

## ENCUENTROS



# *Art and New Media in Italy*

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Lecture by

**Maria Grazia Mattei**

With Remarks by artist

**Fabrizio Plessi**

## IDB CULTURAL CENTER

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The IDB Cultural Center was created in 1992 by Enrique V. Iglesias, President of the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB). The Center has two primary objectives: 1) to contribute to social development by administering a grants program that sponsors and co-finances small-scale cultural projects that will have a positive social impact in the region, and 2) to promote a better image of the IDB member countries, with emphasis on Latin America and the Caribbean, through culture and increased understanding between the region and the rest of the world, particularly the United States.

Cultural programs at headquarters feature new as well as established talent from the region. Recognition granted by Washington, D.C. audiences and press often helps propel the careers of new artists. The Center also sponsors lectures on Latin American and Caribbean history and culture, and supports cultural undertakings in the Washington, D.C. area for the local Latin American and Caribbean communities, such as Spanish-language theater, film festivals, and other events.

The IDB *Cultural Center Exhibitions* and the *Concerts and Lectures Series* stimulate dialogue and a greater knowledge of the culture of the Americas. The *Cultural Development in the Field* funds projects in the fields of youth cultural development, institutional support, restoration and conservation of cultural patrimony, and the preservation of cultural traditions. The *IDB Art Collection*, gathered over several decades, is managed by the Cultural Center and reflects the relevance and importance the Bank has achieved after four decades as the leading financial institution concerned with the development of Latin America and the Caribbean.

## ART AND NEW MEDIA IN ITALY

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*Maria Grazia Mattei*

I want to thank the Cultural Center of the Inter-American Development Bank for providing this opportunity to discuss Italian art and the contemporary culture linked to new technologies. We believe that the “digITALYart” exhibition downstairs is very important at this particular juncture in time; it fills us with pride to be able to export a message related to new and innovative contemporary art which is relatively unknown, even if artists such as Maestro Plessi are already known internationally.

For today’s speech I have chosen the title: Art and New Media in Italy. This title includes three concepts that I would like to briefly outline in order to convey, on the one hand, the signal of a very strong, ongoing evolution of Italian art and also, at the same time, try to place this debate within the general context of art. I will explain briefly the different stages of our road map that will help you understand the relevance of this combination (art + new media) as well as current developments. The introduction of new digital technology is strongly related to the

computer as a tool for creating and processing images, and for bringing about the interaction between artist and spectator, between artwork and audience. This will give you an understanding of what is going on, not only in Italy, but also at the international level as well.

I believe it is important to begin our debate by examining the course of art history, which shows an ever-increasing relationship between art and technology. This debate is not a new one; already by the end of the 19th century and beginning of the 20th, the introduction of photography had had a large impact and had brought about innovations and a real revolution in the art world. Photography steals away space from pictorial portrait, and relaunched painting in a different dimension. Painting becomes abstract, cubism is born, artistic avant-garde is born. The very strong link between art and photography shows how technology in relation to art has created and initiated a profound debate, and caused profound changes, which have led us to today.

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Photography is a good example; let us think about what happened at the beginning of the 20th century with the advent of daily newspapers and let's recall the words of the poet Apollinaire: "brochures, catalogues and posters which scream out loud, here is the poetry of today, and for prose here come the newspapers." This makes us realize how a technique, print in this case, which was addressed to a large audience and which marked the beginning of mass media communications, affected literature as well as visual arts. It was then, in fact, when the first graphics were produced by the artistic avant-garde of the 20th century and famous artists signed posters. On the one hand, new technology exerts an influence and revives the artistic challenge; this has always been true in art history, but particularly, as I said earlier, at the beginning of the 20th century when technology became more precise, more defined and increasingly more aimed at the public at large. On the other hand, this use of technology becomes independent from art, and has a life of its own. Traditional art stays its course but, at the same time, new expressive languages are created. It took several years for photography to establish itself in the art world as a highly artistic form of expression. The evidence is seen today on the market, in art galleries and museums, such as the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York which has organized a large retrospective of the work by the photographer Thomas Struth. His work is celebrated as art work at the same level with painting and sculpture.

Photography has completed its course, during which it had to develop and find autonomous forms of expression, of legitimacy. Today, for all intents and purposes,

it is an integrated part of contemporary art. I gave you this brief outline to underscore how the course of traditional and classical art, starting from the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century onwards, has been upset at times and shaken up so that it has gone in different directions. The most interesting turning point was during the 1960s with the advent of television when the use of new technology and tools with unexplored potential for artistic expression began to gain ground.

Television became popular as mass media and that sparked a counter reaction by the artists of that time; the Fluxus movement in the United States, and also in Italy various independent art movements were born, including Video Art. Nowadays, we are no longer surprised at the idea of elevating an electronic brush representation to the same level as a work of art, as long as it is created by artists, expresses concepts and creates a flow of images. It is a very interesting movement that has allowed for the progressive acceptance of this form of expression as one of the most captivating expressions of contemporary art. We are still talking about technology art, which is becoming autonomous but is still electronic and not digital in nature. Video Art marks a very important milestone in the world. Its founder is a Korean, a naturalized American named Nam June Paik. During the 60s, there was a very lively debate among classical artists and avant-garde proponents in Europe. In Italy, one of the main leading figures was Fabrizio Plessi who is exhibiting here at the IDB Cultural Center. He is an artist who has had a large resonance at the international level and who works in a very peculiar field, which is a spin-off of Video Art: video installations.

Video installations are an answer to the increasing need, already present in the 60s and even more underscored today by Digital Art, to involve spectators, all of us, in an artistic process. These are not phenomena which are completely autonomous, they still find their roots and derive their strength from the preceding art heritage. Video Art creates the so-called video installations, which represent a way to narrate, by fragmenting in space a concept, a tale, a poetic idea, and a message by the artist. An integral part of the artwork is the presence of the spectator. Standing in front of this work, we are no longer passive bystanders; we become an integral part of it. The artwork exists by virtue of our participation, we reconstruct the fragments of a narration, we are involved in a space, in a representation which is spatial and dynamic.

Let me open a historical parenthesis. This need, i.e., the search for a work of art that could be no longer passive, motionless, but that would rather involve the spectator, had already been felt by the artistic avant-garde of the 20th century. As an example, with the beginning of cinema, the filmmakers of the time dreamed of creating a “total” work of art. They were pursuing a synesthesia of languages. They believed that with the help of film, of sound combined with images, the time had come for all of us to get involved and be part of a creative process by using our senses, not only our eyesight, but also our hearing. The artwork could then acquire a meaning by virtue of our being able to assign our own meaning and significance. Among the cinema avant-garde, many artists come to mind, such as Hans Richter and Oscar Fischinger—they all pursued this aim.

The reason why the idea of a total artwork has remained a utopia was basically due to the state of technology and the social environment of that time. In other words, we had to wait until today to be able to accomplish this dream. Thanks to digital technology, artists are now able to create a polyphony of feelings and messages generated by a single numeric and digital denominator. The current debate in the art world on digital culture and on new work produced with these innovative techniques, in particular the newest and more interactive pieces, is not entirely disconnected from what I said before. On the one hand, they are influenced by past history and ideas that had already been anticipated by the artistic avant-garde and, on the other hand, they represent the answer to current specific needs. Video installations are one of the main expressions of Video Art. Video has been used by artists striving to create autonomous audio visual representations where images are not motionless but are instead dynamic, where languages are broken down and different signs are mingled together: life and electronic processes. A sort of aesthetics of the artificial is being created.

Video Art is not a complete departure from the traditional artistic process, no trends or techniques fade away for good; today we work at the computer but painters still paint and sculptors still sculpt, and the traditional expressive forms and techniques are still being used. It is interesting to note that starting in the 1960s new frontiers were being drawn to contrast with the preceding art. There was a very lively cultural debate at the international level; Germany, France and Italy were very active in defining art through the use of new technology. Originating

in the United States and Japan, the computer emerged as a tool and an artistic movement was then baptized: Computer Art. Artists created images through numbers, on the basis of immateriality and advanced bi-dimensional and tri-dimensional shapes. In the United States, the 60s were crucial years for the popularization of this expressive visual language. In Italy, research started a little later, towards the end of the 70s and 80s. Computer Art continued to slowly spread everywhere; its computer generated numerical images conquered other sectors as well, not only the artistic ones. We have all witnessed the progressive evolution of these aesthetics, which cross over to other fields such as cinema, television, graphics and the latest web developments.

As computer graphics and computer generated software become more popular and fall into the hands of artists, a new genre is born to interpret and express the world around us. I believe that what we can say about computers today is the following: computers can be considered a pervasive technology, they are everywhere, and they are by now part of our daily life. The computer is like a motionless engine which manages most of our cultural, social, and business processes. It is somehow the perfect tool to express a vision of the world of today, as was the use of perspective in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. Back then, man was also at the center of innovation, and in Italy perspective was introduced to express a new vision of the world and the relationship of man vis-à-vis the world. Perspective was an innovation, a technique but also a metaphor, if you will; it is a conceptual parameter through which we can measure our vision of the world, and before its introduction, this was not possible.

Computers today represent the tool that is more in line with our times; at least this is what digital artists believe. Our age is characterized by the fact that space-time barriers can cease to exist via the simultaneity of sensations and graphic signs. Today we can mix together, socially and culturally, different messages and shapes. What is relevant today is the connectivity, the transmission of thoughts and ideas, the storage of memory and heritage. Centrality is ever more relevant in the relationship between man and machine. We have indeed intensified our interaction with technology, with machines. Virtual Reality has sparked a very lively debate at the international level and this has led to the creation and understanding of a new symbiotic relationship between man and machine. We understand that the changes occurring in our lifestyle have been prompted by the use of these technologies, but this interaction somehow creates anguish and some soul-searching. Artists who have a unique capability to perceive and anticipate ongoing changes of society's values have used computers and all the different ranges of its technology to manage this complex phenomenon.

If we choose to be a little more farsighted, we should watch closely what is happening now with the new expressive forms of Digital Art, and we will realize that they anticipate and point to some of the crucial trends of the social or, if you will, existential debate of today. Digital technology allows artists to express and give a forceful representation to audiences of all the nuances and ranges of sensibility of the perception of our times. I invite you to try to perceive and detect these signals that are still weak in some ways but are destined to become more

evident in the near future. I already told you what happened with photography and what is happening in the world of Video Art. The next step is Digital Art and all the expressive forms that deal with the immateriality of images, with the interaction and synergism of senses, with the new languages and expressive forms which are catching on.

Let me talk about Italy, which stands out in its peculiarity in the international arena. Italy started to deal with Video Art in the 1960s. Fabrizio Plessi is one of our masters, but there have also been other movements, various other artists and leading figures of performance art, of the "arte povera" who have used video to document, transmit, and collect impressions using new technologies. In Italy, besides Video Art that has produced many video installations, a new current that can be defined as Digital Art was born in Milan in the 80s. Unlike the United States and other countries that have been more structured and faster in seizing the meaning and the future importance of these tools and their use, Italy did not have access to schools or labs specialized in that field. We had instead "botteghe" or apprentice workshops, as was the case during the Renaissance. We speak in fact of the "digital renaissance."

In these "botteghe" that operated like laboratories, computer graphics were elaborated mainly for cinema or television. The work that was done "a bottega" trained our young people to use the computer. They created very simple, minimal images, in contrast to the very eclectic tri-dimensional emphasis that was pursued at that time in other countries. I would like to show you a short clip of the first video where you will see that these artists made

a virtue of necessity as they explored the language of a tool such as the computer from the point of view of a bi-dimensional, almost pictorial, language. We will see an Italian group named "Giovannotti Mondani Meccanici" that started to create the first computerized bi-dimensional images in the 80s. I will show you an extract of an interactive performance where the key word of Digital Art is "interactivity"; this performance was created for an exhibit that I organized in Lugano called "Computer and Art." An interactive performance of Digital Art was based on a very simple software that enabled the artist to film any visitor standing in front of this monitor, and to insert these images into virtual scenarios, computer generated settings with bi-dimensional images. I have defined this installation as "minimal computer art" with all the features that characterize Italian Digital Art: the simplicity, which is still true today, the insertion of a hyper-technical image and super-artificial tri-dimensional graphics that are produced for commercial purposes; and the attempt to realize a piece of work in a minimal style where the interaction of our own body with images and sounds really stands out. The group "Giovannotti Mondani Meccanici" creates scenarios that become interactive with the presence of an audience standing in front of the screen; it is as if by virtue of this computer program, I would see all the movements and gestures of all of you seated here in front of me translated into transformations of sound and image.

These are only some early examples of the first creations of Italian digital graphics in an interactive digital installation. An example of another computer working technique comes from an artist

by the name of Mario Sasso. This artist's background is in painting, but with electronics and then digital graphics he moved into using the new technologies. We can say that Sasso works in the wake of an art that still thinks in terms of painting. He works on developing themes of cities, marks of urban dimensions, and the relationship of man with the landscape; they are part real, as these are in fact little Italian city maps, and part imaginary, as he works them out in further pictorial detail. Interestingly, he strikes me as a transition artist, in that he uses the brush, but also photography, and then adds video that incidentally conveys his own elaboration of signs and aesthetics to the computer; this is therefore a digital graphic elaboration. He created various pictures that we cannot define as such: we may call them multimedia pictures or "multimediality," which has become an established description of new art technologies. Sasso had great success and can now be considered as one of our historical artists. He produced works in the 80s and the early 90s, and recently had a great exhibition at the Lingotto, the new exposition area set up in Turin on the former FIAT industrial premises.

Mario Sasso's next step is obviously into dynamic graphics. Images in movement are not a novel concept in the art world; if you remember that in the past we have had movements like Kinetic Art; even Duchamp in 1913, with "Bicycle Wheel," tried to involve the public in a dynamic perception beyond a static, pictorial piece of work. From Dynamic Art to Kinetic Art, we follow these lines, utopias, dreams of an artistic avant-garde, arrived at by different paths, until we incorporate the audio. Mario Sasso transfers his experience, his pictorial background to a computer-

ized digital-electronic elaboration, and produces an animation in this dynamic video called "Footprint." Mario Sasso's work is a mix of languages, and sound is an integral part of it. Reference to art history is very evident, but there is also an insertion of scientific imagination. Thus the other side of the treatment concerns the relationship between art and technology, involving art, technology and science.

The 1986 Venice Biennial Exhibition of Visual Arts was a very important occasion, as it was totally dedicated to the art-science relationship. I contributed to that initiative in a part of the exhibition that was dedicated precisely to the advent and utilization of new technologies in art, with an exhibition called "Planetary Network" that we mounted in the old rope factory. In Italy in 1986 we were the early birds, ahead of everyone else. In U.S. universities e-mail was used but the technologies were not yet so common. We were four curators from Canada, France, England, and Italy who worked together using the e-mail put at our disposal as a tool by Sharp. In that exhibition, among the various articulations of the treatment, great attention was given to the impact and use of these technologies in the artistic environment where art and science are ever more tightly interdependent. In that exhibition, an artist took part named Adriano Abbado who was among the first minimal computer artists. He was member of "Correnti Magnetiche," a group founded by Mario Canali creating and operating works using bi-dimensional and tri-dimensional images, then developing them into interactive installations. We can say then that in Italy this debate has a history of its own, when our authors and artists worked on their own,



using technological means to make possible experimentation with a new type of language. Our research at that moment was aimed, on the one hand, to develop graphics and an aesthetics connected to dynamic images, but also to fixed ones as you have seen by Mario Sasso, and there are other authors. But another parameter kept acquiring more and more strength, and that is Interactive Art.

At this point I would like to show you the Interactive Art of the Studio Azzurro. Usually with these works, especially interactive installations, more than one author is at work, as they require teamwork and several fields of competence: not only visual-artistic expressive ability, but also computational ability, in a competence mix that generates a work of art bearing a collective signature. The Studio Azzurro was founded by three artists: Leonardo Sangiorgi, Paolo Rosa and Fabio Ciriffino, and then became a very large group operating within and outside Italy, venturing into many other fields of competence, including music etc., which would become part of the project as the occasion demanded.

These two works by Studio Azzurro are good examples of interactive video-installations. The first you see is a piece realized by Studio Azzurro for the exhibition "Oltre il Villaggio Globale" (1995) for the Milan Triennial; its name is "Tables." It is important in these interactive installations to understand the parceling of the narrative, and the spectator's role in reassembling the fragments. The debate on Interactive Art in Italy hinges precisely on this: involving the spectator in a manner that is active, physical but also contemplative, still active at any rate. And a feature of Studio Azzurro's work, as

well as research in Italy and particularly in Milan, when it deals with the new images, is not to emphasize the presence of technology.

Much of what I have witnessed, especially in Europe, strongly stresses technology. In Italy, however we have something of a "digital Italian style," one that minimizes technology, not emphasizes it but rather aims at the narrative, at the contents. In the case of "Tables" the viewer is called into a sensorial act with these tables to discover the story fragmented in space. It is very unlikely in Italy, that many of these groups would work in other directions because, I think, we are still carrying a burden of memory reflection which is historical, artistic, and perhaps forces us to be more prudent in the use of technology, even a little mistrustful, if you will. I believe instead that we should not neglect all that happens around the world, where different technological signals constantly appear. I feel I can say that this is somewhat one of our characteristics, and perhaps today, in this overabundance of technology, so much more so than in the 60s and 70s, we use technology to tell stories again, to transmit contents, to transfer our feelings, our poetry—all this I see as not irrelevant, but rather important.

It is not by chance that if we leave for a moment the art world and have a look at what happens in the industrial world dealing with the new media; we all know that today the most advanced technologies are available. When confronted with the advances in interactive TV, or in broadband, or in advanced telematics, etc., the next question is: what story will it tell? At least in Italy, where especially in Milan there are broadband, cables, the first problem

is to get the service, but when we have it the second problem is what to transmit, what content? This is not just a channel where all that has been produced before is shown, and that's the end of it: interaction presupposes different content, and we work a lot on content.

This second installation, or if you will interactive video placement by Milan's Studio Azzurro, stresses another area of our research in the artistic-expressive world through the new technologies, and that is the man-machine relationship, the relation between the physical and the virtual, and therefore between what is natural and what is artificial. (Clearly it is somewhat paradoxical to project on a screen these installations which are interactive in the space itself, but it is the only way to give you a quick idea of the measures we take in setting up and using new technologies in the expressive-artistic world). A paradox shown by virtual reality is to call into question our own corporeal nature in a sound world which is more and more mediated by machines, where virtual artificial representation and artificial aesthetics advance. Somehow the confrontational need comes up to affirm one's own physical existence. This theme is not an aspect which is known only to the artists practicing Digital Art. Many contemporary artists who do not use the new technologies have placed this question in the limelight of artistic debate—just think of all the post-human discourse over the last ten years, of a whole series of elaborations, by photographers and painting artists, who keep investigating and questioning their own physical existence.

This Studio Azzurro installation somehow acts on the spectator, making him tread on a large video carpet where,

at the beginning, images are static, giving one the impression of walking on a kind of fresco painted on the floor, but then the real physical action of taking a step releases this dynamic process of relationship with artificial bodies moving within the video carpet which I assure you is very upsetting. The goal of a group like Studio Azzurro is to cause emotion, to stimulate a different emotional perception and, in some way, to surprise the spectator.

I have enjoyed reviewing with you this artistic itinerary connected with the new technologies. Before leaving some time for questions, this last part has to do precisely with involving the body in the man-machine relationship. There is another group operating in Milan called "Aventure in Elicottero Prodotti" di Claudio Prati. In it the very advanced technology of 3-D graphics and also of "motion capture" are present. The latter is a new technology with which the cinema, for instance, is creating all its virtual actors. Entrusted to an artist such as dancer Ariella Vidach, these technologies become tools to create a choreography and a symbiotic man-machine experience. In order to have you understand how they operate, these artists do extensive research, and then create performances in space with an audience. Then they create autonomous works, assembled and post-produced, such as this video that was broadcast by the Italian service of Swiss television and followed a whole chain of autonomous distribution.

The last frontier I want to mention is active at the research level in Italy, and it is the so-called "Evolutional Art." Celestino Soddu, who is exhibiting in the IDB Cultural Center Art Gallery at the moment, is one of our exponents, together with

Pietro Gilardi. To underline once more that this journey of the art world is no longer static, motionless work involving the spectator only when it achieves emotional success, Evolutional Art is art in progress, art in process. Soddu and Gilardi have done a great deal of scientific research on so-called “Genetic Art,” and on algorithms that autonomously generate new entities of artistic creation, giving works an autonomous life and an evolution of their own, stressing in their development this principle of causality, which in the art world is extremely important.

I would be pleased to take your questions now, to be in line with today’s topic, all “interactive.” After this brief exploration that I hope to have communicated to you, I truly believe we are living at a very particular moment with the advance of these technologies in the art world. We

are all like pioneers in this sense; we are at the dawn of an expressive-artistic evolution, which will proceed along its path in the history of art. I hope to have demonstrated to you how the technologies enter this path. They develop specific, autonomous dynamics, as we have seen with Video Art, with interactive installations and, as we might still discuss and see, in experiences connected with the internet, Web Art and like expressions. These are spaces which today attract the attention of many creative operators—therefore they are experiences which are not remote from the art world. We are privileged observers if we pay attention, if we can see and listen. We can perceive today signals that will help us to understand a future which anyway is already “in progress,” like the very in-process Evolutional Art we mentioned earlier.

*Maria Grazia Maffei*

**Dr. Maria Grazia Mattei** is an expert in new communications technology and, in 1995, she founded MGM Digital Communication, a research and development studio specialized in digital culture. Dr. Mattei's articles appear in newspapers, catalogues and periodicals such as *A+A Architecture Animation*, *AAVV*, and *Art@Science*. As an art critic graduated from the State University in Milan, she has written programs on digital culture for Italian television, and served on important international juries like *Milia* (Cannes) and *Imagina* (Montecarlo). In 1989 she was responsible for the Imagine Award at the IBTS (International Audio, Video, Broadcasting, Motion Picture and Telecommunication Show) at the Fiera di Milano; and for the European Union in 1997, she produced the Italian edition of TRAM (Training and Research Actions in Multimedia).

## AN EVENING WITH THE ARTIST

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*Fabrizio Plessi*

Now then, it is not my intention to deliver a lecture or give a talk, as I don't believe this is the time or the place; I will only drop a couple of notions about my work and show an old film of mine. My work is decidedly different from what Video Art has usually been. I have tried to work like an alchemist, putting together things which did not appear suitable to stay put together. For this I always tried to use videos and TV, which is the ugliest of objects. I am, of course, more of an archaeologist than a researcher, because since the 1960s, it is as if 300 years of technology development have elapsed. Back in the 70s, my assistant Carlo and I used a Sony Porta Pack to film, which is practically a museum piece these days. Back then it was in black and white, with wire and film hanging down everywhere, truly romantic, like Vittorio De Sica's 1949 film, *Bicycle Thief*. Nowadays, when I see all these technological digital manipulations, I remember that I was working when TV was still black and white.

I would like to show you a short film of an exhibit from 1995; it will help you understand what my exhibitions are like. This *Roma* piece, currently in the IDB atrium downstairs, is but one of the many installations I made for this show. While it is showing, to save time, I will attempt to explain what I think you need to know about the images. After that, if there is somebody experiencing the perpetual tragedy of a question—I am at your disposal, like an absolutely normal masochist. Now, let's hope that the film coming up is the Perugia show rather than the New York film, as usually we are hit by the one that has no business showing up—and this also is technology. That is the nice thing about a live take; it is liquid geometry.

This film takes us traveling through a magical place, which is the Rocca Paulina (Pauline Fortress) in Perugia. I imagined it as a great journey via the twelve or fifteen of my installations. This first installation is about liquid time, where a large

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This informal talk was given by the artist, just after the opening reception of the "digITALYart" (digital art from Italy) exhibition at the Cultural Center art gallery on February 19, 2003.



"Roma II," 1986 by Fabrizio Plessi. Single-channel video and sound installation with multiple television monitors in wooden frames, with travertine marble, at the Inter-American Development Bank, Washington DC, as part of the exhibition "digITALYart" (digital art from Italy). Dimensions variable. The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, New York. Promised gift, Marino and Paola Golinelli, 1999. T245.99.

Photo: Gerald Martineau, *The Washington Post*

mill churns electronic water which in turn ends up in actual water. It is a kind of underground Pompeii, where every environment is enclosed within another environment, and next to every product of mine where technology appears, there always appear ancient, primordial, and barbaric elements; they are of course all deceptions, all false perceptions. Here is another piece that will let you understand what a barbaric idea it is to plant a canoe paddle in a monitor. When I say that I am a barbarian of electronics you understand from these images that it is the real truth. Almost all these elements come from fif-

teen or twenty years ago. Here is a piece of art having to do with all the paintings that have yet to be done: there are only frames (white canvas) waiting for the artist's arrival. The center of the whole exhibit is a piece that started from the idea that the artwork is inside the stone and the artist only has to extract it; I imagined a series of large Michelangelo-sized stones near a kind of airport metal detector which reveals the work of art contained inside. This is fiction, but it is important because it is a poetic idea, and let me repeat that I consider poetic ideas always more important than rational ones.

Here you can see *Roma* set up in a Rome-like site, and this *Roma* keeps changing according to where you locate it. Here it is in an enclosed, suffocating cavern, like an underground stream. The same piece looks totally different downstairs in the Bank's atrium. Here is a little piece, very poetic, based on the idea of what's true and what's false: on an upturned table there is a cup dripping water drops which fall into a vase. You understand that here too this is not true, but perception often deceives us, and many times my work consists in creating these deceptions. Another piece from 1984: *Mare di marmo* (Marble Sea) where a real wind modifies a video image; hence an absurd idea, that a real wind would modify a technological image. Nowadays it would be called interactive, from certain viewpoints, and it was so even before the term interactivity was first coined.

The spectator must move through all these installations and perceive sensations that are different each time. In the order of this exhibition there was a piece that was the apologia to disorder — an associative process of stones falling in water and of stones shaken by an earthquake; the spectator found his way obstructed and could not proceed any further. Then a piece dedicated to chaos and a last piece entitled "Bombay"; it is dedicated to Pasolini, born out of the idea of the great public washhouses of Bombay. There is water in movement and there are these simulations, these wet white cottons waiting to dry in the sun. Against a usually crowded India is set a solitary, empty, metaphysical, absolute India. There is only this lapping of water that elicits in us a kind of absolute, empty, poor existentialism, and above all a truly suffering and silent world. In my

work I always try to inject some thoughts, and I would hope that in the world of technology these ideas remain present.

My work was and still is about eliciting sensations, especially of the poetic kind. The good thing about technology is that it never stops. Today all young artists have at their disposal giant screens, while in the past to find four identical TV sets was a big deal. I did my work during my time, winding up the tension and raising the emotional temperature and the technology. All in all, I think my work can be compared to magnesium flashes reaching with their light into dark and secret corners of our perception. I would like now for some of you to say something. I cast my stone... I cannot do much more. Thank you.

**Question:** Where do you go to find the water images?

**Answer:** My assistant Carlo Ansaloni is a specialist at filming water. In Italy we speak of family-run restaurants, well, all my work is home-made; the wares are genuine and nothing is industrialized. I have not seen this film we just ran for a long time, and seeing it again today makes me feel ninety years old. Still, the same poetics apply today as they did when that film was made. But I believe that the great historical moment of Video Art was truly in the late 1970s, early 80s. After that, we have seen that the dizzy takeoff of technologies did not yield the fruits we expected because, as we were saying this morning, technology is a very difficult animal to tame; those who can't subdue it end up being subdued. For ten years I taught a course on the Humanization of Technologies at the Cologne Kunstschule

in Germany, and I realized the great difficulty of trying to make the students understand that the medium is not the message. My old theory is that Marshall McLuhan made quite a mess; the medium may very much influence the message but it will never be the message. This little ball of a microphone that you see in front of me amplifies my utterances, stupid or sane as they may be, but it has no soul. Rather, the more perfect and sophisticated the technology is, the warier we must be about it.

**Question:** How may your work be possibly influenced by the fact that technology changes so rapidly?

**Answer:** Well, certainly, one thing is very clear: woe to the artists who try to march alongside technology, because when we reach it, technology is already on another level, and the race becomes uneven. The steps taken by technology are much wider than those of the artist, who is trying to keep pace and is instead always behind.

Medicine, for instance, proceeds at the same rate as technology: heart micro-surgery relates perfectly with advances in technology. Intelligent bombs, that reach very precise targets, are perfectly synchronized with the technology of the moment. Unfortunately the artist uses another yardstick, another measure; he cannot move exactly in the time in which technology moves forward.

We started from a vision, as Umberto Eco calls it, "of the global fresco," a vision in which small and large were perfectly attuned, and we shifted to a mosaic society, in which all these tiny tesserae in the end do not give us a collective vision of what we are, and we miss the big picture. That's why there are artists who fall behind, who stumble, who get lost. In our society, where everything is permissive and chaotic at the same time, we no longer have a humanistic, real vision of our time. Each artist must do what he has to do.

Thank you.

**PLESSI**



**Fabrizio Plessi** (b. Reggio Emilia, 1940) attended the Liceo Artistico e all'Accademia delle Belle Arti in Venice. In 1968 he began using water as the central theme of his installations, films, and performances. In 1970 he began participating in the Venice Biennials, and since 1975 he has presented works in public spaces in Italy, Monaco, and Brussels. Plessi was invited to the show at the Venice Biennial and the Venice Film Festival, and in 1982 he exhibited his entire video work to date at the Pompidou Center in Paris. In 1985 Plessi exhibited "Video Going" in Milan, the first video environmental installation in Italy. At the 1987 Documenta 8, in Kassel, Germany, he participated with *Roma II* and at that point his stature as an innovator was recognized at the international level.

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