

[Title](#) || Notes in the margin of a visual and sonic crushing  
[Author](#) || Cristina Grazioli  
[Translation from Italian](#) || Flora Pitrolo  
[Published in](#) || Sabrina Galasso, *Il Teatro di Remondi e Caporossi* (Rome: Bulzoni, 1998)  
[Rights](#) || All rights reserved. © Sciami 2018. Visit [term and condition](#) on sciami.com  
[Number of pages](#) || pag 1 di 3  
[Language](#) || ENG  
[DOI](#) ||

## **Illuminazione, 1967**

*directed by* Mario Ricci

*scenes* Umberto Bignardi

*text by* Nanni Balestrini

*performer* Deborah Hayes, Angela Diana, Claudio Privitera, Marilù Gleyeses, Vivian Lombroso, Tonino Campanelli, Franco Cataldi, Marco Romizi

*film by* Umberto Bignardi, Giorgio Turi and Roberto Capanna, with the collaboration of Mario Ricci

*First performance* Rome, Teatro alla Ringhiera, October 26, 1967

*Replica* Munich Werkraum Theater, 1968

## **Notes in the margin of a visual and sonic crushing**

*Illuminazione* ('Illumination', 1967), directed by Mario Ricci

by *Cristina Grazioli*

Ricci's initial impulse to create a performance based on Nanni Balestrini's text *Illuminazione* was structurally translated thanks to Umberto Bignardi's scenographic apparatus; in re-reading the performance now, we should probably consider Bignardi as a co-director of the piece.

The only remaining version we have access to of Balestrini's text is the version published in *Ma Noi Facciamone Un'Altra* (Feltrinelli, 1968). Although those present cannot remember with precision how close the theatrical text was to the published one, it's plausible that the two were not dissimilar. Bignardi recalls that the text had been "crushed" into segments which isolated the single sounds contained in each word. We can imagine that there was a resonance between the process of fragmentation undergone by the text and the process through which the image too appeared fragmented.

Germano Celant observed: "Theatre towards total disappearance, the stroboscopic illumination, the inarticulate language, the mobile scenography, the movements, cut up into pieces, these are all signs which immediately acquire theatrical and visual meaning. Every fragment, moment by moment, becomes the centre of Ricci's theatrical investigation – the dissolution of the theatre as theatre, the use of rhythmic light as theatre..."<sup>1</sup>. Ricci himself writes about having never planned to make performances solely with light and sound, and after this performance it appears as if an abstracting tendency was generally abandoned (see our text on *Moby Dick*).

The collaboration between Mario Ricci and Umberto Bignardi – a sporadic collaboration, by two artists whose work could appear distant in poetics and activities – has its genesis in a convergence between the interests of the two, a convergence already documented in Bignardi's previous work in 1967. In looking at Bignardi's works from the following few years, a sense can be gleaned of how essential his collaboration with Ricci was: there is a strong continuity between the stage apparatus of *Illuminazione* and his later works (and it must be added that more than a stage apparatus, his was a system which structurally determined the piece's kinetic and visual score).

Various episodes can be related to this field of creation (see examples in the section entitled *Other Contextual Materials*). For example Bignardi's interest in Muybridge's chronophotography: from 1965 onwards he conducted various experiments on the movements of human and animal bodies, inspired by chronophotography. In April 1967 he showed such works at the Amelio Modern Art Agency in Naples; in the programme notes for the exhibition (see document #10 in *Other Contextual Materials*), the artist notes how this sort of procedure was engaged in showing the passing of time "even though the images occur on a flat surface", and sees the exhibition in line with his other work at the time. To work with those images was to "graft my own intervention into a field of investigation into the visual arts which is still open"; it is "material prepared following criteria of fluidity and rhythm": drawings on white paper, drawn with coloured pencils, pastels, inks or graphic material to be recycled. In an interview with Laura Cherubini, in addressing Muybridge's 1965 works, Bignardi declared that he was "entering a phase which went beyond painting": "I was looking for a vehicle through which I could make the images transit."<sup>2</sup>

This type of drawing is also used in two films, made with independent filmmakers: *Amore, amore...* ('Love, love...', 1966, directed by Alfredo Leonardi) and *Motion Vision* (1967, again directed by Leonardi – see document #8), the latter of which supplied some of the material used in *Illuminazione*. Bignardi sees this kind of drawing as a particular kind of animation: "it's through the reanimation of these figures that we get away from imitative phenomena, and move closer to understanding the relations between the languages of cinema and visual arts, by seeing real time pass *in real time* on the screen. I'm interested in the problem of obtaining an interchangeability, a fusion between the medium of communication and the prepared image, and this is also why I built two 'visual machines' (the *prismobile* and the *fantavisore*) in 1965 (...). The work of drawing acquires a projectual edge attentive to the actual consumption of the very images it creates, through the

<sup>1</sup> Germano Celant, Mario Ricci, *A partire da zero*, "Sipario" 296: December 1970, pp. 50-55: p. 55 (which later appeared with the title *Collage per una automitobiografia*, in Franco Quadri (ed.), *L'avanguardia teatrale in Italia. Materiali (1960-1976)*. Turin: Einaudi, 1977. 2 voll., vol. I, pp. 212-221 : 221)

<sup>2</sup> Maurizio Calvesi, Laura Cherubini, *Umberto Bignardi. Opere dal 1958 al 1993*, Roma, Università Degli Studi di Roma "La Sapienza" / Museo Laboratorio di Arte contemporanea, 1994 (catalogo della mostra, Roma 16 febbraio-12 marzo 1994), p. 19

Title || Notes in the margin of a visual and sonic crushing  
Author || Cristina Grazioli  
Translation from Italian || Flora Pitrolo  
Published in || Sabrina Galasso, *Il Teatro di Remondi e Caporossi* (Rome: Bulzoni, 1998)  
Rights || All rights reserved. © Sciami 2018. Visit [term and condition](#) on sciami.com  
Number of pages || pag 2 di 3  
Language || ENG  
DOI ||

design of adequate kinds of media, of visual instruments. I think my future work will keep insisting on this crux, which has to do with a fusion between instruments of diffusion, visual materials and the situations within which these images will occur”.<sup>3</sup>

Apart from underlining the possibility for exchange between different artistic languages, the artist wants to draw attention to the relationship between the immediacy of communication and its project. This is the kind of research context which also engendered the two ‘visual machines’ made in 1965 (or, as Bignardi surrealistically calls them, ‘found modified media’, the aforementioned *Prismobile* and *Fantavisore* - see documents #12 and #13). The *Prismobile* uses the ‘alternate stripe’ system used in advertising, employing translucent plastic strips backlit in neon; the work was exhibited in 1966 at the Attico Gallery in Rome. The *Fantavisore* inverts the televisual system by displaying layered images which are either part of the machine itself or captured from its context of installation (a rectangular box installed with lights provided enough illumination to make visible, by refraction, a series of coloured images etched onto a crystal plate, which was covered by another reflecting surface). This sort of experimentation continued throughout 1969, when Bignardi created the *Implicor* for Olivetti, in which crystal mirrors were treated so as to maintain the visibility of the reflected image; later, up until the early 1980s, the artist created multimedial systems for IBM, and around 1982-83 returned to the medium of painting. One of Bignardi’s references here were Joseph Svoboda’s works presented at international exhibitions, as one of the most important creators of luminous appliances in the second part of the 20th Century. It isn’t until the year 2000 that Bignardi returned to such practices, in an installation at the Anatomy Theatre in Bologna.

Having a sense of this creative context, we can see how the authors were interested in mounting the piece in spaces other than the theatre building, “to create a condition of total fusion between spectator and structure”. As such, “apart from modifying the common meaning of the term ‘cinema’ to take it closer to a more appropriate term describing the concept of a mobile image in a space, we would also obtain a relationship between the dynamics of the visual phenomena occurring in that space and the perceptual dynamics of the audience, who were able to watch, touch, feel and walk around the space as they wished and, as such, became part of the very structure they were invited to spectate.”<sup>4</sup>

Bignardi’s concept here corresponds to Ricci’s idea of “cinema in four dimensions”: Bignardi also recalls<sup>5</sup> a presentation evening in which Umberto Eco was present, in which he reiterated the fact that the piece wasn’t to be seen as cinema at the theatre, which Eco wrote about in the artist’s 1994 catalogue<sup>6</sup> (see document #3b, p.82). More objectively related to the performance is the *Rotor* (see documents #5a and #5b), which was designed by Bignardi but, as the artist explains, not correctly assembled – as he writes about the exhibition *Fuoco Immagine Acqua Terra*, “as I thought about the film *Motion Vision* I almost automatically found the idea for the *Rotor*, because it was a way of reinventing the cinematic image and also of denying it. I shot various nudes in motion and used a sort of animation from my drawings on Muybridge.”<sup>7</sup> The artist relates the graphed action in Muybridge to the act of drawing, and from the act of drawing to the idea of the film (where naked performers “reproduce” the drawing). Of paramount importance to Bignardi’s work here is the “fidelity” of cinema, the fact that the image carries a dose of “reality”. As Germano Celant wrote for the exhibition *Arte Povera e Im/Spazio*, “the image embraces the space, becomes space. It develops inside time and becomes cinema. It dilates across the walls and becomes architecture.”<sup>8</sup>

It was after having seen the *Rotor* at the L’Attico Gallery that Ricci asked Bignardi if he was interested in a collaboration: “that form of image-theatre contained a dilation of the previous experiences with the *Prismobile* and with the *Rotor*. This obviously generated a spectacular dimension, and in the second version presented at the Wiesbaden Museum in 1968 in an exhibition with Pascali, Mattiacci, Kounellis and Lombardo, I also added a soundtrack (...) I remember a review of the show on the ‘Frankfurter Allgemeine’ in which the journalist singled out the difference between the *Rotor* and all the other works, speaking of an audiovisual space which enveloped the viewer in a spatio-temporal hypnosis which continuously returned”.<sup>9</sup> Marco Diacono write in “BIT” in 1967 that the *Rotor* was “a piece which ran on images...”<sup>10</sup>

Bignardi also collaborated with Ricci the following year on *James Joyce*, for which he created costumes with lightbulbs along the profile of the bodies on stage, and which featured backlit plastic strips as part of the set. Also in 1968 Bignardi took part in the production of *L’Histoire du Soldat* directed by Furtwängler at the Kammeroper in Munich, and collaborated with the intermedial nights *Nine Evenings* at the Armory in New York between ’67 and ’68, which he remembers as fruitful collaborations between the art world and big industry players : “it wasn’t a question of sponsorship, but a true meeting between creators in art and in technology, with artists such as John Cage, Rauschenberg and Fahlstrom taking part – in Italy there was an abyss between these fields”.<sup>11</sup> In the same period, he took part in *Events* in Munich and in *Situazione 68* in Florence.

<sup>3</sup> From the programme notes accompanying the exhibition at the Modern Art Agency, April 1967 (see *Other Contextual Materials*).

<sup>4</sup> Umberto Bignardi, *Dinamica visiva e percettiva*, in Giuseppe Bartolucci, *Il “gesto” futurista. Materiali drammaturgici 1968-1969*, Roma, Bulzoni, 1969, pp. 161-162 (from «Bit», december 1967, n. 6, *L’illuminismo può anche essere un Aufklärung*). (See Documents # 2a and #2b).

<sup>5</sup> From a conversation between Bignardi and the author, October 2013.

<sup>6</sup> Maurizio Calvesi, Laura Cherubini, *Umberto Bignardi. Opere dal 1958 al 1993*, cit., p. 82.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 24

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 20

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 21

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

Title || Notes in the margin of a visual and sonic crushing

Author || Cristina Grazioli

Translation from Italian || Flora Pitrolo

Published in || Sabrina Galasso, *Il Teatro di Remondi e Caporossi* (Rome: Bulzoni, 1998)

Rights || All rights reserved. © Sciami 2018. Visit [term and condition](#) on sciami.com

Number of pages || pag 3 di 3

Language || ENG

DOI ||

Ricci speaks of an area of the spectator-individual which he terms “mnemonic-emotivational”, an area reachable through images which count as “actions”, “connected not by the development of a story but solely from a technical point of view; and at a first glance, these images should turn the spectator to reactions more than to feelings”. What he describes is a theatre “of vision”, which communicates through not necessarily abstract images, and which obliges the spectator to react (even through sheer boredom). These images are the product of a working process “on original materials, which signify nothing other than what they visually represent” (Doc. #1). It is clear, then, how important light is as an object of vision.