

1. ART AS A GLOBALISATION OF MEETINGS

Shōzō Shimamoto's first paintings, shown in 1946 at the *Hole Showa 21*, are called *Hole*, referring to an opening or breach. Insistence on "holes" precedes, accompanies and follows (at least up to the *Papers* of 1985) the act of foundation in Osaka in 1954 of the GUTAI group, whose name "concreteness" was suggested to Jiro Yoshihara by Shimamoto himself. The Gutai *Manifesto* of 1956, mimicking the style of similar manifestos of the Western historical avant-gardes of the early twentieth century announced among other things:

To today's consciousness, the art of the past, which on the whole presents an alluring appearance, seems fraudulent. Let's bid farewell to the hoaxes piled up on the altars and in the palaces, the drawing rooms and the antique shops. They are monsters made of the matter called paint, of cloth, metals, earth, and marble, which through a meaningless act of signification by humans, through the magic of material, were made to fraudulently assume appearances other than their own. These types of matter, all slaughtered under the pretence of production by the mind, can now say nothing. Lock up these corpses in the graveyard. Gutai Art does not alter matter. Gutai Art imparts life to matter. Gutai Art does not distort matter. (...) Granted, our works have frequently been mistaken for Dadaist gestures. And we certainly acknowledge the achievements of Dada. But we think differently: unlike Dadaism, Gutai Art is the product that has arisen from the pursuit of possibilities. Gutai aspires to present exhibitions filled with vibrant spirit, exhibitions in which an intense cry accompanies the discovery of the new life of matter.

In this and in other programme documents published in the *Gutai magazine*, the group feels the need to underline the important differences compared with *pointillisme* and *fauvism* first of all, but also in comparison with Western masters such as Da Vinci, Poussin, Rembrandt, Van Gogh, Utrillo and Dalì, names listed according to a view of the past that certainly does not aim to be chronological, but appears topological (insofar as each name indicates the "place" of a particular killing of the life of the material through form, sign and colour).

Moreover, the Buddhist *Sutta Nipāta* Canon says, "Contemplate the world as emptiness (...), always in a state of remembrance – thus spoke the Blessed One." And the "remembrance" mentioned refers to a "co-arising" or "dependent origina-

tion” of the “world as emptiness” itself, in which the events do not run along a chronological line nor can they be grasped in advance by form, meaning identity/difference because each potential figure, in its impermanent eternity, includes other possible figures - but never definitively - as it is, in turn, includable in others:

*It would take infinity to count / all the Buddha's universes. / In each dust mote of these worlds / are countless worlds and Buddhas*¹

Thanks to the efforts of Michel Tapié – the great French critic known for his association with the Informal season, having visited Japan in 1957 – the work of the Gutai group began to come into contact with European and Western art circuits. In this climate, between 1958 and 1968, Shimamoto started to grapple once again with “holes” in his *Esquisse Hole Series* cycle, where the action of the paint rubs against and consumes the layers of paper matter of the painting causing laceration or perforation. A year earlier, the artist carried out an experiment, which was defined as “concrete music” (later acquired by the Pompidou Centre Collection in Paris), in the wake of what John Cage was doing, rolling dice or tossing coins, following the teachings of the *I Ching* or the *Book of Changes*, and in close contact with the artists of the artists’ Club on East Eight Street, New York, including J. Pollock, F. Kline, M. Rothko and R. Rauschenberg.

This serves to emphasise how Shōzō Shimamoto, above all, was an artist and excellent witness in the ethopoietic essence of his *ergon*, on which hangs the possibility of inhabiting a world shared by all in a different way. A form of fruitful globalisation of creativity, in total contrast with the economic, political and cultural scenarios of today’s globalisation. This began as an extension on a global scale of Western models by now reduced to one way of thinking, beyond the meta-narrative and myths with their accompanying propaganda; it is realised as a multiplication of divisions, oppositions, exclusions and “naturalisation” procedures

¹ Buddhist text cited by G. Pasqualotto, *Estetica del vuoto. Arte e meditazione nelle culture d'Oriente*, Marsilio, Venice 1992, p. 52. Pasqualotto writes: “The Buddhist theory of impermanence does not simply mean that ‘everything passes’: once impermanence is understood in the light of the idea of emptiness, it is possible to grasp in depth the *interconnection* of temporal partitions, as well as the events that they distinguish and classify. Thus, no time partition remains separated from the others, and the various events do not remain prisoners of their assigned time partition: it could thus be said that, for Buddhism, every event is eternal, not because it lasts forever, but because it is made up of the wires of an infinite network of causes and effects that link them to past and future events” (p. 57).

to prevent any kind of otherness.² The globalisation *sub specie artis* of which Shimamoto has been for over sixty years an untiring activist in every corner of the globe, beyond any discourse of abstract syncretism or eclecticism, seeks to move towards authentic encounter. And any encounter, in the strongest sense, does not come about – despite the current scenarios of the *global* world – through preventive exclusion, nor assimilation, nor yet through “naturalisation” at any cost. But in reality it only happens in the erotic *ymballesthai* of absolute singularities – in the suspension of the anticipatory and recursive form of differentiation – each of which can only dance around each other, as in the “dance around the One” of Plotinus and Proclus, so that the harmony of the different *rhythmoi* is “invisible (aphanés)”, divinely “stronger” than any “visible harmony” (Heraclitus fr. 54).

This ethopoietic *habitus*³ can only be accompanied by a radical change in the horizon and artistic potential of the event itself. If the *poiesis* of art is what violently interrupts any kind of conversation, as P. Celan wrote, the “triple game”⁴ of contemporary art as a fundamental part of the universe of globalised communication tends to constantly and universally restore the machinery of conversation, doing everything to “avoid communication breakdown, namely the advent of the incommunicable (...), the advent of ‘absolute differences’”.⁵

Well, from the start, the actions of the Gutai Group and Shimamoto forced viewers into an exercise in acrobatics comparable to a blind leap over the irregular spaces between natural stepping stones in a stream, as happens, essentially, in the Chanoyu tradition, the ritual of the “tea ceremony” (which begins following an asymmetrical pathway of raised stones in the *rōji*, the garden in front of the tea hut). In this regard, in the 1956 second collective exhibition at the Ashiya city park, “Gutai open”, an experiment that would seem to anticipate both Western Land Art and the “constructed situation” of the International situationist, but which was at the same time also something very different, referring directly to *Kare-*

² We examined this critically in R. Gasparotti, *I miti della globalizzazione. “Guerra preventiva” e logica delle immunità*, Dedalo, Bari 2003.

³ The term is taken from Michel Foucault, cf. *Dits et Écrits 1954-1998*, Paris, Gallimard 1994.

⁴ Cf. N. Heinich, *Le Triple Jeu de l’art contemporain. Sociologie des arts plastiques*, Paris, Éditions de Minuit, 1998

⁵ M. Zanardi, *Arte al presente*, in *Kainos*, 10, 2010. Thus, for Zanardi, communications and politics machinery – according to his perceptive essay – do everything possible “‘to not repress’ the event, but to anticipate it, to promote it, control it or neutralise it through its planned production or placement in contexts that tame its appearance”. These relentless machines “fear the thought that is at work in art” and thus focus on the promotion of the *name*, which “works as a fetish that distracts from the encounter with the ‘thing’ of art.” (Ibid)

sansui (the art of arranging stones on a gravel base) – Shimamoto presented his *Please, walk on it*, which invited visitors to climb and walk precariously on a narrow and irregular pathway made up of precarious planks, each ready to fall in a different way as soon as a foot came to rest upon it...

2. GUTAI IS EVEN ZEN

The art of Shimamoto, “samurai acrobat of the gaze” (according to A. Bonito Oliva’s⁶ definition) was doubtless influenced by Zen philosophy, but, in the meantime, cannot be situated exclusively within the dimension of a mere manifestation or actualisation of Zen art in modern terms. If there is an opening up to the spirit of Zen behind Shimamoto’s work, it has to be sought and conquered anew through a most radical distancing from the tradition even though it will be lost each time. What is more, as the book of *Lin Chi* says, “If a man seeks the Buddha, he will lose the Buddha, if he seeks the Way, he will lose the Way”...

The protracted exhibitions, actions and performances that Shimamoto set up in Naples in the spring and summer of 2006 at Piazza Dante and the Academy of Fine Arts, promoted and organised by the Fondazione Morra and Rosanna Chiesi, bore the title *Gutai is even Zen*. And the first *Holes*, coming straight after the war, like those of 1954 and the later ’58-’62 series, despite their apparent similarity to the holes and cuts presented by Fontana in roughly the same period, should be read primarily as artistic manifestations of the practice of “non-obstruction” in order to experiment with the possibility of abandoning oneself to that “world of emptiness” intimately characterised by closures (*anattā*) and impermanences (*anicca*). In addition, before founding the Gutai group, Master Yoshihara had been involved in the Bokujin-kai movement, that aimed to revive the ancient art of calligraphy, and Shimamoto himself had been very much struck and influenced by this Japanese calligrapher Nantenbō who had lived across the 19th and 20th centuries, and who not only used much larger characters than traditional calligraphers, but also deliberately allowed his characters to have *nijimi* or smudges, *kasure* or fading, *tobichiri*: splashes, sprays and *tare*, dripping.⁷ The art of calligraphy – that

⁶ A. Bonito Oliva, *Shōzō Shimamoto. Samurai, acrobata dello sguardo 1950-2008*, Skira, Milan 2008. Catalogue of the exhibition dedicated to the Japanese artist held in Genoa at the Museo d’Arte Contemporanea di Villa Croce from 13th November 2008 to 8th March 2009.

⁷ L. Mango-A. Mardegan, *Intervista a Shōzō Shimamoto*, in *Shōzō Shimamoto. Samurai, acrobata dello sguardo 1950-2008*, A. Bonito Oliva (ed), *Op. cit.*, p. 137