

Tenley Bick  
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IAS Confirmation

**CAA 2018  
IAS-Sponsored Session**

**Panel Title: “Processi italiani’: Examining Process in Postwar Italian Art, 1945–1980”**

**Chair: Tenley Bick, Washington College**

**Panel Abstract:** Dominant narratives in modern and contemporary art history have long positioned the 1960s Italian avant-garde Arte Povera – a movement known for ephemeral practices, informalist aesthetics, and “deskilled” procedures – as a subset of process art and post-minimalism, ascribing Italian innovations to movements better associated with British and American artists. This Anglo-Americentric reading, however, does not account for the rich experimentation in artistic process in Italian art throughout the post-WWII period or for the distinctly Italian concerns thereof. These concerns include the politics of artistic labor during the Italian labor movement, the turn to process art as a politicized response to the cultural geopolitics of object-based practices, and the significance of process-focused rather than product-focused art in the post-fascist state, to name a few. Indeed, closer examination of process in Arte Povera – and postwar Italian art, more broadly – distinguishes the work of Italian artists from that of their ostensive American and British counterparts. At a moment of renewed attention to postwar Italian art and culture, especially within American and British scholarship and institutions, this problem is particularly pressing, calling for a revisitation of process in postwar Italian art and revision of postwar art history, in turn.

To that end, this panel invites papers that examine process as a critical site of creative practice in postwar Italian art. Especially welcome are papers that consider process as a distinctive problem or politicized site of Italian artistic practice from 1945 to 1980. Topics might include, among others: the reconfiguration of design in the *contro-design* movement and vanguard groups such as the *Gruppo N*; the implementation of the artisanal and craft in the postwar Italian avant-garde; paper practices in Italian radical architecture; the reconceptualization of artistic work and the Italian labor movement; and ephemeral practices in Arte Povera.

**Speakers, Affiliations, and Paper Titles**

1. Elizabeth Mangini, California College of Arts, San Francisco  
“Passive Process: Arte Povera and the Politics of Autonomia”
2. Laura Petican, Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi  
“Process and ‘Mani Sapienti’: Arte Povera and the Default to Order”
3. Tenley Bick, Washington College  
“Minor Productions: The Work of Michelangelo Pistoletto, 1965–1970”
4. Maria Bremer, Bibliotheca Hertziana – Max Planck Institute for Art History  
“The Artwork as Process as Exhibition: Franco Vaccari's Esposizione in tempo reale”

**1. Elizabeth Mangini, California College of Arts, San Francisco**  
**“Passive Process: Arte Povera and the Politics of Autonomia”**

**Abstract:**

In the Autumn 1973 issue of *Data*, Italian critic Tommaso Trini claimed that three sculptors from the industrial northern city of Turin—Giovanni Anselmo, Giuseppe Penone, and Gilberto Zorio—represented an important direction for Italian art of the era because of their existential probing of materials, objects, and concepts. While their works are process-driven, these artists do not foreground their own authority. Rather, Trini argues: “they reach for new sources of energy such as systematic tensions, revealed contradictions, explicit depreciation—materialized in objects.” Anselmo’s *Untitled* eating/drinking sculptures (1969), Penone’s *Pane Alfabeto* (1969-70), and Zorio’s various cobalt-chloride works (1968-70) each demonstrate that artistic work is something that both precedes and follows the encounter between artist and material.

This reflexive approach to process shares some aspects of American artist Robert Morris’s post- minimal espousal of “Anti-Form” (1968), but, more than this, it embodies the distinctly Italian, anti-authoritarian discourse around labor. After all, it was in Turin where the widespread *Autoreduction* movement took hold in 1974, when workers and consumers collectively determined to reduce the price of public services as a form of protest, echoing Mario Tronti’s “strategy of refusal.” In relief with aspects of the Italian political theory and labor movement of the 1970s that would become known as *Autonomia*, this paper reads the limited, passive position claimed by these artists in regard to their own labor—and, by extension, the active roles granted to material and viewer—as a means to abolish the hierarchical structures dominating the production of artistic meaning.

**2. Laura Petican, Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi**  
**“Process and ‘Mani Sapienti’: Arte Povera and the Default to Order”**

**Abstract:**

In the late 1960s, Arte Povera artist Marisa Merz asserted a process-based object as the foundation of a practice rooted in the politics of artistic labor. Her *Scarpette*, tiny shoes knitted with copper wire or nylon thread, were neither functional nor coldly conceptual. Her colleague Alighiero Boetti contemporaneously launched a geopolitical project that left aesthetic decisions up to his Afghan and Pakistani collaborators, women highly skilled in the craft of embroidery. Both Merz and Boetti had defaulted to a predetermined order, a repetitive action, a system, as a way of marking their engagement with the transhistorical and universal processes of everyday life. Their works evoke the ‘mani sapienti’ of fashion and design ateliers – the painstaking handiwork hierarchically positioned somewhere beneath the maestro’s vision – and align the 1960s Italian avant-garde with concurrent advances in craft and design. What is to distinguish Merz’s knitting and Boetti’s outsourced embroidery from Ottavio Missoni’s zigzagging knitting machines? Largely unbeknownst to contemporary fashion consumers, Missoni’s iconic knitwear was born of found machinery, capable of generating one motif that by default, became its hallmark. The repetitive, systematic processes of hand-stitching, sewing, and embroidery associated with the fashion industry became the mechanisms of radical aesthetic engagement. In the post-World War II era, Italian artists and artisans alike had ‘opted out’ of a trickle-down dynamic in aesthetic experimentation. Conceding to a predetermined system – knitting, embroidery, machines – they defaulted to order and revered the ‘mani sapienti’ processes of Italy’s fashion industry in an interdisciplinary, non-hierarchical socio-cultural practice.

### **3. Tenley Bick, Washington College**

#### **“Minor Productions: The Work of Michelangelo Pistoletto, 1965–1970”**

##### **Abstract:**

Within the tumultuous sociopolitical context of mid-1960s Italy, artist Michelangelo Pistoletto made a heterogeneous collection of sculptural “Oggetti in meno” (Minus Objects; 1965–66)—including a lumpy “sphere” of newspaper and a display case framing a worker’s jumpsuit. While the impoverished material repertoire, anti-capitalist sensibility, and “deskilled” structure of the Minus Objects positioned them as canonical works of Arte Povera, little attention has been given to their fraught engagement of Italian design—the archetypal commodity of 1960s Italy—or to the import of that engagement for the artist’s continued “minus” practices later in the decade. This paper examines Pistoletto’s works resulting from processes “in meno” (a phrase closer in meaning to “fewer” or “minor” rather than the typical translation, “minus”) as a new logic for Arte Povera. Particular attention is paid to the relationship between the Minus Objects and a series of experimental activities developed around the role of the “Minus Man” within the theatrical collective, The Zoo. Using formal and social art historical analysis, including study of the artist’s own design work, I find that Pistoletto’s use of pluralist object production as a precedent to liberal collective practice suggests his simultaneous revision of the capitalist body and undermining of design were related strategies. This finding reveals the Minus Objects and The Zoo’s mutual dedication to a humanist, anti-capitalist model of form and process in which the individual figure is the means to a liberal collective—a new model of plurality within the spaces of commercial culture and counter-culture alike.

### **4. Maria Bremer, Bibliotheca Hertziana – Max Planck Institute for Art History**

#### **“The Artwork as Process as Exhibition. Franco Vaccari’s *Esposizione in tempo reale*”**

##### **Abstract:**

In 1969, the Italian artist Franco Vaccari introduced the phrase “Exhibition in Real Time” to define process-based pieces that distinctively combine photography, installation, and performance within the exhibition format. On the occasion of the 36th Venice Biennale in 1972, he contributed to the “Behavior” section of the Italian Pavilion with his *Exhibition in Real Time No. 4*. After placing a photo booth in the exhibition space, he invited visitors to “leave on the walls a photographic trace of [their] fleeting visit.” Over the course of the Biennale, thousands of photo strips accumulated on the walls. Contextualizing this work within the transition from the libertarian struggles of 1968 to the Years of Lead, this paper suggests to approach Vaccari’s practice not as a subset of Anglo-American art, but as a contribution rooted in the Italian context of those years. With its realist aesthetics, the piece was symptomatic of the compelling concerns of that time to articulate individual identity in a collective, and yet it also translated an increased awareness of the governmentalities and technologies shaping this process. Hence, this paper will explore how Vaccari recurred to process in order to both redefine the artwork as a social space—remodeled according to the exhibition format—and to characterize artistic labor as a social practice, complicit in the production of public subjects and imaginaries.