

## **NATURE FOREVER. Piero Gilardi**

art, ecology, social commitment and political activism  
in the life and work of a master of contemporary Italian art

over 60 works showcase his career from the Sixties to the present

**13 April – 15 October 2017**

#NatureForever #PieroGilardi | [www.fondazionemaxxi.it](http://www.fondazionemaxxi.it)

*Art must become part of life, but as life is alienated,  
we also need to commit to liberating and disalienating life*  
(Piero Gilardi)

*Rome, 12 April 2017.* Piero Gilardi has recreated portions of nature in the form of carpets, reproduced the faces of politicians and industrialists in satirical masks, persuaded protest marchers to push a giant rock together and constructed stones that beat to the rhythm of our heart. He believes in a militant, democratic art free from the market, a positive generator of social transformation. MAXXI is dedicating a major monographic exhibition to Gilardi, **NATURE FOREVER**, curated by **Hou Hanru**, **Bartolomeo Pietromarchi** and **Marco Scotini**, from **13 April to 15 October 2017**.

As the curators explain: "With over **60 works** – from the famous *Nature-carpets* to the interactive installations and through to the Living Art Park of Turin, along with important pieces exhibited for the first time in years or reconstructed for the occasion – the exhibition reviews the career of a master for whom art and life are identified with and become militant commitment, starting out from that as an ecologist. An artist who is also a critic, researcher and political and social activist. For Gilardi, the artistic object goes beyond the purely aesthetic dimension: it is not made to be contemplated but experienced, shared and participated. And it is this interactivity that runs throughout the show."

The exhibition is an integral part MAXXI's research into the great masters of contemporary Italian art and, at the same time, explores Gilardi's career identity as a creative workshop on the pressing issues and concerns of our time.

### **THE EXHIBITION**

**NATURE FOREVER** presents Gilardi's 50-year career in which art, criticism and politics are intertwined. From **the complex relationship between man and nature**, it investigates the era of consumerism and the use of new technologies in a presentation tackling and exploring themes such as ecology, the relational nature of art and social and political commitment. It is divided into **four sections**, each of which includes both **works** and **archive materials** (sketches, texts, original photographs, small works) allowing a comprehensive overview of the artists thinking and poetic.

The **first section** is devoted to work from the **Sixties** and includes, alongside *Macchina per discorrere* from 1963 (one of the artist's first works), a device through which one can speak that seems to have come from the future, *Terrazza*, a structure similar to a stilt house, created for the 1966 exhibition *Arte Abitabile* at the Galleria Sperone in Turin and **reconstructed for the first time for this show**.

Then there are the *Nature-carpets* that have made him famous, sculptures in expanded polyurethane, hyper-realistic but artificial representations of natural scenes, a kind of "disguise", a ritual exorcising the death of nature, *Igloo* (1964) which the public could enter and sit down and a number of *Natur-clothes* created for performances presenting man's original relationship with the natural world, all works that lead back to the idea of art that is usable and "habitable" by the public.

The **second section** focuses on **New Media Art**. The floor of Gallery 3, completely covered with artificial turf, features works such as *Ipogea* (2010), a cavern that offers the possibility of an evocative exploration, *Aigues Tortes* (2007), a log on which you can sit and listen to the sounds of the natural park in Spain from which it takes its name, or the *SassiPulsanti* (1999) which present the visitor with the beating of their own heart.

These works are part of that strand of research that from the 1980s led the artist to adopt technology allowing the spectator to actively participate by interacting with the art.

Also on show is the multimedia work **Inverosimile** (1989), presented on the cusp between the Eighties and Nineties at the Castello di Volpaia and in New York, Paris and Lyon and now exceptionally reinstalled for the first time in an Italian museum. This large-scale interactive installation, which is activated by the breath of the spectators and moves and produces sounds, represents a vine in expanded polyurethane that, like the *Carpets*, present an image of an evidently artificial nature, a total, immersive and interactive environment which the public is invited to enter for a multi-sensorial experience. Sitting on the large green patch of grass the works of this section come together to reproduce the context of the *PAV Parco Arte Vivente*, Gilardi's lifelong commitment to creating a community of eco-art.

The **third section** features Gilardi's **political animations**, from the Sixties to the present, some of which are on show in a museum of the first time. When, in the late Sixties, he realised that militancy did not enjoy the space in the world of art he had hoped for, Gilardi lost interest in the production of "works of art" and devoted himself to creating "useful" works in the political and social ambit, working in psychiatric institutions, factories and working class areas and collaborating with the student movement.

This section features **Andreotti Volante** (1977) and the mask of **Agnelli** (1977) used in protests in the Seventies, the **Masso della Crisi** (2012), an inflatable made for the May 1<sup>st</sup> march, and numerous other projects and costumes made to criticize the political class, defend the environment and civil rights, arouse awareness of peace and tolerance in what has been defined as a "carnivalization" of the artist's world.

The **fourth and final section** presents **Gilardi the curator and critic**. Between 1967 and 1969 the artist made numerous trips to the United States, Sweden, Holland, Germany and Britain; he was a correspondent for *Flash Art*, the *American Arts Magazine*, the Swedish *Konstrevy* and the French *Robho*; he was in contact with a multitude of artists. Less known is his role in the staging of two fundamental exhibitions in 1969: *When attitudes become form* and *Op Losse Schroeven* curated respectively by Harald Szeeman and Wim Bereen. This extremely intensive period is illustrated through **archive materials** recounting Gilardi's abandoning of the "art system" in favour of more direct action "within life", as shown in his political and social work and the project for **PAV Parco Arte Vivente**, Turin's Living Sculpture Park, a Contemporary Art Centre, a "museum beyond the museum" opened in 2008 and conceived as single living organism that rather than possessing traditional works is a naturalistic area studded with installations to be constantly tended to through cultural animation and gardening.

The exhibition layout concludes with a large-scale **wallpaper** portraying a protest against nuclear power at Caorso in 1987, with the protestors wearing costumes by the artist reproducing the faces of contemporary politicians.

Gilardi's research is unceasing and he continues to give form and voice to the community; rather than deception, in his inclusive, democratic and participated work the creative artifice is *power* which the artist constantly invites us to liberate as for him art is not a way of talking about art but about the world.

The exhibition is accompanied by a catalogue published by **Quodlibet**, edited by Anne Palopoli, with critical texts by Hou Hanru, Bartolomeo Pietromarchi, Marco Scotini and Valérie Da Costa and a new text by Piero Gilardi.

**The press kit and images of the exhibition** can be downloaded from the Reserved Area of the Fondazione MAXXI's website at <http://www.fondazionemaxxi.it/area-riservata/> by typing in the password **areariservatamaxxi**

#### **MAXXI – National Museum of XXI Century Arts**

[www.fondazionemaxxi.it](http://www.fondazionemaxxi.it) - info: 06.320.19.54; [info@fondazionemaxxi.it](mailto:info@fondazionemaxxi.it)

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**MAXXI PRESS OFFICE** +39 06 324861, [press@fondazionemaxxi.it](mailto:press@fondazionemaxxi.it)

## **PREFACE**

Giovanna Melandri, President Fondazione MAXXI

Piero Gilardi is an artist who has tirelessly been engaged in civil rights battles. He has not expressed his creativity confined to an artist's studio, but has instead chosen to take sides, with freedom and without exhibitionism, displaying his belief in provocative ideas and finding therein much more than mere inspiration. We may not share all his battles, but we cannot deny his great sense of coherence that goes by the name of a prophetic vision. What I mean by this is that neither politics seen as a community challenge, nor the artist's direct participation in the repercussions of social upheaval are what inform his truly original and unmistakable artistic output, which has been regenerated several times over five decades. And he is certainly not the only artist to interpret his talent amidst the fray of sharp contrasts, protests, lacerations. However, what does make this artist unique is the prescient force with which in different cultural seasons he has known how to anticipate people's rights, capture an unfolding drama, and had the courage to make choices along innovative paths, as concerns both his artwork and his interaction with the environment and languages explored with complete freedom of spirit.

Ever since his Nature-Carpets debuted in the turbulent Sixties, spreading throughout his works and his public, followed by New Media Art, and, lastly, the Parco d'Arte Vivente (Park of Living Art), Gilardi has been a "militant" artist who does not swallow up the scene, but rather offers his expressive force to the service (I don't think he will be upset if I've chosen to use this term) of a greater cause than solitary creativity. Otherwise, it would be hard to explain how he can have indicated and alternated such different trajectories in his research, while always remaining closely connected to the issues of inequality, injustice, and the disasters of our civilization.

Gilardi has felt the explosion of the antagonism in the industrial world, the diseases of the urban context, the exploitation of Third World countries, the power of computer technology, and the alienation of human relations. These are horizons which MAXXI has been looking towards and studying for many years now through the point of view of its artists. In particular, our museum inaugurated its 2017 calendar with an international group exhibition called "Please Come Back. Il mondo come prigionero?", which is closely paralleled by Gilardi's immense skill and civil commitment. Hence, thanks to the retrospective exhibition curated by Hou Hanru, Bartolomeo Pietromarchi and Marco Scotini, our museum acknowledges Gilardi as an artist who has brought his maverick art and vision to the twenty-first century.

## ***Nature Forever – On Piero Gilardi's work***

by Hou Hanru

1 . These are hard times, what with the crisis of the unequal development of the world, and artists need to stand up and do something about it...

For the past decade, people all around the world have gone down into the streets again to protest against the rise of the new dictatorships of social, economic, racial, gender and political injustices, represented by the power of money and the usurping of the *vox populi* by populist and totalitarian politicians against social good and humanistic values. Various forms of street revolts, ranging from Occupy Movements across the world in 2011 to the Arab Spring, and many other protest events, have formed a new force of resistance against the domination of mainstream powers. They struggle to develop experiments for a new democracy. The latest highlight of this global movement is the worldwide protest against the election of Donald Trump and against his contempt for women and "minorities", which took place at the same time as his inauguration as President of the United States... In the midst of the crisis of democracy and environmental devastation, a wild fire of anger, disobedience, and new ideas has been kindled.

Artists and intellectuals have always been on the front line of these social mobilizations, while artistic imagination and creativity have helped to create the most powerful and significant expressions of the struggle involved and the desire for hope. Technologies and the new media of communication, while being strongly criticized by some as the sources of labour exploitation and social division, have also been embraced by almost everyone as the most efficient means of mobilization and strategic inventions. All this leads to new visions for a better world. Of course, this is not something that is only happening today. There is a great tradition of this sort of thing in both modern and contemporary history. As for the contemporary age, one of the most memorable moments can be found in the civil rights movements in its various forms in the 1960s and 1970s, from African American and women's liberations to the revolution that took place in 1968 involving students, workers and common citizens, in the West and the post-World War II trend of independence in the colonized world... These legacies have been constantly re-evoked as inspiration for today's social movements for democracy and justice.

In the 1970s, Italy, with *Operaismo* and *Autonomia* and other radical left-wing activism – in spite of their complexity – was one of the most important bases of social mobilization against the domination of capitalist and imperialist powers. The Italian cultural world, with numerous artists and intellectuals actively involved, was truly avant-garde in the making of this new social climate of aspiration and celebration of the new, the creative, and the emancipated. Piero Gilardi was a key figure in the movement of artistic interventions in the social realm. Ever since then, he has become one of the few truly consistent and persistent actors to carry on with such social engagement. Deeply influenced by critical thinkers like Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, Felix Guattari, and Ivan Illich, as well as others, he has explored a new perspective of artistic practice in our day and age in the realm of biopolitics. On the one hand, he has created *agitprop* artworks, often in the form of procession masks and street performances. On the other hand, he has enthusiastically participated in Media Art movements to venture into up-to-date technological inventions, in order to propose new languages and structures for us to critically confront and contemplate the challenging issue of the ecological and environmental crisis. After nearly half a century since the beginning of his career, Gilardi's art remains highly relevant. It is actually becoming more and more so. Today's urgent situation that has witnessed the rise of populist ideologies and neoliberal economic powers proves to be the best reason for us to understand the importance of this artist's work. The story of contemporary art in Italy and in the world, with such extraordinary "movements" as Arte Povera, Transavanguardia, among others, would not be complete without highlighting the contributions of artists like Piero Gilardi, who remain independent and continuously engaged in seeking expressions that are an alternative to the mainstream in order to promote ties between artistic practice and socio-political reality.

2 . Piero Gilardi became involved in avant-garde art in Italy at a very early stage. In the 1960s, he collaborated with Aldo Modino, Michelangelo Pistoletto, Ettore Sottsass, Gianni Piacentino, and others. He also advised such international curators as Harald Szeemann and Wim Beeren for their historic projects like "When Attitudes Become Form" and "Op Losse Schreeven"... Obviously, Gilardi was one of the most openminded artists of his time, extremely sensitive to new experiments, concepts and forms, as well as to the intellectual debates taking place in this revolutionary period around 1968. He travelled to France and

America, embracing influences from Neo-Dada, Pop art, Nouveau Réalisme, and the Situationist International. At the same time, he was deeply involved in critical reflection and debates on the transition from industrial society to post-industrial society, armed with the theories of Herbert Marcuse and others like him. This helped him from the earliest stage to position himself as an artist with strong socio-political consciousness, particularly concerned about the drastic changes taking place in the landscape, the environment, the post-industrial world, which have profoundly affected the way we live and the very definition of human beings. By participating in projects like "Arte Abitabile", he tended to focus on blurring the borderlines between "High Art" and "Low Art", between art and life, between culture and nature, and attempted to come up with an innovative form of "nature" itself. Obviously inspired by Claes Oldenburg's soft sculptures, he created Nature-Carpets in 1965, which became "examples of the interior decor of the cybernetic 'individual living cell'".<sup>1</sup> This also set up the main direction of the future development of his thoughts, practices and values – to involve himself as an artist in the social reality, especially the challenge of environmental change, incessantly evolving towards crises driven by the rationale of capitalism. This explicit and overt engagement with social and political or, to use a word Gilardi is especially fond of using, *biopolitical*, issues has made him a distinct figure in the avant-garde movement and, to a great extent, put him on a trajectory quite different from most of his contemporary colleagues, often labeled as members of the Arte Povera movement, which tends to focus more on "poetic" and politically "transcendent" realms. Sharing similarly creative and provocative practices of utilizing "poor" materials, Gilardi tends to choose to incorporate industrial products and technologies in his work in order to explore the possibility of transforming nonconventional materials into elements used to construct, or invent, a new nature, an artificial environment that, on the one hand, recalls the images of natural creatures who risk becoming weak and even extinct, and, on the other hand, provides us with a new "natural life", a new habitable structure, if not a utopia... This leads to "nature that is reinvented" and involves direct interactions with social and economic relations in real life. This encouraged the artist to expand and develop the potential concerns of the tension between nature and modernity implied in the research of the Arte Povera artists from a social and political perspective. Eventually, such efforts can be seen as attempts to build an alliance between post-industrial urbanity and the ecological conditions of our day and age. Retrospectively, Gilardi's early awareness of the interactive but contradictory dynamics between modernity and ecology as a major force of transformation of human life and culture was absolutely farsighted. What is even more significant is his use of up-to-date science and technology, based on a sophisticated understanding of the evolution of the mode of production from Fordism to "Toyotism", and perhaps, today, "Digitalism". This rapidly turned him into a pioneer of Media Art. In the early years, he had already understood and experimented new technologies as a main form of artistic expression that efficiently conveys the claim to redefine the new structure of human life and society through deconstruction of the established categorization of "disciplines". For the past four decades, while taking a break from art in favour of social activism, Gilardi has brought his passion for the interaction between art and technology, between human life and environmental change into a system of creation that is always ample, vivid and playful. This eventually leads to new understandings and experiments on social relations between people, hence democracy, in the age of merging human activities, technologies, especially electronicdigital ones, and the environment. This is known as the Anthropocene epoch.

3 . Gilardi's Nature-Carpets representing stones, plants, birds, the ocean, and so on, in coloured foam provide us with a new "nature" in the already urbanized, therefore artificialized, life environment. Not only do they recall the beauty of vanishing nature, but they also have a comforting effect on us, busy and tired in a Fordist and post-Fordist society. They also suggest that we adapt to a new world where nature is in any case becoming unreachable and transformed by human interventions. It is a pursuit of nature, but, ironically, it also implies the impossibility of this nature itself. One must adapt to it and imagine new ways of living in harmony with this new condition. Perhaps, "arte abitabile" really means imagining and creating "art" that will allow us to learn how to inhabit such a new world.

Now Gilardi is convinced that human beings should come together to share ideas and conceive viable social projects to face such a new task of life. Long before the theory of "relational aesthetics" (to a great extent referring to the generation of Nouveau Réalisme, which is closely related to Gilardi himself), Gilardi has already put "relation" at the heart of his work. Public participation is an indispensable element in making sense of his practice. "Visitors" are encouraged to step or sit on his Nature-Carpets as if they were at home. Sculptures in the form of tree trunks, rocks, igloos, etc. invite the public to enter into their "bodies"

and play with them... while costumes in the forms of trees, flowers and fruits are to be worn by the “beholders”, hence transforming them into actors. A novel genre of social theatre is being played out in the midst of the interactive plant world. Real life unfolds in the “art space” stimulated by the overlapping of electric lights, sounds and movements and a new essence is obtained – a kind of simulation of an increasingly present new “anthropocene” world. A postnature community is given birth to.

And this offers a totally new definition of relational aesthetics... However, all this is by no means an innocent and pure artistic expression. It is intrinsically rooted in Gilardi’s social awareness of being an artist who resists the domination of the power of the capital and its way of production – the commodification of art being one evident example of it. In bringing people together to participate in his work, he intends to express his claim for a clear ethical position and defend the integrity of being an artist.

He has therefore decided to develop his work along a new line leading to ways of production alternative to the capitalist market and its institutional system. For a long time, he gave up art-making in favour of “creative” political activism. He did this not to abandon art, but to abandon the “old art”. This new way of art-making intends to reunify individuals to form a different social structure based on equality between people and the emancipation of the oppressed, while defying the economic and ecological crisis. This naturally encourages the artist to go beyond the attractive idea of “individual mythology”, beloved by many of his contemporaries, and to reposition himself in a different terrain: with biopolitical struggle as the aim he has in mind, he converts himself into a protagonist of collective actions and takes his art visions and talent to the street.

Inspired by the historic avantgardes from Russian Constructivism to Situationist International, especially “Rosta Windows” by Mayakovsky, Gilardi focused on designing posters and masks for street protests. This occurred in a relevant context, when Italy, with the Workers’ Movement (*Operaismo, Autonomia...*) reached a peak in the 1970s. And, unlike most of the artists of his generation, Gilardi has incessantly continued with his production to support manifestations of the working class ever since. New posters and, especially, new masks and costumes have been produced and taken to the street for protests and processions.

Monumental but satirical, they help provoke popular enthusiasm, turning anger and fury into pride and joy. Street manifestations are now also the people’s festival. They temporarily occupy the streets – controlled and dominated for a long time by the capital and its political allies – and turn them into a zone of freedom, a Temporary Autonomous Zone, where everyone has the right to exist and express oneself while all urgent issues of our contemporary life, from economic inequality to ecological decline to crisis of democracy, etc., are debated. As key elements in “cheering up” the spirits of the street actions related to marches and occupations, Gilardi’s art does not just satirize the powerful – politicians, capitalists and so on. Also, as these are actions that function as street theatre, popular festival, and even *urban guerrilla* all at the same time, they produce new relationships between different social communities and individuals, and hence regenerate public spheres, or temporary, mobile and interactive spaces for public expression and debates. This is particularly important in the age of the general privatization of urban spaces. For the past two centuries, and especially in the past few decades, urbanization has become one of the most important ways for Capitalism to expand profits and develop its control over people’s lives. And this has also become a global trend accelerating social divisions and conflicts all around the world.<sup>2</sup> Gilardi’s artistic interventions – organizing and “aestheticizing” popular protest, marches and other events – go against the grain of such a trend. Here people are encouraged to encounter, merge and unify in order to create temporary and permanent communities, sharing solidarity and mutual support. They not only defend the cause of the sustainability of the environment, but they also defend the sustainability of society itself... Eventually, the large scale masks in caricature style featuring politicians, capitalists and other symbols of our time help to create a sort of counter-spectacle against consumerist entertainment in the age of the society of the spectacle. They revitalize and “elevate” the ritual of popular celebration with exaltation and joy. Revealing the power of popular solidarity, they shout out claims for hope. These manifestations are actually contemporary carnivals and embody the real *carnavalesque* spirit promoted by Mikhail Bakhtin: in a carnival, everybody shares everything with everyone else, from food to words. One can be liberated from one’s usual social status and even turn oneself into a fool. Humour and folly triumph over reason and discipline. The sacred and the profane are confounded. Social hierarchies are suspended. Social controls are subverted. Everyone can enjoy momentary equality. The world is turned upsidedown. A social utopia is temporary “realized”...<sup>3</sup>

4 . Eventually, Gilardi's involvements with mobile, dynamic, playful and critical street actions are intended to generate social solidarity and common values. Obviously, Gilardi's social activism tackles the question of contemporary society in its political, economic and humanistic crisis. Moreover, with far-sighted vision, he emphasizes the macro problem of the environment and puts everything into mobilizing the public to involve it in the protection of the earth. This leads, naturally, towards the creation of a new kind of community that carries on and furthers the struggle of the working class against the dominant powers, namely the capital and their political allies. He also understands that the true achievement of the sustainability of the earth has to begin by proposing alternative solutions, both socially and artistically. A key element for seeking such solutions lies in the imagining and realizing of alternative structures for collective actions, namely, institutions. Persisting with his critique of and distancing from the mainstream art system, the artist imagined and attempted to create an entirely new institution for experiments on environmental protection and ecological sustainability. In 2008, the PAV-Parco d'Arte Vivente (Park of Living Art) was opened. Working with a good number of international artists, architects and educators, etc., Gilardi transformed a piece of abandoned land in an industrial zone in Turin into an open air "museum" in which research, education and artistic programmes are organized. Focusing on exploring various possibilities for improving the environment, or natural life, in the heart of an urban post-industrial site, it offers opportunities for every innovative idea of ecological revolution to grow, just like an "uninterrupted construction site, an interlacing of dialogues, of experiments open to innovative alternatives in harmony with the living systems of the biosphere."<sup>4</sup> Since then, the PAV has become a full-fledged center of Bio Art in the global art community while playing a unique role in the city's education system. Tens of artists have contributed to the project. But being a living body itself the "PAV does not possess a collection of works to conserve; rather, it is characterized by a natural territory strewn with installations of 'living art' tended to by ongoing animation and gardening."<sup>5</sup> It is by insisting on this dimension of "work in progress", at once "immaterialistic" and permanently creative, that the PAV shows its true pioneer form and strategy of social and artistic production. At the same time, it also suggests a truly original type of institution, an institution that experiences real life and is open to never-ending change. Here, human activities and nature mingle and mutually affect and improve each other, both sustainably and positively. In this post-industrial period, a new reality and a new concept, of nature itself is being generated and "experimented" with. Nature is constantly being "rescued" from crisis and given a new chance to redevelop through interaction with human activities – and vice versa. In this process, new social commons that are always looking for justice and improvement are formed and reinvented... Nature and human society can now hope to live sustainably and, perhaps, forever!

1 Conversation with Andrea Bellini, in *Piero Gilardi*, JRP|Ringier, Zurich 2012, p. 170

2 Ref. D. Harvey, *Rebel Cities: From the Right to the City to the Urban Revolution*, Verso, New York 2013

3 See M. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington 2009.

4 P. Gilardi, *Bioma. Pensieri, creazioni e progetti per un Parco d'Arte Vivente*, ACPAVGribaudo, Turin 2005

5 P. Gilardi, *Thirty Years of Ecological Activism*, *infra*, p. 101

## Piero Gilardi. In the Beginning Was the Mask

by Bartolomeo Pietromarchi

Hanging on the wall in Piero Gilardi's studio is a foam rubber mask that is a satirical portrait of Gianni Agnelli. It is part of a series of works that the artist began making in the early 1970s for May 1, International Workers' Day, which consist of satirical scenes with a political or social theme. Each year, Gilardi's foam rubber "masks" are worn or carried in processions by people who take part in the event and represent politicians, businessmen, famous people or even current topics such as GMOs, climate change, and the economic crisis. This is a lesser known aspect of the artist's activity, one that is unquestionably political and that is not considered a work of art but rather a contribution to the sharing of civil and militant commitment as concerns the ideals and values he believes in. All the same, it seems to lie at the very core of his entire life and work.

Piero Gilardi's career as an artist has been inspired by a conception of art that is identified in life. He believes there is no separation between art and life. The figure of the artist loses its oneness, its protagonistic role, in favour of creativity that takes place in the community and in the multitude. The artist becomes a sort of "enabler" of a work that is needed by the community and that embraces its ideals and values. The artist, therefore, does not just give up the prerogatives of his traditional role, but he also brings about a declassification of the work of art via the strategy of "disguise" and "*mise-en-scène*". Such a strategy includes the use of masks, satire, theatre, games, and the experience of play as an instrument capable of expanding the artistic concept beyond the individual in favour of the community and the public at large. The "carnivalization of the world", as Marco Scotini has cleverly described Gilardi's work, is a process that views the values of the carnival as being socially founding; it is the quintessential example of an experience in which things are shared, the opportunity to temporarily release and overturn order and rules and, at the same time, to do away with any differences and equalities – thanks to the mask. As the artist himself asserts, "the carnival is the heritage of an archetype that is clearly present in the collective unconscious"; it is the ancestral memory of a mythological golden age when the fruits of the earth were shared among all peoples in the course of their common festivities.

Gilardi's masks, Nature-Carpets, interactive installations, everything he has created as an artist all the way to the recent founding of the Parco d'Arte Vivente (Park of Living Art), are concealed behind what appears to be a game, a celebration, a mask, an ethical, social, and political tension, an intellectual rigour, a civil and militant commitment where creativity is functional to a vision of the world based on equality and empowerment.

### In the Beginning

Piero Gilardi is an important figure in contemporary Italian art in spite of the fact that he has always discreetly and deliberately remained on the sidelines. In the early 1960s, Turin and Rome were the two most dynamic centres for the research into and experimentation with art, as witnessed by a flourishing of movements, exhibitions, and artists. That period marked the passage from the Informel to Pop, and all the way, in the second half of the decade, to the myriad labels that attempted to define art that underwent the "dematerialization" of the work in favour of an identification between art and life, behaviour, process, and action. It was the period of Body Art, Performance, Behavioural and Process Art, of the Anti-Form, Arte Povera, and Land art, a time when – to use a famous 1968 slogan – *objet cache-toi* – the object-cumartwork that was identified with goods and included in a specific production/consumption cycle, was perceived as the antagonist by a certain militant, anti-bourgeois, and anti-capitalist ideology. The artwork, therefore, freed from its material constraints, lost its status as a static and permanent object in favour of a tangential, temporary one, shifting from contemplative to participatory conception. During that period in Italy, Gilardi was one of the major names in the theorization and active promotion of such a transition, assuming, as both an artist and an intellectual, its consequences, to the detriment of a linear and acknowledged career.

The first Nature-Carpets exhibited by Gilardi in 1966 are a perfect example of this mindset. The carpets seem to manifest a specific relationship with Pop Art, but this is only apparently true. The Nature-Carpets are, in fact, in the vision of its inventor, no longer a simple work to be passively contemplated, a fetishistic accomplice of the new mass society and of its workings, but rather an aesthetic device that implies, via its phenomenological approach, a relational, involving, and participatory experience. The Nature-Carpets can

equally be hung on a wall or placed on the floor. It can be tread upon, touched, one can lie down on it, and it can also be rolled up, folded, turned upside down. The artistic object thus loses its aura, it is no longer a fetishproduct, the subject and object of economic speculation; rather, it possesses a social mission that completes its value via its use and function. This is “habitable art”, to paraphrase a famous exhibition which Gilardi participated in together with Michelangelo Pistoletto and Gianni Piacentino in 1966, or even “wearable art”, visible in several foam rubber costumes designed and made during that period, and in the “masks” that Gilardi would soon begin creating for the May 1 celebration. “One solution consists in working beyond the object – the object per se as a concrete and perceptible result – towards the spectacle, in union with theatre”, remarked Tommaso Trini at the time.

### **Game-Ritual -Game**

“In my experience in research into and practice of group creativity, since the early 1970s I have had the opportunity to hone a specific methodology that is based on the game-ritual-game sequence”, the artist has said. It is a method that allowed him to define and enforce the identification between tragedy and comedy; deeply-rooted in Italian culture, this allows a person to “disguise” – behind a mask, in satire, in theatre, and in the carnival – a message of political and civil disobedience, which is then transformed into an instrument of protest and dissent.

Indeed, upon closer examination, the resemblance between the *carpet* and real “nature” is only apparent, it is a trick. What we see in these *carpets* is not the hyperrealistic representation of a natural scene, but a “disguise”, a mask, a parody and a contradiction in visual and material terms. Such a work embodies the principle of the pure mask, under which no face can be hidden, as Giorgio Agamben has suggested in a recent essay on the representation of Pulcinella in a cycle by Giandomenico and Giambattista Tiepolo. In those frescoes Pulcinella hides, behind the features of a comical character, its comment on the woes of the world and on the tragedy in human existence, from which, via jests, quips and other expedients, he tries to distance himself in order to avoid a direct confrontation, always in search of a “way out”. And so Pulcinella – a pure mask and thus many masks all at the same time – embodies the principle of a “dismissive” kind of politics: politics that are “either on this side or that side of action”, which calls “into question the supremacy of praxis” and of protest, obstinately taking its distance from the tragic conflict and improvising the comedy of life, the final aim being to find a possible solution.

In this light we can get a grasp of all the following changes in Gilardi’s works, which prove to be consequent to and coherent with this principle. By applying the gameritual- game principle, and via a collective sharing of the game and the disguise, the artist stimulates liberating drives in the people who are involved. The game is gradually transformed into a collective ritual and social and political action, and then goes back to its own dimension, thus toning down the ideological tension of the political rite, and finding, such as in Pulcinella, an alternative way out. The work, in so far as it is a mask and a game, hides a precise function and becomes an instrument of awareness and direct action for those who know and want to share the premises.

In this sense, the Nature- Carpets has evolved, since 1968, into an activity that favours performative and theatrical projects of pure group creativity. The method was then applied to the workshop experiences as concerns anti-psychiatry, to street theatre, and, in the late 1970s, to self-managed projects in the outskirts of the cities and the “world” in general, such as the theatrical animations *La Historia de Rodolfo Rodriguez* with child labourers in the Saint Judas neighbourhood of Managua, Nicaragua, *Stop Pollution!* on the Akwesasne Indian reservation on Cornwall Island, Canada, or the Samburu tribe in Kenya.

### **New Media Art**

In the late 1980s, Gilardi became aware of the fact that the collective and participatory dimension inherent to the development of new technologies could implement the potential of his aesthetic devices. This led to a new chapter in his artistic trajectory. The artist called it New Media Art for which the installation *Inverosimile* (Unlikely) was one of the first and foremost examples. Created for the first time in 1989, *Inverosimile* is a sitespecific installation made up of a variable number of life-size polyurethane grapevines arranged to create a vineyard of sorts, whose movement, lights, and sound are activated electronically. It is a total, immersive, and interactive space which the public is invited to enter so that it can have a multisensory experience. The new frontier of the artist’s research further expands the concept of the Nature-Carpet in a dimension where technology merges with the aesthetic element and multiplies the effect. Once again, thanks to the title of the work, Gilardi asserts the theatrical aspect and the concept on

which his vision is founded. *Inverosimile* is a word that encompasses and at the same time rejects the concept of representation, in so far as it offers a simile with something that is impossible.

In these types of interactive and technological installations, the artist distances himself from the process/behaviour to recover the tactile and sensory experience of the object, while still remaining faithful to the theoretical and conceptual premises that have always informed his work. Way ahead of all the questions that were soon to arise in the debate on a technological and computerized society, the artist's theoretical interventions and his installations, which he hid behind the mask of an apparent innocuous playful experience, immediately dealt with the most controversial themes of the computer age: from virtual reality to interactivity, from the relationship between man and machine to the pervasiveness of the media, from the consequences on direct democracy to social control.

### **Biopolitics**

Gilardi went from the premises discussed above, from his vision of the intersection between art and life – a vision that is derived, as we have seen, from the specific historical period of the late 1960s – to the more recent chapter of his artistic action: the institution of the Parco d'Arte Vivente (Park of Living Art).

Conceived in 2002 and opened in 2008, the PAV is a full-fledged park set up in an abandoned industrial area in the outskirts of Turin. Built according to the principles of bioarchitecture, the PAV is an art centre that hosts both site-specific permanent works and temporary exhibitions and projects, and it is mainly dedicated to artistic expressions that deal with the issues of the environment and a sustainable economy. As always, Gilardi is behind the park's structure and the function, but he allows group work and participation to do the rest. If, as Boris Groys says, "it is possible to state that art becomes biopolitics because it begins to use artistic means to produce and document life as pure activity", then the theoretical premises of the 1960s seem to have been brought to fruition, in an age when even life itself has become the object of technical and artistic intervention. What occurs, then, within this completely new context, defined by art's aspiration today to become life itself, is the complete and long-sought-after identification. In this sense, the PAV is a total work of art, a permanent and group work, where art moves and is identified with life itself: art and life come face to face, as always in Gilardi, as concerns the most urgent ethical, social, and political issues of our contemporary age.

## PERMANENT ASSEMBLY.

### Piero Gilardi: The Social Division of Work and New Forms of Life

By Marco Scotini

*“As a legendary wise man once said, truth cannot be contained in just one dream, nor in the dream of just one man.”*

*Piero Gilardi 1*

#### The Unkept Promise

They say that in the spring of 1969 two milestones in the history of exhibitions defined a new status for contemporary art: concerning its forms of production and reception, its assignment of roles, its ways of being. The exhibitions “When Attitudes Become Form” and “Op Losse Schroeven” – the former having since become a legend, the latter having instead been lost by the wayside – re-emerge today as the twofold mechanism of the same exhibition machine that was to mark a paradigmatic shift in the definition of art and its institutional relations. The radical change that both exhibitions would promote is not only identified with art’s experimental nature in the 1960s, but also with the potential answer to the outwards-moving and libertarian social drives, as well as to the political movements, of 1968.

Opening a week apart, and headed by Harald Szeemann and Wim Beeren, respectively, the two parallel shows hosted by the Kunsthalle in Berne and the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, regardless of their important differences, involved more or less the same artists (on both sides of the Atlantic), and adopted the same installation strategy (informal and chaotic), as well as the same spatial configuration. Lastly, they shaped the post-Minimalist, Poverista, and Conceptual artistic trend that was destined to remain hegemonic in the years to come.

But while this story is common knowledge, what is less known is the key role that Piero Gilardi would play within them, notwithstanding the recent re-readings by Christian Rattemeyer,<sup>2</sup> on the one hand, and Robert Lumley,<sup>3</sup> on the other. However, if we were to treat an artist like Gilardi as though he were merely the advisor of the two exhibitions, it would mean distancing ourselves from a correct historiographic reconstruction, as well as from a suitable formulation of the theoretical problem that his participation in the process would involve. On the contrary, the recovery of this genealogy paves the way for a whole series of inescapable questions, not just as concerns the figure of Gilardi (in all of its complexity and potential) but, more broadly, the concrete ways that cultural devices and creative industries are identified – then as now – with the very heart of the ramifications of production: with the strategies of valorization they mobilize and the forms of control they legitimize. Or, to be more precise, with the power relations they instill or of which they become an object.

What, then, is the current meaning of the reaffirmation of Piero Gilardi’s propulsive force<sup>4</sup> within this process? What are the questions that, by recovering his experience, would be placed back in the playing field? Which certainties would be undermined? The historical given, as such, would have no meaning if it weren’t able to transform itself into a paradigmatic factor and, therefore, into an appeal to the shift (if not the downright overturning) of the current canons of interpretation.

The fact is that the years between 1967 and 1969 are the ones during which Gilardi put aside the production of his famous naturecarpets and, along with that, the objective approach to art, fully in agreement with the processes of de-materialization that were occurring at the time. The feverish, catalyzing and theoretical function that had by then replaced Gilardi’s previous activity did not interrupt the exercise of his creative dimension, however. Rather, this new initiative witnessed his transition from inventor of *forms* to that of *formations*: with dedicated spaces to welcome them (Turin’s Deposito d’Arte Presente is one such place)<sup>5</sup> and the names designating them (the definition “microemotive art” is an example of this)<sup>6</sup>. The journeys between New York and the West Coast, Sweden and Holland, Germany and the UK, just like the correspondence between the newly founded *Flash Art* or the publications for the American *Arts Magazine*, the Swedish *Konstrevy*, and the French *Robho*, were the tools of this new creative phase. In this far-reaching artistic constellation Harald Szeemann was the last protagonist Gilardi encountered, after having gathered around himself in Turin the young and so-called Poverista community, and after having forged relationships with Dutch artists like Marinus Boezem and Ger van Elk, as well as with the curator Wim Beeren. As Jan Dibbets recalls, “Gilardi had spoken to all of us previously [before his contact with

Szeemann] and he was interested in uniting the group of artists. He played a key role saying that all of us needed to connect, to join in view of a different approach to art – changing the way art was sold, challenging the gallery and museum system.”<sup>7</sup> For Marinus Boezem as well, Gilardi himself had been the one to “prepare the minds for ‘Op Losse Schroeven’ in Holland.”<sup>8</sup> In fact, the first draft of the project that Wim Beeren presented to the director of the Stedelijk Museum in December 1968 was entitled “Criptostrutture e Microemozioni” (Cryptostructures and Microemotions), which came straight out of the concept of ‘microemotive art’ formulated by the Turin artist. Gilardi’s text “Primary Energy and the Microemotive Artists” had in fact been published in the September issue of *Arts Magazine*, while the Dutch version of the essay, “Microemotive Art”, had appeared in the *Stedelijk Museumsjournaal* with an introduction by Ger van Elk. It would not be published in Italian until several years later. The conceptual lens through which Gilardi interpreted the different artists – from Nauman to Hesse, from Long to Merz, from Boezem to Zorio – was based on the molecular dimensions of the movement, on the imponderability of the energy, on the perceptive expansion, on the undermining of the primary role of visibility that had been Modernism’s key element. A new condition was on the horizon: it was the one that would allow for the opening up to a total creative action unfettered from both objects and signs – along with the definitive participation in reality in the promise to recombine art and life. To Gilardi’s mind, “identifying the subtle, energetic relationship between one thing and the negation of things”<sup>9</sup> meant choosing as one’s instrument the indeterminacy between form and action. That in such a modality primary energy was offset by “primary structures, in the same way that the emotional micro-scale was offset by the macro-scale of the ‘monumental inaction’ of entropy (put forward by Robert Smithson), was an awareness that was being asserted. All the same, Wim Beeren’s indebtedness to Gilardi would become known thanks to his essay in the catalogue, as well as to Gilardi’s *Politics and the Avant-Garde*<sup>10</sup> appearing in the same publication. Whereas Szeemann himself would totally remove Gilardi’s emblematic involvement in the preparatory phases of “When Attitudes Become Form”, after a substantial disagreement on the management of the exhibition, the political terms are reaffirmed here today – in difficult financial times for art – in all their radicalness. In late November 1968, Szeemann jotted down these words in his diary: “The night-long discussion at van Elk’s home did not concern the need for the exhibition as much as it did the way it is to be produced. Gilardi wanted to see the whole thing as an assembly of artists, from which the exhibition would then emerge naturally: no shipping, no art dealer, but rather the result of the debates between the artists, and a critique of the museum as institution.

The title of the show should be as non-committal as possible, not a recent trend postulating a new movement.”<sup>11</sup> As we now know, the expectations would not be met and the exhibition’s presumed forms of self-production would result in the exact opposite: in an economic undertaking with the private funding of the Philip Morris brand and the involvement of an art dealer like Leo Castelli. We also know that the Swiss curator’s choice would end up having a powerful effect on Gilardi who, coherently with the events of 1968, was forced to re-assess his own role as well as the outcomes of the avantgarde movement that he himself had contributed to shaping. Not only did he remove his name from the event, but he abandoned the art system, moving on to a more direct action having to do with life itself. Far from remaining circumscribed to a single figure, the crucial nature of this event should ultimately be read in terms of its political importance, which continues to raise questions today. Can Gilardi’s gesture still be considered a break in his trajectory, or should it instead be interpreted as a form of emancipation or as the continuation of his creativity, albeit in a different form? Where does the radicalness of art that is presumed to be as such reside? Can art be free from the material relationships of production, and production from its management? Can the means of production not affect the artistic productions themselves? Can semiotic experiments and semantic innovations nevertheless continue to be an outside and independent space with respect to the creative industries? Notwithstanding Gilardi’s numerous attempts to abandon and defect from the art system, something he had done previously, once he had achieved fame, when he abandoned the Galleria Sperone and the Sonnabend Gallery, in this case as well the artist had to end his new trajectory bitterly acknowledging the constraints that capitalism imposes on the subject and on his/her ability to act. Seeing that the micro-breaks, the micro-freedoms are then reabsorbed by the *molar* dimension of the institution, there appears to be no other solution: “art must remain art, perhaps rather mad and arrogant, yet it must not become life.”<sup>12</sup>

### **From Microemotive Art to the Microphysics of Power**

Interpreting the dualism of art-life according to a vitalistic meaning and as an excess or a flow that opposes the inertia of representation, is totally insufficient (if not misleading) with respect to Gilardi's radical research. If this were so we would be within the scope of a "Poverista" aesthetic, which is not this artist's aesthetic. With Gilardi the antagonism of the art-life binomial does not so much occur inside a pivotal moment in modern existence, as much as it does inside an ulterior moment of the dominance of capital. Behind the criticism of a reduction to images, behind the direct choice of what is experienced and no longer of what is represented, there is conflict underway between the productive forces of society and the relationships of production. The separation between such forces and what they can do emerged evermore clearly with the events of 1968.

Gilardi was among the first to clearly recognize that art is entirely within the productive process, and that it is not some exteriority offered up to market relations. Where there is no longer a difference between artistic practice and art, for example, in microemotive art, the reification into a sign and a thing would appear to be impossible. Well, there too it seems impracticable to bring art to life as we are dealing with a space that must first be decolonized. This is why the process of capture and integration brought about by both "When Attitudes Become Form" and "Op Loss Schroeven" (but also by "Arte Povera più Azioni Povere" in Amalfi), as well as the voluntary subjection of avant-garde artists, in Gilardi's view, resemble the character of failure and counterrevolution.

Gilardi uses pages of unsuspected actuality to denounce the one-dimensional nature of the art system and the degeneration of the phenomenon. In their understanding that power finds its economic *raison d'être* not in the market (or in whether or not a product can be sold) but in the control of production as such, they seem to be the foreshadowing of an analysis of the contemporary phenomenon of precarious employment in the tertiary sector. "The artistic establishment as a whole – writes Gilardi in *Robho* – thus carries out a solid social control of Western avant-garde art; the social system of the welfare state achieves through the small deficit of the galleries' business the ideological control of the subversive potential of avant-garde art; the instruments for this control [...] are the funding of the artists, but above all the manipulation of artistic information and the social classification of the artists."<sup>13</sup> It is instantly clear to Gilardi how the institutional organs have the task of separating the creative functions from their social connections, in order to integrate them, by neutralizing the stimuli, in the control exerted by the cultural apparatus. An apparatus that has every reason to sustain semiotic production that, albeit denying it in form, substantially maintains the capitalistic valorization intact. Gilardi's failed attempt to institute a global relationship connecting artists in an alternative circuit derives as much from the personalism of the subjects implicated, as it does from the corporativism of the project itself. Indeed, it was believed that an autonomous artistic organization could be opposed to the market system, while remaining circumscribed to the field of art, however. On the contrary, for it be able to welcome art, life was going to have to change, taking on an active role in political struggle and social insurrections. This belief led Gilardi to other forms of associationism, which saw him fighting in the student movement, in counter-information, in the reality of psychiatric institutes, in factories, in low-income housing districts. Carrying out both political and artistic experience at the same time, without subordinating the one to the other and without abandoning the one for the other, is the priority of any new creative reality that increasingly sets aside its emblematic nature to favour its anonymous and relational one. What emerges is a whole artistic production carried out in relation to the political struggle that situates the graphic arts (workers' cartoons, *tazi bao*, pamphlets, banners) alongside the artistic-therapeutic animation in psychiatric institutes such as the Centro di Lavoro Protetto Femminile (Women's Work Centre) in Turin, the urban murals with the La Comune Gourp, the street theatre in public marches on May 1, the neighbourhood festivals, and the social activities for the elderly in the village of Aurora. Let's just say that in this passage, foam rubber, the material Gilardi prefers to use, goes from being an instrument used to reinvent the habitat (thanks to the naturecarpets and the "Arte Abitabile" exhibitions) to a means used to elaborate the habitus (via mascarons, theatrical animations, allegorical floats). What remains constant is the usability and polyvalence that this plastic output promotes, together with a hobby-like and do-it-yourself aesthetic, with a transformative and participatory potential inherent to the biomorphic and economically irrelevant features of the material *per se*.<sup>15</sup> This is the origin of the carnivalization of the world that for Gilardi (as well as Bachtin) is an indispensable element in desecrating the temples and overturning the sites, the functional distributions, the social attributions. With respect to the "distant and absolute" object that art endlessly continues to prefigure, in Gilardi there is nothing other than the proximity to a familiarized world that is approached, a world that is not meant to be contemplated but turned upside down, taken apart

and put back together through laughter, the imagination, and joyous cursing. The carnivalesque does not respect the divisions between the political and the aesthetic, between high and low, between sensitive and immaterial, between the idealization of the past and the unfinished present: it transgresses them with a combination of bodies and signs that are constantly coming apart and being put back together, with a mixture of seriousness and amusement, with challenges to the irreversibility of time. In this temporary subversion of the order of things, roles, and actions, these are no longer the expression of something that existed before and was an implicit given, rather, they are the expression of a new horizon that has opened up. The object, the means of its representation, and the artist himself are created in the course of the process (always group and dialogic) as the co-production of possibilities and differences. So that “when attitudes become institution”, so to speak, Gilardi can only oppose them with the politics of the event.

### **The Many, the Living , and the Ecosystem**

An analysis of Piero Gilardi's works cannot be limited to those of a single person nor of a generation. His work can serve as a sort of picklock to outline (and thus interpret) the entire production of the new subjectivities that emerged as of 1968, as a “point of no return” (as he himself has called it). The difficulty understanding a figure like Gilardi also lies in the classical paradigm that we use, based on the identity and the univocal character of the subject. If we had to sum up: which of his multiple entities should we choose? That of the artist, the writer, the activist, the curator, the theatre animator, the experimenter with new media, or the environmentalist? Is it true that the more these figures have sought a centralization of the subject, the more we have re-territorialized them? Wouldn't it be better to try to read these Gilardis (in the plural) in the same way we would read Balestrinis or, to stay on Italian turf, Lonzis? Doesn't continuing to read their withdrawal from the art system, from literature, from criticism in terms of caesura mean, each and every time, reasserting the subject of the dominant class as the exclusive referent? And, in consequence, doesn't this mean repositing intact the social division of work? Aren't “the many” the new representatives of the contemporary public sphere? In a 1974 interview where he was being asked whether he wasn't finished by now, the artist replied that the assertion was spot on “as long as we are aware of the fact that the person who made it was referring, whether or not consciously, to a *clearly-defined* field of action, that is, that of bourgeois culture; in fact, in this dimension I am no longer capable of expressing anything, if not an overall critique. This does not mean, however, that I am ‘dead as an artist’ and that I no longer develop any artistic research.”<sup>16</sup> Gilardi would in fact continue to cross other geographies (such as the animation projects with the people of San Judas in Managua, with the Akwesasne Indian reservation in North America, and with the Barsaloi tribe in Kenya) and to interact with other cultures (such as the ones represented by the new technologies and by the interactive works). And it is precisely thanks to the latter that the awareness of the emergence of a new multiple and fractal Self matured, one that would lead the artist, together with bio art, to his further environmental awareness. Gilardi continues to found alternative microcommunities such as the Discussion Group on the Virtual Self in Turin, the Ars Technica in Paris, and the Parco d'Arte Vivente (Park of Living Art), his most recent large-scale artistic-cultural project. Without ever abandoning his role in the activism against the nuclear, in favour of Free Palestine, in support of the environmental and social protests of the NO TAV movement in al di Susa.<sup>17</sup> All this envisions Gilardi at the centre of a multiplication of possible actions, of an expansion of the forms of life associated with a profound attitude towards intersubjectivity at this point extended beyond the borders of the anthropic dimension. Subjectivity is experienced as being plural and polyphonic, to refer back to Bakhtin once more. Gilardi has not and will never cease to create a collective subject where art is never something outside the world. Quite the contrary, it is a field that expands, that is always inclusive and destined to multiply the subjects it withholds; the living, the inanimate, the mechanical.<sup>18</sup> In this field the artifice is not just a place of deception but one of power. Freeing this power is the task that Piero Gilardi's art never ceases to remind us to do.

1 P. Gilardi, “Introduzione”, in P. Gilardi, *Not For Sale. Alla ricerca dell'arte relazionale*, Mazzotta, Milan 2000, p. 11

2 Ch. Rattemeyer *et al.* (ed.), *Exhibiting the New Art, “Op Losse Schroeven” and When Attitudes become Form” 1969*, Afterall Books, London 2010

3 R. Lumley, *Arte Povera in Turin: The Intriguing Case of the Deposito D'Arte Presente*, in R. Lumley and F. Manacorda (eds.), *Marcello Levi: Ritratto di un collezionista/Marcello Levi: Portrait of a Collector*, Hopefulmonster, Turin 2005. Also see R. Lumley, “Habitable Art: In and Around Piero Gilardi”, [nottinghamcontemporary.org](http://nottinghamcontemporary.org)

4 Charles Esche's words about Gilardi are as follows: “We should grant the last word to the person who more than anyone else was the propulsive force behind both *When Attitudes Become Form* and *Op Losse Schroeven*”, in C. Esche,

*Un'ambientazione diversa cambia tutto*, in G. Celant (ed.), *When Attitudes Become Form. Bern 1969/ Venice*, Progetto Prada Arte, Milan 2013, p. 691

5 A. Troncone, *La smaterializzazione dell'arte in Italia: 1967-1973*, Postmedia, Milan 2014; cf. also R. Lumley, *Arte Povera in Turin*, cit. and *Temporary Artistic Communities. Piero Gilardi in conversation with Francesco Manacorda*, in Ch. Rattemeyer et al. (ed.), *Exhibiting the New Art*, cit., p. 230-238. The interview was also published in L. Steeds (ed.), *Exhibition (Documents of Contemporary Art)*, The MIT Press, London 2014

6 The same text was published in English as "Primary Energy and Microemotive Artists", *Arts Magazine* 43, September/October 1968, p. 48 -52, and in Dutch as "Microemotive Art", *Stedelijk Museumsjournaal* 13, 4, 1968, p. 198. Now in Italian as *Arte Microemotiva*, in P. Gilardi, *La mia biopolitica. Arte e lotte del vivente. Scritti 1963-2014*, Prearo, Milan 2016, p. 99-101

7 *Jan Dibbets in conversation with Lucy Steeds*, in Ch. Rattemeyer et al. (ed.), *Exhibiting the New Art*, cit., p. 249

8 *Marinus Boezem in conversation with Steven ten Thije*, *ivi*, p. 241

9 P. Gilardi, *Arte Microemotiva*, cit., p. 100

10 P. Gilardi, *Politics and Avant- Garde*, in *Op Losse Schroeven: Situaties en cryptostructuren*, Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam 1969. Now in P. Gilardi, *La mia biopolitica*, cit., p. 228-233

11 H. Szeemann, *How does an Exhibition Come into Being?*, in Ch. Rattemeyer et al. (ed.), *Exhibiting the New Art*, cit., p. 176

12 P. Gilardi, *17 September 1968. Letter to the magazine Pallone*, *Pallone* 1, 1968, now in P. Gilardi, *La mia biopolitica*, cit., p. 215

13 P. Gilardi, *Letter to the French magazine Robho*, in P. Gilardi, *La mia biopolitica*, cit., p. 225-227

14 For more on this period see P. Gilardi, *Dall'arte alla vita, dalla vita all'arte*, La Salamandra, Milan 1981. 15 P. Gilardi, *Piccolo manuale dell'espressione con la gommapiuma*, ed. by A. Bellini ed., Les Presses du Réel, Paris 2013

16 "Sette domande senza riguardo", *Gala*, December 1974, republished in L. Vergine, *Attraverso l'arte. Pratica politica/Pagare il '68*, Arcana, Rome 1976, p. 160

17 On these subjects see my interview: "Politiche della vegetazione. Conversazione tra Piero Gilardi e Marco Scotini", *Algaecologia*, supplement to *Alfabeta2*, V, 35, April/ May 2014, p. 1-2. Now in an unabridged version in P. Gilardi, *La mia biopolitica*, cit., p. 195-201

18 Cf. Tiziana Villani, *Ecologia politica: nuove cartografie dei territori e potenza di vita*, Manifestolibri, Rome 2013

## **THIRTY YEARS OF ECOLOGICAL ACTIVISM: From Political Animations to The Park of Living Art**

By Piero Gilardi

### **PROLOGUE**

My many decades of experience in research into bio art began back in the 1960s when I made my first Nature-Carpets.

During that period, after the exhibition “Macchine per il futuro” (Machines for the future) where I had expressed my Duchampian break from the dimension of aesthetic representation, my creativity took the form of clothes, furnishings, and utilitarian objects steeped in symbolic meanings borrowed from the emerging social culture at the time.

One cold winter morning, as I was walking along the banks of a river I was aghast at the sight of the huge amount of urban waste tangled in the vegetation on either side of the water, or scattered amid the smooth pebbles on the shore. I felt the urge to recreate that desolate landscape devoid of the signs of pollution. My idea was to reconstruct it in the form of a domestic carpet with the shapes carved into the foam rubber so that I could offer it up for its comfortable use by the body. Later on, I extended the iconography of the first Nature-Carpet that alluded to the shore of a river to other natural lands, recreating grassy areas or fields dotted with fruit, flowers, and vegetables chosen from the changing of the seasons, from germination to decay. I placed these carpets in my apartment and in the homes of some of my artists friends, until one day when a designer noticed them and wrote about them in the architecture magazine *Domus*. That designer was Ettore Sottsass, who saw the semiotic meaning of the work as being the rite to exorcise the death of nature, suffocated and poisoned by the growing pollution of industrialized consumer society. Sottsass was working for Olivetti at the time, where his job was to clad the large electronic calculators in the Elea series with a “humanizing” design. He had instantly understood my decision to use synthetic material produced by the new chemical technologies as the conceptual core of today’s ecological conception, which considers the “reparative” use of bio-technosciences as something that is necessary if we are to repair the altered ecological systems and therefore biodiversity.

### **THE SEVENTIES AND EIGHTIES**

In the 1970s, after having broken off all ties with the merchandising of art, I became immersed in and committed to a great cycle of political struggle that determined the fall of the Fordist production system and the development of the social rights of the working class. In the early 1980s, the fight against the harmfulness of factories was extended to that against the urban environment poisoned by industrial pollution, by traffic, and by speculation in the building sector.

So I began making my militant art – which was expressed in *agitprop* banners, community murals, and street theatre performances – available to the struggle against the sources of urban pollution and in defense of public green areas, such as the parks on the banks of the Dora and Stura Rivers located in Turin, known as FIAT’s commuter town.

Within this context of environmental protests, what emerged in the 1980s was the battle against the danger of nuclear power plants for civil use but with evident military implications. In those years, the popular mobilization for the “denuclearization” of local territories grew. I remember, for instance, the animation that my Collettivo Grafica & Animazione and I created for the human chain that in 1982 sanctioned the denuclearization of Turin’s Le Vallette district, and the murals that we painted on the town hall building in Robassomero concerning a similar measure passed by the public assembly.

The peak of this mass protest against nuclear power plants was reached in 1986/1987 with the motion, proclamation, and victory of the Popular Referendum to shut down the four power plants situated across Italy. This was without a doubt a historic victory for Italy’s popular movements. It was a victory prepared thanks to a combative and capillary mobilization that also involved intellectuals and artists. I remember organizing, with the active participation of many artists – including Mario Merz and Luigi Mainolfi – an exhibition titled “Nucleare? No Arte” in the spaces of the Mulino Feyles in Turin.

But perhaps my most vivid memory of militant art events against nuclear power is the one related to the theatrical animation of a human chain around the Caorso power plant: a gigantic smoke screen “colander” was built that included music and drums and dancing all around the plant. In the 1980s, I succeeded in bringing about another very significant experience related to ecological militancy: it was the performance by

a tribal political theater called *Stop Pollution!* involving the Akwesasne Reservation of the Mohawk Nation on Cornwall Island in New York State, on the Canadian border. In addition to its ecological contents, this experience had other important meanings: at a political level, our support for the Native American movements, at an artistic-cultural level, the confirmation of the universality of collective creativity.

This was the same social creativity that we were developing in the outskirts of the cities throughout the Western world, as part of the context of the proletarian counterculture.

It was an experience of artistic animation that we developed over the course of the month of August 1983 in the "Indian School" of the Akwesasne village, where young people were taught about the culture, lifestyles and social philosophies of the Mohawk tribe.

The students themselves were the ones to suggest the theme of the pollution of the reservation's natural land overlooking the St. Lawrence River, which the chemical industries, with the go-ahead of the federal government, had turned into a container for deadly poisons. The script was based on a rereading of Indian tales that provided us with the mythology and the characters for a dramatization in which nature itself overcame and destroyed the "black phantom" symbolizing pollution.

The animation was performed by a group of kids from the Indian school during a "sacred" even, when all the Mohawk clans living in the surrounding territory got together for the annual Buffalo Dinner. We were very moved when the heads of the clans offered us a message for the Italian people, exhorting them to keep on fighting the imperialist power of white people's capitalism.

### **THE 2000s**

In the 2000s I began to participate in the great NO TAV movement organized by the people of the cross-border Valle di Susa, against the devastating construction of a high-speed railway line from Turin to Lyon. For the march from Susa to the construction site at Venaus, I prepared – akin to a Chinese dragon – a huge "digging mole" pulling a long brightly coloured French TGV train. The protest, with over 20,000 participants, wrecked the infrastructures of the construction site, which was then relocated farther up the mountain, in Chiomonte, in a position that was harder to reach. Ever since then there has been stubborn resistance, fighting and sabotaging the works that are protected by a large number of police officers. By talking to the militants of this movement I was inspired to create dozens of caricatures, figures who scoured the forest trails around the tunnel construction site that, as it expanded, revealed the environmental devastation that would have been caused by the new and pointless railway line.

In particular, I can recall that at a certain moment the forest of centuries-old chestnut trees owned by an elderly valley dweller named Marisa was completely destroyed. She asked me to make her a chestnut tree costume so that she could wear it while protesting.

The members of the NO TAV movement are no doubt essentially inspired by their love of the natural environment, but it is equally clear that in the territory of the Valle di Susa an absolute "clash between civilizations" is unfolding, and this explains the doggedness of the authorities in pursuing through the courts and punishing what they see as being eco-terrorism. In that valley there are two opposite and paradigmatic ways of conceiving and experiencing social relations, the economy, the interaction with the environment and with culture. In twenty-five years of fighting, an alternative political and social community has been consolidated in Valle di Susa, one that is ideologically independent of the dominant Neoliberalism, and whose bywords are solidarity, discussion, organization, and conflict. Against them is the whole Italian industrial-financial system with the relative cross-party group of politicians chained to the ideology of economic hyper-growth.

### **THEORY AND PRACTICE OF MILITANT "ECOLOGISM"**

All these experiences of militant art, developed over the past decades, are founded on the constant interweaving between theory and practice, which is not only seen as the political dialectic internal to the environmental movements, but also as a reference to the development of a kind of anthropological, sociological, and philosophical thinking that has interpreted and nurtured such movements from a theoretical standpoint, starting from the pioneers, people like Gregory Bateson and Ivan Illich, all the way to today's "ecosophy" and environmental ethics.

For me, as an artist, certain positions have been more important than others in the vast panorama of environmentalist theoretical literature, for instance, in the 1990s, Deleuze-Guattari's insights on the three ecologies: naturalistic, social, and mental.

Other important theoretical reference points have been the work of Gilles Clément, with his tales of a “Third Landscape” and a “Planetary Garden”, Vandana Shiva’s analyses concerning land and water, and the post-human interpretations of the zooanthropologist Roberto Marchesini. In recent years, I have been especially influenced by Serge Latouche’s theory of degrowth, and Guido Viale’s theory of “ecological conversion”. Furthermore, along the lines of my passionate experience at the heart of the French debate on the *art-science-technology* triad, I have tried to delve deeper into the ambivalent issue of Bioscience and Biotechnology, also in a conversation with the lucid critical analyses of the United States’ Critical Art Ensemble.

### **THE FOUNDING AND RUNNING OF THE *parco d’arte vivente***

The Parco d’Arte Vivente (Park of Living Art) in the city of Turin is a contemporary Art Centre that specializes in examining, experimenting with, and displaying research into environmental art in its broadest definition today, i.e. Bio Art. If we compare it with a traditional museum, this institution stems from the idea of art parks and gardens as venues where open-air sculpture exhibits are located. However, it is also a reaction to the crisis of the traditional museum. Indeed, in the 1980s the idea of “taking the museum outside of the museum” began to manifest itself, the purpose being to bring it closer to the true dynamics of social culture, as well as to respond to the intrinsic tendency of contemporary art to interact freely with the public in open and/or unusual spaces, such as squares, train stations, and disused factories.

PAV does not possess a collection of works to conserve; rather, it is characterized by a natural territory strewn with installations of “living art” tended to by ongoing animation and gardening. One of the most apt definitions of PAV is that of an “interactive museum surrounded by nature”. This artistic interaction is expressed on two levels: on a first level, the artists invited create projects on site, for instance, the large-scale installation *Trèfle* by Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster, accompanied by the collaboration of our technical team: on a second level, the public is involved in the artists’ activities, comprising both workshops and the animation of the works themselves. One such example is *OrtoArca* by Raffaella Spagna and Andrea Caretto: this is cultivated by a group of young people, and the vegetables produced are donated to the families in the neighbourhood in exchange for organic waste to be placed in PAV’s composter.

At PAV, our “administrative” relationship with the artist is prevalently founded on the remuneration not of the work, but of the creative time he/she devotes to a long-term project.

Besides the principal activity that is conducted at PAV, exhibitions are developed and held in the services centre set in the middle of the park. The artists who have shown their work since 2008, when the structure first opened, include Michel Blazy, Nicola Toffolini, Sophie Usunier, Dario Neira, Brandon Ballangée, Marta de Menezes, Lara Almarcegui, Ettore Favini, Gilles Clément, Lucy and Jorge Orta, Emmanuel Louisgrand, the group called CAE, Botto&Bruno, and all the members of the “Vegetation as a Political Agent” exhibition, which I shall discuss further on.

All the artists at PAV, and the works they produce, offer an overall representation of environmental disaster, of the ruin and risk it signifies, and of possible types of alternative lifestyles, applying the principles of ecology to social organization and to our own way of thinking.

The artists at PAV believe that we cannot passively accept the fact that the environmental and social collapse that has been predicted for the future will simply occur; they are convinced that people must be responsible and act subjectively in order to change the overall model for life and development. This way collapse can be avoided, making it possible to pave the way for models of living that are eco-compatible and that can lead to a solution for the anthropological crisis that humankind is experiencing right now.

PAV’s research programmes are organized according to a theoretical series of general annual themes that are prepared and implemented via seminars, where participants include both the centre’s most assiduous “users”, and invited guests – philosophers, art critics, scientists – who are experts on the issues being discussed.

During the early years, the fundamentals of Bio Art, i.e. the conception of the “living” and of the environment, were analyzed and developed.

Thereafter, group reflection led to the discussion of more specific themes, ones related to the emerging output of bio artists and to the major themes in the theoretical debate at an international level.

In 2011 the discussion focused on the theme of the “monde corporel” and on the interactions between our body and the biosphere. In 2012 the seminars dealt with the sphere of affection in our relationship with nature, extrapolating the theme of the *ethos* of the living.

In 2013 we debated the different conceptions of nature at a geo-cultural level, outlining the development of “internaturality”, about which a study meeting was organized with the participation of anthropologists, philosophers, and artists.

In 2014 the focus was on the issue of common goods. This triggered the indication to explore the artistic experiences that were based on the primary sources of the natural environment and on a community and alternative approach to their management.

This theoretical core of topics led to a series of exhibitions and workshops on the theme of water, and critic Marco Scotini’s invitation to curate the main exhibition in 2014.

### **“VEGETATION AS A POLITICAL AGENT”**

For Marco Scotini, the goal of the international group exhibition was to provide a social history to the area, an allegedly spontaneous one, of living nature, while also bestowing it with a twofold register: on the one hand, history, with the study of botany and its role in the birth of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century colonial plantations, and as a prelude to the capitalistic rationalization of work; on the other, the research underway in bio art, which prefigures effective environmental ethics and a mature ecosustainable society. This exhibition, which from the outset involved Turin’s Botanical Gardens and its team of scholars and researchers, aroused in both the public and the critics a painstaking reflection on the political history of the vegetal world, interwoven with the history of capitalism over the past three centuries and with the history of social protest, which contrasted strategies and domination all the way to today’s global environmentalist movement.

While the exhibition was underway, in August 2014, the Worldwatch Institute announced that the world had already consumed the entire ecological footprint of the previous year, and that it was beginning to use up future resources. People were being dramatically updated as to the acceleration of the ecological disaster. The signal was clearly picked up by the post-No-global ecological movement, which, during a huge march held in New York below the windows of the summit on the environment organized by the UN, loudly claimed the transformation of the Neoliberalist global economic model.

Bio artists are in harmony with the aims of the world’s environmental movement and intend to develop “counter-bio” power via an operative strategy based on three essential lines: participation in conflicts, construction of community experiences of ecosustainable life, and development of knowledge from a scientific as well as historical-social and philosophical standpoints.

Starting from this last aspect of the artists’ commitment, I would like to once again emphasize several aspects of the analysis, such as the ones concerning the political and social role of vegetation inside the biome and in relation to the history of human civilization.

At the limits of prehistory, in the late Neolithic Period, the cultivation of wheat and other cereals that could be harvested was crucial to the configuration of the birth of permanent social formations with a hierarchy of power. Cultivation was mostly carried out by women, while men, as warriors, had the job of defending and expanding the cultivated territories. The exercise of military force was the constituent factor of the tribal caste which held political power even for the purpose of ensuring discipline within the tribe, and in spite of the matriarchal power that women cultivators held for a long time.

The abuse of male power caused rebellion, the predecessor of today’s civil disobedience, and for thousands of years it was considered socially legitimate. Even in as far back as Ancient Greece, the murder of a tyrant was seen as an action that was socially useful and just.

Cereals and legumes were therefore the protagonists of this aspect of Neolithic civilization, and the structure of substantial power has not changed today.

What comes to mind is that even from a symbolic point of view, the vegetal element has come into play in social conflict; for instance, during the Middle Ages there were significant episodes such as “throwing beans in the face” of the feudal lord during the Carnival.

In more recent historical times, plants have played an important role in colonial oppression, witnessed by the dark page of slavery and now during the post-colonial phase.

Agricultural multinationals make use of genetic engineering applied to seeds in order to control and exploit the agricultural populations of the world. In France, for example, the association of “wild sowers” is active today.

The PAV exhibition featured the articulated presence of historic finds offered by Turin’s Botanical Gardens, thanks to the intellectual consultancy of Prof. Rosanna Caramiello. This historic display seems to say that botany, like all modern sciences, has not been neutral in regard to social relations and class conflict. No

doubt botanists, driven by an “illuminist” spirit, have always colluded with the colonial dominations, providing cognitive elements that have made it possible to valorize spices as merchandise, and transplanting in Europe on a vast scale products such as corn, tomatoes, potatoes, followed by the development of massive systems of cultivation in North and South America, and the exploitation of the colonial deportation of Africans.

In the twentieth century, faced with unstoppable demographic growth, there was a drastic shortage of food, and even today over a billion human beings have nothing to eat because of the effect of the unequal distribution of merchandised food resources. Today’s agricultural industry does not just serve to feed the multitudes immersed in the abysmal poverty of the Third World; it also constitutes a core factor of the environmental crisis owing to the massive pollution caused by herbicides, fertilizer, and chemical antiparasitic substances, as well as by genetically modified vegetable organisms.

Today, we are also witnessing the buying up of land in the Third World. The multinationals in both the West and East, including China, expropriate millions of hectares from the native populations all around the world. They destroy forests and plant industrialized monocultures in their place, using very little human labour, and they take credit, with a great deal of “green washing,” for producing biofuels as an alternative to oil products.

We know for a fact that the technical means, that is, the material possibilities, to avoid an ecological disaster and enact an ecological conversion of the overall model of production and development do exist. What we need now is a political, and therefore subjective willingness to force the Neoliberalist power, spread throughout the world, to bring about ecological conversion.

#### **THE NEW GENERATION OF BIO ARTISTS**

In terms of current issues, Marco Scotini brought together a significant group of artists that conduct socially committed advanced research and projects. Séverine Roussel and Philippe Zourgane (ROZO group) put forward an ephemeral architectural structure made up of bamboo and palms according to the vernacular model of Réunion Island, which offered a shaded, friendly space in which – paradoxically – images of the military use of nature were on display: on the one hand, what the Vietcong used as camouflage, and on the other, the French armed troops harvesting crops for the major agricultural owners in Algeria.

The Critical Art Ensemble suggested a desolate “sterile field” treated with the lethal chemical Roundup. Fernando García-Dory used a video to develop the story of his agro-ecological experiences, especially in Spain, as part of the Campo Adentro project; for example, a school inspiring young people to get involved in mountain sheep farming, and work aimed at restoring the atavistic community culture in villages that cultivate cereals.

Bonnie Ora Sherk presented the community and biological microcosm of the gardens saved from the desolation of California’s freeways.

Marjetica Potrč used an innovative reportage book to describe the experience of her group, which involved building a vegetable garden and a public green park along with the inhabitants of the poorest district of Soweto. In conclusion, the novelty of this generation of artists, the bearers of a new ethics and involved in environmental social conflict, consists in the efforts of the grass roots to breathe new life into a new “biopower” with a factual basis.

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**Media Relations**

T +39 06 8305 5699  
F +39 06 8305 3771  
ufficiostampa@enel.com

**enel.com**

## **ENEL THE FIRST PRIVATE FOUNDING MEMBER OF MAXXI – NATIONAL MUSEUM OF XXI CENTURY ARTS**

**Enel's participation as first private founding member in the Fondazione MAXXI** will see the company offer it a membership contribution over the next three years, while also partnering the foundation in an ambitious energy efficiency plan for the MAXXI museum in Rome that will highlight sustainability and energy savings.

Culture, value and accountability are the guiding principles that have prompted Enel to forge partnerships with leading national and international institutions in order to implement innovative projects that give the public a vision of energy that is orientated towards the future. More specifically, Enel is committed to promoting art and music, putting its emphasis on young artists: in 2003 the Group became both a founding member of the Accademia Nazionale di Santa Cecilia and of the Teatro alla Scala and in 2015 of the Maggio Musicale Fiorentino.

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Milan, April 3rd 2017