<u>Blinky Palermo and Gianni Vattimo: A Weak Juxtaposition</u>

By Liselott Johnsson

In the late sixties and early seventies, Blinky Palermo, a painter who lived and worked in Germany and New York, produced an intriguing body of work that extended the boundaries of painting to include objects and architectural space. His drawings, paintings, and objects–when installed in gallery spaces–establish various relationships between artworks, surrounding architectural space, and viewers. As an artist, I want to understand what allows the boundaries of the paintings to "open up" and interact.

Palermo's work changes meaning depending on who is looking at the work, where, and when. For instance, his work has been considered spiritual in Germany and minimalist in the United States. Palermo was open to influences and had extensive knowledge of German, French, and American post-war art; consequently, Joseph Beuys, Palermo's teacher and friend, used the term "porosity" to describe his art (Cooke 15). Gianni Vattimo's theory of 'weak thought' — *pensiero debole* — was developed in the late 1980s. 'Weak thought' is a positive nihilist understanding of the post-modern condition that accepts the erosion and destruction of the traditional metaphysical and rational foundations of modernism as something positive. This will gradually lead to an ethical, social, and political transformation. In this essay, I will use this definition of postmodernity described in *Transparent Society*, 1989, as a "weak" structure to help me understand Blinky Palermo's fascinating work. Could it be that Palermo's art is "weak" rather than "porous"?

Vattimo proposes that the postmodern era starts when "the ideal of emancipation modeled on lucid self-consciousness, on the perfect knowledge of one who knows how things stand, is replaced by an ideal of emancipation based on oscillation, plurality and, ultimately, on the erosion of the very 'principle of reality'" (7). Oscillation is tied to the world of mass media, which, through the constant changes of images and information, creates a flickering quality of how we perceive the world and how we receive information. Plurality is related to diversity and the realization that the affluent western world (dominated by white heterosexual men) no longer dominates the history of culture. In the current world, women and minorities now have a voice. The erosion of reality is due to disorientation caused by the destruction of a central view on rationality of the world; instead multiple co-existing worldviews exist. Vattimo proposes that nowhere is this more evident than in aesthetic experience (45). I am eager to know if these three notions can be observed in Blinky Palermo's work.

Vattimo suggests that mass media and reproduction create forces of oscillation and destabilization that change the nature of art. An understanding of this new essence of art can be reached by combining Martin Heidegger's concept of stoss and Walter Benjamin's concept of shock (Vattimo 47).

Stoss is decribed by Heidegger as "the setting up of the world and the setting forth of the earth." This phenomenon can be experienced in Palermo's *Blaue Schiebe und Stab (Blue Disk and Staff)*, 1968 (Fig. 1). Two blue objects, one elongated staff, and a circular disk are placed in close proximity to each other, leaning against the wall. Seen from afar, the objects appear familiar as if they were either tools or parts of some sort of semaphore signal system. Vanessa Joan Müller, a freelance curator, describes the pieces as an exclamation point (76). Despite their undefined nature, these objects seem familiar and rooted in western culture; "the world has been

set up" (Vattimo 47). The destabilizing notion— "the setting forth of the earth" (Vattimo 47).

happens when the viewer moves closer to the objects. The rod and disk are much larger than

expected; the length of the staff is 8 feet 3 inches and the disk has a diameter of more than 2 feet.

The blue surface, reminiscent of Yves Klein blue, is fabric tape meticulously wrapped around the

objects. A similar destabilizing effect is experienced in *Graue Scheibe (Gray Disk),* 1970 (Fig.

2). This grey irregular wall-mounted oblong disk is only 5 1/8" high, 10 3/8" wide and ¾" deep

and is composed of oil and synthetic paint on cotton canvas on wood-core plywood. The disk

appears insignificant at first, placed at eye level, and surrounded by vast empty white wall space.

Suddenly, there is a shift in perception of the room. *Graue Scheibe* activates and reveals the

surface of the gallery wall space, the way a beauty mark enhances a pretty woman's face. There

is a reversal between the role of the gallery and the exhibited art. The little grey disk negates the

role of the gallery as a showcase for art. Susan Küper says, "Palermo ceased to regard the

painting as an autonomous unit. Instead it was composed of the painted shape on the wall

together with its negative" (74). Many of Palermo's objects produced between 1964 and 1974

share this destabilizing effect.

In his 1936 essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," Walter

Benjamin used the word "shock" to describe the character of the changing projected images of

the movies (238). I propose that Palermo's last body of work *To the People of New York

City,*1976, features cinematic characteristics (Fig. 3). This monumental 15-part series consisting

of 40 aluminum panels, painted in yellow, red, or black—the colors of the German flag—is on

permanent display at Dia: Beacon in the Hudson Valley, north of New York City. Most of the

acrylic on aluminum paintings feature contrasting horizontal or vertical bands on monochromatic

backgrounds and are arranged in groups of the same size according to installation specifications

by Palermo. The cinematic nature of the work is revealed when one walks around the vast gallery installation. Due to the optical effect of the colors, it feels as if the paintings reach out and surround the viewer. The thin aluminum panels reference the reflective quality of a screen. The repetition of the colors, sizes, and compositions can be read as an interpretation of how mass media——through reproduction and exposure—flattens the meaning of symbols and images. Vattimo says, "the rapid diffusion of information tends to render every message immediately banal" (57). Stoss and shock are relevant concepts in understanding the intangible character of the world of today.

The concept of plurality is developed by Vattimo in his essay titled "Utopia to Heterotopia," which describes how utopian ideologies and views of the world have been replaced by heterotopia and asserts that aesthetic beauty today does not emerge from a singular ideological vision, but allows for plurality and inclusiveness (62).

Palermo's work consists of a wide variety of techniques and materials: drawings and paintings on paper, painted objects, wall paintings, metal paintings, stretched cloth panels, wall paintings, and projections. The site-specific wall drawings bring forth selected aspects of the architecture that under regular circumstances would not receive any attention. *Fenster 1 (Window 1),* 1970 (Fig.4), is a wall drawing that features the grid of the gallery storefront window reduced fifteen percent (Küper 74). In the gallery, the viewer can simultaneously look out the storefront window and view the wall drawing. Palermo's work engages the viewer as he or she moves around the room. The hierarchy of the art, the materials, the exhibition space, and the role of the viewer are all altered. Through the variety of materials, methods, and installations, Palermo's work seems to embrace a pluralistic view of the world in a formal architectural way.

The erosion of reality is the realization that man has created everything, including laws and values, and that there is no objective reality. The real world is in a state of dissolution and disenchantment and what remains is "nothing but a play of forces" (Vattimo, 97). Similarly, Palermo's work reaches out in different ways beyond the physical limits of the paintings and invites relationships or dialogues that might be more important than the objects themselves. The physical edges of the works and are imbued with meaning; there is a sense of a "weakening" of the boundaries of the work, the exhibition space, and the viewers. This is obvious in a work like *Schmatterling II (Butterfly II)*, 1969, which is a wall-mounted diptych consisting of a staff-like object and a small irregularly-shaped flat board mounted very close to the staff (Fig. 5 & Fig. 6). The staff is covered with irregularly stretched canvas wrapped around the edges; the face is painted black, while the sides are red. The red painted edge subtly reflects on the wall, makes the wall participate in the aesthetic experience of the piece, and invites the viewer to look at the piece from a diagonal angle. The little disk—perhaps an abstraction of a butterfly——seems to be attracted to the red side of the staff; perhaps the same way a viewer is attracted to it. The black painted face acts as the frame by bringing forth the red painted edge. Susan Küper notes, "A central theme of Palermo's work is edges, which should be regarded not as boundaries but as transitions" (74). In this simple diptych, there is an understanding that reality as we know it has changed; the edges are the new front. Anne Rorimer says that through this shift Palermo redefines "the traditional aspects of painting with regard to its planar frontality" (49).

Through "weakening," henceforth inactive components of the art, such as the edges, installation space, and the viewers themselves have become active (Fig. 7 & Fig. 8). In this post-modern world of communication and plurality, there is no longer one history of humankind or one centralized view of aesthetics. Boundaries, paradigms, and truths have "weakened." In an

absurd sense, the "weakening" of art might instead strengthen and activate its overall position in today's world by engaging its surroundings in a more active way. Art is constituted as much by the experience of ambiguity as it is by oscillation and disorientation. In the world of generalized communication, these are the only ways that art can (not still, but perhaps finally) take the form of creativity and freedom (Vattimo 60). It is this weak quality of Blinky Palermo's work that allows it to stay open and engaging to generations of artists and viewers. In an art context, the validity of *pensiero debole*—Gianni Vattimo's argument regarding 'weak thought'—is proven by the relevance and strength of Blinky Palermo's art.
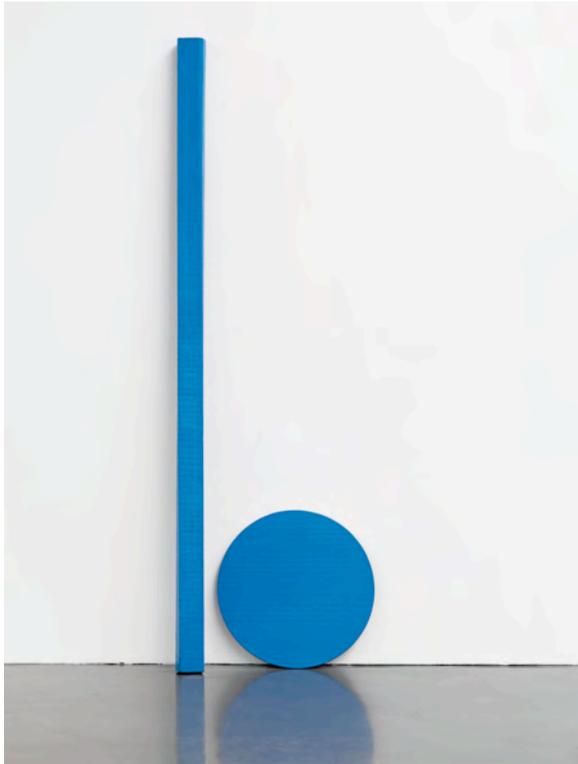
Illustrations

Fig. 1 Blinky Palermo, *Blaue Scheibe und Stab (Blue Disk and Staff),* 1968, fabric tape on wood, staff: 99" x 3 1/8," disk: 25 5/8"x 3/4"

Fig. 2   Blinky Palermo, *Graue Scheibe (Gray Disk),* 1970, oil and synthetic paint on cotton on wood-core plywood, 5 1/8"x 10 3/8"

Fig. 3   Blinky Palermo, *To the People of New York City,* 1976, Installation view at Dia: Beacon, NY, 2003, 15 parts, including 40 panels ranging from 8 ¼" x 6 3/8" to 39 ¼" x 78 ¾"

Fig. 4 Blinky Palermo, *Fenster 1 (Window 1), 1970,* Installation view at Kabinett für Aktuelle Kunst, Bremerhaven

Fig. 5   Blinky Palermo, *Schmetterling II (Butterfly II),* 1969, oil, canvas, wood and composite board, 119 ½" x 36 5/8" x 1 ¾" overall

Fig. 6   Blinky Palermo, *Schmetterling II (Butterfly II),* 1969, Portrait Palermo, 1970, Photo: Barbara Klemm

Fig. 7   Blinky Palermo, *Tagtraum I (Daydream I)*, 1965, Two parts: oil, synthetic textile, canvas, and wood, 23 5/8" x 24 ¾" x 2," oil, canvas, and wood, 9 ¼" x 18" x 2/3"

Fig. 8   Blinky Palermo, *Tagtraum I (Daydream I)*, 1965, Installation view with viewer at CCS Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, NY, 2011, digital photo

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