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Chronicle of a disappearance foretold

ABSTRACT

This essay chronicles the undoing of the synthesis of the arts in post-war Italy, a country where the concept stood as the aesthetic and ideological keystone of the Fascist regime. Different acts of disappearance came into play. One instance involves the flight of decoration from the wall (i.e. the painted or mosaic mural) to a faintly painted veil strewn across a ceiling. Others involve sculptors making cement or concrete reliefs consisting of tiny excrescences disseminated on walls and building façades made in the same material, so that the surface decoration verges on invisibility. Inspired by Umberto Eco's theory of the 'open work', this paper argues that these works' artistic message ultimately emerged through what was lost in transmission.

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It is in Italy that one finds the more radical critique of the totalising mandate of the synthesis of the arts. No country had been more heavily invested in that concept than Italy, where it served as an aesthetic and ideological keystone of the Fascist regime and, consequently, no country was more adamantly intent on its undoing.¹

Visitors to the Milan Triennale who had become accustomed to ascending the entrance staircase towards murals such as Mario Sinoni's *Fascist Labor* (1936) or Filiberto Sbardella's *Hymn to Fascist Civilization* (1940) on their way to the exhibits, were thus greeted, at the 8th Triennale in 1947, by a very different scenario: a diaphanous veil in coloured silk had been hung in makeshift fashion over the ceiling, on thin metal cables (Fig. 1).² Conceived by a little-known designer named Gualtiero Galmanini for Milan's first post-war and post-fascist Triennale, a Triennale dedicated to reconstruction in a country defeated with an economy on its knees, it introduced the viewer to a most un-fascist kind of aesthetic: that of the transient and the ephemeral. On the translucent veil, painted by an artist almost as equally unknown as Galmanini named Leonardo Spreafico, were the allegorical figures of the different Arts that informed — ever since it was founded in 1928 to celebrate the unity of architecture, painting, sculpture, the decorative arts and design — the programmatic basis of the Triennale.

The flight of the painted imagery from the front and lateral walls of the staircase, which were left bare, to the ceiling, was anything if not striking, considering that Giò Ponti was still pounding, in the pages of his magazine *Domus*, in 1939:

Painting needs to celebrate, evoke, document, something. It needs to have an aim, a responsibility: it will not be vacuous and vain. It will fill its environment. Mural painting [as opposed to easel painting] is that

1. This essay expands on some of the themes touched at the very end of my book, *Muralnomad: The Paradox of Wall Painting, Europe 1927–1957*. See: Golan, 2009.

2. There had been no Triennial in the interim. Although she overlooks this particular installation, see: Pansera, 1972.

which cleaves to the function of the walls and these walls are four and they go from floor to ceiling. Mural painting has to occupy those walls entirely. Thank God for the Triennale. But mural painting has a more ambitious function: it should belong — forever — wherever there are walls.³

Entitled *Elementari considerazioni sulla pittura murale*, the piece aimed, Ponti stated, ‘to encourage those who still fear to assign mural commissions to artists’.⁴ Published on the eve of the Second World War and the subsequent fall of Mussolini’s regime, Ponti’s essay reads, in retrospect, as the last of a long list of appeals to the revival of a medium that was, in 1939, on the breach of its demise.



Fig. 1. Leonardo Spreafico, *Sintesi delle arti*, 1947 Milan Triennale. (Photograph courtesy Historical and Photo Archive, La Triennale di Milano.)

‘It is obvious,’ Mario Sironi had loudly asserted in *‘Pittura e scultura nell’architettura moderna’*, published in the same *Domus* in 1932, the first of many essays written by this great favorite of the regime on the subject, that the Mediterranean was the ‘true home’ of the ‘human’, ‘radiant’, ‘solar’ tradition of painted architecture. It was a tradition whose lineage went all the way back to the early-Renaissance fresco and, more significantly, to the Byzantine mosaic and Pompeian wall painting.⁵ Most pugnacious in the Fascist press was his ‘Manifesto of mural painting’ of 1933, co-signed by three major artists of the day — Achille Funi, Massimo Campigli, and ex-Futurist Carlo Carrà. The new renaissance of mural painting, especially the fresco, they stated, allowed for the clearest formulation of the ‘plastic expression of the Fascist spirit’ in terms of an art that needs to acquire a social, educative, and ethical function. ‘From mural painting,’ they predicted, ‘will arise the “Fascist style” with which the new civilisation will be able to identify.’⁶

3. See: Ponti, 1939, p. 37.

4. Ponti, 1939, p. 37.

5. Sironi, 1932, pp. 111–115.

6. Sironi, 1933, pp. 155–157; translated in Harrison and Wood, 1995, pp. 408–409.

In 1947, the ethereal veil, which functioned like a filter or film, a membranous cover on which Spreafico's washed-out figures looked as if they had been projected rather than painted, was all that was left of that loud rallying cry. The organiser's use of the term *velario* from the Latin *velarium* for the Triennale's veil takes on a particular connotation here since this was the term used for the awning stretched over the *cavea*, the sitting area of Roman structures like the Colosseum, to protect spectators from the sun. Here again it was as if this piece of fabric were all that remained of *Romanità*, the regime's bombastic evocation of an imperial past repurposed for the present.



Fig. 2. Umberto Milani, *Plastica parietale*, 1954, Milan Triennale. (Courtesy La Triennale di Milano.)

Two Triennales later, in 1954, the sculptor Umberto Milani's exhibited *Plastica parietale*: a huge, mural-size, low-relief, 6.3 x 12 metres across and made by mixing gesso, sand and cement. Its only motifs were asperities that sank and resurfaced like wreckage — flotsam and jetsam — dispersed this way and that across the cement surface (Fig 2). At the 1957 Triennale, Milani rotated the mural to create *Plastica Orientale*, 7.6 x 4 metres in size, for the floor of the vestibule of the staircase's landing.

Milani's own words used to describe his work in Mario de Micheli's *Scultura Italiana del dopoguerra* in 1958, sounded word-for-word like a denial of Ponti's dogmatic assertions of 1939: 'I think one can individuate the following features in my work: a

desire for self-containment, dreamy introspection, allusion, and humane participation in the creation of the indefinite.⁷

De Micheli was more specific in his description of Milani's sculptures:

What we have is a form of two-dimensional sculpture, a low-relief in fact, even though Milani's procedure in making these works is quite different. He doesn't sculpt by carving out the superfluous matter, but disseminates it instead across the surface to form peculiar incrustations, segments, excrescences. The work thus evokes images of walled cities, moonscapes, and unknown ruins.⁸

Tellingly, none of the sculptors in de Micheli's book, the first major survey of post-war Italian sculpture, evinced a desire or an ambition to collaborate with architects; and of these, Milani was the only one to think of sculpture on an environmental scale. It was a sculptor named Arnaldo Pomodoro, who had made his initial mark with his brother Giò, at the 1954 Triennale as a jewellery designer, who took the opportunity to collaborate with an architect. This was for an apartment building on Milan's Via Antonio Canova 7A near the ground of the Triennale built by the architect/designer Giandomenico Belotti in 1958 (Fig. 3). The reliefs, which looked like the agglutination of fossil particles under a microscope, were distributed in a playful way in different areas of the building façade. They were clumped together to form little square capitals that ran up the thin cement vertical beams that articulate the white brick façade. They also appeared in a frieze format over the entrance of the building's underground parking garage. Larger, and shallower reliefs, seven of them, were placed on what Pomodoro called his '*sottobalconi*' — the areas under the jutting square balconies — an ingenuous place for decoration meant to counter, one more time, any vestige of monumentality. More refined than those on the pilasters, they looked like maps, in *graffito* almost, of sunken cities, lunar dust, a world of shifting and dissolving horizons. While these reliefs were intended to look as if they had been executed on the spot, as if the wet cement had just been flung onto the building while still in construction, and indeed those set along the pilasters might well have been made in situ, the process used for the larger, more pictorial reliefs of the '*sottobalconi*' was less spontaneous — as the artist later revealed in an interview — than the visual effect produced.⁹ The maquettes, which still exist in Pomodoro's studio, involved, as had his jewellery, the intricate fabrication of gelatin moulds in the negative to make the gesso model in the positive, and they were made by using cuttlefish bones. Precast, the reliefs were inserted under the balconies at the time of the building's completion.

This use of cement and concrete for sculptural decoration in architecture evidenced a desire to forgo the use of noble materials such as stone, namely marble revetments, which had been the prevalent material in Fascist architecture (be it Neo-Classical or Rationalist), in favor of "poor" materials.¹⁰ As it takes time to set, cement (as well as concrete) gives the sculptor the time to cast it, mould it, and work it with a trowel by applying, like a painter, different layers before being taken into the architectural mass

7. de Micheli, 1958, p. 142.

8. de Micheli, 1958, pp. 142–143.

9. Pomodoro, 2001.

10. See: Joray, 1977; and Addis, 1994.

by framing. It thus allows the sculptor to achieve a variety of effects that echoed both the rough texture — the *'matierismo'* — and the spontaneity of *'pittura informale'*, *'spazialismo'*, and *'pittura nucleare'*, the Italian variants of the gestural abstraction that had become the dominant pictorial style of the post-war decade. Cement and concrete allowed sculptors to summon up a double or Janus-faced temporality by evoking both surface decay and utter modernity by using a material that belonged to the field of civil engineering. Most important, however, is how, after decades of mulling and wrangling among modernist architects over the question of whether ornament was an added, affixed, and thus supplemental in its relation to architecture, sculpting in concrete allowed architects to achieve the illusion of perfect integration. That this integration produced, by the same token, a condition of near-invisibility, as the reliefs became virtually indistinguishable from the walls, was consonant with the new aesthetic: that of a staging of a disappearance. The fact that the building happens to be on a street named after Via Antonio Canova, the all-time master of academic Neo-Classical statuary is, then, certainly ironic.



Fig. 3. Giandomenico Belotti and Arnaldo Pomodoro, Apartment building, Via Antonio Canova 7A. (Photograph courtesy the author.)

There is only one step between this aesthetic of disappearance and Umberto Eco's concept of the 'open work', which he introduced in a talk delivered that same year,

1958, at a philosophy conference in Venice.¹¹ Presently, Eco argued, the work of art had become open to chance, indeterminacy, ambiguity, and polyvalence, to the point that it was not just a question of inviting different readings on the part of the viewer, but of having the work conceived from the start by the artist as open and unfinished, to await completion by the viewer. This was the sign of a new type of intentionality on the part of the artist. But if so, what are the conditions of their communicability, and what are the guarantees that they will not suddenly lapse into either silence or chaos? Eco found the answer in what he called ‘a kind of cybernetics’ — the field coined by American scientist Norbert Wiener during the 1940s. The two main principles of cybernetics — negative feedback and transmission of information — were meant to counterbalance the effects of indeterminacy and entropy of complex systems (they were in fact devised for the military as a preemptive device to calculate the trajectory of the ammunition being fired by warplane). Setting aside the War (and then Cold War) anxieties associated with this model, Eco turned to the writings of Abraham Mole, a French engineer whose interest in acoustics had led him to investigate the interface between information and aesthetic experience. Mole was, like Eco, an inveterate interdisciplinary go-between, and he intended his book, *Théorie de l’information et perception esthétique* (also published in 1958), to find fields of applications as varied as painting, design, photography, music, urbanism, architecture, television, and cinema.¹² As opposed to cybernetics, Mole made a clear distinction between ‘information’ and ‘meaning’. For him, ‘meaning’ was a function of order, convention, and redundancy, whereas he regarded information as a measure of the freedom of choice with which a message was selected from a set of possible messages: the greater the probability and predictability of a message, the less information. While certain forms of communication, such as a letter or a road sign, need to be understood unequivocally, other forms, such as art, sought and are best conveyed by, he argued, the uncertainty of equivocation, offering their readers sheer information, an unchecked abundance of possible meanings.¹³

Eco’s model was also intended to substitute the metaphorical riffs on ur-languages that had become a constant trope in the art criticism of the 1950s. In his little ode to Amerigo Tot’s aluminum ribbon stretched along the canopy of the Stazione Termini in Rome, the poet and critic Emilio Villa had mused in 1954, in the Roman magazine *Civiltà delle machine*, about incoming travellers to the train station being ‘greeted by heraldic signs, ideographs, lost scriptures, emerging from a distant past, still awaiting to be deciphered.’¹⁴ ‘Milani,’ de Micheli wrote,

thinks of having transcribed his emotion on his slabs in a tight, minute, hermetic, form of writing. We are in the realm of initiatory alphabets, except that for Milani this alphabet has not only a mental but emotive root, like a swarm of undecipherable signs emerging from the bottom of sensorial life.¹⁵

Pomodoro’s humorous response was to insert his own irretrievably scrambled message in a thin ribbon relief on Via Canova just under the tenant’s mailboxes (Fig.

11. Eco, 1989.

12. Eco, 1989, pp. 63–65; Mole, 1958; see also: Devèze, 2004, pp. 189–200.

13. Eco, 1989, pp. 56–58 and 93–94.

14. Villa, 1954, p. 76.

15. de Micheli, 1958, p. 143.

4). What mattered, Pomodoro implied, was no longer the message being emitted, but what was being transmitted, and, by implication, the activation of the onlooker.



Fig. 4. Arnaldo Pomodoro, detail of the mailboxes, Via Antonio Canova 7A. (Photograph courtesy the author.)

It was in New York, thousands of miles away and in a different time-zone, in the new showroom designed in 1954 by the Milanese architecture firm BBPR (Belgiojoso, Peressuti, and Rogers) for Olivetti at 584 Fifth Avenue, that the conceit of a ‘techno-archaic’ was theatricalised (Fig. 5). One of the world’s most innovative designers of business machines, Olivetti, was an international beacon of Italian creativity. The showroom, which was given a seven-page spread by Gio Ponti in *Domus*, confirmed what American reviewers had already identified at the post-war Milan Triennales as the Italian’s distinctive knack for the creation of ambiance.¹⁶ Olga Guelf, the reviewer for the design magazine *Interiors*, termed it ‘a great piece of showmanship ... and wonderful theatre.’¹⁷ In a fanciful display that verged on the effect of a surrealist *Kunstkammer*, the typewriters and calculators were perched on tapered pedestals that emerged like stalagmites from a sea-like floor of malachite green marble. Most successful, for the architecture critic Ada Louise Huxtable writing in *Art Digest*, was the immense mural relief, 4.5 x 23 metres across, commissioned by the firm to the Italian émigré sculptor Costantino Nivola.¹⁸ Nivola’s signature style was yet another technique of his own devising, where forms carved in wet sand were poured in concrete and let dry.¹⁹ ‘Nivola’s beautiful bas-relief,’ Guelf wrote,

suggests, in some areas, the mark of riling water left in sand, of leaves, twigs, thorns, seaweed, and crushed flowers caught by the tide with sea

16. See: Pepall, 2006, pp. 69–79.

17. See: *Domus*, 1954, pp. 3–9; and Guelf, 1954, pp. 124–131.

18. Huxtable, 1954, p. 15.

19. After the Olivetti showroom closed in 1970, the mural panels were put in storage where they were more likely to remain. Joseph Luis Sert, then Dean of the School of Architecture, convinced the company to donate the work to Harvard University, where it was installed in 1973 in the science centre which he himself designed where it still stands. See: *Costantino Nivola in Springs*, The Parish Art Museum, Southampton, New York, 2003.

birds and a star fish. In the rich and complicated surface stand great primeval figures making gestures of welcome, and sexual symbols all intertwined.²⁰



Fig. 5. Costantino Nivola and BBPR, Olivetti showroom, New York. (Photograph courtesy *Domus* [No. 298, September 1954].)

Juxtaposing his variegated natural forms with mechanistic diamond patterns, and others areas left blank except for the textural roughness of the concrete, Nivola played, as did Milani and Pomodoro, with the staging of a disappearance. As Eco and Mole might have said, it is in what was lost in transatlantic transmission that his mural's artistic message emerged.

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20. Guelf, 1954, p. 130.

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