

Surviving the Afterlife

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Flashback, Eclipse: The Political Imaginary of Italian Art in the 1960s, by Romy Golan, Brooklyn, NY: Zone Books, 2021, 312pp., 8 col. and 136 b. & w. illus., hardback, \$35/£28

Romy Golan's new monograph is a beautifully written, deeply researched, and ground-breaking book focusing on Italian art's relationship to history and politics in the 1960s. Golan displays great erudition and analytical subtlety in her investigation of the three groups of works which form the backbone of the book, deploying a novel methodology that concentrates on the historical and political afterlives to which her objects of study relate. Whereas much art history traditionally deals with what is closely related to the work at its moment of production – either in the contemporary historical context or in the motives and intentions of the artist – Golan turns her attention to events, discourses, and histories which lie at a temporal and spatial remove from the moment of the artwork's creation and immediate reception. As in Michelangelo Pistoletto's reflective paintings of the 1960s which, to avoid imaging the photographer, are often shot obliquely, Golan's book generates perspectives slanted towards unaccustomed readings. The result is a creative, historically resonant study which overturns habitual ways of thinking about the period and the longer trajectories linking aesthetics and politics in the twentieth century.

Golan's narrative opens with the work of Michelangelo Pistoletto, in particular his 'mirror paintings' produced in Turin from 1962. While the stainless steel surfaces reflect the work's immediate physical surroundings, the photo-based silhouettes attached to their surfaces include portraits of the artist's close friends and associates. Golan unsettles the common interpretation of these works, which has focused exclusively on their immersion in the contemporary context, resisting their apparent 'presentness' by teasing out other, unexpected dimensions (31). In *Alpino* of 1962 – with its image of a uniformed member of Italy's battalion of mountain soldiers – Golan traces the history of the Italian Futurists' First World War enlistment as part of the Alpine forces, and the role played by Italian Alpine divisions in later resistance to the Nazis during the

Second World War, thereby dramatically pulling the work into relation with two wartime histories of Italy (plate 1). Golan also draws upon art writing in which the paintings were read in impressionistic ways, as in Ettore Sottsass' text of 1965 which responded to the works by evoking the fall of Mussolini's fascist regime, Italy's subsequent foreign invasions, civil war, summary executions, and socially disruptive internal migrations. Later in this opening chapter, Golan reads the works through their reproduction in contemporary magazines, where they were shown side by side with works of American pop art and contemporary design cultures in northern Italy, in regard to which they demonstrate a marked ambivalence by means of uneasy reflections. Uncanny parallels emerge in Golan's reading between Pistoletto's mirror paintings and the



1 Michelangelo Pistoletto, *Alpino [Alpine Soldier], first version, 1962*. Painted tissue paper on polished stainless steel, 200 × 120 cm. Photo: Courtesy of Cittadelarte/Fondazione Pistoletto, Biella, Italy.

anti-fascist magic realism of the Italian painter Felice Casorati's work from the 1920s, and Michelangelo Antonioni's stunning treatise on modern anomie, *L'eclisse* (1962). As this diverse catalogue of references suggests, Golan expands the meaning of Pistoletto's works beyond their immediate spatial and temporal context, taking in a heterogeneous range of mediums and narratives, while nevertheless firmly grounding her analysis in the historically specific context of twentieth-century Italy.

The analysis shifts in the second chapter to a different locale, the lakeside city of Como in northern Italy. The focus here is the artistic event *Campo urbano: Interventi estetici nella dimensione collettiva urbana* in late 1969, a series of happenings and art installations curated by Luciano Caramel, which involved dozens of contemporary artists working in the streets of the city. Golan again focuses on the afterlives of this series of works through examining their photo documentation by the photographer Ugo Mulas (also responsible for many photographs of Pistoletto's work) and in a photobook of the event produced by the erstwhile futurist artist Bruno Munari. In this way, she highlights the resonance of *Campo urbano* with time frames and events which go well beyond its immediate historical context. In this sense, while she places the event alongside the numerous student protests taking place in Europe at that time, she also widens the lens to take in a broader scale of reference points, including the historical avant-garde, early cinema, and the memory techniques of Giordano Bruno and Aby Warburg. Highlighting visual echoes of – or flashbacks to – much earlier artefacts and debates, she argues that the carnivalesque parades, artificial barricades and mock political coups in *Campo urbano* worked through Italy's history of political revolutions and their legacy. In this chapter the reader also encounters Golan's technique of revealing meaning through showing what has been obliterated – or eclipsed – within history. This brings her to discuss Giuseppe Terragni's *Casa del fascio* (1936), also in Como, a modern architectural masterpiece of concrete and glass which was an ideologically laden fascist headquarters. As she points out, the artists involved in *Campo urbano*, whose works were installed in and around buildings in Como's centre, studiously avoided Terragni's structure. More precisely, they deflected attention away from it by inverting and disorienting adjacent buildings, as in Mario Di Salvo's and Carlo Ferrario's *Riflessione* (1969) which saw mirrors placed around and beneath Como's cathedral. In so

doing, Golan suggests, the artists indirectly sought to evoke, but also subvert, the triumphant language of fascist propaganda embodied in Terragni's modernist essay in transparency.

The book concludes by taking the reader to Rome and to the Palazzo delle Esposizioni, a building with a complicated and fraught history, which was the site for the contemporary art exhibition *Vitalità del negativo dell'arte Italiana 1960/70* curated by Achille Bonito Oliva in 1970. A key term in this chapter is the palimpsest, which aptly describes the multiple historical references embodied within the exhibition and its venue. In this way Golan draws attention to the Palazzo's multiple functions over many decades, not only as the sometimes location for Italy's national contemporary art exhibition, the Quadriennale, but also as the venue for the Exhibition of the Fascist Revolution which in 1932 celebrated the tenth year of Mussolini's rise to power. Golan also brings to the discussion the troubled political environment of Italy in the late 1960s, including the radicalization of the left-wing student movement and neo-fascist violence with its bombings and attempted political coups. Against this background she highlights telling aspects of the installation in *Vitalità del Negativo*, including Piero Sartogo's design for the entrance hall to the exhibition, in which enormous black bands intersecting above the visitors' heads formed a graphic 'X' symbol (plate 2). As Golan vividly expounds in this chapter, this shape had an unmistakable resonance with the earlier Exhibition of the Fascist Revolution, and by inverting the meaning of the Roman numeral used to celebrate Mussolini's tenth year in office, produced a pointed refusal not only of the fascist revolution but also of revolutions more broadly, at a time of great political upheaval. In a subsequent, inspired series of interpretations, she also draws parallels between Ugo Mulas' photographs of the exhibition's interior, with their clean lines, deep perspectives, and angled shadows, and similar qualities in the cinematography of Bernardo Bertolucci's film *Il conformista* (1970), about the political seductions of fascism. Using the term 'mimetic subversion' (236) to describe a neo-avant-garde mode of artistic engagement with politics which refuses unambiguous positions and favours irresolution, Golan perceptively draws out the circumspect attitudes of a generation of historically informed artists and curators for whom the certainties of avant-garde activism, particularly in the context of the revolutionary violence of the late 1960s and early 1970s, were no longer available.



2 Piero Sartogo, entrance to *Vitalità del negativo*, 1970.
Photograph: Massimo Piersanti/Archivio Incontri Internazionale/
Courtesy of Fondazione Maxxi, Rome.

Working against a reading of Italian art in the 1960s which would situate it exclusively within the contemporary moment from which it emerged, and preferring to dig deep into what – for many – will be recondite sources, narratives and imagery, Golan promises in this book to allow the various flashbacks and eclipses she identifies to ‘not merely deliver meaning, but also generate it’ (15). Something similar might be said for Golan’s approach itself, which at times strikes the reader as posing more questions than it resolves. The interweaving, intermedial narrative that she produces can produce arguments so creative as to be dizzying and elliptical. This is not so much in the manner of the connections she makes within the text, which are always pertinent and revealing, as in the author’s reticence about nominating precisely what the reader is to glean from the associations she draws. Golan readily admits as much in her introduction; but at certain points I would have preferred that the powerfully evocative series of images and discourses from which this fascinating

book is constructed were interconnected more plainly in order to grasp the ‘power that artworks and images have to attract one another’ (15–16) as firmly as the author does. That said, Golan’s rewriting of post-war Italian art historiography and art-historical methodology lays down a significant challenge to a discipline that, far too often, is satisfied with reiterating inherited approaches grounded in the simplistic idea that an artwork only ever reflects its author or its immediate historical context.