

# Arte Povera and the Baroque

Building an International Identity

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# Introduction

The Spring 2008 issue of the journal *October* placed post-war Italian art in a context that sets it apart from its most customary characterizations. This effort stems from the observation that art of the period has typically been assessed along a twofold trajectory that follows on the one hand, the rejection of traditional painting carried out by Alberto Burri, Lucio Fontana and Piero Manzoni and on the other, the anti-consumerist explorations of natural processes and materials conducted by artists associated with Arte Povera (3). The issue's editor, Claire Gilman, positions these post-war artists in contradistinction to the most contemporary Italian artists who, with the success of recent exhibitions such as Francesco Vezzoli's "star-studded Pirandello extravaganza" at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in October 2007 and the simultaneous *Performa07. Senso Unico* exhibition at P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center, New York, operate in a manner that would deny any concern with national identity or a particular Italian connection (3).<sup>1</sup> Although Gilman states that with respect to these Italian and Italy-based artists and the international art scene, "Italian art has finally arrived" (3), the goal of the current publication is to explore the earlier period, which is rooted in "specific national conditions" and "real historical imperatives" (3).<sup>2</sup>

The goal of this thesis is to take up a similar discussion of post-war Italian art that expands upon previous scholarship centred on a traditional painting vs. materials-based assessment and to examine the works in the context of their contemporary socio-cultural environment. This study, however, will attempt a more profound understanding of artistic developments in the post-war period with consideration of notions of identity and nation, the when and where of artistic events and the physical immediacy of the past in everyday life. The issue of inheritance is a guiding principle, not only related to post-war political and social devastation, but in terms of cultural capital and the prospect of renewal. As Gilman writes, "In Italy, where vestiges of a once predominantly rural society continued to exist alongside rapid economic advancement, this meant acknowl-

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1 *Performa07. Senso Unico* included works by Vanessa Beecroft, Paolo Canevari, Angelo Filimeno, Rä di Martino, Adrian Paci, Paola Pivi, Pietro Roccasalva and Francesco Vezzoli (Gilman 3, note 1).

2 Gilman's 2006 Ph.D. dissertation, *Arte Povera's Theater: Artifice and Anti-Modernism in Italian Art of the 1960s*, similarly provides a reading of post-war Italian art that moves beyond Germano Celant's critical monopoly of the group and the work of subsequent scholars which echoed Celant's characterizations (4).

edging the new as well as the old, the artisanal as well as the technological, the natural as well as the artificial” (6).

For post-war artists grappling with the difficult question of identity mired in the past, disoriented in the present and uncertain about the future, their aesthetic exploration was forced to confront the cultural legacy of their predecessors while re-negotiating a mode of expression relevant to contemporaries.<sup>3</sup> As Francesco Bonami writes, *Arte Povera* “[...] like other Italian art tendencies that preceded and followed it, had to negotiate the present through the residue of the past” (“Now We Begin” 110). Even an exhibition as recent as Bonami’s *Italics. Italian Art Between Tradition and Revolution 1968-2008* held at Venice’s Palazzo Grassi demonstrates that the tendency in documenting Italian art is centred on emphasizing the impact of an immense national artistic heritage on contemporary expression. As Bonami asserts, “A complex project like ‘Italics’ does not seek to present a rigid or definitive point of view but rather to offer an opportunity to reflect on the artistic capital that a country like Italy possessed in the past and continues to create” (“Acknowledgments” np).<sup>4</sup> He goes on to insist that “the great Renaissance tradition” is the backbone of contemporary art in Italy (25). This study therefore aims to flesh out the story of post-war Italian art with a consideration of identity in both national and international contexts, with cultural inheritance as the main protagonist.

*October*’s Spring 2008 contributors highlight alternatives to Germano Celant’s picture of post-war Italian art based on what Gilman describes as “a strangely conservative attachment to an Italian Idealist tradition steeped in the writings of Benedetto Croce” (5). They offer the work of Enrico Crispolti and Renato Barilli as alternative voices that identified with the phenomenology and structuralism of Umberto Eco, Enzo Paci and Luigi Pareyson (5). Counter to Celant’s tendency to characterize Italian artists as purveyors of archetypes, these writers tended toward an aesthetic of multiplicity in reflecting the new cultural landscape (5-6). However, while Gilman points out that “[...] Celant’s rhetoric of poor materials and unmanipulated objects [is] sorely inadequate” (*Arte Povera’s Theater* 5), and further, that Celant’s was only one voice in the arena of

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3 Throughout this thesis, the term “aesthetic” is understood not in reference to an appreciation or criticism of the beautiful, but according to definition A.1. as set out in the *The Oxford English Dictionary*, second edition, volume 1, of 1989: “Of or pertaining to sensuous perception, received by the senses” (206).

4 This exhibition took place at Palazzo Grassi in Venice from September 27, 2008 to March 22, 2009 and is scheduled to travel to Chicago’s Museum of Contemporary Art from July 18, 2009 to October 25, 2009. According to Bonami, “‘Italics’ proposes to give voice to those who have rarely been recognized outside of Italy; to engage Italian and international contemporary culture in a dialogue which up to now has been impossible” (“An Ancient Contemporary Civilization” 27).

post-war Italian art criticism and that he “[...] is and always has been a context-bound figure with his own critical agenda rather than an objective spokesman for the Arte Povera movement” (“Introduction” 5), it remains that Celant’s efforts contributed greatly to the re-establishment of Italian art on the international art scene and were therefore instrumental in resuscitating Italy’s post-war artistic identity. In organizing the group’s early exhibitions and having coined the term “Arte Povera” in 1967, Celant, according to Gilman, “[...] generally sought to make a place for Italian post-war art art by aligning it with wider international trends” (4).<sup>5</sup> His conceptualization of an otherwise heterogeneous group of artists as representative of contemporary artistic currents helped to re-establish a connection with the cultural environment and re-presented Italian art afresh to the larger artistic community. Artists widely associated with the group – Giovanni Anselmo, Alighiero Boetti, Pier Paolo Calzolari, Luciano Fabro, Jannis Kounellis, Mario Merz, Marisa Merz, Giulio Paolini, Pino Pascali, Giuseppe Penone, Michelangelo Pistoletto, Emilio Prini and Gilberto Zorio<sup>6</sup> – were exhibiting before Celant’s conceptualization of their work as a group in the late 1960s, and continued to do so on individual and collective bases long after the group’s dissolution. However, in contrast to his initial politicized, guerrilla warfare-inspired characterization of the group in the late 1960s, his later perspective of the group’s output, articulated in several texts written during the 1980s,<sup>7</sup> took an historicist turn, picturing the artists as participants in a long standing cultural

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- 5 Corinna Criticos has pointed out that Celant was interested in expressing with this term a continuity with Futurism; he had also considered the term “neo-futurisme” in order to evoke “un esprit de totalité” (*L’Arte Povera* 207). Criticos’ unpublished Ph.D. thesis, titled *L’Arte Povera dans les Années 60. Origines et Emergence dans le Monde de l’Art*, completed in 2002 at l’Université de Paris I – Panthéon-Sorbonne, proposes an historical survey of the origins of Arte Povera in the context of its emergence and dissemination in the international art world. It discusses the different “waves” of Arte Povera artists with respect to their predecessors and examines a selection of works according to an identified “desire to break with artistic codes and conventions while taking up again an artistic tradition dating back to Leonardo da Vinci and to Aristotle’s conception of technè” (np).
- 6 Lista provides the names of additional artists who participated in the debut of Arte Povera: Massimo Bignardi, Mario Ceroli, Pietro Lista, Piero Gilardi, Gino Marotta, Plinio Martelli, Paolo Icaro, Gianni Piacentino (“L’Arte Povera” 28). Paolo Thea asserts that Antonio Carena, Sandro Somarè and Ettore Sottsass were also “[...] fully involved in the vicissitudes of *Arte povera*” (44, note 1). Dan Cameron points out that Gilardi was associated with Arte Povera in the early stages but removed himself from the art scene between approximately 1967-1980, a time when his colleagues “[...] were already busily engaged in writing the history of Arte Povera – a history from which Gilardi would be largely excluded” (“Back to the Garden” 123).
- 7 See Celant’s analogy of the Gordian knot with respect to Arte Povera’s complicity in historical, artistic developments in *The Knot Arte Povera at P.S. 1*. Turin: Umberto Allemandi and Co., 1985.

trajectory, cementing their place among major cultural developments of the twentieth century.<sup>8</sup>

The reason for focusing on Celant's role in the emergence of Arte Povera on the international art scene in the late 1960s is centred on a contradiction. Along with Celant's texts, the majority of Arte Povera scholarship is based on the notion of rupture and renewal with respect to the artists' relationship with their cultural inheritance. In the post-war era, Arte Povera works appeared to present a conceptual and literal departure from traditional modes of expression – object-based painting and sculpture were replaced by processes constructed from the stuff of everyday life and the spectator became an agent in the playing out of aesthetic experience. The contradiction occurs in the sense that these visual experiments did not represent a rupture so much as a reinterpretation of a deeply seated mode of expression and sensitivity to materials with roots in Italy's cultural past.<sup>9</sup> In a text on Italian artistic identity, Celant also outlines a principle in Italian art that positions each new expression in the context of an established one. He writes, "D'autre part, si les modèles proviennent du 'moderne' aussi bien que de l'ancien', tous les événements artistiques peuvent être définis comme classiques, le présent comme l'époque du néo-classicisme, de la nouvelle académie, du nouvel esthétisme" ("Pour une Identité" 5). On a superficial level, Arte Povera works appear radically minimalist in comparison to the classical monuments that dot the Italian landscape from north to south, and which have supplemented an image of Italy as the site of grandeur, opulence and tendency toward the classical. Fabro, for example, has reinforced this notion of contradiction with respect to an artistic conception rooted in both tradition and innovation; as stated in 1974, "An authentic love of order is impossible without the denial of order" (qtd. in Celant, *The Knot* 232). The contradiction, it may be seen, is that Arte Povera, in its pared down, "poor" appearance not only defies this notion of rupture with artistic convention, its various manifestations – highly

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8 Robert Lumley provides an alternative perspective to Celant's monopoly of Turin's art scene in the 1960s. His essay, "Arte Povera in Turin: The Intriguing Case of the Deposito D'Arte Presente," in *Marcello Levi: Portrait of a Collector*, 2005, discusses the formation of Turin's Deposito D'Arte Presente as a germinal site of the city's cultural scene whose principal actors included the collector Levi, gallerist Gian Enzo Sperone and the artists, including "filmmakers, actors and musicians as well as the core of artists now known for their participation in the group shows of Arte Povera" (92). Lumley writes, "The evolving organization, activities and conflicts that centred on the DDP provide a fascinating vantage point from which to view the wider social, political and artistic changes of the moment" (93).

9 Criticos argues that in Celant's texts, the emphasis on the elimination of conventions is one of their limitations: "[...] en mettant trop fortement l'accent sur l'élimination des conventions, il masque le rapport de ces artistes et notamment de Paolini à la tradition picturale (*L'Arte Povera* 209-210).

sensual and dramatic processes played out over space and time – exhibit a sensibility that is decidedly baroque.

This notion of rupture is countered on a number of fronts. First, works commonly included under the “loosely configured” (Gilman 6) umbrella of *Arte Povera*, however heterogeneous in terms of appearance, share in a series of common denominators with respect to their conception, their immersion in realms of time and space, their approach to materials and their relationship with the viewer. Of course, not all works appeal to the same criteria all of the time, but it may be observed that upon consideration of the physical and national context from which these artists emerged, a certain sensitivity and perpetuation of an identifiable aesthetic among their works is revealed. In this thesis, I have called this sensitivity or aesthetic “baroque-centric,” a classification meant to denote the persistence of commonly accepted baroque characteristics, differing however, from other twentieth-century developments referred to as neo-baroque. The difference between “baroque-centric” and “neo-baroque” is centred on the notion of a conceptual, historically minded, rather than visual perpetuation of baroque tendencies. “Baroque-centric” separates itself from both the European characterization of the baroque articulated primarily in reference to literature and concerned with notions of movement, instability and metamorphosis, and the neo-baroque and its Latin American variant, rooted in the visual arts, particularly those where bombast, overt sensuality, extravagance and spectacle are given as the defining characteristics of some contemporary works. Referring to *Arte Povera* works as baroque-centric intends to illustrate that the works embody a series of traits and tendencies commonly identified in the art and culture of the seventeenth century, such as an interest in co-extensive space, time, an innovative and highly sensual use of materials, a connection with the natural world and an interest in essential energies and tensions; their persistence in these twentieth-century works is of a conceptual nature tied to the historical context and not identified as mere visual likeness in terms of form or material. For the purposes of this study, comparisons between baroque and *Arte Povera* works are confined primarily to Italy and its most celebrated Roman examples. In this sense, the rupture initially perceived on a visual level between *Arte Povera* works and the more traditional works of their predecessors is rather a re-interpretation of aesthetic modes in which the past gains new meaning and relevance.

The second aspect of contradiction is intimately tied to this notion of baroque-centricity. The drawing of comparisons between *Arte Povera* and its “Baroque predecessors” (Christov-Bakargiev, “Thrust” 22), begs the question of why these comparisons are necessary or even interesting. It may represent no stretch of the imagination to envision one generation of artists growing from the achievements of the previous, or that similar stylistic traits or tendencies are detectable among artists living in the same national or geographical context. The

point of interest is rooted in the particular time and place of the emergence of Arte Povera, that is, in post-war Italy. The impulse toward rupture with the past and the subsequent articulation of a new artistic language were aspects of a socio-political response to the devastation brought about by the fascist government of the first half of the twentieth century. Not only had Mussolini deployed Italy's vast cultural heritage in the construction of an ethno-centric Fascist state, in the immediate post-war era artists seemed unable to break completely with traditional modes of expression; even the most avant-garde experiments with materials and gesture remained fixed in object-based creative processes. Advances made by Arte Povera's immediate predecessors Piero Manzoni, Alberto Burri, Lucio Fontana and Emilio Vedova marked the path for the experimentation that followed in the 1960s and 1970s, but an entirely new visual language was required in order to address a changing culture and a population that had suffered irreparable moral and physical damage over the course of World War II. Arte Povera artists could be considered apolitical in the sense that any national or overt political affiliation was most unwelcome in the social upheaval of the late 1960s. To suggest that the radical experimentation conducted by artists associated with Arte Povera was baroque-centric, that their work displayed distinct connections to their country's cultural heritage and was therefore tied to the past, presents a second aspect of contradiction. The suggestion that their works perpetuated characteristics of their national, cultural patrimony is an unexplored aspect of their history.

Finally, the notion of contradiction is further carried out in Celant's initial conceptualization and promotion of the group. Although his writings have been criticized by authors who, like Gilman, consider them "difficult to decipher" with the result that the larger image of Arte Povera "remains mired in opaque explanations and catchall phrases" (4),<sup>10</sup> it remains that they were most influential in the launch of Arte Povera and Italian art in the post-war period. As Gil-

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10 Henry P. Raleigh has also commented on Celant's writing style. In a review of Celant's 1969 *Art Povera. Conceptual, Actual or Impossible Art?* Raleigh states that the book offers little in terms of explanation of the movement, aside from Celant's concluding chapter, which he describes as "a philosophical ramble that appears an elaboration of Robert Rauschenberg's well-known and oft quoted statement on the marriage of art and life, updated by hip slogans on ecology, love, politics, anti-establishment and loss of identity" (478). Criticos has similarly criticized Celant's writing as "[...] très comprimé, les phrases se succèdent en forme de slogans" (*L'Arte Povera* 213). In a 1971 issue of *Art and Artists* dedicated to contemporary Italian art, Charles Spencer noted that in Italy, "The critics, the writers on art, seem more concerned with philosophy than statement – which may be a viable, even admirable attitude, but sometimes declines into self-pity, even masochism, and too often into interlocutory satisfaction" (16), and that "[...] one envies the Italian critics' ease of philosophical vagaries and verbal acrobatics" (17).

man states, Celant's texts on Arte Povera enjoyed an "unparalleled critical monopoly" (4) in terms of their representation of the group in an international context. With Celant as the official spokesperson of the movement – its ambassador in a sense – it is interesting to note the manner in which the dialogue of the new visual language from Italy was articulated to the international art community. Themes of rupture and renewal were central also in these texts and in the majority of Arte Povera scholarship; the guerilla warfare was "on," so to speak, in terms of distancing one's aesthetic vision from the outmoded forms and techniques of the past. However, the past is what surfaces in Arte Povera scholarship as well as in the works themselves. A cursory review of the literature finds consistent references to Arte Povera's cultural inheritance, Italy's artistic legacy and the historical trajectory in which the group found itself firmly positioned. These references remark on the group's approach to materials, their immersion in essential elements – time, space, gravity and tension, their interest in the spectator's experience and the creation of a dynamic, lived experience in the aesthetic act. Ironically, these are also characteristics widely associated with the baroque; the shift in perspective in terms of the social, cultural and political changes between the seventeenth century and post-war Italy occurred alongside a persistence in aesthetic sensibility that saw consistent modes of conception and execution perpetuate across centuries. The animals, vegetables and minerals that Celant noted had "cropped up" (Celant, *Arte Povera/Art Povera* 119) in the art world were the stuff of everyday life, the raw material that led the path to an experience of contemporary reality for Arte Povera artists. The difference now was that the art object was taken off its pedestal and planted directly on the gallery floor.

The contradiction therefore, considering Celant's launch of the group in terms of its anarchic, revolutionary, guerilla tactics and its essential and therefore universal outlook, was that references and allusions to the Italian context and links to its cultural predecessors are in abundance. This implies that the group did not emerge from a purely artistic context with little consideration of its socio-political environment, but as a cultural movement firmly linked to its past and its national context. In Celant's efforts to establish Italian art on an international stage, it was not inconvenient to emerge from an already legendary cultural framework. These links to the cultural past took the form of literal and thematic references to the baroque, such as an interest in time, space, tension, theatricality and a particular sensitivity to materials. By aligning Arte Povera with the great successes of Italian culture and a national, celebrated past, Celant took on the role of what Anthony Smith calls the "political archaeologist" (*Myths and Memories of the Nation*), whose task it is to conjure collective memories with the goal of reconstructing the present in the image of a past golden age. The contradiction exists in the image of a post-war group of otherwise apo-

litical artists conceptualized and presented as heralds of a renewed Italian cultural identity in an era when extreme nationalism and the heroic past had been deployed in the utter destruction of a country. This is not to suggest that Arte Povera artists consciously made use of their cultural heritage as capital in an effort to engage with a wider audience. Rather, their packaging and promotion by an ambitious critic aware of the popular resonance of Italian art and culture perhaps aligned them with a national context that was not part of their artistic agenda but which has continued to define their output and identity as artists.

This thesis is structured across a five-part methodology, which includes a social history of the immediate post-war era and contextualization of the effects of fascism on Italian cultural production in the 1960s and 1970s. An overview of the aesthetic ground covered by Arte Povera's Informale predecessors in the immediate post-war period will outline the currents at play leading up to the visual experimentation which foregrounded the expression of baroque-centric tendencies. The second part presents an examination of primary and secondary texts in the form of scholarly and critical references to Italy's cultural past and constructs a case for the identification of the baroque and baroque-centric themes in Arte Povera. This examination leads in the third part to an historiographical account of major works of baroque scholarship and commentary on the neo-baroque. This review of baroque scholarship provides the basis for the identification of themes central to the baroque which help build toward a conceptualized system of traits for tracing baroque-centricity in Arte Povera works. The fourth part applies this system of baroque-centric traits to formal analysis of Arte Povera works. These twentieth-century works are compared to their seventeenth-century baroque counterparts in order to highlight commonalities in expression, marking the transition from baroque to baroque-centric. Finally, the fifth part presents a theoretical discussion of the implications of a baroque-centric Arte Povera; that is, a discussion of notions of national identity and the deployment of cultural capital in the internationalist project. Specifically, Smith's work on national identity and cultural heritage and his concept of the "political archaeologist" provide the backdrop to an examination of the role of critics in staging artistic movements.

It is hoped that this study will present an alternative perspective to the story of post-war Italian art previously articulated. Like the authors of *October*, I wish to surpass the conventional characterizations of Arte Povera, which much scholarship has positioned in a dialogue of material-based experimentation. I hope that this investigation into the contemporary cultural climate will provide a balance sheet, so to speak, to those claims of rupture and rejection of Arte Povera's past, with the impression that a consideration of the role of the past will provide a more complete picture of Arte Povera's contribution to the national and international post-war artistic arena and a more comprehensive view of the group's identity in their geographical and cultural context.