

Three-Card Monte

A Semi-Serious Conversation with Giulia Piscitelli

Eugenio Viola

Eugenio Viola Dear Giulia, I think I'll start this conversation "in the midst," so to speak... *Intermedium*, the title you chose for this exhibition at the Madre, is a Latin word that means "being in the middle," a spatio-temporal suspension symbolizing the ongoing creative process. After all, the expository language of the exhibition itself is not a retrospective project, but rather an open view, on the past, present and future of your research and your life. Would you like to talk to me about how this project was born? *

Giulia Piscitelli *Intermedium* as non-absolute value, without ambiguity, as the meaning of calling oneself into play without dogmas, with the desire to come to terms with oneself and the Other. But who exactly is the Other? A viewer who is at times interested and at other times bored, a curator who harbors the word "to cure" or someone who is bed-ridden, a collector who gathers ideas or titles, a gallerist who sells desires or a merchant, a child who sees either colors or massacres, a Communist who reads ambitions or acknowledges reason, a lover of art or a lover of oneself, a wise person or a foolish one. *Intermedium* is not the answer, it's the question.

E.V. Nonetheless, this question always begins from your personal experience, from the incongruences and lacerations of your microcosm, in order to offer, it seems to me, models that transcend the mundane nature of your experience and reflect upon the outside world, or fall back on a resolutely intimate and private dimension. What is the relationship between art and life in your work? In other words, how much are your works influenced by a biographical factor? You did, however, confess to me that you feel as though you're in a certain sense a "daughter of *Fluxus*," a movement characterized by a subversive strategy, whose aim is to face life in the same way as a retrievable aesthetic phenomenon.

G.P. When I met Al Hansen in Giuseppe Desiato's studio, the way he described *Fluxus* was: "*Fluxus* was a deliberate mistake... Birds that fly at different economic levels... The people at *Fluxus* like to bite the hand that feeds them, even when they've already gotten as far as dessert... *Fluxus* is basically the alcoholic art of the 1950s... *Fluxus* is something that can't happen... *Fluxus* is when you try to fart quietly and end up soiling your underwear... *Fluxus* is also something wonderful in the worst possible place... *Fluxus* is like putting your shirt on and realizing that it's your socks... When you approach *Fluxus*, mountains are real mountains, but once you've entered, the mountains are still mountains but you're a few inches off the ground".¹ Alfred Earl Hansen was *Fluxus* and I couldn't help but fall in love with *Fluxus*. I was living on the third floor of a building at the time, overlooking viale Calascione, in Monte di Dio. The path ended with a tall tufa wall. To the left I could see a beautiful garden filled with lemon and orange trees, which belonged to the noble Donadoni family; on the other side of the wall a mother was pushing a stroller back and forth hoping one of her children would fall asleep, and at the same time she was shouting at another child telling him to stop acting

up. They instead lived in a low-rise in viale Calascione. The two situations were separated by just five inches of wall, like a piece of white paper divided in half by a vertical line drawn in pencil. This situation is the same, but with different nuances, all over the world. Naples in this sense is the same as other cities, but with different nuances. Sometimes it's a particular point of view, regardless of where you are, which can shape the relationship between you and the world.

E.V. It is no coincidence that a trace of the city of Naples often indelibly appears in your works. I have often joked with you, saying that you are, to quote Eduardo De Filippo, *A voce 'e Napule...!* (The voice of Naples!). I'm thinking about lots of your works, and especially the ones on view in this show, *Contested Zones*, for instance, an installation produced on the occasion of your show at the Cubitt Gallery, in London, which consists of streamers glued to the wall. Material that's connected to the idea of play and childhood, which by contrast recreates an architectural barrier around the juvenile detention center in Nisida-Porto Paone. Or the ironic project of the *Tre carte* (Three-Card Monte) which opens the show, inviting the visitor into an alienating dimension right from the start: a lithographic stone-matrix on a pedestal reproduces the traditional back of the three playing cards, a video set on another pedestal gives back the technologically contemporary version, enacted by you on this same matrix, but immediately contradicted by the use of transparent cards that force you to play "three-card monte" out in the open... Beyond all vernacular temptation, how important was this to your education and how important is it for you to be Neapolitan today?

G.P. "Yo soy yo y mi circunstancia, y si no la salvo a ella no me salvo yo."² I think that José Ortega y Gasset's words are a better answer than anything I might say. There's no point pretending, each time I see the sea I can't help but think that the same water touches Libya, Egypt, Palestine, Israel, Lebanon, Syria, Turkey, just to name a few countries. Many of these countries are "conflict areas" that demand freedom. With these situations in mind, ones that are apparently far away, as well, I repropose the iron gate that shuts the prison of Nisida in the form of wallpaper: I aestheticize it, I make it visible and attractive, but it will always be the barrier of a detention center. Instead, the *Tre Carte* project, which is based on the international game-fraud, speaks of the potential that we give to nothing, and that's why I play with three transparent plexiglas cards in the video. In the end no one wins.

E.V. Hanging on the walls of this room, just as in the one that hosts *Trees*, are your tapestries, where you intervene directly on the fabrics and, acting by subtraction, you use bleach as a revealer that undermines the surface, from which familiar forms emerge, the shapes of objects or animals that stand out against solid color backgrounds. These melancholy portraits seem to emerge from the corrosive action of time, rise up to a simulacrum of disappearance, to an emblem of a sort of "painting" that abandons its iconic dimension and its conventional tools to become timbre, brand, almost the transposition of the process of the photographic imprint and of the impersonal objectification of time, a solemn and threatening palimpsest of memory...

G.P. The first tapestry is dated 2006. My relationship with tapestries is about

control: I measure up to uncontrollable reality, where you can't make a mistake, however, because the work can't be corrected. These fabrics are worked with bleach, a liquid, colorless substance that acts on the material, making it fade, thus revealing the image. Each fabric has its own pattern and this is why it reacts in a different way each time. The bleach that acts as a revealer is in fact always absorbed differently, and the shapes will only show through when it's dosed correctly, otherwise it shows nothing, or else it goes beyond the revelation, it burns the fabric leaving behind just stains, without a structure. I like to think of bleach as though it were a laser that illuminates the wet fields. The tapestries also remind me of the sails on ships; after all, sails were originally used as canvases for paintings; the banners used in religious processions, but also hippie fabrics, the cloth signs used in protest marches. Above all they're practical: when opened up on the wall they take up several yards, when they're closed they become a roll that's easy to store.

E.V. Although you use different media, tapestry seems to especially interest you: on the occasion of the 54th Venice Biennale, on the walls of the Arsenale you hung a monumental installation of tapestries featuring eleven ears of wheat on them, a symbol that iconically crosses different periods and places, and consequently lends itself to multiple values, as well as to a series of possible references to our present.

G.P. When Bice Curiger invited me to the Venice Biennale, the protests of the Arab world were already underway: I was digitally following the clashes between the police and the young protesters who were against the high cost of living, government corruption and the lack of prospects for growth and change. The rise in the prices of popular consumer goods determined the "bread riot." The forecasts say that in thirty years the world population will be eight billion, thirty percent of whom won't have bread. These are the ideas that inspired me to make the eleven tapestries, to form a series that I called *Spica* (2011), the Latin word for ear of wheat. The number of tapestries is also linked to article 11 in the Italian constitution, which states: "Italy repudiates war as an instrument of-fending the liberty of the peoples and as a means for settling international disputes; it agrees to limitations of sovereignty where they are necessary to allow for a legal system of peace and justice between nations, provided the principle of reciprocity is guaranteed; it promotes and encourages international organizations furthering such ends." For each of the tapestries I made an ear of wheat, drawing from different iconographies: a fossil dated to 1800 BC, an Ear of Wheat/Tripod dated to 280-242 BC, a 2 lire coin from the Republic of Italy in 1949, a spurred Rye, a "conventional" ear of wheat, a Drachma from Metaponto dated to 340-330 BC, 10 *Pfennige* from the German Republic, also from 1949, a Stater from Metaponto dated to 550-470 BC.... The fabrics I chose were taffeta and shantung silk, in memory of the ancient Silk Road. Venice connected the West with the East, creating a route along which ideas and culture traveled. Furthermore, silk reminded me of the Canut revolt in Lyon, the revolt of the silk workers which marked an era, one of the first social revolts, which took place on November 21, 1831 and triggered the so-called Industrial Revolution. Ance-

trally, the ear of wheat is also the symbol of fertility and growth, death and rebirth, the transition from a nomadic lifestyle to the settlements, of Mother Earth, of the ancient Eleusinian Mysteries present in the Mediterranean culture. The work was installed so as to resemble the colonnade of a temple in harmony with the real brick columns of the Arsenale.

E.V. Your work is heterogeneous, in this sense "Inter-medium" also indicates the crossing of different media; unsurprisingly, you move seamlessly from the installation to the video, from photography to "painting," from works on paper to the "ready-made." What is the relationship *between* the different media?

G.P. I must admit that it doesn't all come from my own bag of tricks: I find inspiration in other people's bags as well. The important thing is to choose a person with the right bag, even though I must say that I never found myself taking something from an artist's bag. One of the largest bags belongs to my family: in the name of the father, the mother and the sister. My father researches and transforms the electronic objects others have thrown away. This is something he does on a daily basis. It is to him that I owe works like *Untagged* (2010), *American Skin* (2011), *Universalis Encyclopaedia* (2012), *NA U84848* (2000), *Scalpetto Organico* (2007), *Musicaloro* (2003), *Todos* (2008). My mother has always loved sewing and from her I learned the pleasure of touching the material we find in the tapestries, in *Rischi Minori* (2010), in the flags in *Sim Sala Bim* (2013) and also in *Indoor Combat* (2012). My sister is chaos in a light blue room. She gave me *Sunshine* (2009), *Non ti riconoscevo per un pelo* (2009), *Tornado* (2009). From others I took *Little Italy* (2010), *Untitled* (Poltrone, 2008), *Capri a Ischia* (2011), *Fe Fe Fedayn* (2007), *Mr. Z* (2009). All this to say that the media I use are not paper or magnetic tape, but the people who offer me the chance to evolve personally through them.

E.V. This, on the one hand, confirms the inextricable synthesis between art and life that characterizes your work, which I mentioned at the beginning, and on the other, your aesthetic strategy aimed at dealing – *Fluxus* is a case in point – with life as a retrievable aesthetic phenomenon. Instead, one medium that you have gradually abandoned is performance, which you practiced in the 1990s. Why is that so?

G.P. I want you to know that for me performance art is neither a shamanic ritual nor a form used to cure, via a sort of ritual, a sick community, or one that yearns to be recognized, nor is it an alchemical formula. I don't even think it's a play-event that will be repeated for money; that to me is theater. I think that today I would never be able to do a performance like the one put on by the world of high finance entitled "Crisis," this is why I limit my work to small performances that are almost invisible but make things visible... the love-hate relationship between the wolf and the sheep.

E.V. In this sense your work has changed as well: previously it was very focused on you. Your videos from the 1990s, which are often of disarming fragility, almost always have you in the leading role. Gradually your figure disappears...

G.P. You always start from yourself... I had an unstoppable need to look at myself intimately and understand just how much I was related to the exterior. The truth

of the matter is that I needed to be looked at, and without knowing it I chose the eye of the camera and the video camera. Many recordings were locked in a drawer and forgotten, and years later, when I had the chance to show them as my "work," I did just that. There's a time to record and a time to show something, and the times are not always immediately consequent. My research, as it has evolved, has joined my eye with the technical eye, thus bringing about the disappearance of my body, but not the modality of the process.

E.V. And it is precisely in the modality of the process that the *Intermedium* returns, understood to be a process of incubation that has always characterized your work: a container of images and situations that remain as if suspended, in the middle, between two possibilities: to be or to remain in limbo, in your memory archive. Memory is another of the fundamental elements of your research. So, how important is time to your creative process? Many of your works have a double date, for instance.

G.P. Those facial creams that promise to puff up your skin until it becomes as smooth and firm as a newborn's behind are a big rip-off, but the real rip-off lies in the fact that the people who use them know perfectly well what they're using, they prefer to fool themselves rather than look in the mirror. And the point isn't to look at one's face but at one's self, finding the courage to realize that we can be several things, even a monster. Instead, the cream that makes you younger is produced by a real presence in the present. There are works that require a long incubation time and presenting them ahead of time would create an unhappy work. Between the sowing and the harvesting Nature's laws determine the times: when I create I become Nature and I decide about the growth of the seed and I myself am the seed. When my works have two dates, one of them is the date when the work was sown, and the other is the date when it was harvested. Let me tell you something else: a fruit is said to be "ready to be eaten" when it's ripe.

E.V. But *Intermedium* is also the choice to deliberately leave traces of the show's installation phase along the exhibition route, so that they become witnesses to the process, if not actual works, deliberately left without captions.

G.P. A book or rather a story is divided into pages, and these pages have a number, they aren't part of the story but they are printed on the same page. These "non-works" indicate what stage in the reading my story has reached.

E.V. Can you tell me about your experience at Studio Aperto Multimediale with which you chose, almost provocatively, to end the exhibition?

G.P. There's nothing provocative about it. Studio Aperto Multimediale was a space in the heart of the city of Naples, at via Benedetto Croce 38, born out of the desire and needs of some artists who were active between 1992 and 1995. In those years, in all the European cities, similar spaces had existed for some time, created by artists for other artists. During its period of activity, besides the founders, there were many people working on organizing the events. S.A.M.'s mission was to come to terms with the creativity of multiple subjectivities through various forms, including moments of discussion. The paper documents on view are from my personal archive; with respect to what actually took place, not all of

them are on display. The video-document is a copyleft extract of a moment of discussion through confrontation-encounter-clash. I thought it was a good idea to present this moment from my creative memory, examining my past ideas today, and reading any contradictions. I also believe that since this archive is related to work in the territory, it is especially suitable to a public place like a museum, whose task is to use memory as a mobile zone.

E.V. My use of the word "provocative" actually referred to the fact that at the time you weren't a mainstream artist, you weren't working with a gallery; rather you were working with the space you managed yourself; although it wasn't a protest it was "alternative" to the rationale of a system, that of "mainstream" art, if you prefer, which you belong to today. In other words, what does it feel like to have shifted, in a certain sense, from an ideology of resistance to official acknowledgement on the part of the art systems?

G.P. "One night a mouse found its way into a shop filled with wonderful things to eat: 'How delicious...' but he just didn't know where to begin! The greedy mouse started to nibble on the package of butter, when he suddenly smelled the milk. And close by was the cheese with its sweet fragrance, and as he threw himself onto the cheese and started nibbling at it, from all around he could smell, one after the other, the sausages and the chocolate, the scent of bread and then that of the butter again. The small rodent raced back and forth without stopping. He just couldn't decide what to eat first."⁹ For me, choosing is my job, whatever the circumstances. No one but you can limit or influence your choices and the more the chances for a confrontation the more the work is enhanced. All I can say is that the magic was triggered by the fact that I was ready for the confrontation and along the way I met Gianni Fonti, who was ready to come along with me.

E.V. What do you remember about *Napoli ad Arte* in those years? How do you think the whole art system has changed?

G.P. I remember that we didn't have computers or cell phones, at least, they weren't everywhere the way they are today... Imagine "art made by hand": there was no Easyjet, you had to take night train from Naples to get to Berlin, wearying hours of travel just to touch a wall. And that was only twenty years ago... Over the years, the life system and the thinking system have both changed, and so has the way art is made. A very important transition took place, from a sense of reality to the perception of an illusory world, characterized by the dyslexia between the magical and the virtual, by the suspension of time or at least its mirage. The distance between the eye and the horizon is shorter now, creating a basically two-dimensional vision. The enemy looks different now, but we ourselves are the enemy, and this is a very important arrival point and at the same time an appropriate starting point.

E.V. Which artists influenced your development and which contemporary artists do you feel closest to?

G.P. Among the artists I have met I'd say unquestionably Giuseppe Desiato, Al Hansen and Vincent D'Arista who is mainly a physicist. I have loved artists like Hervé Fischer and his Farmácia Fischer & Co., the GAAG group with their instal-

lations such as the one at the MoMA, Rudolf Schwarzkogler with his hands in the blue blood of fish, Pino Pascali with his worms and many others who possessed an inner density. As for my contemporaries, there is one work that completely won me over, which was begun by Pawel Althamer in the St. Elisabeth-kirche in Berlin as part of the 7th Berlin Biennial; it's called *Draftsmen's Congress*.

E.V. This work bore within itself a series of features close to your own practice: a recording – often brutal – reality, social analysis and narrative research reduced to a basic expression, an extreme concentration, which adds to the flagrancy of the work, completely unmediated, one's own and other's weaknesses. You have always given us a series of micro-stories borrowed from an ethical and aesthetic paradigm that entrusts its poetic force to nuances. You often aim at a recovery of intimacy and emotions, at the acceptance of fragility and the ephemeral, at the reassessment of small gestures, at the perception of diversity, in a tension toward the aesthetic atonement of the mundane. Such as in *Idem* (2010), the bunch-like installation that hung from the ceiling of the hypogeum at the Fondazione Morra Greco, which you made by assembling the leaves of a twenty-year-old agave plant at the Naples zoo. These leaves have different sentences written on them, carved by the visitors to the zoo: messages that celebrate love and unions that aspire to eternity (and are made eternal in the work's protected ecosystem), but entrusted to the fleetingness of a plant's life. Or like in *Rischi Minori* (2010), an installation presented for the first time at the Fondazione Giuliani in Rome, works that in various ways talk about the transience of a human being.

G.P. *Idem* (2010) is the yearning to be and to be there, to recognize one's mortality. It is a cry of love hanging from a thread, it is my Nature and at the same time that of others, it is History, written on an agave leaf, it is the pruning that serves to supply the plant with oxygen and not destroy it. *Rischi Minori* (2010) is the definition that industry gives to the work uniforms that I sewed back onto themselves and covered with latex. My question was, who actually says that the person wearing the uniform truly carries out work qualified as being a "minor risk"? And from this question everything else followed.

E.V. Do you think that work somehow has a therapeutic value? I have the impression that for you, art becomes an instrument of self-analysis, in addition to being a powerful introspective device.

G.P. Your impression comes close to the truth, I undoubtedly took advantage of the meaning of my work to delve deeper into who is the whole and who am I. That said, I want to stress the fact that if a person accidentally injures their hand they must go see a surgeon to have it stitched up, if a person has a psychological problem they must turn to a specialist, and in this we don't try to keep up with fashion. You know, the difference between art and life is that life has, at most, about a hundred years to live, while art can last much longer. The thought of this has always annoyed me. You think you can make art so that you can come close to immortality, and instead you die and your work mocks you. I have always thought that, in the end, for an artist every creation represents his tomb.

E.V. We're slipping into the existential... Another element from your practice seems to me to be irony, even when it becomes a sort of bitter laughter... *Sim Sala Bim* comes to mind, for instance, a title borrowed from an exclamation that's familiar to anyone who, like me, as a child in Italy in the late 1970s watched the "illusionist" Silvan's magic tricks on TV, and that's when the three-card monte metaphor recurs.

G.P. *Sim Sala Bim*, Abracadabra, Open Sesame are keys. My key is the "work," even when it is borrowed, conscientiously retraced, demythologized. *Sim Sala Bim* (2013) is translated into a sculpture, made using a traditional-popular technique: I stiffened an old hand-woven wool blanket by placing it on a form, steeping it in water and sugar for months, to then give it back to the viewer standing up on itself in the shape of a parallelepiped. There's no trick, there's the testimony of a modification achieved by a stage trick. The structure resembles a sarcophagus, the symbol of death, but also a fountain, the symbol of life, such as in Titian's *Sacred and Profane Love*.

E.V. I remember your reaction when I told you that this work reminded me of a coffin... The blanket is in any case an object that you take from the everyday, a sort of "violated" ready-made. This is a recurring strategy in your works, such as in *Untitled (Poltrone)*, a work that you presented at the first exhibition we worked on together, in 2008: *Fate presto!*

G.P. Hurry! Hurry! These were the words the girl shouted as she ran down the steps. She was seeking shelter. There is no shelter, and the little girl knows this. It's the adults who refuse to believe it, and yet they have witnessed steel harpoons pierce the walls of their homes and come to a stop when they hit a chair where just a moment someone was sitting. How lucky not to have been struck. Fortune, the only folk tale that I can use the word Democratic to define today. Fortune. Can you tell me what fortune is, Eugenio?

E.V. You're approaching a controversial and much-debated theme, a topos that cannot be eliminated from Western culture, to which epochs and historical contexts have attributed nuances of meanings and various symbolic values. Basically, Fortune means Chance, at least from Ancient Greece onward, and Randomness, when interpreted philosophically-scientifically, can in turn be understood as a true and proper theory around the nature of the universe itself. Erasmus of Rotterdam believed that "fortune loves those who have the least wit," and this perhaps relates to us: our fortune is to have the chance, in spite of everything, to be able to bring forward our passions in an ethical and coherent manner, which then also became our work, which it is true, sometimes, costs us *Tears of Love*, but all in all, my dear, at least in this respect... we are fortunate!

¹ A. Hansen, in *Milano Poesia 1989, VII Festival Internazionale di poesia, musica, video, performance, danza e teatro*, edited by Mario Giusti, Gianni Sassi, Cooperativa Nuova Intrapresa, Ente Autonomo Milano Suono, 1989, p. 167.

² "I am I and my circumstance; and, if I do not save it, I do not save myself," cf. J. Ortega y Gasset, *Meditaciones del Quijote*, 1914.

³ Citation presumably the product of a dictation, taken from the ready-made/notebook of a fourth-grade girl, thrown out and later found by the artist in her metropolitan reconnaissances.