

Ugo Mulas*

(Pozzolengo, Brescia, 1928 – Milan, 1973)

For Mulas, photography is thought. In order to indicate the creative process of the artists he observed and portrayed working in their studios, he often used the word “operation.” It is a term close to the act of photographing and, in a broader sense, closer to mental elaboration than to manual work. Perusing his writings, a reader will find numerous passages where he seems to programmatically enunciate the desire that is the rational aspect of the artistic activity of conquering the scene where his pictures are shot.

This is the case with the notes on David Smith, where Mulas explicitly points out the importance of the artist’s mental operation in choosing pieces and executing his sculptures, as opposed to the mere physical operation. Or there is the consonance that Mulas expresses with the ironic analysis conducted by Roy Lichtenstein on the presumed spontaneity of the expressionist brushstroke, hemmed in by the thick outlines and rigid stylistic code of comic-book drawing. Perhaps the most significant passage for understanding Mulas’s attitude is the one devoted to Lucio Fontana’s “cuts,” where he describes having gone to the artist’s studio one day, noting his usual guise of photographer and friend bearing witness to the work, but with the specific goal of “succeeding in understanding what he was doing.”

Recounting what he understood, Mulas writes: “It was then that I understood how the preparatory moment, that which precedes the cut, was the most important, the decisive one. Then I begged Fontana to pretend to make some cuts. And so we placed a new canvas on the wall, and Lucio behaved as he did when he was waiting to make a cut, with his Stanley knife in hand, resting against the canvas, held up as if the work were beginning at that instant. [...] It is the moment when the cut has not yet begun and the conceptual elaboration, instead, is already completely clarified. That is, when the two aspects of the operation encounter each other: the conceptual moment that precedes the action, because when Fontana decides to move he already has the idea of the work, and the executory aspect, of the realization of the idea. [...] In one of the photos that I made, Fontana’s hand is moving, as if it had, in that very moment, completed its path; one doesn’t understand that it is a photo made specifically for the occasion, where the cut preexists.” The artifice in Mulas’ analytic process does not invalidate the truth of the photograph and the understanding of the work, much less betray the pre-established goal, for it is neither the uniqueness of the gesture nor the unrepeatable instant that interests him, but rather being able to sort out the concept through an analysis of the sequence of actions. (EV)

Additional Works in the Collection

Piero Manzoni, Bar Giamaica, Milan, 1953/54, gelatin silver print on baryta paper, 14.58 × 14.58 inches

Milan, 1953/54, gelatin silver print on baryta paper, 14.38 × 14.38 inches

Max Ernst, Venice Biennale, 1954, gelatin silver print on baryta paper, 13.87 × 13.59 inches

Marc Chagall, France, 1958, gelatin silver print on baryta paper, 14.58 × 9.57 inches

Richard Hamilton, 1970, gelatin silver print on baryta paper, 9.73 × 13.40 inches

Claes Oldenburg at the Chelsea Hotel, New York, 1964/65, gelatin silver print on baryta paper, 13.71 × 9.22 inches

Emilio Tadini, Sandro Somarè. Bar Giamaica, 1953-54, gelatin silver print on baryta paper, 15.68 × 19.62 inches

Lucio Fontana, Venice Biennale, 1964, original gelatin silver print, enameled, 11.54 × 7.49 inches

Robert Rauschenberg, Venice, 1964, original gelatin silver print, enameled, 11.58 × 7.60 inches

David Smith. Sculpture in the City, Voltri, 1962, gelatin silver print on baryta paper, 13.59 × 17.14 inches

Milan, Street Sweeper, 1953-54, gelatin silver print on baryta paper, 14.38 × 14.38 inches

Milan, Suburbs, 1953-54, gelatin silver print on baryta paper, 14.38 × 14.38 inches

Milan, Suburbs, 1953-55, gelatin silver print on baryta paper, 14.58 × 14.58 inches

Central Station, Milan, 1953-54, gelatin silver print on baryta paper, 14.38 × 14.38 inches

Bar Giamaica, Milan, 1953-55, gelatin silver print on baryta paper, 14.38 × 14.38 inches

Bar Giamaica, Milan, 1953-54, gelatin silver print on baryta paper, 14.58 × 14.58 inches

For "Ossi di Seppia," Monterosso, 1964, six silver salt prints on baryta paper, 14.38 × 13.99 inches

Tancredi, Milan, 1958, gelatin silver print on baryta paper, 13.99 × 13.99 inches

Karen Blixen, Copenhagen, 1961, gelatin silver print on baryta paper, 13.99 × 13.99 inches

Pino Pascali, Rome, 1968, gelatin silver print on baryta paper, 9.57 × 14.46 inches

Giorgio De Chirico in his Studio, Rome, 1968, gelatin silver print on baryta paper, 9.85 × 14.58 inches

Giacomo Manzù's Studio, Rome, 1966, gelatin silver print on baryta paper, 14.70 × 9.85 inches

Fausto Melotti, the Infinite, Milan, 1970, gelatin silver print on baryta paper, 14.38 × 9.65 inches

David Smith, Voltri, 1963, gelatin silver print on baryta paper, 13.59 × 13.59 inches

Lucio Fontana, "Holes," Milan, 1965, gelatin silver print on baryta paper, 9.46 × 13.79 inches

The Funerals of Piazza Fontana, Milan, 1969, four gelatin silver prints on baryta paper, 11.43 × 16.94 inches

Set Design for Alban Berg's Opera Woyzeck, Milan, 1969, Four gelatin silver prints on baryta paper, 19.70 × 19.70 inches

New York, 1967, Seven gelatin silver prints on baryta paper, 14.58 × 9.85 inches

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