

Introduction

by Elizabeth Mangini

In 1968, Mario Merz made a group of neon and beeswax works that reproduced phrases gleaned from that season's political demonstrations, or in the case of *Sit-In*, modeled one of the students' preferred forms of protest. One of these works, in particular, seems apt for introducing the themes that would occupy many artists throughout the 1970s: *Solitario/Solidale* (*Solitary/Solidary*). In 1971 Merz explained that this prophetic and enigmatic phrase, glimpsed as graffiti on the walls of the Sorbonne in the spring of '68, fascinated him because the conflicting adjectives came so close to linguistic elision: in French (*Solitaire/Solidaire*), as in English, the words are differentiated by only one consonant.¹ Stalled in a near dialectical opposition, these terms present a tautological riddle: the conditions these words describe cannot co-exist, yet each idea is dependent upon the other. Can there be true solidarity without a coming together of individuals? How does one know oneself except by that which is shared, or not shared, with others? The phrase itself, as the well-read Merz likely knew, comes from Albert Camus' 1957 short story "The Artist at Work," in which one of these two words is written at the center of a canvas that the protagonist has been working on for years.² In the end, no one is able to determine which word it is, leaving the painting's viewers, and Camus's readers, suspended between these two opposite meanings. *Solitary/Solidary* introduces this issue on the 1970s because it foresees, in the simplest of means, the various paradoxes of artistic engagement in the decade, as well as the way in which viewers were urged to become active participants in determining the meaning of many period works.

We began with the hypothesis that, perhaps as a result of the plurality of the decade, Italian art of the 1970s has until recently received less attention than that of the years that frame it. Bracketed on one side by the international stage and revolutionary impulses of the 1960s, and on the other by a retrenchment of authoritative painting in the 1980s, the Italian 1970s appear to be a decade without a clear artistic identity. Retrospectively, these years have become best known by the moniker *Anni di piombo*, or "Years of Lead," owing to the high profile acts of violence that were carried out by domestic terrorist groups on the far left and far right. Yet this supposedly leaden decade was defining for the aspirations of the Italian feminist movement, and it

solidified Italy's place at the forefront of a new, autonomous workerist movement that infiltrated many aspects of everyday life for a whole generation. We wondered what might be uncovered by focusing exclusively on this decade, with an eye to the relationship between art and social politics, but without regard for canonization or marketing of artistic movements.

In 1977 Carlo Ripa di Meana wrote an editorial that spoke to the challenges faced by the Italian art world in the years of his tenure as the President of the Biennale di Venezia: "Art inevitably creates a tension between itself and society, its conventions, accepted ideas, established ideologies, prejudices, and conventional morality. How a society absorbs these tensions, how it deals with the defiance posed both by art and ideas—these are questions that have been of concern to the Venice Biennale."³ He resigned not long after the controversies that engulfed that year's "Biennale of dissent." A glance at the history of the Biennale during the 1970s—the post-1968 reforms, the parliamentary investigation following Gino de Dominicis's infamous 1972 installation, the substitution of the regular program in 1974 with a series of public works and performances dedicated to the oppressed people Chile under Pinochet, and the revolving door of the Biennale's leadership—reveals some of the anxieties present in the Italian art world at the time. How was art to relate to the larger issues of social justice, economics, political compromise, and domestic terrorism that Italians faced in the 1970s?

The art world in 1970s Italy was as much in transition as other sectors of Italian culture: contraction in some areas, but growth and expansion in others. In 1968 Michelangelo Pistoletto's open invitation to collaborate in the *Lo Zoo* had been one of the forms of artistic resistance to the strictures of the Biennale, but by 1970 *Lo Zoo* was over. Germano Celant declared the end of Art Povera's collective moment in 1972, just as the artists were gaining a foothold in international exhibitions like *Documenta V*. On the heels of her successful 1969 book of interviews with artists, writer and activist Carla Lonzi shifted gears in 1970 to co-found the publishing house *Scritti di Rivolta Femminile*, which aimed, through issue-targeted essays, to reveal the way traditions of sexuality had molded female identity.

Perhaps what was at stake in the 1970s was a fundamental change in subjectivity itself, artistic or otherwise? In the early part of the decade, individual performance practices and investigations of alterity were on the rise, as seen in the tableaux vivant of Luigi Ontani and the performative photographs of artists like Ketty La Rocca and Salvo. In the same year that Gina Pane performed her landmark *Sentimental Action* in Milan, Lea Vergine

published “The Body as Language,” and “Alighiero e Boetti” left Turin to open the One Hotel in Kabul (1973). Looking beyond the local, influential gallerist Gian Enzo Sperone opened new gallery spaces in Milan, Rome (1972), and New York City (1975), but 1976 saw Fabio Sargentini closing L’Attico on Via Beccaria by flooding the Rome gallery space that had, since 1969, seen so many experimental works of art and performance. New forums like Radio Alice and *A/Travero* gave voice to the concerns of a new generation, at the same time others ceased publication. *Data*, Tommaso Trini’s journal that had fiercely examined and championed the conceptual and dematerialized work of the 1970s, published its final issue in 1978, while in the pages of *Flash Art*, Achille Bonito Oliva declared *Transavanguardia* as the new direction for art, one decidedly more introspective than seen in the early years of the decade.

A comprehensive survey of the diverse art happenings of the decade would be impossible, but the essays selected for this issue cover a broad range of topics and approaches to seeing the 1970s in a new light, from studies of single exhibitions, to rediscoveries of marginalized art forms, to new views on well-known artists. Chiara Perrin, for example, writes a compelling study of the elder artist Renato Guttuso, *Cronaca e partecipazione. Il Sessantotto di Renato Guttuso*, arguing that his experience as a teacher of the very youths who were taking to the streets in the Battle of Valle Giulia changed the card-carrying “painter of the party” in ways that would characterize his work from the 1970s until his death in 1987. Centering her analysis on a work little known in Italy, *Giornale murale* (1968) she demonstrates how he married his own earlier convictions to those of the Italian youth movement, whose specific needs had not been addressed by the Italian Communist Party (P.C.I.). The result is a new perspective on the late work of an artist we thought we knew well.

Eminent art historian Maria Grazia Messina contributes an enlightening study of the stakes of *Identité italienne* (Italian identity), the exhibition staged in 1981 at the Musée Pompidou in Paris and accompanied by a massive, far-ranging catalogue. She asserts that the exhibition was initially fueled by a desire to claim that postwar Italian art was connected to Italian political history in the same manner as the early 20th century avant-garde had been rooted in the socio-political life of Paris. Tracing the argument for reading a “collective sensibility” back through the 1970s, she reveals the struggle for Italian artistic identity played out in the Beaubourg show to be resting on the theories and positions of two critics whose relationship was rivalrous throughout the decade: Germano Celant (*Arte Povera*) and Achille Bonito Oliva (*Transavanguardia*).

Danilo Mariscalco and Martina Tanga both address the political theory *Autonomia*, and consider its relationship to the art of the decade in diverse ways. In *Autonomia e abolizione dell'arte: Emergenze maodadaiste nel movimento del Settantasette*, Mariscalco introduces the relationship between the shifting concept of the worker as autonomous and the value of intellectual and artistic work in the late 1970s. Considering the radical Bolognese art collective *A/traverso*, he considers the ways in which they marshaled artistic agency under the rubric *Mao-dadaismo*. Effectively similar to *Autonomia* addressing the system with asystematic responses, he argues that these artists used counter-information to step completely outside the dominant languages of representation. In *Artists Refusing to Work: Aesthetic Practices in 1970s Italy*, Tanga deploys two key concepts of *Autonomia* as a means to consider the practices of three diverse artists. She argues that the refusal to work and self-valorization espoused in the pages of *Quaderni Rossi* and other outlets provided the conditions for free, expansive creativity in the practices of Ugo La Pietra, Maurizio Nannucci, and Franco Summa. In particular, the artistic autonomy they claimed (for the artist, from the market, the gallery, etc...) led them to experiment in the public sphere and to insert their art directly into the everyday fabric of urban life.

Two essays explore diverse avenues of Italian performance in the 1970s. Alessandra Marfaglia writes a case study of feminist politics in the theatrical monologues of actress/activist/playwright Franca Rame, specifically “Una donna sola” from *Tutta casa, letto e chiesa* (1977), co-written with her professional and life partner Dario Fo. Reading this work against both the theater’s expansion into the realm of social experience (Grotowski) and performance art’s pursuit of self-awareness through live action (*Settimana della Performance*, Bologna, 1977), Marfaglia argues that Rame’s work similarly aims to liberate the female body from oppressively gendered representation by attacking social and linguistic structures in the plot of the monologue. In “Comunicazione”, “Ambiente” e “Relazione” *Il Laboratorio di Comunicazione Militante nel contesto dei movimenti video degli anni settanta*, Katharina Jesberger also addresses the Milan-based media-activist group (1976-1978), from the point of view of expanding media in art and in social struggles. She argues that the long-overlooked group should be recognized for its landmark blending of direct address to individuals through teaching workshops and its transformation of the mass medium of video into a socially-engaged relational art.

A number of recent exhibitions have also begun to take up the question of art and visual culture in the 1970s, including *Anni 70: Arte dell'impegno* (Triennale

di Milano, 2009), *Anni 70: Arte a Roma* (Palazzo delle esposizioni, 2014) and *Episodi dell'arte a Milano* (Museo del novecento, 2012). As a means of addressing these voices, we commissioned an interview with curator and scholar Daniela Lancioni, who organized the 2014 show in Rome. The result is a short history of the art scene in Rome and artistic aspirations during the decade, supplemented with anecdotes about original exhibitions and artists. In discussing her careful curatorial choices, Lancioni also reveals much about the artistic climate of the 1970s and speculates on its special relevance to contemporary Italy and to Italian artists working today.

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- ¹ Mario Merz, “Interview with Germano Celant, Genoa, 1971”, interview by Germano Celant, in *Mario Merz*. Curated by ID., trans. Joachim Neugroschel (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation and Milan: Electa, 1989). Exh. Cat., (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, 1989), 106.
- ² Albert Camus, “The Artist at Work”, in *Exile and the Kingdom*, [1957], trans. Justin O’Brien (New York: Vintage, 2007). I am grateful to Jordan Kantor for this reference, made in his own paintings, through which I discovered another aspect of this work by Merz.
- ³ Carlo Ripa di Meana, “News from the Biennale, September 15, 1977”, (response to a letter from Furio Colombo of July 14, 1977) *New York Review of Books*. <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/1977/sep/15/news-from-the-biennale/>, accessed December 15, 2104.