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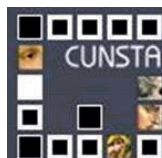
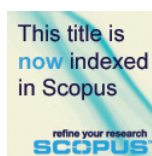
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Saggi

Lectures & discussions: the use of verbal language in the performance practice of Giuseppe Chiari

Francesca Gallo*

Abstract

Despite the growing literature on Italian Performance Art, the talks, lectures and discussions staged by various representatives of the Neo-Avant-garde movements of the 1970s, viewed as artistic performances, have nevertheless remained largely ignored until recently. These public talk-pieces are characterised by a conceptual framework that is equidistant from both poetic declamation and the physical approach of Body Art. To better define and understand this practice we will begin by investigating the performance lectures of Giuseppe Chiari, with the support of photographs, texts and above all audio and video recordings, which have recently become available to researchers.

Nel crescente interesse storiografico per la Performance Art italiana, sono rimaste finora ignorate conferenze, lezioni e dibattiti praticati da alcuni esponenti delle Neoavanguardie negli anni Settanta e intesi alla stregua di opere. Tali esecuzioni pubbliche presentano un

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impianto concettuale, equidistanti sia dalla declamazione poetica, sia dalla fisicità tipica della Body Art. Per definire e comprendere tale fenomenologia si è partiti dalla dimensione verbale e discorsiva di Giuseppe Chiari, basandosi su fotografie, testi e soprattutto registrazioni audio e video, da poco tornate accessibili per la ricerca.

To P. d. M. who loved playing with words

Performance Art was never really very big in Italy, not even during the Golden Age of the Seventies, when many artists experimented with *tableaux vivants* static scenes depicting episodes from (art) history framed by their architectural settings¹. Frontality and the relative stillness of the artists/performers are, to a certain extent, replicated in the lecture performances, when understood as artworks and construed as an *enactment* or action. These performance practices are based on verbal language, with strong conceptual implications or associated with academic critique, at the expense of the centrality of the body, which is mostly still and often naked, i.e. deculturized, in Body Art. They also reinforce the link between live performance and verbal/visual research, an approach not surprisingly adopted by various Italian artists practising this format. If the historical literature, including the recent flowering of interest around Giuseppe Chiari – which is the focus of this paper – seems mostly to have ignored this phenomenology², observers at the time were much more amenable and, as we shall see, fully capable also of grasping the peculiarities of these discursive practices, by suggesting the international backdrop against which they were unfolding.

1. The discursive dimensions of lecture performances

Is there a theatrical dimension to your actions? Probably not, in the sense of theatre as spectacle or personal performance, but if it's interaction you have in mind, the interrelation between two people, in the sense that a conversation too is theatre, then it really is a very important, indeed fundamental, part of my work.

(Acconci 1971)

Today, performance lectures and talks by artists, with the status of artworks, exhibit a recognisable historical genealogy, as well as dedicated reviews and critical references, rather than being a simple means of mediation and

¹ «Ricerche di Storia dell'arte» 2014; De Bellis 2015; Fontana *et al.* 2015; «Sciami Ricerche» 2020.

² Bonomo *et al.* 2016; Corà 2018. However, the first documentary evidence emerged precisely from the publications of some of the artist's photographs, hence the idea of the study: *Giuseppe Chiari* 2018; Gallo 2019.

dissemination of research. Verging on poetic declamation, the multiple formats of lecture performances in art reaped their first successes during the season of Conceptual Art, as spaces where criticism of institutional culture, of traditional teaching models and of the centrality of the object as a commodity within the art system could take shape. At the same juncture in time, and in parallel with other artistic experiences, a certain tendency towards performance was highlighted by art critics³: on the one hand, it was part of the broader and novel phenomenon of experimental research, seeking to renew the function of art, while on the other hand it was clearly affected by a rediscovery of orality.

Internationally, performance lectures were practiced by the Art & Language group, with the twofold intention of narrowing the gap between artistic and scientific research and exorcising the sense of alienation – in Marxian terms – arising from the circulation of symbolic goods, such as objectual works⁴. While in the English-speaking world, Ian Wilson (1941-2020) adopted a rigidly dogmatic approach – according to Filiberto Menna – from which the unexpected is totally banned: his tautological, ironic and provocative answers aim to make sure that «all the received ideas about art and the definition of art backfire on the interlocutors (and their cultural context)»⁵. Which is exactly the sensation one feels when reading, for example, the conversation with Achille Bonito Oliva, dating back to 1971, in which the critic assumes Wilson is using a Socratic method. Such an assumption is rejected by the artist, who rather admires Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* for its emphasis on both form and content and for Wilson's inability to resolve the question of whether language determines the world or vice versa⁶.

However, public discussions as a form of art were made famous and, to a certain extent, identifiable above all by Joseph Beuys' (1921-1986), thanks to over twenty years of practice, often with the aid of his famous blackboards – and, if necessary, even a translator – through which he expressed his personal idea of “art as social sculpture”. In one of his first appearances in Italy, at his solo show at Lucio Amelio's Modern Art Agency in Naples, the German artist animated a long discussion on *Political Concepts for a Transformation of European Society* (November 13, 1971). On this and other occasions, Beuys never undermined his own hegemonic position, implicitly re-proposing the myth of the artist as an exceptional above-average individual, according to an ancient romantic and typically male tradition. However, at a historical juncture marked by a strong demand for democracy at all levels, this “authoritarian” posture was criticised, for example, on the occasion of his speech at the Tate Gallery in London, on 26 February 1972, when the public objected to the artist monopolizing the

³ Conte 2013.

⁴ Poinot 1988.

⁵ Menna 1976.

⁶ Wilson 2008.

microphone, which was perceived precisely as an affirmation of a dominant position⁷. Which, perhaps, is also why Beuys refused a microphone during the gruelling experience of the hundred days debate at Documenta 5, in the summer of 1972.

On the Italian scene, where Beuys served as the main point of reference, to be either emulated or challenged, Giuseppe Chiari (1926-2007) stands out as a performance lecturer. Although he came from a musical background, he was less systematic in his use of amplification, not infrequently at the expense of the full intelligibility of his conversation. Moreover, the constants of “fiction” and artificiality seem to loom larger in Chiari than in Beuys. The Florentine artist, in fact, would transform his talk-pieces into a variation on enactment/performance, in which any pedagogical interest gave way to self-presentation and the attempt to convey aspects of his personal poetics also metaphorically, by ensuring that his audience experience a degree of practical effects as well. Chiari explored a direct relationship with this public, typical of his musical background, along a trail that had already been blazed, in part, by the Fluxus group.

Viewed retrospectively, in fact, Beuys’ lectures appear to be an integral part of his research: although the artist carefully built his persona – through rituals and attributes which critics have carefully investigated identifying their multiple symbology – he never actually seems to perform in front of his audience. Instead, he gradually gives free rein to his teaching vocation, which, as we know, was frustrated by his leaving the Academy of Fine Arts in Düsseldorf – on October 10, 1972⁸ – and seeks an exchange with the audience, in the light of Friederich Schiller’s and Rudolf Steiner’s theories on education. Further proof of the centrality of Beuys’ didactic commitment lies in his foundation of alternative educational institutions, such as the Free International University, in 1973, which clearly points to his trust in the self-organising capacity of the public⁹.

On the contrary, Chiari shows no such para-institutional commitment, despite his comprehensive and complex political views on the role of cultural institutions in the formation of the canon: suffice it to think of his many speeches on teaching¹⁰, the sarcastic expression “quartet society”¹¹, and his participation in grassroots cultural groups and associations in Florence. However, with respect to reliance on discursive mediation, thus with respect to Beuys, Chiari appears substantially sceptical, as we will shortly see.

⁷ Lange 2007.

⁸ Tisdall 1979; Richter 2020.

⁹ Mesch 2007.

¹⁰ Chiari 1969a; Dematteis 2019.

¹¹ Miti 2019.

2. Orality in Chiari

A female voice reads / the letter on the next page / with clear diction and no / emotional participation whatsoever / at fast and constant speed / with strict accuracy.
(Chiari w.d.)

The verbal element makes an appearance in Chiari's work at an early stage: in written form, verbal language appears as instructions for the performers, like a score; in hand-written works; in artist's books. Orally, it appears in the performance itself, as in *Fuori* (Outside, 1965), in which the performer sits with bowed head (to isolate himself from any visual stimuli) and describes, with very precise words, all the noises he hears, taking long pauses¹²; or in *Colore* (Colour, 1966), where the performer «says the name of a colour / present in the surrounding environment / speaks of / this colour»¹³. Another example is *Chatterbox* (1967), in which there are musical elements as minimal interludes included within a long extract from a detective story, in which a little girl witnesses her mother's murder and builds up her courage by talking to a doll called Chatterbox. At the end, the performer of the piece almost becomes a "chatterbox", in the sense that his task – apart from a few short musical interludes – is precisely that of reading the passage from the novel¹⁴.

Halfway between these musical pieces and the lectures we will talk about shortly, are his interventions in which the "musical instrument" becomes the artist's own body and in particular his voice. Mostly written in the 1960s, these works were performed by the composer himself in public, sometimes as new versions and even so-called "improper vocalisms" (tones, timbres, vocalisation). An example of this can be found in *Dont' trade here. Mamma* (November 26 and 27, 1973) performed at the *Contemporanea* event in Rome, during which the word in the title was repeated for two hours with changing rhythms and inflections. It was no accident that the choice fell on a word from which, in a certain sense, the entire linguistic capacity of human beings originates, teetering on that fuzzy border between inarticulate sounds and stammering. This too could have been triggered by Joseph Beuys' *Ja Ja Ja Ja Ja, Nee, Nee, Nee, Nee, Nee* (1969), especially considering that the multiple, which also contains the sound recording, was published by Mazzotta in Italy as an LP, exactly like a musical work¹⁵. Sidestepping Chiari's choice – as a man who winds his way amidst music, speech and drawing – to use his own voice in a similar regressive virtuosity veiled with a degree of sentimentalism¹⁶, we are interested here in

¹² Chiari 1969b.

¹³ Chiari 2000.

¹⁴ Chiari 1969c.

¹⁵ Beuys 1970.

¹⁶ Gallo 2021.

emphasising how orality is explored in multiple directions, in an antinomian way, although always aiming at destabilising the cultural institutions within which the artist himself moves: the musical canon, singing and music, functional communication, an art exhibition.

In the Seventies, even verbal language in its oral form was bent towards a more conceptual approach, as witnessed by the lectures, with their flat and discursive register, and sometimes the use of blackboards on which Chiari wrote algebraic expressions with chalk, as for example at the Galleria Toselli in Milan on the occasion of his talk on *Che cos'è l'arte* (What is Art, April 5, 1973). Elsewhere Chiari used white sheets of paper hanging on the wall, on which he wrote or drew with felt-tip pens, as at Multhipla Gallery in Milan a couple of years later (March 10, 1975, fig. 1), at the 1976 Venice Biennale¹⁷ and during *Discussione in Livorno*, at the Peccolo Gallery (May 27, 1978)¹⁸. These talks were preceded, however, by the “text of a lecture” entitled *Cos'è la musica* (What is music), written in ink on a sort of long roll of paper¹⁹, probably during his first solo show at the Toselli Gallery in 1971. This text is therefore not read or recited but rather written down like a musical score, with no performance so to speak. From the point of view of its delivery, therefore, *Cos'è la musica* cannot be compared to the instructions of Conceptual Art either: Chiari operates within the musical universe, its values and their calling into question, in particular by criticising traditional musical training, which, being associated with the reproduction of sounds, rather than training musicians prepared them to passive listening.

Also in the flow of the international references mentioned above, in the course of the 1970s, performance lectures and public discussions very quickly became recognised art forms²⁰ and garnered a certain following within the Neo-Avant-garde movement in Italy as well.

In the case of *Che cos'è l'arte* (What is art, 1973), for example, the lecture itself was followed by a debate with the audience²¹, along the lines of what Beuys had already been doing for several years. A part of the reflections proposed by Chiari on that occasion were included in his book *Arte* (Art), published by Toselli²² in 1974, and consisting of concise blunt statements by the artist, of an abstract and general character, accompanied by logical expressions in which the reasoning develops algebraically, with some paradoxical and contradictory formulations. Art changes incessantly, like a live activity: when not cast as a relationship

¹⁷ At *Attivo*, the performance show curated by Tommaso Trini as part of the exhibition *Attualità internazionali 72-76*, Chiari presented *La confessione* – «the author will demonstrate / that the artist is a / rehabilitated jobless person» – on July 17 and 19, 1976 (see Bonomo, Mascelloni 1997).

¹⁸ Parma, Archive of Giuseppe Chiari, *Photos*; Florence, Archive of Gianni Melotti, *Photos*; *Giuseppe Chiari* 2018.

¹⁹ Chiari 1972.

²⁰ Here we distance ourselves from some of the considerations made in the albeit fundamental Bishop 2015.

²¹ Similarly, on March 10, 1975, at Multhipla Gallery (Milan, Archive of Giorgio Colombo).

²² Trini 1975.

between a single individual – the artist or observer – and an object, but between two individuals, Chiari writes, «art is no longer art / art is theatre / after art: theatre»²³. This statement is revealing both for its implicit silence with respect to music, for which in the live dimension, as in theatre, the relationship between individuals does not exclusively pass through the object-text; and because lectures represent the case of a relationship between «subject and subject»²⁴, remaining equidistant from both concert and theatrical performance. In this regard, Tommaso Trini compares Chiari's lecture performances to «the theatre of suspicion and, at the same time, a dialogue aimed at mutual understanding, which represents true dialectic»²⁵, and with extreme clear-headedness he also captures Chiari's implicit contention with the analytical practice of Art & Language, according to which art is equivalent to the definition of art, although the latter cannot be defined.

Outside the enclosed garden of contemporary art, discussions and debates were customary, at a historical time in which grassroots participation, reappropriation of the symbolic and democratisation of decision-making and management processes had become, first and foremost, political – rather than just cultural – priorities. Moreover, even the traditional mediation of teaching was no longer identified with one-way communication, but as a dialogic and participatory dimension coinciding, in Italy, with access to higher education by new segments of the population. Chiari grasped the significance of this process and became a protagonist of the art scene, but he also experienced its contradictions, for example in the tension between quality and quantity:

here we are, in this grand establishment, the school [...] which should serve the purpose of making culture loftier and at the same time circulating it; [...] it offers the impossible and, indeed, insists on offering the impossible, without bothering to find solutions. The number of artists is increasing day by day, because the civil rights of being an artist are also increasing. And the thought of ever becoming a great artist becomes more and more absurd²⁶

he maintained in New York, in 1977, during *Discussione*.

3. *Interaction with the public*

However did I become an artist if I already am one / [...] / I'm seeking the reason why / the reason why / I'm / seeking / seeking with the public.
(Chiari 1976)

²³ Chiari 1974.

²⁴ *Ibidem*.

²⁵ Trini 1975.

²⁶ Chiari 1980.

Chiari, however, in spite of the titles and appearances, after prompting dialogue, he then immediately denies it: he evades answering questions, refuses to take them seriously and rambles on. Even when he repeatedly uses the opening formula «Please ask a question», inviting the audience to ask questions freely – on general, contingent, personal, work-related topics and so on – to start the action-conversation²⁷. The reiteration of the opening formula, as well as Chiari's repetition of the performances previously conceived and performed in different contexts, is a further verification of the concept of action as a musical piece, with a score and with variations on each performance²⁸. The comparison with music, on the other hand, is grasped at an early stage by Menna, regarding Chiari's ability to improvise responses, just as jazz musicians do with notes. Although, in this context the artist does not consider himself as one among equals, like musicians on the stage, everything converges towards an authorial autonomy, so to speak, undivided and substantially free from any form of bargaining.

Chiari's request «Please ask a question» clearly echoes the formula used by Beuys – «Questions? Do you have questions?» – on several occasions²⁹, confirming the popularity and authority of that model. The apparent transfer of initiative inherent in such a behaviour – abandoning the conventional teaching model of one-way communication between teacher and pupils/audience – is however contradicted by Chiari himself, who does not let himself be cornered by his interlocutor: in some cases, after his initial – more or less elusive – answers, he embarks on self-reflective reasoning on the first words of the conversation, to turn the conversation back to the difference between the “shared” and traditional definition of art, on the one hand, and his personal idea of art³⁰, on the other.

Transparently, this way of “answering” the public's questions offers a glimpse into another – earlier and, for Chiari, more familiar – model at work: since 1949, John Cage (1912-1992), at the end of some of his lectures with the status of “musical performances”, would be available to take questions from the audience. Here too, despite the customary guise, a precise aesthetic intent is actually revealed: Cage's answers are prepared beforehand, some of them predictably inspired by the repertoire of a brilliant lecturer, others instead arising from the musical performance, in which the members of the audience are invited to repeat the question «once more... once more»³¹. Indeed, in Cage

²⁷ For a partial transcription of that at *Project 74* (Köln) see Chiari 1975. Also *Discussione* at Incontri Internazionali d'Arte in Roma, January 24, 1975 starts at the same way (*Incontri 1974-1975* 1981, pp. 34-41); and that at Studio Trisorio in Napoli, October 19, 1976 (Menna 1976).

²⁸ For the debate on re-enactment and the impossibility of a repeat performance: see Jones, *Hearthfield* 2012.

²⁹ Lange 2007.

³⁰ Similarly, on March 10, 1975, at Multhipla Gallery (Milan, Archive of Giorgio Colombo).

³¹ Saladin 2018, p. 61.

«we can speak of a “performed text”, in the sense that these texts are clearly elaborated with a view to their oral interpretation and are only completed once they have been activated in lectures that have become the theatrical setting of a performance»³². Moreover, with reference to music and with regard to the relationship between artistic research and the subversion of didactic mediation, in 1956, in Nice, Arman had performed in public a *Lecture on jazz* with totally inaccurate contents³³. Chiari too imagined something of the kind, for example in *Le corde* (The Strings, 1966), one of the pieces collected in *Musica senza contrappunto* (Music without Counterpoint)³⁴, with a set consisting of two pianos, a double projection of slides, a microphone, a table on which to draw diagrams, a tuner working on the musical instruments and a composer engaged in providing explanations: presumably, however, in that case the lecturer would have been versed in the subject matter.

The *discussion* format – which differs from the more traditional lecture – matured in Chiari and became fully-fledged between 1974 and early 1975, when he proposed his dialogues with the public as interventions in themselves under the self-explanatory title *Discussione*. At *Project 74*, where there are other similar interventions, such as the ritualized interviews of Braco Dimitrijevic³⁵, Chiari (July 7, 1974), filmed by Luciano Giaccari, equipped with a microphone and seated between two wings of chairs with an audience, resorted to the usual starting formula. But much of this laborious dialogue with the public – expressed in a mixture of French, English, Italian and German and the results of which are often confusing, despite the use of a voluntary translator – focused on the iconoclastic gesture of making the works on show invisible, turning them inside out, so to speak, as in a gesture of dissent against the unexpected title of the event. Chiari, like others, was in fact annoyed by the title *Kunst bleibt Kunst*, to which Daniel Buren provocatively responded with *Kunst beilbt Politik*, and Chiari in turn with *Kunst bleibt Arbeit*. In an attempt to lead the discussion onto the subject of the artist’s research, Jannis Kounellis urged the artist to talk about his relationship with the Italian musical tradition, Catholic culture or even the word “art” itself. Equally unsuccessful in this attempt were the questions posed by Nam June Paik – more familiar with Chiari’s name than with his recent research – on how research has changed in recent years (fig. 2). Chiari, in fact, dismisses the question by defining it as too preoccupied with “paternity”, from which he had emancipated himself some years previously³⁶. On this occasion, the artist not only claimed that facing a public discussion with a poor command of English was a conscious technical choice, he also pulled Dada into his genealogy because of its provocative and

³² Saladin 2018, p. 63.

³³ Mangion 2012, p. 27.

³⁴ Chiari 1969b.

³⁵ Weiss *et al.* 1974, pp. 356-357.

³⁶ Trini 1975.

outrageous approach. In this regard, Bruno Corà asked what would happen if this method of working became a widespread practice: the hypothesis presented itself to Chiari in terms of a real “loss”, in economic and publicity terms, so to speak, obliging him to work out a different sort of strategy³⁷.

In Rome, in January 1975 – probably scribbling notes on sheets of paper hanging on the wall – the discourse focused instead on the contrast between lowbrow and highbrow culture, which the artist defined, respectively, as “poor culture” and “rich culture”. This was exemplified along the lines of the history of music, of the progressive emancipation of the musician from his status as a servant, in the 18th century, to the independence gained by Ludwig van Beethoven and Louis Armstrong’s break with the Western musical tradition. This reasoning by Chiari, of a cultural and political nature, stirred a great deal of controversy among the audience with numerous interruptions, since the public did not seem to be particularly taken over by his arguments³⁸. There is no trace of this in the catalogue of the event, where Giorgio Colombo’s photographs of the intervention at the Galleria Toselli in 1973 are published, so much so that Chiari does not appear in the section dedicated to the performance, but in the one entitled *Art – Language – Thought – Reality*³⁹. A rather bewildering and fatigued atmosphere emerges, finally, from the fragment of recording by Luciano Giaccari at the Galleria Multipla in Milan, in March 1975, where Maria Gloria Bicchieri, Achille Bonito Oliva, Pier Paolo Calzolari, Luciano Fabro, Gianni Melotti and Bill Viola can be recognised among the audience. In this case, Chiari used several large sheets of paper hung on the walls, on which he penned a couple of iconic phrases, but also more abstract diagrams, the last of which centred on the relationship between supply and demand in classical economics⁴⁰. This public discussion practice, therefore, can also take the form of an empty frame, which the artist fills, from time to time, with changing contents, not directly related to his own research but more often related to issues that were close to his heart regarding the art system and its economic dynamics, which Chiari tries to govern in order not to simply submit victimlike.

At the Studio Trisorio in Naples, in October 1976, faced with the same opening formula «Questions, please», the members of the public asked questions like: «Why don’t you make music anymore?», «What’s the meaning of silence for you?», «To what extent do you still consider yourself an artist?», but as expected, and accordingly noted by Menna, the discussion immediately veered

³⁷ Varese, Archivio Videoteca Giaccari (from onwards AVG), Video recording of Giuseppe Chiari’s talk at *Project 74*, 1974, digitised by La Camera Ottica – University of Udine. See also Chiari 1975, p. 56.

³⁸ *Incontri 1974-1975* 1981.

³⁹ Weiss *et al.* 1974, pp. 46, 158-161.

⁴⁰ AVG, Video recording of Giuseppe Chiari, *Che cos’è l’arte*, 1975, digitised by La Camera Ottica – University of Udine. The intervention is also documented by Roberto Masotti’s photographs (see *Giuseppe Chiari* 2018, pp. 263-280) and those by Gianni Melotti (see Gallo 2019, pp. 62-63).

onto the subject of his private and daily life, almost growing into an informal chat between friends. «So that the practice of performance does not differ much from the technique of musical “improvisation”, [...] even now Chiari creates works based on a careful combination of planned and random elements»⁴¹, the critic concludes rather perspicuously. Regarding the random component, moreover, Cage is a fundamental point of reference: in his lecture-enactments, however, besides indetermination the composer applies the same principles that underlie his musical and theoretical practice, i.e. the withdrawal of the ego through the adoption of a predefined structure and with an important role given to silence. On reflection, the semantic component of the word hardly achieves a degree of abstraction comparable to that of sounds: thus, in order to put an end to communication, Cage sees in the overlapping of different speeches – within the same timespan – the possibility of experiencing the absence of meaning and hence chaos. This is what happens in *Where are we going? And what are we doing?* (1961), in which three pre-recorded audio tapes of as many of Cage’s lectures are broadcast simultaneously with a live lecture of his⁴²; or, differently, in *Empty Words*, coinciding with a meaningless text, in which the letters correspond to the sound emissions. Matthieu Saladin, moreover, points out that unlike a musical score Cage personally reads these texts, which he calls lectures, also because they represent an opportunity for self-transformation, especially from the point of view of authorial subjectivity, almost to the point of identifying with the position of the audience⁴³.

Back to Chiari, if the prompted questions are not forthcoming the artist begins his lecture: this is what happened, at the Sala Polivalente in Ferrara, in the autumn of 1977, when he presented his *Discussione sulla struttura e sulla sovrastruttura* (Discussion on Structure and Superstructure, figs. 3-4)⁴⁴. For this intervention Chiari had planned to use four blackboards, a photographer to give him the shots taken during the action, a slide projector, a long-haired model and a piano⁴⁵. However, only the former and the latter appear on the stage, in the partial video recording of the action, which shows Chiari sketching on pieces of slate the visual representation of social organizations (cultural or political, it makes no difference), according to a unitary or multiple model⁴⁶. Here too the exchange with the public remains arduous, even at the end of the lecture, because the public requested explanations about certain political terms that Chiari had used, while the artist wanted to set a more formalistic tone. At the end, he sat down at the piano using it in the way that has made him famous.

⁴¹ Menna 1976.

⁴² Saladin 2018.

⁴³ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁴ Ferrara, Gallerie Civiche Arte Moderna e Contemporanea (from onwards GCAMC), *Archivio Centro Video Arte*, Video recording of Giuseppe Chiari, *Discussione sulla struttura e la sovrastruttura*, 1977b.

⁴⁵ GCAMC, *Archivio Centro Video Arte*, *Lettera di Giuseppe Chiari*, w.d. but 1977a.

⁴⁶ GCAMC 1977b.

Chiari's performance lectures/discussions, in fact, alternate with variations on musical performances or "concerts", usually with the help of one or more objects that can be used as musical instruments in an unusual, improper and irreverent way, as in the case of *Gesti sul piano* (Gestures on the Piano). The artist is culturally and ideologically committed to anti-academic research, free from allegiance to any specific media and established knowledge. Likewise, even his more discursive interventions, among the ones addressed here, have a strong ironic streak, pitted as they are against the official bombastic culture taught in university lecture rooms and music conservatories. Moreover, calling into question the distinction between highbrow and lowbrow culture is precisely one of the founding aspects of the Fluxus poetics⁴⁷. For the adherents of this artistic galaxy, anyone can produce art, make music in any medium, or dispense knowledge through speech. Thus, in his interactions with the audience, Chiari on the one hand seems to favour a certain equality of roles and horizontality of communication with the public, which, however, he then goes on almost immediately to deny, albeit without entirely giving up the opportunity of having a leading role in the conversation. He hangs on to his authorial dimension, even if he does so in a more subtle and apparently resigned way compared to Beuys, for example. In his case, in fact, the analogy with the role of "composer" is more appropriate, in that he only limitedly accepts the performer's inevitable changes to the score⁴⁸, of which after all he remains the author.

4. *Dialectics in New York*

In all countries, a whore is not a simple woman but an easy woman.
(Chiari 1980)

Giuseppe Chiari was the only Italian to be invited, by Annina Nosei, to the *Discussion* review, a particularly significant international acknowledgement dedicated to artist discussions, thanks to his collaboration with the Galleria Renzo Spagnoli⁴⁹, in Florence, with whom the artist worked. The Florentine artist presented his *Discussion* in the Lassman Hall, at New York University, on May 17, 1977; this was a project he had already formalised two years previously, based essentially on taking questions from the public, which this time seemed more natural than in his previous performance lectures held in Italy. Chiari spoke in Italian, the audience

⁴⁷ Higgins 2012.

⁴⁸ Miti 2019.

⁴⁹ New York, New York University Archives, Fales Library and Special Collections, Annina Nosei Gallery Archive 1963-2009, *Programm Discussion*, 1977, MSS. 298.

asked questions mostly in English, and Nosei translated⁵⁰. The audience included John Cage and René Block, who did not take an active role, unlike Simone Forti and Giovanna Dalla Chiesa, who also spoke. Generally, the atmosphere was rather relaxed and animated; and although Chiari realised towards the end that the New York environment was already somewhat accustomed to this type of intervention, he took the opportunity to reiterate several points of his poetics in general and of this new exhibition format, which in his own way was more effective than a traditional vernissage.

Despite being accustomed to the discussion that follows a musical performance, the focus here was entirely different, because the discussion was not about an artwork located “elsewhere”, the discussion was the artwork.

The discussion as a type of art expression is different from panel discussions in which many artists are called to discuss issues of art and culture. However, the frequency of these panels certainly indicates that the meeting of artist and public in a dialogue is a format of pressing interest. Without intending to draw a strict line between what IS art and what is ABOUT art, the discussion-as-art should be signalled as one of the forms of the dematerialization of art: the only form which substantiates the participatory mode and phase of art⁵¹.

Recalling the beginnings of a new way of making music, in which the artist obviously recognized his own origins as well, Chiari explained that in those days, to cause a scandal, it was sufficient just to go on stage and sit at the piano without playing anything for a couple of minutes. The need to “scandalize” was not aimed at achieving success, it was a necessary action in an otherwise “blocked” situation; a laborious and painful gesture – the artist called it, citing *La sedia* (The Chair) – which, if it is accepted and sets the standard, so to speak, will decree the end of any censorship of that type of behaviour, and the authors of similar activities will no longer simply be dismissed as out of their minds⁵².

According to Chiari, from the 19th century to the current historical period the artist had replaced the artwork as the focus of attention. In spite of this, Chiari expresses a dialogical dimension alongside the strongest communicative position

⁵⁰ This is one of Chiari’s best-documented pieces because, in addition to the book-catalogue of the exhibition, the curator donated the audio and video recordings to the Center for Curatorial Studies at Bard College, which digitized the entire collection. Thus, *Discussione* is recorded on two audiotapes – the first one of 73’43” is difficult to understand; the second one of 92’26” – and a 33’11” videotape, with about 6 minutes of overlap between the latter and the second audiotape. These media, therefore, document a demanding marathon of more than three hours, with the pauses for reflection or embarrassment, and the times of translation, while Chiari initially foresaw a duration of a couple of hours. See Annandale-on-Hudson, Bard College, Center for Curatorial Studies Library and Archives, *Annina Nosei Collection of “Discussions” recordings*, Chiari G., *Discussione*, 1977, 015. 013. AA.

⁵¹ New York, New York University Archives, Fales Library and Special Collections, Annina Nosei Gallery Archive 1963-2009, *Programm Discussion*, 1977, MSS. 298.

⁵² See Annandale-on-Hudson, Bard College, Center for Curatorial Studies Library and Archives, *Annina Nosei Collection of “Discussions” recordings*, Chiari G., *Discussione*, audio recording, 015. 013. AA.

(which emerges in his lectures, for example), which is grasped by the public in all its complexity. In fact, it implies a lesser degree of responsibility, even though the artist maintains control over and guides it, for example by allowing himself the luxury of changing and moving away from the subject at hand, setting the discussion on a different course or even gradually changing the rules of the “game”. In this regard, however, Chiari points out that in a concert hall the audience is subject to greater restrictions compared to the participants in a *Discussion*. The aim of this way of understanding art remains a greater more radical change, in which «the artist no longer has a performing role and the audience no longer exists»⁵³, words which echo Allan Kaprow’s (1927-2006) famous statements on the elimination of the audience, rather than Beuys.

Furthermore, in the New York event, there also emerges the unprecedented awareness that compared to a “concert”, the artist receives more from the audience at a *discussion*, thus implicitly confirming that a greater commitment is required from the audience than at a concert. This confirms both the trial-and-error, verification and subsequent adjustment, and the transformative effects of this practice.

In New York, although Chiari has a couple of blackboards behind him, he did not use them⁵⁴, but rather scribbled something on the sheets of paper on his table: directly queried about this, Chiari explained «I’ve chosen the form of discussion and I sign the form of discussion, because the artwork is always a statement. And it’s a statement that a man takes the responsibility to sign. So I sign the discussion, but I don’t sign this [the scribbled sheet of paper]. Just as I do not sign the sweat running down my arm»⁵⁵.

Chiari acknowledges that a certain reciprocity exists between the audience and the artist, in the sense that the members of the public could metaphorically take his place; while among the audience there are those who would like to somehow force him out of an intellectual posture that continues to appear hegemonic, and therefore entrenched to a certain degree: «we want you to come out from behind there, we don’t want to replace you»⁵⁶, a member of the audience exclaimed at one point. In the same vein, Simone Forti admits that «questions can only be traps. The only way we can discuss with you in this format is by trying to set traps for you»⁵⁷.

⁵³ Chiari 1980, p. 200.

⁵⁴ The videotape was filmed in b/w, mostly using a fixed camera, which, from the frame of the table with Chiari and Nosei then zooms in on the artist’s face, every now and then; only once does the camera turn to the right on its axis, to frame the audience. The beginning of the videotape is less clear, with three minutes of Chiari from behind playing the upright piano, presumably in the NYU lobby, followed by a cut before the actual conversation begins. This musical prelude, perhaps simply a way to pass the time before the start of the *Discussion*, or perhaps the studied introduction to it, is also partly present in the second audiotape. Neither the artist nor those present, however, seem to refer to it in the conversation that follows.

⁵⁵ Chiari 1980, p. 204.

⁵⁶ Chiari 1980, p. 206.

⁵⁷ Chiari 1980, p. 208.

In fact, Chiari is seated behind the table, a position that automatically confers authority/authoritativeness: a choice already found in previous situations, in which, however, the artist moved about more freely (fig. 5). In spite of the inevitable tension, the fluidity of the verbal exchange shows a maturity of content, due both to the consolidated formula of the questions⁵⁸ and probably to the greater familiarity of the New York environment with such artistic practices. In this regard, however, this survey has not only reaffirmed the peculiar dependence of knowledge of performative – and generally ephemeral – practices on documentation, also highlighting specific conditions required of the latter for understanding particular dialogical situations such as those examined here. Transcription, for example, inevitably makes the dialogue more linear and coherent, while audio-visual recordings also preserve the “background noise”, the overlapping of people speaking, the distraction of the audience, and so on. The collation of the sources, therefore, is an approach that must become a priority particularly in the study of live actions.

Going back to the New York event, the artist dwelled on the distinction between *easy*, a key term in Chiari’s work, and *simple*, with the latter having above all a technical horizon, as equivalent to elementary. While “easy” «means: possible for everyone, not just technically but civilly as well»⁵⁹, that is «PERMITTED, EVERYWHERE»⁶⁰, therefore with a semantic horizon of a fundamentally political/cultural nature.

Moreover, one of the recurrent themes of this conversation is the contradiction that Chiari notes between the democratisation of access to culture and the need to maintain a certain depth of content. This issue emerges both in relation to the function of the educational system in general, and therefore also of the NYU, whose main mission is to broaden the base of educated people through interest in certain topics; and also when Chiari deals with the reproduction of music: radio, records, audiocassettes do nothing but broaden the base of passive listeners at the expense of training musicians. Or

we are all very much caught up in the problem of the quantity of artists and the quality of art. My moral feeling is that we have to care about the quantity of artists. This means giving up on the quality of art, as the latest researches seem to indicate, we must totally give up on the quality of art for the quantity of artists⁶¹.

In retrospect, Annina Nosei favours a somewhat reductive evaluation of the experience, which in her opinion lacks the dimension of either a true installation or an all-out performance⁶². On the other hand, Chiari’s frequent use of

⁵⁸ Even though it has been noted that his first experiments in this direction date back to the beginning of the decade.

⁵⁹ Chiari 1980, p. 194.

⁶⁰ Chiari 1980, p. 190: capital in the original.

⁶¹ Chiari 1980, p. 192.

⁶² Nosei Weber 1980, pp. 11-17.

comparisons with the past and tradition, on the one hand, and his repeated references to progress and future possibilities, on the other, are criticised by the public, which suggests a certain distrust of such modernist myths.

Finally, it is worth reflecting on the title adopted by Giuseppe Chiari. It is not simply an obvious tribute to Ian Wilson's *Discussions*, and to their marked self-referentiality, such a diction within the corpus of performance lectures indicates the prevalence of the dialogical dimension and of the presumed exchanges between interlocutors. In this regard, the artist lucidly notes the repetition of something already known in musical improvisation: «it is a form of collective work, in which someone says something new without realizing it, perhaps only as a reaction to me»⁶³.

The novelty of the *Discussion*, moreover, consists in declaring the lack of a theme from the very beginning; nothing in particular is discussed – as one might expect in the lectures with other titles – but rather the device is exposed at its zero degree, pure, in one of the moments and spaces of greatest proximity of Chiari to Conceptual poetics. With respect to the latter, however, Italian critics continue to underscore the differences: «to the analytical attitude [...] and tautological propositions of Conceptual art he opposes the continuous deviation from definition», as Viana Conti sharply notes⁶⁴. Later on Chiari proposed other discussions, which, however, like in Ferrara in October of the same year, 1977, featured a more or less pretextual content beginning with the title; or else he would combine the verbal dimension with actual actions, as usual focusing on a spurious form of musicality.

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⁶³ Chiari 1980, p. 212.

⁶⁴ Conti 1977.

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Appendix



Fig. 1. Giuseppe Chiari, *Che cos'è l'arte*, 1975, Milan, Multipla Gallery (ph. Gianni Melotti)

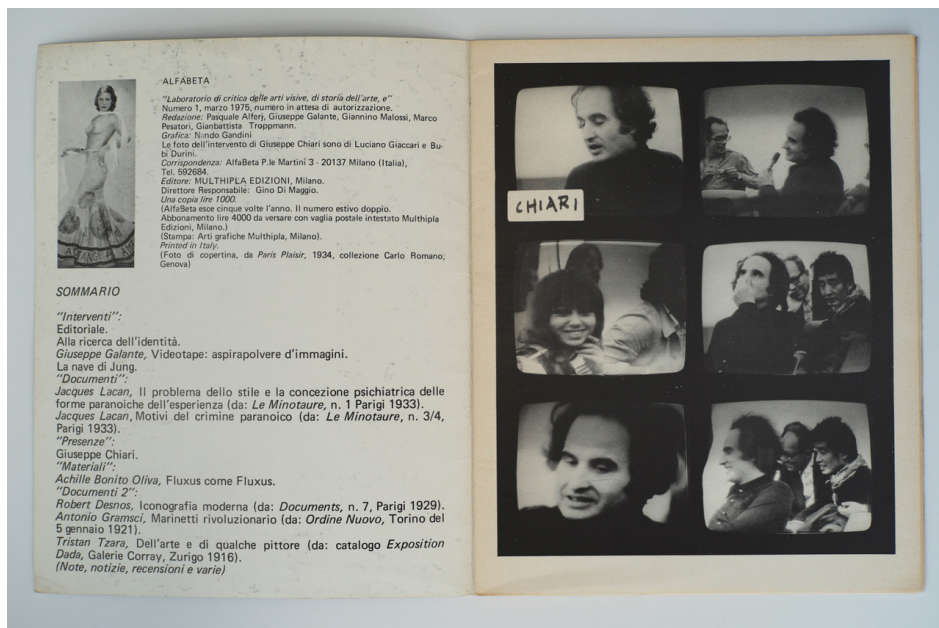


Fig. 2. Luciano Giaccari, videodocumentation of Giuseppe Chiari at *Project 74*, Koln, 1974, frames published in «Alfabeta» (courtesy Gianni Melotti)

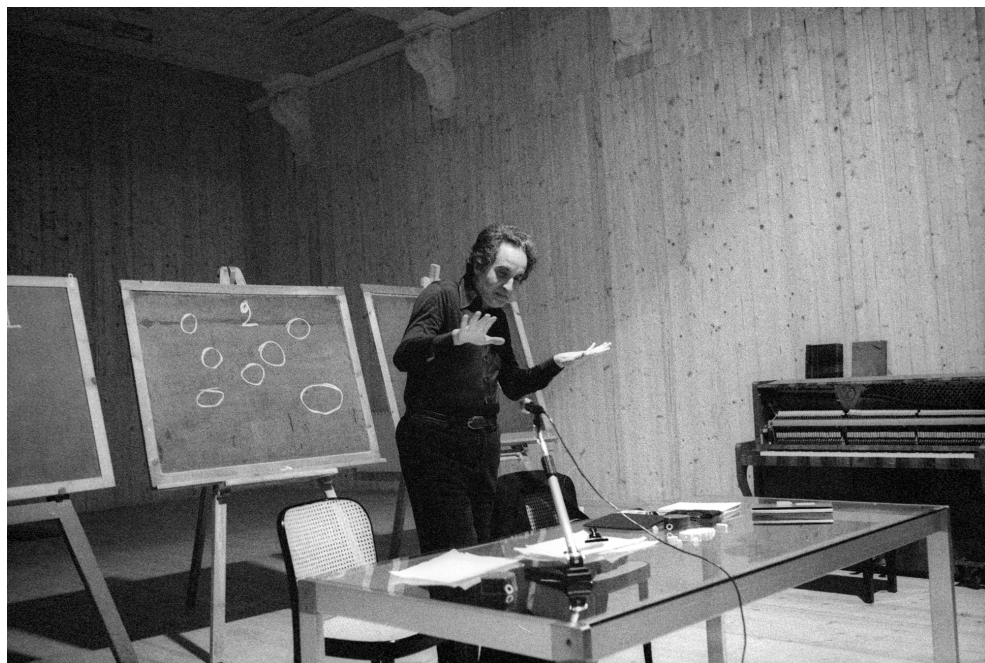


Fig. 3. Giuseppe Chiari, *Discussione sulla struttura e sulla sovrastruttura*, 1977, Ferrara, Sala Polivalente (ph. Marco Caselli Nirmal)



Fig. 4. Giuseppe Chiari, *Discussione sulla struttura e sulla sovrastruttura*, 1977, Ferrara, Sala Polivalente (ph. Marco Caselli Nirmal)



Fig. 5. Giuseppe Chiari, *Discussione a Livorno*, 1978, Livorno, Peccolo Gallery (ph. Gianni Melotti)

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