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“Smith, Roberta, Review: Giorgio Griffa, February 7, 2012 <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/02/08/arts>”

# The New York Times

## ART IN REVIEW

Giorgio Griffa: ‘Fragments, 1968-2012’

By ROBERTA SMITH

Published: February 7, 2013



Jean Vong, Courtesy of the artist and Casey Kaplan  
Giorgio Griffa’s “Festone.”

525 West 21st Street, Chelsea

The floods of Hurricane Sandy interrupted an exhibition at Casey Kaplan’s gallery that was close to his heart: the Italian painter Giorgio Griffa’s first New York gallery show since his debut in 1970. Like most of Chelsea, it’s now up and running. It could hardly be timelier in bringing to light the work of an artist who reduces painting to its basics.

Like many younger artists, Mr. Griffa seems to test how little it takes for something to qualify as a painting. For decades he has used raw unstretched canvas of different textures and tones in a way that emphasizes portability. The paintings are simply folded up when not on view, which invariably makes the grid of fold lines part of the motif. To these surfaces he applies unruled lines and strokes that sometimes accumulate into shapes but often simply repeat for a while and then stop — as if in midsentence.

The short fat strokes of “Segni orizzontali” (1975) march edge to edge across the top of the canvas in pinks and blues, for only four rows, halting halfway through the fifth row. Other paintings consist of thin wobbly lines of color also drawn edge to edge, like an Agnes Martin version of one of Kenneth Noland’s stripe paintings. There are funny details: Of the three zigzag lines in the 1970 “Linea spezzata,” the middle one seems to carefully jump the fold, belying the work’s apparent nonchalance. In the 1969 “Macchie,” a swarm of pink dots scribbled with black pastel have left ghosts on the lower, bare portion of the canvas because of folding.

Mr. Griffa’s early efforts especially take advantage of the eye’s reflexive tendency to read marks on flat surfaces as pictorial but repay the effort with a natural touch, a playfulness that has its own kind poetry and a determination that beauty and deconstruction are not strange bedfellows. His art deserves a place in the global history of abstraction.

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# ARTFORUM



**Giorgio Griffa, Macchie (Stains), 1969, acrylic and pastel on canvas.**

consists of a tumbling constellation of acrylic daubs overlaid with scribbled pastel, was executed from top left to right.

The writerly disposition of this work dovetails seamlessly with a compulsion to foreground materiality and process, which is characteristic of the deconstructive era from which it initially issued. Indeed, the formal similarities it shares with the Supports/Surfaces movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s in France are striking, but it seems blessedly unencumbered by the unwieldy Marxism that beleaguered and ultimately rent apart its French counterpart. Here a kind of pure painting thrives intact, evincing a discreet but tenacious fidelity to its most basic components: paint, canvas, and the human hand.

*-Chris Sharp*

**Giorgio Griffa**  
**CASEY KAPLAN**  
**525 West 21st Street**  
**January 10–March 2**

“Fragments 1968–2012” traverses the past four decades of the Turin-based Italian artist Giorgio Griffa’s winsomely delicate production as a painter. And while changes in terms of content can be described throughout the fifteen paintings on view, fundamental constants remain. To wit: a commitment to mark making on unprimed and unstretched canvases, whose sheetlike folds are as much a part of their composition as the texture of their weave are a part of their fabric. Deploying a bright and airy Matissean palette, Griffa’s marks, which vary from vertical and horizontal stripes to zigzags to numbers, are manually applied in a systematic mode from left to right, and there is often a signature caesura in the middle of the canvas, as if the artist were stopping a thought midsentence: Even *Macchie (Stains)*, 1969, a personal favorite, which

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# THE NEW YORKER

## GOINGS ON ABOUT TOWN

### GIORGIO GRIFFA

Too little known, the subtle Italian painter has espoused minimalism-chastened abstraction of a sort related to the French Supports/Surfaces movement. Large unstretched canvases, gridded with creases, bear sparse marks-floating lines, hesitant stripes, odd curlicues-in pale, sweet colors. Insistently experimental, the works combine majestic scale with intimate touch. They impress, with charm. Call it Color-Field Povera.

Through March 2. (Kaplan, 525 W. 21st St. 212-645-7335.)

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## **GIORGIO GRIFFA** **FRAGMENTS 1968 - 2012**

EXHIBITION DATES: JANUARY 10 – MARCH 2, 2013  
OPENING: THURSDAY, JANUARY, 6-8PM

*"I don't portray anything, I paint." Giorgio Griffa, 1973*

Casey Kaplan is pleased to announce *FRAGMENTS 1968 – 2012*, an exhibition of new and historical paintings by Giorgio Griffa (b. 1936, Torino, Italy). Spanning four decades of Griffa's career, this is the first solo exhibition of the artist's work in New York since 1970, as well as his first in the United States since 1973.

The exhibition presents a selection from over forty years of Griffa's paintings on un-stretched canvas and linen. Throughout the past four decades, Griffa has undertaken a practice that he describes as "constant and never finished", adhering to "the memory of material", and to the belief that the gesture of painting is an infinite one. Within the finite frame of his canvas, each artwork becomes a site of collaboration between painting and the painter as the hand works to reveal a constellation of signs and symbols. This relationship is further mediated by the materiality of the works: the absorption of the acrylic into the fabric from each stroke dictates the brush's next move. The completion of a canvas functions as a suspension of this relationship. After the acrylic has dried, each painting is carefully and neatly folded into uniform sections and filed as a register of their collective life as a whole.

The artworks from the late 1960s and 1970s display the use of an "anonymous" sign, the simple and repetitive movement of the artist's paintbrush to create uniform task-like marks that serve to record the process of painting. These early, minimal compositions began with ordered horizontal and vertical lines that eventually gave way to the use of sponges and fingerprints. While this period displays a shift from the anonymous to the personal, it is united through the consistency of deliberate end points or breaks in pattern and reveals the construction of the paintings as an action interrupted.

Griffa's paintings actively resists perspective and narrative, instead favoring a cyclical connection to the memory of painting as an action. Time is present through aesthetic shifts in the work that are most notable by decade. These mark making variations reveal an awareness of the artist's surroundings and provide evidence of the time within which he was working. For example, in the 1980s Griffa's practice evolved to include expressive forms and brighter tones, coexisting with discordant arrangements of unfinished planes of color. He began to utilize a more concrete set of references in the "Alter-Ego" series (1978 – 2008), in which Griffa aspired to come to terms with aspects of painting's memory within the works of other artists, such as: Henri Matisse, Mario Merz, Yves Klein, Tintoretto, Joseph Beuys as well as imagery of the Romanesque and International Gothic periods.

This shift, from ordered marks towards a broad range of gestures, eventually led to the inclusion of numerical systems into his artworks in the 1990s. Still characterizing his paintings today, the "Canone Aureo" series displays Griffa's interest in mathematic and scientific structures that underlie our natural world. These infinite sequences, such as the Fibonacci series and the Golden Ratio, act as a parallel to Griffa's practice, and additionally function as punctuations in the work's vocabulary. They also determine and organize the signs within a work. Despite these varied trajectories, it is the act of painting that always remains at the forefront. Griffa said in a recent interview with Luca Massimo Barbero: "If these works have the power to speak and to listen, I'll let them do it themselves."

Giorgio Griffa joined the gallery's program in 2011. Solo presentations of his work include MACRO, Museo d'Arte Contemporanea, Rome (2011), Neuer Kunstverein, Aschaffenburg (2005), Städtische Kunsthalle, Dusseldorf (1978) and Sonnabend Gallery, New York (1970), among others. His work was presented in the 38th and 40th Venice Biennale in 1978 and 1980, as well as in group exhibitions at Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, Museum Abteiberg, Kunstverein Münster, Castello di Rivoli, Turin, Kunstverein Hannover, Städtische Museum, Monchengladbach, Kunstverein Frankfurt and Moderna Museet, Stockholm.

For further information about the artists or the exhibition, please contact Loring Randolph or Alice Conconi, [loring@caseykaplangallery.com](mailto:loring@caseykaplangallery.com) and [alice@caseykaplangallery.com](mailto:alice@caseykaplangallery.com).

GALLERY HOURS: TUESDAY – SATURDAY, 10:00AM – 6:00PM  
HENNING BOHL, MATTHEW BRANNON, JEFF BURTON, NATHAN CARTER, JASON DODGE, TRISHA DONNELLY, GEOFFREY FARMER, LIAM GILLICK, GIORGIO GRIFFA, ANNIKA VON HAUSSWOLFF, BRIAN JUNGEN, JONATHAN MONK, MARLO PASCUAL, DIEGO PERRONE, PIETRO ROCCASALVA, JULIA SCHMIDT, SIMON STARLING, DAVID THORPE, GABRIEL VORMSTEIN, GARTH WEISER, JOHANNES WOHNSEIFER

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## GIORGIO GRIFFA

### FRAGMENTS 1968 – 2012

To be men not destroyers.

(Ezra Pound, closing verse of *The Cantos*)

Richard P. Feynman, physicist:

"... a photon is absorbed by an electron, the electron continues on a bit, and a new photon comes out. This process is called the scattering of light. When we make the diagrams and calculations for scattering, we must include some peculiar possibilities. For example, the electron could emit a photon before absorbing one. Even more strange is the possibility that the electron emits a photon, then travels backwards in time to absorb a photon, and then proceeds forwards in time again." (from *QED: The Strange Theory of Light and Matter*)

Until just yesterday, matter was matter and light was light; time was inevitably past, present, or future.

Einstein already turned our yardsticks for measuring the world, time and space, into events. At least we could count on the tangibility of matter and the evanescence of light. Today we learn instead that a particle of light, a photon, can enter an electron—one of the particles that make up matter, along with protons and neutrons—that in turn emits another photon. One might say that when a particle of light encounters a particle of matter, they copulate.

The boundary between light and matter is broken, light becomes matter and matter in turn becomes light.

Arnold Gehlen, philosopher:

"... there is a resonance within us, and without concepts and without words, we grasp something of our own essence. What is interesting about this hypothesis is the notion of a basic self-understanding that starts from the outside, and hence a new possible understanding of symbol and metaphor."

(paraphrased by Maria Teresa Pansera in *Antropologia Filosofica*)

Today, as in the past, we can still consider ourselves capable of grasping things without concepts and without words; following Orpheus into an unknown that never becomes known. This, among other things, is one of the realms of art.

Roberto Calasso, author:

"The essence, *rasa*, of the Satapatha Brahmana, an unmistakable essence, not classifiable as that of a metaphysical nor a liturgical treatise, lies first and foremost in the uninterrupted sensation of focusing thought on the action in the very moment that it is performed, never letting go of it or forgetting it, as if the spark of thought can flash to life only in the moment when an individual being moves its body in accordance with a meaningful design.

It would be hard to find other cases in which physical life and mental life have co-existed in such intimacy, refusing to be separated even for an instant. (from *L'ardore*)

Rather than there being any conflict or hierarchy between the two, physical and mental life embrace each other. Like light and matter. The mind leads the brush and in turn, the brush leads the mind.

Giuseppe Ungaretti, poet:

MORNING

Immensity illumines me.

(postcard from Santa Maria la Longa, January 26, 1917)

The morning is not only that particular morning when the poet put this image on paper, but also all the innumerable mornings of humanity down through the millennia.

The morning that saw the dawn of the Copernican world was a stormy one indeed, which is understandable given that man found himself ousted from his palace at the center of the universe and packed off to humble lodgings on the outskirts of the solar system. Giordano Bruno's death at the stake and Galileo's trial bear witness to that drama.

And yet Bernini greets it with happiness and a sense of wry humor. Immensity illumines him.

That happiness lies in the discovery of motion. The straight line becomes curved, the golden rectangle turns into an oval, space opens up, solids empty out, sculpted garments weave a perpetual movement with the wind, and pursued by Apollo, Daphne turns back into a tree.

The wry humor laughs at hierarchies. The lion on the Fountain of the Four Rivers in Piazza Navona laps the water like a puppy, having laid aside its regal role, and the figure above it raises one hand to shield himself from the falling sky. In Saint Peter's the columns twist up through the air, and the square before it, which at the time was the center of the human world, is conceived with two centers.

The brush scoops up the paint and lays it on the canvas. The canvas absorbs it. The paint dries and while drying it changes and takes on its own configuration. The intelligence of matter is what sustains the operation; my hand is at its service.

And the event continues.

Innumerable photons penetrate those electrons and come out bearing color, image, memory, knowledge, emotion and seduction (this is not a scientific explanation, just an impression).

It is another morning in the endless representation of the world, where knowledge and seduction are stored.

Where do knowledge and seduction lie? In the neurons of our brain? In the photons that emerge from the painted canvas? Do the photons awaken them or carry them along?

In painting, as in music and poetry, there is an indescribable, unbounded native joy that intersects with our individual stories. Perhaps we know how it manifests itself, once it manifests itself. But we do not know where it lies, where it hides.

Thought, our principle reality, is still without an effigy.

A mere stroke of the brush.

Turin, March 28, 2012

Giorgio Griffa

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# KALEIDOSCOPE

## SOUVENIR D'ITALIE

### **Luca Cerizza**

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 saturate: 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

**LUCA CERIZZA** is a contributing editor of Kaleidoscope. a curator, writer and art historian currently based in Berlin, Cerizza teaches at NABA academy in Milan. He recently curated the group show Fuoriclasse (GaM, Milan), and published essays on Arte Povera (Kunstmuseum, Basel) and German artist Michael Riedel (David Zwirner Gallery, New York).

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 panting.” 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.

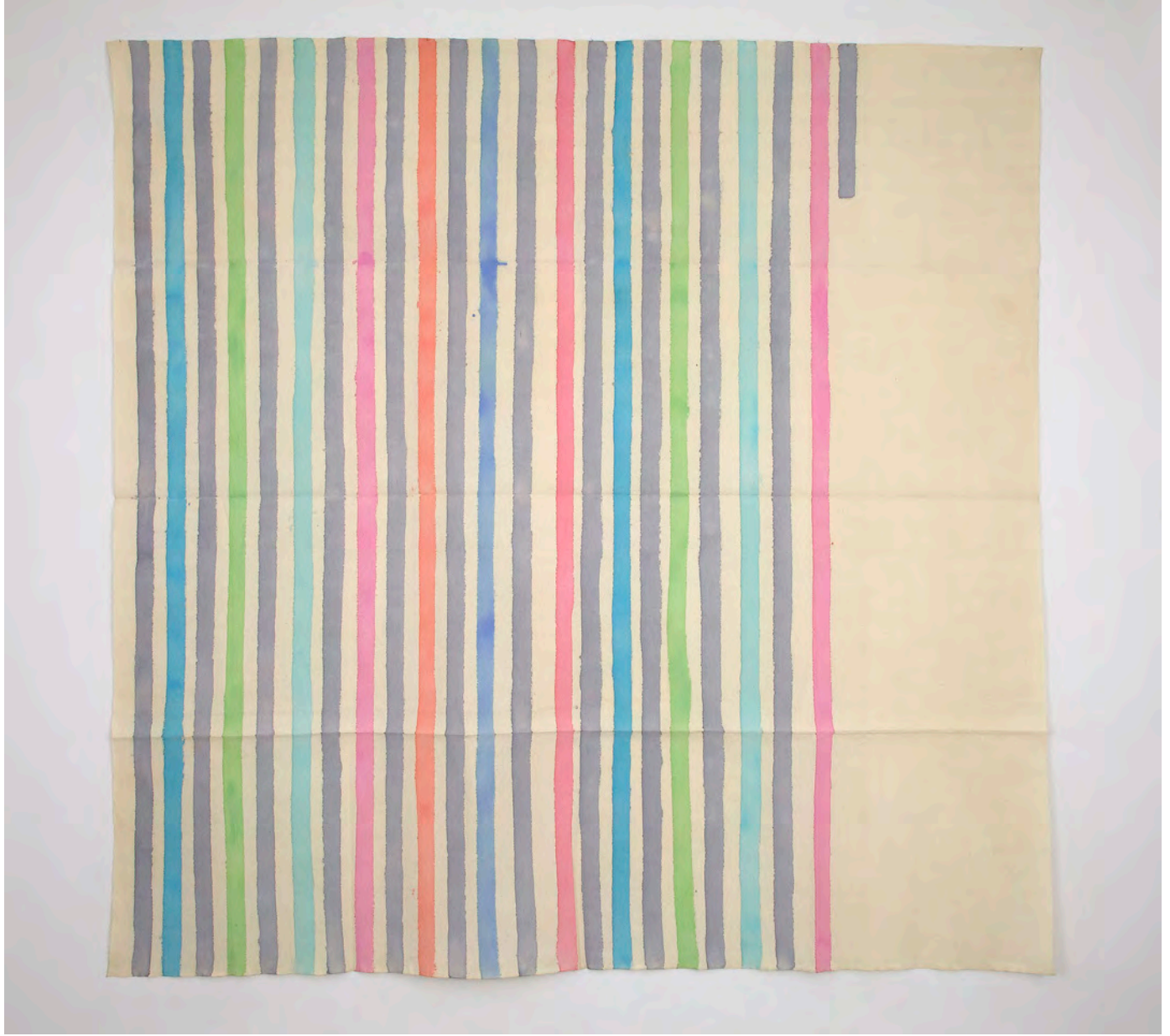
Nevertheless, and like many other italian artists at that time, what distinguishes Griffa’s work is not the radical extremism with which he explored the possibilities of the avant-garde, as if unfolding the resolution of a theorem.

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 be 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 (Dionysus), 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 stasis 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 prehistory 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.

All images © Giorgio Griffa,  
Courtesy of the artist and Casey Kaplan, New York, Photography by Jean Vong

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# Bloomberg

## Ending 40 - Year Hiatus, Artist Survives Sandy in NY Show.

Katya Kazakina - Jan 9, 2013



Giorgio Griffa. Festone, 1984, Acrylic on canvas

“Of course I was going to open with Giorgio’s show,” said Casey Kaplan. “I owed him that. The guy had waited for 42 years to have a show in New York.”

Griffa, 76, was born in Turin, Italy, where he still lives and works. He hasn’t been represented by a gallery since the 1970s, Kaplan said. Yet he has continued to paint every day, creating a large body of work. Much of it has never been exhibited or sold.

His last New York exhibition was with Ileana Sonnabend; eight years later, in 1978, his work was included in the international pavilion of the Venice Biennale.

He uses acrylic watercolor on unprimed canvas, applying a series of vertical and horizontal lines, garlands, zigzags, blotches and tiny dots that allude to writing and evoke works by Cy Twombly, Agnes Martin and Daniel Buren.

### Different Light

“The light is different in watercolor than in oil,” said Griffa in a telephone interview from his studio. “In my work, there’s memory of Italian painting. The canvas is nude on a wall. My idea of painting is that it’s never finished.”

When the painting is dry, Griffa folds the canvas as if it were a blanket or a garment, and stores it away on a shelf.

Giorgio Griffa’s first New York exhibition since 1970 opened just four days before Hurricane Sandy flooded Manhattan’s Chelsea art district last October.

A five-foot water surge hit the Casey Kaplan gallery, where Griffa’s show, “Fragments 1968-2012,” was on view. The deluge stained Kaplan’s ground-floor space on West 21st Street and Griffa’s canvases, whose prices range from \$17,000 to \$80,000.

Most of the paintings need to be restored, a lengthy and costly process that averages \$8,000 per work.

Now the gallery is preparing to reopen its doors tomorrow, with a new selection of Griffa’s paintings spanning four decades. The minimal, poetic canvases are pinned, unframed, directly to the walls with tiny, delicate nails.

Of course I was going to open with Giorgio’s show,” said Casey Kaplan. “I owed him that. The guy had waited for 42 years to have a show in New York.”



Giorgio Griffa. Quasi Dipinto, 1968, Acrylic on canvas

“There are pieces here that have never been unfolded,” said Kaplan, pointing at the vertical and horizontal creases that form as the work ages.

“His work had a tremendous impact in the 1970s, and he’s been carrying out his research into the relationship between painting, writing and mark-making ever since,” said Francesco Manacorda, artistic director of Tate Liverpool, in a phone interview. He went to school with Griffa’s son in Turin. “His investigation looks completely contemporary and fresh.”

### **Different Project**

A week after the flood, Kaplan flew to Turin to break the news to Griffa. While there, Kaplan also sold three paintings to the local museum, Castello di Rivoli, its first holdings by Griffa.

“Giorgio was generous and patient,” Kaplan said. “It was also part of the healing because we started planning a new show right away.”

The two selected a completely new group of paintings, spanning more than four decades through 2012.

“The first exhibition was nice but the second is even better,” Griffa said. “You see, the works need people. Without people, the work is asleep.”

“Fragments 1968-2012” is on view Jan. 10 through March 2 at 525 W. 21st St.; +1-212-645-7335; <http://caseykaplangallery.com/>.

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Press Release  
Berlin, November 2012

**GIORGIO GRIFFA**  
**GOLDEN RATIO**

Opening on Sunday 25th November 2012 at 11 am  
25.11 2012 through 24.2.2013



Giorgio Griffa, who was born in Turin in 1936, first made his name internationally in the 1960s as part of the Arte Povera movement. In 1970 he exhibited at the Sonnabend Gallery in New York and Paris. In 1969 and 1973 he took part in the avant-garde shows "Prospect" in Dusseldorf, where he also had a solo exhibition in the Kunsthalle. In 1978 and 1980 Griffa was represented at the Venice Biennale. His work is currently on show at the Casey Kaplan Gallery in New York ("Fragments 1968·2012", 25.10.12 to 10.1.13).

Giorgio Griffa's work is marked by an asceticism and modesty, which nonetheless radiates with a playful Mediterranean lightness. In terms of the "art of the simple" Giorgio Griffa works on raw, unframed canvas. These are nailed to the wall and painted with luminous colours. Griffa makes relatively free but sparing use of colour in the form of painted lines, dots or numbers. The work may be read as fragments, dealing with time and space dots or numbers. The work may be read as fragments, dealing with time and space.

Giorgio Griffa has called his exhibition in the Mies van der Rohe House "Golden Ratio". The golden section, also called the divine ratio, is currently an important topic in architecture. All the work in the exhibition deals with the golden section in the form of the irrational number 1,618033988749894848204586 8343656381177203091798057628623154486227 05260462818..... For Giorgio Griffa it is a way of approaching the infinite through the modest presence of a simple number.

Dr. Wita Noack (Mies van der Rohe Haus)

## Painting too is Knowledge

### Luca Massimo Barbero and Giorgio Griffa

**LMB:** I'd like to start this conversation of our by talking about your early days: about the artistic and cultural environment in which your first forms of expression took shape, drawing on the affinities or diversities of what was around you, and about how this emerged in your first exhibitions.

**GG:** My roots are in a traditional form of painting, in which the figures gradually became superfluous until I really had no option but to abandon them. This was in the cultural climate of Turin in the 1960s, with Ginsberg reciting his poetry in the basement of the Pezzana bookshop, his voice like organ music, the new theatre and new American cinema at the Unione Culturale, new jazz in the cellars of Via Botero, the Unione Musicale with its contemporary music, Antonioni and Fellini, Beckett and Ionesco, the Galleria di Tazzoli and then Pistoia. .. My long friendship with Aldo Mondino ever since the 1950s and later, towards the mid-60s, with Boetti and those who were to become the exponents of Arte Povera. In a world like that I found I had to deal with Informal Art and the climate was decisive for my early development. In the informal I saw painting at the service of scorching emotions and passions. That temperature needed to be brought down. By abandoning representation, I was able to shift my attention to the prime elements of painting, overturning the dominant position of the painter over paintings, and thus placing myself at its service-at the service of the intelligence of painting. In this I felt, and I still feel, close to those artists of Arte Povera, like Anselmo, Penone, and Zorio, who put their hands to the service of the intelligence of matter. A process that comes from Pollock's dripping, and from even before that.

**LMB:** In this context. I'd like you to describe how your approach to painting changed and became the radical analysis that is still so characteristic of your work today, and how you made your first steps towards this.

**GG:** When I put on my first exhibition in 1968, I'd already established some of the aspects that are still present today. One is the choice of signs that tend to be adopted by everyone and that come from a decision I'd consider more as one of ethics than of aesthetics, along the lines of a verse by Allen Ginsberg: "Every man is an angel": The other aspect is the constant non-finished, when painting is never taken right to the depths of the canvas. Initially it was a reflection on Yves Klein's monochromes, and the need to stop just a moment before completion, because in the meantime life has moved on-as Zen teaches us. Then other aspects became clear: avoiding the final point of closure that suddenly puts the work into the past. leaving a trace of time by suspending the sequence of signs that has been created, one sign after another, in both space and time ...

**LMB:** Your work speaks to the younger generations with the most stunning freshness and effectiveness, without losing anything of the clarity of your original choices. If you had to choose three fundamental shifts in this consistent evolution from your origins to today's paintings-moments of crisis or turning points, of reflection and choices-which would you choose?

**GG:** I'd say the first transition was my abandonment of representation, though I didn't make a choice between representation and abstraction and indeed I believed, and still believe, that the whole controversy caused immense harm to Italian painting.

The consequence of this abandonment was the choice of a painting that represented nothing other than itself. This was nothing particularly new, since a self-referential attitude can be found in all areas of knowledge, and painting too is knowledge.

In 1973 this approach acquired radical overtones with the decision to create only horizontal lines, and it stayed this way for about a couple of years. Probably because this increased my feeling for the centuries-old memory of painting which is encapsulated in



every sign, in the second half of the 1970s I felt the need to move in the opposite direction, organising sequences of different signs on the canvas. It's a cycle of mutual influences or connections, of which the Dionysus shown at the Biennale in 1980 was a part, with transparent canvases in which different signs all interacted with each other.

Numbers came in the early 1990s. Here too, the choice was not aesthetic. It was a matter of fixing each individual within the collective that was the Tre linee con arabesco (Three Lines With Arabesque) cycle. So number 1 was the first, number 2 was the second, and so on.

A few years later, in another cycle, the numbers gave the viewer information about the order in which the signs had been placed on the canvas, somehow emphasising the aspect of moving forward together in the space of the canvas and in the time of the action.

Meanwhile, from 1979 the immense internal memory of painting had led me to come to terms with some particular memories-first just occasionally, with years passing between one work and the next, until I realised that these works too formed a cycle. I called it Alter Ego. Here there are references to Matisse, Yves Klein, Klee, Tintoretto, Beuys, Paolo Uccello, Dora-zio, Brice Marden, Merz, Anselmo, the Romanesque, the International Gothic, the Laocoon, and others.

Lastly, there are these works on the Golden Canon.

**LMB:** In this sort of "evolutionary avant-garde" of yours, a fundamental role has been played by the relationship-which is not illustrative but structural-between poetry and painting. Also in these works for MACRO, we can talk of 'metre', 'verses', and 'stanzas' which form part of the genesis of your work. What are your sources in poetry and painting, and who are the masters of writing and painting who have had the greatest influence on your work, looking at it both today and retrospectively, as well as in terms of its future potential?

**GG:** Let me give the first names that come to mind.

Allen Ginsberg, as I've already said.

Ezra Pound's The Cantos.

Calvino's Lezioni americane.

Matisse, as I've said.

And of course, there's Mozart's music, with its inner happiness, which is so different from our personal feelings.

**LMB:** The room you've created for MACRO has a twofold form of vitality, as a complete, self-contained environment and as a set of works that is in itself

clearly recognisable.

I'd like you to describe the distinctive features of each of these works, but also how they relate to the others, explaining how they came about for this particular place.

**GG:** These works come from an inextricable combination of hand, mind, heart, eyes, canvas, colour, and brush, which means that I can't describe them and analyse exactly how they came about.

I can only say that, considering the space available for them, the first decision concerned the number and size of the works to put on show. This was followed by the choice of fabrics-two works on patina canvas, one on bandera canvas, one on light cotton-and then I made one on oblique strips, on another I wrote large numbers, while on the other two I used the numbers of the Golden Canon to establish the number of signs each time.

Apart from that, I wouldn't know.

If these works have the power to speak and to listen, I'll let them do it themselves.

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# Giorgio Griffa

Canone aureo | Golden ratio



**MACRO**  
MUSEO D'ARTE CONTEMPORANEA ROMA

Marsilio

# The Divine Proportion

## Giorgio Griffa

I bend over to spy on the secret processes,  
to obey rather than to command.

Henry Miller

1.618033988749894848204586834365638117720309179805762862135448622705260462818..

.....

The exact value of the golden ratio corresponds to a number which never ends-mathematicians speak of it as an irrational number.

Euclid defined the golden ratio, also known as the divine proportion, by dividing a segment according to the extreme and mean ratio, where as the whole line is to the greater segment, so is the greater to the lesser. The result is this interminable number, which has never ceased to arouse awe and wonder over the centuries.

Even more awesome is the fact that scholars have discovered sound evidence of the existence of this golden ratio from a time far pre-dating Euclid: in some Assyrian-Babylonian relief sculptures, in the Cheops Pyramid and in the Parthenon.

Most likely Euclid gave mathematical form to an aesthetic criterion that people had known about for centuries, creating this equilibrium without actually being aware of the mathematical principles behind it, or possibly availing themselves of some particular knowledge which was subsequently lost. We artists, on the other hand, create the golden rectangle by means of an extremely simple geometrical operation that has no need for the intriguing aid of mathematics.

The golden rectangle has long been part of collective experience and is to be found quite commonly, whereas the golden number has been largely restricted to specialists. And yet it possesses an extraordinary symbolic and cognitive significance in terms of collective knowledge.

As far as time is concerned, this number has been with us for roughly 2,300 years and will doubtless go on for centuries, for millennia, for millions of millennia, without end.

Forever.

Until the end of time.

It is a way of glimpsing the infinite through a modest little number.

If, however, we consider it from the spatial point of view, an equally puzzling aspect emerges.

Despite the infinite sequence the number does not progress, nor does it ever reach the next one.

1 never becomes 2.

1.6 will never become 1.7. And 1.61 will never become 1.62.

The number does not advance even a millimetre in space.

If I take 1 metre as my base measure, the measure in millimetres would be 1,618-which will never become 1,619.

It does not progress.

It spirals into the unknown.

In my opinion this aspect of Greek knowledge is confirmation of an awareness in art that stretches back as far as Orpheus. When original wisdom, sophia becomes philosophy (that is, the path of knowledge), knowledge of that deep unknown that science can never fathom is assigned to the realm of poetry. Orpheus descended into Hades, he physically entered the unknown. The songs of Orpheus recount the lives of the gods, choosing a subject which science has absolutely nothing to tell us about. And we are not talking about superstition here. I would say that we are dealing rather with knowledge arrived at indirectly, by metaphor, by analogy, through knowledge of various aspects of that deep unknown that lies within us and which cannot be known directly without depriving it of its significance.

Brought to the surface, it would simply dissolve. Orpheus turned back to look at Eurydice and she vanished. The gaze of reason obscures the unknown, dissolves the unutterable.

Modern art has focused attention on the most intimate elements of its representative memory. This would include the quest for the unknown and ineffable, using the state of knowledge prevailing at that particular time. Thus we have Piero della Francesca and perspective in the Ptolemaic universe, the Venetians and the Baroque of the Copernican world, Monet, Matisse and so on, up to Einstein.

Heisenberg's uncertainty principle belongs to our modern age. According to this, it is impossible to know the location or travelling speed of a particle moving in space, since the energy we expend in examining one of the aspects influences the other and makes the whole thing indeterminable.

This means, on one hand, that we are part of the phenomenon we observe—we look at the world from a window, but we are also inside it, and so our observation is modified. Equally, science recognizes that there is a part of the unknown that cannot be revealed.

And Gödel's incompleteness theorem, if I have understood it correctly, stresses the existence of part of the unknown that cannot be revealed, as well as positions or theorems that may not be determined within any known system.

Indeterminable.

Incomplete.

I would say that over the millennia a picture has emerged in which the unknown tends to migrate to its usual home, that of metaphysics, but also to drift towards the realm of physics.

It is in this framework that art and poetry fit—they are instruments for knowing that unknown that cannot be exorcised with words or translated into science.

And the golden number, plunging as it does into the unknown, creates a solid bridge between ancient knowledge and our present day condition.

I am seeking to understand the reasons behind this cycle of work.

I am convinced that images in painting, like those in music and poetry, by virtue of the inextricable tangle of the intellect and senses from which they derive, possess a pleasing ambiguity through which they continue to live beyond their time, not becoming mere relics of the past.

These pictorial images stand for the history and knowledge of their time, but they also go to make up the knowledge that shifts from age to age and from person to person, but which always remains similar, the knowledge of that unknown that lies in the utmost depths (which, if it becomes known, cannot be uttered).

Each of us finds his self, his innermost being, in these images.

I therefore have to choose a different approach from an inevitably personal reading of the works. I have to look at what they stem from...

My training as an artist was rigorously figurative. I rejected the labels of Abstract or Informal, though I gratefully acknowledge my debt to them.

It just came about that figures became superfluous in my painting, superimposed and extraneous—so I had no choice but to abandon them. That was when my painting really began in earnest.

Today I realise that when in the early seventies I came on the scene with the slogan “I don’t represent anything, I paint’”: this was probably down to the fact that I had abandoned figurative depiction and I hadn’t gone down the road of the abstract depiction of utopia, nor of emotional or informal painting.

With the passing of time, I think that because I stuck with my decision not to represent, I realised that it is the painting itself that naturally conveys these aspects—representation, intellect, emotion—bringing along its inbuilt memory, without the need for me to superimpose a memory of my own.

I consider myself to be a traditional painter in the sense that I abandon myself into that millennia-old memory. In the eighties I had an exhibition entitled “30,000 years of memory’:

And I feel (though perhaps heretically) figurative, abstract and informal, all at once.

Figurative because the signs that chase each other around on the canvas narrating their becoming are figures, and because the representation of nature persists through metaphor, rhythm, the blending of time and space, the intelligence of matter measuring itself with that of man, the collective quality of the signs drawn on the canvas—each identical but subtly different from the other, analogously with the organic and inorganic world, men or horses, leaves or crystals...

And obviously I consider myself to be a child of the abstract and informal, since my signs never cross the threshold of the figurative.

But the difference between my work and these is substantial.

There has been a sea change.

There, a hierarchical relationship of domination still prevailed—painting was at the service of the artist, the raw material the artist had to give life to.

Here, on the other hand, the relationship is two-sided, the hand of the artist at the service of the painting, of his physical intelligence and of the millennia-long memory man has endowed it with. The work, indeed, is born of this collaboration, the painter himself also being an instrument of becoming, a simple tool rather than emulator of the Creator.

From this condition derive various work cycles, which continue to exist one alongside the other, since they are not transitions from a stage of dying to a stage of being born, they do not show any progress but are simply different aspects of becoming.

Numbers have also come into play.

The number is a sign, an image used at the service of something other than itself, similar to what happens in painting. But it is not painting and so I couldn’t use numbers outside their function—they would have become unacceptable decorative tinsel in my work, in which decoration is to be taken for its creative rather than ornamental value.

Thus in the cycle *Tre linee con arabesco* (Three lines with arabesque) I have used numbers to collocate, to catalogue the individual works within the cycle—number one was the first work, number two the second, and so on.

In the numbering cycle, however, the numbers indicate, in each work, the order in which the signs or colours have been laid on the canvas, one after the other in space and time.

Indeed I might say that this golden section, or divine proportion, cycle originated in the awareness that humanity has assigned to this number a profound memory of the unknown, the infinite, the unutterable, and that this number denotes such a memory. The next step on from numeracy, let us say, just as painting is the next step on from the drawing of an apple.



Left: Sezione aurea Finale 868, 2009, acrylic on canvas. 240 x 195 cm. Courtesy the artist  
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## Giorgio Griffa

Canone aureo | Golden ratio



**MACRO**  
MUSEO D'ARTE CONTEMPORANEA ROMA

Marsilio

# The Breath of Painting

## Giorgio Griffa and the Natural Discipline of the Golden Ratio

### Francesca Pola

When attempting to define the potential trajectories of Griffa's work, we constantly and inevitably come up against his cyclical, conflicting processes. This is a prolific internal dialectic that, since the 1960s, has always remained faithful to the original premise of his artistic approach, which is transformed by a linguistic consistency that is as rare as it is complex. It dissolves and disperses the conventional instruments and coordinates of painting in order to make it a place of space-time expression and an active terrain for authentic creation. A place where it is possible to 're-trace' the world without imitating or constricting it but rather freeing it, in its most authentically human dimension, in the form of image. This is why Griffa's painting does not create 'pictures', but 'places'. And his paintings are human places, made of canvases, colours, signs, and impressions, just as the walls and rooms that they inhabit and bring to life are human. It is often the setting itself that forms them, as in the case of the works for this exhibition at MACRO, for they have been based around the coordinates of the gallery that contains them. Griffa chooses his dimensions, materials, and signs in relation to their particular locations and, at the same time, he establishes an independent universe of meaning within each one. Oximoronic, this universe is both complete and unfinished, in precarious balance but also, and especially, as free as a living, thinking organism. A sort of micro-macrocosm.

Griffa's work on the golden ratio—a specified, infinite number adopted as a creative horizon—brings out a dimension of exactness that transforms the meaning behind his painting. He translates the universal flow of cosmic space-time into measurable portions, extrapolating them from the sequence of the golden number in a manner that is as arbitrary as it is circumscribed. The MACRO gallery, which is based on these conceptual coordinates, consists of four large canvases, each with its own materials and processes: a sweeping tale and a narrative that unfolds horizontally (Sezione aurea - Obliquo - Finale 6281); a spatial calculation given by the sequence of numbers (Sezione aurea - Grossi Numeri - Finale 754); and a dialogue between numerical code, sign and colour (Sezione aurea - Linee Orizzontali - Finale 398 and Sezione aurea - Segni Verticali - Finale 482). What is surprising about his painting, which appears to have a natural discipline of its own, is that each work brings us into a dimension of creativity that is fresh and new, which neither contrasts with its radical nature, nor dilutes it. On the contrary, it strengthens it. In his purposeful multi-directionality, it is as though Griffa were attributing a sense of total painting to each of these events, conferring upon them an ever-hanging, permanent presence that comprises both past and present in a constant, rhythmical oscillation. In this pulsating place, it is as though we were inside the breathing of the cosmos. In this inexorable, prolific progress of the golden number, and in the intentional absence of absoluteness that turns it into inevitable fragments, the viewer witnesses a dialogue between rationality and desire that, by contrast, always finds its own equilibrium.

Numbers found their way into Griffa's work in the early 1990s, in the *1(e) linee con arabesco* and *Numerazioni* series. This is a reflection on time and progression, on tracing out a possible trajectory of humanity and of decisions regarding the uncontrolled flow of the cosmos. In recent years, the choice of the golden section—as an idea of proportion—makes this relational dimension of his painting even more explicit in its search for a potential alliance between finite and infinite. In his essay on the divine proportion (*La divina proporzione*), Griffa stresses the dialectic between time and space that is such a feature of the golden number: a progressive, infinite time in opposition to



an immobile, finite space. He quotes the scientific references of these investigations: Heisenberg's uncertainty principle and Gödel's incompleteness theorem. And he insists on the idea of evolution and change.

For Griffa, numbers are not so much a method of applied compositional organisation as the possible structure of humans as constantly transforming biological-and ethical- beings. The action with which he 're-traces' this on the canvas is the breathing of painting: the place where the finite and the infinite come together, in which the collapse of space-time gives rise to a new reality. This makes the painting at once a living organism and a regulating abstraction, while the act of painting is a form of writing with the same infinite number. It is a sign and signal of possible knowledge and it is this physiological dimension, this idea of germination which is inherent in the golden number, that makes Griffa's work immune from any risk of being interpreted in a purely formal manner. The method of construction of the work does not deplete its meaning, for the number gives life to the image neither through composition nor through accumulation, but through a mechanism of spontaneous, controlled generation. Tommaso Trini perspicaciously sensed the 'organic' dimension of this meticulous approach to painting: '...So painting means having the colour penetrate the canvas, following its texture, its ability to absorb, its folds, and the care (and psychophysical tension) of the brushstroke: the direction and width and undulation of the line of colour is no more than a passive recording of these fundamental choices. Rather than an autobiographical projection of the painter, at most we find the halo of the absorption of colour. An electroencephalogram, the active registration of the impulses of the brain in a state of passiveness and relaxation: this is the only possible analogy for these paintings.'

Thus it is that the cerebral metaphor can also be shifted to Griffa's current painting practice, with which he attempts to reconnect our rational and emotional cognitive coordinates by plunging us into the amniotic liquid of painting, overriding any hierarchy of vision. Griffa takes us into the very act of painting, with his colours constantly diluted and absorbed by the canvas, with their dissolving acting as the physiological sign of an unknowable destiny, their mercurial fluidity as an inescapable dimension. These are not just symbolic interpretations of his way of working, but organic observations imposed upon us by the image itself, by the destiny of consubstantiality between begetter and begotten, painter and painting, and man and universe. When immersed in painting, the brain is also the place where memory is fertilised, once again offering confirmation of how Griffa's discourse-even though it may concern the statutes, codes and constitutive elements of painting itself-should not be seen so much as analytical or conceptual as humanistic. This is why Griffa's colours appear both ancient and newly born: they constantly feed on the great masters of the past while also being an ongoing meditation on his own works-not to recreate them but to revitalise them continuously and open them up to the new potential of man.

A biological memory that is also the code of infinity, a golden number that is a measure of the unknowable, in an organic rhythm of painting which, for Griffa, is the total action of the cosmos. Like a transforming lens, it is perfectly lucid and precise but never quite in focus, for it always takes us beyond what it observes. It takes us to the remote, future universes within us, which pulsate and expand on the unstable balance of the present.

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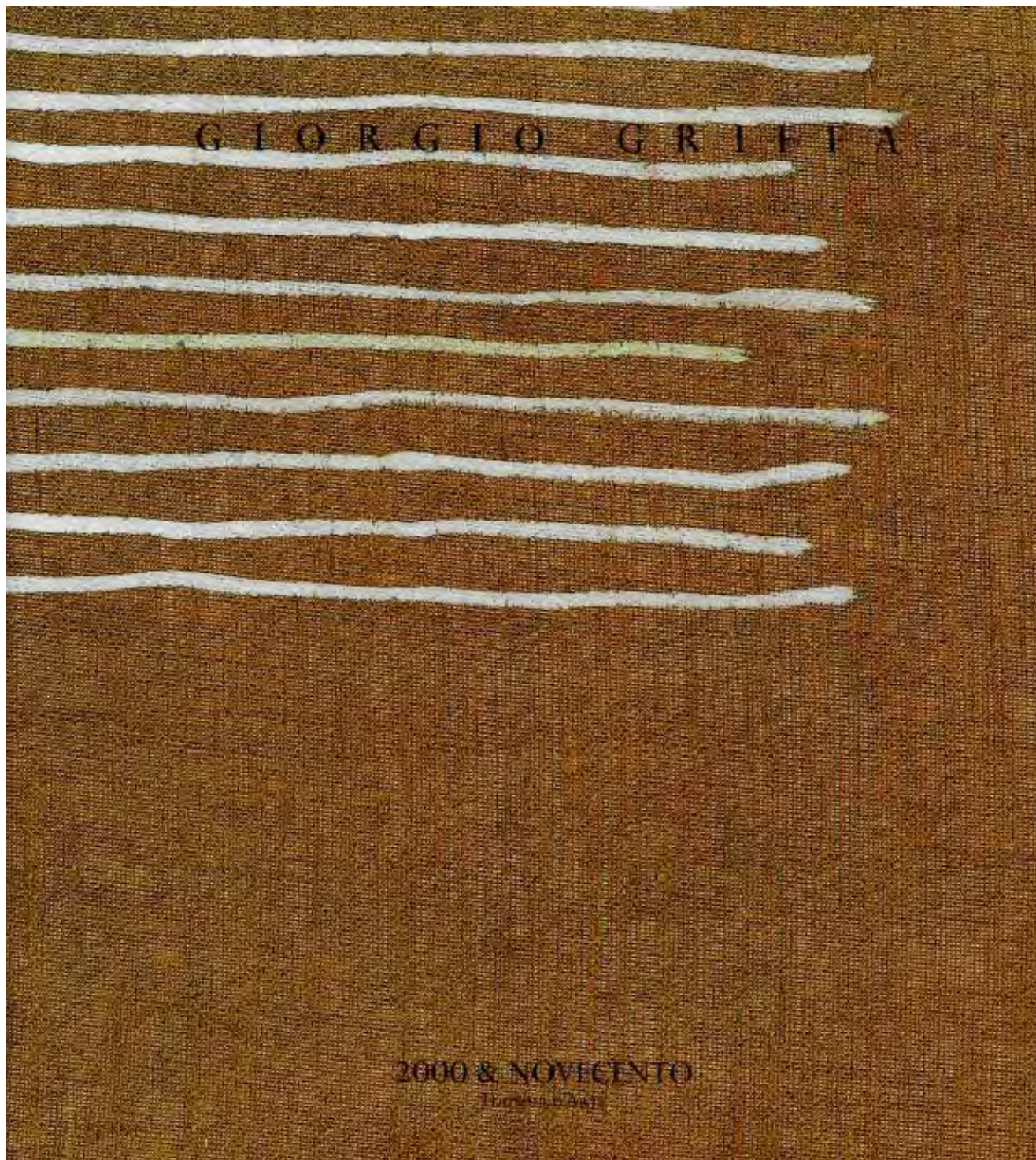
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# *From Marks to Music*

Luigi Abbate

Using the word music to outline the poetics of Giorgio Griffa can lead to many intermittences du Coeur: in other words, to emotional, intellectual, aesthetic, and cultural short-circuits. This is certainly not due to its justifiable if nauseating usefulness (the trite idiom *Ut Pictura...*), but it is, above all, due to what we might call the sensory characteristics of the work, quite apart from Giorgio's genuine attraction to the art of sounds, to his recognition of music's privileged position in, as he says, 'following Orpheus's path of knowledge of the unknown and the inexpressible.'

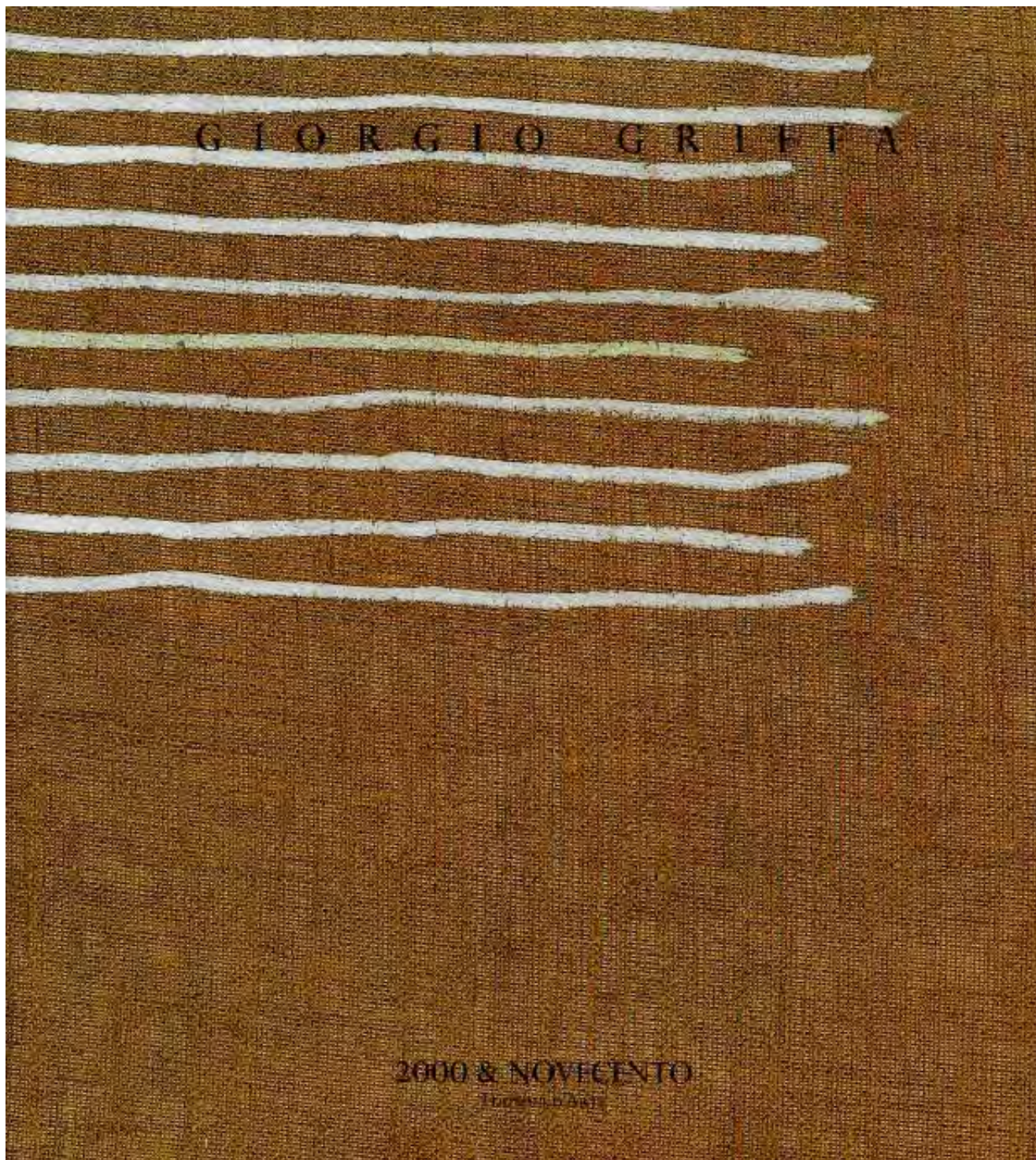
To deal at length with these short-circuits would be a useless repetition of the critique to which this essay is simply a prelude. I will, then, try to pinpoint just some of the possible places where my experience as a musician intersects the career of the painter Giorgio Griffa. These are personal notes, aesthetic-anthropological conjectures about a far vaster relationship between art and music.

Griffa's painting dwells in the world of marks and comes up against - and not just tangentially the wholly musical problem of deciphering those marks. Noble marks but, above all in his early painting, purposely humbled, and without that romantic aura that works of art use to define themselves. Raw-boned marks, stripped of any kind of mnemonic frills, and thus unlike, in music, a Bagatelle by Webern or - in recent aphoristic works by Kurtág - memory-filled "arias sung in one breath". They are more like certain radical experiments by Cage or Feldman or, if you will excuse my presumption, my own *Apax* for wind quintet dating from '84-'85, the Greek title of which, when followed by the suffix *legomenon*, means "never newly coined again, never repeated again". Composed in the '80s at a time when we were still unused to writing music with a computer, I notated it down almost maniacally by hand, perhaps also because the composition was the musical rereading of a strongly "marked" painting - almost a twist of fate. In this way the score could have its own graphic self-sufficiency. And so I discovered my fetish for a well-written page to be related to a more noble and precious fetish: the naked canvas on which the artist leaves his mark. A radical and extreme idea, just like the canvases by Giorgio some fifteen years earlier which, in the great self-reference of the vertical, horizontal, or diagonal marks, gave little or no satisfaction to perceptual succulence or the enjoyment of form and colour - just as I, at the beginning of my career as a composer, rejected repetition in music and thus the recognizability of the object (in musical terms: motif, theme, and harmony). Griffa was then to pass, as he himself has admitted, from his "Calvinist" period to a "Mediterranean" one. Just like me *Apax*, was never again to be repeated). And, I believe, like many others. As in my own case and that of others, this passage meant for him a gradual recuperation of memory. In the meantime, however, the rite of deciphering or not the mark has by now loaded Griffa's work with the esoteric value belonging to music: "*The artist is entrusted with the knowledge of what cannot be known*". And, almost as though to twist the knife in the wound, he continues by making his own the Heisenberg uncertainty principle, Gödel's incompleteness theorems, and Pound's poetic-existential dizziness. In his *Treatise on Harmony*, Pound explained with inspired clarity the problem of harmony's non-verticality: each chord can be perceived only if it persists in time, even if only for a moment. Music identifies itself and establishes its hierarchies in time: in the past we spoke about tonality (certain people still comfortably compose in this way), but today we talk about polarization, harmonic fields. .. Experience helps to mature the need for a deeper research into the meaning of art work, and the

relationship between “filling” the canvas and the completion of the pictorial gesture by way of marks has yet another musical correlation in the relationship between the executive gesture (the best... possible) and the search for Schumann’s *innere Stimme*, the interior voice that is written on the stave but may also not be executed. Griffa himself has spoken of his “... *wish to pass from an imitation of nature using external lines to one using internal lines*”. Not by chance then! The alternative of playing something or not (otherwise, *ad libitum*, optional *ritornellos..* .), and, in general, all the variables linked to the interpretation of a musical work, bring to my mind another particular aspect of Giorgio Griffa’s poetics summarised once again in a recurrent observation in his writings, a statement of his passivity in the face of material: “*To construct a work of art with the marks made by the hands of anybody*”. An extremely human, intimate way of considering Deleuze’s deterritorialization which, I must admit, upsets my musical ego: a disturbing attraction to artistic anonymity, a subtle inclination towards the *cupio dissolvi*. I also share with Griffa the need to debunk the romantic idea that the altist/musician must necessarily feel himself the repository of truth (which is, when it comes down to it, nothing other than a specific form of sagacity) and that, instead, he should not claim to impose his truth on others: a decidedly secular attitude. Perhaps we can interpret in this sense too the lack of a need for a canvas support as a metaphor/metonym of such claims.

But suddenly, and by contrast, a new theme appears on the horizon, almost as though to revive the paternal right, the authority, over the work: it is the artist’s work, his daily work, very like that of a composer or musical interpreter, something which is far more down-to-earth than non-experts like to believe. For example, by working with such materials as watercolours - “*which bring me near to the Mediterranean tradition*” - which permit the process of a marriage between them. And what is this marriage in music if not the so-called “*impasto of colours*” as it is defined in handbooks for scoring and orchestrating? Obviously this definition has been taken over virtually intact from the sphere of painting. And this marriage, in other words the absorption of one colour into another, comes about on the canvas on its own account. Griffa has said, “*I watched, like a careful and involved spectator, an action that was not carried out by me*”. This is rather like a composer who, when not playing himself, entrusts himself to his interpreter: so the composer is the listener/spectator of his own work. Yet again, the artist mysteriously lays down his weapons and trusts in the autogenesis of the work. During a recent conversation, Giorgio spoke to me about the “*intelligence of material*”: once again, an apt and true expression, applicable to many artists as well as being apt for composing music. I would also add: the generous capacity of material to accumulate information and vectorial potential. Generous because it is able to absorb and metabolise even dross - in other words tensions, suffering - and to translate re-creatively deconstructive/destructive urges.

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# *Giorgio Griffa's Boundary Painting*

Marisa Vescovo

The work of Giorgio Griffa, to be seen in the 2000 & NOVECENTO gallery, is very difficult to write about, even after having read just one of his books, "Cani sciolti antichisti" (1980), in which he carefully sets out the outlines of his working process. But seeing that courage is the basic requirement of any activity, I will trust to my feelings and luck.

The beginning of Griffa's by now forty-years-long activity was a thoughtful return to analysis, to the specific tools for painting, with a renewed attention given to the picture's support (the canvas, at first hanging freely and un-stretched), to colour (liberated from its denotative aspect became more autonomous), and to gesture, which determined both the field and the function of the boundary.

These were Griffa's interests from the end of 1967, and they have been labelled variously "New Painting", "Painting/Painting", "Analytical Painting", and "Process Painting". It was, in fact, a question of reducing mental and physical emotionalism to a minimum in order to pinpoint the notion of space and space-time through the physical fact of untreated canvas or hessian. It was a question of visual art as action or the experience of the reality of the body; or, in other words, the arm as it traces out a mark with the same morphological characteristics, though always differing according to the energy of the hand. The hand passed over the surface with a full brush and traced out straight lines of different lengths and arranged horizontally, vertically, or else hatched.

This work is closely connected to that of Conceptual Art, as Menna has underlined, and is strongly influenced by the language and ideas of a specific and autonomous art practice, even in the field of painting. We thus notice Griffa's rejection of the necessity for an object-like form for the work, and a re-evaluation of "making", something which had been put to one side by both Pop artists and Minimalists.

All the above refers to the first series of works on show, the "Segni primari", in which the idea or concept, by eliminating arbitrariness, chance, chaos, emotions, and subjectivity, exalts control, clarity, and sobriety; in fact, the carefully flattened and insignificant marks tend to highlight the process itself.

If we examine *Linee orizzontali* (1969), *Verticale tricolore* (1976) and *Spugna* (1977), we become aware that the two-dimensional polychrome mark develops according to a conceptual structure which is the work's intransigent aim. And here we can clearly see Griffa's wish to undertake a systematic attempt to eliminate any kind of empirical component, one for which the choice of method and order becomes fundamental.

Towards the end of the 'seventies, Griffa felt the need to "open up the work to wider implications", as a result of which different marks began to intersect, but they were always linked both to his earlier practice as well as to his extraordinary memory for past painting which he considered a source of enlightenment and suggestion. In this second series, which was concerned with "Connessioni e contaminazioni"; the layout and combinations of the marks mix and take on varied "forms" and "dimensions", the presence of which, however, demonstrates Griffa's typical additive process, while the combinatory possibilities create rhythmic and multiplying presences on the surface which never become objects.



We find all this in *Quattro segni* (1979), *Per linee orizzontali* (1982), *Incastro viola* (2008) and *Incrocio* (2009), as well as in other works where the amplification of the variations and their abundance of marks and colour, even though eliminating mental and subjective redundancy, underline visual richness, so much so that the lines are now free to break down the boundaries of classical geometry and to compose themselves freely and follow their musical instinct. Such other works as *Avanti e indietro dall'intervallo* (2001), *Angolare* (2002), and *Polittico* (2002), make us aware that painting, besides being a means for spiritual evolution, also demands a mental effort: a genuine creative contribution on the part of the viewer. In these works, in fact, the marks are part of a constructive and repetitive system which, on the one hand, is based on intense and evocative colour, and, on the other, transforms the wave-like movement of the lines into a vibrating continuum bringing to mind a movement towards the infinite. The linear or curvilinear "writing", guided by motor impulses, takes the place of what, in traditional painting, had mass, volume, and material.

There are inevitable transition areas between the visual and verbal arts, especially when one asks oneself about such things as the image's "aim".

It seems that Griffa, by starting from the remains of "mentally" fertilised painting, wants to show that expressive capacities are limitless, that every gesture can become a pretext for painting, and that it is almost always 'with this gesture that the man/artist describes and reveals himself. Painting can thus be established as the sequence of human gestures, full of manual and handcrafted naturalness, aimed at summoning up delicate and evocative memories of culture in the guise of both literature and of *joie de vivre*, as well as a musicality deriving from a succession of a-logical yet all-inclusive facts. The marks of colour following the action of the hand are not completely controlled, and they thus come about as events and testify to the vital association between artefact and artifice. This also means that the impact of the colour has a dynamic quality, a motory chromatic physiognomy, and that at times a colour, even before being perceived, can be heralded by the experience of a certain behaviour of the body.

Already in 1972 Giorgio Griffa had considered using as the title a show of his work in Rome the statement: "I don't represent anything; I paint"; some years earlier Rothko had said, "I don't express myself in painting. I express my not-self". Rothko's statement is to be related to his a-historic, a-temporal, and non-subjective spirit which was part of an originary-archaic dimension of life, the sign of the anonymity of visual perception. For Griffa, instead, the "millennial memory of painting has found, in the development of Minimalism, various Possibilities for allowing its immense patrimony (including that of representation) to continue to live without having to rely on obsolete structures). In Griffa's space-time dramaturgy, the capacity of his gesture imperiously asserts itself; in some cases it "dances" and gives rise to the "visible"; it is a gesture that embodies the revelation and indication of something else that stands beyond simple presence. So the effect is not coldly and rigorously anonymous, but extremely sensitive. Each painting is, therefore, a testimonial to a different knowledge of its execution.

At the end of the '70s he began his third series of "Frammenti". Griffa was to write about it, "The various canvases are cut up into tiny irregular fragments onto which the paint is applied. The fragments are then disseminated in the exhibition space. These selfsame canvases, no longer the neutral support for the painting but an integral part of it, become images and figures together with the paint that they contain ". It is enough to recall the installation *Frammenti*, 1979-80, to understand that these small canvases, covered with a just a few variously shaped marks and placed on the wall, do not offer any inherent certainty; they have no bases or points of support because their irregular outline shapes them two-dimensionally and frees them from any definite vectorial or directional position

-ing. Just like living bodies, they can adapt themselves to all conditions because they have no compositional problems. With these works Griffa shatters the systematic rigidity of his two-dimensional painting and opposes to it a multi-directionality and ubiquity that makes them become vital and free. By denying the canvases a single reality, Griffa affirms their self-generative existence. While being aware of all this, the artist is also aware that the generative act - even while only being able to derive from a network of allusions, debts, and quotations - needs, at the same time, a breach with, and a deviation from, the past. The question is not one of a rejection of the past: but if you love it too much then a really personal style of painting might slip from your grasp. Of course, if you want to paint you must see “everything” - even the past.



Griffa has said, ‘70s the ‘80s I introduced a more specific memory of painting into the work, the old problem of the cohabitation of marks which draw, and paint which colours: marks and field’. This 4th series, “Segno e campo”, leads us to the question of the primacy of mark or colour. In such paintings as Campo rosso (1984), Campo giallo campo verde (1986), Arabesco rosso (1997), Policromo (2003) and Ricurvo (2008), we can see an aura shining around a coloured mark on an “infinite” background. It seems to acquire a vibrant corporality and no longer shows itself just as a fragment of language but also, and contradictorily, as a fragment of a mysterious language that emanates flashes of mental energy. This colour-mark, oscillating between its own lightness and its attraction to speed, meets up with the “elsewhere”. For Griffa the mind is a sacred space in which to activate, as in a theatre, thoughts made up of fragmented words and chromatic paths; a place where there is acted out the abstract-colour-mark play of a world where its poetics are brought into focus, because the act of looking is also an act of reading.

We might speak of “a score of ideograms as weightless as aquatic insects” (Italo Calvino). But the insects are also graphic marks, the writing on a piece of paper, or the notes of a flute playing in silence, and without which there would only be the void-fullness of a world which can only be dissolved by what is light, speedy, and slender. As in Oriental or Orientalist painting, there is no opposition between mark and colour in these works because they are successfully based on their superimposition. The perception of colour had a fundamental role in the manifestation of alchemical ideas which, in turn, have made colour a language of movement which was to emerge as the music of colour in the 20th century. Griffa’s colour has an absolute solidity constructed from the most fluctuating material instability which seems to be obtained from the dust of some cosmicalchemical atomisation; a colour from space and, therefore, a stem cell importing the taste of an unknown colour. On Griffa’s canvases we find the colours of the beginning and end of a day.

Colour is considered as a means for arriving “elsewhere” or for hinting at the climate within the canvas or at the sensitivity of the artist; it is organised by a syntactic chain of marks that resonate against their frame of reference. The colours selected are neither opaque nor brilliant; they retain their latent radiance and suggest weight, but they remain as tender as certain skies by Carpaccio or Lono. It is never a question of the chill industrial clarity of Minimalist tradition but, rather, a strength based on a control of details aimed at a silence linked to the history and intensity of ancient colours. If we look at the various canvases called *Tre linee con arabesco*, 1991, part of the 5th series, we become aware that the various sequences of marks adapt to the series of works by imposing on themselves a unifying rule: three lines accompanied by an arabesque. And the arabesque, as its name implies, is linked to Arabic-Islamic, and at times Chinese, art; it represents the surmounting of representation. In fact it is not a representation but a rhythm, even an acoustic one, that acts through the infinite repetition of a theme: a psalmody. Arabesques permit an escape from the conditioning of time by also becoming a support for contemplation because they have neither beginning nor end: in fact they tirelessly quest for limitlessness. So this type of ornamentation is essentially a kind of negation of geometric closed forms. Schlegel went even further when he suggested that arabesques were even an originary form of human fantasy. The manifestation of the chaos from which forms originate into what we might call creation from nothing.

*“In the second half of the ‘90s I began the series with numbers which aims at imparting information about the way in which the development of the work was realised. The numbers indicate the order in which the various marks and colours were applied to the canvas .” (Giorgio Griffa).* Such paintings as *Otto colori* (2002), *Sei colori* (2006) and *Cinque colori* (2008), do not simply indicate the artist’s way of orchestrating colours and marks - I am now referring to the 6th series - but they remind us that a meaning has been given to the numbers, one that goes far beyond mathematical calculation. From the mystic numbers of antiquity to modern forms of superstition, each culture, from the highest to the lowest, Eastern and Western, has conferred a symbolic value on numbers: religious, philosophical, cosmological, and predictive.

The 7th series, “Alter Ego”, is extremely fascinating. Here the artist gives free rein to his historical memory, a memory that reinvests things with their full import and that can increase attention to differences, to hidden biographical data. His look at the past, and his stratified iconography becomes the just recipe for a search for themes, metaphors, and tales to be dipped into. As Baudrillard says, Art History becomes our “lost reference point”, in other words our myths, and, as such, it takes its place on the canvas. But, as long as the past and memory re-appropriate its meaning and accept its fragmentariness, then it is also necessary to distance ourselves from it and realise the difficulty of understanding it and its fragmentation which, at times, does not reconnect its pieces unless through interpretation and testing. Today, an artist like Griffa draws freely on the storehouse of museums

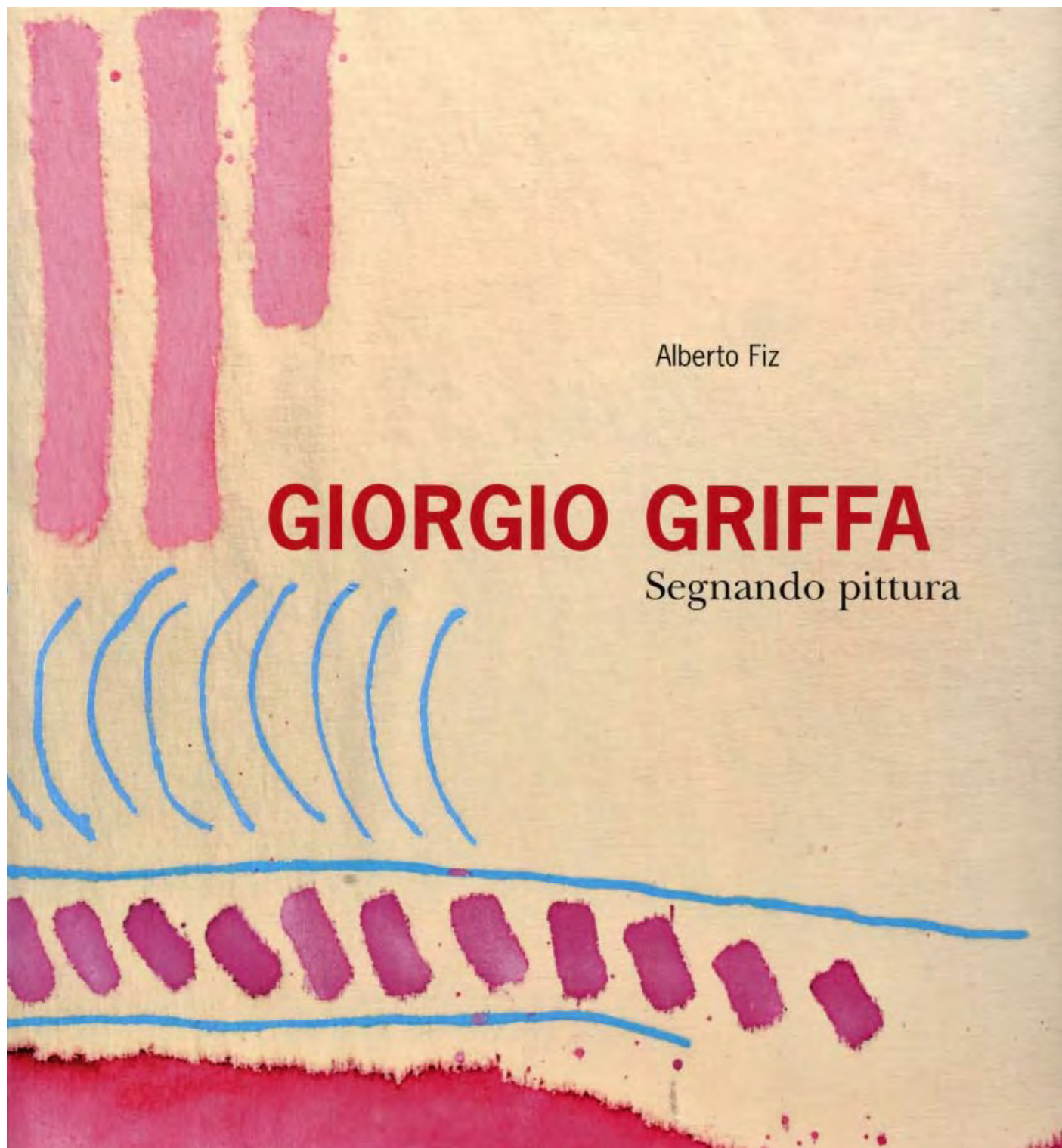
and art history. The artist does not search in the labyrinths of memory in order to debunk values but, rather, for “a comparative model” to be verified, symbols that might represent the origins of existence and action. In our case it is sufficient to look at such works as Paolo e Piero (Paolo Uccello e Piero Dorazio - 1982), Matisseria n. 1 (1982), Tre linee con arabesco n. 319 (Matisse - 1992), Luxe calme et volupte (Matisse - 1999), Fibonacci (Mario Merz - 2006), and Caro Piero (Piero della Francesca - 2008) in order to understand that this extraction of ideas-icons is purely mental or existential and is the result of his love for, or recognition of, data; these can then be transformed and restored to us through marks of colour without any hint of “appropriation” or quotation. So the works are tinged with an iconographic “desire” resulting from an activity aimed at dominating what is irrational and intuitive, while severe self-criticism elevates such thoughts and choices to the plane of aesthetic taste. What is immediately evident is Griffa’s passion for the magical colours of Matisse, someone who countered Cubism with an all-embracing idea of the whole and the greatest expressive complexity together with the greatest simplicity. It is a synthesis of the art - music and poetry come together, and the painting is a synthesis of representation and decoration, lines and colours: everything acts within the ultra-sensitive, though non-crans endenral, dimension of rh heighr 11 d lours. The group of works comprising the 801 “Sezione aurea” series rounds off, without exhausting, this creative period, a period begun in 2000 and that is concerned with the mathematical aspect of the “golden section”. Once again there are numbers, those studied by the Pythagoreans, also known as the pentagram, and which were also considered a symbol of harmony and from which is obtained the golden number, the analogical proportional element between the human figure and the subject of nature. In art the concept of harmony and its numerical laws have ruled since archaic times, whether through the golden section or spiral growth processes; they are known as the Fibonacci series or, in other words, a series of numbers that is endless and thus projected towards infinity. In this way a different vision of the world is suggested, after man had, for centuries, been questioning the value of images in relation to their object referent. The development of modernism has led us to go beyond its limits, even though these limits are not external but an internal frontier, an idea of a boundary, because it comes about at the point in which the visible and the invisible touch and where place and non-place are tangential.

This work about the golden section reminds us that also that if music is the most free form of empirical and everyday experience, the one most unbound by any kind of direct relationship with what language “represents”, then it can be affirmed that there exists an analogy between Griffa’s work and music. Deep down his works are visual “scores” of two-dimensional marks, “unconscious and intuitive” exercises in calculation where the execution is nothing other than the translation into marks of conceptual processes. In this sense the work of Griffa are visual “scores” based on silent relationships between concepts and processes. Each time we try to lend our ears to these sounds they die away only to spark into life once again on another canvas.

Each time we try to lend our ears to these sounds they die away only to spark into life once again on another canvas.

All the series by Griffa have a beginning but not an end: they are constantly developing poetic progressions. In this sense Griffa’s “travel book”, because it is a synthesis of varied yet coherent moments, posits itself as a complex regrouping of experience in which distant events are brought together and, as with the sinuous winding of a river, things interlace, disappear, come back again, and thus suggest the outlines of a temporal experience, but one which is different to the one enclosed within philosophical ideas about time, as time becomes meaningful because it draws the traits of temporal experience in a narrative manner.

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Alberto Fiz

# GIORGIO GRIFFA

Segnando pittura

# SIGNALLING PAINTING

Alberto Fiz

*“Rather than bringing the memory of a leaf to painting, one should attempt to place the memory of painting between the leaves.”*

Giorgio Griffa

Giorgio Griffa's artistic inquiry doesn't relate to painting as such, but rather to its persistence in an attempt to reveal its presence as the subject/object of a search for identity that has the real world as its final aim. The painting develops an inner conscience that asserts itself beyond our judgement and awareness, from the moment that it proclaims an unavoidable existence that isn't at all illusory. This is that “retrograde movement of truth” suggested by the French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty in a perspective where the datum establishes itself long before its definition, since it is itself accomplished in its memory. Griffa, furthermore, refers to a regenerative genetic code that tends to represent itself on the basis of a metamorphic process that is consubstantial with the nature of the sign.

From 1968, the year of his first solo exhibition at the Galleria Martano in Turin, followed in 1969 by the one at the Galleria Sperone, also in Turin, Griffa dealt with the question of painting through a very personal approach by structurally shifting the terms with regard to the codes proposed by the avant-garde movements. And from the 1950s, when Frank Stella executed his Black Paintings, the underlying question was that of limiting the personal effects of manual skill by avoiding any allusive reference to an inquiry that tended to be self-justifying. As a new form of tautology, painting represented one of the cornerstones of an artistic inquiry that rejected all forms of expressionism, lyricism or psychologism. Following the example of Barnett Newman, the artists sought to make painting impersonal by stressing its nature as a physical object, and this was evident, for example in the work of Robert Ryman, Morris Louis, Agnes Martin or Kenneth Noland. The fundamental question, however, was linked to the form of representation in painting that is necessarily painting as such. Everything passed through the elimination of the subjective element, through the reductionism of the pictorial gesture intent on conquering a new dimension where the artists distanced themselves from their own creature considered on the basis of its signifier and not according to its symbolic value. Ryman, in fact, said that he wanted to make a picture crossed by painting and didn't want anything unnecessary in his pictures.



Linee Orizzontali. 1969. Galleria Gian Enzo Sperone, Torino 1969.

In Griffa's case the relationship between painting and representation is interrupted insofar as its own action assumes the processual character that can no longer be circumscribed to precise individual elements.

The localization of the sign, which is intrinsically nomadic, precarious and transitory, no longer has any value, just as the dichotomy between painting and surface loses importance. At the same time, painting is no longer a tautological or metalinguistic tool, even though it determines itself as a mirror of reality. It is in the light of all this that we should interpret his oft-quoted phrase “Io non rappresento nulla, io dipingo” (I don't represent anything; I paint), which Griffa used for the first time as the title of his solo exhibition at the Galleria Godel in Rome in 1972: “I liked that statement because it meant I didn't use deliberately contrived signs or the representation of anything but themselves. But, at the same time, it also expressed the humility of painting: there's nothing more wide-ranging or important than its practice.”

Griffa works on the semantics of the artistic language, finding in the sign the only possible determiner in a process characterized by numerous opportunities when the action of painting is the only element that counts in a thrust towards the infinite variable. Thus the artist analyses the pictorial process by overcoming the artificial distinction between the signified and the signifier that between the language and the word - insofar as what counts is the action of painting itself, which contains the memory of its being and its practice. Griffa avoids, in fact, the risk of excessive formalization or of the academism of the signifier that Claude Levi-Strauss attributed to abstract painting, regarding it in the same way as the academism of the signified. His way of proceeding is not antithetic but, if anything, synthetic in the context of an inquiry where painting is an action that appears as the whole around which it is possible to reason.

The image, if there is one, exists in the memory of painting, in its innumerable peregrinations that eliminate the presence of the avant-gardes to make a tabula rasa, a clean slate. All this is utopia that clashes with the memory of the materials and with their previous indelible history. Indeed, in

his Treatise on Painting, Leonardo da Vinci asserted that, in a stain, "various inventions can be discerned, or rather what one wants to find in it".

From the end of the 1960s, Griffa distanced himself from Minimalism. Which was then characterized by the augmenting of the rational element in a context that aprioristically rejected the underlying assumptions of artistic practice. The execution of an artwork could not become a perfunctory affair, as Sol LeWitt argued in his Paragraphs on Conceptual Art, published in the Summer 1967 issue of "Artforum", insofar as it clashed with its permanent memory and its history in an event in which painting corresponds with the coming into being of the world, not with its fragmentation.

Moreover, already in 1968, in his catalogue essay for Griffa's exhibition at the Galleria Martano, Paolo Fossati explained the zero point "does not involve the elimination of every presence, but is rather the last space from which to check the means of differentiation and dissociation."<sup>2</sup> Thus there is an internal logic of painting that cannot be eliminated, not even by reducing it to its essential elements of pigment, stretcher and brush.

Besides, the first to rebel against Minimalism were the Minimalists themselves and, as early as 1968, Robert Morris - the year before he had started to produce his Felt Pieces in sharp contrast with his previous works - published an article entitled Antiform in "Artforum" in which he stated: "Disengagement with preconceived enduring forms and orders for things is a positive assertion." In a way, the abandonment of Minimalism was the other side of the coin of the Minimalist theory, which inevitably soon had to face up to the historical events of painting and sculpture. In an unpublished text, Griffa wrote: "Minimalist painting has never stopped the dialogue with the age-old memory of painting, even against the wishes of its exponents." And he added: "I believe that within it a line of thought has emerged in the course of time that aims to make these memories explicit without having recourse to theories of restoration."

In other words, apart from the treatment it received from the critics of the day, Minimalism was crossed by painting, which resolved itself by disengaging from the rigidity of the theoretical assumption. Artists like Sol LeWitt, Frank Stella or Robert Morris deliberately contradicted their theories by accepting a renewed reflection of the means of expression. Suffice it to mention the Blind Time Drawings produced by Morris from 1973 onwards, in which the drawings he made with his eyes closed, establishing precise rules for their execution, sought the profoundest memories while stressing the difference between the idea and its realization, as well as between the artistic language and the limits of the body. Griffa was fully aware of all this, having always rejected a hierarchical vision of art history, favouring a horizontal approach in which painting did not reject its own assumptions, but, on the contrary, expressed its age-old conscience - 30.000 anni di memoria (30,000 Years of Memory) was the title of his exhibition held in 1984 at the Galleria L'Isola in Rome - in a concrete act of knowledge

and reminiscence. There was no nostalgia, but just the silent gesture of the artist whose "work only consists of placing the colour in the canvas", as Griffa himself stated in 1975.

It was an approach to the practice of painting in which the paint was involved in an active manner, forming an integral part of the aesthetic result. And it was a simple act that developed manually without any aprioristic prejudice. This painting was the expression of a path that as both individual and collective, where Griffa performed his gesture in a frame of mind that, in an Oriental spirit, he described as "passive concentration". There was no need for a logo or identifying stylistic feature, but, once the point of departure had been established, it was the sign that suggested the way the work should develop and find its rhythm as a result of the first act. The memory with which Griffa worked was neither contemplative nor regenerative and the sign told its own story, reasserting that it belonged to the present time. The artist acted on persistence, making himself available for painting and settling down into it in the utopian attempt to efface himself by performing anonymous, apparently inert gestures and putting himself on the same level as his "partners" - that is, paint, brushes and canvas. In his work, in fact, painting progressively corresponded with the material and it was no coincidence that in 1984 he described himself as a decorator who distanced painting from his hand. Thus if the material was painting itself, this explained the processual logic that envisaged the transition of signs intent on developing their inner memory; these then became tools of a participatory work that could not be concluded because it was itself regulated by the principle of indetermination in a sort of absolute relativism. All this came about in a context that was fluctuating, liquid and, from some points of view, precarious in which the painted canvas, without being mounted on a stretcher, was principally a free space where the work had neither beginning nor end. There was, therefore, an identity between the indefinite aspect of the composition, which could only be seen through a series of fragments, and the action of the memory that affected each sliver of the painting and each movement of the hand and brush. In this sense, the idea of representation vanished for good and the screen of the painting - which had resisted even when faced with the attacks of the avantgardes - was now smashed into a thousand pieces in front of the spectators, who also became involved in the work, participating with their presence in its realization. "It is this that gives rise to the dynamic of an inescapable relationship of continuous toing and froing between the free invention of the mind and the verification of experience, a sort of ping-pong back and forth rather than a game played only in one direction."

Griffa showed himself to be an artist of great topicality thanks to his adherence to the contemporary world as part of his artistic inquiry questioning the very meaning of creation and the role of the creator who sacrificed his own aura by putting himself at the service of a collective sign intended to go beyond the finished work. The latter was an accident from which he freed himself by causing a devel-



Venice Biennale. 1980

development that went beyond the physical perception of the composition: "The wonderful discovery that everything changes and everything moves, and what appears to be still simply has different timing for its coming into being, and the equally wonderful discovery of complexity shift one's attention to coming into being itself. The signs that I place on the canvas are tools of this coming into being and, because of this role, do not represent anything other than themselves."

No longer the artificer or supreme creator, the artist was he who, in a maieutic manner, allowed the sign to emerge, setting the mechanism in motion and deciding the rules - for instance, the point where the signs began, their direction, thickness, colour and order, and the type of support. And it was he who, with his authority, planned the processual action according to a specific methodology that clashed with the tradition concept of style - that is, with the constant form of art described by the American art historian Meyer Schapiro. In reality, Griffa arranged the elements so that the process took place almost without his knowledge by expanding the range of action of the aesthetic operation, which no longer needed immediate recognizability in order to meet with the approval of the general public. No longer was there a logic of cause and effect with regard to signs containing their own memory as well as that of the entire social system. In this way, the risk of seriality was avoided and Griffa's work continuously modified itself by establishing parameters that, unlike what happened in the case of technology, envisaged the continuous metamorphosis of the sign. The programme established by the artist required continuous variations that, despite the

arbitrary nature of their development, were foreseen, although they were not identifiable beforehand. In this respect, Jean-Christophe Ammann wrote: "His canvases are a physical and mental extension sublimated by his corporeity, which expresses an aesthetic sensation. This immediate transposition is not linked to compositional criteria. The form is produced by the transposition adapted to the sphere of sensations."<sup>5</sup>

The considerations of the Swiss art historian were expressed in 1970 on the occasion of the important exhibition at the Kunstmuseum in Lucerne, which analysed the experience of Arte Povera in a broad sense and involved not only Griffa but also other exponents of the movement such as Eliseo Mattiacci, Emilio Prini and Salvo. If we reflect today on that exhibition of nearly forty years ago, it appears evident that Arte Povera was the movement most closely related to Griffa's work, much more so than Pittura Analitica, with which the artist is generally identified. Pittura Analitica, which was never an organic movement, obstinately asserted the topicality of painting, which the post-war avant-garde regarded as a thing of the past that had to be eliminated. The movement focused its attention on the stylistic and semantic problems that the media of painting posed. In this regard, I recently wrote: "Pictorial thought became radicalized in an idea of making painting that referred to nothing but itself. This is the liberated image that triggers off a process of modification of reality."<sup>6</sup>

In this sense, Griffa is a thoroughly "analytical" artist. But his detachment from Pittura Analitica - like that of other artists with regard to what was essentially a heterodox movement - took place in the presence of the processual element at the expense of the self-reflective and psychological one in a context where, for him, painting was a form of passive resistance when confronted by the excessive power of the extrapictorial materials. Griffa is very clear on this point: "First of all, the choice of the media forming part of the traditional ones of painting is not a theoretical choice for 'painting' in contrast with the other media. It's a practical choice determined by my conditions, knowledge, capacities and personal limits. For some time now I have maintained that painting must not be considered to be either privileged or reductive with regard to the other media."<sup>7</sup> Thus the artist calls for equal opportunities for painting, but, in this context, develops a procedure in which the work envisages an entropic process of modification by participating directly in the act of cognition of the world.

In this sense, Griffa's artistic inquiry can be related to those of Pier Paolo Calzolari, Giovanni Anselmo, Gilberto Zorio, Giuseppe Penone and, above all, to those of Michelangelo Pistoletto and Giulio Paolini. He has many affinities with the latter: these may be found in the construction of the artistic language that is to be read as an event in which the various tools of painting participate. Then there's the definition of an art that develops according to the visual procedure and the constant reflection on the practice of painting. However, while Paolini creates a metalinguistic procedure, Griffa doesn't break away from his roots - that is painting - performing an act that takes place as it comes into being in the concrete act of painting, the only tool available.





Over and above his relations with Arte Povera, the formulation of an approach to methodology and design that avoided stylistic academism without any bias against decoration, has allowed Griffa to extend his inquiry and avoid being swallowed up by transcendent asceticism devoid of any prospects. Despite the different results obtained, his work has developed with exemplary consistency from the outset until the present day and it isn't difficult to identify some of the fundamental stages, which for simplicity's sake could be summed up as the transition from the basic sign to the complex one and from a static vision to a dynamic one, creating a progressive dialectic relationship with space that has a certain degree of ambiguity.

Come to think of it, all this is a result triggered off by the process of painting that from 1968 to 2008 has absorbed a new memory that no longer comes from the exterior, but rather from the experience of painting as it produces signs. In short, it's Griffa's "thinking" painting that develops its own consciousness and acquires the identity of its own existence. As the artist himself recalls, "Around 1969 I had a preference for oblique, vertical and descending lines; then from 1970 onwards the lines were organized horizontally, from left to right. Later on, I produced works with a sponge, then with a flat brush. In 1973, instead, I decided and wrote that I would deliberately use horizontal lines and then I went back to other lines that I had already tried out previously, although using a different system, applying the paint with brushstrokes and then allowing it to dry on the hemp or cotton canvas, thanks to which, as it dried, the paint tapered away."<sup>8</sup> Already in 1969, in fact, he had painted a group of canvases, each having five oblique

lines arranged in the same order.

In short, the language of painting is resolved with minimal variations in rhythm, where the unconscious hand, in its slow anonymous movement is guided by the same rational principle to which the task of triggering off the action is entrusted. As the French philosopher and writer Maurice Blanchot stated, "Plain and simple abandon simply becomes the loss of the night", and Griffa knows this only too well, as he is the creator of the mechanism that allows the process of painting to develop beyond its intentionality. From the first signs at the end of the 1960s, the artist understood the sense - that was even dramatic - of vertigo that passes through the potential energy, the apparent nothingness of an empty gesture in its absoluteness and essentiality. Generally speaking, the year of transition is considered to be 1980, when, at the Venice Biennale, the artist exhibited *Dioniso* (Dionysus), a work consisting of transparent canvases in which there were superimpositions, multiplications and variations of the signs. From then onwards, the simple "Minimalist" sign was replaced by one that was dynamic, complex, decorative and Matisian. However, I believe that this is a convenient simplification for an artistic inquiry that has developed cyclically: in other words, it changes structurally, but doesn't evolve hierarchically, existing within a form of communication that's always different but always the same. At the beginning of the 1990s, for instance, Griffa started a series of works entitled *Tre linee con arabesco* (Three Lines with Arabesque), where there were, in fact, three lines and an arabesque in a construction that was as ephemeral as it was ironical in the way it revealed the limits of a tautological artistic language.

Executed obsessively, Griffa's works not only appeared to be different from each other, but they were identified by a number that created a paradoxical order where the chronological sequence was, in fact, disrupted: each work took a different path and the puzzle was expressly created so it could be broken up into the fragmentation of the principle of knowledge that could not possibly be proposed again integrally. The combinatory possibilities were infinite in a logic where space and time were superimposed without obstructing each other and where the number 2 could accompany the number 1,520 or the number 222. Griffa stated: "I have established a rule- that is, I have started a new cycle - that could easily be completed in four or five works. Instead I have created more than a thousand with the same simple rule of the three lines and an arabesque." In short, we were faced with a coming into being that was basically infinite.

In the 1990s this procedure continued with the *Connessioni* (Links), which were exemplified by the numbering of the colours as they settled on the canvas, highlighting another form of cataloguing or recording that was intentionally ephemeral based on an apparent structural logic. The numbering, however, was a purely decorative element that increased the work's ambiguity. On the basis of this rule, which led inexorably towards indetermination - it is no coincidence that Griffa frequently quotes the German physicist Werner Heisenberg's uncertainty principle - in 2006 the artist produced *Sezione aurea* (Golden Section), a cycle that may be regarded as a theoretical overview of his work, which is characterized by the "number that never ends and spirals into infinity, continuing to conduct a dialogue with the unknown over the centuries." We are in the presence of an irrational number within a vision that conceals the ideal of beauty: in fact, with regard to the golden section, Plato, in his *Timaeus*, went so far as to suggest that the harmony of the cosmos was something that preceded nature itself. This principle is not very distant from the Fibonacci series, an essential part of the work of Mario Merz, who, in this way, recorded a proliferating and indefinable mental system. Griffa, too, is fascinated by the extreme point of knowledge where art, science, mathematics and architecture proceed towards another, unknown space that, in its greatest expansion, tends to implode, reviving the profound memory of things. Griffa states: "The irrational number without end, which resolves the equation of the golden section (1,618003398...), symbolizes the area of knowledge that has been devoted to art since the time of Orpheus - that is, knowledge of the unknowable. It is an important aspect of Greek knowledge. Rather than proceeding towards a larger number, this number spirals into the unknown: 1.6 will never become 1.7 or / 1,61 will never become 1,62/ 1,618 will never become 1,619/ and so on, and yet the numbering continues without an end." Painting is the limit of knowledge.



Politico con 13 colori, 1998. Rocca Paolina, Perugia.

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GIORGIO GRIFFA

60 SCHIZZI DA  
OPERE 1968/2000  
E UN TESTO

60 SKETCHES FROM  
WORKS 1968/2000  
AND A TEXT



FRANCO MASOERO

## DISEMBARKING IN GILANIA

(From the Giancarlo Salzano Gallery catalogue, Turin 1998)

*"I would like something that didn't need  
expression and form"*  
(Flaubert)

The archaeologist Riane Eisler gave the name Gilania to a Neolithic society that occupied a wide area of the eastern and southern parts of central Europe. It was based on an agricultural economy, accorded equal status to men and women, and did not know the use of weapons. For about a thousand years, between 4000 and 3000 BC, this society was enslaved by the herding and hunting peoples of the northern steppes, who controlled the horses and arms, bringing with them a model of domination that is still prevalent today. The word Gilania is a blend of the Greek words gyne (woman) and ane, (man). Carbon dating, which makes it possible to establish when objects were made, has begun to enable us to build up a picture of the Gilanians. Theirs seems to have been a developed society, no longer matriarchal but not yet patriarchal, and organized in a non-hierarchical system. A society whose structure calls into question many aspects of our past. I am not interested in examining the scientific basis for this exciting discovery (or invention, if such it is). Rather, disembarking in Gilania has helped me to make some unexpected connections. It has given me a glimpse of a general pattern which extends over the various human disciplines. I see in the twentieth century various phenomena which, within the model of domination, breaks the tools that are used to dominate the world.

Space and time, ruler and clock, were the keystones of scientific observation. They were stable, fixed elements on the basis of which the knowledge and domination of the physical world was organized. With Einstein that hierarchy collapses; space and time become relative elements: they stand in a relationship to one another, and are themselves a relationship. Later, with Heisenberg's indeterminacy principle, science absorbs the unknown into its processes: the unknown becomes part of the scientist's activity. Observation influences the observed phenomenon to such an extent that it makes one aspect of it uncertain. The observer's ability to consider himself as being outside the process now collapses; and this used to be a distinctive feature of domination.

Geometry loses its absolute value and becomes variable as a result of the intersection and accumulation of the forces of gravity. Perhaps it is even annihilated in the black holes of the universe where the force of gravity coagulates into concentrations of energy so compact that not even light can escape from them. Guattari and Deleuze tell us that reality is a rhizome, despite our efforts to simplify it into binary systems that can be dominated by reason. These are just hints.

They point to the hypothesis that humanity has begun to revise its principle of domination: the economic and military tools of domination have become too dangerous; they must be tempered with something else.

Two themes, dominating mankind and dominating the world, have been superimposed in my words, for they are aspects of the same system.

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When I work on a canvas and my hand follows what is happening and I am both tool and craftsman at the same time, I am not able to specify any particular style of mine which superimposes my recollection on the memory of the colour that flows and of the signs that pursue one another. Nor am I able to evaluate any impact on the spectator.

Of the three characters - the author, the work, and the spectator - my concentration is entirely focused, as far as I am aware of it, on the event that lies in the middle. There is nothing new in this; I think it is a constant feature of creation, the relationship to colour, to marble, to stone, to the memories of the materials. It takes on different aspects in different epochs and in different artists.

But the relationship between the work and the spectator is a fact that there is no getting away from.

At a certain point in history we constructed the perspective view, which, through the optical box, fixed an

objective view of the world, external to the spectator. It was a clear process of dominating vision.

With sublime results.

A system in which on the one hand we looked from outside, as if through an open window, and we read the story from outside; while on the other hand the inner involvement, the emotion of letting oneself be absorbed, crossing the threshold, entering the work, was hidden, entrusted to the wisdom of the materials and the spaces. Then the perspective view was no longer enough; the categories of thought that had supported it began to crumble, and the window started to change into a mirror and later simply into an opening.

For example, remember when landscape painting started to traverse perspective with the excrescences of nature, and waters and boats metaphorically invited the spectator to embark on the picture, or when Cézanne broke the volumes and opened space, and others painted the frame, invading the diaphragm of separation, or when Monet's water lilies doubly checkmated the system of domination because matter becomes superior to the hand and because his eye, which is going blind, produces an increasing quantity of light instead of reducing it, as would be logical according to the laws of domination.

If we accept this path, where the difference between figurative and non-figurative becomes unimportant, we may note that the invitation to the spectator to enter the work, to walk through it, is generally accompanied by the disappearance of the story; it is no longer a banquet of the gods or just any old story meant to be read from the outside: the figures, or the signs (which is almost the same thing), are there, in a state of suspense, waiting for the spectator to sit down to table. The perspective work made you look at it from outside. These do not.

I think that the scientist of our time is aware that his action interferes with the phenomenon that is under observation: that he knows he is not investigating that fragment of the world because of the way it is, but because of the way it reacts to provocation. And from it he elicits fragments of knowledge of becoming. So it is not only the craftsman who interferes with the phenomenon; it is the spectator too. We must not forget this aspect. Nor must we forget another aspect, which will prove useful.

Up to a certain limit the phenomenon is dominated; it can be looked at from the outside and reproduced by the will of man, who may turn on the gas or build the atomic bomb. But when the non-linear phenomenon is multiplied and shrunk to the point where other causal

aspects come into play which in the dominated measure, though present, were insignificant, then it escapes from domination and continues to develop according to the concurrent causes as if it were itself a thinking subject.

We may therefore say that beyond that limit the system of domination is put into checkmate.

The phenomenon tends to elude control. And instead of there being a decrease in knowledge as would seem logical, we witness an accelerated increase, so that a few decades have carried science light years ahead. In quantum physics a phenomenon exists in various simultaneous, different, contradictory aspects, and another tricky question arises. The aspect that we investigate with the cognitive procedures is only one of several possible aspects; the phenomenon cannot be dominated except at a very rough level. In the arts after the middle years of the twentieth century I see a rapid extension of procedures in which the craftsman gives up dominating the whole process from raw material to finished work, and exercises a limited dominion or rather puts himself in a different relationship to his materials. Instead of dominating the process from the outside, he enhances participation from the inside; he lets matter talk instead of making it the tool of an external narrative. And so I can tell you of Pollock's hand, which does nothing but arrange the dripping of colour on the canvas.

Of Morris Louis's hand, which just steers the flow of the colour across the canvas.

It is clear that the procedures take place under the artist's control - that goes without saying but in a sense the hand has put itself at the service of colour, overturning the system of domination. Dorazio uses a brush but his procedure is not dissimilar: the artist's intention seems to me palpably subordinated to the vibrations of light and emotion which the colour creates by flowing and interweaving; it is the hand that has become an extension of the brush.

In Ryman painting ends and is sublimated in the mere ancient gesture of putting brush to canvas; the artist withdraws his personal memory before the millennial memory of the act of painting. With Burri the attention shifts to the materials: both in his *combustioni* and in his *cretti* the hand only performs the initial gestures. The process develops of its own accord within the materials that burn or dry out.

With Anselmo the oldest material on which man has exercised the lofty qualities of dominion, namely stone, is manipulated rather than shaped, and displays its memories by virtue of simple significant actions. It is still the hand of man that extracts the memories of the

materials, but the procedure is reversed; it does not require a form to be moulded, and if there is form, it comes by other ways.

Richard Long, too, uses these same stones, but breaks them and organizes them. All he does is arrange them in large circles of barbaric weight, which hold us suspended between millennial ancestral memories, the power of great sculpture, and the precise sense of radical change.

The same change becomes in Gastini physically embodied in the canvas, which is both support and protagonist, tool and agent at the same time, as are the colour, the iron, the signs and the space in a reciprocal dynamic, and here the weight is sublimated into an exchange with the air.

Where it used to be presumed that there was a single direction from artist to work and from work to spectator - a sense, of course, enriched by the internal valencies of the work - I find a movement that goes in both directions. The artist, by moderating the relationship of domination over the materials, shows a readiness to receive from them and not just to give; and he places in his relationship with the spectator the determinate elements of an indeterminate story, the boundaries for a transition in which the spectator, in observing reality, can modify it by his observation.

In a discussion of my paintings of the 1980s, Paolo Fossati wrote of a narration and fabulation that disembarked on Cythera. It seems to me that Gilania provides a more precise motivation for what I have been saying for almost thirty years about my condition as a tool rather than a craftsman, an indeterminate narrative that lies within the signs.

I would say that the detachment from Perspective and Form is obvious and not worth dwelling on. Rather, I would like to stress the strong sense of continuity that is concealed beneath the harshly discontinuous appearance. When we consider the works of the past we are aware how each of them is inseparably linked to its own time - by whose ideas it is nourished - but we also feel the strong and irrepressible sense of presence in our own time. In the physical impact of a sonata by Bach, a sonnet by Petrarch, or a painting by Raphael, this feeling of a presence which transcends the centuries, and which persists in different ways according to the way in which we ourselves change, constitutes an experience just as general as the experience of changes over time, and far more moving.

Therefore the work belongs to the present both of its own age and of later ages.

And at the same time historically it always belongs to the past. I say always because as soon as it is completed it becomes past, just as this sentence I am writing becomes past when I add the final stop that ends it.

It is a duality that I see as a precise sense of continuity between the various epochs and civilizations and between the discontinuities of history. It enables one to see the work as subject rather than object, as an active entity which, in its relations with people - which vary for different individuals and epochs and civilizations - escapes from its own objectivity.

This aspect of continuity comes, in a sense, to participate in the action; it belongs to the relationships that manufacture the work and not simply to the qualities of the finished work. The space of the action extends to aspects that were not necessary in a relationship of dominion over matter.

The chemical reactions that often conclude the works of Zorío continue to be produced in the finished work, and in this way attribute an organic character to that sense of a present that persists in time.

My works are never finished; the signs stop before that can happen, as if they were trying to elude that moment of conclusion when the present ceases to be the present.

These are different ways in which the ambiguous relationship between past and present become part of the constitutive process of the work.

And here the spectator comes back into play. This area of work, which is far wider than the episodes that I have mentioned, comprises paintings which, though strongly characterized, leave the relationship with the spectator indeterminate, displaying rather the modes of their own creation.

They leave the spectator a space for active intervention, for comparing his own memories and those of the work, for emotion and alienation. This seems to enhance that aspect of the work as a subject which is capable of forming a relationship with other subjects, and which is quantally superimposed on its simultaneous existence as an object.

Under the domination of perspective the spectator found himself dispossessed of his own body; he had a soul, an intelligence, a heart, and the body was the container.

With the transition to materials, their memory and their physical impact, we find that we have a body that expands; the orient is no longer so very far away.

The artist is aware, even if he doesn't know it, of that immense chain of causality which in the physical world carries phenomena out of control. So he restricts himself to fixing the body of that painting or that sculpture, the constituent links, the corporeal sense of the work; and he lets the work tell its own story, lets it give and receive in the indeterminable relationship with the spectator, which cannot be dominated except within very rough limits.

I am sure that among the many who have read the Divine Comedy over the centuries - really read it and not just studied it at school - no two people have read it in exactly the same way. This is the body of the work. Which has always existed. This body becomes the sole actor, in the two-way relationship with the body of the artist, who does not merely sow but leaves to the work what the work itself in turn suggests in the process of its creation, and in the two-way relationship of giving and receiving with the countless bodies of its spectators. The other aspects - ritual, magic, religious, narrative, celebrative, etc. have become indeterminate. A striking analogy with scientific thought.

*Giorgio Griffa*

## **Postscript**

It is not a realism that subtracts from reality in order to make it representable. It is a realism which participates in reality, which introduces itself into reality's procedures and so constitutes it in another form.

I look at Cindy Sherman and Vanessa Beecroft, but I also think of Giotto's coretti in the Scrovegni Chapel. The fake peopleless architecture that is introduced into the fresco changes its form.

I read the fresco in its phenomenal aspect; first and foremost it is reality: all the rest it carries inside itself. That is how I understand painting.

*Giorgio Griffa, 7 may 2000*

# *Critical Anthology\**

Paolo Fossati

*Griffa: Empiricism and Functionality*

One of Griffa's canvases is painted irregularly up to a certain point, while the rest of it is bare: neither the canvas nor the colour can explain anything. On the contrary, when they meet here they combine to reject all meaning: together they eliminate every semantic interpretation and, they restore the relationship of reciprocal attraction to the abstraction of its ideation. Faced with the compact wall of this abstracting functionality, Griffa starts by listing the "medium": the idea of painting and discretion are "composed of".

In his furious consumption of categories and motivations, Griffa starts again on each occasion with the primary listings and basic combinatorial structures: on each occasion, setting them out on the canvas hypothesizes the gesture again and gives the hand that traces all the previous gestures that determine the understanding of the future. Thus the idea expressed in physical terms invents the medium, while the medium methodically rearranges the combination of the formal elements.

Griffa's movement in the picture is a synthetic rather than an analytical one; it tends to generalize rather than specify. After its capacity to determine a coded reality has been restored to the gesture, we realize that the analysis of this initial movement is the result of a double action that is both reciprocal and necessary: the empiricism of the dynamic reaction when confronted by the urgency of the event and the repetition of a pictorial tradition identified with Constructivism and Concrete Art. The continuity may be noted in a precise choice: this statement of the work's grammar and syntax in order to propose the model of an alternative reality to the one that is accepted as it is because it exists, which puts the accent on the specific nature of the poetic medium, discretionary when faced with the logical continuity of other genres. Obligated to use itself in order to gauge its possibilities of being a model, the painting modifies the landscape that it produces with its presence in

accordance with a rational and empirical design. Sufficiently didactic to counteract the distraction caused by the vast number of signs surrounding us, it seeks to change credulity into an operation at the limit of its gratuitousness and hence into the evaluation of its responsible possibilities.

However, having reached this point, the continuity of the historical link becomes the divarication of action: after rejecting the consequential didactics and the historic utopia, Griffa's overriding concern is to make the highest empiricism coincide with the most precise functionality, so that one is the cognitive regulation of the other within a systematic analysis of the artistic language. And Griffa goes back to explore a zero point at which empiricism and functionality coincide: this zero point does not involve the elimination of every presence, but is rather the last space from which to check the means of differentiation and dissociation. While the art of painting means making an object that already exists without copying it, the action of painting means imitating in terms of great mobility the types of behaviour not so much as technique per se as technique that dissociates in the ideation the need for praxis as the sign of an active and possible presence.

It is, however, with regard to another point that Griffa measures his distance from a certain type of historicized hypothesis: faced with discontinuity and the way events do not recur, Concrete Art and Constructivism channel all their resources into the constancy of the medium, so that the mode of development does not need to start measuring its further possibilities from scratch on each occasion. On the contrary, every concatenation is broken in these works and certainty becomes doubt worthy of confirmation: the drippings left to an impression of gravity continue on their way, changing their appearance on the support, which is placed obliquely in the space. On each occasion it is necessary to find the zero point without any dramatic quality or sense of the absurd: the gratuitousness and artificiality of the morphological separation is not a method, but rather the carefully conscious cognition of one's own level of provisionality. This



This provisionality has its own modalities and rules: thus, resuming the discourse from the empirical fiction, a very distinctive functionality comes into being.

(Catalogue of the Galleria Martano, Turin, April 1968)

Albino Galvano  
(*Untitled*)

The presence of Giorgio Griffa in the experimental art of the most recent generations is characterized by an original line of development, a clear vision of the objectives and meaning of his work and the relationship linking him to the particular mode of being of the social milieu in which this work takes place, or at least - in accordance with ideological and political positions that are not those of the present writer, but that cannot be ignored if one wishes to understand the significance of large part of contemporary culture - of the relationship that with this milieu he intends, in a certain sense, to theorize. The development of Griffa's intellectual and technical maturity in this direction has been not only very consistent but also rapid. One of Filippo Scroppo's most successful pupils and certainly the most advanced with regard to his cultural responsibility, the artist acknowledges that the training he received had a propaedeutic value that was indispensable for his later development. In fact, he soon made good use of this stimulating lesson of freedom, seeking to develop an artistic practice that did not have as its ultimate aim reproduction or allusion, or the purely formalist hedonism of the "beautiful picture", even if abstract.

Certainly, such an objective, when it is not simply intellectualistic, cannot but exist in a dialectic relationship with what it seeks to refute: in effect, those who have been able to follow the development of Griffa's work, of which here only the most mature examples are on show, will remember pictures that are very "beautiful" in the current meaning of the word, for example variations on the theme of insects and flowers (and this choice of repertoire with what is almost an Art Nouveau flavour is significant). For that matter, it is possible to detect an echo, transposed- but not to the extent that it is unrecognizable into the interplay of "butterflies" a little astonished to find themselves detached from the serial iterations in which they were composed in ballets with roses and locusts in order to arrange themselves in a new and more serious, perhaps more cruel, operation. But this is the last opportunity for painting already in the ambit of the new operations that the large coloured and unpainted spaces and the articulations consisting purely of objects establish.

Having turned against itself, the expressive gesture of painting becomes an event and, as such, eschews any semanticity that is not its own existence and signifying the reason for its coming into being. In Griffa's case, this is a more complex reason than such an intentionally simple result might lead one to believe. One of the points of passage in which the crucial phase of Griffa's more recent work occurred was, in fact, constituted by the articulation of the real spaces of the canvas into complex arrangements that reduced and then progressively made superfluous the last figurative references, whether they were the outlines of a human face or hand, the traces of an elastic band flexed by the symbol of gravitational mass, or the outline of paint drippings. Now that these traces have been eliminated, the angles or intervals that relate one canvas to another are no longer a condition for the proposal of images, even images reduced to initials, but are the continuation of the space in which the canvases are located in the same topological situation that materializes within the canvas and is hardly distinguishable stressing the operative articulations - from differences of colour that have lost any hedonistic meaning. However, while this concept of painting eliminates any relationship between the artist and the public - in other words, between two subjective entities that is established in a different ambit from that of the everyday event or of existence regarded as different ways of exploiting a common object with the rejection of the aesthetic dimension in a distinguishing and restrictive sense, it does not eliminate an ethical value, but asserts it. Thus it is a commitment to restore an overall meaning to this relationship that directly influences our lives in a series of events that are those of everybody's existence. And it influences them with a series of myths that, rightly or wrongly, are regarded as purely comforting and thus evasive and falsified. It is not necessary to discuss here whether this way of presenting the work contributes to the demolition of myths or risks constituting new ones and whether the "hieroglyphics" of the present situation of art in relation to the anxiety and protests of today require decoding that is perhaps different from that offered by the new generation of artists and the critics interpreting them I believe instead that it is much more important to take note of the existence of the critical approach on both the implemental and the theoretical levels, and of the fact that our problems cannot be eliminated. In view of this reflection, I believe that Griffa's work, which has recently managed to resolve its problems directly and is sufficiently courageous to take this critical and practical work on itself, to be particularly timely and significant.

(Catalogue of the Galleria Martano, Turin, April 1968)

Maria Cristina Mundici  
*Quasi Living Organisms*

In Giorgio Griffa's Quasi dipinto (Quasi-Painting) we see canvases, brushstrokes and paint: the materials and tools of painting are preserved with their specificity and displayed as they are. These are works dating from 1968; however, it should be remembered that, in the period when he was learning the techniques of painting in Filippo Scropo's studio, Griffa - on the suggestion of Aldo Mondino - came into contact with the output of Giulio Paolini, who from 1961 to 1964 worked on the separation of the different elements of the artistic object, each of which became a protagonist of the work: tins of paint and brushes, and stretchers and canvases constituted both the materials and the subject of many of Paolini's works in that period. And Griffa was deeply indebted to the artist: the way he laid bare the elements that go to make up painting was clearly influenced by those works by Paolini in which the picture's only subject was its structural components, seen in their original form before they became part of a painting.

This is the point. Despite the reduction of his works to minimum terms, Griffa has never ceased to practice painting. He has distanced himself from figurative art, rejecting the idea that painting reflects a reality external to itself. He has experienced abstraction and its ideological backup. He has come close to overcoming the concept of the picture as a painted surface and tenaciously and rigorously pursued the possibility of painting. "I don't represent anything; I paint", he says.

However, in his Quasi dipinto the process of stripping of painting that characterized all his subsequent output was not yet complete. These works still display the influence of such American painters as Mark Rothko, Ad Reinhardt and Barnett Newman, and the trace left by the brush is very cultured, to the extent that the final fringes are often obtained with modelling, thus once again with a representative process rather than being constituted simply by the interruption of the brushstroke.

A year and a half later, the Galleria Sperone staged an exhibition of Griffa's work that was, in effect, a manifesto of his painting. The artist showed a series of canvases that were not mounted on stretchers, but were attached directly to the wall with nails: technically very simple, they offered us coloured traces left by the movement of the brush over the canvas. The canvases weren't primed and, with the material clearly visible, were themselves the supports for the painting. From one picture to another the weave and texture changed, as did the colour and the way it was arranged on the wall once it was hung. They remained canvases, with all the qualities and characteristics of the fabric, including the fact that they preserved, also when arranged vertically, the folds

caused by the method used for storing the pictures, which were folded up like any other pieces of cloth.

Griffa's pictures were, as I said, hung on the wall, so the canvas was supported on its upper edge by a row of nails placed equidistantly from each other, without, however, hiding the imperfections deriving from this procedure: there was a natural deformation of the shape of the canvas where the nail was inserted, causing greater tension on the upper edge, which, as a result, was stretched, making it wider than the lower edge, and this difference increased in proportion to the length of the canvas. These details were noted by the vigilant eye of the painter and had his approval.

The colour was placed on the canvas, as in the pictorial tradition. Rarely pure, the colours were often the result of mixtures and were combined with white. Rarely applied thickly so that they coagulated on the canvas, they were more frequently used in a liquid form - they were mainly acrylics - and, because of this, the density and colours varied.

The paint was spread with brushes of various sizes or transferred to the canvas with sponges having different degrees of absorption: when painting, the artist laid the canvas on the floor, with sheets of paper under it to absorb the excess paint and liquid. What remained was the mark of the tool - the sponge - or the more elementary trace the brush and the artist left on the canvas: that is, the line.

Thus the painted form was the line: not a calligraphic symbol in the manner of Giuseppe Capogrossi, but the transcription of the physical nature of painting. The line corresponded to the artist's primary gesture, which was so simple as to belong to the hand of everybody. From picture to picture, the breadth only varied according to the width of the brush or sponge used, changing from a thin mark to a field of colour: with a single gesture, the artist reabsorbed the conflict between the line and colour.

On the surface of the picture, the artist's hand repeated the same movement a number of times, with continuous "writing" going from left to right: there was a sequence of horizontal, vertical or oblique lines, sometimes preceded by a void, often followed by the silence of the unpainted canvas. This made it clear that it is a fragment, a portion of reality - of painting - that was now present and had settled here, but that, after a pause, would continue elsewhere, on another canvas with another resonance: a quasi-living organism, it was the unfinished gesture of his previous Quasi dipinto. The single picture was part of a more complex event that took place over a long or infinite period. Furthermore, each picture was closely linked to the time of its execution, to the extent that if an external event interrupted this process, the picture was rejected by the artist because it could no longer be

regarded as the recording of an event happening at a precise moment. Time - that is, the extended time of all the possible works and the limited time required for the execution of a single canvas - became the constitutive element of the work. Deriving from this were parallels with music and poetry, with the times and modes of execution and listening, and with the rhythms of reading. This is what was displayed on the walls of the Galleria Sperone in November 1969. Griffa's exhibition at this gallery demonstrated that his objectives and approach were similar to those of the other artists who could be described, more or less, as exponents of Arte Povera - associated with it in that period. Griffa recalls the encounters and exchanges with these artists, in particular Giovanni Anselmo, Gilberto Zorio and Giuseppe Penone. They also shared the belief that art is a form of knowledge and therefore a construction of reality, that the work leaves the spectator with room for active intervention, that the materials used with all their authenticity promote the actions and reactions on the part of both artist and spectator, and that the work is a quasi-living organism that exists in time and real space. The month before his solo exhibition at the Sperone, the artist took part in a group show at the same gallery together with Anselmo, Boetti, Calzolari, Maini, Merz, Penone, Prini and Zorio: on the floor next to his canvases hanging on the walls, he painted a series of lines that seemed to continue the pictures themselves, thus showing very clearly that he belonged to an area of thought similar to that of the other artists present.

(G. G., UNO E DUE, Edizioni GAM, Galleria Civica d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea, Torino 2002)

Maurizio Fagiolo dell'Arco  
*Propositions for Silence*

Can one remain silent when explaining on what principles this choice is based? Is it possible to discredit the art as an object while remaining within the boundaries of aesthetics? Or rather, can one paint with the painter's tragic tools (canvas, paint, brushes), thus creating problems for His Majesty the Painting? Can one paint the course of a thought? Dada gave a reply and today Griffa does not give another type of reply, but asks the same questions.

Griffa takes a canvas and paint, concentrates and then he outlines the situation. Everything remains in a primary state. The canvas is the material that absorbs the colour and, above all, an action. In the end he doesn't exhibit the picture on a stretcher, but the bare canvas with a

few signs of the rainbow. He dispenses with images of utopia, reality or fantasy: he dispenses with images. Griffa rejects the world of representation (similar to Robert Ryman's method): after all, for Mondrian and even for Pollock, the artist is delegated to represent images. Even the self-important theoreticians of behaviourism aspire to the fetishism of the image.

Griffa uses economy of means for minimal results. He doesn't seek to construct the beautiful sentence but, if anything, he's interested in the punctuation (in order to point out the future of the actions). A white canvas speaks, as does a meadow covered with snow: it's just that the footprints have been imprisoned, while the actions are filtered. Before an artist who has decided that the artistic concept is never immaculate, finally the critic is silent. What's the point of X-raying an X-ray?

(Catalogue of the Galleria Godel, Rome, November 1972)

Tommaso Trini  
*Biography of a Picture*

The only identity of Griffa's paintings is the process to which they are subject, a process that doesn't only speak of painting, a cognitive process that, totally focused on the execution and with an absolute pertinence of actions or structures essential to the pictorial activity, is at the same time apprenticeship, creation and communication. Already in his first exhibition - at the Galleria Martano, Turin, in April 1968 - Griffa's painting had this way of presenting its own biography: it was the recording of the application of paint with a brush on the bare canvas, which was, however, still attached to a stretcher. Since 1967, during the period in which he refused to exhibit his works, the surfaces have tended to become full and compact. Involving the use of either a painting knife or a brush, often with the choice of monochrome surfaces, or achromatic due to the white, the action of painting invariably begins at top left and is interrupted before covering the whole surface of the canvas: the visible interruption of the brushstroke indicates the artist's desire not to produce a finished work, but rather a continuous and open-ended process. It was in this period that Griffa's paintings were dialectically closer to the work of Giulio Paolini, Michelangelo Pistoletto, Giovanni Anselmo and Gilberto Zorio - in other words, to the extrapictorial and critical operations of his contemporaries (not only those in Turin), rather than to the output of Morris Louis, Robert Ryman or Barnett Newman, or even Kasimir Malevich, as one might think. The fact that the canvas is

bare, without a ground, is a reminder of Paolini's reflections (in 1960 and 1961) on the operations that he carried out on the back of the picture and Pistoletto's mirror paintings. Nothing may be superimposed on the bare presence of the painting and nothing may violate the canvas. The marks made by the application with a painting knife of white pigment and synthetic glue on a very thick unprimed canvas were followed in 1968 by coloured stripes, sometimes starting from the bottom. The type and size of the canvas varied considerably, and were often determined by the dimensions of the gallery where the work was to be displayed. On the contrary, the artist gave great importance to the preparation of the paint, no longer using pure colours, which would require an a priori condition, putting a rigid constraint on the painting. The liquidity of the two or three basic colours mixed in bowls and the choice of panels in relation to the type of canvas used were equally important to the subjective psychological relationship that guided the choice of the colour values. Thus painting required the colour to penetrate the canvas and follow its weave, its capacity for absorption, its folds and the attention - and the psychophysical tension - of the brushstroke. The course, breadth and undulation of the line of colour were nothing more than the passive recording of these basic choices: rather than a projection of the artist's autobiography, one found, at most, the halo caused by the absorption of the paint. Hence it was an electroencephalogram, the active recording of the impulses of the brain in a state of passivity and relaxation - the only possible analogy for this painter.

Griffa's decision in 1969 to eliminate the stretcher was the result of the fact that he accidentally started to paint a canvas before it was mounted on its stretcher. From then onwards all his canvases were free, but it did not matter to him if others later mounted his canvases on stretchers. It was a practical choice, not an ideological one: "[I want to] show my pictures in a way that is as close as possible to the state in which I painted them." It was, therefore, a practical need that did not bear on the substance of the work, but allowed the spectator to be fully aware that "only the traces of my work are revealed to the spectator".

### *Constructing reality*

Although he does not like to theorize - and even less does he like to make ideological statements - in recent times Griffa has often been obliged to clarify the meaning of his work. One of his favourite expressions is: "I don't represent anything: I paint." Elsewhere he explains: "If there isn't a definite ideological alternative, it's not possible to represent anything. Representational painting is always that of a finite ideal world. On the contrary, mine

is the painting of a world that comes into being as I do it." Instead of putting the accent on a noun, "painting", a category that exists thanks to external projections, Griffa draws our attention to a verb, "to paint", where the action serves as the backdrop to a condition. It is not, however, characterized by a tendency towards extreme positions, as in the case of Abstract Expressionism. There is no utopian desire to balance an act of transgression, as the fathers of abstraction often sought to. One could say that, after the first generation of Modernists (Mondrian, Malevich, etc.) and after the second generation of extremists (after the Second World War), what I would call the "third generation of painting", according to the evolutionary classification of the cataloguer, is projected, just as it is here, to reverse the direction of the message, which, instead of going from the interior towards the exterior, goes from the exterior towards the interior, from the codes of information to the processes of training and memorization. An attempt is now being made to improve the flow of information and it is here that Griffa's characteristic feature may be found: the art of pertinence. This is not only concerned with what is linked to the activity of painting and nothing else, nor does it only say what relates to the specificity of the means employed and nothing else. Pertinence as Griffa practices it by painting and discussing involves knowing what one is conveying, learning from painting what the lessons of painting are. Rather than the zero degree of painting, his path leads beyond the picture, where the idea of creating as intensely as possible - that is, the idea of the possible - prevails. This is where a result is still lacking and the lines of colour are destined to be nothing more than simple traces of the process, "The spectator will have nothing but the traces of my work." Griffa works with open-mindedness and passivity, without any violence. He explains: "After the initial choice, my work is simply executed. There is no investigation while I work. The work is only executed by the brush, canvas, my effort and so on: these are the elements that execute it and I am a tool just like the others. My active intervention stops before this, at the moment when the choice is made." At the extreme limit, Griffa imposes a rule: "[One should] carry out a process with the most suitable means in the simplest possible way, putting the accent on the minimal moments of this work, on all the components - both physical and spiritual that derive from it and are closely linked to this kind of process." Recently he summed up this rule as follows: "At this moment my work is not making pictures, nor is it drawing lines on the canvas, but it is rather taking the brush and bringing this colour to this canvas, following with the greatest attention what actually happens." These are some of the explanations that pepper his discourse - and this is why I quote them so frequently - but they do not make it arid: on the contrary, "constructing

reality” is Griffa’s true leitmotiv. He opposes it to the utopia of the early twentieth-century avant-garde movements, their models and their hypotheses, which he treats as if they belonged to the Enlightenment. “From the moment when the utopian hypothesis ceases to be valid, our task is to construct reality.” By reality, Griffa seems to mean the reality of the world and not the specific reality of painting. Moreover, it also appears that Griffa puts the construction of reality wholly in the world of the “reality of the canvas, which is not just the reality of colour, but also regards that of illusion, myth, dreams and so on, a physiological reality in which it is possible to act in the present, without utopia.”

(“Art Press”, no. 15, Paris, December 1974-January 1975)

Hermann Kern

*Nothing More than Unfinished Painting... A comment on Giorgio Griffa's works.*

Griffa does not regard the space of painting as a supreme good or as something definitive, but rather as a more or less arbitrary section of a continuous basic infinity, which for purely technical reasons must finish somewhere. This space of painting - in reality, a section - serves as support for making a section from a fundamentally infinite process, from a visible trace without time limits; on it are arranged the traces (lines and signs) that are also given as a possibility outside painting.

If one wished to give each type of painting that character of completeness, of being finished - for example, with the lines continued correctly right up to the lower right corner - this would mean the falsification of information, aviolation of the tempora’ character of painting and would also mean establishing the fluid course of time, presenting a definitive and irreversible result, and creating a timeless object. The fact that Griffa is incapable of continuing to work on a painting he has interrupted is part of this consideration. This is because after the end, after the interruption, he is really older and no longer the same as he was before, it would be inappropriate to continue the work. The temporal and progressive character of painting - as well as its musical nature - is to be found in all these various relationships with time (the horizontal line is a metaphor for it, tool. The following are significant parallels with music:

Rejection of completeness and a static character in favour of a process; painting as annotation with the nature of drawing; an invitation to observers to imagine what the continuation of the line would be like. In other words, during the time needed to observe the work, they are asked to relate time as a pictorial theme to their own

temporal situation and their own notion of time in order to “execute” the work in a sort of dialogue, just as is required when listening to a piece of music.

Musicalization, an approach to music as an extremely abstract art form - which had already been used by Kandinsky as a means of emancipation - and besides, through abstraction to the highest level, through the rejection not only of its function as an illustration and a separate form, but also as a structure, through the subjectification of a rhythmic process - that is, a fluid of energy in which the worktime can also be observed.

Griffa’s impartiality, which can be directed together with the material and the observer, may be attributed in part to the influence of John Cage. In particular, Griffa refers to a memorable piece for the piano of 1952: 4’33”. This work in three movements lasts exactly four minutes and thirtythree seconds, as its title states. Although not one clef is envisaged, it is composed for the piano: the pianist sits for the whole time at the piano, lifting his or her hands three times to the instrument and lets them drop to indicate the three movement of the work, while the rest of the time there is complete silence. The composition consists of the audible reactions of the audience, the noise from outside the concert hall and so on. Cage decided to create this composition after observing that no room is free of sound and that, in any case, one can always hear certain noises everywhere and, in a traditional concert hall, they are simply drowned out by the sounds produced intentionally. And it was stimulating for him to use this material for a composition, given that it was created without a specific purpose. It is probable that for Griffa the break with the past represented by this piece was interesting, as was the clarity with which it fixes the fortuitous nature of its borders and, therefore, the process that was in motion before and continues afterwards. Also of interest is how the artist works with the given material, the relaxed manner in which its genesis and the way it structures itself is observed and his refusal to interfere, and, at the same time, his inclusion of the public and his working directly with time: the analogies could continue.

### *Possible Meanings*

First of all, I believe it is important that, in Griffa’s case, the pictorial media represent themselves and can develop independently, that they are not be distorted by the instrumental nature and informative functions, and that exist without a specific purpose, joyfully, primitive, with infantile irresponsibility and are capable of developing the whole spectrum of possible meanings: not the use of the pictorial media for a preconceived scheme, but the rather allowing them to come to maturity and act. This means that it is not sufficient for the artist to be out of the picture and work on hypotheses that are only

intellectual; the painting must be executed - that is, it must come into being - in order to be, on the one hand, useful as a comparison or disobjectification, as a mirror, and also in order to allow the unknown to appear; the only act that is productive is that where the unknown can emerge as a reaction and separation from the given concepts.

Griffa is not consciously aware of either the origin or the result of each act: its possible poetry, the unknown and doubt. Innovation was not and is not his problem because he regards novelty as an intrinsic property of the development of painting. He states firmly that he has always done everything after the other painters and thinks that innovation is only a problem for the painters who are unable to follow the situation that develops around the painting with sufficient concentration.

This freedom regards not only the material but also the spectator: I believe the participation and inclusion of the spectator is important. The paintings are not complete works; with their partial character they aim at the process, leading the spectator from the first stages to the following ones. They are not separate from everyday life and invite the spectator to take part in the process. From this point of view, it is important that a large part of many works remains empty, that the empty space is emphasized by the scattered traces, and that the spectator should be offered a large space for his or her participation. This is comparable to the tantric projection of the mandala, or completely empty paintings that are meant to serve the believer as a flat projection in order to produce the image of the deity in his or her mind. In this regard, the character of painting as a process is once again indeterminate and its infinitely variable possible solutions make it evident to us that Griffa's activity will be very fruitful in the future.

(Catalogue of the Kunstraum, Munich, June 1975)

Arturo Carlo Quintavalle

*Untitled*

The canvas and the patches of colour, suspended fabrics, abolition of the frame, abolition of the limit between the object that becomes a window onto reality and the picture, which is this reality. Burri had already framed a rag or a fragment, but Griffa relies on this ambiguity between the object, the object that becomes art and reality: behind him is Duchamp, as well as other artists.

Griffa was born in the context of the civilization of writing in a period of critical elaboration that aimed to recover different types of writing for painting on the borderline between calligrams and the different tradition of the image in the West. Griffa does not believe in mimesis -

Then another aspect of Griffa's work emerges: space. There is a difference in the sequence of strokes and patches of colour, and the spatial dimension is to be found in this different repetition. But this dimension is also subtly hidden in Griffa's refined choice of tones, consisting of very delicate relationships, such as gouache on paper, and instead the support is still canvas: once again Griffa speaks of painting, but treats painting as if it were writing and pays attention to the materiality of writing. Thus he is a painter of the phenomenon, not of the idea.

("Panorama", 16 February 1981)

Flaminio Gualdoni

*Matisseria and Other Works*

In the work that Giorgio Griffa has been producing for about fifteen years, the problematic terms constituting its internal factor of stimulus and continuity are clearly perceptible. In the first place, there is the idea of painting as the terrain of cognitive possibilities that are produced from the experience of its identity, from its store of history, which motivates the artist's oft-repeated claim to be a "traditional painter". Secondly, there is the assiduous exercise of the investigative implications of practice, in which the rigorous scrutiny of the mental projection is not extraneous. This is not, however, a programmatic assumption, or even less a dogmatic one, and it presents itself as a severe and continuous warning of the dilemmas of choice and of the critical problems- in the most complete meaning of the term - of praxis. Moreover, his operative horizon is concentrated in the limit point where the pictorial image reveals itself in its primary genesis, in the significant interstice "in which relations are not yet representation". And again, the extreme paring down of the constituent of execution, of the possibility of gesture ("placing the colour in the canvas"), governed by neutrality that becomes a general rule, by a radiant secularization (and, on reflection, this is not without coquetry, otherwise it would be impossible to explain the elegance that is innate in Griffa's style) of the rituality of the painting so that the research for value lies, above all, in the clear and complete quality - at the same time empirical and mental - of the process.

These are all features that Griffa has always displayed unambiguously in their convergence towards the tension of a sign or colour that burdens itself - to the greatest degree of distillation and power - with the "historic sediment of painting": this is a sign that thinks of memory, its own memory, not as a locus of evocation, but rather of relationships, made all the more significant by the elaborating trends of pictorial practice.

This has nothing to do, therefore, with the immaculate workshop of the surgeons of the brush who pontificated years ago; due to an excess of ideology among the critics, an attempt was made to include Griffa in this too. If this were the case, how could we explain his repertoire of colours based on complementary colours and halftones, deriving from a period extending from the Renaissance to the Settecento and from the Sezession to Matisse and that, above all, does not repudiate an ancient landscape thread? And this masterly stimulation of deviations, vibrations, expansions and pockets of sense where a mechanical repetition of gestures would be in order?

In fact, the artist's recent output has fully accounted for this different constitution and its prominent internal reason. His tutelary god is now indisputably Matisse, whose fascination has for some time been present in Griffa's work: there are even explicit tributes to the artist, as in *Riflessione* (Reflection), exhibited in 1980. Thus Matisse conceived the pictorial space, with its precise level of theory, as a sphere of significant relationships and he regarded the image as the balanced tension of qualitative links between signs and colours. He also revived the sheer pleasure of colour, with its functional and decorative possibilities and the fact that it is, after all, the very essence of vision.

In many ways, *Matissieria* may be regarded as a work typifying the maturity reached by Griffa in his recent output, and it was preceded by a series of stimulating exercises - including a triptych, already nearing completion, displayed in the spring at the exhibition *Registrazione di frequenze* in Bologna - in which the artist summed up the possibilities of creating a more fluent rhythm in the sign and greater and more spontaneous brightness in the colour. Matisse's composition with planes of colour, divided up by sensuous linear rhythms, appears on Griffa's canvas as a network of relationships between signs and warm colours - all on the surface, which, as usual, is projected virtually - which have even acquired depths of agitated evocative power, arranged according to organic horizontal trends: orange with curved segments and green with flat layers, while the blues and violets are patches on a red ground, then blue again and a curvilinear motif.

In *Veneziana* (Venetian) it is the rapid, cursive spiral of a green recalling Veronese that gives a meaning to the space and characterizes the fluctuation of orange, violet and ochre, all colours associated with Venetian painting.

In *Lavagna-Beuys* (Blackboard-Beuys) there is an open, live recording that becomes colour and, once again, there is the flavour of painting. *Paolo e Piero* (Paul and Peter), which is all oriented towards delicate lightness - of blues, pink and yellows and sturdy interweaving of diagonals, originates from the interference between the

intellectual; the painting must be executed - that is, it lances of the early Renaissance painter Paolo Uccello and the grid of the contemporary Piero Dorazio in which it is to be found, without sharp contrasts, the value of intimate continuity guaranteeing the true sense of the pictorial experience.

Thus it is this profound coagulation of meaning that safeguards the *raison d'être* of painting and its historical body. Being attuned to its tension - and to the exterior modes of the style, as too many are inclined to preach - is, for Griffa, one of the few paths that we are allowed to take today: or at least that permits us to decently prop up our ruins.

(Catalogue of the Galleria Marzano, Turin, October 1982)

Francesco Poli

### *Painting without a Subject*

The now constant and increasingly articulated presence of professedly decorative elements in Giorgio Griffa's painting seems, in the last few years, to have signalled a notable change of course with regard to the distinctive aspects of his previous period, beginning in 1967-68, which the critics included in a fairly definite manner in the area of the so-called new painting.

What still remains today of the purist severity in the Minimal style, of the zeroing of every representative value that is not strictly self-referential, of the attention paid, above all, to the material process of painting, of the radical reduction of painting to its constituent elements (surface, colour and sign)?

What continuous relationship can be established between the former structural tension of the surface and the present apparent superstructural "superficiality", which is a characteristic that is usually attributed to everything that is, in some way, linked to decoration? If we remain strictly within the normal perspective of interpretation, the relationship becomes fairly relative, in the sense that the latest developments of Griffa's work could be construed as a form of pictorialist liberation from the clutches of cold analytical reason or simply as the accentuation of the lyrical and colour values and the taste for composition, even if this is only just emerging: in other words, it is the loss of methodological consistency, although this favours renewed aesthetic efficacy.

However, through a different and more carefully considered concept of the language of decoration it is possible to see things from another point of view, giving space to considerations that, in some respects, once again cast doubt on the exhaustiveness of the previous interpretations. This is not so much a defence of the more or less

abstract value of consistency maybe in contrast with the recent extolling of the systematic eclectic inconsistency of artistic practice - as a desire for clarity and understanding that does justice to the complexity of a line of investigation capable of producing results that, in my opinion, still have to be adequately assessed. These results are particularly interesting for the problems they raise, revealing all their qualitative importance also because they are linked in a non-fortuitous manner with the working premises that have always informed Griffa's creative practice. The artist - who clearly rejects the most typical features of the avant-garde approach, although he accepts the effect of innovation as an inevitable consequence insofar as it is the condition necessary for every true work of art - made the following statement in 1979 and it is still valid today: "In my work there is no evolution, there is no progress... the lack of evolution does not, however, mean lack of innovation ... innovation is inevitable also when, as in my work, there is nothing that has not been after the others - that is, there is nothing that the others have not already done." In this sense, the experience of painting is a passive one, distant from any tendency towards subjective expressiveness: it involves working with the traces of the anonymous and collective memory of the signs; it is the plotting out of these traces or fragments, causing them to emerge from the fabric of the ground, or - and it is the same thing - immersing them in it.

In my opinion, Griffa is to be credited with having managed to show much of this through images. In other words, he is "creating by images", developing with exemplary determination and clarity a type of painting with intense and carefully considered sensibility that is subtly cerebral, but without aprioristic rationalistic rigidity, where the analytical dimension, although present in some ways, only appears, if necessary, in an implicit manner as one of the aspects linked to the original ideational moment.

This is a type of painting that, in order to rediscover the truth about itself, has radically challenged the well-established logic of the composition and the presence of the subject in the work through a practice that, in parallel with the quest for a Minimalist character, can, in the first stage, be described as one of zeroing, but that, from the outset, has never gone in the direction of a sterile conceptual reduction, since the intention is the exact opposite - that is, positive rather than negative tension on the opening up of new fields of aesthetic signification.

In order to manage to present the painting directly not as a means or medium or material used for representation - it was necessary that the iconic element, even if this is a simple primary sign, should not be something detached from the ground or support, or something attached to this and, vice versa, that the support should not appear to be the ground for the image. In other words, it was

necessary to eliminate the difference between the figure and the ground, removing every element arranged hierarchically as far as attention was concerned, insofar as it was the main subject of the composition. This also meant denying that the figurative space was a clearly defined whole and any possibility of existence of foregrounds and backgrounds - overcoming, among other things, the ambiguity of the interplay between the figure and the ground typical of Concrete Art, which still presupposed the idea of a virtual space.

Thus, it is the sign, the physical trace of colour, the anonymous fragment of figurative memory that lays down the conditions of its meaning, opening up to the process of signifying at the moment when it comes into contact with the support, with the sphere of semantic possibilities and with the field of painting, imbuing it with its substance. But, as I have said, this painting is without a subject and thus there is no trace of a subject of the action - with the consequent possible metaphorical references - just as, on the other hand, there does not appear to be an object to which this action is subjected. The linear sequences, aggregations, accumulations and superimpositions of the brushstrokes and the layers of paint interweave, so to speak, their textures with those of the canvas, settling on this like the sand on a beach or the soil in a field, so as to assume its identity by right, although remaining clearly separate. From this point of view, it is possible to find an analogy with the underlying idea of Land Art works by such artists as Michael Heizer or Walter De Maria. But equally relevant is the reference made by Griffa himself to frescoes in order to underline in his work not only the consubstantiality of the paint and ground but also the timeless fascination of the antique, which oozes from the intonaco and, at the same time, the painting.

For Griffa, the fact that he does not address the problem of the composition means he avoids isolating his work in a closed schema that is seen exclusively as a system of internal relationships. Rather it means regarding the work as one open to every possible coming into being that is never completed because in some ways it can always allude to a non-relative, absolute dimension of painting, even though there is a clear awareness that the latter will inevitably suffer a setback because it will never be able to completely conquer the terrain of its ambitions.

(Catalogue of the Galleria Martano, Turin, October 1986)

Silvana Sinisi  
*Delicate Replication*

Having been working as an artist for about twenty years



Giorgio Griffa continues to be an anomalous case who is difficult to define in the context of the Italian art scene. Decidedly against the tide was the outset of his career in 1967 and 1968, a period when painting, which had been dethroned by less traditional media with a more spectacular impact, was considered to be out-of-date and even regarded with suspicion. This was the moment of glory of Arte Povera, when the utopian movement aiming to renew and reinvent the world, driven by the enthusiasm of creative vitality, was beginning to wane.

Griffa, by contrast, opted for quiet concentration, preferring to work in a sort of secluded soliloquy with the traditional tools and materials of painting: paints, brushes, the neutral space of the canvas which he used from the outset for a nonrepresentational purpose. While it was only from 1969 that he decided to eliminate the stretcher "in order to show my pictures to the world closer to the conditions in which I painted them", right from the start Griffa sought to shift the focus of attention from the final result to the process, with an overall reassessment of the preliminary stage of the choices - dimensions of the canvas, paints, brushes experienced as the most important moment of a work in which the visible results are only the traces of a complex working procedure. Thus, with a more careful interpretation, the artist's apparently unfashionable choice of painting shows itself to be deeply rooted in the historico-cultural context of the late 1960s, revealing a background of critical and cognitive aspirations that were matched by the contemporary art movements where painting no longer played an important role: for instance, Arte Povera, Minimal Art and Conceptual Art. Griffa, however, tends not to impose choices of meanings and to eliminate every subjective connotation from his work in order to make himself available simply as an executor, putting himself "on the same level as the other physical features contributing to applying of colour to the canvas." The only margin of arbitrariness - that is, of "active intervention" - that Griffa allows us to have is the preliminary choice of the materials and tools to be used in the process of painting, where the adoption of a certain type of fabric with particular characteristics of thickness and weave, as well as the choice of colours and brushes, appear on occasion to have been determined by momentary subjective tendencies, which, however, may be traced back to the objectivity of an overall design. Also the choice of the signs, defined at the outset with precise characteristics of width, length and thickness, as well as their arrangement on the canvas, express an underlying idea that is then developed during the process of execution. By reversing the customary schemes of things, the artist places himself, with regard to the action of painting, in a state of "passivity" - that is, a sort of mental vacuum that does not allow distraction, while he identifies with the line made by the

brush guided by his hand, his attention focused on the degrees to which the paint is absorbed, according to the permeability of the surface.

The abandonment of any facile expressive immediacy - curbed by the strong design component - as well as the reduction of painting to its basic features, have led to Griffa's painting being associated with the movement known as Pittura-pittura or Pittura analitica, which became of major importance in the first half of the 1970s. This was, however, a label with which the artist did not entirely identify, as was evident in numerous interviews where he discussed various problems relating to his work. In a text published in 1973 he stated: "I do not carry out any investigation of painting: I do not investigate the objective connotations of colour or the other elements used in painting. I do not, in other words, carry out any active operation, even if this is cooled down and objectified. After the initial choice, my work is simply executed: by the brush, my hand, the paint, the canvas, time, my physical fatigue and so on these are the elements that execute it and I am a means to this end like the others. My active intervention has ceased to play a role earlier, at the moment of choice. Having said all that, I must, at this point, recognize that the only definition I accept for my works is that of painting and that I regard myself as a painter and nothing else."

Between the picture and painting, and between virtual or metaphorical depth and the surface, Griffa opts for the language of painting, but with a fundamental difference from other painters of analytical origin: what counts for him is not the verification of a system that is entrusted to a finished product that is complete in itself, but rather the highlighting of the flow of the dynamic and expanding creative process, which may also be interrupted for external reasons, but is never produces a result that is complete and irreversible. Once again this is a non-authoritarian choice, intended to free painting from an excessively rigid and prescriptive concept, and to reassess not only the creative process but also the role of the spectator, who no longer passively receives the message contained in the work, but is now directly involved in the process of reinterpreting and reworking its meanings. The distribution of the signs and colours on the canvas takes place from a starting point and in a fixed direction, but is not intended to fill all the available surface area. The work develops following a progression that is both temporal, as in music, at times based on the continuum of the line and, at other times, on the rhythmic division between one sign and another. Although the areas of colour appear to follow each other equally, there are small differences and imperceptible changes that reduce the precision of the serial repetition. Each sign comes into being unique and unrepeatable, like every act of life in the irreversible flow of time, and Griffa is

is profoundly aware of this continuous and unstoppable Heraclitean flow.

The result of an important period in the artist's career may be seen in a series of works, executed from 1978 to 1980, consisting of a combination of fragments that are, however, independent and were placed next to each other without any interruption. I recall, in particular, *Dyonisos*, a splendid installation at the 1980 Venice Biennale, where a whole room was lined with a large number of works that were different in terms of size, material and type of sign. The dilation of the work, which was unusual for Griffa, did not produce any sense of excess: on the contrary, it created a result of poetic lightness thanks to the fragile transparency of the materials and the joyful freshness of the colours and the textures. Having become part of a more complex whole, each fragment establishes a relationship with the other elements, forming a link between different experiences, as if it were reconstituting a cognitive path entrusted to the cohesive power of memory. *Dyonisos* seems, therefore, to symbolically conclude a period of Griffa's painting and, at the same time, to inform us of a new direction in his work that was indeed to produce a greater articulation in the pictorial fabric.

(Catalogue of the Galleria dei Banchi Nuovi, Rome 1987)

Paolo Fossati  
*Griffa 1968-90*

At the great banquet of painting and, subsequently, of Conceptual Art in the 1960s and early 1970s when the return to painting, then the colours and gestures of this, right up to such developments as Nomadism or the *Transavanguardia*, or, elsewhere, various anachronisms, were served up - Griffa kept to a restrained and elementary diet. For around ten years, starting with his first exhibition, which was held in 1968, all his works seemed to be inspired by drastic reductions: dots, lines and surfaces left as they were at the beginning of the process. And these were processes with traces and the distribution of dots without a *hors d'oeuvre* or dessert.

There was music full of rhythm and structural tones on the edge of the silence that his canvases were intended to retain as if this was, in its turn, painting. But, in a city like Turin where artists were paying a great deal of attention to these features, he must have been aware of the way the paint was applied and the tension of the colours. For him, too, it was important to make the colour "sing" in certain spaces of the canvas, ready to be surprised by a final result that turned out to be richer - and more viscous than the original idea. These are all things that he

reflected on - and the apprenticeship, before and during the exhibition in 1968 was not brief - and took his time over, gradually carving out a different territory for himself, not for merely sampling, but for analysis. Originally the canvas was prepared, then it was bare: just a few strokes of the brush in compartments, the regularity of which was not calculated precisely, but entrusted to times of repetition; spots of colour, almost always delicate or in light tones, while accumulations of paint are also to be found. These early paintings by Griffa are inscribed in their rectangular surfaces, with their colours, tones and brushstrokes, perhaps with the result that they appear to be cold or indifferent. And the artist soon realized this, he who was not cold, but was indeed indifferent to labels and programmes because he was not willing to accept the formulae that were then - and subsequently - in fashion. In reality - and this needs to be said at once for an artist who is as intense as he is endowed with pictorial qualities of patience - the fact that Griffa did not play the game was a shrewd way of observing and controlling the games of the critics and also, or above all, of the artists, weighing up, sifting and examining them, so that his were felicitous indications of mechanisms and rituals.

For the critics and commentators he was too conceptual to give himself up to painting, too concentrated on painting to become an exponent of Conceptual Art. Griffa has produced a large number of excellent pictures in which an extremely interesting fact gradually became manifest: the more he added other elements - space, more signs, more whites, more thicknesses of lines and so on - the more this procedure, instead of forming drawings and figures was arranged with an order that was as superb (in my opinion, the reasons for the fascination of these works included, and continue to include, a magnificent yet disturbing infallibility) as it was equivocal (no evident reason justified then, or justifies now, the width of the bands shown or those left bare, and the same may be said for the reasons for the interruptions, with lines that suddenly stop, when the hand has not continued the action). Thus there was a happy calculation of the differences in a structure reduced to a minimum.

On the occasion of an exhibition in the mid-1970s the painter in question - the one of Griffa's canvases - decided to let the world know something about himself: he said he did not represent or paint, adding that his work only consisted of "placing the colour in the canvas". He said "in" the canvas because he now used not only an unprepared canvas but also, so to speak, one in a raw state in which the weave was clearly visible, so that the layers of colour, the "placing" Griffa referred to, impregnated the threads of the support and the signs settled on them. This occurred to the extent that it was not possible to work out whether someone - from outside - had painted over the canvas or if that spot or sign came

came from within and whether it was sought after and made or found and accepted. Reduction of the artist's intervention and sediment of painting: the formula of Griffa's early work is essentially this hendiadys. It is a minimal practice that approaches distant things and comes from points that are far from each other.

Compared with the output of his contemporaries or those involved in the same area of artistic investigation - Griffa's work was distinguished by the refinement with which, on each occasion, each canvas upset the balance of the pictorial effect. Like his contemporaries - in terms of age or interest - he sought to revive a dynamic form of painting that was also vital and full with feeling, aiming, like the other artists, to recharge the energy rather than the weight of the work's breath. The context was that of Arte Povera, which was povera (that is, poor) as regards the use of materials and pictorial symbolisms, but very rich in artistic practice, analogies and perspicacity. And here, in one of Griffa's numerous texts, is a phrase that was particularly significant in that climate: "Man is a midwife rather than a creator."

In a situation like that of Arte Povera, rather than weaving the heat of emotion with the thread of his poetic practice, Griffa preferred the cooler solution of the catalogue and the ritual: that is, the maximum distance at which signs and impulses can be kept for them to feed each other. And Griffa also stated: "I am not interested in how the message is conveyed as I am wholly intent on the procedure for constructing the work rather than the ways in which it can be enjoyed."

In the course of time this painter-cum-decorator has sought, at the edges of the traces left by the paint between his canvases, true repertoires of memory, in agreement with his reversal of the gaze. Thus Griffa does not create his own painting, but he looks at it and discovers it, quoting Paul Valery, and we then know that every beginning and every act exists between memory and oblivion, and involves forgetting what we know, if we know it. And he felicitously quotes the poet Eugenio Montale: "Thus history / neglects knowledge for haemorrhoids."

It is worthwhile, therefore, to refer one of Montale's later works, and quote, as if it were a memorandum, a particularly symbolic poem at this point of my commentary on Griffa's output - and this is a commentary by a witness, given that I have followed his painting from the outset with great relief in view of what the times and his contemporaries offer us, in a way that, obviously, receives greater recognition than Griffa has been allowed.

The title of Montale's poem is *L'arte povera*, but it does not refer to the art movement of the 1960s in any case the poem dates from 1971 - but to the poet himself as a painter. It is a tribute, which wasn't intended to be ironical, to the intelligence of his own painting:

easel painting

requires sacrifices

by those who do it and it is always something extra for those who buy it and do not know where to hang it.

For some years I only painted bird nets with trapped birds,

on blue sugar paper or grosgrain for packing.

Wine and coffee, traces of toothpaste

if there was a sea to be decked out in the background,

these were the colours.

I also composed with ashes and cappuccino grounds in Sainte-Adresse, where

Jongkind found his chilly light

and the package was protected with cellophane and camphor

(with limited success).

And the part of myself that manages to survive

the nothing that was in me and the everything that you were,

is unaware.

One does not need to have a lot of critical or historical imagination to realize where Griffa's painting - that is, the painting I am trying to define - belonged. The "picture object", in the sense of a work that, as far as possible, avoids absorbing the passion, private intensity, projections and personal affairs of the artist and is very much on the side of pictorial possibilities, has its putative fathers (Matisse rather than Malevich and followers (from Giulio Paolini onwards, with the same intentional disregard for communication). Non-representation also has these adherents and we are all capable of listing them. The most interesting aspect of such constellations or lineages seems to be the fact that, for Griffa, they have nothing to do with Minimalism, a movement then in fashion that brought about a depressing result - that is, the reproducibility or multiplicability of the modules established by the geometric minimum and transferable from one case to another with continuity. On the contrary, the series of works by Griffa seems to be based on nonhomogenous syntax, so closed is the composition on each occasion to the pure given data; it is, however, a deconstructing composition and hence without any pretence of contiguity, style or taste that are, in their own way, unrepeatable.

I believe that the constellation or lineage within which a possible future historian of today's art could discuss Griffa's work must go back to Dada. Not that such a discreet painter, with his aplomb, propriety and silences, would want to let off firecrackers or provoke others: in other words, Griffa isn't a bomber. However, he knows that blowing up certain consistencies and certain methods means a lot: for example, by dissociating the act of

painting from the artist's personality, so that the picture isn't a mirror, sediment or physiology of the artist (it is no coincidence that Griffa talks about himself as a decorator); or else, by deciding not to tell a story or, to put it more pompously, history - panel after panel, but, on each occasion, withering the onlooker with a still (the film has been lost thanks to some god), work after work, a series of unfinished paintings is another shock given to the conventions of the usual enjoyment of an artwork. In my opinion, the act of painting carried out with a taste for separation and breakage is of this type - that is, Dada - in Griffa's work. Once again, I quote from the artist's writings: "If there is not a defined ideological alternative, one cannot represent anything."

Up to this point I have been recounting - with all the customary chronological inaccuracies - the story of Griffa's early period. Not that things have changed fundamentally in the artist's later - and, all things considered, present - period. However, in the 1980s Griffa's work did take a new turn in the sense that each of the elements of reduction and analysis with which he had worked from the outset proclaimed their right to memory more explicitly; insofar as they were traces, they mapped out, so to speak, their own path. The fact that the gestures of the hand and the intermittence of the colour remained as they were, or varied only slightly, now meant that, on each occasion, they contaminated their own figurative mode. I shall try, once again, to express myself with a formula: from the 1980s onwards, Griffa has produced fairy tales, minimal stories and elementary amalgamations of profiles, shapes and signals, the references to which acquire, as it were, redundancy and referents. Neither mechanical nor automatically established, they are secret relationships. Where the main character of these short stories really lives is their secret theme, in a musical sense - that is, the hidden noise of the various figures put together. From the signs and rites of what he discovers, Griffa retrieves a trace of intention, a concealed text. Thus, just as Duchamp brought forth an object incongruous because it wasn't foreseen in the artistic script - turning it into art, Griffa goes back from the outside to the inside, leaving the thing discovered incongruous in its own way. And it's a precise referent: once again Dada, or something of the sort. My impression is that, in his splendid pictures of the last few years, Griffa has invented for all of us not only storytelling, but also - as Matisse, an artist much loved by Griffa, suggested - an invitation to undertake a journey, with a landing on Cythera. Amidst many immobile and decorated markings and minimal intrusions of the canvas - that is, within his repertoire - a map is being drawn, a place towards which sweetness and wealth of colour enchant and accompany us. Obviously this is a colour that isn't at all expansive and rhetorically expressive: being decorative,

it celebrates its supreme immobility and ascent by means of a gesture in that place. But, precisely because it is decorative, it is able to contain an order and an expansive internal emotivity. And, for this reason, it is an active colour, a conductor with clear and lasting dynamism: psychological maybe. In my opinion, it is no coincidence that certain curved lines - sometimes with a gentle curve and the use of a golden colour to increase its serenity as a bearer of the gaze proliferate and fan out. It's as if the contamination they propose were connected to a movement, a link slowly sewn in the space. And it is not even a mental space where we who interpret Griffa's pictures take the other end of ribbons, frets, broken lines or convolvuli and tie up strands, using both memory and suspension. This is the journey I'm talking about: finding oneself at the edge of the picture and continuing with it, but going beyond.

(Giorgio Griffa, Edizioni Essegi, Ravenna 1990),

Mario Bertoni

*Unfinished*

"I even try to let the hours of the day enter my canvases."  
Matisse

I am quite sure that Griffa would unhesitatingly agree with a sentence like "I even try to let my canvases enter between one hour of the day and the next", meaning by this a space like an interstice requiring the idea of intermediate time - that is, the time a brush takes to cross the canvas: the hand stops, hesitates for some moments on the last square centimetre of the canvas, just as it has done just before, when beginning... , then he removes the brush still wet with paint, breaking off the line, which is unfinished at the lower corner, "at a certain point", a point that is no different from the others, but is certain to be the last (or the first). Surprised by the inevitability of the end and the beginning, the canvas enters time - for the duration of a point.

Griffa has quoted Matisse in various texts and has dedicated a work - *Matisseria* - to him, as if out of gratitude .... Well, Matisse maintained that "we are never clear-sighted enough to realize that the artists we admire would have produced very different works if they had lived in another century", which is already a fine way of discouraging the others from using his work as a model.

While in Matisse's case the term "purity" has a central role, in Griffa's case this role is played by the idea of contamination - of the colour as well as of the canvas - in order to reflect on the physicality or thingness of painting. The sign also participates in this physiological character

"I believe that a general methodology of the creative spirit is in progress that, rather than considering the working tools as just material that the artist moulds, regards them as no longer virgin, but uses them with all the weight of their history and culture, as well as naturally their physical qualities, and entrusts them with the birth of poetry.... And since there is nothing in the world in which there is not an element of human culture, everything - absolutely everything - can be brought into this creative process. Everything, so also painting. The artist who transforms reality has been replaced by the one participating in a procedure for getting to know the world." It is Griffa himself, therefore, who states that the quest for any virginity (or purity) is unfeasible, in the belief that, in any case, every sign is unrepeatable - that is, exemplary "even when nothings exists that the others have not already done before". This is a sceptical position, far from the impetus of the art of first half of the century. It is, in fact, a position that caused Griffa to declare: "In my work there is no evolution and there is no progress" - thus laying claim to an attitude of passivity that allows the artist to become a tool among other tools and, in the end, to accept the situation where the act of painting is constantly marked by the hands of a clock.

So what is the affinity between Matisse and Griffa? If we disregard the intentions and objectives, I believe that it depends, above all, on the fact that they both learnt about and experimented with what Matisse called "the writing of lines" - that is, "the harmony between drawing and colours", or "the precision of thought", a sort of synthesis of the artist's intentions, a meaning and a material. But, immediately after this Griffa distances himself from it, in order to venture into an area that Matisse rejected because he was anchored to feeling, spirit and instinct, while, for Griffa, this was an area in which there was no interiority to which he could lay claim, but simply a receptiveness to knowledge that could be aroused. Thus, while according to Matisse, "Purely intellectual painting cannot exist. .. it actually never starts", Griffa maintained that it could exist and that it neither begins nor ends, "the metaphor of a space (and a time) forever unfinished": it is, in other words, an area around the void, blocked out by thickened colour, which has nothing to do with either order or purity.

(Giorgio Griffa, Edizioni Essegi, Ravenna 1990)

Emilio Tadini

### *Figurative Alphabet*

1. Griffa's painting must be seen - in a way, we might say "expects to be seen" - from two points of view that might even seem to be in contrast.

It's as if we felt it even before we had a clear and distinct awareness of it. I mean, what we feel is that this painting allows us to enter and involves us in dimensions that are very different from each other. We feel that it is from these different dimensions that this painting calls us. And with different voices. But they aren't at all difficult for us to understand.

2. First of all, Griffa's painting makes itself available as a work about what we might call the primordial meaning of painting itself. It's like the repetition of a *mise en scene* on a stage where people, before saying to themselves, "Let's see what we can do with this painting," must have asked themselves, "Lefs see what this painting is." By trying it out. And naturally, by trying themselves out in that act. Irs significant that those two fundamental elements the support and the colour - display themselves in Griffa's work in a very simple way that is, at the same time, revealing.

In the first place, the support and colour show themselves here. But this indisputably practical act ends up by evoking quite naturally a large amount of theory. (I shall mention just some of the possible themes. How does the support enter the dimension of the image created by the colour and the sign? How do the colour and sign enter the dimension defined by the support - and how do they react to its plastic consistency and its colour? What symbolic value can be given to the fact that it is by blocking, in some way, the free path of the brush through the air - in that kind of stop or fall thafs both definitive and indispensable - that the opposition of the support makes the birth of the sign possible and thus that of the meaning? A sort of material dialectic ... etc.).

In the sign, Griffa's painting constructs by trying out, so to speak, its own body. In a very simple manner, it elaborates the materials constituted by the support and the colour.

It's a sort of figurative alphabet....

3. But Griffa's painting, as I said at the beginning, can be seen from another point of view - that is, from a point of view that may appear to be quite the opposite.

No longer is it an evocation of the primordial gesture of painting. On the contrary, it's a work on painting as the result of an infinite elaboration that makes itself available for us today. It's a work on painting that has done everything...

It's as if, in the clamour of all the history of painting, one were to strive to recognize once again the basic notes and rhythms.

4. Griffa's painting may be thought of, on the one hand, as the setting up of a system that, paradoxically, is prior to the history of painting, and, on the other, as the setting up of a system that is consequent on that history. Perhaps the most important thing is that these two

thoughts should be thought of at the same time, because we can feel simultaneously a sense of restored primordially and a sense of great intellectual sophistication that has been created in the absolute simplicity of an artistic practice.

5. (Naturally one shouldn't deliberately set any store on a note like this. If one does find a reason for so doing, may it take effect somewhere very far away on some backdrop. This text is nothing but a small incident in the world that rises up beyond the Indefinable, elastic limits of Griffa's canvases.

Naturally, within those indefinable, elastic limits, the support, colour and signs say everything that there is to say.)

(Catalogue of Giampiero Biasutti Arte Moderna e Contemporanea, Turin, 2001)

Rolando Bellini

*Figurative Alphabet*

What happens on the unprimed canvases piled up in his studio? What happens now on the most recent supports, with their freshly executed signs consisting of colours, signs made of writing and signs formed by numbers? And what happens of an innovative or surprising nature on the latest works produced with intentional sobriety and newfound freedom by Giorgio Griffa? Something that, in my opinion, by moving first and foremost pencil, paper, canvas and paints - in other words, active elements in Griffa's artistic practice - brings together different kinds of event. As the ancient Greeks would have put it: there is an act (pragmal, a chance (tukhi), a purpose (te/os), a surprise (apodestoni), a tautology (tautologos) and, finally, an action (drama).

Furthermore (more particularly), what happens is what happened on the scattered leaves from which the oracles took their auspices and cryptically and symbolically ordained the future destiny of those who questioned them: that is, the constitution of signs consisting of forms, signs formed by numbers and signs made of pictorial writing that always require the active assistance of the spectator moved by the mystery and solicited by the inexpressible that asserts itself through a certain amount of chance. For the latter it is a question of the inspiration of the artist, of the forceful assertion (albeit subtly) of his creative powers, which are, in effect, the felicity of chance. Moreover, there is the combination between writing and painting, numbers and words, signs and calculation, and geometry and the absence of any measurement: thus we observe the dialectic confrontation between void and measurement of space according to classical reasoning - that is, Cartesian, Galilean, Einsteinian, and so on.

The signs disappear and there is, therefore, also dispersion and a great void and a great solid on each of his canvases, whether they be large or small. Whether bare or covered with signs and writing, each of his works, especially the latest ones, display fluctuating spatiality and ironical indifference - hence hidden emotional and intellectual participation - to the deeds and misdeeds of the day. There is also a quality of symbolic representation, recalling the theories of the German philosopher Ernst Cassirer's association that would also have greatly pleased Erwin Panofsky, I suppose.

Adopting a strategy that was favoured by American Pop artists such as Roy Lichtenstein, he made special, artistic use of everything that had hitherto been despised in the art world and he finally produced works characterized by elasticity and synonymous with freedom since they were created with the fewest possible limits or restraints. With a large number of acts that were wholly intentional and disarmingly simple, he trimmed down, so to speak, the overabundant sense in order to focus on their profound personal or expressive value and meaning. Indeed, this is a process that has been intensified in the latest series: it is a process according to which, although without abandoning any symbolic requirement, the symbolic self-referential superstructure is removed. Until very recently, however, this was present and active in the sense of a tautological crescendo, and also of a superstructural expansion that ended up by obscuring form and sign, as well as the artistic act and expression. Thus it is correct to say that lately Griffa's work has been growing in intensity, with a paring down process that, paradoxically, allows him to express more and in a riskier manner than he has been able to do in recent years. Without relinquishing the symbolic overtones - at most of meaning and its contrary, the nonsense implied in every artistic action - and without eliminating the fortuity of the action, its mixture of the explicit and the implicit, the artist performs a new, direct action intended to produce particularly expressive power and manifest subjectivity. In the final analysis, this is his reply to the eternal question, "so what is painting and what is this painting?" Griffa's reply may be found in his artistic practice: the simplicity of his signs, the direct and fragile beauty of his symbols in the form of numbers, the patina of certain layers of paint, the uneven pencil lines, the flavour of the materials, from the pigments to the paper, and the impact between the sign and the bare canvas. All these things - especially in his most recent works - help to define the artist's intentions. What Griffa does is to produce something similar to the spoken language freed from every betrayal of meaning, comparable to the full pronunciation of a word - that is, the correct pronunciation, semantically accurate or valid of that word. Thus he asserts - especially in his most recent series of works -

that it is necessary to pronounce and not articulate each individual sign. This is because, whatever he may do, the painter's art is nothing other than the assertion that is both pure (without residues) and that is also voluntary (that is, conscious) of a certain quality of language.

In the light of what has been said so far, Griffa wants to overcome the false barrier of the metalanguages in order to undertake his own very personal discourse centred on value and efficacy of act of communication intended to show and convey the implicit meaning, not by articulating it but simply by alluding to it. And, by alluding to it - at this point it is now clear - in the delicate and ironical interplay of voids and solids, bareness and cladness, sign and non-sign, number and symbol, and sound and colour.

In conclusion, for the first direct contact with Griffa's works, I would suggest that spectators linger in contemplations, allowing them to savour the flavour of beauty emanating from each individual work and let themselves be captured by the fascination of each "cryptosign" and by the disarming ambiguity and beauty of their forms that say a lot, also about themselves, although without explicitly expressing it. Thus the value of the artist's output may be found in a dual polarity: on the one hand, in the aesthetic flavour exuded by each work, on the other in the fact that each canvas of his, like all his painting, is nothing more than an excellent metaphor that is first and foremost an aesthetic one.

(Catalogue Giampiero Biasutli Arte Moderna e Contemporanea, Turin 2001).

Maria Mimita Lamberti  
*Passages and Fluctuations*

Griffa's painting, simple in its forms, but with refined elegance, seems to offer itself to the most disparate exegetical operations: his characteristic style has lasted over the years, and may be interpreted in the light of Minimalism, semiotics, anthropology, Oriental traditions or Western philosophy, and behaviourism or hermetism, with the interplay of references reflecting the periods and the artistic debate in progress.

These are cultural modes to which his canvases together with the artist - lend themselves with courtesy, accepting the metaphorical capacities of writing and making use of analogies and suggestions from the different fields of human knowledge and exact sciences. And, with the same graciousness, they avoid them.

Attentive and inquisitive, Griffa has developed an interest in all these hypotheses and is willing to make progress in his artistic inquiry without losing his way and, at bottom, without changing. Thus he is ready to absorb the new

stimuli in a personal story that, on each occasion, proudly returns to entrench itself in his painting, which is painting and nothing else.

This is why there is a sort of supreme outmodedness in the output of an artist who has continued to work obstinately without taking advantage of a number of opportunities, when similarities and parallelisms would have offered him prestigious labels if he had only allowed his work to be classified under them.

(Giorgio Griffa. UNO EDUE, Edizioni GAM, Galleria Civica d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea, Torino 2002)

Mario Rasetti  
*A Painter Who Talks to Scientists*

Why has a theoretical physicist like myself, who seeks the laws of matter and asks himself how this can be at the origin of life, has agreed to write this piece, venturing into a field that is very much outside his own specialization? I believe that it is primarily because Giorgio Griffa is an artist who talks to scientists. In the clear geometry of his signs, there is a message that they are able to understand and endorse. There is, in fact, an irresistible tension towards knowledge that unites them in a cultural mission where they have much in common: in particular, they have an identical sensibility to the complex articulations of those spaces - whether these be abstract or real - that they, like him, seek to perceive and represent.

This refined painter and the men of science are like travellers that great eagerness drives to cross the borders of a country that is inconceivable for others in order to reveal its mysterious laws. Defining the key to Griffa's work, and also the vision that science has of nature, is rather like explaining to those unfamiliar with Oriental culture the profound meaning of the haiku: paraphrasing Roland Barthes, one might describe it as 'an immense practice devoted to suspending language' - not, that is, stopping it in a charged or profound silence that is, in a way, mystical, but enunciating something that does not have to develop either in the discourse or in the absence of this. In Griffa's canvases, the language in which the meaning is lacking is the combination of all those critical structures (or rather superstructures) - accumulated over centuries of memory - that see the artist's work as an objective, the final, insuperable point of an unrepeatable experience. As in the case of science, they are paradigms that cause matter and calculation, physical laws and mathematical inventions, and knowledge and conscience to be distant and extraneous in scientific

culture. Griffa's works are instead, like scientific thought, the expression of a continuous, unstoppable dynamic flow that - like the self-similar structure of a fractal - is found in each individual work, but also in the works as a whole, especially in the way in which they are articulated and correlated temporally.

In the first place, perhaps due to an analogical mechanism that is inevitable in my way of thinking as a practising scientist, they call to mind - or rather, they induce it through analogical representation - the elusive entity that mathematicians call omega: a number that defies the laws of mathematics (and this is only apparently a contradiction). Omega isn't an abstract theorem or an impenetrable equation: it's simply a number, as real as pi, infinitely long and literally incalculable. Like Griffa's sequences, omega is a process that reminds us of the limits to what we can know; like Griffa's canvases it contains all the beauty but also the intangibility - that is, the fundamental elusiveness - of every representation.

Thus the quest for omega is to be found in Griffa's canvases: refined algorithms written in an apparently simple alphabet of lines and colours, they codify an enigmatic, elusive multiplicity of possible choices that arouse - in those observing them and seeking to interpret them by deciphering the cryptogram - the perception of an unlimited plurality of options. In these works there is the same enigma of the number with infinite algorithmic relationships, opening up an unlimited combinatorial multiplicity of parallel interpretative worlds, which are as arcane as the innumerably complex - despite the apparent, almost elementary simplicity of the signs - codes in codes concealing mystery (which can be unravelled) and infinity (which is perhaps knowable). Thus every trace, every choice of colour - as if it were a word - has a profound reason in a different knowledge that is difficult to obtain and contains one of the mysteries of the many mysteries of intelligence that cannot be exhausted by a finite number of interpretations.

There are, however, other aspects of Griffa's work that intrigue a scientific observer. Like a true complex system, his painting is the sum of its parts, the overall properties of which don't correspond to precise properties of the individual components: thus it generates a real structure. In this, the messages are constructed through repeated procedures of reflecting abstraction; these are active processes because they are dynamic - that is, articulated systems of transformations that reproduce themselves by generating each other in genealogies that are all the more authentic because they are of an operative nature. Here the very concept of transformation recalls the much more subtle one of formation or self-regulation and consequently of self-construction. The structure is, in fact, combinatorial: its invention - whether this be free or contingent, and effectively seeking an equilibrium that

is both variable and stable - aims at the same time at a final necessity (like a theorem) and an intemporal state that is reversible, yet rooted in possibility rather than in reality (as in an artwork). Why is it that the number of brushstrokes, lines and symbols in Griffa's pictures are nearly always a prime number? And what rhythms that have yet to be deciphered do the frequencies of his brushstrokes conceal?

There is also time, both in each individual canvas and in the sum total of Griffa's work, but it's circular time. We know from anthropological studies that there are cultures that perceive time as cyclical, for example the Hopi Indians in America and Aboriginal Australians - and apparently also Stone Age cultures - but they imply that these peoples are trapped in a curious mental time warp with an essentially mystical significance. But there is instead a much more precise sense of rational purity in the circularity of Griffa's representation: it is the infinity of the circle compared with that of the straight line and the perpetual return of thought to itself, which inexorably sends it back towards its point of departure in an unchanging flow that is, in a way, always different. It is an eternal round in which at each return there is, however, an imperceptible variation - there is more knowledge and more awareness of the world, but also of oneself - in the Steinian rule of explanation by repetition. It is the question the ancients asked about how space, time and matter are constituted and, after a fashion, it finds a reply here: each theory that represents universal knowledge is both an end and a beginning; and the necessary ingredients are incredibly simple in their infinite complexity. On the one hand, there is the symmetry of the observed world, on the other, a new paradigm capable of containing the definition, in terms of geometry, numbers or pure perception, of the body - which I would like to call arithmetic - inherent in the same world.

(Giorgio Griffa. UNO E DUE, Edizioni GAM, Galleria Civica d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea, Torino 2002)

Marco Meneguzzo

*Uninterrupted paths*

Essentially, the components that come into play in Giorgio Griffa's activity as a painter are time, language, the "inside itself" and originality. Evidently, these elements were tangential to the "political" dimension, in the broad sense of the term, the one with which Griffa's painting was generally interpreted at that time, and the political dimension entered into and that flanked them, but without ousting them or being able to take their place. In other words, a personal attitude remained where, to be sure, "personal was political", but where the "place" of



the investigation was actually the political nature of individual action.

Time, then. With an apparent paradox that has illustrious examples in modern science. Griffa's time starts from space. Starts from, but does not end in. In interview and essays, he has long insisted about his "unfinished" and this principle of not finishing is even more visible in his works (more so in the ones he did in the seventies, to a more elementary extent in the later ones), which never close and never will. Obviously, this is not a Western-style "unfinished", and an unresolved tension between reciprocally contrasting and conflicting elements - materials. Gravity/Levitation- but an Oriental-style "unfinished", lightweight and Zen: it is pointless and even harmful to finish a landscape if you are capable of suggesting to the eye of the beholder how it can be completed, thus adding the imagination of the spectator, who thus becomes an actor to the artist's work... But there's more: leaving a work physically unfinished means bringing it back to the attention of the eye that finished it ideally every time that it rests on the canvas. All of Griffa's works are in a sort of suspended animation. In this way, time is always new, open and (nearly) circular: in other words, it is not without a beginning and without an end, as in the eternal return of the Orient or of Nietzsche, but enjoying endless beginnings it is always being renewed, thus achieving the paradoxical form of time which flows in a direction - and thus complying with the Western conception of it - but which, as it can start all over again on an endless number of occasions, is impenetrable in the direction it will take. All this happens because Griffa does not close his works: at a certain moment, the sign is interrupted and the work is "suspended", awaiting other eyes, other gazes, other moments. Completeness is no longer a virtue, because when everything has been completed - in the sense of both space/form and time - also the time of the action is completed: on the contrary, Griffa keeps this space-time crack open, using the only linguistic artifice possible for a painter, i.e. that highly personal unfinished of his.

In this way, the time factor became part of the language of painting: in fact, it returned to being part of painting, after painting had been expropriated by artistic media more overtly directed it (all process art and conceptual art, for example, starting with the great early XX century statements of intent). In this sense, the critical way in which the artist's action has been analysed since the very beginning had identified the problem, but had barely evaluated only its more properly ideological aspects.

His mental and operational path is not ideological, but if anything psychological, as Lacan's analysis of language could also be psychological. Painting exists before the artist, its language obeys internal rules something that I accept happens for every language - although they are

not just structural and mathematical, but also psychological. Thus the artist's meeting with painting is not the application of the character and psychology of the former to the substantially available and neutral language of the latter, but if anything the meeting between two psychologies, that of the being and that of the language. The image of the artist as the "conduit is not new. Plato already spoke about the artist as one possessed by the god (or the daemon) and Paul Klee spoke more or less about himself when he said he was the tree-trunk that transformed the invisibility of its roots into the visibility of the crown of leaves, but after the Dadaist and Surrealist reflections, this mystical vision took on a more earthy aspect, in which psychology in the broad sense of the term - so also including this sort of "psychology of language", as something proper to language itself ... - appeared to be crucial. Griffa is on this wavelength, actually accentuating the linguistic side of psychology, if that is possible, on the other hand trying to erase the psychological presence of the human being, of the artist.

This means that the artist is the product of painting and not the other way around: he is its creature and not its creator, but it is because he finds himself in this condition that he tries to understand everything about his motives. If space and time are evident in Griffa's painting, when we go into greater detail we discern the ways in which the creature's dependence on the creator becomes manifest, in our case that means the painter's dependence on painting. One key word could be "internal", which I defined more generally above when I mentioned "inside itself". With this term, which Griffa uses passim in his writings, but which does not appear to be immediately crucial to his research - unlike "time" - the artist tries to define the feeling he experiences every time that his hand passes from the colour to the canvas.

The inside, the "inside itself" of painting comprises more than just the "classical" semantic structure of the language of painting - and what I mean by classical here is the combinatory, geometric, logical aspects of the various elements that constitute the syntax of painting - as it also includes something more fleeting, more impulsive. This is not a question of finding the Ego of painting, but its Id. In this search, which is more like a psychological excavation - but in the body of painting, note, not in that of the artist!... - Griffa finds many analogies with the ponderous existential question posited by the great painting of the Fifties or the work of such artists as Robert Ryman, who are apparently so different in Griffa, the artist's shout and his anxiety are transformed into the best and most durable results when not so much the individual depth as the depth of painting emerges: in an equal and opposite manner, the action of Ryman - I mention this American artist because he crops up from time to time in Griffa's own words, but it might also be worth rememb-

ering other artists in Colour Field Painting goes to the opposite extreme of arrogating to itself the anonymity of the gesture, the possibility that the hand behind those signs could be random. The result is actually similar; what emerges is the nucleus of painting, its inside self that normally remains most concealed, most unspeakable, maybe even most scandalously intimate, because it was not veiled by any narrative support and was barely sustained - in the beginning back in the Seventies - by a partial ideological support. Once the veil of ideological justification had been stripped away, painting appeared in its paradoxical, "unbearable" essence, just as some find Matisse's painting to be unbearable. Ultimately, the urgency of discovering, of unveiling, the inner nature of painting is comparable to that quest for the original that has been identified as another underlying element in Griffa's action. Coherent with his vision of painting as a psychologically original language, Griffa sees crossfertilisation, mixture and once again the indistinct element as the raw material of language, whence he extracts and abstracts signs that nevertheless convey the memory of that indistinct dimension and that mixture. The signs of the alphabet are themselves the result of images, which in turn were symbols and which derived from things... And talking about the alphabet, for Griffa, is so natural as to be almost self-evident.

(Giorgio Griffa, Silvana Editoriale/ Galleria Fumagalli, Milano 2005)

Klaus Wolbert

### *The Intimacy of Painting*

Giorgio Griffa has taken the essential components that remains when the painterly conglomerate of figurative and also abstract art are disentangled and reduced them to the elements that remain crucial for painting, then used them to layout a sign system, a vocabulary, an alphabet and a store of minimalistically achieved structural elements that are variably at his disposal when he is creating his works and which he places in clear evidence, on next to the other and unmixed, in his painting. He treats each individual element in his pictures separately and actually additively as in each case an independent signature in the system of imagery, as an exemplary presentation of its own self. This begins by converting the image support into a theme: the support is thus an unstretched, unframed and unprimed canvas, with all the characteristic of cracking and folding, pinned to the wall with a handful of nails along the top edge, a theme that continues in the stripes, lines, tracks, logos and commas painted with precision yet also with nuance, in which both the form and the function of the brush chosen in

each case remain retraceably visible. He avoids leaving traces of hesitation, correction or emotional calligraphy in favour of as intersubjective as possible a demonstration of pure painting. As this impression of painterliness could not be achieved using a constructivist imagery based on strict precision, Giorgio Griffa always "paints" directly freehand and takes care that, in the colouristic and formal presence of the brushstrokes on the textile cloth of the canvas, the freshness of the painterly approach and the handmade of his presentation remain with all the characteristics of the fabric of the colour. Although he has not pursued the stark purism and minimalist reduction of his early works any further in his later paintings, which are often in several parts, but has actually developed a straightforwardly ornamental, illuminatingly, colourful, sensitively enticing and moving image structure, the conceptual premises of his painting have remained unchanged in the process.

With his personal contribution to "rescuing painting" from the spirit of painterliness itself, Giorgio Griffa is one of the most frequently profiled representatives of the Analytical Painting that first put in an appearance as a tendency and a term at the beginning of the Seventies. As early as 1972, the critic Maurizio Fagiolo dell'Arco was already describing these radical painterly positions as *pittura/pittura* (painting/painting) in the catalogue of Griffa's exhibition *lononrappresentonullaiodipingo* (I don't represent anything I paint). At the time, the force of his tendency was making its mark in Italy, conveyed there by the German painter Winfried Gaul, especially in the exchange with the art scene in Germany, where Klaus Honnef argued a strong pro-active case for the proximity of fundamental painting with the exhibitions *Geplante Malerei* (Planned Painting) in Munster in 1974 and *Bilder ohne Bilder* (Pictures without Pictures) in Bonn in 1977. Klaus Honnef was also the one who coined the term "Analytical Painting". In Italy, attention was then drawn to the phenomenon of "absolute" or "essential painting", as this position was also called, in the exhibition *La riflessione sulla Pittura* (Reflection on Painting), held in Acireale in 1973, for which a trailblazing catalogue by Filiberto Menna was published, and then in the shows *Arte come Arte* (Art as Art), in Milan in 1973, and *Pittura analitica* (Analytical Painting) in the Galleria del Milone in Milan in 1974.

In the phalanx of those monomaniac artists who have numbered past and present among the personalities showing in the area of Analytical Painting, Giorgio Griffa is the one who has developed his painting's imagery with particularly logical coherence and with an exceptionally intellectual approach, adopting influences both from conceptualism and from minimalism and combining them with the aesthetic demands of "absolute painting" to generate an unmistakable synthesis of his own. Yet

in however rational, axiomatic and streamlined a manner he applies formal and colouristic material, he always succeeds in maintaining a playfully lightweight, lighthearted and poetic component. Giorgio Griffa's paintings are on the one hand an example of very disciplined, precise, artistic thinking with an aesthetic manifestation of an accurately calculated formal planning, while on the other hand they also always show in their very result a considerable, subtle painterly quality that can be traced back to a sensitively refined, artificial nuancing of the medium in the process of painting. Giorgio Griffa's art is distinguished by its concentration on original painterliness, on contemplative delving into the intimate structures and properties of painting and that is also the reason why he has every right to say he "feels [he is] a traditional painter".

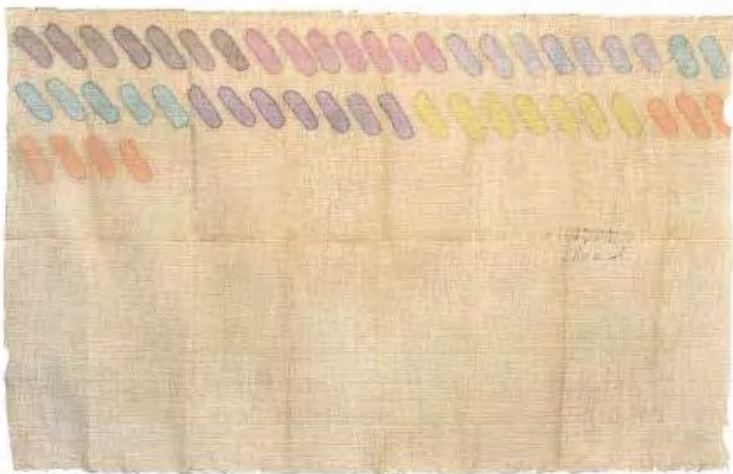
(Giorgio Griffa, Silvana Editoriale Galleria Fumagalli, Milano 2005)

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# GalleristNY

## *Italian Painter Giorgio Griffa Will Show With Casey Kaplan*



"Untitled," 1973. Acrylic on canvas, 118.5 x 90 cm. (Courtesy Lorenzelli Arte, Milan)

Announcing its plans for Art Basel Miami Beach 2011 via e-mail, Casey Kaplan gallery shared that it now represents Italian painter Giorgio Griffa. Born in 1936, Mr. Griffa has not had a one-person show at a New York gallery since 1970, when he showed with the late Ileana Sonnabend.

At Art Basel Miami Beach, Kaplan will show Mr. Griffa's minimal, unstretched paintings that have demonstrated the artist's consistently vivacious exploration of his chosen material and medium and the idea of painting as an action with an infinite duration," the gallery said in its message. A one-person show with Mr. Griffa is scheduled at the gallery for next fall.

Though not well known in the United States, Mr. Griffa has shown regularly in Italy. This year he was the subject of a solo exhibition at Rome's MACRO museum (Museo d'Arte Contemporanea Roma), and he has had recent shows at galleries in Turin, Milan, Seregno and Bergamo.

In an essay written in 1987, critic Silvana Sinisi wrote, "[w]hile Giorgio Griffa has been in the vanguard of Italian art almost 20 years, he continues to be something of a 'case apart,' someone difficult to categorize, somewhat 'out on a limb.'" Almost a quarter century after that was published, New Yorkers will have an opportunity to make sense of his work.

**-ANDREW RUSSETH**