

**LAURA
GRISI**

**VARIABLE
AND
NEON
PAINTINGS,
1966–1968**

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LAURA GRISI'S WORK has always been considered part of Italian Pop Art, though even from the outset she has actually gone beyond that category, promptly intercepting various lines of international artistic research and applying them in her own original synthesis.

From her debut in 1964 to 1968, Grisi's work featured elements derived from the art of the first half of the 1960s, when economic affluence was prompting artists to simulate a society of consumption, borrowing objects, images and media (in Pop Art), or analyzing the capacity of new technologies to influence perception (in Optical Art and Kinetic-Programmed Art), while also absorbing the modular, geometric aspects of industrial production, the absence of subjective-manual intervention (in Minimal Art). On the other hand, however, Grisi's work already included elements belonging to the research conducted in Italy and abroad in the second half of the 1960s, when a phase of economic recession led artists to view the society of consumption as alienating, and therefore to attempt to restore an atrophied creative potential to every individual, making them the protagonists of a dematerialized, de-aestheticized and theatrical art (in the temporary actions and site-specific installations characteristic of Arte Povera and Process Art).

"Your work, from the beginning, has presented a certain 'theatricality,' [...] the places discovered by your works are more like expeditions into the artificial, into fiction."¹

The fact that Grisi's research covers all the above-mentioned elements and not just those of Pop origin is demonstrated by her first cycle of works: the *Variable Paintings*. These are paintings with two or more sliding panels of painted canvas and colored plexiglas: the viewer, urged to alter their overlapping, reveals parts that were previously hidden and changes the color thanks to the shadow cast by the overlaid panels (v. *Seascape*, 1966). Though having affinities with American Pop Art – especially that of Roy Lichtenstein – due to the reference to the society of consumption that mechanically produces playful-modular objects and cold stylized images, the *Variable Paintings* do not abandon the subjective, manual gesture of painting.

"The calligraphic sign [...] is the reverberation of a notion, of a reference that immediately cancels itself and that nevertheless passes through the mind to reawaken a mysterious suggestion."²

1. Germano Celant, *Laura Grisi*, Rizzoli International Publications, New York 1989.

2. Nello Ponente, *Laura Grisi*, Galleria Il Segno, Rome 1964.

L. Grisi, *Grass Field*, 1966, acrylic on canvas, plexiglas, sliding panels, 98 x 62 x 12 cm



Although her works seem to have affinities with Italian Pop Art due to the personal, subjective gesture of the painting, they do not belong entirely to that category: the sliding of the panels, besides suggesting film editing, prompts reflections on perceptive effects, on a par with the Kinetic-Programmed Art of the same period. Moreover, the sequence of images generated by the sliding of the panels produces a narrative character based on the dialectic of the parts with the whole, which on the one hand implies the relativism of vision and its development in time postulated by Henri Bergson, and on the other the desire to perceive the image in different moments expressed by Eadweard Muybridge.

“One merit of Laura Grisi is [...] that of respecting the completeness of the perceptive act and of offering us ingenious diagrams in which, with clear dialectic division, both the subjective-ideal and the objective-existential dimensions find a place.”³

The use of plexiglas, which Grisi shares with American Minimalism, simply augments this reflection on perception. But unlike the Minimalist research that applied it as a self-referential material, Grisi uses it to obtain effects of chiaroscuro and illusion of depth. Her youthful working experience in the Parisian atelier of the Russian costume designers the Doboujinskis had in fact enabled her to learn about the illusionistic properties of plastic materials used in theater sets, and the history of Russian art, including the plexiglas sculptures of Moholy-Nagy.

“A formal principle and a tool: these are the two objectives of Laura Grisi. The first is shadow (man reduced to a figure of himself), the second is the camera (the single and triune eye of us technological Polyphemuses). And in plexiglas she rediscovers these two factors. Plexiglas like? [...] She achieves the blurring of memory without the cold precision of the *réportage*.”⁴

It is a short hop from the chiaroscuro generated by the plexiglas to the introduction of true light, as happens with the *Neon Paintings*. Though borrowing the use of acrylic, plexiglas and sliding panels from the *Variable Paintings*, this new series of works stood out for the use of metal, wood and above all neon, multiplying the light/shadow, depth/perspective, stasis/movement dialectic, and formulating a De Chirico-metaphysical dimension (v. *Glotsy*, 1966; *St. Marks Place* and *Subway*, both from 1967). Introducing

3. Renato Barilli, *Laura Grisi*, Galleria dell'Ariete, Milan 1965.

4. Maurizio Fagiolo dell'Arco, *Mostra Nazionale Premio Trento*, Trento 1967.

B.L.Grisi, *Glotsy*, 1966, neon, acrylic on card, canvas, ondulux, wood, revolving plexiglass, 163 x 131 x 15,5 cm (detail)



neon, Grisi was in line with the “neonization” of art that spread on an international level in the 1960s, parallel to the spread of plastic materials and new technologies: in Kinetic-Programmed Art, for example, neon tubes were used by Chryssa Vardea-Mavromichali and Grazia Varisco, while in Pop Art they were deployed by Roy Lichtenstein and Martial Raysse, in Minimalism by Dan Flavin, in Performance Art by Bruce Nauman, in Arte Povera by Mario Merz and Pier Paolo Calzolari, in Conceptual Art by Joseph Kosuth and Maurizio Nannucci. Grisi uses neon because she wants to work with a technologically defined material that can still be manipulated by craftsmanship, with the goal of obtaining different color shadings, a painting with effects of illusory depths and the cool aura of Nouveau Réalist film, as well as the same artificial dimension of psychological oppression and incommunicability generated by luminous signs at night in cities.

“While actually being not very deep, these compositions create illusory effects of nocturnal space in which shadows of people move mysteriously towards unknown destinations, coming and going in a illusory environment of urban space filled with blazing neon signs and dazzling reflections.”⁵

Precisely in response to the oppression and incommunicability of the mass society, in 1967 and 1968 many artists in Italy and elsewhere proposed a return to the primal, vital elements of nature (just consider Arte Povera). Grisi immediately intercepted this new experimentation, developing the *Natural*

5. Alan Solomon, *Young Italians*, Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston e The Jewish Museum, New York 1968.

Laura Grisi, Installation View in the *Young Italians* exhibition at “The Jewish Museum”, New York, 1968



Elements series starting in 1968, of installation/works that artificially reproduce atmospheric phenomena. Among them, *Spiral Light* and *Sunset Light* (1968) are plexiglas columns containing neon tubes that project a cool colored light outward, triggering reflection on the nature/artifice duality aimed at prompting a psychological metamorphosis and a redefinition of space.

“Every column is a single work and can be taken as such, but the primary intention of Grisi is to occupy a given space with a series of columns.”⁶

With respect to the tautological-objectual and mythical-ancestral use of natural elements implemented by Arte Povera, Grisi presents nature as a mental, technologized fact, as cool light capable of dispersing the “fog” caused by the bombardment of images in the society of consumption.

6. Cesare Vivaldi, *Quattro presenze a Revort* 2, in “Collage”, dicembre 1968.

Laura Grisi working on
Sunset Light, 1967

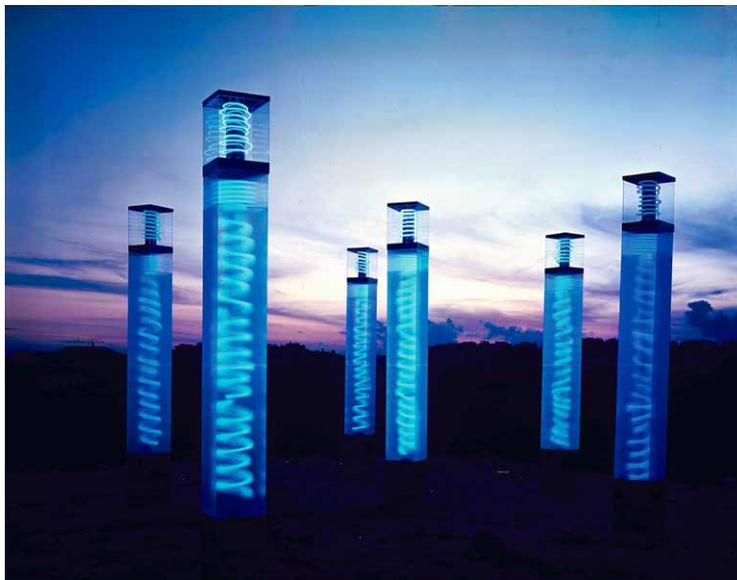


“Her works emphasize the use of constructive forms that remind us of the mass media of the contemporary world, of a setting constructed according to a new technique. Forms of reaction to reality develop from these constructions.”⁷

The particular character of the research of Grisi, from then on, lies in the equal presence of the technological-scientific and aesthetic-perceptive components. Professor Argan also praised her for this:

7. Udo Kultermann, *Laura Grisi*, Galerie E. M. Thelen, Essen 1968.

Laura Grisi, *Un'area di nebbia*,
Galleria Marlborough, Rome, 1969



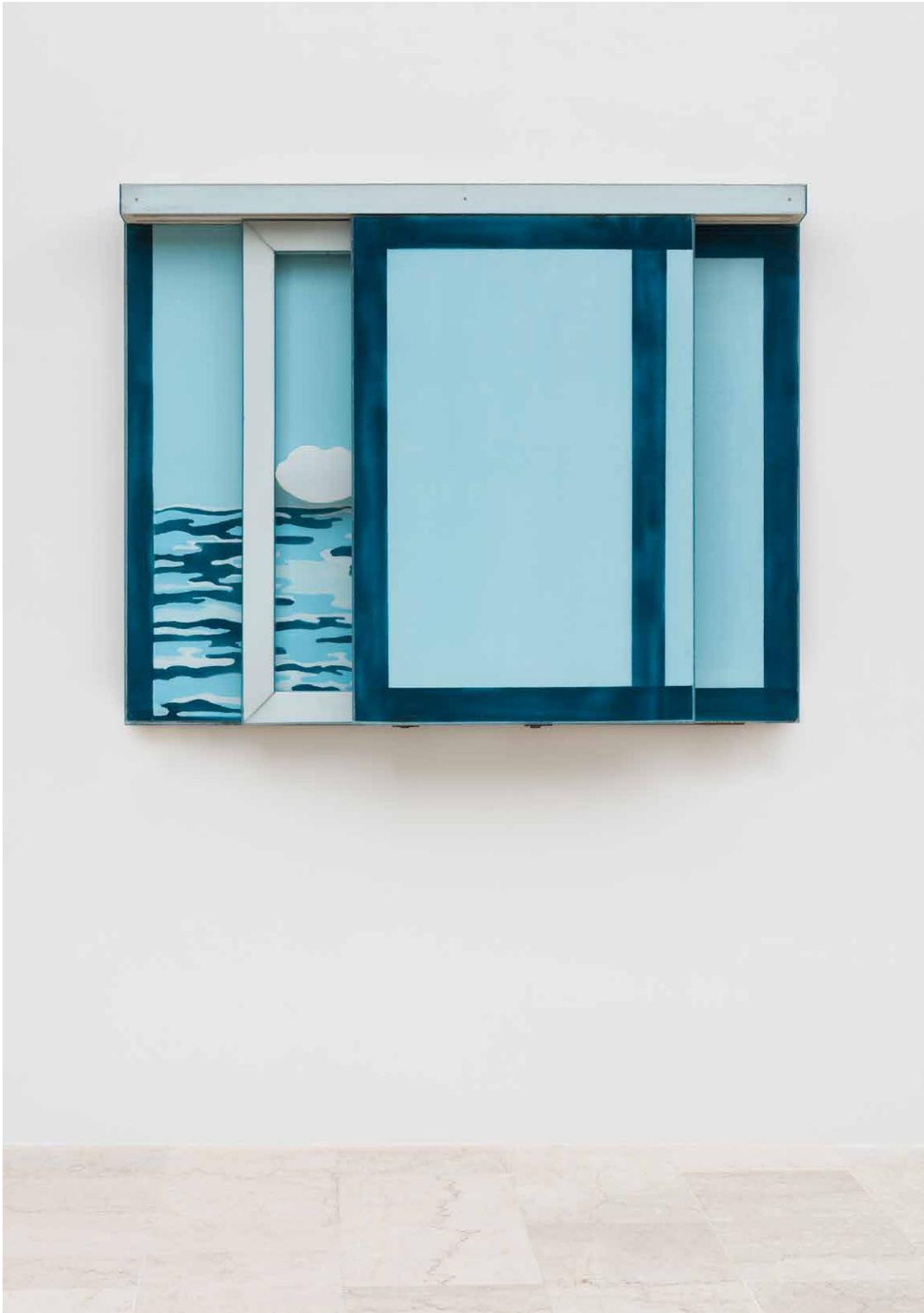
“The process of perception coincides, like duration, with the time of a technical-scientific experiment. [...] With perfect mental honesty, she sets out to measure and maintain, at the same time, the distance and directional identity of parallel paths of research.”⁸

8. Giulio Carlo Argan, *Laura Grisi*, Galerie E. M. Thelen, Colonia 1970.

Ilaria Bernardi



1. Laura Grisi, *Seascape*, 1966
acrylic on canvas, plexiglas, sliding panels, 100 x 122 x 12 cm



1. Laura Grisi, *Seascape*, 1966
acrylic on canvas, plexiglas, sliding panels, 100 x 122 x 12 cm
(panels in a different position)



2. Laura Grisi, *Grass Field*, 1966
acrylic on canvas, plexiglas, sliding panels, 98 x 120 x 12 cm



2. Laura Grisi, *Grass Field*, 1966
acrylic on canvas, plexiglas, sliding panels, 98 x 120 x 12 cm
(panels in a different position)



3. Laura Grisi, untitled, 1965
mixed media on cardboard, 104 x 69 cm



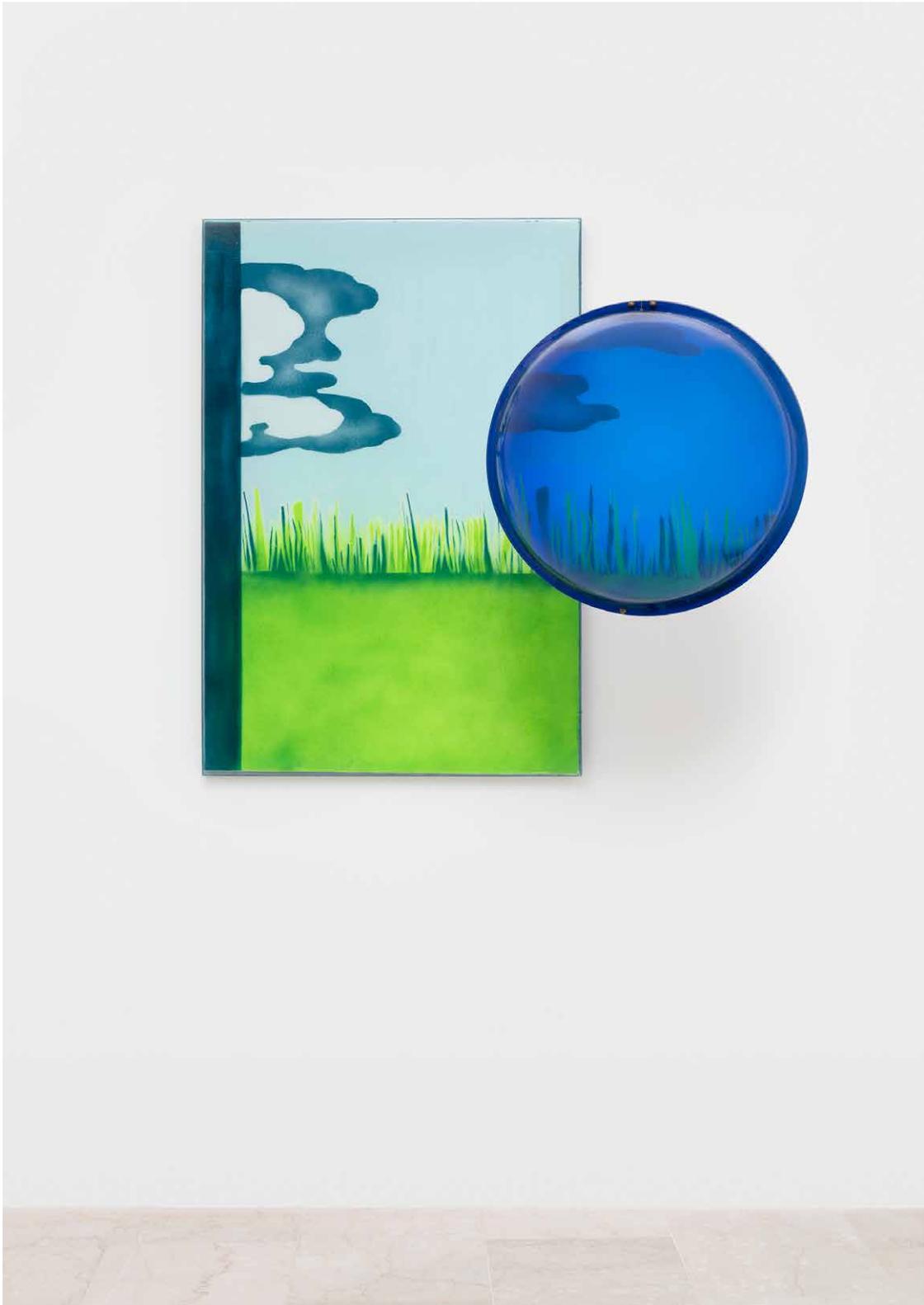
4. Laura Grisi, untitled, 1966
mixed media on cardboard, 100 x 70 cm



5. Laura Grisi, untitled, 1966
mixed media on cardboard, 100 x 70 cm



6. Laura Grisi, untitled, 1966
mixed media on cardboard, 92 x 62 cm



7. Laura Grisi, *Sphere with Grass Field*, 1966
plexiglas and mix technique, diameter 43 cm, acrylic on canvas, 92 x 61 x 3 cm



8. Laura Grisi, *Glotsy*, 1966
neon, acrylic on card, canvas, ondulux, wood, revolving plexiglass, 163 x 131 x 15,5 cm



9. Laura Grisi, *St. Marks Place*, 1967
neon, plexiglass, aluminum, wood, sliding panels, 175 x 185,5 x 21 cm



9. Laura Grisi, *St.Marks Place*, 1967
neon, plexiglass, aluminum, wood, sliding panels, 175 x 185,5 x 21 cm
(panels in a different position)



10. Laura Grisi, *Subway*, 1967
neon, plexiglass, aluminium, sliding panel, 163 x 103 x 22 cm



10. Laura Grisi, *Subway*, 1967
neon, plexiglass, aluminium, sliding panel, 163 x 103 x 22 cm
(panels in a different position)



11. Laura Grisi, *Sunset Light*, 1967
neon, plexiglass, 219 x 30 x 30 cm



12. Laura Grisi, *Spiral Light*, 1968
neon, steel, plexiglass, 219 x 30 x 30 cm



13. Laura Grisi, *Racing Car*, 1967
plexiglass, neon, aluminium box, 80 x 170 x 13 cm

