

**Organic Materiality in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century Art.  
Plants and Animals (Human and Non-Human)  
from Representation to Materialisation**

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*To my parents, Francesca and Angelo*



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**ABSTRACT**

**KEYWORDS:** plants, animals (human, non-human), 20<sup>th</sup> century art, philosophical anthropology, Vitalism, art and science, environment, matter, materiality, new materialisms

The aim of this research is to focus on organic materiality in the 20<sup>th</sup> century art, for its appearance as a protagonist element presented in an artwork for what it actually is rather than as a mere component or instrument for chromatic or decorative purposes. By examining some works and specific case studies, organic materiality is suggested as a filter, and also as a sketch of a method to introduce the elaboration of a problem not to be solved, but to be left open to a variety of possibilities. Regarding the geographical span, this research has an international scope, mainly covering the artistic production carried out in Europe, Northern and Southern America, and Japan in some cases. In this sense, this work assumes its inevitable incompleteness as an attempt to find a place into a pluralistic theoretical discourse in art, and more specifically contemporary art, putting at its core matter as a matter of concern. The present investigation focuses on a kind of materiality that is, organic in the primal meaning of the term, in other words, an adjective “relating to or derived from living matter.” Therefore, in order to present the organic materiality of plants and animals (human and non-human) and their interactions with the 20<sup>th</sup> century art this research, over its chapters, counts on the contributions of history of science and medicine, and philosophical approaches such as philosophy of nature, philosophy of Vitalism, and philosophical anthropology. Moreover, the cycle of

life of organic materiality became not only the object of research but also the method to study 20<sup>th</sup> century art from the point of view selected for this work, whose division in five chapters reflects this “organic method.” Proposing a spiral curve from birth, through youth, maturity, ageing and death with the increase of advanced technology and dissemination of digital media, the apparent disappearance of the organic, seems rather to propose a reformulation of its meaning. Motivated by contemporary artistic practices carried out in the first years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, this research aim to understand the organic in the past century, investigating it from a theoretical point of view, but somehow by asking the organic materiality itself. In other words, the question on the levels of the organic and the human is developed by interrogating the same organic into artworks, not represented but presented, materialised.

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*Indubbiamente l'Occidente ha fatto grandi progressi nel conoscere il corpo, anche se mi lascia sempre più perplesso il fatto che alla radice della nostra medicina c'è l'anatomia, una scienza fondata sulla dissezione dei cadaveri, e mi chiedo come sia possibile capire il mistero della vita partendo dallo studio dei morti. Ma l'Occidente non ha fatto alcun progresso, anzi, forse è andato a ritroso nella conoscenza di tutto quell'invisibile, immisurabile, imponderabile che sta dentro e al di là del corpo, che lo sostiene, che lo lega a tutte le forme di vita e lo rende parte della natura. Psicanalisi e psicologia sono scienze che si muovono ancora soltanto sulla superficie di quell'invisibile, come si sentissero imbarazzate davanti al gran mistero che nessuna scienza, proprio perché tale, potrà mai affrontare.*

*Per questo la ricerca medica non ha altra scelta che quella di scendere sempre più nel particolare, di passare dal piccolo al sempre più piccolo. Ma non dovrebbe una qualche altra ricerca, non necessariamente scientifica, andare in senso opposto: dal piccolo al grande?*

Tiziano Terzani, *Un altro giro di giostra*, 2004





*La vision organique est une donnée permanente de l'intuition philosophique. Lorsqu'on veut penser une totalité individuelle, des parties différenciées qui concourent à l'unité d'un tout, un développement qui s'auto-modifie au cours même de son devenir, c'est le langage de l'organisme qui s'offre le plus naturellement à l'expression, c'est le schème de l'organisme qui se présente d'emblée comme évident. Le vivant est le grand paradigme. Le schème de la vie sert de référence à l'être. L'évidence ostensible du biologique et l'évidence intime du vécu spirituel s'y conjuguent pour dessiner un champ de renvoi particulièrement prégnant, puisqu'il se donne pour l'essence même du concret. Figure privilégiée de l'expérience, le vivant est le type de l'unité complexe, coordonnée, mouvante. Ses catégories sont celles-là même de la totalité rationnelle. L'individualité comme reflet, image et symbole de tout, la volonté unifiante et l'unicité du point de vue, la cohérence harmonieuse et l'aspiration rectrice: à travers ces catégories se reconnaît un mode permanent d'appréhension du réel.*

Judith Schlanger, *Les métaphores de l'organisme*, 1995



## Introduction

The aim of this research is to focus on organic materiality in the 20<sup>th</sup> century art, for its appearance as a protagonist element presented in an artwork for what it actually is rather than as a mere component or instrument for chromatic or decorative purposes. Organic materiality, namely plants and animals (human and non-human), could be defined as a natural “ready-made”, so to speak, deriving from a living entity, so that we could even consider it a kind of “ready-made” *ante-litteram*, coexisting with, and not depending upon, man and his activity. However, the purpose of this research is not to enumerate an endless list of artworks or artists involved in the use of organic materials—a vain as well as an absurd project—but to propose this same materiality in artistic practices as a lens with which to observe the spectrum of approximately one hundred years, the 20<sup>th</sup> century, “wearing” the lenses which entitle this research. In other words, by examining some works and specific case studies, organic materiality is suggested as a filter, and also as a sketch of a method to introduce the elaboration of a problem not to be solved, but to be left open to a variety of possibilities.

Regarding the geographical span, this research has an international scope, mainly covering the artistic production carried out in Europe, Northern and Southern America, and Japan in some cases. In this sense, this work assumes its inevitable incompleteness as an attempt to find a place into a pluralistic theoretical discourse in art, and more specifically contemporary art, putting at its core matter as a matter of concern.

## 1. On Matter, Materials, Materiality and Materialism

In order to address the significant role covered by matter as a more than superficial texture or feature to display the inherent meaning of artworks—whose content is generally considered as the unique herald to define and analyse them—it seems worthwhile mentioning Daniel Herwitz's *Aesthetics* (2008) referring to Canova's marble in sculpture.

Change the material and everything changes with it. The materiality of the finished form is something that cannot be abstracted from visual experience, or from meaning and effect. [...] These things give truth to Hegel's adage that 'not all things are possible in all media of art', and related, that it is the discovery of the potentialities of any given medium, their exploitation and indeed, creation, that defines the history of an art form as much anything else."<sup>1</sup>

Herwitz's assertiveness could lead the reader (a general reader external to the investigation in art history) to think about the central role of materiality in art as a given issue, but it is not. After a long marginalization of materiality in the arts over the last century, an interest in this field of enquiry finally emerged in the 1990s: the art historian Florence de Mèredieu provided an outstanding contribution with *Histoire Matérielle & Immatérielle de l'Art Moderne* (1994). In the introduction to her book she argued that "art history has always appeared as the result or the encounter of two opposed, and consequently, complementary factors: matter and form. [...] Therefore, art history, for a large part, is that of its materials."<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, she also acknowledged that, at least within the field of Western art, "it is noteworthy that these materials were relatively limited. [...] Art, therefore, remained quartered for a long time in a relatively closed field of materials."<sup>3</sup> Moreover, she stated that every

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<sup>1</sup> Daniel Herwitz, *Aesthetics. Key Concepts in Philosophy*, London, New York: Continuum, 2008, 139.

<sup>2</sup> "L'art est toujours apparu comme la résultante ou la rencontre de deux facteurs opposés et, par voie de conséquence, complémentaires: la matière et la forme." [...] L'histoire de l'art est ainsi, pour une large part, celle de ses matériaux." Florence de Mèredieu, *Histoire matérielle & immatérielle de l'art moderne*, Bordas, Paris, 1994, 1. All translations from French are mine, unless otherwise noted.

<sup>3</sup> "Mais, si l'on reste dans le seul champ de l'art occidental, il convient de remarquer que ces matériaux son restés en nombre relativement restreint. [...] L'art est donc resté cantonné longtemps dans un champ matériel relativement clos". F. de Mèredieu, *Histoire matérielle & immatérielle de l'art moderne*, Cit., 1.

technique also evolved over the centuries, and consequently, de Mèredieu highlighted that, especially in the realm of European Avant-gardes at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, artistic practices enriched and diversified themselves through the use of non-traditional materials.

Poor, recycled, industrial, inferred from nature, and even involving the human body, the materials of the 20<sup>th</sup> century inform one of an expansion in the realm of art, going hand in hand with the historical, economic, cultural, and societal developments of the century. In 1997 the art historian Adalgisa Lugli developed her investigations on *Wunderkammern*. Her approach—as Krzysztof Pomian pointed out in the introduction to her volume—was stimulated by the conviction that an artwork cannot be treated as a text, in other words, “an artwork cannot be separated from its materiality.”<sup>4</sup> This statement means that the choice of using one medium instead of another is not, and should not, be indifferent to the art historian, since that difference is foundational for the producer as well as for the consumer of a given art object.

At that time, the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, digital media were encountering a wide spread, which provoked the rise of visual studies as a field of interdisciplinary encounters. In this context, art history, traditionally the discipline devoted to the analysis of images and art objects, would lose its centrality. In that same period, art historian Carol Armstrong also emphasized the attention to the difference in materiality, in other words, to the use of a material instead of another for artistic purposes. Her statements, in fact, appeared in the “Visual Culture Questionnaire” published on the journal *October* (1996), and directed to several art historians including Carol Armstrong.<sup>5</sup>

As a first remark, my aim is to follow Armstrong’s attention to artefacts in their materiality in a context broader than art history—as that of visual studies is. For the extent, I would appropriate of a sentence already formulated in 1980. And I am referring precisely to the question “Do Artifacts have Politics?”, the question entitling an article by Winner (1980). By transposing it into an affirmative sentence, inverting

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<sup>4</sup> K. Pomian, “Adalgisa Lugli: materialità e significato dell’arte”, Introduction to Adalgisa Lugli, *Wunderkammer. Le Stanze delle Meraviglie*, Torino: Allemandi, 1997, 14. All translations from French are mine, unless otherwise noted.

<sup>5</sup> See “Visual Culture Questionnaire”, *October* 77 (Summer 1996): 25–70. Available at <<http://faculty.georgetown.edu/irvinem/theory/VisualCultureQuestionnaire-October-77-1996.pdf>> (accessed in September 2015). Quoted by Michael Yonan, “Towards a Fusion of Art History and Material Culture Studies”, in *West 86th*, Vol. 18, No. 2 (Fall-Winter 2011), The University of Chicago Press, 232-248: 239.

the order of the question, I would, therefore, argue that “artefacts do have politics,”<sup>6</sup> and for this reason materiality should not be overlooked by art-historical studies. However, if we consider that art history might tend to privilege the visual aspects rather than the material ones, the image over the object, these references could be observed just as sporadic examples in this discipline. Nevertheless, more recently—precisely in the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century—literature on art history and materiality have finally started to pay serious attention to this everything less than secondary aspect of art history.

Conversely, an essential part in archaeology research since the inception of the discipline in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, always involved the materiality of objects. “Material culture” is grounded on an analysis of material objects inherent to a specific context in which they were produced—especially in cases in which objects are the sole resources of information in lack of written documents. Apt to provide elements for knowledge on a specific culture, material culture has therefore been at the core of anthropology and sociology research as well. Regarding the relationship between material culture and art history, the art historian Michael Yonan argued

Materiality [...] has been an implicit dimension of art-historical inquiry for more than a century, one that has suffered at the expense of other artistic qualities. Art history has tended to suppress its status as material culture even as it has flirted continuously with materiality, and this has evolved into a serious intellectual limitation. The prestige recently accorded to

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<sup>6</sup> Langdon Winner, “Do Artifacts Have Politics?”, *Daedalus*, Vol. 109, No.1, Modern Technology: Problem or Opportunity? (Winter, 1980), 121-136. I find extraordinary this kind of reflection having appeared already in 1980 and I think it can be useful to summarize its key points and arguments. In this article Winner suggested that technology is generally considered as a symptom by which we might recognize an authoritarian versus a democratic society. “We all know that people have politics, not things”, he argued and later added, “What matters is not technology itself, but the social or economic system in which it is embedded.” He also noticed that this would be a easy conclusion for social scientists and, therefore, proposed a theory of technological politics, in the attempt of, not replacing, but rather complementing theories of social determination and technology (Marxism, for instance). The approach would pay “attention to the characteristics of technical objects and the meaning of those characteristics.” For instance, Winner distinguished two ways that artefacts can contain political properties: 1) a specific invention, design or technical device can determine a particular social effect in a community (I would call it inductive) or; 2) when a particular political situation is the essential condition to establish a specific “man-made system” (I would call it deductive). He afterwards offered some examples of both ways, like Robert Moses’s buildings of roads, parks and public works (infrastructures) between the 1930s and 1970s in New York to create borders between upper and lower classes, white and black people; and the atomic bomb as “an inherently political artefact”.

dematerializing approaches to art, which have resulted in a diminished concern for materiality in general, has only exacerbated the situation.<sup>7</sup>

The issue of dematerialization stressed by Yonan—later addressed in chapter four—is presented here to underline the importance of materiality in art, not in a lateral sense, but for the timespan analysed in this research: the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Yonan also associated the disregard to material culture in art history as a theme which inevitably “overlaps with the larger concerns of historical materialism, which in art-historical discourse has meant a Marxist (or Marxist-inspired) history of art interested in the economic and therefore material conditions from which art is produced.”<sup>8</sup> The materialist approach—intended as inspired by Marxist historical materialism—would lead to consider artworks as a commodity, too reductive a perspective, which has caused major resistance for applying it to art history.

At this point, it is important to underscore that the defence of materiality’s art as a perspective for art history research neither for me or Yonan (recalled here as a useful reference) or the art historians mentioned above, attempts to pursue any prevarication of materiality over the visual, but rather “to some extent it is possible to imagine visual culture and material culture as interrelated aspects of the same scholarly project.”<sup>9</sup> By the way, even “the digital image”, in its disembodied bi-dimensionality, “still requires a material means of conveyance [...] to be seen.”<sup>10</sup> Moreover, I would add that the same technological devices are not neutrally interchangeable, since they affect the way we access information differently, and interact with people, facts and things; in this case, the way we see an image.<sup>11</sup> Afterwards, Yonan referred to the position previously defended by Armstrong in 1996. According to the latter, whether the advantages of including visual studies in art history, it threatens to conceal the importance of materiality. She, therefore, concluded her intervention to the questionnaire arguing:

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<sup>7</sup> Michael Yonan, “Towards a Fusion of Art History and Material Culture Studies”, in *West 86th*, Vol. 18, No. 2 (Fall-Winter 2011), The University of Chicago Press, 232-248: 233.

<sup>8</sup> M. Yonan, “Towards a Fusion of Art History and Material Culture Studies”, *Cit.*, 235.

<sup>9</sup> M. Yonan, “Towards a Fusion of Art History and Material Culture Studies”, *Cit.*, 239.

<sup>10</sup> M. Yonan, “Towards a Fusion of Art History and Material Culture Studies”, *Cit.*, 239. Moreover, I would add that even technological devices are not neutrally interchangeable, since they different affect the way we access information, in this case, the way we see an image.

<sup>11</sup> It seems appropriate remembering the writer Evgeny Morozov’s statement “Why technologies are never neutral”, which entitles the last part of the 10<sup>th</sup> chapter of his E. Morozov, *The Net Delusion. The Dark Side of Internet Freedom*, New York: Public Affairs, 2011.

The material dimension of the objects is, in my view, at least potentially a site of resistance and recalcitrance, of the irreducibly particular, and of the subversively strange and pleasurable. It is again, at least potentially, a pocket of occlusion within the smooth functioning systems of domination, including the market, the hierarchical thought-structures, and subject-positionalities: a glitch in the great worldwide web of images and representations. [...] [T]o subsume material objects within the model of “text” is to discredit and misunderstand the particular intelligence involved in material facture. And least, I would propose that the differences between kinds of production, be they literary, or pictorial, painterly, sculptural, photographic, filmic, or what have you, matter absolutely, that they are the source of whatever philosophical work it does, and that to ignore those differences is to submit utterly to the system of exchange and circulation in which any cultural object undeniably participates.<sup>12</sup>

In continuity with Armstrong’s insight, Yonan pointed out that “the interdisciplinary practices of material culture” must be taken into account, and suggested “mov[ing] toward a more complete synthesis” between art history and material culture, also highlighting “that art has a physical, sensual dimension, and not just a visual one. [...] The physical dimension is an indissoluble component of art’s capacity to mean.”<sup>13</sup> He eventually proposed, instead of the allegory of shadow represented by Plato’s cave in *The Republic*, to consider Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*, “in which the philosopher conceives the world not as traces of something else but as organized embodiments of matter and form.”<sup>14</sup> Following this path, according to Yonan, could have the only beneficial result of empowering art history.

Nevertheless, this attention to materiality in art historical and theoretical investigation has just begun, if we also consider the position of the Dutch art historian Ann-Sophie Lehmann. She opened up her recent essay “The Matter of the Medium: Some Tools for an Art-theoretical Interpretation of Materials” (2014) declaring: “Materials, in spite of their decisive role in determining the meaning and effects of visual artefacts, have long been overlooked in art-theoretical discussion.”<sup>15</sup> According to her colleague and scholar in gender studies and philosophy Iris Van der Tuin,

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<sup>12</sup> Carol Armstrong, in “Visual Culture Questionnaire”, *October*, Cit., 28.

<sup>13</sup> M. Yonan, “Towards a Fusion of Art History and Material Culture Studies”, *Cit.*, 243.

<sup>14</sup> M. Yonan, “Towards a Fusion of Art History and Material Culture Studies”, *Cit.*, 245.

<sup>15</sup> Ann-Sophie Lehmann, “The Matter of the Medium. Some Tools for an Art Theoretical Interpretation of Materials”, in *The Matter of Art: Materials, Technologies, Meanings 1200-1700*, in C. Anderson, A. Dunlop, P. H. Smith (eds.), Manchester: Manchester University Press 2014, 21-41: 22.



Lehmann coined the “4Ms”, which attempt to define “the precise relationships between matter, materials, materiality, and materialism.”<sup>16</sup> Her approach must be framed in the broader intellectual context of cultural theory, whose interest in matter has determined in recent years the so-called philosophy of New Materialisms. According to the initial theorists of this current, Diana Coole and Samantha Frost

For materiality is always something more than “mere” matter: an excess, force, vitality, relationality, or difference that renders matter active, self-creative, productive, unpredictable. In sum, new materialists are rediscovering a materiality that materializes, evincing immanent modes of self-transformation that compel us to think of causation in far more complex terms; to recognize that phenomena are caught in a multitude of interlocking systems and focus and to consider anew the location and nature of capacities for agency.<sup>17</sup>

As Yanbing Er pointed out, the New Materialisms’ focus on matter involved also investigations in the fields of “material culture, eco-critical discourses, material feminisms, and science studies,” in the attempt not to abandon “the historical legacies of materialist thought,” but rather “to reconsider the notion of matter in “acknowledgement of the powerful constellation of geopolitical and biotechnological forces acting in the world today.”<sup>18</sup> These connections and inclusions towards pluralistic theoretical approaches, overcoming “the otherwise narrow boundaries of traditional academic disciplines,”<sup>19</sup> highlight the transversal orientation of New Materialisms. The terms transversal, transversally, and transversality are repeatedly emphasized in Rick Dolphijn and Iris Van der Tuin’s *New Materialisms: Interviews and Cartographies* (2012) regarding different aspects.

In the first place, which is the most relevant aspect for this research, this theoretical approach dismantles the Cartesian dualism of mind and body. This cultural theory

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<sup>16</sup> Iris Van der Tuin, “On the Threshold of New Materialist Studies”, *Forum: University of Edinburgh Post-Graduate Journal of Culture and the Arts*, Jessica Legacy and Yanbing Er (eds.), Issue 19, Autumn 2014, 1-12: 4. Available at <<http://www.forumjournal.org/issue/view/97>> (accessed in December 2014).

<sup>17</sup> Diana Coole & Samantha Frost, “Introducing the New Materialisms”, in D. Coole and S. Frost (eds.), *New Materialisms. Ontology, Agency, and Politics*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010, 1-43: 9.

<sup>18</sup> Yanbing Er, “Editorial Introduction: The New Materialisms”, *Forum: University of Edinburgh Post-Graduate Journal of Culture and the Arts*, Cit., 1-6: 2-3.

<sup>19</sup> Yanbing Er, “Editorial Introduction: The New Materialisms”, *Cit.*, 3.

does not privilege matter over meaning or culture over nature. It explores a monist perspective, devoid of the dualisms that have dominated the humanities (and sciences) until today, by giving special attention to matter, which has been so neglected by dualist thought. Cartesian dualism, after all, has favored mind.<sup>20</sup>

In second place, the transversality of New Materialism is also proposed as a “shift” from the

dualist gesture of prioritizing mind over matter, soul over body, and culture over nature that can be found in modernist as well as post-modernist cultural theories. [...] In other words: a new materialism is constituted by demonstrating how the canonized relations between the aforementioned terms are in fact the outcomes of “power/knowledge” according to which Truth is an instantiation of a politics or régime, as Michel Foucault (1980) would have it.<sup>21</sup>

Without extending excessively on a deeper analysis on the New Materialisms, contemporary cultural theories and eco-feminisms, which would necessarily take me too far from my present purpose. Considering materiality not just as a concern on materials themselves, but rather to underscore the relations produced by the use of certain kinds of materials in significant artistic practices of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, I conclude here this section on matter, whose aim is to provide a definition of the object of this thesis, and move to the following step, the definition of its adjective, the organic.

## **2. On the Organic**

After having focused on the definition around matter, it may be possible to address more specifically the organic and its materiality. A kind of interest in organic materiality in artistic practices awoke the attention of conservators, curators and scientists more than in art history and the theory of art. In way of example, the congress “Modern Organic Materials” organized in Edinburgh in 1988, in which

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<sup>20</sup> Rick Dolphijn and Iris Van der Tuin’s *New Materialisms: Interviews and Cartographies*, Open Humanities Press, University of Michigan Library, Ann Arbor, 2012, 85. Available at <<http://openhumanitiespress.org/index.html>> (accessed in December 2014).

<sup>21</sup> Rick Dolphijn and Iris Van der Tuin’s *New Materialisms: Interviews and Cartographies*, cit., 119.

“despite the title of the meeting and the broad cross section of professional disciplines of those who attended it, the emphasis was on plastic and rubber.”<sup>22</sup> This “emphasis on plastic and rubbers” reveals immediately, and without entering into details, the lack of a relationship between “modern organic materials” and the organic of plants and animals studied in this research. Therefore, in order to investigate this topic in art history, we need to specify and delimit the term “organic” to avoid misunderstandings.

Moreover, in 2009 the University of Pisa published a collection of essays on organic substances entitled *Organic Mass Spectrometry in Art and Archaeology* (2009). Written by specialists in restoration at different universities, their definition for organic materials was that they “can be identified both as the main constituents of an artwork or a cultural heritage object, and as secondary components, mixed with inorganic compounds. Organic materials can be found in the finish or decoration of the surfaces, or as residues of commodities, such as in ceramic or glass vessels.”<sup>23</sup> As a deeper analysis of organic materials, the first chapter of the book was provided with a table<sup>24</sup> with a list of names of ancient organic materials used to improve the understanding of their composition (since they are more subject to degradation than inorganic materials) and to “ensure that ancient artefacts will remain part of our cultural heritage.”<sup>25</sup>

What immediately emerges from reading this table is that the organic involves compounds pre-existing in nature, as well as the products of a synthetic elaboration in the laboratory. But what if our focus on the organic relates only to elements not modified by human intervention and still visually recognizable in their “natural” appearance and integrated in artwork? The present investigation focuses on a kind of materiality that is, organic in the primal meaning of the term, in other words, an adjective “relating to or derived from living matter.”<sup>26</sup> In this case, in order to present

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<sup>22</sup> Clare Meredith, “Modern Organic Materials Meeting”, *Leonardo*, Vol. 21 No 4, The MIT Press, 1988: 453.

<sup>23</sup> Maria Perla Colombini and Francesca Modugno (eds.), *Organic Mass Spectrometry in Art and Archaeology*, University of Pisa, Wiley & Sons, 2009, xii.

<sup>24</sup> See “Table 1.1 Category, organic materials and uses” in Maria Perla Colombini and Francesca Modugno (eds.), *Organic Mass Spectrometry in Art and Archaeology*, University of Pisa, Wiley & Sons, 2009, 4.

<sup>25</sup> Maria Perla Colombini and Francesca Modugno (eds.), *Organic Mass Spectrometry in Art and Archaeology*, Cit., 3.

<sup>26</sup> Dictionary entry at <<http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/organic>> (accessed in December 2013).

the organic materiality of plants and animals (human and non-human) and their interactions with the 20<sup>th</sup> century art, we need to go beyond the observation of biochemical organic compounds in modern biology and chemistry. With this purpose, this research, over its chapters, counts on the contributions of history of science and medicine, and philosophical approaches such as philosophy of nature, philosophy of Vitalism, and philosophical anthropology.

If the organic is by definition related to or derived from living matter, we should, firstly, introduce the concept of life. The attempt is more complex than it may seem, in fact, according to the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben, “a genealogical study of the concept of ‘life’” may prove that this “concept never gets defined as such.”<sup>27</sup> Nevertheless, it appeared “with a decisive strategic function in domains apparently distant as philosophy, theology, politics and—only later—medicine and biology,” and its foundational moment for the articulation of this concept in Western philosophy, according to Agamben, can be traced in Aristotle’s *De Anima*.<sup>28</sup> In a passage from this work (Aristotle, 413a, 20 – 413b, 8), Aristotle’s description of life may be read:

It is through life that what has soul in it (*l’animale*) differs from what has not (*l’inanimato*). Now this term “to live” has more than one sense, and provided anyone alone of these is found in a thing we say that the thing is living – viz. thinking, sensation, local movement and rest, or movement in the sense of nutrition, decay and growth. Hence we think of all species of plants also as living, for they are observed to possess in themselves a principle and potentiality through which they grow and decay in opposite directions... This principle can be separated from the others, but not they from it – in mortal being at least. The fact is obvious in plants: for it is the only psychic potentiality (*potenza dell’anima*) they possess. Thus, it is through this principle that life belongs to living things. ... By nutritive power (*threptikon*) we mean that part of the soul which is common also to plants.<sup>29</sup>

Aristotle, without defining what life is, just recognized in nutrition the principal function that living beings have in common, and, as Agamben observed,

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<sup>27</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *L’Aperto: L’Uomo e L’Animale* (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 2002); trans. by Kevin Atell, *The Open: Man and Animal*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004, 13-16. Excerpt quoted by Jeffrey Kastner (ed.), *Nature. Documents of Contemporary Art*, London: Whitechapel Gallery; Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 151-154: 151.

<sup>28</sup> G. Agamben, *The Open: Man and Animal*, Cit., 151.

<sup>29</sup> G. Agamben, *The Open: Man and Animal*, Cit., 152.

“the isolation of nutritive life constitutes in every sense a fundamental event for Western science.”<sup>30</sup> Afterwards, Agamben continued by exploring the thought of Xavier Bichat (1771-1802), disciple of Paul Joseph Barthez (1734-1806) at the Montpellier school, which was famous for its development of the theories of life at end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. As Michel Foucault explained, in the first lines of the chapter dedicated to “Classifying” in *Les mots et les choses* (1966), during the 17<sup>th</sup> and especially the 18<sup>th</sup> century, “history of the ideas or of the sciences credit with a new curiosity: the curiosity that caused them, if not to discover the sciences of life, at least to give them a hitherto unsuspected scope and precision.”<sup>31</sup> In this realm, the sciences of life, and so-called Vitalism came to be professed in various parts of Europe “by Bordeu and Barthez in Montpellier, by Blumenbach in Germany, and by Diderot then Bichat in Paris. Under these different theoretical regimens, questions were asked that were almost always the same, but were given each time a different solution: the possibility of classifying living beings.”<sup>32</sup>

Incidentally, it might also be useful to mention that in his *Theoria Medica Vera* (1708) Stahl, a member of this movement of life, although more directed towards the ‘animist’ variety, had defended the idea “that a conscious, rational soul, or anima, governs vital functions.”<sup>33</sup> Stahl also argued that “life is the conservation of the organism against dissolution” and “matter itself could not accomplish this without the immaterial anima as the directing agent.”<sup>34</sup> Years after, in *Nouveau elements de la science de l’homme* (1778), Barthez distanced himself from Stahl and the idea of a rational soul operating in animal functions.<sup>35</sup> Therefore, Berthez defended the idea that the vital principle of man—idea inherited by Henry Bergson, who coined the expression *elán vital* presented in his book *Creative Evolution* (1907)—had to be considered using criteria different than just those of body and soul.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> G. Agamben, *The Open: Man and Animal*, Cit., 152.

<sup>31</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things. An Archeology of Human Sciences*, (*Les Mots et les choses*, Gallimard, 1966), Taylor and Francis 2005, 136.

<sup>32</sup> M. Foucault, *The Order of Things. An Archeology of Human Sciences*, Cit., 137.

<sup>33</sup> Shirley A. Roe, “The Life Sciences”, in Roy Porter (ed.) *The Cambridge History of Science: Volume 4, Eighteenth-Century Science*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003, 397-416: 405.

<sup>34</sup> Shirley A. Roe, “The Life Sciences”, *Cit.*, 405.

<sup>35</sup> See Shirley A. Roe, “The Life Sciences”, *Cit.*, 406.

<sup>36</sup> “Le principe vital de l’homme doit être conçu par des idées distinctes de celles qu’on a des attributs du corps et de l’âme.” In AA VV, *La Science Moderne (de 1450 a 1800)*, Tome II, Deuxième édition refondue et augmentée, Presses Universitaires de France, Paris, 1969, 646.

The Cartesian duality of body and soul, in fact, conceived of the body as a clock-like machine, whereas the Montpellier theorists encouraged the variability of “life-phenomena” in search of the slow transformations occurring in the body throughout life. “Vitalist medicine gave special attention to growth and aging, tracing for each of the four ‘stages of life’ (childhood, youth, maturity, old age) the relative proportions and “influence” of the various regions of the body, the varying condition of the vital forces, and the peculiar conditions and diseases characteristic of that stage.”<sup>37</sup> Bichat, continuing on the specificity of laws in the organization of life, declared in the first paragraph of his *Recherches physiologique sur la vie et la morte* (1800) that “life is the *ensemble* of functions resistant to death,”<sup>38</sup> and, therefore, claimed the autonomy for the biological method.<sup>39</sup> The purpose and originality of “vitalist” physiology—as the philosopher Antoine-Augustin Cournot affirmed at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century—was that of finding analogies within the variety of manifestations of life, without the pretension of penetrating the essence of life.<sup>40</sup>

Nonetheless, Bichat directed his attention to the “permanent principle of reaction,” which is the principle of life itself: “unknown in its nature, it can be appreciated only through its phenomena.”<sup>41</sup> Highlighting, for instance, the way a living body reacts to external bodies as a delivery of information about the body’s age, Bichat suggested the difference existing between external powers and internal resistance as a measure of life. He observed: “their excess announces its weakness, while its predominance reveals its force.”<sup>42</sup> He afterwards described the “division in

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<sup>37</sup> Elisabeth A., Williams, *The physical and the moral. Anthropology, Physiology, and philosophical medicine in France, 1750-1850*, Cambridge, UK and New York, USA: Cambridge University Press, 1994, 53.

<sup>38</sup> Xavier Bichat, *Recherches physiologique sur la vie et la morte* (1800), Troisième édition, Brosson Gabon, Paris, 1805, 1.

<sup>39</sup> *La Science Moderne*, Cit, 647.

<sup>40</sup> “Le vitalisme consiste précisément à faire ressortir les analogies que présentent, dans leur étonnante variété, toutes les manifestations de la vie, à prendre ces analogies pour fil conducteur, sans prétention aucune à pénétrer l’essence de la vie.” A-A. Cournot, *Considerations sur la marche des idées et des événements dans les temps modernes*, Boivin, t. II, 1934, 136.

<sup>41</sup> “Tel est en effet le mode d’existence des corps vivans, que tout ce qui les entoure tend à les détruire. Les corps inorganiques agissent sans cesse sur eux ; eux-mêmes exercent les uns sur les autres une action continue ; bientôt ils succomberoient s’ils n’avoient en eux en principe permanent de réaction. Ce principe est celui de la vie ; inconnu dans sa nature, il ne peut être apprécié que par ses phénomènes : or, le plu général de ces phénomènes est cette alternative habituelle d’action de la part des corps extérieurs, et de réaction de la part du corps vivant, alternative dont les proportions varient suivant l’âge.” X. Bichat, *Recherches physiologique sur la vie et la morte*, Cit, 1.

<sup>42</sup> “La mesure de la vie est donc, en général, la différence qui existe entre l’effort des puissances extérieures, et celui de la résistance intérieure. L’excès des unes annonce sa faiblesse; la prédominance de l’autre est l’indice de sa force.” X. Bichat, *Recherches physiologique sur la vie et la morte*, Cit, 2.

organic and animal life;” the first is essential to both plants and animal life, and the second to animals (human and non-human). While organic life is ruled by a repetition of functions, such as nutrition, birth, growth and death in the soil of its germination, animal life adds an exterior life to its internal life by entertaining relationships with neighbouring objects. Marrying its existence with the existence of other entities, taking distance or getting closer according to personal fears or needs, appropriating everything in nature, relating everything to its isolated existence,<sup>43</sup> the animal is an inhabitant of the world, and not just of the place that saw its birth.<sup>44</sup>

Bichat considered organic life as the *ensemble* of functions of the first class; this means a common feature between plants and animals, the “organic texture is the only one necessary to its own exercise.”<sup>45</sup> It consists of adaptation to a continuous circle of matter, based on the repetition of functions related to assimilation—digestion, circulation, breathing and feeding—and to dissimilation—absorption, circulation, pulmonary and cutaneous exhalation, secretion of fluids, excretion.<sup>46</sup> The organic materiality considered in this research is based on these premises, joining from a physiological point of view the different organic lives and their organic vestiges presented in artistic creations and practices.

Through this kind of distinction of life—as Agamben referred—into vegetal and relational, organic and animal, animal and human, it can be possible within man to define what is human and what is not.<sup>47</sup> Furthermore, if this preoccupation belongs to man and not to the animal, “then it is the very question of man—and of

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<sup>43</sup> “Telle est la vie considérée dans sa totalité; examinée plus en détail, elle nous offre deux modifications remarquables. L’une est commune au végétal et à l’animal, l’autre est le partage spécial de ce dernier. Jetez en effet les yeux sur deux individus de chacun de ces règnes vivans, vous verrez l’un n’exister qu’au dedans de lui, n’avoir avec ce qui l’environne que des rapports de nutrition, naître, croître et périr fixé au sol que en reçut le germe; l’autre allier à cette vie intérieure dont il jouit au plus haut degré, une vie extérieure qui établit des relations nombreuses entre lui et les objets voisins, marie son existence à celle de tous les autres êtres, l’en éloigne ou l’en rapproche suivant ses craintes ou ses besoins, et semble ainsi, en lui appropriant tout dans la nature, rapporter tout à son existence isolée.” X. Bichat, *Recherches physiologique sur la vie et la morte*, Cit, 2-3.

<sup>44</sup> “(...) il est habitante du monde, et non, comme le végétal, du lieu qui le vit naître.” X. Bichat, *Recherches physiologique sur la vie et la morte*, Cit, 3.

<sup>45</sup> “J’appelle vie organique l’ensemble de fonctions de la première classe, parce que tous les êtres organisés, végétaux ou animaux, en jouissent à un degré plus ou moins marqué, et que la texture organique est la seule condition nécessaire à son exercice. Les fonctions réunies de la seconde classe forment la vie animale, ainsi nommée, parce qu’elle est l’attribut exclusif du règne animal.” X. Bichat, *Recherches physiologique sur la vie et la morte*, Cit, 3.

<sup>46</sup> See X. Bichat, *Recherches physiologique sur la vie et la morte*, Cit, 4-6.

<sup>47</sup> “The division of life into vegetal and relational, organic and animal, animal and human, therefore passes first of all as a mobile border within living man, and without this intimate caesura the very decision of what is human and what is not would probably not be possible”.

‘humanism’—that must be posed in a new way.’<sup>48</sup> He remarked that “in our culture, man has always been thought of as the articulation and conjunction of a body and a soul, of a living thing and a *logos*, of a natural (or animal) element and a supernatural or social or divine element.”<sup>49</sup> According to Agamben “[t]he incongruity of these two elements” should lead us “to investigate not the metaphysical mystery of conjunction, but rather the practical and political mystery of separation.”<sup>50</sup> This philosophical task is too ambitious for the present work, which, nevertheless, wishes to get closer to a possible answer, and at the same time, to pose new questions.

### 3. On the Organic and Art

Considering the organic materiality as a heterogeneous common denominator between living entities can lead us, at first, to ponder on the conjunction between art and the organic which is part of nature. Florence de Mèredieu, looking at the past, argued that the relationship between art and organic materiality has existed since the prehistoric age, for example in the traces of hands imprinted on the walls of caves, where corporeal secretions, such as urine, blood and sperm were used as ingredients to produce pigments: “an ancestral prefiguration of the place body art will establish between art and flesh.”<sup>51</sup>

Over a long period between 23 and 79 A.D., Pliny the Elder wrote his *Naturalis Historia*, considered as the foremost encyclopaedia of antiquity and whose last books were dedicated to figurative arts. The union of naturalistic and scientific contents (like astronomy, anthropology, zoology, botany, and medicine) with artistic topics (for example mineralogy, sculpture, and painting) in the same *tractatus*, shows that for him and his culture, as well as during the revisiting of his thinking in the Renaissance period, there was a relationship of continuity between art and science, art

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<sup>48</sup> G. Agamben, *The Open: Man and Animal*, Cit., 153.

<sup>49</sup> G. Agamben, *Cit.*, 153.

<sup>50</sup> G. Agamben, *Cit.*, 153.

<sup>51</sup> “Les traces des mains (empreintes négatives obtenues par pulvérisation de la couleur autour de la main) sur la paroi des grottes préhistoriques peuvent apparaître comme une préfiguration ancestrale de ce lien que l’art corporel rétablira entre l’œuvre et la chair. De nombreuses sécrétions corporelles – urine, sang, sperme – interviennent à titre d’ingrédients dans la fabrication des premiers pigments.” F. de Mèredieu, *Histoire matérielle & immatérielle de l’art moderne*, Cit., 271.



and nature. According to Adalgisa Lugli, in her study on the cabinets of curiosities, the separation into two branches of thinking, scientific and humanistic, is a consequence of Illuminist specialism. On the one hand, science with matter and its rationalist anatomization and, on the other, the escape into the idea or a way of thinking about art far from any engagement with the so-called *artes mechanicae*. It is known—Lugli argued—that the artists were the ones who did not want to recognize a link with matter, especially in the 19th century, while their privileged scenery was painting.<sup>52</sup>

The encounter between these two fields, the natural and artificial co-existing—inspired by the re-reading of the Plinian encyclopaedia—is particularly visible in the period between the Renaissance and Romanticism with the increase of collecting in Europe, as a way of acknowledging the world. This practice was considered as a possibility for creating a system without delimitations between natural discoveries, fish, minerals, plants, and art objects.<sup>53</sup> It started with the initiative of naturalists from various parts of Europe—such as Conrad Gessner (Switzerland, 1516-1565), Ulisse Aldrovandi (Italy, 1522-1605), Leonhart Fuchs (Germany, 1501-1566), Francesco Calceolari (Verona, 1521-1609), and Ferrante Imperato (1525?-1615?). Under their motivation dictated by the need of knowing and cataloguing the world, the *Wunderkammer*, or the cabinets of curiosities, developed between the 16<sup>th</sup> and the 18<sup>th</sup> centuries as places of collection and at the same time of investigation.<sup>54</sup>

If we relate collecting and cataloguing with organic materiality, the first nexus/connection we can find in this context is in the technique of the *herbarium*, a practice largely employed by Luca Ghini, a teacher of Botany at the University of Bologna in the 16<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>55</sup> As described by Morton, “[h]e built up his own herbarium (unfortunately not preserved) and his letters record the dispatch of mounted

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<sup>52</sup> “Da una parte la materia e l’anatomizzazione razionalista a cui la scienza la sottopone, dall’altra la fuga nell’idea o un pensiero sull’arte che si discosta sempre più decisamente da qualsiasi indizio di coinvolgimento con le *artes mechanicae*. Ed è noto che da almeno quattro secoli i primi a non volersi riconoscere in un se pur minimo legame con la materia sono stati proprio gli artisti. Il segno massimo di questa spaccatura è certamente l’Ottocento, il luogo privilegiato del suo esercizio è la pittura.” A. Lugli, *Wunderkammer. Le Stanze delle Meraviglie*, Torino: Allemandi, 1997, 105.

<sup>53</sup> See A. Lugli, *Wunderkammer. Le Stanze delle Meraviglie*, Torino: Allemandi, 1997, 105.

<sup>54</sup> A. Lugli, *Wunderkammer. Le Stanze delle Meraviglie*, Torino: Allemandi, 1997, 113.

<sup>55</sup> “Luca Ghini (1490-1556), a Professor of Botany at the University of Bologna, Italy, is thought to have been the first person to dry plants under pressure and mount them on paper to serve as a lasting record (Arber 1938). This practice spread throughout Europe and by the time of Linnaeus (1707-1778) the herbarium technique was well known”. Diane Bridson and Leonard Forman (eds.) *The Herbarium Handbook*, Royal Botanic Gardens, London: Kew Publishing, 1989, 4.

dried plants to other botanists. It was to a great extent his influence and example which led to the general collection and use of herbaria.”<sup>56</sup> Innovation that furthered the progress of botany, this method started as a consequence of the process in which the realistic illustration of plants were drawn (and sometimes painted as well), “some of the Italian manuscript herbals of the fifteenth century show that the value of accurate depiction had begun to be understood.”<sup>57</sup> At the same time, the increase of printers and publishers “out to make quick money, flooded the market with herbals, almost all hasty copies of poor manuscript herbals,” and, although in the 16<sup>th</sup> century the wood engraving was improving, the practice of “herborization” was expanding as well to afford a better appreciation of scientific rigour.<sup>58</sup>

This was also the period in which voyages to explore new places began—“as much intellectual as navigational exercises”<sup>59</sup>—during which the encounter with a new and exotic world took place and made possible the contact with “new and strange populations, unknown plants, animals with shapes never seen before, amazing natural phenomena.”<sup>60</sup> According to Leitão, the dissemination of this information generated not only a deeper appreciation of nature, but also produced a redefinition of how this nature would have been studied,<sup>61</sup> stimulating at the same time an investigation “into the European knowledge and culture.”<sup>62</sup> As Foucault pointed out

The documents of this new history are not other words, texts or records, but unencumbered spaces in which things are juxtaposed: herbariums, collections, gardens; the locus of this history is a non-temporal rectangle in which, stripped of all commentary, of all enveloping language, creatures present themselves one beside another, their surfaces visible, grouped according to their common features, and thus already virtually analysed, and bearers of nothing but their own individual names. It is often said that the establishment

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<sup>56</sup> A. G. Morton, *History of Botanical Science. An account of the development of botany from ancient times to the present day*, San Diego: Academic Press Inc., 1981, 123.

<sup>57</sup> A. G. Morton, *Cit.*, 123.

<sup>58</sup> A. G. Morton, *Cit.*, 123.

<sup>59</sup> “Indeed, as Simon Shama amongst others has argued, in order properly to be understood, even the initiation of Columbus’ quest has to be seen as an earnest philosophical investigation – a mystical, neo-platonic search for an ideal.” Simon Shama “Full circle”, in *Guardian Weekly*, 23 February 1992, quoted by Ken Arnold, *Cabinets for the curious. Looking back at early English museums*, England: Ashgate; USA Burlington, 2006, 109.

<sup>60</sup> See Henrique Leitão, *360° Ciência Descoberta* / Coord. Ed. Henrique Leitão; Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian, Exhibition Catalogue, Lisboa, 2013, 28.

<sup>61</sup> See Henrique Leitão, *360° Ciência Descoberta*, *Cit.*, 28.

<sup>62</sup> K. Arnold, *Cabinets for the curious. Looking back at early English museums*, *Cit.*, 109.

of botanical gardens and zoological collections expressed a new curiosity about exotic plants and animals.<sup>63</sup>

In his “Receipts for preserving and improving collections of Natural Histories” the philosopher William Charleton at the end of the 17th century, “described, for example, methods for conserving eggs with saffron, preserving insects with wax and turpentine, taking impressions of plants on paper, and varnishing shells,”<sup>64</sup> revealing the heterogeneity of interests not as an isolated case but as a spread practice among collectors and curators in art and science during that period. The enthusiasm for the collection and preservation of all these wonders became popular in Europe and promoted the development of cabinets of curiosities and, at the same time, of botanical gardens, thus guaranteeing provisions of plants for scientific investigations in laboratories. The reasons were twofold: firstly, for investigation and, secondly, as a status symbol since collectors were members of the wealthier classes and the aristocracy. As Arnold highlighted

The demand for these designated sites of material investigation came in the form of practical, intellectual and even political pressures. In the first place, both gardens and laboratories clearly fulfilled practical requirements. In order that herbs might provide a lasting usefulness they needed to be planted and nurtured. And if they could be cultivated at home, the great expense and trouble of importing them would vanish. The influx of new plants also had to be given some sort of order. The garden met all these needs.<sup>65</sup>

We can affirm that in these places for the first time, the analysis, the naming of things, their study and observation are brought together with the objects being present, not merely represented. In this sense particularly significant appear the description provided by Foucault of these places affecting the way of observing objects and the relations among the same objects.

With seeing what, in the rather confused wealth of representation, can be analysed, recognized by all, and thus given a name that everyone will be able to understand: “All obscure similitudes,” said Linnaeus, “are introduced only

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<sup>63</sup> M. Foucault, *The Order of Things*, Cit., 142-143.

<sup>64</sup> K. Arnold, *Cabinets for the curious. Looking back at early English museums*, Cit., 141.

<sup>65</sup> K. Arnold, *Cabinets for the curious. Looking back at early English museums*, Cit., 139-140.

to the shame of art.” Displayed in themselves, emptied of all resemblances, cleansed even of their colours, visual representations will now at last be able to provide natural history with what constitutes its proper object, with precisely what it will convey in the well-made language it intends to construct. This object is the extension of which all natural beings are constituted—an extension that may be affected by four variables. And by four variables only: the form of the elements, the quantity of those elements, the manner in which they are distributed in space in relation to each other, and the relative magnitude of each element. As Linnaeus said, in a passage of capital importance, “every note should be a product of number, of form, of proportion, of situation.”<sup>66</sup>

By the end of the 18th and the beginning of the 19th centuries, the image of the scholar as a *bricoleur*,<sup>67</sup> joining scientific and artistic knowledge, experienced a gradual decline. As Lugli explained, this image appeared again after the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in the personalities of some artists who started to paint, not just the objects, but with the objects.<sup>68</sup> The progressive *dissociation* within the culture of curiosities and its marginalization in the 19<sup>th</sup> century had a multiplicity of reasons behind it so that, as Patrick Mauriès recommended, we should not oversimplify.<sup>69</sup> It appeared to be an imperfect science compared with the rise of scientific inquiry based on observation and new methodologies. At the same time, the popular imagination started to change, and “the fascination with what was secret, the magic or esoteric practices associated with the cabinets of curiosities” became “positively undesirable or socially unacceptable”, and thought about “as mere entertainment or naïve illusion.”<sup>70</sup>

After the revolutions of 1848, the interest in “curiosities” was viewed as a symptom of ignorance and superstition, able to fascinate the societal groups considered as the “most vulnerable”: “women, the very young, the very old, primitive people, and the uneducated masses, a motley group collectively designated as the vulgar.”<sup>71</sup> The disintegration of the cabinet of curiosities, considered as impure spaces, injecting confusion between *naturalia* and *artificialia* was relocated when the museums of natural history and art galleries arose in order to host them separately.

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<sup>66</sup> M. Foucault, *The Order of Things*, Cit., 146.

<sup>67</sup> See A. Lugli, *Wunderkammer. Le Stanze delle Meraviglie*, Torino: Allemandi, 1997, 18.

<sup>68</sup> A. Lugli, *Cit.*, 23.

<sup>69</sup> Patrick Mauriès, *Cabinets of Curiosities*, London: Thames and Hudson, 2002, 193.

<sup>70</sup> P. Mauriès, *Cit.*, 193.

<sup>71</sup> P. Mauriès, *Cit.*, 193.

The first step was to abandon the confusion of *naturalia* and *artificialia*, and to separate works of art from works of science; the next was to draw a distinction within the category of works of art between major and minor works, and between fine and decorative art”, with the objective “to vanish the very *syntax* of the cabinet.<sup>72</sup>

And what happened next directly deals with some of the artistic practices of the 20<sup>th</sup> century explored over the next chapters, in fact, as Mauriès declared,

there emerged the topography of art with which we are now familiar, as well as a new nomenclature and bounds of taste which were to remain unquestioned for the two following centuries (a fact that was self-evidently one of the reasons behind the resurgence of the older concept, as we shall see, in contemporary art).<sup>73</sup>

Botanical gardens and natural history collections are assumed for this research as a sort of precedents of the organic materiality in the artistic practices of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (as analysed in chapter 1), not only in visual and material terms, but also for the same meaning of the term organic. In other words, we may affirm that the separation between *naturalia* and *artificialia* occurred when the term *organic* besides being considered as a common characteristic between living entities significantly started to be associated to one branch of chemistry, a process that coincided with the moment in which medicine, “replaced” botany directing the resolution of therapies to chemistry in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and especially in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, through the discovery of the synthesis of urea by German chemist Wohler in 1828. From that moment on, organic chemistry lost its characteristic of the chemistry of vital phenomena, and became just the chemistry of carbon compounds, which are mostly derived from petrol and generally not mixable with water.

In this area stands the object of this research. The study of organic materiality as a visible neither functional nor structural element provides us the possibility of configuring certain heterogeneity within artistic practices. We propose to investigate, not with a “microscope” from the biggest to the smallest element, but in perspective,

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<sup>72</sup> P. Mauriès, *Cit.*, 194.

<sup>73</sup> P. Mauriès, *Cit.*, 196.

from the individual artwork to the artistic practices as a “corpus” in its entirety. Therefore, the organic materiality in the artistic practices is presented here in its literal meaning, in other words, as a witness to its materialisation, which began at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It testifies to the dignity it acquires from its representation within the range of canonical languages of arts, to the presentation of itself. The choice of devoting a research project to this field of inquiry at a time in which digital media are parts of our daily life and video has become a common practice within the arts could seem (and the risk is assumed), as George Kubler said in relation to the lack of attention to form, “unfashionable.”<sup>74</sup>

As the art historian Didi-Huberman remarkably pointed out, from the time of Vasari onwards, the author was conceived as the one who developed an idea, signed with the name of the one who gave it its birth, for a Vasarian derivation then, the idea is something that rebuilt reality by means of invention. The priority of the expression of the idea and the inversely proportional disinterest in matter determined for Vasari the distinction between *arti liberali* and *arti meccaniche*. The first were owners of authenticity, uniqueness, aesthetic value, the second were rejected by the Vasarian humanism in the field of series and multiplication, lacking any aesthetic principle.<sup>75</sup> In his study of the history of the imprint, Didi-Huberman put at the core of his research a subject neglected, or ignored by art history. He declared that for the imprint to exist it does not need to be shaped in the artist’s mind. It does not come along with the *idea*, neither does the *disegno*, nor the *invenzione*; those magic words of the Vasarian aesthetic.<sup>76</sup>

By the same token, the non-processed organic materiality of plants and animals is here considered in the 20th century art. Despite not being the result of a human idea or invention, it reveals human intentions in the artistic creation itself. Its visible and evident integration in the artwork within the artificial space, such as the

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<sup>74</sup> “The other definition of art as form remains unfashionable, although every thinking person will accept it as a truism that no meaning can be conveyed without form. Every meaning requires a support, or a vehicle, or a holder. These are bearers of meaning, and without them no meaning would cross from me to you, or from you to me, or indeed from any part of nature to any other part.” George Kubler, *The Shape of Time. Remarks on the history of things*, Yale University, USA, 1962, vii.

<sup>75</sup> See Georges Didi-Huberman, *La ressemblance par contact. Archéologie, anachronisme et modernité de l’empreinte*, Éditions de Minuit, Paris, 2008, 22-23.

<sup>76</sup> “Pour exister [l’empreinte] elle n’a nul besoin de se ‘former’ dans l’esprit de l’artiste. Elle ne procède donc, à strictement parler, ni de l’*idea*, ni du *disegno*, ni de l’*invenzione*, ces ‘mots magiques’ de l’esthétique vasarienne.” G. Didi-Huberman, *La ressemblance par contact. Archéologie, anachronisme et modernité de l’empreinte*, Cit., 121.

exhibition space of the museum or the art gallery, or the urban public space (as in a few outdoor cases analysed) is spatial and temporal, and at the same time can involve other sensorial experiences together with sight, such as smell and in some cases touch. Without leaving its natural essence and feature, the organic materiality as part of an artwork, also become artificial, blurring the binary oppositions towards heterogeneities and hybrids solutions that merge into something new, as we aim to understand at the end of this work.

#### **4. Structure, perspective and methodology: the organic as metaphor**

Since the idea of developing this research was suggested by some artworks released in the 1960s, at a primal stage this work would cover the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, creating a sort of dialogue between the notion of organic and thematic issues involving the artworks selected. Nevertheless, as soon as the research started to develop, and in the attempt of understanding “what this organic is” and by what means it is intertwined with the artistic practices of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, going backwards to the first half appeared as a necessity. Moreover, this choice inevitably obliged me to open a path even to previous connections with natural history before the century dealt with in the chapters, and for this reason it is presented in the third section of this introduction. Therefore, although focused on matter and materiality and on thematic aspects related to the organic, I realised that chronology could not be escaped, but eventually it was revealed to be a useful tool. In fact, as soon as the research progressed, the cycle of life of organic materiality became not only the object of research but also the method to study 20<sup>th</sup> century art from the point of view selected for this work, whose division in five chapters reflects this “organic method.”

Chapter one, focused on the first three decades of the century, can be identified as a sort of birth and infancy of the organic materiality in the artistic practices through the first experimentations in the realm of collage, assemblages and found objects, followed by a subsequent playful and irreverent youth, fascinated by the past and recovering it in provocative, and sometimes non-sensical ways, with the Surrealist object. There must be underlined, in this chapter, the dimension of wonder

produced by the rediscovery of cabinets of curiosities—as Adalgisa Lugli noted—and the notions of “montage” and “disorder”, the way Didi-Huberman examined them.

Chapter two, could be considered a later stage of youth, in which a broader vision and perspective on the world one lives in (the disasters of the Second World War, the Holocaust) corresponds—regarding the use of plants and animals in the art field—to a taking of position in art, which also meant, at that time, opposition to established codes and an expansion towards other material possibilities. From a theoretical point of view, Gaston Bachelard’s reflections resulted particularly relevant. It is considered his concept of action, whose necessary condition is freedom, and of temporal void in which this action is inscribed, and that—being an adhesion of mind and body—cannot exclude matter, and therefore an idea of materialism.

Chapter three is situated in the middle of the five and is also crucial, bridging the previous decades to the following ones under the analysis of artistic practices such as the Happening, in which the inseparable connection between art and life is made explicit, declared and manifested. It is assumed the experimental character proposed for this chapter proposing a connection between art and life not under existentialist or phenomenological propositions—far from any attempt to negate them—to the organic, which brings within itself the concept of life. It is rather suggested to analyze the concept of art and life, connecting them with the philosophy of Vitalism and philosophical anthropology. The latter, being the discipline with most in-depth analysis on the concept of the organic from a philosophical point of view, whether just mentioned or presented in more details, is always present over the entire thesis.

Chapter four, covering the historical period between the 1960s and the 1970s, is the most extended compared to the others, and corresponds to adult life, hypothetically the most productive, pro-active, and projected to the external world and to the achievement of personal and professional goals in life. During those decades the organic materiality participated in the elaboration of numerous artistic experiences, such as Land Art, Arte Povera, Performance Art, Environmental Art, artistic practices that were also social and political actions involved in a context of global dimensions. It is important to underscore that the large space dedicated in the first part of this chapter to contextualization in science and technology on the one hand, and in social movements on the other hand, aims to demonstrate that purpose of this work also was that of framing the topic of this research in relation with cultural



and social symptoms, which determined or accompanied the artistic practices presented.

The fifth and last chapter, apparently corresponding to a more mature phase, is focused on the last two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, characterized by a renewed interest in painting, and subsequently a renewed and more concerned commitment on environmental issues. The dream of rejuvenation promised by the most sophisticated technology involves the organic materiality, challenged and overcome by cyborgs, cloning and bio-art, to eventually encounter its pixelated de-materialization through the language of digital media. Nevertheless, organic materiality does not disappear. Following the theories of Helmuth Plessner—pivotal exponent in philosophical anthropology and main reference for this research—organic materiality does not traverse a linear path, from beginning to end; nor a circular one, in which end and beginning coincide in a suspended temporality. It rather describes a spiral curve in which, although grounded in the paradox of anachronism—in the sense addressed by Didi-Huberman and presented in the previous pages of this introduction—the considered as initial and final extremes in this research do not touch each other. In other words, they follow a kind of entropic law because of which what have happened caused irreversible changes.

The analysis on organic materiality in the artistic practices of the 20<sup>th</sup> century attempts do rethink the concept that is subject of this work and that ends for assuming other facets, dealing more and more with technology, and expanding its own meaning. Actually, the works of some of the artists presented demonstrate a constant process of re-signification of the term, changing or enlarging its meaning, and therefore continuing to be a non static concept, and effectively faithful to the meaning it brings, though lively, organic. This margin of divergence, or alternately, of not total adherence between an investigation on the organic element from a theoretical point of view, and an examination of artistic practices convoquing it in its materiality, aims to interrogate not only its meaning, but also what it does and how it works as cultural practice somehow by asking the organic materiality itself.

In other words, the question on the levels of the organic and the human is developed by interrogating the same organic into artworks, not represented but presented, materialised. This purpose is also informed of some of the most recent

investigations in Animal Studies, on the one hand, and the “Politics of Vegetation”<sup>77</sup> (as Philippe Zourgane put it) on the other. The first, from Derrida’s *The Animal That Therefore I Am* (1997) began to put on the agenda of thinking what the same thinking is confronting the human and the non-human animal,<sup>78</sup> while at the same time an interest in the animal in art theory and art history appeared, for instance, Giovanni Aloï’s book *Art & Animals* (2012) and the launch of his *Antennae Journal* in 2007, focused on nature in visual culture. The second one confronts the apparent “neutrality” of vegetation as a vehicle of transmission of knowledge, relations of power, and recovery of marginalized people and histories, about which a remarkable one is the case represented by a series of actions of planting seeds carried out from 2001 in several cities by the Brazilian Maria Thereza Alves, whose latest intervention in March 2015 was presented in Dubai.

Another aspect regarding the methodology involves the organic assumed as a central concept to envision this work also for its most immediate sense: every element is considered organic, contributing to make the entire structure function. Therefore, it corresponds to the artwork considered as a unity, among other unities of artworks, whose ultimate meaning contributes to the maintenance of the entire organism: the 20<sup>th</sup> century art observed under the main scope of the organic materiality. “No man is an island entire of itself,” the poet John Donne once said—and this organism, as we put it, is not isolated, but interacts with other organisms. As the French thinker Judith Schlanger declared

First individuality: the organism is the same name of the living being’s individuality. [...] But the notion of organism is not merely a biological concept, it is generalized in a logic, and the representations it conveys provide the imaginative key of two other problems, strictly linked one another: generalized, the idea of organism permits of conceiving at a time the consistency of the human plan of phenomena, and its integration in the totality of the universe. [...] On the other hand, the human level is globally perceived according to the categories of the organism, it is not dissipated in the bundle of levels, which really or intellectually surround it [...]. An organism moves in a world of organisms; this notion is pluralist, by the same virtue, it must be said, of its intuitive essence: the organism’s universe is governed by harmonic

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<sup>77</sup> See Philippe Zourgane, “The politics of Vegetation”, *All-Over*, Wien/Basel, 24 April 2015, 26-33 and P. Zourgane, “Quand la nature construit les corps: la Naissance du Corp Moderne”, in AA VV, *Le politiques de la vegetation*, Paris: Eterotopia, (forthcoming) 2015.

<sup>78</sup> See Kari Weil, *Thinking Animals. Why Animal Studies Now?*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2012, xv.

relationships. Therefore, the organic nature of the human collectivity is situated at a time related with the individual and related with the universe in relationships homogenous and complex. The relationships are not of belonging, size, simple inclusion, but rather of image, correspondence and analogy. Among these different orders of reality, all relationships signify.<sup>79</sup>

In this sense, this work inscribed in the discipline of art history constantly interacts with other fields of research, such as philosophy, history of science, history, sociology and anthropology, without excluding, at some points, literature and music as resources for fresh insights regarding the analysis of specific aspects. We may, therefore, envision the analysis on organic materiality in post-structural terms. In other words, if post-structuralism considered the binary opposition as one term prevailing on the other, we may also affirm that in art history the significance has always powered its predominance upon the significant; the content versus its expression. Consequently, this research on organic materiality in the 20<sup>th</sup> century art assumes and absorbs the encounter of the polarities and dichotomies approached by the New Materialism (and mentioned in the first section) to cross a transversal path in art history as a way to offer another possible perspective to read the world we live in.

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<sup>79</sup> “D’abord l’individualité: l’organisme est le nom même de l’individualité du vivant. [...] Mais la notion d’organisme n’est pas un concept purement biologique, elle se généralise en une logique, et les représentations qu’elle permet alors fournissent la clef imaginative de deux autres problèmes, étroitement liés entre eux: généralisée, l’idée de l’organisme permet de concevoir à la fois la consistance du plan humaine des phénomènes, et son intégration dans la totalité de l’univers. [...] D’autre part, le niveau humain, s’il est perçu globalement selon les catégories de l’organisme, ne se dissipe pas dans l’ensemble des niveaux qui réellement ou intellectuellement l’environnent [...]. Un organisme se meut dans un monde d’organismes; cette notion est pluraliste, en vertu même, faudrait-il dire, de son essence intuitive; l’univers de l’organisme est régi par des relations harmonique. De sorte que l’organicité du niveau de la collectivité humaine se trouve placée à la fois par rapport à l’individu et par rapport a l’univers dans des relations homogènes et complexes. Les rapports ne sont pas d’appartenance, de grandeur, d’inclusion simple, mais d’image, de correspondance et d’analogie. Entre ces divers orders de réalité, toutes le relations signifient.” Judith Schlanger, *Les métaphores de l’organisme*, Paris: L’Harmattan, 1995, 42.



## The first uses of organic materiality in the 20<sup>th</sup> century art

### 1.1 Beyond still life, painting and sculpture

In 1912, in his essay “On the Subject in Modern Painting” (published in the artistic and literary journal *Les Soirées de Paris*), Guillaume Apollinaire noted that, at the time, “painters sometimes still condescend to use vaguely explanatory words such as *portrait*, *landscape*, or *still life*; but many young painters simply employ the general term *painting*.”<sup>1</sup> He observed that painters were no longer imitating nature, and that “today’s art is austere.” Specifically, the paintings Apollinaire was referring to were Cubist, and he was especially interested in Picasso’s painting experimentation and its disengagement from tradition. Some years later (1923), Picasso affirmed that “Cubism is not different from any other school of painting,” defending the idea that “from the point of view of art there are not concrete or abstract forms, but only forms that are more or less convincing lies.”<sup>2</sup>

In the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, visual arts were moving away from strict representation of the real world, having followed a tradition of, according to art historian Carl Einstein,<sup>3</sup> an “imitative insanity.”<sup>4</sup> Merging the frontiers between painting and sculpture and moving from realistic representation towards abstraction, the “individualistic and contemplative” French cubism and the “social, political and

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<sup>1</sup> Guillaume Apollinaire (1880-1918) “On the Subject in Modern Painting,” *Les Soirées de Paris*, February 1912. Reprinted in C. Harrison and P. Woods (eds.) *Art in Theory 1900-2000 – An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, Oxford/Cambridge: Blackwell Publishers, 2003, 186-187: 186.

<sup>2</sup> See “Picasso speaks,” interview with Marius de Zayas, *The Arts*, New York, May, 1923, reprinted in C. Harrison and P. Woods (eds.) *Art in Theory*, Cit., 215-217.

<sup>3</sup> Author, inter alia, of the books *Negerplastik* (1915) and *Africanische Plastik* (1921). Studies where, for the first time, art history was approached in reading artistic production from Africa.

<sup>4</sup> The notion of making a pure replica of that kind is, at least from an artistic viewpoint, absurd. In a book on twentieth-century art, the critic Carl Einstein even spoke in this regard of “imitative insanity,” Maly and Dietfried Gerhardus, *Cubism and Futurism. The evolution of the self-sufficient picture*, Phaidon, Oxford, 1979, 9.

aggressive” Italian futurism, in the words of Pontus Hulten, “both revolted against the old static manner of perception.”<sup>5</sup> For this reason, both styles were considered to be part of the first *Avant-Gardes*, a term referencing the military expression for soldiers positioned in the front line.

*Avant-Gardes*’ first association with the arts appeared in the text *Opinions littéraires, philosophiques et industrielles*, authored by the French socialist philosopher Henry de Saint-Simon (1760-1825). He conceptualized the notion of *Avant-Gardes* as a dialogue between an artist, a *savant* – a kind of technocrat intellectual – and an industrialist, who, by working together, could achieve social progress and build a new society, one that stood against an aristocratic elite.<sup>6</sup> Saint-Simon’s concept of *Avant-Gardes* in the realm of the artistic at the beginning of the 20th century designated the rejection of tradition, in accordance with the increasingly frenetic rhythm of daily life and industry.

The transition towards an unspecified genre in painting as previously mentioned, at the end of the century, was examined by Margit Rowell, who highlighted connections, or rather a progression, from still life to *Avant-gardes*. In 1992, when the exhibition *Picasso et les choses* was showed at Grand-Palais in Paris, she wrote a piece for *Art Press* entitled, “Histoire d’un genre: quelques réflexions sur la nature morte au 20e siècle” (“History of a genre: some reflections about still life at the 20<sup>th</sup> century”),<sup>7</sup> recognizing how, in spite of landscape and portrait paintings, this genre best “translates the changing vision of the world.”<sup>8</sup>

Existing in Western culture at least since Antiquity, according to Rowell, the generally accepted definition of still life—“*Objets ou êtres inanimés faisant le sujet essentiel d’un tableau; genre de peinture qui s’attache à les représenter*” (objects or

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<sup>5</sup> “Within the cultural milieu of 1910, Cubism was an elitist affair, fully accessible intellectually to only a small number of people. But the world was waking up to a new age, the industrial and technological age, and this awakening affected even peripheral and less educated areas. Futurism had no less influence than Cubism but its tactics and theories were different. Cubism was individualistic and contemplative, Futurism was social, political and aggressive. One of the elements that Cubism and Futurism had in common was an interest in movement, a fascination with the dynamics of existence; they both revolted against the old static manner of perception.” Pontus Hulten, “Futurist Prophecies”, in *Futurismo e Futurismi*, organized by Pontus Hulten, exhibition catalogue, Palazzo Grassi, Venezia, 3 Maggio – 12 Ottobre 1986, Milano: Bompiani, 1986, 15.

<sup>6</sup> See “The Challenge of the Avant-Garde,” Paul Wood, Ed., Yale University Press, 1999, in *Art and its Histories: A reader*, Edited by Steve Edwards, Yale University Press, 1999, [PW/SE], 188.

<sup>7</sup> Margit Rowell, “Histoire d’un genre: quelques réflexions sur la nature morte au 20e siècle”, *Art Press*, n°173, Paris, 1992, 24-28.

<sup>8</sup> M. Rowell, “Histoire d’un genre: quelques réflexions sur la nature morte au 20e siècle”, *Cit.*, 24.

inanimate beings featuring an essential painting subject; a painting genre endeavouring to represent them)—requires a further explanation.<sup>9</sup> In its own tradition, still life is a subject whose substance comes from domestic life. Most, and the most important, of the objects represented belonged to nature and were alive, like animals and vegetables, before having been posed in a still life setting. What characterizes and represents its singularity, Rowell underlined, is essentially the absence of a human subject.<sup>10</sup> It is not just a subject, but also a way of seeing (“elle est aussi un regard”), where the presence of the objects, their position and presentation, are never coincidence, reflecting an artist’s will and sensibility, a specific cultural context or “*une signification extra-picturale*” (an extra-pictorial meaning).<sup>11</sup> A bearer of metaphorical meanings, through its purposeful composition, “still life presents a vision of the world.”<sup>12</sup>

Still life is a representation, at last. Since, after conceiving his (real or imaginary) subject, the artist transposes it in plastic terms, he represents it. [...] Compared to portrait, to historical or religious painting, still life, allows, thus, a bigger freedom for invention, because the artist creates the subject that afterwards he represents.<sup>13</sup>

Compared to the other genres of painting, still life has always been considered inferior. Relegated to a private and domestic sphere, its value was derived from the artist’s technical ability, whether acting as *xenia* in Ancient Greece; as *vanitas* in the 16<sup>th</sup> century; as an image of opulence in the 17<sup>th</sup> century Netherlands; or as the will of a client to impose some religious, social, economic or political codes. In any of these cases, although still life painting codes served the extra-pictorial meaning, “the artist

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<sup>9</sup> See M. Rowell, “Histoire d’un genre: quelques réflexions sur la nature morte au 20e siècle”, *Cit.*, 24.

<sup>10</sup> See M. Rowell, “Histoire d’un genre: quelques réflexions sur la nature morte au 20e siècle”, *Cit.*, 24.

<sup>11</sup> See M. Rowell, “Histoire d’un genre: quelques réflexions sur la nature morte au 20e siècle”, *Cit.*, 24.

<sup>12</sup> See M. Rowell, “Histoire d’un genre: quelques réflexions sur la nature morte au 20e siècle”, *Cit.*, 24.

<sup>13</sup> “Enfin, la nature morte est une représentation. Car après avoir conçu son sujet (réel ou imaginaire), l’artiste le transpose en termes plastiques, il le représente. [...] Par rapport au portrait, à la peinture d’histoire ou religieuse, la nature morte permet donc une plus grande liberté d’invention, car l’artiste est le créateur du sujet qu’ensuite il représente.” M. Rowell, “Histoire d’un genre: quelques réflexions sur la nature morte au 20e siècle”, *Cit.*, 24-25.

could keep much freedom.”<sup>14</sup> So, if still life along its tradition had represented a kind of “portrait in code” of the client, the decreasing dependence on clients in the 20<sup>th</sup> century played a fundamental role, and still life became more of “a self-portrait of the artist, of his things and his research.”<sup>15</sup>

Within this context, Rowell underlined how, although at the time it was already common for an artist to work in more than one genre, it was not by chance that Picasso, Braque and Gris, when starting their practice of *papiers découpés* (paper cutting), their preferred subject was still life.<sup>16</sup> Their work included such everyday and ordinary objects as pieces of journals, tobacco packs, glasses, bottles and other symbols of modern life: “they incited a renewal in vocabulary as it related to a society more and more industrialized, distancing itself from nature.”<sup>17</sup> Duchamp’s “ready-mades” (1913, *Bicycle Wheel*, a “rectified readymade” [a term that he coined]; 1914, *Bottle Rack*), everyday objects, displayed unpretentiously and without any significant alteration, questioned the very notion of art as a unique and precious object, and of the artist as creator and inventor of an original idea. With Duchamp’s challenges, according to the homonymous essay by Thomas McEvelley, began the so-called “Age of Doubt.” McEvelley stated, in fact, that

The first absolutely clear sighting of doubt in art history—the first moment it raised its head as from a trench of World War I—is in the works of Duchamp. In their small, perverse, and anti-pretentious way, the Ready-mades—everyday objects exhibited without significant alteration—functioned as a clarion call to doubt.<sup>18</sup>

If ready-made corresponds to the same formal criteria of still life (inanimate subject)—as Rowell remarked—it presents a fundamental difference. “It is not the

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<sup>14</sup> M. Rowell, “Histoire d’un genre: quelques réflexions sur la nature morte au 20e siècle”, *Cit.*, 25.

<sup>15</sup> M. Rowell, “Histoire d’un genre: quelques réflexions sur la nature morte au 20e siècle”, *Cit.*, 25.

<sup>16</sup> M. Rowell, “Histoire d’un genre: quelques réflexions sur la nature morte au 20e siècle”, *Cit.*, 26.

<sup>17</sup> “[I]ls incitent au renouvellement du vocabulaire par rapport à une société de plus en plus industrialisée, qui s’éloigne de la nature.” M. Rowell, “Histoire d’un genre: quelques réflexions sur la nature morte au 20e siècle”, 26.

<sup>18</sup> Thomas McEvelley, *Sculpture in the Age of Doubt*, New York: Allworth Press, 7 School of Visual Arts, 1999, 29-30.



*representation of a chosen object but its presentation.*”<sup>19</sup>

As for sculpture, Margit Rowell described some years earlier (1986) that sculpture gained autonomy in relation to statue making, that modern sculpture “renounced to representation whether of humble or illustrious characters for the struggle of presenting abstract ideas, or an internal vision in concrete form.”<sup>20</sup> In order to delete or somehow forget tradition, far from an idea of progress determined by evolution or accumulation, two possible ways were offered. One, founded on a system of transversal or transcultural references, focused on the present or an imaginary future. The other, abandoning the linear flow of history, referred to non-temporal forms of popular culture, primitive or archaic, or to a mythic substrate specific to some nature-based philosophies, therefore inscribing the act of creation within a circular system. The two approaches referred, according to Rowell, to the anthropological bipolarity of nature/culture and the chronological parameters relating to the opposites immediate/eternal.<sup>21</sup> Both were faced with material and technical choices, far from following preconceived ideas, using malleable and aleatory materials able to transmit and create fluctuant and movable forms.<sup>22</sup>

In this departure from tradition, art left the realm of mimetic representation of natural and artificial objects, instead incorporating them in their materiality within the artistic creation. Having accepted this premise, we might say that the first time organic materiality appeared in a still life, as conceived by its author, it was through its negation. In 1914, in fact, the Italian artist Alberto Magnelli presented *Still Life*, composed of plaster, glass bottle and terracotta.<sup>23</sup> The objects *presented*, rather than represented, were parts of a sculptural composition whose longevity was based on the absence of ephemeral, organic elements such as fruit or leaves. Nonetheless, the linear forms of these objects might remind us of such elements as vegetables or animals that were alive before becoming part of a still life representation.

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<sup>19</sup> T. McEvelley, *Sculpture in the Age of Doubt*, Cit., 26-27.

<sup>20</sup> “Le sculpteur moderne a renoncé à représenter des personnages humbles ou illustres pour s’efforcer de présenter des idées abstraites ou une vision intérieure sous une forme concrète.” M. Rowell, “Avant-propos”, *Qu’est-ce-que la sculpture moderne?*, Exhibition catalogue, Paris, Centre Georges Pompidou, Musée national d’art moderne, 1986, 12.

<sup>21</sup> See M. Rowell, “Avant-propos”, *Cit.*, 12.

<sup>22</sup> See M. Rowell, “Avant-propos”, *Cit.*, 13.

<sup>23</sup> Alberto Magnelli, *Still Life (Natura morta)*, 1914, plaster, glass bottle, terracotta bowl, 56.5x54x56.5, Paris, Musée National d’art moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, in Pontus Hulten and Germano Celant, *Italian Art 1900-1945*, Rizzoli, New York, 1989, 346.

Organic elements were not materialized in that work, but the title referred to them and might even help us imagine where to position them in Alberto Magnelli's composition. His *Still Life* serves as a useful example of organic materiality in art as the result of a transition from still life and ready-made. We can also affirm that at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century organic materiality in artistic practices was a result of transcending the three genres of painting (landscape, portrait, still life); the boundaries between painting and sculpture; the impossibility of representing something; and the progressive dematerialization of the artwork, not as the disappearance of matter but, on the contrary, an *emphasis* on matter permitted by experimentation, with materials once considered "impure," or apparently not willing to exalt the artist's qualities.

## 1.2 During the *Avant-Gardes*

A remarkable year at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was 1906. It was the year of Cezanne's death, and also the year when Picasso, through his association with Derain and Matisse, came to be influenced by African sculpture. That same year, Picasso drew sketches of his *Damoiselles d'Avignon* (1907), a paradigmatic example of the impossibility of representation in cubist painting. Picasso broke apart the unity of the image, defragmenting the subject from multiple points of view.<sup>24</sup>

Cubism and Futurism were some of the first artistic movements internal to Historical *Avant-Gardes*. One of the first technical innovations within the *Avant-Gardes* was collage: a plane surface composed of heterogeneous and non-traditional materials mounted in a representational space, growing increasingly illusionistic.<sup>25</sup> In the realm of the cubist environment, Picasso and Braque in 1912 practised collage, for instance in that year Picasso created his first sculpture, *Guitar*. Through the use of ordinary material and by suggesting parts of the object that weren't there, Rosalind Krauss explained that "Picasso found that sculptural signs did not have to be substantial. Empty space could easily be transformed into a differential mark, and as

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<sup>24</sup> Philippe Piguet "Art, Théâtre, Musique, Cinéma, Littérature," *Les Années 10* d'Anne Bony, Paris: Éditions du Regard, 1991, 79.

<sup>25</sup> See Francesca Gallo, "Tecniche e materiali nuovi nelle avanguardie artistiche," in (a cura di) S. Bordini, *Arte Contemporanea e Tecniche*, Roma: Carocci, 2010 (2007), 15-36: 15.

such combined with all kinds of other signs: no longer fear space, Picasso told his fellow sculptors, shape it.”<sup>26</sup>

Rosalind Krauss recalled the Saussurean linguistic approach that Pierre Daix—expanding “the somewhat limited art-historical vocabulary for describing what transpires with the advent of collage”<sup>27</sup>—used for interpreting Picasso’s collages in his 1979 *catalogue raisonné, Picasso: 1907-1916*. She affirmed, in fact, “[a]gain and again Daix hammers away at the lesson that cubist collage exchanges the natural visual world of things for the artificial, codified language of signs.”<sup>28</sup> Krauss observed that “it is extremely easy to convert the issue of the collage-sign into a question of semantics,” although Daix’s exposition was not based on “a rigorous presentation of the concept of the sign.”<sup>29</sup> She therefore concluded, “we must bear in mind the two absolute conditions posited by Saussure for the functioning of the linguistic sign.”<sup>30</sup>

The first condition refers to the “relationship between signifier and signified in which the signifier is a material constituent and the signified an immaterial idea or concept”, whose absence is necessary as “the very condition of the representability of the sign.”<sup>31</sup> Therefore, she asserted, “[t]he extraordinary contribution of collage is that it is the first instance of the pictorial art as a systematic exploration of the conditions of representability entailed by the sign.”<sup>32</sup> The second Saussurean condition concentrates on difference, rather than on absence, stating, “in language there are only differences.”<sup>33</sup> Krauss also notes that Saussure’s statement “in language there are only differences *without positive terms*,”<sup>34</sup> since the choice from a set of possibilities is always determined by terms which have not been chosen. Applied to collage, this statement reveals, by absence and difference, the richness of functions of single elements composing it.

Finally, applying Saussure’s linguistics to collage, Krauss provided a

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<sup>26</sup> See H. Foster, R. Krauss, Y. Bois, B. H. D. Buchloch, *Art since 1900, Modernism antimodernism Postmodernism*, London: Thames and Hudson, 2004, 38.

<sup>27</sup> R. Krauss, “In the name of Picasso”, *October* n°16 (Spring 1981), in R. Krauss, *The Originality of Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1986, 32.

<sup>28</sup> R. Krauss, “In the name of Picasso”, *Cit.*, 32.

<sup>29</sup> R. Krauss, “In the name of Picasso”, *Cit.*, 32.

<sup>30</sup> R. Krauss, “In the name of Picasso”, *Cit.*, 32-33.

<sup>31</sup> R. Krauss, “In the name of Picasso”, *Cit.*, 33.

<sup>32</sup> R. Krauss, “In the name of Picasso”, *Cit.*, 34.

<sup>33</sup> R. Krauss, “In the name of Picasso”, *Cit.*, 35.

<sup>34</sup> R. Krauss, “In the name of Picasso”, *Cit.*, 35.

definition of “collage” which indicates the transition from representation as image to presentation of organic materiality in the artistic practices of the 20<sup>th</sup> century:

The collage element as a discrete plane is a bounded figure; but as such it is a figure of a bounded field—a figure of the very bounded field which it enters the ensemble only to obscure. The field is thus constituted inside itself as a figure of its own absence, an index of a material presence now rendered literally invisible. The collage element performs the occultation of one field in order to introject the figure of a new field, but to introject it *as* figure – a surface that is the image of eradicated surface. It is this eradication of the original surface and the reconstitution of it through the figure of its own absence that is the master term of the entire condition of collage as a system of signifiers.<sup>35</sup>

The development of collage achieved its widest proportions in *Merzbau*, carried out by Kurt Schwitters in his studio in Hannover between 1923 and 1937 (and destroyed in 1943). Started as a single column, *Merzbau* grew to a massive accumulation and collection of various objects, paper and many other apparently useless elements, even inhabited by mice. As Diane Waldman said, “[i]t is in his *Merzbau* that Schwitters fulfilled his wish to devote himself to junk; from it, he fashioned an assemblage that bridged the gap between art and life.”<sup>36</sup>

As for Futurism, on January 20, 1909, the French newspaper *Le Figaro* published the *Manifeste do Futurisme* by the Italian founder Filippo Tommaso Marinetti. During the six years following 1909, futurists expressed their statements showing faith in the new, and enthusiasm for modernism, the machine, and science. In contrast with the cult of the past, they created a non-academic language in painting.<sup>37</sup> They rapidly and simultaneously expanded towards multiple levels of communications and various manifestos were published: Technical Manifesto of Futurist Painting (signed by Boccioni, Carrà, Russolo, Balla, Severini, 1910); Manifesto of Futurist Sculpture (signed by Boccioni, 1912); Manifesto of the Painting of Sounds, Noises and Smells (signed by Carrà, 1913); Boccioni-authored volume

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<sup>35</sup> R. Krauss, “In the name of Picasso”, *Cit.*, 37.

<sup>36</sup> Diane Waldman, *Collage, Assemblage, and the Found Object*, New York: H. N. Abrams, 1992, 121.

<sup>37</sup> See *Italian Art 1900-1945*, organized by Pontus Hulten and Germano Celant, Rizzoli, New York, 1989, 13.

*Futurist Painting Sculpture* (1914); and Carrà's *Guerrapittura* (1915).<sup>38</sup>

According to the Italian art historian Enrico Crispolti, “[i]n 1915 Futurism reached its maturity. The movement expanded to embrace all forms of sensory perception (synaesthesia) and absorbed the environment in its totality, breaking down the separations between painting, sculpture, etc.”<sup>39</sup> In fact, in March 1915, the artists Balla and Depero drew up in Rome *Ricostruzione futurista dell’universo*, a manifesto for a “Futurist Reconstruction of the Universe.” It was dated 11 March 1915, when it was presented in Milan, the main center of the movement. After Marinetti’s “words-in-freedom,” (*parole in libertà*), that, following the free verses used in poetry introduced by the French artist Licini, aimed to free his own language,<sup>40</sup> and Russolo’s “art of noises,” which introduced the use of noises in a musical context, “Futurist Reconstruction of the Universe” was conceived as a total fusion to rebuild the universe, lightening it up and therefore recreating it completely, in an unlimited, inventive, optimistic and playful approach to life.<sup>41</sup> This manifesto also developed the concept of the “material construction of the plastic complex,” conceived as a result of works made from daily materials, especially industrially or chemically produced.<sup>42</sup> The works of art consisted of layers of materials, occupying the space not only in forms but also in sounds.<sup>43</sup> Finally, the plastic complex would be a sort of “miracle, magic,” joining the four elements, developing spatially but also emotionally,

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<sup>38</sup> See “Futurist Reconstruction of the Universe”, in (organized by) Pontus Hulten, *Futurismo e Futurismi*, Cit., 551.

<sup>39</sup> Enrico Crispolti, “Futurist reconstruction of the universe”, in (curated by) Pontus Hulten, *Futurismo e Futurismi*, Cit., 547.

<sup>40</sup> See Luciano de Maria, in *Futurismo e Futurismi*, Cit., 604.

<sup>41</sup> “Noi futuristi, Balla e Depero, vogliamo realizzare questa fusione totale per ricostruire l’universo rallegrandolo, cioè ricreandolo integralmente.” Available at <[www.futurismo.altervista.org](http://www.futurismo.altervista.org)> (accessed in 19/11/2013).

<sup>42</sup> An excerpt by “Ricostruzione futurista dell’universo”:

“La costruzione materiale del complesso plastico

MEZZI NECESSARI: Fili metallici, di cotone, lana, seta d'ogni spessore, colorati. Vetri colorati, carteviline, celluloidi, reti metalliche, trasparenti d'ogni genere, coloratissimi, tessuti, specchi, lamine metalliche, stagnole colorate, e tutte le sostanze sgargiantissime. Congegni meccanici, elettrotecnici, musicali e rumoristi; liquidi chimicamente luminosi di colorazione variabile; molle; leve; tubi, ecc. Con questi mezzi noi costruiamo dei ROTAZIONI

1. Complessi plastici che girano su un perno (orizzontale, verticale, obliquo).

2. Complessi plastici che girano su più perni: a) in sensi uguali, con velocità varie, b) in sensi contrari; c) in sensi uguali e contrari.”

<sup>43</sup> “3. Complessi plastici che si scompongono: a) a volumi; b) a strati, c) a trasformazioni successive (in forma di coni, piramidi, sfere, ecc.).

4. Complessi plastici che si scompongono, parlano, rumoreggiano, suonano simultaneamente.

SCOMPOSIZIONE TRASFORMAZIONE FORMA + ESPANSIONE ONOMATOPEE SUONI RUMORI”.

to get to the “systematic infinite discovery-invention.”<sup>44</sup> As Crispolti remarked, in Balla and Depero’s manifesto, “two aspects can be distinguished: a constant, progressive refusal of traditional artistic values, and the desire to create a total work of art involving the whole environment.”<sup>45</sup>

The connection between organic materiality and futurist experimentation is more visible in some works of Enrico Prampolini, “generally considered to be the most famous representative of the second generation of futurists.”<sup>46</sup> His earliest pieces are dated between 1912 and 1913, while he was a student at the Rome Academy, from which was expelled after publishing its manifesto *Let’s Bomb the Academies* (1913). He became a member of Futurism and, inspired by the two leading exponents of the movement Boccioni and Balla, developed his formal investigation towards a combination of “abstraction and the use of real elements to create a work of art intended as a concrete, autonomous object.”<sup>47</sup> His *Beguillage* (1914), a collage on wood, is a set of apparently disordered elements, including a feather. Some years later, and also as a sporadic case in his vast futurist production between poetry, painting, design and art critics, Gerardo Dottori’s *Don Quixote without...Mancha* (1928) featured two pine-cones in a sort of model scenery of mixed media.

In the 1930s, Prampolini created works characterized for their “polimaterialism,” where the surface of the canvas consisted of layers of different materials, such as soil, starfish and seahorses, or feathers. *Polimaterico*, from around 1930, and *Stato d’animo plastico marino – Automatismo polimaterico B*, from 1937, are two examples of this kind of multi-material experimentation.<sup>48</sup> Describing the works of Prampolini, who can be considered one of the first to use organic materials in his artistic practice, Menna underlines Prampolini’s awareness of the presence of the organic materiality in his work. Considering it as an autonomous element subjected to a continuous transformation and therefore “protagonist of the drama,”

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<sup>44</sup> “MIRACOLO MAGIA

5. Complessi plastici che appaiono e scompaiono: a) lentamente, b) a scatti ripetuti (a scala); c) a scoppi improvvisi  
Pirotecnica - Acque - Fuoco -Fumi.

La scoperta-invenzione sistematica infinita  
mediante l’astrattismo complesso costruttivo rumorista, cioè lo stile futurista. Ogni azione che si sviluppa nello spazio, ogni emozione vissuta, sarà per noi intuizione di una scoperta”. *Ibidem*.

<sup>45</sup> E. Crispolti, “Futurist reconstruction of the universe”, in *Futurismo e Futurismi, Cit.*, 547.

<sup>46</sup> Filiberto Menna, “Prampolini,” in *Futurismo e Futurismi, Cit.*, 543.

<sup>47</sup> F. Menna, “Prampolini,” in *Futurismo e Futurismi, Cit.*, 543.

<sup>48</sup> See Enrico Prampolini in *Italian Art 1900-1945, Cit.*, 491-492.

Prampolini is a central figure, and somehow initiator, in the realm of our investigation.

His earlier experiments in collage and the realism of objects had been based on objects and fragments of objects taken directly from a real context, whereas the multi-material works considered matter in its purely physical aspects, before it takes on the form of this or that natural object or man-made article. Prampolini spoke of a “biological presence of matter”, of a “matter organism”, an entity with autonomous life subject to a continual process of transformation, filled with “unknown forces” which the artist could bring to light by intervening as little as possible and allowing matter itself to become the protagonist of the drama.<sup>49</sup>

Menna’s affirmation also explains Prampolini’s interest in the presence of the human figure. Among futurist artists, Prampolini was probably the most interested in theatre. In 1915 he authored his manifesto on Futurist scenography, a practice that would permit him the vastest possibilities of experimentation, for example making chromatic architectures by the use of projectors.<sup>50</sup> The second generation of futurists, Balla, Depero and Prampolini, saw in the latter the one who “effectively shepherded the last experiments in Futurism.”<sup>51</sup>

### 1.3 Surrealism and organic materiality

At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the uses of organic materiality in artistic practices were sporadic. Leaves or feathers on the surface of a canvas were organic vestiges mixed in a heterogeneous context and therefore, as Adalgisa Lugli described in relation to *Avant-Gardes*, “[w]ith the assimilated matter, feasible in infinite ways, the painter finally discovers that he can stop to paint *the* things, to paint *with* the things. [...] In collage and assemblage, matter, in its most daily aspect, transforms and

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<sup>49</sup> F. Menna, “Prampolini”, in *Futurismo e Futurismi, Cit.*, 543.

<sup>50</sup> Franco Mancini, “La scena è bella: Objectivity and Transfiguration in Gabriele D’annunzio’s Set Designs”, *Italian Art 1900-1945, Cit.*, 152.

<sup>51</sup> E. Crispolti, “Futurism and Plastic Expression Between the Wars”, *Italian Art 1900-1945, Cit.*, 202.

combines itself almost autonomously.”<sup>52</sup> Surrealist experimentation was one of the first involved in this process, through the employment and development of different media, with a heterogeneity ranging from the newest technological discoveries in photography, daily and domestic objects, and organic elements such the introduction of the animal.<sup>53</sup> About the latter, Florence de Meredieu noticed that, in fact, in 20<sup>th</sup> century, art the animal was presented in various states: “[s]tuffed, alive, dead, integrated in the piece in the form of bones, grease, blood, hair, leather or fat”.<sup>54</sup> The strangeness of the animal world, “disturbing for its similarity to humans and often used in this respect as substitute for human beings,” fascinated surrealists.

Surreality, as theorized by André Breton in his *Manifesto of Surrealism*, published in 1924, envisioned the “resolution of these two states, seemingly so contradictory, of dream and reality, in a kind of absolute reality.”<sup>55</sup> Against the realist position, “inspired by Positivism” and “totally hostile to all intellectual and moral progress,” Breton distinguished it from the materialist position. He considered, in fact, the latter “a welcome reaction against certain ridiculous spiritualist tendencies [...], not incompatible with a certain nobility of thought.”<sup>56</sup> Also recurrent in the Manifesto is the word “marvellous”, revealing a fascination with the mysterious, with dreams and wonders.

In terms of experimentation with mixed media in Surrealism, Max Ernst dated on 10 August 1925 his invention of *Frottages* (rubblings). *Frottage* is a Surrealist technique created by rubbing on paper, revealing the graphic traces of texture underneath the paper. In 1926, Ernst published his portfolio *Histoire Naturelle*

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<sup>52</sup> “Con la materia assimilata, infinitamente percorribile il pittore scopre finalmente che può smettere di dipingere *le* cose, per dipingere *con* le cose. Anche questo è un percorso di meraviglia. Nel collage o nell’assemblage la materia nel suo aspetto più quotidiano si trasforma e si amalgama.” A. Lugli, *Wunderkammer. Le Stanze delle Meraviglie*, Introduzione di Krzysztof Pomian, Umberto Allemandi, Torino, 1997, 23.

<sup>53</sup> It is remarkable that the Luis Buñuel (a Zoology student in Madrid, before deciding to dedicate himself entirely to film) movie *Un chien Andalou* references the displacement recurrent in Surrealism by the presence, in several scenes, of the animal as an incoherent element inside a domestic space. For example, occupying the bed in the bedroom, or a donkey and a horse lying on the strings of an open grand piano. In both cases the animal appears as an element of disorder.

<sup>54</sup> “Empaillé, vivant, mort, intégré à l’œuvre sous la forme de ses os, suint, sang, poils, cuir ou grasse, l’animal aura fourni à l’art contemporain un matériau riche d’informations, inquiétant parce que proche de l’humain et souvent utilisé à ce titre comme succédané de l’être humain. On peut dire que l’étrangeté du monde animal fascine les surréalistes.”, F. de Meredieu, *Histoire matérielle & immatérielle de l’art moderne*, Cit., 277.

<sup>55</sup> André Breton, *Manifesto of Surrealism*, translated by A.S. Kline, 2010, accessed via <http://www.poetryintranslation.com>

<sup>56</sup> André Breton, *Manifesto of Surrealism*.



(Natural History). In his *Frottage* series, we may observe organic materiality of plants as a vestige of the tactile contact between the matrix and the result of his work through the application of force on both. It is the negative, absent and present at the same time and natural information from which take a departure towards a surreal one. Max Ernst's fascination with nature had already been explored in works such as *Étamines et Marsellaises de Arp* (1919), *Mobiles Herbarium* (1920) and *Plantation farcineuse hydrolique parasite* (1921), inspired by Ernst Haeckel's *Art Forms in Nature: The Prints of Ernst Haeckel* (Leipzig and Vienna, 1904).

The art historian Waldman remarked that, “[a]lthough Braque had used sand in several canvases in 1912, it functioned as one of many textural devices. In Masson's paintings [from 1927], sand serves as a fundamental part of the composition, which he augmented by occasionally adding colour and line with pen and brush.”<sup>57</sup> In regards to organic materiality it is remarkable that “Georges Limbour—as William Geffett refers in André Masson's definition on the exhibition catalogue *Undercover Surrealism. Georges Bataille and Documents*—considered sand the ideal material to absorb the colour of blood.”<sup>58</sup> In the realm of photography, experimentation was widespread, as the paradigmatic figure Man Ray shows. His solarisations were a result of his discovery of this technique, made in parallel with Lee Miller, an artist who was also one of his models, (as well as Meret Oppenheim). According to Man Ray, solarisation represented the primacy of matter over thought.<sup>59</sup>

From the first experimentation with media in the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century through collage, then assemblage and ready-made, the Surrealist object appears as a heterogeneous ensemble, where organic materiality is mostly present at its second level: the animal. This classification through levels refers to Helmuth Plessner's analysis of the “levels of the organic”, which we will explore in chapter three.

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<sup>57</sup> D. Waldman, *Collage, Assemblage, and the Found Object*, Cit., 175.

<sup>58</sup> W. Geffett, “André Masson”, in Dawn Ades and Simon Baker, *Undercover Surrealism. Georges Bataille and Documents*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2006, 121.

<sup>59</sup> See Matthew Gale, *Dada & Surrealism*, London: Phaidon, 1997.

### 1.3.1 Surrealist objects

*Qu'est-ce qu'on objet surréaliste? C'est l'objet disloqué d'un corps démembré* (“What is a surrealist object? It's a dislocated object of a dismembered body”),<sup>60</sup> proclaim Guigon and Sebbag in their essay *Sur l'objet surréaliste* (2013). This statement highlights the connection between it and the unorthodox side of Surrealism, around Georges Bataille and *Documents* magazine. Among Surrealists, the word “object”, according to Guigon and Sebbag, appeared for the first time in March 1926 in the exhibition “*Tableaux de Man Ray et Objets des Îles*” at the Surrealist Gallery in Rue Jacques Callot in Paris.<sup>61</sup> As the title of the exhibition refers, the juxtaposition of contemporary painting and ethnographic sculptures had a great impact on the audience and caused an increasing interest in non-Western art.<sup>62</sup> However, Guigon and Sebbag also referenced Breton's interest and fascination for the object had already rose before the publication of his Manifesto. In fact, on October 15, 1918, in an article on Guillaume Apollinaire for *L'Éventail*, Breton cited a passage from *Clarisse ou L'Amitié*, a Paul Morand short story, whose protagonist represented the “image of the modern woman of heteroclitic and inexplicable tastes.”<sup>63</sup> The mysterious heroine is in fact surrounded by her collection of thousands of objects destined to other uses than the ones they are meant for: “small unimaginable objects, without age, never dreamt, wild child museum, alienates asylum's curiosities, collection of a consul weakened by tropics...”<sup>64</sup>

In the introduction to *Discours sur le peu de réalité* (1924), Breton proposed the production and circulation of oneiric objects, without utility or aesthetic value and, for this reason, he “designated flea markets as the propitious place to discover surrealist objects.”<sup>65</sup> *La Révolution Surréaliste* (The Surrealist Revolution), a Surrealist publication in Paris between 1924 and 1929 edited by Pierre Naville and

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<sup>60</sup> Emmanuel Guigon & Georges Sebbag, *Sur l'Object Surréaliste*, Paris: Les presses du réel, 2013, 100. With the occasion of the exhibition on the Surrealist object at Centre Pompidou, Paris, between October 2013 and March 2014, Guigon and Sebbag map the role of the Surrealist object in its moment as well as a way to interrogate the object itself in our 21<sup>st</sup> century daily life.

<sup>61</sup> See E. Guigon & G. Sebbag, *Cit.*, 115.

<sup>62</sup> See Matthew Gale, *Cit.*, 252.

<sup>63</sup> M. Gale, *Dada & Surrealism*, *Cit.*, 33.

<sup>64</sup> “Petits objets inimaginables, sans âge, jamais rêvés, musée d'enfant sauvage, curiosité d'asiles d'aliénés, collection de consul anémié par les tropiques...”, M. Gale, *Dada & Surrealism*, *Cit.*, 33.

<sup>65</sup> See M. Gale, *Dada & Surrealism*, *Cit.*, 34.

Benjamin Péret, followed a similar philosophy. In its first issue, poet Louis Aragon's text "*L'ombre de l'inventeur*" (The shadow of the inventor) was a celebration of the disinterested invention of objects, as metaphors for "philosophic acts of first greatness."<sup>66</sup> In the words of Guigon and Sebbag

Thanks to this « snap of the fingers of the real », the object is designated to « an unknown activity, an undefined use, new, inventing itself », in short, « to a surreal use ». He [Aragon] is well aware of transgressing the identity law, which assigns a name and a place to everything. For Aragon, surrealist invention is pure, philosophic and humoristic. It's pure by looking at nothing which is empiric or useful. It's philosophic for being an act of the spirit. It's humoristic in pursuing an undetermined purpose. There are three phases of surrealist invention of the object: a real defused, an unreal affirmed, a surreal conquered.<sup>67</sup>

Guigon and Sebbag remark that the interest in the object in Surrealism is clearly demonstrated by the group exhibition in 1933 (June 7-18) at Galerie Pierre Colle, which René Crevel described at the time as an "exhibition of surrealist objects" in the journal *Vu*. In his review Crevel affirmed, "thanks to surrealism, there are no more staunch partitions between things and their reflection on man."<sup>68</sup> Three years later, Galerie Charles Ratton hosted an exhibition entirely dedicated to Surrealist objects. "It showed both the potential for group activity and how the insertion into reality of quite modest pieces could provide a route to the marvellous."<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> See M. Gale, *Dada & Surrealism*, Cit., 34.

<sup>67</sup> "Grâce à cette "chiquenaude hors du réel", l'objet est affecté "à une activité qui ne se connaît pas, à un usage indéfini, nouveau, qui s'invente", bref, "à un usage surréel". Il s'agit bien de transgresser la loi d'identité assignant un nom et une place à chaque chose. Pour Aragon, l'invention surréaliste est pure, philosophique et humoristique. Elle est pure car elle ne regarde en rien ce qui est empirique ou utile. Elle est philosophique car elle est un acte de l'esprit. Et elle est humoristique parce qu'elle poursuit un fin indéterminée. Il y a trois temps dans l'invention surréaliste de l'objet : un réel désamorcé, un irréel affirmé, un surréel conquis.", M. Gale, *Dada & Surrealism*, Cit., 35.

<sup>68</sup> "Grâce au surréalisme, il n'y a plus de cloisons étanches entre les choses et leurs reflets dans l'homme. Un pont de mouvantes figures fait la navette du sujet à l'objet, permet au premier de transformer le second et vice-versa." M. Gale, *Dada & Surrealism*, 47. In 1931 Salvador Dalí had been charged with classifying surrealist objects, distinguishing between: "automatique (objets à fonctionnement symbolique), affective (objets transsubstantiés), onirique (objets à concrétiser), hypnagogique (objets-moulages), de fantaisie diurne (objets enveloppés), de fantaisie expérimentale (objets-machines)". Guigon and Sebbag, *Sur l'Object Surréaliste*, Cit., 17.

Main Surrealist exhibitions: 1936 Paris, Exhibition of Surrealists objects at Galerie Charles Ratton, Paris; 1936 *Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism*, curated by Alfred Jarr New York Museum of Modern Art while Georges Bataille founds the periodical *Acéphale* (1936-1939); 1938 Paris Exposition International du Surréalisme.

<sup>69</sup> M. Gale, *Dada & Surrealism*, Cit., 316.

Analysing the relationship between Surrealism and objects, with the aim of questioning objects in their context and in the way they affect our perspective on organic materiality, we will present a few significant examples and discuss them. We start with the first object likely to come to mind when thinking about Surrealism: *Fur Covered Tea Cup, Saucer and Spoon*, made in 1936 by Swiss artist Meret Oppenheim. Introduced to Surrealism by Alberto Giacometti, Oppenheim became famous for her objects that attempted to subvert 19<sup>th</sup>-century morality. One example is *My Governess* (1936), presenting the soles of a pair of women's white shoes served on a tray, tied with twine, simulating a chicken served at the table while transferring an image of dependence and perversion.

*Fur Covered Tea Cup, Saucer and Spoon* is paradigmatic in the dislocation of an object and its juxtaposition to unrelated elements, and in the next pages we will further explore these ideas of “montage” from separated and unrelated elements, to make another thing and create disorder. At this point, it is relevant to observe this object in its materiality: a tea cup, a plate and a spoon covered with animal skin in such a way that they still maintain their shape and are visually the same, but our vision transmits the tactile perception of the impossibility of putting liquid inside the cup, since the fur skin would absorb it rather than containing the liquid. It also transfers a disturbing tactile sensation: imagining putting our lips on animal hair to have some tea. The apparent banality of this explanation is justified in the avoidance of the dominant psychoanalytic interpretation given by Breton, which is notable for its relationship with Surrealism, automatism, dreams and the dimension of the oneiric. About this specific object, Matthew Gale highlights that

To Breton the sexuality of the fur vessel seemed specifically Freudian and he drew upon the title of Édouard Manet's notorious *Déjeuner sur l'herbe* (1863), a work that included a naked model surrounded by clothed men, to give an essentially male interpretation of the work, entitling it “*Déjeuner en fourrure*” (literally “luncheon in fur”). Breton's reading ignored other possibilities, such as the contradictions presented by the object on a practical level, as well as the suggested transformation of a familiar object into an animal.<sup>70</sup>

Also, Catalan artist Joan Miró, in the 1930s “began to experiment with readymade

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<sup>70</sup> M. Gale, *Dada & Surrealism*, Cit., 312.

object sculptures,”<sup>71</sup> including one simply titled *Object* (1936): an assemblage of a stuffed parrot on a wood perch, a stuffed silk stocking with a velvet garter, a derby hat, a cork ball, a celluloid fish, and an engraved map.

Reminding other important figures from Surrealism, whose practice is interrelated with the topic of this research, we may remind another member, Victor Brauner, born and raised in Romania, whose first contact with Surrealism happened in 1924, as editor of the Romanian avant-garde magazine *75HP*.<sup>72</sup> He joined the group only some years later in 1933, probably introduced by Yves Tanguy, at one of the Surrealist meetings organized by Breton at a café on Place Blanche. At the same time, the sixth “Salon des Surindépendents” was showing Dalí’s *Buste de femme retrospectif* (Retrospective Bust of a Woman, 1933) crowned with bread.<sup>73</sup> Also in that year began the publication of the magazine *Minotaure*, and for the first issue (Paris, May 1933) Picasso designed a model with a collage of various elements, such as “cardboard, silver foil, ribbon, wallpaper, burnt linen, leaves, and tacks with gold paint, gouache, and charcoal on wood.”<sup>74</sup>

The brief context described above may serve to frame Victor Brauner’s *Loup-Table* (Wolf-Table, 1939). This piece, in fact, is probably connected with another episode: in 1939 Breton asked his opinion about dedicating the 14th issue of the magazine *Minotaure* to the Devil, and Brauner answered enthusiastically.<sup>75</sup> Brauner’s project of paintings with composite monsters, which he described in a letter to Breton as “a type of application of the spectre of the Devil to the object” was never realized.<sup>76</sup> Nevertheless, his *Loup-Table* seems to refer to the application of the Devil to the object he was describing in the letter mentioned above, dated June 23, 1939. *Loup-Table* displays the union of the head and tail of a stuffed fox, whose body is a table of four legs, one of the four bent in the middle, simulating a real fox leg. The piece combines the heterogeneity of two worlds: domestic and wild. Since it was made during the war, André Breton was the one who, according to Didier Semin<sup>77</sup>,

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<sup>71</sup> D. Waldman, *Cit.*, 172.

<sup>72</sup> See Didier Semin, “Victor Brauner and the Surrealist Movement”, *Victor Brauner: Surrealist Hieroglyphs*, Ostelfidern: Hatje Cantz; New York: Distributed Art Publishers, 2001, 24.

<sup>73</sup> D. Semin, “Victor Brauner and the Surrealist Movement”, *Cit.*, 26.

<sup>74</sup> D. Waldman, *Cit.*, 166-167.

<sup>75</sup> Cf. D. Semin, “Victor Brauner and the Surrealist Movement”, *Cit.*, 31.

<sup>76</sup> D. Semin, “Victor Brauner and the Surrealist Movement”, *Cit.*, 31.

<sup>77</sup> D. Semin, *Victor Brauner dans les collections du Musée national d’art moderne*, Paris: Centre Georges Pompidou, 1996, 18.

surely asked Brauner to make a second version of it for the *Exposition internationale du surréalisme* in 1947. Breton considered, in fact, this object to be emblematic of a kind of premonition of the disasters of the Second World War.<sup>78</sup>

### 1.3.2 The Legacy of Curiosities: montage and disorder

The Levi-Straussian image of the *bricoleur* from *La pensée sauvage* (1962) contributes in describing the practice of artists that from Surrealism, along the 20<sup>th</sup> century, achieved works resulting from the collection of fragments, therefore from a non rationalistic choice, in favour of a process of analogy suggested by the things.<sup>79</sup> Regarding Surrealism specifically, Patrick Mauriès reinforced this point, affirming

[a] number of Surrealists, starting with Breton and Eluard, were avid collectors, a fact which is not surprising given that from the outset object qua object, whether mundane or exotic, craft or art, in its natural state or combined with others, played a role of fundamental importance in the sensibility and aesthetic of Surrealism.<sup>80</sup>

Since the First Manifesto, Surrealism was a reaction to Positivist thinking, characterized in the 1830-1840s by a rational and scientific desire to classify and control.<sup>81</sup> This reaction coincided with a fascination towards the mysterious, dreams and the unconscious that explains the aim of tracing continuity with the legacy of Cabinets of Curiosities. This expression of interest and will to prolong an re-enact this legacy was specially manifested through Surrealist objects. Their cultivation of

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<sup>78</sup> “Victor Brauner seul alors a tablé sur la peur et il l’a fait au moyen de la table que l’on sait (*Espace psychologique*, 1939) hurlant derrière elle à la mort et se prévalant de bourses génitales bien remplies. Cette période de son œuvre nous apporte le témoignage incontestablement le plus lucide de cette époque, elle seule est tout appréhension du temps qui va venir, de loin elle doit passer pour la plus historiquement située. Ces bêtes qui s’enhardissaient jusqu’à nous flairer, dont c’allait être passagèrement le règne, ont beau être rentrées depuis peu dans leurs trous, la lumière de l’Apocalypse persiste à s’étendre sur le monde.” (André Breton, « Entre chien et loup », 1946, in *Le Surréalisme et la peinture*, nouvelle édition, Paris, Gallimard, 1965). D. Semin, *Victor Brauner dans les collections du Musée national d’art moderne*, Cit., 18.

<sup>79</sup> See A. Lugli, *Wunderkammer. Le Stanze delle Meraviglie*, Cit., 24.

<sup>80</sup> P. Mauriès, *Cabinets of Curiosities*, London: Thames and Hudson, 2002, 216.

<sup>81</sup> “During the 1830s and 1840s [...] The first tendency may be connected to the rational and scientific aspect of the age. This was a period when the discourse of progress was still in its infancy and when the desire to know went hand-in-hand with the desire to classify, to organize and to control. Utilitarianism and positivism were the standard-bearers of this tendency, each responding to the sense of change with a new system of ideas.” “The Demands of the present”, Introduction, in *Art in Theory 1815-1900*, Eds. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood with Jason Gaiger, Blackwell Publishers, ltd, 1998, 145.

“disorder”, according to Patrick Mauriès, “had been one of the chief reasons for the banishment of Cabinets of Curiosities from the culture of the Enlightenment.”<sup>82</sup> The reaction to the realist position in favour of the materialist one, in Breton’s first Manifesto of Surrealism shows a relation with the other side of Surrealism with Bataille—the materialist side opposing the Bretonian idealistic one—who focused on the evidence of man’s literal and metaphorical rise from the animal, as we’ll see in the next pages in the journal *Documents*.

Addressing once more the surrealist object, as a result of differing and incongruent elements and reconnecting with an occulted past, we may notice that it deals with two concepts that we will now introduce: *montage* (assembly) and anachronism. In his essay *Quand les images prennent position. L’œil de l’histoire*, Didi-Huberman identified in these two elements (montage and anachronism) a philosophical gesture of the thoughts of Walter Benjamin. *Montage* stays in a constant relation with *démontage* (disassembly), as the construction of history results from assembling elements that have been dissociated from their usual place. For this reason, Didi-Huberman recognized in this operation an act of transgression, which is to say, the taking of a position.<sup>83</sup>

An observation of Didi-Huberman on Benjamin provides us an instrument to transcend organic materiality in Surrealist objects and also to connect them with the antecedent Cabinets of Curiosities. According to Benjamin—as Didi-Huberman referred—, theologically speaking, there is no future redemption without the exegeses of the most ancient texts; psychologically speaking, there is no desire without memory, no future without a reconfiguration of the past; politically speaking, there is no revolutionary force without remounting the genealogic lines, without ruptures and searches of places of affiliation, without re-exhibiting all the anterior history.<sup>84</sup> This last condition—according to Didi-Huberman<sup>85</sup>—explains why, for Benjamin, *avant-garde* always joins, anachronistically, with a kind of archaeology. The canonical association of *avant-garde* with the hectic rhythm of city, the industrial development,

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<sup>82</sup> P. Mauriès, *Cabinets of Curiosities*, London: Thames and Hudson, 2002, 218.

<sup>83</sup> See Georges Didi-Huberman, *Quand les images prennent position. L’œil de l’histoire*, Paris : Les Éditions de Minuit, 2009, 129.

<sup>84</sup> See G. Didi-Huberman, *Quand les images prennent position. L’œil de l’histoire*, Cit., 131.

<sup>85</sup> Didi-Hubermann quotes M. Sagnol “Walter Benjamin entre une thorie de l’avant-garde et une archeologie de la modernité” (1984) in *Quand les images prennent position. L’œil de l’histoire*, Cit., 132.

and the new in lateral sense as opposition and replacement of the old, might induce us to deem paradoxical the attempt of joining avant-garde with archaeology. Nevertheless, the search described by Benjamin could entice us to a deeper research within the avant-garde to find some clues, in which the organic materiality of the artistic object seems to be involved.

Although Benjamin didn't appreciate Ernst Bloch's theses in *Erbschaft dieser Zeit* (1935, *Bequest of This Time*), Didi-Huberman found—with his further perspective from the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century—a general convergence on their points of views concerning the concepts of position and transgression, montage and anachronism. He explained, “Bloch viewed in montage the historic symptom of ‘collapsed coherence’ from a bourgeoisie world freed to the ‘process of interruption’ characteristic of revolutionary *avant-gardes*.”<sup>86</sup> Didi-Huberman highlighted the fact that they both recognized that “there is no more ‘decay’ or ‘progress’ in history: there are heterochronisms or anachronisms of processes of multiple directions and speeds.”<sup>87</sup> In this sense, the New became particularly complex, and Bloch defined it as “non-contemporaneity”, that is to say, “anachronism.” Didi-Huberman's reflections on Bloch's essay on the definition of *montage* are particularly useful to problematize organic materiality as a heterogeneous device in artistic practices of the 1930s and more specifically on the surrealist objects. He argued, in fact:

*Montage* – with its “catalogue of dismissed things, of those contents which find no place in the concept system of masculine, bourgeois, religious,” will therefore be the medium, by excellence, of driving dialectic, that is to say politically fecund, such non-contemporaneity. *Montage* is an exhibition of anachrony (*anachronie*) exactly when it proceeds as an explosion of chronology. *Montage* cut off between things generally together and connects things generally separated.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> “Bloch voyait dans le montage le symptôme historique d’une ‘cohérence effondrée’ du monde bourgeois livré au « procédé d’interruption » caractéristique des avant-gardes révolutionnaires [...]” In Didi-Huberman, *Quand les images prennent position. L’œil de l’histoire*, Cit., 132.

<sup>87</sup> “Il n’y a pas plus de « décadence » que de « progrès » en histoire : il n’y a que des hétérochronies ou des anachronismes de processus à directions et à vitesses multiples.” G. Didi-Huberman, *Quand les images prennent position. L’œil de l’histoire*, Cit., 132.

<sup>88</sup> “Le montage – avec son « catalogue de choses écartées, de ces contenus qui ne trouvent pas de place dans le système de concepts masculin, bourgeois, religieux », serait alors le moyen par excellence de rendre *dialectique*, c’est-à-dire politiquement féconde, une telle non-contemporanéité. Le montage est une *exposition d’anachronie* en cela même qu’il procède comme une *explosion de la chronologie*. Le montage tranche dans les choses habituellement réunies et connecte les choses habituellement séparées,” G. Didi-Huberman, *Quand les images prennent position. L’œil de l’histoire*, Cit., 133.



In this sense we can conceive the essence of Cabinets of Curiosities as a montage of fragments, unrelated objects, and the surrealist object as a quintessential synthesis of montage and anachrony. In the Surrealist object, according to Patrick Mauriès, “to go in and out of reality assumed, by contrast [to the Cabinets from the past centuries reflecting one’s intellectual and wealthy position in society], a polemical dimension, a dialectic for questioning the status of reality and all the evidence in its favour.”<sup>89</sup> As Didi-Huberman wrote, “to dispose will be the way to understand them dialectically,”<sup>90</sup> explaining that the artistic value of use of dialectic differs from the philosophic one in the fact that the latter looks for reasons of the truth, while the artist of montage, disposes of heterogeneity in search of “‘correspondences’ (according to Baudelaire), of ‘election affinities’ (according to Goethe and Benjamin), of ‘gashes’ (according to Bataille) or of ‘attractions’ (according to Eisenstein).”<sup>91</sup>

While in Cabinets of Curiosities this heterogeneity of correspondences consisted in attributing metaphorical meaning to objects in order to achieve a kind of totality of Creation, it “reappeared in Surrealism under the guise of ‘systematic disorder’.” According to Mauriès, “it no longer referred back to the reassuring, sensible world of the divine order, but looked instead to the aberrant, disjointed world of dreams and wonders.”<sup>92</sup> No more under an ordered organization, but rather disorganized, things were not responding to an explanation but to a complicated disorder a—as Didi-Huberman sad—*dialectique de monteur* (which we may translate

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<sup>89</sup> P. Mauriès, *Cabinets of Curiosities*, Cit., 216.

<sup>90</sup> “*Dys-poser* les choses serait donc une façon de les comprendre *dialectiquement*. Mais surgit la question de savoir ce qu’il faut entendre ici par « dialectique ». L’ancien verbe grec *dialegesthai* signifie controverser, introduire une différence (*dia*) dans les discours (*logos*). En tant que confrontation entre opinions divergentes en vue de parvenir à un accord sur un sens mutuellement admis comme vrai, la dialectique est donc une façon de penser liée aux premières manifestations de la pensée rationnelle dans la Grèce antique. C’est avec Platon, on le sait, que la dialectique put acquérir le statut fondamental d’une méthode de vérité qui l’apparentait, voire l’identifiait, à la théorie (*théôria*) et à la science elle-même (*épistèmè*).” in G. Didi-Huberman, *Quand les images prennent position. L’œil de l’histoire*, Cit., 90-91.

<sup>91</sup> “C’est là ce qui distingue fondamentalement la valeur d’usage artistique de la dialectique et sa valeur d’usage philosophique ou doctrinale. Là où la philosophie néo-hégélien construit des arguments en vue de poser la vérité, l’artiste du montage fabrique quant à lui des hétérogénéités en vue de dys-poser la vérité dans un ordre des raisons, mais celui des « correspondances » (pour parler avec Baudelaire), des « affinités électives » (pour parler avec Goethe e Benjamin), de « déchirures » (pour parler avec Bataille) ou des « attractions » (pour parler avec Eisenstein).”, G. Didi-Huberman, *Quand les images prennent position. L’œil de l’histoire*, Cit., 93.

<sup>92</sup> P. Mauriès, *Cabinets of Curiosities*, Cit., 218.

with ‘dialectic of film editor’).<sup>93</sup> This person would correspond to “the one who ‘dys-poses’ by separating and re-joining his elements to the point of their most improbable relation.”<sup>94</sup> Didi-Huberman underscored this fragmentary character as a main trait not only of Bertolt Brecht’s dramaturgy—in which his *Quand les images prennent position. L’œil de l’histoire* is centred—but also of some non academic thinkers as Raoul Hausmann, Eisenstein, Georges Bataille, Walter Benjamin ou Carl Einstein.<sup>95</sup>

Georges Bataille and Carl Einstein were members of *Documents*, whose fifteen issues were published between 1929 and 1931. This magazine can also be interpreted as a practice of montage inherited by the Cabinets of Curiosities whose collections were not separated under disciplines. Subverting the hierarchical order between fine arts, ethnology and archaeology, and spanning to less academic topic for the period as sexuality, *Documents* expanded the possibilities opened up by Surrealism from the very beginning. In the Introduction of the catalogue exhibition dedicated to the journal, *Undercover Surrealism: Georges Bataille and DOCUMENTS* (2006), Simon Baker affirmed that,

DOCUMENTS, however, did more in its pages than chart the interesting discoveries and materials, modern and ancient, Western and non-Western, considered relevant to contemporary society. It constructed—or deconstructed them and worked them into a series of challenges to those disciplines that were implied by its rubric. DOCUMENTS differed from other magazines of the period in its treatment of its heterogeneous subjects.<sup>96</sup>

The concepts of montage and disorder (borrowed from Didi-Huberman’s essay) are also noticeable in the section dedicated to Bataille’s Critical Dictionary. The entry *Informe* (Formless), published in the first issue functions as a statement of the whole concept of the magazine and more extensively of Bataille’s thought. As Michael Richardson referred in the exhibition catalogue dedicated to the Journal mentioned above, “ ‘formless’, for Bataille, is not just an adjective with a particular

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<sup>93</sup> G. Didi-Huberman, *Quand les images prennent position. L’œil de l’histoire*, Cit., 94.

<sup>94</sup> “[...]dialectique de monteur, c’est-à-dire, de celui qui « dys-pose », séparant puis réajointant ses éléments au point de leur plus improbable rapport”, G. Didi-Huberman, *Quand les images prennent position. L’œil de l’histoire*, Cit., 94.

<sup>95</sup> See G. Didi-Huberman, *Quand les images prennent position. L’œil de l’histoire*, Cit., 94.

<sup>96</sup> S. Baker in D. Ades and S. Baker, *Undercover Surrealism: Georges Bataille and DOCUMENTS*, Cambridge MA: The MIT Press, 2006, 13-14.

meaning but a word with a job to do, and this job is to ‘declassify’, to suborn identity.”<sup>97</sup> At this point is also remarkable Masson’s painting *The Butcher of Horses* (1928), a composition in which man, animal and object merged. A kind of visualization of his close tie Bataille, whose contribution to *Documents*, according to Matthew Gale, mainly “focused on the evidence of man’s literal and metaphorical rise from the animal.”<sup>98</sup>

We may find particularly significant, at least in pursuing the path of organic materiality in the 20<sup>th</sup>-century art that the materialist approach to knowledge promoted by *Documents*, appeared in the same period of the publication of the first work that considered foundational for philosophy the study of the organic in living beings. This work is *Die stufen des Organischen und der Mensch. Einleitung in die philosophische Anthropologie* (English unpublished “The Levels of the Organic and Man. Introduction to Philosophical Anthropology”). First published in 1928 the German Helmuth Plessner’s work will be further analysed in the third chapter.

For the time being, as an overall on the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century art, this chapter aimed to focus on the first uses of organic materiality as a result of a shift from the traditional codes of still life in painting, acquiring three-dimensional and multimedia facets that recalled previous experiences of material collections of knowledge, to dismount them and recompose them in order to achieve a freer approach in art as a world interpretation.

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<sup>97</sup> M. Richardson in D. Ades and S. Baker, *Undercover Surrealism: Georges Bataille and DOCUMENTS*, Cambridge MA: The MIT Press, 2006, 152-153.

<sup>98</sup> M. Gale, *Dada & Surrealism*, Cit., 280-281.



## Towards an Expansion of Material Possibilities

### 2.1 “Departing from the Formless”<sup>1</sup>

In the aftermath of the two world wars, the Holocaust, and the atomic bombs, traditional painting that had been complicit in the spread of illusionment and the myth of progress of the Western leadership had lost its credibility, as Thomas McEvelley stressed in his book *Sculpture in the Age of Doubt*.<sup>2</sup> In the attempt of finding expressions in which artists could reflect their position towards the world tragic scenarios occurring in the world, their attempt moved towards absorbing and including everyday life in their practices. This also coincided, as Hans Belting remarked in his *Art History After Modernism*, with “‘Postwar’ art” having left “the guidance of art history in order to meet, in its own time, whatever the outcome would be in redefining its goals. As soon as the artists adopted the style of contemporaneous society, they had to break with art history’s inner logic, at least the logic valid until then.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Title of one of the eighty-two entries composing Jean Dubuffet’s “Notes pour les fins-

<sup>2</sup> “After mid-century the myth of progress through Western leadership no longer seemed credible; it seemed like a kind of illusion that had been temporarily drawn across the screen of world consciousness by the European hegemony. And painting, the central and emblematic artistic medium of this myth, seemed polluted by its complicity with the process of illusion.” T. McEvelley, *Sculpture in the Age of Doubt*, Cit., 43.

<sup>3</sup> H. Belting, *Art History After Modernism*, Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2003, 74. On another front, Belting’s statement can help us understand the limitations, if not inadequacies, of art history in its attempts to study artistic creation at the border between art and science. This was exemplified in the Massachusetts Institute of Technology’s exhibition *The New Landscape (in Art and Science)* curated by György Kepes (1906–2001), in 1946, which featured images originating in the scientific field. As the art historian Ingeborg Reichle remarks in her book *Art in the Age of Technoscience. Genetic Engineering, Robotics, and Artificial Life in Contemporary Art*, “In contrast to the conventional wisdom of the time—art and science are self-contained entities that cannot be mixed—Kepes was convinced that a relationship exists between them that is mediated via a common visual language, and that this relationship between art and science would become stronger through exchange of ideas and mutual contact.” Reichle continues affirming that “In his writings Kepes

In 1945, Jean Dubuffet coined the term “Art Brut” to describe art produced outside the institutional artistic world and the dominant culture by people at margins of society, such as patients in psychiatric hospitals. His collection implemented during thirty years, and was exhibited for the first time at Galerie René Drouin in Paris in 1949. In his “Notes pour les fins-lettrés” (1946), he described creation, whether on “canvas or a piece of paper,” as a process of departing from the formless to bring alive a surface from “the first stroke of colour that one lays on it; the resulting effect, the resulting adventure.”<sup>4</sup> And “it is this stroke, the degree to which one enriches it and gives it direction, that shapes the work.”<sup>5</sup>

Dubuffet’s interest in the art of children, the untrained and the insane constitutes a sort of revival of Surrealist obsession, as defined by David Hopkins, and his attempt to depart from the formless is certainly related to the ideas of Georges Bataille.<sup>6</sup> Dubuffet was the most influential artist of the Informal, a term which appeared for the first time in the text of the exhibition catalogue *Véhérences Confrontées* at the Dusset Gallery in Paris in 1951. It was written by the curator Michel Tapié to describe the rejection of form as a structuring element and artificial constriction, symbolizing a certain rationalism of which was decreed its historical failure. The exhibition featured works by Camille Bryen, Giuseppe Capogrossi, Willem de Kooning, Hans Hartung, Georges Mathieu, Jackson Pollock, Jean-Paul

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endeavored to provide a theoretical framework for his ideas about the structure of the visual analogies that he believed to have recognized in the image worlds of art and science. He did this because he was convinced that scientists for their part were seeking new ways to describe and illustrate their experiments and increasingly abstract procedures. It was Kepes’ hope that if art and science worked more closely together, it would be possible for artists to produce new imagery that would be fruitful for scientists’ search for clear and descriptive models.” I. Reichle, *Art in the Age of Technoscience. Genetic Engineering, Robotics, and Artificial Life in Contemporary Art*, Wien, New York: Springer, 2009, 2-4. The development of bio-art (art in the laboratory made of/with living entities) starting in the 1990s can be considered to be a legacy of Kepes’ ideas.

<sup>4</sup> J. Dubuffet, “Notes for the Well-Lettered”, originally published in Dubuffet’s *Prospectus*, Paris, 1949, 47-99, reprinted in *Dubuffet, Prospectus et tous écrits suivants*, Paris, 1967, from which is extracted this text from C. Harrison and P. Wood (eds.), *Art in Theory*, Cit., 603-605: 603.

<sup>5</sup> J. Dubuffet, “Notes for the Well-Lettered”, Cit., 603.

<sup>6</sup> “In the 1930s Bataille had developed influential notions of formlessness and ‘base seduction’, involving a materialist embrace of the repellent, the excessive, and the bodily, in order to undercut the idealist aesthetics he associated with Surrealism. Bataille in fact collaborated with Fautrier on certain projects, but the writer’s savage anti-humanism was simply one position among several on offer from literary figures of the calibre of Jean Paulhan, Francis Ponge and Sartre.” D. Hopkins, *After Modern Art. 1945-2000*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000, 21.

Riopelle, Alfred Russell, and Wols—“artists from all over the Western world who had in common a practice of lyrical abstraction.”<sup>7</sup>

Concerning the liberation from form in favour of the formless and the exploration of heterogeneous materials on the surface to be worked, the organic as it is approached in this research is present in the mixture of painting (“pâtes battues”) made famous through Dubuffet’s work and Fautrier’s series of *Otages*, realised by the 1945 and notorious for alluding to the massacre of the concluded conflict as well as for the techniques adopted, where the surface was obtained for an accumulation of oil, pigment, and glue, creating a textured medium. As a consequence, Dubuffet stated: “I want painting to be full of life—decorations, swatches of colour, signs and placards, scratches on the ground. These are its native soil.”<sup>8</sup> It is the progressive materialization of the work and its loss of form the one to permit him to accomplish that *prise de conscience*, that according to Sartre an artist would express in the space of a canvas.<sup>9</sup> Dubuffet’s survey on the phenomenology of materials culminated in his series *Texturologies* (1953-59) and *Matériologies* (1959-1961), which featured a mixture of botanical elements, with the belief that “the material is neither the object not the medium of creation, but a permanent excitement of spirit and curiosity.”<sup>10</sup>

### 2.1.1 The case of the “Butterfly Man”

Being “concerned with the nature and significance of paint” in regards to the organic materiality in the artistic practice of the post-war period, Dubuffet’s use of butterfly wings (starting in August of 1953) is particularly relevant.<sup>11</sup> In December of that year, the Galerie Rive Gauche in Paris presented for the first time a series of

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<sup>7</sup> C.J. Marie Dossin, *Stories of the Western World, 1936-1986: From the “Fall of Paris” to the “Invasion of New York”*, PhD dissertation, University of Texas at Austin, 2008, 13. Available at <<https://www.lib.utexas.edu/etd/d/2008/dossind60812/dossind60812.pdf>> (accessed in September 2014.)

<sup>8</sup> J. Dubuffet, “Notes for the Well-Lettered”, in Harrison and P. Wood (eds.), *Cit.*, 603.

<sup>9</sup> See C.J. Marie Dossin, *Cit.*

<sup>10</sup> F. Gallo, “Gesto e Materia”, in S. Bordini, *Cit.*, 81-99: 90. Gallo quotes Hochart, *Jean Dubuffet: le matériaux de la création*, in *Traitement des supports. Travaux interdisciplinaires*, Acts of the Congress ARAAFU, Paris, 1989, 119-122.

<sup>11</sup> See D. Waldman, *Cit.*, 241.

collages Dubuffet made using those insects. Entitled “Démones et merveilles” the exhibition also featured works from Max Ernst, Jean Miró, Dorothea Tanning, and Henry Michaux, but the eight collage presented by Dubuffet dominated the critical debate, according to art historian Sarah K. Rich.<sup>12</sup> Her essay “Jean Dubuffet: The Butterfly Man,” opened with an introductory epigraph from a review of the exhibition that appeared on the February 15<sup>th</sup>, 1954 edition of the Parisian newspaper *L’Information*. That review, signed by the anonymous author “R. D.”, addressed a question commonly asked by many critics at that time, and which can be considered to reside at the core of organic materiality physically presented and not represented in a work of art, and which in many contexts can elicit controversy. This question was: “Why does he massacre butterflies to evoke effects he would better achieve with paint and brushes?”<sup>13</sup>

At this juncture it is useful to reference Diane Waldman’s book *Collage, Assemblage and the Found Object* (1992), in which, referring to a collage made by genuine butterfly wings at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, she was also considering this case as a divertissement, rather than a conscious practice challenging the tradition of painting. According to Waldman, in fact, “collage came into its own as an independent medium of the fine arts during the twentieth-century.”<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless, while in that collage the butterflies appeared in a meticulous order, with their bodies arranged side by side respecting in a decorative mode to the tradition of entomological organization, which started in “cabinets of curiosities” collections and continued with natural history museums, what most revolted the critique was the fact that Dubuffet’s collages “lacked the decorum typical for the display of such specimens.”<sup>15</sup> In fact, the butterflies’ wings were separated from their bodies and used as smaller individual pieces, composing a sort of mosaic on a 25 x 18 cm piece of cardboard. While “three reviews condemned Dubuffet’s contribution to the show as a

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<sup>12</sup> S. K. Rich, “Jean Dubuffet: The Butterfly Man”, *October*, Winter 2007, No. 119, Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 46-74.

<sup>13</sup> S. K. Rich, *Cit.*, 47. Though this may seem to be a rather old-fashioned question, on the contrary it remained relevant through the end of the twentieth century, as demonstrated by “Some Notes Towards a Manifesto for Artists Working With or About the Living World” (first published in *The Greenhouse Effect*, Serpentine Gallery, 2000). Mark Dion wrote this Manifesto in 2000 as a call for awareness on the part of artists working with living beings of the consequences and meaning of that choice. Manifesto reproduced in G. Aloï, *Art & Animals*, London, New York: Tauris, 2012, 140-141.

<sup>14</sup> *Butterfly-wing Collage*. Late 1890. Butterfly wings, 11x14”. Courtesy Antiques by Patrick, New York, in D. Waldman, *Cit.*, 8.

<sup>15</sup> S. K. Rich, “Jean Dubuffet: The Butterfly Man”, *Cit.* 47.



‘massacre,’” another anonymous critic defined “the artist’s process as useless and cruel.”<sup>16</sup>

As Rich remarked, in order to obtain a flat surface on the collage, Dubuffet had to resort to “the process of squashing by which one typically kills an insect.” Moreover “as far as critics were concerned, such brutality apparently yielded no special result, as Dubuffet didn’t seem to have done anything new with the insect corpses. Rather, the collages reproduced pictorial effects common to Dubuffet’s painting.”<sup>17</sup> Despite of the critiques and questions that Dubuffet’s choice raised at that period, Rich posed the question from a scholarly point of view with the aim of discovering the reasons and motivation that induced the artist to adopt this device; how it happened that “the dead butterfly, that morbid medium, [would] become the means by which Dubuffet would attempt to transform the very operations of pictorial meaning in his work.”<sup>18</sup> To this extent, Rich stressed the fact that although these collages have been featured and represented in catalogues, there has no been scholarly discussion of them, except a brief mention in Claude Esteban’s “L’insecte et le topographe” in 1968. In this article, Esteban addressed the meaning of the medium employed by Dubuffet, recognizing that “with the advent of the butterflies came an entirely new order: from the playful contrasts of their natural partitions, their particularity as indivisible entities separate from each other, little trembling monads, the very discontinuity of matter was revealed.”<sup>19</sup>

According to Dubuffet’s published memoirs, he was fascinated by the medium of butterfly wings, which he used during three periods (1953, 55 and 1957). The collages made with the organic matter of butterflies determined a crucial shift—from the “pâtes battues” to the dispersal and juxtaposition of the organic element to compose a collage—in Dubuffet’s oeuvre “from figuration to abstraction, and more important, from cohesive form to dispersal. They established a new pictorial (anti) order of disintegration. All with a butterfly wing.”<sup>20</sup> Rich also pointed out the importance of the author, artist, and printer Pierre Bettencourt, who joined Dubuffet on a trip to Savoy in 1953. While the latter was sketching in order “to capture the

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<sup>16</sup> S. K. Rich, “Jean Dubuffet: The Butterfly Man”, *Cit.* 48.

<sup>17</sup> S. K. Rich, “Jean Dubuffet: The Butterfly Man”, *Cit.* 50.

<sup>18</sup> S. K. Rich, “Jean Dubuffet: The Butterfly Man”, *Cit.* 51.

<sup>19</sup> Claude Esteban, “L’Insecte et le topographe,” *La Nouvelle revue française* 16, no. 182 (February 1, 1968), p. 370, in S. K. Rich, *Cit.* 51.

<sup>20</sup> S. K. Rich, “Jean Dubuffet: The Butterfly Man”, *Cit.* 51.

lively waters and the movement of running of water running from the stones,”<sup>21</sup> Bettencourt, an amateur lepidopterist, was chasing the butterflies in the area. Unenthusiastic about his drawings, and perhaps distracted by his friend’s compositions (collages on which was gluing wings), Dubuffet abandoned his sketches and began producing collages with butterfly wings.<sup>22</sup>

This choice would afterwards create a dispute between them, since Dubuffet’s admiration for his friend, apparent in their correspondence, would be eventually perceived as an ungrateful indebtedness, when Bettencourt visited “Demons et merveilles” without finding an expected mention of his own experimentation with the medium. Dubuffet’s final defence in the face of Bettencourt’s accusation of plagiarism was based on the fact that his artistic practice had long involved organic materials, and that the ways in which they used the materials in their respective collages was essentially different.<sup>23</sup> As Rich remarked, “in the use of butterfly we may find a forward development of Dubuffet’s process of dismounting form through his investigation on matter.”<sup>24</sup> She also drew attention to the metaphorical meaning of this insect:

The butterfly is, of course, the animal most easily associated with such transformation by virtue of its powers of mimicry, as well as its capacity for metamorphosis. As the insect that famously changes from caterpillar to winged thing, the butterfly always already indicates a changing of form, a shifting of meaning. Further, in its drunken flight from flower to stone to tree trunk, the butterfly also suggests a denotation that is always on the move. On its peripatetic route through the environment, the butterfly points to “that,” then “that,” then “that.” Its momentary indication of anything is fickle, capricious, shifting.<sup>25</sup>

In this mobility and shifting characteristic of Dubuffet’s cosmos it was plausible to conceive that “a man can become a butterfly, just as a butterfly can become a man,” in a balanced relationship between the two species. Regarding this notion, Rich also added similarities, even if not explicitly declared, between Dubuffet

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<sup>21</sup> Dubuffet, *Memoire*, p. 94, in S. K. Rich, *Cit.* 52.

<sup>22</sup> See S. K. Rich, “Jean Dubuffet: The Butterfly Man”, *Cit.*, 52-53.

<sup>23</sup> Regarding the dispute between Dubuffet and Bettencourt, here briefly mentioned, see S. K. Rich, *Cit.* 54-57.

<sup>24</sup> See S. K. Rich, “Jean Dubuffet: The Butterfly Man”, *Cit.*, 57.

<sup>25</sup> S. K. Rich, “Jean Dubuffet: The Butterfly Man”, *Cit.*, 58.

and his acquaintance Roger Caillois (who also participated in Georges Bataille's journal *Acephale* [1936-39]) an author who, in the early 1950s, was writing a book (*Meduse et Cie*, 1960; translated *The Mask of Medusa*, 1964) entirely dedicated to insect mimicry. More specifically, "hoping to reconnect remote districts of the natural world under the rubric of mimicry," he theorized a "diagonal science" based on examples of imitation in both the human and insect world, merging entomology and anthropology.<sup>26</sup>

For Caillois, beneath *every* example of mimicry lurked a deep connection between man and insect. The butterflies flaunting their ocelli to stun animals (or even to impress those animals that do not threaten them) share with human beings a primitive desire to dazzle onlookers with acts of sorcery. Caillois similarly asserted that butterfly camouflage and the masks of invisibility worn by heroes of mythology derived from the same primordial compulsion. Once diagonal science merged entomology and anthropology, virtually all forms of mimicry, insect or human, established a universal rule for organic life.<sup>27</sup>

According to Rich, Dubuffet literally materialized the "diagonal science" in his works, in which case this mutual imitation is an intercourse instead of an evolution between species: "Dubuffet's butterfly-men compress the relationship between human and insect, as the two sets of organisms become consubstantial."<sup>28</sup> She also referred to a passage in which Dubuffet, in a lecture given in 1951, rejected the idea of evolution between humanity and other organisms, and considered the notion to be a product of Western culture:

One of the principal characteristics of Western culture is the belief that the nature of man is very different from the nature of other beings in the world. Custom has it that man cannot be identified, or compared in the least, with elements such as winds, trees, rivers – except humorously, and for poetic rhetorical figures. The Western man has great contempt for trees and rivers, and hates to be like them. On the contrary, primitive man loves and admires trees and rivers, and has great pleasure to be like them. ... He has a very strong

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<sup>26</sup> S. K. Rich, "Jean Dubuffet: The Butterfly Man", *Cit.*, 58-59.

<sup>27</sup> S. K. Rich, "Jean Dubuffet: The Butterfly Man", *Cit.*, 60.

<sup>28</sup> S. K. Rich, "Jean Dubuffet: The Butterfly Man", *Cit.*, 60.

sense of continuity of all things, and especially between man and the rest of the world.<sup>29</sup>

If Caillois had levelled the positions of insects and human, “such that the human would not be exempt from the dynamic of imitation to which insects are prone,” by contrast Betterncourt, in his treatise on butterflies, *Le Bal des Ardents* (1953), did not follow this diagonal science, and butterfly’s mimicry only served to underline the superiority of human position.<sup>30</sup> Consequently, Caillois accused him of developing a provincial anthropocentrism that privileged human beings, and which “was not much interested in humans as viewers of mimicry at all; rather, he remarked only upon the ways in which insects and humans might engage in parallel behaviours.”<sup>31</sup>

If, for example, Pierre Bettencourt’s *Le Bouddha* (1953) represents the iconic image of a Buddha with a concentric ordered composition expanding from the symmetry of the eyes to the entire body, Dubuffet’s portraits slip away from any harmonious order. With the imposing size and the frightful dark mouth created through the butterfly wings in *Nez d 'Apollo Pap* (1953); the crossed eyes in *Belle au regard masque* (1953); and the unbalanced position of the arms in *Personnage en ailes de papillons* (1953), these butterfly men, as well as the *vanitas* of a butterfly, all seem to be fleeting images about fly away. In Rich’s words: “It seems they might scatter all together. On the verge of total dispersal, they might finally fall apart.”<sup>32</sup>

In the meantime, the last of the images Dubuffet realised for Bettencourt’s book *Le Bal des ardents* depicted a butterfly with a skull's head and a decaying body.<sup>33</sup> The relationship Dubuffet explored between the butterfly and death, paralleled the reception of his works presented at “Demons et merveilles”. In fact, according to

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<sup>29</sup> Jean Dubuffet, “Anticultural Positions,” lecture given before the Arts Club of Chicago, December 20, 1951, reprinted in *Jean Dubuffet: Retrospective* (Dallas: Dallas Museum of Fine Arts, 1966), quoted by S. K. Rich, “Jean Dubuffet: The Butterfly Man”, *Cit.*, 60.

<sup>30</sup> See S. K. Rich, “Jean Dubuffet: The Butterfly Man”, *Cit.*, 61.

<sup>31</sup> S. K. Rich, “Jean Dubuffet: The Butterfly Man”, *Cit.*, 64.

<sup>32</sup> S. K. Rich, “Jean Dubuffet: The Butterfly Man”, *Cit.*, 70.

<sup>33</sup> The iconography of a butterfly with a human skull, curiously, reappeared in 1991 on the poster for *The Silence of the Lambs*, a movie directed by Jonathan Demme, in which a butterfly, as a metamorphic symbol with a skull (composed of a choreographic disposition of seven nude women quoting Dali’s tableau vivant *Voluptas Mors* from 1951) covers a woman’s mouth (the actress Jodie Foster), representing the feminine form which eventually the masculine killer would wish to transform to. A few months later the association between *vanitas*, butterfly and victim was performed in the first Damien Hirst’s personal exhibition *In and Out of Love*.

Rich, “critics [...] assigned mortuary aspects to all of Dubuffet's works without singling out any one collage as being particularly deathly. Certainly all the collages are, as critics agreed, funereal because they exploit the remains of dead things.”<sup>34</sup> It is also remarkable that “the bodies of those once-living insects are subjected to some pretty degrading ends too, as their hapless corpses are made to imitate smiles, bow ties, and bouquets of flowers.”<sup>35</sup>

Dubuffet also presented a series of landscapes, in which there is no space left for recognition of forms and shapes composing a landscape, and therefore become even more difficult to grasp, for being abstract and unrecognizable as well as crowded. In these cases, like *Paysage aux argus* (1953), which leaves parts of the canvas visible, and even more so in *Vache et Personnage* (1953), whose surface is completely covered with butterflies, mimicry, as Rich properly identified, rises to another level—camouflage. The subject disappears, and “in the process, the figures and their pictorial context surrender their respective boundaries. Human and animal figures, composed of butterfly wings, verge on dissolving into the landscape—a landscape that is itself always already dissolving.”<sup>36</sup> Once more, to describe the process of mimicry, we reference Caillois’ diagonal science. He affirmed that

the organism is no longer located at the origin of the coordinate system but is simply one point among many. Dispossessed of its privilege, it quite literally *no longer knows what to do with itself*. . . . Under these conditions, one's sense of personality (as an awareness of the distinction between organism and environment and of the connection between mind and a specific point in space) is quickly, seriously undermined.<sup>37</sup>

The process of camouflage, through which, according to Rich, “the organism yearns for a post-mortem state,”<sup>38</sup> finds its culmination in *Paysage aux demi-diables* (1953), in which the vertical orientation, usually associated with portraits, is invaded by a landscape of butterfly wings so that any chance for recognizing a single

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<sup>34</sup> S. K. Rich, “Jean Dubuffet: The Butterfly Man”, *Cit.*, 70.

<sup>35</sup> S. K. Rich, “Jean Dubuffet: The Butterfly Man”, *Cit.*, 71.

<sup>36</sup> S. K. Rich, “Jean Dubuffet: The Butterfly Man”, *Cit.*, 71.

<sup>37</sup> Roger Caillois, "Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia," first published in *Minotaure* (1935), reprinted in *The Edge of Surrealism: A Roger Caillois Reader*, ed. Claudine Frank (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2003), 99-100, quote by S. K. Rich, *Cit.*, 72.

<sup>38</sup> S. K. Rich, “Jean Dubuffet: The Butterfly Man”, *Cit.*, 72.

element is lost. “We look for that figure who, perhaps, has now completed its disintegration. The camouflage, the disappearing of the subject, is complete.”<sup>39</sup>

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The employment of butterflies as an artistic medium—not separated from the ethical issues involved—was not an isolated episode in the mid-1950s of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In fact, Damien Hirst’s first exhibition in 1991 presented a piece entitled *In and Out of Love (White Paintings and Live Butterflies)*, which utilized hundreds of Malaysian butterflies, flying in a space surrounded of several canvas until their fatal drop on them remaining with their wings stuck on the canvas covered with fresh monochromatic painting, while attracted from the colourful plants positioned at the bottom of the canvas. The culmination of this use appeared emblematically represented by the laboratory manipulation of butterflies in a work entitled *Nature?*, realised in 2000 by the Portuguese bio-artist Marta De Menezes.<sup>40</sup>

### 2.1.2 Gestural Matter

It could also be argued that, in some cases, experimentation with materials happened as a result of making a virtue out of necessity. For example, in the second post-war period in Europe it was very difficult to find canvas and oil. Consequently, painters used what was as available, like sheets and jute sacks as well as pigments made from fish oil or other kinds of domestic products. These practices were very common for Catalan artist Antoni Tàpies and Italian Alberto Burri (generally considered a precursor to Jannis Kounellis), as well as to the expressionists of CoBrA, a movement in Copenhagen, Brussels, and Amsterdam between 1948 and 1951.

This so-called post-war Informal art included as well other components, like improvisation and ephemerality, determining the primacy of action and a consequent

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<sup>39</sup> S. K. Rich, “Jean Dubuffet: The Butterfly Man”, *Cit.*, 74.

<sup>40</sup> This theme is developed in chapter five.

reconfiguration of philosophical thinking, in Europe as well as the United States and Japan. The legacy of Automatism (the performance of actions without conscious thought or intention), which had been at the core of the Surrealist movement, played a crucial role in this sense and his main experimenter, even before meeting André Breton, was André Masson. In 1926, Masson began the automatic process with which released from the year after his canvas with sand where the matter invites the observer to reconstruct the movements behind the image. Therefore in Masson's work, "psychic automatism is conjugated to a physical dimension linked with the body movements of the artist."<sup>41</sup> In these works, where the canvas lay on the floor, Masson spread a layer of glue, onto which he threw sand and other pigments. He often used sand as a medium, his work featured a total lack of centre, of any sort of order; each fragment considered part of a potentially infinite space, even before Jackson Pollock's action painting, and his most intensive artistic period between 1947-1950. Another reference to Surrealism in Pollock, as mentioned by Gallo, concerns the same practice of dripping, as an elaboration on Max Ernst's oscillations in the 1940s, through which the colour contained in a barrel hung from a machine, covered the canvas with small drops of paint.<sup>42</sup>

This principle of action and, as a consequence, the importance given to gesture, was the agent that determined Jackson Pollock's painting—where the canvas, once "removed from" the easel, extends itself across on the floor, becoming the center around which the artist wander around, making the performance of painting into a dynamic, non-contemplative act. This concept also served as inspiration for a number of John Cage concerts; crossed questions internal to Lucio Fontana's 'Concetti spaziali', with cuts on the canvas' surface as the action of overcoming them by damaging them. This destructive component was also involved in the experimental work presented by the Japanese Gutai Group, first in 1955 and later in 1956, at the Gutai Art Exhibition at Ohara Kaikan Hall in Tokyo. Two particularly relevant works (for the present research) from that exhibition were Kazuo Shiraga's *Challenging Mud* (1955) and Shozo Shimamoto's *Painting by Throwing Bottles of Paint* (1956) gave inspiration, as aforementioned, to some artists in the USA, including Allan Kaprow.

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<sup>41</sup> F. Gallo, "Gesto e Materia", in S. Bordini, (ed.), *Arte Contemporanea e Tecniche*, Roma, Carocci, 2010 (2007), 81-99: 82. Personal translation from Italian.

<sup>42</sup> See F. Gallo, Cit., 83.

Peter Osborne explained that in the USA this kind of experimentation tended to execute “its transformation into other artforms.” For the Gutai’s artists in the mid-1950s, however, the idea of painting was reinvigorated, if sometimes through “gestures of destructiveness.”<sup>43</sup> Osborne affirmed, in fact, “an extreme negation of the painting as a pictorial object was set in counterbalance with the energy of the creative act.”<sup>44</sup> Regarding the relation between Fontana and Pollock, Paul Schimmel explained:

Fontana empathically insisted on the primacy of his over Pollock’s development of a new type of pictorial space, both of which were contingent on dramatic actions. As he stated in 1968 in his last interview, “I make a hole in the canvas in order to leave behind me the old pictorial formulae, the painting and the traditional view of art as I escape symbolically, but also materially, from the prison of the flat surface.... Pollock, then threw paint on the canvas ....He was looking for a new dimension of space, but all he could produce was post-impressionism because he threw paint *onto* the canvas, although he wanted to go *beyond* the canvas.... So, the ‘hole’ is free space and is way in advance of Pollock.” Indeed, Fontana’s punctured and lacerated surfaces [...] were closer to the more ephemeral spirit of Fluxus than the grand gesture that constituted Pollock’s contribution.<sup>45</sup>

After the death of Jackson Pollock, Allan Kaprow highlighted the importance of action painting in the United States and its repercussions for artistic practices in the 1960s, including his own work. The way Pollock was inhabiting painting, experiencing it, living it, brought this impulse for occupying space in works like *18 Happenings in 6 Parts*, created by Allan Kaprow in 1959 with the aim of making a connection between art and life and recognizing Pollock as being responsible for the end of painting, as he stated in 1958: “The other [alternative] is to give up the making of paintings entirely, I mean the single, flat rectangle or oval as we know it.”<sup>46</sup> Working directly on the canvas without preparatory sketches or drawings, Pollock

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<sup>43</sup> See P. Osborne, *Conceptual Art*, London, New York: Phaidon, (2002) 2011, 60-61.

<sup>44</sup> P. Osborne, *Cit.*, 61.

<sup>45</sup> Paul Schimmel quoting Fontana from Erika Belleter, “Lucio Fontana: Between Tradition and Avant-garde,” in *Lucio Fontana, 1899-1968: A Retrospective* exh. cat. (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum and San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 1994), 87, in the exhibition catalogue *Out of Actions: Between Performance and the Object 1949-1979* / with essays by Guy Brett, Hubert Klocker, Richard Koshalek, Shinichiro Osaki, Paul Schimmel, Katrine Stiles, New York: Thames and Hudson, 1998, 22-24.

<sup>46</sup> A. Kaprow, “The Legacy of Jackson Pollock”, *Art News* 57, n° 6 (October 1958), 56 in P. Schimmel, *Cit.*, 20.



also used to imprint his own hands and fingers on his canvases, as well as various materials like buttons, cigarette butts, matchsticks, coins, nails and small bolts, dust, glass and sand, all incorporated while the paint was still fresh. Nevertheless, his work was not the fruit of casual result; on the contrary Pollock explained his control over the manipulation of the paint, in which he did not see any randomness.<sup>47</sup> As a consequence, Pollock's paintings are not only a product of gestural actions, but also and inseparably a matter of material experimentation, which is worth mentioning even if his work did not address directly the organic materiality as focused in this research.

The same way, although apparently not immediately connected with the organic, since the organic cannot be separated from its matter, it seems important mentioning the material experimentation in the Italian post-war period, whose another central figure in this artistic realm was Alberto Burri. Compared with Jean Fautrier and Jean Dubuffet's "matierisme", whose work still maintained a relation (whether if latent) with the image and was known to the Italian artist through his visits to Paris, Burri "banished any trace of image making in favour of defining painting as a wholly material practice."<sup>48</sup> Nevertheless, as Renato Miracco remarked in his essay "Encounters with Matter", this exploration of matter in Italy, this "adventure" of creation—borrowing the expression from Dubuffet—established its major advocates in this period in Burri, Fontana and Manzoni, and was undoubtedly a legacy of Futurism. These three artists are crucial figures "between what went before and what followed."<sup>49</sup> In 1944 Prampolini, one of the major proponents of Futurism, theorized his principles on "polymaterialism," which he defined as follows:

Polymaterial art is a free artistic conception that rebels against the beloved use and abuse of coloured pigment, the mixer, the adulterator, the mystifier against the function of the visual illusionism of pictorial means, from the most reactionary to the most revolutionary. To make the most unthinkable materials rise to a sensitive, emotive, artistic value constitutes the most uncompromising critical assertion against the nostalgic, romantic, and bourgeois palette.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> See F. Gallo, "Gesto e Materia", *Cit.* 85.

<sup>48</sup> Marcia E. Vetrocq, "Painting and Beyond: Recovery and Regeneration, 1943-1952", *The Italian Metamorphosis, 1943-1968*, ed. Germano Celant. New York: Guggenheim Museum, 1994, 26.

<sup>49</sup> R. Miracco, "Encounters with matter", in M. Gale and R. Miracco, *Beyond Painting: Burri, Manzoni, Fontana*, London: Tate Publishing, 2005, 18.

<sup>50</sup> E. Prampolini, "Introduzione all'arte polimaterica," reprinted in Giovanna De Feo et al., *Arte Astratta in Italia 1909-1959*, Rome: De Luca, 1980, 15-16, quoted by M. E. Vetrocq, "Painting and Beyond: Recovery and Regeneration, 1943-1952", *Cit.*, 26.

Alberto Burri's work after 1949 used a range of materials from organic to industrial, enlarging the category of painting, incorporating canvas sacking, scrap iron, wood and plastic, "low and seemingly inexpressive materials of modern life."<sup>51</sup> In 1952 he exposed for the first time started his series of *Muffe* (moulds). At the same time, his works called *Combustioni* (combustions), firstly experimenting the characteristics of wood, and then including also public actions with the combustion of plastics, which also introduced a temporal component in the artistic set. His experiments in *Sacchi* echoed not only in Robert Rauchenberg, who visited the artist's studio in Rome twice in the early 1950s, but also Italian artists, active by the 1960s, who will be part of the group *Arte Povera*.

Miracco also reminded that "Prampolini was the first Italian artist to question the difference between the *use* of material and *being* in matter," referring to Prampolini's words from 1944: "Encounters with matter were not about a battle against painting, but about taking to its extreme the idea of substituting completely and fundamentally the reality of paint with the reality of matter."<sup>52</sup> To this extent, Prampolini's conception of matter was twofold, "being something inherent within the natural world (a living organism, consisting of atoms in perpetual motion) as well as having formal transcendence."<sup>53</sup> His assertions are reminiscent of Gaston Bachelard's words in *Water and Dreams: An Essay on the imagination of Matter* (1942):

Why does everyone always associate the notion of the individual with form? Is there not an individuality in depth that makes matter a totality, even in its smallest divisions? Meditated upon from the perspective of its depth, matter is the very principle that can dissociate itself from forms. It is not the simple absence of formal activity. It remains itself despite all distortion and division. Moreover, matter may be given value in two ways: by deepening or by elevating. Deepening makes it seem unfathomable, like a mystery. Elevation makes it appear to be an inexhaustible force, like a miracle. In both cases, meditation on matter cultivates an *open imagination*.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> M. E. Vetrocq, "Painting and Beyond: Recovery and Regeneration, 1943-1952", *Cit.*, 26.

<sup>52</sup> M. E. Vetrocq, "Painting and Beyond: Recovery and Regeneration, 1943-1952", *Cit.*, 20.

<sup>53</sup> Miracco continues, affirming that: "Another important distinction that Prampolini made was the differentiation between object-matter, whose principle characteristics tend towards an expression of continuity within discontinuity, and of the harmony and dissonance of relationships. These relationships, played out within this dialectic are not so exclusively relevant to the forms of the object-element, as to the organic existence of matter itself." R. Miracco, *Beyond Painting: Burri, Manzoni, Fontana*, *Cit.*, 21.

<sup>54</sup> G. Bachelard, extract from introduction, *L'eau et les rêves* (Paris: José Corti, 1942); trans. Edith Farrell, *Water and Dreams: An Essay on the imagination of Matter*, in (edited by) Jeffrey

If, for Bachelard, meditation on matter allows one to cultivate an open imagination, for Prampolini, which Vetrocq considered to be an initiator of the “conceptual revolution”, “the essence of a work of art lay not in the enduring physical fact of the product but in the ‘spectacular instant’ of the visual experience.”<sup>55</sup> Finally, in the Informal, can be recognized the artistic period in which more emphasis was given to the materiality of art, the Italian art historian Giulio Carlo Argan explained that technique identifies itself with the constitutive process of the image, the latter consubstantial to the matter employed.<sup>56</sup> In a brief, more comprehensive contextualization, Maurizio Calvesi defined the Informal:

More than a movement and a trend, in fact, it was an instance, a point of convergence of the newest researches, a critical and creative attitude characteristic of a period of crisis and development. Informale evidently did not have national limits, even if it could assume altogether differentiated physiognomies in individual countries. If, therefore, Informale was not a movement of precise and outwardly classifiable linguistic characteristics so much as a new mental angle on the aesthetic phenomenon, the establishment of a new relationship between the artist and his work, a new and different awareness of the artistic event and of the making of art, then it is no surprise that its breath was so great as to embrace contrasting extremes of expression and widely divergent creative attitudes.<sup>57</sup>

## 2.2 Matter in Action, Between Ruptures and Encounters

In order to grasp the meaning of a “spectacular instant,” as highlighted by Prampolini, as well as the very concept of action, which captivated the most influential artists around the world from the 1940s and 1950s onwards and was pivotal in the emergence of conceptual art, we must first examine what an action is,

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Kastner, *Nature. Documents on Contemporary Art*, London: Whitechapel Gallery; Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2012, 23

<sup>55</sup> E. Prampolini, “Introduzione all’arte polimaterica,” in M. E. Vetrocq, *Cit.*, 27.

<sup>56</sup> Cf. G.C. Argan, *Materia tecnica e storia dell’Informale* (1959), in P. Barocchi, *Storia moderna dell’arte in Italia*, Einaudi, Torino, 1992, vol. III, t. II, 197-203.

<sup>57</sup> M. Calvesi, “L’Informale in Italia fino al 1957”, first published 1963, reprinted in Maurizio Calvesi, *Le due avanguardie: dal Futurismo alla Pop art*, (the two avant-gardes: from Futurism to Pop art. Milan: Lerici, 1966) 205-207, quoted by M. E. Vetrocq, “Painting and Beyond: Recovery and Regeneration, 1943-1952”, *Cit.*, 29.

how it happens and in which particular moment. For this purpose it will be examined Bachelard's thought, more specifically some passages from his *Dialectic of Duration* (1936), interacting with Luis Althusser's thought.<sup>58</sup>

According to Monika Wulz, Bachelard's study of the question "what is an action?" referred to Eugenio Rignano's *Psychology of Reason* (1920): "Bachelard emphasizes that an action is not just effected by physiological impulses. Instead he points to much more abstract circumstances that initiate the possibility of activity."<sup>59</sup> He wrote that "[t]here has to be permission to act, and the mind must lend its full support to being. We only feel this support, we only feel the mind's presence, in the repose that precedes action, when the possible and the real are clearly compared."<sup>60</sup>

Wulz explored Bachelard's statement, asking "why is the initiation of an action the origin of a temporal duration? Why is temporality only an effect of the agency within this confrontation?" This encounter between "the possible and the real—Wulz explained—requires the idea of nothingness, the possibility of voids. It implies negativism, coercion, inhibition, hesitation and destruction."<sup>61</sup> Contrasting the Bergsonian idea of continuous creation in living processes, Bachelard claimed a philosophy based on ruptures, in other words an "instant of nothingness" as a point of departure.<sup>62</sup> In his *Intuition de l'Instant* (1932), where an instant is isolated, disconnected in a temporal dimension, his concept of nothingness "is a free and undefined sphere where a specific conjunction can take place: the fusion, the adhesion of the mind and the being, the collision of the possible and the real." In this instant of nothingness, when an action begins, lies the foundation of temporality.

Wulz continued exploring Bachelard's philosophy in a way that we can link to the creative process, when she explained,

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<sup>58</sup> It will be developed following Monika Wulz's "Intervals, Possibilities and Encounters. The Trigger of a Ruptured History in Bachelard", in *Epistemology and History. From Bachelard and Canguilhem to Today's History of Science*, Berlin: Max Planck Institute, 2012. Available at <<http://www.mpiwg-berlin.mpg.de/Preprints/P434.PDF>> Acts of the Conference organized at the Max Planck Institute in Berlin on December 2010.

<sup>59</sup> See M. Wulz, "Intervals, Possibilities and Encounters. The Trigger of a Ruptured History in Bachelard", *Cit.*, 77.

<sup>60</sup> G. Bachelard, *Dialectic of Duration*, translated by Mary McAllester, Manchester Clinamen Press, 2000, 86 in M. Wulz, "Intervals, Possibilities and Encounters. The Trigger of a Ruptured History in Bachelard", *Cit.*, 77.

<sup>61</sup> G. Bachelard in M. Wulz, "Intervals, Possibilities and Encounters. The Trigger of a Ruptured History in Bachelard", *Cit.*, 77.

<sup>62</sup> M. Wulz, "Intervals, Possibilities and Encounters. The Trigger of a Ruptured History in Bachelard", *Cit.*, 77.

it becomes rather obvious that Bachelard addresses the isolated instant as a moment of solitude. However, Bachelard does not talk about an isolation of the subject from its environment, but about an isolation from ourselves—a rupture with our own past. Bachelard’s instant is thus a de-subjectified isolation: an isolation without a subject. The moment of solitude is the pure void—devoid of any concept of individuality. In other words, Bachelard’s concept of the instant constitutes the moment in which we depart from ourselves in order to *anticipate* reality. [...] The nothingness, the absence, the lacunae are not only in the individual—they are also part of the materiality that is established in the process of research.<sup>63</sup>

It seems remarkable that Bachelard, in these essays from the 1930s, was stressing the importance of materiality and matter not as separate entities, but rather as core principles from the process of theoretical research. Bachelard identified a “free scope for possibilities of halts and deviations”, as Wulz remarked

in every development, every vital potency, and every continuous movement. The disturbances intervene within these undetermined zones. The obstacles, the incidental occurrences, the disturbances are pure possibilities for unforeseen deviations and novelties. [...] Bachelard points out that even the process of material research is a temporal activity—essentially based on waiting for discontinuous events: “You will have to wait for it [matter] to produce its events.”<sup>64</sup>

In another essay, *Le matérialisme rationnel* (1956), Bachelard attributed the characteristics of discontinuity and instantaneity to life, memory and reason, also considering scientific knowledge to be a sequence of discontinuous events. “He emphasizes that the scientific progress is a phenomenon of suddenness: the epistemic innovation bursts out. At the same time, it makes the traditional epistemology *burst* (*éclater*).”<sup>65</sup> As a consequence results what Wulz highlighted from *l’Intuition de l’Instant*: the concept of “uselessness” of a historiography built on a “sum of facts” put in a chronological line, and which not *make use* of the instants. In other words, Bachelard claimed

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<sup>63</sup> G. Bachelard, *Intuition de l’Instant*, 15, in M. Wulz, *Cit.*, 79.

<sup>64</sup> G. Bachelard, *La dialectique de la durée*, 2001 (1936), in Wulz, “Intervals, Possibilities and Encounters. The Trigger of a Ruptured History in Bachelard”, *Cit.*, 80-81.

<sup>65</sup> M. Wulz, “Intervals, Possibilities and Encounters. The Trigger of a Ruptured History in Bachelard”, *Cit.*, 83.

a concept of time and history that is ruptured, framed, serial: history is affected by intervening obstacles, deviations, and events. Time is a product of the “use of instants” (II, 88). He thus proposes a dynamic kind of history that operates on the basis of temporal frames emerging from the “synthesis in the instant” (II, 82). The duration of time, the characteristic of history, is for Bachelard therefore an ongoing innovation and invention emerging from the instant—the zone of nothingness, the interval, the moment of the rupture, of the no. As a result we can understand the *historical epistemology* with Bachelard as a formation of emerging from within the epistemic void: the rupture in our memory and reason, the break created by the no, the nothingness in ourselves and in the epistemic objects.<sup>66</sup>

Wulz concluded her analysis on the concept of history in Bachelard, based on the instant, the rupture, and the realm of nothingness, encouraging to “creat[ing] a sphere for the confrontation of the possible, the unexpected and the real. It is a zone for the intervention of unforeseen events that trigger the activity of framing and reframing reality and this creates differential temporal realities.”<sup>67</sup> Wulz suggested a connection with Althusser’s *materialism of the encounter*, which is aleatory and founded on the idea that all order derives from disorder.<sup>68</sup> As a consequence, every reality is based on a mere coincidence, and material encounters are unstable and provisional. Therefore, a permanent encounter “can only originate from a coerced connection,” corresponding to the reality of “our specific history”. Then, Althusser, envisioning all materiality and reality as changeable, developed his own concept of history and historiography: a “histoire au present,”<sup>69</sup> meaning a history that instead of dealing with events having transpired in the past, deals with “objects that are open to a random and uncertain future. The historiography of this present history emerges from the singular and incidental encounter in the present. It develops a history from within the current events recurring to the past that has never happened as such.”<sup>70</sup> In other words, according to Wulz’s conclusion:

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<sup>66</sup> M. Wulz, “Intervals, Possibilities and Encounters. The Trigger of a Ruptured History in Bachelard”, *Cit.*, 83.

<sup>67</sup> M. Wulz, “Intervals, Possibilities and Encounters. The Trigger of a Ruptured History in Bachelard”, *Cit.*, 87.

<sup>68</sup> See M. Wulz, “Intervals, Possibilities and Encounters. The Trigger of a Ruptured History in Bachelard”, *Cit.*, 84. (Italics in the original)

<sup>69</sup> L. Althusser, *Sur la philosophie*, 45, in Wulz, “Intervals, Possibilities and Encounters. The Trigger of a Ruptured History in Bachelard”, *Cit.*, 86.

<sup>70</sup> M. Wulz, “Intervals, Possibilities and Encounters. The Trigger of a Ruptured History in Bachelard”, *Cit.*, 86.

The attention to the differential historicity of knowledge, to the historicity of materiality, to the material aspects of the research processes is thus related both to the possibility of unforeseen events and to the idea of the void (1) in the process of research (2) in our epistemic conditionality, and (3) in the epistemic objects themselves. In the laboratory as well as in the history of science (or historical epistemology) the infinitesimal instant of the epistemic void could give us the opportunity to ask a new, a differentiated, question of research, to re-arrange the elements of the history in the present with regard to a moment of surprise. The differential temporality of history relies on the current moment of incidental encounter: a moment of confusion, of disorientation in view of the unexpected, a moment of shock.<sup>71</sup>

These words from Monika Wulz suggest that the historicity of materiality have a double meaning; as method and as object. As method, in the sense that research on organic materiality in 20<sup>th</sup> century art needs to make use of individual moments rather than falling into the trap of a linear narrative. Because organic matter itself, introduced in a work of art, is the result of a contamination, an exploration not circumscribed and isolated, neither from the historical context, nor from the heterogeneous material context, it appears as the only one that justify its presence in art practices. Materiality—and more specifically organic materiality as focus of this research—with its characteristics of discontinuity, of rapture, and moments of void, played a central role in the artistic practices in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, determining an entry that would open the door to conceptual art.

### 2.3 *Going Out of Actions*<sup>72</sup>

The epistemological overview drafted can serve as a contribution in understanding the shift operated by some artists, like Pollock, Cage, Fontana, Shimamoto, in which Paul Schimmel identified some seeds for the conceptual revolution around performance and the object,<sup>73</sup> between the end of the first and the beginning of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. During this period, the neo-avant-

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<sup>71</sup> M. Wulz, “Intervals, Possibilities and Encounters. The Trigger of a Ruptured History in Bachelard”, *Cit.*, 88.

<sup>72</sup> *Out of Action: Between Performance and the Object, 1949-1979*, organized by Paul Schimmel (et al.), Los Angeles: The Geffen Museum of Contemporary Art, 1998.

<sup>73</sup> P. Schimmel, “Leap into the Void: Performance and the Object”, *Cit.*, 17-119: 18.

garde rediscovered and refashioned some of the basic devices developed by the European avant-gardes between the two World Wars (Dadaism, Surrealism, Futurism, Constructivism, Productivism), under new social and artistic conditions.<sup>74</sup> At that time, the artistic practices of neo-avant-gardes presented similarities with the historical, as Hal Foster analysed in-depth in his by then classic *The Return of the Real*. In fact, “Historical and neo-avant-gardes are constituted in a similar way, as a continual process of protension and retension, a complex relay of anticipated futures and reconstructed past—in short, in a deferred action that throws over any simple scheme of before and after, cause and effect, origin and repetition.”<sup>75</sup>

If we consider “the return of the real” as defined by Hal Foster and through the notion of liberation from form and a temporality constructed by a collection of fragmented instants, we can understand this period as a sort of foundation, of “absolute beginning”,<sup>76</sup> to use the words of Bachelard, for those artists that Paul Schimmel places at the “origins” in his essay included in *Out of Actions*. Having explored some aspects of Bachelard’s philosophy, we may then better comprehend the “lineages of negation” that Peter Osborne outlined in four main categories in his *Conceptual Art*, which depart from the negation of Clement Greenberg’s discussion on modern painting, material objectivity, medium specificity, and visuality and autonomy.<sup>77</sup>

Through this negation, we may argue that organic materiality was on its way to affirmation during the period between the 1950s and the 1960s. Osborne declared that each of these four forms of negativity produced, as a counterpart, the development of different artistic forms that can be included in the wide category of Conceptual art. We could therefore deduce that the mature employment of organic materials in artistic practice coincided with the beginning of “conceptual art”, which nevertheless remains a disputed idea.”<sup>78</sup>

Organic materiality in artistic practices during that period elicits discussion of two important points. First, if the concept of “organic” conjures the idea of “life”, the

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<sup>74</sup> Cf. P. Osborne, *Conceptual Art*, Cit., 16.

<sup>75</sup> H. Foster, *The Return of the Real*, Cambridge MA, London: The Mint Press, 1996, 29.

<sup>76</sup> See M. Wulz, *Cit.* 78.

<sup>77</sup> P. Osborne, *Conceptual Art*, Cit., 18.

<sup>78</sup> “Whether viewed as an aberration, a heroic failure, a stepping-stone to the present, or an unfinished project, its neuroses continue to speak to us in a number of registers (artistic, theoretical, political), in a number of different ways.” P. Osborne, *Conceptual Art*, Cit., 16.



heterogeneity of materials appearing with the increase of installation art in the realm of what Rosalind Krauss defined as a “post-medium condition”<sup>79</sup> deals with an intrinsic idea of negativity, in relation with Greenberg. Secondly, what is remarkable is that, for instance, Georges Didi-Huberman, in his essay *La rassemblement par contact: archéologie, anachronisme et modernité de l’empreinte* (2008) identified Clement Greenberg as the final point of the optical primacy of the pictorial in aesthetics and art history the way it had persisted in Western art from a tradition initiated by Giorgio Vasari.<sup>80</sup> This persistence was based on the specific vasarian concept of *disegno* (design), conceived as *procedendo dall’intelletto* (proceeding from intellect).<sup>81</sup> For Vasari, drawing was the “father” of the three major arts: painting, sculpture and architecture. If the intellectual process of “design” (*disegno*) foreruns with a vaguely idealist and vaguely platonic concept, according to Didi-Huberman, “the technical gesture is no more the first: it is located at the end of the path, a mere instrument of an apparently too intellectual process going from the *idea* to the *disegno*-design (artistic invention), and from the latter to the *disegno*-drawing, or alternately in the terms of the same Vasari, the idea as such *espressa con le mani* (expressed with hands).”<sup>82</sup>

This statement does not suggest that technique should have prevalence over the idea or that the originality of an artwork lies in the technical abilities of its creator. Rather, Didi-Huberman clarified this point by referring to the example of Duchamp, who was responsible for the “loss of quality, and the lack of taste, and the decline of a superior art,” according to Greenberg.<sup>83</sup> More precisely, Didi-Huberman, referring to Thierry de Duve’s text on the ready-made from 1989 (*Au nom de l’art. Pour une archéologie de la modernité* and *Résonnances du readymade. Duchamp entre avant-garde et tradition*), states that “beyond the dadaist disrespect regarding the ‘craft

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<sup>79</sup> Rosalind Krauss, “*A Voyage on The North Sea*”: *Art in The Age of Post-Medium Condition*, New York: Thames and Hudson, 1999.

<sup>80</sup> G. Didi-Hiberman, *La rassemblement par contact: archéologie, anachronisme et modernité de l’empreinte*, Paris: Minuit, 2008, 93.

<sup>81</sup> Didi-Huberman uses italics for the Italian words in the text of Vasari on “The Life of Giotto.” Cf. G. Didi-Huberman, Cit. (2008), 93.

<sup>82</sup> “Le geste technique n’est plus premier : il se retrouve enfin de parcours, simple instrument d’un processus apparemment très intellectuel qui va de l’*idea* au *disegno*-dessein (l’invention artistique), et de celui-ci au *disegno*-dessin, à savoir, dans les terms mêmes de Vasari, l’*idea* comme telle *espressa con le mani*.” G. Didi-Huberman, Cit. (2008), 93. Didi-Huberman quotes G. Vasari’s original text from *Le vite dei più eccellenti pittori, scultori e architetti* (1550-1568).

<sup>83</sup> Cf. G. Didi-Huberman, *La rassemblement par contact: archéologie, anachronisme et modernité de l’empreinte*, Cit., 186.

laws', the duchampian decision won't eventually concern more that the *disparition de fabrication* (disappearing of fabrication), and its replacement by a phrase, by a statement device in which is responded 'this is art' and 'no matter who did it.'" It necessarily implies—gradually resulting in the dematerialization of art in Conceptual research—a change in logic, Didi-Huberman explained, producing disorientation of vision and of method.<sup>84</sup> Being the organic by definition a non man-made product (at least until before the late decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century), we might consider it as a further elaboration of the duchampian assertion. It is through this shift in logic and its methodological reflections that organic materiality has to be intended in the artistic practices from the avant-gardes onwards, with an increasing expansion of this device beginning in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Duchamp played a key role in post-war USA. His ideas were absorbed by John Cage, a teacher at the *Black Mountain College*, which was founded in 1933 and conceived as a place where teaching and learning coincided with life in an environment of shared community. An audience probably would not relate to a performance featuring John Cage playing the piano to which a donkey is tied if we did not consider the introduction of music corresponding to the introduction of everyday life into art—a legacy of Dada.<sup>85</sup> Only this parallel can make plausible the presence of silence, noise and nature as music. For Cage, art existed as “purposeless play” for “waking us up to the very life we're living.”<sup>86</sup> It appears that Cage was therefore inclined to live a life driven by aesthetics in its primal meaning of sensorial and perceptual experience, rather than by rationality.

This is supported by what Cage himself wrote about Robert Rauschenberg, resident artist at the Black Mountain Collage, with whom he created the first spontaneous and interdisciplinary happening, in which other members of the faculty participated. Interaction with the audience was encouraged as well, since Cage's

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<sup>84</sup> “Il en est de la fabrication, de la question technique, comme de l'aura et de l'efficacité symbolique en général : ce que l'on ressent spontanément comme une 'mort' n'est en réalité qu'une transformation du mode d'existence des objets dans leurs relations au contexte ; et ce que l'on place spontanément dans le règne indistinct du 'n'importe quoi' n'est en réalité qu'un changement de logique, une désorientation—encore non parvenue à ses effets de 'lisibilité' historique, pour parler en termes benjaminien—de la visée, de la méthode.” G. Didi-Huberman, *La rassemblement par contact: archéologie, anachronisme et modernité de l'empreinte*, Cit., 186.

<sup>85</sup> See Parinaud, André, Carlos Vilardebo, *The Sixties: The Art in Question*, (VHS), 53 mins, Peasmarsh: Roland Collection, 19--.

<sup>86</sup> J. Cage, “Experimental Music”, in *Silence* (1971), London, 1980, 12. In David Hopkins, *After Modern Art.1945-2000*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000, 41.

commitment was to decentralizing the artist's ego.<sup>87</sup> Cage wrote, "Beauty is not underfoot wherever we take the trouble to look. (This is an American discovery.) Is when Rauschemberg looks an idea? Rather it is entertainment in which to celebrate unfixity."<sup>88</sup>

Rauschemberg's famous "combines", a fusion between objects, painting and sculpture, created "a situation involving multiplicity", in the words of Cage.<sup>89</sup> One example is *Bed* (1955), in which the influence of Burri and his *Sacchi* is apparent on the painting done on a quilt; the vertical position reminds directly to the human body, our sleeping and dreaming, and also, according to the art critic Jerry Saltz, *Bed* "is incredibly sexual and looks like sheets after lovemaking."<sup>90</sup> Being his neo-Dadaist instances far from the abstract expressionism flow in the New York scene of those years, *Bed* can be also considered as "an anthropomorphic counterpoint to Pollock's floor-based 'action paintings.'"<sup>91</sup>

His "combination" of objects and its passage from vertical to horizontal orientation of a canvas culminated with *Monogram* (1955-59), which can be considered as a legacy of Dadaism and the Surrealist object, showing also Rauschemberg interest on taxidermy. *Monogram*, in fact, being realised during four years, it features a goat. An animal that Rauschemberg found on a shop, like a Dadaist "objet trouvé" in a period in which he was working with stuffed animals, but in fact, this was not an object.<sup>92</sup> The goat stands in the middle of a horizontal surface

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<sup>87</sup> See D. Hopkins, *After Modern Art.1945-2000*, Cit., 42 and 104.

<sup>88</sup> J. Cage, *Silence*, Cambridge, MA, 1969, 98-107, in C. Harrison and P. Wood, *Art in Theory*, Cit., 734.

<sup>89</sup> J. Cage, *Silence*, Cit., 735.

<sup>90</sup> J. Saltz adds: "As a single bed it also implies autoerotic and private desires. An unexplored side of *Bed* is the polymorphous materiality of its glistening sticky substances: nail polish and toothpaste. Formally, which is the way the art world prefers to look at things, *Bed* performs a kind of triple rotation of psychic and optical space: You look down on, at, and into it simultaneously. Grasping the anti-Greenbergian implications of this, in 1962 art historian Leo Steinberg turned a catchy, maybe empty phrase, labelling this spatial transformation 'the flatbed picture plane,' a method that he said 'expresses the most radical shift in the subject matter of art, the shift from nature to culture.'" J. Saltz, "Our Picasso? A line drawn in the psychic sands of American sexual and cultural values," Tuesday, January 3, 2006, in <[www.villagevoice.com](http://www.villagevoice.com)> (accessed in December 2014).

<sup>91</sup> D. Hopkins, *After Modern Art.1945-2000*, Cit., 44.

<sup>92</sup> Rauschemberg referred in an interview, "First I tried to put it on a flat plane and it was obviously too massive, it had too much character, it looked too much like itself that I couldn't compete with my painting and I tried a couple of devices like light bulbs underneath to lighten it and that didn't work. [...] He still refuses to be abstracted into art: it looks like art with a goat and so I put a tire and then everything went to rest. And they lived happily ever after" (smile) R. Rauschemberg interview was transmitted on Ovation TV in 2008, available on <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PiCnCN2NV-E>> (accessed in December 2014)

composed of painting, collage, of which has replaced the pasture. According to Jerry Saltz, *Monogram* is

A sort of gargoyle or ravaging scavenger guarding over and also destroying art, this cloven-hoofed creature is a shamanic manifestation of Rauschenberg. In early Christian art goats symbolized the damned. This is exactly what Rauschenberg was as a gay/bisexual man and an artist, at the time. A dingy tennis ball behind the animal suggests it has defecated on painting. Allegorically, Rauschenberg is a bull in the china shop of art history, a satyr squeezing through the eye of an aesthetic/erotic needle.<sup>93</sup>

The use of the animal “wearing” a tire, symbolizes the conjunction of the natural and industrial world, in the contemporary world.<sup>94</sup> The relationship between medium and materiality for the leading exponent of the New Realism Rauschenberg’s work found its basis “in his well-known declaration of intent from 1959 ‘to act in that gap’ between art and life”, which would therefore explain the use of “‘a pair of socks’ as ‘no less suitable to make a painting than wood, nails, turpentine, oil, and fabric.’”<sup>95</sup> In *The Contingent Object of Contemporary Art*, Marta Buskirk dedicated a chapter to “Medium and Materiality,” in which she wrote that

In an interview seven years later R. again emphasized material properties, describing how he was “unable to divorce paint, as it was traditionally, from the fact that it was just another material. Paint has a character, a quality, it has a physical, recognizable body and I just couldn’t cultivate in myself that other kind of illusionary quality that I would have had to have believed in in order to have gone in a different direction.” By then his materials list had expanded exponentially, and he concluded that “after you recognize that the canvas you’re painting on is simply another rag then it doesn’t matter whether you use stuffed chickens or electric light bulbs or pure forms.”<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> J.Saltz, “Our Picasso? A line drawn in the psychic sands of American sexual and cultural values,” Cit.

<sup>94</sup> “The MoMA indignantly refused when Castelli tried to sell the museum *Monogram*, arguably Rauschenberg’s most famous work and one of the Paris show’s highlights. Today, it occupies a place of honor at the Moderna Museet in Stockholm.” Jorg von Uthmann, “Rauschenberg’s Mystery Goat Stars in Paris Show of ‘Combines”, *Bloomberg.com* November 8, 2006. Available at <[http://www.bloomberg.com/apps/news?pid=newsarchive&sid=aJO1aQbv\\_DMs&refer=muse](http://www.bloomberg.com/apps/news?pid=newsarchive&sid=aJO1aQbv_DMs&refer=muse)> (accessed in December 2014)

<sup>95</sup> M. Buskirk, *The Contingent Object of Contemporary Art*, Cambridge, MA; London: The MIT Press, 2003, 132.

<sup>96</sup> M. Buskirk, *The Contingent Object of Contemporary Art*, Cit., 132.

This final sentence from Rauschemberg resounds as an alert to consider all research on materiality in dialogue with the organic, as we have examined in this chapter, through an examination of a variety of explorations and specific cases, in which every artist creates a personal response to a widespread interest departing from matter around the two decades in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Moreover, his declaration regarding the fact that it does not matter what materials are used, should not undervalue the importance on materiality, but rather it should emphasize the action of resistance inherent to artistic practices through the appropriation of a broader material vocabulary in which this research is inscribed.

### 2.3.1 “Being (the total being which is pure becoming)”<sup>97</sup> Piero Manzoni

At the same period, the opening from painting and within painting to a variety of medium and material possibilities was expressed by Piero Manzoni as well. The 1957 *Manifesto di Albisola Marina* (Savona, Italy), signed by the artist among others, condemned any kind of abstraction and decorativism, and pronounced art able “to become a natural and spontaneous continuation of our psychological processes, an offshoot of our organic life itself, which develops through the attentive control of consciousness and the immaculate astonishment of the senses.”<sup>98</sup> Years later, Manzoni continued to manifest his position against the tradition of painting, as shown in the statement: “I do not understand painters who, whilst declaring themselves receptive to contemporary problems, still stand in front of a canvas as if it were a surface needing to be filled in with colours and forms,” in the text “Libera dimensione”/ “Free dimension” published in *Azimuth*, n° 2 1960, 19.<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> A sentence from Piero Manzoni, “Free Dimension” (“Libera dimensione”, January 4, 1960) translated from the catalogue *Identité Italienne*, Paris: Centre Pompidou, 1981, 46 for Harrison and Wood, *Cit.*, 724.

<sup>98</sup> P. Manzoni, G. Biasi, M. Colucci, E. Sordini, A. Verga, “Manifesto di Albisola Marina” (“Manifesto of Albisola Marina”), in *The Italian Metamorphosis, 1943-1968*, Germano Celant (ed.), New York: Guggenheim Museum, 1994, 718.

<sup>99</sup> P. Manzoni, “Free Dimension,” Harrison and Wood, *Cit.*, 724. Conceived by the artists Enrico Castellani and Piero Manzoni in Milan with the help of their mentor Lucio Fontana, *Azimuth* was an experimental art journal in affiliation with their gallery Azimut in Milan (the “h” served to distinguish the journal from the gallery), lasting a short but impactful eight months between 1959 and 1960 in which only two issues were published.

Fontana, with his slashed canvases, produced a disintegration of materiality, opening “onto an airy temporality”, and “leaving only a negative space—an anti-mark—operating as threshold onto another zone.” According to Jaleh Mansoor, “Where Fontana conceived of a temporality and materiality that transforms toward ultimate sublation, Manzoni proposes a model wherein materiality unfolds as overlapping and pulsatile.”<sup>100</sup>

This exploration of the nature of matter, centred around the Italian artistic research of Futurism then going through Fontana, Burri, and Manzoni, to the poverist practice of Jannis Kounellis, for what concern Manzoni it involved in particular his first series, *Achromes*, which paralleled Yves Klein’s *Monochromes*. Both of which represented a progressive rejection of painting and figuration and a consequent increasing focus on matter. *Achromes*, consisting of canvases stitched and treated with kaolin or encrusted with small stones or other objects, all of them painted in white, as a negation of colour, as “a-chromes”, was a philosophical exploration of purity. Released between 1958 and 1962, the *Achromes* were part of a theoretical artistic framework developed with other Italian artists in the manifesto “For an Organic Painting.” Published in 1957, the manifesto’s first statement was “We want to organicize disintegration. In a disintegrated world, we want to be able to discover and reveal to ourselves the inner structures.”<sup>101</sup> Regarding the group’s stance on painting, it seems worthwhile to refer an extract from the above-mentioned text “Free Dimension”:

To suggest, to express, to represent: these are not problems today. [...] [W]hether or not a painting is a representation of an object, of a fact, of an idea, or of a dynamic phenomenon, it is uniquely valuable in itself. [...]

Furthermore, the questions concerning colour, chromatic relations (...) are shown to be useless. We can only open out a single colour [...]. My intention is to present a completely white surface (or better still, an absolutely

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<sup>100</sup> Jaleh Mansoor, “We Want to Organicize Disintegration”, *October*, The MIT Press, Vol. 95 (Winter, 2001), 28-53: 35. We may argue that his poetic, even if with different results was more similar to Pollock’s style, featuring the materiality of an accumulation of layers of painting.

<sup>101</sup> The manifesto “For an Organic Painting” continues as follows: “We want to establish these presences unequivocally. Beyond all surface hedonism, all impression, all memory, we disintegrate phenomena and acts in order to find their innermost impulses, to separate the essential from the gratuitous and monodize it with absolute precision, so as to highlight each in its most authentic seed, The painting is our space of freedom, in which we continuously reinvent painting, in continuous search of our primary images.” Milan, June 1957, Piero Manzoni, Guido Biasi, Mario Colucci, Ettore Sordini, Angelo Verga in *The Italian Metamorphosis*, Cit., 718.

colourless or neutral one) beyond all pictorial phenomena, all intervention alien to the sense of the surface. A white surface [...] which is nothing other than a colourless surface, or even a surface which quite simply 'is'.<sup>102</sup>

Furthermore, a turning point in Manzoni's experimental journey from the medium of painting to his more conceptual research on the object is represented by a canvas covered with twenty-five bread rolls coated with kaolin: *Achrome with bread rolls* (1961). It featured, in fact, according to Jaleh Mansoor, the encounter between the schema of the modernist painting and the connection with materiality, "an obfuscated term" by the "models of modernism".<sup>103</sup> After having filled the canvas surface, considered as "living flesh", with any sort of materials like gesso, kaolin, resin, white paint, and polystyrene combined, bounded and left to their own deterioration, Piero Manzoni considered his research on the *Achromes* concluded.<sup>104</sup> Although it does not seem existing any relationship, it is remarkable how this first years of Manzoni's artistic research echoes some verses by the Polish artist Tadeusz Kantor, from his "Carnet des notes" (1955), associating painting to a living organism, and the unpredictability of its matter, therefore, challenging us to face risks towards "an unknown epilogue."<sup>105</sup>

Manzoni's following conceptual experimentations are explicitly oriented to the debunking of art, acquiring a multiplicity of facets in zones, persons, or objects. The artist's role and the artworks' value can be compared to King Midas of Greek mythology, who turned everything he touched into gold. Similarly, Manzoni transformed everything he touched into a work of art. If the greed of the King

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<sup>102</sup> P. Manzoni, "Free Dimension", in *Cit.*, 723-724.

<sup>103</sup> J. Mansoor, "We Want to Organicize Disintegration", *Cit.*, 30-31.

<sup>104</sup> See J. Mansoor, "We Want to Organicize Disintegration", *Cit.*, 44.

<sup>105</sup> "Representation" / loses more and more of its charm. / To create painting is / in itself / a living organism, / moving like / a hive. / Space which retracts violently / condenses forms / to dimensions of molecules / to the limit of the "impossible." / In this dreadful / movement / the speed of making decisions / and of interventions, / the spontaneity of the behaviour / constantly grazes / risk. / Danger connected with phenomena / ignored, / scorned / inhibited in the lowest regions / of human activity / refusing all rational classification. / It is that art will rediscover the reason for being / and its rank. / It is risk which is the origin of this / *great adventure* / of this game which situates itself / always at the limit of the risk / and whose outcome—despite rules—/ remains forever unforeseeable. / ... Painting becomes a demonstration of life, / a depository of diverse activities. / I am fascinated by this play of chance / with *matter* / this battle without victories or defeats / this spectacle, in which I do not at all play the principle character, / and which holds me bound in passionate expectation / of the unknown epilogue. Excerpt from T. Kantor, "Carnet des notes", (1955), in Tadeusz Kantor *Metamorphoses* (Paris, 1982) reprinted in Peter Seltz and Kristine, Stiles (eds.), *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art: a Sourcebook of Artists' Writings*, Berkeley; Los Angeles; London: University of California Press, 1996, 58-59.

endangered his own life—he could not feed himself, after all—Piero Manzoni attempted to debunk art and the system involved in a playful, irreverent and provocative way, ended, in a way, for negating art itself. Regarding the realm of mythology, it seems worthwhile mentioning “For the Discovery of a Zone of Images,” a manifesto signed by Piero Manzoni, among others, in Milan, on December 9, 1956, which opened with the statement “Without myth there can be no art.”<sup>106</sup> Affirming himself as an artist, and therefore as a kind of saint or a magician, in his works between 1960 and 1961, Manzoni advanced the legacy of the Duchampian ready-made, where instead the author was hidden, and the object put at the public attention as a mirror reflecting the subject, which had conceived it.<sup>107</sup>

These artistic practices involved the organic device as well. For example, when using his own body in *Respiro d'Artista / Artist's Breath* (1960), with the balloon inflated by the artist in case the purchaser wished at the price of 200 lire a litre; boiled eggs, stamped with his thumbprint and offered to the public as a critique to the consume of art. According to Mansoor, the residual presence on the canvas was transferred in the organic vestige of the physical presence in a series of thumbprints on paper and on eggs. Nevertheless, paraphrasing Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, who reflected on this topic in his “Formalism and History” in 1975, Mansoor highlights the twofold value inner within the thumbprints, acting as the artist’s mark, and therefore guaranteeing uniqueness, while on the other hand “nothing could be more generic than the indexical trace of a finger.”<sup>108</sup> In other words, “an egg is an egg, grounded in the tautological concretion of itself, like a monochrome.”<sup>109</sup>

His performance, in which the public was invited to eat the artist’s eggs, served as a metaphor for the consuming of art in society and reached its

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<sup>106</sup> “Without myth there can be no art. The work of art finds its cause in an unconscious impulse, the birth and death of a collective substratum, yet the artistic act lies in the awareness of the gesture; an intuitive awareness, for the true technique of artistic activity is intuitive clarification. [...]”, in “For the Discovery of a Zone of Images” in *The Italian Metamorphosis, 1943-1968*, Germano Celant (ed.), New York: Guggenheim Museum, 1994, 715.

<sup>107</sup> Regarding the interrelations between historical and neo-avant-gardes and the institution, we refer to the first of Hal Foster’s three claims, “*the institution of art is grasped as such not with the historical avant-garde but with the neo-avant-garde*,” (italics in the original) in H. Foster, *The return of the Real*, Cit., 20.

<sup>108</sup> J. Mansoor, “We Want to Organicize Disintegration”, *Cit.*, 45. Mansoor quotes Benjamin H. D. Buchloh in “Formalism and History,” in *Formalism and Historicity*, ed. Anne Rorimer, Chicago: Chicago Institute of Art, 1975, 105: “The subjective gesture and the objective sign could be described as being at the same time both singular uniqueness and endless variety of the same, organic individuality and mechanical object, personal experience and collective anonymity.”

<sup>109</sup> J. Mansoor, “We Want to Organicize Disintegration”, *Cit.*, 46.



eschatological extreme on August 12, 1961 at the Pescetto gallery in Albissola Marina. There, Manzoni presented ninety cans of *Merda d'Artista / Artist's Shit* (1961), which has also been seen as a critique of the massive consumerism, since Manzoni was the name of the emerging Italian brand of canned meat.<sup>110</sup> This piece went a step further than his *Lines*, which enclosed the cans in a cylindrical box out of sight from viewers, converting the spatiality of a line to a measure for time. In *Merda d'Artista*, the corporeal matter hidden in the can (its sight, smell and physical presence) alludes, with the label in different languages, to the relationship between production and consumption as a mechanism of a market that have reached global dimensions.<sup>111</sup>

Manzoni also used other bodies in performance activities that, like his previous works, “ ‘were an expression of being in the void,’ as well as ‘being reality and being void.’”<sup>112</sup> For example, signing naked women’s bodies and (pretending to) make artwork of them in 1961 as well as the artist Marcel Broothaers, who on February 23, 1962 received the *Declaration of Authenticity* N° 071 for being signed by Piero Manzoni.<sup>113</sup> At the gallery La Tartaruga in Rome, his *Base Magica (Magic Base)* consisted of a wooden pedestal on top of which two felt footprints invited the audience to occupy the pillar that would magically turn them into works of art, or at least into “Living Sculptures,” a concept the British duo Gilbert & George would explore in the late 1960s.<sup>114</sup> His conceptual poetics culminated with the *Socle du*

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<sup>110</sup> According to Mansoor, they were apparently filled with tomato paste, a quintessential Italian export product. Mansoor, tracing the eschatological by introducing analogies with The Marquis de Sade’s *The 120 Days of Sodom*, argues that “In *The 120 Days of Sodom*, the reader catalogs through endless accounts of libertines and their coordinated consumption of fecal matter, a process that perfectly mimes a well-engineered plan for the organization of labor. The subject whose body produces the desired product (shit) must internally arrange him or herself to ensure the optimum quantity of feces at regular intervals, eaten at correspondingly even intervals. In addition, the axis from anal to oral and back again ensures that all subjects involved are interchangeable parts in a closed circuit.” J. Mansoor, “We Want to Organicize Disintegration”, *Cit.*, 49.

<sup>111</sup> See J. Mansoor, “We Want to Organicize Disintegration”, *Cit.*, 51.

<sup>112</sup> P. Schimmel, “Leap into the Void: Performance and the Object”, *Cit.*, 49.

<sup>113</sup> In this Certificate of Authenticity is written: “Declaration of Authenticity N° 071. This is to certify that [in this case] Marcel Broothaers has been signed by my hand and therefore is to be considered as an authentic work of art for all intents and purposes as of the date below. Signature: Piero Manzoni. Bruxelles, the 23 of 2 / '62.” See image in J. Mansoor, “We Want to Organicize Disintegration”, *Cit.*, 52.

<sup>114</sup> The ephemeral appropriation of another body through a temporal signature as a criticism of the arts system, suggests a connection with—with the due difference and in a global scale in which the critique is addressed to the exploitation of human labour and transformed into a spectacle inside a gallery or a museum, which become involved with the related ethical issues—Santiago Sierra’s site-specific actions and installations documented by video, photography and text. More specifically, in this case, I am referring to his work with tattoos. “In the first, *Line of 30 cm Tattooed on a Remunerated*

*Monde* (*The Basis of the World*, 1961), placed in a field in Herning (Denmark). The inscription, turned of 180° in his characters, said “Socle du monde – Socle magic n. 3 de Piero Manzoni 1961 – Hommage a Galileo”. With this simple inversion Manzoni made the entire world, complemented by living and non-living elements, “The Built Environment and The Grown Environment,”<sup>115</sup> and all of us, performing on top of it, creating a total work of art. Changing the point of view, in the vein of Galileo affirming that is the earth revolves around the sun and not the other way around, Manzoni reiterated the necessity for artists to not limit themselves with specific artistic materials when a world of matter is available. As Broothaers affirmed immediately after Manzoni’s death at the young age of twenty-nine, “in any case, Manzoni will be in the history books of the terrible twentieth century.”<sup>116</sup>

### 2.3.2 An account on organic materiality between Europe and the United States

As mentioned previously, Manzoni’s artistic research paralleled that of Yves Klein, leader of “Nouveau Realisme”. Formed in Paris on October 27, 1960, the group initially included Arman, Daniel Spoerri and Jean Tinguely and was based on a

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*Person 51 Regina Street. México City, Mexico. May 1998*, the artist ‘looked for a person who did not have any tattoos or intentions of having one, but due to a need for money, would agree to have a mark on his skin for life’. The participant received \$50.” Available at <<http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/sierra-160-cm-line-tattooed-on-4-people-el-gallo-arte-contemporaneo-salamanca-spain-t11852/text-summary>> (accessed in January 2015). A parallel between this irreverent action, delimited to a definite moment and for a circumscribed and restricted public at the beginning of the 1960s, turned into a polemical and controversial practice forty years later in the context of the diversities between first and third world, wealthy and powerful versus marginalised and neglected people.

<sup>115</sup> Considering *Socle du Monde* as a total work of art and remaining in Denmark where is placed, when saying that it includes to *The Built Environment* (buildings, structures, constructions) and *The Grown Environment* (plants, tree, nature), with this expression I am referring to the Danish gardener and scholar of nature G.N. Brandt (1878-1945). In his book, *Water and Rockery Plant* from 1917 he had already recognized—according to the architect Stig. L. Anderson, curator and author of the catalogue of the Danish pavilion at the Venice Biennial of architecture in 2014—them as the two complementary entities “at the same time mutually exclusive and mutually interdependent.” See Stig L. Anderson, *Empowerment of Aesthetics*. Catalogue for the Danish Pavilion at the 14<sup>th</sup> International Architecture Exhibition La Biennale di Venezia 2014, Skive: Forlaget Wunderbuch, 14. Piero Manzoni’s intervention—observed from the perspective of being in the 21<sup>st</sup> century—seems also to solicitate our concern towards the relationship between humans and the world, the way we inhabit it and also, the relativity of this world and the environmental urgencies demanded in the so-called Anthropocene era.

<sup>116</sup> Cited in Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, "Formalism and Historicity," 93, quoted by J. Mansoor, “We Want to Organicize Disintegration”, *Cit.*, 53.

manifesto written by the critic Pierre Restany “on the way to a new realism of pure sensibility.”<sup>117</sup>

It is not just another formula in the medium of oil or enamel. Easel painting (like every other type of classical means of expression on the domain of painting or sculpture) has had its day. At the moment it lives on in the last remnants, still sometimes sublime, of its long monopoly.

What we propose instead? The passionate adventure of the real perceived in itself and not through the pros, of conceptual or imaginative transcription. What is the mark? The introduction of sociological continuation of the essential phase of communication, Sociology comes to the assistance of consciousness and of chance, whether this be at the level of choice or of the tearing up of posters, of the allure of an object, of the household rubbish or the scraps of the dining-room, of the unleashing of mechanical susceptibility, of the diffusion of sensibility beyond the limits of its perception.<sup>118</sup>

Regarding more specifically the organic, in the late 1950s, Daniel Spoerri began to produce his *Tableaux-pièges* (“Trap-pictures”). “He is a collector of reality,” Wieland Schmied affirmed at the opening of the artist’s exhibition “Coincidence as Master” at KunstHausWien in 2003,<sup>119</sup> made of everyday objects and situations, contexts which formed “a sentimental alphabet with which to construct, in endless reiterations, the story of life.”<sup>120</sup> His pieces generally feature dining tables affixed to the wall in a vertical position, presenting everyday elements such as a dirty spoon and a glass of water—materialist poetics, permanently displayed while in inevitable and visible decay. It was a metaphor of the cycle of life and death, decomposition and rebirth. In his first text from 1961 on the Trap-pictures, Spoerri wrote

What do I do? I glue found situations, arranged by chance, so that they remain... My Trap-pictures should cause discomfort, because I hate immobility. I like the contradictions that consists in fastening objects, removing them from their constant mutation... I am fond of oppositions and contradictions because they create tensions, and a whole can spring only from

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<sup>117</sup> P. Restany, “The New Realists”, April 1960, in C. Harrison & P. Wood (eds.), *Cit.*, 725.

<sup>118</sup> P. Restany, “The New Realists”, *Cit.*, 725.

<sup>119</sup> See B. Grace Gardner, “Capturing the Ephemeral. And Then the Trap Snaps Shut: Daniel Spoerri’s Compositions of Chance and of the Essentials of Life”, in T. Levy, B. Rädelscheidt, S. Solimano, *Daniel Spoerri: From Trap-Pictures to Prillwitz Idols*, Exhibition Catalogue, Milano: Silvana Editoriale, 2010, 48.

<sup>120</sup> S. Solimano, “If Chance Meets Art to Narrate Life”, in T. Levy, B. Rädelscheidt, S. Solimano, *Cit.*, 15.

opposites. Movement unleashes staticity; staticity, fixation, death should provoke movement, transformations and life.<sup>121</sup>

As Spoerri confirmed in an interview with Belinda Grace Gardner in 2001, his Trap-pictures can be considered still life pieces “which have been turned outward into three-dimensionality.”<sup>122</sup> The materials employed in his artistic production, before starting to work with bronze, presented heterogeneity of mediums, organic included. We may consider the process of life and death involving the elements he used functioning as an attempt to capture the “intuition of the instant” theorized by Gaston Bachelard. The opening of the Spoerri Restaurant in Düsseldorf on June 18, 1968 eventually moved from the practice to the event: the ephemeral of a situation breaking down the barriers between high and lower culture, between author and recipient.<sup>123</sup>

For Arman (born Armand Fernandez), the everyday world that Spoerri organized in dispositions on tables, captured like instant photography, is turned in a series of chaotic *Accumulations*. In 1959, Arman created his *Petits Dechets Bourgeois*, the first of his series of *Poubelles*, in which a transparent box was filled with garbage. In 1960, a culmination of this piece was presented at the Paris gallery Iris Clert, whose space was completely filled with junk he found in the street, “all-too material detritus of mass production.”<sup>124</sup> The intervention, entitled *Le Plein* (Full) was conceived in contrast with another emblematically produced at the same gallery between April and May 1958 in *La spécialisation de la sensibilité à l'état de matière première en sensibilité picturale stabilisée, Le Vide* (The Specialization of Sensibility in the Raw Material State of Stabilized Pictorial Sensibility, The Void) by Yves Klein. The gallery had been emptied, with only one large display case whose walls had been painted white, the exterior window painted blue. At the entrance, a blue curtain designated the exhibition space. Three thousand people attended the opening, which Marta Buskirk has described as “a major event, attracting a huge crowd eager to enter the otherwise empty space and partake of blue cocktails that Klein had spiked

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<sup>121</sup> D. Spoerri excerpt quoted by S. Solimano, “If Chance Meets Art to Narrate Life”, *Cit.*, 19.

<sup>122</sup> B. Grace Gardner, Interview with Daniel Spoerri, in *Die Welt*, April 2, 2001, in B. Grace Gardner, “Cit.” in T. Levy, B. Räderscheidt, S. Solimano, *Cit.*, 39.

<sup>123</sup> F. Gallo “Temi e tecniche della società dei consumi”, in S. Bordini, *Cit.*, 145-163: 149.

<sup>124</sup> D. Hopkins, *After Modern Art. 1945-2000*, *Cit.*, 78.

with a medical dye that would discolour their urine for days.”<sup>125</sup> As Osborne described, “this absence opened up to a possibility of sensibility itself becoming the only content of the work.”<sup>126</sup> This emptiness, I would add recalling to the research on organic materiality in the 20<sup>th</sup> century art, was dynamic and lively and always changeable, depending on who was experiencing the space and performing it.

The absence as material vestiges could be a way to read the *Anthropométries of the Blue Age*, conceived by Yves Klein and performed in a sort of spectacle presented at the Galerie International d’Art Contemporain in Paris in March 1960. Using the body of women as brushes, impressing their silhouette on a surface, performing during a music concert for an élite, which “confirmed the inflation of the creative ego, seen as linked, inextricably with masculinity.”<sup>127</sup> His use of the colour blue, as Klein declared in “The Evolution of Art Towards the Immaterial” (1959), was the result of a sort of revelation he had while reading a passage from Bachelard’s *L’air et les songes (Air and Dreams, 1943)*: “First there is nothing, next there is a depth of nothingness, then a profundity blue.”<sup>128</sup> The poetics of Kline, where organic materiality appears in the emptiness of nothing, in its absence, is reminiscent of Zen philosophy—in fact he previously spent time in Japan between 1952-1953 as a judo student—explored at the same period by Cage and Rauschemberg.

An incidental reference to Rauschemberg’s participation in the Biennale de Paris in 1959 (for artists under thirty-five) is apt, since it increased the resonance of his work in Europe, and his major culmination happened when awarded of the Grand Prize for Painting with its participation to the Venice Biennale in 1964. It was a significant event for that period, and was particularly relevant in that a young American artist winning the most internationally prestigious prize in plastic arts meant moving the world’s new artistic centre from Paris to New York.<sup>129</sup> Firstly,

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<sup>125</sup> M. Buskirk, *Creative Enterprise: Contemporary Art Between Museum and Marketplace*, New York: Continuum Press, 2012, 9.

<sup>126</sup> P. Osborne, *Conceptual Art, Cit.*, 62.

<sup>127</sup> D. Hopkins, *After Modern Art.1945-2000, Cit.* 81.

<sup>128</sup> Y. Klein, “The Evolution of Art Towards the Immaterial”, transcript of a lecture delivered on June 3, 1959, in C. Harrison & P. Wood, *Cit.*, 819.

<sup>129</sup> “Nel 1964 Rauschemberg vinceva il primo premio alla Biennale di Venezia. Era un fulmine a ciel sereno anche per me. Una giuria internazionale dava un’importante riconoscimento a un giovane artista americano, a un’America che era considerata una nazione priva di cultura; quella che c’era era una provincia, derivazione dell’Europa. L’arte era in Europa e non poteva essere che in Europa, a causa delle sue secolari e millenarie tradizioni artistiche. La supremazia di Parigi, il centro artistico del mondo, era minacciata, una vera rivoluzione stava arrivando: New York vinceva Parigi.”, Giuseppe Panza di Biumo, “La villa di Biumo nella mia vita, (a cura di Marco Magnifico e Lucia

“following the deaths of Yves Klein in 1962 and Piero Manzoni in 1963, Rauschenberg became the leader of the new international trend of realism and was thus the best candidate for the award,” as Catherine Julie Marie Dossin observed.<sup>130</sup> Secondly, the dynamic moving forward was complex, and revealing of different trends between Europe and the US regarding the Venice Biennale. In fact, for USA was the door to participating to the most important international event, while in Europe that was average for an already consecrated artist only.<sup>131</sup>

## 2.4 Organic with/non versus synthetic

As a counterweight, we can observe that the increasing use of organic materiality in artistic practices took place in the realm of experimentation on the artistic process that included new synthetic materials, such as plastic. We can conceive of this employment in a context in which art, as a process, and action, a practice, become heterogeneous—a hybrid. Organic materiality in artistic practice is the result of a coexistence with non-organic materials as well. Their use is the result of conceiving art in a different way, and in this vein the *Manifesto del Macchimismo* can be recognized as an important reference from the post-war period and its urgencies in the artistic context, in an Italy in process of industrial reconstruction in the post-war, which can also be applied out of national circumscription. It was written in 1952 by Bruno Munari, founder of Milan’s MAC (*Movimento Arte Concreta*) in 1948. In his words, as Silvia Bordini remarks, we find a complex mixture of progress

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Borromeo Dina), *Villa Menafoglio Litta Panza e la collezione Panza di Biumo*, Skira, Milano, 2001, 66.

<sup>130</sup> C.J. M. Dossin, *Stories of the Western World, 1936-1986: From the “Fall of Paris” to the “Invasion of New York”*, *Cit.*, 126

<sup>131</sup> “These divergent approaches to contemporary art were particularly obvious in the differences between the French and the American selections at the Venice Biennale. While the French presented artists at the end of their career, the Americans presented artists at the breakthrough moments in theirs. The French did present a few young artists, like Kenny and Ipousteguy, but these artists were little known outside France and their works were eclipsed by the more established artists. For the French, the Biennale was a place of consecration and honors. For the Americans, it was a laboratory for the newest experimentations. Until 1964, the French historical view had been shared by other European countries. But in 1964, there was a shift in curatorial practices, with most of the pavilions adopting the American view and showing emerging artists.” C. J. M. Dossin, *Stories of the Western World, 1936-1986: From the “Fall of Paris” to the “Invasion of New York”*, *Cit.*, 129.

and apprehension, “expressing the instance of a complete transformation of the machine in an artwork.”<sup>132</sup>

Compared with Futurism, which focused on the potential of the machine, Munari’s perspective acknowledges the obscure sides of the machine. His motivation is not nostalgia, or a challenge to the machine, but rather, examining the flow of industrial advances, his response is that of an art committing in this process from the inside. Not accusing from the outside, but appropriating of a medium to have a voice in the present time.

The world today belongs to machines [...]. In few years we’ll be their small slaves. Artists are the ones who can save humankind from this danger. Artists have to engage to machines, leave the romantic brushes, the dusty palette, the canvas and the framework; they have to start knowing the mechanical anatomy, the mechanical language, understanding the nature of machines, with their own means. No more colour oils but blowtorch, reagents, chromium plating, anode colorations, thermic alterations. No more canvas and framework, but metals, plastic matters, rubbers, and synthetic resins. Forms, colours, movements from the mechanical world, no more seen from the outside and remade at cold, but harmoniously composed. Today the machine is a monster! Machine must become a work of art! We will discover the art of machines!<sup>133</sup>

The Greek word *plastikos*, adjective of the verb *plessein* (“to mould”), largely employed in sculpture, gave its name to synthetic products derived from chemical modification of natural polymers as celluloid (invented in United States in 1868)<sup>134</sup>, and also to totally synthetic products.<sup>135</sup> This latter group includes Bakelite (phenol-

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<sup>132</sup> S. Bordini, “Macchine”, in S. Bordini, *Arte Contemporanea e Tecniche*, Cit., 117-134: 117.

<sup>133</sup> “Il mondo oggi è delle macchine [...]. Fra pochi anni saremo i loro piccoli schiavi. Gli artisti sono i soli che possono salvare l’umanità da questo pericolo. Gli artisti devono interessarsi delle macchine, abbandonare i romantici pennelli, la polverosa tavolozza, la tela e il telaio; devono cominciare a conoscere l’anatomia meccanica, il linguaggio meccanico, capire la natura delle macchine, con i loro stessi mezzi. Non più colori ad olio ma fiamma ossidrica, reagenti chimici, cromature, ruggine, colorazioni anodiche, alterazioni termiche. Non più tela e telaio ma metalli, materie plastiche, gomme e resine sintetiche. Forme, colori, movimenti, rumori del mondo meccanico, non più visti dal di fuori e rifatti a freddo, ma composti armonicamente. La macchina oggi è un mostro! La macchina deve diventare un’opera d’arte! Noi scopriremo l’arte delle macchine!” Bruno Munari, *Manifesto del macchinismo*, in “Arte Concreta”, 10, 1952, quoted by S. Bordini, “Macchine”, in *Cit.*, 117.

<sup>134</sup> See Francesca Gallo, “Nuovi materiali”, in (a cura di Silvia Bordini) *Arte contemporanea e tecniche. Materiali, procedimenti, sperimentazioni*, Roma: Carocci, 2010, 59-80: 59.

<sup>135</sup> F. Gallo opens her chapter on new materials with a quote by Roland Barthes on plastic: “more than a substance, plastic is the very idea of its infinite transformation; as its everyday name indicates, it is ubiquity made visible. And it is this, in fact, which makes it a miraculous substance”. R.

formaldehyde, invented in 1907)<sup>136</sup> followed by various PVCs, such as polyethylene, polystyrene, polyurethane, and polyester. Plastics are composed by long chains of molecules (called macromolecules or polymers), whose constant chemical element is carbon. This explains why plastics also exist in nature—for example amber, natural gum, celluloid, and bitumen. An early development in scientific and industrial production of plastic took place in the 1920s, and a second phase in the 1950s, achieving a wide distribution from the 1960s on.

Given this context, it is important to acknowledge that the use of organic materiality (the vegetal, the animal, the human, and their physiological vestiges), non-manipulated and maintained as they are, corresponded to the use of a wide range of materials, some also industrial, such as plastics. These disparate materials, in the perspective of our research focus, stand not in opposition, but represent the heterogeneity of devices employed in works of art, especially from the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when attention to matter and gesture, eased gradually from the stativity of art as work to the mobility of art expanding its material possibilities.

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Barthes, (selected and translated by Annette Lavers), *Mythologies*, Hille and Wang: New York, 97, accessed via <<http://www.english.unt.edu/~simpkins/Barthes%20Myths.pdf>>

<sup>136</sup> F. Gallo, “Nuovi materiali”, *Cit.*, 59.



### 3.

## **When Art and Life coincide: Happening, Décollage and Social Sculpture between Vitalism and Philosophical Anthropology**

### **3.1 Aspects of Vitalism in the post-war era**

When we think about philosophy in the post-war era as it relates to artistic practices developed at that time, one would usually reference existentialist philosophy as well as phenomenology.<sup>1</sup> Both of these examples are certainly fundamental pillars in the twentieth century's history of thought. Nevertheless, considering in this research the living at the stages of plants and animals (human and no-human) as inherent to the artistic practices of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, in order to address the vital aspects of the organisms, the proposal of this chapter is to explore the relations between art and life, through some explorations on philosophy of vitalism. For the extent, here are going to be examined some "Aspects of Vitalism," as enacted by the title of a paper by the French philosopher Georges Canguilhem in 1952.

Published after the Second World War, "Aspects of Vitalism" was written with full awareness that the notion of vitalism had been substantially corrupted by Nazi ideology. In recognition of this phenomenon, Canguilhem used the example of the German biologist and philosopher Driesch, whose thought represented "a typical

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<sup>1</sup> We are referring to Husserl's *Logical Investigations* (Logische Untersuchungen), published in 1900/01, his first phenomenological work, taking the distance from psychologism, in favour of a immanent experience of the world, remarkable for the further development in this field, like Merleau-Ponty's *Phénoménologie de la perception* (1945). On the other hand, a pivotal role in the intellectual European context especially from the 1940s onwards was invested by Heidegger philosophy and specifically his *Being and Time* (1927), also encouraging the development of Sartre's existentialism.

case of the transplantation of the biological concept of organic totality onto political terrain.<sup>2</sup> After 1933, the entelechy [the vital principle that guides the development and function of an organism] came to be seen as the Fuhrer of the organism.”<sup>3</sup> Assuming that life was the central focus of his inquiry, Canguilhem attempted to include other branches of science, like physics and chemistry, as part of life and not as the basis from which life arises, by affirming that

Once one recognizes the originality of life, one must “*comprehend*” matter within life, and the science of matter—which is science itself—within the activity of the living. Physics and chemistry, in seeking to reduce the specificity of the living, did no more than remain faithful to their underlying intention, which is to determine the laws between objects, valid without any reference to an absolute, central point of reference.<sup>4</sup>

Canguilhem eventually set out to redeem vitalism, or “the vitality of vitalism,”<sup>5</sup> from any ideology, assuming that

The rebirths of vitalism translate, perhaps in discontinuous fashion, life’s permanent distrust of the mechanization of life. In them we find life seeking to put mechanism back into its place within life...If dialectics in biology is justifiable, it is because what gave rise to vitalism—in the form of an exigency rather than a doctrine—and explains its vitality is found in life: this is life’s proper spontaneity, what Claude Bernard expressed by saying that life is creation.<sup>6</sup>

In terms of vitalism, this idea of creation is similar to Canguilhem’s notion of fecundity, declaring that “no authentic vitality is sterile.”<sup>7</sup> At the beginning of this

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<sup>2</sup> An excerpt from the entry “Hans Adolf Eduard Driesch” in the *Encyclopædia Britannica*: “By 1895 Driesch was a convinced vitalist. He felt himself driven to this position by his inability to interpret the results of his cell-separation experiments in mechanistic terms; he could not envisage a machine that could divide into two identical machines. Driesch applied the Aristotelian term entelechy to denote a vital agent that could regulate organic development. Although such an agent could not be explained by physical science, he believed that its actions were related to the activity of enzymes, which he recognized as important in development.” Available at [www.britannica.com](http://www.britannica.com) (Accessed December 2014).

<sup>3</sup> G. Canguilhem, “Aspects of Vitalism”, in G. Canguilhem, *Knowledge of Life*, translated by Stefanos Geroulanos and Daniela Ginzburg, New York: Fordham University Press, 2008 (1952), 72.

<sup>4</sup> G. Canguilhem, *Cit.*, 70.

<sup>5</sup> G. Canguilhem, *Cit.*, 61.

<sup>6</sup> G. Canguilhem, *Cit.*, 73.

<sup>7</sup> G. Canguilhem, *Cit.* 65.

research we reminded the French anatomist and physiologist Xavier Bichat—a disciple of Berthez and the most significant proponent of vitalism at the Montpellier school of Medicine at the beginning of the 19th century. Bichat, having defined *life* as “those set of functions which resist death”, had, however, emphasized that organic life does not end with natural or accidental death.<sup>8</sup> What is relevant for vitalism, according to Bichat, is reproduction. In the realm of a research rooted in art history, the idea of reproduction in society considered as organism, expands its meaning, what is at stake is not the continuation of the species simply put, but the artistic process (but also social, intellectual, political, etc.) in which the human living subject expresses the vitality of oneself, leaving a trace, materially or in form of memory of her/his passage, beyond the limits of life and death.

If death is not the opposite of life, but rather a part of the life process, and what is really important is reproduction and therefore the intervals between cycles of continuity and discontinuity, creation and destruction, we can make a connection between Canguilhem and Bataille and their philosophies regarding vitalism, and more specifically the ideas of fecundity and reproduction.<sup>9</sup> Specifically, in his essay *L’Erotisme* (1957), Bataille acknowledged the difference between humans and other living organisms as lying not simply in the “Cartesian cogito, but in something more brutal and elemental: it was the recognition of death, something that was placed in evidence by eroticism.”<sup>10</sup> “Eroticism, unlike simple sexual activity is a psychological quest independent of the natural goal: reproduction and the desire for children.”<sup>11</sup> This

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<sup>8</sup> “La vie organique ne finit pas dans la mort naturelle comme dans la mort accidentelle”, BICHAT, Xavier, *Recherches physiologique sur la vie et la morte*, Troisième édition, Brosson Gabon, Paris, 1805, 149.

<sup>9</sup> Canguilhem’s acknowledgement of Bataille’s philosophy is demonstrated by a quote from his *Writings on Medicine* (1989) in the edition curated by Stefanos Geroulanos and Todd Meyers (2012): “In ‘Corps et santé,’ Canguilhem defends his etymological effort through philosophical references that do not appear in the published version of the ‘Health’ essay, citing structuralism and Wittgenstein when he writes: ‘We always learn when we seek to resuscitate, beneath the dust of significations and beneath the banality of uses (Wittgenstein used to say that words don’t have meanings but only uses), the relation, lived in a given situation, between a signifier and a signified.’” Canguilhem further quotes Georges Bataille’s point in “Formless” that “a dictionary begins when it no longer gives meanings of words but their tasks.” Georges Bataille, *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings 1927-1939*, trans. Allan Stockl (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 31. See ENS/CAPHES, Archives de Georges Canguilhem, GC.25.26, “Corps et santé,’ 2.—Trans. In G. Canguilhem, *Writings on Medicine*, Translated with an introduction by S. Geroulanos and T. Meyers, Fordham University Press, 2012 (*Écrits sur la médecine*, 1989), 92.

<sup>10</sup> M. Richardson, “Georges Bataille (1897-1961)”, in *Art: Key Contemporary Thinkers*, Edited by Diarmuid Costello and Jonathan Vickery, Berg, NY, USA, 2007, 154.

<sup>11</sup> G. Bataille, *Erotism: Death and Sensuality*, San Francisco: City Light Books, 1986 (First published in 1962, translation of *L’Erotisme*, 1957), 11.

desire for continuity could also metaphorically be attributed to the creative act made by the artist and in this sense consider the fecundity inner to a creative action.

In eroticism, humans experience *jouissance*, which is not precisely enjoyment, but rather enjoyment imbued with anguish. In eroticism we experience at once the plenitude of being and the terror of death. It makes us aware of our limited natures, of the fact that in being born we are torn from the continuity of existence.<sup>12</sup>

In addition, Bataille pointed his attention to reproduction, which “implies the existence of *discontinuous* beings. Beings which reproduce themselves are distinct from one another, and those reproduced are likewise distinct from each other, just as they are distinct from their parents.”<sup>13</sup> Regarding this kind of differentiation and specificities, Bichat spoke of “irregularities” of the external forms of living organs.<sup>14</sup> There is a passage, which can be read in parallel with the previous affirmation of Canguilhem on fecundity, when Bataille says

It is my intention to suggest that for us, discontinuous beings that we are, death means continuity of being. Reproduction leads to the discontinuity of beings, but brings into play their continuity; that is to say, it is intimately linked with death. I shall endeavour to show, by discussing reproduction and death, that death is to be identified with continuity, and both of these concepts are equally fascinating. This fascination is the dominant element in eroticism.<sup>15</sup>

According to Bataille, we are isolated discontinuous beings yearning for our lost continuity, and this condition is shared by many kinds of organisms (unicellular and complex). He wrote, “this nostalgia is responsible for three kind of eroticisms in man: physical, emotional and religious.”<sup>16</sup> Continuity needs to be considered not as eternal but as a counterweight of discontinuity, each being the interval of the other. In these intervals we identify what Bataille, in his chapter on beauty, described as “knowledge.” This concept can be connected with the intuition of the instant from

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<sup>12</sup> M. Richardson, “Georges Bataille (1897-1961)”, *Cit.*, 154.

<sup>13</sup> G. Bataille, *Cit.*, 12.

<sup>14</sup> X. Bichat, *Recherches physiologique sur la vie et la morte* (1800), *Cit.*, 11.

<sup>15</sup> G. Bataille, *Cit.*, 13.

<sup>16</sup> G. Bataille, *Cit.*, 15.

Bachelard and the aleatory materialism from Althusser. Moreover, Bataille affirmed “as we break through the barriers, as we die, we strive to escape from the terror of death and the terror that belongs even to continuity glimpsed beyond those boundaries.”<sup>17</sup> If, as Bataille entices us to think, knowledge somehow replaces the canonical notion of beauty, and it is acquired through the recognition of one’s limits and the attempt to overcome them, we may interpret the artistic practices of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (the first and second avant-gardes) as attempts to experience those boundaries through processes of creation and destruction, that affirm the vitality of the subject.

### 3.2 Creation and destruction in art: “the modern big bang”

The process that relentlessly conjoins creation and destruction, and involves 20<sup>th</sup> century artists’ work, has been explained by the French art historian Catherine Grenier as a common denominator defined more as an “impulse, rather than a character.”<sup>18</sup> Catherine Grenier remarked that, contrary to our expectations or concerns, “creativity is a modern invention, which cannot be dissociated from the re-definition of the artistic gesture made by artists.”<sup>19</sup> The paradox lies in the idea that if creativity is “an input of modernity” to distance from the tradition, in the second avant-garde, a sort of refusal of individual creativity occurs again. But it does not go backwards; it advances a step further.

Individual creativity, in fact, is not annihilated or just privilege for few, but it becomes a way of life promoted as the only one possible in order to live to the fullest in an active, personal and political way. In this sense, there are considered three pivotal examples: Kaprow, Vostell, and Beuys (as will be shown in the following pages). Paramount in challenging the idea of creation as individual and characteristic of the artist, they dismantled the idea of artist and creation, unless at the unique condition of being conceived as moulded with life and therefore no more individual,

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<sup>17</sup> G. Bataille, *Cit.* 140.

<sup>18</sup> C. Grenier, “The Modern Big Bang”, in *Big Bang: Destruction et création dans l’art du XXe siècle*, Paris: Editions du Centre Pompidou, 2005, 13.

<sup>19</sup> C. Grenier., *Cit.*, 14.

no more prerogative of some people, but a social matter of fact. Moreover, and with respect to the broad spectrum of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Grenier emphasized that

To remain within bounds of truth itself, creativity must be permanently reactivated by a radically reforming principle. By freeing it from the moral issue, artists have become involved in the destruction of this vital function: it is a vehicle of renewal, which works like an energizing and generating force. [...] There is no creation without destruction, nor, contrary to what people might have thought by regularly announcing the death of art, is there destruction without creation. The artist destroys in order to create, but conversely, we can also say that he creates in order to destroy.<sup>20</sup>

This impulse also involves other artistic experiences such as the Viennese Actionismus, and self-destructive performance art, as the case of Gina Pane.<sup>21</sup> From the avant-gardes and subsequently neo-avantgardes, the “modern big bang” for Grenier put forward the main idea that “all creation is summoned to destroy a norm”.<sup>22</sup> This attempt at destruction, she continued, is nothing more than the purpose of “re-creating the origin, and creating the original.”<sup>23</sup>

### 3.2.1 “The art-life game”

One of the most important figures when thinking about the conjunction between art and life, having played a pivotal role in the shift from painting to action in the late 1950s, was Allan Kaprow. His first appearance on the art scene (*18 Happenings in 6 Parts*) was a kind of performance, differing from a theatrical production in that it did not obey conventional narratives and involved the audience in active participation. In 1968 Kaprow defined happenings as “panartistic phenomena, in which energies originally developing within the separate fields of painting, dance, music, poetry, etc., began to cross each other’s paths at various and unexpected

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<sup>20</sup> C. Grenier., Cit., 14.

<sup>21</sup> For Viennese Actionismus and Gina Pane’s relationship with the organic see Chapter 4.

<sup>22</sup> C. Grenier., Cit., 16.

<sup>23</sup> C. Grenier., Cit., 16.

places.”<sup>24</sup> It was characterized by a strong visual component and was presented in 1959 at the Reuben Gallery in New York. The happening was a genre pioneered in New York and practiced by other artists as well, and it soon expanded internationally.

Kaprow, adept at verbally expressing his ideas, particularly as he attempted to spread word of the art he was practicing, and positioned himself and the other artists in continuity with Pollock and Gutai, became a leading figure.<sup>25</sup> After Jackson Pollock’s death in 1956, in fact, Allan Kaprow wrote the essay “The Legacy of Jackson Pollock” in which, according to him, “Pollock [...] left us at the point where we must become preoccupied with and even dazzled by the space and objects of our everyday life, either our bodies, clothes, rooms, or, if need be, the vastness of Forty-second Street.”<sup>26</sup> His main reference during that period had been Harold Rosenberg’s definition of Action Painting as a “metaphor of poetic action” appearing in “The American Action Painter,” published in 1952 on *ARTnews* 51 (n°8), offered to Kaprow by the same art historian.<sup>27</sup>

Martha Buskirk highlighted “Kaprow’s prescience about the breakdown of distinctions between different forms of artistic activity” as well as “an equally sharp appreciation of the contradictions inherent in operating across the boundaries between art and everyday life.”<sup>28</sup> His role was so significant that his work determined a shift in the paradigm of the artist. “Presenting himself as a service provider,” Buskirk remarked, “his own evolution from starting out as a painter and then turning to environment and assemblage, and then to happenings, in some way parallels the larger evolution in the art world. So he is a very important figure in that respect.”<sup>29</sup> As a result, it emerges that the importance of Allan Kaprow in the landscape of 20<sup>th</sup> century art concerns two distinct realms: first, the relationship between ephemerality

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<sup>24</sup> “In Response. A Letter from Allan Kaprow”, directed to Richard Schechner editor of *TDR, The Journal of Performance Studies*, The MIT Press, Editor Richard Schechner, in, “Happenings”, (pp.181-183), in Mariellen R. Sandford (edited by), *HAPPENINGS AND OTHER ACTS*, London and New York: Routledge, 2005,184.

<sup>25</sup> P. Schimmel, *Cit.*, 59.

<sup>26</sup> A. Kaprow, *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life*, (edited by Jeff Kelley), Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1993, 7.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. E. Ehninger, “What’s Happening? Allan Kaprow and Claes Oldenburg Argue about Art and Life”, *Getty Research Journal*, The University of Chicago Press, N°6, 2014, 195-202: 198.

<sup>28</sup> M. Buskirk, *Cit.*, 2012, 117-118.

<sup>29</sup> A. Clements, “Art’s Corrosive Success: An Interview with Martha Buskirk”, *Hyperallergic. Sensitive to Art and its Discontent*, July 27, 2012, available at <http://hyperallergic.com/54766/arts-corrosive-success-an-interview-with-martha-buskirk/> (accessed in December 2014).

and photography; and second, the relationship between art, life, and time (discussed in the previous chapter).

Regarding the first category, we recognize a parallel and a heterogeneous reciprocity between the languages of photography and video that, during the same period, were consolidating their status within the arts and their ephemerality in artistic creation, which became a popular practice in the 1960s, particularly with site-specific installations and nature interventions.<sup>30</sup> Moreover, according to Buskirk, “Kaprow became increasingly suspicious of the relay function of photography, whether as a stand-in for the otherwise ephemeral or a template for its reconstruction.”<sup>31</sup> This was accompanied by an increasing awareness of the progressive conversion of a happening into a spectacle, “evident not only in sometimes sensational media coverage, but also in the impact of documentation on the event itself, as the temptation to act for the camera externalized the experience of the immediate action.”<sup>32</sup> This awareness in Kaprow, as Buskirk pointed out, did not involve his first happening but only emerged in the late 1960s. Furthermore, it could be argued that, in explaining “how to make a happening,” emphasizing the freedom of possibilities with this practice, could somehow mean endangering of a sort of systematization of the happening.<sup>33</sup> Jack Burnham recognized something similar in his article “Systems Aesthetics” (1968):

In the past ten years Kaprow has moved the Happening from a rather self-conscious and stagy event to a strict and elegant procedure. The Happening now has a sense of internal logic which was lacking before. It seems to arise naturally from those same considerations which have crystallized the system approach to environmental situations.<sup>34</sup>

Furthermore, we may argue that Kaprow can be considered to be a paramount example of the artistic practice of conjoining art and life, both in terms of

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<sup>30</sup> Cf. Christine Buci-Glucksmann, *Esthétique de l'éphémère*, Paris: Galilée, 2003, 17.

<sup>31</sup> M. Buskirk, *Cit.*, 2012, 118.

<sup>32</sup> M. Buskirk, *Cit.*, 2012, 122.

<sup>33</sup> See “How To Make A Happening” (1968), 24:43 Minutes, Something Else Press In <http://www.ubu.com/sound/kaprow.html> (Accessed in October 2014). Text available on <http://primaryinformation.org/files/allan-kaprow-how-to-make-a-happening.pdf> (Accessed in October 2014).

<sup>34</sup> J. Burnham, “Systems Aesthetics”, *Artforum*, 7:1, September 1968, in P. Osborne, *Cit.*, 217.



ephemerality and subsequent artistic expressions from the 1960s. Early in the decade, Susan Sontag wrote about the genre of happening, recognizing in Kaprow “the man who more than anyone else is responsible for stating and working out the genre, is the only academic among them; [...] Kaprow by the way, has written the best article yet to appear on Happenings, their meaning in general in the context of the contemporary art scene, and their evolution for him in particular.”<sup>35</sup>

Buskirk also highlighted the role of the institution in remaking ephemeral installations (and Kaprow’s involvement as a paradigmatic example) and stressed the responsibility of the institution in the act of remaking an installation, since it does not mean a mere imitation but rather an interpretation. This idea of interpretation relates to what the French art historian Henry Focillon (author of *Vie de Formes*, 1934) expressed regarding this concept, not within the context exhibition, as Buskirk explored, but more on the relationship between original and copy. Nevertheless, it seems to fit, according to Annamaria Ducci:

In Focillon’s vision the copy, too, is part of the life of forms, since imitation is always an interpretation, it is a kind of creation: “L’oeuvre d’un artiste, vue par un autre, intervient dans une vie nouvelle, qui la traite d’une façon particulière (...) Elle frappe parce qu’elle est unique, mais elle collabore à une autre forme de l’unique, elle la sollicite, elle la favorise. La mémoire de l’artiste n’est pas un dépôt de souvenirs cristallisés, mais un lieu d’agitation et d’expérience.”<sup>36</sup>

In the 1930s, Focillon was teaching at Yale University. One of his scholars was George Kubler, whose “*The Shape of Time*—according to Thomas Reese—was his response across time to his master’s *Vie*, which he criticized, modified, extended, and rebuilt into a much more unified and systematic edifice of thought.”<sup>37</sup> In her chapter dedicated to Kaprow, Buskirk referred to Kubler. In his *The Shape of Time*:

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<sup>35</sup> Susan Sontag, “Happenings: An Art of Radical Juxtaposition (1962)”, in *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (New York: Octagon Books, 1978), 263–74, here 264–65. In E. Ehninger, “Cit.”, 197.

<sup>36</sup> H. Focillon, *Généalogie de l’unique*, in *Actes du II<sup>e</sup> Congrès d’Esthétique et de Science de l’Art*, (Paris 1937), vol. II, 120-127 : 123, in A. Ducci, “To spatialize time is a faculty shared by snails and by historians,” *Art History Supplement* volume 2, issue 1, January 2012, 17-39: 32.

<sup>37</sup> T. Reese, Editor’s Introduction, in *Studies in Ancient American and European Art. The Collected Essays of George Kubler*, ed. Th. F. Reese, New Haven – London, Yale University Press, 1985 p. XXVI. In A. Ducci, “Cit”, 19.

*Remarks on the History of Things* (1962) Kubler, in fact, “had posited the work of art as ‘the residue of an event’ and also a form of signal or relay that would inspire additional works and in turn be read through those subsequent acts.”<sup>38</sup>

Kubler later contributed to *Aspen* in 1967 with a text entitled “Style and the Representation of Historical Time”, which is divided in three parts, analysing the resemblance between the writing of history and the painting of pictures, on the nature of duration as the historians perceive it, and “the third part considers whether the idea of style is suitable to studies of duration.”<sup>39</sup> According to Buskirk, this latter part, which focused on the idea of an action and its reproducibility in relation with time, addresses questions that can be applied to think about the remake of Kaprow’s ephemeral actions or arrangements in the context of the exhibition. In addition, she listed “Kubler’s five axioms about historical duration for their efficacy in describing Kaprow’s approach:

- I. Similar actions by the same agent cannot occupy the same time. If they do, the recipient is different and the action also.
- II. No one agent can perform the same action more than once without aging.
- III. Actions can only be similar, but not identical, being different as to agent, or as to time, or as to location.
- IV. Actions repeated undergo change.

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<sup>38</sup> M. Buskirk, *Cit.*, 2012, Chapter 3, “Kaprows Vector.” She adds that “Although Kubler does not make an appearance in the index to Kaprow’s *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life*, Robert Smithson was reading his work, and there is a suggestive echo in a comparison between museums and mausoleums that Kaprow made in a dialogue with Smithson and a statement by Kubler about parallels between tomb furniture and the museum that Smithson used as the epigram to ‘Some Void Thoughts on Museums’ (a brief essay that appeared on the same page of Arts Magazine as the concluding paragraphs to Kaprow’s ‘Death in the Museum’).”

<sup>39</sup> G. Kubler, “Style and the Representation of Historical Time,” *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences*, December 22, 2006, 849 (Accessed in February 2015 via <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/>). (First published in *Aspen* 5+6, 1967, Section 3.) *Aspen* was an art magazine founded by Brien O’ Doherty and published in ten issues between 1965-1971. It’s unusual form of a box used to include the magazine and print artifacts (including posters and postcards), phonograph recordings, musical scores, posters, games, and other varied objects. Kubler’s “Style and the Representation of Historical Time,” was the third paper in an issue of a booklet including R. Barthes’ “The Death of the Author,” S. Sontag’s “The Aesthetics of Silence” and, inter alia, a flexi-disc recording of Marcel Duchamp reading his 1957 paper “The Creative Act.” See John Logie “1967: The Birth of ‘The Death of the Author’”, 1-43, published in the special Intellectual Property Issue of College English, March 2013, copyright NCTE, available at: <http://www.ncte.org/library/NCTEFiles/Resources/Journals/CE/0755-may2013/CE0755Birth.pdf> (Accessed through academia.edu in February 2015)

V. The agent changes with each repeated action.<sup>40</sup>

It is interesting to read these affirmations on the action, bearing in mind previous explorations of time according to Bachelard and Althusser,<sup>41</sup> and considering a similar interpretation of time by Kubler. In *The Shape of Time*, time is described as—according to Ducci—“intermittent and variable,’ and at the heart of this intermittence there are the *intervals*. The sequence is “a historical network of gradually altered repetitions of the same trait;” consequently, he argued, “in historical time the web of happening that laces throughout the intervals between existences attracts our interest.”<sup>42</sup>

To conclude this overview of the idea of happening from the perspective of Allan Kaprow, in the pursuit of a connection between his artistic and aesthetic research on one side and the everyday flow of life on the other, I must be noted that his ideas were influenced by the pragmatic philosophy of John Dewey’s *Art as Experience* (1934). Kaprow underlined a passage on page eleven, as described by Jeff Kelley: “Even a crude experience, if authentically an experience, is more fit to give a clue to the intrinsic nature of aesthetic experience than is an object already set apart from any other mode of experience.”<sup>43</sup> Conscious of this interconnection between art and life, in a letter to Rosenberg dated August 10, 1968, Kaprow wrote: “At this point, the artist assumes the same variable and uncertain identity as everything else: he is and he isn’t an artist, depending on the context. This is what the art-life game is.”<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> G. Kubler, “Style and the Representation of Historical Time,” Cit., 852.

<sup>41</sup> See Chapter 2.

<sup>42</sup> In A. Ducci, “Cit.,” 22.

<sup>43</sup> J. Kelley, “Introduction” (1992), Allan Kaprow, *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life*, (Edited by Jeff Kelley), Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1993, xii.

<sup>44</sup> E. Ehninger, “Cit.,” 202.

### 3.2.2 Wolf Vostell and “the permanent creative process of life as art”

While in the United States Kaprow was leading the Happening, and he was aware that this experimental practice was being developed in other countries as well.<sup>45</sup> In his book chapter on Happenings in Europe, Günter Berghaus observed, “Wolf Vostell can be regarded as the father of the European Happening movement,” highlighting that Vostell’s most “active peak” occurred “from 1964 to 1966.”<sup>46</sup> Berghaus also explained that on the occasion of the YAM Festival in New Brunswick, New Jersey, in May 1963, Vostell decided, in agreement with Allan Kaprow, “to call my *décollage* events from now on Happenings, in order to start an international movement.”<sup>47</sup> In that same year he had written his manifesto: a sort of poem expressing the meaning of the term “*décollage*” through twenty-seven different verses/definitions of it.<sup>48</sup>

On the philosophy of *dé-coll/age* Wolf Vostell based his entire production of objects, installations and Happenings from the beginning of his work, started at the end of the 1950s. The primal statement of his poetics was awareness on the fact that

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<sup>45</sup> In his letter to the editor of TDR, Kaprow not only claimed the absence of any filiation of happening by the McLuhan expression “medium is message”, but also highlighted the trans-nationality of the Happening since its very beginning. “As far as McLuhan is concerned, his name never came up in any conversations before a year or so ago. And now that it has, his basic insight, the famous ‘the medium is the message,’ is hardly unusual, when you come down to it. French formalist art from Manet to at least Cubism offered precisely this recipe for our understanding, and it became a staple of academic modernism by 1940. McLuhan’s present interest lies in his application of the theory to the mass media (such as TV). So far as I know, he has had no effect upon the Happenings at all. Marshall McLuhan aside, we still must take into account more than thirty Happeners outside the United States, living in at least twelve countries, including Japan, Argentina, Spain and Czechoslovakia. They have their own ideas, even if they are aware of us here. It might be a thought for some future issue of TDR.” In “In Response. A Letter from Allan Kaprow”, in *Cit.*, 185.

<sup>46</sup> Günter Berghaus, “Happenings in Europe: Trends, Events, and Leading Figures”, in R. Sandford, Mariellen (Ed. by), *HAPPENINGS AND OTHER ACTS*, London; New York: Routledge, 1995, 273-328: 271.

<sup>47</sup> W. Vostell, *Happening und Leben*, Neuwied: Luchterhand, 1970 (1965), 273, quoted in *HAPPENINGS AND OTHER ACTS*, *Cit.*, 275.

<sup>48</sup> “*Décollage* is your understanding / *Décollage* is your accident / *Décollage* is your death / *Décollage* is your analysis / *Décollage* is your life / *Décollage* is your change / *Décollage* is your reduction / *Décollage* is your problem / *Décollage* is your TV destruction / *Décollage* is your dirt / *Décollage* is your fever / *Décollage* is your sweat / *Décollage* is your skin / *Décollage* is your sudden fall / *Décollage* is your refusal / *Décollage* is your nerve / *Décollage* is your break / *Décollage* is your own illusion / *Décollage* is your own failure (demise) / *Décollage* is your divestment / *Décollage* is your spot cleaner / *Décollage* is your dissolvent / *Décollage* is your resignation / *Décollage* is your pain / *Décollage* is your diarrhoea / *Décollage* is your revelation / *Décollage* is your own *décollage*.” W. Vostell, “Manifesto”, in Kristine Stiles and Peter Seltz (eds.), *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art: a Sourcebook of Artists’ Writings*, Berkeley; Los Angeles; London: University of California Press, 1996, 723-724.

“life is not made up of constructive elements but that the solution lies between construction and destruction. life is *dé-coll-age* in that the body in one process builds up and deteriorates as it grows older—a continuous destruction.”<sup>49</sup> In addition, he afterwards recalled his impression at the reading of a report published in an issue of the French newspaper *Le Figaro* (September 1954) in which a plane crash was described.

what shocked me so noticeably [...] was the contradiction in one word, for *dé-coll-age* means the take-off of an aircraft as well as the tearing away from an adhesive surface. The flying body was *décolle* as much by take-off as by unsticking, one word included two or more contrary happenings, thus the accident is already in the automobile as it drives, the obsolescence is already prefabricated and built in.<sup>50</sup>

According to Paul Schimmel, “The objects, installations, and Happenings that he had begun to produce in the late 1950s were all manifestations of a philosophy that he termed *dé-coll/age*.”<sup>51</sup> With this term he also named his *Dé-coll/age: Bulletin aktueller Ideen* (*Dé-coll/age: Bulletin of Current Ideas*) published between 1962 and 1967, which increased the diffusion and interconnection between *Nouveau Réalisme*, Happenings, Fluxus and Destruction Art.

Apart from his Happening activities, according to Berghaus, Vostell engaged in the Fluxus movement after his first meeting with its founder and main proponent George Maciunas along with Nam June Paik in 1962.<sup>52</sup> The latter explained that, inspired by Futurism, Dada and Duchamp, “Fluxus is a way of life, not an artistic concept...a continuous integration and disintegration of arts into total events.”<sup>53</sup> Vostell performed at many Fluxus Festivals between 1962 and 1964 and—Berghaus underlined—“He gave more than twenty Fluxus concerts throughout the 1970s and 1980s.”<sup>54</sup> For the purpose of an analysis of the interactions between organic materiality and 20<sup>th</sup> century art, one particularly remarkable moment to point out is

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<sup>49</sup> (Small caps in the original) W. Vostell, *dé-coll/age* (1996), in Kristine Stiles and Peter Seltz (eds.), *Cit.*, 724.

<sup>50</sup> W. Vostell, *dé-coll/age* (1996), *Cit.*, 724-725.

<sup>51</sup> P. Schimmel, *Cit.*, 78.

<sup>52</sup> Cf. G. Berghaus, “Happenings in Europe: Trends, Events, and Leading Figures”, *Cit.*, 271.

<sup>53</sup> Cf. D. Borromeo, “Happening e performance. Corpo e comportamento”, in S. Bordini, *Arte Contemporanea e Tecnica*, *Cit.*, 165-183: 180.

<sup>54</sup> G. Berghaus, “Happenings in Europe: Trends, Events, and Leading Figures”, *Cit.*, 271.

his *Sonata Fandango*, Fluxus music featured at the Multipla Gallery in Milan on October 10, 1975. On that occasion Vostell played a violin covered in meat.

His first action in Paris in 1962 was preceded by a *décollage* in 1958, *The Theatre Takes Place on the Street*, and in 1961, *Cityrama*. The latter was conceived as

a “permanent realistic demonstration at 26 places in Cologne, where life and reality, action and events are declared to be *décollaged* Total Works of Art.” Here, the spectators were encouraged to go to one of the twenty-six sites (a scrap yard, railway station, bomb sight, backyard, an entrance of an ordinary house, etc.) and to carry out actions such as: “listen to the noise of the railway and practice the art of love,” “urinate into the debris and think of your best friends,” “observe the children play, then take a fish in your mouth and take a walk,” or “go into a laundry and ask which year we are living in.”<sup>55</sup>

In his subsequent *Ligne PC Petite Ceinture*, performed on July 3, 1962 in Paris, in the first action that Vostell defined as *Happening*, according to Berghaus, “the audience was asked to board a bus on the PC line, to ride around Paris, and to take note of their acoustical and visual impressions. The rationale behind the early *Happenings* was explained by Vostell:

marcel duchamp has declared readymade objects as art, & the futurists declared noises as art—it is an important characteristic of my effort & those of my colleagues to declare as art the total event, comprising noise / object / movement / color / & psychology—a merging of elements, so that life (man) can be art—[...] content & events in my happenings have to be ordered by the onlooker / participant himself—[...] a happening is direct art in a cathartic sense: realization of raw experiences & psychic recovery through conscious use of the inner freedom in man.”<sup>56</sup>

In that same year, Wolf Vostell invited the audience to write, erase, tear off and paint on a *décollage* he exposed in the *Salón de Mayo 1962 en Barcelona* and participated in the planning of the *Festum Fluxorum*, an international event in Wiesbaden together with Nam June Paik, and George Maciunas.

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<sup>55</sup> G. Berghaus., “Happenings in Europe: Trends, Events, and Leading Figures”, *Cit.*, 273.

<sup>56</sup> W. Vostell, “Genesis and Iconography of My Happenings.” In “Miss Vietnam”, 1–19. San Francisco: The Nova Broadcast Press. 1968, 7–8, in G. Berghaus, “Happenings in Europe: Trends, Events, and Leading Figures”, *Cit.*, 274.

We may find a line of continuity between Vostell's idea of *décollage* and the concept of the formless from which Dubuffet departed in his artistic research, and in fact, according to Berghaus, his first move to the Happening took place in Paris in 1954, in the context of Informal art and the expansion to a variety of material experimentations in an attempt to include the pulsating rhythm of life into the artistic process.<sup>57</sup> Both artists, though, are crucial in understanding the “impulse of creation and destruction” involving the 20<sup>th</sup> century artist's work, as described by Catherine Grenier. Vostell, in fact, even when collaborating with his American colleagues, in an “action lecture” given together with Allan Kaprow in the Cricket Theater in New York on April 19, 1964, affirmed that he was principally “interested in letting the *décollage*-events happen, so that they become events of change or decomposition of the life principles that surround us, whilst you [Kaprow] employ the principle of collage. You build up and construct your happenings.”<sup>58</sup>

The motivation behind his *décollage*/Happenings was that of enlightening the audience through *décollage*. In fact, “by taking everyday occurrences out of their context, it opens up for discussion the absurdities and demands of life, thereby shocking the audience and prompting them to reflect and react.”<sup>59</sup> Vostell's idea of Happening, in accordance with Kaprow's statements, was based on the belief that “there is truly no longer any separation between ‘art’ and ‘life’: the permanent creative process of life as art is taking form on a mass basis and has become a collective movement.”<sup>60</sup> To that extent, and without the necessity of describing each action Vostell conceived, it seems worthwhile to quote a manifesto he prepared for the Happening, *In Ulm* (1970)

happening=life—life as art—no retreat from but into reality—making it possible to experience & live its essence—not to abandon the world but to find a new relation to it—to let the participant experience himself consciously in the happening—to shift the environment into new contexts—to create new meanings by breaking up the old—let the participant experience

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<sup>57</sup> Cf. G. Berghaus, “Happenings in Europe: Trends, Events, and Leading Figures”, *Cit.*, 271.

<sup>58</sup> In “Die Kunst des Happenings: Aktionsvortrag von Allan Kaprow und Wolf Vostell, Cricket Theatre, New York City 19/4/64.” In *Happenings, Fluxus, Pop Art, Nouveau Réalisme*, eds J. Becker and W. Vostell, 399–409. Reinbek: Rowohlt, 402, quoted by G. Berghaus in *HAPPENINGS AND OTHER ACTS*, *Cit.*, 275.

<sup>59</sup> G. Berghaus, *Cit.*, 274.

<sup>60</sup> W. Vostell, *Aktionen, Happenings und Demonstrationen seit 1965*.— Reinbek: Rowohlt, 1970, quoted by G. Berghaus in *HAPPENINGS AND OTHER ACTS*, *Cit.*, 317.

indeterminacy as a creative force—to uncover & let uncover nonsense in sense—lack of purpose as purpose—open form as form—*eccentricity*—participants & performers instead of spectators—simultaneousness through juxtaposition of contradictory elements—new combination & absurd use of everyday objects.<sup>61</sup>

Wolf Vostell's artistic initiation took place in Paris, and then he lived in Dusseldorf and Cologne. In 1970 he moved to Berlin, a city that affected him profoundly, being split in two parts—"décollé". The city somehow became a sort of personification of his poetics, reflected in many of his works in which the iconography of the wall is recurrent. Moreover, as the Catalan art critic Maria Luisa Borrás perceptively highlighted in an interview on Vostell, it does not seem coincidental that he afterward would open his art center (Museo Vostell) in a place in the Spanish region of Extremadura called Malpartida de Cáceres. According to her, the name "mal-partida" invoked the contradiction inherent in a bad ("mal") partition ("partida"), of which the wall in Berlin was the emblematic concretization (concrete in the material sense of the term). Her observation was met with a response from Vostell: "I have never reflected upon this 'mal-partida'. It is fantastic that it is you to recognize the analogy. To evoke the opulent Berlin, with its millions of habitants, regarding a land at the extremes of Extremadura, [...] Do you see? How art and life is the same thing?"<sup>62</sup>

In his Happenings, Vostell used to employ modern objects from consumer society and tools for communication like TVs, telephones, cars, and trains, with the intention of creating environments in which objects would interact with human beings and vice versa. The Portuguese "aesthetic operator"—this is the way he started to define himself and other people involved in the arts from 1969, after "Eleven days of collective art" in Pejo (Italy), a meeting with Bruno Munari among others, all of them refusing the designation of "artist"<sup>63</sup>—Ernesto de Sousa statements from 1979 offer

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<sup>61</sup> W. Vostell, *Happening und Leben* (232-233), quoted in G. Berghaus, Cit., 275-276. My emphasis on the word "eccentricity," for its significance in the philosophical anthropology of Helmuth Plessner, as it will be explained in the next parts of this research.

<sup>62</sup> Cf. E. de Sousa, "Carta de Lisboa I: Vostell e o paraíso perdido", in *Colóquio Artes*, nº 41, Lisboa, Junho 1979, 57-59: 59.

<sup>63</sup> "A palavra artista vai perdendo, no nosso tempo, muito do seu antigo prestígio. Na mais viva experiência colectiva de carácter estético em que participei—em Pejo, na Itália, Agosto de 1969, nos 'Undici Giorni di Arte Collettiva, com Bruno Munari e outros; [...]—os respectivos participantes mais lúcidos recusavam a designação de artistas: operários ou operadores estéticos, assim queriam ser classificados. [...]", Ernesto de Sousa, "Chegar depois de todos com Almada Negreiros", in Ernesto de



an illuminating description of the artist's research. The multifaceted aspects in his work, made him, according to Berghaus, "one of the most influential Happeners of the 1960s."<sup>64</sup>

The aesthetic work of Wolf Vostell is predominantly sociological: having as main topics, the concrete man from one side, the premonition of a primordial nature on the other...the same matter, organic or inorganic...the energy—as human expense on this matter, concentration of forces and ideas, nutriment and technology. But also the social and spiritual paralysis resulting from it, the alienation, the entropy of all meaning. In-communication. And its denounce. And then...disaggregation, putrefaction, useless consume, waste...the disaster, the catastrophe...the war. The décollage of all social instances, of fragile stability—the rupture. As a counterpart, Vostell's work is invested by all human action destined to face, to unglue (in inverse meaning) from those alienator situations, fomenters of entropy. The aesthetic operation, the feast—even being that of waste—the intense and enriching gathering.<sup>65</sup>

### 3.2.3 On the “theory of a Social Sculpture”

Another pivotal figure in the European Happenings movement, which became more influential internationally and with repercussion beyond his generation, is certainly Joseph Beuys. Regarding his relationship with his fellow countryman, Berghaus explained that

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Sousa, *Ser Moderno...Em Portugal*, (ed. Isabel Alves, José Miranda Justo), Lisboa: Assírio e Alvim, 1998, 83.

<sup>64</sup> G. Berghaus, “Happenings in Europe: Trends, Events, and Leading Figures”, *Cit.*, 277.

<sup>65</sup> My translation from the original Portuguese: “O trabalho estético de Wolf Vostell é de raiz predominantemente sociológica; tendo no entanto como tópicos principais, de um lado o homem concreto, do outro o pressentimento de uma natureza primordial... a própria matéria, orgânica ou inorgânica... a energia – como despesa humana sobre essa matéria, concentração de forças e ideias, alimento e tecnologia. Mas também a paralisia social e espiritual que daí podem resultar, a alienação, a entropia de todo o sentido. In-comunicação. E a sua denuncia. E ainda... a desagregação, a putrefacção... o consumo inútil, o desperdício... o desastre, a catástrofe... a guerra. A des-colagem de toda a instância social, de frágil estabilidade – a rotura. Por outro lado, interessa ao trabalho de Vostell toda a acção humana destinada a enfrentar, a des-colar (em sentido inverso) daquelas situações alienatórias, fomentadoras de entropia. A operação estética, a festa – mesmo que seja a festa do desperdício – o convívio intenso e enriquecedor.” Ernesto de Sousa ou Jorn Merkert in *Wolf Vostell (de 1958 a 1979) Envolvimento, Pintura, Happening, Desenho, Video, Gravura, Multiplo*. Texto e Organização Ernesto de Sousa, direcção Gráfica Fernando Calhau, Lisboa: Galeria de Belém, Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian, Maio 1979, 4-18.

Vostell, the “new realist,” who confronted the audience with clear and simple fragments of everyday reality, and Beuys, the “shaman,” whose symbol-laden Actions exuded such a stark and mystical quality. Vostell guided his audiences through an external reality, while Beuys celebrated rituals aimed at channeling the energies of natural and supernatural worlds into the spiritual life of the audience.<sup>66</sup>

In his work, Beuys employed a wide range of materials such as batteries, bones, fat, felt, and living creatures like the hare, the horse and the bee.<sup>67</sup> They were the result of a “Theory of Social Sculpture” he elaborated. For him, the same idea sculpture, was related to something to which is given a form, involved materials but also ideas. For this reason, sculpture and painting per se could not respond to his aesthetic, whose most adequate response was found in his Happening or “or Actions as he preferred to call them, were works of art where everything was in a state of flux, of change and transformation.”<sup>68</sup>

From 1964 on Beuys started to participate actively in every edition of the art manifestation Documenta.<sup>69</sup> His presence was memorable during the fifth—directed by the Swiss curator Harald Szeeman, in 1972—in which Beuys remained in Kassel for one hundred days with a living installation entitled *Bureau for Direct Democracy*, where he sat at a sort of information desk where he met visitors from all over the world, the way he used to do in Dusseldorf, during the years in which he was a professor of sculpture at the Fine Arts Faculty between 1961 and 1972.<sup>70</sup> In this year he left the appointment in the belief that admission to courses should have been free and open to everybody. For this reason, similar to his action in Documenta 5, he explained that he had somehow transferred his office from Dusseldorf, this time face to the street, facilitating the access to any person interested. His attempt to reproduce something similar in Kassel was for Beuys a pragmatic question. His activism achieved a visibility of global scale, permitting him to establish contacts at the

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<sup>66</sup> G. Berghaus, “Happenings in Europe: Trends, Events, and Leading Figures”, *Cit.*, 278.

<sup>67</sup> For a material analysis of Beuys’s work, especially concerning the organic, see Chapter 4.

<sup>68</sup> G. Berghaus, “Happenings in Europe: Trends, Events, and Leading Figures”, *Cit.*, 278.

<sup>69</sup> Documenta, one of the most important exhibitions of contemporary art, has been held every five years since 1955 in Kassel, Germany, when Arnold Bode first directed it. A city where munitions were manufactured, Kassel was completely destroyed during the Second World War. For this reason, it was later chosen as a symbolic place of union in the realm of art. Having conceived of the event as a punctual manifestation, Bode decided to repeat it four years later, due to the success of the original.

<sup>70</sup> Cf. Joseph Beuys and Dirk Schwarze, “Report on a Day’s Proceedings at the *Bureau dor Direct Democracy//1972*”, in Claire Bishop (ed.), *Participation*, Whitechapel Gallery, London; Cambridge, Massachussets: The MIT Press, 2006, 120-124.

international level, spreading his ideas around democracy in a dialogical context, horizontal and open.

He believed in a future whose politics would be lead by art, in other words “originate[d] from human creativity, from the individual freedom of man. For this reason here I deal mostly with the problem of education, with the pedagogical aspect. [...]”<sup>71</sup> In this sense he pointed at education as the basis for the development of free thought, of “an area of freedom”, from which would branch a reconstruction of democracy and of economy, whose connection could only be, in his understanding, art.<sup>72</sup> Therefore the theory of social sculpture is put into practice by the one who the art historian Thierry de Duve defined as “the last proletarian”. According to de Duve the artist represents the proletarian through excellence, since the regime of private property obliges him to put what he produces in the art market. If the proletarian is the one introducing the labour force in the Marxian economic production, in Beuys’s vision, considering every man an artist, this labour force is given by creativity.<sup>73</sup>

Rather than Marxist thought or political figures, regarding his project of democratization, he was inspired by Rudolf Steiner’s anthroposophy, Waldorf’s pedagogy, Goethe and Schiller’s philosophy, and as Berghaus described, “his idealistic concepts of democracy were often derided by the Left and the Center, and [...] few people took him seriously as a politician.”<sup>74</sup> Nevertheless, through his political activism put into practice in his Happenings and Actions, Beuys attempted to the overcome the separation existing between art and life. He affirmed in fact

Art is now the only evolutionary-revolutionary power. Only art is capable of dismantling the repressive effects of a senile system that continues to totter along the deadline: to dismantle in order to build A SOCIAL ORGANISM AS A WORK OF ART. The most modern art discipline—Social Sculpture / Social Architecture—will only reach fruition when every living person becomes a creator, a sculptor or architect of the social organism. Only then would the insistence on participation of the action art of FLUXUS and Happening be fulfilled.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> See J. Beuys in C. Bishop, *Cit.*, 124.

<sup>72</sup> Cf. J. Beuys in C. Bishop, *Cit.*, 124

<sup>73</sup> Cf. T. de Duve, “Joseph Beuys, or the last of the proletarians, *October*, Vol. 45 (Summer, 1988), The MIT Press, 47-62: 55.

<sup>74</sup> G. Berghaus, “Happenings in Europe: Trends, Events, and Leading Figures”, *Cit.*, 282.

<sup>75</sup> J. Beuys in Caroline Tisdall, *Joseph Beuys*, London: Thames & Hudson, 1979, 278, in G. Berghaus, *Cit.*, 283

His ideas about social sculpture implied a unification of thought and speech being molded the way a sculptor gives shape to a plastic object. He asserted that “[t]he most important thing to me is that man, by virtue of his products, has experience of how he can contribute to the whole and not only produces articles but become a sculptor or architect of the whole social organism.”<sup>76</sup>

### 3.3 The Organic at the core of Philosophical Anthropology

From the previous remarks it follows that considering the concept of life without that of the organic is not possible. Therefore, another aspect which needs to be considered when facing the problem of the organic in the realm of philosophy is that of recognizing in which branch of the philosophical thought it is possible to find answers in order to construct an analysis of the organic in 20<sup>th</sup> century art, after having based a reflection about the organic on philosophical statements. Under this scope, three texts will be considered, and Joachim Fischer’s philosophical analysis offers a noteworthy support.<sup>77</sup> As a preliminary definition, it seems necessary to continue the path at the beginning of this chapter in an attempt to, firstly, distinguish philosophical anthropology from other philosophies, and to recognize that generally it is not employed for art historical research, and, secondly, to return to it when studying the organic materiality in artistic practices of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Fischer attempted to distinguish philosophical anthropology from “other theoretical programs” like transcendental criticism, evolutionary theory, phenomenology, existentialism, hermeneutic philosophy, linguistics, or structuralism.<sup>78</sup> According to Fischer “Philosophical Anthropology takes the world of living things, the positionality of organic life, as the precondition for any positioning

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<sup>76</sup> “Not just a few are called, but everyone”, George Jappe interviews Joseph Beuys, *Studio International*, London, vol.184, no. 950, December 1972, pp 226-8, in C. Harrison & P. Wood, *Cit.*, 904.

<sup>77</sup> J. Fischer, “Exploring the Core Identity of Philosophical Anthropology through the Works of Max Scheler, Helmuth Plessner, and Arnold Gehlen”, in *Iris*, issn 2036-3257, I, Firenze University Press, 1 April 2009, 153-170. Comparing philosophical anthropology to other disciplines within philosophy, Fischer proposes this one as a paradigm, and for this reason, he explains, it appears in capital letters.

<sup>78</sup> Cf. J. Fischer, “Exploring the Core Identity of Philosophical Anthropology through the Works of Max Scheler, Helmuth Plessner, and Arnold Gehlen”, *Cit.*, 168.

achieved by human subjectivity.”<sup>79</sup> Therefore, (1) philosophical anthropology cannot be confused with evolutionary theory, which considers all forms of lives under the principle of evolution and (2) it is distinct from phenomenology, since the latter poses consciousness as a starting point, while philosophical anthropology departs from the organic level, in the world of living things, providing a foundation for phenomenology. It diverges from existentialism in that it does not consider the body as a starting point for consciousness, but acknowledges the body in its physicality, and afterwards the lived body comes. It differs from hermeneutic philosophy, linguistics, or structuralism in that all of them approach a theory from the language as the medium for all relationships to the self, the world, and others and eventually underline that “Philosophical Anthropology, by contrast, takes the process of life as its starting point, from whose break in continuity language springs as just one medium among others to bridge the divide (pictorial representation, music, dance, etc.).”<sup>80</sup>

In order to demonstrate the specificities of philosophical anthropology, and especially the particular approach developed in Germany in the first half of the twentieth century, Fischer referred to three texts from three German philosopher: Max Scheler’s *Man’s Place in Nature* (1928), Helmuth Plessner’s *Man and the Stages of the Organic* (1928), and – with a slightly later publication date – Arnold Gehlen’s *Man: His Nature and Place in the World* (1940).<sup>81</sup> One crucial initial statement in Fischer’s research is that, in the practice of observing and describing various aspects of the human sphere, “from the nineteenth century onwards, anthropology is also, irrevocably, a biological discipline.”<sup>82</sup> This assertion, though, explains the reason that biology acquires a pivotal role in philosophical anthropology in the three authors chosen for his discussion. As he remarked, “for Scheler, Plessner, and Gehlen the comparison between plants, animals and human beings or, at the very least, between

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<sup>79</sup> J. Fischer, “Exploring the Core Identity of Philosophical Anthropology through the Works of Max Scheler, Helmuth Plessner, and Arnold Gehlen”, *Cit*, 168.

<sup>80</sup> J. Fischer, “Exploring the Core Identity of Philosophical Anthropology through the Works of Max Scheler, Helmuth Plessner, and Arnold Gehlen”, *Cit.*, 169.

<sup>81</sup> M. Scheler, *Die Stellung des Menschen im Kosmos*, Darmstadt: Reichl, 1928; [Man’s Place in Nature, trans. H. Meyerhoff, Boston: Beacon Press, 1961]; H. Plessner, *Die Stufen des Organischen und der Mensch. Einleitung in die philosophische Anthropologie* (1928), Berlin and New York: de Gruyter, 1975; A. Gehlen, *Der Mensch. Seine Natur und seine Stellung in der Welt*, in K.-S. Rehberg (ed.), *Arnold- Gehlen-Gesamtausgabe, Textkritische Edition unter Einbeziehung des gesamten Textes der 1. Auflage von 1940*, vol. 3, Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 1950/1993; [Man: His Nature and Place in the World, trans. C. McMillan and K. Pillemer, New York: Columbia University Press, 1988].

<sup>82</sup> J. Fischer, “Exploring the Core Identity of Philosophical Anthropology through the Works of Max Scheler, Helmuth Plessner, and Arnold Gehlen”, *Cit* ., 154.

animals and human beings, is a postulate for the development for their argument.”<sup>83</sup>

In the three authors’ approaches, as Fischer underscored, “mind” is not ignored, but rather is taken as a given, and their focus is external, on the living world, in which life is considered not as the objective, material world *per se*, or as nature in a general sense, but on the distanced point of view, the “biologist’s view of the organism”, to observe the living body in its medium or environment.<sup>84</sup> Considering the living body in its environment permitted the three authors to classify the various types of life (plants, animals—we might say non-human animals) into categories, not as a teleological path between body and mind (as would be in the case of German idealism), or as an evolutionary course (as it would be in the paradigm of Darwin). For this reason, he affirmed that

In Philosophical Anthropology, then, the conceptual focus is not on the comparison between human beings and inorganic objects, e.g., between a stone and a human being, but rather on the comparison between human beings and other living beings, e.g., plants, animals, and humans, or at the very least, on the comparison between animals and human beings.<sup>85</sup>

What seems remarkable in philosophical anthropology is that “man”—a term that immediately invokes gender discriminations and therefore I prefer to replace with the term “human”—is the “double-aspect” of existence. In other words, the human exists from within, as a centered subject, and at the same time takes an external position, “finds himself as a body among material bodies, marginalized, de-centered, objectified, like a ‘mere animal’ (Plessner), a thing among other things.”<sup>86</sup> Fischer, as a subsequent step in demonstrating the paradigmaticity of philosophical anthropology, is obliged to refer to more than one example, and therefore referenced the three mentioned above. What surprisingly seems more interesting, especially in the context of creation and destruction and rupture as that main impulse at the core of the artistic practices in 20<sup>th</sup> century art, the three philosophers, in three distinct ways, arrived at a very similar concept to distinguish the human from other livings (plants and non-

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<sup>83</sup> J. Fischer, “Cit.”, 154.

<sup>84</sup> Cf. J. Fischer, “Cit.”, 155.

<sup>85</sup> J. Fischer, “Exploring the Core Identity of Philosophical Anthropology through the Works of Max Scheler, Helmuth Plessner, and Arnold Gehlen”, *Cit.*, 156-157.

<sup>86</sup> J. Fischer, “Cit.”, 158.

human animals).

Firstly, Fischer wrote that the “key concepts Scheler introduced to describe ‘man’s place in nature’ are *Neinsagenkönnen* [he who can say no], *Weltoffenheit* [openness to the world], and the ability for the living being in question to regard something as having a *Gegenstand-Sein* [to be an object].”<sup>87</sup> For Scheler living things are characterized as being moved by an “urge”, which puts each of them in relationship with the other. If this urge could be considered as a common trait between plants, animals and humans, the animal joins it to the experience of “resistance” in the environment in which is immersed. When the experience of resistance becomes “negational”, at that very stage—in the words of Fischer—“there is a break in the biocycle.”<sup>88</sup> This break is a phenomenon of the living human being. As Fischer pointed out, “The mind as principle of negation, of confrontation, of the renunciation of its position, is the tense state of interrupted life.”<sup>89</sup> He also expressed the human living being’s essence as “the result of a genuine wedding of ‘urge’ (resistance) and ‘mind’ (negation).”<sup>90</sup>

After Scheler, in his overview on philosophical anthropology, Fischer explored some key concepts in Plessner’s thought, which are *exzentrische*

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<sup>87</sup> J. Fischer, “Cit.”, 158-159.

<sup>88</sup> J. Fischer, “Exploring the Core Identity of Philosophical Anthropology through the Works of Max Scheler, Helmuth Plessner, and Arnold Gehlen”, *Cit*, 159. The idea of negation central to this resistance and provoking the so-called break, reminds me of Paolo Virno’s *Saggio Sulla Negazione. Per una antropologia filosofica*, Bollati Boringhieri, Torino, 2013, in which Virno defends the idea that negation only belongs to the verbal thought, in other words, he defends the idea that negation does not exist in the visible world. He is reminiscent of Wittgenstein’s question, “is it possible to negate an image? No”. This negation, which doesn’t belong to the sensuous world, is responsible for a break, a rupture, that in his philosophical anthropology (before of the anthropologic one attempted by Virno) Scheler defined as specific of the human animal. Some excerpts of Paolo Virno’s essay on negation follow in the original Italian version: “La negazione [...] è una funzione che appartiene in esclusiva all’attività verbale.” (16) / “Il linguaggio non civilizza l’aggressività dell’*Homo sapiens*, ma la radicalizza oltremisura, portandola a quell’estremo che è il *dis*-conoscimento del proprio simile. È senz’altro legittimo ritenere che il pensiero verbale riplasmami da cima a fondo il cosentire innato. A condizione, però, di non omettere una precisazione urticante: ‘riplasmare’ significa innanzi tutto che il pensiero verbale erode l’originaria sicurezza del cosentire.” (21) / “Scrive Wittgenstein (1960, appunto del 26 novembre 1914) ‘Si può negare un’immagine? No. E in ciò risiede la distinzione tra immagine e proposizione’. La negazione è il crinale che separa il pensiero verbale dalla rappresentazione psicologica. [...] Ma c’è di più: oltre a istituire una secca discontinuità tra ambito linguistico e ambito psicologico, la negazione è anche il tramite privilegiato grazie al quale il primo si innesta sul secondo e lo riorganizza in lungo e in largo.” (51) / “Il ‘non’ interviene dall’esterno delle rappresentazioni. Il punto di rottura è un punto di tangenza.” (56) / “La negazione, dicevo, è una prerogativa esclusiva del pensiero verbale. Essa non ha precursori di sorta nell’esperienza sensibile e nei trambusti emotivi: a meno che, beninteso, non si voglia considerare il vomito o la fuga una forma aurorale di proposizione negativa.” (59)

<sup>89</sup> J. Fischer, “Cit.”, 159.

<sup>90</sup> J. Fischer, “Cit.”, 160.

*Positionalität* [excentric positionality], *natürliche Künstlichkeit* [natural artificiality], *vermittelte Unmittelbarkeit* [mediated immediacy], and *utopischer Standort* [utopian standpoint]. According to Plessner, man's distinguishing characteristic is his excentric positionality,<sup>91</sup> but he firstly distinguished between living and non-living things at the level of the object, "the living thing—quoting Fischer—is characterized by border traffic in relation to its environment, it is a boundary-setting thing."<sup>92</sup> This boundary is therefore positional, in relation to self-affirmation and self-expression; therefore the positionality that characterizes the organic at the level of the plant is open. This idea is derived from the philosophy of Hans Driesch, from which the open positionality is typical of that living organization which is not independent from its own environment. It is specific of the vegetal organism.<sup>93</sup> Conversely, the living of closed positionality establishes a different relationship with the own external, being an autonomous unity, separated from the surrounding environment. It is typical of the non-human animal.<sup>94</sup> This closed, or centric positionality when moving inside and out of this circle of functions, produces—and here we see the similarity with Scheler, but expressed in a slightly different way—a break.

In the words of Fischer, "a break in the circle of functions at the level of the human organism, a break in the sensory-motor-dynamic impulsive bio-cycle."<sup>95</sup> This break at the level of the human living entity is recognized by Plessner as ex-centric positionality. Fischer's explanation makes Plessner's key terms connect each other as follows:

The living entities referred to as humans are those living entities that take a position, that have a position, that are intended to take or have a position with regards to the positions assumed by natural history. They are by "nature" "artificial" or constructed – in nature. They arrive at their achievements "through" media, which enable them to achieve things and at the same time distort those achievements. By dint of their "excentric position" they occupy a "utopian standpoint."<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> Cf. J. Fischer, "Cit.", 160.

<sup>92</sup> J. Fischer, "Cit.", 161.

<sup>93</sup> Cf. Glossary in H. Plessner, *I gradi dell'organico e l'uomo. Introduzione all'antropologia filosofica*, (Italian translation by Vallori Rasini), Torino: Bollati Boringhieri, 2006, 398.

<sup>94</sup> Cf. Glossary in H. Plessner, *Cit.*, 398.

<sup>95</sup> J. Fischer, "Exploring the Core Identity of Philosophical Anthropology through the Works of Max Scheler, Helmuth Plessner, and Arnold Gehlen", *Cit* 161.

<sup>96</sup> J. Fischer, "Cit.", 161.



Finally, Arnold Gehlen, in his “Man: His Nature and Place in the World”, identified some main traits to define the living beings and their characteristics, such as *Handlung* [action], *Entsicherung* [security-withdrawal], and *Entlastung* [unburdening], and *Institution* [institution].<sup>97</sup> For Gehlen the two distinguishing human living beings are “action” and “unburdening”, explaining again a break, “a hiatus between a drive and its fulfillment.”<sup>98</sup>

Into this gap in life steps the ordering influence of “action” as a mental act, but, at the same time, the pressure of the situation can only be alleviated by action as a result of this gap, by action that lends vitality to the material that has been liberated through security-withdrawal (i.e., the movable drives, the perceptive flexibility, the room for maneuver); and by constructing its own artificial world as culture against the pressure exerted on it by the rupture in the external and internal world, it re-establishes the contact in the vital circulation.<sup>99</sup>

In Gehlen’s reflections about the human action we may find substantial insight on the link that the Action enables between art and life in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup>-century artistic practices. This action is not cut off from its context, but—as Gehlen observed—it is inherent to the “institution”, another category he established, “based on the interdependent re-utilization of behavioral modes, and has a vitally stabilizing function, providing the framework for the formulation of life-style goals.”<sup>100</sup> The Happening, the Décollage, and the Action in Beuys’s acception and his idea of Social Sculpture, intervene actively and profoundly within—and at the unique condition that—the institution as intended by Gehlen. In other words, “institution” in this case corresponds not to an established formal entity (to which artistic practices in the 1960s strongly face their opposition as well) but as social environment, that if missing, would automatically negate the sense of the Action as undertaken by Kaprow, Vostell and Beuys, considered to be pivotal figures at this stage, but they are not the only ones, as we have observed in the previous chapters, and will see in the next one.

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<sup>97</sup> J. Fischer, “Cit.”, 162.

<sup>98</sup> J. Fischer, “Cit.”, 162.

<sup>99</sup> J. Fischer, “Exploring the Core Identity of Philosophical Anthropology through the Works of Max Scheler, Helmuth Plessner, and Arnold Gehlen”, *Cit.*, 162.

<sup>100</sup> J. Fischer, “Cit.”, 163.

The importance of analyzing these practices through the support of philosophical anthropology, and especially through these three German authors whose thought has been briefly outlined here, lies—as Fischer has correctly remarked—in the fact that

The style of categorization that can be described as specific to Philosophical Anthropology does not simply show the hiatus at which the mind appears and disappears within the living body but rather follows this hiatus as a line, as a broken line, so to speak, without exception, through all of the cultural and social phenomena it covers and deals with. The relationships to self, the world, and others, that is to say, the inner, outer, and shared world, arise from the bios (the world of living things), they are a displacement (ex-centric) of the bios, which remain within the bios, indeed live within it. It is for this reason that there is an underlying tension of life that resonates in all the categories of Philosophical Anthropology, and the moment of the vital, the shadow of the living body runs deep into the ramifications of the subsequent concepts in psychology and the cultural and social sciences.<sup>101</sup>

The three thinkers, in analysing the aspects of life, chose to stress a comparison between plants, human and non-human animals and, as Fischer noted, “in the biocycle, the living beings come into contact with ‘the other’, over and above mere materialistic causal links.”<sup>102</sup> Nevertheless, in our approach, for an art-historical analysis on plants, animals and humans (as subject and as object of the art process) the core of the study urges us to stand in the realm of materiality as a point of departure for further interpretations of their meaning, which cannot be separated from the medium through which it is manifested.

In regards to the initial remarks in this chapter—the concept of discontinuity and continuity as they relate to organic materiality, and to gain a historical perspective, on the vital cycle of a practice—the use of organic materiality—defined not only in its biological life-span but in the possibility of being produced and reproduced, placed and replaced, exhibited and re-exhibited along the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In other words, the ephemerality of organic materials, though it may shorten the life of an artwork, and grow more fragile with the passing of time, whether related to a performative moment documented through other media (photography, video) or

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<sup>101</sup> J. Fischer, “Exploring the Core Identity of Philosophical Anthropology through the Works of Max Scheler, Helmuth Plessner, and Arnold Gehlen”, *Cit.*, 163.

<sup>102</sup> J. Fischer, “Cit.”, 164.

regularly substituted, its singularity does not matter. What matters is the material presence of the object, maintaining a certain meaning at a specific moment. Vitalism and Philosophical Anthropology, though, have been addressed in this section as necessary elements to consider in the study of organic materiality in 20<sup>th</sup> century art.



## 4.

### **Animal (non-human and human) and vegetal corporality during the long sixties**

...a government is a living organism. Like every living thing its prime characteristic is a blind, unreasoned instinct to survive. You hit it, it will fight back.

—Robert Heinlein, *Stranger in a Strange Land*, 1961: 50

All living beings in the world possess the power of hell  
(É que um mundo todo vivo tem a força do inferno)

—Clarice Lispector, *A Paixão segundo G. H.*, 1964: 18

#### **4.1 Corporality in art, and science crisis in the long sixties**

The main focus of this chapter is the use or inclusion of living forms, those being vegetal and animal—human and non-human—in the artistic practices during the long 1960s. The concept of life is inherent to the scientific discipline of biology, which was born in the mid of the 17<sup>th</sup>-century, and has always attempted to acquire an understanding of the internal functioning of a living body rather than of the problem of life itself, which is, as the French historian of science Michel Foucault highlighted, an epistemological and not biological question.<sup>1</sup> As analysed in the previous chapter, in fact, philosophical anthropology brings some clues to understanding this problem. In his *Die Stufen*, Plessner, interested in finding a theory able to correlate the types of life, vegetal, animal and human, also introduced the concept of “corporality”, which he

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<sup>1</sup> See “Noam Chomsky debates with Michel Foucault” (1971), Eindhoven University, available at <<http://www.artandeducation.net/videos/>> (accessed in December 2014).

defined as “the corporeal concreteness in its ‘lived’ aspect, in other words the body as owned and managed by the living.”<sup>2</sup> This concept appears as particularly significant if we consider these corporalities developing their living functions in the context of an artistic process, exhibition, event, in which they are charged of metaphorical and abstract meaning, even in the concreteness of their materiality. To understand these practices it is necessary, firstly, to contextualise the complex period of the long 1960s, as concerns the role of science and technology and the global social movements.

During World War II, the United States invested an unparalleled amount of resources in research, industry and the military, such as the Radar Project and the Manhattan State Project. The latter is the most famous, having the goal of building the first atomic bomb, and involving more than 250.000 people.<sup>3</sup> After World War II—according to the art historian Reichle—science went through an exponential growth, which resulted in a necessary increased cost of technical infrastructures and “because of the onset of global interconnectedness of research, in incisive changes and dependencies within science. In turn, this led to the dissolution of the clear dividing lines between the individual domains, for example, between science and technology.”<sup>4</sup>

Regarding the periodization around the 1960s, as the historian of science Jon Agar affirmed, the 1960s started at the end of the 1950s and finished in the middle of the 1970s, in fact “[n]o interesting periodization would have the 1960s beginning on New Year’s Day 1960 and ending on 31 December 1969. However, there is no consensus on when a long 1960s might end. Subjects shape historiography.”<sup>5</sup> Among the examples mentioned by Agar the most significant and influent is Marwick’s *The Sixties: Cultural Revolution in Britain, France, Italy, and The United States, c.1958-*

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<sup>2</sup> “Corporalità (*Leib*) indica la concretezza corporea nel suo apsetto ‘vissuto’, vale a dire il corpo come posseduto e gestito dal vivente.” H. Plesser, *I Gradi dell’organico e l’uomo*, Cit., 398. Personal translation from the Italian.

<sup>3</sup> See I. Reichle, *Art in the Age of Technoscience*, Cit., 10. Regarding the connection between Science and its role in national and international politics looks relevant what Jon Agar refers and his remarks will be further assessed in this chapter: “Before 1958, many prominent interventions had been led by scientists. Examples include the Chicago scientists’ opposition to the use of the Bomb before Hiroshima, the foundation of the *Bulletin of Atomic Scientists*, the Russell–Einstein manifesto of 1955, the first Pugwash conference of 1957 and the petition organized by Linus Pauling in 1957–8, signed by 11,038 scientists from forty-nine countries, including thirty-seven Nobel laureates. Scientists were not so prominent after 1958.” J. Agar, “What happened in the sixties?”, *BJHS The British Society for the History of Science*, n°4, 2008, 567-600. First published online 15 July 2008, Available at <<https://www.ucl.ac.uk/sts/staff/agar/documents/whathappenedinthesixties.pdf>> (accessed in December 2, 2014), 579.

<sup>4</sup> I. Reichle, *Art in the Age of Technoscience*, Cit., 10.

<sup>5</sup> J. Agar, “Cit.”, 568.

c.1974 (1998), in which the author proposed a long decade for the 1960s, starting in 1958 corresponding with the growing recognition of the economic power of youth to 1974, coinciding with the oil crisis. Even much earlier than this publication, according to the historian Kornetis, he had already argued that

To draw lines between say 1956 and 1957, or 1958 and 1959 and to select one year as the one in which the Cultural Revolution ‘began’, would be absurd; yet lines have to be drawn somewhere if we are to bring sense to our past and not fall back upon that weariest of all non-historical approaches, the accumulation of large numbers of ‘influences’ culled from back and forth across large acres of time without any precision in locating where came the critical confluence.<sup>6</sup>

D. A Hollinger insisted—in his *Science, Jews and Secular Culture: Studies in the Mid-twentieth Century American Intellectual History* (1996)—in the first years of the 1960s, in which a number of important transformations and a “radically reoriented discussion of the entire scientific enterprise” occurred, as for example T. Kuhn’s *The Structure of Scientific Revolution* (1962).<sup>7</sup> “Nevertheless, —according to Agar who focused on both topics, and we can add that for human sciences as well—the ‘long 1960s’ form a useful periodization for historians of science and technology.”<sup>8</sup> This idea of an expanded decade, ending with the oil crisis in 1973-74,<sup>9</sup> is also very useful to

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<sup>6</sup> A. Marwick, “Room at the Top, Saturday Night and Sunday Morning, and the ‘Cultural Revolution’ in Britain”, *Journal of Contemporary History* 19:1 (1984): 127–152, quoted by Kostis Kornetis, “‘Everything Links?’ Temporality, Territoriality, and Cultural Transfer in the ’68 Protest Movement,” *Historein*, Vol. 9, 2009, 34-45: 36. Available at <<http://www.historeinonline.org/index.php/historein/article/view/20/20>> (Accessed in July 2014).

<sup>7</sup> See J. Agar, “Cit.”, 569.

<sup>8</sup> Agar continues explaining, “The label draws attention to some continuity of aspirations and attitudes, actions and institutions, that together were seen to be part of a process of change. A plausible account of the long 1960s would be to credit both continuous and discontinuous features. In particular, the sciences and techniques promoted under Cold War regimes were partly constitutive of long-1960s transformations.” J. Agar, “Cit.”, 569.

<sup>9</sup> “Much more than 1958, however, there is a consensus in dating the beginning of everything to 1956, which is the year of the Soviet invasion of Hungary, Khrushchev’s Speech at the twentieth party congress in Moscow which signalled de-Stalinisation, but it is also the year of the publication of Allen Ginsberg’s *Howl*, a major paradigm of 1950s alienation and a seminal text for 1960s counterculture. Postcolonial landmarks argue for a different periodisation that starts with the Battle of Algiers and the independence of Ghana in 1957; this year also coincides with Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road*. For others the Cuban Revolution of 1959 is the definite beginning of this longer period, and the American withdrawal from Vietnam and the OPEC-prompted oil crisis of 1973–74 its end.” Kornetis subsequently emphasizes that for the end of the long 1960s there is no unanimity of position: the oil crisis in 1973 is just one possible end among others, which also included the end in 1969 with the “countercultural excesses of Woodstock and the dark side of hippyism, condensed in the Manson ‘family’ murders.” But it also ended “with the often uncritical adoption and transplanted of third-world ‘guerrilla action’ in often entirely

analyse the artistic practices carried out during that period, closely linked with the historical events in which they happened, taking into account some events from the 1950s in history and politics. But also literature and music were seminal for the 1960s at a global level, what Kornetis defined as “cultural transfer” to explain

the process whereby imported cultural items are integrated into a home cultural repertoire, and the consequence generated by this integration. Here, the importance of intertextuality is paramount, the hybridity of culture is recognised and its essence as a changing and dynamic instead of a fixed and static entity accounts for its various transformations. This particular transfer not so much of material as of semiotic goods was not something entirely new in the 1960s; rather it was more of a nineteenth-century phenomenon. However, this trend became dominant in the early 1950s with the so-called ‘Americanisation’ of the European youth, through new consumption modes and models, including cinema and music, that acted as common denominators of new collective identities and subcultural trends.<sup>10</sup>

#### 4.1.1 The debate within sciences during the long 1960s

By the end of the 1960s it became evident, among scientists, that a crisis was taking place and in this realm, in February 1969, a group of them, including Maurice Wilkins, cosmic ray physicist and Nobel prizewinner Cecil Frank Powell, medical scientist R. L. Smith, physicist D. K. Butt and young Imperial College biochemist Steven Rose, were supporting a new scientist-activist movement.<sup>11</sup> In that year, they wrote a letter to Joseph Needham, which would result in the foundation of the British Society for Social Responsibility in Science (BSSRS), led by Needham.<sup>12</sup> The first

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disparate contexts,” whose Brigade Rosse (Red Brigades), formed in October 1970 are an example for the Italian case. See K. Kornetis, “‘Everything Links?’ Temporality, Territoriality, and Cultural Transfer in the ’68 Protest Movement,” *Cit.*, 35-36-39.

<sup>10</sup> K. Kornetis, “Cit.,” 39-40.

<sup>11</sup> See J. Agar, “What happened in the sixties?,” *Cit.*, 570.

<sup>12</sup> Agar quotes a paragraph of this letter: “Over the last few months a group of scientists brought together by a common concern for the future of science and society have been discussing the need for an organisation which will be concerned with the social responsibilities of the scientist. Many scientists have expressed their concern at the new evidence of the abuse and moral compromise of science that is now occurring. Thus the existence of classified scientific research in Universities, the current application of science to techniques of chemical and biological warfare, the potential abuse of discoveries in molecular biology, have and are giving rise to grave disquiet amongst scientists. There has occurred a decline in morale among scientists and a loss of esteem for science in the community at large. Furthermore, the



meeting was held two months later (1969), its keynote theme was “We have to face the fact that there is a crisis in science today” and, according to Agar, more than three hundred people among scientists, students and others interested in science attended.<sup>13</sup>

Wilkins, at the meeting on the “Social Impact of Modern Biology” held in 1970, pointed out that “[t]he main cause is probably the Bomb: scientists no longer have their almost arrogant confidence in the value of science. At the same time non-scientists increasingly and openly question the value of science.”<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless, in front of extremists positions objecting the rational thought as a whole, he also stressed the importance of not over-reacting in this condemnation, but rather “to be socially responsible and choose to pursue science that, to borrow Peter Medawar’s phrase, provided ‘imaginative uplift’. Seventeenth-century natural philosophy had possessed this quality.”<sup>15</sup> Wilkins was inviting the participants for a self-analysis of sciences paralleling the 17<sup>th</sup>-century crisis, which “provoked experimental solutions such as the Royal Society” to the current phase called “to experiments that may produce unexpected results.”<sup>16</sup> It is important to remark that this parallel served also to draw attention to the fact that, for Wilkins, “the crisis in science is only part of a larger cultural crisis.”<sup>17</sup>

As a counterpart, in the realm of Paris 1968, Jacques Monod remarked on the revolutionary role of science for the fact that, adopting an objective approach in analysis and interpretation of the universe, was eradicating all ‘traditional systems of value’:

Hence modern societies, living both economically and psychologically upon the technological fruits of science, have been robbed, by science itself, of any firm, coherent, acceptable ‘belief’ upon which to base their value systems. This, probably, is the greatest revolution that ever occurred in human culture. I mean, again, the utter destruction, by science, by the systematic pursuit of objective

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future of science is threatened by the hostility now felt by young people towards science. These developments we believe originate from the mis-use and abuse of science.” In J. Agar, “What happened in the sixties?”, *Cit.*, 570.

<sup>13</sup> See J. Agar, “What happened in the sixties?”, *Cit.*, 570.

<sup>14</sup> J. Agar, “Cit.”, 571.

<sup>15</sup> Agar continued quoting Wilkins regarding the imaginative uplift characterizing the 17<sup>th</sup>-century in which was “still possible today to catch some of that imaginative uplift. Consider for example the branch of science that deals with nervous systems. Such science should not only lead to control of nervous disorders but, by providing understanding of how the human brain works, should throw new light on the nature of mind itself. The understanding should (to use hippie language) expand the mind ... [Such] self-knowledge should greatly influence our values. Science is valuable, then, in terms of the self-knowledge that it gives.” J. Agar, “Cit.”, 571.

<sup>16</sup> J. Agar, “Cit.”, 571.

<sup>17</sup> J. Agar, “Cit.”, 571.

knowledge, of all belief systems, whether primitive or highly sophisticated, which had, for thousands of years, served the essential function of justifying the moral code and the social structure.<sup>18</sup>

Another reporter of the crisis, besides Wilkins, at the time—according to Agar—was Barry Commoner. In his *Science and Survival* (1966) he commented on the crisis in modern biology as—in the words of Agar—“a science that was being torn apart by the conflict between traditional organismic science, derived from natural history, and an aggressive new molecular biology.”<sup>19</sup> However, Wilkins’s individuation of the crisis in science at the conference on the Social Impact in Modern Biology in 1970 “portrayed it as a momentous condition afflicting the sciences more broadly.” There were also divergent positions and allowed “Wilkins’s label of ‘crisis’ to become a commonplace.”<sup>20</sup> But what is remarkable about that meeting is, as Agar stressed, it “also witnessed divergent views on the very nature of scientific knowledge, ranging from an establishment use–abuse model on one side to a radical critique of scientific knowledge shaped by ideology on the other.”<sup>21</sup>

Social movements constitute the most characteristic feature of the long 1960s, probably for their cohesion towards targets, e.g. nuclear disarmament or the removal of

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<sup>18</sup> J. Monod, “On the logical relationship between knowledge and values”, quoted by W. Fuller in *The Social Impact of Modern Biology* (1971) in J. Agar, “What happened in the sixties?”, *Cit.*, 571.

<sup>19</sup> J. Agar, “Cit.”, 572.

<sup>20</sup> J. Agar, “Cit.”, 573.

<sup>21</sup> J. Agar, “Cit.”, 573. It is remarkable that later Agar—at page 574—affirmed that the general history of the long 1960s addressed a marginal importance to technology and rarely to science. Conversely the religious movement of “Scientology”, created by the American fiction writer Ron Hubbard as an extension of “Dianetics” founded in 1952, together with the literary genre of Science-fiction, which acknowledged a broad expansion in by the 1950s—and one of its major authors was Robert A. Heinlein, whose novels (most famous *Stranger in a Strange Land* from 1961) focused on the social and psychological effects of technological change—do discussed the role of science in society, than science itself. Indulging a bit on the notion of Science Fiction we may reference Donna Haraway that, inspired by the American philosopher Teresa de Lauretis’s *The Technological Imagination* (1980), refers that “SF [being it speculative fiction, science fiction, science fantasy, speculative futures, speculative fabulation] is a territory of contested cultural reproduction in high-technological worlds. Placing the narratives of scientific fact within the heterogeneous space of SF produces a transformed field. The transformed field sets up resonances among all of its regions and components. No region or component is ‘reduced’ to any other, but reading and writing practices respond to each other across a structured place. [...]”, D. Haraway, *Primate Visions: Gender, Race, and Nature in the World of Modern Science*, London & New York: Routledge, 1989: 5. It is noticeable the centrality of the topic in 21st-century in Haraway’s contribution to dOCUMENTA(13) in 2012, in which she returned to the notion of SF, expanding the term as follows: “Sf is that potent material semiotic sign for the riches of speculative fabulation, speculative feminism, science fiction, science fact, science fantasy—and, I suggest, string figures. In looping threads and relays of patterning, this sf practice is a model for worlding. Sf must also mean ‘so far,’ opening up what is yet-to-come in protein time’s past, presents, and futures.” D. Haraway, “SF: Speculative Fabulation and String Figures”, *The Book of Books*, dOCUMENTA (13), Catalog 1/3, Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2012, 253-255: 253.

racism. These targets generated a counter-culture, which found its expression in literature, speeches, actions and movements.<sup>22</sup> Then, they would also include an opposition to authority, hierarchy, establishment, technocracy, the system, Man. “The relevant social movements—as Agar explained—include, but are not restricted to, civil rights, anti-nuclear movements, anti-Vietnam movements, political activism typified by umbrella groups, such as SDS [Students for a Democratic society—1960], new environmentalism and feminism.”<sup>23</sup> Regarding the same concept of “movement”, Agar highlighted the bold potential inner to the word, in fact

Collectively, there was a ‘Movement’, a term with considerable resonance. It is an actors’ category, while as an analyst’s category it emphasizes the social foundations of historical change. Some authors map the long 1960s precisely onto the rise and fall of these social movements that made up the Movement. Others insist on a less rigidly institutional analysis. Anderson, for example, insists that ‘movement’ is a useful term when it ‘connotes all activists who demonstrated for social change. Anyone could participate: There were no membership cards. Sara Evans, a civil rights volunteer, later wrote, “Above all the term ‘movement’ was self-descriptive. There was no way to join; you simply announced or felt yourself to be part of the movement.”’<sup>24</sup>

Regarding the position of scientists in the realm of social movements during the long 1960s, Barry Commoner, in his *Science and Survival*, pointed out that in front of a group making the assertion that, for instance, nuclear testing was “essential to the national interest”, while the other claimed it was “destructive of the national interest.” What emerged was that for the “thoughtful citizen” science was no longer credible, it was no longer telling the truth.<sup>25</sup> However, behind this, the protest started at MIT by

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<sup>22</sup> See. J. Agar, “What happened in the sixties?”, *Cit.*, 577. For Agar social movements are identified with the second wave of the long 1960s, whose first focuses on the institutional dynamics and internal disagreement; the second is the vastest and most involving turmoil of social movements that would provide, in the words of Agar, “a home for sea-change cultures.” The third wave is orientated to the self, and modern science is considered an example of this wave, while Agar suggests considering the three of them not separately but as interconnected and under the scope of the Cold War.

<sup>23</sup> J. Agar, “Cit.”, 578.

<sup>24</sup> J. Agar, “Cit.”, 578. Then, regarding the relationship between Science and scientists and the social movements, Agar distinguishes three kinds of relationships. “First, certain scientists and sciences were objects of criticism because they were seen within social movements as tools of their opponents. Second, places where science was done became theatres for social-movement demonstration. Third, scientists-as-activists were contributors to social movements. This third relationship took two forms: their science could be incidental to their involvement in a movement, or, most significantly, it could be the cause, the tool, the object and subject of activism.”

<sup>25</sup> B. Commoner, *Science and Survival*, London, 1971 (first published 1966), 127, quoted by J. Agar, “What happened in the sixties?”, *Cit.*, 581.

faculty members in January 1969 versed on the role of science and technology in society in a broad sense: “The protesters’ manifesto of 4 March called for ‘turning research applications away from the present emphasis on military technology toward the solution of pressing environmental and social problems.’”<sup>26</sup>

In the context of social movements and the role of science, we should not underestimate the amount of novelty introduced by the discovery of DNA, whose account was presented by its author, James Watson, in the book *The Double Elix* in 1968. Regarding the inquiry on the position of science itself, Agar pointed out the central role of Bronowski and Young. The first one, Director of the Council of Biology in Human Affairs at the Salk Institute and at that moment planning and shooting footage for the celebrated documentary series *The Ascent of Man*, argued the fundamental importance that “If science is to express a conscience, it must come spontaneously out of the community of scientists.”<sup>27</sup> Being face-to-face in the choice between the morality of science and the morality of national and government power, Bronowsky made the final assumption of the incompatibility of both. Therefore he offered, the solution of “a separation, as complete as possible, between science and government in all countries. I call this the disestablishment of science.”<sup>28</sup> The consequences of this “disestablishment”, as Agar sharply noticed, stating an autonomy, self-analysis and self-determination for sciences, “would deliver science to private interests. His argument is a clear example of how sea-change rhetoric could prepare the ground for the commercialization of the life sciences in the 1970s.”<sup>29</sup>

If Bronowski’s talk was chosen as the headline in the *BSSRS Newssheet* in 1971, the most “eagerly-awaited” paper was that of the historian of science Robert M. Young.<sup>30</sup> In his “Evolutionary biology and ideology: then and now, —the *Newssheet* reports—Young started from the same observation as Monod, Wilkins and Bohm: ‘We are struggling to integrate science and values’ but ‘at the same time we are prevented

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<sup>26</sup> S. W. Leslie, *The Military-Industrial-Academic Complex at MIT and Stanford*, New York, 1993: 233, in J. Agar, “Cit.”, 583.

<sup>27</sup> J. Agar, “Cit.”, 593.

<sup>28</sup> J. Agar, “Cit.”, 593.

<sup>29</sup> J. Agar, “Cit.”, 593. Agar continues affirming, “Bronowski’s argument finds echoes in one recent, sophisticated study of science as an ideological and political resource. [Y. Ezrahi, *The Descent of Icarus: Science and the Transformation of Contemporary Democracy*, Cambridge, MA, 1990.] Ezrahi has claimed that a disestablishment of science did indeed take place in the long 1960s and that a wave of reflexivity acted to decouple political action from science as an exemplar of rationality in liberal democracies. Thus the *Ascent of Man* connects to the *Descent of Icarus*.

<sup>30</sup> See J. Agar, “Cit.”, 594.

from doing so by our most basic assumptions.”” Young continued arguing that

It seems to me that it is the social responsibility of science to enter wholeheartedly into this debate and directly answer such works in the non-specialist press. Paradoxically, we must relax the authority of science and see it in an ideological perspective in order to get nearer the will-o'-the-wisp of objectivity. [...] [W]e need—for our own moral purposes—to think seriously about the metaphysics of science, about the philosophy of nature, of man and of society, and especially about the ideological assumptions which underlie, constrain and are fed by science.<sup>31</sup>

In his final remarks, Agar recognized a “contradictory” stance towards science in the generation grown up during the 1960s. On the one hand “free to enjoy benefits (domestic technologies, ‘high-tech music’, synthetic drugs) while, on the other hand, consuming critical texts (Kuhn, Feyerabend, Carson, Ehrlich, Commoner, Illich, Schumacher) and recognizing the ‘loss of innocence’ of science made vivid by anti-nuclear and anti-Vietnam movements.”<sup>32</sup> He also, having distinguished between the three waves during the long 1960s opened the path to new questions regarding the topic such as “How can the changing sciences of selfhood—such as immunology, genetics as informed by triumphant molecular biology, or psychology—be understood as part of these broader changes?”<sup>33</sup>

It becomes necessary, however, to frame the crisis of science and the public view of the scientist, and the debate on industrial growth in a broader context in which the contestation questioned any preconceived value and any given knowledge and belief. For this reason, “[q]uantitative evidence reported by Science, for example, held that the ‘falling away from science’ was ‘part of a general lessening of faith in American institutions and authorities rather than a major anti-science groundswell ... from religion to the military, from the press to major US companies [a]ppreciation for

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<sup>31</sup> R. M. Young, ‘Evolutionary biology and ideology: then and now’, in Fuller, op. cit. (10), 199–213, 201, 203, 211, quoted by W. Fuller in *The Social Impact of Modern Biology* (1971) in J. Agar, “What happened in the sixties?”, *Cit.*, 594. This problem seems having been approached in education, or alternatively at its roots by Thomas Kuhn. In 1962 he was already noticing this “blindness” in students of science towards the analysis of an older science and I suppose that self criticism within the same discipline is necessary whether approaching the history of science in time, whether approaching the role of science in its present social political economic context. Cf. T. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962: 167.

<sup>32</sup> J. Agar, “Cit.”, 598.

<sup>33</sup> J. Agar, “Cit.”, 599.

all of them, without exception, has fallen.”<sup>34</sup>

The debate internal to scientists was also accompanied by “No-growth futurists”, a group of social scientists engaged in “predicting world trends specifically in relation to the economic, ecological, demographic and political conditions that collectively comprise social living,”<sup>35</sup> whose point of departure was a resurrection of Malthusian theory of growth (populations grow faster than the supply of food).<sup>36</sup> Among different points of view under this common frame, Barry Commoner was one of them. His position was focused not on the claim that natural resources are running out, but on the fact that “the impending disaster will be precipitated by the single-minded efforts of industry to make profits.” He considered the current industrial practices as “irrational and destructive,” and proposed a “salvation” achieved not “through the establishment of a no-growth economy, but by rational planning.”<sup>37</sup>

A more radical position was dealt by the principal no-growth futurist group, composed of those who conducted a research on behalf of the Club of Rome, which gave birth to a book entitled *The Limits to Growth. A Report for THE CLUB OF ROME’S Project on the Predicament of Mankind* (1972). This book was the result of a meeting that took place by the will of Doctor Aurelio Peccei in April 1968 at “Accademia dei Lincei” in Rome with scientists from the MIT.<sup>38</sup> In the introduction to this book the authors highlighted their intentions in investigating “five major trends of global concern—acceleration industrialization, rapid population growth, widespread malnutrition, depletion of non-renewable resources, and a deteriorating environment. These trends are all interconnected in many ways, and their development is measured in decades or centuries, rather than in months or years.”<sup>39</sup> Moreover, their purpose was to provide in a non-technical way, a summary with their findings, putting the emphasis not on the specificities of the model, but on what it “tells us about the world”.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> A. Etzioni and C. Z. Nunn, “Public views of scientists”, *Science* (1973): 19, in J. Agar, “Cit.”, 600.

<sup>35</sup> Edward Walter, *The Immorality of Limiting Growth*, New York: State University, 1981, 2.

<sup>36</sup> E. Walter, *Cit.*, 3.

<sup>37</sup> E. Walter, *Cit.*, 3.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. William Watts, “Foreword”, in D. H. Meadows, D. L. Meadows, J. Randers, W. W. Behrens III, *The Limits to Growth. A Report for THE CLUB OF ROME’S Project on the Predicament of Mankind*, New York: Universe Books, 1972, 9. Available at <http://www.donellameadows.org/wp-content/userfiles/Limits-to-Growth-digital-scan-version.pdf> (Accessed in December 2013).

<sup>39</sup> D. H. Meadows, *Cit.*, 21.

<sup>40</sup> D. H. Meadows, *Cit.*, 23.

The implications of those accelerating trends raise issues that go far beyond the proper domain of a purely scientific document. They must be debated by a wider community than that of scientists alone. Our purpose here is to open that debate.<sup>41</sup>

Their study was based on the observation of the increasing factor in five elements: population, food, production, industrialization, pollution and consumption of non-renewable natural resources. “The amount of their increase each year follows a pattern that mathematicians call exponential growth.”<sup>42</sup> Assuming that “[t]he process of economic growth, as it is occurring today, is inexorably widening the absolute gap between the rich and the poor nations of the world,”<sup>43</sup> they proposed two categories of ingredients, physical and social, to avoid exponential growth and as necessary “to sustain the world economic and population growth until, and perhaps beyond 2000.”<sup>44</sup> The physical ingredients “support all physiological and industrial activities—food, raw materials, fossils and nuclear fuels, and the ecological systems of the planet which absorb wastes and recycle important basic chemical substances.”<sup>45</sup> On the other hand, the intangible, social ingredients such as “peace and social stability, education and employment, and steady technological progress,” which are “much more difficult to assess or to predict.”<sup>46</sup>

The analysis presented in the book was developed following four steps not in a linear but in an interconnected sequence: (1) a list of the relationships between the five levels, with the consultation of specialists on various areas, such as demography, economics, agronomy, nutrition, geology, and ecology; (2) a quantification of each relationship using global data; (3) a computerized calculation of all these relationships over time; (4) a test on “the effect on our global system of the various policies that are currently being proposed to enhance or change the behaviour of the system.”<sup>47</sup> Drawing attention to Garrett Hardin’s definition of “side-effects as ‘effects which I hadn’t foreseen or don’t want to think about,’”<sup>48</sup> the authors highlighted that for Hardin “such

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<sup>41</sup> D. H. Meadows, *Cit.*, 23.

<sup>42</sup> D. H. Meadows, *Cit.*, 25.

<sup>43</sup> D. H. Meadows, *Cit.*, 44.

<sup>44</sup> D. H. Meadows, *Cit.*, 45.

<sup>45</sup> D. H. Meadows, *Cit.*, 45.

<sup>46</sup> D. H. Meadows, *Cit.*, 46.

<sup>47</sup> D. H. Meadows, *Cit.*, 90.

<sup>48</sup> See D. H. Meadows, *Cit.*, 147, quoting G. Hardin, "The Cybernetics of Competition: A Biologist's View of Society," *Perspectives in Biology and Medicine* 7 (Autumn 1963): 58, reprinted in Paul Shepard and Daniel McKinley, eds., *The Subversive Science* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1969), 275.

effects are actually inseparable from the principal effect, they should not be labelled *side-effects* at all. Every new technology has side-effects, of course, and one of the main purposes of model-building is to anticipate those effects.”<sup>49</sup>

In this sense, the progress of technology was tackled not “to brand technology as evil or futile or unnecessary. [Being] technologists [them]selves, working in a technological institution (...),”<sup>50</sup> their aim was to question it contrasting a limit to growth as a possible answer to use the resources in the planet in a sustainable way on the long period. They observed that, for instance,

The basic choice that faces the whaling industry is the same one that faces any society trying to overcome a natural limit with a new technology. *Is it better to try to live within that limit by accepting a self-imposed restriction on growth? Or is it preferable to go on growing until some other limit arises, in the hope that at that time another technological leap will allow growth to continue still longer?* For the last several hundred years human society has followed the second course so consistently and successfully that the first choice has been all but forgotten.<sup>51</sup>

Their position, as afterwards declared, can be summarized at best with “the motto of the Sierra Club: ‘Not blind opposition to progress, but opposition to blind progress.’”<sup>52</sup> Recognizing how the two positive feedback loops at that time, like exponential growth of population and industrial capital, the constraints proposed were negative.<sup>53</sup> It seems worthwhile for the extent of understanding and critically contextualizing the meaning of the “no-growth futurist” group urgency that emerged in United States and spread internationally in a period in which Ronald Reagan acclaimed, “There are no limits to growth because there are no limits of human intelligence, imagination, and wonder.”<sup>54</sup>

Nevertheless, they also acknowledged technological advance “both necessary and welcome in the equilibrium state,” which contrast this negative approach to

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<sup>49</sup> D. H. Meadows, *Cit.*, 147.

<sup>50</sup> D. H. Meadows, *Cit.*, 154.

<sup>51</sup> D. H. Meadows, *Cit.*, 153.

<sup>52</sup> D. H. Meadows, *Cit.*, 154.

<sup>53</sup> D. H. Meadows, *Cit.*, 156.

<sup>54</sup> See Enrico Cerasuolo’s documentary *Ultima Chiamata - Last Call* (2013, awarded in the same year of the Special Prize at *Cinemambiente – Environmental Film Festival*, Turin, Italy) which, forty years after the publication of *The Limits to Growth*, retraces the story around the Club of Rome and the biographies of the authors and inventors of the volume, to understand if we have definitely overstepped the limits, or we are still in time for a last call. The documentary also moves from the publication of one of the authors of *The Limits to Growth*, Jørgen Randers’s 2052. *A Global forecast for the next forty years*, *The New report*, Vermont, USA: Chelsea Green Publishing, 2012.



exponential growth providing some “examples of the kinds of practical discoveries that would enhance the workings of a steady state society.”<sup>55</sup> In the awareness that the history of mankind has recorded been marked by a long succession of invention responsible for “crowding, deterioration of the environment, and greater social inequality because greater productivity has been absorbed by population and capital growth,” the authors of *The Limits to Growth* produced an inversion of tendency, encouraging the production of technological advances in the attempt of achieving opposite purposes, envisaging as the main goal “the knowledge that a new idea would be translated into a visible improvement in the quality of life;” in a nutshell, a transition from growth to global equilibrium.<sup>56</sup>

#### 4.1.2 *La Critique Artiste*<sup>57</sup> and “The Dematerialisation of Art”

After a brief overview around the social movements, the crisis in science and the “no-growth” movement approached to enhance a broader vision of the long 1960s, and before focusing closer on the organic materiality, we should at this point present the artistic context of that period. The second wave described by Jon Agar, of grassroots movements, corresponded to the *social critique*, as named by the sociologists Boltanski and Chiapello (in their book *Le Nouvel Esprit du Capitalisme*, 1999). Social critique’s indignation, during the 1960s and the 1970s, considered:

(c) capitalism as a source of *poverty* among workers and of inequalities on an

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<sup>55</sup> The examples included: “new methods of waste collection, to decrease pollution and make discarded material available for recycling; more efficient techniques of recycling, to reduce rates of resource depletion; better product design to increase product lifetime and promote easy repair, so that the capital depreciation rate would be minimized; harnessing of incident solar energy, the most pollution-free power source; methods of natural pest control, based on more complete understanding of ecological interrelationships; medical advances that would decrease the death rate; contraceptive advances that would facilitate the equalization of the birth rate with the decreasing death rate. D. H. Meadows, *Cit.*, 177.

<sup>56</sup> See D. H. Meadows, *Cit.*, 177.

<sup>57</sup> L. Boltanski, and E. Chiapello, book chapter “À l’épreuve de la critique artiste”, in *Le Nouvel Esprit du Capitalisme*, Paris, Gallimard, 1999, 501-579. I became aware of this book and the article by J. Agar by their quotations in the reading of D. Pestre, *Science, technologie et société. La politique des savoirs aujourd’hui*, Conférence, Paris: Fondation Calouste Gulbenkian, Délégation en France, Décembre, 2013.

unprecedented scale; (d) capitalism as a source of *opportunism* and *egoism* which, by exclusively encouraging private interests, proves destructive of social bonds and collective solidarity, especially of minimal solidarity between rich and poor.<sup>58</sup>

The social critique to capitalism paralleled and joined the *artistic critique*—formula proposed as well by Boltanski and Chiapello—, whose reaction to the capitalist system<sup>59</sup> intended

(a) capitalism as a source of *disenchantment* and *inauthenticity* of objects, persons, emotions and, more generally, the kind of existence associated with it; (b) capitalism as a source of *oppression*, inasmuch as it is opposed to the freedom, autonomy and creativity of the human beings who are subject, under its sway, on the one hand to the domination of the market as an impersonal force fixing prices and designating desirable human beings and products/services, while rejecting others; and on the other hand to the forms of subordination involved in the condition of wage-labour (enterprise discipline, close monitoring by bosses, and supervision by means of regulations and procedures).<sup>60</sup>

Capitalism also produced, according to the authors, a redefinition of authenticity. In fact, the inauthentic is not simply what results from “mass production and standardization dissolving difference”, but it becomes “reproduction of a difference for commercial ends”. Therefore the authenticity claim was not simply a counter-position of “the singular as principle of resistance to the uniformity of standard models”, the attention was no more drawn to the object itself, but “to the *intentions* of those it is procured” by; what it recognized as authentic “that which has been made without a secondary strategic intention.”<sup>61</sup> In short, the claim for authenticity—as remarked by Boltanski and Chiapello—denounced “artifice as opposed to the spontaneous, the mechanical in contrast to the living, the sincere in contrast to the strategic, and hence genuine emotion, which arises unintentionally, as opposed to simulated imitation: a challenge to the ‘spectacle.’”<sup>62</sup>

Artistic critique pointed to an authenticity opposed to standardization and

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<sup>58</sup> L. Boltanski, È. Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, Cit., 37.

<sup>59</sup> See L. Boltanski, È. Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, Cit., 169.

<sup>60</sup> L. Boltanski, È. Chiapello, *Cit.*, 37.

<sup>61</sup> L. Boltanski, È. Chiapello, *Cit.*, 449. (Italic in the original text)

<sup>62</sup> L. Boltanski, È. Chiapello, *Cit.*, 450.

accumulation of objects and human beings.<sup>63</sup> It went hand in hand with a demand for liberation. In this realm, the writings of the Frankfurt School members, e.g. Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer and Herbert Marcuse, found an extensive diffusion. Especially Marcuse's *One-Dimensional Man* encountered unexpected success in France during May 1968. With the expression "one-dimensional man" Marcuse meant man as a product of an advanced industrial civilization, where comfort and mass production, would make him incapable of acceding to an immediate and sensuous experience of the world.<sup>64</sup> Many students were also immersed in readings and translations of "ideologically 'unorthodox' authors, such as Rosa Luxemburg, Antonio Gramsci, Guy Debord, Régis Debray and Louis Althusser" who led the way. The lack of a center, even for industrialized Western countries, facilitated the absorption of revolutionary ideas coming from colonies, ex-colonies or protectorates in Africa and Latin America: "Frantz Fanon, Che Guevara and Carlos Marighella were disseminated widely among leftist students of academic institutions, such as Columbia University and LSE and the Polish "Open Letter to the Party" by Kuroń and Modzelewski, which became one of the most widely circulated texts at the Sorbonne."<sup>65</sup>

The trans-nationality of the movements was also increased by the new trend of students leaving their home country to study abroad, but maintaining a linkage for cross-cultural transition and by the media, such as radio and television for dissemination of information, whose sensationalism and manipulation was criticized by activists and protesters under the slogan "The whole world is watching!"<sup>66</sup> in the realm of Marshall McLuhan "Global Village."<sup>67</sup> To understand the global dimension of the social movements in 1968, it is important to include the concept of "territoriality" with which Kernetis referred to

the territorial aspect of the movements, the interconnectivity of different geographical units and the absence of a fixed centre. The protest cultures that

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<sup>63</sup> See L. Boltanski, È. Chiapello, *Cit.*, 439.

<sup>64</sup> See L. Boltanski, È. Chiapello, *Cit.*, 439. They also refer Marcuse's contrast between sublimation and desublimation, being the first associated with "artistic alienation" and the second with "technological reality". Sublimation, associated with an artistic distantiation, permits a critique of reality as a form of "mediated gratification", while desublimation, linked with a technological rationality, longs for an "immediate gratification" in the everyday standardized needs. Cf. L. Boltanski, È. Chiapello, 476.

<sup>65</sup> K. Kernetis, "Cit.", 40.

<sup>66</sup> See K. Kernetis, "Cit.", 40.

<sup>67</sup> M. McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, New York: The MIT Press, 1994 (1964), 5.

emerged in France, Germany and Italy were not produced by local dynamics alone, but they were also deeply influenced by the effect of Prague's 'lost' spring in August 1968 and by Third World revolutionism alike. In a similar way, Eastern European youth, such as the Czechoslovak, Polish and Yugoslav ones, had an eye on the West, in what could be termed as a mirror game of alter egos. In this way the artificial divide between East and West, based on Cold War political imperatives, was virtually annulled by people's own experiences.<sup>68</sup>

This concept is particularly relevant for our analysis—in the realm of the contest during the long 1960s in science, technology and society—to underscore what forms of action were assumed through the artistic practices of that time and, more specifically, which role played the employment of organic materiality at an international level, which could incur in an oversimplification, especially if observing that decade fifty years after, without having lived it personally. To understand this period it is therefore necessary to maintain a close relationship between art and the social environment, intending the latter structurally different from the other. At the same time part of a transnational network in which, according to McAdam and Rucht “protest makers do not have to reinvent the wheel at each place and in each conflict . . . they often find inspiration elsewhere in the ideas and tactics espoused and practiced by other activists. In short, they play the role of adopters in the cross-national diffusion of movement ideas and tactics.”<sup>69</sup> The expanded notion of territoriality, in which protesters belonged no more to a defined nation with determined borders, but to “an imagined community” of an hybrid territory whose frontiers blurs, and asking for “two, three, many Vietnams” or arguing that “Vietnam is here”, as read in graffiti in an Italian factory, implied that local realities did not necessarily matter; that Vietnam as an icon, a situation, a local condition, could be transferred, adopted and adapted.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> K. Kornetis, “‘Everything Links?’ Temporality, Territoriality, and Cultural Transfer in the ’68 Protest Movement”, *Cit.*, 36.

<sup>69</sup> Doug McAdam and Dieter Rucht, “Cross-national Diffusion of Movement Ideas”, *Annals of the American Academy of the Political and Social Sciences* 528 (1993): 56-74 (58)], quoted by Kornetis, in the attempt of trying to reach “a common denominator and points of reference” between “protests that evolved under parliamentary democracies like the US, West Germany and France, a movement that emerged under a communist regime like the Prague Spring, and revolts that confronted a military dictatorship like the ones of Greece, Portugal, Spain and Brazil.” K. Kornetis, “Cit.”, 35.

<sup>70</sup> “This was precisely the nature of third-world-ism as a movement, whereby local and geographical specificities weighed little. Other strong projections of the time included Maoist China, Castro's Cuba, Allende's Chile and the short-lived student unrest in Thailand against Kittikachorn's regime, which proved to be particularly influential concerning Greek students. In addition, it is not a coincidence that Che was the absolute icon of this generation, familiar even to Eastern European youth, as he was the very personification of extra-territorialised guerrilla action. The fact that, according to this line of thinking, there was no longer any fixed centre and no peripheries and that the ‘anti-capitalist’ and ‘anti-

In this realm, the claim for authenticity Boltanski and Chiapello explained, during the 1960s, resulted in a loss of interest by many artists towards the work of art *per se*, and an urgency of freedom from any market purpose, opening the space to what the USA art critic and activist Lucy Lippard and the art critic John Chandler formulated in 1967 and published the year after as “The Dematerialization of Art.”<sup>71</sup> In those years, the process of dematerialisation was at the core of Conceptual art, for Lippard who considered “the idea as paramount” and “the material (...) secondary, lightweight, ephemeral, cheap, unpretentious and/or “dematerialized.”<sup>72</sup>

On the occasion of the republication of *Six Years: The dematerialization of the art object from 1966 to 1972*, (1973) in 1997, in the introductory text Lippard contextualized the Conceptual art period, describing it as “also the era of the Civil Rights Movement, Vietnam, the Women’s Liberation Movement, and the counter-culture—was a real free-for-all, and the democratic implications of that phase are fully appropriate, if never realized.”<sup>73</sup> The art critic described Conceptual art as precedent by Minimal art, the latter emblematically stigmatized in the sentence “less is more,” while “Conceptual art was about saying more with less. It represented an opening up after Minimalism closed down on expressionist and Pop art excesses. As Robert Huot said in 1977 billboard piece: ‘Less Is More, But It’s Not Enough.’”<sup>74</sup> The artistic research in the realm of Conceptual art during the 1960s and the 1970s involved the United States, as well as Europe, China, Japan and Latin America. And actually, as Lippard remarked, her book was also the result of her politicization occurred during her journey to Argentina in 1968 (governed by a dictatorship), where together with the French critic Jean Clay was a member of the jury of a show. During Hans Ulrich Obrist’s interview in 2009, she declared, “1968 in Argentina was one of my radicalizing moments. [...] The important part of it was that we met with the Rosario group,”<sup>75</sup> [*Grupo de Arte de*

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imperialist’ struggle was globalised rendered this sort of political activism quite original. It relativised Cold War institutional-political differentiations, hierarchies and dichotomies, such as the ‘iron curtain’, the three different world spheres, East–West and North–South barriers and so on.” K. Kornetis, “Cit.”, 38.

<sup>71</sup> “In 1967, John Chandler and I wrote the article on “The Dematerialization of Art”, which was published in the February 1968 *Art International*, in which we saw ‘ultra-conceptual art’ emerging from two directions. Art as idea and art as action,” Lucy R. Lippard, *Six Years: The dematerialization of the art object from 1966 to 1972*, University of California Press, (First Edition 1973) 1997, viii-ix.

<sup>72</sup> L. R. Lippard, *Cit.*, vii.

<sup>73</sup> L. R. Lippard, *Cit.*, vii.

<sup>74</sup> L. R. Lippard, *Cit.*, xiii.

<sup>75</sup> Lippard continued affirming, “This was the first time I had ever heard an artist say ‘I am not going to make art as long as the world is this bad. I’m going to work to make the world better.’ Something to that effect. I was stunned by that because the artists I knew in New York were more

*Vanguardia de Rosario* (Rosario Avant-Garde Group), which created a complete upheaval in the local art scene from 1965 until 1969, when its member decided to abandon art altogether]. Together with a group of artists from Buenos Aires, they carried out the happening “Tucumán Arde”, after the government decision to close the sugar plants in that land.<sup>76</sup> The happening had the characteristic of a grassroots movement and anthropological research at the same time, since the artists from Rosario and Buenos Aires first visited the place and contacted with the local people, recording their testimonials, gathering information about the region’s socio-economic conflict and taking pictures. Only at a later stage did they make an exhibition to express their protest in a show. The statement at the root of the action was Juan Pablo Renzi “La obra de arte debe surgir de la relación consciente entre la posición estética del artista y su posición ideológica” (A work of art must emerge from the conscious relationship between the artist’s aesthetic position and his ideological one).<sup>77</sup> Their position was that of engaged intellectual joined in a collective group rather than (as they assumed) distanced, narcissistic and individual artists, and their tones typical of a manifesto culminated in “Tucumán Burns,” “How then will we, the artists, avoid continuing to be the servants of the bourgeoisie? In the contact and participation beside the most distinguished and combative activists, putting our creative militancy and our militant creativeness at the service of the people’s organization for the struggle.” (“Tucumán Arde Declaration—Buenos Aires Noviembre 1968”).<sup>78</sup>

Regarding the term “dematerialisation” itself that Lippard chose to describe the combination of phenomena around the Conceptual artistic practices between the 1960s and the 1970, she admitted that

(...) since I wrote on the subject in 1967, it has often been pointed out to me that dematerialization is an inaccurate term, that a piece of paper or a photograph is

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formalist and less politically involved. When I went back I discovered other artists who were more politically knowledgeable and the Art Workers Coalition started and so forth. The rest of the story is the rest of my life.” H. U. Obrist, *A Brief History of Curating*, 2010, Zurich: JRP Ringier; Dijon: Les Presses du Réel, 214-215.

<sup>76</sup> According to Kornetis, it is important to stress “The difference between protest in Western democracies and that developed in Southern and Eastern European and Latin American countries under authoritarian regimes was stark. In those cases ‘the demonstrators fought for the basic human and political rights – freedom of speech, assembly, and religion – as well as the fundamental personal and property rights already firmly established in Western Europe and North America.’” C. Fink, P. Gassert, and D. Junker, “Introduction”, in Carole Fink et al (eds), *1968. The World Transformed*, 1–27 (22), quotation of K. Kornetis, “Cit.”, 38.

<sup>77</sup> See <<http://part-archive.finitude.org/part5/arde.html>> (Accessed in May 2015).

<sup>78</sup> See <<http://part-archive.finitude.org/part5/arde.html>> (Accessed in May 2015).

as much as an object, or as “material” as a ton of lead. Granted. But for lack of a better term I have continued to refer to a process of dematerialization, or a deemphasis on material aspects (uniqueness, permanence, decorative attractiveness).<sup>79</sup>

It seems obvious, in Lippard’s attempt, that dematerialisation did not mean the equivalent of a disappearance of matter, but rather an unlimited use of matter regardless of its characteristics in terms of prestige or durability, for instance, with a main focus on the idea to transmit which is necessarily conveyed through its own materiality. This is a fundamental point to understand the role of organic materiality in the 20<sup>th</sup> century art and to observe that the concept of dematerialisation coincided with a conscious and mature use of organic materials within artistic practices. This does not mean they are irrelevant such as any other material, they are what is needed for the sake of producing a solution of continuity that the traditional language of art was not capable of transferring anymore at some point.

However, we might affirm that the inappropriateness in the employment of the term “dematerialisation” Lippard was criticized for, produced its effects not in the artistic creation but in art critique and art history. In other words, if on the one hand it facilitated opening the path to different and enriching approaches on the study of art history and the development of art theory—with the contributions of other disciplinary fields such as anthropology, psychology, post-structuralism, culture, gender and post-colonial studies, on the other—it might also plausibly be considered as obscuring art history attention to materiality in the artistic practices as vehicle of cultural, social and political significances, and which had been an integral part of the discipline until the most significant artistic movements and episodes in 20<sup>th</sup> century replaced the traditional techniques with poor, ordinary, ephemeral materials, as Lippard recognized early in their manifestations. Presumably, from that moment onwards the theme on materiality became an issue only in the concretization of the exhibition, from the moment in which “a progressive professionalization of the curator’s position was already becoming evident.”<sup>80</sup> What is remarkable in Lippard’s enunciation of dematerialisation of

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<sup>79</sup> L. R. Lippard, *Cit.*, p.5. An excerpt regarding the inappropriateness of the term raised in a letter of the Art-Language group, Coventry to Lucy Lippard and John Chandler, “Concerning the article ‘The Dematerialization of Art’”, March 23, 1968, in L. R. Lippard, *Cit.*, 43-44.

<sup>80</sup> “During the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, ‘exhibitions have become *the* medium through which most art becomes known. Not only have the number and range of exhibitions increased dramatically in recent years, but museums and art galleries such as Tate London and the Whitney in New York now

Conceptual art, as emerged on the exhibition *Materializing Six Years: Lucy R. Lippard and the Emergence of Conceptual Art* curated by Catherine Morris at the Brooklyn Museum in 2012, is

the demystification of artistic processes that encouraged women's entry into Conceptual art, the blurring of artistic and critical practice, and a growing political consciousness among artists regarding issues of labor. [...] Ultimately, the questions posed in Lippard's 1973 edition of *Six Years*—How can art be political? What is the value of artistic labor? How is difference articulated?—remain open to debate.<sup>81</sup>

The Brazilian art critic Gloria Ferreira stressed as one of the pivotal aspects on contemporary artistic production, from the 1960s and 1970s onwards, has been the pertinence awarded to the place of presentation or inscription of the work, which can assume different formalizations. “It is not simply about the dematerialisation of art, as Lucy Lippard put it, but of multiple possibilities of formalization. The environment, the context and even materials become constituents of the artwork, [conceived] now as a network of significations.”<sup>82</sup> The term formalization requires well a clarification about the form and for the purpose it will be addressed in Marcuse's perspective at the time in which this phenomenon was occurring.

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display their permanent collection as a series of temporary exhibitions. Exhibitions are primary the site of exchange in the political economy of art, where signification is constructed, maintained, and occasionally deconstructed. Part spectacle, part socio-historical event, part structuring device, exhibitions—especially exhibitions of contemporary art—establish and administer the cultural meanings of art.” R. Greemberg, B. W. Ferguson, S. Nairne, “Introduction,” *Thinking about Exhibitions*, Routledge, London and New York, 1996, 2, in H. U. Obrist, *Cit.*, 7.

<sup>81</sup> Wendy Vogel, “Materializing Six Years: Lucy R. Lippard and the Emergence of Conceptual Art”, *The Brooklyn Rail*, November 6, 2012, Available at [http://www.brooklynrail.org/2012/11/art\\_books/materializing-six-years-lucy-r-lippard-and-the-emergence-of-conceptual-art](http://www.brooklynrail.org/2012/11/art_books/materializing-six-years-lucy-r-lippard-and-the-emergence-of-conceptual-art) (Accessed in May 2015).

<sup>82</sup> Personal translation from the original in Spanish: “Uno de los aspectos constitutivos de la producción artística contemporánea, sobre todo a partir de los años sesenta y setenta, es la pertinencia que se le otorga al lugar de presentación o inscripción del trabajo. Este puede, por ejemplo, asumir diferentes formalizaciones cuando se compone a partir de las mismas en las que se da. No se trata simplemente de la desmaterialización del arte, como la formula Lucy Lippard, sino de múltiples posibilidades de formalización. El entorno, el contexto e incluso los materiales devienen constitutivos de la obra, ahora como red de significaciones. G. Ferreira, “¿Un debate crítico?!” in Paula Barrero López y Julian Díaz Sánchez (eds.) *Críticas de Arte. Discrepancias e hibridaciones de la Guerra Fría a la Globalización*, Murcia: Centro de Documentación y Estudios Avanzados de Arte Contemporáneo (Cendeac), 2013, 333-344: 336.



## 4.2 Debating “On the Future of Art” and “The Poverty of Art” in the late 1960s

In 1969 Marcuse was invited to participate in a series of conferences organized at the Solomon Guggenheim Museum in New York. Edward F. Fry, the curator of the museum at that time, decided to engage in a debate with fresh insights around the fundamental statement of an “endemic crisis within contemporary art”; a crisis which, according to him, was involving art “even before the end of the 1960s.”<sup>83</sup> He realized that the problem needed to be tackled—and far from attempting to deliver an exhaustive analysis of it—beyond the frame of the critical and art-historical discourse. For the sake of this, Fry organized a series of lectures at the museum inviting not only art historians but also scholars and intellectuals from philosophy of history, psychology, and social theory, areas which generally have no direct association to art.<sup>84</sup> The following year the seven lectures were published in a volume entitled *On the Future of Art*,<sup>85</sup> with an introduction by the Fry himself where “those of Mr. Burnham and Professor Marcuse” were described as “the two most radical approaches in this collection.”<sup>86</sup> The latter essay will be considered now (while the other will be assessed later on a broader analysis on Burnham’s thought) to develop an analysis on organic materiality and its interaction in artistic practices at the end of the 1960s and the decade of the 1970s.

Marcuse’s essay is entitled “Art as a Form of Reality,” where the term “Art”, as he explained, included not only visual arts, but also literature, music and theatre; and the

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<sup>83</sup> Edward F. Fry, “Introduction”, in (Ed. by Edward F. Fry) AA.VV, *On the Future of Art*, New York: The Viking Press, 1970, vii.

<sup>84</sup> See E. F. Fry, “Introduction”, *Cit.*, viii.

<sup>85</sup> Sponsored by The Solomon H. Guggenheim Museum, the collection of essays included: “Art: Communicative or Esoteric?” by historian Arnold J. Toynbee, “Architecture: Silence and Light” by architect Louis I. Kahn, “Art and the Structuralist Perspective” by art historian Annette Michelson, “Creating the Creative Artist” by psychologist B. F. Skinner, “Phenomenal Art: Form, Idea, and Technique” by artist James Seawright, “The Aesthetics of Intelligent Systems” by artist and theorist J. W. Burnham, and “Art as a Form of Reality” by philosopher Herbert Marcuse, 123-134. Edward F. Fry (ed.), *On the Future of Art*, New York: The Viking Press, 1970. Available at <http://www.guggenheim.org/new-york/exhibitions/publications/from-the-archives/items/view/336> (Accessed in December 2014). Remarkably, forty years after this publication, at the beginning of the 2<sup>nd</sup> decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Erik Niedling and Ingo Niermann produced a documentary and a book interviewing the most eminent figures in the art world to reflect around the same question, on *The Future of Art*, Sternberg Press, 2011.

<sup>86</sup> “Both begin with the more or less explicit judgment that virtually all current art is compromised not only by its own hermetically self-generating aesthetics but also by the isolation of art from the major intellectual and social realities of our time. Burnham explores the researches in artificial intelligence, cybernetics, and systems, and relates them to the small number of artists thus far who have acknowledged these advances in their work. Marcuse, from his position as an eminent dialectician in the Marxist tradition of social philosophy, offers a compelling analysis and portrayal of the fallacies underlying the very concept of the ‘fine arts’ in the modern world.” E. F. Fry, *Cit.*, vii.

term “Form” as defining “Art for Art, that is to say, as essentially (ontologically) different not only from (everyday) reality but also from such other manifestations of intellectual culture as science and philosophy.”<sup>87</sup> In the previous chapter, an analysis on the interconnection between art and life has been presented, including the perspective of philosophy of Vitalism and philosophical anthropology to focus on three of the most significant figures at that time: Kaprow, Vostell and Beuys. A few years later, in the full swing of the social movements by the end of the 1960s, Marcuse, from his political philosophical point of view, addressed to Art a total engagement to life; therefore, any “distance and dissociation of Art from reality are denied, refused, and destroyed: Art (...) must be real, part and parcel of life

—but of a life which is itself the conscious negation of the established way of life, with all its institutions, with its entire material and intellectual culture, its entire immoral morality, its required and its clandestine behaviour, its work and its fun.<sup>88</sup>

All over the globe, in the realm of a necessity for social, political, cultural change, Marcuse noted that vision and the experience of reality were different, and consequently “any communication through the established means seems (...) to vitiate this experience. And this irreconcilability with the very medium of communication also extends to the forms of Art themselves, to Art as Form.”<sup>89</sup> In the contestation panorama in the end of the 1960s, Marcuse recognized Art as complicit with tradition, and this aspect was already at the core of the “formless research” in the Post-war world (see chapter 2). What was changing in the long 1960s was that, in the economic rise in which the proliferation of objects took place, “the work of art, as well as of anti-art, becomes *exchange* value, commodity. And it is precisely the Commodity Form, as the form of reality, which is the target of today’s rebellion.”<sup>90</sup>

Marcuse referred to Walter Benjamin’s *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, for whom, “[i]n principle a work of art has always been

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<sup>87</sup> H. Marcuse, “Art as a Form of Reality”, *Cit.*, 124.

<sup>88</sup> H. Marcuse, “Cit.”, 124.

<sup>89</sup> H. Marcuse, “Cit.”, 124.

<sup>90</sup> H. Marcuse, “Cit.”, 124.

reproducible. Objects made by humans could always be copied by humans.”<sup>91</sup> According to Benjamin, “[i]n even the most perfect reproduction, *one* thing is lacking: the here and now of the work of art—its unique existence—and nothing else—that bears the mark of the history to which the work has been subject.”<sup>92</sup> Benjamin continued with the idea of authenticity, while Marcuse used the concept of “aura” and reproduction to put forward his theory on Form. For Marcuse, in fact, it is the Form that gives uniqueness to art and makes the content of a specific work of art and not of another;<sup>93</sup> it is “a *historical* reality, an irreversible sequence of styles, subjects, techniques, rules—inseparably related to its society and repeatable only as imitation.” Once it had lost its practical meaning, having ceased to be “technique”, Art achieved a Form of its own. This Form permits Art to participate in society in order “to provide the ‘holiday’, the elevation, the break in the terrible routine of life (...) satisfying needs not satisfied in daily work and fun, and therefore pleasurable.”<sup>94</sup>

Marcuse clarified that this was the social function of Art as considered at the time, and not the conception of it by the artist and precisely in this gap we might find the urgency that spread in those years from the artistic critique. And in fact, he afterwards distinguished between two forms of art: one that is “part of the *established* culture”, “*affirmative*, sustaining this culture”; on the other hand, any art that is “*alienation* from the established reality”, a “*negating* force”; he also considered “the *history of Art* can be understood as the *harmonization of this antagonism*.”<sup>95</sup> If we consider the impact of organic materiality in artistic practices as concerns at this point the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it emerges organic materiality as negating force, disruptive of traditional forms, whose “raison d’être” resulted from a further elaboration of still life, and as a tension between construction and deconstruction in 20<sup>th</sup> century art—as Grenier noted<sup>96</sup>—to read and sense the world as well as an active and political

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<sup>91</sup> W. Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility*, (second version), in Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, Vol. 3, 1935-1938, Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (eds.), Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2002, 101-133: 102.

<sup>92</sup> W. Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility*, Cit. 103.

<sup>93</sup> See H. Marcuse, “Art as a Form of Reality”, *Cit.*, 126.

<sup>94</sup> See H. Marcuse, “Cit.”, 126. Marcuse pointed out that this description as referring to the social function of Art at the time, and not the conception of it by the artist and precisely in this gap we might find the urgency that spread in those years from the artistic critique.

<sup>95</sup> H. Marcuse, “Cit.”, 127. The “negating force” Marcuse recognized at that time can be considered as the direct anticipation of Peter Osborne’s “Lineages of Negation” in his volume on *Conceptual Art*, Cit., 18-19.

<sup>96</sup> See C. Grenier, “The Modern Big Bang”, in *Big Bang: Destruction et création dans l’art du XXe siècle*, Cit.

way to participate in it. According to Marcuse, this condition can happen only when Art develops “to non objective art, minimal art, anti-art” for a liberation of the subject, “preparing it for a new object-world instead of accepting and sublimating, beautifying the existing one, freeing mind and body for a new sensibility and sensitivity which can no longer tolerate a mutilated experience and a mutilated sensibility.”<sup>97</sup>

Marcuse then started examining “living art”—rhetorically casting doubt on the expression as a *contradictio in adjecto*—, meaning its “struggle against domination and repression.” Put in other words, this Art, “by virtue of its own internal dynamic, is to become a *political force*. It refuses to be for the museum or mausoleum, for the exhibition of a no longer existing aristocracy, for the holiday of the soul and the elevation of the masses; it wants to be *real*.”<sup>98</sup> The political force inherent to this living art Marcuse depicted in the sentence above functions as probably the most pertinent description for that time of Boltanski and Chiapello’s thirty years later formulation of “artistic critique” during the 1960s and the 1970s. Marcuse continued arguing that

Today Art enters the forces of rebellion only as it is de-sublimated: a living Form which gives word and image and sound to the unnameable, to the lie and its debunking, to the horror and to the liberation from it, to the body and its sensibility as the source and seat of all “aesthetics,” as the seat of the soul and its culture, as the first “apperception” of the spirits (...).<sup>99</sup>

Marcuse’s provocation towards “these frenetic efforts to produce the absence of Form, to substitute the real from the aesthetic object, to ridicule oneself and the bourgeois customer” as “activities of frustration, already part of the entertainment industry and the museum culture,” eventually gave rise to his following and crucial declaration: “I believe the aim of the ‘new art’ is self-defeating because it retains, and must retain, no matter how ‘minimally,’ the Form of Art as different from non-art, and it is the Art-Form itself which frustrates the intention to reduce or even annul this difference, to make Art ‘real,’ ‘living.’”<sup>100</sup> Marcuse problematized this art politically

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<sup>97</sup> H. Marcuse, “Art as a Form of Reality”, *Cit.*, 130.

<sup>98</sup> H. Marcuse, “Cit.”, 130. An historical and theoretical account on the urgency for art to be real in 20<sup>th</sup> century art has been recently provided in Cristina Cruzeiro Pratas, *Arte e realidade: aproximação, diluição, e simbiose no século XX*, PhD thesis, Universidade de Lisboa, 2014.

<sup>99</sup> H. Marcuse, “Cit.”, 130.

<sup>100</sup> H. Marcuse, “Cit.”, 131.

engaged recognizing the impossibility in its struggle for being “real”. In fact he declared,

Art cannot become reality, cannot realize itself as Art in *all* its forms, even in its most destructive, most minimal, most ‘living’ forms. The gap which separates Art from reality, the essential otherness of Art, its ‘illusory’ character, can be reduced only to the degree to which reality itself tends toward Art as reality’s own Form, that is to say, in the course of a revolution, with the emergence of a free society.<sup>101</sup>

In this realm, the tradition cannot be rejected or discarded, according to Marcuse. On the contrary, he attributed to it a truth contained in what has “achieved, shown, and revealed in authentic forms”, which goes “*beyond* immediate realization or solution, perhaps beyond any realization and solution.”<sup>102</sup> Conversely, “living art” and especially *The Living Theatre*—the theatrical company founded by Julian Beck and Judith Malina in New York in 1947 and from 1964 in “voluntary exile” in Europe, was characterized by an experimental drama provoking tradition, authority and sometimes the audience and generally performed outside of the canonical space, for example Pittsburgh steel mill, a Brazilian prison, and the streets of Palermo, Italy<sup>103</sup>—abolished any “Form of estrangement: in eliminating the distance between the actors, the audience, and the ‘outside,’ it establishes a familiarity and identification with the actors and their message which quickly draws the negation, the rebellion into the daily universe, as an enjoyable and understandable element of this universe.”<sup>104</sup> The only place for “living art”, in Marcuse’s belief, is a society in which individuals, “no longer the subjects or objects of exploitation,”

can develop, in their life and work, the vision of the suppressed *aesthetic* possibilities of men and things—aesthetic not as to the specific property of certain objects (the *objet d’art*) but as forms and modes of existence corresponding to the reason and sensibility of free individual (Marx: ‘the sensuous appropriation of the world’). The realization of Art, the ‘new art,’ is

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<sup>101</sup> H. Marcuse, “Art as a Form of Reality”, *Cit.*, 131.

<sup>102</sup> H. Marcuse, “Cit.”, 131.

<sup>103</sup> See “The Living Theatre”,

available at <<http://www.britannica.com/topic/The-Living-Theatre>> (accessed in August 2013).

<sup>104</sup> H. Marcuse, “Cit.”, 132.

conceivable only as the process of constructing the universe of a free society—in other words: Art as a Form of Reality.<sup>105</sup>

He also stressed, that “Art as a Form of reality means not the beautification of the given, but the construction of an entirely different and opposed reality.” This statement went along with Marx’s thought, and I would also add to Schiller’s *Letter Upon the Aesthetic Education on Man* (1794)—upon which Marcuse had built his *Eros and Civilization* (1955)—in defence of the importance of aesthetics and its political and educational role. Marcuse afterwards added, [t]he aesthetic vision is part of the revolution; it is a vision of Marx: ‘the animal constructs (*formiert*) only according to need; man forms also in according with the laws of beauty.’<sup>106</sup>

He also recognized in the “Art as a Form of reality” a utopian impossibility of concretization, which would imply a “total transformation of the existing society; a new mode and new goals of production; a new type of human being as producer; the end of role-playing, of the established division of labour, of work and pleasure.” At the same time, he would not see in the realization of this Art an “invalidation” of traditional art, but rather, being aware of the transcendence of Art “from any ‘daily’ reality we can possibly envisage,” and therefore “even in the most traditional drama” there is “some faithfulness to one’s passion, some ‘freedom of expression’ in defiance of common sense, language and behaviour which indicts and contradicts the established ways of life.”<sup>107</sup>

In the meantime, Conceptual Art in Europe was being expressed “through the transformation of the installation into a type of ‘poor theatre’<sup>108</sup> where nature and culture coincide,”<sup>109</sup> finding expression in *Arte Povera*, which after one year from its first exhibition (*Arte Povera – Impazio* at Galleria la Bertesca, Genoa 1967) had gained international recognition. The main artists involved were Giovanni Anselmo, Alighiero

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<sup>105</sup> H. Marcuse, “Cit.”, 132-133.

<sup>106</sup> H. Marcuse, “Cit.”, 133.

<sup>107</sup> Marcuse continuing, “It is by virtue of this ‘otherness’ that the beautiful in the traditional arts would retain its truth. And this otherness could not and would not be cancelled by the social development. On the contrary; what would be cancelled is the opposite: namely, the false, conformist, and comfortable reception (and creation!) of Art, its spurious integration with the Establishment, its harmonization and sublimation of repressive conditions.” H. Marcuse, “Cit.”, 134.

<sup>108</sup> Definition derived from an experimental theatre the polish dramaturge Jerzy Grotowsky was practising and theorized in his text *Towards a poor Theatre*, known in Italy as *Alla ricerca del teatro perduto*, Padova: Marsilio Editori, 1965.

<sup>109</sup> C. Christov-Bakargiev, *Arte Povera*, Phaidon, London: Phaidon, 1999, 74.

Boetti, Pier Paolo Calzolari, Jannis Kounellis, Mario Merz, Michelangelo Pistoletto, Emilio Prini and Gilberto Zorio, all of them united by the leading curator Germano Celant. The latter, in a text from 1969, explained that for the “artist-chemist,” as he defined the Poverist artist, “animals, vegetables and minerals take part in the world of art. The artist feels attracted by their physical, chemical and biological possibilities, and he begins again to feel the need to make things of the world (...).” He afterwards declared that

What the artist comes in contact with is not re-elaborated; he does not express a judgement on it, he does not seek a moral or social judgement, he does not manipulate it. He leaves it uncovered and striking, he draws from the substance of the natural event—that of the growth of a plant, the chemical reaction of a mineral, the movement of a river, of snow, grass and land, to fall of a weight—he identifies with them in order to live the marvellous organization of life.<sup>110</sup>

Celant’s statement would induce the idea that Arte Povera was somehow disconnected from the turmoil of social movements of 1968. But this was part of a more extensive poetic with political stances, as two significant moments in autumn 1968 demonstrated: *Arte povera più Azioni povere* (Poor art plus poor actions) festival at Amalfi in October 1968, “a lively and divisive debate took place concerning art’s role in politics”<sup>111</sup> in which, among others, participated Pietro Bonfiglioli, owner of the Art Gallery De Foscherari in Bologna (Italy) and a critical-philosophical debate he promoted precisely on “The Poverty of Art” (“La Povertà dell’Arte”) at his gallery at that year. As the Italian curator Germano Celant previously affirmed in the text of the first exhibition of *Arte Povera*, called *Arte Povera - Imspazio* (Genoa, 1967), “physical presence and behaviour have become art.”<sup>112</sup>

Two years later, this affirmation was concretized in one of the most significant exhibitions in the history of contemporary art and curating, *Live in your head. When Attitudes Become Form. Works—Concepts—Processes—Situations—Information*, curated by Harald Szemann at Kunsthalle Bern between March and April 1969, which brought together European and North American artists whose common denominator

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<sup>110</sup> G. Celant, *Arte Povera*, Milan, translated as *Art Povera. Conceptual, Actual or Impossible Art?*, London, 1969, 2225-30, reprinted in C. Harrison and P. Wood (eds.), *Cit.*, 898.

<sup>111</sup> Nicholas Cullinan, “From Vietnam to Fiat-nam: The Politics of Arte Povera”, *October* 124, spring 2008, 8-30: 23.

<sup>112</sup> G. Celant, *Arte Povera – Im spazio* [1967], in C. Christov-Bakargiev, *Cit.*, 220-221.

was, in short terms, an acknowledgement among artists that “the most fundamental law of nature is that everything that exists in space also exists in time,” which opened the path to “unforeseen ways.”<sup>113</sup> Scott Burton, in the text for the exhibition catalogue, reported that

The interaction between time and material also determines the artists’ continuing interest in ‘common’, ‘non-art’ materials—cloth, plastic, dirt and organic matter, industrial flocking. These things are mutable, perishable, sensitive to manipulation to a degree that more usual materials like stone and wood are not. Several years ago Rauschenberg said: ‘I try to act in the gap between art and life’, for that gap continues to narrow. Art has been veritably invaded by life, if life means flux, change, chance, time, unpredictability. Sometimes the only difference between the two is sheer consciousness, the awareness that what seemed to be a stain on the wall is in fact a work of art. [...] Categories are being eradicated, distinctions blurred to an enormous degree today. The difference between painting and sculpture has gone (following that between poetry and prose in verbal art). The tremendous critical intelligence demanded from the ambitious artist is bringing him closer and closer to the intellectual; art and ideas are becoming indistinguishable. [...] The only large esthetic distinction remaining is that between art and life; this exhibition reveals how that distinction is fading. More precisely, is the occasion for the mimesis of that fading. No afunctional act can really be anything but symbolic, but it is compelling to see, at least, the continuing dilation of art’s limits, to watch the quotation marks get further and further apart. In 1913, Marcel Duchamp wrote, ‘Can one make works which are not works of ‘art’?’<sup>114</sup>

At the end of the 1960s and beginning of the 1970s in North America and in Europe, according to Krauss, the “‘post-minimalist’ backlash assumed various guises—anti-form, eccentric art, earthworks—which ran parallel to one another,” based on “an aesthetic rejection.”<sup>115</sup> The latter achieved its acumen in Italy through “poverist” manifestation, or, put in other words, in the name of a “poverty” (“povertà”) heir of the Poor Theatre by Jerzi Grotowski. The Polish playwright attempted to create what he believed theatre was: “the actor-spectator relationship of perceptual, direct, ‘live’ communion,” far from what he called an “artistic kleptomania,” typical of an ironically

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<sup>113</sup> S. Burton, “Notes on the New”, *Live in your head. When Attitudes Become Form. Works—Concepts—Processes—Situations—Information*, Kunsthalle Bern, 22.3-27.4.1969, Exhibition Catalogue, non-paginated.

<sup>114</sup> S. Burton, “Cit.”.

<sup>115</sup> R. Krauss, “Giovanni Anselmo: Matter and Monochrome”, *Perpetual Inventory*, Cambridge, London: The MIT Press, 2010, 181.



called “Rich Theatre.”<sup>116</sup> To a multisensory Rich Theatre worried about outrunning the spectacle of movies and television, the Poor Theatre presented itself as a pure theatre, “cleansed of the hybrid and, of course, the inauthentic condition of its ‘rich’ counterpart.”<sup>117</sup> In the realm of this search for authenticity in society and in art as a reflex of its historical context, the question of “The Poverty of Art” became an urgent call for reflection and critical debate. It included the participation of Italian artists, art critics and art historians whose interventions were published in the first issue of the notebooks series *Quaderni de Foscherari Bologna*, curated by Pietro Bonfiglioli, which introduced the debate as a result of a recognition of two main problems in the contemporary artistic production: the art-life relationship on one side and the search for the primal on the other, both coinciding with a

substantial distrust towards the traditional connotations of totality and self-sufficiency of the artistic doing: a distrust which recognizes the real theoretical framework to which bourgeois art is condemned and its functionality to the system of work division, in the other hand leaving subsistence to the ideological hypothesis of a non functional and non marketable residual; of an original or primary place, almost of a natural estate, to which art could retreat to recognize its totality.<sup>118</sup>

Although the debate took place at the *De Foscherari* gallery, which hosted the exhibition *Arte Povera* curated by Germano Celant, the philosophy had spread throughout the artistic community in Italy, involving the artistic practice of other artists, even those who were not included in the group. In this sense, we consider what Renato Barilli argued in his essay on contemporary art when affirming, “it would not be correct to concentrate the entire participation to the climate of Anti-form, attitude, conceptual to only official members of Arte Povera.”<sup>119</sup> Ultimately, the leading figure of German

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<sup>116</sup> J. Grotowski, “Towards a Poor Theater”, 1965, in C. Christov-Bakargiev, *Cit.*, 213.

<sup>117</sup> R. Krauss, “Giovanni Anselmo: Matter and Monochrome”, *Cit.*, 182.

<sup>118</sup> “Il rapporto arte-vita e la ricerca del primario coincidono in una sostanziale sfiducia che da un lato riconosce di fatto la separatezza teorica a cui è condannata l’arte borghese e la sua funzionalità al sistema della divisione del lavoro, dall’altro lato lascia sussistere l’ipotesi ideologica di un residuo non funzionale e non mercificabile, di un luogo originario o primario, quasi di uno stato naturale, a cui l’arte possa regredire per riconoscere la propria totalità.” P. Bonfiglioli, “Presentazione di un dibattito”, in *La Povertà dell’Arte*, Interventi di Apollonio, Arcangeli, Barilli, Boarini, Bonfiglioli, Bonito Oliva, Calvesi, Celant, Del Guercio, De Marchis, Fagiolo, Guttuso, Pignotti, *Quaderni de Foscherari* N°1, a cura di Pietro Bonfiglioli, anastatic copy realised in occasion of “Arte Povera 1968” at MAMbo Modern Art Museum of Bologna (september/dicember 2011), Bologna: De Foscherari, 2011, 5.

<sup>119</sup> “Non sarebbe però corretto accentrare l’intera partecipazione italiana al clima dell’Anti-form, del comportamento, del concettuale nei soli membri ufficiali dell’Arte Povera.”, R. Barilli, *L’arte*

Celant as spokesperson for all the artists of the group created friction among the members of the collective. As the curator and art historian Nicholas Cullinan highlighted “Even if they shared a political position—one that was often ambivalent—the gap between Celant’s critical and curatorial ambitions and the artists’ individual agendas made this a fragile alliance.”<sup>120</sup>

Regarding the position of Arte Povera in a transnational framework and in a transversal perspective, which overcame the borders between members and non-members, since it was neither a movement nor had a Manifesto, or a definite number of participants, its definition delivered by Christov-Bakargiev seems particularly relevant to explain it.

It may be even be legitimate to question whether Arte Povera should be evaluated within a broader perspective of post-minimalist after 1960s. Undoubtedly, this generation shared certain broad principles: that a work of art is an ‘attitude’ become ‘form’ through a wide range of materials; that they are flexible and transformable; that any medium, technique and location may be used; that art is related to a quest for authenticity and truth, and that it should engage with social concerns stemming from anti-authoritarian position and rejection the ideology of consumer society. However, the more one considers the diverse works of Arte Povera, the more one becomes aware of certain shared characteristics: a reference to domesticity and habitat, a human scale, a layering of diverse cultural references, a rejection of coherent style and artistic signature, as well as the distinction between the literal and the metaphoric, real and virtual, natural and artificial, live and inert, through the transformation of the installation into a type of ‘poor theatre’ where nature and culture coincide.<sup>121</sup>

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*contemporanea. Da Cézanne alle ultime tendenze*, Feltrinelli: Milano, 2005 (1984), 326. The necessity of clarifying this position appeared, when between 2011 and 2012 the most important Italian museums—Triennale in Milan; MAMbo in Bologna; GNAM and Maxxi in Rome; MADRE in Naples—were involved, on the occasion of the 150 birthday of the Italian Union, in what Barilli defined as “excessive” celebration that could probably have been justified in 2008 as commemoration of the ‘68 climate. The latter interested not only the privileged eleven artists included under a “brand” without specific features but rather sharing aspects that were average of a more extended national landscape. In its criticism, Barilli described the qualities of each artist of the group and highlighted others not included as well. He listed: Mario Merz, Pier Paolo Calzolari, Gilberto Zorio, Alighiero Boetti, Jannis Kounellis, Pino Pascali, Michelangelo Pistoletto, Emilio Prini, Giulio Paolini. He didn’t mention Giovanni Anselmo and then stressed other names as Gino De Dominicis, Vettor Pisani, Franco Vaccari, Claudio Parmiggiani, Luca Patella and also didn’t mention Germano Olivotto, although having written in different occasions about him. R. Barilli, “Arte Povera Oltre I Magnifici Undici. Da Merz a Pistoletto”, *L’Unità*, 16-11-2011, 40-41.

<sup>120</sup> N. Cullinan, “From Vietnam to Fiat-nam: The Politics of Arte Povera”, *Cit.*, 11.

<sup>121</sup> C. Christov-Bakargiev, *Cit.*, 74.

The question about form, formless and anti-form in the 20<sup>th</sup>-century art was already part of the artistic research, with its inception in Dubuffet (as it has been described in chapter 2). From the point of view of the practitioners, it is a remarkable idea by Beuys “that formalism does not exist...But the entire problem of “form and anti-form” remains [...]...anti-form is the energy, particularly the energy. [...] In my opinion, forms resemble ideas, and anti-form is energy.”<sup>122</sup> The focus on energy as a primal resource and primal scope of research was also at the core of one of the main protagonists of *Arte Povera*, Giovanni Anselmo. His artistic statement in 1969 is crucial to understand his practice: “The world, things, life, and I are all situations of energy and the question is exactly to not crystallize these situations, but to keep them open and living in function of our life.”<sup>123</sup> In one of his most emblematic pieces he stigmatized this concept by putting an organic element between two pieces of stones tied together and entitled it *Senza Titolo – Struttura che mangia (Untitled – Eating Structure, 1968)*. On a visit to his studio on February 6<sup>th</sup> in 2012, regarding this sculpture he told me:

We are organic, and we are also both organic and inorganic, made of mineral atoms. The difference between organic and inorganic permits us to see the passage of time. With a lettuce, from one day to another, you realize that time goes by. Then, a lettuce from the vegetable garden goes to the kitchen: it is related with food. The piece of granite in the artwork, if the lettuce is not substituted daily, falls down, like us in the need of feeding ourselves every day, otherwise we cannot stand on our feet. These are discourses on reality, on daily life. I did this work as to feed myself, to relate myself with something bigger than a lunch. A successful piece of work suggests you something new every day. The lettuce needing to be changed every day provides you with the possibility to put it on its feet again, each time appearing as new. The first time I did this work, instead of a lettuce I used a piece of meat. Rather more organic, because it drips, it has whey: it is more dramatic. I did not think about the killed animal, I thought about the organic matter. But afterwards, thinking about how many

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<sup>122</sup> “Je pense que le formalisme n’existe pas...Mais il reste tout le problème de “forme et anti-forme”... C’est la grande question...Oui! Peut-on trouver chez l’artiste la place de la forme et celle de une idée...l’anti-forme c’est l’énergie, particulièrement l’énergie. Les proportions, les mesures, etc...est-ce que c’est ça la question... Les choses sont plus comme des éléments chaotiques...les choses sont opposées à elles-mêmes...Pour moi, les formes ressemblent aux idées et l’anti-forme c’est l’énergie.” Ball, Laure. “Interview de Joseph Beuys”. Réalisé pour cours métrage aur l’Art Pauvre, repris in Art Vivant, n° 4, septembre-octobre 1969. In *Arte Povera, Anti-Form*, CAPC, Sculptures 1966-1969, Bordeaux, 12 Mars – 30 Avril 1982, non-paginated.

<sup>123</sup> “Io, il mondo, le cose, la vita, siamo situazioni di energia e la questione è esattamente non cristallizzare queste situazioni, ma mantenerle aperte e vive in funzione del nostro vivere.” In *Arte Povera, Anti-Form*, Cit., non-paginated. All translations from Italian are mine unless otherwise noted.

people die of hunger, I decided to substitute the piece of meat with the lettuce “I do not feed myself with it”, I thought at that time.<sup>124</sup>

Organic elements coexisting with inorganic ones were also part of various pieces by the eldest member of the group Mario Merz, famous for his numerous igloos and for centring his poetics on the formula of the 13<sup>th</sup> century Italian mathematician Leonardo Fibonacci.<sup>125</sup> Another of the official members of Arte Povera worth mentioning in this context is Giuseppe Penone, whose study on sculpture was closely connected with nature and the rural environment in which he grew up, although, as the art historian Didier Semin explained, we should not consider him to be a bucolic poet.<sup>126</sup> *Alpi Marittime, Continuerà a crescere tranne in quel punto* (Alpi Marittime. It will continue growing till that point, 1968) marked the beginning of his use of a tree as an artistic experience. It appears as an investigation through the materiality of the tree that also interrogates time, by the imposition of human force on the tree surface to challenge the vital expansion of the plant.<sup>127</sup> Conceiving of the tree as a fluid matter, he inserted a

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<sup>124</sup> Noi siamo organico, siamo entrambe le cose (organico e inorganico), fatti di atomi minerali. La differenza tra organico e inorganico consente di vedere il passaggio del tempo. Con la lattuga da un giorno all'altro ti accorgi che il tempo passa. Una lattuga dall'orto arriva alla cucina. È una lattuga perché è relazionata col cibo. Il pezzo in granito nell'opera, se non si sostituisce la lattuga ogni giorno, cade giù, come noi che abbiamo bisogno di alimentarci quotidianamente altrimenti non ci reggiamo in piedi. Sono discorsi sulla realtà, sul quotidiano. Ho fatto questo lavoro come per nutrirmi, per mettermi in relazione con qualcosa di più grande di un pranzo. Un lavoro riuscito ti suggerisce qualcosa di nuovo ogni giorno. La lattuga, dovendo essere cambiata quotidianamente, ti dà la possibilità di rifare l'opera, di rimetterla in piedi, ogni volta appare come nuova. La prima volta che feci quest'opera, anziché una lattuga avevo messo un pezzo di carne. Ancor più organico, perché gronda, c'è il siero: è più drammatica. Non ho pensato subito alla bestia uccisa, ho pensato all'organico, ma poi pensando a quanta gente muore di fame, ho deciso di sostituire al pezzo di carne l'insalata, della quale “non mi alimento”, pensavo allora. *Conversation with Giovanni Anselmo*, at the Archivio Anselmo Torino, February 6, 2012.

<sup>125</sup> See Mario Merz, *Voglio fare subito un libro*, Torino: Hopefulmonster, 2005, 115.

<sup>126</sup> “Penone è stato frequentemente, e a torto, considerato come una sorta di poeta bucolico. Non dobbiamo commettere quest'errore: il dialogo che l'artista instaura tra natura e cultura non è espressione di un'inclinazione, per così dire, agreste, la questione vitale per lui è innanzitutto quella della scultura. La scultura concepita come un modo di stare nel mondo, di provarne, ovvero sentire e mettere alla prova, lo spazio, la fluidità, la resistenza o la pesantezza.” Didier Semin, (a cura di Germano Celant) *Arte Povera 2011*, Milano: Electa, 478-489: 484.

<sup>127</sup> This work by Penone has been accompanied by some verses he wrote between 1968 and 1969. “L'opera è proiettata nel futuro, è legata alla crescita dell'albero alla sua esistenza. / L'opera è in divenire; per possedere l'opera occorre vivere accanto all'albero che ne è attore. La mutazione, / il processo di crescita dell'albero è l'esperienza dell'opera d'arte. / L'albero, perso e consumato ogni significato emozionale, formale e culturale, / appare un elemento vitale in espansione, in proliferazione e accrescimento / continuo. Alla sua 'forza' ha aderito un'altra 'forza', la mia. / La sua reazione è il lavoro. / I suoi rami e il suo tronco si adattano agli anelli delle mani, delle braccia, / delle gambe, ma i suoi movimenti tendono a sgroppare nel vuoto / i pesi aggiunti alla sua struttura. / Ad aggravare il suo sforzo a non perdere l'equilibrio reso / Continuamente precario dall'azione demolitrice della forza di gravità / Si aggiunge la spinta del vento e la instabilità del terreno che, smontando, / rende i suoi movimenti simili a quelli del pattinatore.” [1969, 1968, 1968, 1968] G. Penone, *Respirar la sombra/Respirare l'ombra*, Xunta de Galicia, CGAC, 1999, 12.

bronze hand in the act of touching the surface of a young trunk tree, the physicality of the hand witnesses the lifetime of the plant that, as the title of his intervention says, “it will continue to grow except in that point.”

In his use of trees, as for example in *Albero di 12 Metri* (1970), Giuseppe Penone conceived of sculpture as a process that corresponds to the rewind function in video: through the patient process of peeling a beam following the rings of growth, his aim was to find in the dead piece of wood, once destined to be construction material, the life that was in it. This is why Penone describes his work as a kind of accelerated rewind, moving through the phenomenon of growth until the moment in which the man’s hand interrupted it.<sup>128</sup>

It is also possible to find similarities between Penone’s way of conceiving the process of sculpture with the Portuguese Alberto Carneiro’s methods, which is characterised, as he referred, by three phases: “prospection,” “nomination,” and “possession.”<sup>129</sup> In 1968 Carneiro was in London for a postgraduate course at the Saint Martin School of Art, after having completed the Sculpture course at the Porto School of Fine Arts. His first experience with the materiality he would work along his artistic production started at the age of ten. In fact, to quote Santiago Olmo, “he was employed in a workshop devoted to the making of religious images, where he would remain until the age of twenty-one (between 1947 and 1958).”<sup>130</sup> This experience, as Alberto Carneiro himself has referenced several times, was remarkable to know intimately the material he was working with, in order to, afterwards, get to a demystification of the message he would communicate.<sup>131</sup> The sculptures *Fusão de Troncos* (1963-1965) and

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<sup>128</sup> Didier Semin, (a cura di Germano Celant) *Arte Povera 2011*, Milano, Electa, 479.

<sup>129</sup> “ ‘Prospection’ is the field work which allows us to find something, not a way, but matter that corresponds to feelings inside me and that gives dimension to the thing itself. ‘Nomination’ is the moment in which I assume the thing as a vehicle or a means through which I will fulfil my work, and ‘possession’ is the definition of that work as a consequence to the outside, this means as a way of showing it to the public – because in a sense and as we all know, a work does not exist if it doesn’t have an audience.” A. Carneiro, in “Transcription of the round table” with Raquel Henriques da Silva, Joaquim Pais de Brito, Jean François Chougnat, Alberto Carneiro, Pedro Cabrita Reis, João Carlos Alvarez, in Rita Macedo, Raquel Henriques da Silva, (eds.) *Ephemeral art and Conservation. The Paradigm of Contemporary Art and Ethnographic Objects*, Lisbon: Instituto de História da Arte, 2010, 147-178: 157.

<sup>130</sup> Santiago Olmo, “Alberto Carneiro: Nature as Experience”, in *Alberto Carneiro*, Centro Galego de Arte Contemporânea, Xunta de Galicia, 2001, 136.

<sup>131</sup> Alberto Carneiro’s declaration in Manuel Antonio de Pina “Onze anos a fazer santos sem nunca chegar à cabeça” (“Eleven years doing saints with never reaching to the head”), *Jornal de Notícias*, Porto, 2 Mar.1971, 8. At this extent, C. Rosendo remarks how Carneiro’s affirmation echoes his reading of the essay by Marshall McLuhan, a reference in those years in art internationally, pointing the attention on practical and social consequences, in our culture, of any medium – that is of any extension of ourselves. “The medium is the message”, *Understanding Media*,(1964), London, Routledge, 2002, 7-9.

*Tese* (1966-1967)—according to Isabel Carlos—reveal how Carneiro is moving towards a personal research internal to the act of sculpting, where “the tree rises already as metaphor of nature, matter and sculpted object”.<sup>132</sup> At the same time, from 1965 he started reading the French philosopher Gaston Bachelard’s essays that the same artist in many occasion mentioned has a pillar of his reflections on art, its matter and its relationship with the ordinary and sensorial aspects of daily life.<sup>133</sup>

His studies in Portugal culminated with exhibition in 1967 at *ESBAP* (*Escola Superior de Belas Artes do Porto*), known as an investigation of sculpture connected with the current of Minimalism and characterized by abstract forms in the materials of wood, while he was also exploring the materiality of metal, as shown by the sculptures exhibited at that period at the “Cooperativa Árvore,” in Porto too. It coincided with the coming out of a crisis started long before that faced him with the necessity of passing to a new estate of relationship with the world through his work, as he wrote in his diary the 18<sup>th</sup> of September 1967. He continued saying: “I am closer to the origin but still not sufficiently free from my precedents. [...] I need to find the tree of mature fruits at whose shadow I played.”<sup>134</sup>

The metaphorical image of the search for that tree and the necessity of distancing himself from the environment surrounding him determined his choice to go abroad and therefore his residence in London for two years, facilitated by a scholarship awarded by the Gulbenkian Foundation. He was a student at Saint Martin’s School, where Barry Flanagan, Gilbert and George, Richard Long and Hamish Fulton had recently finished their education. In the meantime, as Maderuelo observed, a new generation of artists started presenting their works in galleries and festivals around

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<sup>132</sup> “As esculturas *Fusão de troncos* (1963-1965) e *Tese* (1966-1967), denotam quanto se encontra já afastado da prática de santeiro, que abandona em 1958, e de como procura uma linha de investigação própria: a árvore surge já como metáfora da natureza, matéria e objeto do acto escultórico, mas também entidade portadora de um significado e de uma imagética própria e inerente a ela própria”, Isabel Carlos, *Alberto Carneiro. A Escultura é um pensamento*, Lisboa, Editorial Caminho, 2007, 8-9. All translations from Portuguese are mine unless otherwise noted.

<sup>133</sup> See Catarina Rosendo, *Alberto Carneiro: os Primeiros Anos (1963-1975)*, Colibri, Lisboa, 2007, 52.

<sup>134</sup> “O momento de crise é já longo. A necessidade de passar a um novo estágio de relações com o mundo através do meu trabalho torna-se imperioso. Estou mais perto da origem mas ainda não suficientemente liberto dos meus mortos. [...] Tenho que encontrar a árvore dos frutos sazoados à sombra da qual brinquei.”, “Das notas para um diário. (18 Setembro 1967)”, *Alberto Carneiro, exposição antológica*, Lisboa, Porto, Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian, Fundação de Serralves, 1991, 41, quotation by C. Rosendo, *Cit.* 50.

1968, turning the current tendency by “opposing nature irregularities to minimalist geometry and dematerialized conceptual propositions to pop art objects.”<sup>135</sup>

From that period forward, Alberto Carneiro’s work can be considered as, in the words of Bernardo Pinto de Almeida, a “walk in the balance of a way going in the direction of an almost dematerialisation, even if matters are foreseen and the own sculptor’s role is made explicit in his works.”<sup>136</sup> His recent memory contributes to describe his experience in London:

At the time I did not know the work of any of them. It was after the exhibition ‘When Attitudes Become Form’, organized by Harald Szeemann in Bern, and shown in London in September 1969 at the ICA, that I came into contact with land art, conceptual art and arte povera. I realized then that I myself shared similar concerns and sought different things and means of expression for my art.<sup>137</sup>

Nonetheless, Maderuelo informs us that even if we can place Carneiro’s work at the end of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s in the same category as Richard Long, Hamish Fulton, David Nash, Andy Goldsworthy, Roger Ackling, Chris Drury or Raymond Moore, there are some personal, emotional and spiritual circumstances which clearly differentiate Alberto Carneiro’s work from his British peers, despite their similarities in the use of media.<sup>138</sup> The idea of proposing here the relationship between Carneiro and Penone comes from the reading of a recent text (from 2013) written by Alberto Carneiro, when at a certain point says:

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<sup>135</sup> Quoting the entire paragraph: “Una nueva generación de artistas que empieza a presentar su obra en galerías y festivales hacia 1968 va a dar la vuelta a estos presupuestos oponiendo la irregularidad de la naturaleza a la geometría minimalista y las desmaterializadas proposiciones conceptuales a los objetos del pop art. También en ese mes de mayo 1968 surge en Coventry la revista *Art and Language*, en cuyo primer número, cuyo subtítulo reza: *Journal of Conceptual Art*, se postula por una interpretación del arte como lenguaje, despreciando la materialidad de la pintura y los objetos.”, Javier Maderuelo, “Sobre la naturaleza y el agua”, in *Alberto Carneiro. Sobre los árboles y el agua, Huesca. Arte y Naturaleza*, exhibition catalogue, Sep-Oct 1999, 6.

<sup>136</sup> B. Pinto de Almeida, *As Imagens e as coisas*, Porto: Campo das letras, 2002, 197.

<sup>137</sup> Alberto Carneiro, “Autobiographical anthology: Answers to question that I have been frequently asked about my work”, *Arte Vida/Vida Arte – Art Life / Life Art. Alberto Carneiro*, Exhibition Concept: João Fernandes; Curator and production coordinator: Isabel Sousa Braga, Porto, Museu Serralves, 19 Apr - 24 Jun 2013, 58.

<sup>138</sup> See J. “Sobre la naturaleza y el agua”, *Cit.*.

My identifications with matter are the discovery of my body as nature and art. I have been saying for a long time that ‘the artificial is the natural of man, his true nature’. Therefore what I seek is the recreation of the first tree in the consubstantiation of the abstract art, i.e., the identification of that which in me is the most primordial as experience, idea and art”.<sup>139</sup>

This foundational statement that Alberto Carneiro formulates, also reveals a direct proximity to what was considered as essential of the human being in relation to other organic forms, such as plants and animals, and in relation to nature and culture, according to philosophical anthropological thought of Helmuth Plessner. The German philosopher of nature, in fact, in his *Die stufen* (1928), affirmed, “for the human being, having an existential neediness, divided, naked, artificiality is the expression that essentially corresponds to his nature. [...] Artificiality in acting, in thinking and in dreaming is the interior medium through which man, as natural living being, is in harmony with himself.”<sup>140</sup> Some pages later Plessner added: “Creative motion is an expressive feature. Therefore, the act achieved, which is sustained on the materials offered by nature, obtains the character of artificiality”.<sup>141</sup>

In 1968 Alberto Carneiro was in London, a different environment than he was used to, and also far from the rural place where he had grown up. There he experienced what he later defined as *anamnesis* (from the Greek, composed by *ana*: again and *mnesis*: memory), a remembrance.<sup>142</sup> It determined a process of reformulation and a new approach to sculpture, abandoning representation in favour of presentation and transposition of natural elements. This shift was manifested in the project *Canavial-memória-metamorfose de um corpo ausente*. Conceived in 1968, it was presented at “Galeria Quadrante” in Lisbon in 1973 and chosen as the image cover for the

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<sup>139</sup> A. Carneiro, “Autobiographical anthology: Answers to question that I have been frequently asked about my work”, *Cit.*, 60.

<sup>140</sup> “Esistenzialmente bisognoso, diviso, nudo, per l’uomo è l’artificialità l’espressione che essenzialmente corrisponde alla sua natura. [...] L’artificialità nell’agire, nel pensare e nel sognare è il mezzo interiore con cui l’uomo, in quanto essere vivente naturale, è in accordo con se stesso.” This is my personal translation from the reference I consulted, the Italian translation from the original German book, (a cura di) Vallori Rasini, H. Plessner, *I gradi dell’ organico e l’uomo. Introduzione all’antropologia filosofica*, Torino, Bollati Boringhieri, 2006, 339. Original Title: *Die stufen des Organischen und der Mensch. Einleitung in die philosophische Anthropologie*, 1975 (3rd edition) Walter de Gruyter & Co., Berlin-New York.

<sup>141</sup> “La mossa creativa è una prestazione espressiva. Con ciò l’atto che realizza, che si deve appoggiare ai materiali offerti dalla natura, ottiene il carattere dell’artificialità.” H. Plessner, *Cit.*, p. 345.

<sup>142</sup> The notion of anamnesis in Alberto Carneiro, the analysis of his artistic production between 1963-1975, in relation with the artist Black Notebook (*O caderno preto*) and the relation with his readings of Gaston Bachelard make Catarina Rosendo’s theses a reference for the study on this topic. See C. Rosendo, *Cit.*, chapter 2.



Portuguese Journal of Art's *Colóquio/Artes* for the first volume of 1974.<sup>143</sup> The piece was made of bamboo, signposted with coloured strips tied with raffia strings. Through its apparently arbitrary order, Carneiro aimed to interrogate and recreate the sensation of a body lying down in a cane plantation.<sup>144</sup> Occupying the whole space, accessible to the spectator it was an “involvement,” term used by the artist instead of “installation.”<sup>145</sup>

*O Laranjal – natureza envolvente* (1969) presented an orange tree standing on a mound of earth, its shadow drawn on a vertical raw cloth and its shape cut on a metallic sheet behind the drawing. From above a feminine voice, intermittently spaced between silences and the sounds of bird, recited four texts, one for each season encountered by the environment represented.<sup>146</sup> Experiencing this piece, our perception of the orange grove is enriched by evocative senses encountered through sight, smell and sound. This piece by Carneiro leads us to another parallel with a work realised in the same period by the Italian Luca Maria Patella.

Having studied structural chemistry in Uruguay, Patella had a profound interest in psychology, and went back to Europe at the end of the 1960s to dedicate himself completely to art. He is one of the major figures in visual poetry and a pioneer in the use of video from that period. The relation we propose here between Patella and Carneiro is very transversal and is suggested by an installation Patella presented for the first time at the Walker Art Center of Liverpool. There, after having presented the “Talking Walls” (*Muri Parlanti*), he proposed *Un Boschetto di Alberi Parlanti e Profumati e di Cespugli Musicali, sotto un cielo* (“A small Forest of Talking Trees and Musical Bushes Under a Sky,” 1970-71).<sup>147</sup> The latter was an environment of trees and the sound of birds under a sky of moving clouds created a kind of interactive and sensorial environment, where the spectator, becoming participant, is invited to explore the space where, for example, by touching a bush one would hear a sound, or moving closer to a tree one would hear a

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<sup>143</sup> See M. Brito Alves, *A Revista Colóquio Artes*, Lisboa: Colibri, 2007, 73.

<sup>144</sup> See I. Carlos, *Alberto Carneiro. A Escultura é um pensamento*, Cit. 9.

<sup>145</sup> “[...] ‘involment’, a term used by the artist to single out moments in which sculptural objectuality is redefined by a different relationship between the action and the body, the coordinates of space and time as transformed by those actions and the conditions for sensorial perceptions offered to the viewer, in a semantic expansion that animates the concept of ‘installation’ or ‘ambient’, a more literal translation of environment, which Alla Kaprow postulated as new possibilities for artistic expression and manifestation.” João Fernandes, *Arte Vida / Vida Arte – Art Life / Life Art. Alberto Carneiro*, Cit., 20.

<sup>146</sup> See C. Rosendo, *Cit.*, 162.

<sup>147</sup> *Un Boschetto di Alberi Parlanti e Profumati e di Cespugli Musicali, sotto un cielo*, after having been shown at the Walker Art Gallery in Liverpool in 1971 and the Bienal de São Paulo in Brazil in 1975, has finally been recreated for the exhibition “Luca Maria Patella – Ambienti Proiettivi Animati, 1964-1984”, MACRO, Museum of Contemporary Art Rome, January 30-April 26, 2015.

voice whispering.<sup>148</sup> Here, as in Alberto Carneiro's *O Laranjal*, the tree becomes the pillar from which is built a personal experience from sensorial perceptions.

Another remarkable work for our research is Carneiro's *Os quatro elementos* (1969-1970): a space delimited by metallic beams in a cubic shape, a kind of model synthesis, abstract and concrete at the same time, where the four elements were presented by the materiality of earth, water, coal and a tree, and also photos and plastic. The presentation and transposition of natural elements in the exhibition space culminated in *Uma floresta para os teus sonhos* (1970): two hundred tree trunks of different heights arranged to recreate a visual and tactile impression of a forest. Seemingly disordered, the trunks obeyed to a detailed project that described the piece. Thanks to it, it was possible to do again the piece, with trees from the same place and of the same size, uprooted rather than cut—as Carneiro explained<sup>149</sup>—after their destruction in a fire during their exhibition at the “Galeria Nacional de Arte Moderna” in Lisbon in 1981, where the piece had already been shown in 1977 on the occasion of the group exhibit “Alternativa Zero.”<sup>150</sup> Quoting Catarina Rosendo,

In Alberto Carneiro's work, the tree presents itself as tree, i.e. raw, and at the same time condensing the most totalizing and generical idea of landscape, also reflecting the subject relating to it. In this self-sufficient and tautological formula of remembrance of the tree through the tree is enclosed the game of repetition and variation, assigning new meanings to the presented forms, renewed, in the “screen inside the [real] space.”<sup>151</sup>

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<sup>148</sup> In a conversation with Luca Patella at phone on 17th April 2014 he added that the voice talking, in ironic tones from the inside of the tree is a woodworm, possible to ear only getting closer the ear to the tree trunk.

<sup>149</sup> A. Carneiro at the round table with R. Henriques da Silva, J. Pais de Brito, J.F. Chougnat, P. Cabrita Reis and J. C. Alvarez at the symposium *Ephemeral art and Conservation*, Lisbon: Instituto de História da Arte, 2010, 158-160.

<sup>150</sup> A remarkable work for the context of this research, presented in *Alternativa Zero* is Clara Menéres's *Mulher-Terra-Vida* [Woman-Earth-Life, 1977], featuring the round forms of a nude woman body shaped on the materiality of earth and grass. The green and sinuous surface contained in a wide transparent acrylic box open on the upper side, associates the archetype of the woman to fertility as well as object of desire in her horizontal, yet “submitted”, posture. Images of this work are displayed in *Perspectiva: Alternativa Zero*. Curated by João Fernandes, Exhibition Catalogue, Porto: Fundação Serralves, 1997, 132-133.

<sup>151</sup> “(...) na obra de Alberto Carneiro, a árvore se apresenta como árvore, ou seja, em bruto, ao mesmo tempo que condensa a ideia mais totalizante e geral de paisagem e reflecte também o sujeito que com ela se relaciona. Nesta fórmula auto-suficiente e tautológica de rememoração da árvore pela árvore encerra-se o jogo da repetição e da variação que atribui novos significados às formas apresentadas, que se representam, renovadas, no “ecrã dentro do espaço” real.” C. Rosendo, *Cit.*, 176.

“Man is neither a spectator nor an actor, but simply nature,”<sup>152</sup> declared Penone in one of his verses, and Santiago Olmo said, “Carneiro neither marks nor establishes distances with regard to nature in his oeuvre...the artist process implies another interior process, a formative process through nature. The way in which the artist acts on nature to favour the creation of a fuller idea of man, at once a part of nature and in contrast to it, proves essential.”<sup>153</sup> The similarities between Alberto Carneiro and Giuseppe Penone are not temporal, or related to the specific context of 1968 that we explored here; they define the long trajectory of their work as two parallel paths, where it seems that each one contributes to a better proximity / comprehension of the artistic practice of the other.

In way of conclusion, form and the questioning of it found full expression in some heterogeneous artistic practices characterized for the use of organic materiality as part of the process. From the avant-garde experimentation, through its provocative employment in the surrealist object and the practice of montage and disorder, organic materiality afterwards is the result of a broader expansion of material possibilities, which acquire their mature affirmation and political force in the 1960s.

### 4.3 Animals and plants in the exhibiting space

In her genealogy to *Arte Povera*,<sup>154</sup> whose main characteristic—but not unique—was research for a balance between art and nature, as other Conceptual manifestations at that time like Earth art, Land art, and Environmental art, Christov-Bakargiev highlighted the importance of the US philosopher John Dewey. Early in the 1920s in his writing on aesthetics, he took up the relationship between art, experience and nature, stressing that “[t]hus would disappear the separations that trouble present thinking: division of everything into nature and experience, of experience into practice and theory, art and science, of art into useful and fine, menial and free [...]”<sup>155</sup>

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<sup>152</sup> Penone, *Respirar la sombra / Respirare l'ombra*, Cit., 10.

<sup>153</sup> S. Olmo, *Cit.*, 136.

<sup>154</sup> C. Christov-Bakargiev, *Cit.*, 31.

<sup>155</sup> J. Dewey, “Experience, Nature, art, Experience and Nature,” 1925, in C. Christov-Bakargiev, *Cit.*, 211.

She also referred to a significant antecedent in the Roman artistic scene at the end of the 1960s, when the possibility of including live animals in an event, practice, and artwork found its concretization. This was the case of an installation Richard Serra made at the gallery “La Salita” in Rome between 1965-66 and entitled “Animal Habitats: Live and Stuffed,” which presenting live and stuffed animals, such as hamsters, chickens, doves and one pig exposed inside their cage in the space gallery, had a strong impact on the audience. According to the critic Loris Schermi, in his text on the history of the gallery “nature had violently entered into artwork, with all its consequences, live animals, living together with the stuffed ones had to be fed every day, their cages cleaned daily, attention given to them. Something new was born.”<sup>156</sup> A review of this exhibition appeared in *Time Magazine* on the 10<sup>th</sup> of June 1966, an article whose title, “Please don’t feed the Sculpture,”<sup>157</sup> sounds as the warning reminding the instructions at Zoological gardens, where is common to read “Please don’t feed the animals”. During an interview from 1993, regarding this work, Richard Serra commented

I was using paint with a certain disdain, with the attitude that any material was as good as any other material. And one you find that you’re not using paint for its illusionistic capabilities or its color refraction but as material that happens to be ‘red’, you can use any material as equally relevant. I started using a whole load of materials. I was living in Fiesole outside of Florence at the time and I started using everything that was in the parameters of my surroundings: sticks and stones and hides. I did a whole show of 22 live and stuffed animals.<sup>158</sup>

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<sup>156</sup> Personal translation from the original in Italian, Loris Schermi, “La Salita, storia di una galleria,” 19/01/2001. Loris Schermi referred that Gian Tomaso Liverani opened the art gallery ‘La Salita’ in Rome in 1957. An excerpt in Italian from his text: “Nel maggio del 1966 viene inaugurata la prima mostra personale di Richard Serra: Animal Habitats, Live and Stuffed. Certamente si trattava di un evento di forte impatto: animali vivi e impagliati, criceti, galline, colombe e un maiale (Live Pig Cage I) erano esposti nelle loro gabbie nei locali della galleria. La natura era prepotentemente entrata nell’opera d’arte, con tutte le sue conseguenze, gli animali vivi che convivevano con quelli impagliati dovevano essere nutriti ogni giorno, bisognava pulire le loro gabbie, dedicargli attenzioni. Qualcosa di nuovo era nato. Analogie si trovano nel lavoro di altri artisti, primi fra tutti Pascali e Kounellis che passati da La Tartaruga di De Martiis a L’Attico di Sargentini, si muovevano verso gli elementi naturali e animali, veri (nel caso di Kounellis) o finti (in quello di Pascali), cominciavano a comparire nei loro lavori.” See <<http://www.merzbau.it/appunti.php?mrcnsn=0000000013>> (Accessed in June 2013)

<sup>157</sup> See <<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,942031,00.html>> (accessed in June 2013).

<sup>158</sup> David Seidner, “Richard Serra”, interview with the artist, *Bomb Magazine* 42 (Winter 1993), quoted by G. Aloï, *Cit.*, 7.

This exhibition proposed something completely different with the gallery activities until that time, although the line of continuity was that Liverani was interested in presenting the work of young artists. According to Schermi, the owner of the gallery also incurred in a legal dispute because of that exhibition and, probably under a solicitation of the other galleries in the surroundings of Piazza di Spagna, a vigilant gave him a fine “contesting the fact that the materials exposed were not contemplated in the commercial license. On the refusal in paying the administrative sanction, the matter was solved in front of the judge, which seeing Giulio Carlo Argan and Palma Bucarelli appearing as his witnesses, absolved Liverani.”<sup>159</sup> Aloï, quoting Lynn Cooke, addressed to this controversy the possible reason for omitting this early project in the raisonné catalogue of his sculptural work, as well as not allowing its reconstruction.<sup>160</sup>

Regarding the relationship with artistic practices and the organic materiality, this work by Richard Serra demarcated the entrance of the live animal in an artistic context, and it had tremendous repercussions on the work of other artists, such as Jannis Kounellis from 1967 and Pino Pascali, as he himself referred in the last pages of the art critic (until this publication, to afterwards abandon the art for a total engagement into feminism) Carla Lonzi’s *Autoritratto*. Pascali confessed, in fact, having felt a strong emotion at seeing the animals alive to the point of being induced to propose the same thing. Nevertheless, assuming that probably due to a mental block or a sort of pride, this temptation for him was suddenly replaced by the concern on kind of patent upon an idea, which impeded him to present the same thing, but rather to move on toward a new path.<sup>161</sup>

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<sup>159</sup> “La personale di Richard Serra segna un po’ una deviazione nella linea de La Salita, che fino ad ora si era mossa verso altre direzioni, tuttavia è da considerarsi affine ai programmi di Liverani che basava la sua attività, specialmente sui giovani. Quello che apprezzava di un’artista era il suo problema e quel tanto di originale, di personale che lo distingueva. Il gallerista subì anche una vertenza giudiziaria a causa di quella mostra: un vigile urbano, molto probabilmente sollecitato da alcune gallerie concorrenti di piazza di Spagna, elevò una multa contestando il fatto che erano esposti materiali non contemplati dalla licenza di esercizio commerciale. Al rifiuto di pagare la sanzione amministrativa, la cosa si risolse davanti al giudice che vedendo comparire come testimoni del gallerista, Giulio Carlo Argan e Palma Bucarelli, assolse Liverani.” L. Schermi, “La Salita, storia di una galleria,” 19/01/2001. See <<http://www.merzbau.it/appunti.php?mrcnsn=000000013>> (accessed in June 2013).

<sup>160</sup> Lynne Cooke, “Richard Serra: a case study”, *Tate Papers*, 8 (2007), quoted by Aloï, *Cit.*, 8.

<sup>161</sup> “Quello scultore che mi ha colpito, per quanto possa sembrare, così, negativo, quello scultore americano che ha fatto la mostra alla Salita, e c’erano gli animali veri dentro... adesso, a parte le cose che faceva, vedere un porco, quello che è... ho avuto un’emozione talmente forte che, quasi quasi, così, proverei a mettere gli animali vivi dentro... Solo che... certo, c’è questo fatto, capisci, del brevetto: praticamente l’ha fatto uno, tu... In tutti i modi, è una cosa abbastanza interessante, è una cosa che mi stuzzica molto, solo che l’ho scartata per molte ragioni [...] Perché c’è questa specie di blocco mentale: l’ha fatta un altro e... è una cosa automatica, è terribile, forse sono schiavo un po’ troppo, in questo

A moment of transition in the artistic trajectory of Jannis Kounellis, a few months before his participation in the exhibition *Arte Povera – Im spazio*, at the gallery “La Bertesca” in Genoa, curated by Germano Celant, featured in Milan at the “Galleria dell’Ariete.” Inaugurated on May 15, 1967, according to the description by Carla Lonzi, the exhibition featured a central tableau, whose frame was composed of birdcages with live birds, and their water and food inside. In the exhibition’s catalogue, Lonzi explained that the insertion of birdcages was meant “to introduce a gesture—that of caring of the birds—in the fruition of the artwork.”<sup>162</sup> In this work, the legacy of Serra’s exhibition at the art gallery La Salita, especially for being the first time in which Kounellis was transited in-between painting and installation with living elements, is immediate and fundamental to contextualize his research. In this work, organic materiality still occupy an intermediary role between the canvas and the surrounding space, between materials and concepts, showing, as Lonzi highlighted at the end of her text, Kounellis’s intuition in overcoming the line between painting and conceptual art.

Hence, the most distinguishing character of Kounellis in the landscape of young painting active from 1959-1960, lies in that: his is really an image coming from the brain. These roses, always the same, the same silhouette reflecting more or less the shadow of a rose, are not a figurative fact, they become a figurative fact; but are born as psychic operations bursting out into image. Birdcages with the birds are not realised as forms, in function of the tableau, or as objects, in function of the exhibition, but as an immediate stimulus to bring the spectator to recognize the image value of his own gestures, breaking the habit to abstract and cultural evidence of the object.<sup>163</sup>

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senso, sì. Se una cosa è una strada che ha iniziato uno, proprio la scanso subito, anche se penso che non l’abbia realizzata, come possibilità. È un fatto di orgoglio, forse. A me piaceva l’idea, veramente il fatto di questi animali vivi [...]”. Pino Pascali in Carla Lonzi, *Autoritratto. Accardi, Alviani, Castellani, Consagra, Fabro, Fontana, Kounellis, Nigro, Paolini, Pascali, Rotella, Scarpitta, Turcato, Twombly*, 1<sup>a</sup> ed. 1969; 1<sup>a</sup> re-printed, Milano: et.al/EDIZIONI, 2010, 294-295.

<sup>162</sup> “queste gabbie non sono state pensate come un arricchimento visivo del quadro e neppure come oggetto alla maniera pop, ma sono state messe lì per introdurre un gesto – quello di accudire gli uccelli – nella fruizione dell’opera.” Exhibition Catalogue n. 129, Milano, “Galleria dell’Ariete”, reprinted in a volume recurring the entire trajectory of Carla Lonzi in art critic and art history, between 1955 and 1981, one year before her death: Carla Lonzi, *Scritti sull’arte*, et al./EDIZIONI, Milano, 2012, 508-509.

<sup>163</sup> “Insomma quello che più distingue Kounellis nel panorama della giovane pittura attiva dagli anni 1959-60, sta in ciò: che la sua è veramente un’immagine che viene dalla testa. Queste rose, sempre le stesse, la stessa sagoma che riflette più o meno l’ombra di una rosa, non sono un fatto figurativo, diventano un fatto figurativo, ma nascono come operazioni psichiche che si sprigionano in immagine. Le gabbie con gli uccelli non si realizzano come forme, in funzione del quadro, né come oggetti, in funzione della mostra, ma come stimolo immediato che porti lo spettatore a riconoscere il valore d’immagine dei propri gesti, rompendo l’abitudine all’evidenza astratta e culturalistica dell’oggetto.” C. Lonzi, *Scritti Sull’Arte*, Cit., 509.

The emblematic case of Richard Serra, inspiring the local artistic context in Rome, permits to open the path in this research towards a section focused on the use of animal and plants in the exhibiting space. Through the analysis of some case studies realised between the end of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s, the aim is also to address broader questions, such as the critique to the institution in Jannis Kounellis and in Hans Haacke, with a practice at the borders between art and science, which connects the latter to the work of Luis Benedit. The Argentinian artist, also permits us to move our scope and expand the geographical artistic context towards Latin America, and in particular to Brazil. Ruled by a dictatorship government, in the realm of social movements, as a counterpart in this country a vivid reaction was produced among artists, whose practice involved the organic materiality as a form of resistance with a strong political commitment.

#### **4.3.1 Jannis Kounellis and the “kinetic ready-made”**

In this wide and prolific field we can frame an installation in which Jannis Kounellis introduced what the art critic Renato Barilli named as the “kinetic ready-made”, referring with this formula to a live parrot, emerging from the two-dimensional black surface which is no more a canvas, but a metallic surface. That was the first installation he presented at Fabio Sargentini L’Attico gallery in Rome in 1967, which Christov Bakargiev described as follows:

In 1967 Kounellis created his first installation, in which he combined inorganic elements, which he called ‘structure’, with organic and live elements, which he called ‘sensibility’. In the centre of the gallery eight horizontal iron troughs were filled with earth and planted with cacti. A live parrot sat on a perch fixed to a metal panel attached to the wall. Near by, a vertical structure made of four steel plates compressed a bale of soft raw cotton. In another room goldfish swam in an aquarium set on an iron base. By filling the gallery with these heterogeneous images and materials, and offering no apparent explanation for their juxtaposition, Kounellis transformed the space into a theatrical stage where spectators became participants.<sup>164</sup>

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<sup>164</sup> C. Christov-Bakargiev, *Arte Povera, Cit.*, 107.

The attempt of Kounellis through this installation was the establishment of dialectic between structure and sensibility. With the term structure, though, he intended the painting, representing “a continuing common held aesthetic,” “a witness to history, a link,” and “a cultural, specific and well identified canal:” “the common structure,” conversely the parrot, “the sensuous part” personified “a criticism of the structure.”<sup>165</sup> As a subsequent development of this piece, in January 1969 at the garage of the same gallery, Kounellis presented “his most famous work, in which living beings are featured as artistic material.”<sup>166</sup> It consisted of a *tableau vivant* of twelve live horses, occupying the space during three days in which the audience would listen to their noises, observe them eating, urinating and producing excrement: an unusual and somewhat threatening event to feature for an exhibition that attempted to face ideological and economical interests around the art world, including the artists and the galleries, while proposing to the visitors not simply a visual but a multi-sensorial experience. In an interview to Kounellis in 1972, he explained the tension between structure and sensibility (at the core of all his artistic production) regarding the twelve horses and its derivation from the parrot piece

The important thing is that in this case, the social structure of the art gallery and its spatial organization take the place of the metal structure in the parrot piece. What the parrot did in relation to the structure, the horses do in this one. [...] It’s an act of awareness [...] of the basic nature of a gallery, of its bourgeois origin. So I used the gallery as a bourgeois fact, as a social structure. In this case I was confronted with economic interests, and ideological interests, which are the very basis of a gallery. [*Twelve horses*] was meant to accentuate the artist’s physiognomy vis-à-vis with the system. It’s not the situation itself, but the artist’s position within the system, the position of someone who has to make money. Because the artist has to assume responsibility for his work. Whereas an artist born at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century operated in a different context. [...] It’s a liberation from a certain kind of art history. It’s an act of awareness, and there’s your social comment right here. [...] I believe that the gallery space is conventional. One gallery may suit one kind of work better than another. But basically the gallery space is conventional.<sup>167</sup>

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<sup>165</sup> “Jannis Kounellis, Structure and Sensibility: Interview with Willoughby Sharp” (1972), in Kristine Stiles and Peter Selz, (eds.), *Theory and Documents of Contemporary Art: A Sourcebook Artists Cit.*, 668.

<sup>166</sup> T. McEvelley, “Jannis Kounellis”, G. Celant (ed.) *Arte Povera 2011*, Milano: Electa, 254-267: 255.

<sup>167</sup> “Jannis Kounellis, Structure and Sensibility: Interview with Willoughby Sharp” (1972), in K. Stiles and P. Selz (eds.), *Theory and Documents of Contemporary Art: A Sourcebook Artists*, 668-669.



An evident relationship between Kounellis's idea of structure and the history of European structuralism exists. His proposal of challenging the structure to question the role of the artist in society and his moment to get visibility, in other words, the gallery space, reflected the historical period of contestation and social revolution around 1968, which as observed above, involved Italy as well as the global mediatized world. In Kounellis's belief "art and history run parallel and are not independent of each other contrary to what was believed by the idealist tradition."<sup>168</sup> His criticism of the art world through the media he also used as well as to the society and the historical moment he was living in, impelled him to accept Conceptual art, which would have meant to be categorized and systematized under a classification "blocking any attempt at revolutionary thinking and activity. [...] If I were to accept this business of conceptual art I would have no reason to exist."<sup>169</sup>

On the other hand, the horses also transmitted an idea of power and energy, which dialectically dialogue with the Italian artistic tradition of painting, as in Paolo Uccello's "La Battaglia di San Romano" (The Battle of San Romano, 1438-1440), exhibited at "Galleria degli Uffizi" in Florence, and to the tradition of equestrian statuary, whose remarkable reference is Donatello "Monumento equestre al Gattamelata" (Equestrian Monument to the Gattamelata, 1446-1453), exhibited in Piazza del Santo (del Santo square) in Padua. Regarding this piece, Steve Baker argues,

The postmodern animal is there in the gallery not as a meaning or a symbol but in all its pressing thingness. Symbolism is inevitably anthropomorphic, making sense of the animal by characterising it in human terms, and doing so from a safe distance. This may be the animal's key role in postmodernism: too close to work as a symbol, it passes itself off as the fact or reality of that which resists both interpretation and mediocrity.<sup>170</sup>

Precisely this closeness to the horse, for having been represented several times in all the tradition of representation in human history—let us think, for instance, of the Altamira and Lascaux caverns—"questions our knowledge of the horse as,

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<sup>168</sup> "Jannis Kounellis, Structure and Sensibility: Interview with Willoughby Sharp" (1972), K. Stiles and P. Selz (eds.), *Theory and Documents of Contemporary Art: A Sourcebook Artists*, Cit., 669.

<sup>169</sup> "Jannis Kounellis, Structure and Sensibility: Interview with Willoughby Sharp" (1972), K. Stiles and P. Selz (eds.), *Theory and Documents of Contemporary Art: A Sourcebook Artists*, Cit., 671.

<sup>170</sup> S. Baker, *The Postmodernist Animal*, London: Reaktion Books, 2000, 82, in G. Aloï, *Art and Animals*, London: I.B.Tauris, 2012, 9.

paradoxically, its persistent presence in art seems to have distanced us from the live animal rather than establishing closeness.”<sup>171</sup> Although Baker’s recognition of the post-modern animal as opposed to symbolic interpretation, Aloï also proposed a symbolic meaning around the number twelve, of the twelve horses, which, in his opinion, could have religious valence, in association to the twelve disciples, or to the twelve months of the year, reminding one “that upon entering the gallery space the animal’s struggle with the entanglements of representation automatically begins—whether it is alive or dead.”<sup>172</sup> Remaining in the symbolic sphere, Juan Eduardo Cirlot, in his *Dictionary of Symbols* highlighted, “Jung questions if the horse would symbolize the mother, and he does not doubt that it expresses the magic side of man, the ‘mother in ourselves,’ the intuition of the unconscious.”<sup>173</sup> And reconnecting to the previous work of 1967, in which Kounellis for the first time materialized the dialectic between structure and sensibility through the parrot, the sensible organic, the “kinetic ready-made”, Cirlot referred that the parrot, as well as other birds but with a deeper meaning for his peculiar characteristic, is considered as messenger symbol, and as a symbol of the soul (the Egyptian *Ba*).<sup>174</sup> Nevertheless, the symbolic and poetic meanings inherent to the “sensibility” side of Kounellis’s works in the late 1960s just seems to function more to stress his critical position toward what he meant by “structure.”

#### **4.3.2 Kinetic “systems”: Hans Haacke between the aesthetics of systems and the critique to the systems**

In Kounellis’s works living, and therefore kinetic, elements were protagonists to highlight the dialectic between “structure” and “sensibility” at the core of his poetics. From a different perspective, the German born artist Hans Haacke used them in order to investigate the growth process. He experimented this phenomenon in his first works, like *Kondensationwürfel* (Condensation Cube, 1963-65); *Kugel in schrägem Luftstrahl*

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<sup>171</sup> G. Aloï, *Cit.*, 9.

<sup>172</sup> G. Aloï, *Cit.*, 9.

<sup>173</sup> J. E. Cirlot, *Diccionario de Símbolos*, Madrid: Siruela (1958), 1997, 118. My translation from Spanish.

<sup>174</sup> J. E. Cirlot, *Cit.*, 364.

(sphere in *Oblique Air Jet*), 1964; *Blue sail*, 1964-65; *Ice Stick*, 1966, in accordance with his “Untitled Statement” from 1966

...make something, which experiences, reacts to its environment, changes, is nonstable...

...make something indeterminate, which always looks different, the shape if which cannot be predicted precisely...

...make something which cannot “perform” without the assistance of its environment...

...make something, which reacts to light and temperature changes, is subject to air currents and depends, in its functioning, on the forces of gravity...

...make something, which the “spectator” handles, with which he plays and this animates it...

...make something, which lives in time and make the spectator experience time...

...articulate something natural...<sup>175</sup>

“Animals as such—according to Grasskamp—were not of interest but their role within a system, either constructed by the artist or found, as in *Chickens Hatching* (1969),”<sup>176</sup> to mention an example that will be analysed on the next pages.

By the end of the 1960s other artists and their post-minimalists works included physical, biological and social elements due also to an increasing influence of cybernetics in contemporary art, as proved by some exhibitions featured in New York, Toronto and Buenos Aires between 1968 and 1971.<sup>177</sup> As Walter Grasskamp remarked, at that time “next to the dream of revolution, cybernetics was the second intellectual model that shaped the thinking of the late 1960s.”<sup>178</sup> At the basis of these exhibitions was also the theory of systems, of which the artist, critic and art historian Jack W.

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<sup>175</sup> H. Haacke, “Untitled Statement” 1966 in Peter Selz, *Directions in Kinetic Sculpture*, Berkeley: University of California, 1966, 37, cited in K. Stiles and P. Selz (eds.), *Theory and Documents of Contemporary Art: A Sourcebook Artists*, Cit., 872.

<sup>176</sup> W. Grasskamp, in W. Grasskamp, B. Buchloh, *Obra Social: Hans Haacke*, Barcelona: Fundació Antoni Tàpies, 1995. Exhibition catalogue, 15.

<sup>177</sup> “The Machine at the End of the Mechanical Age” (The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1968), “Information” (The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1970), “New Alchemy: Elements, Systems and Forces” (Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, 1969), “Software”, (Jewish Museum, New York, 1970, curated by Jack Burnham) and “Arte de Sistemas” (Museo de Arte Moderno, Buenos Aires, 1971). See W. Grasskamp, “Survey,” in W. Grasskamp, M. Nesbit, J. Bird, *Hans Haacke*, London; New York: Phaidon, 2004, 42.

<sup>178</sup> W. Grasskamp, “Survey,” in W. Grasskamp, M. Nesbit, J. Bird, *Hans Haacke*, London; New York: Phaidon, 2004, 42.

Burnham, author in 1968 of “System Esthetics”<sup>179</sup> and *Beyond Modern Sculpture: The Effects of Science and Technology on the Sculpture of This Century* was an enthusiast promulgator, envisioning a paradigmatic shift from object to system.<sup>180</sup> He argued in fact that

Behind much art extending through the Western tradition exists a yearning to break down the psychic and physical barriers between art and living reality—not only to make an art form that is believably real, but to go beyond and furnish images capable of intelligent intercourse with their creators.<sup>181</sup>

Most important for our research, he realized that with the situation occurring in the artistic practices at that time “For the first time the word organic ceases to be an unobtainable ideal held out to the artist: following in the wake of cybernetic technology, systems with organic properties will lead to ‘sculpture’—if it can be called that—rivalling the attributes of intelligent life.”<sup>182</sup> In this transition from object to a system in which life and the process of growth was investigated to understand the entire system, Burnham considered the work of Hans Haacke exemplary. On the other hand, the artist reciprocated the interest on “systems”, crediting Burnham for suggesting to him this term for the visual arts.<sup>183</sup> The term “system” knew a broad extension during the 1960s covering various disciplines, scientific and cultural, aiming to theory for organization and communication.

The biologist Ludwig von Bertalanffy was considered a pivotal reference at that time with his *General System Theory: Foundations, Developments, Applications* (1969) analysing the biological processes of evolution and adaptation “as a number of intersecting systems.”<sup>184</sup> At the core of *General System Theory* was the assumption that

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<sup>179</sup> J. Burnham, “Systems Esthetics”, *Artforum*, September 1968, Available at <<https://artforum.com/inprint/issue=196807&id=32466>> (Accessed in May 2015).

<sup>180</sup> In the mid-1960s Jack Burnham attempted to a radical shift oriented towards the connection of the 20<sup>th</sup> century art with Vitalism, therefore, the organic from a philosophical point of view with the arts, in a section entitled “The Biotic Sources of Modern Sculpture” from his book *Beyond Modern Sculpture* (1968). Although Burnham was not interested in the organic as materiality but in organicism as a complex system, leaving him to deal with problems, which are not approached here, it is nevertheless a remarkable example in the realm of art history worth reminding here.

<sup>181</sup> J. Burnham, *Beyond Modern Sculpture: The Effects of Science and Technology on the Sculpture of This Century*, New York: George Braziller, 1968, 312.

<sup>182</sup> J. Burnham, *Cit.*, 320.

<sup>183</sup> See H. Haacke, “Untitled Statement,” Previously unpublished, 1967, in W. Grasskamp, M. Nesbit, J. Bird, *Cit.*, 102-103.

<sup>184</sup> Christina Chau, “Kinetic Systems. Jack Burnham and Hans Haacke”, *Contemporaneity*:

the elements composing an ensemble are interdependent, interacting with one another in a way that each element influences the other, contributing for the implementation of a coherent and compact system of interrelations.<sup>185</sup> Other significant contributions on “systems aesthetics”, being aware that—as Luc Skrebowski pointed out—“[p]erhaps the most accurate position would be to recognize that scientific theories are never directly translated into art practice or criticism, that there is always a slippage in any interdisciplinary borrowings,”<sup>186</sup> came from Norbert Wiener’s studies on cybernetics (*Cybernetics or Control and Communication in Animal and Machine*, 1948)—the science of machines and of the way information is translated into control and regulation in a given system, mechanical, biological, cognitive or social—and Claude E. Shannon and Warren Weaver’s information theory, both occupying a central role for the ideas that Burnham developed.

Moving away from formalism, and at the same time avoiding the reductive expression “Conceptual art” to define some post-minimalist artistic practices occurring by the end of the 1960s and attributing a place for technology and interdisciplinary approaches that in his opinion Michael Fried—author of “Art and Objecthood” (*Artforum*, 1967)—undermined, Burnham proposed “the term *systems esthetic* [which] seems to encompass the present situation more fully.”<sup>187</sup> Following these principles, Burnham believed that the priority at that time needed to be addressed on organization, and therefore the system theory appeared as the most suitable for the extent. He argued

A systems viewpoint is focused on the creation of stable, on-going relationships between organic and non-organic systems be these neighborhoods, industrial complexes, farms, transportation systems, information centers, recreation centers, or any of the other matrixes of human activity. All living situations must be treated in the context of a systems hierarchy of values. Intuitively many artists have already grasped these relatively recent distinctions, and if their

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*Historical Presence in Visual Culture*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (2014), 62-76: 65. Available at <<http://contemporaneity.pitt.edu>> (accessed in May 2015).

<sup>185</sup> Even without expressing artistic concepts, this theory provided to Haacke the possibility to organize his ideas around a set of concepts and vocabulary to define his work, and, on the other hand, to articulate the fluidity of emotions, which was an aspect he was also interested to investigate. See Santiago Olmo, “Imagen de la conciencia crítica.” [Interview.] *Lapiz* 116, Madrid, November 1995, 57-65: 58.

<sup>186</sup> L. Skrebowski, “All Systems Go: Recovering Jack Burnham’s ‘System Aesthetics’”, *Tate Papers*, N.5, Spring 2006, Available at <<http://www.tate.org.uk/download/file/fid/7301>> (accessed in May 2015).

<sup>187</sup> J. Burnham, “Systems Esthetic”, *Artforum*, 7, n°1, September 1968, Available in <<https://artforum.com/inprint/issue=196807&id=32466>> (accessed in May 2015.)

“environments” are on the unsophisticated side, this will change with time and experience.<sup>188</sup>

This way he also provided another approach to the already existing practice of tearing down any boundaries between art and life (as noted in chapter three, and reminding one as well of the previously mentioned concept of “living art” by Marcuse), and moved on from the sculpture as object, to conceive his system aesthetics, asserting that “[c]onceptual focus rather than material limits define the system.”<sup>189</sup> This idea was afterwards developed by Peter Osborne to describe the negativity of Conceptual art in relation with formalism (see chapter two). Moreover, Burnham added that “[w]here the object almost always has a fixed shape and boundaries, the consistency of a system may be altered in time and space, its behavior determined both by external conditions and its mechanisms of control.”<sup>190</sup>

After these considerations, and regarding our scope on organic materiality, Hans Haacke’s work by the end of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s functions as an evident explanation and concretization of system aesthetics. After his first projects focused on physical processes, like condensation, “[i]t was a natural step, then, to introduce actual growth, namely, biological growth.”<sup>191</sup> His first experiment with vegetation from 1967 and exhibited the following year at the Howard Wise Gallery in New York was *Grass Cube* (1967), consisted of an acrylic transparent cube of 76cm covered on the upper side with earth planted with grass seeds. The installation would feature the contrast and coexistence of an apparently neutral industrial object, which, although colourless, exalted the growing changeability of grass growing on top of it. This work, among others, exemplified Haacke’s necessity to overcome the notion of sculpture in favour of a system,

defined as a grouping of elements subject to a common plan and purpose. These elements or components interact so as to arrive at a joint goal. To separate the

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<sup>188</sup> J. Burnham, “Systems Esthetic”, *Cit.*

<sup>189</sup> J. Burnham, “Systems Esthetic”, *Cit.*

<sup>190</sup> J. Burnham, “Systems Esthetic”, *Cit.*

<sup>191</sup> “Hans Haacke. Systems Aesthetics: Conversation with Jeanne Seagal”, excerpt from the interview in *Arts Magazine*, vol. 45, no.7 (May 1971); reprinted in Jeanne Seagal, ed., *Artwords: Discourse on the 60s and 70s* (Ann Harbor: UMI Research Press, 1985, in Jeffrey Kastner, ed., *Nature. Documents of Contemporary Arts*, London: Whitechapel, Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2012, 28-30: 30.

elements would be to destroy the system [...] Therefore, I believe there are sound reasons for reserving the term 'system' for certain non-static 'sculptures', since only in this category does a transfer of energy, material or information occur. [...]<sup>192</sup>

At the same time this work can be considered as Haacke's taking a position regarding minimalist sculptors' interest in inertness. In a symbolic way, the static cubic was challenged by the life cycle of grass in the attempt to demonstrate that "[a]ll the way down there's absolutely nothing static—nothing that does not change, or instigate real change. Most minimal work disregards change. Things claim to be inert, static, immovably beyond time. But the status quo is an illusion, a dangerous illusion politically."<sup>193</sup> At this point, it is important to note Luc Skrebowski's posture confronting Benjamin Buchloh, as concerns Haacke's production in the 1960s. Buchloh, in fact, according to Skrebowski, considered Haacke's early works illegitimately as a "period [lacking] of any critical purchase,"<sup>194</sup> characterized only by "physiological, physical, and biological processes" and that often used technology as a means to create or evoke them."<sup>195</sup> Consequently, he divided the artist's production in two: an early period, followed by a breaking "mature work," politically engaged after his "departure...from the limitations of systems-aesthetics."<sup>196</sup> Disagreeing with Buchloh and his discredit on system aesthetics, which meant, though, oblivion on Burnham's significant work, grounded on a broader recognition that "art history has been notably resistant to systems theory,"<sup>197</sup> Skrebowski insisted on defending that no shift, no separation exists within the entire artistic production by Haacke. All his works are all political, and in our analysis we focus just on those in which animals and plants are present.

Between 1969 and 1972, he carried out other works involving the idea of birth, growth and death through the use of vegetation; like *Grass Grows* (1969), a circular mould of earth disposed on the floor of the gallery space and planted with seeds was

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<sup>192</sup> H. Haacke, "Untitled Statement" (1967), *Cit.*

<sup>193</sup> "Hans Haacke. Systems Aesthetics: Conversation with Jeanne Seagal", *Cit.* 29.

<sup>194</sup> L. Skrebowski, "All Systems Go: Recovering Hans Haacke's Systems Art", *Grey Room*, N. 30, Winter 2008, 54-85: 59.

<sup>195</sup> B. Buchloh, "Hans Haacke: Memory and Instrumental Reason," in *Neo-Avantgarde and Culture Industry* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2000), 205, 215. quoted by L. Skrebowski, "All Systems Go: Recovering Hans Haacke's Systems Art", *Cit.*, 59.

<sup>196</sup> L. Skrebowski, "All Systems Go: Recovering Hans Haacke's Systems Art", *Cit.*, 60.

<sup>197</sup> L. Skrebowski, "All Systems Go: Recovering Jack Burnham's 'System Aesthetics'", *Cit.*

based on the topic of organic and unregulated growth, in which Haacke was interested. The following year he re-proposed this topic in an open space with *Bowery Seeds* (1970), an ephemeral installation, “a zone of free plant growth on a small scale”<sup>198</sup> composed of earth and air-borne seeds on his studio roof in East Houston Street, in New York. He also experimented on controlled, agricultural growth in the piece *Gerichtetes Wachstum* (Directed Growth, 1970-72), in which a linearly disposed mould of earth was planted with beans growing along nylon lines stretched from the centre of the room towards the window, at the Museum Haus Lange, Krefeld, Germany.

As Haacke explained, “the grass pieces went through a life cycle: they were seeded a few days before the exhibition; the seedlings came out of the ground at the time of the opening of the exhibition, they grew during the show, and at the end of the exhibition they were about to die.”<sup>199</sup> The idea of unregulated growth while working with plants, even if afterwards he became committed to with pieces more devoted to communication, with social and straight political issues, according to Grasskamp, “stayed with him for more than thirty years, extending to his project for the Berlin Reichstag, *DER BEVÖLKERUNG (TO THE POPULATION, 1999)*, a wild plant reserve inside the former and recent German parliament building.”<sup>200</sup> Grasskamp remarked that the first time Haacke conceived the “idea of naturally growing an artwork” was in his unrealized project *Topographic Contour Project, Proposal for Fort Greene Park Brooklyn* (1968), which “involved leaving a topographically defined area running around a hilly site to be left free of horticultural intervention.”<sup>201</sup> In *Niemandsländ (No Man’s Land, 1973-74)*, conceived “for a complex of new ministry buildings in Bonn,” he attempted to create a free space, not only out of horticulture, but also of “any political or police intervention,” and this project did not come true either. This idea found, three decades later, a place with *DER BEVÖLKERUNG*, a flowerbed in the courtyard of “a symbolically significant public space,”<sup>202</sup> filled with plants around the voluminous inscription coloured in white at its top, and left to a natural and

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<sup>198</sup> W. Grasskamp, “Survey,” *Cit.* 43.

<sup>199</sup> “Hans Haacke. Systems Aesthetics: Conversation with Jeanne Seagal”, *Cit.*, 30.

<sup>200</sup> W. Grasskamp, “Survey,” *Cit.* 43.

<sup>201</sup> W. Grasskamp, “Survey,” *Cit.* 43.

<sup>202</sup> W. Grasskamp, “Survey,” *Cit.* 44.



uncontrolled self-maintenance which renders the piece changeable and in continuous transformation.<sup>203</sup>

The organic growth was also explored in the open space in some earthworks, some of which had more the character of an action for occurring on a specific date, for instance *Live Airborne System*, on November 30, 1968, observing the act of seagulls eating breadcrumbs in Coney Island, New York; *Ten Turtles Set Free* took place on the 20th July 1970 in St.-Paul-de-Vence, France, where, after having bought ten turtles in a pet shop, Haacke set them free as “a symbolic act which called into question human interference with the freedom of animals and their imprisoned position as pets. (...) Haacke’s liberation of the turtles was an acknowledgement of a principle of environmental ethics—that every life has a right to exist for its own sake.”<sup>204</sup>

In the organic works, marked by the presence of plants and animals in their processes of living, growth and death, Haacke challenged the participation of the viewer. In fact, if the viewer was demanded to project “his emotional and intellectual reactions” on a piece of sculpture or painting to make it significant and to avoid that “the material remained nothing but stone and fabric,” through his works, “whether [...] is required or not, the system’s programme is not affected by his knowledge, past experience, the mechanics of perceptual psychology, his emotions or degree of involvement.”<sup>205</sup> Haacke continued arguing

The system’s programme, on the other hand, is absolutely independent of the viewer’s mental participation. It remains autonomous—aloof the viewer. [...] The viewer becomes a witness rather than a resounding instrument striving for empathy.

Naturally, also a system releases a gulf of subjective projections in the viewer. These projections, however, can be measured relative to the system’s actual

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<sup>203</sup> In 2012, on the occasion of dOCUMENTA(13) the Chinese artist Song Dong took on a similar project involving the uncontrolled organic growth on a mould of leftovers delimited, by a gigantic circular bonsai vase, from the organized Karlshau park in front of the Orangerie, in Kassel, Germany. The title of this ephemeral piece, released for that exhibition and destroyed after its end, is *Doing Nothing Garden*. See V. Badagliacca, “Doing and Nothing. An exploration on Song Dong’s *Doing Nothing Garden* and the possibility of renewing ourselves and our environment through not doing”, *Zeteo. The Journal of Interdisciplinary Writing*, spring Issue, 2014, Available at <<http://zeteojournal.com/2014/05/21/doing-nothing-garden/>>.

<sup>204</sup> Jeffrey Kastner (ed.), *Land and Environmental Art*, London, New York: Phaidon, (1998), 2011, 140. *Ten Turtles set Free*, together with other works with animals released between 1968 and 1972, “Haacke playfully calls them his ‘Franciscan’ works (in reference to Saint Francis, patron saint of animals).” W. Grasskamp, “Survey,” *Cit.* 42.

<sup>205</sup> H. Haacke, “Untitled Statement” (1967), *Cit.*

programme. Compared to traditional sculpture, it has become a partner of the viewer rather than being subjected to his whims. A system is not imagined; it is real.<sup>206</sup>

Burnham defended the same argument approaching the problem of communication as responsible for affecting our response to art, and more extensively to our environment. He argued, “[m]y point is McLuhanite: it is the mode of communication (the printing of the photograph of a work of art) rather than the message itself (the work of art) that has defined and levelled our response to art.”<sup>207</sup> He observed, though, that considering “all earlier art as a form of communication—ignoring style, content, and quality” would induce to the conclusion that “communication is a contemplative, one-way process.” Conversely, he interpreted “happenings, kinetic art, and luminous art” as “some premature attempts to expand the art experience into a two-way communicative loop, (...) sustaining both a real and a conceptual distance between the spectator and the work of art.”<sup>208</sup>

These art forms utilize rather crude technical means, sustaining both a real and a conceptual distance between the spectator and the work of art. As our involvement with electronic technology increases, however, the art experience may undergo a process of internalization where the constant two-way exchange of information becomes a normative goal. We should rightfully consider such a communication shift as an evolutionary step in response. This shift represents what could be called a figure-ground reversal in human perception of the environment. Until now, Western thought has relied upon a fixed viewer-object (or subject stimulus) relationship, where concentration is merely a matter of shifting objectives. A great deal of technological rationalization has derived from this attitude, which has led us to think in terms of human domination and environmental passivity. The change that I perceive, however, encourages the recognition of man as an integral of his environment. The biological sciences are already beginning to realize the mistake of separating organisms from their habitat or subjects from their settings. If the computer has any experimental meaning, it will be to extend our nervous systems farther than the communications media have done so far.<sup>209</sup>

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<sup>206</sup> H. Haacke, “Untitled Statement” (1967), *Cit.*

<sup>207</sup> W. Burnham, “The Aesthetics of Intelligent Systems”, Edward F. Fry (ed.), *On the Future of Art*, *Cit.*, 95-122: 99.

<sup>208</sup> W. Burnham, “The Aesthetics of Intelligent Systems”, *Cit.*, 99-100.

<sup>209</sup> W. Burnham, “The Aesthetics of Intelligent Systems”, *Cit.*, 99-100. The last point regarding the employment of computer as a way of implement technology to improve human relationship in the environment seems in the same line proposed in the final statements reported by the Club of Rome.

The two-way communication shift highlighted by Burnham, concerning system art in a lateral sense, constitutes a significant instrument to understand ephemeral artistic practices in which the object per-se lost its importance and the experience in which the reciprocity of communication happens became the goal of the form of art. On the other hand, as paradoxical as it may seem, the two-way communication may function as another possible explanation to understand Haacke's systems, which existing beyond the viewer presence, parallel the human point of view of the observer to the observed, which is no more in a subaltern position. Nevertheless, it is important to bear in mind the role of all art as an "anthropomorphic" fact—as referred by Burnham—"if one considers art not in terms of appearances but in terms of its function and relation to human activity. Tools, from the simplest hand implements to the most sophisticated computers, are extensions of man's attempt to shape his environment."<sup>210</sup>

Considering *Fog, Flooding, Erosion* (1969), in a field in Seattle, Washington and *Transplanted Moss Supported in Artificial Climate* (1970), in St.-Paul-de-Vence, it becomes evident Haacke's position regarding human intervention in the environment and the consequences originating from it. Skrebowski mentioned this piece to highlight the political implications of these works, which cannot be overlooked, as Buchloh did, and which are inseparable from the physical and biological circumstances characterising them. Moreover, Skrebowski added for the purpose, Bruno Latour's concept of "Political ecology," meaning that nature does not belong to a separate sphere, but is already "the result of a political division, of a Constitution that separates what is objective and indisputable from what is subjective and disputable."<sup>211</sup>

In addition to Skrebowski's argument, we may note more recent further developments in this direction, as the exhibition "Vegetation as Political Agent" curated by Marco Scotini at PAV (Parco Arte Vivente, Turin, Italy) in 2014, whose title is borrowed from the architect Philippe Zourgane. Through this concept, Zourgane addressed the question of connecting "vegetation and governability in order to

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<sup>210</sup> Burnham continues arguing that "According to the biologist P.D. Medawar, there are two types of evolution: endosomatic, or genetic, evolution, to slow process of hereditary change; and exosomatic, or cultural, evolution, which takes place outside the human body and applies to our tools, symbols, and other invented extensions. (...) An awareness of cultural change therefore is accompanied by an understanding of anthropomorphic values rather than a rejection of them." W. Burnham, "The Aesthetics of Intelligent Systems", *Cit.*, 97.

<sup>211</sup> William Rasch and Cary Wolfe, (eds.), *Observing Complexity: Systems Theory and Postmodernity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 17, quoted by L. Skrebowski, "All Systems Go: Recovering Hans Haacke's Systems Art", *Cit.*, 75.

understand that vegetation itself is a political agent.”<sup>212</sup> As a final response he argued that “to treat vegetation—plant life—as a political agent enables us to foresee the ways in which vegetation orders social and economic relations. It is an ordering agent of the colonial and postcolonial territory, of agricultural planning and of urban space.”<sup>213</sup>

Continuing on Haacke research in birth and growth, he also produced also pieces with animals, like *Chicken Hatching* (1969), an installation for the group exhibition “New Alchemy: Elements, Systems and Forces” featured for the Art gallery of Ontario, Toronto, and consisted of fertilized eggs, incubators, lamps, and a thermostat. Its working principle implied that “freshly laid chicken eggs were collected from a brooder, transferred to an adjacent hatchery and distributed among a grid of eight small incubators. The hatching process was controlled artificially, via a simple feedback system of lamps and thermostat.”<sup>214</sup>

The presence of eggs is reminiscent of his colleague and friend Marcel Broothaers’s pieces with eggshells, like *White Cabinet with White Shells* (1965), *Four Eggs* (1966) and *Panel with Eggs and Stool* (1966). While the second and the third present proximities with the work of Piero Manzoni, the first one features a case of the Belgian artist extended use of shells of eggs and of mussels—for instance *Bureau de Moules (Sideboard of Mussels, 1966)*—, released through various combinations: on top of a table or a stool or inside of or overflowing from a cabinet, a pan, a bucket, in a suitcase. As McEvelley remarked, these works suggested “infinite regress,” since the cabinet, for instance “contains the shells, but the shells are containers themselves.”<sup>215</sup> Addressing the polarities “container/contained and, metaphorically, nature/culture, and leaving the question open to reflection, not without a certain dose of irony—“intended to make us question both how we make and make sense of our culture”<sup>216</sup>—distinctive of Broothaers’ poetics,

[t]hese works bring up questions whether art stands apart from or partakes of reality (the question posed by the portrait with the cigar), whether art is natural or cultural (born or made), whether it is compromised in either or both cases,

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<sup>212</sup> P. Zourgane, “The politics of Vegetation”, *All-Over*, Wien/Basel, 24 April 2015, 26-33:27.

<sup>213</sup> P. Zourgane, “Cit.”, 33.

<sup>214</sup> L. Skrebowski, “All Systems Go: Recovering Jack Burnham’s ‘Systems Aesthetics’”, Cit.

<sup>215</sup> T. McEvelley, *Sculpture in the Age of Doubt*, Cit. 78.

<sup>216</sup> L. Hutcheon, *A poetics of postmodernism. History, theory, fiction*. New York, London: Routledge, 1988, 230.

whether it can be removed from one container and put into another, whether humans are nurtured by it, have control over it, and so on.<sup>217</sup>

In *Chicken Hatchings* every piece is arranged in order for life to emerge from the eggshells, “rendering visible the ordinarily invisible facets of motion and energy and collapsing the distinction between life and art by performing actual motions in life, including the life cycle, metabolism, and the transfer of energy.”<sup>218</sup> In the realm of the diffusion of cybernetics, information theory and the same system theory, during the 1960s and the 1970s, exploring the use of new technologies to transform the traditional artistic practices creation of kinetic systems, this work by Haacke experimenting biological transformation through technological devices, according to Burnham delivers “information [that] is derived from the normal activities of animals, in their environments.”<sup>219</sup> It provides “real-time information, information with no hardware value, but with software significance for effecting awareness of events in the present.”<sup>220</sup>

As Christina Chau pointed out, the symbolic identification of concept with software and material with hardware excludes any “interpretation and discussion of the way these systems *move*”<sup>221</sup>. Nevertheless, she also noticed that whether in *Chicken Hatchings* “there is little specific hardware value to the installation in that time and place, the actual movements and behaviors of the chickens are the material processes, which perform the conceptual systems within the work.”<sup>222</sup> Moreover, bringing this argument to organic materiality in artistic practice in a lateral sense, it seems that considering the material as hardware and pointing all the attention to information which has “no hardware value”, the dematerialisation of art by Lippard, by which Burnham was influenced, was complete and acquired an effective and tangible meaning with a consequent loss, and a split between materiality and concept in the discourse of art history.

Another of Haacke’s time-pieces exploring the Bersonian perception of duration was *Ant Coop* (1969), an installation in which replacing the “natural” with the sterile

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<sup>217</sup> T. McEvelley, *Cit.*, 78.

<sup>218</sup> C. Chau, “Kinetic Systems. Jack Burnham and Hans Haacke”, *Cit.*, 73.

<sup>219</sup> J. Burnham, “Real Time Systems”, *Artforum* 8, no. 1 (1969): 49-55: 30; quoted by C. Chau, “Cit.”, 73.

<sup>220</sup> J. Burnham, “Real Time Systems”, 28; quoted by C. Chau, “Cit.”, 71.

<sup>221</sup> C. Chau, “Cit.”, 72.

<sup>222</sup> C. Chau, “Cit.”, 73.

environment of the exhibition space—the Howard Wise Gallery in New York—the spectator could experience time through the movement of ants inside an acrylic container filled with sand as a metaphor of “society in an age of technological expansion.”<sup>223</sup> The dark side of this metaphor could be interpreted through the perspective of the philosopher Ceronetti arguing that

“If technology would pursue the change of our nature, instead of modelling it on a type of Mr Hyde of endless senescence, it would be worth to financing it. “And then we could transform ourselves, if willing to do so, in beetles, ants, lizards, midges, spiders, locusts, jellyfishes, all the communities in the world less unhappy than us.”<sup>224</sup>

The reason for this parallelism is suggested by the fact that at the end of the 1960s ahead of the crash of the political and technological utopias Haacke, and his close friend Burnham ended up rejecting the systems theory, “considered unavoidably complicit with its industrial and military applications and thus illegitimate for an art opposed to commerce and war.”<sup>225</sup> Nevertheless, Skrebowski continued questioning if their reaction was legitimate “and, even if it was, what might this narrative of rejection have to teach us today?”<sup>226</sup> In a further analysis Skrebowski highlighted Burnham’s delusion as a consequent misleading of Marcusean Neo-Schillerianism. In a less studied pamphlet entitled *Art in the Marcusean Analysis* (1969), Burnham argued that post-formalist art should adopt Marcuse’s Neo-Schillerianism in order to overcome the opposition between instrumental and aesthetic reason, envisioning a fusion of artistic and technical reason as inevitable once art sees its function as illusion and ideal apparent. According to Skrebowski, Burnham’s statement was the result of a mistaken understanding of Marcuse’s *sublation* of technical rationality by aesthetic rationality,

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<sup>223</sup> C. Chau, “Cit.”, 74.

<sup>224</sup> “Se la ricerca tecnologica puntasse a farci cambiare natura, invece di modellarla su un tipo di Mr Hyde dalla interminabile vecchiaia, varrebbe la pena di finanziarla. E potremmo trasformarci, volendolo, in scarabei, in formiche, in lucertole, in moscerini, in ragni, in locuste, in scarafaggi, in meduse, tutti popoli della terra meno infelici di noi. Invece mirano a prolungare soltanto i nostri miseri, micidiali giorni di frangibili vertebre che cogitano!” G. Ceronetti, *Insetti senza frontiere*, Milano: Adelphi, 2009, 16. My translation from the Italian.

<sup>225</sup> L. Skrebowski, “All Systems Go: Recovering Jack Burnham’s ‘System Aesthetics’”, *Cit.*

<sup>226</sup> L. Skrebowski, “All Systems Go: Recovering Jack Burnham’s ‘System Aesthetics’”, *Cit.*

mistakenly arguing the possibility of a synthesis between incompatible rationalities. Nevertheless, influenced by Marcuse, Burnham's work set out the wider possibilities of an aesthetics conceived along Neo-Schillarian lines, speculated on the wider possibility of system aesthetics conceived in lines, one that was missed by the 'restricted' and 'Kantian' form of conceptual art but that was picked up in Haacke's ecological works, which use art to model a non-exploitative relation to nature and thereby to model liberation itself.<sup>227</sup>

Moreover, Skrebowski, pointed out the importance of system aesthetic in the study of artistic practices such as Hans Haacke by the end of the 1960s, as an attempt to open the delimitations of a too extensive notion of conceptual art, whose analytic stances not only have been dominant but also ignored the contribution of this theoretical approach.<sup>228</sup> This last consideration, I would argue, suffices to recover system aesthetics historically and as a value. In the transitional phase of rejecting and at the same time using the system theory, Haacke referred in an interview from 1971 the interactions existing between the biological and the social system.

If you take a grand view, you can divide the world into three or four categories—the physical, the biological, the social and behavioural—each of them having interrelations with the others as one point or another. There is no hierarchy. All of them are important for the upkeep of the total system. It could be that there are times when one of these categories interests you more than another. So, for example, I now spend more time on things in the social field, but simultaneously I am preparing a large water cycle for the Guggenheim show.<sup>229</sup>

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<sup>227</sup> L. Skrebowski, "After Hans Haacke", *Third Text*, Issue on "Contemporary Art and the Politics of ecology", Volume 27, No. 120, January 2013, 115-130: 128. Regarding Marcuse and the ecological works Haacke carried out in those years, Skrebowski also noted: "Marcuse makes this point clear in his own discussion of the stakes of the ecology movement: 'The ecology movement reveals itself in the last analysis as a political and psychological movement of liberation. It is political because it confronts the concerted power of big capital, whose vital interests the movement threatens. It is psychological because (and this is the most important point) the pacification of external nature, the protection of the life environment, will also pacify nature within men and women. A successful environmentalism will, within individuals, subordinate destructive energy to erotic energy.'" Herbert Marcuse, 'Ecology and the Critique of Modern Society', *Capitalism, Nature, Socialism: A Journal of Socialist Ecology*, vol 3, no 3, September 1992, pp 29–38. The article is a transcription of a talk given by Marcuse in 1979.

<sup>228</sup> See L. Skrebowski, "Conceptual Aesthetics," in *Beyond the Canon. The Paradoxes of Conceptual Art*, March 22, 2012, Conference at the Generali Foundation, Wien, Austria. Available at <<https://vimeo.com/81714519>> (accessed in May 2015).

<sup>229</sup> Jeanne Siegel, "An Interview with Hans Haacke," *Arts Magazine*, May 1971,18.

The show mentioned by Haacke would have been his first personal exhibition, in his early thirties, taking place in 1971 at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, and curated with Edward F. Fry as the curator, the same one who had previously invited Burnham to lecture on “The Aesthetics of Intelligent Systems”. Both events testify Fry’s enthusiasm towards Jack Burnham’s system aesthetics and Hans Haacke as its greater exponent in art at that time. However, due to a conflict with the museum director, Thomas M. Messer, asking Haacke to remove three pieces—“the two real estate pieces and a visitor’s poll, which, along with ten demographic questions, sought viewers’ political opinions”<sup>230</sup>—and the impossibility to reach a compromise with the artist, the exhibition was cancelled six weeks before the opening and Fry, expressing solidarity to Haacke, resigned from his charge at the museum. If the show had taken place, it would have included an intended piece entitled *Norbert: ‘All Systems Go’* (1970-71), which—according to the fictional narrative proposed by Luc Skrebowski—would have featured

*A white cube. A black bird with bright yellow stripes around the eyes sits in a chrome cage. It rocks gently on its perch. Silence. Occasional scrabbling sounds as the bird readjusts its footing. Time passes. Nothing happens. Suddenly, the caged bird speaks. ‘All systems go’ it squawks. And again, ‘All systems go.’ A pause. ‘All systems go. All systems go.’ Repetition to inanition. ‘All systems go.’<sup>231</sup>*

The name Norbert from the title, referred mockingly to Norbert Wiener, best known as the founder of cybernetics, of which Haacke was no longer confident. He tried in vain to teach to a minah bird the sentence “All systems go”, which the bird “was to have repeated at its own volition,”<sup>232</sup> in vain, for the reluctance of the bird to imitate the sentence and for the annulment of the exhibition. This piece emblematically featured Haacke’s attempt to use system aesthetics to design his systems, which “can be physical, biological or social; they can be man-made, naturally existing, or a combination of any of the above.”<sup>233</sup> As we have explored on these pages, not simply

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<sup>230</sup> W. Grasskamp, “Survey,” *Cit.* 47.

<sup>231</sup> L. Skrebowski, “All Systems go: Recovering Jack Burnham’s ‘Systems Aesthetics’”, *Cit.* Italics in the original.

<sup>232</sup> L. Skrebowski, “All Systems go: Recovering Jack Burnham’s ‘Systems Aesthetics’”, *Cit.*

<sup>233</sup> Hans Haacke, “The Agent,” in Bird, Grasskamp, and Nesbit, *Hans Haacke*, 107, quoted by L. Skrebowski, “All Systems Go: Recovering Hans Haacke’s Systems Art”, *Cit.*, 67. Regarding this point Skrebowski added in note that “It is in this sense that Frederic Jameson characterises Haacke’s practice as



experimentations on physical and biological cycles, but also, and in here lies the contiguity between his earlier and following works along his career, “a critique of the dominant system of beliefs while employing the very mechanisms of that system.”<sup>234</sup>

After what happened at the Guggenheim, Haacke had his first solo exhibition in 1972 at the Museum Haus Lange in Krefeld, Germany. Among the works exhibited, is worth considering *Rheinwasseraufbereitungsanlage* (*Rhine Water Purification Plant*, 1972), an example as others of his works, of “‘event containers’ that render visible the unseen movements of natural elements in the gallery setting.”<sup>235</sup> It featured a rectangular acrylic container filled with water and goldfishes, behind which a big window of almost the same dimensions showed the landscape in the exterior space. The reciprocity we may observe between the natural landscape seen by the window and the underwater life swimming in the container inside the museum does not appear accidentally. The acrylic pool, in fact, was connected by tubes to a system of filtering pumping the polluted water gathered in the Rhine River and collected in tanks disposed on a corner of the exhibition space. The cleanliness of the water was proofed by the presence of goldfishes, and to stabilize the level of water to avoid overflowing, the excess was carried out to the garden of the museum “where it seeped into the ground.”<sup>236</sup> In this work, according to Grasskamp

The idyllic, ‘Franciscan’ direction of his work with plants and animals almost inevitably led him to its political implications. The work drew attention to environmental pollution in the Rhineland, where the region’s dominant river, once praised and painted by the Romantics, had long since become a stinking chemical sewer for the industries of its banks.<sup>237</sup>

This work must be framed in the realm of increasing ecological concerns developed in the artistic practices by the end of 1960s, and related to it, Haacke presented for the same exhibition *Krefeld Savage Triptych* (1972). It is a documentation

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'homeopathic,' a curative response to 'the political dilemma of a new cultural politics: how to struggle within the world of the simulacrum by using the arms and weapons specific to that world ...' Frederic Jameson, "Hans Haacke and the Cultural Logic of Postmodernism," in Brian Wallis, ed., *Hans Haacke: Unfinished Business*, 38-50 (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1986), 42-43.

<sup>234</sup> Jack Burnham, *Great Western Salt Works: Essays on the Meaning of Postformalist Art* (New York: George Braziller, 1974), 11. quoted by L. Skrebowski, “All Systems Go: Recovering Hans Haacke's Systems Art”, *Cit.*, 67

<sup>235</sup> C. Chau, “Cit.”, 73.

<sup>236</sup> W. Grasskamp, “Survey,” *Cit.* 53.

<sup>237</sup> W. Grasskamp, “Survey,” *Cit.* 52.

recording “the level of untreated sewage the city of Krefeld spew[ed] into the Rhine annually (42 million cubic meters).”<sup>238</sup> In light of these considerations, observing *Rhine Water Purification Plant* in the 21st century and going beyond the specificities of period and context, could we consider the operation of “washing” and purification of the Rhine water as a metaphor for multinational’s money laundry’s investments in art? Grasskamp highlighted that “[a]t the time of the exhibition, the City of Krefeld annually discharged 42 million cubic metres of untreated household and industrial waste water into the Rhine. The Museum Haus Lange, like its parent, the Kaiser-Wilhelm-Museum is a municipal institution. The director a civil servant.”<sup>239</sup> Regarding the specificities of the piece, what is certain is that for Haacke movement is used to “merg[ing] with the environment in a relationship that is better understood as a ‘system’ of interdependent processes.”<sup>240</sup> As a consequence—Christina Chau remarked—the apparent isolation of “a body of water [moving] into a Perspex container works exactly to demonstrate that movement, even when it is enclosed, refers to and affects other movements,” even that of “Haacke’s spectators interacting with the piece.”<sup>241</sup> She also highlighted the importance of considering kinetics in earlier Haacke’s works as “information-processing systems rather than experiments of movement systems.”<sup>242</sup> And continued arguing

Contrary to Burnham, I argue that a sensitivity for, and discussion of, the actual kinetic movement in Haacke’s works is a central aspect of the artist’s understanding of systems aesthetics in art. While Burnham’s antipathy towards kineticism separated kinesis from the emerging systems aesthetics in art, artists such as Haacke explicitly emphasized the importance of movement and form to connect media with specific conceptual messages. Haacke created works that were ontologically unstable in order to highlight the unfolding entropic nature within systems theory. Rather than a deference to actual movement, Haacke used motion to highlight it as a tool that is both material and immaterial, as well as actual and virtual.<sup>243</sup>

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<sup>238</sup> *Obra Social: Hans Haacke*, Cit., 76. “The left panel lists data on volume, rate of pollution (official code), breakdown into industrial and household sewage, and fees charged per volume. The right panel lists data on volume of deposable and dissolved matter, and breakdown by volume and name of major contributors of Krefeld sewage. The center panel is a photograph taken January 21, 1972, at Krefeld-Uerdigen (Rhine kilometre 765.7), where the city discharges its sewage.”

<sup>239</sup> W. Grasskamp, “Survey”, *Cit.*, 53.

<sup>240</sup> Hans Haacke, quoted in Burnham "Systems Esthetics," *Cit.*, 35.

<sup>241</sup> C. Chau, “Cit.”, 74.

<sup>242</sup> C. Chau, “Cit.”, 75.

<sup>243</sup> C. Chau, “Cit.”, 75.

The aesthetics of kinetic (adding the adjective the way proposed by Chau) systems adopted in Haacke's production came under artistic practices of site-specificity occurring in the 1970s as "dynamic engagements such as institutional critique (Michael Asher, Daniel Buren, Hans Haacke, Mierle Laderman Ukeles) [which] opened the site to the social, political, racial, and economic context of the aesthetic experience, thus highlighting the hidden power relations at play in art institutions."<sup>244</sup> Therefore, *Rhine Water Purification Plant* can be considered as a transitional piece—in a solution not of breaks as Buchloh put it, but in continuity as proposed by Skrebowski—in which "‘Real-Time Systems’, relating to physics and nature were gradually replaced by pieces triggering social processes or referring to institution."<sup>245</sup> Haacke was interested in investigating the mechanisms inherent to the institutional artistic world, galleries, and museums and by extension to artists: "this does not develop in a way isolated from the social, on the contrary it forms part of a social system. There must be considered the support that the artistic system receives, which essentially come from institutions and people tied to the political power."<sup>246</sup> These factors, Haacke noted, blurs the frontiers between art and politics, and if reducing everything to politics may appear reductive and depleting reality, on the other hand he warned that not connecting art and culture and the political influence, would "necessary[ly] induce [one] to an erroneous, mistaken, fragmentary and fragmentary vision. Proposing a vision of art which could be defined ‘idealist’ is ingenuous."<sup>247</sup>

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<sup>244</sup> Fabien Giraud & Ida Soulard, "The Marfa Stratum: Contribution to a Theory of Sites", Heather Davis and Etienne Turpin (eds.), *Art in the Anthropocene: Encounters Among Aesthetics, Politics, Environments and Epistemologies*, London: Open Humanities Press, 2015, 167-180:174. According to the authors, Haacke belongs to the second phase of site-specificity, while "the first construction phase in the 1960s opened new relations to the notion of artistic experience and its constitutive gestures;" and the third in the 1980s prolonged the instances of the 1970s "by their encounters with feminism and postcolonial theories, as well as a systematic questioning of modes of coercion, racism, patriarchy, and other embedded systems of privilege (Andrea Fraser, Fred Wilson). The third phase started in the wider context of a liberalized economy and completely diluted the notion of site in the newly grounded mobilities best exemplified by the triadic circulation within the "art world" between art residencies, art biennials, and art fairs." 174-75.

<sup>245</sup> W. Grasskamp, "Survey", *Cit.*, 42.

<sup>246</sup> "Incluyendo los aspectos sociales, del mismo modo que a otra mucha gente en aquel momento, me interesaban las cuestiones propias del mundo artístico institucional, galerías, museos y, por extensión, también los artistas; esto no se desarrolla de una manera aislada de lo social, sino que por el contrario forma parte de un sistema social. Hay que tener en cuenta los apoyos que el sistema artístico recibe, y éstos provienen esencialmente de instituciones y personas ligadas al poder político." Haacke in S. Olmo, "Imagen de la conciencia crítica." [Interview.], *Cit.*, 61. My translation from Spanish.

<sup>247</sup> "Cuando se dice que todo es política, es una frase hecha pero es cierto. Ahora bien, la tendencia a reducir todo la política supone un empobrecimiento de la realidad, pero por otro lado intentar desligar el arte o la cultura de las esperas políticas, e ignorar la influencia que desde ellas se ejerce tanto sobre los críticos como sobre los artistas, instituciones, museos, etc. Conduce necesariamente a una visión errónea, equivocada y fragmentaria. Proponer una visión del arte que pudiera ser definida como

### 4.3.3 The bio-anthropological systems of Luis Bedit

In the book entitled *Artificio e natura* (“Artifice and Nature”, 1968) the Italian art critic and philosopher Gillo Dorfles, referring to Hegel, postulated that artificial objects produced by humans should be considered natural and vice versa, affirming “while the ‘things of Nature’ are given only at once, the human duplicates her/himself, to exist as a natural object, but also for reaching to create other objects which are transformations of Nature.” Therefore our duty, according to Dorfles, should be “redeeming the unnatural, transforming artificial facts in natural facts (or naturalized).”<sup>248</sup> In his preface to *Retórica del Arte Latinoamericano* by the Argentinian curator and critic Jorge Glusberg, he recalled this relationship between artifice and nature for describing some artistic expressions occurring in Argentina by the end of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s by synthetizing in two main points the characteristics connoting them according to Glusberg: taking into account of the social, economic and cultural situation; and a “consubstantialization” with the surrounding problems and of the natural (ecological) element, and especially the primacy of the metaphorical element as condition *sine qua non* of these artistic forms.<sup>249</sup>

The most emblematic example of this Argentinian artistic research as concerns our scope on organic materiality in the 20<sup>th</sup> century art is the work of Luis Bedit, and especially some pieces produced between 1967 and 1977, defined by Glusberg as “biological physical-chemical experiences.”<sup>250</sup> Bedit studied architecture and developed this profession while dedicating himself to painting, which he cultivated as self-taught. His primal experiments took place in the realm of Informal research, with layers of paint and use of industrial varnishes, until producing installations with live animals and plants. In this sense the year 1967 was particularly significant, with the exhibition “Lo que hay que pasar” (What one must go through), at the Rubbers Gallery in Buenos Aires, featuring “mechanical animals and characters in fantastic architecture

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“idealista” es ingenua.” Haacke in S. Olmo, “Imagen de la conciencia crítica.” [Interview.], *Cit.*, 61. My translation from Spanish.

<sup>248</sup> “Mientras las ‘cosas de la Naturaleza’ son dadas una sola vez, el hombre se duplica, en cuanto existe de por sí como objeto natural, pero también en cuanto logra crear a su vez otros objetos que son transformaciones de la Naturaleza.” Gillo Dorfles, “Prólogo”, in Jorge Glusberg, *Retórica del arte latinoamericano*, Buenos Aires: Nueva Visión, 1978. My translation from Spanish, 10.

<sup>249</sup> See G. Dorfles, “Prólogo”, *Cit.*, 11.

<sup>250</sup> See J. Glusberg, “Luis Bedit: Las Memorias del olvido”, *Luis Bedit en el Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes. Obras 1960-1996*, Premio Instituto di Tella con el Auspicio de Telefonica Argentina, Exhibition Catalogue, Buenos Aires, MNBA, 1996, 13-41:13.

and spaces;<sup>251</sup> and a ensuing residence in Italy, where he was awarded of a research fellowship in landscape architecture at the Faculty of Architecture in Rome.

In that period, while producing acrylic objects painted afterwards, he was committed to “the study of the treatment of exterior space, and the possible transformation of man and animals’ natural habitats, [which] decisively influenced his posterior experiences with animals and plants, and even the human body—like in *Laberinto Invisible* (Invisible labyrinth, 1971). From then on, he widened his attention to the field of biology and botany.”<sup>252</sup> Considering the possibility of introducing live animals in his works, for his exhibition at “Casa Argentina” in Rome, he incorporated a container with live fishes to his acrylic and painted silhouettes of animals. At that time he also acknowledged and was impressed by the work of Kounellis.

Back in Buenos Aires, he built his first animal habitat with water, objects and live fishes: *Tuttovetro y los pescados* presented for the exhibition “Materiales, Nuevas Tecnicas, Nueva Expresiones” at the Museo de Bellas Artes, and the same year he exhibited *Microzoo* at the Rubbers gallery. In the latter there were featured: “Plexiglass anthills with live ants, ‘Habitats’ of lizards, fishes and turtles, plants in standard glass containers in different germination stages, for example potatoes, and the first beehive with live bees that can go out to the street and look for food.”<sup>253</sup> These objects foremost functioned as didactic displays of individual and collective behaviours of not easy access in the urban environment.

With *Microzoo*, containing acrylic environments for animals, botanical experiences and painting, Benedit attempted to highlight the relationship between nature and culture and their contradictions, and the review published in *Revista Primera Plana* on December 3<sup>rd</sup> described the exhibition as “the result of the happy marriage between art and biology.”<sup>254</sup> Regarding this aspect, Glusberg pointed out that the opposition between culture and science is “tributary of a Manichaeian division derived from the prestige the intellectual practice acquired in our societies. We therefore conclude that the scientific aspect is also integral to the spectrum of cultural regions in which we locate the work of Grippo, Benedit and Dujovni in the range of what we will

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<sup>251</sup> See Carlos Espartaco, “Introduction to Benedit”, in C. Espartaco, *Introducción a Benedit*, Buenos Aires: Ediciones Ruth Benzacar, 1978, non paginated.

<sup>252</sup> Patricia Rizzo, “Biografía Documentada”, *Luis Benedit en el Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes. Obras 1960-1996*, 282-289:284.

<sup>253</sup> See Carlos Espartaco, “Introduction to Benedit”, *Cit.*, non paginated.

<sup>254</sup> See P. Rizzo, “Cit.”, 284.

denominate scientific-imaginary.”<sup>255</sup>

In the realm of the artistic practices in Latin America under the wide range of Conceptual art, Glusberg recognized in an art critic the role of developing the linguistic discourse about another discourse—the artistic one—which could be linguistic or not. However, he highlighted that in one way or another, all conceptual artistic research is a language, or better a “meta-language,” defined by Glusberg as “a theorization about art, sometimes distancing, some others getting close to its language-object: the artistic discourse.”<sup>256</sup> He therefore distinguished between the internal meta-linguistic language of the artist and the external one, appropriate to the critic, the theoretician, and the historian. In the case of Bedit—according to Glusberg—the presentation of the drawings in a smaller scale compared to the objects they represented exposed together with the same objects—to share with the viewer his process of research, conceptualization and realization—functioned as a meta-language, as a “non-linguistic comment of the artworks.”<sup>257</sup> A first example of linguistic and meta-linguistic discourse coexistence in his works took place with the exhibit of *Biotrón* (1970). More broadly, Bedit’s artistic experiences with the biological world mostly fall under two main groups: the labyrinths and the hydroponic environments.

The term hydroponic was coined in the 1930s by William Frederick Gericke, professor at the California University in Berkeley to indicate the cultivation and growth of terrestrial plants in absence of soil, replaced by mineral nutrient solutions dissolved in water. In Bedit’s hydroponic environment “plants—according to Glusberg—received the same conditions offered by Nature. The artifice resides in the nutritive solutions through which he feeds the vegetables and which are parts of his experience, though through this system the artist and the scientist join to model the conditions that

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<sup>255</sup> “La tesis de que lo cultural se opone a lo científico es tributaria de una división maniquea derivada del prestigio que adquiere la práctica intelectual en nuestras sociedades. Concluimos, por lo tanto en que lo científico también integra el espectro de las regiones culturales y ubicamos la obra de Grippo, Bedit y Dujovni en el registro de lo que denominaremos imaginario-científico.” J. Glusberg, *Retórica del arte latinoamericano*, Cit., 98. Regarding the relationship between culture, art and rhetoric, Glusberg distinguished the Latin American art by the end of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s under different ranges and spheres of the imaginary, such as the “political-imaginary” (for instance, Cildo Meireles); the “ecologic-imaginary” (for instance, Franz Krajcberg); the “archaeological-imaginary” and the “scientific-imaginary.” See J. Glusberg, *Retórica del arte latinoamericano*, Cit., 97-99.

<sup>256</sup> “(...) estamos ante un verdadero lenguaje, que es la teorización respecto del arte, la cual a veces se aleja y otras se aproxima a su lenguaje-objeto: el discurso artístico.” J. Glusberg, *Retórica del arte latinoamericano*, Cit., 78.

<sup>257</sup> See J. Glusberg, *Retórica del arte latinoamericano*, Cit., 79.

the soil gives to plants.”<sup>258</sup> His other experiments with water, behind plants (which are going to be analysed below) included works such as *Germinaciones* (Germinations, 1968), *Habitat para caracoles* (Habitat for Winkles, 1969), *Pecera para peces tropicales* (Fish Tank for Tropical Fishes, 1970), and physical experiments such as *Gota de agua* (Water Drop, 1971), *Evaporador de Sachs* (1972). Nevertheless, Bedit urged in declaring that he did not consider himself an “experimenter,” believing that all he was doing was to be “insert[ed] in the art field, filtered by aesthetics and apt to be judged without any ideology, any unprepared spectator [could] see it with strictly plastic parameters. This does not mean that my results do not carry any ideological charge, obviously.”<sup>259</sup>

Bedit became a founding member of the *Grupo de Arte y Cibernética Buenos Aires* when it was founded by Glusberg, director of “Centro de Arte y Comunicación” (CAEC) in Buenos Aires, in March 1969 with the aim of promoting and divulging cybernetics in the city, after entering in contact with the Computer Technique Group in Japan.<sup>260</sup> In the exhibition catalogue for “Arte y Cibernética”, Glusberg’s statements offered an overview about artists at that time, less interested in the artwork as object and looking “for new communication channels.” New compared to traditional art, through which the “dialogue between artists and spectators had been quite inoperative. The information flowed in only one direction, and generally each ‘ism’ was a closed system in order to strengthen established social relations and an apparently lasting group of values. In our time, human beings move both geographically and socially.”<sup>261</sup> What emerges from these arguments is an apparent affinity between Glusberg and Burnham

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<sup>258</sup> “En sus obras, Bedit ofrece a las plantas las mismas condiciones ambientales que les brinda la Naturaleza. El artificio reside en las soluciones nutritivas con las que alimenta a los vegetales y que forman la base de su experiencia, pues con este sistema el artista y el científico se unen para modelar las condiciones que la tierra otorga a las plantas.” J. Glusberg, “Luis Bedit: Las Memorias del olvido”, Cit. 22.

<sup>259</sup> See *Luis Fernando Bedit. Memorias Australes. Desde el Rio de la Plata hasta el Canal del Beagle*, Milan, New York: Ediciones Philippe Daverio, 1990, 29.

<sup>260</sup> “Founding members: Luis F. Bedit, Antonio Berni, Eduardo Mac Entyre, Osvaldo Romberg, and Miguel Ángel Vidal. Further members: Ernesto Deira, Humberto Demarco, Gregorio Dujovny, Mario Marino, Rogelio Polesello, as well as Isaías Nougués, Josefina Robirosa, and Norma Tamburini. The group existed until 1973. Exhib.: 1969, *Grupo de Arte y Cibernética Buenos Aires y Computer Technique Group of Tokyo*, Galería Bonino, Buenos Aires. 1970, *Computer Graphics 70*, Brunel University, Uxbridge. 1971, *Grupo de Arte y Cibernética*, Centro de Arte y Comunicación, Buenos Aires.” See entry “—Grupo de Arte y Cibernética Buenos Aires” at <<http://www.new-tendencias.org/index.php>> (accessed in October 2014).

<sup>261</sup> J. Glusberg, “Arte y cibernética.” In *Primera muestra del Centro de estudios de arte y comunicación de la Fundación de Investigación Interdisciplinaria presentada en la Galería Bonino de Buenos Aires*. Exh. cat., Buenos Aires: Centro de Estudios de Arte y Comunicación (CEAC), 1969. Available at <<http://icaadocs.mfah.org/>> (accessed in June 2015). Non-paginated.

in the late 1960s. Their perspective adopted the external meta-linguistic approach—to follow Glusberg’s previous remarks—to theorize on the artistic discourse recurring both to cybernetics and communication systems and eventually conclude that artists at that time were, in Glusberg words,

more interested in the process which originated their work, than in the finished work itself. Their aim is not a fixed attitude, nor a definitive connection, but a net of uncertainties, ambiguities, a field where nothing is established. The artist of this time is more interested in behaviour than in the essence of things; this tendency can be clearly identified with cybernetic vision.<sup>262</sup>

The absence of this connection in art history (between Glusberg and Burnham and their interest in the interactions between art and cybernetics), not only demonstrates the predominance Western art history had on top of transnational discourses, but also within the Western art history the difficulty or hostility in undertaking an interdisciplinary discourse to include the new languages adopted by artists, their interest in the process, and therefore in the practice rather than in the final result, the art object. Glusberg also highlighted the position of the artist in the context he described: no more isolated in an “ivory tower” but working together with technologists to pursue and develop his research. Glusberg concluded the exhibition text arguing

We are talking about a new art, dynamic, compromised with the social medium to which it belongs, with the interplanetary period, which go further than the institutionalized techniques. A living art, created by innumerable pioneers of our time, who use ideas, synthetic shapes or mathematical equations instead of paintings: lights and motors, and information instead of brushes.<sup>263</sup>

In this artistic and cultural frame must be considered the novelty of Benedit’s personal approach in observing biological phenomena through his work, which eventually led to him to be selected by a committee composed of the art critics Jorge López Anaya, Fermín Fevre and Carlos Claiman to present his work at the Argentinian pavilion at the 35<sup>th</sup> edition of the Venice Biennale entitled “Art and Science”. He presented *Biotrón*, a team work conceived with Antonio Battro, a scientist working with

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<sup>262</sup> J. Glusberg, “Arte y cibernética”, *Cit.*

<sup>263</sup> J. Glusberg, “Arte y cibernética”, *Cit.*



artificial intelligence at the research centre Conicet (“Consejo Nacional de Investigaciones Científicas y Técnicas”), the ethologist José Nunez, and Jorge Glusberg, who gathered the theoretical, technical and economic support necessary to bring the installation to Venice.<sup>264</sup> *Biotrón* was a transparent acrylic structure of 4m long, 2m wide and 3m high, provided with fifty lamps of 100 watts on its ceiling and twenty-five automatic flowers, in which four thousands bees were living. One extremity of the cage was open to the outside, to offer the natural element (the gardens, “Giardini” in the Biennale space), at the other one was placed a real beehive contained in a transparent device to make observable their social life. This experiment, both artistic and scientific, provided to the bees the choice between the artificial flowers and the outside natural gardens, and it was afterwards used at the National University of Buenos Aires.

Following the semiology of Roman Jakobson (R. Jakobson, M. Halle, *Fundamentals of Language*, 1956), Glusberg, in his analysis of the artistic practices in Latin America at that period, recognized two types of elaboration in artwork: “the metaphoric,” implying relations of substitution and the “metonymic,” producing relations of contiguity, and described the work of Bénédict for the relative predominance of the metaphor.<sup>265</sup> Such metaphors, whether in his works he produced environments to describe natural processes, served to bring a new meaning to those processes and therefore, the connection between science and art he attempted, it certainly was directed to the artistic metaphor, to analyse the social behaviour among the contemporary humans and even the elaboration and consumption of art.<sup>266</sup>

In 1971 Glusberg founded the *Grupo 13*, including Bénédict among other Argentinian conceptual artists and was the curator of the exhibition “Arte de Sistemas I” featured at the Museo De Arte Moderno in Buenos Aires—the following year at the Camden Arts Centre in London—, in which Bénédict participated with *Laberinto Invisible* (1971). As declared in the exhibition catalogue, “arte de sistemas” (systems art) was used by Glusberg to comprise the latest tendencies in art of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, referring to “art as idea, ecologic art, art povera, cybernetic art, art of proposals, political art.” Through these forms of art, according to Glusberg, the artists set up “to investigate the entrance of the human in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, where art as a

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<sup>264</sup> See. P. Rizzo, “Cit.”, 284.

<sup>265</sup> See J. Glusberg, *Retórica del arte latinoamericano*, Cit., 98.

<sup>266</sup> See J. Glusberg, “Arte – Ciencia”, (18-21) in *Luis Fernando Bénédict. Memorias Australes. Desde el Río de la Plata hasta el Canal del Beagle*, Cit., 18.

consequence of social change and automation increasing idleness can not be called like that, converting certainly into one of the basic spiritual exercises of new communities.”<sup>267</sup>

Referring to Latin American artists, Glusberg meant the “arte de sistemas” as “an attempt to establish the necessary intersection existing between a group of discourses previously selected, and the concretion of an apt model, able to make viable a reading of the formation process of the same.”<sup>268</sup> If Burnham was concerned with the General System Theory to think his system aesthetics, Glusberg’s approach seems informed of both,<sup>269</sup> but not explicitly, at least in his writings and statements, in which the idea of system is connected to the field of linguistic codes and the discourse, to the “systems of signification” as postulated in Saussure’s *Course in General Linguistics* (1916).<sup>270</sup> In a further definition of system, in fact, he provided that from the Spanish dictionary “Real Academia Española”: “the sum of rules and principles around a subject connected between them. The sum of things that related to one another in an orderly way contribute to a determined object.”<sup>271</sup> He afterwards recalled the linguistic binary oppositions such as natural/cultural; marked/unmarked; significant/signified;

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<sup>267</sup> “El arte de sistemas incluye las últimas tendencias del arte de la segunda mitad de este siglo. Arte como idea, arte ecológico, arte pobre, arte cibernético, arte de propuestas, arte político, se agruparán, bajo el término arte de sistemas; son las inquietudes aparentemente distintas de diferentes artistas de avanzada que se aprestan a investigar la entrada del hombre al siglo XXI, donde el arte - como consecuencia del cambio social y la automatización que aumenta el ocio - puede no llamarse así, se convierte seguramente en uno de los ejercicios espirituales básico de las nuevas comunidades.” J. Glusberg, “Arte de Sistemas en el Museo de Arte Moderno, CAYC, MAMBA, June 28, 1971. Available at <<http://icaadocs.mfah.org/>> (accessed in June 2015). Non-paginated. My translation from Spanish.

<sup>268</sup> “El arte de sistemas es, entonces, una tentativa para establecer la necesaria intersección existente entre un conjunto de discursos previamente seleccionados, y la concreción de un modelo apto, capaz de viabilizar una lectura del proceso de formación de los mismos.” J. Glusberg, *Retórica del arte latinoamericano*, Cit., 133.

<sup>269</sup> Invited by Francisco Matarazzo to organize the exhibitions “Art as Idea” and “Cybernetic Art” for the 11<sup>th</sup> Biennial of São Paulo (1971), Glusberg immediately after went to the United States to enter in contact with the artists Vito Acconci, kakawa, John Baldesarri, Robert Barry, James Coffins, Christo, Walter Dealer, Terry Fox, Dan Graham, Hans Haacke, Michael Heizer, Douglas Huebler, Peter Hutchinson, Main Jacquet, Lee Jaffe, On Kawara, Joseph Kosuth, Christine Kozlov, Less Levine, Gordon Matta, Robert Morris, Dennis Oppenheim, Dorothea Rocksburne, Richard Serra, Robert Smithson, Keith Sonnies, John Van Sam, Bernard Venet y Lawrence Weiner and then decided to call the exhibition “Art Systems”, which he eventually decided to suspend due to the boycott in Brazil under the dictatorship. See J. Glusberg’s letter, “Jorge Glusberg: Por qué resolví participar en 'Art Systems' en la Bienal de San Pablo y ahora desisto.” In *Contrabienal*. [New York]: by Luis Wells, Luis Camnitzer, Carla Stellweg, Liliana Porter, and Teodoro Maus, [1971]. Available at <<http://icaadocs.mfah.org/>> (accessed in June 2015). Non-paginated.

<sup>270</sup> See Roland Barthes, *Elements of Semiology*, Translated by Annette Lavers and Colin Smith (Orig. *Éléments de Sémiologie*, 1964), New York: Hill and Wang, 1977, 9.

<sup>271</sup> “Conjunto de reglas o principios sobre una materia enlazados entre si. Conjunto de cosas que ordenadamente relacionadas entre sí contribuyen a determinado objeto.” J. Glusberg, *Retórica del arte latinoamericano*, Cit., 135.

syntagm/paradigm; denotation/connotation; motivated/unmotivated; continuous time/discrete time; expression/content; metonymy/metaphor; form/substance, and afterwards attempted to apply some of them to the works of some Argentinian artists, for instance Benedit's *Laberinto Invisible*.<sup>272</sup>

In a space of around 600x600x80cm between one concave and seven flat mirrors reflecting the beams emitted by a lamp, the visitor (one at a time) was invited to cross an invisible maze for rats expanded to human scale, finding the path through attempts of trial and errors, the latter signalled by the alarm sounding when the light beam was interrupted. The reward consisted in observing the behaviour of a Mexican ocelot, an amphibious animal supposed to be related to the origins of human species.<sup>273</sup> In this structure, Glusberg emphasized the binary oppositions existing in order to interpret the piece: the significant elements of mirrors, light beams, the sound of the alarm were transferred by Benedit to the field of meaning, their content; the substance of the content is formed by the equivalent from one side the permanence of the initial conditions (positive route) and the alarm sound (negative route); the form of content which organizes meanings among each other describes silence as corresponding to the trait marked, and noise to the trait unmarked. On the denotative level abide the instructions for the visitor denoting how the system may react depending on the participant's actions; all the other elements of the installation stand on the connotative level. Regarding the relation with time, continuity is guaranteed by the satisfactory procedure of crossing the labyrinth, while discontinuity is provoked by an error, until reaching the final objective, the system entropy: the moment in which the participant has interiorized the correct route of the labyrinth.<sup>274</sup> As Glusberg referred

The process of behavior adaptation as related to error (learning curve) constitutes an obvious feed-back mechanism which allows the participant to adapt to the mechanics of the system until he becomes part of it. 'Trial and error' obliges one to memorize and register the alternatives of the positive path.<sup>275</sup>

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<sup>272</sup> J. Glusberg, *Retórica del arte latinoamericano*, Cit., 135-137.

<sup>273</sup> See J. Glusberg, *Retórica del arte latinoamericano*, Cit., 137.

<sup>274</sup> See J. Glusberg, *Retórica del arte latinoamericano*, Cit., 137-139.

<sup>275</sup> J. Glusberg, "Luis Benedit at the Museum of Modern Art, New York," GT-181-A-1, quoted by Daniel R. Quiles, "Trial and Error: Luis Benedit's *Laberinto invisible*", *Arara* No10, 2010. Available at <[https://www.essex.ac.uk/arthistory/research/pdfs/arara\\_issue\\_10/quiles.pdf](https://www.essex.ac.uk/arthistory/research/pdfs/arara_issue_10/quiles.pdf)> (accessed in June 2015).

In his analysis of *Laberinto Invisible*, Daniel R. Quiles proposing an analogy between the two types of labyrinths, visible and invisible, described in Jorge Luis Borges's short story "Los dos reyes y los dos laberintos", pushed forward the metaphorical meaning internal to this piece in the realm of the historical context of Argentina at that time (a regime of dictatorship), but also willing to give to it an international breath (it was then exhibited at the Camden Art Centre in London and at MoMA in 1972). As he noted, in fact,

*Laberinto Invisible*, with its compelling merger of visible and invisible labyrinth, experiential confusion and totalizing knowledge, becomes something like an analogy for this mode of political subjecthood under dictatorship. A larger design is transparent, palpable; yet this does not mitigate direct, immediate control over bodies and movement. Yet we should not forget that Bénédict's work was designed for the international arena, in an increasingly globalized art world in which local context was deemphasized. It is the dexterity of this work in adapting to different contexts—to fit into the seemingly apolitical systems art of North America yet also refer analogically to political conditions in Argentina—that perhaps gives its darker connotations a topicality in a present moment similarly characterized by a push and pull between the comprehension of systems and hopeless imbrication within them.<sup>276</sup>

We may add that the invisibility in this piece can be considered as a metaphor of the System, controlling and accustoming our behaviours in order to obtain compensation, the possibility of not being rejected. Associating sound and discontinuity with the error, Bénédict seems to highlight how a noise or a voice, opposed to silence, is a disturbing element, such as interruption in time against linearity. It therefore becomes inevitable to recognize instances of political power, and bio-power in the social structured system, whether it is abstracting from the contingent political situation in a specific country or region. In this lies the ability of Bénédict in the interaction between art and science, transcending from biological behaviour to reach a hypothesis of deciphering the mechanism in human societies.

A subsequent pivotal moment in Bénédict's career occurred in 1972, when he—first Argentinian artist—received an invitation for a solo show at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, organized by the associate curator of drawings Bernice Rose. It is worth noting that the interest on Bénédict's artistic research between art and science

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<sup>276</sup> Daniel R. Quiles, "Trial and Error: Luis Bénédict's *Laberinto invisible*", *Cit.*

in MoMA environment could be connected with a previous exploration in this field of enquiry through Pontus Hulten's exhibition "The Machine at the End of the Mechanical Age", the museum hosted in 1968. Featuring two hundred pieces including, one the most remarkable for our study on the organic materiality was Thomas Shannon's *Squat* (1966) in which a plant touched by the visitor would move the arms of a robotic structure. A few decades later Brazilian artist Eduardo Kac defined this installation "as the first interactive artwork that is an organic and inorganic hybrid, raising the question of cybernetic entities so relevant to current debates."<sup>277</sup> For his exhibition at MoMA, Bénédict presented his hydroponic environment entitled *Fitotrón* (Phytotron, 1972) and *Laberinto para ratones blancos* (Labyrinth for white mice, 1972). In the exhibition project released on November 14, 1972

The "Phytotron" is a closed environment containing 70 tomato plants and 56 lettuce plants [and forty-seven pepper plants - addition in press-release 125A] which are automatically supplied with light and a chemical growth formula. The "Phytotron" is a closed environment containing forty-seven pepper plants, which are automatically supplied with light and a chemical growth formula. The environment for mice is also self-contained, consisting of a maze, food source, material for burrowing, and an enclosed area for sleeping. Bénédict's work contrasts the carefully constructed plexiglass technical system of the man-made environment with the natural system of the living organisms it circumscribes and modifies. Bénédict rejects the static work of art; fluctuation and variation are central to his work. His environments permit the observation of growth, change and repetition in the patterns of living organisms over a period of time.<sup>278</sup>

In these works we may find evidence of proximities between the research developed by Bénédict and Haacke between the end of the 1960s and beginning of the 1970s. Both in fact focused their interest on featuring in the exhibition space living, kinetic and therefore changeable environments to which spectators assisted without any influence on the mechanisms ruling the systems exhibited. Nevertheless, their presence would eventually lead them to transcend the biological experiences seen through mechanisms ruling and affecting social behavior. *Fitotrón* consisted of a climatic

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<sup>277</sup> Eduardo Kac, "Origin and Development of Robotic Art", *Art Journal*, Vol. 56, N. 3, Digital Reflections: The Dialogue of Art and Technology, Special issue on Electronic Art, Johanna Drucker, (ed.), CAA, NY, 1997, 60-67, available at < <http://www.ekac.org/roboticart.html> > (accessed in August 2015).

<sup>278</sup> The Museum of Modern Art, *Projects: Luis Fernando Bénédict*, NO. 125: November 14, 1972, Available at < [https://www.moma.org/momaorg/shared/pdfs/docs/press\\_archives/4913/releases/MOMA\\_1972\\_0142\\_125.pdf?2010](https://www.moma.org/momaorg/shared/pdfs/docs/press_archives/4913/releases/MOMA_1972_0142_125.pdf?2010) > (accessed in May 2013)

chamber in aluminum and acrylic of 5mx2mx2.30m containing hydroponical cultivation of plants nourished by a chemical solution and receiving light by artificial lamps. As Espartaco pointed out, “[t]heoretically the growth process in those artificial conditions must be the best. By altering certain variables of the dwelling (light, heat, humidity, drugs, etc.) it would be possible to alter the process and obtain mutants.”<sup>279</sup>

At this point it seems worthwhile to elucidate what a phytotron is and which role it played at the intersections between the scientific and political stances, previous to Bénédict’s creation for the American museum institution. The term was coined at the California Institute of Technology, where in 1949, the plant physiologists James Bonner and Fritz Went “unofficially christened the Earhart Plant Research Laboratory the *phytotron*—from the Greek *phyton*, meaning plant, and *tron*, which has come to mean device. Any similarity between the term phytotron and such terms as betatron, synchrotron, cyclotron, and bevatron [was] intentional.”<sup>280</sup> Beside this etymological explanation lies a parallelism the physicist and the President of Caltech Robert Milliken stressed at that time: like the cyclotron at Berkeley, phytotron was extremely expensive, but “phytotrons would be at least as useful for humanity as cyclotron and with no risk of atomic pollution.”<sup>281</sup> Compared with “open-air field trials or greenhouses where a climate might be approximately held steady for the benefit of a whole range of plant species,” a phytotron was designed to stay in a closed, artificial space, “encompass[ing] an entire building of myriad rooms and smaller cabinets in which climatic conditions were exactly replicated and measurably varied.” In a nutshell, as David P. D Munns noted, “a phytotron became a computer-controlled greenhouse.”<sup>282</sup>

The phytotron incorporated the total control of light intensity, temperature, humidity, levels of water, and the nutrients. It was praised as a “multi-science”, involving the collaboration between botanists, physiologists, biologists, and physicists. Its main purpose was to “reproduce in the biological sciences the epistemological basis and certainty of physical sciences. That was the dream at least.”<sup>283</sup> As Munns remarked,

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<sup>279</sup> C. Espartaco, “Introduction to Bénédict”, Cit., non paginated.

<sup>280</sup> Fritz W. Went, “The Phytotron”, June 1949, 3-6: 3. Available at <http://calteches.library.caltech.edu/1008/1/Phytotron.pdf> (Accessed in June 2015).

<sup>281</sup> L.T. Evans, “CERES: An Australian Phytotron,” *Nature*, no. 195 (1962): p. 1142, quoted by David P.D. Munns, “Controlling the Environment: the Australian Phytotron, the Colombo Plan, and Postcolonial science,” *British Scholar* Vol. II: 2, March 2010, 197-226: 215-216.

<sup>282</sup> David P.D. Munns, “Controlling the Environment: the Australian Phytotron, the Colombo Plan, and Postcolonial science,” *British Scholar* Vol. II: 2, March 2010, 197-226: 204.

<sup>283</sup> David P.D. Munns, “Cit.”, 198.

in fact, as soon as more phytotrons were built in different countries and continents, transcendent knowledge could not serve to study the local botanical specificities, and moreover, as also highlighted along our analysis of the organic in philosophical anthropology, “the breakdown of organisms into precise and reproducible parts (the model of the physical sciences) did not map completely onto the biological sciences.”<sup>284</sup> In the frame of history of science, Munns interestingly pointed out that “phytotrons represent not only a key shift in the epistemology of biology but also an underexplored case of science’s relationship to the nation-state.”<sup>285</sup> Reconnecting to my initial remarks at the beginning of this chapter, phytotrons reflected the modernist optimism in the so-called “big science” resulting by the communion between science and technology after 1945 and during the Cold War.<sup>286</sup>

Phytotron became “a model production system,” and—according to Munns—it “simulated not one place but many. Like the nation, the phytotron occupied both meanings: delineating a distinct national maturity as well as evoking a sense of inclusion in the world,” evoking “the goal of reductionist science.”<sup>287</sup> Emblematically, to the questions “what a phytotron is” and “what it can do”, the “pictorial answer”, as Munns remarked

shows four boxes illustrating rain, cloud, sun, and snow—Spring, Autumn, Summer, Winter—transformed into a step function on a chart recorder. The image suggests that the seasons themselves can be transposed from the discrete to the continuous, from the unpredictable to the uniform, repeatable, and regular.<sup>288</sup>

In this sense, the “repeatable ordered knowledge of the phytotron,” which determined the achievement towards certainty in the complex biological field, “paralleled the maturation of a science and a nation.”<sup>289 290</sup>

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<sup>284</sup> David P.D. Munns, “Cit.”, 198.

<sup>285</sup> David P.D. Munns, “Cit.”, 198.

<sup>286</sup> See David P.D. Munns, “Cit.”, 198.

<sup>287</sup> David P.D. Munns, “Cit.”, 210.

<sup>288</sup> David P.D. Munns, “Cit.”, 210. This point, considering the 21<sup>th</sup> century’s global context, makes me also think about the attempt of systematization of seeds operated by the multinational Monsanto, and its relentless consequences on the local biodiversity all over the world.

<sup>289</sup> David P.D. Munns, “Cit.”, 212.

<sup>290</sup> “Like the spread of their cyclo- counterparts, some twenty major phytotrons were constructed between 1945 and the early 1970s in Australia, France, Germany, the Soviet Union, Hungary, Canada,

After these considerations, Bénédict's *Phytotron*, ends up being an interesting case to approach the science internal to it and its relations with dynamics of identity and otherness between hegemonic countries and colonized countries. It is significant that his *Phytotron* was conceived for an exhibition in the USA where this invention was first produced and not in his home-post-colonized country, in an epoch during which this botanical device had already spread. Carlos Espartaco commented Bénédict's installation directing his attention to the "ethno-botanic approach" as

a scientific contribution that can lend fruitful collaborations, associating in the most efficient way natural and human sciences and art, more capable than any other one of clarifying certain aspects of our past and presentifying this very moment. It has been written that the history of civilizations is the history of the use of the plants. [...] let's manage better than ever that ancestral and irreplaceable inheritance: the world of plants.<sup>291</sup>

Espartaco mentioned the role of plants in the history of civilizations, which we may reconnect to the importance of agriculture as necessary initial condition for the transition from a nomadic to a stationary civilization, sowing the seeds for any "advanced" culture, the primal culture of the land: "agri-culture." Nevertheless, he seems to disregard the relationship occurring when a certain type of plants is encountered by another civilization and which role is played by a phytotron in this context. A remarkable account to this point is presented by Munns when affirming

The postcolonial lesson here is straightforward: a botanist appropriated the epistemology of physics to build his science upon firm foundations and to recreate the miracle, as he saw it, of the science of physics. He sought only to emulate, to reproduce, what he regarded as a superior epistemology to gain knowledge about the natural world. He thus firmly colonized the science of biology. Under the banner of a colonial project, botanists damned local knowledge, botanical research conducted via traditional field-trails, or in any non-controlled ways as inferior. They, like generations of imperialists before them, labeled local knowledge and practice as the de-legitimate "other" stressing the authority and legitimacy of their own knowledge and practice via claims to

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and the United States; their number and variety augmented by the Climatron at the Missouri Botanical Gardens, the University of Wisconsin-Madison's Biotron, and, more recently, the Imperial College London's Ecotron. The phytotron was only the first of a whole series of trons for plant biology, in much the same way that the cyclotron was only the first of a series of high-energy physics trons which occupied the very heart of the Cold War in the United States and the Soviet Union." David P.D. Munns, "Cit.", 214.

<sup>291</sup> C. Espartaco, "Introduction to Bénédict", Cit., non paginated.



universalism. But when one succeeds in building a scientific facility that universally controls whole climates and can exactly reproduce environmental variables, he does not merely replicate imperial triumph but makes the colonizers' entire worldview into a joke, because it is not that plants can be like physics but that physics can be plants. For an imperial physicist like Weinberg, western science possessed a privileged position of legitimate authority and must save the less developed world from its own population. The postcolonial Frankel, in stark contrast, recognized that the social implications of scientific knowledge changed from frame to frame.<sup>292</sup>

And here lies the paradox of Benedit's *Fitotrón*, "is not that plants can be like physics, but physics can be the plants."<sup>293</sup> And physics can be transferred to an artistic context when its purpose is no more to display alternatives for nourishing an exponential growth of population—Benedit assumed that his works are prone to various levels of interpretations, and was not interested in a scientific analysis of them but on the behavior of their protagonists, animals and plants<sup>294</sup>—but to inform contemporary societies that they are also part of a computer-controlled greenhouse affecting not only their body but their entire corporality of thoughts, beliefs, choice, in a word, their entire lives in a social system.

Even if not explicitly declared for the *Fitotrón*, Benedit not only had an architectural ecological concern for "artificial equilibriums of substitution, in the attempt of getting close the common man to the world he does not live in or know,"<sup>295</sup> but also added that—in light of Munns' observation—he had a postcolonial preoccupation in his works. This aspect was advanced in his later works during the 1990s, especially regarding the botanic expeditions to Latin America, as visible for instance in his reinterpretation of the Sicilian sailor Alessandro Malaspina's expeditions for the Spanish crown in the 18<sup>th</sup> century in installations like *El viaje del Beagle* and *Retrato de Indios de Tierra del Fuego exhibited* featured at the Museum of Modern Art in Oxford in 1994.<sup>296</sup>

As referred above, for the exhibition at MoMA Benedit also presented *Laberinto para ratones blancos*, a habitat where six mice were living, provided with water, but in

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<sup>292</sup> David P.D. Munns, "Cit.", 224.

<sup>293</sup> David P.D. Munns, "Cit.", 224.

<sup>294</sup> L.F. Benedit, *Luis Fernando Benedit. Memorias Australes. Desde el Rio de la Plata hasta el Canal del Beagle*, Cit., 31.

<sup>295</sup> See L.F. Benedit, *Luis Fernando Benedit. Memorias Australes. Desde el Rio de la Plata hasta el Canal del Beagle*, Cit., 31.

<sup>296</sup> See J. Glusberg, "Luis Benedit: Las Memorias del olvido", *Cit.* 33-34.

order to receive food they had to solve the labyrinth's path "connected to the nest which lengthen[ed] and [became more complicated] every 48 hours moving the food away from the point of departure."<sup>297</sup> This piece presented an ironical analogy between the mice's behaviors determined by a series of obstacles to overcome in order to achieve some compensation and the human's mechanical conducts regulated by a social system organized to the pursuit of objectives similar to those of the non-human animals.<sup>298</sup>

In the same year the Buchholz Gallery in Munich hosted his solo exhibition featuring three different labyrinths. *Laberinto para cucarachas* (Cockroaches Labyrinth, 1972), an almost impossible to find insect in that country; *Laberinto para hormigas* (Ants Labyrinths, 1972), exploring the ants' cooperation in finding the itinerary towards food-compensation; and *Laberinto vegetal* (Vegetal Labyrinth, 1972). The latter experiment, referring to the single element of the plant, which is static, attempted the mobility internal to any labyrinth in a slightly different way. In a box were planted seeds growing in the direction of a 40 watts lamp and as soon as the plant was growing it had to choose among right or left alternatives to follow the path to the light. "In the limit it survives or dies."<sup>299</sup>

After having carried out numerous botanical and zoological pieces with habitats, labyrinths and artificial cultivations between the end of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s, Benedit got to a point of considering himself as "a suspicious being to artists and much more suspicious to scientists. Anyway, this was rather affecting me, more than anything I arrived at a limit, [and] felt that had no more to give."<sup>300</sup> Nevertheless, on other two separate occasions in further exhibitions featured works involving zoological and botanical elements, presented and not represented, and one of them occurred after the invitation of Jasia Reichardt to exhibit at the Whitechapel Gallery in London. There, among various watercolours and art-science objects, were also displayed two plants of the same size through which Benedit posed to elicit an interaction from the public by talking to the plants. Each plant was, in fact, provided with a ruler to observe their growth and was also accompanied by instructions indicating to spell words of love to one and expressions of hate to the other. Benedit's

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<sup>297</sup> C. Espartaco, "Introduction to Benedit", Cit., non paginated.

<sup>298</sup> See J. Glusberg, *Retórica del arte latinoamericano*, Cit., 151.

<sup>299</sup> C. Espartaco, "Introduction to Benedit", Cit., non paginated.

<sup>300</sup> "en un ser sospechoso para los artistas y mucho más sospechoso para los científicos. De todas maneras, eso me afectaba relativamente, [pero] más que nada llegué a un limite, [y] sentí que no daba para más." In J. Glusberg, "Luis Benedit: Las Memorias del olvido", 23.

experiment reported that the plant treated with words of love got dry after few days.<sup>301</sup>

The following year Benedit worked in *Proyecto Huevos* (“Eggs Project”, 1976-77), which was composed of a box in form of a parallelepiped with twelve orifices in which twelve wooden eggs were located. On its right an embalmed chicken contained in a Plexiglass box accompanied by the compositional drawing of the same on the wall behind it. This piece pointed out once more the dialectic between the natural and the cultural, a topic so dear to the artist (which it also seems reminiscent of Broothaers’s works with eggshells), offering a profound critique of the society behaviour, if we pay attention to Glusberg’s analysis.

The combination allude to the modification of the bird, which a long time ago would brood one or two times a year; the living together with the man and her exploitation by him, produced in the chicken some biological transmutations. In the picnic in 2001, *A Space Odissey*, the astronauts eat an artificial product and comment that it tastes like chicken. It is probable that in not too distant a future there won’t exist nor chickens, nor eggs, and their elements will be replaced by chemical products, like built up eggs.<sup>302</sup>

The chicken was real and present but dead, and the eggs artificial, but presented in a box like they are found when they are put on sale in markets. In this piece the dialectic between nature and culture seem irreconcilable, unless we follow the flow towards a scenario like the one depicted in Kubrick’s science-fiction movie. This piece, together with *El Super Artificial* (1977) was part of the group exhibition *Signos en Ecosistemas Artificiales* (Signs in Artificial Ecosystems) presented by the members of the CAYC Group at the 14<sup>th</sup> São Paulo Biennial in 1977 where it was awarded with the “Grande Premio Itamaraty.”

In form of final remarks on the analysis presented on a selection of works by Luis Benedit I would argue that through his experimental research he processed not mere empiric sets to observe living organisms and their behavior. Rather, he operated a

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<sup>301</sup> See P. Rizzo, “Cit.”, 286-287.

<sup>302</sup> “El conjunto alude a la modificación del comportamiento del ave, la que hace mucho tiempo empollaría una o dos veces al año; la convivencia con el hombre y su explotación por parte de éste, produjeron en la gallina ciertas transmutaciones biológicas. En el picnic de 2001, odisea del espacio, los astronautas comen un producto artificial y comentan que tiene gusto a pollo. Es probable que en un futuro no muy lejano no existan pollos, ni huevos, y que sus elementos sean reemplazados por productos químicos, tales como los huevos torneados.” J. Glusberg, “Naturaleza y Cultura”, in *Memorias Australes*, Cit., 34-35: 35. My translation from Spanish.

sort of “antropofugismo” borrowing the term from his fellow countryman novelist Julio Cortazar’s “Geography” story in his *Histórias de cronópios y de famas* (1962). We might translate as “antropoescapism”, a provisional attempt to escape from the human scenery, which in reality remarks the observation and concern on man and the way he acts in his environment. We could alternatively put that, Luis Bénédict put on some kind of fairy tales whose performers were insects, plants, and animals, but instead of using words to describe them he materially took them, not for scientific purposes, but as a writer, with an aesthetic purpose. Luis Bénédict, in the conditions he created for the inhabitants of his pieces, created a theatrical narrative through his fairy tale boxes and by this process produced metaphors of human society, significant meanings for human existence.

#### **4.3.4 Animals and plants in the Brazilian Neo-Avant-guard**

By the end of the 1960s Latin-American intellectuals and artists, as Glusberg noted, replacing the “significant forms and the traditional historicism” expressed themselves not through aesthetic objects but through a language. “The Latino artist coming forward, which is anticipating and questioning, proposes a change of attitude and thus claims the artistic fact as an agent for this change.”<sup>303</sup> Regarding the case of Brazil, the country was governed by a military dictatorship from 1964 and its consequent socio-political crisis, and the subsequent disaggregation of the populist leftist germinated uprisings among artists and intellectuals against the regime. The hotbeds for their protest “in universities, theatres, museums, in the so-called progressive publishers, in small presses and in the streets of the cities” gave rise to a prolific

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<sup>303</sup> “En remplaçant les formes significatives et l’historicisme traditionnel, ils arrivent à communiquer et informer du besoin qu’ont les intellectuels et les artistes latino-américains de s’exprimer à travers un langage et non pas à travers des objets esthétiques. L’artiste latino-américain qui est en avance, qui anticipe et questionne, propose un changement d’attitude et prétend ainsi que le fait artistique soit un agent pour ce changement.”, Jorge Glusberg, “Un art engagé”, *Artitudes International*, n.30-32, Paris, 1976, 35-36.

counter-culture, denominated “cultura alternativa de esquerda”<sup>304</sup> (leftist alternative culture).

Based on a revision of Marxism they struggled for freedom of expression and a new generation of artists and intellectuals emerged claiming the formulation of a new concept of art, a critical assimilation of the Brazilian culture towards the international context and formulating a new relationship between art and politics in the name of autonomy of artistic language. The year 1967 was particularly significant and prolific in this debate around culture and the arts. In fact it was when the *Tropicalismo* originated with allegorical music poems by Caetano Veloso and Gilberto Gil, and musical experimentations with electronic sonorities. Contrarily to the opinion of militant leftist part of that time, considering *Tropicalismo* as “an alienated movement, conformist and integrated to the international imperialism,”<sup>305</sup> the philosopher Celso Favaretto replied stressing the possibilities enhanced by the movement for the creation of a new vanguard, politically positioned towards the political situation of the period, “using allegory and irony as basic ingredients for the social questioning.”

In this realm, Hélio Oiticica stated by the end of the same year, in his text “The Appearance of Supra-Sensorial”, “[t]here is currently in Brazil the need to take positions in regard to political, social, and ethical problems, a need which increases daily and requires urgent formulation, since it is the crucial issue in the creative field.”<sup>306</sup> Moreover, he declared

Sculpture changed, as painting did, shedding the old conditioning to which it had been subject, breaking the base, attaining mobility, and becoming a hybrid product, the object. Everything else derived from painting or sculpture leads to the object, which is therefore a path, a passage to this new synthesis.<sup>307</sup>

In the attempt of overcoming the rigid construction of the Concrete and Neo-Concrete visual arts movements developed in his country, although—as Stéphane

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<sup>304</sup> Marília Andrés Ribeiro, *Neovanguardas: Belo Horizonte – Anos 60*, Belo Horizonte: C/Arte, 1997, 66. She quotes “cultura alternativa de esquerda” by Maria Amélia Mello (org.), *Vinte anos de resistência. Alternativas da cultura no regime militar*, Rio de Janeiro: Espaço e Tempo, 1986.

<sup>305</sup> M. A. Ribeiro, *Cit.*, 68, quoting Augusto Campos, “Balanço da bossa e outras bossas”, São Paulo: Perspectiva, 1978, 153.

<sup>306</sup> H. Oiticica, “Appearance of the Supra-Sensorial” (English translation by Guy Brett et al., Hélio Oiticica, Rotterdam: Witte de With; Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 1992, 127-30), in C. Harrison and P. Wood (eds.), *Cit.*, 913.

<sup>307</sup> H. Oiticica, “Appearance of the Supra-Sensorial”, *Cit.*, 913.

Huchet remarked—the first neo-concrete exhibition at the Modern Art Museum of Rio de Janeiro in 1959, featuring works by Lygia Clark and Oiticica from the mid 1950s, pursued a way out of the “concretist” limits.<sup>308</sup> Oiticica defended the construction of a *Nova Objectividade* (New Objectivity), where the object was intended as part of an environment, of a unique context (like in *Nuclei*, *Penetrables*, *Bolides*, *Parangolés*, and *Environmental Manifestations*) with the purpose of seeking a “‘life-experience proposition’ for today.”<sup>309</sup>

*Nova Objectividade Brasileira* entitled the landmark group exhibition (for instance, Anna Maria Maiolino, Ferreira Gullar, Lygia Clark, Lygia Pape, Nelson Leirner, and many others) in which he presented in the Museum of Modern Art in Rio de Janeiro in 1967. In the words of Marília Andrés Ribeiro, “this exhibition demonstrated the capacity of artists and critics of organizing themselves collectively in favour of a new semiotic and political perspective for Brazilian art.”<sup>310</sup> On the occasion he created an installation entitled *Tropicália* that featured “the precarious construction material of the *favela* (shanty town) as a form of art. His experimentation was divided in two parts: the process of its material realization and the interaction with the public.”<sup>311</sup>

It seems worthwhile to remark the participation of the artist Lygia Pape, expressing her ironic attitude towards the “dead art of museums” through a counterpoint displayed by two “Caixas de Humor Negro” (Black Humour Boxes), one entitled *Caixa de Baratas* (Cockroaches Box, 1967) and the other *Caixa de Formigas* (Ants Box, 1967). *Caixa de Baratas* was a transparent box containing twenty-eight dead beetles disposed in four lines of seven each in the entomologist manner. The bottom of the box was a mirror surface reflecting the face of visitors in the space between a dead insect and another. This operation served to attain “a critique to the exploitation of artistic production [prosecuted] by institutions.”<sup>312</sup> In *Caixa de Formigas*, Pape explored the

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<sup>308</sup> See. S. Huchet, “La crítica de arte brasileña en los años sessenta y setenta como relato singular dentro del gran relato del arte moderno”, 275-291: 276, in P. Barreiro López and J. Diaz Sanchez (eds.), *Cit.*

<sup>309</sup> H. Oiticica, “Appearance of the Supra-Sensorial”, in *Cit.*, 914.

<sup>310</sup> M. A. Ribeiro, *Cit.*, 78.

<sup>311</sup> R. Resende “Brazilian poor art, or Arte Povera, from 1960 to 2010”, in Guillermo Santamarina, Alejandra Sebastida (curated by), *Ergo, Materia. Arte Povera en el Muac*. Exhibition Catalogue at Museo Universitario Arte Contemporaneo Mexico, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 2010, pp. 183-185: 183.

<sup>312</sup> Vanessa Rosa Machado, “Anarquia e Crítica em Lygia Pape”, *II Encontro em História da Arte – IFCH /UNICAMP*, 2006, 356-363: 358. Available at <<http://www.unicamp.br/chaa/eha/atas/2006/MACHADO,%20Vanessa%20Rosa%20-%20IIIEHA.pdf>> (accessed in June 2015).

erotic dimension of carnal devouring and the unpredictability of live things. From the orifices, the living ants could exit the box and cross the space of the museum catching up with the works of the other artists. In the centre of the box, from which departed three circumferences in growing order, was positioned a piece of raw meat around which the enormous Brazilian ants (*sáuvas*, highly prejudicial for damaging agriculture) joined. Its bottom was also mirrored and on its upper side was written “a gula ou” and on the lower “a luxúria” (“gluttony or luxury”).<sup>313</sup>

The following year, Lygia Pape released *Caixa Brasil* (Brasil Box, 1968), a wooden box of 25x30cm and around 6-7cm in thickness. It was painted in blue outside, and in the inside it was lined with red felt (symbolizing blood and the violence of colonialism) and contained the word “Brasil” in silver letters (symbol of the exploitation of the country for its richness in primary resources) and the hair of three races (American Indian, white and black) following the order of their entrance to the country. As the art historian and curator Paulo Reis referred, “Later on there are more boxes about violence followed. These works are paradigmatic—Boxes—and then unfold into other sensorial works by Pape, becoming emblematic of a period and at the same time indicating the transitory and the organic in the work of Lygia Pape.”<sup>314</sup>

The New Objectivity coined by Oiticica was inspired by the Brazilian *cinema novo*, whose pertaining directors, such as Glauber Rocha (*Terra em transe*, “Land in Ainguish”, 1967) among others, by the mid-1950s and in the wave of the Italian *Neorealismo* and the French *Nouvelle Vague* endeavoured a cinema closer to reality, with more content and lower costs. This attempt to recall the attention to poverty in arts practiced by Oiticica appears similar to Arte Povera, according to Ricardo Resende, who at the same time noted that its instances were much more radical compared to the Italian “movement.”<sup>315</sup> Oiticica’s main focus, in fact, were the most marginalized sectors of society, those living in the *favelas* and his assumptions were stigmatized in his famous flag poem “seja marginal, seja herói” (be marginal, be hero, 1968).

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<sup>313</sup> See V. Rosa Machado, “Cit.”, 358.

<sup>314</sup> Paulo Reis, “The transitory and the organic in the work of Lygia Pape”, *Dardo Magazine*, sep-jun, nº11, Santiago de Compostela, Spain, 2009, 50-57: 52. Pape’s research with organic and perishable materials continued along her artistic trajectory in works such as *Narizes e Línguas* (Nostrils and Tongue, 1995), with bread, wooden, copper and smells; *Cortina de maçãs* (Apples contain, 1996) composed of apples, bananas and hair; *DNA* (2003) made of sixty white bacins, beans, rice, halogen lamps and red pigment.

<sup>315</sup> See R. Resende “Brazilian poor art, or Arte Povera, from 1960 to 2010”, *Cit.*, 184.

His works *Tropicalia* (1967) and *Eden* (1969) reproduced environments within the exhibition space inviting one to relax and proposing the relationship with nature by the presence of live animals and plants in an ensemble conceived as an evasion from consumerist conventions and established rituals. In these pieces the natural and domestic materials used played a primal and not secondary role.<sup>316</sup> His “life experience proposition”, with participatory practices like *Parangolés* (1965) with the friends in made in the *favela* of *Mangueira*, was also at the core of the participatory artistic practices carried out by Lygia Clark, in which the corporal contact culminates in an organic form given by the creation of a “corpo coletivo” (collective body), such as in *A Casa é o Corpo* (The House is the Body, 1968), an environment enveloping the body for the participants to experience a sort of “rebirth.” There is no more performance in there, since there are no more spectators, as manifested in her *Baba Antropofágica* (1973).<sup>317</sup>

Another noteworthy moment occurring in 1967 was the exhibition at *Salão de Arte Moderna* in Brasilia (founded in 1960 as the federal capital of the country), where the presentation by the artist Nelson Leirner of *Porco* (Pig, 1967) unleashed a debate around the criterion for an artwork to be selected for its participation in a public show. It was a stuffed pig tied to a ham (“immediately stolen by the public”<sup>318</sup>) into a rectangular grade in wood. Few days after the opening, Leirner wrote an article published in the newspaper *Jornal da Tarde*, addressing to the jury the question “Qual é o critério?” (What is the criterion?)—published on 27 Dec. 1967—for the inclusion of his piece into the exhibition. His question gave origin to a dynamic public debate named “happening da crítica” (happening of critique), which turned his piece into one of the most famous in Brazilian Conceptual Art.

At that time Leirner was a member of the *Grupo Rex*, active in São Paulo between 1966 and 1967 and marked by humour and critique of the art system.<sup>319</sup> His operation, therefore, must be considered in this frame and—as Gloria Ferreira pointed out—the singularity of this action consisted in the “inver[sion] of the usual way of

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<sup>316</sup> See F. Gallo, “Ambienti e Installazioni”, in S. Bordini (a cura di), *Arte contemporanea e tecniche. Materiali, procedimenti, sperimentazioni*, Cit., 101-116: 115.

<sup>317</sup> See P. Schimmel, *Out of actions*, Cit., 204.

<sup>318</sup> Gloria Ferreira, “¿Un debate crítico?!” , Cit., 340.

<sup>319</sup> The members of the group were Wesley Duke Lee, Geraldo de Barros y Nelson Leirner, and his students José Resende, Carlos Fajardo y Frederico Nasser. They also edited the journal *Rex Time* and carried out other activities such as exhibitions, conferences and happenings. See G. Ferreira, “¿Un debate crítico?!” , Cit., 340.



questioning the prerogatives of critique: it is about the criteria of inclusion, and not of those which serve to reject a piece of artwork.”<sup>320</sup> On the other hand, she also highlighted that among the members of the jury there were the critics Mario Pedrosa and Frederico Morais “manifestly committed to contemporary art.”<sup>321</sup> A couple of months later Mario Pedrosa replied with the article “Do porco empalhado aos critérios da crítica”, (“from the stuffed pig to the criteria of critique”, *Correio da Manhã*, Rio de Janeiro, 11 Feb. 1968) interpreting the stuffed pig as a “consequence of the whole aesthetic and ethic artist’s behaviour,” positioning it in the decisive importance attributed to the idea, to the artist’s attitude in post-modern art. Likewise, as a Trotskyist legacy, he considered the critic as living “in a permanent revolution.”<sup>322</sup>

In the meantime Frederico Morais appointed the importance of the current edition of the Bahia Biennial (started in 1966 and abruptly interrupted by the military regime in 1968) as a point of decentralization from the two conventional poles of Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo, and overcoming the modernist idea of progress to claim the appropriation of the “baroque and tropical” folk origins of the country.<sup>323</sup> His active engagement, inspired in the ideas of Marcuse, went in strict contact with Clark, Oiticica, Meireles and Barrio, among others, “proclaiming the death of conventional art and the opening to multisensory and environmental experiences.”<sup>324</sup> His emphasis on the integration between art and life, paying attention to “the appropriation of precarious materials, of the residues of the consumerist society in the Brazilian artistic creation” can be considered as a prosecution of the aesthetics of rubbish already practiced by Schwitters, Burri, Cage and Kaprow.<sup>325</sup>

Morais fomented a take of position by the artists against conventional art in defence of the Guerrilla Art, affirming, “the artist today is a sort of guerrilla,”<sup>326</sup> whose task consisted of

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<sup>320</sup> G. Ferreira, “¿Un debate crítico?!” *Cit.*, 340.

<sup>321</sup> G. Ferreira, “¿Un debate crítico?!” *Cit.*, 340.

<sup>322</sup> See G. Ferreira, “¿Un debate crítico?!” *Cit.*, 340.

<sup>323</sup> See F. Morais, “O vazio, a construção, o salto: II Bienal de Bahia”, *GAM*, Rio de Janeiro, nº17, 1968, non-paginated, quoted by M. A. Ribeiro, *Cit*, 169.

<sup>324</sup> See M. A. Ribeiro, *Cit*, 169.

<sup>325</sup> See M. A. Ribeiro, *Cit*, 169.

<sup>326</sup> “O artista hoje é uma espécie de guerrilheiro.”, F. Morais, “Contra a arte afluyente: o corpo é motor da ‘obra’”, *Revista de Cultura Vozes. Vanguarda Brasileira: caminhos & situações*, Petrópolis, vol. LXIV, nº1, ano 64, jan./fev. 1970, 49, quoted by M. A. Ribeiro, *Cit*, 169.

“creating for the spectator (...) nebulous, undefined situations provoking in him, more than estrangement or repulsion, fear. (...) In the artistic guerrilla, however, all are guerrillas and take the initiative. The artist, the public and the critic constantly change their position in the event and the same artist can be victim of an ambush weaved by the spectator.”<sup>327</sup>

His statements about the guerrilla art must be considered in light of a pivotal antecedent in the Brazilian context: the poet Décio Pignatari and his text “Teoría da guerrilha artística” (“Theory of the guerrilla art”, 1967).<sup>328</sup> Pignatari commented the art of that time as a “meta-vanguard”, “conscious of itself” and an “experimental process” at the same time, in which “to select, to decide, to be able to use practical and symbolic resources available, to invent: such tools are those of the artistic guerrilla, of the guerrilla operation.”<sup>329</sup> Rather than drawing attention to the event, considered already redundant for him, he acknowledged the necessity to change the structure of art, “to make an authentic revolution,” praising an art of “relations,” of “revolution structures,” in terms of semantic *simultaneity* and *mosaic*.<sup>330</sup> His idea of mosaic for the artist, in opposition to the cubist and post-cubist symbolic linearity of the image, is considered by Huchet as a point of connection with the subsequent idea of “encyclopaedic knowledge”—defended by Pedrosa in 1968 (“Do porco empalhado aos critérios da crítica”)—the critic must possess, “to question the meaning, and not only interrogate or highlight formal and expressive values.”<sup>331</sup>

Morais also pursued a sort of “counter-art history” paralleling the unfinished artists’ projects—declaring his inspiration on the “open work” derived by Umberto

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<sup>327</sup> “A tarefa do artista guerrilheiro é criar para o espectador (...) situações nebulosas, indefinidas, provocando nele, mais do que estranhamento ou repulsa, o medo (...). Na guerrilha artística, porém, todos são guerrilheiros e tomam iniciativas. O artista, o público e o crítico mudam continuamente suas posições no acontecimento e o próprio artista pode ser vítima de uma emboscada tramada pelo espectador.” F. Moraes, “Contra a arte afluyente: o corpo é motor da ‘obra’”, *Cit.*, 49, quoted by M. A. Ribeiro, *Cit.*, 169.

<sup>328</sup> D. Pignatari, “Teoría da guerrilha artística” in G. Ferreira (eds.), *Crítica de Arte no Brasil: Temáticas Contemporâneas*, Rio de Janeiro: Funarte, 2006, 158-159, quoted by S. Huchet, “La crítica de arte brasileña en los años sessenta y setenta como relato singular dentro del gran relato del arte moderno”, *Cit.*, 284.

<sup>329</sup> “Seleccionar, decidir, saber utilizar los recursos prácticos y simbólicos disponibles, inventar: tales son las herramientas de la guerrilla artística, de la operación guerrillera.” S. Huchet, “La crítica de arte brasileña en los años sessenta y setenta como relato singular dentro del gran relato del arte moderno”, *Cit.*, 284.

<sup>330</sup> See D. Pignatari, “Teoría da guerrilha artística” in G. Ferreira (eds.), *Cit.*, 160-161, quoted by S. Huchet, “Cit.”, 285.

<sup>331</sup> S. Huchet, “Cit.”, 285.

Eco's *Opera Aperta* (1962)—as a counterpoint to the finished artwork and to official art history, and eventually proposed the opposition of “the body against art.”<sup>332</sup>

In the Brazilian case, the important thing is to turn misery, underdevelopment into our principal richness (...). If necessary, we will use our body as the canal of the message, as the art motor. The body, and its muscles, the blood, the innards, the excrement, above all, the intelligence.<sup>333</sup>

Morais had also interiorized Marcuse's dual character of art: harmonizing the status quo on the one hand, and attempting to a social, political and sexual freedom on the other.<sup>334</sup> His ideas found their most significant expressions in the two exhibitions simultaneously held in 1970 on the occasion of the inauguration of the “Palácio das Artes” in Belo Horizonte: *Objeto e Participação* (Object and Participation) and *Do Corpo à Terra* (From Body to Earth). The latter lasted three days and the participant artists for the first time were invited not to present finished works, but rather to develop them directly *in situ*. Moreover, the multiplicity of times and spaces for each work, impelled the artists and the same curator to be present in all of them, highlighting the plural character of this manifestation, defined not by a central, static centre, but rather an organic—we might say—development of the artworks, most of them ephemeral.<sup>335</sup>

In the text-manifesto “Manifesto do Corpo à Terra”, Frederico Moraes argued the impossibility of conceiving a Nation without automatically including the idea of art, which is “an experimental exercise of freedom,” consequently “the creative exercise will be as effective as freedom will be.”<sup>336</sup> He also stated art as a “vital human necessity,” and “more than a collective fact—it is integral part of the society.”<sup>337</sup> He similarly considered the ludic instinct as a vital element for the manifestation of every human being in the society. For this reason, he believed that the government's duty was that of “creating effective conditions for the ‘aesthetic desire of the social body to

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<sup>332</sup> “O corpo contra a arte.” F. Moraes, “Contra a arte afluyente: o corpo é motor da ‘obra’”, 59, in M. A. Ribeiro, *Cit.*, 170.

<sup>333</sup> “No caso brasileiro, o importante é fazer da miseria, do subdesenvolvimento, nossa principal riqueza (...). Se for necessário, usaremos o próprio corpo como canal da mensagem, como motor da obra. O corpo, e nele os músculos, o sangue, as vísceras, o excremento, sobretudo, a inteligência.” F. Moraes, “Contra a arte afluyente: o corpo é motor da ‘obra’”, 59, in M. A. Ribeiro, *Cit.*, 170-171.

<sup>334</sup> See M. A. Ribeiro, *Cit.*, 171.

<sup>335</sup> See <<http://memoriasdaditadura.org.br/movimentos-artisticos/corpo-terra-1970/>> (accessed in June 2015).

<sup>336</sup> Frederico Moraes, “Manifesto do Corpo à Terra”, in M. A. Ribeiro, *Cit.*, 295.

<sup>337</sup> F. Moraes, “Manifesto do Corpo à Terra”, in M. A. Ribeiro, *Cit.*, 295.

obtain its full achievement.”<sup>338</sup> Acknowledging, though, the differential and multiple changeability of the human being, as well as that of life, Morais envisioned the same mobility for art, stressing the necessity of “recovering or retaking the body. And the earth. Between both the object lives.”<sup>339</sup> In this sense Morais reconfigured the idea of “pop,” a concept saturated by the American Pop Art to which Conceptual Art in its various declinations reacted, attributing a central role to the daily and ordinary, common object presented and not represented.<sup>340</sup>

As Marília Andrés Ribeiro noted, “the proposals presented [...], integrating art with life, transformed the city into a stage for the interventions of the artists. For Frederico Morais this event was the last and most radical collective manifestation of the ‘Brazilian vanguard’, and his proposal was conceived as the ground zero of the new critic.”<sup>341</sup> Among the participations to *Do Corpo à Terra*, I will consider only those of Cildo Meireles and Artur Barrio, for their contextual relevance in the analysis of the organic materiality in the artistic practices pointed out here. Famous for his uprising “Inconfidência Mineira” (Miner Indiscretion) against the Portuguese rule in 1789, in continuity with the ideals spread by The French Revolution, Tiradentes was in 1792 “captured and cruelly hanged, drawn and quartered.”<sup>342</sup> Therefore, Meireles’s indignation disclosed in witnessing of the military regime abusively appropriating the image of Tiradentes as “‘their’ national hero. Of course, the hypocrisy of their symbolic manoeuvres was clear and I [Meireles] decided to make a work about this.”<sup>343</sup>

*Tiradentes: Totem—Monumento ao Preso Politico (Tiradentes: Totem—Monument to the Political Prisoner)* took place in the park, and consisted of tying ten

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<sup>338</sup> F. Morais, “Manifesto do Corpo à Terra”, in M. A. Ribeiro, *Cit.*, 295.

<sup>339</sup> “É preciso recuperar ou retomar o corpo. E a terra. Entre ambos vive o objeto.” F. Morais, “Manifesto do Corpo à Terra”, in M. A. Ribeiro, *Cit.*, 297.

<sup>340</sup> Whether Morais’s inspiration to Marcuse’s ideas was explicit in his writings, this Manifesto, in connecting the concepts of “nation” and of “pop” as popular, seems reminiscent of the idea of “nazional-popolare”, the Italian philosopher Antonio Gramsci analysed in his *Quaderni dal Carcere* (1929-1935). Gramsci, in his study on the “letteratura nazional-popolare”, observed that differently than in Russian or in German and other languages, in Italy the two adjectives did not coincide, not only linguistically, but also in the intellectuals’ cosmopolitan ideals, disconnected from the real cultural needs of the people.

<sup>341</sup> “As propostas apresentadas na manifestação *Do Corpo à Terra* ampliaram a noção de arte, integrando-a com a própria vida, e transformaram a cidade em palco para as intervenções dos artistas plásticos. Para Frederico Morais esse evento foi a última e a mais radical manifestação colectiva da “vanguardia brasileira”, e sua proposta foi concebida como o marco zero da nova crítica.” M. A. Ribeiro, *Cit.*, 176.

<sup>342</sup> Susan M. Anderson (guest curator), “The Consumption of Paradise”, 6-15: 6, in *Body to Earth. Three Artists From Brazil*, Fischer Gallery, University of Southern California, 1992.

<sup>343</sup> Cildo Meireles in “Gerardo Mosquera in conversation with Cildo Meireles”, 6-35: 15, in Paulo Herkenhoff, Gerardo Mosquera, Dan Cameron, *Cildo Meireles*, London: Phaidon, 1999.

live chickens to a wooden stake, surrounded with a white cloth and then set them on fire. Years afterwards, Meireles recalled that moment declaring: “Of course I would never repeat a work like *Tiradentes*...I can still hear those poor hens in my emotional memory. But in 1970 I felt it had to be done.”<sup>344</sup> But on the other hand, he also acknowledged at that moment that during his *Tiradentes: Totem—Monumento ao Preso Politico* “for many who witnessed the event, the explosion recalled the well-televised image of Buddhist monks who created a funeral pyre for themselves during the Vietnam War.”<sup>345</sup> In this sense, his work achieved an active political resonance not only regarding the national situation, but also on a global, transnational, perspective, towards which Meireles felt the urgency to take a stance at that time. Thus, he later declared

Some Brazilian artists felt obliged to make compromising political work at that time, even if their actual artistic and intellectual interests were apolitical, as mine were. I always tried to make it clear that this was a personal response. It expressed my beliefs and also responded to the demands of the artwork I was trying to produce. There were formal and conceptual aspects which were closely linked to the issue of the art object, and which had nothing to do with political discourse.<sup>346</sup>

His *Totem*, therefore, was an attempt to react to the regime, not literally, which would be immediately censored, but through a dislocation of the theme to read the present situation by the use of the metaphor, that he was interested to work through. Nevertheless, this temporal displacement did not advocate a representational distance, but rather assumed all its force through the actual presence of life and death, and the only way was the use of raw material, the live chickens immolated under a white cloth, a colour which seems to testify their innocence and pure ideals of freedom, and at the same time a clean façade to hide the opponents and, though victims, of the dictatorship.

As an aside from the Brazilian context, with regard the topic of killing animals as a piece of artwork, it is remarkable in this context to recall Kim Jones’s *Rat Piece* (1976). In this half an hour-long performance he set fire to three male rats in a cage. This act was intended as a call to attention to the disasters of the Vietnam War, in which he participated serving the US marine, and at the same time as a sort of healing

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<sup>344</sup> Cildo Meireles in “Gerardo Mosquera in conversation with Cildo Meireles”, *Cit.*, 15.

<sup>345</sup> Susan M. Anderson, “The Consumption of Paradise”, *Cit.*, 6.

<sup>346</sup> Cildo Meireles in “Gerardo Mosquera in conversation with Cildo Meireles”, *Cit.*, 15.

regarding his personal experience. Nevertheless, it had a shocking impact on the audience and he ended up in court. His argument was that of a sense of duty in obliging Americans what they did not want to see happening in Vietnam. On the other hand, this fact problematized the role of the audience and their responsibility, when he said: “They could have stopped me.”<sup>347</sup> A final remark on the animals chosen for his action, the rats, also highlight the general human attitude towards them: they are normally used for scientific experiments, they are considered pests, and in his analyses of the piece, Aloï eventually suspected that if they were kittens, “we can safely say that things would likely have been very different.”<sup>348</sup>

Artur Barrio (born in Portugal, and moved to Brazil at the age of ten) presented in Belo Horizonte three different operations entitled *Situação* (1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> part). He started off his artistic trajectory the year before with his *Manifesto* “against theories in art, against salons, against prizes, against juries, against art criticism.”<sup>349</sup> Observing that industrial products in the third world (including Latin America) for their high cost were mostly average for an elite he contested, Barrio declared, “creation cannot be conditioned, creation has to be free. Therefore, based on this socio-economic aspect, I make use of materials which are perishable and cheap [...] such as: rubbish, toilet paper, urine, etc.”<sup>350</sup> The ephemerality of the materials used was a political choice, with the aim of not being “appropriated anew by a system of art that is still compromised with the fetishist circulation of the object or document.”<sup>351</sup> He afterwards used to document his works through photographs, videos, artist’s book, but none of them he considered as a work of art, but a mere and instrumental a record, or alternatively “um registro.”

In April 1970 he carried out his daily actions, starting at 10.00 a.m., walking in the streets of Rio de Janeiro carrying bags filled with: “bits of nails, saliva (split), hair, urine, snot, bones, toilet paper, used or not, sanitary towels, pieces of used cotton paper, sawdust, leftovers, paint, bits of films (negatives), etc.”, with the purpose of a

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<sup>347</sup> Kim Jones, in Susan Swenson, “Conversation with Kim Jones: April 25, 2005”, *War Paint*, Pierogi Gallery, New York, exhibition catalogue, 14. Quoted by G. Aloï, *Cit.*, 123.

<sup>348</sup> G. Aloï, *Cit.*, 123.

<sup>349</sup> Artur Barrio, “Manifesto”, Rio de Janeiro, 1969, in Claudia Gonçalves (eds.), *Resist(R)os. Artur Barrio*, Porto: Museu Serralves, 2000, 226-227: 226.

<sup>350</sup> Artur Barrio, “Manifesto”, *Cit.*, 226.

<sup>351</sup> João Fernandes, “Artur Barrio: Registros/ Artur Barrio: Records”, in *Resist(R)os*, *Cit.*, 16-19: 16.

“fragmentation of the everyday in terms of the passer-by.”<sup>352</sup> For the demonstration in Belo Horizonte his *Situação T/T, 1* (1<sup>st</sup> Part) or *14 Movements* took place between the 19<sup>th</sup> and the 20<sup>th</sup> of April he elicited the sensorial perceptions of the body (actor and spectator) through the materials used: “blood, meat, bones, clay, rubber, cloth, cable (rope), knives, bags, a chisel, etc.”<sup>353</sup> On the 20<sup>th</sup> in the morning *Situação T/T, 1* (2<sup>nd</sup> Part) took place in a river/sewer in the Municipal Park and, according to Barrio’s written record, 5,000 people were present, including the incursion of the police and afterwards the firemen.<sup>354</sup> *Situação T/T, 1* (3<sup>rd</sup> Part) was his last intervention in the space by the use of sixty rolls of toilet paper.<sup>355</sup>

Among his later works by the end of the 1970s are remarkable his experiments with meat released in Paris: *Rodapés de Carne* (Meat Skirting Boards, 1978) and *Livros de Carne* (Books of Meat, 1979), in which the act of reading becomes a sensorial and personal experience: Barrio is the one cutting the meat with the knife and at the same time the only one touching, leafing through and reading along the way of a possible imaginary and non-linear reading. In a retrospective exhibition held in the São Paulo Museum of Modern Art at the end of 2007 by the art critic Moacir dos Anjos, the latter defined the initial trajectory of Artur Barrio by the 1960s as characterized by a “a poetics of *gambiarra*” (in the sense of improvisation), which “eliminates from art any kind of representation of the senses, as the artist and critic Ferreira Gullar wrote in a recent article for the newspaper *Folha de São Paulo*. What Gullar means is that this art is all about its own ugliness and the crudeness of its materials.”<sup>356</sup> Resende concluded his text declaring,

This was the first example of the aestheticization of poverty within the Brazilian institutional art world. Perhaps it can be joined to the concepts of Arte Povera, especially regarding Artur Barrio, whose work is always coherently contemporaneous and which goes through time without being tied to fashionable terms of the definitions of Eurocentric (and late 20<sup>th</sup> century American-centric) art history. By nature, this kind of art history excludes all that is different, that which it doesn’t understand, and that which is, once again, below the equator.<sup>357</sup>

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<sup>352</sup> A. Barrio, “Defl.....Situação.....+S+.....RUAS.....ABRIL”, 1970, in *Resist(R)os*, Cit., 87.

<sup>353</sup> A. Barrio, “Situação T/T, 1 – 1970 (1st Part), in *Resist(R)os*, Cit., 97.

<sup>354</sup> A. Barrio, “Situação T/T, 1 – 1970 (2nd Part), in *Resist(R)os*, Cit., 98.

<sup>355</sup> A. Barrio, “Situação T/T, 1 – 1970 (3rd Part), in *Resist(R)os*, Cit., 100.

<sup>356</sup> Ferreira Gullar, “A pouca realidade 2”, *Folha de São Paulo*, March 21, 2010, quotation by R. Resende “Brazilian poor art, or Arte Povera, from 1960 to 2010”, *Cit.*, 185.

<sup>357</sup> R. Resende “Brazilian poor art, or Arte Povera, from 1960 to 2010”, *Cit.*, 185.

To conclude this exploration over the Brazilian artistic environment around the 1960s and reconnecting with its beginning, it seems worthwhile to remember Glusberg's differentiation around ranges and spheres of imagery in Latin American art (previously mentioned) to introduce the ecologic-imaginary of the artist Frans Krajcberg. Born in Poland and having lost all his family under the Nazi persecutions, he afterwards moved to Stuttgart (Germany) to study the fine arts, got acquainted with the artists Fernand Léger and Marc Chagall in Paris, and afterwards settled in Brazil from 1948 onwards. Considered one of the most important activist of Brazilian environmental movement born under the military dictatorship (1964-1984)—“together with forerunners, such as Miguel Abellá, Aziz Ab'Saber, Nanuza Menezes, Fernando Gabeira, José Lutzenberger, Augusto Ruschi and Cacilda Lanuza—<sup>358</sup>Krajcberg put at the core of his works “the question of ethics and moral nature.”<sup>359</sup> He left apart the pictorial language characterizing his initial trajectory to embrace—in the words of Pierre Restany—“a realistic more and more immediate and objective approach.”<sup>360</sup>

In 1964 Krajcberg carried out his first work with a dead tree trunk and from that moment he started on his environmental mission through his artistic practice. Through his sculptures, made of burnt wood in the Amazons he provided a rebirth to dead, and therefore, waste material, since the burnt wood has no commercial value. His sculptures contain the duality of love and death: sensual forms transformed in their shape to transfer at the same time an idea of beauty which never refuses to hide the strength of the political message carried out. By the end of the 1960s Krajcberg declared: “Hardly anything is done by chance in my work: I transform natural elements, I do not copy them; presenting them alone does not satisfy me.”<sup>361</sup>

The resonance of his political artwork spread internationally, and in 1978, together with Sepp Baendereck and Pierre Restany, he wrote *O Manifesto di Rio Negro*

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<sup>358</sup> Pelicioni, 2002, quoted by Adriana Teixeira Lima, Marcos Antonio dos Santos Reigota, Andréa Focesi Pelicioni, Eleite Jussara Nogueira, “Frans Krajcberg e sua contribuição à educação ambiental pautada na teoria das representações sociais”, in *Cad. CEDES*, Universidade de Campinas, vol. 29, n. 77, 117-131: 122, Jan./Apr 2009. Available at <[http://www.scielo.br/scielo.php?script=sci\\_arttext&pid=S0101-32622009000100008&lng=en&nrm=iso](http://www.scielo.br/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S0101-32622009000100008&lng=en&nrm=iso)> (accessed in February 2015).

<sup>359</sup> See J. Glusberg, *Retorica del arte latinoamericano*, Cit., 97.

<sup>360</sup> P. Restany, “Krajcberg et l’anti-destin”, Text for Frans Krajcberg exhibition at the *Galerie “J” Paris*, 1966.

<sup>361</sup> F. Krajcberg in *O Jornal*, Rio de Janeiro, 23.04.69, quoted in “Frans Krajcberg art Adventure in Ecology”, *Frans Krajcberg. A Fragilidade da Natureza*, Curitiba: Travessa dos Editores, 2005, 74.



(The Manifesto of Rio Negro),<sup>362</sup> one of the first criticizing to the model of development the dictatorial regime adopted in the Amazons. His tireless engagement of a life in which art practices and ethics merged in a unity still continued in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In fact, on the occasion of his retrospective exhibition *Frans Krajcberg: Natura*, in the OCA building at the MAM, Museo de Arte Moderna in São Paulo, featuring sixty-five of his sculptures, and also including photographic and video works, invited to a round table on “Actual Challenges in Art and Ecology” in homage to his work, the apparent fragility of Krajcberg in his eighty-seven years ended up in the strength of his final claim “não façam da floresta um jardim” (beware of making the forest into a garden).<sup>363</sup>

#### 4.4 “Planting is political”: environmental artistic practices in the urban space

The reference to ecological issues through the artistic practice of Krajcberg permits us to address another important aspect concerning the organic materiality in the artistic practice in the long 1960s and that is explored in this section. Some artists, in fact, in the realm of an active political engagement, proposing alternative possibilities to construct values as equality, environmental sustainability, education, citizenship in form of dialogical and connective aesthetics, adopted the action of planting in the urban space as affirmation of equal opportunities and solidarity growth, free from economic interest. In this sense, through the act of planting enabled the purpose of enhancing the growth of a new society, a constructive response in reaction to the given society structure.

One of the most famous students and feminist slogan during the social movements in the late 1960s was Carol Hanisch’s paper-claim “The Personal is Political,”<sup>364</sup> declaring that “[...] personal problems are political problems. There are no

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<sup>362</sup> See Pierre Restany, Frans Krajcberg, Sepp Baendereck, “Manifesto do Rio Negro do Naturalismo Integral”, Colóquio Artes, nº40, March 1979, Lisboa: Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian, 50-52.

<sup>363</sup> “Desafio Atuais da Arte e Ecologia.” Mesa Redonda em homenagem a Frans Krajcberg. Participantes: Frans Krajcberg, Fabio Feldmann, Florian Breyer, e Felipe Chaimovich (mediador), OCA, MAM Museo de Arte Moderna de São Paulo, Parque Ibirapuera, November 29, 2008.

<sup>364</sup> Founding Member of the New York Radical Women, Hanisch’s paper “The Personal is Political” was originally published in Notes from the Second Year: Women’s Liberation in 1970 and was widely reprinted and passed around the Movement and beyond in the next several years.” See C. Hanisch, “Introduction”, 2006. Available at <<http://www.carolhanisch.org/CHwritings/PIP.html>> (accessed in June 2015).

personal solutions at this time. There is only collective action for a collective solution.” Arguing the importance of equal rights and opportunities in every sphere, we could mutate this sentence by interchanging the adjective “personal” with the action of “planting” to underline the political relevance of the action of planting, when carried out by artists during that period.

Although the reference to Carol Hanisch, my proposal for this section is to start from the South, considering in the first place the political agency of planting through the figure of the Guinean agronomist and politician Amilcar Cabral. As incongruent as it may appear, the pertinence of the analogy with Carol Hanisch is revealed in her own text, in which she addressed at a same level “women, blacks and workers” (those who work for a living). The political program Cabral conveyed aimed at the independence of Guinea Bissau and Cap Verde Islands from Portugal, at finding material solutions compatible with the reality of the local people, their needs, their resources and their sustainable development and acquisition of goods.<sup>365</sup> His idea of “planting seeds” in the soil, stably based on agricultural concerns for the local context, at the same time supplied him with the most productive metaphor to give birth to a revolution for the independence of the country and more broadly the African Liberation Movement.<sup>366</sup>

According to the Pan-Africanist political scientist, Ronald W. Walters: ‘Cabral explained that in his experience a cultural renaissance preceded and signaled revolutionary activity, that the affirmation of the cultural personality of the oppressed was preparation for the act of rejecting the personality imposed by the professor, and that culture carried the seed of revolt because it was the foundation of the history of a people in its unfolding and its reaction to events.’ Cabral, also an agronomist, could find no more appropriate metaphor. We must continue to plant seeds, but in soils our own.<sup>367</sup>

Moving back to the northern hemisphere on the opposite side, on the American West coast, we may find proximities between the agricultural project linked with the ideals of revolution and implementation of a more sustainable society of Amilcar Cabral

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<sup>365</sup> See Amilcar Cabral, “Algumas Notas da Guiné—algumas notas sobre as suas características e problemas fundamentais,” Separata da revista *Agros*, Vol. XLII, nº4, 1959, in Mario de Andrade (eds.) *A Arma da Teoria. Unidade e Luta I. Obras Escolhidas de Amilcar Cabral*, Lisboa: Seara Nova, 1976, 44-56.

<sup>366</sup> A remarkable work on the African Liberation Movement and the figure of Amilcar Cabral is *Conacry* (11 minutes, 2012), the short film by the Portuguese artist Filipa Cesar in collaboration with the Portuguese writer Grada Kilomba and the American Radio Activist Diana McCarty.

<sup>367</sup> Joshua Myers, “Planting Seeds: Reflections on the cultural politics of Amilcar Cabral, 2014-01-22, *Pambazuka News*. Pan-African Voices for Freedom and Justice,” Issue 662, Available at <<http://www.pambazuka.net/en/category.php/features/90277/print>> (accessed in June 2015).

and the landscape architect, planner, educator and artist Bonnie Ora Sherk.<sup>368</sup> In the 1970s she carried out the project *Crossroad Community* (also known as *The Farm*, 1974-1980) “involving the transformation of seven acres of public land in San Francisco, which was considered to be derelict into a new city ‘farm park.’”<sup>369</sup>

#### 4.4.1 Sculpting a Living Farm at a Crossroads: Bonnie Ora Sherk

In the artistic practice of Bonnie Ora Sherk, rather than an aesthetic experience separated from reality, —as referred by the art critic Will Bradley—“art itself represented a condition to aspire to, an unrealized but vital and essentially ethical sphere almost wholly unrelated to the existing institutions of art; an ‘outside’ that did not just mean life in the woods but could be manifest anywhere.”<sup>370</sup> Her first operation of introducing vegetation into the urban space occurred in June 1970, when, in collaboration with Howard Levine, transporting several palm trees and hundred meters of turf from around the streets of San Francisco, she created a series of three ephemeral Portable Parks, “with a live calf and a llama completing the effect.”<sup>371</sup> In her subsequent works she also acted as a performer in public settings away from the conventional exhibiting gallery space. In *Sitting Still I–III* (1970) she was sitting “into a found

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<sup>368</sup> This association is suggested by the exhibition *Vegetation as Political Agent* (Pav, Torino, May-December 2014) featuring both of them. As Marco Scotini declared “The exhibition therefore combines, and places on an equal footing, artistic and architectural works by thirteen international artists with documents pertaining to the pioneers of the earliest ecological revolutions, and scientific equipment relating to the botanical world. As well as works and installations, the exhibition includes a wide range of illustrations and vegetation samples, archive materials and posters produced in a broad range of different cultural contexts. The geopolitical contexts underpinning the exhibition span from the Indian Ocean (Mauritius and Réunion Islands) to Guinea-Bissau, from South Africa to Mexico.” M. Scotini, “Vegetation As A Political Agent”, *Commons Art. Le odierne esperienze relazionali della Bioarte*, PAV, Art Program, 2014, Prinp Editoria D’Arte 2.0, 2014, 48-49: 49.

<sup>369</sup> Liena Vayzman, “Farm Fresh Art: Food, Art, Politics, and the Blossoming of Social Practice”, *2.5/The Food Issue*, November 14, 2010. Available at <[http://www.artpractical.com/feature/farm\\_fresh\\_art\\_food\\_art\\_politics\\_and\\_the\\_blossoming\\_of\\_social\\_practice/](http://www.artpractical.com/feature/farm_fresh_art_food_art_politics_and_the_blossoming_of_social_practice/)> (accessed in March 2015)

<sup>370</sup> Will Bradley, “Let It Grow”, *Frieze*, Issue, 94, October 2005. Available at <[http://www.frieze.com/issue/article/let\\_it\\_grow/](http://www.frieze.com/issue/article/let_it_grow/)> (accessed in March 2015).

<sup>371</sup> Will Bradley, “Let It Grow”, *Cit.*

environment of garbage and water adjacent to a free construction site [...] facing an ‘audience’ of people in slow-moving cars.”<sup>372</sup>

Performed at the San Francisco Zoo *Public Lunch* (1971) featured Sherk eating calmly her meal in the cage next to the another where a tiger was devouring a piece of meat. For the whole duration she also paced, took notes on her feelings and on what was happening (performing the human activity of writing) and also rested, but the centrality of the entire action was reversed to the act of eating “to blur boundaries between human and animal behavior, public and private space, everyday life and spectacle.”<sup>373</sup> She remembered that day as follows:

Most people came to the zoo at the regular public feeding time o the lions and tigers at 2 pm on Saturday and in February to see the animals being fed. I was one of the animals fed on that day, and for those spectators it was a surprise. There were also a few people who came because they knew that there was to be a performance piece that I was presenting, although they did not know what the piece was going to be.<sup>374</sup>

In this work emerged her interests in “interrelationships, analogies, and communications between diverse species, and [i]n the interconnections between biological, cultural, and technological systems,”<sup>375</sup> that she would deepen in her projects later on.

In this piece, for which she wore a black dress and heels, she also addressed her idea on “ ‘cultural costumes’: styles of dress with strong gender, class, and occupational associations that might shape others’ perception of the wearer, and also might alter the wearer’s sense of self.”<sup>376</sup> Through her dress choice and her calm and elegant attitude in eating “she amplified and nuanced the contrast between human and animals meals,”<sup>377</sup> and also highlighted the aspect of consumption of a meal as a cultural fact. Her interest of meal-based performances continued with *The Waitress* (1973) and *The Short Order Cook* (1973-74)—the latter at Andy’s Donuts, at the junction of Castro and Market

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<sup>372</sup> Interview of Bonnie Ora Sherk, in Stephanie Smith, *Feast. Radical Hospitality in Contemporary Art*, Smart Museum of Art, The University of Chicago, February 16 – June 10, 2012. Excerpt available at <<http://www.alivinglibrary.org/blog/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/Feast-Bonnie-Ora-Sherk.pdf>> (accessed in March 2015), 128-133: 128.

<sup>373</sup> “Conceptual and Performance Feasts: Bonnie Ora Sherk”, 126, in Stephanie Smith, *Cit.*

<sup>374</sup> Interview of Bonnie Ora Sherk, in *Cit.*, 132.

<sup>375</sup> “Conceptual and Performance Feasts: Bonnie Ora Sherk”, 126, in *Cit.*

<sup>376</sup> “Conceptual and Performance Feasts: Bonnie Ora Sherk”, 126, in *Cit.*

<sup>377</sup> “Conceptual and Performance Feasts: Bonnie Ora Sherk”, 126, in *Cit.*

Street in San Francisco—wearing a waitress uniform in the first and jeans and t-shirt in the second. In both cases Sherk attempted to blur or erase any boundary between art and life involving the concept of hospitality as connected with the preparation and offer of a meal, “as a simple, common element, with multiple symbolic meanings. Food as material is something accessible to all of us.”<sup>378</sup>

The aspects, at the core of Bonnie Ora Sherk’s artistic research, explored in these early works, delving into the relationship between human, animal and natural environment, merged and expanded in 1974, in her major project with her co-worker Jack Wickert, entitled *Crossroads Community (The Farm)*, that for years afterwards she herself considered not only as the first alternative art space at that time, pioneering in urban agriculture, but also, regarding her approach, a performance as those she did before.<sup>379</sup> As the curator and writer Mirjana Blankenship referred in her essay “The Farm by the Freeway”

From 1974 to 1987, the derelict spaces underneath and beside the freeway sprouted corn stalks, vegetable gardens, fruit orchards, goats, children, and circuses—all under the umbrella of art and ecology. Crossroad Community (The farm) was one of San Francisco’s early community cultural spaces that sought to connect people, animals, plants, and resources, heralding a new form of ecological thinking in an increasingly industrial and gentrified city. While post-millennial San Francisco is a city where Victory Gardens grow by City Hall and urban farming thrives, in the 1970s the concept of a farm by the freeway was not an ordinary sight, but the inception of a revolution.<sup>380</sup>

*The Farm* was a collective project of artists and local activists for, and involving, the local community, including activities described by the co-founder Jack Wickert, such as “hammering, sawing, digging, picking, carrying, lugging, toting, hauling, sweeping, mowing.”<sup>381</sup> The *Crossroad Community*, a living site-specific sculpture in the open space, was “a farmhouse, a vegetable patch, a theatre, a rehearsal space, a ‘school without walls’, a library, a darkroom and gardens ‘for humans and

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<sup>378</sup> Interview of Bonnie Ora Sherk, in *Cit.*, 133.

<sup>379</sup> See Interview to Bonnie Ora Sherk, in *Cit.*, 128.

<sup>380</sup> Mirjana Blankenship “The Farm by the Freeway”, Chris Carlsson (eds.) *Ten Years That Shook the City: San Francisco 1968-1978*, San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2011, 219-231. Excerpt available at <[http://foundsf.org/index.php?title=The\\_Farm\\_by\\_the\\_Freeway](http://foundsf.org/index.php?title=The_Farm_by_the_Freeway)> (accessed in March 2015).

<sup>381</sup> Alfred Frankenstein, *San Francisco Chronicle*, 9 December 1976, quoted by Will Bradley, “Let It Grow”, *Cit.*

other animals.”<sup>382</sup> An article published in the San Francisco Chronicle in 1979 described *The Farm* in its essential heterogeneity and inspiring diversity:

On most days you would be likely to encounter such scenes as: people of all ages and races tending vegetables, flowers and small fruit trees; ducks and geese and chickens performing in the Raw Egg Animal Theatre, a barn-like area where the audience consists mostly of young children getting acquainted with the animals, listening to their sounds, drawing pictures of them; and demonstration lectures by an expert in gardening showing neighborhood people how to grow more vegetables in their own yards.<sup>383</sup>

The structure of *The Farm* contained an actual farm with animals and vegetable gardens in the lower part, while upstairs there was a library and an art gallery, and at the bottom a school. Considered in retrospect, Will Bradley highlighted the importance of *The Farm* for intersecting modern art and Utopian radicalism, with a broad activist vision but acting in the local community; using “a rhetoric drawn both from the art mainstream—creativity, personal development and freedom, the harmony of nature—and from the avant-garde, with its drawing together of art and life, to give temporary legitimacy to a project whose aim was to establish a social model in explicit opposition to the prevailing conditions.”<sup>384</sup> This multidisciplinary and multicultural center proliferated with the coexistence of art, nature and technology in their variety of sustainable ways, until the local institution claimed the space, and despite Bonnie Ora Sherk and other members’ of *The Farm* to keep it alive, when it reached 80,000 signatures presented in vain in 1976. In 1977 the Prop J - The Open Space Pass Fund project was approved, in 1980 the construction of an urban park was approved and Sherk left *The Farm*, which was eventually completely dismantled in 1987.

Bonnie Ora Sherk has been continuing her work on community gardens, providing a link between ecological and sustainable development, at Braunstein/Quay Gallery in San Francisco with her projects *A Living Library & Think Park*, the latter meaning a space to “think, feel and be more empathetic to each other and all species.” In her words

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<sup>382</sup> Will Bradley, “Let It Grow”, *Cit.*

<sup>383</sup> Harold Gilliam, ‘A Battle of Open Space out on Potrero’, *San Francisco Chronicle*, 8 July 1979, quoted by Will Bradley, “Let It Grow”, *Cit.*

<sup>384</sup> Will Bradley, “Let It Grow”, *Cit.*

*A Living Library* is a metaphor: Everyone and Everything of Earth and in Space is part of A Living Library—people, birds, trees, air, water—and all the things we create, such as: parks, gardens, schools, curricula, artworks, networks, communities, businesses, celebrations. By participating in *A.L.L.*'s framework, processes, and methodologies, we learn and understand that culture and technology are interconnected and part of nature—a fundamentally important systemic idea.<sup>385</sup>

In 1990 a documentary on *The Farm* was filmed, with interviews and archive videos, produced by its co-founder Jack Wickert and directed by Mike Kavanagh, MaryEllen Churchill, and Kathy Katz.<sup>386</sup> Among the most significant testimonials worthwhile to mention in this analysis are those of Jeff Brown, the gardener at *The Farm*, when declaring: “There is something about farming that is multicultural.” An affirmation pertinent for the context in focus, but also highly productive and promising at the moment of thinking a sustainable idea of farming as a basic principle for the coexistence and mutual empowerment of any multicultural society. Joan Holden, playwright for S.F. Mime Troup, another poignant testimonial of *The Farm* remembered the positive opportunity of a space described as a “little spark of nature, this little irruption of nature in the concrete jungle, proving that life could still exist there, offers another poignant and relevant testimonial.” Holden also stressed the meaning of a space as such

The Farm represented the great alternative, independence. We did not know how much the Farm was going to be to deal with the city in the future, but the ideal was a spontaneous, grassroots independent, autonomous, collective organization that created itself. It was out of control. For the same reason that we loved it and it represented life to us that had to kill it. Because it represented disorder, misrule, anarchy.<sup>387</sup>

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<sup>385</sup> Bonnie Ora Sherk, “A Living Library & Think Park: Place-Based, ecological Transformation of Schools and Communities”, Article on Local & Global Vision of A Living Library Published in 60<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Journal for United Nations NGO/DPI Conference, September 5-7, 2007, United Nations, New York. Available at <[http://www.alivinglibrary.org/UN\\_60th\\_allarticle.html](http://www.alivinglibrary.org/UN_60th_allarticle.html)> (accessed in March 2015).

<sup>386</sup> *The Farm*, (47 mins, 1990), directed by Mike Kavanagh, MaryEllen Churchill, and Kathy Katz, produced by Jack Wickert. Available at <[http://foundsf.org/index.php?title=The\\_Farm](http://foundsf.org/index.php?title=The_Farm)> (accessed in June 2015).

<sup>387</sup> Joan Holden, *The Farm*, (47 mins, 1990).

As an artist and as a landscape architect, Bonnie Ora Sherk carried out a project, which involved the public with participatory methods in all the activities practiced, it increased the role of citizenship and individual initiative from childhood (through educational and artistic programs), it challenged the system as an institution, acting on the people and converted it in the subjective action of the individuals to construct and sow democratic values in the community. Nevertheless, if we consider the biologist and anthropologist Gregory Bateson's *Step to an Ecology of Mind*, we might notice a missing point in Sherk's ecological program, and probably in any grassroots and spontaneous, non-structured movement that before or afterwards is challenged to negotiate or disappear. Bateson's following words may function as a metaphor to synthesize the beauty, the freedom and the ephemeral in the project *Crossroads Community (The Farm)*.

It used to be said that "Nature abhors a vacuum," and indeed something of the sort seems to be true of unused potentiality for change in any biological system. In other words, if a given variable remains too long at some middle value, other variables will encroach upon its freedom, narrowing the tolerance limits until its freedom to move is zero or, more precisely, until any future movement can only be achieved at the price of disturbing the encroaching variables.<sup>388</sup>

#### 4.4.2 A Forest in the City: *Time Landscape*

By the end of the 1960s, the need to overcome the limitations of the white cube as the space to display a work of art in galleries and museums, made the artists refuse the entire system society, in search of a more authentic relationship with and within nature and the possibility it could offer. These manifestations, began in the United States and then spread internationally, and came to be known as Land Art practices, including eco-, earth-, and environmental art. As in the case previously explored, the organic materiality in the artistic practices in this research is not approached in the natural landscape, but the rather in the artificial space, the latter being, the space of the exhibition, inside a building, or outside in the urban space.

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<sup>388</sup> Gregory Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, Northvale, New Jersey, London: Jason Aronson Inc., 1987 (Originally published: San Francisco: Chandler Pub. Co., 1972), 522.



If we consider the planned and organized metropolitan areas, in which—as referred by the writer Rebecca Solnit—“streets are the space left over between buildings,”<sup>389</sup> we may find an analogy between the streets and the green areas of a city resulting in the space subtracted to buildings. Both streets and parks, or gardens in the city are also designed and built, but they are those public spaces in which the act of “walking, witnessing, being in public” in the city, where the word citizen shapes its meaning, “around participation in public life [...], and public space is merely the void between workplaces, shops, and dwellings.”<sup>390</sup>

Rebecca Solnit’s observations about the dimension of walking in the city, with its historical stratifications of various periods, on the one hand immersing the walker in a multiple temporality (between present and past) and on the other, participating in public life, resulted particularly useful for introducing *Time Landscape*, a project engaged in the history and memory of the place by the artist Alan Sonfist. It provides an example (among others referred on the following pages) of organic environment in the city, not accidental but created by a co-working team of public institutions, architects, urban planners and the citizens. Alan Sonfist’s artistic practice is closely linked to his personal experience with nature, and it sprouted as an attempt to give continuity and to contribute to the maintenance of it, ahead of its progressive destruction. He declared, in fact, “[t]he forest I witnessed as a child ended up being bulldozed and set in concrete. That was the end of my forest, and the beginning of my art.”<sup>391</sup>

In 1965, Sonfist conceived his public art project<sup>392</sup> of implanting a forest in the middle of the city that thirteen years later would find his creation in a blanket of land of 14m x 61m between La Guardia Place and West Houston Street in Manhattan: *Time Landscape* (1978). The project was commissioned by the Department of Transports and for the purpose Sonfist carried out research about the site from then to the past to the time of the Dutch arrival in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. The purpose was—according to Sonfist—“a con-temporary recreation of the natural indigenous landscape before colonial

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<sup>389</sup> Rebecca Solnit, *Wanderlust*, New York, London: Penguin Book, 2000, 345.

<sup>390</sup> R. Solnit, *Cit.*, 346.

<sup>391</sup> John K. Grande, “Natural/Cultural. Alan Sonfist”, in John K. Grande (foreword by Edward Lucie-Smith), *Art Nature Dialogues. Interviews with Environmental Artists*, New York: State University of New York Press, Albany, 2004, 165-176: 167.

<sup>392</sup> For a definition of Public Art from the point of view of the artist involved in this practice see the article: Andrea Blum, Houston Conwill, Patricia Johanson, Joyce Kozloff, Alan Sonfist, George Sugarman, Athena Tacha, John Pitman Weber e Elyn Zimmerman “Public Artists on Public Art”, *Art Journal*, Vol. 48, No. 4, Critical Issues in Public Art (Winter, 1989), 336-346, in which the authors, North-American artists gave their contribution on what is or should be public art.

settlement, a forest surrounded by skyscrapers.”<sup>393</sup> The notion of void, as the space resulting from the subtraction of urban construction, used by Solnit, is exemplified by Sonfist’s description of *Time Landscape*: “It is a time gap; a hole into the past.”<sup>394</sup> He continued explaining

It wasn't easy to bring the past into the present: I researched historical documents and original deeds, tracing the shifting form of the site from present to past, and consulted with biologists and botanists to return many of the pre-colonial species to the land. I researched the geology, identified the substructure, and brought specimens of Manhattan's native schist to the site as well.<sup>395</sup>

In this project research, going back to the history of the country of pre-colonial times to select which plants and animals could stay in *Time Landscape*, went hand in hand with his personal experience, going backward to his childhood in which the forest was a sort of pure and sacred space (afterwards destroyed by an intentional fire and kept in his memory).<sup>396</sup> In his artistic research and practice he never questioned what was or was not art, but rather “[i]t was more the uniqueness of these elements that attracted me.”<sup>397</sup> He “transplanted living tree species such as beech, oak, and maple and over two hundred different plant species native to New York, selected from a pre-colonial contact period in New York,” and also interacted with “foxes, deer, snakes, and eagles.”<sup>398</sup> He understood the urban forest as a “Nature Theater” populated not only by vegetation but also by all the sounds produced by the coexistence of flora and fauna, and “allowing the animals themselves to become the performers, the migration of birds becomes a special event.”<sup>399</sup>

Among the team working on Sonfist’s project from the fields of biology and botany, there were also a chemist and an urban planner aiming to establish which the original natural conditions of the site were and in what manner the actual pollution of

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<sup>393</sup> A. Sonfist, “Public Artists on Public Art”, *Art Journal*, Vol. 48, No. 4, 340.

<sup>394</sup> A. Sonfist, “Public Artists on Public Art”, *Cit.*, 340.

<sup>395</sup> A. Sonfist, “Public Artists on Public Art”, *Cit.*, 340.

<sup>396</sup> “My art began in the street fires of the South Bronx, late 1950s, when I was a child. Gangs and packs of wild dogs were roaming the streets where I was growing up. The neighborhood was a landscape of concrete, no trees. The Bronx River divided the two major gangs, and the river protected a primal forest. It was my sanctuary as a child. The human violence didn’t enter the forest; it was my magical cathedral. I would skip school to spend every moment I could in this forest and replenish my energy, my life. The forest became my life, and my art.” A. Sonfist in J. Grande, *Cit.*, 166.

<sup>397</sup> A. Sonfist, in J. Grande, *Cit.*, 166.

<sup>398</sup> A. Sonfist, in J. Grande, *Cit.*, 166.

<sup>399</sup> A. Sonfist, in J. Grande, *Cit.*, 167.

the city would have permitted the sustainability and survival of the animal species inhabiting *Time Landscape*.<sup>400</sup> The interest for the natural history of sites pursued by Sonfist brought J. Grande to consider his work “less that of an ideologist than that of a *bio-historian* who works with the culture/nature crossover,”<sup>401</sup> being bio-history—in Sonfist’s words—“the layering of nature in time [...] This layering is a continuum. It’s not one fixed moment. [...] Within this continuum one can select out different unique events.”<sup>402</sup>

As informed by the information plaque at the entrance, Sonfist explained that *Time Landscape* was also possible thanks to the collaboration of the local community clearing the site, planting, and to this day protecting it, making *Time Landscape* a truly public sculpture.”<sup>403</sup> And the concept of public sculpture immediately connects with the idea of “Sculpture in the expanded field” (1979) elaborated by Rosalind Krauss in a subsequent essay to describe the development and new possibilities explored from the 1960s onwards in the realm of this artistic genre, overcoming its traditional restrictions.<sup>404</sup> She argued that

The logic of sculpture, it would seem, is inseparable from the logic of the monument. By virtue of this logic a sculpture is a commemorative representation. It sits in a particular place and speaks in a symbolical tongue about the meaning or use of that place. [...] But the convention is not immutable and there came a time when the logic began to fail.<sup>405</sup>

In her survey on sculpture from the end of 19<sup>th</sup> century to the 1960s she ended up arguing the abstract condition of the sculpture to “become pure negativity: the combination of exclusions. Sculpture, it could be said, had ceased being a positivity, and was now the category that resulted from the addition of the not-landscape to the not-architecture.”<sup>406</sup> Once more Krauss’s insights bring us the notion of negativity as

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<sup>400</sup> The fulfilment of this work was also possible thanks to the intervention of the Greenwich Village planning department, members of citizen administration, the Horticultural Society of New York and various banks. See Michael Lalach, *Land Art*, Modena: Taschen, 2007, 92.

<sup>401</sup> J. Grande, *Cit.*, 167-170.

<sup>402</sup> A. Sonfist in J. Grande, *Cit.*, 170. For the concept of biohistory Sonfist also made reference to his work in *Circles of Time in Tuscany*.

<sup>403</sup> A. Sonfist, *Art Journal*, *cit.*, 340.

<sup>404</sup> See Rosalind Krauss, “Sculpture in the Expanded Field”, *October*, Vol. 8 (Spring 1979), The MIT Press, 30-44.

<sup>405</sup> R. Krauss, “Sculpture in the Expanded Field”, *Cit.*, 33.

<sup>406</sup> R. Krauss, “Sculpture in the Expanded Field”, *Cit.*, 36

the space of void in forests of concrete that *Time Landscape* offered, a “not-landscape” as she referred, since its materialisation is not the landscape of itself but a vision of a time lost in history, of which the walker can appreciate a small portion, receiving a fulfillment and a sense of loss at the same time.

Nevertheless, although Krauss highlighted the auto-referential condition of modern sculpture and its separateness from its context, *Time Landscape* attempted to celebrate the precise place in which it was created, the way it was centuries before.<sup>407</sup> Therefore, Sonfist’s explained “[a]s a war monument records the deaths of soldiers, my art records the deaths of forgotten rivers, springs, and rocks that lie buried beneath layers of concrete. Unlike a statue that records a single, timed event, my work celebrates man's interaction with the planet in geological time.”<sup>408</sup> And finally he declared

By involving the community's past and present in a work of public art, we increase our awareness of ourselves and our history. Public art in public places celebrates shared values and must embody them to survive. People must learn to see themselves not as an isolated force standing at the edge of a cliff but as a continuum of the natural world. And it would be a fatal mistake to exclude, in any conception of human history, the earth we stand on, our land. If that bronze rider does not get off that bronze horse and live in the world, the world may continue without him.<sup>409</sup>

The importance of *Time Landscape* is not only exemplary as public art, but also as public heritage, materializing in the present a natural ecosystem of a past period, maintained to exist for the future generations, and at the same time to offer a dimension of continuity between, and coexistence of, nature and culture.

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<sup>407</sup> In an early statement Sonfist declared: “Natural phenomena, natural events and the living creatures on the planet should be honored and celebrated along with human beings and events.” A. Sonfist, “Natural Phenomena as Public Monuments” (1968), in K. Stiles and P. Selz (eds.), *Theories and documents of contemporary art. A sourcebook of artists’ writings*, Cit., 547.

<sup>408</sup> A. Sonfist, “Public Artists on Public Art”, *Cit.*, 340.

<sup>409</sup> A. Sonfist, “Public Artists on Public Art”, *Cit.*, 340.

#### 4.4.3 About the Environmental Sculpture of Agnes Denes

Apart from the male land artist community arisen in New York by the end of the 1960s, and aimed at a need to inhabit the landscape to fulfil her ecological ideal founded upon philosophical issues, rather than for expanding the artwork outside the walls of the exhibiting space, the Hungarian-born Agnes Denes soon abandoned the practice of painting to definitely immerse in and pioneer environmental art. Her visual artistic practice was accompanied by an intense activity of writing, sometimes in the form of essays, others in poems. And she also used shorter expressions to put her ideas and concepts into words, as in the case of one of her first written works, “Exercises in Eco-Logic” (1967). In it she stated, “[m]ake art with rivers, forests, roots, wolves, crawling insects, history, forms into concepts, put words into fossils and bones. Read the past and foresee the future. Do drawings in black and white. Everyday life has color, make art without color to become distinct.”<sup>410</sup>

In 1968 she presented her “first eco-act”<sup>411</sup> in the form of a private ritual in Sullivan County, New York: *Rice/Tree/Burial* (1968). The order of the three terms obeyed the succession of three different symbolical actions: planting rice, chaining trees and burying a poem. The first in the order represented the initiation of the life cycle and its growth. “Preparing the Seedbed”<sup>412</sup> for sowing the soil as the start to set a new something “into motion (fertilization, conceiving, induction).”<sup>413</sup> Performing the chain of the trees meant for Denes “to indicate interference with life and natural processes (evolutionary mutation, variation, decay, death).”<sup>414</sup> But we may also note the ambivalence of putting chains, round trees, as creating bonds, connections and on the other hand turning them loose, confining, including, and therefore, excluding.

The ambivalence inherent to this act contains what Denes expressed as “the mysterious life-force of an organism and its partial triumph over boundaries and restraint—its uneven, limited transcendence. Chaining trees also expressed choice, the selection and defining necessary in the creative process.”<sup>415</sup> In Denes’s words the

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<sup>410</sup> Agnes Denes, “Exercises in Eco-Logic” (1968), In Klaus Ottman (ed.), *The Human Argument. The Writing of Agnes Denes*, New York: Spring Publications, 2008, 264.

<sup>411</sup> See A. Denes, “Exercises in Eco-Logic”, 1968, in Klaus Ottman (eds.), *Cit.*, 264.

<sup>412</sup> A. Denes, “Rice/Tree/Burial” (1968-79), K. Ottman (ed.), *Cit.*, 93.

<sup>413</sup> A. Denes, “Rice/Tree/Burial” (1968-79), K. Ottman (ed.), *Cit.*, 87.

<sup>414</sup> A. Denes, “Rice/Tree/Burial” (1968-79), K. Ottman (ed.), *Cit.*, 87.

<sup>415</sup> A. Denes, “Rice/Tree/Burial” (1968-79), K. Ottman (ed.), *Cit.*, 87.

creative process is, therefore, manifested not as an additional process but rather on a subtractive one in neo-platonic terms, a selection among the present matter. Chaining acquires the sculptural accent with the “marble” replaced by forest. “The chained trees stood as monuments to human thought versus nature,” she declared, which suggests to me an analogy with Michelangelo’s first strophe from his Sonnet 151, “The best of artists do not own any concept that is not already contained in the marble and its superfluous matter, and only the hand obeying the intellect can accomplish it.”<sup>416</sup>

Consequently, the following act of burial of the haiku (“in an airtight container, twelve feet deep”)<sup>417</sup> Denes wrote and of which did not made a copy, “giving up to the soil”, as she recalled, “represented the concept as essence of invention, which connects and defines life and death and acts as modifier and rationale for both.”<sup>418</sup> The burial marked our intimate relationship with the earth, indicating trespassing, disintegration and transformation on the one hand and on the other hand, a source of life and “metaphor for human intelligence and transcendence through the communication of ideas”<sup>419</sup> to future generations. In this sense, the burial functions as a sort of pacification, not as a reiteration of life but rather as a humble acceptance of its finitude in order to leave space to future descendants.

The three moments of this action, exemplified by the triangle with which Denes schematized he ritual,<sup>420</sup> are part of the cycle of phenomena from chaos to order, again and again, so the rice, the tree and the burial come to be analogous, interactive and interdependent. This ritual marked the beginning of Agnes Denes’s artistic creation that she defined as “visual philosophy”,

a complex process that explores essences as forms of communication. It finds methods to put analytical propositions into visual form, defines elusive processes and creates analogies among divergent fields and thought processes. It challenges the status quo and tests its own validity.<sup>421</sup>

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<sup>416</sup> “Non ha l’ottimo artista alcun concetto c’un marmo solo in sé non circonscriba col suo superchio, e solo a quello arriva la man che ubbidisce all’intelletto.” Michelangelo, 151 “Non ha l’ottimo artista alcun concetto”, in Michelangelo Buonarroti, *Rime*, Bari: Laterza, 1967. My translation from 16<sup>th</sup> century Italian.

<sup>417</sup> A. Denes, “Exercise In Eco-Logic (1969), K. Ottman (ed.), *Cit.*, 103.

<sup>418</sup> A. Denes, “Rice/Tree/Burial” (1968-79), K. Ottman (ed.), *Cit.*, 88.

<sup>419</sup> A. Denes, “Rice/Tree/Burial” (1968-79), K. Ottman (ed.), *Cit.*, 88.

<sup>420</sup> A. Denes, “Exercise In Eco-Logic (1969), K. Ottman (ed.), *Cit.*, 103.

<sup>421</sup> A. Denes, “Rice/Tree/Burial” (1968-79), K. Ottman (ed.), *Cit.*, 88-89.

In form of continuation of this work, at Artpark in Lewiston in New York, Denes elaborated another project entitled *Rice/Tree/Burial—Chained Forest*, chaining the trees of a sacred Indian forest and *Rice/Tree/Burial—Time Capsule 1979-2979*, burying instead of a haiku, a time capsule at 47° 10' longitude and 79° 2' 32'' latitude inside the park. The capsule in steel, contained in a lead box in 9ft of concrete, contrary what to could be expected, did not contain objects but a series of desiccated microfilms (a material that accentuates the ephemerality of the process as a durational fact, as well as the contingency of the medium) and placed inside steel with responses by university students from around the world providing answers for the questionnaire. This was composed of 27 questions, “dealing—as written on its sign in the park—with human values, the quality of life and the future of mankind. Since this is an attempt in communication between our era and a distant time in the future (a thousand years hence) it is essential that this time capsule remain undisturbed until the designated time.”<sup>422</sup> And finally, together with the questionnaire and the microfilms, there was a letter that Denes addressed to the “*Dear Homo Futurus.*”<sup>423</sup>

Among the works composing the extensive artistic production of Agnes Denes, at this point we are going to focus on her urban project in New York city, in which her ecological concerns assumed a powerful political relevance: *Wheatfield—A Confrontation* (1982). The site chosen for this work was a plot of land of two acres at the Battery Park, in lower Manhattan, close (at that time) to the World Trade Center, which had been inaugurated in 1973. This area, from 1981 onwards, registered an increase in the construction of buildings that would turn it in the neuralgic centre for business and multinational companies on global scale. In “The Philosophy” of this project, Denes intended

to plant a wheatfield in Manhattan instead of designing just another public sculpture grew out of the long-standing concern and need to call attention to our misplaced priorities and deteriorating human values. Manhattan is the richest, most professional, most congested and, without a doubt, most fascinating island in the world. To attempt to plant, sustain and harvest two acres of wheat here, wasting valuable real estate and obstructing the "machinery" by going against

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<sup>422</sup> Agnes Denes, “Notes on Ecologic: Environmental Artwork, Visual Philosophy and Global Perspective”, *Leonardo*, Vol. 25, n° 5, Art and Social Consciousness, Special Issue, 387-395: 389.

<sup>423</sup> A. Denes, “Rice/Tree/Burial” (1968-79), K. Ottman (ed.), *Cit.*, 89.

the sys-tem, was an effrontery that made it the powerful paradox I had sought for the calling to account.<sup>424</sup>

For as bizarre as such a project apparently might seem, Denes was aware of the impact that a huge field planted between the World Trade Center, opposite to the Statue of Liberty, and nearby Wall Street would provoke. With this astonishing visibility, *Wheatfield—A Confrontation* would have pushed all the people, not just the local community, to reset the table of priorities with values divergent from those defined on a basis of material and economic parameters, to alert us on the current situation of danger for life on the planet, and therefore it would invite everyone to think about the matter.

*Wheatfield* represented for Denes “food, energy, commerce, world trade, economics,” and therefore also “mismanagement, waste, world hunger, and ecological concerns.”<sup>425</sup> Attempting to deal with a universal concept, it aimed to confront the High Civilization, while providing what she defined as a sort of “Shangri-La,” a harmonious and peaceful place in which it was still possible to benefit from “forgotten values, [and] simple pleasures.”<sup>426</sup> On the contrary of a country field or a farm, the soil in Battery Park was not biologically rich or fertile, nor clean; it was “full of rusty metal, boulders, old tires, overcoats, [but still] every inch was precious real estate.”<sup>427</sup> But precisely the difficulties the territory as such obliged us to face, provided the challenge and substantiated the concept at the basis of this project, which otherwise would not have found its *raison d’être*.

The cleaning and digging of the soil began in March, and the on 1<sup>st</sup> of May in the morning the plantation of wheat started. The act of planting “consisted of digging 285 furrows by hand, clearing off rocks and garbage, then placing the seed by hand and covering the furrow with soil. Each furrow took two to three hours.”<sup>428</sup> The plantation phase lasted for sixteen days, was maintained during four months and—according to what is referred in Denes’s “The Act”—on August 16 the harvest started getting to the amount of “more than 1,000 pounds of healthy, golden wheat.”<sup>429</sup> The funding for this project was limited, but Denes could count on the help of her two assistants and around

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<sup>424</sup> A. Denes, “Wheatfield—A Confrontation” (1982), K. Ottman (ed.), *Cit.*, 162.

<sup>425</sup> A. Denes, “Wheatfield—A Confrontation” (1982), K. Ottman (ed.), *Cit.*, 162.

<sup>426</sup> A. Denes, “Wheatfield—A Confrontation” (1982), K. Ottman (ed.), *Cit.*, 162.

<sup>427</sup> A. Denes, “Wheatfield—A Confrontation” (1982), K. Ottman (ed.), *Cit.*, 162.

<sup>428</sup> A. Denes, “Wheatfield—A Confrontation” (1982), K. Ottman (ed.), *Cit.*, 164.

<sup>429</sup> A. Denes, “Wheatfield—A Confrontation” (1982), K. Ottman (ed.), *Cit.*, 165.



two to seven volunteers per day. Afterwards, in the same year, “during the wheat embargo with Russia, [Denes] proposed the synchronized planting of three wheat fields to the governments of the three superpowers in Moscow, Beijing, and Washington, D.C.”<sup>430</sup> Bringing together USA and URSS through the wheat in a symbolic action of reunification had a powerful meaning in the full of the Cold War.

*Wheatfield—A Confrontation* not only meant a taking into account towards global issues, such as food, economics and ecology, but it also attempted to abolish the dichotomy between nature and culture, without negating their differences. As Mark Daniel Cohen pointed out

The wheatfield and the city are of different orders, there is a jolt of inappropriateness in laying one in the lap of the other, and yet they are interdependent. The city depends for survival on the field of natural growth, and what is grown is the stuff of commerce, of business, the trade that grows a city. This is not the identity but the harmony of seeming opposites, the search not for interchangeability but for balance.<sup>431</sup>

In the summer of 1990, the art journal *Critical Inquiry* dedicated part of the issue to “Public Art”, including texts by artists with one of Agnes Denes, among others. The cover featured an image of the Wheatfield forming a sort of sea from whose horizons was rising the Statue of Liberty facing left, the West and in her text, entitled “The Dream”, Denes declared “I believe that the new role of the artist is to create an art that is more than decoration, commodity, or political tool. It is an art that questions the status quo and the direction life has taken, the endless contradictions we accept and approve of. It elicits and initiates thinking processes.”<sup>432</sup> In her collection of writings from 1967 to 2007, published in 2008 and containing also her Manifesto (1969)—probably the first one written by a woman artist—the editor of the volume Klaus Ottman, in the book’s introduction described *Wheatfield—A Confrontation* with a

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<sup>430</sup> A. Denes, “Wheatfield—A Confrontation” (1982), K. Ottman (ed.), *Cit.*, 165.

<sup>431</sup> Mark Daniel Cohen, “The Self-Intricating Art of the Mind. Agnes Denes: Uprooted & Deified—The Golden Tree”, *Hyperion: On the Future of Aesthetics*, volume II, issue 1, February 16 – March 17, 2007, 1-8: 6. Available at [http://www.agnesdenesstudio.com/WRITINGS The Self Intricating Art of the Mind by Mark Daniel Cohen.pdf](http://www.agnesdenesstudio.com/WRITINGS%20The%20Self%20Intricating%20Art%20of%20the%20Mind%20by%20Mark%20Daniel%20Cohen.pdf) (accessed in January 2013).

<sup>432</sup> Agnes Denes, “The Dream”, *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 16, N.4 (Summer 1990), Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 919-939: 920.

temporal metaphor, imagining this work as seen by the perspective of ancient Greek historian Plutarch.

Quoting Aeschylus (“The field I sow is twelve days’ journey round; Berecynthian land”), Plutarch reminds us that “if this speaker was not merely a lover of agriculture but also a lover of fellow men, he would find more pleasure in sowing the field which could fellow men...but if [he meant]: “I sow all this in order that I may subjugate the whole inhabited world”, I deprecate the sentiment. Plutarch would surely have revered the two-acre wheat field that Denes planted in 1982 at the foot of the World Trade Center in Manhattan’s financial district – a work dealing with corporate greed and world hunger. It yielded one thousand pounds of wheat – one of the first large-scale ecological works of art and, to my knowledge, the first art capable of literally feeding humanity.<sup>433</sup>

Thirty-three years later the Riccardo Catella Foundation, the Nicola Trussardi Foundation and Confagricoltura invited Agnes Denes and founded the paramount re-proposition of “the wheat-field” expanded on a surface of five hectares in the city of Milan.<sup>434</sup> This invitation is not surprising if we consider that on the 1<sup>st</sup> of May of the same year in the city “Milano Expo 2015 Feeding the Planet, Energy for Life” was inaugurated. From its inception, and even previous to it, various voices in favour and against “Expo2015” found their expression in national and international journals and platforms, as can be expected of such a colossal event and consequent huge investments, most of the times questionable, if put on the balance of priorities in the political and social agenda up to those appointed for the task. Nevertheless, in the context of Expo, whether the pertinence, supposed or proved, of Agnes Denes’s *Wheatfield* re-created in Milan, I would argue that the figure of the woman and artist of inspiring and unique philosophical and emotional artistic work came out diminished, if not completely misled. Or, perhaps, I am mistaken. But as the title clearly refers, it was not only a “Wheatfield”; it was also, and foremost, “A Confrontation.” But the times are not mature yet and, as she has taught throughout her artistic practice, the future will tell on us.

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<sup>433</sup> K. Ottmann, “Introduction”, in K. Ottman (ed.), *Cit.*, xiii.

<sup>434</sup> See Maika Pollack, “Interview to Agnes Denes”, *Interview Magazine*, June 2, 2015. Available at <<http://www.interviewmagazine.com/art/agnes-denes/#>> (accessed in August 2015).

#### 4.4.4 Towards the plantation of a new society

In this section it has been possible to observe the ecological concerns at the base of collective artistic projects for the improvement of the community life in Bonnie Ora Sherk; to become aware of our ancient past and be able to question the present with Alan Sonfist. To respect to our environment in the long run envisioning a more sustainable life for us and the future generations with Agnes Denes, hence for a human reconstruction, as in the case of *7000 Oaks* (Kassel, 1982) by Joseph Beuys, whose work brings our focus back to Europe. His artistic practice from the mid-1960s, closely connected to his elaboration of a “Theory of Social Sculpture,”<sup>435</sup> involved the cultivation of plants, the participation of animals, his own body and the use of other organic elements, to communicate metaphorical messages in the attempt of conjoining art with other spheres of life, such as political action and green philosophy.

As many other artists of his time, Beuys started his artistic career by doing oil paintings, drawings watercolours, and sculptures during twelve years, to reach in the 1960s the field of performance and experimental Actions, in the same line as Kaprow and Vostell.<sup>436</sup> Therefore, the organic materiality present in Beuys’s art corresponded with his statement “man must be aware that he keeps together everything: the plant, the animal, the earth, and that these elements are, essentially, the very same organs of man.”<sup>437</sup> The inseparability in compartments of his research imposes treating the main characters of his production in the same place, and before addressing his monumental environmental piece for the city of Kassel, I will concentrate on another fundamental aspect of his poetics: the animal dimension.

On the 26<sup>th</sup> of November 1965 at the Galerie Schmela in Dusseldorf he presented *How to explain Pictures to a Dead Hare* (1965). The pictures to be explained were his own work exhibited in the gallery space, in which he walked during three hours with an iron sole attached to one foot and a felt sole to the other. His face was

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<sup>435</sup> See chapter 3.

<sup>436</sup> See P. Schimmel, *Cit.*, 80. Schimmel continued arguing: “Through the performances he was able to affect and influence a broad public to a degree that was never possible with his drawings. Beuys’s hermetic artistic language, sophisticated manipulation of the media, and repositioning the figure of the artist from the aesthetic into the political arena profoundly altered the trajectory of art.”

<sup>437</sup> “L’homme doit avoir conscience que tout tient ensemble: la plante, l’animal, la terre et que ces éléments sont, pratiquement, les organes mêmes de l’homme.” Joseph Beuys quoted by F. De Mèredieu, *Cit.*, 278.

covered with honey and gold leaf and in his arms he was carrying a dead hare and took its paw to touch his works while making a tour of the exhibition. He afterwards sat on a bench and keeping mute, he “explained” the images to the hare. Beuys and the hare were the only spectators of that exhibition, and in order to create this kind of intimate space he “insisted that the gallery remain closed to the public, so that this performance was visible only through the doorway and street window.”<sup>438</sup> He commented this Action as follows:

This was a complex tableau about the problem of language, and about the problems of thought, of human consciousness and of the consciousness of animals. [...] The hare incarnates himself into the earth, which is what we humans can only radically achieve with our thinking: he rubs, pushes, digs himself into materia (earth); finally penetrates (rabbit) its laws, and through this work his thinking is sharpened, then transformed, and becomes revolutionary.<sup>439</sup>

The hare was the central element of the entire action.<sup>440</sup> Its highly symbolic presence represented a connection between life and death, while the honey, secreted by bees meant the organic productivity. It, therefore, defined a contrast, or rather the necessity of mediation, of union, between the lively and sensuous experience of the world and intellectual thinking. The latter is lively as well as honey is, but in his “Statement on How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare”, Beuys alerted one of the dangers of an arid abstract thinking turning into dead thinking, and applied to political and pedagogical fields. In this statement he continued declaring

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<sup>438</sup> P. Schimmel, *Cit.*, 80.

<sup>439</sup> Beuys, Joseph (1972) *Zeichnungen von 1947–69*. Exhibition catalogue. Galerie Schmela Düsseldorf, Munich: Schirmer Mosel, 10, quoted by G. Berghaus, “Happenings in Europe: Trends, Events, and Leading Figures”, *Cit.*, 280.

<sup>440</sup> For a further symbolic definition of the hare, see that provided by J. E. Cirlot in his *Diccionario de Símbolos*, *Cit.*, 284-285. “En el sistema jeroglífico egipcio, signo determinativo del concepto Ser, simbolizando, en consecuencia, la existencia elemental. Entre los algonquinos, la Gran Liebre es el animal demiurgo. Egipto conoció también este mito. Hécate, diosa lunar, estaba en Grecia relacionada con las liebres. El correlato germánico de la citada Hécate, la diosa Harek, iba acompañada por liebres. En general, la liebre es un símbolo del procrear, ambivalente por el dualismo del sentido, natural amoral, o moral, con que se considere. Los hebreos la consideraban “animal inmundo” (Dt 14, 7). Según Rabano Mauro, simbolizaba la lujúria y la fecundidad. Sin embargo, también había sido convertida su figura en alegoría de la ligereza y de la diligencia en los servicios, pies aparece en muchos sepulcros góticos, con ese sentido emblemático, que es secundario respecto al anteriormente expuesto. Un carácter femenino es inseparable de la simbolización fundamental aludida: por ello, la liebre es también el segundo emblema de los doce del emperador de China, simbolizando la fuerza Yin en la vida del monarca. En ese país se conceptúa a la liebre como animal de presagios y se supone que vive en la luna.”

The idea of explaining to an animal conveys sense of the secrecy of the world and of existence that appeals to the imagination.[...] Imagination, inspiration, intuition and longing all lead people to sense that these other levels also play a part in understanding. [...] It's a question again of Which Reality? Is it the limited materialist understanding of material, or is it substance? Substance for me is a greater issue and includes evolutionary power which leads ultimately to the real meaning of *Materia*, with its roots in *MATER* (mother—as in 'mother earth'), as one pole of spirituality while the other encompasses the whole process of development.<sup>441</sup>

In 1969 Beuys received an invitation to set on stage the production of Goethe's *Iphigenia* and Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* at the "Theater am Turm" in Frankfurt during the *Experimenta 3 Festival*. He decided to perform both pieces simultaneously, therefore the stage was divided in two parts, on one side that for Titus (empty) and on the other that for Iphigenia (with a microphone on a stand, chalk drawings and scores written on the floor, lumps of sugar, and blocks of fat distributed on stage).<sup>442</sup> At the back of the stage he set a *tableau vivant* with a white horse—mythical animal in Siberian shamanism<sup>443</sup>—eating hay or stomping its hoofs on a resounding iron plank. In Berghaus's description of the two in one piece performed

Over the loudspeakers came fragments of both plays spoken by Claus Peymann and Wolfgang Wiens. Beuys himself, initially wrapped up in brilliant white fur, "played" Iphigenia. His movements echoed those of the horse as he spoke Goethe's text into the microphone. In between, he walked around the stage, patted the horse, squatted down and measured his head, made some guttural noises, spat fat into the Titus corner, played the cymbals. Some of the ritual actions were repeated; others were improvised and determined by the behavior of the horse.<sup>444</sup>

This was certainly not a conventional representation of theatrical plays and the texts of the two pieces, announced through an electronic medium, emblematically

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<sup>441</sup> J. Beuys, "Wie man dem toten Hasen die Bilder erkart", (1965); reprinted in English as "Statement on How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare" in Caroline Tisdall, *Joseph Beuys*, trans. Caroline Tisdall, London: Thames and Hudson, 1979, 105, quoted by Tracey Warr (eds.) *The Artist's Body*, London: Phaidon, 202-203.

<sup>442</sup> See G. Berghaus, "Cit.", 281.

<sup>443</sup> See F. De Mèredieu, *Cit.*, 278.

<sup>444</sup> G. Berghaus, "Cit.", 281.

stood—we might say—on one side as the *Logos versus Mythos*, on the other, with the organic element of the human, the animal. The other organic elements used, sugar and fat, as Florence de Mèredieu pointed out, have an animal origin and also are ductile and fluid materials; depending in fact on the contingent climatic conditions they can transit from the liquid to the solid status and vice versa. They also are calorific materials, providers of nourishment and protection. By performing this piece once more Beuys, “material of his own actions and social mentor,”<sup>445</sup> conveyed the importance to reconnect to “a pre-rational form of consciousness.”<sup>446</sup>

To conclude this brief exploration over the animal dimension in Beuys’s artistic practice, I will also refer to his Action in United States, *I Like America and America Likes Me* (1974), in which he spent one week with a coyote in the space of the René Block Gallery in New York. He was travelling by plane, and an ambulance directly transported him straight to the gallery. Then, even without stepping on the American soil, he was introduced to a coyote to spend three days with him in the same caged room. As he entered, he covered himself with a felt blanket and a felt tent. Similarly to his performance with the dead hare, the time shared with the live coyote was almost silent, sometimes interrupted by sounds and movements Beuys produced to capture the coyote’s attention, and they also directed each other’s intense moments of mutual observation.

The natural status of cohabitation among the human and non-human animal was disturbed by the presence of fifty copies of *The Wall Street Journal*, symbolizing—in Beuys’s words—“the ultimate rigor mortis inherent in the thinking about CAPITAL (in the sense of the tyranny exerted by money and power). A symptom of our time, where CAPITAL ought to have become an ARTISTIC CONCEPT.”<sup>447</sup> This Action attempted to take a position in the political context of the period in which Beuys criticized the American modern multinational interest and military commitment in the Vietnam War. As a counterpart, the coyote, a wild dog symbolizing the totemic animal of the Amerindian world, “the spirit of disorder, and the enemy of boundaries,”<sup>448</sup> connected

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<sup>445</sup> See F. De Mèredieu, *Cit.*, 278.

<sup>446</sup> G. Berghaus, “Cit.”, 281.

<sup>447</sup> J. Beuys, quoted by Caroline Tisdall, *Joseph Beuys: Coyote*, Munich: Schirmer Mosel, 1976, 16.

<sup>448</sup> Karel Krényi, “The trickster in relation to Greek mythology, in Paul Rodin (eds.), *The Trickster: A Study in American Indian Mythology*, Bell Publishing, New York, 1956, 185, quoted by G. Aloï, *Cit.*, 10.

him to the American ancestors—it is worth mentioning that apparently to the original inhabitants of America, the coyotes were considered as a sort of threatening plague, and were exterminated by the Europeans.

The eventual destruction of the pieces of journals on which the coyote urinated or just destroyed—according to Aloï—“ironically lent themselves to symbolic interpretation, the animal embodying the incompatibility of nature and man-made systems, and on another level symbolized the ‘revenge of nature’ against the subjugating and commodifying values of capitalism.”<sup>449</sup> Through his shamanic presence and rituals, the shaman being the intermediating and mystical figure apt to intermediate between the visible and invisible world, Beuys managed to create a connection with the animal, and with their final embracement, he succeeded in demonstrating the possibility of a harmonious coexistence between the human and the initially considered hostile animal, as well as a harmonious coexistence in a world in peace, cleaned out of economical interests. After the performance, Beuys left the gallery the same way he had arrived.

In the meantime his work manifested an increasing interest in political issues, till actively participating in political life. In the realm of this engagement it is possible to frame *7000 Oaks* (1982). It was his last presentation in Kassel, where he participated with a coral work extended through the entire city. At its inception, on the first day of the 7<sup>th</sup> edition of Documenta, Beuys presented 7000 basalt stones close to the entrance of the Fridericianum Museum and, opposite to it he planted the first oak. The coexistence of stone and tree featured a fruitful concretization fruit of cooperation among various entities, including the local communities and associations and the same citizens willing to participate in the selection of the sites for the plantation. This process lasted five years and it emblematically ended on the 12<sup>th</sup> of June in 1987, day of the opening of the subsequent edition, when, after Beuys’s death, his son Wenzel planted the 7000<sup>th</sup> oak.

The unity composed by the dyad stone-tree proposed a sort of yin and yang in perennial proportional mutation through the passing of time, testifying the growth of the plant in relation with the immobility of the stone, more visible at the beginning until becoming almost hidden by the plant. As the Italian art historian Antonio D’Avossa noted

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<sup>449</sup> G. Aloï, *Cit.*, 10-11.

The proportional repositioning announced by the 7000 Oaks project, for Beuys is not only that of an urban relation in change or the proportion between the oak and the basalt column situated at its feet, between the vegetal and mineral world. It is also that of the human abilities, which in a symbolic union modify the concept of art and put it in connection with nature. [...] Therefore, the collective gesture of planting has become the principal practice of his action, and the basalt column the reference that this action is in growth. The column cannot grow. On the contrary, it will shrink proportionally to the oak growth.<sup>450</sup>

*7000 Oaks* was conceived as a permanent project in the public space, and interestingly, on the same Documenta, the artist Donald Judd stated in his text “On Installation” the existence of the artwork as a form of resistance to the capitalist artistic system.<sup>451</sup> Correspondingly, Beuys envisaged this project as the putting into action of the environmental issues he urged to address and affirmed: “I believe that planting these oaks is necessary not only in biospheric terms, that is to say, in the context of matter and ecology, but in that it will raise ecological consciousness—raise it increasingly in the course of the years to come, because we shall never stop planting.”<sup>452</sup> The act of planting acquired the metaphorical meaning of planting a new society; it concretized his idea of social sculpture<sup>453</sup> to shape a society not regulated by economic mechanisms but pursuing a renovation among the humans, all the living and non-living entities, and their communal existence. In form of enclosure, and in line with the philosophical premises

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<sup>450</sup> “Lo spostamento proporzionale annunciato dal progetto delle *7000 Querce* per Beuys non è solo quello di un rapporto urbano che cambia o della relazione e della misura tra la quercia e la colonna di basalto disposta ai suoi piedi, tra il mondo vegetale e il mondo minerale, ma è anche quello delle capacità umane che in simbolica comunione modificano il concetto di arte e lo avvicinano alla natura. [...] Dunque è diventato il gesto collettivo del piantare la pratica principale della sua azione, e la colonna basaltica il punto di riferimento che questa azione è in crescita. La colonna non può crescere, anzi si ridurrà proporzionalmente alla crescita della quercia.” Antonio D’Avossa, *Joseph Beuys. Difesa della natura*, Milano: Skira, 2001, 26. My translation from the Italian.

<sup>451</sup> “Permanent installations and careful maintenance are crucial to the autonomy and integrity of art and to its defence, especially now when so many people want to use it for something else», Donald Judd “On Installation.” Documenta 7, Kassel, 1982, 164-67, in James Meyer, *Minimalism*, London/New York: Phaidon 2000, p.268, quoted by Margarida Brito Alves, *O Espaço na Criação Artística do Século XX*, Lisboa: Colibri, 177.

<sup>452</sup> Tree-Planting Project after Joseph Beuys’ *7000 Oaks* on the occasion of Walker Art Center’s exhibition, Joseph Beuys MULTIPLES], Available at <http://www.walkerart.org/archive/5/A443691B863A96046164.htm> (accessed in December 2012).

<sup>453</sup> “My objects are to be seen as stimulants for the transformation of the idea of sculpture, or of art in general. They should provoke thoughts about what sculpture can be and how the concept of sculpting can be extended to the invisible materials used by everyone: Thinking Forms – how we mould our thoughts or Spoken forms – how we shape our thoughts into words or SOCIAL SCULPTURE how we mould and shape the world in which we live: Sculpture as an evolutionary process; everyone an artist. That is why the nature of my sculpture is not fixed and finished. Processes continue in most of them: chemical reactions, fermentations, colour changes, decay, drying up. Everything is in a state of change.” Joseph Beuys, 23/04/1979, in Volker Harlan, *What is art? Joseph Beuys*, United Kingdom: Clearview Books, 2004, 9.



of this research on organic materiality in the artistic practices in the 20<sup>th</sup> century art, it seems pertinent to mention Florence de Mèredieu declaring, “[t]he entire plastic work of Beuys is the image of his Vitalist scheme.”<sup>454</sup>

#### 4.5 Carnal Embodiments (And What It Then Conveys)

Far from distinguishing any type of hierarchies between plants, animals and the human body, at least a physical distinction between the first group and the other two is that plants own a lymphatic system instead of a cardiovascular system. In other words, plants do not bleed. In the last part of this section centred on the organic materiality during the long 1960s, I will briefly mention the exhibition of animal organic fluids, such as blood (human and non-human), and their essential role for the transference of meaning inherent to the practices in which it was displayed.

In the realm of breaking down boundaries within the practices of art, Eleanor Antin conceived her project of *Blood of the Poet Box* (1965-1968). Being also a poet, and therefore, participating in poetry readings and close to the circles of poets, she designed a box that, reminiscent of Duchamp’s *Boîte-en-valise* (1941-1948), a suitcase in which he collected miniatures of his works, she imagined a box containing others’ “belongings”, the blood of one hundred poets she personally met. In an interview given in 2009, she remembered that the idea arose almost accidentally. She had received a sewing box for Christmas, from the brand Sewing Susan and afterwards, in the window of a science store, she saw an old one of the same, which inspired her in doing the piece.<sup>455</sup>

The title came from Jean Cocteau’s avant-garde movie *Blood of a Poet* (*Le sang d’un Poète*, 1930), she therefore intended her homonymous box as “sort of kidding

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<sup>454</sup> “L’œuvre plastique entière de Beuys est à l’image de ce schéma vitaliste.” F. De Mèredieu, *Cit.*, 279.

<sup>455</sup> “So I had this Sewing Susan and I just bought some antiseptic and cotton and I started - I started with David [Antin, her husband] to see what it would be like to draw blood - eeww, I stuck his finger. It was gross. But he was my guinea pig and I covered the specimen with a slide cover like they do in the lab. And I had my first blood slide.” *Interview with Eleanor Antin*, conducted by Judith Olch Richards at Artist’s studio in Del Mar, California May 8, 2009. Available at <<http://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-eleanor-antin-15792>> (accessed in March 2015).

around at first with the idea of the artist's soul, his life's blood.”<sup>456</sup> Her attempt was to question, in an ironic way, the pre-eminence of the artist, by taking his most basic and lively biological element, the blood, to guard his identity. Being itself and, at the same time, ironizing any fetishistic attitude towards collecting objects that belongs to important people, artists in this case, this process maintained its own poetry through the material collected.

As she recognized afterwards, it could have been DNA, generally considered the detector of identities, but I would add that this sophistication would have impelled the fluidity and relational character of this process. Blood flows, it is dynamic in its essence, a vehicle, and also a transmitter, it can save or infect. It is a very carnal symbol of life. At the same time, blood is also historically linked to the biological lineage with social class demarcation: having blue blood was synonym of coming from a royal or very important family. And, as a third remark, the instrument used to let the material come out was a needle for sewing, which reminds one of to the domestic spheres, and therefore to the woman's sphere. Eventually, blood symbolizes the notion of belonging by excellence; let us think about the expression “blood of my blood,” which declares so much in meaning through such a short phrase. Among others, she received samples for her box from the “beat” poets Allen Ginsberg and Lawrence Ferlinghetti, the poets Barbara Guest and Diane Wakoski, and the artists Carolee Schneemann and Yvonne Rainer.

The artist's body, whose blood Antin collected in her playful and poetic work, occupied a central role between the end of 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s in artistic practices at the core of which the exposure to situations of risk, suffering and masochism served to materially reject, in François Pluchart's words, “the prostitutorial overvaluing of beauty,”<sup>457</sup> substituted by an emergence for body expressiveness, “in order to produce thought.”<sup>458</sup> In this sense, the provocation pursued by Viennese Actionism (*Wiener Aktionismus*, 1960-1971) in their performances was transformed into a “shock-like experience.”<sup>459</sup> The Viennese Actionists, or the “Wiener Aktionisten”

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<sup>456</sup> *Interview with Eleanor Antin*, Cit.

<sup>457</sup> F. Pluchart “L'Art Corporel”, (1974) Paris: Éditions Galerie Stadler, 1975, 4-5, in T. Warr (eds.), *Cit.*, 216-217.

<sup>458</sup> F. Pluchart, “Risk as the Practice of Thought”, *Flash Art*, 80-81, February-April 1978, 39-40, in T. Warr (eds.), *Cit.*, 219-221.

<sup>459</sup> Hanno Millesi, “Comments on Viennese Actionism”, *The Collection*, Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien, Exhibition Catalogue, Curated by Lòrànd Hegyi, Wien, 2001, 159-185: 161.

as they were named by Peter Weibel and Valie EXPORT in the book they edited on the group,<sup>460</sup> were Günter Brus, Otto Muehl, Rudolf Schwarzkogler, and Hermann Nitsch. In the attempt of merging art and life, their spectacular and aggressive actions mainly took place behind closed doors, or they were attended by only a few initiated.<sup>461</sup> During these actions, sexually explicit and visceral, in fact, they used “their own and collaborators’ bodies as ‘material’, along with excrement (their own) and other bodily fluids, animal blood and body parts, paint, and sharp objects.”<sup>462</sup>

The list of practitioners in this sphere of action could be lengthened—I will just mention Michel Journiac’s *Messe pour une corpe* (*Mess for a body*, 1969), a sort of ritual event in which he offered a pudding made with his own blood; and Gina Pane, whose performances are probably the most famous for the artist exposing herself in self-inflicted violent situations. Nevertheless, the aim of this work is precisely that of decentering the artist as material and focus on the organic materiality in a lateral sense, more oriented to plants and non-human animals. The importance of having presented in a short form the human organic aspect finds its reason in permitting to draw the line of the organic materiality in the 20<sup>th</sup> century art. Having the 20<sup>th</sup> century as chronological framework, the long 1960s treated in this chapter demonstrate to be—with the three levels of vegetal, non-human, and human animal—the mature, or adult phase of the organic materiality in the 20<sup>th</sup> century art.

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As an aside, particularly significant appear the figure of the playwright Antonin Artaud when referring to a “body without organs” in his *To Have Done with the Judgement of God* (1947), a concept that the philosopher Gilles Deleuze borrowed in some of his writings by the end of the 1960s. Through philosophical anthropology, we could observe that a living body is an organic complex, an organism that is not simply the sum of its parts, but a unit in each part of it, therefore the organs composing it are

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<sup>460</sup> See Mechtild Widrich, “The Informative Public of Performance. A Study of Viennese Actionism, 1965–1970 TDR: The Drama Review 57:1 (T217) Spring 2013. ©2013 New York University and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 137-151: 138.

<sup>461</sup> Hanno Millesi, “Comments on Viennese Actionism”, *Cit.*, 162.

<sup>462</sup> Mechtild Widrich, “The Informative Public of Performance. A Study of Viennese Actionism”, *Cit.*, 138.

not only part of this totality but also represent its unit. “A body without organs” sounds impossible, until technology finds a way to produce it, but Artaud’s expression is vigorous and powerful and incredibly able to express the freedom pursued by art, that he already intended as not separated from life: a so lively body to break up with its own organization. In form of conclusion, one of his poems, quoted in the closing credits of filmmaker Katrine Jacobs’s *Healing the Western Mind, Part 1: Joseph Beuys in America* (1996):

We do not live  
through our entire  
self at each  
instance of our  
bodies  
in an absolute space  
of our bodies  
We are sometimes  
knee  
sometimes foot  
sometimes lungs  
sometimes liver  
sometimes membrane  
sometimes uterus  
sometimes anus  
sometimes nose  
sometimes sex  
sometimes heart  
sometimes saliva  
sometimes urine  
sometimes aliment  
sometimes sperm  
sometimes excrement  
sometimes idea  
We are not only  
dispersed throughout  
our bodies

We are also  
dispersed  
in the outside  
of things.<sup>463</sup>

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<sup>463</sup> See Katrine Jacobs's *Healing the Western Mind, Part 1: Joseph Beuys in America* (1996), Available at <http://gazelluloid.com/post/katrien-jacobs-healing-the-western-mind-part> (accessed in April 2015). The director dedicated the Artaud's poem to Jack Burnham.



## Organic-Post-Organic Materiality

### 5.1 After the Revolution: “When Forms Have Become Attitudes—and Beyond”<sup>1</sup>

If the political stances had been at the core of the artistic practices during the 1960s and the 1970s, in the 1980s it seemed they got to an enclosure towards “private” expressions, which led to the recovery of painting. Most emblematic examples were the German neo-Expressionism, the Italian Trans-Avant-garde (headed by the curator Achille Bonito Oliva), and the North-American *Bad Painting*. Following the metaphor of life, as in the previous chapters, after the mature engagement in culture and society, it would appear, in some aspects, however, not entirely, that the artistic practices encountered with a senile introspective phase.

In this realm, the recovery of painting as a medium—as Jorge Glusberg remarked—was not be intended as “a return to painting”, since the latter never put an end to its own existence, despite its reiterated announcement of death, and even less far a “return to painting”, since it was not disconnected by the social, political and aesthetic instances of the time, nor obsessed with a mania on the future as it was for Modernity.<sup>2</sup> Glusberg continued highlighting that, after the 1970s, Conceptualism assumed diversifications in form of a sort of “conceptual imprint” in the subsequent

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<sup>1</sup> Thierry de Duve, “When Form Has Become Attitude – And Beyond”, in Zoya Kocur and Simon Leung (eds.), *Theory in Contemporary Art since 1985*, USA, UK, Australia: Blackwell Publishing, 2005, 19-31. This paper was previously originally presented at the conference “The Artist and the Academy: European perspectives on Today’s Fine Art Education,” held at Chilworth Manor, University of Southampton, UK, on December 9 and 10, 1993.

<sup>2</sup> “El retorno a la pintura no constituyó un *retorno de la pintura* – nunca dejó de existir, pese a los anuncios reiterados de su muerte – y, mucho menos, una *pintura de retorno*, ya que se nutre de la actualidad (social, política, estética), eso sí, desligada de la manía del futuro tan acendrada durante la Modernidad.”, Jorge Glusberg, *70-80-90: Setenta Artistas de las Décadas de Ochenta y Noventa*, Exhibition Catalogue, Buenos Aires, MNBA, 1986, 16.

artistic production, which overcoming the primal principle of rupture, typical of historical avant-gardes, quoted and reformulated the past with free and conscious attitude.<sup>3</sup>

In this context, nevertheless, it is possible to frame a painting made of heterogeneous materials, including those organic, such as that of the German Anselm Kiefer, who, after a trajectory through drawing and painting by the end of 1960s, from the 1980s his production included the most diverse materials. From his works released in the 1980s with vegetal elements we just mention *Emanation* (1982-86), *Die Treppe* (The Staircase, 1982-83), *Johannisnacht* (1986), and *Elisabeth of Austria* (1988), the last one featuring a picture with human hair. The life of organic elements in form of vegetables, seaweed, shells participated in the canvas of the Spanish Miquel Barceló, who, participating in Documenta 7 in 1982, his painting was conceived as part of the international wave of the time.<sup>4</sup> However, from the beginning his work assumed a personal language, neither historic, nor quoting anyone or anything.

The legacy of Conceptual art and its ramifications, such as Land Art, anti-form and Arte Povera, in spite of the dominant presence of painting and sculpture, survived through an interest in installation among those artists who were not following the most current trends. At the same time, Arte Povera was celebrated through international exhibitions, such as “Identité Italienne: l’art en Italie depuis 1959” curated by Germano Celant in 1981, held at the Centre Pompidou, whose doors in Paris opened to the public in 1977. The consecration of the artistic production and “museification” of those artists whose primal intention had been to react to the institution, and their poetics was reduced to a banal form of a simple use of “poor” materials.

An isolated case, perhaps for his education in medicine previous to his artistic work, is Wolfgang Laib. His artistic practice went hand in hand with the study of oriental philosophies, such as Buddhism and Taoism. From the mid-1980s, volatile, fluid and also nurturing materials, such as pollen and milk, inhabited his installations. Although inspired by the work of Mario Merz, whose installations used to be site

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<sup>3</sup> Jorge Glusberg, *70-80-90: Setenta Artistas de las Décadas de Ochenta y Noventa*, Cit., 16.

<sup>4</sup> See Enrique Juncosa, “De rerum natura”, *Miquel Barceló 1984-1994*, Whitechapel, London, 1994, 10.



specific, Laib's works are not conceived as site-specific pieces.<sup>5</sup> We might even affirm the contrary: despite not being conceived for a specific space, the delicacy of the material and the shape given to it, changes the relationship with the same space, transforming time in a ritual sequence. "If you have a milk-stone—Laib declared—or a pollen piece in a private space, the life around, in that space, has to be changed."<sup>6</sup>

In the meantime, in 1982 *Art Journal* dedicated an issue to "the crisis in the discipline" of art history. In the editorial to the issue Henry Zerner pointed out that "the established art history with its stylistic analysis, iconographic reading, monographs, and catalogues [was] by no means the neutral, objective activity that it claim[ed] to be and it [was] instead, in the service of a dominant ideology [...] and deeply involved with the market."<sup>7</sup> Although the previous fifteen years, as he noted, had already brought to surface this issue, the current crisis impelled to reformulating the question under new paradigms and methodologies, with contributions from which emerged "the need to rethink the object of art history."<sup>8</sup> Therefore, Zerner explained, "[t]he new art history promises to be much more thoroughly historical than the old, because it believes that art is not purely aesthetic but that it has many functions and that these functions are not simply peripheral or even detrimental, but an essential part of its nature and meaning."<sup>9</sup>

One year later, the art historian Hans Belting published under the German title *Das Ende der Kunstgeschichte?* ("The End of Art History?", 1983). The essay did not aim—in Belting's words—"to write an obituary for art and art history. Instead, I asked myself whether art and the narration of art to which we have grown accustomed were still compatible."<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, on the further new publication on the same topic, he alerted on the meaning attempted in his formula "the end of art history", declaring

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<sup>5</sup> See C. Christov-Bakargiev, *Cit.*, 46.

<sup>6</sup> W. Laib, em T. McEvelley, *Cit.*, 180.

<sup>7</sup> Henry Zerner, "Editor's Statement: The Crisis in the Discipline", *Art Journal*, Special Issue: The Crisis in the Discipline, Vol. 42, No. 4, Winter 1982, published by: College Art Association. Also available at <<http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/00043249.1982.10792811#preview>> (accessed in November 2014)

<sup>8</sup> H. Zerner, "Editor's Statement: The Crisis in the Discipline", *Cit.*

<sup>9</sup> H. Zerner, "Editor's Statement: The Crisis in the Discipline", *Cit.*

<sup>10</sup> Hans Belting, *Art History After Modernism*, *Cit.*, 7.

But I must again insist on the initial argument that the rhetorical figure of speech dealing with the end of art history does not mean that art or art history is over but that, both in art and in the discourse of art history, we can foresee on the horizon the end of a tradition whose familiar shape had become, in the era of modernism, canonical.<sup>11</sup>

Belting recognized that, despite its claim for a universal freedom of thought and of technological progress, Modernism showed its limitations to read the world in a global perspective, while art lost its ability to provoke and the technological hopes were replaced by “the fear of the loss of nature.”<sup>12</sup> In light of these facts, Thomas McEvelley highlighted that the crisis was “much larger than art; it was the end of the age of certainty about history in the large sense and with it any certainty about small byways such as art history.”<sup>13</sup> Moreover, the production of art, paralleling the intellectual discourse on art history in academia, overcame the apparent obsolescence of the two dichotomies, the formalist and the modernist; the latter inherited from the Bauhaus model.

The formalist perspective, which valued talent, *métier* and imitation versus, respectively, the modernist notions of creativity, medium, and invention conflated to the synthesis of attitude, practice and deconstruction.<sup>14</sup> As Thierry de Duve remarked, disciplines such as “linguistics, semiotics, anthropology, psychoanalysis, Marxism, feminism, structuralism and post-structuralism, in short, “theory” (or so-called “French theory”) entered art schools [...]”<sup>15</sup> Their introduction occurred in the mid-to late 1970s and achieved its full accomplishment by the mid-1980s,<sup>16</sup> and it meant reorder and/or disorder the ways of making of art.

In the meantime the increasing circulation of computers and media technology was shaping a new society that, as the psychologist and computer scientist Sherry Turkle remarked, implied a shift from modernist computational culture to a post-modernist culture of simulation.<sup>17</sup> The latter reminds us of the book *Simulacres et*

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<sup>11</sup> H. Belting, *Art History After Modernism*, Cit., 7.

<sup>12</sup> H. Belting, *Art History After Modernism*, Cit., 6.

<sup>13</sup> T. McEvelley, *Sculpture in the Age of Doubt*, Cit. 32.

<sup>14</sup> See T. de Duve, “When Form Has Become Attitude – And Beyond”, *Cit.*

<sup>15</sup> T. de Duve, “When Form Has Become Attitude – And Beyond”, *Cit.*, 27.

<sup>16</sup> The philosophical thought of Foucault on power; Deleuze and Derrida theories on difference and repetition as an eternal return and Derrida were pivotal in the subsequent developments in theory and culture.

<sup>17</sup> See Sherry Turkle, *The Second Self: Computers and the Human Spirit* (1984) and S. Turkle, *Life on the Screen: Identity in the age of Internet* (1995).

*simulation* (1981) in which the author, the French philosopher and sociologist Jean Baudrillard, declared that the ultimate primacy of the object on the subject—“the subject is no more the one desiring, it is the object the one seducing”—had the inevitable consequence of turning the artwork an “absolute merchandise.”<sup>18</sup> According to Baudrillard, the imaginary in art was replaced by hyper-reality and its disappearance in a no more existing image, such our image appearing when facing a mirror and immediately disappearing when we leave it.

On another front, Jean-François Lyotard attempted to escape the philosophical environment within academia “beyond institutionalized philosophy” and towards “a philosophy yet to come, one which corresponds to the abolition of ‘disciplinary’ boundaries,”<sup>19</sup> and together with the design theorist Thierry Chaput, director of the *CCI Centre de Création Industrielle* in Paris, conceived the exhibition *Les Immatériaux* (“The Immaterials”, 1985). On Lyotard’s work, James Williams commented that it “is not on art; but with art; he constructs art-philosophy-politics assemblages that are designed to make points and transform arguments across all three subjects.”<sup>20</sup> The exhibition came six years after his most internationally famous and influential publication *The Postmodern Condition* (1979), to be inscribed in the theoretical debate started by the mid- 20<sup>th</sup> century on the necessity to reach new theoretical instruments to interpret the social, economics and cultural changes occurring, and at the same time encountering its critique in Jürgen Habermas’s

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<sup>18</sup> “La réflexion du sociologue français concernant le primat de l’objet sur le sujet, et l’œuvre d’art comme ‘marchandise absolue’, va littéralement créer un mouvement. ‘Ce n’est plus le sujet qui désire, c’est l’objet qui séduit’ et qui jouit désormais d’une existence autonome, explique-t-il. Pessimisme hégélien selon lequel les rênes du déterminisme seraient désormais aux mains des choses, la pensée de Baudrillard rejoint la sensibilité commune, qui constate l’importance croissante du marché de l’art par rapport aux œuvres qu’il distribue. Pour lui, l’art ne relève pas de l’imaginaire mais de ‘l’hyperréel’ de l’obscénité (le “*plus visible que le visible*”) et de la fascination (pour la “*magie de sa disparition*”): il survit à sa propre mort, dans une monde frappé lui-même d’ ‘hypertélie’, devenu ‘quelque chose dont les images nous atteignent, mais qui n’existe plus’ ”, Nicholas Bourriaud, “Baudrillard, ce héros (le simulationnisme)”, in *Les années 80 d’Anne Bony*, Paris : Éditions du Regard, 1995, 62-82: 81.

<sup>19</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, Élie Théofilakis, “Les Petits Récits de Chrysalide” (interview), in Théofilakis (ed.), *Modernes, et Après. Les Immatériaux*, Paris: Autrement, 1985, 5–6, quoted by Robin Mackay, “Immaterials, Exhibition, Acceleration”, 215-242: 232, in Yuk Hui and Andreas Broeckmann (eds.), *Thirty Years After Les Immatériaux: Art, Science, And Theory*, Meson Press, 2015. Open Access edition available at <<http://meson.press/books/30-years-after-les-immateriaux/>> (accessed in June 2015).

<sup>20</sup> James Williams, “Jean-François Lyotard (1924-1998), in Dormuid Costello and Jonathan Wickery (eds.), *Art: Key Contemporary Thinkers*, Cit., 129-131: 129.

rehabilitation of modernity,<sup>21</sup> through which, and without entering on the debate, modernism and post-modernism became the two categories to be considered in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

In this chapter the organic materiality is explored in relationships and issues, addressing the idea of immateriality, environmental concerns in a techno-scientific context, the notion of cyborg and the new perspectives envisioned by genetic engineering for the human and the non human animals challenging the same notion of the concept proposed in this research, until its final supposed disappearance with the spread of the language of new media.

## **5.2 Featuring the im-materiality of mat(t)er<sup>22</sup> and its derivatives between the 1980s and the 1990s, with a forward looking**

Regarding artwork, Lyotard intended the post-modern in terms of a process undergoing from the great narratives to their fragmentation and directed towards heterogeneous structures. *Les Immatériaux*, held between March 28 and July 15, 1985 at the Centre Georges Pompidou, consisted of a sort of manifestation of his ideas from the same catalogue. It was composed, in fact, of two parts: *Épreuves d'écriture* (Writing Proofs) and *Album et Inventaire*. The first one displayed the concept of the exhibition through its fragmentation in a kind of “lexicon of the immaterials”, with sixty entries (plus annexes) defined by around thirty invited authors among writers, scientists, artists, philosophers and linguists.<sup>23</sup>

This vocabulary served to provide a kind of atelier for divergences rather than “un musée de consensus” and the way it was formulated already acknowledged the

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<sup>21</sup> See *Modernity versus Postmodernity* (1981) and “Modernity an Unfinished Project” in Maurizio Passerin, E. Seyla Benhabib, *Habermas and the Unfinished Project of Modernity*, the MIT Press, 1997.

<sup>22</sup> This typing makes reference to Somer Bodribo, *Nothing Mat(t)ers: A Feminist Critique of Postmodernism*, North Melbourne Victoria, Australia: Spinifex, 1993 (1992).

<sup>23</sup> See Jean-François Lyotard and Thierry Chaput, “La raison des épreuves”, in *Les Immatériaux: Epreuves d'écriture*, Catalogue, Vol. 1, Paris: Centre Georges Pompidou, 6-7:6. Available at <[http://monoskop.org/images/f/f9/Les\\_Immatériaux\\_Epreuves\\_d\\_écriture.pdf](http://monoskop.org/images/f/f9/Les_Immatériaux_Epreuves_d_écriture.pdf)> (accessed in July 2015). The authors also added: “La démultiplication des champs sémantiques engendrés par un mot, l'évidence de la complexité de sens, se qui constitue le ressort de l'écriture et de la pensée dans leur bataille contre ce depot de significations établies qu'est la langue.

levels of proximity and intimacy achieved by the electronic and informatics language, enriching at the same time the repertoire of writing through ramifications, stratifications and interferences.<sup>24</sup> The authors experienced the so-called postmodern writing in the months previous to the exhibition (September to December 1984), during which each of them disposed at home of an Olivetti M20 connected to a central system, an Olivetti M24 located in the Pompidou Museum to write on paper between two and ten lines texts to define the list of terms received, which afterwards would be inserted and saved in the central machine. The latter was accessible for everyone to comment on, and during the exhibition it was publicly available. This experiment—emancipatory for that time, obsolete if observed from a perspective of thirty years later, to the point of it being difficult to understand in its out-dated logic—enhancing the interchange of communication, it also highlighted the dimension of influence, encounters and suggestions derived from reading what another had written, somehow in the attempt of reactivating the Flanorian and wandering experience in the urban streets, as described by Benjamin in continuation with Baudelaire.<sup>25</sup>

The exhibition was a major event in Parisian life; it occupied the entire fifth floor of the museum and took two years of preparation. Lyotard's, and postmodern theories', resistance to interpretation, or to any attempt of critique, taking a "position of self-regulation within his own philosophical meditation, such that he both represents and diagnoses postmodernism: this is the simultaneity of the postmodern condition."<sup>26</sup> Among the main topics approached, there was a consistent presence of the idea of a "second skin" or prosthesis as a substitute of the organic functions—for instance, *Habitacle*, which featuring a Japanese "cell for sleeping" with a radio, television, telephone and air conditioner, questioned the notion of habitat as a place of

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<sup>24</sup> "C'est une propriété redoutable de l'électronique et de l'informatique qu'elles peuvent se faire ouvrir de loin le plus proche intimité. Nos retraites se qui nous protégeaient sont devenus la plus pauvre des interfaces. Le secret de l'écriture, le va-et-vient du texte, en train de se faire, pré-textes, textes de soutien, brouillons, ratures, dérobades de la pensée devant le bien-connu, autant que anamnèse nécessaire pour dissiper le préjugé possible, —si cela aussi était exposé à ce qu'on appelle par antiphrase la communication, nous demandons-nous, qu'advierait-il ? Peut-être-ce là l'épreuve qui attend l'écriture à l'âge de postmoderne. » Jean-François Lyotard and Thierry Chaput, "La raison des épreuves", Cit., 6-7.

<sup>25</sup> See Jean-François Lyotard and Thierry Chaput, "La raison des épreuves", Cit., 6-7. *Épreuves d'écriture* (Writing Proofs) appears as a sort of Logbook—and possibly Christov-Bakargiev had it in mind when conceiving one of the three catalogues released for dOCUMENTA(13) she directed in 2012—showing the exchange of ideas between the participants around abstract concept and at the same time sharing their doubts and material difficulties towards the complicated software they needed to use for the interaction.

<sup>26</sup> Somer Bodribb, *Nothing Mat(t)ers: A Feminist Critique of Postmodernism*, 12.

identification and joy replaced by the sole functional dimension.<sup>27</sup> In a general view, as Robin Mackay pointed out, *Les Immatériaux* did not address any notion of dematerialisation, incorporeity, or disembodiment, but rather made use of technological instruments as a “a grasp of matter beyond the human perceptual gamut, decomposing the structure of objects into systems of imperceptible elements which are then recomposed, predominantly through the use of machine languages, into new materials.”<sup>28</sup> Mackay continued affirming that

According to the proposition of *Les Immatériaux*, these new developments disrupt the notion of matter as something destined for and subservient to human projects. Rather than a stable set of materials ready for use, we are faced with an unstable set of interactions that problematise apparently stable polarities such as mind versus matter, hardware versus software, matter versus form, matter versus state, and matter versus energy.<sup>29</sup>

The prior message to transmit through the exhibition—as Lyotard later declared—was the idea of “incertitude about the finalities of these developments and incertitude about the identity of the human individual in his condition of such improbable immateriality.”<sup>30</sup> This statement also necessarily implied curatorial choices, such as the exclusion of mouldings and pedestals, whether paintings and sculptures were present, and the proposition of a fluid space in which the visitor circulated in darkness without following a sign posted itinerary and therefore with the risk of ending in a sort of labyrinth, also filled with grey screens, in which sight was elicited no more but as well as other senses of perception. The sense of uncertainty was therefore enhanced through the construction of an entire environment, which aimed to be completely different from a gallery or a royal construction, and eventually Lyotard pursued the blurring, or rather, “the dissolution of boundaries between our bodies and the things and the things we encounter.”<sup>31</sup> It was the first time in the

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<sup>27</sup> See “Album et Inventaire”, Catalogue, Vol. 2, Cit.

<sup>28</sup> Robin Mackay, “Immaterials, Exhibition, Acceleration”, *Cit.*, 215.

<sup>29</sup> Robin Mackay, “Immaterials, Exhibition, Acceleration”, *Cit.*, 215.

<sup>30</sup> “Les Immatériaux: A Conversation with Jean-François Lyotard and Bernard Blistène”, reported by Tara McDowell, on Art-Agenda, May 27, 2014. Available at <<http://www.art-agenda.com/reviews/les-immateriaux-a-conversation-with-jean-francois-lyotard-and-bernard-blistene/>> (accessed in July 2015).

<sup>31</sup> Tara McDowell, “This monstrous neologism: on Lyotard’s *Les Immatériaux*”, *un.Magazine*, Issue 7.2, July 2014, Available at <<http://unprojects.org.au/magazine/issues/issue-7-2/this-monstrous-neologism/>> (accessed in July 2015).

history of exhibition that a person external to the specific context—in this case a philosopher—was the curator of an exhibition. In *Les Immatériaux*, displaying theory through objects in a space the visitor could wander in wearing headphones to hear sounds or listen to the reading of texts, also promoted a form of democratic horizontality. The earphones, in fact, also served to permit an encounter with the objects, non-mediated by guides, leaving the discussion on impressions and ideas outside in form of a dialogue.

The concept of *Les Immatériaux*, as shown in the “Album et Inventaire”, was based on five main sequences: not-body, not-speech, not-other, not-history, not-me. And standing the “*im*” for negation, each of them corresponded to the pathways “matériau, matrice, matériel, matière, maternité” (the material, the matrix, the material as adjective, matter, and maternity), suggesting the resistance of the body (me, here, and now) to the dematerialisation in the life of media.<sup>32</sup> Instead of author, title, date, and technical details, each caption, referring to the work it was close to, included the five terms as a parameter to describe the work featured.<sup>33</sup> If, for Lyotard, for Materials (*matériau*) was intended that on which a message is inscribed; its support or format and also the craft, the liberation of the message could from there on be possible thanks to an overcoming of the resistance of material; Matrix (*matrice*) meant the code, the “cipher” on the message, what lies at the origin of a certain phenomenon to decipher (like the DNA code). Material (*matériel*) signified “the dispositive of transmission and capture of the message transporting it to its destination, and Matter (*matière*) was “the object upon which the message provides some information; what the logician and the linguist call the referent of the message.”<sup>34</sup> And finally, particularly significant, in the scope of a definition of post-modernity, appears the description Lyotard provided for the term Maternity (*maternité*)

Maternity: the source of the message, the giver existence and authority, its author. The recipient imprints on the message its own destination and to the message recipient destine (which is receiving the message). While the humans

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<sup>32</sup> “pas les corps: matériau / pas la parole: matrice / pas l’autre: matériel / pas l’histoire: matière / pas moi: maternité”, See “Album et Inventaire”, Catalogue, Vol. 2, Paris: Centre Georges Pompidou, 9.

<sup>33</sup> See “Album et Inventaire”, Catalogue, Vol. 2, Cit., available at <[http://monoskop.org/images/5/52/Les\\_Immatériaux\\_Album\\_et\\_Inventaire\\_catalogue.pdf](http://monoskop.org/images/5/52/Les_Immatériaux_Album_et_Inventaire_catalogue.pdf)> (accessed in July 2015). Non-paginated.

<sup>34</sup> See “Album et Inventaire”, Catalogue, Vol. 2, Cit.

believed themselves as the eminent recipients of life, of the visible, intelligible, of law, they imagined being the God's sons or rather, like in the ancient Near-Eastern religions, the Goddess's. Predestined. The modern man attempted to occupy the position of the author, arrogating for himself the "creation." Therefore, we say "paternity" of an artwork. Phantom of a single seed. Femininity is discarded by authority, declassified at the side of passions, of dependencies. Whether the message is a sentence, a visible image, a building, a child, a kind of richness, a place, an item of clothing, —we, postmoderns, renounce to attribute to it an origin, a primal cause. We do not believe that a mother is predestined to us and we do not assume any paternity. Freedom of the orphans.<sup>35</sup>

Although there was this aura of uncertainty inside which the exhibition aimed to be maintained, being the main presentation of the postmodern theory, the definition of Maternity provided by Lyotard in *Archive et Inventaire* could not be more explicit and sounding as an extirpation of "matter" from its root, the "mater." The exhibition soon encountered critique, such as of feminist theory to postmodernism. In her *Nothing Mat(t)ers: A Feminist Critique of Postmodernism* (1992), between the preface and introduction Somer Brodribb, placed the following letter she wrote to a friend after visiting *Les Immatériaux*.

Paris, July 14, 1985—Dear Mary, Just saw an exhibition showing in Paris right now called *Les Immatériaux* (the immaterials); appropriate name for its abstract tyranny: the talking heads of Lacanian structuralism are finally disembodied. In fact, the exhibition leads through a birth tunnel and then spills you out into a theatre of the non-body for a period of Sartrean anguish and nothingness, and the appropriation of the birth process for death by means of slides and voices from genetic experimentation. A screen shows a huge pregnant belly (no other parts of the woman are visible) [it is referring to Annegret Soltau, *Auf dem Gebärtisch*, 1978] and a wall traces the various kinds of paternal, nuclear affiliation the new reproductive materials afford. So that you enter the Theatre of the Non-Body and end up in the Labyrinth of Language: Theseus enters the womb and kills mat(t)er! *Les Immatériaux* is curated by Lyotard (the author of *The Postmodern Condition*); it is really tied to an ideology of modernization begun by de Sade and *culminating in the growing opinion that these new technologies will finally liberate "us" from the dirty animality of the maternal body*. And after the emergency conference last week in Sweden! (We changed the name to the Feminist International Network for Resistance to Reproductive and Genetic Engineering). *Les Immatériaux* is really about The Mother Machine and a total mining of the local female body as raw material. It was sort of a lecherous hymn to Amandine, the first French "test-tube" baby: in fact, the "Father" of IVF here

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<sup>35</sup> See "Album et Inventaire", Catalogue, Vol. 2, Cit.



recently told a men's magazine how he fantasized about Amandine and how she would be at puberty: would she ever understand what she owed him? He also dreams of pregnancy for men, in the oral cavity: patriarchal genesis at last! Je n'y crois pas. Amitiés, Somer<sup>36</sup>

In the direct tones proper of a letter to a friend, Bodribb put on paper her immediate impressions after visiting the exhibition, and on the following pages she also referred Élie Théofilakis, editor of a collection discussing Lyotard's *Les Immatériaux*, and his statement "modernity is dead," and the binomial man/nature has been replaced by man/technique.<sup>37</sup> At this point the question of modernity brings to the discussion Bruno Latour, with his *We Have Never Been Modern* (1991), but before that, I will first conclude on Bodribb's observations on the exhibition, since her feminist perspective if on the one hand criticized the exhibition as promoting a techno-science world made by and for the masculine, on the other, reading her words at the distance, she also appears as fearing technology, and possibility it provides. She argued, in fact, "*les immatériaux* create us and we are not longer in control. Even the frontiers of life and death become fluid, mobile. We are already other, indeed, we are the immaculately conceived! Can we say then that postmodernism is the philosophy of the immaculately deceived? The undead?"<sup>38</sup> And finally, Bodribb stated

Lyotard's game of language represents the postmodern universe of dematerialized knowledge. In postmodern genesis, the word of creation is absolute through tekne. Its matrix is the indeterminacy of life and death, the exchangeability of subjects, the casual commercialization of human material and its rigid scientific control. None of postmodernism's commentators have recognized how reproductive and genetic engineering is its spermatocentric economy and "male-stream" culture, its regimes of accumulation and signification. It originates in a masculinist crisis to relegitimize patriarchal power, filiation and articulation. It pretends a brave new world which will find new materials to eternalize patriarchal power in a postmortem culture where life is simply the time which is not yet death: half-lives of the immaterial. These are the phallic de-signs which postmodernism disseminates. Stimulated by death, not energized by life, the eternal clone always waits. Never generative of new forms, always dreaming of filiation, and immaterial genealogies.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Somer Bodribb, *Nothing Mat(t)ers: A Feminist Critique of Postmodernism*, Cit., xiii. The emphasis in italics is mine.

<sup>37</sup> Somer Bodribb, *Nothing Mat(t)ers: A Feminist Critique of Postmodernism*, Cit., 12.

<sup>38</sup> Somer Bodribb, *Nothing Mat(t)ers: A Feminist Critique of Postmodernism*, Cit., 12.

<sup>39</sup> Somer Bodribb, *Nothing Mat(t)ers: A Feminist Critique of Postmodernism*, Cit., 126.

To better understand the spirit of that time, the role of *Les Immatériaux* when it took place, and its resonances, and to place the organic materiality in that period, we may frame Bodridd's thought and her words in one of those feminist instances at the of the so-called material turn in feminist theory, as described by Kari Weil, in her *Thinking Animals. Why Animal Studies Now?* (2012). Weil remarked that it emerged from two instances. On the one hand, the attempt to recover the "abjection" of nature developed by some feminists, and by "abjection" Weil recalled J. Kristeva's *Powers of Horrors: An Essay on Abjection* (1982) to express the leaving outcast "those natural elements of faeces or blood or milk that are seen to defile the self and that are associated with the maternal-feminine."<sup>40</sup> On the other, its consequent adoption of post-structuralism to defend the idea that the "material real is produced by discourse and language."<sup>41</sup> Bodridd could enter in the first instance, while the attempt of calling to attention to matter as "natures-cultures" is a relativist approach, of which Donna Haraway and Bruno Latour are two of the most significant contributors.

Before analysing their theories, and in order to get the all idea behind *Les Immatériaux*, it seems worth highlighting the innovative contribution of this exhibition for that time, not only for introducing new media art, but also for the fact that the same exhibition, deconstructing the format of its own, as Francesca Gallo pointed out, for the way it was produced and displayed, made of itself a real artwork.<sup>42</sup> Moreover, its merit in the history of art and of exhibition consisted in having joined art and science, or better, art and techno-science,<sup>43</sup> not from notions of creativity or invention, but from what really was at stake, the very matter, and its derivatives. This recognition, of course, turns the issue into more problematic than it may appear and to approach it we should go back to the argument "Modernity is dead", Théofilakis declared regarding *Les Immatériaux*. This apparent axiom enables us to question as a

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<sup>40</sup> Kari Weil, *Thinking Animals. Why Animal Studies Now?*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2012, 176.

<sup>41</sup> Kari Weil, *Thinking Animals. Why Animal Studies Now?*, Cit., 140.

<sup>42</sup> Francesca Gallo, "Ce n'est pas une exposition, mais une œuvre d'art. L'exemple des *Immatériaux* de Jean-François Lyotard", *Appareil*, 10-2012 Issue on "Lyotard et la surface d'inscription numérique, available at <<http://appareil.revues.org/860>> (accessed in July 2015).

<sup>43</sup> The term techno-science refers to the science produced in the laboratory, see Bruno Latour, Steve Woolgar, *Laboratory Life. The Construction of Scientific Facts*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986 (1979). The developments in techno-science also registered from the 1980s onwards an increasing number of artists moving from the atelier to the molecular biology laboratories, working with genetic engineering, and therefore generating intense debate around this way to produce artwork. See Ingeborg Reichle, *Art in the Age of Technoscience. Genetic Engineering, Robotics, and Artificial Life in Contemporary Art*, 2009, Cit.

first stance what Modernity is, considering that few years after Bruno Latour claimed, “No one has ever been modern. Modernity has never begun.”<sup>44</sup>

It would take too long a detailed review on Latour’s mentioned essay, and it is not the actual purpose of this research, but it will be useful at least to summarize—and taking the risk of being simplistic—some key points, starting from Latour’s considerations on postmodernism, which he considered as “a symptom, not a fresh solution.”<sup>45</sup> While postmodernism did not propose solutions, and modernism wanted to debunk the past, Latour, in the attempt of keeping the good aspects from both to read his present time,<sup>46</sup> chose a third way, a “non-modern”, or “amodern” attitude, different from an “anti-modern” one. He therefore went backward to the pre-modern era of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, recalling the examples of political philosopher Thomas Hobbes’s artificial creature Leviathan and the natural philosopher Robert Boyle’s air pump and their inseparability to describe a Constitution, distinguished from the political ones, and which “defines humans and nonhumans, their properties and their relations, their abilities and their groupings.”<sup>47</sup> He questioned its critique to modernity not being founded on any other proposal than a disenchanting nihilism.

Moreover, regarding science, Latour referred to an interview Lyotard gave to scientists in 1988, which we may consider as the negation or contradiction of those assumptions, which had moved to the actual exhibition of *Les Immatériaux*. He declared, in fact,

I simply maintain that there is nothing human about scientific expansion. Perhaps our brain is only the temporary bearer of a process of complexification. It would then be a matter of detaching this process from what has supported it up to now. I am convinced that that is what you people [scientists!] are in the process of doing. Computer science, genetic engineering, physics and astrophysics, astronautics, robotics, these disciplines

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<sup>44</sup> Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, translated by Catherine Porter, Cambridge, Massachusetts Harvard University Press, 1993 (1991), 47.

<sup>45</sup> Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, Cit., 46.

<sup>46</sup> “There has never been a modern world. The use of the past perfect tense is important here, for it is a matter of a retrospective sentiment, of a rereading of our history. I am not saying that we are entering a new era; on the contrary we no longer have to continue the headlong flight of the post-post-modernists; we are no longer obliged to cling to the avant-garde of the avant-garde; we no longer seek to be even cleverer, even more critical, even deeper into the ‘era of suspicion’. No, instead we discover that we have never begun to enter the modern era. Hence the hint of the ludicrous that always accompanies postmodern thinkers; they claim to come after a time that has not even started!” B. Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, Cit., 47.

<sup>47</sup> Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, Cit., 15.

are already working toward preserving that complexity under conditions of life independent of life on Earth. But I do not see in what respect this is human, if by human we mean collectivities with their cultural traditions, established in a given period in precise locations on this planet. I don't doubt for a second that this 'a-human' process may have some useful fringe benefits for humanity alongside its destructive effects. But this has nothing to do with the emancipation of human beings.<sup>48</sup>

It is evident, in this recognition, what Latour criticized regarding the postmodern condition, which is the fact of not having tried to connect nature, society and discourse (leaving nature and technology and their pure separateness) society swamped under “false consciousness, simulacra and illusion,” and discourse “detached from everything.”<sup>49</sup> In a nutshell, this interpretation of life, as a legacy of Heidegger’s philosophy, according to Latour, forgot Being.<sup>50</sup> Therefore, he noted that

We are carrying out the impossible project undertaken by Heidegger, who believed what the modern Constitution said about itself without understanding that what is at issue there is only half of a larger mechanism which has never abandoned the old anthropological matrix. No one can forget Being, since there has never been a modern world, or, by the same token, metaphysics. We have always remained pre-Socratic, pre-Cartesian, pre-Kantian, pre-Nietzschean. No radical revolution can separate us from these pasts, so there is no need for reactionary counterrevolutions to lead us back to what has never been abandoned. Yes, Heraclitus is a surer guide than Heidegger: ‘Einai gar kai entautha theous.’ [“Here, too, the gods are present”]<sup>51</sup>

Latour escaped the two ways of traditional thought versus radical rapture, the duality of nature and culture, with the belief that, at the time he wrote his book, there could not be any promise of “progress, permanent revolution, modernization, forward flight.”<sup>52</sup> The only way possible could be, though, that of “displac[ing] our attention”, in order to “regain the capacity of to do our own sorting of the elements that belong to our time” and eventually rediscover, through this process, a freedom, denied by

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<sup>48</sup> Jean-François Lyotard “Dialogue pour un temps de crise (interview collective)”, *Le Monde*, 15 April 1988, xxxviii, quoted by B. Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, Cit., 61.

<sup>49</sup> B. Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, Cit., 64.

<sup>50</sup> B. Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, Cit., 65.

<sup>51</sup> B. Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, Cit., 67. The translation from Heraclitus verse is at page 65.

<sup>52</sup> B. Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, Cit., 76.

modernism, but “never really lost.”<sup>53</sup> Underscoring the importance of reading Nature and Society not as extreme poles but as a set of heterogenous intermediators, which make them “no longer explanatory terms but rather something that requires a conjoined explanation,”<sup>54</sup> Latour’s perspective increases the pertinence of the present research. In fact, the analysis on organic materiality in artistic practices during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, apparently separating the non-worked organic material from the fabricated one and from the inorganic, works as a tool to understand and interpret the relationship and interconnections between nature and culture, not as distinct but as reciprocating systems of significance. In this sense, the philosophic anthropology of Helmuth Plessner adopted for the purpose assumes a particular relevance, despite its oblivion in a century dominated by existentialism and metaphysics.

“We want to gain access to things themselves, not only to their phenomena. The real is not remote; rather, it is accessible in all the objects mobilized throughout the world. Doesn’t external reality abound right here among us?”—Latour declared, in the name of a sociology not “constructed around the Social only;” of a discourse not merely based on “language games”, but “that mix with things as well as with societies, uphold the former and the latter alike, and hold on to them both.”<sup>55</sup> And finally, in the name of a Being not emptied of its substance, Latour envisioned a

Real as Nature, narrated as Discourse, collective as Society, existential as Being: such are the quasi-objects that the moderns have caused to proliferate. As such it behooves us to pursue them, while we simply become once more what we have never ceased to be: amoderns.<sup>56</sup>

Latour attempted to reconnect the human with the non-human stating, “Cultures do not exist, any more than nature does. There are only natures-cultures, and these offer the only possible basis for comparison.”<sup>57</sup> In this sense, technology and science, for Latour, were not considered external to human life and concerns, nor

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<sup>53</sup> B. Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, Cit., 76. Latour afterwards wrote: “We have never plunged into a homogeneous and planetary flow arriving either from the future or from the depths of time. Modernization has never occurred. There is no tide, long in rising, that would be flowing again today. There has never been such a tide. We can go on to other things - that is, return to the multiple entities that have always passed in a different way.”

<sup>54</sup> B. Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, Cit., 81.

<sup>55</sup> B. Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, Cit., 90.

<sup>56</sup> B. Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, Cit., 90.

<sup>57</sup> B. Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, Cit., 96.

important, simply for their truth or efficiency, but rather “because they multiply the non-humans enrolled in the manufacturing of collectives and because they make the community we form with these beings a more intimate one.”<sup>58</sup> It goes out of saying the way this statement complexifies and enlarges the inter-relationship among agents that moderns have for long considered not only separated but not related, while

[t]hese new nonhumans possess miraculous properties because they are at one and the same time both social and asocial, producers of natures and constructors of subjects. They are the tricksters of comparative anthropology. Through this opening, sciences and technologies will emerge in society in such a mysterious way that this miracle will force Westerners to see themselves as completely different from others.<sup>59</sup>

In one word, what appeared as urgent to Latour was the implementation of relativism, or better, and distinguishing from an absolute and even cultural, relativist relativism as the one apt to abandon universalist arguments in favour of empirical ones and that “[i]nstead of stopping midway, it continues to the end and rediscovers, in the form of work and montage, practice and controversy, conquest and domination, the process of establishing relations.”<sup>60</sup> The subsequent reference to ethnology as the discipline devoted to the problem solving of relativism in practical terms makes apparent the proximities between Bruno Latour and Hal Foster, who in his *The Return of The Real* (1996) registered that art and theory turned “to the referent as grounded in [the materiality of] a given identity and/or sited community.”<sup>61</sup> Especially *The Artist as Ethnographer*, one of the essays from Hal Foster’s book collection, highlighted that “the ethnographic turn in contemporary art [...] constitutes a sequence of investigations: first of the material constituents of the art medium, then of its spatial conditions of perception, and then of the corporeal basis of this perception [...]”<sup>62</sup> They culminated in mapping the cultural and discursive network, beyond the exhibition space, regarding the institution and considering other factors, as class, gender, provenance, and dealing with various theories and social movements. It meant a vigorous update of the theory paralleling the contemporary artistic processes from

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<sup>58</sup> B. Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, Cit., 108.

<sup>59</sup> B. Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, Cit., 112.

<sup>60</sup> B. Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, Cit., 113.

<sup>61</sup> Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real*, Cambridge; Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1996, xviii.

<sup>62</sup> H. Foster, “The Artist as Ethnographer”, *The Return of the Real*, Cit., 171-203: 184.

the mid-1960s onwards, and Foster, in the 1990s, was one of the first starting to consider these perspectives in art criticism and art history and noting the return of the real he described.

We might say that, due to their different positions, one philosophical and the other art historical, Latour was critical of post-modernism as well as of modernism, while Foster asserted the state of the facts derived from both perspectives and their connections with the artistic practices along the 20<sup>th</sup> century. However, Foster, making the meaning of a supposed critical distance relative, at the end of his book, he did not negate the critical judgment to which any “artist, critic, theorist or historian can ever escape,” and, therefore, proposed making judgments “not only reactive but active,” and “not only distinctive but useful.”<sup>63</sup> He did not reject anthropology, but recognized its limits, since the poles of confrontation, by the 1960s and 1970s and especially the 1980s, dramatically changed in terms of shape, class, gender, and places in the global scenario. And even if, as Latour declared, “we have never abandoned the old anthropological matrix. We have never stopped building our collectives with raw materials made of poor humans and humble nonhumans,”<sup>64</sup>—to say it in Foster’s words—“the age of techno-science or techno-culture in the 1990s (in which research and development, or culture and technology, cannot be separated)”<sup>65</sup> made some questions rise.

How could we be capable of disenchanting the world, when every day our laboratories and our factories populate the world with hundreds of hybrids stranger than those of the day before? [...] How could we be victims of reductionism, when each scientist multiplies new entities by the thousands in order to be reductionist for a few of them? How could we be rationalists, when we still don’t see beyond the tip of our own noses? How could we be materialists, when every matter we invent possesses new properties that no single matter allows us to unify (Dagognet, 1989)? How could we be victims of a total technological system, when machines are made of subjects and never succeed in settling into more or less stable systems (Kidder, 1981; Latour, 1992a)? How could we be chilled by the cold breath of the sciences, when the sciences are hot and fragile, human and controversial, full of thinking reeds and of subjects who are themselves inhabited by things (Pickering, 1992)?<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> H. Foster, “Whatever Happened to Postmodernism?”, in *The Return of the Real*, Cit., 205-226: 226.

<sup>64</sup> B. Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, Cit., 115.

<sup>65</sup> H. Foster, “Whatever Happened to Postmodernism?”, in *The Return of the Real*, Cit., 218.

<sup>66</sup> B. Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, Cit., 115.

Retaining from the moderns “long networks, size, experimentation, relative universals, final separation between objective nature and free society” and conversely rejecting from them “separation between nature and society, clandestineness of the practices of mediation, external Great Divide, critical denunciation, universality, and rationality”, Latour also adopted the same criterion with the pre-moderns, from which retained “non-separability of things and signs, transcendence without a contrary, multiplication of nonhumans, temporality by intensity” and, as a counterpart, rejected “obligation always to link the social and natural orders, scapegoating mechanism, ethnocentrism, territory, limits on scale.”<sup>67</sup> He finally and, most importantly for a constructive critique to post-moderns, retained from them “multiple times, constructivism, reflexivity, denaturalization”, however rejecting their “belief in modernism, critical deconstruction, ironic reflexivity, and anachronism.”<sup>68</sup>

In the global order of natures and multitudes, Latour attempted to make room for the nonhumans created by science and technology through a reconstruction of humanism, in which the human, in order to be grasped, include “that other part of itself, the share of things.”<sup>69</sup> As he afterwards referred,

The scale of value consists not in shifting the definition of the human along the horizontal line that connects the Object pole to the Subject pole, but in sliding it along the vertical dimension that defines the nonmodern world. Reveal its work of mediation, and it will take on human form. Conceal it again, and we shall have to talk about inhumanity, even if it is draping itself in the Bill of Rights. The expression ‘anthropomorphic’ considerably underestimates our humanity. We should be talking about morphism. Morphism is the place where technomorphisms, zoomorphisms, phusimorphisms, ideomorphisms, theomorphisms, sociomorphisms, psychomorphisms, all come together. Their alliances and their exchanges, taken together, are what define the anthropos. A weaver of morphisms - isn't that enough of a definition? The closer the anthropos comes to this distribution, the more human it is.<sup>70</sup>

So Latour defined the *anthropos* as “a weaver of morphisms”, and

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<sup>67</sup> See Figure 5.1 “What is retained and what is rejected”, in B. Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, Cit., 135.

<sup>68</sup> See Figure 5.1 “What is retained and what is rejected”, in B. Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, Cit., 135.

<sup>69</sup> B. Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, Cit., 136.

<sup>70</sup> B. Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, Cit., 137.



nevertheless asserting that “[i]f the human does not possess a stable form, it is not formless for all that”, but rather “it becomes the mediator and even the intersection of the two” poles (natural and social) of the Constitution.<sup>71</sup> For the human achieving this “new position”, implies the amendment of the Constitution.<sup>72</sup> Confronting the modern one—according to Latour—the non-modern constitution guaranteed the “non-separability of the common production of societies and natures”; he redefined freedom as “a capacity to sort the combinations of hybrids that no longer depend on a homogeneous temporal flow”; and finally interpreted the production of hybrids, “by becoming explicit and collective”, “the object of an enlarged democracy that regulates or slows down its cadence.”<sup>73</sup>

Regarding the “new position” of the human referred to by Latour, it recalls the positionality of organic life approached by philosophical anthropology, and the paying of attention to this aspect may bring to the surface that this position for the human was not actually new, but probably a disregarded philosophical approach during modernism.<sup>74</sup> According to Plessner, in his *Die Stufen* (1928, republished in 1975), the notion of positionality involves the organic at its three stages: the vegetal, the animal, and the human. Open the first one; closed the second one; the follower human positionality is defined as “excentric”, or alternatively, we might say that the human is distinguished by the other two levels of the organic for the main trait of exocentricity (Exzentrizität).<sup>75</sup>

According to Plessner, the exocentricity of the human explains its being half nature and, at the same time, half artificiality. The latter constitutes the medium through which the human finds its balance in the world. In this way, culture does not represent “a super-compensation of inferiority complexes, but rather it indicates an

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<sup>71</sup> See B. Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, Cit., 137.

<sup>72</sup> See B. Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, Cit., 138.

<sup>73</sup> See Figure 5.2 “Modern/non modern constitutions” in B. Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, Cit., 141.

<sup>74</sup> See chapter 3.

<sup>75</sup> While J. Fischer talks about “excentric positionality” (see chapter 3) the term “exocentricity”, referred to the human stage of the organic for Helmuth Plessner appears in the sentence: “Through exocentricity (Exzentrizität), i.e. orientation and openness towards the others and the world, that the human being can arrive at self-awareness and self-identity.” See Jaromír Febera and Jelena Petrucijová, “Upbringing In-Between Reason and Belief (Insight of Philosophical Anthropology)”, *Journal of Siberian Federal University. Humanities & Social Sciences* 3, August 2015, 377-386: 385. Available at <[http://elib.sfu-kras.ru/bitstream/2311/16725/1/02\\_Feber.pdf](http://elib.sfu-kras.ru/bitstream/2311/16725/1/02_Feber.pdf)> (accessed in August 2015).

absolutely pre-psychological, ontic necessity.”<sup>76</sup> He afterwards defined exocentricity as a “condition in which the living subject indirectly entertains a direct relationship with the whole.”<sup>77</sup> As apparently absurd, contradictory or even illogical such a definition may seem, it results by recognizing that, in the first place, a relationship entertained by its components without intermediary elements is defined as direct; otherwise, or in second place, we will speak of indirect relationship. But, given the third case, when the intermediary element becomes necessary for the pursuit of producing and granting the immediacy of the connection—according to Plessner—, we face an indirectly direct relationship, or mediated immediacy.<sup>78</sup>

For a better understanding of the “excentric positionality” it seems worth remembering Gehlen’s philosophy for its efficacy in getting to the core of some crucial point of the Plessnerian research.<sup>79</sup> For Gehlen, the excentric position of the human, witnessing the wanting, thinking, impelling and sensing and immediately living in all these states produces a fracture between soul and body and, at the same time, it compounds a unity of both spheres. But this unity—as Fadini remarked in his epilogue to the Italian translation of Plessner’s *Die Stufen*—does not form a third structure, on the contrary, within the fracture, the gap, the void among them the mediation takes place.<sup>80</sup> Therefore, for Plessner, and to reconnect his position to Latour’s ideas, the collocation of the human in the world is characterized by a “plurality of positions (‘as body, psyche, and Self’), which makes the same world an ‘external world’, an ‘internal world’ and finally a ‘shared world’ (‘common’).”<sup>81</sup>

The philosophical anthropology approach of M. Scheler, H. Plessner and A. Gehlen describes the human relation to the world in terms of “openness towards the world”, and in the case of Plessner it is expressed through the humans’ representation of their physicality as “body” (*Körper*) and “own body” (*Leib*), intended as

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<sup>76</sup> “Ciò non vuol dire che la cultura rappresenti una supercompensazione di complessi di inferiorità, bensì indica una necessità assolutamente pre-psicologica, ontica.” H. Plessner, *I gradi dell’organico e l’uomo*, Cit., 344.

<sup>77</sup> “L’eccentricità della posizione si può determinare come una condizione in cui il soggetto vivente sta in relazione indirettamente diretta con il tutto.” H. Plessner, *I gradi dell’organico e l’uomo*, Cit., 347.

<sup>78</sup> See H. Plessner, *I gradi dell’organico e l’uomo*, Cit., 347.

<sup>79</sup> See more about Gehlen in chapter 3.

<sup>80</sup> See Ubaldo Fadini, “‘De homine’. Percorsi dell’antropologia filosofica novecentesca”, in H. Plessner, *I gradi dell’organico e l’uomo*, Cit., 385-395: 389.

<sup>81</sup> Ubaldo Fadini, “‘De homine’. Percorsi dell’antropologia filosofica novecentesca”, in H. Plessner, *I gradi dell’organico e l’uomo*, Cit., 389.

“expression of the psyche.”<sup>82</sup> It is remarkable that the term, through which Plessner defined the psyche, the soul is connected with the same idea of corporality (*Leib*). The space between the body and the own body, in Plessner’s discourse, permits to establish a “self-distance”, and therefore to recognise its “self-other.” The “distance” as anthropological category, in this process, permits to find a relationship with nature and, at the same time, to affirm artificiality as a necessary implementation of living. In Fadini’s words,

Plessner attempt to point out the self, its paradoxical unit, in the exocentricity, in the belief that the human constitutes himself in distancing expressed by being always with the other intended as radical other, decisive, with his presence, in the planning of a being which put the permanence of his condition of metamorphosis the sole (“spiritual”)—human—possible premise of identification.<sup>83</sup>

The position of human exocentricity applied to a techno-scientific world, permits to create a connection between Plessner’s philosophical anthropological and Latour’s human morphisms, in which the human is invested by the role of mediator between natures-cultures. They could also be considered as the first as a premise of the second, or the second as a further elaboration of the first in a world more and more inhabited by man-made-objects. Reconnecting to Latour’s belief on the non-separability between the common production of societies and natures, his point could permit to speak again of democracy, but “of a democracy extended to things themselves.”<sup>84</sup> In the end of his book, acknowledging “the other cultures we can no longer dominate” and our incapability to have control over the environment, he also recalled the recent history of that time, mentioning, in way of example, the Berlin Wall fell in 1989 as “offering us a unique practical lesson about the conjoined failure of socialism and naturalism.”<sup>85</sup> He defined his own work as an attempt to gather

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<sup>82</sup> See Ubaldo Fadini, “‘De homine’. Percorsi dell’antropologia filosofica novecentesca”, in H. Plessner, *I gradi dell’organico e l’uomo*, Cit., 393.

<sup>83</sup> “Plessner si sforza appunto di indicare l’io, la sua unità paradossale, nell’eccentricità, nella convinzione che l’umano si costituisca nel distanziamento espresso dall’essere sempre insieme all’altro inteso come altro radicale, decisivo, con la sua presenza, nella progettazione di un essere che fa del permanere nella condizione di metamorfosi la sola premessa di identificazione (“spirituale”)—umana—possibile.” Ubaldo Fadini, “‘De homine’. Percorsi dell’antropologia filosofica novecentesca”, in H. Plessner, *I gradi dell’organico e l’uomo*, Cit., 394.

<sup>84</sup> B. Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, Cit., 142.

<sup>85</sup> B. Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, Cit., 145.

disseminated themes in the realm of anthropology from his philosophical point of view, leaving to others, able to pursue the task, “to convene the Parliament of Things.”

We should also add at this point that the legacy of Latour’s “Parliament of Things”<sup>86</sup> arrived in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, inspiring not only new materialist philosophical approaches, but also one of the most significant international exhibition of the century: dOCUMENTA(13) directed by Carolyn Christov Bakargiev,<sup>87</sup> based on Latour’s approach towards non-human perspectives was re-elaborated in his essay “From Realpolitik to Dingpolitik” (2005).<sup>88</sup> Nevertheless, recalling Latour’s concept of freedom referred in his above mentioned *We Have Never Been Modern* imposes one to question to what extent the same is pertinent to this research, and what its connection with the organic materiality in the 20<sup>th</sup> century art is.

Elisabeth Grosz’s section on “Freedom and Materiality” (2015) apparently provided to me a link to enable an answer to this problem.<sup>89</sup> Whether she does not explicitly referred to Latour, her discourse evidences proximities, or, at least, a common philosophical matrix. In her essay, Grosz approached the terms of autonomy, agency and freedom in the attempt of introducing within feminist thought not the tradition of dialectical phenomenology inherited from Hegel, through Marx, nor existentialism, structuralism and post-structuralism, but rather “the philosophy of life, the philosophy of biology, the philosophy of nature”, initiated by the pre-Socratics,

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<sup>86</sup> Title of his latest section 5.5; see B. Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, Cit., 142-145.

<sup>87</sup> She introduced her “Artistic Director’s Statement” with the declaration: “dOCUMENTA (13) is dedicated to artistic research and forms of imagination that explore commitment, matter, things, embodiment, and active living in connection with, yet not subordinated to, theory.” See PressRelease/Introduction to Documenta/Artistic Director’s Statement, available at <[http://d13.documenta.de/uploads/tx\\_pressesection/3\\_Introduction.pdf](http://d13.documenta.de/uploads/tx_pressesection/3_Introduction.pdf)> (accessed in November 2014).

<sup>88</sup> B. Latour, “From Realpolitik to Dingpolitik.” Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel (eds.) *Making Things Public: Atmospheres of Democracy*, Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2005: 4–31.

Among others’ theories we should recall the “thing theory” based on the study of material culture, for instance Quentin Meillassoux and Graham Harman, attempting to broaden “the anthropocentric focus of the sociologues to query the play of the object world in which the human is a single actor among all objects, while the ecological crisis has added a dimension of urgency to the acknowledgment of the life of the nonhuman.”<sup>88</sup> Steven Henry Madoff, “Why Curator Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev’s Documenta May Be the Most Important Exhibition of the 21st Century”, *blouinartinfo.com*, July 5, 2012. Available at <<http://www.blouinartinfo.com/news/story/811949/why-curator-carolyn-christov-bakargievs-documenta-is-the-most-important-exhibition-of-the-21st-century>> (accessed in September 2012).

<sup>89</sup> See Elisabeth Grosz, “Feminism, Materialism, and Freedom”, 47-60: 55 in Christopher Cox, Jenny Jaskey, Suhail Malik (eds.), *Realism Materialism Art*, Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College: Sternberg Press, 2015. This same essay was previously published in Diana Coole and Samantha Frost (eds.) *New Materialism. Ontology, Agency, and Politics*, Duke University Press, 2010, 139-157.

and then elaborated by the 19<sup>th</sup> century by Darwin, and then by Nietzsche and Bergson in the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>90</sup> She did not address the philosophical anthropology which has been at the core of the present research on organic materiality in the 20<sup>th</sup> century art, but her contribution, focused on remarks of philosophy of life previous to the German philosophers here presented, is certainly relevant in this discourse.<sup>91</sup>

In order to direct a central role of matter “any understanding of subjectivity or consciousness as free and autonomous,” Grosz recognized the necessity to get away from the tradition of “reason, rights, and recognition,” and therefore realized a way “outside the subject.”<sup>92</sup> She developed the concept of life, bare life “where freedom is conceived not only or primarily as the elimination of constraint or coercion but more positively as the condition of, or capacity for, action in life.”<sup>93</sup> A positive perspective stimulated her purpose in order to accomplish a step towards a “freedom to”, rather than a “freedom from”, an achievement, instead of an elimination of constraint, and instead of the more known articulations of freedom proposed by Nietzsche and Foucault, she focused on Bergson, in her opinion almost neglected by feminism and postmodern literature.<sup>94</sup>

The connection between Latour’s morphism, and the idea that the human does not pertain to a stable form seems to go hand in hand with Grosz’s attempt to link matter and freedom, overcoming the duality between determinists and libertarian thought. Through her recalling Bergson’s philosophy, especially *Time and Free Will* (1889), in which—according to Grosz—“free acts are those which both express us and which transform us, which express our transforming,”<sup>95</sup> she afterwards examined other Bergson’s works, such as *Matter and Memory* (1896); *The Creative Mind* (1911); *Mind Energy* (1859) and *Creative Evolution* (1907), more focused on the interrelations between the organic and the inorganic, and “the internal constitution of

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<sup>90</sup> E. Grosz, “Feminism, Materialism, and Freedom”, *Cit.*, 47.

<sup>91</sup> I could say even reassuring, while reading her essay at the final stage of the writing of this thesis.

<sup>92</sup> E. Grosz, “Feminism, Materialism, and Freedom”, *Cit.*, 47.

<sup>93</sup> E. Grosz, “Feminism, Materialism, and Freedom”, *Cit.*, 47-48.

<sup>94</sup> See E. Grosz, “Feminism, Materialism, and Freedom”, *Cit.*, 48-49.

<sup>95</sup> E. Grosz, “Feminism, Materialism, and Freedom”, *Cit.*, 53.

freedom through its encounters with the resistance of matter.”<sup>96</sup> She continued affirming,

[L]ife is consciousness, though not always an active consciousness. Consciousness is a projection onto materiality of the possibility to choice, a decision whose outcome is not given in advance, which is to say, a mode of simplifying or skeletonizing matter so that it affords us materials on and with which to act. It is linked to the capacity for choice, for freedom.<sup>97</sup>

The capacity for choice is remindful of the previously mentioned Latour’s invitation to “display our attention” and “sort”. Referring to life itself, she did not include the object worlds, or in Latour’s words, the Parliament of Things, but referred to Bergson’s “various degrees of freedom,” for instance the plant world, whose faculty of movement, e.g. a condition for freedom, is not absent, but dormant.<sup>98</sup> Nevertheless, she afterwards mentioned the degree of “indetermination” through which Bergson—in *Matter and Memory*—recognized “the true principle of life,” and, therefore, the degrees of freedom.<sup>99</sup> At this point the linkage between the living and the non-living happens. As Grosz referred

[i]ndetermination spreads from the living to the nonliving through the virtuality that the living brings to the inorganic, the potential for the inorganic to be otherwise, to lend itself to incorporation, transformation, and energetic protraction in the life and activities of species and individuals: “At the root of life there is an effort to engraft on to the necessity of physical forces the largest possible amount of *indetermination*.” [Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, 114] Life opens the universe to becoming more than it is. But equally, Bergson argues, matter as a whole, the material universe, must contain within itself the very conditions for the indeterminacy of the life which it generated.<sup>100</sup>

In this sense, the binary elements of matter and memory, life and inorganic are overcome in their “endosmosis, where matter expands into life and life contracts into

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<sup>96</sup> E. Grosz, “Feminism, Materialism, and Freedom”, *Cit.*, 55.

<sup>97</sup> E. Grosz, “Feminism, Materialism, and Freedom”, *Cit.*, 55.

<sup>98</sup> See H. Bergson, *Mind-Energy*, trans. H. Wildon Carr (London: Macmillan, 1921), 10-11, quoted by E. Grosz, “Feminism, Materialism, and Freedom”, *Cit.*, 55.

<sup>99</sup> See E. Grosz, “Feminism, Materialism, and Freedom”, *Cit.*, 56.

<sup>100</sup> E. Grosz, “Feminism, Materialism, and Freedom”, *Cit.*, 56-57.

matter in pure duration.”<sup>101</sup> In the end, the connection between freedom through indetermination and life through matter is exemplified in Grosz’s declaration—along through Bergson’s philosophy—that the expansive possibility of the universe, the possibility of being is given because “life can exist only because of the simultaneity of the past with the present that matter affords it.”<sup>102</sup> Having afforded the question of materiality in the 1980s with the post-modernist theories of Lyotard expressed in his exhibition *Les Immatériaux*, we afterwards approached its critique through Latour’s *We Have Never Been Modern*, to find out its inherent relationship with the non-modern anthropological philosophy of the 1930s and 1940s and connect it with the most recent further elaboration in feminist perspective on materialism based, once again, on pre-Socratic, pre-modern philosophy and its legacy at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

### **5.3 Materiality: between the return of environmental issues, new narratives of the past, and emotional connections**

*Here we stand  
Like an Adam and an Eve  
Waterfalls  
The Garden of Eden  
Two fools in love  
So beautiful and strong  
The birds in the trees  
Are smiling upon them  
From the age of dinosaurs  
Cars have run on gasoline  
Where, where have they gone?  
Now, it’s nothing but flowers  
There was a factory  
Now there are mountains and rivers  
You got it, you got it  
We caught a rattlesnake  
Now we got something for dinner  
You got it, you got it  
There was a shopping mall*

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<sup>101</sup> E. Grosz, “Feminism, Materialism, and Freedom”, *Cit.*, 57.

<sup>102</sup> E. Grosz, “Feminism, Materialism, and Freedom”, *Cit.*, 58.

*Now it's all covered with flowers  
You got it, you got it  
If this is paradise  
I wish I had a lawnmower  
You got it, you got it  
Years ago  
I was an angry young man  
I'd pretend  
That I was a billboard  
Standing tall  
By the side of the road  
I fell in love  
With a beautiful highway  
This used to be real estate  
Now it's only fields and trees  
Where, where is the town  
Now, it's nothing but flowers  
The highways and cars  
Were sacrificed for agriculture  
I thought that we'd start over  
But I guess I was wrong  
Once there were parking lots  
Now it's a peaceful oasis  
You got it, you got it  
This was a Pizza Hut  
Now it's all covered with daisies  
You got it, you got it  
I miss the honky tonks  
Dairy Queens, and 7-Elevens  
You got it, you got it  
And as things fell apart  
Nobody paid much attention  
You got it, you got it  
I dream of cherry pies,  
Candy bars, and chocolate chip cookies  
You got it, you got it  
We used to microwave  
Now we just eat nuts and berries  
You got it, you got it  
This was a discount store,  
Now it turned into a cornfield  
You got it, you got it  
Don't let me stranded here  
I can't get used to this lifestyle.*

Talking Heads, *(Nothing But) Flowers*, 1988



Taking on the position of Latour regarding, for instance, the acknowledgement of an environmental problem we can hardly control, a few circumstances occurring at the end of the 1980s need to be considered at this point, in order to afterwards deal with how some specific artistic practices of our interests came into place, not as illustrative, but as coherent with the time they were conceived in and carried out as contributions to a global debate. As a first account, the song (*Nothing But*) *Flowers* from the album *Naked* (1988) by the *Talking Heads* is remarkable. Its lyrics addressed environmental issues ironically, with a mix of electronic sound and sonorities of African percussions. In this context we also witness an opening of the artistic map internationally, or rather, globally: for instance, the exhibition “Aperto” (“Open”) in Venice in 1988 registered a robust presence of artists whose provenance was from the so-called Third World. Dan Cameron, one among the five curators, declared “the end of styles war”, and the emergence of a “pluralistic cultural perspective,”<sup>103</sup> which he acknowledged as a cause of disorder in the realm of visual (and plastic) arts.

One year later, a crucial step towards this direction was moved by the *Le Magiciens de la Terre* (1989), curated by Jean-Hubert Martin and presented as the first worldly exhibition of contemporary art (whether with all the limits for which it was criticized afterwards). In it participated 101 artists coming from different places in the world, including Africa and New Zealand. From this exhibition we just mention the work by Cildo Meireles entitled *Missão* (Mission), for the matter and material excretions featured.<sup>104</sup> The installation was composed of three elements: a path covered with 600,000 coins (symbolizing power), a ceiling made of around 2,000 and 2,500 bones of oxen (bones to be intended as the common denominator between life and death).<sup>105</sup> The two parallel and horizontal square plans are connected by a thin column positioned in the middle made of host, symbolizing the human flesh, whose fragility and ephemerality contrasted with the durability and hardness of coins and bones.<sup>106</sup>

Regarding the environmental concern in this global scope, it is remarkable the document emitted in 1987—*Our common future*, or *Brundtland Report*—which

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<sup>103</sup> See Nicholas Bourriaud, “Baudrillard, ce héros (le simulationnisme)”, in *Les années 80 d’Anne Bony*, Éditions du Regard, Paris, 1995, 88.

<sup>104</sup> See. F. De Mèredieu, *Cit.*, 277-278.

<sup>105</sup> See *Magiciens de la terre*, Exhibition Catalogue, Centre Pompidou, Paris, 1989, 197.

<sup>106</sup> “La dureté de l’os et des piécettes contraste avec la vulnérabilité de la ‘chair’ de l’hostie.” F. De Mèredieu, *Cit.*, 278.

resulted from the United Nations World Commission on Environment and Development Sustainability.<sup>107</sup> In the text it was reported that “[t]he Commission has focused its attention on the areas of population, food security, the loss of species and genetic resources, energy, industry, and human settlements - realizing that all of these are connected and cannot be treated in isolation one from another.”<sup>108</sup> A few years later, the international Conference on Environment and Development (*Conferência das Nações Unidas sobre o Meio Ambiente e Desenvolvimento – ECO 92 ou RIO-92*) took place. It was held in Rio de Janeiro in 1992,<sup>109</sup> and on the occasion an artistic project funded by the Goethe Institute Brasilia was presented, in which American and European artists participated: it was entitled *Arte Amazonas. Uma contribuição artística para a Conferência das Nações Unidas sobre Meio Ambiente e Desenvolvimento, “Rio-92.”*<sup>110</sup>

In this realm, “[a]ctivist and ecological/site-specific work that had its beginnings in the 1960s in Conceptual-related projects [saw] a revival in the 1980s and 1990s,”<sup>111</sup> and at this exhibition the participation of Mark Dion was remarkable. After his permanence in the Amazon forest, during which he collected “specimens of flora and fauna: insects, feathers, fungus, and nests,”<sup>112</sup> he presented a work entitled *On Tropical Nature* (1991) in the attempt of “stimulating the spectator to be interested in the raw data from the tropical forest, the way science does.”<sup>113</sup>

After acknowledging the treasures of Nature in its perfection and totality, the Human, according to Dion, will experiment a completely new sensation of astonishment. He proposes not to transmit values by any selected medium or

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<sup>107</sup> World Commission on Environment and Development Sustainability, Oxford University Press: “Our common future” (1987). Available at <<http://www.un-documents.net/our-common-future.pdf>> (accessed in December 2014).

<sup>108</sup> Point 40 on “The Policy Directions”, in *Our Common Future*, Cit., non-paginated.

<sup>109</sup> See <<http://www.direitoshumanos.usp.br/index.php/Agenda-21/capitulo-01-conferencia-das-nacoes-unidas-sobre-o-meio-ambiente-e-desenvolvimento.html>> (accessed in July 2013).

<sup>110</sup> *Arte Amazonas. Uma contribuição artística para a Conferência das Nações Unidas sobre Meio Ambiente e Desenvolvimento, “Rio-92”*, Museu de Arte Moderna, Rio de Janeiro; Museu de Arte, Brasília; Bienal de São Paulo, Parque Ibirapuera; Staatliche Kunsthalle Berlin, Goethe Institut Brasilia, 1992.

<sup>111</sup> L. Lippard, *Six Years*, Cit., xxii.

<sup>112</sup> See Perdita v. Kraft-Lottner “Vida na Amazônia”, *Arte Amazonas*, cit., 45.

<sup>113</sup> “estimular o espectador a interessar-se pelos dados brutos da mata tropical, a exemplo do que faz a ciência”, Perdita v. Kraft-Lottner “Vida na Amazônia”, *Arte Amazonas*, cit., 45.

any distanced formulation, but rather by an intimate relationship with the objects, through their immediate presence.<sup>114</sup>

As declared in a conversation with Alexis Rockman in 1991, Dion's focus on environmental concerns within his artistic practice coincided with the "view that the loss of biodiversity is a critically underestimated ecological issue."<sup>115</sup> Acknowledging that "life is based on webs of interrelationships," he believed that the destruction of "the elements within those interrelationships" meant (and means more and more urgently) the reduction of "our options for the future," mining "to disrupt the natural processes that keep the life-cycle going."<sup>116</sup> The way Dion operated his involvement on ecological issues approached critical positions towards the museum institution, by his attraction on what he afterwards called "the thingness"<sup>117</sup> of museums, in the attempt of generating—in the words of Rockman—"a revisionist 'official history' of natural history in a pseudo-documentary format."<sup>118</sup>

Dion's response to this comment results particularly relevant for our discourse on the organic materiality in the 20<sup>th</sup> century art exhibited in the artificial space of the gallery or the museum or in the urban space (as we noted in the previous chapter with some cases of artists working outside the delimited space devoted to featuring artworks, but nevertheless, even if outside, in a constructed space). He responded

You've touched exactly what makes these organisms so detestable in our culture. These creatures are constant reminders of our part in the biological contract. They remind us that, like all animals, we are implicated in a set of

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<sup>114</sup> "Após entender os tesouros da Natureza em sua perfeição e totalidade, o Homem, na opinião de Dion, experimentará uma sensação completamente nova de estupefação. Propõe que não se transmitam os valores por um meio selecionado qualquer ou por qualquer formulação distanciada, senão por um relacionamento íntimo com os objetos, através de sua presença imediata." Perdita v. Kraft-Lottner "Vida na Amazônia", *Arte Amazonas*, cit., 45. Images, 98-99.

<sup>115</sup> "Mark Dion and Alexis Rockman. In Conversation // 1991", extract from conversation, *Journal of Contemporary Art*, Spring/Summer, 1991; reprinted in *Concrete Jungle*, Middletown, Connecticut: Ezra and Cecile Zikha Gallery, Wesleyan University, 1993, 6-8, included in the anthology of Jeffrey Kastner (ed.) *Nature*, Cit., 157-159: 157. From the 1980 onwards, a pivotal figure in the concern towards biodiversity, its disappearance and the challenge to save it, has been Vandana Shiva. Her first collection of essays was realised in the volume V. Shiva, *Monoculture of the Mind: Perspectives on Biodiversity and Biotechnology*, London; New York: Zed Books, 1993.

<sup>116</sup> "Mark Dion and Alexis Rockman. In Conversation // 1991", *Cit.*, 157.

<sup>117</sup> "Mark Dion in conversation with Anna Dezeuze, Julia Kelly and David Lomas", *Papers of Surrealism*, Issue 4, Winter 2005, 1-14: 6 (Conversation transcribed by Kerry Cundiff.) Available at <<http://www.surrealismcentre.ac.uk/papersofsurrealism/journal4/acrobat%20files/Dioninterview3.pdf>> (accessed in November 2014).

<sup>118</sup> "Mark Dion and Alexis Rockman. In Conversation // 1991", *Cit.*, 158.

relations with other animals, that we do not benefit from some of those relationships. The modernist cube [...] is an example of the denial of the biological contract. It is the environment without nature. In the same way that our culture does not acknowledge shit, distances itself from the production of food or denies the processes of ageing, these animals remind us that we too are animals—and therefore mortals. [...] I view my practice as closely akin to documentary. [...] I'm interested in a different site for the production of truth—the pedagogical institution of the museum. Since, like you, my main interest is the question of the representation of nature, it is the natural history, ethnographic and history museums—as well as zoological and botanic parks—that interest me. These are fascinating institutions because they represent a society's 'official story', all the conventions and assumptions of what gets to stand for nature a particular time for a particular group of people. [...]<sup>119</sup>

A few years later, Dion declared that his interest in museums was based on a fascination to that kind of surrealism that produces “more about a kind of un-comfortability, an uneasiness in some way, some un-canniness to existence,”<sup>120</sup> and therefore that surrealism interrelated with the legacy of cabinets of curiosities and antiques (a relationship analysed in the first chapter). This interest passed through a fascination for things as vehicles, not much for the transmission of knowledge, for which generally museums are supposed (and legitimize their presence) to stand for, but rather the input of generating thinking and curiosity by the experience of seeing a very object, instead of its representation in a picture or a video.<sup>121</sup> He afterwards declared his early draw “to things that were fragmented, to things that were anomalies, to curiosities,”<sup>122</sup> and, therefore, considered the importance of museums for “motivating through marvel and through wonder and not about learning a handful of facts.”<sup>123</sup>

Mark Dion's work, concerned with environmental issues and histories of science involving notions of power and domineering regarding the relationship between Europe and the conquered countries in modern times, is also symptomatic of a renewed interest in the earlier cabinets, in which natural and artificial coexisted equally as collections of objects. This phenomenon occurring at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was defined by Martha Buskirk as “a somewhat paradoxical return of the

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<sup>119</sup> “Mark Dion and Alexis Rockman. In Conversation // 1991”, *Cit.*, 158.

<sup>120</sup> “Mark Dion in conversation with Anna Dezeuze, Julia Kelly and David Lomas”, *Cit.*, 4.

<sup>121</sup> See “Mark Dion in conversation with Anna Dezeuze, Julia Kelly and David Lomas”, *Cit.*, 6-7.

<sup>122</sup> “Mark Dion in conversation with Anna Dezeuze, Julia Kelly and David Lomas”, *Cit.*, 8.

<sup>123</sup> “Mark Dion in conversation with Anna Dezeuze, Julia Kelly and David Lomas”, *Cit.*, 9.

antiquarian, not as a ridicule, but as guise taken up by artists turning their attention to histories of both objects and institution.”<sup>124</sup> These artists’ interventions implied dismounting the museum collections obeying to “instituted narratives” to “shake up” the traditional museum order,<sup>125</sup> and, therefore, give room to other possible narratives, eventually reflecting, according to Buskirk, “the fact that neither museum strategies nor artistic responses have remained static.”<sup>126</sup>

Regarding the plant element in the artificial space of the exhibition, a significant event, was the publication *trans-plant. Living Vegetation in Contemporary Art* (2000),<sup>127</sup> including Dion also, edited by Barbara Nemitz. This work resulted from Nemitz’s artistic research, which had begun with her project *KünstlerGarten Weimar* in 1993, and which she defined as “the experiment with a form of existence as a process of cognition.”<sup>128</sup> This project involved the presentation of 20 works installed in areas within Weimar, and also a lecture series with other artists and scholars, a project journal, guided tours, and the publication of the volume *transplant* mentioned above, all together under Nemitz’s initial statement “[w]ork with living plants is both an intimate and a visionary endeavor.”<sup>129</sup> From this volume are remarkable for this study the work of artists Barbara Nemitz, Mel Chin, Mark Dion, Gloria Friedman, Newton & Helen Mayer Harrison, Henrik Hakansson, Avital Geva, Siobhán Hapaska, Sann Kunce, Teresa Murak, Fabrice Hybert, among others.

Without going into the specificities characterizing the single works, it seems nevertheless worth summarizing the theoretical frame inherent in the selection made by the editor for this book, also as a wider context in which her work can be placed. First of all, Nemitz attributed the use of living plants in the already spread and common “unrestricted pluralism in matters of style,” but this is not the only reason. In fact, she also added that living plants in an artwork, opposed to non-living matter, produce the effect of facing the artist with something alive, and therefore “[w]orks with plants are dynamic forms that develop and involve plans for life. Unlike “dead

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<sup>124</sup> M. Buskirk, *Creative Enterprise*, Cit., 2012, 3.

<sup>125</sup> See M. Buskirk, *Creative Enterprise*, Cit., 2012, 4.

<sup>126</sup> M. Buskirk, *Creative Enterprise*, Cit., 2012, 5.

<sup>127</sup> Barbara Nemitz (ed.), *transplant. Living Vegetation in Contemporary Art*, (Texts by Kim Levin, Barbara Nemitz, Peter Herbstreuth), Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2000.

<sup>128</sup> B. Nemitz, “Affinities”, in B. Nemitz (ed.), *transplant. Living Vegetation in Contemporary Art*, Cit., 9.

<sup>129</sup> B. Nemitz, “Affinities”, in B. Nemitz (ed.), *transplant. Living Vegetation in Contemporary Art*, Cit., 7.

matter”, plants exhibit relationships of dependence by virtue of the constant need for suitable living conditions.”<sup>130</sup> Furthermore, Nebitz commented on the vital principle inherent to the plant, participating in artwork through the stimulation of our smell (with its scents and odors) while also through our sight (with its shapes and colors), generating “lasting and significant effects.”

Information broadcast by a work of art with plants gains in density and depth, as it presents not only what a human being has thought and produced but also, ultimately, the inexplicable, the other, as a component of the work. This living substance contains more than we know. [...] Awareness of the changeable nature of their inherent life processes increases the possibility of perceiving the formal relationships of artistic works not merely as static stimuli but in a much more comprehensive way. Interest in living processes is much more direct than that in inanimate materials. Works which incorporate living vegetation take advantage of this opportunity to establish contact by virtue of their ability to appeal for emotional closeness.<sup>131</sup>

The ephemerality of the organic element linked with the emotional process that it conveys reminds one of *Strange Fruit (for David)* (1992-1997) by Zoe Leonard, in which the materiality used depended on a specific choice, and also questioned—according to Buskirk—“what constitutes the definition of the work over the long term.”<sup>132</sup> Leonard started her work in the post-feminist context of New York, exploring through photographs in black and white a tool to document the image of the woman as perceived and represented by men. For this installation, something different happened: it was created by occupying the floor of the Paula Cooper Gallery in New York with peels from “almost three hundred oranges, grapefruits, and bananas that Leonard has sewn back together after consuming the fruit, sometimes incorporating buttons and zippers as well as stitching.”<sup>133</sup> The use of these organic elements in their perishable status, leaving their nature unaltered and dispersed in a “random arrangement”, offered some metaphorical associations, which Buskirk highlighted as follows:

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<sup>130</sup> B. Nemitz, “Affinities”, in B. Nemitz (ed.), *transplant. Living Vegetation in Contemporary Art*, Cit., 7.

<sup>131</sup> B. Nemitz, “Affinities”, Cit., 9.

<sup>132</sup> M. Buskirk, *The Contingent Object of Contemporary Art*, Cit., 143.

<sup>133</sup> M. Buskirk, *The Contingent Object of Contemporary Art*, Cit., 143-145.

The multiple references of the title—to the Billie Holiday song, with its powerful image of lynched bodies, to Leonard’s friend David Wojnarowicz, who died of AIDS in 1992, and to the pejorative of the use of the term “fruit” as slang for gay—suggest specific associations that support a general sense of loss. Thus their presentation, dispersed across the floor of the gallery, serves to emphasize the isolation of each of these paradoxical objects.<sup>134</sup>

In an interview by Anna Blume at Documenta 9 (1992), Leonard recalled that period while she was feeling guilty for doing art while “people were falling like flies.”<sup>135</sup> Feeling inadequate in the gap and incompatibility between “fighting against the capital” in Wall Street and then exposing her pictures in Germany, she reported what her friend David told her, something like: “Never give up on beauty. We fight to pursue these things, so we will regain beauty.”<sup>136</sup> And afterwards she realized he was right arguing “you cross all the battles not because you want to fight, but because you want to get somewhere as a person. You want to give your contribution to create a world in which you can sit and think about the clouds. This could be our right as human beings.”<sup>137</sup>

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<sup>134</sup> M. Buskirk, *The Contingent Object of Contemporary Art*, Cit., 145.

<sup>135</sup> Zoe Leonard in Anna Blume, “Documenta 9”, in Emanuela de Cecco and Gianni Romano (eds.), *Contemporanee. Percorsi, lavori e poetiche delle artiste dagli anni Ottanta a oggi*, Milano: Costa & Nolan, 2000, 216-218: 218. This sentence by Zoe Leonard is reminiscent of some works by Damien Hirst in which flies are literally stick on the canvas and have a close relationship with death, producing an entire black surface filled with dead flies: *Holocaust* (2003); *Genocide* (2003); *Typhoid* (2003); *Aids* (2003); and the two bigger round canvases: *Black Sun* (2004) and *Night Falls Fast* (2004). As declared during a conversation with Mirta d’Argenzio, Damien Hirst was inspired by Hobbes’s Leviathan: “It was a quote where he said people are like flies brushed off a wall. I liked that metaphorically. Your whole life could be like points in the space, like nearly nothing. Also if you stand back far enough you think people are just like flies, like the circle of a fly of a fly is like your own life. [...]”, Damien Hirst interviewed by Mirta D’argenzio, “Like People, Like Flies”, in *Damien Hirst*, curated by Eduardo Cicelyn, Mario Codognato, Mirta d’Argenzio, exhibition catalogue (English version), Museo Archeologico Nazionale, Napoli, 2005, 86-94: 94.

<sup>136</sup> “Non rinunciare mai alla bellezza. Combattiamo per avere queste cose, così avremo di nuovo la bellezza.” Zoe Leonard in Anna Blume, “Documenta 9”, in E. de Cecco and G. Romano (eds.), *Contemporanee. Percorsi, lavori e poetiche delle artiste dagli anni Ottanta a oggi*, Cit., 218. My translation from the Italian.

<sup>137</sup> “Attraversi tutte le battaglie non perché vuoi combattere, ma perché vuoi arrivare da qualche parte come persona. Vuoi dare il tuo contributo per creare un mondo in cui puoi sederti e pensare alle nuvole. Questo dovrebbe essere il nostro diritto in quanto esseri umani.” Zoe Leonard in Anna Blume, “Documenta 9”, Cit., 218. My translation from the Italian.

#### 5.4 The organic and the machine: Cyborgs, Cloning and Bio Art

The decade of the 1990s was particularly significant for the new perspectives it featured regarding life, its reproduction and its modifications by technological means. Those were the years in which, between August 1990 and February 1991 the Gulf War, then the ten-years war in Ex-Yugoslavia started in 1991, the Rwanda genocide in 1994, and the war in Kosovo between 1998 and 1999 displayed images of war and death, which for the first time were massively televised and broadcast, therefore, perceived by audiences from the entire world in a different manner. We might say, in a surgical perspective, provoking even the reduction to banality—in Susan Sontag’s words—“Regarding the Pain of Others.”<sup>138</sup>

The discovery of the AIDS virus and the fragility of a body fighting against cancer produced an obsession on the body subjected to its cellular annulment and the attempt to re-conquer it through the most innovative developments in medicine. In the meantime, scientific progresses opened new paths in the field of genetic engineering and aesthetic surgery, offering chimeras and reflecting in the art field a re-proposition of embodiments, not only the way they are, but also as they could be thanks to the support of the most advanced technology. The exhibition *Post-Human* in 1992-1993 at Castello di Rivoli in Turin departed by Jeffrey Deitch’s curatorial statement that “in the future artists will not be engaged just in redefining what art is. In the post-human future artists could be involved in the redefinition of the same existence.”<sup>139</sup> These possibilities produced the development of bio-art, on the one hand, and the definition of a post-organic body and/or cyborg, on the other. Below the definition of cyborg, Donna Haraway formulated in her book *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women. The Reinvention of Nature* (1991):

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<sup>138</sup> S. Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, New York: Picador, 2003. In this book Sontag also addressed the Israel and Palestine conflict started in 2000 and the September 11, 2001 attack to the Twin Towers.

<sup>139</sup> An excerpt from Jeffrey Ditch, *Post-Human* exhibition catalogue, 1992-1993: “What we do know is that we will soon be forced by technological advances to develop a new morality. We will need to build a new moral structure that will give people a framework of how to deal with the enormous choices they will have to make in terms of genetic alteration and computerized brain enhancement. We will have to face decisions not only about what looks good, but what *is* good or is bad about the restructuring of the mind and body. The limits of life will no longer be something that can be taken for granted. We will have to create a new moral vision to cope with them. In the future, artists may no longer be involved in just redefining art. In the post-human future artists may also be involved in redefining life.” Available at <<http://www.artic.edu/~pcarroll/PostHuman.html>> (accessed in July 2013).



A cyborg is a hybrid creature, composed of organism and machine. But, cyborgs are compounded of special kinds of machines and special kinds of organisms appropriate to the late twentieth century. Cyborgs are post-Second World War hybrid entities made of, first, ourselves and other organic creatures in our unchosen “high-technological” guise as information systems, texts, and ergonomically controlled labouring, desiring, and reproducing systems. The second essential ingredient in cyborgs is machines in their guise, also, as communications systems, and self-acting, ergonomically designed apparatuses.<sup>140</sup>

In 1996 genetic manipulation began, and on February 14, 1997 the announcement of the first mammal cloned by a somatic cell was broadcast: the birth of the sheep Dolly. This astonishing discovery envisioned the promises of alternative possibilities through the “true copy”, and even human cloning became a contemplated hypothesis, facing acute critique and condemnation from the side of political authorities and the Catholic Church. In this sense, the Universal Declaration on the Human Genome and Human Rights released on November 11, 1997 was adopted as an instrument to uphold and make applicable the respect of human genetics and its ethical principles inspired on the fundamentals of the United Nations.<sup>141</sup> A reference is remarkable at this point by Gilbert and Sahotra (which is reminiscent of Eleanor Antin’s work presented in the previous chapter) to Haraway, who “hypothesizes that in today’s vocabulary, ‘genome’ has replaced ‘blood’ as the stable basis for race and ethnicity,” and recognizing that “[t]he gene functions culturally as the unchanging essence, the rock in the storm. Like science, in general, genetics is seen as containing the underlying truth amidst social uncertainty.”<sup>142</sup>

The artistic practices became a field of unlimited experimentation, in which the borders between real and virtual, natural and technological, eventually blurs, in a mixture of sensationalism and sight domestication. In this realm, we may consider the case limit between art and science, and involving a sequel of judiciary sentences, of German anatomist Gunther Von Hagens, whose technique of “plastination” to preserve human tissues of dead bodies, around which his controversial work

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<sup>140</sup> D. J. Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women. The Reinvention of Nature*, London: Free Association Books, 1991, 1.

<sup>141</sup> See Noëlle Lenoir “La Déclaration universelle sur le génome humain et les droits de l’homme”, *Universalis 1998. La politique, les connaissances, la culture en 1997*, ENCICLOPÆDIA UNIVERSALIS, France, 93.

<sup>142</sup> Scott F. Gilbert and Sahotra Sarkar, “Embracing Complexity: Organicism for the 21st century”, *Developmental Dynamics*, 219, 2000, 1-9: 6, quoting D. J. Haraway, *Modest\_Witness@Second\_Millennium*, New York: Routledge Press, 1997.

gravitates, was patented in 1977. He founded the Institute of Plastination in Heidelberg in 1993, and his first exhibition *Body Worlds*, displaying to the wide public an invention until that moment average of medical studies, took place in Japan in 1995. It was afterwards featured in more than fifty cities around the world, until the opening of the *MeMu Menschen Museum* in Berlin Alexanderplatz.

Mario Perniola wrote about an aesthetic of *dégoûtant*, developed by French philosophers Luce Irigaray and Jacques Derrida. According to Perniola, both

describe us a sensing inscribed in an exteriority irreducible to spirit, in the feminine sex wrinkles or in the cavities of lungs, in an unpronounceable writing or in a technic prosthesis, in a chemical substance or in an incomprehensible ritualism, in other words, in “things that sense”; this way bringing the sensing of difference to make a physiological transfer, whose outcome and meaning we must question.<sup>143</sup>

In 1993, on the occasion of the final year students’ exhibition at the Brera Fine Arts Academy in Milan, Vanessa Beecroft, together with her drawings and a diary book, performed with thirty women all dressed like her and posing as mannequins, silently, creating a situation in between a *tableaux-vivant* reminiscent of classic painting and references to the contemporary fashion world.<sup>144</sup>

Jana Sterbak (born in Prague and based in Canada) centred on the body her artistic practice, which is situated—in Teresa Macri’s words—“in a sort of conflictive de-territorialisation between physical nature and human artifice.”<sup>145</sup> At the core of her poetics lies the metamorphic becoming of the human being, its transitory and ephemeral essence, its natural limits over which the human is not in control, but intervene through science, technology, self-representation and art to respond to this uncontrolled chaotic flux, reacting, and at the same time, acknowledging, the fear of death. “Hence, probably, all her vital impulse gets born, her experimentation on the

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<sup>143</sup> “Irigaray e Derrida descrevem-nos um sentir que se encontra inscrito numa exterioridade irreduzível ao espírito, nas pregas do sexo feminino ou nas cavidades pulmonares, numa escrita impronunciável ou numa prótese técnica, numa substância química ou num ritualismo incompreensível, isto é, em «coisas que sentem»; assim levam o sentir da diferença a realizar uma mudança fisiológica, sobre cujo alcance e significado nos devemos interrogar.” Mario Perniola, *A estética do século XX*, editorial estampa, Lisboa, 1998 (*L’estetica del Novecento*, Il Mulino, Bologna, 1997), 187-188. My translation from the available Portuguese book translation.

<sup>144</sup> See Emanuela de Cecco and Gianni Romano (eds.), “Vanessa Beecroft”, in *Contemporanee. Percorsi, lavori e poetiche delle artiste dagli anni Ottanta a oggi*, Cit., 309-314: 309.

<sup>145</sup> T. Macri, *Il corpo post-organico*, Genova, Costa & Nolan, 2006 (1996), 155.

artifice as liberator pathology from the natural order.”<sup>146</sup> The analysis Macri put on Sterbak’s works permits us to establish a relationship with philosophical anthropology we have been discussing on the previous pages. And especially the idea of *Leib*, that for Plessner corresponded to the sentient and conscientious body, somewhat distanced by the physical body (*Körper*). Inspired by classic characters by the Czech literature, like the *Metamorphosis* (1915) of Gregor Samsa by Franz Kafka, as well as the artificial creature of *The Golem* (1914) by Gustav Meyring, Sterbak began her work with a corporeal obsession, being at the same time creator of organs and sensations, Golem now is creator, as declared for the piece *Golem: Objets comme sensations* (1979-1982). Particularly remarkable for our research results what Macri observed:

With Prague’s clay robot, spectral figure of the possible, the golem *Körper* invented by Jana is a kind of embryonic phase of the being. Timeless dismembered organs, beyond life and death: it does not seem decisive to comprehend if they are relics or beginnings. In this process the becoming of the being, in this phase that will bring her to the complex realization of the *Leib*, Sterbak crosses the threshold of desire. The more physical the body, the more desire is let loose.<sup>147</sup>

Nevertheless, our desires and our physical limitations are continually faced with the uncomfortable truth of mortality as independent of our choices, it only leaves, for Sterbak the possibility of “self-creation”—as Richard Noble referred—and as soon as we get to know ourselves the necessity to present and create ourselves to and for the others emerges.<sup>148</sup> In this way, projecting our image to the others to be recognized and legitimized for who we are, the cultural element of the dress contributes in presses of creation of our subjectivity. Inspired by representation of the *vanitas*, a genre crossing the tradition of still life painting and also sculpture, in 1987

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<sup>146</sup> “Da qui, probabilmente, nasce tutta la sua pulsione vitale, la sua sperimentazione sull’artificio come patologia liberatória dall’ordine naturale.”, T. Macri, *Il corpo post-organico*, Cit., 156. My translation from the Italian.

<sup>147</sup> “Come il robot di argilla praghese, spettrale figura del possibile, il *Körper* golemico inventato da Jana è una sorta di fase embrionale dell’essere. Organi smembrati senza tempo, oltre la vita e oltre la morte: non sembra decisivo comprendere se sono resti oppure inizi. In questo processo del divenire del corpo, in questa fase che la porterà alla realizzazione complessa del *Leib*, la Sterbak attraversa la soglia del desiderio. Più si fa corpo e più si scatena il desiderio.” T. Macri, *Il corpo post-organico*, Cit., 157.

<sup>148</sup> See Richard Noble, “Jana Sterbak: Dialectica da Criação e do Confinamento” (translation by Fernando L. Costa), *Performatus*, Ano 2, N° 9, 2014, 1-21: 3. Available at <<http://performatus.net/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/Jana-Sterbak-%C2%AB-Performatus.pdf>> (accessed in June 2014).

Sterbak operated a shocking embodiment of this idea through her performance *Vanitas: Flesh Dress for an Albino Anorectic* (1987). The feminine and gracious pose she assumed contrasted with the repulsion caused by the dress she wore, made of thirty kilos of beefsteaks sewn between them. Meat, fat, muscles, and iron strings created a mutant dress, in its ephemerality. Colours getting darker, smells becoming more pungent, of the meat getting dry—these physical transitions were all recorded by photographs documenting the process—transferred the organic immediacy of decay and putrescence: the tragedy of death represented all over Western metaphoric still life paintings could not be more blatant and disturbing.

*Flesh Dress* stigmatized the finitude of life and more concretely the finitude of carnal pleasures and desires, in vain our efforts to overcome the tragedy of life. At the same time, this piece had an ironic component operating as a social critique to an over imposed market with make-up, beauty products and well-being clearing out fake messages a perennial youth. If death, as Hobbes put it, means the end of desire, and in some cases the end of the good, “for those unable to believe in the possibility of redemption, the vanity of the human effort evoked by the ageing of the dress is profoundly tragic.”<sup>149</sup> Another interesting point Macrì highlighted concerns the term in the title: Sterbak called it “flesh” dress and not “meat” (which is animal and therefore eaten, by non vegans or vegetarians). Therefore from the title, “her work offers the possibility to be identified with the human and with the [non-human] animal.”<sup>150</sup> And concluding on this piece, the Italian writer and art critic declared, “[t]he carnal metaphor as existential parabola is fully stroked, the dress is not more that its blaspheme fetish.” Sterbak’s performances, confronting the human with the machine, eventually demonstrate her prosthetic perception of life with all its metamorphic components, in which, “the mutant body is the only possible way of sensorial reactivation, the human is too little.”<sup>151</sup>

Another remarkable example in the realm of artistic practices before and during the 1990s involving the human body and its metamorphosis offered by prosthetic interventions is that of the French performer Orlan. Before analysing a few aspects of her work it might be useful to refer to some accounts *On spiders, cyborgs*

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<sup>149</sup> Richard Noble, “Jana Sterbak: Dialectica da Criação e do Confinamento”, *Cit.*, 13.

<sup>150</sup> “Già nel titolo, *Flesh* piuttosto che *Meat* (carne da mangiare), l’opera offre la possibilità di essere identificata sia con l’uomo che con l’animale.” T. Macrì, *Il corpo post-organico*, *Cit.*, 161.

<sup>151</sup> “Il corpo mutante è l’unica possibile via di riattivazione sensoriale, l’umano è troppo poco.” T. Macrì, *Il corpo post-organico*, *Cit.*, 175.

*and being scared* (2001) addressed by Joanna Zylińska. In her book, whose insights also apply to interpret the poetics of Sterbak mentioned above, Zylińska put forward the concept of cyborg placing at the core of her research the notion of sublime, following its tradition from the most significant references from antiquity to the present, but in dialogue with the contemporary time in which she wrote the book. Reluctant to refer to this period as “postmodernity”, she focused “on the feeling of saturation, or excess that characterizes our everyday experience of being-in-the world.”<sup>152</sup> Her point of departure was Edward Rothstein description of the sublime in 1997 as “a relationship between order and disorder,” which eventually “provides an important model, and extreme case, of how we come to understand the world.”<sup>153</sup> A consequently productive theme, according to Zylińska, “when it comes to describing fears, anxieties and fascinations connected with the technological age.”<sup>154</sup>

Addressing the sublime permitted Zylińska to bring together aesthetics and ethics and develop an ethical proposal not circumscribed within a philosophical current, but rather a response to “(re)awakening of the ethical impulse in contemporary cultural studies and cultural theory.”<sup>155</sup> For the extent she brought into her discourse Orlan’s carnal art, which is the priority of our interest for this research, the music by Laurie Anderson, philosophical references such as Luce Irigaray (among others), prompting a terrain to develop a sublime open to sexual difference in the encounter with the other, and Judith Butler’s gender theory, with the aim of formulating a new discourse on the sublime: “the feminine sublime.”<sup>156</sup> Zylińska’s “feminine sublime” developed an idea of “displacement” in continuity with Lyotard’s notion of sublime expressed in his *Inhuman* (1991): “[w]hat is sublime is the feeling that something will happen, despite everything, within this threatening void, that something will take ‘place’ and announce that everything is not over. That place is merely ‘here’, the most minimal occurrence.”<sup>157</sup> The title chosen for this book was

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<sup>152</sup> J. Zylińska, *On spiders, cyborgs and being scared*, Manchester University Press, 2001, 2. Available at <[http://joannazylińska.squarespace.com/storage/documents/zylińska\\_spiders.pdf](http://joannazylińska.squarespace.com/storage/documents/zylińska_spiders.pdf)> (accessed in December 2014).

<sup>153</sup> Robert Rothstein, “Contemplating the Sublime”, *The American Scholar*, 1.09.1997, quoted by J. Zylińska, *On spiders, cyborgs and being scared*, Cit., 2.

<sup>154</sup> J. Zylińska, *On spiders, cyborgs and being scared*, Cit., 2.

<sup>155</sup> J. Zylińska, *On spiders, cyborgs and being scared*, Cit., 3.

<sup>156</sup> See J. Zylińska, *On spiders, cyborgs and being scared*, Cit., 4.

<sup>157</sup> J-F. Lyotard, *The Inhuman*, (trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Richard Bowiby), Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991, 93, quoted by J. Zylińska, *On spiders, cyborgs and being scared*, Cit., 4.

explanatory of her theoretical purpose, as she commented

The spiders and cyborgs of my title can be seen as harbingers of unprecedented couplings and unwanted connections. In this sense, the spider and the cyborg are next of kin, inhabiting both the natural and the technological world and transgressing the distance between human and inhuman. The respective feelings of arachnophobia and technophobia they evoke reflect a broader anxiety at the heart of the modern world, which both bemoans the loss of the natural and passionately yearns for the alien. We can see these anxieties in recent controversies over genetically modified food, organ transplants, plastic surgery, cloning and “foetus personhood”, to name a few of the aspects of the battle for (or against) the control of Nature. These fears and desires, often formulated in clearly polarized, dialectical terms, seem to me to be also representative of the negative pleasure that is associated with the sublime. [...] If death is the ultimate source of fear in the experience of the sublime, the feminine sublime can be interpreted as a recognition, rather than denial, of mortality and finitude to which the self is exposed in its encounter with absolute difference.<sup>158</sup>

Zylinska questioned if the cyborg was merely a metaphor or a material presence, recognizing its “instability of the boundary between what is traditionally perceived as human and machine.”<sup>159</sup> She observed that the notion of cyborg challenged any stability in defining identity “channelled into sexualized bodies and genders,”<sup>160</sup> and underscored that in first Haraway’s definition of cyborg the prominent characters of the latter are “encounter” and “transgression”.<sup>161</sup> Encounter between the human and the non-human animal and transgression in pulling out the boundary among these two, in Plessner’s words, “levels of the organic.” This first definition reveals that the cyborg has not merely to be connected with the human and the machine, but with any kind of embodiment implying transgression and encounters with an otherness external to the body, creating an “uncertain ontology.”<sup>162</sup>

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<sup>158</sup> J. Zylinska, *On spiders, cyborgs and being scared*, Cit., 7-8.

<sup>159</sup> J. Zylinska, *On spiders, cyborgs and being scared*, Cit., 128.

<sup>160</sup> J. Zylinska, *On spiders, cyborgs and being scared*, Cit., 128.

<sup>161</sup> “The cyborg appears in myth precisely where the boundary between human and animal is transgressed. Far from signalling a walling off of people from other living beings, *cyborgs signal disturbingly and pleasurably tight coupling*. Bestiality has a new status in this cycle of marriage exchange.” D. J. Haraway, “A Manifesto for Cyborg: Science, Technology and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s, Elisabeth Weed (ed.), *Coming to Terms*, New York; London: Routledge, 1989, 174. Quoted by J. Zylinska, *On spiders, cyborgs and being scared*, Cit., 128.

<sup>162</sup> J. Zylinska, *On spiders, cyborgs and being scared*, Cit., 129.

But interestingly, since the very myth recalled by Haraway, in which the encounter with the otherness makes me think about the inebriation of the Bacchantes in a Dionysian state, the association and inseparability between the cyborg and the feminine is inevitable. Moreover, Zylinska associated the feminine and the machine, commenting that Andreas Huyssen noted this association “between women and machines was first made in the 18<sup>th</sup> century.”<sup>163</sup> Reminding us of the critique Somer Bodriibb moved to the exhibition *Les Immatériaux*, “the construction of machines and automata fulfilled the male dream of self-mothering and self-sufficiency: it was ‘the promise of creation outside woman, of identity free of difference, of self-conception without death.’”<sup>164</sup> On the other hand, Zylinska introduced the idea of “mimicry” borrowed by Luce Irigaray: “[t]here is an initial phase, perhaps only one ‘path’, the one historically assigned to the feminine: that of mimicry. One must assume the feminine role deliberately. Which means already to convert a form of subordination into an affirmation, and thus to begin to thwart it.”<sup>165</sup>

Nevertheless, this search for new forms of identification by women is problematic, especially because it leads to “adopt various cyborgian masks” that Zylinska interpreted as a non triumphant “overcoming of the gendered body and the self.”<sup>166</sup> On the contrary, she believed that “[t]he feminist use of the cyborg can thus be seen as a performance of imposed subordination through the discourse of technology, with a possibility of thwarting it.”<sup>167</sup> Moreover, Zylinska warned, the pursuit for a new self-fashionable aspect “involves the risk of incompleteness and failure,”<sup>168</sup> that twofold aspect of fascination and sense of jump in the dark inherent to the sublime. In a nutshell, as Jennifer Gonzalez put it, “the cyborg is like a symptom—it represents what cannot otherwise be represented.”<sup>169</sup> This means that the practices involving the cyborg metamorphosis attempted to fight a given identity to

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<sup>163</sup> J. Zylinska, *On spiders, cyborgs and being scared*, Cit., 129.

<sup>164</sup> J. Zylinska, *On spiders, cyborgs and being scared*, Cit., 129, quoting Andreas Huyssen, “The Vamp and the Machine: Technology and Sexuality in Fritz Lang’s *Metropolis*”, *New German Critique*, 24: 5, (1981-82), 152.

<sup>165</sup> Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which is Not One*, (trans. Catherine Porter), Ithaca; New York: Cornell University Press, 1985, 76. Quoted by J. Zylinska, *On spiders, cyborgs and being scared*, Cit., 130.

<sup>166</sup> J. Zylinska, *On spiders, cyborgs and being scared*, Cit., 130.

<sup>167</sup> J. Zylinska, *On spiders, cyborgs and being scared*, Cit., 130.

<sup>168</sup> J. Zylinska, *On spiders, cyborgs and being scared*, Cit., 131.

<sup>169</sup> Jennifer Gonzales, “Envisioning Cyborg Bodies: Notes from Current Research”, 268, in Jenny Wolmark (ed.), *Cybersexualities*, Edumburgh University Press, 1999, quoted by J. Zylinska, *On spiders, cyborgs and being scared*, Cit., 131.

transform it to the point of negating the concept of identity itself, and this is the case of Orlan.

Active as a performer from the mid-1960s—a time during which are worth remembering *TV Bra for Living Sculpture* (1969, a Fluxus performance by Nam June Paik and Charlotte Morman), and then *Human Cello* (1965-1971) and *TV Cello* 1971, for Paik's attempt to humanize technology—in 1990 Orlan gave the start to a series of nine surgical “performances” entitled *The Reincarnation of Saint-Orlan*. The epithet “saint” referred to the proposal of reincarnation, through several surgeries, elements from paintings and sculpture of Western representation of femininity and artistic representation—for instance the chin of Botticelli's Venus and the nose of Diana—to challenge it transferring the tools of moulding and shaping to the surgeon's scalpel. At the same time, she also wrote a manifesto, “Manifesto of Carnal Art”, explicative of what carnal art is and what is not, and it opened providing a definition:

Carnal Art is self-portraiture in the classical sense, but realised through the possibility of technology. It swings between defiguration and refiguration. Its inscription in the flesh is a function of our age. The body has become a “modified ready-made”, no longer seen as the ideal it once represented; the body is not anymore this ideal ready-made it was satisfying to sign.<sup>170</sup>

For Orlan, Carnal Art differed from body art for the absence of any kind of redemption through pain, and for being interested not in the result, but in the process during the surgery, therefore the mutation, is made. This interest in the process is testified by the filming and live broadcast of her operations in the surgery room, while the audience witnessed the operations turned into a spectacle. Orlan was not against aesthetic surgery, but provided a critique to the dominant aesthetic canons which surgery offers as achievable and feasible, taking a stance regarding “developments in medicine and biology questioning the status of the body and posing ethical problems.”<sup>171</sup> It eventually annulled the same idea of beauty as an external quality, extending it, not metaphorically but literally, to the internal *Körper* (and not the *Leib*): to internal organs such as livers and pancreas. As Zylinska noted, this encounter with

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<sup>170</sup> Orlan, “Carnal Art” Manifesto, available at <http://orlan.eu/adriensina/manifeste/carnal.html> (accessed in July 2013).

<sup>171</sup> Orlan, “Carnal Art” Manifesto.



the sublime, for Orlan meant the incarnation of sublimity by giving her body to “art”.<sup>172</sup>

The ethical concerns of the cyborg hybridization were not disregarded by Haraway, who in fact in her manifesto declared that “[t]his essay is an argument for pleasure in the confusion of boundaries for responsibility in their construction.”<sup>173</sup> But like Chris Hables Gray’s “Cyborg Bills of Right” legal issues involved are based on the American legal system and do not attain—as Zylinska pointed out—“his or her intrinsic singular rights,” although, as Grey made explicit these issues were projected in “the 21<sup>st</sup> century cyborg society.”<sup>174</sup> In other words, the cyborg hybridization legal concerns seem postponed to a “monstrous” future, but monstrous because it is hardly imaginable to get us prepared.<sup>175</sup>

The artistic project Orlan persecuted over her body, at the borders between non-human and human, hold a strong political component, as Michelle Hirschorn remarked

[Orlan’s] work raises serious questions concerning identity, societal taboos against opening the body, the mind/body dualism, the often acrimonious relationship between women and technology, the limits of art and language, physical pain, representations of the female grotesque, myths of femininity, private and public domains, the long legacy of colonization that western medicine has exerted over female bodies, as well as the historic relationship between art and life that is inherent within the tradition of avant-garde performance throughout the twentieth-century.<sup>176</sup>

Orlan transgressed all these kinds of boundaries in a synthesis that Zylinska described as “aesthetic of sublime,” while the sublime has been traditionally associated to the masculine and beauty to the feminine, thus collapsing “the active passive dichotomy that regulates traditional aesthetics.”<sup>177</sup> Regarding how to consider Orlan’s practices

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<sup>172</sup> See J. Zylinska, *On spiders, cyborgs and being scared*, Cit., 132.

<sup>173</sup> D. J. Haraway, “A Manifesto for Cyborg”, 174, quoted by J. Zylinska, *On spiders, cyborgs and being scared*, Cit., 132.

<sup>174</sup> See J. Zylinska, *On spiders, cyborgs and being scared*, Cit., 132 and 148.

<sup>175</sup> See Zylinska reference to Derrida regarding the monstrosity of the future, in J. Zylinska, *On spiders, cyborgs and being scared*, Cit., 132-133.

<sup>176</sup> Michelle Hirschorn, “Orlan: Artist in the Post-Human Age of Mechanical Reincarnation”, in Griselda Pollock (ed.), *Generations and Geographies in Visual the Arts: Feminist Readings*, London; New York: Routledge, 111-112.

<sup>177</sup> J. Zylinska, *On spiders, cyborgs and being scared*, Cit., 135-136.

within feminism, or better how to know if her practice is feminist, it might be useful to recall the American philosopher and pioneer in gender studies Judith Butler, who her *Gender Trouble* (1990) concluded

[t]he critical task for feminism is...to locate strategies of subversive repetition enabled by those constructions, to affirm the local possibilities of intervention through participating in precisely those practices of repetition that constitute identity and, therefore, present the immanent possibility of contesting them.<sup>178</sup>

As an aside about the contrast between beauty and sublime and a fresh perspective from the early 1990s seen from the 21<sup>st</sup> century, a scene from the movie *Caro Diario* (1993) is remarkable, depicting the Italian director and protagonist Nanni Moretti strolling around the city of Rome on his Vespa and “measuring the life that he still has,” he thought: “I must film what I like, not ugly things. Stylists exhibit their collection in a museum in Florence, and why should I go to film it? There is a crazy showing off with her plastic surgery operations inside a museum, and who cares? [...]”<sup>179</sup> The humorous and critical allusion Moretti makes to Orlan in his film brings us the public perception of Orlan’s performances at the time she started her cycle of plastic surgery operations.

Nevertheless, considering our interactions through digital machines in a futuristic, phantasmagorical and science fictional perspective, Orlan’s mutations and display of masks of femininity, through which she refuses the encapsulation into any category of gender identification and human or non-human classification, I would argue that it may be interpreted also as a survey on surveillance society, the latter created by telecommunications and computer power. In a world in which our identities are more and more publicly displayed on the web, and the all world is watching, with or without our consensus, the need to keep our identity private has become a more urgent necessity. While trying to protect our private sphere the “responsabilisation” on our use of technology make us, at the same time, observed

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<sup>178</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*, London and New York: Routledge, 1990, 167. Quoted by J. Zylinska, *On spiders, cyborgs and being scared*, Cit., 145.

<sup>179</sup> “Devo filmare quello che mi piace, non le cose brutte, gli stilisti espongono le loro collezioni in un museo di Firenze e perché devo andare a filmare? C’è una pazza che si mette in mostra con le sue operazioni di chirurgia plastica dentro un museo, e chi se ne importa? [...]” Nanni Moretti in *Caro Diario* (1993).

and spies.<sup>180</sup> In the meantime, “leaving our trace” in ordinary activities such as paying with a credit card, accessing a web page, commenting on a social network, testify our last time on-line, our last visit to a certain place, in and out, I would call it, the “wired screen.”

Science fiction first issues of the comic book *The Private Eye* (2013) envisioned the 2076 society in which we will dress mask and long coat covering the entire body, to walk from one place to another until reaching a safe refuge to embody our authentic self, under the menace of a cloud which is going to burst spreading rainfall of metadata containing our secrets and most intimate information.<sup>181</sup> Orlan’s metamorphosis seems to escape the predictability to the ones who “own” our image, failing others’ expectations, also in terms of gender, misdirecting any code of common shared ideas of beauty. In a monstrous—because unpredictable and for this same reason fascinating—future, the carnal art embodied by Orlan, negating the obligations of a given identity, and proclaiming the “unsteadiness” as the sole stable category for her living body, might be the only possible way, paradoxically, to preserve one’s own self.

The only boundary for Orlan, even if apparently not explicit—while obsessively alluded in Sterbak’s work as an omnipresent shadow—is death, a topic that Damien Hirst explored in controversial and disputed ways. *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living* (1991), also known as *The Shark*, was composed of a glass and steel tank of 210cmx630cmx210cm containing a shark immersed in formaldehyde solution. As described by Mario Codognato

[t]he formaldehyde, like a chemical utopia that can hinder the inevitable decomposition of organic bodies and stop the final pulsating moment, almost forever, congeals life and death and prolongs movement and stasis, sound and silence, in the visual sculptural palpability of the mass and three-dimensionality howled by the force of life.<sup>182</sup>

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<sup>180</sup> See Mark Andrejevic, “The Work of Watching One Another: Lateral Surveillance, Risk, and Governance”, 479-497, in Wood (ed.) *Surveillance and Society*, 2005. Available at <[http://www.surveillance-and-society.org/articles2\(4\)/lateral.pdf](http://www.surveillance-and-society.org/articles2(4)/lateral.pdf)> (accessed in June 2015). For a more recent account on surveillance studies see Rachel E. Dubrovsky and Shoshana Amielle Maghet (eds.) *Feminist Surveillance Studies*, (Foreword by Mark Andrejevic), Duke University Press, 2015.

<sup>181</sup> Brian K. Vaughan, Marcos Martin, Muntsa Vicente, “The Private Eye”, Issue 1, first published on *Panel Syndicate*, March 2013.

<sup>182</sup> Mario Codognato, “Warning Labels”, in *Damien Hirst*, Cit., 25-46: 31.

The formaldehyde, while celebrating symbolically “the subjugation of the animal,”<sup>183</sup> at the same time enhances the encounter with the animal matter, present in flesh and bones. This experience produces in the visitor, according to Aloï, a sublime effect, increased by the real dimensions of the shark transferring the fear in the viewer of being eaten by the animal with his open mouth if it were not that it is dead.<sup>184</sup> Another work, *Mother and Child Divided* (1993), from the title might lead us to imagine (before seeing it) a mother and child in pain for having been separated. Conversely, and once again more literally, the piece composed of various parts featured dismembered bodies of a cow and a calf contained in tanks filled with formaldehyde substance and displayed in the exhibiting space to form a corridor. By walking through this corridor the visitor crosses the divisions of each body, going through their internal organs perfectly visible. Aloï pointed out that the formaldehyde conservation “belonged to the tradition of natural-museum preservation, not that of classical art. [...] [In Hirst’s work, the animal] is stripped of its scientific value and finds itself caught up in a web of representational references.”<sup>185</sup>

Since *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living* (1991), whose making implied Hirst’s commission of the killing of the fish, the use of the animal, in its physicality, in contemporary art started to be addressed as a matter of concern, involving ethical issues also connected with marketing. In this sense, Hirst provides a paradigmatic example, in fact, he used several other animals for the pieces he conceived, while from the early 1990s these acquired very high rates, thanks to the promotion carried out by Saatchi, at that time supporting the art of young British artists, emblematically represented in the exhibition *Sensation* (1997), held at The Royal Academy of Art in London.

While Hirst presented a liminal example between science and art for still using the animal in its original shape, an increased use of the animal through the developments carried out by genetic engineering, from the 1980s onwards, caused many artists to leave the atelier and to start working in the molecular biology laboratory, recreating beings not the way they are, but how they could be. Thus Bio Art began. For a better understanding of what bio-art is and the importance it invests in bringing the humanities to take a stance on scientific developments affecting the

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<sup>183</sup> G. Aloï, *Animals & Art*, Cit., 4.

<sup>184</sup> “The Sublime Animal”, in G. Aloï, *Animals & Art*, Cit., 4.

<sup>185</sup> G. Aloï, *Animals & Art*, Cit., 2.

society we live in, here an excerpt by Robert Zwijnenberg introducing Ingerborg Reichle's *Art in the Age of Techno-science* (2009)

The growing complexity and inaccessibility of science and technology make it increasingly harder for scholars in the humanities to formulate responses that move beyond those of the general public, while many also have to rid themselves of their own personal anxieties regarding science. Why is it important that the humanities should again have a real say in academic and public debate about the natural sciences? The humanities constitute an academic domain that should be clearly distinguished from that of the social sciences, in both theoretical and methodological respects. For example, unlike the social sciences, the humanities hardly generate quantitative data. [...] Reflection in the humanities on science can become more profound through reflection on the relationship of art vis-à-vis science. In the past years particularly the artistic search for ways of relating to the life sciences has led to new works of art that posit ethical claims which, I feel cannot be ignored by the humanities. This new form of art provides the humanities with direct access to the life sciences from their own humanities perspective. A new form of art that may perfectly suit this role for the humanities is bio art.<sup>186</sup>

A pioneer in bio-art, from the early 1990s, is the Brazilian Eduardo Kac, who pointed out the impossibility, and even unacceptability, “to circumscribe the questions raised by biotechnology within the scientific research.”<sup>187</sup> Recalling the notions of “bio-power” and “bio-politics” formulated by Michel Foucault,<sup>188</sup> Kac remarked that these questions, involving hybrids, cloning, and transgenic, affect social relations and therefore, must be included in the debate occurring to discuss the world we live in. At the same time, the total decoding of the human genome in 2000 can be considered as the milestone to conclude our analysis on the organic materiality addressed in this research.<sup>189</sup> Focused on the matter as produced by nature and included in a man-made context, as a way to cross the 20<sup>th</sup> century art, and culture in a lateral sense, with the

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<sup>186</sup> Robert Zwijnenberg, “Preface”, in Ingerborg Reichle's *Art in the Age of Technoscience* (2009), Cit., xiii-xxix: xvi, xviii.

<sup>187</sup> Eduardo Kac, “Art That Looks You In The Eye: Hybrids, Clones, Mutants, Synthetic and Transgenic in Eduardo Kac (ed.) *Signs of Life: Bio Art and Beyond*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2007, 1-4. Excerpt from the book republished in Jeffrey Casstnar (ed.), *Nature*, Cit., 68-70.

<sup>188</sup> See M. Foucault, “The Birth of Biopolitics”, in *Michel Foucault: Ethics / The Essential Works, Volume I*, Ed. Paul Rabinow, London: Penguin, 1997, 73-79.

<sup>189</sup> See David R. Bentley, “Decoding the human genome sequence”, in *Human Molecular Genetics*, Volume 9, No 16, Oxford Journal Press, 2000, 2353-2358. Available at <<http://hmg.oxfordjournals.org/content/9/16/2353.full.pdf+html>> (accessed in September 2015).

arrival of bio-art, on the one hand, and new digital media, on the other, reach the end of its journey to begin a new life.

### **5.5 Organic materiality: from materialisation back to representation, or the final dematerialisation (?)**

In the 1990s, whether the artistic manifestations in which the organic materiality was present, we also register the end of this practice in favour of others due to the implementation of new media, which affected the language of the arts, and their practices. The launching of the World Wide Web in 1991 meant, over the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and onwards, a dramatic change in our daily habits of communicating, accessing to information, and reading a text with a variety of options and segmentation. It eventually affected our way of perceiving our place in, effectively, a global world wide web. Quoting the computer scientist and new media theorist Lev Manovich,

[...] by the end of the decade it will also become clear that the gradual computerization of culture will eventually transform all of it. So, invoking the old Marxist model of base and superstructure, we can say that if the economic base of modern society from the 1950s onward starts to shift toward a service and information economy, becoming by the 1970s a so-called post-industrial society (Daniel Bell), and then later a “network society” (Manuel Castells), by the 1990s’ rapid transformation of culture into e-culture, of computers into universal culture carriers, of media into new media, demands that we rethink our categories and models.<sup>190</sup>

In the realm of the development of search engines, coding information and conducting search, on September 15, 1997 the search engine browser invented by Larry Page and Sergey Brin, named Google, was born, with an increasing spread that would lead to what Siva Vaidhyathan defined as “an eschatological ideology: a

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<sup>190</sup> Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media*, Cambridge, Massachusetts; London: The MIT Press, 2001, 6.

belief in fulfilment of prophecy.”<sup>191</sup> The idea of eschatology, related to the ultimate destiny of humanity, implied to find answers in the access of information, and, therefore, in the sovereignty of “techno-fundamentalism,” in an “hyperlinked society.”<sup>192</sup> In Vaidhyathan’s perspective it found its concretization in Google’s belief that “the constant application of advanced information technologies—algorithms, computer code, high-speed networks, and massively powerful servers—will solve many, if not all, human problems.”<sup>193</sup>

Digital media, whether in photography or in video and computer art, featured dematerialized images. Tools as cameras, video cameras, laptops, and later on telephones and smartphones, born as accessories, ended up gaining a more and more protagonist role in everyone own daily routine as well as in the artistic language. These devices became—and have become—a sort of prosthesis, body extensions, impossible to separate from, and the lens becoming our sight, or alternatively transferring our sight to a prosthetic frame. The digital, intangible, and reproducible image, also editable through sophisticated to increasingly ordinary effects, opened new paths in the artistic practices.

Digital media also affected the way to read and interpret the world surrounding oneself and the way to intervene in an expanded, or destabilized, notion of “public sphere,” as was coined and concerned by Jürgen Habermas in 1964.

By “the public sphere” we mean first of all a realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed. Access is guaranteed to all citizens. A portion of the public sphere comes into being in every conversation in which private individuals assemble to form a public body. They then behave neither like business or professional people transacting private affairs, nor like members of a constitutional order subject to the legal constraints of a state bureaucracy. Citizens behave as a public body when they confer in an unrestricted fashion—that is, with the guarantee of freedom of assembly and association and the freedom to express and publish their opinions—about matters of general interest. In a large public body this kind of communication requires specific means for transmitting information and

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<sup>191</sup> See Siva Vaidhyathan’s book chapter “Google Ways and Means. Faith in Aptitude and Technology”, 51-81: 55, in S. Vaidhyathan, *The Googlization of Everything (And Why We Should Worry)*, University of California Press, 2011.

<sup>192</sup> Joseph Turow and Lokman Tsui (eds.), *The Hyperlinked Society: Questioning Connections in the Digital Age*, The University of Michigan Press, 2008.

<sup>193</sup> S. Vaidhyathan, *The Googlization of Everything (And Why We Should Worry)*, Cit., 55.

influencing those who receive it. Today newspapers and magazines, radio and television are the media of the public sphere.<sup>194</sup>

The centrality of this notion of “public sphere”, through the spread of internet and on the wave of post-structuralist theories was overcome by a critique of this notion in favour of multiple layers of “public spheres”—as proposed by Peter Dahlgren—, whose plurality include discourses of gender, race, group, class, and its format increase the informal participation.<sup>195</sup>

Regarding the arts more specifically, the French journal *Esprit*<sup>196</sup> in 1991 introduced a debate around the “crisis in contemporary art” with an article by Yves Michaud, which culminated in the homonym text, published in 1997, emphasizing the reflection on this topic connected with the consequences of democratization of culture and pluralism.<sup>197</sup> In the meantime, digital photography in its immateriality was at core of a debate accompanied by an exhibition in Montreal, entitled *Photographie & Immaterialité*.<sup>198</sup> And finally, the instantaneity of photography, augmented by the birth of the digital image, produced—according to Paul Virilio—the predominance of the aesthetic of disappearance over the aesthetic of appearance, “the emergence over many centuries of a line, a mark, or sculpted volume and its ponderous mass.”<sup>199</sup>

Presented and not represented, entered in the artistic practices of the 20<sup>th</sup> century through an experimentation on practices such as collage, assemblages and found objects, achieving its mature degree by the 1960s in expressions such as Arte Povera, Land Art, and environmental art, and then confronting with technology (the

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<sup>194</sup> Jürgen Habermas, Sara Lennox, Frank Lennox, “The Public Sphere: An Encyclopedia Article (1964)”, *New German Critique*, No. 3 (Autumn, 1974), Duke University Press, 49-55: 49. Available at <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/487737?origin=JSTOR-pdf>> (accessed in June 2015).

<sup>195</sup> For a critique to Habermas’s notion of the “Public Sphere” see Peter Dahlgren, “The Internet, Public Spheres, and Political Communication: Dispersion and Deliberation”, in *Political Communication*, N. 22, 147-162, Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2005. Available at <<http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/10584600590933160>> (Accessed in June 2015).

<sup>196</sup> See <http://www.esprit.presse.fr/archive/review/article.php?code=9810&content=michaud> (accessed in July 2013)

<sup>197</sup> See Marie-Noëlle Ryan, “La crise de l’art contemporain en discussion. A propos de l’ouvrage d’Yves Michaud : *La crise de l’art contemporain. Utopie, démocratie et comédie* (P.U.F, 1997)”, *Æ* - Volume 3: Fall/Automne 1998. Available at [http://www.uqtr.ca/AE/vol\\_3/ryan1.htm](http://www.uqtr.ca/AE/vol_3/ryan1.htm) (accessed in August 2015).

<sup>198</sup> *Photographie & Immaterialité – Marché Bonsecours, Montréal, 5 septembre – 15 octobre 1997*, quoted by Celine Mayrand, *Parachute* N. 89, January, 1998, 45-46.

<sup>199</sup> Paul Virilio, “Photo Finish”, in Lumintia Sabau, Iris Cramer and Petra Kirchberg (eds.) *The promise of photography*, The DG Bank Collection, (with essays by Boris Groys, Rosalind E. Krauss and Paul Virilio), Munich, London, New York: Prestel 1998, 19.



application of scientific knowledge for practical purposes), organic materiality ended up in its final back to representation through the immateriality and incorporeity of the digital image. It could be considered its final death, but is this dematerialisation completely enacted? The pluralities of artistic possibilities, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century entice to rather speak of a new birth of heterogeneity and hybrids, in which live and inert matter coexist, expanding the same notion of the organic. We might say that the initial presentation, at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, conjoins to the end of the century with its digital representation creating a sort of ring composition. But these too extremes do not touch really, since the processes between them, following a sort of entropy law, are not reversible. We could rather argue that the path followed around this century, draws a sort of spiral.

In order to figure out the spiral movement suggested, I will recall once more to the philosophical concern of Helmuth Plessner, regarding—in his words—“the curve of development. Ageing and death.”<sup>200</sup> It seems worth proposing this connection in the final part of this research, after having analysed the organic as the scope of the entire work and also, metaphorically, as a methodological approach to address this theme over the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Considering the curve of development from a formal point of view, and before reaching his final observations, Plessner noted, at first, two possibilities.

On the one hand, death and aging appear as the result of two forces stranger one another: corporeality competing with life, the latter directed towards an indefinite development in ascension while corporeality accomplishes a movement in the opposite direction determining the triumph of death over life. In this sense, in its path through youth, maturity and ageing, life should be conceived as an endless direct line, unrelated with death, and therefore connected with the idea of an immortal afterlife, in which life is freed from the body to access to its real, eternal, pure essence.<sup>201</sup> On the other hand, death is conceived as coessential to life, which is finite. Life therefore includes both tendencies in which one prevails in the first “positive” ascent move, followed by a second “negative” phase in descent move, both of them balanced in the intermediate passage phase. In this sense, the development would be a path of

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<sup>200</sup> See H. Plessner, *I gradi dell'organico e l'uomo. Introduzione all'antropologia filosofica*, Italian translation and edited by Vallori Rasini from *Die stufen des Organischen und der Mensch. Einleitung in die philosophische Anthropologie*, Cit., 173.

<sup>201</sup> See H. Plessner, *Cit.*, 174.

ascending and descending at the same path through continuities and discontinuities, in which the body pursues life without ever accomplishing the conditions of life and therefore without really dying.

Nevertheless, according to Plessner “nothing is obtained by these two possibilities.”<sup>202</sup> Therefore, he proposed a third one, conceiving of death as “immediately external and not coessential to life, but, through the form of development essential to life, it becomes an interposition and unconditioned fate of life.”<sup>203</sup> Going toward its fate, life describes a spiral curve of development, in which each point of the line does not encounter necessarily opposite directions, being placed not in but upon the point of departure. Plessner considered that neither corresponding to dying, or self-destruction or auto-negation, life goes towards death. The latter is separated from life but still forced from life. It is a blind force, neither comprehensible, nor acceptable from life; it is made possible by development, in which youth, maturity, and ageing are considered as a priori of life introducing transience.<sup>204</sup> What is remarkable in Plessner is that in this spiral movement, whose extremes are the beginning of life and the external irruption of death, they are given by a relationship of the body with its limit, it is not an abstract reflection but concrete, based on the materiality of the body.<sup>205</sup>

At this point, we might observe that the analysis on the organic materiality of plants and animals, human and non-human, presented in the artistic practices of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as paradoxical as it may seem the association, bring us to deal with issues which are not only average of historical and theoretical positions in art history, but are not separated from it. On the contrary, artworks analysed in this research enticed this kind of reflections on the organic, on life. The supposed dematerialisation at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century could be intended as a superposition of the digital media and technology, which are not to be considered as antagonistic forces replacing previous codes, but rather as further steps in the spiral curve, co-existing and challenging notions that reveal their arbitrary facets, obliging us to rethink them and reshape them over and over again.

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<sup>202</sup> H. Plessner, *Cit.*, 174.

<sup>203</sup> H. Plessner, *Cit.*, 174.

<sup>204</sup> H. Plessner, *Cit.*, 176.

<sup>205</sup> H. Plessner, *Cit.*, 177.

## **Final Remarks**

### **(and directions for future researches)**

Coming to an end of this work inevitably implies putting a full stop at some point, although there would still more to be read, analysed, seen, considered, pondered, included or taken out. It also acknowledges that many questions have been left unasked and others not answered, and regarding the artists and artworks selected, some received more attention, some others were only mentioned, others not even mentioned, and certainly new insights, that could have been part of this work, will appear only when it will be separated from the hands that typed it. Nevertheless, its limits are also part of the project, in the sense that this work aimed from its beginning to provide a perspective among others, motivated by the consideration that the sphere analysed has been underrepresented in the history of art for a long time, the organic materiality in the 20<sup>th</sup> century art; therefore with the purpose to increment a debate around a research.

The last part of the title introduces the idea of transition “from representation to materialisation.” This choice was meant as particularly useful to describe, in the first chapter, the shift from the representation of plants and non-human animals that from the painting genre of still life, we might say, “popped up” to the collage, assemblage and the object, and at a further stage the human body (as observed in chapter three and four). Nevertheless, representation and materialisation should not be endeavoured towards an antithetic interpretation of them, but rather to their interconnections, from the moment in which representation, I would argue, embodied its own image and, therefore, encountered its materialisation to fulfil the accomplishment of question that the traditional representative language could not answer anymore. However, this subsequent step was not directed to a mere presentation of what was previously represented with the traditional codes of painting and sculpture, but paradoxically aimed to an abstract reconfiguration of meaning. As

referred in the introduction of the book edited by Paul Crowther and Isabel Wünsche, *Meanings of Abstract Art. Between Nature and Theory*,

Traditional pictorial art and sculpture is based on conventions of resemblance between the work and that which it is a representation “of.” Abstract works, in contrast, adopt alternative modes of visual representation, or breakdown and reconfigure the mimetic conventions of pictorial art and sculpture. They may well contain some recognizable figurative content. Indeed, they may even be composed entirely of such content—but, as it were, dislocated from its usual visual contexts and functions. More frequently, they will involve nothing more than configurations of color, shape, and texture that elicit our visual interest in their own right.<sup>1</sup>

If from the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century onwards technology started to be used as a tool to modify and reproduce life in the laboratory, at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, technology, through the increase of digital media, has been considered as a response to escape the boundaries and limits of life subjected to death, in the pursuit of a forever life. Certainly, whether we want it or not, we live in times in which once we live our trace on the internet, we are going to stay there in the never ending and ever memory of software machines, in a virtual and non real sphere. Nevertheless, the apparent intangible aspects of digital media and software engines, from the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, have come across a reformulation of the same concepts of materialism and realism in philosophy.

On the final front of this work, the 20<sup>th</sup> century ended with the dissemination of digital media whose massive production and spread of pixelated images provoked a return to representation, through the exponential multiplication of filmic and photographic images. It has also been possible thanks to a more and more advanced technology tools availability, which at the same time gave access to a virtual escaping of the boundaries between life and death. This phenomenon is extensive and happens in unpredictable ways, until the point to reformulate McLuhan statement “Medium is the message” from his major work *Understanding Media: The Extension of Man* (1964) into “Software is The Message” (2014). As Manovich explained,

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Crowther and Isabel Wünsche (eds.), *Meanings of Abstract Art. Between Nature and Theory*, New York and London: Routledge, 2012, 1.

Outside of certain cultural areas such as crafts and fine art, software has replaced a diverse array of physical, mechanical, and electronic technologies used before the 21<sup>st</sup> century to create, store, distribute, and access cultural artifacts, and communicate with other people.<sup>2</sup>

Consequently, as Manovich concluded in his article entitled with the new formula he suggested describing society at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, “Thus it is time to update *Understanding Media*. It is no longer the medium that is the message today. Instead, ‘the software is the message’. Continuously expanding what humans can express and how they can communicate is our ‘content’.”<sup>3</sup>

Nevertheless, precisely these times inspired me to embark on the research project carried out over these pages. In fact, from the very beginning of this work, it seemed that the organic materiality, the way it has been approached in this research is subjected to continuous and discontinuous updating and re-enactments that suggested going backwards from the contemporary in the attempt to reconstruct a spiral genealogy of the organic materiality in the 20<sup>th</sup> century art. In fact, as Manovich pointed out, software is a main protagonist in our society, even if not often including “certain areas of crafts and fine art.” The latter term seems more and more difficult to define, since the borders between fine arts and media arts have almost blurred, and a possible way for the theoretical discourse and cultural debate include both might be that of approaching them with by taking into account of materiality and materialism.

This perspective goes also hand in hand with the fact that, “[o]ntological commitments,” as Stephen White pointed out, “are thus entangled with questions of identity and history, with how we articulate the meanings of our lives, both individually and collectively.”<sup>4</sup> Additionally, the turn to materialism is demanded to respond to “ethical and political concerns that accompany the scientific and technological advances predicated on new scientific models of matter and, in particular, of living matter.”<sup>5</sup> The ethical and political issues directly involve this research on organic materiality in the 20<sup>th</sup> century art, although, for reasons of space

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<sup>2</sup> Lev Manovich, “Software is the message”, *Journal of Visual Culture*, vol.13, n.1, April 2014, 79-81: 79, vcu.sagepub.com

<sup>3</sup> L. Manovich, “Software is the message”, *Cit.*, 81.

<sup>4</sup> Stephen White, *Sustaining Affirmation: The Strengths of Weak Ontology in Political Theory*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000. Quoted by D. Coole and S. Frost (eds.), *New Materialisms. Ontology, Agency, and Politics*, *Cit.*, 5.

<sup>5</sup> D. Coole and S. Frost (eds.), *New Materialisms. Ontology, Agency, and Politics*, *Cit.*, 5.

and focus on the main field of inquiry, it has just been touched on for specific case studies.

Moreover, and this was the main point of departure for a study of organic materiality motivated by artistic practices realised in the first years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, renewed concern about the matter, materials, and materiality also coincides with a different approach to the objects in the ocean of production and consumption of them. In the realm of pollution, nature devastation and increasing amounts of waste, strategies such as recycling, reusing and even using less interrogate our own attitudes towards materiality even in our most ordinary activities. These concerns do not only belong, or can be relegated to, behavioural practices to which we can sympathize with, or have an interest in, but rather they have become a crucial necessity calling us to participate and take responsibility. Song Dong's *Doing Nothing Garden* (2012) is just an example of this kind of reflections in the artistic practices.

Particularly remarkable Diana Coole and Samantha Frost' statements at the core of the theories around the New Materialisms:

As critically engaged theorists, we find ourselves compelled to explore the significance of complex issues such as climate change of global capital and population flows, the biotechnological engineering of genetically modified organisms, or the saturation of our intimate and physical lives by digital, wireless, and virtual technologies. From our understanding of the boundary between life and death and our everyday work practices to the way we feed ourselves and recreate or procreate, we are finding our environment materially and conceptually reconstituted in ways that pose profound and unprecedented normative questions. In addressing them we unavoidably find ourselves having to think in new ways about the nature of matter and the matter of nature; about the elements of life, the resilience of the planet, and the distinction of the human.<sup>6</sup>

Facing “the elements of life, the resilience of the planet, and the distinction of the human,” the way the authors put them, in a time in which anthropocentrism have been replaced by other philosophical perspectives we should ask what is the pertinence of philosophical anthropology in the contemporary theoretical debate. Therefore, it seems also mandatory to explain to what extent philosophical anthropology, the way it was used for this research, might be a pertinent resource for

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<sup>6</sup> D. Coole and S. Frost (eds.), *New Materialisms. Ontology, Agency, and Politics*, Cit., 5-6.

contemporary art practices. This clarification appears necessary especially after the pivotal exhibition for the 21<sup>st</sup> century held in Kassel in 2012. In fact, curator Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev conceived Documenta 13, with a program that was the fruit of a “‘holistic and non-logocentric vision,’ whose associative structure insisted upon ‘a more balanced relationship with all the non-human makers with whom we share the planet and our bodies.’”<sup>7</sup>

In order to connect Plessner’s thought to the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and therefore from that position looking back to the 20<sup>th</sup> century analysed in this research and imagining possible perspectives for the future, we might consider Jos de Mul’s insights, which provide a critical re-interpretation and valuable contribution in this sense in order to draft, in his words, a “philosophical anthropology 2.0.” In the first place, in the realm of the new materialist, transversal and not dualist theories (differently, for instance, from many neuroscientists that have fallen into this trap<sup>8</sup>), we should remember that Plessner had already refused the Cartesian dualism. According to de Mul

After all, the idea that life is inseparable from matter (*GS IV*, 177), and that human life is a psychophysical unity (*GS IV*, 75), is not only defended by ancient hylozoists like Thales, Anaximenes, and Heraclitus, but it is indeed also the very presupposition upon which Plessner’s bio-philosophy and philosophical anthropology rest.<sup>9</sup>

Developing a profound analysis on the open positionality of the plant, the closed positionality of the non-human animal, and the “eccentric position” of the human, Plessner attempted “to find a mind/body neutral language that could, in terms simultaneously empirically and phenomenologically meaningful, locate human beings amongst the continuum of living organisms and yet also pick out the differentia of

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<sup>7</sup> C. Christov-Bakargiev, “The Dance Was Very Frenetic, Lively, Rattling, Clanging, Rolling, Contorted, and Lasted for a Long Time”, dOCUMENTA (13), The Book of Books, Catalog 1/3, Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2012, 34. Quoted by Christopher Cox, Jenny Jaskey, Suhail Malik, “Introduction”, in Christopher Cox, Jenny Jaskey, Suhail Malik (eds.), *Realism Materialism Art*, Cit., 15-31: 28. Regarding the relationship among human and non-human agents sharing the planet and the human, in her essay Christov-Bakargiev made reference to D. Haraway, *When Species Meet*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007.

<sup>8</sup> Jos de Mul, “Philosophical Anthropology 2.0. Reading Plessner in the Age of Converging Technology”, in Jos de Mul. (ed.), *Plessner's Philosophical Anthropology. Perspectives and Prospects*, Amsterdam/Chicago: Amsterdam University Press/Chicago University Press, 2014, 457-475: 468.

<sup>9</sup> Jos de Mul, “Philosophical Anthropology 2.0.”, *Cit.*, 459. GS stands for Plessner, Helmuth. 1980-1985. *Gesammelte Schriften* (GS). 10 volumes. Edited by Günter Dux et al. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.

their organismic being.”<sup>10</sup> Although the critiques moved to philosophical anthropology by Heidegger, in the 1930s and 1940s, especially “against essentialism and anthropocentrism,” and by the Frankfurt School considering the transition from philosophy to anthropology as “fossilization of man transforming him into a fixed objectivity,” de Mul pointed out that these critiques might not apply to Plessner.<sup>11</sup> In fact, “As we read in *Die Stufen*: ‘As eccentrically organized being, man must still make himself into what he already is.’”<sup>12</sup>

According to Plessner, “man is artificial by nature”, and therefore, in order to find his own realization, “he needs a complement of an unnatural, non-grown kind,” this necessity is grounded in man’s form of existence.<sup>13</sup> Therefore, there cannot be a stage of the organic after the human, “the eccentric positionality is the highest possible stage of animal nature.”<sup>14</sup> Interestingly, de Mul remarked that in the age “Homo sapiens 2.0 and trans—and posthuman life forms is not sheer science fiction” the positionality of the human, through “specific types of information and communication technologies [...] create a phenomenal experience which could be called poly(ec)centric.”<sup>15</sup> The eccentric position is also defined by de Mul as “virtual”, in the sense that, if we consider a person connected to a robotic body through which he can sense the world, “virtual eccentricity becomes real eccentricity: our centricity doubles.”

On the other hand, the further technological developments towards cyborg and artificial life permit to reformulate the “artificial by nature” into “natural by artifice.” As Jos de Mul sharply noted:

This so-called ‘alien genetics’ is only one way the cyborgization of life is taking place (De Mul, 2013). We could add numerous other strategies that are being developed, such as the neurotechnological and nanotechnological engineering of organic life, the addition of electronic implants and distributed explants, up to the creation of artificial intelligence and artificial life. Natural selection, which has been the motor of the evolution of life on earth for several

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<sup>10</sup> Lenny Moss 2007. *Contra Habermas and towards a Critical Theory of Human Nature and the Question of Genetic Enhancement*. *New Formations* 60 (1): 139-149: 147. Quoted by J. de Mul, “Philosophical Anthropology 2.0. Reading Plessner in the Age of Converging Technology”, *Cit.*, 460.

<sup>11</sup> J. de Mul, “Philosophical Anthropology 2.0.”, *Cit.*, 461.

<sup>12</sup> H. Plessner, *GS IV*, 383, quoted by J. de Mul, “Philosophical Anthropology 2.0.”, *Cit.*, 461.

<sup>13</sup> J. de Mul, “Philosophical Anthropology 2.0.”, *Cit.*, 461.

<sup>14</sup> J. de Mul, “Philosophical Anthropology 2.0.”, *Cit.*, 462.

<sup>15</sup> J. de Mul, “Philosophical Anthropology 2.0.”, *Cit.*, 462.



billion years, and which in the short human culture already has been complemented with breeding, is increasingly becoming an unnatural selection of artificial elements. As a consequence, trans—and posthuman life will increasingly be ‘*natural by artifice*.’<sup>16</sup>

Regarding ecological issues, in which philosophical anthropology seems to separate man from nature, de Mul highlighted that this should not be applied to Plessner, whose stages or levels of positionality put “a rather strong emphasis on the continuation of life forms.”<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless, Plessner acknowledged the difficulty “for humans to act in a non-anthropocentric way. [...] As centric beings, anthropocentrism is unavoidable. However, thanks to our eccentricity we not only have the possibility to take the perspective of our fellow men and women, but that of other centric species as well.”<sup>18</sup>

These two points, about the reformulation from “artificial by nature” to “natural by artifice” and the eccentric positionality that permits the human to perceive themselves not separated but in a communal living with the environment, are extremely relevant for the time being and it is remarkable, at this point, recalling the exhibition “Vegetation as Political Agent”, curated by Marco Scotini at PAV-Parco Arte Vivente in Turin in 2014. In an interview Scotini referred to the structure of the exhibition and the historical, rather than biological and naturalistic, scope that motivated him to conceive the display of an ensemble of works, artworks and testimonials from different parts of the world. He also remarked the necessity to think about

the green as something that belong to us, believing that the actual crisis, in reality, is a crisis of subjectivity. Therefore, claiming for the green, means claiming for a possible alternative, to imagine possible worlds. Thus, somehow, it is not that thing to protect. It is something that we have to re-imagine completely. *The green must be artificialized*. We do not have to be nostalgic towards something lost, but *we have to reinvent it*. This is the aspect that the exhibition aims to suggest.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> J. de Mul, “Philosophical Anthropology 2.0.”, *Cit.*, 465.

<sup>17</sup> J. de Mul, “Philosophical Anthropology 2.0.”, *Cit.*, 465.

<sup>18</sup> J. de Mul, “Philosophical Anthropology 2.0.”, *Cit.*, 465.

<sup>19</sup> Interview to Marco Scotini – Vegetation as Political Agent, published on Youtube on July 6, 2014. Available at <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=44RnCoKXm0I>> (accessed in November 2014). My emphasis and my translation from the Italian.

Regarding technology, in the fifth chapter we proposed an interconnection between technology and man-made objects for Latour and human eccentric positionality for Plessner. De Mul interchanged the roles between technology and the human, asserting that one co-evolves with the other: “[w]hile technological innovations can be seen as products of human tool-making, we ourselves are the product of technology as well. Eccentricity is as much the outcome of, as it is the precondition for techno-cultural development.”<sup>20</sup> We also previously referred to the concept of “mediated immediacy”, in which the mediated term is necessary in order to accomplish the immediacy of connection. In the technological environment we live in, De Mul pushed this concept further towards the formulation of an “immediate mediality.” According to de Mul, it “refers to the fact that in cases of poly(ec)centricity or meta-eccentricity, immediacy is the result of a technological mediation that is constitutive for human experience and without which the experience wouldn’t be possible at all.”

Regarding these aspects of “mediated immediacy” and “immediate mediality”, with apologies for the play on words, an immediate reference to the Lebanese Rabih Mroué’s *The Pixelated Revolution* (2012) occurs. A multimedia installation composed of different parts, including a videoconference in which the artist and theater performance firstly declared: “Syrians are shooting their own death.” As Mroué recalled in an interview, this was a comment a friend of his pronounced during a conversation about the current Arab Revolution which started in 2011, which gave the initial impulse for his research on images by protesters recording the revolution through their mobile phones and immediately posted on YouTube, which he manipulated afterwards.<sup>21</sup> The term “shooting” manifests its ambivalence, reminding at the same time to a gunshot as well as to a photographic shoot. In fact, the victim (whose video is published afterwards on internet networks) is not immortalized but he does immortalize. And this same action turns him into the sniper shot’s victim he is shooting. As Mroué declared

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<sup>20</sup> J. de Mul, “Philosophical Anthropology 2.0.”, *Cit.*, 465-466.

<sup>21</sup> “Rabih Mroué in Conversation with Philip Bither”. Available at <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZYXxPIh7zPo>> (accessed in May 2013).

I can see that the cameraman could have escaped if he wanted to. He had enough time to run away before the sniper shot him. But instead, he kept filming. Why? Is it because his eye has become an optical prosthesis and is no longer an eye that feels, remembers, forgets, invents some points, and skips some others? I assume that the eye sees more than it can read, analyze, understand, and interpret. For example, when the eye sees the sniper lifting the gun towards it in order to shoot and kill, the eye keeps on watching without really understanding that it might be witnessing its own death. Because, by watching what is going on through a *mediator*—the little screen of a mobile phone.<sup>22</sup>

Fighting against the primitive weapons and tools of death, torture and mutilation, protesters used the tools of today: digital media, new technologies, mobile phones and Internet.<sup>23</sup> In a paradoxical way, this one like others Rabih Mroué's works displayed a representation that affirms life through what José A. Sanchez defined as a "theatre of death."<sup>24</sup> Mroué continuing,

So, the Syrian cameraman will be watching the sniper directing his rifle towards him as if it is happening inside a film and he is only a spectator. This is why he won't feel the danger of the gun and won't run away. Because, as we know, in films the bullet will lose its way and go out of the film. I mean it will not make a hole in the screen and hit any of the spectators. It will always remain there, in the virtual world, the fictional one. This is why the Syrian cameraman believes that he will not be killed: his death is happening outside the image.

This work, carrying with itself the all tragedy of war, annihilation and destruction, also documented, in de Mul's words, "the technological modification of our positionality."<sup>25</sup> This transformation "might intensify the alienation that is inherent in the eccentric life form and that constantly evokes our attempts to overcome this alienation. If something will be overcome, it will not be our alienation,

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<sup>22</sup> R. Mroué, "The Pixelated Revolution", 378- 393: 386-387, my emphasis. In Rabih Mroué, *Image(s), Mon Amour. Fabrications*, with texts by Rabih Mroué, Bilal Khbeiz, Aurora Fernández Polanco, Lina Saneh and Pablo Martínez, Ca2M, Centro de Arte 2 de Mayo, Madrid 2013. Available at <<http://www.ca2m.org/es/publicaciones-2>> (accessed in March 2014).

<sup>23</sup> See R. Mroué, "The Pixelated Revolution", *Cit.*, 387.

<sup>24</sup> José A. Sanchez, *Prácticas de lo real en la escena contemporánea*, Coyoacán México D. F.: Paso de Gato, 2012, 236.

<sup>25</sup> J. de Mul, "Philosophical Anthropology 2.0.", *Cit.*, 473.

but rather our specific form of life.”<sup>26</sup> Therefore, if the inescapability to death not only belongs to the human but to every living entity on earth,

Perhaps it will be the destiny of man to be the first species that will create—both out of freedom and out of ontic necessity—its own evolutionary successors. This project will display both the grandness and the dreadfulness of the human life form. [...] Perhaps this tragic standpoint is the price we have to pay for developing a level beyond eccentric positionality. We might be tempted to call it inhuman, but as Plessner concludes his essay on inhumanity: “Inhumanity is not bound up with a specific historical age [...], but is rather a possibility that is given in man, to ignore himself” (Plessner 1982, 2005).<sup>27</sup>

At that time, when it arrives, and probably those livings today might not witness it, the organic materiality the way we addressed on these pages, in dialogue with the artificial by nature and the natural by artifice, will not be at issue anymore, but in the meantime we would not stop questioning about the living, its limits and its eccentric possibilities.

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<sup>26</sup> J. de Mul, “Philosophical Anthropology 2.0.”, *Cit.*, 473.

<sup>27</sup> J. de Mul, “Philosophical Anthropology 2.0.”, *Cit.*, 473-474, quoting H. Plessner, 1982. Unmenschlichkeit. In *Mit anderen Augen: Aspekte einer philosophischen Anthropologie*. Stuttgart: Reclam.

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