

## BRUNO DI BELLO

## HENRY MARTIN

He may wear  
two hats  
when it rains.  
But when he writes  
with his blood,  
he writes  
on pale pink paper!  
(A poem for Bruno Di Bello, 1966, by Vincent  
H. d'Arista)

## The paintings:

1958-1959

large whitish canvases, painted, with broad vertical stripes of color along both outside edges. horizontal pencil lines mark off about the center third of the central white space. this central rectangle serves as the field for a series of slanting and apparently rapid pencil strokes arranged in loose symmetry around a horizontal axis. the pencil strokes obviously obey a principle of abstract composition in an emotional painterly kind of way while the two marginal color stripes and the central white field are arbitrary and relatively impersonal. the pencil marks are dry-brushed so as to integrate them into the tone of the background.

1960-1962

repeated rows of vertical pencil lines over monochrome painted canvas (1) or superimposed on horizontal streaks of gouache or water color on paper (2). in the works on paper, the individual pencil marks tend to be all of a type. they are not differentiated according to rows. in the works on canvas, each row of pencil marks tends to differentiate itself in quality from the row before and after it. the works articulate themselves as fields rather than as compositions. (this is more true of the paintings than of the works on paper.) it is important to note that in the works on paper the streak of color is 'imitated' by the row of lines superimposed upon it. there is a very elementary contrast between the rows of color and the pencil marks: one action/many actions. color/sign. relaxation/concentration. continuity/repetition. all of these contrasts, however, disappear quite comfortably out of view as a result of the stateliness of the whole. in the works on canvas, the contrasts are still there, but rendered more ineffable by virtue of being expressed only in the differing qualities of the pencil marks in the various rows and not in terms of the more dramatic contrast between two

different materials. in the works on canvas, the area of the pencil marks is always in some way differentiated from the total surface area available. either there is a line around it, or the painted area of the canvas on which the pencil marks are made is smaller than the canvas itself.

1962-1964

rows of letters stenciled in wax on white canvas. there can be one or several (two or three) letters and they can be in one or several (two or three) colors. the canvases moreover are all covered with a sheet of onion-skin paper and some of the letters are on top of it while others are veiled below it. in some canvases the letters are widely and evenly enough spaced to remain legible, in others they become illegible (4), in others they are partly legible (3). in *M painting*, a smaller letter forms a pale tightly scanned field beneath a larger darker letter. in this painting one is also made to notice the calligraphic quality of the manner in which the crayons are applied. the standardization of the stencil in these works has much the same function as the standardization of the photograph and the darkroom in later works.

1964-1967

collage on canvas, often beneath onion skin, or partly beneath onion skin. the collage elements are usually large, rectangular and printed — pages from newspapers for example (5, 6). sometimes a work will play with the scale of two similar images in different dimensions; more frequently a particular from the page lay-out will be blown up in size and redrawn by hand. this is an example of what is referred to below as 'tension between two antagonistic systems.' usually there is a space between and around the various elements of the paintings and sometimes this separation is heightened by lines painted around them.

1968-1969

photographic canvases bearing recompositions of images of Klee, Lenin, Tatlin, Duchamp, Malevitch, and others (7, 8). the original photographs have been cut wholly or partially into squares that have subsequently been recomposed back into the original format. blown up to canvas size, they are tinted a variety of colors in the developing bath. in some cases the canvas consists of recompositions of two identical photographs.

1970

photographic canvases of the words *L'Arte?* and *L'Arte!* the canvases

form a series. the first is the word *L'Arte?*, the second is the same canvas divided into twelve parts and recomposed (4 x 3), the third is the same canvas divided into 48 parts and recomposed (8 x 6), the fourth is the same canvas divided into 192 parts and recomposed (16 x 12). canvases 5, 6, 7, and 8 are divided respectively into 192, 48, 12 and no squares, but the word decomposed and recomposed is *L'Arte!* the difference is a change from a question mark to an exclamation point.

1971

photographic canvases of the sun, the moon and the human hand (9). squares have been cut out of the centers of the original photographs and recomposed. the works are conceived of as possible projects for intervention upon nature and the metaphor they contain is similar to the metaphor of the labors of hercules. the canvases are printed blue or sepia.

1971

photographic canvases of the letters of the alphabet. A to Z (12). each of the 26 canvases is divided into four parts, arranged vertically. first there is the letter, then the letter split into four parts, then 16, then 64. the division of the letters is systematic, obviously; the recomposition, not so obviously, is not. masking tape and a spray gun are used to render the scissors clearer.

1971-1972

photographic canvases of words. decomposed words are spelled out with the decomposed letters of the alphabet series. as before, the divisions are spray painted (10, 11).

projects currently in execution — a series of photographic paintings constructed like the word paintings but with word roots rather than with whole words with whole meanings. the roots used are primarily concerned with things that are connected to art. PUH (*pupilla* or *pupil*; *piccolo*, which means *small*; *puledro*, which means *pony*). SEQ (*sequire*, which means *to follow*; *sollecitare*, which means *to excite*; *scivolare*, which means *to slip* or *to slide*). SKU (an old german root having to do with *frankness* and *sobriety*). FID (to do with *violation*). AJEM (to do with *image* and *imitate*). OP and OQ. DEUK (*ducere*, which means *to lead* and in german *ziehen*, which means *to pull*). LEU (*collegare*, which means *to connect*; *giogo* or *yoke*, in english and consequently *congiogare*, which has to do with *conjugation*, joining together). STER gives *stella*, *astra*, *star*, and *extend*, *estendere*, *stern* in both

english and german, *sterben* in german, which means *to die*.

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How a painting is made  
(now, 1971-1972)

step one:  
find an interesting photograph (in a magazine, a newspaper or a book).

this obviously doesn't hold true for the works made with letters.

step two:  
make a negative of the image and print it in several copies being careful about the tonalities, the contrasts, the shadings.

step three:  
cut up the images into the proper number of squares.

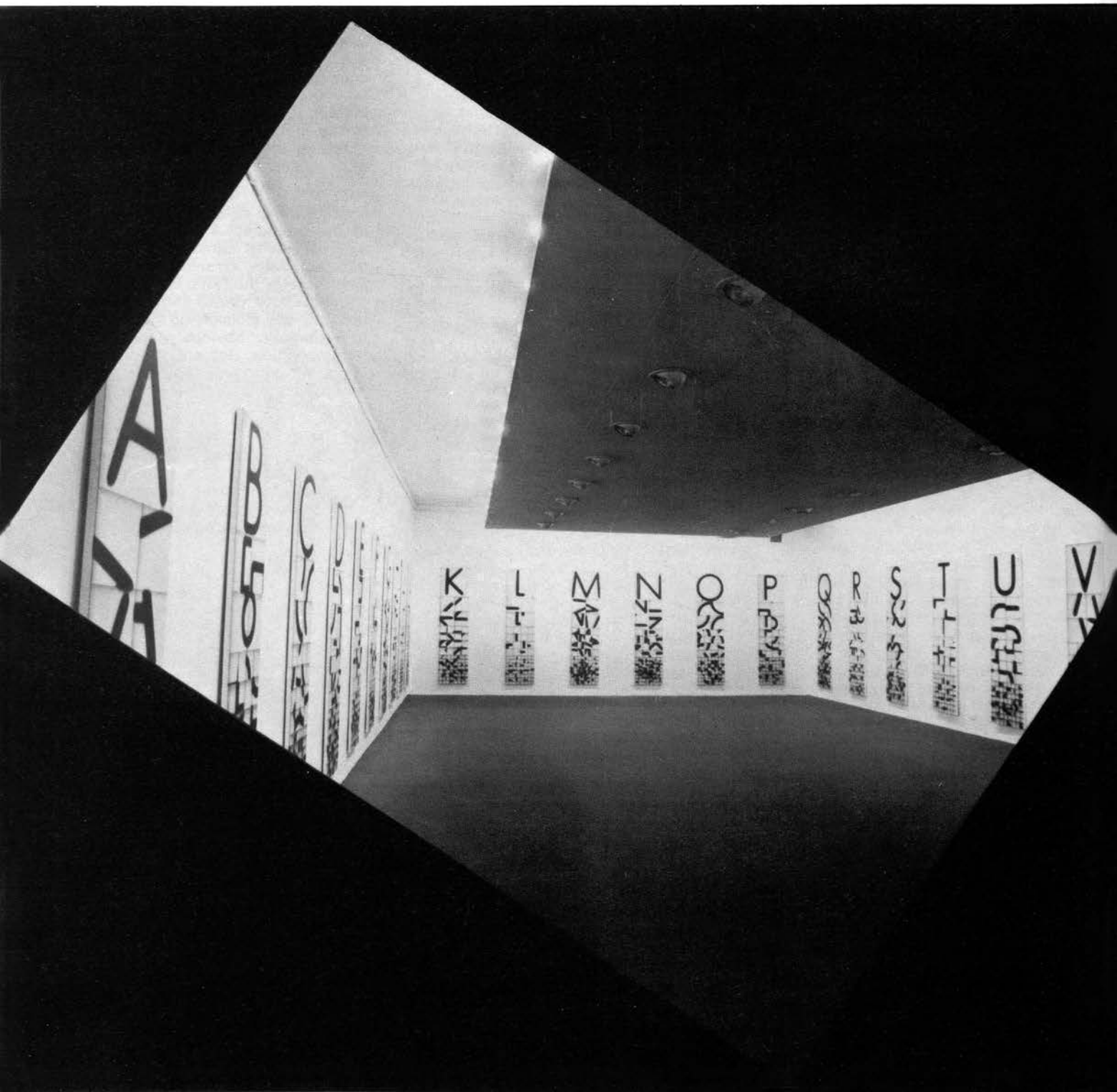
step four:  
make a small mock-up of the final work recomposing the squares. although the cutting of the squares

is systematic, their recomposition is entirely free.

step five:  
rephotograph the mock-up, enlarge and print it on emulsioned canvas, sometimes tinting the canvas in the various baths it has to go through.

step six:  
block out the system of cuts and squares on the surface of the developed canvas in masking tape and air-brush the lines in transparent water-color. this is a variation of the standard technique

12. Bruno di Bello: *Alfabeto*, 1971. 26 tele fotografiche cm. 50 x 200. Allestimento allo Studio Marconi, Milano, 1971.



of photographic re-touching. the grid brings back into evidence the edges of the squares of paper in the mock-up, but naturally, it never precisely coincides with the real sectioning that it represents. it is the sectioning rendered visible and ideal.

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There are several constants in Bruno Di Bello's work. There is always a series of repeated signs, and there is always a tension between two antagonistic systems. One of the systems is always personal and his own, the other is always imposed by form or by subject matter or by the rigors of pre-determined procedure. But what makes these paintings works of art is something that the paintings themselves insistently refuse to declare. All of the steps of their production are made to appear as mechanical as possible. The steps that are not mechanical are too exiguous and perhaps too embarrassingly traditional to serve as the basis of an esthetic. The non-mechanical steps are simply a question of composition and a final almost corrective intervention with an air-brush. Moreover, the paintings confuse the issues with a certain deliberateness. A primary confusion is to be found in the very choice of subject matter. Bruno Di Bello's subject matter often has to do directly with art itself, and it is very easy to find oneself talking about the subject matter rather than the painting in which it is used. Some of the procedures in the paintings are equally confusing. Bruno Di Bello spends a lot of time cutting things up, and cutting things up is associated with the notion of analysis. So it can seem that he is analyzing something. Filiberto Menna, in fact, has written that Di Bello is concerned with analyzing the iconography of modern art on the strength of the perception that he has cut up and recomposed the word *L'Arte* and several images of the faces of pioneers in the twentieth-century avant-garde. Similar considerations are invited by the more recent paintings concerned with the letters of the alphabet, words, and the roots of words. One can easily find oneself involved in a train of thought that has to do with art as linguistic system. The link between the surfaces of the paintings and some of the commoner notions of cubism and futurism are still another easy route into digression. Thinking about art ordinarily requires that we postulate a 'content' and a 'something else'. The 'something else' is what we're really interested

in. Bruno Di Bello's deliberate confusion of the issues is an expression of the 'something else's' desire to protect or camouflage itself. He makes the statement:

*I think a work of art should be full of traps and blind alleys.*

Here are some other things he says about his work. Some of these statements, too, are traps and blind alleys. Some of them perhaps are not.

'I use words that are connected with things that interest me — *bach*, for example, or *Zen*.'

'I am interested in words that have to do with ways of reading and experiencing the paintings — words like *cage*, or the expression *aut aut*.'

'The use of words of personal interest to me is similar to the use of images of people who have been important to me as I did in the works of 1968 and 1969.'

'These works can be read either as a word or a letter that breaks up into fragments or as a series of fragments that builds up into something intelligible. I like the idea of a series of fragments that builds up into a word *root* since the root continues to develop *outside* the painting. I like the idea of a process that continues beyond the confines of the canvas.'

'I am interested in working on language from the alphabet up.'

'I like the idea of a body and a system of work that grows on its own.'

'To make a painting you have to look at one thing while in fact you are doing something else.'

'I like words with four letters since that way the painting ends up square.'

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One of the most clearly marked tendencies of the art of the past few years has to do with the way in which many artists have almost systematically identified the whole of art with one or another of its admittedly poorly defined parts. This is simply a question of operating procedure. The parts that are denied, ignored, or simply theorized out of existence, however, never manage quite thoroughly to disappear. They only go slightly underground and make themselves more difficult to see. By now it is almost doctrine that the individual work of art be somehow incomplete — that it concern itself with one thing and one thing alone — that it give

up all pretence of furnishing a total and thoroughly integrated experience. The discursive parts of Bruno Di Bello's work (the parts that have been called 'traps and blind alleys') form a commentary upon this situation. His refusal to submit the more muninous and more essential parts of his work to the apparently analytic concerns that form a part of the 'subject matter' of the work amounts finally to a *parody* of analysis and to a tentative imitation that the rage for analysis is not, as such, up to any particular form of good. Wittgenstein reminds us that no language is capable of describing itself. Which means that any language that *seems* to be describing itself is probably doing something else. Korzybski tells us that every language is based on a series of terms that are necessarily *undefined*. The fact that they are undefined is what gives them power and access to the world of feeling. Where Bruno Di Bello stands with respect to concept or analytic art is best summed up by a short resume of a booklet that he is now seeing into publication. Its title is *Hi-Fi Writing*, and it is to be printed by Scheiwiller's *Pesce d'Oro* with an introduction by Vincenzo Agnetti.

*Hi-Fi Writing* is a sort of ready-made. The first page of the book is a photograph of Bruno Di Bello with his eyes closed and his head bristling with electrodes. The electrodes were attached to an electroencephalograph. The lower part of the photograph and the rest of the page on which it appears are covered with the grid on which the encephalogram was recorded and the grid is covered with the beginnings of the twelve tracings that resulted from the encephalogram. The rest of the pages of the book are simply a reproduction of all of the encephalogram. About an hour. A scansion of signs across a grid offers certain obvious analogies to Bruno Di Bello's paintings. While the registration of his brain-waves was taking place, Bruno Di Bello gave himself completely over to thought. He thought about many things, and he thought about making works of art. The idea that lies behind this ready-made runs as follows:

'If we really want to accept this idea that there is no separation between art and life, or between realization and concept, which is all the same thing, in that case we can get down to the business of discovering art in that direct and physical part of thought that can be registered exactly and scientifically on the electroencephalograph.'