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EXPORT / IMPORT: THE PROMOTION OF CONTEMPORARY ITALIAN ART IN
THE UNITED STATES, 1935-1969

by

RAFFAELE BEDARIDA

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Art History in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy,
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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Art History in satisfaction of the Dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK
ABSTRACT

EXPORT / IMPORT: THE PROMOTION OF CONTEMPORARY ITALIAN ART IN THE UNITED STATES, 1935-1969

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Raffaele Bedarida

Advisor: Professor Emily Braun

Export / Import examines the exportation of contemporary Italian art to the United States from 1935 to 1969 and how it refashioned Italian national identity in the process. I do not concentrate on the Italian art scene per se, or on the American reception of Italian shows. Through a transnational perspective, instead, I examine the role of art exhibitions, publications, and critical discourse aimed at American audiences. Inaugurated by the Fascist regime as a form of political propaganda, this form of cultural outreach to the United States continued after WWII as Italian museums, dealers, and critics aimed to vaunt the new republic’s political validity and cultural vitality in a process of national rehabilitation and economic modernization. My thesis is that, beyond the immediate aim of political propaganda and of creating a new foreign market for Italian art, these cultural manifestations had a more important function for their makers: they served as laboratories for Italians to construct their own modern identity. The United States, in fact, represented not only the world’s new dominant cultural and economic power, but also the paradigm of modernity. Bringing contemporary Italian art to the US in key moments when the relationship between the two countries was redefined, was a way to re-invent Italy’s self-image at home.
Export / Import argues three major points that complicate standard narratives of Italian Fascist propaganda on the one hand and of American Cold War imperialism on the other. First, I challenge the idea of propaganda as a one-way action that affects only the receiving end by showing the transformative power that the making of propaganda has on the identity of its makers. Secondly, I question the idea of influence, ubiquitous in art historical discourse. What has been deterministically simplified as the phenomenon of Americanization of Italian culture and identity is studied here as a pro-active and non-linear process of identity construction on the part of the supposedly passive object of cultural imperialism. Finally, I address traveling exhibitions as a form of translation: both physical and cultural. Exported to a different country, artworks changed context and took on new meaning. Some of them entered American collections, others returned to Italy with new connotations attached to them.

After an introduction, which examines futurist artist Fortunato Depero’s experience in New York (1929-1931) and his subsequent fixation with America, the discussion begins with the exhibitions of contemporary art organized by the Fascist Regime in the US (1935-1940). The second chapter investigates Twentieth-Century Italian Art held at MoMA in 1949 and other postwar shows that promoted a “New Italian Renaissance,” allegedly the fruit of both the Allied liberation of Italy and the defeat of Communism in the Italian political elections of 1948. Chapter three focuses on a third wave of shows that, during the “economic boom” of the late 1950s, advertised a “New Italy,” optimistic and open to American culture. The final chapter analyzes the launch of Arte Povera on American soil in the late 1960s as both a specifically Italian reaction against “Cocacolonization” and part of the international protests of the late sixties.
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INTRODUCTION

“WILL SMASH THE ALPS OF THE ATLANTIC:” EXPORTING ITALIAN ART TO AMERICA AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF A MODERN NATIONAL IDENTITY*

New York makes its first appearance, within the 1940 autobiography of Italian futurist artist Fortunato Depero’s, *Fortunato Depero nelle opere e nella vita*, with a description of Macy’s 1929 Thanksgiving Parade [fig. 1]: “The most impressive and characteristic images of this commercial procession are the immense, swinging balloons … which represent human and animal figures. Flying elephants and lunar heads smile and float happily above the crowd … They seem to belong to a fabulous world made of huge soap bubbles.”1 The passage closes the book’s section on advertising and introduces the more strictly autobiographical part, “Brani di vita vissuta” [Fragments of a Lived Life]. Here, New York covers by far the largest portion: fifty pages out of eighty.

The prominence given to New York is remarkable considering that Depero had spent just two years in the city; a full decade had passed since then; and, above all, those two years did not coincide at all with the peak of his career. On the contrary, Depero’s two years in New York, from 1929 to 1931, were largely unsuccessful and signaled the beginning of Fortunato’s misfortune in Italy too. A second interesting point is that New York is presented in the book as a lived experience, as opposed to other cities where he

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* Developed as part of the 2013-2014 fellowship at the Center for Italian Modern Art (CIMA) in New York, the section of this “Introduction” dedicated to Depero derives from a paper presented at the Depero Study Day, CIMA, February 21, 2014. I extend my gratitude to Fabio Belloni, Heather Ewing, and Laura Mattioli, whose comments and ideas during the year spent at CIMA have greatly contributed to the present text.

1 Fortunato Depero, *Fortunato Depero nelle opere e nella vita* (Trento: Mutilati e Invalidi, 1940), 239. The translation is mine. Literally, Fortunato Depero in His Works and Life, the book was published in English as *So I Think, So I Paint* (Rovereto: Mutilati e Invalidi, 1947) with a substantially revised content and structure.
had resided: Rome, Capri, or Rovereto are discussed indirectly through Depero’s artistic production in those cities.²

Depero had expressed his intention to move to New York as early as 1922, but it was only in 1928 that he was able to turn the idea into reality.³ Encouraged and helped by his industrialist friends and clients, he nonetheless met with deep skepticism from his artist friends.⁴ Filippo Tommaso Marinetti especially tried to deter him. At that time Paris was still considered the center of the international art world, and America was, at best, a profitable market. “I was told that there is no art in America,” Depero wrote.⁵ During his entire New York adventure, Depero regularly sent Marinetti detailed reports on his activity. These often read like attempts to convince the revered capo del futurismo of the value of his American enterprise.

On October 2, 1928, while still on the transatlantic liner Augustus, Depero wrote to Marinetti with typical optimism: “I will smash the Alps of the Atlantic, I will build machines made of light on top of the giant American parallelepipeds.”⁶ Everything looked promising to him. He arrived with his wife Rosetta by his side and his recently completed bolted book, Depero futurista under his arm. This landmark publication was a

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² These cities appear in other chapters dedicated respectively to: inspirational figures (“Incitatori”); theory (“Ideologie d’artista”); painting (“Opera pittorica”); tapestries (“Arazzi Depero”); furniture and interior design (“Nuovo orizzonte artigiano”); and theater (“Teatro plastico”).
³ Depero to Franco Rampa Rossi, Milan 1922, reproduced in Scudiero and Leiber 1986, 243.
⁴ The industrialist and collector Arturo Benvenuto Ottolenghi was the main sponsor of his trip. See Depero 1990, 217. Fedele Azari (1895–1930) conducted business in New York and was probably part of Depero’s enthusiasm for the city. In the spring of 1928, when the project materialized, however, Azari warned Depero about the difficulties and the taste gap he would encounter in America. Beatrice Avanzi, “Fortunato Depero e la pubblicità: un’arte ‘fatalmente moderna’,” in Gabriella Belli and Beatrice Avanzi (eds.), Depero pubblicitario: dall’autoréclame all’architettura pubblicitaria (Milan: Skira, 2007), 31–32.
⁶ Depero to Marinetti, October 2, 1928, in Filippo Tommaso Marinetti Papers, Box 10, Folder 214, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven. The translation is mine.
collection of his past achievements and a showcase of his graphic abilities. Depero used it in New York as a portable museum and as a means of self-promotion: he donated it to potential clients and exhibited both the book as a unit and its unbolted pages as seen in photographs of the Exhibition of the Italian Book of 1929 [fig. 2]. He had also shipped 500 of his art works, with which he hoped to conquer the American art market. Through his childhood friend Ciro Lucchi, the artist had arranged a two-year contract with the New Transit Company to open his Futurist House in a hotel on 23rd street in Chelsea. The New Transit partners agreed to give him the space in exchange for a small monthly rent of $150 and a 20% commission on sales. The Futurist House was to hold a permanent exhibition of Depero’s work and function, similarly to his former studio, the Casa d’Arte of Rovereto, as a workshop for the production of all sorts of things, merging the boundaries between fine and applied arts. His American business card listed: “paintings, plastics, wall panels, pillows, interiors, posters, publicity, [and] stage settings.” Depero’s ambition did not stop there: as he wrote to Marinetti, his American dream was to open a futurist school and then to found a futurist village on the outskirts of New York.

As soon as his feet touched American soil, however, the artist realized that things were more difficult than anticipated: he had to pay high customs fees for the twenty

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9 Depero to Marinetti, October 2, 1928 (see n. 10).
10 The New Transit Hotel.
11 Belli 1999, 150, nn. 1 and 2.
13 “Credo riuscirò a creare col tempo il mio sognato villaggio futurista,” Depero to Marinetti, October 2, 1928. He talks about the project of a futurist school in another letter: Depero to Marinetti, April 25, 1929, in Filippo Tommaso Marinetti Papers, Box 10, Folder 214, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven.
boxes of art he was bringing (indeed, he had to borrow some money to pay for that\textsuperscript{14}); then he had to hire contractors to turn the decrepit Transit Hotel into a usable space; and, far from “smashing the Alps of the Atlantic,” his work shown at the Guarino Gallery (with a catalogue text by Christian Brinton) actually failed to sell [fig. 3].\textsuperscript{15} Disappointed by the meager earnings, Lucchi and the New Transit partners terminated the two-year contract in April 1929 (just five months after the signing) and asked for a high rental price which Depero could not afford.\textsuperscript{16}

Depero’s timing was disastrous: 1929 was not the best moment to start a career in New York, as the financial crisis of the Depression was triggered by the Wall Street crash. Secondly, he did not speak English [fig. 4]. He had counted on the large Italian community in New York and on the Italian government’s officials: he expected some support for his activity, which he called “the truest and most ingenuous propaganda for \textit{italianità}.”\textsuperscript{17} But as he complained to Marinetti, his art did not match the local community’s idea of \textit{italianità}: this was best expressed by the neo-Renaissance palazzo of the Casa Italiana, which opened in 1927 [fig. 5].

As for the Italian government, Depero moved to New York too early: the fascist regime only started to promote systematically contemporary Italian art in the United

\textsuperscript{14} Depero 1990, 25: “casse e bauli di quadri, disegni ed arazzi requisiti e mandati in dogana dove sostano per ben due mesi e sono poi rilasciati dopo cento consulti e con il pagamento del dazio di ben 15.000 lire (diconsi quindici mila lire) che non possedevo.”

\textsuperscript{15} The flyer for the Guarino show listed carefully the titles of 17 paintings and 17 tapestries, but only mentioned generic “drawings and posters” and “pillows,” which were obviously less important. Depero’s private note on the exhibition sales, however, listed only five pillows and one drawing: none of the important (expensive) pieces was sold. See “Attività Depero a New York, Manoscritto, 10 pp.” in Enrico Crispolti (ed.), \textit{Nuovi archivi del futurismo} (Rome: De Luca, 2010), 310.

\textsuperscript{16} Depero had to pay $1200 for the termination of the agreement. He renounced his large workshop and exhibition space and only kept a bedroom, kitchen, and shared restroom. He was then hosted by his friend John Salterini and later moved to a less expensive apartment on 11th Street.

\textsuperscript{17} Depero to Marinetti, April 25, 1929 (see n. 15): “E’ la più vera e più geniale propaganda d’italianità che sto facendo.”
States in 1935 during the Ethiopian Campaign, and continued to do so until Italy entered World War II in 1940 as part of their efforts to project a positive image of Italy and to promote the idea that fascism had turned Italy into a modern country (see Chapter 1).\footnote{18 See Sergio Cortesini, ‘One day we must meet’: La politica artistica italiana e l’uso dell’arte contemporanea come propaganda dell’Italia fascista negli Stati Uniti tra 1935 e 1940, PhD dissertation supervised by Simonetta Lux (Rome: Università degli Studi di Roma La Sapienza, 2003).}

When Depero arrived in America, however, Mussolini was still popular in the United States and was not interested in using contemporary art as a means of propaganda.\footnote{19 The only exception was the 1926 Exhibition of Modern Italian Art, curated by Christian Brinton under the patronage of the Italian Government, which opened at the Grand Central Art Galleries in New York. The show, which included four paintings by Depero, is an important precedent to Depero’s American enterprise. Brinton was a major supporter of futurism in the United States and a friend of Depero’s collector and collaborator, Fedele Azari. His enthusiastic text for Depero’s exhibit at the Guarino Gallery should be seen in line with the 1926 show and with his promotion of non-French art. The Carnegie International in Pittsburgh awarded some important prizes to Italian artists during the 1920s but they were all far from futurism: Giovanni Romagnoli received the second prize in 1924; Ubaldo Oppi, second prize 1925; Antonio Donghi, first honorable mention 1927; Felice Carena, first prize and Albert C. Lehman prize, 1929. Gordon Bailey Washburn, Retrospective Exhibition of Paintings from Previous Internationals, 1996-1995 (Pittsburgh: Carnegie Institute, 1958), np.} So Depero’s applications for financial and institutional support were unsuccessful.\footnote{20 Depero described how a promised grant was withdrawn and his American enterprise was made possible by the financial support of the industrialist and philanthropist, Arturo Benvenuto Ottolenghi: “raggiungo Genova fiducioso in seguito ad una promessa ottenuta a Roma di avere una riduzione sul dispendioso viaggio. Invece delusione completa.” [As a result of a promise obtained in Rome to have a reduction on the expensive trip, I reach Genoa confident. Instead complete disappointment.” Depero 1940, 275–77.}

His multiple attempts to conquer the sympathy and support of Italian diplomats in America reached the nadir of humiliation when the Italian ambassador at Washington sent back one of his “originalissimi cuscini” (a Depero-designed pillowcase) that the artist had sent as a gift.\footnote{21 Depero had sent the pillow as a present but the ambassador, afraid that a payment was expected, wrote that it the sending of the pillow “was an equivocation.” Letter from Ambasciata d’Italia to de Pero [Fortunato Depero], December 18, 1928, MART Archives, Rovereto, Fondo Depero, Folder “Libro imbullonato e viaggio in America ,” Dep.3.1.16.22.} Later, when he returned to Italy, Depero played a major role, as we will see, in initiating the debate and cultural trend that lent weight to the United States as the center
of modern culture, which ultimately led to the aforementioned governmental program of art exhibitions in the late 1930s.\textsuperscript{22}

Without institutional support, Depero was forced to turn to other means to make a living. After the Wall Street crash, he and Rosetta offered free Italian food to attract potential clients to his studio: Rosetta cooked home-made ravioli and Fortunato fermented grapes in his bedroom to produce wine – an illegal but lucrative activity during Prohibition.\textsuperscript{23} Despite these culinary stratagems, he received an overwhelming number of refusals: he failed to sell the paintings brought from Italy, and of the many project proposals sent around, he only obtained minor commissions. \textit{Vogue} magazine rejected his sketches, calling them “too heavy” [fig. 6].\textsuperscript{24} He was luckier with \textit{Vanity Fair}. But of Depero’s many submissions, the magazine only published two covers, one of which was printed in March 1931, after he had returned to Italy [fig. 7].\textsuperscript{25} His long-time acquaintance, the dancer and choreographer Léonide Massine got him a job at the Roxy Theatre. Depero greatly admired that grand temple of cinema and spectacle on Broadway, and depicted it many times in his drawings and free-word compositions, but his role at the Roxy consisted only of small, short-term commissions. His ambitious proposal of a show on New York entitled \textit{The New Babel}, characterized by a mobile stage setting, was turned down [fig. 8].

\textsuperscript{22} Through his letters to Marinetti, Depero promoted his American activity as a tool to advertise a modern Italy regenerated by Mussolini. Soon after his return to Italy, Depero was named “Cavaliere Ufficiale dell’ordine della Corona d’Italia” for his propaganda in America. See telegram by Boselli to Marinetti [1931 settembre], da Roma a Roma, Mart Archivio del ‘900, Fondo Depero, Dep. 3.1.25.6.

\textsuperscript{23} Depero 1990, 90–92. For Depero’s description of how the idea of hosting Italian dinners arose, see Depero 1947, 127–28.

\textsuperscript{24} Condé Nast Publications to Depero, March 27, 1930, Mart Archivio del ‘900, Fondo Depero, Folder Corrispondenza sciolta, 1930.

\textsuperscript{25} \textit{Vanity Fair} published Depero designs on the covers of its July 1930 and March 1931 issues. The latter also included a short article, “The Past and the Present of a Futurist” (p. 31), which reproduced a different version of the cover’s motif.
Depero described the unpleasant and frustrating experience of going to meet a potential client, bringing his sketches with him:

Half an hour of tram and subway, half an hour in a wreck of a tramcar through dirty quarters of ghetto. I stumble and curse, smelling a horrible stink. I walk through the thick rain, closing my drawings and my thoughts within a defying scroll which I keep under my arm … The metal bridges which I cross are gigantic. … I come down from the bridges and get on another tramcar. … I get off. I walk backwards and forwards. I ask, ask again and, at last, an iron door bears the number I am seeking.26

The result of all this trouble was a straight-out rejection.

When Depero returned to Italy, he continued to look to New York City. The discrepancy between Depero’s New York flop and his insistence on its significance can be explained, as Günter Berghaus has convincingly proposed, as the confluence of masochism, a provincialism complex, and a damaged self-image.27 An alternative explanation (not mutually exclusive with the previous one) is that, by insisting on his New York experience, Depero became a leading voice in the growing debate on Americanism in Italy during the 1930s. He made sure to document and advertise the fact that he went to America when other artists still looked to Paris. Now that, more and more, Italian intellectuals, artists, and the government alike directed their interest toward the United States, Depero tried to carve out a role for himself and to capitalize on this trend (no pun intended).

27 Günter Berghaus, *Futurism and Politics: Between Anarchist Rebellion and Fascist Reaction, 1909–1944* (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 1996), 290–307. Depero himself somehow acknowledged this aspect of his personality when he wrote, in the Foreword to the English edition of his autobiography: “I cannot help thinking that a writer or an artist should, from time to time, dedicate some of his works to those people and hostile forces which have constantly humiliated, grieved and exasperated him during his life, who have gently and with delicate cunning tried to make him stumble in every circumstance and misunderstand and misrepresent his expressions and work.” Fortunato Depero, *So I Think So I paint*, cit., p. 1.
His *Nelle opere e nella vita*, published in 1940, was largely a collection of previously published material. The chapters on New York, in particular, were the result of an intense self-promotional activity over the span of many years during which, after having returned to Italy, Depero gave conferences, led radio programs, and wrote articles and *tavole parolibere* (free-word compositions), all focusing on New York. His articles on this city appeared in widely distributed newspapers and magazines such as *La Sera*, *Il Secolo XX*, and *L’Illustrazione Italiana* [fig. 9]. He also included large sections on New York in his books, in *Numero unico futurista Campari* [Single Number “Campari 1931”] of 1931, in *Futurismo 1932* [F.T. Marinetti in Trentino 1932] [fig. 10], and in *Liriche radiofoniche* [Radio Lyrics] of 1934. Depero intended to bring together many of these texts in a book entitled *New York Film Vissuto* [New York – A Lived Film], which he carefully designed and extensively advertised [fig. 11]. Conceived as the first book with an audio component, *Film Vissuto* was a complicated and expensive project. The fact that it was never realized could in part explain why Depero felt the need to include so many of those texts in his 1940 autobiography.

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In retrospect, Depero’s *Nelle opere e nella vita* can be situated between two types of publications published in Italy right before and after the war [fig. 12]: on the one hand it anticipated a series of memoirs written by mature artists – for example Carlo Carrà’s *La mia vita* [My Life] (1943), Giorgio De Chirico’s *Memorie della mia vita* [The Memoirs] (1945),29 and Gino Severini’s *Tutta la vita di un pittore* [The Life of a Painter] (1946) – who in the 1940s, at the end of an era, documented their past; on the other hand, it was part of a series of publications, between the late 1930s and early 1940s, which focused on America as the future. Among the most influential were Margherita Sarfatti’s *L’America: ricerca della felicità* [America: The Pursuit of Happiness] of 1937 and Emilio Cecchi’s *America amara* [Bitter America] of 1939. A third important publication was Elio Vittorini’s anthology of American literature, *Americana*, which was prepared in the years 1938–40 and published in 1942 after a notorious episode of censorship.30 My focus here is on many such texts belonging in the latter group.

In his article, “Il modello Americano” Umberto Eco described the “American myth” as a key aspect in the idea of modernity for his generation, which grew up in fascist Italy.31 Writer Cesare Pavese similarly recalled this phenomenon:

American culture became for us something very serious and valuable, it became a sort of great laboratory where with another freedom and with other methods men were pursuing the same job of creating a modern taste, a modern style, a modern world that, perhaps with less immediacy, but with just as much

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29 De Chirico’s memoirs also included a section dedicated to his trip to New York.
30 The Ministry of Popular Culture forced the publisher Bompiani to withdraw the first edition of the book immediately after its release in 1941. By then, Italy was directly involved in World War II as a German ally and Vittorini’s comments about American culture and America in general were perceived as too enthusiastic. After a tense correspondence with Bompiani, the Minister of Popular Culture Alessandro Pavolini agreed with the publication of a revised version of *Americana*: cleansed of Vittorini’s introductory text and comments, this had a more cautious introduction by Emilio Cecchi. See Claudio Gorlier, “L’alternativa americana,” Elio Vittorini, ed., *Americana* (Milan: Bompiani, 1984), pp. VII-XV.
pertinacity of intention, the best of us were also pursuing. … In those years American culture gave us the chance to watch our own drama develop, as on a giant screen.\textsuperscript{32}

Historian Emilio Gentile has convincingly argued that, during the late 1930s, “Americanism” was an important cultural phenomenon for Italian anti-fascist and fascist intellectuals alike: “Americanism was, for fascist culture, one of the main mythical metaphors of modernity, which was perceived ambivalently, as a phenomenon both terrifying and fascinating.”\textsuperscript{33} The phenomenon transcended social, cultural, geographical, or political divides. Vittorio Mussolini, son of the dictator, enthusiastically reviewed American movies. In 1936, he wrote that Italian fascist “spirit, mentality, and temperament” were more similar to American young spirit “than the Russian, German, French, and Spanish ones.”\textsuperscript{34} Similarly the anti-fascist activist and partisan Giaime Pintor celebrated “American young blood and candid desires” as opposed to German culture.\textsuperscript{35}

In 1930s Italy, one’s position in relation to American culture, whether in favor or against it, was an important defining characteristic of an intellectual. It did not correspond to the degree of his or her faithfulness to fascism but was rather identical to one’s position in relation to modernity.


\textsuperscript{34} Mussolini compared Italy, rejuvenated by Fascism, to America, whose youth derived from an alleged lack of historical past: “questa giovinezza gli é data dal non avere secoli di storia e di cultura, di sistemi e leggi filosofiche.” Vittorio Mussolini, quoted by Umberto Eco, 1984, cit., 8.

\textsuperscript{35} Giaime Pintor, 1943, quoted by Anna Maria Torriglia, \textit{Broken Time Fragmented Space: A Cultural Map for Postwar Italy} (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002), 85–86.
Depero was not only part of this debate; he contributed to setting the tone of it, being one of its earliest and most vocal participants. As was the case for most of the Italian Americanists who came after him, the description of New York City in Depero’s writings and in his art was an ambivalent one. On the one hand he celebrated the grandiosity and dynamism of the modern metropolis, which he identified as the future. For example, in his ad for Campari [fig.13] the bottles are turned into streetlights and are called “i fari dell’avvenire” (the light of the future): the image was made for a publicity campaign to be distributed in Italy, but the presence of skyscrapers and of the signature “Depero New York,” clearly visible, signified a world to come. In other words, New York was the tangible image of Italy’s “avvenire.” On the other hand, Depero also depicted and described the city as a gloomy, oppressive, and alienating environment [fig. 14], indicative, perhaps of his own failed career there.

In the abstract New York was seen as the realization of Futurism’s utopian project of a total work of art. Depero’s description of the city closely followed the words used by him and Giacomo Balla in their 1915 manifesto, The Futurist Reconstruction of the Universe: “dynamic,” “noise-making,” “luminous,” “exploding.” And images from Italian magazines of the 1910s depicting New York had been inspirational to the futurist idea of the city of the future, as envisioned especially by Umberto Boccioni and by Antonio Sant’Elia.

36 The importance of America in the Italian debate was, in fact, prominent at least from the late 19th century, as shown by Dall’Osso 2007. Depero’s view of New York was likely influenced by contemporary travel reports regularly published in Italy. In particular, the envoy of Corriere della Sera, Arnaldo Fraccaroli had published his book New York: Ciclone di genti (Milan: Treves, 1928), which includes some of the tropes found in Depero. But the identification of the American Myth as a theater for Italian modernity was a characteristic of the 1930s and Depero was a pioneer in it.

Depero’s actual first-hand experience of the city, however, proved hard to reconcile with his ideals. The *Futurist Reconstruction* manifesto wanted to recreate the universe, “cheering it up.” But Depero found the city “a devil-made metropolis, inhabited by a devil-possessed humanity,” as he wrote to the futurist artist Gerardo Dottori, and its urban environment oppressive and alienating, especially in moments of financial hardship. Everything went too fast in New York, he said, so he looked forward to a quiet weekend in the countryside. He also wrote: “I can take no more shops hurling into my face, no more skyscrapers weighing down onto my head, no more illuminated texts blinding me.” Now, whereas a similar statement would sound normal to any New Yorker, when pronounced by a futurist it became a declaration of defeat. For Depero, this wrote: “Oggi cominciamo ad avere intorno a noi un ambiente architettonico che si sviluppa in tutti i sensi: dai luminosi sotterranei dei grandi magazzini dai diversi piani di tunnel delle ferrovie metropolitane alla salita gigantesca dei grattanuvole americani” (“Now around us we see the beginnings of an architectural environment that develops in every direction: from voluminous basements of large department stores, from the several levels of the tunnels of the underground railways to the gigantic upward thrust of American skyscrapers.” Quoted from Mary Ann Caws (ed.), *City Images: Perspectives from Literature, Philosophy, and Film* (New York: Gordon and Breach, 1991).  

41 Depero 1990, 42. Original: “con inauditi sforzi mi sradico dalla folla e mi avvio a casa. Non ne posso più. Ancora negozi che mi si avventano alla faccia, ancora grattacieli che mi pesano sulla testa, ancora parole-luci che mi accecano.”
reality was all the harder to accept precisely because of his identification of New York with his utopian ideals.\footnote{This thesis is further supported in Chiesa 2010.}

Depero described what he called “the metropolitan mule.”\footnote{Depero 1940, 292. Quoted here from Depero 1947, 139–40.} He was a member of the crowd oppressed by the gigantic gears of the New Babel. Before going to New York, Depero had not been particularly interested in depicting the crowd (unlike other futurist artists). There he dedicated many images and reflections to it (see fig. 14): it was not the crowd evoked in Balla’s interventionist paintings, unified by its patriotic voice and will; it was the contrary, a crowd fragmented and disoriented by the heavy geometric structure of the city. Depero’s negative interpretation of the modern city can be compared to that of George Grosz (as Enrico Crispolti has done), or to Fritz Lang, who used the name New Tower of Babel for the corporate headquarters in his famous movie *Metropolis* of 1927 [fig. 15]. Like in these two authors, Depero’s oblique towers give a sense of instability and chaos, as if this excessive structure was about to implode or crash on top of its inhabitants and those who overcrowd the underground world of laborers [fig. 16]. The repetitive anonymity of the grid structure, the working conditions, and the hyper-stimulation of the modern city have turned the metropolitan inhabitant into an externally controlled robot. In Depero’s free-word composition *State of Mind in New York* [fig. 17], the artist expresses how overwhelmed he is by the many languages and stimuli of the city; indeed he has to turn his mind to his Italian certainties, Marinetti and Mussolini, in order to react and move forward: “Avanti!”

While Depero’s reaction to the city was, like that of Grozs and Lang, one of revulsion and fascination at the same time, he did not share their anti-capitalist ideology.
Depero actually celebrated the consumerism of the Americans. “Every year the Americans remodel their homes – they destroy with remarkable easiness,” he wrote. “They are a fickle, capricious people – and these are great qualities to progress and to keep the market lively.” In his manifesto *Futurism and Advertising Art*, which was conceived in New York and published in Italy in 1931, Depero famously celebrated contemporary industrialists by comparing them to ancient patrons of the arts, and he called advertising the truest and most direct heir of the grand art historical tradition.

During his stint in New York, Depero realized that painting was powerless in the urban context; and he embraced advertising, mass media, and popular entertainment as the necessary avenues to survive and master the metropolis. Well before going to the United States he worked in several media and merged the boundaries between them, but he still considered painting the most important of all. In 1927, as he was getting ready to depart, he wrote: “to ship over there not only my decorative art but also my most important pieces, namely my paintings.” These colorful paintings were “concentrated bombs of polychromatic explosions. How I’d love to hurl them against the dismal parallelepipeds of this Babel.” Accordingly, the first logo of his Futurist House presented a painter’s palette or alternatively a target on the facade of three anonymous parallelepipeds [fig. 18, 19]. In theory, the canvases he had shipped from Italy were supposed to be Depero’s weapons, the bomb-paintings to be thrown against the

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45 “A New York City nel 1928,” in Scudiero and Leiber 1986, 244. Original: “Porterò laggiù l’opera mia non solamente decorativa ma quella di maggior importanza i quadri.” The translation is mine.
47 For a different interpretation of these images, see David Leiber, “The Socialization of Art,” in Scudiero and Leiber 1986, 88–117.
skyscrapers. In practice, however, they proved quite ineffective: nobody took note of or bought them.

In New York Depero did not paint. Rather, he celebrated the city’s visual culture through non-fine art mediums. In a work like *Nine Heads with Hat* [fig. 5], for example, he embraced the grid and the repetitive quality of the city life and its commercials. The pattern contained the simplified face of Al Capone, the quintessential mass-media icon of the moment, which can be recognized by the rounded face, full lips, bulbous nose (different from Depero’s typically triangular noses), and iconic hat. It is not a canvas, say, à la Mondrian, but a pillowcase - that is a practical every-day object. Depero had made pillows for more than a decade before New York. But in New York he decided to abandon the handmade method of the previous years and planned to produce his pillows by machine.48 The only art possible in New York, Depero seems to say, was popular, was applied, and it embraced the visual language and the modes of production of the city.

When Depero was in Paris in 1925 he admired the modern capital but also paid a visit to art shows and to the studio of Constantin Brancusi (1876–1957).49 In New York he did not visit other artists’ studios, nor did he seem to notice that the Museum of Modern Art had opened while he was there.50 But he did find art in other places. “They told me that in America there is no art … this is not true,” he wrote. “The skyscrapers offer audacious perspectives, only interrupted by advertising, luminous machines, … exuberant and

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48 He wrote to his friend and collector, Gianni Mattioli: “I am buying the first machine for the production of cushions and tapestries. It’s magnificent; it sews a cushion in 10 minutes – (it would take two days by hand).” Depero to Mattioli, New York, October 5, 1929. In Gabriella Belli, ed., *Depero Futurista: Rome-Paris-New York*, cit., p. 152.

49 Depero 1940, 270–73.

50 The Museum of Modern Art opened to the public on November 7, 1929.
enormous publicities. Lights that drop and explode and spin dramatically, directing the stream of the crowd in a rhythmic flux and re-flux of a thousand colors.”51

Before moving to New York, Depero had represented advertising as a megaphone [fig. 20]. Once there, he realized that the city itself was the most powerful megaphone, as we can see from a later version of his logo [fig. 21], where the painter’s palette is substituted by the name Depero and the skyscrapers are no longer targets against which the artist throws his bombs; rather they function as a megaphone shouting out his name.52 Later, in his Campari ads, similar buildings would serve as advertising boards or gigantic podiums for the advertised product [fig. 22]. Ironically, the buildings of the metropolis that neutralized the effect of his paintings were subsequently turned into the artist's publicity medium.

Again, Depero’s fervid imagination exceeded his actual achievements: in New York, in fact, he produced none of the gigantic billboards, monumental balloons, or explosive fireworks that he described in theory. Back to Italy, however, he expressed these ideas through his manifesto of advertisement and his intensified activity for Campari and other brands.53 In these works made for an Italian audience he represented New York, he did not use the city as his medium. Like the Egyptian pyramids, which also appeared in one of his campaigns for Campari, New York appeared as a topos, which existed somewhere in-between reality and fiction.

52 David Lieber, cit., 88-117.
By turning his whole New York experience into a refrain for the Italian public, he also exploited another fundamental principle of advertisement - one mastered by Marinetti since the publication of the 1909 manifesto in Paris: that the manipulatory power of mass media is potentiated by physical distance.\(^{54}\) It was none else than Marinetti who initiated the big bluff when, in a 1929 article and, again, at the Venice Biennale of 1932, he celebrated Depero for his alleged “triumphs in America.”\(^{55}\) And Depero continued, as we saw, with articles, conferences, radio programs, books, ads, and with the two editions of his memoirs, reiterating that fictional idea for a whole decade.\(^{56}\)

It is unlikely that Depero’s fixation with New York did directly influence the Italian government’s decision to promote Italian art in the United States during the late 1930s.\(^{57}\) As discussed in Chapter 1, it was rather a concurrence of political and economic reasons, independent from Depero’s activity. Depero, however was one of the first and loudest voices in the Italian debate on Americanism of the 1930s, which in turn formed the ideological terrain for that intervention. He intuited an important and enduring principle: that the promotion of contemporary Italian art in the United States, beyond its actual success in America, had a crucial importance for the Italians. It was a way to

\(^{54}\) In the Parisian newspaper *Le Figaro*, Marinetti famously bluffed by presenting an Italian movement that did not exist yet; in Italy he consistently exaggerated the successes of Futurism in Paris, London, Berlin, etc. On Marinetti’s ability to inflate or alter information see Emily Braun, “Vulgarians at the Gate,” in Laura Mattioli Rossi, ed., *Boccioni’s Materia* (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 2004), pp. 1-21.

\(^{55}\) Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, *XVIII Esposizione Biennale internazionale d’arte* (Venice, Italy: Biennale di Venezia, 1932), pp. 169. “I trionfi di Depero nell’ America del Nord” is also the title of a 1929 article in an unidentified newspaper, preserved in the Depero Archive in Rovereto. I thank Günter Berghaus for signaling the latter.

\(^{56}\) For a full list of Depero’s publications on New York see note no. 28.

\(^{57}\) The government was aware of it thanks to Marinetti’s intercession and to Depero’s direct appeals to both local and central authorities. Berghaus has documented Depero’s unsuccessful attempts to get recognitions and commissions from the government by sending his publications and proposals to fascists *gerarchi* and even directly to Mussolini. Günter Berghaus, cit., pp. 299-301. It should be mentioned, however, that the government gave official recognition to Depero’s “propaganda in America,” and soon after his return to Italy, awarded him with the honorary title, Cavaliere Ufficiale della Corona d’Italia See Telegram by Boselli to F. T. Marinetti, [1931 settembre], da Roma a Roma, Mart archives, Dep. 3.1.25.6
confront the ultimate paradigm of modernity and define themselves against it. Depero’s case is therefore considered here as a prelude to the events discussed in the four chapters of this thesis.

The purpose of my dissertation is to demonstrate how Italian institutions, dealers, critics, and artists constructed a modern national identity for Italy through the exportation of contemporary art to the United States in key moments within the years 1935-1969. I do not concentrate on the Italian art scene per se, or on the American reception of Italian shows. Through a transnational perspective, instead, I examine the role of art exhibitions, publications, and critical discourse aimed at American audiences. After the Second World War, the evolving Italian art scene was used to demonstrate the new republic’s political validity and cultural vitality in a process of national rehabilitation and economic modernization – even though it was the Fascist regime that had inaugurated what we might call today the “branding” of Italian art to gain favor with the United States. My central thesis is that, beyond the immediate aim of political propaganda and of creating a new foreign market for Italian art, these cultural manifestations reflected back on their makers like the film projected on the big screen, to use Pavese’s analogy: they ultimately forced (or helped) Italians to define their own modernity in relation to the world’s new dominant cultural and economic power.

The redefinition of Italian identity in relationship to the United States underwent four key moments, as reflected in the cultural enterprises organized to represent Italy abroad. Each of them is discussed in a separate chapter. Chapter 1 (1935-1940) elaborates how Fascist cultural diplomacy provided a foundational template for the branding of contemporary Italian art in America. As the Ethiopian campaign and the anti-Semitic
Laws had negative repercussions on American public opinion, Mussolini turned to art as a means of political propaganda in the United States. Through exhibitions that emphasized a range of styles, including expressionism, primitivism, magic realism, and, in exceptional cases, futurist abstraction, the Fascist government distanced itself from Nazi Germany’s ban on the avant-gardes as “degenerate art.” By pairing contemporary and Renaissance art shows for exportation, the regime asserted the continuity between Italy’s modern period and its glorious historical heritage - a prestigious cultural capital to which the “new world” could not lay claim.

Two distinct phases characterized Mussolini’s strategy: from 1935 to 1938 the government intervened indirectly through private art dealers; and from 1938 to 1940 the regime itself participated directly in promoting Italian art in America. In the first period, Mussolini supported two major enterprises which were presented as privately organized but, in fact, were largely sponsored by the government. The first one was the Exhibition of Contemporary Italian Paintings, which opened in 1935 and toured for more than a year across the United States. Curated by the twenty-three-year old art dealer, Dario Sabatello and focusing on young artist, the show emphasized, beside stylistic diversity, how fascism had rejuvenated Italy. The second enterprise was the Comet Gallery, a commercial space on 52nd Street in New York owned by the Roman aristocrat Mimi Pecci Blunt. By exclusively showing Italian artists (Corrado Cagli, Afro and Mirko Basaldella, Renato Guttuso and Carlo Levi among others), she attempted to make an “Italian School” accepted as an alternative to the École de Paris.

In 1938, the Fascist government closed the Comet for its alleged internationalism and support to Jewish artists, and entered its second, more aggressive phase. The Fascist

58 See Chapter 1, for detailed list.
government sent two parallel shows to the 1939 *International Exposition of San Francisco*, one of Renaissance masters and one of contemporary artists. The latter highlighted the regime’s pluralistic cultural production. So well was it received, that plans began for two more contemporary Italian exhibitions, one of art and one of architecture, respectively for the Art Institute of Chicago and the MoMA. The outbreak of the war interrupted both projects. But only temporarily.

Chapter 2 (1948-1952): After World War II, the United States rebuilt Italy against the background of mounting tensions between the USSR and the West. In conjunction with the Marshall Plan, a number of major shows and books in the United States presented a “New Italian Renaissance,” allegedly the fruit of both the Allied liberation of Italy and the defeat of Communism in the Italian political elections of 1948. The effect was a redemptive operation from the Fascist past, in spite of the fact that most of the artists presented were the same promoted by the Fascist government. The chapter focuses on the most important of them: *Twentieth-Century Italian Art* held in 1949 at MoMA in New York. 59

This large survey was presented as demonstrations of a cultural rebirth after the fall of Mussolini. In fact, its concept and content dated back to the Fascist period. Now, works of art by most of the same artists facilitated the cultural, economic, and political initiatives of the Marshall Plan. Unlike the initiatives discussed in the other chapters, this show was not self-promotion organized by Italians. Yet, beside the changed attitude toward Italian modernism on the part of the Americans, the fact that American curators

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59 Other shows mentioned are: *Handicraft as Fine Art in Italy*, curated by Carlo L. Ragghianti at the House of Italian Handicraft (217 East 49th Street, New York), catalogue: *Handicraft as Fine Art in Italy* (Florence: CADMA, 1948). *Italy at Work: Her Renaissance in Design Today* (Chicago: Art Institute, 1950), it traveled for three years through twelve American museums and eleven states; *Olivetti: Design in Industry* (New York: MoMA, 1952).
put together this project of national rehabilitation reveals an important aspect of Italian cultural diplomacy in the aftermath of World War II. Due to the bad reputation of Italian propaganda after Mussolini, the Italian postwar government encouraged foreign institutions to promote Italian culture rather than doing it directly, in line with the cultural policy of “multilateral initiatives,” theorized and supported Italian Prime Minister, Alcide De Gasperi. These initiatives, however, were followed with great attention in Italy and played an important role in the postwar Italian artistic debate and scholarship. The MoMA survey established the American canonical history of Italian art from Futurism to post-war abstraction: the history of Futurism was cut in 1915 in order to clean it from its involvement with Fascism; advanced artists of the Ventennio, such as Giorgio Morandi, were presented as apolitical and therefore inherently anti-Fascist; contemporary abstractionists were removed from both their present affiliation with the Communist Party and continuity with Italian abstraction of the previous decades. The Italian press and public digested this new post-Fascist incarnation of the arts, ignoring obvious strands of continuity - including the presence of Italian critics who had served the regime and now the Republic.60

Chapter 3 (1955-1958): During the economic boom, as Italy developed into a consumer society, a third wave of artistic enterprises in the United States advertised a “New Italy.” Now, Italian critics and dealers let go of a longstanding nationalistic rhetoric of the “Italian tradition,” even within native modernist styles: by advertising Italian art’s openness to American culture, they presented Italy as a cultural bridge between Europe and the United States.

The chapter focuses on the American career of the Italian painter Afro Basaldella

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between 1955 and 1958. As one of the most successful Italian artists of the period, Afro’s work and activity are discussed as a case study to understand the intense artistic exchange between Italy and the United States (and in particular between Rome and New York) during this years and how it helped re-shape the image of Italy after the post-war period of reconstruction and national rehabilitation. Present in the American art scene since the 1930s, Afro became, starting in the 1950s, the main artist of the Catherine Viviano Gallery in New York. But it was only after the 1955 exhibit, The New Decade at the MoMA, that he came to represent the image of a “New Italy.”

The evolution of Afro’s painting and writing during the second half of the decade signaled a shift of interest from European Informel to American Abstract Expressionism. Simultaneously, Afro’s self-appointed function as a “cultural bridge” across the Atlantic changed direction of travel: first accused of chauvinism for his promotion of Italian artists in the United States, after 1956 he helped introducing and popularizing American artists in Italy. Parallel to a wider change in the definition of internationalism in Italy between reconstruction and economic boom, Afro’s U-turn corresponded to Italy’s political as well as cultural shift: the Europeanism of the postwar decade gave way to the “Atlanticism” supported by new Prime Minister, Amintore Fanfani (he was intermittently premier four times between 1954 and 1963).

The chapter concludes with the 1958 survey exhibition, Painting in Post-War Italy 1945-1957, where Afro featured prominently. Supported by the Italian government, the show put an official seal to the reconstruction period. Organized by the Italian art historian Lionello Venturi at Columbia University’s Casa Italiana, the survey was also the culmination of Venturi’s trajectory in America: emigrated in 1940 as an anti-Fascist,
he returned to Italy in 1947 where he advocated the need for a cultural dialogue with the United States and for abstraction as an international lingua franca.\textsuperscript{61} Venturi’s was the most prominent of a number of exhibitions and publications, at the turn of the decade, to define the international identity of Italy’s \textit{Informale} painting in the international abstract art context.\textsuperscript{62} Coincidentally, Abstract Expressionism, which had no visible impact on Italian painting until the economic boom of the late 1950s, became successful in Italy. Through a series of exhibitions and publications at the turn of the decade, the Italians tried to read the two movements retrospectively as parallel developments of the same post-war tabula rasa.\textsuperscript{63}

Chapter 4 (1965-1969): Subsequently, with the launch of Arte Povera on American soil, a specifically Italian reaction against “Cocacolonization” dovetailed with the first cultural phenomenon to be transatlantic in nature: the social protests of the late sixties. In a paradoxical conclusion to my narrative, I will argue that the movement that most explicitly rejected the process of Americanization, Arte Povera, was also the first expression of a newly Americanized Italian culture.\textsuperscript{64}


\textsuperscript{64} The Great Depression, with which the dissertation opens, was also a transatlantic phenomenon and demonstrated how interconnected the European and American economic systems were. As a consequence of the Great Depression, governments on both sides of the Atlantic, sponsored public art programs. Despite the similarity these programs, however, each country emphasized its national identity and uniqueness. On the contrary the 1968 movement presented itself as a phenomenon that developed “from below” and across national borders.
The chapter reconstructs Celant’s dialogue with America in the late sixties as a prelude to the release of his landmark book, *Art Povera* in 1969. Little is known about this aspect in the early yet fecund period of the critic’s career. I especially focus on his relationship and collaboration with his mentor at the University of Genova, the art historian Eugenio Battisti. The latter also taught at Pennsylvania State University (1965-69) and conceived two shows in 1968 at the Jewish Museum in New York: *Young Italians* and *Recent Italian Painting and Sculpture*. Here, he compared post-war *Informale* painters and sculptors who dominated the 1950s Italian art scene to the younger generation and especially to Arte Povera artists working with non-conventional materials.65

It was Celant’s book, *Art Povera* however, that established the movement in America. Celant finessed a new tactic to promote Italian art: under an effective cover of non-national, anti-establishment rhetoric, the book ultimately marketed his “made in Italy” label. *Art Povera* did not limit itself to the Italian artists, which Celant had previously called Arte Povera. The first survey to present in America the international developments of post-Minimalist neo-avantgardes and to discuss them as part of the same global phenomenon, *Art Povera* included artists working in Europe and the United States who had been previously labeled under various names (conceptual, process, and land art). By comparing the Italian Arte Povera artists’ anti-American and anti-modernist stance to the counter-cultural movements in Europe and the United States, Celant strategically turned in his favor one of the traditional obstacles to the acceptance of Italian modernism:

65 The Informale artists included: Carla Accardi, Alberto Burri, Giuseppe Capogrossi, Ettore Colla, and Lucio Fontana. The Arte Povera artists were: Mario Ceroli, Jannis Kounellis, Pino Pascali, and Michelangelo Pistoletto. Conceived and put together by Battisti, the two shows were ultimately curated by the Americans Alan Solomon and Kynaston McShine, respectively (see chapter 4).
Italy’s subaltern status within industrialized Western Europe as an internal “other,” now gave Celant and Arte Povera artists a privileged leading position, or even a status as an alternative model, within a global movement that rejected the negative effects of modernity, industrialization, and consumerism. Only after his Italian artists had established a career in the United States by exhibiting at the New York gallery of Ileana Sonnabend, Celant could resume the old rhetoric of *Italianità*, newly charged with countercultural undertones.

My account opens with Depero’s arrival in New York in 1929 with his “bolted” book under his arm, and closes with a similar scene forty years later, when Celant arrived in America for the first time carrying his book hot of the print press. The strategies and outcomes of their respective operation could not be more different: to the confrontational nationalism of the former, the latter preferred the rhetoric of transnationalism; the former failed, the latter, we shall see, succeeded. In both cases, however, as in the other enterprises between these two ends, personal motivations dovetailed with nationalistic pride. More importantly, the promotion of Italian contemporary art in the United States served as a way for major protagonists of the Italian artistic debate to define and situate their modernity as Italians in the international context.

The European and American scholarship of the last twenty years relative to my field of study can be divided into three groups. They respectively focus attention on either, Fascism’s affiliation with modernism, American cultural diplomacy in Europe  

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during the Cold War; or Italian post-war art.\textsuperscript{67} My thesis looks at the interconnection among these areas of study. By doing so, I challenge two major trends dominant in the literature. One is the idea of World War II as making a total break between Fascist and democratic Italy. In particular I address the redemptive distancing of post-war Italy from the Fascist past as a construct of Cold War rhetoric.\textsuperscript{68} The other is the perception of the post-war cultural relationship between Italy and the United States as a one-way process of Americanization of the former. If art historical revisionism in the United States has focused on American cultural diplomacy in Europe, a transatlantic perspective is seldom developed by Italian scholarship. The only exceptions are Sergio Cortesini’s dissertation on the exhibitions of Italian art organized in the United States by the Fascist government and Germano Celant’s gathering of primary sources, \textit{Roma - New York}.\textsuperscript{69} Both fail to address the issue of continuity between the pre- and the post-war period. Some studies

\begin{itemize}
\item Until recently, Italian scholarship has tended to focus on the art produced within the national boundaries of Italy. A significant symptom of this attitude are the art history textbooks, from high school to graduate school levels, which have overwhelmingly \textit{Italian} perspectives on the history of art even when they treat art after 1900. The most popular textbooks are: Carlo Bertelli, Giuliano Briganti, \textit{Storia dell’Arte Italiana} (Milan: Electa, 1986, latest edition 2010); Giulio Carlo Argan, \textit{La storia dell’Arte Italiana}, originally released in 1968 the textbook was updated and republished in several editions through de decades. The latest, updated and edited by Achille Bonito Oliva, is from 2002: Giulio Carlo Argan, Achille Bonito Oliva, \textit{Storia dell’Arte Moderna} 1770-1970, \textit{L'arte oltre il duemila} (Florence: Sansoni, 2002). They present Italian art as their focus with the rest of the world included as a contextualization to what happens in Italy.
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\textsuperscript{68} Cortesini’s dissertation is currently in print as a book: Sergio Cortesini, \textit{One Day We Must Meet. La diplomazia dell’arte contemporanea italiana negli Stati Uniti di Franklin D. Roosevelt} (Milan: Johan & Levi, exp. 2015).
have explored the transatlantic career of individual Italian artists, but lack a broad perspective on the long-term, collective phenomenon. Finally, Celant’s activity during the last four decades as the most prolific author and curator, both in Italy and in the United States, on the Italian arts of the discussed period, has made his version of this history the one commonly accepted. Even if his method and interpretive framework has been contested in the last ten years, “his” artists still form the undisputed canon of postwar Italian art. It is only by considering his early role as the main advocate of Arte Povera that we can start to historicize his narrative. Claire Gilman has contested Celant’s theoretical framework to understand and discuss Arte Povera artists. In her dissertation, Gilman has specifically expressed the goal to overcome Celant’s master narrative and has criticized other art historians (for example Thomas Crow) for taking Celant’s “agenda as an explanation of the work at hand rather that what it is: Celant’s own personal program.” But both in her dissertation and in the October issue on postwar Italian art that she edited, Gilman still relied on the canon and genealogy of Italian art constructed by Celant.

71 See Benjamin Buchloh, “The Italian Metamorphosis,” *Artforum* 33 (January 1995): 82-83. Buchloh’s review is a first attempt at deconstructing Celant’s narrative, but it ignores the dialogue with America as a central component of such construct.
73 Gilman, dissertation, cit., p. 4.
74 In her dissertation, Gilman has acknowledged the importance of Cleant’s show, *The Italian Metamorphosis*: “This dissertation owes its existence to two events that took place during my first year of graduate school: the Guggenheim Italian Metamorphosis exhibition where I first saw Pistoletto’s mirror paintings, and Benjamin Buchloh’s seminar on post-World War II European art which encouraged me to write about them. From there, my fascination with Arte Povera was born.” Claire Gilman, dissertation, cit., p. vii. Still in the special issue on of October that she edited, Gilman kept, unchallenged, the canon and the genealogy established by Celant.
An important precedent to my approach is Paolo Scrivano’s work on the transatlantic “architectural dialogues” between Italy and the United States from the Fascist regime to the Cold War. 75 In this dialogue, Scrivano has productively distinguished between Americanism, intended as an Italian “intellectual projection and imaginary space disconnected from the direct control of official policies,” and Americanization, intended as the process of transformation of Italy “shaped by the postwar political and economic hegemony of the United States.”76 If this distinction is central to my method too, a major difference derives from my focus on art. Unlike architecture, art did not depend on major investments, industrialization, or technological progress. It, therefore, lent itself to operations of bluff and to the ideal construction of a modern façade for Italy, independently of the country’s actual process of modernization. More portable than architecture and culturally more prestigious than industrial design objects, paintings and sculptures became the ideal product of exportation aimed at conquering America.

From a more broadly methodological point of view, I challenge the idea of propaganda as a one-way action that affects only the receiving end by showing the transformative power that the making of propaganda has on the identity of its makers. Secondly, I question the idea of influence, ubiquitous in art historical discourse. What has been deterministically simplified as the phenomenon of Americanization of Italian culture and identity is studied here as a pro-active and non-linear process of identity construction on the part of the supposedly passive object of cultural imperialism. This

75 Paolo Scrivano, Building Transatlantic Italy: Architectural Dialogues with Postwar America (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013).
does not mean that I adopt a “ping-pong” narrative: for example, I do not counter traditional accounts of the impact of American Abstract Expressionism onto Italian painting by emphasizing the influence that, the other way around, the Italian Alberto Burri might have had on Robert Rauschenberg when the American artist visited Rome in 1952.\textsuperscript{77} I, rather, focus on the historical significance of the fact that the success of Burri, Afro Basaldella, and other Italian artists took place in the United States first and in Italy thereafter; and so I explore the way they, or their American dealers presented their art in the United States during the 1950s as Italy moved from the reconstruction period to the economic boom. By doing so, this study goes against the apparently natural direction (the more powerful country exporting its art), and therefore complicates notions of hegemony and subalternity. Furthermore, the fact that these artists were recognized in the United States before they were in Italy made their response to American art (or lack of response to it) a more complex and significant choice than one of absorption or rejection of the foreign model. It was, rather, part of a larger set of changing criteria to construct and project their image as Italian \textit{and} as international artists at the same time. This approach might be of little relevance to a teleology of stylistic innovation, but explores art’s role in the discursive and continuously shifting construction of Italy’s national identity. By complicating standard narratives of Italian Fascist propaganda on the one hand and of American Cold War imperialism on the other, this approach establishes more nuanced transnational approaches.

\textsuperscript{77} A similar approach was used, for example by Alan Solomon in his text for the exhibition catalogue, \textit{Young Italians} (Boston: Institute of Contemporary Art, 1968), np; and it still informed Celant’s books, \textit{Roma – New York}, 1993, cit., and \textit{Italian Metamorphosis}, 1994, cit.
CHAPTER 1

EXPORTING FASCIST CULTURE / IMPORTING AMERICAN MODERNITY

The Fascist government started to promote contemporary Italian art in the United States during the Ethiopian Campaign (1935-1936) and continued to do so until Italy entered the Second World War (1940). The regime acted in two ways: at first, during the years 1935-1938, it sponsored private initiatives of Italian dealers and critics operating in America; then, starting in 1939, it directly participated in international fairs and exhibitions held in the States as organizer and lender of contemporary Italian art shows. This chapter considers five main enterprises. The first two are the exhibitions organized by two Roman gallery owners with the government’s financial and bureaucratic support. In 1935, art critic and dealer Dario Sabatello curated the Exhibition of Contemporary Italian Paintings, a large survey, which traveled the country for more than one year. In 1937, the renown art patron and dealer, Anna Laetitia Pecci-Blunt established in Midtown Manhattan the Comet Gallery, a permanent branch of her Galleria della Cometa, preexistent in Rome. In 1939, the state sent contemporary Italian art shows to three events: the two universal expositions, the Golden Gate International Exposition in San Francisco and the New York World’s Fair in Queens, and a smaller show, International Women Painters, Sculptors, Gravers organized by the National Council of Women of the United States at the Riverside Museum, in Manhattan. Italian diplomacy worked hard to be present at all of these exhibits in spite of the official American rule forbidding a single state to be simultaneously at both the San Francisco and the New York fairs and in spite of the protests, raised by many in America, against the attendance of the Fascist state
after the legislation of the anti-Semitic Racial Laws in 1938 and the alliance with Nazi Germany of 1939 (fig. 1 - NYPL protester’s anti-Italian postcard).

The year 1939 was indeed another watershed in the history of Mussolini’s Italy and signaled a shift in Fascism’s own cultural politics at home as well as abroad. The promotion of contemporary Italian art in the United States was no exception: beside the important passage from private to official initiatives, the exclusion of Jewish artists and the introduction of propaganda content in the exhibitions characterized this change. The approach sharply contrasted with the shows organized before 1939, where, as discussed later in this chapter, both the prominence of Jewish artists and the avoidance of politically celebratory artworks were two strategic choices of the regime.

All the more striking then, in the deteriorating political scene of the war’s eve and early conflict, was the persistence of significant elements of continuity, which endured across the 1939 divide and which even influenced Italy’s post-bellum cultural diplomacy. Most evident was the stubborn and constant importance given to contemporary art as a means of national self-representation in the United States, as opposed to the art of the past, which was much more prestigious and requested by the American public. Also, the Italian government continued from start to end to adopt what Italian diplomats called “American methods:” strategies of marketing and values associated with the United States.

As this chapter will argue, the Fascist effort at promoting contemporary Italian art in the United States had two main goals. The most obvious one was political propaganda: following the invasion of Ethiopia, in a moment of crisis in the relationship between the two countries, contemporary art exhibitions, together with other initiatives, presented a
positive image of Italy in the States as the latter became an increasingly influential global power. Not openly acknowledged was the less palpable goal to conquer America metaphorically, a nation understood to be the quintessential symbol of modernity – a desire only partially expressed by what the Italian organizers of the exhibitions frequently called “cultural penetration.” Ultimately, the effect was quite the opposite and the operation of conquest reflected back upon its makers, making the Italians absorb the American model. If the pragmatic choice of Fascist propaganda was to adopt so-called “American methods” in the format and content of the exhibitions in order to facilitate their good reception in the United States, the study and practice of such methods by Italian art critics, dealers, and diplomats, in fact, inaugurated a process of active absorption of procedures and values associated with America and therefore with perceived modernity.

During the years 1935-1938, the Italian government’s interest in new strategies of propaganda in the States dovetailed with the business ambitions and nationalistic devotion of a young, enterprising art dealer, Dario Sabatello. His story and exhibition project deserves special attention here: not only because Sabatello’s exhibition of 1935 was the first large survey of modern Italian art in a decade and the second ever held in the United States, but also because it set the theoretical framework, the tone, and content for

1 Below I discuss the usage of this term by Dario Sabatello, Giuseppe Bottai, Antonietta Paoli Pogliani, and Ugo D’Annunzio.
2 The 1926 *Exhibition of Modern Italian Art* was organized by the Italian Ministry of Public Instruction under the auspices of New York-based Italy America Society. Held at the Grand Central Art Galleries in New York, it included some of the artists presented in the late-1930s shows. After New York, the exhibit traveled to Boston, Washington D.C., Chicago, and San Francisco, introducing an itinerary soon to become standard for the Italian shows. In the catalogue foreword, Christian Brinton wrote of an Italian “New Renaissance,” a phrase that recurs periodically during the following decades. Differently from the exhibits of the years 1935-1940, however, this first show was an isolated initiative and was not part of a systematic operation as those considered in the present chapter. The 1926 show had a section of “Painting,” which included: Giacomo Balla, Giovanni Boldini, Guido Cadorin, Felice Casorati, Primo Conti, Giorgio
the subsequent exhibitions discussed in this chapter. Sabatello was art editor of the
Roman newspaper *Il Tevere* and owner of the Galleria Sabatello, a contemporary art
gallery founded in 1932 in Via del Babuino mostly dedicated to young Italian artists. In
his early twenties (he was born in 1911), he was already renewed in Italy for his
international connections and for his entrepreneurial spirit. The Italian press often noticed
Sabatello’s activity, and not only for the art that he promoted: even more noteworthy
news was that the celebrated French critic and supra-fascist Waldemar George “came
expressly to Rome” for one of Sabatello’s events;³ or that the gallery was exclusively
funded through private investments, “a unique fact, in the field of modern art [in Italy],
with the only exception of the Galleria Pesaro in Milan.”⁴ Sabatello’s gallery also caused
controversies for its combination of artistic and extra-artistic events (or so they were
perceived): from the contested conference held at the gallery’s opening by influential
writer, Massimo Bontempelli on fashion -“the true spirit of modernity” - rather than fine
arts, to the much-commented-upon intervention of the world champion boxer, Primo
Carnera as an anomalous auctioneer at a Sabatello’s sale event.⁵

In 1934, after a visit to California, Sabatello closed his gallery to dedicate himself
to the promotion of contemporary Italian art in America. In a written proposal to the
Under-secretary of Press and Propaganda (a newly-founded office soon to be turned into

⁴ See Sileno Salvagnini, pp. 299-306.
a proper Ministry), he underscored how this activity would simultaneously serve the national image and make entry into the expanding art market in this country. He firstly aimed at California, because, differently from the East Coast, it had not been monopolized by French art dealers. Only after having conquered the West coast through a traveling show, could Italian contemporary art impress the more challenging territory on the Atlantic side of the country. He envisioned the institution of a permanent exhibition space for recent Italian art and design in New York. This, wrote Sabatello, would be “a very interesting art center, immensely useful for cultural and political propaganda, and also economically profitable.”

In 1933, Fascist Italy staged in the United States spectacular demonstrations of its own technological advancement. In occasion of the Century of Progress Exposition, Italo Balbo famously flew from Rome to Chicago (fig. 2) and the Rex achieved the record time for naval Atlantic crossing. Sabatello, who was in America on that occasion, suggested that contemporary art was not less powerful than technology as a tool to promote the new image of a modern Italy, reborn under Fascism. With the triumph of the 1932 Mostra della Rivoluzione Fascista still in mind, which successfully combined contemporary art, design, and propaganda, and now noticing that “the admiration for Fascism and, especially, for the figure of Mussolini has lately reached fabulous and almost incredible proportions among Americans,” Sabatello declared to the Office of Propaganda of the Ministry of Popular Culture that “For the first time maybe in history, Italy is in a most

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6 Dario Sabatello, Considerazioni, cit. p. 47. Original: “un centro d'arte interessantissimo, infinitamente utile a fine propagandistici culturali ed anche politici, ed economicamente redditizio.”

7 The Rex was a luxurious liner, partly owned by the Italian government, which sailed between Italy and the States from 1931 to 1944 (when it was bombed by American air forces).
privileged position for cultural propaganda.”

He pointed out that art was not yet among the many and diverse reasons for Italy’s prestige in America, which ranged instead, “from [Italo] Balbo’s flight to the sport victories at the latest Olympic games, from Italy’s resilience after the economic crisis to Carnera, the Rex, the benevolent attitude toward Jews, and especially the Duce’s personal charm and magnetism.”

Art, however, played a special role in Italy’s national pride and should thus become part of Italy’s self-promotion in the United States. Due to the Italian unbeatable artistic tradition, art was a field where, differently from technology, the United States could not compete with Italy – or so Sabatello and many Italians believed. Centuries of Italian pre-eminence in the art filed had been interrupted only temporarily during the nineteenth century by French supremacy. Now Italy was reborn under Fascism and Sabatello expressed his belief “that the 20th century will renew the pre-eminence of Italian art in the world.”

The growing importance of the American art market and institutions also meant a new opportunity to promote contemporary Italian art internationally. Paris was the undisputed avenue and goal for the international ambitions Italian modern artists, critics,

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8 Dario Sabatello, Considerazioni generali sull’espansione generale italiana negli Stati Uniti d’America, in Archivio Centrale dello Stato, Ministero della Cultura Popolare, Dir. Gen. Propaganda, b. 218, f. Stati Uniti 1934. 1 parte, sf. Esposizione d’arte moderna in California dott. Sabatello. Reported in Sergio Cortesini, ‘One day we must meet:’ La politica artistica italiana e l’uso dell’arte contemporanea come propaganda dell’Italia fascista negli Stati Uniti tra 1935 e 1940, doctoral dissertation supervised by Simonetta Lux, (Università degli Studi di Roma La Sapienza: Rome, 2003) cit. p. 46. Even if it is likely that Sabatello’s nationalistic emphasis was in part determined by opportunism (to get fundings from the government), his life-long commitment to promoting Italian art would demonstrate the sincerity of his dedication. Original: “L’ammirazione per il Fascismo e specie per la figura di Mussolini ha raggiunto in questi ultimi tempi tra gli americani proporzioni favolose e quasi incredibili … L’Italia viene a trovarsi in fatto di propaganda culturale in una posizione privilegiatissima.”

9 Dario Sabatello, Considerazioni, cit. Original: “dal volo di Balbo alle vittorie sportive alle ultime Olimpiadi, dal modo come l’Italia è passata attraverso la crisi economica, a Carnera, al Rex, all’atteggiamento di simpatia nei riguardi degli ebrei, e soprattutto il fascino ed il magnetismo personale del Duce, hanno contribuito a questo.” The reference is to Italo Balbo’s famous transatlantic flight of 1933 from Rome to Chicago. Primo Carnera was an Italian boxer with a successful career in the States, culminating in 1933 in New York when he became world champion. The Rex was a luxurious transatlantic ship, launched in 1931.

10 Dario Sabatello, San Francisco 1935, p. 17.
and dealers. Explained Sabatello: “the conquest of modern art’s market takes place through Paris. But in light of the renewed and systematic French boycott of our art, … our painting and our sculpture, which are among the most interesting and vital, are almost unknown in the world.”\footnote{Dario Sabatello, \textit{Considerazioni}, cit.} The American market now offered an alternative avenue to international recognition.

Within Sabatello’s own career as a gallerist, the self-appointed role as a national flag bearer in America also played an important part in turning him into an official actor of the regime’s cultural politics. The American venture brought him into close contact with major figures at the top ranks of Fascist cultural hierarchy: from the director of the Roman Quadriennale, Cipriano Efisio Oppo to the Member of Parliament (and future Minister of Education), Giuseppe Bottai, from the Under-secretary of Press and Propaganda (and son-in law of Mussolini) Galeazzo Ciano to the Italian Ambassador to Washington, Augusto Rosso. Sabatello’s career as an official player in the regime’s cultural politics culminated in 1937 when he was named founding director of the Galleria di Roma, the state-funded exhibition space of the Fascist corporation of artists, Confederazione Fascista Professionisti ed Artisti. Nevertheless, a Jew, he lost his job in 1938 and, in 1939, he immigrated to the United States.

Conceived in 1933 in a climate of optimism and maximum prestige for Fascist Italy, Sabatello’s project was put into practice and traveled the United States from January 1935 through May 1936, that is during the period of political tension preceding the October 1935 invasion of Ethiopia, and then during the diplomatic crisis following
In the dramatically changed political context, the project took on new meanings. It now answered the Italian government’s need for new and effective propaganda strategies to correct the negative image of a brutal, imperialist Italy. In a 1935 “Note on Propaganda,” Ambassador Rosso endorsed Sabatello’s ideas: he confirmed that exhibitions of contemporary art organized by private dealers (and secretly sponsored by the government) were perfect means for constructing a new, positive image in the United States. Art circumvented the Americans’ hostility toward forms of official and didactic state propaganda. As I will argue later in this chapter, this very idea was influenced by American marketing strategies, which were starting to penetrate Italian consumer culture in the early 1930s. The adoption by the Fascist state of such “public relations” method was already part of a process of absorption of modernity discussed below.

Sabatello’s Exhibition of Contemporary Italian Paintings (fig. 3), obtained governmental funding through Rosso and Ciano. Through the help of Sabatello’s friend, Walter Heil, the director of the California Palace of the Legion of Honor and great admirer of Fascism, the exhibition received the logistic support of American Western Art Museum Association. The local Fasci Italiani all’Estero, independent groups of Italian émigrés and Italian-Americans, who adhered to Fascism and practiced independent forms of pro-Fascist propaganda, offered logistic support and the most enthusiastic audience.

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12 Starting as early as September 1934, the correspondence between the United States Ambassador at Rome, Breckinridge Long and the Secretary of States, Cordell Hull expressed an increasing concern over Italy’s military preparations to attack Ethiopia. During the year preceding the invasion, various attempts were made by American diplomats to dissuade Mussolini, culminating with the direct intervention of President Franklin D. Roosevelt who sent a message to Mussolini on August 18, 1935. See U.S., Department of State, Publication 1983, Peace and War: United States Foreign Policy, 1931-1941 (Washington, D.C.: U.S., Government Printing Office, 1943), pp.28-32.


Opened on January 11, 1935 at the San Francisco California Palace of the Legion of Honor, the show included ninety works by twenty-seven artists and toured throughout the country, from the Pacific to the Atlantic coast. In line with the Fascist rhetoric of “largo ai giovani” (give way to youth), the exhibition’s emphasis on contemporary artists inaugurated one constant of Fascist exportation of art to the States and corresponded to the idea, expressed by many Fascist writers on America, that youth was a powerful link between the United States, young country par excellence, and the new Italy, rejuvenated by Mussolini. Accordingly, the show’s culminating stop was the Palazzo d’Italia of the Rockefeller Center in New York, whose monumental entrance, sculpted by Attilio Piccirilli, spelled “eterna Giovinezza” (fig. 4). Nevertheless, hostile critics in Italy blamed the curator for the presence of many “immature” works.

15 The exhibition toured to: the California Palace of the Legion of Honor, San Francisco, California (January 11 – February 10, 1935); Los Angeles County Museum, Los Angeles, California (February 20 – March 16); Portland Art Association, Portland, Oregon (March 27 – April 25); Art Museum, Seattle, Washington (May 1 – June 2); Washington County Museum of Art, Hagerstown, Maryland (November 11 – 30); Currier Gallery of Art, Manhester, New Hampshire (December 11 – 30); International Building of the Rockefeller Center, New York, New York (March 12 – 28, 1936); City Art Museum, Saint Louis, Missouri (May 6 – 23, 1936).

16 The artists included were: Alberto Bevilacqua (b. 1896), Renato Biroli (1906), Massimo Campigli (1895), Giuseppe Capogrossi (1900), Carlo Carrà (1881), Felice Casorati (1886), Emanuele Cavalli (1904), Gisberto Ceracchini (1898), Giorgio de Chirico (1888), Filippo De Pisis (1896), Ferruccio Ferrazzi (1891), Eleonora Fini (1908), Guglielmo Janni (1892), Franco Gentilini (1909), Carlo Levi (1902), Mario Mafai (1902), Francesco Menzio (1899), Angiolo Modirotto (1900), Giorgio Morandi (1890), Enrico Paulucci (1903), Adriana Pincherle (1906), Fausto Pirandello (1899), Pippo Rizzo (1898), Ottone Rosai (1894), Aligi Sassu (1912), Gino Severini (1883), Mario Sironi (1885), Mario Tozzi (1895), Alberto Zivieri (1908).

17 The Palazzo d’Italia, had just inaugurated its monumental portal, whose relief was, as the New York Times emphasized “the largest piece of decorative sculpture ever executed in glass.” “Glass Sculpture,” New York Times, November 17, 1935, X11.

Even the inclusion of female artists - two out of twenty-seven - was a concession of the Italian organizers to values which they perceived as typically American: “misses [Adriana] Pincherle and [Leonor] Fini have been included for extra-artistic reasons because, being the show held in America, it is useful to include some women’s names.”19 In Italy, as Victoria De Grazia put it, “Mussolini’s regime stood for returning women to home and heart, restoring patriarchal authority, and confining female destiny to bearing babies.”20 The 1935 exhibition inaugurated a strategy of self-representation adopted by the regime in the United States, which featured the deliberate inclusion of women artists.

Sabatello’s stylistic choice too constituted a template for the subsequent exhibitions. Most of the artists featured in the show had just exhibited at the 1935 Quadriennale of Rome. A state-sponsored survey of contemporary Italian art taking place every four years starting in 1931, the Quadriennale became, during the 1930s, more and more important as an alternative to the Venice Biennale: especially with the edition of 1935, the Roman show signaled itself as the most receptive institution for advanced artists as opposed to an increasingly conservative Biennale.21 Finally, the Quadriennale distinguished itself for its attempt to find a meeting point between art market and state patronage, a perfect model for the American operation, also based on a synergy between

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19 Dario Sabatello to Antonio Maraini, Schema della mostra d’arte contemporanea negli Stati Uniti d’America, attached to a letter of August 31, 1934, Galleria Nazionale d’Arte Moderna, Archivio Maraini, fold. 41, Stati Uniti, quoted by Sergio Cortesini, p. 45. Presented as Italian, in fact, Fini was born in Buenos Aires in 1907 to Italian and Argentinian parents and grew up in Trieste, which was annexed to Italy only after World War I.
21 Locally, the regional shows, Mostre Sindacali Regionali were the most receptive institution. But the Quadriennale was the first national institution to recognize artists such as Arturo Martini (1931) or Scipione (1935) and, differently from the Biennale it exhibited abstract artists of the Milanese Galleria del Milione. See Sileno Salvagnini, *Il Sistema delle Arti*, cit.
private initiative and regime’s cultural politics. Sabatello closely collaborated with the Quadriennale director, Oppo for the 1935 edition; in turn, Oppo was in the executive committee and played an important part in the selection of the artists for the San Francisco show. Different from the Quadriennale, however, Sabatello excluded futurism and geometric abstraction and presented to the American public those tendencies that, in his words, constituted together a form of “anti-academic Classicism.” The latter were, in his and his collaborators’ view, modern as well as deeply rooted in Italy’s artistic heritage. They variously combined expressionism, primitivism, and magic realism with elements derived from Etruscan, Roman, Renaissance, Baroque, or other stylistic idioms that, in the intentions of the organizers, were “most obviously Italian, devoid of influences of foreign origins.”

Influenced by critics Margherita Sarfatti, Massimo Bontempelli, and Waldemar George, Sabatello indicated an Italian way to modernity which was “a third way:” not a backward-looking return to tradition (“a realism that was empty, trite, and purely formal … photographic, academic, void of epic or artistic content”), nor, like the futurists or the geometric abstractionists, described as “essentially critical and polemic, hence transitory.” Within the so-called Novecento, “a general term implying modernity,”

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23 Oppo regularly (and positively) reviewed the exhibitions at Sabatello’s gallery in the newspaper La Tribuna. He also supported the San Francisco exhibit in an enthusiastic article, “Una mostra d’arte italiana in America,” cit.
24 Dario Sabatello, San Francisco 1935 cit., p. 17.
26 Dario Sabatello, Exhibition of Contemporary Italian Painting Under the Auspices of the Western Art Museum Association and the Direzione Generale Italiani all’Estero (Tivoli: no publisher, 1934), p. 17. On Waldemar George theories in relation to fascism, see Matthew
Sabatello identified some artists of the “old generation” who paved the way for the current situation. Carlo Carrà, described as “the most significant and interesting painter of modern Italian art,” embodied this evolution through his career: he went beyond his extreme and negative phase as part of Futurism and Metafisica (“[he] has participated on the ground floor of all artistic battles”); and now, “his present solid, and almost magical realism [was] surpassing most modern painting.”

Carrà’s main work on display, *Summer* of 1930 (fig. 5), combined elements of what Bontempelli had recently called *primordio* – in Sabatello’s words, “a world that is at the beginning of Time and that creates its own Space” - with a sense of plastic solidity, which was well rooted in Italy’s most glorious tradition. As Sabatello wrote, “[Bernard] Berenson, who classifies painters as structural or decorative (Masaccio and Botticelli, for example), would certainly assign Carrà to the first category.”

Carrà, together with other internationally renown artists such as Mario Sironi, Giorgio de Chirico, Massimo Campigli, and Giorgio Morandi among others, provided the younger generation of artists with a mature synthesis of tradition and modernity, allowing them, according to Sabatello, to inaugurate a new era of classicism led by Italy: “no country in the world has a well defined and interesting a group of painters between the ages of twenty-five and thirty-five years as has Italy.”

The reason was historical according to this feat of Fascist propaganda: “No European country has yet risen above the period of unbalance in the transition from the old era to the new … Italian painting seems, at this moment to be one of the most

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28 Dario Sabatello, *Exhibition*, cit., pp. 11-12.
29 Dario Sabatello, *Exhibition*, cit., p. 12.
homogeneous in Europe, and perhaps the only one that has emerged from the polemic and critical stage, and found its direction.” Italy’s maturity as a modern nation, Sabatello implied, did not depend on technological advancement: in spite of the bombastic manifestations of the regime, Italy’s belated and incomplete process of industrialization could not compete with truly industrialized European countries, let alone the United States. Italy’s advantage was rather “moral, social and political, bearing witness to the rebirth of a people.”

Sabatello’s entry for the catalogue also underscored regional specificities within the national umbrella. By doing so, he inadvertently acknowledged and skirted over one of the greatest contradictions of the overall operation: behind the nationalistic rhetoric of italianità, stood a country that was in fact dramatically fragmented. Especially, the gap between a rich, leading North and a poor, under-represented South was visible in the critic’s description of the artists as divided by city or regional school: starting from the foremost top with Piedmont and going downward, his survey stopped at Rome, failing to mention anything from the southern half of the country. The openly-expressed goal for the regional approach was to emphasize the unique richness and variety of Italy’s artistic tradition and to declare how modern Italy, reborn with Fascism, was now ready to resume the cultural leadership that she had fulfilled through the past centuries: “that the twentieth century will renew the pre-eminence of Italian art in the world.”

The competitor for cultural supremacy, again, was France. Among its many firsts, the San Francisco show inaugurated a long-lasting battle to be fought on the American territory to define the Italian School as independent from and as important as the École de Paris. That was one more reason why Sabatello’s show excluded the futurists or the

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31 Dario Sabatello, Exhibition, cit., p. 17.
abstractionists of the Milanese Galleria il Milione, who had a prominent role in Italy’s contemporary art scene and were featured in the 1935 Quadriennale. Understood as not rooted enough in the national specific tradition and too influenced by foreign trends, these movements were marginalized here as they would be in the subsequent shows in the United States, even as they played a prominent role in exhibitions organized by the regime both at home as well as in other countries. It is precisely these movements that provided continuity in the post-war period.

Among the young artists, Sabatello gave special importance to those of the Roman scene presented as a synthesis and summa of Italy’s complex identity: “they are from all parts of Italy … Romans, from choice [sic], if not all by birth.” The emphasis was on three painters: Emanuele Cavalli, Giuseppe Capogrossi, and Fausto Pirandello (figs. 6-7). Sabatello indicated Carrà and Morandi as their masters, who inspired their interest in “tonal painting and solid architectural construction.” These artists together with Corrado Cagli (a painter represented by Sabatello’s gallery but absent from the San Francisco exhibit) later became a staple of Pecci-Blunt’s shows. Their definition as the “School of Rome” was famously embraced by Waldemar George, who supported them both in Italy and in France. However Sabatello was probably aware that the term had been first formulated in the United States by the Italian correspondent of the New York Times in his review of a 1933 exhibition of Cagli, Capogrossi, Cavalli, and Eloisa

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32 The reviews of the 1935 Quadriennale accused the futurists of Parisian affiliations and the abstractionists of being derivative of German art. See Salvagnini, cit., pp. 32-33, see especially note 62. Deliberately marginalized in the United States, Futurism featured prominently in the 1937 Berlin exhibition of Italian art, Ausstellung Italienischer Kunst von 1800 bis zum Gegenwart, held at the Akademie der Künste. Mussolini in person made this choice, in spite of Hitler’s attack on the movement as “degenerate,” of which he was well aware. The show indeed upset Hitler and was cause of diplomatic embarrassment. See Benedetta Garzarelli, “Parleremo al Mondo Intero.” La Propaganda del Fascismo all’Estero (Alessandria (Italy): Edizioni dell’Orso, 2004), pp. 209-223.
33 Dario Sabatello, cit., p. 15.
34 Dario Sabatello, cit., p. 16.
Michelucci at the gallery of Pier Maria Bardi in Rome. Sabatello probably hoped to attract again the attention of the American press.

Pirandello’s *Stairway*, was indeed the most reproduced and commented upon painting, perhaps also because of the artist’s familiar name: in 1934, his father, Luigi Pirandello had received the Nobel Prize in Literature. The overall reception by American critics, however, was unenthusiastic. The show was perceived as a front for the regime even with Sabatello’s art-historical window dressing. Anticipating the fate of all of the later shows organized by the regime, the responses of journalists and critics corresponded to their negative (and some positive) opinion on Mussolini and Italian Fascism. Most comments noticed the shared use of dull earth-like colors and interpreted it as a “lack of vitality.”

In spite of the tepid reception of the show by American critics and collectors (only one painting was sold - Carrà’s *After the Bath*, fig. 8), its importance was remarkable: it reached a vast and diverse audience, most of which had never been exposed to contemporary Italian art before, creating a fertile terrain for the more successful enterprises of the post-bellum period, and it set up an influential template, in both content and theoretical framework, for the organizers of subsequent Italian exhibits in America, before as well as after the Second World War.

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37 The Los Angeles County Museum purchased Carrà’s painting by will and with the financial support of the collector and curator, Willam Preston Harrison. The acquisition sparked controversy for two reasons: its “ultra-modern” style, its political association with Fascist Italy; See Alma May Cook, “Ultra-Modern Fascist Art Displayed at L.A. Museum,” *Los Angeles Evening Herald and Express*, February 21, 1935; “Purchase Plan Increases Storm Over Italian Art,” *Los Angeles Evening Herald and Express*, March 14, 1935. The debated is documented by Sergio Cortesini, One Day…, cit., p. 63.

38 The only precedent was Brinton’s show of 1926. See note 2.
The second initiative, the Comet Gallery, was a commercial exhibition space inaugurated in December 1937 and exclusively dedicated to contemporary Italian art. Located on 10 East 52nd Street in Manhattan, the Comet was the American branch of the Galleria della Cometa, active in Rome from 1935. Owners of the two galleries were the Roman aristocrat Anna Laetitia Pecci-Blunt and her husband, the New York banker and collector Cecil. The Pecci-Blunts held internationally famous literary salons in their homes in Rome and Paris. While the Roman space was self-sponsored by the Pecci-Blunts, the New York gallery secretly received financial support from the Italian Ministry of Press and Propaganda. Their proposal to open an analogous state-sponsored gallery in Paris was not put into practice, further demonstrating the Fascist government’s specific interest in the United States for this kind of operation. In Rome, the Cometa was famous as the only truly international salon in Rome. Here the count and countess organized not only art exhibitions but also concerts, readings, and performances of theatre and dance. The alliance of Pecci-Blunt was a fusion of the Peccis, a noble family from Tuscany and Rome of papal descent, with the Blumenthals, a Jewish family of world-famous art collectors based in New York and Paris. By choosing this couple as Italy’s cultural ambassadors in New York, the Fascist government constructed an image, which merged an inimitable tradition of papal art patronage with modern, namely

39 Francesca Romana Morelli, cit., p. 364.
40 The original project to open a branch of the Cometa in Paris as well as in New York is documented in Mario Quesada, “E nel Cielo di Roma Apparve la Cometa,” in Lucia Chiavazzi (ed.), Una Collezionista e Mecenate Romana: Anna Laetitia Pecci-Blunt (Rome: Edizioni Carte Segrete, 1992), pp. 151-152 and in Francesca Romana Morelli, Cipriano Efisio Oppo …, cit., pp. 371-372. In the catalogue of the group show, Nino Franchina, Renato Guttuso, Lia Pasqualino-Noto, held at the Cometa in Rome, June 10 – 24 1937, the gallery announced, “the opening of two branches overseas, one in New York and the other in Paris, in December of the year XVI [1938].” See Giuseppe Appella, ed., Galleria della Cometa: I Cataloghi dal 1935 al 1938 (Rome: Edizioni della Cometa, 1989), np. I am not aware, however, of any direct evidence to explain why the Parisian gallery never opened. Morelli convincingly attributes this to both Oppo’s and Pecci Blunt’s documented preference for the expanding American art market, on the one hand, and their hostility toward the dominance of the École de Paris, on the other.
American, flair. In spite of the modification of the too-overtly Jewish name Blumenthal into the more neutral Blunt (as requested by pope Benedict XV), the regime also advertised itself, as late as 1937, as the image of multiculturalism and integration in order to distance itself from Nazi Germany.

Through a fast-paced program of group and solo exhibits in its New York venue as well as in museums in Detroit and Chicago, the gallery’s activities gave Italian contemporary art unprecedented visibility in the States. It received frequent reviews both in art magazines and in the national press during its short life.\(^41\) The selection of artists was almost identical to that made by Sabatello and combined the older generation of Novecento with younger artists mostly from Rome. The star, however, was the young painter, Corrado Cagli (fig. 9): a prominent figure in the early 1930s Italian debate on mural painting and a leader of the so-called “Scuola Romana.” Cagli was so closely identified with the Roman Cometa that he was considered by many as its director.\(^42\)


\(^{42}\) Giuseppe Appella has argued that this is a misconception derived from the anti-Semitic polemics of the years 1937-1938, which associated the Cometa with the Jewish artist Cagli to boycott both artist and
Significantly, Cagli was also Jewish and had represented Italy at the 1937 Paris Universal Exposition with a series of “portable murals” on the history of Italy from Cesar to Mussolini. These paintings were censored immediately after the opening day, in a premonition of the Anti-Semitic legislation to soon follow, by order of Galeazzo Ciano who was disappointed by the artist’s expressionist deformation of the glorious leaders’ features. Nevertheless, the regime allowed Cagli’s work to be shown at the Comet. His solo exhibit along with a group show of twenty-seven artists inaugurated the Manhattan space.

Unlike Sabatello, who introduced his San Francisco catalogue with a long text, Pecci-Blunt published small catalogues with only images. Only rarely, an extremely brief, unsigned paragraph opened the American publications (figs. 10, 11). This choice was peculiar to the New York branch of the Comet, whose Roman catalogues distinguished themselves for their literary texts by Italy’s most celebrated writers and poets, including the gallery’s director, the poet and art critic, Libero De Libero and other authors, like Giuseppe Ungaretti, Massimo Bontempelli, Luigi Pirandello, Alberto Moravia, or Emilio Cecchi, underscoring here the finest of Italian literary culture fed into Fascism. The avoidance of texts probably depended on the difficulty of translation for these authors’ prosa d’arte, but also corresponded to the cautious evasion of celebratory gallery. It is nevertheless evident that Cagli had a prominent role not only as the main artist of the gallery (his shows inaugurated both the Roman and the New York space) but also his correspondences with Lucio Fontana and with Libero De Libero, where he clearly had a decisive role in choosing and inviting other artists.

content in the exhibited work and in their interpretation. The permanent presence in New York and regular advertisements in the influential art magazine *Art News*, secured a more permanent impact on the art scene. The reviews, however, did not differ substantially from those of Sabatello’s exhibition, including the legitimate suspicion of Fascist control and propaganda goals.

In September 1938, after less than one year of activity, the Comet was forced to close by the same government that had originally sponsored it. Cause of the censorship was a change in the regime’s cultural policy in the United States after the publication of the anti-Semitic Laws and the alliance with Nazi Germany. In spite of its brevity, the Comet’s activity had an important impact by introducing for the first time to the New York public artists, like Morandi, Renato Guttuso, Cagli, Afro Basaldella, and Mirko Basaldella, who later dominated the post-war narrative on Italian twentieth century art. During the 1950s most of these artists found a new advocate in the Italian-American art dealer Catherine Viviano (see Chapter 3).

Yet during the period 1939-1940, the United States government allowed the Fascist state to sponsor directly contemporary art events to the three main international

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45 Despite the façade as a private initiative, Time magazine talked about the show as “a view of Art under Fascism” and talked about “painters on whom the Corporate State has set the seal of official approval.” “Italian Comet,” *Time* magazine, vol. 30, n. 25, December 20, 1937, pp. 22, 24. In a review, Florence Davis pointed out that, although the paintings exhibited by the Cometa did not present any propaganda theme, they expressed, indirectly, a feeling of government’s control, with no space for “protest” or “doubt”: “Everything is ‘safe’ and under control.” Florence Davies, “Modern Italian Painting,” Detroit News, February 27, 1938. Quoted by Cortesini, cit., p. 122.
46 The US press did not take note of this as an act of censorship. The *New York Times* journalist, Edward Alden Jewell, wrote: “Now that New York’s lamented Comet Gallery is no more (it lasted but one season) our opportunities to keep informed as to present-day developments in Italy are infrequent. This is a matter for regret, since the contemporary Italian school embraces talents well worth watching in their experimentation and progress.” Despite his regret, however, he failed mention the cause of the Comet’s abrupt closure. Edward Alden Jewell, “Three Countries and Seventy-Nine,” *New York Times*, May 28, 1939, p. X7.
exhibitions held in America: the *Golden Gate International Exposition* held in San Francisco in 1939 and the two editions of the *New York World’s Fair* of 1939 and 1940. The only European dictatorship to participate in all of the three fairs, Italy had prominent monuments, pavilions, and contributed some the most spectacular (and visited) art shows (figs. 12, 13 – Italian pavilions in SF and NY).

In 1939-1940, Italy was also part of a smaller yet significant show, *International Women Painters, Sculptors, Gravers* held at the Riverside Museum in New York.

In San Francisco, the regime sent two Italian art exhibits: one of contemporary and one of ancient art. The former was part of a larger show, the nation-based survey *Contemporary Art* organized by the Division of Contemporary Painting and Sculpture of the Exposition (fig. 14). Three directors were respectively in charge of the three participating continents, “Australia, Europe, and North America.” Walter Heil, director of the Palace of the Legion of Honor in San Francisco, supervised the European division, within which each country curated its own exhibit. “The works representing Contemporary Art in Italy – the catalogue explained – were selected by the Ministry of Education.”

Two officials of this ministry curated it under the supervision of the minister Giuseppe Bottai: the influential art historian Roberto Longhi and the younger Giulio Carlo Argan. A fourth, crucial person was Antonio Maraini, a powerful *deputato* (member of the Italian parliament) and the Secretary General of the Venice Biennale, who strongly advocated Italy’s participation in this show.

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47 Hitler’s Germany did not participate in any of the fairs; absent in San Francisco both Franco’s Spain and Stalin’s USSR withdrew after the first season of the New York World’s Fair, declining to return for the second season of 1940.
49 See the exhibition catalogue, *Contemporary Art, Official Catalogue*, cit. The bulk of the correspondence on this exhibition is at the Archivio Antonio Maraini, Archivi Galleria Nazionale d’Arte Moderna, Rome.
The other exhibit was a survey of five hundred years of Italian art, from the Renaissance to the nineteenth-century, which included a selection of celebrated masterpieces from Italy’s best-known museums, including Sandro Botticelli’s *Birth of Venus* from the Uffizi (fig. 15). Part of a larger European survey, *Masterworks of Five Centuries*, the show was requested by Heil, who organized this enterprise too, as the Golden Gate Exposition’s Director of the Division of European Art. The enterprise encountered the skepticism of many Italian government officials, who begrudgingly agreed to send it (uninsured) as the price to pay in order to have the contemporary exhibition included in the Exposition: “if we don’t accept the request to ship 20-25 ancient works, we will not be able to send the modern ones.”\(^5\) The twin-show formula (Renaissance and Contemporary), in fact worked in perfect tandem with Fascist political rhetoric. Mussolini’s discourse on artistic renewal was always linked to the glorious achievements of the Italian past, which was universally famous and effectively branded: the national creative genius that had dominated with the Roman Empire, was revived during the Renaissance (the first re-birth), and was now undergoing a third era of triumph under the leadership of the Duce.

The double show format had already been successfully employed four years earlier in Paris with the simultaneous display of *L’Art Italien de Cimabue à Tiepolo* at the Petit Palais and *L’Art Italien des XIXe et XXe Siècles* at the Jeu de Paume. In both 1935 and 1939, the enterprises played important propaganda and diplomacy roles in moments

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\(^5\) Giuseppe Morelli to Antonio Maraini, Florence, October 23, 1937, Archives of the Galleria Nazionale d’Arte Moderna, Fondo Maraini, Folder “San Francisco,” letter no. 33. Original: “se non sarà accolta la domanda per l’invio di 20-25 opere antiche, non sarà possibile mandare le moderne.”. Morelli was an artist and a deputato (member of the Italian Parliament).
that were crucial for Italian foreign policy.\footnote{See Emily Braun, “Leonardo’s Smile,” in Claudia Lazzaro and Roger J. Crum (eds.), \textit{Donatello among the Blackshirts} (Cornell University Press: Ithaca, 2005), pp. 173-86, 272-5.} A few months before the Fascist invasion of Ethiopia, the Parisian exhibitions emphasized humanism and the civilizing mission of the two Latin sister-nations. In San Francisco, at the eve of Second World War, in a fair “dedicated to the cause of international peace and good will,”\footnote{These are words of the director of the Golden Gate International Exposition, Leland W. Cutler, ‘World Peace Day Set On Treasure Isle,’ in \textit{Golden Gate International Exposition}, October 24, 1938, n.p.} Italy presented itself as the “determinant weight” on the balance of world’s peace. \textit{L’Art Italien des XIXe et XXe Siècles} in Paris, however, conveyed a modest front for Italy’s present liveliness, for it did not and could not attempt to compete with French modern art nor with the Italian old masters.\footnote{On the prominence given to the old-master section both in terms of promotion and reception of the twin show, see Emily Braun, ‘Leonardo’s Smile,’ cit.} In San Francisco, the Italians tried to give more emphasis to contemporary art as they always did in the United States. The American results, however, did not differ substantially from those in Paris: the contemporary works (fig. 16) were overwhelmed by the stardom of Renaissance paintings. So exceptional was the media coverage and public enthusiasm that a number of major American museums asked the Italian government to extend the excursion of the old masterpieces for a touring show before they left the United States.\footnote{The first requests came from the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, the Art Institute of Chicago, and the Metropolitan Museum of New York. See Cortesini, \textit{One Day} (2003), p. 147.} The works in the modern section were sent back home right away.

Obsequiously titled \textit{Italian Masters Lent by the Royal Italian Government}, the subsequent touring exhibition was shown at the Art Institute in Chicago (November 18, 1939 – January 9, 1940) and proceeded to its last and most important stop, New York.\footnote{See Frederick A. Sweet, ‘Masterpieces of Italian Painting,’ \textit{Bulletin of the Art Institute of Chicago, Special Italian Exhibition Number}, vol. 33, no. 7, December, 1939, pp. 109, 111-13.} Significantly enough, it did not travel to the Metropolitan Museum, where the hallowed artists would have found a more appropriate company, but rather at the Museum of
Modern Art. The museum’s director, Alfred H. Barr Jr. fought hard to convince his trustees to take the *Italian Masters*, because the content was so anomalous for an institution devoted to modern art. In the catalogue, he likewise justified the presence of the old works at the MoMA as the ‘Italian sources of three great traditions of [modern] European painting.’ Moreover, he orchestrated a parallel exhibition entitled *Modern Masters from European and American Collections*, which presented twenty-nine paintings from the late-nineteenth and early twentieth century.

The adoption of the Fascist twin-show formula was seemingly a model, but in fact, Mussolini’s eternal Renaissance had been hijacked by Barr and rerouted onto his modernist teleology, as seen in his chart at the end of the old paintings catalogue (fig. 17). Also the *Modern Masters* show stated that the true legacy of the Italian Renaissance was not in Italy; instead, the pre-eminence of the school of Paris was absolute, and had united with the emergent American modernism. None of the modern descendants of the Italian masters was Italian. At the opening, Barr’s historiographical operation was celebrated by Nelson Rockefeller, president of the Museum, who hailed the Renaissance

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56 Worth further investigation, the negotiations with the Met probably failed because of a missed agreement over the insurance. See Cortesini, *One Day* (2003), p. 149.
59 Each artist was present with one work except for where indicated. The catalogue opened with the American artists: Whistler, Eakins, Homer, Ryder, Epstein. The French school was more conspicuously represented by: Degas, Renoir (two works), Cézanne (two works), Van Gogh (two works), Gauguin, Seurat, Rousseau, Vuillard, Rouault, Derain, Matisse, Braque, La Fresnaye, Gris, Picasso, Miro, Brancusi, Maillol (two works), Despiau. The only exception was the German Lehmbruck, whose art, the catalogue pointed out, ‘[was] now repudiated in his own country’ (p. 35). See Alfred H. Barr, Jr. (ed.), *Modern Masters from European and American Collections*, (Museum of Modern Art: New York, 1949).
as the ‘ideal bridge between Italian and American cultures.’ In this first specular reversal, which anticipated the dynamics of the post-war period, a given of Fascist propaganda was mirrored in American cultural policy. The civilizing mission that Italy fulfilled in the past was now to be led by the United States, as the new face of Western humanism.

The Italians, for their part, used the occasion to pursue a future agenda. Fascist representatives, Eugenio Ventura, Responsible Trustee of the Royal Italian Government and the critics Cesare Brandi and Giulio Carlo Argan were sent by the Italian government in order to courier its uninsured masterpieces but also to propose an ambitious pair of all-modern Italian exhibitions, one of contemporary art and one of architecture. After their meeting with Barr (fig. 18), Ventura optimistically wrote to the Director of Antiquities and Fine Arts for the Italian Ministry of National Education, Marino Lazzari that the shows ‘would start in New York in April 1941 and go on to Boston, Philadelphia, Washington, Chicago, Detroit, Toledo, Cleveland, Cincinnati, Indianapolis, St. Louis, Kansas City, Los Angeles, San Francisco, and come to an end in Canada, Toronto and Montreal.’

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61 Brandi was sent as delegate of the Ministry of National Education; Argan was General Supervisor for the same Ministry, and was in charge to inspect the shipping and the return of the works; Ventura was Responsible Trustee of the Royal Italian Government, see Alfred H. Barr, Jr. (ed.), Italian Masters (1940), p. 4.
But the exhibitions could not be realized. The first obstacle, as Barr wrote to Ventura, was the Museum’s refusal to accept exhibitions of foreign art without having the ‘complete control of the selection.’ The second was Italy’s entrance in the war.

If the *Old Masters* exhibit at MoMA publicized Italy’s past grandeur, another major event in New York celebrated its present technological development and culture. For the two editions of the New York World’s Fair, Italy built one of the most spectacular pavilions (see fig. 12). The building itself was a *tour de force* of technology and fine arts, which effectively announced its content. The façade consisted of a 147-feet-tall and 29-feet-large waterfall, dedicated to the Italian inventor Guglielmo Marconi and to his invention, the radio. The interior opened with a didactic show on the history of Rome’s empire from Caesar to Mussolini, culminating with the recent acquisition of the African colonies and re-achieved status of Empire. Other exhibits celebrated Italy’s contribution to the world’s scientific and technological progress. Artifacts on display comprised the Breda Elettrotreno, the real locomotive of a futuristic electric train (at the NYWF archives, an entire folder containing hundreds of letters is dedicated to the complicated transportation of this item), and Lanital, an artificial textile fibre synthesized from casein.

Within the pavilion, the *Exhibition of Italian Contemporary Art* included a selection of works by more than one hundred and thirty contemporary painters and sculptors. Most of the artists had already exhibited in the previous shows held in the States. It presented, however, some significant novelties. Differently from earlier exhibits organized for the American public, now many of the works had propaganda, imperialist, and openly racist content. They included monumental sculptures of *H. M. The King*

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63 Barr to Ventura, New York February 15, 1940, AHB [AAA: 3155; 775; 776]. MoMA Archives, NY.
Emperor (by Francesco Messina, fig. 19) and of The Duce (by Romano Morelli, fig. 20), as well as sculptural personifications of Italy and of its colonies: Eritrea, Libia, Somalia, Etiopia (fig. 20), and Africa Italiana. Other propaganda pieces depicted Land Reclamation and Public Works, the Fascist youth movements Balilla and Gioventù Italiana del Littorio, and even The Improvement of the Race, a painting by Ferruccio Ferrazzi celebrating the anti-Semitic legislation (fig. 21).  

Secondly, as both the press release and the catalogue made sure to point out, all of the works in the show came from the collection of the Italian state. By doing so, the organizers of the exhibit attempted to emphasize the important role that the State had as a patron of the arts. Already in the catalogue of the 1935 exhibit, Sabatello had similarly vaunted the Fascist government’s promotion of the arts. But in his intentions the show, differently from the 1939 one, praised the government indirectly by celebrating the beneficial effects of Fascist cultural policy in the creation of a lively art scene: presented as a private initiative, the show was made up of direct loans from the artists (their current addresses were specified in the catalogue). On the other hand, at the New York World’s Fair, the direct emphasis was on the State’s cultural interventions. Analogously to the Renaissance masterpieces, the contemporary works were now presented as the generous loan of a royal collection. Even if the roster of the artists was substantially unchanged - with the notable absence of the Jewish artists who had always exhibited until now - , the blatant propaganda content undermined the earlier pretense to humanism.

An interesting mixture of English and Italian titles characterized the English-language section of the catalogue. This was probably due to the American public’s familiarity with Fascist terms and slogans, which were often left untranslated in the American press. There is no documentary evidence to determine whether a certain diplomacy was used in the translation process. For example, Ferrazzi’s two allegorical paintings translated respectively Land Reclamation and The Improvement of the Race, had a more disquieting assonance in their original version: La Bonifica della Terra and La Bonifica della Razza.
Finally the pavilion included a separate Futurist section. Ostracized from the previous American shows, the movement was now presented with a minor profile as witnessed by the fact that it was included in the exhibition’s official catalogue and no review of the show mentioned it. The only published mention of the movement is found in *Italy at the World’s Fair – New York 1939*, an English-language volume printed by Florentine publisher Vallecchi on behalf of the Italian government. Not accompanied by illustrations, the installation, described as follows in the book, was probably the most experimental show of the pavilion and an exceptional case among Futurist exhibitions ever mounted in the United States, which presented more than traditional sculpture and painting.\(^65\) Marinetti and Prampolini’s interpretation of the Italian pavilion echoed the interpretation given to the earlier *Mostra della Rivoluzione Fascista* of 1932, which also combined technology, art, and propaganda:

Italian Futurism, created by the poet F. T. Marinetti, participates at the New York World’s Fair of 1939 with a most original presentation of its multifarious activities. These activities comprise aeropoetry, the theatre, aeropainting, aerosculpture, aeroarchitecture and aeromusic. A vast hall covering a surface of almost 80 square meters will exalt futurism in a panoramic synthesis made by the ingenious aerodynamic, architectural composition conceived by the leading painter of Italian Futurism, Enrico Prampolini. These expressions of futuristic ideologies, arranged in this exhibitis [sic] by the aeropoet F. T. Marinetti, comprise the finest examples in the fields of poetry and all the arts. They include the works of F. T. Marinetti, Boccioni, Sant’Elia, Prampolini, Prampolini’s participation is often mentioned in the literature on the artist’s mural sculptures and architectural interventions. See Enrico Crispolti in *Enrico Crispolti and Rosella Siligato (eds.), Prampolini: Dal Futurismo All’Informale* (Rome: Edizioni Carte Segrete, 1992). Achille Bonito Oliva, *Prampolini, 1913 – 1956* (Modena: Galleria Fonte D’Abisso Edizioni, 1985). Unlike the NYWF, however, I was not able to find any other documentary evidence of a futurist participation in the Exposition.

\(^{65}\) Italy’s pavilion at the 1939 Golden Gate International Exposition, held in San Francisco was possibly another exceptional case of Prampolini’s mural sculpture if we trust the only review mentioning it: Jack James and Earle Weller, *Treasure Island, The Magic City, 1939-1940. The Story of the Golden Gate International Exposition* (San Francisco: Pisani Printing and Publishing Company, 1941), p. 114: “One of the outstanding pavilions on Treasure Island was that of Italy. Names of the leading cities and regions were embossed on a 115 foot tower at the base of which appeared the Fascist emblem, a bronze axe. Marble was used in the construction of the columns and the floor. Designed by Dr. Alfio Susini of the Italian Royal Academy, the tourist lures of Italy were shown in colored motion pictures, murals and dioramas. Native flower girls acted as hostesses. The attractive scenes, which were the center of interest in the main exhibit room, were the works of Prampolini, pupil and friend of Marinetti, pioneer in the field of futuristic art.” Prampolini’s participation is often mentioned in the literature on the artist’s mural sculptures and architectural interventions. See Enrico Crispolti in *Enrico Crispolti and Rosella Siligato (eds.), Prampolini: Dal Futurismo All’Informale* (Rome: Edizioni Carte Segrete, 1992). Achille Bonito Oliva, *Prampolini, 1913 – 1956* (Modena: Galleria Fonte D’Abisso Edizioni, 1985). Unlike the NYWF, however, I was not able to find any other documentary evidence of a futurist participation in the Exposition.
Enrico Prampolini’s preparatory drawings for a monumental mural relief (400 x 450 meters) and for the design of the exhibit give a visual rendering of the disposition of Boccioni’s sculpture, *Unique Forms of Continuity in Space*, windows displaying *Parole in Libertà* compositions, wall texts, and paintings (fig. 22). If the 1932 *Mostra della Rivoluzione Fascista* celebrated the tenth anniversary of Mussolini’s rise to power in Rome, the New York World’s Fair heralded the thirtieth birthday of futurism by supposedly conquering the land of the future. Augusto Cesareo, a Neapolitan poet and futurist sympathizer who visited the exhibition sent Marinetti a postcard of the Fair. He wrote: “From the Exposition of the future, which signals, after thirty years, the movement that we have started! I am so pleased to see that the exhibition of Italian Futurism is outstandingly presented here.”

The Italian pavilion was the most visited exhibit of the Fair after the other technology-centred *Futurama* show of General Motors. Yet, similarly to the effect in San Francisco, the presence of the paintings and sculptures of Italy’s best contemporary artists went almost completely unnoticed: the technological extravaganza around them and the Botticelli contemporaneously exhibited at the MoMA got all the public attention.

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67 Augusto Cesareo to F. T. Marinetti, postcard of the New York World’s Fair, Air View of the Fair, stamped New York, August 16, 1939. Getty Research Institute, Research Library, Special Collections and Visual Resources, Filippo Tommaso Marinetti Correspondence and Papers, 1886-1974, Series 1, Box 3, Folder 2. Another document in the same archival folder testifies to the fact that the exhibition did take place: letter by General Vincenzo Mezzacapo, Secretary General of the Italian pavilion at the NYWF, to Marinetti, dated May 13, 1941, discussed the impossibility to return the exhibition material of the Fair’s Futurist Exhibition and the dismantling of Prampolini’s windows.

68 See Sergio Cortesini, cit., p. 232.
Of a different slant altogether was the International Women exhibit, a nation-based survey of contemporary women artists organized by the National Council of Women of the United States and held from October 17, 1939 to January 14, 1940 at the Riverside Museum in the Upper West Side, Manhattan (fig. 23). A smaller project than the fairs, the International Women exhibit required nevertheless great organizational efforts and diplomatic support of the government. The show, which included Australia, Czechoslovakia, France, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Switzerland, and the United States, opened two weeks after Hitler’s invasion of Poland and few months after that of Czechoslovakia.69 Italy was the only participating dictatorship, and corresponded in time to Mussolini’s late attempt to present himself to America not only as a defender of war peace, but the only one able to contain Hitler.

The Italian sculptor Antonietta Paoli Pogliani was the coordinator of the whole European section of the show and curated the Italian exhibit with the financial support of the Ministry of Popular Culture.70 She selected twenty-one Italian artists including herself, under the supervision of Maraini, still the head of the Venice Biennale, and made sure that they received the best and largest room in the show.71 Overall, International

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70 Proposed by the National Council of Women of the United States (NCW), the show was approved by the International Council of Women at the organization’s international meeting held in Edinburg in July 1938. With a letter dated November 3, 1938, Pogliani was invited by the president of the NCW exhibition committee, Grace Thompson Seton, to become coordinator of the European section of the exhibition. The incompleteness of Records of the National Council of Women of the United States, at the New York Public Library, make it hard to determine why the NCW chose an Italian and more specifically Pogliani. What is documented, however, is Pogliani’s enthusiasm for the opportunity for Italian propaganda given by that choice of an “Italian and fascist woman” – as the director of the Istituto per le Relazioni Culturali con l’Estero, Luciano de Feo reported to the Italian Consiglio dei Ministri. The minister Ottaviano Koch granted 5000 liras to the show. See Cortesini, cit. pp. 175-179.
71 The artists included in the show were: Anna Barbaro, Milena Barilli, Marina Battigelli, Lorenza Carlesi, Sofia Chiostrri, Lea Colliva, Renata Cuneo, Lia Dall'Oglio, Agnese di Groppello, Stefania Guerzoni, Filli Levasti, Olga Milani, Natalia Mola, Marisa Mori, Gilda Nagni, Amalia Panigati, Antonietta Pogliani, Eva Quajotto, Anna Maria Tommasini, Tina Tommasini, Adelina Zandrino. See National Council of Women,
Women was well attended but generated tepid reviews in the American press. Main criticism was its lack of vitality. Art News expressed surprise about the serenity, which dominated the exhibited canvases, despite the ongoing war was dramatically affecting most of the participating countries.\textsuperscript{72} The Italian section too failed to attract much praise, nor were any works sold, despite the promotional efforts of the Italian consul Gaetano Vecchiotti. As Pogliani commented, “the events of the conflict unfolding in Europe, have obviously influenced the press. It was not one of the most propitious moments to turn an international exhibition into an Italian success.”\textsuperscript{73} Even the Italian-American press, which was particularly supportive of all of the other exhibitions of Italian contemporary art held in the United States, did not pay much attention to the International Women. The latter fact was probably due to the concurrence of the manifestation with more sensational cultural events such as the World’s Fair and the Renaissance show at MoMA.\textsuperscript{74} Pogliani’s relentless attempts to bring the show to other American cities after New York was encouraged by Thomas Howe, director of the Palace of the Legion of Honor in San Francisco. Although the project had to be suspended after Italy’s declaration of war against France and Britain, Pogliani vowed: “we should continue and insist at the opportune moment.”\textsuperscript{75}


\textsuperscript{73} Antonietta Paoli Pogliani, promemoria dattiloscritto “conseguito brevi manu” per il Minculpop, no date (but late 1940), in Archivi Centrali dello Stato, quoted by Cortesini, cit., p. 181.

\textsuperscript{74} Il Progresso Italo-Americano, which during the same period meticulously covered the Italian participation at the NYWF, dedicated only one brief article to the International Women show: R. “Artiste Italiane al Riverside Museum, Il Progresso Italo-Americano,” October 29, 1939.

\textsuperscript{75} Antonietta Paoli Pogliani, promemoria dattiloscritto, cit. Original: “Concludo che a tempo opportuno si deve continuare ad insistere.”
Looking backward upon this micro-history, the persistence with which the Italian government and many private impresarios were eager to promote contemporary Italian art in the States is striking, especially given the dramatic changes that occurred in the relationship between the two countries during the precarious years, 1935 to 1940, when Italy drew closer and closer to Nazi Germany. Even the outbreak of the war in 1939 and Italy’s decision to enter against the Western democracies failed to inhibit the self-promotional urge in the realm of culture. On the contrary, Germany –Italy’s ally – officially refused to participate in exhibitions in the United States even when, as at the 1939 New York World’s Fair, it was invited by the American organizers. It was only Italy’s declaration of war in 1940 and the resulting interruption of maritime communication across the Atlantic that disrupted this program of cultural diplomacy. And still, the works of the New York World’s Fair as well as those of the International Women exhibit were left in storage New York throughout the duration of the conflict with the idea of exhibiting them there in the future. Other exhibition projects, such as Pogliani’s and Argan’s proposal to MoMA, were kept on hold and resumed very soon after 1945, during the Reconstruction years (see Chapter 2). The question, therefore, is why did the Italian government and private citizens put so much economic and organizational effort into this cultural operation of promoting contemporary Italian art?

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76 Germany’s file, in the NYWF archives, documents the negotiation for the inclusion of a German pavilion at the Fair and for the organization of a “Germany Day” within the Fair’s program, and Germany’s ultimate cancellation. See The New York Public Library Manuscript and Archives Division, NYWF 1939 and 1940 Incorporated Records, box 1403, fol. 9.

77 Pogliani’s intention is documented in the aforementioned document by Antonietta Paoli Pogliani, promemoria dattiloscritto, cit. Sergio Cortesini has reconstructed the ironic epilogue of the Italian works of the NYWF after the end of the war: Post-bellum Italian government officials now saw them as embarrassing symbols of Fascist imperialism and tried to have them destroyed. Ultimately they were shipped back home and stored at the Galleria Nazionale d’Arte Moderna in Rome. See Cortesini, cit., pp. 255-257.
To be sure, the immediate goal was propaganda. The promotion of contemporary Italian art in America, as has been documented by art historian Sergio Cortesini, was part of a larger diplomatic effort of the Fascist government to avoid political isolation and embargo after the unpopular invasion of Ethiopia.\textsuperscript{78} As a result of its brutal colonial conquest and its renegade diplomacy, Italy found itself politically ostracized in Europe and economically sanctioned by the Society of Nations.\textsuperscript{79} As the American presidential elections of November 1936 approached, more and more Americans - including incumbent president and candidate, Franklin D. Roosevelt - questioned the present neutral choice of the Unites States toward Italy.\textsuperscript{80} Italian politicians followed this ongoing debate with great concern: at stake was not only the relationship with the United States, which was a major political power and a big creditor. In 1925, Mussolini had obtained favorable arrangements for the payment of Italy's World War I debt to the United States.\textsuperscript{81} As John Diggins has convincingly argued, in 1925, American bankers and administrators saw in Mussolini a source of stability, which would benefit international economy and Wall Street in particular.\textsuperscript{82} Far from being unanimously accepted, the


\textsuperscript{79} The diplomatic crisis between Italy and Ethiopia worsened in January 1935, when the Italian army approached the Ethiopian borders. The war ended in May 1936 with the conquest of Addis Abeba and the proclamation of the Fascist Empire.


\textsuperscript{81} In 1925 Mussolini obtained that Italy’s WWI debt to the United States of $ 1,647,869,197 would be paid off over sixty-two years. A very low interest rate of 0.4 percent made Italy’s total debt $ 2,042,000,000. See John P. Diggins, Mussolini and Fascism: The View from America (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972), pp. 193-98 e 354-62. See also Gian Giacomo Migone, Gli Stati Uniti e il Fascismo: Alle Origini dell’Egemonia Americana in Italia (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1980). Migone has effectively reconstructed the complex mixture of private and public interests that shaped the American debate over the Italian debt up to the Ethiopian crisis. He dedicated particular attention to the influential role played by the J. P. Morgan Bank.

\textsuperscript{82} John Paul Diggins, cit., p. 185.
benevolent treatment of Italy was questioned in America during the 1936 presidential campaign, especially after Mussolini imperialism in Africa changed the image of Fascist Italy, now perceived in America as a major cause of global instability.\textsuperscript{83} It was during the Ethiopian crisis that Mussolini founded the Ministry for Press and Propaganda and decided to launch new strategies of cultural diplomacy.\textsuperscript{84} The newly created ministry enhanced and revised the regime’s methods of propaganda, affecting Italy’s cultural diplomacy everywhere, but particularly with regard to the United States.\textsuperscript{85}

Cultural diplomacy featured prominently in the promotion of Italy’s national image abroad well before the rise of Fascism. In the pre-World War I years, cultural initiatives mostly consisted of courses and lectures to promote the knowledge of Italian language, literature, and history rather than art exhibitions, which became common among European nations as well as in Italy between the wars. During the 1920s, the Fascist government’s cultural program abroad developed in line with that of other European countries.\textsuperscript{86} In the 1930s, however, after having consolidated its consenso at home, Mussolini declared the universality and exportability of Fascism, and implemented

\textsuperscript{83} The debt continued to be a source of controversy and anxiety in the relationship between Italy and the United States well into the post-war period, during the Peace Treatise and the infamous trip to the US of Italian prime minister, Alcide De Gasperi, in 1947. On the continuous debate, before and after WWII about Italy’s debt, see Rosaria Quartaro, \textit{I Rapporti Italo-Americani Durante il Fascismo}, cit., pp. 31-40; and Rosaria Quartaro, \textit{Italia e Stati Uniti: gli anni difficili (1945-1952)} (Napoli: Edizioni Scientifiche Italiane, 1986), pp. 148-149.

\textsuperscript{84} Formed in 1934 as the Sottosegretariato di Stato per la Stampa e la Propaganda, the office was expanded in June 1935 into an actual ministry (Ministero per la Stampa e la Propaganda). In May 1937, after the term “propaganda” acquired a negative acceptance, it was changed into Ministero della Cultura Popolare.

\textsuperscript{85} See Lorenzo Medici, \textit{Dalla propaganda alla cooperazione: la diplomazia culturale italiana nel secondo dopoguerra (1944-1950)} (Padua: CEDAM, 2009). Medici’s first chapter is dedicated to the regime’s cultural diplomacy in the United States before the Second World War emphasizing the special importance of this country within Fascist foreign affairs.

\textsuperscript{86} A brief, yet well documented overview of Italian cultural diplomacy up to Fascism is offered in the first chapter of Lorenzo Medici, \textit{Dalla Propaganda alla Cooperazione}. 
propaganda abroad. Touring exhibitions of Italian art were an important part of this new attempt at promoting Italy’s image internationally. Major enterprises in countries other than the United States included: the 1930 Exhibition of Italian Art, 1200-1900 held at the Royal Academy of Arts in London; the two shows of 1935 held simultaneously in Paris, _L’Art Italien de Cimabue à Tiepolo_ at the Petit Palais and _L’Art Italien des XIXe et XXe Siècles_ at the Jeu de Paume; the 1937 _Ausstellung Italienischer Kunst von 1800 bis zum Gegenwart_, held at the Akademie der Künstein in Berlin; and Italy’s pavilion at the 1937 _Exposition Internationale_ in Paris. The effort made in the United States starting in 1935, however, was unique outside Europe and logistically more complicated; even compared to European countries it had no equals in continuity, quantity, expense, nor bureaucratic effort. Furthermore, nowhere as in the United States did the Italian government put as much emphasis on the contemporary artistic production as opposed to the art of the past or to forms of cultural production other than art.

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88 See Benedetta Garzarelli, “Parleremo al Mondo Intero.” _La Propaganda del Fascismo all’Estero_ (Alessandria (Italy): Edizioni dell’Orso, 2004).
89 The only other long-lasting support of contemporary art was in France, where, during the years 1929-1936, the Fascist government actively promoted the so called _Italiens de Paris_. The logistics and the economic investment dedicated to sending exhibitions to the United States, however, was obviously greater. Moreover, the regime also organized _L’Art Italien de Cimabue à Tiepolo_ on its own initiative. Finally, the fact that the effort to export contemporary art shifted from France to the United States concurrently to the invasion of Ethiopia confirms two main points discussed in this chapter: 1) the crisis that followed the colonial campaign made Italy’s diplomatic effort concentrate on the United States; 2) in the second half of the 1930s America substituted France as the symbol of modernity in the Italians’ perception. The 1937 exhibition held in Berlin of Italian art from the 19th century to the present was an isolated and awkward attempt: designed to show the “ideal communion” between the two dictatorships, it ended up upsetting Hitler for its inclusion of modernist art – especially Futurism – that he had just called “degenerate.” On the Parisian show, see Emily Braun, “Leonardo’s Smile,” _cit._, pp. 173-86, 272-5. On the Berlin show see Benedetta Garzarelli, “Parleremo al Mondo Intero.” _cit._, pp. 209-223. Garzarelli’s excellent book considers France and Germany as two “case studies.” It is unfortunate, however, that it fails to acknowledge the importance of Italian cultural diplomacy in the United States and to consider its specificity.
90 Different from everywhere else, the only exhibition of ancient art sent to the United States was an initiative of the American organizers of the San Francisco Golden Gate Exposition, who requested it. The Italian government sent it begrudgingly, as the price to pay in order to have the contemporary exhibition
It is difficult, a posteriori, to determine how effective the exhibitions were as a means of political propaganda. Helped by America’s own isolationism, Mussolini’s diplomacy successfully reached its goals: the relationship between the two countries, in fact, enjoyed rather good health until 1940, given that the various pre-war diplomatic crises had no concrete consequence before Mussolini entered World War II on Hitler’s side. In spite of the regime’s actions declared as unacceptable by Washington, most notably the declaration of the Italian Empire in 1936, the anti-Semitic Laws in 1938, and the alliance with Nazi Germany in 1939, the United States never interrupted diplomatic relationships with Italy and continued to grant the Duce very favorable financial conditions over payment of World War I debt. In spite of his harsh words, Franklin Delano Roosevelt never joined in the Society of Nations’ official condemnation of the invasion of Ethiopia nor in the economic sanctions against Italy.

It would be wrong, however, to argue that the promotion of contemporary Italian art in America was only determined by economic and political aims or to view it as the principal reason for the two nations’ continued diplomatic relations up until 1940. The accepted at the Exposition as well: “if we don’t accept the request to ship 20-25 ancient works, we will not be able to send the modern ones.” Giuseppe Morelli to Antonio Maraini, Florence, October 23, 1937, Archives of the Galleria Nazionale d’Arte Moderna, Fondo Maraini, Folder “San Francisco,” letter no. 33. Original: “se non sarà accolta la domanda per l’invio di 20-25 opere antiche, non sarà possibile mandare le moderne.” Morelli was an artist and a deputato (member of the Italian Parliament); Maraini was the influential Secretary General of the Venice Biennale and a deputato too. Other forms of cultural diplomacy were represented by the activity of the Istituti Italiani di Cultura, founded and promoted by the regime worldwide, which focused their cultural activities on the glories of Italy’s ancient art and or on Italian language and literature. The continuous promotion of contemporary art was unique to the United States. See Stefano Santoro, “The Cultural Penetration of Fascist Italy Abroad and in Eastern Europe,” Journal of Modern Italian Studies, 8:1 (2003), pp. 36-66.

91 See John P. Diggins, cit., pp. 193-98 e 354-62. See also Gian Giacomo Migone, Gli Stati Uniti e il Fascismo: Alle Origini dell’Egemonia Americana in Italia (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1980). In 1925 Mussolini obtained that Italy’s WWI debt to the United States of $ 1,647,869,197 would be paid off over sixty-two years. A very low interest rate of 0.4 percent made Italy’s total debt $ 2,042,000,000. Migone has effectively reconstructed the complex mixture of private and public interests that shaped the American debate over the Italian debt, culminating with the Ethiopian crisis. He has dedicated particular attention to the influential role played by the J. P. Morgan Bank.
tendency to explain the cultural initiatives of the Fascist state at home and especially abroad through the sole utilitarian agendas of propaganda is understandable: cultural diplomacy of Fascist Italy was more centrally controlled than that, say, of democratic Italy after the war, and it was more carefully channeled toward the nationalistic propaganda needs of the regime. Yet, art exhibitions conveying nationalistic messages were not (and are not) a prerogative of Fascism. Similarly to the cultural diplomacy of western democracies, Fascist cultural diplomacy was the result of contrasting ideas and strategies within the government.92 It had to negotiate overlapping, and often conflicting, activities and interests of various bureaucratic organisms and officials (in our case, as seen in this chapter, the many ministers, members of Parliament, etc.), several figures competing to represent Italy to the American authorities (ambassadors, directors of cultural institutes, special commissioners, etc.). It was also the result of the interaction between state and private initiatives, which often had converging but not identical goals and priorities.

One example was the long-lasting legal struggle of Italian ambassadors and consuls to gain control over the American Fasci Italiani all’Estero, which were independent groups of Italian émigrés and Italian-Americans who adhered to Fascism and practiced independent forms of pro-Fascist propaganda. The Fasci Italiani actively promoted and helped organizing the Italian exhibitions in the States. They often mediated between Italian and American authorities more successfully and quickly than the diplomats in charge. Their enthusiastic participation significantly contributed in making these events culturally and politically relevant in America – especially in cities with numerous and influent communities of Italian-Americans, such as San Francisco,
Chicago, and New York. But the Italian diplomats perceived them as dangerously outside of the regime’s control.

Another example, directly related to the Italian exhibitions of contemporary art was the collaboration between the state and private art dealers such as Sabatello or Pecci Blunt: their nationalistic dedication and economic aims conveniently matched the government’s propaganda needs, but their cultural visions and social ambitions cannot be simplified within the limits of Mussolini’s plans. The incongruences emerged when the government changed strategy and interrupted those privates’ activities.

It would be, therefore, wrong to argue that the promotion of Italian contemporary art in America was determined only by economic and political aims. If one intends to understand the authentic enthusiasm of the large and diverse crowd of people actively involved in the promotion of Italian art in America, and in order to explain how major aspects of this operation outlived Fascism, another, not explicitly acknowledged driving force should be examined here; one with longer-lasting consequences. The Italian exhibitions were part and the product of a new national obsession, which continued well after the Second World War: that of metaphorically conquering America, perceived in Italy as the symbol of modernity par excellence.

During the 1930s, Italy became more and more fascinated with everything American.93 The phenomenon transversally (yet in different ways) involved virtually

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93 In 1942, the Italian writer Emilio Cecchi wrote: “The beginning of the 1914-1918 war found the world’s readers with their heads bent onto Russian novels. The beginning of the new war, in 1939, found them with their heads bent onto American short stories and novels.” Emilio Cecchi, “Introduzione all’edizione del 1942,” in Elio Vittorini, cit., p. 1037. Original: L'inizio della guerra 1914-1918 trovò i lettori di tutto il mondo a testa china sui romanzi russi. E l'inizio della nuova guerra, nel 1939, li ha ritrovati a testa china sulle novelle e sui romanzi americani.” A statement of this sort by a prominent and official figure of Fascist culture and approved by Fascist censorship is all the more striking in light of Italy’s autarchic ideology and of the fact that in 1942 the United States was the enemy in the ongoing war. Nothing similar would have been even thinkable in Germany after 1933 when Hitler ascended to power, let alone in 1942 with the war.
every group and environment beyond social, cultural, geographical or political divides: from Fascist official circles to dissident environments, from high to popular culture, from rural areas to cosmopolitan metropolis, from North to South. We saw how the son of the Duce, Vittorio Mussolini and the anti-fascist activist Giaime Pintor used similar words of admiration for America’s young “spirit, mentality, and temperament.” 94 The Fascist Minister of the Corporations, Bottai and the journal he edited, Critica Fascista considered Taylorism, also called “American scientific management” as a viable model to modernize and rationalize not only Italian industry but the country’s whole social system. 95 Similarly, Marxist theorist and anti-fascist activist, Antonio Gramsci expressed his admiration for Taylorist techniques of “scientific management”: despite his criticism to what he described as the ultimate form of capitalist exploitation, Gramsci was interested in the rationality of Taylorist methods, which he saw as the product of a sound social structure (America), devoid of Europe’s residues of feudalism and “army of parasites.” 96

The historian of Fascism, Emilio Gentile has documented how an unprecedented number of books on America and translations of American literature increasingly flooded Italy’s publishing market throughout the 1930s. 97 America attracted more and more interest among the Italian public and especially among intellectuals, culminating at the

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94 See Introduction.
end of the decade. America - Gentile has convincingly shown - gradually came to be seen in as synonymous with modernity.

The promotion of Italian contemporary art in the United States should be read as integral part of this growing interest in America. Yet working in an opposite way from the importation of American books to Italy, which Gentile described, the exported exhibitions of Italian art were not a means for Italians to directly absorb American culture. In the intentions of their organizers, as we have seen, they had the opposite goal: to export Italian culture. Nevertheless, they were the byproduct of the same fixation with America. The exhibitions were conceived and promoted in the first place by people who had already visited the United States, had an admiration or a personal link with it, had written about this country (Sabatello, Pecci-Blunt, Bottai). The organization of the Italian shows further contributed to the phenomenon by bringing Italian artists, intellectuals and entrepreneurs to the States and nourish the Italians’ interest in modernity American style through reviews, accounts, and new projects. The effort that the government and private organizers put into the organization of exhibitions, which were not initially requested by the hosting country, attest to a collective desire to have Italian contemporary culture recognized in the United States.

The language privately used by the Italian organizers of these exhibitions in their correspondence revealed more ambitious intentions behind the declared aims to succeed commercially or advertise Fascism in the States. Terms such as “expansion,” “conquest,” “penetration” and similarly aggressive expressions frequently recurred in

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98 I am considering this phenomenon as what philosopher Michel Foucault named “a positive unconscious of knowledge,” that is: the desire to conquer America “elud[ed] the consciousness” of the exhibitions’ organizers. See Michel Foucault, The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences (New York: Vintage Books, 1970), pp. ix, xi.
those documents and stridently clash with the peace-oriented official rhetoric of the exhibitions. For example, Sabatello entitled his exhibition proposal to the Ministry of Popular Culture, “Reflections on the General Expansion of Italy in the United States” and his proposed goal when he advocated the establishment of a permanent exhibition space in New York was “the conquest of the American modern art market.” Giuseppe Bottai – former Minister of Corporations (1929 - 1932), now Minister of National Education (1936 – 1943) - wrote to the Minister of Popular Culture, Dino Alfieri that art exhibitions were “the basis for our real and long-lasting penetration of the West Coast and, possibly, of the Atlantic side of the United States.” The sculptor Antonietta Paoli Pogliani commented in a note to the same Ministry that the New York exhibition of Italian female artists that she curated was a positive operation of “italianità and penetration,” and was part of a “slow and tiring work through which we can conquer [even] those cultural environments hostile to us.” Lastly, Ugo D’Annunzio, named Minister of Popular Culture after Alfieri, wrote that “this kind of cultural manifestations … represent a very desirable form of cultural penetration and therefore also of propaganda for the Regime.”

99 See below on Dario Sabatello’s 1933 Reflections on the General Expansion of Italy in the United States of America. Here and below the emphasis is mine.
100 Dario Sabatello, “Progetto d'istituzione nel Rockefeller Center a New York - nel Palazzo d'Italia - di un grande centro di diffusione del pensiero, dell'arte antica e moderna, e dei prodotti dell'artigianato italiano,” typed paper, in ACS, cit.
interconnected yet not identical. Propaganda concerned the image of Italy and its promotion. Penetration, as the other terms highlighted above, had a military expansionist connotation. What could paintings and sculptures conquer? In a period of colonial expansion, similar terms of penetration and conquest were commonly used in Fascist Italy to express territorial ambitions. The United States, however, was definitely out of the Italian army’s reach (in terms of geographic distance and military competence) and of Mussolini’s imperialistic aspirations. Far from intending to colonialize America, bringing Italian contemporary art to the United States was a way for the Italians to metaphorically capture a symbol. The regime was interested in having the title of a “modern country” somehow similarly to that of “empire,” which had likewise only recently been acquired.

Similarly to the imperial ambitions, the push of politicians and intellectuals to have Italy accepted as a modern country predated Fascism. A precedent was that of the Futurists. By publishing the manifesto in the leading French newspaper *Le Figaro*, Filippo Tommaso Marinetti intended, in his own words, “to conquer Paris and appear in the eyes of all as an absolute innovator.” And, as we saw, later Depero intended to “smash the Alps of the Atlantic.” By conquering America, which had substituted Paris

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*stimolare (Museum of Modern Art, Università, ecc.) costituiscano una forma desiderabilissima di penetrazione culturale e quindi anche di propaganda per il Regime.”*

* This differentiated Fascist’s cultural diplomacy in the United States from, for example, Eastern Europe (especially Romania, Hungary, and Bulgaria) where the exportation of Italian culture had an ambition of cultural if not even political colonialism. See Stefano Santoro, “The Cultural Penetration of Fascist Italy Abroad and in Eastern Europe,” Journal of Modern Italian Studies, 8:1 (2003), pp. 36-66.


* See Introduction.
as a symbol of modernity, Mussolini aimed at having Italy accepted as a modern country: not only internationally but also by the Italians themselves. In Italy, the growing global importance of the United States as a new economic and political power and as the new centre of modernity alternative to France came to be perceived as a great opportunity for the recognition of Italy’s own modernity. Given that – so went a commonplace among Italians in the 1930s - Italy was continually boycotted and demeaned by its neighbouring and competing “Latin sister,” the nation’s urge towards modernity could only find the right recognition and international soundboard in the “New World.” Also, as the Fascist rhetoric emphasized, America was itself a creation of the “Italian genius:” from its “discovery” by the Italian explorers (“Colombo and Vespucci … are the inaugurators of modern history”\(^{108}\)) to the physical construction of its modern cities by Italian workers (“The Brooklyn Bridge’s piers stand on the corpses of the Italian workers who laboured underwater for half dollar a day”\(^{109}\)). The acceptance by foreign countries - the United States above all of them - of Italy as a modern country was an effective way to overcome its longstanding inferiority complex as a backward nation.\(^{110}\) As early as 1925, the Duce asked representatives of the Fasci Italiani all’Estero: “Do me a favor: tell them that next to the monuments there are factories and next to the museums there are working sites … that the Italian Nation does not rely on the past but marches vigorously toward the


\(^{110}\) On the continuity of this complex in Italy, beyond Fascism, see Emily Braun and Michelangelo Sabatino, eds., _Special Issue: Italia Barbara: Italian Primitives from Piero to Pasolini_, _Journal of Modern Italian Studies_, Vol. 17, No. 3 (June 2012).
future.” Mussolini was struggling “against the common place according to which Italy would be rich in beautiful memories, full of venerable museums, of eternal monuments, but a backwater in what is called modern civilization.” America was a major field - real and mythical – where Mussolini fought the battle for the recognition of Italy’s image as a modern country.

Cesare Pavese, as noted in the Introduction, was not alone in seeing America as “great laboratory” and “theatre” of modernity. The myth of America affected many different groups of people in Italy. In their post-war accounts of the 1930s, influential writers of the Italian left, such as Elio Vittorini, Italo Calvino, and Umberto Eco, who grew up in Fascist Italy, attributed to the American myth a central formative role for the intellectual maturation of an anti-fascist environment. They all identified Americana, a two-volume anthology of American literature, edited by Vittorini, as the most paradigmatic product of what Eco has called “an education to America.” Prepared in the years 1938-1940 and published in 1942, Americana was not only a simple translation of America’s most representative fiction writers from the origins to the present; it also included original introductory texts by Vittorini himself, which testifies to the cultural and political importance of America as a model, and a rich section of illustrations, mostly consisting reproductions of WPA-sponsored photographs. A myth needs to be rectified,

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112 See Introduction.
here. In the postwar context, the regime was simplistically presented as anti-American, even though, as I have shown, this was not true. According to this logic, Vittorini’s admiration for American literature and his *Americana* was intrinsically anti-Fascist. The syllogism saw as a confirmation the fact that Americana was censured in 1942 by the Fascist government: to the eyes of postwar readers this further confirmed the anti-regime nature of 1930s “Americanism,” as the admiration for American culture came to be known.\(^{114}\) This idea has survived until now.\(^ {115}\) If the first edition was indeed censured, it is also true that a revised edition of *Americana* was approved by the regime and released just a few months later with a foreword by the conservative *Accademico d’Italia*, Emilio Cecchi – a clear example of the ambivalent relationship that the Fascist regime had with Americanism.

We saw how historian Emilio Gentile has defined the debate on Americanism in Fascist Italy as politically transversal.\(^{116}\) The anti-Americans, both fascist and anti-fascist, employed the same recurrent stereotypes to criticize the American “civilization of machines” that they used to attack the consequences of modernity on people’s lifestyle.\(^ {117}\) America was a civilization with neither culture nor spirit because it was driven by money and hedonism. (The financial crash of 1929 was frequently explained as a providential punishment). Aspects of American lifestyle that anti-Americanists perceived as

\(^{114}\) Umberto Eco, cit.

\(^{115}\) See Claudia Dall’Osso, *Voglia D’America: Il Mito Americano in Italia tra Ottocento e Novecento* (Rome: Donzelli, 2007), p. 16; Edoardo Esposito, ed., *L’America dopo Americana* (Milan: Mondadori, 2008). During the Cold War period, due to the need of a redemptive narrative and of a legitimation of the NATO alliance between Italy and the United States, the historical literature both in Italy and in the States interpreted the phenomenon of late-1930s Americanism in Italy as part of a growing anti-Fascist sentiment among Italian intellectuals. More recent scholarship has revised that interpretation by showing how complex and widespread Italian Americanism in fact was, as discussed below.

\(^{116}\) See Introduction.

\(^{117}\) These included fascist writers Alberto Moravia and Emilio Cecchi as well as anti-fascist author Vittorini himself (before his 1940 conversion to Americanism).
particularly dangerous were women’s emancipation and the allegedly consequent
dissolution of the family institution. What made the United States inevitably distant and
inferior to Italy were America’s lack of history and the Americans’ lack of territorial
roots. As a consequence, wrong values such as modernity and internationalism
triumphed. Among the most vocal exponents of these positions were the artists and
intellectuals of the anti-modernist Strapaese movement. One of its leaders, artist Mino
Maccari despised America’s modernity as “‘bastard, international, external, mechanical.’”
He defined its social order “‘a concoction brewed by Jewish bankers, pederasts, war
profiteers and brothel-keepers.’” 118 Yet, Italian anti-Americanists also criticized American
society’s “Racism and Opportunism,” as a chapter of Emilio Cecchi’s 1939 influential
book, America Amara (Bitter America), was significantly entitled. 119 In their travel
reports, which they frequently published in Italian major newspapers, popular writers
such as Cecchi and Cipriano Efsio Oppo pointed out and sarcastically commented on
American racism and discriminations of African-Americans, Jews, and the poor. 120 In
1936, coming back from a three-month stay in New York, writer Alberto Moravia wrote
to Giovanni Prezzolini, his host and director of the Italian Academy at Columbia

119 Cecchi is particularly violent in his discussion of the segregation of African-Americans, on the
phenomenon of lynching, and the condition of the black community in Harlem. Emilio Cecchi, America Amara
120 Cecchi’s America Amara originally appears as a series of articles published in the most read Italian
newspaper, Corriere della Sera between 1937 and 1938. Oppo spent long periods to the United States in
the years 1931-1933 and then for the New York World’s Fair in 1939. He regularly reported his American
trips in the Roman newspaper La Tribuna: during his first stay he published a series of “letters” and during
his second stay he reviewed the Fair and wrote about American museums. See Francesca Romana Morelli,
Cipriano Efsio Oppo, cit.
University: “In America the mentality is still that of slavery and exploitation … Being a poor in the United States is a bit like being a Jew in Germany or a pariah in India.”

The Americanists, for their part, admired America’s modernity. They praised the Americans’ sense of collectivity and youthful spirit, which were also central features of Fascist rhetoric. They often likened Roosevelt’s America to Mussolini’s Italy. The official *Dizionario di Politica* of the Fascist Party compared, under the entry “United States,” the powerful figure of the American president to that of the Italian Duce. Often, Italian writers claimed with pride that Roosevelt’s New Deal had fascist corporativism as a model. If the anti-Americanists criticized the civilization of machines, Americanists celebrated the United States for its “technocracy.” Not only did so the industrialist Alberto Pirelli or the futurist artist Fortunato Depero but also the most official exponents of the Fascist party, from the aforementioned *Dizionario di Politica* to Mussolini himself. In 1933, the latter wrote an article in the American magazine *Technocracy* praising technological modernity in the United States, and he cited the United States as a model when, in 1940, he instituted Italy’s national “Day of technology.”

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121 Alberto Moravia to Giovanni Prezzolini, 1936 Conte di Savoia from America to Italy, in Giovanni Prezzolini, ed., *Alberto Moravia - Giovanni Prezzolini: Lettere*, (Milan: Rusconi, 1982) to p. 23.
122 Among the most enthusiastic were: leading intellectuals, Massimo Bontempelli, Cipriano Efisio Oppo, and Margherita Sarfatti; artists as diverse as futurists Fortunato Depero and Francesco Di Cocco, tonalist Corrado Cagli; the film critic and author Vittorio Mussolini (son of the Duce); journalists Cirlantini and Beniamino De Ritis; and above all Benito Mussolini himself, until the outburst of World War II. The rhetoric of America as a “young” country was not unique to Fascist Italy but well rooted in European tradition. What was new was that Fascist Italy did not use this rhetoric to patronize America as it was done for centuries but rather as a special link across the Atlantic. On the traditional perception of American from a European perspective see Vann Woodward, *Old World’s New World* (New York – Oxford: New York Public Library, Oxford University Press, 1991). Woodward, however, fails to mention Fascist Americanism.
emerges from Emilio Gentile’s analysis, is that in Fascist Italy, both the anti-Americanists and the Americanists measured Italy’s modernity, either by contrast or by comparison, in relation to the United States. Even the strongly critical Moravia admitted:

“of all the countries that I have visited so far, [the United States] is the one that seems to me the most modern, that is the one which, with no apparent will, has created a certain kind of civilization that all the others, Russia included, try to emulate.”

The American myth went even beyond the limits of Italy’s intelligentsia on which Gentile focuses his study. Painter and writer, Carlo Levi described the importance and intensity that the American myth had as a popular, almost religious phenomenon. Levi was a Jewish Italian artist from Turin who made a successful career in Fascist Italy during the 1930s. He was one of the main artists exhibited in the United States by both Sabatello and Pecci-Blunt. Paradoxically, all of those exhibitions, including his solo show at the New York Comet (spring 1938), took place during his period of al confino captivity (1935-1939) in the southern, rural region Basilicata where he was sent as an anti-fascist. He described the importance of the American myth for those peasants in Southern Italy who had formerly emigrated to the States and had come back “around 1929 when the crash in the U.S. and the rosy promises of Fascist propaganda caused some emigrants to return to Italy, where they found themselves stuck.” Wrote Levi:

America is present not only in the language and memories of the peasants but in the objects of everyday life and the tools of their trades: razors, scissors, armchairs. These importations from the other side are the outward signs of the peasants’ religious devotion to all that is American. They very often use American weights and measures –inches, feet and pounds – instead of the European metric system.

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125 Alberto Moravia, cit., p. 17. Original: “di tutti i paesi che ho visitato fin'ora, [l’America] è quello che mi pare il più moderno, cioè quello che senza volontà apparente ha creato un certo genere di civiltà che tutti gli altri, compresa la Russia, cercano di imitare.”
Levi went on to describe the mythical and almost religious nature of America in a way that adds to Pavese’s definition:

The myth of America is no such romantic invention as the ‘South Sea Islands.’ It is not a creation of the intellect, such as the last of the myths of Western Europe ‘Paris, City of Light,’ nor is it a social and political myth like that of Soviet Russia. It is a true, a magical myth, the expression of a peasant world, where magic has real power and every object has, in consequence, a dual nature. … It is because the peasants see in America the magical vision of both an earthly paradise and a promised land that the myth has its dual nature. So does every image and object belonging to it; for instance the pictures of Franklin Delano Roosevelt in the peasant houses.

In his celebrated book on the *confino* experience, *Christ Stopped at Eboli*, written between 1943 and 1944, Levi described the religious veneration of iconic symbols of America in a peasant’s house:

The eyes of the two inseparable guardian angels looked at me from the wall over the bed. On one side was the black scowling face, with its large, inhuman eyes, of the Madonna of Viggiano; on the other a colored print of the sparkling eyes … and the hearty grin of president Roosevelt. I never saw other pictures or images than these: not the King nor the Duce, nor even Garibaldi, no famous Italian of any kind, nor any one of the appropriate saints; only Roosevelt and the Madonna of Viggiano never failed to be present … Sometimes a third image formed, along with these two, a trinity: a dollar bill.126

The regime was well aware of this phenomenon: “Many village streets, even during the Fascist regime, were called ‘Via Washington.’ In fact this is a popular street name all over the regions of Apulia, Basilicata and Calabria.”127

Fascism worked hard to strengthen the bonds between Italy and the communities of Italian émigrés in the United States. The exhibitions of Italian art in the States and their success had a prominent role in nourishing the national pride not only of Italian-Americans, as demonstrated by their direct involvement (as for the Faschi Italiani all’Estero) and by abundant space given to these cultural enterprises in the Italian-

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127 Ibidem.
American press, but also by reflection of the Italian population: for many Italians, an
Italian success in America was more significant than an Italian success anywhere else.\textsuperscript{128}
The regime also knew that the opinions of Italian-Americans were very influential on
their families and communities across the Atlantic: by manipulating the opinion of
Italian-Americans to influence people back home, the regime anticipated a strategy
systematically practiced by the United States and the Democrazia Cristiana during the
Cold War period.

If we consider the promotion of Italian art in the United States as part of the myth
of modern and forward-marching America, so important and widespread in 1930s Italy, it
is not surprising that the regime’s operation was as much an operation of conquering
American public opinion, as one of conquering an image at home. The cultural policies
reflected back upon its makers. It did so at many levels. Firstly, the Italians welcomed the
perceived shift of the international art center from Paris to New York as a positive
opportunity to promote the “Italian school.” The intention was to propose an Italian way
to modernity that was alternative to the dominant French-centered narrative. But by doing
so, they implicitly recognized America as the new arbiter of modernity and gave an
unforeseen importance to its market, museums, and scholars. Secondly, the Italian
organizers of the shows closely studied how American galleries, museums, and
universities functioned and were structured. The declared goal was to “study the enemy”
in order to penetrate the American art system more effectively.

In a report of 1935 Augusto Rosso, the Italian ambassador to Washington,
theorized a strategy, specifically conceived for Italian self-promotion in America, which

\textsuperscript{128} See Sergio Cortesini, cit. pp. 33-35. The relationship between the regime policy on Italian emigres and
that of “consensus” in Italy is discussed by Matteo Petrelli, \textit{Il Fascismo e gli Italiani all’Estero}, cit.,
especially pp. 63-76.
greatly affected the subsequent exhibition activity considered here. Firstly, he maintained that the organization of propaganda “should be managed by … people who deeply know the goals and methods of American life, and who should be left free to freely act ‘the American way.’ … If we want to help the Fascist cause in America, we cannot follow any other method than one specific to the United States.”

The results were the passionate reports by very diverse perspectives, from the art dealer Sabatello to the cultural bureaucrat Oppo, from the writer Cecchi to the art historian Argan. The latter’s report was particularly interesting both for its content and for the impact that this early experience had on his later career as one of the most influential intellectuals of post-war Italy and Communist mayor of Rome.

Wrote Argan: “I was disappointed to notice that, in America, museums are much younger, more open, and closer to the people than in our country.” He suggested that Italy take its example from American museums’ fruitful integration of curatorial and conservation departments. And, commenting on the quality and vastness of American museums’ collections, he concluded: “for any art scholar, not having visited America, now represents a serious and fundamental lacuna.”

Secondly and more importantly, Rosso also suggested that the Italians adopted the “American way” to pragmatically enhance their success among the American public and

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130 Argan authored in 1968 the famous, Storia dell’Arte Italiana, which, constantly revised and republished in several editions (the most recent in 2008), has been the most popular textbook in high schools and undergraduate art history courses in Italy, influencing art history teaching for many generations. He was the first Communist mayor of Rome between 1976 and 1979.

press, even when “that might seem, sometimes, in contrast with the Regime’s spirit.” He theorized the adoption, in this country, of a “more subtle” form of propaganda, which should work more efficiently than any traditionally direct intervention of the Fascist government: “[w]e should not create, in the public nor … in the American Government, the feeling that what is being done is political - that is Fascist – propaganda, sponsored by a foreign government: that would cause … suspicions and violently hostile reactions, especially from the press.”132 Art exhibitions were indicated by Rosso as perfect tools of “parallel diplomacy” for they were not openly political. For the sake of propaganda effectiveness, Rosso suggested that the Italian government study and embrace what he called “American methods,” that is modes of operation and contents that would be perceived as familiar to and in line with the values of the American public. The “subtlety” of American propaganda consisted above all in its indirectness, as opposed to the Fascist excessively direct one.133 The idea was that Italian art exhibitions should be able to promote aspects of Fascist Italy which would positively impress the American audience, and that they should do so in an American fashion: indirectly.134 In other words, more than the content of the shows their real propaganda message was in the indirectness of their operating methods. Not only would this be a strategy – Rosso advised - to disguise the propaganda nature of the enterprises and win the sympathy of

133 In the 1930s, also Antonio Gramsci, in his *Quaderni del Carcere* (“Americanism and Fordism”) refers to American “extremely subtle ideological and political propaganda.” David Forgacs, ed., *A Gramsci Reader: Selected Writings 1916–1935* (New York: New York University Press, 2000) p. 278. The idea of the more “subtle” nature of American propaganda was well rooted in Italy if authors with such opposite ideological positions as Gramsci, a jailed political dissident, and Rosso, a Fascist bureaucrat, referred to it in a similar way.
134 Rosso’s ideas and the very terms that he used (“American methods,” “subtle,” or “indirect”) were part of a larger phenomenon, during the 1930s, of absorption in Italy of American marketing strategies. See Adam Arvidsson, *Marketing Modernity: Italian Advertising from Fascism to Postmodernity* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003).
American audiences, but it was also a way to distance Italian Fascism from the truly unpopular Nazism. The government adopted Rosso’s ideas and used key “American methods” as guidelines of its contemporary art exhibitions. These were respected with a stricter rigor until 1938 but also informed some major principles of the 1939-1940 exhibitions.

The first method was inherent in Rosso’s idea of subtlety: the Fascist government organized art shows indirectly by secretly sponsoring private initiatives of critics and dealers. As the minister Dino Alfieri put it, “considering the American people’s indomitable aversion to any form of propaganda, we found it more appropriate to give the event a private character rather than presenting it as a product of this ministry.”

By hiding the regime’s presence behind a façade of commerce-driven private initiatives, the shows concealed their political propaganda goals. At the same time, private initiative, which in Fascist Italy was closely associated to the United States, appeared as a driving force of Italy’s cultural and economic vitality. In the immediate, this choice was dictated by the Fascist government’s pragmatism – namely, the non-ideological adoption of the most effective strategy for the specific circumstance. In the long run, however, this precedent created the basis for a long-term cultural diplomacy that, during the Cold War period, was based on the initiatives of private critics and galleries similarly for political reasons. The exception represented by the Golden Gate Exposition, the New York World’s Fair and the International Women exhibit, where the regime openly revealed

136 Often the equation had a negative connotation. See below in this chapter my discussion of Americanism and anti-Americanism in Fascist Italy.
itself as organizer and lender of the shows, depended on these events’ organizational structure, which demanded official national participation.\textsuperscript{137}

Rosso similarly suggested that exhibitions of Italian art avoided any direct propaganda content. Indeed, to the surprise of American reviewers, the artworks brought to the United States, different from those exhibited in Italy and in other countries, included no busts of Mussolini, or celebration of Italy’s military campaigns. Nor did they directly depict any of the Fascist propaganda’s tropes such as the corporate state, swamp reclamations, construction of new cities etc. The only exception was the New York World’s Fair. Every pavilion of the Fair featured nationalistic and self-celebratory content, and therefore Italian propaganda did not stand out. Yet it is also true that the anti-Semitic Laws signalled a turning point in Fascism’s strategy of self-representation in the United States.

The Italians attributed a major importance to the role and influence of Jews in American society, due more to prejudice than to actual knowledge of the condition of American Jewry.\textsuperscript{138} The successor of Rosso, ambassador Fulvio Suvich wrote to the minister Galeazzo Ciano: “There is in America a confused and strong antipathy to the Nazi regime. The Jews, who have important positions in the press, finance, universities, criticism, obviously take advantage of this. The Jewish element is capable of 100%
exploiting the hostility that the American spirit feels against Nazi aspects such as racism and religious persecution.”

Paradoxically, a typically anti-Semitic premise – that of over-emphasizing the power of Jews – caused the regime to showcase the well-being of Italian Jews and their integration in Fascist culture. In his 1934 official report, Dario Sabatello (naively) adduced Mussolini’s “benevolent attitude toward the Jews” as a major factor to explain why “for the first time maybe in history, Italy is in a most privileged position for cultural propaganda.”

In 1937, as the anti-Semitic campaign became more and more vociferous in the Italian press, the regime distanced itself from Nazi anti-Semitism through diplomatic avenues. Suvich reassured the American Jewish Congress that, “the Italian Government plans no change in the policy towards its Jewish population whom it regards highly, and that recent attacks against the Jews in the Italian press are not significant of government attitude.” And, after a trip to Italy, Generoso Pope, a prominent figure in the New York City Italian-American community, carried Mussolini’s message: “I authorize you to declare and make known, immediately upon return to New York, to the Jews of America that their preoccupation for their brothers living in Italy is nothing but the fruit of evil informers. I authorize you to specify that the Jews in Italy have received, receive, and will continue to receive the same treatment accorded to every

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other Italian citizen and that no form of racial or religious discrimination is in my thought, which is devoted and faithful to the policy of equality in law and the freedom of worship.”

Art exhibitions thus conveyed an important message of cultural integration, and, consistently with Rosso’s strategy, they did so indirectly. The role of Jews in Italy’s contemporary art scene was indeed prominent (especially compared to the demographically irrelevant Jewish population in that country). The participation of Jews in the promotion of contemporary Italian art in the United States was particularly strong and was given deliberate visibility by the regime as both organizers of the shows and as artists exhibited. Not only was Sabatello himself an notable member of the Jewish Community of Rome (in the late 1930s he even served as its president), but also the co-owner of the Comet Gallery, Cecil Pecci-Blunt was an American Jew who integrated himself very well to Rome’s highest society: “né Blumenthal,” as *Time* magazine promptly noticed, he had married Anna Laetitia (Mimi) Pecci, nephew of pope Leo XIII, and “straightway became a Papal Count by appointment of Benedict XV.” Jewish artists Corrado Cagli, Carlo Levi, Roberto Melli, Amedeo Modigliani, and Adriana Pincherle alternatively featured in all of the discussed exhibitions until 1939 and they received special visibility in the New York shows of the Comet. The 1937 inauguration exhibit of that gallery gave particular importance to the young Cagli, who was the only artist to have a whole room in the large survey in spite of the fact that other artists in the

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show (Giorgio de Chirico, Massimo Campigli, or Carlo Carrà) were much more famous than he was in the States. Cagli was also the only person beside the gallery owners to come all the way to New York on that occasion, one that soundly deflected any concern over Fascist anti-Semitism.\(^{145}\)

It should be noted, however, that these artists or their works were described never as Jewish in the exhibitions’ catalogues. Perhaps one of the regime’s propaganda “subtleties,” this did not pass unnoticed among Italy’s most vociferous anti-Semites. It was indeed Sabatello, the Comet Gallery, and Corrado Cagli, which in same period, 1937-1938, were at the center of some of the most notorious episodes of the Italian anti-Semitic campaign. Led by the reactionary journalists, Giuseppe Pensabene and Telesio Interlandi, it culminated with notorious episodes of verbal and physical violence: from the brawl at the opening of a Modigliani exhibit in Sabatello’s Galleria di Roma, which ended in a fistfight and lawsuit between Interlandi and Sabatello;\(^{146}\) Anton Giulio Bragaglia’s article “accusing” de Chirico of being Jewish - not coincidentally when the painter was in New York for his exhibition at the Comet; the series of articles by Pensabene and Interlandi in the newspaper *Il Tevere* and the weekly magazine *Quadrivio*, which, by using the tones of Nazi war against “degenerate art,” attacked modern art and in particular Cagli and the artists of the Comet as “International, Bolshevik, and Jewish”.\(^{147}\) As early as mid-September 1938, barely a week after the publication of the

\(^{145}\) The fact that Cagli Jewish identity was determinant in giving him so much visibility at the opening of the New York Comet has been documented by Francesca Romana Morelli, *Cipriano Efisio Oppo: Un legislatore per l’arte* (Rome: Edizioni De Luca, 2000), p. 372. Mario Quesada, “E nel Cielo di Roma Apparve la Cometa,” cit., pp. 83-87

\(^{146}\) The episode took place in June 2, 1937 and even reached Mussolini’s office. Sabatello was convicted and lost his position as director of that public gallery. See Maurizio Fagiolo dell’Arco, *Scuola Romana: Pittura e Scultura a Roma dal 1919 al 1943* (Rome: De Luca, 1986).

\(^{147}\) Giuseppe Pensabene, “Disegni alla Galleria della Cometa,” *Il Tevere*, January 11-12, 1937. Here, Pensabene accused “the abundance of means that Israelites never lack when they decide to provoke certain
Fascist anti-Semitic Laws, the director of the Comet, Libero De Libero wrote to friends and artists involved in the exhibition program of the Cometa gallery to announce the forced interruption of its activities: “as a result of the Fascist campaign against the Jews, the Galleria della Cometa ceases to exist.”

The equation of multiculturalism with American modernity was, for better or for worse, a media refrain and literary cliché of the Italian depiction of the United States. The deliberate and notable inclusion of Jews in the construction of a modern image for Italy, was a weak and hypocritical claim of an Italian multiculturalism dramatically interrupted by the racist legislation of 1938.

Similar to the inclusion of the Jews, the choice to have women in the art exhibitions exported to the United States was made for pragmatic reasons. The emancipation of American women was one of the most strongly debated aspects of American society among Italians (whose law did not grant women the vote until 1946). Seen as the opposite of the Fascist massaia rurale (rural housewives), the American “new woman” - not confined within her domestic duties and having a role of her own -- became a negative paradigm within Fascist propaganda in Italy and a staple of anti-American arguments, being described as the main cause for the despicable dissolution of the family institution in the United States. Simultaneously, during the 1930s, the very same paradigm conquered many Italians as the quintessence of a modern society, through Hollywood films, new forms of advertisement which emulated American ones (fig.), and illustrated women’s magazines, like Grazia, Gioia and Lei, which were openly styled on orientations in the artistic life of a country.” Telesio Interlandi, “Straniera, bolscevizzante e giudaica,” Il Tevere, November 24-25, 1938. On the anti-Semitic campaign against the Comet Gallery see Lucia Chiavazzi (ed.), Una Collezionista e Mecenate Romana, cit.

148 Letter from De Libero to Tullio D’Albisola, September 12, 1938, in Lettere..., p. 75.
American precedents such as *Harper’s Bazaar, Vanity Fair* and *Vogue*. As I have mentioned earlier, the inclusion, in Sabatello’s 1935 show of two female artists, Eleonora [sic] Fini and Adriana Pincherle (also Jewish), was a token made by the Italian organizers in recognition of principles which they saw as characteristically American: “misses Pincherle and Fini have been included for extra-artistic reasons because, being the show held in America, it is useful to include some women’s names.” This idea continued to characterize the shows of the Fascist regime in America until the end, culminating with the government’s participation in the 1938-1940 exhibition, *International Women Painters, Engravers, Sculptors*. Even if the qualities appreciated in those female artists were their graciousness, delicacy, or other attributes traditionally (and dismissively) attached to “feminine” artworks, the presentation in New York of Italian female artists within an international context still projected in the United States an idea of Italian woman drastically different from the *massaia rurale*, the fertile, rural housewife advertised at home.

In order to counter the suspicion growing in the States by the mid-1930s that Fascism was revealing itself to be as aggressive and brutal as Nazism, these exhibitions pointedly conveyed the message that Italy was substantially different from Germany in central issues, as witnessed significantly in their divergent policies on censorship and religious intolerance. By emphasizing the pluralistic styles of contemporary Fascist art, the regime opposed itself to the Nazi ban on the avant-gardes and its “degenerate art”

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151 Dario Sabatello to Antonio Maraini, Schema della mostra d’arte contemporanea negli Stati Uniti d’America, attached to a letter of August 31, 1934, Galleria Nazionale d’Arte Moderna, Archivio Maraini, fold. 41, Stati Uniti, quoted by Sergio Cortesini, p. 45.
The anonymous text that introduced the opening exhibition of the Comet Gallery emphasized this point: “Italian present day art may be compared to a tree – grown up in the wide world revolution of artistic taste – of which this anthology intends to show the various branches and trends.” And Sabatello used the same metaphor in his catalogue introduction, where he referred to the presence in the show of “many values and numerous branches.”

Particular attention was given to stylistic idioms that American reviewers described as “expressionist” (fig. 24 - Carlo Levi) and “super-realist” (see fig. 7 – Fausto Pirandello), borrowing these terms not from the Italian organizers of the shows but rather from the stylistic categories which American museums, and first among them New York’s Museum of Modern Art, were formulating in the same years. The Comet, however, intentionally (and clumsily) avoided terms borrowed from non-Italian art movements. The twenty-seven artists presented at the gallery’s opening were divided into four groups: “intellectualists and metaphysic painters, artists drawing their inspiration directly from nature, and deep subtle listeners of the music of colours and tonalities.” Yet any explanation was missing on how to apply those labels.

Sabatello, on the other hand, refused to divide artists into stylistic schools. He rather emphasized the regional variety that characterized Italy now as it did during the past centuries. His text for the 1935 exhibition’s catalogue scrolled the Italy’s territory region by region, North to South. He explained that the stylistic pluralism of Italian art

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155 *Anthology of Contemporary Italian Painting*, cit.
under Fascism was well rooted in Italy’s regions’ diverse history and artistic tradition. He
then went on to emphasize Rome as the center of a polyphonic scene, whose richness
depended on the convergence to the capital of artists from all over Italy. In the final
section of his entry entitled “The Italian Government and the Artists,” he then showed
how the convergence of regional diversities to Rome was a result of Fascist cultural
politics: through a hierarchical system of state-funded art exhibitions and prizes, which
started at a regional level (Mostre Sindacali) and culminated in Rome (Quadriennale) the
regime was able to valorize and give visibility to the peripheries and simultaneously
promoting a national identity based on regional diversities whose binder was Rome. Yet,
by emphasizing regional diversity as a form of pluralism, Sabatello could not avoid one
of the great contradictions of Fascist rhetoric on national identity: the dramatic
fragmentation of the country on every possible account – historically, culturally,
linguistically, economically. Finally, his description of the country from North to South
stopped at Rome, inevitably underscoring the under-represented condition of the largely
rural, illiterate and poor southern half of the country. Nevertheless, Sabatello’s argument
for a national identity based on regional variety was a successful one if in 1949 James
Soby used exactly the same scheme in his discussion of post-war art for his catalogue of
the MoMA’s exhibition *Twentieth Century Italian Art*.156 The cover of the same
catalogue represented Italian art as a truncated tree coming back to life (fig): in the
intention if its author, as discussed in Chapter 2, it alluded to the Fascist past as to a
period of cultural death and to the postwar present as to a moment of rebirth;
paradoxically, it recycled the motif of the tree so often employed during the 1930s to

promote Italian contemporary art in the United States through regime-sponsored exhibition.

More than conquering America, the exhibitions and the process of preparing them ended up being a laboratory for the Italians to define their own modernity in close dialogue with the United States. This was visible immediately, as discussed in this chapter, through the adoption for the Italian shows of “American methods” and values associated with America and therefore with modernity. By organizing exhibitions that deliberately gave prominence to private enterprises over the state, avoided explicit propaganda content, made a point of including as many Jewish and female artists, promoted (at least in theory) a pluralism of styles, and emphasized the link between art, science, and technology, the Fascist government ended up inaugurating a process of active absorption of values and models that the Italians perceived as American - that is as modern. Even more significantly, the American model, absorbed through Fascist cultural diplomacy, would be resumed after the end of the Second World War when, during the Marshall Plan years, Fascist Italy’s fascination with American modernity re-emerged and re-inscribed itself under the new rhetoric of the Cold War.
CHAPTER 2
OPERATION RENAISSANCE: MOMA AND THE POST-WAR REHABILITATION OF ITALY

We in America have tended to neglect [twentieth-century Italian art], not only because of our rightful interest in our own contemporary painting and sculpture, but also because of two formidable counter-attractions in Europe – the Parisian present and the Italian past. (James Thrall Soby and Alfred H. Barr, Jr., Twentieth-Century Italian Art, MoMA, 1949)

In June 1949, barely two months after Italy entered the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the exhibition Twentieth-Century Italian Art opened at the Museum of Modern Art in New York (fig. 1).¹ It included Italian paintings and sculptures from Futurism to post-war abstraction and was accompanied by a richly illustrated 144-page catalogue. Widely publicized as the first survey of modern Italian art in America, it was also MoMA’s first show after World War II to focus on a single European nation.² The next one to be mounted, almost a decade later in 1957, featured the art of the other former enemy nation with a similarly straightforward title: German Art of the Twentieth Century. The two exhibitions, however, could not have been more different. Organized

² The other nation-based show was the considerably smaller and less publicized Modern China, held in 1946 without a catalogue.
twelve years after the defeat of the Axis powers, with West Germany’s rehabilitation well under way, *German Art of the Twentieth Century* was curated by German art historians, and paid for by the Government of German Federal Republic. Understandably, no art formerly accepted or exhibited in the Nazi Germany was included.³ By contrast, *Twentieth-Century Italian Art* was prepared and held in the immediate post-war moment, it received little help from the Italian Government, and the art was selected by two leading figures of the American Museum: Alfred H. Barr, Jr., and James Thrall Soby.⁴ The starkest difference lay in the content: the majority of the artworks included in the Italian show were pieces that had been supported and widely exhibited under the Fascist regime.

The exhibition *Twentieth-Century Italian Art* and the political motivations behind it are fundamental to an understanding of how modern Italian art, from Umberto Boccioni to Lucio Fontana, entered American museums and was historicized after World War II. Why did the MoMA invest so much effort in this show --just four years after the fall of Mussolini? How was it possible to incorporate the artistic heritage of the Fascist period into a new post-war context? And what role did the Italians play in the organization of the exhibit? The answers to these questions underline the key role of *Twentieth-Century Italian Art* in the construction of a new image for the Italian nation state – one distanced from the Fascist past. As this chapter will also demonstrate, however, the exhibition inevitably underscored issues of continuity between Fascist and post-Fascist Italy.

³ As the ‘Foreword’ to the catalogue stated, the exhibition ‘ignor[ed] the false pathos and propaganda art of the Nazi regime,’ and the ‘highly selective representation of some of the leading artists of post-World War II Germany’ (p.11) only included artists from the Federal Republic. Andrew Carnduff Ritchie (ed.), *German Art of the Twentieth Century* (Museum of Modern Art: New York, 1957)

As discussed in Chapter 1, the idea of a MoMA survey of modern Italian art was originally advanced by the Fascist government, and intended as the crowning achievement of Benito Mussolini’s cultural policy in the United States. In the immediate aftermath of Italy’s defeat and civil war (1943-45), the reins of the projects had changed hands, as had the diplomatic goals: now directed by the Americans, it facilitated the cultural, economic, and political initiatives of the Marshall Plan, begun a year earlier. As a result, Italian artists, curators, and institutions active in the pre-war period were rehabilitated according to the exigencies of the Cold War years.

Until 1940, it was the Fascist government who tried to promote Italian contemporary art in the US, while the Americans were mainly interested in the ancient glories of that country; after the war, a new initiative for a modern Italian show came from an American art historian. As early as May 1945, Charles Rufus Morey wrote to Alfred Barr asking about ‘the feasibility of an exchange of exhibitions of contemporary Italian and American painting to get rolling some time in the fall.’⁵ An eminent medievalist, Morey had been the chairman of the Department of Art and Archaeology at Princeton University from 1924 to 1945.⁶ After having served with the American Commission for the Protection and Salvage of Arts and Monuments in War Areas, in 1945 he was briefly Director of the American Academy and then named Cultural Affairs Officer at the United States Embassy in Rome. The reason for Morey’s idea of an exhibition exchange was essentially political. As he would write a few years later, the ‘Communist menace’ was stronger in Italy than any other European country, and the

proposed cultural exchange would strengthen the US-Italy links. But also, he stated, because the Italian academic environment was too politicized, it was up to American ‘objective’ (namely non-political) scholars to write the history of recent Italian art. The Italians themselves were asking for it:

I detect a tendency in Italy … to look to the United States for the history of art in the two half-centuries just closing; to expect Alfred Barr and Henry Russell Hitchcock, or scholars of their type, the perspective and objectivity which could produce an authentic account of modern art, free from the polemics which have accompanied its growth and claim to popular appreciation.

Morey’s proposal was not at all the first contact between him and Barr. In fact, it was Morey’s courses at Princeton that, according to Sybil Gordon Kantor, ‘fixed [Barr’s] decision to pursue art scholarship.’ In particular, Morey’s analysis of the developments of Medieval styles would be the model for Barr’s identification of formal patterns and genealogy in his famous chronological charts.

Barr wrote to the Modern’s Director of Exhibitions, Monroe Wheeler: ‘I do not know whether the proposed exchange of exhibitions is feasible but I do believe that the contemporary Italian school is now second only to that of France on the European continent.’ Barr was interested for several reasons. First of all, it was an opportune moment to fill gaps in the MoMA’s collection: he needed a representative selection of twentieth-century Italian art and especially a strong group of Futurist works to round out the museum’s incomparable pre-war modernist holdings. Barr had already acknowledged the movement, albeit briefly, in his seminal exhibition and catalogue, *Cubism and Abstract Art*, and was savvy enough to intuit that the fall of Fascism presented the right

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11 Barr to Wheeler, AHB [AAA: 3153; 960]. MoMA Archives, NY.
occasion to carry out a new critical interpretation of Italian modernism. Given Italy’s devastated economy, the Italian art market was auspicious terrain for American buyers. The press release for the eventual 1949 exhibition even stressed this economic imbalance, as part of jump-starting at least one aspect of the Italian economy: ‘[Italian] artists charge low prices for their works – perhaps one-fifth as much as in America – and thus sell regularly a good part of what they produce and at the same time make art accessible to interested people even of modest resources.

Secondly, Barr was now free to do his own show, finally unrestricted by Italian government, let alone, Fascist interference. (‘[I want] complete control of the selection,’ he stated to Ventura in 1940). Revealing in this sense was Barr’s attitude toward the involvement of the Italians in the organization of the show. During the preparation of the enterprise, Barr and Soby, actually, thought of asking Italian critics for their collaboration. And these were none other than Brandi and Argan, the art historians sent to New York in 1940 by the Fascist government, who had now become main players in the cultural politics of the reconstruction years. Barr remembered ‘Brandi’s intelligent interest in contemporary Italian painting,’ and Soby wondered whether to ‘ask…Argan [to write] on the Roman School of Scipione and Mafai.’ But ultimately none of the Italian critics was involved. One reason was that the American curators opted for

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12 Barr included Futurism in his chart (catalogue’s jacket) and dedicated a chronology and critical text (pp. 54-63) to it. Futurism was presented here as being influenced by Neo-Impressionism and Cubism, therefore within a French-centered history of modernism. De Chirico was also mentioned briefly, as an outsider figure ‘admired by the Dadaists’ (p. 174).

13 Barr bought futurists works from Benedetta Marinetti (futurist artist and widow of Filippo Tommaso) through Romano Toninelli (see below). In the same years Lydia Malbin Winston was buying some of Boccioni’s most important works from the artist’s sister Raffaella; see Barnett and Lydia Malbin papers, Smithsonian Archives of American Art, Microfilm reel 569.

14 Twentieth Century Italian Art, Press Release, June 1949, James Thrall Soby Papers (JTS), I.8, MoMA Archives NY.

15 Barr to Ventura, February 15, 1940.

16 Barr to Wheeler, September 24, 1945, AHB [AAA: 3153; 921]. MoMA Archives, NY.

17 Soby to Barr, February 14, 1949, AHB [AAA: 2176; 980] MoMA Archives, NY.
autonomy of selection and critical judgement. On the other hand, Barr gave priority to the acquisition opportunities rather than critical expertise of the Italians. He pushed to have Romeo Toninelli as the Italian point person for the show. An industrialist, art dealer, and owner of an important Futurist collection, Toninelli was president of the Milanese Circolo delle Arti, a club of dealers and collectors who would partially finance the show, lend one third of the works exhibited, and sell to the Museum a good part of them.\(^\text{18}\)

While inviting Italian art historians to nominally join the exhibition’s Organization Committee, Soby expressed his concern that they would ‘not join a committee of which someone far less eminent and experienced than themselves [like Toninelli] is boss.’\(^\text{19}\)

\(^{18}\) As early as in December 27, 1946, Toninelli wrote to Wheeler proposing a form of collaboration between the Museum and the Circolo, which had the advantages of an ‘absolute freedom on your behalf of the choice of the works as well as the artists to be presented in said exhibition’ and ‘the solution of the financial problem such an exhibition carries with it.’ See letter of Toninelli to Wheeler of December 23, 1946, AHB [AAA: 3153; 865-868]. MoMA Archives, NY. In February 14, 1947 Monroe Wheeler declined an offer of public economic support by Ranuccio Bianchi Bandinelli, Director of the Fine Arts division for the Italian Ministry of Education, declaring that the Museum had already accepted Toninelli’s proposal.

See letter of Wheeler to Bandinelli, AHB [AAA: 3153; 920-921]. MoMA Archives, NY. According to an undated document entitled ‘Twentieth Century Italian Painting and Sculpture. A Proposal for an Exhibition to be held at The Museum of Modern Art,’ the initial projected expense covered by the Circolo delle Arti Society was $21,575 out of the overall $31,575 estimated for the organization of the show. AHB [AAA: 3153; 1180-1184]. MoMA Archives, NY. The series of letters between Barr and Toninelli found in the Alfred H. Barr, Jr. Papers document that Barr’s main interest was to purchase futurist works from or through Toninelli. Toninelli was also the founder in 1945 of the Milanese gallery Il Camino, affiliated with the Ghiringhelli brothers (see below, note 53). Named life honorary member of the Modern in 1949, he would play a major role in the organization of the exhibition The New American Painting of 1958.

\(^{19}\) Soby to Barr, January 7, 1949, AHB [AAA: 3153; 1114]. MoMA Archives, NY. This exclusion did not pass unnoticed in Italy. Emilio Jesi, who was considered by Soby ‘the most important single collector of Contemporary Italian Art,’ refused to lend his works (see letter of Soby to N. Rockefeller, November 11, 1948, AHB [AAA: 3154; 540]). In order to convince him, Nelson Rockefeller asked for the intervention of Ambassador Dunn. In a letter to the ambassador, Jesi explained: ‘The American officials who have come to Italy have relied upon neither well-informed nor qualified people… Since this is an initiative which regards primarily Italy, which is entitled to be presented to American public and critique with the best possibilities of success, and since there are people in Italy in the critical and artistic fields who could interest themselves with absolute competence (I mean scholars such as Prof. Lionello Venturi, Prof. Roberto Longhi, Lamberto Vitali, Prof. Carlo L. Ragghianti, etc., and first class artists – also from the point of view of critique – such as Carlo Carrà, Giorgio Morandi, Marino Marini, Giacomo Manzù, etc., officials of the Ministry of Public Instruction, extremely competent in the field of modern art, such as Prof G. C. Argan, Prof. Cesare Brandi, and the Superintendent of Galleries in Milan, Prof. Fernanda Wittgens ….), I request that the organization of the exhibition be entrusted to a mixed Italo-American Commission, with a view to Italian art at the New York exhibition.’ Jesi to Dunn, December 27, 1948, anonymous translation, AHB [AAA: 3154; 477]. MoMA Archives, NY.
Finally, Barr had a personal investment in resuscitating modern Italian art. As Morey alluded in a letter to Barr ‘I feel sure that you would have as much or possibly more interest in such a program with reference to Italy than in the case of any other country.’\(^{20}\) The link was none other than Barr’s wife, the accomplished art historian, Margaret Scolari, who was born and raised in Rome where her father was an antiques dealer. During the preparation of *Twentieth-Century Italian Art*, Barr would write to the Futurist artist Giacomo Balla: ‘A long time ago you used to give my wife chocolates on the Pincio when she was a little child.’\(^{21}\) Her father, named Scolari, was a friend of yours at the time.’\(^{22}\) Mrs. Barr fluency in French, Italian, Spanish and German was of crucial importance for her husband’s curatorial activity. Her own studies on Italian art culminated in *Medardo Rosso (1858-1928)*, the first monograph in English on the Italian sculptor, published by the Modern in 1963 on the occasion of an exhibition there.\(^{23}\) Yet what, if any, influence Margaret Barr may have had on her husband’s decision to mount the show, on his acquisitions of modern Italian art, or his inclusion of certain artists, cannot be determined from any extant archival sources, and remains a matter of speculation.

Another impetus for Barr and the MoMA enterprise was the involvement of the show’s co-director, James Thrall Soby, in modern Italian art. From 1930 on, Soby became the foremost collector of Giorgio de Chirico in America.\(^{24}\) He wrote the volume *The Early Chirico* in 1941, and his *Contemporary Painters* published in 1948 by the Modern, included a chapter entitled ‘Italy: Two Movements, Two Painters’ which

\(^{21}\) Pincio is part of Villa Borghese in Rome, near Balla’s house.
\(^{22}\) Barr to Balla, March 15, 1949, Registrar Exhibition Files (REG) *Twentieth-Century Italian Art* exhibition file, MoMA Archives, NY.
focused on Boccioni and de Chirico. Herein, he complained about the American ignorance of Italian modernism and expressed the hope ‘that there will be soon in this country a full-scale exhibition of twentieth-century Italian art, with an accompanying publication.’

Starting in 1948, Soby served as the American representative on the Comitato Internazionale di Esperti (International Committee of Experts) of the Venice Biennale, and wrote the foreword for the MoMA 1951 monographic catalogue on Modigliani. In 1956, Barr asked the Italian consulate to confer upon Soby an official recognition for ‘his really devoted and quite extraordinary services to Italy.’ Not only was Soby an extremely influential figure in the Museum, but during the years of the gestation of Twentieth-Century Italian Art, Barr was personally indebted to him. As is well known, the board of Trustees fired Barr as Director of the MoMA in 1943. Writes Sybil Gordon Kantor: ‘his taste was running ahead of the trustees’, his writings were always behind schedule, and, in the area of administration (which he disliked), competing forces were undercutting his efforts. In the ensuing dismissal Barr was bravely defended by Soby, who first ‘managed to keep him in the Museum’s Library,’ and in 1947 sustained his nomination as director of the collection. Twentieth-Century Italian Art was the first important exhibition curated by Barr after his experimental shows of the late 1930s that had got him into trouble. Mostly engaged in fulfilling his new role of

27 Barr to Laurance Roberts, February 27, 1956, AHB [AAA: 2181; 198], MoMA Archives, NY.
29 In the intermediate years, he curated minor or anomalous exhibitions: *Italian Masters* and *Portinari of Brazil* in 1940; *Joe Milione’s Shoe Shine Stand* in 1942; *Portarait of Gertrude Stein by Picasso* in 1948. In 1947, Barr was appointed director of the museum collection. In fact, as discussed below, *Twentieth-Century Italian Art*’s main goal, was for Barr, the acquisition of works representative of Italian Futurism and Metafisica that would fill an important gap in the museum’s collection. Sybil Gordon Kantor, *Alfred H. Barr*, p. 362.
providing the museum’s collection with Futurism, Barr left the curatorial choices largely to Soby.

From the viewpoint of the Italians, meanwhile, the show was an opportunity not to be missed. The newly-elected republican government enthusiastically received the project: Ranuccio Bianchi Bandinelli, Director of the Fine Arts at the Ministry of Education wrote: ‘this initiative meets my full adhesion and liveliest interest. The Ministry is eager to do its best in order to help such an enterprise.’

MoMA’s interest in putting together the show dovetailed with the newly elected Italian government’s policy toward the promotion of contemporary art in the United States. The leader of Democrazia Cristiana (Christian Democracy, DC) party, Alcide De Gasperi, who was the Italian Foreign Minister between 1944 and 1945, and Prime Minister from 1945 to 1953, favored so-called “multilateral” initiatives: that is, collaborations involving Italian individuals with American colleagues or institutions, without the direct intervention of the Italian state. This line of action characterized the whole post-war decade of reconstruction and national rehabilitation.

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30 The Italian population voted for the republic in the June 2, 1946 general election and referendum, after which king Umberto II was forced into exile and Enrico De Nicola of the Partito Liberale Italiano was elected first President of the Republic of Italy. Prime minister was the Christian Democrat, Alcide De Gasperi.

31 ‘La loro iniziativa di una Mostra della Pittura Italiana del Novecento, da tenersi nel Museum of Modern Art durante la primavera 1947 – di cui mi ha riferito il prof. Doro Levi – incontra la mia piena adesione e il mio vivo interessamento.’ Notable is the fact that Bandinelli was not informed about the project with an official communication from the Museum, but he was rather told by an Italian professor, Doro Levi. Bandinelli concretely offered: logistic support for Barr and Soby during their stay in Italy; the expertise of Italian art historians who could guide the ‘American curators’ through the archives, artist studios, collectors, and museums; lend works of art owned by public collections for free; and ‘cover the transportation expenses of the paintings in Italy up to the leaving port.’ See the letter of Ranuccio Bianchi Bandinelli to Wheeler, August 22, 1946, AHB [AAA: 3153; 915] MoMA Archives, NY. A prominent art historian and archeologist during the ventennio, Bianchi Bandinelli (1900-1975) became a central figure in the reconstruction years.

32 On the American support of the Democrazia Cristiana and, especially, of the election of De Gasperi in 1948, see below.
De Gasperi saw culture as the most effective tool to rehabilitate the image of Italy abroad after Fascism but he was also aware of the bad reputation of Italian cultural diplomacy after Mussolini’s propaganda initiatives: “Activities of high culture [are] one of the most effective tools with which our country can make its voice heard again: not to promote nationalistic statements but to arouse sympathy and comprehension in the relationship with other countries, and to facilitate other forms of political and economic [collaboration] with them.” A second obstacle was the country’s precarious financial status. As one of his officials straightforwardly put it: “the old idea of ‘cultural propaganda’ should be banned. It has always been expensive and it has delivered poor results. Our ‘cultural policy’ is that of not doing it.” De Gasperi’s solution was not so drastic: rather than “not doing it,” he proposed what he liked to call “multilateral initiatives” or “cultural cooperation.” By promoting “mutual understanding, safeguard of peace, and international solidarity,” he embraced an internationalism and cooperation rhetoric, which was well received in both catholic and communist environments, and which was seen as safely opposed to the imperialistic nationalism of Mussolini’s regime.

33 Original: “attività di alta cultura [sono] uno degli strumenti più efficaci con cui il nostro Paese può far sentire di nuovo la propria voce, non per preparare affermazioni nazionalistiche, ma per suscitare simpatie e comprensioni nei rapporti con gli altri Paesi e per agevolare ogni altra forma politica ed economica con loro” Asmac, Gabinetto (1944-1958), b. 83 (1944-1947), posiz. 6 Ris. 2/13’ Istituti e scuole all'estero—Finanziamenti, promemoria, De Gasperi a Parri, Roma, 14 luglio 1945. Quoted in Lorenzo Medici, p.84
34 Original: “La vecchia idea della "propaganda culturale" va bandita. La sua applicazione è sempre stata costosa e ha dato scarsi risultati. La "politica culturale “ è quella di non farla.” Asmac, Gabinetto (1944-1958), b. 106(1944-1947), fase. 49. I.R.C.E., “Relazione sul lavoro compiuto per la riorganizzazione dell'Irce e per la ripresa dei rapporti con l'estero nel campo della vita culturale,” Carlo Antoni to Carlo Sforza, Roma, 29 marzo 1947. Antoni was the director of the National Institute for Foreign Cultural Relations (Istituto Nazionale per le Relazioni Culturali con l’Estero – IRCE), Sforza was Italy’s Minister of Foreign Affairs.
36 Lorenzo Medici, cit., p. 74.
His emphasis on cooperation was also a way to make sure that Italy’s relationship with Western democracies (America above all) was not that of a defeated enemy but one of an ally. Nevertheless, due to the precarious economic condition of post-war Italy, De Gasperi was urged by the Ministry of Finance “not only the reduction but even the total suppression of any cultural activity abroad.” As a result, the Italian government reduced the public budget dedicated to “cultural activities abroad” to 137 million lira, that is one fifth of the pre-war budget, and abolished some of the major institutions formerly responsible for Fascist cultural diplomacy. Between 1945 and 1953, most of the Italian cultural institutes and the governmental office for the cultural relations with foreign countries, IRCE (Istituto Nazionale per le Relazioni con l’Estero) were closed. Of the many existent “Case d’Italia” De Gasperi commented: “they evoke unpleasant memories and provoke understandable diffidence in local communities.” He suggested that their names were changed and that they were either sponsored by privates or suppressed.

Times were hard, so De Gasperi relied on external sources (private individuals or institutions) to “find the means not to let the little flame to fade: we should keep it burning waiting for better times. Then we will be able to resume the vast action of accords and agreements in the field of culture, to which also the great democracies devote

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37 With the United States, De Gasperi signed a peculiar agreement for the institution of Fulbright fellowships, which he significantly called a “small Marshal Plan for culture.” The five million dollars of American money used to sponsor fellowships for American citizens to study in Italy and for Italians to study in America were distributed by a selection committee that included an equal number of American and Italian members. Differently from similar programs stipulated by the American government with other European countries after the war, the Italian government had equal weight in the final decisions without paying a cent. Lorenzo Medici, cit., p. 152.

38 Original: “non solo la riduzione ma addirittura la soppressione totale di ogni attività culturale all’estero.” Asmac, Gabinetto (1944-1958), b. 83 (1944-1947), posiz. 6 Ris. 2/13, Istituti scuole all'estero - Finanziamenti, promemoria, De Gasperi a Parri, Roma, 14 luglio 1945.


40 Lorenzo Medici, cit., pp 139-152.
great attention and care today.”

So when MoMA contacted private collectors and artists in Italy to organize Twentieth Century Italian Art, De Gasperi’s government saw a great opportunity: it was a form of international collaboration, the Italian government could not be accused of nationalistic propaganda, and the “little flame” would keep burning for free.

In fact, the old nationalistic idea of promoting the Italian school in the United States was still alive, but the pull of other issues now prevailed: the flourishing American art market was particularly appealing during the post-war years of hardship, and critics perceived the need for a cultural ‘catch up’ after Fascist isolationism after the mid-1930s. The Italian architect and editor, Gio Ponti opened his influential magazine, Domus, of June 1949 with an exchange of letters between himself and Barr about the Modern’s interest in buying Italian art and openly invited artists and collectors to keep their prices down. The exchange also emphasized the growing, worldwide influence of the Modern and role of the proposed exhibition in affirming modern Italian art.

In line with De Gasperi’s emphasis on collaboration, the show was an opportunity for cultural exchanges. Italian publishers, art dealers, and museums seized the occasion: the Edizioni del Milione planned a series of monographs of Italian artists in English; the competing Italian art dealers Gino Ghiringhelli and Carlo Cardazzo hounded Barr for the

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41 Original: “trovare i mezzi per non lasciar spegnere la fiammella che dobbiamo tenere accesa in attesa che tempi migliori ci permettano di riprendere quella vasta azione di intese e di accordi nel campo della cultura, cui anche le grandi democrazie dedicano oggi particolare attenzione e cura … gli uomini del lavoro e della cultura sono i primi interpreti del popolo italiano, i veri ambasciatori […] che precedono I diplomatici e li sostituiscono dove non è possibile mandarli.” Asmac, Gabinetto (1944-1958), b. 83 (1944-1947), posiz. 6 Ris. 2/13, Istituti e scuole all'estero - Finanziamenti, progetto di lettera, De Gasperi al ministro del Tesoro, Federico Ricci, Roma, s.d. [novembre 1945]. Quoted by Lorenzo Medici, p. 85.

Italian exclusive sales contract for the publications of the Museum of Modern Art;\(^{43}\) Fernanda Wittgens, Director of the Brera museum in Milan and Supervisor of the Art Galleries of Lombardy, availed herself of the occasion to ask instructions on how to update museums’ labels.\(^{44}\) Celebrated old artists (fig. 2), almost young painters, and completely unknown figures wrote to Barr in order to be included in the show or to sell their work. Tellingly, they underlined either: their participation in the Resistance, persecution as anti-Fascist, private dissent toward Fascism, or at least accused other artists already included in the show of having been more Fascist than they were.\(^{45}\) Every single word revealed dire poverty.\(^{46}\)

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\(^{43}\) Ghiringhelli was the owner of the Milanese publishing house and gallery, Il Milione. On Ghiringhelli see also Bruno Zevi’s letter to Barr, note 53. Cardazzo was the owner of two galleries, Naviglio in Milan and Cavallino in Venice. For their letters, see AHB [AAA: 3153; 910-915]. MoMA Archives, NY.

\(^{44}\) AHB [AAA: 3153; 877].

\(^{45}\) The fascist past of people involved in the exhibition is a trope during the preparation of *Twentieth-Century Italian Art*. A major problem that Barr and Soby had to solve in order to collaborate with the Circolo delle Arti, was the prominent role that the Ghiringhelli brothers played in it. The Ghiringhelli (Virginio, Giuseppe, and Livio) were owners of the Milanese gallery Il Milione and currently promoter of the Fronte Nuovo delle Arti (see below). Their involvement in the organization of the MoMA exhibition was problematic for they were accused in the post-war period of having been Nazi collaborators and informers. Barr wrote to a number of Italians asking for advice on this matter. The most insightful answer is that of Bruno Zevi:

‘Dear Mr. Barr: I received your letter two days ago, and I am glad to be able to give you some of the information you are asking for. Actually the Ghiringhelli brothers, directors of the Milione, in Milan, have been accused immediately after the liberation of having denounced various anti-Fascists leaders who were deported into Germany. One of the persons who accused them was the Milanese painter Raffaele De Grada. When the Allies arrived in Milan, few days after the liberation, the Ghiringhelli flew away, and their place was occupied by a cultural organization dependent on the Committee of National Liberation. Later on there was a trial, and the Ghiringhelli were absolved ‘for insufficiency of proofs’. As you know, now these people have started again their activity. Their editorial activity goes under the same name of IL MILIONE, while the art gallery has taken the name of IL CAMINO. They are also starting a club called CIRCOLO DELLE GRAZIE [aka Circolo delle Arti], and I DUE FORNI. Their address is Via S. Andrea 1, Milan. These are the facts and I should stop my letter here. You were kind enough, however, to ask my opinion as to whether you might proceed to work with them. … The fact that they have been absolved does not mean anything. Everybody has been absolved in Italy, and if the anti-Fascists had not killed Mussolini, I am afraid that he would have been absolved too. To give you an example, Interlandi, whom you probably heard as one of the worst Fascists, is going around in Italy. After the few months when there was much talk of epuration [sic, purge] and very few deeds about it, an epuration law was made. Count Sforza was the epuration chief, totally inefficient. Later on, Nenni took his place, and was even more inefficient. Then came the amnesty done by the new King Umberto. After strong protests on the part of the anti-Fascists parties, something incredible happened. Togliatti, chief of the Communist Party, then Minister of Justice, perhaps in order to show that the Communists were better forgivers that the King, proposed a law of general amnesty. Fascist leaders, criminals of all sorts came out of prison. Obviously by this time, everybody like the Ghiringhelli were absolved. Who could punish them after such a scandal? … The
What Morey envisioned as a little project to be done ‘some time in the Fall [1945],’ actually took four years to be accomplished. His proposal evolved into a remarkably wider plan that, encompassed the exhibition idea of 1940, and dovetailed with Barr’s desire to build the most comprehensive collection of European modernism. More to the point, the diplomatic value of the exhibition substantially increased because of the post-war political relationship between the United States and Italy.

The United States was rebuilding Italy against the background of mounting tensions between the USSR and the West. After the war, the Partito Comunista Italiano (Italian Communist Party PCI) was the largest in Western Europe, and carried the prestige of representing the main of the anti-Fascist resistance. The main anti-communist party, supported by the United States and by the Church, was De Gasperi’s right-centrist Democrazia Cristiana (fig. 3). After the Liberation, a series of coalition governments that included both PCI and DC followed one another until 1947, increasingly controlled by De Gasperi.\(^4\) In March 1947, American president Henry Truman announced his

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\(^4\) A typical letter was the one sent by a certain Peter: ‘Dear Alfred, I wonder if you remember a painter by the name of Bargheer (…). I have heard from all kinds of people who were in Italy through the war that Bargheer has a completely clear record as far as the Nazis and Fascisti [sic] are concerned. Of course he’d like to be shown over here since he is poor as a church mouse, like all Italian painters, so if you could do something to get him into the show, I’d be grateful,’ (Peter to Barr, February 22, 1948, AHB [AAA: 3153; 915] MoMA Archives, NY.

\(^4\) The first government, led by Ferruccio Parri (Action Party Pd’A) was a coalition government where the left (PCI, Socialist Party PSIUP, and Pd’A) had the majority over the centre-right (DC and Liberals). It lasted from June to November 1945. De Gasperi (DC) substituted Parri in a new coalition government,
program of containment of the Soviet menace through economic investments in Europe.

On May 1st Secretary of State, George Marshall wrote to the American Ambassador at Rome, James Dunn about the great risk of a communist victory in the forthcoming Italian elections scheduled for October 1947, when the government of the country would be contended between the DC and the PCI. Marshall also urged De Gasperi to govern without the Communists. From this moment on, the Rome Embassy became the headquarters of the American war on Italian communism, and the ambassador Dunn its spokesman. On May 12, 1947, after a trip to Washington, De Gasperi resigned from his position as prime minister of the coalition government, formed a new one-party DC government, and postponed the elections to April 1948. That summer, the beginning of the Marshall Plan was announced, and the American intervention in Italian politics and economy became progressively more directed until the spring 1948 national elections.48

Paul Ginsborg has described it:

American intervention was breath-taking in its size, its ingenuity and its flagrant for any principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of another country. The US administration designated $176m of ‘Interim Aid’ to Italy in the first three months of 1948. After that the Marshall Plan entered in full operation. James Dunn, the American ambassador at Rome, made sure that this massive injection of aid did not go unobserved by the Italian general public. The arrival of every hundredth ship bearing food, machines, etc., was turned into a special celebration. Every time the port was a different one…and every time Dunn’s speech became more overtly political. Whenever a new bridge or school or hospital was constructed with American help, there was the indefatigable ambassador travelling the length of the peninsula to speak in the name of America, the Free World and, by implication, the Christian Democrats… And just in case the message


was not clear enough, on 20 March 1948 George Marshall warned that all help to Italy would immediately cease in the event of a Communist victory.49

During these years, the Italian-exhibition project increasingly acquired diplomatic value. In July 1947, coinciding with the beginning of the Marshall Plan, Paul Hyde Bonner, Economic Adviser to the Rome embassy wrote an informal note to Washington, supporting the MoMA enterprise:50 ‘the underlying purposes would be: (1), to promote friendly relations between the two countries; and, (2), to demonstrate the revitalization of the creative force in Italy under a democratic regime.’51 And barely ten days after the DC victory at the elections of April 18, 1948, Dunn himself wrote to Nelson Rockefeller the first official letter mentioning the exhibition: ‘It is a relief to have the elections over and Italy can settle down now to some good hard work toward economic recovery. I was also very pleased to hear that the Museum of Modern Art is undertaking an exhibition of modern Italian painting and sculpture, as this will be of tremendous help and encouragement to the Italians.’52 Also Barr, right after the elections, wrote about the Italian project to the early promoter of the show, Morey, who was still cultural attaché at the Rome Embassy. Barr should have felt an excessive political pressure, which endangered one of his most sacred principles, the independence of art from the realm of politics. He wrote to his former teacher:

Dear Rufus, After two years of discussion and uncertainty which has lasted right through the current week, we have finally decided that we can go ahead with our exhibition of Italian painting and sculpture… Mr. Soby [and I]… were much encouraged by your interest and by that shown by the Italian Government authorities. However, as in the past, we plan to organize our exhibition with complete independence of government supervision … We realize of course that the present political situation in Italy is delicate

50 Paul Hyde Bonner was part of the Economic Cooperation Administration (ECA) Mission to Italy.
51 Paul Hyde Bonner to W. Avrell Harriman (Secretary of Commerce), July 29, 1947, AHB [AAA: 3153; 1058]. MoMA Archives, NY.
52 James Clement Dunn to Nelson Rockefeller, April 28, 1948, AHB [AAA: 3153; 935]. MoMA Archives, NY.
and complicated. Although we hope that the exhibition will promote sympathy and understanding between Italy and the United States on a cultural level, we feel that it is essential to act independently of official channels insofar as possible. We should like your sympathy and understanding in this problem, for if it were to appear that the exhibition – whatever its quality – were officially sanctioned or supported it would suffer in the eyes of the artists and critics because of the political implications. We believe that we must choose the exhibition on artistic values alone irrespective of the political affiliations of the artists. This may seem unrealistic during this period, but after a great deal of thought we are convinced that no matter what happens in the next year or so, in the long run even the political consequences of the exhibition will be better if it is selected for quality alone.  

In late April 1948, Barr and Soby went to Italy where they stayed for two months and a half. Soby wrote to Rockefeller: ‘There is an extraordinary energy in the arts in Italy at the moment … I believe more than ever in the quality of the show itself and in its usefulness as a cultural tie between this country and Italy.’ 54 They dedicated most of their attention to Rome and Milan, but also travelled to Florence, Bologna and Venice. They attended the Venice Biennale and the Rome Quadriennale of that year, both in their first edition after the war. 55 But above all, they deeply scrutinized studios and galleries, gathering catalogues and little magazines.

A new idea of an exhibition exchange came again: the Museum was asked to sponsor the show of Peggy Guggenheim’s collection at the Biennale. She had been

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53 Barr to Morey, April 24, 1948. AHB [AAA: 3154; 271-272]. The preparation of the Italian exhibition is characterized by the uncertainties of a moment of changes not only in the Cold War dynamics but also in the history of the Modern’s own international politics. It documents an interesting shift toward the Museum’s new international and political role in the years just before the institution of the International Program of Circulating Exhibitions in 1952. That MoMA Program, as John Elderfield has written, was ‘in an ambivalent relationship to similar, governmental agencies’ in the early Cold War era. John Elderfield, ‘Preface,’ in John Elderfield (ed.), The Museum of Modern Art at Mid-Century: At Home and Abroad (Museum of Modern Art: New York, 1994), p. 7. On the institution of the International Program and its precedents, see in the same volume, Helen M. Franc, ‘The Early Years of the International Program and Council,’ pp. 108-49.

54 Soby to Rockefeller, June 8, 1948, AHB [AAA: 2181; 198]. MoMA Archives, NY.

invited to exhibit in the vacant Greek pavilion.\textsuperscript{56} It was the first time that artists such as Arshile Gorky, Robert Motherwell, Jackson Pollock, and Mark Rothko were shown in Europe.\textsuperscript{57} But Barr’s decision was again for the MoMA’s autonomy of choices. He wrote from Rome to the recently-appointed curator of the museum’s collection, Dorothy Miller:\textsuperscript{58} ‘I hope the coordinating committee will reject sponsorship … [which] involves approval of the whole exhibition and its organization.’\textsuperscript{59} In fact, the museum limited its participation to Barr’s official presence at the opening (fig. 4). The result, as Peggy Guggenheim would recall it, was awkward: ‘the name Guggenheim [was] on a map in the Gardens next to the names of countries like ‘Poland,’ ‘Rumania,’ ‘Austria,’ ‘France’. I felt as if I were a new European country.’\textsuperscript{60} The catalogue entry for Peggy’s show was written by none other than Argan, who ignored almost completely the American artists in the show to focus on Peggy’s collection of prewar European avant-gardes (more on this in Chapter 3).

If the Italians remained indifferent toward contemporary American art, the Americans showed an unprecedented interest in contemporary Italian art: the concept of a post-Fascist Italian Renaissance became in America a media refrain. This was noticed in a 1948 \textit{Harper’s Bazaar} article by Corrado Cagli, who expressed his concern about double meaning the word ‘renaissance’ had of birth but also of re-birth, that is return: ‘the idea of a renaissance in Italy…seems pompous and unreal…There has been no lack of

\textsuperscript{56} In 1948, many countries were absent from the Biennale for political or economic reasons. Their pavilions were used for special exhibitions. Greece did not participate because of the civil war (1945-1949). It was the young Italian abstract painter, Giuseppe Santomaso, who suggested that the Biennale Secretary, Rodolfo Pallucchini invite Peggy Guggenheim. See Anton Gill, \textit{Peggy Guggenheim} (Baldini Castoldi Dalai: Milan, 2004), pp. 385-7; Enzo di Martino, \textit{La Biennale di Venezia, 1895-1995} (Editoriale Giorgio Mondadori: Milan, 1995), pp. 43-53.


\textsuperscript{58} Miller was hired in 1934 as the assistant of Barr and was named curator in 1947.

\textsuperscript{59} Barr to Miller, May 19, 1948, AHB [AAA: 3153; 1025]. MoMA Archives, NY.

continuity that would justify the necessity of a rebirth." An Italian Jewish artist included in the MoMA show, Cagli escaped Europe in 1939 with the help of Barr and moved to the United States as an exile. In 1946, Cagli received the Simon Guggenheim Fellowship for his drawings of concentration camps done in 1945 as a US soldier who partook in the liberation of Buchenwald. After the war, he was one of the first promoters of the Italian show in New York and a major link for Barr and Soby with the Italian art scene. Cagli opposed the idea of a new Italian Renaissance, both in Italy and in the United States, because it implied that Fascism was a closed parenthesis. He knew well Fascist support of modern art, having enjoyed himself public commissions from the regime. The prestige value of the Renaissance had also been compromised by its central value.

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61 Corrado Cagli, ‘Today’s “Italian Renaissance”’, Harper’s Bazar, March 1948, pp. 233-237. It is significant that while declaring the problematic implications of the rhetoric of the Renaissance, Cagli himself was working at the settings and costumes for George Balanchine’s The Triumph of Bacchus and Ariadne: a ballet ideated by Cagli for Lincoln Kirstein’s Ballet Society, based on a Renaissance poem by Lorenzo The Magnificent. Cagli’s own ambivalent relationship with the Renaissance is representative of a wider condition in the late 1940s. During the war and its aftermath, a focus on Renaissance art provided many persecuted scholars, artists, and collectors from Germany and Italy (especially among exile Jews), with a well ordered world view, a seductive ivory-tower escape from the reality of death and devastation everywhere. See Allen J. Grieco, Michael Rocke, Fiorella Gioffredi Superbi (eds.), The Italian Renaissance in the Twentieth Century, Act of an International Conference, Villa i Tatti (Leo Olschki: Florence, 2002). Especially relevant is the essay by Christopher S. Woods, ‘Art History’s Normative Renaissance,’ pp. 65-92. Wood argues that Austrian and German art historians who emigrated to the US not only did tend to privilege Italian 15th and 16th centuries on other areas of study, but also had a more affirmative and celebratory approach to it, simplifying the more dialectical analysis which characterized their own studies while in Europe. If Woods’s argument refers to the German-speaking world, I agree with Romy Golan that the same is true for the less numerous Italian case. See Romy Golan, ‘The Critical Moment: Lionello Venturi in America,’ in Christopher E. G. Benfey, Karen Remmler (eds.), Artists, Intellectuals and World War II: The Pontigny Encounters at Mount Holyoke College, 1942-1944 (University of Massachusetts Press: Amherst, 2006), p. 122-35.

62 See letter by Cagli to the Italian painter Afro Basaldella of July 14th 1939, Archivio Afro, Rome.

63 In an unpublished letter to the Italian art critic and dealer, Pier Maria Bardi, of February 11, 1946, Cagli describes his role of promoter of the show with Barr and Soby. Letter, Cagli to Pier Maria Bardi, February 11, 1946, Archivio della Scuola Romana, Rome. Bardi was an influential art dealer and critic during the ventennio in Milan and Rome. In the late 1940s, he lived between Rome (where he owned the art gallery, La Palma) and Sao Paulo in Brazil (where, that year he founded the Museu de Arte de São Paulo).

64 When he wrote the Harper’s Bazaar article, Cagli had just experienced a violent contestation of his solo show in Rome. The opening was turned into a brawl when a group of young abstractionists - the self-proclaimed ‘Marxist and formalist’ artists of group Forma - contested Cagli’s new abstract works because they were inconsistent with his early figurative career under the Fascist regime. Cagli had a solo show at the gallery Studio d’Arte Palma in November 1-20, 1947. The catalogue text was written by Massimo Bontempelli, a prominent writer and art critic during the ventennio. He was contested by Consagra, Guerrini, Perilli, Accardi, Sanfilippo, Mugeri, Mirabella and was defended by Mirko, Afro and Guttuso. The episode had a great echo in the Italian press.
role in Fascist rhetoric. In the war’s aftermath, the word Renaissance was an all too familiar noun – both reassuring and vacant. It suggested a return to order and an overused point of reference for the reconstruction of a national identity.65

Cagli’s complaint, however, had no visible impact on Italian cultural diplomacy: the Renaissance continued to be used as the most powerful symbol of civilization that Italy had to offer. And so, in January 1949, Michelangelo’s sculpture David, from the Bargello Museum in Florence, was lent by the Italian government, ‘as a token of gratitude for postwar aid.’66 Oblivious of the MoMA Renaissance show of 1940, Life magazine wrote: ‘The first Michelangelo statue ever to be seen in the U.S. arrived in Washington last month aboard a U.S. warship and was set up in a big hall of the National Gallery, the scene of President Truman’s inaugural reception.’67

In the acrobatic rhetoric of cultural diplomacy, the Renaissance had taken on a new meaning, which was dear to President Truman’s administration. Highly regarded for its artists but also for its enlightened patrons, the Renaissance was a synonym for the promotion of civilization at large.68 As we saw, on occasion of the 1940 Old Masters,  

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65 The influential American critic and writer, Charles Rolo, for one, wrote a long article entitled ‘Italian Awakening’ in the magazine Tomorrow. Here, the idea of a new Renaissance was used for conservative purposes, as feared by Cagli. A trope of Fascist propaganda was adopted to describe the fascist ventennio as well as the early twentieth century Italian avant-gardes as an aberration from the true national character, that the order of the Renaissance to which ‘neoclassical’ post-war art was returning: “The neoclassicism of a [Pericle] Fazzini, the geometric realism of a [Renato] Guttuso, … each represent in some measure a return in modern dress to Italy’s greatest traditions – the realistic vision of the Renaissance and of the chronicles of Boccaccio. D’Annunzio heroic enlargements and their parody by the futurists were an unnatural departure from that tradition.” Charles J. Rolo, ‘Italian Awakening’, Tomorrow, January 1948, p. 28. Both Fazzini and Guttuso, as described below, featured prominently in the 1949 Italian show at MoMA.  
66 Charles Seymour Jr. Michelangelo’s David from the Bargello, pamphlet (National Gallery of Art: Washington, DC, 1949). The work was installed in time for President Truman inaugural reception, held at the Gallery on January 20. It was then shown to the public from January 24 to June 28, 1949.  
67 ‘A Famous David Comes to the U.S.,’ Life, January 24, 1949, p. 104. The 1940 show included Michelangelo’s marble relief, Madonna and Child from the Bargello as well. See Italian Masters, cit., p. 32.  
68 Life magazine periodically dedicated illustrated articles to the Doria and on the Colonna families in contemporary Rome, emphasizing their activity as patrons of the arts. Tradition: Italy’s Great Aristocrats Represent Her Nobler Times,” part of the photographic essay, “Italy” photographs by Alfred Eisentaedt,
Nelson Rockefeller had appropriated the rhetoric of the Renaissance to support American civilizing mission, four months after the beginning of the Second World War (see Chapter 1). Now, the US army had liberated Italy from Fascism, the American financial backing of the DC had granted the victory of democracy in the elections of April 1948, and, finally, the whole package of economic aid operated in these years under the umbrella of the Marshal Plan, had made Italy’s “Rebirth” possible: all this was perceived and advertised in America as an action of modern beneficence, a form of patronage at a national level. Life magazine, for example, in concomitance with the opening of Twentieth-Century Italian Art at MoMA, emphasized how the present cultural and artistic Renaissance of Italy was made possible by the American intervention and support (fig. 5).

It was Italian design that prepared the American terrain Twentieth-Century Italian Art. Before the MoMA show, exhibitions of Italian design presented to the American audience the most immediate and tangible evidence of Italy’s new renaissance. After the war, the idea originally advanced by Argan, Brandi, and Ventura of an Italian architecture exhibition was also revived. But it had to be different from the one proposed in 1940, the architecture of the regime being too overtly connected to the Fascist image. At the same time, there was hardly any new architecture to commend, given the

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69 In the immediate postwar period (December 20, 1944 – August 17, 1945), Rockefeller served as President Truman’s First Assistant Secretary of State.
70 Paul Ginsborg, A History of Contemporary Italy, pp. 92-128.
72 The success of Neorealist cinema in America, another major aspect of the rhetoric of Italy’s cultural rebirth, exploded starting in the spring 1948, that is right after the first design shows.
73 In 1949, Life magazine published a photographic essay on the current abandoned state of Mussolini’s EUR in Rome. It was significantly entitled “‘The Third Rome’ Empty, Incomplete, It Fittingly Commemorates a Dictator’s Dream,” Life, November 21, 1949, pp. 111-114.
economic misery of the new Republic. Instead, the architecture exhibition project evolved into a series of events focusing on Italian design, which was cheaper to produce, more portable, and sellable. An important center was the House of Italian Handicraft, founded in New York in 1947 with the financial help of the American Import – Export Bank (fig. 6). It promoted exhibitions such as Handicraft as Fine Art in Italy (1948). This included many of the artists that, one year later, would exhibit at Twentieth-Century Italian Art. But, unlike the MoMA show, it emphasized the intersection between fine arts and artisanal practice in Italy, as the Italian art historian Carlo Ragghianti wrote in

74 New construction, started with the foundation of Ina-Casa in 1949, would begin to yield results only in the mid-1950s. See Paola Di Biagi, La Grande Ricostruzione: Il Piano Ina-Casa e l’Italia degli anni Cinquanta (Donzelli: Rome, 2001).

75 Celebrating the $50,000,000 in exports from Italy to the United States during the first six months of 1948, Senator Owen Brewster triumphantly declared that Italy offered ‘a strong bulwark against communism, whose influence is waning as economic activity revives.’ ‘Handicraft Lines Recover in Italy,’ The New York Times, October 1, 1948. Brewster was a Republican senator, Maine. Between 1948 and the early 1950s, Italian design events of various kinds proliferated in the US, from the 1951 commercial extravaganza ‘Italy at Macy’s’ to the 1952 MoMA exhibition on Olivetti typewriters and graphic design (figs.). Authorities such as the Italian minister of foreign trade Ugo La Malfa and New York mayor, Vincent Impellitteri attended which featured contemporary furniture as well as a three-ton model of Saint Peter’s church. The Macy’s event was well covered by the press with articles published in New York newspapers as well as in weekly magazines: ‘Italian Fair Here Opened by Mayor,’ The New York Times, September 11, 1951; ‘Abroad at Home,’ Time Magazine, September 17, 1951, http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,815481,00.html. On the Olivetti show, see The Bulletin of the Museum of Modern Art, vol. 20, no. 1, Autumn, 1952: 3-19; Aline B. Loucheim, ‘Industry’s New Approach to Art,’ The New York Times, October 26, 1952.

76 The founder was Max Ascoli. An Italian Jewish intellectual and author, Ascoli held the chair of Philosophy of Law at the University of Rome until he left Fascist Italy in 1932 to come to the United States. Here, he taught at the New School of Social Research in New York. In the postwar period, Ascoli embraced the Cold War ideology, as expressed in his book, The Power of Freedom (Farrar, Straus: New York, 1949). He was the president of Handicraft Development, Inc., a non-profit organization, which sponsored the House of Italian Handicraft through the Committee for Assistance and Distribution of Artists Materials (CADMA). Ascoli received a $4,625,000 credit form the Export –Import Bank in December 1947. See ‘Italian Handicraft Aided,’ The New York Times, July 31, 1947; ‘Italian Trade Aid Seen in Bank Loan,’ The New York Times, December 8, 1947.

77 The House of Italian Handicraft was located at 217 East 49th Street, New York. The catalogue of Handicraft as Fine Art in Italy was designed by Bruno Munari: Carlo Ludovico Ragghianti (ed.), Handicraft as Fine Art in Italy (CADMA: Florence, 1948).

78 Extremely ambitious and conceptually similar to the subsequent Italy at Work, the exhibition presented works by thirty-seven artists, craftsmen, and designers, with a selection that was much more forward-looking than the one that MoMA would make one year later: Afio, Mirko Basaldella, Enrico Bordoni, Luigi Broggini, Massimo Campigli, Pietro Cascella, Felice Casorati, Sandro Cherchi, Fabrizio Clerici, Pietro Consagra, Filippo De Pisis, Agenore Fabbri, Lucio Fontana, Pietro Fornasetti, Renato Gregorini, Lorenzo Guerrini, Renato Guttuso, Leoncillo Leonardi, Carlo Levi, Paola Levi Montalcini, Marino Marino, Fausto Melotti, Giovanni Michelucci, Giorgio Morandi, Adriana Pincherle, Anita Pittoni, Armando Pizzinato, Emanuele Rambaldi, Giuseppe Santomaso, Aligi Sassu, Carlo Sbisa, Maria Signorelli, Ettore Sot-sas Jr., Enrico Steiner, Nino Ernesto Strada, Giulio Turcato, Gianni Vagnetti.
The emphasis on Italian creativity and ingenuity fostered by American money started with the activities of the House of Italian Handicraft and culminated in 1950 with *Italy at Work: Her Renaissance in Design Today.* The latter literally echoed ambassador Dunn’s words: ‘Italy can settle down now to some good hard work toward economic recovery’ and summarized at many levels the rhetoric of the “new Italian renaissance.”

The exhibition opened in 1950 at the Brooklyn Museum in New York, it included more than 2,000 items, and traveled for three years through twelve American museums and eleven states. The true design counterpart of the MoMA show, *Italy at Work* was entirely organized by American curators, and its selection was made by an American jury.

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79 Carlo L. Ragghianti (ed.), *Handicraft*, np.


81 James Clement Dunn to Nelson Rockefeller, April 28, 1948.

82 The museums, as listed in the catalogue, included: Baltimore Museum of Art, Baltimore Maryland; Albright Art Gallery, Buffalo, New York; Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, Illinois, Museum of Fine Arts of Houston, Houston, Texas; Minneapolis Institute of Fine Arts, Minneapolis, Minnesota; The Brooklyn Museum, New York City, New York; Carnegie Institute, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania; Portland Art Museum, Portland, Oregon; Museum of Art, Providence, Rhode Island; City Art Museum of St. Louis, St. Louis, Missouri; M. H. De Young Memorial Museum, San Francisco, California; Toledo Museum of Art, Toledo, Ohio. Meyric R. Rogers (ed.), *Italy at Work*, p. 7.
appositely sent to Italy. As proudly stated in the catalogue, the objects on display were all designed and produced in Italy after 1945. Their interest was both cultural and commercial: Meyrick R. Rogers, curator of Decorative and Industrial Arts of the Art Institute of Chicago, explained in the catalogue that, for the American public, the opportunity of seeing these objects meant ‘the broadening of our cultural experience.’ But also, he continued, ‘pleasure in such things is always heightened by the possibility of possession,’ that is to say, things on display could be bought. _Italy at Work_ offered a peculiarly diverse array of objects, styles, and production methods. The industrial design of Marcello Nizzoli’s ‘Summa’ - an electronic calculator for Olivetti - and Carlo Mollino’s plywood-and-glass furniture, cohabitated with Lucio Fontana’s self-consciously avant-garde ‘art-craft’ ceramics, but also with actually handicraft straw animals and liturgical objects (figs. 7-9).

Italy was presented as a country where industrial and artisanal designs, international modernity and regional traditions were deeply intermingled. The message, as Gertrude Allen, director of the House of Italian Handicraft, assured the _New York Times_ readers, was that Italian design ‘was not in competition with mass-produced goods in this country.’ The craftsmanship dimension was presented as the product of a romanticized Italian regionalism that had already been successfully represented in the US by neo-realist films. But also, as argued by Penny Sparke, small industry meant family.

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83 Originally proposed by Argan and Brandi to Barr during their 1939 meeting, the idea of a show and a book of Italian architecture and design was proposed again in 1949 to MoMA by the Italian architects Ernesto Nathan Rogers and Ignazio Gardella but was turned down by Monroe Wheeler. MoMA Archives, Monroe Wheeler Papers, I. 103, II.22 and II. 21. The show was curated by Meyric R. Rogers, curator of Decorative and Industrial Arts of the Art Institute of Chicago. The selection committee was composed by: Rogers; Charles Nagel, director of the Brooklyn Museum; and Walter Dorwin Teague, New York-based industrial designer. Author of the catalogue Foreword, the latter was well-known as a pioneer in the establishment of industrial design as a profession in the US.

84 Meyric R. Rogers (ed.), _Italy at Work_, p. 18.

85 These objects were designed by unknown, local artisans. The straw animals were by Emilio Paoli, the religious objects by Assirelli.

Since the nineteenth century, the Catholic Church had encouraged the development of regionally based, small-scale manufacture as a means of sustaining the importance of the family. Mussolini had followed this tradition giving craft work a special legal status and tax exemptions. In the Reconstruction years, family and Christianity, together with freedom, were the main values promoted by Christian Democracy and supported by America, as visualized in a 1948 election poster: the allegory of Italy holds the symbol of the DC, a shield decorated with a cross, to defend “patria, family, and freedom,” which are attacked by the communist hammer and sickle (fig. 10). Not only did the craft dimension represent the Italian specificity of uninterrupted tradition, but it was also socially reassuring stressing, through materials, iconography, and practice, its rural and religious roots. It was in this reassuring and depoliticized frame of mind that the brand ‘Italian design’ would achieve its international acclaim: a design that looked like industrial but had not the social inconveniences of real industry; it was modern but showed crafty attention to details and traditional knowledge of materials.

Organized just one year after Twentieth-Century Italian Art, Italy at Work made explicit a concept that was only implied in the 1949 MoMA exhibition, but which is key to an understanding of the role given to Italian artists in the new Renaissance rhetoric: individualism was its central term. A given of Cold War ideology – that of individual freedom - was projected backwardly to redeem the Italians from their Fascist past. Painters and sculptors had a prominent part in Italy at Work – from Corrado Cagli, who designed the tricolore catalogue cover to the aforementioned Lucio Fontana. Two reasons were given: on the one hand, they were indicated as the link between artisanship and

88 Paul Ginsborg, A History of Contemporary Italy, p. 120.
modernity - Fontana could simultaneously fire a ceramic vase at the kilns of Albisola and design the neon Spatial Light at the Triennale in Milan (1951); more importantly, Rogers asserted the Cold War concept of art as the quintessential manifestation of freedom. He opened the exhibition catalogue with these words: ‘The Italian is an individualist. Hence this exhibition.’ Not only was individualism a rhetorical device to depict the Italians as naturally belonging to the Atlantic Pact, but it also provided the Italians with a much needed collective alibi: twenty years of totalitarian government were presented as other and against the Italian true character. Individualism explained the survival of creativity, which was itself a sign of Italian people’s autonomy from or inner rebellion against authoritarian oppression. Another member of the selection committee, Walter Teague, described the new Renaissance phenomenon in Italy at Work’s catalogue as ‘an upsurge of the Italian vitality that seems to have stored itself up during the long, grey Fascist interim, waiting for this day of sun again.’ Teague’s literary image closely recalled (if it was not directly inspired by) the sprouting trunk illustrated in the catalogue cover image of Twentieth-Century Italian Art (fig. 11).

If design was to embody Italy’s post-war economic and creative resurgence, the high-culture prestige of painting and sculpture was more appropriate to celebrate the renaissance of Italy as a nation. Twentieth-Century Italian Art, as the catalogue’s foreword stated, was ‘planned as a general introduction to modern Italian art.’ Its explicit aim was to form a canon of Italian modernism, and to locate its place in the international context. From the foreword we can grasp the agenda for the exhibition:

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90 In 1951 Lucio Fontana exhibited the famous Spatial Light – Structure in Neon at the 9th Triennale in Milan.
92 Walter D. Teague, ‘Foreword,’ in Italy at Work, p. 10.
93 Alfred H. Barr, Jr. and James T. Soby, Twentieth-Century Italian Art, p. 5.
[Twentieth-century Italian art] has produced two movements – Futurism and the scuola metafisica – which have made vital contribution to the international mainstream of art in our time. These two movements have been examined in some detail in the following pages. With more recent Italian developments our method has been less methodical… The climate for art is propitious in Italy just now, with the shackles of Fascist isolationism rusting empty on the ground, and we have sought… to indicate what directions the newer creative impetus is taking.\textsuperscript{94}

The curators, in short, stressed three fundamental aims: (1) to legitimize the Italian contribution to twentieth-century modernism – that is, place it in Barr’s avant-garde taxonomies; (2) to sideline the Fascist period as a closed parenthesis when the national creative genius was temporarily stymied; and (3) to conceive of a ‘new Renaissance’ corresponding to the return of democracy (and American patronage). The catalogue cover image visualized the narrative of national rebirth: from the dead trunk of a cut-off tree, a new leaf has just sprouted colored with the three hues of the Italian tricolore. Italy’s cultural resurgence was well rooted in its past, exemplified by the paradoxical, if revealing, choice of a pseudo-roman typography on the catalogue cover, with distinct echoes of Fascist era imperialist design.

The first aim of legitimizing Italian modernism was successfully achieved by the two curators in the first and strongest section of the exhibition- not coincidentally, the one that was also the most distant in time and already art history. And so the show began with Futurism (fig. 12), also the subject of Barr’s sole essay for the catalogue. Barr effectively finessed the main problem facing the post-war reception of Futurism: its fundamental involvement with Fascism. He first turned to the need for historical detachment: ‘The year 1949 marks the fortieth anniversary of Italian Futurism… it should be possible now to wipe the dust of age and battle from these paintings, drawings and

\textsuperscript{94} Alfred H. Barr, Jr. and James T. Soby, \textit{Twentieth-Century Italian Art}, p. 5.
sculptures and look at them with fresh interest and a certain objectivity.\textsuperscript{95} He then rewrote the history of Futurism having it end in 1915 with the Great War (in which the Italian were Allies), and thus avoiding having to grapple with its next and longer phase under the regime. Instead he clearly separated the two with a dismissal shrewdly based on aesthetic quality, rather than ideological grounds: ‘A second generation of Futurists grew up around Marinetti, painted, wrote manifestos, demonstrated and were accorded some official recognition. A few of them were men of talent but their activities seem marginal and their achievements minor in quality beside those of the original Futurists.’\textsuperscript{96} As Enrico Crispolti has written, with this ‘Boccioni-centric’ interpretation of Futurism, Barr also freed Italian art historians from uncomfortable self-censorship, initiating the standard framework for Futurist studies in the 1950s by Roberto Longhi, Franco Arcangeli, and Argan.\textsuperscript{97}

In a prescient comment, Barr even succeeded in giving to Futurism a central role in the development of the European avant-garde, correctly broadening its legacy beyond national borders: ‘Throughout Europe the influence of early Futurism was perhaps greater than that of any movement save cubism. Often dismissed by French as a rather tasteless and provincial back eddy of cubism, Futurism was in principle, a repudiation of the static, puristic and quasi-academic elements in the Paris movement.’\textsuperscript{98} Despite the global reach of the Italian movement, however, he limited his discussion to painting and sculpture, avoiding reference to their typography or manifestos. His choice was probably due to the intrinsically political meaning of Futurists’ multimedia and performative approach to art, and their destabilizing attempt to merge the boundaries between high and

\textsuperscript{95} Alfred H. Barr, Jr., ‘Early Futurism,’ in \textit{Twentieth-Century Italian Art}, p. 16.
\textsuperscript{96} Alfred H. Barr, Jr., ‘Early Futurism,’ in \textit{Twentieth-Century Italian Art}, p. 16.
\textsuperscript{97} Enrico Crispolti, \textit{Storia e Critica del Futurismo} (Laterza: Rome-Bari, 1987), p. 94.
\textsuperscript{98} Alfred H. Barr, Jr., ‘Early Futurism,’ p. 16.
low culture. This curatorial choice was reflected by Barr’s Futurist acquisitions, which focused on painting and sculpture masterpieces of the first period such as Boccioni’s *Unique Forms of Continuity in Space* (1913), Carrà’s *Funeral of the Anarchist Galli* (1911); Balla’s *Swifts* (1913), or Sverini’s *Bal Tabarin* (1912). By doing so, Barr commenced an Anglo-American tradition of considering the movement exclusively in light for its high-art (less revolutionary) manifestations – a curatorial view that has held fast until recent years.

The works of Amedeo Modigliani made a cameo appearance (fig. 13). As Soby wrote: ‘Of all the twentieth-century Italian artists the most famous, with the possible exception of de Chirico, is Modigliani.’ He was already in the canon of modernism and in the MoMA collection, but now he was presented as Italian. As with the Italian

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99 Interestingly enough, Futurist politicization of art was given a prominent role in Barr’s pre-war, *Cubism and Abstract Art*. The introduction to the book included a chapter entitled ‘Abstract Art and Politics,’ where Futurism and Surrealism were identified as the two main movements, treated in the book, with strong political implications. Alfred H. Barr, Jr., *Cubism and Abstract Art* (Museum of Modern Art: New York, 1936), p. 16.

100 The Futurist 1949 acquisitions include: Boccioni, *Development of a Bottle in Space* (1912, bronze); *Unique Forms of Continuity in Space* (1913, cast 1931, bronze); Carlo Carrà, *Funeral of the Anarchist Galli* (1911, oil); Balla, *Swifts. Paths of Movement + Dynamic Sequences* (1913, oil); *Speeding Automobile* (1912, oil); Sverini, *Dynamic Hieroglyphic of the Bal Tabarin* (1912, oil). Alfred Barr would write in a statement that these works included ‘three of the half-dozen most renewed achievements of the movement.’ But he would also complain that these still left ‘the Museum without a painting by the Futurist leader [Boccioni].’ Statement by Alfred H. Barr, Jr, to Miss Chamberlain, Mr. Soby, Miss. D. Miller, Mr. Ritchie, and Mr. Burden, of September 1949. AHB [AAA: 3153; 980-982]. MoMA Archives, NY. In a letter to Toninelli of October 26, 1948, Barr wrote about his negotiation with ‘Signor Marinetti’ [sic] (the owner of the painting was actually Benedetta Marinetti): ‘the price was hard to arrive at because the works were of considerable rarity in a very inactive market. We were able to agree about the Boccioni sculpture, but the price he asked for his paintings seemed to us extremely high. I cannot guess what the triptych States of Mind would bring in the Italian market, but here in America it would bring very little.’ AHB [AAA: 3153; 985]. MoMA Archives, NY. Three years later Barr fulfilled his goals by adding the centerpiece to that collection for $5,800, Boccioni’s painting *The City Rises* (1910). The triptych of *The States of Mind* (1911) would be donated to the Museum by Nelson Rockefeller in 1979.

101 The first museum show in the United States to survey futurism beyond WWI and beyond fine arts was Vivien Greene’s *Italian Futurism 1909-1944: Reconstructing the Universe* held at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, February 21-September 1, 2014.

102 MoMA owned one sculpture, two paintings and some drawings by Modigliani before the 1949 show: the 1915 sculpture entitled *Head*, (acquired in 1939); the 1917 painting, *Anna Zborowska* (acquired in 1934); and the 1915-16 painting *Bride and Groom* (purchased in 1942, no longer in the collection). See Alfred H. Barr, Jr. *Painting and Sculpture in the Museum of Modern Art* (Museum of Modern Art: New
promotion of Modigliani at the 1948 Quadriennale, the claims to make Modigliani a national treasure were weakened by the historical reality of a career made in France. Instead his Italianità depended less on his modernism than on his stylistic references to the country’s grand Trecento, Quattrocento, and Cinquecento masters: ‘He remained unmistakably an Italian artist, harking back periodically to the primitives, Botticelli, the sixteenth-century Mannerists. It was out of his Italianism that he was able to make his own contribution to the modern idiom of the School of Paris.’ Soby mentioned nothing of his Jewish, or his French identities. Like Boccioni, Modigliani had died just before the rise of Fascism, and hence, just in time to insure an untainted posthumous reputation: ‘His death occurred in 1920,’ affirmed Soby, ‘This was precisely the moment when many of his countrymen at home were entering a long period of reactionary artistic isolation.’

The second, original Italian contribution to modernism – Metaphysical painting - was analyzed by Soby, whose strengths as a curator and collector did not always compensate for weaknesses in historical accuracy. His essays reveal the lack of an overall critical perspective, and consist of a collage of artists’ biographies. Soby reduced the ‘Scuola Metafisica’ to only three figures: Giorgio de Chirico, Carrà, and Giorgio Morandi (figs. 14-15); namely, the same artists selected for the exhibition, Tre Pittori Metafisici Italiani (Three Italian Metaphysical Painters) that Soby had seen at the 1948 Venice Biennale. Soby, however, overturned the value-judgement of the Venetian show. Tre Pittori equalled the three painters’ importance in the Metafisica, and in particular

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York, 1948), p. 316. The 1949 exhibition was the occasion to buy the masterpiece painting, Reclining Nude (c. 1919), which was already in the American market since 1929.

celebrated Morandi, who was awarded the Biennale grand prize for Italian painters. On the contrary, Soby considered Carrà and Morandi as secondary Metafisica figures, their main contribution to the history of modern art being Carrà’s Futurist phase of the 1910s and Morandi’s still-life paintings from the 1920s to the present. De Chirico, the artist Soby was interested in, was defined ‘the founder and leading figure of the School.’ The school itself, Soby continued, ‘was fundamentally a rationalization of the art de Chirico had been creating in Paris from 1912 to 1915.’ His *Disquieting Muses*, on the catalogue frontispiece (fig. 16), underlined his pre-eminent position as the best-known Italian artist in America: differently from Morandi or even the Futurists, de Chirico had been exhibited regularly in the United States for twenty years. Metafisica was juxtaposed to Futurism as its counterpart as well as its chronological succession, by limiting it between 1916 and 1921. Its portrait as a school – a rather deserted school - was clumsy. Soby wrote: ‘Unlike Futurism, *pittura metafisica* had no inaugural program, nor did it result in a widespread group of activity. Yet the fact remains that it is a distinguishable movement in modern art.’ The three artists’ separate biographies followed, without convincing the reader on the real consistency of the school. The end of Metafisica was explained with two causes, one biographical and one historical. The first one was the ‘growing enimity’ between de Chirico and Carrà over the historicization of the movement, after the latter published his 1919 book, *Pittura Metafisica*. Again, Soby

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104 The show was curated by Francesco Arcangeli who was an art historian and critic based in Bologna, and a close friend and supporter of Morandi. It should be noted here also that both Carrà and Morandi (but not de Chirico) were part of the Biennale’s Commissione per l’Arte Figurativa (Committee for Figurative Art), which approved the Special-exhibitions projects. The exhibition caused De Chirico’s indignation, which famously ended up in a seven-year-long trial (1948-1955) between the artist and the Biennale.

105 Soby wrote: ‘As a painter in the scuola metafisica Carrà used a vocabulary of forms invented by de Chirico’ (p. 22) and ‘Morandi’s activity in the scuola metafisica was peripheral’ (p. 23).

106 Soby, ‘La Scuola metafisica,’ in *Twentieth-Century Italian Art*, p.17.


108 See Emily Braun (ed), *De Chirico and America*.

spoke in defense of de Chirico: ‘Since [de Chirico] was without question the inventor of ‘metaphysical’ painting, he may well have been irritated that his disciple had rushed its premise into print.’ Soby, ‘La Scuola Metafisica,’ p. 17. The second one - in line with the grand scheme of the show - was the rise of Fascism.

Yet Soby could not finesse the problem of the late de Chirico. Since the thirties Soby had been the leader naysayer in America of de Chirico’s post-metaphysical production, both as a collector and as a critic. His monograph of 1941, The Early Chirico, brought to the United States the Surrealist rejection of his post-1918 work. Nevertheless he decided to deal in some way with the late de Chirico, and included three from the 1920s (fig. 17). Concurrently, Soby had been working on a new edition of his book, planning to change its title from The Early Chirico into a more neutral The World of Chirico. Just a few days after the opening of the Italian show, however, he regretted this and wrote to Wheeler: ‘I had thought first of including at least few later works [in the monograph], but those I put in our Italian exhibition, though they are among his best post-metaphysical pictures, convince me that he did truly go to pot around 1918.’

The late de Chirico was just a side-show to the real embarrassment of the exhibition. If a purpose of the MoMA enterprise was to assert the Italian rebirth after Fascism, the problem remained of how to account for the modernist art produced under Fascism during what the catalogue termed a culturally ‘dormant phase.’ Since the late

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10 Soby, ‘La Scuola Metafisica,’ p. 17.
13 Soby to Wheeler, July 12, 1949, AHB [AAA: 2176; 973]. MoMA Archives, NY. Before the 1949 MoMA possessed three paintings by de Chirico. All of them belonged to the pre-1918 period: The Evil Genius of a King (1914-15, purchased in 1936), The Nostalgia of the Infinite (1912-13, purchased in 1936); Delight of the Poet (c. 1913, acquired in 1941, no longer in the collection), See Alfred H. Barr, Jr, Painting and Sculpture (1948), p. 304. The museum did not buy de Chirico works during the 1949 show. The Anxious Journey (1913), which was not included in the exhibition, was bought in 1950 at auction through the Lillie P. Bliss Bequest, 1950.
1930s, the Modern had emphasized that totalitarian regimes were persecuting the avant-gardes. In the rising Cold War rhetoric of the late 1940s and especially after the recent polemics in the American press which attacked modern art as ‘communistic,’ the message broadcasted by MoMA in a militant-like way now was that the flourishing of modernism was itself the thermometer of the degree of individual freedom in a country.\(^{114}\) Mussolini’s shrewd cultural politics had allowed, if not encouraged, a pluralism of styles and movements in the arts, which resulted in an all-but-dormant scene. How to represent the expressionist and abstract art of Fascism therefore, without condemning it like a reversed degenerate art exhibition, nor rendering it too appealing?\(^{115}\) The result was something in between, presented with deliberate historical confusion: the mix of modernist realism with expressionist tinges, which was a 1930s stylistic koine in Italy as much as in the United States, was artificially presented as an isolated form of mild protest against the alleged official ‘ponderous classicism,’\(^{116}\) and even more notably, Italian abstraction of the interwar years was ignored in order to show the ‘younger abstractionists’ as a new post-war phenomenon. The damage was done nonetheless as the reviewer of *Art Digest* concluded: ‘real originality and power lay largely dormant, so far

\(^{114}\) Between 1946 and 1949 modern art was progressively under attack in the United States by conservative politicians and journalists, starting with the reaction against ‘Advancing American Art’ shown at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in the fall of 1946 to George A. Dondero’s 1949 speech ‘Modern Art Shackled to Communism’ and Barr’s reply. (Dondero was Republican Representative for Michigan). The relevance of the Italian show in this debate was evident as a letter by Alfred Barr to Mrs. Franklin D. Roosevelt of June 29, 1949 demonstrates: ‘When you so kindly visited our Italian exhibition the other day we spoke of the difficult problem of censorship for the arts in Russia and other European countries. Many of us who work in the art field have been deeply disturbed that the same problem has arisen in our own country, though of course not to anywhere near so serious degree. In the hope that it may interest you I am therefore enclosing an article in reply to recent attacks on the arts by Representative Dondero of Michigan.’ AHB [AAA: 2176; 978]. MoMA Archives, NY. On MoMA’s position in this debate, see Helen M. Franc ‘The Early Years of the International Program and Council,’ in John Elderfield (ed.), *The Museum of Modern Art at Mid-Century: At Home and Abroad* (Museum of Modern Art: New York, 1994), pp. 114-15.

\(^{115}\) Alfred Barr had struggled with the same problem in the 1936 exhibition catalogue, *Cubism and Abstract Art*, where he acknowledged Mussolini’s tolerance and even support of futurism and modernist architecture, calling it “confusing.” Alfred Barr, *Cubism and Abstract Art* (New York: MoMA, 1936), p. 56.

\(^{116}\) Soby, ‘Painting and sculpture since 1920,’ in *Twentieth-Century Italian Art*, p. 30.
as the present showing is concerned, from the ‘metaphysical school’ until the post-war sculptors.117

In the MoMA narrative, the Novecento followed upon Metaphisical painting and embodied the Fascist reaction. The Novecento was founded in 1923 by the Jewish art critic and journalist Margherita Sarfatti, who was professionally and personally close to Mussolini. Begun with a group show of seven artists, by 1926 the movement’s exhibitions included more than one hundred painters. In the early-1920s climate of ‘return to order,’ the Novecento artists shared the idea of an art inherently Italian, characterized by the plastic solidity of Giotto’s tradition, but also influenced by de Chirico’s neat volumes and dream-like atmospheres; a decade later, the label ‘Novecento’ comprised various competing tendencies including reactionary forms of naturalistic figuration.118 But Soby simplified the matter: ‘After the March on Rome, the influence of the two original movements [futurism and metafisica] was more effective outside Italy than in… Indeed the principal Italian school of the mid-1920s was the deliberately reactionary group known as the Novecento.’119 The overall ambiguity with which MoMA presented the Novecento was exemplified by the way its main figure, Sironi, was described. On the one hand he was portrayed as the Fascist artist, and isolated from the context to avoid contaminating others. As Soby wrote: ‘He occupies a solitary position among modern Italian artists.’ Nevertheless, even in the little space devoted to him in the text, one can see Soby’s strong attraction to Sironi’s ‘powerful romantic expressionism, which seems to be developed independently, being as closely related to the seventeenth-
A redemptive operation was mainly made through Morandi, who was presented as an isolated figure, focused on his formal research, independent from Fascist rhetoric, and
untouched by ‘the pressure of outer events.’\textsuperscript{125} The Museum, which before 1949 had no works by the artist, purchased more Morandis than anybody else except for the Futurists (fig. 20).\textsuperscript{126} This operation’s success is confirmed by the structure that most of the exhibition reviews followed: Futurism - de Chirico - Modigliani – Morandi - new generation.\textsuperscript{127} Morandi’s participation in Metafisica completed his image as the bond between the pre-Fascist avant-gardes and post-Fascist young abstractionists, bypassing the dictatorship. But another, more salient art history linked Morandi to the Fascist past, one that was to remain undisclosed for decades. Morandi had exhibited with \textit{Novecento} in 1926 and 1929, he was affiliated with the reactionary, regionalist, anti-modern movement \textit{Strapaese} (supercountry), and had not missed a single Biennale, nor a Quadriennale (the two most official Italian exhibitions under Fascism). Morandi enjoyed a solo show at the 1939 Quadriennale, when Jewish artists could not longer participate in it or any other exhibition because of the Fascist anti-Semitic legislation of one year earlier.\textsuperscript{128} Despite his co-existence, if not outright affiliation, with the regime, between 1945 and 1950, at least five Italian monographs on Morandi were published and in 1948 he was awarded the

\textsuperscript{125} Soby, p. 26. Presented as a secondary phenomenon was also the ‘Roman School,’ defined by Soby as ‘the first successful resistance to the authority of the Novecento.’ Soby, p. 30. Emily Braun has convincingly problematized the post-war historical reception/invention of the Roman School in her ‘The Scuola Romana: Fact or Fiction?’, \textit{Art in America}, vol. 76, no. 3, March 1988, pp. 128-37.

\textsuperscript{126} The museum bought in 1949 six etchings and two paintings by Morandi: \textit{Still Life} (1938, 9 ½ x 15 5/8’), and \textit{Still Life} (1916, 32 ½ x 22 5/8’). A third painting, \textit{Still Life} (1949, 14 ¼ x 17 ¼’), was purchased by Soby for his private collection. He eventually bequeathed the painting to the Museum in 1979.


first prize for Italian painting at the first Venice Biennale after the war: He was made to embody the opposition to the Fascist rhetoric. His obsession with dusty bottles that had been interpreted before the War as a refusal of ‘the contaminating effects of industrialization and European (particularly Parisian) ideas,’ was now seen as a private resistance against Fascist magniloquence. His post-war typical portrait, represented him as the Italian version of the existentialist artist (fig. 21), hidden in his studio, while painting obsessively his bottles in an infinite series of little canvasses. As Soby wrote, Morandi ‘is today almost universally considered by the Italians to be their finest living painter.’ But if post-war Italy needed such a redemptive symbol of domestic headshaking, Morandi was also perfect for the American show because, as Braun has put it, he ‘falls into the French camp of pure painting, the love of the sensuous stroke and vivid materiality of the pigment.’ Soby read his art in a formalist way, as a further modernist example where simplicity is highest achievement (he compared him to Mondrian). Morandi’s implicit anti-Fascism was allegedly demonstrated by the apolitical nature of his art. As an American reviewer wrote: ‘Among the bombastic fascist offerings, his quiet art was a sardonic defiance in point.’

If the main artistic interest of the exhibition focused on Futurism and Metafisica, its political message was the post-war art renaissance in Italy. As the Modern’s press release stated:

A special emphasis is placed on the younger men whose works in many instances have never before been seen in this country. Though their contemporaries in the film field

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129 Giovanni Scheiwiller, Giorgio Morandi (Chiantore: Turin, 1945); Cesare Gnudi, Morandi (La Stampa: Florence, 1946); Le Incisioni di Morandi, (Calcografia Nazionale: Rome, 1948); Mario Ramous, Giorgio Morandi (L.Cappelli: Bologna, 1949); Francesco Arcangeli, 12 Opere di Giorgio Morandi, (Il Milione: Milan, 1950).
130 Emily Braun, ‘Speaking Volumes,’ p. 91.
132 Emily Braun, ‘Speaking Volumes,’ p. 90.
have already won international reputations with such remarkable movies as *Open City*, *Shoe Shine*, *Paisan*. The painter and sculptors, too, are producing valid, original art despite the strength and renown of the older generation and despite the isolationism of the Fascist period in which they grew up. … The number, the variety of expression and the quality of the works of art in this exhibition are perhaps indicative, along with other manifestations such as films, of a new renaissance in Italy.¹³⁴

To demonstrate Italy’s vitality, Barr and Soby had to show something interesting for the American public. From a situation swarming with several little exhibitions, crossed short-living groups, daily manifestos and one-issue magazines, they had to choose something representative. On the one hand they selected the neo-romantic realism of the Roman ‘School of Portonaccio’ of Vespignani, Muccini and Urbinati, as the pictorial counterpart of the neo-realist cinema, already familiar to the American public.¹³⁵ Soby described Vespignani’s crumbling peripheries (fig. 22) as ‘a delicate yet piercing commentary on post-war Italy.’¹³⁶ But the curators’ main choice was abstraction: ‘the best painters of the younger generation are generally abstract in style.’¹³⁷ Their choice successfully conveyed the intended message. *Time* magazine’s review of the show was entitled ‘Lively Proof’ and ended: ‘Italian art had survived Fascism, the exhibition proved beyond a doubt.’¹³⁸

The problem was that in the post-war years, when the MoMA was promoting abstraction as apolitical, the development of Italian abstract art was complex and fraught with political partisanship. And the debate over abstraction versus figuration had become even more politicized after the PCI leader, Palmiro Togliatti pronounced his anathema

¹³⁵ These artists were sponsored by Galleria dell’Obelisco of Rome. Interestingly, Italian Cinema, which had experienced a major boom in the immediate post-war years, was under a deep economic crisis between the late 1940s and early 1950s. A major reason for this crisis was the political pressure and censorship during the early DC government. See Gian Piero Brunetta, ‘Cinema, the Leading Art,’ in *The Italian Metamorphosis*, p. 438-49.
¹³⁷ ‘Statement by Alfred H. Barr, Jr. For release,’ September 1949, JTS, I.8. MoMA Archives NY.
against non-naturalistic art in September 1948.\(^{139}\) Now, the artists of the Fronte Nuovo delle Arti (New Art Front), chosen by Barr and Soby to represent the new tendencies, were at the centre of that debate.\(^{140}\) Founded in 1946, the group had a special exhibition in the 1948 Venice Biennale, where Barr and Soby saw them.\(^{141}\) Most of the Fronte artists shared a past in the anti-Fascist group of intellectuals Corrente (1938-1943) which had explicitly refused apolitical formalism in art, and presently they had a moral attitude toward art making, a left-wing affiliation (most of them were members of the PCI), and a loosely post-cubist abstract style.\(^{142}\) Things changed when, later that year, the communist journal \textit{Rinascita} published the aforementioned article by Togliatti, reviewing negatively an exhibition in Bologna including most of the Fronte artists. An immediate letter of protest was signed by communist artists led by Guttuso: ‘we want…an art which should truly become one with the just struggle of the working class…[yet is in line with] the most advanced tendencies in contemporary art.’\(^{143}\) But by the summer of 1949 – with the MoMA show just opened - the following debate caused the Fronte to split into two

\(^{139}\) On the debate about abstraction in Post-war Italy, see Marcia Vetrocq, ‘National Style and the Agenda for Abstract Painting in Post-war Italy,’ \textit{Art History}, no. 12, December, 1989. Togliatti published his article with his well-known pseudonym Roderigo di Castiglia, \textit{Rinascita}, Rome, October, 1948.

\(^{140}\) On the Fronte Nuovo and Italy’s political debate at the turn of the 1940s see Adrian Duran, \textit{Painting, Politics, and the New Front of Cold War Italy} (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014).


\(^{142}\) Born as a magazine named ‘Corrente di Vita Giovanile,’ Corrente was an independent group of intellectuals based in Milan, which included writers, critics, philosophers and artists. In 1939 the group opened the exhibition space Bottega di Corrente in via dell Spiga (Milan) and in 1941 founded the publishing house Edizioni di Corrente. Despite the lack of a programmatic choice of style, expressionism predominated. The artists most actively participating in Corrente include: Renato Birolli, Bruno Cassinari, Raffaele De Grada, Lucio Fontana, Renato Guttuso, Giacomo Manzù, Giuseppe Migneco, Ennio Morlotti, Aligi Sassu, Ernesto Treccani, Emilio Vedova. Writers and critics feature: Luciano Anceschi, Giulio Carlo Argan, Antonio Banfi, Piero Bigongiari, Luigi Comencini, Carlo Emilio Gadda, Alfonso Gatto, Alberto Lattuada, Enzo Paci, Vasco Pratolini, Salvatore Quasimodo, Luigi Rognoni, Umberto Saba, Giancarlo Vigorelli, Elio Vittorini. In the 1949 catalogue, Soby barely mentioned Corrente as the precedent for the post-war Fronte Nuovo but failed to discuss it. Soby, Twentieth-Century Italian Art, cit., p. 32.

groups: the abstract formalists, and the realists who remained faithful to the PCI’s
dictates. The leader of the latter tendency was Renato Guttuso.144 The dynamics of these
events enjoyed a notable interest in the United States even among the general public. In
January 1949 Time magazine dedicated an article to ‘The Struggle of Guttuso,’ about the
artist’s first reaction to Togliatti’s pronouncement; and in August of the same year Life
magazine published two photographs, side by side. One portrayed Guttuso, labelled
‘obedient artist’ (fig. 23). The caption explained: ‘prominent Red artist who changed
style to meet party’s ideas.’ The other showed Consagra, another artist from the notorious
Bologna exhibition: ‘Communist sculptor Pietro Consagra…refuses to obey party edicts
on art.’145 All of this was absent from the MoMA show.

Beside the untimely trip of the MoMA curators, right before the dissolution of the
Fronte and such a radical watershed in the Italian artistic debate, what is significant is the
fact that Soby managed to avoid the artists’ affiliation to the PCI and the very content of
their works in favour of a formalistic reading. What counted for him was the fact that the
artists of the Fronte adhered to the international stylistic Esperanto, ‘which has evolved
from cubism and its later abstract ramifications and, to a lesser degree, from
expressionism… no one of them has shown any inclination whatever to return to
traditional realism of technique; it is such a work as Picasso’s Guernica which is their

144 His return-to-order manifesto was the traditionally realistic painting Occupazione delle terre incolte in
Sicilia, exhibited at the Venice Biennale of 1950. See Lara Pucci, ‘Terra Italia: The Peasant Subject as Site
of National and Socialist Identities in the Work of Renato Guttuso and Giuseppe de Santis,’ Journal of the
Essay – Rome,’ Life, vol. 27, no. 5, August 1, 1949, p. 50. In a letter of April 28, 1949 to Laurance P.
Roberts, director of the American Academy in Rome, Soby wrote: ‘One day when you have a chance could
you let me know the present status of Guttuso in relation to the recent Communist Directive in Italy against
modern art. I was told this noon by an editor of Life Magazine that Guttuso had capitulated and was now
painting completely realistic picture.’ [AAA. Roll 3153; Fr. 1287]. On July 15, 1949, Guttuso wrote a letter
to Soby, where he justified his new style: he considered modernism as the new academic art, playing now
the same cultural role that official art had under Fascism. AHB [AAA: 3153, 1189]. MoMA Archives, NY.
AHB [AAA: 3153; 1189]. MoMA Archives, NY.
ideal, and not academic propaganda art in the Soviet Union.\textsuperscript{146} Guttuso, presented as ‘the most forceful figure in the Fronte,’ was the only one with a painting reproduced in color in the catalogue. The paradox is that this painting, which was chosen for its formal qualities, represented a politically radical subject matter: entitled \textit{La Mafia} (fig. 24), it reproduced almost exactly a canvas that Guttuso had exhibited at the 1948 Biennale, \textit{Contadino Siciliano} (Sicilian Farmer). This depicted, in a geometricized neo-cubist style, a farmer at work. What changed in the MoMA painting beside the title, was the addition of a second figure hidden behind a tree and aiming his rifle at the farmer’s back. The reference was to the notorious events of Portella della Ginestra in Sicily, where, on May 1, 1947 submachine-gun fire opened on a crowd of peasants who, following the PCI victory at the regional elections, were celebrating Labour Day. Eleven were killed and sixty-five wounded. Executioner of the massacre was a band of gunmen led by the Sicilian brigand Salvatore Giuliano, who immediately became the scapegoat. But in a famous speech to the Constituent Assembly, the Sicilian PCI secretary, Girolamo Li Causi soon denounced the political nature of the slaughter and implicated that, behind it, the mafia, local landlords, police, and centre-right parties all came under suspicion. A large nationwide wave of protest followed, causing one of the gravest political crises in post-war Italy.\textsuperscript{147} Done in the months preceding the April 1948 elections, this painting belonged to a moment when the events of Portella della Ginestra were a major theme in the PCI electoral campaign as well as a symbol in the protests of southern peasants for

\textsuperscript{146} James T. Soby, ‘Painting and Sculpture since 1920,’ p. 32.

\textsuperscript{147} The hidden figure in Guttuso’s painting probably alludes to the political responsibilities behind the actual murder. Guttuso painted a larger version of this painting, originally owned by Toninelli, entitled \textit{L’Uccisione del Capolega}, which included a third group of a man covering the eyes of a kid in front of the murder. He returned to this theme in 1953 with a large painting explicitly entitled Portella della Ginestra. See Enrico Crispolti (ed.), \textit{Catalogo Ragionato Generale dei Dipinti di Renato Guttuso}, 3 vols. (Giorgio Mondadori: Milan, 1983), vol. 1, p. 177; Lara Pucci, p. 331.
the redistribution of the land. This subject matter was probably not as evident to the eyes of Nelson Rockefeller, who purchased the painting for his private collection.\textsuperscript{148}

In spite of its name, ‘Recent Sculpture’ actually included pieces of Arturo Martini from 1919, and Marino Marini, Giacomo Manzù, Emilio Greco and Pericle Fazzini from the thirties. Fontana, who showed three recent ‘baroque’ ceramics (fig. 25), was here much closer to his works of the thirties than to his recent spatialist sculptures.\textsuperscript{149} Nevertheless, the section was a triumph (especially Marino Marini).\textsuperscript{150} Part of the reason for this success was the fact that sculpture was the only significant aspect of modern Italian art that had never been exhibited to the American public in the 1930s.\textsuperscript{151} But above all, the style of the Fronte artists remained a peripheral phenomenon in the teleology, advocated by critics such as Clement Greenberg or Barr himself, that saw a

\textsuperscript{148} Mistakenly indicated as property of the Museum of Modern Art in the 1949 catalogue (p. 130), the painting was actually acquired by Rockefeller for his own collection. See Enrico Crispolti (ed.), \textit{Catalogo Ragionato} (1983), p. 178.
\textsuperscript{149} Fontana’s first work entitled \textit{Concetto spaziale} was finished in 1947.
\textsuperscript{150} The \textit{New York Times} called the sculpture section ‘the most interesting part [of the show]’ and dedicated the article’s two reproductions to two sculptures one by Manzù and the by Fazzini; \textit{Vogue} of July 1949 published two photographs by Irving Penn portraying respectively Manzù and Marini. Right after the show, Marini was commissioned a portrait of the ambassador Dunn in Rome and of Nelson Rockefeller in New York. And it was after Marini’s success at the MoMA show that the New York art dealer Curt Valentine started planning the artist’s first solo show in his gallery in February 1950. \textit{Look} magazine reviewed the show with an article entitled, ‘Marini: the new Italy’s Top Sculptor.’ Howard Devree, ‘Italian Modernism: Futurism to the Present In Museum Show,’ \textit{The New York Times}, July 3, 1949. http://query.nytimes.com/search. See the letters by Marini to Curt Valentine of November 27, 1949 (on Dunn’s portrait) and September 15, 1950 (on Rockefeller’s portrait). Curt Valentine Papers, Correspondence Marino/Marina-Curt, Museum of Modern Art Archives. ‘Marini: The New Italy’s Top Sculptor Has His First U.S. Show,’ \textit{Look}, February 2, 1950. The collaboration between Valentine and Marini started in 1948, during the prepartion of the MoMA show. It is during the show that Valentine pushed to become Marini’s official dealer in the United States: in his letter to Marini of September 6, 1950, Valentine mentions MoMA’s interest in purchasing Marini’s Portrait of Carrà and, for the first time, claims his role as mediator: ‘This is only to make [MoMA] aware of the fact that I am your dealer in the United States.’ The first letter in the Marin-Valetine correspondence mentioning the show of 1950 is dated November 3, 1949, therefore after the end of the MoMA exhibition. Curt Valentine Papers, Correspondence Marino/Marina-Curt, Museum of Modern Art Archives.
\textsuperscript{151} In 1938, an exhibition of Italian sculptures was planned by the New York branch of the Roman gallery, Cometa owned by Anna Laetitia Pecci Blunt and directed by Libero De Libero. But the derogatory campaign against the gallery’s international ‘Judaic’ and ‘Bolshevik’ scope brought an end to this extremely intense chapter in the Italian art world in the second half of the Thirties. Regarding the events surrounding the Galleria della Cometa, see: \textit{Una collezionista e mecenate romana. Anna Laetitia Pecci Blunt 1885-1971} (Rome: Carte Segrete, 1991); and Sergio Cortesini, \textit{One Day} (2003).
linear evolution from the Impressionists and the School of Paris to the rise of Abstract Expressionism. The axis Paris-New York central in the early rhetoric on Abstract Expressionism left much more space to ‘alternative’ schools of sculpture than painting.

A limit but also a reason for the exhibition’s value as a historical document was its unfortunate timing. As discussed above, Barr and Soby were in Italy just few months before the notorious condemnation of abstraction by Togliatti, and the following furious debate. Furthermore, the year 1949 was one of the most significant turning points in the Italian arts of the twentieth century not only for the artists involved in the show but especially for those who were excluded. Fontana made the first monochrome Buchi (fig. 26), and created his first environmental piece, the Ambiente Spaziale at the Galleria del Naviglio in Milan; Alberto Burri included the sack for the first time in his painting, *SZ1*; and Giuseppe Capogrossi started composing his canvasses with his fork-like signs. Barely two months after the MoMA show ended, a large exhibition opened at the Galleria Nazionale d’Arte Moderna in Rome. Called *Mostra Internazionale dell’Art Club*, it included many of the artists that would lead the Italian avant-garde of the following decade and beyond, most of whom were excluded by the Modern: from the young abstractionists of the group Forma to Burri, Capogrossi, and Mimmo Rotella.

Beside timing, the real limit of the 1949 MoMA exhibition was ideological. The organizer of the *Mostra Internazionale dell’Art Club* and author of the catalogue foreword was Enrico Prampolini, who was also the director of the exhibition space Art Club in Rome. A major animator of the post-war cultural scene in Rome, Prampolini (fig. 27) was a protagonist of the Italian second Futurism in the interwar period, he was affiliated to Dada in the late 1910s and to the European abstract movement Abstraction Creation in the 1930s. His legacy in Italy comprises Burri and the Informale, but also
Arte Povera. The notable exclusion of Prampolini from the 1949 exhibition, beyond his individual case, gives a sense of the ideological restraints of MoMA: by ignoring the Fascist support of modernism and the presence of important abstract art movements during the ventennio, it understood Italian post-war abstraction and Informale as derivative respectively of the Parisian School and the American Abstract Expressionism rather than a phenomenon with specific roots and historical reason.

As a result the 1949 MoMA exhibition was old even before opening. It is significant in this sense that artists like Bruno Cassinari, Guttuso and Armando Pizzinato were labelled ‘Younger Abstractionists,’ when they had already embraced the cause of social realism. It was for this reason, but also for either the exclusion of the Italian art historians from the organization of the show and the strong anti-Americanism widespread in Italy after the Atlantic Pact, that the show was deliberately ignored by most of the Italian art critics on the press. The critic Raffaele Carriere, who had begun his career under Fascism, and who participated in the 1949 show as a lender, complained in the Roman newspaper Il Tempo: ‘All the Italian press keeps silent up to now. A really incomprehensible silence;’ and Marco Valsecchi in the weekly magazine Oggi answered him that Italian critics ignored the show just because nobody had told them


153 Eloquent ideological counterpart was Clement Greenberg’s dismissive review of an American volume on Italian art, published in 1948’s climate of new interrelations: Hans Felix Kraus, Modern Italian Painters (Englewood: New Jersey City, 1948). The book anticipated most of the MoMA 1949 exhibition’s artists: ‘There has been, lately a certain improvement in standards of reproductions in American art publishing… The color reproductions in ‘Modern Italian Painters’ would do credit to a Viennese or Zurich publisher, and it is a pity that hardly more than three or four artists included seem to deserve the lavish technique and care spent on their plates. Aside from Modigliani and the early De Chirico, modern Italian painting has indeed little to boast of.’ Clement Greenberg, ‘Painters’ Roundup,’ New York Times, Book Review, May 9, 1948, p. BR5.

about its existence: ‘We even had to order and buy the catalogue at the bookstore.’\textsuperscript{155} The show was originally supposed to travel to the Tate of London, to Sydney, San Francisco, Chicago, Toledo, Rome, Florence, Milan and Venice. In fact, none of these took place.

If the actual exhibition was ineffective as a portrait of twentieth century Italian art, and failed to grasp the best of post-Fascist developments in the arts, its effects – pro and con were concrete. Lionello Venturi wrote in \textit{Art News}: ‘One salutes with pleasure the Museum of Modern Art’s enterprise to bring before the American public a wide sampling of the work of Italian painters and sculptors during the last forty years. The choice of artists and their works was made by Alfred H. Barr Jr., and James Thrall Soby, who know what the American public is interested in; and by their selection they have put the canons of contemporary Italian criticism to an international test.’\textsuperscript{156} And it was through its acquisitions, that the Modern managed to set a new canon of Italian art in the first half of the twentieth century. A few days after the end of \textit{Twentieth-Century Italian Art}, as if the entire enterprise had been conducted to justify the collection of an ex-enemy’s national art, Barr could proudly announce to the press the exhibition of ‘the Museum’s new Italian acquisitions’\textsuperscript{157} (fig. 28). That canon, as seen, was the product of specific historical circumstances, but nonetheless determined the interpretative framework for Italian modernism in the United States for decades after.

Two other consequences of \textit{Twentieth-Century Italian Art} are key to an understanding of the events discussed in the next two chapters: firstly, it stimulated a market for Italian contemporary art in the United States, and therefore encouraged new enterprises in the following years. The most important of them was the opening, in 1950,

\textsuperscript{155} Marco Valsecchi, ‘In mostra a New York una grande rassegna dell’arte italiana contemporanea,’ \textit{Oggi}, Milan, October 6, 1949.
\textsuperscript{156} Lionello Venturi, ‘The New Italy Arrives in America,’ \textit{Art News}, Summer 1949, pp. 27-9, 60.
\textsuperscript{157} \textit{Statement by Alfred H. Barr, Jr. for Release}, September 1949, JTS, I.8. MoMA Archives NY.
of Catherine Viviano’s Gallery, a large space in mid-town Manhattan (very close to
MoMA), entirely dedicated to contemporary Italian art. Active until 1970, the Viviano
Gallery is a protagonist of chapter 3. A more indirect yet major consequence of
Twentieth-Century Italian Art, like every important export of Italian art to the United
States, was felt in Italy. Despite Italian critics’ initial silence, the way Barr and Soby
historicized Italian modernism reverberated back across the Atlantic: the impact of this
show on Italian artists, critics, and dealers cannot be over-estimated. At a distance of ten
and twenty years, respectively, the show of 1949 affected the enterprises discussed in
chapters 3 and 4.
CHAPTER 3

“TU VUO’ FA’ L’AMERICANO:” RESHAPING THE IMAGE OF ITALY BETWEEN RECONSTRUCTION AND ECONOMIC MIRACLE

As Italy moved from the decade of Reconstruction (1945-1955) to the Economic Miracle (1958-1963), an image of a "new Italy" emerged in the United States. Gone was the redemptive rhetoric of a destroyed and poor country resurfacing from the war's rubble; and the idea of Italian modernity as a rebirth from Italy’s own past gave way to a new one. What prevailed now was a present-oriented country with a modern, glamorous, and pleasing façade. Above all, the “new Italy” was advertised as international, a term that during the 1950s increasingly came to signify the inroads of American imperialism.

Italy’s economic crisis was over and the reconstruction process had transformed the nation: a more stable country and a solid ally of the United States, Italy was now ready to forget its recent past. Fascism and the trauma of the war were now pushed as much as possible toward the status of distant historical events. De Gasperi, the austere and bent antifascist, was replaced by the smiling Amintore Fanfani, who was first elected prime minister of Italy in 1954 and, after the political elections of May 1958, was simultaneously prime minister, foreign minister, and secretary of the Christian Democracy party. He was known simply as “il padrone d’Italia” (Italy’s owner). He embodied Italy’s changed climate, which combined an amnesia of the past with a focus on the future.

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1 “Tu vuo fa’ l’americano” is the title and first line of a popular song in Neapolitan dialect by Renato Carsone and Nicola Salerno, released in 1956. It loosely translates as, “You’d like to act like / to be an American.”
4 The expression by P. Ottone is quoted by Ginsborg, cit., p. 444.
on the present and an openness to America; the fact that he had signed the anti-Semitic “Manifesto della Razza” in 1938 and that he had collaborated with the racist magazines *Dottrina Fascista* and *La Difesa della Razza* did not affect his political career. And, unlike the most prominent political leaders of the Reconstruction era, he did not participate in the Resistance. In contrast to Alcide De Gasperi’s strong Europeanism, Fanfani promoted a decidedly “Atlanticist” foreign policy.

With the support of president Giovanni Gronchi (in office from 1955 to 1962), Fanfani embraced the so-called “Neoatlantismo” (new Atlanticism) foreign policy with the goal to renew the alliance with the United States and to give a more active role to Italy within the NATO. The idea was to decrease the military function of the North Atlantic Treaty, in which Italy could not play a relevant role, and increase its economic, social, and cultural scope. Fanfani’s party, the Democrazia Cristiana traditionally used the “communist menace” as an argument to solicit political and economic support from the United States. Starting in the mid-1950s, this threat lost credibility and contractual power, and Fanfani adopted a new strategy. He presented Italy a positive example of Americanization. In particular, after the Suez Crisis of 1956, Fanfani saw the diplomatic crisis of France and Britain with the United States as an opportunity for Italy to become the privileged ally of the latter. He even proposed to the American president, Dwight D. Eisenhower (in office from 1953 to 1961) to use the recent reconstruction of Italy through

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5 Between 1936 and 1943, Fanfani was professor of Economy History at Università Cattolica in Milan. From 1943 to 1945, he was in Switzerland.
6 Alessandro Brogi, *Confronting America: The Cold War between the United States and the Communists in France and in Italy* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2011), p. 234. Coined in 1950 after the foundation of the NATO, the word Atlanticism (Atlantismo in Italian) indicated the belief in the military, political, economic, and cultural cooperation between North America and Europe.
8 See Lucia Ducci, Stefano Luconi, Matteo Petrelli, cit., pp. 126-132.
the Marshall Plan as a successful model to “expand the area of prosperity” throughout the Mediterranean.9

Fanfani’s Neoatlantismo coincided with a new openness to America even beyond the traditionally pro-American Democrazia Cristiana. In the immediate post-war period, as we saw, Americanism was strong even among intellectuals affiliated with the Partito Comunista Italiano (PCI). But in the early 1950s, the Korean War (1950-1953) and the McCarthyist campaign against alleged communists in the United States (1950-1954) raised strong concerns about political and intellectual freedom in Italy. Many saw the American military intervention in Korea as an imperialistic aggression. And they compared the McCarthyist “witch hunt” to Fascist repression, still fresh in their memory, and followed the trial and execution of Ethel and Julius Rosenberg (1951-1953) with apprehension (fig. 1).10 So the Korean War armistice and the United States Senate’s censorship of Joseph R. McCarthy came as major causes of relief and reconciliation. Subsequently, the Soviet Army’s invasion of Hungary in 1955-1956 greatly damaged the image of Russia, and the consequent crisis in the relationship between leading Italian intellectuals and the pro-USSR PCI further lessened their anti-Americanism.11 Although

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9 In 1958, Fanfani proposed a Marshall Plan for the Middle East where Italy played the double role as an example to be emulated and as the representative of the United States in the Mediterranean. Lucia Ducci, Stefano Luconi, Matteo Petrelli, cit., p.132.

10 Authors like Pavese, Vittorini, and Calvino, who were leading voices in the immediate post-war Americanism, changed their positive attitude during the “witch hunt” period. Pavese died in 1950, but both Vittorini and Calvino reconciled with the United States after 1956. See Paola Castellucci, Un modo di stare al mondo. Italo Calvino e l’America (Bari: Adriatica Editrice, 1999), pp. 12, 17-56. See also, Gampiero Chirico, ed., Elio Vittorini: epistolario americano (Palermo: Lombardi, 2002).

11 See Stephen Gu ndle, Between Hollywood and Moscow: The Italian Communists and the Challenge of Mass Culture, 1943-1991 (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000), p. 84-99. On the crisis of the PCI after 1956 see Paul Ginsborg, cit., pp. 208-209 and 292-293. A significant example of the shift in attitude toward the United States after 1956 is that of the influential writer Italo Calvino who left the PCI in 1957. Castellucci has effectively described the shift from the great concern during the McCarthyist years to the new openness to America after 1956. See Paola Castellucci, Un modo di stare al mondo, cit., pp. 57-100. One can sense disgust but also a tone of relief in the letter with which the painter Renato Birolli communicated to the gallerist, Catherine Viviano, his exit from the PCI: “I announce you that I have left
important forms of “cooperation” and individual examples of Americanism persisted without interruption throughout the post-war decade, as we shall see, it was only during the second half of the 1950s that pro-American sentiments were widely spread and that Fanfani’s rhetoric expressed the dominant ideology.

Fanfani succinctly expressed his ideas in an article entitled “A Bridge over the Atlantic,” which appeared in a 1958 special issue of the American magazine *Atlantic Monthly* dedicated to Italy (and including texts by two protagonists of this chapter, Lionello Venturi and Irene Brin, among many others). As the newly elected prime minister, he declared that the difficult period of reconstruction was over and that with a new era of stability and wealth, an invisible bridge across the Atlantic linked Italy and the United States:

Since the War we have constantly pursued the ideal of European integration on the lines drawn by Alcide De Gasperi, Prime Minister of Italy during our most difficult years of reconstruction… The millions of tourists, including Americans, who now visit us every year realize that we have come a long way. We intend to go on, even hurriedly, in order to put ourselves among the most advanced nations as quickly as possible. … [Now,] one can hardly speak of the Old and New Worlds; the terms, in fact, are seldom used now, at least in Italy - we speak instead of the western world and the free world, and we mean the same thing by

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both. … Thus an opposition which considers Italy from one standpoint and America from another is inconceivable today.\textsuperscript{13}

His renouncing the distinction between “Old and New Worlds” was a major shift even within the most pro-America forms of Italian diplomacy. Although Mussolini had compared American ‘youth” with fascist \textit{eterna giovinezza}, his definition of Italy’s modernity was based on the idea of regeneration and inspired by Italy’s unique history, as exemplified by the twin-show formula where an exhibition of contemporary Italian art was paired with one of ancient art. That idea was revived in the immediate post-war period with the promotion of Italy’s “new Renaissance” and effectively expressed by the cover image of the 1949 MoMA exhibit: a tree, well rooted in the past and sprouting new life. Now, as Fanfani stressed, Italy was focused on the present as much as was the United States. And even the Catholic Church - the stronghold of the idea that Rome was the \textit{città eterna} - renounced tradition as a rhetorical device. The election of pope John XXIII in 1958, after the death of Pius XII, gave the papacy a new façade: one of openness to modernity. In his Concilio Ecumenico Vaticano II, the new pope challenged the church’s traditional rejection of social change: “What is tradition?” he famously asked. “It’s the progress that was made yesterday, just as the progress that we must make today will constitute the tradition of tomorrow.”\textsuperscript{14}

By focusing on the here and now, the Italians defined a new national identity that renounced Italy’s grand history but also conveniently forgot their embarrassing recent past; Fascism and World War II no longer haunted the “new Italy,” busy celebrating its


own economic boom. The analogy with the United States was, therefore, all the more convenient and expressed what the “new Italy” aspired to be: a stable democracy and a wealthy country, with no past.

American-style modernity – embodied by technology and consumer goods - became entrenched in Italy, as the nation transformed itself into a modern consumer society at a fast pace. Even before the economic miracle of the years 1958-1963, Italy experienced a process that cultural historian Stephen Gundle has called the “Americanization of the everyday.”15 The economy of desire penetrated Italian society. It spread through both the industrialized cities of northern Italy and the rural areas of the south as an ideology or ethos before it changed the actual behavior, a phenomenon called by sociologists “anticipatory socialization.”16 Italians, who in the 1950s were poorer than their Northern European counterparts, could not generally afford consumer goods. They nevertheless absorbed the culture and values associated with them. It was through American cinema, which was widely distributed and popular in Italy beginning right after the end of the war, that these goods and a new American-style consumer culture became accepted in Italy as synonymous with modernity. The campaigns of American advertising agencies operating in Italy, such as J. Walter Thompson, whose clients became ubiquitous first in Italian weekly magazines and then in television, also played a key role in spreading American consumer culture.17 As economic historian Adam Arvidson has

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17 See Adam Arvidson, cit., pp. 65-89. Arvidson exemplifies the phenomenon through the advertisement for the detergent OMO, launched by the American agency J. Walter Thompson. Even if the percentage of families owning private TVs was still low before the economic boom, public TVs (located in bars, case del popolo, and other public venues) reached most of the Italian population, especially in poor and rural areas where people felt they were cut out from the modernization process and also could not afford cinema tickets. See Stephen Gundle, “L’americanizzazione del quotidiano,” cit., p. 574-575.
put it, “‘Americanism’ and ‘consumerism’ blended together in the Italy of the 1950s to form, for the first time, a vision of modern life that was widely diffused and embraced by all inhabitants of the peninsula.”

Italy was finally “unified” by an ideology from without and by an international economy.

The moment was effectively captured in 1956 by the Neapolitan popular singer Renato Carosone, who famously sang “Tu vuo’ fa’ l’americano” (you want to act like an American). The song made fun of a young man from Napoli who affects American consumerist behaviors by dancing to rock and roll, drinking whiskey and soda, wearing branded jeans, and smoking Camel cigarettes, without having the money to afford that kind of lifestyle: “those cigarettes that you smoke leave mama broke.”

“Tu vuo’ fa l’americano,” included in the popular 1958 Italian movie Totò Peppino e le Fanatiche and then sung by Sophia Loren in the 1960 American film It Started in Naples, became the soundtrack for Italy’s “economic miracle.” It bore witness to how the transformation of Italian culture predated that of the country’s economy. As music historian Alessandro Portelli has noticed, the content of Carosone’s song, which exuded an ironic

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19 Text: Tu vuo’ fa’ l’americano/ mericano, mericano.../ sient’a mme chi t’ o fia fia? / tu vuoi vivere alla moda,/ ma se bevi "whisky and soda" / po’ te siente ’e disturba’... / Tu abball’ o’ rocchenroll / tu giochi a baisboll... / ma e solde p’ e’ Ccamel / chi te li dà? la borsetta di mammà!? / Tu vuo’ fa’ ll’americano / mericano, mericano... / ma si’ nato in Italy! / sient’ a mme: nun ce sta niente ’a fa’ / ok, napulità!/ tu vuo’ fa’ ll’americà / tu vuo’ fa’ ll’americà! (Renato Carosone and Nicola Salerno, “Tu Vuo Fa’ l’Americano,” 1956) English translation from Neapolitan slang: You wear trousers with a logo on the back / you wear a hat with the raised peak / you trotting along Tuleto's streets / showing off yourself, to make people look at you / You'd like to be an American, / 'merican, 'merican / listen to me, is it worth? / you want to be trendy / but if you drink "whiskey and soda" / and then you have a long hangover / You dance rock 'n' roll / you play baseball / but who gives you the money to buy Camels? / your mother's bag! / You'd like to be an American / 'merican, 'merican / but you were born in Italy! / isten to me, there's nothing you can do / ok, Neapolitan?” The reported phrase is a fragment of the song as sung by Sophia Loren in the 1960 film It Started in Naples.

20 Totò Peppino e le Fanatiche was directed by Mario Mattoli. It Started in Naples was directed by Melville Shavelson.
detachment if not actual hostility to the process of Americanization, was contradicted by the rhythm of the same song, which was directly inspired by American rock music.  

As the Italians tried to “act like Americans,” the promotion of contemporary Italian art in the United States functioned as a theatrical stage where to rehearse and learn their new role. Encouraged by a growing interest and market for Italian art in the United States, the Italians used art to re-brand their national image: firstly, by distancing themselves from the picture of poverty and destruction which had prevailed during the Reconstruction decade; and, secondly, by promoting Italy as the ideal bridge between Europe and the United States. In the process, they came to discover and appreciate, beside the good business, also American art critics and artists. Even more importantly, they actively absorbed American values. For Italian artists, having commercial success in America and receiving support from American critics became important factors for their career in Italy too. By the end of the decade, American artists encountered widespread enthusiasm in Italy for the first time.

Three distinct phases characterized the promotion of contemporary art in the United States in the fifties. Until 1956, cultural diplomacy was still organized according to Alcide De Gasperi’s outlines of “multilateral” initiatives: therefore, as discussed in Chapter 2, the Italian government encouraged the initiatives of Americans or of private Italians but did not take action directly. Between 1956 and 1958, the government did not modify its actual policy, but it did change its rhetoric: having abandoned the emphasis on cooperation, it now presented Italy as the preferential bridge between Europe and the United States. But only in 1958, during the Fanfani administration, did the Italian foreign

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Ministry resume a direct sponsorship of exhibitions of contemporary Italian art and an active program of cultural diplomacy in the United States.

As early as 1945, De Gasperi predicted:

[It is necessary] to find the means not to let the little flame to fade: we should keep it burning waiting for better times. Then we will be able to resume the vast action of accords and agreements in the field of culture, to which also the great democracies devote great attention and care today… The men of business and of culture are the first interpreters of the Italian people, its true ambassadors … who precede diplomats and substitute for them where it’s not possible to send them.22

Despite the bombast of the Prime Minister’s words, his goals actually proved quite realistic. The 1950s turned out to be a propitious moment to promote Italian art in America. The idea of the Italian rebirth under the aegis of the Marshall Plan and of Pax Americana, appealed the Cold War rhetoric, as seen in Chapter 2; and the expanding American art market encouraged new enterprises.23 As a result, an increasing number of initiatives, organized by both Americans and Italians, promoted contemporary Italian art in America during the 1950s (Italian-Americans played an especially important role as cultural mediators).

The 1949 show, *Twentieth-Century Italian Art*, as we saw, was the combined result of Fascist cultural policy and Cold War dynamics; its consequences, however, were far-reaching.24

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22 Original: “trovare i mezzi per non lasciar spegnere la fiammella che dobbiamo tenere accesa in attesa che tempi migliori ci permettano di riprendere quella vasta azione di intese e di accordi nel campo della cultura, cui anche le grandi democrazie dedicano oggi particolare attenzione e cura … gli uomini del lavoro e della cultura sono i primi interpreti del popolo italiano, i veri ambasciatori […] che precedono I diplomatici e li sostituiscono dove non è possibile mandarli.” Asmac, Gabinetto (1944-1958), b. 83 (1944-1947), posiz. 6 Ris. 2/13, Istituti e scuole all’estero - Finanziamenti, progetto di lettera, De Gasperi al ministro del Tesoro, Federico Ricci, Roma, s.d. [novembre 1945]. Quoted by Lorenzo Medici, p. 85.

23 In particular, the boom in art sales in the 1950s in New York skyrocketed the prices of the School of Paris making it a propitious time for the promotion of the less expansive contemporary Italian artists. See Titia Hulst, *The Right Man at the Right Time: Leo Castelli and the American Market for Avant-Garde Art*, dissertation (New York: New York University, 2014), pp. 56-58, 113. Hulst has documented the price boom of the School of Paris and discussed it as an opportunity for the promotion of American art. Mary Ann Calo has linked the same phenomenon to Herbert Meyer’s choice to promote Italian art at the World House gallery in New York (more on this later). Mary Ann Calo, *Modernism at the Fringes: Herbert Meyer and the World House Galleries* (Hamilton, NY: Picker Art Gallery, Colgate University, 2011).
resembled De Gasperi’s wish: with no financial effort on the part of the Italian government, the exhibition succeeded in stimulating knowledge, interest, and a market for contemporary Italian art in the United States. In 1950, the Italian-American Catherine Viviano opened her gallery in New York with the declared goal “to do for Italian art what Pierre Matisse has done for Modern French art here in America,” and indeed the gallery became a showcase of postwar Italian art for two decades (more on her activity in the second half of the chapter).24 The same year, the gallery of Curt Valentin, also in New York, started exhibiting Marino Marini on a regular basis and turned him into one of the most sought-after artists in America;25 Massimo Campigli’s market boomed in the United States and Renato Guttuso’s choices in art and politics became relevant beyond the world of contemporary art insiders by being regularly discussed in *Time* and *Life* magazines.26 Other Italian artists and critics came to the United States as part of American-sponsored fellowships: in 1951, Mimmo Rotella went to Kansas City on a Fulbright; in 1953, Piero

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24 Original: “per lungo tempo ho avuto in mente l’intenzione di stabilire una galleria con l’intento di fare per l’arte italiana ciò che ha fatto Pierre Matisse per l’arte francese moderna qui in America.” This was the text of a standard letter that Viviano sent to the Italian artists, Afro, Corrado Cagli, Renato Guttuso, Mirko Basaldella, Giorgio Morandi, and Fausto Pirandello, in February-March 1950. Catherine Viviano Gallery Records, Archives of American Art, Washington, DC. Emigrated from Sicily in 1901, Viviano (born Caterina) grew up in Chicago where she studied at the Art Institute and, from 1933 to 1949, she worked for the influential gallery of Pierre Matisse in New York. She was born in 1899 as Caterina Viviano in Partanna, Sicily and immigrated to the States with her family when she was two. Caterina arrived in New York on the S.S. Liguria, which sailed from Naples on October 23, 1901. She was with her parents, Maria Sanfilippo and Gaspare Viviano, and three sisters, Rosa, Benvenuta, and Filippa. A scan of their document of immigration is available at the Ellis Island Foundation: [http://www.ellisisland.org](http://www.ellisisland.org) (accessed July 10, 2013). See also “Catherine Viviano, 92, Art Dealer and Expert,” *The New York Times*, January 9, 1992, p. L D 23.

25 Originally named Buchloz gallery, it was renamed Curt Valentin Gallery in 1951, which operated until Valentin’s death in 1954. After the first solo show of Marini at the Buchloz gallery, *Life* magazine published an illustrated article on him significantly entitled “Marino Marini: Sculptor from Italy Becomes U.S. Best-Seller,” *Life*, May 22, 1950, pp. 99-102. On January 19, 1951, Valentin wrote to Marina (this was the name used by Marini’s wife, née Mercedes Pedrazzini, who had a very active role in managing the artist’s work and keeping his English correspondence): “I have requests from everywhere for pieces to be included in exhibitions, and I do not have enough material.” Correspondence Marino/ Marina, Curt Valentine Papers, MoMA Archives, New York.

Dorazio participated in the Harvard International Summer Seminar, in Cambridge; in
1953 and in 1957 Gillo Dorfles was a visiting scholar at the Western Reserve University
in Cleveland; and in 1957 Mirko Basaldella was invited to direct the Design Workshop at
Harvard.

So high was the demand for Italian art that a second space mostly dedicated to it
opened in New York, alongside Viviano: the World House Galleries. Founded by the
television pioneer and businessman, Herbert Mayer, the World House Galleries
inaugurated in 1957 on Madison Avenue at 77th Street in Manhattan, in a 6,900 square
feet space designed by Frederick Kiesler. Mayer was particularly interested in Italian art
because of the great potentials of its growing market and was helped in his endeavor by
the Italian émigré, Leo Castelli, who was then laying the foundations for the opening of
his gallery.27 The centrality of Italian art within the World House was made clear right
away in the gallery’s first year. As art historian Mary Ann Calo has pointed out, the
opening show, The Struggle for New Form (January 22 – February 23, 1957), on early
20th-century European and American modernism gave special prominence to Futurism
within the international context.28 The second show was a large survey, Italy, The New
Vision (March 1 – 23), which included works by forty contemporary Italian artists; the
New Yorker described it as of “museum proportion.”29 Furthermore, later that same year
to Italian artists: two who were already famous, Giacomo Manzù (April 24 – May 18)

27 In a letter of April 5, 1957 to the Italian painter Piero Dorazio, Leo Castelli discussed how to promote
Italian painters in New York and he talked about his collaboration with World House Galleries. He
concluded, however, that “having noted … that the owner is rather immature in artistic matters, I have soon
recused myself” [orig: “avendo constatato … che il proprietario e’ piuttosto immaturo in materia d’arte, me
ne sono ben presto disinteressato.”] Archives of American Art, Washington DC, Leo Castelli Gallery
Records, Box 8, Folder 46.
28 Mary Ann Calo, Modernism at the Fringes: Herbert Meyer and the World House Galleries (Hamilton,
and Giorgio Morandi (November 5 – December 7), and one to the lesser-known painter
Gustavo Foppiani (December 1957 – January 1958).³⁰

Leo Castelli was committed to the promotion of contemporary Italian art himself.
He imported Italian art, even before opening his gallery in 1958. His correspondence
from 1956 to 1958 with the artist and critic, Piero Dorazio focused on finding and selling
Italian art of the early twentieth century, mostly Futurism and Metafisica.³¹ In the first
year of his New York gallery, he held a solo show of Giuseppe Capogrossi and one
dedicated to the Italian artist, Angelo Savelli, who had moved to New York in 1953. He
also planned a solo show of Dorazio and group show of contemporary Italian painters,
including Dorazio, Emilio Vedova, and Emilio Scanavino to be held in his New York
gallery.³² These two did not work out, but another artist met in Rome that summer

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³⁰ The first two were presented by internationally famous art historians, Lionello Venturi and John Rewald. The gallery’s interest in Italian contemporary artists continued in the following years with shows of Pietro Consagra (February 3 – March 1, 1958), Foppiani (September 22 – October 3, 1959), Enrico Prampolini (October 6 – 31, 1959), Manzù (April 5 – May 7, 1960), Morandi (December 6, 1960 – January 14, 1961), and Mirko (May 2 – 27, 1961). Mayer’s collection of Italian artists went beyond the gallery’s exhibition activity, as demonstrated by the holdings of Italian artists in his donation to Colgate University. The artists included are: Giuseppe Banchieri, Renato Borsato, Giovanni Brancaccio, Renato Bruscaglia, Domenico Cantatore, Ugo Capocchini, Arturo Carmassi, Alfredo Chighine, Giovanni Ciangottini, Francesco D’Arenella, Carlo D’Aloisio Da Vasto, Mario Guido Dal Monte, Carlo Dalla Zuora, Pericle Fazzini, Gustavo Foppiani, Giuseppe Gambino, G. Giuliani, Goïfredo Gori, Emilio Greco, Virgilio Guidi, Riccardo Licata, Giacomo Manzù, Mario Marcucci, Quinto Martini, Gino Morandis, Giovanni Nascio, Laura Padoa, Iide Pantaleoni, Giorgio Dario Paulucci, Ferruccio Pasqui, Nino Perizi, Pimentel, Tilde Poli, Giò Pomodoro, Ugo Rambaldi, Carlo Ramous, Francesco Rejtano, Brunella Fra Saetti, Bruno Saetti, Giuseppe Santomaso, Maria Sbisa, Luciano Spazzali, Francesco Vecellio, Carmelo Zotti. I extend my gratitude to Amanda Douberley of Colgate University for sharing precious information on the Italian artists collected by Herbert Mayer.

³¹ On October 1, 1956 Dorazio wrote that he had found “the paintings you are interested in: De Chirico, Ritratto di C. Cirelli, 1915 … Balla, Pessimismo – Ottimismo, 1923 … Severini, Natura Morta, 1916 … De Chirico, Torre Metafisica, 1914.” Dorazio to Castelli, Rome, October 1, 1956, Leo Castelli Papers, Archives of American Art. On February 10, 1957 he sends photographs of more available works: “a Severini of 1914, Carrà 111 (Il Tramway), two Boccioni, Severini 1913 (Il Crollo) … and some pre-futurist pieces by Boccioni.” Dorazio to Castelli, Rome, February, 10, 1957. On August 21, 1958 He writes again about “1) del quadro di Severini futurista. Ci sono altre gallerie (la Bussola e Schneider) che mi hanno chiesto perché’ interessate. 2) quadro Severini natura morta cubista. Balla, Auto in corsa; De Chirico.”

³² The plan for a solo show of Dorazio was discussed in a series of letters between Dorazio and Castelli. On August 9, 1958, Castelli wrote to Dorazio about the Venice Biennale: “I stopped a long time in the section for young Italian and foreign artists, and also for older Italians, mostly to look at those artists you’ve
through Dorazio, Salvatore Scarpitta, had his first solo exhibit at Castelli in 1959 and continued to work with him until Castelli’s death in 1999. Castelli made great efforts to support those artists and make them better known. He tried to convince Capogrossi (not spoken to me about, who might be taken into consideration for a group show in New York ... Perilli is good, but perhaps not autonomous enough yet. Certainly worth following. Turcato, like Capogrossi, probably wouldn't have much success in America at the moment. Scanavino, many of whose paintings I've seen at the Cavallino [gallery in Venice], already has a physiognomy that is rather all his own. A bit solid, perhaps. Chighine, on the other hand, seemed less interesting to me. A bit too precious. I've been to see Vedova. ... I like his painting a lot. I think that Vedova may be one of the most mature painters in Italy. Well, there you have very briefly a few of my fleeting and very incomplete impressions, from which you will have gathered that I haven't yet arrived at any final conclusion as to who would make up my group. Perhaps you've given it a little thought yourself and have some ideas. ... For the moment, the nucleus would seem to be Dorazio, Vedova, and Scanavino. As for Scarpitta, I have other plans, since his current works can no longer be called paintings.” On August 20, 1958 Dorazio wrote about a studio visit that Castelli made in Rome and of Castelli’s proposal of a long-term collaboration: “voglio ringraziarti per l’offerta di occuparti dei miei quadri. Ci credi veramente? Ne sei sicuro? … preferirei avere rapporti con te a NY piuttosto che con altre gallerie. Vogliamo molto bene a Rose Fried ma sappiamo che non puo’ occuparsi ufficialmente di pittori giovani… Ti mando foto di lavori recenti da scegliere per mostra da te.” Dorazio to Castelli, Rome October 1, 1958 talks about Castelli’s idea of a group show: “Credo tuttora che la tua idea di fare una mostra di tre o quattro pittori italiani sia in fondo ottima e anche non troppo impegnativa … Mi pare che i nomi che tu facevi di Vedova e Scanavino siano senz’altro fra i migliori.” On November 4, 1958 Dorazio sent five photographs of his recent paintings and further discussed the group show project “per l’Italia avevi scelto mi pare Vedova, Scanavino e me.” The letters of Castelli to Dorazio are at the Archivio Dorazio, Todi, Italy. The letters of Dorazio to Castelli are at the Archives of American Art, Washington DC, Leo Castelli Papers, Box 4, Correspondence: Piero Dorazio.

33 Castelli visited Scarpitta’s studio in Rome with Kiesler, as described by Scarpitta in an interview with Paul Cummings of 1975, see: http://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/ interviews/oral-history-interview-salvatore-scarpitta-12727 (accessed: 6/15/2014). Here, Dorazio is misspelled Doratsio. Recalling his early shows at Castelli’s, Scarpitta effectively described the shift from the Reconstruction focus on trauma to the economic-boom optimism: “In 1964, I painted my last painting of a certain kind. I was disturbed at my latest show at Castelli’s, because I heard a young guy who, as he looked at my paintings, told his friend ‘you can see how this [artist] is still interested in stories, tragedies… you can still sense, here, a 1950 thing, you can still sense human tragedy.’ I was disturbed by this because I don’t want to bother anyone with tragedies … [I want to do] an happy painting.” Scarpitta’s words are from Carla Lonzi, Autoritratto (Milan: Et. Al., 2010), p. 103. Later, between 1960 and 1962, Castelli’s ex-wife and life-long collaborator, Ileana Sonnabend, too flirted with the idea of opening her gallery in Rome. Before 1963, when she settled on Paris, she sojourned in Rome and established collaborations with the artists of the so-called “Scuola di Piazza del Popolo.” She worked especially closely, with Mario Schifano and Jannis Kounellis, and with the owner of the La Tartaruga gallery, Plinio De Martis. Partly in line with Castelli’s links with the Italian art world, partly due to her own motivations, Sonnabend’s interest in Italian artists would prove the most fruitful for their success in the United States in the long run. During the second half of the 1960s, she was largely responsible for the success of Michelangelo Pistoletto in America. And after 1970, when she opened her gallery in New York, she largely contributed to the commercial fortune of Arte Povera (see chapter 4). Through the correspondence with Castelli, Talia Kwartler has documented Ileana and Michael Sonnabend’s 1961 sojourn in Rome and the beginning of their collaboration with Italian artists and dealers. “Why Not Rome? Reconstructing Ileana Sonnabend’s Roman Sojourn, 1960-62,” paper delivered at the conference, Rome Revisited: Rethinking Narratives in the Arts, 1948-1964, American Academy, Rome, January 15, 2015. I extend my gratitude to the author for showing me the unpublished text.
successfully) to come to New York for his opening.\textsuperscript{34} In 1959, Castelli sent materials and information on Savelli’s art and on his market to Orazio Fumagalli, curator of the Tweed Gallery of the University of Minnesota, and sent works to the newly-opened Elliston Gallery of Fort Worth, Texas, where he agreed on a one-third commission contract.\textsuperscript{35} His own self-interest seemed to be secondary to promoting these artists. As he wrote to Savelli, “you would be much better off and get the recognition that you … deserve in a gallery who relies less than I do on a small group of collectors.”\textsuperscript{36} In the summer of 1958, he travelled to Europe to find artists for his gallery. Castelli wrote to Dorazio: “I want to tell you again how much I liked the milieu in Rome. I think you’ve made tremendous progress in the last two years, and with an intelligent exchange policy (in which, with your and Plinio [de Martiis]’s help, I would like to play an important part), Rome could become the third center of world art.”\textsuperscript{37}

By the late 1950s, the reputation and market for Italian art in America was strong as it had never been before. In an article of 1957 entitled “The New Italy,” the \textit{New Yorker} magazine stated: “The contemporary Italians, so little noticed in this country only a few years ago, have been advancing upon us with startling rapidity.”\textsuperscript{38} The reputation of Italian modernism was such a commonplace, that a \textit{New York Times} review on twentieth-century German art used it as a yardstick for success: “much of the German work has never become as familiar in this country as the French and, later, the Italian work of the

\textsuperscript{34} Giuseppe Capogrossi to Leo Castelli, February 2, 1958, Leo Castelli Papers, Archives of American Art, Box 4, Correspondence: Giuseppe Capogrossi.

\textsuperscript{35} Castelli to Fumagalli, January 15, 1959. Leo Castelli Papers, Archives of American Art, Box 4, Correspondence: Orazio Fumagalli.

\textsuperscript{36} Castelli to Savelli, August 27, 1959. Leo Castelli Papers, Archives of American Art, Box 4, Correspondence: Angelo Savelli.

\textsuperscript{37} Castelli to Dorazio, August 9 \{1958\} reported in Anna Costantini, “Before the End of the Journey: Testimony across the Atlantic,” Germaine Celant, ed., \textit{Italian Metamorphosis}, cit., p. 36. De Martiis owned the gallery, La Tartaruga in Rome.

same period.”39 The Times also dedicated an article entitled “Americans Compete for Italian Moderns” to analyze the market boom:

a man like Afro has seen his prices (current range $500 - $2,500) tripled in the past three years, while Burri ($300-$1,500) … has likewise jumped into the upper brackets. Under the careful guidance of the Obelisco Gallery a group of youngsters have become best sellers here and abroad. Among these are Music ($200-$1,000), Vespignani ($300-$800), Caffè ($400-$800), Foppiani, Caruso, and others. Sculpture has played a very important part … with many of the results to be seen in American collections. Marini, Mascherini, Manzù, Minguzzi, Greco … have more recently been joined by men like Afro’s successful brother Mirko ($400-$2000), Fazzini, and several others.40

This commercial success received a stamp of institutional endorsement in 1958, when the International Council of MoMA approved the project of a large survey show, Arte Italiana del XX Secolo da Collezioni Americane (Twentieth-Century Italian Art form American Collections) to be held in Milan and Rome in 1960.41 The president of the International Council, Bliss Parkinson advertised the exhibit as, “the demonstration of how greatly esteemed is twentieth-century Italian art today in America.”42 Through this exhibition, the MoMA also claimed for itself a central role in the “discovery” of modern Italian art, which, as the curator of the show, James Soby emphasized, had started in 1949 with “his” other exhibit, Twentieth Century Italian Art.43 An important, yet unexpressed, goal of Arte Italiana was to reassure the Italians: MoMA was the institution which, in

39 The review was on the MoMA show, German Art of the Twentieth Century (more on this show, later). Howard Devree, “Art: From Germany,” New York Times, October 2, 1957, p. 66.
41 The show was held at the Palazzo Reale in Milan from April 30 to June 26, 1960 and at the Galleria Nazionale d’Arte Moderna in Rome from July 16 to September 15, 1960. Here it was the feature exhibition of contemporary art during the time of the Olympic Games.
43 “During the past fifteen years our enthusiasm for twentieth-century Italian painters and sculptors has increased steadily, and the day when we tended to write off Futurism as a boisterous variant on Parisian cubism is past … Now, as we hope the present exhibition will make clear, there are many contemporary Italian paintings and sculptures of first-rate interest and importance in America.” James T. Soby, ed., Arte Italiana del XX Secolo da Collezioni Americane (Milan: Silvana Editoriale, 1960), p. 16. The show was presented at the Palazzo Reale in Milan, and the Galleria Nazionale d’Arte Moderna in Rome.
1958, organized the retrospective show of Jackson Pollock in Rome and the large survey exhibition, *The New American Painting* in Milan (more on these later). Through *Arte Italiana*, the Museum rebutted charges of cultural imperialism raised by hostile critics in Italy: although some Italians saw Pollock as “the Elvis Presley of painting,” who colonized the Italian art world, the International Council of MoMA presented itself as a promoter of a two-way cultural exchange and indicated painting as a field where, unlike the music industry for instance, Italy and the United States could engage a dialogue on equal terms.

The Italians, for their part, seized the opportunity given by the American interest and market. During the 1950s, more and more Italian dealers invested time and money to promote their artists in the United States. The most important of them were in Milan and in Rome: Beatrice Monti, (owner of Galleria dell’Ariete, Milan), Romeo Toninelli (Toninelli Arte Moderna, Milan), Carlo Cardazzo (Il Naviglio, Milan and Il Cavallino, Venice), Plinio De Martiis (La Tartaruga, Rome), Irene Brin and Gaspero del Corso (l’Obelisco, Rome). Their interest in economic gain dovetailed with a desire to reshape Italy’s image. As De Gasperi had hoped for, private initiatives did “precede diplomats

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44 See below on these shows.
45 “Il Presley della pittura,” *Avanti!* (Rome), March 22, 1958, p. 70. In a description of the project for the Museum’s internal use, the International Council compared this show to a similar event organized by the same institution in France: De David a Toulouse-Lautrec (Orangerie, Paris, 1955). It concluded: “this type of exhibition is extremely effective for international cultural relations and for the enhancement of American prestige abroad.” Document dated October 21, 1959, MoMA Archives, New York, Collection IC/IP, Folder I.B.530.
46 As in Chapter 1, here too my discussion of “desire” should be intended in a Foucauldian way as “a positive unconscious of knowledge;” although re-shaping the image of Italy was not openly stated as a goal by the organizers of these initiatives and, as Foucault would put it, this goal “eluded [their] consciousness,” I discuss their language and modes of exhibition as evidence of a gradual change of the image of Italy that they intended to project. See Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Vintage Books, 1970), pp. ix, xi.
and substitute for them.”

Starting in the early 1950s, with the beginning of the economic recovery in Italy, and culminating with the economic boom at the end of the decade, an ever-increasing number of exhibitions and publications organized by Italians in the United States tried to counter the image of backwardness, poverty and destruction that had prevailed (also in a redemptive key) during the immediate post-war period.

These initiatives constructed the image of the “new Italy” in America. Well established by 1957, it was officially embraced and supported also by the Italian government starting in 1958.

The most successful of these initiatives was that of the Obelisco gallery of Rome led by the married couple, Brin and del Corso. If the New York Times, as we saw, noticed their commercial success, the impact of their activity was greater than that. In 1952, Brin, an influential journalist, fiction writer, and art critic became the Roman editor of Harper’s Bazaar. Often acknowledged as a major player in the construction of the prestige of “made in Italy” fashion in the United States, she is less known as a stout advocate of Italian artists.

Through Harper’s Bazaar, she contributed to the construction of Italy’s new image in America, one far removed from the romanticized condition of poverty, destruction, and backwardness emphasized during the Reconstruction era. By combining contemporary fashion and art she advertised a

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47 It is not possible to determine one single motive behind such desire, which, beside the specific circumstances of each individual, can be explained as combination of national pride, a way to market their “made in Italy” product.

48 As she began her activity, Viviano still wrote to Afro that she had to make a special effort in order to overcome the “strong prejudice” that Americans had against Italian artists: “È difficile portare al successo questi italiani. C’è un fermo pregiudizio nei loro confronti.” Catherine Viviano to Afro, March 24, 1952, Rosemary Ramsey, cit., p. 48. On this topic, see my article: “Manufactures of vegetable fiber’: Esportare Sacchi”, in Daniele Astrologo, Raffaele Bedarida, Ruggero Montrasio, eds., Prima che il gallo canti (Turin: Allemandi, 2011), pp. 38-40.

49 See the excellent book, Vittoria Caterina Caratozzolo, Irene Brin: Lo Stile Italiano nella Moda (Venice: Marsilio, 2006).
sophisticated, urban, and modern Italy. Possibly inspired by photographer Cecil Beaton’s use, in 1951, of Jackson Pollock’s paintings as backdrops for *Vogue* fashion photographs, Brin had the works of the artists represented by the Obelisco consistently reproduced in *Harper’s Bazaar*.\(^{50}\) They received great visibility through articles dedicated to the artists and to the gallery itself (figs. 2, 3) or, more often, through fashion photo shoots which used their works as backdrops or, like for Marini’s sculptures and for Burri’s paintings, as acknowledged interlocutors for the models and their clothes (figs. 4, 5, 6). As a result, contemporary Italian art was frequently reproduced in the magazine: Marini in May 1952 and in September 1953; Antonio Music in June 1953; Burri in April 1954 and in September 1955; Bruno Varuso in April 1954; Fabrizio Clerici in March 1956; Luciano Minguzzi in March 1957; Domenico Gnoli in December 1958 and in December 1959.\(^{51}\) This consistent and enduring pairing of art and fashion gave an aura of fine art to Italian fashion products and gave a patina of glamour to paintings and sculptures.

Brin and del Corso also promoted Italian art more traditionally by organizing exhibitions, which toured the United States and by opening a short-lived exhibition space, the Obelisk Gallery in Washington D.C., which held only one show: *New Italian*  

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Renaissance from October 30 – December 13, 1952. What was new was the glamorous context and a new rhetoric of cultural dialogue with America through which they advertised their artists. For the 1953 show, Twenty Italian Painters See America, Brin convinced the American cosmetics entrepreneur and art collector, Helena Rubinstein to commission twenty Italian artists represented by l’Obelisco to paint a view of America each, although most of them had never traveled to the United States. Most of the resulting paintings depicted an America, which was partly imagined and partly received through American movies, advertisements, illustrated magazines, and popular music. Some artists, significantly, mixed their fictional America with Italian elements: they ended up representing an Americanized Italy more than America. Franco Gentilini depicted a dream-like Brooklyn Bridge, which he knew from American ads. He declared: “it has grandeur and romance … and is always being sold.” Nino Caffé painted Baseball (fig. 7), a quintessentially American sport. The match, however, involved not only the usual players in white uniforms but also “an energetic group of priests” all dressed in

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52 It included: Caffe, Eliano Fantuzzi, Manlio Guberti, Costanza Mennyey, Ivan Mosca, Music, Aldo Pagliacci, Renato Paresce, and Mario Russo. The gallery was situated on 3241 P Street, N. W., Washington D.C.

53 In some exhibitions, Brin and Del Corso still recurred to the rhetoric of the Italian tradition: both the 1952 show, New Italian Renaissance and the 1954 Eterna Primavera: Young Italian Painters invoked Italy’s eternal youth and ancient roots. And the 1955 Major Works, Minor Scale focused exclusively on figurative art because, the press release stated, abstraction was a “foreign stimulus.” This contradiction can be explain as part of a complicated process of defining Italy’s national identity between national essentialism and internationalism. The fact that the gallery was supporting artists like Afro and Burri who, according to their criteria, were influenced by “foreign stimulus” confirms that they embraced international influences. Eterna Primavera: Young Italian Painters, Contemporary Arts Center, Cincinnati Ohio, October 16 – November 4, 1954. Actually, the show presented not only young artists as the artists’ age ranged from 27 to 64: Afro (42 years old), Alberto Burri (39), Nino Caffé (46), Massimo Campigli (59), Bruno Caruso (39), Bruno Caruso (27), Fabrizio Clerici (41), Franco Gentilini (45), Giorgio Morandi (64), Ivan Mosca (39), Antonio Music (45), Aldo Pagliacci (41), Antero Piletti (32), Fausto Pirandello (55), Mario Russo (29), Renzo Vespignani (30). The press release of Major Works, Minor Scale stated: “this selection is not fully representative of Italian art because it contains no non-figurative painting or sculpture. On the whole, its participants have been more influenced by indigenous developments than by the foreign stimulus of abstract tendencies that has been exerted since end of the war in 1945.” See below on this show. Press release, Archives of American Art, Washington, DC; American Federation of Arts Records; Exhibition Files, 55 – 7.

54 Although they claimed that to the press, Afro had been to America in 1950 (see below).
black cassocks. Bruno Caruso painted an *Ice Cream Vendor in Brooklyn* wearing a harlequin costume. Afro, who had actually visited the United States in 1950, depicted *Chicago*, a city that he had not visited and that he knew from gangster movies. He described this abstract painting as a “mass of violent, plunging verticals.” And Alberto Burri, who had been to Hereford, Texas as a prisoner of war did not depict that America. Rather he made, *Jazz*, one of his burlap *sacchi* (fig. 8).\(^{55}\) The show, which opened in Italy and then toured through the United States, was featured in *Vogue* (fig. 9) and in *Look* magazine.\(^{56}\)

Brin and Del Corso promoted cultural dialogue through an intense activity of exchange as well. They consistently invited American artists to exhibit at l’Obelisco: they were especially proud of having hosted the first solo shows in Italy of Saul Steinberg (1951), Robert Rauschenberg (1953), and Carlyle Brown (1954), and Arshile Gorky (1957).\(^{57}\) They also encouraged their Italian artists to collaborate with American galleries and they cooperated directly with American art critics and institutions.\(^{58}\) In particular, l’Obelisco was the first Italian gallery to collaborate with the New York-based organization American Federation of Arts (AFA), which had an important role in gaining contemporary Italian art recognition throughout the United States.

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57 Through the collaboration with Corrado Cagli, who returned to Rome from the United States in 1947 (solo shows at l’Obelisco, October 1, 1947; May 31, 1950; February 14, 1952), the Obelisco was the first gallery in Italy to exhibit American artists after the war. They include: Eugène Berman (May 26, 1949), Harvey Fite (November 5, 1949), Willard Golovin (February 3, 1950), Pavel Tchelichew (April 15, 1950), Stanley B. Kearl (February 16, 1951), Joseph Greenberg (May 10, 1951), Saul Steinberg (May 15, 1951), Bernard Childs (March 1, 1952), Geroge Biddle, (July 19, 1952), Robert Rauschenberg (March 3, 1953), Kay Sage (March 16, 1953), Hedda Sterne (April 14, 1953), Gertrude Schweitzer (November 18, 1953), William Congdon (November 28, 1953), Carlyle Brown (November 16, 1954), Tchelichew (March 1, 1955), Vera Stravinsky (March 29, 1955), Ivy Nicholson (March 2, 1956), Alexander Calder (March 14, 1956), John Rood (December 6, 1956), Arshile Gorky (February 4, 1957).
58 See below on the collaboration of l’Obelisco with American critics and museums.
During the 1950s, the AFA frequently worked as a mediator between the Italian organizers of a show and AFA members, including American museums, universities, and other cultural institutions interested in hosting it. The organizers would put the exhibit together and ship it to America at their expenses; the AFA rented the show to its vast network of contacts and took care of the logistics, including circulating the exhibit, insuring it within the United States and mediating eventual sales. A characteristic of the AFA program was that their shows circulated not only through important museums and major cities but also through peripheral centers, universities, small exhibition spaces, and private galleries distributed throughout the United States and Canada. This is what attracted Brin and Del Corso, who intended to reach a broader public than regular museum goers and art collectors.

Between 1952 and 1953, Viviano had collaborated with the AFA to circulate *Five Contemporary Italians*. But this was a “mini-show” only consisting of five paintings in

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59 A letter by Thomas Messer, Director of Exhibitions, AFA to Del Corso, of September 13, 1954 gives a sense of a typical collaboration: “Upon return to my office, I should like to sum up the plans for an exhibition which you generously allowed us to formulate during this past summer at the Obelisco Gallery. … tentatively entitled “Small Works by Contemporary Italians” and consisting of approximately 15 paintings and 15 sculptures, each artist represented by three works … we contemplated the inclusion of the following 5 painters: Caffe, Music, Falzoni, Vespiagnani, Caruso and the following five sculptors: Fazzini, Minguzzi, Mascherini, Greco, Manzu. The selection, of course, would be yours, except in those cases in which the material may have to be obtained in New York and in which I assume you will want us to carry out the selection as well as all of the details. As for the procedures, I understand our agreement in the following manner: The exhibition would be originated from the Obelisco Gallery and every effort would be made by the American Federation of Arts (the circulating agency) to give full credit to the originator. AFA would also do its best to promote conditions favorable to sales so that the initial investment of the Obelisco Gallery would be decreased as much as possible from sales profits which would go to the originator in their entirety, without any deductions on our end. On the other hand, Obelisco would agree to pay the cost of preparation and to assume the cost of shipment and insurance except during the period of circulation in the United States. Once in this country and throughout the period of circulation, AFA would assume these costs as well. … confirm the result of this tentative project so that I, in turn, may obtain final approval from our Exhibition Committee. …” American Federation of Arts Papers, Exhibition Files: 55-57 Major Work in Minor Scale, Smithsonian Archives of American Art, Washington, DC.

total (one per artist), and it originated in the United States. In 1954, Brin and Del Corso organized *Major Works, Minor Scale*, a larger exhibit including ten artists and thirty works, between paintings and sculptures. First held at l’Obelisco in Rome, it was then circulated by the AFA from 1955 and 1957, through eleven venues distributed in nine American states and Canada. The show was not particularly successful in traditional terms: almost completely ignored by the American press, it sold only seven out of thirty pieces. But it stimulated countless lectures and students’ assignments, it attracted the

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61 The first contact of Brin and Del Corso with the AFA occurred on occasion of the 1954 show, *Eterna Primavera: Young Italian Painters*, which they organized at the Contemporary Art Center at the Cincinnati Art Museum. The museum’s curator, Robert H. Luck served also as the assistant director of the American Federation of Arts. *Eterna Primavera: Young Italian Painters*, Contemporary Arts Center of the Cincinnati Art Museum in Cincinnati, Ohio, October 16 – November 5, 1954. The show included: Afro, Burri, Caffe, Campigli, Caruso, Clerici, Gentilini, Morandi, Music, Pagliacci, Antero Piletti, Pirandello, Russo, and Vespignani. The catalogue, was prefaced by Robert H. Luck, *Eterna Primavera: Young Italian Painters* (Cincinnati: Cincinnati Art Museum, 1954), np. The other supporter of the collaboration was Paul Hyde Bonner, the former American ambassador to Rome and early supporter of the 1949 MoMA show. He was friends with Thomas Messer, director of the AFA and suggested that the latter visited l’Obelisco during his trip in Rome in the fall 1954. See Thomas Messer to Paul Hyde Bonner, September 23, 1954. Archives of American Art, Washington, DC; Exhibition Files, 55 – 7.

62 The show was originally held at l’Obelisco in Rome with a different title: *5 Prittori – 5 Scultori*. It included three works per artists. The five painters were Nino Caffé, Bruno Caruso, Giordano Falzoni, Antonio Music, and Renzo Vespignani; and the sculptors Pericle Fazzini, Emilio Greco, Giacomo Manzù, Marcello Mascherini, and Luciano Minguzzi. The American venues included: National Arts Club, New York City (September 10-20, 1955); Des Moines Art Center, Des Moines, Iowa (October 6 – 15, 1955); Museum of Art Ann Arbor, Michigan (November 1-22, 1955); Andrew Dickson White Museum, Ithaca, New York (January 4-25, 1956); Hunter Gallery, Chattanooga, Tennessee (February 8 – March 1, 1956); Currier Gallery of Art, Manchester, New Hampshire (March 14 – April 15, 1956); Kaufmann’s Department Store, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania (October 7 – 22, 1956); Moorehead State Teachers College, Moorhead, Minnesota (November 5 – 25, 1956); University of Manitoba, Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada (January 19 – February 7, 1957); University of Kansas, Lawrence, Kansas (February 21 – March 31, 1957); Mulvane Art Center, Topeka, Kansas (April 15 – May 5, 1957). Archives of American Art, Washington, DC; Exhibition Files, 55 – 7, “Documentation.”

63 Sold pieces were all of the three paintings by Antonio Music (*Dalmatian Motive*, 1952; *Dalmatian Motive No. 62*, 1952; *Little Horses No. 66*, 1951); one painting by Vespignani (*The Mail Boat*, 1954), and all of the three sculptures by Fazzini (*Reclining Boy*, 1946/1954; *Dancing Girl*, 1950/1954; *Dancer*, 1949). Press release, Archives of American Art, Washington, DC; American Federation of Arts Records, Exhibition Files, 55 – 7. The show was listed by the New Yorker magazine but not reviewed. The only
interest of two commercial galleries in New York, Heller and Martha Jackson, who inquired with the AFA about the possibility of hosting the show; and it inaugurated an intense season of collaborations between the AFA and Italian art institutions.\textsuperscript{64} between 1957 and 1960 the AFA circulated no less than five large survey exhibitions on Italian contemporary art and three solo shows of contemporary Italian artists.\textsuperscript{65} One of these was the 1958 survey, \textit{Painting in Post-War Italy 1945-1957}: organized by the Italian government, this was the largest, and had the longest and most prestigious itinerary (more on this later).

The most important result of the activity of Brin and del Corso was that Italian contemporary paintings and sculptures came to be seen as symbols of a refined modern taste even beyond the art world: contemporary Italian artists now conquered Hollywood and the fashion world, and they seduced millions of Americans through mainstream TV programs, movies, and illustrated magazines from Hollywood movies to design magazines.\textsuperscript{66} In Billy Wilder’s 1960 comedy film, \textit{The Apartment}, for example, the

\begin{footnotesize}

\textsuperscript{64} See Renee Value, Associate AFA, to Del Corso, May 16, 1955. Archives of American Art, Washington, DC; Exhibition Files, 55 – 7.


\textsuperscript{66} It is unlikely that Brin and del Corso’s activity would have been so impactful without the concurrent activity of Catherine Viviano, who also extensively travelled Italian art through the AFA and the International Art Lending Service of MoMA. See below. On this see also, Rosemary Ramsey, “In Concert: Afro and Catherine Viviano” cit., and my article, “‘L’alleato più prossimo’: Il Moma e la promozione dell’arte europea fuori New York, 1952-1954,” cit. Another important activity was that of Olivetti in the United States. Starting with the 1952 MoMA exhibition, \textit{Olivetti: Design in Industry}, Olivetti advertised its business machine by juxtaposing them to Italian contemporary architecture and painting. In 1954, Olivetti opened a store on Fifth Avenue designed by the celebrated Italian architect studio BBPR and decorated by a large mural relief by Costantino Nivola. \textit{Vogue}, which used this artwork as a backdrop for fashion

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modest apartment of the protagonist, a white-collar employee of a Manhattan corporation (played by Jack Lemmon), is contrasted with the elegant office of his powerful boss. The former is a claustrophobic, dark environment decorated with cheap posters reproducing works by super-famous modernist artists such as Marc Chagall, Piet Mondrian, and Pablo Picasso (fig. 10); the latter, in contrast, is a spacious interior with stunning views of New York’s skyline and featuring two original pieces by Italian artists, sculptor Arnaldo Pomodoro and painter Massimo Campigli (fig. 11).

During the second half of the 1950s, contemporary Italian art became extremely fashionable for Hollywood. The exhibition, *New Renaissance in Italy* at the Pasadena Art Museum in 1958 was made possible by the many loans from Hollywood collectors. The actor and producer Kirk Douglas lent one painting by Campigli, two paintings by Mario Sironi, and a sculpture by Marino Marini; the actor Vincent Price lent a painting by Afro; the Hollywood press agent Henry C. Rogers lent an Afro; the actor Rex Evans lent a painting by Filippo De Pisis, one by Campigli, and a drawing by Gino Severini; the producer, Harry Lenart lent a sculpture by Marini, two paintings by Morandi, and one by Campigli; the Beverly Hills radio writer Max N. Benoff lent two paintings by Edmondo Bacci, one by Giuseppe Capogrossi, one by Roberto Crippa, and one by Gianni Dova; the screenwriter Michael Blankfort lent a sculpture by Emilio Greco; the screenwriter and photographs, described the showrooms as a place “where the business of business machines is combined with pleasure in contemporary art.” If the Olivetti machines received a fine-art aura from the juxtaposition, the paintings received visibility and acquired a status of glamour and refined taste.

film director Norman Panama lent a sculpture by Marini; the film producer, Harold Hecht lent a painting by Modigliani; the actor Sam Jaffe lent a painting by Morandi. Kirk Douglas also lent: three paintings by Campigli to the Venice Biennale of 1958.68

Simultaneously, American design and fashion magazines featured Italian art as signs of a sophisticated modernity. *Vogue*, for example used a painting by Campigli in an article on buffets as an indicator of modern taste (fig. 12). A photograph portraying a “Traditional Buffet” featured a “nineteenth-century French brocade cover [and] screen of old French mushroom prints” was juxtaposed to another photograph entitled “Modern Buffet,” which included a painting by Campigli. 69 Likewise *Life* magazine’s photographic article, “Drum Beaters for Modern” depicted a Florence Knoll interior where Mies Van Der Rohe furniture faced a horse-and-rider sculpture by Marini.70 And *Domus* in Italy proudly published photographs illustrating the New York office of the president of CBS broadcasting company, where Mies Van Der Rohe’s leather and metal chairs and a geometric painting by Joseph Albers cohabited with one of Marini’s bronze horses (fig. 13).71 In 1958, Irene Brin triumphantly wrote in the *Atlantic Monthly*: “[Italy owed] much of its initial popularity in the postwar years to fashion. Today the position is somewhat reversed, and Italian fashion undoubtedly owes part of its popularity to the enthusiasm abroad for *grissini* bread-sticks and Parmesan cheese, Sophia Loren and Anna Magnani, the sculpture of Marini and Manzù.”72

70 “Drum Beaters for Modern: Knoll Use Dramatic Displays,” *Life*, March 2, 1953, p. 74. During the 1950s, American designer Florence Knoll often combined Marino Marini’s sculptures with Bauhaus furniture in luxurious interiors, as regularly seen in advertisement images in *Life* magazine.
Brin’s passage was significant for two main reasons: firstly, she stressed the prominent role played by contemporary art in reshaping the image of the “new Italy” (although her text was dedicated to fashion); secondly, by juxtaposing the sculpture of Marini and Manzù with gourmet food and cinema stars, Brin advertised how different was the image Italy in America compared to the immediate post-war period, when she and her husband began their activity as art dealers. She described that period: “We had been defeated and we were poor, penitent, and without justification.”\(^73\) That was the same post-war period when, in Italy Brin was dismissed as “frivolous” and “superfluous.” Now she was part of the official propaganda promoting the “new Italy.”\(^74\) In 1955, the Italian government awarded her with the honorary title of *Cavaliere ufficiale dell’Ordine al Merito della Repubblica Italiana* for her contribution to the “international affirmation of Italian fashion;”\(^75\) and now her text appeared in the *Atlantic Monthly* special issue on Italy alongside texts by the Italian prime minister, the president, and other major exponents of the Italian intelligentsia.\(^76\)

If the activity of Brin and del Corso in the United States started as a private initiative of “cooperation,” as wished for by De Gasperi, it now fit in with Fanfani’s

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\(^73\) Irene Brin, “Italian Fashion,” cit., p. 65.

\(^74\) Gio Ponti denounced this attitude in his article, “È il superfluo Superfluo?” Here he supported Brin and proposed that the “superfluous” was actually useful to enhance the quality of life and, therefore, was an important part of the reconstruction process. Ponti’s position, however, was countercurrent and his piece significantly appeared in the fashion magazine *Bellezza*, which would not be taken seriously by the same people he was criticizing. Gio Ponti, “È il superfluo Superfluo?” *Bellezza*, n. 1, 1945, p. 41. See Vittoria Caterina Caratozzolo, *Irene Brin: Lo stile italiano nella moda* (Venice: Marsilio, 2006), pp. 28-29. On her reception under fascism and the censorship of her magazine, *Omnibus* and the controversial reception of Brin’s work during the Ventennio, see Maurizia Boscagli, “The Power of Style: Fashion and Self-Fashioning in Irene Brin’s Journalistic Writing,” in Robin Pickering-lazzi, ed., *Mothers of Invention* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), pp. 122-125.

\(^75\) Caratozzolo, cit., p. 43.

rhetoric of the bridge across the Atlantic. Endorsed by the government, they concurred with Neoatlantismo in emphasizing a privileged relationship between Italy and the United States. President Gronchi explicitly compared the current “dawn” of a guilt-free and present-oriented Italy to America. He wrote: “The Italian is a builder, a pioneer – not unlike, in spirit, to the American.”

The shift of rhetoric aimed at the American audience was partly a change of marketing strategy and partly reflected the actual transformation of Italian society. But it also played an active role of identity construction. The career of Afro Basaldella between America and Italy during the 1950s is considered here as a case study to analyze the dynamics and transformative effects of this process. Supported by both the Viviano Gallery and I’Obelisco, Afro Basadella was one of the most successful Italian artists in the United States. In particular, his career illuminates three fundamental aspects of the transatlantic exchange between Italy and the United States: (a) the shift in the American reception of contemporary Italian art; (b) the gradual transformation of attitude (and strategy) on the part of Italians in projecting their image as the “new Italy” through contemporary art shows; and (c) the reception of Abstract Expressionism in Italy.

Afro’s work was not new to the American public. Beside the exhibits of the Comet Gallery in New York (1937-1938), his paintings appeared in the contemporary Italian art shows of the Golden Gate Exposition and the New York World’s Fair (1939-1940). After the war, he participated in Handicraft as Fine Art in Italy (1948) and

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77 Giovanni Gronchi, “Italians as Builders and Pioneers,” in Atlantic Monthly, cit., p. 5. To further emphasize the sense of presentness, Gronchi’s piece ended with Vincenzo Cardarelli’s poem, “Dawn.” Similar to Gronchi and Fanfani, in her text Brin contrasted the current “new Italy” with the country in immediate post-war moment: “We had been defeated and we were poor, penitent, and without justification. At that time, our good points and our suffering had not found expression.” Irene Brin, “Italian Fashion,” cit., p. 65.
Twentieth Century Italian Art (1949). From Viviano’s inaugural show in 1950 until the closure of the gallery in 1970 he was the artist most promoted by her, featuring in both group and solo shows on a regular basis. It was between 1955 and 1958, however, that Afro’s success in America reached its highest point and came to embody the image of a “new Italy.” 1955 marked his participation in the Museum of Modern Art milestone exhibition, The New Decade and 1958 the traveling show, Painting in Post-War Italy 1945-1957, organized by Lionello Venturi. A pivotal figure, Afro personally facilitated the promotion of fellow Italian artists in this country, and from the other side, he played an important role in determining the success of American Abstract Expressionism in Italy.

The show, The New Decade: 22 European Painters and Sculptors held at MoMA in 1955, signaled the first major change. It was dedicated to European painting and sculpture of the previous ten years, that is since the end of World War II. Afro, one of the twenty-two chosen artists, exhibited four large canvases (fig. 14). With artists organized


79 The four works exhibited at MoMA and reproduced in the catalogue were Cronaca Nera, 1951 (No. 238), Balletto, (No. 302), Incontro, 1954 (No. 328) and Ragazzo col tacchino, 1954 (No. 318). Andrew Ritchie, The New Decade: 22 European Painters and Sculptors, The Museum of Modern Art, New York 1955, pp. 79-81. The numbers in brackets are those of the Catalogo Generale Ragionato, Dai Documenti dell’Archivio Afro (Rome: Dataars, 1997). For conservation purposes, when the exhibition left New York, the painting Ragazzo col tacchino, that showed some damage, was substituted by the painting Figura from
according to nationality, he represented Italy alongside painters Alberto Burri and
Giuseppe Capogrossi and sculptors Mirko Basaldella (Afro’s brother) and Luciano
Minguazzi. The other featured countries were France, Germany, England and Holland.80

The chronological limits of the exhibition, 1945-1955, were determined by the decennial
anniversary of Yalta. The curator of the show, Andrew Carnduff Ritchie, the influential
director of the Department of Painting and Sculpture at the MoMA, also gave this
periodization a political and historical meaning. Ritchie described it as a “decade of
anxiety, not to say despair,” which had just closed with “important signs of hope” for the
artistic and economic-political future of Europe.81 According to Ritchie, with the end of
the difficult years of reconstruction, a new era of well-being lay ahead, signaled by the
overcoming of divisive nationalism inherited from the dictatorships of the first half of the
twentieth century and the appearance of a new cultural ferment that was international in
nature. It was precisely by virtue of this optimistic interpretation of the historical moment
that The New Decade promptly marked a turning point in cultural attitude on the part of
Americans onto which Italy would now jockey for position.

1954, as shown in the letters from Ritchie to Richard S. Davis (assistant director, Minneapolis Institute of
Arts) from 19th to 24th August 1955, MoMA Archives, New York, 85 (5), folder 1. It has been impossible
for me to define which work this was, as the painting was neither reproduced nor described, and in the
Catalogo Generale there is no reference to a work of 1954 entitled Figura. The only indication in Ritchie’s
letter is that the painting belonged to Catherine Viviano. It is therefore possible that it is Figura distesa,
1954 (No. 326) or Doppia figura, 1954 (No. 327) both exhibited at the Viviano Gallery in the 1955
exhibition (see below).

80 There was also the strange exception of Maria Helena Viera da Silva, who apart from being one of only
two women in the exhibition together with Germaine Richier, had an anomalous condition of being
stateless, as Portugal was absent from the list of “national groups” in the catalogue: even though reference
was made to the fact that the artist trained and lived in Paris, her works were not grouped together with the
French, but rather at the end of the catalogue, after Karel Appel who was the only one to represent Holland.
Unlike Portugal, Holland was listed among the “national groups” and had its own specific bibliography.
Ritchie, 1955, cit., pp. 102-111. Evidently the fact that Portugal was not a western democracy created some
embarrassment for the organizers of the exhibition. See below regarding this point.

81 The Museum of Modern Art, Press release N. 45, 11th May 1955, “Recent European painting and
politics, is in a state of flux but that in both fields there are remarkable signs of hope, despite a decade of
anxiety, not to say despair”.
The New Decade was an important event for Afro and a pivotal moment in his career. Unable to go to the United States for the opening, he went all the way to Minneapolis to see the exhibition there after it had left New York. More importantly, when the exhibition was over, Afro asked the curator, Ritchie to present him at the Venice Biennale the following year. This was a strategic shift. Only two months before the MoMA exhibition, in March 1955, the Italian critic Lionello Venturi – famous both in Europe and America – had presented the Afro show at Catherine Viviano’s New York gallery; and, before that, Venturi had been the main supporter of Afro in Italy too, as seen on occasion of the Venice Biennales of 1952 and 1954. Instead, in 1956, Afro chose to appear in Venice (a two-hour drive from his native Udine) as an artist already well known in the United States. Nine out of the ten works on view came as a loan from the United States, and the only “Italian” work, lent by the Milanese collectors Emilio and Maria Jesi, had an American title, Silver Dollar Club. The critical text for the show was authored by Ritchie, who was known to the Venetian public as the curator of the American pavilion at the previous Biennale.

It was the first time that an American critic influenced the career of a contemporary Italian artist in Italy, and Afro knew that. In the letter where he made his

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82 The artist had been to the United States only once before, in 1950 for the opening of the Viviano Gallery. When he arrived in Minneapolis, Afro was the guest of Richard Davis, a collector and director of the Minneapolis Institute of Arts. See Catherine Viviano’s letter to Afro, 14th September 1955, published in Barbara Drudi (edited by), Afro, Da Roma a New York, 1950-1968 (Siena: Gli Ori, 2008), p. 142.
85 Davide Colombo, dissertation, cit., p. 121.
request, Afro called Ritchie “the first person in America to have faith in me” and underlined his belief that: “also in my country your authority can carry some weight.”

In retrospect it is difficult to establish what weight Ritchie’s imprimatur carried. In any case it was that year in Venice that Afro received his first important award in his native country, winning the top Biennale prize for Italian painting. In his presentation, Ritchie identified Afro as the artist that, better than anyone else, expressed: “the new youth of Italian spirit … a character that is national and international at the same time.” From being considered an exponent of this or that national school, Afro was finally recognized in Italy as a prominent international artist.

The importance of this moment was threefold. Firstly, contemporary Italian art was now appreciated and promoted for its internationalism rather than its Italianness. Secondly, the internationalism of Italian art was no longer synonymous with Europeanism as in the postwar decade: its definition was now determined across the Atlantic. Finally, American modernity was no longer a myth or an ideal terrain of “conquest” as in the pre-war period, nor a source of national redemption as in the post-war decade: America, with its institutions, its market, and its critics was a major partner for the definition of Italy’s cultural progress.

Afro’s case was not isolated. In 1955, a similar episode involved another major Italian artist, Alberto Burri, who was also present in the New Decade show (fig. 15). The first monograph on Burri was published in Italy only after two years of successful exhibits in America, and just three months before his first large museum show ever, which opened in October 1955 at the Fine Arts Center in Colorado Springs (and traveled

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87 Letter from Afro to Ritchie, cit.
through the United States and Canada). Once again, the author of the book was an American critic.

Gaspero del Corso commissioned the text from the director of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York, James J. Sweeney, using words that were very similar to those seen in Afro’s letter to Ritchie. “You have been the first to appreciate [Burri] in America,” wrote del Corso. And, like Afro, who had called on Ritchie’s “authority,” del Corso called on Sweeney as a source of legitimization for Burri: “I need an authoritative critic to present the artist, and only you could be that person.” Very few Italian critics like Emilio Villa and Lorenza Trucchi had already supported Burri in the

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89 Trained as a physician, Burri started painting in prisoner-of-war camp in Texas. After the war he returned to Italy and started a career as an artist. His first American shows were in 1953: two solo shows, respectively at the Allan Frumkin Gallery in Chicago and at the Stable Gallery in New York; and two group shows, respectively *Twenty Imaginary Views of the American Scene by Twenty Young Italian Artists* (the show, which featured works from the Helena Rubinstein collection, opened at the Galleria dell’Obelisco in Rome from June 16-25, and then traveled to New York and twelve additional venues in The United States through December 1954) and *Younger European Painters: A Selection* (organized by Sweeney, it opened at the Guggenheim Museum in New York from December 3, 1953-February 21, 1954, and then traveled to nine more venues in the United States through March 1956). In 1954, he had a second solo show at the Frumkin and participated in a group exhibit at the Martha Jackson Gallery in New York. In 1955 he came back to the United States for the first time after the war in occasion of the MoMA show, *The New Decade*, and had a second solo show at the Stable Gallery in collaboration with Martha Jackson. The exhibition, *The Collages of Alberto Burri* opened at the Fine Arts Center in Colorado Springs (October 4 – 31, 1955) and traveled to The Oakland Art Museum, Oakland (November 12 – December 4); Seligman Gallery, Seattle; Fine Arts Gallery at the University of British Columbia, Vancouver, Canada (March 13 – 31, 1956); Pasadena Art Museum, Pasadena, CA (May 5 – 20); San Joaquin Pioneer Museum, Stockolm, CA (June 3 -19). His 1952 exhibition, *13 Opere di Burri* at the Galleria d’Arte Contemporanea in Florence, Italy (which was an extension of his 1952 show *Neri e Muffe*, at the Obelisco in Rome) was a small selection of works, which did not receive much attention.


91 Del Corso to Sweeney, May 22, 1954: “we are preparing a monograph of our painter, Alberto Burri, whom you have been the first to appreciate in America, with the sharpest sensitivity. … Now, in order to move on with the publication, I still need an authoritative critic to present the artist, and only you could be that person.” [Original: “Stiamo progettando una monografia del nostro pittore Alberto Burri, che lei, con acutissima sensibilità, ha apprezzato per primo in America. […] Mi manca purtroppo, per iniziare le stampe, un autorevole prefatore [sic] che presenti l’artista e solo lei potrebbe esserlo”]. Solomon R. Guggenheim Archives, New York, J. J. Sweeney Papers, box 182, folder 59b.

92 Idem. Emphasis is mine.
early 1950s. But only after Burri’s American success and the publication of Sweeney’s monograph did a wide group of Italian critics seem to notice the artist: on the occasion of the *VII Quadriennale* in Rome, which opened at the Palazzo delle Esposizioni in Rome on November 1, 1955 and ran through April 30, 1956, Burri was once again presented by the American critic. It is significant that in the same year, 1955, two of the most celebrated post-war Italian artists, Afro and Burri, found an important moment of recognition in Italy through the support of two critics, Ritchie and Sweeney, from prominent American museums, the Museum of Modern Art and the Solomon R. Guggenheimg respectively.

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94 Burri’s work, which had been supported in Italy only by l’Obelisco gallery and by the art magazine *Arti Visive* (in particular Emilio Villa), now received greater and broader attention. This included the indignant response of Leonardo Borgese, the conservative journalist of the newspaper *Corriere della Sera*, who called his work “tatters … that the rules of the Quadriennale should not accept.” *Arti Visive*, which had dedicated three articles to Burri’s work over the previous three years, now run three articles on him in just one year. In fall 1955, Burri collaborated on an article with the magazine *Civiltà delle Macchine*, which a cover to him. See: *Arti Visive*, n. 10, 1955, p. 5; Giuseppe Cenza, Alberto Burri, “Il petrolio sotto le colline,” *Civiltà delle Macchine*, n. 6 (November-December), 1955, pp. 36-38; Marco Balzarro, “Burri,” *Arti Visive*, n. 5, 1956, p. 18; Leonardo Borgese, “Sono esposti alla Quadriennale e dicono che sia arte,” *La Domenica del Corriere*, n. 2, (January 8), 1956, p. 8; cover of *Civiltà delle Macchine*, n. 6 (November-December), 1956; Emilio Villa, “Emilio Villa, Alberto Burri,” *Arti Visive*, n. 3-4, 1956, p. 27. Gillo Dorfles called Burri’s work together with Fontana’s as the most “interesting” work of the Quadriennale, Gillo Dorfles, “La Settima Quadriennale,” *Aut Aut*, 31 (January 1956), pp. 69-74. The prominence and precedence of American art criticism on Burri was noticed in a 1957 text by Enrico Crispolti, *Alberto Burri, Ennio Morlotti, Emilio Vedova* (Rome: galleria La Salita, 1957). And, Robert M. Coates, in his review of the Quadriennale for the *New Yorker* magazine, declared that he dedicated no space to the artists, Afro, Mirko, Emilio Vedova, Morandi, and Burri, because they were already “well known in America, and I was less interested in them than in some who were unknown to me.” Robert M. Coates, “The Quadriennale,” *The New Yorker*, January 14, 1956, p. 76. On Burri’s collaboration with *Civiltà delle Macchine* see Emily Braun, ed., *Alberto Burri: The Trauma of Painting* (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim, 2015), p. 182.

95 In 1955, also the painter Renato Birolli, who was planning a monograph on his work with the Milanese gallery Il Naviglio, insisted on having an American critic to write the text. He wrote to Catherine Viviano: “the text should be long … and it would be great if it’s written by an American critic, as you have suggested.” Birolli to Viviano, October 19, 1955, Catherine Viviano Gallery Records, Archives of American Art, Box 3, Folder: “Birolli, Renato - Correspondence.” Original: “Il testo dovrebbe essere lungo … e sarebbe bene fosse scritto da critico americano, come tu stessa mi dicevi.” The monograph was actually made only ten years later, in 1966, with a text by the Italian critic Marco Valsecchi.
How “americano” was Afro? He was well connected with the American community in Rome even before he started working with Viviano, and his enthusiasm for everything American started in the early 1950s.\(^{96}\) He traveled to the United States for the first time in 1950 and was immediately seduced. When he returned to Italy, his friend, the painter Renato Birolli wrote to Viviano: “He’s literally enthusiastic about you and about America.”\(^{97}\) Another painter, Armando Pizzinato confirmed to her with almost identical words: “Back from America, Afro and [his wife] Maria stopped in Venice... They were enthusiastic about America, about American life and, above all, about you.”\(^{98}\) It is important to note that, in this early phase, Afro’s enthusiasm was directed toward America, American life, and his American dealer: but he did not manifest any interest whatsoever in American art.\(^{99}\) Things changed after *The New Decade*.

In 1955, Afro was aware that he was enjoying, as his painter friend Fausto Pirandello wrote to him, “a lucky year,” a golden moment in his American career.\(^{100}\) And indeed, in the following five years, prestigious American institutions, such as the MoMA, the Carnegie International, *Life* magazine, the American Federation for the Arts, the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, and universities like Mills College, Columbia, and MIT exhibited and welcomed Afro among the top exponents of the international

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\(^{96}\) See *Afro: Catalogo Generale*, cit., p. 379.

\(^{97}\) Renato Birolli to Catherine Viviano, October 10, 1950; Catherine Viviano Gallery Records, Archives of American Art, Box 3, Folder: “Birolli, Renato - Correspondence.” Original: “Afro è giunto a Milano... È letteralmente entusiasta di te e dell'America.”


\(^{99}\) He did not ever mention American art as a possible influence in his correspondence, nor was it evident in the way his art was presented in Italy. Barbara Drudi, *Afro, da Roma a New York, 1950-1968* (Siena: Gli Ori, 2008), pp. 49-50.

\(^{100}\) Fausto Pirandello to Afro, 5th January 1955, published in Luciano Caramel, 1989, cit., p. 151. Pirandello’s letter referred to the fact that the new year had started on a Saturday, but he probably also referred to Afro’s many American projects for that year, for Pirandello too worked with Catherine Viviano.
contemporary art scene. Besides *The New Decade*, in the same year, he had his third solo exhibition at the Viviano gallery, the most successful one so far. As Viviano told him: “This exhibition has contributed to making you one of the greatest contemporary artists.” Also in 1955, Afro’s work was given its own room in the exhibition *Contemporary Italian Art* in Saint Louis. He was amazed when he went to visit the show, where he was “received like a great personality” and found himself at the center of academic conferences and television interviews. Finally, that autumn he was part of the jury for the prestigious Carnegie International Prize in Pittsburgh (fig. 16), and the catalogue reproduced one of his paintings on the cover. There was a double satisfaction here: on the one hand he received so much recognition that he wrote to his painter friend Renato Biroli, “it has been a merry-go-round without any rest, with parties, interviews with journalists, official lunches, photographers everywhere and television. ... I felt like a movie star.” On the other hand, on this occasion Afro also promoted those artists who were closest to him, successfully fighting for recognition for Birolli and Toti Scialoja, who received the second and fifth prize respectively. If in the previous years Afro had mediated some of the relationships between Catherine Viviano and the Italian artists,

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101 It must be noted that the exhibition *Younger European Painters* organized at the Guggenheim by James J. Sweeney from 2nd December 1953 to 21st February 1954 exhibited works by Burri and Capogrossi, but not Afro’s, who was associated with the other two only after the MoMA exhibition of 1955: in *Italy, the New Vision*, held at the World House Galleries in New York in 1957 and the exhibition curated by Lionello Venturi in 1958. The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum inaugurated Frank Lloyd Wright’s famous building in 1959 with an exhibition curated by Sweeney that included two Italians: Afro and Burri.


103 The exhibition was held at the City Art Museum of Saint Louis from 13th October to 14th November 1955.


106 The last time an Italian had won a prize at the Carnegie was in 1937 when Felice Casorati received the Second Prize, and, before that, in 1931 when Mario Sironi received a Second Prize as well. It always corresponded to the presence of an Italian as part of the Jury: Cipriano Efisio Oppo in 1931, Ferruccio Ferrazzi in 1937, and Afro in 1955. See Gordon Bailey Washburn, ed., *Retrospective Exhibition of Paintings from Previous Internationals* (Pittsburgh: Carnegie Institute, 1958), np.
with the Carnegie in 1955 he became the official “gateway”\textsuperscript{107} for Italy in the United States, up to the point of being accused by his American colleagues of chauvinism.\textsuperscript{108}

1955 also marked a change in the historical framework for his painting, a transformation that arguably influenced the artist’s perception of his own art. The American exhibitions of 1955, and \textit{The New Decade} in particular, helped Afro to redefine his own autonomy. A shift of perspective was revealed by his attitude toward artists like Renato Guttuso and Corrado Cagli during one of the American conferences. Until a short time before they had been his closest friends and points of reference, and, as we have seen, Afro’s work had been associated with their paintings for about twenty years.\textsuperscript{109} Now, instead, as he wrote to Scialoja, he publicly minimized their importance: “I have sized them up, without ever saying anything bad about them but limiting them to the right proportions.”\textsuperscript{110} This did not mean that Afro had forgotten all of his Italian friends. On the contrary, he now exploited his success to promote fellow Italian painters in America more than ever; he just changed his alliance and favored the gestural abstraction of Birolli and Scialoja. He privileged this style at a moment when it began to be understood as an

\textsuperscript{107} The expression used by Afro is “Testa di Ponte,” which in Italian indicates the end of the bridge touching the “other” bank of a river. “Testa di ponte” is also the title, probably self-referential, of a painting from 1957 that Afro exhibited in the same year at the Catherine Viviano gallery (No. 371).


\textsuperscript{109} This was true not only in Italy (from the exhibitions at the Cometa during the 1930s to Pier Maria Bardi’s at the Palma in the late 1940s) but also in the United States. In the MoMA exhibition in 1949 (see Chapter 2) Afro was introduced as a minor artist compared to the two who were in a more prominent position, Renato Guttuso and Corrado Cagli. See Alfred H. Barr, Jr. And James T. Soby, \textit{XX Century Italian Art}, MoMA, New York, 1949, p. 33. Cagli, together with Cassinari and Pizzinato, was also part of the Venturi group before it was reduced to the “group of eight” in its official and strategic version in 1952. See Luca Massimo Barbero and Sileno Salvagnini, “Afro, gli Otto e l’America attraverso gli archivi”, in Luciano Caramel ed., \textit{Afro: Italia/America} (Milan: Mazzotta, 2007), p. 58. In 1947, Afro together with his brother Mirko and Guttuso physically defended Cagli from the contestation of the Forma 1 artists in Rome. The episode, which degenerated into a brawl, was covered by the national press and caused a sensation in Italy. There, Afro was depicted as a faithful follower of the older and more influential Cagli. See chapter 2.

\textsuperscript{110} Afro to Scialoja, 20th October 1955, cit.
international lingua franca, linking western European and American democracies, as suggested by *The New Decade* show.\footnote{In the mid-1950s MoMA launched a program of circulating exhibitions to educate the American public to modern art beyond the New York area. European and especially Italian abstract art played an important role in it. See Raffaele Bedarida, “L’alleato più prossimo: Il Moma e la promozione dell’arte europea fuori New York, 1952-1954,” in Germano Celant, ed., *Emilio Vedova, De America* (Milan: Skira, expected publication 2016).}

Whereas *Twentieth Century Italian Art* followed an essentialist logic of italianità, which it derived from the fascist exhibits of the 1930s, now MoMA promoted the idea of a post-war concert with all of the western European democracies in close harmony - economically, politically, and culturally - with the United States.\footnote{See John Elderfield (edited by), *The Museum of Modern Art at Mid-Century* (Museum of Modern Art: New York, 1994).} This happened not only through exhibitions of American art held in Europe through the Museum’s International Program (inaugurated in 1953), as has been widely discussed in the art-historical literature of the last thirty years, but also by showcasing European activity in the United States, as in the case of *The New Decade*.\footnote{Another prominent example was the exhibition *Europe: The New Generation*, organized by MoMA, which circulated through the United States for two years between 1952 and 1954. See Raffaele Bedarida, “L’alleato più prossimo,” cit.} The exhibition of twenty-two European artists was in fact matched with a parallel show bearing an almost identical title, *The New Decade: 35 American Painters and Sculptors*, arranged by John Baur, curator (and soon to become director) of the Whitney Museum. The two shows travelled around America together, to the Minneapolis Institute of Art, the Los Angeles County Museum and the San Francisco Museum of Art, inviting a direct comparison of the recent developments in painting and sculpture on both sides of the Atlantic.\footnote{The dates of the tour were New York 10th May – 7th August 1955; Minneapolis 21st September – 30th October 1955; Los Angeles 21st November 1955 – 7th January 1956; San Francisco 2nd February – 15th March 1956.} The American critic Dore Ashton was positively surprised by exactly that when she called the MoMA
and Whitney concomitant shows, an “unusual [opportunity] to compare, on the spot, recent art at home and abroad.”\textsuperscript{115}

In fact, what emerged from the comparison, beyond the rhetoric of cooperation among European democracies and the United States, was the message that America led the way. In \textit{The New Decade} catalogue, Ritchie emphasized how the United States had taken the baton from France and raced ahead as the new center of international culture. He wrote that Europe had lost its political centrality, the pre-eminence of the French school was over, and therefore “new starting points” could come about only through a tight dialogue between the European western democracies and the United States. He positioned the results of this political and cultural pact in opposition to the Nazi and Fascist past, and to the current Soviet enemy. (This idea was dear to the Italians since the 1930s and was seen as an opportunity for the rediscovery of the Italian school of art as opposed to the \textit{École de Paris}.\textsuperscript{116})

Ritchie saw Afro’s abstract painting as a perfect synthesis of this transatlantic alliance: a new Italian culture that had strong local roots while being open internationally - that is to America. He praised Afro’s use of colors “as deriving from the tradition of his native Veneto;” yet, he linked his ambiguous forms and gestural brushwork to American

\textsuperscript{115} Dore Ashton, “The Artists in Europe,” \textit{The New York Times Magazine}, May 8, 1955, pp. 28-29, cited in Germano Celant, \textit{Roma New York} (Milan: Charta, 1993), p. 104. In fact, a similar comparison was not unprecedented: the most direct precedent was, in fact, the pair of exhibitions \textit{Younger European Painters: A Selection} (1953) and \textit{Younger American Painters} (1954), organized by James Sweeney at the Guggenheim Museum and featuring many of the artists of \textit{The New Decade}, including Afro, Burri, and Capogrossi. The significant difference was that the Guggenheim shows were not held simultaneously, and therefore could not (and did not) stimulate an immediate comparison between Europe and the US, as the MoMA and Whitney shows did. See Tracey Bashkoff, \textit{Art of Another Kind} (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 2012).

Abstract Expressionism. It was “an expressive form of a national and international nature at the same time.”\textsuperscript{117} Ritchie’s assumption was therefore that the Italian “nature” of Afro’s art was a link to the past, and his modernity looked to America.

Ritchie’s text for \textit{The New Decade} set an important precedent for the interpretive framework with which the Italian critic Lionello Venturi promoted Afro’s work (and contemporary Italian art more in general) in \textit{Painting in Post-War Italy}.\textsuperscript{118} This was a large survey exhibition, which opened in 1958 at the Columbia University’s Casa Italiana and circulated for three years through the United States and Canada.\textsuperscript{119} Like Ritchie, Venturi in his text for the exhibition catalogue celebrated the end of the post-war period of national rehabilitation and the beginning of a new internationalist agenda. Different from Ritchie, however, Venturi avoided any reference to an Italian specificity or tradition. Moreover, his catalogue text had no reference to the Fascist past. Venturi had promoted internationalism since the interwar period, but \textit{Painting in Post-War Italy 1945-1957} presented two important elements of novelty: firstly, Venturi’s idea of internationalism now traced a special link between Italian and American art, as opposed

\textsuperscript{117} Andrew Ritchie, 1956, cit.
\textsuperscript{118} Venturi acknowledged his debt by including Ritchie’s catalogue in \textit{Painting in Post-War Italy}’s “Selected Bibliography of Italian Painting After 1945.” In this list, Ritchie’s was the only source written by an American together with the 1949 MoMA catalogue, \textit{Twentieth Century Italian Art}, and it was the only one, which did not focus exclusively on Italian art.
\textsuperscript{119} \textbf{1958}: Casa Italiana of Columbia University, New York, NY (January 20 – February 8); Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. (February 14 – March 6); Highbee Company, Cleveland, OH (April 21 – May 11); Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, MA (June 2 – June 22); Syracuse University, Syracuse, NY (October 2 – 22); Munson – William – Proctor, Utica, NY (October 2-22); J. B. Speed Art Museum, Louisville, KY (December 4 – 30). \textbf{1959}: Columbus Museum of Arts & Crafts, Columbus, GA (January 10-30); Columbus Gallery of Fine Arts, Columbus OH (February 15 – March 15); Colorado Springs Fine Arts Center, Colorado Springs, CO (April 1- 22); San Francisco Museum of Art, San Francisco, CA (May 11 – June 28); Stanford University Art Gallery, Stanford, CA (July 15 – August 5); Carlton College, Northfield, MN (October 5 – 25); Cornell University, Ithaca, NY (November 5 -25); University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI (December 5 – 25). \textbf{1960}: Springfield Art Museum, Springfield, MI (January 8 – 28); Eastern Illinois University, Charleston, IL (February 8 – 28); Public Library, Winston-Salem, NC (March 6 – April 5); The Art Gallery of Toronto, Toronto, Canada (September 30 – October 30).
to his previous focus on Europe; secondly, the trans-Atlantic international agenda now received the stamp of official approval from the Italian government. The Cultural Department of the Italian Foreign Ministry sponsored the show and initiated with it a new phase of cultural diplomacy in accordance with Fanfani’s rhetoric of the “bridge over the Atlantic.”

Venturi opened his text with the capitalized words “AFTER THE LIBERATION IN 1945 ITALY DEVELOPED…” making it immediately clear that he did not intend to discuss Italy’s past, and continued by describing Italy’s “new start.” He then divided the forty-four artists included in the show into three generations: those “who today are over sixty years of age” included Carlo Carrà, Roberto Melli, Felice Casorati, Francesco Menzio, Filippo De Pisis, Massimo Campigli, Mario Sironi, Giorgio Morandi, Gino Severini, Alberto Magnelli, Enrico Prampolini, Luigi Spazzapan, Atanasio Soldati, and Mauro Reggiani; those who emerged after the war and were “largely responsible for the revolution in taste which took place after 1945,” including Fausto Pirandello (considered a “passage from the old generation to the new”), Mario Mafai, Giuseppe Capogrossi, Lucio Fontana, and Enrico Paulucci; and finally, “the third generation – those thirty to forty years old,” which featured Renato Birolli, Giuseppe Santomaso, Antonio Corpora, Afro, Antonio Scordia, Toti Scialoja, Giulio Turcato, Emilio Vedova, Mattia Moreni, Ennio Morlotti, Corrado Cagli, Antonio Music, Franco Gentilini, Giovanni Stradone, Piero Sadun, and Renato Guttuso. This group also included “two artists who are over forty:” Alfredo Chighine and Alberto Burri. With very few exceptions, these artists were hardly new to the American public (the list is indeed familiar to the reader of the

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120 Lionello Venturi, cit., p. v.
121 Ibid. Chighine is misspelled “Chighino” in the catalogue.
present text). Even the group of “young artists” included Afro, Cagli, Music, Gentilini, and Guttuso: they had exhibited in America on a regular basis since the 1930s. Yet Venturi presented the “young artists” as a novelty. In particular he promoted the abstractionists among them as his personal choice: “this group of painters represents, in my opinion … what is most characteristic in Italian painting since 1945.”

The main novelty of the 1958 text was the way Venturi defined internationalism. He supported the same artists that he had promoted in 1952 as the “gruppo degli otto,” but now he did not link them to pre-war European avant-gardes as he had done in 1952. Rather, he defined internationalism through the comparison with the United States. He did that in the brief Columbia catalogue and expanded his point in the longer and more abundantly illustrated book, *Italian Painters of Today*, published in 1959 by Universe Book, in New York. In the latter he delineated a brief historical account of

122 Lionello Venturi, *Painting*, cit., p. vi. This was the largest group by far and the one Venturi dedicated most attention. It included a diverse array of artists, ranging stylistically from the figurative expressionism of Guttuso to the gestural abstraction of Vedova. The emphasis of Venturi’s text, however, was on Afro and the other artists from the former “gruppo degli otto,” which he had promoted in the early 1950s. Launched in 1952, the group included: Afro, Birolli, Corpora, Moreni, Morlotti, Santomaso, Turcato, and Vedova. Lionello Venturi, *Otto pittori italiani*, 1952, cit., reproduced in Luciano Caramel, ed., *Arte in Italia 1945-1960* (Milan: Vita e Pensiero, 1994), p. 168.


124 He applauded the “young artists” in the Italian show for their, “enthusiasm, spontaneity, natural ease, boldness.” Lionello Venturi, *Painting*, cit., p. vii. These terms were the same with which Abstract Expressionism was being promoted in Italy at the time, and very similar to those used by Venturi himself to talk about Jackson Pollock. Venturi’s review of Pollock’s show at the Galleria Nazionale d’arte Moderna in Rome emphasized the artist’s “fervor,” his “spontaneity … as it happens when you create a new tradition without having one behind you” and concluded “there is no doubt that Pollock’s art is American.” Lionello Venturi, “Dall’America arriva un mito: La mostra di Pollock,” *L’Espresso*, May 23 1958, p. 16.

125 Here, Venturi focused on eleven painters: Pirandello, Mafai, Birolli, Santomaso, Corpora, Afro, Cassinari, Turcato, Scioloja, Scordia, and Vedova. He had, therefore, eliminated the socialist realists who were still present in the Columbia show (“not one of these eleven painters took part in the neo-realist
abstraction, where he focused on the three national schools of France, United States, and Italy. If he indicated French Cubism as the origin “from which all other non representational forms are derived,” he criticized current French abstractionists: “if [they] have a limitations, it is their ultra refinement.”

Not unlike Clement Greenberg, Venturi contrasted French *belle peinture* with American painters, which he indicated as the most radical in contemporary art. Venturi wrote: “The more progressive artists, those who represent the avant-garde of our period and who are ready to break completely with every tradition and fling open the doors to the future, are some American painters, such as Pollock, Tobey, Gorky, De Kooning, etc.” Finally, he described Italian abstraction as the synthesis of the other two schools and the most successful of them all:

[Italian painters] are less radical than the Americans, less refined than the French, but they have great qualities; they are enthusiastic, spontaneous, daring, they feel a constant need to renew themselves and, finally, they have something which is their alone, natural facility for painting. … These painters are recognized as Italian artists, not because they are bound to local century old traditions, but because they express international ideals in an Italian way.

Nor linked to the past nor defined otherwise, the “Italian way” discussed by Venturi was a synthesis of Europe and America in a way that was close to Fanfani’s rhetoric of the “bridge over the Atlantic.”

Not only did Fanfani’s government sponsor the show, but it also made sure that the official nature of the initiative was emphasized in its marketing. In a letter to the American Federation of Arts, the Director of the Cultural Division of the Italian

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127 Idem p. 12.
Embassy, Filippo Donini requested that explicitly: “the Cultural Department of the Foreign Ministry of the Italian Republic will be credited as being the sponsor of the exhibition in all material used for publicity and display purposes, and Lionello Venturi will be credited with the selection.”

The last time that the Italian government had officially sponsored a comparably comprehensive art show in the United States was at the Italian pavilion of the New York World’s Fair in 1939-1940, an exhibition filled with imperialist rhetoric, racist content, and cleansed of Jewish artists. Moreover, the venue of *Painting in Post-War Italy*, the Casa Italiana, was an institution founded in 1927 and associated with Fascist propaganda. Originally co-sponsored by the City of New York, the Italian-American community, and Mussolini’s government, the Casa was so closely linked to the Fascist Government that it was object of Columbia students’ anti-Fascist contestation after the 1935 invasion of Ethiopia. For the same reason, during World War II and in the decade following it, the sign “Casa Italiana,” originally engraved in stone on the main door’s lintel, was covered in plaster. In 1958, however the context had changed. Now the engraved letters “Casa Italiana” was revealed once more, the Italian government sponsored the show, and the Italian *tricolore* appeared prominently on the catalogue cover (fig. 17).

Simultaneously, the Italian foreign minister, Giulio Pella, and the ambassador in Washington, Manlio Brosio, inaugurated the Italian Cultural Institute on Park Avenue in

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131 The 1949 MoMA catalogue had a tricolore too, but it was sponsored by an American institution. Furthermore, there, the colors of the Italian flag were apologetically inserted in an almost dead trunk.
New York. And nobody, either in Italy or in the United States, claimed that “they evoke unpleasant memories,” as De Gasperi had said about the Case Italiane right after the war.


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132 Legally established in July 1958, the Institute opened officially on April 6, 1959 in the presence of the Italian officials and of the New York State governor, Nelson A. Rockefeller. Initially called “Centro Italiano di Informazioni,” it was changed into Istituto Italiano di Cultura in 1961. See Lorenzo Medici, cit., p. 160.

133 De Gasperi, 1945, quoted in Lorenzo Medici, cit., p. 152.


135 Furthermore, in 1957, Il Milione started a new series of publications, “Young Italian Painters,” edited by Marco Valsecchi and published in America as part of the ongoing “Edizioni del Milione - 12 Paintings” series. Two other volumes, Guido Ballo’s Modern Italian Painting: from Futurism to the Present Day (New York: Praeger, 1958), Roberto Salvini, Modern Italian Sculpture (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1959), were more historiographical in nature (they both spanned from Futurism to the present), but still emphasized a tradition of presentness within Italian modernism.
Afro’s work featured prominently in most of the aforementioned exhibits and publications, and turned out to be the most representative artist of the “new Italy.”\textsuperscript{136} He was the pièce de résistance for both Venturi’s promotional activity and the Viviano gallery, and, by now, his work was well known to the American public even beyond the art world. In 1958 alone, as Venturi’s show circulated throughout America, Viviano dedicated to him a solo show, of which she triumphantly wrote: “Afro’s exhibit was greatly successful. Personally, I was very satisfied by it because for the first time I was able to compete with the major French galleries.”\textsuperscript{137} \textit{Life} magazine published “Star Brother Act in Art,” a long photographic essay on him and his brother Mirko (fig. 18).\textsuperscript{138} And the famous Hollywood actor, Vincent Price promoted his work on CBS. Viviano recounted the episode to Afro: “Now, your name is always mentioned among the most prominent contemporary painters, and last week one of your paintings was shown in one of the most popular TV programs, that of Ed Murrow, who interviewed Vincent Price in his home. Vincent showed your painting and said: ‘This is a painting made by the great contemporary Italian artist, Afro.’ And so tens of millions of people saw your paintings and heard these words!”\textsuperscript{139}

Afro’s successful career in America was a transformative process. The way his writings and paintings changed in the period between 1955 and 1958, that is between the

\textsuperscript{137} Viviano to Birolli, January 15, 1958. Catherine Viviano Gallery Records, Archives of American Art, Box 3, Folder: “Birolli, Renato - Correspondence.” Original: “La mostra di Afro ha avuto un grandissimo successo. Io personalmente ne sono molto soddisfatta perché per la prima volta ho potuto competere con le maggiori gallerie francesi e fare gli stessi prezzi richiesti per Manessier e Bezaine (?). Sin dall’inizio tendevo a questo risultato e ora finalmente ci sono riuscita.”
\textsuperscript{139} Viviano to Afro, October 23, 1958, Archivio Afro, Rome, reproduced in Afro, \textit{Catalogo Ragionato}, cit., p. 401. Original: Il tuo nome è ora menzionato sempre coi primissimi pittori contemporanei, e la settimana scorsa un tuo quadro è stato mostrato in uno dei più popolari programmi di television, quello di Ed Murrow che intervistava nella sua abitazione Vincent Price. Vincent ha mostrato il tuo quadro e ha detto ‘Questo è un quadro fatto dal grande pittore italiano contemporaneo Afr.’ Così decine di milioni di persone hanno visto il tuo quadro e hanno sentito queste parole!”
two shows, *The New Decade* and *Post-War Italian Painting*, exemplifies the laborious process of identity shift the nation was undergoing. Particularly telling is the transformation, in his writing and in his art, from a focus on memories of the past to one on the present: a transformation that happened in close dialogue with the American reception of his painting and with American art. During the same period, Afro moved from being a promoter of Italian art in the United States, to becoming a key figure in the importation and success of American art in Italy.

Three pieces of writing by Afro mark the 1950s, forming rare theoretical statements by the artist, who was well known for being reticent about his work. In the first text, written for the critic Umbro Apollonio in 1953, Afro defined the making of his paintings as the slow reappearance of a “decanted reality” through memory. For the artist painting was “the poetic counterpart of reality, of which memory preserves the most essential part.” In the second text, requested by Ritchie for *The New Decade*’s catalogue, there was a substantial identification between the memory of an experience evoked by the painting and memory of the painting itself; a painting was compared to an “organism” whose process of formation is visible. Therefore, the painting could “contain the lightness, the living breath of an evocation, the leap or shudder of memory”, but at the same time it formed an “enclosed world” that was autonomous from life. Finally, in the third piece written in 1957 for Venturi, the artist declared that he had abandoned every reference, even distant, from a lived or re-evoked reality. Instead, he defined his own

140 Letter from Afro to Umbro Apollonio, January-February 1953. This and the following two pieces of writing have been republished in Caramel, 2007, cit., pp. 93-97.
painting as the carrying out of an absolute present, which corresponded to the pictorial act. As he explained, “what remained of memory was [just] indistinctness.”

A similar shift was expressed by the change in style and subject matter of his paintings. Before 1955 his paintings were blurred, made of apparitions and mist, and often described by titles referring to the past, such as *Ricordo d’infanzia* [Childhood Memory] (1952 and 1953), *Una crisi di coscienza* [A Crisis of Conscience] (1952), *Per non dimenticare* [Lest We Forget] (two paintings of 1952 bear this title) or *Per una ricorrenza* [For an Anniversary] (1955, fig. 19). After 1955 and until the end of his career (he died in 1976), Afro never again used titles alluding to the past. Starting in 1956, he tended towards a less structured type of painting, more gestural and on the surface. These works were in stark contrast to his earlier work, which was carefully and visibly composed. His titles, still descriptive, no longer referred to evocations of the past, but rather to the act of painting itself or to the colors visible in the paintings: *Composizione rosso giallo* [Red Yellow Composition] (1956, fig. 20); *Rosso col bianco* [Red with White] (1956); *Deserto rosso* [Red Desert] (1956). Many 1957 paintings were

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142 See catalogue raisonné, *Catalogo Generale Generato Dai Documenti dell’Archivio Afro* (Rome: DataArs, 1997); *Ricordo d’Infanzia*, pp. 113 and 127; *Una crisi di coscienza*, p. 120; *Per non dimenticare*, pp. 109 and 114; *Per una ricorrenza*, p. 156. In 1955, William N. Eisendrath, Jr. noticed the use of descriptive titles in the catalogue of the show, *Contemporary Italian Art* held at the City Art Museum of St. Louis. He indicated this as a characteristic shared by many Italian artists: “In scanning the catalogue of the works of art, it will be noted that, with the exception of a very few, all have titles that refer to a specific image. No matter what degree or format of abstraction [artists] have taken their work, the title sincerely indicates an image or idea from which they proceeded. This is perhaps a natural characteristic of a nation where the visual and the classic are daily familiar.” William N. Eisendrath, Jr., *Contemporary Italian Art: Painting, Drawing, Sculpture*, *Bulletin of the City Art Museum of St. Louis*, Vol. 40, No. 3 / 4, exhibition catalogue (October 13 – November 14, 1955), pp. 4-5.

143 This was the reason why art historian Maurizio Calvesi did not consider Afro an Informel artist. Maurizio Calvesi, “Informel and Abstraction,” in Emily Braun, ed., *Italian Art*, cit., p. 289.
entitled *Composizione* [Composition] or *Pittura* [Painting].\(^{144}\) Afro’s shift, similar to, and in parallel with, Venturi’s newfound focus on Italy’s presentness, corresponded to a willed abandonment of memory and to an emphasis on the here and now that reconfigured the Italian national consciousness in the years between the Reconstruction and the Economic Miracle.\(^{145}\)

By concentrating on the present and by removing the past from their rhetoric, Afro and the other promoters of the “new Italy” identity, renounced the bombast of Italy’s grand past, while also avoiding the problematic memory (and responsibility) of their recent history. During the 1930s, “primordio” was the central theme in Afro’s work – that is, the founding myths of the collective Italian and Fascist identity. During the 1940s, he represented the collective unconscious through totemic symbols of Jungian derivation, such as *La Sfinge* [The Sphinx] of 1948 and *L’araldo* [The Herald] of 1949.\(^{146}\)

Afro’s painting during the first half of the 1950s again emphasized a collective identity based on the past. Two themes emerged with prominence: childhood and the trauma of World War II. Titles like *Giardino d’infanzia* (Childhood Garden, 1951), *Ricordo d’infanzia* (Childhood Memory, two paintings, one of 1952 and one of 1953, bear this title), and *La Paura del Buio* (Fear of Darkness, 1952) explicitly alluded to childhood.\(^{147}\)

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\(^{144}\) See catalogue raisonné, cit.: *Composizione rosso giallo*, p. 158; *Rosso col bianco*, p. 164; *Deserto rosso*, p. 162; *Composizione*, pp. 170 (three paintings with this title at this page) and 182; *Pittura*, p. 179. Afro, in fact, used titles of this kind in some of his earlier paintings, but they were much more rare and, above all, they were used for small or minor works.

\(^{145}\) This shift was not unique to Italy. The same concept of forgetfulness and amnesia, for example, was presented as a quintessential characteristic of modernity in Roland Barthes’ *Mythologies* published in 1957.

\(^{146}\) In the immediate post-war period, Corrado Cagli was largely responsible for the popularization of the work of Carl Gustav Jung among Italian artists, Capogrossi, Afro, and Mirko Basaldella. On the influence of Cagli on Afro, see Enrico Crispolti, ed., *Dino, Mirko, Afro Basaldella* (Milan: Mazzotta, 1987).

\(^{147}\) See catalogue raisonné, cit.: *Giardino d’infanzia*, p. 99; *Ricordo d’infanzia*, pp. 113, 127; *La Paura del Buio*, p. 120. In a 1955 article, Dore Ashton emphasized the importance of childhood memories and anecdotes in Afro’s paintings even when this was less evident from titles or recognizable subjects, as witnessed in her own conversations with the artist. Dore Ashton, “Afro,” *Art Digest*, May 1955, reproduced in *Catalogo Generale Generato Dai Documenti dell’Archivio Afro* (Rome: DataArs, 1997), p. 392.
War-themed paintings, on the other hand, suggested the memory of unspecified victims the Holocaust through their titles and vaguely recognizable figures. Venturi, for instance, saw a “prostrate and wounded figure” in *Lest We Forget I.* 148 And the American journalist Emily Genauer identified *Lest We Forget II* (fig. 21): “a twisted barbed-wire kind of line that loops through the composition suggest memories of war or its aftermath.” 149 Afro himself encouraged this reading by using the same motif in his monumental work, bearing a more explicit title, *Guerra Ricostruzione e Pace* (War, Reconstruction and Peace, 1954). 150 In another painting of this period, *Portico d’Ottavia* of 1953, he juxtaposed the scrolls of ancient capitals, depicted at the center, to a menorah in the upper right (fig. 22), probably a reference to the stratification of memory in the Roman square Portico d’Ottavia, heart of the Jewish ghetto: here, the ancient remains of Rome’s grand past coexisted with the impalpable yet still vivid memory of the Nazi roundup of the Jews of Rome in 1943, ten years before the painting was made. Similar to Gerhard Richter’s paintings of the 1960s (fig. 23), which were also painted as blurred, Afro’s canvases of the first half of the 1950s alluded to the complicated process of collective memory and oblivion. However, while the German painter included specific references to the Nazi past by reproducing and altering ready-made photographs from that period, in Afro’s canvases the images, which are almost unrecognizable, are always suggestive, never literal. As Genauer wrote: “Obviously the artist has not wanted us to think of war literally. He communicates chiefly a melancholy mood.” 151 More to the

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150 Afro made this painting for the public insurance institution, Istituto Nazionale Assicurazioni, in Rome. It is a portable “mural” on wooden panels measuring 8.75 x 26.28 feet.
151 Genauer, cit.
point, while Richter disturbingly depicted his own (or any German’s) “Uncle Rudi” proudly wearing a Nazi uniform, Afro’s memory was directed to the victims of the war, to his own fears as a child and to childhood reminiscences.\footnote{Two paintings of 1952 and one of 1953 are entitled \textit{Autobiografia} (Autobiography, pp. 99, 112, and 125).} What cultural historian Ruth Ben-Ghiat has written about neo-realist films can be applied to Afro’s memory paintings as well: their focus on childhood (which Ben Ghiat describes as belonging to the “sphere of purity”) and war trauma “facilitated the displacement of collective responsibility for Fascism by consistently shifting culpability away from ordinary Italians.”\footnote{See Ruth Ben-Ghiat, “Liberation: Italian Cinema and the Fascist Past, 1945-50,” in R. J. B. Bosworth and Patrizia Dogliani, eds., \textit{Italian Fascism: History, Memory and Representation} (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1999), p. 84. The centrality of children in Italian films was evident to the American public of the time if the fashion magazine \textit{Harper’s Bazaar} run an article on this phenomenon: “Attori Bambini,” \textit{Harper’s Bazaar}, February 1952, p. 166.}

Afro’s memory paintings, conceived in the early 1950s, went beyond his private dimension and were part of a wider national phenomenon of memorialization and self-redemption. Central to the process of Reconstruction in Italy, they had in America an important interlocutor and a source of legitimization. Catherine Viviano successfully exhibited and sold in the United States many of Afro’s most important (and most redemptive) paintings, such as \textit{Fear of the Night}, \textit{Lest We Forget II}, \textit{A Crisis of Conscience}, \textit{Portico d’Ottavia}, and \textit{For an Anniversary}.\footnote{As documented by Davide Colombo, in \textit{Afro. The American Period}, cit., (see relative page numbers below), \textit{La paura del buio} [Fear of the Night] was bought in 1956 by Seymour H. Knox for the Albright-Knox Gallery, Buffalo; the year before, Viviano sold a gouache with the same title to Emily S. Nathan (p. 144); exhibited at Viviano’s in 1953 \textit{Senza titolo} (Per non dimenticare II) [Untitled (Lest We Forget II)] was reviewed by Emily Genauer in the \textit{New York Herald Tribune}, and then purchased by this art critic in 1955 (p. 158); Viviano exhibited \textit{Una crisi di coscienza} [A Crisis of Conscience] in 1952 and sold to Joseph Pulitzer, Jr. in 1954. Pulitzer wrote about this painting: “\textit{The Crisis of Conscience of 1951 projects a strong emotion – anxiety and repentance},” Joseph Pulitzer, \textit{Modern Painting, Drawing and Sculpture, collected by Louise and Joseph Pulitzer, Jr.}, Vol. I (Cambridge, MA: Fogg Art Museum-Harvard University Press, 1957), p. 8, quoted in Colombo, cit., p. 163; in 1954, Pulitzer bought \textit{Portico d’Ottavia} directly from the artist and then exhibited the work in the 1955 show, Contemporary Italian Art at the City Art Museum in Saint Louis; in 1955, Pulitzer purchased \textit{Per una ricorrenza} [For an Anniversary] from a solo show of the
success the preparatory sketches and enlarged photographic details of the monumental
gates of the Fosse Ardeatine, built in 1951 by Afro’s brother, the sculptor Mirko.\textsuperscript{155} The
gates were one of the first, most publicized, and symbolic public monuments of the war’s
aftermath. Erected on the outskirts of Rome, the gates memorialized the massacre of 335
Italians (mostly Jewish) perpetrated by the Nazi occupying army in 1944 as a retaliation
against an act of resistance. In commissioning the monument, the government celebrated
the patriotic heroism of Italian partisans against German occupiers, and therefore
presented Italy and the Italians as heroes and victims rather than perpetrators in the recent
tragedy. Bringing and promoting these works in America (the same thing can be said of
the neo-realist movies) was not just about the market; it was also a search for absolution.
Their success in this country was, for the Italians, a stamp of international approval.

After 1955, as Afro received recognition in America and started to emerge as a
key figure of a “New Italy,” his work for the first time did not focus on the past: not
mythical, historical, or personal. In her review of Afro’s 1955 show at the Viviano
Gallery, Dore Ashton noticed the artist’s more spontaneous abstraction and interpreted it
as a shift toward presentness and optimism: “The fanciful, ebullient side of his nature
emerges in the highkeyed recent paintings – those in which he allowed himself the most
freedom and spontaneity to date. In these, he celebrates the delights of the senses. These

\textsuperscript{155} Viviano exhibited these works in 1950 with success. See Howard Devree, “Both Old and New,” \textit{New
exhibited are the preliminary sketches for the third gate, which Mirko has just completed. The photographs
show the detail of the completed plaster model.” The sketches were acquired by Nelson Rockefeller.
Viviano then continued to advertise Mirko’s Ardeatine monument throughout the decade: in 1953 on
occasion of MoMA’s competition for a monument, where Mirko was awarded the second prize. As a
result, MoMA’s press release described only the Ardeatine monument, MoMA, Press release, March 13,
1953. As late as in 1957, in a biographical note on the artist, Viviano devoted six out of twelve lines to that
project: “He executed the bronze gates for the Ardeatine Caves in Rome, a memorial to 320 Italians killed
by the Germans in 1944 in reprisal for the death of 32 Germans.” The rest of the biography was a list of
paintings are less residual; closer to the nerves than to the dark regions of the memory." Afro’s painting now centered more and more on the vitality of the present; gone were both the hallowed antiquity and the haunting memories of the war. His gestural style, according to the then current existentialist reading of informale and of Abstract Expressionism, did not allude to anything but the presentness of the act of painting - or the hic et nunc, as Italian art critics commonly said in the late 1950s.

This was the moment when Afro’s activity as a cultural bridge changed direction. He had previously served as a “gateway” to the United States for Italian art; during the second half of the 1950s he became a facilitator of Abstract Expressionism’s success in Italy. He did that in two ways: indirectly through his painting, which now, as Ritchie put it, “was national and international at the same time,” that is mediated between the tradition of Venetian “tonalismo” and Abstract Expressionism; and, more importantly, through a direct activity of promotion. Afro’s close friend, Toti Scialoja, was the first one in Italy to compare Afro’s painting to that of Arshile Gorky, in 1956. The comparison became commonplace after 1957, when Afro himself wrote the catalogue entry for Gorky’s first solo show in Italy, at l’Obelisco gallery. Here, Afro acknowledged the

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157 The special issue of the magazine Il Verri of June 3, 1961 was entirely dedicated to Informale and offers a useful summary of the leading interpretation of this phenomenon among Italian art critics. The phrase “hic et nunc” recurs with noticeable frequency throughout the volume. For a comprehensive historicization of including the dominance of the existentialist interpretation of Informale in Italy during the second half of the 1950s, see Enrico Crispolti, L’Informale: Storia e Poetica, Vol. I (Assisi-Rome: Carucci Editore, 1971), pp. 47-61.
158 In the US, Afro had been compared to Gorky as early as in 1952: Henry McBride, “Afro of Italy,” Art News, May 1952, reproduced in Afro, Catalogo Generale, cit., p. 386. Starting in 1956 the Italian and the American interpretation of Afro overlapped. Carlo Efrati [Toti Scialoja], Arti Visive vol. 2, n. 5, 1956. Significantly, Scialoja’s article appeared in a special issue of the Italian art magazine, Arti Visive dedicated to Gorky, which was the first one of the magazine to publish each text in both Italian and English. The same issue had a special section dedicated to Jackson Pollock’s death (pp. 21-22). That corresponded to the moment when Gabriella Drudi took over the direction of the magazine with the help of Scialoja and Afro. See Davide Colombo, “Arti Visive”, una rivista ‘tra’: astrattismi, interdisciplinarietà, internazionalismo,
importance of Gorky and, more generally, of American painting (meaning Abstract Expressionism): “During these past few years, American painting has assumed a leading role in global discourse. This is a confessional painting, an art of spiritual and moral ‘action’ possessing a fire, possessing a tension that corresponds like no other to our existence as moderns, to the way we live now. With their painting, Americans simply live, they affirm their being in the world as the awareness of human life, human reason.”

Afro’s closeness to Abstract Expressionism went beyond his stylistic affinity to it and his activity as a publicist. Between 1957 and 1959, Afro became close friends with the American artists Willem de Kooning, Mark Rothko, Conrad Marca-Relli, and Philip
Guston (fig. 24). Each had Afro as a major point of reference for their trips to Rome.\footnote{Barbara Drudi, Afro, Da Roma a New York, 1950-1968 (Prato-Siena: Gli Ori, 2008) pp. 74-75.}


Afro, again, was at the center of a national phenomenon: the booming fortune in Italy of American art and, in particular, the “osmosis” (to use Germano Celant’s expression) between Rome’s and New York’s respective art scenes.\footnote{Celant, Costantini, cit., p. 23.} This activity peaked between the summer of 1957 and the spring of 1958, right after the Gorky show at l’Obelisco. In July 1957, the Rome-New York Foundation opened in Rome, under the supervision of a board of directors composed of European and American art critics led by Venturi, with the declared goal of bringing American artists to Europe and European artists to the United States.\footnote{The first group show included Italian, French and American artists together. The board included: James Sweeney, Herbert Read, Michel Tapié, Rudigler, Sandberg, and Venturi. The first exhibition included: Giuseppe Capogrossi, Ettore Colla, Carla Accardi, Burri, de Kooning, Sam Francis, Franz Kline, Mark Tobey, Lucio Fontana, Pollock, and Marca Relli. See Celant, Costantini, \textit{Roma – New York}, cit., pp. 135-136.} On October 16, 1957, Conrad Marca Relli had a solo exhibition at the gallery La Tartaruga in Rome, owned by Plinio de Martiis. On February 27, 1958, Franz Kline had his first solo show in Europe, also at La Tartaruga. On March 1, 1958, Jackson Pollock had his first European retrospective at the Galleria Nazionale d’Arte Moderna in Rome. Curated by Palma Bucarelli, the director of the Galleria, the exhibition was a sensation. On May 1, 1958 the large survey exhibition, \textit{The New American Painting}, organized by the International Council of MoMA, opened at the Galleria Civica d’Arte Moderna in Milan. Cy Twombly, who had moved to Rome in 1957, had his solo show at La Tartaruga in Rome on May 17, 1958. The 1958 Venice
Biennale’s Grand International Prize went to Mark Tobey, the first American to win that award since Whistler in 1895.\textsuperscript{164} The success of these events among artists and critics was accompanied by a new interest among Italian collectors. In this period Italy emerged as one of the major art markets in Europe for American art, and that the important collections of Giorgio Franchetti and Giuseppe Panza di Biumo started by purchasing Abstract Expressionist artists.\textsuperscript{165}

The art-historical literature has abundantly documented and debated the American interests, intentions, and political agendas behind the exportation of Abstract Expressionism to Europe, but little attention has been paid to the European response to it.\textsuperscript{166} The fortune (or misfortune) of American art in Europe, however, was equally dependent on the internal cultural and political debate within each of the European countries.\textsuperscript{167} Italy was no exception. By the end of the fifties, Abstract Expressionist artists had exhibited in Italy for a full decade, starting with the presence of the Peggy

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{164} Celant, Costantini, cit., pp. 123-155.
\item \textsuperscript{165} Anna Costantini, “Before the End of the Journey: Testimony across the Atlantic,” cit., p. 34. Titia Hulst has documented how in these years Northern Italy emerged as the southernmost tip of the so-called “blue banana”: “the curving band that stretches from London through Holland, Germany, and Switzerland.” This band, which overlaps with Western Europe’s industrial corridor, was the main market in Europe for American art. Titia Hulst, \textit{The Right Man at the Right Time. Leo Castelli and the American Market for Avant-Garde Art}, Doctoral Dissertation, Adviser: Thomas Crow (New York: NYU Institute of Fine Arts, 2014), pp. 118-120 and 237.
\end{itemize}
Guggenheim Collection at the Venice Biennale of 1948. Many Italian artists and critics, as we saw, traveled to the United States during the early 1950s and had first-hand exposure to American art. Afro, for example, traveled frequently to New York starting in 1950. But it was only during the second half of the decade, as Italy reshaped its image as a modern country in close dialogue with the United States, that American art became relevant and interesting to the Italians.168

Again, as had already happened in the 1930s, the collective effort to promote a new image for Italy in the United States altered the self-identity of the promoters. And so the advocates of Italian art in the United States – Afro, Venturi, Brin and Gasparo Del Corso above all - ended up becoming the main greeters of American art in Italy.169 Eager to abandon the mournful tone of the Reconstruction years and ready to embrace what

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168 In 1957, Afro wrote retrospectively: “during my first visit to America, I saw many of Gorky’s pictures.” Afro Basaldella, Gorky, cit., p. 124. Significantly, he wrote about this only in 1957, whereas before that date he did not mention Abstract Expressionist art in his correspondence nor did he promote American artists or publish on them. Afro’s case was not isolated. Another significant example was that of the Milanese movement, Nuclearismo and in particular of Gianni Dova. In the early 1950s, he became famous for abstract paintings employing a dripping technique which, starting in the 1960s, has been commonly described as evidence of the impact of Pollock onto Italian painters. Indeed, it is very likely that he was aware of and influenced by Pollock. An important Pollock show was held in 1950 at the Milanese gallery il Naviglio owned Carlo Cardazzo. None of the art critics writing about Dova during the 1950s, however, even mentioned Pollock. They rather quoted the atomic bomb, surrealist automatism, and other exclusively European sources. In 1951 Gillo Dorfles, introducing his show at the Galleria del Milione in Milan, refereed to Max Ernst. In 1957, Tristan Sauvage (aka Arturo Schwarz) compared him to French tachism (Tristan Sauvage (Arturo Schwarz), Pittura Italiana del Dopoguerra (1945-1957) (Milan: Schwarz Editore, 1957). And in 1958 Enrico Crispolti associated him to Michel Tapié’s art autre and mentioned Wols, Bacon, Giacometti, and, again, Ernst. Significantly, it was only in 1962 that Schwarz re-told the story of the origins of Nuclearismo, by including an often quoted anecdote of Dova’s oath on Pollock and Wols before buying enamel paints and starting to drip color on canvases arranged horizontally onto the floor. Tristan Sauvage, Arte Nucleare (Milan: Schwarz, 1962), p. 19-21. As for the other nuclearisti, only the third manifesto of the Movimento Nuclare “Contro lo Stile,” published in September 1957, did mention Abstract Expressionism. See Luciano Caramel, ed., Arte in Italia (Milan: Vita e Pensiero, 1994), pp. 144-145.

169 Beside Afro, many protagonists of this dissertation were key figures in the acceptance and success of American art in Italy during the economic boom: starting with abstract Expressionism and culminating with Pop Art in the 1960s. Venturi reviewed Pollock in the popular press and organized the Rome-New York Foundation; Brin and Del Corso exhibited American artists at L’Obelisco; Toninelli was MoMA’s contact person in Milan for the 1958 show; Bucarelli organized the Pollock retrospective at the Galleria Nazionale d’Arte Moderna in Rome in 1958 and wrote the catalogue entry for Twombly’s first show in Italy.
they saw as the optimistic forgetfulness of consumer society, the “new Italy” had finally learned to act like America, to paraphrase Carosone’s song.
In November 1969, as students rallied in protests and demonstrations against American military intervention in Vietnam erupted in America and across Europe, the 29-year-old Italian art critic Germano Celant launched Arte Povera on both sides of the Atlantic. He did so through a manifesto-style book, which he released simultaneously in three languages and in four countries: Italy, West Germany, the United Kingdom, and the United States.\(^1\) Published by Praeger with the title \textit{Art Povera}, most significantly, the American edition introduced the movement and the author himself to the United States for the first time. (To avoid confusion, I use the italicized English title, \textit{Art Povera} to indicate the 1969 book, and Arte Povera to indicate the Italian artists promoted by Celant with this name during the preceding two years.\(^2\)) Unlike previous shows and publications using the word “Povera” in the title, the new book included American and European artists who had already been categorized by other critics as part of: Land Art (or Earthworks), Conceptual Art, Anti-form, Process Art, or Post-Minimalism.\(^3\) But \textit{Art Povera} was the first survey in America –either in published or exhibition form – to assess these various groups comprehensively, to include artists working on both sides of the

\(^1\) Germano Celant, \textit{Arte Povera} (Milan: Mazzotta, 1969); \textit{Art Povera} (New York: Praeger, 1969); \textit{Art Povera: Conceptual, Actual or Impossible Art?} (London: Studio Vista, 1969); \textit{Ars Povera} (Koln: Studio Wasmuth, 1969).

\(^2\) As discussed below, the group changed in number and formation through the years, but nowhere as dramatically as in the 1969 book.

Atlantic, and to present them all as one and the same phenomenon. The book, in fact, ended up functioning as a Trojan horse, a kind of an infiltration strategy of conquest mostly aimed at promoting contemporary Italian art in America. As Celant’s first enterprise outside of Italy, Art Povera initiated his long-term, almost obsessive, reflection on Italian identity in an international context.4

Intentions of conquest and obsessions aside, Art Povera, in fact executed the most successful campaign, to date, of exporting Italian art to the United States.5 As such, it was the paradoxical culmination of the collective promotional effort traced in the present study. The first paradox was that while Celant claimed for Art Povera a “stateless” character and announced the obsolescence of national boundaries in art, he actually

4 In the short term, as discussed below, a major accomplishment of Art Povera was that Celant became the point of reference in the United States for the Italian artists of the book. Subsequently, he dedicated a still ongoing career to the intertwined themes of modern Italian identity and of the relationship between Italy and the United States. Beside the long bibliography of monographs dedicated to Italian artists, three major publications focused on these themes. The first one was The Knot: Arte Povera at P.S.1 (New York/Turin: P.S.1/Allemandi, 1985): in this exhibition catalogue on Arte Povera (the full Italian title and the Italian-only formation were now introduced in America too), Celant structured the whole architecture of his text on the dichotomy between Italy and United States, which culminated with the final and longest section, entitled “Italian Complexity.” The second one, Roma - New York: An Art Exploration (Milan: Charta, 1993), was an anthology of primary sources interspersed with narrative introduced by Celant and Anna Costantini, which documented the intense activity of exchanges in the contemporary art field between Rome and New York after the Second World War. In his introductory historical overview, Celant discussed the relationship between Italy and the United States as one of “specularity and osmosis.” (p. 13). Thirdly, he organized an important exhibition at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum and published the related catalogue, The Italian Metamorphosis, 1943-1968 (Rome-New York: Progetti Museali Editori, Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, 1994). In his introduction to this monumental volume, which includes eighteen essays and 778 pages filled with color photographic reproductions, Celant again discussed Italian modern identity defined in close dialogue with America. In particular, he addressed problems of mutual misunderstanding through an essentialist approach to identity: “The contradictory and dialectical dichotomies between matter and spirit, social and individual, essential and redundant, ephemeral and permanent, history and present, fusion and confusion, which systematically mark Italian art, confounded the linear Anglo-Saxon mind.” (p. 7). Through a comparative analysis of these three publications, one gets a sense of Celant’s perception of his own historical role: the dichotomies and incomprehension extant before Art Povera were solved by his publication in 1969 (both Rome-New York and Italian Metamorphosis end right before that date). It was only after the Trojan horse of Art Povera entered the precincts of American art that Celant could articulate the Italian genealogy before Arte Povera, with its specificity and uniqueness. America was not the only interlocutor for Celant: Identité Italienne: L’art en Italie depuis 1959 (Paris and Florence: Centre Georges Pompidou, Centro Di, 1981) was a key moment in his definition and promotion of italiantà abroad.

5 Arte Povera established itself as the first Italian art movement since Futurism and Metafisica (in the singular form of Giorgio de Chirico) to enter the American art historical canon. The waves of success and the process of historicization of Arte Povera in the United States are discussed below.
launched a “made in Italy” brand through it. Secondly, of all the Italian art tendencies presented in America since the 1930s, the most successful one – Arte Povera - was also the most openly and vehemently anti-American, despite its desire to sell in that country.6

Before the publication of the book, the Italian and the European art world had already encountered the term “Arte Povera” and most of the artists and ideas associated to it. In Italy, Celant had invented, branded, and refashioned the Arte Povera label in a number of exhibitions and publications, starting in 1967. The most important ones were the exhibition Arte Povera – IM Spazio at the Genoese Galleria La Bertesca in September 1967; the article “Arte Povera: Appunti per una guerriglia,” published two months later in the Italian art magazine Flash (later changed into Flash Art); the exhibition Arte Povera curated in February 1968 by Celant at the Galleria de Foscherari in Bologna; and the three-day event Arte Povera + Azioni Povere held in October 1968 in Amalfi’s ancient arsenals, which featured site-specific installations and actions. During these first two years, Celant’s grouping changed:7 shows and publications between 1967 and 1970 added and dropped artists in a fluid manner. It was only much later, in the 1980s, that Arte

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6 In the last ten years, Arte Povera scholars have pointed out Celant’s many intellectual contradictions, questioning his narrative or interpretive framework of the movement. See in particular Claire Gilman, ed., Postwar Italian Art, Special Issue, October 124 (Spring 2008) and Giovanni Lista, Arte Povera (Milan: 5 Continents, 2006). In her dissertation, Gilman specifically expressed the goal to dismantle Celant’s master narrative and has criticized other art historians (for example Thomas Crow) for taking Celant’s “agenda as an explanation of the work at hand rather that what it is: Celant’s own personal program.” Gilman, dissertation, cit., p. 4. My intent here is not to restore Celant’s master narrative. Rather, I intend to historicize the construction of such narrative: the goal is not to find the “correct” interpretation of Arte Povera (Celant’s or otherwise), but rather to consider the way it was presented in America as part of the redefinition of a modern Italian identity.

7 It grew in number and in diversity. The beginning was Italian and male: the Genoese show included Alighiero Boetti, Luciano Fabro, Jannis Kounellis, Giulio Paolini, Pino Pascali, and Emilio Prini. Then, through the Flash article and the Bologna exhibit, Celant added: Giovanni Anselmo, Mario Ceroli, Piero Gilardi, Mario Merz, Gianni Piacentino, Michelangelo Pistoletto, and Gilberto Zorio. And with the much more numerous event in Amalfi, Arte Povera included also a woman, Marisa Merz, and three artists from other European countries: the Dutch Jan Dibbets and Ger van Elk, and the British Richard Long. Pier Paolo Calzolari too, who would later become part of the permanent Arte Povera formation, was acquired on that occasion. Luciano Fabro retrospectively recalled: “It was in Amalfi that we became aware of being part of an international context.” Luciano Fabro, “La forma è sempre il risultato dell’atto,” in Giovanni Lista, Arte Povera, cit., p. 28.
Povera was sealed to a stable formation of thirteen artists: Giovanni Anselmo, Alighiero Boetti, Pier Paolo Calzolari, Luciano Fabro, Jannis Kounellis, Mario and Marisa Merz, Pino Pascali, Giulio Paolini, Giuseppe Penone, Michelangelo Pistoletto, Emilio Prini, and Gilberto Zorio.8

In Europe too, Arte Povera and Celant were already known before the publication of the book, *Art Povera*. Between 1968 and 1969, major European events presented the Italian movement as integral part of an international phenomenon,9 most importantly, *When Attitudes Become Form* curated by Harald Szeemann and *Op Losse Schroeven* curated by Wim Beeren.10 Celant did not organize these two events. Both catalogues featured other Italian authors, Tommaso Trini and Piero Gilardi respectively. But they discussed Celant’s Arte Povera and framed it as the Italian branch of the various Post-minimalist tendencies developed simultaneously in Europe and the United States. Trini

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9 Beside *When Attitudes Become Form* and *Op Losse Schroeven* (see below) two other major moments for the internationalization of Arte Povera were *Prospect 68* and *Prospect 1969*. These events were art fairs with the direct participation of commercial galleries. As such, they did not provide a critical framework for the art presented, but they greatly contributed to the circulation of the Arte Povera artists and of their work in the international circuit. *Prospect 68* was held at the Kunsthalle in Düsseldorf from September 20-29, 1968. Here, Ileana Sonnabend from Paris, presented Anselmo, Merz and Zorio; and Sperone from Turin presented Prini, Calzolari, Piacentino, and Boetti. The fact that some of the artists might have been included in the catalogue but not in the actual show, as remembered by Gilberto Zorio in an interview with Lara Conte does not exclude their presence from the German art scene in 1968), Lara Conte, *Materia, corpo, azione: Ricerche artistiche processuali tra Europa e Stati Uniti 1966-1970* (Milan: Electa, 2010), p. 301 note 458. *Prospect 1969* was held from September 30 to October 12 in the same venue. Sperone now presented Boetti, Prini, Penone, and Calzolari; Fabio Sargentini of the Galleria L’Attico in Rome presented Kounellis and Eliseo Mattiacci.

10 *When Attitudes Become Form* was shown as curated by Szeeman at the Kunsthalle of Bern, March 22 – April 27, 1969. It was then exhibited at the Institute of Contemporary Art in London, August 28 – September 27, 1969. Here, it was rearranged by Charles Harrison. In 2013, it was memorialized by Celant in the show, *When Attitudes Become Form Bern 1969 / Venice 2013*, Fondazione Prada, Venice 1 June–3 November 2013. Merz, Anselmo, Zorio, Boetti, Kounellis participated in the show, and the exhibition catalogue added Pistoletto, Icaro, Prini, Calzolari, and Pascali. *Op Losse Schroeven* was held from March 15 – April 27, 1969 at the Stedelijk Museum. It included: Anselmo, Calzolari, Icaro, Kounellis, Mario and Marisa Merz, Prini, and Zorio. For a comparative reconstruction of the two exhibitions see, Christian Rattemeyer, ed., *Exhibiting the New Art: ‘Op Losse Schroeven’ and ‘When Attitudes Become Form’ 1969* (London: Afterall, 2010).
did this with the detached tone of a factual historical account, one where Celant played an important role;\footnote{The term “Arte Povera” was mentioned by Szeemann himself, in his brief catalogue entry “About the Exhibition,” as one aspect of a more complex international tendency. Trini gave a different interpretation: rather than one aspect of an international phenomenon, he emphasized its national origins. Arte Povera was, for Trini, an Italian movement, which, only after it was formed and had defined its identity, discovered how much had in common with tendencies elsewhere. When he claimed to focus on “the international scene” but actually compared only Italy and the United States, Trini anticipated an important strategy (and contradiction) of Celant’s \textit{Art Povera}.} Gilardi polemicized against Celant.\footnote{Differently from Trini (and in open polemic against Celant and Szeemann), Gilardi condemned the internationalization that was taking place. An early proponent and a catalyst of internationalization, Gilardi disapproved of the direction it was taking. He described it as part of a domestication process and a marketing strategy, which betrayed the movement’s origins: “Turning to Italy, the critic Germano Celant united a group of new artists in a spontaneist and antistructural ‘situation’; inspired by the work of Pistoletto, this was known as ‘Poor Art’ and its first tiny manifesto, published in October 1967, already spoke in terms of ‘Guerrilla warfare’ against the system; this movement included Anselmo, Boetti, Fabro, Kounellis, Pascali, Piacentino, Paolini, Merz and Zorio; later Prini and Calzolari. At first, the association was somewhat strained and, with the passing of time, an air of institutionalism crept in, revealing a facet of commercial promotion and a tendency to seek integration with the international artistic establishment.”} In both cases, however, they cited Celant and used his label and ideas as the inevitable point of reference. Szeemann and Beeren too, in their brief catalogue introductions, cited Arte Povera. Szeemann also invited Celant to deliver a speech at the opening ceremony in Bern.\footnote{He wrote in his \textit{Precronistoria}: “A Berna, Celant, il giorno di inaugurazione, tiene una conferenza sulle ragioni operative e concettuali dei lavori.” Germano Celant, \textit{Precronistoria}, cit., p. 113.} Embraced or contested, by 1969 when he published \textit{Art Povera}, Celant was part of the European debate and Arte Povera was considered an important aspect of post-Minimalism.

Things were different in America. Some individual artists included in Celant’s group had exhibited in the United States before the publication of \textit{Art Povera}. Michelangelo Pistoletto had important shows between 1966 and 1969.\footnote{In the 1960s, Pistoletto had two solo exhibitions at American museums within three years: in 1966 (April 4-May 8) at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, and in 1969 (May 13-June 15) at the Albright-Knox Art} And three group
exhibitions, which featured some of the Arte Povera artists, predated Celant’s book: 
*Young Italians*, curated by Alan Solomon at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston (January 23–March 23, 1968) and The Jewish Museum, New York, (May 20 – September 2, 1968); *Nine at Castelli*, curated by Robert Morris at Leo Castelli Warehouse, New York (December 4–28, 1968); and *Nine Young Artists: Theodoron Awards*, curated by Edward F. Fry and Diane Waldman at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York (May 24 – June 29, 1969). None of these examples, however, referred to Celant’s ideas, none mentioned the term Arte Povera, and the critic’s name remained absent. The same artists who in Europe were called “Arte Povera” and discussed as an internationally significant movement, in the United States were presented individually as peripheral examples of tendencies that were centered in America.15

Even an artist like Michelangelo Pistoletto, who was the only *poverista* to have an American career before Celant and the creation of the Arte Povera term, was allegedly encouraged to leave Italy and take residence in the United States in order to really make it in America. According to Pistoletto’s retrospective account, Leo Castelli warned him:

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“you should come to the United States, otherwise there is nothing more to do for you here.”\(^{16}\) If Pistoletto recalled this as an act of arrogance, Castelli was probably just aware of the current attitude in America toward contemporary European art.\(^{17}\) In the Walker Art Center catalogue of Pistoletto’s 1966 solo show of mirror pieces, the Museum’s director, Martin Friedman, devoted his entire text on differentiating Pistoletto from American Pop art (Friedman’s only point of reference): “Pistoletto’s literalism, although timely because of his tenuous relationship to Pop art, developed in a much quieter, less programmatic, fashion.”\(^{18}\) He compared Pistoletto’s work to Andy Warhol, Robert Rauschenberg, Claes Oldenburg, and George Segal to emphasize the differences, and concluded: “Pistoletto’s only analogies to Pop are the wry references in some of his works to his own experience attending the American exhibition at the 1964 Venice Biennale. His representation of an Oldenburg stove and a Chamberlain sculpture at the Biennale are actually comments on recent American art.” Similarly, the *Artnews* review of the show reproduced Pistoletto’s *Man with Cigarette* “looking to” American art (fig. 1): “The background” - the caption explained – “reflects the Castelli Gallery and a Rauschenberg painting.”\(^{19}\) As an Italian

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\(^{17}\) In fact, Pistoletto’s original reaction was much less indignant than he recalled in his interview with Celant of twenty years later. In a letter to Castelli, of 1965 he actually wrote that he was considering his offer, or at least to spend a longer period in New York: “Credo che tornerò a NY e questa volta non soltanto per vedere ma per lavorare. Peccato che quel lavoro in California non sia ancora maturato, se no avrei potuto già passare là l’estate.” Pistoletto to Castelli, April 12, 1965, Leo Castelli Records, 2.28, folder “Artists Letters – Circa 1958-1965, 1989,” Archives of American Art, Washington DC.


\(^{19}\) John Ashbery, “Talking of Michelangelo,” *Artnews* 65, no. 4 (Summer 1966), p. 42. Romy Golan has noticed how it was only the Americans who discussed what was reflected in Pistoletto’s work and in the photographic reproductions of it. Although Golan’s argument aptly points to the inability of the Italians to
artist, Pistoletto was presented in the inevitable act of reproducing or reflecting (literally) American art without participating in it. Nor did Friedman or other American critics compare his work to other contemporary Italian artists, except for Giorgio de Chirico who was alive but definitely less “timely” as a comparison than Warhol or Rauschenberg.

In the 1969 Albright-Knox catalogue, too, on the occasion of Pistoletto’s second American museum show, curator Robert Murdock contrasted his style of “social commentary” to that of Warhol. “The spirit of these pictures is one of half-amused participation rather than of serious protest,” Murdock wrote in the catalogue. “They are quite in contrast with, for example, Andy Warhol’s grisly transcriptions of news events and personages.” By the time of this show, Arte Povera was established and well known throughout Europe. It was about to land in America through Celant’s book, but Murdock failed to mention it or any of the artists associated with it. Pistoletto was compared to the film director Michelangelo Antonioni, but the Italian art referred to was not contemporary at all: “The general mood of his tableaux and the grouping of figures in them seem more related to the work of certain Renaissance painters, such as Andrea Mantegna and Piero della Francesca than to modern Italians.” No such moderns were actually named.

recognize their own “oblique” dialogue with American pop, it is significant, from the perspective of the present study, that, on their part, the Americans fixated on their own mirrored image. Romy Golan, “Flashbacks and Eclipses in Italian Art in the 1960s,” *Grey Room*, 49 (Fall 2012), pp. 102-127.

20 Golan concludes: “The gift of invisibility of the mirror paintings might also explain, in retrospect, why Pistoletto was the first European artist of his generation to be given a solo exhibition in the United States.” Romy Golan, “Flashbacks,” cit., p. 118.

21 Martin Friedman, “Michelangelo Pistoletto,” cit., np.


The reception of group exhibits was even worse. The show *Nine at Castelli* has been discussed in recent art historical literature as a key passage in the internationalization of the post-Minimal American scene.\(^{24}\) But reviewers at the time, who described it as an important exhibit, actually ignored the only non-Americans in it, the Italians Anselmo and Zorio [figs. 2, 3].\(^{25}\) As it turned out, the works of these two artists were stuck at the United States customs and did not make it for the opening. It is significant, in any case, that art critics generally failed to notice their absence in spite of the fact that they were listed in the exhibition’s poster and were necessary components to the number nine announced in the title.\(^{26}\) And so the presence of Anselmo and Zorio in this landmark event failed to leave a trace in the American debate of the time.

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\(^{24}\) See, for example, Christian Rattemeyer, *Exhibiting the New Art*, cit., p. 15; Richard J. Williams, *After Modern Sculpture: Art in the United States and Europe 1960-70* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), p. 149; more recently, Lara Conte has written that *Nine at Castelli* together with *Antiform* at the John Gibson Gallery in New York (October 5 - November 7, 1968) bear “witness to the emergence of a new relationship between the artistic scene in America and in Europe, and contributed to determine the construction of that internationalization of postminimalist artistic avant-garde which would impose itself more definitively during the year 1969.” Lara Conte, cit., p. 126.

\(^{25}\) With no catalogue and no press release, the show lacked a clear message from the organizers. The show was surrounded by an aura of mystery, which was probably deliberate. A reviewer lamented: “I received word via the art world that it might be better if I did not write about this show. It was supposed to be some sort of secret.” John Perrault, “A Test,” *Village Voice*, December 19, 1968, p. 19. The Leo Castelli Records have a rich photographic documentation of installation views of the exhibit but no material on the organization. Yet critics immediately acknowledged its importance. Max Kozloff’s influential piece for *Artforum* did not even name the Italians. Max Kozloff, “9 in a Warehouse,” *Artforum*, 7, 6 (February 1969), pp. 38-42. In the *New York Times*, Philip Leider, who wrote that the show “[signaled] the closing out of what might be called ‘Phase One’ of the adventure that has been called ‘Minimal’,” noticed the absence of the Italians: “Only seven of the nine have actually shown up, works by two Italians (Anselmo and Zorio) failed to arrive.” The missing pieces were installed later, during the second week of the exhibit, but neither Leider nor any other reviewers bothered to return all the way uptown to where the exhibition took place, “in a Castelli warehouse-gallery at 103 West 108th Street, which is neither plush nor heated.” Philip Leider, “The Property of Materials: In the Shadow of Robert Morris,” *New York Times*, December 22, 1968, p. D31.

\(^{26}\) The other artists included in the show were: Richard Bollinger, Eva Hesse, Stephen Kaltenbach, Bruce Nauman, Alan Saret, Richard Serra, Keith Sonnier. On November 27, the works of Anselmo and Zorio were sent by Ileana Sonnabend from Paris to New York via International Air Transport. International Air Transport to Castelli, November 27, 1968, Leo Castelli Gallery Records, Box 11, Folder “Ileana Sonnabend Galerie, Paris.” As late as in December 11, 1969, however, Szeemann wrote in his diary that he visited the show and that the works of Anselmo and Zorio were “still at customs.” Harald Szeemann, “Chronology: How Does and Exhibition Come into Being,” republished in Christian Rattemeyer, cit., p. 177.
The other international group exhibit, Nine Young Artists did not go better. Part of an acquisition prize, Theodoron Awards, it was an important opportunity for Zorio to enter the prestigious Guggenheim collection. But his work failed to impress reviewers. The longest and most influential review, written by Scott Burton for Artnews, failed to mention his presence (and that of the other Europeans). Burton emphasized the interest in time and process in the works exhibited at the Guggenheim, which he compared to the concurrent Whitney exhibit, Anti-Illusion: Procedures/Materials. Zorio’s work in the show (fig. 4) would have been perfectly compatible with Burton’s thesis; the Guggenheim catalogue in fact described it in terms that were very close to his (“Zorio is concerned with process and the nature of materials”). But Burton made a different choice. By emphasizing the importance of Abstract Expressionism as the immediate precedent for the current tendency and, then, by naming only American artists, he gave a specifically American connotation to contemporary artists’ renewed interest in what he called “the temporal dimension.” Artforum dismissed the show in general, with the exception of one American artist. “With the only exception of Richard Serra’s lead sheet

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27 Scott Burton, “Time on Their Hands,” Art News, 68, 4 (Summer 1969), pp. 40-45. The other artists in the show were Barry Flanagan, Gerhard Richter, John Walker, Dan Christensen, Bruce Nauman, James Seawright, Richard Serra, and Peter Young.


29 Edward F. Fry, “Gilberto Zorio,” in Edward F. Fry and Diane Waldman, Nine Young Artists: The Odoron Awards (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1969), np. The catalogue presented each artist with a photographic reproduction, a resume, and a very short critical text. An overall discussion of the selected artists as a group was missing.

30 Scott Burton, “Time on Their Hands,” cit., p. 40. The other Europeans in the show were Gerard Richter, from Germany, and Barry Flanagan and John Walker from England. Of these Zorio and Flanagan could have been easily included in his reflection on process and materials. On the Guggenheim’s chauvinism in the late 1960s to early ’70s see Alexander Alberro, “The Turn of the Screw: Daniel Buren, Dan Flavin, and the Sixth Guggenheim International Exhibition,” October, 80 (Spring 1997), pp. 57-84.
and prop setups, the Guggenheim Museum’s showing of nine young artists ... was a feeble looking affair.”31 Zorio’s work was reproduced and discussed, but not in a positive way. The reviewer reported that after an “instant, initial spark, [she] found the piece oddly flaccid, almost puerile in its vacuity and bland pretension.”32

Of these exhibitions, Young Italians (fig. 5), held at the Boston ICA and the Jewish Museum in New York, was the most important precedent to Celant’s promotional effort in America. For two reasons: it was the first initiative to address the problem of the American prejudice against Italian art, the awareness of which was important for Celant’s conception of the Art Povera book; secondly, unlike the other shows, this project involved Celant directly through his mentor, Eugenio Battisti (more on this later). The bad reception of Young Italians informed, by reaction, Celant’s strategy.

The curator of Young Italians, Alan Solomon addressed, head on, the problem of Americans’ biased attitude toward non-American art: “During the past five or ten years, in a gradual and unconscious process, we in America have become accustomed to judging world art against American standards and American conditions. ... We came more and more to turn in on ourselves, becoming less and less interested in the contemporary art of other countries.”33 He did not deny that his perspective was an American one: “The show was selected with an American eye, with the American audience in mind.” Acknowledging it was, he believed, the first step in going beyond the simplistic logic of “influence” to gain a more nuanced understanding of the two-way flow

32 Ibidem.
33 Alan Solomon, Young Italians (Boston: Institute of Contemporary Art, 1968), np.
between Italy and the United States, between national and international.\textsuperscript{34} “In a particular national situation the problem becomes the manner in which the native sensibility contends with exogenous pressures, whether it submits and accommodates to the foreign style, or whether the external influence becomes a springboard for new departures.”\textsuperscript{35}

Solomon’s idea of a two-way flow reflected the show’s own gestation. Far from being just “selected with an American eye,” in fact, \textit{Young Italians} originated from a project of the Italian art historian, Eugenio Battisti, and was then adapted by Solomon. Battisti (1924-1989) was a Renaissance art historian who lived in the United States between 1965 and 1970, where he taught at Penn State University and the University of North Carolina.\textsuperscript{36} Here, he was a tireless promoter of contemporary Italian art with the help, from Italy, of his former students and collaborators. One of them was Germano Celant. He was Battisti’s former student at the University of Genova and collaborated with him at both \textit{Marcatré}, the magazine that Battisti had founded and directed since 1963, and the Museo Sperimentale d’Arte Contemporanea, a contemporary art collection that he had started and curated since 1963.

As early as in 1965, just a few months after his arrival in America, Battisti managed to have the official ceremony of donation of the collection of the Museo Sperimentale to the Galleria Civica of Turin take place in New York City in the presence of director of the Galleria Civica Vittorio Viale, of the director of the Italian Cultural Institute of New York Giuseppe Cardillo, the Italian Consul General Vittorio Cordero di

\textsuperscript{34} Solomon made the example of Alberto Burri’s influence on Robert Rauschenberg and the latter’s success at the 1964 Biennale.
\textsuperscript{35} Alan Solomon, \textit{Young Italians}, cit., np.
Montezemolo, the Parisian gallerist Denise René, the President of MoMA Rene d’Harnoncourt, and the newly appointed director of the Jewish Museum, Sam Hunter.37 On that occasion, Battisti discussed with Hunter the idea of a show of contemporary Italian art at the Jewish Museum. Describing the event to Celant, Battisti presented this possibility with amusement, as an exciting reversal of fate. The Jewish Museum was the institution behind the Pop Art exhibit at the Venice Biennale of the previous year, which had marked the victory of Robert Rauschenberg; Battisti, therefore, saw the Jewish Museum as the most appropriate venue to promote contemporary Italian art in America.38 He attributed a diplomatic role to the enterprise. Having sought and obtained a promise of support from the Italian ministries of Education and of Foreign Affairs, he explained to Viale: “It’s a show with a diplomatic value and it is a very official move of the [Italian]


38 Battisti to Celant, December 10, 1965, Archivio Battisti, cor65L428. See above for the full original text. More in general, Battisti considered the Jewish Museum as one of the most influential and internationally oriented institution in contemporary art field, so he wrote to Viale: “[Al] Jewish Museum, dove quest’anno è stata tenuta una splendida mostra di arte cinetica francese, e una personale immensa di Vasarely. Queste mostre hanno costituito un efficacissimo rilancio della cultura francese, ed ho potuto anche sentire dai protagonisti direttamente quali erano le loro idee di conquista del mercato e della critica americana … Con l’Istituto Italiano di Cultura si è parlato, ma in modo molto teorico, del vantaggio di una mostra analoga, possibilmente più generale, dedicata all’arte Italiana [sic] di oggi, che è praticamente conosciuta solo in via molto indiretta.” Here, Battisti probably confused three shows held between the Jewish Museum and MoMA. In 1965, the former held Two Kinetic Sculptors: Nicolas Schoffer and Jean Tinguely (both artists were based in France). It was the latter, however, to host in 1965 the exhibitions The Responsive Eye on kinetic art (which was not exclusively French but it included many artists represented by the Parisian gallery Denise René) and a solo show of Victor Vasarely (who was born in Hungary but based in France). Battisti to Viale, January 1966, Archivio Battisti, Rome, cor66L020.
Originally planned for April-June 1967 (when, in fact, the Museum eventually held the now-famous show, *Primary Structures*), the exhibit was conceived by Battisti as “a definitive anthology of the modern tendencies in Italy.” His proposal, approved by Hunter, was to invite for each one of the represented tendencies the main critics who supported it. These would select the works and present the movement or style in an autobiographical fashion: “for example for Op Art [Giulio Carlo] Argan, [Umbro] Apollonio, [Sergio] Bettini; for Pop Art [Maurizio] Calvesi, [Alberto] Boatto (author of the first book in Europe on Pop Art, currently in print), Maurizio Fagiolo; for the New Figuration [Enrico] Crispolti, [Franco] Russoli, etc.” Celant was not invited as a curator for he was not (yet) associated to one specific artistic movement. Battisti, though, contacted him as the main person who had put together the collection of the Museo Sperimentale and therefore had direct access not only to that collection but also to the artists who had donated their works for it.

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40 Battisti to Viale, January 1966, Archivio Battisti, Rome, cor66L020: “Il Direttore [dell’Istituto Italiano di Cultura], prof. Cardillo, ha, dopo un lungo colloquio con me, preso un appuntamento con il direttore del Museo Jewish ed ha chiesto se fosse stato possibile avere ospitalità per talune di queste mostre. La risposta è stata talmente positiva che supera ogni possibile desiderio. Cioè in un secondo colloquio è stato chiesto il progetto di una unica larghissima mostra, con catalogo, tale da costituire una antologia definitiva delle tendenze moderne in Italia dedicandole la piena stagione del 1967, da aprile a giugno.”


42 Battisti to Viale, January 1966, Archivio Battisti, Rome, cor66L020. Original: “Il piano provvisorio della mostra che si era pensato con Cardillo e poi discusso con il direttore del museo Jewish – si tratta di una mostra a livello diplomatico e che vuole essere un ufficialissimo atto del governo - è di presentare le principali tendenze italiane di oggi, op art, pop art, “nuova figurazione”, surrealismo e neo dada. Si era pensato che per ogni raggruppamento di invitare per la scelta e le presentazioni i critici che oggi più sostengono queste tendenze, facendo fare loro anche la storia delle loro stesse polemiche e difese: per esempio per la op art Argan, Apollonio, Bettini; per la Pop Art Calvesi, Boatto (autore del primo libro europeo sulla Pop art, ora in stampa), Maurizio Fagiolo; per la nuova figurazione Crispolti, Russoli, ecc.”

43 Battisti to Viale, January 1966, Archivio Battisti, Rome, cor66L020. Original: “Sarebbe assai utile, credo, che i critici invitati fossero responsabili di precise posizioni. Per questo, ad esempio, un Ragghianti non avrebbe ragione di essere, un Argan si, una Palma Bucarelli forse no (anche se è straordinariamente
Although the “tendencies” identified by Battisti were all rather derivative in relation to America, he emphasized their roots within the Italian tradition. He also envisioned a section of the show dedicated to Italian artists from the previous generation who were influential on the current tendencies: “It will be a big historiographical enterprise, one of the biggest ever made, where we should introduce those masters and those works ([Lucio] Fontana for example) that are considered as direct models and examples by the young artists.”

Everything seemed set up. The Jewish Museum offered to pay all of the installation expenses, advertisement in the United States, and insurance during the exhibition, the Italian Cultural Institute agreed to cover the transportation with relative insurance and the catalogue. Battisti contacted Italian critics and dealers to organize the committees, to select the artists, and even to discuss the installation project. He wrote enthusiastically to one of his collaborators in Italy, Maurizio Calvesi:

By now you probably know already that my big hit was the organization, at the Jewish Museum, on behalf of the Italian government, of the greatest exhibition of contemporary art ever made in America. The Jewish Museum is the largest in New York dedicated to international exhibitions. This year, it presented the entirety of
France [French art], so fabulously and exemplary; the next year will be the turn of Italy. I wrote to Viale asking the technical and organizational support of the Museo d’Arte Contemporanea [of Turin]; and I intend to create a series of selection committees, one for every [artistic] trend. You of course should be involved. All expenses will be paid from the [Jewish] Museum of New York and the Italian Cultural Institute.47

Organizational and financial problems, however, took the project out of Battisti’s hands. The Italian Cultural Institute discovered that the budget of the exhibition was beyond its possibilities and, in the fall 1966, the reins of the project passed to the director of the Galleria Nazionale d’Arte Moderna in Rome, Palma Bucarelli. From Rome she was able to receive a promise of sponsorship from the Italian ministries of Education and of Foreign Affairs. But these too became unavailable soon afterwards. Battisti lost hope and interest.48 In November 1966, he resigned from the curatorial project and called it “la mostra alluvionata” (a reference to the recent flooding of Florence).49

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47 Battisti to Calvesi, February 1966, Archivio Battisti, Rome, cor66L108: “Tu saprai già a questo punto che il grosso mio colpo è stata l’organizzazione, presso il Jewish Museum, per conto del governo italiano, della massima mostra di arte contemporanea mai fatta in America; il Jewish Museum è il più grande di New York dedicato a mostre internazionali e quest’anno ha presentato tutta la Francia, in modo favoloso ed esemplare, il prossimo anno sarà la volta dell’Italia. Ho scritto a Viale chiedendo l’appoggio tecnico e organizzativo del Museo di Arte Contemporanea; e penso di creare una serie di commissioni di invitati, ciascuna per qualche tendenza. Tu naturalmente dovresti essere in campo. Tutte le spese saranno pagate dal Museo di New York e dall’Istituto Italiano di Cultura.”

48 In two letters to Cardillo, Battisti summarized the events: “Nel frattempo sarebbe bene che Lei scrivesse alla Prof. Palma Bucarelli, incaricandola direttamente dell’organizzazione della Mostra del Jewish Museum. Infatti essa è riuscita a carpire violentemente quelli del Ministero, e a torcerli (a nome dell’Istituto Italiano di Cultura, s’intende); inoltre sta perseguitando quelli del Ministero degli Esteri, Ufficio Relazioni Culturali, che se ne fregano, e dichiarano che mai Lei ha parlato di mostre, mai l’hanno vista a Roma, ma Archi ha sentito fare il Suo nome, ecc. Proprio come facevano quelli del Ministero della Pubblica Istruzione. Inoltre giubilanti sorridono all’idea di non avere una lira. Poiché invece Lei ha perso varie giornate, a Roma, con questi negatori delle virtù, Palma chiede una copia delle lettere che Lei ha inviato, e tutte le indicazioni possibili, perché si possano addentrare i responsabili, e spremere soldi. È intenzionatissima a fare la mostra, secondo d’altronde le idee che si erano dette, e con quella commissione, non altra.” Battisti to Cardillo, November 1966, Archivio Battisti, Rome, cor66L461.


Sam Hunter was interested in rescuing the project and asked his predecessor, the former director of the Jewish Museum, Alan Solomon to organize it with the Boston ICA. The reason behind Hunter’s choice was twofold. Firstly, he was willing to host the show at the Jewish Museum but did not want to be involved in a situation that had become “too Italian and very unlikely to be solved;” his Museum, therefore should not figure as the organizing institution in order to avoid diplomatic issues with the Italian Cultural Institute. Secondly, Solomon had contacts with the Italian art world through his collaboration with Leo Castelli, and he had worked in Italy, although as a promoter of American art. Solomon had curated the American pavilion at the Venice Biennale of 1964 when he was still director at the Jewish Museum. The show and Robert Rauschenberg’s winning first prize at the Biennale marked a key moment in the exportation (and consequent reception) of American art in Italy.

As a result, *Young Italians* was the tangible product of a cultural diplomacy crossfire between Italy and the United States. As Solomon explained in the catalogue, the

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50 This is how Sue M. Thurman, director of the ICA summarized the story to Solomon in a letter of August 23, 1967, Alan Solomon Papers, Archives of American Art, New York, roll 3922, frames 243-244.

51 Solomon wrote to Cardillo: “Since I have travelled in Italy frequently, especially since I did the American show for the 32nd Venice Biennale, I feel that I am entirely familiar with the developments in Italy.” In the same letter he explained: “I conceive of this as an exhibition designed to introduce Americans to innovations in Italy which are not simply reflections of Pop Art or any other movement originated here on in another country.” Solomon to Cardillo, June 16, 1967. Alan Solomon Papers, Archives of American Art, New York, roll 3922, frames 135-136.

52 The United States Information Agency entrusted the Jewish Museum the task of curating the US pavilion for the year 1964, and Solomon curated the show as director of this institution. See Daniela Lanciai, “Tutti i nodi vengono al pettine,” in Walter Guadagnini, ed., *Pop Art, 1956-1968* (Cinisello Balsamo: Silvana, 2007), p. 58.

project had shifted perspective, but the roster of artists remained the same selected by Battisti. The catalogue presented the artists in a neutral alphabetical order, which, in fact, did not help American readers orient themselves among many unfamiliar names. In his text, however, Solomon ordered them using a different logic: he discussed artists individually without indications of clear groupings, therefore avoiding both American and Italian labels, but their sequence suggested a clear narrative. He started with the “purists” (Solomon’s term) working in monochrome: Enrico Castellani, Agostino Bonalumi, Francesco Lo Savio, and Getulio Alviani. The two latter were also defined as artists “thinking and working in terms of industrial techniques and materials.” Then came the pivotal figure of Pino Pascali, whom Solomon called “the most imaginative and inventive of the younger Italians.” Pascali was linked to this group for the geometric structures in his Rivers and Seas (fig. 6): “[They were] closely related to the machine shop involvements of LoSavio and Alviani … [and had] something to do with the present international return to geometry.” At the same time, he showed an interest in organic materials: “he explores the possibilities of water… he deals with earth, covering large cubes and found forms like roofing tiles with a kind of mud.” Solomon did not name Arte Povera but he linked this aspect of Pascali’s art to the next grouping of artists, identified for their use of everyday materials and images: Sergio Lombardo (fig. 7), Mario Ceroli, Renato Mambor, Laura Grisi, and Jannis Kounellis (fig. 8). In Italy, these artists had been associated with Arte Povera more or less directly. Solomon’s last two artists, Valerio Adami and Pistoletto (fig. 9), were discussed as more overtly figurative artists and compared to Pop art. Solomon did not deny American (especially Pop) and other international influences or relationships, but he stressed elements of national specificity.
and continuity as well (he opened his text by comparing the present enterprise to the 1949 MoMA show, *Twentieth-Century Italian Art*).

Partly pleased by Solomon’s initiative and partly willing to reclaim the paternity of the project, the Italian Cultural Institute of New York proposed a collaboration with the Jewish Museum. Cardillo suggested that when the *Young Italians* traveled to New York, the Jewish Museum paired it with another, concurrent exhibit: *Recent Italian Painting and Sculpture* (fig. 10). This show, would present older artists who were influential on the *Young Italians*. The idea was part of Battisti’s original project, but he had lost interest. He dismissively called the new version of the show too “academic” and “official.”54 Hunter, in fact, did not contact Battisti for this second project. Again, he preferred to entrust an American curator, Kynaston McShine, the Jewish Museum’s curator of Painting and Sculpture.55 (Less than two years later, McShine would curate the landmark exhibit *Information* at MoMA, which was the first institutional show to present in America the international developments of post-Minimalist art, including Arte Povera artists.56) The show included: Carla Accardi, Enrico Baj, Alberto Burri, Giuseppe Capogrossi, Andrea Cascella, Ettore Colla, Pietro Consagra, Piero Dorazio, Lucio

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54 Battisti wrote to Carla Panicali: “Essa sarà certamente importante, e ben fatta; ma come tutte le cose ufficiali, rischierà di riuscire un po’ accademica. ...Tuttavia non voglio abbandonare a se stessa completamente la mostra ‘ufficiale’ di New York. E, per introdurre elementi di stimolo, mi sembra che siano necessarie due cose a) approfittare del fatto che a New York c’è il nostro maggior musicista vivente, Luciano Berio, il quale insegna alla Julliard College, della Columbia University, e chiedere a lui di sonorizzare l’ambiente, e organizzare una sera di avanguardia musicale ad altissimo livello. In secondo luogo, esistono dei films sperimentali ed anche su opere d’arte (quello di Di Laura su Vedova; è un autentico capolavoro), che potrebbero dar luogo ad un’altra serata; o a due serate, una su films (potrebbe essere il Vedova e l’altro documentario, di un’ora sulla mostra di Foligno); e nella seconda sera, i films sperimentali e d’avanguardia fatti in Italia.” Battisti to Panicali, July 24, 1967, cor67L559.


56 See below on this show.
Fontana, Gastone Novelli, Achille Perilli, Arnaldo Pomodoro, Giò Pomodoro, Mimmo Rotella, and Toti Scialoja (fig. 11). Despite the generational difference (the catalogue called them “i vecchi”), these artists were represented by very recent pieces, which could have been included in the “younger artists” show. And so Accardi exhibited her *Tenda* (1965-66), an environmental piece made of transparent plastic (fig. 12); Burri showed a series of *Bianchi* (1965-66), semi-transparent panels made out of burnt plastic and cellotex; and Fontana displayed some *Concetti Spaziali* from 1967 consisting of oval panels of lacquered iron punctured by holes and a pill-like sculpture of lacquered wood sliced by one of his iconic “cuts” (fig. 13). In the catalogue, McShine explained the logic behind the inclusion of the “Recent” side by side with the “Young” Italians:

Works by the younger artists (under thirty-five) formed the exhibition *Young Italians* selected for the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston by Alan Solomon. Most of them are not known in America … This exhibition [*Recent Italian*] has focused on fifteen artists who emerged more or less in the fifties. At times they have been called the ‘international’ Italians — young Italians cynically call them ‘i vecchi.’ Nevertheless they gained international recognition very early and since then have been consistent in providing work of the highest quality always with aesthetic interest. Unlike many of their contemporaries they have remained uncompromising and do not shift styles according to the most recent developments reported in periodicals or seen in ‘biennials’ or on visits to other countries. This has given their work an added strength while it has not denied them an aesthetic that is truly universal and personal. They have an elegance and refinement that can be considered characteristically Italian. The identity of each artist is specific and precise.  

Loosely in line with Solomon’s ideas, McShine emphasized the complex balance of international and national identity, and individuality. Yet, unlike Solomon, McShine alluded to a widespread provincialism of the Italian art scene from which the selected artists allegedly distinguished themselves: “They all work either in Milan or Rome but

57 The catalogue mistakenly captioned them as “oil and paper on canvas.”
they have transcended the possible ‘city-state’ provincialism that may have arisen because of Milanese or Roman ‘art-world’ politics.”

Despite the organizers’ effort and enthusiasm, the two shows garnered the usual treatment accorded in the United States to Italian art. Solomon’s protest that Americans had become “less and less interested in the contemporary art of other countries,” in retrospect reads like a sad presentiment: indeed both shows, Recent Italian Painting and Sculpture and Young Italians, if not ignored, were dismissed by the press. In a rare review, eloquently entitled, “Too Bad, Because at First It Sounded So Good,” the New York Times lamented: “Here the basis for inclusion would seem, irrefutably, to be that young Italy is most vital when it most closely imitates middle-aging America.”

The Italians knew that they were doomed to be seen as irrelevant or, at best, as derivative ramifications of more important phenomena that were centered in America.

The late Lucio Fontana expressed a widely shared resentment when he told Carla Lonzi:

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59 Guido Ballo, who wrote the other catalogue essay, focused on the continuity of internationalism within Italian twentieth-century art. It was not a novelty of the post-war period as the present exhibition might imply but originated with Futurism, which currently enjoyed an important revival among Italian critics and artists alike: “In Italy the drive of freedom of expression offered by artistic languages of a more international kind, still derives, be it indirectly, after all these years, from futurism … Only now it is looked at with renewed interest by many of the critics who have emerged since the second world war, and by some of the artists … this group of artists takes us to the core of all that is vital in the Italian art of our time.” Guido Ballo, “Introduction,” in Recent Italian Painting and Sculpture, cit., np.

60 The same disdain was reserved to European art in general. An eloquent example of this attitude was Amy Goldin’s Art News article, “Sweet Mystery of Life,” a seven-page piece on what she called “anti-art revolution” involving “conceptual art, anti-form, soft art, earthworks.” Here, for example she summarizes the Bern exhibition, When Attitudes Become Form as a show “which brings together a lot of familiar names: Carl Andre, Bill Bollinger, Eva Hesse, Sol LeWitt, Robert Morris, Bruce Nauman, Richard Serra, Keith Sonnier.” Goldin ignored the whole European component as well as the fact that a major aspect of the show was putting together American and European art. Amy Goldin, “Sweet Mystery of Life,” Art News, 68, 3 (May 1969), p. 47.


62 What historian Mary Nolan, said of the 1968 political movement could be said of the art world as well: “All too often the American New Left, like the country it critiqued [the United States], imagined itself the center of global protest from whom others could and should learn. Europeans, by contrast, were more knowledgeable about and willing to borrow from countercultures and protests in other European countries.” Mary Nolan, The Transatlantic Century: Europe and the United States, 1890-2010 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), p. 275.
“[The Americans] are so chauvinistic now that they have become even worse than the French… Someone like Pascali has been seen as a Pop artist, but it is not true at all. At all! But they mistake everything for Pop Art. … I would like to organize an international symposium on painting of the last thirty or forty years in order to show to these Americans that they have anticipated nothing, as of today, of European art, against their claim that Europe is finished.”63

Celant distinguished himself by avoiding both querulous protests and frontal confrontations with American chauvinism. He, as we saw, was a student of Eugenio Battisti, a fact that cannot be understated. Battisti in turn called Lionello Venturi his master. Celant had inherited from both the idea that the best way to impart relevance to Italian art and to make one’s voice as a critic heard (in his own country too) was to create a platform of ideas to be exported to the United States. (When, later, Celant focused his book, *Roma-New York: 1948-1964* on the transatlantic activity of figures such as Venturi, Afro, and Viviano, he was constructing a genealogy for himself.64) But from his collaboration with Battisti for *Young Italians*, Celant had also direct exposure to the specific obstacles encountered by contemporary Italian art in America.

The relationship with Battisti, although never studied, had a major impact on Celant’s formation and especially on the strategy that Celant adopted to promote Arte Povera in the United States. Not only did Battisti give a clear methodological imprinting through his teaching and writing to the young Celant as his mentor in Genova; he also

63 “[Gli americani] sono sciovinisti peggio dei francesi, adesso … Un Pascali potrebbe essere un Pop-Art, non è vero niente, niente! Ma loro scambiano tutto per Pop Art… Io vorrei, domani, fare un congresso internazionale e aggiornare trent’anni, quarant’anni di pittura e far vedere agli americani che loro non sono niente precursori, oggi come oggi, dell’arte europea, che loro dicono che l’Europa è finita.” Published in 1969, the interview was recorded in 1967. Carla Lonzi, *Autoritratto* (Milan: Electa, 2010), pp. 104-105.
gave Celant his first practical opportunities to work as an art critic and curator, and continued to provide the younger critic with guidance for many years even after he left Italy. Although very active in the contemporary field, Battisti was an Early Modern art historian. His discussion of Renaissance and Baroque art had an evident, yet unacknowledged, influence on the elaboration of Arte Povera.65 In his most influential book, *L’Antirinascimento*, Battisti went against the traditional idea of Renaissance art as characterized by balance, order, rationality, and geometry, in a way that anticipated many of the post-Minimalist terms and ideas used by Celant to define Arte Povera.66 Moving beyond a painting-centric vision of the Cinquecento, he emphasized the theatrical, the hybrid, and the ephemeral.67 Battisti explored, in his own words, “the popular roots of some of the most cultured and sophisticated aspects of the Renaissance: like luxury artisanship, ensigns, automata, and fountains.”68 In a chapter entitled “La magia degli elementi” (the magic of elements), Battisti discussed the Cinquecento artisan’s relationship with natural materials as “humble,” in terms that anticipate Celant’s *Art Povera* text.69 If the Renaissance heritage, its rationality, and civilizing mission had

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65 It is significant that Battisti is mentioned only once in the book by Laura Petican, *Arte Povera and the Baroque: Building an International Identity* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2011), and he is mentioned only as key to the process of internationalization of Arte Povera, not for the influence that his historical perspective on anticlassicism between the Renaissance and the Baroque era had on his extensive milieu and on Celant in particular. In this study, I focus on Battisti’s relationship with and influence on Celant, but a specific research project should be dedicated to the overall impact of Battisti’s work on his many collaborators who defined the Italian contemporary art debate in the 1960s and, within it, the definition of Arte Povera, including: Enrico Crispolti, Carla Lonzi, Marisa Volpi, Achille Bonito Oliva, Maurizio Calvesi, Daniela Palazzoli and many more.

66 Christopher Wood and Michael Cole have convincingly read the anticlassicism of Battisti as a reaction to Fascist classicism: “it is not Brunelleschi’s Florence that he was trying to demystify but the spurious geometries of Mussolini’s EUR.” Battisti focused on, as Christopher Wood notes, “automata, magic and talismanic images, wonders and portents, the Wunderkammer, astrology, alchemy, the topoi of the witch and the wild man.”Christopher Wood and Michael Cole, cit., pp. 651-652.


69 Eugenio Battisti, *L’Antirinascimento*, cit., p. 160. Original: “l’artigiano, alle prese con le nuove materie, che gli giungevano dai luoghi più impensati e per lui addirittura inimmaginabili, dal fondo del mare e del
dominated, in the past, the rhetoric of the Italian tradition in the United States, Battisti provided Celant with an alternative model (popular, anti-rational, counter-cultural), which proved important for his promotional strategy aimed at the American counter-cultural movement (more on this later).

Celant’s career as an art critic began under the aegis of Battisti. In 1963, as we saw, Battisti founded and then directed Marcatrè, one of the most influential magazines of contemporary art and culture in Italy, for which Celant wrote and served as a member of the editorial board. Another initiative of Battisti had a great impact on Celant was the foundation in 1963 of an independent study group at the Biblioteca dell’Istituto di Storia dell’Arte (the art history library) of the university of Genoa, with the goal of constructing a comprehensive archive of contemporary art. Battisti and his group set out to systematically collect photographs, catalogues, and newspaper clippings. Celant, who was part of the team, later acknowledged this experience as a key precedent for his self-appointed role as the “archive keeper” of Arte Povera. In 1963 Battisti also initiated the project for the Museo Sperimentale d’Arte Contemporanea in Genoa with help of the art

più alto dei ghiacciai, quelle stesse materie avevano non solo una meravigliosa organizzazione da rispettare, ed un ciclo di sviluppo o di degenerazione, ma un vero e proprio nucleo magico e significante. Il tardo rinascimento non solo sente il mondo come animato, ma ne vuol tradurre il vitalismo, in immagine.”
70 Celant remained faithful to his leadership until the magazine’s last issue in 1970. In a letter to Battisti dated October 1970, Celant referred to Battisti that he had distanced himself from the magazine when Battisti was no longer in charge (1969-1970) and now that Battisti was resuming control he was willing to collaborate with the magazine again: “my name was born with you and therefore with the old Marcatrè. Now it seems like we are going back to the old Marcatrè, or at least to the people who led it, namely you.” Celant to Battisti, November 1970, cor70L352.
71 The project involved Rosa Cecchetti, Celant, Elena Parma, Stefania Parodi, Giovanni Rosso, and Stella Maris Zumino as announced in Marcatrè, 1, November 1963, p.117. See also Lara Conte, cit., p. 222.
72 The book Art Povera was itself a form of archive. Celant also created the Information Documentation Archives, in Genoa in 1970, with the goal of establishing a permanent archive for Arte Povera, Conceptual Art and Land Art. The archives were based in Celant’s apartment and had a staff of four: Celant was the “curator,” Ida Gianneli “editor,” Franco Mello “visual coordinator,” and Giorgio Colombo “photographer and film operator.” Germano Celant, “Information documentation archives,” Nac, 5, May 1971, p. 5. See also Fabio Belloni, Impegno, ricerca azione. Militanza artistica in Italia (1968-1972), doctoral dissertation (Udine: Università di Udine, advisor Flavio Fergonzi, 2009), pp. 143-146.
historian Ezia Gavazza and of Celant. Structured around the active involvement of young artists, who made the creation of the collection possible through direct donations of works, the Museo Sperimentale was conceived by Battisti as “un’utopia realizzabile” (an achievable utopia), for it emerged from very little funding and bypassed galleries and collectors. The Museo Sperimentale fulfilled an important role as the only museum of contemporary art in northern Italy, and it also promoted the idea of a dynamic institution dedicated to education, promotion, and even production of current art. This was particularly refreshing in Italy, where museums were largely devoted to conservation. In his foreword to the museum’s first catalogue, Battisti identified his source of inspiration in the United States: “Based on my experience in America, I can say that the basis [for museums’ success] is the acknowledgement that the museum’s goal is education more than conservation; that its life reflects that of today’s society and that, therefore, its structure should become more dynamic than in the recent past.” Initially based in Genoa, the Museo Sperimentale was donated to the city of Turin in 1965, where it opened in 1967. Here, Celant gained his first curatorial experiences, and it is here that in 1970 he organized the landmark exhibition Conceptual Art, Arte Povera, Land Art, which was the most immediate development of the ideas expressed in the Art Povera book.

73 “Un’utopia realizzabile” was the title of Battisti’s foreword to the Museum’s catalogue, cit. pp. 9-15  
74 Eugenio Battisti, “Un’utopia realizzabile,” cit., p. 9. “Dopo l’esperienza Americana, potrei dire che alla base sta il riconoscimento che il compito del museo è educativo, più che conservative; che la sua vita riflette quella della società di oggi e che quindi la sua struttura deve farsi ancor più dinamica che nell’immediato passato.”  
76 In a letter dated January 16, 1967, Celant reported to Battisti: “ti scrivo per informarti che il Museo sperimentale di arte contemporanea di Torino si farà e penso sarà inaugurato ai primi di aprile. [Luigi] Mallè mi ha chiamato, su tua indicazione (GRAZIE!), per gli ulteriori inviti e per ordinargli la raccolta. Ho
Celant’s devotion for and debt to his master was so evident that, in a 1967 letter, he proudly informed Battisti that his colleagues had nicknamed him “il Battistino” (the little Battisti):

I am working hard to bother fogy culture as much as I can; if I am not wrong this is one of your innumerable teachings. What I like above all is that people call me ‘il Battistino,’ and not only because I gained weight, but also because I bustle about: obviously one hundredth of what you have done, but I hope the direction is the same.77

It is evident from the correspondence between Celant and Battisti that the younger critic saw his mentor as a rebellious, out-of-the-box scholar who fought against a conservative cultural establishment, which dominated Italian academia and museums (they called it “la cultura parruccona” – literally “wagged culture”) and against these
institutions’ stiff bureaucracy. On the contrary, Battisti depicted American museums and academia enthusiastically as much more open and permeable than the Italian ones. Despite Celant’s initial skepticism, Battisti convinced him that the only way for him to pursue a successful career and make his voice heard in Italy too was to leave for the United States. At first, in 1965, when Battisti moved to the United States, Celant jokingly called his mentor’s new home “the unknown world ‘USA’.” But by 1967, Celant had changed his mind: as he prepared the catalogue for the Museo Sperimentale in Turin together with Battisti, who was then based in the United States, Celant wrote to Battisti: “your ‘voice from America’ makes everything you say more macroscopic and true.”

A former student of Lionello Venturi, Battisti inherited the older art historian’s mission to promote cultural exchanges between Italy and the United States. In his letters to Celant, Battisti often stressed how similar exchanges would both fill an important cultural vacancy and offer great career opportunities. When he moved to the United States, Battisti systematically facilitated projects of collaboration between the two countries and focused special attention on the promotion of contemporary Italian art in America. In his projects, Battisti tried to involve his former students as much as possible, and Celant was at the top of the list.

Battisti involved Celant in a number of projects. The first one, in 1965, was a...

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78 Starting in the 19th century, the adjective “parruccone” became synonymous with old style and reactionary - an allusion to the ancien régime. See http://www.treccani.it (retrieved September 17, 2015).
81 As he tried to organize a show of contemporary Italian art at the Jewish Museum in New York, Battisti wrote to the museum’s director, Sam Hunter: “The Italian school was, actually, a creation of Lionello Venturi (who was my teacher at the University of Rome); and now has the support of young critics, but not perhaps, the full international support given by Lionello Venturi. This is one of the reason [sic] of the opportunity of a great exhibition in New York.” Battisti to Hunter, March 1967, Archivio Battisti, Rome, cor67L260.
show of drawings by Italian artists under forty lent by the Museo Sperimentale to be held at the Italian Cultural Institute of New York;\(^8\) he also tried, in vain, to produce and distribute an English edition of *Marcatré* in America.\(^3\) Then, as we saw, he asked Celant to help him organize the show, *Young Italians* at the Jewish Museum. In 1967, Battisti proposed to Celant an exhibit of Italian industrial design from the collection of the Musei Civici of Turin to be held at the same New York institution.\(^4\) The show was not realized but started a conversation between Italian authorities and American museums which would lead to the major show, *Italy: The New Domestic Landscape*, held at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1972, for which Celant contributed a catalogue essay.\(^5\)

On many occasions, Battisti stressed to Celant the advantages of American academia and encouraged him to come to America.\(^6\) Battisti even pushed Celant to get his “laurea”

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\(^3\) Battisti tried during his first period but, as he explained to the members of the editorial board of *Marcatré* Piero Gamacchio and Riccardo Tortora, the project failed: “l’interesse per il Marcatré qui è vivissimo, abbiamo scritto a molte fondazioni, per poter trovare qualche appoggio. … Tradurre la rivista in inglese, e stamparla in Italia, esportarla, è risultata … irrealizzabile; e bisognerebbe avere più relazioni di quante io ne ho per ora per fondare un nuovo Marcatré, qui.” Battisti to Gamacchio and Tortora, November 25, 1965, Archivio Battisti, Rome, cor65L404.


\(^5\) The project was in line with Celant’s current thesis project “on the relationship between art and industrial design in the years 1930-39 in Italy and especially in Milan,” which would lead him to the publication of his first book, a monograph on Marcello Nizzoli in 1968. Celant to Battisti, March 16, 1965. Archivio Battisti, Rome, cor65L109.

\(^6\) Battisti involved Celant in a project to establish a permanent American campus in Rome to facilitate exchanges between Italian and American academic worlds (with the help of his long-time friend Bruno Zevi they planned to establish the new campus at Palazzo Massimo.). He wrote to Celant, January 1967: “[Lavoro alla] creazione di un campus universitario delle più grosse università americane a Roma. Il 17-18 ci sarà presentazione della proposta al governo italiano, rappresentato dal direttore dell’Istituto Italiano di Cultura, di New York. Spero che la cosa si realizzi, bene; ed allora avremo una università internazionale, in Italia, ad un livello estremamente superiore di quello della media delle università americane. Tu dovrai venire qui, e vedere di persona. L’unico difetto della mia situazione è che non sono ancora introdotto nel
degree as soon as possible and move to America: “How is your English? … I want you to A) get your laurea B) speak English in order to conquer all of the girls C) be prepared to an adventurous academic career.”

Celant, on his part, turned to Battisti to help him bring American art to Italy and, especially, Italian art to America. Celant sought to do this through a variety of formats: a show of drawings by American artists to be exhibited in Turin; a book of Futurist artists’ writings to be published in the United States; a series of didactic films on Futurism and other avant-gardes to be distributed through American universities. Eventually, he concentrated his efforts on travelling to the United States himself. In the summer 1967, he wrote Battisti about a research project on the Dada movement in America that he would develop in New York: “What do you think? Do you think that a year and a half is enough?” He then asked for a recommendation letter to apply for a

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Harkness Foundation fellowship. “My hope is to come visit you next year. If I remember correctly, the universities that you suggested were Columbia and NYU, right?” And again: “If everything goes well, I’ll come to the US in October 1968.”

Battisti, however, warned Celant about some risks of going to New York during this phase of his career: “you would lose your place in the line [in Italy] and people will surpass you.” He suggested two options: (1) to stay a while longer in Italy and come to the United States as an established professional (“when you’ll have your laurea and a bunch of publications, it will be easy to return to the United States”); and (2) to do a PhD in America and choose a career in this country. Celant opted for Battisti’s first proposal: he renounced his planned trip of 1968, got his laurea, produced a lot in Italy (including the preparation of the book *Art Povera*), and finally came to the United States in December 1969 with the book hot off the press like Depero with his Bolted Book in 1928.

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94 Battisti to Celant, September 9, 1967, “Il tuo progetto di lavoro mi pare assai interessante. …. [unica osservazione:] Se lo prolunghi oltre un anno, rischi di perdere ogni contatto con il mondo italiano, e di sciupare la coda che hai fatto. Tutti ti passeranno avanti. Mi pare che lavorando sodo tu possa in un anno concludere. Quando tu sia laureato, ed abbia pubblicazioni, dovrebbe essere facile ritornare negli Stati Uniti … Altro discorso, invece, andrebbe fatto nel caso che tu voglia iniziare una carriera universitaria negli Stati Uniti, la quale ha, come tutte le cose del mondo vantaggi e svantaggi. Lo svantaggio è l’isolamento e la specializzazione; il vantaggio il fatto di incominciare con una tranquillità economica notevolissima. Io ti consiglierei, ad ogni modo, nel momento in cui tu incominci ad avere relazione con la Columbia, e con la New York University, di prendere contatto con qualche professore, e di chiedere a loro consigli sull’eventuale tua iscrizione ad un programma di philosophic degree, cioè di dottorato (che corrisponde circa alla nostra libera docenza, ed apre le porte alle università). In questo caso, veramente, ti verrebbe prolungare il soggiorno negli Stati Uniti.”

His tactic did not focus on either national (Italian) or international identity. Rather, he emphasized the rootlessness and nomadic nature of *Art Povera* through his slogan of “arte apolide” (stateless art). Celant used variously words such as “apolide” (stateless) or “nomadic” to distance himself and the art he promoted from the term “international,” which was over-used in the Economic Boom period, and implied interaction between nation-states and ultimately American imperialism. By the late 1960s, the generation of Celant perceived Fanfani’s Atlanticist foreign policy as a form of humiliating subservience to the American egemony. *Art Povera*, on the contrary, claimed to identify a phenomenon that went beyond the framework of nations or regions in a way that is similar to the more recent “rise of transnational history,” even as he conceived it as way to export Italian art into the seemingly impenetrable borders of the United States.

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96 On the English translation of the Italian word *apolide*: the English abstract of the article published in *Casabella* was entitled “For a non-national Biennale” and, I believe, missed part of the political tone of the Italian word “apolide,” which legally defines the status of a person with no nationality whatsoever. This gave Celant’s Italian version a stronger political connotation of “stateless” or even “displaced.” Another term used by Celant very often in the same period was nomadism or nomadic, which openly countered the overused rhetoric of Italian roots. Germano Celant, “Per una biennale apolide” (English abstract entitled “For a non-national Biennale”), *Casabella*, n. 328 (September 1968), pp. 52-55.

97 In 1967, Celant described what he supported as “experimental research,” which resisted what he called “a stylistic International:” “La ricerca sperimentale si sviluppa quindi non soltanto in senso contenutistico-emozionale, ma tenta principalmente il recupero, il ridimensionamento critico del linguaggio visual, che nell’uso banale operato dai mass-media è diventato un sistema ottuso e precluso ad ogni forma di acquisizione e conoscenza del reale, un’internazionale stilistica di valori privi di senso, uno strumento espressivo ormai capace solo di veicolare contenuti inattendibili e mistificati.” Germano Celant, “Situazione 67,” in *Museo Sperimentale d’Arte Contemporanea*, 1967, cit., p. 17.

98 Fanfani was foreign minister from 1966 to 1968, which corresponded to the rise of the protests against the war in Vietnam and to Celant activism. In that period, left-wing critics accused Fanfani of servilism toward the United States. In Turin, the Galleria d’Arte Moderna became a protest center against Fanfani’s Americanism. See “Da tutto il Paese montano la protesta e l’appello alla lotta per ottenere che l’Italia si dissoci dale responsabilità americane,” *L’Unità*, Friday, July 1, 1966, p. 2. See also Valerio Bosco, *L’amministrazione Nixon e l’Italia* (Rome: Eurolink, 2009), pp. 31-43.

99 The expression “transnational” has entered the historical vocabulary (and fashion) starting in the 1990s, and so Celant could have not used it in 1969. Therefore, its usage here is a historical projection and should be considered as such. Transnational, however, is the most effective term to discuss Celant’s operation for the sake of clarity. Akira Iriye, *Transnational History: The Past, Present and Future* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), pp. 1-18. The fact that he did not consider anything beyond
The fact that *Art Povera* was presented simultaneously in various countries and multiple languages gave the publication a transnational character. A remarkable achievement for a twenty-nine year old who had never published outside of Italy, Celant’s was a deliberate and well orchestrated effort to go beyond the unequal Italy-United States power relationship. It was not presented as an Italian book translated into English but as a cultural product that claimed no nationality of origins. The title, however, revealed the true nature of Celant’s maneuver. All of the editions kept in their titles the Italian word “povera,” which was underscored in the cover and first page of the American edition (fig. 14 – more on this later). A few years earlier it used to indicate just a group of Italians, this label was now extended to encompass a fully European and transatlantic phenomenon. Although “povera” arguably had Italian and subaltern connotations (especially in America), Celant turned this negative cliché on its head: key to the counter-cultural movement, poverty had acquired positively ethical connotations. Harold Rosenberg rose to the bait in his review of the book for the *New Yorker*. He wrote: “Art povera does not associate itself with the needy, but, like earthworks in America, it asserts its alienation from the art market and its opposition to ‘the present order in art.’ In addition poverty represents for it a kind of voluntary creative detachment from society.” And so the book extended the territory of the Arte Povera label to include thirty-six artists from various European countries and the United States.

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Western Europe and North America, strips away any postcolonial accceptation acquired by the term in the last twenty-five years.

100 The Amalfi event in 1968 was the first one involving non-Italian artists. But they were all European.

The United States had the highest number of artists in the book with sixteen, followed by Italy (fourteen), Holland (three), Germany (two), and Britain (two). They were not separated by country, as it was customary, but mixed together as in When Attitudes Become Form and Op Losse Schroeven. To the American public, Art Povera strategically suggested that what was done in Europe (and especially in Italy) was not only important per se, but was intertwined with and even necessary to understand what was happening at home.

Celant went beyond that. He listed artists only by name and current city of residence, with no indication of their nationality (or origins) beside the spelling of their names and, in some cases, the language of their captions. The book did not specify their place of birth, curriculum or biography either. Without external research, a reader could not determine whether the city where artists currently worked corresponded to their country of citizenship or origins. Not unlike On Kawara, who started the “I met” series

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102 See below for the full list of artists.
103 More typical was a publication such as the monumental and lavishly illustrated volume, New Art Around the World (New York: Harry Abrams, 1966). Here, the art of each country was discussed separately by art historians with the relative nationality. And so, Sam Hunter wrote on the United States, Alain Jouffroy on France, Nello Ponente and Maurizio Fagiolo on Italy, etc. In Carla Lonzi’s collection of interviews, Autoritratto the artist, Carla Accardi lamented that approach (probably referring to the Jewish Museum’s Recent Italian Painters and Sculptors): “you make a show of Italians in New York… but the show that one should be able to do in her life is not an Italian show in New York, but a show where you have someone from France, someone from England, an American one and there you have Carla Accardi … very unlikely, right?” Carla Lonzi, Autoritratto, cit., p. 90.
104 The list was: “Walter De Maria (New York), Michelangelo Pistoletto (Turin), Stephan Kaltenbach (New York), Richard Long (Bristol), Mario Merz (Turin), Douglas Huebler (Boston), Joseph Beuys (Düsseldorf), Eva Hesse (New York), Michael Heizer (New York), Ger Van Elk (Holland [sic]), Jannis Kounellis (Rome), Lawrence Weiner (New York), Luciano Fabro (Milan), Bruce Nauman (Southampton [sic]), (New York), Jan Dibbets (Amsterdam), Giovanni Anselmo (Turin), Robert Barry (New York), Pier Paolo Calzolari (Urbino), Dennis Oppenheim (Brooklyn, N.Y. [sic]), Barry Flanagan (London), Robert Smithson (New York), Giulio Paolini (Turin), Reiner Ruthenbeck (Düsseldorf), Alighiero Boetti (Turin), Keith Sonnier (New York), Giuseppe Penone (Garessio [sic]), Franz Erhard Walther (New York), Hans Haacke (New York), Gilberto Zorio (Turin), Robert Morris (New York), Marinus Boezem (Gorinchem, Holland [sic]), Karl [sic] Andre (New York), Emilio Prini (Genova), Richard Serra (New York), Germano Celant (Genova), Zoo [sic].”
105 The great majority of the artists lived in their country of citizenship. Some exceptions included Franz Erhard Walther and Hans Haacke, who were both German but were just described in the catalogue as active
in 1968 consisting of lists of names of the people he met in hotels and other international sites, *Art Povera* too suggested that “names were a kind of international language with an aesthetic quality of their own.”

The variety of languages mixed up in the works’ titles, in the captions, in some of the artists’ statements, and even in the title of the book could not be read by most of the readers and further contributed to the nomadic character of *Art Povera*. Acknowledging and embracing obstacles of communication was the very opposite of the post-war idea of abstract painting as an international lingua franca. This Babel-like aspect was made particularly evident by the art reproduced in *Art Povera*, which often incorporated the written word or was documented through the combined use of text and photography. And so Pistoletto’s handwritten texts in Italian stayed in Italian (fig. 15). Penone’s illustrations were accompanied by extended captions explaining his actions in Italian, and their English translation could be found at the end of the book. Franz Walther’s texts were kept in German and the relative English translation was not at the end but was incorporated in the book’s Table of Contents at the beginning of the volume. Emilio Prini’s text, in Italian, remained “untranslated in accordance with the wishes of the artist” (fig. 16).

Almost all of the works’ titles were kept in their original languages.

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106 On Kawara series allegedly originated from the artist’s difficulty to remember western names and started during an extended stay at a hotel in Mexico City frequented by a particularly diverse clientele. Excluded from *Art Povera*, On Kawara was part of Celant’s exhibition and catalogue, *Conceptual Art, Arte Povera, Land Art* of few months later, which was considered by Celant as the direct continuation of the *Art Povera* book. More on this later. As part of his reflection on internationalism, during the same period, On Kawara started using Esperanto. Jeffrey Weiss and Anne Wheeler, eds., *On Kawara* (New York: Guggenheim, 2015), pp. 75; 129.

107 Germano Celant, ed., *Art Povera*, cit., p. 211.
For the same reason, Celant carefully avoided to group artists by nationality. Although Celant claimed that *Art Povera* presented artists in random order, the book’s chaotic appearance was, arguably, another deliberate strategy used by the author to conceal his goal to promote Italian art. He wrote: “the book [had] no designated order, it grew organically as I received the materials or the artists’ contacts.”108 But the fact that the book never juxtaposed more than two artists from the same country seems a deliberate reaction to the traditional nation-based format. A special attention in this sense was devoted to the Italians: *Art Povera* never put two Italian artists in a row - a statistically improbable fact, considering that they were almost half of the artists in the book.109 In this case Celant’s emphasis on the nomadic quality of the movement dovetailed with his shrewdness in avoiding a perceivable redundancy of Italians, and indeed prevented accusations of chauvinism. He also substituted the cover illustration. The Italian edition reproduced an igloo of the Italian Mario Merz (fig. 17); the foreign editions illustrated American artist Walter De Maria’s *Mile Long Drawing* in the Mojave Desert, between California and Nevada (see fig. 14).110

Yet, the hybrid title, *Art Povera*, with its mixture of Italianate English and Italian, already revealed Celant’s strategy, between transnational rhetoric and a nationalist agenda: the English word “Art” was modified by the Italian word “Povera.” Furthermore, the adjective (Povera) came after the noun (Art) in an Italian fashion, which sounded

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109 The only exception was the Zoo of Pistoletto, which came after Celant. But the book did not specify the city of this, last artist. Furthermore, considering that Celant had collaborated with the Italians for many years and that he physically gathered the material for the book in Italy, he had likely collected their material generally before the non–Italian artists.
110 The image should looked particularly American to Celant: the artist’s body laid on the ground echoed the desertic landscape, in a way that was similar to the most famous scene of Sergio Leone’s 1968 movie *Once Upon a Time in the West*. Although Leone’s film was mostly shot in Spain, his desert landscapes and his characters represented an idea of America that was particularly dear to Celant and his generation (more on this later).
strange to the English-speaking readers (see below). The result was a label that recalled other movements of the 1960s such as Pop Art, Minimal Art, Op Art, etc., but also sounded like an Italian mockery of them. As an Italian critic who emerged in the 1960s, Celant was used to receive already-packaged artistic movements from America. Now he inverted this dynamic. Art Povera took a name, already applied to an Italian movement, and stuck it like a little Italian flag into an international phenomenon.

The strategy only partially succeeded. Some American reviewers wondered why an artistic sea change that had been already defined in various ways in English now needed one more name in Italian. As the Los Angeles Times critic put it: “current approach dubbed Concept Art, Earth Art, Process Art, Information Art [has been] most recently Italianized into Art Povera, the title of a heavily illustrated volume by Germano Celant.” Even more skeptical was John Moffitt in the Art Journal: “Before launching into a discussion about the metaphysical and worldly connotations of the povera (impoverished) phenomenon, it would be best to define this perhaps unfamiliar term. Arte Povera (the author-collector is Italian, although the selections are worldwide) is, in the

111 Film historian, Marcia Landy has given a similar interpretation to the Spaghetti Western phenomenon (between emulation and parody of an American genre), “‘Which Way Is America?’: Americanism and the Italian Western,” Boundary 2, Vol. 23, no. 1 (Spring 1996), pp. 35-59.

112 In a 1985 interview, Celant retrospectively recalled the origins of Arte Povera as follows: “We wanted to create an alternative to the modular and standardized way of working [of minimalism], romantically tied to order and technology; and to call the American media into question. Arte povera was therefore a legitimate defense of a historic culture run on the rocks – as European culture was. The only hope for salvation lay in rejecting puritanism and homogenization.” Germano Celant, “How to escape from the hallucinations of history,” in Celant, ed., Arte Povera / Art Povera (Milan: Electa, 1985), p. 25. The Italian version of the interview was more explicitly referring to American media power: “mettere in discussione gli strumenti del comunicare’ americani.” Idem, p. 16

113 William Wilson, “New Volumes Mirror a Feeling of Uneasiness,” Los Angeles Times, December 7, 1969, p. C74. The review discussed Celant’s book along with other newly relased volumes: Gillo Dorfles, Kitsch: The World of Bad Taste (Universe); John Russell and Suzi Gablik, Pop Art Redefined (Praeger); Edward Lucie-Smith, Late Modern: The Visual Arts Since 1945 (Praeger); Samella Lewis and Ruth Waddy, Black Artists on Art (Contemporary Crafts). The uneasiness announced in the title, referred to the reviewer’s feeling that all of these books were symptoms of a shift in the parameters with which art is evaluated: “a slow disappearance of the need for unpleasant good-bad distinctions as the culture becomes more sophisticated. If we ever are able to jettison the evils of dark-light distinctions, we will see art, from Raphael to Zap comics, as phenomena to be enjoyed as experience.”
general sense, ‘process’ or conceptual art.”¹¹⁴ And commenting on Celant’s confusing language he joked (note that he was reviewing the American edition): “Even my Dizionario Tascabile Mondadori Italiano-Inglese wasn’t of much help in working that out!” (emphasis is original).¹¹⁵ Nobody, however, accused Celant of nationalism as they had done with Afro in the fifties. Rosenberg, for one, had no problem with the title: “the term ‘art povera,’ which means impoverished art, seems a convenient designation.” Nor did he see this as a form of Italian chauvinism: “The international character of the de-aestheticizing movement is conveyed in a pictorial survey of earthworks, materials, and conceptual art assembled by Germano Celant, a young Italian art historian-critic.”¹¹⁶

The “stateless” approach of Art Povera was the first practical realization of a battle that Celant had previously advocated only in theory, in two articles on the 1968 Venice Biennale published in the Italian architecture magazine Casabella in August and September of that year: “Una Biennale grigio-verde” and “Per una Biennale apolide.” He accused the Venetian institution of being backward and reactionary, calling the Biennale “this 19th century ferry-boat making its way indifferently through the waters of the May revolution, the student rebellion.”¹¹⁷ Celant focused on the main themes of the contestation of the 1968 Biennale, such as political censorship, connivance with the art market, and bourgeois hegemony. In his second piece, he proposed his solution, “the

¹¹⁴ John Moffitt, “Germano Celant: Art Povera - Review,” Art Journal, 30, 1 (Autumn, 1970), p. 124. More rarely, the term, was also perceived as a useful aesthetic category to define, although retrospectively, the work of American artists, as in the case of an article of the Christian Science Monitor on Eva Hesse, entirely based on quotations and photographs from Celant’s book, which stated: “It is appropriate that Miss Hesse’s work should have been included. ‘Impoverished’ or ‘Poor Art’ implies the aesthetic premise of either the artist’s poverty or the impoverishment of traditional means and materials (in the artist’s view) or both.” Kenneth Baker, No Title, The Christian Science Monitor, June 29, 1970, p. 6.
¹¹⁶ Harold Rosenberg, “De-aesthetization,” cit., p. 64.
Statelessness was the answer. Celant explained how the nomadic nature of youth culture and the 1968 worldwide protests had made obsolete a Biennale based on national pavilions. In the contemporary art field, magazines and information, which circulated internationally at increasing speed, changed the way art could and should be mapped now. Accordingly, he declared, “current artistic experimentation militates against nationalism.” He, therefore, proposed a Biennale that was not based on “static” national pavilions, but rather on a “fluid” non-national dimension. He proposed a thematic or stylistic approach instead: “there is no place for nationality in the matter of information; at most, only the diversity of idiom should be considered; that is, the exploring of the message: primary structures, minimal art, funk, poor art, happening.” Celant, finally, compared the latter format positively to “fluid” contemporary art forms that the “Biennale apolide” should present: actions, events, and art made with deteriorating materials rather than “inert” objects.

When he wrote “Per una Biennale Apolide” (September 1968), Celant was organizing Arte Povera + Azioni Povere in Amalfi, the first attempt to turn Arte Povera into an international phenomenon. The non-Italian artists included in the Amalfi manifestation, however, consisted only of Europeans: the British Richard Long and the

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119 “[Magazines] show less nationalistic interest in the artist’s provenance than in the work itself … the autonomy of foreign contributions [at the Biennale] eliminates any possibility of an exact survey of the international experimentation. In fact, nationalism militates against a non-national analysis of results achieved in current experimentation.” Germano Celant, “Per una biennale apolide,” Casabella, n. 328 (September 1968), pp. 52-55. Although Celant did not quote Marshal McLuhan here, the American author was constantly mentioned by Celant in his writings starting in 1967. It is safe to say that he was likely an important point of reference for Celant’s idea of arte apolide. Celant retrospectively dedicated ample space to McLuhan in The Knot, cit., p. 27.
120 Germano Celant, “Per una biennale apolide,” cit., p. 52.
121 The word fluid was often used by Arte Povera artists. Most noticeably, by Zorio, who included this term in the title of some key works. His text for the Art Povera book opened with the words: “I like to talk of fluid and elastic things, things without lateral and formal perimeters.” Art Povera, cit., p. 185.
two Dutch Jan Dibbets and Gerald Van Elk, surrounded by no less than twenty-nine Italians. Furthermore, Celant was not responsible for their inclusion: it was rather the artist Piero Gilardi. In the Amalfi catalogue, Gilardi figured as one of the invited artists but he actually had an important role in the organization of the show and was responsible for the inclusion of the non-Italian artists. He had travelled through Europe and the United States during the previous years and had published regular “reports” on the American and European art scene in the Italian art magazine *Flash Art* between September 1967 and December 1968. He was, therefore, much more informed than Celant and more open to expanding the Arte Povera constituency.

Openly inspired by the Futurist leader Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, whom he quoted more and more often during this period, Celant proclaimed things first and tried to comply afterwards. And, like Marinetti, he decided to overcome the inefficiency and “passatismo” of Italian art institutions by launching “his” group of artists abroad. Indeed, in this period, Celant even reflected on the possibility of changing the name of his group from Arte Povera into “Neo futurismo italiano.” Different from Gliardi, Celant’s ultimate goal was not to expand the Arte Povera constituency to international artists. His real objective was to give international relevance to his group of Italian artists and the best way to do that was to make them relevant in the United States.

122 See Lara Conte, cit., p. 55.
124 In 1968, Celant was working on a book on Futurist manifestos (see below). In his “Biennale Grigioverde” article he quoted Marinetti by calling the institution “passatista” and by calling for an “immensificazione” of perception through art. Celant, “Una Biennale in Grigioverde,” cit., pp. 53, 55.
For Celant America was not just an instrument to amplify his voice (like Depero’s skyscrapers-turned-megaphone). His interest in American art grew visibly in the period after his “Biennale apolide” text (September 1968), as if his reflection on art and nationalism had led him to write on the country most often accused of cultural imperialism. But, in fact, he was studying and absorbing important aspects of the American model. The progression of the articles he regularly published in *Casabella* between 1968 and 1970 give us a measure of a shift. Through 1968, he published only articles on Italian art: “Young Italian Sculpture” (January 1968), Gianni Piacentino (March 1968), and Mario Ceroli (July 1968). After “Per una Biennale apolide” and the Amalfi show – that is, when he started to work on *Art Povera* - he wrote for the first time on American artists: Dan Flavin (January 1969), Walter De Maria (March 1969), and Bruce Nauman (February 1970). Celant alternated these with short essays such as “Imago 12” (April 1969), “La Biennale ‘Sempreverde’” (July 1969), “Arte Turistica” (November 1969), and “Inciso” (February 1970), which were bitterly disillusioned reflections on the role of the art critic and artistic institutions in Italy.\(^{126}\) Compared to the latter, his pieces on American artists read like alternative models or positive ways out. He read Flavin as belonging to a “post-ideological world;”\(^{127}\) he saw De Maria as one who “no longer believes in the artist who holds up a model of values to the spectator; he believes only in his personal experience.”\(^{128}\)

\(^{126}\) These texts tended to be very short and written with the tone of intimately personal notes, expressing the critic’s disgust or caustic scorn for his job’s tools and common practice: exhibitions, biennials, reviews, catalogue entries. For example, he described the job of the art critic as a cycle consisting of “ruminating and vomiting the same mash.” “Per una critica acritica,” *Sipario*, 287, March 1970, p. 19. The monographic articles were more traditional in format and more positive in tone. Beside the Americans, quoted above they included Italian industrial designers (not artists!), Marcello Nizzoli (August/September 1969) and Enzo Mari (January 1970).

\(^{127}\) Germano Celant, “Dan Flavin,” *Casabella*, January 1969, p. 54;

In the January-June 1969 edition of the magazine *La Biennale di Venezia*, Celant published a preview of what, a few months later, would be his text for the *Art Povera* book. In the version for *La Biennale di Venezia* Celant used a rather bombastic title for it: “Il senso della vita (Europa + America).” Although Celant would drop this title in the *Art Povera* book (where he inserted his text without title), in retrospect, it gives us an interesting interpretive key to the content of this now-famous passage. Through a language mostly driven from phenomenology, Celant’s piece celebrated the role of art as a tool to enhance all of the sensory experiences beyond art. He proclaimed: “It’s time to re-begin to experience the sense of life and of nature … the sensory, sensational, sensitive, impressionable and sensuous.” The article (and its title) played with the ambiguity of the Italian word “senso,” which could be interpreted existentially as “the meaning of life” but also erotically as “the sensuous experience of life” – an indirect homage to Susan Sontag’s rallying call, “In place of a hermeneutics we need an erotics of art.” Given that Celant’s text did not talk about the differences or the communalities between European and American art at all, so the title functioned as an affirmative declaration: not only did the two continents share this new form of art, but actually the “plus” suggested that the symbiosis of Europe and America was a prerequisite for the new form of art. (The mathematical symbol, already used in *Arte Povera + Azioni Povere*, was, again, a sign of identification with or homage to Marinetti). When we consider that only six out of thirty-six of the artists in the *Art Povera* book were from

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130 The fact that Celant dropped this title in the book was, most likely, a strategic choice to keep it more open (or more ambiguous). But, in retrospect, this early publication documents some of the ideas behind the origins of Celant’s now-famous text for *Art Povera*.

131 “È arrivato il momento di riiniziare ad esperire il senso della vita e della natura […] il sensorio, il sensazionale, il sensitivo, il sensibile, il sentimentale, il sensuoso.” The passage was then reproduced almost exactly in the *Art Povera* book.
countries outside of Italy and the United States, we can safely deduce that when Celant wrote “Europe + America” he was actually emphasizing the primacy of those two countries with the benefit of association for Italy. Trini forwarded a similar idea of a geopolitical cultural avant-garde in his catalogue essay in *When Attitudes Become Forms: “From Turin to New York, and from Rome to San Francisco, European and American artists have gradually discovered just how much they have in common. This unsuspected discovery of basically similar aesthetic experiences suggests the existence of a particular ‘aesthetic condition’ that is growing.”*132

In his *Art Povera* strategy Celant also formulated his theoretical framework inspired by American sources.133 Celant acknowledged American authors Seth Siegelaub and Susan Sontag as the sources for his idea of a “critica acritica” in a 1970 article of that title, which informed the approach and format of the book (more on this later).134 The

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134 Germano Celant indicated them in a methodological article: “Per una critica acritica” (Towards an acritical criticism). He published the article with small variations in no less than three Italian magazines: *Casabella*, n. 343, December 1969, pp. 42-44; *Sipario*, n. 287, March 1970, pp. 19-20; *Nac*, n. 1, September 1970, pp. 29-30. The other authors listed in that article were also Americans: Harold Rosenberg, Lucy Lippard, and Gregory Battcock. Two more names mentioned by Celant were the British art critic, Lawrence Alloway, who had been living in New York since 1961, and the Italian Carla Lonzi. She had written her book *Autoritratto* (the one named by Celant) in the US during a residence in Minneapolis from August 1967 and May 1968 with her companion, the artist Pietro Consagra. On the origins of the “critica acritica” method and Celant’s debt to Siegelaub and Sontag, see Fabio Belloni, dissertation, cit.
only names actually cited in Celant’s essay in the 1969 book were those of two well-established Americans: the philosopher John Dewey and the composer John Cage.\footnote{Germano Celant, \textit{Art Povera}, cit., pp. 225 and 227. This choice proved right if an American reviewer who declared the book and Celant’s style as difficult to make sense of, later found the name of Cage helpful: “A good source – one of many, but nevertheless, easily specified – is to be seen in John Cage’s ethic of indeterminance.” And to Cage and his theories, he dedicated the final one-third of the review. John Moffitt, “Germano Celant,” cit., pp. 124, 126.}

The format of \textit{Art Povera}, was directly inspired by Seth Siegelaub’s publications. A New York critic, art dealer, and curator, he introduced innovative ways to promote contemporary artists. Celant especially acknowledged Siegelaub’s \textit{Xerox Book} for having eliminated the interpretive role of the critic. “He offered [artists] Lewitt, Weiner, Barry, Huebler, Morris, Andre, and Kosuth a new operative space, the printed or reproduced page,” Celant marveled. “He invited them to produce something for [the page] and made a book out of it … a book directly made by the artists, with no mediation whatsoever, either critical or typographic.”\footnote{Celant, “Per una critica acritica,” cit., p. 44. “Siegelaub ha offerto a Lewitt, Weiner, Barry, Huebler, Morris, Andre e Kosuth, un nuovo spazio operativo, la pagina stampata o riprodotta. Li ha invitati a produrre qualcosa per essa e ne ha fatto un libro … un libro fatto direttamente dagli artisti, senza nessuna mediazione critica o tipografica.”} Celant pursued the same goal in \textit{Art Povera}, explaining: “the book consists of documents and works of art made specifically for the printed page. The author [Celant] therefore asks each artist to produce directly the six pages that belong to him [the artist], as a work or as a document.”\footnote{Germano Celant, \textit{Precronistoria}, cit., p. 152.} As an exercise in purported transparency, \textit{Art Povera} proposed to document Celant’s own work of gathering artists’ materials as much as the artists’ work. Documentation was the declared goal and participation the method: “By gathering the book, I’ve simply lived together [with the artists] the moments that I document, through letters, direct contacts, exchanges of ideas, discussions, critiques.”\footnote{Germano Celant, \textit{Precronistoria}, cit., p. 152.}
If Siegelaub’s work was the acknowledged model for Celant’s format, another major theoretical influence was that of Susan Sontag. Celant’s manifesto on the role and method of the contemporary critic, “Per una critica acritica” opened with a long citation from Sontag’s “Against Interpretation,” which had been translated into Italian in 1967.139

“Per una critica acritica” was the most important of a series of texts which the Italian critic elaborated alongside his *Art Povera* publication, and wherein he rejected his earlier approach to art criticism.140 Inspired by Sontag, he declared in contradictory fashion: “art criticism … should renounce its function as ‘judgmental’ action, it must produce values, elements of discussion, it has to become a work of strategy.”141 Not only did Sontag provide him with a straightforward condemnation of the type of criticism that he wanted to distance himself from (on various occasions Celant appropriated other expressions from her famous article, such as “encrustations of interpretations,” “leave the work of art alone”142), she also helped him to define his alternative method of “acritical criticism.” Transparency, participation, and documentation were the main goals, and they

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139 Celant’s quote was taken from: Susan Sontag, *Contro l’interpretazione* (Milan: Mondadori, 1967). Original edition: *Against Interpretation and other essays* (New York: Farrar Straus and Giroux, 1966). The version of Celant’s article “Per una critica acritica” published in *Nac*, ended with a list of authors acknowledged by Celant as his sources. They included: Harold Rosenberg, Lawrence Alloway, Lucy Lippard, Seth Siegelaub, Gregory Battcock, and Susan Sontag. While all of the other authors except Sontag were active as art critics, had worked with many of the artists included in *Art Povera*, had collaborated with Celant in that or other projects, or had reviewed the book (see below), Sontag can be identified as the main source of inspiration for the idea and method of critica acritica. Celant’s *Nac* article opened with a long quotation from her: “La nostra è una delle epoche in cui l’idea dell’interpretazione è generalmente reazionaria e soffocante. Come le esalazioni dell’automobile e dell’industria pesante inquinano l’atmosfera, così le emanazioni delle interpretazioni artistiche avvelenano oggi le nostre sensibilità. In una cultura dove il problema ormai endemico è l’ipertrofia dell’intelletto a scapito dell’energia e dalla capacità sessuale, l’interpretazione è la vendetta dell’intelletto sull’arte. È anche qualcosa di più è la vendetta dell’intelletto sul mondo. Interpretare è impoverire, svuotare il mondo, per instaurare un mondo spettrale di ‘significati.’ È trasformare in mondo in questo mondo (‘Questo mondo’. Come se ce ne fossero altri). Questo mondo, il nostro mondo, è già fin troppo svuotato ed impoverito, basta con i duplicati, fin quando non torneremo a fare un’esperienza più immediata di ciò che abbiamo,” see Fabio Belloni, dissertation, cit., p. 100-118.

140 See in particular, Germano Celant, “Ad Amalfi ho intuito che,” *Arte Povera + Azioni Povere*, cit., p. 53.


could be achieved by giving sensual experience preeminence over analytic and expositionary commentary. As Sontag expressed in classic counter-cultural terms in the famous conclusion of her essay:

… 9. Transparence is the highest, most liberating value in art – and in criticism – today … The aim of all commentary on art now should be to make works of art - and, by analogy, our own experience - more, rather than less, real to us. The function of criticism should be to show how it is what it is, even that it is what it is, rather than to show what it means.
10. In place of a hermeneutics we need an erotics of art.143

The first instance where Celant applied the “critica acritica” method, Art Povera featured key aspects of Sontag’s decalogue, or so he claimed.144 No interpretive criterion - chronological, alphabetical, national - regulates the artists’ order. Celant claimed experience as a criterion and transparency – meaning the non-interjection of the authorial voice - as a method. Rather than judging their work from a position of authority, Celant equaled himself and his method to the artists and their creative project. He placed his own text in the penultimate section of the book rejecting the traditional introduction. His essay fits the same six-page space accorded to each of the participants so that he appears as an equal among others. Even his selection of artists was an act of participation; Celant explained that the choice was mostly based on human encounters with and “sympathy”

143 Susan Sontag, Against Interpretation, p. 14. Later in her book, Sontag uses the world transparency to describe and praise three Italian authors: Michelangelo Antonioni, Cesare Pavese, and Tommaso Landolfi, who were part of what she called an “anti-rhetorical tradition.” They (at least the former two) had significant influence on Celant. Sontag’s book also included an essay entitled “The Anthropologist as Hero” dedicated to the Structural Anthropology of Claude Levi-Strauss, which provided Celant with another valuable piece of advice. If Celant’s “guerrilla” rhetoric had lost credibility, the anthropological approach, described by Sontag as “one of the few interesting and possible intellectual positions,” became a major alternative model for Art Povera. Noticeably apolitical, compared to his earlier writings, Celant’s text for the 1969 book focused on “primitivism” and accepted an “ahistorical” condition that is very close to Sontag’s presentation of Levi-Strauss. Susan Sontag, Against Interpretation, cit., pp. 69-81. On the importance of Levi-Strauss and structuralist anthropology for Arte Povera, see Emily Braun, “Mario Merz: Ethnographer of the Everyday,” The Magnolia Table (New York: Spereone Westwater, 2007).
144 Although Sontag is not quoted directly in Art Povera, Celant’s initial manifesto-like statement “Stating that” used the same expressions and discussed the same ideas, which Celant attributed to Sontag in his “Per una critica acritica.”
for the artists personally. Documentation or transparency was the main goal of the book, in line with Sontag’s idea of showing “how it is what it is.” And so the volume mostly consists of full-page reproductions of black and white photographs and short texts, all provided by the artists and unmediated by the critic.

Not an exhibition catalogue or a monograph, *Art Povera* distanced itself from its immediate predecessors in art publishing and artists/critics collaborations. Celant’s only two books published before *Art Povera* followed very different, traditional formats. The first one was the 1967 catalogue of the Museo Sperimentale d’Arte Contemporanea of Turin (fig. 18). Edited by Celant under the supervision of Battisti, this was a typical catalogue with explanatory texts followed by the reproductions of the works. These were organized alphabetically by artist’s name and juxtaposed to the biographical information on each author. The second book was a monograph on the designer Marcello Nizzoli published in 1968 (fig. 19). Organized chronologically and framed art historically, this

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145 “The choice of human contacts and the selection of photographs has been my only critical choice and my only intervention.” As he planned a second volume out of the same collection of material (gathered documents exceeded what could be published in *Art Povera*), he declared that the title for that book would be “In sympathy with” (In simpatia con): “I would like to give it this title because I intend to document my choices in sympathy with the artist, in short emotive and personal choices, not language-based or critical ones.” Germano Celant, “Critica Acrítica,” cit., discussed in Fabio Belloni, Dissertation, cit., p. 108. The ideal continuation of *Art Povera* was, in fact, the 1970 exhibition *Conceptual Art Arte Povera Land Art*. Here Celant did not use “In simpatia con” as a title, but he opened his entry with the dedication: “in simpatia con Heizer, Anselmo, Kosuth e Prini.” Germano Celant, “Sommario,” in *Conceptual Art Arte Povera Land Art* (Turin: Galleria Civica d’Arte Moderna, 1970), np.

146 When he sent the book to Battisti, Celant explained to his former mentor, in letter dated October 1970: “my idea is to create systematically archives of documents, I am not interested in the critic’s word, but the document, history is made mostly with the documents, then with words, that’s why my current work is based on the systematic publication, in just few fields, of documents on contemporary and modern art.” cor70L352 Archivio Battisti, Rome. More on this below.

147 In a letter to Battisti he referred to these two publications as “my only two books.” Evidently he did not attribute the same status to other catalogue essays or articles published until then.

148 Eugenio Battisti, ed., *Museo Sperimentale*, cit. Although the official editor of the book was Battisti, in honor of the person who had conceived and begun the Museo Sperimentale project, it was actually put together by Celant, as documented by the correspondence between Battisti, Celant, and Aldo Passoni, Archivio Eugenio Battisti, Rome. In a letter to Battisti Celant described his activity as a factotum of the museum: “bisogna sballarsi le casse, misurarsi i quadri, battere a macchina le lettere, fare telegrammi, insomma a parte le spese coperte, tutto identico al 1964, con la soddisfazione di farlo. Non capita molte volte di fare un museo!” Celant to Battisti, March 1967, Archivio Battisti, Rome, cor67L259.
too was an orderly and academically rigorous study. Both publications focused exclusively on Italian artists, which were discussed in terms of Italian specificity and continuity.

Why did Celant suddenly focus so much on America? The reason behind this shift can be explained as part of a larger, collective phenomenon as well as in relation to Celant’s own career ambitions. Celant’s engagement with the United States would seem to contradict both his renowned anti-Americanism and that of the movement Arte Povera itself. Political critiques marked defining moments in Arte Povera’s history: a key work that influenced the genesis of the movement was Pistoletto’s “Vietnam” (1965), representing a demonstration against the American war in Vietnam. One of the most iconic Arte Povera manifestations was Mario Merz’s “Igloo di Giap,” (1968). This consisted of a metallic structure holding a neon text which quoted an anti-American strategy of the Vietnam People’s Army’s General, Vo Nguyen Giap. Celant used this work to illustrate the cover of the Italian edition of the book Arte Povera (see fig. 17). Most famously, the first theoretical manifesto of Arte Povera was Celant’s oft-quoted piece “Appunti per una gueriglia” (1967), which compared Arte Povera to Vietnamese guerrilla warfare. Here, Celant framed Arte Povera as a reaction against consumerism and technocracy, seen as forms of American imperialism, and to Op Art, Pop Art, and

150 Anti-American passages punctuated, for one, Carla Lonzi’s interviews to Pascali and Kounellis, gathered in her book, Autoritratto. Pascali distanced himself from American culture: “the Americans are very individualists and don’t even look at each other’s face.” (p. 93). Kounellis praised Vietnamese resistance against America: “[the Vietnamese] demonstrated that, the country is so poor, but has its own idea of life and defends it… well, it will be they who will influence the Americans very soon, and this is a great lesson.” A lesser-known example was Tommaso Trini’s “Superwestern Express,” a violently anti-American and pro-Palestinian political pamphlet, written after the Six Day War. “Gli hanno roto il muso a quei figli di Allah, gli hanno rapato a zero la forza aerea e cosparso il culo di harissa al napalm, seminato il deserto di tanks e thank-you per le minacce, a quei bastardi ex-colonizzatori, così imparano a strillare: adesso li facciamo fuori.” The piece was included in the draft of the third issue of Pianeta Fresco, a magazine edited by Fernanda Pivano. The issue was not published, and Trini’s text was retrieved at the Fondazione Fernanda Pivano, Milan, by Fabio Belloni, cit., p. 28.
Minimalism, seen as a parallel form of cultural imperialism:

In a world dominated by inventions and technological imitations, one has but two alternatives: the first involves the assimilation … of the system or its codified and artificial languages in a convenient dialogue with the existing social or individual structures … the placement of one’s work in the abstract microcosm (Op), in the socio-cultural macrocosm (Pop), or in the formalist macrocosm (primary structures). The second alternative is the opposite of the first: the free self-projection of human activity.151

Art historians have contextualized the emergence of Arte Povera within what Robert Lumley called a “new wave of anti-Americanism” in Italy during the 1960s.152 As Nicholas Cullinan has explained: “the language of turf warfare and contested ground referred to by General Giap, quoted by Merz, appropriated by Celant, and claimed by the students of ’68 marked an alignment where guerrilla war served as an analog for cultural rivalry, peasant resistance as a model for Arte Povera renunciation of consumerism, and Vietnam as a metaphor for University protests.”153

The Art Povera book too included typical anti-American tropes in the form of anti-Pop Art and anti-consumerism statements.154 Unlike his 1967 article, however, now Celant did not propose to counter the process of Americanization head on through nation-based form of guerrilla warfare, which saw the colonized Italians fighting against the American colonizers. Now he adopted “the assimilation of the system” as his strategy. He presented an Americanized, consumeristic society as a shared condition of Western Europe and the United States. If the fusion “Europe + America” was an incontrovertible fact, the only viable response was a common European and transatlantic counter-culture,

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154 This aspect is especially emphasized by Claire Gilman, dissertation, cit., pp. 2-3.
as the book *Art Povera* expressed by mixing the artists’ languages and nationalities into an inextricable blend.\(^{155}\) Originally conceived by Celant within the logic of the Italian post-Informale moment and theorized as a specifically Italian reaction to American imperialism *in Italy*, the Arte Povera narrative was now adjusted in the book-manifesto *Art Povera* to make it internationally relevant:\(^{156}\) now Celant strategically promoted the specifically Italian reaction to Americanization as a viable model for an international movement of counter-culture. Hence Celant invested the most effort to succeed in America.

The preparation of *Art Povera* to launch in the United States coincided with a new form of Americanism in Italy at the turn of the 1960s. Or, more precisely, it coincided with a reconfiguration of the Americanism / anti-Americanism divide. Unlike in previous years, America was not embraced or contested as a monolithic whole. The left-wing intellectuals of Celant’s generation criticized the United States’ foreign politics and despised American capitalism, but admired American counter-culture and political activism.\(^{157}\) The distinction between these two Americas became more and more clear

\(^{155}\) Dan Cameron has argued that Celant’s operation to launch Arte Povera had two phases: the first one, framed it as an Italian phenomenon, the second one, as an international one, in close dialogue with the United States. Dan Cameron, “Anxiety of Influence: regionalism, Arte Povera and the Cold War,” *Flash Art* (International Edition), 164 (May-June 1992), pp. 75-81. Claire Gilman has contested Cameron in that, she believes, Celant’s goal was to celebrate Arte Povera as an international movement from the very beginning. Claire Gilman, cit., p. 7. Like Gilman, I believe that Celant’s initial idea of Arte Povera already reacted to American art, but, as I argue in this chapter, he originally reacted to the American influence in Italy and only after 1968 did he formulate Arte Povera as an internationally exportable model.

\(^{156}\) In 1967, Celant defended his “laurea” thesis on Italian art after Informale at the university of Genova. I was not granted permission by the author to access the manuscript. Celant’s longest and most complex text written in the 1960s is the little-known 1967 essay for the catalogue of the Museo Sperimentale in Turin, “Situazione 67.” Here, he traced the recent developments of Italian art starting with Informale and discussed most of the Arte Povera artists (but without using the term, which he introduced just a few months later) framing them exclusively within a national narrative. This was in part due to the nature of the collection he was presenting (which was also significant for Celant had an important part in conceiving and putting together the collection).

\(^{157}\) Californian scholar, Theodore Roszak, enjoyed a great success in Italy. He was the author of the influential book, *The Making of a Counter-Culture: Reflections on the Technocratic Society and Its Youthful Opposition* (Garden City NY: Doubleday & Co., 1969), which would be published in Italy only in
during the second half of the 1960s, as non-parliamentary leftists in Italy increasingly emphasized a condition of communality shared with American counter-cultural movements. Or, to put it in Trini’s words, they “discovered how much they [had] in common.”

As early as 1966, the Italian journalist Oriana Fallaci noticed this shift with skepticism. In an interview, she asked Italian writer and film maker Pier Paolo Pasolini, who was visiting New York (fig. 20), to explain the changing relationship of Italian communists with the United States: “They [the communists] get here full of hostility, preconceptions, and even scorn, and immediately they are struck by the Revelation, the Grace. Everything is fine, they like everything: they leave in love, with tears in their eyes,” she stated. A Marxist and an harsh critic of American consumerism, Pasolini was an atypical of the Italian Communist party and the extra-parliamentary Left, but he expressed a widely shared feeling when he replied: “the true revolutionary movement in the whole Earth is not in China, not in Russia: it’s in America. You know? You go to Moscow, to Prague, to Budapest, and you realize that the revolution has failed … You go to France, to Italy and you realize that the European communist is an empty man. You come to America and discover the most beautiful left that a Marxist could find today.” He went on to declare that he had just decided to set his projected film on the life of Saint

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158 Tommaso Trini, in When Attitudes Become Form, cit., np.
160 Pasolini’s intermittent affiliation to the Italian Communist Party (PCI) and with the extreme left extra-parliamentary group Lotta Continua did not stop him from taking controversial positions openly against the orthodoxy of these groups.
Paul in America: “I want to transfer the whole action from [ancient] Rome to New York and set in our time, without changing anything.”

Even more than Pasolini, the semiologist Umberto Eco articulated this double sense of fascination and rejection for different aspects of American culture. In his groundbreaking book, *Apocalittici e Integrati* (1965) he studied American popular culture (especially comics and music) and its counter-cultural function in American society. Eco emphasized how American popular culture often had a strong social and political value, which was lost when imported to Italy. For example, he compared Pete Seeger’s song *If I Had a Hammer* to Rita Pavone’s adaptation, *Dammi un Martello*. The original message was political, for Seeger referred to the judge’s hammer, which he wanted “to slam hard” to indict what was wrong with society. “Because of his songs,” Eco explained, “he was condemned by the House of Un-American Activities Committee.” The Italian singer transformed this song of political protest into a “superficial” and “consolatory” message by turning the hammer into a weapon against “quella smorfiosa” who attracts every boy’s attention at a party. Nevertheless Eco attacked American mainstream mass-media culture as oppressive and addictive. Two years later, Eco expanded this argument in an influential 1967 lecture: “Towards a Semiological Guerrilla Warfare.” Here, Eco appropriated the language of Vietnam anti-American warfare to

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164 “Rita Pavone invece chiede un Martello per darlo in testa a ‘quella smorfiosa’ che si accaparra l’attenzione di tutti i ragazzi della festa … ecco come un messaggio, già dotato di significato proprio, viene assunto usandone la configurazione superficiale e caricandola di un messaggio … appiattito in una significazione nuova, con funzione consolatoria.” Umberto Eco, *Apocalittici*, cit., p. 295.
to theorize a “cultural guerrilla” against American “official culture.”

A regular contributor to *Marcatré*, Eco’s ideas had an immediate impact on Celant.

Eco later explained the shift of attitude toward America during the 1960s, by telling the story of a fictional “Roberto.” He represented a typical Italian intellectual of his own generation, born in the 1930s (the assonance with Umberto was not random). According to Eco, what the United States represented to him during the immediate post-war period changed during the 1960s. And that change was even more radical for the subsequent, “third generation” of those who came of age after the war (for example Celant, who was born in 1940, and his cohorts):

Roberto inhabited the extra-party territory of the cultural activities, the publishing houses, the cinemateques, the newspapers, concerts, and therefore was culturally very influential. He was born between 1926 and 1931 [Eco was born in 1932]. Educated under fascism, his first act of rebellion (obviously not a conscious one) was the reading of comics translated (badly) from American. Flash Gordon against Ming was for him the first image of the fight against tyranny. … After the war he was a member of or affiliated to a left-wing party. He respected Stalin, was against the American invasion of Korea, protested against the execution of the Rosenbergs. He left his party after the Hungarian facts … He rediscovered and promoted the New Deal epic, he loved Sacco, Vanzetti, and Ben Shan; even before the Sixties (when they became famous in America) he knew the folk songs and the protest dances of the American anarchic tradition, and, at night he listened with his friends to Pete Seeger, Woody Guthrie, Alan Lomax, Tom Joad, and the Kingston Trio. He had been initiated to the myth of [Elio Vittorini’s] *Americana* but now his bedside book was *On Native Grounds* by Alfred Kazin. That’s why, when the third generation, that of ’68, launched its challenge, often against men like Roberto, America was already a way of living, even though none of those kids had read *Americana*. And I am not talking about blue jeans or of chewing gum, namely of the America which was dominating Europe as a model of consumerist culture: I am still talking of that myth matured during the Forties, which still functioned somehow in the background. Yes, for those young people, America, intended as Power, was the enemy, the gendarme of the world, the adversary to be defeated in Vietnam as well as in Latin America. But the fronts for that generation were four: the enemies were the capitalist America, the Soviet Union which had betrayed Lenin, the Communist Party which had betrayed the revolution, and, finally, the [Italian] Christian Democratic Establishment. But if America was the enemy as a government and as a model of capitalistic society, there was an attitude of

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rediscovery and of revival toward America as a people, as a melting pot of rebelling races. … Old versus young people, white and black, new immigrants and already stabilized ethnic groups, silent majority and vociferous minorities. They did not distinguish substantially between Kennedy and Nixon, but they identified themselves with the Berkley campus, with Angela Davis, with Joan Baez and Bob Dylan.\footnote{166}

The cultural shift captured by Eco corresponded to broader political transformations. After the idyll of the “Miracolo Economico,” the transatlantic relationship between Western Europe and the United States descended into crisis.\footnote{167} As inflation rose and economic growth stalled across the Atlantic, American political and military hegemony faced a serious challenge with a consequent wave of anti-Americanism.\footnote{168} Anti-American sentiments were hardly new in Europe. What was new, however, was that now the American model was questioned in similar ways in the United States as well as in the NATO aligned countries. Similar forms of cultural and political radicalism in Western Europe and in the United States were, in part, the independent result of parallel development of wealth, consumerist lifestyle, mass education, and youth culture. But by the end of the sixties they were commonly seen as part of the same international phenomenon.\footnote{169}

If the war in Vietnam and the news of the bombings of Vietnamese villages with napalm put an end to the good will and fortune of Atlanticism which had culminated in Italy during the economic boom, the Italian youth movements now identified the “true” and good America with student protest, counterculture, and

\footnote{166 Umberto Eco, “Il Modello Americano,” cit., pp. 14-18.}
\footnote{167 Here I follow the periodization proposed by Paul Ginsborg, \textit{A History of Contemporary Italy: Society and Politics 1943-1988} (Penguin: London, 1990).}
\footnote{168 Mary Nolan, \textit{The Transatlantic Century}, cit., p. 267}
\footnote{169 Some historians have maintained that, in fact, American civil rights movement’s acts of non-violent protest and civil disobedience (1955-1968), the Mississippi Freedom Summer of 1964, the Berkeley Free Speech Movement (1964-65), and the American antiwar movement (1964-1971) predated and had a leading role over the European Sixty-eight. Mary Nolan, \textit{The Transatlantic Century}, cit., 273}
Black Power.\textsuperscript{170}

Until the mid-1960s, every cultural manifestation coming from the United States tended to be perceived in Italy as the official representation of America or even as an extension of the American government. (And, vice-versa, every form of promotion of Italian art in the United States was seen as a form of cultural diplomacy, as seen in Chapter 3). This was the case in 1957, when the Rome-New York Foundation in Rome opened with a show including American Abstract Expressionist painters: an Italian critic described it as “the landing of marines on the banks of the Tiber.”\textsuperscript{171} This attitude culminated with the Venice Biennale of 1964, when part of the Italian press discussed the victory of Robert Rauschenberg as an act of American imperialism, often using military terms to describe it. Even a critic like Maurizio Calvesi, who supported Pop Art, saw that victory as a form of nationalistic aggression: “it’s worrying … the uncovered nationalism with which the United States have conducted their cultural offensive.”\textsuperscript{172} Enrico Crispolti too liked the show but contested the operation and went so far to compare the American intervention at the Biennale to that in Vietnam, against which he wished for a similar form of resistance.\textsuperscript{173}

Between 1967 and 1969 things changed. The categories were no longer United


\textsuperscript{172}Maurizio Calvesi, “Proposte e Polemiche,” \textit{D’Ars Agency}, June 20 – October 20, 1964, p. 29. Quoted by Daniela Lancioni, “Tutti i nodi vengono al pettine,” cit., p. 67.

States versus Europe (or Italy) or Western versus Eastern block. They were, rather, young versus old and official culture versus counter-culture, namely categories that went beyond national and geographical boundaries. The metropolis and its skyscrapers as the quintessential symbol of America now gave way to the desert, a regenerative myth absorbed in Italy through American beat writers and now associated with the counter-culture. In this context American counter-culture and protest movements become sources of inspiration for their vitality and strategies for Italian intellectuals and political activists. As American protests and counter-culture grew in the Italians’ perception of the United States, American art too was now read in Italy as a form of cultural critique from within. Even American Pop Art, which was previously seen negatively as the expression and celebration of American consumerism, now became “pop contestation” from the inside. And the art magazine *Metro* dedicated a thirty-page long special issue to an inquiry, “La sfida al sistema,” where American artists Allan Kaprow, Donald Judd, Sol Lewitt, Robert Smithson, Dan Graham, Billy Kluver and Experiments in Art and Technology (E.A.T.) answered questions on their political engagement: “Can the present language of artistic research in the United States be said to contest the system? In which way and to what extent?”

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174 Before the late sixties, many Italian artists, from Fortunato Depero to Fontana, depicted skyscrapers as the symbol of America. Depero represented them in a number of works and mediums (see Introduction). Fontana evoked New York in a 1961 series of *Concetti Spaziali* made with reflective metal. At the end of the 1960s the American desert became an important topos of Italian visual culture and literature alike. In Lonzi’s *Autoritratto*, Fontana claimed that he had nothing to learn from America in terms of space: “I am Argentinian and I have the pampas which is ten times bigger than the desert of Arizona.” Lonzi, *Autoritratto*, cit., p. 104. From Sergio Leone’s Spaghetti Westerns (which culminated with 1968 *Once Upon a Time in the West*) to Michelangelo Antonioni’s *Zabriskie Point* of 1970 the desert acquired a central status in Italian cinema. In this context should be situated Celant’s choice to reproduce on *Art Povera’s* cover Walter De Maria’s Mile Long Drawing, shot in the Mojave Desert.


More and more, Italian art critics of Celant’s generation abandoned geographical distinctions between Europe and America in favour of cross-national categories, such as mainstream versus counter-culture, or highbrow versus lowbrow taste.\textsuperscript{177} Despite their emphasis on collaboration, even the Economic Boom supporters of the “cultural bridge across the Atlantic” ultimately acknowledged the need to connect Italy and the United States, as two monolithic and separate blocks. Now critics emphasized cross-cultural affinities or, as Tommaso Trini explained, a shared “aesthetic condition,” which ran “from Turin to New York, and from Rome to San Francisco, European and American artists have gradually discovered just how much they have in common.”\textsuperscript{178}

Traveling to the United States and, more importantly, publishing books or articles reporting on the cultural scene there became a standard rite of passage in the career of an Italian art critic of Celant’s generation. In 1967, for example, Alberto Boatto published \textit{Pop Art in USA}; Carla Lonzi published a report, “Notizie da New York,” and finished her book \textit{Autoritratto} during her stay in the United States between 1967 and 1968. In 1967, Piero Gilardi described the art scene in California and in New York for the art magazine \textit{Flash}. In May 1968, Daniela Palazzoli wrote from the United States for the Italian magazine \textit{Bit} while Maurizio Calvesi wrote his American report for \textit{Cartabianca} after a brief trip to New York earlier that year (between March and April). In 1969, two years after her stay in America, Marisa Volpi published an influential book on post-war

\textsuperscript{177} Dorfles’ book on kitsch, \textit{Kitsch: Anthology of Bad Taste}. Published in 1968 in Italy and in 1969 in the United States, it presented the aesthetic category of “international kitsch” as a shared cultural field “from below,” which ranged from the Italia in Miniatura to Disneyland amusement parks, and from Pope John XXIII ashtrays to John F. Kennedy mugs. The distinction between high and low, Dorfles maintained, was more remarkable and significant than the geographical one marked by national boundaries. And the fact that the book could be published on both sides of the Atlantic with no adaptation of content seemed to confirm this point. Gillo Dorfles, \textit{Kitsch: Anthology of Bad Taste} (New York: Universe Books, 1969), pp. 14, 26, 98, 148.

\textsuperscript{178} Tommaso Trini, “New Alphabet,” in Harald Szeemann, \textit{When Attitudes}, cit., np.
American art, *Arte dopo il 1945, USA*; and Bonito Oliva described in the magazine *Domus* his summer trip “on the road” across America. During the same summer 1969, Mario Diacono reported from New York and Berkeley.\(^{179}\) A first-hand exposure to the American art scene was important to them for two reasons: firstly, to understand American art beyond what they perceived as an official façade (for example, the American pavilion at the Venice Biennale); secondly, to progress in their career in Italy. Through his trips to New York, for example, Boatto started the idea of American Pop as a movement of cultural critique from the inside; his book on Pop Art and his contacts in America were crucial to establish him as a critic in Italy. Gilardi’s article on Funk art in California determined the success of the movement and of Gilardi as a critic in Italy.\(^{180}\) Calvesi’s brief trip to New York was arguably not a turning point in his career, but it gave him a more authoritative voice. After visiting the studio of Robert Morris, Calvesi compared his felt sculptures to Arte Povera artists and predicted that “second wave of Minimalism” was the upcoming international trend.\(^{181}\)

In contrast to the cultural reportings of his colleagues, Celant used his direct and up-to-date knowledge of the American artistic debate to a different purpose: by mimicking the style of American writers he performed his strategy of cultural


\(^{181}\) Calvesi named Pistoletto, Pascali, Kounellis, Fabro, Paolini, Prini, Zorio, Anselmo, Boetti, and Merz but avoided the term Arte Povera. He rather compared them to the older artists, Vasco Bendini and Calzolari.
infiltration.182 And his strategy proved successful. Before the Art Povera book he was totally unknown in this country. In December 1968, he sent out letters in an Italianate English to some of the most influential figures in the American contemporary art world: “Dear Sirs, I am glad to inform you that Mazzotta editor -Milan- decided to make out come [sic] in the libraries my book on the most up to date artistical [sic] researches, during the next march [sic].”183 The letter was formed as a request for “the photographic material … catalogues, statements of the same artists and other useful documents,” but it was also a strategic way to make connections in America. And it was successful. For example, in December 1968, Leo Castelli forwarded to Seth Siegelaub the aforementioned letter by Celant, adding just a brief note: “If this guy didn’t write to you directly you should take care of this.”184 In January 1969, Siegelaub sent the requested materials to Celant, initiating a prolific collaboration between the two.185 In the spring, Celant asked for more contacts and invited Siegelaub “for organizing a show at Sperone’s Gallery of Weiner, Kossuth [sic], Barry and Huebler.”186 The group show did not take place but, in the following two years, each of the four artists exhibited individually at

182 Fabio Belloni has documented, through a detailed chronology of Celant’s publications between 1968 and 1969, how he incorporated in real time some of the most advanced ideas formulated by American artists and critics. In particular, he makes the example of how Celant absorbed Joseph Kosuth’s ideas of the artist as critic, which were formulated in “Art After Philosophy,” in Studio International of October 1969, in his Casabella article “Per una critica acritica” as early as December 1969. This was well before the first Italian translation of Kosuth text in Data, 3 (April 1972), pp. 43-46. Belloni, Dissertation, cit., p. 115. Whereas Belloni has argued that, among the Italian critics of his generation, Celant had the most direct and up-to-date knowledge of the American artistic debate and integrated it to his writing, I believe that his unique characteristic consisted in mimicking the style of American critics.

184 Idem.
186 Celant to Siegelaub, no date [but spring 1969]. Siegelaub affirmative answer is dated July 4, 1969, The Museum of Modern Art Archives, Siegelaub Papers, I. D. 3. Celant’s proposal related to a series of artist books that he co-edited, between 1969 and 1972, with Sperone’s business partner, Pier Luigi Pero. They were dedicated, respectively to the work of: Weiner, Kosuth, Huebler, Barry, Fulton, Merz, Penone, and Anselmo. Gian Enzo Sperone: 35 Anni di Mostre, cit. p. 41. It is likely that Celant hoped to combine the series of books with a series of parallel shows at the Sperone gallery.
Sperone with the collaboration of Celant and Siegelaub. In December 1969, Siegelaub reciprocated by inviting Celant to be part of the special issue that he was editing for the magazine *Art International*: “I am asking 8 critics from different parts of the world, each to edit an 8-page section of the magazine, and to make available their 8 pages to the artists that interest them.” Siegelaub’s original plan was to invite Tommaso Trini as the only critic from Italy. Trini at the time was one of the most active and influential art critics in Italy and had just contributed to the exhibition catalogue, *When Attitudes Become Form*. The new collaborations with Celant and the publication of *Art Povera* in November, however, appear to have influenced Siegelaub to drop Trini and invite Celant instead.

Everything happened fast. In January 1970, Ileana Sonnabend, who had been representing Arte Povera artists in Paris, opened her first New York gallery at 924 Madison Avenue. In July, McShine gave Celant and Arte Povera their first American institutional recognition through the influential exhibition *Information*, held at MoMA. Celant’s *Art Povera*, was the only book written by an Italian to be included among the

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189 Undated document [but between August and October 1969]: the page is clearly a working sheet, where Siegelaub annotated an early version of the plan for the Art International issue. It included an incomplete list of people to invite: Gerry Schum, Harald Szeeman, Tommaso Trini, Lucy Lippard, and Charles Harrison (three bullet-points were left blank). Some of these were then actually invited (Lippard and Harrison accepted, Szeemann declined), Trini and Schum were dropped from the project. The Museum of Modern Art Archives, Siegelaub Papers, I. A. 82.
“recommended readings.”191 The art critic Robert Pincus-Witten described the impact of Celant’s book in McShine’s milieu. The American painter Gary Stephan had just moved to New York after his graduation at the San Francisco Art Institute (“its local quasi-paranoid tradition of the Trascendent Morality of Pure Painting still intact”). Together with painter Neil Jenney, Stephan helped McShine install a show at the Jewish Museum and “had heard Germano Celant’s Arte Povera book ‘chatted-up’ in McShine’s office, and knew that the future was in ‘The Conceptual’ – dirt, plants, wrapped earth- you remember. So they made some Arte Povera – I was calling it Postminimalism – and Jenney called Richard Bellamy to come down to inspect the stuff, with an eye to inviting them into the Green Gallery, then a leading avant-garde locale.”192 By October 1970, less than a year after the release of Arte Povera and his first trip to the United States, Celant considered himself integrated in the New York art world and could write to Battisti: “because I travel to New York all the time I would like to change my role [at Marcatrè] to become the person in charge of reporting on the American scene.”193

In the subsequent few years, major shows and publications in the United States included Arte Povera as a crucial aspect of post-Minimalism and Celant’s book emerged as an important point of reference. In addition to McShine’s Information, two influential publications especially emphasized the impact of Arte Povera in America: Harold Rosenberg’s book, The De-Definition of Art, and Lucy Lippard’s volume Six Years: The

192 Robert Pincus-Witten, “Gary Stephan: The Brief Against Matisse,” Arts Magazine, March 1982, re-published in David Ryan, ed., Talking Painting: Dialogues with Twelve Contemporary Abstract Painters (New York / London: Routledge, 2002), p. 210. Pincus-Witten’s account shows how central Celant’s book was in the contemporary artistic debate after its publication in New York. It was discussed by the most important art critics; it altered the creative equilibrium of young artists; and was capable of modifying the current art language (“they made some Arte Povera - I was calling it Postminimalism”).
Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972.\textsuperscript{194} If the global quality of the phenomenon was now widely accepted, it is safe to say that \textit{Art Povera} played an important role in starting the process. (Lippard took the next step to expand the discussion beyond the Western world by subtitling the book, “Occurring Now in the Americas, Europe, England, Australia, and Asia”).\textsuperscript{195}

By 1972, less than three years after his first appearance in the United States, Celant was solidly established in America as a point of reference for everything Italian. In that year alone, he contributed an essay on Italian design for the Museum of Modern Art’s monumental catalogue, \textit{Italy: The New Domestic Landscape} and published two monographs on Italian artists for the Sonnabend Gallery in New York: one on Giulio Paolini and one on Piero Manzoni (fig. 21).\textsuperscript{196} These two were the first two volumes of a projected series, “Sonnartbooks,” published by Sonnabend Press and edited by Celant.

\textsuperscript{194} Lucy Lippard, \textit{The Dematerialization of the Art Object, 1966 to 1972} (New York: Praeger, 1973). In this book, which is a chronological list of shows and publications intermixed with primary sources (the same format as would be used by Celant in his \textit{Precronistoria}, cit.), Celant’s main shows and publications are discussed and republished as an integral and important part of that international process of “dematerialization” outlined in the book. See pp. 30, 40, 68. Significantly, Celant and Arte Povera were absent, in the original article bearing this title, authored by Lippard together with John Chandler, “The Dematerialization of Art,” \textit{Art International}, 12, 2 (February 1968), pp. 31-36.

\textsuperscript{195} The book, in fact, had very little beside the United States and Europe. Other major surveys with an international approach were: Seth Siegelaub, ed., \textit{July/August Exhibition}, book supplement of \textit{Studio International} Vol. 180. No. 924 (July-August, 1970), here Siegelaub invited critics David Antin, Germano Celant, Michel Claura, Charles Harrison, Lucy Lippard, and Hans Strelow to select artists. Celant included Anselmo, Boetti, Calzolari, Merz, Penone, Prini, Pistoletto, Zorio. The magazine was published in Switzerland but was widely distributed in the United States (where Siegelaub further publicized this issue). Diane Waldman and Edward Fry, eds., \textit{Sixth Guggenheim International}, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York February 12 – April 11, 1971. The show had an international approach and included Merz. Some shows surveyed postminimal art without Celant’s Italians: \textit{Conceptual Art and Conceptual Aspects}, New York Cultural Center, New York, April 10-August 25, 1970; \textit{Art in the Mind}, Oberlin College, Oberlin, Ohio, April 17-May 12, 1970; Earth, Air, Fire, Water: Elements of Art, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, February 4 – April 4, 1971 (but it included Laura Grisi). The fact that the tendency to historicize the phenomenon went beyond Europe and the United States was marked by the \textit{Tokyo Biennale ’70}, Metropolitan Art Gallery, Tokyo May 10-30, 1970 (it included Fabro, Kounellis, Merz, Penone, Zorio).

himself. The series of publications stopped with these two, but signaled, according to Celant himself, the beginning of the process of historicization of Arte Povera.\(^{197}\) The success of Arte Povera in America corresponded to Celant’s infamous proclamation of the movement’s end, on occasion of a show at the Kunstraum in Munich in 1971, as if its ultimate goal was now achieved.\(^{198}\) After having defended the Arte Povera label for years, even against some artists’ attempts to secede, Celant now proclaimed that it was time for artists to pursue individual activities. As for Celant himself, his work too changed perspective and attitude. He went from being a “militant” to a “historian.” As he recalled some forty years later:

At the outset my writings were short and essential, which is what befitted a catalogue introduction or a foldout for a gallery, to be later rewritten in a more complete, historical and scientific format. This began in 1972 with my analytical contribution on Giulio Paolini for Sonnabend Press in New York. From that writing onwards, which enacted an exhaustive monographic text devoted to a young contemporary artist, something quite rare at the time, the militant process paved the way to the studies and the contribution of the historian.”\(^{199}\)

By 1972, the time of “guerrilla” was long gone. But now Celant also retired the ideas of “acriticism” and “statelessness.” Celant had embraced, as Theodor Adorno and Max

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\(^{197}\) For many Italian artists too, *Art Povera* was a trampoline to their American success. While the artists included in the book (both Europeans and Americans) had widely exhibited in Europe already, to the American public most of the Europeans and especially the Italians were unknown: the American readers of *Art Povera* now found these new names associated with some of the hottest American artists of the moment. And out of twenty Europeans, no less than thirteen were Italian. Before 1969, as we saw, Arte Povera artists had been presented only individually and without much impact in the United States, now they were part of mainstream, yet very diverse, shows and publications including MoMA 1970, *Information* show, Harold Rosenberg’s 1972 book, *The De-definition of Art*, and Lucy Lippard’s 1973 book, *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object, 1966-1972*; and they were supported by Ileana Sonnabend with a series of exhibitions and publications in New York.

\(^{198}\) Celant proclaimed the dissolution of the movement in his catalogue essay for, *Arte Povera - 13 Italienische Künstler* (Munich: Kunstverein, 1971), which was also reproduced in the magazine *Domus.* The event is recalled retrospectively in Germano Celant, “How to Escape from the Hallucinations of History,” in *Arte Povera, History and Stories,* cit., p. 26.

Horkheimer would have it, the culture industry of the late capitalist moment. What remained was an internationally marketable Italianità on which he, subsequently, built a prosperous career both in Italy and the United States.

Celant ultimately achieved the nationalistic venture, metaphorically expressed by Depero forty years earlier, to “smash the Alps of the Atlantic.” But whereas Depero tried (unsuccessfully) to overcome the Italian national complex of backwardness by exporting his utopian project of modernization, Celant embraced that very complex and turned it into a marketing tool. Through Arte Povera, he exalted those characteristics that were traditionally considered as obstacles to the modernization of Italian society (rural, poor, Mediterranean, irrational, archaic) and used them as an exportable antidote to the negative effects of American modernity, consumerism, and technocracy. Adopting the language of American critics proved a successful strategy to “infiltrate the enemy.” But it also worked the other way: it was functioned as a way to interiorize an American perspective. In other words, Celant was able to market and export successfully his product to the United States, and he made Arte Povera perceived as internationally relevant from an American-dominated perspective. In the process he imported American models and parameters of cultural relevance into the Italian artistic debate. In the Young Italians catalogue, Alan Solomon had lamented that “we in America have become accustomed to judging world art against American standards and American conditions.” Through the book Art Povera Celant did not counter these standards and conditions, as he had declared in his “guerrilla” manifesto of 1967. Rather, he made them his own.

200 The influential and oft-quoted text, Dialectic of Enlightenment by Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer was published in Italy for the first time by Einaudi in 1966 as Dialettica dell’Illuminismo and was part of the Italian debate from which Celant’s original definition of Art Povera as a Guerrilla war emerged. See Germano Celant, The Knot Arte Povera at P.S.1, cit., p. 27.
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