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ARTFORUM

1000 Words: Giuseppe Penone

By: Elizabeth Mangini (October 2010)



Giuseppe Penone, *Alpi Marittime—Continuerà a crescere tranne che in quel punto* (Maritime Alps—It Will Continue to Grow Except at That Point), 1968/2003, tree, bronze; arm, 15 3/4 x 4 x 5 1/8". Installation view, Maritime Alps, near San Raffaele Cimena, Italy, 2008.

SINCE GIUSEPPE PENONE burst onto the Turinese art scene in the heyday of Arte Povera with a series of photographs documenting actions performed in the forested foothills of the Italian Maritime Alps, trees have remained central to his oeuvre. More than just a raw material, trees for Penone are organisms with a life force that he can work both with and against. In the "*Alpi Marittime*" project, begun in 1968, he interrupted the natural growth of saplings by introducing permanent markers of his presence—a metal cast of his hand, or a wire silhouette of his body's embrace—the effects of which he documented for thirty years. Conversely, in the famous series "*Ripetere il bosco*" (Repeating the Forest), 1969–97, he recovered the "trees" hidden inside milled lumber by carving away the pulp around the hard knots that were once the living tree. This sustained attention to our relationship to nature is part of Penone's poetic articulation of the tensions between tradition and technology that defined northern Italy as it shifted to an industrial economy after World War II. Critic Tommaso Trini has described Penone as belonging to the "Turin School" of Arte Povera, characterized by conceptual rigor and earnest investigation of the internal operations of works of art. Among his peers Giovanni Anselmo, Mario Merz, and Gilberto Zorio, Penone is distinctive for his intertwined physical and philosophical approach to the practice of sculpture, positing, for example, that the sculptor's touch is analogous both to the organic formation of matter in nature and to the broader implications of human labor. In 1981, he made *Essere fiume* (To Be a River), two identical stones placed side by side, one taken from a riverbed, sculpted by the passage of water over its surface, the other a replica created by the artist. Such works as this, like the corporeal traces left on the "*Alpi Marittime*" trees, investigate the slow time of organic processes in counterpoint to technological speed, connecting human and geologic scales of time. On the summer solstice of this year, Penone presented *Idee di pietra* (Ideas of Stone), 2004/2010, the inaugural work of Documenta 13 (the exhibition proper opens in 2012). The piece comprises a bronze sculpture of a large tree with a stone lodged high in its branches, as well as a living sapling planted nearby. Speaking in Kassel at

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noon on the dedication day, the artist described the physical tensions between the two trees and the boulder in terms of his broader investigation into the philosophical and sensory divide between the practices of painting and sculpture. Afterward, I asked him to elaborate on these ideas and how they relate to the conventional notions of perception that are foundational for understanding one's own being in the world.

PAINTING AND SCULPTURE are terms that indicate two expressive languages. Conventionally, sculpture is volume, and lives in space, while painting is surface, two-dimensionality. Sculpture is born from the imprint of feet in mud, painting from the imprint of hands—dirty with mud—on the walls of a cave. The conventional ways in which we describe these two modes are schematic and synthetic, and one can find many differences and similarities.

We know that the etymology of *color* is “to cover.” Painting covers the surface on which it lies and hides the light. Sculpture, on the other hand, discovers, creates a space that it fills with air and light. While this is not how these two media are usually characterized, I think that if painting covers and sculpture discovers, then the force of gravity characterizes painting, and the force that escapes gravity, the force of light, characterizes sculpture. The force of gravity attracts matter that settles, covering the surface of the earth; one can think of the dust that continually covers the surfaces of the houses in which we live. The force exerted by light is opposed to the force of gravity. It is the force that allows the upward growth of trees, which are beings that develop and function in search of light, and it is the force that makes our own lives possible.

I am fascinated by the thought that a tree—whose form is defined by reaching toward light, escaping gravity—is transformed in this sculpture by the bronze casting, fossilized in metal, using the very gravity to which it is opposed. The process of bronze casting has its roots in the dark history of humans. It is a technique based on the capacity to render metals fluid with fire and gravity.

In order to distribute the bronze throughout the whole sculpture and to allow air to escape from the form being constructed, one attaches tubes to the wax maquette that have the form of branches. The sculpture is thus for a time a web of branches; it takes on a vegetal form. When outdoors—in the rain, the sun, the cold—bronze is also a metal that takes on the patina and color of the wood and leaves.

Such tensions and oppositions are components of any expressive form—that is, of any language. The associations between the contrasting elements in a work such as this create the distinctions necessary for the elaboration of an idea and allow for an unusual, unexpected perception of reality. This is important because our perception of the world, not only its scientific fact, is what determines our experience of it. In some of my early works of 1968–69, to which the current installation relates, I similarly put living trees and stones in relation to one another to draw on these fruitful distinctions.

The tension between painting and sculpture I've spoken about here can alternately be considered in perceptual terms, as the former is primarily a visual experience and the latter a tactile one. Painting is subject to the conventions and constraints that our brain processes while

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we are learning to see. Sculpture, on the other hand, helps the comprehension of reality more directly and objectively. This might seem contradictory to my distinction based on gravity and light, since it is true that light is necessary for the perception of painting, whereas the form and the volume of a sculpture can be perceived in the absence of light—but there is an intertwining. Don't forget that the first experiences of the child are tactile; only later does he interpret reality with sight. In a certain sense we learn to see with touch, and we are continually correcting visual distortions or uncertainties with the experience of touch. I am convinced of the necessity of touch to correct perceptions of vision that are often illusory, with touch helping to form a more precise consciousness of reality. We see only the forms and the things that we have learned to see.

The title of the work is *Idee di pietra* [Ideas of Stone]. It isn't a material so much as an idea, but the materials used are able to contain it. The type of stone that is between the branches of the bronze tree is granite, which is a crystalline stone. I always ask myself why we are attracted to geometric forms, like crystals, that are present in nature. Evidently, we associate geometric forms with thought, with order, with logic, with our brains, which know nothing of geometry but produce concepts for it, and a stone of this size has millions of crystals, of ideas. The stone's form, produced by erosion, by the water of a river, is somewhat organic. In this way, it can make us think of a brain, a brain of stone that contains thoughts.

The bronze sculpture that supports the stone was modeled after a nut tree. Farmers had pruned this particular nut tree to develop the trunk. What fascinates me about trees is their structure: The tree is a being that memorializes the feats of its existence in its very form. Similarly, our bodies could be considered the sum of the performance of our existence. The tree can be considered a metaphor for the work of a sculptor who fixes his actions in the material.

The small sapling planted near the bronze tree reanimates the sculpture; it indicates the rebirth and vitality of trees. It is not the same species. Here I planted a holly because it is an evergreen. Its growth will occur in relation to the bronze tree.

This living element is to some extent a return to my first works of 1968, "Alpi Marittime," which were a series of actions carried out in the landscape that I documented with photographs over many years. There I used living trees as the raw materials of sculpture, modifying their growth through contact with other elements, like an iron cast of my hand. In a certain sense, the artist is someone who animates, renders alive the material he uses. In traditional sculpture, one intervenes in and acts on inert materials. In these early works, by contrast, the inert element was the presence of the sculptor, and the action in the work was achieved through the growth of the trees over time. It is the same for the new piece installed in Kassel, in which the weight of the stone stands in for the weight of leaves. What one constructs over time is a work in the process of being: a work in emergence, projected into the future.