

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Francesco Bonami, "Tristes Artistes," *Frieze*, March 2012, p. 27 – 28.

ART HISTORY

While visiting one of the many venues of 'Arte Povera 2011', the words of General Võ Nguyên Giáp of North Vietnam came to mind: 'If the enemy masses his forces, he loses ground. If he scatters, he loses force.' In 1968, Mario Merz translated this declaration into Italian and transformed it into blue neon letters that crowned the first of his igloo sculptures. *Igloo di Giap* (Giap's Igloo) became a cornerstone of postwar Italian art history.

By organizing 'Arte Povera 2011' – which, between last September and April this year, is being staged across eight different museums and cultural institutions throughout Italy – its curator, Germano Celant, has become his own worst enemy. By including too much work from the past three decades (i.e. well beyond the movement's accepted historical period), and by missing some essential pieces – in particular key works by Alighiero Boetti, whose touring retrospective is currently at Tate Modern in London, and Luciano Fabro's seminal *Lo spirato* (The Expired, 1968–73) – it was all too clear that Celant's original instinct to wrap up Arte Povera 40 years ago was the right one. 'Arte Povera 2011' is a little like Harald Szeemann updating his great 1969–70 show 'When Attitudes Become Form: Live in Your Head' to 'When Attitudes Become Form: 1969–2004'.

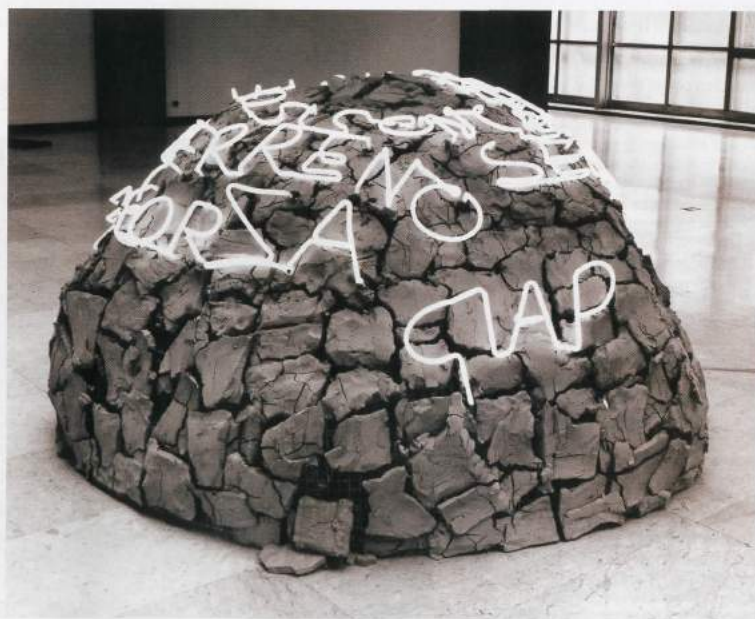
Re-staging history is always risky. By scattering and diluting the movement that Celant created, with amazing intuition, in the late 1960s, the revolutionary force originally demonstrated by these artists has been lost. In his inexplicable need to celebrate himself and his own historical relevance, Celant has turned Arte Povera into *Arte Triste*. Revolutions and heroes rarely age well. He has transformed the movement's legacy into one of bathos; rather than developing a patina, most of the works have accumulated a metaphorical dust.

In spite of his claim that he sticks to the facts, Celant's strategy has often been one of manipulating history in order to fit different contexts and circumstances. For example, Genoa – the city where, on 27 September 1967, Arte Povera was born in the Celant-curated show 'Arte Povera: IM Spazio' at the Galleria La Bertesca – was dropped as a venue due to budgetary concerns. In other words, history was revised by the economic crisis. It's like leaving out Bethlehem in an exhibition



Tristes Artistes

Held across eight Italian galleries and museums, 'Arte Povera 2011' fails the original spirit of the art movement created by Germano Celant
by Francesco Bonami



Entrare nell'opera courtesy: Museo d'Arte Moderna di Bologna - Igloo di Giap courtesy: Archibio Merz, Turin

Top:
Giovanni Anselmo
Entrare nell'opera
(Entering the Work)
1971

Right:
Mario Merz
Igloo di Giap
(Giap's Igloo)
1968

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about Jesus. The need to reaffirm the importance of Arte Povera at a moment when it risks being relegated to a chapter – albeit an important one – of art history by a completely transformed economy and art market, prompted the Italian curator to sidestep the rules in the historicizing of what he (rightly) considers to be his own creation.

Approached from an art-historical angle, 'Arte Povera 2011' contains many of the key works of the period. However, one of the major problems with this series of exhibitions is that the contemporary autonomy of each artist has been forced to function within the constraints of a model that no longer works. Many of the pieces included in the show could, in a different context, be read as independent developments of the artists' language, but are included here as embarrassing attempts to update the concerns of a long-gone age. It's as if former Red Brigade terrorists – who are now wearing completely different hats as writers, journalists and social workers – were forced by the movement's theoretician to once again don their balaclavas and share in ideals that are no longer relevant. Likewise, in 'Arte Povera 2011', strong voices have been diluted by a contrived context and beliefs turned into a rusty ideology.

'How to Escape from the Hallucinations of History' is the title of a long interview with Celant first published in 1985, and now reprinted in *Arte Povera, Storia e Storie* (Arte Povera, History and Stories, 2011),

Above:
(From left) Tommaso Trini, Bonito Oliva, Germano Celant, Filiberto Menna and Marcello Rumma at 'Arte Povera + Azioni Povere', Amalfi, curated by Germano Celant and Eduardo Cicelyn 1968

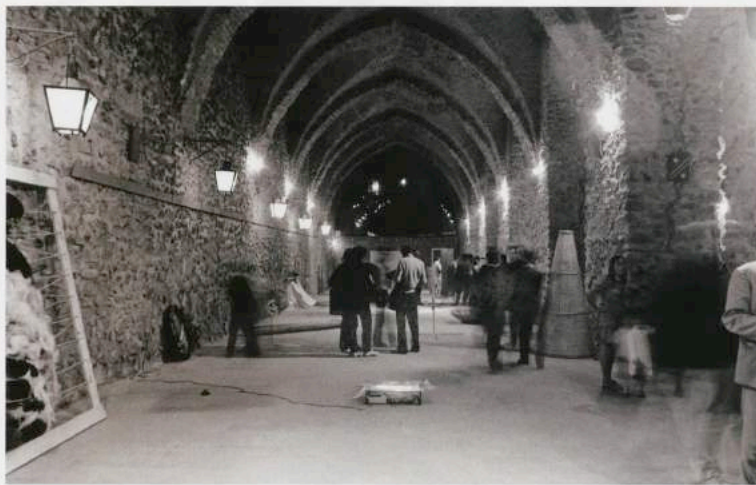
Below:
'Arte Povera + Azioni Povere', Antichi Arsenali, Amalfi, 1968
Installation view

Germano Celant has transformed Arte Povera's legacy into one of bathos; rather than developing a patina, most of the works have accumulated a symbolic dust.

the latest book that purports to bring accounts of the movement up to date. In it, friends, curators and critics ask Celant a series of questions. One in particular underlines the curator's strategy: 'The label "Arte Povera" disappeared from your writings after 1970. Why?' Celant replies: 'After five years our experiment was recognized and it was no longer necessary to act like a group.' Further on in the new publication, in an interview with Paola Nicolin, Celant elaborates on his reasons for killing his creation: 'In 1971 I declared that Arte Povera had concluded its existential cycle, because I didn't want to be known or labelled as Mr Arte Povera for the rest of my life.' From 1972 until 1985, the former Mr Arte Povera devoted himself to fostering the careers of individual artists, but in the autumn of 1985 he returned with the exhibition 'The Knot: Arte Povera' at P.S.1 in New York. Why did he change his mind and once again call to arms his dispersed guerrilla group, more than a decade after their experiment was successfully concluded? In the same interview from 2010, he notes: 'My work has not stopped me from rethinking the historical and contemporary role of Arte Povera, so in a moment of an extreme boom in the market and of extreme conservatism in the arts, in the 1980s I proposed a big exhibition titled "The Knot: Arte Povera". I wanted to emphasize that the "knot" of this research had not yet been untangled.'

Not unlike Italy's Christian Democrat politicians of the 1970s, Celant has always been able to say a lot without explaining anything. I believe that 'The Knot: Arte Povera' was not the response of guerrillas fighting a rampant market, but an understandable (if misguided) attempt by the curator to be part of that very same market, which the Arte Povera artists otherwise risked missing out on. The show made clear that many of the group's members had struggled to reinvent themselves as conventional painters and sculptors. The huge success of the *Transavanguardia* group in the 1980s – which was created by Achille Bonito Oliva – pushed Celant and his artists to come out of hiding and fight for a much bigger slice of cake than the one they had on their own table in the '70s. This seemed at the time to be a good enough reason to revise facts and old decisions. While jeopardizing the integrity of Arte Povera's past, these patchy exhibitions also suggest that the movement no longer has the energy to sustain itself coherently in the present. The knot has become a noose. No doubt General Võ Nguyên Giáp would have dismissed this latest attempt to regroup as delusional.

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Images courtesy: Lia Rumma photographic: Bruno Manconi