

Many Cities, One Providence—

OPERATION 24 PAGES:

A PUBLIC ART INTERVENTION

IN 1970s ITALY @ Hunt-Cavanagh Gallery,

PROVIDENCE COLLEGE

GALLERIES.

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Guest Curated by Dr. Martina Tanga

Exhibition Essay

In 1973, the art historian and curator Enrico Crispolti brought together an unlikely group of contemporary Italian artists—Fernando De Filippi, Ugo Nespolo, Umberto Mariani, Fabrizio Plessi, Sergio Sarri, Francesco Somaini, Valeriano Trubbiani, and Emilio Vedova—for an unprecedented urban art intervention. He commissioned them to create posters that he installed in pre-existing advertising spaces in cities across the country. The title for this extramural and disseminated exhibition was *Dissuasione Manifesta: Operazione 24 fogli* (Manifest Dissuasion: Operation 24 pages). The goal was twofold: to infiltrate the system of commercial advertisement with art and overturn the mechanisms of communication in urban space. While ads operated with subliminal messages to inconspicuously persuade consumers to buy commodity products, Crispolti employed art to do the opposite, to reveal the power of coercion by presenting ephemeral visual imagery untethered to a tangible art object. In one single move, Crispolti sought to disrupt and challenge channels of communication both inside and outside the art world by blurring the boundaries of the elite status of art and commodity culture.

The eight artists that participated in this endeavor were of different generations, working in various cities and circulating within different artistic groups. De Filippi, Mariani, Sarri, and Somaini, for instance, were based in Milan, while Plessi and Vedova had their practice in Venice. Moreover, neither medium, style, or approach connected the Milanese artists: De Filippi was a conceptual artist, Mariani was an abstract painter, Sarri had made his name as an innovative Pop artist, and Somaini worked as a sculptor. Likewise, Plessi was an emerging artist with a hybrid practice that was conceptual, sculptural, and associated with the Pop art movement, while Vedova was an older artist and had promoted the social importance of abstraction in the 1950s. Trubbiani and Nespolo were also seemingly disconnected from the others. Trubbiani was a sculptor who often created site-specific installations in the urban environment based in Ancona, which is in the Marche region in central Italy. Nespolo was a Turin-based artist who had worked closely with the Arte Povera artists and gravitated towards the curator Germano Celant in the late 1960s. During the 1970s, Nespolo was primarily concerned with language and graphics. This diverse selection of artists shows that Crispolti was not interested in bringing together a cohesive group of artists with a clearly defined aesthetic for this exhibition. Instead, he embraced a radical, non-hierarchical curatorial approach, disregarding the values and logics internal to the art world. The result was an unusual and visually complex exhibition. Drawing on a variety of divergent languages, from Abstraction to Realism, Conceptual to Pop art, Crispolti flooded the urban environment with a multitude of visual messages.

Operazione 24 fogli was not only diverse in terms of artists but also for its geographic

installation. Between 1973 and 1979, Crispolti sited the intervention in eight cities, in the northern, central, and southern regions of the peninsula. In chronological order they were: Volterra in Tuscany (1973), Macerata and Fano both in the Marche (1974), Milan in Lombardy (1974), Capo d'Orlando in Sicily (1975), Como again in Lombardy (1975), Salerno in Campania (1975), and lastly Livorno, also in Tuscany (1979). The urban environment in each of these sites differed enormously; some were small provincial towns while others large metropolitan spaces. Further, Italy's culture and urban sensibilities varied greatly from North to South. Whereas the North was known as the industrial capital of the nation, the South was characterized by an agricultural economy. This impacted the shape and sensibility of the urban environment, and how people inhabited it. By extension, this must have also impacted citizens' reactions to Crispolti's urban exhibition, understanding it in terms of their geographic and cultural specificity. Perhaps it was indeed Crispolti's intention to test his urban experiment in different geographic locations to consider those varied contexts.

Crispolti's urban art intervention needs to be understood in the broader context of a developing art movement called *Arte Ambientale* (Environmental Art). During the 1970s, Italian artists reimagined the boundaries of art and generated conceptual and participatory interventions situated directly in the city streets. Their experimentation emerged during a decade of cultural crisis, when fierce domestic terrorism aggravated an already fragile political situation. Moreover, the failure of the preceding decade's utopian aspirations, culminating in the 1968 student and labor movements, made conditions tenuous for the avant-garde. *Arte Ambientale* artists reacted by embracing a position of artistic autonomy and social critique to confront the widespread sense of malaise. Their work engaged with cultural patrimony, social actuality, and political contingency at a time when the lines between public art and protest were increasingly indistinct. Crispolti was a key protagonist in *Arte Ambientale*, curating salient exhibitions like *Volterra '73*, held in the Tuscan town of Volterra in 1973, and *Ambiente Come Sociale* (Environment as Social) in the Italian Pavilion of the 1976 Venice Biennale. *Operazione 24 fogli* fit neatly within these initiatives, as it challenged the art institutional sphere, was defined by its urban setting, and was political in its intention and scope. Nevertheless, it is perhaps a stretch to define all the artists that participated in this urban intervention as *Arte Ambientale* artists, as they all had distinct artistic practices and careers.

Crispolti's objective with *Operazione 24 fogli* was to activate audiences outside the confines of the art establishment. For him the aim was, as with all *Arte Ambientale*, to awaken citizens to their everyday environment and to ultimately be more participant in their social, urban, and apolitical lives. Operating from a decidedly leftist political spectrum, Crispolti instrumentalized art in the city to counter the numbing effects of the capitalist system. Yet, specifically in relation to this project, his framework for the extension of art in urban space was still defined against the traditional medium of painting, which he saw as the embodiment of the elitist circuit of art displayed in galleries and museums.¹ In the form of posters, Crispolti saw the flat image of painting

as breaking free of its ivory tower by appropriating the mechanisms of circulation of consumer mass images. Moreover, subversion between the realms of art and commodity products went both ways: it not only questioned the aura of art by negating an original painterly object and circulating as a multiple, but also challenged the message of commodity culture, imploding it from the inside, critiquing the inimical, inconspicuous agenda of consumer advertisements.

Indeed, the title of the exhibition, *Operazione 24 fogli*, comes from the film industry's advertisement posters, which typically comprised of twenty-four paper sheets, each measuring 100 x 70 centimeters (39 x 27 inches), which were pasted together onto billboards or walls. Crispolti, therefore, was adhering to a standard design tradition that was embedded in Italian twentieth-century material culture. The first film to have an accompanying poster was the *La Presa di Roma* (The Seize of Rome) from 1905, and since then, the business considered it paramount to promote the spectacular nature its product through the monumental poster format.² Advertisements—for films and commodity products—only increased in ubiquity with the economic boom of the 1950s and '60s, a phenomenon that is also known as the *miracolo economico*, or economic miracle. Up until this time, Italy had a largely rural economy and many inhabitants did not live in large metropolitan areas. This meant that the majority of the Italian population was not influenced by ads in urban spaces.³ But by the 1970s, large poster advertisements were part of the everyday visual field in the city with products to buy and movies to watch, and Crispolti was responding to this new visual, urban language, and subverting it.

It is also important to consider *Operazione 24 fogli* in terms of the twentieth-century historical narrative, and anterior and posterior avant-garde experiments that attempted to disrupt the boundaries between art and commodity. Precursors to this operation can be found in the experiments of the French Situationist International group working in the 1950s. Particularly, aesthetic strategies of *détournement*—integrating art forms in non-art contexts for the purpose of turning expressions of capitalist systems and their media cultures against themselves—finds resonance with Crispolti's 1973 exhibition. More recently in the 1990s, artists like Felix Gonzales Torres used billboards as sites for the installation of his work. Between February 20 and March 18, 1991, the artist's *Untitled (Bed)* punctuated the New York skyline, on six billboards throughout Manhattan, Brooklyn, and Queens. With locations ranging from 10th Avenue near the Javits Center to the far corners of Brighton Beach, the work reached diverse populations and altered the associated media landscapes. Drawing a bridge between the 1950s and the 1990s, *Operazione 24 fogli* broadens our understanding of how artists have used public space and sites typically reserved for advertising to reach a broad audience while subverting traditional channels of media communication.

Yet, how can we frame and understand the display of art in this de-contextualized urban space? Crispolti, perhaps naively, considered the art poster's visual imagery as a

liberated form of expression by occupying the spaces of advertisements without selling a commodity product. In their new location, however, these artworks still carried with them the meanings and associations they did in the art institutional sphere. Moreover, they conveyed different discourses set by the artists' agenda for a visual language. For instance, Vedova's poster ultimately spoke of his belief that gestural abstraction could express a socialist outlook. Likewise, Plessi's giant sponge, photomontaged onto Venice's Grand Canal, alerted audiences to burgeoning environmental concerns. Perhaps the most complex was Sarri's art poster, as the artist subverted yet again the language of Pop Art by appropriating the very graphics of advertisements, which in turn, were returned to the spaces of billboards as non-selling-products art posters.

Ultimately, Crispolti's exhibition was groundbreaking as it was the first extended initiative, on a nation-wide scale, to displace art outside of the gallery circuit and insert it within the mechanisms of advertisement to undermine the economies of both the art establishment and consumerism. The Situationist International in Paris also attempted this endeavor, in theory, but the artworks they produced circulated only within the discourse of the art world and did not enter the terrain of the urban environment. A further difference is there was much more coherence within the Situationist International, while the abiding common denominator for these artists was Crispolti. Crispolti's curatorial voice for *Operazione 24 fogli* complicated each visual product, which cannot be understood as only operating within the artist's vision. Certainly, what the exhibition did offer these artists was an alternative and expansive platform from which to communicate to Italy's broader publics.

–Martina Tanga

Endnotes

- 1 Enrico Crispolti, *Arti visive e partecipazione sociale* (Bari: De Donato, 1977), 57-60.
- 2 Roberto Della Torre, *Invito al cinema: le origini del manifesto cinematografico italiano (1895-1930)* (Milano : EDUCatt, 2014), 39-40.
- 3 Teresa Fogliani, Rosaria Paci, and Anna Maria Fogliani. *Lettura e scrittura del manifesto pubblicitario: codifica e decodifica del messaggio* (Catania: C.U.E.C.M., 2003), 31.

Artist Biographies

Fernando De Filippi

Born in Lecce in 1940; lives and works in Milan

De Filippi is a conceptual artist whose practice encompassed film, performance, photography, painting, installation, and public sculpture. Using linguistics and re-appropriated imagery, his work questions ideology, identity, and constructions of reality. Particularly during the 1970s, De Filippi focused on urban posters as an art form that infiltrated existing channels of communication, such as advertisements and political slogans, to disrupt and subvert conventional modes of artistic expression.

De Filippi studied painting with Enzo Morelli and Film with Tito B. Varisco. He graduated from the Accademia delle Belle Arti di Brera in 1964. The artist has exhibited since 1959, notably at the Studio Sant'Andrea in Milan; Palais des Beaux-Arts, Brussels, XXXVII Venice Biennale; Kala Institute, Berkeley, California; New Gallery Museum Department, La Valletta, Malta.

Umberto Mariani

Born in Milan in 1936; lives and works in Milan

Mariani is a painter whose work came to prominence in the early 1960s for his exploration of three-dimensionality. His work is associated with the Spatialism movement of the Italian post-war avant-garde. He is best known for his shaped canvases with multidimensional folds of fabric carved out of lead sheets. These were inspired by the Classical Greek statues he observed during his training. Fascinated by the folds of textiles carved out from the hard white marble, Mariani experimented with different compositions and techniques to manipulate the painterly surface, exploring illusions of light and shadow.

Mariani studied with neoclassical painter Achille Funi and graduated from the Accademia di Brera in 1958. In the 1970s he exhibited widely in Europe at institutions such as the Palais des Beaux-Arts in Brussels and the Musée Moderne in Paris. He is represented by Opera Gallery and has shown work at their gallery in Hong Kong and Monaco.

Ugo Nespolo

Born in Mosso, Biella in 1941; lives and works in Turin

Emerging as an artist in the early 1960s, Nespolo was an initial member of Arte Povera,

exhibiting language-based artworks and sculptures at the “Il Punto” Gallery, Turin and Schwarz Gallery, Milan. He was also involved with Fluxus and, together with Ben Vautier, organized in Turin a series of Fluxus events in 1968. Nespolo was an early experimenter of avant-garde film, making his first movie, “Grazie, mamma Kodak” in 1966. Throughout the 1970s, he filmed artists such as Enrico Baj, Alighiero Boetti, Lucio Fontana, Mario Merz, and Michelangelo Pistoletto. Playfulness, irony, and color are recurring themes throughout Nespolo’s multimedia career.

Nespolo studied with the painter Enrico Paolucci and graduated from the Accademia Albertina di Belle Arti of Turin in 1963. He also obtained a degree in Modern Literature at the University in Turin, with a thesis on Semiology. He has exhibited his work widely, including, the Centre Pompidou in Paris; Philadelphia Museum of Modern Art; Tate Modern, London; Peggy Guggenheim Collection, Venice. Since the 1980s, he has engaged in high-profile advertising campaigns for companies such as Fiat, Ferrari, Swatch, and Campari.

Fabrizio Plessi

Born in Reggio nell’Emilia in 1940; lives and works in Venice and Palma de Mallorca

Influenced by Pop Art and Conceptualism, Plessi has focused much of his artwork on the theme of water. He has been interested in the material as an element, a precious resource, and, living in Venice, he was an early investigator of water ecology. A pioneer in the use of video in the 1960s, Plessi experimented with different visuals of water in the form video sculptures and video installations that combined, with great evocative power, monitors with wood or iron structures, objects or materials.

Plessi trained as a painter with Giuseppe Santomaso at the Accademia di Belle Arti di Venezia, graduating in 1962. Plessi’s work has been exhibited extensively in one-person shows at institutions like the Centre Pompidou in Paris (1982), the Guggenheim in New York (1998), the San Diego Museum of Contemporary Art (1998), and the Guggenheim in Bilbao (2001). In 1987, his celebrated installation Roma took part in the *Documenta VIII* in Kassel. In 2011 Plessi represented the Italian pavilion at the Venice Biennale Pavilion with the exhibition *Mari Verticali*.

Sergio Sarri

Born in Turin in 1938; he lives and works in Milan

Sarri is a painter who came to prominence in the 1960s Milanese Pop Art scene. His work explores the relationship between man and machine, a theme that developed as early as 1965 after a trip to America. Inspired by mass-media, advertising, television, and cinema, Sarri’s canvases have become increasingly complex, where the human

body and fantastical machines parts are fragmented and intertwined. The artist’s representations are characterized by a retro color palette and crisp contours that critically emphasize our increasing dependence on robotics and machines. Sarri studied painting in Bern, Switzerland, and Paris, France in the late 1950s. He has received significant awards including: Premio Suzzara (1967), Premio Bollate (1967), Premio Ramazzotti (1967), Premio Campigna (1973); invited to the XXXVI International Biennial of Art in Venice (1972), XI Quadrennial National Art of Rome (1986), Premio Sulmona (1991). His works can be found in numerous public and private collections, including the Museum of Modern Art, Bologna; Museum of Contemporary Art, Varese; Grafick Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, Holland; G. Fall Collection, Paris; M. Montserrat Collection, New York, U.S.A; and Buffalo Art Gallery, Center for the Arts, U.S.A. From 1994 to 1997 he was the professor of artistic anatomy at the Brera Academy of Milan.

Francesco Somaini

Born in Lomazzo in 1926; died in Como in 2005

Somaini was an abstract sculptor who began his career began in the 1950s and was associated with the Informel inspired, Italian Movimento d’Arte Concreta (MAC) movement in Milan. In the 1960s he shifted his preoccupations to urban space and conceived of monumental structures that could counter the alienating effects of the modern metropolis. Unable to realize his enormous, utopian constructions Somaini turned to photomontage, during the 1970s, as a primary means of sculptural expression. From the mid-1980s onwards, the artist turned to large-scale, public commissions made of traditional materials such as marble and bronze.

In 1949, upon completing a law degree at the Università di Pavia, Somaini attended Giacomo Manzù’s courses at the Accademia di Belle Arti di Brera in Milan. He presented his first sculptures at the 1948 Quadriennale in Rome, and, in 1950, he participated in the Venice Biennale. At the Biennale of São Paulo of Brazil (1959), he was awarded the first international prize for sculpture. Notable among Somaini’s many one-person shows were presentations organized by the Wilhelm Lehmbruck Museum, Duisburg (1979); Palazzo di Brera, Milan (1997); Castel Pergine, Trento (2000); and *Somaini, Sculture, dipinti e disegni 1950-2001*, Como (2002). In 2007, the Galleria Nazionale d’Arte Moderna e Contemporanea, Rome, mounted Somaini’s first posthumous retrospective exhibition.

Valeriano Trubbiani

Born in Macerata in 1937; lives and works in Ancona

Trubbiani is a sculptor and draftsman, whose work is characterized by metaphysical themes involving man’s relationship with nature. Since the mid-sixties, the artist

created iron welded sculptural installations that focus on recurring cycles: The War Machines of the Sixties, the dense Parade of animals, the mysterious monumental cities of the Tales of land, the Tales of water and sea. From a tradition of blacksmithing in the Marche countryside, Trubbiani's work engages with the effects of Italy's post-war modernity on the slow pace of rural life, folklore, and mythology. During the 1970s he created spatial sculptures using ropes, laces, nails, and binding mechanisms to sadistically capture helpless animals, swallows, ducks, oxen, evoking fantastical narratives on the delicate balance between man and his pastoral environment.

After earning a degree from the Institute of Art of Macerata in 1956, Trubbiani came to Rome where he attended the Academy of Fine Arts from 1959 to 1960 and was connected to sculptors like Edgardo Mangucci and Gino Marotta. He has exhibited extensively, including the Biennale of young artists, Paris (1963); the Biennale of São Paulo of Brazil (1965); Venice Biennale (1966, 1972, 1976); and the European Sculpture Triennial, Paris (1978).

Emilio Vedova

Born in Venice in 1919; died in Venice in 2006

Vedova was an abstract, expressionist painter, prominent in the Postwar period. He was radical in both politics and technique, fusing socialism with abstraction. In 1942, he joined the Milanese anti-Fascist artists' association Corrente (Current, 1938–43), which also included Renato Birolli, Renato Guttuso, Ennio Morlotti, and Umberto Vittorini. In 1946 he co-signed the manifesto *Beyond Guernica*, which urged artists to engage with reality without being naturalistic, and he was also a founding member of the Fronte Nuovo delle Arti (New art front, 1946–50), in Venice. He is known for his large, almost environmental, canvases filled with wild brushstrokes of smeared, poured, and dripped paint, with titles referencing explicit political content, like *Protest Cycle*, *Universal Manifesto*, and *Korea*.

Primarily a self-taught artist, he attended for a short period the evening decoration classes at the Carmini school. Vedova's first solo show in the United States was held at the Catherine Viviano Gallery in New York in 1951. In the same year, he was awarded the prize for young painters at the first Biennale of São Paulo of Brazil. In 1952 he participated in the *Gruppo degli Otto*. Vedova was represented at the first *Documenta* exhibition in Kassel in 1955 and won a Guggenheim International Award in 1956.

Curator Biography

Dr. Martina Tanga is a curator and art historian with an interest in art that engages with social concerns, feminism, and the built environment. She is a specialist in Italian 20th-century Italian art, and her book, titled *Arte Ambientale, Urban Space, and Participatory Art*, to be released by Routledge Press, examines radical artistic practices situated in Italy's 1970s urban landscape. She has held positions at deCordova Sculpture Park and Museum in Lincoln, Massachusetts and the Worcester Art Museum, Worcester, Massachusetts. Tanga earned her BA and MA in the History of Art from University College London and a Ph.D. in the History of Art and Architecture from Boston University.

Providence College Galleries (PC–G)

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Operation 24 pages: A Public Art Intervention In 1970s Italy is presented as part of PC–G's Many Cities, One Providence, an exhibition series offering Providence audiences idiosyncratic glimpses of innovative contemporary artists working in cities near and far. The series stems from PC–G's interest in cultivating relationships with artists, scholars and arts communities from around the world in order to draw connections between the city of Providence and other urban contexts.

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