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ARTE POVERA

The Great Awakening

Texts by Simon Baier, Bernhard Mendes Bürgi, Luca Cerizza,
Karsten Löckemann, Christiane Meyer-Stoll, Linda Schädler,
Rainald Schumacher, Christian Spies, Maren Stotz, and Angela Vettese,
and a conversation with Ingvild Goetz

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CANTZ

CONTENTS

FOREWORD AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS
BERNHARD MENDES BÜRGI
7

THE GREAT AWAKENING
RAINALD SCHUMACHER
in Conversation with Collector
INGVILD GOETZ
11

ON THE PHENOMENON OF TIME IN ARTE POVERA
A Descriptive Approach on the Basis of Selected Works
CHRISTIANE MEYER-STOLL
19

ITALY IN THE SIXTIES: A HISTORICAL GLANCE
ANGELA VETTESE
33

DIFFERENCE, MORE THAN REPETITION
The Influence of Arte Povera on Art after 1989
LUCA CERIZZA
45

SELECTED WORKS
With texts by
SIMON BAIER, KARSTEN LÖCKEMANN,
LINDA SCHÄDLER, RAINALD SCHUMACHER,
CHRISTIAN SPIES, MAREN STOTZ
57

INDEX
Complete Works of Arte Povera in the Goetz Collection
121

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY
140

ITALY IN THE SIXTIES: A HISTORICAL GLANCE

ANGELA VETTESE

"The postwar generations do nothing but watch America, copying its trends, feeding on its films and myths . . . Until, in Los Angeles, a young man shoots Bobby Kennedy, almost without knowing why, just as Oswald might have shot at another Kennedy. In the meantime there had been the assassination of Martin Luther King. So at this point, what does this America have to teach us? Violence, just violence, and of the worst kind. There is nothing worth copying from this fabulous America."[1] These words are from the letter of a reader of the prestigious Italian weekly magazine *Epoca,* which was influenced—also in its graphics—by the American weekly *Life,* though it was designed by the great Bruno Munari: one of those bridgelike personalities that took the Italy of design and art from its before to its after, from a poor rural country to one in the vanguard of the world, especially the world of forms.

That issue of *Epoca* was a full-color "special" on the death of Robert Kennedy. On the cover, a group of men in dark suits carried a coffin draped with an American flag. A phrase and an image that narrate an era: the United States no longer represented the main source of inspiration for a new lifestyle. This was the start of a time in which, for almost two decades, the new lifestyle would also be inspired by Italy: in terms of food, of course, but also fashion, the way of thinking about free time, and the language of art. This is becoming clear only today, long after the most intense, pioneering moment of this influence. Therefore, only now can Arte Povera, in the field of visual arts, receive the historical recognition it deserves. So let's take a look at what, in historical terms, lies behind this arduous but important rebirth.

People began to look to Europe, the England of Carnaby Street and the miniskirts of Mary Quant. After the flood in Florence in 1966, when thousands of young people gathered to save books and artworks, creating an operative chain of so-called *angeli del fango* (mud angels), even in Italy students had learned how to organize and protest. This was an important precedent for the specifically Italian interpretation, a few years later, of France's "May 1968," which had its counterpart not among students but in the working class during the "Autunno Caldo" (hot autumn) in 1969. A desire for cultural independence and a return to roots exploded—in keeping with what Alberto Sordi had expressed, in a nutshell, in a famous scene from the film in which he plays a young man who

1 Letter to the editor in the weekly magazine published by Arnoldo Mondadori editore, *Epoca* XIX, 925 (June 16, 1968), p. 1.

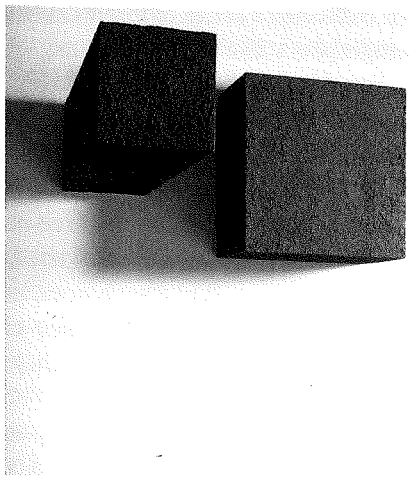
wants to live like an American, but then succumbs to the temptation of a big dish of pasta.[2] It was comedy, of course—*commedia all'italiana,* in fact—but also a clear indication of a specific way of approaching the culture of consumption, discarding and challenging certain parts of it.

After the exultance of the postwar years, in which the Marshall Plan had helped Italy to reconstruct and become a market and ally for the United States, the symbolic power of the countries that had won World War II was fading, particularly that of America, which was experienced as a double-edged sword. The artist Michelangelo Pistoletto often relates that in the early nineteen-sixties, when his mirror paintings had caught the eye of the art dealer Ileana Sonnabend, she asked him explicitly to become an American citizen, in exchange for almost guaranteed success. The answer was no,[3] but we also know that Pistoletto's prices today cannot rival those of Roy Lichtenstein. That proud no was one of the many acts that led to a desire for Italian renewal, the roots of which lay primarily in the Turin area, with the creation of new galleries or the transformation of already existing ones. The works of a group of local artists began to appear in the programming of Luciano Pistoi's Galleria Notizie, and the same artists were instrumental in the launch of the Christian Stein, Gian Enzo Sperone, and Giorgio Persano galleries. In Rome, Fabio Sargentini opened his gallery L'Attico for the group he had met through Pino Pascali and Jannis Kounellis. Starting a new gallery did not require a particularly heavy investment in those days. Sales were few and far between, and a talent for improvisation was a must. The art system had yet to become the fully encoded money-making machine it is today, and there was room for the adventures of young people, many of whom had not reached the age of thirty at the time. Simultaneously, the collapse of unquestioning faith in the United States and its cultural role also led to a decline of the desire to work with that country's galleries. The task at hand was to invent one's own territory.

For many years in Italy the Soviet bloc had had enormous power to influence opinions; important art historians were still tied to Socialist Realism and the aesthetic precepts expressed in Moscow by Andrei Zhdanov; other critics and historians like Giulio Carlo Argan and Palma Bucarelli, director of the Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna in Rome, one of the only Italian museums then regularly making acquisitions, were fascinated by what Lea Vergine has correctly called "the last avant-garde," i.e. Optical and Kinetic Art, still based on "an

2 *Un Americano a Roma (An American in Rome)*, 1954, directed by Stefano Vanzina.

3 Cf. Angela Vettese, "From the Early Paintings to the First Reflective Surfaces," in Carlos Basualdo, ed., *Michelangelo Pistoletto From One to Many: 1956–74*, exh. cat. Philadelphia Museum of Art (Philadelphia, 2010), pp. 29–51; Angela Vettese, "Que reste-t'il: introduction and interview with Michelangelo Pistoletto," in Cristina Baldacci and Clarissa Ricci, *Quando è scultura* (Milan, 2010), pp. 199–210.



Pino Pascali, *1 metro cubo di terra e 2 metri cubi di terra (1 Cubic Meter of Earth and 2 Cubic Meters of Earth),* 1967

evolutionary idea of the medium."[4] Yet Italy's newest generation was also losing faith in the Soviet Union, America's geopolitical opposite—the communist bloc whose ideals and funding led support to the PCI (Partito Comunista Italiano), the strongest communist party in the non-communist world. "Dramatic hours in Prague—the Political Office of the PCI expresses its grave dissent"[5]: this was the headline chosen by *l'Unità,* the newspaper of the Italian Communist Party, the day after the sudden invasion of the Czech capital by Soviet tanks. Until then no one had really wanted to believe in the cruelty of the purges of Stalin, and many had disagreed with the positions of Nikita Khrushchev. The extreme wing that wanted Italy to become part of the communist bloc as soon as the war was over had to begin to give ground. *Il Resto del Carlino,* the most widespread daily newspaper in the part of Italy that was a PCI stronghold, found itself having to print the headline "World Distressed by 'Second Hungary.'"[6] Many had already left the party ranks after their first trips to Hungary and other Eastern bloc countries and their realization of the conditions of poverty in those places. Others chose a non-affiliated or pro-Yugoslavian position, seeing Tito as a possible foil to the Soviet world. After the bloody failure of the so-called Prague Spring, the PCI began to break up, first, and then to move toward the process of transformation that would lead to its definitive demise in the nineteen-nineties.

4 Lea Vergine, *Arte programmata e cinetica (1953–1963): L'ultima avanguardia,* exh. cat. Palazzo Reale, Milan (Milan, 1983).

5 *L'Unità* XLV, 191 (August 22, 1968), p. 1.

6 *Il Resto del Carlino* (August 22, 1968), p. 11.

In the meantime, *Epoca* published a series of inserts entitled *I bei posti* (Beautiful Places), where photographers like Mario De Biasi, Alfredo Panicucci, and Giorgio Lotti illustrated worlds beyond any Italian's wildest dreams: from the Bahamas to Acapulco, San Diego to Marrakesh. The dream of the sea cruise or the faraway vacation began, which was to occupy for many years the increasingly high-budget and exotic leisure time of Italians. Up to this point, they had been a people accustomed to going on vacation three months a year at their grandparents' house, or in little rooming houses on the Adriatic, or in Versilia. Big savers, and often the proprietors of their own homes, unable to believe in the State and to seriously follow any rules—a key to their creativity, to some extent—Italians started thinking for the first time that they were wealthy enough to abandon some of their prudent habits.

Travel in distant lands gained appeal not only as a seaside dream but also as a matter of behavior: to get free of the dictates of a traditional upbringing, perhaps by following in the footsteps of the countries of the North, became an increasingly desirable pastime. The myth of "Swedish women" was widespread, the liberated, long and leggy blonds who seemed like just the opposite of the mustached wife in the film *Divorzio all'Italiana,*[7] in which the yearning for a young woman leads to the murder of the wife as the only way of getting free of her. Italian women had gained the right to vote only in 1947; those of Norway, the first in Europe, had been voting since 1913. Such rapid advances were not demanded for the world of one's sisters, wives, or daughters, but there was no full realization of the fact that sexual liberation would go hand in hand with liberation of a mental nature. The same issue of the progressive weekly news magazine *Panorama* that offered ample coverage on themes like the student protests in Paris, the figure of Che Guevara, and the unusual culture of the actress Bette Davis also contained an illustrated piece entitled "Husband Gets More Virile with Home Striptease."[8] In 1962 a film like *Il Sorpasso,*[9] in which Vittorio Gassman doesn't know how to cope in his relationship with his separated wife and winds up, out of impulsive resistance to feeling old, by killing his impromptu traveling companion in a reckless automobile accident, had already shed light on the desire to get away from an ethics of monogamy, closely linked to the matrimony/patrimony relationship.

The first *cantautori* (singer-songwriters) of the so-called Genoa school—above all Luigi Tenco, who committed suicide in 1967—were addressing the same sense of disorientation caused by the abandoning of ancient moral precepts; one of his most famous songs has lyrics that would have been

7 *Divorzio all'italiana (Divorce, Italian Style),* directed by Pietro Germi, 1961.
8 Unsigned article in *Panorama* (June 20, 1968), pp. 45–46.
9 *Il Sorpasso (The Easy Life),* directed by Dino Risi, 1962.

unthinkable just twenty years earlier: "I fell in love with you because I had nothing to do." In an extremely erudite to and fro between poetry of Friuli and of street kids from the Roman outskirts, between work as a writer and director and editorial contributions to high-circulation dailies like *Il Corriere della Sera,* the reasons and radicality of this type of change also tormented Pier Paolo Pasolini, one of the most sensitive but also provocative analysts of that time of transition.

The cities where Arte Povera developed are Turin, Milan, and Rome: in substance, the centers of driving force in Italy, those in which the thrust toward industry and a model of urban life less steeped in rural memory was strongest, as well as the places of political and financial power. Turin meant FIAT, the largest factory in Italy, Fordist by nature and counterbalanced in the town by Giulio Einaudi Editore, the publishing house that changed Italian culture by translating Proust, Brecht, Sartre, Mann, Borges, and Musil, and by granting attention to Antonio Gramsci's legacy and to the reconstruction of the history of the country. Milan meant the Bourse, a large number of industrial companies and publishers such as Rizzoli and Mondadori, which were more popular than Einaudi but important in spreading an affection for books through low-cost productions. Rome meant parliament and the government, and of course Cinecittà, with its worldly Dolce Vita milieu. Each of these poles had its evolutionary melody and the countermelody of tension and corruption. This world lasted until the big oil crisis of 1973, which suddenly, irremediably, changed the whole mood of the country and destroyed an atmosphere that had been marked by hope and freedom of critical thought.

Italy has always struggled with the idea of political bipolarism and pursued a path of compromise solutions. In the days of the Count of Cavour, halfway through the nineteenth century, when a unified state did not yet exist, there was talk of a *Connubio* (marriage); later Agostino De Pretis called the tendency to smooth over and reconcile the most distant zones of the Italian parliament "Transformism."[10] This tendency could not help but be accentuated, given the American statement of opposition to the PCI's participation in the Italian government: since the PCI was numerically very strong, as long as the American opposition was tangible it was substantially impossible to form a government without the presence of another great bastion of consensus, the Christian Democrats, always with more or less support from four other, smaller parties. The American refusal to allow the PCI to enter a government was so strong that even

10 This term was invented to indicate the convergence between the conservative and progressive wings, considering the need to take unpopular steps such as a new *Tassa sul Macinato* (flour tax) by progressive-leaning governments, which were headed—starting in 1876—by Agostino De Pretis, Francesco Crispi and, to some extent, Giovanni Giolitti: a political episode that began less than fifteen years after the political unification of Italy and concluded on the eve of World War I.

when Aldo Moro tried to reinstate the venerable method of combining right and left, proposing a "Historic Compromise" and calling the PCI into play, his action was put to a stop by his kidnapping on the part of the Red Brigades: an episode from 1978 that has never been fully clarified. In effect, Italy was governed by the same group of people from 1947 to 1992, the year in which investigations into the corruption of politicians and parties intersected with changes on the international scene.

Arte Povera, then, was born in what was a poor country, which, after years of hopes and financing in the immediate postwar era, had believed it could become a wealthy country, but had never understood how to develop the mechanism of its democratic dynamics and had also been disrupted by a lively, rapid shift of population from the countryside to the city. In some cases industrialization had brought pilot projects with a utopian tone, like the typewriter factory run by the cultured, idealist, visionary entrepreneur Adriano Olivetti.[11] In other cases, instead, industrial facilities were built in improbable places, putting steel mills on the most beautiful Italian coastlines, from Naples to the Gulf of Taranto. Experiments that failed over the course of a few years were financed by an organism known as the *Cassa del Mezzogiorno* that was supposed to solve the "Southern Question," namely that of the underdevelopment of the South and its dramatic impact on the economy of the whole country. Quickly, in fact, and until today, the economy of the area under the Alps had aligned itself with that of Switzerland, of the Ruhr, of the richest areas of Europe. Italian backwardness, then and now, was caused by a lack of determination (which began already at the time of the government of Giovanni Giolitti, even before the birth of Fascism) to resolve the gap between the part of Italy that came from small, efficient states, and the part that came instead from the age-old inefficiency of the Bourbon rulers of the South.

When Germano Celant published his essay-manifesto of the movement in 1967, he found himself applying a term connected with a rebellion that had South American overtones in a place that, in effect, might have had

11 Adriano Olivetti, son of a Jewish father and a Waldensian mother, was born in 1901 and studied engineering and business organization in the United States. In his early thirties, he was already at the helm of a manufacturer of typewriters in Ivrea, Piedmont, which for a long period was to remain the world leader in that sector. Olivetti's formula was to create integrated products in which new technologies were combined with a simplified, highly portable design, made with the help above all of the architect Marcello Nizzoli. The management of the company was based on socialist principles, rendered effective by the motivated participation of the workers in the creation of products and by a sort of fusion between the corporation and the working community. This was the most outstanding experiment of reaction against Fordism in Italy, though not the only one. Examples of care devoted to the quality of life of workers could be found in many companies in Milan, involving the construction of housing facilities near factories. These include the Riva-Calzoni complex, which even produced turbines for Niagara Falls, and was organized like a village in which work, culture, and leisure time were seen as part of a complete system.

similar problems—with a lack of development caused by both the continued existence of a rural society linked to Catholic conservatism, and by the near-colonialist interference of the United States. Furthermore, there was the need to break free of a new, aggressive dream, that of a consumption that was supposed to fix everything: "Mo Mo Moplen," a famous comedian recited in a televised advertisement. Which meant: "and now Moplen plastic fixes everything." It was truly a great liberation to no longer have to use metal buckets and terracotta vessels, but one decade sufficed—from the mid-nineteen-fifties to the mid-nineteen-sixties—to rapidly generate a critique of the new way of living, a critique that had taken twenty years to develop in the English-speaking countries.

We can grasp the meaning of certain phrases written at the time by Celant only in terms of the context outlined above (which would also benefit from greater detail): "FIRST COMES THE HUMAN being and then the system, or that's how it was in antiquity. Today, however, society presumes to make prepackaged human beings, ready for consumption. Anyone can propose reform, criticize, violate, and demystify, but always with the obligation to remain within the system. It is forbidden to be free. . . . In a context dominated by technological inventions and imitations, one finds oneself faced by one of two choices: either a kleptomaniac reliance on the system and the use of codified and artificial languages in comfortable dialogue with existing structures, both social and private, the acceptance of ideology and its pseudo-analyses, an osmosis into all the apparent revolutions that are immediately reabsorbed, the subordination of one's work to the abstract (op) microcosm or to the socio-cultural (pop) and formal (primary structures) macrocosm; or, entirely at the other extreme, an option for free and individual self-development."[12]

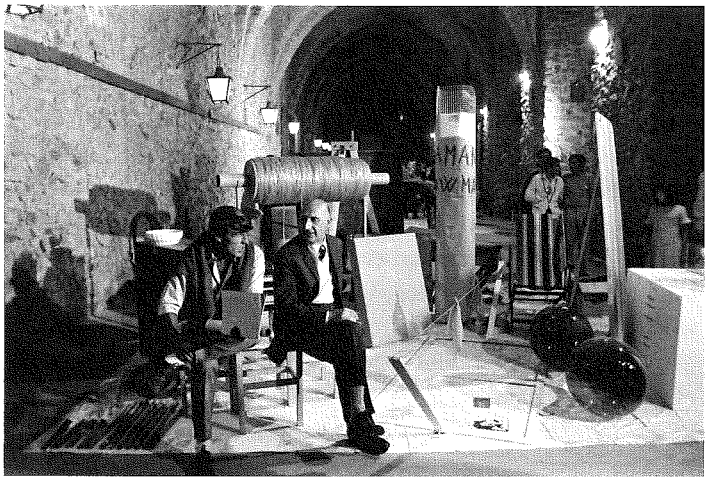
It is this "free and individual self-development" that the artists of the group were seeking: a formula valid all over the world but particularly complex and necessary in Italy, which was more backward but also ready to realize that a counter-formula was needed. The country was at a moment, in fact, in which the American style kitchen coexisted with the rural tradition of grandma's hearth. And it was possible to realize that the second option was still the most rational. In terms of social relations, too, it was a country in which more people were living as singles (once known as old maids or confirmed bachelors), but this solitude was tied to a sense of solidarity with the family, which may have been excessive in its control and protection of the group, but was nevertheless an important form of social buffering. The growth of consumerism

12 Germano Celant, "Arte Povera: appunti per una guerriglia," *Flash Art* 5 (November–December 1967). English from "Notes for a Guerilla War," trans. Henry Martin, at www.flashartonline.com (accessed on June 15, 2012).

and industrialization was balanced and to some extent countered by the survival of rural habits. And we find signs of this survival in the cubic meters of earth of Pascali (fig. p. 35), the bundles of Merz, the fluffy cotton cloud by Jannis Kounellis, the trees of Penone, the stones tied to lettuce by Giovanni Anselmo, and so on.

Enthusiasm for the new was approached in a doubtful and skeptical manner, so much so as to give rise to a poetics of disenchantment made even stronger by the bounceback from a serious economic crisis in 1963. This disappointment regarding any ideology, from the American dream to the Russian, from democracy (whose weaknesses were quickly starting to show) to consumerism, was harnessed by design and fashion, which would later be identified with the postmodern spirit: the former gained a key place in the world with exhibitions like *Italy: The New Domestic Landscape* at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1972; the latter needed more time to develop productions that, starting in the late nineteen-seventies, bore the names of Versace, Armani, Fendi, Romeo Gigli, and others. Visual art, design, and fashion represented, after the decline of cinema, the creative disciplines that in Italy counterbalanced the industrial culture that was already in decline as it was born, precisely due to the specific issues of a country that had remained so long dormant. Visual art, even before design and fashion, had already realized that it was necessary to concentrate on the service sector, which was to represent the image of Italy in the world.

Arte Povera springs from this complexity and conveys it, developing previous and less well-known experiences it may have opposed at the time, but which are undoubtedly its ancestors: those of Lucio Fontana and, in particular, of his sensorial environments, a combination of spatial sensibility and the theme of the labyrinth; those of Piero Manzoni who challenged the role of the auteur; those of Gianni Colombo and, in general, of Gruppo T, and many other experiences that emerged in the early nineteen-sixties, directed to create a brand-new relationship with the audience (coming, by the way, from the same post-constructivist legacy that was nourishing Lygia Clark and Hélio Oiticica in Brazil). This was happening in the same years in which Umberto Eco was working on his epochal *Opera Aperta (The Open Work),* and in which Carla Accardi helped initiate the shift from a formalized vocabulary of "signs" to three-dimensional works one could also inhabit. These experiences reflect an iconophilia one might be reluctant to confess to in an art world as substantially iconoclastic as ours, but that nonetheless remains fundamental in a society centered on images, such as that of Italy: this dependence on the figure is imposed on us, in part, by an age-old history of links and continuity with ancient Greece, and in part by the five hundred years of insistence on beauty, connected with the Council of Trent and the ensuing developments in the way of communicating religion among Catholics.



Alighiero Boetti (left) and Gillo Dorfles in front of *Shaman Showman* at the installation of the exhibition *Arte povera più azioni povere*, Amalfi, 1968

Jannis Kounellis, *Senza titolo (Apollo) (Untitled [Apollo])* Performance, Galleria La Salita, Rome, 1972, photo: Claudio Abate

Consciously or not, Arte Povera, too, as it grew and above all as the individual protagonists reached maturity, has developed all these aspects, which Celant's first approach seemed to reject. Two examples will suffice: Alighiero Boetti, after the Amalfi episode (fig. p. 41, top) in September 1968,[13] decided to get away from found objects and the poetics of assembled relics, returning to work on a vertical, traditional icon, with *due mani e una matita* (two hands and a pencil) as many of his works put it, from 1969 on. Jannis Kounellis has always emphasized that he is a "painter." No one wanted to abandon the production of images, transforming tables with real vegetables into images, as did Mario Merz, renewing the ancient tradition of the still life, or following the form of a tree as a sculpture that is able to leave a solid trace of its transformation in space and in time. This impossibility to give up materiality and its image-oriented construction within the work persisted even when the pressure toward the dematerialization of the work mounted, with the exception of the case of Piero Gilardi, which led to his expulsion from the group.

Arte Povera has attempted to produce something that would oppose the idea of art as merchandise. But it could not do this in an American conceptual spirit, replacing the artifact through the reduction of the work to words or statements. The movement has inevitably adhered to the history of a country based—precisely—on images, capable of producing them and, in general, of producing sensations. And it has done so by burying America, more than the Soviet Union, accepting backwardness, even using it as thematic material, and rushing almost directly forward from the countryside to the society of service industries, practically skipping the phase of true industrialization. The revolt against Fordist dynamics was the most profound protest Arte Povera has been able to advance, responding to the place from which it came and moving toward Italian responses that are starting only today to seem truly acceptable: a new yes to images, a new yes to things well made, a new yes to ancient myth, a new yes to a protective affective sphere, a new yes to land, water, energy, and the basic elements.

13 Meaning the debate caused by the exhibition *Arte povera più azioni povere,* organized by Marcello Rumma in Amalfi, September 1968, with a series of polemics related to the political nature of the work, to its materiality, to the possibility to transform even a football match into a performance.