

PERIPATETIC PETTENA
Notes on a Wandering Visionary

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In today's gallery world, where stock exchange voracity appears interchangeable with art-fair commodity peddling, the anti-commercial and introspective dialogues of the environmental movement during the late 1960s and '70s were like apostolic meditations by comparison. Even the merchandising excesses associated with Pop Art now seem like somber banking conventions, in contrast to the souk-like sales tactics of current international expos. Also, to its historical credit, the Pop era contributed significantly to liberating the 1960s New York art scene from the fusty anti-figurative bias of third generation Abstract Expressionism. By contrast, current events like Art Basel Miami Beach and the Armory Show appear dominated by hyperbolic celebrations of conceptual vacuity, a disproportionate enthusiasm for transitory talent and a steadfast avoidance of original aesthetic values. There is a ubiquitous re-packaging of influences from the past, defended with such vaguely apologetic labels as Appropriation, Pseudorealism, Post-postmodernism, Metamodernism and Neomimimalism. All too much of the new work, endorsed as hot ticket progressivism, is in fact a deferent version of 'if-you-please' avant-garde.

In all fairness to the current art world, there is also an admirable surge of social and political activism – particularly as manifested in minority advocacy and anti-violence messages in performance works, video art and choices of populist subjects in painting. While some of this production is trenchant and relevant, there is also a prescriptive category of image delivery that looks more like party propaganda than visionary art. On another problematic level – however commendable the purported artistic mission may be – too many of the presentation tactics today are unashamedly derivative of installation baggage from the 1960s to the '90s. The exhausted devices include rubble-like detritus spread over the floor; giant photo-realist portraits in rhythmic confrontation; any object wrapped in gauze, netting or fabric; social commentary transcribed in neon cornices, process works in so-called 'forbidden media', calligraphy or computer graphics applied to walls, repetitious manifestations of minimalist aesthetics, and that ultimate past-due banality: the protest stratagem of a totally empty gallery.

In contrast to the entire climate of art commerce in 2017, environmental artists of the 1970s concertedly opposed cultural institutions as the exclusive venues of display. Robert Smithson complained that "Art galleries and museums are graveyards above ground – congealed memories of the past that act as a pretext for reality." The unified objective was to move away from 'object thinking' in favour of 'contextual thinking.' This motivation meant rejecting the majority of those ubiquitous frames, pedestals, spotlights and exchange-of-goods rituals, identified with art dealerships. The replacement became an audacious (and sometimes economically perilous) role of the artist as entrepreneur, engineer and politician. In addition to these courageous occupational commitments, there was a profound and unifying sense that art had a responsible role in the public domain... An accountability factor long abandoned in

favour of the cultural cosiness of museums and galleries. Also, the 1970s' content of dialogue and definition of innovation were markedly different from social activism today – particularly since too much aesthetic quality in the new millennium seems to be taking a backseat to inflated illustrations for political agendas. Earlier motivations focused on key questions that gallery-oriented artists weren't asking: for example, why was such a large proportion of society cut off from exposure to art; why did art and architecture remain conceptually disconnected; what was the art world's response to ecological initiatives, and where was the 'integrative/inclusive' sensitivity needed to legitimately represent societal diversity?

The essential difference in the Environmental Art movement's contribution to recent history was its dedication to conceptual change and its avoidance of commercial comfort zones that have invariably tended to package styles and peddle them as voguish artefacts. To their great credit, the foremost innovators expanded the definition of art. They opened up the notion of the edgeless aesthetic experience and included people interaction as an intrinsic 'raw material' in the conceptual process. They welcomed the absorption of surrounding circumstances and broke down barriers that had traditionally separated art, architecture and landscape. The leading edge of Environmental Art in the 1970s included Robert Smithson, Michael Heizer, Gordon Matta-Clark, Alice Aycock, Mary Miss, Allan Sonfist, Dennis Oppenheim, Vito Acconci, Nancy Holt, Dan Graham, Agnes Denes and the Italian artist/architect Gianni Pettena.

During the late 1960s, Pettena was marginally associated with the Radical Architecture movement in Italy. By then, however, he had already developed a divergent preference for Conceptual Art and Earthworks. The key Radical studios, like Archizoom, Superstudio and UFO, declared a new activist era of design. They claimed to embrace the disorder and diversity of society by affirming their sympathy for Pop culture's vitality; but from Pettena's perspective, this mission was too often manifested in high design coherence. A good deal of the idealistic rhetoric supporting the movement harkened back to those utopian and formalist-based manifestos of early Modernism. Gianni Pettena, on the other hand, was attracted to low-tech materiality, sociologically based content and earth-centric interventions. In the early 1970s, with an infinite curiosity about the sources of ideas to be found in the USA's vast expanses of undeveloped terrain and regionalised rituals of suburbia, he hit the roadways of America.

As a wandering observer, Pettena perused the country's open space voids, arterial interstate systems and small town iconographies to become one of Environmental Art's most contemplative prophets of integrative thinking. He also engaged in dialogues with his most admired American artists and produced a series of site-specific works that contributed significantly to the fusion of ideas from art and architecture.

In the process of focusing his travel research, shaping an environmental agenda and evaluating the American scene, Pettena had to marginalise a lifetime of aesthetic and philosophical influences from his native Italy – including his credentials as a European art historian. He set about comparing opposing environments – for example, a motorist in the USA (if confined only to highways) can drive for three thousand miles without passing a single gratifying architectural experience, while a tourist in Italy cannot travel more than a hundred yards without encountering a myriad of aesthetic rewards. From the standpoint of cultural sensitivity, even Pettena's activities related to Radical Architecture were focused on critiques of the cityscape and still sheltered under a Mediterranean umbrella. While the protest aspects of his involvement with Radicalism generated some of the most potent imagery associated with the movement, the Italian urban context itself tended to modify its impact. Because of Italy's legacies of municipal civility and cultural esteem, the streets of Florence, Milan and Rome have always seemed a little too gracious to function as credible backdrops for citizen outrage and defiant art statements. As an illustration of this problem, Italian protest marches – no matter how incensed the rebels claim to be – invariably disband for the luxury of a three-hour lunch, where participants argue more fervently over wine choices than Marxist ideology. It was the compromised atmosphere of 'polite

Radicalism' that moulded Gianni Pettena's early work, but it also provoked his subsequent rebellion. As mentioned above, by the late 1960s, he had become disenchanted with the increased morphing of Radical Architecture rhetoric into a Milanese design world of fashionable living-room furniture.

When he arrived in the USA, Pettena was already sympathetic to the political discontent of anti-war students and hippie choices of alternative lifestyle. But he also understood that (like Italy) middle-class young people, who were the main beneficiaries of an affluent economy, activated most of this protest. With the exception of the African-American struggle for civil rights – where vicious opposition threatened violence and incarceration – the American Youth Movement was relieved of such dangerous consequences by a generally permissive political climate. Pettena recognised the irony of benign rebellion and its tendencies toward hypocritical manifestos; hence, his quest for understanding America aligned more with the Beat Generation's random sense of discovery than the Youth Movement's targeting of bourgeois values and that dreaded enemy: the 'industrial/military establishment'.

In his diary of personal revolt, *On the Road*, Jack Kerouac viewed the state of arbitrary wandering as a process of cleansing away career distractions and the economies of greed. While saturated with personal anger, his writings were more internalised and often served as a critique of his own failure to see the world of idiosyncratic behaviour and random experience for what it is; "Nothing behind me, everything ahead of me, as is ever so on the road." Although Kerouac opposed the pathological evils of institutional power, he avoided indulging in political cant. Instead, he focused on the enlightening revelations of randomness and the value of unpredictable encounters with personalities and situations. During Pettena's own road trip, he adopted this same brand of impartial observation – in fact, among the disdained American dwelling choices, he looked with open-minded appreciation at suburban sprawl. While the Youth Movement had abandoned the much-disparaged suburbs in favour of hippie communes, Volkswagen vans and geodesic domes, Pettena recognised the value of sociological and iconographic consistencies in ubiquitous forms of regional habitats. He understood furthermore that a truly integrative vision of Environmental Art must emerge from a hospitable absorption of contextual readings and archetypal situations... Not from a place of condescending opposition.

The Pettena road trip benefitted from his belief in the Dadaists' and Surrealists' commitment to unexpected sources of content and humble materials. This meant (as Picasso is credited for advising) you don't make art by imitating the Parthenon, but rather by transforming the debris under your feet. Pettena's assessment of the American experience avoided the usual grab bag of clichéd assumptions. In particular, he questioned those recurrent scenarios in Hollywood movies, where the country is depicted as a vast wasteland of repetitious boredom and functions as a cinematic backdrop for films about domestic neuroses, youth rebellion or criminal violence. Acknowledging Duchamp's proposition of art as idea, Pettena saw the USA as an under-explored and fertile compression of random and institutionalised spectacles – a vast, serial 'found object', just begging for re-interpretation. In this way he honoured the Duchampian heritage of inverse thinking, wherein an original conceptual thought can become sustainable as a benefit of its timeless qualities of questioning. From this contrary perspective, he also took into account that works of art – especially those institutionally endorsed as monumental or eternal – tend to become boring and unsustainable relics by virtue of their arrogant premises. In clarifying the 1960s' divergent spirit of modesty and economy of means, Allan Kaprow summarised: "Thus, for us now, the idea of a 'perfect work of art' is not only irrelevant because we do not know what are the conditions of such a phantasm, but it is, if desired, presumptuous and unreal."

Through contact with artists like Allan Kaprow, Gordon Matta-Clark and Robert Smithson, Gianni Pettena reinforced his concern with the concepts of indeterminacy and chance through the production of Environmental works. In each case – Kaprow's 'happenings', Matta-Clark's 'cuttings' and Smithson's 'Land Art' – the final

interventions were intentionally impermanent, or physically vulnerable to vandalism, neglect, weather damage or, at times, simply to community aversion to controversial art. Especially in the case of Smithson's interest in 'entropy' (the irreversible degradation of energy and matter in the universe) he invested his work with built-in qualities of disorder, unpredictability and disintegration. In an essay for 'Artforum' in September of 1968, Smithson described his vision as 'Sedimentation of the Mind'. He wrote: "One's mind and the earth are in a constant state of erosion; mental rivers wear away abstract banks, brain waves undermine cliffs of thought, ideas decompose into stones of unknowing and crystallizations break apart into deposits of gritty reason." By crediting the parallels between disconnected mental processes and chaotic forces in nature, Smithson reinforced the pioneering contributions of Duchamp: that art could be intangible and transitory, thereby shifting its objectives to the polar opposite of conventional qualifications for collectability.

Pettena's relationship with Kaprow and Matta-Clark benefitted from their shared commitment to 'making' – or 'unmaking' – and by declaring these evolutionary processes in themselves as the ultimate aesthetic content. Characterised by disorientation and dematerialisation, the performance and installation works by Kaprow required his audience to physically/psychologically accept a visceral involvement, as in his *Yard* piece of 1961, where participants were invited to navigate random piles of car tyres, or in his 1967 *Fluids for Los Angeles*, where the gradual disappearance of a melting stack of ice blocks provided a soggy and – ultimately – invisible art experience. In both works, their enduring importance has been predicated on 'memories of situations' and the controversial debates they inspired about definitions of art that emerged after the fact.

The surgical operation-on-buildings strategies of Gordon Matta-Clark were closer to Pettena's interventions by way of their common use of architecture as a 'subject matter' for art. But the two artists' differences of intent were based on how they viewed the whole subject of habitat from a critical perspective. For Matta-Clark's interventions (called Anarchitecture) he used conventional structures as receptacles for dissection and penetration. His perverse 'cuttings' exposed hidden meanings and new aesthetic relationships. Like Jacques Derrida's deep excavations of language as a strategy for questioning surface meanings, Matta-Clark's 'revelation-by-incision' processes were parallel to those of Deconstruction. In actual fact, his work's relationship to linguistic and philosophical ideas was conceptually more substantial – as well as more radical – than establishment architecture's Deconstruction Redux of some years later... especially as manifested in the kind of stylishly fragmented formalism, which attracted a lot of critical endorsement in the late 1980s.

Matta-Clark's use of architecture as subject matter was a confrontation with culturally endorsed expectations for habitat as design, materiality and structural stability. Gianni Pettena, on the other hand, saw architecture as an absorptive receptacle for natural forces. In their different motivations, Matta-Clark referred to his work as "an expression of the commonplace that might encounter the grandeur and pomp of architectural structures and their self-glorifying clients." Pettena explained: "I wanted to emphasize the role that nature had in our conceptual strategies, but I didn't even want to deploy violence against architecture like Gordon Matta-Clark was doing. My approach was a little bit softer. It's true that I was using abandoned buildings, but to cover them with ice. Or I was making architecture like the *Tumbleweeds Catcher*, in Salt Lake City, just for hosting ideas."

Matta-Clark's 1974 *Splitting* project in Englewood, New Jersey, operated on an archetypal suburban house, already destined for demolition. He saw his surgical invasion of this discarded structure as a form of preservation by demolition, since the dwelling (at least by theory and intent) was converted from obsolescence to art through his actions. Also, by slicing a building in half and wedging apart walls to insert a giant crack, he challenged the American middle-class view of the architectural enclosure as a means for the perpetuation of privacy and segregation. In a second notable project, his *Conical Intersect* at the Paris Biennale of 1975, Matta-Clark cut a series of gaping holes

in the walls of a 17th-century apartment building. Consistent with his usual choice of derelict structures for intervention, this edifice had been condemned for removal in the wake of President Mitterrand's then burgeoning 'Grands Projets' in France. Matta-Clark's guerrilla action was confrontationally situated directly across from Beaubourg renewal and its ongoing erection of the Piano & Rogers-designed Centre Pompidou. As a critique of the museum's over-zealous glorification of machine-age values, he challenged the emerging institution with what he called a celebration of the 'non-umental': an aesthetic of architectural subtraction in the face of a Parisian investment in profligate urban development.

Gianni Pettena's most significant works in the USA involved two buildings during 1971 and '72: a suburban dwelling in Utah and a college administration building in Minneapolis. To achieve the Salt Lake City project, he and a coterie of university students covered the exterior of a private residence with a layer of wet clay, which quickly hardened into an epidermis of dry adobe under the summer sun. For the Minnesota intervention, entitled *Ice House I*, Pettena again marshalled student assistance. From access positions at roof level, they helped him hose down an abandoned grade school building with a deluge of water in the middle of winter. As the layers froze, transparent skins of ice gradually enveloped the structure. While not ecological in the technical or sustainable sense, Pettena's clay and ice projects offered an incisive critique of the industrial establishment's greed-driven conceit that the conquest of nature can always be justified as economic progress. Additionally, these interventions acknowledged the eco-friendly reality that entire civilisations – Alaskan and African, principally – have lived in harmony with their respective climates by the construction of ice and clay habitats.

Returning to Gianni Pettena's American travel itinerary of the early 1970s, his affinity with the Earthwork projects of Robert Smithson and Michael Heizer inspired his quest for alternative sources of art experience – or at least the uncovering of clues for a new environmental sensitivity – in places where one would least expect to find them. While his suburban projects took advantage of people's reflex identification with certain architectural profiles for home and school, his investigations of geological spectacles and abandoned industrial sites led him to adopt a totally different response. Pettena's ice and clay projects were compressed in both scale and territorial occupancy. His exposure to Monument Valley and the open spaces of Utah, Arizona and Nevada motivated a different level of environmental engagement. In particular, he understood that the visual experiences of expansive vistas and natural phenomena defeated the capacity of art installations to achieve a meaningful presence; furthermore, their natural components were too exotic to use as a source material.

During the period of his intervention projects in Italy, Pettena often used massive signage and graphic intrusions to 'de-code' the overwhelming dominance of historic architectural imagery in Italian cities. His objective was to counter the cultivated excellence and consensus imagery in Renaissance and Baroque surroundings by shifting attention to the muddled indecisions of people's collective unconscious and the anxieties of political injustice in contemporary society. When on the road, photographing Monument Valley, or taking notes on various abandoned industrial sites in the American Midwest, he became highly sensitised to the need to discard his earlier relationship with historical backdrops in Italy and look objectively at the nature-defined scale references and market-imposed industrial obsolescence of the American panorama. He also knew that he had to reject the (lazy artist) temptation to view geological formations as scenic subject matter and derelict steel mills as an inspiration for Neo-Constructivist sculpture. By shunning the seductive appeal of scenographic environments, Pettena used his photographs and travel documents in the manner of a filmmaker gathering research for a Western cinema saga, in which the choice of context provides a matrix for unravelling the movie's narrative intentions. Unlike Robert Smithson, who engaged geological and/or industrial sites' physicality as an intrinsic component of his art, Pettena (in essence, an innovative urbanist) used the evolutionary impact of natural forces as his content. In the early development of his ideas, he explained: "Land Art is more recent and my break with it is clearer.

First, the choice of dealing with either the urban environment in general, and building structures specifically, alters my whole realm of reference and shifts it away from the grand theme of vast natural emptiness which, for the Earth artist, was literally like drawing on a blank canvas." Although both he and Smithson embraced the concept of entropy and the action of 'nature's revenge' in determining the destiny of Environmental Art, Pettena's transformations used architecture as a passive receptacle – invaded by heat, damp and wind – and as an evidentiary monitor for the effect of these forces on architecture's ultimate dematerialisation.

Although a vast range of influence from the Environmental Art movement still prevails internationally, the quality of dialogue and willingness to embark on new areas of investigation have declined through the prioritisation of style over substance. To reiterate the initial premises for this examination of Pettena's work and that of his generation of artists, the loss of intellectual courage is a casualty of the culture market; in particular, its dangerously seductive promises of meteoric career ascension and attendant wealth. While justifiably crediting today's socially conscious art as a commendable direction, it is still not on the same level of conceptual breakthrough as those 'escape-from-the-gallery-into-the-streets' motivations that triggered the 1970s and '80s spirit of rebellion. Broadly influential and sustainable ideas in the arts are rarely associated with instant acceptance. On the contrary, they are usually greeted with barriers of resistance – even mockery – that have to be remedied by a climate of gradual enlightenment. Thoughtful assimilation often requires combative discourse and a consensus definition of epochal relevance. Neither is likely to emerge from the speedway-like corridors of a contemporary art fair.

There is a prevailing assumption in the history of art evaluation that the critical tactic of harkening back to some 'good old days' of superior aesthetic values is evidence of reactionary nostalgia. Sometimes this is true, but often not. Surely the healthiest motivations in art – confirmed by Gianni Pettena and his generation's contributions – were described by Richard Huelsenbeck in the *Dadaist Manifesto* of 1918: "Art, in its execution and direction, is dependent on the time in which it lives and artists are creatures of their epoch. The highest art is that which, in its conscious content, presents the problems of the day."