ALMINE RECH

Arte Povera

Oct 9, 2024 — Jan 20, 2025 | Bourse de Commerce - Pinault Collection, Paris, France

On 9 October 2024, the Bourse de Commerce — Pinault Collection will host an expansive exhibition devoted to Arte Povera. Composed by the curator Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev using some fifty historic, emblematic works from the Pinault Collection that she has placed in relation to works from other prestigious public and private collections, this exhibition, a landscape to be explored, has been designed specifically for the museum's spaces. This is where François Pinault wishes to show his collection of Arte Povera, with the aim of revealing potential correspondences between the works and the spirit of the place, for example, between the glass hemicycle atop the Rotunda and Mario Merz's igloos, which, according to the artist, are both symbols of the world and of small homes at the border of full and empty, shelters "granting a certain social dimension to people", as well as places to dream.

Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev is an Arte Povera specialist and globally recognised exhibition curator. As the former director of the Castello di Rivoli, she transformed this castle into the birthplace of the most experimental art forms, all the while keeping it the primary home of artists of this Italian movement. Determined to show their works not as objects, rather as poetic forces that inhabit space and time, the curator has envisioned this exhibition as a vast open stage that lets these artists' ideas circulate freely. To exhibit Arte Povera is a challenge, an exchange at every instant between the public, the artists, and the actors involved in this adventure. As a space that is both central and intermediary between the interior and the exterior, the Rotunda thus welcomes the dynamic collective of these thirteen artists. Arte Povera was exhibited for the first time in 1967 by Germano Celant. In the context of Italy's industrialisation and the dominance of the American art scene, the challenge lay in inventing a new relationship to the world to combat the dehumanising forces of consumerism while taking back "possession of reality", to use Celant's worlds. In relation to this collective core of landmark works and more recent creations by these artists, thirteen specific spaces have been devoted to each one of them to convey the singularity of their thinking and artmaking as intimately as possible, while the interstitial spaces house contemporary artists whose works demonstrate just how much the pulse of Arte Povera continues to beat throughout even very recent artistic and creative endeavours.

Lying between alchemy, archaism, pantheism, phenomenology, and a political consciousness that focused on the place of human beings in the universe, this exhibition, curated by Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, provides a novel experience of the space, a temporary but essential anchoring in time and space of Arte Povera, whose legacy continues to nourish contemporary creations.

The exhibition

The exhibition *Arte Povera* at the Bourse de Commerce — Pinault Collection traces the birth in Italy and the development and legacy of this movement across the globe. The curator, Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, has assembled more than 250 works for the museum by the thirteen protagonists of Arte Povera—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 – as well as new commissions given to the artists of this historic group and to international artists of the following generations whose work resonates strongly with the thought and practice of Arte Povera.

The curation has been entrusted to Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, an internationally recognised specialist in this Italian movement. It draws from the Pinault Collection's major holdings of Arte Povera, which have been placed in resonance with works from the Castello di Rivoli Museo d'Arte Contemporanea in Turin, the Fondazione per l'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea CRT in Turin, the Kunstmuseum Liechtenstein — Vaduz, the Museo e Real Bosco di Capodimonte in Naples, the Galleria d'Arte Moderna (GAM) in Turin, the Centre Pompidou in Paris, and the Tate in London. The curator has initiated an innovative dialogue with old and new works, thereby situating Arte Povera within a larger temporal landscape.

A movement of materials and energy

"By the mid-1960s, a number of Italian artists had begun making what we today call Arte Povera works using simple, inexpensive materials and techniques to create elemental installations that would induce in viewers an understanding of being embodied and grounded in the here and now and being alive. They channelled in their works flows of energy, whether physical and chemical, as determined by the fundamental forces of the universe, or psychic energy, such as memory and emotions. Their works were earthly, focused on an empirical and practical understanding of life through our encounter with things (both material and immaterial), energy and its transformative movements throughout the universe, from the micro scale of subjective experience and a phenomenological reduction of perception to the macro scale of the fundamental forces of physics that move the universe and make it live. Energy was important to them, from how it operates in the tiniest synapses in our brain, to the incommensurable movements that underlie the cosmos. Many of the artists grew up in places at the foot of the Alps, from Liguria and Piedmont, to Lombardy, Friuli and Veneto, where hydroelectricity plants were developing and the geological and geographic forces of the mountainscape, as well as its stark connection with the nearby Mediterranean Sea, were particularly perceivable.

The materials they used were both what we call 'natural' and 'rural' (such as earth, potatoes, salad, water, coal, twigs, trees, live bodies of animals including humans, etc) and what we call 'artificial' and 'urban' (things found in hardware stores like metal scaffolding, stainless-steel slabs, lead ingots, light bulbs, wooden beams, neon tubes, in art-supplies stores, like chemicals, cans, wooden strips, and technological tools of the time, such as analogue photography, slide projectors and video recording), with no distinction between them.

These artists explored art as a form of empirical practice rather than abstract philosophy, the embodiment of their subjective understanding of the world through the phenomenological reduction of experience to its essentials. They were suspicious of over-intellectualization and of abstract theory. Art also had to be *reale*, meaning alive and not mimetic nor representational, and it had to be 'authentic', meaning that it had to be the fruit of an experience of truth and accord between our fundamental core values and our actions, and not a superficial or conventional repeated expression. And so they used common and humble materials and simple techniques often employed by craftspeople or daily workers, from the highest forms of craft (like embroidery, book-binding or glass-blowing) to ancient knowledges in domestic spaces (such as folding sheets, binding twigs, combing the wool of mattresses, knitting, lighting a fire, and carpentry). The craft of making art and the craft of daily life were elements in their works.

By celebrating holistically the entire space where art is deployed, as part of their works, as one would in a home or in a church, furthermore, they contributed in a fundamental way to the development of what we today call 'installation art' – a space where elements are placed without clear boundaries and that is traversed by the audience viewers who become part of the artwork itself while they are there. In an installation, energy can run back and forth between the elements placed in space and the viewer, able to proprioceptively understand the meaning of artworks, bypassing intellectual understanding, simply becoming aware of the transformative process and impact they have on us."

— Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev

Expanding art history

Arte Povera artists have always been interested in situations of basic perception, combining their fascination with daily life with a deep respect for, and great interest in, artistic tradition. Mistrusting the excessive intellectualisation of art, they share the belief borrowed from Baroque aesthetics that heterogeneity and complexity in art are positive values and a driving force of creativity.

By radically redirecting contemporary artistic language towards new horizons, Arte Povera transformed the history of Western art and invented a much broader definition of creation. The acceptance of contradiction and complexity as tied to a sense of openness, fluidity, and a changing subjectivity situated the practices of this movement beyond the confines of modernism, and this has strengthened the interest elicited in Arte Povera today far beyond the boundaries of Western contemporary art. The exhibition at the Bourse de Commerce also explores the context in which Arte Povera emerged: Postwar Italy, its avantgarde (Fontana, Manzoni, Accardi, and others), and parallels with other international movements, such as Gutaï in Japan.

Arte Povera is generally defined as an artistic trend from the late 1960s, but its influence was and remains considerable. In all the interstitial spaces of the Bourse de Commerce, twelve artists whose practice resonates with that of Arte Povera continue this history, from David Hammons, William Kentridge, Jimmie Durham, and Anna Boghiguian in the 1980s to Theaster Gates, Pierre Huyghe, Grazia Toderi, and Adrián Villar Rojas in the 1990s, and to Garcia Torres, Renato Leotta, Agniezska Kurant, Otobong NKanga, and D Harding in the 2000s. In his/her own way, each of these artists confronts and actively works with this heritage.

A dialogue between more than 250 works

In addition to a core of works by the thirteen artists associated with Arte Povera, the exhibition includes items and documents that trace the key phases of what we can consider the movement's beginnings. These episodes are rooted in the culture of the Mediterranean, from the Pre-Socratics to Lucretius. They are informed by the particular relationship between modernity and rurality that characterised Italy until the second half of the twentieth century, and which had followed a trajectory that was Franciscan in its origins, which sought to impoverish the work. Each of the thirteen artists in the exhibition is associated with a personality, a movement, an era, or a material that he/she has deemed to be a profound influence, from an image by Giorgio De Chirico for Paolini to an icon painting for Marisa Merz.

The "precursor" section is counterbalanced by one for "successors": young and mid-career artists whose practice demonstrates the assimilation of the Arte Povera experience or a similar manner of working, and thereby an interest in primary energies, in the metamorphosis of matter at the intersection of nature, culture, and artificiality, and in a phenomenological reduction of the experience of the living world.

"In an era where everything is abstracted and the technology through which we experience the world is opaque to most people, there is a need to go back to basics and affirm why matter matters and why embodied life and materials matter. This is why an exhibition of Arte Povera is important today. To curate or to collect Arte Povera means to believe that an artwork can be real and not a representation of something else, that it can change and be subject to the metamorphosis through time, and that it can be made of humble materials and that these materials may not have a long duration, and yet also believe that this art can stay with us through the decades, centuries, thousands of years."

— Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev

Curated by Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev