

CARDI GALLERY | LONDON

DIFFERENCE AND AFFINITY

AGNETTI BOETTI PAOLINI PRINI

curated by Piero Tomassoni

Cardi Gallery London is delighted to present a group exhibition of four preeminent Italian artists: Vincenzo Agnetti, Alighiero Boetti, Giulio Paolini, Emilio Prini. The first in a series of exhibitions aimed at showcasing the main themes of 1970's Italian art, *Difference and Affinity* traces an identity of Italian "conceptual" art.

Poetic, elusive, playful, at times romantic - Italian conceptualism is clearly distinct from its British and American variants. The latter are mostly concerned with language and processes, and have the dematerialisation of the work of art as their main aim ('Art as idea'). Italian artists, on the other hand, continue in the tradition of making artworks as tangible objects. The physical presence of the art object and the properties of its materials, a link with history and politics, the recognition of intrinsic aesthetic qualities: these elements remain fundamental in Italian art from the 1970's, even in its more "conceptual" variants.

Through many important works from the late 1960's and early-to-mid 1970's, this exhibition illustrates the common features among the artists showcased, as well as their individual specificities and what makes them unique and impossible to classify in a movement or tendency. This is a feature common to several Italian artists of that decade, including some that had begun their career or had touch points with Arte Povera, but then went on to forge their own very individual paths (Boetti, Paolini, Prini).

Vincenzo Agnetti (Milan, 1926 - 1981) was a poet and writer, as well as a visual artist. While words are central in his works, each artwork also has a rigorous and specific formal appearance, also due to the use of significant materials such as bachelite and felt. Maxims, axioms and aphorisms composed by the artist - or random series of letters produced by the artist-invented "Drugged Machine" - tend to constitute the main visual element of the work, to which the materials are integral.

Alighiero Boetti (Turin, 1940 - Rome, 1994) is considered one of the most versatile and influential Italian artists of the 20th century. His work, initially associated with Arte Povera for the use of simple and industrial materials (he then dissociated himself from the movement in the early 1970's), evolved throughout his career, in connection with his migration from Turin to Rome and his frequent travels and long stays in Afghanistan and Pakistan. In the 1970's his work, predominantly inspired by politics, poetry, and mathematics, ranged from drawings and works on paper, to embroidery, to mail art.

Giulio Paolini (Genoa, 1940) is one of the most highly regarded living Italian artists. His practice focuses on deconstructing artworks and highlighting their constitutional elements. Through the use of drawing, photography, and installation, he explores the relationship between the viewer and the artwork, as well as

the correlations between artist, artwork and art history. Far from the political and formal stances of Arte Povera (albeit having participated to some of its exhibitions), Paolini cultivates a strong personal connection with the great masters of the past and a sense of belonging to the wider history of art.

Emilio Prini (Stresa, 1943 - Rome, 2016) was a key figure in the Roman and Italian art scene in the 1970's, and the few works he left behind (mostly photographs and works on paper) are significant traces of his passage and of his histrionic attitude. Whilst his wider purpose may be interpreted as the one of being absent or on "not-making" work, the artworks he did make often consisted in a reflection on the processes of art making and on the functioning of its tools (cameras, lights, audio recorders, etc.).

An essay by Piero Tomassoni accompanies the exhibition and explains in further detail the historical significance of the artists exhibited and of 1970's Italian "conceptual" art, as well as what distinguishes them from their contemporaries and from the leading movements of their time.

Cardi Gallery
22 Grafton Street
LONDON W1S 4EX, UK
t. +44 (0) 2034989633
mail@cardigallery.com
www.cardigallery.com

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/cardigallery>
Twitter: <https://twitter.com/cardigallery>
Instagram: <http://instagram.com/cardigallery>

#CARDIGALLERYLONDON #DIFFERENCEAFFINITY

OPENING HOURS:

Wednesday, 20 June to Friday, 7 September 2018. Open Monday through Friday, 10 am – 6 pm;
Saturday by appointment only. The Gallery will be closed between Monday, 6 and 20 August, 2018.

Additional opening hours during MAW - Mayfair Art Weekend: Friday, 29 June 2018, 6 - 9 pm; Saturday, 30 June 12 am - 5 pm & Sunday, 1 July 12 - 5 pm

Exhibition Opening: Tuesday, 19 June 6 – 8 pm

PRESS CONTACTS:

mail@cardigallery.com

DIFFERENCE AND AFFINITY.
Notes on Italian Conceptual Art

By Piero Tomassoni

Towards the end of the 1950's, artists started to feel the need to go beyond the pervasive practises of Abstract Expressionism and Art Informel, which had been dominating the art scene since the end of the Second World War. The emphasis on spontaneity, gestures, materials, and the incommunicability of the inner emotions of artists had started to become academic and to generate mannerisms that had very little left of the disruptive, primordial power of these movements' early manifestations. Some seminal essays of those years by leading artists on both sides of the Atlantic¹ are a strong indicator of the need for change, and the drive of the artists towards something new and different.

One group was seeking a complete revolution, by bringing every day life into art and transforming art into seemingly innocuous actions and images: the themes and materials to be used in art could be taken from anywhere except from the traditional forms of art. Concurrently, another group was looking to make art "objective", focussing on perception and purging it from the emotional and very subjective stances of Abstract Expressionism and Informel. This second tendency was largely embodied by the so-called Op Art (optical art) in Europe and by Minimalism in America. The latter, in particular, wanted to demonstrate that art could be made by reverting to basic shapes, colours, and materials, stripping the artwork of anything "unnecessary". By the second half of the 1960's, this process led to the idea of removing the physical object entirely. It is no coincidence that it was one of the preeminent minimalists, the American artist Sol LeWitt, who first enunciated the main principles of Conceptual Art in 1967².

Since then, the term Conceptual Art has acquired such a broad meaning in its common usage that it could encompass the vast majority of the artistic output of the past 50 years. However, the main proposition that Conceptual Art originally offered as formulated by LeWitt is that art

¹ Allan Kaprow, *Assemblages, Environments and Happenings*; Yves Klein, 'The Evolution of Art towards the Immaterial'; Carl Andre, 'Preface to Stripe Painting'; all from 1959.

² 'Paragraphs on Conceptual Art' (*Artforum*, New York, Summer 1967), 'Sentences on Conceptual Art' (*Art-Language*, Coventry, May 1969)

CARDI GALLERY

should mostly be concerned with ideas, which are the most important aspects of the work. Furthermore, these ideas did not necessarily need to translate into a physical artwork, but could remain entirely immaterial. And if the work does indeed become an object, what it looks like is not important: the artist has to be primarily concerned with the process of conception and realisation, devising a plan according to which anyone could realise the work, therefore stripping it of subjectivity to the largest possible extent. As textual descriptions were increasingly used as a means to illustrate ideas, in some cases art became a pure study of language and its mechanisms. But not all artists were going in this direction.

Only a few months after the publication of LeWitt's 'Paragraphs', the Italian art critic and curator Germano Celant identified in Italy the emergence of a new "movement": Arte Povera³. The artists that could be ascribed to Arte Povera were those that went against the system, rejected the current commercial and social conditions of the art world and refused to embrace any existing movement. Artworks had to be "self-sufficient social gestures" and the artist had to be a guerrilla fighter against the establishment. In a highly politically polarised climate, new ideas were brought into art from different disciplines (anthropology, psychoanalysis, literature), and many artists were actively engaged in the social debates and movements that led to the revolutionary season of 1968. Going against any form of homologation, Arte Povera had a wide scope and its circle was made up of artists as diverse as Michelangelo Pistoletto, Giovanni Anselmo, Giulio Paolini, Alighiero Boetti, Giuseppe Penone, Gilberto Zorio, Luciano Fabro and Emilio Prini amongst several others. Each of these artists participated in some of the most important early exhibitions of Arte Povera. However, some of them immediately distinguished themselves through their highly personal practice and approach, while not necessarily abiding by the rules of any other international "movement". They also did not share all the principles behind Arte Povera or its primary modes of expression and production. In fact, in some cases they went in quite the opposite direction.

Giulio Paolini (b. 1940) made his seminal work, the *Disegno Geometrico*, in 1960: a white canvas with the simple drawing of a square. This work, realised at the age of 20, provided the foundation and framework for much of the artist's output in the years to come. The main themes connecting all his works are the phenomenon of 'vision' in art, the act of looking, which forges the relationship between the artist/spectator and the artwork; and the history of time, the

³ 'Arte Povera: Appunti per una guerriglia' ('Arte Povera: Notes for a guerrilla war'), *Flash Art*, November 1967

CARDI GALLERY

connection of every new artwork with all previous artworks ever made by mankind. Far from the rejection of tradition promoted by Arte Povera, with its present-focused stance, Paolini is an artist outside of (his) time, a scholar who operates in the liminal space between the creation of a work and its completion, which can never be attained. In his intellectual elaboration of the artworks before their realisation, and with the literary titles and references to the history of art playing a major role, Paolini could be considered a 'conceptualist'. However, his universe is made of images, visual references which are symbols and metaphors for other images, in an intricate and highly personal elaboration which could never be reduced to immaterial ideas or objective processes.

Alighiero Boetti (1940-1994) was an explorer of time and space too, always looking to discover the things of the world through ever changing perspectives. In a balancing act between opposing forces (order and chaos, necessity and chance, similarity and diversity), Boetti started working in the 1960's by using simple industrial materials to illustrate his ideas. This created a strong affinity between him and the other protagonists of Arte Povera, whose operating centre was Turin, the artist's birthplace. In the early 1970's the artist moved from Turin to Rome, and 1972 marked his official disaffiliation from the movement. His practice had become increasingly concerned with charting logical and mathematical processes, through works on paper whose light appearance dissimulates the weight of a strenuous formal and philosophical research. Charting real and imaginary connections between images, places, and people (like in his *Postal works* and in *Calligrafia*, 1971), Boetti is a master of embroidery in the wider sense, devising processes which play on the ideas of difference and repetition (*Immagine e Somiglianza*, 1976). Processes and ideas are therefore at the centre of the work, but inextricably tied to the physicality of the means employed and to their aesthetic result. With his vast and polyhedric oeuvre Boetti was "bringing the world into the world" (*Mettere al mondo il mondo*) thanks to his "Initial Energy" (*Energia Iniziale*, 1979), producing thousands of small and large visual puzzles whose light and poetic character enabled him to tackle even the most serious themes, political or otherwise, without losing the playful attitude that characterised him for his whole life.

Boetti was not the only artist keen on wordplay in the 1970's:

The word is a portable sign.

Different words together form speech, an available object.

The word not written and not spoken remains the sole real mystery.

CARDI GALLERY

These are three of the 14 'telegrams sent to himself' by Vincenzo Agnetti (1926-1981) 'to deviate the concept of time as a state in itself'⁴. The centrality of words in Agnetti's practice make him, in a way, the most "traditional" Italian conceptualist. A writer and poet, his statements are sometimes an expression of pure logic, sometimes an analysis of the primary concepts and elements of the artistic production, sometimes a reflection on life and the human condition. Cutting and ironic, his axioms are often tautologies, logical truisms uttered with the intent of irritating the viewer. Whilst central in the work, words are never left without a specific material support, which varies in substance, shape, and colour based on the content of the text. *The written or spoken word depreciates the object which supports it but is objectified*⁵: by being put on a support the word acquires its definitive identity and becomes an object. The artists also intended to go beyond the traditional use of language, to focus on words and letters themselves (*Deprived of the ambiguity of language, the word becomes a universal instrument*, 1971). Elements of randomness are introduced in the *Beyond language - Semiosis* series: works produced with fragments of texts resulting from the use of the artist's made "Drugged machine", a modified typewriter where the letters typed do not correspond to the keys pressed by the operator. In these works, words and letters lose any standard connotation to become pure signs, patterns of symbols ornatng the more traditional canvas support. This way, the reflection of the artist on language goes beyond literature and criticism to enter the domain of visual art.

Negating the need of producing anything at all, Emilio Prini (1943-2006) did not see art as a method for creating objects. His work consists mainly in subtracting, erasing, shifting, and finding other escamotages to participate to the art discourse without actually being there. A telegram confirming his participation to an exhibition, a singer performing an aria, his physical presence on a gurney (without ever touching the ground): these are some of the ways in which the artist managed to participate to something by proxy, subtraction, or substitution. With an often entirely autobiographical code of reference with no available documentation, Prini's work is enigmatic and mysterious, much like the rare poster that portrays the artist himself to announce an exhibition in Rome (*Emilio Prini 26 Aprile 25 maggio 1979*, 1979). Through the occasional analysis of art's media and processes, often attained by the use of photography or audio-recording, Prini's work was in continued development and never reached defined ends, eventually arriving to the total negation of art-making.

⁴ Vincenzo Agnetti, Documenti, Martano/Due, Turin 1972

⁵ Ibid.

CARDI GALLERY

Each of these artists have a singular approach to art making which in turn makes it difficult to classify their practice in a single category or movement. Whilst they may share common traits with Conceptual Art, Arte Povera, and in some cases Performance Art, their work surpasses these confining definitions and has eluded historical classification. Today this lack of classification could be viewed as disadvantageous, in an art world which increasingly tends to historiographic simplification and homologation. However, it exemplifies the powerful and multifarious creativity which characterised Italy in the 1970's, a territory still partially uncharted, with ample opportunity for research, debate, and historical rediscovery.

Cardi Gallery
22 Grafton Street
LONDON W1S 4EX, UK
t. +44 (0) 2034989633
mail@cardigallery.com
www.cardigallery.com

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/cardigallery>
Twitter: <https://twitter.com/cardigallery>
Instagram: <http://instagram.com/cardigallery>

#CARDIGALLERYLONDON #DIFFERENCEAFFINITY

OPENING HOURS:

Wednesday, 20 June to Friday, 7 September 2018. Open Monday through Friday, 10 am – 6 pm;
Saturday by appointment only. The Gallery will be closed between Monday, 6 and 20 August, 2018.

Additional opening hours during MAW - Mayfair Art Weekend: Friday, 29 June 2018, 6 - 9 pm; Saturday,
30 June 12 am - 5 pm & Sunday, 1 July 12 - 5 pm

Exhibition Opening: Tuesday, 19 June 6 – 8 pm

PRESS CONTACTS:

mail@cardigallery.com