



## The Risorgimento of Arte Povera

by Steven Pestana

HAUSER & WIRTH | SEPTEMBER 12 – OCTOBER 28, 2017

LUXEMBOURG & DAYAN | OCTOBER 23 – DECEMBER 16, 2017

LÉVY GORVY | NOVEMBER 2 – DECEMBER 23, 2017

MAGAZZINO ITALIAN ART | JUNE 28 – ONGOING

This fall, three major international galleries in New York City and one private collection mark the semi-centennial of Italy's pivotal Arte Povera era with comprehensive surveys. Since its inception in the 1960s, this influential group of post-war disruptors has enjoyed varying degrees of visibility in the United States, with a significantly stronger presence in commercial galleries than in the country's institutional collections. Although these artists remain vital fixtures in European institutions, isolated works on view in stateside museums are scarce, and few museums have featured

*poveristi* solo exhibitions in recent memory.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, from the outset of the movement, Arte Povera has remained

a closely held love for a cadre of devoted supporters. Taking place outside the public institutions where we might ordinarily expect to find this sort of historical treatment, these four exhibitions richly illustrate their patronage and a compelling portrait of a fiercely innovative group of artists.



Installation shot of *Arte Povera*. Courtesy Hauser & Wirth.

From September to October, Hauser & Wirth hosted *Arte Povera: Curated by Ingvild Goetz*. Goetz began collecting Arte Povera with a passion early on; her extensive holdings occupied three floors of the gallery's Chelsea location, amounting to a museum-quality display. This season, Luxembourg & Dayan is presenting *Contingencies: Arte Povera and After*, an exhibition showcasing historically significant selections alongside a handful of emerging artists. Daniella Luxembourg, a partner in the gallery, acquired some of her first works from the Arte Povera era, and post-war Italian art is key to her gallery's program. Levy Gorvy's *Ileana Sonnabend and Arte Povera*, curated by Germano Celant, turns the lens on luminary art dealer Ileana Sonnabend's crucial relationship with these innovative experimentalists as a collector, a promoter, and a cultural liaison. The show will be their third post-war Italian exhibition this

year. The most impressive of the four exhibitions may be at Magazzino Italian Art in Cold Spring, New York, a new public exhibition space housing pieces from the collection of Nancy Olnick and Giorgio Spanu. The 18,000-square-foot space was inaugurated in June with *Margherita Stein: Rebel With a Cause*, an ongoing show celebrating Mrs. Stein; a gallerist, collector, and one of the movement's most ardent supporters.

Arte Povera emerged from an atmosphere of growing civil unrest in the aftermath of Italy's post-war reconstruction effort. While the artists' work was eclectic, they did share certain inclinations. An anti-establishment, even anti-modern outlook was pervasive among them, particularly in reaction to the industrial city of Turin's troubled economic transition under the Marshall Plan. Turin was home to several *poveristi*, and like countless disaffected locals, they viewed the influx of American capital as a kind of colonization, bringing with it exploitative labor policies and a toxic ethos of consumerist capitalism. The artists generally chose subversive visual and performative strategies over dealing overtly with specific current events, an approach they felt could help accelerate a break with entrenched political and artistic ideologies. For instance, a tautology of materials—a creative tactic in which the medium inherently expresses the content of the artwork—could create a versatile alternate language particularly adept at revealing socio-cultural contrasts. The *poveristi* also embraced contingency, in which the artwork is considered an open proposition whose final form is determined by relational circumstances, such as audience participation or site-specificity. Through the decay of ephemeral media, certain works embodied a critique of capitalism's prioritizing of consumption, ownership, and value.

The work of Pier Paolo Calzolari and Emilio Prini, two quintessential exponents of Arte Povera, can serve as examples of these ideas in practice. In Calzolari's hands, the *poveristi*'s interest in entropy gives way to artwork exploring states of metamorphosis. Witness Calzolari's 1969 piece *Rapsodie inepte*, on view at Magazzino. A twisting pipe arcs upwards and over to arrive at a neon script spelling out the piece's name—a recurring phrase in Calzolari's work—in a warm yellow glow. Beneath, a crudely modeled lead tray gathers condensation; both the pipe and tray are connected to a freezer unit. Constantly reacting to its immediate atmospheric surroundings, the piece's metallic elements exist in flux, by turns visible in their original state or thickly frosted over, becoming the expression as well as the vehicle of Calzolari's motif of cyclical transformation.

Emilio Prini's artwork sought to highlight the disconnect between subjective experience and its objective representation. Incorporating text, actions, sound, light, machines driven to failure, and institutional critique *avant la lettre*, much of Prini's work survives only in photos, and photos of photos. Rare examples of his extant work, included at Hauser & Wirth, captured the artist's persistent interest in experiential, highly personal standards of measurement, such as a coiled neon light measuring the perimeter of his studio (*Perimetro - Misura studio stanza*, 1967) and a length of aluminum bent to the specific dimensions of its current space (*Standard*, 1967). Prini went so far as to demand that his work be destroyed; when it was not, he threatened to handle the job personally. Perhaps as a result, his work is otherwise absent from these exhibitions. Prini was an elusive figure; he rarely gave interviews, and much of his work went undocumented. As such, Prini tends to resist historicization—but in that, he may have conveyed the critical challenge of Arte Povera best.

Photographic documentation of the *poveristi*'s otherwise fleeting, boundary-breaking interventions can exude an infectious, Happening-like electricity. Michelangelo Pistoletto, primarily known as a painter, also headed a guerilla art-theater collaborative called *Lo Zoo* that was prone to participatory performances on public streets. Jannis Kounellis, who likewise considered himself a painter, even when working with assemblages of steel, coffee grindings, and flames, would sing poetry as a rhythmic guide to his painting gestures—he also incorporated live musicians and dancers to activate his work. Less theatrical were Giuseppe Penone's actions, which emphasized human connection to and modification of the surrounding environment. *Rovesciare i propri occhi (To reverse one's eyes)* (1970), a series of photos of Penone wearing mirrored contact lenses literalized this reciprocal relationship. While wearing them, he could not see but only reflect his surroundings.

The story of Arte Povera is also the story of Germano Celant, the mouthpiece of the movement who unified the group under a single banner and rallied for its cause until 1971 via his tireless writings, exhibitions, and critical dialogue. But Celant was not alone in his support of the artists associated with Arte Povera. Though the artists did not share a title before Celant bestowed one in 1967, many of them already knew each other and were familiar with one another's work. The artist Piero Gilardi was particularly enterprising in his outreach to art networks beyond Italy, establishing contacts in Northern Europe and the United States that would, in time, be beneficial to all. Margherita Stein began fervently collecting these artists, and in 1966, upon opening Galleria Christian Stein in her Turin home, she began exhibiting the *poveristi* and offering them a salon-like place of social congregation. Gian Enzo Sperone, a young dealer also based in Turin, was thoroughly involved with the group. Sperone knew Ileana Sonnabend, a prominent Paris-based gallerist and the ex-wife of mega-dealer Leo Castelli, and by the late '60s, both Sonnabend and Sperone would each host nearly every artist associated with Arte Povera at their respective galleries. Castelli, too, developed an interest; he brought *poveristi* Giovanni Anselmo and Gilberto Zorio to New York for an influential exhibit, *9 at Leo Castelli* (1968). In turn, Swiss curator Harald Szeemann (who had also been in touch with Gilardi), would invite all participants of the *9 at Leo Castelli* exhibition as well as five additional *poveristi* for inclusion in his landmark 1969 exhibition *Live In Your Head: When Attitudes Become Form* in Bern, Switzerland. That same year, Szeemann began giving Ingvild Goetz, then working in art publishing, crucial guidance as she embarked on her own collection and gallery.

Although the *poveristi*, in search of a fundamentally new artistic identity, would in general eventually develop strong reservations about integrating any historical or contemporary influence, the group was initially receptive to their international counterparts, often showing alongside them. As the art world moved towards "dematerialized" art—that is, art posing a radical challenge to the primacy of the object—the *poveristi*'s own hybrid practices and assemblages of lead, neon, organic matter, industrial detritus, and the like didn't look too far-removed from the indeterminate, process oriented "anti-form" tendency identified by Robert Morris.



Installation shot of *Arte Povera*. Courtesy Hauser & Wirth.

In his 1967 essay “Arte Povera: Notes for a Guerrilla War,” one of Celant’s earliest statements on the movement, the young curator decried the notion of the artist as a cog in the cultural marketplace: “Mass production mentality forces [the artist] to produce a single object that satisfies the market to the point of saturation . . . Even though he rejects consumer society, he discovers himself one of its producers.” Over the next few years, in an effort to resist market cooptation, Celant cultivated an ambivalence to the meaning of *Arte Povera*, exploring and embracing the term’s elasticity. Yet throughout, one aspect of his idea remained consistent: that for all its variations and defiance, *Arte Povera* was still an identifiable, meaningful current. Herein would lay the vexation of *Arte Povera*’s utopian impulse. The notion of *Arte Povera* itself was a marketable product, and its patrons equally enmeshed in the thickets of the marketplace.

With its greater acceptance, for certain artists, the term ‘*Arte Povera*’ came to be considered a liability; indeed, some still harbor reticence or even consternation about the term, whether for its homogenization of an otherwise diverse group, or for its leading to an easy commercial cooptation that had begun to affect creative and curatorial decisions. Remarkably, Celant agreed. In March 1971, after five years of frenzied activity, he published an article in which he summarily announced the movement’s failure to effect actual political change or break with the commercial art establishment. From then on, the idea of *Arte Povera* as a collective seemed to vanish from the global scene. The artists’ individual practices, however, continued to thrive. Celant, too, would become a powerful curator on the European art circuit, eventually helping to launch an *Arte Povera* revival in the mid-80s across museums and cultural institutions internationally. *Arte Povera* would henceforth maintain a consistent presence overseas. Nevertheless, while the *poveristi* found steady commercial representation among many of the top international galleries, its subsequent presence in similar stateside institutions arrived only in ebbs and flows.

Does that mean the movement did, in fact, fail? The *poveristi*’s hopeful rebellion, laden with humanism, was more platonic than didactic. Perhaps this has been *Arte Povera*’s true challenge to the status quo. As much as they embraced the ephemeral, the *poveristi* harnessed materials and processes in all their tactile and poetic dimensions. At a time when the art of the United States—the source of the predominant art of the moment—was attempting to dematerialize the process of art making, an equally doomed prospect, the *poveristi*’s own lack of success in the dismantling of commodification did not negate the nobility of the ideal. Certainly, the visionary patrons of the day, who not only discerned the *poveristi*’s efforts, but appreciated them, had a compelling magnetism of their own. These effervescent intellects shared a mutual promise of brighter shores. The movement may not have turned out to be a socio-political magic bullet, but if there is any justice in posterity, we will remember *Arte Povera*’s timeless challenge to destructive ideologies more often.

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**1. Notable exceptions include 2012’s *Aleghiero Boetti: Game Plan*, which travelled from the Tate Modern to the Museum of Modern Art; the Nasher Sculpture Center’s 2015 exhibition *Giuseppe Penone: Being the River, Repeating the Forest*; and 2017’s *Marisa Merz: The Sky is a Great Place*, which travelled from the Met Breuer in New York to Los Angeles’s Hammer Museum.**

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