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GIUSEPPE PENONE - HIS ARTISTIC CONTEXT AND WORK

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ILLUSTRATIONS

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ILLUSTRATIONS 4

INTRODUCTION 5

Chapter:

 I The background to Arte Povera 6

 Arte Povera 8

 The International Connection 9

 II Penone's sources for his sculpture and some writings
 by the Artist 14

 III Some of Penones Work 23

 IV Conclusion 33

.....

BIBLIOGRAPHY 35

ILLUSTRATIONS

- Plate 1.
Maritime Alps. It will go on growing except at that point. 1968. Steel hand and tree. p. 23.
- Plate 2.
Its being in its twenty second year, viewed at the present. 1969. Wood. p.24.
- Plate 3.
The tree's years plus one. 1969. Wood and wax. p. 24.
- Plate 4.
Reverse your eyes. 1970. Mirrored contact lenses. p. 25.
- Plate 5.
Unroll your own skin. 1970-72. Photographic emulsion and window. p.25.
- Plate 6.
Potatoes. 1977. Five bronze elements and potatoes. p. 26.
- Plate 7.
Pumpkin and Absolute Black form Africa. 1978-79. Bronze and Granite. p. 26.
- Plate 8.
Soffio. 1978. Fired clay. p. 27.
- Plate 9.
Large Plant Gesture 2. 1983. Bronze. p. 28.
- Plate 10.
Path 3 (Sentier de Charme). 1985-85. Bronze and vegetation. p.28.
- Plate 11.
Three Landscapes. 1986. Bronze and vegetation installation. p.29.
- Plate 12.
Path 1. 1983-84. Bronze, (detail). p. 30.
- Plate 13.
Fingernail. 1988. Glass and stone. p. 30.
- Plate 14.
Untitled. 1988. Stone and plaster. p. 31.

INTRODUCTION

The return to nature is a very fashionable theme at the moment. Giuseppe Penone was never separated from it. He is one of a few artists who are concerned about our environment, and in particular about nature. In his work, sculpture and writing, he endeavours to bring humans closer to understanding nature. The form his work takes is unique. That is the reason why I chose the sculptor Giuseppe Penone as the subject of this thesis.

Because it is not possible to isolate a single work of art or artist without delineating the cultural, ideological, and political field to which that work or artist belongs, those parts of Penone's background which substantially illuminate his "socio-cultural" identity will be reconstructed, before his work is investigated.

First of all the political and artistic history of Italy from Mussolini to the 1960's, which resulted in Arte Povera, is looked at. Then Arte Povera, the group in which Penone was active at the beginning of his artistic life, is considered. The next aspect discussed is the social and historic environment in which Penone grew up and which is one source of his inspiration. Finally, some of his more important pieces are investigated and discussed.

The background to Arte Povera.

In order to understand the significance of Arte Povera and of Giuseppe Penone, it is essential to look at its immediate progenitors in the Art History of Italy from Mussolini, who suppressed modern art, onwards.

During the 1930's and 1940's advanced modern art didn't circulate very widely in Italy: the fact that it continued to exist in spite of a reactionary and murderous regime wasn't much of a comfort. Indeed, that even seemed at times to be a sign that its modernity was insignificant. Fascism provincialised the Italian art scene not by physically destroying modern art, but by robbing it of validity as a frame of reference. Even though the visual arts did not fare nearly as badly in Mussolini's Italy as they did in Germany, the situation was difficult and confused. The problem for a great many artists, especially the younger talents, became the discovery of an art that would be capable of defining "modern" as a case of clear opposition to the regime. This was the basis for the formation of the partly expressionist, partly neo-realist "Corrente" group. Among its participants were nearly all of the artists who were to dominate art scene after the war. Though finally suppressed in the 1940's, this was the group that established the terms for the discussion of art in Italy right down to the middle of the 1950's.

In the middle and late 1950's, Italian artists were making important contributions to all the dominant international styles of modern art, and the artists emerging then were already anxious to break new ground. The willingness to see culture progress and extend its boundaries is characteristic of Italy, and when the pace of the international art world of the 1960's suddenly accelerated into Pop, Op, Minimal and all the various ramifications of conceptual art and beyond, Italy took it all easily in its stride. Milan became one of the most exciting cities for art in Europe.

In Italy, as in most western countries, there was a remarkable change in the climate of artistic research in 1966/67 which posed the question of whether or not to break with the past. The prevailing climate was critical, generous and confused. The keynote was nomadism. Confusion extended even to the critics and as a result there are few critical accounts of these fertile years.

The Zeitgeist was epitomised in the "Inhabitable Art Show" which took place in the Sperone gallery in Turin in the summer of 1966, and in the "Fire, Image, Water and Earth" show which took place in the Attico gallery in Rome in 1967. The former dealt with a new concept of artistic space which began with the object and not with the environment: an antropological and no longer linguistic space. This show (with Pistoletto, Gilard, Piacentino, and Anselmo) drew together the initial nucleus of what was later to be called the School of Turin. The second show (with Kounellis, Pascalli, Pistoletto and others) pulled together the panorama of new tendencies under the banner of primary elements. In the succeeding months the most active centre of art was undoubtedly Turin, where what Germano Celant later defined as Arte Povera was emerging. It was in this flux that the nineteen year-old art student Giuseppe Penone began to find his artistic feet.

At the same time the "Cultural Revolution" - a revolt by the student underground movement and by extraparliamentary forces - was experienced in Italy as in other countries. Though only in its first year, an ongoing revolutionary process had already developed for those for whom the system was seen as a fragmented whole against which one must measure the revolutionary subject. The general, but still hidden, impatience with imperialist (Algeria, Vietnam...) or institutional repression, with the rejection of desire and individual aspiration changed itself into an open protest against all paper tigers. A student movement slogan of the time went like this: "I take my desires as reality because I believe in the reality of my desires, culture is the inversion of life."

Arte Povera

These ideas were part of a general atmosphere, and even though they didn't prove to be the general panacea they aspired to be, they became the mainstay of a lot of powerful work by artists such as Alighiero Boetti, Pierpaolo Calzolari, Giuseppe Penone, Mario and Marisa Merz and others known collectively as the Arte Povera group. The members of this group entrusted themselves to the "dream" and "myth" structure of Italian and European culture which develops independently from technological and industrial demands. They propagated instead the romantic domain and situation specific work, as well as self-determination in their own form of expression - things which belong as matter or course to the poor, using material such as twigs, neon light, ice, felt, fat, piles of paper doilies, the human body itself and interventions with nature.

In Italy artistic conflict was subjected to such a revision and dethroning by Arte Povera that it was possible from then on to use materials and symbols out of every possible context. That resulted in availability and extreme anti-iconography: the taking in of foreign elements and pictures - believed lost, which were taken from everyday life and from nature. The matter fell into motion; borders were lifted. A new area of expression was created the boundaries of which were indefinable.

The tools of Arte Povera were just about anything and its general subject was the feel of organic process or the immanence of physical and biological law. Imagination was seen as an extension of nature itself, and the beautiful messiness of nature was the condition it, and especially Penone, aspired to achieve. Visuals and plastics were seen as they happened and as they were. The empirical quality of artistic enquiry, rather than its speculative aspect, was exalted. The hard fact, the physical presence of an object, or the behaviour of a subject was emphasised. Corporeality of material and gesture, which are always real and palpable in others, are

brought into relation with our own bodies. Here we reach the real terrain of Arte Povera.

Arte Povera was a phenomenon that tended towards "deculturation", towards regression of the image to the pre-iconographic stage. It was a hymn to commonplace elements, to nature understood in terms of democratic unities, and to man as a physiological and mental fragment.

Arte Povera was a continuous presentation of factual significance. It thus effected a return to the Middle Ages, not only from the technical point of view but also from a poetic point of view. It set up a man-nature identity that had a pragmatic intent. It denoted total identification between "reinvention and invention", almost as though it had rediscovered aesthetic tautology: the sea is water, a room is a perimeter of air, cotton is cotton, the world is an imperceptible set of nations, a corner is the convergence of three co-ordinates, the floor is an area of tiles, life is a series of actions.

Acting as a group Arte Povera (diligently followed by Tommaso Trini as well as by Germano Celant) were Michelangelo Pistoletto, Mario Merz, Mariso Merz, Jannis Kounellis, Luciano Fabro, Giovanni Anselmo, Pierpaolo Calzolari, Giulio Paolini, Alighiero Boetti, Gilberto Zorio, Emilio Prini and Giuseppe Penone.

The International Connection.

From Turin to New York, and from Paris to San Francisco, European and American artists gradually discovered just how much they had in common. In Italy there was Arte Povera, with its particular emphasis on the shifting of interest from the object to the subject, and from things to man, which expresses a univocal reality rather than an ambiguous one, as in the past.

In America the same poverty of materials underlay the term "raw materials".

But there were others: "antiform" indicated a plastic quality that happened, and avoided form; "process art" focused on the subject more than on the resulting object or piece; the intellectual intensity of certain works was the basis of the term "conceptual art"; another definition, coined by Gilardi in reference to its vision of the whole, was "microemotive art" which points out the undoubted emotivity of some works, as well as their lack of planning. As can be seen, one was faced with an art broadly based on non-selective and non-discriminating thought. Even the American attempt at unification that went under the name of "earth work movement" seems appropriate here.

This discovery of basically similiar aesthetic experience suggested the existence of a particular "aesthetic condition" that was growing. These experiences bridged space and in 1969 brought together artists like Walter de Maria, Michelangelo Pistoletto, Richard Long, Mario Merz, Joseph Beuys, Eva Hesse, Michael Heizer, Jannis Kounellis, Luciano Fabro, Bruce Nauman, Joseph Kosuth, Jan Dibbets, Giovanni Anselmo, Dennis Oppenheim, Robert Smithson, Giulio Paolini, Alighiero Boetti, Giuseppe Penone, Hans Haacke, Gilberto Zorio, Robert Morris, Emilio Prini, Richard Serra, and others. Although these experiences did not make up a movement, they constituted a way of thinking, or more precisely, a practical way of realising a new thought.

From the end of the sixties to the middle of the seventies the unity of the Arte Povera group was a uniting impulse, with which one could make art which was independent of American and Anglo-saxon internationalism. By the beginning of the eighties the group no longer existed. From that point on it was the individuality and the uniqueness of the individual which counted and these individuals advanced and built upon the artistic humus of the previous decade.

The distinguishing feature of Arte Povera was its direct relationship to, and reaction against, the historical movement. This created a plurality of refractions whose understanding involves a knowledge of history as well

as of everyday reality. Because it made a point of relating to its context, attempting to internalise it dialectically, Arte Povera was a tension more than a system. Arte Povera was and is a way of being, and of considering oneself, that changes like the weather. Although it had a critic-spokesman (Germano Celant), it never had an artist-leader, nor a manifesto. As the work of the artists matured, so their diversity became more evident. Twenty years later the continued use of the term draws its definition from the collective exhibitions in which these artists appeared and which now seem to signify a nationalist tendency, a concept itself at odds with Arte Povera's original broad-based cultural concerns.

Arte Povera seems to have been the end of an epoch in Italy. It is the last movement to have established even a fictive air of leadership, or to have convinced itself and others that it was an avant-garde engaged in capturing a position on the heights that the regulars would later come to make safe and sure forever. At times the strictly antiformal position of Arte Povera opened the way to a great many uninteresting neosurrealist tableaux and even to some work of doubtful morality (like Dino de Dominicis's piece at the 1972 Venice Biennale, based on the "exhibition" of a young man afflicted with mongolism). But the movement did leave some sound and lasting attitudes behind it. Perhaps, ironically, it made the quality of individual works of art the only possible issue. For the last few years, the art scene in Italy has been somewhat adrift, characterised by the more or less peaceful coexistence of any number of different ways of making and thinking about art.

In an interview with Joel Lasanna in 1981, Fabro said that he was very happy that:

"... one of the known merits of our generation is the taking of a whole lot liberties from which one profits immediately: frivolity, arbitrariness, hyperbole, digression and being crazy." "Our" generation being Merz, Penone, Kounellis, Zorio, Anselmo, Fabro and many others. This generations quest for identity is accompanied by an attempt to clarify

the ties which unify art and nature. In the course of history, nature has been drawn constantly by art. The drawing which was the result gave coherence to religion as well as to science and society. I asked myself a question - why then this boundary to nature which an artist invented at the beginning of humanity ? It is always totally inaccessible for us artists ? 1

Footnotes.

¹ Chalumeau, Jean-Luc. "Arte Povera", L'Art comme Travail de Menagere", Opus International, No. 111, November-December 1988, p.32.

CHAPTER II.

Penone's sources for his sculpture and some writings by the artist.

Giuseppe Penone emerged in the late 1960s as one of the Italian Arte Povera artists whose style had affinities with the earthworks and conceptual art movements. Since then a continuing theme in Penone's work has been his attempt to capture a sense of the life-force in nature and to convey the idea of man in nature as part of that same spirit. Nominally a sculptor, he questions through his work the relevance of such categorisations, taking his ideas directly from the earth and the landscape and exploring his own relationship to them.

Penone's artistic activity cannot be isolated from the activity of nature: united they form a work of art. The primal forces of nature acting on the environment, combined with the artists actions form an overwhelming and intensely symbolic, at times symbiotic, relationship. His artistic activity embraces a cultivation of earth, seeds, leaves, clay and stones destined to become painting and sculpture. His elaborations partake of the ancient practices of planting and carving, keeping the line of communication between man and nature open. Since 1968 he has worked to objectify a "double" of the becoming of the woodland or the flow of a river. He has pursued a "state of nature" in materials such as wood and earth, in order to transform them into creative entities in which the artificial movement is wedded with the natural event. His search for intertwinings with a stone or a tree, in order that they should bear visual "fruit" coincides in the history of contemporary art with the need that was felt by the European and American artistic communities to find forms and images that are not derived from industrial products and materials, but are direct results of nature. Penone's art is, in essence, an intimate dialogue between himself and nature, a dialogue which has been an integral part of his existence since childhood.

Penone grew up outside Turin in the rural community of Garessio, a village on the border of the Ligurian Alps and the Valle Padana. The relationship between Penone's social identity, his work and techniques, and his environment lies in Garessio; his physical, historic and cultural home.

From prehistoric times the vicissitudes of nature and weather have directed the course of village life. Traces of human activity dating from the Neolithic and the Ice Age are plentiful in the region: implements from ancient cultures, as well as stones incised with plant and animal motifs by prehistoric artisans have been discovered. Indeed, these archeological finds have become a source of inspiration for Penone, who feels a spiritual affinity with primitive man in his close relationship with the earth. Conscious of the way natural forces and man have acted upon stone, tree and the environment in general, Penone has sought to use the lessons of his observations in his art and make an imprint on nature that will be visible to future generations.

In 1969 Giuseppe Penone wrote:

" On the 25th of September, 1881, Giovanni Battista Penone bought a piece of land in the Vall' Organa region... This land was planted by Giovanni Battista Penone as a vineyard, and potatoes and wheat were sown between the rows of vines in alternating annual cycles. The work was done by hand. The land was divided into four regular parts by low stone walls... In 1969 Pasquale Penone still farms this land by the same methods. He considers the action a moral duty, as this was his father's first property, hence the first lasting impression of his labour...

Every year about 160 or 170 manhours are ploughed into this land. In the 88 years about 14,520 manhours have been invested. With another 11,160 hours of work by nature, can the brute strength accumulated make this land assimilate and express human qualities. Things acquire this ability in different ways, depending on the availability of accumulated animal power ... The way in which animal power is measured out is what determines just how much power of human expression a thing will have. In any case, this animal power is almost always assimilated and expressed through the action and language of time. Time itself is a kind of action that allows things to express themselves and to act as human being; similarly, wind, rain, flowing water, wedges and other bodies that tree can assimilate can be human expressions..."¹

Penone's vision is a poetic one that recalls the animism of primitive

art and the pantheism of antiquity. Nature is seen as a vast and sensuous organism regulated by its own cyclic destiny. Its vital rhythms are a source of constant renewal felt throughout the microcosm of each part; animal, vegetable and mineral. Nature is the great memory, the ever-present model of the processes of change and growth that shape the individual life, each successive generation, and in turn the cultures of civilisation.

" And if they contain written things, the trees can transcribe and remember them, acting as intermediaries between he who wrote the wedges and he who, perhaps, one day will read the wood. In this way whole books can be written in the forests, wooded avenues, gardens, parks and orchards, if the need to read things written is not a short-term need, but a long-term one, and if it can be fulfilled by chance. An identical operation may be excuted by inserting, in the holes drilled in blocks of stones, objects of materials that hold a story or that one presumes will make a story one day. These stones will then have to be abandoned to a river so that the story may be read little by little by the water. In this sense the most rewarding thing one can do is to imprison a word, a phrase, a cry or a human sound in stone in such a way that the river, one day, will make it heard... 2

The empathy that Penone feels for pre-historic art reflects this vision of an undivided universe in which man's understanding of himself is articulated through his identity in nature rather than his separation from nature.

Animism and pantheism are naturally pretexts for the first person transference of the artist into the growth process of the entirety of creation.

The art object is nothing other than the trace left by this poetic fusion.

Penone is an artist who openly acts not from nature but for it.

Penone is most often thought of as somewhere between Arte Povera and conceptual art, but one wonders if either of these terms has ever been consistently and sufficiently well defined to do him any sort of justice. Even though his work apparently comes close to the limit of total formal non-existence, it has a sense of synthesis and a toleration for contamination that places it at a considerable distance from conceptual art's rage for analysis. Penone is less interested in the analysis of his instruments than he is in their use for the analysis of the imaginative and physical world in which he finds himself immersed. As Penone developed he drew on

conceptual and minimalist aesthetics as well as on Arte Povera. He adapted the intellectualism of conceptual art and the formalism of Minimal art.

In its final syntheses, his artistic vision is so individual as to defy classification into a single movement.

Penone's uniqueness derives primarily from the affirmation of a perfect syntony which in its extreme suggests the artist's bodily fusion with all of nature. Penone writes:

" In order to produce sculpture the sculptor must lie down, flatten himself on the ground letting his body slide, without lowering himself hastily, gently little by little and finally, having reached a horizontal position, he must concentrate his attention and his efforts upon his body, which, pressed against the ground, allows him to see and feel himself against the ground, allows him to see and feel against himself the things of the earth: he can then open his arms to fully enjoy the coolness of the ground and attain the necessary degree of peace for the accomplishment of sculpture... When he finally feels light-headed, the coolness of the earth cuts him in half and allows him to see with clarity and accuracy the point which detaches the part of his body which belongs to the void of the sky, and the part that belongs to the fullness of the earth. It is at that point that sculpture occurs." 3

Like an organism of simple structure, Penone mixes himself with the environment, camouflaging himself, he enlarges his threshold for things.

He draws from the substance of a natural event - that of the growth of the plant, the movement of the river, of snow, grass and land, the fall of a weight - he identifies with them in order to live the marvellous organisation of things.

If in a mythical thought the cultivated earth is impregnated with human life, then it is logical to assume that its humus hosts phenomena of growth that are similiar, identical, or complimentary to those living beings. Indeed the ground is a genuine organ identifiable with the human diaphragm: the head of the being lies below it; the abdomen above. The processes of thought, breathing, vision and hearing take place in the ground or head; the eyes, mouth, and ears can be localised in natural elements such as roots and potatoes.

" The path follows man, it is the moment between man's passing and the time when the effort of his passing is lost. The path is the memory of the sculpture, but the remembrance, the tradition that transmits the occurrence from generation to generation, the mastery, often offer poor models for inspiration. A good path is one that loses itself in the undergrowth, one where the bushes come together immediately behind the back of the wanderer without saying whether he is the first one to leave a trace on it or the last one ever to tread it. One should walk the last path; the aim is to lose the path in order to find it and follow it again; that is why it is necessary to care for the virgin forest and bushes, for the undergrowth and the fog. The lucidity of the well-marked path is sterile. To find the path, to follow it, to examine it and separate the tangled undergrowth: that is sculpture." 4

He seeks to make visible through his art well-known but invisible natural processes. He strives for a restitution, to its original state, of that which has already been altered or forgotten. Art for Penone becomes a kind of restitution of the natural in all its hidden complexity. It becomes an imaginative search for the demonstrably real but apparently non-existent, a rigorous and romantic "recherche du temps perdu" (In Search of Lost Time/Marcel Proust) that attempts to re-establish forgotten facts and forgotten distinctions.

Like primitive humans, Penone does not separate himself from the world of animals and plants, but experiences the world in a continuous state of participation and symbiosis. He tries to attain a degree of identification and exchangeability with the elements, so that in his linguistic and expressive manifestations the human and natural worlds melt together. For him the relationship between being and environment is not based on abstract logic but on feeling and perception understood as genuine bodily fusions with nature as a whole.

" The reality of a tree as a form is found by following the amorphous fluidity of the wood step by step, this journey reveals the major, signifying events in the life of the tree, memory of the forest; the breath of leaves extends with a gentle caress of a strong, even violent pressure, product of warmth and cold but also of man's body, unstable and slow but with artifice fast and firm, it recalls the river's existence, its flowing gesture, its expansion, like the greasy streak that is the trace of the

human body. With habitual gestures, real and normal, the heroic spirit is embodied in the work of art and reveals the sacred banality of things. To touch a clay figure, to capture this in bronze, to transform it into sculpture that instead of becoming a statue is the reflection of the living sculptor condensed in his own gestures; this is what it means to follow the form of the tree, memory of the forest. If the earth is mother, if it is also given human form, if the place where the roots join the trunk of a tree recalls the crotch, if the sculpture is made of earth and the earth is fecund, if the sculpture evokes the feminine, if forming the earth is a sensuous act, if sensuality gives pleasure and if it is right to derive pleasure from a clay sculpture, then the organic gesture of the sculptor can project this like a trace of the skin developing through space." 5

Paying equal attention to both himself and the world, and above all, to deducing from regulated nature the qualities, forces, the warp and woof, the various aspects of the multiform varieties of life, Penone has developed a sculptural alphabet with an utterly original organic existence. Penone virtually seeks the soul of the vegetal and fibrous material or x-rays its identity. He seeks the soul of the wood as a cyclical proposition is the tree. The external imprint of the human skin is like the imprint of the bark, the plastic impress of the body parts is like the impress of portions of a trunk. Such resemblances evoke the subjectivity of the artist as conscious of the natural link, they manifest its absolute singularity; and yet they are also particulars of a common anthropological dimension. A body, like a tree, lives internally from a sap, a lymph, from a vital breath that always determines its particular aspect, its appearance.

" First of all care must be taken of the wilderness where the breath is contained in the leaves in continuous flux beneath the trust of the wind's logic. The leaves spread out to occupy the interspace of stillness, they are privileged negatives of the form in motion which tends to sculpt itself through repetition.

Closed eyes and torpid body lie down gently on the ancient bed; the back of the neck drowns in the leaves and from the open mouth the breath sinks into the leaves. Run through by the breath, they produce a sound, they are the goat's food. The flowing lymph forms the leaves, extends the earth, and makes it possible to obtain the bark which, filled with breath, becomes an instrument of sound.

Elements shaped in and by the air, in habitual contact with the wind, modelled by the wind, carried by the wind. Gone over again by the hand of man, they repeat the contours, the suction, the little vortices, the ruffled pressure of the wind. New leaves are born to repeat the wind." 6

With the breath, Penone begins the journey back from the leaves to the tree, whose form is the cumulative materialisation of a succession of movements in time. He has returned consistently to the tree as a model, because its stationary form embraces and integrates the events of life, both great and small. The tree cannot forget or dispose of marks of time. The minimum trace of an action becomes visible through its projection in time. Like an archaeologist of the invisible, Penone methodically exposes the layers of time and experience, building a reality in which isolated events remain unaccounted for, in either their origins or their consequences. The tree becomes a metaphor for all systems of growth and change, and for the structure of history itself. It is a procedure for looking from the inside out, different from the normal procedure of art which selects and analyses forms and figures from the outside. It can be compared to an almost magical and surreal feeling that sinks its roots in the sacred and unconscious, except that Penone's imagery arises from the concentric rings or bark of a tree trunk, from the flow of water or the pace of an animal feeding, which at their limits encounter the rigidity of a hand, a stone, an alphabet, or a cement tub, marked by letter or human imprints. Almost as though nature were the only mobile, unlimited sign of the inertia of human beings and of their tools of reading and editing. Yet representing a dialogue between the body and nature by placing one inside the other, the artist points out the vital tension that culture addresses to nature, its attempts to manage and use it, its intention to mould it.

Penone feels the anxiety of conservation, almost as though nature, agriculture and botany were collectors items, museum pieces, inestimable values to conserve for future history. The wildness of the woodland, though planned and orderly, therefore becomes a moment of memory so complete that it can be utilised in art like a fragment of a Greek statue or a sacred icon. With respect to the rapid pace of the city, these visions, materialised in parks and gardens, are to be considered as the historic

unconscious of an urban culture. They become places of lost memories, ruins of forgotten feasts and colours: this is why Penone intertwines his art and being with the body of nature. In the fullness of their contact develops the unconscious and the collectivity. At the same time their fragile union summarises the precarious position of those two subjects, human being and nature, in a hypertechnological world. They are placed on the same plane, grafted into each other, because they represent the contact of a memory in extinction.

Since the beginning of Penone's activity the image of the tree and the body have supported the artistic building, reflecting his desire to capture the synthetic reality of the world. It is the starting point of absolute beginning, from which his energy flows. His vision is based on this pillar, which at any given time can become the vertical axis that incorporates and attracts all his elements. Around it the bark of things, the essentiality of human gestures that have given form to objects, is regenerated.

For Penone, the reality of art is, and remains, a matter of association. His work illustrates various tangents of that reality, with an expressiveness which depends neither on drama nor on pathos, but on beauty and poetry. His sculpture is quiet, but by no means reticent. Every action Penone imposes upon nature, whether external or through his own body, opens up a dialogue between the natural and the man-made, the internal and the external, the fluid and the concrete, the vertical and the horizontal, or between the negative and the positive volume. Penone does not seek to interpret nature and its often mystical forces; he attempts only to portray the possibilities and limitations inherent in the encounter between the artist and nature. For Penone the historical anthropological aspects of form emerge gradually within the limits of human experience and correspond to the integrated growth processes of nature.

Footnotes.

¹ Penone, Giuseppe and Celant, Germano. Arte Povera, History and Protagonists, p.143.

² Ibid.

³ Penone, Giuseppe. Giuseppe Penone, Städtisches Museum Abteiberg Moenchengladbach, p.8.

⁴ Ibid. p.12.

⁵ Penone, Giuseppe and Bradley, Jessica. Giuseppe Penone, p.64.

⁶ Penone, Giuseppe and Spoetter, Walter. Documenta 7, p.312.

Some of Penone's work.

Penone's artistic activity began in 1968, in the year which art, if not society, changed and moved away from morphology and formalism, reducing the phenomenological analysis of its minimal tendencies, and moved towards the individualistic and socialistic voluntarism of formal and material anarchy.

Below I describe, from my point of view, his major and most important work.

In 1968 Penone fixed a cast iron hand, his own, to a young tree at the point where he had originally grasped it. The instant of touch was transformed into a permanent point of contact. As the tree grew, it began to consume the obstruction in the same way that water ripples and flows round a stone in a stream, undeterred in pursuing its final destination. Penone called it: "It will go on growing except at that point." (plate 1.)

Penone wrote:

"In the work on the growth of trees I was imagining a different density of matter, wood a hard material, becomes fluid and soft with time. I explored the relationship between the lifetime, the breath of the tree and my breath, seen as natural but opposite elements. Another aspect that concerns time is the route the work takes: it has many phases of development, and every moment can be final. This passage through the work in its different moments, is followed in the opposite direction, gives the reading of the flayed tree: I go back in time on piece of wood, traversing its form and surface one centimeter at a time. This might seem like a craft approach to execution, but the labour and practice of an action always develop a knowledge that facilitates thought. It is a choice, a way of life, running through the work in time with my presence, without entrusting it to others: I see it as a relationship between the breathing of one material with respect to the other. In my opinion the elements are fluid, even stone is fluid, a mountain crumbles and becomes sand, it's just a matter of time. The duration of our life allows us to ascribe values of "hard" and "soft" to certain things, while time annuls them. In doing the work of sculpture, which is based on a hard element that is brought into proximity of a soft one - the chisel that penetrates the wood - I'm compelled to consider these aspects if I want to approach the problem." 1



Plate 1.

What Penone wrote includes his first "tree", which he created in 1969 when he was 21. Starting from a beam of wood with a square cross-section, he removed the year-rings one by one, going round the knots carefully to show the branches. He worked, removing the rings, until the tree had regained the volume it had when it was 21 years: dead of course, but cleanly resurrected. One side of the beam was left intact as a way of condensing in the present both the past and the future of the tree. The poetic title of the tree was: "Its being in its twenty second year, viewed at the present."(plate 2.)

Here Penone's work isn't the production of an aesthetic object. The work isn't that which is presented to the eye of the spectator, rather it is the experience which was lived, of which the object is more or less an indication. In the same year, 1969, Penone brought a young tree into his workshop and coated it with wax from its base to the tip of its branches. At the same time as it received the marks from the smallest irregularities in the bark, the bark also received the imprints of the artists fingers. The act of molding allowed him to put himself into a natural process. (plate 3.) The latter piece, an act of addition, contrasted to the tree which is based on the principle of subtraction. In 1970 Penone wore a pair of highly polished mirrored contact lenses, which figuratively and effectively made him blind. Penone in this case is dealing with the limits between the external and the internal. This work clearly leads into a contemplation of the relationship, and the distinction that must be made, between external reality, the eye that reflects it more than perceives it, and finally the mind, behind the eye, that comprehends. This link of relationships becomes further and almost impossibly complicated if the object in front of the reflecting eye is a photographic camera or another human being, but of course this the condition in which the work most naturally exists when it exists - this is the condition in which another mind can begin to interpret or simply feel the distinctions that this work is able



Plate 3., The tree's years plus one.

and anxious to make. Like the eyelids, the lenses stopped the entrance of light, forming a barrier between the interior and the exterior world, while maintaining contact with both. (plate 4.)

Giuseppe Penone transformed the sense of touch into sight when he developed photographs of impressions taken from his entire body surface directly onto a window sensitised with photographic emulsion. (plate 5.) Since 1970 Penone has "unrolled his own skin" on walls and glass windows and lights, demonstrating its vast visual potential, as unpredictable and mysterious as a forest. By transferring enlarged details of a thumb, elbow, eyelid or cheek to surfaces of canvas or stone, he reveals an unknown territory. He focuses our gaze on the vast desert of a portion of the body, draws us into the infinitely small detail of human beings, penetrates the hiding-places of the skin to open up another dimension. The skin is thought of as endlessly unfolding details of the body onto the surfaces it touches. Through the constant contact that it has with clothing, with objects, and with the air that it displaces and is enveloped by, a palpable image of touch emerges.

" The work involving skin is a reflection on the traces we leave on things, random mark or involuntary images like the imprint left on a piece of glass or a vase. I made the unrollings by transferring the traces of my blackened skin to adhesive tape. The pressure produced the image, which I projected in space and went over again with a series of gestures that involved me totally. It wasn't a found image, as my body had made it, I had made the gestures of touching - an insignificant everyday action with nothing special about it. Similarly when I went over the images I didn't follow a specific plan as both found images and plans absorb knowledge. As I proceeded I came to know more about my body, as well as about the wall surface, It was like walking on my own skin and on the skin of space. Two moments existed. Furthermore the techniques of picking up and projecting the image were different. I went from a very small strip, to a wall, to a detached panel, the Eyelids... Thus a "map" was produced of the skin of my eyelid, which is the point of closure, like the contact lenses..."
Thus a "map" was produced of the skin of my eyelid, which is the point of closure, like the contact lenses..."²

Several other drawings made by the same method followed. As the scale was increased the drawing filled the wall, and the intricate circuitry of creases punctuated by pores and interrupted by hairs began to resemble the



Plate 4. Reverse your eyes.



Plate 5.

map of a lush, subcutaneous continent in which plant and animal merge in a dense undergrowth.

In his "Potatoes", Penone tests how far the forms of nature can be subjected to the pressure of the art form and still remain natural. Penone took impressions of his facial features and made moulds from them - the results were negative versions of positive volumes. He buried these moulds with germinating potatoes, so that in time they would force the potatoes into physiognomical forms. The process was successful with five potatoes, which Penone subsequently cast in bronze and exhibited among a pile of normal potatoes. (plate 6.) Here the artist's concern with alterations of systems of growth and positive and negative volumes finds a new and highly original synthesis.

"The Potatoes of 1977 deal with a different problem. I thought about the form that has a value of transmission for man - and there aren't any. Geometric forms are recognised as man-made, as are anthropomorphic forms. It is difficult to understand the work of the human being if this work is integrated in nature. If I make a stone exactly like a river stone, nobody notices the difference. If instead I make a head, it becomes significant. There is human incapacity to understand something that is not just like us. Potatoes, like many other vegetables, have interesting tubers and roots. There's actually a whole literature: just think of mandrake, people used to believe that the tubers of the mandrake, because they are anthropomorphic, possessed magical powers. I made anthropomorphic potatoes in my image. I indicated this aspect using the growth of tubers, then I cast them in bronze. I did the same with squashes in 1978-1979." 3

In "Pumpkin and Absolute Black from Africa" (plate 7.) 1978-79, the magical properties that were once equally attributed to art and agriculture are restored in a mysterious transformation. Developing what he did before in his "Potatoes", Penone's pumpkins this time contain the image of the entire face and thus become head, centres of sensory reception and mental processes. Watching over this strangely animated garden is an imposing mass of black granite, which contains a negative image. Like a scarecrow, the clothing and the head signify the existence of a living body. Although it is formed out of hard rock, the imprint gives the impression of softness,



Plate 6



Plate 7

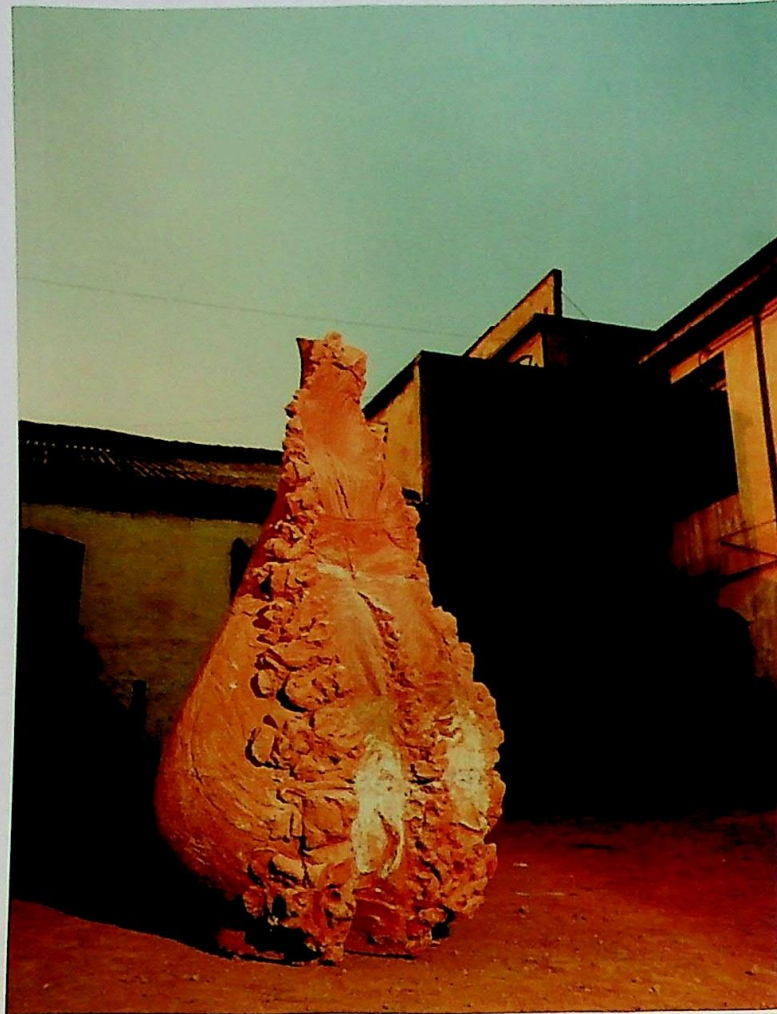


Plate 8.

as if a living being had been fossilised at some inconceivably distant point in time. Conversely, the pumpkins conform to the negative of a human face and their relatively short period of growth is captured in bronze for eternity.

" Absolute Black of Africa is made of granite, a hard material, because it was intended to be a privileged negative for the growth of plants. I've always exhibited it as a scarecrow because it is part of the site-specific iconography of the garden... The idea was to make a double: in Absolute Black of Africa I sought to make a negative that would have a projection in time. It's a work suitable for an archaeological museum, because one can see images made in stones. They look like they were made yesterday, even after two thousand years, they have the extraordinary ability to stand outside time. And so I made the mark of this soft body in the hardest material - granite. I gave this figure a suit of clothes and a hat in order to place it historically, as the age of sculptures, in Roman portraiture as in artistic iconography in general, is declared on the basis of the hair of clothing... The figure rests with its back against the wall to give a sense of an impersonal testimony. Finally I left some air between the hair and the stone hat, it became like a shell. It was a way of leaving a dated and datable mark." ⁴

Terra-cotta is deeply rooted in the long tradition of Italian art. The sculptors of the Renaissance, the ancient Romans and the Greeks before them favoured its use. The recovery of terra-cotta as viable material has allowed contemporary artists to rediscover rich possibilities and to reinvent vital new forms. Penone sees terra-cotta as a material of the earth whose properties are quite different in its natural as opposed to its fired state. Moreover, the fluidity of this medium when mixed with water and its ability to capture ephemeral forms which do not lose their freshness when the clay hardens, appeals to Penone's poetic sensibility. In his terra-cotta sculptures Penone reopens the questions of how to make visible what is well-known but invisible in nature; in this case, the process of breathing. Penone's terra-cottas are called "Breath" (Soffio) and take two forms - vases (1978)- (plate 8) and leaves.

The artist seeks to rediscover in his "Soffio" the process of breathing; the breath being both an extension of man, and of nature in the form of wind. When a vase maker constructs a vase on the potter's wheel, his breath

remains inside the work, his breath, in fact, gives the work its life. Penone relates this phenomenon to Egyptian mythology, where the Creator of man was a vase-maker: "Prometheus, son of Japhet and Clymene, modelled the man with mud and water while Athena blew into them the breath of life." In fact, the word "sculptor" in Egyptian translates as "one who gives life".

For each leaf piece Penone amasses a large pile of leaves in the forest and then blows into the pile to obtain what he calls "the negative form" of blowing. He subsequently translates this into a terra-cotta equivalent - a large vase shape. The leaves displaced by blowing are suggested by the delicately modelled clumps of clay which define the undulating perimeter of the hollowed negative form. Penone leant against the clay, leaving the imprint of his body visible on the vase, so that here, as in all of Penone's work, there is an intensely human dimension: When the viewer presses against the sculpture, his body completes the work, and he can blow into a palette-shaped mouthpiece. If one were to blow into a pile of real leaves, they would move, fill out the negative form and return to their original positions. But this cannot happen in "Soffi". Penone thus creates a tension between the original concrete form, and the abstract, implied possibilities of its altered version.

In Penone's "Large Plant Gestures" 1983-88, he uses contours of bodies cast in bronze and places some of them within the context of plants and vegetation, so as to suggest growth and change as well as overgrowth and decay. (plate 9.) The traces of his fingers when he modelled the clay become ideal channels along which liquid can flow, and the outside skin reminds one of the bark of a tree. In its form and structure the imprint and the outside skin is strongly reminiscent of a plant-like organism - a kind of Green Man, or wood spirit, or conversely a reference to Daphne turning into a laurel tree. That also goes for Penone's "Path" sculptures (1987-87, plate 10.) which are executed in the same way as his "Large Plant Gestures"



Plate 9.



Plate 10.

and "Plant Gestures". After 1984 he calls his "Plant Gestures" "Landscapes" or even "Vertical Landscape".

Penone skillfully manipulates his various material to make the viewer feel in touch with nature, with the wellsprings of life.

He uses bronze, one of his few concessions to the eighties materialism.

" This material is very important for me. It has a remarkable ability to fossilise plants, probably because it was invented at a time when plants had magical qualities. Still today in casting, reed-like tubes are used to let the air escape from the mould, and to pour in the bronze. The idea of using an instrument that lets air pass, that carries the breath like a sound, interested me, like the idea of a material - bronze - that could fossilise plants in an ideal way. I have problems making bronze works in the sense of sculpture, but not in the vegetable sense..." 5

"Large Plant Gestures", 1983, are sculptures that are irresistibly attracted to bushes and trees, that change into obscure souls wandering through forests and parks, they are the inhabitants and conquerors of a nature that surrounds them and changes them into infinite growth.

With "Plant Gestures" and "Landscapes" we are at the height of fusion. (plate 11.) The figure finds the imprint of its being in the intertwining of leaves and branches, but acquires its support too. It is no longer an artistic arabesque, but constitutes itself as a natural multitude, the crowded vegetation of a new landscape.

"... For me touching a form without changing it, is like stretching out to vegetable form, like climbing liana or ivy. The reading of a form, the sculpture or gesture of the sculptor is therefore a plant-like fluidity: that's why the work is called "Large Plant Gesture". It becomes like the reading of a physical form which in its reality relies on the real.

The work was executed technically after making a clay sculpture on a mannequin that serves as an armature and had standard proportions. Once the whole mannequin had been covered with clay I touched it, leaving traces of my fingers on points that would be recognisable and expressive... My hands left a depression in the clay, which I filled with wax. The bronze was cast over the wax, and from the trace came the bronze "bark" that constitutes the figure interlaced with trees or potted plants. It is therefore a gesture that indicates the figure, the space within which the figure is born, the procedure is just the opposite of that of the flayed tree, where I am the element in movement and the tree is static while I recover the tree-form. Here it



Plate 11. Three Landscapes.



Plate 12. Pate 1. (detail).



Plate 13.

is the tree that recovers the human figure... I thought about the permanence of the vegetable with respect to other form and as a consequence I crafted my "Large Vegetable Gesture" indissolubly to the tree...

There's the aspect of substitution of vegetable for the body as the possibility of becoming of the material of the human. When one dies one becomes plant-food. "Path", 1985, is also based on this idea: the negative of a face is impressed on the branches. (plate 12.) When I needed to show the "Large Plant Gestures" in an interior I used pots, which as we have seen possess cultural connotations."

In his "Fingernail", 1988, Penone is again using the human body, if only a part of it. The fingernail, a sculptors tool and instrument of exploration, the protection for the finger, is unique from person to person, with its shape and its patterns, almost like a fingerprint one could identify a person with it. Penone's "Fingernails" are more directly revealed than in the images reflected in nature, in trees or tubers. It unleashes an unknown force, because it pushes sculpture to a confrontation with the space of the body, as an external territory: a landscape not yet dominated by the simplification and routine of vision.

" I began with the idea of the fingernail as a tool for making sculpture, as a utensil of the body. I've been working on it for three years, and its subsequent to the work on the eyelid and the Soffio. I thought of making the fingernail of glass because glass is used to clean wood. It's sharp. At the same time it's transparent, so the glass and fingernail would have the same identity and fragility. The fingernail is also the negative of the flesh, it gathers the earth, a part of which is deposited within it, in a vase. I made them on clay, which I had already made use of to construct the imprint of the body, like the fingernail there's the imprint of the flesh. Enlarged it becomes a container for the body, it has an almost sepulchral meaning... 7

In some of Penone's glass "Fingernails" one can find either hand or foot prints, like points of reference where the fingernail comes from, the original being imprinted in the reproduction.(plate 13.)

While the "Fingernail" is an unusual image in art, glass does not really suit it: glass does not have the same quality as a fingernail; it is not as flexible and it is transparent and not translucent as a fingernail is.

In Strasbourg I repeated the work of the Fingernail with another stone, in the Musee de l'Ouvre Notre Dame, the cathedral museum. The space I chose was the Sculptors Meeting Hall. I took the same stone used to construct the cathedral, the same as the floor and I cut troughs in it, in which I placed plaster negatives of the nails and fingers of different people. It is another reference to the idea of culture, to losing one's nail in digging. It became like a reliquary." 8

With this piece he is almost recalling the history of that particular place and space, in using the same material as in the building and in his negative casts of fingernails of anonymous people. He may be recalling all the people and sculptors, who built the cathedral, and who meet there, documenting their lost fingernails, their power, and their work which went into that sculptors meeting hall. (plate 14.)



Plate 14. Untitled.

Footnotes.

- 1 Penone, Giuseppe and Celant, Germano. Giuseppe Penone, p.17.
- 2 Ibid, p.20.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 Ibid, p.23.
- 6 Ibid, p.24.
- 7 Ibid, p.27
- 8 Ibid.

feel about what we are in the living world. The life force that goes through his work is the same guiding hand of nature; it is the metamorphosis of life itself.

Penone's sculpture is a restoring of elusive actuality, the invisible aspects that are the present, and through which the future receives an inscription of the past. Embedded in his use of materials such as bronze and terracotta is the concept of transformation. He moulds organic forms in bronze and plaster. He is acutely aware of the value of mythology, for in myth the real opposition that constitutes reality and balance is an emblematic structure; this structure gives meaning to the vertical metamorphosis in which man and nature participate. Yet this does not mean that Penone merely seeks to express harmony, or to construct subjective representations through objects and images. Instead, he approached his subjects by slowly penetrating the various layers that account for their existence.

Penone gives sensual density to nature. He infuses it with a formal level of logic that renews and renews it. He suggests an almost sexual relationship, of pleasure and immersion of the work, where aesthetic potentiality is broadened without being marked by industrial state. He calls for a qualitative change in the earthly and botanical substances of art. He uses artifice, like all artists, but he attempts to preserve the natural

Giuseppe Penone's work suggests a secret law which acts upon the relationship we have with the world we live in. His work helps us to understand those natural laws which are a forgotten part of our lives. Like the seed, there is within each one of us a sleeping force which is the memory of a once true relationship with the world around us. Penone's sculpture loosens that memory and unlocks our natural awareness of how we feel about what we see in the living world. The life force that goes through his work is the same guiding hand of nature: it is the metamorphosis of life into art.

Penone's sculpture is a restoring of elusive actuality, the invisible moments that are the present, and through which the future receives an impression of the past. Expressed in his use of materials such as bronze and terra-cotta is the concept of transformation. He fossilises organic forms in bronze and plaster. He is acutely aware of the value of mythology, for in myths the dual oppositions that constitute reality find balance in an emblematical structure; this structure gives meaning to the continual metamorphosis in which man and nature participate. But this does not mean that Penone merely seeks to express harmony, or to construct subjective associations through objects and images. Instead, he approaches his subjects by slowly penetrating the various layers that account for their existence.

Penone gives sensual density to nature. He infuses it with a formal blood or lymph that reawakens and remoulds it. He suggests an almost sexual relationship, of pleasure and insemination of the womb, where aesthetic potentiality is aroused without being marked by industrial scars. He calls for a qualitative change in the earthly and botanical substances of art. He uses artifice, like all artists, but he attempts to preserve the natural

state of things. He manipulates materials, but lets them grow and develop according to their climatic rhythms and flows. He preserves the dynamism of nature and prolongs its ardour until he finds a maturation where sculpture lives and pulsates, constructing an object of aesthetic investment that is the fruit of the balance between human labour and earthly energy. Art finds expression where uncertainty is not changed into tumescence, hence Penone makes his forms swell and grow until their ripeness, the furthest limit their development, is evoked and then blocks them in another material, such as marble or bronze, fired clay or iron. He fixes the leaves of bark at an instant before they crack or dissolve. He preserves their sensuality and fury, the memory of their naturalness. He brings to blossom their story and their past, sensitises the distance between their volumes and surfaces, solidifies them in images.

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