Arte Povera, A Question of Image
Germano Celant and the Critical Representation of the Neo-Avant-Garde

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How is it possible to ‘recount the story of Italian art in the last forty years’ without falling into ‘the maze of the official critical approach?’ asked Francesco Bonami in connection with his exhibition Italics: Arte Italiana tra Tradizione e Rivoluzione 1968–2008 (Italics: Italian Art between Tradition and Revolution 1968–2008). In a departure from his predecessors, the curator regarded 1968 as the beginning of the ‘maze.’ In that year, the critic Germano Celant launched arte povera, a ‘train’ that, in Bonami’s view, only reached the international scene after leaving a number of Italian artists of considerable merit standing on the platform. If Bonami’s critical objective was, above all, to break with the legacy of arte povera, mine in this essay will be to discover what made it possible to build such a movement within the international art scene. Bonami’s question, however, does touch upon a central point where criticism and history meet, and reveals that the difficulty of ‘recount[ing] the story’ of the neo-avant-garde was at the very heart of the critical debate in the late 1960s. In this respect, Harald Szeemann’s statement, when he installed his famous exhibition Live in Your Head: When Attitudes Become Form, could not be clearer: ‘No one has given the complex phenomenon a satisfactory name or category, in the same way that Pop, Op and Minimal were. Names so far suggested – Anti-Form, Micro-Emotive Art, Possible Art, Impossible Art, Concept Art, Arte Povera, Earth Art – each describes only one aspect.’ The New York gallery owner Seth Siegelaub highlights another distinctive aspect of this situation: ‘conceptual art, which is an inappropriate name, was probably the first artistic movement which did not have a geographic centre.’ Symptomatic of the transformations then underway in the art world, these uncertainties show how the neo-avant-garde was in the process of eluding the judgment of critics and the market by refusing both to produce art objects [objets d’art] and to accept the aesthetic categories that made it possible to evaluate them. Art seemed to be capable of redefining itself through the notion of information: declarations, projects, and photographic images were regarded as disrupting the elitist circuit of the art object in
order to activate the democratic circuit of international information about aesthetic events. In this transitional period, documents played an unprecedented role through specialized journals, catalogues, and ‘book documentary’ – documentary books created to accompany a single event or exhibition. Confronted with these changes, criticism was forced to redefine its own role and develop strategies capable of ‘recount[ing] the history’ of the neo-avant-garde while also appropriating the aesthetic transformations then underway.

In this context, the emergence of arte povera is an exemplary case. Coined in 1967 by Germano Celant, this label has enjoyed extraordinary success that has attracted the attention of specialists and provoked a great variety of opinions. Over the years, the notion has taken on a polysemic value which at once embodies that of an aesthetic and activist manifesto, a set of procedures, the definition of a group, and even a national trait. Germano Celant was able to use these disparate categories without ever solidifying his construction into a model, making it especially difficult to historicize the movement and its critical strategy. As a result, polemics surrounding the legitimacy of arte povera’s claim to represent the Italian neo-avant-garde have driven international debate. Some have criticized Celant’s construction of an avant-garde with national borders – a sort of exotic preserve within a movement characterized by an internationalist spirit – while others have pointed to the movement’s ideological and aesthetic ambiguities, its theoretical inconsistencies, or the aestheticizing consecration of the 1980s. Today, one can only acknowledge that polemics are an integral part of the movement’s history. This ‘coherent incoherence,’ to borrow the title of a ‘poverista’ exhibition curated by Germano Celant, is, as it were, a deliberate paradox: an irony that arte povera shares with the international avant-garde and which is accompanied – with political, linguistic, and structural accents – by the entire critical mythology of the 1960s and 1970s.

To penetrate the ‘maze’ of Arte Povera, one must analyze not so much the coherence of its narrative as the critical construction of its image. By following the trajectory from a demand for documentation to the establishment of a dialectic between the artists’ images and their critical interpretation, it becomes possible to grasp the movement’s iconography in its earliest years. Studying the image of Arte Povera and – specifically in this essay – the way in which Germano Celant incorporated photography into his critical approach can help us to retrace the processes by which this movement defined itself in terms of the neo-avant-garde and asserted itself within the system of contemporary art.

The ‘Book Documentary’

The valorization of art’s documents has its origins in the 1950s. In the course of that decade, the break with the modernist tradition and the quest for a new balance between artwork, exhibition space, and public led to the gradual establishment of an ephemeral art embodying new ways of working. ‘This period is characterized to a very high degree by an economy of the gift without return,’ which no longer produces works but develops an increasingly organized control of visual information. In most cases, this documentation possesses a narrative-documentary dimension that can sometimes reach the quality of a critical reading.

In Italy, in the early 1960s, Piero Manzoni, Michelangelo Pistoletto, and Giulio Paolini were among the first to use photography to explore the nexus between information,
conceptual reflection, and the work of art. These pioneers anticipated strategies that would be expanded in the late 1960s, giving rise to new possibilities for interpreting creative processes. For critics and most artists, the problem of documentation arose around 1967 with the dissemination of research linked to installations and public manifestations, which coincided with the theorization of arte povera. *Arte Povera più Azioni Povere*, the event which took place in Amalfi from October 4 to October 6, 1968, marks the turning point toward documentation. It was the first official presentation of the movement outside the gallery circuit. For Germano Celant, it was an ‘immediate consumption of the critical-esthetic event, directly placed outside consumption and direct passage from Arte povera to Azione povera.’

Arte Povera più Azioni Povere, the event which took place in Amalfi from October 4 to October 6, 1968, marks the turning point toward documentation. It was the first official presentation of the movement outside the gallery circuit. For Germano Celant, it was an ‘immediate consumption of the critical-esthetic event, directly placed outside consumption and direct passage from Arte povera to Azione povera.’ Artists and critics were exhorted to enter into dialogue, to confront one another, to act in concert, and to go beyond the old positions of an artistic culture that revolved around the artwork as object. In the city’s old shipyards, the Genoese critic presented most of the artists of arte povera: Alighiero Boetti, Luciano Fabro, Giovanni Anselmo, Piero Gilardi, Mario Merz, Giulio Paolini, Gianni Piacentino, Michelangelo Pistoletto, Gilberto Zorio, Jannis Kounellis, and Pino Pascali. For three days, the event also included actions involving artists like Gino Marotta, Icaro, the Guitti of the Zoo (the street theater group created that same year by Michelangelo Pistoletto), and young foreign artists such as Richard Long, Jan Dibbets, and Ger Van Elk. The presence of these latter three (through Piero Gilardi’s connections) heralded the international dimension that would be assumed by this generation of avant-garde artists.

At the closing discussion, a number of artists complained about the ambiguous role of photographers and television cameras throughout the three-day event. In his firsthand report, Gilardi recounts:

> “Three staff photographers covered the setting up of the works and the carrying out of the actions ... As always, the presence of the television crew dampened the spontaneity of the events, and some artists lodged complaints. In effect, television cameras, even though they were brought by director Emilio Greco, a good friend of almost all the artists who showed at Amalfi, tinged the atmosphere of the exhibition with ambiguity.”

In spite of their tone, these comments did not reflect an aversion to the media but expressed the artists’ demand for control of their own work. They were disturbed by the presence of public television because it forced them to play the role of avant-garde artists without having any control over the images and their distribution. Published by Marcello Rumma in 1969, the catalogue-document presents many images alongside reports by the participants. However, this attempt at documentation only rarely offers a true visual reading of the events. Celant sought to give the book a documentary format, but the lack of choice between a graphic design that encompasses the images and a neutral and cadenced documentary presentation does not generate a convincing alternative to the style of reporting adopted in other book documentary of the art scene, such as *Assemblage, Environments & Happenings* (1966), *New York: The New Art Scene* (1967), and *Il Teatro delle Mostre* (1968). Thus, *Arte Povera più Azioni Povere* reveals the not-yet-fully developed state of documentation within the movement.

These first attempts to represent ephemeral actions prompted artists to take a more active role in constructing an image suitable for media transmission that would be capable of conveying their work. The attention to documentation that gradually incorporated the media of visual information into the artistic process led to collaborations with a number of operator-artists linked to photography and video. These images constituted an increasingly widespread practice that, in Italy, would be
After the Amalfi experiment and the publication of the associated book documentary, the critic continued to pursue his reflections on documents in the article 'Per una Critica Acríctica' ('Towards an Acritical Criticism), which was first published in 1969 in the journal Casabella. For Celant, the aesthetic challenge laid down by the neo-avant-garde demanded a new role for criticism. Criticism had to renounce 'gossip' and instead undertake a 'conservative and historic documentary activity ... in order to have power, not over art, but over the instruments of communication.' Celant shifts the activity of criticism in a manner that complements the new positions of the avant-garde, and proposes control over the information produced by the artists, that is, over the images which were all that these artists actually produced at the moment when their artwork itself was becoming dematerialized. The decision to renounce critical judgment conceals a new position of supremacy for criticism. Its 'historical activity' must express itself through the act of choosing among the documents supplied by the artists: 'Documenting doesn't mean not choosing; it doesn't mean taking an interest in all the art produced; it means being able to choose the art one wishes to save, with all the risks and dangers that go along with such a choice.' This represents an attempt to theorize a positive solution to the crisis of the role of criticism, a solution that uses documents as an alternative to the interpretive text, which is now dismissed as 'gossip.' Celant proposes a new form of criticism which appropriates the instruments and objectivity of the historical narrative. Among the possible documents – firsthand reports, film, video, audiotape, and so forth – Celant will choose photography as the privileged medium with which to build his new critical construction.

The year 1969 saw the publication of three seminal books on the neo-avant-garde: the exhibition catalogues for Live in Your Head: When Attitudes Become Form and Op Losse Schroeven, and Arte Povera, the photobook by Germano Celant. These three books (to which one must at the very least add Gerry Schum’s documentary film Land Art) do not confine themselves to tracing the international panorama of a new generation of artists; they are indispensable tools for studying the institutionalization of the movement as expressed in the three critics’ approaches to laying out their publications.

Harald Szeemann formats his catalogue as a loosely bound collection of files, choosing to collect the material provided by the individual artists on separate sheets, following an aesthetic that already characterized the cataloguing practice of a number of conceptual artists. The catalogue Op Losse Schroeven: Situaties en cryptostructuren, for its part, consists of two separate folders enclosed within a single cover. The first adheres to the logic of a traditional catalogue: a map of the exhibition is followed by critical texts and illustrated capsule biographies of the artists. By contrast, the second reproduces the artists’ projects in such a way as to create an artist’s book that clearly alludes to the Xerox Book published by the gallery owner Seth Siegelaub the previous year.

With its square format and full-page images, Arte Povera – which was published simultaneously in Italy, Germany, England, and the United States – is the first photobook by a critic on this new international generation. Celant brings together an extremely broad panoply of the international scene, including American conceptual artists such as Joseph Kosuth, Lawrence Weiner, Robert Barry, and Douglas Huebler, the land artists Richard Long and Dennis Oppenheim, all the arte povera artists, as well as German artists such as Joseph Beuys and Dutch artists including Jan Dibbets. In Arte Povera, each artist is given about six pages in which to present his or her own work by way of a careful choice of images and layout, following a methodology introduced by Seth Siegelaub in his
catalogue-exhibitions.\textsuperscript{26} Whereas the Amsterdam and Bern catalogues had adopted the aesthetic of the loose-leaf collection in this the project, in which photographs still had their traditional function of illustrating the texts and biographical notices, Celant chooses to give photography an exclusive space of its own. \textit{Arte Povera} also differs from the other catalogues in the absence of ‘stage directions’ or signposts for the reader. The only guide is a foreword that defines the informational value of the critical procedure:

> ‘The book does not attempt to be objective since the awareness of objectivity is false consciousness.
> ‘The book, made up of photographs and written documents, bases its critical and editorial assumptions on the knowledge that criticism and iconographic documents give limited vision and partial perception of artistic work.
> ‘The book, when it reproduces the documentation of artistic work, refutes the linguistic mediation of photography ...
> ‘The book narrows and deforms, given its literary and visual oneness, the work of the artist.’\textsuperscript{27}

The rejection of the evocative power of photography by the artists and the critic has its ambiguous and ironic aspects:\textsuperscript{28} in reality, for most of the artists presented by Celant, photography and film were essential media for visualizing ephemeral projects or actions. Documentation was not just the trace of the avant-garde’s rejection of the work; it was also the construction of a documentary iconography of that position. In this context, the theorization of the medium’s inability to convey its ephemeral object – the event or idea of art – is necessary to ensure the historical dimension of the documents while denying the images an aesthetic value as works that would contradict the renunciation of the artwork-object. And yet, despite that Celant demanded one not seek ‘a unitary and reassuring value’ in the book’s images but ‘rather ... the changes, limits, precariousness and instability of artistic works,’\textsuperscript{29} most of the photographs became known as the only images of these works; they are the document-works that today appear in museums, catalogues, and art history books. The following year, \textit{Information}, the catalogue of the exhibition organized at New York’s Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) by Kynaston McShine, would take up Celant’s idea of interpreting the information of the neo-avant-garde primarily through the medium of photography by publishing an uninterrupted sequence of full-page image-documents. Emilio Prini, who was invited to participate in the New York exhibition along with Giulio Paolini, Giuseppe Penone, and Michelangelo Pistoletto, decided to present in the MoMA catalogue a reproduction of a double-page spread of his work that had originally appeared in \textit{Arte Povera}, thus indirectly acknowledging the groundbreaking role of Celant’s book.

**The Photograph between Art and Criticism**

\textsuperscript{13} With \textit{Arte Povera}, Celant had theorized the photograph’s lack of any aesthetic value. However, his strategy of control over documents developed in parallel with the transformation of the international art world. In 1971, when arte povera entered the museums, the critic declared that the experimental phase of the movement was over and decided instead, to follow the work of individual artists.\textsuperscript{30} At the same time, the function and status of the artists’ documents evolved in respect to the theorization and use that Celant made of them. If one goes through his articles in \textit{Casabella} – the famous architecture journal for which he served as contemporary art editor beginning in 1965 –
it is easy to reconstruct the evolution of his strategies regarding the valorization of photographic documents and page layout.

In the article 'La Natura è Insorta' (Nature Has Arisen), which appeared in *Casabella* in the summer of 1969, Celant continues to use photographs to illustrate his text without making any distinction among the various genres of photograph involved. Press photographs share the page with photographic documents, artworks (Robert Smithson, *A Non-Site*), a photograph from the set of Gerry Schum's film *Land Art*, and stills from the same film. Despite the variety of the images employed, Celant's text develops no particular argument regarding the media of documentation. The article continues to exhibit echoes of May '68, emphasizing the ecological sensibility of land art and the difference between the movement's tendencies in America and Europe.

In the following year, the article 'Conceptual Art' reflects an entirely different approach which inverts the relationship between text and image. A brief note informs the reader: 'the photographs and writings published in the journal constitute one form of the exhibition Conceptual Art, organized by Germano Celant.' Following a practice first introduced by American conceptual artists, the piece is presented not as an article but as an exhibition in the form of an article. On the first page, the captions of the works appear together with a brief text by Celant entitled ‘Appunti’ (Notes), which introduces conceptual art without offering any commentary on the works themselves:

'Since Duchamp made his choice, ... [a]cting, thinking, and communicating have become aesthetic and artistic matters ... The idea has thus become the real 'precipitate' of artistic research, while the aesthetic or artistic document itself has been transformed into a trace or residue. A trace or residue which tends to disappear and to figure only as the witness to an idea.'

This discourse confirms the positions formulated by Celant in 'Per una Critica Acritica.' As in his book *Arte Povera*, in this text Celant minimizes the value of the images as iconic representations and instead asserts their exclusive status as 'witness to' an idea. A few lines later, however, he qualifies this position by mentioning an aspect of conceptual research that operates with the media-focused nature of these new types of work. These 'residues,' thus, appear as opportunities to try out the new languages of the media:

'An art ... which will not allow itself to be manipulated or mediated by the traditional channels such as museums and art galleries, but directly invades the instruments of communication and information themselves (the television, newspaper, magazine, book, photograph, etc.), accepting and exalting their particular values and linguistic implications.'

The article-exhibition ‘Conceptual Art’ presents works that are already conceived with print reproduction in mind. In these practices, the photograph becomes one pole of reference for an artistic action that constructs a new model for representing art. This is probably what Emilio Prini had in mind when he chose the title *Magnete* (Magnet) for a work comprising an enigmatic image of a camera. Photographs and conceptual statements of Douglas Huebler, Hamish Fulton, and Joseph Kosuth are interspersed in the article, which concludes with portraits by Gilbert & George.

Around 1970, it was becoming increasingly apparent that exhibitions were going to be translated into catalogues, journals, and books, and that the photographs were becoming new types of works, beyond their initial status as documentation. The photographs established themselves as icons that found artistic operations aesthetically and
historically. In 1971, a new piece by Celant appeared in *Casabella* entitled ‘Kounellis/Prini/ Pisani’ (1971). This time, Celant even forgoes defining the article as a form of conceptual exhibition, commenting at the end of a brief introduction to the photographs that ‘each of these images has its justification in its reality.’ The article contains three images by the Italian artists listed in its title: a self-portrait of Prini in his studio; a portrait of a woman wearing a gas mask by Vettor Pisani; and the photograph of an action that Kounellis had organized with the Lucio Amelio Gallery in Pozzuoli, in which the artist is seen at sea in a fishing boat traveling at full speed.

None of these three images involves an urban or conceptual intervention. There is no written indication in the form of an announcement of the project, whether by Celant or the artists. The photographs thus lose almost all value as documents and instead assert their iconic strength. Confronted with these works, Celant once more revises his theoretical position:

‘The role of the intellectual ends with the dissemination and publication of the sign; deciding on this sign is the intellectual act; presentation and explanation are only a banal and ordinary moment; the sign-meanings facilitate understanding and a different and variable behavior of knowing. What is important is not the sign-work but the conditions in which the sign-work is produced and perceived. The signs are models of scattered actions, disappearing objects, referential events, phenomena of deflection in time and memory.’

The ‘residues’ have now become ‘sign-meanings,’ ‘models of actions.’ Faced with the images developed by the artists, Celant recognizes their fundamental value, their power to construct an action as an icon, one which grounds that action ‘in time and memory.’ What is important, however, he adds, is the conditions in which these images are produced and perceived, the places of the event and their mediatization, by way of photographs, magazines, catalogues, and books – all conditions which are born of the relationship between the artists and the critic.

**Information Documentation Archives**

During this period, the critic’s arguments underwent a rapid transformation. After the guerrilla declarations of the first *arte povera* manifestos, Celant gradually returned to the fold of artistic discourse. His focus was no longer the negation of the artwork as object but the transformation, alteration, the replacement of the old by a new aesthetic and conceptual system. This development would lead the neo-avant-garde to translate itself into the system of contemporary art. With their installations, actions, and interventions, the artists construct a paradigm of art that eliminates the contemplation of the art object by involving the audience in a participatory and pleasurable experience. Art is thus literally removed from its institutional space: the presentation of works in museums is replaced by ephemeral installations, while the traditional reproduction of art becomes the documentary representation of the aesthetic event, which finds a new place in the space of the media. Between 1967 and 1971, the photograph on the one hand, the gallery and later the museum on the other, establish themselves, respectively, as the representation and the theater of contemporary art. In this context, the Genoese critic comes more and more to theorize criticism as a kind of cataloguing activity, which he puts into practice as a curator of exhibitions. While in 1970 Celant was still lamenting in the pages of *Casabella* that the reader received ‘the rotten wares and defecations of the
critic, the photographer, of graphic design and typography’ and was doomed to ignorance since ‘all the media contribute to ignorance,’ in 1971 he announced the creation of ‘information documentation archives.’ This was an organization that gathered ‘slides, declarations, films, photographs, press releases, magazines, newspapers, catalogues, microfilm, videocassettes, original documents, photocopies, various publications, and bibliographies’ and sought to ‘act as an information and documentation service on art and architecture.’ The critic now signaled his distance from the activist stance of his positions by developing a strategy capable of transforming the ideas and experiments of the avant-garde into icons of the art system.

In the announcement-manifesto for information documentation archives, the objectives of the new organization are divided into three different areas:

- **The “theory” department** develops new operational methods of information and documentation; studies and organizes planning tools and services ...; drafts books, manifestos, films, images, essays, bibliographies, and chronologies ...; and develops an advisory and historical service for museums, magazines, publishers, and cultural institutions ...

- **The “information” department** uses all existing cultural tools to work on propaganda and the dissemination of its ideas, of the documents and data collected ..., and directly and with total operational and coordinating responsibility controls the management and dissemination of the information ...

- **The “organization” department** seeks to contact financial backers, publishers, [and] museums ... inclined to collaborate ... and offers advice to those involved in organizing monographic exhibitions in [the] museums as well as to publishers, magazines, television, and radio, ... and finally organizes virtual museums of information.

Celant turned this organization into a kind of trademark. In 1971 and 1972, the byline of his articles is consistently accompanied by the phrase ‘information documentation archives,’ a kind of label which certifies that the artist and photographs presented are guaranteed by the critical selection of Germano Celant. The critic’s intention is to appropriate the informational strategies and tools for using the media (above all photography) adopted by artists in magazines and other publications in an effort to disseminate his own critical discourse within the art system. No longer merely a private critical instrument, the archives become a tool for information and ‘propaganda,’ a virtual museum that can be assembled on demand and adapted to any type of presentation, from exhibition spaces to the various media. Celant becomes the author of this media construction, this ‘maze,’ which – in a clear-sighted paradox – he terms an ‘instantaneous history of art.’

In 1971, the artists Celant was working on and the documents and fact sheets available through the organization ‘information documentation archives’ were the same artists presented in his book *Arte Povera* and at the exhibition *Conceptual Art, Arte Povera, Land Art*, which took place at the Galleria Civica d’Arte Moderna in Turin in June and July of 1970. The title of the Turin exhibition highlights the perspicacity of Celant’s program. He would succeed in positioning the Italian group within the institutional rise of conceptual art by organizing the shift from the activist narrative of arte povera to the affirmation of its image within the system of contemporary art.
NOTES


2. Introduction to the catalogue Live in Your Head: When Attitudes Become Form (Bern, 1969), quoted in Robert Lumley, ‘Spaces of Arte Povera,’ in Zero to Infinity: Arte Povera 1962-1967, ed. Richard Flood and Frances Morris (Minneapolis/London, Walker Art Center/Tate Modern, 2001), 41. The first two group exhibitions to present the international neo-avant-garde at public museums in March 1969 were Live in Your Head: When Attitudes Become Form, which was organized by Harald Szeemann at Kunsthalle Bern, and Op Losse Schroeven: Situaties en Cryptostructuren, which was coordinated with Szeemann’s exhibition and organized by Wim Beeren at the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam with the assistance of the artist Piero Gilardi.


5. For an examination of the transformation of art magazines and journals in Italy in the late 1960s, see Giuliano Sergio, ‘Forma rivista. Critica e rappresentazione della neo-avanguardia in Italia (Flash Art, Pallone, Cartabianca, Senzamargine, Data),’ in Palinsesi. Rivista on line di studi sull’arte contemporanea italiana, no. 1: Una nuova metodologia per gli anni Sessanta, ed. Denis Viva, 2011 (http://www.palinsesti.net/index.php/Palinsesti/article/view/21/26).


11. For more on the issue of iconography as a tool for history and art history, see among others Carlo Ginzburg, ‘Da Warburg a Gombrich,’ in Miti emblemi spie. Morfologia e storia, 29–106 (Turin:


16. Celant brought a group of critics together for the event, including Achille Bonito Oliva, Gillo Dorfles, Daniela Palazzoli, Filiberto Menna, Tommaso Trini, Angelo Trimarco, and Henry Martin.


18. For Vittorio Boarini and Pietro Bonfiglioli, ‘the system won again the moment that Arte Povera was institutionalized and placed within the tamed circuit of all the other artistic trends … The immediate consequence was the reduction of the ‘povere’ actions within the televised representation of reified and inevitably serially reproducible works … Its exponents willingly consented to play the part imposed on them by the world of reified communication and ended up playing the clown before the cameras.’ G. Celant, *Arte povera più azioni povere* (Salerno: Rumma Editore, 1969), 66–67.


20. Restricting ourselves to the Italian scene, a list of the relevant artists would at the very least include Gerry Schum, Ugo Mulas, Paolo Mussat-Sartor, Claudio Abate, Mimmo Jodice, Gianfranco Gorgoni, Mario Cresci, Luigi Ghirri, and Luciano Giaccari.

21. Celant’s title is an allusion to Susan Sontag’s book *Against Interpretation*, which was published in the United States in 1964 and translated into Italian in 1967 (Milan, Mondadori). Celant ultimately published two versions of this article, the second in the opening issue of the journal *NAC* (Milan, 1970). Still missing from the first version was the entire section on documents as ‘residues’ and the emphasis on critical activity as an activity of historical conservation that was theorized in the final version. All of the following citations are taken from this second edition of the article. That edition also includes a note in which Celant makes an interesting distinction: ‘criticism as event – see Harold Rosenberg and abstract expressionism; Lawrence Alloway and pop art; Lucy Lippard and minimal art; Germano Celant and Arte Povera or conceptual art or land
art – and criticism as the conservation and cataloguing of the residues or traces of the artists or artistic products – see Carla Lonzi, Lucy Lippard, Seth Siegelaub, Gregory Battcock, and Germano Celant.’ G. CELANT, ‘Per una critica acritica,’ NAC, Milan, 1970, no. 1: 30, n. 1.
23. Ibid., 29.
24. Ibid., 30.
25. In taking this approach, Celant adopted a logic that had already been used by artist’s books and catalogues. See among others Edward RUSCHA, Twenty-Six Gasoline Stations, which was published by the artist in 1963 in an edition of three thousand copies, and the catalogue by Douglas HUEBLER published by Seth Siegelaub in New York in November 1968; however, mention must also be made of Piero Manzoni: The Life and the Works, a book conceived by the Milanese artist in 1962 and published by Jes Petersen in an edition of sixty copies, which consisted of one hundred blank pages.
26. See the catalogue-exhibition January 5–31, which was produced in New York in 1969 in the gallery-office of Seth Siegelaub and contained works by the conceptual artists Joseph Kosuth, Lawrence Weiner, Robert Barry, and Douglas Huebler. For more on this exhibition, see among others J.-M. POINSOT, Quand l’oeuvre a lieu (Geneva: MAMCO, 1999), 103–5.
30. For an autobiographical interview with the Genoese critic, see G. CELANT, ‘How to Escape from the Hallucinations of History,’ in Arte Povera Art Povera, ed. G. CELANT (note 7), especially 17.
33. Ibid.
34. Ibid.
36. Ibid.
40. G. CELANT, ‘Information documentation archives’ (note 39): 5. The organization’s headquarters was located in Genoa and included, in addition to Celant, Ida Ganelli and the visual coordinator Franco Mello.
41. Ibid.
42. See G. CELANT, ‘Per una critica acritica’ (note 21): 30.
ABSTRACTS

Arte povera is an exemplary critical phenomenon. Coined by Germano Celant in 1967, the label has enjoyed extraordinary success, attracting the attention of specialists and provoking a tremendous variety of judgments. Over the years, it has taken on a polysemic value which embodies at once an aesthetic and activist manifesto, a set of procedures, the definition of a group, and even a national trait. Germano Celant was able to use these disparate critical figures without ever solidifying his construction into a model, making it especially difficult to historicize the movement and its strategy. To understand the success of arte povera, one must analyze not so much the coherence of its discourse as the historical construction of its image. Rereading the way that German Celant incorporated photography into his critical approach in his catalogues, books, and journals helps us retrace the process by which arte povera defined and established itself within the system of contemporary art.

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