



A Free Course on the History of Western Art

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60-14 ARTE POVERA

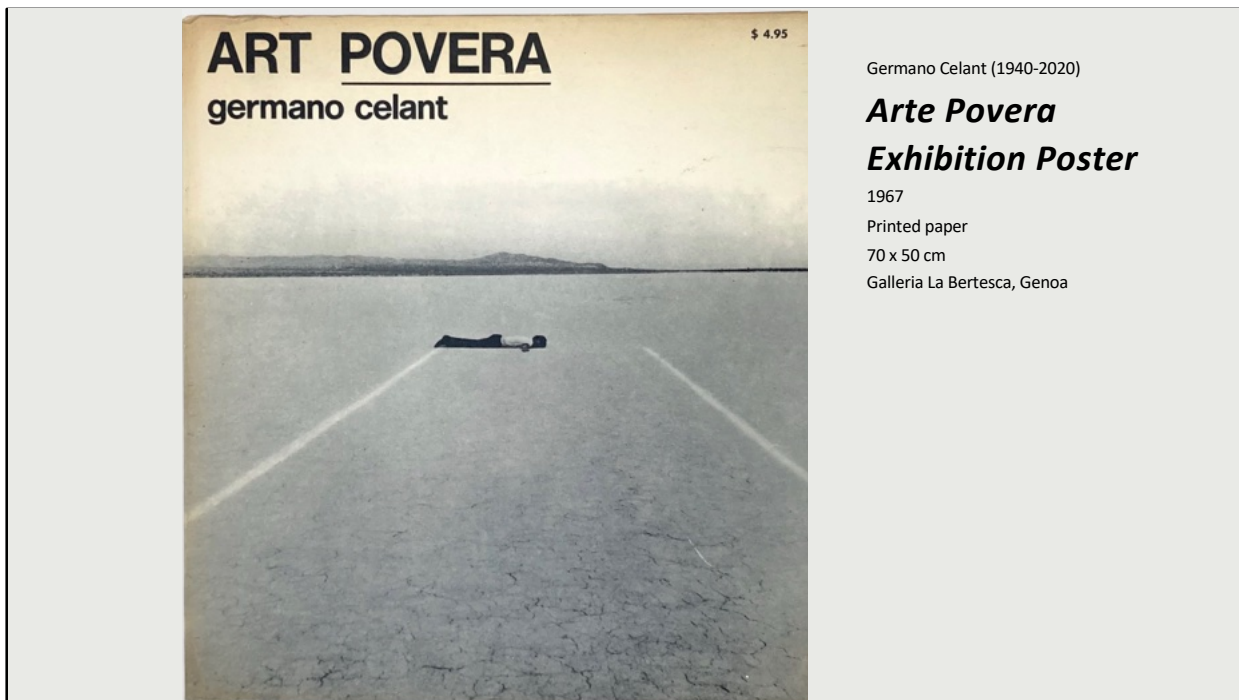
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Michelangelo
Pistoletto, *Venus of
the Rags*, 1967

This is section 60 on recent art movements and this talk is on the Italian art movement Arte Povera. The term literally meaning "poor art", was coined by Italian art critic **Germano Celant** in 1967. The name didn't refer to poverty of means but rather to the movement's radical rejection of traditional artistic materials and commercial gallery values.



Germano Celant (1940-2020), *Arte Povera* Exhibition Poster, 1967, Printed paper, 70 x 50 cm, Galleria La Bertesca, Genoa

Celant organised the landmark exhibition "**IM Spazio**" (**The Space of Thoughts**) at Galleria La Bertesca in Genoa in September 1967, which is considered the official starting point of the movement.

This exhibition brought together a dozen Italian artists who shared a common attitude rather than a unified style. They rejected abstract expressionism and American **Minimalism**, which they saw as cold, industrial, and unsuited to Italy's cultural context. Instead, they embraced "poor" materials: earth, rocks, rags, wood, glass, and found objects. The movement emerged during Italy's post-war economic boom, the so-called "**Miracolo Italiano**", when rapid industrialisation was transforming Italian society.

The late 1960s were a time of intense political upheaval across Europe. **Student protests in 1968** and worker demonstrations challenged established institutions. *Arte Povera* artists participated in this revolutionary spirit, attacking what they saw as the commodification of art. They wanted to strip away pretence and reconnect art with life, memory, and the physical world. Celant described their work as "guerrilla warfare" against the art establishment.

Pronunciation Guide:

Arte Povera: AR-tay POH-veh-rah

Germano Celant: jer-MAH-noh cheh-LAHNT

References:

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<https://www.masterclass.com/articles/arte-povera>



Michelangelo Pistoletto (b. 1933)

Venus of the Rags

1967

Marble and textiles

212 x 340 x 110 cm

Tate, London

Michelangelo Pistoletto (b. 1933), *Venus of the Rags*, 1967, Marble and textiles, 212 x 340 x 110 cm, Tate, London

Venus of the Rags became the iconic emblem of Arte Povera. The work juxtaposes a concrete cast of a neoclassical Venus statue against an enormous pile of colourful rags. Pistoletto bought the Venus from a garden statue retailer for pennies, then placed it facing a heap of paint-stained rags he'd used to clean his **Mirror Paintings**. The goddess of love and beauty, symbol of eternal classical perfection, turns her back on us to contemplate discarded consumer waste. Critics immediately recognised the work's explosive cultural commentary. **Germano Celant** praised Pistoletto for creating "a dense dialogue between past and present". The art magazine **Flash Art** called it "a meditation on beauty in the age of disposability". The rags represent everything transitory in consumer society, the throwaway culture of modern Italy. The Venus remains unchanged, timeless, whilst the fabric pile embodies constant transformation and decay. Italy in 1967 was experiencing both prosperity and disillusion. The economic boom had brought wealth but also **social inequality** and **environmental degradation**. Pistoletto lived in Turin, Italy's industrial heartland, where **FIAT factories** dominated the skyline. He witnessed mountains of textile waste from the garment industry. The work addressed the tension between Italy's glorious artistic past and its problematic industrial present. It asked: what happens when eternal beauty confronts throwaway culture?

In 2023, a monumental version installed in Naples was destroyed by **suspected arson** just two weeks after installation. The perpetrator was arrested, and the work was rebuilt using the charred metal frame as its base, transforming destruction into new meaning.

Pronunciation Guide:

Michelangelo Pistoletto: mee-kel-AHN-jel-oh pees-toh-LET-toh

Venere degli stracci: veh-NEH-reh DEL-yee STRAH-chee

References:

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Mario Merz (1925-2003)

Igloo di Giap

1968, Metal structure, wire mesh, bags of clay, neon, 120 x 200 cm diameter
Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris

Mario Merz (1925-2003), *Igloo di Giap*, 1968, Metal structure, wire mesh, bags of clay, neon, 120 x 200 cm diameter, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris

Giap's Igloo was the first of over 200 igloos Merz would create throughout his lifetime. The hemispherical structure was built from a metal frame covered with wire mesh supporting clear plastic bags filled with clay soil. White neon tubing spells out an Italian translation of **North Vietnamese General Võ Nguyên Giáp's** guerrilla warfare maxim: "If the enemy masses his forces, he loses ground; if he scatters, he loses strength." This was 1968, the height of the **Vietnam War** and global anti-war protests.

The igloo form fascinated Merz as both primitive shelter and cosmic metaphor. He saw in its dome shape the spiralling energy of growth, which connected to his obsession with the **Fibonacci sequence** (1, 1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 13...). This mathematical series, discovered by a 13th-century Italian monk, describes natural growth patterns in shells, leaves, and galaxies. Merz would later incorporate neon Fibonacci numbers into his igloos, linking prehistoric dwelling forms to universal mathematical laws.

Politically, 1968 was explosive. **Student occupations** paralysed universities across Italy. Workers went on strike. Merz, who had been imprisoned during **World War II** for anti-fascist activities, remained deeply engaged with revolutionary politics. The bags of clay resembled military **sandbags**, creating visual tension between shelter and defence. Art historian **Elizabeth Mangini** noted how the clay's mass provides strength but sacrifices ground coverage, embodying Giáp's strategic paradox.

Merz collected materials locally for each installation, rebuilding igloos differently each time like a nomad adapting to new environments. He continued making igloos until his death in 2003, creating "cities of igloos" in major exhibitions

worldwide.

Pronunciation Guide:

Mario Merz: MAH-ree-oh MERTS

Igloo di Giap: EE-gloo dee JAP

Võ Nguyên Giáp: voh noo-YEN jap

References:

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Jannis Kounellis (1936-2017)

Untitled (12 Horses)

1969, Twelve live horses, gallery space, Variable dimensions, Galleria L'Attico, Rome (original)

Jannis Kounellis (1936-2017), *Untitled (12 Horses)*, 1969, Twelve live horses, gallery space, Variable dimensions, Galleria L'Attico, Rome (original)

In January 1969, Greek-born artist **Jannis Kounellis** shocked the art world by inaugurating Rome's **Galleria L'Attico** new location—a former underground garage—by filling it with twelve live horses. The horses were tethered at regular intervals around the perimeter of the white-walled gallery, facing inward. Professional grooms tended them throughout the day, and they were returned to stables each evening. The installation lasted three days. This was Arte Povera at its most audacious.

Kounellis always insisted he was a painter. He conceived the installation pictorially: the rectangular gallery referenced a canvas, with the horses organised like compositional elements. But unlike **Marcel Duchamp's readymades**, Kounellis's "readymade" was alive, breathing, defecating, snorting. The horses brought the chaotic reality of nature into the sterile white cube of the gallery. **Critic Germano Celant** wrote that Kounellis had succeeded in making "organic and inorganic, human and nonhuman, mythic and everyday dialectically comprehended and united."

Italy in 1969 was convulsed by the "**Hot Autumn**" labour strikes. Some **1.7 million people** had abandoned rural countryside for factory work, and agricultural employment had plummeted from 8 to 3 million workers in a single generation. The horses embodied this severed connection to agrarian life. They were also mythic, evoking **classical antiquity**, when horses pulled chariots and symbolised power. Now they stood passive, domesticated, displaced.

The work has only been restaged five times due to its complexity and cost. When **Gavin Brown Gallery** in New York presented it in 2015, critic **Jerry Saltz** called it a work that "stills the spirit and lifts the senses... a crazy love, this albumen of the

mind."

Pronunciation Guide:

Jannis Kounellis: YAH-nees koo-NEL-ees

Galleria L'Attico: gahl-eh-REE-ah lah-TEE-koh

Cavalli: kah-VAHL-lee

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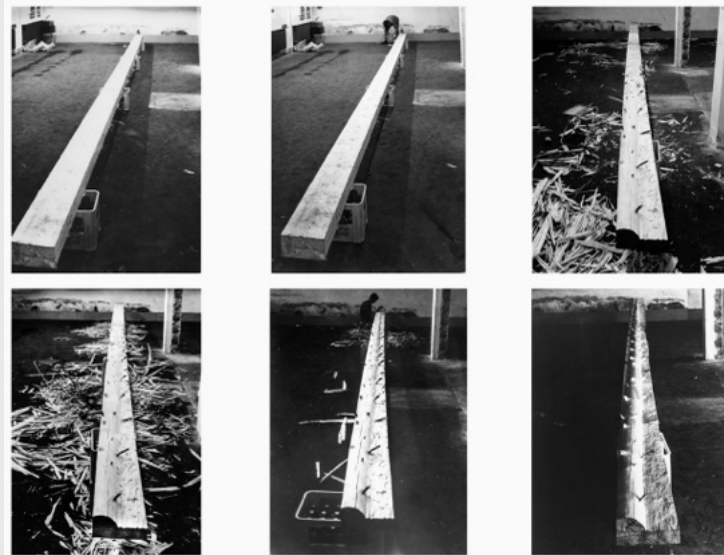
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Giuseppe Penone (b. 1947)

Albero di 4 metri (4 Meters Tree)

1969, Wood (stripped timber), 400 x 25 x 25 cm, Galleria Sperone, Turin (original)

Giuseppe Penone (b. 1947), *Albero di 4 metri (4 Meters Tree)*, 1969, Wood (stripped timber), 400 x 25 x 25 cm, Galleria Sperone, Turin (original)

At just 21 years old, **Giuseppe Penone** became the youngest member of the **Arte Povera** movement when **Germano Celant** included his work in the seminal 1969 publication **Arte Povera**. Penone's breakthrough came with his **Alberi (Trees)** series, which he began in 1969 and continues today. These works involve painstakingly carving away the outer growth rings of industrial timber beams to reveal the sapling hidden at the core. It's sculpture as archaeology, uncovering the tree's memory locked in wood.

The first work in the series, **Albero di 4 metri**, was exhibited at **Galleria Sperone** in Turin in 1969. The title references both its 4-metre length and the complexity of identity. An earlier version was titled "**His Being in the Twenty-Second Year of His Age in a Fantastic Hour**", marking Penone's age when he made it. By stripping away growth layers, Penone literally reversed time, making the young tree visible again within the aged timber.

Penone grew up in **Garessio**, a small village in the **Maritime Alps** between Piedmont and Liguria. His father was a farmer, and Penone developed an intimate relationship with the natural world. In December 1968, he performed a series of actions in the woods near his home: he intertwined three saplings, embedded his handprint in tree bark using copper wire, and enclosed a tree's crown in a net weighted with plants. These interventions left physical traces that would develop over years as the trees grew.

Critic Philip Larratt-Smith observed that Penone "anticipated land art's emphasis on landscape intervention" but remained anchored in **Arte Povera** through "intimate, site-specific manipulations of natural forms." The trees aren't representations of nature but actual nature transformed by patient, meditative

labour. They embody **energy, growth, memory, and time** made visible.

Pronunciation Guide:

Giuseppe Penone: joo-SEP-pay peh-NOH-neh

Alberi: ahl-BEH-ree

Garessio: gah-RES-see-oh

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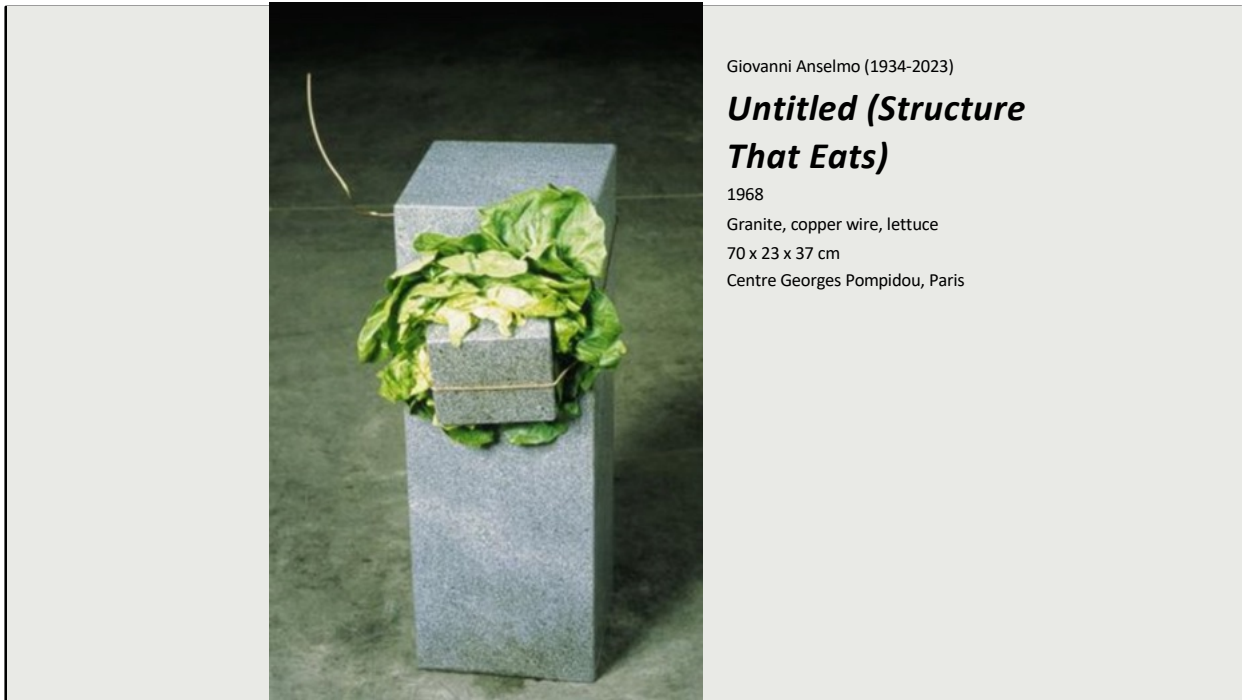
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Giovanni Anselmo (1934-2023)

Untitled (Structure That Eats)

1968

Granite, copper wire, lettuce

70 x 23 x 37 cm

Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris

Giovanni Anselmo (1934-2023), *Untitled (Structure That Eats)*, 1968, Granite, copper wire, lettuce, 70 x 23 x 37 cm, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris

Untitled (Structure That Eats) is perhaps Arte Povera's most elegantly simple yet philosophically profound work. Two blocks of granite—one large pillar, one small block—are bound together by copper wire with a fresh head of lettuce squeezed between them. As the lettuce wilts and shrinks over several days, tension decreases and the small block begins to slide downward. To keep the sculpture "alive," museum staff must replace the lettuce every few days. The work **literally eats**.

Anselmo's revelation about art came in August 1965 whilst climbing a volcano on the island of **Stromboli**. At sunrise, he saw his shadow cast not on the ground but suspended in the air. He realised that invisible energies constantly surround us—**gravity, light, magnetism, time**—and that art could make these forces perceptible. **Critic Germano Celant** wrote that Anselmo's works provide "a fine lesson in relativity" because "their existence depends on direct human interaction."

The granite represents permanence and geological deep time—rocks formed millions of years ago. The lettuce embodies ephemeral biological life measured in days. Some critics interpreted the work as symbolising **man crushed between forces greater than himself**. Others saw it as a meditation on **entropy and decay**. Anselmo stated: "I, the world, things, life—we are points of energy, and it is not as necessary to crystallise these points as it is to keep them open and alive." The work premiered at **Galleria Sperone** in Turin in 1968, the same gallery that launched **Penone** and **Merz**. The lettuce requirement created practical and philosophical questions about art preservation: What happens when the organic element dies? Is the work complete without its perishable component? These

questions anticipated **installation art** and **performance art** debates about ephemerality.

Pronunciation Guide:

Giovanni Anselmo: joh-VAHN-nee ahn-SEL-moh

Senza titolo: SEN-tsay TEE-toh-loh

Struttura che mangia: stroo-TOO-rah kay MAHN-jah

References:

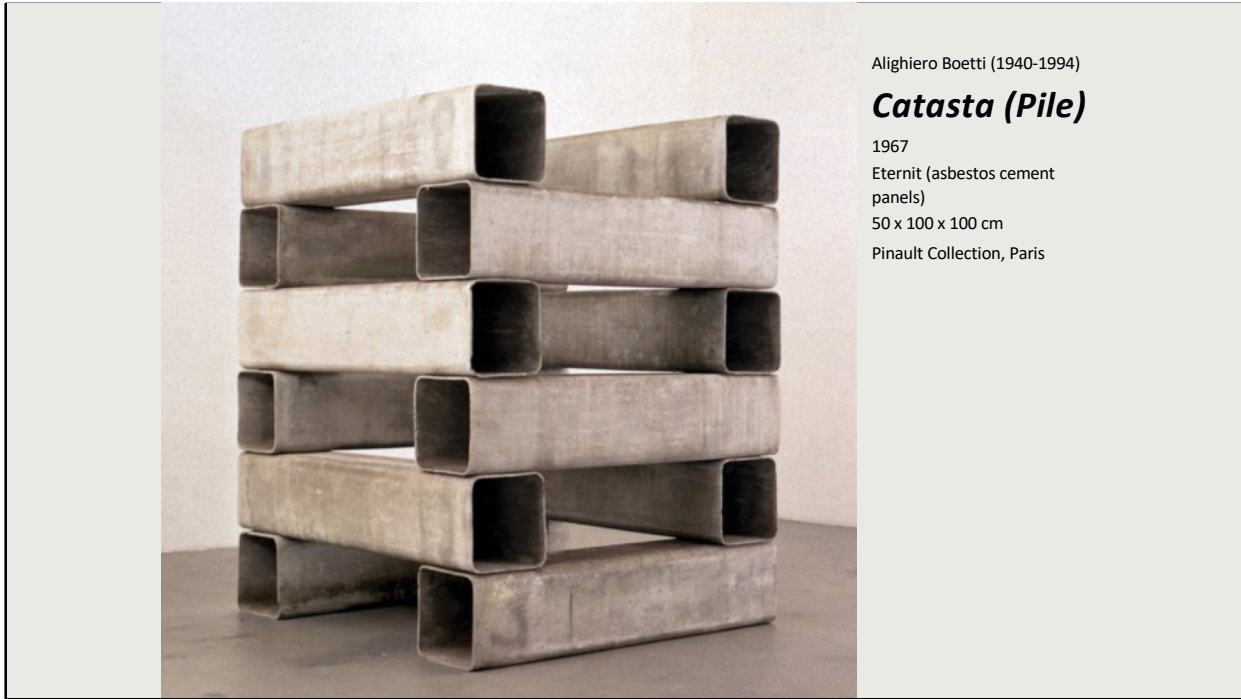
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Alighiero Boetti (1940-1994)

Catasta (Pile)

1967

Eternit (asbestos cement panels)

50 x 100 x 100 cm

Pinault Collection, Paris

Alighiero Boetti (1940-1994), *Catasta (Pile)*, 1967, Eternit (asbestos cement panels), 50 x 100 x 100 cm, Pinault Collection, Paris

Alighiero Boetti stands apart in Arte Povera for his conceptual rigour and playful wit. ***Catasta (Pile)*** exemplifies his early interest in system-based art and humble materials. The work consists simply of industrial **Eternit panels**—asbestos cement sheets commonly used in Italian construction—stacked in a neat pile. There's no transformation, no artist's touch. Just industrial building materials presented as sculpture.

The work challenges every assumption about what art should be. There's no expressive gesture, no personal mark, no precious materials. It's the antithesis of traditional sculpture. **Critic Germano Celant** praised Boetti for "nullifying the dichotomy between art and life" and presenting materials that "speak for themselves." The pile could be mistaken for construction debris or warehouse storage. That ambiguity was precisely the point.

Boetti was one of the most intellectually adventurous Arte Povera artists. Unlike colleagues who worked primarily with natural materials, he embraced **industrial products, systems, and concepts**. His work engaged with **language, mathematics, cartography, and time**. From 1971, he spent extensive periods in **Afghanistan**, where he established collaborative relationships with local craftspeople to produce his famous embroidered world maps and tapestries.

The choice of **asbestos** in 1967 had no health implications at the time—Eternit was ubiquitous in post-war Italian construction. The material now carries toxic associations that add unintended layers of meaning. The work embodies Arte Povera's engagement with the detritus of Italy's **industrial boom**: cheap, mass-produced materials flooding the market. Boetti died in 1994 in Rome. The **Tate** described him as "one of the most important and influential Italian artists of the

twentieth century."

Pronunciation Guide:

Alighiero Boetti: ah-lee-GYEH-roh boh-ET-tee

Catasta: kah-TAHS-tah

Eternit: eh-TER-neet

References:

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Luciano Fabro (1936-2007)

Italia d'oro

1968-71

Gilded bronze, Murano glass

260 x 160 cm

Pinault Collection, Paris

Luciano Fabro (1936-2007), *Italia d'oro*, 1971, Gilded bronze, Murano glass, 260 x 160 cm, Pinault Collection, Paris

Luciano Fabro's series of **Italia** sculptures became Arte Povera's most direct engagement with Italian national identity. Each work depicts the Italian peninsula's distinctive boot shape inverted—hanging upside down from the ceiling. This first version combines gilded bronze with sheets of precious **Murano glass**, creating a luminous, fragile Italy suspended in space. Later versions used silk, leather, lead, and even Carrara marble, each material adding new symbolic weight. This version is made of gold.

The inversion was both formal innovation and political provocation. **Italy in 1968** was experiencing the "**Years of Lead**"—a period of social turmoil, terrorism, and political violence that would last until the early 1980s. The **Christian Democratic** government was mired in corruption. The **Communist Party** was gaining strength. **Right-wing terrorism** and **left-wing militant groups** like the **Red Brigades** were emerging. Fabro's upside-down Italy suggested a nation in crisis, its values inverted.

But the work also references art history. The suspended, precious object recalls **Baroque reliquaries** and church treasures. The gilded bronze evokes Italy's Renaissance heritage. Fabro was asking: What is Italy? Is it the land itself, the culture, the materials, the shape on a map? By constantly reimagining it in different substances—sometimes precious, sometimes cheap—he suggested identity is fluid, constructed, performative.

Germano Celant included Fabro in the first Arte Povera exhibitions. Fabro's **Floor Tautology** (1968-70) consisted of a floor that required constant cleaning, making the artwork dependent on maintenance labour. This questioned art's autonomy and highlighted invisible work. He was interested in how artworks exist in relation

to their architectural containers—floors, walls, ceilings—and how meaning shifts when these relationships change.

Pronunciation Guide:

Luciano Fabro: loo-CHAH-noh FAH-broh

Italia: ee-TAH-lee-ah

References:

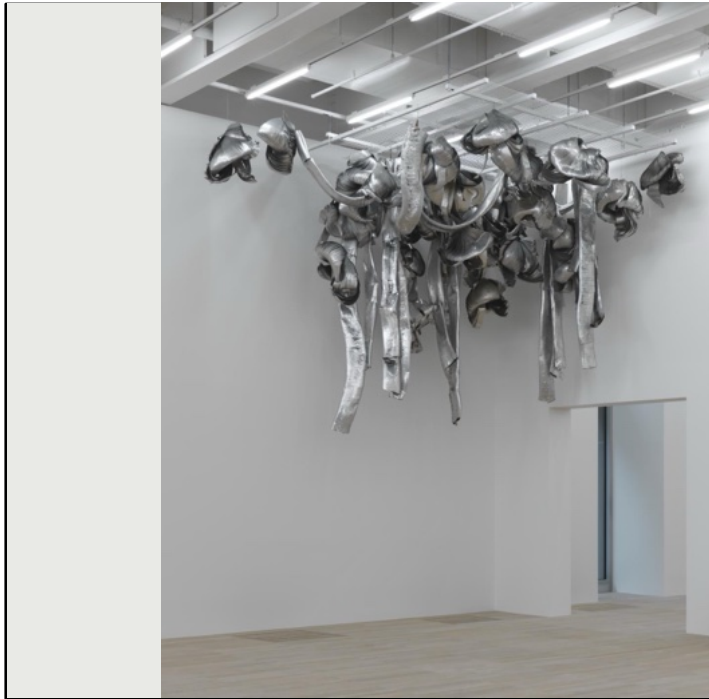
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Marisa Merz (1926-2019)

Untitled (Living Sculpture)

1966-68

Aluminium, copper wire, wax

Variable dimensions

Tate

Marisa Merz (1926-2019), *Untitled (Living Sculpture)*, 1966-68, Aluminium, copper wire, wax, Variable dimensions, Tate

Marisa Merz was the only female member of the Arte Povera group and one of the most independent voices in 20th-century Italian art. Married to **Mario Merz**, she developed a completely distinct practice characterised by intimate scale, domestic materials, and patient, meditative labour. Her delicate wire sculptures and woven aluminium pieces contrast dramatically with the monumental igloos and dramatic gestures of her male colleagues.

Merz's **Untitled (Living Sculpture)** series consists of intricate forms knitted or woven from thin aluminium and copper wire, sometimes coated with wax. These organic, cellular structures suggest growth, biological forms, neural networks. They occupied corners of her home, grew across walls, inhabited unexpected spaces. Unlike the dramatic gallery installations of **Kounellis** or **Pistoletto**, Merz's work emerged from daily life—made at the kitchen table whilst caring for her daughter **Beatrice**.

In 1967, **Germano Celant** was assembling his Arte Povera exhibitions. Marisa was included alongside thirteen male artists. Despite recognition, she remained ambivalent about the label. She stated: "I never felt like I belonged to a group." Her work resisted categorisation. It was intimate rather than confrontational, process-oriented rather than conceptual, rooted in **craft traditions** often dismissed as "women's work."

The materials themselves were significant. Aluminium was industrial but could be worked by hand. Copper wire conducted electricity, suggesting invisible energies. Wax was organic, alchemical, transformative. These materials weren't "poor" in the sense of worthless; they were humble, malleable, responsive to touch. Merz created what critic **Julia Bryan-Wilson** called "feminist minimalism"—work that

insisted on the domestic, the handmade, and the personal as legitimate artistic territory.

Pronunciation Guide:

Marisa Merz: mah-REE-sah MERTS

References:

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Gilberto Zorio (b. 1944)

Stella polare (Polar Star)

1969, Metal tubes, neon, electric motor, 200 x 250 x 250 cm, Castello di Rivoli, Turin

Gilberto Zorio (b. 1944), *Parchment Star*, 2020, Parchment, aluminum, two javelins, phosphorus, 250 x 250 x 260 cm, Turin

Gilberto Zorio brought alchemical obsessions and elemental transformations to Arte Povera. His **Parchment Star** consists of a large parchment covered in green phosphorus in which a five-pointed star has been cut out.

Zorio was fascinated by chemical reactions and states of transformation. Many of his works incorporated materials undergoing change: **evaporation, oxidation, combustion, crystallisation**. He used substances like **alcohol, sulphuric acid, cobalt chloride**, and **phosphorescent salts** that reacted to heat, light, or humidity. His crucibles—vessels used in alchemy—became recurring sculptural forms, suggesting art as transmutation of base matter into something transcendent.

The **Polar Star** references navigation and orientation, themes central to several Arte Povera artists. **Anselmo's** compass pieces and **Merz's** spiralling igloos also addressed how humans orient themselves in space. But Zorio's approach was distinctly theatrical. The slowly rotating star created a hypnotic, almost spiritual experience. The blue neon light suggested both **industrial modernity** and **celestial mystery**. This was high-tech mysticism, using contemporary materials to evoke timeless wonder.

Zorio participated in the groundbreaking "**When Attitudes Become Form**" exhibition curated by **Harald Szeemann** at Kunsthalle Bern in 1969, which brought Arte Povera into dialogue with **American Post-Minimalism** and international conceptual art. His work demonstrated that "poor" materials didn't mean poverty of ambition or effect. The materials were humble, but the experiences they generated could be profound, beautiful, transformative.

Pronunciation Guide:

Gilberto Zorio: jeel-BAIR-toh ZOH-ree-oh

Stella polare: STEL-lah poh-LAH-reh

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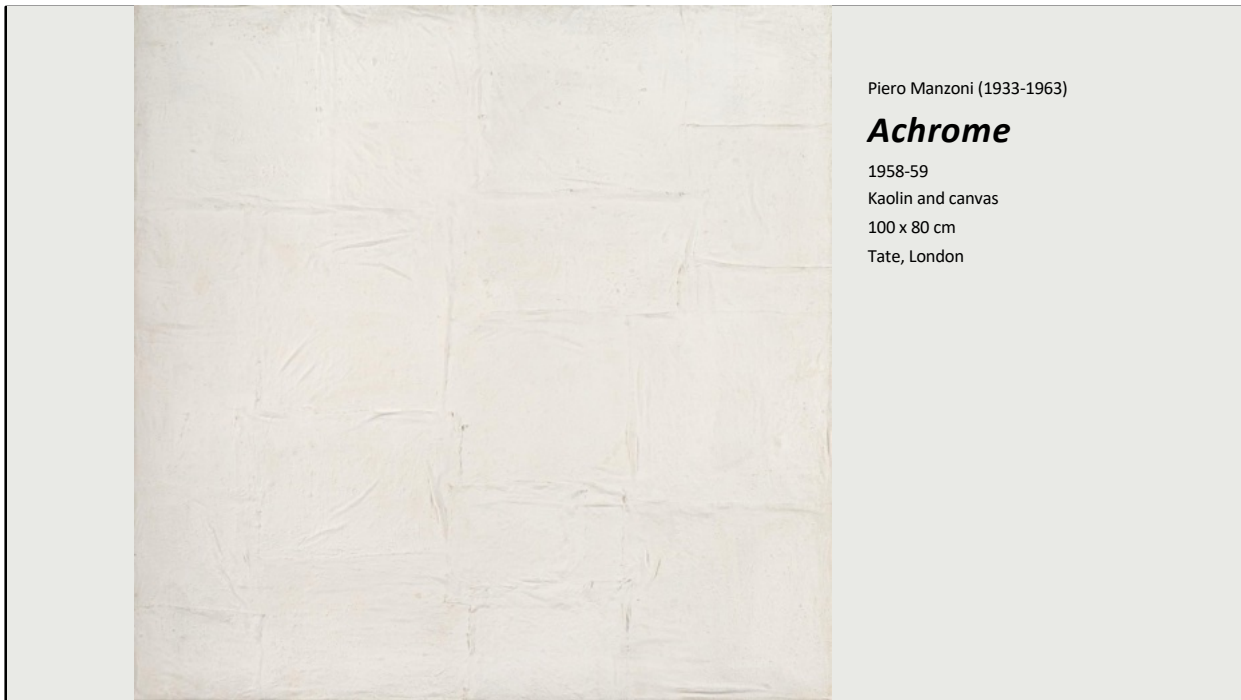
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Piero Manzoni (1933-1963), *Achrome*, 1958-59, Kaolin and canvas, 100 x 80 cm, Tate, London

Piero Manzoni died in 1963, four years before **Germano Celant** coined the term *Arte Povera*, but he was the movement's spiritual godfather. His radical questioning of artistic conventions paved the way for the younger generation. The **Achromes**—literally "without colour"—began in 1957 and continued until his death. These white monochrome canvases were soaked in kaolin (china clay), creating crumpled, textured surfaces that reject painting's traditions of colour, composition, and representation.

The **Achromes** weren't painted; they were **process-based**. Manzoni soaked canvas in liquid kaolin, then allowed it to dry naturally. Gravity and material properties created the form. The artist's role became selecting the moment to fix the work, rather than imposing design. This approach directly anticipated *Arte Povera*'s emphasis on **material behaviour** over artistic gesture. **Germano Celant** acknowledged Manzoni's influence, noting he "proposed the importance of poor materials used not as symbol but as veritable devices."

Manzoni's provocations extended beyond the **Achromes**. In 1961, he created **Artist's Shit** (*Merda d'artista*)—ninety tin cans allegedly containing his own excrement, priced by weight to match gold. This savage critique of the art market asked: if the artist's signature confers value, why not monetise bodily waste? He signed **hard-boiled eggs**, calling them edible sculptures. He signed people's bodies, declaring them **Living Sculptures**.

Born into aristocratic wealth, Manzoni moved in international avant-garde circles including **Yves Klein** and the **Zero Group**. His early death at 29 from a heart attack prevented him from participating in *Arte Povera* exhibitions, but his radical spirit—combining **conceptual rigour, material experimentation, and irreverent**

humour—defined the movement's DNA. The **Tate** describes his work as "profoundly influential in putting Italian avant-garde practices on the map."

Pronunciation Guide:

Piero Manzoni: PYEH-roh man-ZOH-nee

Achrome: ah-KROH-meh

Merda d'artista: MEHR-dah dar-TEES-tah

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Harald Szeemann

When Attitudes Become Form Exhibition

1969

Kunsthalle Bern, Switzerland

Harald Szeemann, *When Attitudes Become Form* Exhibition, 1969, Kunsthalle Bern, Switzerland

The legendary exhibition "**Live in Your Head: When Attitudes Become Form**" opened at **Kunsthalle Bern** in March 1969, curated by **Harald Szeemann**. This groundbreaking show brought together **69 artists** from Europe and America, including Arte Povera artists **Mario Merz, Giovanni Anselmo, Gilberto Zorio, and Jannis Kounellis**. The exhibition's title perfectly captured the era's shift from **finished art objects to process, concept, and action**.

Szeemann allowed artists to build works directly in the museum, alter them during the exhibition, or create ephemeral pieces that would decay. **Richard Serra** threw molten lead against walls. **Joseph Beuys** covered the floor with fat. The Arte Povera artists contributed igloos, living sculptures, and material interventions. The show privileged **changeability over permanence, energy over form, attitude over product**. It was anarchic, messy, exhilarating—and deeply threatening to conservative art institutions.

The exhibition positioned Arte Povera within an international context, demonstrating parallels with **American Post-Minimalism** (artists like **Robert Morris, Eva Hesse, Bruce Nauman**), Japanese **Mono-ha** ("School of Things"), and European **Conceptual Art**. All rejected the "slick technological aesthetic" and commodified gallery object in favour of **humble materials, bodily experience, and phenomenological encounter**. These movements shared Arte Povera's suspicion of industrial modernity and market values.

The show caused scandal. Conservative Swiss critics attacked it as **nihilistic vandalism**. The **Philip Morris** tobacco company controversially sponsored it, prompting debates about corporate patronage of radical art. But "*When Attitudes Become Form*" became **the** defining exhibition of the era, canonising a shift in art-

making that still reverberates today. **Germano Celant** later organised "**Conceptual Art, Arte Povera, Land Art**" at Turin's Galleria Civica in 1970, cementing these international connections.

Pronunciation Guide:

Harald Szeemann: HAH-ralt SZAY-mahn

Kunsthalle: KOONST-hah-leh

References:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arte_Povera

<https://www.theartstory.org/movement/arte-povera/>

<https://www.nationalgalleries.org/art-and-artists/glossary-terms/arte-povera>

<https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/a/arte-povera>

<https://www.artlex.com/art-movements/arte-povera/>



Political Context

Italy 1967-1972 - Years of Lead

Documentary photograph
Turin student protests, 1968

Political Context, Italy 1967-1972 Years of Lead, Documentary photograph, Turin student protests, 1968

Arte Povera emerged during one of the most turbulent periods in modern Italian history. The movement's lifespan (1967-1972) coincided with the "**Hot Autumn**" of 1969, massive **worker strikes, student occupations**, and the beginning of the "**Years of Lead**"—a period of terrorism and political violence lasting into the 1980s. This wasn't art made in isolation; it was art made in the streets, during riots, alongside revolution.

This photograph shows the aftermath of the [Bologna massacre](#), a railway station bombing by the [neo-fascist Nuclei Armati Rivoluzionari](#) in 1980, which killed 85 people in the deadliest attack during the Years of Lead.

The **1968 student protests** paralysed Italian universities. At **Turin University**, where many Arte Povera artists were based, students occupied buildings for months. They demanded educational reform, condemned the **Vietnam War**, and challenged authoritarian structures. **Workers joined students** in unprecedented solidarity. In autumn 1969, over **five million workers** went on strike, demanding better wages and conditions. Italy's industrial heartland—especially Turin, home to **FIAT**—became a battleground.

Arte Povera's rejection of commercial gallery values wasn't abstract philosophy; it was concrete politics. **Germano Celant** described the movement as "**guerrilla warfare**" against established institutions. Artists literally attacked the commodification of art by using materials with no market value. Their work couldn't be easily bought, sold, or preserved. **Kounellis's horses** returned to stables each night. **Anselmo's lettuce** rotted. **Penone's interventions** grew in forests, inaccessible to collectors.

The movement also responded to Italy's rapid industrialisation. Between 1950

and 1970, Italy transformed from an agricultural nation into an industrial power—the so-called "**Economic Miracle**". But prosperity came at enormous cost: **environmental destruction, urban sprawl, cultural amnesia**. Arte Povera artists used pre-industrial materials (clay, wood, stone) to resist this erasure of memory. They weren't nostalgic; they were critical. They asked: what are we losing in exchange for consumer abundance?

Pronunciation Guide:

Anni di piombo: AHN-nee dee PYOHM-boh (Years of Lead)

Autunno caldo: ow-TOON-noh KAHL-doh (Hot Autumn)

References:

<https://vowi.us/arte-povera-from-historical-origins-to-contemporary-influence/>

<https://www.dailyartmagazine.com/arte-povera/>

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Giuseppe Penone (b. 1947), *Tree of 12 Metres (Albero di 12 metri)*, 605 x 190 x 130 cm, Tate, Movement Dissolution, *Arte Povera Disperses*, 1972-75, Artists pursue individual paths

By the mid-1970s, Arte Povera as a cohesive movement had dissolved. The art market also transformed. Initially, Arte Povera works resisted commodification—how do you sell living horses or rotting lettuce? But by the mid-1970s, **collectors and museums** found ways. Photographic documentation became collectible. Artists created **editioned versions** of ephemeral works. **Mario Merz** started building igloos for major museums. **Pistoletto's** Venus sculptures entered prestigious collections. The anti-commercial stance became increasingly difficult to maintain.

Artists pursued different paths: **Boetti** spent increasing time in **Afghanistan**. **Penone** focused on monumental public commissions but continued to produce works like this, *Tree of 12 Metres*, They remained important artists but no longer as a unified movement.

Yet Arte Povera's influence persisted. Its lessons—**embrace humble materials, question commodity status, privilege process over product, make invisible forces visible**—became fundamental to contemporary art practice. The movement's brief unity gave way to lasting individual achievements.

The first major retrospective, "**Zero to Infinity: Arte Povera 1962-1972**", opened at **Tate Modern** in 2001, introducing the movement to a new generation.

Contemporary artists continue Arte Povera's investigations. **Theaster Gates** uses reclaimed materials from Chicago's South Side to address race and urban decay.

Tania Bruguera employs humble materials in politically charged performances.

Mona Hatoum transforms everyday objects into unsettling sculptures. **Olafur Eliasson** makes natural phenomena perceptible through minimal interventions.

These artists may not reference Arte Povera explicitly, but they operate within its expanded definition of what art can be.

The movement's market value has skyrocketed. **Pistoletto's Venus of the Rags** sells for millions. **Merz's igloos** command premium prices at auction. **Kounellis** retrospectives draw huge audiences. This commercial success creates irony: a movement that rejected commodification became extremely valuable. Yet the works retain their critical edge. They still question consumption, permanence, and artistic authority.

Pronunciation Guide:

Brigate Rosse: bree-GAH-teh ROHS-seh (Red Brigades)

References:

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60-14 ARTE POVERA

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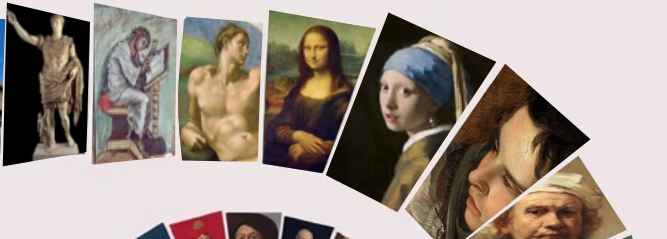
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Michelangelo
Pistoletto, *Venus of
the Rags*, 1967

Arte Povera emerged in late-1960s Italy, championed by critic Germano Celant, uniting artists including Giuseppe Penone, Mario Merz, and Michelangelo Pistoletto in rejection of industrial consumer culture. Using "poor" materials — earth, rags, live animals, neon — they collapsed distinctions between art, life, and natural process. Their legacy shaped installation art, institutional critique, and the broader dematerialisation of the object that dominated advanced practice through the 1990s and beyond.

- I hope you enjoyed this talk and will come back soon.



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