



*Pino Pascali with Colomba della pace,  
1965. Photograph by Claudio Abate.*

# From Vietnam to Fiat-nam: The Politics of Arte Povera\*

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*We're already in the midst of a guerrilla war.*

—Germano Celant, “Arte Povera: Appunti per una guerriglia,” 1967<sup>1</sup>

*War, no—Guerrilla action, yes.*

—Italian student political slogan, 1968<sup>2</sup>

“First came man, then the system. That is the way it used to be. Now it’s society that produces, and it’s man that consumes.”<sup>3</sup> This was the opening salvo from Germano Celant’s manifesto “Arte Povera: Appunti per una guerriglia” (Arte Povera: notes for a guerrilla war), which launched the group upon its publication in *Flash Art* in November 1967.<sup>4</sup> Celant’s overtly politicized tract proclaimed Arte Povera’s radical dimension, invoking revolutionary rhetoric as an attack on consumerism. Critiquing the superstructure of capitalism, invoking class struggle, and questioning the “use value” of art, the language of violence co-opted by Celant was consonant with the Italian political situation of the time.<sup>5</sup> By 1968, Celant’s metaphorical guerrilla war was also appropriated by dissenting university students, who identified themselves with political heroes such as Fidel Castro,

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1. Germano Celant, “Arte Povera: Appunti per una guerriglia,” *Flash Art* 5 (November/December 1967), p. 3.

2. See Paul Ginsborg, *A History of Contemporary Italy: 1943–1980* (London: Penguin, 1990), pp. 306–07.

3. Celant, “Arte Povera: Appunti per una guerriglia,” p. 3.

4. This text was in fact the second that Celant had written on Arte Povera. The first, “Arte Povera—Im Spazio,” was produced for the catalog of the exhibition of the same name at Galleria La Bertesca, Genoa, in September 1967. See Germano Celant, *Arte Povera—Im Spazio* (Genoa: La Bertesca, 1967).

5. As Jean-François Chevrier has observed of the pivotal nature of the year 1967: “In terms of the critical possibilities that emerged in this space of crisis, I’d like to talk about use value. . . . Use value is a Marxist concept that was reworked in that period, like others such as commodity fetishism, which was fundamental to the anti-object thinking of conceptual art.” See Jean-François Chevrier, Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, and Catherine David, “The Political Potential of Art 2,” in *Politics, Poetics: Documenta X, the Book* (Ostfildern-Ruit, Germany: Cantz, 1997), p. 628.

Chairman Mao, Ho Chi Minh, and Che Guevara and espoused the guerrilla tactics of General Nguyen Giap, predicting, “The university will be our Vietnam.”<sup>6</sup>

The language of guerrilla warfare echoed through Celant’s text, ricocheted through the universities, and was inscribed upon Mario Merz’s *Iglou di Giap* (Giap’s igloo) of 1968. Merz scrawled a statement on guerrilla tactics ascribed to the Vietcong general in neon across a hemispherical structure covered in sandbags, imbuing it with revolutionary intent: “*Se il nemico si concentra perde terreno, se si disperde perde forza*” (If the enemy concentrates, he loses ground; if he scatters, he loses force). The nexus between the simultaneously aggressive and defensive aesthetic of Merz’s work, Celant’s rhetoric, and Giap’s strategy is suggestive of how, in the late 1960s in Italy, invoking the ideology of guerrilla warfare acted not only as a reference to, and condemnation of, the presence of U.S. troops in Vietnam, but was also deployed as a charged metaphor for the struggle against American imperialism. If America’s military interventions in Vietnam and economic and cultural involvement in Italy were aimed at halting the spread of Communism in both countries, then this unlikely solidarity was used in Italy to legitimize and redeploy a “new wave of anti-Americanism.”<sup>7</sup> Therefore, the language of turf warfare and contested ground referred to by General Giap, quoted by Merz, appropriated by Celant, and claimed by the students of ’68 marked an alignment where guerrilla war served as an analog for cultural rivalry, peasant resistance as a model for Arte Povera’s renunciation of consumerism, and Vietnam as a metaphor for university protests.

Celant’s desire to dismantle the barricades between art and life, between politics and aesthetics, was short-lived, however. Arte Povera’s metaphorical armed struggle prefigured actual violence, and once the utopian ideals of 1968, which Celant’s writings anticipated, degenerated into the dystopian reality of the bombings, assassinations, and terrorism of the early 1970s, Celant’s prophetic words of 1967 accrued a more sinister meaning, when he spoke of “A revolutionary existence becoming terror.”<sup>8</sup> The violent rhetoric of Celant’s early theorizations of Arte Povera, which invoked anarchist thought and spoke of the viewer being “truncheoned” by the aesthetic assault of the artists, was recanted once the student battles gave way to real violence and Arte Povera achieved international recognition. The fact remains, however, that Celant has spoken of the “undeniable” reciprocity between Arte Povera and politics, and his theoretical framings of the group were inextricably linked to Italy’s political background, with both the founding manifesto and his call for the group’s dispersal in 1971 enmeshed in its

6. Ginsborg, *A History of Contemporary Italy*, pp. 306–07.

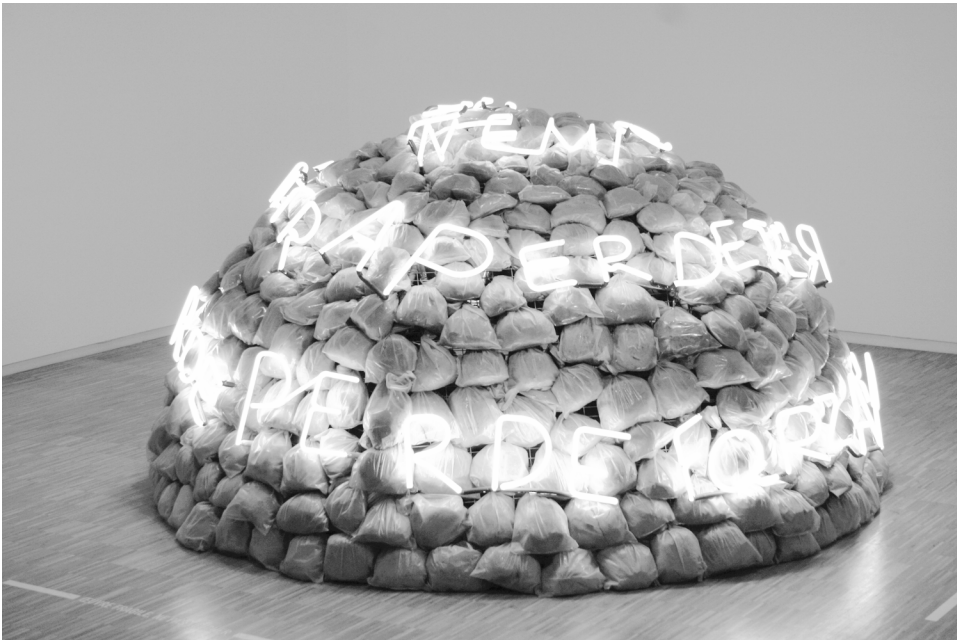
7. As Massimo Teodori writes, “During the 1960s a new wave of anti-Americanism went through Italian politics and society, fostered by the protest movements which originated in the U.S. itself. Both the traditional Communists and . . . different credos, Marxist-Leninist, Maoist, Trotskyist, thirdworldist, took the variegated world of that protest—the student revolts, the campaigns for civil rights and against poverty, and the opposition to the war in Vietnam—for something similar to a revolutionary movement of a Marxist and Communist left.” Massimo Teodori, *Maledetti Americani: Destra, sinistra e cattolici: storia del pregiudizio antiamericano* (Milan: Arnoldo Mondadori Editori, 2002), p. 85.

8. Celant, “Arte Povera: Appunti per una guerriglia,” p. 3.

respective potential and failure to respond to the contemporary social situation.<sup>9</sup> Arte Povera therefore had two interrelated political agendas: a real art-world battle against American hegemony and a romanticized revolution that legitimized this insurgency. Added to this was the group's own delicate and occasionally divisive internal politics, with Celant's tendency to speak on behalf of the artists causing friction among the members of the collective. Even if they shared a political position—one that was often ambivalent—the gap between Celant's critical and curatorial ambitions and the artists' individual agendas made this a fragile alliance.

This article explores these issues and the political dilemma for Italian artists of the period against the backdrop of the growing outrage over the Vietnam War, student riots, workers' strikes, and the beginnings of terrorism in the country. The recent resurgence of interest in and rapid translation of political philosophers such as Antonio Negri and Paolo Virno—who began as founding members of the radical political group Potere Operaio (Worker's power) during this period—suggests that a reappraisal of Arte Povera in terms

9. Germano Celant, *Arte Povera/Art Povera* (Milan: Electa, 1985), p. 15.



Mario Merz. *Igloo di Giap*. 1968. © Mario Merz by SIAE.

of its relationship to politics is overdue.<sup>10</sup> Now, more often eulogized than analyzed by authors either unwilling or unable to critically examine the group, Arte Povera may accept a richer reading through reincorporating a historical framework that reframes it in a social and political context. This task is complicated, however, by prevalent formalist and apolitical readings of Arte Povera that have championed style over substance, presupposing something innately Italian about it—a condition that Roland Barthes has termed “Italianicity.”<sup>11</sup> An example of this approach, which describes Arte Povera as if it were another over-aestheticized but beautifully designed Italian export, along with Alessi appliances and Illy coffee cups, is the following: “Above all, they are Italian in their ability to present images which, however ‘ordinary,’ are handled with uncanny ‘style.’”<sup>12</sup> However, privileging the aesthetics of Arte Povera to the exclusion of more contentious issues may in itself be symptomatic of a problematic political background. As Claudio Fogu has argued, the construct of an innately Italian sense of style may well be the most durable and insidious legacy of Fascism: “Lest we want to give in to that dangerously essentialist notion that Italians have style in their blood, we cannot but recognize that this cultural construct . . . might be the most enduring legacy of Fascist modernism.”<sup>13</sup>

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Celant’s rhetoric was indicative of a youth movement that, as Paul Ginsborg has argued in his history of postwar Italy, accepted “a dangerously casual attitude towards violence, adopting contemporary South American and Asian liberation struggles as their models, with little reflection on their applicability or likely consequences in the Italian situation.”<sup>14</sup> Celant’s appropriation of the model of Asian and Latin American urban guerrilla movements for his manifesto was an analogous position to the one that would ultimately be taken up by “red terrorism,” with a two-volume study of the Tupamaros published by Feltrinelli becoming “a

10. See, for example, *Grey Room* 21 (Fall, 2005), which published an interview with Paolo Virno and translated several of his texts. Antonio Negri’s collected writings from the 1970s were recently published as *Books for Burning: Between Civil War and Democracy in 1970s Italy*, trans. Arianna Bove, Ed Emery, Timothy S. Murphy, and Francesca Novello (London and New York: Verso, 2005), while Sylvère Lotringer and Christian Marazzi’s 1980 collection of essays, *Autonomia: Post-Political Politics*, was reissued by Semiotext(e) in 2007.

11. Barthes uses this term in his analysis of a French advertisement for the Italian pasta brand Panzani. He writes: “Its signifier is the congruence of the tomato, the pepper, and the tricolor (yellow, red, green) print of the ad; its signified is Italy, or rather Italianicity.” Roland Barthes, “Rhetoric of the Image,” in *The Responsibility of Forms: Critical Essays on Music, Art, and Representation*, trans. Richard Howard (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1985), pp. 21–40, esp. p. 22.

12. Caroline Tisdall, “Materia: The Context of Arte Povera,” in *Italian Art in the Twentieth Century* (London: Royal Academy of Arts, 1989), pp. 363–68, esp. p. 364.

13. Claudio Fogu, *The Historic Imaginary: Politics of History in Fascist Italy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003), p. 204.

14. Ginsborg, *A History of Contemporary Italy*, p. 313.

sort of do-it-yourself manual for the early Red Brigades.”<sup>15</sup> Celant’s original conception of Arte Povera referenced Marx and served notice of a rejection of “consumer society,” eschewed the debased role of the artist as producer, and criticized Pop art and “primary structures.” While the language of Celant’s writing is often opaque, and his politics vague, certain affinities can be established. The oppositional stance of Celant’s texts on Arte Povera, for example, which link cultural hegemony to broader socio-political issues, is reminiscent of the writings of Antonio Gramsci, whose *Quaderni del Carcere* (*Prison Notebooks*, 1948–51) called for a successful revolution to be preceded by a war of ideas, and posited the utopian possibility that politics could be influenced by art and culture.<sup>16</sup>

Celant’s characterization of Arte Povera reflects Italy’s struggle to reconcile and adapt to its transition from a relatively impoverished and predominantly agrarian country ravaged by World War II to the rapidly industrializing nation propelled by the Marshall Plan–backed *miracolo italiano*, or economic miracle, in the late 1950s and early ’60s. Together with American aid, the growth of companies such as the Turin-based automobile company Fiat (which by 1967 was selling more cars in Europe than any other company) and other firms such as Olivetti and Zanussi contributed to Italy’s burgeoning foreign trade. Yet this “miracle” caused Italy a great deal of social tension and upheaval. A case in point was the dislocation engendered through the geographical and economic schism of mass migration from the poor South to the rich North. This diaspora was documented in Luchino Visconti’s *Rocco e i suoi fratelli* (*Rocco and His Brothers*) of 1960, which juxtaposed the harsh reality of the North’s newfound prosperity against the South’s pool of cheap labor. Visconti’s modern fable was a testament both to the dramatic transformation that Italy experienced during this time and the struggle for some of its populace to keep pace with this change.

#### L’USA usa: *From Venice to Vietnam*

In 1969, Emilio Prini produced *L’USA usa*, a play on words that translates as “the USA uses.” The work consisted of a tape machine that continuously recorded the sound of its own mechanism until this incessant usage caused it to self-destruct, echoing the cannibalistic aspect of capitalism. If we rewind to the emergence of Arte Povera, it must be foregrounded against two situations in Italy

15. Ibid., p. 362. During the late 1960s and early ’70s in Italy, there was a groundswell of interest in this guerrilla group. See, for example, Oscar José Dueñas Ruiz and Mirna Rugnon de Dueñas, *Tupamaros* (Milan: Sapere, 1974); and Alain Labrousse, *I Tupamaros: la guerriglia urbana in Uruguay* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1971).

16. The first edition of Gramsci’s *Quaderni del Carcere* was arranged according to the subjects Gramsci pondered during his imprisonment, and included the role of the intellectual, the party as “modern prince,” and the “national-popular” tradition in Italian history. The definitive critical edition was published in four volumes as Antonio Gramsci, *Quaderni del Carcere*, ed. Valentino Gerratana (Turin: Einaudi, 1975).

that caused widespread anti-Americanism—the art-world politics of the ascendancy of American Pop art, which reached its apotheosis with Robert Rauschenberg’s Grand Prize for painting at the 1964 Venice Biennale, and the accompanying outrage over the Vietnam War.

The controversy over Rauschenberg’s victory at the Biennale, during the year in which the U.S. Pavilion was under the auspices of the American government for the first time, spread beyond the pavilions, as cardinals and Communists converged to deplore the “Biennale of Pop Art.”<sup>17</sup> The Italian press published hostile reviews of the American contingent at the Biennale, with Turin’s *La Stampa* characterizing (or caricaturing) them as “modern-savages, psychically close to those redskins who a century ago celebrated their rites wearing crushed top-hats on their heads and sardine cans around their hips . . . they obviously do not represent the intelligentsia of a great progressive country.”<sup>18</sup> Milan’s *Corriere della Sera* was more succinct: “We reject an American art which does not defend the values of the spirit. . . . If this is America, then America is treason.”<sup>19</sup> This American onslaught induced parallels to the invasion of Vietnam.<sup>20</sup> The following year, anger over Vietnam reached a crescendo with nationwide protests across Italy on December 21, 1965. These demonstrations were reflected (literally) in Michelangelo Pistoletto’s mirror painting *Vietnam* (1965), which showed one of the political protests against the situation and drew the viewer involuntarily into the crowd, defying him or her merely to remain as a passive viewer.

The same year as Pistoletto’s mirror painting, Pino Pascali produced a body of bricolage works constructed from consumer detritus. Water pipes, light meters, tires, camping equipment, and even a Fiat carburetor were reconfigured into full-scale facsimiles of cannons, missile launchers, and machine guns. While the theatricality of Pascali’s *Le Armi* (Weapons, 1965) testified directly to his training as a set designer, their intention, like that of Pistoletto’s cipher-like mirrors, is more debatable. Claudio Abate’s iconic photographs of Pascali posing with his weapons depict him as a proud provocateur and include machismo displays of the artist appropriating the missile *Colomba della pace* (Dove of peace) as an oversized phallus and posturing as a soldier. But if Pascali’s weapons were a joke, his gallerist

17. For example, the patriarch of Venice, Cardinal Urbani, condemned the “moral disorder” of the “disintegration of the human image” and banned clerics from attending the exhibition. This veto reached the Vatican, when the official newspaper *Osservatore Romano* supported his decision against the “grotesque relics, attic junk with the addition of . . . indecent ostentations, offending the moral sensibility.” *Pravda* was even more severe, condemning the Pop art on display in the Biennale as a “tragic carnival,” instead praising Soviet Socialist Realism. See Tullia Zevi, “The Biennale: How Evil Is Pop Art,” in Steven Henry Madoff, ed., *Pop Art: A Critical History* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1997), pp. 124–26, esp. pp. 124–25.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 125.

19. *Ibid.*

20. Antonio Recalcati, one of the Italian artists exhibiting at the 1964 Venice Biennale, commented: “The invasion of Pop art for Europeans was like the Vietnam invasion—it was marketed as a real invasion.” Interview with the artist, Paris, May 20, 2003.



Michelangelo Pistoletto.  
Vietnam. 1965.

was not laughing. Plinio de Martiis, owner of Rome's Galleria della Tartaruga and a former champion of the artist, refused to exhibit the works, and instead, at the suggestion of Pistoletto, they were exhibited in January 1966 at the Galleria Gian Enzo Sperone in Turin—housed in the same building as the Turinese headquarters of the Partito Comunista Italiano, or PCI. Ironically, de Martiis's reluctance to exhibit Pascali's weapons may not have been because they were presumed to be anti-American statements against the Vietnam War, but because they were perceived as too close to Pop art, an aesthetic about which Sperone, who had shown the work of Roy Lichtenstein, James Rosenquist, and Andy Warhol when his gallery first opened in 1963, had fewer reservations. While the reading of these works as a serious comment on or against the situation in Vietnam is

ultimately implausible, considering their opacity and sarcasm, their at least superficial connotations certainly colored their reception.

A more persuasive interpretation may lie in the titles of Pascali's weapons. With names such as *Cannone "Bella Ciao"* (The "Goodbye Beautiful/Lover" cannon, 1965), which referenced a popular partisan song from 1943, they perhaps refer not to the contemporaneous war in Vietnam, but to the memory of World War II.<sup>21</sup> When Allied forces first gained entry to mainland Italy in 1943, landing on the shores of Pascali's hometown of Bari, the artist was eight years old. I would like to return to the Claudio Abate photograph of Pascali with his weapons and compare it to a little-seen childhood photograph, which shows the infant Pascali posing with a rifle. Pascali's recollections of playing war games as a child, because "our fathers were at war," and the visual similarities between the two photographs suggest a

21. On the history of popular Italian political songs, see Stefano Pivato, *Bella ciao. Canto e politica nella storia d'Italia con un scelta di testi* (Bari and Rome: Editori Laterza, 2005).



source for his subsequent desire to conflate conflict with childish role-play.<sup>22</sup> If the nostalgic language of childhood has often been invoked as an easy trope to describe Pascali's works, then this is a childhood complicated by the memory of Fascist Italy. In a eulogy to Pascali, written after he died in a motorcycle accident in 1968, Jannis Kounellis spoke of "the trauma of the American landing" as informing Pascali's works, leaving a "visual imprint of the weapons, the kit, the tents, the trucks . . . the dream of a world that is formed in childhood, not as some lyrical event."<sup>23</sup>



*A young Pascali, posing with rifle.*

Kounellis's reading of Pascali's work acknowledges the lingering nostalgia but complicates this soft-focus yearning with the hard-edged political reality that was both artists' inheritance. The impact of the ongoing "trauma of the American landing" was shown by the public reaction when an updated version of the American fighter-planes of Pascali's childhood returned to Italy the same year his weapons were shown. In 1966, James Rosenquist's *F-111* (1964–65) was exhibited in Rome, attracting much negative commentary in the left-wing Italian press, which, perhaps wounded by the work's spaghetti backdrop, failed to see the self-critique implied in the co-existing images of war and plenty. While Rosenquist's antiwar statement was misread in Italy as a glorification of the very values he was attacking, Pascali's much more ambivalent weapons were at first shunned for being too reminiscent of American Pop art, and then, as we shall see, hijacked to prove the artist's anti-Vietnam War stance (a stance that was often conflated with being anti-American). In this charged situation, much could be lost in translation.

#### *Minimal Investment: Marshall Aid and Minimalismo*

Arte Povera arose out of a society devastated by World War II and subsequently rebuilt with the help of American Marshall Aid. Within this context, Pop art and Minimalism tended to be viewed in Italy as another exported product from a technological and industrialized country. As Benjamin Buchloh has

22. Pino Pascali, handwritten statement, reprinted in Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, *Arte Povera*, trans. Liz Heron (London and New York: Phaidon, 1999), p. 264.

23. Jannis Kounellis, "Per Pascali," *Qui Arte Contemporanea* 5 (March 1969), pp. 22–23, esp. p. 23.

pointed out, “To the very extent that the Italian misreading of American Minimalist sculpture emphasized *technology* as its primary mode of production, Arte Povera took up an explicitly antitechnological stance.”<sup>24</sup> Further, these American exports were placed in opposition to a sensuous Arte Povera rich in references to Mediterranean culture, history, and memory, the materials of which were invested with a heavy freight of political and ideological associations, while its titular signification tied it to notions of political economy.

This reading is evident in Piero Gilardi’s 1969 text *Politics and the Avant-Garde*, which drew from Marshall McLuhan, Chairman Mao, and Herbert Marcuse to develop a critique of contemporary art. Gilardi examined Pop art’s perpetuation of the “myth of a classless society, encouraged by the planning of consumption,” and argued for continuity, rather than rupture, between Pop art and Minimalism, after their shared inception in an advanced capitalist society: “The Pop dimension has spread from 1965 onwards; its content has been reduced to essentials; the reductive experience of Primary Structures and Minimal art has been born. . . . The ideology of the consumer and of the information society remains; artists, however, having pursued their analysis of its iconography to the limit, now concentrate their attention on its entropic structure.”<sup>25</sup> As the reception of Rosenquist’s *F-111* in Italy demonstrated, there was little room for ambiguity in the perception of American art during this period. Much as a work that featured images of American consumerism and atom bombs had to be in favor of those values, according to a certain Italian reading, even Minimalism could not be conceived as a critique of Pop art’s celebration of capitalist society (let alone could the implicit criticality of Pop art itself be considered): to be from America was to be unquestioningly for America.

In his infamous interview with Bruce Glaser, and alongside Frank Stella, Donald Judd stated, “I’m totally uninterested in European art and I think it’s over with.”<sup>26</sup> Elsewhere in the interview, Judd spoke of “the structures, values, feelings of the whole European tradition. It suits me fine if that’s all down the drain.”<sup>27</sup> Judd’s reviews for *Arts* magazine went even further, often contrasting European art unfavorably against its American counterpart, an example being his damning of Yves Klein with faint praise as “the biggest frog . . . in a rather stagnant pond.”<sup>28</sup> Celant was one person from Judd’s “stagnant pond” to react to this “obtuse and absurd” dismissal.<sup>29</sup> Judd’s critique, published one year prior to

24. Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, “Forward,” in *Arte Povera: Selections from the Sonnabend Collection* (New York: Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Art Gallery, Columbia University, 2001), p. 7.

25. Piero Gilardi, “Politics and the Avant-Garde,” *Op Losse Schroeven: situaties en cryptostructuren* (Amsterdam: Stedelijk Museum, 1969), n.p.

26. “Questions to Stella and Judd: Interview by Bruce Glaser, edited by Lucy Lippard,” in Gregory Battcock, ed., *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1968), pp. 148–64, esp. p. 154.

27. *Ibid.*, p. 154.

28. Donald Judd, *Complete Writings, 1959–1975: Gallery reviews, book reviews, articles, letters to the editor, reports, statements, complaints* (Halifax, Nova Scotia: Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design; New York: New York University Press, 2005), p. 69.

29. Celant, *Arte Povera/Art Povera*, p. 16.

the codification of Arte Povera, provided the impetus for Celant to marshal his forces. In his words, Arte Povera aimed to

call the American media into question. Arte Povera was therefore a legitimate defence of a historic culture run on the rocks—as European culture was. The only hope for salvation lay in rejecting Puritanism and homogenization, in contaminating them and ripping them open with soft and acid matter, with animals and fire, with primitive craft techniques like axe-blows, with rags and earth, stones and chemicals. The important thing was to corrode, cut open, and fragment—to decompose the imposed cultural regime.<sup>30</sup>

Pascali's *Un metro cubo di terra* (One cubic meter of earth) and *Due metri cubi di terra* (Two cubic meters of earth) of 1967 seemed to heed Celant's battle cry, referencing—and arguably ridiculing—Judd's sculptures, by translating the “primary structures” of Minimalism into the “primary materials” of Arte Povera. Here, even the *terra firma* of Italy evoked a cultural difference based on heritage. If a gauntlet had been thrown down by Judd, then the artists of the European tradition responded with the language of war, or more precisely, in the age of Vietnam, a non-traditional *guerrilla war*.

#### *Cultural Revolution/Culture Clash*

From 1966 to 1967, the Cultural Revolution in China inspired a wave of Maoist fervor in Italy, with Mao's invitation to “open fire on headquarters” providing a model for disenfranchised Italian youths to initiate their own cultural revolution.<sup>31</sup> By 1967, the year Arte Povera emerged, protests against the Vietnam War were bleeding into growing internal student unrest. As Gilardi noted, Arte Povera relied on actions and environments situated in places formerly alien for art, and this manifestation was “similar to that underlying the political ‘mobilization’ of modern student meetings.”<sup>32</sup>

During the academic year 1967–68, demonstrations occurred in twenty-six out of thirty-three Italian universities, and by March 1968, an estimated half-million students were on strike. As the example of Pascali attests, the generation of '68 was affected by two wars—World War II and Vietnam—in addition to the conflicts of the Cold War and the Cultural Revolution in China. For the students, as for Arte Povera, global events unified localized discontents and acted

30. Ibid.

31. Gilardi wrote at length on the significance of the Cultural Revolution in China, comparing Mao's famous dictum “Wouldst thou know the apple? Eat it,” to “the perceptive dimension of the artistic and political avant-gardes that lie outside the system.” Gilardi, “Politics and the Avant-Garde,” n.p.

32. Ibid.

as a justification for them.<sup>33</sup> The specter of Chinese Communism would also be evoked in reactions to the events of '68, which was often one of moral panic. *Corriere della Sera* referred to the students as *Cinesi*, a phrase that, as Robert Lumley argues, “conjured up the red menace and the yellow peril in one.”<sup>34</sup>

The turning point of the student movement came in February 1968, with the occupation of the faculty of architecture at the University of Rome. The “Battle of Valle Giulia” marked the escalation of a previously pacifist movement into a more violent one. On June 16, 1968, Pier Paolo Pasolini published his famous anti-student poem “Il PCI ai giovani” (The Italian Communist Party to youth) in *L'Espresso* in response. It began:

It's sad. The polemics against  
the PCI should have been done in the first half  
of the last decade. You're late, kids . . .  
Now the journalists of all the world (including  
those of the television)  
are licking (as I believe one still says in university)  
your arses. Not me, my friends.  
You have the faces of spoilt rich brats . . .  
You are cowardly, uncertain and desperate . . .  
When, yesterday, at Valle Giulia you fought  
the policemen  
I can tell you I was on their side!  
Because the police are the sons of the poor  
They come from subtopias, be it in the cities or in the countryside . . .<sup>35</sup>

Some of the artists affiliated with Arte Povera whose work was embroiled in the disputes shared Pasolini's reservations about the student movement. In May 1968, at the height of the student unrest, Luciano Fabro was invited to participate in the *Nuovo Passagio* exhibition at the Milan Triennale, alongside artists including Giovanni Anselmo, Alighiero e Boetti, Mario Merz, Kounellis, Pistoletto, Prini, and Gilberto Zorio. After students occupied the exhibition, the installations by the artists were canceled. To contest this, Fabro and the critic Carla Lonzi wrote a text disavowing the politicization of the artist, which was also signed by Giulio Paolini. The text stated: “While a Worker or a student is defined by his belonging to the working categories, to be an artist . . . does not coincide with belonging to a union.”<sup>36</sup>

33. For a comprehensive study of the '68 movement in Italy, see Giuseppe Carlo Marino, *Biografia del sessantotto: utopie, conquiste, sbandamenti* (Milan: Tascabali Bompiani, 2004).

34. Robert Lumley, *States of Emergency: Cultures of Revolt in Italy from 1968 to 1978* (London: Verso, 1990), p. 180.

35. Pier Paolo Pasolini, “Il PCI ai giovani!” *L'Espresso*, vol. XIV no. 4, (June 16, 1968), pp. 12–13, esp. p. 13.

36. Carla Lonzi, *Autoritratto* (Bari: De Donato Editore, 1969), pp. 230–31.



Luciano Fabro. *Italia d'oro*. 1968–71.

Like Pascali, Fabro arguably drew his political references from memories rather than contemporary polemics. Despite Fabro's reluctance to align himself with the present political struggles of the students, his *Italie* series, begun in 1968, which examined the notion and character of nationhood, can be read in terms of the country's political past, and, like Pascali's ambivalent weapons, was also subject to censorship. Fabro produced several variations on the theme of Italy strung upside down and suspended by a wire noose, including a cartographic outline of the country in *Italia rovesciata* (Italy turned upside down, 1968), an iron *Italia fascista* (Fascist Italy, 1969), and finally, the gilded bronze *Italia d'oro* (Golden Italy, 1968–71). For Fabro's solo exhibition at the Galleria de Nieubourg in Milan in 1969, a street poster was printed with a reproduction of *Italia*

*rovesciata*, but in the turbulent political climate it was deemed too inflammatory and banned by Milan's council from the walls of the city. Fabro's suspended Italy referenced not only the economic and social division between North and South, but also one of the most iconic images of Fascism and its aftermath—an event that occurred in Milan when Fabro was nine years old: the public humiliation in April 1945 of the bodies of Benito Mussolini, his mistress Claretta Petacci, and the former Secretary of the Fascist Party, Achille Starace, who were suspended upside down and spat on by the crowd.

Fabro's choice of material for *Italia d'oro* may also have been politically motivated, recalling Jewish writer Primo Levi's consideration of the metal in his autobiographical novel *Il sistema periodico* (*The Periodic Table*, 1975). In the book, which deals with Italy's experiences under Fascism, Levi constructs a narrative of the trauma of Fascism through recourse to the elements of the periodic table after which each chapter is named. If Fabro's golden Italy might be suspected to imply a lingering memory of Fascism and its indelible tarnishing of the country, then Levi's reflections in his chapter on "Gold" confirms it: "We proclaimed ourselves the enemies of Fascism, but actually Fascism operated on us, as on almost all Italians, alienating us and making us superficial, passive, and cynical."<sup>37</sup>

One month after Fabro's antagonistic encounter with the student protesters at the Milan Triennial, the Venice Biennale of 1968 witnessed the same power

37. Primo Levi, *Il sistema periodico* (Turin: Einaudi, 1975), p. 132.

struggle between students and authorities, with artists caught in between. An estimated three hundred Venetian students, emboldened by events in Paris, demonstrated against the Biennale, scrawling the announcement “La Biennale è morta” across the windows of the pavilions, while their posters and placards—including “1964: Pop Art—1968: Poliz Art”—indicted political and artistic hegemony.<sup>38</sup> The students also invoked a litany of cult political icons, from Marx and Mao to Che Guevara and Ho Chi Minh, whose names they declaimed loudly outside the American Pavilion. If the enemy at the Biennale four years prior had been external and easily identifiable—with even the Vatican and the Kremlin reaching a rare consensus on this issue—now the dispute was an internal, and far more divisive, one. At the Biennale, the politics of the art world and the imperatives of political action clashed, causing twenty out of twenty-three Italian artists to withdraw their works in sympathy.

Pascali, whose angular weapons had given way to a display of fluffy animal and vegetable forms, was less sure of the students’ cause, and an interview from the time revealed an unease similar to Fabro’s reaction to the student protests at the Milan Triennale: “Artists have always been victims of politics, used now by someone, now by someone else. And this has not necessarily happened because of economic purposes, as we are all maintained by the same system: be it in Russia or the socialist states, or in the West, they all eat off of the same plate.”<sup>39</sup> Pascali continued, in words that would anticipate the problems to come:

All these things have shown that we are still at a level of violence, that people think they can impose their moral problems with violence. Physical violence is one thing, intellectual violence is another. Here physical violence was used on both sides. The police were here to avoid physical violence and were involved by a certain kind of provocation. Hence



*Pascali. Due metri cubi di terra, left, and  
Un metro cubo di terra, right. 1967.*

38. See Lawrence Alloway, *The Venice Biennale 1895–1968: From Salon to Goldfish Bowl* (London: Faber and Faber, 1969), p. 26.

39. Pino Pascali, “Io la contestazione la vedo così,” *Bit 3* (June 1968), p. 49.



Merz. *Che fare?* 1968. © Mario Merz by SIAE.

we found ourselves in a crossfire; between the students who had nothing whatsoever to do with our claims and with our cultural interests on one side, and the police who wanted to maintain order at all costs, in order to keep Venice from suffering economically on the other. We found ourselves in an ambiguous situation which in no way corresponded to the real needs of the Italian cultural situation.<sup>40</sup>

But Pascali's political ambivalence about the demonstrations in Venice stretched further than just a disavowal of the students' cause. In a seldom-seen excerpt from a 1967 interview, he put forward a self-critique that refused to repudiate Italy's Fascist past: "It is clear that if someone thirty years ago was a Fascist, we can't say that it was a mistake. It means that thirty years ago he had the moral and human temperament to be a Fascist."<sup>41</sup>

40. Ibid.

41. "Carla Lonzi e Pino Pascali: Discorsi," *Marcatré* 30–33 (1967), pp. 238–45, esp. pp. 240–41.

*Arte Povera as Agitprop*

The slogans of '68, if not the actions of the students, *did* however inspire some of the artists associated with Arte Povera. For Mario Merz, political activities acted as a catalyst for artistic ones. Some brief biographical details bear repeating. Merz began his career as a medical student before he was arrested and imprisoned for one year in Turin in 1945 for his role as a partisan in the anti-Fascist group *Giustizia e Libertà*. While in prison, he began to draw using whatever materials came to hand, and his drawings were first published in 1949 in *L'Unità*, the Italian Communist Party's newspaper, founded by Antonio Gramsci. By 1968, Merz's neon works, such as *Solitario solidale* (Solitary solidarity) and *Objet Cache-Toi* (Object, conceal yourself), pointed to political commitment by quoting the slogans and graffiti scrawled on the streets of Paris that May. *Sit-in*, from the same year, referred to the pacifist political protests taking place and even adopted their logic. The tautological title of the work describes the neon's penetration into a wax base, as its heat caused it to become embedded and increasingly trenchant. Merz's *Che fare?* (What is to be done?), also from 1968, took the words of Lenin's celebrated 1902 speech, in which he issued a polemical call to arms that analyzed the relation between a revolutionary party and the working masses and the role of the individual in the revolutionary process. Merz transposed Lenin's dilemma into a contemporary comment on the social upheaval that was occurring around the artist, the same year that Lenin's polemic was republished in Italy to an enthusiastic readership.<sup>42</sup>

The slogans and situations of 1968 also found their way into two exhibitions in Rome that made explicit connections to the student unrest. At the *Percorso* exhibition at the Galleria Arco D'Alibert in Rome that year, curated by Pistoletto, the artist anticipated the barricades of May '68 by constructing walls of cement sacks throughout the gallery space, and Mario Merz's militaristic *Igloo di Giap* was displayed. At the *Teatro delle Mostre* exhibition at Galleria della Tartaruga in Rome in May of that year—which included Boetti, Pier Paolo Calzolari, Prini, and Paolini—the writer Nanni Balestrini contributed by calling the gallery from Paris and dictating slogans from the walls of the city, which were then transcribed onto the walls of the gallery by Achille Bonito Oliva, thereby also revealing how porous the seemingly sealed definition of who constituted Arte Povera actually was.

Even as Arte Povera was gaining international recognition, political commitment was causing dissension among the ranks. At the *Arte povera più Azioni povere* (Poor art plus poor actions) festival at Amalfi in October 1968, a lively and divisive debate took place concerning art's role in politics. The following month,

42. Vladimir Lenin, *Che fare?*, ed. Luciano Gruppi, (Rome: Editori Riuniti, 1968). Lenin's tract was one of the most influential texts behind the student and workers' movement during this period, and references to it abound. See, for example, Emiliano Patrizi's article "Il 'Che fare' del Movimento Studentesco," in the special issue "Quale contestazione," *Quindici* 12 (September 1968), p. iv.



a special issue of the periodical *Cartabianca* was published titled *Contestazione Estetica e Azione Politica* (Aesthetic protest and political action), which featured Pascali's *Natura morta* missile on the cover.<sup>43</sup> The accompanying essays were illustrated by documentary photographs of the *événements de mai* in Paris and the *contestazione* of Valle Giulia, alongside reproductions of works by Kounellis, Mario Merz, Pistoletto, and Zorio, thus presenting images of both political events and the politicized aesthetics of Arte Povera as if they were equivalent, or at least unquestionably in accord with one another. Art and politics were now being explicitly intertwined. Or, in the case of the periodical *Quindici*, unraveled. Launched in 1967 as an offshoot of the literary movement Gruppo 63, whose members included Umberto Eco, Nanni Balestrini, and Eduardo Sanguinetti, the periodical ceased publication in 1969, as its position as a journal concerned with art that began to pontificate about politics became untenable. *Quindici*, according to Eco, increased its circulation to four times its original readership, but was now being read by militants more interested in politics than poetry.<sup>44</sup>

By 1969, the growing tension of the mass strikes of the *autunno caldo*, or “hot autumn,” saw a “cooling” in Arte Povera’s engagement with politics, as the clash between students, workers, and authorities became increasingly antagonistic and the slogans of ’68, beloved by Merz, gave way to more complex issues. Ambivalence toward art’s relationship to politics, as expressed by Fabro and Pascali one year earlier, now extended to the necessity of either supporting or disavowing what was becoming an increasingly violent, as opposed to utopian, struggle. Italy’s “hot autumn” presaged a long winter of discontent that would continue until the 1980s. Strikes at the Fiat plant in Turin saw the rhetoric of revolution deployed with even more force. Independent demonstrations of workers from Fiat and other factories, amassed outside the gates of the Mirafiori plant, substituted the official trade union slogan, “No more rent rises,” with the more uncompromising “What do we want? Everything!”<sup>45</sup>

The 2001 exhibition *Zero to Infinity: Arte Povera 1962–1972* characterized Arte Povera as starting from a “clean slate,” invoking Roland Barthes’s notion of “degree zero” to purge this period of its political problems.<sup>46</sup> Instead of this tabula rasa, I would propose as a paradigmatic work Jannis Kounellis’s *Senza titolo* (Untitled, 1969), with its slate-scrawled slogan *Libertà o Morte, Vive Marat, Vive Robespierre* (“Liberty or death, viva Marat, viva Robespierre”), alluding to

43. See *Cartabianca: Contestazione Estetica e Azione Politica* (November 1968).

44. Umberto Eco, “The Death of Gruppo 63,” in *The Open Work*, trans. Anna Cancogni (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989), p. 248.

45. Ginsborg, *A History of Contemporary Italy*, p. 316. This slogan was taken up by Nanni Balestrini’s 1970 novel *Vogliamo tutto*, the protagonist of which was an employee at the Mirafiori plant, a southern immigrant who feels politically and psychologically dislocated from his surroundings. Nanni Balestrini, *Vogliamo tutto* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1970).

46. Richard Flood and Frances Morris, “Introduction: Zero to Infinity” in *Zero to Infinity: Arte Povera 1962–1972* (London: Tate Modern; Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 2001), pp. 9–19, esp. p. 15.

Jacque-Louis David and the French Revolution as providing both an anachronistic commentary on the contemporary insurgency and a corrective to what the artist later criticized as the amnesia of American Minimalism.<sup>47</sup> By collapsing the Paris of 1789 with the Italy of 1968, Kounellis acknowledged that, for an artist working in Italy during this period, the slate could never be wiped clean. His juxtaposition of Marat and Robespierre foregrounded by a flickering candle in the wake of '68 illuminates Antonio Negri's revisiting of the French Revolution, and what he characterizes as its "uneradable temporality."<sup>48</sup> As Negri argues, citing Tocqueville, "After the revolution . . . 'the past has ceased to throw its light upon the future, and the mind of man wanders in obscurity.'"<sup>49</sup> Kounellis's work suggests the presence in Arte Povera not just of the historical past and the political present, but also of a *politicized* past and a *historical* present.<sup>50</sup> As Svetlana Boym has noted, periods of nostalgia are often precipitated by a revolution, as indeed happened in the post-revolutionary France to which Kounellis refers.<sup>51</sup> Read from this perspective, the simultaneous retrograde and revolutionary references of Kounellis's work, and his recognition of this cyclical and inevitable pattern of history, are a testament to the fading of the utopian optimism of '68.

By the late 1960s, the Marxism that Celant had invoked in his initial conception of Arte Povera was being radically reformulated by a heretical wing of the Italian labor movement known as *operaismo* (workerism). *Operaismo* had a contradictory relationship to the Marxist tradition, in that it rejected the concept of work as the defining factor of human life and refused the hierarchical and theoretical organization of revolution through the practice of autonomous self-valorization. Breaking away from the orthodox Communism of Gramsci, the founder of the PCI, young *operaismo* intellectuals learned from the workers themselves the reality of the conditions of production, which were then confronted through a series of strikes and sabotages.<sup>52</sup> This pragmatic and militant

47. Kounellis has argued that the European idea of the palimpsest runs counter to the aesthetics of American art: "There is a sculpture by Bernini near the Pantheon. It is this little elephant, and upon his back there is this little Egyptian obelisk. Bernini used this element of the obelisk—it's a very old element—with an elephant that he made from a drawing by Raphael. This is an idea of accumulation. This is something that Minimalists do not have. In the works of American artists in these last fifteen years they have voluntarily eliminated the idea of accumulation. They have chosen another kind of logic. The square eliminates completely the possibility of accumulation. . . ." Robin White, "Interview with Jannis Kounellis," *View 1* (March 1979), pp. 8–21, esp. p. 15.

48. Antonio Negri, *Il potere costituente: saggio sulle alternative del moderno* (Varese: SugarCo., 1992), p. 223.

49. *Ibid.*, p. 224.

50. Maurizio Viroli's book *For Love of Country: An Essay on Patriotism and Nationalism* perhaps offers a way to address this issue. Viroli cites Niccolò Machiavelli's observations on the nostalgic, rather than nationalistic, character of Italy, and these words seem to maintain their relevance in discussing the postwar politics of Italian art. Maurizio Viroli, *For Love of Country: An Essay on Patriotism and Nationalism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), p. 30.

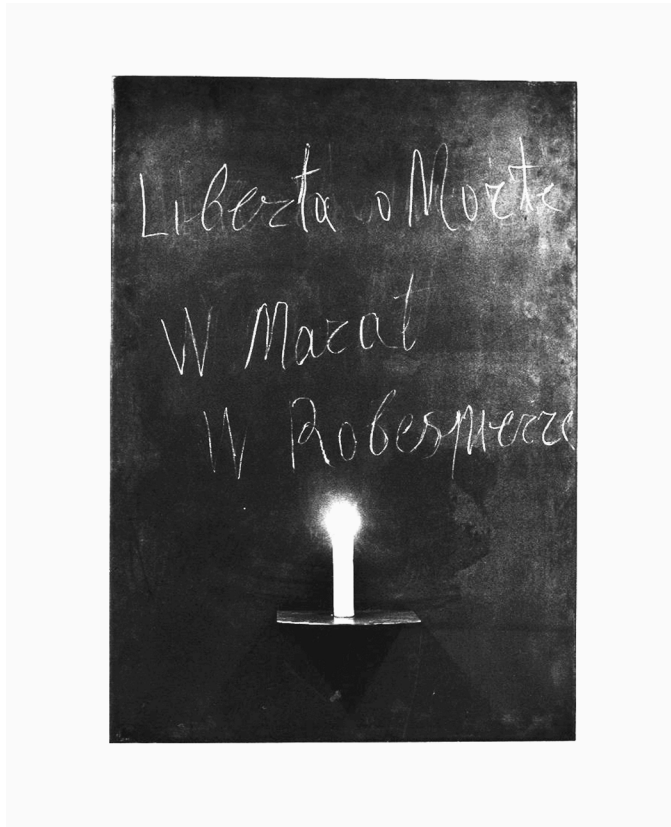
51. Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), p. xvi.

52. See Steve Wright, *Storming Heaven: Class Composition and Struggle in Italian Autonomist Marxism* (London: Pluto Press, 2002).

approach opposed the hegemony of the PCI and Gramsci's strategy of small steps to achieve social change. *Operaismo* also challenged the notion of the centrality of the proletariat, which underpinned the entire socialist tradition, and called for a reevaluation of the categories of class analysis that recentred the revolutionary struggle on new social subjects, who were emerging from Italy's factories and universities. The *operaismo* movement and the factory struggles found an echo in a work by Mario Merz from 1970—a neon sign proclaiming *Sciopero generale/azione politica/relativa proclamata/relativamente all'arte* (“General strike/political action/relative proclaimed/relatively to art”). The language of strikes and political action was seeping into art, and the theory of Arte Povera began to mirror this theorization of the experience of work, or even the need to replace theory with action, as a text by Celant from 1969 stressed: “In this ‘poor’ art, life and politics are not apparent or theoretical . . . they realize that what is important is not life, work, or action, but the conditions under which life, work, and action take place . . . it tends towards . . . politics (family, spontaneous action, class struggle, violence, environment).”<sup>53</sup>

The disenfranchisement that followed 1968 also acted as a catalyst for terrorist groups such as the Brigate Rosse (Red Brigades), which formed as early as October 1970. These groups initially described themselves as “autonomous workers’ organizations” who were willing to fight the employers on their own terms. As the revolution failed to materialize, optimism was replaced by impatience. What was now needed, they argued, was direct, violent action, which would destabilize the capitalist structure and make revolution inevitable. Like Celant's impetus for Arte Povera, the inspiration for these groups came from revolutionary models in South America and Asia. While many of the artists associated with Arte Povera became more reluctant to engage in political references once the optimism of '68 deteriorated into terrorism, others found new ways to navigate this political terrain. In the case of Piero Gilardi, it was not his artistic output, but rather his renunciation of it that testified to his refusal to either abandon his political ideals or to be associated with terrorist activities. For his 1967 solo show at Galleria Sperone in Milan, Gilardi showed utilitarian objects, such as a wheelbarrow, saw, and comb, constructed from found elements. Gilardi's works attest to the artisanal impulse of Arte Povera, which coincided with Pasolini's discourses on Italy's lost agrarian character in the face of increasing industrialization and urbanization, which posited politicized nostalgia as a corrective to the growing impatience of groups such as the Red Brigades. For Gilardi, however, to be an artist in the guise of an artisan was not enough of a political statement. As he recalled: “Starting in '68, I did some work on commission; then I stopped making objects for galleries, and I got a job as a craftsman. I worked for a furniture maker, doing pieces that I painted, and this left me free

53. Celant, *Arte Povera* (Milan: Gabriele Mazzotta; New York: Praeger; Tübingen: Wasmuth; London: Studio Vista, 1969), n.p.



Jannis Kounellis.  
Senza titolo. 1969.

to be militant, from leafletting in the morning to the meetings in the evening and Saturdays. I experienced these political times intensely.”<sup>54</sup>

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Cut to: Ettore Scola’s 1973 film, *Trevico-Torino: Viaggio nel Fiat-nam* (Trevico-Turin: trip to Fiat-nam). Scola’s low-budget feature—part drama, part documentary, and funded by Unitelefim (the PCI’s film collective)—followed the struggles of a migrant southern Italian laborer who relocates to Turin to work on the Fiat production line.<sup>55</sup> The plot and geographical journey of the film weren’t new—indeed, by this time the trajectory of the protagonist was

54. “Conversazione tra Piero Gilardi e Claudio Spadone,” in *Piero Gilardi* (Ravenna: Loggetta Lombardesca, 1999), pp. 29–38, esp. pp. 35–36.

55. For one of the first reviews of the film, see Goffredo Fofi, “Qualche film,” *Quaderni Piacentini* 50

becoming a cliché after Visconti's similar *Rocco e i suoi fratelli* (*Rocco and His Brothers*, 1960)—and neither was the combination of narrative and newsreel footage, which Pasolini had included in his *Uccellacci, uccellini* (*The Hawks and the Sparrows*, 1966), intercutting his Marxist parable of the life of Saint Francis with documentary images of Palmiro Togliatti's funeral procession in Rome in 1964. What was striking about the film was the way it documented the transition from what had jokingly been referred to as "Fiat-ville" in the 1960s, as the Turin-based automobile company became the economic dynamo behind the *miracolo italiano*, to a city tinged with the apocalyptic imagery of Vietnam, as strikes and social dissent engulfed it. Turin, the epicenter of Arte Povera, was now witnessing the conflation of the Italian car and the American war implied by the film's title, as the political concerns of the Left in Italy became increasingly internalized and focus shifted from the international implications of the Cold War to the national concern for a possible civil war during the *anni di piombo* (years of lead).

In 1971, Antonio Negri delivered a paper entitled "Crisi dello Stato-piano: Comunismo e organizzazione rivoluzionaria" (Crisis of the planner-state: communism and revolutionary organization") at the annual conference for Potere Operaio. The paper attempted a revision of the traditional Leninism referenced by Merz three years earlier, one based on the contemporary Italian situation, through recourse to a rereading of Karl Marx's *Grundrisse*. With its themes of production, alienation, and the rise of technology, the work had become pertinent once again, and recently translated into Italian, it became, in the words of Negri, "the *livre de chevet* [bedside reading] of the movement of the seventies."<sup>56</sup> Negri's paper centered on the dialectic of wealth and poverty, and his application of these terms to a real engagement with class struggle, productivity, and consumerism showed how quickly Celant's appropriation of these themes for his construct of metaphorical aesthetic poverty had been overtaken.

The same year as Negri's paper, an article appeared that also concerned itself with the politics of poverty. In the March 1971 issue of *Domus*, Germano Celant penned a suicide note for Arte Povera. While the thrust of the essay was essentially the same as those of the four previous years—an attack on consumerism that posited the revolutionary potential of art—the vocabulary was now one of despair and resignation, used to describe a political spiral that had spun out of control. Part *j'accuse*, part *mea culpa*, it seems strangely appropriate that Celant, the person who christened Arte Povera, would also be the one to

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(July 1973), pp. 205–07.

56. Antonio Negri, "Preface to the Italian Edition—Twenty Years Later," *Books for Burning: Between Civil War and Democracy in 1970s Italy*, p. xxxix. Enzo Grillo translated Marx's *Grundrisse* in two volumes as *Lineamenti fondamentali della critica dell'economia politica, 1857–1858* (Florence: La Nuova Italia, 1968–70).

attempt to bury it. As he acknowledged, “The attempt to destroy, annul, or dissolve the myth of culture as art, theatre, architecture, cinema, philosophy, science, law, or history into everyday utility, has failed.”<sup>57</sup>

*From PCI to P.S.1*

But this swan song for Arte Povera only acquires its full significance when bracketed between two of Celant’s other tracts. The first, written on the cusp of ’68, opened this article. In the other, he attempted to resurrect, rewrite, and historicize Arte Povera in the mid-1980s, after it had slept through the *anni di piombo* of the 1970s, with the attendant “Red terrorism,” assassinations, and bombings. In 1967, Celant had declared himself in the midst of a guerrilla war. By 1985, he instead invoked a depoliticized historicism in his essay for the exhibition catalogue *The Knot: Arte Povera at P.S.1*. A corrective to his overtly politicized manifesto of 1967, and one aimed at an American audience, eighteen years later, Celant’s retrospective reading instead employed classical allusions to imply a historic present, inescapably enthralled by the past, where “Everything is confused and interwoven, like a Gordian Knot, made up of memories and archaeological strata.”<sup>58</sup> From guerrilla warfare to confused nostalgia, and from 1960s metaphorical radicalism to 1980s career politics, Celant wrote about the political situation of the late 1960s in a way that distanced himself from it: “A new generation wanted, *perhaps utopianly*, to abolish all levels of stratification and hierarchy. *These young people* felt an imperious and irrepressible need to break loose and to fight for equality.”<sup>59</sup> (emphasis added) The gulf between Celant’s choices of metaphors—from an enthusiastic member of a guerrilla war in 1967, through the renunciation of an unravelling political spiral in 1971, to the remembrance of an obfuscating and confused “knot” in 1985—parallels the shift in authorial voice, from first person to third, present tense to past, active to passive, prediction to recollection.

In many ways, Arte Povera’s historical trajectory and its shifting quest for political legitimacy mirrors its social context perfectly. The group’s inception in the late 1960s is a testament to a period when collective action was still seen as a viable catalyst for social change. Its dispersal at the beginning of the *anni di piombo* in the 1970s echoes a time when doubt was cast over the aims and ideals of ’68, as impatience began to bleed into violence. By the 1980s, its reemergence and historicization acted as a riposte to the ascendancy of the retrograde and market-driven Transavanguardia, but one that was careful to reposition itself according to the same vogue for nostalgia, ironically, by evacuating its historical

57. Germano Celant, “Senza Titolo,” in *Domus* 496 (March 1971), pp. 47–50, esp. p. 47.

58. Germano Celant, *The Knot: Arte Povera at P.S.1* (New York: P.S. 1, 1985), p. 4.

59. *Ibid.*, p. 12.

and political context. Perhaps it is only now, given the revival of interest in art from the era of the Vietnam War, and the uneasy (too easy?) parallels this provides to our own age, that Arte Povera's legacy of politicizing aesthetics or aestheticizing politics can be recuperated.<sup>60</sup>

60. See, for example, Julian Stallabrass's recent examination of representations of the Iraq War through the lens of Vietnam. Julian Stallabrass, "Not In Our Name," *Art Monthly* 293 (February 2006), pp. 1–4. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri also cite the Vietnamese struggle as a pivotal moment in the resistance of "empire": "The Vietnam War represents a real turning point in the history of contemporary capitalism insofar as the Vietnamese resistance is conceived as the symbolic center of a whole series of struggles around the world that had up until that point remained separate and distant from one another. The peasantry who were being subsumed under multinational capital, the (post)colonialist proletariat, the industrial working class in the dominant capitalist countries, and the new strata of intellectual proletariat everywhere all tended toward a common site of exploitation in the factory-society of the globalized disciplinary regime." Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000) pp. 260–61.