

Arte Povera and Italian Autonomia: Presenting the Laborer

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Acronyms and abbreviations of Italian political parties and organizations during Arte Povera

AO: Workers' Autonomy
CIA: US Central Intelligence Agency
DC: Christian Democracy Party
Demau: Demystification of Authority
LC: Continuous Struggle
MI: Metropolitan Indians
PCI: Italian Communist Party
PSI: Italian Socialist Party
PO: Workers' Power
RB: Red Brigades

On 7 June 1968 students from the Committee of Students, Workers and Revolutionary Intellectuals in Venice called for a boycott of the *1968 Venice Biennale*, saying that the *Biennale* functioned as a “tourist activity destined for the rich... [That] enriches the great hotel companies together with the big industries which exploit labor,” (from a pamphlet called “Workmen Companions” in Alloway, The Venice Biennale 1895-1968: from salon to goldfish bowl, pg. 25). Twenty of twenty-three artists from the Danish, Italian and Yugoslav pavilions boycotted the exhibition. Fifteen of the artists had been from the Italian pavilion. Two artists from the French pavilion boycotted as well. Students had previously occupied the studios at the Academy of Fine Arts and the School of Architecture, which led to the stationing of approximately a thousand *Guardia* at the *Biennale*. The Swedish pavilion closed and the Russian exhibition arrived late. Artists shown at the *Biennale* included Arman, Anthony Caro, Mario Ceroli, Jasper Johns, Donald Judd, Yves Klein, Roy Lichtenstein, Lo Salvio, Pino Pascali, Robert Rauschenberg, Bridget Riley and Andy Warhol. *Time Magazine* reported on 28 June “Violence Kills Culture”¹ and disparaged the cancellation of prizes. Many US reports did not mention that Arte Povera exhibited across Italy and Germany that same year. What culture had been killed? In the 1968 *Venice*

¹ *Time*, “Violence Kills Culture,” 28 June 1968, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,841335-1,00.html>.

Biennale, the occupations of artists became inseparable from the political struggle surrounding the Italian Autonomist movements. During this period, the Italian Autonomists and Arte Povera artists intended to present labor as an autonomous force. While Italian Autonomia developed autonomous networks that opposed the synthetic representation of labor by union councils and the nationalist parties dislocated from the laborer's subjective and analytic ontology, Arte Povera's aesthetics formed a radical disjunction from methods of representation in order to project the image of the laborer in time.

Designating Arte Povera

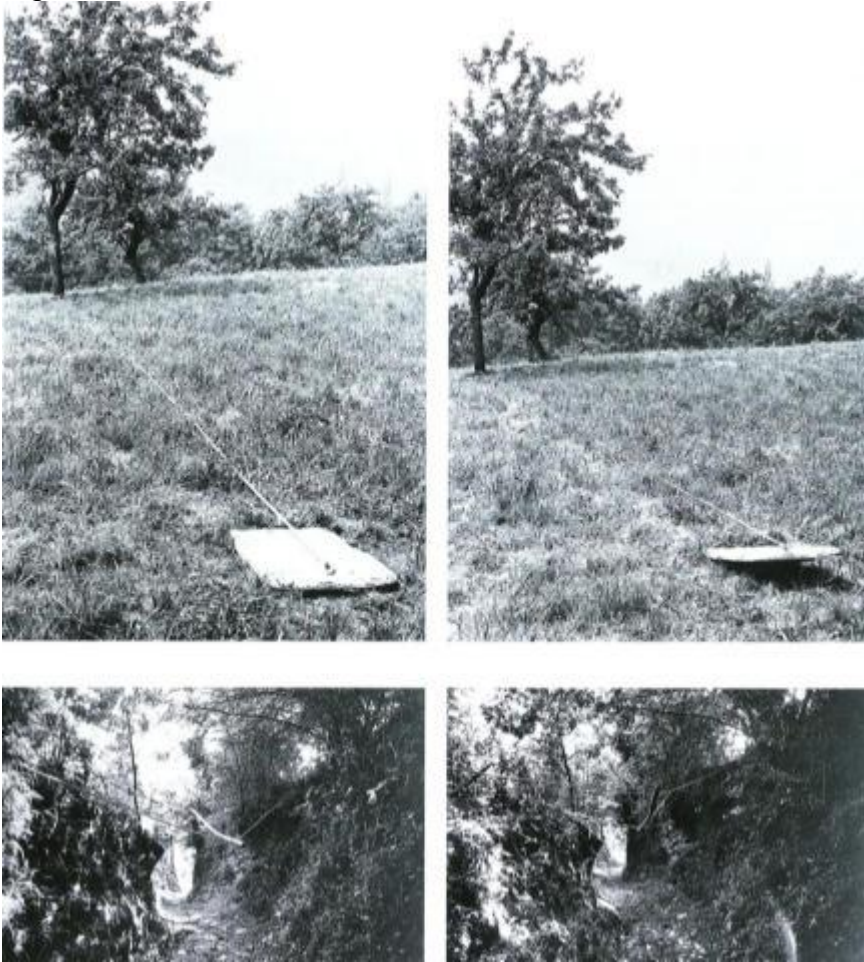
Germano Celant first used the term Arte Povera to describe the work of Alighiero Boetti, Luciano Fabro, Jannis Kounellis, Giulio Paolini, Pino Pascali, and Emilio Prini in the *Arte Povera e IM Spazio* exhibition from 27 September – 20 October 1967 in Genoa, Italy. The term became important enough to write a manifesto called "Arte Povera: Notes on a Guerilla War" in 1967 and then reemerged in another essay "Arte Povera" in 1985. The term designated the work of Giovanni Anselmo, Alighiero Boetti, Pier Paolo Calzolari, Luciano Fabro, Piero Gilardi, Jannis Kounellis, Mario Merz, Marisa Merz, Giulio Paolini, Pino Pascali, Giuseppe Penone, Michelangelo Pistoletto, Emilio Prini, Gilberto Zorio and has been taken up by the Fondazione CRT Cassa di Risparmio di Torino, Castello di Rivoli Museo d'Arte Contemporaneo and GAM - the Galleria Civica d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea, Torino, in the exhibition *Arte Povera in Collection* in 2000 and the exhibition *Zero to Infinity: Arte Povera 1962-1972* by the Tate Modern and Walker Art Center on tour from 13 October 2001-13 January 2002. In either case, Arte Povera is ambiguously defined, often misunderstood for a reference to the cheapness of the materials or an evacuation of ideology in an aesthetic mystification.

The term Arte Povera means "poor art," or, proletarian art. Not surprisingly, then, does the Marxist origins of an art for the poor disincite capitalist sectors of the art market, especially one that was proliferating "Pop, Op and primary structures" (Celant, "Arte Povera: Notes on a Guerilla War") art at the time of the 1968 *Venice Biennale*. The work presented at the 1968 *Venice Biennale* marks a stark contrast to Arte Povera, with notable exception to Robert Rauschenberg, who visited Italy earlier in the decade and whose cardboard box combines resemble the analytical² assembling of various materials similarly used by artists in Arte Povera.³

² Yve Allain-Bois in "Robert Rauschenberg's Combines: Two Views," *Artforum*, March 2006, XLIV, No. 7, describes Rauschenberg's combines as atomistic. If Rauschenberg's combines disorient any coherent polarity to the assembling of material, then the combines dislocate any centering of an origin in their composition.

³ Richard Long, Robert Rauschenberg and Richard Serra, exhibited in Italy prior to the 1968 *Venice Biennale*. John Cage made a visit prior to the *Biennale* as well, which made Fluxus an influence in Italy. Carl Andre, Joseph Beuys, Bill Bollinger, Hanne Darboven, Walter De Maria, Jan Dibbets, Barry Flanagan, Van Elk, Eva Hesse, Stephen Kaltenbach, Sol Lewitt, Richard Long, Robert Morris, Bruce Nauman, Robert Ryman, Alan Saret, Richard Serra, Robert Smithson, Keith Sonnier, Hans Strelow, Lawrence Weiner and William Wiley were exhibited with artists from Arte Povera. In 1968 Leo Castelli Gallery exhibited *Nine at*

Fig. 1



Top: Giuseppe Penone, *Pietra corda, albero, sole/Pietra, corda, albero, pioggia* (Stone, rope, tree, sun/Stone, rope, tree, rain), 1968

Black-and-white photographs

2 photographs: 64 X 49 cm (25 3/16 X 9 5/16 in.) each

Bottom: Giuseppe Penone, *Pelle, corda, ramo, sole/Pelle, corda, ramo, pioggia* (Leather, rope, branch, sun/Leather, rope, brance, rain), 1968

Black-and-white photographs

2 photographs: 64 X 49 cm (25 3/16 X 9 5/16 in.) each

For designating Arte Povera, the issue was the projection of an ideology in aesthetic terms that presented the struggle of the poor against the abstraction of their labor according to capitalist doctrine. Arte Povera sought to disrupt the systems of representation that alienated the image from its producer to return the image of labor to the laborer. If the artist projects what the laborer expels by being themselves a laborer, the occupation of art remains tautologically bound to

the laborer. It was seen, then, that *techné* (craft) separates one method of labor from another, and, thus, an art of the poor, an aesthetic meant to locate a subject with the object of their own production, attempted to transgress any one *techné* and diffuse any superfluous method in the articulation of a project. Significantly, artists within Arte Povera recognized that no one method sustains all projects, and, therefore, an unrestrained *poiesis* (poetics) formed the juncture between Arte Povera artists.

The radical break from traditional representations of work in *poiesis* is inseparable from the political and ethical implications of work from Arte Povera. A *poiesis* had to transgress any one method of representing labor to render an analytical ontology of the laborer. What method of production does Giuseppe Penone mimic and poeticize in *Pietra corda, albero, sole/Pietra, corda, albero, pioggia* (*Stone, rope, tree, sun/Stone, rope, tree, rain*), 1968 (fig. 1)? Similarly, the Italian Autonomists rejected the Italian Communist Party's (PCI) poetic demands for "dignity in work," once it became known that that dignified work expressed a compliance with fordist production. However, the *poiesis* that locates the object of art for the purposes of contemplating its qualities also means that the art dislocates from a non-contemplative act. As such, Arte Povera contended with the impossible premise of negating representation entirely. That Arte Povera had to present labor in one way or another did not concede the grounds for aesthetics solely to those based on representation. On the contrary, Arte Povera presented labor as labor as that of its contingency (poor), for the purpose that the poor might define its own contingency.

Representation vs. Presentation

Representation, as the projection of a dislocated image from its origins in time in order that it might re-present in another, concerned both the Italian Autonomists and artists of Arte Povera. Concurrently, the Italian Autonomists struggled against the representation of labor divisions by global capitalism that permeated the PCI and DC while Arte Povera struggled against the production of static objects meant to represent increasingly stratified divisions of labor in an international market. Meanwhile, a non-factory labor front encountered the memory of past fronts in the decline of fordist production methods met with increased post-industrial sectors of the economy centered on information and service. This memory marked the terminus of any particular project to emancipate labor, leaving traces of past events represented in the present. No matter what the rupture, elimination of representation outright was and is impossible. Pistoletto's *Minus Objects* show the contradiction of attempting to represent a removed present from historical contingency. Yet, because Arte Povera prioritized the projection of the laborer in time over the projection of a fixed object, it had to problematize its own historical contingent by making it aesthetic. For this reason, there appears the heterogeneity of practices from artist to artist, from earlier to later practice, from region to region, etc. These contingencies had their roots in the often diverging circumstances from artist to

artist and each artist's willingness to alter their method regardless of the coherency of the movement.

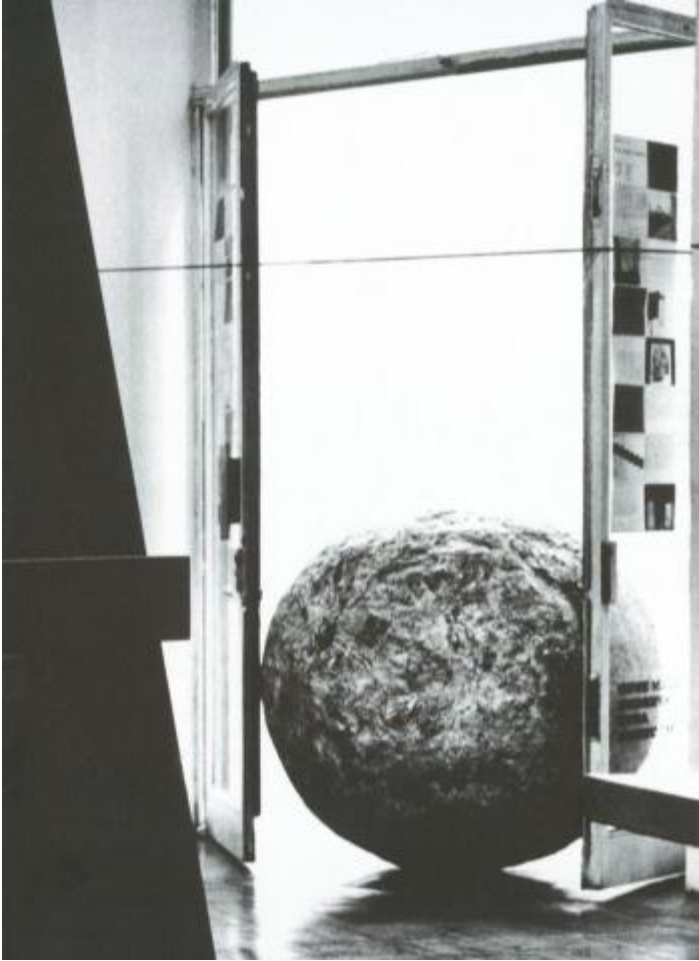
In order to present an autonomous labor force, projects became less defined by their productive capacity. As such, the models of Italian Autonomia and Arte Povera had more to do with projection than with production as the valorization of commodities. Projection became a model by which the artists of Arte Povera might subvert systems of representing their labor in commodities, measuring instead the artist's labor by the quality of the event instead of by a production method. As such, the methodologies of the various artists in Arte Povera were and do remain anarchic.

Fig. 2



Film still of Michelangelo Pistoletto in 1967 on a street in Turin with Palla di giornali (Oggetti in meno) (Ball of newspapers [Minus objects]) 1966

Fig. 3



Michelangelo Pistoletto
Palla di giornali (Oggetti in meno) (Ball of newspapers [Minus objects]), 1996
 pressed newspaper
 diameter 100 cm (39 3/8")
 Installation at Galleria Sperone, 1967
 Courtesy of MICA library scanner

In Arte Povera a specified project often articulated an event and, thus, could not represent work according to a prior method. For instance, Michelangelo Pistoletto in *Ball of Newspapers [Minus object]*, 1966-68 (fig. 2 and 3) rolls a ball of newspapers down the streets of Turin into the Galleria Sperone.⁴ Here, it should be noted that at the time, the representation of events according to center-right newspapers (in Italy, the US and elsewhere) attempted to represent the Italian Autonomists as terrorists. Pistoletto parodies and subverts the representation of mass narratives in organizations like the mass-media by creating an event out of materials meant to report events (newspapers). While

⁴ At the time, the rightist organization Ordine Nuovo closely collaborated with the Italian Military Secret Service, SID (Servizio Informazioni Difesa). Peteano terror formed from this collaboration, which wrongly blamed the militant Italian left for fascist organized bombings.

newspapers record *news*, the presentation of the newspapers in an absurdly unreadable format rejects their value as a historical fixture of events. Instead of reporting events as if reporting was a non-event, Pistoletto presents the accumulation of news in large ball as an event in itself.

Fig. 4



Giuseppe Penone

Trattenere 17 anni di crescita (Holding onto 17 Years of Growth), 1968-1985

Ashwood trunk and steel cast of artist's hand (removed)

h. 500 cm, diameter 25 cm ca. (196 ³/₄" h, 9 ⁷/₈" ca. diameter)

Galleria Civica d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea, Torino

Fondazione Guido ed Ettore De Fornaris, 1986

Fig. 5



Giuseppe Penone
Alpi Marittime (Maritime Alps), 1968
 black-and-white photographs
 6 photographs: 64 X 49 cm (25 3/16 X 19 5/16")

Arte Povera artists used time as well as the artist's own agency over production to produce events. The energy of these events was seen as a way of circumventing the ideological fixity associated with traditional representations of the labor struggle. The artists tended not to distance themselves from their work, as did Donald Judd and Pop artists, who relied on factory work to represent their ideas. Nor did Arte Povera resemble Conceptual Art, which tried to represent ideas disjoined from their material origins. Instead, Arte Povera sought to ground ideas in material.⁵ For instance, Giuseppe Penone, as part of *Alpi Marittime (Maritime Alps)*, 1968 (fig. 4) placed a steel casting of his hand into an ashwood tree trunk, removing it after seventeen years in *Holding onto 17 Years of Growth*, 1968-1985 (fig. 4). The trunk grew around the steel cast of his hand, showing the projection of himself inseparable from the growth of the ashwood. The two appear joined. Historical contingency meets time and ontology. Labor meets its

⁵ Here I am using material as the object affected by time.

origins in time. This rejection of labor disjoined from its ontological roots in time, it might be supposed, simultaneously rejected the politics of labor represented by union councils and the PCI, who opposed the *autoriduzione* (autonomous price-setting) occurring among populations in cities like Turin and Piedmont.⁶ The PCI replied to the squatters, “workers don’t break the law” (Katsiaficas, The Subversion of Politics: European Autonomous Social Movements and the Decolonization of Everyday Life, pg. 41). It might be supposed, also, that the remote location of the events for *Alpi Marittime* mimic the decentering of labor according to a new terrain away from the factory.

Both Italian *Autonomia* and *Arte Povera* attempted to subvert consumerism born of the politics of scarcity. Whereas Pop-art relied on the methods of representing commodities according to the iconicity of brand names and trademarks, identities revolving on their “15 minutes of fame,”⁷ *Arte Povera* attempted to work within the liminal frame of reference of the mundane, away from the spectacle of commodity-fetish. This may have contributed to the willingness of the Italian artists to boycott the 1968 *Venice Biennale*. Moreover, *Arte Povera* criticized the static nature of Judd’s *Specific Objects*.⁸ For the *Arte Povera* artists, objects may develop into a method by which ideas might get represented in subsequent methods of reproduction, whereas only time might specify a non-repetitive event, one meant for contemplation instead of consumption. Alighiero Boetti’s *Pile*, 1966 parodies the repetition of a serial production method in what becomes a question of the “balance between ‘will’ and ‘limits’ understood as a basic factor of our present life conditions” (Boetti, Arte Povera in Collection (catalog), pg. 116). Why does Boetti stop stacking at 34 *Eternit bars*?

Fig. 6



⁶ *Autoriduzione* tactics included the reduction of electric bills and the adjusting of transportation fares according to what the commuters can afford instead of company fees.

⁷ Warhol, Andy

⁸ Artists from *Arte Povera* frequently write of using energy in their work as a way to limit the objectification of their work.

Giovanni Anselmo

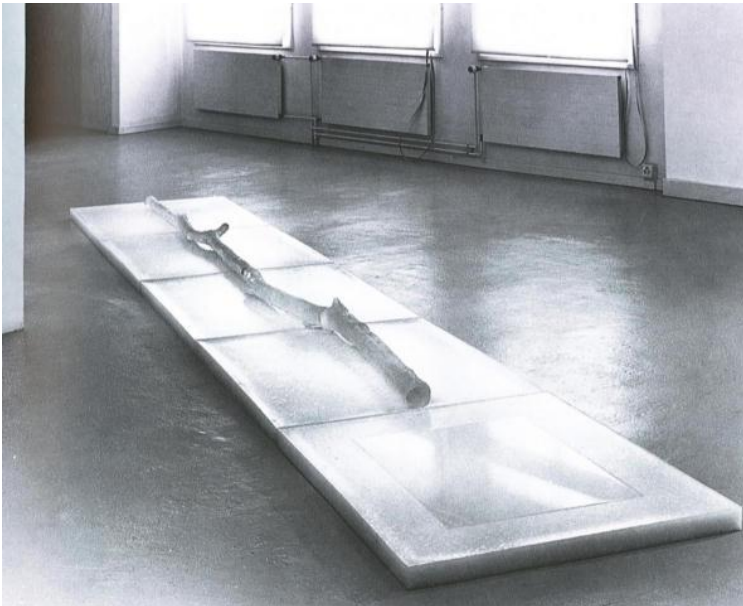
Neon nel cemento (Neon in Cement), 1967-70

fluorescent tube, cement

10.5 X 551 X 10.3 cm (4 1/8 X 217 X 4 1/16")

Collection of Margherita Steein / on permanent loan to Castello di Rivoli Museo d'Arte Contemporanea, Rivoli-Torino, Galleria Civica d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea, Torino, 2000

Fig. 7



Giuseppe Penone

Propagazione (Propagation), 1997

Paraffin, crystal and water

16 X 600 X 100 cm (6 1/4 X 236 1/4 X 39 3/8")

Castello di Rivoli Museo d'Arte

Contemporanea, Rivoli-Torino

Long term loan, 2000

Fig. 8



Giovanni Anselmo

Respiro (Breathing), 1969

Sea sponge and iron bars (13 X 470 X 6 cm [5 1/8 X 185 X 2 1/8"])

Photo Paolo Pellion, Torino

Castello di Rivoli Museo d'Arte Contemporanea, Rivoli-Torino

Long term loan, 1996

Basing their methods on time, Arte Povera artists favored the projection of labor in the event over the production of static objects. Giovanni Anselmo in *Neon in Cement*, 1967, (fig. 6) suspends two neon tubes in cement. The neon tubes appear lit on either end, causing the work to expire once the neon tubes burnout. Whereas Dan Flavin's neon works remain lit as long as the galleries and museums replace the bulbs, time limits Anselmo's *Neon in Cement*. Similarly, Giuseppe Penone's *Propogation*, 1997, (fig. 7) critiques Robert Smithson's static representation of time according to dialectical non-sites and sites. Anselmo's *Breathing*, 1969, (fig. 8) critiques Judd's static structuralism. In these critiques, foremost was the critique against the representation of ideas by materials. Instead, Arte Povera presents ideas in material as way of transgressing any continuity of a system of representation.

To represent was to poeticize a synthetic form of labor separate from its ontology. The historicity of representation loses its ontological requisite once it alienates itself from the laborer that produces it. As representation abstracts value and places it on a surrogate subject, it was seen to obscure the processes of self-valorization required for labor to reproduce itself as a subject. The dislocation of labor through channels of representation in capital quantifies, and thus, divides labor according to hierarchical stratifications. As Arte Povera opposed the quantification of time that measures the value of an object for

purposes of exchange, it also attempted to resist the commodity-status associated with capital. Arte Povera was against this symbolic repetition of value represented by objects. Since the quantities determining exchange-value never has symbolized a co-equal presence between producer and consumer, Arte Povera sought an aesthetic based on the mere ontological presence of quality. What designated itself as “poor art” was also about quality!

The Italian Autonomists recognized at the time of the Arte Povera movement that the party system was attempting to recompose the reproduction of labor according to an increasingly centralized international market. Presentation of a politics based on subjective ontological needs became the objective against the mass colonization associated with global imperialism. In such cases when unions and parties became rigid and disconnected from the analytic demands of labor, Italian Autonomists separated themselves from these organizations, denouncing representation forthright. The organizations that claimed to represent the needs of labor became part of the state apparatus in light of the threats from Italian Autonomists in order to preserve an economy based on fordism and consumerism. Economists held these beliefs as necessary for the reproduction of labor, basing the science on market orthodoxy.

Conversely, Italian Autonomia and Arte Povera identified with the geography of post-fordism and reductivism. In other words, Italian Autonomia and Arte Povera sought to reduce the causes of scarcity exploited by US imperialism regarding the use of agriculture and oil among other things and advocated for the rights of labor to its products and rights over reproduction.

Italian Autonomists sought to present the ontological needs of labor according to a radical valorization of subjectivity. Representation of these needs dislocated those demands from their origins located in the present conditions of labor. However, the PCI prioritized representation in order to present a synthetic objectification of labor according to where it believed it might take hold of the mechanisms of production. While the PCI sought to control the mechanisms of production that had existed since the industrial revolution, Italian Autonomia was disinterested in the long and repetitive tasks of operating factories only to increase consumption. The battleground over the forms of production according to fordism and consumerism remained a tired one for Italian Autonomists, and one that petrified labor from its subjective ontology. Instead, the Italian Autonomists demanded the subjective rights of labor for its own purposes of reproducing itself. The Italian Autonomists wanted the luxury to define labor according to their needs. However, the PCI and union councils declared these demands *lazy* while the DC claimed that their tactics were those of a terrorist.

Fig. 9



Michelangelo Pistoletto

L'architettura dello specchio (Mirror Architecture), 1990

Gold-plated wood, mirrors

Each quarter 380 X 200 X 5 cm (149 5/8 X 78 1/4 X 2")

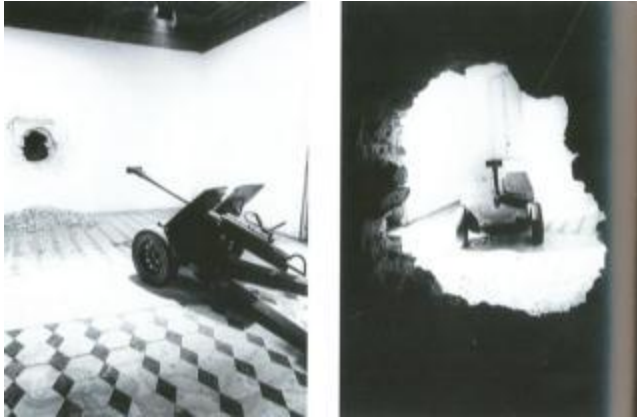
Photo Paolo Pellion, Torino, Castello di Rivoli Museo d'Arte Contemporanea, Rivoli-Torino

Donation Gruppo Delle Carbonare, 1991

Arte Povera sought to unify labor with its image by disrupting unified representations of state hegemony over the laborer. Interestingly, in a work succeeding Arte Povera by Michelangelo Pistoletto called *Mirror Architecture*, 1990, (fig. 9) a framed mirror divides horizontally. Void enters each fracture of a unified image. Writes A d'Avossa, "In almost total substitution of the Cloister's colonnade by the fragments of huge mirrors it is possible to feel all the tension and gravity of the building in its present form. It is the mirror that supports this architecture. It is the mirror that divides it. And it is the Mirror that multiplies it" (d'Avasso in Arte Povera in Collection [catalog], pg. 276). What supports the architecture is its articulation located in time by the subject. Simultaneously the architectural image, as intended by the architects of the Cloister, has its narrative scrambled by the dislocation of the architectural image. Whatever image, then, remains the authority of the subject located in time. The fracturing of the intended architectural space by the mirrors disrupts the spatial continuity of a unified space. Fracturing of the mirror disrupts the spatial continuum of the building by the implication of a void, or lapse, which gets read as the distance between one image and another. One image transgresses the limits of another by implicating time in the articulation of the architectural image and limits the authority of the architect over the subject. The concern of Pistoletto is in disrupting a spatial continuity, allowing time to penetrate the image of the

architecture, articulating the laborer in the architectural space. This anarchic positioning of the subject in time corresponds to the rejection of authoritarianism.

Fig. 10



Pino Pascali

Cannone 'Bella Ciao' ("Bella Ciao" canon), 1965

At exhibition *Cannonata De Dominicis-Pascali* at Galleria L'Attica, Rome, February 2001

Fig. 11



Giulio Paolini

Apotheosis of Homer (The apotheosis of Homer), 1970-1971

Music stands, black-and-white photographs, color photographs, printing on paper
Edition 8/10

Dimensions variable

Collection Herbert

Arte Povera's aesthetic of presenting the laborer's autonomy meant a rejection of a continuous narrative from subject to subject. In a disorientation of hegemony, contingency no longer removes itself from the ontology of the subject's image in time and disillusiones a symbolic icon's magisterial presence. Pino Pascali flips the industrial/military complex on its head in *Cannone 'Bella Ciao'* ("Bella Ciao" cannon), 1965 (fig. 10). Giulio Paolini in *Apotheosis of Homer*, 1970-1971, (fig. 11) removes the narrative of symbolic historical figures played by actors. Paolini writes:

The *Apotheosis of Homer* (*Apotheosis of Homer*) is the title of an Ingres painting, exhibited in the Louvre. In this work, several historical figures see Homer as the symbol of classical inspiration. My work, which bears the same title, includes a series of photographs placed on lecterns as though they are individual and autonomous scores... and creates a scene

without any narrative aim: apart from their common symbolic function (Paolini in Arte Povera in Collection [catalog], pg. 208).

Paolini negates the symbolic representation of events in a chronology. Instead, the symbolic personas situate in the event of their being read by various actors. Their symbolic significance presents a radical mimesis of identity and appears absurd in the case of one event. Similarly the Italian Autonomists rejected traditional identity given by traditional occupations. Some Italian Autonomists defined identity by labor only as long as that labor fulfilled an ontological necessity. This is not to say that the Italian Autonomists knew no luxury! Their ideologies of luxury separated them from the austerity of the PCI and union councils. Luxury came with the time allotted for the laborer to replenish their energy, not fetishism in accordance with surplus for surplus sake.

The Image of Italian Autonomia and Arte Povera

A heterogeneous mix of Italian Autonomist groups met informally at conference events. The Autonomia Operaia (AO or Workers' Autonomy), Potere Operaia (PO), Lotta Continua (LC or Continuous Struggle), Demau (acronym for the Demystification of Authority) and Red Brigades (RB) headed the major organizations. LC was the largest with 50,000 registered activists, 100 full-time paid officials, branch offices in all 94 Italian provinces and 21 neighborhood offices in Rome. Differences over whether to struggle within the state apparatus or favor a Maoist approach with armed struggle against the state and its elections divided the Red Brigades, who favored the latter, from the AO, who leaned towards the former.⁹ Autonomist groups comprised of mostly women, unemployed, workers, professionals, intellectuals, artists and students who were anti-capitalist and anti-authoritarian. Italian Autonomia had little mentioned contact with Arte Povera, yet the two do not appear in opposition to one another.

Fig. 12 Arte Povera Geography

Location of Practice (Italy)	Arte Povera Artists						
Biella	Michelangelo Pistoletto (1933, b. in Biella)						
Milan	Mario Merz (1925, b. in Milan)	Marisa Merz (1931, b. in Turin)	Luciano Fabro (1936, b. in Turin)				
Pesaro	Piero Paolo Calzolari (1943, b. in Fossomb-						

⁹ Katsiaficas, The Subversion of Politics: European Autonomous Social Movements and the Decolonization of Everyday Life, pg. 42.

	rone [Pesaro])						
Rome	Pino Pascali (1935-1968, b. in Rome)	Jannis Kounellis (1936, b. in Piraeus Greece)	Alighiero Boetti (1940-1994, b. in Rome)	Emilio Prini (1943, b. in Genoa)			
Turin	Mario Merz (1925, b. in Milan)	Marisa Merz (1931, b. in Turin)	Giovanni Anselmo (1934, b. in Borgofranco D'Ivrea)	Giulio Paolini (1940, b. in Genoa)	Piero Gilardi (1942, b. in Turin)	Gilberto Zorio (1944, b. in Andorno Micca, Biella)	Giuseppe Penone (1947, b. in Garesio, Cuneo)

The groups remained largely heterogeneous due to the analytic nature of their demands and opposed the bureaucratized system of synthesizing local demands with trans-local party ones. The synthesis of demands into a streamlined party appeared too bureaucratic and rigid. On the one hand, the party systems turned labor into a synthetic dialectic by streamlining its demands by continually composing and recomposing divisions of labor. On the other hand, the reproduction of labor presents the ontological needs for labor to reproduce itself analytically. In Italian *Autonomia*, the synthetic demands of labor (those of the PCI) no longer met the analytic demands of its constituency, who were demanding abortion rights, tougher punishment for rape, less work, higher wages and education reform among other things, which caused a crisis over the presentation of the terrain of labor.

Because of the heterogeneity of the Italian Autonomists, the representation of unified labor under the auspices of party affiliated union councils and parties aligned with state apparatuses maligned against their demands. Companies demanded stricter factory discipline in exchange for concessions after the Hot Autumn of 1969, in which mass strikes of 5 ½ million workers struck (1/4 of the labor force) and hundreds of thousands occupied and sabotaged various governmental controls. The government and corporations arrested 13,000 strikers, demonstrators and saboteurs in addition to suspending 35,000 of their employees.¹⁰ However, workers earned wage increases and established a labor force counter to capitalist/state hegemony.

Fig. 13

¹⁰ Katsiaficas, *The Subversion of Politics: European Autonomous Social Movements and the Decolonization of Everyday Life*, pg. 38.



Demonstrations in Corso Traiano Turin, 3 July 1969

For the political left, at issue was the viability of reproducing labor relations according to the party-system, which was dominated at the time by the fascist DC, rigid union councils and the center-left PCI. An increasing scale of agriculture from local to national or international levels of production caused a demographic shift away from rural communities and into urban and then suburban areas once wage work de-centered from the factory into service industries. Ten million individuals were removed from farms. Former agricultural workers came predominantly from the South, which had been considerably poorer than the North, and migrated into industrial centers such as Milan, Naples, Rome and Turin. The agricultural workforce decreased from 49.3 percent to 18.8 percent of the entire working population from 1951 to 1971. Four million individuals left the South for large cities in the North. Social services and infrastructure did not meet the increases in demand.¹¹ Numerous strikes centered on Fiat in Turin, Montedison in Portomarghera and FATME in Rome. These changes coincided with the crisis of scarcity according to US international hegemony. According to Sergio Bologna:

[The] relaunching of US hegemony depends in addition on results already acquired, which allow the USA control over scarcity, especially in the key sectors of energy and food internationally. (“The US have emerged as the key source of global nutritional stability”—Secretary Brzezinski, in Foreign Policy No. 23). Every “national” choice in the area of basic energy and food must come up against the international division of labour. (Sergio Bologna, “The Tribes of Moles” in Autonomia: Post-Political Production, pg. 44)

¹¹ Katsiaficas, George, The Subversion of Politics: European Autonomous Social Movements and the Decolonization of Everyday Life, Forthcoming: Open Humanities Press, online texts http://www.eroseffect.com/books/subversion_download.htm

Italy increased its dependence on US imperialism in order to maintain good relations with the US firms and corporate interests that increasingly dominated the production mechanisms that became necessary in an international economy based on empire (oil and agricultural products among others). Fiat depended on US military and industrial expansion into the Middle East to secure the flow of oil that fuelled its cars. However, Fiat depended on the workers to produce those cars in its factories. Fiat assumed that it could exploit the rise in immigration to receive cheap labor. To the Italian Autonomists, who were most likely already against the Second Indo China War (1959 to April 30, 1975), Algerian War (1954-1962), and sympathized with the communist and guerilla movements in Central and South America, the factories were seen as exploiting both the Italian working class and that of other labor markets abroad.

The PCI increasingly became a branch of the state apparatus by increasingly aligning with the DC, who was implementing fascist tactics known as the “strategy of tension” against the Italian Autonomists. The PCI could alienate Italian Autonomia from the security of labor by labeling all of Italian Autonomia terrorist in nature, thereby separating their demands from those of the mass movements, which proved increasingly precarious for the far left. Functioning as a state apparatus, the PCI with support from the DC moved against the Italian Autonomists by representing the struggle as that between consumerism and terror. The Italian Autonomist organizations, such as the Metropolitan Indians (MI), that occupied the universities rejected this opposition. They were for “creative production.” Graffiti at the university in Rome read “When even shit becomes marketable, then the poor will be born without an ass” (Katsiaficas, The Subversion of Politics: European Autonomous Social Movements and the Decolonization of Everyday Life, pg. 51). On 7 April, 1973, twenty-two leading intellectuals in the PO including Antonio Negri and Paolo Virno were charged with fictitious crimes. Negri was accused and charged with masterminding the kidnap and execution of DC president Aldo Moro.¹²

Bologna had been one of the more creative of the autonomist centers. There, *Radio Alice* broadcasted a dada-spontex non-commercial radio. Falsification of signs proved successful for disrupting state hegemony. Forgeries of diplomas and IDs, false train tickets and money orders, devices dodging utility bills and domestic sabotage became an inventive way to reorganize property use. In one instance, the Bolognese autonomists distributed keys to traffic-light control boxes prior to the visit of Prime Minister Andreotti in order to block intersections and prevent the Prime Minister from giving a speech.

In Italian universities, the introduction of proletarian students with paid leave from factories called “150 hours” showed that the universities had been a sector of the economy in which social mobility and careerism often occurred besides learning.

¹² Various publications by the Italian Autonomists provided alternative leftist texts.

Italian Autonomia resisted ideological fixity but was steeped in Trotskyist, Maoist and Marxist ideology. However, not unlike the differences in Arte Povera, its strategies differed among its members. Spectacular violence contradicted the attempts to supersede terrorism. Differences between the woman's groups and workerist groups from the factories caused occasional conflict within Italian Autonomia. In a case involving an abortion rights march by Lotta Continua, security marshalls reacted against the march for which no men were allowed in November 1975.

Recently the CIA was found to have supported the "strategy of tension." General Maletti, Commander of the counter-intelligence section of the Italian military intelligence service from 1971 to 1975, testified in 2001 for the 1969 Piazza Fontana bombing in Milan (with a special immunity accorded) on charges of obstruction of justice:

The CIA (Central Intelligence Agency), following the directives of its government, wanted to create an Italian nationalism capable of halting what it saw as a slide to the left and, for this purpose, it may have made use of rightwing terrorism... I believe this is what happened in other countries as well...Don't forget that Nixon was in charge and Nixon was a strange man, a very intelligent politician but a man of rather unorthodox initiatives.

Maletti further stated:

Among the larger western European countries, Italy has been dealt with as a sort of protectorate. I am ashamed to think that we are still subject to special supervision.¹³

The CIA and mafia possibly had a role in the distribution of heroine which crippled parts of the Italian Autonomist movements. The DC sensationalized the response to the kidnapping and execution of DC president Aldo Moro in March, 1978, in order to further marginalize the Italian Autonomist groups.

The 1973 Historic Compromise between the DC and PCI began a series of Stalinist tactics of repression in Italy, from which Italian Autonomia with its creativity could not recover. Arte Povera dissolves as a movement in the 1980s after having and continuing to have a limited influence in the US. It is unlikely that such a widespread critical reticence was unaware of the movement. Equally unlikely is it that most of the US cultural channels overlooked the politics of Arte Povera by insisting on show upon show of art objects easily exchanged according to the latest commodity fetish. More likely, the politics of an art that attempted to present labor in its time disagreed with the consumerism prevailing in the art market, one that valued consumption over contemplation. As Arte

¹³ Philip Willan, "Terrorists 'helped by CIA' to stop rise of left in Italy" from *The Guardian*, 26 March, 2001, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2001/mar/26/terrorism>

Povera sought to meet the ontological demands of labor by subverting the idealism of an art market that tried to instill in the event a commodity-status, and, thus, deny any exteriority to systems of representation and exchange, it also located itself within a specific project of history in light of Italian Autonomia. Yet, Arte Povera's dissolution does not mean the end of an art for the poor, but, instead, signals the conditions of labor and its aesthetics have changed and require a revolution beyond what happened in Italy.

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