

Alan Solomon:

*"Young Italians"*

Institute of Contemporary Art, January 1968, Boston,

The Jewish Museum, May 1968, New York

## ITALIAN ART OF THE MID-SIXTIES

There has not been an occasion for Americans to take any kind of general look at contemporary Italian art for some years, perhaps not since the 1949 Museum of Modern Art exhibition *XX Century Italian Art*.

*Young Italians* is a much more modest undertaking, limited to twelve artists, all under forty. ...

The show was selected with an American eye, with the American audience in mind ...

During the past five or ten years, in a gradual and unconscious process, we in America have become accustomed to judging world art against American standards and American conditions.

The standards refer essentially to the qualities of the New York School and evolve from the abstract expressionist experience, even though they are subsequently adjusted to pop art and the new abstract painting and sculpture. Without stopping to think about it, we expect art to be blunt, forceful, based on direct intuitive perception of the art instead of on an intellectual process or formal theories, without very much content (in the old sense of literary or other non visual values), without ideological complications (non-esthetic ones), etcetera.

It is not without reason that we are predisposed toward these criteria, because they reflect the national sensibility and our true feelings more aptly than anything which came before in the twentieth century, when for a long time native realism and its foreign cousin cubism had been uneasy bedfellows in our art.

The American conditions against which we measure others are those of an affluent culture, with a high Gross Art Product. I am not necessarily talking about money here (although money has a lot to do with it) but rather about what one might call esthetic economics, the cultural manifestations of the production, distribution and consumption of art. Our high rate of production and consumption of paintings and sculpture of quality are pretty much taken for granted nowadays, but they are in fact probably unprecedented in history and without parallel in the rest of the world. ...

Where New York City alone has at least four institutions which regularly draw large crowds to contemporary exhibitions, most countries in Europe at the best have one, and they are usually guided by conservative policies, or they do not have the means to maintain an effective schedule. ... If our present attitudes toward style express *us* nationally to a fuller extent than before, at the same time, the American esthetic has become equally attractive to artists in other countries, and they have turned to New York models during the past ten years, instead of looking toward Paris, as they had done before. It was entirely new experience for us to discover that others were emulating us, and that the products of the transaction were unexceptionally inferior, since, as history has so often indicated, the imitator never surpasses his model.

Consequently, we came more and more to turn in on ourselves, becoming less and less interested in contemporary art of other countries, either because it seemed retarded (still Paris-oriented) or because it was weak and familiar (unsuccessfully copying American prototypes).

As a result, we have reached the state where very few foreign artists who are not long established can expect to be shown in the New York galleries. ...

In other instances, the American influence has had a positive effect. I believe that in our self imposed isolationism we are largely unaware of a resurgence of art occurring at present in Europe after the hiatus which resulted from the decline of Paris. ... This new efflorescence in the visual arts can be seen most clearly in England and Italy.

The Italians are, as we are well aware, more open and expressive than Americans; they function passionately and emotionally in all aspects of their ordinary lives; they relate intensely and sensitively to other people. ...

At first glance their art seems to have nothing to do with any of this ... Their work appears reasoned, detached, and reticent, more concerned with form and surface than with substance. It gives the impression of being totally separated from all the qualities which they bring to bear on the rest of their lives. In effect, the Italians are disposed to favor abstraction in their art. ...

There is a handful of serious collectors of new art in Italy, and a few museums with funds to buy a painting now and then. Except for occasional teaching jobs, most of the artists under forty seldom have an opportunity to make a decent living. They live in a kind of limbo where, except for a small circle of admirers and sympathetic critics, the rest of Italy is quite indifferent to them. ...

The Italians apparently separate art and life more, and regard art as a function of the mind rather than of the feelings. Their art tends to be cool, rational and deliberate, more subtle than direct, more restrained than affective. In one sense, of course, this attitude is traditional, and can be traced back to its roots in Renaissance rationalism. ... Instead of painting his feelings (the Italian artist) lives them, and expresses his aspirations in his art. Harmony, order, and clarity of form acquire an almost religious significance for him. ...

In the face of all this apparent confusion and frustration, given the manifest cross-purposes and difficulties, it is astonishing to see that there is so much vitality in Italian art at the moment. One finds more energy, more diversity, and more new ideas than anywhere else outside the United States.

Lo Savio and Alviani represent the purest manifestation of technological elaboration of the constructivist tradition; Castellani and Bonalumi extend Fontana's physical manipulation of the pure painted canvas; Pascali, Ceroli, and Lombardo adapt constructivist attitudes toward technology or the new minimal sculpture.

*Enrico Castellani* is the oldest of the artists in this exhibition, and perhaps the best known in the United States. In the new generation, his work represents the purest and most authoritative expression of a Milanese strain which originates in the slashed and perforated monochrome canvases of Fontana. ... (These canvases) represent the quintessential Italian sensibility; elegant and refined, they compel us while keeping their distance.

Another purist who came a different route was *Francesco Lo Savio*, a Roman who died in 1963, at the age of 28. (His "total articulations" together with the painted black metal reliefs of bent surfaces and intersecting planes) are of particular interest to us because they anticipate by at least five years many of the explorations of pure passive form in metal and other homogeneous materials which now occupy American and British sculptors.

*Sergio Lombardo*, who lives in Rome, began as a figurative painter, working in a flat abstract manner. Subsequently, he turned to geometric design in bright colors with enameled surfaces. In order to purify these surfaces, he changed to formica in primary colors, cut to provide appropriate

shapes. The piece in the exhibition represent an extension of these problems into a three-dimensional situation. While the work participates in what is becoming the prevailing international formal style of sculpture, it is unique in the way it exploits the potential variability of a repeated single unit in combination. This structure is based on seven identical pieces (although the number might be changed without limit) made so that they might be joined in an almost infinite range of possibilities. The sculpture can be arranged to run along the floor, grow into the air, climb up a wall or turn a corner of the room. ...

*Iannis Kounellis*, a greek who has lived most of his time in Italy, is represented in the exhibition by four paintings, although he has since begun to produce objects, after an interlude in which he made pictures like one elaborated by twenty-four birds in cages. His earlier paintings disposed stark black graphic images, arrows, letters, numbers and diagonal barrier marking un large white canvases. ...

*Michelangelo Pistoletto*, who lives in Turin, brings together that pervading Italian preoccupation with the interplay between exact location and indeterminate displacement of the surface plane ... we join Pistoletto's people in our space, and see ourselves as part of the picture.

As I pointed out earlier, the diversity of this group of artists suggests a flow of energy from some essential wellspring. It is difficult to say at this point to what all this might come. ... Whatever the circumstances, the vitality persists and bears watching. Italy could well be the place where the next significant developments in contemporary art occur.

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