

Au delà du possible, au delà du connu...

About Mauro Valsangiacomo's *Out Off Universe* cycle of works on paper

In order to observe, discuss, dissect and criticise, to defend, but above everything else to experience an artist's work, you must force yourself not to sidestep its total extent, the creative path that brought it about, its place in history and its awareness of that place and that history. Similarly, it is simply not feasible to neglect certain other factors, of the kind concerning our own existence that it is given to none of us to choose: not so much the essence of *chance* as that of *coincidence*.

From the way he appears to have decided to shape his artistic approach, from the way he has contributed to improving the definition of that point of view that opens onto the final frontier, towards imminence, determining his own self, or *Id*, reiterating the predominance of *subject* over *object*, of *individual* over *tribe*, and repudiating the omnipotence of matter, **Mauro Valsangiacomo** (1) indicatively chooses painting as his medium, even though he has surpassed it extensively, thrusting beyond the mark of personal sign that we all leave as we make our way forward, beyond the limitations that every medium sets on the message.

Nevertheless, the artist's choice of means of production has not been decisive since the beginning of his career, as coincidence would have it that the author of these works was born 57 years ago, in 1950, and had no other choice but to spend his early maturity progressing through the stages of that epoch-making surge of change and development that occurred at the beginning of the seventies: it was one of those moments in history when there was a highly palpable awareness of escaping from a devastating post-industrial society and entering, no less subversively, in the technological society of *Neo-Enlightenment* that implied draining knowledge and depriving it of its spiritual dimension.

[Marshall McLuhan's fundamental writings, Franco Vaccari's warning words about the *Technological Unconscious*, the advent of *Performance* and of *Body Art* as approaches to the subjectivisation and seclusion of the body, the authentication of thinking, the concept of "back to nature" with Joseph Beuys' neo-shamanism, Urs Lüthi and questioning the concept of identity and of subject: altogether, this constituted a veritable explosion of combined cause and effect in man's cognition. And before them all there was Marcel Duchamp, with his decontextualised, occult(ed) work. Then there is today's technological and information-technological era, which has produced "short thinking", as the time available to us for every decision seems to have become less than a split second and the dimension of that split second is also measured in terms of how an object relates to the space that contains it.]

His production, too, coincided with moments of research into the potential of installations, in parallel with the contemporary thread of *Art and Architecture* or *Art in and for Space*, or with the experience he had with video in the early eighties, which had a vigorous overtone of performance and action.

But while chance is often facilitated by ignorance, coincidence on the other hand is not; just as the artist's experimentation and his weakness for analysis make an enormous, continuously developing work in progress of their involvement. This is where Valsangiacomo tackles painting in a manner that is only apparently heterogeneous and abstract, but in actual fact quite faithful in relation to his research, to his coherence of expression and idiom.

Nothing is left to chance in the author's artistic expression. For us, the *Body Art* movement is still an important phase of changing mindsets, as it was not so much a question of the body itself as of its liberation, as though it acted on its own and in full to represent a shell, a container, a congenital, pernicious gaol-like constriction. The quest for emancipation from the body, as a desire to make it a subject, to break through a frontier and transform the *Ego* into *Id*, certainly inspired the various conceptions that M.V. has of his medium – including that of painting – as significant.

Looking back at his recent career, his abstract, material oils on canvas, executed with a serial dynamic, have every evident appearance, to our eye, of his conceptual commitment. There is no narrative here, no search for chromatic vibration, nor is there any immediate impression of rhetorical development. His painting is anti-aesthetic, just like all his liberating thinking and gesture. But above all, it indicates a performing action without the presence of an audience, which means that the author is actually the only witness of his own action, solitary in the delirium of his creative design, obsessive in its bodily fury, layering colour upon colour until the canvas splits asunder, self-destructing and collapsing under the weight of the matter itself. This work is almost a premonition, as though he were in search of an ontological truth, yet perfectly aware that he will not achieve it with the medium he is using to try to express it. *Removing a veil from another veil*, as he has written..., it is almost as though Valsangiacomo were painting, using primarily his own body, which he programs and which then triggers liberating gestures towards a delirious, breathless quest for a metaphysic.

[...] *This means that it [the body] is, at one and the same time, a point of view and a point of departure: a point of view or a point of departure that I am and that at the same time I surpass towards what I ought to be.* [...] (Jean-Paul Sartre)

While expiating the balance between the bodily action – almost as though the body were psychopathology – and mind and soul, M.V.'s output reveals a narrative that proceeds in parallel with his making, with his desperate and maybe vain attempt to unveil his intimate thought, visionary and Utopian. Cosmic.

With this ritual of the instinctive gesture poised at the passage towards a spiritual plane, towards a *different* world, beyond the line of marginality, the artist is linking – maybe unconsciously and sometimes, but coherently with the epoch-making drama of technological mystification and all the many and

varied aesthetic ramifications on which philistine society gorges itself – with the group of *Body Art*. Which denounced and to a certain extent laid claim to an unhealthy pleasure regressing towards a vaguely analytical reconstruction and identification of his individual conscience within the group. A moment of pain, but of catharsis.

[...] *Repressed instincts are the dangers that menace the condition of civilised man.* [...] (2)

I like to think that the series of works to which the artist has given the single serial title of **Out Off Universe**, on which he started working more or less just as the new millennium was dawning, constitutes an important moment in that process of balanced decantation of the body, by which I mean the seclusion of the senses and the inhibition of the individual's willpower on which the author constructs his substantial moments of reflection.

These works are created principally using printers' inks on partly satin-finished papers: they defy being defined with purely painterly criteria. Poetically and subtly, the artist applies fields of monochromatic colour to the paper support, spreading it almost beyond the margin of the sheet's perimeter and intervening gently with an almost imperceptible yet signal set of body gestures. There is a fragility to the support and a delicate respect paid to how the artist handles the material. Valsangiacomo establishes an almost feminine, lyrical and intimately focused relationship with his medium and the language he has decided to choose: paper and the transparency of colour.

It is as though, when faced with a coherent, concrete, substantial work of painting, he had exhausted his physical forces, arriving at a sum total that rules out all prejudice and disenchantment. His is a silent act of bodily liberation, which enables him to surpass matter itself, his action, his presence in the flesh and as an object... and as gesture.

There is always – also in this artistic commitment of his – a certain predisposition to behavioural ritualism, repetitive and hypnotic, although the way his work proceeds displays a logical attitude and a cathartic synthesis on several levels: the almost ecstatic dimension of unconscious loss of consciousness towards the *All...* towards the Universe.

The fitting choice of the title in English also encapsulates a refined, apparently opposed dichotomy of meanings in the way it repeats and emphasises *Out* and *Off*: one a more literal expression, paired pleonastically with another more figurative, metaphorical one, which the author respects, coherently, while reiterating the impossibility of identifying the beginning and the end of every one of these paintings, as though they were all fragments of one and the same limitless great painting: a vast, cosmic, universal field of colour, in actual fact, stretching beyond all time, beyond all architecture. There is no allegory or hallucination here, just a tranquil path towards transcendence.

There is no shortage of coincidences in the specific situation of this particular case, either.

After a fragment of life dedicated to studying painting, on the basis of millennia of research into figuring and above all narrative [the concept of the non-figurative work – sometimes perceived as an analytical distraction – is recent], M.V. displays all his maturity here as he asks himself some fundamental questions about the form and cognition of space: through what is, appropriately, a complex abstraction that he does not conceive of as a facile idiom of painting and style.

[Special attention deserves to be paid to the challenging, but successful, attempts he made back in the early nineties of the last century to demand of his painted plaster and clay sculptures (fundamentally his plastic and statuary form) that they dematerialise, depriving themselves of their own form.]

It would appear that *Out Off Universe* summarises a quest for maturity as a redefinition and sublimation of the *Id* in the very space and time. Within the framework of his personal quest for artistic non-places, by which I mean places-not-of-the-flesh, non-object places, almost unreal or trans-real places, the artist (un)consciously creates a procedure of cross-fertilisation. *Out Off Universe* defies the criteria of painting, so as to revive and integrate his years of research into photography and Video Art, as a mechanical means of production; the camera that subverts, bursts in and interferes in the universe of creative purism.

Nevertheless, his subtle veils of colour do not look so much like photography as they actually approach aesthetically the appearance of a photographic or X-ray plate. Prevalently in degrees of anthracite, his papers delve beyond a mere coexistence of aesthetics and procedure to investigate the places of non-willpower and of non-consciousness, becoming antidotes to finiteness: it is as though M.V. were making a point of searching for that ontology that makes it necessary to *remove the veil from another veil*, separate out, make a distinction from a reality, even though it is our own, that is constrictive and looming.

Out Off Universe should not be ruled rationally out of a totalising path between the past, the present and future possibilities.

Mario Casanova 25.09.2007 [Translation: Pete Kercher]

(1) Mauro Valsangiacomo (1950), Swiss artist, Lugano, Switzerland.

(2) Lea Vergine, *Body Art and Performance. The Body as Language*, Skira Editore, Geneva-Milan 2000, p. 16.