

On occasion of his solo exhibition at Frankfurt am Main, Piero Gilardi is presenting an unreleased video, original masks used in street protests from 1970s till nowadays and his “Nature-carpets”.

Text by Bernard Vienat

Piero Gilardi. Biopolitics

In the age of the so-called *Capitalocene*, it has become evident that nature lost its virginal character long ago. Living in artificial environments to escape the effects of climate change and prevent extinction has become a reality. The replacement of bees by tiny flying robots is no longer a science-fiction fantasy, and underlines the dependence of humans-as-consumers on technological apparatuses. Piero Gilardi’s (*1942) artistic practice is certainly an early statement about this evolution into a machine-made and financialized nature. From his role as one of the early protagonists of Arte Povera, to his collective actions organized for protests, and since 2008 the development of his initiative Parco de Arte Vivente in Turin, Gilardi has forged a distinctive unity between artistic practice and activism. Throughout, he has maintained a continuous fight against power, against the transformation of life into a commodity. His vast oeuvre over the last fifty-five years displays a deep awareness of how life has been absorbed by capitalism.

Long before discussions over the “End of Nature” or exhibitions speculating on a posthuman era became commonplace in the art world, Gilardi began his now famous series of *Nature-Carpets* (*Tappeti-natura*) in 1965, which proposed alternative environments in which humanity could evolve and thrive after the loss of their natural biotope. These carpets are what he called “cybernetic individual living cells”: little pieces of “nature” composed of foam rubber formed into pebbles, fruits and vegetables, and fresh grass, exhibited on the floor, where visitors could sit or step on them. Their texture and materiality recall the soft sculptures of Claes Oldenburg, who, with his oversized hamburgers and VW Beetle, made a radical comment on pop culture. Further comparisons to Pop art come to mind, considering that Gilardi named these simulacra of nature “carpets,” which suggest a relation to mass-consumption products. However, his carpets are not edition multiples, but rather thought to be parts of an infinite composition in which one would be placed next to the other, to compose an environment of their own and work toward the reinvention of life on earth.

Nonetheless, nature itself becomes a kind of consumer product here. Gilardi’s futuristic project might have anticipated debates over the privatization of nature: making us question, to whom does this “new nature” belong? Who is a fortiori the owner of life?

Despite his early success and close friendships with artists such as Michelangelo Pistoletto, in 1967 Gilardi chose to continue his work outside of the art system, which he perceived as limiting to artists' creativity. Following several trips abroad, including to New York, Paris, and Stockholm, he briefly resurfaced in 1969 to advise curators Harald Szeemann, on his landmark exhibition "When Attitudes Become Form," and Wim Beeren, on the no less influential show "Op Losse Schroeven." He rejected an individual art career until 1983, dedicating himself instead to a collective activist-artistic practice.

During this period, he directed his effort first toward psychiatric rights as an art therapist, by implementing a participative theater that involved patients recreating the situations experienced while interned in the hospital. Gilardi soon developed his participative work for Workerist street protest inspired by Augusto Boal's "Theater of the Oppressed," which incorporates spectators into the role of actors, in order to transform their perspective on their reality and foster social change.

The film *Sulle strade nelle piazze*, which documents a series of demonstrations from 1976 until its release 2016, spotlights Gilardi's contributions to those protests. From the first images of demonstrations against Fiat, to GMOs, the wars in Iraq, and the European Central Bank, we see his monumental rolling horse, Roman helmets, swords, caricature masks of politicians and oligarchs such as Silvio Berlusconi, Gianni Agnelli, and Bill Clinton, disguising the army of protestors. He appears himself in the documentary along with the crowd, designing costumes or with a megaphone, but always part of the collective. A unique form of street theatre is produced by the effect of the costumes and the dynamic they generate, allowing the participants to access a kind of transmutation, a detachment from everyday life. They seem to become temporarily free from the oppressive power they are demonstrating against, whether embodied by the corporation that employs them or the global-capitalist regime. In this light, the costume *Pollution* (1983) and the mask *Agnelli* (1986/2016), much like the *Nature-Carpets*, might be seen as important connective points between Gilardi's artistic practice and his fight for emancipation from the capitalistic stranglehold on human and nonhuman beings.

Bernard Vienat

Biography

Piero Gilardi was born in Turin in 1942. He started in 1965 to create his "Tappeti-natura" (Nature-

carpets)—floor installations and wall reliefs made of meticulously molded and painted polyurethane foam that take the form of rocks, plants and a wide variety of nature studies—which brought him substantial critical and commercial success through the '60s. He exhibited in Paris, Brussels, Cologne, Hamburg, Amsterdam and New York. He later grew disillusioned with the art world, however, and, by the early 1970s, ceased producing regular art works to engage in the new artistic trends of the late '60s, *Arte Povera*, *Land Art* and *Antiform Art*. He took part in the first two international exhibitions of these new movements at the *Stedelijk Museum* in Amsterdam and at the Bern *Kunsthalle*.

In 1969 he started a long trans-cultural experience to conceptually analyze and practice the “Art/Life” combination. He spent the next 10 years traveling in Italy and abroad, writing theoretical analyses of society and culture, the focus of his thinking during this period of civil upheaval. As political activist and animator of youth culture, he organized street theatre, actions and protests in factories, along with several experiences of collective creativity in places such as Nicaragua, Indian Reserves in the USA and Africa.

In 1981 he reentered the art works. In 1985 he started an artistic research project with new technologies with the elaboration of the *IXIANA PROJECT* (which was presented at the Parc de la Villette in Paris). This work consisted of a technological park in which the public could artistically experiment with digital technologies.

Recently he has been producing a number of multi-media interactive installations and participated in international exhibitions.

At the beginning of 2003 he promoted the plan of the PAV – Parco Arte Vivente (*Living Art Park*) in Turin is an experimental contemporary art centre, a meeting point and a research facility dedicated to the relationship between art on one side and nature, biotechnology and ecology on the other. The park is open to the public and directed by Piero Gilardi.

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