

Living Spaces: the Politics of *Arte Povera*

Against a background of new modernities emerging as alternatives to centres of tradition in the Italy of the so-called “economic miracle”, a group formed around the critic Germano Celant (1940) that encapsulated the poetry of *arte povera*. The chosen name (“poor art”) makes sense in the Italy of 1967, which in a few decades had gone from a development so slow it approached underdevelopment to becoming one of the economic driving forces of Europe. This period saw a number of approaches, both nostalgic and ideological, towards the popular, archaic and timeless world associated with the sub-proletariat in the South by, among others, the writer Carlo Levi (1902–1975) and the poet and filmmaker Pier Paolo Pasolini (1922–1975).



Fibonacci Napoli (Fabricca a San Giovanni a Teduccio), 1971, a work which presents a numerical sequence that complicates and humanizes the simplistic logic of minimalist artists, while adding a political component: the numbers relate to the workers who join a *mensa operaia* (workers’ table), a place as much to do with alienation as unionist conspiracy. *Arte povera* has been seen as “a meeting point between returning and progressing, between memory and anticipation”, a dynamic that can be clearly understood given the ambiguity of Italy, caught between the weight of a legendary past and the alienation of industrial development; between history and the future.

It was an intellectual setting in which the *povera* artists embarked on an anti-modern approach to the arts, criticising technology and industrialization, and opposed to minimalism. It was no coincidence that most of the movement’s members came from cities within the so-called *industrial triangle*: Luciano Fabro (1936–2007), Michelangelo Pistoletto (1933) and Alighiero Boetti (1940–1994) from Turin; Mario Merz (1925–2003) from Milan; Giulio Paolini (1940) from Genoa. Criticism of industrial development led all of them towards an “aesthetic of the obsolete”, which looked closely at the creative processes of handicraft and materials produced by manual work.

While giving an elegy for a disappearing world, which was studied with an archaeologist’s fascination, *arte povera* was looking at areas like attention to processes, the perishable, the fragility of things and the performative component. Fabro’s *Vetro di Murano e seta indiana (Piede di vetro)*, 1968–1972, temporarily brings an extinct animal back into existence using iconic hand-crafting materials like Murano glass and Chinese silk. Pistoletto’s *Le trombe del Giudizio* (1968) echoes the instruments the fascists used to mobilize the masses; the trumpets came from a performance in the artist’s studio in 1968, and once exhibited they lose their historical aspect and look like functionless archaeological remains. Merz makes a direct criticism of minimalism in

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