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Galerie Hussenot, Paris

IS IT YOURS?

IS IT MINE?

Franco Mazzucchelli

Notes by Antonio de Martino

Franco Mazzucchelli's (Milano, 1939) five-decade practice reveals a troubling possibility: that art's critical potential was always foreclosed by its structural position within systems of value production and institutional legitimation.

In 1964, a twenty-five-year-old Mazzucchelli began his radical "A. to A." (Art to Abandon) series, systematically abandoning large inflatable sculptures in public spaces across Italy. These bright PVC forms were released into spaces where they would be discovered, manipulated, and ultimately destroyed by passersby—works that belonged to no one and everyone simultaneously, their ownership dissolving the moment they left the artist's hands—children playing with alien objects on beaches, workers encountering sculptural interventions in factory courtyards, families stumbling upon unexpected forms in city squares. Documentation reveals the works' brief, precarious lives before succumbing to weather, vandalism, or official removal.

There is a fundamental pessimism underlying Mazzucchelli's gesture. The abandonment was not strategic but symptomatic—a recognition that art's claim to social relevance had become untenable within existing frameworks. By literally abandoning his works, Mazzucchelli acknowledged what the art world refused to admit: that art's social function had always been mythical, sustained only through institutional mediation that separated it from genuine public engagement. The "A. to A." series functioned as mourning rituals for public art's impossible promise. Each abandoned work marked another site where art's social pretensions encountered their material limits. The minimal and soft forms invited interaction, but this interaction remained fundamentally aesthetic—detached from the political and economic forces that actually structure public space. The works created "pseudo-publics": temporary gatherings organized around aesthetic objects that dissolved once those objects deteriorated. The communal encounters with abandoned works—children collectively transforming sculptures into play objects, workers negotiating unexpected forms in shared spaces—created temporary communities organized around ownerless objects. This collective engagement with the abandoned reveals the same structural conditions that later manifest in the decorative works: both series create forms of

shared complicity, whether in the innocent destruction of public interventions or in the knowing participation in art's decorative function. The temporal structure proved crucial: works existed in public for days or weeks—too brief to establish genuine social relations, too extended to function as discrete aesthetic experiences. The abandoned inflatables occupied a temporal no-man's-land where neither art nor politics could effectively operate, demonstrating not art's democratic potential but its structural inability to engage with actual social conditions.

After confronting a creative crisis that lasted through the 1980s, Mazzucchelli returned to production in the 1990s with "Bieca Decorazione" (Awry Decoration)—wall-mounted inflatable works that explicitly acknowledged their decorative function. His characteristically direct statement revealed institutional truth: "Any work of art, even those with the highest ideological content, once hung, becomes decoration and takes on a completely different meaning from the original artistic intention." This insight exposes the fundamental dishonesty underlying art's critical pretensions. The "Bieca Decorazione" series operates through cruel honesty: rather than maintaining the fiction of critical distance, these works openly declare themselves as "pure simple decoration to be sold." They function as "symptomatic critique"—revealing institutional systems not through opposition but through exaggerated compliance. Black PVC material with heat-stamped geometric patterns creates precisely the restrained aesthetic that functions effectively in both institutional and private contexts. Most significantly, air valves are positioned where an artist's signature would traditionally appear, with Mazzucchelli's name embossed around the valve—a gesture revealing the mechanical nature of artistic identity within market systems. The pneumatic element remains crucial but functions differently than in the abandoned works. Where earlier inflatables demonstrated material vulnerability through public deterioration, the "Bieca Decorazione" works maintain their form through controlled atmospheric pressure. They exist in permanent states of artificial life support, sustained by the same institutional and economic systems they nominally critique.

The trajectory from abandonment to decoration traces what might be called the "topology of cynicism" in contemporary art. The abandoned works operated through ideological naïveté—maintaining belief in art's transformative potential even while demonstrating its impossibility. The decorative works embody cynical distance—functioning effectively within institutional systems while maintaining ironic awareness of their own complicity. This cynicism should not be read as defeat but as diagnostic tool. By openly acknowledging their decorative function, these works expose the hidden decorative dimension of all gallery-based practice. They demonstrate the ability to function effectively within systems whose fundamental contradictions one fully understands.

The relationship between the two bodies of work is dialectical rather than evolutionary. The abandoned inflatables demonstrated art's impossibility outside institutional frameworks; the decorative works reveal its complicity within those frameworks. Together, they map the complete territory of art's social positioning, revealing both the naïveté of external critiques and the cynicism of internal operations. Throughout both series, the PVC material functions as more than an aesthetic choice—it embodies "material consciousness" of art's industrial positioning. Unlike natural materials favoured by Arte Povera, PVC openly declares its synthetic origins, its dependence on petrochemical industries, its integration within systems of mass production. The

inflatable medium creates "plasticity"—the capacity to both receive and give form within strict limits determined by material properties and environmental conditions. This plasticity extends to questions of possession: the works exist in states of perpetual circulation between public and private, artist and audience, critique and complicity. Both bodies of work operate according to "exhaustion aesthetics"—functioning not through the promise of transformation but through the acknowledgement of limits. This exhaustion is structural, reflecting art's position within late capitalist systems that have successfully absorbed and neutralised most forms of cultural resistance.

Mazzucchelli's practice gains particular relevance in our current moment of institutional crisis. The cynicism of the "Bieca Decorazione" series should be read not as pessimism but as realism about art's actual social function. By honestly acknowledging their decorative role, these works create space for a genuine assessment of art's institutional positioning. This is not to suggest that art lacks social function, but that its actual function differs fundamentally from its claimed function. The question is not whether art can maintain its critical function, but whether it can develop forms of consciousness adequate to its actual social positioning. Mazzucchelli's practice suggests that such consciousness requires abandoning art's heroic self-conception in favour of diagnostic analysis of structural conditions. The pneumatic works breathe with the rhythm of institutional life support, their artificial inflation sustained by the same systems they reveal. Art exists in permanent states of artificial life support, sustained by institutions whose contradictions it cannot escape. The question is whether this condition can become the basis for new forms of consciousness rather than merely new forms of cynicism.

Ultimately, Mazzucchelli demonstrates that art's critical potential lies not in claims to autonomy but in honest analysis of its own structural positioning. The abandoned works and decorative objects function as diagnostic tools, revealing the material and institutional conditions that determine artistic possibility. This is not the end of critique but its beginning—the recognition that effective criticism requires understanding the systems within which it operates.