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# Frieze

*Arte Povera*

*Tate Modern, London, UK*

By Alex Farquharson (September 10, 2001)



Unbelievably, 'Zero to Infinity' is the first survey of Arte Povera to be held in Britain. We've had solo, senior-status shows by many of its prime exponents - Luciano Fabro, Michelangelo Pistoletto, Jannis Kounellis, Giuseppe Penone, Alighiero Boetti - in recent memory, but no overview.

The movement officially began in 1967, when the young critic-turned-curator Germano Celant coined the Arte Povera moniker, and ended in 1970, when he took the unilateral decision to bury it and work with its individual participants. Usually it's the artists that reject the way their individualism has been subsumed by movements defined by critics or curators, but in Arte Povera's case it was the artists (most of them, at least) who wanted to keep the show on the road into the 1970s.

This says a lot for the strange coherence of this most enigmatic of art movements, and the relative isolation Italian artists experienced prior to their integration within international post-Minimalist tendencies at the close of the decade. The show's curators, Richard Flood from the Walker Art Center and the Tate's Frances Morris, made the innovative decision to extend the time frame to include Arte Povera's immediate aftermath and its pre-history, when some of its slightly older practitioners (Pistoletto, Pino Pascali and Kounellis, for example) were beginning to be known individually. Academically, this move revealed the extent to which Arte Povera did or didn't come out of nowhere, and how, after its dissolution, the artists set out on the divergent, individually trademarked careers we know today.

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In terms of an exhibition experience this strategy allowed the curators to combine the best features of solo and group exhibitions. Most artists were given a room or section to themselves for a single large installation or series of works - Fabro's giant silk, marble and metal Pieds (1968-71), for example, surrounded by a wall piece in green thread entitled Penelope (1972), was achingly beautiful. Each artist also got to hang with others in small, relatively undidactic groupings around themes such as the objects' relationship to painting, political context, or the eponymous connectedness of nothing and everything. Often a section would trigger a solo set piece where a shared tendency was of prime importance to a particular individual. So, for example, the sculpture and semantics of painting that connected Fabro, Kounellis, Pascali and Pistoletto had a semi-detached relationship with a section of works by Giulio Paolini exploring the ontology of painting in ways that exceeded Jasper Johns and haven't been bettered since.

This osmosis between group and solo presentations put the viewer in the active position of working out to what extent Arte Povera holds together as a movement. Interpreted literally, it can be considered the antithesis of Pop Art, perhaps more so than any parallel American movements: it was organic, industrial, bio-chemical, in flux, phenomenological, presentational, non-representational, almost devoid of colour and implicitly anti-consumerist (after all, it coincided with the end of the miracolo italiano and the rise of worker/student insurrections). Arte Povera is a relatively watertight tendency if one views it via a hard core of around half the artists in 'Zero to Infinity', for whom alchemy serves as a useful motif. The works of Gilberto Zorio, Kounellis, Mario Merz, Pierre Paulo Calzolari and, to a degree, Marisa Merz, Giovanni Anselmo and Penone, all seem analogously connected with the apocryphal science of transforming inert, base materials into 'gold' of a living, universal, primordial, esoteric kind. Hence Mario Merz's attachment to Fibonacci's invention of a numerical system that behaves like self-generating patterns in nature (the breeding of rabbits and the structure of shells, for example) and his fondness for the brilliant gaseous light neon gives off once excited by electrons.

There's a certain wild mysticism to Celant's Arte Povera that one is tempted to attribute to a Catholic sensibility, which contrasts with the more pragmatic post-Minimalist Americans and northern Europeans who came to be defined by the Structuralist rationales of Lucy Lippard's 'Dematerialization' and Rosalind Krauss's 'Expanded Field'. But just when you feel you have a handle on it, you realize there are just as many anomalies: Fabro's luxurious marbles and classical symbolism; the philosophical, eccentric Pop of Pistoletto's 'Minus Objects' (1965-6); or the strikingly contemporary, illusionistic, plastic 'nature carpets' by Piero Gilardi (1966-8) and 3D super-Realism of Pino Pascali's pacifist 'Weapons' series (1965) - modern cannons, bombs and machine-guns made of wood. Pistoletto, Gilardi, Fabro, Pascali and Paolini, in various ways, confuse the presentation of materials with the representation of images, and in their cases at least, the Pop and Povera dialectic breaks down.

It was the works' playful openness, their surprisingly fresh physical condition and the show's clear but non-dogmatic exposition that gave a sense of relevance to what could have seemed arcane concerns. Indeed, it wasn't hard to play spot-the-1990s artist: 'Zero to Infinity' abounded with precedents for works by Martin Creed, Damien Hirst, Liam Gillick, Susan Hiller, Felix

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Gonzalez-Torres, Charles Ray and others. While the show certainly made for numerous lively encounters, it couldn't in the end breath new life into everything: Kounellis' parrot was missing from its perch (Untitled, 1967), no one was playing Bach's St John Passion (the score of which appears on Untitled, 1971), there wasn't a butane torch in sight, and the 12 horses, woe of woes, weren't stabled in the turbine hall. As these artists would have known all along, a museum, however big, is no place for infinity.

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