Italian Art in Two Political Decades

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Ileana Sonnabend and *Arte Povera*, New York : Lévy Gorvy, 2017

Gianfranco Baruchello: *Archive of Moving Images 1960-2016*, Milan : Mousse Publishing, 2018.

Sous la dir. d'Alessandro Rabottini, Carla Subrizi

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Pier Paolo Pasolini : *entre art et philosophie*, Reims : Epure, 2018. Sous la dir. de Fabrice Bourlez, Véronique Le Ru

- 1 “Until we arrive at a less biased [...] assessment of a great – terrible, for sure, but also extraordinary – period of struggle and social transformation like the 1970s, we won’t be free. Maybe sooner or later we will be freed from prison, but we won’t be truly free until the people’s understanding of that period of struggle changes”.¹ With this statement the philosopher and militant Paolo Virno addressed the judge of the “7 of April Trial”. This trial, which began in 1982, was an attempt by the state to criminalise the entire extra-parliamentary left. The history of art can contribute to a more nuanced assessment of the 1970s, but to do so it needs to trace the politicisation of large sectors of society, including the art world, to the previous decade, where the Italian 1970’s turmoil has its roots. From the rise of *operaismo* to the strikes of 1969, the bombing perpetrated by fascists groups, the emergence of feminism and the 1977 movement, politics was the most distinctive trait of these two decades. It offered artists manifold ideas, topics and images with which to engage on a personal and artistic level. One could even argue that, in such a climate, which took Italy to the brink of civil war, the absence of a political dimension from the work of an artist was intentional. Five volumes have recently focused on the complex linkage between art and politics in 1960’s and 1970’s Italy, casting new light on four artists active mostly in Rome and a gallery-owner who promoted *Arte povera* between New York and Paris. Two publications are exhibition catalogues: *Giosetta Fioroni: The 60s in Rome* and *Ileana*

*Sonnabend and Arte Povera*². The others are an edited book, *Pier Paolo Pasolini: entre art et philosophie*, a monographic study, *Fabio Mauri*, and finally a *catalogue raisonné* of the films and videos made by Gianfranco Baruchello, *Archive of Moving Images 1960-2016*.

- 2 After her monographic volume on Pino Pascali and an anthology of Lucio Fontana's writings, Valérie Da Costa concentrated on Fabio Mauri, a major artist who has not yet received his due. She focuses on Mauri's performances, as they provide an excellent vantage point from which to explore Mauri's unclassifiable work and skilful use of media. Da Costa's richly illustrated bilingual book provides, among other things, an insightful analysis of one of Mauri's most controversial performances, *Che cos'è il fascismo*. This is generally translated into English as *What is Fascism*, but it actually means "what Fascism is". First staged in 1971, shortly after the failed or fake Borghese military coup (the rationale of the plot remains unclear), the present tense of the title could not be more appropriate. Yet the performance glanced backwards, and reactivated the late 1930's enrolment ceremony of the Gioventù Italiana del Littorio, the youth movement of the Fascist Party. Against a backdrop of nationalist and racist propaganda, the innocence associated with adolescence generates, as Da Costa rightly notices, an eerie atmosphere that exposes the perverse (and persisting) fascination that fascism exerts.

- 3 Pier Paolo Pasolini was a friend of Mauri's. His work as a poet, fiction writer, journalist and film director has received international acclaim but still deserves the kind of multidisciplinary analyses that the book edited by Véronique Le Ru and Fabrice Bourlez has collected. The publication does justice to the complexity of Pasolini's work, offering a plurality of readings that tackles topics as varied as vernacular architecture in Pasolini's film, Pasolini and linguistics, and the analogies between Foucault's and Pasolini's "politics of truth". Toni Hildenbrandt's essay, "Allégories du profane en terres étrangères dans l'œuvre de Pasolini après 1968", stands out as an innovative contribution, highlighting the direct political impact of a film that has gone largely unnoticed, *Le Mura di Sana'a* [*The Wall of Sana'a*]. A further protagonist of the Roman artistic scene in the 1960s and 1970s is Baruchello, a veteran artist whose work has been internationally reassessed over the past ten years. While his most famous film, *Verifica incerta* (1965) [*Uncertain Verification*], has long been saluted as a masterpiece, most of Baruchello's work on "motion images" is overshadowed by this achievement. Combining scholarly essays, archival materials and detailed descriptions of films and videos, *Gianfranco Baruchello: Archive of Moving Images 1960-2016* reveals the artist's pioneering undertakings, as well as pivotal political works, such as *Film operaio* (P.O.) [*Workers' film* (P.O.)], where "P.O." means "Potere Operaio", the revolutionary organisation of which Baruchello was a member.

- 4 *Ileana Sonnabend and Arte Povera* is lavishly illustrated but less convincing than the aforementioned books. The two-volume publication, with a cardboard cover that clumsily alludes to the impoverishment putatively inherent in Arte povera, illuminates Sonnabend's significance in the emergence of this trend. The catalogue has the merit to highlight the gallery's role, which accounts of Arte povera have often neglected. Yet, the book fails to address the issue of politics and, for example, does not discuss the exhibition that Piero Gilardi had in Sonnabend's Parisian gallery in 1967. Regardless of the post-1968 political divergences between Gilardi and the curator, Germano Celant, it would have been important to at least mention Gilardi's show. Yet, the interview with Celant that is featured in the catalogue has a rather self-celebratory timbre, and adds

little. By contrast, the catalogue *Giosetta Fioroni: The 60s in Rome* is exemplary in that it reproduces a large number of artworks, and supplements them with photographs of Fioroni's exhibitions, excerpts from her diary and exhibition reviews, conveying, not without nostalgia, her time in Paris and her subsequent Roman years. Fioroni's 1960's production appears to be one of the most powerful of her generation. Her trajectory and artistic *milieu* are sketched through fragmentary notes, private snapshots and ephemera that poignantly evoke the thriving art scenes of Paris and Rome, whose swift decline was anticipated by Fioroni's timely departures, first for Rome and then for Salgaredo where she resided for most of the 1970s. The reader navigates the different directions took by Fioroni's work, which began approaching feminist topics in 1968. In her late 1960s canvases, in particular, one senses the growing need for commitment but also for a freedom that would inform what Paolo Virno aptly described as the "terrible" and yet "extraordinary" 1970s.

NOTES

1. Biscotti, Rossella. *The Trial*, p. 7, unpublished manuscript, Biscotti's archive, translation slightly modified by the author.
 2. *Giosetta Fioroni: The 60s in Rome*, Milan: Silvana Editoriale, 2017, published on the occasion of the exhibition of the same name held at MMOMA, Moscow, 6 September-22 October 2017; Germano Celant, Sonnabend Gallery, eds., 2 vol. *Ileana Sonnabend and Arte Povera* (New York: Lévy Gorvy Gallery, 2017) published on the occasion of the exhibition of the same name held at Lévy Gorvy, New York, 2 November-23 December 2017.
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AUTHOR

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Jacopo Galimberti is a post-doctoral fellow of the British Academy at the University of Manchester. His research focuses on post-war art in Western Europe and he is currently writing a book about *operaismo*, *autonomia* and the visual arts. His articles have appeared in several journals such as *Art History*, *The Oxford Art Journal* and *Grey Room*. He is the author of *Individuals against Individualism: Western European Art Collectives (1956-1969)*, Liverpool University Press.