

## 5. THE CYCLE OF VITALITY

### 5.1 Introduction

This chapter focuses on the *Cycle of Vitality*, a cycle of three international contemporary art exhibitions organised at the CIAC by Paolo Marinotti together with Willem Sandberg – then director of the Stedelijk Museum of Amsterdam – and with the external support of artist Asger Jorn. *Vitalità nell'arte*, *Dalla natura all'arte* and *Arte e contemplazione* presented Italian and international artists whose formal vocabulary was close to *art informel* and abstract expressionism. However, unlike the traditional fine art exhibitions organised in Italy at the time (as seen in chapter three), the Palazzo Grassi exhibitions did not try to inscribe the selected works of art within an art historical framework or a critical analysis (as exemplified by the dismissal of the label *informel* in Marinotti's first text).<sup>1</sup> Instead they presented works under three themes: vitality, nature, and contemplation. Although the way in which these themes were addressed seemed (and still seems) naïve and rather vague, the three exhibitions managed to call into question the very nature of the thematic exhibition as developed in Italy up to that point. Of the three exhibitions, the first two travelled to the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, while *Vitalità nell'arte* toured also to the Kunsthalle of Recklinghausen, Germany and the Louisiana Museum, Copenhagen, confirming the international agenda of the CIAC.

The *Cycle of Vitality*, by pushing in new directions the possibilities offered by thematic exhibitions applied directly to contemporary art, shed new light on those aspects of exhibition making left unexplored by architects in their experiments of the 1950s. Surprisingly, the result of this shift was that both architecture and exhibition design, key elements in the transformation of Italian exhibition history since the 1930s, remained excluded from new developments in contemporary art exhibition making. What took the place of architects and exhibition design as the connecting principle of the elements constituting an exhibition – the art works, the space and the public – was the only component that architects had not fully addressed in their 1950s projects: the institution's relationship to the discipline of art history. Although to some extent they emptied this relationship of meaning by foregrounding the aesthetic experience of an exhibit rather than its place in an art historical narrative, at the same time the selection of the pieces was

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<sup>1</sup> Paolo Marinotti, 'Réponse à moi-même' in *Vitalità nell'arte*, exh. cat., Venezia: Centro Internazionale delle Arti e del Costume, 1959, pp.6–7.

undertaken by museum directors who still managed their institutions according to a history of art as theorised by Argan. The CIAC, instead, lacking any connection with the discipline of art history, quickly assumed the role of the connecting principle between art works, space and public, a role that constitutes the essential starting point for the rise of curatorial practice.

## 5.2 The *Cycle of Vitality*

The exhibition cycle marked a turn in the CIAC's programme. From being concerned mainly with the concept of costume – both in its relationship with the history of textiles and with the expression of human creativity – the CIAC shifted the focus of its activities to contemporary art and its capacity to create a rupture in the present while, at the same time, aiming to foster a contemporary European culture. In so doing, Marinotti, rather than betray the initial purposes of the CIAC, capitalised on its multidisciplinary nature and on the new areas of possibility opened up by its research on *costume*. Neither museum nor university, yet engaged in developing historical exhibitions and interdisciplinary research, the CIAC provided a platform to road test how art could function outside a traditional disciplinary framework. Furthermore, Marinotti could delve more directly into the relationship between creativity and technology by addressing contemporary works of art. As seen in chapter three, during the 1950s this issue was the subject of a burgeoning debate in magazines and exhibitions, reaching its apex at the tenth Milan Triennial, partly dedicated to industrial design.

In discussing the role of the CIAC in facilitating alternatives to traditional museological display – the way in which, on the one hand Marinotti, and on the other Jorn and the Situationists brought a fresh perspective to the debate on the unity of the arts, and the move away from architect-led exhibition design for contemporary art thematic exhibitions – I come full circle with the analysis of those three elements identified in chapter two and explored further through subsequent chapters. By substituting the place of architects and exhibition design with the institution itself as the connecting principle, by the end of the 1950s, the thematic exhibition based on contemporary works of art revealed the existence of a new cultural field in which, eventually, curatorial practices proliferated.

As already mentioned in my introduction, it is not my intention to promote Marinotti, Sandberg or Jorn as the 'first' curators, although the first two certainly acted in a



manner that today we would call curatorial, and occupied a curatorial position in producing thematic exhibitions related to contemporary art. While the catalogues credit Marinotti and Sandberg as the exhibition organisers, Jorn was never mentioned since he preferred not to be directly involved. Nevertheless, we know that he supported Paolo's vision and provided him with suggestions regarding which artists to invite to exhibit at Palazzo Grassi. Still a Situationist at the time of the cycle, Jorn managed nevertheless to be both involved in the critique of the art system and engaged in a dialogue with an emerging by-product of it. Already in touch with Sandberg since the COBRA exhibition of 1949 at the Stedelijk Museum, he re-established contact with him in 1958, this time as a member of the Situationist International.<sup>2</sup>

The coming together of Marinotti, Sandberg and Jorn around the Palazzo Grassi exhibitions organised between 1959 and 1961 is somewhat surprising and disconcerting.<sup>3</sup> The three men seemed to be united by a passionate character, a critical stance towards their times and a moral urgency to intervene, through their actions, in the creation of a new social body. The expressionist language of the period following the Second World War mirrored their appetites for subverting the existing conditions of reality and expressed the chaotic inner nature of the subjects they wanted to summon up. While Jorn, alongside his paintings, found in writing and in the collective dimension his instruments to intervene in reality, Sandberg and Marinotti recognised the institutions, which they ran as their medium for expression.

This said, one is nevertheless led to ponder what other possible reasons there might have been that led the three to collaborate. As pointed out at the end of the previous chapter, Marinotti in 1958 discussed with the board of the CIAC the need to concentrate the activities of Palazzo Grassi in a more decisive way towards the (so-called western) European context and towards more contemporary expressions of culture. This was due to the number of private international companies that started investing in projects more related to contemporary production (such as Krupp). Nevertheless, it could be inferred that the move towards contemporary art allowed Paolo the chance to distance himself further from his father and his burdensome legacy of political, economic and social

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<sup>2</sup> The name COBRA is an acronym of the initial letters of the capital cities from which the participating artists came: Copenhagen, Brussels, Amsterdam. COBRA aimed to overcome the lessons of Expressionism and Surrealism by drawing its imagery from the ancient mythology of Northern Europe in order to unleash new energies with the potential to rebuild post-war society through art.

<sup>3</sup> The three collaborated again in 1963 for *Visione-colore*, an exhibition not comprised in the Cycle (and therefore not considered in the present dissertation), in which Jorn's role clearly overshadowed that of Sandberg.

successes. In an interview conducted by me in 2002, the Venetian art critic Paolo Rizzi – who was involved as a young student in the activities of Palazzo Grassi first as an exhibition guide and then as the reporter on art-related events for *Il Gazzettino*, Venice’s local newspaper – stressed the fiery relationship that existed between Marinotti father and son.<sup>4</sup> From his recount, it seems that Franco did not take his son’s passion for contemporary art particularly seriously. United by their love of the arts, father and son were nevertheless divided by their taste, one more focused on modern art and the other on contemporary art. It could be inferred that Paolo’s interest in contemporary art developed partly as a way of differentiating himself and his field of interest from his father. In this way, Paolo could approach the CIAC not only, as Rizzi claimed in his interview, as the plaything of a spoiled child, but as the very instrument through which he could find his place (and make his name) in the world, stepping out from behind the heavy shadow of his larger-than-life father. In fact, compared to the achievements made by Franco during his life, Paolo’s activities at the CIAC up until 1958 seem rather narrow in their scope. However, things changed after that date, when his meeting with Sandberg and Jorn not only allowed him to operate in the field of contemporary art, unhampered by the presence of his father, but also to develop an international network that put him in contact with those ideas and artists that were decisively distancing themselves from any right wing sentiments such as characterised his father activities.

As previously mentioned, Marinotti found in Sandberg a precious ally and counsellor for the CIAC’s transition to contemporary art institution. What Sandberg instead found in Marinotti might be explained by the extreme generosity of the latter (most likely implied by the very role played internationally by Marinotti as a wealthy patron of the arts). As appears from different interviews (such as the one I conducted with Sandberg’s secretary Ad Petersen, or the one by contemporary curator Hans Ulrich Obrist with Harald Szeemann), after the Second World War the Stedelijk Museum only had access to an extremely limited budget, which in turn affected the politics of collecting contemporary art.<sup>5</sup> As was the case with Szeemann, it was often Sandberg’s role to collaborate with other international institutions on the transportation of artworks. It is not coincidence that both *Vitalità nell’arte* and *Dalla natura all’arte* travelled from Venice to Amsterdam, not only fulfilling Paolo’s project to boost links with Europe and promote the idea of a Europe united through culture (with the CIAC as a driving force), but also allowing the Stedelijk to

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<sup>4</sup> I interviewed Paolo Rizzi in June 2002 in Venice.

<sup>5</sup> I interviewed Ad Petersen on March 2009 in Amsterdam, Hans Ulrich Obrist, *A Brief History of Curating*, Zurich: JRP Ringer, 2008, p.87.

host exhibitions including major artists from different countries. In addition, there may have been another reason why Sandberg decided to accept Marinotti's offer of collaboration. As underlined by Caroline Roodenburg-Schadd in her article, Sandberg's policies on acquisitions changed during the 1950s.<sup>6</sup> From his first interest in acquiring abstract art, he moved on to extending the representation of contemporary Dutch artists more related to *art informel* and abstract expressionism within the Stedelijk's collection. The initial collaboration with Palazzo Grassi and its contemporary art exhibitions, therefore, could also be read as an attempt to expand the awareness of, and international market for, Dutch contemporary art, as the art market became increasingly intercontinental with its focus shifting from Paris to New York.<sup>7</sup> In fact, it is not by chance that of the two artists commissioned by Marinotti and Sandberg to make art works in-situ for *Vitalità nell'arte*, it was the Dutch painter Karel Appel who produced a mural textile using man-made fibres produced and provided by the SNIA Viscosa industries.

It was Guy Debord who expressed in a letter to the artist Constant of 25 September 1959 his belief that Sandberg's main motivation in his relationship with Marinotti was to launch a new movement affiliated to COBRA, via the CIAC's programme of exhibitions.<sup>8</sup> As he later recounted, Debord's comment came at the end of a year-long stormy relationship with Sandberg himself. The relationship between Jorn, Debord and Sandberg became particularly intense at the end of the 1950s, with Sandberg attempting to revive international interest in COBRA and its afterlife in the different paths taken by its members during the 1950s. Nevertheless, despite tensions with Sandberg, Jorn accepted Marinotti's offer to collaborate on the CIAC. Only the peculiar nature of the two men can explain this: Marinotti in 1958 was immediately fascinated by both Jorn's personality and his artistic production, soon becoming Jorn's main Italian collector (and indirect sponsor of the Situationist International). Jorn, instead, could see in Marinotti the experimental

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<sup>6</sup> Caroline Roodenburg-Schadd, 'Sandberg and The Stedelijk: The Museum Moderniser as Collector' in *Stedelijk Museum Bulletin* n. 4, 2004.

<sup>7</sup> This point is further supported by the fact that Sandberg in his catalogue entry for *Vitalità nell'arte* rather than quote articles published within the COBRA magazine decided to refer to the 'Reflex' Manifesto written by Constant, Dutch artist member of Reflex, then COBRA and finally of the Situationist International. The circumstance is even more telling since Constant by 1959 dropped his activity as a painter, and decided to be an architect, his participation in *Vitalità nell'arte* thus becoming unfeasible.

<sup>8</sup> Guy Debord letter to Constant, 25 September 1959, published in English in <http://www.notbored.org/debord-25September1959.html>. Last accessed 15 February 2014. In the same letter, Debord dismisses Marinotti as being interested only in buying Jorn and Gallizio. In a letter of the 22 September 1959, Debord expressed to Constant Jorn's concern that Sandberg's interest in organising an exhibition at the CIAC aimed to position Dutch artists as the leaders of modern art. This supposed agenda obviously clashed with Jorn's which aimed to position Scandinavian art as the new beacon for modern language. Guy Debord letter to Constant, 22 September 1959, translated into English at <http://www.notbored.org/debord-22September1959a.html>. Last accessed 15 February 2014.

entrepreneur he was looking for to reverse both Max Bill's logical approach which aimed to subjugate artistic inventiveness to industrial production, and the cult of the artist as a genius within the art system.

In his relationship with Marinotti, Jorn pursued a quadruple goal: the first was to establish an artist–collector relationship; the second was his interest in the possible collaboration with an institution exceptional of its kind (Marinotti being new to the art system and the CIAC not resembling any traditional art museum); the third, related to the possibility of realising the Situationist city through the economic support of Marinotti, was concerned with the Utopolis project (sketched out by the Situationists in 1960, if realised it would have been the apotheosis of the activities of the Situationist International); and the fourth and final one, more related to Jorn's own personal interests, was the creation of an outpost for the Scandinavian artistic tradition within Venice, the heart of Mediterranean culture, Christian at its core and long derided by Jorn for alienating humans from nature and from themselves. A long-standing concern of Jorn's from the 1940s until his death in 1973, his interest in primitive Scandinavian art and its influence on medieval sculpture of the area resulted in his undertaking a range of different projects.<sup>9</sup> As demonstrated by the private correspondence between him and Marinotti, Jorn urged Marinotti to organise a vast exhibition at the Palazzo Grassi in order to illustrate the importance of Scandinavian culture and its relevance in the present day by including examples of creative production right from the primitive era to expressions of contemporary art.<sup>10</sup> The exhibition never took place since Marinotti refused to reintroduce exhibitions with a historical element which would go against the post-1959 vocation of the CIAC to devote itself to contemporary art. Nevertheless, Jorn's agenda found its partial expression (and a degree of revenge on Sandberg) in *Visione-colore*, the exhibition organised in 1963 largely by Marinotti (although still with Sandberg in the background), with the substantial input of Jorn, as proved by the overwhelming presence of Danish artists belonging to the generation of Helheistein in the show, artists with whom Jorn had started communicating and collaborating in the early 1940s during the German occupation of Denmark.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Regarding the Utopolis project, Marinotti's role and its final failure, please refer to Stefano Collicelli Cagol, *Venezia e la vitalità del contemporaneo. Paolo Marinotti a Palazzo Grassi (1959-1967)*, Padova: Il Poligrafo, 2008. Among the projects developed by Jorn on Scandinavian art the main one is the 'Scandinavian Institute of Comparative Vandalism'. Peter Shield, *Comparative Vandalism: Asger Jorn and the artistic attitude to life*, Aldershot: Ashgate, 1998, and Niels Henriksen, 'Asger Jorn and the photographic essay on Scandinavian vandalism' in *Inferno: Journal of Art History*, vol. 8, 2003.

<sup>10</sup> Letter of Asger Jorn to Paolo Marinotti, probably dated summer 1959, MJA, Silkeborg, file 'Til Paolo Marinotti.'

<sup>11</sup> Paolo Marinotti, *Visione-colore*, exh. cat. Venezia: Centro Internazionale delle Arti e del Costume, 1963.

Whatever their different agendas, Marinotti, Sandberg and Jorn all found common ground in the concept of ‘vitality’. The word had appeared in different documents produced by the CIAC since 1951; at the same time it was used by Jorn in one of his famous texts published in *Cobra*.<sup>12</sup> This widespread use of the word is evidence of its currency around the end of the Second World War, given the need to respond at the level of cultural production to the traumatic events of the war. It should be pointed out, though, that in Italy the word was widely used also at the time of Fascist propaganda, as demonstrated by different slogans published in the house organ of the SNIA Viscosa, *I Tessili nazionali*, during the second half of the 1930s. But if in the case of the CIAC, ‘vitality’ generally relates to costume as a generator of a new (commodified) life and on the wholesome influence on it of the industry of man-made fibres, in the context of COBRA, back in 1949, it assumes a more poignant meaning.

Referring to the instinctive spontaneity driving a COBRA artist to experiment and produce his art, in his pamphlet ‘Discours aux pingouins’ published in the magazine *Cobra* Jorn claims that it is through such means that one can ‘get closer to the vital source of life.’<sup>13</sup> Hal Foster, in his *October* essay ‘Creaturely Cobra,’ relates this statement to the special attraction of the group toward the ‘creaturely’, a concept he puts in relation to the animal aspect of all living subjects. For Foster, the creaturely becomes the distinguishing feature of COBRA in respect to pre-war Surrealism and its uses of automatism.<sup>14</sup> As pointed out by Constant in the *Reflex* manifesto of 1948 – the avant-garde group he created together with Dutch artists Karel Appel and Pierre Alechinsky a year before merging with COBRA – after the Second World War and its fallout, a new era opened up for European artists where ‘a painting is not a construction of colours and lines, but an animal, a night, a scream, a human being, or all of these.’<sup>15</sup> As aptly noticed by Foster, this statement recalls the one by the Nabi painter Maurice Denis (‘a painting ... is essentially a flat surface covered with colours assembled in a certain order’) and refers to a new understanding of painting by the Reflex and COBRA artists.<sup>16</sup> A painting must be the expression of inner forces, such as are able to unleash the ‘vital source of life’, and these vital sources are not to

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<sup>12</sup> Asger Jorn, ‘Discours aux pingouins,’ in *Cobra*, n.1, 1949

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p.8. English quotation by Hal Foster, ‘Creaturely Cobra’ in *October* n.141, Summer 2012, p.5

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Constant, ‘Manifesto’, in *Reflex*, 1, 1948 quoted by Hal Foster, ‘Creaturely Cobra’.

<sup>16</sup> Maurice Denis (1890), ‘Definition of Neotraditionism’ in Charles Harrison, Paul Wood and Jason Gaiger (eds.), *Art in Theory 1815 – 1900*, London: Blackwell, 1998, p863.

be confined within the human realm but opened up to those forces – material, immaterial – that drive the entire world.

Foster describes COBRA's creaturely stance as a response to the traumas of the War and of the Holocaust (although it should be noted that artists such as Jorn never made reference to the Holocaust either in his writings or his paintings). What was it then that pushed Jorn in 1959 – already a member of the Situationist International and a harsh critic of the lack of impact of the COBRA experiments – to return to the concept of vitality so closely related to COBRA? The question is even more apposite since, in his poetic statement published in the catalogue of *Vitalità nell'arte*, Sandberg quoted from Constant's *Reflex* Manifesto discussed earlier. The answer is to be found in the agenda that both Jorn and Sandberg tried to promote during the late 1950s: on the one hand, as later discussed, Sandberg wanted to position Duch art and artists at the forefront of the international debate by taking COBRA, as the last international avant-garde, as their frontrunner. Moreover, rather than responding to the fallout from the Second World War which had ended almost fifteen years before, he was reacting vehemently to the brutal peace that followed after 1945 and the impact of the Cold War on Europe and its culture. Jorn, instead, rather than promote his previous life as a COBRA painter, wanted to support Marinotti in what he foresaw as a new institutional project able to counteract the traditional paths followed by art institutions and their relationship with the art market. Moreover, as would later become clear, he believed the CIAC – thanks to its relationship with the textile industry – could re-launch a new kind of dialogue between that industry and artists, after the experience of the Bauhaus during the 1920s and the controversial new Bauhaus school opened in Ulm in 1956 by designer Max Bill. Finally Jorn, faithful to his polemical vision of the history of art and its inherent differences between Northern and Southern Europe, pinpointed the CIAC and Marinotti as the perfect institution through which he could bring his fight to international attention. 'Vitality' became a tool through to flag up his belief in the peculiarity of Scandinavian art in respect to the more Apollonian Mediterranean vision.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> One of the main influences on Jorn's thinking was Friedrich Nietzsche and his distinction between the Apollonian and Dionysian, explained in Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, New York: Dover Publications; London: Constable & Company, 1995, translated by Clifton P. Fadiman, which for Jorn stood respectively for Southern and Northern Europe. Jorn explained his theory in his pamphlet 'Apollo or Dionysus' (1947), published in Ruth Baumeister, Ruth Baumeister (ed.), *Fraternité Avant Tout. Asger Jorn's writings on art and architecture, 1938–1958*, Rotterdam: 010 publishers, 2011, pp.153–65

It could be that, indirectly, it was English critic Herbert Read at the end of the 1950s who redirected Sandberg's attention towards the concept of 'vitality'. Through it, Sandberg and Marinotti aimed to respond to the sterility of the official cultural politics of those years; the hopeless political landscape produced by the Cold War created, on the one hand by the U.S. anti-Soviet paranoia and, on the other hand, by the ferocious Soviet repression of the Hungarian Revolution in 1956. Furthermore, the persistence of functionalist values as a privileged vehicle of capitalism within International and Italian design culture (as proven in the third chapter by the Milan Triennial exhibitions of the 1950s) certainly reinforced the belief that contemporary artists deserved an institution where they were free to present their art without any constrictions. In 1957, Read published his book *The Tenth Muse*, containing the text 'A Seismographic Art,' in which he links informal art to 'vitality', recognised alongside 'beauty' as one of the two principles behind aesthetic form.<sup>18</sup> It is likely that it was Sandberg who suggested vitality to Marinotti as the main theme around which to focus the exhibitions of the CIAC, finding the latter extremely receptive to the idea.

From this point of view, it should be noted that the CIAC's thematic contemporary art exhibitions adopted a retrograde position in respect to what was happening in artistic production at the time in Italy and Europe. As highlighted already, Read used the term 'vitality' mainly in the context of *art informel*, that although not exactly mainstream within the institutional discourse of the time, was a fading language among artists given its extreme popularity (and vulgarisation). With the most up-to-date artistic experimentations in the United Kingdom, France or Italy looking at popular culture as a source of inspiration or towards a production more rooted in happenings and time-based media, the artworks presented by the CIAC within the *Cycle of Vitality* seemed irredeemably stuck in the early 1950s.

If Marinotti tended to be more conservative in his choices, presenting even in 1967 ex-COBRA artists and works of *art informel* alongside the latest in Pop Art (already in 1964 Rauschenberg had won the Golden Lion for painting at the Venice Biennial), Sandberg was clearly more up-to-date in terms of the artistic languages of his time, as demonstrated by the exhibitions organised at the Stedelijk Museum of Amsterdam in 1961 and 1962, such as

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<sup>18</sup> Herbert Read, *The Tenth Muse: Essays in Criticism*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1957.

*Bewinden Bewogen* and *Dylaby*.<sup>19</sup> Therefore, it was not just questions of taste that were driving Marinotti and Sandberg in their decisions, or ignorance about the latest artistic developments of the time. It was rather a definite decision not to become another venue introducing the public to the most up-to-the-minute developments in the art world, but a desire instead to conceive a series of exhibitions able to address a theme, a concept, a particular discourse related more to the immediate present than a record of the state of things at a given historical moment.

The thematic exhibition provided a specific context which allowed for a concentration on the formal qualities of the art works presented, not so much within an art historical framework but rather in trying to figure out what kind of artistic forms were able to articulate the present and have an impact on the life of the exhibition's visitors. The fact that the *Cycle of Vitality* was taking on the thematic exhibition, born within the tradition of the commercial exhibition sector as demonstrated by the Milan Fair and the Milan Triennial, where functionalism still thrived, demonstrates a clever move on the part of Marinotti, Sandberg and Jorn in beating the enemy with its own weapons. In order to understand more profoundly the level at which the fight against internationalism was developing, it is necessary to turn to the Italian experience of Asger Jorn in the 1950s.

### 5.3 Asger Jorn in Italy

In order to understand Jorn's position in relation to Marinotti and the CIAC, it is necessary to analyse the three-day-long First International Congress of Industrial Design, organised in 1954 at the tenth Milan Triennial.<sup>20</sup> The keynote speaker on the third day was Max Bill, who had already presented his work on several different occasions, in particular at

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<sup>19</sup> Paolo Marinotti, *Campo Vitale*, exh. cat. Venezia: Centro Internazionale delle Arti e del Costume, Palazzo Grassi, 1967. Willem Sandberg curated *Bewogen Beweging* in 1961 (together with Pontus Hultén) and *Dylaby* in 1962.

<sup>20</sup> The congress consisted in a three-day-long conference which gathered together Italian and international speakers, among whom were the philosopher Enzo Paci, the Swiss architect Max Bill, the Argentinian Tomas Maldonado, the Americans Konrad Wachsmann and Walter D. Teague, the Englishman Paul Reilly and the Frenchman Jacques Viénot. Max Bill at the time was Rector of the Hochschule für Gestaltung Ulm, a new school founded in the city of Ulm with the aim of being the new school of the Bauhaus, shut down in 1933 by the Nazis; in 1956, Tomas Maldonado, already an acclaimed designer, succeeded Bill as the Rector of the school. Teague is considered one of the pioneers of the professionalization of the industrial designer in the U.S., Wachsmann was director of the Illinois Institute of Technology of Chicago from 1950, Sir Paul Reilly directed the *Design Council*, while Jacques Viénot founded in 1951 the 'Institut d'esthétique industrielle.' The proceedings of the three day conference, its papers and discussions are published in *La memoria e il futuro: 1. Congresso internazionale dell'industrial design. Triennale di Milano, 1954*, Milano: Skira, 2001.



the sixth Milan Triennial (1936) and its ninth edition (1951) in the Swiss section.<sup>21</sup> In 1951, Bill was invited to become director of the Hochschule für Gestaltung Ulm, which officially opened to students in 1956. The school, an independent institution sponsored by the husband and wife team Scholl-Acher, aimed to revive the Bauhaus experience, helping at the same time in the reconstruction of Germany according to democratic values. The initiative allowed Bill to promote his vision of a functionalist design where beauty should coincide with the utility and functionality of the produced object. In his talk at the 1954 congress, Bill reiterated these positions, highlighting that this alone should be the role of those artists who were involved in industrial design.<sup>22</sup> He obviously triggered a range of reactions among those present but probably the fiercest one was from Jorn, with whom Bill had already had a heated exchange of letters the year before.

In 1953 Jorn was recovering at Villars Chésièrs (Vaud) in Switzerland from chronic TB, when he learned about the Hochschule für Gestaltung. The school appeared to him as a possible new project in which to invest his energies. During his hospitalization, COBRA – the collective artistic movement he cofounded in Paris in 1948 – came to an end. When he heard that the Hochschule für Gestaltung wanted to revive the spirit of the old Bauhaus, he immediately wrote to Bill to propose himself, a ‘free artist’, as a possible tutor. Bill dismissed his request by stressing that there was no space in the Hochschule für Gestaltung for artists not actively involved in the production of functional objects.<sup>23</sup> In response to Bill’s plans and in the face of his school, in December 1953 Jorn, in postal correspondence with the Italian artist based in Milan, Enrico Baj, founded the ‘International Movement for an Imaginist Bauhaus.’<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, he promoted in 1947, at the Palazzo Reale of Milan, an international exhibition devoted to concrete art, which prompted the foundation a year later of the M.A.C., the Italian abstract group based in Milan.

<sup>22</sup> The four points proclaimed by Bill are: 1) the function of the artist is not to express himself, but to create harmonious objects at man’s service; 2) since the artist is responsible for human culture, he has to take care of problems related to serial production; 3) the goal of production is to achieve the unity of function, including the aesthetic function of the object; 4) the goal of each production must be to satisfy men’s needs and inspirations. *Ibid.*, p.66. My translation.

<sup>23</sup> The exchange was later summarised by Jorn in one of his texts as follows: “for Jorn: ‘Bauhaus is the name of an artistic inspiration,’ for Bill: ‘Bauhaus is not the name of an artistic inspiration; it signifies a movement that represents a well-defined doctrine’ to which Jorn replies: ‘If Bauhaus is not the name of an artistic inspiration, it is the name of a doctrine without inspiration, i.e. a dead doctrine.’” Asger Jorn, ‘Image and Form. Against Eclectic Empiricism’, 1954, in Ruth Baumeister (ed.), *Fraternité Avant Tout*, p.267. Translated by Paul Larkin.

<sup>24</sup> On the concept of the ‘imaginist Bauhaus’ please refer to Nicola Pezolet, ‘Bauhaus Ideas: Jorn, Max Bill, and Reconstruction Culture’ in *October*, n.141, Summer 2012, pp. 86–110 and Mirella Bandini, *L’estetico il politico. Da Cobra all’Internazionale Situazionista 1948/1957*, Ancona-Milano: Costa&Nolan, 1999.

Jorn finally had the chance to confront Bill in person at the international congress of industrial design. He introduced himself as a 'free artist,' as opposed to Bill's concept of an artist, indirectly highlighting the fact that no artists sat among the panellists (a point stressed also by Lucio Fontana).<sup>25</sup> He questioned Bill's thesis, highlighting the internal contradiction in Bill's argument that technique, function and aesthetics should work together in producing the designed object. For Jorn, the aesthetic element of an object should not be in any way driven by concerns about functionality, since the aesthetic coincides rather with the non-functional and unexpected parts of an experience. Driven by human desires, the contemporary artist needed to find a way to retain his freedom and his willingness to experiment, although living at a moment where everything was tending towards standardisation.<sup>26</sup>

The speech did not succeed in sparking further discussion around Jorn's provocative points of view, but it remained as evidence of the critique of functionalism.<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, it underlined the different perspective of those artists not interested in approaching technique purely on the terms set by industrial designers and their proponents. Not by chance, Jorn presented at that Triennial the series of ceramics collectively created with other artists, such as Fontana, Sergio Dangelo and Emilio Scanavino, during the *International meeting of ceramics* which took place that summer in Albisola, a small Italian seaside town near Genoa famous for its ceramic production, where he was then living at Baj's suggestion.

After his participation at the international congress of industrial design in 1954, Jorn returned to Albisola, contacting artists who participated in the COBRA experience in diverse ways, such as Pierre Alechinsky, Karel Appel and Karl Otto Götz (all three later involved in the *Cycle of Vitality*). Jorn realised that the limitation of COBRA was its failure to produce actual end results. As a group based on the idea of further exploring automatism in everyday life through artistic experience, COBRA was unable to reach solid ground. With the International Movement for an Imaginist Bauhaus, Jorn intended to

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<sup>25</sup> Lucio Fontana in *La memoria e il futuro: 1. Congresso internazionale dell'industria design*, p.93.

<sup>26</sup> Here he posited also an interesting comment on the Milan Triennial, challenging the idea that it existed mainly for educational purposes: 'It is important to understand this inevitable law: quantity creates the basis for the birth of new qualities. This is why large expositions need to retain their character as fields of experimentation and avoid becoming transformed into educational institutions. The greatest experiments here are the confrontations between the different stages of perfection, and the direct confrontation between objects and the public.' Asger Jorn, 'Against Functionalism', 1957, *Ibid.*, p.274.

<sup>27</sup> For this reason, an English version of the speech was included in Joan Oackman (ed.), *Architecture Culture 1943–1968: A Documentary Anthology*, New York: Rizzoli, 1993.

operate in a different way, and he considered the public polemic against Max Bill a first step in further challenging the art system. As part of his International Movement for an Imaginist Bauhaus contribution, he explored collective creativity by inviting children to decorate ceramic plates with him, and realised (with French artist Pierre Wemaëre) a tapestry composed according to traditional northern weaving techniques. In 1961, a new series of tapestries by the two artists found its way into *Arte e contemplazione*.

It was in Albisola that, in the summer of 1955, Jorn by chance met two artists who were having an exhibition at a local café, Giuseppe Pinot Gallizio and Piero Simondo. He immediately developed a strong fellowship with Gallizio, whom he saw as epitomising his idea of a 'free experimental artist'.<sup>28</sup> Gallizio, already 53 years old, had begun painting just two years before, experimenting with different chemical materials usually not found in traditional painting (such as chemical glues and acids).<sup>29</sup> The amateurish degree of his practice immediately attracted Jorn, together with his multiple interests: chemistry, botany, archaeology, nomadism and politics were some of Gallizio's areas of expertise. After their meeting, the two artists decided to explore further the experimentalism they were pursuing in their own artistic practices by opening a laboratory, the Laboratorio Sperimentale, in Alba, Gallizio's hometown near Turin.

The notion of collective experimentation had been crucial for Jorn since the COBRA years and it was further reinforced after his fight with Bill against the latter's idea of the artist as an industrial designer. For Jorn, experimentation allows an artist to develop his/her independent imaginary, something that was not a given (as in the Romantic vision of the artist as genius), but needed to be developed through training and practice. To Bill's idea of a useful art that has to be both beautiful and functional, Jorn opposed the 'sensational process as a cultural method'.<sup>30</sup> Sensation and amateurishness were associated with the Surrealists' language, primarily directed at exploring the unconscious. Since COBRA, Jorn tried to expand on these Surrealist premises, testing them against everyday life experiences. The Laboratory offered a further possibility to develop his research and

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<sup>28</sup> For Jorn, 'the free artist is a professional amateur' as he claims in his text 'Against Functionalism,' in Ruth Baumeister (ed.), *Fraternité Avant Tout*, p.280.

<sup>29</sup> On Giuseppe Pinot-Gallizio: Maria Teresa Roberto with Francesca Comisso and Giorgina Bertolino (eds.), *Pinot-Gallizio Catalogo generale delle opere 1953-1964*, Milano: Edizioni Gabriele Mazzotta, 2001 and Nicola Pezolet, 'The Cavern of Antimatter: Giuseppe "Pinot" Gallizio and the Technological Imaginary of the Early Situationist International' in *Grey Room*, n.38, Winter 2010, pp. 62–89.

<sup>30</sup> Jorn recognised how sensation was used by what was then called the cultural industry, condemned by religion, morality and reason. At the same time, he wanted to understand sensations without relation to moral judgement, thinking it to be only related to knowledge. Asger Jorn, 'Form and Structure', in Ruth Baumeister (ed.), *Fraternité Avant Tout*, p.298.

expand his network of international contacts. To Bill's preconceived notion that there was no place in the renewed Hochschule für Gestaltung Ulm for 'free artists,' Jorn opposed the Laboratorio Sperimentale, freed from any pedagogical goal. Jorn states:

The activity of the fine arts is anti-professional and anti-intellectual, but it must, on its own autonomous basis, have the possibility of continually collaborating with the two areas that can provide experimental and educative bases of support: industry and professional schools, on the one hand, and elementary schools, high schools, universities and research institutes, on the other; as well as with specifically fine-arts organisations around the world. All these organisations must be changed, as must the very conception of fine art.<sup>31</sup>

As it is possible to understand, this argument on the one hand demonstrates Jorn's ability to think always in dialectical terms, while on the other hand it reveals his interest in seeking out a dialogue and collaboration with the institutionalised systems of education, training and production. This can partly explain his openness to the dialogue with Marinotti, himself linked to industry via a cultural institution. It should be noted, though, that these conciliatory words were written in 1957, when the experience of the International Movement for an Imaginist Bauhaus had not yet come to an end due to the birth of the Situationist International. That year in September, the International Movement for an Imaginist Bauhaus merged with the Lettrist International, a French group interested in exploring new ways of affecting everyday life through new urban experiences. The first meeting of the two groups happened in Alba on 2 September 1956 during the First World Congress of Free Artists, promoted by Jorn and Gallizio as an attempt to gather together artists and intellectuals sharing their position from all over the world.<sup>32</sup> In his opening speech, Jorn underlined the goal of the meetings, in which artists would finally have the

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<sup>31</sup> Asger Jorn, 'Against Functionalism,' in Ruth Baumeister (ed.), *Fraternité Avant Tout*, p.279.

<sup>32</sup> On that occasion, two exhibitions opened: one in the City Town of Alba, *I mostra retrospettiva di ceramiche futuriste 1925-1933*, organised by the artists of the Laboratory together with Tullio Mazzotti di Albisola, and another one at the Teatro-Cinema Corinto in Alba, an exhibition of the Experimental Laboratory of Alba with works by Jorn, Gallizio, Simondo, Constant, Pravoslav Rada, Jan Kotik (two Czech painters unable to attend the congress because of problems getting through border control), Wolman and the sculptor Franco Garelli. In Dada style, the latter exhibition presented written canvases with messages such as: 'All the canvases guaranteed in pure cotton' or 'Swearing Forbidden'. The first exhibition was occasioned by a meeting between Jorn and the by then forgotten Futurist Farfà, who worked at Mazzotti's kiln in Albisola before the war. It is interesting how although the Futurists were anathematised in post-war 'zero hour' Italy, the artists linked to the International Movement for an Imaginist Bauhaus decided to organise an exhibition highlighting the pre-war movement's engagement with craft. The choice of ceramics, in line with their previous activities, goes some way to explaining the interest in relating the movement to an artistic avant-garde that, despite being criticized by Jorn, witnessed the engagement of the artist with society. For Jorn's critiques of Futurism, see to his text 'Form and Structure' published in Ruth Baumeister (ed.), *Fraternité Avant Tout*, p.281.

chance to speak and discuss the role of the artist in an industrialised society. In particular, he believed in the artist's playful and free use of machinery, so as to subvert the conventional use of machines in industrial society.

On this occasion, Gil Wolman, one of the participants from Paris, laid down the Lettrist theory of unitary urbanism, aimed at realising a new possible unity between art and technique, antifunctionalist and revolutionary, able to impose change on people's lifestyles. The concept was further developed by Guy Debord, at the time leader of the Lettrist and later one of the main proponents of the Situationist International, in his 'Rapport sur la construction des situations', published in Paris in 1957. In this text, Debord summarises the techniques used later by the Situationist International to subvert the bourgeoisie's values and their control on the structures of the society, such as free time. *Dérive, détournement*, unitary urbanism, all implied new ways of inhabiting the city, its streets and spaces, recognising in desire and surprise key elements to successfully realise this new kind of experience. The mission of the Situationist International was then 'to expunge, by all hyperpolitical means, the bourgeois idea of happiness.'<sup>33</sup> In this framework, the goal of an artist was not to produce new works or a new kind of art, but rather to overcome the traditional idea of art by transforming everyday life into a permanent state of art in itself, which would help to destroy the current bourgeois organisation of labour and free time by means of creating a 'situation'.

Gallizio and Jorn, inspired by the theory of unitary urbanism and by the concept of *détournement*, developed further research into painting. *Détournement* came to life as a playful technique of the Lettrist through which to release people's imaginative power. Theorised in 1956 by Wolman and Debord, it relates to the effect of displacement achieved through the subversion of people's everyday mental associations. Within the context of the Situationist International, it became one of the instruments through which to criticise the existing cultural system, by showing its ineffectiveness.

Jorn, at the time constantly travelling between Albisola, Paris and Silkeborg (in Denmark, where part of his family lived), concentrated on producing a series of paintings in which he *détourned* existing cheap paintings realised by unknown Sunday painters, by intervening on their surfaces. Thanks to Jorn's act, which put into question notions of

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<sup>33</sup> Guy Debord, 'Rapport sur la construction des situations et sur les conditions de l'organisation et de l'action de la tendance situationniste internationale', Paris, 1957, reproduced in Mirella Bandini, *L'estetico il politico*, p.287. My translation.

authorship, technical ability and the economic value of art, these paintings were allowed to enter the artistic circuit from which they were initially excluded. Furthermore, they allowed him and the Situationist International to realise their goal of challenging the very notion of art. Jorn publicly presented these paintings on the occasion of his exhibition *Vingt peintures modifiées* at the Galerie Rive Gauche, Paris, in May 1959.

Gallizio, instead, from January 1958 started producing what he called ‘industrial paintings.’ In his laboratory-cellar, the amateur artist unfolded pieces of canvas which had been industrially produced and therefore had standard dimensions. Together with his son, Giors Melanotte, and other occasional participants, he covered the canvases with chemical colours, resins and perfumes using mechanical devices, such as agricultural sprayers, then left them to dry either outside in the sun or inside his cellar, where he installed a purpose-built heating system. Gallizio’s aim was to produce an art based on a playful use of machinery, capable of denying artistic competence in the realisation of the art work and eventually of contradicting the economic logic regulating the art market. Sold by the metre, according to the wishes of the customer, with the possibility of being used in different ways, such as fabric to make a dress or to cover a couch, the industrial painting mocked not only the traditional idea of painterly authorship, but also reversed the logic of the industrial designer as according to Bill’s definition.

The industrial painting allowed the Situationist International to enact a *détournement* of the art world, starting with its gallery system. Presented in Turin and Milan for the first time within private galleries, the industrial painting reached its apex as a Situationist strategy when it was presented at the Galerie Drouin in Paris, opening on 13 May 1959.<sup>34</sup> On this occasion, Debord and his wife Michele Bernstein, an active participant in the Situationist International, helped Gallizio in conceiving and organising the exhibition. The Italian painter produced 145 metres of paintings covering the whole gallery in what he called the *Caverna dell’antimateria*, a ‘cave of anti-matter’, coalescing his archaeological and scientific interests and fascinations. The title recalled the scientific theories of Francesco Severi and Francesco Pannaria, based on their ideas of the energy exchange between matter and anti-matter. The environment aimed to immerse visitors in a loop of continually transforming

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<sup>34</sup> The first presentation occurred at Galleria Notizie, Torino, May 1958. For the occasion, Michele Bernstein published the text ‘Eloge de Pinot-Gallizio’ in *Notizie Arti Figurative*, the bulletin of the gallery. The text was later published in the monograph that the Situationist International dedicated to Pinot-Gallizio in 1960, although by then he had already been expelled from the movement: Michele Bernstein, Asger Jorn (eds.), *Eloge de Pinot-Gallizio*, Paris: Bibliothèque d’Alexandrie, International Situationniste, 1960. The second exhibition happened in Milan at the Galleria Montenapoleone, July 1958.

energy affecting the whole of their sensory perception, thanks to the perfumes used in producing the paintings and a musical instrument called a Theremin, which could produce noise in reaction to the movement of visitors. Models dressed in industrial paintings welcomed visitors as they entered the space, helping them to orientate themselves in this provisional reality. The idea was to sell sections of industrial painting by the metre during the evening, creating a *détournement* of the standard gallery experience. Despite being part of the organisation of the show, Debord was clear in stating that the *Caverna dell'antimateria*, being inside a gallery, could not as such be considered the fulfilment of a situation, but more a construction of an ambiance.<sup>35</sup> It is likely that Debord, after the event attracted interest in the art world, did not consider the *détournement* of the artistic system as any longer a viable option for the Situationist International. Gallizio, instead, published his *Manifesto della pittura industriale. Per un'arte applicabile* in August that year, demonstrating how for him industrial painting still constituted his main project.<sup>36</sup> It is important to highlight the subtitle of this manifesto, 'for an applicable art', underlining Gallizio's idea of the different uses to which his industrial painting might be put. This was also reflected in the various manifestations of works created through industrial painting: for example, the next presentations of the *Caverna dell'Antimateria* differed hugely from the Drouin presentations, as demonstrated also on the occasion of Gallizio's participation in *Dalla natura all'arte* (discussed later). In the Munich exhibition, for example, the work consisted of unstretched canvases, which Pinot-Gallizio left dangling from the ceiling rather than wrapping the space with them.

One year later, the Situationist International decided to refuse Sandberg's invitation to present itself in the context of an exhibition at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam. This was the second invitation to collaborate with the Stedelijk that the Situationist International had turned down, having already been asked to contribute in 1958 to a historical exhibition on COBRA, due to the presence of Jorn and Constant in both groups. In between the two events stood *Vitalità nell'arte*, in which Jorn participated together with other ex-COBRA artists (such as Karel Appel and Pierre Alechinsky). In 1960, though, after the Situationist International refused his offer, Sandberg offered the space to Pinot Gallizio for a solo show. Gallizio accepted, resulting in his expulsion from the Situationist International, the same year his works appeared at *Dalla natura all'arte*. In order to

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<sup>35</sup> Letters from Guy Debord to Pinot Gallizio: Paris, 14 February 1960; Paris, 26 April 1960; Paris, 6 May 1960, Archivio Gallizio, GAM, Torino.

<sup>36</sup> Pinot-Gallizio, 'Manifesto della pittura industriale: Per un'arte applicabile,' Alba, 1959.

understand how this quarrel affected the *Cycle of Vitality*, it is necessary to focus briefly on Sandberg and his anti-museological attitude.

#### 5.4 The anti-museum of Willem Sandberg

Sandberg's take on the museum makes his contribution relevant not only in relation to the present research but also in respect to curatorial studies more generally. He curated more than 300 exhibitions in his seventeen years as director of the Stedelijk Museum (1946–1963), but I believe he deserves a special place within curatorial studies for his innovative (and groundbreaking) stance on the contemporary art museum, rather than for these exhibitions. Already in 1973, the French magazine *Connaissance des arts*, in an article written by critic Eveline Schlumberger, pointed out how under Sandberg the Stedelijk had become the model of the anti-museum of contemporary art.<sup>37</sup> During his entire career, he maintained a resolute position regarding the need to overcome traditional ways of selecting and showing contemporary art within the walls of a museum, as his series of writings and lectures demonstrates.<sup>38</sup> Pontus Hultén, who was meant to succeed Sandberg in 1963 as the Stedelijk's new director, summarised the latter's contribution in his biography of the Dutch director stating: 'It is possible that most of the best elements of the modern museum world were first introduced in the Stedelijk [by Sandberg].'<sup>39</sup>

Like Marinotti, Sandberg had not trained as an art historian, somewhat atypically for a museum director at the time. He seemed rather perplexed by art historians, who according to him were more interested in the past and concerned with writings on – and judgments about – art, rather than art itself. Yet he certainly respected them from an intellectual point of view and, as he revealed in his ICA lecture in 1973, found fundamental

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<sup>37</sup> Eveline Schlumberger, 'Sandberg mon expérience avec l'art', in *Connaissance des arts*, n.254, April 1973, p.79. Schlumberger, wrote a profile of Sandberg after a conversation with him. It should be noted that the article was published on the occasion of Sandberg's exhibition of his graphic design experiments in the Musée des Arts Décoratifs, at the time directed by another now forgotten figure of that European museology which predated curatorship: François Mathey. On the Sandberg exhibition: *Sandberg 'désigne' le Stedelijk 1945-63. Typographie - Muséographie*, exhibition catalogue, Paris, Musée des Arts Décoratifs, 30th March–30th April 1973.

<sup>38</sup> On Sandberg I have consulted the following publications: Willem Sandberg, 'Réflexions disparates sur l'organisation d'un musée d'art d'aujourd'hui', in *Art d'aujourd'hui*, serie 2, n.1, October 1950, republished with the English translation ['Some Reflections on the organisation of a Museum of Contemporary Art'], in Pieter Brattinga and Ad Petersen (eds.), *Sandberg, Een documentaire A documentary*, Amsterdam: Cosmos, 1975, pp.113–8; Willem Sandberg, 'Nu midden in de XX eeuw', republished with the English translation ['The Now in the Middle of the XXth Century'], in Peter Brattinga and Ad Peteresen, *Sandberg, Een documentaire A documentary*, pp.121–3; Ad Petersen, *Sandberg. Graphiste et directeur du Stedelijk Museum*, Paris: Éditions Xavier Barral, 2007.

<sup>39</sup> Pontus Hultén, 'in the stedelijk...', in Pieter Brattinga and Ad Petersen (eds.), *Sandberg, Een documentaire A documentary* p.5.



inspiration in their writings.<sup>40</sup> In his talk, he used a quotation from the Italian art historian Lionello Venturi (who published in 1936 in English an influential book titled *History of Art Criticism*, written while he was in exile in Paris, that developed – and departed from – Croce’s position on aesthetics) to confirm the necessity of posing a challenge to the historical mission of the museum.<sup>41</sup> He states:

Lionello Venturi expresses this experience so well: ‘if it is true that all history is the actual interpretation of the past then the awareness of the art of today is the basis for all history of the art of the past’ ... we are looking with the eyes of today [so] why not start looking at the art of our own period and going step by step back into the past? And pick from the past what is topical today. The aim of a museum of contemporary art = to help in making us aware of our own epoch.<sup>42</sup>

Sandberg largely misinterpreted, and moreover was not concerned with, the context in which the Italian critic made his claims. His attitude in tackling the institution directly as his principle medium, destabilising it by dismissing the traditional link between museums and the discipline of art history, demonstrates how far his position was from art historians dealing with museums, such as Argan, and other contemporary art museum directors, such as Alfred H. Barr Jr. or Alexander Dorner.

Sandberg’s education was as erratic and fragmented as his peregrinations around Europe to obtain it. He studied painting in Amsterdam for one year after the First World War, where he became acquainted with Marxist writings and socialist ideas. He then moved to Switzerland in 1921 for health reasons, where he joined the Mazdaznan movement, based on the mystical philosophy of Dr. Otoman Zar-Adusht Ha’nish (at the time living in the U.S.), attracted by its alternative natural healing methods. It was during that summer that he met artist Johannes Itten, who used to bring his Bauhaus students to the Mazdaznan meetings. Determined to resume his artistic education, he moved to Paris,

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<sup>40</sup> The intervention was later published in a leaflet: Willem Sandberg, *Museums at the Crossroads*. *Herbert Read lecture by Willem Sandberg*, ICA: London, 1973.

<sup>41</sup> Lionello Venturi, *History of Art Criticism*, New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., 1936. Translated by Charles Marriott.

<sup>42</sup> Willem Sandberg, *Museums at the Crossroads*, p.8. In particular, Sandberg says: ‘I think that we are all convinced that art museums have a function today despite Marinetti’s outcry – some 60 years ago – ‘burn the museum’ a slogan often repeated since. Museums during the last century took over the role of churches, palaces, public buildings often became receptacles for collections that otherwise might have been dispersed, but we should reconsider their exact function, which seems to me to show the development of human creativity taking into account that we are looking at the past with the eyes of today. When I went to the Amsterdam academy right after the first war Raphael was the great hero our outlook changed quickly; and soon the hero changed: Leonardo, Piero, Uccello, Giotto primitive art etc.’ Since Sandberg did not use capital letters and punctuation I have added these for clarity.

where he eventually abandoned this plan and decided to head to Vienna to attend the classes of psychologists Karl Bühler and Alfred Adler. It was here that he learnt Otto Neurath's method of pictorial statics, a graphic way to convey information via images, which he would repeatedly use at the Stedelijk. On his route back to Amsterdam, he visited Germany and the Bauhaus. It was only in 1934 that Sandberg started working with the Stedelijk museum, as a member of the committee appointed to organise exhibitions on applied art. From this very quick sketch of his life, which incidentally demonstrates the degree of freedom of movement and of contacts existing in Europe at that time, it is possible to better understand the range of Sandberg's interests.

In 1938, he was appointed deputy director of the Stedelijk, after being involved in the installation of exhibitions dedicated, among others, to Moholy-Nagy, Theo van Doesburg and contemporary photography. In the same year, he organised – together with modernist architect Mart Stam (a close associate of Lissitzky during his German period), and Nelly van Doesburg – the exhibition *Abstrakte Kunst*, presenting abstract art to the Dutch public as a sort of counterweight to the infamous *Entartete Kunst* (1937). During these years he started prioritising the refurbishment of the museum, in an attempt to modernise its out of date architecture. He had the museum's walls painted white, aligning it with international trends, and removed the yellow glass panes from the entrance ceiling, replacing them with a velarium commissioned from Itten to welcome visitors. It was around this period that he met graphic artist Hendrik Nicolaas Werkman, with whose help he further refined his ability as a graphic designer, a job to which he also committed himself as director, when he designed each catalogue or poster produced by the Stedelijk for its own events.

During the Second World War, Sandberg forged identity documents and participated in the destruction of the Office of Vital Statistics in opposition to the Nazi occupation, was forced to go into hiding, and trained in graphic design while concealing several contemporary masterpieces from the Stedelijk collection. His commitment against the enemy gained him, once the war was over, the moral stature to become director of the Stedelijk Museum.<sup>43</sup> According to Sandberg, it was the trauma of the war that pushed him

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<sup>43</sup> Italy underwent the same tendency to appoint those who had distinguished themselves in actions against the Nazis and Fascism to public positions such as that of museum director (e.g. Caterina Marcenaro in Genoa) or city Mayor (as in the case of Giovanni Ponti, who was also the President of the Venice Biennial). This was clearly a reaction to twenty years of dictatorship, but it should be noted that many offices kept their existing employees despite the 'purge' which had been declared to eradicate Fascism once and for all. Guido

to question the value and the aims of a contemporary art museum in the post-war era.<sup>44</sup> He noticed that, rather than reflecting on the war experience, society's tendency was to forget about the previous years as quickly as possible (this thought continued to trouble Sandberg in 1959, when he worked on *Vitalità nell'arte* together with Marinotti, as documented by his entry in the catalogue).<sup>45</sup> He considered that a museum should question its own time, addressing – rather than concealing – its anxieties through the works of those artists able to interpret it. As a response to this need, as soon as he encountered Picasso's *Guernica* (1937) on a trip to London in 1946, he decided to organise a show of the Catalan master at the Stedelijk.

For such reasons, Sandberg did not organise art historical exhibitions or support artists mainly inspired by the traditional masters, but preferred to open the museum to contemporary experimentation. Convinced that the role of a director was not to judge but to present art for the judgement of others, he opened in 1949 – only one year after its formation – an exhibition dedicated to the COBRA group, provoking one of the biggest scandals in the city.<sup>46</sup> For him the task of a contemporary art museum was to present exhibits that contribute to an understanding of the present. This allowed him to display even art from the past or from different cultures, as well as objects produced outside the canonical artistic field (such as, for example, propaganda posters by a workers' union), if this could help to achieve that understanding.

In the face of the idea that a contemporary art museum is an asylum for works considered useless by a community, Sandberg opted for the creation of a place constantly connected with the life of the city. 'Art should breathe in the streets,' he stated, and for this reason he relentlessly organised events week after week to induce local citizens to come and check out what was going on at the Stedelijk.<sup>47</sup> Furthermore, he created the conditions for a better relationship between the urban landscape and the museum's architecture. He created a coffee shop with large paned windows looking out onto the park behind the

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Crainz, *Storia del miracolo Italiano. Culture, identità, trasformazioni fra anni cinquanta e sessanta*, Roma: Donzelli editore, 2005, pp.3–31.

<sup>44</sup> Willem Sandberg, *Museum at the Crossroads*, p.2.

<sup>45</sup> In his catalogue text for *Vitalità nell'arte*, Sandberg states: '1940–1945, in Europe there is the night, the kingdom of despair and oppression, a vital energy, directed against the horror and the dryness of the present, waits for new possibilities and for the creation of a tomorrow. 1945 ... Europe speaks of freedom, but hesitates to free itself, instead of building is just rebuilt. It is not like that among the artists, there are small groups or individuals that push their research to the limits...and have created the movement COBRA.' Willem Sandberg, 'Vitalité dans l'art', in *Vitalità nell'arte*, p.8. My translation.

<sup>46</sup> The exhibition design was by architect Aldo van Eyck, later member of Team X. The style of the paintings, recalling childish drawings, shocked many of the visitors.

<sup>47</sup> Willem Sandberg, as reported by Eveline Schlumberger, 'Sandberg mon expérience avec l'art', p.79.

museum, where he positioned a fountain functioning as a barrier without obstructing the view from and of the park. He also added a playground for children close to the museum, in order to create a comfortable amenity which would be used in the everyday life of the community. Among the initiatives he suggested were the opening of a library, a theatre for lectures and films, and the presence of young artists in the museum's spaces at the disposal of visitors to answer questions and talk about art. Obviously, these were not entirely new ideas, since the U.S. museum sector had adopted such an approach to its services since the late 1920s, as exemplified by MoMA. From what can be understood from contemporary sources, such as Schlumberger's article or the biography on Sandberg, as well as from my own interview with Ad Petersen, Sandberg's personal assistant, what irritated the (mainly right wing) press was Sandberg's anti-elitist approach, which they denigrated as mere populism – a way in which to increase the numbers of visitors to his museum, without any regard for maintaining high standards.<sup>48</sup> Described variously as a 'luna park' [theme park], a 'circus' and a 'fair', Sandberg's museum bore its largest share of insults when he opened what he considered his masterpiece, the New Wing (figs. 76–7).

Opening in 1954, in a smaller version than originally planned due to budget cuts, the two storey New Wing extended along the south-east side of the Stedelijk building, along van Baerlestraat. Designed to freely accommodate artworks and exhibits through the use of movable panels, with natural light entering from the side like an artist's studio, rather than top-lit as was the norm in other museums, the New Wing was distinctive for its movable panels. For practical reasons (related to lighting) as much as conceptual ones, Sandberg decided to have them made in glass, unleashing a new wave of polemic and nicknames, such as 'the aquarium'. In fact, glass allowed Sandberg to achieve a twofold goal: on the one hand, he could advertise what was going on inside the museum, giving passers-by a sneak peek at what was installed, on the other hand, he created a constant dialogue between the exhibitions and the street outside, breaking through the pristine isolation that white-cube museums traditionally aspired to. Furthermore, the new wing embodied his idea of contemporary art taking on the street, actually making it a part of street life.<sup>49</sup> The new wing implied the logic of the shopping mall, with its products shining behind the glass panes and Sandberg shamelessly admitted to this connection. He even reiterated this vision twenty years later, when he was invited to be part of the selection

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<sup>48</sup> I met Ad Petersen on 5 March 2009 and I recorded the interview in his house in Amsterdam.

<sup>49</sup> Already before the opening of the New Wing, Sandberg was obsessed with demonstrating to the community of Amsterdam that the museum was a place they owned. Understanding that the imposing architecture deterred people, he once exploited the scaffolding enveloping the museum to invite people to climb on it and take a look at what was going on inside.

committee for the Centre Georges Pompidou, the new museum of contemporary art in Paris and pushed for the project to be assigned to architects Renzo Piano and Richard Rogers. The glass façade conceived by the two architects that allowed direct communication between the outside and inside of the museum immediately attracted Sandberg, who had exploited the same effect in the New Wing.

It is clear that Sandberg's main concern was the public, towards which though he was never condescending. Pontus Hultén, in pointing out how the Stedelijk in the 1950s corresponded to what MoMA in the 1930s was for the artistic community, admits 'the real difference [with MoMA] lay in another kind of basic attitude. Sandberg's museum sided with the artist, not the public.'<sup>50</sup> This seemingly paradoxical statement matches with what Schlumberger infers in her article: 'Basically pessimist, indeed, about the effects of his optimistic philosophy, Sandberg did not believe that art, like a venerated idol, needs to await the homage of its devotees. He believes it has to be thrown at the heads of people, forcing itself on their indifference and obliging them to look at it.'<sup>51</sup> For this reason, he invited artists to create their works directly within the museum, as happened in one of his most famous exhibitions, *Dylaby* in 1962.<sup>52</sup> In reality, the main difference with MoMA lay in the Stedelijk's different position towards the public (and hence different relationship with artists).

Rather than lecturing visitors on aesthetic decisions made by artists, aiming to develop their taste or give them a lesson in style, Sandberg preferred instead to empower their minds and senses and through the experience of art, or other exhibits able to give form to the present and its tensions. In many exhibitions, he invited architects (such as Mart Stam or Aldo van Eyck) to devise the design, convinced by the central role of exhibition design. His catalogues lack any critical explanation of the work exhibited, just as in the museum there were no labels explaining what visitors should look at. In order to enhance the viewing experience of art works and exhibits, which had to be seen frontally, Sandberg employed the use of free-standing panels and plinths through which visitors were able to wander freely. Furthermore, he put plants in the museum in order to render the rooms more familiar. Architecture was a key element in devising his strategy to transform

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<sup>50</sup> Pontus Hultén, 'in the stedelijk...', in Peter Brattinga and Ad Petersen (eds.), *Sandberg, Een documentaire A documentary*, p.5.

<sup>51</sup> Eveline Schlumberger, 'Sandberg mon expérience avec l'art', p.80. My translation.

<sup>52</sup> On the occasion of *Dylaby*, Sandberg, together with Ad Petersen, invited six international artists to create environments or installations at the Stedelijk Museum between 30 August and 30 September 1962. More information on the exhibition can be found in: Phaidon Editors and Bruce Altshuler (eds.), *Biennials and Beyond – Exhibitions That Made Art History, 1962–2002*, London: Phaidon Press, 2013, pp.27–36.

the museum, its functions and the experience it could offer. ‘The quality that we recognise as “art”,’ Sandberg claimed, ‘is not inherent in the object [but] is the quality of the relationship between the object and the viewer.’<sup>53</sup>

This was again part of Sandberg’s strategy to empower the museum public to develop its own judgement, something very similar to what Italian architects experienced in the 1950s in their collaborations with museum directors. Sandberg used to say that ‘exhibitions are attuned to the intellectual level and sensitivity of the average visitor’, therefore not directed at politicians, art historians or artists in need of celebration.<sup>54</sup> But in shifting the museum’s focus from the past to the present, Sandberg called into question its very mission. Of course, he was mindful of conservation issues, and his deputy director, Hans Jaffé, was an art historian, but for him personally the museum had ‘to base everything it does on the present.’<sup>55</sup> So contemporary art was functional since artists are the ‘seismographers of the present’ (Szeemann’s definition but clearly relevant also for Sandberg), allowing the museum to focus better on the present. Sandberg detailed his obsession with the present in the *NU manifesto*, which he wrote in 1959.<sup>56</sup> In it he declared how scientific discoveries, household electrical appliances and the era of airplane travel all conflicted with traditional Europe: its furniture, habits, life style, and its cities. Between the two possible routes opening up for the contemporary subject – either looking for refuge in a nostalgic past or jumping into an exploration of the present – Sandberg, of course, always opted for the latter.

It is in this restless interest in a changing society and its potential for change that it is possible to understand how Sandberg’s anti-museum vision could dovetail with Marinotti’s attempt to reboot Palazzo Grassi. A member of more than eighty national and international associations dedicated to a wide range of subjects, for example the restoration of cinema film, Sandberg was a tireless traveller, visiting the Americas, Israel, and other European countries numerous times. He was a key figure in facilitating contacts among the international artistic community in the aftermath of the Second World War, when communications were still difficult. Furthermore, he understood the importance of

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<sup>53</sup> Willem Sandberg, ‘Some Reflections on the Organisation of a Museum of Contemporary Art’, in Peter Brattinga and Ad Petersen (eds.), *Sandberg, Een documentaire A documentary*, p.115. My rewording. The original quotation in English is: ‘The quality “art” does not lie in the object, it is the quality of the relation between the object and the person who sees it.’

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p.115.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, p.113.

<sup>56</sup> An English version of the *Nu Manifesto* is published in Peter Brattinga and Ad Petersen (eds.), *Sandberg, Een documentaire A documentary*, pp.121–3.

reconnecting with Germany, leaving aside the enmity of the war period; he was a friend of Arnold Bode (the first director of Documenta, Kassel in 1955), and Thomas Grochowiack (director of the Kunsthalle of Recklinghausen, where *Vitalità nell'arte* travelled between its Venice and Amsterdam showings). He visited Italy various times after the war and almost without exception attended Pallucchini's editions of the Venice Biennial. For the latter, Sandberg acted as commissioner of the Dutch pavilion and as a member of the international jury in charge of selecting the international exhibitions presented by the Biennial.<sup>57</sup>



Fig.76: The New Wing at the Stedelijk Museum, 1956.

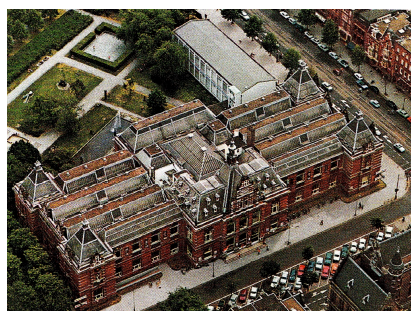


Fig.77: An aerial view of the New Wing and the Stedelijk Museum.

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<sup>57</sup> Sandberg was commissioner of the Dutch pavilion at the Venice Biennial in 1948, 1952 and 1956, while from 1951 until 1956, he was a member of the international jury of the Venice Biennial promoted by Rodolfo Pallucchini, director of the Venice Biennial from 1948 to 1956. His written exchanges with Pallucchini, which I have researched, demonstrate the different positions between Pallucchini's art historical approach and the one more in tune with the present artistic experimentation supported by Sandberg. Stefano Collicelli Cagol, 'Biennale di Venezia 1948-1956: la corrispondenza tra Rodolfo Pallucchini e William Sandberg', in *Saggi e Memorie di storia dell'arte. Rodolfo Pallucchini e le arti del Novecento. n.35. 2011*, Fondazione Giorgio Cini Istituto di Storia dell'Arte: Venezia, 2012, pp.175–84.

### 5.5 *Vitalità nell'arte*

The first exhibition of the *Cycle of Vitality*, *Vitalità nell'arte* opened officially to the public on 7 August 1959, after an intense year of trips, studio visits and networking by Marinotti under the supervision of Sandberg. The latter put the former in contact with Jorn, whose influence on the CIAC's exhibitions grew remarkably during the following years. With the installation design by Carlo Scarpa, the careful selection of a group of Italian artists by Rodolfo Pallucchini and critic Marco Valsecchi, *Vitalità nell'arte* presented itself as a break within the general culture of contemporary art exhibitions in Italy and in Europe. Dedicated to artists across the (mainly so-called Western) world, the exhibition travelled to Germany, Holland and Denmark on an international tour. The exhibition almost seemed aimed at demonstrating that if Paris had lost its place within the global art system in favour of New York, the province of Europe could still provide artists and institutions able on the one hand to compete with the new U.S. power and, on the other hand, to generate a cultural cohesion through which to build a new idea of Europe (at that moment only conceived of in economic terms).<sup>58</sup>

It is not clear exactly when Marinotti and Sandberg met for the first time, but from a letter in Marinotti's archive, it was probably in 1957.<sup>59</sup> At the time, Italy was experiencing an economic boom, while the Cold War tensions of the early 1950s, caused by the Korean War, were receding. In 1958, Italy witnessed the initial crisis of *Centrismo*, the government from the centre catholic party of the Democrazia Cristiana, which since 1948 had counted on a near-majority of seats in Parliament. Considered a turning point, 1958 witnessed the emergence of a new season of social conflict challenging the habits and mindsets taken for granted during the previous decade. After the Soviet repression of Hungary in 1956, many intellectuals questioned their allegiance to the Soviet Union.

In an interview with the critic and journalist Marcello Venturoli in 1967, one year after the death of his father Franco, Paolo admits that with the kind of exhibitions

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<sup>58</sup> The artists invited to show in *Vitalità nell'arte* were, in alphabetical order: Pierre Alechinsky, Karel Appel, Sandra Blow, Alberto Burri, César, Wessel Couzijn, Alan Davie, Roël D'Haese, William De Kooning, Jean Dubuffet, Etienne-Martin, Claire Falkenstein, Franco Garelli, Karl Otto Goetz, H.A.P. Grieshaber, Asger Jorn, Ger Lataster, Jaques Lipchitz, Marino Marini, Joan Mitchell, Mattia Moreni, Gea Panter, Eduardo Paolozzi, Carl-Henning Pedersen, Jackson Pollock, Arnaldo Pomodoro, Giò Pomodoro, Antonio Saura, Kimber Smith, K. R. H. Sonderborg, Bram Van Velde, Emilio Vedova, Theo Wolvecamp. Alongside these artists, the exhibition presented also works by the poet-painters Henri Michaux, Lucebert e Hugo Claus.

<sup>59</sup> Letter from Paolo Marinotti to Willem Sandberg, Milan, 13 December 1960, Stedelijk Museum Archive (SMA), Amsterdam, file 3949 'Dalla natura all'arte.'



organised up to that point, he came to realise that he would ‘constantly run the risk of shifting to a folkloristic plan ... and [he] understood that if the Centre had continued organising these types of exhibitions [such as those installed between 1951 and 1956], there was a risk of regressing, of eking out a living with little effort, but at a high price.’<sup>60</sup> Certainly, as analysed at the end of chapter four, the research into costume completed by the CIAC on the occasion of the 1956 congress must have contributed to setting in motion a series of such reflections in Marinotti’s mind. In particular, the accent placed upon the role of the present in producing a costume, highlights the need to act in an ‘atemporary’ way in respect to one’s own time. Although he never mentioned this notion in his texts after 1959, it certainly affected his decision in looking to contemporary art as the new field to which to devote his energies.

In the series of texts prepared on the occasion of *Vitalità nell’arte* – the opening speech, the *Manifesto della Vitalità* declaimed at the opening, and in his catalogue text – Marinotti tried to define the role of vitality. Although he could not define it conceptually, his position can be summarised in three points: first, vitality is understood as that which determines the dynamics of history, at the core of any new civilisation; second, vital art legitimizes industry; and third, *Vitalità nell’arte* was seen as an active agent to intervene in the present.

Marinotti considered vitality to be the fundamental element regulating the dynamism of history. In realising man’s essence, vitality allowed the given structures of a fixed social organisation to be challenged. This point recalls the idea of ‘atemporaneity’ evoked in the CIAC document on the occasion of the 1956 conference on costume, with vitality recognised as the element that would allow a new costume to emerge and establish itself. ‘The problem therefore is only one,’ Marinotti says in his Manifesto, ‘to create the future.’ Since any civilisation begins with a new dawn, this explains his interest in artistic poetics such as that of COBRA, influenced by myths and legends from ancient cultures, and still present in the output of artists such as Asger Jorn, Pierre Alechinsky or Karel Appel.

It was in commissioning Appel to realise an environment using SNIA Viscosa textiles that Marinotti could assert the key role of vitality in legitimate industry. The vital approach allowed industry once again to become part of man’s creative process, a thought

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<sup>60</sup> Marcello Venturoli, *Tutti gli uomini dell’arte*, Milano: Rizzoli, 1968, pp.191–2. My translation.

that Marinotti also pursued in the second exhibition of the CIAC. It is probable that Marinotti's meetings with Sandberg and Jorn, of which I will shortly give an account, helped him to partially reposition his arbitrary beliefs about class conflict and the role of the CIAC as an institution at the service of industrial production. Certainly, the encounter with Jorn, at the time deeply interested in the relationship between industry and artistic creativity, exercised a strong fascination for Marinotti. The two discussed the position of the CIAC in respect to the SNIA Viscosa in an exchange of letters, resulting in the almost incredible position of Marinotti becoming charmed by the spell of the Situationists for a brief period of time, and contemplating building at his own expense a new town named 'Utopolis' for them.

Finally, in considering the exhibition as an active agent intervening in the present, Marinotti wanted *Vitalità nell'arte* to act as a meeting point for groups of individuals who were at that moment dispersed. Here Marinotti refers not only to the international group of artists that he gathered together at Palazzo Grassi, but also to the members of the public who visited the exhibition. It is interesting to note the shift that took place in the experience of the exhibition's public in respect to the mass events of the 1930s. No longer treated as the amorphous mass that Fascism aimed to mould, but rather as an ensemble of individuals, in tune with the exhibition design strategy adopted by architects in Italian museums of the 1950s, the CIAC's visitors, according to Marinotti, could find in *Vitalità nell'arte* the example of an attitude that had the capacity to touch the everyday life of each and every individual. A final note in Marinotti's catalogue text dismisses his intention to position *Vitalità nell'arte* as an exhibition aimed at creating new critical labels or exploring already existing ones. In his fictional dialogue with himself, Marinotti asks 'and the *informel*?' and his alter-ego replies 'yes, of which form?', rapidly dismissing any kind of engagement with the sort of critical language usually developed in collective exhibitions of contemporary art.<sup>61</sup> Towards the end of his text, he explains how he wanted *Vitalità nell'arte* to document what was happening at that moment in the field of art – not to make a judgement about it, but to offer a platform for those artists and the public to meet. This clearly recalls the same attitude as Sandberg had in respect to the contemporary art museum and his role as a director who, rather than making judgments, offers art up for judgment by others.

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<sup>61</sup> Paolo Marinotti, 'Réponse à moi-même', in *Vitalità nell'arte*, p.7. My translation.

The story goes that around 1958, Marinotti realised that contemporary artists, whom he regarded as the ‘salt of the earth,’ needed a public space in which to express themselves, and he decided to dedicate the CIAC to this purpose.<sup>62</sup> Since he knew only a few artists, he looked for a partner, finding his mentor in Sandberg. Marinotti recounts his meeting with him at the Stedelijk, where the latter showed him a couple of hideous ceramics, inviting him to express his feelings towards them. After Marinotti smashed one against the floor to show his disgust, Sandberg understood that he had found an accomplice after his own mind, and the two started collaborating in the realisation of an exhibition on vitality in art. They shared not only a similar artistic temperament, but also the fact that neither of them had trained as an art historian. Marinotti, under the patient guidance of Sandberg, proceeded to develop his knowledge about international contemporary art by talking with Sandberg and following his suggestions of which artists’ studios to visit.

The particular backgrounds of both Marinotti and Sandberg were reflected in their approaches to their writing. Sandberg, as a graphic designer, paid particular attention to the visual appearance of a text. Rather than writing a critical account in a traditional way, he preferred to compose short sentences, aligned one under the other, almost like a poem, and to eliminate the use of punctuation. Marinotti, considering himself a poet, gave himself full licence to experiment with a different writing style or device each time. For example, for *Vitalità nell’arte* he self-interviewed and produced a manifesto; for *Dalla natura all’arte* he wrote a sermon-like text, and for *Arte e contemplazione* a poem. In Italy, aside from Emilio Villa – a talented intellectual based in Rome and founder of art magazines such as *I Quattro Soli* – hardly any of the militantly vocal critics attempted anything other than a descriptive style of writing in publications such as exhibition catalogues.

Considered by art critics and art historians vital tools in the development of artistic research, catalogues followed a rigorous format of presenting a critical profile of the artist exhibited (this returns again to the theme of the museum as a function of a discipline). This was the case, for example, with the Venice Biennial, that since its reopening in 1948 had routinely involved the best art historians in selecting the Italian artists and in deciding on the main exhibitions to present in the Central pavilion and other venues. It is interesting to compare the catalogues of *Vitalità nell’arte* and the 1958 Venice Biennial: obviously, the lavish design and format of *Vitalità nell’arte*’s catalogue immediately indicates the difference

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<sup>62</sup> Marcello Venturoli, *Tutti gli uomini dell’arte*, p.192.

in budget between the two institutions. Both had artist-designed covers: H.A.P. Grieshaber for *Vitalità nell'arte*, Scarpa for the Biennial. In the *Vitalità nell'arte* publication, the participating artists were listed in alphabetical order, each with his/her own section with at least one coloured page and three black and white pictures documenting the artworks exhibited at the CIAC. The Venice Biennial catalogue, by contrast, followed the installation plan for the order of the artists' presented, and only a selection of them had their art works reproduced in black and white at the end of the catalogue. A few lines of biographical information constituted the only texts in the *Vitalità nell'arte* publication, while in the case of the Venice Biennial, every artist accorded a solo presentation in the exhibition had a separate catalogue entry written by a critic. The *Vitalità nell'arte* catalogue was therefore almost an extension of the exhibition, while the Venice Biennial catalogue was a summary of the artistic debate of the time. This format was sustained for the other two catalogues of the cycle's exhibitions also, although the *Dalla natura all'arte* one published its installation shots in the order of the actual installation and added a series of aphorisms and short texts dedicated to each artist.

It is to some extent possible to trace the steps of the exhibition's organisation through the correspondence between Sandberg and Marinotti filed in the archive of the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam.<sup>63</sup> The first document mentioning the project is a letter to Marinotti, James Johnson Sweeney and Rodolfo Pallucchini sent by Sandberg on 31 March 1959 with a provisional list of 23 international artists he intended to invite to participate in *Vitalità nell'arte*.<sup>64</sup> At the time, Sweeney was the director of the Solomon Guggenheim Museum in New York City, while Pallucchini was Professor of Modern Art at the University of Padua, having stepped down from being general director of the Fine Art sector of the Venice Biennial in 1956. They were part of the specialist committee set up by Marinotti and Sandberg in order to further reinvigorate the importance of the exhibition in the eyes of the international artistic community and to help in securing works of art for the show. In the letter, Sandberg asks the recipients for their feedback and comments in order to proceed with the project, noting that preliminary contacts had already taken place. Setting up an international academic committee certainly helped to communicate the transition of the CIAC from a focus on the history of textiles and costume to contemporary art, ensuring the support of a group of highly respected international experts

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<sup>63</sup> The exchange of letters between Marinotti and Sandberg is collected at the SMA, Amsterdam, File 325, 'Vitalità nell'arte.'

<sup>64</sup> Letter from Willem Sandberg to Paolo Marinotti, Rodolfo Pallucchini and James Johnson Sweeney, Amsterdam, 31 March 1959, in SMA, Amsterdam, File 325, 'Vitalità nell'arte.'

from the art world. In early May the advisory committee expanded to include Thomas Grochowiack, then director of the Recklinghausen Kunsthalle, one of the most lively German kunsthalls of the time and one of the European venues for the exhibition tour (together with the Stedelijk and the Louisiana Museum), and the Italian critic Marco Valsecchi, since Pallucchini felt uncomfortable in being left alone to select the participating Italian artists.

In a post-script to Sweeney, Sandberg notes that ‘we don’t want to include all the existing vital artists in the show of this year, as we hope to be able to organise an exhibition along the same lines every second year between two biennials.’<sup>65</sup> On the one hand, this suggests a plan to reposition the CIAC in respect to the Venice Biennial as a possible alternative institution; on the other hand, it indicates that Sandberg recognised that the ‘vitality’ concept was rather too broad in respect to contemporary production. Sandberg further tackled the issue in his catalogue text, where he admits that vitality was already a relevant quality in past art, but with the historical conditions brought about by the trauma of the Second World War, it had become especially relevant in the present day. *Vitalità nell’arte* did not pretend to include all those artists who demonstrated a quality of vitality in their art works, but rather to offer a wide range of different examples. For Sandberg, *Vitalità nell’arte* further extended his post-war research around artists able to confront the traumatic events of the war that Europe in general had too quickly decided to put aside. This was the reason why he hailed COBRA in 1949, and why in 1958 he could still recognise in that artistic movement the seeds of an attitude still relevant for European history a decade later.<sup>66</sup> The paintings presented at the *Vitalità nell’arte* exhibition were primarily realised in the late 1950s, apart from those by Jackson Pollock and Carl-Henning Pedersen, an artist who in the early 1940s had largely inspired Jorn’s later COBRA experiments.

In the catalogue of *Vitalità nell’arte*, Sandberg clarifies his position, not only by suggesting that after the war ‘vitality’ erupted in the works of some artists presented at *Vitalità nell’arte*, but also by noting how after 1945, Europe betrayed the desire for a new beginning which had emerged during the war. He states: ‘Europe speaks about freedom /

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Sandberg argued that COBRA was the artistic movement that best expressed in its works the expectations for a regenerated society that had taken root during the Second World War, and which the Cold War finally put an end to.

but hesitates to renew itself / instead of building it rebuilds itself.<sup>67</sup> It is not clear though, if Sandberg's interest in a COBRA revival was also driven by commercial reasons; certainly it was relevant that both Appel and Alechinsky were Dutch (Constant, also part of COBRA, had already abandoned art for architecture in 1959, and for this reason did not participate at any of the CIAC exhibitions).

Another key passage in Sandberg's text is the repositioning of *Vitalità nell'arte* in respect to other contemporary art exhibitions of the time. Sandberg explicitly mentions both the Venice Biennial and the Kassel documenta, stating that while these institutions aim to give an account of the different critical expressions of their time, *Vitalità nell'arte* instead concentrates on the presentation of a particular quality present in contemporary artworks. Conscious of the need to provide a framework for visitors in order for them to appreciate the novelty of an exhibition dedicated to vitality in art rather than to the critical presentation of a tendency or a movement, he concludes, 'The aim of an exhibition will not be to satisfy the exhibitors but to shake up the visitors. We hope that the vitality coming from the artworks presented [at *Vitalità nell'arte*] will take possession of them.'<sup>68</sup>

In a letter dated 4 and 5 April 1959, a rather excited Marinotti thanks Sandberg for his precious suggestions about which artists to meet in Paris.<sup>69</sup> The day before, Marinotti had met Jorn for the first time in his studio, and was immediately enthralled by his personality. It was on this occasion that Jorn mentioned Gallizio to Marinotti, defining him as a 'super-vital' artist, together with the fact that he was about to open an exhibition of his work in Munich (Jorn referred to the exhibition at the Galerie Van de Loo which anticipated by a few days the exhibition in Paris at Galerie Drouin). As well as giving news of which other artists he had or hadn't managed to meet, such as Appel and Joan Mitchell (who were away from Paris), Sam Francis, or Kimber Smith (later invited to take part in *Vitalità nell'arte*), Marinotti took the chance to summarise briefly the state of things with the organisation of the exhibition.

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<sup>67</sup> Willem Sandberg, 'Vitalité dans l'art', in *Vitalità nell'arte*, exh. cat., Venezia: Centro Internazionale delle Arti e del Costume, 1959, p.8. My translation.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., I have added punctuation for clarity.

<sup>69</sup> Letter from Paolo Marinotti to Willem Sandberg, Milan, 4–5 April 1959, SMA, Amsterdam, file 'Vitalità nell'arte.'

On 10 April he expected to meet Scarpa in Milan to discuss the exhibition design, together with Pallucchini.<sup>70</sup> He highlighted the lack of artists from Germany, since until that moment only one had been selected, and that there was no one from Spain. Since the aim was to present a European exhibition (meaning Western Europe), he suggested inviting more artists from these countries. Furthermore, Marinotti mentions the need to discuss the catalogue and start gathering all the information required from the artists, such as biographies and images of their works. He ends the letter on a happy note: ‘the enthusiasm is huge and the vitality is enormous.’<sup>71</sup> The letter highlights the key role played by Sandberg in the selection process, while witnessing Marinotti’s determination to be involved in all the decisions. Either alone or with Sandberg, he visited the studios of almost all the artists invited to *Vitalità nell’arte* to select directly with them which works to exhibit.

In the same letter, Marinotti also mentions his hope of meeting Karel Appel in Venice by mid-April. As already mentioned, the artist received a commission from the two curators to create an environment with coloured fabrics provided by the SNIA Viscosa (fig.88). It is not clear if this decision was a tribute to Franco Marinotti, acknowledging the by now significant diversion of the CIAC from its original links to the family business. It nevertheless witnessed Marinotti’s on-going interest in connecting (and legitimizing the connection of) industry with art. Alongside Appel, the Italian painter Emilio Vedova received an invitation to realise three paintings directly in the exhibition space, in an area expressly arranged for him by Scarpa. Vedova produced *Scontro di Situazioni* (in English, ‘Collision of Situations’), a title that a very bitter Jorn later on did not appreciate, seeing it as a provocative reference to the Situationist International (figs.85–6). The invitation to Appel and Vedova to work directly in the space, interpreting the concept of the exhibition in dialogue with the architecture of the Palazzo Grassi, as well as the choice of Scarpa to conceive the exhibition design, confirm that the Milan Triennial was an important inspirational model for the CIAC.

The involvement of Scarpa, at the time busy as usual on many projects, was probably the suggestion of Pallucchini who, as seen in chapter three, had had the

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<sup>70</sup> Architect historian Miriam Ferrari provides a first descriptive account of the exhibition *Vitalità nell’arte* from the point of view of the exhibition design conceived by architect Carlo Scarpa, on the basis of six drawings found within Scarpa’s archive. Miriam Ferrari, “1959 – Allestimento della mostra ‘Vitalità nell’arte’; Venezia, Palazzo Grassi, in Guido Beltramini (ed.), *Carlo Scarpa e la scultura del ‘900*, Venezia: Marsilio, 2008, pp. 196–205.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

opportunity to work with the architect on different occasions at the Venice Biennial.<sup>72</sup> Scarpa interpreted in a refined way the concept of the exhibition, the vital impulse present in the paintings and sculptures selected, by imposing a dynamic pace on the exhibition visitor (no seats were to be found in the exhibition spaces while the walls of the corridors and rooms had irregularly oriented panels to convey an idea of movement). Furthermore, he was the perfect candidate for working at the CIAC, due to his passion for fabrics, expressed in several of his exhibition designs, from the Biennial show dedicated to Toulouse Lautrec in 1952, to the one on Antonello da Messina, in Messina in 1953. By looking at the few surviving installation shots of *Vitalità nell'arte*, Scarpa's design strikes one immediately as being airy, clean and bright. It gives the impression that the architect developed a completely different relationship and understanding of the palace's spaces in respect to previous exhibitions realised at the CIAC up to that point. Gone was the heavy-handed use of curtains in *Il Costume nel tempo*, and the near-denial of the palace's architecture in *La leggenda del filo d'oro*; instead, *Vitalità nell'arte* substituted white curtains, *carabottini* (a particular wooden grate used on boats) and coloured fabrics modulating the light to gently highlight the art works and guide visitors through the space. In this exhibition, as pointed out by Scarpa himself, light played a key mediating role between the historical palace and the contemporary art works, and helped him understand how to organise the spaces and distribute the art works. As already seen in chapter three, natural illumination was a fundamental element in Scarpa's language, as demonstrated not only in museums such as the Abatellis or Castelvechio, but also in more permanent architectures such as the expansion of the Gipsoteca Canoviana and the Brion cemetery (both near Treviso).<sup>73</sup>

About *Vitalità nell'arte*, Scarpa states: 'It was precisely in relation to the natural light that I have envisioned the succession of different environments, figuratively qualified by the works on display; in short, it was the palace, with its succession of original routes, that

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<sup>72</sup> At the XXIV Venice Biennial, 1948 Scarpa realised the installation design of the exhibitions: *Arturo Martini; Tre pittori metafisici dal 1910 al 1920; Massimo Campigli; Paul Klee and the Peggy Guggenheim Collection*; at the XXV Venice Biennial, 1950, he designed the Book pavilion at the Giardini; at the XXVI Venice Biennial, 1952, he was invited to design the retrospectives dedicated to Alberto Viani and Toulouse-Lautrec and he conceived the garden of the central pavilion and the ticket office. Between 1953 and 1956, he worked on the building of the Venezuelan pavilion. In 1956, at the XXVII edition, he designed the installation for the Piet Mondrian exhibition. Once Pallucchini left the Biennial, Scarpa had the opportunity to work continuously from 1958 to 1972. For a detailed analysis of Scarpa's participation at the Venice Biennial please refer to: Orietta Lanzarini, *Carlo Scarpa. L'architetto e le arti. Gli anni della Biennale di Venezia, 1948–1972*, Venezia: Marsilio, 2003.

<sup>73</sup> Scarpa worked on the refurbishment and extension of the Gipsoteca Canoviana, in Possagno (Treviso) between 1955 and 1957, and was involved with building the Brion cemetery, known as Tomba Brion in San Vito d'Altivole, between 1970 and 1975.



suggested to me the idea of a spatial continuum.<sup>74</sup> One could understand, and appreciate, the central role played by light in *Vitalità nell'arte* from the very beginning of the exhibition. After climbing the staircases, visitors passed through a corridor with the ceiling lowered in respect to the original height of the palace. In this way, the architect almost squeezed visitors *in media res*, immediately establishing the pace of the exhibition through the very medium of the display. Rather than denying the architectural historical space of Palazzo Grassi, Scarpa modified the perception of it, allowing visitors to experience the vitality at the core of the exhibition. It is for this reason that, from the beginning, he positioned lighting at the heart of his design. He covered the ceiling of the passage with a reflective material, allowing the light coming from the window in front of it to shimmer against its surface. Almost reversing the physical presence of water in Venice so it appeared to be above the heads of the visitors, by placing the flow of the Canal on the ceiling, Scarpa further enhanced the effect of light by concealing the window behind two vertical *carabottini*, functioning as a curtain (fig.80).<sup>75</sup> Given the fact that *art informel* seemed to be the predominant artistic style in *Vitalità nell'arte*, Scarpa's design seemed to welcome visitors with a reference that once again demonstrated his attention to the inner logic of the artworks he presented, with the broken up reflections recalling an abstract expressionist painting. Finally, this solution could be read as an homage to Marcello Nizzoli and his installation for the *Sala dei Poeti*, presented at *Venezia Viva* in 1954 (fig.74). On that occasion, Nizzoli positioned in the centre of the room a picture of a Venetian canal in which some buildings were reflected. From a coloured image published in *Domus*, it emerges that the wall to the right of the corridor – welcoming visitors to the exhibition – was bright red. This approach, as already seen, was a device previously used by Scarpa in other display projects such as Palazzo Abatellis in Palermo.

The two surviving floorplans of *Vitalità nell'arte*, one for each floor, demonstrate how Scarpa was not afraid to change the exhibition design right up to the last minute (figg.78–9). This was most likely due to both the needs of artists and the adjustments demanded by the physical presence of artworks once they were placed within the exhibition space. At the same time, an analysis of these documents allows us to understand how Scarpa translated the concept of vitality into his exhibition design. Scarpa conceived

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<sup>74</sup> Carlo Scarpa quoted by Giuseppe Mazzariol, 'Per la mostra "Vitalità nell'arte" a Palazzo Grassi, Venezia', in *Domus*, n.361, 1959, p.54. My translation.

<sup>75</sup> Scarpa used the device of the *carabottino* at the entrance of the exhibition on Piet Mondrian which he designed at the GNAM in Rome in 1956, although this time it functioned as a ceiling. On that occasion Sandberg sat on the academic committee of the exhibition. For a study on Carlo Scarpa's installation, please refer to Anna Chiara Cimoli, *Museo effimeri. Allestimenti di mostre in Italia, 1949–1963*, Milano: Il Saggiatore, 2007, pp.168–79.

the route through the exhibition as unidirectional, with visitors compelled to follow it from the start until the end. As demonstrated by the sinuous and energetic lines he drew on the maps to show visitors' paths, he aimed to achieve a dynamic route by creating an energetic dialogue between the palace's architecture, the natural light coming from different sources (both from the windows on the perimeter walls and from those opening onto the central courtyard of the Palace) and the exhibition design he created for the occasion. Scarpa redesigned the already asymmetrical architecture of Palazzo Grassi, drawing on his experience over more than a decade in designing 'musei interni' (museum interiors), as stated by Antonella Huber in her previously discussed book on the refurbishment of Italian museums after the Second World War.<sup>76</sup>

Scarpa positioned panels in the middle of a room to force visitors to make certain turns built temporary walls on which to hang artworks which continued from one room to another, almost sliding visitors into the next space, and devised asymmetrical interiors which both increased the surface area available for the display of art and at the same time enhanced the dynamic aspect of the exhibition. It is interesting to note how, despite *Vitalità nell'arte* being mainly comprised of artworks generally inscribed within the language of *art informel*, this did not equate in Scarpa's mind to the need to abandon a rationalist approach to the design. As seen in other exhibitions, such as the ones dedicated to Paul Klee or to Piet Mondrian, Scarpa employed the same means that had characterised his practice to date, while moulding them to the task in hand. Although, looking at the maps, the lines drawn to indicate the routes for visitors to take are dynamic and nervous, this is not reflected in the clean lines of Scarpa's display. Thus, even if informal forms characterised the artworks presented in the exhibition, attesting the expression of vitality in contemporary art and its ability to affect viewers, at the same time Scarpa used a quite different language in his rational design, achieving the apparently impossible task of bringing structure to the chaos while allowing visitors walking through the exhibition to experience the sense of vitality inherent in the works on display.

The vibrancy of the experience must have been further enhanced by the differentiated use of panels and textiles (fig.90). Prior to *Vitalità nell'arte*, Scarpa had used the combination of textiles and panels in various design installations, for example as early as 1948, at the Venice Biennial, in the room dedicated to Arturo Martini and the three

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<sup>76</sup> Antonella Huber (ed.) *Il Museo Italiano. La Trasformazione degli spazi storici in spazi espositivi*, Milano: Lybra Immainge, 1997.

metaphysical painters, in 1949 in some of the rooms of the Giovanni Bellini retrospective curated by Rodolfo Pallucchini, and most famously in the exhibition *Antonello da Messina e la pittura del Quattrocento in Sicilia*, organised at Palazzo Zanca in Messina in 1953.<sup>77</sup> On this occasion, Scarpa covered the entire inner surface of the museum with white cloth that had been dyed with black tea leaves, pleated and stretched from floor to ceiling. It was also in this exhibition that he first used *carabottini* and horizontal panels to stress the continuity between the different rooms and spaces of the exhibition. As he had already done in Venice in 1948, in the room showing masterpieces by Antonello da Messina, Scarpa angled the pleated fabric walls forwards – a solution also employed in Palazzo Grassi – bringing them into dialogue with the panels arranged in the centre of the space to support the paintings, panels which he tilted according to the sources of natural light.

Currently no photographic documentation covering the entire *Vitalità nell'arte* exhibition has been located, making it difficult to reconstruct the entire display exactly. It is possible, however, to speculate in some instances. On the surviving plan of the first floor, for example, a room whose perimeter Scarpa marked with a broken line bears the word 'César'. At *Vitalità nell'arte* the French artist exhibited a series of sculptures whose size would have easily allowed them to be positioned in that room. This seems to be confirmed by the installation of *Dalla natura all'arte*, the second exhibition of the *Cycle of Vitality*, which this time was documented in the catalogue. In the latter exhibition, Scarpa's installation design for this same room remained fairly intact, although this time it housed sculptures by Germaine Richier. The fact that some of Scarpa's designs survived in the second exhibition of the cycle can be inferred from another installation shot of the first floor, still showing Richier's sculptures, which this time are positioned in the niche originally created by Scarpa expressly for Emilio Vedova (figs.85 and 98). To return to César, then, Scarpa positioned the five sculptures shown surrounded by perimeter walls broken up almost at zig zag angles, so as to create a visual and experiential mechanism for the visitors through which they could approach the artworks while constantly bearing in mind the theme behind the exhibition and the reason why those pieces had been selected and displayed.

On both floors, Scarpa devoted both the main rooms facing the Grand Canal to sculpture, probably for reasons of lighting and space. Each of these rooms led into another smaller one facing the large internal courtyard of Palazzo Grassi, and both were flooded

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<sup>77</sup> On the exhibition *Antonello da Messina e la pittura del Quattrocento in Sicilia*, please refer to Anna Chiara Cimoli, *Musei Effimeri. Allestimenti di mostre in Italia 1949-1963*, Milano: Il Saggiatore, 2007, pp. 93–108.

with light coming from the skylights which were decorated with globes of murano glass. Opposite the entrance to the main room on the first floor – slightly off centre and facing the Canal Grande – Scarpa positioned Marino Marini's equestrian sculpture which occupied the entire room on its own (fig81). In dialogue with the natural light source coming from the windows, Scarpa designed a panel, slightly taller than the sculpture, against which the work was juxtaposed. It is not currently possible to ascertain what colour Scarpa used for the panel. Thanks to its function in framing the sculpture, though, visitors could immediately appreciate the sculpture once they were in the room. In effect, the panel provided an abstract background against which the sculpture could be read and experienced, isolating it from its actual architectural setting. This solution recalls the installation designed by the BBPR studio at the Castello Sforzesco in Milan to separate Michelangelo's *Pietà Rondanini* from both the rest of the museum collection and the space of the Sala degli Scarlioni, although in that case Michelangelo's sculpture was concealed from sight when visitors first entered the room.

The principle of adjusting the display installation according to the sources of light so as to trigger a reaction in the visitor as soon as he/she entered the room was not new to Scarpa, who had previously adopted this strategy in museum designs such as Palazzo Abatellis in Palermo. In the room dedicated to Marino Marini, though, Scarpa added a further element of intervention. Rather than denying the elegant architecture of the palace, as had happened in the textile exhibitions that characterised the first eight years of the CIAC's programme, Scarpa remained faithful to the exhibition's concept and its embodiment through the installation design and added a second taller screen behind the Marino Marini panel, which separated the main room from the smaller one in the background. Decorated with abstract symbols recalling those used by the artist-poets presented in the exhibition and with broken linear elements, the purpose of this screen was to further illustrate the concept of vitality within the space, while preventing the visitor from diverting from the route through the exhibition devised by Scarpa and in addition facilitating the appreciation of the sculpture by screening out the light coming from behind. Finally, this would have allowed him to show artworks in the other space. The choice to isolate Marini's sculpture from the rest of the exhibition, in a space on its own, seems to emphasise the generation gap between him and the other (much younger) invited artists.<sup>78</sup> As admitted by Scarpa himself in the *Domus* article, he had initially intended to position the

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<sup>78</sup> In the passage quoted by Giuseppe Mazzariol in *Domus*, Scarpa defined Marini's presence in the exhibition as 'contradictory', hence his desire to put it outside the palazzo. Giuseppe Mazzariol, 'Per la mostra "Vitalità nell'arte"...', p.56.

equestrian sculpture outside the Palazzo. Architectural historian Miriam Ferrari has found a preparatory drawing by Scarpa in which he put the sculpture to the right of the entrance to Palazzo Grassi that was by the water.

Generally, Scarpa allocated each artist a separate room, creating a dialogue between them throughout the display. In some instances, however, he grouped together artworks by different artists. In the case of the first option, he adopted a number of solutions in order to make connections between works physically separated by the architecture of the building; he either used walls (or fake ceilings) that continued from one room to another, or he re-designed details of parts of the doors or employed *carabottini* to unite different spaces through a common element, and lastly he positioned different cubes of various dimensions on the ceiling, covering them with fabric of different colours to animate the architecture and create a continuum in the installation experience.

An example of this can be seen in a photograph of the installation which documents how Scarpa linked the two rooms dedicated to Burri and Saura (fig.82). The two painters had a distinct approach to their medium, the former using different materials such as burnt plastic or wood applied to his paintings, while the latter engaged with painting and colour in a rather expressionist way. Scarpa saw in the two a similar approach and attention towards matter, but while in Burri's canvases an organised pictorial space emerges, in Saura's painting it is more the energy of the painterly gesture that regulates the composition. In terms of the installation design, from Burri's room it was possible to glimpse into Saura's, with the typical strategy of anticipation devised by Scarpa in previous installations. In this particular case, however, so as to draw the visitor's attention to the adjacent room, Scarpa used a subtle detail, conveniently caught by the photographer who documented the installation: Scarpa covered the architrave of the communicating door between the two rooms with fabric stretched into a triangular shape so as to point the visitor in the right direction and to physically illustrate the need to read the artworks of the two artists as linked. In another instance, Scarpa joined the open space containing sculpture by Roel D'Haese's with paintings by Joan Mitchell and Sandra Blow hanging on the walls, by using cubes of different dimensions and colours on the ceiling and at the same time covering the long perimeter wall and windows with a fabric-covered framework, slightly tilted at the top, both to convey a sense of movement and vitality and to unite the different architectural spaces (fig.83).

By enveloping visitors in a space-time continuum in this way, Scarpa exploited the enfilade of rooms on each of the palace's two floors, the multiple light sources – offered by the windows in the perimeter walls and those facing the covered courtyard at the centre of the building – and the artworks themselves that, as usual, were his point of departure in deciding how to develop the relationship between the architecture and the exhibits. On the first floor, having passed through Marino Marini's room, visitors encountered the paintings of the self-taught French artist Gea Panter, while seeing at a distance one of Vedova's paintings (fig.84). Scarpa played with the enfilade of rooms, by creating an effect of almost forward flight. He visually reduced the distance between the two rooms thanks to the use of *carabottini* in the corridor that separated them; in this way he could lower the ceiling to better frame Vedova's painting in the background, as if squeezing the visitors' eyesight towards a vanishing point that coincided with a close-up view of the painting. The trick also created an immediate dialogue between the two art works despite their distance, and allowed a glimpse of the rest of the exhibition.<sup>79</sup>

Together with Appel, the Venetian painter Vedova was invited to create his artworks directly within the space of the CIAC. Along the corridor facing the courtyard on the first floor of the Palazzo, Scarpa designed for Vedova a niche within which to position three large canvases. Covered with a white horizontal panel to maintain the human proportions of the space, this niche embraced visitors and framed the newly commissioned paintings (fig.85). Once the paintings were *in situ*, Scarpa positioned to the right of the niche a sculpture by Franco Garelli, an Italian sculptor closely related to Jorn and to the Alba laboratory. The informal gestural nature of Vedova's paintings found their three-dimensional correspondence in Garelli's sharp-cornered and abstracted forms.

It is an installation shot of Garelli's sculptures that reveals how Scarpa brought them into dialogue with Vedova, since the third Vedova painting was hung on the back wall of the niche (fig.86). Moreover, this photograph shows how Scarpa treated the high ceiling of the Palazzo by partially covering it with brown and white square panels (white only being used in proximity with the Vedova niche). For this occasion, Scarpa used a solution already tested in previous exhibition designs, such as in the Antonello da Messina exhibition in Messina, when he partially covered the original ceiling with panelling in order

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<sup>79</sup> Scarpa also used this device in the Mondrian exhibition to allow visitors to get a glimpse at points in the installation of the later (and most famous) paintings by Mondrian.

to detract attention from it (fig.87). In the case of *Vitalità nell'arte*, this device allowed him to highlight through a change in the ceiling a high point of the exhibition (namely Vedova's niche with the specially commissioned artworks). At the same time, it gave a rhythm to the space and offset the monumentality of the high ceiling by interrupting it with a simple abstract form such as a square.

Rather than creating a quiet ambiance and slow pace for a contemplative visit, Scarpa designed a display aimed at prompting movement and participation, as he noted: 'there is a lack of rectilinear spaces in which to stop, and instead the directions of passage are underlined, the invitations to pass through are emphasized, to achieve a meaningful participation.'<sup>80</sup> 'Participation' for Scarpa means emphasizing how the understanding of works of art takes place through the actual experience of the space, and how at the same time, the space actively participates in highlighting the artworks' inherent values. Scarpa had already tested this approach in his museum refurbishments of the 1950s, a key experiment for all those architects involved, and which challenged the viewer's traditional contemplative relationship with a work of art.

Another example of Scarpa's approach is on the second floor, in the main room facing the Canal Grande (fig.90). The room joined another elegant subsidiary space, facing the courtyard and with a slightly lowered floor, marked by a single step dividing the two. Scarpa played with the multiple light sources, building two vertical white panels and two wide *velari* (framed pieces of semi-transparent fabric in a pale blue colour) in the room facing the Canal Grande. In this way, he managed to animate the room's spaces and highlight details of sculptures by Edoardo Paolozzi, Jacques Lipchitz, Wessel Couzijn and Claire Falkenstein through contrasts with both the lighting and the panels (fig.89). Seen against the background of these architectural elements, the irregular forms characterising these artworks emerged distinctively, stressing their formal energy (as Marinotti declared at the beginning of his manifesto, 'vitality is form') (fig.91). In contrast, these same artworks appeared smoother when looked at through the *velari* that almost suspended them in an ethereal dimension (fig.92). To further animate the space, Scarpa covered the ceiling in a brownish violet fabric. In the adjoining room, in order to even out the difference in the floors levels, the architect positioned a series of cubes on the floor covered with fabrics of different colours, such as blue, green and grey, recalling the tones of Venice and its canals.

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<sup>80</sup> Carlo Scarpa quoted by Giuseppe Mazzariol, *ibid.* My translation.

On their white plinths, the smooth and organic wooden forms of three sculptures by Etienne-Martin seemed almost to float (fig.93).

According to the surviving preparatory plans for the exhibition, the textile mural piece realised by Appel was found on the second floor. In this room, Scarpa's only intervention seemed to be related to the source of light, which he positioned within a box suspended in the middle of the space through thin cables (fig.88). As mentioned, it is probable that the suggestion to commission a work from Appel for the exhibition came from Sandberg, but the decision to get him to create a mural in textiles related directly to the support given to the CIAC by the SNIA Viscosa (which provided the fabric). This move evokes past memories of the ambiguous liaisons between artistic production and its co-option for political or commercial reasons. It exposes the hidden unconscious of the very form of the thematic exhibition, recalling its inter-war ties with propaganda and commercial exhibitions while, at the same time, bringing to mind the problematic relationship of the CIAC with the past history of the SNIA Viscosa, and the relationships that existed between Marinotti, Mussolini and the political agenda inscribed within the story of man-made fibres.

Appel's installation did not receive positive comments from the critics, who generally considered it a fiasco. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that Appel's proposal was for an environment, probably inspired by the Situationist version of the *Caverna dell'Antimateria* created by Gallizio in Paris some months before *Vitalità nell'arte* took place. As Gallizio had done in Paris, so Appel covered the walls and ceiling of the space with textiles, with the floor being the only area left uncovered. However, while in Paris Gallizio installed a series of canvases that he had painted previously (his industrial painting), in Venice, Appel worked *in situ* using various textiles to create his fabric mural. In this way, he acted as a living artistic advertisement for the SNIA Viscosa, in line with the commercial marketing strategy used by the company since the mid 1930s. It is not clear if this was an ironic comment on the Situationists' action presented at the Galerie Drouin, or if Appel was trying to compete with it by producing his own version of the pictorial environment. At the same time, it should be noted that Appel, in this room, also resurrected echoes of the experience at Bregneröd in 1949, where the interior surfaces of a Danish countryside building were completely covered with paintings, in dialogue with the building's architecture, by COBRA artists together with the contribution of friends and their own children. It is interesting to note that the pattern of the floor visible in the photograph



appears similar to a drawing found on Scarpa's sketched map (fig.79). It is not clear if Scarpa decided to copy, in an extremely literal way, a drawing passed to him by Appel, or whether the floor design was a solution devised by Scarpa to create an environment consistent with the one set up by Appel in the rest of the room.

Scarpa's design certainly contributed in raising the profile of *Vitalità nell'arte* in respect to other exhibitions at the time. Around 1958, *art informel* was reaching its peak of visibility in Italy, with the Venice Biennial devoting for the first time a section to young international artists producing paintings primarily through gesture, signs or with a materials-based approach to the canvas. In 1959, the only other review of a contemporary art exhibition in *Domus* was of *Arte Nuova*, co-curated in Turin by gallerist Luciano Pistoï, the critic Angelo Dragone and Michel Tapié, the French *amateur d'art*, as he liked to call himself. *Arte Nuova* and *Vitalità nell'arte* featured some of the same artists and the tendency towards *art informel* was clearly now mainstream. But the difference between the two lay in their basic premise: *Arte Nuova* provided an account of what was going on at the time in contemporary art production, under general, and generational, frameworks such as 'art of today'. *Vitalità nell'arte* by contrast, set up a theme, or rather a concept through which to trigger a precise response in visitors, leading them to discover and awaken their own vitality and so strike a contrast with the accepted norms of present-day society. Obviously, there was a complete lack of any long-term view or project in this approach, in that it was not clear what one was to do with this vitality once the cycle was activated. This was probably one of the weakest elements of the exhibition's conceptualisation, alongside the fact that the decisions about which artists and what artworks were representative of a quality of vitality rested only in the subjective responses of Marinotti, Sandberg and Jorn (who participated in the organisation of the show by advising Marinotti on which artists to select).

If history and art history were no longer the guiding principles for organising an exhibition, what came after relied only on the vision and ability of its organiser. It should be noted though, as art historian Flavio Fergonzi observes, that at the end of the 1950s Italian critics struggled to develop a new language able to respond to new artistic practices.<sup>81</sup> Having abandoned formalist jargon, young critics such as Enrico Crispolti

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<sup>81</sup> Flavio Fergonzi, 'La critica militante', in Claudio Pirovano (ed.), *La pittura in Italia. Il Novecento/2*, vol.2, Milano: Electa, 1993, pp.569–91.

started to concentrate on the description not so much of the artwork but of how it was made by the artist. In particular, works of art began to be interpreted as cultural acts, rather than simply as aesthetic products. This certainly helped to bridge the gap between an exhibition such as *Vitalità nell'arte*, which aimed to highlight the function of art in the construction of society, and those exhibitions which aimed to showcase the most recent artistic productions in order to connect them with the current state of culture (such as *Arte Nuova* or the exhibition *Giovani artisti italiani e stranieri* at the XXIV Venice Biennial, 1958, dedicated to young Italian and international artists).

*Domus* praised the exhibition design of *Vitalità nell'arte* and its ability to mediate the encounter between contemporary art works and a historical building. This encounter was not always appreciated however by the general press; the newspaper *Il Corriere Lombardo* titled its article 'Tiepolo insulted by jugglers', making a comparison between the artists exhibited and the current social plague of the 'teddy boys,' both seen as examples of the degeneration of contemporary society.<sup>82</sup> In general, the exhibition received positive comments about Scarpa's installation design, the selection of the artists and for its ambition.<sup>83</sup> Only a few cultural magazines, such as *Evento*, a minor Venetian publication dedicated to phenomenology, dismissed the use of the notion of vitality as interpreted by the CIAC, underlining its inconsistencies and the risk of making simplistic generalisations under such a confused banner.<sup>84</sup> The exhibition went largely unremarked by art historians, although many came to visit it; the main critical voice raised against it was that of Carlo Ludovico Ragghianti, writing in the pages of the prestigious *Sele Arte*.<sup>85</sup> Ragghianti dismisses the thematic premise of the exhibition, but recognises the presence of some good artists, such as Burri, Vedova, Dubuffet, Pollock, the Italian Mattia Moreni, the Pomodoro brothers and Paolozzi, who in his view had been erroneously mixed in with younger or less accomplished artists. In particular, Ragghianti raised his voice against Sandberg's statement, clearly misinterpreting his words. Where Sandberg opposed COBRA to the 'architectural wisdom and tranquil contemplation' of the previous epoch, evidently referring to functionalism and in particular to De Stijl, Ragghianti understood these words as a paean to Nazi rhetoric. This misunderstanding reveals the difficulty of understanding what was at

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<sup>82</sup> Mario Monteverdi, 'Tiepolo insultato da poveri giocolieri', in *Il Corriere Lombardo*, 19–20 August 1959. The reference to Tiepolo recalls the 18<sup>th</sup> century frescos of the palace, in the style of Tiepolo.

<sup>83</sup> Among other reviews of the exhibition are: Anna Maria Brizio, 'Vitalità nell'arte', in *La Stampa*, 2 September 1959; Luciano Semerani, 'Vitalità nell'arte', in *Casabella-Continuità*, n.232, October 1959; Silvio Branzi, 'Trentasei artisti d'avanguardia all'insegna della "Vitalità nell'arte"', in *Il Gazzettino*, 12 August 1959; Marco Valsecchi, 'A Venezia uno "zoo" di quadri', in *Il Giorno*, 19 August 1959.

<sup>84</sup> Gino Baron, 'Vitalità e libertà nell'arte', in *Evento*, n.10, November–December, 1959.

<sup>85</sup> Carlo Ludovico Ragghianti. 'Vitalità nell'arte', in *Sele Arte*, n. 43, 1959

stake at Palazzo Grassi, even for an art historian such as Ragghianti. This was partly because of the different agendas pursued by Marinotti, Sandberg and Jorn, and partly because of the fact that by stepping outside the art historical narrative, the entire project became unreadable for the critics. It is the second exhibition of the cycle, *Dalla natura all'arte*, that provides further clues to an understanding of how the entire *Cycle of Vitality*, rather than being read purely from an art historical point of view, should be considered within the framework of the history of exhibitions and of curatorial studies.

In the event, probably the harshest criticism of *Vitalità nell'arte* came from artists. Among those who participated, Dubuffet, in a letter to Paolo prior to the opening, expressed his doubts about the group shows and their meaning (ironically, Dubuffet was the only artist who participated in all three of the cycle's exhibitions and eventually had a solo show at CIAC in 1964). Piero Manzoni, not involved at any level in *Vitalità nell'arte*, published a harsh critique fully exposing those contradictions that Marinotti was unable to see. A third critique, more articulated in respect of the context of his personal relationship with Marinotti, came from Jorn himself also in the form of a letter. Each of these is discussed below.

In a letter to Marinotti of 6 June 1959, Dubuffet emphatically declares how happy he is to have met him, while at the same time confessing that he cannot but hate the CIAC. Since 1949, he had taken an anti-cultural position in support of *art brut*, and he could not accept supporting any kind of institution involved in the organisation of culture. Furthermore, he expressed his dislike of exhibitions in general, which

by nature confuse minds [of the visitors] rather than clarifying them; all the paintings destroying themselves by being close to each other; there is a mix of contradictory and irreconcilable values; even more, the false ones are mixed with the true and [exhibitions] are a despicable occasion of advertisement, commerce and fraud. In any case, it is bringing Art down to a miserable level of competition...of comparison, where there is nothing to be gained.<sup>86</sup>

Almost a manifesto against the exhibition, Dubuffet's position summarises the ongoing tensions between the different parties (such as artists, curators, architects) involved within the process of the exhibition, particularly giving voice to the

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<sup>86</sup> Letter from Jean Dubuffet to Paolo Marinotti, Venice, 6 June 1959, APM, Milano 'Lettere di Dubuffet'. My translation.

discomfort of the artists. Dubuffet limits the value of the exhibition to its role of making public a work of art within an art historical context aimed at establishing its value (both aesthetic and economic), denying any further agency to both the exhibition and the work.

By contrast, Manzoni's lucid analysis – punningly titled *Viltà nell'arte*, 'baseness in art', because of the apparent similarity to the word 'vitalità' yet with altogether the opposite meaning – immediately detected the substratum of *Vitalità nell'arte* and the cultural background from which it emerged, namely the marketing agenda of the CIAC. He first states that only Burri and Pollock can be considered 'vital' painters, their works clearly overshadowing those of the other participants, whose limitations they reveal. He then underlines, with reference to 'vitality' as the main theme of the exhibition, how 'infinite times the most simple human feelings became a refuge for desperate people: infinite times they tried to cheat on us by evoking the homeland, the mother, the land, and even spaghetti.'<sup>87</sup> He then directly exposes Marinotti's contradictory desire to challenge the world of production through artistic practices able to question that very world, while being implicated in it through his link to SNIA Viscosa. Manzoni, quoting Marinotti, claims: 'they talk of escaping from "the emptiness of technique", to defend (them!!!) our civilisation, to go back to the essence of man.'<sup>88</sup> Clearly, Manzoni, as a result of his own research, could not tolerate an exhibition in which expressionist paintings and sculptures still appeared as the most advanced (and requisite) artistic production of the present time. His article ends with the assertion that other areas of investigation (such as performance) have taken over at the current moment in the art world, and with that he also pinpoints another limitation of all of the exhibitions that Marinotti organised in the 1960s. In fact, Marinotti clung to the concept of vitality all his life, which resulted in him being blind to the more up-to-date developments happening in art production. While Sandberg was moved by a constant interest in new developments, Marinotti could not really be in tune with those artistic practices that, since the end of the 1950s, had started to challenge traditional forms of art. However, this was not the case with installation art, perhaps better expressed by the term 'environments', given the role of the Milan Triennial in popularising the medium.

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<sup>87</sup> Piero Manzoni, *Viltà nell'arte*, first published in "Il pensiero nazionale", n.19, Roma, 1-15 ottobre 1959, then republished in Germano Celant (ed.), *L'inferno dell'arte italiana Materiali 1946-1964*, Genova: Costa&Nolan, 1990, p.255.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

Jorn expressed his critique by letter, after visiting the show in mid-August. His response could not have been more trenchant and definitive in breaking off any future relations with Marinotti. He recognised, with a hint of irony given the rest of the letter, the wide scope of the enterprise and its installation, although he noticed how Vedova and Appel were accorded the most visibility with their commissioned projects, leaving all the other works of art to provide ‘colours to these two temples.’<sup>89</sup> According to Jorn, Vedova’s *Scontro di situazioni* directly but mistakenly addressed the Situationist interest in superceding art and creating situations. What bothered him most, though, was the fact that the design that Marinotti had commissioned him to create for the exhibition posters ended up being printed on the headscarves for sale in the shop in order to market the exhibition (fig.94). Jorn, who had researched ancient weaving techniques together with Wemaëre, found industrialised printing an abomination; moreover, Marinotti had not asked for his permission to use his art in this way, and this was for Jorn unacceptable; he therefore asked to be compensated. Finally, Jorn saw the exhibition as a celebration of COBRA, (as confirmed by Sandberg’s text in the catalogue), an initiative he already refused to participate in when the Stedelijk Museum of Amsterdam tried to organise an exhibition in 1958:

It seems that you did not understand that you played a double game with this exhibition: one of presenting an art that is a break with the traditional aesthetic, and one of adapting this art to the public taste. The latter forced you to valorise the ... pretty side of this development.<sup>90</sup>

In order to understand Jorn’s outraged reaction and his reference to Sandberg’s exhibition, it is necessary to move away from *Vitalità nell’arte*, stepping back to 1958 and to those events that in 1959 and 1960 led to *Dalla natura all’arte*, the second exhibition of the cycle and a further chapter in the tormented relationship between Sandberg, Jorn, Marinotti and the Situationist International.

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<sup>89</sup> Letter from Asger Jorn to Paolo Marinotti, 26 August 1959, in Asger Jorn Archive (AJA), file 11. My translation.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

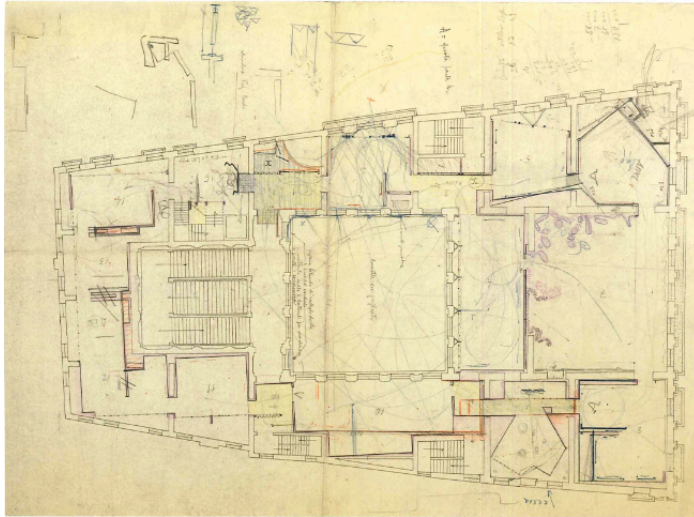


Fig.78: Carlo Scarpa's floorplan of *Vitalità nell'arte*, Palazzo Grassi, Venezia, first floor.

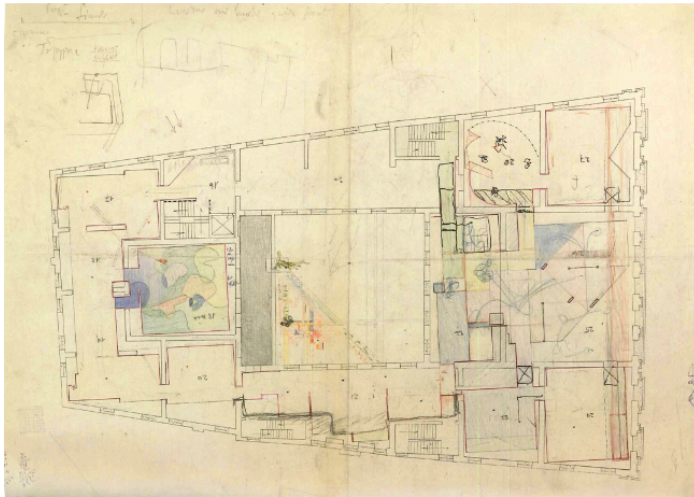


Fig.79: Carlo Scarpa's floorplan of *Vitalità nell'arte*, Palazzo Grassi, Venezia, second floor.

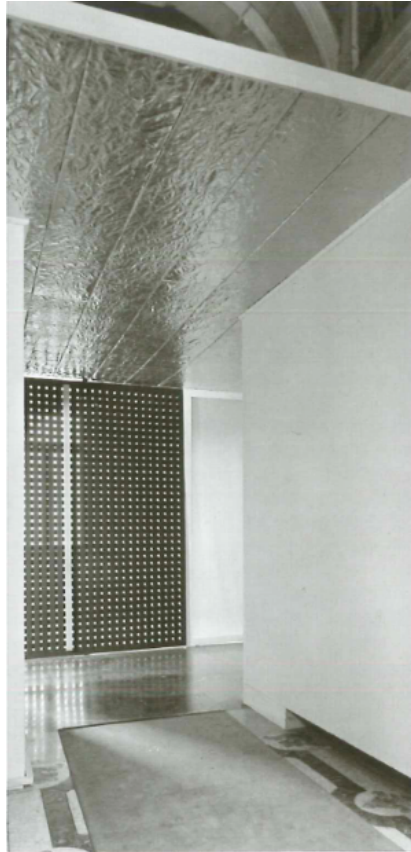


Fig.80: *Vitalità nell'arte*, CIAC, Venice, 1959, the entrance of the exhibition, exhibition design by Carlo Scarpa.

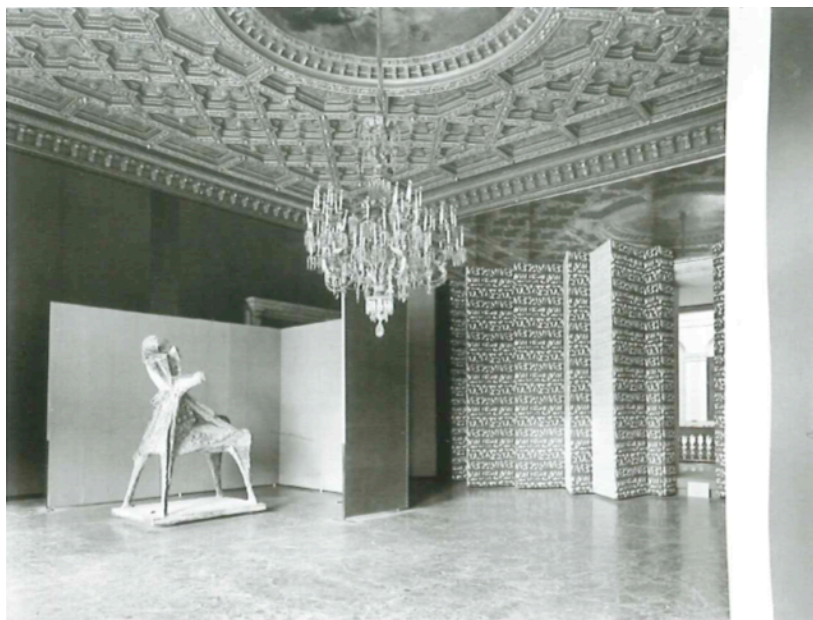


Fig.81: *Vitalità nell'arte*, CIAC, Venice, 1959, Marino Marini's Room, exhibition design by Carlo Scarpa.





Fig. 82: *Vitalità nell'arte*, CIAC, Venice, 1959, Antonio Saura's room viewed from Alberto Burri's, exhibition design by Carlo Scarpa.



Fig. 83: *Vitalità nell'arte*, CIAC, Venice, 1959, a sculpture by Roel D'Haese's with paintings by Joan Mitchell and Sandra Blow. Design by Carlo Scarpa.





Fig.84: *Vitalità nell'arte*, CIAC, Venice, 1959, Gea Panter's work with painting by Emilio Vedova in the background, exhibition design by Carlo Scarpa.

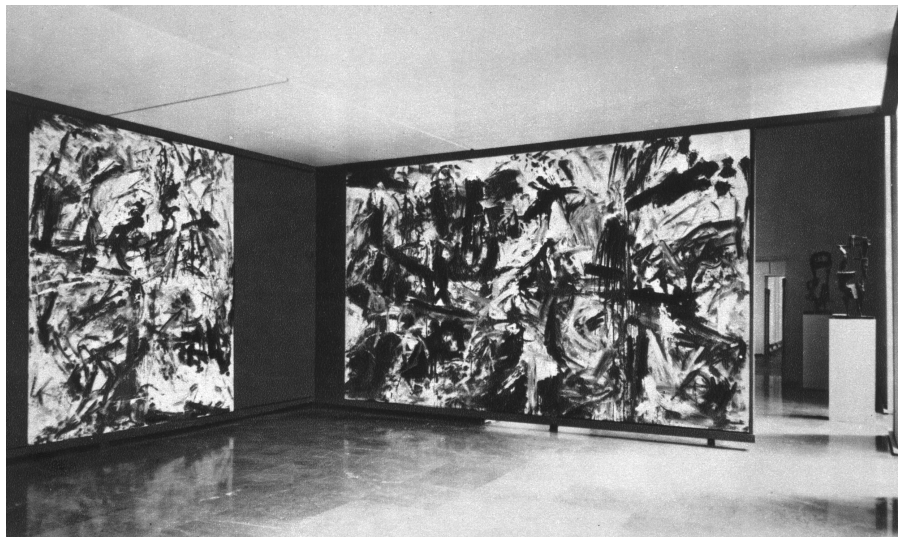


Fig.85: *Vitalità nell'arte*, CIAC, Venice, 1959, *Scontro di Situazioni*, part of the triptych by Emilio Vedova, exhibition design by Carlo Scarpa.



Fig.86: *Vitalità nell'arte*, CIAC, Venice, 1959, *Scontro di Situazioni*, part of the triptych by Emilio Vedova, and sculptures by Franco Garelli, exhibition design by Carlo Scarpa.

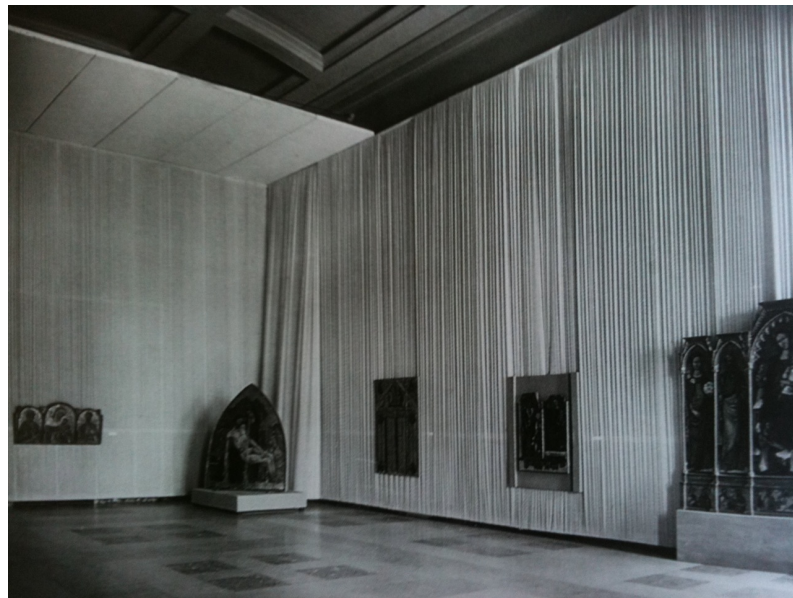


Fig.87: Installation view of the exhibition *Antonello da Messina e la pittura del Quattrocento in Sicilia*, Palazzo Zanca, Messina, 1953. Design by Carlo Scarpa.



Fig.88: *Vitalità nell'arte*, CIAC, Venice, 1959, Karel Appel's installation made with SNIA Viscosa fabrics.

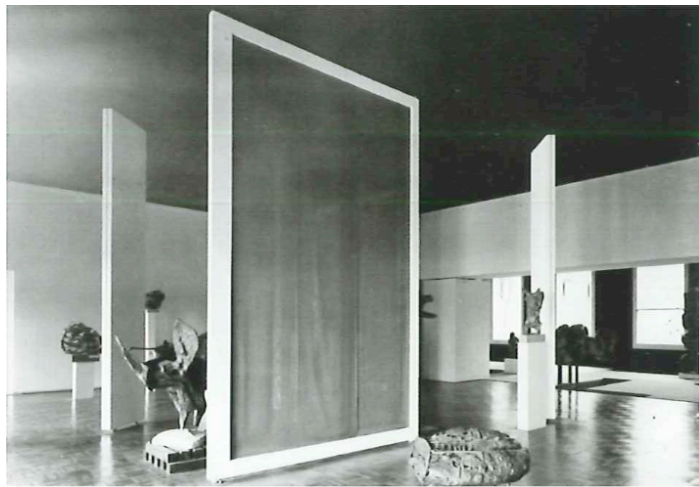


Fig.89: *Vitalità nell'arte*, CIAC, Venice, 1959, second floor sculpture rooms, with works by Eduardo Paolozzi, Wessel Couzijn and Claire Falkenstein ,exhibition design by Carlo Scarpa.





Fig.90: *Vitalità nell'arte*, CIAC, Venice, 1959, second floor sculpture rooms, with works by Claire Falkenstein and Wessel Couzijn, exhibition design by Carlo Scarpa.



Fig.91: *Vitalità nell'arte*, CIAC, Venice, 1959, second floor sculpture rooms, with works by Etienne-Martin and Wessel Couzijn, exhibition design by Carlo Scarpa.



Fig.92: *Vitalità nell'arte*, CIAC, Venice, 1959, second floor sculpture rooms with works by Etienne-Martin and Wessel Couzijn, exhibition design by Carlo Scarpa.



Fig.93: *Vitalità nell'arte*, CIAC, Venice, 1959, second floor sculpture rooms, works by Etienne-Martin, exhibition design by Carlo Scarpa.

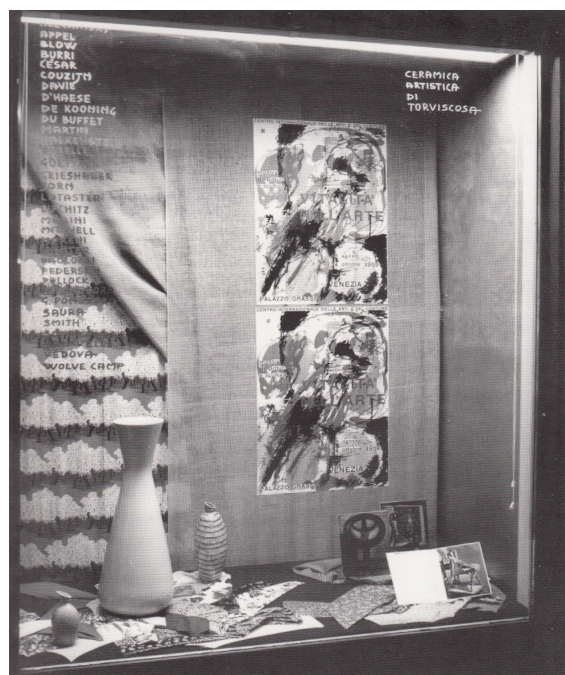


Fig.94: vitrine at Palazzo Grassi, 1959, with fabric and pottery inspired by (and promoting) *Vitalità nell'arte*.

## 5.6 Dalla natura all'arte

In 1958, ten years after the birth of COBRA, Sandberg decided to organise an exhibition reuniting the artists who had participated in the movement, in an attempt to assess its legacy during the 1950s. As mentioned above, both Jorn and Constant had in the meantime become members of the Situationist International, and when Sandberg invited them to participate in the show, they proposed that he split the exhibition into a historical section covering the COBRA years (from 1948 to 1951) and the post-COBRA development of some members of the group, and a second section devoted instead only to the presentation of Situationist research.<sup>91</sup> Both parts should be supervised by two members of the Situationist International. The reason for such a severe response on the part of the Situationist International was the suspicion, voiced by Debord in his article in the second bulletin of the *Internationale Situationniste*, that Sandberg, together with Christian Dotremont, the Belgian poet who was among the founders of COBRA, only wanted to re-launch the movement mainly for reasons of profit.<sup>92</sup> In 1956, Gallery Tiptoe in Brussels opened the exhibition *COBRA after COBRA*, laying down the conditions for a renewed market in COBRA and post-COBRA artists.<sup>93</sup>

Eventually, Sandberg refused to agree to the conditions imposed by the Situationist International, promising them however that he would host a future exhibition entirely dedicated just to their practice. The year after, in 1959, Sandberg invited the Situationists to the Stedelijk, giving them two rooms and carte blanche to propose an exhibition for the museum. This was quite a revolutionary act by Sandberg, if one considers the fact that the Situationist International denied both that it was an artistic avant-garde and that no such thing as a Situationist art really existed.<sup>94</sup> Needless to say, a slew of unacceptable conditions imposed by the Situationist International forced Sandberg to cancel the exhibition and the Situationist International to walk away from the project.

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<sup>91</sup> Letter from Guy Debord to Willem Sandberg, 25 January 1958, at <http://www.notbored.org/debord-25January1958.html>. Last accessed 22 August 2013.

<sup>92</sup> Guy Debord, 'The Friends of COBRA and What They Represent', in *Situationist International Bulletin*, n.2, December 1958, at <http://www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/si/cobra.html>. Translated by Reuben Keehan. Last accessed 22 August 2013.

<sup>93</sup> On the relationship between the afterlife of Cobra and the SI, please refer to Nathalie Aubert, "'COBRA after COBRA'" and the Alba Congress. From Revolutionary Avant-Garde to Situationist Experiment', in *Third Text*, vol. 20, Issue 2, March 2006, pp.259–67.

<sup>94</sup> Constant wrote a letter to Debord complaining about the presence of the painters, to which Debord replied stressing how he did not want to impose any directive on their production since he was not an art critic and he did not want to act like one. As he says: 'What technical means will we be able to use [for the Stedelijk exhibition]? In themselves, they are nothing: their arrangement is the new art, obviously not as a work of art, but as practice.' Letter from Guy Debord to Constant, 7 September 1959, at <http://www.notbored.org/debord-7September1959.html>. Last accessed 22 August 2013.

The initial plan was to fabricate a labyrinth inside the Stedelijk, recreating a fake urban context where visitors could experience reproduced wind, rain and smells from the city. In this room, industrial painting was supposed to play a significant role. In the room next to the labyrinth, published materials and recorded lectures (something used often by Debord in public speeches) would give information on the Situationist International to the museum public. Finally, the Situationist International wanted to organise a series of *dérives*, or ‘driftings’, around Amsterdam, with three different groups at a time departing from different areas of the city and converging on the Stedelijk. Through the *dérives* – already used by Debord at the time of the Lettrist International – the Situationists wanted to provide visitors with a unique experience of exploring urban space (this time that of Amsterdam), in which their senses and their everyday relationship with the city would have been called into question.<sup>95</sup>

After Sandberg drew a number of logistical issues to their attention, the Situationists decided to withdraw from the project.<sup>96</sup> The end of the affair became public in the fourth issue of the *Internationale Situationniste*, where the Situationists publicly accused Sandberg of pushing them to make unacceptable compromises in order to realise their exhibition.<sup>97</sup> In response to this accusation, Sandberg replied in a firm letter to Jorn in which, surprised and vexed, he gave his own account of events.<sup>98</sup> When both the Situationist International and Sandberg called off the project, Sandberg invited Gallizio to put on a solo show of his industrial paintings. In accepting this invitation, the artist signed his own sentence; Debord immediately expelled him from the Situationist International for colluding with the art system. Eventually, Gallizio’s exhibition opened in Amsterdam in May–June 1960. On 7 July 1960, Gallizio was among the artists presenting their artworks at the exhibition *Dalla natura all’arte* at the CIAC.

It is probable that the idea to develop an exhibition devoted to the relationship between art and nature came initially from Sandberg, but certainly it prompted an instantly

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<sup>95</sup> The project was to achieve the *détournement* of the museum itself, since as Debord states: ‘We will only construct the Amsterdam exposition in complete freedom and according to our plans, with the help of Sandberg but against his idea. I have also said that this way [...] we risk ending the entire Amsterdam affair if Sandberg grieves too much over this attack against him.’ Letter from Guy Debord to Constant, 22 September 1959, at <http://www.notbored.org/debord-22September1959a.html>. Last accessed 22 August 2013.

<sup>96</sup> Letter from Guy Debord, Constant and Asger Jorn to Willem Sandberg, at <http://www.notbored.org/debord-7March1960.html>. Last accessed 22 August 2013.

<sup>97</sup> ‘Die Welt als Labyrinth’, in *Situationist International Bulletin*, n.4, translated by Paul Hammond, at <http://www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/si/diewelt.html>. Last accessed 22 August 2013.

<sup>98</sup> Letter from Willem Sandberg to Asger Jorn, 29 July 1960, SMA, Amsterdam, File 5512,.

positive response in Marinotti. As presented in chapter four, the CIAC had already addressed the relationship between nature and science in 1952 with the exhibition *La leggenda del filo d'oro*, which was part of the post-war reframing of the narrative around man-made fibres. The aim of *Dalla natura all'arte* was to introduce the public to the new relationship with nature developed by contemporary artists, thus distancing the CIAC from the informal tendencies exhibited in *Vitalità nell'arte* and in other exhibitions of the time. While *Vitalità nell'arte* included 33 international artists rigorously divided between painters and sculptors (plus three artist-poets), *Dalla natura all'arte* was restricted to just nine who, alongside work in traditional media, also presented photographs, collages (in Dubuffet's case created with elements direct from nature) and environments.<sup>99</sup>

In his opening speech, Sandberg suggested that the idea for the exhibition came from the new works by Dubuffet, in which he composed collages with natural elements such as butterfly wings or tree bark.<sup>100</sup> An analysis of *Dalla natura all'arte* demonstrates however that the exhibition evolved in a more complex way than Sandberg could initially have expected. It is clear that as a thematic exhibition, *Dalla natura all'arte* distinctly developed, within the contemporary art context, a number of traditional elements from its historical lineage, such as the journey of initiation, the development of a discursive narrative through the show, the commissioning of art works made for and in the space, and the final apotheosis (which this time this did not take place in a circular or elliptical room, although it maintained the same logic). Therefore, in analysing the exhibition, it is possible to follow Sandberg's narrative, which reproduced an interesting but partial development of the theme, and at the same time to observe how the CIAC, even when dealing with contemporary art, maintained a strong link with the propagandist agenda of the SNIA Viscosa and Franco Marinotti, although Paolo almost managed to derail these intentions through his choice of artists to include.

Paolo Marinotti explained the exhibition's premise in his catalogue text.<sup>101</sup> This time, his was the only text introducing the publication, which appears quite different from the *Vitalità nell'arte* catalogue in its layout. While the earlier catalogue featured only short biographies of the artists, ordered alphabetically, the *Dalla natura all'arte* catalogue presented

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<sup>99</sup> The artists invited to the CIAC's exhibition were: Lucio Fontana, Jean Dubuffet, Giuseppe Pinot Gallizio, Henry Heerup, Enzo Mari, Etienne-Martin, Bruno Munari, Germaine Richier, Sofu Teshigahara,

<sup>100</sup> The opening speech is published in Paolo Marinotti and Willem Sandberg, *Vitalità nell'arte. Dalla natura all'arte. Testi e Discorsi*, Venezia: Centro Internazionale delle Arti e del Costume, 1960, pp.25–7.

<sup>101</sup> Paolo Marinotti, 'Arte e realtà', in *Dalla natura all'arte*, exh. cat., Venezia: Centro Internazionale delle Arti e del Costume, 1960, unpaginated.



short texts by different authors and artists (such as Henri Focillon and Paul Klee) that the curators hoped would suggest some possible reflections to the visitor while in the rooms of the exhibition, together with very short quotes to briefly explain the artwork presented. Furthermore, the catalogue reproduced installation shots documenting the exhibition itself. For the time, this approach was very unusual; the Venice Biennial, for example, would only publish close-up images of the artworks and if the context was visible, it was a neutral one; equally rare was the decision of Tapié, in the catalogue of *Arte Nuova*, to publish pictures of the artworks gathered together before the installation had begun. The presence in the catalogue of comments, such as those by Klee or Focillon, that constituted the narrative of the exhibition seems to be an original feature of the show, clearly referring to the tradition of Bauhaus discursive exhibitions, further elaborated by Italian exhibition culture of the 1930s.

While for *Vitalità nell'arte* Marinotti used the device of the self-interview for his contribution, in the *Dalla natura all'arte* catalogue his text is closer in style to a sermon. It reflects his Catholicism and further reinforces the importance for him of presenting those creative energies able to give form to a new *costume*.<sup>102</sup> In the text, Marinotti reprises his argument that the essence of man (as much as the essence of nature) across the ages is to be a creator, meaning that he has always to transform his present living conditions to create new forms. He recognises how the special relationship between art and nature can demonstrate this vital impulse in a more direct and clear way. Within this framework, *Dalla natura all'arte* comes as the natural sequel to *Vitalità nell'arte* while demonstrating at the same time the original way in which contemporary artists address nature. For Marinotti, the artists invited to be part of *Dalla natura all'arte* not only produced artworks that related directly to nature (for example, Munari who took pictures of natural elements, such as wood, resembling sculpture), but they also found within themselves the impulse to create something radically new, taking inspiration from the knowledge of nature offered by science (such as the *Caverna dell'antimateria* by Gallizio).

A copy of the exhibition press release produced by the CIAC and preserved in the Stedelijk Museum Archive highlights three critical points about the exhibition.<sup>103</sup> The first one considered the relationship between art and nature according to two different

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<sup>102</sup> Since man is made in the image of God and God is the creator, man has to commit himself to creation. It is a natural state, a vocation that cannot be eluded but at the same time a vocation that has to address the nature that is both outside and inside him. Ibid.

<sup>103</sup> "From Nature to Art", English press pack about the exhibition preserved at the SMA, Amsterdam, File 3949 [Dalla natura all'arte].

approaches: artists who recognise artistic forms in nature, and artists who insert natural elements into their work. This was eventually extended further by inviting artists who interpret their inner nature (to create new forms) according to scientific principles. If this logic in the selection of the exhibition seemed clear to the curators, the critics struggled to understand it. As discussed below, this could be ascribed to the fact that none of them seemed to grasp at the time the strong link between *Dalla natura all'arte* and the propagandist exhibitions that both the CIAC and the SNIA Viscosa had pursued in the past. In those exhibitions, nature and science were clearly conflated, allowing Marinotti a smooth transition between the two concepts.

The second point considered the key role played by exhibition design, which the press release describes as a fundamental element in conveying the theme of the exhibition, and a characteristic typical of the thematic show in general, as argued in this dissertation. On this occasion, rather than relying on an Italian architect, Marinotti invited the Danish architect Robert Dahlman-Olsen to collaborate with him at Jorn's suggestion. Sandberg suggested Constant, the ex-COBRA painter, who since 1955 had devoted himself to architecture and was a member of the Situationist International from 1957 to 1960, until he was expelled. It is not clear why Scarpa was no longer involved in the project, but this may be explained by the large number of commitments he had at the time. From the installation shots, though, it is possible to see how Dahlman-Olsen re-used many of the interior partitions designed by Scarpa (for example, in the photographs of the sculptures of Germaine Richier, positioned in the same space as Vedova's paintings and César's sculptures). The catalogue mentions that 'the exhibition was installed with the contribution of Robert Dahlman-Olsen, Lucio Fontana, Enzo Mari, Bruno Munari and Sofu Teshigahara.'<sup>104</sup> This reflects the fact that all these artists either arranged or created their artworks directly in response to the spaces of the palace, marking an early step in the shift towards artists being more directly involved in the organisation of an exhibition's installation.

It is important to note that rather than proposing works of art that confronted the architectural environment, the artists were invited to respond to the theme by realising specific works within the space. This cannot be stressed enough, given the fact that other exhibitions at the time, such as the Venice Biennial, never considered taking similar risks as those taken at Palazzo Grassi. As mentioned before, until 1956, during the Pallucchini era,

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<sup>104</sup> *Dalla natura all'arte*, s.p. My translation.

the main aim of the Biennial was to provide a proper art historical framework for the Italian and international public after the bleak years suffered by the institution during the Fascist period. In reality, even before the arrival of Maraini at the Venice Biennial in 1928, the institution had always treated avant-garde artists with great suspicion. It is the particular attitude of the CIAC that allowed different artists such as Fontana, Gallizio or Teshigahara to develop specific projects or *ad hoc* installation design for their artworks. The openness towards artists, as underlined by Marinotti in the 1967 interview with Marcello Venturoli mentioned earlier, constituted one of the main driving forces behind the turning of the CIAC towards contemporary art. At the same time, the influence of Sandberg and Jorn on Marinotti himself can be clearly seen. Sandberg had advocated the role of the museum as an open space for artists since his early days as Stedelijk director, while Jorn, instead, considered experimentation a fundamental element of any artistic practice. As already noted, in Jorn's view an artist could aim to develop his/her own independent imaginary only through continual experimentation rather than due to his/her inner and innate genius. To be able to consider an art institution no longer as a temple of aesthetic values validated by a historical discipline such as art history, but instead as a place open to experimentation, accepting those potential risks involved in any such production, must have sounded like a challenge worth the risk for Jorn the Situationist. This can further help to explain his relationship with the CIAC during his Situationist years.

If one considers *Dalla natura all'arte* from the point of view of the experiments taking place in terms of the media and languages it presented, it is possible to understand the chilly reception it received at the hands of the critics. If it is true that the *Cycle of Vitality* failed to introduce to its public the most recent artistic movements or personalities (such as the Nouveau Realistes or Piero Manzoni), it should be noticed that photography, installation, objets-trouvés and an ancient technique from Japan such as the Ikebana nevertheless provided the public with an unusual exhibition experience. The critical response to the installation design was negative, some finding it too showy, others claiming it was poorly organised within the space. Alongside the installation shots published in the catalogues, a film produced by the CIAC about *Dalla natura all'arte* uniquely documents its installation design.<sup>105</sup> In this way, it is possible to detect a theatrical element that had very little in common with the refined reflections on exhibition display by Italian architects of the time, such as Scarpa.

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<sup>105</sup> The film *Dalla natura all'arte* belongs to the Archivio Storico of the Istituto Luce, currently accessible online at [www.archivioluce.com](http://www.archivioluce.com), Dalla natura all'arte D045303. Last accessed 15 February 2014

The third point emerging from the press release, and confirmed by the Stedelijk Museum catalogue designed by Sandberg, was the fact that the Amsterdam version of *Dalla natura all'arte* included just seven artists instead of nine. There is no trace of Munari and Mari who evidently were removed from this version. Munari, it will be recalled, was the artist involved in the book *Il poema di latte* by Marinetti, which had been commissioned by the SNIA Viscosa in 1937, and a family friend of the Marinotti's; Mari was a designer who at that time was involved in designing the stands for both Montecatini and SNIA Viscosa at the Milan Fair. It is probable that they both found their way into the show due to pressure from Franco Marinotti, in order to subtly redirect the theme of the exhibition closer to the original aims of the CIAC, both artists being sensitive to the SNIA Viscosa's activity. This notion seems to be confirmed by a letter sent by Gaetano De Luca, Paolo Marinotti's assistant at the CIAC, to Sandberg discussing which works of art from *Dalla natura all'arte* should travel to the Stedelijk for the Amsterdam version. When he comes to Mari, he writes, "Those are bulky items, and we believe they were justified here in Italy for the reasons you know already."<sup>106</sup> At this point there is no evidence in any other document to suggest what these reasons were other than that they must be related to the intervention of the SNIA Viscosa (and probably Franco Marinotti himself).<sup>107</sup> If one needs further evidence, the titles and the materials of Mari's works are self-explanatory: *Architettura vegetale* (Organic Architecture), made from *arundo donax*; *La natura si trasforma* (Nature Transforms Herself), made from wood, cellulose and reeds; *Fili e trame* (Threads and Weavings), in aluminium and thread. Mari's installation, exploring the language of seriality and optical illusion through natural and artificial materials, was a hymn to Torviscosa and the SNIA Viscosa enterprise that none of the contemporary critics and academics commented on at the time.

While Mari's work was shown on the second floor, Munari's, instead, welcomed visitors at the beginning of the exhibition, albeit following a prelude in the outside courtyard composed of the Ikebanas of Sofu Teshigahara, the Japanese artist at the time championed by Michel Tapié (figs.95 and 97). At the time Tapié was living in Turin, where on 3 March 1960 he opened the ICAR – International Centre of Aesthetic Research – a

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<sup>106</sup> Letter from Gaetano De Luca to Willem Sandberg, 23 September 1960, SMA, Amsterdam, File 3949 [Dalla natura all'arte]. My translation.

<sup>107</sup> The engagement of Enzo Mari with the design of the SNIA Viscosa pavilions at the Milan Fair is reported in the artist's biography in an exhibition catalogue which however does not highlight his participation in *Dalla natura all'arte*, and his works are not reported in any of the publications consulted about him. Francesca Giacomelli (ed.), *Enzo Mari, L'arte del design*, Milano: Federico Motta Editore, 2008, p.137.

cultural centre devoted to exhibiting contemporary art, to which he invited several of the artists who had also participated in the *Cycle of Vitality*, together with artists from Japan.<sup>108</sup> He was the first, in 1951, to use the term *informel* to define the artistic tendency of some artists such as Jean Fautrier, Jean Dubuffet and Wols. Having good relationships with both Gallizio and Sandberg, it is likely that Tapié's involvement with the Palazzo Grassi exhibition was thanks to his introduction to Marinotti by one or other of the two.

In 1959, Tapié had contributed to the organisation of *Arte Nuova*, which presented some of the same artists as *Vitalità nell'arte*. In that exhibition, he also introduced the Ikebana master Teshigahara, who for the occasion built an Ikebana in the courtyard of Palazzo Granieri in Turin. Teshigahara was not only an artist but also a master of the ancient technique of Ikebana making, which he helped to re-launch in Japan by opening the country's most prestigious school for this practice. As explained by Tapié in the *Dalla natura all'arte* catalogue, while in Japan Ikebana is not strictly speaking considered art, since it is a traditional craft of arranging cut natural elements such as flowers, branches and logs, he believed that in the western context, nevertheless, it could be considered parallel to a work of sculpture.<sup>109</sup> Teshigahara's participation in *Dalla natura all'arte* must surely have been thanks to Tapié, who was also a close friend of Gallizio.

As mentioned above, *Dalla natura all'arte* could be read both as a thematic exhibition exploring the relationship between art and nature, and as a thematic exhibition that has inscribed within it the genealogy of mass and commercial exhibitions developed in Italy since the 1930s. The relationship between art and nature follows the narrative proposed by the memo and by Marinotti in his catalogue text. On the first floor were those artists who recognised in natural elements those forms that could be transposed or translated into art. This is the case with Munari's photographic enlargements of branches or roots, installed in three different rooms with straw strewn on the floors (fig.96). The sculptures of Etienne-Martine, Teshigahara and Henry Heerup also functioned on the same principle, although

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<sup>108</sup> On Michel Tapié, I consulted Mirella Bandini (ed.), *Michel Tapié, Un art autre e altri scritti di estetica: 1946–1969*, Segrate: Nike, 2000.

<sup>109</sup> Michel Tapié, 'Sofu Teshigahara', in *Dalla natura all'arte*. Coincidentally, Teshigahara's son, Hiroshi Teshigahara participated 28 years later in the exhibition *Magiciens de la Terre*, curated by Jean Hubert Martin, with an open-air gallery realised in bamboo on the terrace of the fifth floor of the Centre George Pompidou in Paris, together with a calligraphy scroll containing a Japanese poem from 1917. Although not mentioned in the recent book on the exhibition, it would be interesting to understand what influence Michel Tapié had in the cultural environment of the 1950s and 1960s, knowing that Pontus Hultén, Martin's mentor at the end of the 1970s, lived in Paris at the time, as did François Mathey. The latter was another key figure engaged in overcoming Western contemporary art categories as director of the Musée des Art Decoratifs from 1955 to 1986. He is also missing in the narrative of the publication on *Magiciens de la Terre*. Lucy Steeds (ed.), *Making Art Global (Part 2), Magiciens de la Terre' 1989*, London: Afterall Books, 2013.

these artists collected natural materials (again wood or rocks) and intervened on them (fig.97). The first floor also housed Germaine Richier's sculptures that, like the collages created on the second floor by Dubuffet, introduced visitors to the second theme of the exhibition: artists who appropriated natural elements in order to then create their own works (fig.98). Finally Gallizio, Mari and Fontana, all on the second floor, further developed the concept of exploring their own inner nature by creating forms referring to the most secluded aspects of nature, recently revealed by science (such as the *Caverna dell'antimateria* by Gallizio) (figs.99–102).

Commentators lamented the organisers' lack of a consistent analysis of the exhibition's theme. For Carla Lonzi, a key figure in Italian art criticism of the 1960s, the exhibition did not expressly address the Expressionist, Surrealist and Dadaist characteristics of the works presented.<sup>110</sup> Dorfles highlights how, as usual, exhibitions with a 'theme' work only if they are able to synthesize a problem effectively. This was not achieved by *Dalla natura all'arte*, in his view, where the organisers failed to grasp the 'relationship between the natural formative process and the human formative process' and had not based the exhibition on 'pondered and precise ideological and aesthetic pedestals.'<sup>111</sup> Dorfles also dismisses the choice of artists selected, apart from Munari and Mari (friends of his) and Fontana (although he cannot understand why he was in this particular exhibition). Another critic, Marco Valsecchi, did not appreciate the installation design, which he saw as too pompous and theatrical, a kind of 'hidden persuader' to cover up the weakness of the idea of paralleling natural forms with those consciously created by man, which to his mind was an unacceptable confusion.

These criticisms are to some extent unjustified. In particular Dorfles, although he acknowledges the theme addressed by the exhibition, seems to consider it only from his own point of view, ignoring for example how the three rooms installed by Fontana (of which we have unique documentation thanks to the film of the exhibition), did pertinently explore themes related to nature. In his second room, for example, Fontana installed five of his *Nature*, artworks belonging to a cycle started in 1960 in Albisola (fig.101). It was not only the title and the actual form of these artworks that connected with the theme of nature, but Fontana went so far as to refer to them as objects from another planet.

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<sup>110</sup> Carla Lonzi, "Dalla natura all'arte" a Palazzo Grassi, in *L'Approdo Letterario*, n.11, July–September 1960, pp.137–8, republished in Lara Conte, Laura Iamurri, Vanessa Martini (eds.), *Carla Lonzi, Scritti sull'arte*, Milano: edizioni et. al, 2012, pp.216–8.

<sup>111</sup> Gillo Dorfles, "Dalla natura all'Arte" a Palazzo Grassi, a Venezia, in *Domus*, n.371, 1960, p.38.

Looking at their installation in the film of *Dalla natura all'arte*, positioned on dark plinths in a room whose walls were rendered dark, it is possible to speculate that the very effect Fontana was aiming at in the installation was almost the experience of walking in a lunar landscape (the race to land on the moon had started only a year earlier with the Soviet Union's launch of their first Luna 1 module, which crashed into the moon's surface).

Rather than addressing *Dalla natura all'arte* as an exhibition that aimed to reflect on the relationship between nature and art in art historical terms, one should approach it as a thematic exhibition responding to specific elements which at the time were still present in Italian exhibition culture. The exhibition began with the natural and spectacular prelude by Teshigahara, immediately bringing the theme to the visitors' attention, showing how man can work directly with nature. The first floor opened with the photographic images by Munari, an artist engaged not only with SNIA Viscosa propaganda in the 1930s, but also with numerous exhibitions of the time, such as the *Esposizione dell'Aeronautica Italiana* and various editions of the Triennials. Munari further stressed the relationship with nature, adding technology as a new mediator for its experience. The other artists on this floor reiterated the state of nature when transformed by the actions of man. On the second floor, having passed Dubuffet – for Sandberg, key to the concept of the exhibition and surely appreciated by Paolo Marinotti, but with very little to add from a marketing perspective – visitors encountered the *Caverna dell'antimateria* by Gallizio (fig.99). For the occasion, Gallizio prepared an *ad hoc* version of the work, referring back to the Drouin installation although with a different outcome. He framed the three canvases of industrial painting that in Paris had covered the two side walls and the end wall opposite the entrance, configuring them in the same way within the room allocated to him at Palazzo Grassi. He then created a panel in front of the entrance forcing visitors to either go right or left to enter his room and on the background of this panel he positioned another piece of industrial painting. This panel being wider than the entrance, once inside, visitors were enveloped in a continuous strip of industrial painting, which although it did not cover the ceiling and the floor (to avoid repeating the Situationist experiment at the Galerie Drouin of 1959), at the same time aimed to recreate that force field in the centre of which matter and antimatter could meet.<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> Apparently the Situationist Jan Kotik, in visiting the exhibition, accused Gallizio of having renounced his critique of the art system so present in Paris, by installing his *Caverna dell'antimateria* in this way. Letter from Jan Kotik to Pinot Gallizio, 25 October 1960.

This new version of the *Caverna dell'antimateria*, the third one to date after those at the Galerie Van de Loo in Munich and the Galerie Drouin in Paris in 1959, further demonstrates the importance for Gallizio of the concept of industrial painting as an applicable art. According to the different contexts, the actual form of an artwork could undergo different transformations because the very meaning of the industrial painting, at the heart of the *Caverna dell'antimateria*, allowed a variety of uses and forms of the canvas able to call into question the very notion that an artwork should be always the same and present itself always in the same version. This acknowledgment on the part of Gallizio provides an alternative perspective on the understanding of his idea of industrial painting. Nicola Pezolet recently underlined the lack of a real industrial machinery behind the production of the industrial painting of Gallizio.<sup>113</sup> If the definition is taken literally, one cannot but agree with this reading; but at the same time Gallizio considered it fundamental, on the one hand, to use industrially produced canvas, and on the other hand, to produce an abundance of painting without paying too much attention to the gesture *per se*. As any image of the industrial painting demonstrates, Gallizio presented it in the form of a huge roll of canvas wound around a wooden stick. This could also reflect the practice of the extremely widespread production of textiles in Piedmont, the region where Gallizio lived. It should not be forgotten that Gualino, the founder of the SNIA Viscosa, was from Turin and it was there that, in the early 1920s, the company first switched to producing man-made fibres. Moreover, as early as 1935 Marinetti praised the plant of Venaria, a town between Turin and Alba, belonging to the SNIA Viscosa. Alongside the SNIA, another main competitor in the area was the Miroglio factory. Therefore, the industrial landscape may well have informed Gallizio's interest in using raw material produced in the locality to launch his attack on both industrial production based on the standardisation of products and on the art system and its commodification of the artistic experience through the market.

Back in the corridor of the second floor of Palazzo Grassi, dotted with a series of anthropomorphic stones by Gallizio, visitors could finally encounter Mari's work (fig.100). The latter further explored the suggestion given at the beginning of the exhibition in Munari's photographs. The use by Mari of products such as *arunda donax* or cellulose, extolled by the SNIA Viscosa since 1937 (from the foundation of Torviscosa and the propaganda at the *Esposizione dei Tessili Nazionali* in Rome, Marinetti's poems of the late

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<sup>113</sup> Nicola Pezolet, 'The Cavern of Antimatter', pp.67–73



1930s and Antonioni's movie in 1949), clearly suggests what trajectory the exhibition wanted to follow in the analysis of the relationship between art and nature.

To interrupt this plan, however, there was a second artwork by Gallizio, *Lo spazio incredulo dei disimmetrici (elemento del tempio dei miscredenti)*.<sup>114</sup> The two works by Gallizio seemed to act as an interlude from Paolo's perspective within the narrative superimposed on *Dalla natura all'arte* by his father at the very last minute. Interrupting the run towards the final apotheosis of the exhibition in the last room, where the work of Fontana was displayed, the industrial painting by Gallizio introduced an element of uncertainty into the narrative. As previously discussed, Paolo felt particularly close to the programme of the Situationist International and to the way in which both Jorn and Gallizio understood machines. The subjugation of technology through the vital approach of the artist who follows his instincts and pleasures was the answer to the 'emptiness of technique' feared by Paolo.<sup>115</sup>

After this breach in his father's vision, though, the exhibition proceeded to its final epiphany with the work of Fontana, another artist fully involved in Italian exhibition culture of the 1930s. Fontana had the opportunity to work in 1936 with Edoardo Persico and Marcello Nizzoli on the *Sala della Vittoria*, that marked the sixth Milan Triennial and produced a witty response to the Fascist agenda. Furthermore, he was an advocate of artistic freedom, well expressed in his Manifestos and in his intervention at the 1 Congresso Internazionale di design, organised at the ninth Milan Triennial in 1954. For this reason, he occupied a unique position which allowed him, on the one hand, to manage the marketing agenda pushed by the SNIA Viscosa within *Dalla natura all'arte* and, on the other hand, to affirm the distinct position of the artist in respect to the standardisation of production heralded by the design culture of the time.

In the last of his rooms, he created a dream-like installation with state-of-the-art textiles produced by the SNIA Viscosa. Not a circular room this time, but definitely a room with a centre, the installation *Esaltazione di una forma* was organised around a totemic, slightly off-centre, solid form in the middle of the space (fig.102). Fontana surrounded the form with SNIA Viscosa *lilion* in red and orange, as recounted by the astonished critics: 'The last room is really phantasmagorical, a great optical effect. It is entirely upholstered from the floor to the ceiling, with red curtains, which continuously cross the space with

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<sup>114</sup> In English: The Incredulous Space of the Disimmetric (Part of the Temple of the Nonbelievers).

<sup>115</sup> Paolo Marinotti, Réponse à moi-même' in *Vitalità nell'arte*, p.7.

voiles of the same colour. The hidden light is also red, so the visitor remains dazzled and bewildered. At the exit, a window provides a glimpse of the Grand Canal.<sup>116</sup> As had already happened in *La leggenda del filo d'oro*, so too in *Dalla natura all'arte* the journey of initiation progressed from nature (starting in both cases in the Far East, although this may have been a coincidence) to science. While in the earlier exhibition of 1952, silk thread turned into man-made fibre, in *Dalla natura all'arte* the visitor was carefully led from nature to the 'artificial', with the final room in the exhibition by Fontana celebrating the products of scientific research.

At the same time, in looking at Fontana's installation and the optical effects it creates, one cannot but think of the Baroque effects achieved by the artist. Neobaroque together with Neo-Liberty were the two predominant tendencies of the time in Italy, clearly counterposed to Modernism and Functionalism.<sup>117</sup> Between 1948 and 1951, Fontana concerned himself with the creation of environments. His neon whiplash covering the ceiling of the ninth Milan Triennial, in 1951, already exemplified his interest in using a Neobaroque language (fig.51). By creating an environment rather than a collectable object, Fontana reversed the commodification of artistic production underlined within the Milan Triennial, but also, as noted by Romy Golan, subverted with a gesture as much artistic as it was political the Fascist use of the same ceiling during the fifth Milan Triennial (fig.17).<sup>118</sup>

The fact that Fontana chose to present the SNIA Viscosa textile not as Appel had done in *Vitalità nell'arte* (where despite the animalistic impulse behind the work, the fabrics were arranged alongside one another in a manner almost reminiscent of a shop display), but by employing a neobaroque language verging on the kitsch, allows us to speculate as to the real intentions of the artist. It seems almost as though he wanted to negate the very idea of producing a beautiful object, while instead presenting visitors with a phantasmagorical physical experience, characterised by a degree of roughness in its formal execution: fabrics criss-crossed the room chaotically; the walls were covered in orange and red textiles; an abundance of *lilium* was gathered in jumbled heaps mimicking the expressive and

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<sup>116</sup> My translation. P.R. [Paolo Rizzi], 'Dalla natura all'arte', in *Il Gazzettino*, 8 July 1960. Curiously, Paolo Rizzi in the article's title lists only seven artists. The exhibition was also reviewed by M. S. Dall'Oglio, 'Dalla natura all'arte a Palazzo Grassi', in *Arte Oggi*, n.7, 1960; Marco Valsecchi, 'Dalla natura all'arte', in *Il Tempo*, 31 July 1960.

<sup>117</sup> Art historian Anthony White suggests that Fontana's use of kitsch worked as a challenge to modernist taste. Anthony White, *Lucio Fontana. Between Utopia and Kitsch*, Cambridge, Mass. London, England: The MIT Press, 2011.

<sup>118</sup> Romy Golan, *Muralnomad. The Paradox of Wall Painting, Europe 1927–1957*, New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2009 p.230.

voluminous treatment of draperies in marble sculptures or apotheosis in painting of the Baroque era, with a glorified asymmetric monolith emerging in the centre of this chaos.<sup>119</sup>

As pointed out by Romy Golan, in the 1950s the return to the Baroque in Italian culture had a precise purpose, aimed at rethinking the entire history of Modernism, precisely because Baroque art explored the same spatio-temporal dimension which characterised the Modern era.<sup>120</sup> How then can Fontana's gesture be read in respect to *Dalla natura all'arte*? On the one hand, it reveals his ability once again to resist any attempt to reduce artistic creativity to the different agendas at play within the art world and, in this case, the thematic contemporary art exhibition (as pushed by the marketing needs of the SNIA Viscosa); on the other hand, it demonstrates Fontana's lucid ability to pursue his own interests. After having landed in the lunar environment created by the series of *Nature*, the visitor to *Dalla natura all'arte* was propelled into another dimension, almost a cosmic environment that glorified a formless form. This was the end of a journey of initiation which had the potential to undermine the carefully laundered message no doubt wished for by the SNIA Viscosa's marketing office.

It is obvious that the two readings of the exhibition (one more art historical, the other one placing more attention on its thematic genealogy) should not be isolated and need to be taken together. If it is true that *Dalla natura all'arte* seemed to be (again after *Vitalità nell'arte*) addressing too broad a theme without enough historical depth, one should nevertheless recognise that Marinotti and Sandberg did not want to provide an art historical approach to contemporary production, but rather a framework for it based on their particular concerns. As this dissertation argues, thematic exhibitions of contemporary art responded to a different set of goals than more historical art exhibitions, because of the very structure through which they came into being: having a theme to which artists could respond, a narrative that often worked to create a journey of initiation, and a projection of the future (or the past) into the present. Marinotti and Sandberg most likely had no choice but to accept the SNIA Viscosa diktat of inserting Mari and Munari into the exhibition, while, at the same time, the way in which they organised the exhibition meant it could develop its own meaning in respect to their idea of presenting different artistic approaches

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<sup>119</sup> Furthermore, there is another possible influence in Fontana's installation if one compares *Esaltazione di una forma* with the Duchamp's exhibition *First Papers of Surrealism*, organised in New York in 1942. On that occasion, Duchamp ensnared paintings within a tangled web made of miles of string. Echoes of Surrealist influence in another Fontana's installation can be found also in the exhibition *Lucio Fontana opera 1949-61* at the ICAR of Turin, if compared with the installation of the *Exposition International du Surrealism 'Eros'*, organised in Paris in 1959.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.230-5.

to nature. *Dalla natura all'arte* is also interesting because it forcefully promoted a discursive approach typical of thematic exhibitions, which had its roots in the avant-garde experiences of the Bauhaus (and of course of the mass exhibitions of the 1930s). In each room, visitors could find a short text that helped them to develop their understanding of the artworks, whether written by Focillon or Klee or Paolo Marinotti himself, who not by chance placed in Mari's room a quote from the exhibition guide of *La leggenda del filo d'oro*, making explicit a connection between the two exhibitions that was not only thematic but also logical. With *Dalla natura all'arte*, the model of the contemporary art thematic exhibition demonstrated a valid alternative to the art historical narrative in presenting works of art in public, even though the critics did not yet understand it, with consequences for the third and last exhibition of the cycle.



Fig.95: *Dalla natura all'arte*, CIAC, Venice, 1960, Courtyard Palazzo Grassi, with the Ikebana by Sofu Teshigahara.

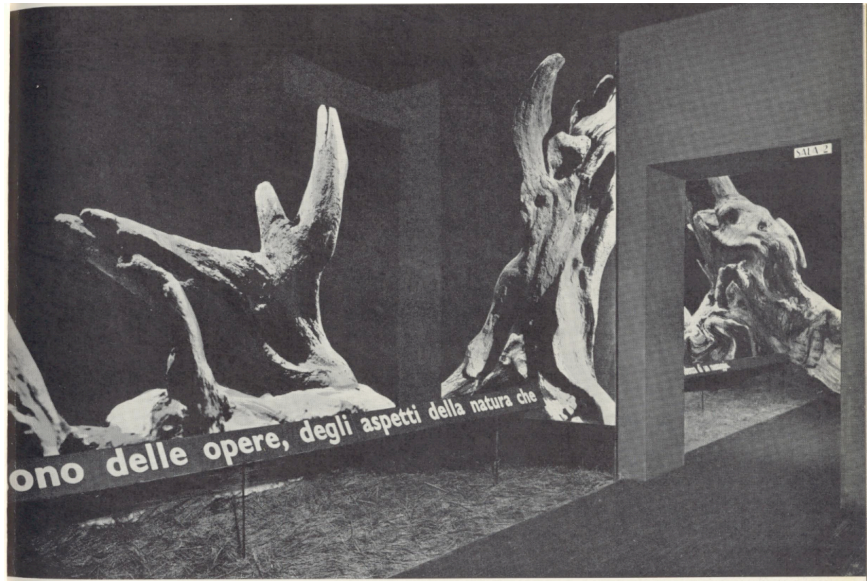


Fig. 96: *Dalla natura all'arte*, CIAC, Venice, 1960, Room with work by Bruno Munari.

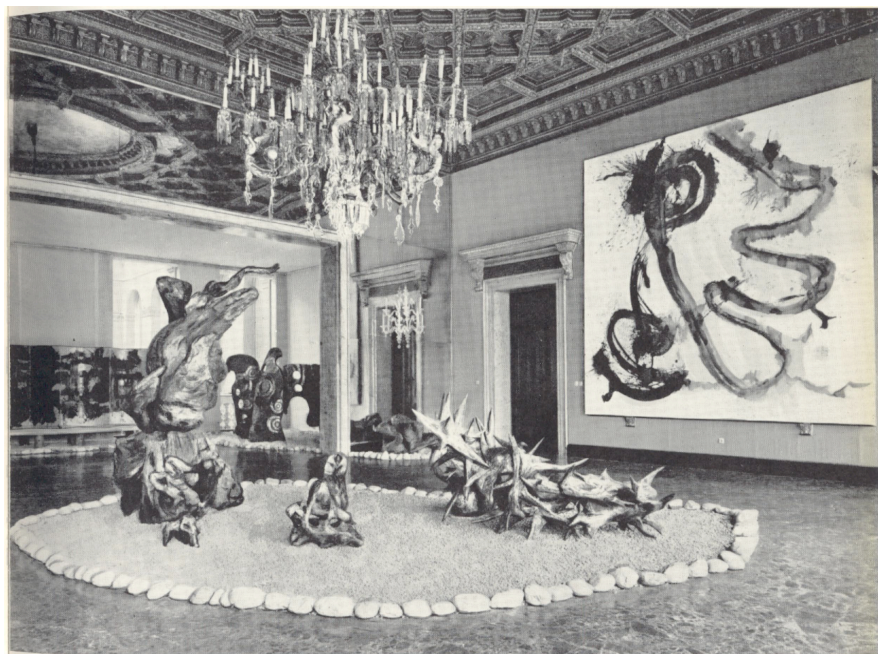


Fig.97: *Dalla natura all'arte*, CIAC, Venice, 1960, Room with poems and sculptures by Sofu Teshigahara.



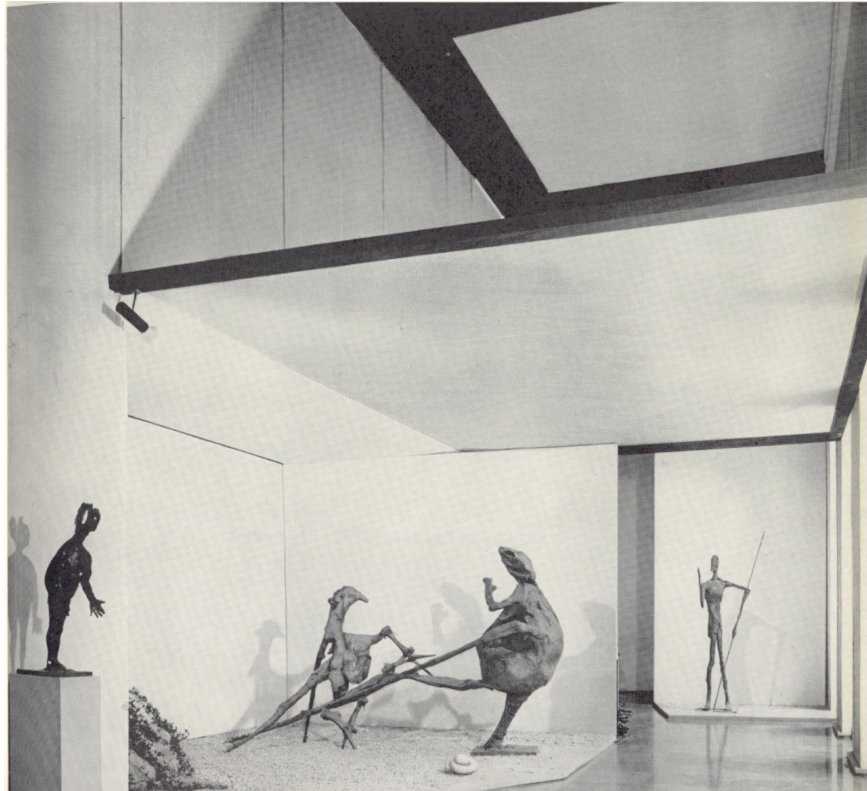


Fig.98: *Dalla natura all'arte*, CIAC, Venice, 1960, Room with work by Germaine Richier, exhibition design by Robert Dahlman-Olsen using existing installation structures designed by Carlo Scarpa for *Vitalità nell'arte*.

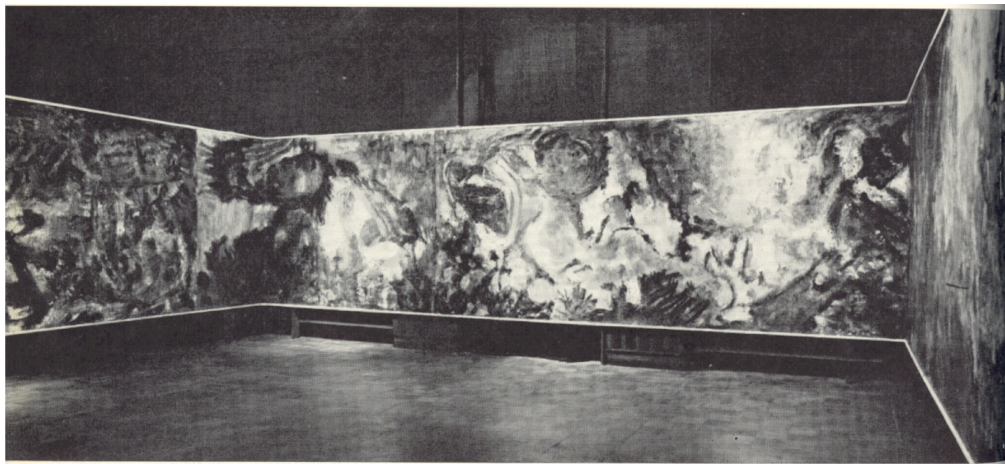


Fig.99: *Dalla natura all'arte*, CIAC, Venice, 1960, Gallizio's installation of the *Caverna dell'antimateria*.



Fig.100: *Dalla natura all'arte*, CIAC, Venice, 1960, Room with work by Enzo Mari.



Fig.101: *Dalla natura all'arte*, CIAC, 1960, Room with *Nature* and *Concetti Spaziali* by Lucio Fontana.





Fig.102: *Dalla natura all'arte*, CIAC, Venice, 1960, *Esaltazione di una forma* by Lucio Fontana, created using SNIA Viscosa's fabrics.



## 5.7 *Arte e contemplazione*

While the first two exhibitions in the cycle have been analysed extensively, *Arte e contemplazione* offers less scope for an in-depth examination of its exhibition design and thematic development.<sup>121</sup> However, *Arte e contemplazione* does allow for further consideration of the diminishing role of the architect in exhibition design, the role played by the institution in inscribing this type of exhibition within the overall narrative of the cycle, and the dwindling of the synthesis of the arts as one of the pivotal elements of a thematic exhibition. With no architect commissioned to plan its installation, and a refusal to reframe artists within the traditional contemporary art exhibition format (such the one of *Arte Nuova*), but maintaining the criteria adopted by the CIAC for the *Cycle of Vitality* and adopting a perspective close to the informal reading developed the same year by Eco in the pages of *Il Verri*, *Arte e contemplazione* points to the future potential of the contemporary art thematic exhibition.

Of the three exhibitions, *Arte e contemplazione* was the one in which Marinotti's intellectual limitations emerged most clearly. Probably as a result of the bad press that *Dalla natura all'arte* received for its overly theatrical installation, he opted for a less daring thematic approach and the inclusion of more traditional media such as painting and sculpture. The theme of 'contemplation,' though, perfectly matched his mental state and it would hardly have been possible for him to develop the cycle in any other direction. *Arte e contemplazione* relied on a simpler, more basic presentation, without any architects involved in the design. While *Dalla natura all'arte* somewhat laboriously brought the cycle back to the CIAC's original goals in its link to the propaganda of the SNIA Viscosa, *Arte e contemplazione* aligned itself more to *Vitalità nell'arte*, to which it tried to act as the 'anti-climax,' as declared by Marinotti in his poetic catalogue text.<sup>122</sup> Critics resolutely dismissed *Arte e contemplazione*, mainly because of its lack of consistency from a conceptual point of view. For this reason, they judged it as a belatedly avant-gardist exhibition of work by a list of already fairly well-known 'informel' artists, at a time when the art system was already saturated by this tendency.

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<sup>121</sup> The participating artists were: Kengiro Azuma, Paul – Émile Borduas, Martin Bradley, Maria Luisa De Romans, Jean Dubuffet, Lucio Fontana, Sam Francis, Roger Hilton, Asger Jorn, Hans Platschek, Mark Rothko, Emilio Scanavino, Emil Schumacher, Antonio Tàpies, Walasse Ting, Bram Van Velde, Jaap Wagemaker, Pierre Wemaëre, Wols. The exhibition opened 15 July 1961.

<sup>122</sup> Paolo Marinotti, 'Arte vitale: uno e tre', in *Arte e contemplazione*, exh. cat. Venezia: Centro Internazionale delle Arti e del Costume, 1961, unpaginated.

In a letter to Sandberg sent on 13 November 1960, Marinotti proposes ‘art and contemplation’ as the title for the third exhibition, nominating Sam Francis as the artist whose work was most emblematic of the theme (fig.103).<sup>123</sup> For this event, it is probable that Marinotti worked on the exhibition more independently than he had previously, although Sandberg contributed a text to the catalogue. There is no consistent correspondence about the exhibition between the two, and *Arte e contemplazione* did not travel to the Stedelijk Museum as the previous two exhibitions of the cycle had done. Moreover, the list of artists seems to rely heavily on the contribution of Jorn, who was still very close to Marinotti at the time.

In agreeing the theme of ‘contemplation’, Marinotti and Sandberg understood it to mean a capacity to contemplate vitality as a value in itself, translating this act into a physical form. Thus, they did not really interpret the term in a Crocean way, as the significant moment of experiencing the autonomy of an artwork. Rather they juxtaposed contemplation to vitality as another key principle driving contemporary artistic expression and intended that the exhibition should help visitors to experience artists’ own personal contemplation of vitality. As well as Francis, the two curators invited 21 artists, among them Mark Rothko, Antoni Tapies, Wols, Bram Van Velde, Dubuffet and Jorn, who presented a new series of paintings as well as the *tapisseries* produced together with Wemaëre. On this occasion, Marinotti extended the invitation to his sister Maria Luisa De Romans, who was a painter, and Francesco Torri, the pseudonym used by Franco Marinotti himself when producing his terracotta works. In *Arte e contemplazione*, there were no artworks made using SNIA Viscosa textiles, with Marinotti opting instead to exhibit works produced using traditional crafts, such as woven tapestries or terracotta bowls. In this way, he still maintained some connection with textiles within the *Cycle of Vitality*.

Judging from the photographic documentation, the decision not to have the exhibition designed by an architect resulted in a rather sloppy installation. For example, in the room dedicated to Fontana a series of rough poles holding up the temporary ceiling are positioned in the middle of the space, clearly obstructing the visitors’ sightlines; even in the photographs, their effect is to disrupt the installation (fig.104). The Graphic Office of the CIAC designed the catalogue, reproducing a painting by Wols on the cover, and organising the layout in a similar way to that of *Vitalità nell’arte*. Like the earlier publication, the *Arte e contemplazione* catalogue had artists’ pages ordered alphabetically with short biographies for

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<sup>123</sup> Letter from Paolo Marinotti to Willem Sandberg, Milan, 13 November 1960, SMA, Amsterdam, File 3949.

each one; the works were photographed in a neutral environment (generally in colour) and each of the curators produced his own text. Among the highlights of the exhibition were the cycle commissioned from Fontana about the city of Venice; three paintings by Rothko (an artist already exhibited in Venice at the 1958 Biennial); and twenty one works by Wols (celebrated the year before by the Venice Biennial).<sup>124</sup>

As Lonzi underlines in her critique of the exhibition, *Arte e contemplazione* did not present anything really new, demonstrating a diminished energy in respect to the other two exhibitions of the cycle.<sup>125</sup> Furthermore, she questioned whether the entire cycle did indeed have its own aesthetic and ideology, as Marinotti claimed it did. Quite rightly, she suggests that the catalogue's texts were 'providentially hermetic,' giving only vague and ambiguous definitions of concepts such as 'vitality' and 'contemplation', with the result that many of the artists in this last exhibition could be the same as those in *Vitalità nell'arte*, in comparison to which *Arte e contemplazione* seemed not simply complementary but in some cases almost a reparation for earlier omissions. Lonzi argues that Tapié's *art autre* and *art informel* were the two concepts best able to explain the aesthetic imposed on contemporary art production of the 1950s, dismissing 'vitality' and 'contemplation' as being too vague.<sup>126</sup>

To some extent, Jorn predicted this response in a letter to Marinotti dated 21 December 1960. He wrote to Marinotti voicing his concern that the latter was planning to organise another exhibition for the following year.<sup>127</sup> Nevertheless, he urged Marinotti to do it on the condition that it would be his last one, the 'anti-climax' of the previous two,

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<sup>124</sup> In 2006, the Peggy Guggenheim Foundation of Venice exhibited Fontana's cycle for the first time since then, reuniting all its now dispersed pieces. Luca Massimo Barbero (ed.), *Lucio Fontana Venezia/New York*, exh. cat. Venezia: Peggy Guggenheim Collection, 2006. In this respect, it is striking that Anthony White, in his monographic work on Lucio Fontana dedicates the first chapter to the cycle assuming that the paintings on Venice were created on the occasion of his first solo show at Martha Jackson Gallery in New York. The same book ignored the three rooms presented by Fontana at *Dalla natura all'arte* and the occasion that originated the art works presented there. Anthony White, *Lucio Fontana. Between Utopia and Kitsch*.

<sup>125</sup> Carla Lonzi, 'Arte e contemplazione a Palazzo Grassi a Venezia', in *L'approdo Letterario*, year 7, n.16, October-December 1961, pp.172-3, republished in Lara Conte, Laura Iamurri, Vanessa Martini (eds.), *Carla Lonzi, Scritti sull'arte*, pp.257-9.

<sup>126</sup> Dorfles considered *Arte e contemplazione* to be a survey of avant-garde artists rather than an exhibition with a theme, and he reviewed it as such. Gillo Dorfles, "'Arte e contemplazione' a Palazzo Grassi", in *Domus*, n.382, September 1961. Among the other critics' reviews, Marco Valsecchi, 'Arte e contemplazione', in *Il Tempo*, 29 July 1961; Guido Marussi, "'Arte e contemplazione' questo il tema dell'attuale mostra a Palazzo Grassi", in *Le Arti*, n.5-6, June 1961; Paolo Rizzi covered the exhibitions in three different articles for the local newspaper *Il Gazzettino*: "Gli artisti presenti ad 'Arte e contemplazione'", 9 July 1961, "Oggi si apre la mostra 'Arte e contemplazione'", 15 July 1961, "Inaugurata a Venezia la mostra 'Arte e contemplazione'", 16 July 1961; Marcello Venturoli, "Inaugurata a Venezia la mostra 'Arte e contemplazione'", in *Paese Sera*, 21 July 1961; J. P. Hodin, 'Art and Contemplation', in *The Studio*, n.823, 1961 and Jean Leymarie, 'Art et Contemplation au Palazzo Grassi à Venise', in *Quadrum*, n.11, 1961.

<sup>127</sup> Letter from Asger Jorn to Paolo Marinotti, Savona, 21 December 1960, Museum Jorn Archive (MJA), Silkeborg, file 'Til Paolo Marinotti - Fra Ursula Lehmann Brochhause.'

‘the dramatic culmination and the end of the spectacle.’<sup>128</sup> As it was really only Marinotti who was the true heart of the project, doing a third exhibition in a row ran the risk of weakening the originality of his approach, dissipating the creative tension and passion which had infused the project so far. Jorn and Marinotti had several discussions about the CIAC and its commitment to contemporary art. At the time, Jorn was reflecting on the relationship between professionalism and art, a theme he saw as directly related to the problematic relationship between the SNIA Viscosa and the CIAC, of which he obviously had first-hand experience.

The first time Jorn discussed the CIAC with Marinotti dates back to the summer of 1959. In two undated letters, Jorn comments on the documents and catalogues published by the CIAC since its opening in 1951. In the first letter, he points out that after having addressed the creative problems related to the textile industry in the first years of the CIAC, Marinotti now wants to reverse his position and understand how his industry can affect people’s needs in the present.<sup>129</sup> According to Jorn, Le Corbusier and the Bauhaus followed a similar trajectory between the two world wars, but as far as the field of textiles was concerned they both failed miserably. Jorn therefore urges Marinotti to adopt a clear stance and clarify his ideas, especially if he wants to create a new development out of his already productive activity. As a member of Situationist International, Jorn agreed with Marinotti that the main risk for man in the present day was the dominance of routine, and that the same was true for art when it was reduced to a habit of secondary importance. He pushes Marinotti to confront the previous experiments of the Bauhaus and to pursue a harsh and independent critique of his own activity within the domain of costume and textiles, in order to unleash new energies and inspire new artistic production.

In the second letter, Jorn goes back to the question of the unity of the arts, considering the theme of the unity of textiles, the subject of a CIAC symposium in 1952. For Jorn, one can only try to achieve the unity of textiles if at one and the same time one also maintains its differentiation. As proven by the history of costume, it was only through differentiation that new epochs could emerge. Therefore for Jorn, dissolving forms was as important as any attempt to unify them: ‘I consider this tendency of dissolution – that manifests itself in the variability – as the aesthetic effect, which is opposite to the tendency

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<sup>128</sup> Ibid. My translation.

<sup>129</sup> Letter from Asger Jorn to Paolo Marinotti, probably dated summer 1959, marked in the Museum Jorn Archive as ‘sommer 1959 1’, MJA, Silkeborg, file ‘Til Paolo Marinotti.’

towards unity that I consider an ethical and functional tendency.’<sup>130</sup> The modernist rationalist tendencies concentrated exclusively on a context of artistic unity, therefore it is towards the field of differentiation, as yet insufficiently explored, that Jorn invites Marinotti to turn his focus.

At the time, Jorn was working with Wemaëre to make tapestries, so he was particularly sensitive to the medium of weaving, and this is where he urged Marinotti to concentrate his efforts.<sup>131</sup> But in 1959, Marinotti had already abandoned issues around textiles, costume and weaving in order to embrace contemporary art. Jorn’s comments are nevertheless interesting because he exhorted Marinotti to further analyse his relationship with both the textile industry and the debate of the first half of the twentieth century on the relationship between art and industry: a call to which Marinotti failed to respond.

Jorn resumes his appeals to Marinotti in December 1960, this time on the relationship between the CIAC and the SNIA Viscosa, which resurfaced in *Dalla natura all’arte* and was close to his then current interest in the writings of Sorel.<sup>132</sup> He defines the CIAC as a unique institution in respect to the two existing models of cultural foundations linked to industry: the first, similar to the Rockefeller, Carnegie or Carlsberg, gives surplus funds from business activities to an independent foundation supporting art and science; the second model is similar to the Olivetti one, which supports science and art in order to boost its business, thus creating surplus funds and ‘augmenting the cultural and human value of the company in order to create a model of cultural unity.’<sup>133</sup> The CIAC, for Jorn, occupies a third, different, position, above and beyond these two models in striving towards a new goal: the realisation of a new spirituality, completely different from any transcendent experience so far conceived by man. All the CIAC had to do was simply to observe what new developments arose in the fields of art, science and technology and then, without intervening, address and present the knowledge produced in each of these fields through their mutual interaction. This recalls Jorn’s position in respect to the dissolution of form (rather than its unity) achieved through aesthetic experimentation. Jorn recognised in

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<sup>130</sup> Letter from Asger Jorn to Paolo Marinotti, probably dated summer 1959, marked in the Museum Jorn Archive as ‘sommer 1959 2’, MJA, Silkeborg, file ‘Til Paolo Marinotti.’ My translation. Jorn already addressed functionalism and aesthetics as the two of the three principles forming the unity of art (the third one being not ethics but technology) in his intervention at the congress of the tenth Milan Triennial, then republished in ‘Contre le Functionalism’ in Paris in 1957, now republished in Ruth Baumeister, *Fraternité Avant Tout*, p.271.

<sup>131</sup> Wemaëre gives an account of his collaboration with Jorn at the production of tapestries in his writing published by Guy Atkins (ed.), *Asger Jorn The Crucial Years, 1954-1964*, London: Lund Humphries, 1977, pp.111-122.

<sup>132</sup> Letter from Asger Jorn to Paolo Marinotti, 12 December 1960, MJA, Silkeborg, file ‘Til Paolo Marinotti.’

<sup>133</sup> Ibid. My translation.

the openness of the CIAC and of Marinotti himself – who did things without knowing exactly what the final outcome would be – an original and essential quality, which also constituted the reason for his feeling so close to that project.

In the event, there is no actual evidence of Jorn's reactions towards *Arte e contemplazione*, but he certainly would not have adopted the point of view of critics such as Dorfles or Lonzi, who stuck closely to the parameters of art criticism to measure the effectiveness of the exhibition and of the *Cycle of Vitality* in itself. In their remarks about *Arte e contemplazione* and the cycle, these critics seemed to align themselves with the general dismissive tendency of the time towards *art informel* (which was the main tendency in *Arte e contemplazione*). The same attitude epitomised the monographic issue of *Il Verri* dedicated to informal art and published the same year as *Arte e contemplazione*. Among the art historians or artists whose texts were either being translated into Italian for the first time (such as Clement Greenberg, Harold Rosenberg, Jean Dubuffet or Tapié) or commissioned for the occasion (Argan, Dorfles and Crispolti), one stands out in particular for its original position, written by the semiologist Umberto Eco.<sup>134</sup> I would like to conclude this chapter by comparing the position expressed by Eco in his article with that reflected by the *Cycle of Vitality* at the CIAC: the pairing of the two positions highlights how a tendency to read contemporary art outside the disciplinary framework provided by art history was prevalent at the time in different cultural fields.

Eco's article addressed informal art by reframing it within the idea of 'open work,' a concept he publicly presented for the first time in Venice at the 12<sup>th</sup> International Congress of Philosophy in 1958. In his 1961 article, Eco develops an argument about *art informel* employing the concept of 'vitality,' explicitly addressing Herbert Read's use of the term. In particular, he refers to an essay by Read in which the British critic poses the question as to whether the viewer's experience of *art informel* still pertains to the domain of aesthetics. Read recognises that *art informel* depends on the principle of vitality (allowing for an experience of the essential quality of life), rather than on the principle of beauty (bearing the sign of intellect). He makes a distinction 'between objects that are imaginative, and objects that merely evoke images' and asks whether it is still an art experience when 'the spectator becomes an artist?'<sup>135</sup> He manages to give an affirmative answer, remaining within the aesthetic domain by confining vitality to painting as the principle means by which the

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<sup>134</sup> Umberto Eco, 'L'informale come opera aperta' in *Il Verri*, year V, n.3, 1961, pp.98–127, Eco published a new version in *Opera Aperta*, Milano: Bompiani, 1962, consulted edition, 2000

<sup>135</sup> Herbert Read, *The Tenth Muse*, pp.299–300.

artist conveys his personality, his inner world that received 'its plastic rhythms in graphic form' and that visitors can finally appreciate and access.<sup>136</sup> While Read sets aside the question of communication in relation to vitality by reducing it to a confrontation between two different aesthetic principles, Eco provides a more comprehensive perspective on *art informel*.

With the notion of 'open work' in 1958, Eco wanted to provide a model to address a series of shifts occurring in different cultural fields such as music, literature and art of his time.<sup>137</sup> Although referring primarily to contemporary production, he recognised how some works from the beginning of the twentieth century could also work within this framework. In his 1961 essay, he defines the function of an open art as an

epistemological metaphor. The discontinuity of phenomena has called into question the possibility of a unified, definitive image of our universe; art suggests a way for us to see the world in which we live, and, by seeing it, to accept it and integrate it into our sensibility. The open work assumes the task of giving us an image of discontinuity. It does not narrate it; it *is* it.<sup>138</sup>

Later in the essay, Eco explains how the realm of information theory can help us to understand the communicative capacity of this new type of work of art through the distinction between 'meaning' and 'information.' The former pertains to an ordered and repetitive structure allowing the clear understanding of a given message. The latter, by contrast, relates to a disordered and unpredictable structure proportional to an increasing quantity of possible information. In this case, however, in order to avoid crossing over into the realm of white noise, the structure needs always to have a minimum intention that turns information (even something extreme like noise) into a signal.

Read therefore denies any possibility of communication to *art informel*, by claiming the principle of vitality as being what regulates the transfer of the artist's inner life onto the canvas, with the painting resulting as the artist's seismograph. Eco by contrast, recognises the artist's communicative intention in the way in which he/she organises the form of the art work in its making: an open work can be open only if it is a work made with intention. At the end of his article, Eco recognises how, in the case of an open work, 'the dialectics

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<sup>136</sup> Ibid., p.303.

<sup>137</sup> Umberto Eco, 'L'informale come opera aperta', in *Il Verri*.

<sup>138</sup> Umberto Eco, *The Open Work*, p.90. Translated by Anna Cancogni.

between work and openness, the very persistence of the work is itself a guarantee of both communication and aesthetic pleasure.<sup>139</sup>

Eco refers to a *Kunstwollen* principle operating in the present day and recognisable in artists from different countries and using different media.<sup>140</sup> In his introduction to the book *The Open Work*, published in 1962, he further addresses the role of contemporary art as an epistemological metaphor: ‘in this way contemporary art is trying to find – anticipating science and social structures – a solution to our crises, and it can find it in the only way possible for it, as an imaginative way, offering us images of the world functioning as epistemological metaphors.’<sup>141</sup> And he then continues, claiming how these metaphors constitute a ‘new way of seeing, feeling, understanding, and accepting a universe in which traditional relationships have been shattered and new possibilities of relationship are being laboriously sketched out.’<sup>142</sup>

I believe Eco’s position can help to reposition the CIAC’s *Cycle of Vitality* by relating it to three elements that emerge in the presentation of what constitutes an open work: the first concerns the shift in reading a work of art from an art historical perspective to one informed by communication; the second relates to the analysis of the response given by contemporary art to the cultural milieu; and the third investigates how the open work in some way superseded the principle of the synthesis of the arts.<sup>143</sup>

For Marinotti and Sandberg, the concept of vitality was not to be viewed particularly as an art historical category, although it is likely that Sandberg got his inspiration from Read. The same goes for the notion of contemplation, which for them was unrelated to the mainstream Crocean meaning in use at the time. Eco’s approach in reframing *art informel* within the theme of the open work further weakened art history as the only framework within which to meaningfully experience an artwork. Eco shifts the terms of discussion into a communicative realm that appears very similar to the one desired by Marinotti when he decided to turn the CIAC into a contemporary art exhibition centre, and

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<sup>139</sup> Ibid., p.104.

<sup>140</sup> As declared by Eco, he understood Riegl’s principle of *Kunstwollen* via the interpretation of Erwin Panovsky. Umberto Eco, *Opera Aperta*, Milano: Bompiani, 1962, consulted edition, 2000, p.19,

<sup>141</sup> Ibid., p.3. My translation.

<sup>142</sup> Umberto Eco, *The Open Work*, p.XV.

<sup>143</sup> See Romy Golan, ‘La doppia scommessa dell’Italia dalla “sintesi delle arti” all’opera aperta’, in *Il Caffè Illustrato*, 2006, n.33, pp.60–72.



also by Sandberg when he sought to present vital art as a means to awaken Europe from the anomie into which it fell with the Cold War.<sup>144</sup>

Eco's thesis underlines the crisis of knowledge brought about by new technologies and scientific discoveries, for which contemporary art tried to provide a possible model of interpretation. The CIAC, in its move towards contemporary art, aimed to force a break with the traditions and social structures of its own time, in the attempt to create a new *costume*. As pointed out in chapter four, this attitude did not relate to fashion which, by constantly replacing its products always reaffirmed its own existence, but to the idea that one needs to be 'atemporary' to one's time. For Marinotti, Sandberg and Jorn, contemporary art constituted the field in which it was possible to express one's atemporality, unleashing new energies onto the world. For this reason, Marinotti decided to open the CIAC to contemporary artists and found in Sandberg and Jorn two perfect partners for his mission.

When Jorn recognised the aesthetic principle as the one that inspired continuous experimentation in free artists, as opposed to the technical and functionalist imperatives that constituted the synthesis of the arts for Max Bill, he departed from the principle of the unity of the arts to explore a dissolution of form. Jorn, in continuing to paint, did not issue his call for experimentation as a way of achieving the destruction of form, but rather of investigating the possibility of an artist being inspired by what was happening in other fields of knowledge and changing his practice accordingly, thus overcoming the idea that a work of art has to be functional. In this way, he aimed to avoid falling into the rhetoric of the unity of the arts as understood both by Le Corbusier and by Bill, while claiming that free experimentation in making art could counteract the alienation brought about by the technologically driven contemporary world.

While the latter position certainly pertained only to Jorn and his Situationist experience, the former approach seemed to echo some of the consequences of Eco's open work, as pointed out by Romy Golan, who argues that the Italian pre-war obsession with the synthesis of the arts struggled to maintain credence in the post-war context due to its association with the Fascist regime. While the Milan Triennial continued to present the

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<sup>144</sup> In 1962, Eco was commissioned to write a critical text on the occasion of the exhibition at Olivetti's shop in Milan of several optical Italian artists. While this instance may contradict the value of Eco's article on *Il Verri*, where he managed to position his comments outside the art historical framework, in reality we could consider the text Eco produced for *Il Verri* as symptomatic of the future approach to artworks by non-professional art historians.

synthesis of the arts as its main organisational principle during the 1950s, Golan argues that it is with the open work of Eco that a new possible relationship could be developed between art and other fields such as science and technology. The open work, Golan suggests, seems to take over from the role of the unity of the arts in moving the Italian debate in a new direction.

This development helps to understand how and why the unity of the arts, so pivotal in the emergence of thematic exhibitions, gave way to another way of conceiving the relationship between art and other fields that in turn influenced, not just conceptually, but also physically, the production of contemporary art. The CIAC, with its invitations to artists to produce commissioned artworks in relation to the spaces of Palazzo Grassi and the theme of its exhibitions, inscribed itself in this new narrative, rather than in that of the unity of the arts. Appel, Fontana, Mari and Munari all created ephemeral works using new technologies or materials not traditionally associated with art, and which at the same time were promoted by the CIAC within a specific communications strategy: the framework provided both by the theme of the exhibitions, and by the hidden agenda of the SNIA Viscosa.

This brings us to a final consideration of the *Cycle of Vitality* as emblematic of the gradual move away from involving architects in the exhibition design of a thematic exhibition: from Scarpa's magnificent installation of *Vitalità nell'arte*, through the collaboration of Dahlman-Olsen with artists installing their own works, to the final erasure of any architect involvement in *Arte e contemplazione*. We do not know why this happened, whether it was because of cuts to the CIAC budget, or due to artists complaining that their works were used as mere props by another creator (the architect's role being to make 'the exhibition of an exhibition'), but we know that Marinotti thought he could bring his thematic exhibitions in line with more general trends in the organisation of contemporary art exhibitions, which did not assign anyone specifically to their installation. I believe that the CIAC, in using the device of a cycle, somehow led Marinotti to dispense with the need for an architect's involvement, since the narrative of the exhibition was already clearly established both as part of that specific cycle and by his institution that, in the previous two years, had set its own course in adopting conditions of display significantly different from those of other contemporary art venues. Among these differences were the abandoning of an art historical perspective; the adoption of a theme as the main narrative; the willingness to be an agent of social change; the invitation to artists to respond to the exhibition's

theme through the production of a site-specific or newly commissioned work, and the publication of a catalogue aimed at documenting the exhibition rather than providing a critical insight into the art displayed.

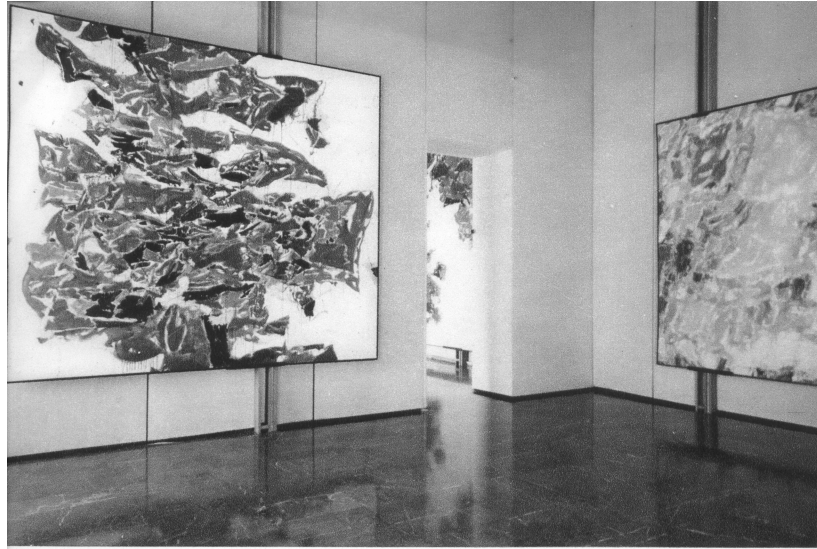


Fig.103: *Arte e contemplazione*, CIAC, Venice, 1961, works by Sam Francis.

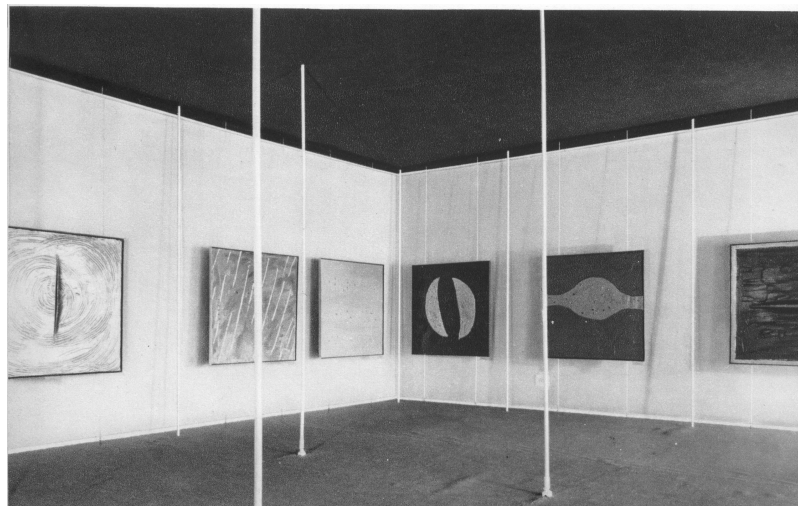


Fig.104: *Arte e contemplazione*, CIAC, Venice, 1961, works by Lucio Fontana.