Remembering Manfredo Massironi

Manfredo was an extraordinary and humble man. Trained as an architect in Venice, he was always fascinated by visual forms. Combining his care for construction and his interests in shapes, he became an artist – and a superb one, and a member of the avant-garde *Il Gruppo Enne* in the 1960s. The Group Enne exhibited their works collectively; individuals were anonymous, at least for a while. Their works were exhibited all over Europe (Belgrade, London, Paris, Rome, Zagreb, and at the Venice Biennale in 1964) and at the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

It is almost commonplace for an artist to regard each work as an experiment, but when Manfredo – a visual artist with profound psychological insights – discovered that there was actually a scientific field that did experiments in vision, he was hooked and retrained himself as a psychologist. It was foreordained that he would align with the Italian Gestalt Psychologists – the best known in North America are Fabio Metelli and Gaetano Kanizsa – but he always remained an independent thinker and doer. When I knew him he taught in Verona, but for a time he had what I thought was the best possible job a perceptual psychologist could have: He traveled to Milan to teach a class on perception to design students. And I couldn’t imagine a better person to do it.

Manfredo discovered me (I wish I could say it was the reverse) when he and Ugo Savardi were working on invariants – mathematical constancies thought to aid the perception of shape. I had just published work that discussed the same invariant, the cross-ratio. Unsurprisingly, Manfredo’s interest came from art, in particular anamorphic paintings. On the basis of our mutual interests, he invited me to Padova and Verona in 1990. I gave three talks there and one in Rome, but he also took me on architectural day trips around Padova, Verona, and Rome. Actually, the Rome trip included only “Baroque Rome.” Always the visual purist, he suggested that one must never mix architectural styles in the same tour. As I was departing he gave me two of his works, one from his series *completamenti amodali* (a two-side play on amodal completion) and one from his series *soltazioni* (a two-piece play on subtracted space). Carefully wrapped up (only Manfredo could wrap so carefully and securely – he did, after all, study and construct artistic knots) I had a bit of trouble getting them through customs in New York. The agent queried me extensively, but when I said I was an academic psychologist who studied perception and was interested in posters, he let me through. Posters indeed! They are the most striking artworks that my wife and I own.

In 1993, when my family and I spent a sabbatical year in Paris, he hosted us for a week in Padova and Venice. A few years later I invited him to Cornell University and Ithaca, New York for several months. He sat in on our seminars and we quickly fell into working on what turned out to be our only collaboration, “Pictures and their special status in cognitive inquiry” (Cutting & Massironi, 1998). A psychologist interested in vision myself, I found it astonishing to work with someone with so much first-hand knowledge and depth of understanding. My wife, Claudia Lazzaro and I then visited Italy in 2001 and, showing his ecumenical
interests in form, Manfredo was more interested in her work on the layouts of Italian Renaissance gardens than in my then current work on the canon of Impressionist art. He didn’t think much of the French Impressionists, but he was a marvelous host. I had a delightful visit again in 2008, but unfortunately he was already failing from Parkinson’s disease. For me his lasting scholarly work is his only English language book (Massironi, 2002), translated by my former student Nicola Bruno. It is a marvelous, idiosyncratic text brimming with visual ideas and lessons about visual form.

James Cutting

References: