

## Cultural Provocation: Italian Art of the Early Sixties

The passage from the 1950s to the 1960s marked the beginning of a profound transformation in the cultural fabric of Italian society. It was an important boundary which, like Joseph Conrad's 'line of shadow', fell across the history of the formation of Italy's modern national identity, definitively leaving behind the reality and the myths that nurtured the debates of the post-war period. It is not easy to reduce to formulae the meaning and direction of that renewal which, in a wave of vitality and open-mindedness, swept through the literature, art, social sciences, cinema and theatre of the 1960s. One might characterize it as a series of negations: the negation of the principle of authority, of all dogmatism, of ideological schemes, of political engagement and of traditional expressive means. Or, as some artists did, one might stress the need for formal absoluteness, the exclusion of all elements extraneous to the art in question, the investigation of new themes and respect for the pluralism of positions that aspired to a complete rupture with the past. These were the ideas which brought about the phenomenon of the neo-avant-garde and were at the heart of the cultural revolution that exploded in 1968.

It is true that these ideas in and of themselves were not entirely new, given their close affinity to Dada, to Russian Suprematism, to Piet Mondrian's opposition to the notion of 'artistic fiction', to Marcel Duchamp (who at that time began to be mythicized), or, to draw close to home, to the work of Lucio Fontana (Cat. 159). The context, however, was clearly new, that is, Italian society in a state of rapid transformation, and the objective, to seize reality, was more uncompromising and extreme, conferring an unquestionable originality on the ideas being formulated. But to whatever degree these ideas were new, 'theories', to quote Goethe, 'are grey and the tree of life is green' and the principal characteristic that distinguished the manifestations of the sixties and the force that sustained them (by which I mean not their cause and their anti-ideological ideologies, but their substance, their quality) was above all vitality. It was a vitality that broke through all schematic barriers, quick as mercury, provocative and disenchanting. And, in the case of the neo-avant-garde, this vitality – on the impulse of an inventive inspiration that ignored all limits and all pre-established forms – sometimes sustained the light, fragile, ephemeral apparition of poetry, just as a dancing, fragile ball of celluloid in a shooting range in a fairground is kept aloft for barely a moment in the most precarious equilibrium by a jet of water. The presence of this fleeting, indefinable epiphany of poetic images and ideas (of a poetry expressed in new and elusive forms and merging in unexpected contexts) is indispensable if we are to acknowledge the validity – or better, the value – of sixties radicalism, to establish its artistic nature, irrespective of the intentions which originally lay behind it.

Artistic intentions and qualities are often indissolubly tied to the beginnings of a movement whose nascent state implies a rupture with the past, confirming Henri Focillon's principle that the content of every work of art is its form. This is particularly true of the early sixties, when the intention was to disavow any prefigured plan and was declaredly anti-ideological, 'anti-content'; instead, the artistic task was identified as a sort of short-circuiting of the work itself.

At the threshold of the 1960s, the emerging intention was to impose a radical change on the very notions of art, of the artist, of space and of pictorial gesture, so that the eyes of the new generation of artists were opened to fresh possibilities. To some, these possibilities seemed immediately convincing, even fascinating, and, in the name of a totally non-figurative art (which was neither painting nor sculpture),

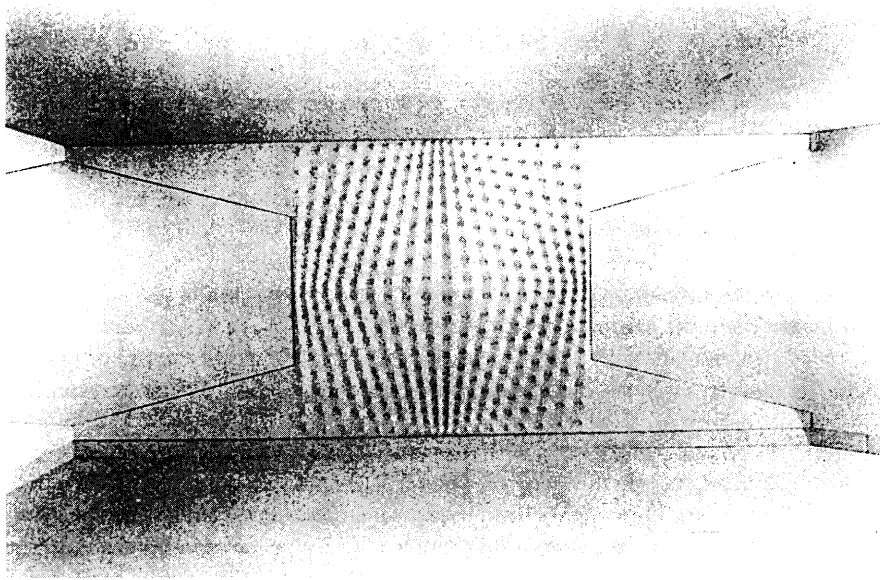


Fig. 1 Enrico Castellani, *White Space*, 1967. Installation in the exhibition 'Lo spazio dell'immagine', Palazzo Trinci, Foligno

they turned their backs on the past, on the old and tormented debates of the post-war period, debates which were still kept alive during the fifties and which were now considered destitute of all interest by partisans of both realist and abstract art. A new and provocative current swept away existentialism's clouds of ontological anguish, the romantic and visceral sensibility of *Informel*, and above all the super-ego of commitment that had been nurtured by intellectual anxiety and by a sense of guilt in the years following the fall of Fascism.

The new objective, which was presented as a pure, absolute affirmation of vitality and freedom, did not presuppose *a priori* certainties and did not presume to convey any message. The only *a priori* assumption was that of the artist's creative nature: only the artist could elevate any object to the category of art, and only his action could concretely affirm reality in and of itself. It excluded all objective or subjective transcriptions of reality into pre-established languages, whether abstract or realistic, all recourse to those techniques that have traditionally pertained to painting and sculpture. Art was the will to make art, nothing more. It had no history.

The *Nuova concezione artistica* (New Artistic Conception) announced these objectives in the pages of the Milan magazine *Azimuth*, which was founded by Piero Manzoni and Enrico Castellani.<sup>1</sup> (It lasted for only two issues, the first published in the winter of 1959, the second in January 1960.) Manzoni and Castellani personified two opposing poles of that desire to change the world that animated so many vital forces during those years – a period that was clearly impassioned and full of hope, in Italy and elsewhere, but one that also gave way to rapid disillusionment. Castellani held fast to an almost mystical belief in art as a *tabula rasa*, an idea that he pursued and still pursues with the intransigent austerity of an ancient iconoclast (Fig. 1). Manzoni's ever ingenious, provocative inventions employed ironic ambiguity to push his ideas to the limits of joke and whimsy, making amusement an essential and almost always clever component of his mocking performance. But in reality, this champion of non-engagement was driven by a sense of challenge for most of his brief career.

In 1960 Manzoni wrote:

I cannot understand those painters who, while saying they are open to contemporary problems, continue to place themselves in front of a canvas as if it were a surface to be covered with colours and forms in a more or less habitual and easily appreciated style. They draw, take a few steps back and look with satisfaction at what they have done, cocking their heads, half-closing an eye. They approach the canvas again, add another line, apply another touch. These gymnastics continue until the canvas is completely covered: the painting is finished. A surface of unlimited possibilities has been reduced to a kind of receptacle into which unnatural colours and artificial meanings have been forced. Why not empty this receptacle? Why not liberate the limitless sense of total space, of pure, absolute light? There is only this to express: being and living.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The *Nuova concezione artistica* exhibition was held at the Galleria Azimuth in Via Clerici, Milan.

<sup>2</sup> P. Manzoni, 'Libera dimensione', *Azimuth*, 2, January 1960.

This search for an absolute reality, for a direct, immediate relationship between the artist and the object of his reality, that is, the work of art, was pushed to the limits of tautology in works such as Manzoni's *Linea, 7,200 m* (*Line, 7,200 m*, 1960; Cat. 185) or *Sculture viventi* (*Living Sculptures*, 1961; Fig. 2) – people bearing the artist's signature on their arms or backs – or his notorious canned excrement, *Merda d'artista* (*Artist's Shit*, 1961; Fig. 6, p. 298). This commitment to provoke, moving beyond any type of representation or pictorial expression, was not entirely new in the history of the avant-garde, from Dada to Neo-Dada and contemporary developments in Pop Art (*Target with Plaster Casts* of 1955 by Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg's *Monogram* of 1959 were illustrated in the first issue of *Azimuth*). But the cultural provocation of the sixties was concerned more with conceptual invention than with the desecration of the object, with how to choose the most appropriate among infinite realities and be anti-representational in a way which produced the mental spark and poetic intuition that characterized the relationship between the artist and the world. As Luciano Fabro has maintained, this world, which one begins to know from *things* themselves, was seen in terms of what *is*, and not according to traditional formal interpretation. It is the idea that is visualized and materialized as presentation of fact – fact that is present, not represented.

This sort of cultural provocation was unthinkable without the contributions of Fontana, who was surely the forerunner of *Nuova concezione artistica*. Fontana did not approach the canvas as a surface ready to receive an image, but rather, in his use of monochrome (absolute monochrome was one of the objectives of those years), he considered the canvas itself as an image. It was the image of a spatial reality with which the artist could interfere only with a gesture that verified its very reality: the gesture of a cut or a hole.

Although Fontana was certainly the forerunner, his was not the only voice in the desert. Alberto Burri was also on the frontier of the *totally new* during the fifties. Burri's *Sacchi* (*Sacks*; Cat. 165-7), which first appeared in 1950, represented a radical transformation of the concept of painting: the passage from representation to object. The burlap sacks, by their material and the stencilled letters announcing their identity, were immediately recognizable for what they were. But Burri added his own signs, forms and colours. The variations in tone and weave of the rough canvas, the compositional zones created by the lines of seams and different tones of burlap, the relationships between fiery reds and intense blacks and the natural colours of the raw jute, reflected a rigorous underlying formal system. In the formal nobility of the *Sacchi*, Burri revealed his latent classicism, his instinctive faith in the ancient and continually renewed Italian sense of scale, what one might even call *divine proportion*. And this is the connecting thread, at first hidden and then increasingly obvious, that binds together all his work, up to the most recent pieces. It is not difficult to imagine Burri with his head tilted and eyes half-closed, lovingly observing his work in progress, adding and taking away, correcting and changing, moving back from and approaching the canvas, in short, engaging in all those gymnastics that Manzoni found useless and ridiculous.

The *Sacchi*, which are the true, disconcerting novelty of the fifties, with their tangible presence of material marked by use and the action of time, are also images charged with a deep suggestiveness, with references to life forces and the history of man. The nature of some of these metaphors may derive from the Umbrian origins of the artist, from that medieval sense of poverty and labour that the mended and rough material evokes. Is not a Burri burlap piece perhaps like the worn, patched cowl of Saint Francis, preserved in a case in Assisi, or like the blackened, torn sacks of the coal-miners who lit their fires in the Apennines?

From 1960 to 1967, that is, until the first exhibition dedicated to *Arte Povera*, projects of cultural provocation made themselves felt throughout Italy, particularly in the urban centres of Milan, Turin and Rome. In January 1960, a few days after the Milan exhibition of *Azimuth*, Francesco Lo Savio had a show entitled 'Spazio luce' (Space Light) at the Galleria Selecta in Rome; his mute surfaces clearly presupposed both Fontana's 'spatial concepts' and a new interest in the non-painting of

Fig. 2 Piero Manzoni, *Living Sculpture*. At the Galleria La Tartaruga, Rome, 22 April 1961



'achromatism'. (In the same year, Udo Kultermann organized the 'Monochrome Malerei' exhibition at the Städtisches Museum in Leverkusen, where Lo Savio's work was shown along with that of Fontana, Manzoni, Castellani and Yves Klein.) In September, Lo Savio exhibited his first *Metalli* (*Metal Pieces*; Cat. 186) at the Galleria La Salita in Rome. Slabs of opaque black metal, modulated by transverse planes, revealed the artist's attempt to achieve the greatest possible freedom in the formal structuring of the object-artwork, defining a space of action within the object itself, and articulated by the reflections of the space-light.

In March 1962, Michelangelo Pistoletto exhibited his *Acciai riflettenti* (*Reflecting Steel Pieces*; Cat. 197-200) at the Galleria La Promotrice, Turin. As he stated in the catalogue, 'When I realized that someone like Pollock, although he attempted to transfer life onto canvas through action, did not succeed in taking possession of the work, which continued to escape him, remaining autonomous, and that the presence of the human figure in the painting of Bacon did not succeed in rendering a pathological vision of reality, I understood that the moment had arrived to make the laws of objective reality enter the painting'.<sup>3</sup> A year later, Pistoletto applied images of human figures to mirrors, redefining the notion and spatial dimension of collage and engaging the viewer in a literal penetration of the field of the painting-object.

The year 1960 saw the debut of Mario Schifano, in the '5 Pittori Romani 60' exhibition at the Galleria La Salita, although his mature work dates from 1963 onwards. Despite the almost monochromatic, large canvases of his early years, Schifano was strongly attracted to the latest developments in America. Works of American Pop Art were exhibited at the United States Consulate in Venice during the Venice Biennale of 1964 and came as a revelation to many Italian artists. Schifano's sensibility was close to that of such artists as Johns and Jim Dine, and he instinctively embraced a pictorial quality that was completely alien to his contemporaries' non-figurative concerns (*Mare [Sea]*, 1963; Cat. 196).

In October 1964, Giulio Paolini had his first one-man show, also at the Galleria La Salita, where he presented monochrome wooden panels resting against or hanging from the walls, mimicking an exhibition in the course of preparation and analysing, with panels instead of canvases, the fundamental relationships behind the concept of an exhibition. Perhaps the artist of greatest conceptual originality among the young protagonists who emerged during the sixties, Paolini throughout his career has found his bearings within the labyrinth of relationships that can be discovered

<sup>3</sup> M. Pistoletto, quoted in G. Celant, ed., *Identité Italienne*, Paris, 1981, p. 81.

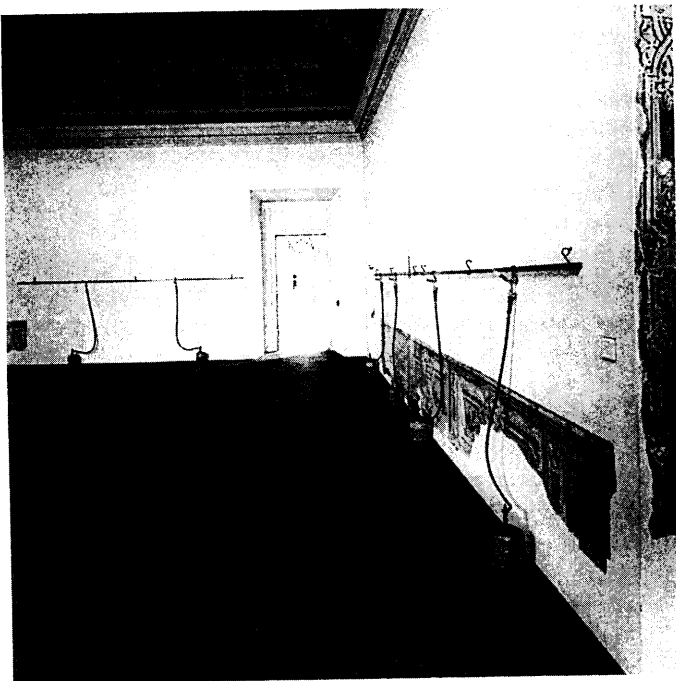
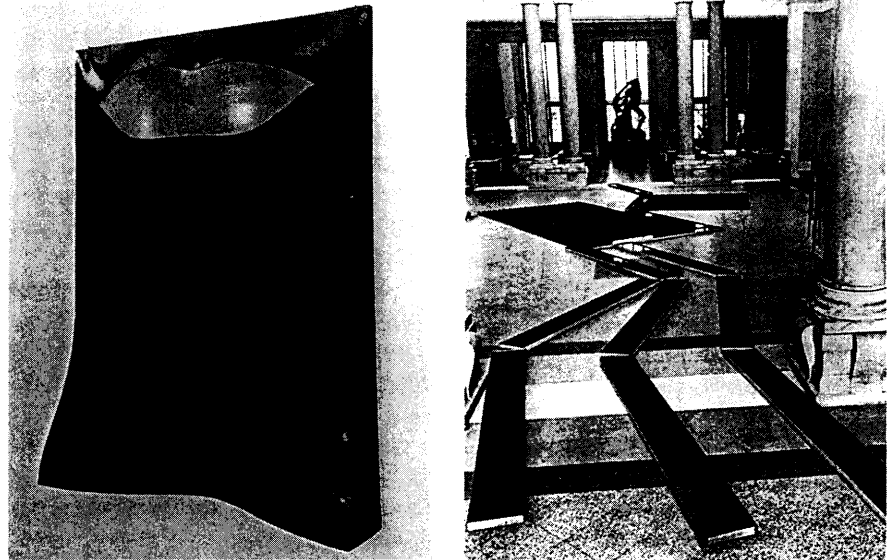


Fig. 3 Jannis Kounellis, *Untitled*, 1969-84. Castello di Rivoli, Turin

Fig. 4 Pino Pascali, *Red Lips: Homage to Billie Holiday*, 1964. Galleria Civica d'Arte Moderna, Turin

Fig. 5 Pino Pascali, *Work Fields, Irrigation Canals*, 1967. At the Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna, Rome, 1969



between one object and another, between an object and its significance, between object and viewer, between object and time. And he does so with a lucidity and rationality that borders on folly ('folly' in the sense of an unpredictable and fantastic amplification of the rational), and with an abstinence from all references to the senses, save that of sight.

The temperament of Jannis Kounellis is substantially different. He, too, must be considered one of the most complex and poetically talented artists of the non-figurative neo-avant-garde – an artist in continual growth and one who contributed some of the most significant works of the sixties and the following decade. His first one-man show was held in 1960 at the La Tartaruga gallery in Rome, where he exhibited his *Alfabeti* (*Alphabets*; Cat. 213), a series of black letters and numbers stencilled on a white background. By the mid-sixties, Kounellis was feeling the need to move beyond the rigorous conceptual neutrality of language that was fundamental, for example, to the logical demonstrations of Paolini, and he tried to turn away from all manifestations of conceptual transcendence. He attempted to prove that the images presented by an artist are no different from any other form of life: containers of earth, cacti, live horses lined up along the walls of the gallery like works on show (Cat. 215). They have an identity, an identity that conveys an idea. This was clearly only a passage in Kounellis's history of polemical statements of his lack of interest in lifeless images, that is, his interest in life. It was an assertive passage towards a greater sense of individual identity which then led him towards images that reflect the most noble qualities in the history of Western art, conveyed through the tangible, concrete life of objects and materials bearing the imprint of primitive human work – in other words, that sense of form that not even the counter-culture movement succeeded in destroying. At the same time, he has incorporated in his work such archetypal elements as fire, used as a linguistic term, as an active presence and as a 'trace' in the form of smoke or charred material (Fig. 3). But he reconciles fire with his innate aspiration to classical rhythms: a sharp flame, emerging from the ear of an overturned classical head, or an imprint of fire blackening the wall in a series of lines high up in a room, like the rhythm of columns surrounding a temple.

The personality most representative of the extraordinary artistic vitality of the sixties is, however, without doubt Pino Pascali. His development was as brief as it was vital – less than ten years, as if his overwhelming life force were inextricably linked to the brevity of his life. From his first Neo-Dada experiments in 1959 to his 1964 *Quadri oggetto* (*Object Squares*) – *Biancavela* (*White Veil*), *Labbra rosse* (*Red Lips*; Fig. 4), *Muro di pietra* (*Stone Wall*), to name only the most well-known – he freed

himself from any particular model. He then produced the *Armi* (*Cannons*, 1965; Cat. 188) and the *Finte sculture* (*False Sculptures*, 1966): animals made of white canvas stretched over wooden ribs, which are equally false animals and false sculptures. And there were *Mare* (*Sea*, 1966), consisting of waves of canvas with a lightning bolt of black wood, the *Elementi della natura* (*Elements of Nature*, 1967-8), made of water, earth and straw, and finally, in 1968, the *Ricostruzione della natura* (*Reconstruction of Nature*), works which could be defined as his desires. His path of development was like the crashing of an ocean wave; it was violent and acerbic, charged with fantasy, with mythical and profound meanings, with references to the earth.

The search for the essential, for the *primal*, the urge to strip things of all superstructure, to remove them from the authority of history and arrive at what can be understood as the mythical core – this is the continually recurring theme of Pascali's work. His investigations sometimes followed the path of rediscovered childhood and infantile passions, relived with aggressive purity. At other times, he pursued the primitive, the prehistoric, to re-find in the essence of things the spatial and temporal ideas of the first agricultural peoples. Clearly for Pascali, as for children, names lie within things, are things themselves, and it is no accident that he quoted the psychologist Jean Piaget in this connection. This complete identification between things and names, which is experienced in a primitive world and recaptured in childhood, is the key to a work such as *Mare*, Pascali's sea of canvas and wood. What are canals, if not water and form? – precisely regular, elongated containers of water, as in *Canali d'irrigazione* (*Irrigation Canals*, 1967; Fig. 5). Yet there comes a moment when reality is revealed differently: names are not concrete things, but simply abstract players in a game of association. Pascali investigated this further in the realm of childhood, as in *Bruchi da setola* (*Bristle Caterpillars*), consisting of a series of brushes and mapping out a territory of encounter between imagination, word and thing. The pursuit of his goals was indeed a demonstration of 'continually giving birth to himself', of immediately settling himself in the future, as Cesare Brandi has written.<sup>4</sup>

That great tumult of ideas and emotions, that youthful surge of energy, joy and courage, those lucid theorizings, those archetypal references, that sense of the ephemeral – all those forces that from 1959 acted to ignite the creativity of a group of artists were seized on, adopted and promoted by the art critic Germano Celant, who was the first to recognize the common motivations and dynamic force behind the artists' work. He organized the first group exhibition dedicated to the provocative work of the sixties at the Galleria La Bertesca in Genoa in 1967. It included work by Kounellis, Paolini, Pascali and Alighiero Boetti, and was brought together under the name *Arte Povera* (a reference to the 'poor theatre' hypothesized by Jerzy Grotowsky) to indicate a linguistic process that 'consists of removing, eliminating, reducing to the minimum, impoverishing signs, reducing them to their archetypes'. In 1968, a broader *Arte Povera* exhibition was organized by Celant in Bologna at the Galleria de' Foscherari, with the work of Giovanni Anselmo, Pascali, Gilberto Zorio, Emilio Prini, Mario Merz, Pistoletto, Paolini, Kounellis, Fabro and Mario Ceroli. The exhibition became an occasion for extensive debate, engaging critics and artists of the most varied tendencies, among them Celant, Renato Barilli, Maurizio Calvesi, Francesco Arcangeli, Umbro Apollonio, Renato Guttuso and Achille Bonito Oliva.

The tone of the various essays published by Celant after the first *Arte Povera* exhibition was undoubtedly consonant with the tense situation prevailing in Italian political and intellectual circles during those years, as witnessed by his 1967 article 'Arte Povera: Notes for a Guerrilla War'.<sup>5</sup> The various artistic manifestations of *Arte Povera* projected the utopias that inspired the cultural revolution of the 1968 student demonstrations with the slogan of 'power to the imagination': the return to a natural state; Pier Paolo Pasolini's nostalgic vision of a productive system based on the direct relationship between man and the object of his work, between man and nature; and the idea of a new semiology based on the language of action. Above all, they called for the necessity for art to free itself from the system of production and the power of capitalism. In 1967-8, there arose around *Arte Povera* the ideological myth of a new

4 C. Brandi, introduction to V. Rubiu, *Pascali*, Rome, 1976.

5 G. Celant, 'Arte Povera: Appunti per una guerriglia', *Flash Art*, 5, November-December 1967.

6 G. C. Argan, in a paper read at the twelfth Congresso Internazionale d'artisti, critici, e specialisti d'arte, Verrucchio, September 1963. The content of Argan's discourse and the subsequent press debate are discussed in Celant, ed., *Identité Italienne*, pp. 107-10.

autonomy of art, freed, through conscious force of will, not only from every pre-established norm, but also from the structure of power and the market place; it was the myth of an art that annihilates itself, identifying with the very process of life.

It is worth considering that annihilation as a form of sublimation, implying a positive, optimistic sign, of that order of ideas which, in its negative, pessimistic implication, led Giulio Carlo Argan in 1963 to revive Hegel's idea of the 'death of art'.<sup>6</sup> Argan posed the problem of the abolition of the creative autonomy of art in favour of a transformation of art itself into a sort of technique of the imagination that would place its products at the service of collectivity, replacing the images created by industry or the mass media. Art, in other words, as the highest private expression, the expression of the individual, no longer had reason to exist in the modern world. This was a common belief in the sixties.

There is no doubt that the sensibility of many artists associated with *Art Povera* showed notable affinities with the utopias of 1968. But the vitality, the fantasy, the subtlety, the freedom, that had ignited the flame of cultural provocation in the early sixties were transmitted to many of the protagonists who emerged with the movement, like Boetti, Mario and Marisa Merz and Zorio. Inevitably, the intellectual and poetic energy soon slowed down, and the tumult of ideas and feelings that had animated an entire decade ebbed away. But the matrix of *Arte Povera*, the impulse that it had conveyed, gave birth to new linguistic variants, new forms of cultural extension, new paradoxical provocations. The fact remains that Italian art in the 1960s, with its provocative tendency towards extremes, showed that, despite the radical ruptures with the past, art and poetry are inalienable private and individual expressions of the human soul.