Obituary - Nachruf

Remembering Manfredo Massironi (1937-2011)

Manfredo Massironi, best known for his artistic and scientific research in the field of visual perception, died on November 30, 2011. He was a brilliant, ironic man, a talented visual scientist and an original interpreter of the developments of Gestalt Psychology in Italy.

Manfredo was born in Padua in 1937. His interest in visual perception and Gestalt psychology began with his university studies at the Institute for Industrial Design and then the Faculty of Architecture in Venice. At the end of the fifties and beginning of the sixties the connection between experimental research on perception as developed in the laboratories of psychology and the manipulation of perceptual factors in art and architecture was not familiar to scholars and
students. During this period Manfredo (together with 8 other students from the Faculty of Architecture in Venice) founded an avant-garde artistic group, known as the Gruppo Enne (1960-1965), in order to create art which was characterized by a great deal of analysis of perceptual laws and organization. Between 1963 and 1964 there was a long journalistic debate on the artistic research developed by avant-garde groups and Giulio Carlo Argan (one of the most important Italian historians/art critics of the 20th century) emphasized in particular the role of Gestalt Psychology in the artistic research developed by the Gruppo Enne and proposed the term “neo-Gestalt” to refer to their research. In 1967 Argan wrote for the Catalogue of the Group exhibition in Lodz: “By replacing the idea of ‘works of art’ and instead stimulating the aesthetic experience directly by means of the perceptive/imaginative faculties of the observer, visual research leads to the final deconsacration of art. From now on, art will be free from the need to be set against the background of a specific Philosophy, Aesthetics, and will instead be explained – just like any other phenomenon – by means of science, namely, by the Psychology of Perception and Gestalt Psychology”. Throughout his career Manfredo continued to demonstrate how perception functions by means of his artistic work. However, after an intense period of working on art and theoretical writing on the Programmed Art movement¹, from the seventies Manfredo became more and more interested in scientific work on visual perception.

He became a significant member of the Italian school of researchers in visual perception (including Fabio Metelli, Gaetano Kanizsa, Paolo Bozzi, Giovanni Vicario and Riccardo Luccio among others). They were devotees of the experimental - and partially also theoretical - essence of the Gestalt approach, an approach that Bozzi renamed the Experimental Phenomenology of Perception and which Manfredo adopted as the framework of his work. During this period his artistic production slowed down, to the advantage of his theoretical and experimental research on perception. However, he continued creating works of art in connection with his research: “Rottura di costanza” [Violation of Constancy], “Prospettive rovesciate” [Inverted Perspectives], “Completamenti amodali” [Amodal Completions], “Sottrazioni” [Subtractions], “Piegature” [Folds], “Nodi” [Knots] are at the same time the titles of his artworks and useful

¹ His works of art have been shown in both national and international exhibitions: *Nova Tendencija* in Zagreb (1961, 1963, 1965); the VI Biennial International and exhibition *Oltre l’Informale* [Beyond the Informal] held in Rimini and San Marino in 1963; the 32nd Biennial International Art Exhibition in Venice, 1964; *The responsive Eye* international exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, 1965; the V Biennial Exhibition in Paris in 1967, where he was awarded the Theodoron Foundation of Chicago Prize; the *Kinetic* international exhibition, London, 1970; The exhibition of *Contemporary Italian art* organized by the gallery of Modern Art in Rome and shown in Rome, Venice and Belgrade in 1971; the Quadriennal Exhibition in Rome, 1973 and 1976; *the L’altro occhio di Polifemo* [Polifemus’ Other Eye] exhibition at the Gallery of Modern Art, Bologna, 1978; the *Ultima avanguardia* [The Last Avant-Garde] exhibition at the Palazzo Reale, Milan, 1984 and the *Enne & Zero, motus etc.* exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in Bolzano, the Palazzo della Ragione in Padua and the Gallery of Modern Art, in San Marino in 1996.
keywords to summarize his research themes. He studied the perceptual constancy of size and form (with P. Bonaiuto), the functioning of perspective invariants such as the Cross-Ratio in anamorphosis and concave surfaces (with U. Savardi), the perception of spatial structure with oblique viewing (with Deregowski and Parker), the laws of amodal completion and mental completion in pictorial representation (with G. Kanizsa and S. Mastandrea), the role of organizational versus geometric factors in mental rotation, folding tasks and the perception of knots (with R. Luccio, N. Bruno and D. Bressanelli), the relation between visual perception and mental images (with C. Cornoldi e P. Rocchi) the special status of pictures in perceptual and cognitive inquiry (with J. Cutting) and the representation and perception of light and colors in achromatic graphic art (with D. Zavagno). To all these fields he brought an enlightening contribution (a complete list of his publications is available at: http://www.ephplab.eu/page.php?17). His devotion to studying and revealing the role of drawing and graphic images in the understanding of visual perception remains one of his main contributions. He dedicated several books to this subject including his last book (Massironi, M., The Psychology of Graphic Images, Mahaw, London: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2002).
The exhibition “Manfredo Massironi. Visual Research and Art. Art and Visual Research”, organized as part of the GTA international conference held in Macerata, Italy in 2007 on The Development of Gestalt theory in Psychology and Adjacent Fields represented a display of the originality and complexity of his career. In the catalogue of the exhibition (available at http://www.ephplab.eu/page.php?17), a group of scholars in perception (Ivana Bianchi, Michael Kubovy, Ugo Savardi and Ian Verstegen) followed in Manfredo’s footsteps, artwork by artwork, and encouraged people to complement the aesthetic experience of these objects with the wonder of experiencing the enchanting story which each piece tells about perceptual organization.

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Ugo Savardi, born in 1953, is a full professor of General Psychology at the University of Verona. His main research interests are in the theoretical and methodological foundations of experimental phenomenology, the direct perception of relationships and in spatial perception.

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