

## **The Perfect Weaver**

Mario Sartor, 2008

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I want to use the term “weaver” in its polysemic valence, to define an artist who died twenty-two years ago, leaving loving memories and a deep feeling of nostalgia among those who knew him as a friend and who appreciated him as the creator of extraordinary works of art.

Edoer Agostini was born in 1923 in San Martino di Lupari, a small country village to the north of Padua. He spent there most of his life and left us – all too suddenly and all too soon – in 1986, shortly after being invited to the XLII Biennale di Venezia, dedicated to “Art and Science”. By a curious irony of life, he met his death just before the opening of the Biennale.

After attending what we now call compulsory school and some training courses, he entered the world of work and got immediately involved in a large number of social activities. This went on until the Second World War, when he was recruited as a soldier. He was soon taken prisoner, on September 8, 1943. He was held prisoner in Dachau, then in Danzig, Poland, and finally he was deported to Russia. He was one of the “lucky” few who in 1947 managed to go back to Italy, after surviving all sorts of hardships and dangers in a long journey through innumerable horrors. He never talked about that. The dignity of the language and a reticence in talking about what was utterly indescribable left to him only few, scant words, which could be eloquent only to those who had the sensitivity and the desire to understand.

Among the things of his past, which Agostini talked about, one in particular was strictly connected to his art. During the long journey back from Russia he was able to get himself something to eat by stopping at country izbas and drawing portraits of dead people in exchange for some food (This was an old habit dating back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, which was still widespread in many cultures, including ours.). His portraits were essential, just like him. It was typical of him to go to the heart of things, to seize their distinctive facets, their revealing traits, their distinguishing features.

His skills at drawing – a talent not yet ripe of which he was still unaware, something which was not yet art, but a prelude to expressing concepts, to defining the outline of a world – remained latent and undeveloped, until he went back to Italy and life required that he put an end to that chapter and started on a new path. Not by forgetting his past, but by making a new plan for his future.

He returned to his social commitment in different fields. He expressed his sense of solidarity by devoting his time to politics, to the union, to charity. This solidarity led him to start a manufacturing activity, to give work to a large number of women in his area. He opened a textile factory, which he managed with some success in his youth and as an adult.

His deep knowledge of warp and weft and of the geometrical patterns which give fabrics their own rhythm, became (not by chance, I believe) one of the fundamental factors introducing Agostini to Constructivist art, in a progression of inner and scientific understanding. This scientific approach had developed and spread in the second decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century from the Russian Constructivism. It was a question of recognizing, within the matter, its infinite combinatorial possibilities and rhythmic elements, which also had a lot in common with the mathematical values inherent in the music he loved.

Art was for Agostini a long meditation on doing, perceiving, and seeing, on modifying reality and therefore on the act of constructing: from an illusion of naturalism to a skilful construction – modulated, rational, highly intellectual and, in its own way, deeply poetical. The ensuing anti-naturalism, common to all forms of optical art, was generated by that lenticular, even microscopic observation of the matter. It was the result of a scientific assumption, which chose the infinitely small as its object of observation, and saw in structures, relations and recurrences a new perspective of development for art, and even a paradigm for social optimism, for a Utopian vision which accompanied the history of the Western world until the Eighties. It was therefore the prospect of dealing, not only with a new artistic project with thousands of speculative variables cherished by all the Constructivist artists, but also the prospect of contributing to the progress of our civilization, through an industrial progress which was thought of (in a quite naïve way, as we could add with hindsight) as linear and unlimited. That was an artistic season which for some artists had a strong ideological charge, for others a human charge, just as strong and valuable.

Agostini understood, in a Galilean way, that is in a rational way, that it was a question of methodology. While investigating the laws of nature, he sensed their correspondence with the syntax of constructing. Creativity consisted in organizing the lemmas of this syntax not in a specious system, but in an organism which was logic and in working order. It consisted in weaving a discourse. Like in the *Dialogues Concerning the Two Chief World Systems* by Galileo, Agostini answered a hypothetical Simplicio that the new science – that is, the new art – was able to, and had to, project itself towards a form of understanding and of representation which used a mathematical language and geometrical forms, functions and relations.

But this approach to reality had a structure which could not be separated from a dynamic and creative aspect, whose expansions were

equivalent to the inventive fertility and the poetic power of the artist. Agostini, who was not an ingenuous scholar, modelled his own graphic, chromatic, plastic alphabet, according to a personal and recognizable style. His style, based on specialist intuitions which also contributed to his artistic growth, aimed at creating forms and volumes, optical illusions, chromatic ambiguities, iconic instabilities, which Umberto Apollonio would later define as the “vibratility of a rhythmic process”.<sup>1</sup> So, Agostini the artist shifts the question to the field of visual perception, and finds an artistic answer to it. The ensuing representation was the outcome of the simultaneous concurrence of conceptual elaborations and emotional aspects, which guided the artist towards the end result, after considering manifold creative potentialities. Having caught this essence, it was a question of methodology and of sensitivity to transfer into an artistic product a research within a field of open experimentation.

This is a mature approach to a refined and highly intellectual form of art – and such was Constructivist art in the course of the last century, reaching even to the present day, despite some tired obsessions – and it is to be considered as a slow but steady ripening process of Agostini’s personality. Only his modesty held him back from a wider celebrity, and he rarely went beyond his sphere of fellow artists and art critics.

Yet, if we look into another aspect of Agostini as a great weaver, we will soon discover his deep and well-established relations with painters and sculptors of Abstract art and more precisely Constructivist art and with their ideas on making art. Agostini soon got in touch with the artists of Gruppo N in Padua and of Gruppo T in Milan, as well as with the Argentinian artists of GRAV (Groupe de Recherche d’Art Visuel) and with the German artists of Gruppe Zero. But, at the end of the Fifties, Agostini was already following a path of experimentation, Constructivist, geometric and rhythmic experimentation, which seemed to be linked to Abstraction-creation and to *Arte concreto-invencción*. With or without being fully aware of that, Agostini was following a route which was in line with Mondrian’s and Kandinsky’s experimentations, touching (accidentally, I think) on the original and emarginated experiences of *Arte Madí* and of the other Argentinian artists of the “*Manifiesto invencionista*”. In Argentina, artists like Gyula Kosice and Carmelo Arden Quin, together with other brilliant and unconventional artists, had introduced a new and provocative way of making art, not only by breaking with the existing representative schemes, but also by inventing new cognitive approaches. The painting distorted its quadrangular shape into a polygonal and irregular shape, so that it could become a suitable container for matters which, being disorderly, required different forms.

It is a bit surprising that an atypical artist like Agostini, who never attended an Academy of Art or a school of architecture, can be so fascinated by Constructivist art, whose instruments he soon comes to master. Agostini reveals deep speculative skills in working on forms and rhythms, and extraordinary skills in eurhythmic orchestrations, not deprived of some intentional dissonance.

For Agostini – and for all the artists who dedicated themselves to optical and kinetic art between the Seventies and the Eighties – it was not only a question of devising skilful chromatic effects, but also of working with a variety of materials with the infinite patience of a craftsman – paper, wood, ceramics, PVC, and so on – in order to achieve *trompe-l’œil* optical effects. These optical effects are only the most striking (and maybe the most ingenious) aspect of a procedure based on very sophisticated calculations and an extremely refined sensitivity for abstract forms. Optical illusions make us lose ourselves into their depths, trying to find where their interlacing warp and weft lead; they make us search for the thickening of shadows and the brightening of light, in an interplay which reveals a skilled mastery of forms, a research and study implying rational analysis and great responsiveness to the vibrations of light. Agostini’s research was a strong combination of Max Bill’s and Maldonado’s works on the one hand and Vasarély’s and Capogrossi’s on the other. But, Agostini moved one step further, in a dialectical relationship with many other artists, who were his travel companions, who admired him and were admired by him, who were active interlocutors, especially those belonging to Gruppo N and GRAV. This dialectical relationship led him to give his geometrical forms a plastic and pictorial three-dimensional effect, acting like a patient craftsman with his chisels.

With about two hundred works of art – paintings, relief paintings, ceramics, columns, prints – in about thirty years of mature production, Agostini has left a distinguishing mark in the field of geometric abstraction.

At the end of paths of research in which contemporaneity was highly regarded and was intended as a spur and as a measure of value, the originality of Agostini’s achievements was proved not only by his unrivalled weaving skills, but also by that interplay and interlace of geometric forms which often suggested solid structures, as light and delicate as lace. As El Lissitzky liked to say about new artists, Agostini had become a “builder of a new universe of objects”. His aiming at a rigorous methodology, his mastery of techniques, and his unquestionable talent, all contributed to making of this craftsman-artist and philosopher of forms a creator, who invariably approached a problem and offered one or more solutions.

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<sup>1</sup> U. Apollonio, *Arte e didattica*, catalogue of an art exhibition, Palazzo Agostinelli, Bassano del Grappa, Assessorato alla Cultura / Museo Civico, 1987, p.24.

The modularity of Agostini's composition required a high geometrical precision in his personal representations. He distilled this modularity from a scientific analysis of reality, demonstrating therewith a great mastery of techniques, which still generates our wonder. This is because he never lapses into weary repetition or mere intellectual pleasure, unlike other artists of his generation, who continued to work, although they had lost their creative power.

In time, art became a dominant part of Agostini's life, and gradually replaced any other activity. His artistic commitment was also in organizing and creating art exhibitions. He often took part to these exhibitions as an artist, but he is especially remembered by all those artists who admired him and who got in touch with him, for his "weaving skills" in gathering together artists like Julio Le Parc, Hugo De Marco, Horacio García Rossi from Argentina, Yvaral from France and Francisco Sobrino from Spain; or Alberto Biasi and Manfredo Massironi from Padua, Heinz Mack, Otto Piene, Günter Uecker from Düsseldorf; and in keeping in touch with Bruno Munari and Max Bill, Jesús Rafael Soto and Carlos Cruz Díez.

This international and intercontinental, European and Latin-American dimension is the most interesting expression of his organizational work. It now appears as a clear manifestation of an intrinsic curiosity, strong and uninhibited, which clashes with the apparently local dimension of the man. Due to his life circumstances, Agostini never crossed the borders of Europe. Nevertheless, he became well-known and respected even in America, as proved by the interest of many collectors.

Thanks to his organizational work and relations, Agostini's home town became for many years a centre (and not a minor one) for culture and art, for art exhibitions and debates on art. The surprising climax came in 1981, with the opening of a Museum for Contemporary Art in San Martino di Lupari – abstract, constructivist, optical, kinetic art, as it is commonly called. Not only is this museum one of the many surprises of Italian provinces, but it is also one of a very few examples (probably the only one in those years) of a collection of art pursued with rationality and determination, a place likely to become a real centre for culture (if only there had been a political interest in that). The collection comprises works of art donated by artists of international renown: Agostini, Biasi, Bonalumi, Bill, Casula, Chiggio, De Marco, Facchin, Finzi, García Rossi, Landi, Le Parc, Marcolli, Massironi, Morellet, Pianezzola, Presta, Scarpa, Sobrino, Soto, Stein, Tasca, Varisco, Vasarely, Yvaral e Zavagno, and a large number of other artists, from Italy and abroad. Agostini's museum was an involuntary monument to himself, and an invaluable gift to his town.

Here emerges another aspect of Agostini as the "perfect weaver": a man of culture, enthusiastic and aware of his times, determined and generous, always ready to accept a challenge. The challenges he accepted could only be judged as thoughtless, if not insane, by the majority of the people living in the Italian provinces, who in those decades were stubbornly pursuing a quite disorderly economical development, totally lacking in a clearly defined cultural project. But those challenges, set in a wider, international context of artistic research, are almost a prophetic anticipation of the growing need of contemporary people for a deeper understanding of the different forms of living, inhabiting, producing.

The forms created by Agostini have nothing in common with those images produced by our computers through complex data processing: images that are intrusive, ordinary and cheap, but devoid of the tiniest creative flair.

In 1986, the year of this death, Agostini wrote: "I firmly believe that a statement of principles on how to be a contemporary artist should concern, first and foremost, how to be a man. As for me, I consider myself 'a man of my own age'. So, in my attempts to produce contemporary art I want to be 'an artist of my own age', with all the implications this may have".<sup>2</sup> This was more than a spiritual will. Seen from the perspective of his whole life, which was coming to its end, this was also a concise and truthful way of considering the whole of his existence.

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<sup>2</sup> E. Agostini, in *Arte e didattica*, *op. cit.*, p. 24.