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Germano Celant: Archive as Practice

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- 1 As a promoter and theoretician of Arte povera, Germano Celant (Genoa 1940–Milan 2020) is a figure of reference in international art criticism. His name is associated with projects that have marked the history of exhibitions and defined a specific critical/curatorial militancy. Celant developed his own “informative” practice, informed by journeys, meetings with artists, collections and materials, gradually broadening the horizon from the transnational dimension of the 1960s and 1970s to the planetary dimension of the age of globalization, while at the same time managing to fit it into the mechanisms of culture industry. Based on a “guerrilla” strategy connected with the initial formulation of the “poor art” [Arte povera] label (1970), Germano Celant forged his own vision of post-war Italian art and of a cultural identity. He promoted and asserted it all over the world in tandem with his curatorial personality associated with missions, including his collaboration as senior curator at the Guggenheim Museum in New York (1989-2008), projects at the Venice Biennial—from *Ambiente/Arte* in 1976 to being in charge of *Future, Present, Past* for the 47th Edition in 1997—and the artistic direction of the Prada Foundation (1995-2020).
- 2 From his early days in Genoa in the 1960s, archival practice was at the hub of Germano Celant’s critical and curatorial discourse. In the great Ligurian capital, he took his first steps in art as editor-in-chief of the magazine *Marcatré*, founded by Eugenio Battisti in 1963. As professor of art history at Genoa University, Battisti complained about the almost total lack of study centres, libraries and document collections relating to contemporary art in Italy in the 1960s, as well as a dearth of museums devoted to contemporary art. As a response to these gaps, the art historian that he was launched *Marcatré*, an avant-garde magazine with a multidisciplinary approach, and then conceived the Museo Sperimentale d’Arte Contemporanea, whose collection was given to the Galleria Civica d’Arte Moderna in Turin (now the GAM).
- 3 That intense period of training with Eugenio Battisti profoundly marked Germano Celant’s militant approach, in a perspective somewhere between art criticism and art history. Battisti influenced his “expositive” writing [*scrittura espositiva*], in the form of a

progressive dialogue and a contamination between languages. On this subject, Celant recalls: “My career is marked by a training in an historical approach, inculcated at the University by Eugenio Battisti, in such a way that my analytical attention can be applied to any artistic subject whatsoever, from watches to witches, from automata to Brunelleschi. This is why I immediately embarked on a 360-degree investigative project ranging from art to design, by way of architecture. This common vision is also the consequence of having, for several years, been the editorial secretary of the magazine *Marcatré*, founded in 1963 in Genoa, then transferred to Milan, where there was a mixture of different languages of architecture, art, design, music and literature [...]. The interest in cross-pollination between the arts came into being at that particular moment.”¹

- 4 If archival practice lent structure to Germano Celant’s critical/curatorial vision from the early days of his career, it also contributed to the creation of a work space forming, over time, his heritage in terms of books and documents. In 2007, the Celant archives were transferred from Genoa to Milan, at the same time as the critic himself moved to the regional capital of Lombardy. On the lower floor of his private house, which was an old stationery shop situated on Via Grasselli in Milan, most of his books and documents were brought together (the posters and documentation to do with certain exhibitions are held in Genoa).
- 5 As Marcella Ferrari, current director general and project manager of the Studio Celant in the Milanese archives, points out, “the materials are for the most part organized and divided up in alphabetical order. Only a part of the library is currently catalogued for research reasons. This the part concerned with non-fiction. In the part devoted to documents, we also find several photographic reports, most of them dating back to the start of Celant’s career, when the production of books was still also a manual art”.²

Celant Archive – Studio Celant, Milan © Attilio Maranzano

- 6 Still regarded as a private work space, the Celant archives in fact hold an extraordinary heritage which might make them the reference centre in Italy for studying international art in the latter half of the 20th century, in various forms ranging from Arte povera to Conceptual Art, and from process art to performance—research areas which Celant followed and promoted, with an attentiveness always concerned with a broader history rooted in the avant-gardes of the early 20th century, and not without a continual interference of languages and disciplines. As far as the future of the Celant archives is concerned, Marcella Ferrari points out that “the Studio Celant, a name

chosen by Celant's heirs to define the place when the critic died, is currently accomplishing some of the projects initiated by Celant. It is developing, on the one hand, with the desire to realize projects on which Celant should have worked; on the other, it envisages study and promotional activities to do with his person and his archives."³

- 7 Starting from archival practice, Celant defined a working methodology and re-invented a critical vision in relation to the crisis of interpretation lying at the heart of the debates of the 1960s and 1970s. The borderline between art history and art criticism is thus visible, at the same time as the emergence, at an international level, of a new figure: that of the exhibition maker, with his precise goals, his *modus operandi*, and his strategies. With people such as Harald Szeemann, Jean-Christophe Amann and Achille Bonito Oliva, Germano Celant worked out a method of intervention using an "expositive" form of writing. The "verticalized" relations between artist and critic, as well as the interpretative angles directed towards the work were reversed by re-configuring a "horizontality" based on the quest for a discursive practice of sharing and exchange between the critic and the artist in what is the exhibition's hybrid, anthropological and informative space.
- 8 From his moveable and international viewpoint, Celant developed his own curatorial method, which, in the transition from the 1960s to the 1970s, he defined as "acritical criticism" [*critica-acritica*]. Acknowledging the teaching of Eugenio Battisti, the discursive and relational practice of Carla Lonzi, Susan Sontag's "aesthetics of silence", and the creative and conceptual work around Seth Siegelaub's book,⁴ Celant reckoned that criticism must "proceed alongside art", without judging the work. It must live, experiment, conserve and collect. It must abandon the "ambiguous word with many meanings" in favour of "information".⁵ To this end, "acritical criticism" must rely on documentation tools: from photography to shooting films, and from recording to printed documents. This methodology would give rise to the book *Arte Povera*, published in four editions and three languages in 1969. This book "depends on the contingency of the collection of documentary equipment".⁶ It is made up of images, without any geographical separation relating to artists' origins—based on the procedures and process-based practices which emerged all at once in Italy, Europe and the United States in the second half of the 1960s. The critical essay, for its part, is relegated to the back burner. Pages are devoted to each artist, in such a way that the book creates a printed visualization of the exhibition circuit, and reinstates the organic relation between artist and critic. If the initial selection was powerful—for Germano Celant carefully defined the invited artists by sidelining others—the book's construction, conversely, provided the documentation of a lived experience.
- 9 In the continuity of this methodological practice, Celant founded the Information Documentation Archives (IDA), with the collaboration of Ida Gianelli,⁷ in Genoa in June 1970. Divided into three sections—Arte povera, Conceptual Art and Land Art—, the IDA was conceived as a documentation centre, a collection of materials relating to contemporary art and architecture, and as an advisory centre for institutions, for the creation of publications and exhibitions. Like Harald Szeemann, Germano Celant worked around the idea of the archive, organizing a visionary and perceptive project which forged a two-way operation: in the promotion of both curatorial and editorial projects, independently of the academic university world and museums.

Germano Celant, « information documentation archives », *NAC: Notiziario Arte Contemporanea*, May 1971, p. 5 © with courtesy of Celant Archive, Milan

- 10 From the editorial viewpoint, in the 1970s, Germano Celant abandoned the format of the short introductory text and promoted that critical tool called the monograph, hitherto usually reserved for describing an already established career. He used it, conversely, as a tool for confirming and supporting the work of young artists in international art circles. In the Giulio Paolini monograph, published in 1972, to mark his show at the Sonnabend gallery in New York, Celant more precisely defined a method of analysis and a *modus operandi*. With regard to that publication, he would recall this: “For me, this is the first step towards a methodological change in the curatorial writing of a book. Based on this, I am reducing occasional introductions to a minimum, and I am deciding to write just “monographs” of historical significance, with in-depth and well-documented research texts, as if they were devoted to an already totally “historicized” artist, instead of a “young” one: which is to say, an initial and scientifically in-depth analysis of the artist’s work. This involves avoiding the “superficiality” typical of many of yesterday’s and today’s critics, and lending an historical weight to the artists to whom I dedicate my attention. From this there resulted the series of major monographs, including Merz, Kounellis, Pistoletto, Accardi, Heizer, De Maria, Wesley, Gehry, Mapplethorpe, Nevelson, Sachs, Melotti, Oldenburg, Dine, Manzoni, Vedova, Salvadori, Kiefer, Rotella, Canevari, Abramović, Zorio, Calzolari, Djuberg, Rehberger, Holler, Vezzoli [...]”.⁸

Book's cover: Germano Celant, *Giulio Paolini*, New York: Sonnabend Press, 1972 © with courtesy of Celant Archive, Milan / This book is also located in the collections of the INHA-Archives de la critique d'art [PREST.T1790]

- 11 Alongside the monograph, the exhibition catalogue also acquired ever greater importance, by referring, from the 1970s onward, to the essence of Celant's analytical and informative methodology. In it, he used chronology like a comparative and objective sequence of artistic events,⁹ often framed in a broader social and cultural history. The exhibition catalogue *Identité italienne: l'art en Italie depuis 1959*, for the show held at Beaubourg in 1981,¹⁰ is the emblem of this. In a volume of more than 600 pages, Celant embarked on a close comparison of data and events, aimed at sketching an "official narrative" of post-war Italian art in an "arte poveriste" perspective, at a time when the "trans-avantgarde" vision was also being asserted at the international level, through the critical and curatorial action of Achille Bonito Oliva. With *Identité italienne: l'art en Italie depuis 1959*, Celant's international rise as an exhibition curator soared. Exhibition followed exhibition, one being *The Italian Metamorphosis, 1943-1968*, at the Guggenheim Museum in New York in 1994, relaunching, in a diachronic manner, the "Arte povera" label,¹¹ and confirming a grand narrative of post-war Italian art.

Book's cover of the catalogue *Identité italienne : l'art en Italie depuis 1959*, curated by Germano Celant, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, 1981 © with courtesy of Celant Archive, Milan / And in the collections of the INHA-Archives de la critique d'art [PREST2.S0917]

- 12 During the 1990s, cross-disciplinarity became Celant's peculiar stylistic code, visible in a series of major exhibitions where art dialogued with design, architecture, music, film, dance, fashion, food, and the like. Among the tentacular exhibition projects which marked that period in the history of exhibitions—perhaps partly accomplished—, we may recall *Arti & Architettura* (Genoa, 2004), *Vertigo: Il secolo di arte off-media dal Futurismo al Web* (with Gianfranco Marianello, Bologna: MAMbo, 2007), *Art or Sound* (Venice, Ca' Corner della Regina, 2014), and *Arts & Foods: Rituali dal 1851* (Milan: Triennial, 2015, as part of the Expo Milano 2015). In these shows, just as in the re-enactment activities applied in various ways to recent projects, the archive is either the point of departure for embarking on research with curatorial teams, or material to be exhibited by rekindling the methods and formats of the document itself. This was the case with *Post Zang Tumm. Art Life Politics: Italia 1918-1943*, which was held in the Milanese headquarters of the Prada Foundation in 2018, and with *When Live in Your Head. When Attitudes Become Form*—based on the legendary exhibition organized by Harald Szeemann at the Bern Kunsthalle in 1969. That exhibition was literally re-created in the 18th century Ca' Corner della Regina building in 2013, the place where the Venetian exhibition space of the Prada Foundation are located, thanks to the dialogue between Celant, the architect Rem Koolhaas, and the artist Thomas Demand. By thinking about the seed of the curatorial activity and the model of the “laboratory-exhibition”, Germano Celant lived as a militant critic (a pioneer, in this sense, with the show *Arte Povera più Azioni Povere*, presented in Amalfi in 1968). With hindsight, he revised the Szeemann exhibition with an almost archaeological method. Throughout his life, he dwelt on crucial issues, to do with his own curatorial approach, questioning the relation between past and present, and between historical vision and critical militancy. In this operational radicalness, the

archive becomes a space of questioning and continuous overlap, and a space rekindling the sense of history in a politics of the present.

View of the exhibition *Post Zang Tumm. Art Life Politics: Italia 1918-1943* curated by Germano Celant, Milan: Prada Foundation, 2018 © Attilio Maranzano, with courtesy of Prada Foundation, Milan

NOTES

1. Celant, Germano. "Un sogno insieme. Intervista di Stefano Casciani", *Domus*, 9 ottobre 2010 <https://www.domusweb.it/it/arte/2010/10/09/germano-celant-un-sogno-insieme.html>
2. Marcella Ferrari, in conversation with the author, Milan, 16 September 2020.
3. *Ibid.*
4. See Celant, Germano. "Per una critica acritica", *Casabella*, n° 348, December 1969, p. 42-44
5. Celant, Germano. "Per una critica acritica", *NAC*, n° 1, October 1970, p. 29-30
6. Celant, Germano. *Arte Povera*, Milan: Mazzotta; London: Studio Vista; New York: Praeger, Cologne: Studio Wasmuth, 1969, p. 5
7. "Information Documentation Archives", *NAC*, n° 5, May 1971, p. 5
8. Germano Celant, in written exchanges with the author, 30 July 2011
9. See, in particular, *Preconistoria: 1966-69. Minimal Art, Pittura Sistemica, Arte Povera, Land Art, Conceptual Art, Body Art, Arte Ambientale e Nuovi Media*, Florence: Centro Di, 1976. The catalogue borrows the setting of Lucy R. Lippard's book, *Six Years: The dematerialization of the art object from 1966 to 1972*, New York: Praeger, 1973.
10. *Identité italienne : l'art en Italie depuis 1959* (25 June-7 September 1981, Paris: Centre Georges Pompidou, Musée national d'art moderne), Paris: Centre Pompidou ; Florence: Centro Di, 1981. For an analysis of the catalogue-chronology, read: Messina, M.G. "Identité italienne a Parigi, Centre

Pompidou, 1981: le ragioni di un catalogo-mostra", *Palinsesti*, no.4, 2014, <http://www.palinsesti.net/index.php/Palinsesti/article/viewArticle/56>

11. *Coerenza in coerenza: dall'arte povera al 1984* (12 June-14 October 1984, Turin: Mole Antonelliana), Milan: Arnoldo Mondadori Editore, 1984

Del Arte Povera a 1985 (24 January-7 April 1985, Mad: Palacio de Cristal, Parque del Retiro), Madrid: El Viso, 1985

The Knot: Arte Povera at P.S.1 (6 October-15 December 1985, New York: P.S.1), Turin: Allemandi & C

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