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KALEIDOSCOPE

SOUVENIR D'ITALIE

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Analyzes the serene passivity of GIORGIO GRIFFA

a perfect balance of the avant-garde and the traditional, the italian artist adds a sentimental touch to the analytical approach of american minimalism, with a repetition full of difference and the ever-human fragility of nonmechanical execution.

It has been approximately 45 years since Giorgio Griffa began working as an artist, yet his oeuvre remains a kind of “simple mystery,” as it were, not entirely unveiled. His preferred media, techniques and processes are dully straightforward, while his reflections, layered influences and art-historical references are much more complex. A perfect balance of the avant-garde and the traditional, the analytical approach and the sentimental, structure and poetry, Griffa’s work has a kind of simplicity underneath whose surfaces complexity lies.

Born in Turin in 1936, Griffa grew up in an art context dominated by art informel, Tachisme and abstract-Expressionism, hence his conception of painting as the repetition of gestures and signs, and as a mode of writing and conveying inner sensations and singular rhythms. Around the mid-1960s, with the boost of a changing socio-political climate, new artistic languages began to affirm themselves. Avant-garde movements such as Neo-Dada, Pop and Minimalism made their arrival in Turin and, partly as a polemical reaction to them, the Arte Povera movement started to take shape. Like many other artists at that time, Griffa cooled down the temperature of his work and, between 1967 and 1968, his language acquired the unique attributes that continue to characterize it to this day.

First came his minimal tools and poor, apparently “weak” materials. On the unprepared canvas of cotton, linen or hemp, the artist applied color in lines and stripes of different width and length, mainly horizontally. Initially he used oil color, then, in the 1970s, he began opting for acrylic, tempera and watercolor. In 1969 he gave up the stretcher and started to hang his canvases by means of tiny nails. As he worked on canvases lying directly on the floor, the lack of a stretcher meant a better ability to move around and within the cloth, in a quasi-osmotic, close relationship with his tools.

The signs emblematic of his works are often horizontal (a “feminine” archetype), moving from left to right as in the Western manner of reading and writing, and stop before reaching the right-hand-side of the frame. In other works, vertical stripes proceed from the bottom of the canvas and stop shortly after, often at the center of the painting. In any case, the picture is never saturated: the “structure” followed by Griffa always leaves a margin of openness and indetermination.

Biography

GIORGIO GRIFFA (b. 1936, Turin) lives and works in Turin. He has had solo exhibitions at Mies van der Rohe Haus, Berlin; MACRO, Rome; GAM, Turin; Kunsthalle Düsseldorf; Kunstverein Brunswick; and at numerous galleries across the world. He participated in the Venice Biennale in 1978 and 1980.

Current & Forthcoming

GIORGIO GRIFFA is currently having a retrospective exhibition at Casey Kaplan, New York, through January 2013.

Author

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Whatever its thickness, direction and form, Griffa’s sign is always the recording of a predetermined process, of decisions that were made before beginning to paint. Every picture, then, is the result of a single movement that is repeated and unchanged, except for its color and direction. Whereas the inner rhythm remains the same, what varies is the timbre of the notes that compose it. You might even say that every work is a fragment of a hypothetically endless canvas.

Griffa’s work has often been related to Italian and international movements named as Nuova Pittura (New Painting), Pittura-Pittura (Painting-Painting) and Pittura analitica (analytic painting). The artist himself has repeatedly emphasized his distance from the idea of art as meta-reflection, and rather insists on the allusive, poetic and musical aspects of his practice. For Griffa, analysis is too much of an “active” process as opposed to the serene passivity of his conception of painting. Nevertheless, and despite the different formal results, he does share certain commonalities with these movements. Between the end of the 1960s and the mid-1970s, in a sociopolitical and cultural context of challenging authority and authorship, Griffa—like many others—sought an impersonal and “anonymous” language. The artist’s self is not given as an expression but rather as an impression: the sensitive, certainly not heroic, recording of an action that has no purpose of composition and representation. “I don’t represent anything, I just paint,” he wrote tellingly in 1972.

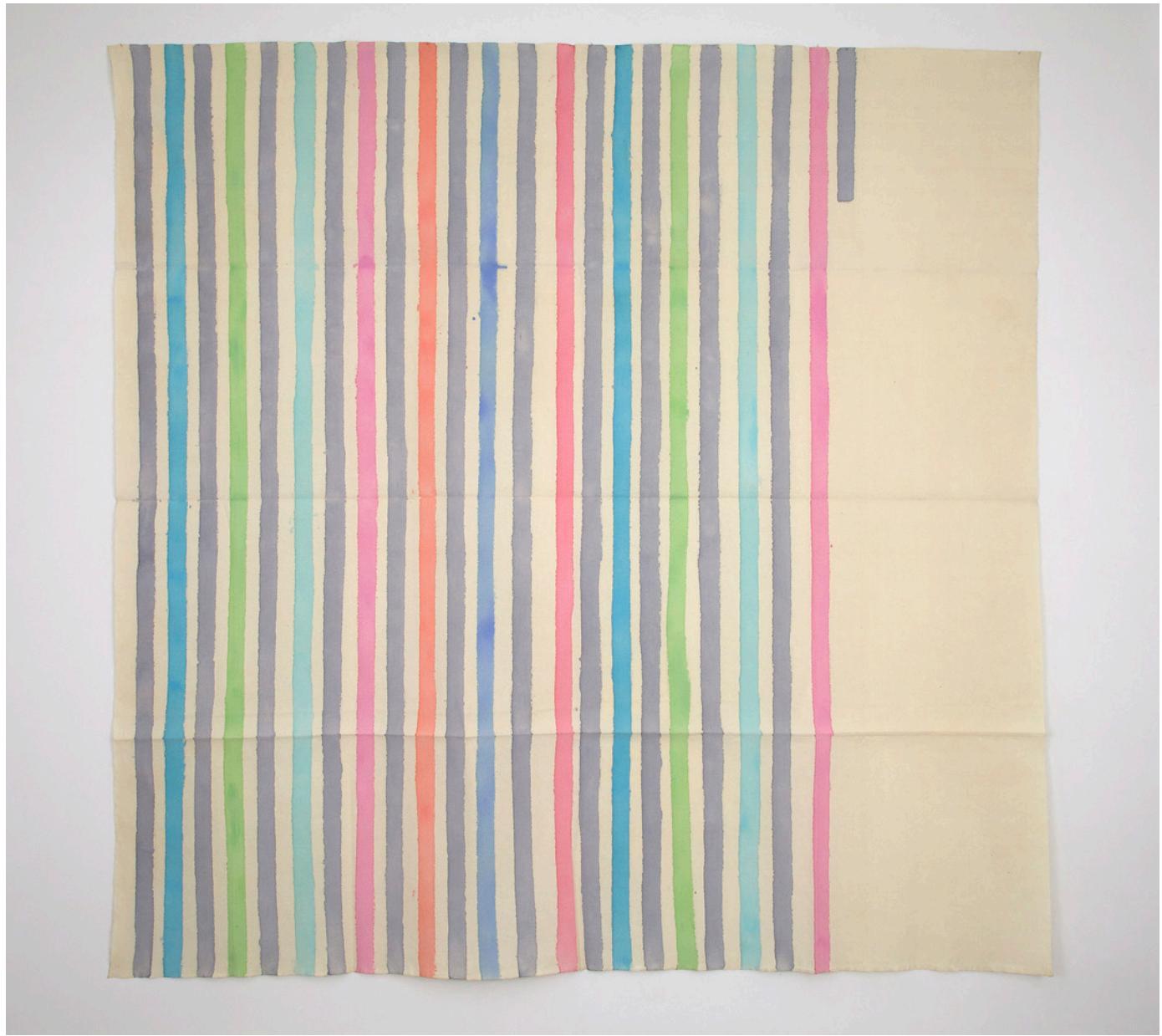
To paint is to measure the time and rhythm of executing an action, a space in between the French words *tache* (spot) and *tâche* (task). In this regard, Niele Toroni’s practice also comes to mind, with its depersonalized manual operations that are continually repeated without variation, and which obey a given set of rules and use a given set of tools. If Toroni defined himself as a “painter rather than an artist,” Griffa, in a catalogue dated 1984, described his own work as “house painting.” What they have in common, then, is the gesture of merely applying color on a surface, with the focused “passivity” of the self-immersed in the very craft of painting.

Nevertheless, and like many other Italian artists at that time, what distinguishes Griffa’s work is not the radical extremism with which he explored the possibilities of the avant-garde, as if unfolding the resolution of a theorem.

Policromo, 1976



Verticale, 1976



Quasi Dipinto, 1968 (detail)



Obliquo, 1975



Instead the depersonalization pursued by american Minimalism, french new painting (such as the BMPT group) and Conceptualism evokes Taylorist modes of production through the repetition of forms and gestures within mathematical and structural patterns. The artist's intervention is as close as possible to the machine's: every trace of gesture, every "impression" of the body on the work is controlled in a form of repetition that leaves no trace or, rather, is identical to each other. in much Italian art of that period, this dominant language is "corrupted" by the use of unpredictable natural materials and a certain manual skill—although this skill might simply delegated to another person, as in the case of Boetti, which lend the works the ability to account for diversity and change. as Griffa noted in a lecture in rome in 1979, "the apparent repetition of the predetermined order of strokes, is in fact a metaphor of the novelty of every act of life," in which "every sign is exemplary in its own right." in other words, Griffa's repetition is full of difference.

If minimal and conceptual oriented art movements aspire to a practice that proves an assumption and verifies a system, italian art, including Griffa's oeuvre, conversely enters and engages a process of recording and knowledge. if the former is art as idea, the latter is art as phenomenon. Compared to the impersonal, mathematical rigor typical of analytical painting, his use of predetermined rules, the economy of mediums and the repetition of gestures are all in the service of an attitude that is actually more reminiscent of Zen discipline. although extremely contained, Griffa's gesture conveys the smudges and imperfections of color application, the uncertainty of sign, the ever-human fragility of nonmechanical execution. Establishing an even relationship with the mediums employed, Griffa's interventions become sensitive recordings of the relationship between material and support,

transferring an inner time, rather than a mechanical reproduction and possibly alienating practice, onto the canvas. This practice of painting as recording, this observation of painting in its doing, contributes to what the artist, in the same 1979 lecture, defined as a "process of getting knowledge of the world."

Though the ideas of the fragment and the unfinished have been present in his work since the beginning of his artistic maturity, at the threshold of the 1970s Griffa began to explore the possibilities inherent in overlapping and combining different canvases into larger installations. Consider, for example, *Frammenti* (fragments) and *Dioniso* (*Dyonisus*), both from 1980. in the following years Griffa freed himself from the severity typical of the 1970s and started adopting a more hedonistic language, with larger color fields, richer shades and signs drawn from a vast repertoire of decorative motifs, such as arabesques, Greek frets, spirals and waves. The rhythm of these paintings became nimble, agile and dynamic. Polyphony replaced monody.

During the 1980s, an era characterized by neo-Expressionist and neo-figurative painting and by a neo-historicist wave, Griffa maintained an iconoclastic language enriched with art-historical references, quotations and fragments from the vast vocabulary of painting. among these, a special place was occupied by Matisse, dear to Griffa for restoring the original purity and expressivity of painting with his signature combination of primitivism and modernity, archaism and progress. Quotations from past artists including Matisse as well as Piero della francesca, Tintoretto and Sonia Delaunay arise alongside references to contemporaries such as Giovanni anselmo, Daniel Buren and Mario Merz. Treated by Griffa's synthetic approach, these iconographic memories "return" to be part of a repertoire layered over time, a centuries-old memory of signs in which,

we believe, his own painting desires to belong.

Over the years, it became clearer that Griffa's work aspires to exist in an imaginary space-time continuum, a dimension cohabited by the archaic and the contemporary, the status of mythical time and the progress of the present. in this perspective, the decorative motifs—whether drawn from Buren or from a timeless popular heritage—contribute to this search for a language endowed with a mythological quality. indeed, although in line with the 1960s and '70s avant-garde, Griffa's decorativism has ancient origins. it is rooted in the history and pre-history of painting and writing, in the ornamental motives of ancient cultures. Thus it is no surprise that, in a recent and ongoing series such as *Canone aureo* (Golden Canon), the artist combines mathematical series with brush signs in a form reminiscent of the calligraphic attitude of traditional Japanese art. Both his ornamental language and his productive methods (the canvas is laid on the floor to be painted and, unstretched as it is, can easily be folded and carried) are typical of a nomadic civilization, of an art based on the provisional and the anonymous.

Blending the premises of the avant-garde with historical memory, Griffa manages to create a consistent and harmonious body of work. around late 1960s, at a time when the artist's authority and authorship were questioned and criticized, he understood that, in order to gain a true modernity, it was necessary to be ancient again. Thus his gestures and signs are connected with a history of anonymous authors who have applied ever-similar, ever-different myriad traces on the world's infinite surfaces. To emphasize this connection is one of Griffa's most significant achievements and his true legacy to date.

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