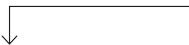


Paolo Scheggi,
Intersuperficie
curva nera,
1969, acrilico
nero su tre tele
sovrapposte,
120 x 120 x 6,5
cm. Courtesy
Franca and Cosima
Scheggi, Paolo
Scheggi/SIAE.



NITESWEEPERS

Ilaria Bignotti

GC Did you wear black to get in tune with the topic of this interview?

IB No: eighty percent of the curators I know dress in black from head to toe. Including me.¹ I believe that black is primarily a way to communicate: it means concentration, meditation, depth. It is also a way to feel 'at ease': it protects, outlines, defends, envelops...

However, I think a curator has to retreat from the hyper-role she assumed, and go back to letting the artist speak and do.

GC So, let's start from your 'black' experience as a curator.

IB I've always dealt with artists who work with this non-colour. In 2011, when I was working on my PhD, during a conference curated by Angela Vettese and Patrizia Magli dedicated to 'The Blackness of Black',² I talked about Paolo Scheggi, an artist I've worked on for many years. In a very long, unpublished interview, which I'm very fond of, Achille Bonito Oliva told me that their common denominator was a passion for the night as a place of black, of darkness, of the possible double. He met Scheggi in 1968, when his career as a militant critic had just started. He said that Scheggi was a 'nitesweeper'³ like him: Oliva is a fantastic neologist, and the definition he chose for his friend, who died at thirty for a heart problem he had suffered from for ten years, is perfect.

Scheggi had black in his pocket. Raised in the existentialist Sartrean climate, imbued with French culture, he weaved a profound relationship with darkness. Black became an enveloping nocturnal blanket for his urban performances, in mythical-political direction, or even as a material for the creation of meditative, metaphysical, reflective and immersive environments. For instance, *Interfiore*,⁴ 1968, or the *Tomb of Geometry*, 1970, wonderfully photographed by Ugo Mulas, with those walls of glossy black laminate where the names of flat and solid geometric figures stood out. This was the tomb of the myth of the project, of

1. This is common in the whole art and design milieu: see *Why Do Architects Wear Black?*, ed. by Cordula Rau (Wien: Springer 2009).

2. See, *La nerezza del nero*, ed. by Eva Ogliotti and Ruggero Canova (Treviso: ZeL, 2013).

3. Oliva's *notturbino* plays with the Italian word *netturbino* (street cleaner), keeping its reference to the city (*urbe*) and changing its root *netto* (neat, clean) with *notte* (night).

4. Paolo Scheggi, *Interfiore*, Rome, May 1968, Galleria La Tartaruga. This work was reinstalled in the exhibition 'In Between: Dialogues of light', curated by Ilaria Bignotti and Federica Patti, in collaboration with the Scheggi Archive, Spazio Arte CUBO-Unipol, Bologna, 3 January-3 March 2018. Scheggi's environment dialogued there with that of a young French artist, Joanie Lemercier.

the rational and planned utopia of the sixties, to which Scheggi partook in, and which he now repudiated, in that new decade after the collapse of 1968. This was also a tomb of the 'Modern' white. A black tomb.

Scheggi is an artist of blackness. He constantly worked on it, and believed in its power as a non-colour to shape the aesthetic consciousness of the man of the late 20th century. Black was instrumental in Scheggi's work in order to make the word, its form, the thought turned into image, appear. To make the light of truth appear. He was a prophetic artist.

GC Scheggi's research on monochrome involved other colours. Do you think black played a special role for him?

IB Scheggi belongs to the post-war generation. He was born in Settignano in 1940 and died in Rome in 1971. The Renaissance belongs to him. He came from a family of artists: his grandfather was a sculptor and his mother a miniaturist. Scheggi was a product of his time: he dealt with the rethinking of the historical avant-gardes and started a reflection on monochrome, on the relationship between surface and depth, following the passage opened by Lucio Fontana (who closely followed the work of the younger artist since 1962). In his *Intersurfaces* – monochrome canvases formed by three levels pierced by ellipsoidal or regular geometric openings – black is a chromatic and conceptual choice: it reveals and hides the space play between the superimposed canvases, creates depressions and densities of obscure power, inviting the eye to go beyond the first layer of the image. Since 1968, black became a fundamental element of his work. He used it to overcome the concept of two-dimensional work and enter the space of life, of the city, of theatre. Scheggi wanted to revolutionize the world poetically. He was an artist who, since his early twenties, was aware that he would come to the end of his brief and intense life. Black was a constant presence, ultimate reflection, power of form, friendly mystery.

GC On the other hand, for many artists, darkness seems to be a way to get more attention.

IB It is no coincidence that in the late 1950s black was a protagonist: Lucio Fontana's cuts and holes violated the canvas, getting rid of the traditional easel painting and the pedestal sculpture, and opened a black breach for the post-spatial season, which is the main subject of my studies. It is the era of zeroing, of the

tabula rasa, of the work on objects placed in space and in the consciousness of man, shaped as gestures of a new world, split between dreaming the moon and fearing the atomic bomb. The intellectual-artist is at the centre of this debate, he carries the burden of recent history, believing in the utopia of an art that can consciously intervene in the world. Between the 1960s and '70s, everted, disseminated, expanded works, crossed by rhythms of signs, depressions and depths, welcome or create areas of light and shadow. They shaped black, and chose it as a monochrome for a conceptual and operative reduction. In this way, they acted in space where the time of life takes place.

GC Does this still make sense?

IB The analysis of the relationship between man and the cosmos is at the centre of the aesthetic reflections of many artists with whom I worked. From Paolo Scheggi to Arthur Duff, an artist of German descent who lived in some NATO bases and, after a long American residence, now lives in Vicenza. Duff works with black in two directions. He uses simple materials, such as ropes, with which he weaves works that are celestial fabrics, mindful of the galaxy classification system. The measure of infinity passes through the minimal gesture of making a knot. In this case, the black rope, woven with colourful fluorescent threads, becomes the material that shapes the concept. Duff also works a lot in the nocturnal or darkened space. He processes with sophisticated software texts and light codes projected in the sky or in the environment, often mixing childhood memories with narrating names. His luminous installations act as the alter ego of Cai Guo-Qiang's pyrotechnics ones. This extraordinary Chinese artist sets fire to the night, showing fantastic, celestial stairways that unite man and cosmos, or working out visionary explosions of colours and fumes in the sky, to give life to a dark and palin-genetic power. Duff uses led lights, Cai Guo-Qiang fire. Artifice and nature. Both visualize the fragments of consciousness of the contemporary man in the dark space of the night.

The light generated by black, as a manifestation of artistic thought, is also at the centre of the project 'Black: An Idea of Light', I curated at the Cortesi Gallery in London in 2015. I made a selection of artists, both post-war and contemporary, analysing how their choice of black brings out light as form and sign: from Scheggi to Jason Martin, from Morellet to Francesca Pasquali. I analysed their vision of black as a plastic material that welcomes, imbues and re-launches light.



↑
Francesca
Pasquali, *ScopaMI*,
2016, broom
bristles and metal
frame, London,
Tornabuoni Art
Gallery. Courtesy
Francesca Pasquali
and Tornabuoni
Art. All rights
reserved.

GC Architects are more at ease handling materials than colours: white and/or black are 'natural' choices for us. For an artist, it is probably an intentional process.

5. Verbatim 'sweep me', but an Italian would understand it as 'screw me'.

IB Some artists use the black of night, of the repeating time of the life cycle, to reveal works of light, while others, such as Francesca Pasquali, work with black materials. Her early works fascinated me and I selected her for a prize of which I was a jury member. One of these, *Pulp*, is an assemblage of glossy and opaque neoprene and Lycra bodies stacked and overlapping to form a place to rest with your own body. Between the sense of abandonment and the promise of a hug. Francesca's work is coherent, dense. She constantly evolves and explores the reuse of industrial materials, the relationship with matter, the senses, the need to receive and give that translates in something to touch, live, inhabit. Francesca uses plastic, foam rubber, straws, bristles, rubber bands, balloons... She creates wefts that unfold in space, huge Penelope's shrouds that fill the eyes and invite to contact. *ScopaMI*⁵ is another extraordinary installation. The artist paved the space of two galleries, first in 2011 and then five years later, at Tornabuoni Art London, with over forty-five square meters of black broom bristles, in their cylindrical shape, as they come out from the factory before their transformation into consumer objects. The floor of the environment, entirely covered with bristles, became an unstable plane on which you could walk but may stumble, hence had to move with caution: humble and dignified and, right from the title, peremptory and hungry for contact, her installation seems a fitting metaphor for the role of art today. It must satisfy and bend to the will of others. It is a carnal desire for possession and, in its being taken and enjoyed, it risks denial and oblivion once the fashion passes by. In fact, *ScopaMI* is an ephemeral installation subject to destruction: the bristles lose their compactness due to treading and the floor becomes shattered and dispersed, disintegrating and fraying. The artist takes the risk. The choice of black is therefore strategic as this non-colour exacerbates the presence of the work in space, and, at the same time, makes it lose its perimeters, its dimensions... It expands and concentrates.

GC Black tends to recede in the background, often bringing environmental noise to the fore.

IB At Marignana Arte in Venice, I recently inaugurated a one-man show by Mats Bergquist, a Swedish artist, entitled 'The darkness

→
Mats Bergquist,
Broken Monochrome,
2018, encaustic
on wood, 37 x 37
cm. Photo Enrico
Fiorese. Courtesy
Mats Bergquist
and Marignana
Arte, Venezia. All
rights reserved



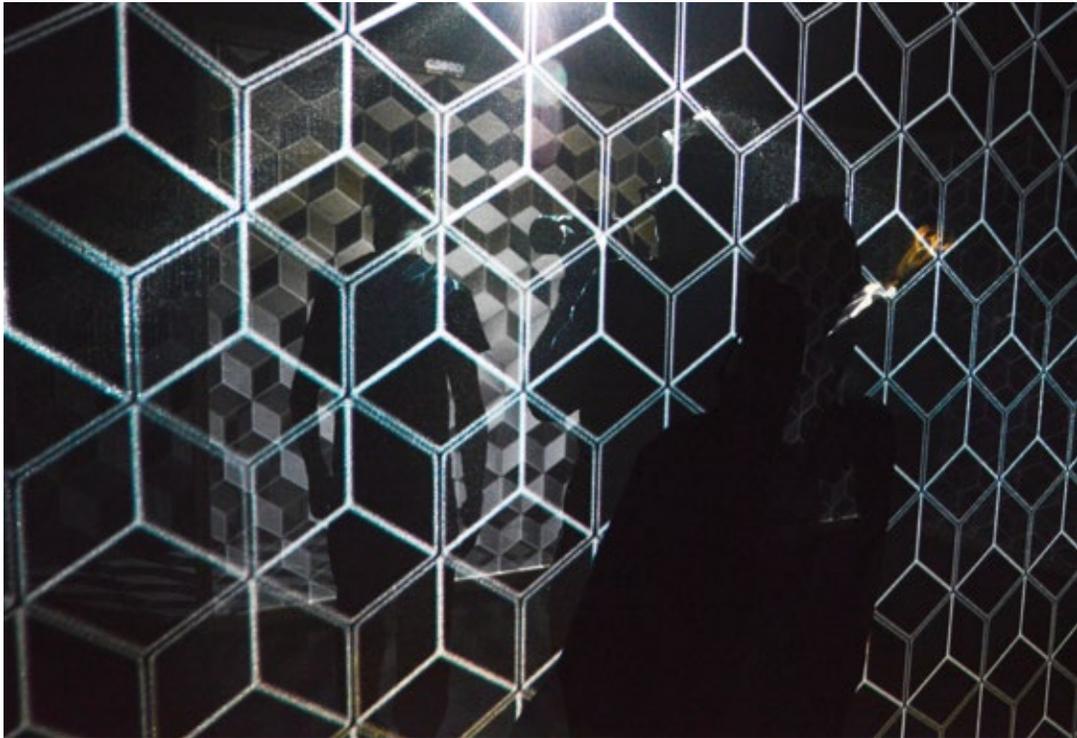
of light'. Bergquist works with both white and black. He elaborates works of great plastic power, playing on concave or convex surfaces, on monochrome and the relationship between glossy and opaque. Bergquist is an intellectual, imbued with poetry, cinema, literature. Through his work, he translates, and conveys to the public, the spiritual sense the man of the 21st century pursues through the journey of life from whatever cultural geography he may come. All of Bergquist's works are the visualization, always at the centre of our culture, of the mysterious relationship with the beyond, understood as destiny, god, desire. He shapes objects of rare beauty: iridescent ovals, lanceolate spatial sculptures, two-dimensional works that fragment and break geometrically, one interpenetrating the other. Working with different techniques, from encaustic painting to raku ware, Bergquist achieves infinite variations on black, reflecting on the power of the icon or producing primeval forms such as his cosmic eggs. Arranged in space, his works call us. They intensify the process of reflection and recognition between our body and the work, between our feeling and the life of the work. They demand a relationship.

- GC** Have you ever used obscurity as a form of disorientation or perceptual deception in the exhibitions you curated?
- IB** Dark walls bring out contrasts or relationships between the works: on black, they enter in relation with each other with particular significance – especially the works of the 1960s and '70s, monochromes featuring exact shapes, few elements. For instance, I relied on this device to highlight the language of Ivan Picelj – a Croatian artist less well known than other exponents of programmed and kinetic art. At the Cortesi Gallery in Lugano, I set up a *quadreria* on a black background, displaying his works densely mixed with those of other artists belonging to the New Tendency movement, all of small dimensions. The result was very powerful. I also used a black room for the exhibition on black as a place of light that I mentioned above, where black works sculpted the space in a dark and stunning game. Sometimes, the black box or a darkened environment is required by the work. This was the case for the reinstallation of Scheggi's *Interfiore I* curated at Spazio Arte CUBO in Bologna. It is formed by a number (about ninety, in the original version) of fluorescent yellow paint circles immersed and suspended at different heights in a darkened space illuminated by blacklight, with a Wood's lamp. It was first presented at the Galleria La Tartaruga in Rome in May 1968.

Its 'Exhibition Theatre' housed a continuous happening where different artists had to set up their own environment in just one day in order to trigger a changeable and pressing aesthetic and emotional experience in the audience. *Interfiore* overcomes the two-dimensionality of the work on the wall, it enters the space of life, the temporality of experience: a seminal work that can 'happen' only in relation to the observer who becomes a conscious and free activator. Joanie Lemerancier, the artist I selected for the dialogue with Scheggi in the exhibition, worked on this environment: called to interpret his language, he composed an immersive ephemeral experience formed by dynamic projections of light, layered surfaces, reflecting or semi-transparent materials, following a rigorous geometric composition of space. A reboot resulting from the stylistic features typical of the French artist who addresses Spatialism and Op-Art masters by relying on up-to-date technologies.

GC Therefore, there is a dialogue between symbolic blackness and sensorial darkness.

IB The artists I work with understand black both as a preferential medium for the manifestation of their thought and as an element shaping an object or an environment. Coherently with our times, it is ephemeral in its being (paradoxically) clear, it is resilient in its coming out as apparently peremptory: black does not build, it suggests; it does not solve, it questions; it does not say, it whispers. In different ways, times, languages.



Joanie Lemerrier,
Plans, 2018,
site specific
installation,
lights and video
mapping, 400 x 300
x 300 cm. Courtesy
Joanie Lemerrier.
All rights
reserved.

Next page:
Paolo Scheggi,
Interfiore, 1968,
fluo. yellow paint
on wooden rings,
Wood light, 400 x
400 x 400 cm ca.
Courtesy Paolo
Scheggi / SIAE.

