

Germano Celant, “Nuvolo a story of materials” in  
*Nuvolo and Post-War Materiality 1950-1965*,  
exhibition catalogue, Di Donna Galleries, New York, 2017-2018

## Rome – New York

Nuvolo (*né* Giorgio Ascani but best known by his nickname) was born in 1926 in Città di Castello, in Umbria. His move to Rome in 1950 came at a time of increasingly close cultural relations between the Italian capital and New York.<sup>1</sup> This was a two-way dialogue based on reciprocal exploration, whereby simultaneous developments in the two cities occurred both autonomously and heteronomously, with both freedom and constraint, mirroring and complementing one another. Italian art was thus indebted to American art, just as the latter was to promoters and artists who lived in Italy. The latter included Irene Brin, who, with Gaspero del Corso, opened the Galleria L’Obelisco in Rome in 1946, specializing in international visual art. As a writer and journalist connected to *Harper’s Bazaar* and *Vogue*, Brin played a crucial role in channeling information about leading figures in international experimental art. As early as 1948, she, together with del Corso, took an interest in Alberto Burri and Afro. She organized two touring exhibitions of Italian artists in collaboration with the American Federation of Arts<sup>2</sup> and in 1953 presented Robert Rauschenberg’s first solo show in Italy – indeed, in Europe: *Scatole e Feticci personali*. Parallel to this projection toward the United States, American artists and institutions embarked on a corresponding “discovery” of Italy: not as a place for sightseeing, but as a country with deep cultural roots that might offer inspiration and encourage creativity. In addition to its historical legacy, Italy also hosted the most important artistic event of the period, the Venice Biennale, a stage for the international “consecration” of art. The 1948 Biennale, the first after World War II, featured the Peggy Guggenheim Collection, with artists ranging from the Surrealists to Mark Rothko. Rothko was awarded the Prix de Rome in 1950 – a prize which included a residency in the Italian capital, and which had been awarded to Philip Guston in 1948. On the other side of the Atlantic, in 1949, this reciprocal attention led to the exhibition *Twentieth Century Italian Art*, curated by Alfred H. Barr, Jr. at The Museum of Modern Art in New York (MoMA). This exhibition included Futurist and Metaphysical art as well as works by young artists such as Afro, Corrado Cagli, Toti Scialoja, and Lucio Fontana.

This flow of meetings, contacts, exchanges, and loans of works also stimulated the market, as evidenced by the opening a year later of the Catherine Viviano Gallery on 57th Street in New York, in the premises formerly occupied by the illustrious dealer of Surrealist art, Julien Levy. Focusing almost exclusively on Italian artists including Afro, Renato Birolli, Cagli, Ennio Morlotti, Armando Pizzinato and Scialoja, Viviano sold their works to major institutions such as MoMA and the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York as well as to collectors such as Albert C. Barnes. In Venice this same year, the United States Pavilion at the 25th Biennale presented works by Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, and Arshile Gorky while Peggy Guggenheim organized Pollock’s first European show at the Museo Correr in Venice and began to collect work by young Italian artists such as Tancredi Parmeggiani.

Artists who played a key role in these transatlantic contacts included Burri, whose presence in the United States began in 1953, with shows at the Frumkin Gallery in Chicago and Eleanor Ward’s Stable Gallery, managed by Conrad Marca-Relli, in New York. A show at the Galleria L’Obelisco in 1954 was followed in 1955 by participation in *The New Decade: 22 European Painters and Sculptors* at MoMA, an other solo show at the Stable Gallery, and the publication of the first

monograph on his work by James Johnson Sweeney, Director of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum. The Galleria L'Obelisco presented Burri's first *Combustions* on wood and paper in 1957; this was followed by a show at the Galleria La Tartaruga, also in Rome, in 1959.

Burri was a significant reference point for Nuvolo, who saw him at work both in their hometown of Città di Castello and in Burri's studio on Via Margutta, Rome. Burri constantly strove to bridge the gap between an ideal concept of art and an approach that was grounded in reality, with a human dimension; he always sought to define painting in concrete, material terms as something exposed to the effects of time. Beginning in 1948, he subjected his canvases to rips, tears, patches, holes, mold, and scars and stitched them together to form a skin that appears to have been corroded by wind and water. There is nothing smooth, polished or unnatural in this work; its materiality signifies, in a metaphoric way, the existence and the vital expansion of worldly things, spanning birth to death.

Burri's collages of 1948, which he made using bitumen and enamels, display a delight in physicality. Dispensing with all scholarly interpretations, including literary rationalizations, they focus on the different layers of material existence. They are "bodies" that grow, as in *Gobbo* (Hump), 1950 (ill. 1), whose skin swells outward, ceases to serve as a passive support, and asserts itself as a living organism. The presence of tension directed outward attests to Burri's desire to make painting "passionate," something that resists the limitations of its surface. Seeing *Gobbo* in this context suggests that the artist is aware of the material stasis that is implicit in Pollock's technique, in which the flat canvas supports only a "superficial" magma whose chaos is an angst-ridden reflection of the individual. Thus Burri's process may be seen as a return to Jacopo Tintoretto's "fury" in painting – an attempt to address the weight, interweavings, heat, and encumbrance of the image. In Burri's work, a world of things emerges with a focus on itself alone, with no extraneous points of reference, not even the artist's own statements. As he wrote in 1955, "Words are no help to me when I try to speak about my painting. It is an irreducible presence that refuses to be converted into any other form of expression. It is a presence both imminent and active. This is what it stands for: to exist so as to signify, and to exist so as to paint."<sup>3</sup>

It is the "word" of matter that counts more than the silence of the human being. This is a continuous process of reification, full of effects. It neither complains nor raises hopes and never raises doubts about existence; it is a secret force whose energy survives anonymity.

By presenting matter on the surface, whether flat or shaped, Burri emphasizes the need to know it thoroughly, to make it "speak" without reservations. Thus, in the years following the trauma of World War II, the material becomes tormented, conceived and manifested with all its wounds and dramas; it erects boundaries of color and fabric that it then seems to breach, flaunting "beauty" as something to be discarded. It is as though Burri envisioned glory as residing not in the human being, but in the sensibility of his materials or in his love for them – a love that, in order to manifest itself, tends toward suffering and death. This is why the works in burlap, iron and wood contort, emerging from nothingness in a state of rebellion. The materials are neither outside the artistic realm nor pictorially excessive; they are only what they are, transient and perishable like any other material.

Burri, however, was not the sole focus of a dialogue between Rome and New York. While his work left an imprint on an entire generation of Italian and American artists (especially Rauschenberg), Afro – with his travels, social contacts, and correspondence – must also be taken into consideration in order to understand the development of the intense and fruitful relationships that artists, galleries, collectors, and critics established between the two cities. Born in Udine in 1912, he went to live in Rome first in 1934 and then again in 1945, after the war; he was the first artist invited to show work at the Galleria L'Obelisco in 1948. Afro also maintained

contacts in Venice, especially with Peggy Guggenheim and, through her, with American art and art criticism; he was repeatedly represented in major group exhibitions in New York from 1948 onward. It was to Afro that Viviano, who had displayed his work in numerous solo shows, turned for advice on Italian artists to present in her gallery. The first of these shows, held in May 1950, brought the artist to New York for a long stay during which he became thoroughly acquainted with the world of the Abstract Expressionists, from de Kooning and Franz Kline to Robert Motherwell and Marca-Relli. Afro's strong relationship with the gallery resulted in inclusion of his work in many American collections, including those of Helena Rubinstein and Barnes, and he was the subject of illustrated reviews by critics such as Dore Ashton, in *Arts Digest* and *ARTnews*, as well as other journals.

Afro's work received its highest acclaim in Italy at the 1956 Venice Biennale, where he was awarded the prize for best Italian painter, followed in 1960 by the Guggenheim International Award. His efforts to rid Italian art of its provincialism did not slacken, however, with personal success. In 1955 he suggested that Viviano show the work of Scialoja, who had an exhibition there the following October (ill. 3). In Rome, perceiving the gradual shift in energy from the established L'Obelisco to the new Galleria La Tartaruga, founded by Plinio De Martiis, he helped to make the latter an international point of reference. After initially focusing on the Roman School of Mario Mafai, Scipione and Antonietta Raphaël, La Tartaruga slowly developed an interest in Italian Art Informel and the younger generation, from Gruppo Origine to Gruppo Forma, seeing this work as a parallel to American Abstract Expressionism. The gallery showed the work of Salvatore Scarpitta in 1955; of Piero Dorazio (newly returned from the United States), Leoncillo, Giulio Turcato, and Ettore Colla in 1957; and organized a group show in 1958 of de Kooning, Afro, and Marca-Relli. Solo exhibitions of Kline and Cy Twombly followed in 1958, as well as a group show featuring Afro, Giuseppe Capogrossi, Pietro Consagra, de Kooning, Kline, Marca-Relli, and Matta.

This network of shows and dialogues attracted the attention of gallery owners like Leo Castelli, who had been active in New York since 1957 with a stable of artists that included Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns, and the Italian Angelo Savelli (ill. 4); and Ileana and Michael Sonnabend, who visited Rome in 1961 with the intention of opening a gallery (which they eventually did, in Paris, in 1962 with an exhibition of Johns); through De Martiis, they became interested in the work of Mario Schifano.

The artist Scarpitta and the collector Giorgio Franchetti also played significant roles in relations between New York and Rome. A solo exhibition of Scarpitta's work (ill. 2) was staged at Leo Castelli in 1959 (the Italians Capogrossi and Savelli had already exhibited there) and three shows were organized at La Tartaruga. Franchetti traveled to New York in December 1957 and was subsequently responsible for the arrival on the Italian market of important works by Rothko and Kline, which were purchased for the Panza di Biumo Collection in Varese. Together with De Martiis, Franchetti became a champion and personal friend of Twombly, who had lived in Italy since 1957.

Nuvolo played a part in this climate of frequent exchange and strong personalities. Burri invited him to Rome in 1949 to work with him on some projects, and again in 1950 to live in his studio on Via Margutta. Burri's studio served as a crossroads where many different artists came together, and it was here that Nuvolo met Cagli, Colla, and the poet and art critic Emilio Villa. In 1954, he began collaborating with the magazine *Arti visive* (associated with Fondazione Origine) by producing several silkscreen covers (ill. 11). Numerous international figures contributed to *Arti*

*visive*, including Willem Sandberg, curator at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, and the

English critic Lawrence Alloway. Nuvolo's involvement with this group of intellectuals, artists, and philosophers kept him constantly informed about current ideas and aesthetic developments, both in Italy and abroad. He also became attuned to the galleries and museums that were most actively disseminating new art, beginning with Galleria Numero in Florence, established by Fiammo Vigo, who was deeply involved in contemporary work and exhibited artists such as Öyvind Fahlström, Almir Mavignier, Mario Nigro, and Emilio Scanavino.

But it was Villa who promoted Nuvolo most forcefully. Villa was a key figure in experimental circles in Italian art and, as early as 1949, had been bold enough to challenge the academic vision of art historians with an article on Matta and to defend and support international contemporary art before many other critics did. He also maintained direct contact with practitioners of the visual arts opposed to "realism" and became one of the first authors to write about emerging figures such as Fontana (ill. 5) and, after 1951, Burri, Capogrossi, Colla, and the young Mimmo Rotella, applying literary models to visual interpretations.<sup>4</sup>

Nuvolo's encounters with the poet and writer, which occurred in the winter between 1950 and 1951, found expression in a dialogue about technical methods and controlled, careful results achieved through silkscreen, which Nuvolo began using in 1951. Villa coined the term "*serotipia*" to define his work: "painting with the means of serigraphy or silkscreen, but employed within the limitations of the unique and unrepeatable example."<sup>5</sup> For many years, Villa's high regard for Nuvolo was documented in various texts in magazines such as *Arti visive*, as well as in exhibition catalogues from 1954 to 1972.<sup>6</sup>

Following Nuvolo's participation in the 1954 *Mostra nazionale arte non-oggettiva* (a term used to describe abstract painting among modern art ranging from Paul Klee to Wassily Kandinsky, from Kazimir Malevich to Georges Vantongerloo) at Galleria Numero, where he showed alongside Carla Accardi, Capogrossi, Nigro, Achille Perilli, Savelli, Emilio Vedova, and others, Villa wrote a catalogue introduction for Nuvolo's first solo show, in 1955 at the Galleria delle Carrozze in Rome, which included serigraphed papers and *Serotipie*. This was followed by a solo show at Vigo's gallery, for which Cagli wrote an essay, and inclusion in the *Primo salone d'estate* at the Galleria San Marco in Rome. The latter, a group show conceived by Villa and Cagli, featured leading figures from the Roman art scene such as Burri, Dorazio, Amerigo Tot, and Turcato, among others. Some of these artists, such as Scarpitta and Rotella, would exhibit with Nuvolo the following year in the show *Le correnti orfiche* in Palermo.

In addition to Villa, Nuvolo received support from De Martiis, who included him in a group show at La Tartaruga with Dorazio, Perilli, Scarpitta, and Ugo Sterpini in October 1957. This was followed by a solo show in March 1958 of *Bianchi-Collages* (White Collages): canvases on a white ground onto which he glued silkscreen fragments (ill. 19); the catalogue contained a text by Villa.

Nuvolo's work corresponded to the policy of La Tartaruga, which was then moving away from Art Informel and toward a more object-oriented approach. There was a focus on "zero degree" painting, an artistic process that tends to eliminate and cancel out all traditional techniques, replacing color with primary materials such as raw canvas or metal, and substituting use of the brush with tools that exploit the aesthetic effects of, for example, fire and rain (Yves Klein), or kaolin, which naturally dries into a unique texture and shape without the artist's intervention (as in the case of Manzoni). The result is an impersonal object, drawn from the life essence of materials themselves. The exhibition *Giovane pittura di Roma*, held in February 1959 at La Tartaruga, featured Nuvolo and Accardi, Umberto Bignardi, Gino Marotta, Novelli, Perilli, Antonio Sanfilippo, Scarpitta, Rotella – artists known for their appropriation of materials, including posters and other items taken from daily life, introduced onto the surface of the canvas. This

is seen in Nuvolo's screen-printed strips of paper on a white ground, or in his sewn canvases. The underlying implications of such practices were the presentation of reality rather than its representation, and the self-assertion of art – a painting or a sculpture – as an autonomous entity, inflected as little as possible by the artist's action: an approach shared by their Milanese contemporaries, from Enrico Castellani to Agostino Bonalumi.

With this change in direction, it was no longer the artists imposing themselves on the “thing,” but the object asserting its independence. Art Informel and Abstract Expressionism thus gave way to an object-oriented art that fit within a line of development that ranged from American Neo-Dada to French Nouveau Réalisme and which developed in Italy, beginning in 1960, in the Scuola Romana of Franco Angeli, Jannis Kounellis, Gioetta Fioroni, Schifano, Cesare Tacchi, and Tano Festa.

In an interplay of conquest and assimilation, this ever-closer communication between Rome and New York contributed to the creation of mutual projects, such as the promotion of American artists in Italian galleries and the showing of Italian art in American museums and other institutions. This trend also involved collectors, especially Peggy Guggenheim, who took a keen interest in the Italian art scene through her foundation in Venice. She purchased works by Nuvolo in 1958 through De Martiis and donated them in 1961 to the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston and the Atlanta Arts Association, now known as the High Museum of Art. These two institutions were not the only ones to take an interest in Nuvolo; he was among the Italian artists (with Afro, Burri, Colla, Rotella, Scialoja, Vedova, and others) selected in 1957 by John Gordon, Curator of Painting and Sculpture at the Brooklyn Museum, for the exhibition *Trends in Watercolor Today, Italy-United States*. He also took part in *Contemporary Italian Drawing and Collage* (1959-60), a show organized by the American Federation of Arts which toured nine American cities; *Contemporary Italian Art* (1960) at the Illinois Institute of Design, Chicago, which also included Accardi, Afro, Burri, Capogrossi, Castellani, Colombo, and Consagra; and *Eight Contemporary Artists from Rome* (1963), organized by Topazia Alliata for the Minneapolis Institute of Art, which also featured, among others, Accardi, Fabio Mauri, Mohamed Melehi, and Lucio Pozzi. The visibility that Italian art and Nuvolo enjoyed in the United States ended at a specific historical point, with a “rift” that occurred between the two countries after the International Prize for Painting was awarded to Rauschenberg at the 1964 Venice Biennale: the consecration of Pop Art further consolidated the primacy of American art.

## Nuvolo's Journey

Nuvolo's parents worked in a typography business, and from the time he was a child he was immersed in the world of color and printing. While still young, he developed his manual skills and in 1943 began to work on projects entailing decoration, ornamentation and restoration. This activity was interrupted in 1944, when he joined the anti-Fascist resistance as part of the Brigata Proletaria d'Urto “San Faustino” in the Upper Tiber Valley, obtaining the *nom de guerre* Nuvolo. In 1949, after his first experiments with printing techniques made at the Scuola Tecnica Industriale per le Arti Grafiche in Città di Castello, he was invited by Burri to collaborate on a wall fresco in Rome. This project, along with other pictorial works, connected him with the postwar rebirth of Italian art and stimulated him to move, in 1950, to the Italian capital, where he supported himself with work as a photographic engraver. Here, in the studio on Via Margutta, he began experimenting with silkscreen, attempting to expand the medium's technical process in order to achieve a particular pictorial effect. The result was the *Serotipie*, something aesthetically similar to contemporaneous researches in Art Informel.

In 1950 Italian culture still bore the deep imprint of the tragedy of World War II and the sense of failure connected to that immense historical catastrophe. Social and economic incentives, however, led to a recovery that coincided with a change of direction in the arts. Along with developments in Neorealism, painters and sculptors adopted a gestural approach, eliminating assumptions of form and narrative and exploring a dimension of lived experience regardless of political predilection. In Italy, this break with past strategies was interwoven with an emphasis on the creative impulse formed by subconscious and visceral responses, encouraged by a growing awareness of new forms of aesthetic expression, exemplified in particular by Pollock. The first news of Pollock's shattering contributions came through Peggy Guggenheim, who moved to Venice in 1948, and through artists such as Cagli, who lived and exhibited in the United States, and Marca-Relli, who worked for periods in Rome, renting studios in the city beginning in 1948. Pollock's public discovery, however, occurred in June 1950 at the 25th Venice Biennale, when Alfred H. Barr selected three huge paintings by him, including *Number 1A*, for the American Pavilion, along with works by five other artists. This impact was reinforced in July with a show of twenty paintings, two gouaches and one drawing from the Peggy Guggenheim Collection at the Museo Correr in Venice.<sup>7</sup> The exhibition catalogue contained an introduction and critical review by Bruno Alfieri, who described the work as "chaos ... absolute lack of harmony ... complete lack of structural organization ... total absence of technique, however rudimentary ... once again, chaos. ... By comparison with Pollock, Picasso, poor old Pablo Picasso, looks like a placid, conformist painter of the past."<sup>8</sup> The show then traveled, in reduced form, to the Galleria del Naviglio in Milan.

Nuvolo entered the professional art circuit in Rome, where contacts with Villa, Burri, Colla, and the Gruppo Origine, in addition to discourse surrounding international artistic developments, encouraged him to take up painting. His early experiments are rooted in his experience as a printer. In 1951, as Villa attests,<sup>9</sup> he started applying a layer of nitrocellulose, to which he added oil paint or tempera, to small surfaces, to obtain drop and stain effects similar to those found in Pollock's drip paintings (ills. 7, 8). This "formless" result was achieved not through the chance outcome of automatic gestures, but from control attained through careful mechanical application. These images echo Abstract-Informel compositions that, while engaged with the work of Italians such as Dorazio and Savelli, bear similarities with art characterized by the application of seemingly molten flows of paint, seen both in the United States, especially in Action Painting, and in Europe, for example in the deeply textured canvases of Wols (ill. 9), who exhibited at the Galleria Il Milione in Milan in 1949.<sup>10</sup>

Nuvolo's technique, however, was different: he invented and experimented with forms of silk-screen printing, adopting an artisanal method by grinding pigments from metal oxides and mixing them with resins and nitroglycerin to produce inks, to which he then added oil paint or tempera.<sup>11</sup> The effect is one of stratification. Compared to the improvisational gesture tracked on the canvas, from Fontana's holes to Kline's or Mark Tobey's signs, Nuvolo's intervention, in the *Serotipie*, is oriented toward intentionality and control, despite the chaotic, formless images that result.

An analysis of this work – starting with the pieces that still survive, which date from 1952 – reveals a strong, consistent sense of both impalpability and dense materiality (ill. 10). There is an accentuated desire to emphasize chromatic substance, an interest that is tactile as well as visual and results from the transposition of fluid paint onto canvas, similar to what Burri explored in his *Muffe* (Molds, ill. 87). Nuvolo uses the support – paper, or paper on Celotex, or paper on board – as a crucible where the color takes on an existence of its own, becoming an active element. The result is a tortured, pulverized image that somehow ends up being both efferves-

cent and visceral, like a force rising up from the depths of manually applied layers: the effect is dazzling. Color flows like a river, or cascades like a flood over the surface; it is the energy and torment of a “possible” figure, as in the extraordinary vocabulary later developed by Gerhard Richter in his abstract paintings. While the scale is obviously different, Nuvolo’s *Serotipie* similarly reveal the corrosive violence of an act that works through layering to erase any narrative in favor of color, painting’s irreducible element.

Nuvolo’s imagination comes from the “gut,” so much so that, in the *Serotipie*, he was compelled to produce hundreds upon hundreds of small works, as if he were continually seeking to remove and erase the figure, dissolving it (ills. 108, 109). This process is typical of that period, when Art Informel was seeking to purify art of any ideology or narration, politics or propaganda, in order to destroy the mimetic aspect represented by the realistic “double” and to transport painting into a state of pulsating materiality. Nuvolo, like other artists, became aware of a genetic dimension to artistic creation, an engagement with the embryonic stage of the pictorial and sculptural process, which took hold from Rome to Milan, from Leoncillo to Fontana with a focus on gesture and action, on inchoate matter and primary signs. He started again from scratch, from the flesh of painting to the stain, from the limitation of surface and space to the embrace of free and irrational intermingling of elements within the picture plane. A widespread and uninterrupted formlessness was unleashed that constituted an investigation of the very elements of art-making.

In his close proximity to the working processes of Colla and Cagli, Nuvolo intuitively understood, however, that the primitive dimension of painting had to be controlled and cooled down. While convinced of the importance of free and personal creation, through which the work becomes a form of evidence of existence, he also possessed misgivings about the spontaneous act. The tool he employed for distancing himself from impulse was silkscreening – an intermediary technique that allowed him to remove himself from authorial mark-making. With this neutral and detached form of production, the artist no longer resorted to costly emotional outlay but rather revealed traces of banal, everyday reality taken from the mass media – traces that, in this case, are “without form” – an extreme example of which would later be seen in Warhol’s *Piss Paintings* (1977-78), where, with irreverence and irony, *dripping* is transmuted into *pissing*.

Nuvolo thus produced the appearance of a “thing” that originates not from the subconscious and the psyche, but which rather reflects only the artificial light and layering of color. There was a shift of attention from exceptionality and the excessive glorification of creative individuality to the uniform – and hence boring – production that governs the world of seriality and consumption. In a certain sense, the unconscious aim was to strip painting of all uniqueness and sanctity, to dissolve its aura and make it similar to the output of an industrial assembly line. Moreover, the work fell within a process of self-definition, free from artistic intervention – a process that, beginning in 1957, became the hallmark of artists such as Manzoni and Scarpitta, both of whom allowed the work to ultimately define itself through the drying of the kaolin surface or the interweaving of fabrics.

It is in this sense that we must understand *Scacco matto* (Checkmate), 1953 (ill. 14), a large collage of painted paper on canvas that introduces a “gridlike structure,” a departure from Art Informel practice that reintroduces a pattern. Thanks to his experience with printing and graphic design, Nuvolo was drawn to layout and to geometric structures. Instead of preserving the map of dirty, decomposed and almost sullied arrangement of color, he neutralized it by organizing it according to a grid, imparting order and neatness as if in response to the destructive approach then seen in Jean Fautrier’s heavily worked surfaces or Rotella’s *décollages* (ills. 12, 13).

Nuvolo, in this series called *Scacchi* (Checkerboards), reformulated the presence of the linear masses seen in Art Informel and Nuclear Art,<sup>12</sup> reshaping them in such a way as to suggest organization (ills. 128, 129). He created a pattern, almost as though he were taking into consideration the “decorative” risk entailed in a “staining” process: “collages of screen print remnants with a geometric basis (square or rectangular) in which ... polychromy ... lends final unity to the image.”<sup>13</sup>

As early as 1954, this fusion of formlessness and structure brought Nuvolo to the attention of Vigo. It subsequently appeared in the artist's book by Nuvolo and Villa, *Cinque invenzioni di Nuvolo e un poema di Emilio Villa (Sì, ma lentamente)* (Rome: La Palma), the first in a series of publications called esodizioni which they produced until 1971. Collaborating with Villa, who was known for his structured writings, may also have provided a stimulus for Nuvolo to eliminate “disorder” and impose a geometric order that is anti-natural and anti-real – an attitude of working that can also be considered in relation to the broader history of visual poetry, for example the work of Karel Teige.

Nuvolo's squares, which create neither perspective nor landscape, were clearly inspired by Mondrian's grids – also a point of reference for Burri, who had replaced color with raw materials such as burlap, among others. Nuvolo used the gridlike structure to flatten out the physical qualities of his work on the surface. He sought to avoid forms of physical relief which appear in the work of other artists, such as Fontana's *Pietre* (Stones), in order to focus on the corporeal essence of the fragment of serigraphed paper: his material. The repetition of form coincided with the urge to produce *Serotipie*, as though their “abstraction” could lead to concreteness, their void to a solid in which painting is regenerated and takes on life – a life connected to the world of things rather than to the traditional ceremony of painting. Like other artists of international importance who became established in the postwar period, including Dorazio and Pinot Galizio in Italy; Fautrier, Antoni Tàpies and Manolo Millares (ill. 163) in France and Spain; and artists from Addie Herder (ill. 105) to Marca-Relli (ill. 15) in the United States, he was interested not in an emphasis on gesture, but rather in the mixing of enamels and cellulose to obtain surfaces that are rough but do not appear to be directly manipulated by the artist's hand.

This aspiration to resolve the contradiction between formlessness and form, and to put forward a logical basis for discourse on materials or images, is not far removed from the sequences of squares and rectangles seen in Johns's work, for example *Gray Numbers* (1958), or in Bruce Conner's *Untitled* of 1954–61 (ill. 16), within the sphere of American Neo-Dada that, beginning in 1957, informed Manzoni's *Achromes* (ill. 17) or, beginning in 1959, the structuralist and optical works of the Zero group or the kinetic art of Gianni Colombo, Gruppo N, Gruppo T, and Julio Le Parc.

In addition to variations on the *Serotipie* and *Scacchi*, in 1956 Nuvolo produced an anomalous and interesting work: *Untitled*, a collage of painted paper arranged on a structure and mounted on wood (ill. 18). A continued pursuit of inexpressivity (which is totally antithetical to personal and gestural expressiveness) is apparent in this large collage, which possesses reductive characteristics resulting from Nuvolo's decision to nail a large sheet of cardboard to the wooden support and to leave part of a Scacco visible on the right. The exposure of the pattern of the cardboard as it was produced in the factory, with its modular attributes, complements the arrangement of the serigraphic grid; they are each repetitive systems – one prefabricated, the other created by the artist. It is as though Nuvolo were anticipating his future interest in a detached, almost scientific approach that, from 1965 to 1992, using new technologies, would result in the *Oigroig*, *Modular* and *Aftermandelbrot* series, as well as in the opening of his *Atelier di Serigrafia* in 1968. The 1956 *Untitled* also looks like a continuous “field,” the painted surface transformed



into a compact, opaque plane heralding the subsequent *Bianchi* (White) and *Cuciti a macchina* (Machine-Sewn) series. These represent an emergence from the darkness of the *Serotipie* and *Scacchi*; they reflect light, with results that are more liquid and transparent, while the pattern decomposes and extends outward.

In 1957 Nuvolo began to systematically give equal visual weight to the serigraphic cuttings and their white canvas grounds (ills. 203, 205). He was moving toward the decomposition of the grid and a chromatic transcendence that was independent from the subjective image, establishing a field pulsating with other possibilities. The point of reference was Burri and his *Bianchi*, 1952 (ill. 92), except that Nuvolo's fragments lose physicality and material impact: light, thin pieces of paper vacillate between presence and absence, floating in a white limbo of controlled, decipherable traces. It is another step toward procedural regulation, signifying a conceptualization of forms and their organization in both material and immaterial terms. In addition, Nuvolo attempted an osmosis of polychromy and monochromy (ill. 204), with a view to moving toward a self-referential condition, where surface is only surface and increasingly free from all authorial marks, whether shapeless or geometric. The projection of images onto the canvas gives way to a focus on the aesthetic quality of pure materials such as fabric and deerskin. He moved toward a *tabula rasa* from his serigraphed work and then finally achieved either an incisive geometric or floating structure in the sewn works. The near-cancellation of the artist's hand served to eliminate the mystique surrounding the personal manipulation of chromatic material and ushered in the self-assertion of the *support* – unprimed canvas, fabric or paper, intended *not* as a vector for other signs, but rather as an autonomous entity in its own right. Thus, in 1957, after some experiments with collages of painted paper on canvas (ill. 229), Nuvolo proceeded to directly sew together pieces of fabric in soft colors such as white, cream, and brown. This series of works, *Cuciti a macchina*, came to the attention of Peggy Guggenheim in 1958. The adoption of textiles as a pictorial medium put Nuvolo on a parallel track and somehow in competition with Burri; however, he moved in another direction due to the transparency and lightness of his materials and the emphasis on the importance of the actions of “cutting” and “sewing.”

The process of cutting indicates a shift from looking to doing and moves ever closer to collage, made from pieces of reality taken from the world.<sup>14</sup> It means slicing with scissors through fabric or deerskin to create an autonomous object, one that does not interpret things but rather constructs them. Cutting puts an end to the traditional “representation” of the image, deconstructing and reassembling it as evidence of the artist's processes of thinking and making.

Nuvolo continued cutting fabric of different colors in the following years, fragmenting it and moving from the more cerebral, internal realm of screen-printed color to the external, physical realm of the material. Through this appropriation, he opened his work up to the world of extant things, which he incorporated in order to expand his aesthetic vision to life itself. As with other artists, from Marca-Relli to Scarpitta, from Savelli to Tàpies, his leap into the heart of raw matter was prompted by the need to find a new and non-emotive role for the canvas, no longer “painted” but rather transformed into a self-signifying entity: a communicative vehicle of its own material identity.

This physical and formal investigation put him in the vicinity of artists such as Bonalumi and Castellani, who, since 1959, had been emphasizing the objective nature of art with their shaped canvases (ill. 6). Castellani wrote in 1958: “My surfaces of canvas, laminated plastic or other materials, dematerialized by the absence of color as an element of composition, tend toward modulation and accept the third dimension, which makes them perceptible. Light is now the tool of this perception. They are abandoned to its fortuitousness, its contingent form and intensity. No longer part of the domain of painting or sculpture, being able to assume the monumentality of

architecture or reduce its space, they are the reflection of that total inner space...”<sup>15</sup>

This is consistent with the precept of art for art’s sake, professed and practiced by Ad Reinhardt in New York, whereby materials are not subordinated to any other use, but are presented as such “without symbols, without objects, without associations, without allusions, without images.”<sup>16</sup> Given his story with abstract art, Nuvolo did not eliminate formalization. He continued using a Mondrian grid and a Burri-like irregular structure, but he was already displaying an attitude of “indifference,” making use of materials in accordance with a geometric grammar obtained through a detached process such as sewing, which also created raised “lips” at the edges of the cut pieces (ill. 266). This was a way of working without the tools of serigraphy, which acted as a sort of technological paintbrush, eliminating external motivations. As Reinhardt again put it, pure art has “its own reason, its own discipline. It has its own ‘integrity’ and not someone else’s ‘integration’ with something else.”<sup>17</sup>

With the fabric pieces, subjected to sewing and assembly, Nuvolo returned to a primary manual involvement typical of the *Serotipie* he had invented in 1951 in keeping with the revival of a tradition that would be the subject of *Textile U.S.A.*, a 1956 exhibition at MoMA in New York.<sup>18</sup> This can also be seen as an updating of a concern with soft, flexible materials, in opposition to the rigidity gradually gaining ground with the early optically-oriented work being made in France by artists ranging from Robert Jacobsen to Jesús Rafael Soto, presented in the exhibition *Le Mouvement* at the Galerie Denise René, Paris in 1955,<sup>19</sup> displaying an increasing emphasis on the use of aluminum, plastic, neon tubes, and motors. Moreover, the thread connecting the pieces of fabric became a signifying trait for the artist in 1958, when he created linear marks and diagrams, first freely elaborated and then more geometric, graphically delineated paths that unfolded – first chaotically, resembling seismograms, then with greater precision, once again Mondrian-like – on the prepared canvas (ill. 20). This is another form of control over chaos, derived from Art Informel, which gave way to a compositional organization made with a sewing machine, which could guarantee an order that simultaneously offered clarity and precision. A mechanical immediacy remains – an entirely optical purity, fueled by linear and graphic intensity as much as by a material essentiality. In fact this is a use of disorder in order to make the “logic” of a methodical and impersonal act of creation perceptible. It is as though Nuvolo were attempting to combine Pollock-style dripping with Marcel Duchamp’s conceptual process, best exemplified in his *3 Standard Stoppages* (1913–14), obtaining an effect that was no longer the result of chance, but rather was controlled, realized through the use of a sewing machine. Beginning in 1959, the insertion of deerskin, positioned in the center or at the side (ill. 265), in a sequence or a grid, in some cases breaking apart (ill. 21), contributed to an overall geometric composition that became fluid, depending on the diversity of the colors and patterns of the material (ills. 275, 277). This movement of surfaces, while clearly determined by his experiences in graphic design, unwittingly occurred alongside the rebirth of Art Concret theorized in 1960 by Max Bill and Max Bense, with the support of the *Monochrome Malerei* exhibition at the Städtisches Museum, Leverkusen. This coincidence is perhaps due to the interweaving of Nuvolo’s incipient interest in technology with the spirituality inherent to the “geometric system” of the Concrete artists, and in the luminosity of metals in the work of Otto Piene and Heinz Mack. Raw, primary matter is asserted as a “new” chromatic quality. The artist’s ego is suppressed in favor of the aesthetic quality of physical phenomena and facts. This is the beginning of a “redemption” of pure Aesthetics which, in subsequent years, will take concrete shape in Minimalism and Pop Art, continuing through to Arte Povera and Conceptual Art.

In Nuvolo’s work this development was oriented toward perception. The fantastic variation of colored materials and their combinations are pleasing and almost sentimental, producing

vital and organic structures that highlight the physical traits of the chosen materials to such an extent that they display a capacity for mutability (ill. 270). The material projects out and moves, establishing new forms within; it reveals new extensions of chromatic stimulation that come to assert their own presence in the field of the canvas. Inert matter creates a bountiful territory that absorbs the sensibility of the artist and his art.

In order to avoid redundancy, in 1960 Nuvolo departed from the grid-like format and began producing a numbers of works made from strips of canvas and paper laid down on a white ground, in a way that suggests an infinite process. He accomplished this effect by using repetition and verticality to create an open, ongoing structure. He wanted to deconstruct the grid, decentering the composition and instead highlighting the luminosity of the screen-printed fragments. He reinforced this way of working in 1961, with sewn pieces of fustian, deerskin or fabric (ill. 294), “sublimated” by a vertical orientation and asymmetrical arrangement, creating fields and strips, open territory and closed bands of different materials, with no respect for balance and harmony, in contrast to the rigid geometry of the *Scacchi*. In subsequent works such as *Untitled* of 1962 (ill. 301), the sequence became absolute, transformed into an arrangement of materials, between skin and painting, where the screen-printed portion is framed so that it appears as a citation and fragment of memory. That same year the strips of different types and consistencies aligned in variations that range from monochromy (ill. 302) to multi-material and polychromatic compositions, a method to which he also returned in the 1962 work *Soldatino blu* (ill. 299).

The vertical construction became extreme with the stretching of deerskin in different colors to form totalities that do not allow themselves to be trapped by coordinates and structures, but instead reject their constrictive formality and present themselves as examples of boundless verticality (ill. 22). The effect in these *Tensioni* (Tensions) of 1962 was achieved by the elasticity of the material, which was stretched downward, transforming the work into a field of taut energy. Nuvolo continued to use this procedure in the years that followed, strengthening the impression of a solid, concrete art, perceptible in its physical totality, through its own expressive power. He accentuated the material element that also resides in its inner movement, from texture to color and elasticity, outside any subjective use or formalist purism, which might call its power into question.

To conclude, Nuvolo’s artistic explorations until 1965 allowed art to exit the condition of existential angst perceived in American Abstract Expressionism and European Art Informel in order to assert the autonomous existence of the aesthetic object. His goal, to keep art alive through its concrete and material dimension, was an approach that coincided with subsequent optical and spatial inquiries in the arts, to such an extent that his explorations after 1965 remained relevant in their in-depth examination of a completely new technology. The story continues.

Notes:

<sup>1</sup> See *Roma anni '60. Al di là della pittura*, edited by Maurizio Calvesi and Rossella Siligato, exhibition catalogue, Palazzo delle Esposizioni, Rome, December 20 – February 15, 1991 (Rome: Edizioni Carte Segrete, 1990); Germano Celant and Anna Costantini, *Roma–New York 1948-1964* (Milan: Charta, 1993); Maurizio Fagiolo dell'Arco and Claudia Terenzi, *Roma 1948-1959. Arte, cronaca e cultura dal neorealismo alla dolce vita*, exhibition catalogue, Palazzo delle Esposizioni, Rome, January 30 – May 27, 2002 (Milan: Skira, 2002); *New York New York. Arte italiana. La riscoperta dell'America*, edited by Francesco Tedeschi, exhibition catalogue, Museo del Novecento and Gallerie d'Italia, Milan, April 13 – September 17, 2017 (Milan: Electa, 2017).

<sup>2</sup> *Eterna Primavera: Young Italian Painters* (1954) and *Major Works Minor Scale* (1955–57).

<sup>3</sup> Alberto Burri, “Words Are No Help,” in *The New Decade: 22 European Painters and Sculptors*, edited by Andrew Carnduff Ritchie, exhibition catalogue, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, May 10 – August 7, 1955 (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1955), p. 82.

<sup>4</sup> Emilio Villa, *Attributi dell'arte odierna 1947/1967*, new and extended edition, edited by Aldo Tagliaferri (Florence: Le Lettere, 2008).

<sup>5</sup> Emilio Villa, , exhibition catalogue, Libreria “al ferro di cavallo,” Rome, October 30, 1958 (Rome: Libreria “al ferro di cavallo”, 1958).

<sup>6</sup> See Emilio Villa, “Indicazioni,” in *Arti visive*, second series, no. 1, Rome, November 1954; *Nuvolo*, exhibition catalogue, Galleria delle Carrozze, Rome, May 6–20, 1955 (Rome: Galleria delle Carrozze, 1955); *Nuvolo*, exhibition catalogue, Galleria La Tartaruga, Rome, March 27 – April 10, 1958; *Mostra di serotipie di Lorri e Nuvolo*; *Nuvolo “Nuntius Celatus”*, exhibition catalogue, Galleria d'arte Lo Spazio, Rome, June 1971 (Rome: Delta Editori, 1971); *Nuvolo*, exhibition catalogue, Galleria Poliantea, Terni, November 21–30, 1972 (Terni: Galleria Poliantea, 1972).

<sup>7</sup> See Kirk Varnedoe and Pepe Karmel, *Jackson Pollock, and Jackson Pollock: Interviews, Articles, and Reviews*, both published in connection with the exhibition at The Museum of Modern Art, New York, October 28, 1998 – February 2, 1999 (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1998 and 1999).

<sup>8</sup> Bruno Alfieri, “Piccolo discorso sui quadri di Jackson Pollock (con testimonianza dell'artista),” in *L'Arte Moderna*, Venice, June 8, 1950; Deborah Solomon, *Jackson Pollock: A Biography* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987).

<sup>9</sup> Villa, *Nuvolo*, Galleria La Tartaruga, 1958.

<sup>10</sup> See *Wols: Retrospective / Die Retrospektive*, exhibition catalogue, Kunsthalle, Bremen, April 13 – August 11, 2013 and The Menil Collection, Houston, September 13, 2013 – January 12, 2014 (Munich: Hirmer Verlag, 2013).

<sup>11</sup> From a description of Nuvolo's techniques, sent by his son Paolo Ascani on July 25, 2017.

<sup>12</sup> The Movimento Arte Nucleare was launched on October 12, 1957 with a show at the Galleria San Fedele in Milan. Their manifesto, signed by Enrico Baj, Klein, Pierre Restany, Manzoni, and others declared opposition to geometric abstract art in favor of the use of automatic techniques.

<sup>13</sup> *Nuvolo. Presentazione ciclica delle opere*, exhibition catalogue, Studio Piattelli, Rome, April 2–30, 1977 (Rome: Studio Piattelli, 1977).

<sup>14</sup> See Germano Celant, “Tagliare è pensare,” in *Il Tempo e la Moda*, with Luigi Settembrini and Ingrid Sischy (Florence and Milan: Biennale di Firenze and Skira, 1996), pp. 31–36.

<sup>15</sup> Enrico Castellani, “Totalità dell'arte oggi (1958),” in *Zero*, no. 3, Düsseldorf, 1961.

<sup>16</sup> Ad Reinhardt, “The Next Revolution in Art,” in *Art International*, no.10, December 1962; quotation from Germano Celant, Paolini (New York: Sonnabend Press, 1972), p. 8.

<sup>17</sup> Ad Reinhardt, “Twelve Rules for a New Academy,” in *ARTnews*, New York, May 1957.

<sup>18</sup> The exhibition *Textile U.S.A.* was held from August 29 to November 4, 1956 at the Museum of Modern Art, New York.

<sup>19</sup> See *Denise René, l'intrépide. Une galerie dans l'aventure de l'art abstrait 1944-1978*, edited by Jean-Paul Ameline, exhibition catalogue, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, April 4 – June 4, 2001 (Paris: Centre Pompidou, 2001).