

September 20th 2024

## **Surprise is an Explosion of Attention**

Davide Maria Coltro's *Medial Paintings* can surprise us because they evade certain expectations of staticity, univocity, and permanence upon which painting often relies. However, more than texture, subject, or the treatment of light, what these canvases subvert is the distribution of our attention. A single glance is not enough to grasp their presence, their existence. By their very nature—variable and uninterrupted flows—these paintings can only be experienced partially: no matter how much concentration we devote to them, we can only witness a finite series of moments. The exhibition of *Medial Paintings* does not represent the final moment of artistic creation but rather a glimpse into the process. Each work serves as an open channel between the artist and the viewer, allowing the creative process to continue beyond the exhibition. The screens act as windows into the randomized flow programmed by the artist, constantly changing while following predetermined parameters. Once our scattered attention is activated (not in a negative sense, but simply as diffused, dispersed), as observers, we are challenged to relinquish the need to experience everything. In a digital and real world where the recording and dissemination of artworks are easier, more accessible, and more multifaceted than ever, this exhibition invites us to embrace distraction—that is, the displacement of attention. We can happily surrender to the flow and impermanence, accepting our inability to dedicate the same level of concentration to everything before us. Coltro, like practically all contemporary artists, works in a context where the audience's gaze is shaped by the use of digital devices and the habit of consuming content in a fragmented manner. Since his earliest experiments, his work has aimed to stimulate a deeper process of internalization, inviting the viewer to engage in an intimate and conscious interaction with the artwork. From the late 1990s onward, Coltro has explored the fluid language of digital media, anticipating not only contemporary artistic trends but also the very ways in which images are now disseminated and experienced. His collaboration with Pietro Gagliardi, which began in the early 2000s, reinforced and solidified this research, contributing to the diffusion of these new perceptions. The innovation of this inquiry does not lie so much in the relative novelty of the medium used but rather in making explicit the constant transformation of art and our perception of it: when a screen is installed in a gallery or a collector's home, it becomes a portal through which a pictorial experience flows—one that already exists in potentiality and, in fact, exists with greater originality in that interval between creation and presentation.

The historical significance of the artist's contribution resonates with Nicolas Bourriaud's reflections on *relational aesthetics*, formulated around the time Coltro's artistic vision was taking shape:

*"Artists invent ways of living, or they create awareness of a moment M in the assembly line of social behavior patterns, making it possible to imagine another state of our civilization."*<sup>1</sup>

Coltro's aesthetic explorations shape our perception of the world, intertwining with what has always been familiar and rewriting the fabric of our interactions. It is an act of continuous speculation, where the digital becomes a means of decoding and

---

<sup>1</sup> Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetic*, 2002, les presses du réel

amplifying reality, opening portals to unexpected dimensions. This play of reflections does not end with functionality but delves into the depths of social and cultural models, germinating new possibilities.

The element of surprise and the impact of the works in this exhibition depend not only on the internal mutations of the artwork itself but also on the mental disposition of the audience, accustomed to interacting with a constant flow of moving images yet rarely required to maintain prolonged attention. While aimless "scrolling" through social media is a familiar action, the distraction—or rather, the diffused attention—we are invited to engage in with *Medial Paintings* feels like a welcome novelty.

In her most recent publication<sup>2</sup>, Claire Bishop has linked the concept of *refreshing*—the reloading of web pages—to contemporary art, referencing a process of continuous reactivation and renewal of the audience's attention that characterizes certain performances within the museum context. We could apply this analogy to the works in this exhibition: *Medial Paintings* and *Medial Sculptures* function, in part, as extended browsers, where the different temporalities and configurations of the artwork can be explored at the viewer's discretion—or rather, according to the moment and the viewer's attention span. The observer has the possibility to "navigate" between different moments of the artwork, choosing where to focus their attention while still remaining at the mercy of the artist's choices and the hardware at hand, which control the rhythm and sequence of changes. Time in Coltro's installations is organized in cycles and continuous flows, yet it also includes moments of surprise and sudden changes that challenge the idea of temporal linearity—particularly in the case of the repeated activation performance for *Surprise* on September 19, 2024. The canvases operate through an inseparable interconnection between the artist's will and the viewer's agency. We do not have full control over our interaction with the artwork, yet we can still decide when and how to "click" or move, choosing to explore or ignore certain elements, following our instincts in deciding when to approach or step away.

The reproduction and dissemination of exhibitions through social media is now a common practice, both for museums and galleries as well as visitors. This form of documentation, often shared in real time, not only amplifies the visibility of exhibitions but sometimes even replaces the direct experience of the artworks. In an increasingly digital age, it is difficult to separate traditional interaction with art from its online representation. In light of these reflections, one naturally wonders what the experience is like for a visitor who chooses to photograph the exhibited works and how it differs from that of someone who dedicates their full attention to the elusive and continuous presence of the *Medial Paintings*. The observer is drawn into a blurred flow between the real and the virtual, through the transmission of constant variation. Even in this case, we are an audience particularly suited to ambiguity, accustomed as we are to experiencing art "for others," filtered through the lenses of our smartphone cameras.

Which experience will hold more value, be remembered, shared, and reproduced through social media, and how it will transform, remain open questions.

---

<sup>2</sup> Claire Bishop, *Disordered Attention. How we Look at Art and Performance Today*, Verso Books, 2024