



passaggi nell'arte italiana a cavallo del millennio

senza margine

Marsilio

THE SHAPE OF GENERATION IN ART

Senzamargine

La galleria delle Collezioni presenta in occasione del decennale del MAXXI una mostra dedicata a nove maestri dell'arte italiana contemporanea. Grandi installazioni e opere significative realizzate negli anni della maturità, opere *senzamargine*, per riprendere il titolo della rivista d'avanguardia fondata nel 1969 da Alberto Boatto, al quale è dedicato il focus di approfondimento nell'Archive Wall.

Nove maestri, finora non presenti nella collezione del museo, che testimoniano la vitalità e la diversità delle ricerche artistiche in Italia a cavallo del millennio. Autori spesso attivi a margine dei movimenti più noti e che negli anni hanno saputo mantenere l'indipendenza e l'originalità della loro ricerca, divenendo punti di riferimento per gli artisti delle generazioni successive.

Nei grandi lavori ambientali di *senzamargine* emergono in tutta la loro attualità alcune delle tematiche oggi al centro delle riflessioni artistiche e con esse una nozione di arte italiana che supera i confini geografici e si nutre del mondo e nel mondo.

Iniziamo così un percorso che incrocia lo sguardo periferico e la narrazione della Storia e da questa torna all'esperienza individuale e alla memoria collettiva, in un equilibrio tra la leggerezza e il dramma di un'identità mai risolta che sfugge a ogni definizione e si sottrae a ogni appartenenza. Lungo la scia di migrazioni, trasmissioni e diaspore, seguiamo così il tentativo degli artisti di trovare una via d'uscita dal labirinto dei luoghi e delle storie, la loro capacità di immaginare attraverso l'arte una forma di *de-locazione*, una condizione nella quale tracce, ombre, vestigia diventano gli indizi per ricostruire, a ritroso e per sottrazione, il nostro sguardo dal di fuori.

MILLENNIO

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ALEXANDER NAGEL

George Kubler pointed out in 1962 that the biographical arcs of individual artists take their shape from the larger arcs of the times in which they unfold. “To the usual coordinates fixing the individual’s position—his temperament and his training—there is also the moment of his entrance, this being the moment in the tradition—early, middle, or late—with which his biological opportunity coincides.” Biography is therefore only ever a part of the story. “Biography is a provisional way of scanning artistic substance,” Kubler writes, “but it does not alone treat the historical question in artists’ lives, which is always the question of their relation to what has preceded and to what will follow them.” The moment where the biological opportunity engages the larger historical developments Kubler calls the artist’s “entrance.” A young artist might be born into a belated phase, like Palma Giovane or Federico Zuccaro in the later sixteenth century. “Without a good entrance,” notes Kubler, the artist is “in danger of wasting his time as a copyist regardless of temperament or training”—unless he shifts traditions to find a “better entrance.”¹ Although it is logically present in his argument, Kubler does not mention the converse scenario, where an established and successful artist is suddenly toppled by the advent of new developments, such as Perugino, Botticelli, Francesco Francia, and Jacopo Ripanda were in the first decade of the sixteenth century.

“A given individual, born ten years earlier or later, would have become, insofar as his own development and his effect in the world is concerned, a completely different person.”² Goethe’s declaration applies well to Raphael, who would not have become Raphael had he not arrived at a moment transformed by Leonardo and Michelangelo. Just as important is that he arrived not too late after the older masters. Although born a mere seven years after Michelangelo, he was in danger of being belated despite his youth, and was saved by not being born ten or more years later and by responding very early to the new developments. After playing catch-up for about five years, he entered into contemporaneous

1 George Kubler, *The Shape of Time: Remarks on the History of Things* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1962), 6.

2 Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, “Vorwort,” in *Aus meinem Leben. Dichtung und Wahrheit*, in *Goethes Werke*,

Hamburger Ausgabe in 14 Bänden, vol. 9 (Munich: Verlag C. H. Beck, 1982), 9: “Ein jeder, nur zehn Jahre früher oder später geboren, dürfte, was seine eigene Bildung und Wirkung nach außen betrifft, ein ganz anderer geworden sein.”

rivalry with his greatest contemporaries, and then used his later entrance to advantage by embracing the new media of print to broadcast his art, a novel track only a few decades old, not known before in the West and of little interest to his immediate precursors. A more belated artist, Giorgio Vasari, radically shifted tracks (at least for part of his activity) by formalizing his belatedness in writing, producing a massive history of the previous three centuries of art and thus finding a position for himself at the beginning of a new development that would come to be known as the discipline of Art History.

Even if it was organized by biography—the artists’ “lives”—Vasari’s scheme of art history anticipated Kubler’s insight. Whatever the inherent abilities of the artists, Vasari argued, they were subject to the conditions of their age, and should be judged relative to those conditions. On this logic, it is not fair to say Giotto was less good than Michelangelo, as Michelangelo benefited from having had his entrance in a more advanced artistic culture. Against those who snicker when he praises artists of past times as much as he does those of present, Vasari offers the Ciceronian distinction between what is true absolutely (*simpliciter*) and what is true according to circumstance (*secundum quid*): “I don’t know what else to respond but that I’ve always intended to praise not *simpliciter* but *secundum quid*, taking into account the places, times, and other similar circumstances.”³ Even so, Vasari does allow that some artists simply confound his historical scheme, escaping their time, such as Donatello, who, “although he was in their time [the time of the other artists of the second period, roughly the fifteenth century], I wonder whether I should put him among those of the third period [the period of Michelangelo], his work being comparable to the good ancients.” What makes Donatello a shifter, both backwards (with the ancients) and forwards (with the

3 Vasari, *Le vite dei più eccellenti pittori, scultori e architetti*, 1568, VI, 410: “A coloro ai quali paresse che io avessi alcuni, o vecchi o moderni, troppo lodato, e che, facendo comparazione da essi vecchi a quelli di questa età, se ne ridessero, non so che altro mi rispondere, se non che intendo avere sempre lodato non semplicementi, ma, come s’usa dire, secondo che, et avuto rispetto ai luoghi, tempi et altre

somiglianti circostanze. E nel vero, comechè Giotto fusse, poniam caso, ne’ suoi tempi lodatissimo, non so quello che di lui e d’altri antichi si fusse detto, s’e’ fussi stato al tempo del Buonarruoto: oltre che gl’uomini di questo secolo, ii quale e nel col mo della perfezzione, non sarebbono nel grado che sono, se quelli non fussero prima stati tali e quel che furono innanzi a noi.”

moderns of Vasari's time) is the liveliness of his figures, an uncontainable vivacity and movement that keeps them from being fixed in historical time.⁴

Not all periods impose the same correlations of biological age and artistic age. Arthur Rimbaud and Paul Verlaine were much farther apart in age than they were in poetic sensibility, and though critics might agree that Rimbaud was the more radical and new voice, both belonged to the leading edge of poetic production at the time. The Romantic cult of artistic youth as expressed in *Adonais*, Shelley's ode to Keats, was not a universal rule in the nineteenth century, when radical statements regularly came from artists in advanced maturity, such as Beethoven, Goya, Degas, Tolstoy, and Cézanne. The twentieth-century avant-gardes tended to insist on the correlation between youth and newness, as can be seen from the ages of the members of the Fauve, Futurist, Dada, and Surrealist movements, yet it did not become a hard and fast rule for twentieth-century art. The New York school painters were middle aged when they made their strongest statements. The image of the avant-garde artist at mid-century was of a tough, ruggedly individualist, existentially afflicted middle-aged man.

The 1960s, by contrast, affirmed a strong correlation of youth with new artistic developments, a trend clearly announced in the United States by the sudden emergence of the twenty-something Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns in the later 1950s. When Warhol moved, around 1960, from the realm of commercial illustration into the world of avant-garde art, he was already in his thirties. The type of the young fogey, Warhol's basic self-styling in the 1950s, was fine and even fashionable in the magazine world, but when he shifted into the art world Warhol adopted a young and edgy look and embraced youth culture as the matrix for his art-making. Continually challenged by his biological age to avoid the taint of belatedness, he engaged in a constant and deliberate track-shifting in his art, usually by introducing references and media that lay outside of art as traditionally understood (even if exactly this kind

of traffic had been advocated by established modern movements such as the Bauhaus school). By 1962 he had transferred silk screen technology, above all known in the commercial realm, into fine art production, a track-shift meant to mark a break from the previous generation's painting practices. Then, in the middle 1960s he announced that he had finished with paintings altogether and would now work in film (an invention some decades old, experiencing a notable new wave at the time) and video (a completely new technology, born in this very moment). When he went back to painting in the 1970s, it was only as reincorporated into what he hoped was the radical concept of "business art," yet another new track.⁵

One significant and recent template for the new emphasis on youth culture was the emergence of rock and roll. Its earliest practitioners, Jimmy Preston, Bill Haley, Rosetta Tharpe, and others, were not particularly young, an index of the fact that they came from other sectors of music production, such as country or jazz or blues, where the youth correlation was not strong and younger performers regularly adopted seasoned personas. But once it got established, and identified with Elvis Presley, Fats Domino, Little Richard, Eddie Cochran, and Jerry Lee Lewis, rock and roll became a music by young people for young people, in fact repellent to any but the young. In the 1960s, the demographic fact was formally proclaimed as a historical and ethical principle. The only ones in a position to understand the times and thus to lead the way into the future were the young. To be above a certain age was to be hopelessly lost to the time. "Something is happening here but you don't know what it is, do you, Mr. Jones?"

Although developments in visual art were in many ways not congruent with pop music in the 1960s, the two developments became strongly aligned in their affirmation that new art had to be done by young artists. Never in the history of Western art was the direction of art so clearly given over to the young. The closest it had come to doing so was the moment around 1500, when Michelangelo, Dürer, Raphael, and Giorgione, all in their twenties, changed the course of art—a remarkable fact, yet it is also significant that the fact of their youth never

4 Vasari, 1568, III, 18: "Ma non mi risolvo in tutto, ancora che fussi ne' lor tempi, Donato, se io me lo voglia metter fra i terzi, restando l'opra sua a paragone degli antichi buoni: dirò bene che in questa parte si può chiamar lui regola degli altri, per aver in sé solo le parti tutte che a una a una erano sparte in molti; piché e' ridusse in moto le sue figure, dando loro una certa vivacità e prontezza che posson stare e con le cose moderne, come io dissi, con le antiche medesimamente."

5 Blake Gopnik, *Warhol* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2020), chapters 14–15, 20–21, 24, 39, and passim.

became a theme or a rallying cry, or a cudgel in the hands of detractors. The New York school of abstract painters, as mentioned above, were middle aged in their prime, and then a decade or so later were being succeeded by a new breed of young artists who had barely paid their dues: Johns, Rauschenberg, Stella, Kaprow, Morris, Kusama, Marisol, Hesse, Smithson, Ruscha, and of course Warhol (not as young as he wanted to be and, in fact, he had paid some dues). Donald Judd and Sol LeWitt, not yet forty, assumed the role of wise elders to the new generation. In France, the leading postwar artists, Fautrier and Dubuffet, were middle aged at their height, and then were succeeded by a cadre of young artists: Yves Klein, who died at thirty-four in 1962, Arman, and Tinguely, who was a bit older but trended young and was helpfully paired with the youthful icon Niki de Saint-Phalle. In Italy, the artists who dominated 1950s art—Manzù, Marini, Giacometti—were grand, established figures, all advanced in years. Burri and Fontana came into real prominence and counted as radical in the 1950s, when they were in their forties. But then at the end of the decade a new art came in with a generation of emphatically young artists, beginning with Manzoni, who died at thirty in 1963, Kounellis, Schifano, Lo Savio, Fioroni, Pistoletto, and then the generation of Arte Povera in the later 1960s. Here is a list of the artists in *senzamargine* together with the years of their birth:

Carla Accardi 1924
 Luciano Fabro 1936
 Luigi Ghirri 1943
 Yervant Gianikian 1942
 Jannis Kounellis 1936
 Angela Ricci Lucchi 1942
 Anna Maria Maiolino 1942
 Claudio Parmiggiani 1943
 Mario Schifano 1934

These artists were well positioned to benefit from a good entrance. In their twenties in the 1960s, they came up in a moment that was loudly announcing that everything, including art, had to change. (The exception here is Carla Accardi, who had shown work as early as 1947.) Young when art and not only art was changing radically, they were then lucky enough to reach an advanced age in an era—the 1980s, 1990s, and naughts—that was itself self-consciously belated, a time when art regularly thematized its belatedness by engaging in references to earlier art, in particular the art of the 1960s. The 1990s saw the marked

development of an “archival impulse” in a diverse array of work focused on historical events and conjunctions fraught with personal and political relevance.⁶ Beginning in the 1990s and growing in the first decade of the twenty-first century, the curatorial mode became a major feature of an artistic culture increasingly concerned with problems of remaking, restaging, remixing, reenactment and reperformance, reinstallation, recovery, etc. Underpinning these developments was the fact that the very idea of the avant-garde fell sharply away a century after it had been invented, and with it the principle that certain media, such as painting or drawing, were no-go zones of historical obsolescence. It is rare to see such a congruence between a biographical arc and a historical arc, where, for a certain generation, youth coincided with a time of such proclamatory change and middle and older age met a moment of emphatic retrospection and an equally proclamatory affirmation of historical nonlinearity.

The situation was not the same in the realm of contemporary music, which saw the rare phenomenon of a sharp break—punk and then “new wave” in the late 1970s—only fifteen years after the previous musical revolution of the mid-1960s. The great figures of the 1960s, such as Bob Dylan, the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, the Who, the Band, Eric Clapton, Joni Mitchell, and Neil Young, remained powerful voices in the 1970s and then, one after another, tumbled or at least stumbled after 1980. Bowie, a few years younger than the others, had positioned himself declaratively as a post-1960s artist and was acknowledged as a precursor for much of the new music. Yet even he fell into sharp decline after 1984’s *Let’s Dance*. “Better to burn out than to fade away,” sang Neil Young in 1979, but fade away is exactly what they did, until a distinctly more ecumenical and even archivally oriented musical culture took hold in the 1990s and naughts, allowing Young and Dylan and eventually Bowie to come back to life as artists.

The late 1970s brought significant developments in visual art, eagerly branded and trumpeted by a revved-up art market, but they offered nothing like the dividing line that punk and postpunk had thrown down for music. *senzamargine* reveals a group of artists who suffered less from a supersession complex than

6 Hal Foster, “An Archival Impulse,” *October* 110 (2004), 3–22.

artists of advanced age had at other times (and particularly, one imagines, in the 1960s themselves). Mario Schifano's combinations of photography and painting were vindicated and given new life by developments in the 1980s and 1990s. Luciano Fabro's site-specific works enjoyed a new reception under the newly defined category of "installation art," and met the new times with an increased use of color and surface sheen. Anna Maria Maiolino's use of photographic documentation of performances in her "Photopoemaction" was recognized as newly relevant in the naughts, as interest grew in the uses of performance-documentation as material for reperformances. Always influential in photographic circles up to his death in 1993, Luigi Ghirri acquired a new standing in the art world as a succeeding generation of artists working in photography—Jeff Wall, Thomas Struth, Zoe Leonard, Thomas Demand, and others—achieved canonical status and fundamentally shifted the place of photography in the world of art.

The emergence and formalization of the category of "contemporary art" in the 1990s retroactively cast the artists of the 1960s and early 1970s as part of a configuration made and remade into the present.⁷ Paradoxically, this idea of the contemporary arose hand in hand with a marked falling away of the idea of an avant-garde and a corresponding embrace of nonlinear histories, itself an inheritance of the art of the 1960s. "The value of temporal events in the natural *history* of Modernism have become untenable, even gross, in so far as they represent a defense against nondurational *histories*," wrote Robert Smithson in an essay on 1930s architecture.⁸ The work of any number of artists of that moment, from Smithson to Giovanni Anselmo and Gino de Dominicis, staged radical disruptions of historical logic, setting art into functions of geological time, the posthuman, and the eternal. A generation of critics, theorists, and curators arose in their wake to rewrite and restage the history of art in configurations no longer structured by the logic of progress and succession. In this environment of temporal destabilization, there is no need to see the work presented in this exhibition as late, or the larger culture as belated.

Photography, the most punctual of media, has emerged in the last decades as a model of temporal multiplicity, a fact emphatically asserted by Jeff Wall's intricate stagings and digital reworkings, as well as Thomas Demand's labors of reconstruction and remediation. Yet in the predigital photographs of Luigi Ghirri, which have the quality of paintings of a world imagined as the materials for an art never before seen yet also not contemporary, these elements are already there. We look at a corner of the Orvietan abbey of Santi Severo e Martirio, and we see a thirteenth-century fresco that belongs to this place yet has already been cut out and reinstalled into the wall (strangely, tilted at a slight angle) by conservators of later centuries. We start to notice that the fresco, like this photograph, is a translation of other media. The rectangle of the *Madonna with Saints* was imagined by the thirteenth-century painter as a hanging, a textile that itself depicts other materials, such as the Virgin's marble throne. The site-specific view adopted by the photograph, with paintings shown in their material contexts, reveals that the painting has a similarly "embedded" structure, with the Virgin and child installed in a throne structure that both completely separates them from the two saints from later times (Augustine and Severus) to either side and yet sets them all into structured relation to one another, an internal articulation that is then embedded in the larger articulation of the ornamental rectangular framework, which closes the whole image off from the environment of the church and the people in it, and mediates the relation between the patterned church interior and the world of the saints. The transmedial quality of the fresco—the quality it has of being between media—allows for significant trespassings, such as Saint Augustine's feet, which cross below the zone of the Virgin's throne and into the socle zone, closer to our reality, suggesting more generally that thresholds are for crossing. We notice a part of another fresco to the left, from about 1400, which also seems to imitate a textile, its border showing a roundel with the head of a woman—a contemporary woman, in a hat that was fashionable in *c.* 1400—turned to look towards the main scene (an *Annunciation*, not shown in the photo). The framework both separates her from the central scene and connects her to it. The photograph thus reveals the paintings as layered images, containing their own histories of transposition and embedded viewership, their layered structures anticipating the later gestures of reverence that have taken place in front of the frescoes, as well as the efforts of conservation that have intervened to protect them by removing and reinstalling them. We

⁷ See James Meyer, *The Art of Return: The Sixties and Contemporary Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019).
⁸ Robert Smithson, "Ultra-
 moderne" (1967), in *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, 2nd edition, edited by Jack Flam (Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996), 63.



1. Luigi Ghirri, *Orvieto*, 1985. *Paesaggio italiano* Series
 Reproduction from original 6 × 7 cm transparency

can start to see that the humble elements arrayed in front of the wall with the frescoes, the chairs and the desks arrayed at ninety-degree angles, are extensions of the elements already registered and compiled in the frescoes, a further frame of mobile life now recognized—recognized by the photograph—as part of the extended world of these paintings. An art historian might say that the view of things afforded by this photograph was enabled by the site-specific, frame-questioning, transmedial interventions of the art of the 1960s—that Ghirri is seeing the world through the eyes of Minimalism, Environments, and Arte Povera. And that may be true. But more than anything this work puts into practice a way of seeing things that no longer orders the world by sequential art-historical genealogies.

It could be that the celebration of noncontemporaneity in the contemporary is a logical rebellion against the emphatic and unprecedented synchronization of life that has arisen as a result of the internet, the smartphone, and the increasing globalization of mass culture. Or it could be an effect of those very developments, since the new platforms bring everything onto the same plane, in fact making it all—distant and near, new and rediscovered—contemporary. The increasing presence and power of the art market since the 1980s, which has naturally fueled the steady rediscovery of artists, some of them retrieved from the archive still alive, chimes with a cultural predisposition to celebrate individualities and differences as arrayed on an increasingly shared playing field. Against these resolved differences, can one point to generative ones? “True contemporaneity,” says Terry Smith, “is the contemporaneity of different types of difference.”⁹

9 Jeffrey J. Williams, “The Contemporist: An Interview with Terry Smith,” *symplokē* 22, 1–2 (2014), 363.