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The leading thread: video, media, installation: a conversation with Federica Marangoni

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Article Text

Federica Marangoni is an important Italian media artist and designer based in Venice. She is a pioneer of video, performance and installation in Italy. Marangoni's exhibition at Ca'Pesaro – International Gallery of Modern Art, Venice, entitled *Il filo conduttore/The Leading Thread* (2015), was curated by Gabriella Belli. [1] The exhibition was organised by the Fondazione Musei Civici di Venezia in response to Venice Biennale's 56th International Art Exhibition – All The World's Futures. The following interview consists of several conversations held before and after this major exhibition and are part of the AHRC funded research project 'EWVA European Women's Video Art in the 70s and 80s', based at Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art and Design, University of Dundee. [2] [3]

LL/ES: The Leading Thread was "announced" by an imposing site-specific sculpture attached to the front of the building, on the Canal Grande. It was a wire that unravelled from a reel, a recurring element in your body of work (see *The Birth of Light*, 1992; *Freiheit*, 1999) [3]. Since the 60s you have always experimented and researched new and innovative materials, including Plexiglas, Plastics, Polyester. [4] The medium employed in *The Leading Thread* mimicked the effect of a neon tube, which you have been using since the 60s. How did you start using neon in your practice and which medium did you employ to make this sculpture for Ca'Pesaro?

FM: I started to use neon in the 60's. The first piece was a white neon tube silhouette self-portrait lying into its own negative shape excavated into white polyurethane. Of course this has strong associations with a coffin and ephemerality of life and the physical body. My use of neon became words often on top of a TV, or on a mirror like the large red word *ART* of 1987 (Madrid, Centro Cultural Casa de Vacas), also as shapes as in *Dripping Rainbow* and *Bleeding Heart*. The neon I used for *The Leading Thread*, is the result of a much

research of modification of the neon tube. It's called cracked neon, the tube is filled with mini-spheres of solid glass and the neon gas entering is obliged to find his way out, therefore creating a "light in motion."

This new visual effect of light concentrated in the tube moved like blood through veins. For the Ca'Pesaro installation I used a very simple line/sign along one side of the building vertically and along the water horizontally. It created an outline of the splendid baroque architecture. It was a contemporary art gesture, a dialogue, rather than a violation of the building. The neon, a double tube, reached a huge glass coil standing on the canal door of the Palazzo, representing the energy of art.



Figure 1. Federica Marangoni, *Il filo conduttore / The Leading Thread*, 2015, installation, Venice, Ca'Pesaro – Galleria Internazionale di Arte Moderna, photograph from Canal Gra.

LL/ES: The neon also entered the ground floor of Ca'Pesaro. How did you structure your presence in the space?

FM: Inside I had two rooms connected and quite open, I create two installations in two rooms. In one of the rooms there was the sound of the heart. The installation was all dedicated to human tragedies, to humanity and to the horrors that happen in the world every day. We look at the papers and then we throw them away because we can't look any more. It's been the same all my life: wars, killings, people dying because of famine in the desert. I started to collect clips from magazines and newspapers back in the 70's.

I have been using these dramatic images ever since. This is an endless video called Tolerance In Tolerance (2005). [5] A continuous collage of images of horrors updated to 2015, it is accompanied by the continuous sound of a heartbeat, which fills the room. On the floor there is the red neon like blood flowing into the large roll of barbed wire.

The other was a silent room, with a silent video: just my hand, that writes on a wall directly in neon. These are the screams that I address to humanity. My hand keeps silently writing. This is my last piece connecting research with video and neon – without having the real neon. In the second room on the black wall, behind the barbed wire with red neon hung a long sign in white neon – about 5 metres: "It's not a good day to be human."



Figure 2. Federica Marangoni, *Il filo conduttore / The Leading Thread*, 2015, multi media installation, Venice, Ca' Pesaro - Galleria Internazionale di Arte Moderna, detail.

This was the most tragic thing I have ever read on a wall. I saw it in the subway in New York. I was running, there was this wall with writing and underneath a beggar. It was already an installation and I photographed it with my camera. Then I re-built it here in Ca'Pesaro with this little woman beggar. It is created simply with pieces of wood covered by black textile simulating her curved body, the head covered by a shawl with a resin cast of my hand attached to her outstretched arm.

LL/ES: You mentioned, this silent video connects two research threads in your practice: video and neon. When did you start to use video?

FM: I began to use video in the second part of the 70's. It was a relatively new medium at the time and young artists like me felt free to experiment with these new media. I had already started using neon long before that. At that time, I didn't know much about what was happening in the USA. But then little by little the use of technology entered into my work and I developed it.

LL/ES: How did you see the possibilities of video as a new medium at the time?

FM: This is a very difficult question. To reply properly I should think of myself when I was thirty, driven by the results of my research. Now I can tell you that I predicted the future of this process though at the time it was considered fragile. Not many people believed video had a future and would become an established medium. We headed forward with the spirit of pioneers but with little means. I believed in it even if I didn't know much about what was happening around the world. We were in our little "cell" and we were lucky to find it. I didn't know for example about Nam June Paik, whom – I could have never imagined at the time – later would become my friend.

LL/ES: You started using video at Centro Video Arte at Palazzo dei Diamanti in Ferrara? How did it start this collaboration?

FM: Well at the time there were not many of us who wanted to experiment with video. We wanted to use this medium but we had limited funds. At the time, Lola Bonora and the director of the Museum, Franco Farina, created a centre for video experimentation, giving the possibility to some artists to produce video works. We did our videos and our performances at the Centro Video Arte.

LL/ES: In 1980, you were invited to show your work at MoMA in New York. Can you tell us more about that experience?

FM: Previous to that, I started working as assistant Professor to prof. Angiola Churchill at New York University I ran the summer course of glass art and design in Venice and they later invited me to teach in NY.

In 1979, I was working in a Gallery on 57th street. I had lost an entire shipment of glass sculptures for the exhibition. They were stolen at the port. Therefore I bravely did a new performance about the "ritual of life and death". In Manhattan anything can occur: a young curator of MoMA was in the audience, and he invited me to perform a new work at MoMA in February 1980.

At MoMA, I also brought my 16 mm *The Box of Life*: [6] it was the world premiere of the film, which had been produced at Centro Video Arte. For this I also made a new performance with bleeding wax masks – which were my double. These masks were electrified and they melted, only the skull remained. The performance was entitled *The Interrogation*. The tape recording was of questions like in a police interrogation: "Why are you an artist?" and I kept the melting mask in my hands in front of my face, till it was consumed, and then I took a transparent mask and distributed it to the public. It had a strong impact on the audience.

LL/ES: When did you begin to make video installations?

FM: I started to make them almost at the same time as I began to use video. I never used video in a narrative way. I wanted to use it as a fourth dimension for sculpture: to give life to it. Thus it became video-installation. The first was *MAXXI TV* (1980), which used TVs instead of control buttons and the image was projected onto a canvas. It was first shown in Ferrara, and later re-installed in Milan.

LL/ES: What have you preserved of *MAXXI TV* and other early installations?

FM: I have only bad photo-documentation: we were not aware that this would become our memory. At the time we made very complex "environments" (ambienti) – this is what we called them – and they were destroyed after the exhibitions.

For example, in 1970 I presented *La Strada* (The Street), a multi-sensory environment (ambiente sensoriale) curated by Pierre Restany at Centro Apollinaire in Milan, directed by Guido Le Noci. [7] It reproduced a cityscape at night, with a street with the white zebra lines and pedestrians. Pedestrians were silhouettes, made of a special Perspex, which glowed in the Wood's Lamp. [8] The effect was similar to a neon. In the dark, the soft foam rubber floor was designed to disorientate the visitors. The zebra lines and the silhouettes

were illuminated by black light. A 16mm film gave the impression of traveling in a car, accompanied by a voice-over by the poet Roberto Brivio. It was a big production and it is all gone. It has never been re-installed.

LL/ES: Are you working on a new project at the moment?

FM: As always since the early days when I cut out my silhouette from a piece of Perspex and put it on a grey plastic road with the white pedestrian strips I have many projects: I am always 'On the Road'!

References

1. Federica Marangoni: il filo conduttore / The Leading Thread, ed. Gabriella Belli (Venice: Fondazione Musei Civici, 2015).
2. EWVA aims to address the under-researched contribution of women artists to video as art form in Europe. Principal Investigator is Professor Elaine Shemilt. with Co-Investigator Professor Stephen Partridge, Research Fellow Dr Laura Leuzzi and archivist Adam Lockhart. Information and materials are available on <http://www.ewva.ac.uk>.
3. For the video recorded interview in English and Italian see <https://vimeo.com/148213824>. Video recording by Giorgia Marangoni. Edited by Lockhart with the support of the artist and Leuzzi.
4. See Federica Marangoni: i luoghi dell'utopia: iconografia e temi fondamentali nell'opera di Federica Marangoni / The Places of Utopia: Iconography and Basic Themes in Federica Marangoni's Work, ed. Viviana Conti (Milan: Mazzotta, 2008), 46-47 and 142-145.
5. See P. Restany, "Elettronica: madre di un sogno umanistico/ Electronic/ Mother of a Humanistic Dream," in *Ibid*, 52-58.
6. *Ibid*, 124-133.
7. See *Camere incantate, espansione dell'immagine*, ed. Vittorio Fagone (Milan: 1980), 145-146; Grahame Weinbren, "Symbols and Materials/ Simboli e materiali," in *REWINDItalia Early Video Art in Italy / I primi anni della videoarte in Italia*, eds. Laura Leuzzi, Stephen Partridge (New Barnet: John Libbey Publishing 2015), in particular 148-149 and 158-159 and Laura Leuzzi, Elaine Shemilt, Stephen Partridge, "Body Sign and Double a Parallel Analysis of Elaine Shemilt's Doppelgänger, Federica

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8. On the collaboration with Restany see *Una generazione intermedia: percorsi artistici a Venezia negli anni '70*, ed. Riccardo Caldura (Comune di Venezia, 2007), 36-39, in particular 36-37.
9. P. Restany, in *Federica Marangoni: i luoghi dell'utopia*, 52.

Bios

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Professor Elaine Shemilt is an artist, a Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts, the Royal Geographical Society, a Shackleton Scholar and has a Carnegie Scholarship. She is the Artistic Director of the Centre for Remote Environments, the Vice Chair of the South Georgia Heritage Trust and Chair of Printmaking.