COLLECTORS' FOCUS
ARTE POVERA
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In the last five years, prices have risen sharply for artists associated with the Arte Povera movement. With the collector base spreading from Europe to the US and American institutions actively buying, it is unlikely this strengthening market has peaked. Emma Crichton-Miller



hether it is a response to the mood of austerity or more the natural turning of the wheel of fashion, the group of artists associated with the Arte Povera movement is currently riding high on the cultural agenda in Europe and the US. In the last three years, we have seen 'Arte Povera: The Great Awakening' at the Kunstmuseum Basel; exhibitions of Michelangelo Pistoletto at the Serpentine, the Philadelphia Museum of Art and the Louvre; Giuseppe Penone at Versailles; an Alighiero e Boetti retrospective at Tate Modern and Madrid's Museo Reina Sofía, and the Serpentine's recent Marisa Merz show. There has been an increase in commercial activity, too. In May last year, New York's Marianne Boesky Gallery mounted an exhibition of Pier Paolo Calzolari – the first in a quarter-century. More recently, Gagosian has presented Mario Merz in Paris and Penone in London, and Cheim & Reid and Blain | Southern saw exhibitions of new work by Jannis Kounellis and Gilberto Zorio respectively.

All this exposure has had a significant effect on auction prices, with many records broken over the last four years. The highest price achieved by an Arte Povera artist is £1.8m, for a Boetti *Mappa* dated 1989 (from his celebrated series of embroidered maps of

the world) at Christie's London in June 2010 (Fig. 1). And at this year's Italian sale at Christie's London in October, Pino Pascali's witty 1964 work, *Muro di pietra (Pietra pietra)*, realised a surprising £1.65m. This giant 'wall' of fabric, mounted on canvas and stitched to look like blocks of stone, with the word 'PIETRA' stamped on each block, had apparently been on sale privately in Italy at a far lower price, and was estimated at a careful £400,000–£600,000. This suggests that less well-known names are now drawing attention on the global stage, especially for work from the 1960s and early 1970s.

The Arte Povera group of artists was first defined by the critic and curator Germano Celant, in a show in Genoa in 1967 that included work by Boetti, Kounellis, Pascali, Luciano Fabro, Giulio Paolini and Emilio Prini. The group was by no means cohesive and is generally expanded to include Giovanni Anselmo. Undoubtedly, however, its naming marked a revolution in art within Italy. As Celant wrote at the time: 'What is happening? Banality is entering the arena of art...We are living in a period of deculturation. Iconographic conventions are collapsing, symbolic and conventional languages crumbling.'

Growing up in the political turmoil of post-war Italy and maturing in the radical ferment of the

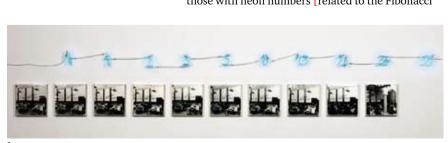
- 1 Mappa, 1989 Alighiero e Boetti (1940-94) Embroidered tapestry, 116×217cm Sold for £1.8m at Christie's London in June 2010 Christie's Images Limited
- 2 Autoritratto del 62, 1962–65
  Michelangelo Pistoletto (b. 1933)
  Painted tissue paper on stainless
  steel, 120×100cm
  Sold for £1.3m at Christie's London in
  February 2013
  Christie's Images Limited
- 3 Senza titolo (Una somma reale è una somma di gente), 1972
  Mario Merz (1925–2003)
  Ten gelatin silver prints laid down on wood panel, neon tubing and wire 49×346cm overall
  Sold at Sotheby's London for £578,500 in October 2013



1960s, these artists assertively employed humble materials – sacking, soil, trees, wax, coal, cardboard, found objects – questioning the nature of how art is made. Much of the work produced was ephemeral and performative, resisting commodification. As a consequence, for some artists – including Fabro and Anselmo – only a very small number of works are available for sale.

Although Celant chose to limit the movement to 1967–72, many seminal pieces date from before and after this short period. Michele Casamonti, director of Tornabuoni Art insists: 'One must not confine Arte Povera to Turin and a few years. Rome was also important. The meetings of these artists were fluid and many paths were taken but the change of language for that generation was permanent.' He suggests that while for Pistoletto and Fabro the most valuable works are the earliest, Boetti, Calzolari and Kounellis continued to develop important work. The record for Pistoletto was achieved at Christie's London in February – £1.3m for his early mirror painting, Autoritratto del 62 (1962-65; Fig. 2). Nicolò Cardi, director of Galleria Cardi, Milan, confirms: 'Each artist has his own peculiarity and dynamism on the market,' but suggests that 'the works which date back to the '60s and '70s are the most sought after by collectors.' Ellen Robinson of Cheim & Read suggests that for the Greek-born Kounellis, the most prized work is even earlier: 'Fifties paintings on canvas and board'.

The significant dealer at the time was Gian Enzo Sperone in Turin. Today, his colleague David Leiber at Sperone Westwater in New York explains: 'The market has generally strengthened in the last five years for all of the artists.' He adds: 'We are most active in the markets for Alighiero e Boetti and Mario Merz. The market for Boetti is wide-ranging as he was an extremely prolific artist.' With respect to Merz, he explains, 'the most sought-after works are those with neon numbers [related to the Fibonacci



sequence]; igloo-shaped sculptures, especially those, again, with neon, and early works [especially those from the late '60s].' This year the gallery sold an edition of Merz's brushwood sculptural arrangement Lingotto (1969) to the National Gallery of Art, Washington, for a figure in the region of half a million dollars. One unexpected highlight of the Italian sale at Sotheby's London in October was an edition of Merz's neon Fibonacci piece, Senza titolo (Una somma reale è una somma di gente) of 1972 (Fig. 2), which achieved £578,500 against an estimate of £250,000–£350,000. Merz's auction record still stands, however, at £792,000, set at Christie's London in 2005 for Igloo Objet cache-toi (1968–1977).

Sotheby's senior specialist Claudia Dwek confirms that interest has risen throughout the world, but especially in Europe and America, over the last few years. She cites Tate Modern's 2001 show, 'Zero to Infinity: Arte Povera 1962-1972', which toured extensively in America, as a major influence. Mariolina Bassetti, Christie's head of modern and contemporary art in Italy, also credits dedicated Italian sales in London (which began at Sotheby's and Christie's in 1999) with lifting the Arte Povera artists into an international market. Thomas Rieger of veteran Arte Povera dealer Konrad Fischer Galerie in Düsseldorf suggests that the most sought-after works are sculptures and works on paper by Penone, paintings and Fibonacci installations by Mario Merz and drawings by Kounellis. He suggests that most collectors focus on one or two artists rather than the group, and that the works are bought by private collectors and institutions – 'mainly French, Italian, US, Belgian and Japanese'.

Serra Pradhan, director at Marianne Boesky in New York, reports: 'The market has steadily been growing. There has always been a collector base but it has spread from Europe to the United States. A lot of American institutions feel a bit behind and are actively buying.' The gallery has a number of Arte Povera artists, and in 2011 began to represent Calzolari – tipped off about his significance for younger artists by artist Jay Heikes. As she puts it: 'For us Arte Povera [artists are] interesting for the way their work relates to our programme, for their focus on materiality.' Casamonti is more emphatic: 'The language of Arte Povera is spoken everywhere. It is no longer Latin – it is English.'

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