

ARTE POVERA IN TURIN 1967-1978:
CONTEXTUALIZING ARTISTIC STRATEGIES DURING THE *ANNI DI PIOMBO*

by

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Art History in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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Elizabeth Mangini

Adviser: Professor Romy Golan

This dissertation presents an original analysis of four artists based in Turin, Italy: Giovanni Anselmo (b. 1934), Mario Merz (1925-2003), Giuseppe Penone (b. 1947), and Gilberto Zorio (b. 1944). Although these sculptors are ordinarily considered either individually or within the context of the 1960s-70s movement *Arte povera*, focusing on the sub-grouping reveals historical, tactical, and thematic connections that are otherwise unapparent. Their specific careers evolved within the social, artistic and intellectual context of Turin during a time of great political upheaval and philosophical foment. This study contributes to a new understanding of engagement by these four artists with Italian aesthetics and politics, and presents a framework through which to study *Arte povera* more generally.

Critic Germano Celant was based in Turin in 1967, when he developed the notion of *Arte povera* as a national artistic phenomenon that began in 1967 and ended in 1971. From its inception, the label was applied to contemporary Italian artists whose projects explicitly aimed to de-invest the artwork of predetermined meaning, but it is often misunderstood as referring to an interest in "poor" materials. Rather than attempting to recast and debate the term *Arte povera* however, this dissertation

primarily argues that the socio-political history of Turin, combined with a prominent school of phenomenological philosophy, inspired the rise of specific aesthetic strategies and their subsequent identification by figures such as Celant, Tommaso Trini, Mirella Bandini, and others.

Anselmo, Merz, Penone, and Zorio, in particular, created objects and installations that used natural and industrial materials alike to engage viewers in modes of active perception, creating empowered viewing subjects. Seen in relief with contemporary philosophical ideas about multi-sensory experience forming the sensible world, such artworks appear as aesthetic analogues to the political mobilizations occurring in Turin's factories and streets. Using a periodization based on Italian political history rather than the artistic one considered by Celant, this study examines the projects of these four artists from the student movement's beginnings in 1967 to the climax of domestic terrorism in 1978. It situates each artist's material practice within the local philosophical and social context to reveal its latent political charge.

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One of the great pleasures of working in contemporary art history is the opportunity to benefit from the insight of living artists. It has certainly been the case in this dissertation, and my deepest thanks are first to the artists who have made themselves available to me. Giovanni Anselmo took time away from installing a major retrospective in Bologna so that we could meet and conduct an interview in the exhibition's galleries. He offered me a view to his oeuvre that was truly inspirational. Giuseppe Penone opened his Turin studio to me and generously spent hours talking and showing me work. He has been gracious in answering frequent email queries, as well as recounting personal details of his life and his approach to making art. Gilberto Zorio and I corresponded over a number of weeks, illuminating his unique and dynamic approach to materials. I am grateful for the kind help of the artist Grazia Toderi in facilitating the technical aspects of our discussion. Beatrice Merz made me feel welcome at the Fondazione Merz in Turin, where her father's legacy lives on. In Milan, Luciano Fabro welcomed me into his studio and his home, painting a picture of the intellectual and cultural landscape of *Arte povera*.

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INTRODUCTION

The artist, who was exploited before, now becomes a guerilla warrior.

-Germano Celant¹

From concept to corporeal sensations and open to both chance and the contingencies of the quotidian, the artist is now trying every possible stimulus and available energy source in an attempt to transform them into concrete direct experience, into manual work and subterranean communication.

-Tommaso Trini²

Three figures appear engrossed in discussion: at the left a man seen from behind digs his hands into his pockets, while on the right another, viewed in profile, crosses his arms and casts his eyes at the floor (fig. 1). The central figure catches that downward gaze in earnest attention to presumed speech we cannot quite make out. The persons gathered together are young, hip, and identifiable, even though two have their backs turned to us. They are, from left to right, Giovanni Anselmo, Gilberto Zorio, and Giuseppe Penone: central protagonists of the postwar Italian art movement known as *Arte povera*. What is the content of their conference? Are they discussing the current exhibition at Gian Enzo Sperone's important Turin gallery, where they all regularly show their sculptures? These artists might be discussing the critic Germano Celant's recent abandonment of the term *Arte*

¹ Germano Celant, "Arte Povera: Appunti per una guerriglia," *Flash Art*, no. 5 (November-December 1967): 3. Reprinted in English as "Arte Povera: Notes for a Guerilla War," *Arte Povera=Art Povera*, trans. Paul Blanchard (Milan: Electa, 1985), 35-37. Page citations are to the English edition.

² Tommaso Trini, "Imagination Takes Command," *Domus* 471 (February 1969): 90.

povera that had brought their work international notoriety since he introduced it six years earlier, in 1967. Maybe they are conversing about politics. Are they addressing the controversial "historic compromise" recently proposed between the mainstream left Italian Communist Party (*Partito Comunista Italiana*, or PCI) and their long-time adversaries the centrist Christian Democrats (*Democrazia Cristiana*, or DC)? Perhaps they are lamenting the recent actions of the Red Brigades (*Brigate Rosse*, or BR), the extremist group gripping their Piedmontese city with fear of kidnappings and homemade bombs? Then again, their conversation may be more intimate. Is Penone, the youngest of the three artists, talking shop with Zorio, his former mate at art school? Are they wondering where the senior statesman of the Turin art scene, Mario Merz, might be this evening? Perhaps he's having dinner at home with his wife, artist Marisa, and thirteen year-old daughter, Beatrice. We can only wonder about the silent summit, since the figures are silk-screened images on a mirrored surface, locked in the reflected world of their colleague Michelangelo Pistoletto's *Sacred Conversation* (*Sacra Conversazione*, 1973).

That these particular artists appear reproduced in one of Pistoletto's signature "mirror paintings" is significant, since they, together with Mario Merz, comprised what critic Tommaso Trini called the "Turin School," a subset of *Arte povera* which coalesced around Sperone's gallery in the late-1960s.³ These

³ Tommaso Trini, "The Prodigal Maker's Trilogy: Three Exhibitions: Berne, Amsterdam, Rotterdam," *Domus* 478 (September

artists, the writer claimed, arrived at an “existential attitude” about their own works through an engagement with the contemporary international artists also showing there—such as Andy Warhol, Bruce Nauman, and Dan Flavin—as well as from a formative exhibition that Pistoletto staged at his studio in 1966. As some artists recalled, this latter exhibition of *Minus Objects* paved the way for the sculptural approaches that would characterize their own mature styles. Zorio, for example, related that:

Pistoletto made a great shift: he had temporarily abandoned his reflecting surfaces to seek other means of expression, other situations [...] My work was completely unknown then – as was the (important) work of Anselmo [...] We went with [Piero] Gilardi to Pistoletto’s studio and it was a great revelation to me.⁴

Anselmo, too, noted that seeing this radical move pushed him in new directions. As he described it, one of those mirror paintings, no matter how much it played with the perceptions of presence and absence, “nonetheless ‘represents’ reality.”⁵ The departure of Pistoletto’s *Minus Objects* from his earlier project demonstrated what many of the other artists had been working

1969), 46. Trini, who will be introduced in depth in the following pages, was a regular critic for and contributing editor of the design, architecture, and art magazine *Domus*, as well as founding editor of the contemporary art journal *Data* (1971–78).

⁴ Gilberto Zorio, interview by Mirella Bandini, Turin, October 1972, originally published in “Torino 1960/73,” *NAC* 3 (March 1973), reprinted in Bandini, *1972: Arte Povera a Torino* (Turin: Allemandi, 2003), 26. Partially reprinted in English in *Zero to Infinity: Arte povera 1962–1972*, ed. Richard Flood and Francis Morris, trans. Caroline Beamish (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center and London: Tate Modern, 2001), 324–5. Page citations refer to the English excerpts unless otherwise noted.

⁵ Giovanni Anselmo in conversation with Andrea Viliani, in *Giovanni Anselmo: Where the stars are coming...*, ed. Gianfranco Maraniello and Andrea Viliani (Turin: Hopefulmonster, 2007), 216.

toward on their own: a way of thinking about the artwork as a materialized perception in time and space. No longer satisfied with mere representations of reality, Anselmo, Merz, Penone, and Zorio, artists whose emblematic work emerged in 1967-68, aimed to directly present the tensions of material encounters in the phenomenological space that objects and viewers share. This dissertation argues that by engaging viewers' active perception and soliciting them in a collaborative creation of the work's meaning—beyond the usual hermeneutics of interpreting an oil on canvas or sculpture on a pedestal—these four artists consciously acted to privilege the subjectivity of individual experience. Such a generous engagement of the spectator countered prevailing models of artistic communication predicated on the distribution of a directed message from artist to audience, and is structurally analogous to the anti-authoritarian politics of the "68" generation, who famously resisted domination by state and corporate powers.

The artists are best known under the encompassing label *Arte povera*, which, when Celant formulated it, stood not only for an attitude towards materials but also connoted a revolutionary politics. The original designation included a wide range of practices, including paintings, sculptures, installations, and performances by artists from Turin, Rome, Milan, and Bologna, and the applications of the nomenclature quickly became even broader. The term's relative ambiguity and its subsequent disavowal by Celant make Trini's focused designation of a local "school"

appealing.⁶ Was there something about Turin, its history, politics, or cultural scene that gave rise to an approach to art that privileged subjectivity thus? Are there shared themes that emerge when works produced there are regarded together? By restoring the Turinese artists' projects to a detailed and culturally-specific context, which is not to say a provincial one, this study seeks to deepen Celant's initial claims of the revolutionary nature of *Arte povera*, and to explore the socio-cultural factors that made his recognition and theorization possible in the first place.

The northern Italian city—which Celant hyperbolically claimed was the center of his world at that time—was highly stratified, with deep divides between “industrialist” managers and workaday laborers. The fissures deepened when workers for regional factories like automaker FIAT (*Fabbrica Italiana Automobili Torino*) began to protest recessionary cuts and the growing automation of assembly lines.⁷ The national center-left governments of the early 1960s, led most notably by Prime Minister Aldo Moro, were unsuccessful in implementing the promised reforms that might have ameliorated such local

⁶ “Arte povera” as conventionally used, generally refers to Giovanni Anselmo, Alighiero Boetti, Pier Paolo Calzolari, Luciano Fabro, Piero Gilardi, Jannis Kounellis, Mario Merz, Marisa Merz, Pino Pascali, Giulio Paolini, Giuseppe Penone, Michelangelo Pistoletto, Emilio Prini, and Gilberto Zorio.

⁷ Robert Lumley, *States of Emergency: Cultures of Revolt in Italy from 1968 to 1978* (New York: Verso, 1990), 110–20.

stresses.⁸ Prefiguring the worker movements by only a few years, the Italian youth movement also gained early momentum at The University of Turin, which was home to an important school of philosophy. In 1972, Zorio remarked, "Turin is the city that shuns worldliness; it's a conservative city, a closed city, the city of FIAT [...] You don't find that fun-loving irony in any of our work that you find in the work of Roman artists." Instead, he argues that the vitality of the Turin School includes "a toughness, a rigor because we are all sons of this terrible city."⁹ One might expect an art born of this situation (and characterized in its critical inception as constituting a "guerilla war") to be topically pointed, but even from the outset, the engagement of this work was rarely directed at specific issues or aligned with explicit politics.¹⁰

In this study, I take Trini's designation of a "Turin School" and define it further, and in newly specific ways. The objects and environments created by Anselmo, Merz, Penone, and Zorio between 1967 and 1978 were structured so that the

⁸ Paul Ginsborg, a British historian of European history who taught at the University of Turin from 1977-80 and currently teaches at the University of Florence, provides the standard political history of these post-war years, chronicling the tangled attempts to find stability and compromise in Italy's parliamentary system. Of note is his discussion of the historical alliance of the moderate Christian Democrats (DC) and the Socialist Party (PSI) referenced briefly here. Paul Ginsborg, *A History of Contemporary Italy: Society and Politics 1943-1988*, (London: Penguin, 1990; reprint, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 254-297.

⁹ Zorio, interview by Bandini, 325.

¹⁰ Celant, "Notes," 36. The critic's "manifesto" and its effects will be discussed in greater depth in Chapter One.

experience of the work itself modeled the active participation and subjectivity necessary for the direct political activity undertaken by many of their generation. Contrary to the popular understanding of *Arte povera* as a purely materialist endeavor, for these four artists in particular, materials were chosen for the principles they helped demonstrate, not as an end in themselves. These arguments are supported by close readings of the works, their critical reception, and comparisons with the philosophical models that were present in Turin. Reading the theoretical concepts that emerged from the University of Turin, specifically, and drawing upon the same sources that were influential for its philosophers, I reveal that these artists' projects are structural analogues of a shared, revolutionary sentiment about aesthetics and communication. Umberto Eco, a student and later teacher at the University in the late 1950s and early 1960s, is central to telling this story of *Arte povera*; his theorization of the "Open Work" is commonly (and properly) identified as important to Celant's original conceptualization. Therein, Eco argued that all works of art always offer themselves for interpretation, but he was concerned with works that are structured to specifically require the participation of the receiver. In a notable passage on music, he notes that for many contemporary works, "the author seems to hand them on to the performer more or less like the components of a construction kit."¹¹ His identification of the empowerment of the receiver

¹¹ Umberto Eco, *The Open Work*, trans. Anna Cancogni (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), 4. Originally published as *Opera*

figures prominently in my readings of the Turin school artists' tactics, as do the philosophers who influenced Eco's theory of aesthetic reception, such as Nicola Abbagnano and Luigi Pareyson, who are typically unexamined in art historical studies of the time.

These scholars were the main conduits in Turin of the continental philosophy of phenomenology. In particular, the inherently embodied aspect of perception posited by French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty is fundamental to analyzing sculptural practices, since the object-oriented medium necessarily engages the viewer in shared space.¹² Merleau-Ponty's study on the visible and invisible aspects of perception helps us understand the ways the Turin School artists' three-dimensional works indicate unseen, yet perceptible forces and energies.¹³ One

Aperta (Milan: Fabbri, 1962). Hereafter, page citations are to the English edition.

¹² Alex Potts, Professor of Art History at the University of Michigan, has authored an important book on twentieth-century sculpture with an entire chapter dedicated to Merleau-Ponty's influence on the art and art criticism produced in the United States during the 1960s. Given the focus, *Arte povera* is not included, but the study is nonetheless useful for my argument. Potts argues that, while neither of the phenomenologist's major publications dealt with art or visual aesthetics directly, Merleau-Ponty's models of perception allowed for a critical self-awareness of the apprehension of objects that translated into the viewing of art. Further, he asserts that it was not important to prove that artists like Donald Judd read these philosophical texts directly, since the ideas could be seen in the writings about their projects. See Alex Potts, "The Phenomenological Turn," *The Sculptural Imagination: Figurative, Modernist, Minimalist* (New Haven: Yale University, 2000), 211-21.

¹³ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible* (1964), ed. Claude Lefort, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1968).

of the arguments of phenomenology considered by Edmund Husserl and taken up by Merleau-Ponty is that it avoids pre-existing constructions and revives living contact with the body.¹⁴ The latter's concept of the *chiasm* or crossing-over between vision and touch lends insight into the ways these artists privilege an integrated and activated viewing body. The aesthetic writings of John Dewey were also crucial to the Turinese philosophical school from which Eco descended, and his privileging of multi-sensory experience will be considered in tandem with more mainstream phenomenology.¹⁵

While this study is the first of its kind to consider Anselmo, Merz, Penone, and Zorio together and to view their specific practices within the matrix of phenomenology and social politics, the choice of artists and the focus on Turin has an important, contemporaneous precedent in Trini's criticism. A frequent critic and contributing editor for the internationally distributed magazine *Domus* in these years, and founding editor of the Italian art journal *Data*, his writings were as fundamental to the elaboration of artistic tendencies of this generation as Celant's treatises on *Arte povera*.¹⁶ An early habitué of

¹⁴ Dermot Moran, *Introduction to Phenomenology* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 5.

¹⁵ For more on connections between Merleau-Ponty and Dewey, see Victor Kestenbaum, *The Phenomenological Sense of John Dewey: Habit and Meaning* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1977), 5-7.

¹⁶ Milan-based *Domus* is an Italian magazine of visual culture, spanning architecture, design, and art. Started by architect/designer Gio Ponti in 1928, it was an important resource for art reviews in the 1960s, during which time Trini

Sperone's gallery, Trini was closely tied to the Turinese scene, as was his brother, the designer Clino Trini Castelli.¹⁷ For Trini, what was so compelling and distinctive about the artists emerging in the later 60s, especially those in Turin, was that they moved away from creating an art of information toward an art of communication, mental processes, and behaviors.¹⁸ He suggested that such works' engagement of the viewer's attention and experience mirrored the kinds of experiences being argued for by the broader social movements in that city, such as the student and worker movements that originated in the University and

was a frequent contributor. Seeking an international audience, many articles appeared in both English and Italian, though the English texts, printed on pink interleaved paper, were often translated excerpts of the Italian. Occasionally articles written in French appeared in French and Italian (as is often the case with articles contributed by Pierre Restany) and not in English. I give the English titles when translations appeared in print, Italian titles where translations are my own. *Data* (1971-1978) was a smaller-circulation publication, compared to *Domus*, with the balance shifted toward art criticism over design (the journal's subtitle was "Pratica e teoria delle arti," Practice and theory of art). It also published many articles in English as well as Italian. Because it was concurrent with the maturation of *Arte povera*, Trini and others like Turinese critics Mirella Bandini and Daniella Palazzoli reviewed many of these artists' exhibitions in its pages.

¹⁷ Both brothers were closely connected to Sperone: Tommaso managed the short-lived Milan outpost of the gallery in 1966-67, and Clino was involved in designing and producing the gallery's printed matter. The connections amongst these figures paint a picture of a very lively exchange. Clino was a collaborator of the designer Ettore Sottsass, Jr. Sottsass was a frequent contributor to *Domus*, as was Trini. Clino Trini Castelli introduced Sperone and Sottsass, who had a show at the Milan gallery. He showed the mirror paintings of Pistoletto to Sottsass, and introduced Sperone to Gilardi, who was a friend of Pistoletto. See Anna Minola, et al, *Gian Enzo Sperone: Torino, Roma, New York*, 2 vols. (Turin: Hopefulmonster, 2000), 20-3.

¹⁸ Tommaso Trini, "The Sixties in Italy," *Studio International* vol. 184, no. 949 (November 1972), 165-70.

quickly spread to Turin's factories.¹⁹ In three separate articles—"The Prodigal Maker's Trilogy" (1969), "The Sixties in Italy" (1972), and "Anselmo, Penone, Zorio and the new sources of energy for the desert of art" (1973)—Trini identified and qualified a Turinese faction within *Arte povera*. He argued, for example, that what separated the Turinese artists from others of their generation was "an art concerned with the internal process of the aesthetic object — an art in which the general perceptions of the world, the aesthetics, are closed within the individual."²⁰ The counterpoint Trini recognized between the individual and the world forms one of the central themes connecting these particular four artists, and stands as a fundamental concept for the latent engagement that I am arguing for in their works. Celant too, when first theorizing *Arte povera*, apprehended the covert form of these politics, calling the objects "social gestures in and of themselves...formative and compositive liberations which aim at the identification between man and world."²¹ With divergent means, each Turin School practitioner can be seen to posit the phenomenological idea that individual perception of the world can actively shape it.

Since I am less interested in thinking about the enduring use value of Celant's label "*Arte povera*" than in recovering the

¹⁹ Tommaso Trini, "Anselmo, Penone, Zorio e le nuove fonti d'energia per il deserto dell'arte," *Data* 3, no. 9 (Autumn 1973): 62-7.

²⁰ Trini, "Sixties," 166.

²¹ Celant, "Notes," 36-37.

context in which the artists and their first apologists recognized commonalities amongst their practices, this study will largely eschew the somewhat tired question of encompassing group identity—"What exactly is *Arte povera*?"—that unnecessarily bogs down so much of the writing on the subject.²² By focusing on these four artists identified, I do not seek to limit the discussion of all *Arte povera* to Turin, nor do I discount other local artists like Pistoletto (who was seen as a precursor), Giulio Paolini (who was primarily involved with problems of painting), or Alighiero Boetti (whose conceptually oriented projects quickly diverged from these other artists' investigations of materials).²³ Certainly, Marisa Merz was an equal partner with her husband in the art world, but most of her objects of the era—such as a pair of shoes woven of copper thread or a wire cage interlaced with pieces of a wig—are not the same kinds of perceptual exercises as those of the four sculptors discussed here. Thus, rather than arguing for a regrouping of *Arte povera*, I hope this study brings useful focus to the discussion of these four artists' projects, concentrating on what

²² In the introduction to a special issue of *October* on post-war Italian Art, issue editor Claire Gilman asks this question without providing a substantial answer. See Claire Gilman, "Introduction," *October* 124 (Spring 2008), 4.

²³ The artists can also be categorized to some extent by where they were primarily showing in the 1960s-70s. Paolini, for example, mainly showed at Pistoletto's *Notizie*. See Mundici, "Torino 1963 – 1968," in Minola, *Sperone*, 29, n. 22. Although Boetti did have shows at Sperone after 1969, in Turin he was part of the early stable of Cristian Stein and exhibited his work more frequently at Galleria Franco Toselli in Milan.

connects them rather than trying to develop a homogenizing category to contain a diverse range of practices.

Fundamentally, *Arte povera* is the theory of a critic and curator, not the guiding principle of a set of practitioners, and any definitions of the term are always contingent and fractional. Surveys of Italian art use the nomenclature, but inevitably fail to cohesively account for the range of artists.²⁴ Perhaps as a result, the numerous monographic books and exhibition catalogues produced over the last forty years often deemphasize the group identity. Even histories of *Arte povera* itself generally avoid overarching analyses, since the artists had practices with as many differences as similarities. One such example is the popular trade book *Arte Povera* (1999), edited by Castello di Rivoli's curator Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, which was one of the first major English-language publications to focus exclusively on the "movement" written by someone other than Celant.²⁵ An important milestone in that regard alone, Christov-Bakargiev's book is also a significant resource for reproductions of major

²⁴ Many accounts of postwar Italian art, especially those in English, are found in exhibition catalogues, such as the Centre George Pompidou's *Identité italienne: L'art en Italie depuis 1959* (Italian Identity: Art in Italy after 1959) (1981), the Royal Academy of Arts' *Italian Art in the 20th Century* (1989), and the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum's *The Italian Metamorphosis: 1943-1968* (1995). By design, these three books provide general accounts of the art and culture in Italy during these years, and are useful for the broad picture they paint of the context from which *Arte povera* emerged. See a discussion of these exhibitions and Celant's role in Ada Chiara Zevi, *Peripezie del dopoguerra nell'arte italiana* (Turin: Einaudi, 2005), 285.

²⁵ Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, *Arte Povera* (New York: Phaidon, 1999).

works and excerpted primary texts presented in monographic sections, which are framed by an introductory essay and some closing thoughts. The tome provides some of the raw materials for contextualizing *Arte povera* in its pages, but does not provide a sustained, synthesized analysis.

One of the most useful texts in understanding the Turinese scene is similarly a compendium of primary voices: Mirella Bandini's *1972: Arte Povera a Torino*. Published in 2002, it reproduces, in Italian only, interviews mostly conducted as a special report on local artists published in the journal *Notizie d'Arte Contemporanea (NAC)* in March 1973.²⁶ One of a handful of important critics in Turin, (a number of whom were women), Bandini's interviews and her own first-hand analysis of the local scene make it an essential resource of which I make use throughout this study.²⁷

Recently, several exhibitions have sought to take stock of *Arte povera*. For the exhibition *Zero to Infinity: Arte Povera 1962-1972* (2001), on which I worked as a curatorial assistant, a catalogue was produced that contextualizes the beginnings of *Arte povera* through short critical essays.²⁸ For example, scholar

²⁶ Mirella Bandini, *1972: Arte Povera a Torino* (Turin: Allemandi, 2002). A few of the interviews were first published in *Data*.

²⁷ Lucia Re has written an insightful study on the relative lack of attention given to female Italian writers. Though outside the realm of the present study, she does mention the important role of female critics. Lucia Re, "Language, Gender and Sexuality in the Italian Neo-Avant-Garde," *MLN* 119 (2004): 135-73.

²⁸ Richard Flood and Frances Morris eds., *Zero to Infinity: Arte Povera 1962-1972* (exhibition catalogue) (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center and London: Tate Modern, 2001). This book also includes an

Corinna Criticos reads the movement through anti-idealist philosophical discourses, providing an introductory case study for the kind of analysis I engage in here. Also included is a text by historian Robert Lumley, which outlines the broad distinctions between the artists in Rome and those in Turin, an important pretext to this study. As a survey of *Arte povera's* prehistory and early years, this catalogue provides a general view to the national cultural conditions of that decade, and it sets the stage for more in-depth investigations.

Another example is the exhibition *Un'avventura internazionale: Torino e le arti 1950-1970* (An International Adventure: Turin and the Arts 1950-1970), organized by curator Ida Gianelli in 1993, which focused on connections between the various artistic forms produced in Turin.²⁹ The show's catalogue provides insightful essays like curator Paolo Fossati's personal account of the transitional social, cultural, and political climate in Italy. It also features interviews with local gallery owners, collectors, and critics, and a broad review of two decades of artistic production, including writing, music, theater, cinema, and photography, without going into any one of these spheres in depth. Since its expansive survey ends at the

essay by Christov-Bakargiev on postwar Italian art before *Arte povera* and a piece by curator Francesco Bonami on the legacy of *Arte povera* for contemporary art. It includes a timeline that sketches a trajectory of concurrent cultural and political events.

²⁹ Ida Gianelli, ed., *Un'avventura internazionale: Torino e le arti 1950-1970* (exhibition catalogue) (Turin: Castello di Rivoli and Milan: Charta, 1993).

very beginning of *Arte povera*, Gianelli's exhibition catalogue provides useful information about the cultural climate of the 1960s and a foundation for the present study.

More recently, academic scholarship has sought to compliment the resurgent curatorial interest in *Arte povera*. In 2008, the journal *October* published a special issue focused on postwar Italian art, which featured essays by emerging and established scholars on *Arte povera* and its predecessors. Issue editor Claire Gilman writes about the "staged subjects" of Pistoletto's mirror paintings as an oscillation between *Arte povera's* entreaties to the viewer and Pop art's blank stare. Rosalind Krauss, a founding editor of the journal, presents Giovanni Anselmo's work through a determined anti-Minimalist lens, perpetuating a problematic discourse about *Arte povera* as a secondary reaction to American art, rather than reading it on its own terms.³⁰ Nicholas Cullinan, a young scholar and curator, reads *Arte povera* within a political context, drawing connections between protests of the American war in Vietnam, the labor-oriented *Operaio* movement in Italy, and artworks like Pascali's junk-sculpture *Weapons (Le Armi, 1965)*. Curiously, his analysis of artists based in Rome centers on the labor movements of Turin's factories and widespread opposition to American imperialism. Like Krauss, he interprets *Arte povera* as reactive

³⁰ For example, Krauss suggests that Anselmo's interest in gravity is derived from seeing Richard Serra's work. This is an issue that I will revisit in the second chapter. See Rosalind Krauss, "Giovanni Anselmo: Matter and Monochrome," *October* 124 (Spring 2008): 129.

to American culture.³¹ Other texts in this issue address the works of Alighiero Boetti, Marisa Merz, and predecessors to the movement, Alberto Burri and Lucio Fontana.

Through many of these same writers or their students, *Arte povera* has also become the focus of several unpublished doctoral dissertations, whose methodologies can be divided into two broad approaches: those attempting to find an overarching definition of *Arte povera*, and those seeking alternative histories within the framework the term provides. In a dissertation completed at Columbia University in 2006, Gilman focused on Kounellis and Pascali, who were based in Rome, and Pistoletto, who divided time between the capital and Turin in the later 1960s. She argues that these artists' uses of materials were primarily "theatrical" and, as such, represented specifically anti-modernist approaches antithetical to "distinterested" material specificity. It is an analysis that primarily views the work in dialogue with and as a rejoinder to, terms set by American formalist discourse.³²

Another dissertation is currently underway at the Courtauld Institute, where Cullinan is writing a thematically organized survey of the movement as a whole. Broken into chapters that

³¹ See, for example, Cullinan's agreement with art historian Benjamin Buchloh's assessment of the "anti-technological stance" of *Arte povera* owing to a misreading of American Minimalism. Nicholas Cullinan, "From Vietnam to Fiat-nam: The Politics of *Arte Povera*," *October* 124 (Spring 2008): 17.

³² Claire Gilman, Ph.D. dissertation, *Arte Povera's Theater: Artifice and Anti-Modernism in Italian Art of the 1960s* (Columbia University, 2006). See also, Claire Gilman, *Arte Povera: Selections from the Sonnabend Collection* (exhibition brochure) (New York: Miriam and Ira Wallach Gallery, Columbia University, 2001).

deal with broad themes such as "classicism" and "materials," this study will also examine the connections between the post-war social context and the artists' works.³³ Finally, Christopher Bennett, at the University of Michigan, is writing a dissertation structured as case studies of Alighiero Boetti and Pino Pascali between 1965 and 1970. His thesis aims to investigate the different approaches of these two artists as a means to address debates about consumerism and social activism in postwar Italy.³⁴ My dissertation is similar to Bennett's in approach, comprising a case study of four artists' projects between 1967 and 1978.

In order to provide a framework for the Turin School's genesis and early reception, the first chapter of this study tracks social and political events in Northern Italy and introduces the ideas emerging from Abbagnano's school of phenomenology. The local contemporary context proves fundamental to understanding how the artists, as well as critics like Celant and Trini, understood the physicality of these artworks to exemplify a political position. Turin's central role in the early resistance to Fascism and, later, to the Nazi occupation of Northern Italy in the final years of World War II will be considered as important foundations for the leftist politics of the city, setting the stage for the student and worker movements

³³ In my most recent conversations with Cullinan, he told me he was taking some time away from his dissertation to accept a curatorial fellowship. I am unsure of the status of his project as of 2009.

³⁴ For a general direction of this research see Christopher G. Bennett, "Substantive Thoughts? The Early Work of Alighiero Boetti," *October* 124 (Spring 2008): 75-97.

that erupted in 1967.³⁵ Intellectually, the philosophical discourses emerging from The University of Turin prove vital to *Arte povera*, since Celant's theorization of it was colored by the school's marriage of existentialism, phenomenology, and Dewey's pragmatism. Pareyson's theory of "formativity," which argued that the exchange between artist and viewer that happens in interpretation is the actual means of formation of the work, was a clear predecessor to the stress that Celant placed on *Arte povera's* experiential aspects.³⁶ The critic/curator also directly cites Dewey in the 1969 book *Arte Povera*, and borrows the concept of the "open work" from Eco.³⁷ For example, when writing in 1968 about Anselmo's early works, like an untitled sheet of curved Plexiglas, Celant remarks that they "are 'open' works, which in the final analysis cannot be possessed" (fig. 2).³⁸ Celant's references to the theories of Eco, Dewey, and Merleau-Ponty have been previously noted, but this study is the first to consider in depth the connections between these theories, the socio-political climate of Northern Italy, and the artworks exhibited as *Arte*

³⁵ For an excellent account of this political and cultural history that was written by a member of the philosophy faculty at the University of Turin, see Norberto Bobbio, *Trent'anni di storia della cultura a Torino (1920-1950)* (Turin: Cassa di Risparmio di Torino, 1977).

³⁶ Luigi Pareyson, *Estetica-Teoria della formatività* (Turin: Edizione di filosofia, 1954), reprinted in *Luigi Pareyson: Opere complete*, vol. 10-11 (Milan: Mursia, 2000). Page citations refer to the reprint edition.

³⁷ Germano Celant, *Arte Povera* (Bologna: Galleria de Foscherari, 1968), reprinted in English in Celant, ed. *Arte povera = art povera*, 57. Page citations are to the English edition.

³⁸ Eco, *The Open Work*, 87.

povera during this decade.³⁹ A reading of the four artists' major themes against the socio-political backdrop and concurrent philosophical thought does not argue that their art illustrates political sentiment, nor that they were consciously appropriating ideas from philosophy for their artworks. Rather I propose that an organic spread of ideas and mutual influence provides a framework through which the strategic connections among their works become visible. Celant's well-known and central role in the genesis of *Arte povera* is briefly re-examined in this first chapter, detailing his important synthesis of the critical issues in art and aesthetics already circulating in Turin.

In chapter two, I read Giovanni Anselmo's projects through the phenomenological principle that the world restages itself with every perception, and argue that it is emblematic of how the Turin-based artists engage the viewer in the production of meaning. His apparently simple objects, such as a stone held aloft by a slipknot, comprise a complex *oeuvre* in which pre-calculated material interactions foreground the perpetual tensions inherent in the combination of two substances (fig. 3). By typically resisting crystallization into a singular image or perceptual moment, Anselmo's structurally "open" sculptures continually stage their presence within a shifting contextual field. However straightforward they may seem at first glance, encountering Anselmo's situations potentially opens pathways to

³⁹ See Bakargiev, *Arte Povera*, 15. See also Corinna Criticos, "Reading Arte Povera," in *Zero to Infinity: Arte povera 1962-1972*, ed. Richard Flood and Francis Morris (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center and London: Tate Modern, 2001), 67-88.

the contemplation of omnipresent forces like energy, gravity, or magnetism that evade everyday consideration. Once revealed, these larger systems activate a viewing subject by including the body within their operation. Merleau-Ponty wrote: "It is neither contradictory nor impossible that each sense should constitute a small world within a larger one, and it is even in virtue of its peculiarity that it is necessary to the whole and opens upon the whole."⁴⁰ Anselmo's sculptural devices connect to this discourse of phenomenology by positing the individual as equally empowered to reshape the world through altered perception.

The artist's interest in the tensions produced by material forces can also be read thematically, in the context of an opposition between nature and industry, or more pointedly between Italy's traditionally agricultural economy and Turin's rapidly expanding industrial sector. Anselmo demonstrates how all matter, regardless of natural or industrial connotations, is subject to the universal laws of nature. Rejecting dualities such as natural and industrial, mental and physical, and visible and invisible, Anselmo's objects and materials instead demonstrate the vital exchange between such oppositional concepts within larger systems. Further, the revelation of latent energy in seemingly inert mass serves as an important metaphor for the

⁴⁰ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception* (Paris: Gallimard, 1945). Reprinted in English as *Phenomenology of Perception* [1962], trans. Colin Smith (New York: Routledge Classics, 2002), 257. Page citations refer to the English edition.

activation of revolutionary sentiment in seemingly inert materials and bodies.

Giuseppe Penone's body of work evidences the centrality of multi-sensory perception found in Turinese *Arte povera*. In the third chapter, I examine the ways in which touch exceeds vision in his work and how tactile engagement implies the manifestation of an embodied subject. Through material encounters that foreground the role of human presence—such as permanently adhering an iron cast of his hand to the trunk of a growing tree—Penone demonstrates a means by which subjectivity, an individual's perception of his or her agency, can be reconsidered (fig. 4). The artist indicates the powerful effect of even small human actions when considered within a geological conception of time, reinforcing the centrality of individuals in shaping the world.

Penone's focus on tactile sensations is also a form of de-sublimation, a conscious adoption of an oppositional position relative to the abstract and highly ordered way in which one is schooled or acculturated. It enacts a critical and self-conscious split between mind and body. I argue that Merleau-Ponty's concept of the reversibility of touch, the way it can both actively and passively access sensory information, is fundamental in understanding how Penone's works navigate individual subjectivity within the context of his contemporary social paradigms.⁴¹ The artist's project does not seek refuge

⁴¹ In a chapter of *The Visible and the Invisible* titled "The Intertwining—The Chiasm," Merleau-Ponty describes the way the

from Turin's industrial turmoil by working in the natural world, but rather identifies the many counterpoints between such poles as agricultural and industrial through material investigations. His work argues for an equivalence between the sculptor's efforts and the labor of manual work. Touch remains the constant factor in these paradigms, and it is shown to replicate, amplify, and subvert organic systems such as growth, sedimentation, and decay.

In 1967, Gilberto Zorio began demonstrating the volatility of solids to engage the viewer and investigate the precariousness of seemingly durable structures. Among the Turinese artists, his objects and installations best exemplify a consideration of alchemy as an analogue for the radical transformation of the world through altered perception. The fourth chapter begins by investigating how Zorio's *oeuvre* and *Arte povera* in general have been connected to alchemy in the past. Through a historical overview of the philosophical foundations of alchemy and a close analysis of key artworks, this chapter offers further connections among phenomenology, *Arte povera*, and the Turinese milieu between 1967 and 1978.

When one of Zorio's objects, for example, changes color before the viewer's eyes, it uses an aesthetic value to indicate

hand can actively touch and feel itself being touched, as in a handshake. He asserts "The reversibility that defines the flesh exists in other fields; it is even incomparably more agile there and capable of weaving relations between bodies that this time will not only enlarge, but will pass definitively beyond the circle of the visible." Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "The Intertwining—The Chiasm," *The Visible and the Invisible*, (1964), ed. Claude Lefort, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 144.

a physical change (fig. 5). That is, rather than simply presenting a column of concrete or vat of liquid as a mute object to be experienced spatially, Zorio uses materials to engage the viewer in a consideration of forces, energies, and instabilities. His object-demonstrations connote the fluidity and energetic exchange of even the most obdurate matter. Alchemy provides a historical framework for using the visible signs of the natural world to understand its invisible processes, and underscores the complexity of the materiality often identified with *Arte povera*. The early science also foregrounds the individual's role in meaning-making, providing a foundation for the activated subjectivity necessary to envision social transformation.

When Celant wrote that "[*Arte povera*] effects a return to the Middle Ages, not only from a technical point of view [...] but from a poetic point of view as well," he might have most succinctly been describing the work of Mario Merz.⁴² Chapter five investigates the ways in which Merz's work uses forms and systems drawn from the Middle Ages, such as the Fibonacci numbers, to bring fresh perspectives to present challenges (fig. 6). Though such references are historically remote, underlying politics come closer to the surface in Merz's work. Mediated by these distant referents, the works remain open fields of signification rather than direct political statements. For example, the concept of solidarity is easily read when the proliferating numerical system is applied to photographs of factory workers entering a

⁴² Germano Celant, "*Arte povera*" [1968], 49.

cafeteria. Such a work does not, however, point to specific partisan politics or incendiary issues, but positions the viewer to navigate possible meanings within a general sphere of inquiry.

Like alchemy, a medieval worldview might also be considered a historical parallel of phenomenology, since it might privilege first hand experience, as during a "dark age" in which knowledge must be reconstructed from primary evidence. Both artist and viewer can be said to occupy this medieval point-of-view in Merz's structurally "open works." Moreover, Eco's writings of the 1970s use the Middle Ages as a specific temporal frame through which the contemporary moment might be accessed. In "*Il Medioevo è già cominciato*" (The Middle Age has already started), he correlates the medieval era and the post-1968 decade as transitional moments of great uncertainty and necessary change.⁴³ This chapter examines how Eco's provocative correlation resonates with Merz's use of remote systems to mediate pressing political sentiment.

Returning to the *Sacred Conversation* with which we began, one might recognize the device indicated by the title as one that originated in Italy in the early 1400s, in which figures of the Madonna and Child appear together in the same pictorial space with saints and devotees, instead of being divided into

⁴³ Umberto Eco, "*Il Medioevo è già cominciato*" in Colombo, *Documenti su il nuovo medioevo: La cultura, il potere, l'industria, le forme di vita nell'epoca neofeudale* (Milan: Bompiani, 1973), 5-28. A revised, re-titled, and aggressively abridged version of this essay appears in English in: Umberto Eco, *Faith in Fakes: Travels in Hyperreality*, trans. William Weaver (London: Secker and Warburg, 1986), 73-86. (Page references are to the earlier and more complete Italian edition.)

compartmentalized panels.⁴⁴ Viewing the works of Anselmo, Merz, Penone, and Zorio together in the same space, against the shared backdrop of Turin between 1967 and 1978, it becomes clear that the political dimensions of their art had to come from the structure of the work itself. When asked about the role of politics in his work at the time, Penone remarked that an artwork could have political content if it coincides with the needs of the work, but one can't force an external content into the language and form of an artwork. Moreover, he suggested that since the political is a direct action in society, its most effective language is certainly not the language of art, which comes nearer to poetry in its logic and address to the viewer.⁴⁵

In the Turin School works there is no call for proletarian revolution nor sloganeering, but there is a shared desire to reawaken what had been dormant, a being in the world that foregrounded the embodied nature of perception. This ethos emerged alongside both the local aesthetic partiality for phenomenology and the libertarian politics of the late 1960s, and survived throughout the turbulent 1970s, known in Italy as the "Years of Lead" (*Anni di piombo*). Although Celant abandoned the term "*Arte povera*" in 1971, this study will argue that the tactics developed by these Turinese artists works continued to be

⁴⁴ "Filippo Lippi's *Barbadori Altarpiece* (begun 1437, Louvre, Paris) is perhaps the first dated example." See "sacra conversazione." The Oxford Dictionary of Art. Ed. Ian Chilvers. Oxford University Press, 2004. eNotes.com. 2006. 30 Oct, 2009 <http://www.enotes.com/oxford-art-encyclopedia/_sacra-conversazione>

⁴⁵ Giuseppe Penone, e-mail message to author, 25 September 2007.

relevant to considerations of art and politics at least as long as the spirit of 1968 pervaded.⁴⁶ It was only in 1978-79, as the political tide turned toward the conservative retrenchment of the 1980s, that another artistic generation came to the fore in Italy, and this study will conclude with a rationale for this new periodization of *Arte povera*, whose end is defined by a moment of cultural involution.

⁴⁶ Germano Celant, "Senza titolo," in *Arte povera*, ed. Eva Madelung (Munich: Kunstverein, 1971), reprinted in English as "Untitled," in *Arte povera = art povera*, ed. Germano Celant, trans. Paul Blanchard (Milan: Electa, 1985), 154-63. Page citations are to the English edition.

CHAPTER ONE

TURIN AS EPICENTER: THE POLITICAL, PHILOSOPHICAL, AND ARTISTIC
HORIZONS OF THE TURIN SCHOOL CIRCA 1967

Though it is commonly believed that avant-garde artists are out of touch with the human community in which they live, and that traditional art remains in close contact with it, the opposite is true. In fact, only avant-garde artists are capable of establishing a meaningful relationship with the world in which they live.

-Umberto Eco¹

For me, Turin was the center of the world.

-Germano Celant²

Celant was not alone in thinking that the Piedmontese city was an axis around which so much seemed to revolve in the late 1960s. Indeed post-war Turin was in many ways emblematic of the changes happening throughout Italy, and it was a flashpoint for social and cultural events. Between 1951 and 1967 the population of the urban center almost doubled, and it increased nearly eighty percent in the neighboring suburbs.³ Certainly by the numbers, the city seemed to be exerting its own gravitational pull. While the Genoa-raised curator might be counted among those migrants, the majority were laborers who came from southern

¹ Umberto Eco, "Form as Social Commitment," in *The Open Work*, trans. Anna Cancogni (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), 142. Originally published as *Opera Aperta* (Milan: Fabbri, 1962). Hereafter, page citations are to the English edition.

² Germano Celant, "How to escape from the hallucinations of history," in *Arte Povera=Art Povera*, trans. Paul Blanchard (Milan: Electa, 1985), 22.

³ Paul Ginsborg, *A History of Contemporary Italy: Society and Politics 1943-1988*, (London: Penguin, 1990; reprint, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 220.

provinces like Foggia, Reggio Calabria, and Bari in search of work. These local circumstances were central to the national transformation that defined the immediate post-war decades throughout Italy, and they set the stage for the social conflicts of the late 1960s.

The University of Turin was at the center of intellectual life in the city, and was also the site of major student protests in 1967.⁴ In the early 60s, the university's reputation was enhanced by an important school of philosophical thought there that defied the idealist aesthetics of Benedetto Croce (1866-1952), which still dominated Italian philosophy at the time. Led by Nicola Abbagnano (1901-1990) and Luigi Pareyson (1918-1981) this new philosophical orientation incorporated strands of continental phenomenology (notably, Edmund Husserl and Maurice Merleau-Ponty) with American pragmatism (e.g. John Dewey) to forge a new branch of aesthetics focused on the importance of perception and the individual's immersion in time and space.⁵ Abbagnano and Pareyson's teachings on the centrality of bodily experience for aesthetic perception were formative for students

⁴ For more on the general climate around the university, see Pietro Derossi, "Anni Cinquanta/Settanta, alcuni ridcori," in *Un'avventura internazionale: Torino e le arti 1950-1970* (exhibition catalogue), ed. Ida Gianelli (Turin: Castello di Rivoli and Milan: Charta, 1993), 175-7.

⁵ Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev has argued that Merleau-Ponty's theories published in his 1945 book *Phenomenology of Perception* (published in Italian in 1965): "allows a closer parallel [than Husserl] with some of the principles underlying *Arte povera*. For Merleau-Ponty, the relationship between consciousness and the world is equivalent to the relationship between nature and the body." Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, *Arte Povera* (New York: Phaidon, 1999), 26.

like Umberto Eco and Gianni Vattimo, contemporaries of Celant and the *Arte povera* artists, who eventually became important philosophers in their own right.

In terms of art education in Turin, the *Accademia Albertina di Belle Arti di Torino* was an official training ground for many artists, but it was not the only resource for vanguard practitioners. More important was a new crop of exhibition spaces such as the collaborative *Deposito d'Arte Contemporanea* (Depot for Contemporary Art), the *Museo d'Arte Sperimentale di Torino* (Museum of Experimental Art), and commercial galleries like those of Gian Enzo Sperone and Christian Stein.⁶ These new art spaces not only gave the young Italian artists venues in which to show, but also brought important international contemporary art to Turin.⁷ For example, an exhibition at Sperone in April of 1967 included Anselmo, Pistoletto, and Zorio, as well as Warhol, Flavin, Rosenquist and others from Italy and abroad.⁸ No single factor—politics, philosophy, or a single gallery—could be said to have caused artists to behave a certain

⁶ For a detailed history of the *Museo Sperimentale*, which had earlier manifestations in Genoa as the *Teatro Stabile* (1963) and *Teatro Falcone* (1964) before the collection was given to Turin in 1965, see Mirella Bandini and Rosanna Maggio Serra, *Il Museo Sperimentale di Torino: Arte italiana degli anni Sessanta nelle collezioni della Galleria Civica d'Arte Moderna*, (Milan: Fabbri/Rivoli-Turin: Castello di Rivoli, 1985).

⁷ Claire Gilman notes that Francis Bacon, for example, had seventeen shows in Turin's galleries in the 1960s. Claire Gilman, Ph.D. dissertation, *Arte Povera's Theater: Artifice and Anti-Modernism in Italian Art of the 1960s* (Columbia University, 2006), 45.

⁸ Anna Minola, et al, *Gian Enzo Sperone: Torino, Roma, New York*, 2 vols. (Turin: Hopefulmonster, 2000), 106-7.

way, or to be interested in making particular types of work, but together they coalesce into a picture of social, intellectual, and artistic vibrancy. In order to understand the genesis of, and critical response to, the Turin School artists, it is critical to explore in further depth the contextual triangle of socio-politics, philosophical ideas, and artistic climate.

Rome is acknowledged to be the ancient and contemporary civic center of Italy, but Turin has been pivotal to three major socio-political milestones in the country's modern history: the 19th-century *Risorgimento* (Unification), anti-Fascism between the world wars and the organization of the Resistance to Nazism during WWII, and the student-worker movements of the late 1960s, which partially devolved into extremism in the 1970s. The first capital of the kingdom established after the *Risorgimento* in 1861, Turin was home to the Savoia (Savoy) family, who ruled the country following the "resurgence" of Italy after centuries of foreign occupation until the establishment of the First Republic in 1947 (though only nominally after Mussolini's ascendancy in 1922).⁹ Many historians see residual links between the progressive, nationalistic, renegade spirit of the *Risorgimento*—which was largely organized in Turin's grand cafes by intellectuals like Garibaldi and Cavour—, Turinese anti-

⁹ The term "*Risorgimento*" was originally coined to refer to the "resurgence" of Italy after centuries of foreign occupation and divided territories. Harry Hearder, *Italy: A Short History*, 2nd ed., rev. Jonathan Morris (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 155.

Fascist activities between the wars, and the region's central role in the partisan resistance to Nazi occupation between 1943 and 1945.¹⁰ The main groups of "partigiani" (partisans) grew out of the five (anti-Fascist) political parties outlawed during Fascism, including the democratic *Giustizia e Libertà* and its related *Partito d'Azione*, the communist-backed *Brigati Galibaldi*, and the socialist *Brigati Matteotti*. The clandestine groups included and in some cases had been founded by major intellectual and left-leaning political leaders such as future Prime Minister Ferruccio Parri, publisher Leone Ginzburg, writer Natalia Ginzburg, author and Auschwitz survivor Primo Levi, philosopher Norberto Bobbio, and politician and historian Vittorio Foa.¹¹ For

¹⁰ Richard Lamb, *War in Italy 1943-1945: A Brutal Story* (London: Da Capo/St Martin's, 1993), 203. For more on history of partisan movement, see also Mario Giovana, *Giustizia e Libertà in Italia: storie di una cospirazione antifascisti 1929-1937* (Torino: Bollato Boringhieri, 2005). The partisan movement might be said to officially begin with the formation of the *Comitato di Liberazione Nazionale* (CLN) out of the various anti-Fascist parties in September 1943, but as this book argues, those opposed to fascism in general, like *Giustizia e Libertà*, had been fighting its various forms (in Italy, Spain, and Germany) since the 1920s. Therefore to refer to the founders of these parties as partisans denotes their importance to the later fight.

¹¹ See Lamb, 203-226. All of the figures mentioned here were originally from or based in Turin and were prominent in the anti-Fascist movement between the wars and during WWII. Many of them are profiled by the *Associazione Nazionale Partigiani d'Italia*. See <http://www.anpi.it/uomini.htm>. (Last accessed 02/28/2009.) Leone Ginzburg was a director of *Giustizia e Libertà* in Turin and founder of the *Partito d'Azione* while in exile. He died at the hands of Gestapo interrogators in 1943. Carlo Levi was also a Turinese founder of *Giustizia e Libertà* in 1929, but was in exile in Lucania and Paris between 1935-1941. After WWII, he was the editor of *Partito d'Azione's* publication, *Italia libera*. See Ginzburg, 52-8, and 63-7. Primo Levi's 1944 internment at Auschwitz originated with a 1943 arrest for resistance activities conducted under the auspices of *Giustizia e Libertà* in the

northern partisans, the years spent waging a guerilla war against Germans and the remnants of Mussolini's Fascist state known as the *Repubblica Socialista Italiana* (RSI), and in some cases sabotaging of the "official" government of former Fascist (and monarchist sympathizer) Pietro Badoglio, were brutally violent.¹² The experiences of these individual Resistance fighters, and their political marginalization in the aftermath of the war were foundational in establishing the social landscape of 1960s.¹³

In post-World War II Italy, in general, a backlash against Fascism resulted in numerous political divisions, and the ideological discord between socialist, communist, monarchist, and centrist conservative constituencies (to name only a few) was such that a 1946 national referendum only narrowly favored the establishment of a republic. The surreptitious and extraordinary influence of both the Catholic Church and the U.S. government also greatly complicated post-war domestic politics. The Vatican, eager to step into the power vacuum, backed the center-right "traditional values" Christian Democrat party (*Democrazia Cristiana*, or DC) over the Communists (*Partito Comunista Italiano*, or PCI), who had long opposed a politically powerful

Piedmontese mountains. See Ian Thompson, *Primo Levi: A Life* (New York: Metropolitan, 2003).

¹² Hearder cites that at least 35,000 partisans were killed between 1943 and 1945, and 21,000 wounded. Higher mortality rates may owe to the fact that the Fascists and Nazis did not have to take prisoners because they were not officially soldiers and therefore not subject to Geneva convention. Hearder, 247, note 1.

¹³ Tobias Jones, *The Dark Heart of Italy* (New York: North Point Press, 2003), 43.

church. Further, desperately needed reconstruction aid via the Marshall Plan came at the price of bowing to American political demands, and thus as the Cold War took shape, the Allies quickly abandoned the Communists and traditional Socialists, (*Partito Socialista Italiano*, or PSI), many of whom had been members of the Resistance. In the postwar period, the Americans, especially, found it more politically viable to support former "pardoned" Fascists than communists and socialists.¹⁴ This political reversal was particularly unpalatable in Turin and Piedmont where members of *Giustizia e Libertà* and *Partito d'Azione* were local heroes.¹⁵ The swift fracturing of alliances forged between the small groups of the Resistance, and specifically the DC's opposition to any "openings to the left," lies at the root of much of the suspicion and ill-ease among the Italian left that pervaded into the 1960s and 1970s, and is often cited as one of the causes of later civil unrest in Turin.¹⁶ The Italian Parliament was notoriously weak at this moment, but the

¹⁴ Ginsborg notes that "On March 20 1948 George Marshall warned that all help to Italy would immediately cease in the event of a Communist victory" in the still-fragile nation's upcoming elections. Ginsborg, 115.

¹⁵ For example, Penone's main knowledge of Pareyson was for his role as a *partigiano*, not as a philosopher. In their shared home-region of Cuneo there is a school named after Pareyson because of that important role. Giuseppe Penone, e-mail message to author, 10 May 2008. Pareyson had been teaching philosophy at the *Liceo classico* di Cuneo before 1943, when he became directly involved in the Resistance. See Francesco Tomatis, "Luigi Pareyson: filosofo della libertà," *Cuneo: provincia granda* 2 (2002): 16-20.

¹⁶ Jones, 43.

centrist DC party remained quite stably in power for most of the first republic, to the exclusion of more labor-friendly parties.¹⁷

The political history of post-war Italy is tied as much to the socio-economic aspects of the post-war recovery as the continued marginalization of former Resistance fighters. Here, too, Turin is central to the national narrative. With both an aristocratic, cosmopolitan identity and a strong history of political, anti-bourgeois activism, Turin has a complex and highly stratified social structure, which became more pronounced in the aftermath of WWII. As the third hub of the so-called northern "industrial triangle," Turin's manufacturing sector, especially that of FIAT was vitally important to the Italian economy in the 1950s and 60s.¹⁸ Indeed, by the mid 60s, almost a quarter of Italy's total investment was tied to FIAT's material needs.¹⁹ As factories like FIAT, Pirelli, and Olivetti sprang back to life in the post-war years, they attracted poor Southern laborers whom they paid cheaply. On the backs of this labor (and some would argue exploitation), Italy turned around its economy

¹⁷ Sidney Tarrow, Professor of Government at Cornell University and specialist on post-war Italian politics, argues that this transitional period in Italy was more stable than most scholars give credit. Further, he suggests that the crises that centrist Italian politics posed for both Left and Right may have opened the door to real solutions in the Second Republic (1980-present). See Sidney Tarrow, "Italy: Crisis, Crises or Transition?" in *Italy in Transition: Conflict and Consensus*, ed. Peter Lange and Sidney Tarrow (London: Frank Cass & Co., 1980), 166-85.

¹⁸ The "industrial triangle" consisted of the northern cities of Turin, Genoa, and Milan, and was the center of the doubling of industrial production seen between 1958-1963. Ginsborg, 214.

¹⁹ Ginsborg, 215.

and began moving with breakneck speed into an industrialized future. The "Italian Miracle," as the recovery was known, changed the broad, agriculturally-based economy that had survived millennia into an industrial economy based in Northern cities within a few short years. When the "new" economy turned sour in 1964, industrial unemployment rose rapidly and the conditions of the rootless—and now jobless—laboring immigrants in Turin worsened. At the same time, an alliance between the political center and the left, which had been heralded as salvation for the working classes, proved relatively weak and ineffectual.²⁰

Against this backdrop, in the autumn of 1967, Turin's students initiated a movement of determined opposition to the city's stratified society and established institutions, as well as the industrial system reinforcing them. The protests were initially against at poor teaching, outdated facilities, and overcrowded conditions, but soon turned to larger social and ideological issues like industrialization, consumerism, and class divisions. The students' uprising, as historian Paul Ginsborg has remarked, "was an ethical revolt, a notable attempt to turn the tide against the predominant values of the time."²¹ Immediate complaints were specific to the University, but many Italian students, like those in Strasbourg in 1966 and Paris in 1968,

²⁰ Michele Salvati, "Muddling Through: Economics and Politics in Italy 1969-1979," in *Italy in Transition: Conflict and Consensus*, ed. Peter Lange and Sidney Tarrow, trans. Paul Mattick (London: Frank Cass & Co., 1980), 31-48. Salvati is a professor of economics at the University of Modena.

²¹ Ginsborg, 301.

were also generally disillusioned by what they saw waiting for them outside of the school environment: the triumph of capitalist gain over community and the slim prospects in Italy's continued slumping economy. They found common ground on these points with the laboring classes of Turin. The city was an epicenter of this student movement, and one of the first places where the police began to intervene in the demonstrations.²²

On 27 November 1967, the student occupation of the University's central location, the *Palazzo Campana*, and the *Facoltà di Lettere e Filosofia* (Department of Humanities and Philosophy) established a model for similar protests nationwide that have been likened by historians to the surprise attacks of guerilla warfare, with students regularly interrupting lectures and hijacked the discussions towards their own aims.²³ They coalesced spontaneously in small-scale disruptions that succeeded in upsetting the institution's normal operations. These tactical impulses, which drew on the Piedmontese anti-Fascist and partisan legacies, were most immediately inspired by Che Guevara, whose murder in Bolivia a month earlier had made him an instant martyr-figure, as well as by Vietnamese responses to US and Soviet aggressions that made daily news in Italy. The unstructured, action-based tactics seen in Turin, in conjunction with a

²² Guido Crainz, *Il Paese Mancato: Dal miracolo economico agli anni ottanta*, 2nd volume of *L'Italia contemporanea* (Rome: Donzelli editore, 2003), 144-52.

²³ Crainz, 321-56.

²⁴ Crainz, 321-56.

libertarian rejection of all centralized authority and formalized ideology, found their way into many of the demonstrations throughout Italy's universities that autumn and winter.²⁵

The tactics employed by the University students shared something of the intellectual spirit of the very departments they were occupying, though surely this irony was lost on both. Indeed, in the two decades following WWII, the University was a vibrant center of a new direction for philosophy that aimed to theorize the phenomenological world through embodied experience and active participation in the creation of meaning. Teachings at the department of philosophy—headed primarily by Abbagnano, and secondarily by Norberto Bobbio and Pareyson—resisted the influence of Crocean idealism by focusing instead on a blend of phenomenology, existentialism, and the pragmatism of Dewey.²⁶ Croce's foundational 1901 treatise *Aesthetic*, had argued for an "ideal" art separate from the concerns of everyday life, and his views on artistic autonomy dominated the Italian context for the first half of the century.²⁷ The Neapolitan philosopher had aimed to distance what he termed aesthetic "intuition" from everyday sense "perceptions," stating that the latter are "what the spirit

²⁵ Ginsborg, 307.

²⁶ Nicola Abbagnano, "Verso il nuovo illuminismo," *Rivista di filosofia* XXXIX (Ottobre-Dicembre 1948): 313-25.

²⁷ Benedetto Croce, *Aesthetic*, trans. Douglas Ainslie (New York: Noonday Press, 1956), 4th impression of 1922 edition. First English edition published by Macmillan & Co, 1909.

of man suffers, but does not produce."²⁸ Gillo Dorfles, the prominent Italian aesthetician, critic, and painter, provided an important mapping of the postwar Italian aesthetic tradition at mid-century, arguing that in the postwar period, "Italian philosophical thinking sought to regain the time lost, and so appeared more explicit in its disagreement and in its criticism, which turned against the aesthetic dictatorship of Croce."²⁹ He identified Antonio Banfi (student of Piero Martinetti in Turin), as an important counter position, because Banfi introduced an approach to the arts that took into account the physical and contextual realities of artistic practice as early as 1926, and eventually gave rise to two main schools of phenomenology headed by Abbagnano in Turin and Enzo Paci in Milan.³⁰

²⁸ He argued that intuition required freedom from intellectualism and other external forces. Croce, *Aesthetic*, 5.

²⁹ An abstract painter in the early post-war period, Dorfles was a founder of the 1948 Concrete Art Movement (*Movimento Arte Concreta*, or MAC), a critical advocate of design in the 1950s and 60s, and a professor of aesthetics in Milan and Trieste. Well-known for his aesthetic writings, Dorfles maintained in this essay, that Croce remained an important figure, respected for his resistance to Fascism, and it was not until after his death in 1953 that a real change could be undertaken. See Gillo Dorfles, "New Currents in Italian Aesthetics," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 12, no. 2 (December 1953): 184.

³⁰ While Banfi is often identified as being connected to Milan because of his academic post there and his own students like Enzo Paci, he was himself a student of Martinetti in Turin. It should also be noted that he had direct contact with phenomenologist Edmund Husserl in Berlin in the 1920s, and the two became friends. For more on Banfi, see Sylvia Benso and Brian Schroeder eds., *Contemporary Italian Philosophy: Crossing the Borders of Ethics, Politics, and Religion* (Albany: State University Press of New York, 2007).

Many Italian philosophers sought to move beyond Croce in these years, and Abbagnano's school and the journal he edited with Bobbio, *Rivista di filosofia*, were notable in their international breadth, looking beyond Italy for alternative models.³¹ Eugenio Garin, the pre-eminent chronicler of Italian philosophy, positions this openness to new philosophical models in Turin as part of the renegade legacy of Piedmontese resistance, arguing that in the post-war years Turinese thinkers were more free than their Southern colleagues to consider new horizons for philosophy that reached to France, Germany, and the United States.³² (Indeed, Abbagnano, Bobbio, and Pareyson were all also compatriots in the anti-fascist *Partito d'Azione* during WWII.³³) Garin further contends that this protracted end of WWII allowed philosophers in Turin and other devastated areas of the

³¹ Paci was also interested in the implications of Dewey's thought for a "positive existentialism." The Milanese philosopher's friendship with Luigi Pareyson is documented in Tomatis, *Luigi Pareyson*, 12. Since there was a personal connection to suggest intellectual reciprocation, I will at times also refer to passages in Paci's writings if they appear relevant to the discussion of *Arte povera's* Turin School.

³² Eugenio Garin, *History of Italian Philosophy*, Volume II, trans. and ed. Giorgio Pinton, (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi: 2008), 1072. Garin also notes that Abbagnano was "the first to make the themes of existentialism known in Italy," filtered through Dewey's pragmatism. Garin, *Italian Philosophy*, 1094.

³³ Other writers such as Paul Virno (b. 1952) and Antonio Negri (b. 1933) were more directly involved in the worker movements of the 60s and 70s, but they fall outside of the scope of this study since they are not part of the intellectual context of Turin, based at the time in Rome and Padua respectively. Nicholas Cullinan presents an argument that compares the "aestheticized politics" of *Arte povera* with the radical labor movements these thinkers participated in, *Operaismo* and *Autonomia*. See Nicholas Cullinan, "From Vietnam to Fiat-nam: The Politics of *Arte Povera*," *October* 124 (Spring 2008): 8-30.

North to feel as if they could start anew, and fresh encounters with the ideas of Marx and continental writers in neighboring countries are evident in the work produced there.³⁴

Abbagnano and Bobbio were specifically oriented toward Dewey, and the humanist promise of the American's insistence on the primacy of experience. (Bobbio, a lawyer, was more attentive to the legal aspects of Dewey.) In an essay written for *Rivista di filosofia* in 1948, Abbagnano sketched the major arguments of Deweyan pragmatism in order to draw connections with existentialism and phenomenology, which he described as the most promising European philosophies. He focused on Dewey's emphasis on experience—messy and error-riddled though it always is—as central to the formation of consciousness. For Abbagnano, this was critical because it is humanizing and democratic. In the wake his partisan experience, the notion that both tragedies and triumphs can be understood as part of the ordering of consciousness was especially appealing. He concluded that the most important factor of what he called "*nuovo illuminismo*" is that it "looks at reason for what it is: a human force directed at rendering the world more human."³⁶

³⁴ Silvia Benso and Brian Schroeder, "Preface," *Contemporary Italian Philosophy: Crossing the Borders of Ethics, Politics, and Religion* (Albany: State University Press of New York, 2007), xiv.

³⁵ Garin, 1072.

³⁶ Abbagnano, "Verso," 325. Translation mine. See also Emily Braun's argument that the works of *Arte povera* artists were engaged in a specifically Italian project of establishing a "new humanist" national identity in opposition to advancing American-style capitalism. Emily Braun, "Mario Merz; Ethnographer of the

Dewey's major aesthetic writing, *Art as Experience*, was translated into Italian in 1951, though an oppositional position vis-à-vis Croce began to take shape at least as early as 1948.³⁷ Despite Croce's claims that Dewey's work was derivative of his own, the American's critique of idealism and his emphasis on the reconnection of aesthetics with everyday experience provided a marked challenge to the Italian. Dewey pointedly argued that the hurdles between art and everyday experience were "philosophies of art that locate it in a region inhabited by no other creature, and that emphasize beyond all reason the merely contemplative character of the esthetic."³⁸ Indeed, the primary argument of *Art as Experience* sought to defy the idealistic theories that "rest upon the separation of the live creature from the environment in which it lives."³⁹ Instead, the American asserted, "the esthetic

Everyday," in *Mario Merz: The Magnolia Table* (New York: Sperone Westwater, 2007), unpaginated (4).

³⁷ John Dewey, *Arte come esperienza* (Firenze: La Nuova Italia, 1951). Dewey and Croce exchanged letters on the pages of the *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism (JAAC)* after the book's publication in 1948 in which the latter accused the former of being derivative of his own writings. Dewey responded with protest on this key point, that meaningful experiences exceeded that of experiences primarily concerned with the question of truth. For him, a search for meanings superceded a quest for a singular, ideal truth. See Benedetto Croce, "On the Aesthetics of Dewey," *JAAC* VI (1948): 203-7, and John Dewey, "A Comment on the Foregoing Criticisms," *JAAC* VI (1948): 207-9. For a narrative account of this debate see the first chapter of Thomas Alexander, *John Dewey's Theory of Art, Experience and Nature: The Horizons of Feeling*, (Albany: State University Press of New York, 1987).

³⁸ John Dewey, *Art as Experience* [1934] (New York: Perigee, 1980), 11.

³⁹ Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 131.

is no intruder to experience from without [...] it is the clarified and intensified development of traits that belong to every normally complete experience."⁴⁰ This anti-idealist, experience-based philosophy was formative for what became known as the "School of Abbagnano."

Equally important to the philosophical climate in Turin, and perhaps even more so in its explicitly aesthetically oriented dimension, was Pareyson. In 1966 the *British Journal of Aesthetics* dubbed him "the first Phenomenological-Existentialist aesthetician in Europe."⁴¹ His major aesthetic theory, *Aesthetics: Theory of Formativity (Estetica-Teoria della formatività)* (1954), introduced his notion of "formativity," which posited the art object as something simultaneously made and organic, with a life of its own.⁴² Pareyson argued that the execution of the work, whether it is written poetry or a dramatic representation, necessarily extends it beyond the idealist confines of the object to the conditions of its making. The interest in art objects comes from their having been made by someone, instead of being naturally occurring forms. This theory

⁴⁰ Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 47.

⁴¹ Hugh T. Bredin, "The Aesthetics of Luigi Pareyson," *The British Journal of Aesthetics* 6 (1966): 193-203. Downloaded from <http://bjaesthetics.oxfordjournals.org> 21 May 2008. Emphasis in the original text. Bredin notes that the mainstream in Italy is similar to that in the rest of continental Europe, which is to say a mixture of Existentialism and Phenomenology, but Pareyson, Paci, and Abbagnano remain less well known outside Italy.

⁴² Luigi Pareyson, *Estetica-Teoria della formatività* (Turin: Edizione di filosofia, 1954), reprinted in *Luigi Pareyson: Opere complete*, vol. 10-11 (Milan: Mursia, 2000). Page citations refer to the reprint edition.

had the twofold effect of privileging both the materiality of the work and the conditions of its production. Though the artist is central to the artwork, its meanings are unfixed, and lay latent, to be traced by the viewer through the work's material appearances. This mode of interpretation—which proposes a potentially infinite exchange between the artist and the viewer through the experience of the object—is, for Pareyson, the fundamental process by which art is actually created or formed. Such positioning of “formativity” as a theory of reception links Pareyson to Dewey, who argued that “a work of art, no matter how old and classic, is actually, not just potentially, a work of art only when it lives in some individual experience.”⁴³ For both writers, the central idea was that a new work of art is created each time the object is experienced by the viewer, or the “perceiver” as Dewey would say. Pareyson's formativity laid the ground for thinking about an art object as a communication between maker and perceiver, and had a great influence on the way the dynamics of art were understood and theorized in Turin in the 60s.

Perhaps the most relevant figure, contemporary to *Arte povera*, to emerge from the unique aesthetic fusion of Turin's “School of Abbagnano” was Eco. Though arguably best known in an English speaking context for his fiction writing, his aesthetic theories were part of the intellectual fabric of Turin in the 1960s. The influences of Pareyson and Abbagnano are evident in

⁴³ Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 108.

Eco's collection of early writings: *Definizione dell'Arte*, especially those from 1955-1963, the period during which he was teaching at The University of Turin.⁴⁴ The notion of formativity is explicitly explored as a resistance to Croce and as an assimilation of Pareyson's ideas.⁴⁵ Eco's essay "La scoperta della materia," is particularly important in this regard, as it cites Pareyson's attention to an artwork's physicality as an antidote to the idealist insistence on the "pale ghosts" of expression and intuition.⁴⁶ Eco quoted his teacher:

The artist lovingly studies his material, probes it to the end, gauging its behavior and relationships [...], analyzes it because it reveals latent possibilities and adapts it to his intentions; he searches it because it suggests new and original possibilities to take hold of, he follows it because its natural development can coincide with the demands of the work to be made. [...] Art is not the figuration and formation of the life of a person. Art is not that figuration and formation of a material, but the material is formed according to an unrepeatable way of forming that is the same spirituality of the artist made into style.⁴⁷

Rather than consider the material of an object extrinsic to its meaning as Croce did, formativity argues for its fundamental role: the exchange between artist and substance forms the inimitable value of the artwork. According to Eco, the kernel of Pareyson's important opposition to Croce lay in the theory that

⁴⁴ Umberto Eco, *Definizione dell'Arte* [1968], reprint edition (Milan: Bompiani, 1983), 6. Translations from this book are mine. Eco graduated from the University of Turin in 1954 and was teaching there from 1961-1964.

⁴⁵ Michael Caesar, *Umberto Eco: Philosophy, Semiotics, and the Work of Fiction*, (Oxford, UK/Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1999), 7.

⁴⁶ Eco, *Definizione dell'arte*, 211-2.

⁴⁷ Pareyson, quoted in Eco, *Definizione dell'arte*, 213.

"every type of work is inherently an execution," even if only in its "resurrection in the experience of the receiver."⁴⁸ The centrality of these ideas to Eco's thinking becomes even more evident in his influential 1962 book, *The Open Work* (L'Opera aperta).⁴⁹ A fuller elaboration of his aesthetics theories, the text notably includes a reprint of his 1955 review of Pareyson's *Estetica* as its seventh chapter, "Form and Interpretation in Luigi Pareyson." Eco's underscoring of the notion that "the dialogue with matter is indispensable to any artistic production," and that "physicality, here understood as resistance, is necessary to the formative action both as a motive and as an obstacle" is particularly relevant to the plastic arts.⁵⁰ The object is the central axis around which a communication or relationship between artist and viewer revolves. In the case of *Arte povera*, the viewer's co-presence with a sculptural object or immersion in an installation restages the artist's dialogue with matter through the perception of material resistances.

While Pareyson may have most directly introduced the notion of artistic exchange and communication, both Dewey's pragmatism

⁴⁸ Eco, *Definizione dell'Arte*, 19. "[...] ogni tipo di opera richiede una esecuzione – che la faccia rivivere nell'esperienza del fruitore." Emphasis is in the original. Translation mine.

⁴⁹ Since *The Open Work* appeared in English in 1989, with substantial changes from its original Italian edition I refer to it by its English title to denote this difference. It should be noted that Chapter 8 of *The Open Work* appeared in *Definizione dell'Arte*, which was never fully translated.

⁵⁰ Eco, *The Open Work*, 160.

and Abbagnano's phenomenology helped form the philosophical basis for Eco's anti-idealist aesthetics.⁵¹ (And Eco himself noted that that the essays in *Definizione dell'Arte* reflect the general climate of research in the "Scuola di Estetica di Torino."⁵²) In "Form as Social Commitment," a chapter of *The Open Work* (also included in the original Italian edition of 1962), Eco quotes Dewey's description of a man lifting a stone, a passage in which the American echoes the communicative formativity of Pareyson, and also the embodied phenomenology of Abbagnano and Merleau-Ponty: "Every experience is the result of interaction between a live creature and some aspect of the world in which he lives [...]. The process continues until a mutual adaptation of the self and the object emerges and that particular experience comes to a close..."⁵³ Indeed, the idea that phenomenological experience is a process of exchange that gives rise to meaning is one of the foundations of Eco's own argument: that meaning is gathered from the form of exchange as much as from its subject of discourse.

The main argument of *The Open Work* is that all artworks are interactions, but Eco is particularly interested in how aesthetics attends to the "openness" of these exchanges, a moment in which works are structured to be open or "in movement."⁵⁴ When applied to visual and plastic art, the theory suggests that

⁵¹ Caesar, 7.

⁵² Eco, *Definizione dell'Arte*, 6.

⁵³ Eco, *The Open Work*, 133.

⁵⁴ Eco, *The Open Work*, 22.

objects become the site of a new relationship between artist and viewer (or receiver) in which the latter is privileged as a co-contributor in the formation of meaning. He argues that contemporary works—and here he writes about the music of Belgian composer Henri Pousseur, the writings of James Joyce, and the “informal” works of artists like Dubuffet—do not have a specific set of commonly agreed upon symbols, but rather are structured to allow the viewer to navigate through a variety of associations. When this new relationship with the work of art is seen “against the background of historical influences and cultural interplay which links art by analogy to widely diversified aspects of the contemporary worldview,” such works might reach beyond the constraints of their media or aesthetic structures to connect with current trends in other spheres.⁵⁵

When Eco writes that “far from being fully accounted for and catalogued, [art] deploys and poses problems in several dimensions,” we may read a foreshadowing of Celant’s politically-loaded assertion a few years later that the guerilla artist of *Arte povera* was “capable of choosing his places of battle and, with the advantages conferred by mobility, surprising and striking, rather than the other way around.”⁵⁶ The new emphasis on the viewer presented by Eco’s combination of Dewey’s experienced-based aesthetics with Pareyson’s reception-based formativity is critical to considering how an artwork might be

⁵⁵ Eco, *The Open Work*, 23.

⁵⁶ Eco, *The Open Work*, 23, and Celant, “Notes,” 35-36.

structured to emphasize the viewer's perceptual capacities and thus their sense of engagement. Eco's notion of form as social commitment supports the notion that the heightened subjectivity achieved through formal strategies might parallel political activation.

An aesthetics centered on experience and formativity is fundamental to the reading of the political engagement of Turinese *Arte povera* as structural, rather than as topical political protest. There is a striking alignment between an emphasis on presence and phenomenological space as political engagement in Anselmo, Merz, Penone, and Zorio, and the theoretical insistence upon an awareness of being and personal agency prevalent in the philosophy emerging from the University. The left-leaning intelligentsia in Turin, whose politics had been formed a generation earlier during Fascism and the Resistance, had much more conservative views on actual art than their writings on aesthetics might suggest. Gian Enzo Sperone criticized the conservative artistic taste of these local PCI-aligned figures for "hid[ing] behind the values of 'Neo Realistic' painting of militant communists like Renato Guttuso [(1912-1987)]," while ignoring the avant-garde European art like *Arte povera* that was actually subversive.⁵⁷ Emphasizing the generational divide between these approaches to art and politics, historian Robert Lumley asserts that for *Arte povera*, the model of artistic political engagement to be avoided at all costs was

⁵⁷ Gian Enzo Sperone, e-mail message to the author, 13 October 2009.

that of Guttuso, whose scenes like the wartime execution of partisans or the 1964 funeral of the communist leader Togliatti blur aesthetic concerns and party politics under the banner of history painting (fig. 7).⁵⁸ So what did constitute political engagement for *Arte povera* in Turin?

In November 1967, Celant asserted that twenty-six Italian artists were working against a capitalist co-option of their practices by refusing to conform to set stylistic rules, and thereby rejecting a role of producing consumable artworks for the market.⁵⁹ Published in the art magazine *Flash Art*, his Marxist-informed text "Arte Povera: Notes for a Guerilla War" (*Arte Povera: appunti per una guerriglia*) used rhetoric prevalent in the countercultural student movement of the time to establish a group identity for artists based variously in Turin, Rome, Milan, and Bologna that would eventually include Anselmo, Alighiero Boetti, Pier Paolo Calzolari, Luciano Fabro, Piero Gilardi, Jannis Kounellis, Mario Merz, Marisa Merz, Pino Pascali, Giulio Paolini, Penone, Michelangelo Pistoletto, Emilio Prini, and Zorio. While Celant's text is rightly understood as marking the moment when this identity was formulated in an international

⁵⁸ Robert Lumley, "The Spaces of Arte Povera," in *Zero to Infinity: Arte Povera 1962-1972*, ed. Richard Flood and Francis Morris (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center and London: Tate Modern, 2001), 58.

⁵⁹ Germano Celant, "Notes," 35-37.

context, it was not the artists' manifesto, but Celant's.⁶⁰ These individuals did not share a common aesthetic goal, nor did they express revolutionary aims in the strident terms that many earlier artistic avant-gardes had done. Instead, their aesthetic interests ranged from Pop to European conceptualism, and though many believed their projects to be relevant to the social and cultural moment, most did not expect their art to partake in direct political action.⁶¹ A central and shared interest in "open" structures, however, did run through the work of many of these artists, especially amongst those based in Turin. In the local aesthetic context, Celant read this art as being politically engaged.

The artistic milieu in 1960s Turin was comprised of a variety of personalities and practices that, though often internationally-acclaimed, were present in the vibrant local gallery scene. This ranged from the abstractions of Italian Informal (*Informale*) artists like Emilio Vedova, to the topically political works of *Nucleare* artists like Enrico Baj, to the provocative objects of Manzoni and Azimuth-related artists in

⁶⁰ Not all of these artists were included in Celant's original text, and some that were included early on are today no longer considered part of *Arte povera*. While most of the artists accept the term today, *Arte povera* was never really a movement in the sense that the artists did not self-organize within a group identity as historical avant-gardes had done. In interviews with Giovanni Anselmo, Luciano Fabro and Giuseppe Penone, conducted by the author in May 2006, each expressed a similar indifference to the term and the group identity.

⁶¹ For more on the debate about the Pop sensibility of Arte Povera artist Michelangelo Pistoletto, see Claire Gilman, "Pistoletto's Staged Subjects," *October* 124 (Spring 2008): 51-55.

Milan, to what curator Marco Meneguzzo calls "the curious fringes of Situationism in the Piedmont region."⁶² Manzoni, whose oeuvre includes such diverse works as boiled eggs stamped with his thumbprint (he invited the audience to "consume" art), the bodies of nude models signed as "living sculptures," and preserved tins of "artist's shit," was important for introducing a notion of material diversity as an aesthetic position, since it strained the limits of marketability. The Milanese student of Lucio Fontana was a signatory of a 1957 manifesto entitled "Against Style" (*Contro lo Stile*), which aimed to widen the possibilities for art by arguing that its "essence should be a 'modifying presence' in a world that no longer needs celebrative representations, but presences."⁶³

Such hostility toward style and representation, and specifically Manzoni's combination of nihilism and extreme openness to the possibilities of art, inherited from Duchamp and Dada artists, were important predecessors of *Arte povera's* experimentation with materials that emphasized presence and foregrounded reception. In fact, in his 1969 review of the European exhibitions that marked *Arte povera's* entry to the

⁶² Marco Meneguzzo, "Verso l'arte povera 1963-1969: storia tra poetica e strategia," in Marco Meneguzzo and Paolo Thea, *Verso L'Arte Povera: Momenti e aspetti degli anni sessanta in Italia*, trans. Howard Rodger MacLean (Milan: Electa, 1989), 13-14. (Note that the texts in this book are printed in Italian and English, but the book's title is not translated into English.)

⁶³ See Manzoni et al, "L'arte non è vera creazione (Art is not the true creation)," in *The Italian Metamorphosis: 1943-1968*, ed. Germano Celant, trans. Stephen Sartarelli (exhibition catalogue) (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1995), 717.

international scene, Trini argued for recognizing the importance of Manzoni's "phenomenological or situational practice," of which he considered the Turinese artists to be the best contemporary examples and undeniable heirs.⁶⁴ The critic questions the exhibitions' omission of Manzoni's influence, and concludes that it is due to Celant not specifically mentioning him in the early formulations "at home" in Italy. It might also owe to Manzoni's absence on the scene in the late 60s, following his premature death in 1963. Still, when Celant wrote about *Arte povera* artists' variable guerilla tactics as resisting the market co-option of their practices, an echo of Manzoni's own rejection of marketability through a rejection of style can be heard.⁶⁵

The most immediate model for the intersection of politics and aesthetics in Turin was Situationism, a movement more conventionally associated with Paris in the later 60s. In fact, Piedmont was an early, important crux for the development of Situationism's more activist approach to art and politics, specifically the "International Movement for a new Imagist Bauhaus" (IMIB) headed by Giuseppe Pino Gallizio and Asger Jorn.⁶⁶

⁶⁴ Tommaso Trini, "The Prodigal Maker's Trilogy: Three Exhibitions: Berne, Amsterdam, Rotterdam," *Domus* 478 (September 1969): 45-46.

⁶⁵ Celant has written that Manzoni was an important figure for him in the early 60s, and he has become a scholar of the artist, organizing an early (though still posthumous) exhibition in 1972. For more on Manzoni in general and for Celant's take on the artist, see Germano Celant, *Piero Manzoni* (exhibition catalogue) (London: Serpentine Gallery and Milan: Charta, 1998).

⁶⁶ For a detailed account of Pinot-Gallizio's role in Situationism and, specifically, the Piedmontese setting for its important developments, see the first chapter of Gerd Rainer-Horn, *The*

In the important "Alba Platform," formulated under the direction of Jorn and Gallizio in 1956, the Situationist International was formed with a mission to create a unity of life and art. They resolved that:

Whatever prestige the bourgeoisie may today be willing to accord to fragmentary or deliberately retrograde artistic tentatives, creation can now be nothing less than a synthesis aiming at integral construction of atmosphere, of a style of life...a unitary urbanism [...].⁶⁷

In arguing for "unitary urbanism," this early text clearly formulates the rejection of the discrete art object—and by extension, Crocean idealism—as a political stance against bourgeois, capitalist culture. The politically oriented Situationists were also vital to growing the student movement in Turin. In the journal *International Situationiste* #12 of 1969, the unsigned essay "The Beginning of an Era" claimed:

In Italy the SI was able to make certain contribution to revolutionary current as early as 1967, when the occupation of the University of Turin served as the starting point for a vast movement; both by way of the publication of some

Spirit of '68: Rebellion in Europe and North America 1956-1976 (Cambridge: Oxford University Press, 2007). See also Mirella Bandini, *Pinot Gallizio e il Laboratorio Sperimentale d'Alba: del Movimento internazionale per una Bauhaus immaginista (1955-57) e dell'Internazionale situazionista (1957-60)*, (exhibition catalogue) (Turin: Galleria Civica d'Arte Moderna, 1974). See also Braun, "Mario Merz: Ethnographer," unpaginated.

⁶⁷ "The Alba Platform," reprinted in English in *Situationist International Anthology*, ed. and trans. Ken Knabb (Berkeley: Bureau of Public Secrets, 1995), 14-15. Originally published in *Potlatch: Information Bulletin of the Lettrist International*, #27 (2 November 1956). It should be noted that in this text, these members of the International Movement for a new Imagist Bauhaus (IMIB) and those of *Lettrisme*—which would eventually coalesce into the Situationist International—specifically rejected the Nucleare agenda in the person of Enrico Baj.

basic texts [...] and by way of the radical action of a few individuals [...].⁶⁸

By this point in the late 1960s, the original artistic faction had been cleaved from the more directly political wing active at the University of Turin, but artists like Gallizio remained local examples of the legacy of the group's previously more permeable boundaries between art and politics. Their presence in Piedmont is vital in contextualizing both the northern *Arte povera* artists' and Celant's attitudes towards a politicization of art.

Concurrent with the staging of student demonstrations at the humanities and philosophy department of the University, Celant's "Notes" argued that artists, by their creative and revolutionary natures, usually attempt to get outside of the system of production and consumption by making radical works, yet they find themselves necessarily forced back into the role of a producer of objects by an art market that desires stability and constancy. *Arte povera*, Celant contended, was different: it was a truly revolutionary art that rejected this uniformity in order to remain vital. He described the radical nature of these means of working, writing:

Consistency is a dogma that has to be transgressed [...]. A new attitude for taking repossession of a 'real' dominion over our existence leads the artist towards continual forays outside the places assigned to him [...]. No longer among the ranks of the exploited, the artist becomes a guerilla fighter, capable of choosing his places of battle and with the advantages conferred by mobility, surprising and striking, rather than the other way around.⁶⁹

⁶⁸ See Knabb, *Situationist International Anthology*, 255.

⁶⁹ Germano Celant, "Arte Povera: Appunti per una guerriglia," *Flash Art*, no. 5 (November-December 1967): 3. Reprinted in English as "Arte Povera: Notes for a Guerilla War," *Arte*

In opposition to highly developed systems of representation, he described *Arte povera* as a polysemic collection of individual actions and improvised episodes in an artistic guerilla war.

Celant's use of this militaristic language lies as much in the conditions of the contemporary social moment as it does in the history of the avant-garde. For example, a few months before the demonstrations in Turin and the publication of Celant's text, the leftist publisher Feltrinelli issued an Italian edition of Che Guevara's writings, promoting the notion of guerrilla warfare as a social position.⁷⁰ The popular slogans on posters and banners, such as "War no, guerilla action yes," evidences the term in the general public sphere.⁷¹ In Celant's immediate intellectual and cultural horizon, as well, the term "guerilla" was also prevalent: Eco wrote an essay at exactly the same time—in 1967—that equated semiology with guerilla tactics.⁷² He

Povera=Art Povera, trans. Paul Blanchard (Milan: Electa, 1985), 35-37. Page citations are to the English edition.

⁷⁰ Feltrinelli, who had been in Bolivia in the 1960s, is also credited by some for first publishing the now ubiquitous photograph of the revolutionary taken by Korda Gutierrez. See Ernesto "Che" Guevara, *La guerra di guerriglia* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1967). Italian historian Guido Crainz has argued that Che was a popular figure among the radical Italian left as early as 1963, when excerpts from *La Guerra di guerriglia* were published. He makes the point that Che's death was commemorated in Italy because there happened to be a Catholic congress in session only two days afterward, and many of the delegates from the third world held a march in honor of the fallen revolutionary. See Crainz, 149-50.

⁷¹ Ginsborg, 307.

⁷² See Umberto Eco, "Towards a Semiological Guerilla Warfare," in *Faith in Fakes*, trans. William Weaver (London: Secker & Warburg, 1986).

argued that in order to stage a revolution, one no longer needed to seize control of the army or police, but rather the radio and the television. Perhaps Celant saw that art could also be considered among the forms of communication poised to disrupt the political order, though the *Arte povera* artists did not use these more popular media as some earlier artists like Fontana had done.⁷³

Furthermore, *International Situationiste* #11, October 1967, ran a text by Viénet that also argued for the use of "guerilla tactics" in the world of communication and information, which he viewed as separate from traditional notions of art. For Viénet, casting doubt upon the veracity of news and the voice of authority in mass communications was an essential step in preparing for political revolution.⁷⁴ Thus, amidst the political fervor of 1967, Celant's positioning of *Arte povera* as a

⁷³ The main instance of *Arte povera's* involvement with such mass media came in the form of a few short monographic films created by the German artist Gerry Schum, which were shown in a television broadcast "exhibition" called *Identifications* in 1970. See Ulrike Groos, Barbara Hess, Ursula Wevers, eds., *Ready to Shoot: Fernsehgalerie Gerry Schum/videogalerie schum*, (Cologne: Snoek Verlagsgesellschaft, 2004).

⁷⁴ In the article, titled "The Situationists and the new forms of action against politics and art," Viénet proposed the promotion of guerilla tactics in the mass media, which he believed "was an important form of contestation, not only at the stage of urban guerilla warfare, but even before it." As previously noted, most of the artists connected with Situationism split off from the group in 1961, but as a writer and filmmaker, Viénet was still a figure with whom other writers and artists with similar political sympathies might have engaged in 1967. From this paradoxical position, he provides both a point of contact and one of departure for Celant's use of this militaristic language. Knabb, *Situationist International Anthology*, 214.

destabilizing force was hardly unique in using the language of urban "guerilla" warfare. His application of these notions directly to autonomous artistic practice, however, was distinct. In formulating his ideas about *Arte povera*, he drew connective webs between the anti-establishment attitudes he saw in the Turin's galleries and on its streets.⁷⁵

Other contemporaneous figures also emerge as synthetic conduits for the ideas and impulses of the intellectual, political, and creative spheres as well, including dealers, critics, and artists. Turin's art scene was replete with new and sometimes unusual commercial exhibition spaces, including the important galleries run by Luciano Pistoï (*Galleria Notizie*) and Christian Stein, where many of the artists whom Celant labeled *Arte povera* had already shown together in the mid-1960s. Sperone's gallery was of particular importance to Trini's identification of a Turin School, not only because it was the venue for groundbreaking solo exhibitions by Anselmo, Merz, Penone, and Zorio, but also because it was a central place for intellectual and personal exchange; it was where these artists

⁷⁵ The spirit of social revolution among youth existed in varying degrees of intensity in many parts of the world at the time, as Gerd Rainer-Horn's previously cited book argues. Certainly, this ethos was strong in the United States as well as France. I do not aim to discount these other conditions by looking at Turin, specifically, only to investigate the particular nuances of the context that may have nurtured *Arte povera* here as opposed to Post-Minimalism in the US or Situationism in France. It should be noted that, paradoxically, Celant's "Arte Povera," while proposing an art of disruption and a rejection of the strictures of production and consumption, ended up providing a structure for the artists to begin to gain individual (market) recognition.

debated ideas and go to know each other.⁷⁶ Here, in a gallery run by a former student of the philosophy department in Turin, the ideas about embodied perception and a re-centering of subjectivity found form in works by vanguard artists.⁷⁷ Pareyson, Vattimo, and Eco were known to Sperone, who recalls an excellent course by the latter on the aesthetics of James Joyce, but none evidenced a particular appreciation for, or understanding of, the most avant-garde European or American art.⁷⁸ Although this work was most closely allied with the aims of the protest movement and the expanded philosophies of the Abbagnano School, it was paradoxically ignored and misunderstood by both. Sperone notes that the radical politics of the era had no room for this art either, recalling that:

In 1969 in fact, in the rebellious era of the student movement, my new gallery was situated in a slightly decentralized loft, on the inside of a building in which there was also the headquarters of the extra-parliamentary movement "Lotta Continua." The gallery was the object of total indifference mixed with hostility and jeers on the part of the members and leaders of the movement.⁷⁹

⁷⁶ The gallery is where the first one-person shows of Zorio and Anselmo were held, and where Merz first showed neon works. See Minola et al, *Gian Enzo Sperone*, 24-5, 112-13, 118-19, 122-23. As to the social aspect of the gallery, Pistoletto introduced Zorio to Sperone. Penone, in turn, cites Sperone's gallery as the first place he met Anselmo. Email with the author, 20 September 2009.

⁷⁷ Sperone notes that he was a student of the humanities and philosophy department at the University of Turin, but he became so busy with the gallery that he did not finish his studies there. Gian Enzo Sperone, email with the author, 13 October 2009.

⁷⁸ Gian Enzo Sperone, email with the author, 13 October 2009.

⁷⁹ Gian Enzo Sperone, email with the author, 13 October 2009. Note that it was in 1969 that the gallery moved from Via Cesare Battisti to the new "loft" space at Corso San Maurizio described by Sperone. See Minola, 35-7.

That these writers and activists were oblivious to the subversive intent of *Arte povera* only reinforces Trini's notion of subterranean communication. The very fact that the gallery would share a space with *Lotta Continua* evidences the parallels between the local attempts to break the hegemony of the established art world and the fight against social institutions waged by the student movement.

Celant's own rhetorical connection between Turin's new art scene and the protests on its streets came, somewhat circuitously, by way of an art historian teaching at the University of Genoa, Eugenio Battisti. Battisti was Celant's professor, and his major book, *L'Antirinascimento* (The Anti-Renaissance) (1962), fundamentally disallowed art's separation from the rest of "life." The argument characterized Italian culture as a richly sedimentary collection of influences that comprised a continuum from pagan antiquity, through the Middle Ages and Renaissance to the present day.⁸⁰ The connections made in this book between the forms and iconographies of fables, pagan objects, and artisinal handicraft with the masterworks of "modern" painters proposed meaningful ways that the past could be accessed in the present. As such, it provided an important model

⁸⁰ Eugenio Battisti, *L'Antirinascimento* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1962), 13. Luciano Fabro testified to the importance of Battisti for *Arte povera*, maintaining that he was not just an important intellectual figure at the time in Northern Italy, but Fabro recalled that *L'Antirinascimento* was something that many artists had on their bookshelves at the time. Luciano Fabro, interview by author, written notes, Milan, Italy, 21 May 2006.

for Celant's theorization of contemporary art in terms that recalled, for example, the "medieval feeling" of St. Thomas Aquinas.⁸¹

Battisti, though his academic post was in nearby Genoa, was an active part of Turinese cultural life as a founding editor of *Marcatré*, a journal devoted to contemporary art and culture for which Celant served as art critic, and to which Eco contributed frequently.⁸² Important art critic and feminist writer Carla Lonzi also published in *Marcatré's* pages. Battisti was unlike the others of his generation that Sperone criticized for ignoring emerging artists. Instead, he was known to invite contemporary artists, including some of those connected to *Arte povera*, to come to his art history courses and to bring one of their own works of art to discuss. He typically purchased these works, and

⁸¹ Celant, *Arte Povera = Art Povera*, 51. Like Eco's varied interests in the medieval aesthetics of St. Thomas Aquinas and the pop culture of RAI television, Battisti links past and present in a meaningful way. Neither Eco nor Battisti was the first to foreground consideration of the past simultaneously with the contemporary, however that they did so and that they had actual ties to *Arte povera* through Celant makes their similar approaches significant for this discussion. For more on earlier models, see Romy Golan's discussion of Lionello Venturi's similarly two-pronged approach to art history and its influence on the younger generation of post-war scholars such as Argan, Brandi, and Archangeli in "The Critical Moment: Lionello Venturi in America" in *Artists, Intellectuals, and World War II: The Pontigny Encounters at Mount Holyoke College 1942-44* (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2006).

⁸² Published from 1963-1970 by Leirici in Genoa and Milan, *Marcatré* was a broadly conceived cultural review, comprising not just art, design, and architecture, but also literature, music, communication theory, spectacle, and "contemporary folklore" (*cultura di classe e folklore contemporanea*). Abbagnano also contributed a handful of theoretical essays, but did not write critically on contemporary artists like *Arte povera*.

later donated them to the *Galleria Civica D'Arte Moderna Torino*, forming the core of its contemporary collection.⁸³

Battisti also established the *Museo Sperimentale d'Arte Contemporanea* in Turin, where he organized the exhibition *Situazione '67* in April 1967, a survey that included Boetti, Fabro, Paolo Icaro, Kounellis, Mario Merz, Marisa Merz, and Paolini. Celant served as the space's curator, and he credits this job and his work as an art critic for *Marcatré*, both platforms offered by Battisti, for establishing his entrée into the Turin art scene, and specifically giving him the opportunity to meet numerous artists.⁸⁴

For his own part, Celant organized four exhibitions between the autumns of 1967 and 1968 that were outside of Turin—two in Genoa, one in Bologna, and one in Amalfi—in which he began to work through the implications of the term "*Arte povera*" in the accompanying catalogue texts. The artists included in the three earliest exhibitions were those whom Celant had befriended in Genoa, Turin, and Rome. The last of these exhibitions, *Arte povera + azione povere* (literally, "poor art plus poor actions"), came after a year of political turmoil, including student demonstrations at the Venice Biennale and Milan Triennale. It

⁸³ Gianelli, *Un'avventura internazionale*, 40.

⁸⁴ Celant recalled that, having dropped out of engineering school, he began taking courses with Battisti and set up a University Center for the Visual Arts, where he invited visiting lecturers such as Argan, Eco, Pasolini, Calvesi, and Bertolucci. "In this way I got to know important dealers and artists. I dealt with them personally, in their exhibition spaces and studios." Celant also cites that he attended the *Gruppo '63* conference in Palermo as a young art critic. See Germano Celant, "How to escape," 21.

was then that *Arte povera* began to expand, both by including international artists and by traveling to Amalfi in the South (in an ironic reversal of the Italian migratory pattern of the post-war years). Here Celant and other critics began to refine their ideas about the relationship between this art and contemporary politics.

In the essay that accompanied this exhibition, Celant refined his initial idea of the *Arte povera* artist as "guerrilla warrior" to suggest that the socio-political value of this art was not *directly* political. Here he argued that it was not topically addressed to political events; rather it had "the aim of eliminating the sectorial and classicist division that undermine the revolutionary and propulsive charge."⁸⁵ Instead of literally taking to the streets, their objects and interventions aimed to undermine structural and conceptual roadblocks. For example, the authoritarian power relations of traditional creator/viewer interactions, where a message is imparted in a one-way communication from active creator to passive viewer, only serves to perpetuate class divisions. Dewey criticized the separation of art from everyday life on the grounds that, "When, because of their remoteness, the objects acknowledged by the cultivated to be works of fine art seem anemic to the mass of people, esthetic hunger is likely to seek the cheap and vulgar,"

⁸⁵ Germano Celant, "Azione Povera," in *Arte povera + azione povera* (Salerno, Rumma, 1969). Reprinted in English in Germano Celant, ed. *Arte Povera = Art Povera*, trans. Paul Blanchard (Milan: Electa, 1985), 88-89. Page citations refer to the English edition.

with "Art" objects serving as a wedge between classes.⁸⁶ Celant contends that this new work comes down off of the pedestal and opens itself to the viewer's active engagement precisely because such two-way bridges between creator and viewer might model the kinds of feedback possible across social divides.

Like Eco's notion of "form as social commitment," Celant argued that these works' structures engendered experiences that could themselves be revolutionary. Using language resounding with phenomenology, he wrote:

The problem is no longer one of offering formulas, such as aesthetic objects, but of sensitizing or quickening the sensibility of the public by means of actions that lead to a new enlargement of perception realized through corporeality and awareness.⁸⁷

He argued that the work of art was necessarily losing its discrete status and had instead become an action on the "stage" of daily life. This changing conception of engagement reflects an appreciation for phenomenology's focus on individual perception structuring the world. Celant recognized that many of these artists now challenged the conditions of everyday life through the microcosm of the artistic sphere and insisted upon a devalorization of the fine art object as the locus of an aesthetic experience. Their works were no longer to be encountered in the museum but in non-traditional art spaces where physical engagement with the objects could take place. In the sense that such power structures were being challenged, the

⁸⁶ Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 6.

⁸⁷ Celant, "Azione Povera," 89.

artists could support the actions taking place on other stages, at other scales, but could remain engaged in "art."

In accordance with this new stress on events over traditional objects, the "exhibition" *Arte povera + azioni povere* also included performances, actions, and critical debates that were staged in, for example, a defunct medieval armory.⁸⁸ The influential scholars and critics of contemporary art who participated in the critical debates attempted to define the variety of artistic practices they viewed in Amalfi and ventured to contextualize their social import. In the collection of essays published after the weekend's close, most commentators remarked on the open and participatory character of the art and suggested a link between such attitudes and the larger social movements worldwide. One critic in particular, Achille Bonito Oliva, argued that because these projects engaged the viewer in unusual patterns of behavior and thought, they might affect that individual's perception of his or her own power as a maker of meaning through active participation and viewing. He wrote about the new emphasis on reception, arguing that this generation of artists produced objects in which:

⁸⁸ The artist-participants were divided into three groups. "Arte povera" included Anselmo, Alighiero Boetti, Fabro, Mario Merz, Marisa Merz, Paolini, Pascali, Piacentino, Pistoletto, and Zorio. The "azione povere" section included Anna Maria Boetti, Jan Dibbets, Icaro, Pietro Lista, Richard Long, Gino Marotta, P. Martelli, Prini, and Ger Van Elk. Finally, Pistoletto's theater group Zoo made up the third section called "azioni di gruppo." The critics present included Vittorio Boarini, Piero Bonfiglioli, Achille Bonito Oliva, Germano Celant, Gillo Dorfles, Piero Gilardi, Henry Martin, Filiberto Menna, Daniella Palazzoli, Angelo Trimarco, and Tommaso Trini.

The relationship with the object tends not to be an authoritarian relationship (in the sense of imposing use), but a relationship that undermines partiality, in which it is no longer the object that is consumed, but the subject that is formed. Its formation consists in the sensorial articulation produced by the work.⁸⁹

Bonito Oliva's argument underscores the idea that these artists' works, which deal with the foundations of individual experience, were contemporaneously understood to have the potential to affect political change by redirecting consciousness. They did so by addressing the formation of individual identity in such a way that opened it up towards larger social or communal goals.

Filiberto Menna, a historian and philosopher known for his writings about the role of aesthetic criticism, similarly understood this new interest in situations rather than objects as a means to generate an active viewing relationship that went beyond the divide between active production and passive consumption. He wrote "if they really have to make something, they prefer to make structures and environments that involve the spectator and place him or her in a situation full of life and vigor."⁹⁰ This effect of disrupting the viewer's psychic and

⁸⁹ Achille Bonito Oliva, "Contro la solitudine degli oggetti" in *Arte povera + azione povera*, ed. Germano Celant (Salerno, Rumma, 1969). Reprinted in English as "Against the solitude of objects," in *Arte Povera = Art Povera*, ed. Germano Celant, trans. Paul Blanchard (Milan: Electa, 1985), 87. Page citations are to the English edition.

⁹⁰ Filiberto Menna, "Un'arte di entusiasmo," in *Arte povera + azione povera*, ed. Germano Celant (Salerno, Rumma, 1969). Reprinted in English as "An art of enthusiasm," in *Arte Povera = Art Povera*, ed. Germano Celant, trans. Paul Blanchard (Milan: Electa, 1985), 97. Page citations are to the English edition. For more on the writer see also Menna, *Critica della critica*, (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1981).

perceptual structures relates the *Arte povera* installations with the goals of the student movement. Acknowledging the tactical differences that divided the one from the other, Menna argued:

If progress and civilization have had to sacrifice man's deep psychic structure to the state of necessity and biological survival, sublimating it in the performance principle, the moment has come (thanks too to the progress made by modern technology) to proceed in the opposite direction, to move away from 'civilization' toward 'nature,' in order to recover the latter as an autonomous and originally positive moment of the human person.⁹¹

His view of the new works as reversing course, and offering de-sublimating experiences, is perceptive and extremely revealing. As the following chapters detail, artists like Anselmo, Merz, Penone, and Zorio recover alternative ways of experiencing the phenomenological world in order to open new avenues of meaning, at times, by willful regressions to and negotiations with the past.⁹² Menna recognized that these artists had discovered new relevance in outmoded systems and corporeal experiences by interpolating these historical forms with an ironic view of the present.

⁹¹ Menna, "An art of enthusiasm," 97.

⁹² My use of the term "regression" here is drawn directly from the texts of both Menna and Trimarco. The latter, discussed below, uses the term to refer to these works of art that he identifies as being without the "intellectual stratifications and reflective components of signs, actions, gestures, and behavior." In other words, he uses the term as somewhat equivalent to Celant's "povera." See Angelo Trimarco, "Un spazio vitale precario e instabile," in *Arte povera + azione povere*, ed. Germano Celant (Salerno, Rumma, 1969). Reprinted in English as "A vital, precarious, and unstable space," in *Arte Povera = Art Povera*, ed. Germano Celant, trans. Paul Blanchard (Milan: Electa, 1985), 97 and 99. Page citations are to the English edition.

Finally, artist, critic, and Amalfi participant Piero Gilardi echoed these sentiments about such open, or fragmentary, artworks and the political role of the artist in an essay was published a few months later. In the catalogue for another important international group exhibition in Amsterdam titled *On Loose Screws* (*Op Losse Schroeven*), Gilardi claimed that Amalfi, and specifically the conditions under which works were viewed or experienced there, served as an antidote to the commercialization of the art market:

It is well known that the majority of the avant-garde galleries in the States run at a loss. Their financing, via the assistance of a notorious clause in the tax legislation, offers one of the many safety valves for exuberant capitalist spending; at the same time, the avant-garde is held on a leash, channeled into the ideology of the 'system.' [...] Artists have found their most effective freedom of action in mixed-art festivals, in action meetings and one-day group shows; in Italy, the most successful exhibition has been that of the 'Poor Actions' at Amalfi.⁹³

For Gilardi, exhibitions in alternative spaces like the events at Amalfi provided the proper conditions for the artists to reclaim their outsider status.⁹⁴ He argued that artistic freedom required distance from the capitalist "system" of gallery exhibitions, and

⁹³ Piero Gilardi, "Politics and the Avant-Garde," in *Op Losse Schroeven: situaties et cryptostructuren* (exhibition catalogue), by Wim Beeren (Amsterdam: Stedelijk Museum, 1969), unpaginated.

⁹⁴ That the Amalfi event was achieved with the financing of a wealthy backer apparently did not pose an ideological problem for Gilardi, since he fails to mention Marcello Rumma's fundamental involvement.

that this could best be achieved through an emphasis on action and communication in non-traditional arenas.⁹⁵

More importantly, Gilardi's discussion of the successes of *Arte povera* at Amalfi and other non-commercial venues argues that the viewer also benefited from the alternative experiences such exhibitions engendered. He wrote:

The new environment is not a space for conditioning the viewer, but an experience of freedom which leads him to the recognition of his own perceptive autonomy; the psychological mechanism involved is similar to that underlying the political 'mobilization' of modern student meetings.⁹⁶

Gilardi's statement evidences a contemporaneous understanding of *Arte povera* as connected to the political and social movements of the day in the way the open structures of artists' installations encouraged viewer subjectivity, rather than on the level of sloganeering or direct political action. Both artists and critics understood that the relationship of these works to their audience—and the multifarious experiences the works catalyzed—could alter one's sense of self, community, or even world-view. The mental switch that was thrown through the experience of the work was, according to Gilardi, comparable to actual political mobilization.

⁹⁵ That this text was published in the catalogue for a museum exhibition is somewhat ironic, but the Stedelijk show was attempting to bring that same spirit into the institution. The inclusion of this essay was likely strategic on the part of the exhibition's curator Wim Beeren, and also was likely meant by Gilardi to be somewhat polemic.

⁹⁶ Gilardi, "Politics and the Avant-Garde," unpaginated.

This is the central idea about *Arte povera* that emerged in 1968 and carried throughout the next decade. For all of the rhetoric about "guerilla war," the political effect of these projects was rooted in the phenomenological experience of the work's material form, rather than in the illustration of or agitation over specific events. These works were not narrowly propagandistic, but rather openly structured, to allow the viewer to find individual meaning. While it was not one thing or one person that gave rise to the attitudes and tactics known as *Arte povera*, the intersections of historical, political, social, intellectual, and artistic spheres in Turin created a space in which problems of agency and subjectivity were foregrounded, and acknowledged by writers and artists alike. The overtures to the viewer and focus on perception identified by so many of *Arte povera*'s early critics after that weekend in Amalfi owed to current awareness of phenomenology that had been disseminated by The University of Turin. Like the concurrent student movement, it shared a commitment to the empowerment of individuals over the status quo and institutional atrophy. The artists Trini identified as the Turin School pursued the oblique relationship between the artwork and politics as a reassertion of the agency of the viewer through phenomenological interactions.

CHAPTER TWO

GIOVANNI ANSELMO'S PRIMARY ENERGIES:
*THE VISIBLE AND THE INVISIBLE*¹

I, the world, things, life, we are situations of energy and the point is not to crystallize such situations, though maintaining them open and alive is a function of our living.

-Giovanni Anselmo²

In April 1968 Anselmo installed his first solo exhibition at Sperone's gallery on Via Cesare Battisti. Although he had been included in group exhibitions there and in Bologna the previous year, this show was the first opportunity critics had to grasp a cohesive sense of his project. One of the most discussed works in the exhibition was an untitled, tall, black Formica column with a sphere placed upon its top (Fig. 8, at left). The ball, which was just above eye-level, appeared to move in response to visitors in the gallery, because the column was partially hollow and served as a basin for water upon which the sphere floated. A deceptively subtle object, it remained in constant motion as the different materials accommodated themselves to each other: the water was contained in the column and partially displaced by the sphere, and yet, the sphere was

¹ I take the term "primary energy" from Piero Gilardi's essay "Primary energy and microemotive artists," *Arts* (September-October 1968): 48-51. Reprinted in Celant, *Arte Povera = Art Povera*, trans. Paul Blanchard (Milan: Electa, 1985), 100-103. I borrow from Gilardi here because Anselmo's own writings evidence his strong interest in energy as the ostensible subject of his works.

² Giovanni Anselmo, [artist's statement], in *Art Povera*, ed. Germano Celant (New York: Praeger, 1969), 109.

held aloft by the tension of the water's surface. In the text published in the show's slim catalogue, which bore an image of this piece on the cover, art historian Maurizio Fagiolo dell'Arco noted how the work both indicated the instability of every solid, and conversely, "demonstrate[d] that everything mobile can be fixed within the rules of structure," thus offering "a fine lesson in 'relativity.'"³ Celant, writing in the same book, similarly emphasized the inherent mutability of such sculptures, arguing they should be understood as dynamic situations *posing as* objects, which "recompose themselves each time, their existence depending on direct human interaction."⁴

These notions of relativity and perpetual re-composition, which emerged in Anselmo's first show, are central to the artist's stated goal of having his work resist crystallization into a single image or static object. Such ideas closely follow Merleau-Ponty's argument that the world itself is recomposed for us with every perception, which in the Turinese context was working its way through Eco's writings.⁵ In *The Open Work*, for example, Eco argued that when Merleau-Ponty wrote "'it is

³ Maurizio Fagiolo, *Anselmo* (Turin: Sperone, 1968), reprinted in English in Gian Enzo Sperone: *Torino, Roma, New York*, by Anna Minola, et al, vol. I. (Turin: Hopefulmonster, 2000), 123.

⁴ Germano Celant, *Anselmo* (Turin: Sperone, 1968). Reprinted in English in *Arte Povera = Art Povera*, trans. Paul Blanchard (Milan: Electa, 1985), 57. Emphasis is mine.

⁵ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception* (Paris: Gallimard, 1945). Reprinted in English as *Phenomenology of Perception* [1962], trans. Colin Smith (New York: Routledge Classics, 2002), 256-57. Page citations are to the English edition.

therefore essential for an object and also for the world to present themselves to us as open...and as always promising future perceptions,'" he spoke to the fundamental character of an artwork as structured to allow ongoing perceptions subject to the context.⁶ For Anselmo, this structural notion is foregrounded in a project that stimulates the viewer's consciousness of dynamic visible and invisible energies, allowing his objects to resist formal and interpretative closure.

Between 1967 and 1978, Anselmo endeavored to reveal tense fullness in empty spaces and to discover latent energy in seemingly inert materials by activating the viewer's ability to recognize them as small indications of a dynamic macrocosm. In the service of this project, the molecular (invisible) connections amongst matter became of key interest to Anselmo, the pursuit of which often informed the physical makeup of his works. Far from arbitrary, his aesthetic choices often privilege materials, like metamorphic rock, that reveal traces of former states in order to underscore this point. In a 2006 interview, Anselmo suggested that even humans continue to live on infinitely as part of a ceaseless exchange of energy among organic materials. He also noted that in such terms and on a macrocosmic scale, water is more precious than gold, therefore references to water and other seemingly low materials in his works are anything

⁶ Umberto Eco, *The Open Work* [1962], trans. Anna Cancogni (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), 17, quoting Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception*, (Paris: Gallimard, 1945), 384.

but "poor."⁷ Celant recognized this interest in material possibilities relating more to process than materiality per se. In 1969, he wrote: "Animals, vegetables and minerals have cropped up in the art world. The artist is attracted by their physical, chemical, and biological possibilities. He is renewing his acquaintance with the process of change in nature [...]."⁸ Though materials may be classified in different taxonomies, they are all subject to the fundamental universal forces that Anselmo's project teases out for consideration. His strongest works reveal the perceptible signs of the invisible, energetic bonds between man and nature through first-hand material encounters.

Anselmo began his artistic career drawing and painting, activities that he has said were unsatisfying because they excluded both the artist and the viewer: "You remain alone with your emotions, instead of really being able to share them."⁹ His turn to a temporally-based sculptural practice came after a period of hitchhiking through Europe, during a formative experience climbing Stromboli. Standing on the slope of the volcano, he reportedly recognized in his shadow a significant relationship between his body, light from the sun, and an infinite conception of time. The artist has often published a photograph of himself taken on that hike as a souvenir, and perhaps proof of the watershed experience. Describing the

⁷ Giovanni Anselmo, interview by author, written notes, 22 May 2006, Bologna, Italy.

⁸ Celant, *Art Povera* (New York: Praeger, 1969), 225.

⁹ Anselmo and Viliani, "In Conversation," 211.

revolution that occurred in his thinking around this time, he has said that:

The event undoubtedly made it possible for me to approach my work in a different way, that is, to conceive works that were no longer the way I had created them up till then—paintings, drawings, etc.—but 'devices' in which the energy that surrounds us, and that we ourselves are, is not crystallized, represented once and for all.¹⁰

After this experience, he began demonstrating perceptible traces of such energy through simple material, if not sculptural, "devices." The aim was to present material situations that foregrounded contingency rather than unity.

Among the earliest of these is an untitled work from 1966 that was first exhibited in a group show at Sperone in April 1967.¹¹ A red polystyrene bulb is held aloft, at eye level, by an iron filament set into a small wooden cube (fig. 9). This piece registers human presence when viewers move through the gallery space, displacing air and causing the wire to vibrate and the polystyrene "head" to wobble. Active in its visible relationship to the body as an erect object, the sculpture also makes viewers self-conscious of the (invisible) air pushed around as they move through the room. The tensile properties of the vertical iron rod, the backbone of the piece, also demonstrate the pull of gravity because the height of the work is a maximum height at which the iron wire will stay erect, at which it can resist

¹⁰ Anselmo and Viliani, "In Conversation," 211-12.

¹¹ In correspondence with the author, Sperone notes that this exhibition at his gallery was the first place Anselmo publicly showed work like this. Gian Enzo Sperone, e-mail message to author, 13 October 2009.

gravitational pull.¹² A related work from that same year, taller but without the polystyrene atop the wire, is described in the most recent monograph on Anselmo as consisting of "iron, wood, and force of gravity." The viewer is thus both made aware of inhabiting a physical body through the dynamic negotiation of the piece in the gallery, and also cognizant of the subjugation of that body (and the work itself) to unseen but omnipresent and defining forces.

The notion of invisible energy governing everyday life continued to develop in works that Anselmo exhibited later that year, including one of his best known pieces, *Direction*, (Direzione). It was first shown in *Con temp l'azione* (with time action/contemplation), a collaborative exhibition curated by Daniela Palazzoli. The show opened in early December 1967, occupying three different gallery spaces in Turin—Sperone, Christian Stein, and *Il Punto*—concurrent with the student occupations at University.¹³ The double-entendre of the exhibition's title nods equally to the prevalence of action-based works and to the time-dependent manner in which they are apprehended. The curator wrote that these artists' projects were actively engaging: "[The artwork] contemplates (simultaneously it produces) its own actions via an in-out of itself that presents

¹² Anselmo and Viliani, "In Conversation," 212 and 238.

¹³ Remo Pastori ran *Il Punto*, but Sperone had served as the gallery's director before opening his own space in 1964. Minola et al, *Gian Enzo Sperone*, 17.

its events and treats its own objects."¹⁴ She describes a dynamic model wherein meaning is both created and reflected upon in the phenomenological space of the gallery. It can be read as analogous to the youthful desire to re-form the world in the process of living through it, and a fitting description of Anselmo's sculptures included in the show.

Direction is a roughly triangular stone slab that lies on the floor (fig. 10).¹⁵ A small magnetic compass is embedded in the rock's surface. The slab's vertex usually points in the same northerly direction as the tiny compass needle, creating the impression that the stone has also "oriented itself" to the north.¹⁶ This sculpture is presented as if it is a found object, stumbled across by the viewer and artist alike. It is revealed upon closer inspection to be pregnant with latent energy and invisible forces. First, on a perceptual level, the shape of the stone is created of three uneven diagonals, or vectors, which activate the empty space around them because they problematize "gestalt" recognition. That is, unlike a square or cube, which has equal sides, or a circle or sphere, which has stable

¹⁴ Daniela Palazzoli, *Con temp l'azione* (Turin: Stein, Il Punto, Sperone, 1967), reprinted in English in *Arte povera = art povera*, ed. Germano Celant, trans. Paul Blanchard (Milan: Electa, 1985), 39.

¹⁵ Anselmo made another version of *Direction* in 1966, comprised of a hollow wood form covered in Formica, which also had a compass embedded in the surface. See Anselmo, "[statement]" *Data 2* (February 1972): 58. His 2007 exhibition catalogue reproduces a period photograph of this work, but its current whereabouts and condition are unknown.

¹⁶ Anselmo, "[statement]," *Data*, 58.

diameters, this triangle is irregular, and therefore cannot be as easily grasped as a geometric concept. Second, because the sculpture is extremely low to the ground—the stone is only a few inches in height—its mass appears to weigh heavily on the floor, underscoring the gravitational pull that holds it down.¹⁷ Third, the material, schist, has specific geological connotations. Schist is a metamorphic rock, formed of either igneous or sedimentary rock that, through exposure to extreme heat and pressure, has changed molecular constitution. The type of stone therefore perfectly embodies Anselmo's fascination with the molecular connections between materials. Lastly, the compass's small, quivering needle, a visible sign of its subjugation to the forces of the Earth's ambient magnetic field, enlivens the seemingly inert material. Gravity and magnetism are two physical forces to which bodies are constantly subject, but which one rarely considers because of their "invisibility." In *Direction*, Anselmo highlights these normally naturalized forces by making them perceptible in the real space of the exhibition.

Such demonstrations of invisible forces can be understood as part of the work's sociality. By providing a visible example of gravity and magnetism within everyday encounters and common materials, Anselmo's *Direction* allows the viewer a step outside

¹⁷ Anselmo recalled that he executed this version in stone because of its weight, specifically that it could communicate that the "universe is not only bulk but also weight." See Anselmo, "[statement]," *Data*, 58.

of the normative sphere of vision and experience.¹⁸ When he reprised *Direction* in Amalfi in 1968, he used his own body in a demonstration of universal magnetism. Instead of exhibiting the stone, he pushed a wet canvas sheet across the dusty floor of the exhibition space in a northern direction, using a magnetic compass as a guide (fig. 13). The artist's body thus perceptibly demonstrated abstract forces and created a tangible analogue of a body's "orientation" in the world at large. Such a macrocosmic glimpse might occasion a broadened worldview, in which the closed perceptual dialectic of self versus world could expand to include other, previously invisible, possibilities. That is, in recognizing the limits of the visibility, one might consider other invisible forces that shape everyday experience, such as politics, economics, family, tradition, social custom, language, or institutions. From this expanded point of view prompted by Anselmo's presentation of energies, one can begin to understand, and even undermine, man-made "invisible" systems like government and class. By doing this through the *form* of the work rather than its explicit *content*, Anselmo models the notion of an artist using "form as social commitment," which, as Eco describes, "rejects a formal system but does not obliterate it."¹⁹

¹⁸ Reflecting on this work in 1979, curator Jean-Christophe Ammann wrote that it could be compared with the eastern orientation of Christian ecclesiastical architecture where an unseen power (faith) informs the orientation. In the case of Anselmo, it is not faith but physical energy that provides the impetus for the stone's orientation. See Jean-Christophe Ammann, *Giovanni Anselmo* (exhibition catalogue) (Basel: Kunsthalle Basel and Eindhoven: Stedelijk Van Abbemuseum, 1979), 16.

¹⁹ Eco, *The Open Work*, 141.

Anselmo's subtle propositions protest normative models of viewing the world as rigid and static, and offer an expanded outlook on everyday experience that is difficult to undo. Once we have been offered a means to apprehend what is normally beyond our observation, it is difficult to close that aperture down again.²⁰ The expansive point-of-view and raised consciousness afforded by Anselmo's works can thus be understood as one means to social transformation, if we consider that the same clarifying lenses can be turned on other "invisible" structures.

Anselmo's acknowledgement of his viewers as active receivers and co-creators can also be read through phenomenology to reflect the historical context in which social- and self-consciousness were primary preoccupations of both politically-oriented protesters and many intellectuals. For Merleau-Ponty, for example, the physical encounter of the body with the sensible world was understood as a moment in which one's own consciousness came into focus. More radically, he argued that conscious perception actively creates the world:

²⁰ Italian critic and art historian Bruno Corà has compellingly noted aspects of Anselmo's work that relate to Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, arguing that, when experienced, Anselmo's works constitute the crossing of a threshold that cannot be reversed. Once one perceives these alternatives, ignorance can no longer be maintained. He writes: "All this seems to support Merleau-Ponty's pertinent axiom 'With the first vision, the first contact, and the first pleasure, there is an initiation... an opening up of a dimension that will never again be closed, a fixing of a gauge by which any other experience will subsequently be referred.'" Bruno Corà, "Giovanni Anselmo: Sites of Universal Reversibility," in *Giovanni Anselmo* (exhibition catalogue), ed. Gloria Moure, trans. Joe Lyons and Richard Rees (Santiago de Compostela: Centro Galego de Arte Contemporanea and Barcelona: Ediciones Polígrafa, 1996), 26.

Every sensation is spatial; we have adopted this thesis, not because the quality of an object cannot be thought otherwise than in space, but because, as the primordial contact with being, as the assumption by the sentient subject of a form of existence to which the sensible points, and as the co-existence of sentient and sensible, it is itself constructive of a setting for co-existence, in other words, of a space.²¹

This "primordial contact with being" that Merleau-Ponty claimed established one's perception of the world provided a model for bringing individuals in touch with a physical relationship to the natural world from which, in the Italian context, they had been alienated by post-war industrialization and consumer spectacle. By occasioning sensible, participatory experiences, Anselmo's works established conceptual and physical systems of knowledge as part of the same horizon of perceptual experience. If the viewer mastered such systems of knowledge through first-hand perceptual understandings engendered by the encounter with the artwork, then other seemingly opaque institutions and structures might also appear to be within reach.

Another project from 1967, also first shown in *Con temp l'azione*, further exemplifies this tension between the individual viewing experience and the broader concepts it might introduce (fig. 11). *Untitled* is a sculpture consisting of two wooden boxes covered in black Formica set atop one another. At first it appears related to American precedents, such as one of Robert Morris's early *Mirrored Cubes* (1965), or Tony Smith's steel *Die* (1962): still and stable, these cubes are easily comprehensible geometric forms made of a commercially available, quotidian

²¹ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 256-57.

industrial materials. However, unlike Morris or Smith, Anselmo's "cube" frustrates an intuitive recognition of its geometric form. While the volumes themselves are regular (technically, parallelepipeds), the artist "corrects" for the fact that the floor on which they sit is never exactly even by inserting four steel wedges between the two blocks to level the box (fig. 12).²² Consequently, this "stabilized" cube is anything but static. Once the first impression of the work's cube-like character gives way to a focused view of the constituent parts, Anselmo's sculpture becomes dynamic. It reveals itself to be built of parts, and subject to constant, nearly imperceptible forces; for its stability is a tenuous balance created by the multiple resistant relationships between the floor, the slick Formica surfaces, and the smooth steel wedges. In order to pointedly foreground these forces, a spirit level is embedded in the surface of the top box, demonstrating the fragile equilibrium in which the "cube" is being held. What was first seen as solid and stable is revealed through the viewing experience to be fluid and tenuous.

In 1969, Trini wrote that what became clear in the new art (which in this instance he saw as not limited only to Italians) was that "somehow that objecthood was over."²³ Instead, he argued

²² Some sources have suggested that the boxes themselves are uneven (Christov-Bakargiev, *Arte Povera*, 77), but the artist maintained to me that the boxes themselves are regular and even. Since the floor is always a little uneven, the top volume is almost never level. Anselmo, interview by author, 22 May 2006.

²³ See Tommaso Trini, "Nuovo alfabeto per corpo e materia," *Domus* 470 (January 1969): 46. Reprinted in English as "New alphabet

that actions and events were foregrounded. In the Italian context, this refocus extended the kinds of overtures to "real" space pioneered by Lucio Fontana as much as it responded to the international art seen in spaces like Sperone's gallery or the Venice Biennial. Benjamin Buchloh has suggested that the Italians' interests in simple demonstrations and their juxtapositions of natural and industrial materials, what he calls their "explicitly antitechnological stance," stemmed from a "misreading" of American Minimalism that "emphasized technology as its primary mode of production."²⁴ This not only ignores Italian precedents like Fontana, Manzoni, and Pinot-Gallizio, it gives the Turinese artists little credit in their reading of Minimalism, let alone phenomenology, and makes their response secondary to that of their American contemporaries.

The U.S.-centric sentiment is pervasive among certain American art historians of the period. For example, in Krauss's recent essay on Anselmo, one of the first by an *October* editor to actually focus on an *Arte povera* artist, the work is also positioned as reactionary. She goes so far as to suggest that Anselmo's interest in entropy and gravity could have been "assisted" by Richard Serra's *Prop* sculptures, seen in New York at the *9 at Leo Castelli* exhibition in late 1968, an exhibition

for body and matter," in *Arte Povera = Art Povera*, ed. Germano Celant (Milan:Electa, 1985), 109-13. Page citations refer to the English edition.

²⁴ Benjamin Buchloh, "Foreword," to *Arte Povera: selections from the Sonnabend collection*, by Claire Gilman (New York: Wallach Art Gallery, Columbia University: 2001), 7.

in which Anselmo took part.²⁵ However, gravity was central to Anselmo's work already in 1966, making her claim not only uncharitable, but also factually incorrect. Of course there was exchange between Italian and international artists—indeed Sperone brought many contemporary artists, including Americans, to Turin—but the prevailing English-language literature continues to view the relationship under the dominance of New York “first.” Instead, Anselmo's work needs to be read *first* through the local Turinese interpretations of phenomenology, *second*, through the Italian cultural and political context, and *third*, comparatively, in conversation with broader international trends.

Unlike the American precedents which *Arte povera* has been said to “misinterpret,” Anselmo's *Untitled* has its own operation: it does not simply correlate to the viewer's body to create a measurable awareness of architectural space, but rather it offers a glimpse of the invisible forces actively filling the “empty” space. This box acts like a black hole of sorts: condensing the energy of the room in the relationship between the cubic form, the floor, and the steel shims into the delicately balanced small air bubble that indexes otherwise imperceptible pressures.²⁶ The artist has stated that this air bubble causes the cube to lose “all its actual value, remaining only an energy situation.”²⁷

²⁵ Rosalind Krauss, “Giovanni Anselmo: Matter and Monochrome,” *October* 124 (Spring 2008): 129.

²⁶ Giovanni Anselmo, interview with Mirella Bandini [1972], in *1972: Arte Povera a Torino*, ed. Mirella Bandini (Turin: Allemandi, 2003), 26.

²⁷ Anselmo, “[statement],” *Data*, 58.

Anselmo's *Untitled* cube demonstrates the power present in all material encounters, aesthetic or otherwise. According to Merleau-Ponty, all sensible beings carry the memory of such encounters with them as an experiential horizon to help interpret later perceptions, suggesting an open and fluid concept of space based on personal interpolation rather than absolutes.²⁸ This expanded dialectical system counters the notion of a closed, univocal mode of perception and meaning. Akin to Pareyson's "formativity," and the thesis of Eco's *Open Work*, the idea that the work is only a fragment held in a triangulation between the creating subject, the perceiving subject, and non-subjective factors such as history is central to Anselmo's art. The artist's desire to keep his works from closing into a single meaning or image is evidenced by his repeated use of the visible tensions in artistic gesture and in the interactions of materials, which make the otherwise purely conceptual apprehension of something like energy palpable and immanently present for the perceiving subject.²⁹ His objects' potential scale foregrounds a new humanism that is foreign to American technological determinism.

²⁸ "An initial perception independent of any background is inconceivable. Every perception presupposes, on the perceiving subject's part, a certain past [...]." Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 328.

²⁹ In a 1972 interview with Bandini, Anselmo noted that while his works from 1967-68 might seem to be at rest, they were in fact actively subjected to invisible forces. See Bandini, *1972: Arte Povera a Torino*, 26.

Many of Anselmo's early sculptures use geometric shapes antithetically, to reveal instability rather than cohesion. His work titled *Torsion* (Torsione) (1968) is an important example of this counterpoint between highly rational geometry and a visceral phenomenological experience of the object (figs. 14 & 15). Here the artist set two ends of a piece of leather into the top plane of a wet block of concrete. Once the concrete had dried, he positioned this cube near a wall, and inserted a large wooden dowel into the leather "loop" sticking out of the concrete (in another version, the dowel was iron). Using the dowel as a lever, he twisted the leather around itself, the tension increasing with each rotation. When the material would no longer give, the artist lodged the dowel against the wall, channeling the counteractive energy of the now tightly wound leather into the wall. In a period statement, the artist wrote: "The energy of a torsion [...] must live with its true force. It clearly could not live with its form alone."³⁰ The work demonstrates the principle of latent energy through leather's tension and the tenuous friction between the dowel and the wall, presenting "true force" in the viewer's conditional time and space.

Positioned in a room or gallery, *Torsion* solicits an instinctive understanding of its constitutive forces. Anselmo described the way this relationship becomes apparent:

In *Torsion* [...] the energy I transmit to the piece by doing a contorsive movement – and that I press on the work due to the weight of iron or cement bar until I detach myself from the piece – this energy is then immediately returned to me

³⁰ Anselmo, [artist's statement] in *Art Povera*, 109.

in relationship to the extension of the real force in the return movement.³¹

For the artist, opposing the force of the action and its return is a personal, physical experience, but the viewer can also perceive the tension that suspends the twisted material because it embodies basic physics to which everyone can relate. When children twist the ropes of a swing, for instance, they know it will release into a dizzying counter-spin. When encountering Anselmo's work, such earlier experiences remain on one's perceptual horizon—a somatic memory—giving viewers a palpable, if intuitive, sense that the friction between the wall and the dowel could slip at any moment, sending the big beam flying across the room with equal and opposite force.

Inasmuch as a work like *Torsion* relies on natural paradigms and ubiquitous forces, it also maintains a dialogue with the facts and myths of a cultural collective past.³² In this regard, curator Francesco Bonami's argument that *Arte povera* "had to negotiate the present through the residue of the past" seems particularly relevant.³³ Following such logic, one can identify formal rhymes with classical sculpture like Myron's *Discus*

³¹ Anselmo, "[statement]", *Data*, 58.

³² Eco considers the facts of history and the ubiquitous myths of a culture to be non-subjective factors, since they are not experienced first-hand, but nevertheless they create part of the constellation of factors that inform our encounters with the world. See Eco, *The Open Work*, 42.

³³ Francesco Bonami, "Now We Begin," in *Zero to Infinity: Arte Povera 1962–1972*, ed. Richard Flood and Francis Morris (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center and London: Tate Modern, 2001), 109.

Thrower (c. 460 B.C.E.), or references to Renaissance predecessors like Michelangelo's tensely static *David* (1501-04), or Bernini's Baroque *David* (1623-24).³⁴ As fellow Arte povera artist Fabro suggested, these examples are not just pictures in history books to an Italian artist, but physical examples of a shared cultural heritage, and part of the artist's horizon.³⁵ The parallels are plainly evident: these well-known sculptural figures are "caught" at the moment just before the tension is unloaded, before the winding motion releases pent-up energy. Their stasis reveals tension through well-described musculature and concentrated facial expressions.

In *Torsion*, Anselmo does not represent an illusion of twisting flesh in marble or stone, but rather presents us with the real thing: tightly wrung leather. His demonstration of the force applied to real skin makes the concept visceral. Moreover, because he does not create a picture, the work allows the viewer, if they can, to consider allusions to both these past artistic precedents and contemporary "stresses," widening the horizon from which meanings can be posited.³⁶ Therefore these works take on a

³⁴ Recently, a similar connection between another version of *Torsion* and Baroque sculpture has been made in the textbook *Art Since 1900*. See Foster et al, *Art Since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2004), 513.

³⁵ Luciano Fabro noted that the context for an Italian artist is different from the American context because for an Italian artist, art history is everywhere. Luciano Fabro, interview by author, written notes, 21 May 2006, Milan, Italy.

³⁶ Krauss famously argued in 1966 that even in Donald Judd's seemingly most obdurate objects, allusion enters into their perception because of the way the mind seeks to correlate new

variety of significations, depending on the individual conditions of their viewing, apprehension, and re-composition. That is, the meanings depend very much on the person viewing and the conditions of the encounter, but some examples might clarify the point. Is it too much to read Anselmo's concrete and leather sculpture as an allusion to the human body trapped in an urban environment? The tightening a testament to increasing social tensions of 1968? Perhaps one can read the strain as representative of the harbored resentment of the political left in the post-war period, which laid the groundwork for the counter-cultural, counter-twisting, actions of the 1960s and 70s? Finally, this palpable material tension might embody what has been called the "strategy of tension" deployed by Italian radical groups on both ends of the spectrum to provoke each other during the "Years of Lead."³⁷ Certainly there is a perceptible violence to the object, which might resemble a primitive weapon to some viewers. All of these readings are possible because this work does not *represent* so much as *present*, and in so doing allows for communications that are at once defining and infinitely

experiences with those already recorded. See Rosalind Krauss, "Illusion and Allusion in Donald Judd," *Artforum* 4, no. 9 (May 1966): 24-26.

³⁷ Tobias Jones cites the first use of the phrase "strategy of tension" as being by the Italian correspondent for the *London Observer* in 1969. Tobias Jones, *The Dark Heart of Italy*, (New York: North Point Press, 2003), 46. I am not suggesting that Anselmo knew of this phrase from this context, but that a reference to "tension" would have been understood by viewers to be more than material.

generative.³⁸ A 1969 statement by the artist clearly laid out his preference for demonstration and action over representation and illusion:

Since every way of thinking and of being has to correspond to a way of acting, my work really is the physication (sic) of the force of an action, of the energy of a situation or an event, etc., not just the experience of this on the level of annotation or of a sign of dead nature.³⁹

By presenting forces and energies in devices that make their action physically perceptible in the present of the viewer's experience, Anselmo's objects maintained an openness that allowed for multiple, simultaneous readings. This vitality created a different experience for viewers who no longer received information handed down by the artist/creator, but rather actively took a role in creating meaning through the perception and interpretation of the work. It created the right conditions for an empowered subjectivity.

In 1968-69, Anselmo created three "devices" that activated viewers' perceptions of inert materials by ascribing life-like, or more specifically human, qualities to them. While the stone, steel, copper, and cotton wool that constitute these works do not represent anything illusionistically, he places these materials in relationships that have them "perform" three of the most basic

³⁸ Anselmo has explicitly stated that his works did not aim for representation so much as presentation, echoing a common statement among the Turin School artists in general. Anselmo and Viliani, "In Conversation," 216.

³⁹ Anselmo, [artist's statement], in *Art Povera*, 109.

animal actions: eating, drinking, and breathing. Further involving others in the physical aspects of the work, one of these requires the active care and (human) attention in order to avoid physical destruction.⁴⁰ In *Untitled* (1968), commonly known as "eating structure," Anselmo fastened two polished granite blocks together with a copper wire, between which he alternately inserted a piece of raw meat or a head of lettuce (figs. 16 & 17).⁴¹ A pile of sawdust situated at the base of the stone to catch the liquid drippings of the meat, also humorously represents a pile of crumbs that "missed the mouth." If the meat or salad were left untended over the duration of an exhibition, they would wither or rot, and the resulting loss of volume would reduce the friction that holds the two blocks of stone to one another. The smaller stone would then fall to the floor and possibly shatter. The artist instructed that the work needed to be "fed" with fresh meat or produce in order to maintain its stable form and avoid this destructive fall. Here, that which is

⁴⁰ Anselmo has stated that the works require "human intentionality and volition" in order to survive. See Corinna Criticos, "Reading Arte Povera," in *Zero to Infinity: Arte Povera 1962-1972*, ed. Richard Flood and Francis Morris (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center and London: Tate Modern, 2001), 84.

⁴¹ Criticos has claimed that the work was never exhibited with meat, that the photo published in Celant's 1969 book was only used for the invitation, but the artist's testimony to me argues otherwise. It is true that in most exhibitions after 1969 he has used a head of lettuce, based both on aesthetics and morality. The lettuce wilts quickly and needs to be replaced almost daily, which makes the work more vulnerable. He insists that the subsequent use of lettuce was also a moral choice, because the state of hunger in the world made the wasting of meat more objectionable to him than the more ethically renewable vegetable. Anselmo, interview with the author, 22 May 2006. Criticos, "Reading Arte povera," 84.

normally consumed for energy as food is physically used to maintain the energetic situation of the sculpture. As in his earlier works, "eating structure" gives shape and material demonstration to invisible forces such as friction, gravity, and, in this case, cellular degeneration.

Anselmo further explored such divergent materials in a related piece, *Untitled* (1968), commonly referred to as "drinking structure" (fig. 18). Here water is wicked slowly through the cells of soft cotton wool, out of a steel box, and onto the floor. Like its "eating" counterpart, Anselmo's drinking apparatus demonstrates the imperceptible, interdependent relationship between three seemingly disparate materials: steel, water, and cotton wool.⁴²

These seemingly simple sculptures actually engage a range of dialectics in order to undermine stereotypical material polarities. The hard stone of "eating structure" might be considered more durable than the soft lettuce, but if the vegetable were to fall, it is granite that would break. Both the organic and inorganic matter depends on human interaction for their survival in this relationship. A copper wire, a product of industrial production and application, is the force that connects these two "natural" materials. Mindfully chosen, copper is used for its association as an energy conductor. Instead transmitting electricity, as from a power plant, here it relays the force of friction between two natural materials in a visibly perceptible

⁴² Bandini, 1972: *Arte Povera a Torino*, 27.

manner. Further, the long lifespan of the granite and copper, which is normally unapparent, contrasts with the short viability of the vegetable. In an interview with Bandini, Anselmo discussed his interest in understanding his own place in the phenomenological world centering on temporality:

Lately, I have been making works that spring from ideas that are about time in time - time in the broad sense, or the infinite, or the invisible, or the universal, maybe simply because I am a terrestrial being and therefore I am limited in time, in space, and in detail.⁴³

For him, demonstrations that call upon broad impressions of space and time reveal the contingency of fixed polarities. By relating universal concepts to perceivable phenomena, all materials and beings appear joined in a distended struggle against gravity and entropy.

One might speculate that food and water are two essential factors for the survival of most organisms and catalysts for perceivable, energy-producing reactions within the human body. Eating and drinking are conscious actions undertaken daily, but most people are much less attentive to the air that is similarly required for life-sustaining processes. In *Breath* (Respiro) (1969), Anselmo again evokes an animated relationship between materials and creates another contrast between hard and soft materials, or between animal and mineral (fig. 19). Here a sea sponge is wedged between two equally long iron poles, which lie on the ground in perfect alignment. It is not difficult to imagine that the sponge expands and contracts with ambient

⁴³ Bandini, 1972: *Arte Povera a Torino*, 26.

condensation; indeed, a living sea sponge receives its necessary oxygen from water.⁴⁴ Thus, the installation demonstrates that the organic material is animate rather than inert, suggesting that the sponge is still "breathing" as it absorbs moisture from the environment. In the case of iron, the movement is imperceptibly slow, yet it too expands and contracts. The two materials are accommodating themselves to each other, and to the environment in which they are placed, which changes in humidity, temperature, or vibration, according to the presence of the viewer. The work allows one to consider a dynamic relationship between the two extremely different materials, and brings consciousness to the automatic act of breathing.

In conceptually animating apparently inert materials, each of these three demonstrations or devices can also be understood to allude, through the comparison of organic and inorganic materials, to the connections between nature and industry in Italy during this period.⁴⁵ For example, even under the pressure exerted by the iron beams, the sponge continues to "breathe,"

⁴⁴ It is perhaps far less intuitive to consider the other aspect of the material equation: that the iron too expands and shrinks with extreme changes in temperature.

⁴⁵ This tension between tradition and innovation, the natural and the industrial, was a central challenge in post-war Italian society. Michele Salvati, economics professor at the University of Modena, has argued that attempts to simultaneously hold onto the past and move forward created political and economic instabilities. He maintains that these contradictions created economic instability in the mid-1960s, and fed the student movements of 1968, and the radicalization of politics in 1969-70. Michele Salvati, "Muddling Through: Economics and Politics in Italy 1969-1979," in *Italy in Transition*, ed. Peter Lange and Sidney Tarrow, trans. Paul Mattick (London: Frank Cass & Co., 1980), 31-33.

perhaps as humans adapt and survive the changing conditions of history and politics.⁴⁶ In revealing the vital, dynamic, and symbiotic relationships among such seemingly disparate objects, these works may be read to critique hierarchical and egocentric structures, parallel to the sentiments of and coalitions between the early student and worker movements in Turin. If separations between natural and artificial, or organic and inorganic, were no longer seen as necessarily oppositional, one could argue for their co-existence. Inorganic materials are animated in these works in order to heighten the viewer's awareness of the energy flowing through all such encounters, both within and beyond the gallery. The material and temporal relationships demonstrated here might also be seen as an allegory for the human dependency upon, and interconnectedness with, other organisms and substances in the natural world. The energy generated by and contained in these relationships exceeds the boundaries conventionally separating the individual and the world. Anselmo's demonstrations unfolding in the public space of the gallery constitute small signs of the much larger cosmic system that binds all materials and beings into an essential relationship. Such expanded perspectives remain his project's central political force.

⁴⁶ A recent interview between Anselmo and MAMBO curator Andrea Viliani reveals some of the artist's candid thoughts about the significance of these works for the social moment. The interview was published as I was working on the revisions of this text, and I cite it here as further evidence of my claims that even the works that seem to be strictly about materials can be read as veiled social references. See Anselmo and Viliani, "In Conversation," 212.

While he continued to make sculptural works that solicited active engagement of physical forces as well as the viewer's time and mental energy in the real space of the gallery, Anselmo also used photographs to document actions outside its walls. This presented particular challenges to his dynamic working habits, since a photograph necessarily "freezes" an image.⁴⁷ Fragmentary and restless, Anselmo's sculptural objects resist singular resolution. That is, even though they can be photographed, the sculptures' documentation remains critically incomplete. A detailed description can help explain how the work operates, but never adequately replaces a first-hand encounter. In 1969, Trini argued that one of the important legacies of Duchamp's readymade for postwar sculpture was that it frustrated photographic reproduction and emphasized first-hand experience.⁴⁸ Photographs often record the actions that extend from three-dimensional practices, in order to document and communicated single performances for history. One of the ways in which Anselmo circumvented this crystallization of action-based works into a

⁴⁷ This work, and others by Penone, Merz, and Zorio that are to be discussed later, are evidence that the *Arte povera* artists did on many occasions use photography. Buchloh has criticized these artists for not making use of photography as Post-Minimal and Conceptual artists did in the late 1960s, writing that it was "nearly absent" from *Arte povera*. See Buchloh, "Foreword," 7.

⁴⁸ See Tommaso Trini, "Duchamp dall'oltreporta," *Domus* 478 (September 1969): 43-45. Additionally, Pierre Restany's extensive series of articles in *Domus* retrospectively charted the development of the "open work" in twentieth-century art on an axis that turns around a Duchampian pole. See Pierre Restany, "L'Autre face de l'art," *Domus* 579 (February 1978): 41.

single image, was to use seriality to extend the perceptual experience, as in his *Documentation of human interference on universal gravitation*, (*Documentazione di interferenza umana nella gravitazione universale*) (1969), comprising twenty small, black and white photographs of a horizon (figs. 20 & 24).⁴⁹

To make this work, Anselmo began by taking a photograph at a fixed spot around sunset. On foot, he began to move quickly towards the setting sun, taking photos at regular intervals. His theorem was that by moving westward, in opposition to the earth's rotation, he could interfere with the normal perception of that rotation, essentially extending the time it took for the sun to disappear below the horizon line. Of course, the action was so minute when compared to planetary movement, that its effect was imperceptible. In *Documentation*, it is only through the microcosm that indications of the macrocosm become perceptible. Inasmuch as one might cognitively recognize that gravity is created by the earth's rotation, it is something that one cannot generally perceive. The photographs of Anselmo's somewhat quixotic action provide a demonstrable, if mostly conceptual way to consider these forces.

The printed images themselves are small, 1-1/8" x 1-1/8" each, but are hung close together and at even levels, such as to create a horizon for the viewer that extends beyond one's peripheral vision. Installed sequentially, this line of

⁴⁹ This work exists in a number of versions, some of which have more photographs than others, and are presented in a slightly different manner, for example framed in a single frame, or, alternately, tacked to the wall individually.

photographs also acts as a filmstrip when “read” from left to right, in which the viewer can replicate the changing perspectives of the artist as he performed the action. Such presentation does not employ seriality just as “one thing after another.” I want to suggest that Anselmo’s sophisticated conceptual systematicity is neither rationalistic nor simply ordered, but points to an order that is much larger than our normal ability to perceive.⁵⁰ According to a study of repetition in postwar art by Briony Fer, such artworks that extend time through seriality, as many Sixties works do, give viewers access to new conceptions of subjectivity by transforming and restructuring everyday habits of looking.⁵¹ By his imaginative proposal and serial execution of this irrational action, Anselmo makes the viewer recognize the daily occurrence of the setting sun as a sign of universal forces that act on a much larger scale. The repetition of the sun rising above and falling below

⁵⁰ Bonito Oliva’s account of the relationship between American post-Minimal artists and these European counterparts suggests that in fact they share the aim of creating a transparency between the internal world and the external world. See Achille Bonito Oliva, “America Antiforma,” *Domus* 478 (September 1969): 32.

⁵¹ In *The Infinite Line*, Fer argues that many artists in the 1960s shared an interest in seriality. However her analysis of repetition and seriality stems from the readings born of American Minimalism vis-à-vis Mel Bochner, and it also looks back to Manzoni’s linking of disparate elements into a single project. Of particular interest to this context is her chapter on the way seriality and subjectivity were bound together in works experienced through time on a human scale. See Fer, *The Infinite Line: Re-Making Art After Modernism*, (New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press, 2004), 3-4, 48-63.

the horizon line acts as a sign of these macrocosmic occurrences, which Anselmo condenses here into a single experience.

The concentration of visible signs of an expansive system found in *Documentation* helps contextualize the connections scholars have made between *Arte povera* and the Dewey's writings.⁵² Picking up on this thread, Corinna Criticos has recently argued that what was critical for *Arte povera* was Dewey's understanding of "the work of art as 'clarifying and concentrating meanings contained in scattered and weakened ways in the material of other experiences.'"⁵³ In fact, Dewey posited that artworks are fundamentally communications in which things reveal themselves through enunciation, and in this sense *Documentation's* translation of the expansive macrocosm into an intelligible, communicable concentrated form is exemplary.⁵⁴ Indeed, the setting of the sun is something that everyone can perceive. The earth's horizon and the sunset can be considered a device: the perceivable sign or enunciation of larger planetary and galactic systems that are rarely considered because they are too massive to be fully visible.

If Anselmo's works implore the viewer to consider the visible as microcosmic sign of something that exceeds normal perception, they also occasion a consideration of the way these

⁵² See Victor Kestenbaum, *The Phenomenological Sense of John Dewey: Habit and Meaning* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1977).

⁵³ Corinna Criticos, "Reading Arte Povera," 84.

⁵⁴ John Dewey, *Experience and Nature* (New York: Dover, 1958), 183.

signs operate. For Anselmo, these early perceptual demonstrations led to an engagement with linguistic structures and systems. In an early example of such work, which bridges his material and linguistic interests, Anselmo used a slide projector to cast the word "*Dissolvenza*" (Fading) onto an iron block. He suggested that the constant projection of light would continue until the block (eventually) dissolves from oxidation (although, realistically, the projector would probably fail first). More than just a simple spotlight on the object, the illuminated word informs the viewer's reading of the whole installation.⁵⁵ Would the area of iron exposed to the word dissolve faster than other areas?

Anselmo's interest in language had its own challenges because language itself is based on closed and arbitrary systems so such that a word has only a small range of meaning. Constructing tautologies became an important strategy for Anselmo in countering the prescribed order of linguistic systems and keeping the work open to the vagaries of its reception. In 1971, he began another series of works that used the same slide projectors to spatialize the relationships between word and image or experience: the tautology was established between the projected word and its exhibited context, such that it implicated the viewer explicitly and physically.

In the first such work, titled *Invisible* (Invisibile), a slide projector faces out from the wall into the void of the room

⁵⁵ See Anselmo, "[artist's statement]" in *Arte Povera = Art Povera*, 161.

in which it is exhibited.⁵⁶ At first approach, the viewer focuses on the visible object, the projector, which seems to be simply shining a light into the room. Because the projector is positioned far from a screen or wall, it appears to lose its traditional function of throwing an image onto another surface. Indeed, it seems that whatever is being projected dissolves into pure light in the larger space, and any specific image remains imperceptible. At certain distances from the projector, a blurred outline might prompt the viewer to physically shift and adjust oneself to try to find the right distance at which an image comes into focus.

The "image" remains obscure until the viewer encounters the beam of light at just this remove, when a projected word, "*Visibile*" (visible), appears on the body (fig. 22). Here Anselmo literalized the function of the open work, of prioritizing participation, by making this work invisible without physical and conceptual interaction. It transforms the viewer's body into the screen on which the work plays itself out. The reception of the work occurs both physically, when walking into the stream of light to reveal the otherwise imperceptible word, and it develops conceptually, in the struggle to reconcile these two opposite terms. When the word "*visibile*" comes into focus, does the (invisible) work cease to exist? Or is it only at that moment of perception that the work exists? Can a work be both

⁵⁶ Although he had earlier done *Fading*, this work is different in character from the other projection works that are not connected to objects, but which instead address space more than time, thus I maintain that *Invisible* is the first of a new type of work.

invisible and visible at the same time? The slippage between these opposing terms recalls a pre-linguistic moment in which the viewer must rely on experience to make the leap between one meaning and the other, between the body and the mind.⁵⁷

In *Invisible*, the tautology of in/visibility is more than a linguistic game; it indicates a vital tension between the macro and the micro, and between intellectual concepts and our sensory perceptions, what we might call the vertical and the horizontal, respectively. In a foundational analysis that has informed the parameters for my use of the terms vertical and horizontal here, Krauss argued that prevailing concepts of modernism that focus on opticality misunderstand artistic practices better understood more carnally in the body, and specifically on a horizontal plane. Based on Bataille's interpretations of Freudian "sublimation" to mean acculturation, she argued that the sublimation involved in, for example, hanging a painting on the wall "verticalizes" it, moves away from the material and tactile nature of its making and toward an intellectual or optical experience.⁵⁸ Anselmo's work often proposes a physical engagement

⁵⁷ It should be noted that Merleau-Ponty's *The Visible and the Invisible* may have been influential for Anselmo, or might more generally have been a topic of discussion at the time. The writer's ideas about the "chiasm", as elaborated in this book, will be discussed in relation to the work of Giuseppe Penone in the following chapter. This text was published in 1964 in French and was translated into Italian in a 1969 publication by Bompiani, which also published numerous works by the philosophers of the University of Turin, including Eco.

⁵⁸ Krauss's argument refers specifically to the opticality of Jackson Pollock's paintings as claimed by Clement Greenberg. Instead, she asserts that the ninety-degree turn that is made as

over an optical one, and in this work he specifically points to the instability of vision, as well as another "vertical" system: language. The concept of invisibility is apprehensible through negative definition: something that is beyond one's ability to be visually perceived. Yet, as this work demonstrates, invisibility does not necessarily signal absence. Further, the limits of perception are not absolute, but radically contingent. The "invisible" is here revealed only by the physical engagement of the viewer: as the viewer seeks resolution of the tension between visible and invisible—and between absence and presence—the work points to the linguistic slippage between these terms, as well as to the intellectual leaps we take in understanding the physical realities of everyday life (such as gravity, magnetism, energy, etc...).

The vast and imperceptible macrocosm in which humans play only a small role is the subject of another slide projection piece, first realized by Anselmo in 1972, and repeated in various iterations over the next six years. *Detail* (Particolare) consists of the Italian word for detail, "*particolare*," cast from multiple projection devices positioned around a room (figs. 23–25). These machines are aimed at various and seemingly random spots: the wall, the floorboard, the ceiling.⁵⁹ The referent to

Pollock's paintings move from the floor, where they were made, to the wall, where they are received, is a verticalizing of the works that "tames" the artist. Rosalind Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993), 246.

⁵⁹ The original 1972 and subsequent 1974 installations of this work at Sperone are pictured and described in Anna Minola, et al,

which the linguistic sign "detail" refers is constantly shifting and completely context-dependent. On a small scale, a projector aimed at the floor might reveal a detail of wood grain, while stepping back a bit, it could refer to a detail of a pattern made by the floorboards, or pulling even further away, it could refer to the floor as a detail of the room, or the room as a detail of the building, or the building as a detail of an architect's work, a civic project, a period style, or a natural resource. The list of possible references is nearly endless. In semiological terms, the word "detail" is a shifter, a word requiring an enunciation or context to have meaning.⁶⁰ Shifters such as "this," "that," "I," or "you" were identified by Russian linguist Roman Jakobson and have been correlated to a discussion of art by Krauss in her "Notes on the Index II: Seventies Art in America."⁶¹ Shifters are all fragmentary words—or, in Jakobson's terms, "empty signs"—that need to be connected to particular subjects or objects in order to function as a part of the linguistic system. Like "detail" these shifters can point to a wide range of subjects and objects, and the referent can change with each iteration, making shifters

Gian Enzo Sperone: Torino, Roma, New York, vol. II (Turin: Hopefulmonster, 2000), 244-45.

⁶⁰ Johannes Meinhardt introduces the concept of the "shifter" in relation to this work by Giovanni Anselmo to argue that it offers another source of potential energy in his work. For Meinhardt's essay see: Johannes Meinhardt, "Anzeichen der fliessenden Welt. Giovanni Anselmos Indizes energetischer Prozesse," in *Arte Povera: Arbeiten und Dokumente aus der Sammlung Goetz 1958 bis heute*, ed. Ingvild Goetz (Munich: Sammlung Goetz, 1997), 47-59.

⁶¹ See Rosalind Krauss, "Notes on the Index II: Seventies Art in America," *October* 3 (Spring 1977): 68-81.

the most "open" parts of speech.⁶² For Anselmo, "detail" operates to keep the situation/experiment open to what the viewer brings to his or her interaction with the installation, physically or metaphorically. It is a linguistic concept analogous to the fragmentary nature of the aesthetics of open works, being contingent on the audience's horizon of experience. By pointing to otherwise insignificant or unnoticed areas of an "empty" space in *Detail*, Anselmo allows viewers to consider the act of connecting vision with comprehension, and provokes them to perceive the concept of being one detail among many, one jumble of molecular stuff in a vast network of shifting energies and materials.⁶³

Anselmo's productions of this decade demonstrate his fundamental engagement with the concepts of material connectivity and codependency. Their emphasis on such essential, natural links between seemingly disparate materials opens up a horizon instead of closing them off into a hierarchy, even among substances with more industrial than natural associations. These efforts can be understood to parallel the anti-hierarchical, even

⁶² Michael Caesar argues that Jakobson was important to Eco's formulation of the "open work." Michael Caesar, *Umberto Eco: Philosophy, Semiotics, and the Work of Fiction*, (Oxford, UK/Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1999), 25.

⁶³ When this work was shown in 1978 as part of a larger exhibition at Sperone Westwater Fischer gallery in New York, an *Artforum* review noted "the viewer will correspondingly see him/herself as a detail in the piece." This is certainly part of the experience of the work, but I am arguing that beyond this, the artwork or installation is a microcosm that projects this experience of physical and perceptual interconnectedness onto a universal scale. See Carrie Rickey, "Anselmo," *Artforum* vol. 7, no. 6 (February 1979): 63.

libertarian sentiment of the early student movement. If all elements, organisms and processes can be seen as equalized on a molecular level—by a natural, biological, or physical order—as they are in Anselmo's works, then perhaps social hierarchies like class, race, and gender might also be seen on level ground. To be clear, it is not the content of Anselmo's works that is the primary locus of their connection to the social and political era, but their very structures—participatory, emancipatory, open-ended situations, experiences, and demonstrations—that embody the contemporary moment of social transformation and political upheaval in which they emerged. Anselmo's colleague Giuseppe Penone similarly used perceptible demonstrations of natural systems during this period as a way to foreground individual subjectivity and to explore the complexity of human interaction with the natural and industrial world.

CHAPTER THREE

GIUSEPPE PENONE: TOUCH AND PERCEPTUAL LEARNING

The succession of contacts, of gestures, impressed on a plastic material defines content and determines form. The traces of the fingers become idea channels for the flow of fluids. They bring the image closer to the configuration and structure of a plant. [...] The clay that fixes or memorizes the action, retains the imprint, solidifies the trace of fluid, and makes the sculptor's work a plant.

-Giuseppe Penone¹

Since 1968, Giuseppe Penone has explored the embodied experience of materials, using a metaphor in which the sculptor's touch is analogous to both the organic formation of matter in nature and to manual labor. His objects, actions, and installations almost always oppose the visual with the tactile. Drawing the two faculties into an active relationship reveals touch to be foundational to understanding visual information, as well as one's own being in the world. This concern with the tactile imparts the social context through which the project emerged, since contact implies presence and agency. Importantly, the artist's shaping contact is considered to be the content of the work, echoing Pareyson's notion of formativity, which posits that to interpret a form means to assume the point of view of the producer.² Since Penone executed many early works *in situ*, in nature, the artist's body becomes the explicit point of communication with the viewer's body, requiring empathy and a conceptual inhabitation of the producer's point of view.

¹ Giuseppe Penone, "[artist's statement]" in *Arte Povera=Art Povera*, ed. Germano Celant, trans. Paul Blanchard, (Milan: Electa, 1985), 239.

² Pareyson, quoted in Eco, *Definizione dell'Arte* [1968], reprint edition (Milan: Bompiani, 1983), 26. Translation mine.

Some of Penone's projects have developed over long periods of time, and are documented with photographs or residual objects. They point to experiences that temporally exceed the contracted encounters possible within the white cube of the gallery space. Employing his own body as a perceptive tool, the artist's sculpture stages encounters between materials and human bodies over time in order to alter our view of the temporal relationship between man and nature.³ His tactile investigations into the slow time of organic processes can be read as a counterpoint to industrial speed, but are far from being staunchly anti-technological. Instead, Penone's art naturalizes industrial labors by intertwining human and geological scales of time. The traces left by human touch—whether in the stated pursuit of making sculpture or not—are always at the center of Penone's practice.

Born in 1947, Penone is slightly younger than the other *Arte povera* artists, but the Garessio-raised sculptor's precociousness quickly earned him entry to the Turinese art scene.⁴ While studying at the Albertina Academy of Art (*Accademia Albertina di belle arte di Torino*), where his brother Giovanni was also enrolled, he followed a regular course of study

³ Penone, "[artist's statement]" in *Arte Povera=Art Povera*, 239.

⁴ Garessio is a rural area outside of Turin, where Penone was raised on a family farm. For his biographical background, see Giuseppe Penone, interview with Mirella Bandini, [Garessio, 1971], *Data* (Summer 1973): 7-18, reprinted in *1972: Arte Povera a Torino*, ed. Mirella Bandini (Turin: Allemandi, 2003), 66. Page citations are to the reprint.

that included traditional approaches to the modeling of materials. In retrospect, Penone noted that the school served him by negative definition—it helped him understand what he did not want to do.⁵ While there, however, he found kindred spirits among the students, such as Zorio, who recounted his first encounter with the younger artist:

It was an extraordinary meeting; by the end of the first days [Penone] demonstrated an exceptional modeling ability (his maternal grandfather was a sculptor). In the turn of a year he had exceeded the praxis of modeling and had completely changed his type of work.⁶

Impressed by his colleague, Zorio introduced him to Sperone and encouraged the dealer to offer him an exhibition. Penone subsequently exhibited at the *Deposito d'arte presente* in 1968 and in group shows at Sperone in early 1969. His inaugural solo exhibition opened at the gallery in December 1969. Although he knew Zorio from the *Accademia*, it was through his affiliation with the gallery that Penone met Anselmo, Pistoletto, and the other artists with whom he would be critically associated.⁷

⁵ "La scuola che ho frequentato mi è servita per capire cosa non dovevo fare." Giuseppe Penone, email message to the author, 20 September 2009. Translation mine.

⁶ In an extended interview with Mirella Bandini, Zorio responds to a question about the Turinese situation in the mid-60s, and those artists, like Penone, that he was close to. He described their first meeting: "*È stato un incontro straordinario; fin dai primi giorni ha dimostrato un'eccezionale abilità a modellare (il nonno materno era scultore). Nel giro di un anno ha superato la prassi del modellare e ha cambiato completamente il tipo di lavoro.*" Gilberto Zorio, interview with Mirella Bandini, Turin 1972, in *1972: Arte Povera a Torino*, ed. Mirella Bandini (Turin: Allemandi, 2002), 109. Translation mine.

⁷ Penone, email message to the author, 20 September 2009.

Already in 1968, when he was only 21 years old, the project Penone exhibited at the *Deposito d'arte presente* exemplified the Turin School artists' approach to demonstrating the man/nature relationship via phenomenology and direct physical engagement with materials. This breakthrough project, *Maritime Alps* (Alpi Marittime) (1968), comprised a series of actions performed out-of-doors and their photographic records. Though not sculpture in the traditional sense, it conceptualized and concentrated the important role of touch in the labor of a sculptor. Here intercessions in the landscape, such as interruptions in natural growth of trees in the woods or disturbances in the flow of a stream through the forest were marked by durable traces left by the artist. These interventions showed the impact of sustained human presence on the landscape and in organic systems.

The work's title, *Maritime Alps*, refers to the small Piedmontese mountain range in which Penone was living at the time.⁸ Commuting by train from the mountain village to Turin via Genoa to get to the *Accademia*, the artist observed dramatic shifts between rural and industrial areas. A major element of that landscape is the tree. A foundational resource for art, agriculture, and industry alike, the tree emerged as a factor common to nature, the quotidian life of building materials, and the traditional modeling skills of a sculptor. Penone saw the tree not as inert matter, but as a natural 'force' against which

⁸ The artist's childhood home, Garessio, is in Piedmont (Cuneo) but closer to the coastal region of Liguria, in the foothills of the French section of the Alps. Bandini, *1972: Arte Povera a Torino*, 65.

he could juxtapose other forces, such as his own, to provoke a reaction.⁹

In one work of this series, Penone intertwined the trunks of three saplings so that they would grow together, a simple gesture that carried overtones of medieval agricultural practices like grafting, in which two species of tree would be spliced together. In another action, the artist wrapped his arms and legs around a tree trunk, marking the outline of this embrace—the outline of his entire body—with a thin galvanized wire that traced a series of nails that had been driven into the tree at various points of his body's contact (figs. 26-28). As the tree grew it retained the artist's wire silhouette. On one version of the resulting photographic documentation, Penone inscribed the phrase "The growing tree will preserve my action," (fig. 28) while he captioned another version of this same image "The growing tree will remember the points of my contact" (fig. 27). The latter phrase is especially interesting because Penone's choice of words signals an animistic understanding of the tree. Instead of merely "preserving" a trace as a passive function of a material acted upon, Penone here uses the Italian verb "ricordare" to suggest that the tree, as a living organism, actively "remembers" the encounter with his body. In a third intervention, the artist grasped a small tree trunk with his hand, and marked its outline with a series of nails. He then added lead weights to the armature in a number corresponding to

⁹ Bandini, 1972: *Arte Povera a Torino*, 65-66.

his age, vowing to add another weight every year (fig. 29).¹⁰ The action established an intimate relationship between the artist's body, which even in youth grows every year closer to the grave, and the tree, which naturally grows up and away from the ground. In order to demonstrate the differences between the two organisms, Penone made his own mortality physically weigh on the tree. As time passes, the burden becomes heavier as the psychological trauma of mortality comes ever more into focus. A *memento mori*, this episode also addressed the interruptions of ecological systems due to human impact by drawing parallels between a human life and the tree's life. Over time, the action demonstrates the relationship between the lifetime of the tree and the lifetime of a man.

The *Maritime Alps* embodied Trini's statement that "Mother Nature represents the whole operative area of an art [...] in which place and duration are at the service of the creative experience."¹¹ Indeed the way the artist's touch might extend over the protracted intervals of nature permeates another action from this project, "My height, the length of my arms, my breadth set into a brook," in which the artist built a rectangular frame to the dimensions of his full figure with limbs extended, and set this concrete frame into a small stream bed (figs. 30 & 31).

¹⁰ In 1988, Penone had an exhibition that included photographs updating the all of the *Maritime Alps* project at L'Ancienne Douanne, Strasbourg. See Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, *Arte Povera* (New York: Phaidon, 1999), 146.

¹¹ Tommaso Trini, "Imagination Takes Command," *Domus* 471 (February 1969): 50.

Permanently "present" in the riverbed, the artist's body continuously diverts the flow of water. Like a stone or fallen tree branch, the surrogate body alters not only the natural movement of the river, but also affects the shape of the water, sculpting it, as it passes over and through the obstruction.

The streambed also foreshadows Penone's sustained interest in the correlation between the sculptor's hand and "natural" sculpture. In his 1981 installation *To be river*, a work outside of the chronological scope of this study but which bears mention in relation to *Maritime Alps*, he exhibited two identical stones: a found river stone shaped by the flow of water over time, and an exact replica made by hand carving with traditional tools.¹² Here as in the earlier work, human presence or "man-hours" are drawn into contrast with the immense temporal scale of the natural world. These small perceptible experiments indicate the enormous scale of civilization's impact on natural systems through the touch and presence of a single body.

One effect of the *Maritime Alps* actions that draw together vastly different scales of time is that they can change the way one looks at the present. That is, by bringing together a human body, with which we can empathize by our experience of our own bodies, with materials that have longer life spans, a new conceptualization of each might be possible. In 1972, the artist

¹² For discussion of this work see Ludovico Pratesi, "Showing Traces," in *Giuseppe Penone: paesaggi del cervello*, ed. Costantino D'Orazio, trans. Alexander Martin (exhibition catalogue) (Prato: Ex Chiesa della Madalena and Turin: Hopefulmonster, 2003), 60-63.

wrote about the possibility of accessing an altered perspective through such works:

If one of the functions of art is the continuous reinterpretation of reality, changing the concept of time puts us in a position to revise and recreate conventions of the real and allows us to imagine new forms with new values.¹³

If apprehending the growth cycles of a tree or the journey of a rivulet of water through these interventions of the body offers a new perspective on human implication in natural systems, then that altered perception can be used constructively, to fashion new realities with corresponding ideals. By contrasting the human and geological scales of time through traces of his own body, Penone offers a means by which the viewer can understand the impact of sustained individual activity on seemingly remote events.¹⁴ Using sculpture as a metaphor for the re-formation of social structures, the *Maritime Alps* works argue for engagement

¹³ Giuseppe Penone, in *Giuseppe Penone: Writings 1968-2008*, ed. Gianfranco Maraniello and Jonathan Watkins, trans. Marguerite Shore (Bologna: MAMbo/Birmingham: IKON, 2009), 78.

¹⁴ I asked the artist about the possible importance of George Kubler's writings on the relationship between forms and an expanded concept of time, which were important for the negotiation of industrial and natural for contemporaneous American artists like Robert Smithson. Penone did not recall reading Kubler's texts. He maintained that although there are no theoretical references that can be pointed to directly, in the conception of the works there was an attempt to correlate the Latin humanistic tradition with its origins in a Panistic view of nature. Thus, even if he didn't read Kubler, the notion of contrasting divergent scales of time was of central importance. Giuseppe Penone, e-mail message to author, 16 July 2007. In further investigating this, I later found that curator Kathryn Tuma refers to Kubler as general contextual background in an essay about Penone's drawings. See Kathryn Tuma, "The Other Side of Nature," in *Giuseppe Penone: The Imprint of Drawing*, ed. Catherine de Zegher (exhibition catalogue) (New York: The Drawing Center, 2004), 78.

in shaping the future by demonstrating the simple means by which change can be effected.

A second aspect of this series relating to expanded notions of time is a negotiation of the chasm between biological associations of materials and their applications under human hands. In each *Maritime Alps* action, the encounters between Penone's body and nature (that is, the artist's touch) are recorded in the materials of industry, such as galvanized steel, iron, concrete, and lead, setting up an additional layer of cultural metaphor and an analogy of the body with labor and industry. The navigation of these two poles parallels the artist's biography: while raised in the countryside, he transplanted himself to Turin, the industrial center of post-war Italy, from which he then brought industrial materials back to the rural landscape for the *Maritime Alps* actions. Materials are poetically equalized in an oscillation between natural and industrial connotations; the hand is human, yet its surrogate is iron, the body's embrace is flesh, yet it is traced with galvanized wire. Trini noted this counterpoint at the time, writing: "for an art like this, which makes nature and culture visibly and plastically converge in a substantial unity, identification is an ongoing process."¹⁵ More recently, curator Didier Semin reflected on how "My height, the length of my arms,

¹⁵ Trini, Tommaso Trini, "Nuovo alfabeto per corpo e materia," *Domus* 470 (January 1969): 46. Reprinted in English as "New alphabet for body and matter," in *Arte Povera = Art Povera*, ed. Germano Celant (Milan: Electa, 1985), 113. Page citation is to the English edition.

my breadth set into a brook," revealed the continuity of man and nature:

We are made of the same water as the river and of the same minerals as those it carries with it, and it is only by virtue of a tiny percentage of something else that we can look down on that stream with such condescension. It is this percentage that invented the *cogito*, war and the mobile phone.¹⁶

Semin identifies the important notion that the natural and the industrial are linked on a material level, and hints at the social implications of this connection. Such correspondence alters one's perspective, by denying stark oppositions. In the context of the intense politicization and stratification of late 1960s Turin, a temporally expanded point-of-view that integrates disparate materials also offers a means for the mediation of political divides.

Such polar exchange gives Penone's work its critical energy. But retrospectively ruminating in the 1980s, Celant submitted a different interpretation, situating these works in a larger, international tendency to emphasize the natural over the industrial, arguing:

[Penone's] search for inter-twinings with a stone or a tree, in order that they should bear visual 'fruit', coincides in the history of contemporary art with the need that was felt by the European and American artistic communities to find forms and images that are not derived from industrial products and materials, but are direct results of nature.¹⁷

¹⁶ Didier Semin, *Giuseppe Penone: The Politeness of Matter* (exhibition catalogue) (Geneva: Galerie Guy Bärtschi, 2002), 9.

¹⁷ Germano Celant, *Giuseppe Penone* (Milan: Electa, 1989), 8.

By trying to equate the Italian artist with the by then canonical American land artists like Smithson, Michael Heizer, and Walter De Maria, Celant eclipses the productive friction between the natural and the industrial in Penone's works. It is a curious argument, since Celant also pays significant attention in that text to Penone's rural biography. It is not that his background would prohibit reading Penone's work in an international context, but Celant takes this further than most other critics, arguing that the artist's childhood in Garessio, which he claims is a place where people lived in caves for centuries, "serves to recompose, by a materialistic procedure, the particular anthropological structure that appears in the phenomena of [Penone's] work."¹⁸ He doesn't suggest how the reader may resolve the paradox of his argument, which, on the one hand, suggests that the artist has primitive roots that define his practice, and on the other, connects him to the American avant-garde. In trying to align the Italian with his international contemporaries, Celant neglects the local situation and obscures the significant duality in these works. What makes Penone's project redolent of its cultural time and place is exactly its negotiation between modern industry and traditional aspects of Italian culture, and, further, between the regional reality of

¹⁸ Celant, *Penone*, 12-13. While Penone's biography is frequently discussed in the relevant literature, Celant is unique in placing such emphasis on the "primitive" nature of this rural upbringing. For more on his argument about how Garessio relates to Penone's work, see Celant, *Penone*, 10-12. Semin also mentions the impact that being a "man of the soil" may have had on the artist's interest in tactility, which is discussed later in this chapter, but does not suggest that this is a backward position.

agricultural life and the multinational implications of urban Turin's industry.

Penone maintained a correspondence between modern industry and the primeval in his works, because it allowed him to more fully occupy the complexities of his present moment. In a statement that accompanied the publication of the *Maritime Alps* documentations in 1969, Penone discussed the personal importance of his family land as a function of man-hours or labor put into the earth—14,520 hours of work between 1881 and 1969 by his calculations—but stopped short of suggesting that this was somehow a “primitivizing force.”¹⁹ In fact, in an interview with Celant, the artist argued for the centrality of the connections between industrial and natural materials and processes in these early works, rather than a separation:

On close examination even the image of the factory makes reference to that of the field. Take assembly lines: the lines parallel one another just like the furrows of a ploughed field. [...] There's a millennial quality in this way of thinking, and I want to preserve it. Our culture has separated one way of thinking from the other, the human being from nature. I don't believe such a clear distinction can be drawn; there is human material and there are materials called stone and wood, which together make up cities, railroads and streets, riverbeds and mountains. From a cosmic point of view the difference between them is irrelevant.²⁰

For the artist, the tree he embraces is not limited to only one interpretation—nature or industry, the past or the present—but

¹⁹ See his artist's statement first included in *Conceptual Art Land Art Arte Povera* (Turin: Galleria Civica D'Arte Moderna, 1970), reprinted in English in Maraniello and Watkins, *Penone: Writings*, 90. Page citations refer to the English.

²⁰ Celant, *Penone*, 19.

rather fluid enough to encapsulate both concepts at the same time.

Critics like Trini, writing in the moment, read this natural/industrial counterpoint as endemic to Turin and its contemporaneous social turmoil. Correlating the tactics of the student movement and the works of *Arte povera* he wrote:

The sense of nature is such that the attitude of the artists towards nature and matter is marked with nonviolence, in contrast with the idea of domination through scientific conquest that Western thought traditionally exercises on these entities.²¹

Thus, Penone's equalization and normalization of the techno-industrial through material permutation challenges the hierarchy of domination, and perhaps even considers ways in which the two might coexist. The combination of both natural and industrial materials was a metaphoric proposition for a new relationship between physical human labor and alienated industrial labor.

Finally, in his most succinct display of this interdependent man/nature relationship in the series, Penone grasped a young tree trunk with his hand. He then made an iron cast of this gesture and affixed it to the tree, creating a permanent encounter through an indexical surrogate between his hand and the tree. The photograph of this action bears the inscription: "The tree will continue to grow except at this point" (figs. 32 & 33).²² The subject of this work is the touch of the artist's hand, a traditional marker of authenticity, to

²¹ Trini, "New Alphabet," 113.

²² "*L'albero continuare a crescere tranne che in quell punto.*" Translation from Christov-Bakargiev, *Arte Povera*, 146.

raw material. This touch acts upon, and against, the natural development of the tree, simultaneously utilizing and undermining the tree's growth cycle. An ambivalent rather than auratic marker, the artist's touch here can be a metaphor for the work of a sculptor as well as that of the farmer, for the artisan as well as the factory worker. The seemingly simple presence of a single hand, extended over the lifetime of a developing form, is forceful enough to redirect the orientation of growth. The forest, the artist wrote, is "a slow factory producing wood."²³

I pay significant attention to the *Maritime Alps* here because the artist was engaged with the project for nearly 30 years, returning to the sites to further document the impact of these interventions with each passing decade. Moreover, the series neatly catalogues Penone's early dedication to primary, corporeal encounters with materials, and the traces of the hand or body distended over long periods of time. In this pursuit, his larger project often has as a sub-textual interest in craft, agriculture, and artisinal knowledge: systems of interaction with natural materials rooted in first-hand, experimental, sensory perception. His approach presumed nothing in advance and relied on experience, taking materials in hand in order to understand their fundamental properties. Penone's physical engagement with raw substances stood in direct contrast to the alienation from traditional processes and systems of knowledge that had emerged in the post-war years, yet it also attempted to naturalize the

²³ Giuseppe Penone [statement, 1970], in Maraniello and Watkins, *Penone: Writings*, 121.

industrial by that corporeal contact. After years of schooling, (and what some might call cultural sublimation), Penone used his early works to "relearn" such alternative systems for himself, in artworks that operate as open channels for the flow of phenomenological knowledge about the world back to the viewer.

In 1969, Penone staged a new encounter with a tree in order to question modern reliance on hyper-rational thinking and scientific systems of learning. In the action *Write, Read, Remember* (*Scrive, Legge, Ricorda*), he inscribed an iron wedge with the 21 letters of the Italian alphabet on one side and the 10 Arabic numerals (integers) on the other (fig. 34). He then drove this wedge into the trunk of a tree, splitting the bark and piercing its "flesh" with the remedial lesson. The absurdity of trying to "teach" a tree a rational system of writing and counting by literally drilling it into its trunk can be understood as a criticism of modern systems of learning and education. Instead of learning by experience, curiosity, and touch, we conventionally learn by rote repetition: "write, read, remember." The animation of these trees—the idea that the material might remember his touch or learn the alphabet—was an embodiment of the material in the service of perceiving its true character. Further, *Write, Read, Remember* contrasted the organicity of the tree and the rational system of language to initiate the viewer's consideration of the material's state of being. As a sculptor aiming to re-engage the natural world without retreating to it, Penone empathetically approached the

tree, in order to grasp its place among the systems of nature and modern society.

A related work of the same year, *Bread Alphabet* (Pane alfabeto), extended this investigation to fauna. Here the artist encased steel rendered letters of the Italian alphabet in a loaf of bread, and set it outside (originally on a windowsill of Sperone's gallery). As hungry pigeons feasted on the crumb, they slowly revealed the building blocks of human communication hidden within, enacting a traditional means of sculpture by subtraction (fig. 35). In the context of eating for corporeal survival, the letters are meaningless barriers to the birds rather than carriers of knowledge or means to enlightenment. The staged farce of their "ingestion" of such a system is contrasted with the somatic contentment found in the bread itself. Perhaps most meaningful is the recognition that the act of "sculpture," if understood as a basic interaction of two bodies resulting in a reshaping, is always reciprocal: the loaf is shaped by the touch of the birds, and the pigeons are shaped by what they ingest. As in *Read, Write, Remember* and the *Maritime Alps*, the material is revealed to be active rather than passive, since the bread nourishes the birds and the trees "remember" points of contact. Penone's early works, in which substances are simultaneously formative and formed, seem to ask: Is the artist similarly affected by such sensory experiences? Does information accessed through the flesh shape the mind?

Penone has written about the necessity of using all of his senses to perceive the material aspects of making sculpture. In a text concurrent with these early works, he echoed the central tenets of the *Phenomenology of Perception*, writing of the desire to recuperate, at least for a moment, a state in which the analytic mind might yield to pure sensory experience—to the world's natural materials and processes—so that vision and touch might again be reintegrated in the object:

To make sculpture the sculptor must lie down, slipping to the ground slowly and smoothly, without falling. Finally, when he has achieved horizontality, he must concentrate his attention and efforts on his body, which, pressed against the ground, allows him to see and feel with his form the forms of the earth. He can then spread his arms to take in the freshness of the ground and achieve the degree of calm necessary for the completion of the sculpture. [...] The sculptor sinks...and the horizon line comes closer to his eyes. When he feels his head finally light, the coldness of the ground cuts him in half and reveals, with clarity and precision, the point that separates the part of his body that belongs to the void of the sky from that which is in the solid of the earth. It is then that sculpture happens.²⁴

Here, even if romantically, Penone proscribes a literal and figurative horizontality: a conscious and willful regression to a pre-linguistic state. Tangible evidence is to be experienced for oneself through the whole body, and not solely through the learned mind, nor its "vertical" accomplices, the eyes. The artist identified a split between the mind (indicated here as that part of the body belonging to the sky) and the body

²⁴ Giuseppe Penone, "Six Statements for Maritime Alps" (1968), in *Zero to Infinity: Arte Povera 1962-1972*, ed. Richard Flood and Francis Morris (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center and London: Tate Modern, 2001), 298.

(belonging to the earth) as a fundamental dialectic of making sculpture. Furthermore, Penone here formulates the sculptural act as a verticalization of the corporeal, multi-sensory experience. To begin, however, the sculptor needed to resist the intellect and defy sublimation, focusing instead on the ground, the earth, and the horizon line.

Building upon this approach, Penone devised an action that forced him to inhabit a fully tactile, "horizontal" position by apprehending new situations and environments using every sense except sight. In the photographically-recorded actions begun in 1970 titled *To Turn One's Eyes Inside Out* (*Roversciare i propri occhi*), Penone temporarily blinded himself by inserting mirrored contact lenses into his eyes (figs. 36-38). In collaboration with an array of photographers, amateur and professional alike, the artist explored areas that were new to him while wearing the opaque lenses.²⁵ For example, if he were having an exhibition in Munich, he would wear the lenses upon arrival to record his first impressions of the city through sound, smell, and touch. Required to initially relate to his surroundings through non-visual senses, he thus reversed the conventional reliance on sight. For most humans, the eye is the most trusted witness to the existence of the self in the world, allowing one to understand oneself as separate from other things in the world.²⁶

²⁵ Interview with the author, written notes, 22 May 2006, Turin, Italy.

²⁶ I refer here to the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan's notion of the "mirror stage", the pre-linguistic and pre-symbolic

Yet as far back as Plato's cave, vision alone—the eye set loose, without experience and grounding in the other senses—has also been understood to be unreliable. Not wanting to be fooled by shadows, Penone thus choreographed scenarios in which he had to first experience a new place with his flesh instead of his eyes.

This series of actions allowed the artist to temporarily regress to the mode of encountering the world that Dewey referred to as particular to the "savage." For the latter, the savage was a model of a fully alive being, focusing totally on the present:

His senses are sentinels of immediate thought or outposts of action, and not, as they so often are with us, mere pathways along which material is gathered to be stored away for a delayed and remote possibility.²⁷

Along this line of argument, Celant's suggestion that Penone's emphasis on tactility reveals a "primitive" way of being in the world takes on a relevance that is apart from the artist's biography. When the critic argues that protohistoric man did not separate himself clearly from other organic forms of life, "the clear dividing lines between subjectivity and objectivity, dream and reality, were blurred," he echoes Dewey's formulation of the man grounded in the present.²⁸ For the artist, the sensory information gathered through this action is used immediately to ascertain his new surroundings, but rather than a complete reversal, he effects a crossover between this "savage" state and

recognition of the self as "I." See Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1977), 1-7.

²⁷ John Dewey, *Art as Experience* [1934] (New York: Perigee, 1980), 19.

²⁸ See Celant, *Penone*, 12.

a more acculturated mode by connecting the first impressions with the images seen when the lenses are removed and the photographs made by others were developed.

For the viewer of the resulting photographs, the gap between the multi-sensory experience and its purely visual documentation is palpable. This interruption, and the temporal delay it necessitates, probes the traditional artist/viewer relationship as it simultaneously draws together these two modes of experience (for the artist, like the viewer, does not see the experience until later).²⁹ Instead of receiving information through his eyes and later re-transmitting it through a communicative medium, Penone captured an instantly-reflected image in the mirrored lenses before he had ever actually seen it. In the text that accompanied the 1977 publication of these photos in an artist's book, Penone wrote:

When the eyes, covered with mirrored contact lenses, reflect back into space the image they gather with the usual movements one has when observing, the ability to see is deferred. [...] The delay with which I capture an image makes mirrored contact lenses into diviners of future sight.³⁰

²⁹ That is, in addition to the action that allowed the artist to experience the world corporeally, viewers' encounters with the artist via the photographs allowed them to see the reflected images before the artist could.

³⁰ *"Quando gli occhi, coperti dalle lenti a contatto specchianti, reiflettono nello spazio le immagini che raccolgono con i movimenti abituali dell'osservare, si dilaziona nel tempo la facoltà di vedere [...]. Il ritardo con cui mi approprio della immagine, rende le lenti a contatto specchianti divinatorie del vedere futuro."* (Translation mine.) Giuseppe Penone, *Rovesciare gli occhi* (Turin: Einaudi, 1977), 70-71.

Foregrounding this element of delay destabilized visual authority and further questioned the hierarchical separation between artist and viewer.

In the absence of eyesight, skin becomes the primary barrier through which we must pass in order to understand our own being and our "place" within the body. In two texts from the 1960s, *Eye and Mind* (1961) and *The Visible and the Invisible* (1964), Merleau-Ponty wrote about to the mind's ability to create a concept for an invisible physical sensation as the *chiasm*, or crossing-over, between perception and the cogito as essential to being.³¹ He explained:

A human body is present when, between the seer and the visible, between touching and touched, between one eye and the other, between hand and hand a kind of crossover occurs, when the spark of the sensing/sensible is lit [...].³²

Thus presence is comprehensible through that moment when the vision and touch correspond. Penone's work attempts to locate

³¹ Merleau-Ponty's *The Visible and the Invisible* was published in Italian in 1969. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible* [1964], ed. Claude Lefort, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1968). The phenomenologist had also written about the notion of reversibility in the earlier essay "Eye and Mind." (See next note.) After writing this chapter, I discovered an essay by Michael Newman, which connects Merleau-Ponty's notion of reversibility to Penone's later fingerprint drawings and *Glove* (Guanto) (1972). Newman does not make an argument based on the historical availability of the text or its ideas, rather simply uses the concept for his interpretation. See Michael Newman, "Sticking to the World-Drawing as Contact," in *Giuseppe Penone: The Imprint of Drawing*, ed. Catherine de Zegher, 103-110.

³² Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Eye and Mind," in *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader: Philosophy and Painting*, ed. and trans. Michael Smith (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1993), 125. Originally published as *L'Oeil et l'esprit* (Paris, Gallimard, 1961).

that spark, to operate on the frontier between the seer and the sensible. If this border seems permeable and difficult to identify, one might consider that Merleau-Ponty also asserted that touch is reversible: one can feel oneself being touched as well as actively touch. For him, touch is therefore both simultaneously active and passive. Compared to vision, this "reversibility" of touch requires the mind to interpret more complex sensible signals, and it can also provide more information, making touch perhaps better than vision in perceptive terms.

Here too, Dewey's theories of experience align with Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, a significant confluence given the importance of both thinkers to the philosophy produced in Turin. The American philosopher went so far as to argue that his own theory of aesthetics and experience relied on an acknowledgment of the foundational import of encountering one's environment through the fragile border of sensory organs:

No creature lives merely under its skin; its subcutaneous organs are a means of connection with what lies beyond its bodily frame, and to which, in order to live, it must adjust itself, by accommodation and defense but also by conquest.³³

Penone's investigation of this living boundary and of the crossover between touch and sight would be central, in Dewey's terms, to understanding one's own being in the world, one's own subjectivity. When Penone "blinded" himself, he denied the itinerant potential of the eyes, and forced open the boundary

³³ Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 12.

created by the skin through a greater reliance upon touch.

Evoking Dewey's sentiment, the artist wrote of this barrier:

The skin, like the eye, is a border element, the extreme point that makes us able to divide ourselves and separate ourselves from that which surrounds us, the extreme point that is able to envelop vast physical extensions... it is the point that allows me, still and after all, to identify myself and to identify.³⁴

These two borders, then, between the inside and the outside are for Penone the frontier of understanding his own being in the world. Even by simply closing one's eyes, we feel ourselves to be more inside our bodies, less a part of the outside world.

"The eyelid" the artist wrote, "separates touch from sight."³⁵

Just as being is apprehended through a mediation of vision and touch, the mirrored lens acts as a surrogate for the eyelid, closing vision to the wearer, and offering it instead to the viewer.

The artist focused on this counterpoint between the eye and the flesh—and, specifically, the fallibility of sight alone—in another photographically documented work. *To Unroll One's Skin* (Svolgere la propria pelle) (1970–72) records an action in which Penone photographed every inch of his skin through a microscope slide (figs. 39 & 40).³⁶ His attempt to indexically register the

³⁴ "La pelle, come l'occhio, è un elemento di confine, il punto estremo in grado di dividerci e separarci da ciò che ci circonda, il punto estremo in grado di avvolgere fisicamente estensioni enormi... è il punto che mi permette, ancora e dopotutto, di identificarmi e di identificare." Quoted in Tommaso Trini, "Anselmo, Penone, Zorio e le nuove fonti d'energia per il deserto dell'arte," *Data* 3, no. 9 (Autumn 1973): 67. (Translation mine.)

³⁵ Penone, [statement 1976], in *Penone: Writings*, 246.

surface of the body's tactile barrier is mockingly analytical.³⁷ The methodical approach to his own body is replete with detailed images—indeed, it is hyper-visual—yet it fails to yield any useful information as to the nature of skin as a material nor, more importantly, of the man who inhabits it. Like Anselmo's *Detail*, particulars do not resolve into a sensible whole (figs. 23–25). The multiple images in the resulting artists' book are visually accurate, yet they fall short of revealing the whole truth of what it means to be inside of that body, or to encounter the individual in the world.³⁸ When these images were translated to an installation, exhibited at Documenta 5 in 1972, Penone mounted them as transparencies on panes of window glass, further emphasizing the notion of the skin as a barrier or border (fig. 41).

³⁶ In Celant's 1989 monograph on Penone, the title appears translated as "To Unroll Your Skin," whereas in the 1999 book by Christov-Bakargiev and the 2001 Walker Art Center exhibition catalogue, it appears as "To Display One's Skin." I am using the former both because it is earlier and because it comes from a more focused, monographic source.

³⁷ Guy Tosatto has compellingly written about the correspondence between Penone's project and the *Santa Sidone* or "Holy Shroud" of Turin, which was believed for centuries to have been the cloth in which the body of Christ was wrapped for burial. In the 19th century, photographs "revealed" the indexical markings of a body on the relic. For Tosatto, the connection to Penone's work centers on this indexicality, the imprint of a body without the artifice of representation. This analysis serves to further support the notion that like many *Arte povera* artists, Penone's work is replete with veiled layers of historical significance. See Guy Tosatto, *Giuseppe Penone: 1968–1998*, (exhibition catalogue) trans. Elena Brizio et al. (Galego: Centro Galego de Arte Contemporanea, 1999), 177–178.

³⁸ Giuseppe Penone, *Svolgere la propria pelle* (Turin: Sperone, 1971).

Penone combined his interest in the reversibility of touch and with his personal identification with nature in the related *Unroll your skin/stone*, (*Svolgere la propria pelle/sassi*) (1971). Recalling the earlier use of his body to interrupt a stream in *Maritime Alps*, here the artist engraved his handprint on a stone and deposited it in a stream, where the water filled the tiny rivulets marked by the sculptor's touch (fig. 42). The water was displaced by his handprint and impeded, if subtly, in its travel over the otherwise smooth stone. In a work like this, Penone's preoccupation with the physical impact of his presence and touch is self-evident, yet a latent social aspect of these interests emerges upon closer examination. The artist has written that the touch of a human hand, while it presses itself on an object, has the capacity to both create and destroy: "from the negative of his impressed skin infinite positives can be made, as many as there are future contacts with the surface."³⁹ Like the river, which simultaneously carves away stone and carries water, and like the farmer who both clears the land and cultivates it, the sculptor's touch, his action, can be seen as both additive and reductive. In drawing an analogy between his conscious effort and the river, Penone continued to consider the symbiotic relationship between natural systems and human labor, using his own body to demonstrate these crossings-over for the viewer in a poetic form.

³⁹ Giuseppe Penone, [statement, 1974], in Celant, *Penone*, 66.

If touch provides perceptual understanding through this reversibility, it also implies presence in a way that sight does not.⁴⁰ Sight can facilitate knowledge through a variety of mediations, distanced and delayed by pictorial representations or written linguistic systems, for example. Touch, conversely, relies on knowledge gained through presence and proximity. Touch implies immediacy: knowledge rooted in the body. In the context of Turin's student and worker movements, "presence," especially of bodies, was a fundamental issue (immigrant bodies infiltrating the city) and key weapon (sit-ins, walk-offs, strikes) used to publicize political beliefs. Like the demonstrations that interrupted factory lines, urban traffic, and university classes, Penone's works in these same years—through their elaboration and amplification of touch—use the presence of the artist to make their meaning palpable.

The interdependency of vision and touch in Penone's work can be read as alluding, perhaps, to the essential relationship between the systems of nature and industry, between the powerful and powerless, between the political left and the right. The artist has suggested that there is a latent politics to his project, which he contends was born in "a moment of strong reaction to the political and social system, which didn't allow political indifference." Further, he explains that what was shared among those of his generation was "strong social criticism accompanied by a desire to reset values, in order to be able to

⁴⁰ Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 144 and 152.

rebuild on the basis of rediscovered identity."⁴¹ Indeed, a politics can be found in the foregrounding of presence through touch and in the cross-over between vision and touch, because they are both strategies aimed at a consciousness of being that is fundamental to empowered subjectivity. Awareness of one's own being in the world, and one's identity, requires an investigation into the limits between what one is and what one is not. Penone compares the human body with the materials of nature and industry in order to better understand both being and world.

In 1969, Penone embarked on a series of sculptures of trees known as *Repeating the Forest* (Ripetere il bosco). The themes of touch and time, latent in the *Maritime Alps* and *To Turn One's Eyes Inside Out*, became explicit in these *Trees* (Alberi). If touch was the artist's primary perceptive tool, the problem of time raised questions as to the scale of his material investigations. Could the essential nature of a material such as wood be ascertained in an hour of touching... a day... a year... or a human lifetime? Could it be established on a human scale at all? Penone's works asked such questions and he has spoken frequently of the role of time in his practice:

In my opinion the elements are fluid, even stone is fluid, a mountain crumbles and becomes sand, it's just a matter of time. The duration of our life allows us to ascribe the values of 'hard' and 'soft' to certain things, while time annuls them. In doing the work of sculpture, which is based on a hard element that is brought into proximity of a soft one—the chisel that penetrates the wood—I'm compelled

⁴¹ Penone [statement 1999], in *Penone: Writings*, 13.

to consider these aspects if I want to approach the problem.⁴²

The artist's presence establishes a necessarily human temporal scale, which becomes the measure against which the material is perceived, defined, and comprehended. The material interactions are also considered temporally, since the very qualifiers "hard" or "soft" refer to the material's endurance vis-à-vis a human scale of time. From the first *Tree* made in 1969-70, to those he continues to make today, Penone uses these sculptures to disrupt the time and touch of human culture and activity, in order to recover the organic ontology of the material.

In 1969, Penone took a milled beam of timber and began to carve away the softer flesh of the wood around the hard knots. This reductive technique took its direction from the material itself, the natural growth pattern of the tree that bore the plank providing the template for carving. After removing most of the pulp, he revealed the relief of a "tree within a tree," the knots having yielded the shoots of former branches cut off in the milling process. The sculpture specifically operated as a recovery of time, and Penone's first beam yielded a form that represented the tree at twenty-two years old, (an age he determined by counting the rings that marked its annual bark growth) (fig. 43).

The work, *Its being in the twenty-second year of age in a fantastic hour* (Il suo essere nel ventidueesimo anno d'età in

⁴² Giuseppe Penone, "Interviewed by Germano Celant" (1989) in Celant, *Penone*, 17.

un'ora fantastica), started with an industrial product—a building block of the post-war economic miracle, in which natural forms were literally subjugated to the geometry and rationalized modes of industrial production—and returned, through an extended encounter with the artist's touch, to an age at which it still followed the path of its natural organic growth. Pointedly, the "age" of this first tree corresponded to the artist's own age at the time, a correlation that reinforced Penone's use of his own body as a necessary phenomenological marker of scale and a counterpoint to organic materials that he had established in his earlier work.⁴³ In a 1971 interview, Penone remarked on the temporal aspect of these *Trees*:

Precisely because my work lives a life of its own, the element of time is an inseparable part of my work. For example, the nut tree planted by my grandfather in 1883 is still growing, and each of its years is registered in its trunk."⁴⁴

In these sculptures, however, Penone's touch did not alter or stunt the aging of a young tree as the earlier actions did, but rather "reversed" the process in a kind of excavation, carefully turning back the clock in the life of the wood.

As an organic material straddling the demands of both the natural and industrial world, the *Trees* are also surrogates for

⁴³ Christov-Bakargiev, *Arte Povera*, 148.

⁴⁴ "Proprio perché il mio lavoro vive da una sua vita autonoma, l'elemento tempo fa parte inscindibile del mio lavoro. Per esempio l'albero di noce nostrano piantato da mio nonno nel 1883 sta ancora crescendo e ogni suo anno è registrato nel suo tronco." Giuseppe Penone quoted in Mirella Bandini, 1972: *Arte Povera a Torino*, 68. (Translation mine.)

the human body. For Penone, the relationship between the body and the tree is not just one of visual similarity or even molecular irreducibility but material metaphor. If erect bodies separate humans from animals, then the vertical growth of a tree naturally symbolizes the human body: its branches the arms, its roots the legs, and its trunk a spinal cord.⁴⁵ Like the tree, the body is both hard and soft, and passes from one state to the other at different stages of a life cycle. He drew analogies from both the similarities and differences between the tree and his own body in terms of their respective roles in natural systems, their relationships to time, and their subjection to the modern systems of industrial production.

To underscore this counterpoint between nature and industry, Penone always left a trace of both histories in the finished works.⁴⁶ For example, in some trees, the trunk and branches were carved out in the round for the upper three-quarters of the trunk, but remain locked in the industrial plank at their base, demonstrating an exchange between the two systems (fig. 45). In other cases, Penone only removed the flesh in relief—that is, the “tree” remained half-submerged in the plank (fig. 45). This allowed the material to simultaneously embody both industrial and natural states, and two moments in history, underscoring the diversion of wood towards industrial aims, and

⁴⁵ Penone, interview by author, 20 May 2006.

⁴⁶ See Celant, *Penone*, 19.

reinforcing a sense of the restorative influence of the artist's hand.

In many ways, Penone's pursuit of the ontology of organic materials paralleled the preoccupations of American Anti-Form or "Process" artists in the late 1960s. In his 1968 essay "Anti-Form," Morris shifted the American discourse away from the rigid, industrial systematicity of Minimalism towards a softer, more aleatory methodology that emphasized the natural properties of materials and focused on the process by which works came to arrive at their current state.⁴⁷ In the same few years during which Penone performed the *Maritime Alps* and made the *Trees*—Morris began making felt works that hung loosely from the wall or gathered haphazardly on the floor (fig. 46). Celant's 1969 book *Arte Povera*, which marked the curator's attempt to move the moniker to an international context, included five pages dedicated to Morris's felt works, and they were exhibited at Sperone in Turin in late 1969.⁴⁸ An emphasis on process is certainly one aspect of Penone's *Trees*, but despite the influence that has been (often anachronistically) argued by so many American scholars, we should ask if these projects were really so similar.

As Celant recognized, the *Arte povera* artists were not alone in investigating the fundamental nature of materials. Indeed, the works of a number of artists included in the 1969 book similarly reveal the inherent properties of matter by

⁴⁷ Robert Morris, "Anti-Form," *Artforum* 6, no. 8 (April 1968).

⁴⁸ Minola et al, *Gian Enzo Sperone*, 138.

subjecting it to natural laws rather than aesthetic rules. Important differences, however, distinguish the divergent interpretations of "process" and "materialism." In Morris's felt works, for example, the fabric is subjected to a minimal amount of actual processing by the artist: he performs but one action in the life of the material. These post-minimal works emerged from the Greenbergian focus on medium specificity, and accept the raw materials as a given, as irreducible.⁴⁹ While the felt remains "true" to its current state, which is that of an industrial raw material, it carries none of the markers of its organic origins as animal hair. For Morris, however much he moved away from hard-edged minimalism in the late 60s, the work of art remained in the realm of formal concerns, how it looked in the gallery, how the viewer experienced it as an object.⁵⁰

Penone's *Trees* also address the viewer in these terms, but offer more than just the physical properties of the wood: they communicate the material's history and perhaps even suggest a connection between their organic composition and the viewer's own constitution. In the *Trees* the material is highlighted as borne and sedimented across time, rather than rooted entirely in the

⁴⁹ This argument about how Morris' materials operate is elaborated by Benjamin Buchloh in "Conceptual Art: From the Aesthetic of Administration to the Critique of Institutions," *October* 55 (Winter 1990): 105-143. See especially the section on "Robert Morris's Paradoxes," 115-119.

⁵⁰ Morris's interest in phenomenology is clear in his later writings, but even his felt pieces still emphasize the perception of materiality and objecthood. See Alex Potts, "The Phenomenological Turn," in *The Sculptural Imagination: Figurative, Modernist, Minimalist* (New Haven: Yale University, 2000), 114.

present. The wood is shown as the product of a horizon of incidents experienced by the organism, including its life as an industrial raw good. The former life of the tree, the milling of the wood into a plank, and the artist's recovery work, all converge to arrive in the poetic tension of the object (fig. 46).

Further, the *Trees* are not elements of chance, as the folds in Morris' felt work, but rather testaments of lived experience. The process is one of deliberate action by the artist, and the material carries layers of cultural signification, from the tree-body metaphor, to a crucifix, to an Italian conception of humanism, to the agricultural and artisinal practices so deeply rooted in European history. Since they testify to the work of the human hand, these works also critically connect to the growing automation of Turin's factories.

In a 1973 interview with Bandini, Penone described the specificity of material and process of the trees in a way that belied the importance of his labor and the centrality of manual work to the artist's identity. Using the metaphor of a work-a-day laborer, Penone stated:

For the past twenty days I've worked all day, every day, just like a carpenter [...]. I've been trying to obtain from a beam, originally 11 m long, 22 cm wide and 10 cm thick, the form of the tree that is fossilized inside of it. [...] It'll take me about a month to complete this task, and it'll take whoever sees the finished work an instant to perceive it; nevertheless, the whole process is a very long one.⁵¹

⁵¹ Giuseppe Penone, "Interview by Mirella Bandini," in *Data* (Summer 1973): 7-18. Partially reprinted in English in Celant, *Penone*, 55.

Here artistic efforts are cast as man-hours, in terms of time spent touching, working a raw material. If the sculptor's work is not so different from manual laborer, the artist reversed the conventional direction of labor vis-à-vis materials in the *Trees*. Here his touch interrupted the mill, and by extension, the factory, when he reversed the tree's age. Whereas industry cut the timber down to a regular, rectilinear size to fulfill a function within a rational, regular system of building, Penone's object subverted the industrial logic and all the rationality it infers, substituting an alternative biological order. The final sculpture revealed a natural form that had been rendered invisible by the imposition of regular dimensionality. Ironically, the work also reversed the auratic gesture by following this alternate logic instead of imposing the artist's own. That is, instead of taking the wood as a raw material to be subjected to the artist will, Penone submitted himself to the task of recovering the natural trajectory of the tree's growth. Like Anselmo's attempt to "delay" the sunset in *Demonstration*, Penone's highly subjective endeavor to "reverse" time in the *Trees* evidences a re-integrated relationship between man and nature in an altered concept of the force of labor.

Penone's emphasis on manual labor can be understood in terms of his larger artistic preoccupation with time and materials, and also as a concerted artistic response to the social and political climate of Turin. In what became known as the "Hot Autumn" of 1969, Italy experienced a series of massive

workers strikes between July and November that threatened to seriously destabilize the economy. Violence became common in many of these later encounters between protesters and police. A prime example is the strike at the FIAT factory in Turin, on 3 July 1969 that turned into a street fight known as the "Battle of *Corso Traiano*," in which 500,000 workers were on strike in Turin's streets.⁵² Before being beaten back by riot police, they set up roadblocks and torched a flatbed truck full of new automobiles leaving the FIAT factory.⁵³ At this moment, the power of the worker movement became visible to the larger culture through public demonstrations. Concurrent with the increased visibility for Italian labor, especially in Turin, Penone's objects underscored the visible signs of his own toils. As the artist himself recalls, the increasing mechanization of the FIAT factory was one of the main points of conflict, since each technological advancement eliminated the need for human labor.⁵⁴ In this context, the *Trees* are certainly politically loaded: they can be seen as allusions to transformation as natural outcomes of human action or labor. Further, this project's focus on process and the comparison between the sculpture performed by hand and that enacted by nature offers a remediation for the alienation of industrial labor. In his *Trees*, time and touch converge on the

⁵² See Diego Giachetti, *Il giorno piú lungo. La rivolta di corso Traiano (Torino, 3 luglio 1969)*, Biblioteca di cultura storica (Pisa: BFS Editore, 1977).

⁵³ "Striking Workers Fight Turin Police," *New York Times*, July 4, 1969 (ProQuest Historical Newspapers The New York Times 1851-2003): 4.

⁵⁴ Penone, interview by author, 20 May 2006.

piece of wood, and the final form brings human labor in synch with natural systems.

While he continued working on and exhibiting the tree series *Repeating the Forest* in the later 1970s, Penone also began making works that used organic processes to create "traditional," representational images, in a reversal of the excavation tactic used for the *Trees*. In *Potatoes* (Patate) (1977) Penone took six plaster casts of his individual facial features, and made them into molds. Significantly, he cast those features that are the locus of four of the senses: vision, hearing, smell, and taste. On his family's farm, the artist dug up a portion of a crop of young potato buds and replanted them within these plaster molds. There, tubers grew into the shapes of Penone's nose, ears, eyelids, and lips. Casting the mature, altered potatoes in bronze, he displayed these sculptures among a pile of the unadulterated crop (figs. 47-50). Whereas a wooden box or a piece of furniture are easy to recognize as products of human labor on a raw material and are quantifiable as products of man-hours, a potato may be the product of just as many hours of human and animal labor in the field, but is considered a completely natural product. Penone's *Potatoes* display this normally invisible work by pointing to the labors that cultivated both the "natural" and "altered" vegetables.⁵⁵

⁵⁵ Though outside of the chronological scope of this study, it bears noting that Penone repeated the process two years later with pumpkins that grew bearing the impression of his entire visage (fig. 51).

The artist has said that one of the primary "problems of sculpture is contact," and his 1977 project makes a case for the transformative power of sustained engagement, furthering the argument begun with his earliest works.⁵⁶ Since the growth cycle of a potato is much shorter than that of a tree, the effect of sustained contact can be more readily available to the viewer than it is in, for example, the *Maritime Alps*. Importantly, the touch of the artist is in this case not that of the hand, but of the body's other sensory receptors: eyes, ears, nose, and mouth. This tactic would suggest that perception, through all of one's senses, can be considered contact, and can have transformative potential. Whether accommodation, defense, or conquest, the contact between flesh and material is, for Penone as for Dewey, a fundamental means of being in the world. The natural world and its systems of growth, decay, and adaptation provide the artist with a parallel model through which to understand what Merleau-Ponty referred to as the reversibility of the tactile. Grounded by phenomenology and an aesthetics of experience, the constant in his objects and actions over the decade 1968-78 is the use of touch as a signifier of the authority of a sensate, laboring body. The artist's dual focus on transformation as both a natural process and as a result of human contact in the later 1970s might be seen in the context of the splintering of the student and worker movements, which had given way to radical terrorist groups like the BR. Penone's reconsideration of the

⁵⁶ See Celant, *Penone*, 17.

body's multi-sensory contact as transformative presents a constructive alternative to the alienation that led to such violent resistance. For other Turinese artists like Merz and Zorio, the political connotations of the transformative power of labor on materials became more pronounced, as did some specific forms connected to the *anni di piombo*.

CHAPTER FOUR

GILBERTO ZORIO: THE ALCHEMY OF SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION

Alchemy follows all of history, runs parallel to the transformations and the testimonials, and at times, is intertwined with art, as it is with mine.

-Gilberto Zorio¹

In Gilberto Zorio's breakout solo exhibition at Sperone in 1967, transmutation united an otherwise disparate collection of sculptural objects (fig. 52). Denoting a physical change of state within a given substance, this function of the ancient science of alchemy provided the artist with a means to reveal both interconnectedness and instability in the material world. Departing from the representational terracotta and polystyrene forms of his student days, the 22-year old artist here embarked on a project that fused form and function by presenting material experiments in the space shared with the viewer. For example, a semi-cylinder of asbestos cement filled with cobalt chloride paste entitled *Pink-Blue-Pink* (Rosa-Blu-Rosa) (1967) figured prominently in the exhibition. The low, long object cut diagonally across the floor, requiring the visitor to circumnavigate it order to see the works on the other side. Drawing close, a viewer most likely found a blue substance filling the grey vessel. However, if the room was particularly crowded or humid, the cobalt-chloride would be pink, having changed from blue in response to the atmospheric conditions.

¹ Gilberto Zorio, interview via e-mail exchanges with the author, 31 October-17 November 2008, previously published in part in *Matrix/Berkeley: A Changing Exhibition of Contemporary Art*, ed. Elizabeth Thomas (Berkeley: University of California, 2009), 312-15.

Just to the left of the piece, Zorio installed a tall cylinder that appeared to have sloughed off an outer skin, with thick folds of plaster gathered at its base. This *Column* (*Colonna*) (1967) was also impregnated with cobalt chloride and similarly disposed to change color with fluctuating heat and humidity. Behind it, a taller column cast of fiber-cement rested on three partially inflated inner tubes, the incongruent materials precariously accommodating each other's forces and responding to atmospheric changes. In the far right corner, a rudimentary *Tent* (*Tenda*) (1967) both offered shelter and demonstrated evaporation through saltwater poured onto its roof. These four works shared a common strategy: they aimed to demonstrate the basic alchemical principle of material volatility, catalyzed here by a literal assembly of (viewing) bodies that emit energy in the form of heat. In Zorio's own words, such sculptures that implicate the viewer in vital situations are "an attempt to render the physical solids surrounding us dynamic."²

The "alchemical" in such early endeavors is manifest by an interest in the interdependence of materials, a privileging of the viewer, and a call for embodied perception already identified in the work of Anselmo and Penone. Like the other Turin-based artists, Zorio argues that his project:

Desires to be together with stimuli that offer an "author-spectator privilege," to catalyze energetic images and also to be analogous to the movement of senses and feelings, of the visible, the invisible, of the tactile, of sound, of

² Zorio, interview with author, *Matrix/Berkeley*, 313.

smell, of animality... My work tries to provoke perceptive reactions of me and of the viewer. My work interrogates itself, interrogates me, leaving hopefully, the freedom of response.³

Toward his goal of provoking "perceptive reactions," Zorio's installations often present substantive change as ordinary and natural, thereby revealing the contingency of natural laws or organic phenomena upon such local conditions as the very body of the viewer. A recognition of oneself as an integral and formative part of the material world is one possible result of such encounters. Alchemy, when seen as a philosophy that used material investigations to understand one's place in the natural world, provides a historical parallel and material analogue for Merleau-Ponty's insistence that perception is effected by the living body's sensory experience of the physical world.⁴ Further, a consideration of alchemy in such terms highlights the depth and cultural specificity of the materiality often identified with *Arte povera*.

Historically, *Arte povera* and alchemy have routinely been connected. In 1969, Celant provided a precedent for later critics and scholars in this regard by claiming, "the artist-chemist organizes living and vegetable matter into magic things [...]."⁵ Many subsequent accounts, especially those focused on Zorio, echo Celant's use the words "alchemy" or "chemist" as if

³ Zorio, interview with author, *Matrix/Berkeley*, 314.

⁴ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* [1962], trans. Colin Smith (New York: Routledge Classics, 2002), 206.

⁵ Germano Celant, *Art Povera* (New York: Praeger, 1969), 225.

they had singular, unambiguous, universal meaning, which they do not. In an example from the popular press, *New York Times* critic Michael Kimmelman entitled a review "The Alchemy of Gilberto Zorio," yet fails to explain the reference in the text, only mentioning alchemy in penultimate word of the piece: "More important is the element of magic, the sense that these objects result from grand but inexplicable alchemical experiments."⁶ Frustrating as it is, the way "alchemy" is used here is typical of many texts on Zorio.⁷ The casual conflation of magic and alchemy is also representative, and equally unconstructive. Curator Klaus Wolbert similarly joins the two concepts in a monographic catalogue essay:

[It did not] take Zorio very long to find his own unmistakable theme, which marked him as an adept of those mediaeval alchemists, makers of gold and magicians who sought the philosopher's stone.⁸

In another example, Lumley has used specific alchemical terms like "alembic"—the vessel in which substances are mixed during

⁶ Michael Kimmelman, "The alchemy of Gilberto Zorio," *New York Times*, 7 June 1991. See also Roberta Smith in the *Times*: "[Mr. Zorio] emerges here as an artist who is part engineer and part alchemist, and whose art walks a tightrope between the physical and the metaphysical." Roberta Smith, "Engineering and Alchemy," *New York Times*, 20 May 1988.

⁷ The "magical" in an Italian context problematically suggests the paradigm of the protean creator that resurfaced in the late 1970s with the *Transavanguardia* painters and their champion, Achille Bonito Oliva, a model antithetical to *Arte povera*. I seek here to distinguish Zorio from these tendencies by suggesting that the *Arte povera* artist used alchemy as a more complex allegory for the revolutionary social context.

⁸ Klaus Wolbert, "At the Sign of the Pentagram," in *Gilberto Zorio* (exhibition catalogue), ed. Klaus Wolbert, trans. Kercher et al (Darmstadt: Institut Mathildenhöhe and Turin: Hopefulmonster, 2005), 165.

the alchemical process—to describe features of Zorio's works. The employment of such language is evocative, and the analogies are warranted, but Lumley, too, stops short of analyzing what it means to be making works that refer to alchemy.⁹

The surface appeal of linking alchemy with *Arte povera* is understandable, reinvesting as it does a sense of aura and mystery to works of art that specifically aimed to unveil process and "remove the 're-' from 'represent.'"¹⁰ Problematically, such uses of alchemy, perhaps unwittingly, undermine the way these artists stepped away from idealist notions of the work of art as complete unto itself. Zorio uses alchemy to communicate information openly, to reveal process, rather than to shroud it in enigma. The second critical error of the examples cited above is that they mention alchemy a-historically. That is, in relation to Zorio and *Arte povera*, "alchemy" has been used as an enticing headline that suggests a certain mysteriousness, while neither explicating what the works reveal, nor investigating what alchemy means within a specific work or artistic practice.¹¹

⁹ See Robert Lumley, "Spaces of Arte Povera," in *Zero to Infinity: Arte Povera 1962-1972*, ed. Richard Flood and Frances Morris (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center and London: Tate Modern, 2001), 54.

¹⁰ Echoing a sentiment heard frequently from the artists themselves, Thomas Crow describes *Arte povera* as aiming to remove the "re" from represent. See Crow, *The Rise of the Sixties* (London: Calmann and King Ltd., 1996), 48.

¹¹ By contrast, Jacob Wamberg's compilation of essays, *Art & Alchemy* (Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press, 2006) is a serious achievement in understanding what alchemy has meant to artists over the last millennium. The essays cover a wide range of topics, but none of them deal with *Arte povera*, and so I cannot count it as a study of alchemy in relation to the topic at hand.

Although they point to the artist's interests in contingency and material transformation, such casual references often obscure more than they reveal.¹²

Contrary to these critical uses, alchemy's appeal for artists like Zorio was rather as a phenomenological model for structuring the artwork and as a historical reference for transformative potential. An investigation into what it might mean for an Italian artist such as Zorio to engage with the issues this historical reference elicits is warranted to bridge the disconnect between how he talks about his works as parallel to its themes, and the persistently glib application of "alchemy" to analyses of *Arte povera*. Re-anchoring this debate in Turin is fundamental in this regard, for it was there where the local philosophical tradition and political climate made alchemy an attractive political metaphor for a larger societal pursuit of

I will nevertheless refer to some of the more general essays, as they are relevant to the general notion of alchemy and its historical connections with art.

¹² In a recent exhibition catalogue for Zorio, Ada Masoero argues that of all of the *Arte povera* artists, "[...]there is no doubt that [Zorio] was the most successful interpreter of the alchemical side [...]." Her account mentions connections between lead as an alchemical material as well as his use of terracotta and alchemical vessels. Masoero describes the alchemy of his work as "the dualism of opposites" and suggests that his "alchemical" use of metals connects the artist to foundational mythologies where the blacksmith figure is the source of life. However, after introducing the notion, she departs from alchemy altogether and argues that "it is primarily on certain principles of Futurism that his works seems to draw for inspiration," (sic) Masoero specifically argues that the importance of the viewer/spectator was a consciously Futurist influence on Zorio. See Ada Masoero, "Zorio: Roots," in *Gilberto Zorio* (exhibition catalogue), ed. Klaus Wolbert, trans. Kercher, et al (Darmstadt: Institut Mathildenhöhe and Turin: Hopefulmonster, 2005), 170-173.

radical transformation. How do the alchemical principles of fluidity, stability, and inflammability symbolize the cultural and political aspirations of a younger generation in Turin during this decade? Zorio recalled that Turin in the late 1960s was:

A repository for the desire to revive a humanistic life, freedom, justice, creativity...utopia. Turin has a long tradition of strife, of desires; it is a city of work and at the same time of culture, it is a city that sparks stimuli for important innovations. The artists, my peers, we were searching for this, and finally found it ...it was a natural discovery that the most diverse identities could carry a series of images: strong, subtle, dispassionate, devastating, new.¹³

Perhaps the same combustive conditions that fueled a social uprising among the youth and workers of Turin also ignited a search for the conceptual possibilities inherent in material encounters. Without a historically grounded, critical investigation of alchemy itself, the linking of art and alchemy reads as a wistful longing for omnipotent creators or a new form of materialism. Therefore, a better understanding of Zorio's project requires, first, a detour from his art to sketch the history of this elusive science. Then, retuning to the works themselves, we can begin a reevaluation of the relationship between the scientific and aesthetic against the intellectual and social backdrop of Turin.

¹³ Zorio, interview via e-mail, 31 October–17 November 2008. Ellipses in the original.

To begin, popular definitions of alchemy must be separated from more historically specific ones. In terms of the former, *Webster's International Dictionary* defines alchemy as:

The medieval chemical science and speculative philosophy whose great objects were the transmutation of base metals into gold and the discovery of the universal cure for diseases and means of infinitely prolonging life; also, the pseudo art practiced by those professed to have accomplished one of these objects, or a modern pseudo science professing similar aims.¹⁴

Here alchemy is regarded both a (pseudo) science and a philosophy, but both serve the direct material goal of turning low metals into gold or (impossibly) prolonging life. Similarly, the *Oxford English Dictionary* cites "alchemy" to mean the medieval and sixteenth century science that was a forerunner to modern chemistry, and it similarly mentions the focus on gold making. In addition, the *O.E.D.* cites two more figurative meanings: "Magic or miraculous power of transmutation or extraction" and "Glittering dross ('All is not gold that glitters.')"¹⁵ From these two sources we would surmise that popular usage of the term "alchemy" today is either figurative, referring to a mysterious process (or, pejoratively, to a

¹⁴ *Webster's New International Dictionary* (New York: G & C Merriam Co., 1954), 60.

¹⁵ OED Online, 1989 edition:
http://dictionary.oed.com.ezproxy.sfpl.org/cgi/entry/50005304?query_type=word&queryword=alchemy&first=1&max_to_show=10&sort_type=alpha&result_place=1&search_id=liAk-1lGV1B-16732&hilite=50005304.
 Accessed 3 April 2007.

suspicious claim), or literal, denoting the pursuit of a secret formula that aims to produce gold from base metals like lead.¹⁶

Historically, alchemy is obviously more complex than these common definitions suggest. Not just a secret recipe for attaining wealth, alchemy is a discipline that has its roots in the Hellenistic culture that thrived at the Alexandrian crossroads, where it mixed with astrology and stoicism to create a study of earthly and cosmic nature.¹⁷ Most of what we know today as alchemy is derived from *Al-khymia*, an Arabic book that integrated much of the earlier Greek (Alexandrian) philosophy, and which was translated into Latin in 1144.¹⁸ This medieval text presents itself as a story about a wise man who lived outside of Jerusalem, and who used parables to advise a young man in the art of alchemy: a personal search through a physical and intellectual

¹⁶ Jan Bäcklund and Jacob Wamberg argue that alchemy is misunderstood today because, since the Enlightenment, it has been marginalized by the development of the rationalist sciences, and because it was "appropriated" to serve as an archetype of Jungian psychology. Jan Bäcklund and Jacob Wamberg, "Introduction," to *Art & Alchemy*, ed. Jacob Wamberg (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, 2006), 9.

¹⁷ Trevor H. Levere, *Transforming Matter: A History of Chemistry from Alchemy to the Buckyball* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), *passim*. Levere, a historian of science, mentions that a form of alchemy was also practiced for medicinal purposes in fourth-century B.C.E. China, though he maintains that the historical link to Greek/Arabic alchemy is unclear.

¹⁸ Aksel Haaning, "The Philosophical Nature of Early Western Alchemy: The Formative Period c. 1150-1350," in *Art & Alchemy*, ed. Jacob Wamberg (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, 2006), 24. The text is a palimpsest of voices and has a complex history of its own. Levere states that when *Al-Khymia* was translated into Latin in the Middle Ages, the alchemical destruction of material properties and its reconstitution into another material or transmutation into other physical properties was understood as a metaphor for the death and resurrection of Christ.

engagement with nature, which produces a "*lapis iste*," or stone.¹⁹ The stone was a metaphor for enlightenment and understanding about the workings of the natural world.²⁰ Therefore the basic idea of alchemy as it entered Western Europe, was to study nature in order to understand one's own place within its invisible workings.²¹

In the Middle Ages, the journey of self-discovery through material science described in *Al-Khymia's* parables led to the belief that metals literally grew in the earth and that, over time, minor metals (or "low" metals like lead) developed into precious metals like gold and silver.²² Alchemical "instructions" or formulas—alchemy's physical aspects—are as diverse as the

¹⁹ According to the *Oxford Latin Dictionary*, "*lapis*" is defined as "a stone, usu. Meteoric, supposed to have divine or magical properties" and "*iste*" can mean "that which you have, use, feel, see, etc., that of yours" or "such as you possess." *Oxford Latin Dictionary*, s.v., ed. P.G.W. Glare (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 1001 and 971. So, *lapis iste* could be translated to mean "one's own powers" or "interior energy." This metaphorical reading of will be important for understanding Merz's use of neon in the following chapter.

²⁰ Haaning, 25-27. He emphasizes that in the original text, alchemy is considered a personal search—a search within oneself. The "*lapis*" or "stone" is considered to be a symbol for spiritual enlightenment. In a period text, *The Alchemists*, authors Caron and Hutin describe alchemy thus: "The Magnum Opus of alchemy is considered to be tangible, physical auxiliary of a particular inner ascetic discipline, whose aim is to procure illumination, perfect knowledge." M. Caron and S. Hutin, *The Alchemists*, trans. H. Lane (New York: Grove Press, 1961), 153.

²¹ Haaning points out that the text is strikingly similar to the structure of the New Testament of the Christian bible. Further, he argues that alchemy flourished in medieval Europe because it was likened to the notion of knowing the (invisible) Roman Catholic God through nature, itself considered to be the work of God. Haaning, 26-29.

²² Levere, 8.

individuals who have tried to move the "science" forward over the last two millennia. Whether explained allegorically or practically, the process is usually portrayed as a series of combinations and adjustments to three basic elements—mercury (fluidity), sulfur (inflammability), and salt (stability)—understood to be the building blocks of all natural materials.²³ Through various steps involving heating, evaporating, stirring, and condensing, the true nature of these building blocks would be revealed, and thus all things deriving from them could be understood and refigured to produce any other substance.²⁴

According to Trevor Levere, a historian of science, even though alchemy turned out to be technically improbable, it still helpfully developed some strategies that would become the scientific method, "providing a framework and a tool for the acquisition and organization of knowledge."²⁵ This philosophical tool provided a platform and inspiration to both scientists and

²³ Most sources describe the process as following one or two paths. A dry process of mixing material to cultivate metals had few steps but was apparently very dangerous. A wet process, had many more steps and was apparently less reliable, but was not as dangerous. Caron and Hutin, *passim*.

²⁴ Levere notes that in medieval times, alchemists ascribed to the material dyad described in the Arabic text—Mercury (less combustible) and Sulfur (combustible). It was Paracelsus who added salt, which conveniently paralleled the Christian Holy Trinity. Further, Levere notes that Zozimus was a leading Alexandrian alchemist who set forth most of the basic techniques still used by material scientists today, including "distillation, sublimation (converting a solid directly into a vapor by heating it), filtration, the use of furnaces and more." Levere, 5-6, and 10.

²⁵ Levere, 13.

philosophers, such as Aristotle, Albertus Magnus (the teacher of St. Thomas Aquinas), Sir Francis Bacon, Robert Boyle, and Isaac Newton.²⁶

By the seventeenth century, the metaphorical "stone" came to be thought of more literally, as the key to gold's cultivation and a recipe for growing precious metals at will. Aksel Haaning, a Danish professor of philosophy and the history of ideas who has written extensively about the connections between alchemy and philosophy, argues that this diminished understanding of alchemy seems to have developed later—specifically at the birth of capitalism. He notes that this was a major shift:

The ambition of alchemy, as expressed by twelfth and thirteenth century philosophers, was not bent on making gold. Gold was a part of it, but most important was the ability to understand and imitate that invisible process, which occurred visibly in nature.²⁷

For medieval experimenters, then, a discipline that promised connecting the visible and the invisible—the earthly and the divine—was its own reward. If one is to understand what alchemy might mean as a historical reference drawn by Zorío or his contemporary critics, it is crucial to recognize the parallel development of both its philosophical aims and its physical aspects.

In the 1960s, Italian art criticism was one of the few places where alchemy was being used as a means for analyzing both

²⁶ Wamberg cites the possibility that Albertus Magnus wrote the text "Libellus de alchimia," which may have been influential to the kind of thinking that inspired St. Thomas Aquinas. Wamberg, 31.

²⁷ Haaning, 28.

historical and contemporary works of art, precisely because these critics used it to connect the material and conceptual aspects of artworks. For example, in 1965 and 1969, the Roman critic and art historian Maurizio Calvesi published two studies that investigated alchemy as a structure of thinking that corresponded to the organization of images and forms produced in the same time period.²⁸ He argued that it is the hinge between the kind of thinking that dominated antiquity and that which emerged in the Renaissance and Baroque periods. Specifically, he cited alchemy's unitary principle, its proposition of a cyclical structure between micro- and macrocosm, and its connection of man and world as fundamental to the emergence of western culture in the modern period.²⁹ Calvesi argued that, although his early studies begin with the works of Francesco Piranesi and Albrecht Dürer, this line of inquiry was also important for the contemporary moment.³⁰ Calvesi was, however, concerned with recognizing a melancholic or Saturnine identity for the artist/chemist, therefore in its focus on the persona of the artist, his studies diverge from the kind of argument I am making

²⁸ See Maurizio Calvesi "A noir (Melencolia I)" *La Storia dell'arte* 1/2 (gennaio-giugno 1969): 37-96. Note that Calvesi was one of the founding editors of this Florence-based journal of the history of art. See also Maurizio Calvesi, "L'autore del Polifilo," *Europe Letteraria* n. 35 (giugno 1965): 12. I am grateful to Denis Viva of the University of Udine for pointing me to Calvesi's 1960s work on alchemy and art.

²⁹ Calvesi, "A noir," 37.

³⁰ "...è indispensabile procedere ad un'indagine vastissima, nella cultura Contemporanea e a ritroso nel tempo." Calvesi, "A noir," 38.

about the correspondence between alchemy and phenomenology. However the presence of the discourse is still notable, and in 1986, Calvesi published *Arte e alchemia*, a broad study of the connections between the two disciplines from antiquity to the twentieth century.³¹

Perhaps more significant in terms of argument was the well-known contemporary catalogue raisonné of Marcel Duchamp's works published by the Milanese gallerist and art historian Arturo Schwarz in 1969. He argued: "the alchemists' unitary concept of the universe is the archetypal model for Duchamp's unitary concept of life and art."³² Although he later published a full book on art and alchemy, *L'immaginazione alchimica* [1979], here Schwarz mentioned the topic primarily in a detailed footnote to a description of Duchamp's *Large Glass*, specifically connecting it to the element of time in the composition. For him, time corresponds to alchemy because the quest to make lead into gold is technically the acceleration of natural processes. Certainly, Zorio's demonstrations of chemical interactions in the gallery are isolations and accelerations of naturally-occurring chemical interactions. Works like *Pink-Blue-Pink* also compare to

³¹ Maurizio Calvesi, *Arte e alchimia*, (Firenze: Giunti Barbèra, 1986). The twentieth-century artists discussed by Calvesi in this volume are Giorgio de Chirico, Marcel Duchamp, Jackson Pollock, and "the surrealists" in general. He also refers to the Jungian use of alchemy in psychoanalysis and intimates a connection to the "neo-avant garde" or *transavanguardia*.

³² For more see Arturo Schwarz, *The Complete Works of Marcel Duchamp* (New York: Abrams, 1969), 182. (Although he was based in Italy, Schwarz published this complete catalogue in both English and Italian.)

Duchamp's use of indexical markers of change, such as the thermometers in works like *Why Not Sneeze Rrose Selavy?* (1921), a painted metal birdcage half-filled with marble "sugar" cubes, a piece of cuttlebone, and a thermometer.³³ Schwarz's comments on the unity of art and life through this metaphor are perhaps most significant. In this "unitary" sense, the twin philosophical and physical foundations of alchemy provide a significant model of Celant's "man-nature relationship" for Zorio's project.

As a discipline that, at its core, is a study of nature and an engagement with organic materials, alchemy is highly relevant to the Turin School and the phenomenological bent of the University's philosophy department. In this light, for instance, Anselmo's *Direction* can be viewed to contain alchemical metaphors, since it is a stone that orients the viewer through the compass embedded in its surface (fig. 10). Further, his works generally aim to impart awareness of gravitational forces and of natural systems, and the artist used natural materials to visibly demonstrate invisible processes. Likewise, Penone's *Trees* index a search for a better understanding of an organic material's true nature by reversing the masking and regulating processes of industry (fig. 44). I have already suggested that his *Maritime Alps* metaphorically refer to the medieval practice

³³ A 1964 replica of this work is in the collection of *The Museum of Modern Art, New York*, as a gift of Galleria Schwarz that same year. It is therefore a considerable possibility that this work was on view in Italy at some point in the early 1960s. Rosalind Krauss used Duchamp's 1918 *Tu'm* as a demonstration of indexicality in visual artworks in her seminal essay "Notes on the Index I: Seventies Art in America," *October* 3 (Spring 1977): 68-81. Jasper Johns also used thermometers in his works, notably the painting *Thermometer* (1959).

of grafting, which alchemists cited as parallel to their own bonding of art (science) and nature. Like alchemy, grafting requires human action to induce the reaction, but the work is done by nature; the tree grows together on its own.³⁴ While such projects partake of an interest in phenomenology that often parallels alchemy, these artists do not engage the specific, thematic tenets of the science as Zorio does.

After a childhood split between two paradigms—the industrial Piedmontese town of Biella in the North and the medieval Adriatic town of Termoli in the South—Zorio settled in Turin as an adolescent. He eventually studied sculpture at the *Albertina Accademia di Belle Arti*, and like Penone, this traditional training served his facility in working with materials, but did not catalyze his mature work.³⁵ Zorio had early success, showing when he was just eighteen in a 1963 exhibition organized by Piero Gilardi, the Turinese artist and critic for whom he worked as a studio assistant. Though this work was met with encouragement, Zorio significantly refigured his practice away from illusionistic modeling toward a more aleatory material exploration after seeing a gallery exhibition

³⁴ For more on grafting as a negotiation of art/nature see: William Newman, "Alchemical and Baconian Views on the Art/Nature Division," in *Reading the Book of Nature: The other side of the scientific revolution*, ed. Debus and Walton (Kirksville, MO: Thomas Jefferson University Press, 1998), 89. Newman cites: Robert Boyle, *The Works of the Honourable Robert Boyle*, vol. 3, ed. Thomas Birch (London, 1772), 442-3.

³⁵ Zorio, "Interview by Bandini," in *Zero to Infinity*, 324.

of Pistoletto's that same year. He has spoken of recognizing a kinship in the project of the elder artist, who was also from Biella but a decade older. The instability of the real world reflected in Pistoletto's stainless steel "mirror paintings" prompted Zorio to abandon "the seductions of material and tactility" and begin working with expanding polystyrene instead of clay.³⁶ While still a student, he also learned from Gilardi, who was close to Pistoletto and Sperone in the early and mid-60s. Zorio helped Gilardi during the day and used the studio at night to work on his own projects. After finishing a body of this polystyrene work at the *Accademia* in 1965, he "spent a few months doing nothing. Then I decided to...go looking for perceptions; I had to do something."³⁷ This search resulted in a body of work that emphasized the inherent tensions in everyday interactions of materials and bodies, such as those that occur when encountering an "open work" of environmental or installation art. It was then that Zorio found compatibility of function and form, by relying on the perceptive values of a material for the principle he wanted to demonstrate, rather than on a purely aesthetic value.³⁸

In a 1972 interview with Bandini, Zorio discussed the use of novel substances in his work, saying:

Today one writes (and I won't cite the authors) about *Arte povera* as using ugly materials, rough materials, and it is totally wrong. Such a use of materials is in fact a new kind of materialism. The materials are what they are and

³⁶ The artist, quoted in Ada Masoero, "Zorio: Roots," 171.

³⁷ Zorio, "Interview by Bandini," in *Zero to Infinity*, 324.

³⁸ Zorio, "Interview by Bandini," in *Zero to Infinity*, 326.

are used for their own properties. For example, I use asbestos cement, (eternit), because it is a material that stands up to heat, a dense material *par excellence*, and I put it in juxtaposition with cobalt chloride, a hypersensitive material *par excellence*.³⁹

This combination of opposing properties for the purposes of experimentation and demonstration is radically different from a celebration of materials or a "new materialism."

The critical framework in which early works like *Pink-Blue-Pink* and *Column* were presented was formative for the reception of Zorio's practice in general, and provides a basis for reading the alchemical as an organizing principle and a theoretical analogue for social change (fig. 53, fig. 5). Writing in the small exhibition catalogue to the show, Trini singled out the cobalt chloride works as key to arriving at an understanding of natural processes precisely because they respond to the atmospheric conditions of the gallery. He also argued that these circumstances could be seen to relate to conditions beyond the aesthetic sphere:

[Zorio's works] go a bit beyond the spatial environment and its laws. Meaning, to think about the roots of universal laws. To see mass as energy, after Einstein, leads one to discover the unity in variety, the necessity of contingency: all which is present in the work of Zorio. He made, for example, a work of "changeable color": color, that changes here with the change in atmospheric humidity,

³⁹ "Oggi si scrive (e non cito gli autori) sull'Arte Povera in quanto uso di materiali bruti, rozzi, e si sbagliato tutto. Di quest'uso dei materiali si è fatto un nuovo materialismo. I materiali sono quelli che sono e sono stati usato nella giusta dimensione. Per esempio, io uso l'eternit perché è un materiale che regge al calore, ottuso per eccellena, e lo metto in contrapposizione al cloruro di cobalto, materiale ipersensibile per eccellenza." Gilberto Zorio, "Interview by Mirella Bandini," [1972] in *1972: Arte Povera a Torino*, ed. Mirella Bandini (Turin: Allemandi, 2002), 101. (Translation mine.)

can also come to be subject to laws other than aesthetic ones.⁴⁰

In other words, Trini identified these works as extending beyond a physical encounter of phenomenological space to perceiving the "root of universal laws" of energy and molecular transformation. These objects, which Trini also called "aconceptual and sub-physical," introduce an alchemical approach to the material world because his use of heat to produce a chemical reaction can be read as revealing a tangible, indexical sign of larger or more fundamental systems at work.

Therefore this project is tied to alchemy by what the critic called "a dynamic vision of the structuring of the world."⁴¹ Upon closer analysis, however, there is also alchemical specificity in these object-demonstrations, both in terms of Zorio's means and in the kinds of physical evidence his works produced. For example, transmutation requires the introduction of heat to produce the chemical reaction, and there were three varieties of heat known to alchemists, one of which was known as

⁴⁰ *"É andare un pó oltre l'ambiente e le sue legge. Significa agire e pensare sulla base di leggi universali. Vedere la massa come energia, dopo Einstein, conduce a scopire l'unità nella varietà, la necessità nella contingenza: tutto ciò è presente nell'opera di Zorio. Ha fatto, per esempio, un lavoro <<colorato variabile>>: anche il colore, che qui muta col mutare dell'umidità atmosferica, viene così affidato a leggi diverse da quelle estetiche."* Tommaso Trini, *Zorio* (exhibition brochure) (Turin: Galleria Gian Enzo Sperone, 1967) (unpaginated), 7. Translation is mine. N.B. There is a partial translation by Gilda Williams of this text in Christov-Bakargiev, *Arte Povera*, 276.

⁴¹ Trini, *Zorio*, (unpaginated) 6.

"humid fire."⁴² As in a *bain-marie*, this indirect heat was produced by boiling water, rather than introducing direct heat or flame to a material. Thus, the atmospheric moisture created by bodies in the gallery directly references this alchemical technique. Further, in alchemy prime matter was black, as in the absence of color or properties, and an alchemist would aim to transform this raw material into white, yellow, and purple states.⁴³ The change of color provided proof and a visible sign of transmutation. In this respect, color transformation in Zorio's work can also be understood alchemically. As Trini noted, factors such as color become signifiers of meanings other than aesthetic ones.

We can perhaps thus read these cobalt-chloride works as analogous to the parable form through which alchemy was first communicated. In this case the formal components of a work of art refer to something outside of aesthetic concerns, yet which is intimated in the essential properties of the medium. Gilardi, in his important critical assessment of international tendencies, identified this integration as the difference between Zorio and Merz (who he referred to as "Microemotive" artists) and Process-oriented contemporaries in the United States. For him, the Italian artists went beyond simple investigations of materials to present substances and energies as simultaneously known and

⁴² Caron and Hutin, 66.

⁴³ Levere, 5.

mysterious.⁴⁴ Zorio, in particular, capitalized on viewers' abilities to "read" color, drawing them into an aesthetic dialogue, and then refocusing their attention. That is, while pondering an aesthetic value, the viewers are invited to consider their own bodies' release of heat into the atmosphere. By extrapolating from the physical object, these color changes exemplify the contingency of matter itself. What appears solid and immutable, changes. What seems like an aesthetic, subjective choice occurs without direct artistic control.

Tent, also in the 1967 exhibition, further denotes the specifically alchemical nature of Zorio's processes and materials (fig. 54). Here he constructed a simple shelter of iron tubes (*dalmine*) and cloth; formally it is a basic geometric volume constructed of readily available industrial materials. On the "roof" of this tent Zorio poured salt water, which was partially absorbed and partially held in tension by the weave of the fabric.⁴⁵ In time, some water dripped slowly through the saturated material, but most evaporated. Aside from the visible gravitational drip, the invisible processes of cellular saturation, osmosis, and evaporation left behind an altered substance and a visible trace of the material interaction: salt crystals on the surface of the fabric. What was once held in

⁴⁴ See Piero Gilardi, "Primary Energy and the 'Microemotive' Artists," *Arts* (September-October 1968): 48-51.

⁴⁵ Zorio's recent exhibition catalogue lists seawater as the material, but since I have found no other evidence of seawater specifically as the material, I am considering it to be a poor (too literal) translation of the Italian term. See Wolbert, *Zorio*, 180.

suspension was now separated into a visible residue, what was liquid became solid. That Zorio used salt, one of the material building blocks essential to alchemy, strengthened the bond between his own experiments and this "science" of nature.

Dewey provides a way of thinking about the relationship between the artist and scientist that brings the two close together much as alchemy might. In *Art as Experience*, he writes that artists and scientists provide two models for working with the tensions and harmonies of nature, the former cultivating resistances and tensions for their "potentialities," and the latter studying moments of tension as a springboard for further research.⁴⁶ Historically, alchemy stands a link between art and science, tracing back to the experimentalism of Francis Bacon. A sixteenth century "hinge" figure between medieval alchemy and the modern scientific method (the inductive method of scientific experiment), Bacon added rigor to the tradition of alchemical experimentation and created the grounds for what we now regard as "rational" instead of "magical."⁴⁷ In terms of Zorio's work, art and science come together, paraphrasing Gilardi, to simultaneously present the known and the unknown: factors that appear magical, or subject to forces beyond one's purview, are revealed to be part of an ordered and comprehensible system.

The perceptible transaction of liquid saline water to crystallized salt produces an expenditure of energy significant

⁴⁶ Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 15.

⁴⁷ He is also responsible for the notion of "knowledge is power." For more on Bacon, see Levere, 18-21.

for understanding the appeal of alchemy for Italian artists of Zorio's generation. The artist's combination of materials induce a reaction, producing for the viewer a visible proof of the latent energy and vitality in physical matter. As water forces itself into the fabric and the fabric holds the water in its fibers, Zorio's *Tent* choreographs a material exchange. Trini described these reaction-causing works as indicative of the way the artist "seems to 'feel' mass as constant energy." He wrote:

The action with which Zorio takes possession of things of the world is also that which transforms their physical state into another. His energy remains visibly conserved in the work—a spectacle of potential energy.⁴⁸

Works like *Tent* can be understood as demonstrations of both artistic and social energies. The viewer, who witnesses the material metamorphosis, has the potential to see the possibilities for other foundational changes.

Celant's contemporaneous "Notes" drew correlations between Zorio's early tactics of visualizing transformation and a model of social engagement by arguing that such material contingencies can become revolutionary once understood by the viewer.⁴⁹ He

⁴⁸ *"Zorio sembra <<sentire>> in termini di massa come energia continua. [...] L'azione con cui Zorio s'impossessa delle cose del mondo è anche quella che trasforma il loro stato fisico in un altro. La sua energia resta visibilmente conservata nel lavoro—uno spettacolo di energia potenziale."* (Translation mine.) Trini, *Zorio*, unpaginated (7).

⁴⁹ Since he directly refers to works, such as *Tent*, included in the 1967 exhibition at Sperone, which was only Zorio's second exhibition and the first to show non-traditional works like these, we can assume that Celant is considering the works exhibited there when he talks about Zorio in "Notes."

maintained that Zorio's objects were unnerving in the way they show our reliance on natural laws:

An unpredictable co-existence between power and existential precariousness spoils our tranquility and calls our claims into question, to remind us that every 'thing' is precarious, it is sufficient to force the breaking point to make it explode. Why not try it with the world?⁵⁰

In Celant's estimation, if viewers could ponder the changeable, contingent forces of nature through chemical transmutation, then perhaps they could see that the social world itself needs only a little push to break and transform. Though subtle, this is one of the most perceptive aspects of Celant's text. In Zorio's own words, the connections are indeed parallel, but separate. In 1972, Bandini specifically asked the artist to reflect on the connection between art and politics in 1968, when the social structures in Turin were breaking up. He replied, "The relationship between our work and the things that happened was a relationship of ideas, not actions."⁵¹ Zorio's sculptures did not directly intervene in the political realm, but they offered altered perspectives of the mutability of the world. Alchemy, in Zorio's work, can be seen to weave together two distinct threads: it was a historical model of the local phenomenological philosophy that foregrounded first-hand experience, and it offered temporal distance through which political sentiment could be communicated as universal material concepts.

⁵⁰ Celant, "Notes," 37.

⁵¹ Zorio, in *1972: Arte Povera a Torino*, ed. Bandini, 102.

If alchemy functions as a metaphor for social change in these early works, it was reemphasized in the works Zorio executed in the subsequent few years, strengthening as the political climate intensified. In the spring of 1968, student protests at Milan's fourteenth triennial exhibition of architecture and design (*La Triennale di Milano*), to which the artist had been invited, resulted in the cancellation of the show, and similar demonstrations in the summer disrupted the Venice Biennale as well (though only temporarily).⁵² That fall, Zorio participated in *Arte povera + Azione povere* at Amalfi, where he displayed older works like *Pink-Blue-Pink* alongside a few new pieces that encouraged participation or witness to the transmutation of material states. One of these, *Fluorescent Sponge* (*Spunga Fluorescente*, 1968), consisted of a non-reactive asbestos bowl that held a fluorescent liquid and a sponge. Zorio installed a black light above the work so that the liquid absorbed by the sponge (invisible under normal lighting conditions) would glow. Like *Pink-Blue-Pink*, this visible sign of transformation, the light-reactive liquid absorbed by the sponge, was catalyzed by the conditions of its exhibition.

The most important new work he installed at Amalfi was *The Fire Came Through* (*Il fuoco é passato*, 1968), which introduced

⁵² Milanese *Art povera* artist Luciano Fabro and the important critic and feminist author Carla Lonzi authored a response to the demonstrations at these exhibitions. See Fabro and Lonzi, "Documento sull'occupazione della XV Triennale di Milano." (1968) Reprinted in *Luciano Fabro. Biografia. Ediografia*, ed. Jole de Sanna (Pasian de Prato: Campanotto, 1996), 48. Also note that Lonzi served as a curator for Pistoï's Galleria Notizie in the late 1960s.

fire in his oeuvre, an element that he would continue to use throughout the 1970s (fig. 55). Here a circular metal cage supported an asbestos slab, and a filament threaded around the cage so that both ends touched the panel. In keeping with the "actions" element of the festival, Zorio ignited the filament and let it burn out. The documentary image of this ephemeral work shows the burnt residue left on the metal cage and on the inflammable asbestos. The consuming flame had altered the chemical state of the filament (expanding it) as well as the metal (blackening it), but the fireproof asbestos was unchanged. When fire and flames are used in Zorio's work, the result is nearly always the complete transformation of a material: something is burned, creating a perceptible physical alteration.⁵³

In *The Fire Came Through*, the filament's carbonized vestige became a sign for a past event, something that the viewer only accessed through the material remnants. Such traces were significant clues to a vital process or an alchemical formula that the viewer was left to go back over and interpret. The title of the work "*Il fuoco é passato*" might be read either, hopefully, as the metaphorical ascension of the next generation

⁵³ This is significantly different from *Arte povera* artist Jannis Kounellis's works with flames during this period, which, like *Margherita Fuoco (Fire Daisy)* tend to be lit torches in the gallery, consuming only their own gaseous material. That is, where Zorio's Rome-based colleague most often used fire to theatrically, to engage the viewer's senses by throwing heat in the gallery, his own applications always transform material, much like an alchemist would apply heat in various stages to aid the chemical transmutation. See Eduardo Cicelyn and Mario Codognato, *Jannis Kounellis* (exhibition catalogue), trans. Marguerite Shore (Naples: Museo D'Arte Contemporanea Donna Regina and Milan: Electa, 2006), 52-5 and 92-5.

to carry an artistic or political torch, or, melancholically, as "the fire is passed," casting doubt on the possibilities for rekindling a revolutionary flame.

The next year, Zorio again used fire in *Burnt Writing* (*Scrittura bruciata*, 1968-69) to investigate the dynamic between presence and communication. Here he similarly built a wire cage, this time around an electrically heated copper plate that lay on the ground. To this structure, the artist attached a copper ledge that he used as a desk to write messages on paper with "invisible" ink (fig. 56). He then tossed each page onto the hot copper plate where the encounter of ink and heat made the words momentarily visible, only to disappear again as the paper was immolated. This work used a material change through the introduction of fire to explore the relationship between the known and unknown, the visible and the invisible, and between presence and absence. The artist's messages written remained invisible until subjected to a heat that ultimately destroyed them. In making the idea visible—or in communicating an idea—it was destroyed, leaving only a charred residue for later potential viewers. This paradox between what is perceivable and comprehensible points to the common thread in Zorio's work of the instability of ideas, language, and material states. It also argues, much like the works of Anselmo and Penone, for the importance of primary experience and presence to the communication of the work, since viewers not present at the performance would not have the opportunity to read the texts.

Zorio's early career and his focus on volatility differed significantly from the material interests of the Anti-Form or Process artists in the United States.⁵⁴ Comparing one of his works from this period, *Lead Weights* (Piombi) (1968-69), a pair of vessels connected by a copper arch, with a contemporary project by Richard Serra, *Splashing Lead* (1968-69), the residue of an action in which the artist hurled molten metal at the join of the gallery wall and floor, reveals how different uses of materials separated the Italian context from the American one (figs. 57 & 58).⁵⁵ Both works were shown in the landmark exhibition *Nine at Leo Castelli*, organized by Robert Morris only a few months after Amalfi (December 1968-January 1969) at the Castelli Warehouse in New York City. Reviewing the show for *Artforum*, critic Max Kozloff rightly noted that the works in the exhibition "especially the artificial, man-made objects, return

⁵⁴ It is critical to keep American artists in the margins of these discussions because they were in fact part of the context of Turin, showing at Sperone, which was the center of Zorio's connection to his generation. He talks about the centrality of Sperone and the importance of the Americans showing there in the 1972 interview with Bandini. See Bandini, *1972: Arte Povera a Torino*, 102-3.

⁵⁵ In an interesting analysis, Richard Williams considers how Serra's work changed in reception and therefore meaning from the first appearance in New York to a second performance in Europe. At the Castelli Warehouse, it appeared to fit with the industrial aesthetic and called attention only to its ephemeral qualities, but in its second iteration in *Op Losse Schroeven* at Bern, it appeared to be a violent intrusion on the elegantly tiled floor of the museum. See Richard Williams, *After modern sculpture: Art in the United States and Europe 1965-1970* (New York and Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), 153-4.

to nature, obey physics."⁵⁶ Indeed, Serra and Zorio share a focus on the malleability and volatility of even the heaviest, most seemingly solid materials. However, Kozloff also argued that conceptual flatness was the main problem with this new work, in which "even an intensified exploration of the properties of one material does not permit a great or meaningful variety of statements within it."⁵⁷

In order not to undermine his own formulation, and to suggest that "strength of personality" was all that could save these artists from creating material one-liners, he completely ignores both Anselmo and Zorio, the only two *Arte povera* artists in the exhibition.⁵⁸ Why omit only these two artists in his review? The material allusions present in a work like *Lead Weights* would have contradicted his argument that there was nothing meaningful beyond the material statement. A more inclusive read would have underscored the differences as opposed to the similarities between the Italians' projects and those of the Americans.

Zorio's *Lead Weights* set up an (al)chemical demonstration of material interactions over time. The work consists of two

⁵⁶ Max Kozloff, "9 in a Warehouse: An 'attack on the status of the object.'" *Artforum* 7, no. 6 (February, 1969): 39.

⁵⁷ Kozloff, 42.

⁵⁸ The slightest inference toward Anselmo's work might be recognized in the mention of "cotton batting" among a long list of materials seen in the show. The work exhibited was *Untitled (Drinking Structure)* discussed here in chapter two. Otherwise, Kozloff mentions neither of the Italians by name or in description. All of the other seven artists are named, discussed and illustrated in the text. See Kozloff, 38-42.

lead sheets formed into shallow containers and set side-by-side. Connected by an arc of copper, one vessel contains hydrochloric acid, the other, copper sulfate. Within the dense lead containers, these liquids are stable, but they interact with the copper, slowly forming crystals that climb up the arc, suggesting that they might meet at a point far in the future.⁵⁹ Were these two substances to meet, a chemical reaction would take place that would change their color from pale blue to green, which, in the context of Zorio's work, is a further marriage of an aesthetic principle and a chemical law, in art as in alchemy.⁶⁰ This object is only partially complete, however, since its full maturation—the color reaction—only becomes visible over a long period of time. In this work, the alchemical metaphor provides the viewer a framework through which the invisible and temporal becomes intelligible and present.

If Zorio's work provided a possibility to perceive otherwise undetectable chemical reactions, as a metaphor for the intellectual (and perhaps even spiritual) enlightenment of alchemy, then Serra's work, by contrast, remained rooted in the phenomenology of space. In a photographed performance in late December 1968, the Serra ladled molten lead at the intersection

⁵⁹ Christov-Bakargiev, *Arte Povera*, 61.

⁶⁰ Colin Baker describes this reaction, adding that if one adds ammonia to the green liquid produced by this mixing, the liquid would give off heat and smoke, and turn a deep aquamarine blue. Idem, "A Spectacular Reversible Reaction," *Education in Chemistry* (Essex, UK: Royal Society for Chemistry, May 2006), on-line edition. www.rsc.org/Education/EiC/issues/2006May/ExhibitionChemistry.asp (Accessed 14 December 2007.)

where the vertical plane of the wall and the horizontal plane of the floor of Castelli's warehouse met. (fig. 67) Once cooled, the lead hardened in this crevice became a record of the action for as long as it was installed. One of the pieces traditionally used to argue for Serra's site-specific concerns, the work was so integrated to the concept of place that it could not be removed from the site without conceptually and perhaps even physically destroying it.⁶¹ In Zorio's words, the difference between himself and artists like Serra was that "the European dimension is always mediated; with a relationship between the object and life, the object and action..."⁶² Conversely, Serra has said that *Splashing Lead* was not about chance or gesture, or the relationship of the material to the everyday, but about a repetitive action used to make a sculpture.⁶³

Serra's specific use of lead might be understood in purely practical terms since it is a relatively soft metal that is easily brought to a melting point. It carries connotations of heavy industry and the steel-mill background so often raised in biographical narratives of the artist. Similarly, Zorio may have

⁶¹ Kozloff's main argument relied on this notion of the object being destroyed upon removal. Serra's work was seen as opening a new relationship between the physical environment and the object that countered traditional understandings of the role of sculpture. So central to his thesis, the work was reproduced on the cover of the magazine.

⁶² Bandini, *1972: Arte Povera a Torino*, 100.

⁶³ Kynaston McShine, "A Conversation about Work with Richard Serra," in *Richard Serra Sculpture: 40 Years*, ed. Kynaston McShine and Lynne Cook. (exhibition catalogue) (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2007), 24-5.

used lead because of its relative malleability and non-reactive nature—we have already heard him say that he chose materials as a means to an end—and it can also be linked to the rise of heavy industry in Turin's post-war years. It is in what the materials are capable of doing that the two artist's works significantly diverge. Serra recently responded to questions about his works of this period saying: "for me the choice of material is subjective and accounts for one's sensibility and intuition."⁶⁴ Less cavalier, Zorio carefully selects materials to create a specific reaction and a visible physical transformation according to physical laws, not intuition.⁶⁵ Here, the crystallization of copper sulfate liquid traces only one part of the transformation, which continues after artist has removed his hand and the viewer encounters it. When eventually completed, this interaction creates a wholly different chemical compound, signaled by a new color. The possibility for radical transformation of the material—indeed, the actual transmutation from one substance to another—underscores the differences between Zorio and Serra, and refutes Kozloff's argument that the material would exhaust itself once its own properties were known. Instead, *Lead Weights* contains the possibility for multiple interpretations of the

⁶⁴ Phong Bui, "Phong Bui in Conversation with Richard Serra," *The Brooklyn Rail* (June 2006): 2. In this candid interview Serra also makes the bold suggestion that his 1966 show in Rome that included live animals had a profound impact on the development of *Arte povera*.

⁶⁵ It is true that Serra's work changes state, from liquid to solid, but it nevertheless remains lead. By design, it succinctly describes the space of the corner and is a trace of the completed action of the artist.

individual materials, their interaction, and the forces at work. Only the traces of these reactions are viewable under normal conditions, but we know that the chemical process will continue even if we don't witness a dramatic moment, hence Zorio's object addresses the correlation between what we experience and what we know, linking mind and body through this demonstration of material mutability.

In 1969, Zorio began exploring what he termed "radical fluidity" as a means to reveal the interconnectedness of materials—this same sense of shared chemical or molecular roots that had inspired alchemists for centuries—and as a way to describe the divergence between what is known versus what is experienced.⁶⁶ *To purify words* (Per purificare le parole) (1968-69), inaugurated a number of different works addressing these ideas (figs. 59 & 60). The first version of this work was a long, soft canvas tube filled with isopropyl alcohol that lay on the floor in a circle. The tube's two ends were lifted off of the ground by a steel stand and held in place at the approximate

⁶⁶ The term "radical fluidity" is borrowed from the title of one of Zorio's works that will be discussed later. Zorio's use of the term may be related to the early 20th century philosophy of Henri Bergson, whose concepts of duration, fluidity, and dynamism, or "universal flux," were important to the Italian Futurists and later to the Fluxus artists. Notably, his early phenomenological philosophy was considered an anti-intellectual stance because it centered on intuition and experience. See Caroline Tisdall and Angelo Bozzolla, *Futurism* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2000), 21-22, 29. Bergson's philosophy was, in part, based on the Greek philosopher Heraclitus's term "radical fluidity." See Ivy G. Campbell, [review of] "Edouard Le Roy, *The New Philosophy of Henri Bergson*," *The American Journal of Psychology* 24, no. 3 (July 1913): 445-55.

height of an adult's face. One end of the tube was fitted with a mouthpiece, the other left open for listening. Visitors to the exhibition were invited to speak into the mouthpiece and to listen to the garbled sounds that emerged from the other end as the sound waves of the spoken words passed through the liquid alcohol. The words "passing through" the liquid were literally purified—in the sense that one might clean a wound with alcohol—and they were purified metaphorically, since the apparatus reverted the words from an organized system of linguistic sounds into perceivable, but incomprehensible "pure" sound. What is returned to the viewer/participant via the body's sensory organs bears little resemblance to the structure of the thought that it emitted only seconds before.

The artist explained that the viewer's mental and physical participation in this work was central to its operation:

The *Purifications of Words* are works in expectation; they wait for the user to use them by speaking into them, the words running/traveling through the interior, which contains alcohol, and reemerging distorted but purified. ...one speaks at length and the vapors also enter by "osmosis" into the "speaker"; mind and body are tied to the "sculpture."⁶⁷

Engagement with the work pulls the viewer into an experience of sound, speech, and sight that reverses the trend toward order that the mind imposes on sensory perceptions. The encounter with this "purification" or return to pure sound reconfigures the barrier between mind and body as fluid rather than rigid.

⁶⁷ Zorio, interview by e-mail, 17 November 2008.

Zorio has recreated *To Purify Words* many times in the past four decades, evidencing the centrality of the themes of fluidity and a mind/body interrelation to his project. In other iterations, the vessel holding the alcohol was made of terracotta, leather, or glass (fig. 61). In some versions, other elements have been added to the equation: hydrochloric acid or copper sulfate, for example. The constant in each iteration is the liquid alcohol, which carries its own materially specific associations to alchemy. A distilled and purified form of organic solids, alcohol transforms other materials it comes in contact with, from simply saturating, to burning, or purifying. When ingested, alcohol also has the power to transform the mind through inebriation. In Zorio's alchemical idiom, this highly refined, pure substance can be understood as unique in its ability to modify both physical form and the (invisible) state of the mind. Through the transformative properties of alcohol as a material, the series *To Purify Words* allowed the artist to explore instabilities between intellectual and physical knowledge.

In 1969, Zorio conducted another experiment with language that attempted to break it down into the building blocks of sound (fig. 62). He installed a number of microphones that could be spoken into Sperone's Turin exhibition space. The sound was muffled and distorted, mixing with sounds coming from the other microphones until it was totally unintelligible.⁶⁸ Rarely

⁶⁸ This work was recreated for an exhibition at the Dia Foundation, New York City in 2001, where Zorio collaborated with

mentioned in the literature because it was dismantled and only apprehensible through photographic documentation, this work, titled *Microphones*, remains central to the discussion of language and mutability in Zorio's project. For his self-selected contribution to Celant's 1969 book, *Arte Povera*, Zorio evoked this piece:

I like to talk of fluid, elastic things, things without lateral and formal boundaries. [...] A word that is absorbed by a microphone and repeated many times by a loudspeaker, loses its literal meaning and becomes an incomprehensible sound, that is nevertheless mentally and physically perceptible.⁶⁹

In this work, too, the artist plays with the fluidity with which something can shift from comprehensible to incomprehensible. The distortion enacted by the microphones emphasized the gap that must be bridged between what is merely audible and what is comprehensible.⁷⁰ In phenomenological terms, it probed the connection between the sensation absorbed by the body and the experience knit together by the mind.

Jorge Pardo, who made a series of curtains that further altered the perception of the space and sound. See the aforementioned portion of my interview with the artist published in *Matrix* for his thoughts on this later installation and its coincidence with the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001.

⁶⁹ Gilberto Zorio, "[artist's statement]," in *Art Povera*, ed. Gemao Celant (New York: Praeger, 1969), 185.

⁷⁰ A contemporaneous work, *Voltaic Arc* (Arco Voltaico) literally channeled an electric current through copper tubing, also demonstrated this fluidity in a material form. The work was used as the invitation card for Zorio's 1969 exhibition at Sperone Gallery in which both works appeared. Exhibition card illustrated in Minola, *Sperone*, 130. Work illustrated in Celant, *Art Povera* (1969), 188.

Among the Turin School artists, Zorio is the only one who often uses sound as a medium. A unit of sensory perception, a sound is usually ephemeral. That is, in the absence of documentation, its ability to transmit information to the brain requires the physical presence of the body simultaneous with the active production of the sound. The temporal aspect of sound might be a considered commentary on the role of speech in a political context. When many voices are trying to speak, the result is a jumble that is as incomprehensible as the "noise" coming from *Microphones*. On the other hand, we might also consider that the strictures of language and the ideologies to which it is often tied only allow for certain thoughts to be spoken, hence the "purification" returns these words to pure sound. In *The Open Work*, Eco wrote that noise, or entropy, was a constant threat to the communication of a message, but that some disorder actually increases the level of information conveyed by a message because there are more possibilities available to the listener.⁷¹ Therefore, in *Microphones* and *To Purify Words*, the distortion of conventional language is exactly what allows the listener/viewer to engage with an open, poetic message.

Zorio deepened his examination of the invisible flow of information between mind and body through language in a series of

⁷¹ Umberto Eco, *The Open Work*, trans. Anna Cancogni (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), 53. Originally published as *Opera Aperta* (Milan: Fabbri, 1962). Hereafter, page citations are to the English edition.

works called *Radical Fluidity*, (*Fluidità radicale*) (1969).⁷²

Here, material investigations merged with his conceptual and phenomenological interests, bringing the two sides of alchemy to bear. In the first version of this work, he fashioned an iron rod with a circular crook on one end (fig. 63). Incised into the side of this rod was the word "FLUIDITÀ". On the outside edge of the crook, the word "RADICALE" was welded in raised letters. The artist showed the "use" of this enigmatic object in a series of photographically-documented actions: holding the rod by the crook, or handle, he began waving it around like a foil, jousting and jabbing in the direction of the camera.⁷³ Though bold, the action bore no violence except to the artist himself, who was left with the word "RADICALE" impressed on his hand. Recalling our previous analysis of Merleau-Ponty's chiasm one can see how this work also explores the reversible or two-way flow of signals between hand (or body) and mind. A comparison might be made with Bruce Nauman's contemporary sculpture *From Hand to Mouth* (1967),

⁷² This work was originally conceived as a contribution to a performance at Sperone by Pistoletto's Zoo, titled *Lo Zoo scopre l'uomo nero*, in which the elder artist invited others to take part and submit works to "his" show. The show followed the egalitarian nature of the Zoo and of earlier exhibition models like Amalfi, where artists expanded their practices to include actions. It is additional evidence of what Trini and others identify as the influence of Pistoletto on the later Turin School artists. See Minola, *Sperone*, 36.

⁷³ Curator Constance Lewallen wrote that the origin of this object was related to a trip Zorio took to Japan in 1969, where "he was inspired by Japanese archers who, through intense interior training, can hit a target from hundreds of years away." As such, this form is related to the javelins that Zorio also began to use after this trip to Japan. See Constance Lewallen, *Gilberto Zorio, Matrix/Berkeley* 152 (exhibition brochure) (Berkeley, CA: University Museum/Pacific Film Archive, 1992).

which also explored the connection between mind and body with an ironically deadpan manifestation of a common phrase that refers to bare existence (fig. 64). The American artist, also included in Celant's 1969 book, was in Turin that year and was photographed at Sperone's gallery using Zorio's *To Purify Words* (fig 65).⁷⁴ Nauman's wax and cloth cast of his arm and neck literalized the impossibility of illustrating of the flow of information and impulses. As a discrete object, his sculpture does not involve the viewer in the same way that Zorio's performance does.⁷⁵ On the contrary, the latter underscores the temporal aspect of the movement: from thought, an action is sparked, and from action a new thought enters one's horizon.

The element of duration in Zorio's works should not be overlooked, since their process and meaning are often only fully realized over an extended period of time. In *Radical Fluidity*, the imprint of the words on Zorio's skin is a product of a temporally extended encounter, but the result is fleeting. The artist also reproduced this phrase in a photograph made by "writing" with a lit cigarette during a long exposure (fig. 66). This iteration of the work provides another view to the notion of the connections and interruptions between mind and body, or, between the comprehensible and sensible. The sinuous line that

⁷⁴ Nauman was also included with Zorio in *Nine at Leo Castelli* (January 1969), and he had a solo show at Sperone in February 1970. See Minola, *Sperone*, 158-59.

⁷⁵ See Bruce Nauman, *Please Pay Attention Please: Bruce Nauman's Words*, ed. Janet Kraynak (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003), 163-164.

is captured as the small light is drawn across the camera's aperture is an ephemeral sensory perception that could not be experienced unless captured by the film: what would be just a blur to the naked eye becomes language with the aid of a mechanical eye.⁷⁶ By contrast with the stability of language that makes a notion intelligible, Zorio's action is fluid and unstable, a random movement of the artist's hand that only coheres in the arrested time of the photographic document.⁷⁷

These slow movements at the foundation of radical transformation resonated with the growing urgency of the revolutionary movements in Northern Italy. When *Radical Fluidity* was exhibited that October, Turin was in the midst of the most extensive series of workers' strikes in the post-war period. This was the so-called "Hot Autumn."⁷⁸ The escalating tension and violence that began that fall and lasted throughout the 1970s define the decade that became known, retroactively, as the "Years of Lead" (*anni di piombo*). Over the next decade, Zorio conducted

⁷⁶ It should also be noted that this action recalls Pablo Picasso's drawings with light that were recorded by the photographer Gjon Mili, though Zorio is decidedly writing not drawing. See Gjon Mili, *Gjon Mili: Photographs and Recollections* (Boston: New York Graphic Society, 1980).

⁷⁷ Zorio also translated this work to neon, a material that will be discussed in depth in the following chapter in relation to Mario Merz, since he uses it earlier and with more consistency than Zorio. In short, the paradoxical relationship between fluidity and form is one that neon itself can be seen to embody. See later discussion of Merz for more on neon as a material.

⁷⁸ A series of FIAT strikes began in July of that year and continued into the fall. Ginsborg notes that this was a very hopeful moment for those on the side of revolution because a real coalition had developed between the students and the workers. Ginsborg, 316.

numerous experiments with lead, transmutation, and material fluidity, and he also added elements that clarify the connections between the alchemical experiments and the political shifts of the era.⁷⁹

In 1972, as these *anni di piombo* continued to take shape, Zorio began to use five-pointed stars in his work. The first of these was a leather "mask" that had two small star-shaped cut outs for eyes, through which a red light shines (fig. 68).⁸⁰ This *Self-Portrait (Autoritratto)* (1972), examines the counterpoint between touch and vision, between the eyes and the skin as a sensory barriers between the self and the world. Here the star stands as a translator of those perceptions. According to the artist, it "is an image that I try to load with terrestrial

⁷⁹ Although the term did not come until later, many historians consider the "years of lead" to begin in 1969, with the bombing at the Piazza Fontana and to last until the kidnapping of Aldo Moro in 1978, or alternately, the Bologna train station bombing in 1982. Lumley argues that the term shows up in Italian dictionary in 1983, and its most likely first use comes from Margarethe Von Trotta film of 1981: *Die Bleierne Zeit*, chronicling the parallel period of civil unrest and far-left radicalism in Germany. See Paul Ginsborg, *A History of Contemporary Italy: Society and Politics 1943-1988*, (London: Penguin, 1990; reprint, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 360 and Tobias Jones, *The Dark Heart of Italy*, (New York: North Point Press, 2003), 44-48. See also Indro Montanelli and Mario Cervi, *Anni di Piombo (1965-1978)* (Milan: Rizzoli, 1991) and Robert Lumley, *States of Emergency*.

⁸⁰ In an interview with the author, the artist noted that his first experiments with the star were in 1970-71, but came into finished works in 1972 with the mask and incandescent star. Zorio, interview via email exchange with the author, 31 October-17 November 2008. (Not previously published.)

energy, animal energy, and spiritual energy."⁸¹ In this light, the symbol is a portal that exists between the material and the transcendent, between body and mind, much as alchemy negotiates the threshold between the visible and invisible.

Zorio's stars can also be directly read as alchemical symbols, as has recently been argued by Wolbert, who identifies them as pentagrams or pentacles: age-old magical symbols. He directly quotes a number of pentagram-related passages from Goethe's *Faust*, an argument for the way he believes Zorio to "enrich [his art] with the traditions of culture and to equip it with secretive imputations." Again here, alchemy is equated with a magical or unscientific pursuit. Wolbert further attempts to connect this symbolism with the socio-political world, noting that at the time, the star symbolized both Soviet and US armed forces, making it a complicated post-war symbol.⁸² While it is true that the star is emblematic of both sides of the Cold War struggle—and certainly the Vietnam conflict continued to be of international importance throughout the 1970s—Wolbert misses a symbolism much closer to Zorio's local environment: the *Brigate Rosse* (Red Brigades, or BR).

⁸¹ Zorio, interview via email exchange with the author, 31 October–17 November 2008. (Not previously published.)

⁸² Wolbert writes: "The association of political meanings that derives from the fact that the pentagram was both the 'Soviet' star and is also used as the symbol of US armed forces could perfectly well be included in Gilberto Zorio's thematic calculations, with a sophisticated multiply significant hindsight." Wolbert, "Sign of the Pentagram," 166.

At the same time Zorio began using the five-pointed star in 1972, it had become the omnipresent and notorious symbol of Italy's leaden years.⁸³ A symbol with an already-complex iconicity, the pentagram was appropriated by the BR for its own logo. Just months before Zorio's exhibited works, the BR star was publicized in photographs of the kidnapped Sit-Siemens executive Idalgo Macchiarini that were mailed to the press with ransom notes (fig. 69).⁸⁴ While the BR was only one of a number of extreme groups on both sides of the political spectrum who continued to provoke each other over the next decade, it was perhaps the most notorious and, in that sense, the most "mainstream."⁸⁵

⁸³ Zorio notes that he began working with the star in 1970-71, but the work was not realized finally until 1972. He also rejects the notion that he consciously used the star in reaction to the BR, which I am not suggesting here, only noting coincidence. Zorio, interview via email exchange with the author, 31 October-17 November 2008. (Not previously published.)

⁸⁴ This was the first such action taken by the BR, according to the present day manifestation of the group. Quoting from this source: "*La prima azione BR che invece ha come obiettivo una persona avviene a Milano il 3 marzo 1972, quando l'ing. Idalgo Macchiarini, dirigente della Sit-Siemens, viene prelevato di fronte allo stabilimento, fotografato con un cartello al collo e sottoposto ad un interrogatorio di alcune ore sui processi di ristrutturazione in corso nella fabbrica.*" See <http://www.brigaterosse.org/brigaterosse/storia/storial.htm> (Accessed 19 May 2007.)

⁸⁵ The groups on the left had inverse counterparts on the far right which instigated their own violent attacks, including parts of the neo-fascist *Movimento Sociale Italiano* party (MSI) and Masonic groups like P24, which had ties to Italian secret police as well as the American CIA. Like many other historians, David Forgacs argues that this bombing at Piazza Fontana was likely done by right-wing neo-fascists, although it was initially blamed on anarchists. This was a calculated maneuver to prevent a major victory for the left. David Forgacs, *Italian Culture in the Industrial Era 1880-1980: Cultural industries, politics and the*

As a radical offshoot of the Italian Communist Party (PCI), the BR borrowed from the more conventional ideology and symbolism, and it had some popular support well into the 1970s.⁸⁶ Their signature act of violence was the kidnapping of businessmen like Macchiarini, whose captive photograph in front of the BR symbol, a five-pointed star within a circle, was quickly circulated to the media with a list of demands. While in the first two years, the BR did not kill any of their captives, in 1974 they began a program of marked assassination. I do not mean to suggest that Zorio was in any way connected to the BR, nor that he sympathized with their views and tactics. Indeed the artist notes, "the actions of the BR were, for me, the apex of great errors."⁸⁷ Rather I introduce this as a cultural anchor, to offer a synchronic and specific historical context to the complex iconicity of the five-pointed star as a symbol in Zorio's work as it emerged in 1972. He used the star, "cosmic in that it becomes a global image existing in almost every culture on earth," precisely because it could be read in so many ways, from the alchemist's pentacle to the BR's insignia.⁸⁸

public (New York/Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990), 139.

⁸⁶ David Moss, *The Politics of Left-Wing Violence in Italy, 1969-85* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989), 36-40.

⁸⁷ Zorio, interview via email exchange with the author, 31 October-17 November 2008. (Not previously published.)

⁸⁸ Zorio, interview via email exchange with the author, 31 October-17 November 2008. (Not previously published.)

This five-pointed star, with all of its layers of meaning for the "Years of Lead," became a vehicle through which Zorio could revisit and perhaps reframe many of the themes and tactics that he had initiated in the fruitful period of 1967-69. For example, the second work using the symbol was the *Incandescent Star* (Stella Incandescente) (1972): an electrified wire construction that glows red in a darkened gallery (fig. 70). It can be correlated with his interest in fluidity, language, and writing, since it is an emblem that can be easily made with a flourish of the hand. The gesture involved in scribing a star also performs the energy of the vectors delineated. His *Laser Star* (Stella Laser) (1975) had to be traversed in order to navigate its exhibition, visibly implicating the viewer in the crosshairs of this powerful symbol. Like the electric wire, the laser could burn the flesh of someone who stood in its arena too long. Similarly Zorio's 1974 *Star of Spears* (Stella di giavelotti) constitutes both a symbol of energy and a weapon (fig. 71).

The subterranean political messages that these stars might be said to impart, ultimately trace back to the works' materiality. For his *Burned Star* (Stella bruciata) (1977), a performative work that he repeated on numerous occasions, Zorio used an oxy-hydrogen flame to cut or burn a star into the gallery wall or floor (fig. 72). As in earlier works, Zorio here used fire to transform materials. However the flame and the star are destructive, invasive, and violent in these later examples. The revised tactic is in keeping with the shifts in politics in 1977,

a year that saw a new generation of students, (the so-called *Indiani Metropolitani*), rise up against the school and the institutions of the state.⁸⁹ Just as disaffected youth groups began to occupy buildings and set their own prices for goods and services, Zorio's transformative flame and the layered symbolism of the star may have constituted a form of social protest. The star, universal yet with specific applications, provided the artist with an attractive position of ambiguity with which to introduce current and relevant politics into an investigation of the phenomenology of materials and seemingly outdated alternative systems of knowledge like alchemy.

Zorio's process-oriented art demonstrated that sometimes radical change occurs to the most stable materials and structures, and that the natural order connects every material and organism with a dynamic energy. Alchemy provided a way for Zorio to address social change indirectly, suggesting that Celant's provocative question, "Why not try it with the world?" might not have been so far-fetched. For Merz, an artist 22 years Zorio's senior, references to social transformation were more explicit, but they also relied on the historical distance of a system introduced to Western Europe during the Middle Ages.

⁸⁹ Beginning in Milan in 1977 and spreading quickly to other cities, a new youth movement sprung up, giving new relevance to the splinter groups and their symbols. Ginsborg cites two distinct but intertwined strands within this movement: one that was spontaneous and irreverent, "seeking to create alternative structures rather than to challenge the powers-that-be," and another that was militarist, and that "aimed to build on the culture of violence of the previous years." See Ginsborg, 381-3. For more detailed accounts, see Devire Approdi, *Settantasette: La rivoluzione che viene* (Rome: Castelvecchi, 1997).

CHAPTER FIVE

1202-1978: MARIO MERZ'S ECHOES OF THE MIDDLE AGES

Fibonacci's numbers are in accelerated expansion, it is from them that I drew the idea that it was possible to represent with new faculties all the examples that one comes upon in the world of matter in expansion, understood as also living vital lives: living in rapid and controllable expansion.

-Mario Merz¹

In 1970, Mario Merz published an artist's book titled *Fibonacci 1202/Mario Merz 1970*, which reproduced sketchbook drawings and notes. Two years later, he issued another book, *Fibonacci 1202/Mario Merz 1972*, comprised of photographs of patrons entering a Turin restaurant in numerical accordance with the counting system introduced by the medieval Italian monk Leonardo Pisano Bogollo, who was known as (Leonardo) Fibonacci.² In both examples, the artist drew explicit connections between the contemporary moment and the remote past in the titles, which refer to the publication of the mathematician's *Liber Abaci* in 1202. The medieval tract was as foundational for European mathematics and sciences as it was for the arts; its introduction

¹ Mario Merz, "Fibonacci's Numbers and Art," [1974] in *I want to write a book right now*, ed. Beatrice Merz, trans. Paul Blanchard (Turin: Hopefulmonster, 1989), 106. Originally published in *Mario Merz*, by Carlo Huber (Basel: Kunsthalle Basel, 1975).

² Mario Merz, *Fibonacci 1202/Mario Merz 1970* (Turin: Sperone, 1970). Mario Merz, *Fibonacci 1202/Mario Merz 1972* (Turin: Sperone, 1972). When exhibited separately, the photographs are titled *A real sum is a sum of people* (1972). Note that Fibonacci was known also by the name Leonardo Pisano or di Pisa. The name Fibonacci is a contraction of his "figlio di" or "figlius" Bonacci, his father's surname. R.E. Grimm, "The Autobiography of Leonardo Pisano," *Fibonacci Quarterly* vol. 11, no. 1 (February 1973): 99-104.

of Arabic numerals proved vital to the former, and its theories led to notions of idealized proportion (especially the Golden Mean) in Renaissance art. In the pages of these artist's books from the early 1970s, Merz looked back to 1202 for inspiration, and found that the way of thinking demonstrated by the medieval counting system remained relevant for both the arts and society.

One of the central things that Merz recognized in this observation-based system was that it could contain both notions of singularity and multiplicity in the same expression. That is, since the numbers expand generatively (each is the product of adding the two preceding numbers), even the largest numbers have a direct relationship with the smallest, first number in the system. This would prove significant as a means for addressing complex phenomena and forms through the lens of a simple system. This idea was also important for his interest in contemporary labor protest movements, in which individuals working together aimed to enact sweeping change.

In the first artist's book, Merz used the numerical series to explain the construction of an igloo's dome and the drawing of a spiral, two recurring iconic forms in his oeuvre (figs. 73-75). The inscription following a series of instructional drawings reads: "*La resistenza diminuisce con la dilatazione della spirale.*"³ This phrase, "Resistance diminishes with the dilation of the spiral," can be understood as a formal description of the

³ "The resistance diminishes with the dilation of the spiral." Merz, *Fibonacci 1202/Mario Merz 1970*, unpaginated. (Translation mine.)

process of pushing the drawing implement across the paper, or, more provocatively, as a reference to the fate of the fracturing labor movements following the "Hot Autumn" of 1969: as worker activism gained followers, its focus became less directed, and the strength of purpose was diluted by competing interests. As some factions became more radical, for example, others sought compromise. The enigmatic phrase scribbled by Merz on the book's pages bridges the gap between 1202 and 1970 by suggesting that the organically derived counting system might be used in the present day for more than the construction of an elegant curve. Perhaps, as is seen in the photographs of gathering individuals in the second book, the values of solidarity and strength in numbers might also be palpably demonstrated by this natural system. More broadly, Fibonacci's system allowed Merz to access a way of thinking that regarded all phenomena, even contemporary political action, to be part of a living, biological system.

Merz's leftist politics were often more explicit than other Turin School artists. This difference might have been generational, since he, born in 1925, was almost twenty years older than Anselmo, Penone, and Zorio, and was directly involved in the resistance through the antifascist group *Giustizia e Libertà* during the German occupation. Though his father was an engineer for FIAT, (or perhaps because of it), Merz had long resisted conforming to a life as a capitalist producer, spending his younger years traveling between Italy and France doing odd-jobs and meeting other artists and thinkers. As a member of the military arm of the *Partito d'Azione* during the final years of

WWII, the artist was jailed for a number of months for handing out anti-Fascist leaflets at his school.⁴ While imprisoned at the *Carceri Nuove* in Turin, he began drawing, and he met the art critic and future Turin gallerist Luciano Pistoï (a fellow political prisoner).

After his release, the Merz began painting and soon found commercial and critical success for his canvases of abstracted organic subject matter that were painted with a heavily gestural style that drew upon the visual language of the abstract painters associated with CoBrA.⁵ Pistoï reviewed Merz's first exhibition of paintings in 1954 at La Bussola Gallery in Turin for *L'Unità*, the official newspaper of the communist party (PCI), noting that the young artist was "content neither with the abstract beauty of the painting, nor with the superficial impression of nature, but

⁴ Merz's biographers are consistently vague about the exact amount of time spent in detention during the German occupation. Marcella Beccaria notes that he joined *Giustizia e Libertà* in September 1943, and that he spent "a number of months" imprisoned for related activities. See Marcella Beccaria, "Chronology," in *Mario Merz* (exhibition catalogue), ed. Pier Giovanni Castagnoli, Ida Gianelli, and Beatrice Merz, trans. Lucian Comoy et al (Turin: Hopefulmonster, 2006), 210.

⁵ CoBrA is an acronym for Copenhagen, Brussels, and Amsterdam, and referred to a group of painters from those cities pursuing semi-abstract painting in the postwar period. Its main protagonists were Karel Appel, Christian Dotremont, and future Situationists Constant and Asger Jorn. See Nico Laan, "The Making of a Reputation: The Case of CoBrA," in *Avant-Garde and Criticism*, ed. Klaus Beekman and Jan de Vries (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007), 91-118. For a detailed account of Merz's early career see Beccaria, "Chronology," 210-25. See also Nancy Spector, "[Mario Merz] Biography," in *Mario Merz* (exhibition catalogue), ed. Germano Celant, trans. Joachim Neugroschel (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation and Milan: Electa, 1989), 282.

seeks instead to go deeper and learn more about it."⁶ It was already clear to Pistoï that Merz's interest in nature exceeded mere aestheticization, and that the artist aimed instead to depict its vitality and processes. A series of paintings from 1956 of *The Welder* (Il saldatore) presage interests in (neon) light, energy, and the instability of meaning that would soon point the artist in *Arte povera*'s object and installation-based direction (fig. 76). One might even read this early figure of the fire-wielding welder as an alchemical reference to the transformative power of individual action.

In Merz's oeuvre, however, the Fibonacci numbers best represented an imagined Middle Ages as time when knowledge was acquired and organized through first-hand experience and direct observation. Fibonacci first posited this sequence in the early thirteenth century as an organizing rubric for the phenomena he observed in nature.⁷ He explained that numbers derived from

⁶ See Luciano Pistoï, "Mario Merz at the Bussola," in *Mario Merz*, by Castagnoli et al (Turin: Hopefulmonster, 2006), 32. Translator not listed. Originally published in *L'Unità*, Torino, 10 June 1954. Antonio Gramsci founded the newspaper in 1924.

⁷ The sequence was known in the Arabic world for nearly a millennia before Fibonacci, but he is credited with bringing it to the Latin world, and in connecting it with a specifically Catholic theological world-view. As previously noted, Fibonacci is also credited with introducing Arabic numerals to Europe, a system that surpassed the Roman numeral system. This is significant, since it evidences an entrenched and accepted system being replaced by another system. Like alchemy, it is also representative of the influence of Arabic culture on European traditions. For more on Fibonacci, see Richard Dunlap, *The Golden Ratio and Fibonacci Numbers* (Singapore and Rive Edge, NJ: World Scientific, 1997), and in Italian, see Luigi A. Radicati, ed., *Fibonacci tra arte e scienze* (Pisa: Cassa di Risparmio, 2002).

adding the preceding two numbers in the sequence (1+1=2, 1+2=3, 2+3=5...) formed a system that could explain the invisible order of natural growth, expansion, and proliferation, and advance infinitely (1, 1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 13, 21, 34, 56, 89, 144, etc...). This progressive, proliferative system was believed to account for natural phenomena such as the number of petals on a flower, digits on a hand, seeds in a fruit, rings on trees, or offspring in an animal litter. For Merz, who began using the numbers in 1968, these propagating numbers emblematically connected the natural and the societal.⁸ He wrote, "the proliferation of beings [upon which the Fibonacci series is based] is the primigenial (sic) cataloguing of the consciousness of reality."⁹ That is, Merz considered these numbers to be early attempts to find logic in the chaos of human existence through observations of natural phenomena. Could the ebb and flow of a civil gathering—starting, perhaps, with a few core individuals, growing into a crowd, and dispersing at the edges—be better conceptualized through understanding natural forms like the dilating spiral of a snail's shell?

John Dewey, who was so influential for the philosophers at the University of Turin, contends that "the participation of

⁸ A precedent for Merz's interest in the Fibonacci numbers as a building rubric may be found in Swiss-born architect Le Corbusier's concept of the "Modulor," an anthropometric scale of proportions first published in 1948 and expounded upon in an address at the 1951 Milan Triennale. See Romy Golan, *Muralnomad: The Paradox of Wall Painting, Europe 1927-1957* (New Haven: Yale: 2009), 241.

⁹ Mario Merz, *I Want to Write a Book Right Now*, trans. Paul Blanchard (Turin: Hopefulmonster, 1989), 115.

[archaic] man in nature's rhythms, a partnership much more intimate than is any observation of them for purposes of knowledge, induced him to impose rhythm on changes where they did not appear."¹⁰ The Fibonacci series is such a propositional order for nature, devised so as to find rhythm in human participation in perceived phenomena. It considers all elements to be connected through the workings of the system. Dewey similarly describes a human experience as being comprised of many constituent parts that flow one into the other, even if one part seems to dominate our perception. For him, form and organization are the way in which "material is ingested and digested through interaction with that vital organization of the results of prior experience."¹¹ Moreover, Dewey directly cited mathematics as "the most generalized statements conceivable corresponding to the most universally obtaining rhythms. The one, two, three, four, of counting [...] are means of recording or imposing rhythm."¹²

The medieval counting system offered Merz a distinct historical model for the ordering of experience that Celant, in 1968, referred to as the pragmatic intent of a "man-nature" identity catalyzed by *Arte povera's* "return to the Middle Ages."¹³ As Celant saw it, the medieval in *Arte povera* was both technical,

¹⁰ John Dewey, *Art as Experience* [1934], (New York: Perigee, 1980), 148.

¹¹ Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 55-6.

¹² Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 149.

¹³ Germano Celant, *Arte Povera* (Bologna: Galleria de Foscherari, 1968), reprinted in English in *Arte povera = art povera* (Milan: Electa, 1985), 49. Page citation is to the English edition.

in its "proletarian technique," and poetic in the artists' seeking a closer identification with earlier ways of being in the world. Merz's interest in Fibonacci's numbers is literally "medieval," as a vestige of medieval thought. It is also medieval in Celant's sense, because it is a simple system that can be used to organize human experiences of both the natural and the technological aspects of the phenomenal world. Since these antipodes can be accounted for under the same system, Fibonacci's numbers in Merz's work can be understood to stand for the powerful co-reliance of presumed oppositions like the natural and the cultural, or the individual and society. A means of organizing knowledge discovered through direct observation, the Fibonacci numbers connect the experience-oriented aspects of Turin's postwar phenomenology with an anthropologically centered worldview that dates to the beginnings of humanism.

In the contemporaneous context of Turin, this "return to the Middle Ages" noted by Celant represented an artistic strategy of purposeful desublimation, relative to the highly industrialized city and its hierarchical structures.¹⁴ Such an

¹⁴ A few decades earlier, the concept of "the medieval" had been deployed by the Fascist regime as part of its nationalist project. In contrast to the pageantry and gallantry that made an overvalued past useful to Mussolini, the medieval systems exercised in Merz's works do not attempt to harness a historical moment of glory, but rather one of darkness and uncertainty. See Emilio Gentile, "The Myth of National Regeneration in Italy: from Modernist Avant-Garde to Fascism" in *Fascist Visions: Art and Ideology in France and Italy*, ed. Matthew Affron and Mark Antliff (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), 25-45. See also D. Medina Lasansky, *The Renaissance Perfected: Architecture, Spectacle, and Tourism in Fascist Italy* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2004), 19-21.

oppositional stance mediated by historical distance provided Merz with a way to propose alternative models for social organization in artworks that mirrored the aims of activism without seeming didactic. This is substantiated not by nostalgic musings on the "medieval" by the artist himself, but by analyses of the artist's project by figures like Trini. It is also supported by Eco's contemporaneous writings, which directly theorized the Middle Ages as an analogue to the socio-political realities of Italy's restless transitions to industrial capitalism.¹⁵ Merz's use of the Fibonacci numbers similarly reveals the functioning of power through the historical distance of the medieval.

While not yet using the Fibonacci numbers directly, Merz's inaugural exhibition at Sperone in January 1968 marked a crucial shift away from the expressionistic, CoBrA-inspired paintings he had been making since the 1950s, and toward the three-dimensional works that characterized *Arte povera's* putative engagement with reality instead of its representation (fig. 77).¹⁶ This show, which collected the experiments that Merz had been conducting over the past two years with neon light, showed his ability to

¹⁵ The medieval in Eco's writings, both in terms of aesthetics and politics, are examined in the latter half of this chapter.

¹⁶ We have seen that Michelangelo Pistoletto is more of a predecessor since his works of the mid sixties (1964-66) were influential to what Anselmo, Merz, Penone, and Zorio took up in the later sixties. See Tommaso Trini, "The Prodigal Maker's Trilogy: Three Exhibitions: Berne, Amsterdam, Rotterdam," *Domus* 478 (September 1969), 46.

bridge between artistic generations and across media.¹⁷ Fontana, Gallizio, Manzoni, and others had begun the assault on painting by breaking the two-dimensional picture plane in favor of environments, and Merz's exhibition marked a similar departure from painting to become decisively engaged with objects and installations. Pistoletto has argued that though they may have had similar skepticisms about painting, Merz superseded Gallizio by moving away from canvases (however spatially installed) and toward objects.¹⁸ After the Situationist painter's death in 1964, Merz incorporated some of the new ideas circulating around Sperone's scene, which moved him beyond the crises of painting.¹⁹ Though older than the other three artists discussed here, in this sense, Merz truly belongs to this artistic generation, also arriving at similar material and tactical strategies for keeping

¹⁷ In a 1983 interview with Germano Celant, Merz states that he felt at the time that he was unique in using the neon: "As for me, in 1965-66, I invented neon—that is to say, it was an invention for me." Mario Merz, "Interview with Germano Celant, Turin, 1983," in *Mario Merz*, ed. Germano Celant, trans. Joachim Neugroschel (exhibition catalogue) (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation and Milan: Electa, 1989), 51. It should be noted as context that Sperone's gallery in Milan had an exhibition of the American artist Dan Flavin's fluorescent light sculptures in February of 1967, which traveled to the Turin gallery that March. Tommaso Trini reported on this exhibition for *Domus* magazine. See reprint of his review in Anna Minola, et al, *Gian Enzo Sperone: Torino, Roma, New York*, vol. I. (Turin: Hopefulmonster, 2000), 104-5.

¹⁸ Note that some of these works were previously shown in *Con temp l'azione* (December 1967) and at the Galleria Civica d'Arte Moderna di Torino (April 1967). Some are dated 1967, since they were made in anticipation of the January 1968 exhibition.

¹⁹ See Mario Merz and Michelangelo Pistoletto, "il significato di Gallizio per la nuova generazione," in *Pinot Gallizio: Laboratorio Sperimentale d'Alba*, ed. Mirella Bandini (Turin: Galleria Civica d'Arte Moderna, 1974), 29.

works open to the contingencies of their exhibition in 1967 and 1968. Like the younger artists in Turin with whom he was associated, this exhibition staked a claim for the texture of reality and the instability of meaning in works of art.

A bolt of neon light announced Merz's new plastic interests in contingency, energy, and material change, piercing nearly every object in the show.²⁰ The lone "painting" there, entitled *In the Road* (Nella strada), marked this transition from two-dimensional representation to the phenomenological conditions of three-dimensional space. It is a white monochrome canvas with red flaps that tents off the wall and is run through by a neon tube (fig. 78). In a 1971 interview Merz recalled that:

The neon work came into being as light or a bar of light or flow of light passing through the object. [...] The neon, by traversing and piercing [the canvases], triggered a separation between the canvas and the light—that is, a concrete destruction of the canvas as the space of painting.²¹

These neon bars may have disrupted painting's illusionary space by physically penetrating the object, much like Fontana had done when he slashed his monochromatic canvases, however they did not destroy the painting as an object. Using neon for this interruption added significant complexity to Fontana's gesture because it coexisted with the painting as another object.

²⁰ For more installation views and an excerpt of catalogue text in English see Anna Minola, et al, *Gian Enzo Sperone: Torino, Roma, New York*, vol. II (Turin: Hopefulmonster, 2000), 118-19.

²¹ Mario Merz, "Interview with Germano Celant, Genoa, 1971," in *Mario Merz*, ed. Germano Celant, 104.

The use of neon was not entirely new to Italian art—Fontana himself had created a ceiling installation using neon at the Milan Triennale of Design in 1951, and a number of the artists of *Gruppo T* such as Grazia Varisco had also used it in works as early as 1962 to activate atmospheric effects of kinetic painting (figs. 79 & 80).²² Merz's use of neon in 1968 differed from these significant precedents in that he created a situation of instability through a continual penetration of the picture plane or disruption of the integrity of everyday objects. The artist has stated that the neon passing through an object is itself, "not an object—it is the power to say 'I think that in nature, the elements all crisscross one another.'"²³

Merz's early use of penetrating neon allowed him to explore the interdependence—or, to borrow Zorio's term, the "radical fluidity"—of natural materials. He reflected:

Science tells us that, in nature, the elements all pass into one another; the meaning of nature is transformation. This led to the idea of creating a sculpture that was not

²² Gruppo T was a collective of artists and designers interested in interactive art and kinetics that was founded in Milan in 1959. For more, see Lucilla Meloni, *Gli ambienti del Gruppo T: arte immersiva e interattiva* (exhibition catalogue) (Milan: Silvana, 2004).

²³ Merz, "Interview Genoa, 1971," 105. In Merz's work, the neon added a plastic element, yet it is itself paradoxically both an object and not. That is, to be visible, neon is necessarily encased in a glass tube and activated by an electrical current, but it also produces the phenomenon of light emanating from it. A natural element, its visibility is (here) made possible by its containment within a man-made tube and its link to an civic system of industrial electricity.

fixed, that was not geometric—a construction that would be a transformation rather than a construction.²⁴

The bar of light ruptured everyday objects, whether a wine bottle, an umbrella, or a FIAT car, and in so doing it opened and activated them to new meanings and connotations.²⁵ It signified the fragility of wholeness and intimated the interconnectedness of the phenomenal world. As Dewey argued, our perception of the physical world is constructed out of a flow of experiences upon which we impose order.²⁶

Writing in the small catalogue produced for the show, Celant wrote about these interrupted objects in terms that connect them to the phenomenological and hermeneutic emphasis found in Turinese philosophy:

The presentation of a series of contradictory combinations, bound by a 'non history', and perceived as a single event, helps Merz communicate how the reality perceived, using light, does not take place with a series of object 'detachments', but rather by means of undifferentiated impacts. [...] The inner structure, the consistent rule, and the system of opposition between one product and another are experienced in the successive phase of interpretation.²⁷

²⁴ Merz, "Interview Genoa, 1971," 105. This sentiment must be seen in opposition to the American Minimalist focus on material specificity and objecthood.

²⁵ Note that *Car* was shown later that same year in another exhibition with neon, but it bears noting here for evidence of material variety. Merz remarked that in these early neon works, "piercing the car, the bottle, the glass, the water, or the plant with the neon tube meant physically carrying the action of transformation from one element to another." Merz, "Interview Genoa, 1971," 105.

²⁶ cf. notes 10–12.

²⁷ Germano Celant, "Groups of sense," in *Mario Merz* (Turin: Galleria Sperone, 1968), reprinted in English in *Mario Merz*, ed. Castagnoli et al (Turin: Hopefulmonster, 2006), 42. Translator not listed individually.

Further, Celant argued that the artist's use of neon light was not just a technological marker, but also an anthropological one. "Merz," the critic wrote, "demonstrates that Man is also made of the mechanism/mark of light."²⁸

The artist's first uses of the material were thus read as a metaphor for "interior" light, that is, spiritual illumination or vitality. For example, in a review of the Sperone show, Palazzoli remarked that the neon tubes "form that reduced, introverse visibility [...] that can materialize the image of an interior energy."²⁹ She saw this light, which is a literal demonstration of energy made visible by the interaction of an electrical current and neon gas, as representative of the kind of latent or invisible energy that could be activated in all facets of nature, including in each person.

Merz's use of light as an anthropological marker in these early works can be read as preliminary link to the medieval. Scholars of the Middle Ages separate the notion of the "light of nature," or *lumen naturae*, from its contemporary conception of "natural light," *lumen naturale*. The first expresses a spiritual interconnectedness of the universe, and the second is associated with the humanist development of "reason" in the Enlightenment period.³⁰ Arguably, Merz's use of neon here and in later works in

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Daniela Palazzoli, "[review of] Mario Merz at Sperone", Turin, *B'IT* 2, no. 1 (March-April 1968): 27.

³⁰ See Aksel Haaning, "The Philosophical Nature of Early Western Alchemy: The Formative Period c. 1150-1350," in *Art & Alchemy*,

which it was used to write letters and numbers can be read as a commingling of the two terms: as much a demonstration of the natural order of the material universe as a concrete example of human capacity for organizing sensory perceptions through language. At the intersection of the two terms, the artist's sculptures suggest reciprocity: reason was built upon an understanding of the light of nature, just as the mind requires information acquired by the body's senses. This appreciation of neon's physical properties is imperative for considering the complexity of Merz's subsequent experiments with the material.

Merz used neon to penetrate everyday objects in the 1968 Sperone show for both visually practical and symbolic reasons, a dual purpose that it retained when he began to expand its use to other forms. Commonly used for commercial applications of language, such as advertising, Merz soon used neon to spell out poetic and partisan phrases, like those carried by protesting students and striking workers in Turin and Paris. Just as he had used it to disturb the illusory space of painting and the integrity of everyday objects, Merz sought disrupt the transparency of language by making it both visible and tangible, or, in his terms "concrete."³¹ He recognized that by spelling something out with neon tubes he could make the language more

ed. Jacob Wamberg (Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press, 2006), 35, n.14.

³¹ Merz, "Interview Genoa, 1971," 105.

object-like, challenging some of its symbolic function.³² At the same time, neon's material connotations—its literal volatility—made writing in it evocative of the fluidity of language and its dependence on context for meaning. Interested in poetry from an early age, the linguistic element became a vital part of his project in 1968.³³ Merz's neon texts concretized political sentiment in neon letters; they were produced concurrently with protests in Italian and French universities, at cultural events like the Venice Biennale, and at the gates of factories like FIAT.

In 1968, Merz responded to the charged climate with three key works using neon writ phrases. *Solitary Solidary* (Solitario Solidale), *What is to be done?* (Che Fare?), and *Sit-In* are all works in which the artist rendered the titular text in neon set onto a bed of wax (figs. 81-83). *Solitary Solidary* reproduces a phrase appropriated from revolutionary graffiti scribbled on a wall during the May upheavals in Paris (fig. 81). Merz has said that he was intrigued by the way these two homophonic words

³² Note that around the same time the American artist Bruce Nauman was using neon to write cryptic and sometimes tautological phrases. Nauman's 1967 neon wall or window sign "The True Artist Helps the World by Revealing Mystical Truths," appeared on the back of the English-language edition of Celant's book *Art Povera*, (New York: Praeger, 1969). Nauman also began showing at Sperone in the early 1970s.

³³ Christov-Bakargiev has written a provocative essay connecting Merz's use of language with the tradition of imagist poetry practiced by Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot. See Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, "'Thou wilt give thanks when night is spent': on words in the art of Mario Merz," in *Mario Merz*, by Castagnoli, et al (Turin: Hopefulmonster, 2006), 148-65.

seemed stalled in a near dialectical opposition.³⁴ The two adjectives are linguistically suspended because they do not truly modify one another, but the phrase they make, however grammatically incorrect, is not without meaning. There is a lyrical sense in which the project of communal solidarity might be seen to start "solitarily" with each individual (or with an interior energy). Indeed, Marcuse's critique of Marxism argued that "solidarity would be on weak grounds were it not rooted in the instinctual structure of individuals."³⁵ Thus this phrase might be seen to embody the interdependence of individuality and collectivity. The material composition of the neon, visibly glowing through the activation of many individual molecules, echoes and underscores the linguistic suspension of the phrase itself.

Of course, the words Merz spelled out were significant in and of themselves. Merz has said of these pieces, "the word imposed itself almost of its own accord, with the magnum force it could have in the social context, the context in which words are

³⁴ The title of this work was translated into English as "Solitary Solidarity" in Germano Celant's 1989 retrospective catalogue of Merz's work (106). However, a better translation of the Italian "*Solidale*" and the French "*Solidaire*" which Merz refers to would be "Solidary." In an interview with Celant published in that same volume, Merz identifies the two words "*Solitario Solidale*" as adjectives, further supporting this revision of the translation. He wrote: "I was interested in those two French adjectives placed side by side – they were important and, at the same time, they were suspended." Merz, "Interview Genoa, 1971," 106.

³⁵ Herbert Marcuse, *The Aesthetic Dimension: Toward a Critique of Marxist Aesthetics* [1977], trans. Marcuse and Erica Scherover (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978), 17.

exchanged."³⁶ The particular phrases the artist employed could often be read in various ways, and his preference for the openness of the language in such works is evidenced by the fact that the title of another 1968 piece *Che fare?* (literally, "What is to be done?") is almost never translated (fig. 82). His appropriation of the famous phrase in which Vladimir Lenin addressed the role of the intellectual in society, evidences an engagement with this very pertinent question, but refuses to provide any clear answers. The phrase might be read in political terms, given the source and the context of that turbulent year, but just as easily might be understood as an expression of resignation, as in the common Italian expression: "boh."³⁷ Proffering such varied interpretations differs significantly from the "committed" approach of "PCI" artists like the elder Guttuso.³⁸ Merz's work does not illustrate a scene, but politically questions the viewer's notion of self via the consideration of personal agency. At the time, as Trini argued, the neon pieces reflected "the call words for different but parallel battles (young people, students, etc...)." ³⁹ Indeed,

³⁶ Merz, "Interview Genoa, 1971," 106.

³⁷ In another version of this work Merz wrote the phrase "Che fare?" on the wall over an open, running tap, combining the political with the quotidian in a way that further complicates an easy or narrowly partisan reading of the work.

³⁸ Note that Lumley argues that Guttuso was the negative example of a correlation of aesthetics and politics for the *Arte povera* generation. See Chapter One, note 58 for the direct reference.

³⁹ Trini differentiated Merz's text-based neon works from those made by Nauman, such as the artist's name written in large neon letters (as if written on the moon, according to the artist), or

although the texts were drawn from political sources—graffiti on the walls of the Sorbonne—they were not themselves direct calls to action, but echoes of shared attitudes among the artists, the students, and the workers.

Sit-In also reveals how such topical and pointed phrases took on expanded meanings through their sculptural presentation (fig. 83). First shown at *Arte povera + Azione povere*, this sculpture does not reference a specific slogan. Instead, it represents an important integration of concept and object, since the letters literally “sit in” the wax. The work is more than just a semantic pun, for the neon letters release heat and thereby begin to soften the hardened wax. The once-solid material thus yields to the warm letters, which further embed themselves in the dispersed wax.⁴⁰ This work can be seen as an intersection of the political activities of the students and the Turin School artists’ interest in phenomenology and first-hand experience. Here the text and the form of the work parallel each other: just as students and other demonstrators would occupy a

“The True Artist Helps the World by Revealing Mystical Truths.” He wrote that Nauman’s work directly argued for the importance of the artist in society, and the centrality of the artist as the active subject of the work. Merz’s works, on the other hand, were aimed more at harmonious interactions. Tommaso Trini, “Imagination Takes Command,” *Domus* 471 (February 1969): 50.

⁴⁰ The artist created two versions of this piece, which accounts for the different descriptions of the state of the wax. When Gilardi reported on the experiences of Amalfi, he noted that a stream of melted wax ran across the floor. Christov-Bakargiev writes that the wax does not melt away, it only softens. See Christov-Bakargiev, *Arte povera*, 116. Photographs including originals from Amalfi that I accessed at Lia Rumma Gallery in Naples seem to support Gilardi’s assertion in part, but it does not appear that the wax was completely consumed.

given space and refuse to leave until their demands were met, the neon letters "sit" in the wax, enacting the same suspension of action and stasis that typifies this form of political demonstration. This play between conflict and acquiescence is both presented by the phrase and demonstrably repeated in its manifest form. Merz has said of this work:

I did *Sit-In* because I had seen sit-ins both in photographs and in real life: people sitting on the ground within a given space. I planned to reproduce this image as an idea. In fact, this small iron structure with 'sit-in' written in wax had a meaning that had to do with the center of a space, which was the space in which the sit-in took place.⁴¹

Therefore if the vessel that holds the wax symbolizes the social space in which a demonstration might occur, the neon in this work corresponds to human activity. Here, Merz constructed a metaphor that uses chemical reactions—between electricity and the neon gas, and between the heated neon tubes and wax—to figuratively present a tactic for collective transformation.

The artist has suggested that his use of wax in these works was also pictorial. He compares it with the medieval tradition of setting figures against gold leaf in order to make them more resplendent. He stated: "This beeswax I use constitutes my golden background. It is not a cheap or poor material. It is highly symbolic. I want the wax to be a landscape, as gold in medieval works can become a sort of sunset for the viewer."⁴² In this sense the wax serves to both highlight and anchor the neon

⁴¹ Merz, quoted in Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, *Arte Povera* (New York: Phaidon, 1999), 106.

⁴² Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, "Arte povera 1967-87," *Flash Art* (November-December 1987): 59.

text. While the politically charged *Solitary Solidary* and *Sit-in* interacted with the wax containers as a compositional ground—perhaps incrementally privileging the text over the object—this was not only way the artist integrated the two. Neon words also appeared on walls, objects and, most notably, on the igloo-like structures he began building in 1967-8.⁴³

Merz has described his igloos as in-between structures that can be read both as dwelling and as half-globe, or as house and as world, that is, as micro- and macrocosm.⁴⁴ For him the igloo "is a measure of anthropological space," which connects it to phenomenological aspects of his work by emphasizing the measure of the human body.⁴⁵ Early examples like *Giap's Igloo* (Igloo Giap) (1968) and *Objet Cache-Toi* (Object, Conceal Yourself)

⁴³ Merz has spoken of different igloos and/or different situations as bringing about the igloos. In the 1971 interview with Germano Celant, he discusses *Giap's Igloo* as the first igloo and *Objet Cache-Toi* as the second. See Merz, "Interview Genoa, 1971," 106. However in his book of collected writings published later he says that he started to work with the igloo form in 1967, and obliquely suggests that *Objet Cache-Toi* is the first igloo. See Mario Merz, *I Want to Write*, 139. Lacking further evidence to the contrary, I will continue to consider *Giap's Igloo* as the first, since he said that he began making the first igloo in 1967, before the phrase "*Objet Cache-Toi*" was used as a graffito on the walls of the Sorbonne.

⁴⁴ See Merz, *I Want to Write* 137. See also Merz, "Interview Genoa, 1971," 105-6. Critics have read the symbolism of the igloos in different ways. Since it is less the point here to investigate them as an icon in themselves as is it to understand them in relation to Merz's oeuvre as a whole, I cite Criticos's argument that Merz's igloo is an "archetypal structure" to support her argument that it, like many *Arte povera* works, is to be understood formally, as reduced or impoverished signs. See Corinna Criticos, "Reading *Arte povera*," in *Zero to Infinity: Arte Povera 1962-1972*, ed. Richard Flood and Frances Morris (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center and London: Tate Modern, 2001), 78.

⁴⁵ Merz, "Interview Genoa, 1971," 105-6.

(1968) used accompanying neon texts to complicate straightforward readings of the structures' quotidian uses, with the text positioned as a kind of puzzling caption (fig. 84). These igloos did not "contain" the words as the wax-filled vessels did, instead, the actualized text and object/structure coexisted in the three-dimensional space. When asked in 1971 why he used neon rather than simply writing or painting the text, Merz replied: "luminosity is visibility of the whole. [...] It is a visual material like the paint for a fresco."⁴⁶ Although the igloo form recurs throughout Merz's career, the 1968 examples are distinct in as much as they used politically charged texts taken directly from the public sphere. *Objet cache-toi*, for example, was another found phrase from the walls of the Sorbonne in May 1968.

Giap's Igloo consists of an earth-covered metal armature overlaid with a neon quote by the North Vietnamese (Vietcong) General Vo Nguyen Giap: "Se il nemeco si concentra perde terreno se si disperde perde forza" (If the enemy masses he loses ground, if he scatters, he loses strength).⁴⁷ Underscoring the topicality of this reference, the Italian publisher Feltrinelli published an Italian translation of Giap's writings—*Guerra del popolo, esercito del popolo* (People's War, People's Army)—in February

⁴⁶ Mario Merz, "interview by Tommaso Trini," *Data* 1, no. 1 (September 1971): 21.

⁴⁷ It should be noted that Merz made three versions of this work. The first, discussed here, consisted of mud or earth caked on the metal armature, the following two were made with plastic bags filled with plaster and attached to the armature. See Christov-Bakargiev, *Arte povera*, 55.

1968 (fig. 85).⁴⁸ Giap's contemporary political statement revealed that the strategies of the contentious Vietnam War were suspended in an irresolvable deadlock. The phrase is like a Zen paradox or *koan*, not meant to be easily resolved, but rather meditated upon until a mental transmutation makes it intelligible. The sentiment of Giap's statement succinctly relayed and redoubled the same dialectical impasse, or tautology, that Merz sought through the interaction of neon and object. The letters are simultaneously immaterial light, concrete objects, and written, symbolic language, just as the igloo is both a shelter and geometric form. The very structure of *Giap's igloo*, built of many individual bags of sand, also models the sentiment of the dictum. Each single grain of sand contributes to the strength of the structure, yet when amassed for such a purpose, they do not cover as much ground as when they are spread out on the beach or desert. By appropriating the cryptic phrase that refuses to propose the best resolution between two opposing positions, re-writing it in neon, and integrating it with an object that itself oscillates between dwelling and globe, Merz suspended the text's meaning for further contemplation. Finally,

⁴⁸ Originally published in French in 1961, the radical publisher Feltrinelli issued the first Italian version of Giap's book, complete with foreword from the Cuban edition by Ernesto "Che" Guevara in 1968. The book contained four essays on revolutionary strategy, illustrative maps, and a timeline of the current battles between American troops and the Vietcong. It was advertised on the cover as containing "The psychological, political, and military techniques of the fight against imperialism for its inevitable defeat." See Vo Nguyen Giap, *Guerra del popolo, esercito del popolo* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1968).

the viewer has to walk around the structure in order to read this phrase, enacting the "covering little ground" as she thrice circumnavigates the igloo to completely read the sentence.⁴⁹

Merz recalled that when he first read the phrase that he eventually imposed upon *Giap's Igloo*, it altered his view to something as "absolute" as war:

It was not the idea of the enemy as somebody whom one must move against; rather, the idea of the enemy in a dialectical situation that involves the person reading the words. This was very important for me: the idea of strength in an absolute sense was removed from strength itself. Strength became a dialectical quality in relation to the individual himself [...].⁵⁰

In other words, such closed concepts as "good" or "evil" were seen to be open as part of a dialectic that included the person perceiving/reading the text, making them completely contingent. While explicitly referring to events half a world away, the phrase also resonated with the local, Italian context. In the Turinese context specifically, we can read the values of solidarity in the notion that strength within the individual citizen is central to the strength of the community. Giap's succinct statement of this impasse pointed to an understanding that the only way out of a deadlock between two absolute powers, whether the context was a war in Vietnam, the Cold War, the struggle between striking workers and the factories, or student demonstrators and their institutions, may be small, individual transformations. Therefore altering one's perception of things,

⁴⁹ Bakargiev, "Words in the art of Mario Merz," 149.

⁵⁰ Merz, "Interview Genoa, 1971," 106.

such as might occur through the encounter of an artwork, emerged as an extremely vital activity to the larger community and to Merz's work of the decade. His igloos explored the counterpoint between the individual's internal vitality and the compounded energy of solidarity in communal activities by oscillating between a presentation of the everyday microcosm (house) and a representation of the macrocosm (globe).

Concurrent with the igloos and neon text pieces of 1968, Merz affixed neon expressions of the first five numbers of the Fibonacci sequence (1, 1, 2, 3, 5) to his family's kitchen wall, lending what Emily Braun has called "perceptual acuity into the seemingly most inconsequential workaday routine" (fig. 86).⁵¹ The medieval counting system provided Merz with an alternative means of conceptualizing and communicating the order of everyday experiences of social and universal phenomena. Then in 1970, he made an igloo from iron pipes that derived their form from the nature-based Fibonacci number sequence. Merz's *Fibonacci Igloo* (1970) brought together these two idioms of his works, the igloo form and the counting system, in a way that underscores the anthropological dimension of both. In this later sculpture,

⁵¹ Emily Braun, "Mario Merz: Ethnographer of the Everyday," in *Mario Merz: The Magnolia Table*, ed. Gian Enzo Sperone (exhibition catalogue) (New York: Sperone Westwater, 2007), unpaginated (8). In addition, Braun's argument ties Merz's use of Fibonacci numerals to Claude Levi-Strauss's notion that the propensity for order was the 'concrete science' of primitive man. Levi-Strauss falls outside of the local considerations of this Turin-focused study, but Braun's argument, connecting the structuralist analyses of such texts as the "Raw and the Cooked" [1964] to issues of bodily interaction with the environment, is complimentary to my own interests in reading the works through the Turinese reception of continental philosophy.

steel pipes increase in intervals determined by the numerical sequence (fig. 87). Merz has talked about the numbers as a way to investigate the human aspect of perception, stating:

I did this series because it is biologically conceivable, because it has a direction and, above all, roots, but it has roots, because it has a biological meaning, even if the meaning is not directly scientific.⁵²

The artist may have recognized that the igloo was also an unscientific form that imposed order on natural materials. That is, indigenous architects invented the vernacular dwelling through observation, trial, and error. In the Middle Ages, this form, the dome, had to be reinvented from scant evidence left by ancient cultures.⁵³ The Fibonacci sequence, imported from Arabic-speaking cultures, offered one plan for such a feat.

Discussing Merz's igloos in general, curator Felix Zdenek has cited specifically Italianate sources for the domed shape of these structures. He argued that the "*trulli*" or vaulted store houses and shelters in Apulia, and further, Etruscan shepherd huts might provide Italian examples of the igloo form and a local example of prehistoric cultures than Merz's term "igloo" suggests. These native structures are not exact analogues, but Zdenek's suggestion is significant because it connects Merz's project to broader interests in vernacular or anonymous

⁵² Merz, "Interview, Genoa, 1971," 109.

⁵³ Merz hinted at the notion that such structures were not arrived at by accident, but by a system of construction techniques, which had to be relearned through observing extant examples. "Ancient architecture is not fortuitous, because it is not just a covering of space." For more on Merz's understanding of the Fibonacci numbers, see Merz, "Fibonacci's Numbers and Art," 106.

architecture. For example, in 1964 the Austrian-born (Moravian) architect Bernard Rudofsky curated a well-known exhibition at The Museum of Modern Art, New York titled *Architecture without Architects*, which investigated both historical and contemporary patterns of "non-pedigreed" building.⁵⁴ The Apulian *Trulli* were among the examples highlighted in the show, and Rudofsky noted in the catalogue that this "archaic house form of an early megalithic civilization" had survived with little alteration since the second millennium B.C., "despite the passage of a dozen nations."⁵⁵ The book also highlighted the stepped plans of craggy Italian hill towns like Positano and the movable architecture of nomadic societies in Western Asia and Africa.

In terms of a politicized understanding of Merz's roughly contemporaneous pursuit of the igloo structure, Rudofsky's interest in the indigenous architectural solutions was significant in that it was read as a critique of industrial culture at mid-century. One critic called the exhibition "an immensely popular event that definitively established [Rudofsky's] reputation as a relentless critic of the vacuity of modern life."⁵⁶ The interest and its anti-industrial connotations were deeply felt in Italy, where Rudofsky resided in the 1930s,

⁵⁴ Bernard Rudofsky, *Architecture without Architects: An Introduction to Non-Pedigreed Architecture* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art/Doubleday: 1964).

⁵⁵ Rudofsky, 48-9.

⁵⁶ Jean-François Bédard, "Lessons from Bernard Rudofsky," (exhibition review) *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, vol. 67, no. 2 (June 2008): 277-79.

and where he and architect Giuseppe Pagano collaborated on an exhibition of vernacular architecture at the Milan Triennial in 1936. In the postwar period, the Genoese architect and former partisan member of *Movimento d'Unità Proletario* (MUP) Giancarlo de Carlo continued this interest in non-pedigreed architecture as a resistance to the rapid industrialization of the early postwar years, and as an expression of his strongly socialist politics.⁵⁷ In a 1971 text "An Architecture of Participation," he wrote that the error of modernist architecture was that "the problem of organizing physical space was approached with the same criteria used in organizing the production of commodities."⁵⁸ The architectural solutions of the past and of present nomadic peoples was therefore seen in Italy, as elsewhere, as an alternative to uniformity the country's increasingly capitalist, industrial identity.

The link between Merz's igloos and the discourse on vernacular architecture is important because in this specifically anti-modern architectural context, writers like Zdenek could view

⁵⁷ De Carlo encountered Rudofsky in Italy through Pagano. He curated "Spontaneous Architecture" at the 1951 Milan Triennale, (the same one, incidentally, where Fontana first exhibited his neon works). See Hermann Schlimme, "The Mediterranean Hill Town: A Travel Paradigm," in *Travel, Space, architecture*, Jilly Traganou and Milodrag Mitrasinovic, eds. (London: Ashgate, 2009), 155. Note that the section on de Carlo is subtitled "learning from Urbino: Hill Town as Opera Aperta."

⁵⁸ Giancarlo de Carlo, "An Architecture of Participation," *Perspecta* 17, (1980): 74. De Carlo first used the term "Architecture of Participation" as the subject of a lecture given in Melbourne Australia in 1971. The text of that lecture was subsequently published by the Royal Institute of Architecture (1972) and later in the journal, which is the source I cite.

the artworks as using the past progressively rather than nostalgically:

By turning back to an original architectural form, Merz demonstrates that man can develop in a positive sense only if he revitalizes his relationship to his own tradition and to natural evolution, so to draw from it his impulses for the present and the future.⁵⁹

Zdenek's analysis suggests that a conscious mining of the past could benefit the present. Moreover, because it is "biologically derived," Merz's use of Fibonacci system as a building rubric allowed him to construct forms that resonate with naturally occurring forms in the way that many "primitive" or non-pedigreed builders do. In *Fibonacci Igloo* the artist constructed a form that theoretically contains within it the same building blocks as naturally occurring "structures" and organisms.

The Fibonacci numbers impose an order, aiding in the conceptualization of human activities in relation to the underlying operations of the natural world, by giving form to otherwise invisible systems.⁶⁰ Beyond the igloos, this realization had broader implications for Merz's thinking about the gaps between representation and reality, as well as his interest in social interaction. The numbers refined some of the ideas introduced in the neon text pieces by providing a way to

⁵⁹ Felix Zdenek, "The Power of Imagination," in *Mario Merz*, trans. Stephen Reader (Essen: Museum Folkwang Essen and Stuttgart: Staatsgalerie Stuttgart, 1982), 7.

⁶⁰ Merz wrote: "the progression [of numbers] creates a non-asthmatic relation between the walls and me...that is a relation...visible and invisible..." He also stated "Numbers are a relative extension of the body through five fingers." Thus, even the body was an extension of a singular interior energy. Merz, "Fibonacci's Numbers and Art," 106-7.

demonstrate relationships between individuals, such as "1+1=2," and to represent communal strengths, without eliding the particularity of the individual.⁶¹

In 1971, Merz began to apply these numbers series to public spaces and everyday situations, affixing neon Fibonacci numbers to a staircase, to a wall, and to the spiral of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York.⁶² He also used the system as a formula for staged encounters with people in works like *Fibonacci Naples* (Fibonacci Napoli) (1971) (figs. 88 & 89). This later, photographic work gave tangible form to usually invisible, but omnipresent, organizational structures. Here, Merz photographed factory workers entering their company cafeteria, documenting the workers' assembly in an order that corresponds to the numerical sequence. (The first two frames each depict one worker, who is then joined by a second, and a third. In the next picture there are five, then eight, etc, until the room is full with 55 men.) The images act as a sort of filmstrip when displayed on the wall in a horizontal line, as the room quickly progresses from empty to full. Each photograph has a neon number affixed to its frame that identifies and "doubles" or shadows the number of workers

⁶¹ Since 1 "represents" the individual every other number in the sequence can be understood as an extension of that individual.

⁶² The Guggenheim example continued the artist's dialogue between man-made constructions and natural systems as well as his growing interest in the relationship between the Fibonacci numbers and spirals vis-à-vis the golden mean. In this case, he took an existing structure and deconstructed it by imposing the medieval counting system on its physical form.

within it. Here the neon functions as a sign for energy, but also importantly, the sculptural numbers offer a contrast to the distance of a photographed subject matter by making the numerical expansion manifest in the real space of viewer.

By using factory workers, Merz deploys the medieval system to give visible order to the kind of assembly seen in the contemporary labor movements. The Fibonacci numbers allowed Merz to break down the notion of a mass into a perceptibly methodical gathering of individuals, and provided a theoretical and historical distance that removed the project from being a direct political message. Merz's work can thus be read as a proposition to consider the structure of organized assembly, generally, and relies on the viewer for contextualization. In 1971, such images from a Neapolitan factory could have been interpreted as referring to the plight of Southern workers, many of whom were displaced to Northern cities like Turin to find work. The fact that the figures are depicted when they are on break might also have been understood as a reference to the one time of day when these laborers could meet, talk, and perhaps conspire to strike or plan work stoppages. None of this is explicit in Merz's work, however, and although the Italian labor situation in the early 1970s teases out such subtexts, the work itself poses as a more general investigation of systems and energies. Merz's work argues for such ambiguity, seeking to engage the viewer with the image, while avoiding a direct message or slogan that might be easily consumed or refuted. The Fibonacci numbers help the artist reinforce this rhetorical distance, while at the same time

refining his examination of the individual in relation to the group. The expanding numbers echoed the idea that group strength, or solidarity, begins with and returns to solitary individuals.

In a related work from 1972, *A real sum is a sum of people*, which appeared in alternate form in *Fibonacci 1202/Mario Merz 1972*, the same process of multiplying people occupying space is captured in photographs of a Turin restaurant filling with diners. For Merz, these projects using a canteen and a restaurant displayed the idea that "a series of people in a restaurant is more elementary than a series of numbers (the series is elementary but people assembled for a common function is more elementary)."⁶³ The Fibonacci series is posited here to be secondary, that is, as a system through which a natural occurrence can be visually described and made comprehensible. The underlying theme of the work is the instinctive nature of assembly. The Fibonacci numbers serve to highlight the system at work in a social situation, while also expressing infinite expansion by their systemic logic. Once the system is grasped, it can continue to operate either to its exhaustion or, in the case of Fibonacci's system, to infinity. Applied to the workers in Naples and the restaurant patrons in Turin, Merz highlights the infinite and progressive power of an assembled group of individuals.

⁶³ Mario Merz, *I Want to Write*, 97.

In 1971 and 1972, the assembly of bodies in space was just as powerful a metaphor as it was when Merz created *Sit-In* in 1968. A scan of newspaper headlines from those "leaden years" offer plenty of evidence of Italy's continuing labor struggles.⁶⁴ Among nearly daily reports of strikes in sectors from farming to transportation to factory lines, a few examples bear mentioning because of their specific connection to Turin. In the winter of 1971 (which was, somewhat ironically, the fiftieth anniversary of Italy's Communist party (PCI)), Turin's largest private employer, FIAT, laid off 37,000 employees, an event that even made the news across the Atlantic.⁶⁵ In 1972, reports indicated that Turin was steeling itself against the impending renegotiation of contracts arrived at during 1969's "Hot Autumn." One correspondent stated, "Turin has become the pole of the strongest tensions of Italy."⁶⁶ In this environment, Merz's use of the medieval Fibonacci numbers to materialize the images of bodies in space can be seen as tangible presentation of the power of collective energy when organized, whether by trade unions, by extremist groups, or perhaps even when gathered for a communal meal.⁶⁷

⁶⁴ See, for example, the headlines "É ora di isolare i gruppi teppisti" and "Violenza alla Fiat Mirafiori e Rivalta" in *La Stampa* (30 October 1969) and "L'ora delle cifre," in *Il Corriere Della Sera* (29 November 1968), quoted in Crainz, *Paese Mancato*, 354, 362.

⁶⁵ *New York Times*, 13 February 1971, Page 36, Column 4.

⁶⁶ Paul Hofmann, "A Bursting Turin Is Looking to Fiat for Help," *New York Times*, 28 March 1972, Page 10.

⁶⁷ Around this time Merz also began to use tables in his work, in conjunction with the Fibonacci numbers. For example, his 1973 work *It Is Possible to Have a Space with Tables for 88 People as*

Merz was not alone in mediating references to the present with allusions to the distant past. Indeed this strategy can be seen as part of a much larger cultural milieu. References to the Middle Ages follow a line of responses to the political challenges that began in 1967 and continued into the 1970s. In 1967, writers Indro Montanelli and Roberto Gervaso published *L'Italia dei Secoli D'Oro: Il Medio Evo dal 1250 al 1492* (Italy in the Golden Centuries: The Medieval from 1250 to 1492). The popular trade book describes the Middle Ages as a time when the first hints of the Renaissance were beginning to show, and therefore a time full of possibilities.⁶⁸ Was there a reason why 1967 was the year in which this backward glance landed directly on the Middle Ages? In Turin specifically, some of the local scholars addressed the contemporary political moment obliquely, and one specifically used the medieval as a touchstone. Most

It Is Possible to Have a Space with Tables for No One, was a work with nine tables expanding in size to accommodate 1-88 people according the Fibonacci system. (Neon numbers appeared on each table.) He spoke of tables as being horizontal platforms, basically pieces of the floor raised up, for both practical and intellectual reasons. Because tables function in both *Fibonacci Naples* and the later work, the tables in the photographs may also be considered to be precursors to these tables. The horizontal platform created by the table in these works could represent a physical marker of social space and a common purpose. The notion of communal interaction over such everyday occurrences as a meal is taken up by artists in the mid-1990s, artists referred to by French curator Nicholas Bourriaud as promoting a "relational aesthetics." See Nicholas Bourriaud, "Art of the 1990's" and "Space Time Exchange Factors," in *Relational Aesthetics* (Paris: les presses du real, 1998; reprint 2002), 25-48. For Merz's own writings on the tables, see Merz, *I Want to Write*, 112, 122.

⁶⁸ Indro Montanelli and Roberto Gervaso, *L'Italia dei Secoli D'Oro: Il Medio Evo dal 1250 al 1492* (Milan: Rizzoli, 1967).

significant for reading Merz was the writing of Umberto Eco. In Eco's theoretical writings of the period, references to the Middle Ages operate both structurally, in the use of allegory, and thematically, in making comparisons between his present day and the past era in aesthetic and political terms. When viewed together, both Merz and Eco appear to be operating in the stream of a broader cultural idiom that may have been employed to cope with the tumultuous social challenges of this decade.⁶⁹

Eco's engagement with medieval literature, culture, and aesthetics can be traced back to his studies with Pareyson and his doctoral thesis on the aesthetics of St. Thomas Aquinas at the University of Turin. In 1959, excerpts of his thesis were incorporated into a book on the history of aesthetics—*Momenti e problemi di storia dell'estetica*—in which he argued that the scholastic interest in "sensible beauty" (*amor ornamenti*) acknowledged that beauty was a property in relation to knowing subjects.⁷⁰ Aquinas' notion that beauty is something that pleases us—that it is a recognition of something *by someone*, and not an

⁶⁹ In the contemporaneous cinematic context, for example, the medievalism in the films of Pier Paolo Pasolini, most notably his *Trilogy of Life: The Decameron* (Il Decamerone) (1971), *The Canterbury Tales* (I racconti di Canterbury) (1972), and *Arabian Nights* (I fiori delle mille notte) (1974) can also be productively understood in this regard.

⁷⁰ Peter Bondanella, *Umberto Eco and the Open Text* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 7–8. In 1956, Eco published his doctoral thesis on the aesthetics of Aquinas as a separate volume, but as a dissertation, not as a trade book.

objective fact—appeared analogous to Pareyson's focus on reception.⁷¹ Eco wrote:

Medieval taste, we may conclude, was concerned neither with the autonomy of art nor the autonomy of nature. It involved rather an apprehension of all of the relations, imaginative and supernatural, subsisting between the contemplated object and a cosmos which opened onto the transcendent.⁷²

Eco contended that in seeking to integrate of the natural and theological, Aquinas' medieval aesthetics saw objects as touchstones for contemplating the macrocosm. For Eco, this scholastic interest in (art) objects as integrated parts of our experience could be linked to the rejection of Crocean idealism prevalent in Dewey.⁷³ It appeared to be a historical foundation for his teachers' focus on reception and interpretation.

Eco's early work on scholasticism coalesced with his interests in semiotics and information theory in *The Open Work* (1962).⁷⁴ Here he argued that in the Middle Ages, allegory opened texts to multiple layers of interpretation in a way that was similar to his own semiological theories about the relationship

⁷¹ Umberto Eco, *Art and Beauty in the Middle Ages*, trans. Hugh Bredin (New Haven: Yale, 1986). Originally published as "Sviluppo dell'estetica medievale," in *Momenti e problemi di storia dell'estetica*, vol. 1 (Milan: Marzorati, 1959). Page citations refer to the English edition.

⁷² Eco, *Art and Beauty*, 15.

⁷³ Eco, *Art and Beauty*, 15-17. See also Adele Haft, Jane White and Robert White, "Umberto Eco, Semiotics, and Medieval Thought," [1987] in *Umberto Eco*, ed. Mike Gane and Nicholas Gane, vol. 2 (London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2005), 157.

⁷⁴ Adele Haft, Jane White and Robert White, "Umberto Eco, Semiotics, and Medieval Thought," 157-9.

between reader and text, or a viewer and an artwork.⁷⁵ Eco asserted that in addition to literal, moral, and analogical approaches to reading, medieval allegories ensured that "the reader of the text knows that every sentence and every trope is 'open' to a multiplicity of meanings which he must hunt for and find."⁷⁶ He posited a similarity to the reader of contemporary open works, who is searching for meanings buried within and between the lines of a comparatively indeterminate text. The medieval reader, however, likely interpreted these signs through prescribed symbolic systems, whereas the reader of contemporary open works had no such coda.

⁷⁵ Umberto Eco, *The Open Work* [1962], trans. Anna Cancogni (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1989). The connection between the role of the reader in Eco's own moment with the role of the reader of a medieval text is not as obvious today as it would have been originally, since his chapter on the medieval and the open work was cut out of the first English and later Italian editions and published separately as *The Aesthetics of Chaosmos: The Middle Ages of James Joyce* (1966/1982). It was published in Italian as *Le poetiche di Joyce: dalla "summa" al "Finnegans Wake"* in 1966, and in English with the title above in 1982. Bondanella argues that Eco's willingness to re-edit and reconstruct his own texts is evidence of his own open approach to writing. See Bondanella, 13, 23. Also see Bondanella for discussion of the book on Joyce, 26-29, 151.

⁷⁶ Eco, *The Open Work*, 5. He asserted that there were three kinds of open works: first, a work that requires organization or completion by the receiver, such as a piece of contemporary music that is deliberately left in a non-definitive state, second, a work that seems whole, but has many competing stimuli that the reader must negotiate and interpret (like Symbolist poetry), and third, a more general openness that is the result of the implicit exchange between author/artist and receiver through the text/object. The medieval theory of allegory falls into the last category, and as Eco notes with an example from Dante's thirteenth letter, which offered four ways of reading texts. See also Caesar, 18.

Eco's separation of the symbolic foundations of the medieval allegory from the more open, contemporary allegory likely owes to a debt to Walter Benjamin's writings on the subject. In *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, Benjamin insists that modern allegory differs from the Romantic concept that is nearer to symbolism, which claims to unify a natural or mythical object into an ideal.⁷⁷ According to literary historian Bainard Cowan, Benjamin believed that such symbolic unity hid "an unbridgeable gap that exists between the realm of the ideas [...] and the world of phenomena [...]." ⁷⁸ Conversely, the modern allegorical mode is a devalorization or fragmentation, which probes that very gap as away to destabilize meaning. His concept of modern allegory does not consolidate the object and the transcendental, but rather serves as "a focal point from which to look on things," which, though fragmentary, provides a more truthful view of the world than the illusions of wholeness presented by the symbol.⁷⁹

Emily Braun has traced Benjamin's modern, ironic allegorical mode in the paintings of Italian artists Giorgio de Chirico and Mario Sironi. She argues that it offered the latter a means by which to use classical imagery, but to resist the

⁷⁷ Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (1928), trans. John Osborne (London: NLV, 1977).

⁷⁸ See Bainard Cowan, "Walter Benjamin's Theory of Allegory," *New German Critique*, no. 22 (Winter 1981): 111-112. This understanding of the allegorical mode as a devalorization or an opening links directly to Celant's early discussions of *Arte povera*, and indeed, "devalorization" echoes the term itself.

⁷⁹ Cowan, 111-12.

stability of meaning intimated by the classical style of many artworks produced during the "return to order" between the two world wars.⁸⁰ Similarly, Eco's model of the open work presented artists like Merz with a means by which the past, (in this case medieval one), could be referred to "allegorically" to create instability rather than nostalgia. One political aspect of Merz's project can be found in such use of allegory, because, as Braun notes, it is "antiauthoritarian: it is an avant-garde means of transgression that eludes authorial intention and directness of message [...]."⁸¹

Looking at Merz's igloos, we may recall how they operate like fields of information that require participation, rather than one-way directives to passive receivers. They do not assert authority, nor do they employ a specific set of commonly agreed upon symbols. Rather they are structured to allow the viewer to navigate through a variety of associations. Benjamin Buchloh has argued that the modern allegorical impulse is indicative of a "transformation of the individual psyche as well as that of larger social structures."⁸² His contention parallels the

⁸⁰ Braun argues that this mode of working is, for Sironi, indicative of a recognition of the instability of meaning itself. Emily Braun, *Mario Sironi and Italian Modernism: Art and Politics under Fascism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 80-4.

⁸¹ Braun connects this mode to Roland Barthes' writings on the death of the author, which was published in 1968, contemporary to *Arte povera* and to the student and worker movements in Italy and France.

⁸² Benjamin Buchloh has argued that Benjamin's theory is exemplified in Dadaist montage, which uses allegorical methods to interrupt the transformation of the object to a commodity. While the argument is, in this case, in the service of non-Italian

central argument of this study, which holds that the conceptual and perceptual openings to the viewers of Turin School works carried revolutionary potential in their very structures.

Like many of the Turinese artists' projects that proposed alternative means of communication through antiquated or obsolete systems, Eco's studies of semiotics and his comparison of medieval allegory and modern "open works" in particular, described the ways in which this means of communication reflected contemporary worldviews through a palimpsest of its historical forms. Semiological connections between open works and (modern) allegories are not the only link to the medieval in Eco's writing, however: with the 1973 publication of his article "*Il Medioevo è già cominciato*" (The Middle Age has already started), he began explicitly comparing the Middle Ages to modern culture. In this essay, he identified elements of the remote past that provided insight to his own era.⁸³ "*Il Medioevo è già cominciato*" provides a strong theoretical basis for our discussion of the

artists in the 1970s and early 80s, one of Buchloh's main points is that this impulse is traced through the works of the artists in the 1960s, and might be seen as complimentary to the works of *Arte povera*. Benjamin Buchloh, "Allegorical Procedures: Appropriation and Montage in Contemporary Art," *Artforum* (September 1982): 43-56.

⁸³ Umberto Eco, "*Il Medioevo è già cominciato*," Umberto Eco, "*Il Medioevo è già cominciato*" in *Documenti su il nuovo medioevo: La cultura, il potere, l'industria, le forme di vita nell'epoca neofeudale*, ed. Furio Colombo (Milan: Bompiani, 1973), 5-28. A revised and aggressively abridged version of this essay appears in English in: Umberto Eco, *Faith in Fakes: Travels in Hyperreality*, trans. William Weaver (London: Secker and Warburg, 1986), 73-86. (Page references are to the earlier and more complete Italian edition.)

specific connections being drawn between the Middle Ages and the years 1967 to 1978.

In "*Il Medioevo è già cominciato*," Eco applied his semiological methods to a direct examination of how the Middle Ages might be considered as a correlative of the contemporary moment. The text was part of a collection of essays addressing these ideas that was edited by linguist and then correspondent to *La Stampa*, Furio Colombo.⁸⁴ Written by different authors, including Eco, political scientist Giuseppe Sacco, and sociologist Francesco Alberoni, the essays addressed the question of a "New Middle Ages" from different socio-political angles. Sacco's essay, for example, "*Città e società verso il nuovo medioevo*" (City and Society Toward the New Middle Ages), considered the outcome of the fortification of cities and universities in the wake of 1968. He specifically cited the post-68 formation of radical splinter groups of the left like the BR and their inverse, the right-wing "fascist goons" in Italy, as well as the Baader-Meinhof group in Germany as examples of the tribalization of late 20th century Europe. He described the new urban situation as parallel to the fortified cities and partitioned, clannish state of civic life in Medieval Europe. Specifically, Sacco recalls the community groups like the "contrada," prevalent in the old social structure of Siena,

⁸⁴ Note that Colombo went on to be editor-in-chief of the newspaper *L'Unità*, a professor of journalism at Columbia University in New York, and a senator in the Italian parliament. See interview: www.euroalter.com/2008/interview-with-furio-colombo. Accessed 10 October 2009.

suggesting that post-68, Italy entered an era in which such "tribes" began to form and divide communal cohesion, ultimately weakening any chance for proletarian unity.⁸⁵ For his contribution, Alberoni considers the new colonialism bred by the Cold War, such as was being witnessed in Southeast Asia at the time. He ponders the effects that the struggle between two super powers would have on the development of the rest of the world.⁸⁶

Eco's essay for the collection responded to Roberto Vacca's influential 1971 book *The coming dark age* (Il medioevo prossimo venturo)—a hyperbolically apocalyptic account of the dangers lurking in an increasingly technologically complex society.⁸⁷ In his rejoinder, Eco considered a less drastic scenario, in which calling something "medieval" did not carry such pejorative connotations, but rather it emphasized certain aspects of an already existing situation. To this end, he argued that to effectively draw the parallel between the Middle Ages and his day, it was important to specify what one means by "Middle Ages," and to "liberate the notion of the medieval from the negative

⁸⁵ Giuseppe Sacco, "Città e società verso il nuovo medioevo" in *Documenti su il nuovo medioevo*, ed. Furio Colombo (Milan: Bompiani, 1973), 14 and 114-116.

⁸⁶ Francesco Alberoni, "Scenario di Potere," (Power Scenario), in *Documenti su il nuovo medioevo*, ed. Furio Colombo, (Milan: Bompiani, 1973), 63-81.

⁸⁷ Vacca's 1971 book was published in English in 1973 with the translation of "medioevo" in the title as "dark age," and I reflect his choice here. This selection contributes to a view of text as apocalyptic, a view that is further borne out by the fact that the book is introduced with an epigraph from the biblical text itself. Roberto Vacca, *The coming dark age*, trans. J.S. Whale (Garden City, NJ: Doubleday, 1973).

aura to which it has been bound by certain Renaissance-oriented cultural critics."⁸⁸ Eco maintained the importance of clarity and specificity in reference to the Middle Ages because it was a time period that could be said to span nine centuries (from 500–1400). Rather than aiming to define the Middle Ages by a date, he suggested that certain social, cultural, economic, and political conditions could be said to constitute a "Middle Age."

Drawing upon the general cultural conditions of the historical European Middle Ages, Eco argued that a "Middle Age" is a period that follows a historic peace that has unified the world on linguistic, technological, and ideological levels, but which is beginning to break apart through its own complexity.⁸⁹ This unstable coalition is further pushed towards collapse by the presence of "barbarians" at the borders, who bring new social paradigms and alternative perspectives.⁹⁰ He seemed to suggest

⁸⁸ *"E in secondo luogo di liberare la nozione di Medioevo dall'aura negativa di cui l'ha fasciata certa pubblicistica culturale di ispirazione rinascimentale."* (Translation mine.) See Colombo, *Documenti su il nuovo medioevo*, 9. Drawing upon Bondanella's assertion that Croce's dismissal of the Middle Ages was one of the things Eco sought to counter in elevating their status, it is likely that he was referring to Croce in this quote. See Bondanella, 10.

⁸⁹ Eco introduced the abridged reworking of this essay in his book *Faith in Fakes* with another essay titled "Dreaming of the Middle Ages." In this later essay, written to introduce the earlier text, Eco identified ten different ways of understanding the Middle Ages as a pretext, which range from the romanticized "Excalibur," to the neo-theological, to a nostalgic and utopian notion of "Tradition." See Umberto Eco, *Faith in Fakes: Travels in Hyperreality*, trans. William Weaver (London: Secker and Warburg, 1986), 72.

⁹⁰ He suggested that only three years into 1970s, the decade was already shaping up to be such a period: an era in which the *Pax Americana* that followed the Second World War was beginning to

that in midst of this dissolution of the status quo, opportunities to learn and benefit from alternative perspectives emerge. If the modern (First-World) Western man is the ancient Roman in his analogy, it was still unclear to Eco who the barbarians would be, but he contended that change could come from any number of different places and peoples:

It is difficult to say if it will be the Chinese, or the people of the Third World, or the protest generation, or it could be the southern immigrants who, in Turin, are creating a new Piedmonte that had not existed before; and if they will breach the borders (where they are) or if they are already working inside the social body.⁹¹

He recognized the latent power of Asia and the Third World, and also acknowledged that the radical factions of the protest generation might still hold potential power. Further, he located a major cultural transformation already underway in Turin. There, akin perhaps to the ancient Romans' eastward expansion, the headless capitalist "empire" had called Southern Italian workers to the North. The immigrant laborers' presence there was in service to the capitalist system, but clashes of culture and exploitative labor practices threatened to destabilize or even

lose its foothold. Rather than arguing, as Vacca does, that this faltering cohesion constituted an apocalyptic crisis, Eco suggested a closer look at the reality of the historical Middle Ages. The fall of the Roman Empire in the first millennium, though it triggered economic crisis and a power struggle, also begot a great period of cultural growth that came into full bloom in the Renaissance. Eco, "Il medioevo," 10.

⁹¹ *"Difficile dire se siano i cinesi o i popoli del Terzo Mondo, o la generazione della contestazione; o gli immigranti meridionali che a Torino stanno creando un nuovo Piedmonte che non era mai esistito prima; e se premano alle frontiere (dove sono) o lavorino già all'interno del corpo sociale."* (Translation mine.) Eco, "Il medioevo," 12. NB: Eco acknowledged the modern clumsiness and pejorative associations of the term "barbarian."

destroy the whole system as this newly-organized labor rubbed up against the entrenched and stratified local culture. Could the "backward" ways of the Southern Italian immigrants to Turin have contributed to the local *Arte povera* artists' privileging of first-hand experience over indoctrinated knowledge?⁹² Indeed, rather than dreading the dissolution of the old culture, Eco seems to suggest that one could see the changes—already occurring—to be the inevitable mechanism of societal growth and renewal. If the Middle Ages were not dark years so much as they constituted an era of heterogeneity, then by analogy, the concurrent crises were growing pains to which society would adapt and through which it would move forward.⁹³ These are the factors that Eco argued corresponded to the post-1968 era in Italy. His embrace of the medieval as a state of social, cultural, political, and economic flux provides a context for what I am reading as the radical undertones in Merz's use of medieval idioms like the Fibonacci numbers.

Eco used the Middle Ages as a specific historical comparison through which to build a contemporary social theory: a lens through which to view and, more importantly, to give order to the otherwise shapeless present through its resemblance to the

⁹² I refer here to such studies of the agrarian postwar South as Edward C. Banfield, *The Moral Basis of a Backwards Society* (New York: The Free Press, 1958).

⁹³ Eco says something to this effect — that the future will be about adapting to constant chaos — this underscores for him the importance of understanding semiology as a system and poetic or open works as one that do not communicate directly, but perhaps leave the most room for broad interpretation and growth. Eco, *The Open Work*, 20-23.

past. In the mid-1970s, Merz employed the medieval Fibonacci numbers in order to give form to present political sentiment, and to insert instability into seemingly monolithic institutional order. For example, the artist applied the numbers, written in neon, to stacks of a conservative daily newspaper in *Newspaper "Il Resto del Carlino" of May 1976* (Giornale "Il Resto del Carlino" del maggio, 1976) (1976) (fig. 90).⁹⁴ Like works of art, newspapers are a means of communication, but their texts are structured to transmit information in only one direction. That it, with the exception of editorial pages, the reader of a newspaper does not communicate back to the writer. Ideally, journalistic language is straightforward and presumes objectivity. In Merz's work, the neon numerals break that unidirectional means of communication, opening even a conservative voice to broader meanings. If, in his earlier works, the Fibonacci numbers had been interjected into the perceptions of leftist politics, this installation seems to ask if they might also be used to interrupt the messages of those on the right.

An artist's writing of 1976 bears a similar refusal of easy readings or short answers by using cryptic and poetic structures to address immense questions. In his essay "An Extremely Long Hard Sunday Approximately From 1966 and Now We Are In 1976," he used the image of Sunday, a day without labor, as a symbol of

⁹⁴ One of the oldest newspapers in Italy, *Il Resto del Carlino* is a conservative daily based in Bologna. <http://www.worldpress.org/newspapers/EUROPE/italy.cfm>. Accessed 18 November 2009.

art's role in resisting the dominant capitalist culture. He wrote that for himself and his colleagues, the period between 1966 and 1976 was a rupture; it was a period in which they were "undressing culture to see how it is made."⁹⁵ The comparison of an artist's function to that of a laborer centers on the moment outside of work, just as in *Fibonacci Naples* he focused on the pause in the middle of the workday. This suggested that the artist's role is on the margins of everyday politics: in the break, on the Sunday, and perhaps that the means by which he communicates must also be indirect.

Fibonacci Naples, seen in its historical context and alongside the theoretical model presented by Eco, emerges as a *summa* of Merz's engagement with the medieval. It combines his material investigation of neon, his interest in the relationship between the individual and the social, his political sympathies, and finally his use of the Fibonacci series as a rubric that might order to the vast chaotic experience of the world.⁹⁶ For Merz, as for Eco, the medieval represented a specific moment that was so remote as to be nearly mythological itself, yet it was also a deeply felt foundation for modern life and cultural customs.

⁹⁵ Mario Merz, "An Extremely Long Hard Sunday Approximately From 1966 and Now We Are In 1976," *I Want to Write A Book Right Now*, trans. Paul Blanchard (Turin: Hopefulmonster, 1989), 53-55.

⁹⁶ Merz wrote: "Fibonacci-Naples/artistic choice that does not describe free time/but (collective) real time." Merz, *I Want to Write*, 97.

Merz was aware that these references could provide alternative systems for organizing knowledge and, by extension, for accessing power. For example, when Trini asked him if his use of the Fibonacci numbers had anything to do with the question of art and life, Merz responded:

Do you mean the problem of art going out into the streets, etc.? This business of art and life can also be expressed in other terms. If we can apply this series [of numbers] to art, it means that in sociology ... we can include the terms of an idea which arises from the study of plant and animal proliferation. The change from Roman numbers to Arabic numerals is the undefineable quality that has overturned a system.⁹⁷

Just as the symbolic change from Roman numerals to Arabic numerals (the integers 0-9) created a fundamental shift of conceptual framework, reintroducing an outmoded system can fundamentally change the way people think about their interaction with the world. Moreover, Merz's project attests that even in works that focus on presence and reception, such historical references provide an important delay through which the viewer can actively engage the work. For him, connecting the foundations of modern science and industry found in medieval systems like the Fibonacci numbers and vernacular architecture like the igloo destabilized the rigid rationality of science and industry. Like the Fibonacci sequence itself, Merz's work reasserts the power of individual human experience at the root of even the most hierarchical social structures.

⁹⁷ Mario Merz, "interview by Tommaso Trini," 21. (Ellipses in the original.)

CONCLUSIONS

ARTE POVERA c. 1978: THE SPIRAL MOVES AWAY FROM THE CENTER

In 1979 Anselmo was offered a solo exhibition at the Kunsthalle Basel, and rather than create new work, he convened a group of older objects, including *Direction*, *Torsion*, and *Detail*, together into a single installation.¹ His retrospective glance serves as an important marker in the trajectory of the Turin School. Why in 1979 did he choose to look back at earlier works in this way? Perhaps he already understood that his project's openness was threatened by ossification if it entered too easily into the narrative of art's history. His recontextualizing gesture might also be seen as another iteration of his interest in horizontality, since individual works (especially those with the already-auratic status of being "Sixties objects") became equalized when collapsed into this kind of installation. On the other hand, perhaps the 1978 Venice Biennial had shown that there were already "barbarians" within the borders of the art world who endangered the model of engagement that characterized the artist's career. As such, Anselmo's reframing might have been a way to argue anew for his works' tactics. Counter to the convention that locates the end of the movement in 1971, a standard that follows Celant's assertion that the collective, revolutionary moment was "over" at the beginning of the decade,

¹ Though the terminology may seem peculiar, the artist himself uses "convene" to describe the way he brings these objects together. See Gianfranco Maraniello and Andrea Villiani, *Giovanni Anselmo*, (Bologna, MAMBo: 2007), 45.

Anselmo's retrospective move at this particular moment encourages new consideration of the periodization of *Arte povera* in Turin. In 1978, each of the Turin School artists experienced reversals, either in their works directly, or in their critical reception.

1978 was also a crossroads in the socio-political battles born in 1967. It was a significant turning point in the political legacy of the Sixties, after the disaffected youth movements of the mid-Seventies were violently repressed by the state.² While many historians cite 1977 as the lowest point in the immediate post-68 period, as the goals of these youths—the *Indiani Metropolitani*—diverged from those of organized labor and became increasingly affiliated with terrorist activities, 1978 was the year in which the popular sentiment began to truly shift away from radical politics.³ On 16 March 1978, the BR kidnapped Aldo Moro, the former Italian Prime minister and head of the

² Lumley devotes a chapter of *States of Emergency* to "the generation of year nine," which charts the emergence of the mid-Seventies movement out of the legacy of the late Sixties. He identifies the differences between the two moments, primarily the fact that many of the later movement were of the working class, not bourgeois students fighting on behalf of labor. Finally, he argues that the fracturing of the later youth groups under the political and institutional pressures applied in 1977 led to their falling under the shadow of the armed struggles. See Robert Lumley, *States of Emergency Cultures of Revolt in Italy from 1968 to 1978* (New York: Verso, 1990), 295-312.

³ Asor Rosa argues that in the wake of the crackdown of 1977, the youth movement was both cleaved from the labor movement and suffered internal divisions that led Italian youth down one of two paths: private life and narcissism, or extreme and often random violence. See Alberto Asor Rosa, *Le Due Società*, (Turin: Einaudi, 1977), vii-viii.

Christian Democrat party (DC).⁴ He was held for 54 days, during which time photographs of Moro holding current newspapers under the BR star were frequently mailed to the press to prove that he was still alive (fig. 91). These photographs appeared in the papers week after week until Moro's body was recovered on 9 May 1978 from the trunk of a car in Rome symbolically parked between the headquarters of the PCI and DC, whose interests Moro had controversially sought to align. Though the BR's activities continued well into the 1980s, Moro's death served as a call to seek further conciliation between radical political divides.⁵ Although the BR's assassination of Moro was meant to show their strength and rally public support, it did the opposite, especially in Turin, where, as Turinese political historian Carlo Marletti argues, it alienated the majority of workers in the city's major factories from their cause and garnered support among only a small fringe of extremists.⁶ In fact, in Turin, the tide had already begun to turn a few months earlier, when the BR

⁴ For further details in English see Richard Drake, *The Aldo Moro Murder Case* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995) and Leonardo Sciascia, *The Moro Affair and the Mystery of Majorana*, trans. Sascha Rabinowitch (New York: Carcanet, 1987).

⁵ Ginsborg, 384-5, 401-3. Lumely also identifies this event as bringing a symbolic close to the years of protest and the beginning of a period of reclusiveness and narcissism. See Lumley, *States of Emergency*, 337.

⁶ Carlo Marletti, "Uccidere in nome delle idèe: Continuità e mutamenti del terrorismo ideologico e politico degli Anni Settanta e Ottanta," in *Il Piemonte e Torino alla Prova dal Terrorismo*, ed. Roberto Tutino (Turin: Rubbettino, 2004), 32. Marletti, a political historian at the University of Turin, describes the labor unions that actively demonstrated *against* the actions of the BR after Moro was killed. Also see Marletti for account of Casalengo case.

assassinated the vice-editor of *La Stampa*, Carlo Casalengo, and the local populace filled the grand Piazza San Carlo to demonstrate against terrorism (fig. 92). In 1978 many Italians encouraged the restoration of order after a decade of unrest.⁷

In June 1978, only a month after Moro's assassination, the Venice Biennial opened with an exhibition looking at the intersections of art and nature: *Dall' arte alla natura, dall'natura alle arte* (From Art to Nature, From Nature to Art). It included all four of the Turin School artists, along with many of the other leading *Arte povera* figures. It was of little surprise that these artists figured into this survey of contemporary art, because the exhibition's curator, Bonito Oliva, had played a significant role in *Arte povera*'s development in the 1960s and 70s, writing about the artists' works and including them in exhibitions. Even the theme seemed tailor-made for Anselmo, Merz, Penone, and Zorio. Introducing the exhibition's premise, the organizers wrote that representation, or "the correspondence between the aesthetic object and the natural object," was no longer art's goal. Instead, they argued that contemporary practices aimed at the kind of engaged, phenomenological relationship between the viewer and the object I have described here, one in which "the interaction between a

⁷ Crainz cites this response of the general public and further argues that the years of 1978-80 were the final violent throes of terrorism as it became threatened by the state's crackdown. Again, though it is beyond the scope of this study, he also discusses the corruption that continued into the 1980s as reactionary, right-wing politicians assumed greater power. See Guido Crainz, *Il Paese Mancato: Dal miracolo economico agli anni ottanta*, vol. 2 of *L'Italia Contemporanea* (Rome: Donzelli editore, 2003), 587-91.

subject, with all of his memories and experiences, understandings and desires, and an object" triumphs over traditional concepts of nature.⁸ But were the *Arte povera* artists' works being celebrated by Bonito Oliva as vanguard, or were they being put to rest in the central pavilion of the Biennial, to make way for another generation?

Zorio's contributions to the 1978 Biennial demonstrated that his symbols and tactics continued to hold relevance. Indeed, perhaps the five-pointed star, which he exhibited both as an object with a javelin attached to its side (*Stella con giavellotti*) (1978) and cut into the exhibition floor with an oxy-hydrogen flame (*Stella bruciata*) (1971-78), contained even more powerful associations in the weeks following Moro's death at the hands of the star-spangled BR. That same year, Zorio produced a work that brought together two important strands of his work, the star and the purification vessels. *Star to Purify Words* (*Stella per purificare le parole*) is a three-dimensional leather star filled with alcohol (fig. 93). Is the combination of the two lines of the artist's project characteristic of the socio-political moment in which compromise and conciliation were paramount? Within this context, one might speculatively read Zorio's star-shaped vessel made of (animal) skin as an allegorical call to purify and transform the divisive national political and social discourse. Here, Zorio's star—whether emblematic of the star of the alchemist, the U.S., the U.S.S.R.,

⁸ Achille Bonito Oliva, et al., *Artenatura* (Venice: Edizione La Biennale de Venezia and Milan: Electa, 1978), 5.

or the BR—might be cleansed by the indistinctiveness of the layers, or the fluidity with which it slides from one into the other. One might also argue that in this moment the symbolism of these works also began to seem overtly political, overtaking the experimental, philosophical, and alchemical connotations these signs had previously evoked.

At the Biennial, Merz retrospectively exhibited some of his first sculptural works: a group of his early neon pieces titled *Horse Theater* (Teatro cavallo) (1967), and one of the early igloos, *Never has stone been raised on stone* (Mai alzato pietra su pietra) (1967-68). Later in 1978, however, Merz returned to the medium he had abandoned a decade earlier, taking a paintbrush in hand again. Whereas in the late 1960s the artist presented taxidermied animals with neon Fibonacci numbers trailing behind them on the wall, he now painted large canvases with representations of mythical beasts. Merz has said that he needed to revisit painting, to “negate the assumption that painting was something self-contained.”⁹ Indeed, he encrusted canvases with a bricolage of objects like leaves and snail shells, and sometimes caked them with clay and mud. Perhaps the Biennial’s retrospective look at his sculptural works prompted the artist to see if he could go back and attain the same relationship between viewer and work in painting that he had achieved with objects. Some critics have cynically suggested that Merz’s return to

⁹ Mario Merz, “Interview, Turin, 1983,” in *Mario Merz* (exhibition catalogue), ed. Germano Celant, trans. Joachim Neugroschel (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation and Milan: Electa, 1989), 52-3.

painting was market-driven.¹⁰ However, it is more productive to consider that by revisiting the early neon pieces in the Biennial, the artist became interested in using painting to amplify his own subjectivity, while simultaneously trying to hold onto an open, vital character. To be certain, 1978 marked another turning point in Merz's own thinking about his practice, but like the other three artists, he was still committed to the core principles of "open works."

Penone's projects of that year also partook of a retrospection of sorts. A decade after creating *Maritime Alps*, he returned to the sites of these first interventions to document the continued interactions between the industrially-marked traces of his touch and the natural materials of the forest. For the Biennial, Penone exhibited a recent, untitled project: a wall-sized panoramic drawing that enlarged an impression of his own skin (*Senza titolo*) (1977). According to the artist, the transposition of the enlarged imprint of his skin to the wall required creating a "skin" of graphite for the wall.¹¹ The borders of the room were thus imagined as the boundaries of the artist's and the viewer's reversible sense of touch. This work,

¹⁰ Curator Francesco Bonami charges, that Merz's return to painting can be attributed to the simultaneous rise of the *Transavanguardia* painters. He wrote that exhibitions of *Arte povera* in the early 1980s revealed that figures like Kounellis, Calzolari and Merz had also recently: "succumbed to the allure of painting, an issue never fully rejected by the artists but now crucial for success on the international scene." Francesco Bonami, "Now We Begin," in *Zero to Infinity: Arte Povera 1962-1972*, ed. Richard Flood and Frances Morris (Minneapolis, Walker Art Center and London: Tate Modern, 2001), 114.

¹¹ Penone, quoted in *Artenatura*, by Bonito Oliva, et al, 141.

and the related *Eyelid* (Palpebre) (1978) – a mural-sized drawing of the imagined view through the artist's eyelids – continued his interest in the dialogue between visual and tactile perception.¹² However, unlike *To Turn One's Eyes Inside Out*, these later works veer away from the action-based tactics that had characterized his 60s and 70s works, and toward representational approaches. Akin, perhaps, to the increased withdrawal from the social sphere by the younger generation after 1977, these works also turn slightly inward from the more engaged works of the previous decade. Were such new works related to the changing social moment? How could these structural solutions arrived at in 1967-68 continue to argue for the role of the artist in society in 1978?

Eco, too, must be considered in the cultural shift that marked that year. During Moro's 54 days in sequester, Eco began working on his first novel, *The Name of the Rose* (1980), which put his social and semiological theories into practice by dealing with the political crisis obliquely: it is a murder mystery set in a medieval monastery. He used tactics and structures first identified in *The Open Work* to engage readers in a semiological game: the book is layered with suggestions that it was to be read allegorically.¹³ For example, it opens with a fictional narrative

¹² For more on this work and a discussion of the way this work focuses attention on an interior life, see Guy Tosatto, "Eyelid," in *Giuseppe Penone 1968-1998* (exhibition catalogue), trans. Elena Brizio et al. (Galego: Centro Galego de Arte Contemporanea, 1999), 189-93.

¹³ In the separate volume published after the novel, Eco suggests that his novel sets a trap for willing readers who want to play

frame, in which the author establishes distance by stating that he is retelling a story that was told to him. Specifically, Eco wrote that on 16 August 1968, he was handed an 18th-century book that itself reproduced a 14th-century manuscript.¹⁴ He ended this narrator's introduction to the novel saying that when he first received this manuscript: "there was a widespread conviction one should write only out of a commitment to the present, in order to change the world. Now after ten years or more, the man of letters [...] can happily write out of pure love of writing."¹⁵ In the spring of 1978, Eco was, like the artists, using his practice to reflect back on the previous decade. Since the form of this work is a novel, which some had argued was dead in the late 1960s, it can be considered a return to tradition.

Most of the Turin School artists, however, strayed only modestly from the tactics and principles of their earlier works. Still, they can be seen against a backdrop in which many aimed to restore order in the art world.¹⁶ In 1979, Bonito Oliva

his game. It is also in this volume that he testifies to beginning work on the novel precisely during the time that Moro was being held by the BR. See Umberto Eco, *Postscript to The Name of the Rose*, trans. William Weaver (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1984), 5, 53.

¹⁴ Though I have looked, I have not been able to find any special significance to the date of August 16, 1968. I do think that it is important that in his 1980 novel, Eco refers back to 1968. By renouncing the suggestion that the stories might carry any meaning, Eco provoked his readers to look for it.

¹⁵ Umberto Eco, *Il Nome Della Rosa* (Milan: Bompiani, 1980). Reprinted in English as *The Name of the Rose*, (1983) trans. William Weaver (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1994), 5. Page citations are to the English edition.

¹⁶ Bonami, 115.

followed in Celant's footsteps and published a manifesto for a new generation of Italian artists in the pages *Flash Art*. Bonito Oliva had earlier lauded the *Arte povera* artists' model of artistic engagement for "undermin[ing] partiality," and had included all of the Turin School artists in "his" Venice Biennial. Only a year later, however, he reversed on these artists to stake his claim on a new generation, writing: "During the Sixties there was a moralistic connotation to art, even avant-garde art: in its critical ambition, *Arte povera* pursued a repressive, masochistic line..."¹⁷ He argued that the new generation, here labeled "*Transavanguardia*" for the first time, was different because, contrary to the traditional aims of the avant-garde, it no longer confused art and life. Moreover, he claimed that each artist of this new group, which included Sandro Chia, Francesco Clemente, Enzo Cucchi, Nicola De Maria, and Mimmo Paladino, eschewed the collective social good for hermeticism and individuality. In direct opposition to the object-based, empowering physicality of Turin School *Arte povera* that Bonito Oliva once championed, the new generation of artists were primarily painters based in Rome who focused on personal symbolisms and signs that were "utterable only through the

¹⁷ Achille Bonito Oliva, "La Trans-Avanguardia Italiana," *Flash Art*, no. 92-93 (October-November 1979): 17-20. Reprinted in English as "The Italian Trans-Avant Garde," in *Transavanguardia* (exhibition catalogue), ed. Ida Gianelli, trans. Isabel Varea and Ros Schwarz (Turin: Castello di Rivoli/Milan: Skira, 2002), 271-5. Page citations are to the English edition.

grammar of vision" and foregrounded the artists' subjectivity.¹⁸

While analyzing the merits of this new generation are well beyond the scope of this study, Bonito Oliva's text provides a resounding punctuation mark, effectively ending the era that Celant had inaugurated a decade earlier with "Notes for a Guerrilla War." Challenged by the escapism of this new artistic direction, perhaps 1978-9 were precisely the years for the Turin School artists to revisit older works, and to reconsider their roles as artists in society.

Bonito Oliva's turn against the artists he formerly embraced reveals that he, too, saw something in the 1978 Biennial that changed his view of *Arte povera*.¹⁹ With the exception of Merz's later forays into painting, the artists' works had not radically changed, yet it was clear that the times had. *Arte povera's* contextual backdrop faded at the close of the *anni di piombo*, and the themes of transformation, malleability, organic interdependence, activism, and radical energy were no longer the values of an increasingly individualistic, cautious, and closed society. The artists' impulses to adopt a means of address that engaged viewers in the co-production of meaning were sparked in the intense moment of their artistic maturity c. 1968, but their resonance with such left-wing social values became less

¹⁸ Bonito Oliva, "Trans-Avant Garde," 273.

¹⁹ Bonito Oliva began to write about a new generation even earlier, as evidenced by his publications and exhibitions of the 1970s such as *L'ideologia del traditore* (Milan: Electa, 1976). The radical turn from the text of the 1978 Venice Biennial to the directly denigrating words used in the *Transavanguardia* manifesto, however, is remarkable.

pronounced as the political pendulum swung back to the right in 1978. With this shift, the new generation emphasized opposite values: aura, narrative, internal drama, and separation from the outside world. These principles connected with the ethos of a new era.²⁰ In this conservative turn, the viewer was reassured by the myth of the hero artist, rather than challenged to consider that he was no different from a piece of stone, a tree, or grain of sand.

As Celant announced the start of *Arte povera*, his voice has also held considerable sway in the literature in defining its end as a moment when the artists' individual careers gathered momentum, marked less by individual exhibitions than by the critic's first publication of a monograph (on Paolini) in 1972. However, this study has shown that the artists' whole attitude toward making work did not necessarily change when they achieved individual critical success. Instead, for projects that were structurally engaged with their social moment, it is more productive to bracket them with the end of a socio-political era. The Turinese artists' tactics may have temporarily lost significance for a country that was eager to move on from the divisive politics of the *anni di piombo*, but today they are valuable to us as social documents of an era that ended in the late 1970s. Their projects are also significant for the

²⁰ By the close of the 1970s, the center shifted back to the political capital, Rome. In 1981, for example, Sperone closed his Turin gallery and focused his attention on a new space in the "eternal city" where Sandro Chia was already showing in 1979. Anna Minola et al, *Gian Enzo Sperone: Torino, Roma, New York*, vol. II (Turin: Hopefulmonster, 2000), 12.

contemporary artistic paradigm because they are models for a relationship between art and its social context that has recently reemerged. In the beginning of the twenty-first century, the politics and positions of the late 1960s are being mined both in the social and aesthetic spheres. This might account for the recent re-emergence of the artistic strategies born of that era, evidenced, for example, by Eco's *The Open Work* appearing in an anthology of texts on "participation" and relational aesthetics, and the renewed popularity of *Arte povera* for scholars and exhibition curators alike. Surprisingly, it is with the distance provided by the last forty years that *Arte povera* and its contexts can be studied without the muddiness of contextual particulars. The artists' oeuvres can also demonstrate possible solutions to the challenges facing artists and critics today. Most importantly, because the Turin School artists' works primarily related to their political moment tactically rather than thematically, they can be revisited and appreciated without nostalgia for the specific political issues of the years in which they were made.

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