Glasses on, pen in hand, glancing at the papers resting on his thighs with the serious air of a young intellectual. This is how Germano Celant appears in a photograph taken in the early days of October 1968 at the Antichi Arsenali in Amalfi. Celant – who died at the age of eighty on 29 April in Milan – had just inaugurated one of the fundamental exhibitions in the artistic landscape, *Arte povera + Azioni povere*. The exhibition, the “meeting” (an open-ended discussion between critics, artists and the audience which included the other four men in the photograph: Tommaso Trini, Achille Bonito Oliva, Filiberto Menna, and Marcello Rumma), and the actions performed by the artists under the gothic vaults of the Arsenali, in the streets of the coastal town or by the sea, represented the eruption of a spirit of radical novelty in which works and performances gave life to an anarchic mixture of materials, images, bodies, and thoughts. An unconventional and exemplary event, Amalfi initiated a model of the exhibition as a place where art “happens” in continuity with life.

Alongside other new names in the international art scene, most of the artists exhibited in Amalfi were part of the Arte Povera group launched by Celant in an exhibition at La Bertesca in Genoa the year before. In Celant’s manifesto *Arte povera. Appunti per una guerriglia*, (“Arte Povera. Notes for a guerrilla war”) published in November 1967 in Flash Art, he drew a map of the most recent Italian artistic research which underscored its revolutionary impulse against the expressive languages, ideas and institutions of art. The title’s provocative reference to guerrilla warfare recalls the opposition strategy that Umberto Eco defined as “semiological guerrilla warfare” in a conference in New York in 1967 which gave an active role to individual reception, against the manipulation operated by the mass
media. Eco’s opposition to the dominant codes of communication and his empowerment of the recipient of the messages, originally proposed to counteract dominant social and political models, becomes in Celant’s text an invitation to overcome the passive condition that condemns the artist to just “perfect the social structure, never to modify and revolutionize it”. The Arte Povera artist “becomes a guerrilla, wants to choose the place of combat, to possess the advantages of mobility, to surprise and to strike.” With its demand for essentiality and authenticity, Arte Povera (the epithet was at least in part derived from the notion of “poor theatre”, i.e. the ascetic and essential, coined by Jerzy Grotowski) is therefore “engaged with contingency, with the event, with the a-historic, with the present”. It rejects categories and labels and tends towards “formative and compositional, anti-systematic liberations, aimed at the identification of man-world”, in which “man is the fulcrum and the focus of research, no longer the means and the instrument”.

The most recent research on Arte Povera has helped to strip Celant’s position of the inevitable ideological emphasis of the 1967 manifesto, while also lessening its political value. It’s also recognized the great differences between the different artists in the “group”, who were in reality a constellation of heterogeneous personalities each with their own individual paths and poetics. And yet the strength of Celant’s original intuition remains irrefutable. With Arte Povera one can well say that a new, complex, and unpredictable course began for Italian art. For an entire generation of artists and critics, this was a transformative moment in which Celant simultaneously interpreted all its crucial traits and set a new cultural standard: the unavoidable internationality of the art scene, the rise of the independent curator, the new pre-eminence of exhibition-making over the traditional text, and an increasingly direct relationship with artists.

An important book with an innovative graphic layout, Arte povera was published in several languages in 1969 (its English title: Art Povera. Conceptual, Actual or Impossible Art?) and further highlighted the young critic’s ability to create long-range connections and firmly position Italian experiences in the landscape of European and American environmental and post-minimalist studies. However, a change of perspective is already perceptible in the book. Celant dropped the metaphor of guerrilla warfare and adopted a new critical stance, in which “magic” and a sensitivity to the archetypal and mythological aspects of artistic practices takes the place of collective mobilization and revolutionary change. This symptomatic change of critical perspective becomes more noticeable as we move away from 1968. Celant would reiterate and refine these opinions in the following decades, especially from Arte Povera’s reboot in the United States with the 1985 exhibition The Knot: Arte Povera at PS1 onwards. The last chapter of Celant’s involvement with Arte Povera has been the extensive retrospective of Jannis Kounellis, the first since the death of the artist, at Prada Foundation in Venice in 2019.

Celant’s ideal is a form of “critica acritica” (or “uncritical criticism”), which goes hand-in-hand with art, discarding any intellectual hierarchy and rejecting the ideological judgment and prescriptive attitude typical of critics of the previous generation such as Giulio Carlo Argan. These positions were expressed in November 1970 in an article for the magazine N4C in which Celant proposed replacing the practice of interpretation, and its inevitably authoritarian aspects, with a new mode based on “listening” to the work, according to the ideas put
forward by Susan Sontag in a widely read essay, Against interpretation (1964) which he also quoted in the article. “What is important now is to recover our senses. We must learn to see more, to hear more, to feel more”, Sontag wrote. “Collecting”, “archiving”, and “recording” must therefore replace the “text”, denying the latter its power. This stance also incidentally reflects a cultural shift towards a divorce between criticism and art history that took place in Italy after ’68 and would represent a serious limit for the reception of contemporary artistic culture in subsequent decades. The figure of the curator became an essential reference for Celant – whose Idealtypus is realised in Harald Szeemann – as achieving on all levels an “immediate” relationship with art practices.

Celant always preferred a precise description of the works and a close analysis of the artists’ poetics to the demanding writing style and intransigence of the old school. He also showed little interest – unlike his eloquent and omnivorous peer Achille Bonito Oliva – for broader theoretical or historical considerations. For this reason, perhaps the best part of his production consists of solid documentation as is evidenced by books such as Precronistoria 1966-1969 (1976, since republished by Quodlibet in 2017), a chronological and documentary collection dedicated to the new international art scene, and Offmedia (1977), which investigates new artistic media like books, records and films. The best example of this methodology remains the catalogue of the exhibition Identité italienne at the Centre Pompidou (1981), an example of a narrative in which the synoptic reading of artistic, cultural and political events becomes an instrument of interpretation and the (contested) construction of a canon.

In a volume dedicated to Giulio Paolini in 1972, Celant adopted the monograph as his favourite format. This choice, as evidenced by the numerous publications produced in over four decades, soon became central to his work. By writing about an artist whose practice was still developing (Paolini was only thirty-two) rather than established masters, Celant not only demonstrated a critical farsightedness but also crucial insight. For art has abandoned the modernist rule of tabula rasa and the permanent revolution of languages; art is now characterized by a plurality of alternatives to be observed and validated as soon as they appear. The monograph, once the posthumous ratification of an œuvre, becomes the moment of its formation, at the same time establishing the coordinates of that rhizomatic, indefinite, horizontal condition, synthesized in the syntagma “contemporary art”.

On the other hand, Celant’s subsequent career reflects the increasingly rapid incorporation of the most recent artistic research into the circuit of major institutions and big galleries – an “artworld” in which the curator becomes a respected and efficient professional figure. Celant remained a leading figure in this panorama until his death: he became a curator at the Guggenheim in New York, where he staged important retrospectives (Mario Merz, 1989) and spectacular shows, such as the much-discussed The Italian Metamorphosis: 1943-1968 (1994), an ambitious attempt to narrate in post-ideological form a period in Italian cultural history from the rubble of the war to the peak of the boom by widening the view from art to cinema, design and fashion. This is the model, seductive and risky, of a multidisciplinary approach adopted more recently in Arts & Foods at Milan’s Triennale (2015), an exhibition whose size, ambition and cost did not fail to provoke controversy. At the Fondazione Prada, which he had directed since 1995, his interest in documentary excavation and historical narration has found even broader implementation in ambitious projects such as The Small Utopia: Ars
**Multiplicata** (2012), an extensive survey of artist’s books, multiples and editions in 20th century art. Even more symptomatic of this curatorial approach was the remake (but perhaps it would be better to say the appropriation) of Harald Szeemann’s famous 1969 exhibition *When Attitudes Become Form* (2013), and above all *Post Zang Tumb Tuuum* (2018), an extensive reconstruction of Italian art between the two wars that nevertheless highlighted, beyond a setting that was all too impact-oriented, an evasive approach to the historical and political issues raised by the show itself.

An assessment of Celant’s life should take into account all the aspects that have come to intertwine in his personality from the very beginning, marked by his university studies with Eugenio Battisti in Genoa and his work for *Marcatrè*, one of the most authoritative multidisciplinary magazines of the time, of which he became editorial secretary in 1963. Only in this way is it possible to account for a character who could bring together the faithful companion of the artists and the strategic organizer, the passionate collector of documents and testimonies (and I hope that his extraordinary personal archive will now be preserved and made accessible) and the connoisseur at the service of a sophisticated cultural industry. This ambivalence is structural in the art scene and the culture of late capitalism in general, and Celant has long physically embodied its characteristics and contradictions. True to what he wrote in the Amalfi catalogue, for him criticism has always been pragmatically equivalent to the “immediate realization of a result, action or event, [...] not only as a dimension of the preferable and the hypothetical, but as an event in progress with the present and contingent reality”.

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