

art

“Ileana Sonnabend and Arte Povera” at Levy Gorvy

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The Arte Povera movement in Italy increasingly looks like much more than a mere alternative to the American Minimalism of the same period--roughly in the late 1960s and the early 1970s. Minimalism, at the time, seemed like a profound change in contemporary art--its fierce simplicity and absence of cultural reference felt like a rejection of the values that drove the art system in New York. Many of the artists who participated in the movement, Richard Serra and Carl Andre chief among them, maintained a rhetoric of political commitment, in particular a stand against the harsh depredations of the Vietnam War. But, interestingly, as happens so often in contemporary American art, the avant-garde (or what was left of it) was at first accommodated and then coopted by the market, as well as by businesses who like to display sculpture that make no disturbingly obvious political statements. Indeed, Minimalism is appearing more and more to embody an esthetic self-containment that is in keeping with the failed political positions of the 1960s. Moreover, its formal simplicity argues against a stance that would remain in dialogue with the past. Indeed, the only true advance of the movement seems to lie within its radical simplicity of structure, which offered nothing in the way of culture reflection or affiliation. While it may be argued that this absence of embellishment was a retort to the cultural baggage the artists faced at the time, this position looks more and more like a typical example of American arrogance--a kind of cultural imperialism that, again and again, we seem unable to free ourselves from.

By contrast, the (mostly) sculpture of Arte Povera can--must--be seen in light of its determination to work within a deep-set historical awareness, as well as its decision to reject industrial materials in favor of a poor art that is striking in its substantive reticence. But the modesty of materials seen in Arte Povera art in no way acts as a statement of self-abnegation or small drive (there is a way of being ambitious that, at the same time, demonstrates restraint). Whereas the positioning, and the work, of the Minimalists now seems isolatingly theoretical and even theatrically self-involved--this despite its seeming simplicity--Arte Povera never gave up on historical dialogue, a decision that enabled them to draw from the past and gain both intellectual and emotional depth. It is true that the writing occasioned by Minimalist art has been excellent, in large part because the work gives so little to its audience, but the critical achievement is predicated on a complete acceptance of the works' self-containment and near contempt for the viewer. In contrast, Arte Povera has always felt resolute in its long discussion of values that met,

rather than circumnavigate, the past. In fact, there is a dignity and gravitas found in the sculptures of Jannis Kounellis and Mario Merz, the group's best-known artists, that show how strongly they feel about art's purpose as establishing communication between the artist and his audience rather than evidencing a state of purist ideology. One hesitates to prophecy, but Minimalism's radicalism, mostly rhetorical, has begun to look tame in light of Arte Povera's concerns with a genuinely poetic justice.

The roughly dozen artists who comprised the Arte Povera group have of course aged--although a few are still working. But the achievement remains prominent, gradually taking on a historical weight that has made their work even more distinguished. In America at least, we have been sitting in the doldrums for a couple of decades, obsessed as we now are with the sliver politics of identity art. Unfortunately, a similar loss seems like it is taking place among Italian artists. Indeed, the abject antics of Maurizio Catalani hold sway--at least in America. He seems representative of the many capitulations being made in art today--strikingly, and perhaps inevitably, Catalani lives and works in New York. Most of the art in the in this excellent show was made in Italy from the early 1960s through the end of the 1970s--a time of extraordinary cultural and political upheaval in many Western countries. Given this volatile matrix of change, the artists responded by concentrating on a deliberately impoverished aesthetic, which was partly an opposition to the increased materialism of Italian culture after the Second World War. Indeed, Mario Merz, the oldest participant in the group, was solidly Marxist and supported himself by driving a truck after the War. The anti-materialist leanings of Arte Povera artists did offer an alternative to the worldwide swing toward affluence and increased consumption; this deliberate restraint permeates the art--but not the ambition--of what may well be the most important Western art movement of the second half of the 20th century.

The true concern of American modernist and contemporary artists and critics seems to go back to a lofty formalism time and again. But much light has been shed on the problems of a close reading of such art, often treated as if it were meant for enjoyment alone in social isolation--without the consideration of a social and historical context. As a result, it is a pleasure for an American art writer to find that Arte Povera never once loses sight of what it means as a social statement and keeps in mind its historical origins--not to mention the excitement of the Italian artists' genuine attempt to reach out to an audience beyond the close and closed environs of the art world. Merz's glass igloos, as beautiful as they may be, also deliver a metaphor of social consequence; they speak of home and shelter--a mixture of physical and metaphysical resources incorporating a public stance. Penone's trees act as substitutes for the real thing; their poetic license is a treatment of nature oriented toward the sublime, but they also subtly demonstrate a concern for the ecology of the future. And Kounellis's moving assemblages speak to the creation of what he calls in one work's title a "utopian theater"--that is, a site where the visionary might survive without attracting hostility or assault. Moreover, artist Giulio Pasolini has named one work *The Sense of the Past* and in another title refers to Heraclitus, the pre-Socratic philosopher

of flux. It is clear from the works mentioned that Arte Povera artists move in the direction of a historicized lyricism bridging the past with the spiritual needs of the present. This kind of work does not lend itself easily to academic analysis or theory, being oriented toward transformations of experience.

Germano Celant, the curator of the exhibition and the writer/critic who coined the name “Arte Povera” two generations ago, has gathered some of the best works of the movement. Giovanni Anselmo’s untitled sculpture, created in 1968, is likely the best-known work in the exhibition. It consists of a 26-inch squared column of granite, with another slab of granite attached to the larger stone by copper wire. Between the two pieces of granite the viewer finds a head of lettuce, which must be regularly attended to in order for it not to wilt and let the loosely attached slab fall to the floor. Something about this remarkable work remains absolutely original and new, some fifty years after it was first made. The contrast between the square edges of the stone and the wilting leaves of the lettuce form a comic drama between raw materials shaped by man--the granite column and slab--and the lettuce, a raw material whose transformation into a cultural object remains difficult if not impossible (although it is done in this sculpture!).

Seeing that the sculpture literally falls apart without someone paying daily attention to the lettuce, Anselmo’s enigmatic work becomes, neatly enough, a lyric argument for the triumph of nature over culture. But this may be a case of overinterpretation; the textures brought about by the use of such highly different components make it clear that Anselmo’s eccentric, but utterly memorable, work of art is dependent on the contrast of structural elements--as most good art is. Still, the untitled work is an *extreme* case of highly contradictory substances--hard and soft, formed and left as is. The work’s meaning remains inscrutable. It says very little directly while intimating many things that don’t fully come clear in the viewer’s thinking. But, we can ask, why must a work of art have a specified meaning? Perhaps it is best to let the work be--and allow it to be understood in as many ways possible.

While the radicalized but ineffective rhetoric of Minimalism leads us toward the no return of a cul-de-sac, it seems to me that Arte Povera remains open and free. Where else in recent art can we find a consistent attempt to create a metaphysics from such humble materials? It is best that we do not romanticize the movement, but it is also fair to say that no other contemporary art has so consistently sought a transcendence brought about by impoverished elements: materials such as tobacco leaves, rope, and glass and neon. This kind of thinking lends itself most effectively to specifically sculptural concerns in Arte Povera, although excellent two-dimensional work is also present in the show--witness the polished, stainless steel mirrors with painted figures or objects made by Michelangelo Pistoletto.

Often Arte Povera works feel elegiac, to the point of melancholy, in their unassuming construction. Inevitably, they throw a much longer shadow than the art by the Minimalists,

whose sense of monumentality often feels self-consciously important. Enough time has passed to think about whether the work of both movements will last. In America, the need for impartial measure is particularly necessary, taken as we are with a predatory market that now reads achievement only in light of a work's price. For example: Even though the accomplishments of the abstract expressionists were remarkable, their high point, we remember, took place in the middle of the last century. But the movement in New York continues to be championed with a nearly religious awe. It is the art market that supports such pretensions. The now-extended history of Arte Povera must also be recognized; its extraordinary emotional reach, the product of its association with the past and its leftist political leanings, adopts a stance that focuses on both private and public concerns. For this reason its esthetic possesses a genuine depth. It clearly conveys a communal sympathy beyond its physical manufacture--something that does not happen with America's Minimalist wood piles or lyric abstraction, both of which have been turned completely into a commodity. While it may not be entirely fair to emphasize the market's critical influence on American art as the only measure of its achievement, it is important to establish a measure of objectivity that places present and recent contemporary art in its context. Arte Povera, both by implication and design, speaks to a far larger audience.

Rather than incorporating theory as a background structure, Arte Povera makes use of experience based on historical awareness. For this reason, its depth keeps a distance from facile critical interpretation, especially of a purely theoretical kind. It may be that the artists associated with Arte Povera were able to imbue their art with historical weight because of the longevity of Italian culture--in contradistinction, of course, to the recent origins of the United States. Inevitably, though, what stands out about the Italian movement is its *emotional* resonance, a quality we do not associate with Minimalist art. Jannis Kounellis, the remarkable Greek-born sculptor who died in 2017 in Rome, was associated with the Arte Povera movement since 1967. His charged but enigmatic presentations established visual metaphors whose meaning and reach remain to some extent arcane, being concerned with raw materials and extended assemblages of objects taken as self-contained, complete entities from daily life. Behind the abstruse content, though, it is possible to find deeply felt concerns with the effects of industry and the maintenance of a shadowy sublime. Even the title of Kounellis's wall-size assemblage, *Manifesto for a Utopian Theater* (1973), part of the show, indicates a belief in activism and an idealized dialogue between the artist and his audience. It is a mysterious but highly affecting piece, composed of a lamp placed some six feet high on the wall; a large, yellow acrylic painting, monochromatic in nature; a vintage sewing machine on a wooden stand; and a large plaque framed in wood.

Kounellis's constellation of discrete objects doesn't make immediate sense--partly because the things incorporated into his sculptural tableau do not contribute to a merger in which the objects are drawn into seamless union. Instead, their separate identities tend to make them look like props for a play given on unusually abstract terms--a stance promoted by the directness of the title. If we think of the word "manifesto," we quickly associate it with a radical position, both in

politics and art; and if we consider the term “utopian theater,” again we are meant to imagine a place where idealized interactions take place through culture. Considered under these circumstances, the items start to make sense, being in alliance with the general tenor of the work’s title. For example, the lamp placed rather high up on the wall becomes a means of enlightenment as well as illumination; the monochrome yellow painting serves as a partial background, indicative of recent painting history, as well as being an actual work of art; and the sewing machine, whose forms retain interest even when its utility is underplayed, feels like a homage to labor--unpaid labor at that. If the objects do obtain, in the eye of Kounellis’s audience, more than a small amount of cohesion, suddenly the art begins to define itself, however abstractly--as a highly effective, if curious, demonstration of radical import. This is achieved by the pieces *thematic* adjustment to the other items near them, so that they do in fact cohere even though they are highly different from each other.

The bigger question posed by Arte Povera has to do with the very large chasm between the content of the artpiece and the ease with which a viewer may access that content. Ever since modernist abstraction, the gap between image and content is becoming increasingly broad--to the point where the issues adumbrated by Arte Povera tend to remain in the background, in a place where they are not easily understood. There are both strengths and weaknesses associated with this kind of presentation--in one way, it is exciting to connect the destined import of the metaphor with the image that originated it. Yet, in another way, it is often extremely hard in art now to make that leap because connecting the artwork with its meaning can become quite difficult. Inevitably, such complexity forces contemporary art into a position distanced from what it art has traditionally set out do, namely, delight the eye and the mind.

The force behind the American Minimalists has mostly been intellectual--hence the extraordinarily successful criticism supporting its implications. But with Arte Povera, it becomes clear that there is remarkable emotional substance to its leanings, something that has proven difficult to find in Minimalism. Much of this emotion is related to the materials themselves. The choice of unassuming components--a genuine resistance to the time’s preoccupation with comfort and cash--cannot be emphasized too greatly in this show; Pier Paolo Calozari’s untitled 1970 installation, consisting of two rows of large tobacco leaves joined by a short neon light, attract intense interest not only because of the contrast between the neon lighting and the leaves, but also because the lack of luxury represents a moral stand. It is true, though, that the position is not specific--we cannot ascribe a particular social issue to the way these artists make art. Even so, we can detect a general intransigence regarding the easy pleasures of bourgeois culture. Recently, the accommodation of wealth in art has reached unreasonable extremes: the skull produced in 2007 by English artist Damien Hirst, made of platinum and covered with diamonds, had an asking price of one hundred million dollars. It seems to me that, given the extreme oppositions seen in the work of an artist like Merz and someone like Hirst, we need to make a choice--we need to reject one outlook and embrace the other.

A more impartial viewer might easily ask: Why can't both kinds of art exist at the same time? Since the 1970s, we have accepted pluralism in both materials and philosophy. This is true enough, but it can be answered that the contrast in attitudes is so extreme as to result in an absurdity no breadth of conception can fuse. The artist decides to support or reject the times he is in, and since the advance modernism, now a century old, art and literature and music have been characterized by revolt--either technically or politically (the British writer T.S. Eliot, whose politics were openly reactionary, was the most radically inventive poet of his time, while other artists and writers, such as Picasso and Rene Char, were politically non-cooperative with the right). Given these extremes of belief, a simple acceptance of the times, or a nonjudgmental description of them, seems inadequate as historical judgment. This is why Arte Povera is so great an art movement: the group found an essentially *neutral* methodology, in the sense that it was not transparently demonstrative of a particular politics, that nonetheless demonstrated a complete rejection of the values taken up by the majority of Italians.

Inevitably, though, Arte Povera had to be explained intellectually in order for the art to resonate clearly. This has been true for almost every art movement since modernism--even Pop art. It is even more true now, when the terms of art are almost irredeemably opaque. Art critics no longer criticize so much as they describe and explain; they might as well be cultural anthropologists. At the same time, in very recent art, we have the sense that there is a global esthetic, one narrowing to a point where it is impossible to tell where the art comes from--as someone said, "There is no African art anymore--only art from Africa."

While the social situation in Italy after the war caused the Arte Povera movement, its work was directed toward an abstraction that cannot be culturally or geographically located. Michaelangelo Pistoletto's stainless-steel mirror format, which include painted figures or objects that take up only a fraction of the work's space, invite--or demand--the viewer's participation, which consists of inserting himself into the shimmering plane. But there is nothing specifically Italian about its aura. In a 1963-64 work, called *Seated Woman from Behind*, we see exactly that: a short-haired matron in a light-colored dress who gazes away from her audience. The person gazing at the image inevitably is caught up within it. This results in an aura of complicity, in both a formal and an intellectual sense. The imagery, though, generates no particular ties with Italy. The work could have been made by anyone in any culture.

Thus the piece transmits a cultural neutrality--even if Pistoletto was responding to specific social circumstances in Europe. He emphasized the eradication between the place of the artist and that of the viewer. As a result, the work demands the inclusion of a real person within its artificial world. Life intrudes on the making of art, but in this case it is instigated by the artist himself. It is a compulsorily democratic exercise, with an important idea, namely, the involvement of the audience into the world of the image.

Few bodies of work have been able to do this so successfully as Pistoletto's stainless steel mirrors. If it is true that the materiel of Arte Povera is democratic in both a literal sense, it is also worth saying that its implications occupy a place where Pistoletto's art is made available to *anyone* standing in front of it. As a result, the viewer owns the work and makes it unique for the few moments he stands before it. The import, both in the sense of ownership and in the sense of collaboration, is extraordinarily open--something we would easily align with a leftist politics. The image is shared rather than bought--at least for a moment.

The 1970 neon triangle fashioned by Calzolari, with the English phrase, also in neon, "Abstract in your home," written across its center, feels very much like a voice making fun of the bourgeois need to have an artwork over the sofa. This piece is not deliberately beautiful, but rather communicates its message in a literary manner. Like so much of the art seen in this show, it embodies an attitude that borders on insurgency--we remember the title of Celant's inaugural text in the November 1967 issue of *Flash Art*: "Arte Povera: notes for a guerilla warfare." The rhetoric of the title matched the spirit of the time, although its stance is hardly maintained today; this show took place in a former bank on 73rd Street and Madison Avenue, in the heart of the city's Upper East Side, still the most affluent neighborhood in New York. As good as the show is--and it is truly excellent--its location underscores the commercialization of an idiom intended to oppose the desire for possessions that characterized not only an Italian but a worldwide phenomenon. So it is with a somewhat wary attitude we rehearse the radicalized tropes of an attitude that held sway in the art world exactly a half century ago, but which have been more or less extinguished now--at least in America.

This wariness by no means should accept the intelligence and integrity of Arte Povera's social critique. In 1967, when the movement began, the Vietnam War, correctly called by Sartre "cultural genocide," was at its high point, and America was perpetrating the aggression alone. Perhaps it is as inevitable as it is sad that time transforms a current position into a historical one; now, a great moment in art has been released to the predations of the market, so transparently aggressive today in New York. But in the works in this show, we see Arte Povera preserve its refusal to fit into an easily commodified style, even if the artworld has grown savvy enough to know it is viewing great--and therefore highly commodified--works of art. Politics in American art today have been rendered small in spirit by an emphasis on the personal; we can see that in the small outlook of much identity art. It is as if one's emotional life were the seat of virtue. This is hardly true, but it is the way things are seen now. Arte Povera holds out hope by keeping a live a critical spirit based on a not-so-quiet refusal to participate in a shallow manner of living, but the rejection is now seen mostly as a historical moment, not a contemporary one.

To sum up, "Ileana Sonnabend and Arte Povera" is an immensely moving exhibition, curated by the man who defined, described, and explained a cutting-edge experiment in which not only were

the ideas new, but also the very substances they were made of. The only criticism that can be written is the lack of information, in the actual show itself, about Sonnabend's relations with Celant and her long-term support of the Italians' experiment. A substantial description of her involvement, several pages long in the press materials, emphasizes the success of her efforts, as Celant comments, to have "brought them [the Arte Povera artists] into an international context." There is also a voluminous catalogue devoted to the history of Celant and Sonnabend's friendship and curatorial collaborations. But it would have been nice to have had more information found within the exhibition itself, something that could have been done with wall cards explaining the works more fully.

But that is a small complaint. A full history can indeed be gotten from the monograph, which will serve as a measured and accurate report of a time when contemporary art was shouldering not only esthetic questions but ethical ones. While the social values of Arte Povera exist through implication, they nonetheless communicate a profound reaction against the commercialization of life--and art--that was taking place in Italy at the time. Unfortunately, we are now in a position where this commercialization is taken for granted--so much so, that revolt has been spirited away from public issues and retreated into private complaint. We cannot call such a move political; it is, instead, a vanity that looks like it is going to stay. But historical precedents do not easily die. We have artists like Merz and Kounellis and Pistoletto and Anselmo to thank for their extraordinary refusal to yield to the social demands of their time--a disposition that engendered a body of work that still stands as a visual advance and moral elevation, inspired both then and now.