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Volume 10, 2018

Edited by Connell Vaughan and Iris Vidmar

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The European Society for Aesthetics

Department of Philosophy

University of Fribourg

Avenue de l'Europe 20

1700 Fribourg

Switzerland

Internet: <http://www.eurosa.org>

Email: [secretary@eurosa.org](mailto:secretary@eurosa.org)

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***Experiencing the Making Paintings by Paolo Cotani,  
Marcia Hafif and Robert Ryman***

Marta Benenti<sup>1</sup>

*FINO Consortium*

Giovanna Fazzuoli<sup>2</sup>

*University of Rome La Sapienza*

ABSTRACT. In the paper we deal with the possibility that we experience creative gestures in the fruition of a specific kind of abstract paintings. For this purpose, we consider few specific, abstract works by artists Paolo Cotani, Marcia Hafif and Robert Ryman, dating back to the early 1970s. These paintings among others have been described by critics as *displaying the act of their making*, although they are all characterized by an extremely limited range of chromatic and formal features. Searching for a justification of this description, we resist the temptation to account for it in terms of the critics' knowledge about artists' intentions and working methods. We rather insist that it is grounded in the perceptual properties of the paintings and in the kind of response that they can trigger in the viewers. We therefore develop a simulative account of the creative gesture, aiming at doing justice to artists', art critics' and historians' theoretical framework, as well as to the observer's phenomenal experience.

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<sup>1</sup> Email: [martabenenti@gmail.com](mailto:martabenenti@gmail.com)

<sup>2</sup> Email: [fazzuoligiovanna@gmail.com](mailto:fazzuoligiovanna@gmail.com)

## 1. Introduction

In our paper we try to account for the phenomenally rich experience of a specific kind of abstract paintings displaying an extremely limited range of chromatic and formal features. These paintings have been described by art critics as *making their creative process visible on canvas*. In assessing the plausibility of this description, we resist the temptation to account for it in terms of the critics' knowledge about artists' intentions and working methods. We rather insist that it is grounded in the perceptual properties of the paintings and in the kind of response they can trigger in the viewers. As a result, we suggest that the perceptual experience of a creative process is potentially available to any beholder that is not provided with specific background knowledge.

For this purpose, we consider few paintings dating back to the early 1970s. We first provide the reader with contextual information about the relevant artists, the paintings themselves, and the way they have been described by art critics. We therefore propose an account based on simulation and imaginative engagement triggered by such properties. Finally, we look back at the works and test our hypothesis against their features. This allows us to suggest experimental and further practical applications of our approach. Importantly, we insist that, despite it may illuminate the aesthetic experience we can have of certain artworks, our view should not be overgeneralized. Its strength resides instead in its consistency with the works' critical discourse. Our proposal is the result of a joint venture between philosophical and art-historical perspectives.

## 2. Art Historical and Critical Framework

During the Sixties and Seventies, the tendency towards the dematerialization of the art object which characterized both the American and European stage, with the international rise of conceptual art, process-art, installation art, video and performance, contributed to the discussion around the future of the painting medium. Especially in Italy – which will be the geographical focus of our paper, along with New York City – painting was often considered obsolete. Many abstract painters carried out an investigation into the fundamental elements of painting and their mutual relations through the act of painting itself: an analysis and deconstruction of the medium and discipline of painting aiming at reviving the latter by, ideally, returning to its “degree zero.” For many, this was an interim period of work, a way to rediscover painting through a systematic and often solitary practice, in order to move on towards new and unexplored directions.

Notwithstanding the incredible variety of its outcomes, this attitude towards painting often resulted in body of works conceived as systematic groupings presenting very reduced expressive features, excluding all emotional, symbolic and metaphorical references, and forcing the viewer into a situation of visual constraint. Within this framework we have decided to focus on a few works dating back to the late 1960s and early 1970s by three international artists – namely Paolo Cotani, Marcia Hafif and Robert Ryman – that will later serve as test bench for our thesis.

By the mid Sixties, New York based artist Robert Ryman had begun to develop discrete series of works, such as the *Winsors* (1965-1966). Ryman loaded a two-inch brush with white paint and pulled it across the

unprimed support from left to right until the brush was bare. The same gesture was always repeated beginning just under the previous white stroke of paint whose bottom edge served as demarcation for the next. The last stroke would more or less coincide with the bottom edge of the painting. The resulting traces thus appear almost equivalent in width and length, yet uneven with regards to the application of paint, its materiality and thickness, in relation to the canvas. In this view, the latter was no longer considered a mere support. Instead, the ground becomes significant per se: its color, texture and reaction to paint – always white in color – are exposed to the viewer.

A few years later, during the first half of the 1970s, Rome based artist Paolo Cotani's *Passages* (1972-1974) present the viewer with stratifications of acrylic paint that is accumulated on the canvas with repetitive and potentially unended gestures running from one edge to the other and covering the entire surface – a surface whose dimensions relate to the maximum extension of the artist's arm. His later works entitled *Elastic gauzes* (1974-76) elaborate on the *Passages* presenting various degrees of thickness determined by layers of superimposed elastic bandages. These are painted prior to being stretched and wrapped around the frame and, finally, color is spread in a homogeneous stratum over the whole surface. These works are characterized by a controlled artistic gesture, pushed to the point of its maximum extension, in order to literally construct the painted surface – i. e. the canvas. Thus, they focus both on the materiality of the painted surface and on the process of its making. An internal rhythm is also determined by the incessant interplay between background and foreground: the focus of our gaze constantly moving from one layer to the other as we

attempt to define its figure-ground relationship.

Marcia Hafif was born in Pomona, California, and moved to Rome, Italy, in the early Sixties. She was thus influenced by Italian painting and theory and took this cultural background with her to the States in the 1970s. After completing her Master's degree at Irvine, California, Hafif moved to New York to explore painting. In New York she elaborated new painting criteria, namely an operating method which appears to relate in some way to those previously mentioned: a medium pencil was used to trace short vertical marks on a sheet of drawing paper starting in the upper left, working across and down to finish at the bottom of the paper surface. The repetitive marks rhythmically scan the surface with a pregnant and continuous pattern determined by a regular movement of the hand. A similar gesture was later experienced with more traditional painting tools: a brush and acrylic paint. Fourteen colors were chosen to represent a standard palette, each applied in vertical strokes covering the front surface and leaving a margin at the edges. The work's title refers to the date on which the actions took place, thus excluding any external reference.

The illustrated works have been described by critics as focusing on the process of their making. Unlike other paintings where forms and colors play a major expressive role, these works limit their palette to focus on their material and process-based features. Moreover, by eliminating all emotional, symbolic and metaphorical references, they signify painting per se.

According to several critics of the time, the painter's creative processes are said to be perceivable as displayed on canvas. Naomi Spector states that Ryman's *Winsors* "had no meaning outside the paint and the

supporting material and the history of the process of the application.” (Spector 1974, p. 9). Within the framework of an exhibition displaying works by Cotani and Hafif, amongst others, Marisa Volpi states that the exhibited works “shift the viewer’s focus towards the mental and artisanal processes through which the works have been conceived and realized” (Volpi 1973, *our translation*). Claudio Cerritelli describes the superimposed layers of paint in Cotani’s *Passages* as “the sum of subsequent passages relating to the real time of the pictorial process.” (Cerritelli 1985, p. 32). According to the aforementioned critics, these paintings appear to make the process of their creation available to the observer. How can this be?

### **3. Our Hypothesis**

One may try to account for the idea that we can see the creative process in the paintings by appealing to all sorts of contextual information: a process-based approach to the visual arts that is typical of the period; knowledge of the techniques employed; acquaintance with the critical discourse; artists’ statements about their works, and so on. Yet, reducing the explanation to a matter of background, contextual knowledge and expertise risks to undermine the role played by the specific perceptual structure of these works. Therefore, our effort will be to focus on such perceptual structures in order to strengthen the idea that they can, to a relevant extent, convey the experience of a creative process. More specifically, we believe that, in virtue of their perceivable features, these paintings trigger in imagination the simulation of their alleged creative process.

### 3.1. Simulation Theories

Our hypothesis it thus that these paintings manage to trigger in viewers a mechanism of simulation such that they can experience the artworks as being the result of some creative processes. Unsurprisingly, this hypothesis relies on so-called “Simulation Theories” of mindreading that, although very widespread, deserve a brief introduction.

Common sense has it that, in many circumstances, we represent others’ mental states by putting ourselves *in their shoes*. Simulation Theory develops this intuition into a theory of *mind-reading*. According to this approach, we understand what’s on others’ mind thanks to our capacity to inwardly simulate their mental states. Simulation processes can be triggered by others’ behaviours, expressions, movements, as well as by the beliefs one holds about them. As explained efficaciously by Shanton and Goldman in an overview about simulationist approaches:

ST (in its original form) says that people employ imagination, mental pretense, or perspective taking (‘putting oneself in the other person’s shoes’) to determine others’ mental states. A mentalizer simulates another person by first creating pretend states (e.g., pretend desires and beliefs) in her own mind that correspond to those of the target. She then inputs these pretend states into a suitable cognitive mechanism, which operates on the inputs and generates a new output (e.g., a decision). This new state is taken ‘off line’ and attributed or assigned to the target. (Shanton & Goldman 2010, p. 527).

Although Simulation Theory is mostly concerned with mind-reading, it has

been used to deal with numerous aesthetic issues. For instance, it plays a major role in most of Kendall Walton's theorizing: from *make-believe* to emotions in fiction (Walton 1990), from engagement with music (Walton 2008) to empathy (Walton 2015). Gregory Currie and Ian Ravenscroft mostly rely on simulation to ground theory of imagination (Currie & Ravenscroft 2002) and, more broadly, Currie is firmly convinced of the pivotal power of simulation in empathizing with people, fiction and objects (Currie 2011). Just to quote one further, less common example, in his view based on sensuous imagination, Paul Noordhof takes Simulation Theory to be the best suited to account for expressive properties of artworks (Noordhof 2008). According to these theories, simulations are triggered not only by other human beings – real or fictional – but also by inanimate objects, provided that they are experienced either as resulting from intentional activities, or as behaving “intentionally” – like animated beings do.

Thus, applications of simulation to aesthetics and aesthetic experience are neither new nor spare, so that we can peacefully rely on this model for our own present purposes. Unlike the above mentioned examples, however, ours is not intended to be an account of painting fruition in general. That is, we do not take simulation, and especially the simulation of creative processes, to be essential to all kinds of painting appreciation. Rather, we limit to apply this idea to the paintings at stake, suggesting at most that it could be extended to similar ones.

### 3.2. Two Levels of Simulation

According to its proponents, simulation can be paradigmatically a low-level or a high-level process (e.g. Goldman 2006; Currie 2011). High-level simulation is a conscious experience with a rich, integrated phenomenology that involves imagination, namely imagining to be “in the other’s shoes”. It basically consists in the capacity to adopt others’ perspectives in order to understand their reasons and intentions. Low-level simulation, instead, can operate “within the person”, which means that it can be out of personal control, inaccessible to awareness and nevertheless give rise to conscious experiences. Classical examples of high-level simulation are visualizing – the cognitive process of generating visual images – and motor imagery – the cognitive process of imagining bodily movements and actions (Currie 1995; Currie & Ravenscroft 2002; Goldman 2006). A quite common argument in favour of simulationist explanations of motor imagery is the fact that imaginative performances about bodily movements are frequently constrained by the same biochemical factors that determine actual bodily movements (Parsons, 1987, 1994; Parsons, *et al.* 1998; Goldman 2006). Low-level simulation is commonly taken to be the class of subpersonal mechanisms implementing simulation processes, that is mirroring processes. The *mirror neuron system* is usually considered the main responsible for this sort of processes (e.g. Gallese et al. 2004; Goldman 2006; Hurley 2005).

Given this preliminary distinction, we are in the position to look back at our paintings and hypothesize that perceiving the visual features that they instantiate can trigger a process of motor simulation – more specifically, a process that mimics those gestures that have or might have lead to the

realization of the paintings. The simulation process provides an integrated experience of those visual features as resulting from the simulated creative gestures, the outcome of the process being the experience of paintings as resulting from a creative activity – namely the one that has been performed in imagination.

Apparently, this hypothesis is compatible with both levels of simulation. Let us start from the subpersonal level and its neural implementation. We overtly draw on the hypothesis proposed by Freedberg and Gallese (2007), according to which:

the artist's gestures in producing the art work induce the empathetic engagement of the observer, *by activating simulation of the motor program that corresponds to the gesture implied by the trace*. The marks on the painting or sculpture are the visible traces of goal-directed movements; hence, they are capable of activating the relevant motor areas in the observer's brain. (Freedberg and Gallese 2007, p. 202, *our emphasis*).

Relying on evidences about the activation of the left premotor cortex caused by the visual presentation of handwritten letters (Knoblich *et al.* 2002 and Longcamp *et al.* 2005), Freedberg and Gallese predict that if our brains can reconstruct actions by observing their graphic outcome, then the same should hold for the experience of artworks that are characterized by the gestural traces of the artist. Some years later, Umiltà *et al.* (2012) tested this hypothesis using reproduction of Lucio Fontana's notorious *Concetti Spaziali* (Spatial Concepts) and showed the activation of the cortical motor system in the viewing of Fontana's static artwork. In the light of these

results, we believe that various characteristics of the artworks with which we are dealing speak in favour of an explanation in terms of motor subpersonal activation. This will become clearer in a while, as soon as we will analyse the artworks feature by feature. In short: as well as in the already tested case of Fontana's works, it is likely that salient perceivable properties of these paintings trigger the subpersonal activation of a simulative motor mechanism.<sup>3</sup>

Regarding higher level, conscious simulation processes, we suggest that the observation of these paintings triggers an imaginative simulative engagement in the beholder. Due to the perceptual cues on the canvas, we are lead to consciously imagine the way in which those paintings were actually realized. Our imaginings represent the stages of supposed creative processes, for they find handholds and visual confirmation in the perceptual features of the paintings.

Importantly, the imagined creative processes need not be the real ones. That is, we may undergo the imagining of creative gestures that could not correspond to the actual techniques and actions employed by artists, but a mismatch between our imagining and actual creative processes that are

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<sup>3</sup> We are currently arranging an experiment thanks to a collaboration with the Gemelli Hospital in Rome, whose aim is precisely to test motor activation in the view of these paintings. We believe that a general virtue of our analysis is that it takes in due count the consistency with the art historical context. If true, the activation of motor imagery that allegedly characterizes the fruition of these paintings would match the explicit interest for creative and material processes expressed by artists and critics. This is particularly promising in the view of further applications in the practical context of exhibitions and art teaching.

behind artworks is not necessarily detrimental to the overall fruition. Kendall Walton notices something that he generalizes to all aesthetic appreciation and that is worth mentioning here: “The action we “see” in a work may not correspond to what the artist actually did in creating it; our perception may not be veridical.” (Walton 2008, p. 228). Yet, in the context of aesthetic appreciation, this is not problematic, because the aesthetic context deals with veridicality in a specific way:

Interest in appearances regardless of their veridicality is an interest of a special and somewhat unusual kind. In many or most ordinary (non-artistic) contexts, appearances are important primarily for what they might indicate about reality [...] Aesthetic contexts are different. Appreciators notice and enjoy appearances more or less for their own sake, without necessarily even wondering whether or not things actually are as they appear. (Walton 1999, p. 37)

#### **4. Applying The Hypothesis**

We can now go back to the concerned paintings and analyze their features so as to provide substance to our hypothesis of imaginative simulation.

Ryman’s methodical testing of material possibilities is revealed on the work’s surface. The means by which Ryman uses the edge to circumscribe the pictorial activity invite us to consider the work as the evidence of a series of actions. The regular strokes of white paint help us focus on the differences characterizing each stroke as a result of the uneven pressure applied and the slips of the brush. The material characteristics of the canvas also show between the strokes, while the title of the works refers to the paint

used and thus avoids any associative reference: *Winsor* derives from Winsor & Newton, the British paint manufacturers whose products Ryman used. A temporality internal to the painting itself is thus perceived by the viewer who is immediately engaged in imagining the elemental and repetitive act of covering the visibly unprimed linen canvas with regular strokes of white paint. A before and after of the painting process is also perceived as the observer confronts the work beginning on the top left as if it were a written text – consistently with Ryman’s method of spreading paint on the canvas.

One could argue that we – i.e. the observer – could have absolutely no knowledge about the materials and tools necessary for painting and would thus not easily be engaged by such material traces of the painting process, although clearly differentiated from one another and exhibited on the painting surface. On the other hand, Marcia Hafif’s works on paper develop a rigorous working method using more common tools. Her regular marks of black graphite scan the paper surface in a manner similar to our everyday experience of writing or scribbling on paper with a pencil. The dimensions of the paper support – and consequently those of the pencil marks left by Hafif – are much larger than those commonly used. Nonetheless, we are not overwhelmed by the work’s dimensions, and are able to imagine ourselves being capable of controlling such a surface and reproducing such traces of the artist’s creative process.

Similarly, the observation of Cotani’s gauzes presents the viewer with a material stratification suggesting the temporal succession of their creation. In virtue of the textural quality of the material, at least two simulative actions are triggered. First, the visibly tense gauzes invite to simulate the action of stretching; second, being the gauzes visibly wrapped around the

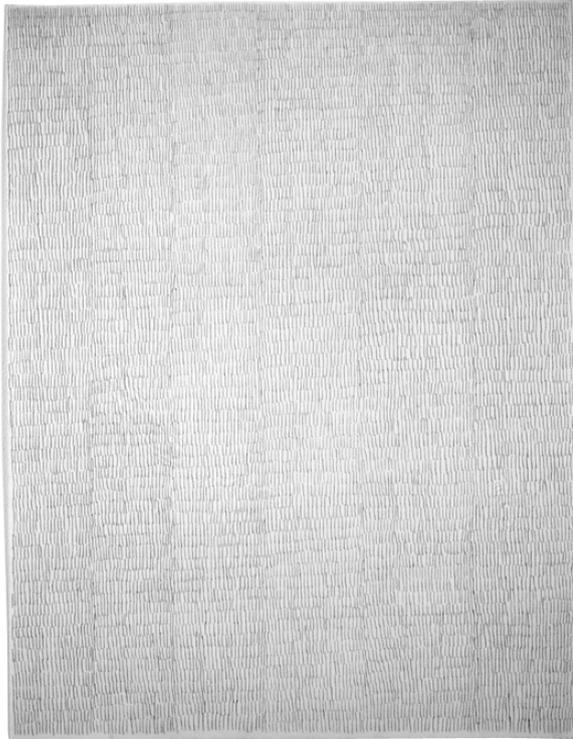
whole painting frame, the simulation involves a movement in space which ideally envelopes the entire painting-object. Such a simulation can find further appeal on the visible size of the picture frame, which relates to the extension and natural gesture of Cotani's arms. This allows for a mechanism of identification which is rooted in our bodily size and minimal capacities.

## **5. Conclusions**

In the paper we have tried to account for the possibility that we experience creative gestures in the fruition of a specific kind of abstract paintings. For this purpose, we have considered few specific, abstract works by artists Paolo Cotani, Marcia Hafif and Robert Ryman. These paintings, characterized by an extremely limited range of chromatic and formal features, have been described by critics as making their creative process visible on canvas. Far from being a metaphor, this description tells us something about the appearance of the works. As such, the "making" that is visible in these paintings is likely to be available for non-expert viewers too. Although we acknowledged the importance of contextual information in the artworks' fruition, we resisted the temptation to account for this description in terms of the critics' knowledge about the artists' intentions and working methods. We suggested that the kind of experience described is, instead, rooted in the works' perceptual features and involves the simulation of their alleged creative processes. We showed why this hypothesis is viable given the framework offered by Simulation Theory and experimental data about low-level simulation in front of static artworks. Moreover, we offered detailed descriptions of how high-level simulation could work in these

cases. We insisted that subpersonal mechanisms of mimicry – allegedly implemented by the mirror neuron system – could be responsible for imaginative processes that take place at the personal level. Viewers could accordingly be prompted to simulate in imagination those gestures that lead or might have lead to the realization of the works. Finally, we noticed that the selected paintings are particularly suitable for this kind of response thanks to their perceptual qualities, from the size of the canvas to the repetitiveness of the strokes, from the limited range of colours to the minimalism of shapes.

We think that our proposal could be a contribution to the historical and critical debate about these paintings. Namely, it could provide phenomenological as well as empirical support to critics focussing on the importance of the processes involved in the making of these works. Moreover, a perceptual approach enriched by simulation sounds like a viable strategy to make the fruition of minimalistic paintings available for broader audiences, precisely because it invites to a careful observation of basic features and to the imagining of creative processes, before appealing to critical, contextual knowledge. If empirical tests confirm that the way in which non-expert viewers tend to approach these paintings corresponds – at least to some extent – to the one we designed, fruitful strategies could be developed aimed at improving the audience's fruition of this and similar kinds of abstract paintings.



**Figure 1:** Marcia Hafif, February 16 1972, pencil on paper, 24x18 Marcia Hafif Trust



**Figure 2:** Paolo Contani Bende Elastiche (Elastic Gauzes) Gauzes and Acrylic 60 x 60 1975 Courtesy of Paolo Cotani Archive



**Figure 3:** Paolo Contani\_Bende Elastiche (Elastic Gauzes) (back side) Gauzes and Acrylic 60 x 60 1975 Courtesy of Paolo Cotani Archive

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