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Style

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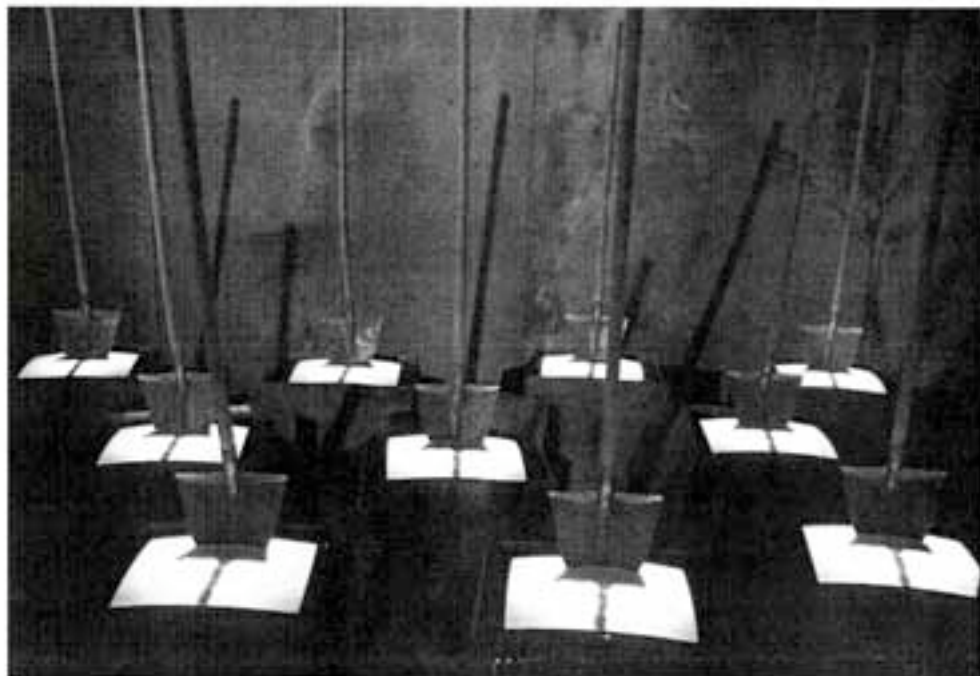


Photo provided by Patricia Pines

Photo by John Pines

The protean
art of

Fabrizio Plessi

One of the problems with conceptual art is tightly summed up by T.S. Eliot in "The Hollow Men":

*Between the idea
And the reality
Between the motion
And the act
Falls the Shadow*

On an upper floor at the Wood Street Galleries is a long table filled with drawings by Fabrizio Plessi that refer, in large part, to his large-scale sculpture and installation work created over the past few years. To a lesser extent, they refer to the three significant works on show in these galleries in Pittsburgh. They are essentially sketches of ideas, and not preparatory notes, drawn with precision and panache.

Although not preparatory, they anticipate, in an open-ended way, a concrete resolution. One might almost imagine that these scraps of paper were sufficient in themselves. But for about 30 years now, Plessi has created an important reputation for work with video, something that has come to be recognized as the medium of contemporary art. This artist uses video as Michelangelo used marble.

The use of the television monitor by Nam June Paik in the early 1960s heralded the advent of video art, and Plessi, who was born in 1940 in Reggio Emilia in Italy but who now lives in Venice, was himself an early exponent. The Fluxus movement in Germany was an important influence on these artists and connects them to the mainstream of the contemporary art of their time. Today, Paik and Plessi are elder statesmen and still producing significant work.

Two years ago, Plessi was the subject of a major retrospective at the Guggenheim Museum in New York, a show which traveled to the Museum of Contemporary Art in San Diego the following year. At the Wood Street Galleries through March is "Fabrizio Plessi: Bronx," a much smaller show comprised of installation work

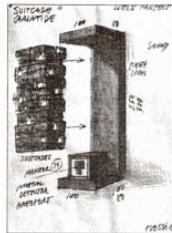
and sculpture, as well as a body of drawings that provides an economical guide to Plessi. In one sense there can never be a definitive gathering together of the works. They are either over, after the fashion of performance work and variously documented, or their scale makes it impossible for them to travel. Like architecture, we have to make do with images.

But Plessi's work is essentially protean, capable of undergoing changes of scale and emphasis. A small work, "Cristallo Liquido/Liquid Crystal," a video installation first performed in 1986 and re-created here in Pittsburgh, is a smaller version of one of his most famous installations spectacularly displayed in the cafe Florian in the Piazza di San Marco in Venice. The work in Pittsburgh is different in effect and sensibility, but both are first cousins. At the cafe Florian, in a spectacular ogonise room,

quantities of wine glasses were suspended from the painted ceiling. Beneath them, galvanized buckets contained small video monitors displaying drops of fluid striking the surface of water. In this most social of environments a highly stylized social interaction was presented, albeit without human intervention. The piece was part of the 1981 Venice Biennial, and re-enacted at the Guggenheim and in San Diego, implying that his work, although site-related should perhaps not be viewed as strictly site-specific.

In Pittsburgh the work is more solitary. A single bucket equipped with a monitor sits beneath an inverted table suspended from the ceiling, with a single wine glass fixed to it. It may be even poignant.

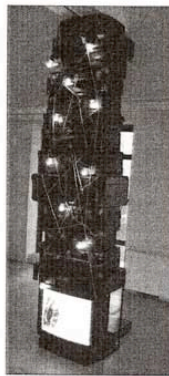
On the same floor, another of Plessi's pieces is set up, a work first shown in 1982, and subtly altered to the Pittsburgh site. (It would be interesting to know whether these works successively presented are seen by the artist as essentially the same work or essentially different from



A project study for 'Le Cariatide del Poveri/The Caryatids of the Poor.'

each other.) "Le Cariatide del Poveri: The Caryatids of the Poor" is a columnar sculpture with suitcases stacked one upon another to touch the ceiling. They are roped together and have dim light bulbs attached to the column. The base is a video monitor, which resists the ordinary rules of architecture. Plessi is an engineer, rather than an architect, despite the strong architectural character of both his physical work and his drawings. As with "Liquid Crystal," beyond the formal properties of the sculpture, there is an emotive quality inherent in the work... the suitcases suggest impermanence and lack of fixity, an important phenomenon in the 20th century.

"Bronx," the largest of the Plessi installations at Wood Street, has been revived a number of times, most notably at the 1986 Venice Biennial, but here is given a floor to itself. It derives from a project study of 1981. A series of monitors, surrounded with plates of rusted steel, project images of moving water. Touching the monitor itself, steel spades appear to be submerged in the liquid. The large-scale assembly, surrounded by huge plates of rusted steel, and separated from the viewer by a grille, has a disruptive sound element that is threat-



▲ Le Cariatide del Poveri/The Caryatids of the Poor, a sculptural installation by Fabrizio Plessi.
► Cristallo Liquido/Liquid Crystal, a sculptural installation by Fabrizio Plessi.

ening, and implies violence. In all of these works the important roles of water and the fluid properties of video light are seen to be closely related. Time and the spatial properties of the work are equally significant. Together they represent the raw materials out of which Plessi builds his sculpture. It may be a far cry from the early days when Plessi took a saw and proceeded to cut a body of water in half, but his essential preoccupations remain, nicely distilled at Wood Street.

Graham Shearing is the art critic for *The Tribune-Herald*.

