

Philosophical Essays on Ugo Nespolo's Art and Cinema

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Edited by

Davide Dal Sasso and Daniela Angelucci

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INTRODUCTION

DANIELA ANGELUCCI, DAVIDE DAL SASSO

An indefatigable experimenter with new creative possibilities. With his work the Italian artist Ugo Nespolo (1941-) has given shape to a poetics that stands out in the contemporary art scene by existing on the border between avant-garde and pop.

Marked by a playful and ironic attitude, in fact, Nespolo has developed his artistic research by continually renewing its directions and objectives through the exploration of numerous operative possibilities. From painting to installations with ordinary objects and materials, from performances to sculptures, from films to illustrations to the most recent production of animated movies: his art is ever-changing.

On the one hand, Nespolo follows some of the paths inaugurated by the artists of the historical avant-gardes, such as the Italian futurist Fortunato Depero. On the other hand, he experiments, under the influence of the artistic scene of the 1960s, that is, more precisely, by new conceptual practices and by Pop Art. Both orientations were decisive for the development of his artistic production in visual art as well as of his video and cinematographic experimentation.

The essays that make up this collection, therefore, aim to bring to light some of the most significant aspects of Nespolo's poetics in relation to these two areas. In order to do so, the texts gathered in this book examine Nespolo's work from different theoretical perspectives, through the contributions of philosophers, critics, historians of art and cinema, and artists such as Enrico Baj.

The book consists of three sections. The first includes some essays dedicated to Nespolo's works that fall within the visual arts. The second presents essays that investigate his cinema, or focus on some of his films. The third section concludes the book with two interviews made at different stages of Nespolo's career, which tackle some of the key themes of his poetics, offering a direct insight into his theoretical reflection. In addition to offering an analysis of Nespolo's poetics from different theoretical perspectives, the volume proposes a selection of essays chosen by taking

into account their importance in the framework of critical reflection on the artist's work.

Let us start with the first section. The heterogeneity that characterizes Nespolo's artistic research, his continuous oscillation between avant-garde and pop, are well summarized in a notion that is essential for his poetics: that of "puzzle". To introduce this element, which in Nespolo translates into an operative key, the book begins with the essay by Francesco Poli. Constructed as a glossary, it allows the reader to understand very well the main historical and artistic references as well as the key words of what we might consider Nespolo's "puzzle poetics".

The combination of pieces and tiles and the exploration of narrative possibilities, in Nespolo, is at one with his interest for the material dimension, for things and objects. This aspect is highlighted by Maurizio Ferraris in his contribution, which takes cue from an exhibition of Nespolo's work held at the Museo Nazionale del Bargello in Florence¹: Ferraris analyses the document nature of his works and the role of art as a production of social objects.

After all, the passion for things and for possible narrative implications reveal Nespolo's attentive gaze on society and on its relational dynamics. These aspects certainly stand out in some of his films, while necessarily being affected by the influence of Pop Art on his work. This topic is addressed by Andrea Mecacci, who considers Nespolo's work in relation to the history of Pop Art investigating his revival of the Warholian model based precisely on the acceptance of things and reality, with the aim of achieving beauty through the production of images.

Especially in the mature phase of Nespolo's work, images are the artist's main reference point. The puzzle poetics finds its maximum expression in the production of works that, as Tiziana Andina observes, are characterized by being ironic, exuberant and visionary pop variations. These traits stand out both in some of his paintings as in the dissemination of images that Nespolo accomplished with his works for the Turin underground lines. The combination of pieces, or fragments, that individually appear as mere chromatic fields or indefinite elements, is crucial for such works to express their narrative and fairytale power.

In fact, in Nespolo's production, fiction plays a crucial role. This emerges by considering, for example, his works for theatre. Carola Barbero focuses on this theme with her essay on Nespolo's work on the

¹ Ugo Nespolo's exhibition, *Novantiqua*, was held at the Museo Nazionale del Bargello in Florence from October 9th, 2009 to January 17th, 2010.

scenes of *Madama Butterfly*², which allows us to reflect on the relationship between uniqueness and repeatability of the work of art, paying attention to its narrative structure.

Recognizing Nespolo's interest in fiction and in the narrative possibilities that art can offer does not mean claiming that he draws a clear line between fiction and reality. In part, his work is also characterized by a reflection on the nature of visual representation. This topic is addressed by Elisa Caldarola, who presents different artistic paths taken by Nespolo where he cites the works of other artists and focuses on a theme particularly dear to him: the relationship between the audience and the museum.

Nespolo's puzzle poetics originates in his first experiments made both in the field of painting and in that of conceptualist practices. The latter are crucial for the philosophical investigation of art, in particular as regards the possibility of accounting for the role of aesthetics in relation to philosophical speculation. In this vein, Adam Andrzejewski focused his study on Nespolo's artistic production in light of the theses offered by the aesthetics of everyday life. In this perspective, both some of the conceptual works made in the 1960s, and the recent ones for the Turin underground lines—which translate some of the main aspects of the urban environment into images—refer to the reflection on the experience of everyday life.

The connection between the artist's earliest and later works reveals the dual nature of Nespolo's puzzle poetics, which lies in between pop art and avant-garde: it is neither visual production nor based on the use of ordinary objects and materials. This specificity allows us to consider the transversality that characterizes Nespolo's approach to art: that is, an operative methodology on the border between tradition and conceptualism.

So what is the role of cinema in all this? Nespolo himself answers this question in one of the interviews included at the end of the present book. Whereas art and painting were more closely related to the world of galleries, the art market, and the expectations of a certain environment, the possibility of working through the camera's gaze, ever since the 1960s, has been for Nespolo an opportunity for freedom. How this was possible, given the strong technological and industrial boundaries with which cinema has always had to deal with in the course of its history, can only be understood by following the particular path of experimentation, playful and eclectic, created by Nespolo's films. His first cinematic work, *Grazie*

² On 19 July 2007, *Madama Butterfly*—directed by Stefano Vizioli and with sets and costumes by Ugo Nespolo—opened the Puccini Festival in Torre del Lago.

mamma Kodak, expresses this irony but also love for the handicraft aspect of filmmaking in its very title.

This amused gaze, consistent with the view that Nespolo has always had for all the images, not only those in motion, emerges in the pages written by Enrico Baj, opening the section dedicated to Nespolo's cinema. According to Baj, the artist's films, like his paintings, are composed of puzzle pieces, electronic tiles that—thanks to their fragmentation and their fast pace—turn the viewer into a voyeur and a “fornicator”, arousing an obsession for “interrupted images”.

The speed and “fugacity” of Nespolo's filmic images is also the object of the critic Vittorio Fagone, who places them within a line that goes from the surrealists and the futurists to the cinematographic and experimental experiences of pop and conceptual artists. What he emphasizes is Nespolo's frenetic pace, his caricatural irony, his subversiveness with respect to the idea of an “auratic” and devout fruition, as well as the centrality of experimentation as a creative game, which starts from cinema and spreads up to encompass life as a whole.

After all, the playful practice and vision is what links Nespolo's film production to his artistic research, making these two sides of his activity two faces of the same poetics. The essay by Paul Sutton is explicitly dedicated to playfulness. After contextualising Nespolo's filmic work in the artistic milieu in which it was born, Sutton identifies the formal qualities of repetition and rhythm as its specific characteristics. These traits are implemented in his films in order to play with viewers, to test their skills and endurance, but also in order to offer a theoretical reflection on the stylistic forms of interruption and assembly.

Playful repetition is also addressed in the contribution by Timothy Campbell, who refers in particular to *La galante avventura del cavaliere senza volto* and *Buongiorno Michelangelo* to identify a rebellion against the theoretical, social, and cultural paradigm by which material objects and the self are the center of a life dedicated to consumption and production. The relationship with objects and with space proposed in the films discussed proposes instead different ways of holding, touching, and using, which playfully escape the grip of a repetitive power apparatus.

This necessary and meaningful “uselessness” of objects and narration is underlined by Eduarda Neves, who highlights the deeply pataphysical nature expressed by Nespolo, a disciple of Alfred Jarry. For Neves, the film *Con-certo rituale*, which, in a grotesque and ironical way, is all about exceptions and anomalies—such as magic, noise, or the ambiguous eroticism of bodies—has all the potentialities of a “minor cinema” able to open up a new field of criticism.

Enrico Terrone also tackles the transgressive and antidogmatic nature of the artist's work, although from a different perspective. He highlights how Nespolo's experimental cinema manages to challenge the main assumptions of analytical philosophy of film. From an ontological point of view, the artist's films cannot in fact be described as token-projections of a type-work to which they refer (think of the "cinematographic performances" of the works of art of the 1960s), nor can they be understood as visual experiences that intend to emulate ordinary perception.

The second section concludes by returning to the concepts of playfulness and experimentation that already emerge in the manual and combinatorial practice of Nespolo's artistic research. Transposed into cinematography, these elements naturally result in a playful critique of ordinary experience conditioned by the pursuit of usefulness, proposing examples of a life that is "unplanned", but "invented and recorded at the moment", as the artist himself put it.

Nespolo's puzzle poetics is characterized by the vitality of its research and, above all, by a strong link with theoretical reflection and the operational dimension. Nespolo's practice, in fact, reveals both a deep emotional bond with things and an existential fabric pervading it. These aspects are brought to light in the conversation between the artist and Gianni Vattimo, with particular focus on the relationship between artistic practice and existential reflection. This theme is also evoked in the interview that concludes the volume, in which the vitality of the puzzle poetics is explained by the artist himself, starting from his interest for in-depth analysis and theoretical reflection.

EDITORIAL NOTE

The essays by Tiziana Andina, Enrico Baj, Carola Barbero, Elisa Caldarola, Davide Dal Sasso, Vittorio Fagone, Maurizio Ferraris, Andrea Mecacci, Francesco Poli, Enrico Terrone and the interview with Gianni Vattimo have been selected from *Rivista di Estetica*, “Nespolo e la filosofia. Avanguardia, cinema, immagini”, Davide Dal Sasso (ed.), n. s., S. n. 58, LV, (1/2015).

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Sarah De Sanctis has translated into English the essays selected from *Rivista di Estetica* and the interview with Ugo Nespolo, *The Relationship between Art and Theory*.

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free and imaginative reading of the works. It is no coincidence that the artist is a supporter of pataphysics, the science of imaginary solutions.

One should keep in mind that the main meaning of the word “puzzle” is related to confusion, perplexity, riddle, intrigue. The same happens with the artist: while jigsaw puzzles cease to be interesting when solved, his works are open and problematic figurative devices, because they are aesthetically stimulating.

While being apparently easy and pleasant to read, upon a more careful observation these works turn out to be intriguing and complicated, playing on a refined dialectics between the de-structuring and structuring of the language of visual representation.

Nespolo’s inventive move has been to practice the puzzle technique as an astonishing and surprising artistic form, one that also questions traditional painting procedures.

The starting cultural context for this operation was that of Pop Art in the early sixties. And the main feature of Pop Art was not only the choice of subjects and themes related to the iconography of mass culture, but also the use of impersonal and stereotyped styles and techniques, such as those of graphic design in advertising, aerography in billboards, comics and photoserigraphy.

The real pop artist—wrote the critic Robert Rosenblum—makes the style coincide with the subject: he represents serial images and standard objects using a style that is also based on a plastic vocabulary and serial production techniques (see Rosenblum 1990).

Fascinated with the stereotypical playful freshness of children’s drawing books (those with outline drawings to be coloured in), Nespolo was the first to employ puzzles to create inventive images or reworked ones based on existing models. The use of this technique (not for serial production but for unique works) is quite original, because the interesting factor is not the taste for the difficulty of the game but the visual appeal of the combination of individual elements made with pieces of brightly coloured wood.

In the first phase there was mainly a childish dimension presented with amusing irony, but later things got complicated to the extent that new themes came into play, along with word plays and puns linked to issues of visual poetry and sophisticated citation strategies, especially aimed at revisiting the history of modern and contemporary art.

In Lichtenstein’s art, the banal graphical style of comics and the stochastic screening become elements of a sophisticated personal style elaborated to produce works endowed with a complex metalinguistic value. Likewise, in Nespolo the puzzle takes on the role of a unique and

unmistakable stylistic mark, structurally affecting both signifiers and signified, form and content.

Pop Art in Turin

Nespolo's puzzle-works, with their compositions of synthetic and imaginative vividness, are undoubtedly among the best contributions to be found in Italian Pop Art, even though, as has been said, they later took on different characteristics.

It is worth mentioning here that in Turin, towards the mid-sixties, the post-informal turn towards Neo-Dada and Pop was one of the most timely and interesting events of that age. Even though there has not been something like a Pop-Art group in Turin (like the one in Rome, with Schifano and his friends), many artists were stimulated by that new cultural climate. Amongst them were Antonio Carena, Pietro Gallina, Beppe Devalle, Giorgio Bonelli, and especially (in a very original way precluding to further developments) Aldo Mondino with his ironic painting games, Piero Gilardi with his *Tappeti Natura*², Alighiero Boetti with works of genial and playful conceptuality, and in some ways Michelangelo Pistoletto with his mirrors and *Oggetti in meno*.³ There is a particular comic-playful vein linking Nespolo to Mondino, and to Boetti in particular.

Beyond Pop Art. Points of Contact with Arte Povera

Soon after the boom of Pop Art, Nespolo was one of the protagonists of the vibrant scene of the Turin avant-garde scene, in close relation with the exponents of the emerging movement called Arte Povera.

His creative commitment went beyond painting and was articulated in two directions. On the one hand, experimental filmmaking (one of the most important aspects of his research also in the following decades), and on the other, the realisation of objects, constructions and installations with rather poor materials, always in an ironic and paradoxical tone, but also with specific conceptual values.

This is the case with *Macchine e oggetti condizionali*⁴, a large repertoire of objectual research made in 1967 and exhibited the next year at Schwarz Gallery in Milan. Tommaso Trini commented at the time:

² *Nature Carpets* (ed.).

³ *Minus Objects* (ed.).

⁴ *Machines and Conditional Objects* (ed.).

Nespolo intervenes on the reason of things rather than on things themselves. He invented “pseudo-materials” that add an artificial character to artefacts; he built a car to carry air and a phone to communicate the buzz of its inner lymph, electricity; he has arranged space with metal rods like tubes, creating environments that are obstructions, barriers. [...] A parallelepiped of stacked wooden boxes refers to a primary structure; but there are carpenter’s vises, attached tools that turn formal data into constructive references. Or we see a secret inert ribbon, winding between two containers, within which it folds and unfolds if we accept to manipulate this sculpture-game. [...] Therefore, to Nespolo’s mind, building means being part of an action-reaction mechanism. Between the use of wicker baskets, ping-pong nets, compressed paper or filing cards and the function of the new object, he is interested in the moment of transformation. Between owning and using, he emphasises knowing. (Trini 1968: 23)

At another exhibition (at Il Punto Gallery, 1968), Nespolo set up a spectacular installation: *Molotov*, with hundreds of bottles fitted with fuse, placed neatly in oblique storage facilities. It was a provocative ephemeral monument devoted to the political struggles of 1968, perhaps with an implicit reference to Duchamp’s *Bottle Rack*.



Ugo Nespolo, *Molotov*, 1968, wood and bottles, 600 x 200 x 150 cm.

Many of these works are not too far from the more minimal ones that his friend Alighiero Boetti was making in those years: for example, *Ping Pong*, *Mimetico*, *Rotolo di cartone*, *Catasta*, *Lampada annuale*, exhibited at his first solo show at Galleria Stein in 1967.

Despite their obviously different artistic intentions, there is also some affinity between Nespolo and Boetti from the point of view of the use of craft techniques. Boetti made tapestries (worn by Afghan and Peshawar women), such as world maps or word games and puns; Nespolo made puzzles and other works realized with words and images, with different techniques of artistic craftsmanship.

Boetti himself, in a conceptual work of 1968 printed as a manifesto, names a list of sixteen friends including all artists of Arte Povera (Ceroli, Schifano, Simonetti and Nespolo), each of which comes with a cryptic judgment written with undecipherable symbols. In 1967 Nespolo participated with many of these artists in one of the fundamental exhibitions of that turn, *Con/temp/l'azione* (at Christian Stein, Il Punto and Sperone galleries).

The close relation to the artists of Arte Povera was also strengthened by the realisation of three art films on the works of other artists: *Neonmerzare* (1967), *Boettinbiancoenero* (1968) and *Buongiorno Michelangelo* (1968-1969). These are extraordinary examples of avant-garde experimentation open to the most vital and stimulating interdisciplinary experiences (plastic arts, theatre, cinema).

These works also testify to the artist's preference for metalinguistic explanation, re-reading, re-interpretation and citation operations that deal with other closely contemporary or modern artworks.

Dada Fluxus

“L’art est inutile. Pas d’art. A bas l’art”. These words could be read on a sign that Nespolo held during a performance with Ben Vautier at the Galleria d’Arte Moderna in Turin in 1967. In addition to Gianni-Emilio Simonetti and Giuseppe Chiari, Nespolo is one of the few Italians involved with Fluxus, an international movement characterised by the greatest freedom of expression, interdisciplinarity and multimediality, breaking all aspects of traditional formalisation and embracing a close relationship between art and life.

It is worth mentioning here the provocative “portrait” that Ben Vautier made of his friend:

Nespolo
 est ambitieux
 Nespolo
 est jaloux
 Nespolo
 est hypocrite
 Nespolo
 est méchant
 Nespolo
 est menteur et rusé
 Nespolo
 est dévoré de
 prétention
 C'est un loup
 Il se porte bien.⁵

This radical, though short-lived, experience has contributed to the evolution of an attitude of ironic counter-current freedom, and to a Dadaist view of art ("anti-art") set against seriousness, which has developed in the most destabilising forms, especially in filmmaking, but has left strong and lively traces also in Nespolo's paintings and sculptures.

In 1977, at Dov'è la Tigre? in Milan he put together a spectacular ludic event: a sort of interactive happening. It was a bizarre fun fair with various games actively involving the whole audience.

Pataphysics

Nespolo's Dadaism is particularly related to Alfred Jarry's "science of imaginary inventions". His character doctor Faustroll is a great master of it. In 1948, the Collège de Pataphysique was born in Paris. It later spread to Milan, with the college founded in 1964 by Enrico Baj, and to Turin, with the one founded by Nespolo himself after participating in the Milan one. In 1972, Nespolo and Baj inaugurated the Premio studio d'Arte Baj & Nespolo in Milan.

The pataphysical spirit is marked by an attitude based on imagination, a taste for anarchy, irony, sarcasm, libertarianism, openness to paradoxes and creative provocativeness. There is a strong tendency to ridicule any form of conformism and bourgeois respectability.

As an example of Nespolo's pataphysical *forma mentis*, one might quote a fragment of a text published in a 1974 catalogue (Galleria Blu,

⁵ Ben Vautier's text was published on the catalogue of the exhibition *Macchine e oggetti condizionali*, Galleria Schwarz, Milan, 5-30 March 1968 (ed.).

Milan). The section *Biobibliography* (divided in three parts, “Nato”, “Crepato”, “Campato”, which roughly translate as “Born,” “Kicked the bucket”, “Stayed alive”) reads: “Nato: Pappato Rognato Caccato Dormito / Il babbo veloce lo dice al cognato / Precorre Istintato Mostrato col dito / Artista sicuro Ben ricco impegnato [...]”.⁶

Words and Images: Playing Games and Playing both Sides

The dimension of the game is used by Nespolo in an openly childish sense, but also in the form of sophisticated linguistic and iconic arrangements, as well as sarcastic remarks criticising the ideology and system of contemporary art. It takes shape through an articulate interaction between written texts and artistic formalisation by means of a wooden jigsaw puzzle, along with other techniques and materials, such as alabaster inlay or embroidery.

While not being wholly original, this part of Nespolo’s work might be somehow related to the research area known as Visual or Concrete Poetry, albeit with a very particular feature: it is marked by a major interest in visual quality, which is far from the intellectualism and critical sociology of the latter.

Nespolo is first of all an artist and a painter, able to transform words and phrases in elements endowed with undeniable visual charm (like Magritte or Boetti, although in a very different way), while still managing to keep signification.

In this sense, perhaps the best interpretation of Nespolo’s complex verbal-visual ludic dimension is the rather cryptic text by Edoardo Sanguineti, titled *Rompilingua Scioglitesta* (included in the catalogue of the exhibition *Ugo Nespolo nella più bella mostra dell’anno*, L’Atelier, Turin, 1970), which reads: “Un Giuoco Oscuro Non È Scurato Per Oscurare L’Oscurità Un Giuoco Ondoso Non È Sondato Pen Ondosare L’Ondosità [...] Un Gioco Oblato Non È Sublato Per Oblatore L’Oblacità Un Giuoco Osceno Non È Scenato [...]”.⁷

⁶ Born: Eaten Whined Shitted Slept / the quick dad tells the brother in law / anticipates instinct shown with a finger / confident Well off busy artist (ed.).

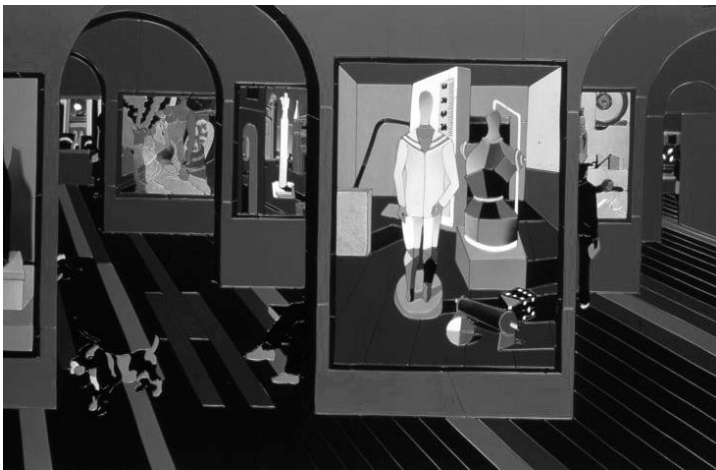
⁷ An Obscure Game Is Not Obscured To Obscure The Obscurity An Ondose Game Is Not Dosed to Ondose Ondosity [...] An Oblate Game Is Not Sublated To Obliterate Oblacity An Obscene Game Is Not Scened (ed.).

The Poetics of Citation

One of the most characteristic aspects—and perhaps the most important one—of Nespolo's research is his declared aversion to the myth of the artist's creative originality and of the "work of art", as well as to the avant-garde rhetoric of innovation and continuous invention of new languages and styles.

Nespolo's theoretical and operative position is very peculiar and interesting because it is consciously contradictory and provocative. Let me explain better. Nespolo's inventiveness is out of question, and his formation in the 1960s was strictly related to avant-garde research (neo-avantgarde) in a preeminent cultural context like that of Turin. Therefore, like almost all his colleagues at the time, he could have chosen that direction for his works. Instead, in the early 1970s, he chose to be different, to adopt another more baffling position compared to the programmatic new tendencies, be they Minimalism, Process Art, Arte Povera or Conceptual Art.

His choice, which (long before the time came) had a specific postmodern value, was unusual because while being based on a real belief in operative freedom, it also argued for a sort of "return to craft" *à la* De Chirico—that is, for the production of well made artefacts, with non-avantgarde techniques but ones related to craftsmanship, albeit in an innovative way.



Ugo Nespolo, *Suggestioni ferraresi*, 1982, acrylics on cut wood, 80 x 120 cm.

Citing/Copying

Here is a declaration (in Nespolo's typically provocative style) in praise of copying, entitled *A coloro che si sentono copiati (con la mania dell'invenzione)*: "INVENTARE / INVENTARE / INVENTARE / ma che cazzo sognate di fare / La regola sia invece / COPIARE QUANDO TI PARE / (questo sì che è inventare) / ecco cosa si deve fare"⁸ (excerpt from the exhibition catalogue at Galleria Blu, Milan, 1974).

Well Made Art. Techniques of Artistic Craftsmanship. Postmodernism

On the one hand, Nespolo produced experimental films (not many, but scattered over the years). On the other, in the early 1970s, his production of figurative art specialised in puzzle-paintings but also in works realised with other materials and techniques of craftsmanship, maintaining an ironic and provocative aim.

*L'avanguardia punto dopo punto*⁹ (1973 exhibition at Galleria Blu in Milan), is an example of shameless citationism mocking the avant-garde by transposing onto a silk embroidery a series of works by innovative artists, such as Noland, Morris, Warhol, Lichtenstein and Gilbert & George. This attitude, which could be defined "retro-avantgarde", anticipated a wide production of puzzle-artworks (including impressive compositions) staging citations of works by the main contemporary and avant-garde artists.

The following year, in the same gallery, Nespolo had a solo exhibition that was ironically described by Paolo Fossati as belonging to "arte ricca" ("rich art", as opposed to *arte povera*, i.e. poor art): the very title, *Ugo Nespolo. Alabastro, argento, avorio, ebano, lacca, seta, smalto*,¹⁰ underlined the display of precious materials in order to make works with great craftsmanship. Besides, that exhibition also presented a series of small classic temples filled with small objects, in a style that could be defined pop-deco, anticipating a clear postmodern spirit.

⁸ *To those who feel plagiarised (and are obsessed with invention)*: INVENT / INVENT / INVENT / what the fuck are you hoping to do / Let the rule be instead / COPY WHENEVER YOU LIKE / (this is real invention) / here's what you should do. (ed.)

⁹ *The Avantgarde Point after Point* (ed.).

¹⁰ Ugo Nespolo. Alabaster, silver, ivory, ebony, lacquer, silk, enamel (ed.).



Ugo Nespolo, *Les deux lignes*, 2012, acrylics on cut wood, 152,5 x 132 cm.

One should add another consideration on puzzle-paintings here. These works, beyond their undoubted pop connotation, may also be related to the traditional Renaissance art of inlays, especially the wooden ones made by master inlayers often based on the cartoons provided by great artists.

In an interesting conversation with the artist the philosopher Gianni Vattimo said he was impressed by Nespolo's "compositional, even manual, mastery" (and by his particular pre-postmodern ironic vein), which is marked in many respects by "the recovery of forms, even traditional ones", albeit in a non-traditional way. He rightly noted: "You could, with good reason, claim to have shown a postmodern sensibility even back when a type of modernistic avant-garde was still predominant." (Vattimo and Nespolo, *infra*: pp. 148, 149)

Museum Stories

"I love to use the 'stock of the arts' as a source of inspiration, so to speak; and also 'reality around us'..." (Vattimo and Nespolo, *infra*: p. 150).

*Storie di Museo*¹¹ is a title of a good book documenting a large part of the extensive production of Nespolo's puzzle-works. It is dedicated to the fascinating, alienating and fetishist theatricalisation of modern and contemporary works of art, combined together as pieces of a great cultural puzzle. These works are the triumph of an ironic and bulimic citation strategy, targeting not the works of artists (often beloved and always respected) but the way in which they are left to the use and abuse of an alienating ideology: that of a pseudo-elitarian "aesthetic fruition", functional to the art system and to the more general system of the society of spectacle.

Nespolo's work should not be interpreted only as an intelligent and brilliant, playful and provocative *tour de force* (as some critics have done all too often), but also as a testimony of a sincere feeling of love-hate for a reality that determines the fate of artistic creativity.

So, in that sense, one must believe Nespolo when he says that this ironic and sometimes sarcastic attitude, with a liberating function, also has a tragic connotation.

"If you think about it", said the artist to Vattimo in the aforementioned conversation, "there has to be some sort of tragedy even in the 'game': I have always put it into play, in order to bring an element of ironic doubt into 'modernity'. This is the case with my museum exhibitions, which feature images showing the more-or-less imaginary halls of museums with their works, reduced to figurines." (Vattimo and Nespolo, *infra*: p. 151, 152)

In the introduction to the book he writes: "This book collects the many stages of a singular journey where the theatre of art is represented with all its protagonists: the empty box / museum, the silent artwork / protagonist, the spectator / shadow" (see Nespolo 2001). This provocative position is supported in the volume by numerous citations by writers and philosophers, mainly by a series of ruthless considerations on New York's art system made by Tom Wolfe, author of the famous pamphlet *The Painted Word* (1975).

That being said, one has to appreciate, even with amusement, the figurative quality of the complex, articulated and fanciful compositional games of kaleidoscopic chromaticity. The works of the most celebrated artists are revisited and reinvented with transgressive precision (starting from the artist's knowledge of the original linguistic solutions) and related to the exhibition spaces and visitors, giving rise to sophisticated, iconic, stylistic narrations. Here everything is, so to speak, "Nespolised", as in a

¹¹ *Museum Stories* (ed.).

big game of cards where instead of kings, queens and jacks, we find the figurines of art history—loved, collected and mocked.

Nespolo takes to the extreme the liberating attempt at neutralising the fundamental contradictions with a strategy of ludic escapism, intentionally developed in a double and ambivalent sense: that of a provocative infantilising regression, and that *au deuxième degré* of a sophisticated metalinguistic operation.

I used the term “attempt” because there is a risk (which is aesthetically productive) of entering a labyrinthine reality with no ways out. But this, perhaps, is the unavoidable fate of art.

Nespolo's

This polemic attitude towards the art system becomes even more provocative when Nespolo directly addresses the art market. In this sense, a paradigmatic act was the foundation of “Nespolo's Società in proprio” in 1993. This operation was staged through the realisation of a series of puzzle-works presented as images of an auction catalogue that document, as numbered lots, the pieces by various artists, from Dubuffet to Larry Rivers, from Appel to Baselitz, from Warhol to Twombly.



Ugo Nespolo, *Golden Museum*, 2016, acrylics on cut wood, and gold leaf, 70 x 100 cm.

Fortunato Depero

Nespolo's favourite artist is Fortunato Depero: an extraordinary exponent of Futurism who has been rather underestimated so far. This is because, for conformist historians and critics, he was guilty of two things. On the one hand, he disregarded the canonical separation between "pure" art (painting, sculpture) and applied art, which is why he was accused of being an artist-craftsman or, at most, a proto-designer. On the other hand, in any case, he was considered too superficial because of his imaginative ludic irony. In short, Depero has not been taken very seriously (not even at the time, when "real" artists like Sironi and Carrà dominated the scene) and has been rather marginalised.

However, Depero has been a great precursor of an open and free conception of artistic creativity as something widespread and multidisciplinary. Both very sophisticated and naive, this brilliant artist was an original painter, sculptor, scenographer, object designer and graphic designer for advertising. With an extraordinary creative energy, he has always pursued his (and Balla's) dream of a "Futurist reconstruction of the universe".

Nespolo's admiration for Depero (showing in his collection of the latter's works and texts) is a clear stance aimed at establishing a different definition of the contemporary "museum" artist. In many ways, Nespolo sees Depero as a reference model, even though he is well aware that times have changed and the avant-garde utopia must be replaced by a more concrete operative and professional pragmatism. However, this does not hinder the freedom to transgress and pursue new forms of creative experience.

Collectionism

What clearly emerges from Nespolo's elaborate and complex artistic citationism is a singular collector's syndrome, kept under control for creative purposes. It is no coincidence that this passion for collecting was also concretised, for both entertainment and cultural interest, into veritable collections of objects that can be found in his spectacular studio.

Collections of paintings and sculptures by beloved artists, pop objects, cameras and projectors, books and rare publications on contemporary art: all of this is strictly related to Nespolo's own works, creating an objectual landscape that in many ways coincides with the artist's inner world.

In this sense, Nespolo's studio is a concrete extension of his mental landscape (and this holds for all real artists). Gianni Berengo Gardin's photographic book *Dentro lo studio* (2003) is an excellent proof of this.

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NESPOLO:
BETWEEN WARHOL AND RILKE
MAURIZIO FERRARIS

It is hard to imagine a better location for Nespolo's works than the Bargello, in Florence. The Bargello is the epitome of a reusable space: it has been used for various political and legal purposes, but also as a prison. Indeed, it used to be full of instruments of torture, which in the mid-eighteenth century Leopold of Lorraine melted to celebrate (deluding himself a little) the end of the dark ages. But is it so strange that such a palace should become a museum? In the city of the Uffizi Galleries, this should not be that surprising. Offices (Uffizi) gather documents, inscribed acts, things that involve at least two people and that have value precisely because they survive—they leave a trace.

This is why there are entire palaces—be they ministries or banks, archives or registry offices, libraries or police stations—collecting documents, those documents whose burning often accompanies the end of a regime. The need for registration and recording (the need for paperwork) is the main characteristic of the social world, namely the world of promises and bets, money and works of art, which includes the most important things in our lives—those affecting our happiness or unhappiness.

In the hierarchy of values (and often prices) of social objects, a special place is occupied by inscriptions that are supposed to move or amuse us, frighten us or make us think, or even just make us look good in society: that is, works of art. Now, what are artworks if not documents—inscribed acts involving an author and a recipient, an artist and a client? Acts that have no value unless they find expression and inscription? Do not believe someone who tells you he has got a whole novel in his head, and only has to write it. That novel simply does not exist, for the same reason why a bet, a promise, a banknote or a marriage do not exist until they are recorded.

Indeed, a work of art begins to exist only in the presence of expression and inscription; this tells us (and Nespolo knows this better than anyone

else) how important the actual *work* (understood as labour) is in art: craft is the mother of all arts, and, in the end, it is true that genius is first of all diligence. Therefore, in the office called Bargello, hundreds of documents were gathered over time. They comprise treaties and sentences, concerning many people including Machiavelli (who was locked up and tortured here in 1513) and Donatello: a sculptor, goldsmith, designer—that is, once again, an inscriber. So it seems only normal—indeed, only right—that the Bargello should also host Nespolo’s artistic documents, which are some among the most document-like works of contemporary art. Nespolo’s art is openly, consciously, admittedly and brilliantly about documentality.¹



Ugo Nespolo, *Gail*, acrylics on cut wood, 1981, 100 x 140 cm.

Did you see how much writing there is *about* his works, *in* his works? And how often he likes to work with those other tireless manufacturers of inscriptions we call writers and screenwriters? Nespolo’s artistic vocation must have begun when he was told to show his “licence and registration, please”. Luckily, instead of those documents he gave us his art, his

¹ For more details on documentality see Maurizio Ferraris, *Documentality: Why it is Necessary to Leave Traces*, English transl. By Richard Davies, New York, Fordham University Press, 2012. (ed.)

thousand artworks occupying the most varied locations, revealing the depth of his great Pop Art (this, at least, is my interpretation). *Pop* here does not mean “popular”—or, even worse, “populist”—but, on the contrary, bearer of a critical view for which there is nothing so low as not to deserve attention, but there’s also nothing so high as not to deserve a sneer. Someone endorsing such a view could only end up at the great archive of the Bargello—luckily, things have changed (at least a little bit) since the days of Machiavelli.

This is the first thread connecting the Office of the Bargello and Nespolo’s own office, where he tirelessly produces documentality. But there is also another thread, which is just as important. This time, instead of starting from the Bargello, let us start from Nespolo—or better, his office / workshop / factory in Turin. I would spend entire days there: that place is the kingdom of fetishism, which is the reasonable and polite answer to narcissism. It hosts a huge collection of objects: everywhere are objects, chairs, cameras, musical instruments, books, jukeboxes, puppets, robots, and Nespolo wanders around them like Superman in the Fortress of Solitude. The only difference is that, luckily, this place is not at the North Pole, and there are even hanging gardens and Neapolitan majolicas.

Well, the Bargello is not too different. Once become a museum it, too, has gathered the most diverse things—bronzes, porcelain, textiles, statues and rings—in a huge fetishist accumulation. These are “minor arts”, as they say, mostly referring to their size—forgetting that, if so, a large nineteenth century canopy in cast iron (say, the structure of the Crystal Palace) should be considered “major art”, and the Great Wall or the skyscrapers in Dubai should be called “huge”.

The truth is that minor arts, which are defined such with formidable inaccuracy and unfairness, say a lot about art: that is, they show that artworks are first of all objects, sundry items of modest size—the furniture of our lives. There is no fundamental discontinuity between an ornament and an artwork, or between advertisement and art: this is Nespolo’s great lesson, as we can see at the Bargello as well as in his workshop in Turin.

So, the Nespolo Factory, this junk dealer’s warehouse, is a full-fledged museum, just like the Bargello. And, note well, just as in the case of documents, this is not an exception, but the rule. If we go to Dresden, or to the Castello Sforzesco, or anywhere else, to any other museum, we will find the same things: objects that, at some point, have become artworks—and were not expecting that. A scimitar never knew that one day it would be showcased in a gallery for the benefit of tourists. Someone who commissioned a coffin never knew that one day that coffin would be exposed in a museum next to coins and buckles... Let alone with himself,