

**Giuseppe Penone:**  
an interview by Mirella Bandini

*Your first works - dating from 1968 - make use of natural elements ("Trees"). What is the reason for this operative choice?*

I simply used a reality that was not an invention. Since 1968 (I was living in a small piedmontese village in the Maritime Alps) I assimilated, consumed certain type of images revealed themselves in their intrinsic belonging to nature; then they revealed themselves in their intrinsic reality. Thus, the tree, having lost and exhausted all emotional, formal and cultural meaning, appeared to me as it really is: a vital element, constantly expanding, proliferating and growing. I used it as a natural "force", opposing it with another "force" (mine), to which it reacted ("Iron hand", "Lead plus Wire plus lightningrod", "Three Intertwined Trees"), or which it encompassed (as in the attempt to make it record things unrelated to it: "Wedges"). I characterized and displayed the reversibility of this process in "Barked Tree", which is the discovery of a strata of the tree at a given age.

*You come then, from the circularity of a natural, rural culture, where work is seen as a creative function, of work-life, where the energy given by man to the earth is seen as its transformation into vegetal energy. Consequently, as many other artists, you did not go through the crisis of disengagement from a certain type of institutionalized culture. I mean to say: it seems to me that what you did was to just transfer your attitudes to the language that best fitted you.*

In fact, I started to work right away on the stimuli that derived from my reality, from the things that I had experienced in "my" native culture, which certainly did not rise from the fictitious reality and necessity to make sculpture in order to create the object. And the object, when there is one in my work, is nothing but the tool itself which only later defines it, as in "Wedge for the Tree", or "Alphabet for Bread", the "Contact Lenses" which I will actually wear.

As far as I am concerned, the problem of art, a priori, does not exist. There exists simply, the problem to adhere to reality.

For example, my paternal grandfather, in his time made splendid works of art. To list a few: road excavated out of rock for 500 meters, following the course of the Rio del Manico in order to link a woods with a municipal road; removal and interment of large stones to turn a piece of land into a meadow; grafting of about 1,500 trees; deviation of Rio del Manico in order to obtain an arable area; yearly reaping of about 16,000 square meters of land; hand-milking an average of 18 cows a day; wood cutting executed during the winter period;

transportation of lumber as a load bearer; building of a 15 room farmhouse; manuring of trees.

*Which artists did you most frequent in Turin?*

In 1966, at the Albertina Academy, I met Gilberto Zorio, who put me in contact with the work being carried out in those years by Piero Gilardi, Michelangelo Pistoletto and Giovanni Anselmo. As they were not working on art and structure, but on life, for me they became a strong incentive.

*You quite often use the photographic medium. Is photography an absolutely objective linguistic means for you or a sign employed to substitute the idea?*

The first photos I saw were always witnesses or documentations of events: family groups, marriages, etc. Photography in my work, has above all this witness meaning. I use it as an instrument which can reproduce reality in a cool and objective way.

*How do you record the time element?*

Precisely because my work lives a life of its own, the time element is an inseparable part of my work. To give you an example, the nut tree planted by my grandfather in 1883 is still growing, and each year is recorded in its trunk. ("Wax Books", and on the inside, the grooves of the path made by a lit fuse; works on Trees).

*After the experiences on the reality you knew the best ("Trees"), in 1969 you worked on the "square" spaces of an art gallery (Wall Element, Floor Element, Air Bar) and then, since 1970, on "your own" reality: the skin. What is the meaning of this shifting of inquiry?*

Schematically, I could synthesize these three moments like this: at first, I lived in Garessio, a small piedmontese village; then in Turin; and then... on trains (the Ceva-Savona-Genoa-Genoa-Turin line). I mean, if at the beginning I worked on trees because they were the things I experienced and absorbed the most, when I arrived in Turin there was the necessity to become aware of the new reality that surrounded me, in a physical way first of all. Of change and survival, or better still, of my own identification with this space. There came from the analysis of contingent reality, the necessity to clarify the fact that my identity was not the product I gave, but myself, along with the things I could, I can and I will be able to see ("Mirroring Contact Lenses") and the things I could, I can and I will be able to touch (works on the "Skin").

The imprints I leave every day on everything, even on the air, by taking possession of it, place my element — man — in a condition of parity with the things which surround us. By changing the reality outside myself, the skin is the point which allows

me, after all, to identify myself and to identify.

*Your most recent operations still converge on the skin, the dividing element of our body from external reality. As far as you are concerned, what determined the possibility of this continuous analysis?*

The skin, as the eye, is a border element, the extreme point that can divide us and separate us from what surrounds us, the extreme point that can physically encompass enormous expanses.

The receptive element of the imaged of our existence — the eye — with the "Mirroring Contact Lenses" placed on it, also becomes a projection element since the same perceived images are reflected on it. Therefore, the image cannot be consumed, but only read.

The use of the skin is, consequently, the minimum image I can give and it is what complies, at the utmost, with my reality. By changing reality outside of me, it is still the point which allows me to recognize myself. So a specific use for this element does not exist, but there are different possibilities for use according to the changed reality which surrounds us. ("Book", "Zincographic Plate", "Photographic Emulsion on Window and on Neon", "Finger Tips", "Dust-trap Book").

*Can you comment on the possibilities concerning your works from 1970 to 1973?*

The skin is an element which leaves images depending on the infinite possibilities of man to touch things or to just exist; even air and water receive negative forms and therefore, skin prints.

The first image possibility I gave of my skin was the optic-photographic one ("Book"): I photographed the whole body skin as a unity, by using a small piece of glass to flatten the area so that the image will tally exactly in a point with the surface of the page itself.

In "Zincographic Plate", there are two possibilities: the mechanical one of photographic printing and air which takes the shape of the container or the contents. In a way, I dilate my possibility with this work to leave the image of my skin and therefore, absurdly, I dilate my possibility of life and movement.

The "Photographic Emulsion", which reproduces the print of my skin applied to the window or to neon, both light elements, acts first of all, as a transparency, whose image covers a determined space; secondly, it is the first point of impact of light on the glass element, which isolates the internal space from the external one and becomes a dividing and border element like the skin itself.

The same happens in "Finger Tips", pressed against a piece of glass or a mirror, as these are dividing elements between reality and its reflexion, therefore, its image.

In "Dust-trap Book", the skin element, besides leaving images, gathers other prints and dust from the touched elements; the process is thus overturned, and the fingers by touching other things, deposit their image on them, loaded and thickened by different elements. By this process I invade, better still, I occupy the space in a more total way, I dilate my perceptive knowledge, and give this possibility to the spectators as well.

## Lucio Pozzi

*A. ... You already know (dont you) or sense that life is going to be extended far beyond what we now think reasonable.*

*Q. Do you think that there will be a further need for artists after this change comes about?*

*A. We're already at the point where we don't take that idea of only doing what is necessary.*

*Q. I'm sorry, let me rephrase it. Do you think they will exist?*

*A. What else will exist?*

*John Cage*

*in Perspecta 11, Yale University 1967*

I.

Many people have felt for quite a long time that painting is an outdated way of operating, now superseded by seemingly solider, less illusionistic, less artisan or less private processes. One could even go as far as to talk of an anti-painting tradition throughout the whole modern movement. More recently large numbers of painters have given up painting in favour of other kinds of action.

Two important consequences have arisen out of this shifting of interests, namely:

- 1) the reducing of painting to its bare essentials and nothing more;
- 2) the abolition of the concept of art, in that any human activity may be seen as a succession of situations, each springing from a particular combination of factors with compatible proportions. These material, procedural or conceptual factors are all there always, but they are accentuated to a different degree in every situation. As for myself, what I try to do is to think comprehensively, with an awareness of all the aspects of culture, and to avoid specializing my understanding of things even if I am forced to limit my choice of things to do.

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It is useless to establish or to preach which factors or which combinations of those factors are to be included in the category of art and which are not, because art as a category does not exist, serves no purpose and is of no interest. Everything is life, in other words, culture. Utilitarian practice and aesthetic theory are contemporary both in what we call life and in what is defined as art; in the former more emphasis is placed on one, and in the latter more on the other. There is no reason for marking out the boundaries of art or life. There is no sense in saying «this is art and this is not», using the word "art" as though it were a recognized standard extrapolated from the rest of experience.

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I want to avoid being for or against painting or anything else. Any kind of action is acceptable, and that includes painting. But for this same reason each way of operating entails a limited number—and only that number—of possible choices. I regard painting as ultimately devoid of

associations and meanings. It is nothing more than the plain and simple application of colour onto a static surface. And in painting as in other things I am interested in doing things with a respect for the elementary properties of the materials, procedures and concepts that I am dealing with.

This «respect for materials»—one of the canons of the modern movement—does not signify simply a respect for the raw properties of stone, iron, fiberglass, glass or canvas. Material should be understood to mean informative material.

They are as concrete as other materials: optical illusionism (part of the electrochemistry of the brain), manual work and personal experience. They are all elements that can be combined and measured to a greater or lesser extent. The application of colour to a static surface, which implies them, may in turn be considered an element, an informative material that can be combined with other elements, just as a *found object* is combined with others in an *assemblage*.

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It seems necessary, to my mind, to be spectators who are conscious of what is happening and also of what we are told has happened.

It is a control which we procure for ourselves, just as all systems cannot exist without controls.

History, the past. For me it's like a big dictionary of forms whose context is, all things considered, unknown to me. I find in it a card-index of archetypes of the imagination, to which I can have access if I wish.

The modern movement is part of the inventory drawn up in our time to retrace in our own terms all the aspects of life which during the pre-agricultural and agricultural ages of the history of mankind were represented in mythologies, religions and languages that can by now only with difficulty be reconciled to contemporary reality.

The forms, like the materials, procedures and directions of thought, of those times were linked according to hierarchies that symbolized integrated cultures. Now they have reached us but are isolated and meaningless.

It is in this way that we use forms—as mere perceptive stimuli in which the only thing that matters to us is the logic and sense of the combinations.

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I am disturbed by the current use of the concepts of progress, novelty and originality. They are artificial substitutes for metaphysical codes that are by now unacceptable, and as such the substitutes are unacceptable too. They are treated in a too straightforward and unequivocal way.

The interpretations of progress and regress, as they now reach me from my culture, seem to me to be stuck in a one-dimensional conception of time and history. Progress and regress