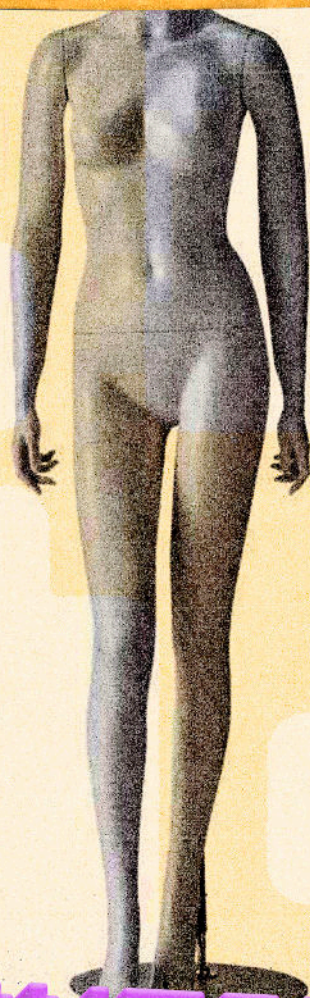


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Di Paolo Musso

Electronic Transcendence

By Paolo Sacchini (Accademia di Belle Arti di Brescia SantaGiulia)

Abstract: In the wide and varied panorama of contemporary artistic experiences that are more attentive to the sphere of spirituality, lighting interventions, video installations and digital works are still unusual presences in sacred buildings. However, their inherent incorporeality has proved to be a very effective tool in evoking transcendence, and therefore seems to be able to open very interesting horizons. The contribution proposes a comparative reading of some of these emergencies, ranging from the most dated works by Dan Flavin and Bill Viola to the most recent creations by Piotr Piasta, Davide Coltro and Pier Paolo Patti.

When flipping through a manual of contemporary art history, it is quite rare to come across works with an explicitly and recognizably religious subject, and, moreover, one cannot fail to notice how the frequency of such encounters becomes increasingly rare over the decades, as a consequence of the gradual secularization process of Western civilization. However, this does not at all mean that artists' interest in the sacred has disappeared; on the contrary, this is unequivocally evidenced not only by the many broadly spiritual experiences or variously tending towards the 'sublime' that permeate the art of the entire 20th century (from Malevich to Rothko, from Nancy Holt to Ana Mendieta), but also by the numerous episodes of direct and concrete collaboration between the Church and contemporary artists (from Denis to Severini, from Rouault to Matisse, from Sutherland to Fontana, from Manessier to Richter, and many others still) [1]. In this general context, a recent and extremely interesting

presence is that of the most technologically advanced art, whose inherent incorporeality has proven to be highly effective in evoking transcendence.

The ecstatic luminosity of faith. Dan Flavin at the Red Church of Milan

Remarkable, first and foremost, is the luminous intervention with which Dan Flavin was able to aesthetically and spiritually qualify the Church of Santa Maria Annunciata in Chiesa Rossa in Milan [2], which is already, in itself, architecturally interesting because it is a good representation of the 'Franciscan' clarity – but not without its issues – of Giovanni Muzio's design style, who, not by chance, was repeatedly called upon to design spaces for liturgy [3].

Flavin encircled the interior architecture of the church with a system of fluorescent tubes in various colors that are almost hidden from the observer's view and that activate when the twilight begins, at which point the building – and especially the faithful who inhabit it and who intimately breathe its liturgical purpose – is immersed in an ethereal yet very intense atmosphere, in which the earthly and decidedly familiar physicality of the common neon light (which, in the most manifest way, is "historical" light and not "eternal") [4] acquires a delicate but truly vivid metaphysical quality.

Clearly, this is not simply an operation of lighting the architectural space, but rather a transfiguration of it carried out through an installation [5] that "encompasses the profiles of the church's architecture, cuts the corners, redraws the volumes, revises the perspectives," using the fluorescent tube to

achieve a “wide spatial resonance, both in terms of chiaroscuro perception and in terms of chromatic combinations” [6]. In this way, the space illuminated in blue, pink, golden yellow, and ultraviolet becomes a sort of enormous and indeed ‘ambient’ “non-figurative icon” [7] that shines with the vitality of light, which becomes revelation.

It is impossible to overlook, first and foremost, the connection of Flavin’s work with the tradition of church stained glass, which has also experienced a new and highly interesting flowering [8] in contemporary times. Specifically, one could agree with Pierangelo Sequeri, who has significantly defined Flavin’s proposal as “the prophecy of a modern theological reworking of the stained glass window” [9], as well as with Pierluigi Lia, who has rightly pointed out how in the intervention at the Red Church, the inversion of the usual direction of light – no longer from outside to inside, but from inside to outside – adds an additional stimulus, with the church somehow extending beyond itself to permeate the life of the surrounding community that frequents it and recognizes itself within it [10]. Furthermore, alongside this easily intuitive parallelism, the suggestion could be expanded to include other well-defined emergences of wall decoration in mosaic (such as the gold backgrounds of early Christian, Byzantine, and Norman basilicas) or, at times, even painted: an example of this is the ethereal and pervasive decorations of churches by Valentino Vago [11], as well as – in its own way – the very Chapel of the Scrovegni, which is truly modernly ‘ambient’ in the choice of the intense lapis lazuli blue that ignites the entire spatial box. And regarding environments, it is not even inappropriate to compare Flavin’s installation – though, of course, with due critical caution – to the subtly transcendent

intentions of environments strongly marked by the presence and action of light, such as those of Fontana [12] and Turrell [13].

The temporality of the spiritual experience. Bill Viola’s video installations

If for Flavin the encounter with the realm of spirituality was incidental, in Bill Viola’s work transcendence has always been a persistent leitmotif, albeit expressed differently depending on the circumstances, and developed from a somewhat ‘syncretic’ perspective thanks to the balance with which the American artist has been able to blend and suspend both the tradition of Western religiosity and the many significant Eastern influences that have strongly shaped his approach to life and artistic creation [14]. Furthermore, and perhaps precisely because of this subtle, non-denominational balance, it can be added that Viola’s works are in no way assertive, but rather aspire to subtly evoke the Mystery: not by chance, one of the main philosophical references in his research is the so-called Via Negativa of St. John of the Cross, the mystical path based on the deep awareness of the essential “unknowability of God,” who is “totally other, independent, complete,” and therefore “cannot be grasped by the human intellect, cannot be described in any way,” with the result that “when the mind faces the divine reality, it empties, halts, and enters a cloud of unknowing. When the eyes cannot see, the only thing that works is faith, and the only way to approach God is through interiority” [15].

With Viola’s video installations, one forcefully enters the universe of the digital, even though his early works, in which visual reflections on transcendence appear, precede the time of the absolute dominance of binary programming logics. Furthermore, the

difference from Flavin's work is total in terms of formal outcome, as the absolute and ecstatic luminous aniconism of the minimalist artist gives way here to a 'figuration' [16] – if we can still call it that, considering it is video art – which deliberately aims to retain the poetic suggestion of narrativity in its full force, developed through technological and even cinematic means, reaching the territory of visually captivating theatrical experimentation (think of Peter Brook or Bob Wilson).

In particular, the most well-known work of Viola is *The Greeting*, a thoughtful but highly creative reinterpretation – and thus by no means slavish – of Pontormo's *Visitation*; but as mentioned, there are many of his works (from *Emergence*, which relates to Masolino da Panicale, to *Catherine's Room*, which dialogues with Andrea di Bartolo, from *The Crossing to The Path*, from *Room of St. John of the Cross* to the *Martyrs* series, from *The Messenger* to *The Deluge*) that clearly demonstrate the artist's interest in spiritual themes. In fact, according to him, "the profound meaning, the source and inspiration of all art, is that life does not end forever" [17].

In all of these works, the elements that contribute to generating and expressing transcendence are numerous and deeply intertwined, and among them – undoubtedly – the recognizable iconographic and even compositional references drawn from the tradition of Western Christian art play an important role. However, it would be truly shortsighted to limit oneself to such a reading, perhaps even taking the liberty of polemically reproaching Viola – to give just one example, and as has indeed been heard – for "not understanding what a *Visitation* is," as if the intention of the American artist had been merely to translate ancient paintings into

video. Viola's video installations, in fact, do not copy or reproduce the models of the past, but instead use the details and overall structure of such paintings only as tools aimed at facilitating an immediate acclimatization of the viewer – precisely due to the clear religious recognizability of the referenced elements – into the supersensory atmosphere in which the works aspire to project them. Furthermore, it is worth emphasizing that this result is achieved by Viola in a way that is almost entirely independent of the viewer's precise knowledge of the works that he has freely referenced in each case, and this is precisely because, in his works, the American artist – despite the specificity of the references – aims more to evoke the atmosphere of a general shared visual heritage that can be identified by all as 'sacred,' rather than to diligently (and much less philologically, in symbolic or theological terms) refer to this or that specific work from the past.

Rather, the truly determining element in fostering a compelling transcendent experience of Viola's works (to the point where "the viewer is virtually incorporated into the work, in the sense that they cannot simply watch but are expected to actively participate, which presupposes a bodily awakening") [18] is the expansion – sometimes even extreme – of the temporal flow, to which Viola arrived after reflecting on the example offered by music, "the art of time" par excellence [19]. In *The Greeting*, for example, thanks to the use of a complex camera capable of capturing 300 frames per second (compared to the usual 24), "an event that originally lasted forty-five seconds now unfolds like an elaborate choreography over the course of ten minutes" [20], so that the viewer is led to intimately experience the event being narrated in the work with an emotional depth

that is truly unusual, and primarily due to the fact that the extreme slowing down ends up giving essential significance to every smallest variation of the image over time [21]. In this way, the viewer is almost transported into another space, because – as the artist himself significantly explains – “when we begin to slow down time, using these technological tools, we automatically cross a threshold and move away from the physical world to enter the metaphysical one. In fact, the only place outside of technology where it is possible to slow down time is the human mind” [22].

Some recent experiences: Piotr Piasta, Davide Coltro, Pier Paolo Patti

The two examples mentioned are truly towering in the landscape of more technologically-driven art that explores the sense of the sacred, but they are by no means isolated incidents as one might believe. On the contrary, they can be considered simply the most advanced and recognized tip of a very lively and varied scene, which undoubtedly deserves to be better known.

For instance, to propose an analysis of some recent developments, one could start with the work of Polish artist Piotr Piasta, who, within the broader context of his research on the theme of memory, often focuses on moments of collective ritual, incorporating the sound component into his videos with considerable evocative power. Particularly poetic is *May devotions to the Blessed Virgin Mary* (2016) [23], in which the ritual of the Marian prayer, sung daily in the fields at the end of the workday by Polish women, is in some way transfigured by the choice of split screen. On the right, the faces of the women are shown as they invoke the Virgin, while on the left, there are beautiful, light, and serene shots of wildflowers gently illuminated by the

sun, swaying in the wind, and traversed by ants. The audio channel, which is unique and reproduces the chant of the women’s prayer, acts as the hinge between the two halves of the video. On the right, it synchronically and somewhat ‘naturalistically’ accompanies the movements of their faces, eyes, and lips, while on the left, it instead becomes an emotional, extradiegetic commentary on the discreet beauty of a seemingly residual (if not even insignificant) microcosm, which becomes a conduit for a moving epiphanic moment.

Another highly poetic example in its results, and at the same time incredibly interesting for the particularly advanced and experimental nature of the technology employed, is the work of Davide Coltro, a Verona-based artist – now living in Milan – who has been engaged for many years in a sharp and theoretically aware research on ‘electronic painting.’ His works, in fact, do not belong at all – primarily from a technical standpoint – to the realm of video art, even though the slight movement of the images that characterizes them might initially make one think of a slowed-down video, akin to Bill Viola’s style. In reality, however, his ‘electronic paintings’ (or ‘systems’) are not at all screens displaying moving images derived from a ‘filming’ process, but rather “Remote Artistic Terminals” [24] that receive, in real-time via an internet connection, the delicate and progressive random evolutions – which generate infinite ‘digital icons,’ each fully autonomous in its singularity (and not simple frames from a single longer narrative piece) – of an initial image. This image is usually a photograph taken by the artist himself and then specially processed to produce “a continuous stream of informational bits to be reassembled at the other end of the network” [25].

In particular, among all of Coltro's works, *Medium Color Landscapes* (since 2013) stands out, perhaps for its ability to create an intimately contemplative atmosphere thanks to the achievement of an unexpected 'digital sublime.' These landscapes, deliberately reminiscent of the aesthetic of photographic pictorialism from the late 19th and early 20th centuries, are each characterized by Coltro with the 'medium color' of that specific landscape fragment – hence the curious title of the series – which is the tone resulting from the mathematical average of all the chromatic values present in the original image. The result is estranged atmospheres, in which the tones, far removed from reality, have an abstracting effect that simultaneously stimulates the sensitivity and calms the spirit, not unlike the gold or lapis lazuli backgrounds in medieval art.

However, *Crux* is also very interesting, a surprising cross physically created through the juxtaposition of the hardware components of several systems, each of which is then immaterially traversed by the image of a blue sky slowly crossed by clouds (per crucem ad lucem, as Coltro himself emphasizes) [26].

Even more abstract, sometimes reaching entirely aniconic results, is the language chosen for some of his interesting works on sacred themes by Pier Paolo Patti, a versatile artist from Salerno for whom video – which constitutes the privileged realm of his training – is just one of many possible expressive options, often conceived from the outset to combine and harmonize – in a logic of contrasting juxtaposition and balanced intersection – with objects that have an evident 'lived' memory and particularly pronounced physicality. Among Patti's various works [27], the most interesting for the

analysis attempted here is perhaps *Skèpsis*, a complex multimedia installation in which a very strange Last Supper is staged, where the diners are represented by bulky and clearly obsolete computer screens and televisions, crossed by intangible and abstract digital images, and resting on heavy construction scaffolds that simulate the table on which the dinner takes place [28].

From its title, the work clearly reflects the 'skeptical' and 'doubtful' nature of Patti's intense existential research, as a non-believer who questions evangelical themes from a decidedly secular perspective. Yet, when watching the courageous video of the Campania artist – where, on an audio that evokes the 'background noise' of the universe, vaguely figurative images alternate with symbolic inserts and even completely optical sections – one cannot help but feel a jolt and raise questions about the meaning, invoking the unceasing human search for the infinite, regardless of the name or identity one wishes to assign to it.

Paolo Sacchini

(Accademia di Belle Arti di Brescia SantaGiulia)

Note:

[1] See, among others, at least C. De Carli, ed., *Gli artisti e la Chiesa della contemporaneità*, catalog of the exhibition Brescia, Museo Diocesano, November 10, 2000 - January 9, 2001, Mazzotta, Milan 2000.

[2] Designed by Flavin in the last months before his passing (November 29, 1996), the installation *Untitled* was inaugurated in 1997 during the exhibition *Opere 1964-1981* (November 29, 1997 - January 31, 1998) organized by the Fondazione Prada, which completed the work in collaboration with the Dia Center for the Arts in New York and the Dan Flavin Estate.

[3] See, among others, G. Mezzanotte, Giovanni Muzio. *Architetture francescane*, Eris, Milan 1974.

[4] P. Lia, *Dire Dio con arte. Un approccio teologico al linguaggio artistico*, Ancora, Milan 2003, p. 346.

[5] Regarding the more or less effectively “installational” nature of Flavin’s work, see the interesting reflections of P. Lia, *Dire Dio con arte*, cited, pp. 339-340, and H. Damish, *Un simple trait de néon*, in G. Celant, ed., *Cattedrali d’arte*. Dan Flavin per Santa Maria in Chiesa Rossa, Fondazione Prada, Milan 1998, pp. 153-164.

[6] P. Lia, *Dire Dio con arte*, cited, p. 332.

[7] *Ibid.*, p. 337. Flavin’s great interest in Byzantine icons is well known, and in fact, in the famous *Icons* series, he sought to reproduce with a new medium “that almost magical aura” (see G. Celant, ed., *Cattedrali d’arte*, cited, p. 5).

[8] See, for example, C. Brisac, *Le vetrate. Pittura e luce, una storia di mille anni*, Mondadori, Milan 1984; *Lumières contemporaines. Vitraux du XX^e siècle et architecture sacrée*, Centre international du Vitrail, Chartres 2005; S. Meda, *La vetrata nell’architettura sacra a Milano nella seconda metà del Novecento*, Vita e Pensiero, Milan 2009.

[9] P. Sequeri, *L’estro di Dio*, Glossa, Milan 2000, p. 198.

[10] P. Lia, *Dire Dio con arte*, cited, pp. 334-335.

[11] Regarding the churches painted by Valentino Vago, see for example G. Santi, *Celebrare con le immagini nelle chiese italiane. Committenza, orientamenti, realizzazioni*, Vita e Pensiero, Milan 2017, pp. 113-136.

[12] See, for example, M. Pugliese – B. Ferriani – V. Todolì, eds., *Lucio Fontana. Ambienti = environments*, catalog of the exhibition Milan, Pirelli Hangar Bicocca, September 21, 2017 - February 25, 2018, Mousse - Pirelli Hangar Bicocca, Milan 2018.

[11] See, for example, J.L. Kosky, *Vedere la luce: la contemplazione e le opere di James Turrell*, in S. Knauss – D. Zordan, eds., *La promessa immaginata. Proposte per una teologia estetica fondamentale*, EDB, Bologna 2011, pp. 295-311.

[12] See, for example, the many frequent references to Japanese culture that Viola himself highlighted in an interview with John Hanhardt during the *Going forth by day* exhibition at the Guggenheim in New York in 2002, and more recently featured in the Italian translation of the catalog of the 2017 Florence exhibition *Rinascimento elettronico*, from which multiple citations will be made (J. Hanhardt, Bill Viola interviewed by John G. Hanhardt, in Bill Viola. *Going forth by day*, catalog of the exhibition Berlin, February 9 - May 5, 2002, Guggenheim Museum Publications, New York 2002, pp. 85-115; recently republished in J. Hanhardt, John G. Hanhardt intervista Bill Viola, in A. Galansino – K. Perov, eds., *Bill Viola. Rinascimento elettronico*, catalog of the exhibition Florence, Palazzo Strozzi, March 10 - July 23, 2017, Giunti, Florence 2017, pp. 130-167; references will be made from this latest Italian translation).

[13] M. Michelacci, *Icone del sacro. Chiesa, arte e cultura visuale*, Vita e Pensiero, Milan 2019, pp. 152-153.

[14] However, it is not at all descriptive: referring to another work but actually illustrating a concept applicable to his entire production, Viola has clarified that in his view “incessant description” is “another limit of the Western system [...], as if identifying or naming something would allow you to understand it. I wanted them to live the experience” (J. Hanhardt, John G. Hanhardt intervista Bill Viola, cited, p. 147).

[15] B. Di Martino, *Dissolvenza in nero*, in B. Viola, *Nero video. La mortalità dell'immagine*, Castelveccchi, Rome 2016, pp. 7-15: 10. See also J. Hanhardt, John G. Hanhardt intervista Bill Viola, cited, pp. 135-138.

[16] J. Hanhardt, John G. Hanhardt intervista Bill Viola, cited, p. 147.

[17] *Ibid.*, pp. 149-150; also very interesting, *ibid.*, pp. 135-138.

[18] B. Viola, *The Greeting*, in A. Galansino – K. Perov, eds., *Bill Viola*, cited, p. 37.

[19] In Bill Viola's words, “even the smallest details of the scene emerge. The unconscious language of the body and the nuances of fleeting looks and gestures are accentuated, lingering in the observer's consciousness. The slight changes in light and wind conditions become crucial events. At times, the background moves to the foreground, and in the darkest parts behind the central figures, other figures can be seen engaged in unknown activities. The geometry of the walls and buildings seems to violate the laws of optical perspective, and this, together with the ambiguity of the lighting, gives a subjective character to the scene as a whole. Ultimately, the actions and intentions of the characters do not find an explanation nor become evident. The precise meaning of the event remains suspended like an ambiguous and speculative gesture” (*ibid.*).

[20] J. Hanhardt, John G. Hanhardt intervista Bill Viola, cited, p. 150.

[21] Available online at the URL http://piotрпиasta.com/may_devotions_to_the_blessed_virgin_mary.html (last accessed February 12, 2021).

[22] D. Gigli, *La tecnologia come forma dell'arte: il system*. Intervista a Davide Coltro (URL <https://www.heritage-srl.it/overlook/davide-coltro-e-il-system/>; last accessed February 12, 2021).

[23] *Ibid.*

[24] M.B. Ferri, *Sacro contemporaneo. Dialoghi sull'arte, Ancora*, Milan 2016, pp. 101-106: 105.

[25] See at least also Abbà (R. Barbato, ed., *Abbà. Perdono e inconsapevolezza*, catalog of the exhibition Naples, Galleria Primopiano, November 24, 2017 - January 15, 2018, [s.n.], [s.l.] 2017).

[26] F. Cipriano, ed., Pier Paolo Patti. *Skèpsis. Alterazioni del tempo*. Videospace, catalog of the exhibition Torre Annunziata, Liceo Artistico Statale Giorgio de Chirico, November 20, 2014 - January 16, 2015, [s.n.], [s.l.] 2014.

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