***// gesto*: Global Art and Italian Gesture Painting in the 1950s**

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This essay examines how the remarkably vibrant and cosmopolitan art scene in post-war Italy helped to shape a society undergoing a difficult period of transition. In a few short years, despite catastrophic economic problems and deep, ongoing political and social divisions, Italy emerged from wartime chaos and ruin to become one of the world's great post-war democratic and economic successes. That the visual arts were considered important to this recovery is demonstrated by the enormous effort put into art and cinema in Italy at the time of the European Recovery Program (Marshall Plan). However, precisely what role did art play in this recovery? More specifically, in what ways did artists respond to the post-war challenge of forging relationships with new global communities? In this paper, which investigates the international cultural exchanges that took place in Italy during the 1950s, we set out to answer these questions. By exploring the ways in which artists in Italy initiated and became involved in dialogues and collaborations with their international colleagues, and how international artists were drawn from around the world to participate in Italian creative industries, we show how art in Italy contributed to the national recovery by working to re-invent the very idea of Italy as a modern, open and global society.

As has been demonstrated in the considerable literature on this period of Italy's turbulent twentieth-century history, the extraordinary economic and political recovery of Italy in the years after World War II was accompanied by a renaissance in cultural terms that had far reaching implications within Italy and far beyond.¹ Across a broad range of media, including cinema, painting and sculpture, but also design, fashion and architecture, Italy rose to prominence in this period as one of the world's premier producers of visual cultures. Accompanying this was an unprecedented boom in output. To take some significant examples: Film production in Italy underwent rapid growth in this period, rising from 92 in 1950 to over 200 films per year in the 1960s, and Italian neo-realism, which became one of the world's most famous cinematic traditions, continues to occupy a central place in film histories, film festivals

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1 See for example Ginsborg, P. 1990, *A History of Contemporary Italy: 1943–1980*, Penguin, London; Duggan, C. and Wagstaff, C. (eds), 1995, *Italy in the Cold War: Politics, Culture and Society 1948–1958*, Oxford, Berg; Gundle, S. 2002, 'Hollywood Glamour and Mass Consumption in Postwar Italy', *Journal of Cold War Studies*, vol. 4, no. 3, pp. 95–118.

and cine-club cultures internationally.² A similar boom took place in the realm of fine art, with contemporary painters such as Alberto Burri and Lucio Fontana beginning to attract immense interest from international museums and galleries in Europe and the United States, commanding record prices in the art market both in the 1950s and 60s and in the present day.

As we have argued elsewhere, one of the distinctive characteristics of Italian culture in this period is the open, international exchange that underpinned this cultural boom, as filmmakers, artists and writers were drawn to the country and local producers sought out collaborative relationships with international creative figures from beyond Italy.³ In this paper we argue that a collaborative dialogue with American, European and Japanese art, typical at a broader level of the Italian response to cultures from around the globe in this period, was an essential component of the extraordinary post-war recovery of Italy at an economic, political and cultural level. In order to understand the impact of the incredibly diverse cast of creative figures on the Italian cultural scene, and its impact on questions of national identity more broadly, our method focuses on the social networks between producers and consumers that underpin works of visual culture, and examines the communities of art production and consumption as well as the works which were the outcomes of these exchanges.

Nearly 70 years later, it is, for many, hard to credit the circumstances that turned the defeated and depressed Axis powers of 1945 into the countries of economic miracle. This development was, perhaps, most miraculous in the Italian context. As Ginsborg points out, however, in the matter of post-war economic expansion, Italy was a major protagonist, radically reshaping itself from a peasant country to a major Western industrial nation.⁴ The apparent, subtle political instabilities of the centre-left/centre-right frictions under the hegemony of Christian Democrat stewardship of the body politic should have worked against this transformation. Nevertheless, on the back of incredible growth in the production and consumption of goods (electrical appliances, cars, type-writers amongst others), a six fold increase in trade of these goods with other nations, monetary policy sympathetic to GDP growth, business investment and capital, economic development was undeniable. In income terms alone, Ginsborg highlights that over the period Italy had the greatest income per capita increase of Europe.⁵ As Pieter Lagrou argues, however, national recovery involves not

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2 Wood, M. P. 2005, *Italian Cinema*, London, Berg, p. 14.

3 Nicholls, M. 2005, 'Freud and Gidget Go to Rome but Uncle Sam Doesn't: The Roman Fever Films 1953–1963', *Studi d'Italianistica nell'Africa Australe*, vol. 18 no. 2, pp. 1–33; Nicholls, M. 2006, 'Visconti's Il gattopardo: Melancholia and the Radical Sensibility' *The Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, vol. 23, no. 2, pp. 97–110; White, A. 2011, *Lucio Fontana Between Utopia and Kitsch*, Cambridge, Mass., MIT Press; and, Gardner, A., Nicholls, M. and White, A. 2012, 'Cold War Cultures and Globalisation: Art and Film in Italy 1946–1963' *Third Text*, vol. 26. no. 2, pp. 205–215.

4 Ginsborg, *A History of Contemporary Italy*, p. 218.

5 Ibid., pp. 212–18, 235–239.

only 'material reconstruction and economic growth, political restoration and national reconciliation' but also 'the reinvention of national identities'.⁶ What we argue is that the recovery of Italy involved a national re-invention that involved a radical opening at the political, social and cultural level. Evidence for this openness at the cultural level, which contrasted enormously with the closed fascist society of preceding decades and its policies of autarky, is found in the broad range of institutions, events, and individuals with deep and active connections to international artistic communities that flourished in Italy during this period.⁷ These include the French and American academies, major exhibition venues including the Venice Biennale, foreign news desks and the major Hollywood studios. It also involved visual artists from countries in Europe, the Americas and Oceania such as Asger Jorn [Denmark], Roberto Matta [Chile], Wilfredo Lam [Cuba], Cy Twombly [USA], and Albert Tucker [Australia], as well as international art promoters such as Peggy Guggenheim and Irene Brin, all of whom lived and/or worked in Italy at this time. As a result, rather than falling into a defensive nationalism or passively reproducing the imperatives of the victorious Western superpower, Italy became an intense cross-cultural centre of creative and cultural activity.

In what follows, a history of gestural painting in Milan, Turin and Venice but also smaller regional Italian centres such as Alba and Albisola, a central focus will be the Italian Nuclear art movement and its journal *Il gesto* in the years 1952–1959. As the case studies will demonstrate, the evolution of gestural painting and its eventual critique within the Italian context was the product of intense exchange with artists from a range of different regions and countries, including Scandinavia, Northern Europe, North and South America and Japan. As Nancy Jachec has recently shown, gestural painting was the vehicle for a post-war idea of pan-European integration, particularly at the Venice Biennale exhibitions of this period, where the work of French, German and Italian artists in particular was connected to a universalising, humanist philosophy which connected peoples and cultures across national borders.⁸ In this paper we continue this vein of research, while focusing more on individual artists and artistic groups and their writings rather than the management of major exhibitions such as the Venice Biennale, and examining those forces leading to the breakdown of the predominance of gestural painting rather than those leading to its ascendancy. As we demonstrate, the development of gestural or Informal painting in Italy was intimately connected to exchanges at the micro-level between individual artists and artistic groups across Europe, the Americas

6 Lagrou, P. 2004, *The Legacy of Nazi Occupation: Patriotic Memory and National Recovery in Western Europe, 1945–1965*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, p. 15.

7 Gardner et al., 'Cold War Cultures and Globalisation'.

8 Jachec, N. 2007, *Politics and Painting at the Venice Biennale, 1948–64: Italy and the Idea of Europe*, Manchester, University of Manchester Press.

and Asia. This tendency refutes the idea of a reclusive, national style emerging in this period but also demonstrates how, contrary to earlier accounts, which have interpreted the presence of American Abstract expressionism in countries like Italy as a weapon of 'soft power', the Italian response in its international dimensions allowed for distinctive, regional responses to broader transnational developments in art.

Informal Painting and Nuclear Art in Italy: European and American Networks

In the years immediately following the end of World War II, Italian artists began to experiment with Informal painting. This was an abstract form of art, inspired by surrealist automatist techniques, which exceeded the closure of clearly-defined form and focused on artistic process.⁹ Underpinning the rise of this style in Italy was a series of important exhibitions in Rome, Venice and Milan of European and American art in the late 1940s and early 1950s, as well as a series of exchanges between Italian, European and American artists.¹⁰

In 1952 the Italian artist Gianni Dova, who was a member of the Milan-based Spatialist movement led by Lucio Fontana, began to include free, swirling loops of paint in his compositions. According to a contemporary artist familiar with Dova's work at that time, Dova 'swore only by Pollock and Wols.'¹¹ The German-born artist Wols, who was considered the chief protagonist of the European Informal movement at this time, worked in an erratic scratching and scumbling technique connected to surrealist automatism which was first visible in Italy in paintings exhibited in Milan's Il Milione gallery in 1949. Contemporary commentators on Wols' work concentrated on the artist's existential act, seen as a despairing attempt to wrest personal freedom through the moral and aesthetic authenticity of choosing from the myriad possibilities for action presented in an absurd world. The French critic Michel Tapié, for example, wrote about such works in terms of their 'violence of the gesture' and 'expressivity.'¹² Jackson Pollock's innovative dripping technique was first visible in Italy at a 1950 exhibition organised by Peggy Guggenheim in Venice. In an essay by the Italian critic Bruno Alfieri on Pollock, which appeared in the context of the

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9 See Calvesi, M. 1989, 'Informel and Abstraction in Italian Art of the Fifties,' in E. Braun (ed.), *Italian Art in the 20th Century*, London, Royal Academy of Arts, pp. 289–293.

10 For the impact and development of informal painting in Italy and Europe see Petersen, S. 2009, *Space Age Aesthetics: Lucio Fontana, Yves Klein, and the Postwar European Avant-Garde*, University Park, Pennsylvania State University Press, esp. pp. 78–79.

11 Quoted in Petersen, *Space Age Aesthetics*, p. 79.

12 See Kurczynski, K. 2007, 'Ironie Gestures: Asger Jorn, Informel, and Abstract Expressionism' in *Abstract Expressionism: The International Context*, Piscataway, Rutgers University Press, p. 112.

latter exhibition in 1950, Pollock's work was discussed in the following terms: 'Pollock has broken all the barriers between his picture and himself: His picture is the most immediate and spontaneous painting. Each one of his pictures is part of himself...I start from the picture, and discover the man.'¹³ In making such statements, Alfieri was repeating a theme evident in critical commentary in the USA on the artist's work, including in a 1949 review by Sam Hunter published in *The New York Times* which described Pollock's work as 'a direct physical expression of states of being rather than of thinking or of knowing.'¹⁴

As statements by Italian artists in the later 1950s convey, such techniques and theories associated with Wols and Pollock would become something of an orthodoxy among Italian painters. In a statement in the catalogue to his 1957 Rome exhibition Gastone Novelli argued that:

The creation of a valid artistic oeuvre has its origins in the impulse that triggers action and finishes with the physical act of the execution [...]. We must...forget everything that is taught about balance and knowledge, so that the creative act may regain its spontaneity.¹⁵

Toti Scialoja, who visited New York in 1956, wrote the following year that 'painting is not meant to represent, is not a mirror, but serves to express you yourself entirely...a picture is primarily a thing, useful if only for bearing your spiritual imprint. Painting as traces of life.'¹⁶ In the thinking of these and other Italian artists, painting's primary purpose was to enable an authentic expression of the individual.¹⁷ The ideology of this approach to art was that, by abdicating control of the composition and focusing on the gestural process of laying paint down on the canvas, the artist could give expression to an authentic truth: the creative self in its encounter with the material. Rather than a reflective representation of a world or a rational organisation of a surface, Informal painting saw the painterly mark as a sign which embodied its very process of making, and ultimately the source of that process, the creative figure of the artist. Moreover, as Scialoja argued, at that time Informal painting was thought

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13 Alfieri, B. 1950, 'A Short Statement on the Painting of Jackson Pollock' in *Arte Moderna*, June 8, reprinted in P. Karmel (ed.), 1999, *Jackson Pollock: Interviews, Articles and Reviews*, New York, The Museum of Modern Art, p. 69.

14 Hunter, S. 1949, 'Among the New Shows', *The New York Times*, 30 January, sec., 2, p. 9, republished in Karmel, op. cit.; Hunter, S. 1999, *Jackson Pollock: Interviews, Articles and Reviews*, New York, the Museum of Modern Art, p. 61.

15 Novelli, G. 1957, in *Gastone Novelli*, Galleria La Salita, Rome, republished in G. Celant and A. Costantini, 1993, *Roma-New York 1948-1964*, Milan, Charta, p. 127.

16 Scialoja, T. 1957, 'Per Gorky', *Arti Visive*, nos. 6-7, Reprinted and translated in Celant et al., *Roma-New York*, p. 133.

17 See Vetrocq, M. E. 1989, 'National Style and the Agenda for Abstract Painting in Post-War Italy', *Art History*, vol. 12, no. 4. p. 465: 'The end of the first phase of 'post-war' painting in Italy was signalled by the radical definition of the individual as the sole bearer of the energies of artistic creation.'

to express 'intrinsic being in the anonymous existence of masses, of machines.'¹⁸ In this he was echoing the American art historian Meyer Schapiro's view in 1957 that 'a culture that becomes increasingly organised through industry, economy and the state' leads artists to emphasise the material aspects of their craft 'which confer to the utmost degree the aspect of the freely made.'¹⁹ For many Italian artists, the Informal movement, with its origins in French, German and American painting, provided the means for resisting social and technological pressures thought to work against authentic individuality.

Among the many artists to take up a version of Informal painting in Italy during the 1950s were Enrico Baj and Sergio Dangelo, the founders of the Nuclear Art movement in Milan. In the early 1950s they began working in a gestural, spiralling and spattered painting mode. As Marco Bugatti argues, Baj's and Dangelo's Nuclearism was 'one of the very first Informal experiments in Italy, and perhaps the only one which was fully gestural.'²⁰ In its very beginnings the movement employed gestural techniques with the object of disintegrating form. Among their techniques were the swirling movement of poured paint and the chance effects created by the mixture of oil and water. In this way they abdicated control over their work and allowed the materials at hand to determine the form.²¹

As they stated in their 'Manifesto of Nuclear Painting' issued on the occasion of an exhibition of Baj's work held in Brussels in February 1952, 'The Nuclearists desire to demolish all the 'isms' of a painting that inevitably lapses into academicism.... Forms disintegrate; the new forms are those of the atomic universe.'²² Like many other Informal artists, Baj and Dangelo saw their work as providing an antidote to the pre-meditated compositional routines of geometric abstraction that had enjoyed a certain currency in Europe immediately after the war. Beniamino dal Fabbro wrote in 1953, for example, that 'the Nuclearists are romantics in revolt against the academic classicism of the abstractionists.'²³ However, for all that the Nuclearists were connected stylistically and theoretically to contemporary currents of Informal painting, they differed from the American and other European examples of that style in that their gestural and automatic procedures embodied ideas relating to modern science and technology. Their

18 Scialoja, T. 1991, *Giornale di pittura*, Rome, Editori Riuniti, 1991. Quoted in Celant and Costantini, *Roma-New York*, p. 120.

19 Schapiro, M. 1958, 'Recent Abstract Painting: The Liberating Quality of Avant-Garde Art, 1957', in M. Schapiro, 1978, *Modern Art: 19th and 20th Centuries, Selected Papers*, New York, George Braziller, 1978, pp. 222, 218.

20 See Bugatti, M. 1994, 'Il Movimento Arte Nucleare' in L. Caramel, (ed.), *Arte in Italia: 1945-1960*, Milan, Vita e Pensiero, pp. 135-141, esp. p. 136.

21 For a description of some of these techniques, see Schwarz, A. 1957, *Pittura italiana del dopoguerra 1945-1957*, Milan, Schwarz, p. 152, no. 1.

22 Baj, E. and D'angelo, S. 1962, 'Manifesto of Nuclear Painting', republished in A. Schwarz, *Arte nucleare*, Milan, Galleria Schwarz, p. 203.

23 dal Fabbro, B. 1953, 'Definition of the Nuclearists', in Schwarz, *Arte nucleare*, p. 207.

work was an attempt to do justice to what they saw as the new realities of nuclear fission and microbiology, a vision of the world as matter in movement. In this they were continuing the work of an artistic movement from earlier in the twentieth century, Italian Futurism, which had put great emphasis upon industrial and mechanical processes and products, and had been inspired by such modern inventions as the racing car and the machine gun. Indeed, in spite of their distance from the belligerent, hyper-nationalistic dimensions of early Futurism, in one sense the Nuclearists were engaged in an updating of that earlier, technical dimension of Futurism by addressing the newer phenomenon of nuclear energy in their work. Nevertheless, as their work evolved, the Nuclear artists, and in particular Enrico Baj, would become more engaged with the global networks of artists beyond the borders of Italy, making discussions of his work in terms of pre-war national traditions difficult to sustain.

Enrico Baj, 1954, *Arte nucleare*, Lithograph, 32 x 22 cm.

Exchanges with Northern Europe: CoBrA, Asger Jorn and Dada

In the spring of 1952, Baj met the Belgian artist Pierre Alechinsky in Paris. Thus began an important association which would lead to a close working relationship with the Danish artist Asger Jorn, who along with Alechinsky, was a member of the recently dispersed CoBrA group of artists from Denmark, Belgium and the Netherlands. Through the group, Baj and the other Nuclear artists were invited to join the International Movement for an Imagist Bauhaus founded by Jorn in Italy in 1954.²⁴ This movement was intended as a protest against functionalist tendencies in architecture, design and art, tendencies, which Jorn viewed as oppressive due to their exclusion of representational art. In a letter to Baj, Jorn outlined his response to the Swiss artist Max Bill's call to re-establish the original Bauhaus on the principles of a rationalist synthesis of art and architecture. Jorn declared 'a war on the part of all experimental artists against the oppression of abstract and functionalist architecture against art and free painting.... The house must not be a machine for living in, but a machine to shock and impress, a machine of human and universal expression.'²⁵

This critical attitude to functionalism, scepticism about industrialisation and emphasis on the importance of expression went hand in hand in Jorn's thinking with a critique of certain aspects of Informal painting in Europe generally. In 1954, Jorn argued that Michel Tapié had created what amounted to an academy of Informal abstraction.²⁶ For Jorn this also extended to the Italian situation and therefore had important implications for Nuclear painting. As Jorn explained in a letter of 1955 to Baj, in which he criticised the Spatialism of artists such as Gianni Dova and Lucio Fontana,

The Nuclear movement floats in the air and goes forward without strategy and on the basis of tactical opportunity. To stabilize it one can found it in commerce like the Spatial movement, which will assure an economic evolution, but not an artistic evolution, because popularity is gained through repetition and not through renovation.²⁷

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24 Bandini, M. 1977, *L'Estetico/Il Politico, da Cobra all'Internazionale Situazionista 1948–1957*, Rome, Officina Edizioni, 1977, p. 101.

25 Letter from Asger Jorn to Enrico Baj, Villars, December 1953, see <http://debordiana.chez.com/francais/1955.htm> viewed 6/27/2012

26 Asger, J. 1954, 'The Meaning of the Nuclear Plastic Experience', cited in K. Kurczynski, 2007, 'Ironic Gestures', p. 112–113. As Kurczynski notes, these kinds of attacks on contemporary art were already being launched in Paris among the critics who supported Lyrical Abstraction, Tachism and Art Autre. See p. 248, footnote 30. See also Francblin, C. 1997, *Les Nouveaux Realistes*, Paris, Editions du Regard, p. 14.

27 Letter from Asger Jorn to Enrico Baj, Alba, 6 October 1955, see <http://debordiana.chez.com/francais/1955.htm> (viewed 27 June 2012).

Enrico Baj, 1959, *Omaggio floreale*, Oil and collage on canvas, 40 x 50 cm.

Bergamo Accademia Carrara, Dip. n° 9lac00144. Comune di Bergamo.

For Jorn, who by 1954 had relocated to Italy, the gestural painting that was beginning to flourish in Italy was compromised by its connection to the art market. It was being reproduced for the sake of market popularity and was therefore not truly innovative. In this sense it could be seen as an ossified form of painting commensurate with the academicism of art that the Nuclear painters had so railed against.

Both of these letters from Jorn quoted above found a warm reception from Baj, who, as we know from his written replies, was largely in agreement with his Danish colleague. Indeed, by 1954 Baj had begun to abandon gestural abstraction and introduce human figures and non-fine art materials including mass produced printed fabrics and wallpaper into his work.²⁸ As Edouard Jaguer would point out several years later, in Baj's work around this time 'post-*Informal* automatism meets with two other great fundaments of 'modern' creation: collage and the

²⁸ See Negri A., and Pirovano, C. 1993, 'Esperienze, tendenze e proposte del dopoguerra', in C. Pirovano (ed.), *La Pittura in Italia: Il Novecento/2: 1945–1990*, vol. 1, Milan, Electa, p. 142 for a discussion of the shift away from gestural automatism in the work of the Nuclear artists.

'ready-made.'²⁹ The shift away from Informal painting in Baj went hand in hand with the introduction of two techniques borrowed from the earlier Dada movement, which challenged the ideology of artistic originality.

Among the stimuli for Baj's interest in Dada and their techniques of collage and the ready-made was the activity of the Egyptian-born scholar Arturo Schwarz who had moved to Italy in 1949. Schwarz published and exhibited works by French and German Dada artists, including Marcel Duchamp, Max Ernst, Kurt Schwitters and Francis Picabia, in his bookshop gallery in Milan from 1954.³⁰ Dada was also present in other forums and venues in Italy around this time including published discussions of the movement, which began to appear in Italian publications such as Achille Perilli's article 'Antologia Dada' in a 1954 issue of the journal *Civiltà delle Macchine*.³¹ In response to his encounter with early Dada, Baj began extravagantly debasing his painting with outlandish intrusions of mass-produced kitsch, imposing monstrous figures onto his collages of boudoir wallpaper backgrounds and soft-pornographic paintings purchased ready-made at flea markets. In a strident reaction against Informal painting, prompted by an exchange with contemporary and historical artists from Scandinavia and northern Europe, these works strip painting of the existential dramas of contemporary gestural abstraction and desublimize the art work by acclimatizing it to the vernacular world of the everyday.

***Il gesto*, the French Connection and the Attack on 'Style'**

1955 saw the first issue of *Il gesto: International Review of Free Forms*, a journal published by the Nuclear movement in collaboration with the French Journal *Phases*. This publication, which served as an exhibition catalogue of a show at the Schettini Gallery in Milan, also constituted the second issue of the Information Bulletin of Asger Jorn's Imagist Bauhaus.³² The journal was an international collaboration, which documented the work of a very wide group of artists, from virtually every European and Scandinavian nation as well as the USA, Canada, several Latin American countries and Japan. The art reproduced in this issue of *Il gesto* largely conformed to the international Informal and

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29 Jaguer, E. 1959, 'Enrico Baj e la comica interplanetaria' in *Il gesto*, no. 4, n.p. For more on the development of Enrico Baj's work in this period and its relationship to that of Asger Jorn, see Kurczynski, K. 2008, 'Expression as Vandalism: Asger Jorn's "Modifications"' in *Res: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, vol. 53/54, pp. 293–313.

30 For the history of Arturo Schwarz and his gallery, see Celant, G. 1998, *Piero Manzoni*, Milan, Charta, pp. 262–264.

31 Perilli, A. 1954, 'Antologia dada', *Civiltà delle Macchine*, vol. 2, no. 5, p. 19.

32 *Il Gesto. Rassegna internazionale delle forme libere* 1, published in June 1955 in Milan by the Movimento arte nucleare Enrico Baj and Sergio Dangelo was entitled *N. 2 del Bollettino d'Informazione del Movimento Internazionale per una Bauhaus Immaginata*.

Abstract Expressionist tendency. However, by the time of the next issue of *Il gesto* in 1957 edited by Baj and Dangelo, which sported a cover by the Cuban artist Wilfredo Lam who was working in Italy during this period, the attitude of the editors had changed and the journal became a venue for publically and explicitly expressing a new dissatisfaction with Informal art.

The French critic Edouard Jaguer, who was director of *Phases* and closely associated with both the CoBrA and Nuclear movements, indicted Informal art in the 1957 issue of *Il gesto* for what he saw as its increasingly mechanical appearance and complacent character:

today we are witnessing a reiterated orgy of coloured stains, always more aleatory, as well as an assault of repeatedly identical modes, which are nothing more than 'mechanical liberations,' the shock value of which ends up withdrawing. The gesture, having lost every quality of direct emotional testimony becomes more and more simple reflexes...these stains and scribbles have become nothing but formal tics, the happy externalization of a new intellectual comfort.³³

In a 1957 manifesto titled 'Against Style', Baj, Dangelo and Piero Manzoni, along with a number of other French artists and critics including Armand, Yves Klein, Pierre Restany, argued that:

In February, 1952, the first Nuclear Manifesto stated our intention of doing away with the last remaining concessions to Academicism. Our revolt against the reign of the right-angle, against the dominion of the gear and the machine, and against chilling and geometrical abstraction, had found its voice.³⁴

The text goes on to draw attention to the fact that, echoing comments made earlier by Jorn about the commercial qualities of Italian Spatalist painting, even the newest painting technique 'risks becoming the object of stereotypical repetitions of a purely mercantile character.'³⁵ In this attack on 'style', they argued that the 'monochrome propositions' of the French artist Yves Klein, one of the signatories to the manifesto, were the last possible forms of 'stylisation.' In January of 1957 Yves Klein had exhibited a series of monochrome blue paintings at the Apollinaire Gallery in Milan. These uniform surfaces, which were painted with a roller and made use of the newest synthetic pigments and

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33 Jaguer, E. 1957, 'Così come vi furono un tempo dei poeti maledetti...', *Il Gesto* 2, n.p.

34 Baj, E., et. al., 1957, 'Contro lo stile', reprinted and translated in G. Celant (ed.), 1995, *The Italian Metamorphosis, 1943–1968*, New York, The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, p. 719.

35 Baj, E. et. al., 'Contro lo stile', p. 719. Baj has recently explained that 'in Italy, painters like the classical Morandi or the modernist Capogrossi...had a tendency to stereotyped repetition.... This behavior is evident in the habitual behavior of *homo economicus*, who wants to eternally repeat himself. This repetitiveness came to be known as a 'Style.' Baj, E. 1980, 'Baj par Baj', in *Enrico Baj*, Paris, Editions Filipacchi, p. 19.

binders, were not only industrial in their execution. As the panels in that Milan exhibition were of identical dimensions and format, Klein also openly flaunted the sameness of individual works. This was an uncompromising attack on the orthodoxy of uniqueness and originality that had defined the Informal painting movement.³⁶

Interest in Dada, accelerated by Duchamp's presence in Italy in 1958, continued to propel this questioning of the Informal movement. The September 1958 issue of *Il gesto*, edited by Baj, Dangelo, and the young Milanese artist Piero Manzoni, contained a 1956 photograph of Marcel Duchamp before his work, the *Large Glass*, as well as one of Picabia's mechanical drawings of 1917.³⁷ It was through an art inspired by international currents of Informal gesture painting that the Nuclearists had initially sought a way to go beyond academicism. However, the Nuclear artists and the international circles they moved in were concerned about this travesty of painting, this spectre of sameness and exhaustion of language that they sensed invading art. It was increasingly evident that the very means of achieving a resistance to the world of 'the gear and machine' had been absorbed within it, and the art of gesture was fast becoming little more than frivolous window-dressing for an unchanged industrialised world.

Manzoni, Klein and Johns: After the Gesture

Piero Manzoni, another Milanese artist briefly associated with the Nuclear art movement, would further the critique of Informal painting in his work. In the later 1950s, in opposition to the Informal painters' tendency to emphasise the spontaneous, original and the handmade, Manzoni started to deliberately and aggressively incorporate mechanical, industrial and pre-fabricated procedures into his working process. After a brief period in which he employed a standardised mechanical beast or homunculus figure in his works, he began to use imprints of objects, as in his series of paintings *Pincers*, *Pins*, *Keys* and *Nails*. This was followed by a few paintings in which actual objects were included, such as *Untitled* of 1957, which has a key applied to the surface of the canvas.

These works were quickly followed by his first white monochrome paintings, inspired by the example of Yves Klein, such as *Achrome* of 1958, assembled in a repetitive and mundane manner out of pre-cut squares of canvas. This series was a manifestation of another aspect of the critique of Informal painting explicitly referred to in the manifesto 'Against Style': the 'tabula rasa.' This

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36 See Buchloh, B. H. D. 2000, 'Plenty or Nothing: From Yves Klein's *Le Vide* to Arman's *Le Plein*', in *Neo-Avantgarde and Culture Industry: Essays on European and American Art from 1955 to 1975*, Cambridge, Mass., MIT Press, p. 269; and, Bois, Y-A. 2007, 'Klein's Relevance for Today', *October*, vol.119, p. 86.

37 *Il gesto* 3, 1958, n.p.

concept, which expressed the desire for a clean slate for art, a kind of ground zero of painting, had already been embodied in Yves Klein's monochromes. One of Manzoni's first 'white' paintings of 1958 assembled in this way was published in the third issue of *Il gesto* in September of the same year.³⁸ The appearance of this work in this issue of the review, which was co-edited by Manzoni, was a sign that the Nuclear movement was beginning to distance itself artistically as well as theoretically from the Informal current. Manzoni's achromes were the artist's attempt to put forward his idea of an art work uninflected by the limitations imposed by individualised artistic gesture. Like Klein's paintings, Manzoni removed painterly skill as much as possible. The reduction of the artist's intervention to the minimum, to a workman-like and mechanical repetition, of a laying out of similar elements, removed subjective content from the painting.

Piero Manzoni, 1958–1959, *Achrome*, Kaolin and canvas squares, 130.5 x 97.6 cm.

Herning Kunstmuseum, Herning. © Piero Manzoni/SIAE. Licensed by Viscopy, 2013

Manzoni's definitive break with the Nuclear movement also happened around this time as he began to reject that movement's mourning of the loss of originality, expression and authenticity in art and more fully embrace the routines of the machine. Among the international inspirations for this shift in Manzoni's work was indubitably the work of the Dadaists visible in Milan at this time as well as

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38 *Il gesto* 3, 1958, n.p.

that of the American Neo-dada artist Jasper Johns, whose 1955 collage painting *Flag* depicting the American flag was visible at the Venice Biennale in 1958.³⁹ Manzoni's works, already exhibited and published in mid to late-1958, literalised and made explicit in a visual way the repudiation of artistic skill incarnated in both Klein's and John's work. The repetitious applications of identical squares of canvas, applied in a methodical way, not only highlighted the lack of gestural and psychic investment on the part of the artist but also would lead ultimately to a questioning of the definition, purpose and function of the art object. The artistic attack in Italy on the premises of international Informal painting was now complete.

Gutai and Fontana: The Japanese/Italian Dialogue

Another kind of response to Informal painting visible in Italy around this time was presented by the work of Japanese artists. An exchange with Japan was begun in 1955 by the Nuclear group through Enrico Baj who established contact with the Japanese artist Shiryu Morita representing the Bokuzin-Kai group of calligraphic artists.⁴⁰ This was followed by a dialogue between the work of Lucio Fontana and the artists of the Gutai group based in Osaka whose first European exhibition took place in April 1959 in Turin. By this time the work of Lucio Fontana had been reproduced and discussed on several occasions in the pages of the group's eponymous journal. This contact between Fontana and the Gutai artists came about largely through the efforts of Michel Tapié, who had edited the eighth issue of *Gutai* in 1957. That issue, subtitled 'The Informal Adventure', had a reproduction of one of Fontana's earliest 'hole' canvases of 1949, in which the surface of the canvas was punctured with a series of perforations, on both front and back covers.⁴¹ The immediately preceding, seventh issue of *Gutai*, also published in 1957, contained a detailed discussion of Fontana's work in an article by Jiro Yoshihara titled 'The Third Gutai Art Exhibition.' In his description of the work of a number of Gutai artists, the author refers to Kanayama, who made paintings with electronic toys that traced patterns on a horizontally-placed canvas. He argues that 'These are paintings in which the hand of the author is literally absent.' Later in the same text, he discusses the work of Shimamoto, who produced canvases by literally shooting paint at them. Comparing this work to that of Fontana, Yoshihara argues that

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39 In May of 1958, Manzoni and Baj were included in an exhibition titled 'Avant-garde' with works by the Dadaist Francis Picabia. Manzoni's awareness of the Dada movement is further evidenced by 1959 in his statements in the interview 'Otto pittore otto a Manzoni', *Travaso* 1959, reprinted and translated in G. Celant (ed.), *Piero Manzoni*, p. 282, but also by his publication of neo-dada and dada works in *Azimuth* 1, 1959.

40 See Izima, T. 1955, 'La calligrafia Giapponese e il gruppo Bokuzin-kai' Enrico Baj trans.), in *Il gesto* 1, n.p.

41 *Gutai* 8, 1957.

'This is an investigation of the highest order of chanciness. The hand of the artist does not paint even the smallest part of the canvas...these are creations painted by mechanical will.'⁴²

Lucio Fontana, 1949, *Concetto spaziale*, Paper on canvas, 100 x 100 cm.

Fondazione Lucio Fontana, Milan. © Lucio Fontana/SIAE. Licensed by Viscopy, 2013

While there are no statements attesting to Fontana's attitude to the Gutai group, the fact that Shimamoto had been producing canvases with holes in them for some years would surely have roused Fontana's interest. He did possess a copy of *Gutai 9*, which was issued in April of 1958, where his own work is reproduced alongside that of Kanayama and Shimamoto as well as other gestural painters from this period, including the Frenchman Georges Mathieu and the Americans Jackson Pollock and Cy Twombly.⁴³ The Japanese group's unusual techniques offered a twist on the confessional aesthetic of Informal painting.⁴⁴ In later 1958 Fontana shifted definitively from his more Informal painting-inspired hole paintings with their erratic, impulsive appearance, to a new series of more mechanical-looking paintings cut open in long slashes with a Stanley knife. These works, with their cool, clean aesthetic, literally and polemically worked to 'empty out' human gesture. Given the artist's awareness of Gutai's mechanical procedures, it seems likely that the work of the Japanese artists was one of the many important influences contributing to this shift in Fontana's later work.

42 Yoshihara, J. 1990, 'The Third Gutai Art Exhibition.' Reprinted in *Giappone all'avanguardia: Il Gruppo Gutai negli anni Cinquanta*, exh. cat., Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna Milan, Electa, p. 158.

43 A copy of this issue is held at the Lucio Fontana Foundation in Milan.

44 As the American critic Dore Ashton would observe late in 1958, 'the one virtue of painting that the gesture eliminates is its individuality. Far from being autographic, the automatism in these paintings is eerily anonymous: a great tangle of lines spreading net-like over the world in an equalizing action.' Ashton, D. 1958, 'Art: Japan's Gutai Group', *The New York Times*, 25 September.

One of the many responses to gestural painting evident in Italy in this period, Gutai and Fontana pushed the gesture to an extreme, revealing that the mark's reification as a mechanical device was one consequence of the Informal ideology, thereby performing a critique of the mythical subjectivity of gestural painting.

Conclusion

After an initial period in which the American and European versions of Informal painting had a certain currency in Italy, Enrico Baj, inspired by the work of Asger Jorn, debased the canvas support for Informal paintings with kitsch decorative materials. Piero Manzoni looking to historical examples of the Dada artists, contemporary French art and American Neo-dada painting, removed gesture in favour of a blank 'tabula rasa'. The strategy of the Japanese Gutai group, which exhibited in Italy but also were in dialogue with Lucio Fontana at this time, was to produce an absurd exasperation of the gesture, removing psychic connection to the artist's presence. All these artists working and/or exhibiting in Italy at this time were responding to the fact that, across the globe, it was becoming increasingly evident that gestural painting's quest for authenticity had resulted in a machine-like, formulaic art.

This short history of gesture painting in Italy in the 1950s, from an initial enthusiasm to its eventual critique and demise, reveals a broadly international dialogue conducted between artists from many different parts of the globe. Emblematic of this dialogue and this collaboration was a work produced in Milan in 1960 titled *The Large Collective Anti-Fascist Painting* with contributions from the Paris based artists Jean-Jacques Lebel, Erro and Antonio Recalcati, with Enrico Baj, Roberta Crippa and Gianni Dova in Italy and Wilfredo Lam from Cuba. This painting, which was far removed stylistically from the gestural painting of the previous decade and was a protest in support of Algerian independence, has been described by the art historian Jill Carrick as a 'transnational collective' work.⁴⁵ Through vibrant, international artistic exchanges such as these, exchanges which characterised the post-war moment in Italy, Italian art integrated itself into larger global artistic economies, attracting and engaging artists from a wide variety of cultures, and thereby helped to give rise to a society which possessed a dynamic transcultural energy exemplifying international perceptions of what a recovered post-war European country might look like.

The period of Italy's post-war recovery therefore stands as a substantial and highly significant time of interaction between artists and cultures from around

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45 Carrick, J. 2008, 'The Assassination of Marcel Duchamp: Collectivism and Contestation in 1960s France', *Oxford Art Journal*, vol. 31, no. 1, pp. 1–25.

the globe, equally important in its significance and productivity as Paris and Berlin in the inter-war years. Furthermore, in its very modernity, we argue that Italy's post-war cultural explosion played a role not only in that nation's recovery but also in defining the significance of Italy as a global brand in the fields of international art, design and travel. In addition to the artists already highlighted, Achille Castiglioni and Emilio Pucci in design and fashion, Alberto Moravia, Primo Levi, Tennessee Williams, Dylan Thomas and Aldous Huxley in literature, and avant-garde artists including Salvador Dali, Henry Moore, all played a role in Italian cultural production in the post-war period. Together these individuals contributed to transforming post-war Rome, Milan and Venice into cosmopolitan, global centres of cultural activity. In so doing they had a lasting effect on contemporary art and entertainment cultures around the world, as well as on international perceptions of what Italy would be after World War II, and what Italy remains in the popular and critical imagination to this day.