

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Matthew S. Witkovsky, “Less is More’ and ‘*Che fare?* Arte Povera – The Historic Years,” *Artforum*,
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View of “*Che fare? Arte Povera—The Historic Years,*”
2010, Kunstmuseum Liechtenstein, Vaduz.

“Less is More” and “*Che fare? Arte Povera—The Historic Years*”

IN SEPTEMBER 1971—in “Notes on the Spectator,” his editorial statement for the inaugural issue of the Milanese art journal *Data*—Tommaso Trini discerned the collapse of a classic avant-garde opposition between art and anti-art. The embrace of previously rejected forms, an ever-quickenening cycle of acceptance increasingly determined through the “complicity of a clique [*gruppetto*] of spectators-readers-dealers-critics-collectors,” had imploded when artists definitively joined the *gruppetto*, making their function as producers indistinguishable from that of participants in art’s consensual reception. No longer could one speak of an extra-artistic work or situation, but

instead only of the discursive nature of a given context as well as of presentational styles and other “elements [that] underlie communication in art,” all of which had in fact *become* the work of art. Trini named collectors as primary spectators and furthermore emphasized buying as a participatory move. Artists, he maintained, should not consider selling and collecting as external to creative considerations, for “aesthetic experience belongs to the spectator, and measurements of economic value are part of his means of observation.” What mattered now for art was to consider what it meant when artist and spectator—and artist and collector—stood in alignment.

I thought of this odd and prescient essay recently while taking in two exhibitions that chart such realignments at the moment of their emergence in the years around 1970. The first, “Less Is More: Pictures, Objects, Concepts from the Collection and the Archives of Herman and Nicole Daled, 1966–1978,” which was on view at the Haus der Kunst in Munich this past spring and summer, made clear that engaged and self-aware collectors actively helped to define the terms of what is known loosely as Conceptual art. The second, “*Che fare? Arte Povera—The Historic Years*,” now nearing the end of its run at the Kunstmuseum Liechtenstein in Vaduz, frames the shifts Trini articulated within the context of *Arte Povera*’s visceral material intensity. Like

“Less Is More,” “*Che fare?*” concentrates exclusively on early works in their original iterations, and features a number of pieces not seen in years or decades. The conjunction of these shows suggests, more strongly than usual, key areas of overlap between *Arte Povera* and Conceptual art, two movements that continue to brush by each other today as in the past, while remaining relegated for the most part to separate historical camps.

“Less Is More” gathered some two hundred works by forty artists, along with groupings of documents from Dan Graham, Robert Ryman, Carl Andre, Peter Roehr, Douglas Huebler, and many others. (Most arresting in the latter category is the manuscript for Sol LeWitt’s foundational 1968 essay “Sentences on Conceptual Art.”) Throughout the exhibition we saw the collectors—principally Herman Daled—investigating their own role and status, and even undermining market efficiency through their co-involvement in the activities of production and display. For decades, Daled has made index cards (without pictures) the point of access to the works he owns, which he himself views only in storage. Art, in the best manner of Conceptual practices, is replaced by linguistic information, and institutional information at that: vendor, date of acquisition, purchase price, title, occasionally a terse description. In the exhibition’s catalogue Benjamin H. D. Buchloh rightly makes much of this and other positions that merge collector and artist—as Trini had foreseen—in a joint project to shift “the registers of artistic production into linguistic definition and the critique of institutions.” Recalling the argument of his classic 1989 essay “Conceptual Art 1962–1969: From the Aesthetics of Administration to the Critique of Institutions,” Buchloh further admires Daled for understanding what Buchloh calls the paradoxes of Conceptual art. He singles out, for instance, photographs from the exhibition that show Daled working alongside Marcel Broodthaers, the artist to whom the collector was closest, to carve “the plans of a future museum in the sand of a Belgian beach at De Haan–Le Coq (during low tide, thus guaranteeing its imminent effacement).” For Buchloh, this ephemeral work epitomizes not just the collaboration of artist and collector in ways that undermine market relations, but also the absurdity of attempts to contravene those relations: “How could one seriously engage in an artistic proposition that proclaimed the historical end of the work’s object and commodity status, when one was either

an artist or a collector?” Flagrantly treating art as a vacation pastime, Broodthaers’s “sand castle” project (subsequently recorded by him as the “documentary section” of his museum) marks the dual limit of Conceptual art in self-negating farce and salutary institutional critique.

There are startling examples of such critique on display in Vaduz that might well cause today’s viewer-collectors (I include myself, as a curator at a collecting institution) to question our habitual procedures of acquisition. At one end of the exhibition corridor is a suite of twelve awning canvases by Daniel Buren, each of a different color, which Buren delivered monthly to an exhibition space rented for the purpose by Daled in a downtown Brussels arcade. Buren made his contributions like clockwork, as if *they* were the rent check, and allowed his “landlords” to keep them—but on condition that the Daleds purchase no other art throughout the year. (An exception was made only for Broodthaers.) At the corridor’s other end hangs a series of marks on canvas and paper by Niele Toroni, whom Daled paid twice in successive years for the same exact object, thereby underscoring—though emphatically not reifying—the artist’s principled adherence to an unvarying facture. (Consider making *that* proposal to a museum acquisitions committee!) The work now carries two dates of creation, an instance of Derridean supplementarity that yet again joins collector to artist in an imaginative act.

While “Less Is More” described a historical trajectory that was consistently “dry,” in the manner and the legacy of Marcel Duchamp’s *art sec*, the exhibition in Vaduz is, one might say, far easier on the eyes. Principally showing works from private collections formed in the period, the latter exhibition revels in the aesthetic possibilities of materials in their pure state. Organized in four large galleries, “*Che fare?*” is dense with works: 124 pieces

plus dozens of documentary materials and ephemera. A sense of intimate familiarity with the art, as if viewers themselves lived with these items, is conveyed by an astonishing absence of physical safeguards. Visitors thread their way past fragile floor objects and accumulations of tobacco, sugar, wax, or aluminum largely unprotected by any barrier or alarm. Little numbers on the walls and floor are the only guide to information supplied in an accompanying brochure. Among the more visible didactic intrusions are warning signs in a room that has at one end Gilberto Zorio's massive wall piece *Resistance Skins*, 1968, and Mario Merz's *Bottiglia (Bottle)*, 1967, two works that use live electric cables; at the other end hang Zorio's *Hatred*, 1969, involving a needle-tipped object suspended from the ceiling nearly at eye level, and Jannis Kounellis's *Fire Daisy*, 1967, in which a ring of iron petals mounted on the wall surrounds a roaring Bunsen burner. The fear of tripping—a conventional museum hazard—is heightened, to say the least, by the distant possibility of electrocution, blinding, or burning.



Mario Merz, *Bottiglia (Bottle)*, 1967, glass bottle, spray paint, neon, bar clamp, acrylic, glass, iron, transformer, electric cable. Installation view, Kunstmuseum Liechtenstein, Vaduz, 2010.

The show's title, borrowed from a work and exhibition by Merz, is, we are told, not primarily a reference to Lenin's 1902 tract "What Is to Be Done?" but

instead a summation of the existential difficulty of creative individuals: What should one make? Making things new is undoubtedly at the core of *Arte Povera*, and from the standpoint of Conceptualist orthodoxy this preoccupation with materials and individual subjectivity is legitimately suspect. Yet it would be a serious mistake to reduce the Munich and Vaduz shows to “mind” versus “matter.” Such a separation does not account for the persistent bodily concerns in Conceptual art, for example, or the frequent recourse in *Arte Povera* to linguistic paradigms and issues of representation in industrial bureaucracy. Salvatore Mangione (Salvo)’s *Herewith the Memorandum and Articles of the Firm of Salvo* (1969–70), a sealed and wrapped envelope with its title written across the front and its titular contents hidden from view, fits especially well with the “aesthetics of administration” that was plentifully on view in Munich. More original works in the same vein include *Little Flowers of San Salvo*, 1970, a calligraphic text copied verbatim from a fourteenth-century devotional but with all mentions of Saint Francis replaced by “Saint Salvo,” and the remarkable *12 Self-Portraits*, 1969, in which the artist fuses his likeness through photo-montage onto press photographs of a fascist, a partisan, a guerrilla fighter, and various laborers.

In fact, many pieces in the two shows pursue common themes, such as the elaboration of illogical and corporeal units of measure in the manner of Duchamp’s *3 Standard Stoppages*. In Munich, a terrific early piece by Graham, *March 31, 1966*, takes the banal form of a typewritten list of distances, descending from the interstellar—1 octillion miles “to edge of known universe”—to the intraoptical (.00000098 miles “to cornea from retinal wall”). One might compare this work to Giovanni Anselmo’s photo piece *Documentation of Human Interference in Universal Gravitation*, 1969/1971, for which the artist traversed a snow-covered landscape at dusk,

walking toward the setting sun and taking a photograph every twenty steps, for a total of twenty photographs. Printed at a little over one square inch each, the pictures appeared in a row across the wall in Vaduz, suggesting in microcosm the artist's "survey" of solar infinitude that proceeds, as for Graham, by using his body as yardstick coupled with a mechanical recording device (typewriter or camera). If the American work seems more radical for its air of quasi-scientific factuality, and the Italian softer in its mystical overtones, one need only recall LeWitt's celebrated opening phrase in the manuscript *Daled owns*: "Conceptual artists are mystics rather than rationalists."

Like much of the work by Graham—and Vito Acconci, Gilbert & George, Dennis Oppenheim, and others—the variously threatening, playful, and seductive pieces on view in Vaduz address mind and body alike, and especially in this beautifully littered installation they conjure the *gruppetto* circa 1970 as bodies gathered in a shared zone of risk—the space of display. Trini worried, rightly, that the new art would turn display into manipulative voyeurism. And his worries did not just concern the Italians. In the inaugural issue of *Data*, Trini juxtaposed Merz with Buren, and put Luciano Fabro on the cover while printing an interview with Ian Wilson inside. Like his compatriots, Trini gave sustained consideration to the artists recently on view in Munich (a sign of interest that was only intermittently reciprocated at the time and remains more the exception than the rule). Surveying the transnational terrain, Trini thrilled to these "discursive works" yet fretted over their idealistic presumptions, caught not between art and its opposite but between science and spectacle. "The false path of spectacle is similar to that of science in that both hold forth the illusion of an art for all, for the masses. . . . [B]ut history tells us that the advent of a self-reflexive art closes the door to an art for the masses or placed in the service of the community." *Che fare*, indeed?