

## Gianni Pettena

Gianni Pettena, architect by nature | solo exhibition | november 28, 2021 - february 20, 2022

*"The ecological crisis isn't just about pollution. It's the sudden and brutal revelation of the failure of reason". Pierre Fournier<sup>1</sup>*

Notwithstanding what Mrs Thatcher said, there are always alternatives. It all starts with an awareness that freedom is a mere state of mind. Armed with courage, clear-sightedness and a sense of responsibility, we can then define what constitutes our world and actively build our lives. *"All you need is a little imagination,"* as Charles Trenet used to sing.

When something leaves us speechless and paralyses us, it's up to us to recover our means of expression and our ability to take action. This time, it's true, there's no alternative. We have to take the global social, economic, political situation as our starting point—however unpleasant it may be. Then we have to assume our responsibilities and make the appropriate decisions. As for me, I'm more in favour of "agrowth", another form of positive atheism that runs through my life and activities, just as others, in their time, were "anartists" or "anarchitects"—the category to which Gianni Pettena belongs. His aim is not to illustrate Rudofsky's idea of an "architecture without architects". Instead, like an elephant ashamed of its size, he is eager to avoid disturbing his surroundings by his weighty presence. Such politeness and good manners are in marked contrast to the zealous ambition of many architects, who make "capitalism + cash" into a very vulgar sum. To Marcel Duchamp's assertion that there is "too much art", Pettena might reply that architecture is already everywhere, with the sky as its roof, the ground as its floor and the hills and mountains as its buildings. The rest would be mere vanity.

This is how Gianni Pettena's unique personal journey has unfolded: a journey that has bravely resisted the forces of dominant thought, which sees nature as something to be exploited, not understood. This doesn't stop this hegemonical system from knowing a lot about its environment, but it can't be "part of" that environment because it's in too much of a hurry and too arrogant to properly absorb it. Pettena's creations, without shying away from this context, have always aimed to convey his clear-sighted reading of things. He does this without pathos, irony or bitterness, and his mischievous, poetic presence shifts reality just as a piece of lemon zest might enliven a bland dish. An inveterate smoker of cigars, Pettena also imbues the space with a smoky aroma: another way of inhabiting it, invisibly, like a *genius loci*.

At his second solo show at Salle Principale, held this autumn, the exhibits testify to the status of an "architect without architecture": without the concrete, codified, standardised architecture that is embraced by our civilisation. Using

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<sup>1</sup> Pierre Fournier, forerunner of ecology. Éditions Les cahiers dessinés - 2011

natural, basic elements such as water, clay, air, rock and bushes, Pettena reveals an architecture that doesn't know it is architecture, or at least an architecture we were hitherto unable to see and which now seems to come to life under the influence of these elements. Whether it be a suburban house that he entirely covered in clay as if covering a face with make-up, a kind of *prósôpon* (πρόσωπον) for buildings (*Clay House*, 1972, Salt Lake City), or a translucent mantle of ice covering a school or a small house (*Ice I and II*, 1972, Minneapolis), the architect revitalises places that have been downgraded by particular lifestyles and standardised materials. Sometimes Pettena is satisfied with looking at these monuments with his characteristically polite gaze, like the desert skyscrapers fashioned by time on the high plateaux of Colorado (*About Non Conscious Architecture*, 1972) – which inevitably leave us speechless just as they invade the unconscious of demonic architects who are reduced to mimicking their majesty with conjuring tricks... Towers of vegetation are constructed by the wind (*Tumbleweeds*, 1972, Salt Lake City): Pettena offers them up to nature's whims, and nature does what it wants with them. In *Architectural project #2 / Planes crossing*, 1971, Pettena highlights the pathos of a quest for absolute, salutary perfection—that of modernism, imprisoned in dogma, which, despite its extreme stringency, ends up dissolving in a gust of wind. The Italian anarchist seems to remind us that nature can do whatever it wants — and always ends up winning the day.

Dominique Mathieu – november 2021

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