

1968: It's Just a Beginning

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An expert on Futurism, Metaphysical art and Italian and International avant-gardes in the first half of the twentieth century, her research also extends to the sixties and seventies and the contemporary scene, with numerous essays and other publications. In collaboration with Giuliano Briganti she curated the exhibition *Pittura Metafisica* (Palazzo Grassi, Venice 1979) and edited the catalogue, while with Maurizio Calvesi she edited the Catalogue Raisonné of Umberto Boccioni's works (1983). She curated with Bill Lieberman the Boccioni retrospective at the Metropolitan Museum of New York in 1988 and has since been involved in many international exhibitions. She organised Richard Serra's show at the Trajan's Markets (Rome 1999), planned the Gary Hill show at the Coliseum (Rome 2005) and was one of the three committee members of the Futurism centenary exhibition (Pompidou Paris, Scuderie del Quirinale Rome and Tate Modern London) celebrating in the same year (2009) with *Futurism 100: Illuminations. Avant-gardes Compared. Italy-Germany-Russia* the anniversary at MART in Rovereto. In 2015 she focused on Matisse's fascination for decorative arts (*Arabesque*, Scuderie del Quirinale Rome) and at the end of 2017 a show organized at La Galleria Nazionale in Rome anticipated the fifty years of the 1968 "revolution".

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ABSTRACT

1968 marks the beginning of a social, political and cultural revolution, with all of its internal contradictions. It engulfs the artistic world on both sides of the Atlantic in a veritable transformation, a cathartic rebirth crystalized through the reconfiguration of traditional canons. This creative impulse refuses any artifice, assimilates contradictions, incorporates experience and imaginary worlds, restructures ideas about space and time, definitely severing the boundary between object and concept, while short circuiting reality and the imaginary. Inspired by codes of common origins, minimalism, conceptual art, arte povera and land art nonetheless carry diversity in their approaches and methods; yet they coexist and coalesce, in an intricate weave of exchange and rhythmic synchronicity.

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It's just a beginning. A time of unique revolutionary intensity.

1968: From Europe to America stylistic similitudes and analogies of varied origins cast the same message of subversion and vitality, definitely severing the boundary between object and concept.

1968: It is the beginning of a revolution. Revolution that had been fermenting for years and that explodes with great uproar and extraordinary appeal in that fateful 1968. Precisely

1968 marks the peak of a process that encompasses the desire for emancipation, self-determination and rebellion against anti-democratic rules and principles. In the arts and culture this veritable insurgency can be traced back to the first historical avant-gardes and the innovative and experimental power of their research, manifestos and works. Yet it is not through proclamations that the dynamic and vigorous challenges of a new, boundless art will be enacted; an art that conceives of new strategies in order to renew its commitment of being in the world

according to a different logic, true to its very existence and evolutionary drive. A sense of identity, for long deeply violated and denied by repressive totalitarian governments, now reverberates as a widespread driving force; a sense of identity that surges, fully visible, uncovering new frontiers through the gushing vitality of engagement. Despite the diversity in their approaches and methods, minimalism, conceptual art, arte povera, land art and other artistic tendencies rapidly emerge and propagate at the speed of waves radiating into space. The awareness of a collective process that exemplifies a purifying, cathartic rebirth is clearly discernible, in the wake of a rampant freedom of forms and methods.

What had been fostered by the most diverse sectors of society produces a short circuit, a horizontal and transversal phenomenon, a contagion that extends to the whole world, breaking the boundaries between countries, classes, races and disciplines. Longing for the other, the future, in an impulse that in science conquers the Moon and in cinema is inaugurated by the cosmic adventure of Space Odyssey. It also leads to denial and destructive fury. It raises barricades and breaks down the reassuring canons of the bourgeoisie at all levels. Heir to the fractures of the post-war period, it reaps the fruits of the Beat generation, the Nouvelle Vague and experimentalism in literature.

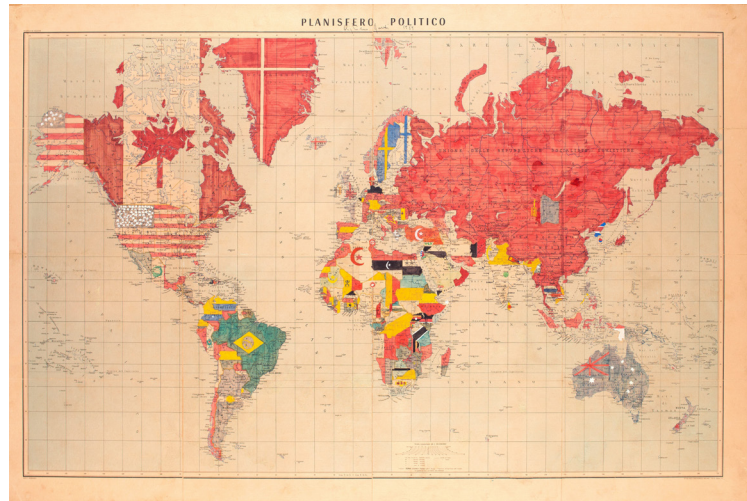


FIG. 1 Alighiero Boetti - Planisfero Politico, 1969.



FIG. 2 Gilberto Zorio - Untitled, 1966

While the new sound of rock erupts on the Isle of Wight, a different humankind, previously somatically and anthropologically unimaginable, makes its debut and converges in Woodstock. A new society emerges and evolves, in art as in everyday life. It is a creative generation: it dismantles in order to reconstruct using new methods and materials, believes in the vitality of action – both political and theatrical, adopts spectacle and incorporates polarity: order and disorder, camouflage and autonomous patrols of extremist political fringes. It is a generation that protests against the Vietnam War, falls in love with iconic personalities and is not afraid of contradictions.

The reality of the sixties is fragmented, discontinuous, suspended. Revolutionary instincts and vigorous criticisms arise, fuelling the debates of young “militants”. *Appunti per una guerriglia*¹ is the manifesto of this reality. Chaotic, erratic and systematically dissonant, the proclamation makes use of a parasemiological lexicon and is tinged with the colours of revolution. Looking at the world through different eyes reveals new horizons.² Appreciation for the new art from America becomes reason to underline a non-conflictual diversity. This marks the progression of those years in a dynamic engagement of exhibitions and plans of action with the intent of establishing a eurythmic coexistence³ in a single domain of participation. Domain that shuns the power of artifice and is in accordance with the passing of time, the materiality of action, the magical call of the elements, the simple perception of physical phenomena, the recording of basic processes of the mind, the desire to leave a footprint as indication of a continuous flow of energy between oneself and the essence of the universe. In the exact space of its very occurrence.

Magic and sociability, spells and collective action do not assuredly evoke ideas of transcendence, but rather absorb, as if in ecstatic restlessness, the vital forces of the cosmos and draw energy from the dissymmetry of the external ordering of signs. The search for new forms is now open to “happy coincidences” where time is always dominant and where numbers, abstractions that support the visual, aim at a central fulcrum, a place of hypothetical equilibrium.

What must be overcome are the limits of painting as a practice ending with single gestures. Painting is no longer the visible action of what is imagined; painting is no longer the only visible action of what is imagined. The image retains its moral significance and its measure, both physical and metaphorical; what remains are the phantom of the fresco, the power of rhythms, the tensions in sculpture. The past is perceived as evidence of a culture that is still alive, founded on millennial roots, yet it becomes necessary to find rules to channel this tradition into new frameworks. First, that of space. The space

1. Germano Celant, “Flash Art”, *Appunti per una guerriglia*, no 5, (November-December 1967): 3.

2. In the previous decade, critics, artists and gallery owners in Milan, Turin and Rome had created a dense network of relations with the United States. Suffice to recall the important activity of Mario Tazzoli and La Galatea, a formative experience for Gianenzo Sperone in Turin; that of Plinio de Martiis, Giorgio Franchetti and La Tartaruga; of the exhibitions at the Galleria d'Arte Moderna in Rome under the direction of Palma Bucarelli (Jackson Pollock, 1958, followed by Mark Rothko, 1962, and Arshile Gorky, 1967); of Toti Scialoja and Gabriella Drudi in New York in 1956. In addition to the important experimental role it had acquired since 1966, from the end of 1969 L'Attico of Fabio Sargentini becomes a fundamental international stage for the contamination between different artistic experiences: from Simone Forti's dance-constructions to Sol LeWitt's solo show, the *Danza Volo Musica Dinamite* festival with Terry Riley, La Monte Young, Steve Paxton and others, up to the famous act by Robert Smithson, *Asphalt Rundown*.

3. It is important to recall here the international exhibitions attended by many Italian artists of the time, such as *Prospect 68*, Städtische Kunsthalle and Düsseldorf, September 20-29, 1968, curated by Konrad Fischer and Hans Strelow; *When Attitudes become Form*, curated by Harald Szeeman at the Kunsthalle in Bern, March 22-April 27, 1969; the participation at the Venice Biennale, at Documenta in Kassel and the very important exposition *Contemporanea*, curated by the Incontri Internazionali d'Arte (art section by Achille Bonito Oliva), held in Rome in the parking lot of Villa Borghese from November 30, 1973 to February 1974, when Christo wrapped the Aurelian Walls. Nor should we forget that many Italian artists such as Salvatore Scarpitta, Mario Schifano, Michelangelo Pistoletto, Pier Paolo Calzolari, Gilberto Zorio, Giovanni Anselmo, Marisa Merz, Mario Merz, Luigi Ontani, to name but a few, had exhibited at the Sonnabend Gallery since the sixties, with Paula Cooper since 1968, with Marian Goodman since 1977 and later in other private and public spaces.



FIG. 3 Giovanni Anselmo - Untitled, 1968

in painting, the space of the image in the duration of the event, punctuated by temporality discernible in the very dimensions of the work.

This is the new mapping of the nascent Italian art. Space is conceived as a whole and not as truth or sublimation of fixed coordinates. Nor is it a dimension to be conquered or acted upon. It is fundamentally different from the concerns of American minimal or conceptual art and primary structures. Despite the apparent similitude of forms and volumes, absent are those archetypes on which *arte povera* builds the structure of its own vision. Indeed, one of the American protagonists of the momentous exhibition *Primary Structures* at the Jewish Museum in New York states in 1966: "A shape, a volume, a colour, a surface are an entity in itself. It shouldn't be concealed as part of a fairly different whole. The shapes and materials shouldn't be altered by their context."⁴ While on the Mediterranean shores *arte povera* conceives of a more magical and cosmic vision: "Even if elementary you must exercise a spell on yourself, otherwise you are not an artist. (...) you have to start from something that concerns the ability to form. The ability to form comes before form. Form comes later."⁵

Dimensions expand evoking patterns that advance at the rate of biological proliferation. If painting is speed, it is so in every way and in all directions, from the past to the present, to the future and vice versa; the starting point is in the mind of the artist. The intent is to externalize, signal a reversal of the artifice, assimilate an idea of contradiction, all through a continuous progression in organic development. And again: to observe, frame, focus, acknowledge vibrations, make visible. Ordinary gestures, simple yet incommensurable acts.

Gestures that evoke humanity's primary experiences, that speak of an age in which things spun to the rhythm of the universe, a very distant time where the breach between word, figure and action had not yet occurred. It is a search for that very rhythm, creating an idea of wholeness by combining impulse and invention together with what is logical and rational, albeit these remain imperceptible fragments, infinitesimal splinters in the wake of a great mystery. Light heavy, visible invisible, liquid solid, inert dynamic; polarities of a non paradoxical universe unearth analogous stratifications of hidden natural energy: "Europe is a very different space from America,



FIG. 4 Matta-Clark - Tree Dance, 1971, still from video

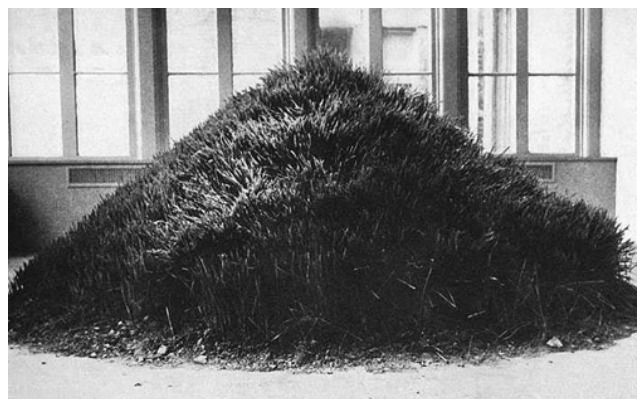


FIG. 5 Hans Haacke - Grass Grows, 1969



FIG. 6 Jannis Kounellis - Carboniera, 1967

4. Donald Judd, *Primary Structures: Younger American and British Sculptors*, exhibition catalogue, New York City, April 27 - June 12, 1966, ed. Kynaston McShine (New York: The Jewish Museum, 1966).

5. Germano Celant (ed), *Mario Merz*, exhibition catalogue, Palazzo dei Congressi ed Esposizioni, Repubblica di San Marino, November 18, 1983 - January 22, 1984, (Milan: Mazzotta 1983), 161-162.

rather than belonging to action it belongs to the reflection of that action [...] Truthfully that is the problem of Italians, Europeans [...] it takes the intensity of who has nothing to really create something"⁶ says another exponent of arte povera. Sculpture hence reinvents itself, drawing from the pure forms of nature its own compositional elements, giving life to imaginary worlds, new tautological truths of the visual system, where reality is continuously restored as a form of the imaginary. The awareness of perspective is suggested through materials or elements extraneous to art but not to history or myth. By bending the boundless repertoire of European art history, distant timeframes are forced into dialectical short circuits that embody the very same principles of representation. Having overcome the boundary of aesthetics, syncretism is achieved through permeability and dilation, encompassing new techniques, extra-European cultures and dimensions foreign to traditional perception.

Considering the state of the arts in Italy during the post-war period, Burri and Fontana occupy an eccentric and metaphorical position in the eyes of the Italian generation of the sixties; Burri for revealing the hidden potentials of matter and Fontana for transcending the physical space of reality. They embody a pictorial experience, echoes of resemblance and other universes strongly linked to an important and noble past; a past that American art does not possess and does not control. Futurism's abolishment of a canonical understanding of space and time is channelled into Fontana, by way of Boccioni's simultaneous representation of the multiplicity of dimensions and forces. These elements of impetus and participation, emotional and structural depth are then conveyed to the younger generations. The past is understood as a formal and stylistic entity, especially within the complex intellectual dimension of all it has expressed, transformed and revitalized. The past, whose value is restored in the words of Jannis Kounellis:



FIG. 7 Jonas - Wind, 1968, still from video



FIG. 8 Luciano Fabro - Italia rovesciata, 1968

6. Pino Pascali, "Pino Pascali e Carla Lonzi. Discorsi", *Marcaté*, no 30-33 (1967), interview by Carla Lonzi, republished in Vittorio Rubiu, *Pascali*, introduction by Cesare Brandi, (De Luca Editore: Rome, 1976), 156-160.

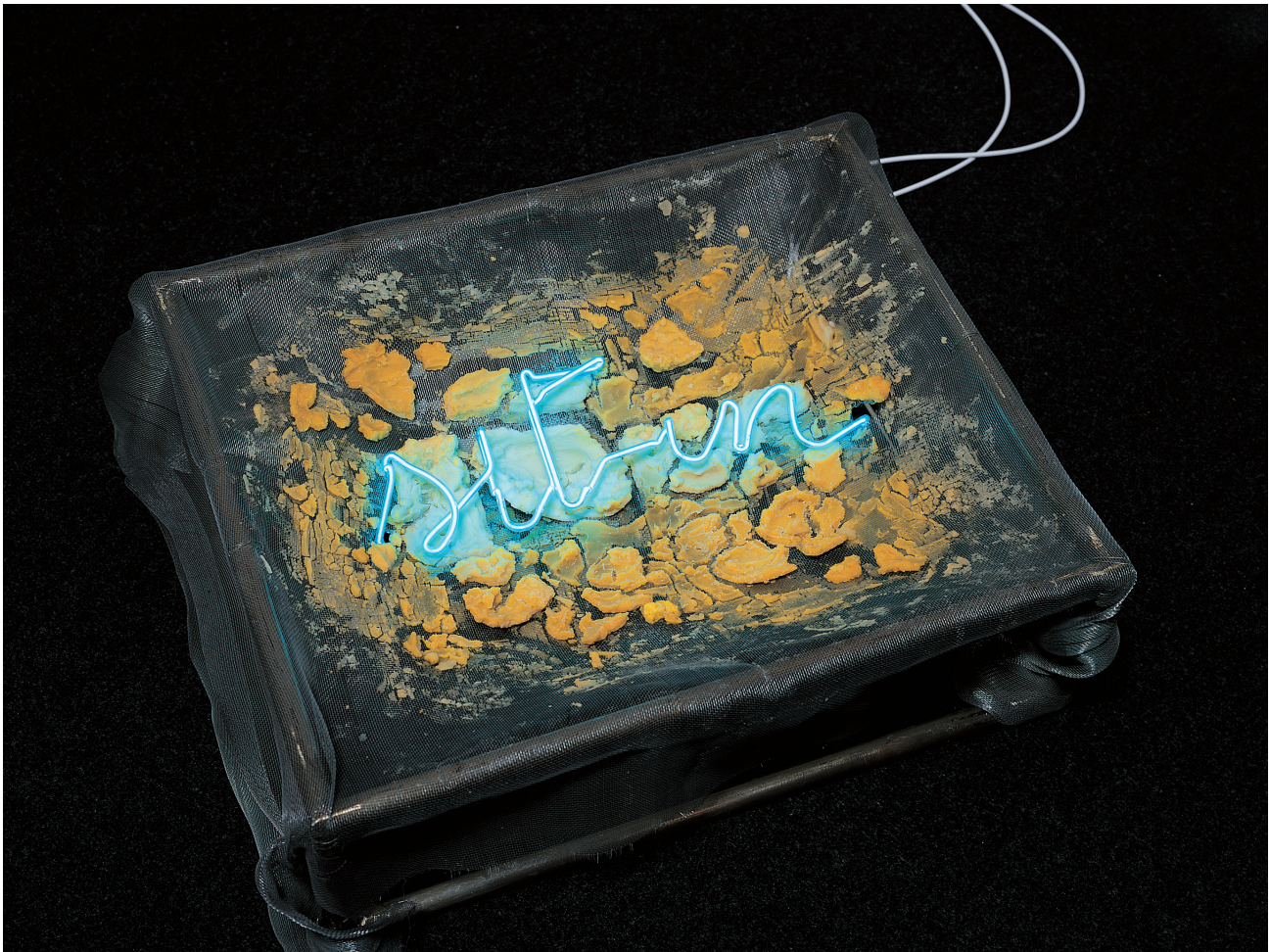


FIG. 9 Mario Merz - Sit-in, 1968

“The works of Burri and Fontana had a fundamental role in my education, like the work of many other artists of that same generation who discovered in matter a field of research. Subsequent political events inspired a reading of history that undoubtedly influenced our sensitivity and way of evaluating space, allowing for the codification of a language that, naturally, takes into account the historical and cultural problems of this country, but that had, since the beginning, interlocutors in both Europe and America.”⁷

Emphasizing the deep cultural separation:

“I am against the world of A. Warhol and of the epigoni of today. I want to restore the climate experienced by the Cubists.

I am against the condition of paralysis to which the post-war period has reduced us: by contrast, I search among fragments (emotional and formal) for the scatterings of history.

I search dramatically for unity, although it is unattainable, although it is utopian, although it is impossible and, for all these reasons, dramatic.

I am against the aesthetics of catastrophe;

7. Jannis Kounellis, *Odyssee lagunaire: écrits et entretiens 1966-1989* (Paris: D. Lelong, 1990), 133, republished in Jannis Kounellis, *Odyssea lagunare* (Sellerio: Palermo, 1993), 98.



FIG. 10 Mario Schifano - Festa cinese, 1968

I am in favour of happiness; I search for the world of which our vigorous and noble 19th-century forebears left us examples of revolutionary form and content.

I am an admirer of Pollock, for his dramatic and impassionate search for identity.

I am an expert traveller, I know all the tortuous routes of my land of Europe, the mountain paths and the big cities, with their passionate stories and sagas.

I like the pyramids of Egypt, I like Caravaggio, I like Van Gogh, I like the Parthenon, I like Rembrandt, I like Kandinsky, I like Klimt, I like Goya, I like the impetus of the Winged Victory of Samothrace, I like medieval churches, I like the character of Ophelia as Shakespeare describes her and I honour the dead, thinking of myself that I am a modern artist."⁸

8. Jannis Kounellis, "Un uomo antico, un artista moderno", *Vardar*, no 2 (February 1982), republished in Kounellis, *ibid*, 92.

Here we perceive the restlessness of an enquiry far from that of overseas: semantic experimentation is combined with that vital sensitivity unveiled by the Cubists and explored by the Italian avant-gardes in Futurism. Kounellis, as well as other artists of his generation, finds in Futurism, Boccioni, and Malevič's suprematism the sense of a primary, dynamic impulse. He pursues this enthusiastic fervour, the vital impulse of the Futurist inquiry, within a mythography whose sources recall the authority of ancient models. It is an impulse contrary to the disconcerting emptiness of de Chirico's visions – deserted, crystallized, emptied of humanity, although consonant to Kounellis for the similarities in origin and lexicon. Both these models, the dynamic and the immutable, emerge from archetypal memory. They reveal fragments of classical elements, memories and simple echoes, discernible in the works of Pino Pascali, and in many others by Giulio Paolini, Luciano Fabro, Mario Schifano, Gilberto Zorio, Alighiero Boetti, Mario Ceroli, to name but a few.

These fragments do not only reveal a sensibility for lost classicism and the history of artistic practice, a sensibility different from that of the protagonists of American pop art in the use of materials, intention, form and gestures. A fragment of reality is for Europe a metaphysical vision of the real, a metonymic part of a more complex whole, while for the Americans it is a simulated reality, a hyperbolic reflection of consumer society. The same society that concurrently produces aesthetic detachment in the adoption of rigid symbols derived from elementary structures that impose themselves in architecture and bend nature to their will. Nonetheless America is omnipresent, as an ideal reference and at the same time a subject of political criticism for young Italians, as for Franco Angeli and his painted icons which simultaneously allude to the greatness of capitalism and the noble strength of the Roman Empire.

Starting in the late fifties, Rome is for the Americans an attractive harbour, drawn by the popular and dynamic environment, the thriving film industry and the mundane atmosphere; welcomed by Toti Scialoja and Gabriella Drudi, who act as a bridge between the two continents following their 1956 trip to the United States.⁹ Rome as a place of culture and extraordinary natural and historical beauty, but also popular spontaneity and candour; it beckons from an unfamiliar world still so firmly rooted in original authenticity. Rome that now relives the splendour of its past through the new film industry. Two artistic centres in Italy at the time, Rome and Turin, hedonistic and experimental the one, productive and industrial the other, are on the same wavelength in suggesting an elsewhere, a sense of space imagined with materials no longer belonging to art. Alterity is sought after and strongly desired, as once more Kounellis underlines, offering an enlightening confrontation between two American artists, between who chose to relate to the old world and who instead depicts the symbols and myths of the new: “[...] the difference between Cy Twombly’s painting and that of Lichtenstein: that of Cy lasts, because there is training to his gestures, in Cy there is something intimate, extremely intimate, while [Lichtenstein] has a much more external quality which leads him to that experience also in a critical sense [...]”¹⁰ Twombly, still sensitive to the echoes of the past, traces epic narratives translating them in a modern vocabulary, while Lichtenstein’s images reiterate idioms derived from comic strips. Even when the lexicons seem to stem from the same source or from codes of common origin, it is the imaginary dimension of being, that perception of a vital flow, which marks the separation between the two continents, making a distinction



FIG. 11 Marisa Merz - Living Sculpture, 1966

9. “Two months in New York. Met and frequented all the most thriving painters of the new school in New York. Friendship with De Kooning, Rothko, Guston, Motherwell and Marca Relli. Visit to the studios of Kline, Reinardt (sic), Vicente ... Befriended Jeanne Raynal, studied the paintings of Gorky in his collection, visited Pollock’s home in the East Hamptons, the places of his life and death...”, Toti Scialoja, “Un quadro è una cosa”, *L’esperienza moderna*, (1956) accessed June 25, 2018, http://www.trax.it/toti_scialoja.htm

10. From Jannis Kounellis, *Un villaggio pieno di rose*, interview by Carla Lonzi, from the catalogue of the exhibition *Kounellis, La Tartaruga Gallery, Rome 1966*, republished in Kounellis, *ibid*, 24.

between two planes of existence.

The fuse lit in 1968 shines for a brief season and as it burns risks exhausting its very own premises, as will inevitably transpire, markedly in politics. Nothing will be the same again, despite the attempts of restoration. This breath of fresh air will remain a conquest in every field; the combination of techniques and languages will produce new experiments, in cinema, theatre, visual arts and literature.

Yet yesterday's world – the one of bourgeoisie – is near, even more than China is. Forfeited illusions generate monsters, the impossibility of obtaining the impossible produces violent drifts in a “generation” that preaches love instead of war.

The moment of confluence between students, blue-collar workers, artists, intellectuals, philosophers, poets, filmmakers and playwrights is magical. It seems that the miracle of a “world saved by kids” is about to come true, and the diversions provided on the one hand by armed struggle and on the other by ashrams do not predominate. The hopeful stance of utopia prevails over that of monotonous bourgeois banality and unsettling dystopia. A new intellectual lingua franca¹¹ originates from the debates between Marxism, historicism and idealism; a language sensitive to phenomenology and existentialism, both identified as a basis for a new perception of experience understood in its pre-categorical form. In close proximity with “a philosophy of the organic process, founded on the inalienable reality of time and the interdependence of events,”¹² a stimulus for new confrontations with reality.

From Europe to America stylistic similitudes and analogies of varied origins cast the same message of subversion and vitality, definitely severing the boundary between object and concept. The idea of what is contemporary is crystallized through an encroachment on the space-time continuum: actuality and creation are now part of the same life experience particularly due to the dissolution of the normative model, the elimination of opposites, and the refusal of any artifice. New terrains are explored in the search for an original dimension, where ideas and terminology derived from anthropology, semantics, esotericism, and other worlds previously not associated by overarching aesthetic models, coexist and coalesce. An explosive charge of immeasurable dimensions that will sow the seeds for renewed utopias and propagate with extraordinary force in the coming and current generations.

11. Suffice to mention here only a few of the fundamental texts published at the time and very rapidly distributed in Italy, due to their translation being almost concurrent to their release in original language: Michel Foucault, *Les Mots et les Choses. Une archéologie des sciences humaines* (Paris: Gallimard, Bibliothèque des sciences humaines edition, 1966) [*Le parole e le cose: un'archeologia delle scienze umane*, translated by Emilio Panaitescu (Milan: BUR, 2006), 14 (I ed., Milan: Rizzoli, 1967)]. *L'Archéologie du savoir*, will be published in 1969 in the same French collection [*L'archeologia del sapere*], translated by Giovanni Bogliolo (Milan: Rizzoli, 1971). In 1966 there will be very interesting developments in the human sciences: Jacques Lacan's two volume book, *Écrits* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1966); the Italian translation of Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Mythologiques, t. I: Le Cru et le cuit* (Paris: Plon 1964) [*Mitologica I. Il crudo e il cotto*, translated by Andrea Bonomi (Milan: Il Saggiatore, 1966)] the second volume of *Mythologiques, Du miel aux cendres*, will be published in French for Plon editions in 1967; Gérard Genette, the first tome of *Figures* (1966-1972) (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, Tel Quel edition, 1966) [*Figure: retorica e strutturalismo*, (Turin: Einaudi, 1969)]; Algirdas Julien Greimas, *Sémantique structurale: recherche et méthode* (Paris: Larousse, 1966) [*La semantica strutturale: ricerca di metodo*, translated by Italo Sordi, Rizzoli (Milan, 1968)]; Roland Barthes, *Critique et Vérité* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1966 [*Critica e verità*, translated by Clara Lusignoli and Andrea Bonomi (Turin: Einaudi, 1969)]) and the Italian translation of *Éléments de sémiologie* (Paris: Denoël/Gonthier, 1965) [*Elementi di semiologia*, translated by Andrea Bonomi (Turin: Einaudi, 1966)]. Umberto Eco had already published the first version of *Opera aperta: Forma e indeterminazione nelle poetiche contemporanee* (Milan: Bompiani, 1962), an extremely important text for the poetics of the neo-avant-garde. He published in 1966 *Le poetiche di Joyce: dalla "Summa" al "Finnegans Wake"* (Milan: Bompiani, 1966) (edition then modified based on the second part of *Opera Aperta*, 1962) and *La struttura assente: introduzione alla ricerca semiologica* (Milan: Bompiani, 1968) and *La definizione dell'arte* (Milan: U. Mursia, 1967) witnesses the publication of *La fine dell'avanguardia* (*Appunti per una frase di Goldmann, per due versi di un testo di avanguardia, e per una intervista di Barthes*) by Pier Paolo Pasolini, “Nuovi Argomenti”, new series, no 3-4 subsequently also in Pier Paolo Pasolini, *Empirismo eretico* (Milan: Garzanti, 2000).

12. In Enzo Paci, *Dall'esistenzialismo al relazionismo* (Messina-Firenze: G. D'Anna, 1957), 15; cited in Guido Davide Neri, “Paci e Merleau-Ponty. Una testimonianza e qualche riflessione”, *Chiasmi International*, no 2 (2000).