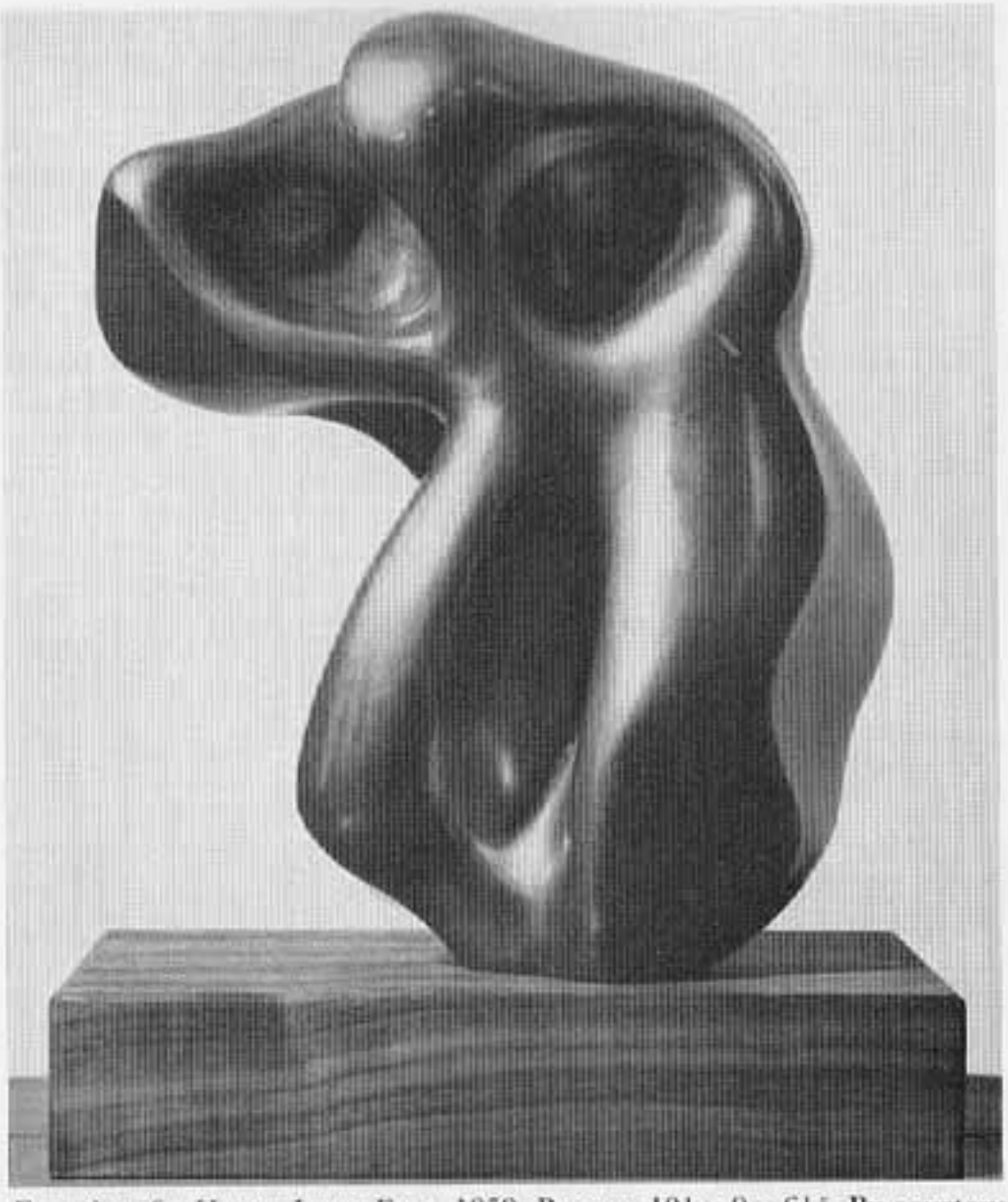


Evocation of a Human Lunar Form, 1959. Bronze, $10\frac{1}{2} \times 9 \times 6\frac{1}{2}$". By courtesy of the Sidney Janis Gallery, New York

Ptolemy III, 1961. Bronze, $79\frac{1}{2} \times 44 \times 31$". Collection: Galerie Denise René, Paris



EUGENIO CARMI: THE VALUE OF THE TEMPORARY

UMBERTO ECO

I.

In attempting to introduce this review of Eugenio Carmi's recent work with a theoretical reflection, the first author that comes to my mind is Walther Benjamin, whose essay on *The Work of Art in the Age of its Technical Reproducibility* (Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit), written in 1936, only now reveals its pertinence (at the time, it was merely prophetic).

Benjamin perceived as an initial shock the advent of photography. With photography, the figurative work of art became reproducible. Not in the sense that a photograph reproduces a picture, but in the sense that the photograph, as a picture, does not have an archetype, a unique original. Every copy of a photograph is the original. But there no longer being an "original" original, one we must not destroy if we do not want to lose our physical, historical, magical contact with the work of art itself, something that had always been the principal aspect of every work of art has disappeared. Benjamin calls this something the "aura": a mystical—or magic—halo that the veneration and fetishism of admirers raised around that one object which the artist had produced with his own hands, and of which all reproductions were nothing but pale copies. It was of no importance that these copies might be as perfect as the original; the original was wrapped in a sort of prestige, a fundamental value, so that it alone breathed the miraculous air of the moment of creation.

The modern gallery and museum are based on this principle. The collector of olden times (take, for example, the treasures of the Duke de Berry or Charles IV of Bohemia—or even earlier, the Roman patricians) was interested primarily in having something "rare" and "unique". Whether it was the work of a goldsmith, a statue, a unicorn's horn or the skull of Saint John the Baptist was of little importance; it was enough that it was the only one of its kind available.

The modern collector, since the times of the Renaissance lord and Napoleon, has had a clearer idea about the difference between a work of art and a curiosity; but his attitude has not changed. The work of art is important because it is beautiful, but it is sought after not so much to be admired as to be possessed exclusively. People visit a museum primarily for the satisfaction of admiring a unique piece which everyone talks about and which can be seen nowhere else. A modern collector will probably tell you that he wants to own a painting primarily because it is beautiful; but try telling him that his De Chirico, which he admires so much, is not a De Chirico. All his esthetic enjoyment will vanish; in part because his little accumulated capital has become valueless. The myth of authenticity renders his esthetic enjoyment inauthentic.

The dadaists had indeed already attempted to destroy this sacral halo that dominates the work of art, putting, for example, a mustache on the Gioconda. But the Gioconda with a mustache itself became a unique piece and is today an object of veneration. Because it constitutes the magical and unique expression of a gesture against magical and unique expressions. Protest against Value itself acquired a Value. The difficulty in separating esthetic value from economic value is based on the fetish of uniqueness.

The whole battle of contemporary art has been aimed at stripping this Value of its myths. The artist broke up and dissociated the image of Man (the temple of the Divinity! *Les demoiselles d'Avignon* is a terrible insult to God!); he experimented with new ways of perceiving Space and Time (which had been understood as eternal forms of things); he offended and reconstructed Nature . . . But not for long. Man, Nature, Space, and Time, dissociated, broken up, deformed, were incarnated in objects that in their turn became the temple of Value. These objects went into the Museums, and the cycle began again. Today, if they do not move directly into the Museum, the Gallery functions in its stead. The Gallery is the antechamber of the Museum; in the Gallery, the art object is presented as a candidate for eternity. The market sets to work to confer an economic value on it; the object passes through the hands of two or three collectors, increasing in price, like a stock too much in demand on the market, and when its eco-

nomic value has reached a certain height, almost by magic, its esthetic value is confirmed. At this point, the doors of the Museum are flung open.

Why are the impressionists great? Ask the man in the street and he will tell you, "because at the last auction a Renoir brought in a billion lire". But why did it bring in a billion? Because it was "beautiful", certainly, but primarily because it was "unique"; once it disappeared there would be no replacement. The genius of humanity had been incarnated for a single moment in a fragile physical body, exposed to the corrosion of time, chemical and atmospheric agents. To save it, and since it has been saved, it must have an immense price.

If we think about it, we shall see that this phenomenon has always concerned only the figurative arts. No one has ever asked himself whether the *Divine Comedy* is less beautiful simply because there are innumerable copies on the market. Or more exactly, the enthusiasm of a bibliophile for a manuscript or rare copy has never been confused with the love of a refined and sensitive reader. Nor have we experienced particular neuroses on the part of lovers of architecture; the architectural object is used, consumed, rebuilt, restored, added to, retouched, without scandalizing anyone in particular, except the historian and the protector of monuments. *Hamlet* becomes no less beautiful if we discover that its author is not Shakespeare, but Marlowe or Francis Bacon; and we can enjoy reading the *Odyssey* even though we know it was not written by the same author as the *Iliad*. But we destroy a De Chirico when we learn that it is not by De Chirico.

Interest in the rare and precious object is reasonable and natural; there is nothing morbid about it. But the point is that the whole history of the criticism, trade, collection and enjoyment of art has been dominated by this one aspect, pushing all other values into the background. Thus the esthetic values have been subordinated to a value that is, in the last analysis, economic, since the process of attributing value to the scarcest objects on the market is basically an economic process. On this process, the prestige of gold as a universal equivalent is based; because of this same process, produce is destroyed to keep prices from falling. What difference is there between the merchant who destroys an over-abundant coffee crop and the artist who destroys the plates of his print to maintain the value and rarity of the few numbered copies? Only one: that the coffee merchant does his destruction secretly, while the artist publicizes it to reassure the collector. The fact that we have lost the habit of considering this attitude immoral stands as proof that our sense of art has been deeply corrupted by economic practice.

In recent times, artists have become aware of this distortion. The sit-ins organized by artists at exhibitions where they were supposed to show their paintings are evidence that the artists are trying to protect their works and their activities from the iron laws of a market that by now has but few points of contact with art itself. But these artists that sit in at exhibitions and *Biennali* do not then have the courage to refuse the offers of galleries (nor could we expect them to commit professional suicide). They express discomfort, but they continue to produce unique pieces for the galleries, which the laws of the market, not the laws of art, will make "valuable".

II.

What makes the "unique" work of art absurd is the very pace with which forms in the contemporary world follow one upon the other and are consumed. The artist of the past copied an unchangeable nature, which had at least as much chance of remaining unchanged as the painting that copied it and the rules of perception through which men would understand both. But in our century, the artist pursues a series of changing images that are part of an industrial landscape in perpetual formation, and the painting does not aim so much at copying objects as at restoring them in a context that judges them, in a deformation that debates them. When telephones are no longer used, what possibilities of communication will be left to Oldenburg's monstrous soft telephone, which ironically considers the universe of telephones, monsters of our daily lives.

While much of the art of the past found its initial pretext in the surrounding world and went on to invent an autonomous universe, the universe of the work itself, contemporary art "converses" with the landscape that inspires it. A Poussin landscape is still comprehensible even if the nature that inspired it has long since disappeared; but the value of a Pop painting reproducing an advertisement, a road sign, an object, lies precisely in the relationship between the painting and the object deformed or reproduced. We cannot understand Lichtenstein without comic strips, Arman without automobile graveyards, and the huge junk heaps that industrial civilization creates on its outskirts. And it is even difficult to understand the universe of abstract art, from Mondrian to Vasarely, without reference to the problems of perception and to the forms that today's world has continually set before its inhabitants. In a certain sense, contemporary art has many points in common with the *comic* art of all ages. We know perfectly well that we can understand Aeschylus better than Aristophanes and Racine better than Molière; and this because the comic develops its message with a particular reference to contingencies and thus appears more intimately tied to a particular society, way of thinking, epoch. The close relationship between contemporary art and the world about which, and with which, it speaks makes its products more perishable, ready to disappear with the landscape to which they refer.

III.

Crisis of the "unique" object and crisis of the "eternal" object. To these two characteristics that dominate the artistic activity of today, we must add a third: the crisis of a certain notion of manual and artisan labor. Anyone who visited the "Cybernetic Serendipity" exhibition in London (held at the Institute of Contemporary Art from July to October 1968) will have seen how electronic machines are capable of programming and executing many objects similar to those produced by contemporary art. This does not mean that the machine can perform the work of the artist without difficulty and by itself, but rather that today the work of the artist can be carried out with the aid of machines. An art that hinges on the repetition of visual patterns, on situations of interplay, on the invention of new configurations, or on movement, can find something more than just an aid in the machine; it can find a new material with which to work, just as the fifteenth-century painter found in oil colors a medium that changed the very way of understanding forms, light and the physical consistency of the artistic object.

In a certain sense, the contemporary artist, starting from his experience with new materials (iron, resins, plastics, lights), has gradually discovered new ways of working these materials; and, starting from an investigation of the civilization of machines understood as the "object" of artistic invention (industrial civilization as seen by the futurists or the dadaists, by Pop painters, by the authors of assemblages, etc.) has slowly discovered machines as the "subject" of invention, or, at any rate, as a new channel of communication.

IV.

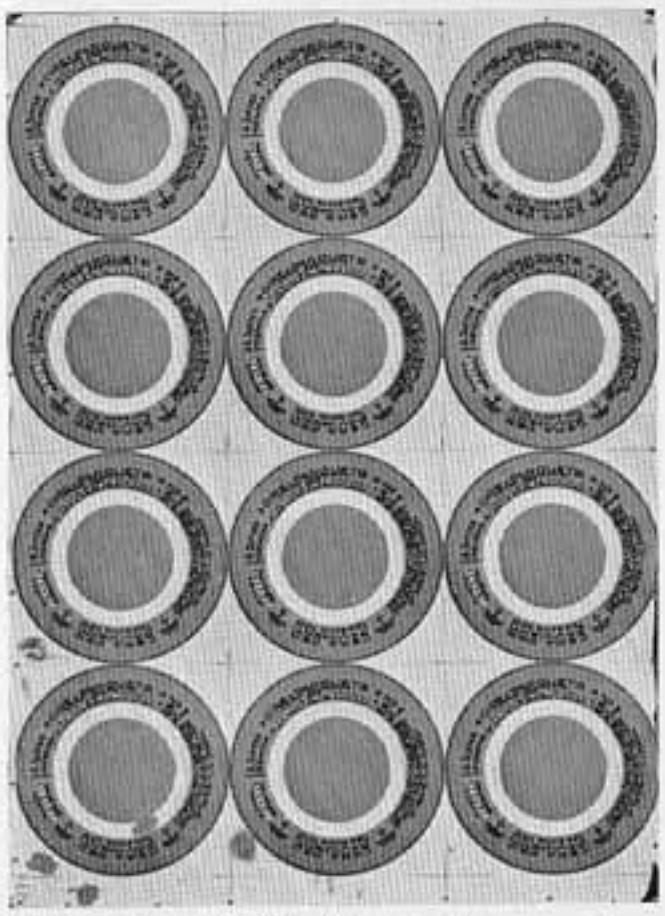
Eugenio Carmi's work can be situated at the point where these various problems and tendencies of contemporary art cross, come together and clash.

I believe that on his driver's license and passport, Carmi is listed as a painter; and until 1962, he was a painter, although he "painted", as he paints today, with other materials than colors and brushes. On the side, he worked as an advertising designer and graphic consultant for a large industry. He could have earned his living designing images for the industrial world and continued his own activity as a painter, without any attempt to tie the two activities together. He could have designed placards, folders and posters for economic reasons, continuing on his own to produce "unique" pieces to sell in the galleries with other materials.

But in 1962, we find him in a machine shop instructing a group of metal workers and handling a welding torch. He was taking part in the now historical Spoleto operation to populate a city remote in time and space with huge metal structures. Carmi was not alone at Spoleto; he had been one of the inventors and animators of the initiative.

And yet Spoleto still did not represent a clear break with the traditions of modern art. Spoleto became like a huge gallery; the works were unique and the artists, even if they directed teams of workers (and hadn't the Renaissance masters done just the same?) still worked according to the artisan techniques of always. They made a contribution of images to modern civilization, but it was still a work anchored to the rules of craftsmanship of the past.

In 1963, Italsider, the company with which Carmi was working as artistic consultant, published a book entitled *I colori del ferro* (The Colors of Iron). This book includes works by Burri, Kemeny and many other artists, but the most interest-



12 Red Circles, 1964. Lids of floor-wax tins, 74.5 × 65 cm



Algeria 1962. Iron and stainless steel sculpture, 200 × 150 × 50 cm. Photographed at Spoleto by Ugo Mulas

ing part is that which reproduces, as if they were works of art (according to the technique of the *objet trouvé*, in any event), industrial waste, scorched pieces of tin, scrap iron and piles of junk, where time, the weather and traces of processing have embroidered forms and colors much like those of the great masters of the *informel* and of action painting. In a certain sense, the book sought in the chance products of industry the equivalent of the intentional products of art of those years. In a certain sense, it still represented an attempt to interpret industrial products in the light of artistic experience. But there was something new in the book, represented in the accompanying notes, written by a technician or an engineer, which explained how the materials had come to have their particular aspect. These notes were the same whether they referred to one of Carmi's works or a chance mass of metal waste. And in the light of these explanations, the work appeared in all its "beauty". Its esthetic value arose from a recognition of procedures different from those of art, but which nevertheless produced absolutely invented forms or forms worthy of having been invented.

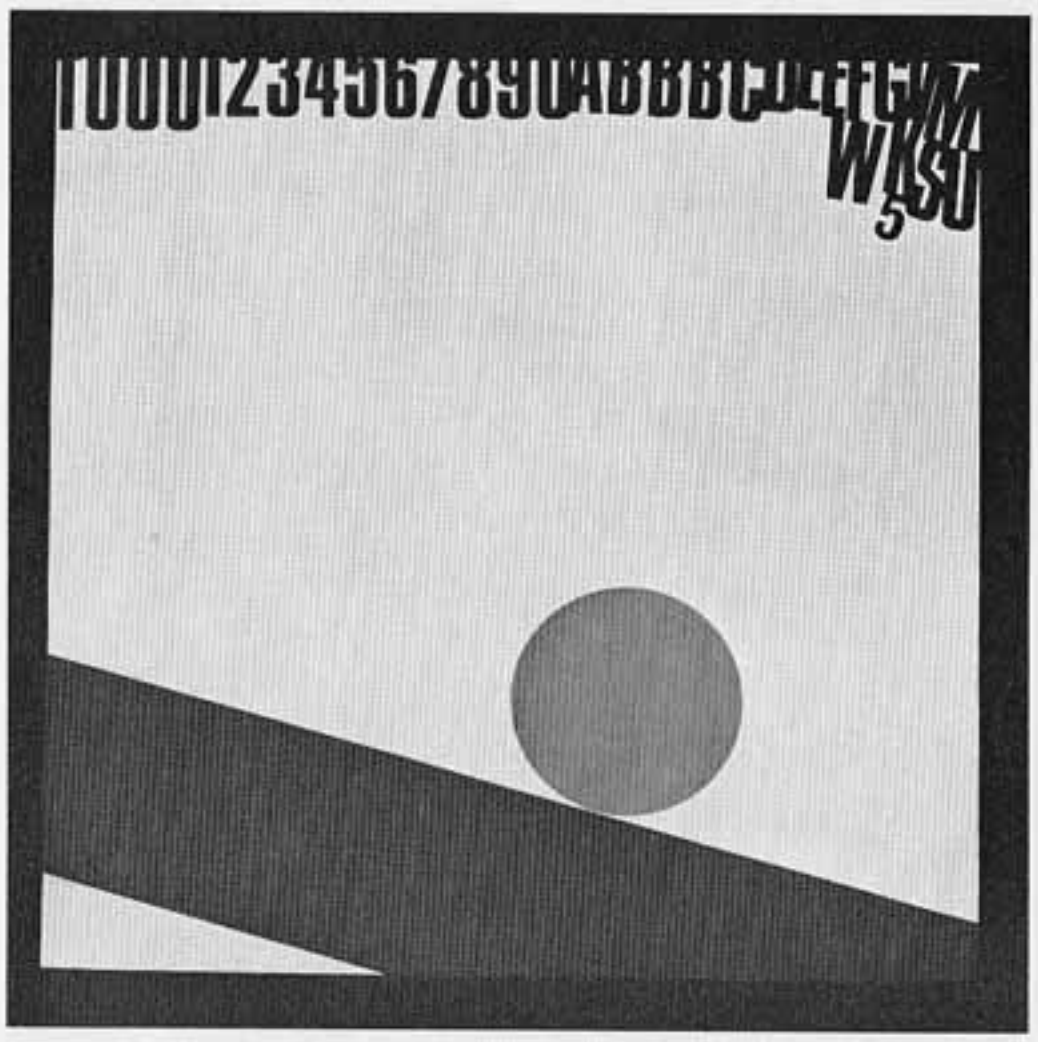
Through these experiences, Carmi began to understand the inventive possibilities of industrial processes. But not in the sense in which a designer who produces objects for industry can understand them and celebrate them. Carmi began to see the possibilities of exploiting industrial procedures to produce objects that were not "usable", but that succeeded in saying something about our relationships with the world of production, either ironicizing it or grasping its "contemplatable" elements—those elements in which commonplace forms could open up new horizons to our imagination.

In the same year, Carmi discovered his "tins". These are lithographed bands of tin-plated metal coming from various print shops, originally intended for use as containers for tomato paste or such, and "trial sheets" on which the printer tried out his colors, often going over the same surface more than once, regardless of whether the images came out off-center, superimposed or blurred.

It is worth while analyzing more closely the result of this operation, since we can find here, in embryonic form, the sense of Carmi's successive operations. The first impression these tins give is that of being, at one and the same time, "Op" paintings (with various textures that create perceptive ambiguities) and "Pop" paintings, with a strong sense of irony towards objects in the world that surrounds us, in the same way as Warhol lines up tins of Campbell Soup. These images are useless by-products of industrial production, but Carmi saw in them certain rhythms and indications of "programming". Some of them were intentional, others the result of chance superimposition; Carmi intervened with only a few touches, joining two images, adding an auxiliary element, creating a frame . . . But he always intervened to emphasize a "seriality" that already existed from the beginning. This seriality is indeed twofold: on the one hand, the image as repetition of standard elements that recall the industrial processes and, on the other, the object itself as a repeated and repeatable piece. So repeatable that we can find many other identical ones, if only we know how to look for them.

These objects are not unique. They are derived from mass-produced material and they can be mass-produced. They can be thrown away, since in principle they are worth nothing; the author himself presents them as *scrap*. They can be touched, since even through the fingers it is fun to feel the various layers of color on the rough base material. And touching them does no harm; they can stand up under much worse. It was not by chance that in the same year Carmi founded the Galleria del Deposito. Established in an old coal warehouse, the gallery differs sharply from other galleries in that it gives little importance to exhibitions; it sells by mail order, sending its bulletin-catalogue to hundreds of potential customers. It does not belong to a dealer who builds up a "stable" of artists; it was the artists themselves, together with a few critics, who chipped in to make the initiative possible. It does not produce unique works. It produces serigraphs, prints of various kinds, and mass-produced metal objects, which can be bought at a reasonable price. The catalogue includes works by Fontana, Max Bill, Vasarely and the Genovese artists who gave the initiative its start: Carmi, Flavio Costantini, Emanuele Luzzati, and others. To take part, it is enough to join the Boccadasse cooperative and be willing to sell a work at a price within the reach of the general public, without worrying about its uniqueness.

Through the Galleria del Deposito, the public can obtain works of considerable esthetic value at quite low cost. Carmi's problem, to use his own words, is to "stimulate spiritual con-



Silkscreen print from one of the images produced by Carmi's *SPCE* shown at the Venice Biennale, 1966

sumption". His public must be able to have effective images before its eyes, images that bring to mind the universe of commonplace, daily images. And for this reason, Carmi's serigraphs reflect an obsession with the alphabet, road signs, labels, those images that surround us on all sides. But these daily images and signs are, so to speak, revisited by the painter, who frees them from their immediate utility—and from that aggressive crowding one upon the other that prevents us from even recognizing them—so that they become rhythms, invitations to visual joy. Carmi is obsessed by these images. In 1966, while Cathy Berberian was preparing her now famous composition using onomatopoetic comic strip words as vocal elements (bang, clack, slam, swoom), he followed up her vocal research with a visual study, transforming the sounds into images. The result was that delightful book *Stripsody*, where the sounds on the multicolored page bounce, vibrate, snap, scurry and explode, producing a chain reaction of synesthetic associations. Carmi is obsessed by the image, but no obsession has ever been so gay and full of joy. Carmi would like all his fellow men to be able to fill their houses with these images, and he would like to be able to turn them out in true mass production. But the market still demands a signature . . . Multiple Works, fine, but numbered and signed. Carmi has to live with his trade as a painter, and he still signs his works. But he waits only for the moment when dealers will accept them without numbering and when a public will emerge ready to replace high price with great number. He is waiting for a public that ceases to see the work of art as an economic investment rather than a simple investment of imagination. At this price he will be perfectly willing to see his public throw away his images at a certain point when it has tired of them. The world is full of images to be proposed or re-proposed.

For example, Carmi has designed fabrics for women's wear for Rudi Gernreich. The woman herself thus becomes the "carrier" of the same images that the painter invents for his projections or his multiples. It is no longer the case to speak of "applied art"; these are distinctions that for Carmi have lost all meaning. Monica Vitti now wears one of Carmi's dresses, and Carmi feels that her body is better qualified than the wall of a museum to offer a new visual opportunity to the eyes of the beholder. Carmi adds an element of mischievous *ars poetica:* museums have accustomed him to too many female nudes . . . "Now we have freed ourselves from the obsession: we are no longer interested in undressing women (as painters—he specifies), but in dressing them."

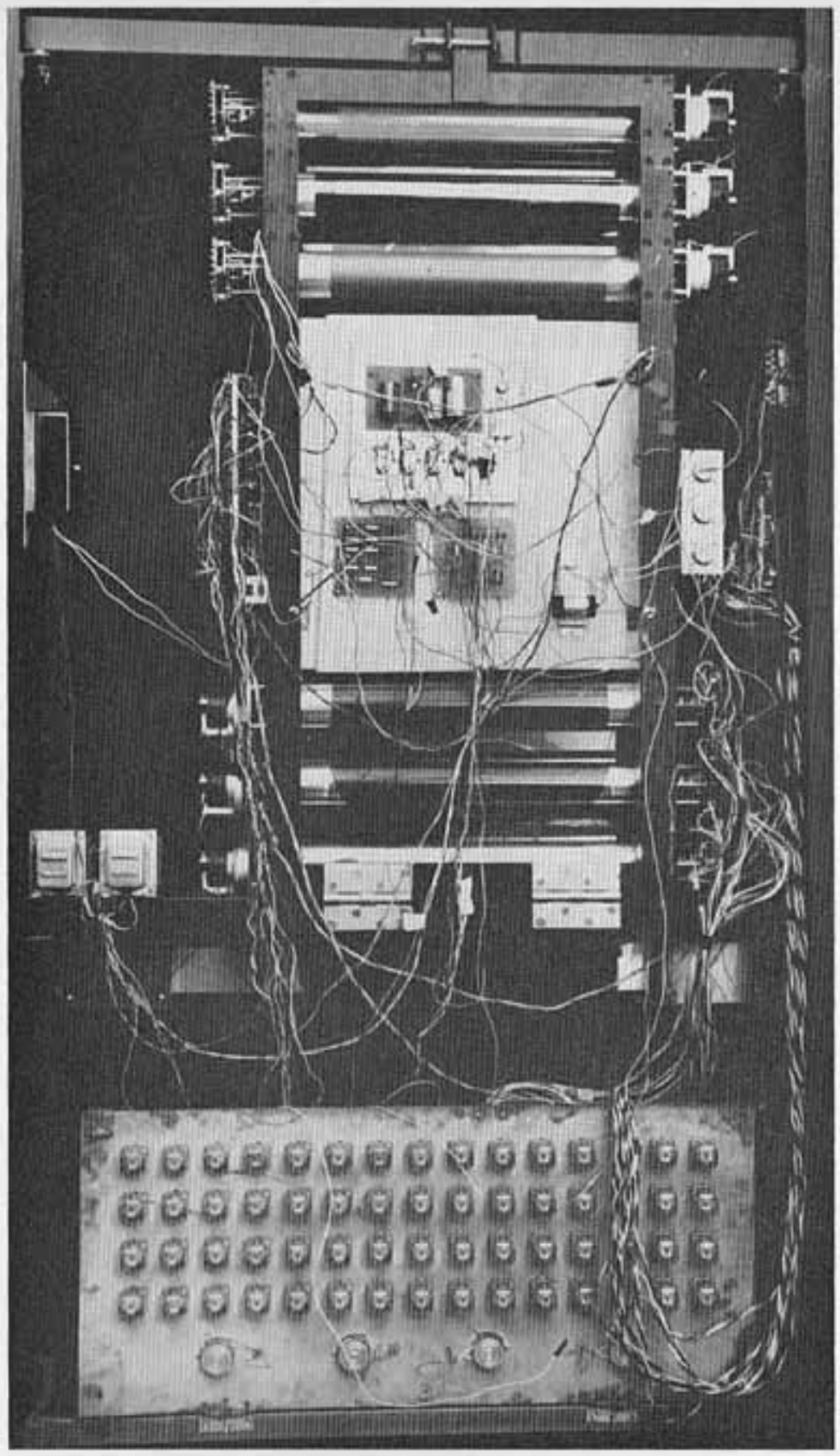
V.

Carmi is obsessed by the image: to the point of lying to himself. He says: "We must no longer care about the technique, the material with which the work is done; the structure of the image is sufficient." This is not true, and he knows it. Because he chooses the colors and the forms to be realized in serigraphy, with their thin patina in relief—which we can run our fingers over—and those to be printed on shiny tin. And in his most recent works, the 1968 multiples, he knows exactly which parts must be realized in serigraphy and which instead, work by work, must be done by hand with a brush; and he wants them on canvas, because he calculates the effect of the material on the result of the double technique he uses. But even for these canvases, which he turns out in series, he aspires to the temporary. The image of tomorrow will undoubtedly be different from the image of today, and a painting that still costs a certain sum runs too great a risk of becoming an economic possession and being used as such, even when our eyes demand different stimulations.

For this reason, in the last two years Carmi has turned to electronic computers and electromechanical means to produce mobile works in constant formation or, more precisely, generators of images that offer the spectator changing stimulations according to the surroundings and the behaviour of the public.

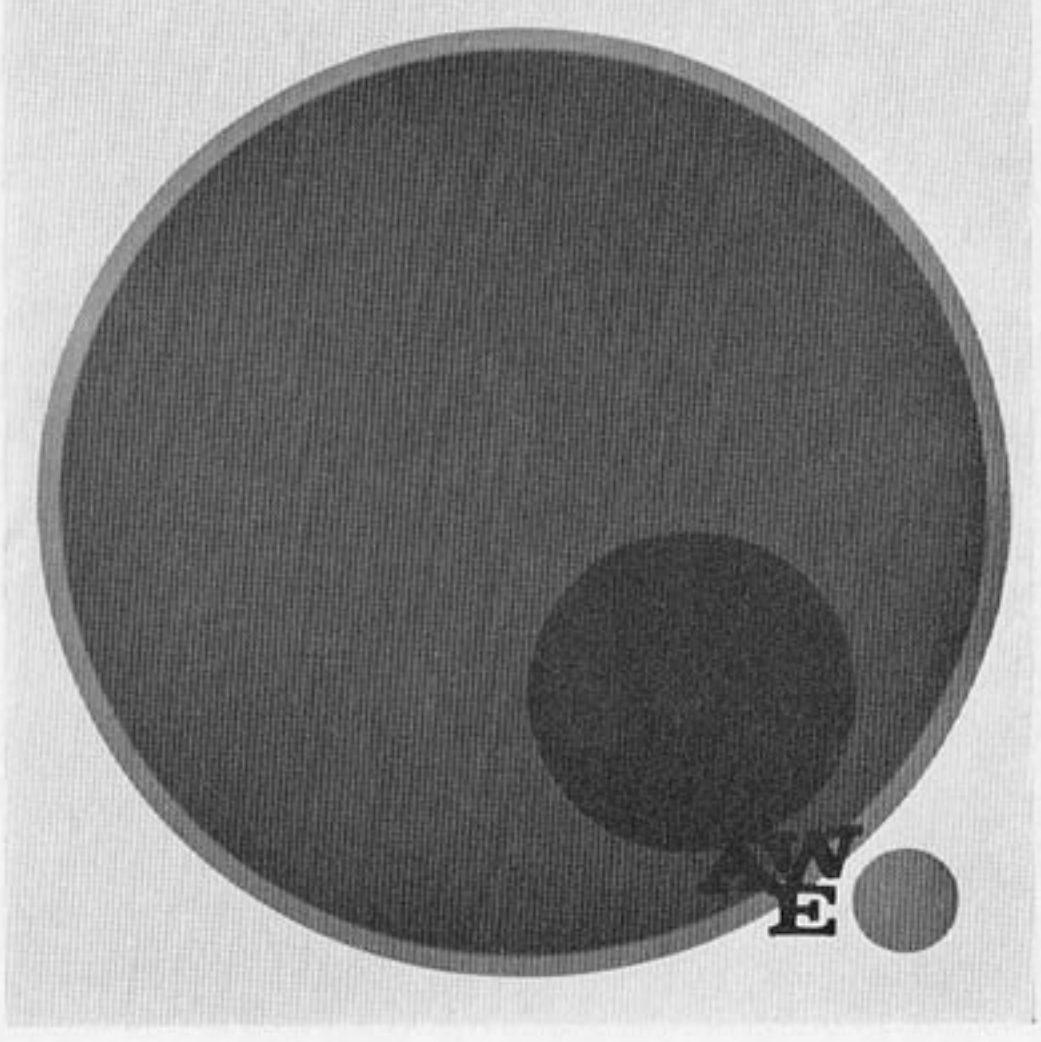
Thus at the 1966 Biennale, he presented his *SPCE* (Polycyclical Structure with Electronic Control). He serigraphed a series of images (parts of road signs, elementary geometrical structures, letters of the alphabet) on three melinex tapes that wind and unwind according to an electronic system that reacts to the sound stimuli produced by its surroundings. The resulting images are derived from the superimposing of three fragments, and each fragment is in turn chosen from among six others, so that the total of the elements that make up the image is formed by 72 elements. The images produced by this multiplicity of combinations are 864. The machine generates visual stimulations, and the public intervenes to determine them. Duration is destroyed; the work lives *l'espace d'un matin*. The object-fetish at last gives way to the free activity of the imagination.

Mechanism of *SPCE* during construction



Carmi with some of his multiple paintings of 1967. Each painting measures 80 × 80 cm and is made in an edition of ten

Silkscreen print of an image produced by the *SPCE*



The inspiration of the image generator presented at Lund in 1967 is no different. Here also we have elements of urban landscape, words, signs, pieces of newspaper, which can be combined in hundreds of different ways. The visitor can combine his own picture, which he then sees projected, on a keyboard. The keyboard controls three projectors that superimpose various elements on three screens, creating an environmental situation. But a machine of this sort is expensive and produces nothing that can be sold, and Carmi has had to realize some of his projections as serigraphed and handpainted pictures. Such are his present multiples.

But Carmi wants something else. And anyone who visited the Cybernetic Serendipity exhibition in London, where Carmi exhibited his Carm-o-matic (another image generator, based more or less on the same principles as the *SPCE*), understands what his dream would be. I saw children having the time of their lives yelling into the machine to make it produce unexpected images, to make its rollers turn so that the stroboscopic lights (which illuminated chance groups of images for infinitesimal fractions of time, imprinting variable configurations on the retina) would do something new. And I saw severe, dignified visitors having as much fun as the children. They touched, shouted, laughed—and they *looked* and naturally they *saw*. And it was no longer the cold, religious looking of museums. It was life. It was the assurance that the image could disappear immediately after, since in any case a new one would promptly take its place. Just as in life. In that moment the Museum was through.

(Translated by Martha Adams)

Il testo italiano di Umberto Eco può essere richiesto alla Galleria Il Segnapassi, via Mazzolari 12, 61100 Pesaro, Italia.

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