

Luca Beatrice

In the trenches

“You know, I always feel like I am in the trenches”. This is maybe the most beautiful sentence among the ones spoken by Pino Pinelli. Just a few days ago, at a dinner, in a *trattoria* just a few steps away from his Milan-based studio on Via Anfiteatro, where the Master is a regular customer. Notwithstanding the fact that his work has been focused on the analysis of pictorial language for decades with few, infinitesimal, variations resulting from logic, method and rigor; notwithstanding the fact that critics have written reams and reams about him (and here the challenge really becomes interesting for me, what can I say that is new, I who do not like the excessive focus on technique and specialist self-referentiality?), Pinelli likes to endlessly discuss, explain, and motivate as if his work had been created yesterday. This is, of course, due to his personal character and natural proclivity (I promised him that I would not overly praise his rare elegance, his snarky bon ton, his innate Southern manners, but I just cannot bring myself to fail to at least mention them), but also for a cultural condition that I deem to be essential for the artists of those generations that came to the fore towards the mid-1970s.

His history is well known. Pino Pinelli was born in Catania in 1938; in 1966 he competed for the San Fedele Prize in Milan, and it was in Milan that he decided to stay, just in time to brush shoulders with Lucio Fontana, who passed away two years later. Following his first solo exhibition at the Bergamini Art Gallery in 1968, he became, starting from 1973, a key personality of that abstract modality that was without a doubt entirely Italian, but with evident points of contact between Europe and America concerning a new questioning of contemporary painting, organized under different denominations by critics, *Pittura Analitica*, *Pittura Pittura*, *Nuova Pittura* (Analytic Painting, Painting Painting, New Painting). The need to lump together different painting schools under the same theoretical umbrella, given that the sum of several individuals forms a group, once again points to the longing for a cultural militancy, that has now almost vanished or at least been overcome by the idea of art that is now global and no longer linked to a particular country. Consequently the place, where the artist you are interested in lives and works, has frankly become altogether irrelevant. It was like that before, and in fact, art history was studied according to cohesive movements (and it was dramatic, in many cases, to be excluded) and to the places these belonged to. In Italy, in particular, *Arte Povera* (Poor Art) strengthened the need to move ahead all together, knowing moreover how to interpret the social upheavals that rocked the year 1968. At the turn of the 1980s, the last movement was the Transavantgarde, hence the overcoming towards the current hyper-individualism, which makes the scheme of the whole obsolete.

Pinelli, like the others of his generation, crosses the transition from informal painting and of classical abstraction, where the artist expresses the highest degree of his subjectivity, which exploded with Pollock, in a pre-performance and theatrical language, to a progressive but an irreversible reduction towards repeatable, serial, monochrome surfaces (it would be interesting to point to his relationship to Pop Art, it also being serial but iconic) and especially objective surfaces, an object that in Milan shows more than a tangency with modern design. Decades would seem to have passed between 1956, the year of Jackson Pollock's death, and the opening of the *Monochrome Malerei* (Monochrome Painting) exhibition in Leverkusen in 1960, considering the sudden acceleration to “another” painting (compared to what it is not clear, but certainly not to the previous one) that made of monochrome its own credo.

However another issue is looming and is urgent: how can painting survive the tsunami of modern avant-gardes that, exactly a century ago, with Ready Made as an accomplice, swept away in one fell swoop the old concepts of beautiful art by introducing new materials and objects taken from reality? And again, what characteristics can today legitimately be maintained, in order to guarantee the right of citizenship in contemporaneous art museums that most often consider it an obsolete relic of the

past? Not to mention: how many times have we heard of “the death of painting”? At least as many times as we have read about the death of the novel. Yet we are still here, asking ourselves what the sense of painted surfaces is, appreciating them with a full involvement, holding a book (or a Kindle reader, the medium does not matter so much) in order not to stop dreaming.

Pino Pinelli is among those artists who, determined to continue to paint, raises a key point. A theory that we still live on our reputation, and I think that's the reason – beyond the flow of the market and what Gillo Dorfles has called “the oscillations of taste” – why his research as well those of his era are today more than ever at the heart of historical-critical interest.

For Pinelli, in short, the fundamental and irreplaceable condition of doing lies in the perfect union or synthesis between aesthetics and ethics. He has never hidden his personal propensity to beauty: elegant and finite shapes, perfect space control, a wise execution that does not rule out that craftsman’s knowhow which American minimalists would refuse out of hand for ideology’s sake, the multi-sensorial involvement in the perception of the work, starting with that tactile sensitivity set upon velvety, sensual surfaces, engrossing in their depths.

Yet, were we to stop at this level of aesthetic observation, we would do a disservice to a work the ethical sense of which is first and foremost a necessity, where doing always has a meaning and a logic for an artist who, with half a century of career behind him, has never stopped feeling that he is in the trenches. For example, giving up the definite totality of the painting to break the surfaces, exiting the predetermined boundary of the frame, invading the wall and posing, amongst the first ones, the question of space, not in the sense of three-dimensional occupation, sometimes invasive but rather of going beyond the Syntactic-grammatical rules, is this not perhaps a revolution at the root of the language?

He said in a recent interview with Giorgio Verzotti published on “Flash Art”: “my vision is a fundamental part of my work, but there is also a tactile, sensory involvement that invites you to touch, feel, and see. Certainly art is thought. Thinking and doing. Doing and thinking”. The skin of painting, in brief.

Pinelli, from the beginning, never understood painting as a resistive fact, a nostalgic, creation suspended in an almost non-metaphysical time that will be the expressive must in the 1980s. Rather, as always calling into question those acquired certainties, which are able to draw out the essence every time, getting right to the point. There is no further possibility: painting is always and only a mental fact. It has been so from the time of Piero della Francesca, who was not by chance Pinelli's theoretical point of reference, since it falls to us modern people the ability to move beyond the iconographic reading of the work and its symbolic meaning to mentally attack the structure. Ethics means first of all asking why things are so.

I would not waste any time now to put list some of those colleagues in the *Pittura Analitica* (Analytic Painting) current, whose freshness and actuality truly strike and intrigue us: if there is an artist who has had an equal impact to Pinelli, so deeply on the theory of painting, at least in his early days, it is Giulio Paolini. Not only for the dissemination of painting (or of what remains of it) in space, but also for the importance of its back, the B Side, the frame instead of the canvas, which overthrew the traditional perceptive concept of the spectator accustomed to the spectacle of colour and image. Pinelli, for his part, remains anchored to the front side chasing us with his notes of chromatic sensuality. Nonetheless, like Paolini, he affects structure deeply, he puts it in crisis, and he starts from scratch because there is no other way to reconstruct after freeing himself from rules and regulations.

Numerous episodes of a pathway marked by the coherence that made him immediately recognizable, Pinelli is certainly an extremely varied and curious painter; he could not have been otherwise, he who so much loved Fontana, who he often defines him as “my beacon” at the same level as Manzoni. From the ethical necessity, we are still impressed, so accustomed to and seduced (let’s admit it) by the figure of the artist-acrobat and his strenuous search for continuous theatrical bombshells, that, when they are finished, we no longer know where to go nor what saint to pray to. Of course, perhaps the biological clock of Italian art stopped a few decades ago. Not only art, but

also culture: cinema, literature, poetry, theatre, and music, even politics. However, if there is a claim for the status of another generation of that of the so-called postmodernism (which Pinelli does not like, or rather he distances himself as soon as he may) is the certainty that art does fall into in an evolutionary-Darwinian line. We ourselves decide what to choose, which object seems more appropriate and interesting to talk about of our time, regardless of when it was produced.

Pino Pinelli titled this exhibition *Pittura* (Painting). And it is about painting. In the trenches, which are not necessarily those of fighting, but even of doubt as well.

He confided to Giorgio Bonomi that, “doubt is the constant that accompanies my work. I have my artistic adventure with the consciousness and the necessity to face the febrile dizziness of experimenting every day”.

Written in Pietrasanta on April 25, 2017. And certainly not by chance.