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Futuro, Presente, Passato: Remembering Germano Celant (1940–2020)

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e-flux journal #108 — april 2020 Shumon Basar and Hans Ulrich Obrist
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The art historian, critic, and curator Germano Celant passed away on April 29, 2020, in Milan. Perennially clad in black, his hair a mane of swept-back white, he was as distinctive a physical presence as his presence has been in the art of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Described to us once as “a living Vasari” – a reference to the pioneering sixteenth-century author of *Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects* – Celant’s sustained output over the last six decades is a map that connects Italian avant-gardes to accelerated internationalism. Celant’s love for history’s radical turns in turn became the very engine through which he managed to shape institutions old and new. Celant produced and reproduced reality, par excellence. Here, we recall how he did this, and why that mattered.

Baroque Beginnings

Celant studied the Renaissance and the Baroque with the legendary art historian Eugenio Battisti at the University of Genoa in the early 1960s. Battisti’s 1962 book, *L’antirinascimento* (The Anti-Renaissance), became one of Celant’s formative influences. *L’antirinascimento* was later described by Christopher S. Wool as covering “a whole range of material and topics that don’t fit – automata, magic and talismanic images, wonders and portents, the *Wunderkammer*, astrology, alchemy, the topoi of the witch and the old man.”

This eclectic synthesis of knowledge fields became a model for what Celant would later pursue. And from Battisti’s understanding of the Baroque, Celant told us he discovered that “there was no distinction between architecture, design, decoration.”¹ What emerges is a total space where disparate categories can meet. The Baroque’s heightened use of sensory effects to stage drama and emotion, the “need to be surrounded by something,” as Celant said, also became the DNA for all that was to follow in his output.

Guerrilla Warfare

In 1963, Celant started to write for *Marcatré*, the leading interdisciplinary magazine in Italy, where art sat alongside cinema, design, and theory. Soon he also joined the architectural journal *Casabella*. In his capacity as art critic for both publications, he began to visit and befriend artists of previous generations, such as Lucio Fontana. But more importantly, he developed relationships with artists of his own generation throughout Italy.

This led Celant in 1967, at the young age of twenty-seven, to curate his first seminal show, “Arte Povera – Im Spazio,” in Genoa’s Galleria la Bertesca. It marked the beginning of Arte Povera

as an aesthetic, philosophical movement, whose ideas were refined in a manifesto-like text published in *Flash Art* the same year, entitled “Notes on a Guerrilla War.” Two years later, an eponymous book was released that included the artists Giovanni Anselmo, Alighiero Boetti, Luciano Fabro, Michelangelo Pistoletto, and many others.

As Celant put it, “each of these artists chose to live with direct experience, and feel the necessity of leaving intact the value of the existence of things.” (These now feel like premonitory words in relation to the extinction and environmental crisis we face today.) Celant described the need for a “shift that has to be brought about ... the return to limited and ancillary projects where the human being is the fulcrum and the fire of research, in replacement of the medium and the instrument.” Arte Povera therefore is “an art that asks only for the essential information, that refuses the dialogue with the social and cultural system and aspires to present itself as something sudden and unforeseen.”

It acted as ballast against the loudest art at the time: that of American Pop, which was already perceived as an imperialistic presence in postwar Europe. Indeed, in 1964, Donald Judd

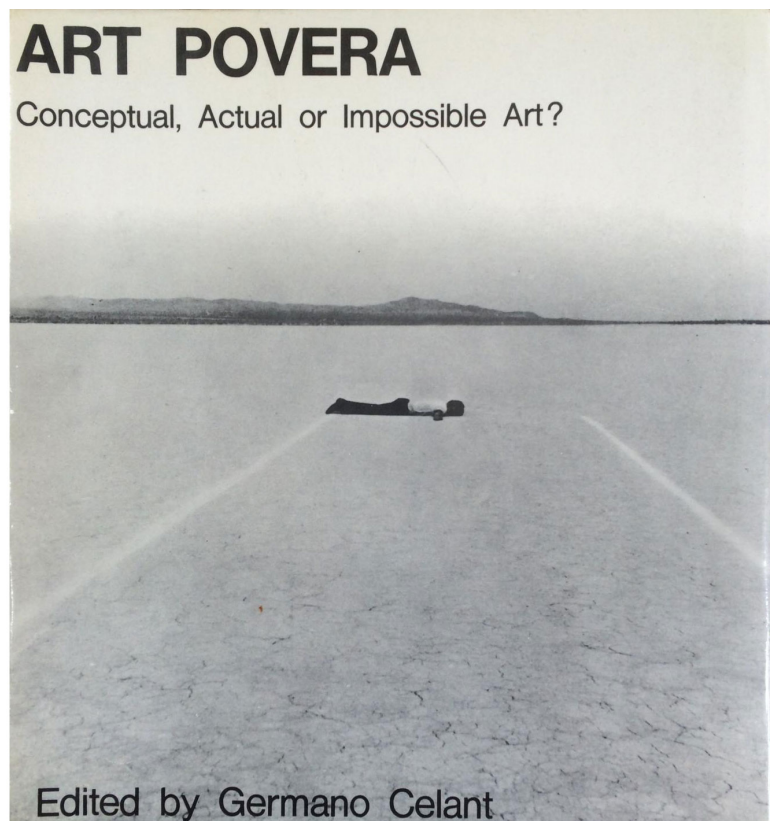
had dismissed European art as mere “decoration.” Arte Povera, through Celant’s skills of rhetoric, friendship, and flair, proved there were alternative narratives, and that Italian culture was renewing its critical, countercultural vigor.

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Art and its Environments

In the 1970s, Celant started to work more internationally. He became one of the first truly itinerant curators, similar to his friend, the Swiss Harald Szeemann, who had coined the term “*Geistiger Gastarbeiter*” to describe this new global vocation. Celant would work simultaneously in many cities at once, “*N’ETRE QU’ENTRE*,” to quote the poet Camille Bryen.

The 1970s also marked Celant’s first larger exhibitions. When, in 2016, we invited him to the Global Art Forum, alongside Francesco Vezzoli, we asked Celant to present a case study of what we feel was and remains his most influential show of that time: “Ambiente/arte dal futurismo alla body art” (Environment/Art: From Futurism to Body Art) at the 1976 Venice Biennale. Installations by Dan Graham, Joseph Beuys, Bruce Nauman, and others were placed into dialogue with immersive works from historical avant-gardes – works by Theo van Doesburg, El



Covers of the books *L'Antirinascimento* (1962) by Eugenio Battisti and *Art Povera* (1969) edited by Germano Celant.

Lissitzky, and Piet Mondrian.

"The first political gesture was to take away the walls, to clear the space," Celant told us. "Whenever you enter an institution, you have to bring the space with you." What was at stake for Celant was not a show *about* objects, but being *surrounded* by art, which, throughout the avant-garde, he said, has regularly taken the form of rooms. "Environments are very important elements in our culture," he explained. "It's a totally different experience to walk into a room by Lucio Fontana than see a piece by Fontana."

And here, again, we go back to his beginnings with the Baroque. What reigns supreme is not a collection of isolated fragments (where art has the status of domestic decoration), but instead a symphonic *totality*.

Reread History

"I reread history through the contemporary," Celant admitted to us. Seeing history "in reverse" meant that working with contemporary artists (something that Nancy Spector described as Celant's "alchemy") would lead to conversations about their roots. This telescoping – from the extreme present to the just past and the deeper past – would ultimately allow Celant to perceive and present history differently, as something constantly evolving.

For example, during his inaugural visit to Los Angeles in 1972, Celant "discovered emptiness" in the light artists of Robert Irwin and Maria Nordman. This discovery informed one of the guiding principles of the exhibition

"Ambiente/arte" four years later – the emptying of what was already in the Venice exhibition space when Celant arrived to fill it. Erasure as gesture.

The second instrumental move in "Ambiente/arte" was how, in these stripped spaces, Celant reconstituted enactments of historic shows and exhibition displays. This has nothing to do with nostalgia. The broad range went from Lissitzky, Puni, Mondrian, and Kandinsky to Claes Oldenburg, Sol Lewitt's bedroom, and Arman's "Le Plein" (the 1960 Iris Clert gallery show that acted as a riposte to Yves Klein's earlier "Le Vide" show at the same gallery).

Celant told us that "nobody is collecting the artist's studio." The studio is also very seldom reconstructed, despite the fundamental role it plays as the laboratory of art. Examples like Francis Bacon's studio in Dublin, or Alberto Giacometti's and Constantin Brancusi's studios, both in Paris, are notable but rare. However, already in "Ambiente/arte," Celant reconstructed Giacomo Balla's studio as one of its revelatory environments.

At its core, "Ambiente/arte" argued that the history of art is not made up only of fragments of the market, but of holistic ensembles. Given that we mostly only ever know seismic moments of exhibition history through either oral testimony (since only a few people may have seen them directly) or limited photographs, Celant believed there was a necessity to communicate the experience of these exhibitions through

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Germano Celant presenting at the Global Art Forum in 2016, behind a powerpoint image of the Mondrian installation at "Ambiente/Arte," Venice Biennial, 1976.

reenactments. While this may now seem like a familiar technique employed by culture everywhere, in 1976 this was not yet the case.

Attitudes and Forms

In 2013, at the Fondazione Prada in Venice, Celant reenacted Harald Szeemann's infamous exhibition "When Attitudes Become Form," originally presented at the Bern Kunsthalle in 1969. Together with a display feature conceived by the architect Rem Koolhaas, a ghostly outline of the Bern Kunsthalle was imported into Palazzo Corner della Regina's eighteenth-century interiors. Even 1960s period radiators were added.

Without forced fetishism, this reincarnation allowed us to experience a show we all knew from the catalogue at the time, and from installation photos. Here, Celant, along with Koolhaas and the artist Thomas Demand, were making a contemporary statement based on a historic case study.

Celant told us that it was his dream to one day reenact Marcel Duchamp's exhibition design for the 1942 "First Papers of Surrealism" show, held at the Manhattan offices of the Coordinating Council of French Relief Societies. Here, Duchamp used a "mile of twine" to create a

web-like intervention between the displayed works. Our late friend Leonora Carrington told us about this extraordinary occasion, where one needed scissors to cut the twine and enter the space.

Metamorphosis

In 1988, the Guggenheim's new director, Thomas Krens, appointed Celant curator of contemporary art. The *New York Times* announced the European's arrival thus: "Mr. Celant (whose name is pronounced jer-MAN-o che-LANT) was born in 1940 and is representative of a new kind of curator, one who functions as an impresario or guest-artist in one city after another, moving from place to place and from commission to commission."²

He followed Harald Szeemann's example of a "permanent impermanent" curator, who is attached to an institution and at the same time remains a free spirit. (This too was Szeemann's arrangement with the Kunsthau Zürich.)

Years ago, Szeemann told us that as an independent curator, one is always invited to do group shows. But, in the long run this is not satisfying. One wants to go deeper with artists in solo shows.

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Installation view of "When Attitudes Become Form: Bern 1969/Venice 2013" Fondazione Prada, 1 June – 3 November 2013. Photo: Attilio Maranzano. Courtesy of Fondazione Prada.

Celant did stage solos at the Guggenheim. They included Mario Merz, Rebecca Horn, Ettore Spalletti, and Haim Steinbach, with whom he inaugurated his younger artists program series called “Osmosis.”

However, Celant’s milestone of this period was a historical group exhibition in 1994 entitled “The Italian Metamorphosis, 1943–68,” masterfully designed by Gae Aulenti. Here, again, the DNA of his time in Genoa with Battisti and the Baroque asserts itself. Celant believed that exhibitions, like painting, were a language, and, in order to articulate them fully, every great exhibition also needed to deliver an appropriate display language with it. And, if one wants to surround the visitor with architecture, one needs to work with architects, such as Koolhaas or Aulenti. As well as being a close friend to our mentor Zaha Hadid, Celant advocated for architecture throughout his career, from the radicals of Archizoom and Superstudio, to later becoming a curator at the Fondazione Aldo Rossi.

Indeed, “The Italian Metamorphosis” included architecture in its exhibits, alongside film, photography, fashion, design, as well as staples of painting and sculpture. Calling upon the expertise of a nine-curator team, more than a

thousand objects – mixing typewriters, cars, jewellery, furniture – drew equivalence between high and popular arts, as well as fighting against the segregation of disciplines. He wrote in his catalogue essay that Europe and America’s rejection of postwar Italian art and culture “may also have been caused by its sensual and ‘Baroque extremism.’” From that moment on, this extremism would be considered a unique cultural asset.

Serious Fashion

The February 1982 “special issue” of *Artforum* magazine featured neither an artwork nor an artist on its cover. Instead, it simply showed a woman with her hair scraped back, one hand on her hip, against an anonymous grey background. What mattered was what she was wearing: a sculptural bamboo cowboy dress, accented in red filaments, designed by Issey Miyake.

The cover was considered scandalous. It had been the idea of *Artforum*’s then thirty-year-old editor, Ingrid Sischy, and contributing editor Germano Celant. Never before had clothing adorned the hallowed magazine. To regular readers – steeped in structuralist theory and conceptual treatises – the cover was heresy.

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Germano Celant in Bern, 1969.
Photographer unknown.
Courtesy of Fondazione Prada.

Reflecting back on this moment in 2011, Celant said that he and Sischy had strongly believed that fashion was “a serious language,” deserving of serious attention.³ He explained that two parallel tendencies in the 1980s led art and fashion to develop intense interest in one another. Firstly, artists – like Julian Schnabel and David Salle – became stars, communicating themselves through media rather than exclusively through galleries. “They use media to affirm their image,” Celant said. “In the process, they become fashionable. And mass market.” At the same time, certain fashion designers turned away from the mass market. Instead, they chose to sell “idea products.” Here, fashion found itself craving contemporary art’s validation. The convergence resulted in a new power coupling.

Such mutual affection became the basis for the inaugural Biennale di Firenze, entitled “Time and Fashion,” held in 1996. It was cocurated by Celant, Luigi Settembrini (who was previously responsible for the fashion parts of “Italian Metamorphosis”), and Ingrid Sischy. Across nineteen of Florence’s museums, forty-nine fashion designers were showcased within installations overseen (once again) by architect Gae Aulenti. A strand included collaborations between fashion designers and artists – Helmut

Lang with Jenny Holzer, Gianni Versace with Roy Lichtenstein – in seven pavilions designed by the Japanese architect Arata Isozaki. While the “art–fashion complex” feels utterly ubiquitous now, “Time and Fashion” was one of the very first large-scale attempts to put the two disciplines on common ground.

Restless and Useful

A year before the Biennale di Firenze, in 1995, Celant had been appointed the director of Fondazione Prada, which, for the previous two years, had been known as PradaMilanoArte. This surely explains why one of the collaborations at “Time and Fashion” was between Miuccia Prada and Damien Hirst.

Celant was no fan of fashion houses appropriating artists’ work to produce decorative textiles, or window-dress their boutiques. Instead, he told us, what interested him was “coproduction.”

The ensuing spirit of Fondazione Prada seemed to come from this notion of equal, experimental collaboration between artists and fashion houses, as well as Celant’s critique of historical museums, where departments work in silos, rarely collaborating. “Museums are past,” Celant informed us. “There’s no chance they can



Portrait of Germano Celant in the exhibition “Post Zang Tumb Tuuum. Art Life Politics: Italia 1918-1943,” 18 February - 25 June 2018, Fondazione Prada. Photo: Delfino Sisto Legnani and Marco Cappelletti. Courtesy of Fondazione Prada.

compete anymore as *laboratoriums*. There is no institution that dissolves languages. That will be the future of the institution.”

A quick glance over the twenty years⁴ he directed the Fondazione Prada attests to this restless, anti-museological mission, which came out of constant conversations with Miuccia Prada and Patrizio Bertelli, as well as with a close constellation of artists, philosophers, filmmakers, architects, and designers they forged together over time. While the core organizational team of the Fondazione Prada has always been a tiny fraction of the hundreds of staff that power New York’s MoMA or London’s Tate, its neurology has always been tentacular, and its interests agile.

Pre-metamorphosis

In 2015, when the Fondazione Prada moved to its current location at a former spirits distillery in Milan, Celant became its “Artistic and Scientific Superintendent.” The year 2018 saw Celant mount one of the most ambitious projects of the Fondazione’s history: “Post Zang Tumb Tuuum. Art Life Politics: Italia 1918–43.”

On reflection, this may well have been a kind of prequel to his “Italian Metamorphosis” exhibition at the Guggenheim, which had covered the years 1943–1968. Celant, like Szeemann,

preferred not to do group shows, but when he did, they tended to have a historical rubric. Through a chronological timeline of exhibition reenactments (part photographic, part loaned works) designed by long-term collaborators Michael Rock / 2x4, “Post Zang Tumb Tuuum” told a maddeningly encyclopaedic history of Italy’s interwar period, which saw the rise of political fascism, and consequently, its enveloping effects on art, media, and culture.

At a time when far-right and neofascist politics has been sweeping across Europe over the last several years, to the horror of many of us, “Post Zang Tumb Tuuum” was a visceral reminder of the tools with which fascism not only creeps into power, but also into the cultural imagination.

Memento

All of this brings us to the last show of Celant’s we saw firsthand: the posthumous retrospective of Jannis Kounellis at the Fondazione Prada in Venice last year. As we made our way through the exhibition, we were able to chart not only Kounellis’s artistic legacy – as one of Arte Povera’s best-known protagonists – but also significant moments of exhibition history.

Starting from his early works, we were able to experience how after 1967, Kounellis turned

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Exhibition view of “Post Zang Tumb Tuuum. Art Life Politics: Italia 1918–1943,” 18 February – 25 June 2018, Fondazione Prada. Photo Delfino Sisto Legnani and Marco Cappelletti. Courtesy Fondazione Prada. From left to right: Adolfo Wildt, *Vir temporis acti (Uomo antico)*, 1913; Adolfo Wildt, *Amen*, 1914; Adolfo Wildt, *Ritratto di Augusto Solari*, 1918; Adolfo Wildt, *La Concezione*, 1921; Adolfo Wildt, *Maria dà luce ai pargoli cristiani*, 1918; Adolfo Wildt, *Carattere fiero – Anima gentile*, 1912; Adolfo Wildt, *L’anima dei padri*, 1922.

even more radical by embracing concrete and natural elements including birds, soil, cacti, wool, coal, cotton, and fire. When we heard a cello playing Johann Sebastian Bach (starting in 1970 Kounellis began to include the presence of musicians in his works), vivid memories of our last interview with Kounellis came back to us. We remember how he told us about the works coming “alive with music,” and how the music would guide the improvisations of the dancers who were also present – dancing in front of the work and creating a repetition unified within itself, “never reaching a totality.” The aliveness of works was always expressed in Kounellis’s move outside of the painting – and yet, he always considered himself a painter.

However, the strongest inscribed memory for us remains the olfactory dimension of the Venice show. Starting 1969, Kounellis brought smell into his works. At the Ca’ Corner della Regina venue, Celant had installed shot glasses of grappa on the top floor, whose sharp scent filled the room, while on the staircase, the walls were lined with delicately balanced pyramids of coffee grounds. We were immersed in the immaterial.

While Kounellis had passed away just two years prior, there was nothing archaic or

mournful about this show. It felt alive and fresh, resonating with recent practices that employ living sculptures, both human and nonhuman. As Celant wrote in his catalogue essay, “By getting the public to react emotionally and physically, [Kounellis] tried to bring people closer to reality, where art is not a dead indication, but life.”

This leads us to another memory, when Tino Sehgal and Dorothea von Hantelmann suggested that we revisit Margaret Mead’s 1943 text “Art and Reality: From the Standpoint of Cultural Anthropology.” Here Mead approaches the exhibition form as a ritual, appealing not only to the visual sense but every type of sense experience. Mead wrote:

For art to be Reality, the sensuous being must be caught up in the experience. Our present practices by which people sit on stiff chairs and listen in constrained silence to a piece of music or wander in desultory unpatterned groups in an art gallery looking at framed pictures ... is the very opposite process. One sense might be heightened, one emotion sharpened but, except in rare cases, there is no increase in the whole individual’s relationship to the whole of life.



Left: Jannis Kounellis, *Untitled*, 1967. Iron, flame, rubber pipe, gas tank; Right: Jannis Kounellis, *Untitled*, 1968. wood, wool. Installation view from “Jannis Kounellis,” Fondazione Prada, 11 May – 24 November 2019. Photo: Agostino Osio/Alto Piano. Courtesy of Fondazione Prada.

The Game

Germano Celant insisted to us that, above all things, he was an art historian – although the way he dressed, with his many turquoise rings, his cowboy belts, and his leather gilets, was not what the typical art historian ever looked like. The typical art historian was also not to be found at the front row of Prada fashion shows, sitting next to the latest Hollywood ingénues. Celant always felt distinctly ageless to us, and therefore, implicitly immortal too.

We remember the first time we visited Celant's house, where he lived with his wife, Paris, and his son, Argento, and where his studio is also located. A former paper mill converted in 2006, it contains one of the most exquisite private collections of art, furniture, tapestries, paraphernalia, and books we have ever encountered. Every item had a story. Every story came from a time that Celant worked with someone over those six decades. A personal barter economy, bypassing the art market. This house-museum made us think of Curzio Malaparte's phrase *casa come me*, "a house like me," where a space and its contents are a portrait of its inhabitant, a portrait of a life.

"Being a one-person band all my life," Celant told us, "I could do things, because I was associated with museums, but also, freelance: 30% with the Guggenheim, 30% with the Fondazione Prada. I always play the game of getting an idea through and not following the institution."

In 1967, in that era-defining Arte Povera manifesto, Celant wrote: "Freedom, in the visual arts, is an all-contaminating germ." In 2020, as we face an unprecedented planetary pandemic, which has taken so many loved ones away, we reread Germano's words with hope. After all, the future is invented with fragments of the past.

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Quotes taken from "The Future is the Past: Germano Celant and Francesco Vezzoli interviewed by Shumon Basar and Hans Ulrich Obrist," Global Art Forum 10, Art Dubai, March 16, 2016
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UhPA63IEqfk&feature=youtu.be>.

2

John Russell, "Guggenheim Names Curator," *New York Times*, December 1, 1988
<https://www.nytimes.com/1988/12/01/arts/guggenheim-names-curator.html>.

3

"Fashion Houses Art Patrons: Grazia Quaroni and Germano Celant interviewed by Philip Tinari," Global Art Forum 5, Art Dubai, March 16, 2011.

4

See "History: Fondazione Prada – Activities" at the Fondazione Prada website
<http://www.fondazioneprada.org/history-en/?lang=en>.

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