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## Introduction

This book is about 1960s Italian art and its troubled, but also resourceful relation to the history and politics of the first part of the century and the aftermath of World War II. It rewrites the history of Italian art of that decade, exploring, but also reproducing the ambiguities and temporal switchbacks that the artists themselves performed — my method adopts and adapts strategies that I identify in the works. My account is mostly structured by the flashback and the eclipse — two forms of nonlinear and decidedly nonpresentist forms of temporality — as well as by flashbacks within flashbacks in the form of a *mise en abyme*. Although some of the flashbacks might appear fanciful, my method is fundamentally archival. Both flashbacks and eclipses are, without fail, historically specific. They are efforts to recover what the established, more linear narratives have left out. At the same time, these temporal models complicate chronology. What are being recalled in flashbacks and at other moments occluded in the art of the 1960s are not only episodes of Italian nationalism and Fascism, but also various liberatory moments of political and cultural resistance: the political imaginary of 1960s Italian art.

The word “imaginary” appears in the subtitle as a noun, rather than an adjective. It signifies ways in which a social group images its history, its nation, its geography, its institutions, its laws, its symbols, and its place in the world. Here, I hope to offer a model to those

cultural and political historians who are increasingly thinking about how the past is processed *in* images. The book achieves its revision of existing accounts through analysis not only of artworks, but also of the images that mediated these artworks, including photo books and shots of exhibitions. Some images are culled from films. I also attend to works' critical and often poetic reception.

The book is full of images virtually unknown to English-language readers. It is centered geographically and mnemonically on Italy, but some of its imaginaries are not: they include, notably, those of Paris and New York. Thus, even though it deals with just one decade and one country, it is resonant with European and American postwar culture at large. It is Italian, but also concerned, at moments, with geopolitics. Italian art, with its political preoccupations, invites such an approach, but this book more broadly aims to offer a general paradigm of how artworks and images redouble or even triple their artistic and political contexts.

My main protagonists are, in order of appearance, the artists Michelangelo Pistoletto and Giosetta Fioroni, the photographer Ugo Mulas, Ettore Sottsass (as a critic, rather than a designer), the graphic designer Bruno Munari, the curators Luciano Caramel and Achille Bonito Oliva, the architect Piero Sartogo, Carla Lonzi (as an artist, rather than a critic), the filmmakers Michelangelo Antonioni and Bernardo Bertolucci, and, in flashback among the departed, the Novecento painter Felice Casorati, the writer Massimo Bontempelli, the art historian Aby Warburg, the architect Giuseppe Terragni, and the Renaissance friar-philosopher-mathematician Giordano Bruno (as patron saint of the sixty-eighters).

My project began somewhat serendipitously with what became this book's first chapter: the detection of narrative plots in images of Pistoletto's *Mirror Paintings*—life-size cutouts of people and mundane objects made of thin, translucent paper and placed on the reflective surface of polished stainless steel—when they appeared on the pages of art magazines, exhibition leaflets or catalogues, and books during the 1960s. In the *Mirror Paintings*, the viewer and



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anything that happens to be placed in front of the sheet of steel become part of the scene.<sup>1</sup> Creating an image of these artworks required a specific technique. In order to photograph these paintings without being included in the picture, one would have to move sideways and shoot at an angle. Any images one sees of the *Mirror Paintings* unencumbered by glimpses of the photographer himself or herself have been airbrushed, as they have been in most color reproductions featured in Pistoletto's post-1960s publications. When I told Pistoletto himself that I was interested in what was captured in the 1960s photographs of his works, he was attentive, but ultimately perplexed; he protested that "the *Mirror Paintings* are impossible to photograph: you lose the dynamic of the present. The photos are nothing but a collateral effect." But this "collateral effect"<sup>2</sup> and its relation to what is omitted in "the dynamic of the present" were precisely what interested me, and it became paradigmatic of my approach to the Italian 1960s as a whole via the flashback and the eclipse.

While the flashback reveals something that has been omitted, the eclipse reveals by omission. The two can be seen as opposites, but also as complementary. Constantly flipping between the two, the format of this book functions like a device or *dispositif*.

A flashback refers to the intervention of the past in the present flow of a narrative. Flashbacks are used in literature and film to recount events that happened before the story's primary sequence of events, to fill in crucial backstory. As Maureen Turim explains in *Flashbacks in Film: Memory and History*, "The flashback is a privileged moment in unfolding that juxtaposes different moments of temporal reference. A juncture is wrought between present and past and two concepts are implied in this juncture: memory and history. The analysis of flashbacks in film is first of all a history of formal changes in storytelling techniques."<sup>3</sup> Citing Leslie Halliwell's *Filmgoer's Companion*, Turim calls flashback "a break in chronological narrative during which we are shown events of past time which bear on the present situation."<sup>4</sup> In film, various camera techniques and special effects have

been employed to alert the viewer that the action shown is from the past; the edges of the picture may be deliberately blurred, the cinematography may become jarring or choppy, or unusual coloration may be used. There are, moreover, various types of flashbacks: multiple flashbacks, embedded flashbacks, disruptive or abrupt modernist flashbacks, all of which exemplify the self-reflexivity of the medium.<sup>5</sup> Key to the flashback is the collapse of the distinction made between history (a generic linear narrative) and story or plot (the inscription of events as they appear in the personal, subjective narrative of an artwork). The flashback is simultaneously historical and subjective.<sup>6</sup>

Often associated with 1960s Italy due to the title of Michelangelo Antonioni's most famous film, *L'eclisse*, made in 1962, the eclipse is less readily discernable as a visual and temporal device. A solar eclipse (such as that in Antonioni's film) is a planetary alignment in which the moon blots out the sun from the perspective of those on earth. But even at the moment of total occlusion, a trace of the sun's glow remains visible behind the dark disk of the moon. This vestige of what lies behind the moon draws attention to what is being momentarily hidden. It is dangerous to stare at an eclipse: although one isn't immediately aware of it, the solar rays that escape around the edges of the moon can excoriate the eye. Eclipses have been regarded as bad omens. Observers experience unease at the untimely disappearance of sunlight and the eerie light that remains. Difficult to photograph, an eclipse also mimics, in cosmic terms, the movement of a camera's shutter opening and closing as it captures its subject. In doing so, eclipses seem to turn the world into an image-making apparatus.<sup>7</sup> This photographic (and filmic) nature of the flashback and eclipse is why my analysis is largely mediated by black-and-white photographs: those culled from art, design, and architecture magazines such as *Domus*, those of photo books, and shots of exhibitions already installed, in contrast to exhibition catalogues, which are almost always produced beforehand.

An eclipse, once it is recognized as such, can mask a flashback. And a flashback can include, nested in it, either another flashback or an eclipse. When nested, they produce an effect of a *mise en abyme*. The

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reduplication of the same image within the image itself — be it a painting within a painting, a film within a film, or a text within a text — *mise en abyme* is also common in dreams, as when we dream that we are dreaming. In an article published in *Art International* in 1975, the art historian Valentina Anker and the literary critic Lucien Dällenbach proposed the *mise en abyme* as a key strategy of recent art. They noted that most artists, rather than manually and painstakingly replicating an image in paint, opted for the mirrored surface as a shortcut.<sup>8</sup> Dällenbach went on to propose that the *mise en abyme* and the mirror are interchangeable.<sup>9</sup>

Dällenbach posits that not only do the stories within the stories produced by the *mise en abyme* necessarily disrupt the development of chronology, but the *mise en abyme* also produces either a semantic compression or a semantic dilation of the thematic content of the main story and that of the story contained within it.<sup>10</sup> Although fleeting, the flashbacks and eclipses produced by the works in this book triggered such a response on the part of art critics. They loosened fingers upon typewriter keys. Hence the many quotes that I include from contemporary reviews, translated here into English for the first time. The quotes themselves perform some of the flashbacks and eclipses that structure the book.<sup>11</sup>

A number of the connections I make between artists and events, especially in the longer flashbacks, might appear to be a stretch, the result of associative thinking, and indeed, many of the flashbacks and eclipses in this book are mine, but a degree of speculation is within the logic of the visual thinking on which this study is founded. Flashbacks and eclipses are by nature investigative. They complicate narrative. They do not merely deliver meaning, but also generate it. The images know more than we do. The artworks and the images thereof generate both real and imagined narratives about the connection between the present and the past that historians cannot grasp with documents alone. Flashbacks and eclipses are mostly involuntary — each realization hit me, visually, in an unexpected manner, a testament to the power that artworks and images of artworks have

to attract one another. I thus capture mental images that are visually vivid, momentary, and fleeting — hence the elliptical quality of some of this book’s passages. Some degree of decontextualization and elliptical writing is necessary for a flashback to remain a flashback and for an eclipse to remain an eclipse.

As a result, while each chapter in this book involves discrete episodes, they resolutely do not constitute “case studies.” This is because flashbacks, eclipses, and the resulting *mises en abyme* at work in each chapter end up rearranging and enfolding the overall narrative in ways that make the chapters overlap with one another, thus constituting the book as a whole. This introduction provides a prequel explaining *why* Italian artists, critics, gallerists, and curators wanted to revisit their recent past obliquely, through flashbacks and eclipses, and why this should have happened during the 1960s.

That impulse derived from the fact that the artistic avant-gardes of the 1910s and 1920s — in other nations associated with progressive or oppositional politics — were in Italy deeply imbricated first with nationalism and then with Fascism. The Futurists are emblematic of this artistic entanglement with rightist politics, but they were by no means alone. During the *ventennio*, Fascism’s two decades in power, the regime managed to maintain an insidious combination of tolerance and censorship regarding art. As many have noted, it was not so much that any tendency in art was accepted, but rather that everything was instrumentalized, and each tendency reflected a different facet of what Fascism was: Futurism, Magic Realism, Neoclassicism, Neo-Etruscanism, Neo-Byzantinism, and even abstraction.<sup>12</sup> Mussolini’s hands-off art policy during the *ventennio* had the effect of dividing and conquering the intellectual community, making opposition particularly difficult.<sup>13</sup>

Consequently, around 1960, the protagonists of this book found themselves uncertain about their own relation to their twentieth-century pasts. In the aftermath of the war, the newly minted Italianate lineage of abstraction was made to square with the post-war myth of the “zero hour,” an absolute break with the past and

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a rebooting of history. Many were happy to echo the philosopher Benedetto Croce's claim that the Fascist *ventennio* was only a historical "parenthesis" in the country's steady path to liberalism since unification in the 1860s. Croce's concept of a parenthesis was one that allowed for both a rhetoric of historical continuity — minus twenty years — with an idealized parliamentary democratic past and, alternatively, one of rupture with totalitarianism.<sup>14</sup>

This triumphant abstraction was pitted by artists, critics, curators, and politicians against a pictorial Socialist Realism similarly defended by artists, critics, curators, and politicians aligned with the USSR. In 1948, under the aegis of the two postwar priestesses of pictorial and sculptural abstraction — the American expat collector Peggy Guggenheim and Palma Bucarelli, the new director of Rome's Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna — the first postwar Venice Biennale and the first postwar Rome Quadriennale, respectively, were both dominated by the democratizing agenda of pictorial and sculptural abstraction.<sup>15</sup> This agenda coincided, in 1948, with Italy's first postwar elections and the victory of the Christian Democrats, who would dominate Italian governments throughout the period covered by this book. But in a country with the largest communist party outside of the Eastern Bloc, the polarizing geopolitics of the Cold War locked artistic discourse in Italy into years of tenacious and acrimonious debate about the merits of abstraction versus figuration well into the 1960s.<sup>16</sup> Although staunchly ideological in tone, this all-absorbing debate — one that, in Italy, was mostly an affair *within* the political Left — was itself a form of amnesia, absolving those involved from a reflection on Italy's recent Fascist past.

Concomitant with this was a key theme in the historiography of the Italian postwar: the celebration, verging on myth, of a string of minor victories against Fascism after the long stain of collaboration with and occupation by the German Nazis. This was the equivalent of what Henri Rousso, in his study of the French Resistance during the years of Vichy, called "Résistantialisme."<sup>17</sup> Paradoxically, it was the turn to a Pop type of figuration in Pistoletto's *Mirror Paintings* in

the early 1960s that brought back the past lost in the rebooting of history from year zero or under erasure in Croce's parenthesis, in part serendipitously, as we will see.

Chapter 1 uncovers the narrative plots reflected in both the *Mirror Paintings* of the Turinese artist Pistoletto and in the images made of them. The pent-up body language of the figures profiled on his steel plates and the gallery installations of these works portray a bourgeoisie transitioning out of the political engagement of the immediate postwar decade to the psychological disaffection of the Italian economic miracle.<sup>18</sup> Like the protagonists in Michelangelo Antonioni's famous tetralogy of *L'avventura* (The adventure, 1960), *La notte* (The night, 1961), *L'eclisse* (The eclipse, 1962), and *Deserto rosso* (Red desert, 1964), which single-handedly closed off the political engagement of Italian cinema that characterized the immediate postwar Neorealist decade, Pistoletto's figures are those of anomie. They embody the troubling situation of Italy in 1962 and 1963, the starting point of this book. This moment, known as *la congiuntura*, the conjuncture, was an economic inflection point in which the optimism of the postwar reconstruction, followed by the Italian economic miracle begun in 1954, showed the first signs of inversion. Inflation and a slowdown in productivity pointed to the gap between real salaries and the mirage of possibilities offered by the "boom."

However, key to rethinking the geopolitics of Pop outside the United States and Britain is viewing it in terms of a history of circulation, not merely of artworks, but of images that appeared in magazines. Photographed in the magazine *Domus* (a true institution on the Italian cultural landscape from the time of its founding in 1928), the images of Pistoletto's *Mirror Paintings* reaffirm a complicity, so totally Italian, with the world of design, but more significantly, appearing as they did in the pages of a magazine relentlessly and successfully intent on Italy's *aggiornamento* (catching up) with its European neighbors and the United States, they reveal the nonsynchronisms of what some historians have called *il lungo dopoguerra Italiano*, the protracted Italian postwar.

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Assessments of the geopolitics of Pop have varied greatly. Until recently, American critics and scholars have largely dismissed Pop art as a derivative and doomed option for European artists. Embracing Pop also was seen by 1960s critics and subsequently by scholars as surrendering to America and to the amnesiac pleasures of the postwar economic boom. In contrast, studies of the Nouveaux Réalistes, the French counterparts of the Pop artists, have stressed their confrontational, anticonsumerist resistance to America. The Americanophilia of English Pop has conversely been interpreted as an ironic, deflationary stance. The German artist Gerhard Richter's photo paintings have been viewed, meanwhile, both as a response to Andy Warhol and, in German terms, as the by-product of a traumatic history.

In fact, as the *International Pop* exhibition at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis (the museum that gave Pistoletto his first solo show abroad in 1966) and *The World Goes Pop* exhibition at the Tate Gallery in London (both in 2015) showed, Pop art was a phenomenon that emerged almost simultaneously in industrialized and industrializing nations across the globe in the early 1960s. In contrast to the other Pop artists in Italy and elsewhere, however, Pistoletto's attitude cannot be grasped as fascination, deflation, or hostility toward American Pop and American-style consumerism. Many of the photos in *Domus* of Pistoletto's *Mirror Paintings* show other artists' paintings in reflection, revealing how the reflective surface selected by Pistoletto is a device to enter into a dialogue, obliquely, with British, French, and, most importantly, American Pop. With his *Mirror Paintings*, Pistoletto, I propose, was the only Pop artist to thematize what it felt like to be on the receiving end not just of an American economic but also cultural dominance that had become virtually absolute by the early 1960s.

By reflecting the works of others, Pistoletto's *Mirror Paintings* have a tendency to eclipse themselves. As such, they are the only Pop works to interrogate how American artists and critics in the 1960s perceived European and other foreign "Popisms" as mere reflections of themselves. Until 2019, for example, Pistoletto's *Uomo*

*con pantaloni gialli* (Man with yellow pants, 1964), a cutout of his Turinese dealer Gian Enzo Sperone, whose gallery brought American Pop to Italy, forced the other — all American — Pop works hanging in the main Pop room at MoMA into a compelling scenario that brought all these questions — artistic, existential, and geopolitical — to the fore. The viewer saw Sperone from the back, standing while leaning an elbow against the edge of the mirror, one leg crossed in front of the other. His pose reads as one of observation, reflection, and relaxation, but also of passivity toward whatever happened to hang on the gallery wall diagonally or in front of him — in this case, Andy Warhol's Campbell's Soup silk screens (Figure I.1; Plate 1). Was Sperone — or his alter ego, Pistoletto — a key player, a witness, or an intruder who has infiltrated a room in which peripheral figures do not really belong?

The reception of Pop was of course not the only element of the Italian art scene in the 1960s. In anglophone art history, the account of Italian art of the early 1960s has been fixated on the figure of Piero Manzoni and especially on the movement known as Arte Povera.<sup>19</sup> Spearheaded by Germano Celant, this movement finally placed post-war Italian art on the international map. Arte Povera has been valued as a process-oriented art. While some have interpreted it as fraudulently antitechnological and nostalgic, it has been redeemed in other accounts that stress its militant political activism and its desire to dissolve sculpture into performance. More recent studies have widened its purview to include other art movements,<sup>20</sup> as did an issue of the journal *October* dedicated to postwar Italian art.<sup>21</sup>

However, this focus on Arte Povera itself reflects in the current presentist approach to Italian art a loss of interest in the past and uncertainty about the future, as the French historian François Hartog posited in *Regimes of Historicity: Presentism and Experiences of Time*.<sup>22</sup> That presentism actually began in the 1960s with the events of 1968, when students declared, “Tout, tout de suite” (Everything, right now). The presentist approach harks back most significantly to two major exhibition catalogues: Germano Celant's *Identité italienne: L'art*



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*en Italie depuis 1959* (Italian identity: Art in Italy since 1959) at the Centre Georges Pompidou in 1981 and *Roma anni '60: Al di là della pittura* (Rome in the '60s: Beyond painting) at the Palazzo delle Esposizioni in Rome in 1990.<sup>23</sup> More recent studies by a younger generation of Italian scholars and curators have focused on the Italian version of Pop (namely, the Roman Pop movement known as the Scuola di Piazza del Popolo), the history of exhibitions, and the reorientation of practices toward the extramural trespass of art into its surroundings in an art of participation.<sup>24</sup>

These detailed and archive-based reconstructions of the feverish 1960s, book-length studies, have all been written in the form of reportage. Their intent is always to recapture the urgency of what Fabio Belloni has called an “impegno nel presente,” that is, a militant political commitment in the present tense. All these authors seem to covet the 1960s and want us to relive rather than revisit them. They do not address the ways in which what occurred before year zero affected postwar Italian art, a past that, precisely because it was then being eclipsed, appears only obliquely and tangentially, as in Pistoletto's *Mirror Paintings*.

Chapters 2 and 3 therefore look at artists, participatory events, and exhibitions that have remained for the most part off the radar. The second chapter centers on a participational event, *Campo urbano: Interventi estetici nella dimensione collettiva urbana* (Urban field: Aesthetic interventions in the collective urban dimension), a series of interventions by forty artists (among them Bruno Munari and the collectives of the younger generation, Gruppo N and Gruppo T) who, joined by musicians, architects (Ugo La Pietra), art critics, local firemen, electricians, and the general public, took over the northern city of Como, as well as part of its lake, for a single day, on September 1, 1969 (Figure I.2). *Campo urbano* belongs to a number of urban “sorties” that took place, some semiofficially, others almost anarchically, in provincial towns across the peninsula from 1967 to 1969, none of which had previously been host to contemporary art. Many of these events had fallen into obscurity before being revived

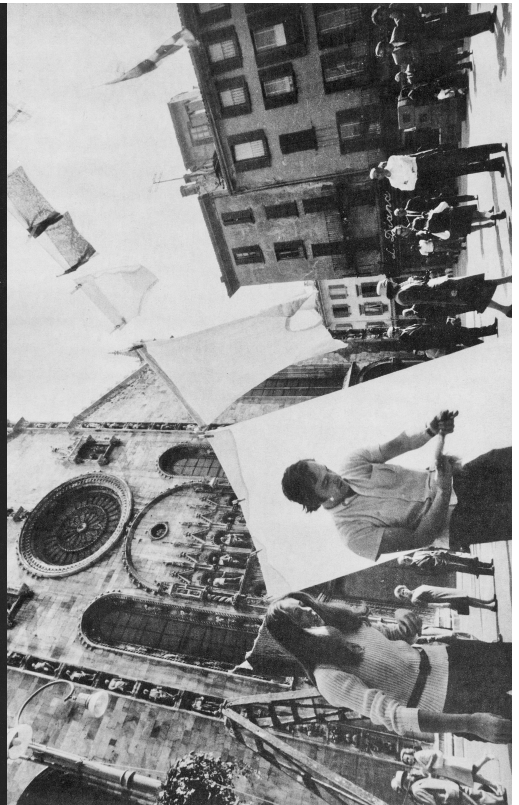
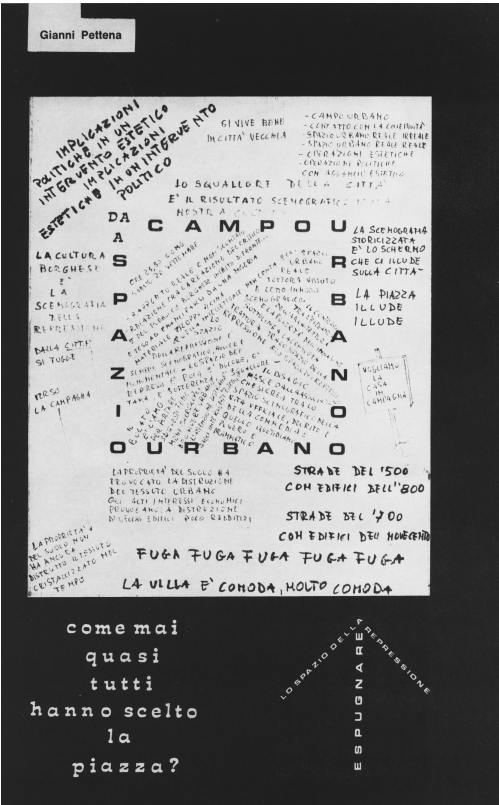


Figure 1.2. Gianni Pettina, *Come mai quasi tutti hanno scelto la piazza?* (How come almost everyone has picked the main square?). *Campo urbano*, 1969. Photography: Ugo Mulas. Design: Bruno Munari.

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by Alessandra Acocella in *Avanguardia diffusa: Luoghi di sperimentazione artistica in Italia, 1967–1970* (Pervasive avant-gardes: Sites of artistic experimentation in Italy, 1967–1970). These include *Parole sui muri* (Words on walls), which took place in Fiumalbo in the province of Modena (August 8 to 18, 1967); *Un paese + l'avanguardia artistica* (A country + the artistic avant-garde), in Anfo in the province of Brescia (August 25 to September 3, 1968); *Al di là della pittura* (Beyond painting), in San Benedetto del Tronto, a small resort town near Ascoli Piceno (July 5 to August 18, 1969); *Nuovi materiali nuove tecniche* (New materials new techniques), in Caorle, a town on the Adriatic coast close to Venice (July 20 to August 20, 1969); and *Meno 31: Rapporto estetico per il 2000* (Minus 31: Aesthetic report for 2000), in Varese (September 13 to 21, 1969). Best known was *Arte povera + azioni povere* (Poor art + poor actions), which took place in the resort town of Amalfi. There, Germano Celant and the publisher-collector Marcello Rumma convened an international cast of artists for three days of actions, performances, and debates in early October 1968.<sup>25</sup> The organizers of these events sought sponsorship — often successfully — from the municipality, the local tourist agency, the chamber of commerce, and other institutions, rather than from a cumbersome or incompetent central governmental art bureaucracy. In doing so, the organizers inadvertently highlighted the reality of the constant removal of regulations in Italy, where rules are often taken lightly.

What distinguishes *Campo urbano* from the others in this list is the self-conscious way in which its artists and its organizer, the art historian Luciano Caramel, used the historical center of the city of Como as their frame. What also distinguishes it, even more importantly for my account, is the way it was recorded by means of a photo book. Other late 1960s event-based artistic interventions used the printed page as their documentary platform. But the *Campo urbano*'s photo book — shot by Ugo Mulas, otherwise known for his reportage of the Venice Biennales, with a layout by Bruno Munari, Italy's foremost book designer — is unique. Nothing could be more “event based” and “in the moment” than *Campo urbano* photographed by Mulas with a

single handheld Olympus camera, without which no trace of that day would remain. And yet, designed by Munari, whose long career (he was born in 1907) bridged both halves of the past century, the *Campo urbano* photo book summons — breathlessly — a series of episodes in Italy’s all-too-brief historical avant-garde.

For example: the moment when the first phase of Italian Futurism had an impact on Dada, or the little-known and hardly ever recorded exhibitions of “scatter pieces” by Munari in Milan galleries that marked the sporadic emergence of an Italian neo-avant-garde in the 1950s. Moving from *campo* to *campo* (square to square), the Mulas/Munari *Campo urbano* photo book telescopes, in one of the furthest flashbacks in this book, almost four centuries, back to Giordano Bruno, and from there forward to the sojourn of the art historian Aby Warburg in Rome in 1929. With the artists of *Campo urbano* avoiding Como’s most famous building, Giuseppe Terragni’s Casa del Fascio, Chapter 2 includes one of this book’s most eminent eclipses. The building is Como’s modernist landmark, built in 1934, when the architect had designated Como as the Fascist regime’s model city.

The book’s third chapter changes gears and atmosphere by moving from the pent-up body language of the *Mirror Paintings* and the free movement in the city streets of *Campo urbano* to an exhibition held in a city where everything feels historically overdetermined: Rome.<sup>26</sup> It centers on *Vitalità del negativo nell’arte Italiana 1960/70* (Vitality of the negative in Italian art 1960/70), an exhibition that occupied the ground floor of the monumental Palazzo delle Esposizioni on Via Nazionale in the winter of 1970, reviving an ideologically loaded Neoclassical venue under the mantle of contemporary art. Curated by the rising star of the moment, Achille Bonito Oliva (the principal competitor of Celant), it was designed by the architect Piero Sartogo (Figure I.3). Bonito Oliva is known in the Anglo-American art world primarily for his later work as a champion of Transavanguardia and as a protagonist of 1980s postmodernism. It is his first two years as curator that are of interest here, however. *Vitalità*’s closest reference points appeared to be the Tuscan and Umbrian



**Figure 1.3.** Piero Sartogo, entrance to *Vitalità del negativo*, 1970. Photograph: Ugo Mulas. Courtesy of the Piero Sartogo Archive.

towns that had just hosted similar avant-garde exhibitions. And yet its atmosphere recalled that of the many exhibitions that had taken place in those same rooms during the 1930s. Nowhere, one could argue, did exhibitions (as distinct from permanent museum displays) play such a cardinal role as in Italy.<sup>27</sup>

Exhibition design rose to prominence in the post-Fascist, postwar reconstruction years, when Italy resumed its status as an avant-garde project. Yet in a curious mirror image, such had already been the case with exhibition design during Mussolini's *ventennio*. So central were exhibitions to the regime that the art historian and media theorist Jeffrey Schnapp, the historian Marla Stone, and, most recently, Germano Celant himself, with his blockbuster *Post Zang Tumb Tuuum: Art Life Politics Italia 1918–1943* at the Fondazione Prada in 2018 in Milan, were able to recount the course of Italian Fascism via its exhibitions.<sup>28</sup>

Too little attention has been paid in exhibition histories to the way in which exhibitions related to their architectural containers and to how exhibitions may function as palimpsests, that is, a superimposition (mostly as mental images) of other exhibitions that have taken place in the same space. Although half of Italy's museums were founded after 1945, Italian curators, architects, and exhibition designers still found themselves endlessly revisiting preexisting interiors, some of which were ideologically toxic. It is significant in this regard that the essay on exhibition design in the multivolume *Storia dell'architettura Italiana* (History of Italian architecture) published in 1997 should describe it as first and foremost an art of prosthetics. "In designing an exhibition," writes its author, Sergio Polano, "one constructs a set of relationships with a space that welcomes, includes, hosts — relationships that can in turn negate, hide, conceal, occlude, veil the 'container' in the process of attempting to read that space, comment upon it, enhance it, but also deform it, modify it, estrange it."<sup>29</sup> A key protagonist in this chapter is thus the nineteenth-century Beaux Arts Palazzo delle Esposizioni, refurbished in 1931 to house the Rome Quadriennali, the main showcase for the display of painting

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and sculpture produced not just during but in celebration of Fascist rule, as well as other major propaganda exhibitions of the regime.<sup>30</sup> The somber mood of *Vitalità*, set in the premier space of Fascist exhibitions, provoked some critics to accuse Bonito Oliva of reviving the Fascist seduction.

Taking place at the threshold of the *anni di piombo* (years of lead), *Vitalità* can also be seen in retrospect as a harbinger of the violence of the coming decade, when Italian cities would be rocked by bombings in the bitter struggle between the extreme Right and the extra-parliamentary Left. Key to my interpretation of *Vitalità* are the dual concepts of “mimetic subversion” (a strategy that engages the enemy, but obliquely) and that of the likelihood of the betrayal of fellow artists and the solidarity of the avant-garde.<sup>31</sup> Here I propose a filmic reading of the exhibition: the date of its opening coincided with the moment when *Il conformista* (The conformist), Bernardo Bertolucci’s own revisitation of the *ventennio*, a film where treason is all-important to the narrative, hit Italy’s movie screens. As evidenced by the photographs shot by Mulas on its opening night and the reviews of the time, *Vitalità* produced in its visitors a sensation of entrapment. It is with this scenario of a cul-de-sac as phenomenological as it was political, rather than with a separate conclusion, that this book intentionally reaches its frustrating denouement.

This being a book on the 1960s, I was able to interview some of its main protagonists: Pistoletto, Fioroni, Caramel, Bonito Oliva, and Sartogo. Others unfortunately died before I was able to speak with them. Sottsass, the author of the two longest and most extraordinary quotations in this book, died in 2007, just as I was beginning this project. Carla Lonzi died in 1982 at the age of fifty-one. Mulas, the one figure who traverses all three chapters of this book, also died prematurely, in 1973 at the age of forty-five. In the little book *La fotografia* (Photography) published just after his death, Mulas reminisces about the beginning of his career at the Venice Biennales:

I was photographing without any intention to understand what was going on, and there was always something happening. . . . I was photographing

everything: not only the most important artists and the most important events: it's not that I was lacking the will to choose, but I felt that I could not take on the attitude of a critic — there was nothing in particular to understand, there was nothing to do but to report.<sup>32</sup>

My approach to Mulas's photographs contradicts his assertion: it is Mulas who conveyed, better than any art critic, the deep meaning of the artworks described in this book.

Largely inhabited by men, this book is traversed in a significant but not always obvious way by a number of female figures.<sup>33</sup> Present in the first chapter but not in the events surrounding 1968 recounted in Chapter 2, women reappear in Chapter 3. In Chapter 1, in the most spectacular installation of Pistoletto's *Mirror Paintings* in Milan, we encounter working-class girls. They stand at the center of the lineup of anonymous figures in *Ragazze alla balconata* (Girls at the balcony, 1964), in one of the three mirrors lined up on a plinth in a showroom in Milan in 1965. We see them, as always with Pistoletto's cutouts, from the back looking outward, toward the void, or more prosaically, toward whatever happens to be reflected in the mirror, in this case, an elegant commercial street (see Figure 1.7). Sottsass, in some of his more wonderful lines on the *Mirror Paintings*, imagines them coming to Milan from Turin or perhaps coming from Carmagnola, a small town some thirty kilometers away from Turin, to Italy's second-largest industrial hub, dressed in their Sunday best. Later in the chapter, Giosetta Fioroni appears, in a photo by Mulas, as the only woman artist standing among her cohort of Italian Pop artists at the 1964 Venice Biennale (see Figure 1.11). The men all look in different directions, oblivious to the feminine silhouette appearing behind them in the photograph of one of Fioroni's paintings. Six years later, in the 1970s, and now in Chapter 3, Fioroni reappears. She is again the only woman in the otherwise all-male cast of Bonito Oliva's *Vitalità del negativo*. Her faint but mural-sized images are among the historically and politically most haunting works in that exhibition. It is the silhouette of Fioroni standing in front of her mural installation on



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opening night in a photo shot again by Mulas that opens the door toward my cinematic reading of that show (see Figure 3.18). Later in that chapter enters Italy's most influential female critic at that moment, Carla Lonzi, now turned militant feminist (see Figure 3.24). She appears in the last pages of this book in another one of those all-male situations, the one set up by *Amore mio* (My love), a smaller exhibition curated by Bonito Oliva a few months before *Vitalità* in the Palazzo Ricci in the town of Montepulciano. Technically uninvited, Lonzi takes her stand not through her presence in the Palazzo that hosted *Amore mio*, but by being introduced by a third party only into the pages of its catalogue. Betraying a betrayer who had betrayed another betrayer, Lonzi's intrusion creates, in the last paragraphs of the book, an unexpected narrative twist.

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