

**Martina Tanga**  
**Flipping the Exhibition Inside Out: Enrico Crispolti's**  
**Show *Ambiente come Sociale* at the 1976 Venice Biennale**

**Abstract**

In 1976, art historian and curator Enrico Crispolti – charged with organizing the show, *Ambiente come Sociale*, for the Italian Pavilion at the Venice Biennale – radically rethought the exhibition form. In an unconventional move, he strategically chose not to house any artworks within the confines of the gallery space. Instead, he sprawled documentary photographs, videos, texts, pamphlets, and audio recordings on tables like the products of field research. The artworks themselves were site-specific and located elsewhere in various towns and cities across the country. Adhering to the Biennale's overarching theme of environment and decentralization, Crispolti championed artists working in Arte Ambientale (environmental art), who were making art located in the urban context and social reality. Yet, Crispolti turned the institution's theme inside out: while visitors came to its center to see the art, they were thrust outwards towards the peripheries, and outside in the city, where the actual artworks were sited. The ingenuity of this action, and the re-conception of what could constitute installation art, is evident when Crispolti's exhibition is compared to Germano Celant's 1976 Biennale show *Ambiente/Arte*, a diachronic art historical study of this new art medium. While Celant presented self-referential examples based on formal qualities, Crispolti exponentially broadened the boundaries of installation art to include the environment, urban context, social questions, and political contingency. This paper examines Crispolti's curatorial strategy as it aligned, but also critiqued, the Biennale as a cultural institution. Furthermore, it frames the exhibition as a medium for artistic innovation, particularly in the definition of environment and installation art.

**Keywords**

Arte Ambientale, Ambiente, Institutional Critique, Enrico Crispolti, Exhibition Design

# Flipping the Exhibition Inside Out: Enrico Crispolti's Show *Ambiente come Sociale* at the 1976 Venice Biennale

Martina Tanga

Just six months before the 37<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale was scheduled to open in July 1976, art historian, critic and curator Enrico Crispolti was unexpectedly called to organise the exhibition that represented Italy in this multi-national art world presentation.<sup>1</sup> Internal politics at the institution – which led to the resignation of the cinematographer Maurizio Calvesi and author Silvano Giannelli from the visual arts commission – fortuitously resulted in an opportunity for Crispolti.<sup>2</sup>

Not many curators would have had an exhibition concept, and a method to implement it, at such short notice. Crispolti, however, with his ear close to the ground, had been working tirelessly throughout the 1970s with artists – such as Ugo La Pietra, Franco Summa, Riccardo Dalisi, and the collective Humor Power Ambulante – supporting and promoting their projects that were participatory, temporary, and explicitly sited in the urban environment. Necessity is the mother of invention and Crispolti, in an accelerated timeframe, seized the chance to reconceive the exhibition as a creative medium in order to introduce to Biennale audiences artistic experiments occurring in Italy's streets and piazzas.

The resulting exhibition, *Ambiente come sociale* (Environment as Social), July 18 – October 10, 1976, was innovative both in its content and form. Crispolti brought artists, who, for the most part, skirted spaces of institutional display – such as galleries and museums – to the art establishment, specifically the Venice Biennale. These artists typically chose to inhabit a peripheral position *vis-à-vis* the art economy, operating in the social, urban environment. This enabled them to gain greater artistic autonomy from commercial and elitist structures that pervaded the institutional art system and to attain the freedom to engage directly

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The painter Raffaele De Grada was also on the commission and in charge of the Italian Pavilion. He worked together with Crispolti on *Ambiente come Sociale*. De Grada's original exhibition idea centred on the theme "Habitat". After Crispolti was commissioned to curate the exhibition in the Italian Pavilion in January 1976, De Grada took a secondary position and let Crispolti take the lead on the exhibition concept, content, and execution.

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Stefania Portinari, "La Biennale di Venezia 1976: Ambiente/Arte," in *Anni settanta. La Biennale di Venezia* (Venice: Marsilio, 2018), 266. See also Maurizio Calvesi, "Polemica sulla Biennale", *Corriere della Sera*, July 1, 1976, 3 and "Commissioni, dimissioni di S. Giannelli and M. Calvesi," Historical Archives of Contemporary Arts, Venice (ASAC), FS, AV, b. 225. Among other things, Calvesi resigned over the fact that he thought the general theme "Ambiente" was too vague, and he wanted a historical show about the history of the Biennale.

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Martina Tanga, *Arte Ambientale, Urban Space, and Participatory Art* (New York: Routledge, 2019).

with urban audiences.<sup>3</sup> Crispolti's decision to bring these artists to the Biennale – a site, in many ways, at the centre of the art world – was bold.

The question of how to present these artists' work authentically drove Crispolti to reconceive the exhibition form. Embracing the notion of decentralisation – the recalibration of power from the centre to the periphery – as an exhibition strategy, Crispolti did not show *any* original artwork in the Biennale galleries, and only displayed documentation of site-specific and ephemeral interventions that had taken place elsewhere across the country.<sup>4</sup> While mounting an exhibition composed of documentation of large-scale, site-specific artworks was not new – already in 1969, curator Willoughby Sharp had used such methods when showcasing Land Art in the show *Earth Art* held at the Johnson Museum at Cornell University<sup>5</sup> – Crispolti embedded his choice within the context of the Venice Biennale. His presentation went to the heart of the Biennale's recent institutional crisis, which originated in 1968 when protests charged the organisation of being elitist and anti-democratic.<sup>6</sup> Capitalising on the Biennale's predicament, Crispolti fashioned the exhibition as a form of institutional critique; a creative practice typically carried out by artists to highlight the role museums, galleries and other sites of display have on the presentation of art. The work undertaken by practitioners of institutional critique is one of decentring in that they seek to shed light on latent power disparities. Crispolti's curatorial program, additionally, needs to be understood in relation to broader definitions of decentralisation, a loaded word in the art of politics of 1970s Italy. Crispolti, therefore, leveraged his ability to examine the redistribution of power to challenge the hierarchies internal to the Biennale and the art establishment. *Ambiente come sociale* was of the moment and, without missing a beat of the chants on the streets, Crispolti intended to “bring into the context of the Biennale issues and experiences *in vivo* and debate them, in order to make the Biennale itself to be an instrument of creative presence in the current socio-cultural debate”.<sup>7</sup>

Unfortunately, Crispolti's efforts for *Ambiente come sociale* have received scant critical attention.<sup>8</sup> This might have been because the 1976 Biennale was extravagantly large, with many new initiatives and special exhibitions.<sup>9</sup> With so much going on, the organisers did very little to promote Crispolti's show.<sup>10</sup>

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For an analysis of Enrico Crispolti's decentred curatorial projects and philosophy during the 1970s see Enrico Crispolti, *Arti visive e partecipazione sociale* (Bari: De Donato, 1977). For philosophical and political theories of decentralisation see: Cossutta, Armando. *Decentramento e Partecipazione: L'iniziativa dei Comunisti per l'attuazione della Legge sui Consigli di Circonscrizione* (Roma: Editori Riuniti, 1977) and *I Consigli di Quartiere* (Roma: Editori Riuniti, 1973).

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The Johnson Museum was, at the time, called the Andrew Dickson White Museum of Art. See Andrew Dickson White Museum of Art, *Earth Art*, exh. cat. (Ithaca, NY: Andrew Dickson White Museum of Art, Cornell University, 1969). Sharp included actual artworks made of earth in the galleries and site-specific artworks scattered around Cornell's campus. While some artists used conceptual practices drawing on documentary material, the exhibition presented actual artworks on site. Prior to Sharp's *Earth Art*, artist Robert Smithson curated the 1968 exhibition at the Dwan Gallery in New York titled simply *Earthworks*. This exhibition included documentary material of large-scale outdoor works by fourteen artists, including Herbert Bayer, Robert Morris, and Claes Oldenburg. This exhibition included site-specific artworks, like Morris's *Untitled (Dirt)*, as well as documentary photographs of artworks sited elsewhere. See Suzaan Boettger, “This Land Is Their Land”, *Art Journal Open* (April 19, 2013), [artjournal.collegeart.org/?p=3566](http://artjournal.collegeart.org/?p=3566), accessed March 2020.

6

Enzo Di Martino, *The History of the Venice Biennale: 1895-2005: Visual Arts, Architecture, Cinema, Dance, Music, Theatre* (Venice: Papiro Arte Venezia, 2007), 60-64.

7

“Intendo così portare dentro il contesto della Biennale il problema ed esperienze nel vivo del loro dibattersi, in modo da permettere alla Biennale stessa di farsi strumento di reale e creativa presenza nel dibattito socioculturale attuale”. Crispolti, *Arti visive e partecipazione sociale*, 309–310.

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Portinari, “La Biennale di Venezia 1976”, 260.

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Apart from the central exhibition curated by Germano Celant, there were numerous special exhibitions, including: *Spagna avanguardia artistica e realtà sociale 1936–1976; Il Werkbund – 1907 alle origini del design; Il razionalismo e l'architettura in Italia durante il Fascismo; Europa-America: Centro storico-suburbio, 27 architetti contemporanei; Ettore Sottsass: un designer Italiano; Design: Cinque Graphic Designers; Design: Le forme del vetro; Man Ray, testimonianza attraverso la fotografia;* and finally *Attualità Internazionali '72–'76*.

The exhibition entrance, as we can see from this documentary photograph, was through a back door on the Calle Paludo, and there was little signage within the Giardini for the exhibition [fig. 1]. Not only was it hard to locate geographically, but the show also suffered from critical invisibility, as it was omitted from the English press packet.<sup>11</sup> It is no surprise, then, that it received minimal coverage.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, *Ambiente come sociale*, based entirely on projected images and ephemeral material, was hard to document, and installation photographs yielded very little information when it came to aesthetic display and experience. All of these factors are obstacles to scholarship. Speculating further, none of the artists in the exhibitions have achieved renowned status, and their work from 1970s Italy is just now beginning to be studied.<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, Crispolti's exhibition is an important early example of curatorial practice as institutional critique. Its decentralised strategy, applied to many different facets of exhibition organising, has much to offer with regards to democratising the experience of art.

fig. 1  
Entrance to exhibition *Ambiente come sociale*, Venice Biennale, July 18 – October 10, 1976. Pictured entering the exhibition: Prime Minister Giulio Andreotti with journalist Floris Luigi Ammannati  
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## Ambiente

The term *Ambiente* (Environment) pulls together various dimensions of understanding space in terms of art, politics, and the social context. It was the overarching theme for the whole Venice Biennale, titled *Ambiente, Partecipazione, Strutture*

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Sara Catenacci, "L'ambiente come sociale alla Biennale di Venezia 1976: note di un libro mai realizzato", in *In corso d'opera: Ricerche dei dottorandi di Storia dell'Arte della Sapienza*, ed. Michele Nicolaci, Matteo Piccioni, and Lorenzo Riccardi (Rome: Campisano Editore, 2015), 321.

11

Patrizia Regorda, "Biennale di Venezia 1976: la sezione Italiana "Ambiente come sociale" (MA thesis, Università degli Studi di Pavia, 2004), 87.

12

Catenacci, "L'ambiente come sociale alla Biennale di Venezia 1976", 320. Most of the national press critiqued the 1976 Biennale for focusing on quantity rather than quality of exhibitions and directed specific critiques toward the exhibition *Attualità '72-'76*. What little was written up about *Ambiente come sociale* focused on the fact that it was an ideological exhibition only about social issues, and completely missing aesthetic innovation. See Regorda, *Biennale di Venezia 1976*, 60–62, and 90.

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Tanga, *Arte Ambientale, Urban Space, and Participatory Art*, 5–6.

*Culturali* (Environment, Participation, Cultural Structures), selected by the visual arts commission<sup>14</sup> led by architect Vittorio Gregotti.<sup>15</sup> They chose it because it was considered broad enough to be interpreted in different ways, nationally and internationally; the idea of environment was linked to trends in installation and land art within Italy and other countries.<sup>16</sup> Gregotti hoped to present a cohesive exhibition across the pavilions, and many nations showcased art that aligned with the theme. For instance, the participatory artist group Collectif d'Art Sociologique, exhibiting work in the French Pavilion, projected cinematographic footage onto historic buildings in Venice.

Richard Long's work, shown in the British Pavilion, also engaged with the environmental theme by installing rocks inside the gallery, along with photographs of other rock sculptures, such as *A Line in Ireland* (1974) and *A Line in the Himalayas* (1975). The American Pavilion likewise chose to show artists who responded to the theme *Ambiente*, such as Robert Irwin and Jim Roche. Broadening the implications of the term, the Swiss Pavilion showcased works of Ernst Aklin and Ernst Buchwalder that addressed ecological issues.

In Italy, *Ambiente* helped define the type of artwork – now called *Arte Ambientale* (environmental art) – Crispolti had been promoting across the country: temporary, often participatory, and sited specifically in the urban space.<sup>17</sup> A movement that had been gaining traction since the beginning of the 1970s, it had various manifestations in exhibitions like Luciano Caramel's *Campo Urbano*, held in Como in 1969; *Interventi sulla città e sul paesaggio*, held at Zafferana Etnea in 1970; and most prominently in *Volterra '73*, curated by Crispolti in Volterra, Tuscany, in 1973. Environmental art was still inchoate in Italy, and at this time it was referred to in different ways, such as “arte sociale” (social art), “arte partecipata” (participatory art), and “arte urbana” (urban art).<sup>18</sup> Indeed, it was the Biennale's general theme – already chosen in 1975 before Crispolti was called to curate the Italian Pavilion – that helped give this art movement its name. Combining *ambiente* (environment) with *sociale* (social) for his title, Crispolti began to define an art practice that involved the expansion of aesthetic projects outside museums and galleries and into streets and piazzas.

This type of site-specific art engaged with the urban environment as a space of social relations.<sup>19</sup> Crispolti only later defined “Arte Ambientale [as] part of an urban context, where there are people, where you have an architectural context. It [was] active in that it hoped to change the space in which it [was] situated.”<sup>20</sup> Moreover, the art was intimately tied to its urban site, to its diversity, anthropological patrimony, social actuality, and political contingency.<sup>21</sup> Participatory to varying

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Members of the 1976 Venice Biennale Visual Arts Commission included: Eduardo Arroyo, Enrico Crispolti, Raffaele De Grada, Pontus Hulten and Tommaso Trini.

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Vittorio Gregotti was the Director of the Visual Art and Architecture section, 1974-1976.

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Gregotti's understanding of the term *Ambiente* was interdisciplinary, as he came from an architecture background. Final approval of the theme was given on March 27, 1976. See Regorda, *Biennale di Venezia 1976*, 42.

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Tanga, *Arte Ambientale, Urban Space, and Participatory Art*.

18

Luciano Caramel, “Towards the Seventies (Beyond the Sixties),” in *Arte in Italia negli anni '70: verso i settanta (1968–1970)*, eds. Luciano Caramel, Elena Di Raddo, and Ada Lombardi (Milan: Edizioni Charta, 1996), 25.

19

Alessandra Pioselli, “Arte, politica e territorio: esperienze nella Milano degli anni settanta”, in *Milano città d'arte: arte e società 1950–1970*, eds. Paolo Campiglio, Marilisa Di Giovanni, Cristiano G. Sangiuliano, and Alessandra Pioselli (Alessandria: Edizioni dell'Orso, 2001), 97.

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“La land art non è attiva, è molto romantica. Cioè, la misura della land art non è la città, ma il deserto. L'Arte ambientale si inserisce in un contesto urbano, la piazza dove c'è la gente, dove hai un contesto architettonico che voi confrontare. C'è una idea attiva. L'Arte ambientale tende a modificare lo spazio dove è messa.” Enrico Crispolti, interview with the author, Rome, August 4, 2011.

21

Enrico Crispolti, “Preface”, *Praticare la città: Arte ambientale, prospettive di ricerca e metodologie d'intervento*, Massimo Bignardi and Enrico Crispolti (Naples: Liguori Editore, 2013), xiii.



degrees, it sought to engage citizens in the process of creation and, in turn, critical reflection. The goal of environmental art was to awaken urban inhabitants out of a state of passive conformity and into a new sense of civil and social consciousness. These artists' work, therefore, was necessarily based outside in the urban sphere, as the site where they could unfurl creative activity with a different modality from gallery-based art, firmly rooted in the social context.

Environmental art embraced a decentralised approach that could not have been more fitting to the Biennale's 1976 agenda. This year in particular, the institution was concerned with promoting democratic values and reaching working-class audiences beyond the famous exhibition venue of the *Giardini* (gardens). New initiatives involved programming in neighbourhoods around Venice and beyond.<sup>22</sup> In other words, the Biennale wanted to extend beyond its institutional space – into the urban space – to reach broader public.

At the same time, however, positioned outside the traditional Biennale grounds, environmental artworks inherently critiqued the spaces of aesthetic display of the art establishment, in both museums and galleries, in ways that related to institutional critique. Asserting autonomy, environmental artists disengaged from the art institutional sphere to take up sociopolitical issues of the city, such as capital's territorialisation of urban space, the uncontrolled growth of cities, rampant land speculation, and the desperate need for working-class housing.<sup>23</sup> These issues were, perhaps, antithetical to typical art-world concerns, and environmental artists sought – each to varying degrees – to find value for their projects outside of the art world economy.<sup>24</sup>

The crux of the matter is that their presentation at the Biennale reveals a dynamic tension between the institution – and its goals to decentralise and democratise – and environmental artists – whose projects sited in alternative locales were inherently critical of institutional spaces. The shifting contextual relationship between the artwork and its space of display – its location, but also narrative, politics, and framework – was complex, and challenged the traditional dichotomy of institutional critique. That is to say, at the 1976 Venice Biennale, critical artwork was presented at an institution that was itself going through a process of self-critique and sought to implement institutional change to make the Biennale more democratic, transparent, and accessible to a broader public.<sup>25</sup> This resulted simultaneously in an alignment of art and institutions, as well as critical opposition, thanks to Crispolti's innovative exhibition strategy. He cleverly brought the *issues* into the centre – in terms of the institution and discourse – but without compromising the criticality of artworks.

In *Ambiente come Sociale*, Crispolti organised examples of environmental art in a way that reflected the provisional nature of the art form itself.<sup>26</sup>

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For example, the conference titled "Il decentramento culturale in Italia", October 1-3, 1976. The meeting included sociologists, artists, trade union members, representatives of grassroots associations, and local organisations. The common objective was to debate how to include, in the circuits of cultural production, those individuals who had traditionally been excluded, and to question the role of cultural institutions in this process. See "Attività del Gruppo permanente di lavoro per i convegni", reprinted in *Annuario 1977: Eventi del 1976: La Biennale di Venezia* (Venezia: La Biennale di Venezia, 1977), 426.

23

See, for example, Martina Tanga, "Riappropriazione Dell'Ambiente: Ugo La Pietra's and Franco Summa's Urban Interventions" in *Arte Ambientale, Urban Space, and Participatory Art*, 106-141.

24

In general, curators and promoters of art practicing in the 1970s – Germano Celant or Achille Bonito Oliva – did not embrace social political art, like environmental art, into the mainstream art scene.

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See Martina Tanga, "Institutional Reinvention: The Venice Biennale during the 1970s", in *Untying 'the Knot': The State of Postwar Italian Art History*, eds. Marin Sullivan and Sharon Hecker (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2018), 207-228.

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Crispolti was called in to organise the exhibition in January 1975, just five months before the Biennale was scheduled to open. Sara Catenacci's essay "*L'ambiente come sociale* alla Biennale di Venezia 1976: note di un libro mai realizzato," in Nicolaci, Piccioni, and Riccardi, *In corso d'opera*: 317-324, documents the political context around the commissioning of Crispolti's exhibition with Raffaele de Grada.

Working with designers Ettore Sottsass and Ulla Salovaara, he exhibited interventions that had taken place in cities across Italy as research findings, filling four large galleries of the Central Pavilion with documentary material in the form of projected photographs, videotapes, artists' interviews, and other ephemeral material. Environmental art was not introduced as a fully formed, codified, and unified aesthetic movement; rather, Crispolti expressed an art practice that was evolving. The flexibility of the term itself was reflected in the exhibition design, with temporary walls to which documents and images were hastily tacked and elements that could be changed out at a moment's notice.

As an organizing structure, Crispolti showed documentation of artworks in five diverse "hypotheses" of aesthetic interventions within the urban sphere: Hypothesis and Reality of Urban Conflict, Individual Urban Re-appropriation, Spontaneous Participation – Political/Poetical Action, Participation with/through the Local Entities, and Hypothesis of Social Relations through the State Entities.<sup>27</sup> These hypotheses allowed groupings of similar art practices to draw out themes in the different approaches to environmental art. Displayed as research, Crispolti implied that these classifications were tentative and in flux, and, as the curator, his role was to synthesise these urban art interventions and present them as documentation to the public.

It is unclear how Crispolti communicated these hypotheses within the exhibition space; as we shall see, he organised this material in a nonsequential and nonlinear narrative. The independently published accompanying exhibition catalogue, however, is much more structured; it elucidates Crispolti's conceptualisation of these categories and provides information on each artist. For instance, Crispolti described how the artwork under the title "Hypothesis and Reality of Urban Conflict" revealed social conditions within the city.<sup>28</sup> For example, setting up a palpable tension between the urban environment and the often aggressive geometric shapes of his sculptures, artist Mauro Staccioli used a formal vocabulary to create charged confrontations with viewers.<sup>29</sup> Temporary – albeit constructed from heavy-duty concrete and iron – Staccioli's sculptures functioned as ephemeral instruments of perceptual inquiry and critical reflection.<sup>30</sup>

Crispolti articulated what he described to be a flexible way of intervening in the urban social sphere in the grouping titled "Individual Urban Re-Appropriation".<sup>31</sup> Here, he focused on the work of designer and architect Ugo La Pietra, who engaged with the city through conceptual ethnographic projects that sought to uncover latent power relationships. His object of study was Milan's urban working class and he documented instances of their creativity in photographs and schematic drawings. In the catalogue, La Pietra's interventions are represented by images of recent projects, such as *I gradi di libertà (Degrees of Freedom)* from 1969–1972, in which he recorded the non-conforming footpaths carved by inhabitants of massive working-class housing complexes, detailing their perambulations in *fotomontaggi* (photo-collages). For La Pietra, these were instances where inhabitants were reappropriating their lived spaces by becoming conscious of their agency to navigate them.

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"Ipotesi e realtà di presenza urbane conflittuale, Riappropriazioni urbane individuali, Partecipazione spontanea— azione poetica/politica, Partecipazione in rapporto con/attraverso l'ente locale, Ipotesi di rapporto sociale attraverso l'ente statale". Translation by the author.

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"Un momento di 'avvertimento' ideologico che intende proporre al sociale urbano una sollecitazione rivelatoria, rompendo dunque un equilibrio fittizio in una prospettiva problematica diversa: suggerisce cioè emotivamente un diverso ordine di ragioni, una diversa consapevolezza della realtà della condizione sociale urbana". Ibid., 6.

29

Crispolti, *Ambiente come sociale la Biennale 1976*, 6. Also included in this grouping was the work of Nino Giammarco and Francesco Somaini.

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Mauro Staccioli, "Artist Statment", in Crispolti, *Ambiente come sociale la Biennale 1976*, 9.

31

Also included here was the work of Gruppo Salerno 1975, Fabio De Sanctis, and Gruppo Coordinamento (Carlo Maurizio Benvenuti, Tullio Catalano, and Franco Falasca).

Crispoliti invited a more active form of audience engagement in the third hypothesis, titled “Spontaneous Participation – Political/Poetical Action”.<sup>32</sup> He chose artists who worked in the public arena to create unrehearsed actions that sought to dialogue with citizens, meant to produce moments of creative freedom as an alternative to the “conditioning” present in everyday life.<sup>33</sup> He highlighted the work of Franco Summa, based in Pescara, as he interwove his projects with the urban environment and often collaborated with the local community. In the catalogue, Summa highlighted an intervention carried out with Pescara’s local art students, titled *Una bianca striscia di carta (A white strip of paper)* from 1973. The students held up large white sheets in Pescara’s main square, forcing inhabitants to walk around them, making them aware of the city’s spaces. Summa sought to redesign the city with simple elements – in this case paper – and to transform urban spaces, allowing citizens to relate to and reconsider the topographical context of social life.<sup>34</sup>

Similarly involving citizens in the active production of art, the Neapolitan group Humor Power Ambulante (Peripatetic Humor Power), formed in 1975 and comprising Marta Alleonato, Carlo Fontana, Ernesto Iannini, Annamaria Iodice, Claudio Massimi, Silvio Merlino, Roberto Vidali, and Giuseppe Zevola, organised participatory performances in urban space with simple but intimately poetic artistic acts. For instance, they coordinated events that involved selling stones warmed by the artists’ hands or Neapolitan raindrops for luck. With irony and wit, the group politicised everyday life to contribute to a new sense of the human condition.<sup>35</sup> Zevola, in particular, referred to the group’s practice as a type of urban performativity. Both Summa and Humor Power Ambulante activated the city’s inhabitants in projects through spontaneous collaboration, as a way of making them more aware of their lived context.

In the last two hypotheses – “Participation with or through the Local Entities” and “Hypothesis of Social Relations through the State Entities” – Crispolti focused on instances where artists had collaborated with inhabitants in grassroots urban initiatives. He emphasised in the catalogue – explicitly making references to the regional electoral outcome on June 15, 1975, and the national parliamentary elections on June 20, 1976—that this was a unique moment, as the country seemed to have finally gained a democratic perspective.<sup>36</sup> In both of these elections, the *PCI - Partito Comunista Italiano* (Italian Communist Party) achieved unprecedented visibility.<sup>37</sup> Crispolti cited as an example of such an initiative the *Operazione Roma Eterna*, based in the Testaccio neighbourhood of Rome.<sup>38</sup> All of the projects highlighted in Crispolti’s groupings were site-specific and represented in the first three rooms as documentation.

Structurally, Crispolti did not organise these different hypotheses in linear succession in the exhibition layout. On the contrary, Crispolti’s narrative flow – or *percorso comunicazionale* (communication pathway) – was like concentric circles of a spiral: at each ring, there was more information the visitor could discover

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Included in this section was the work of Eduardo Alamaro and the Cooperativa Artigiana e Pronto Intervento of Pomigliano d’Arco, as well as the work of Vincenzo de Simone in the school G. Pascoli di Cicciano, Naples, Crescenzo del Vecchio, Riccardo Dalisi, and Laboratorio di Comunicazione Militante.

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Crispoliti, *Ambiente come sociale la Biennale 1976*, 16.

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Franco Summa, email to the author (September 26, 2013).

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Humor Power Ambulante, “Untitled”, in Crispolti, *Ambiente come sociale la Biennale 1976*, 22.

36

Crispoliti, *Ambiente come sociale la Biennale 1976*, 32.

37

See introduction in Giacomo Sani, “The Italian electorate in the mid-1970s: Beyond tradition?” in *Italy at the Polls: The Parliamentary Elections of 1976*, ed. Howard Rae Penniman (Washington: American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research, 1977).

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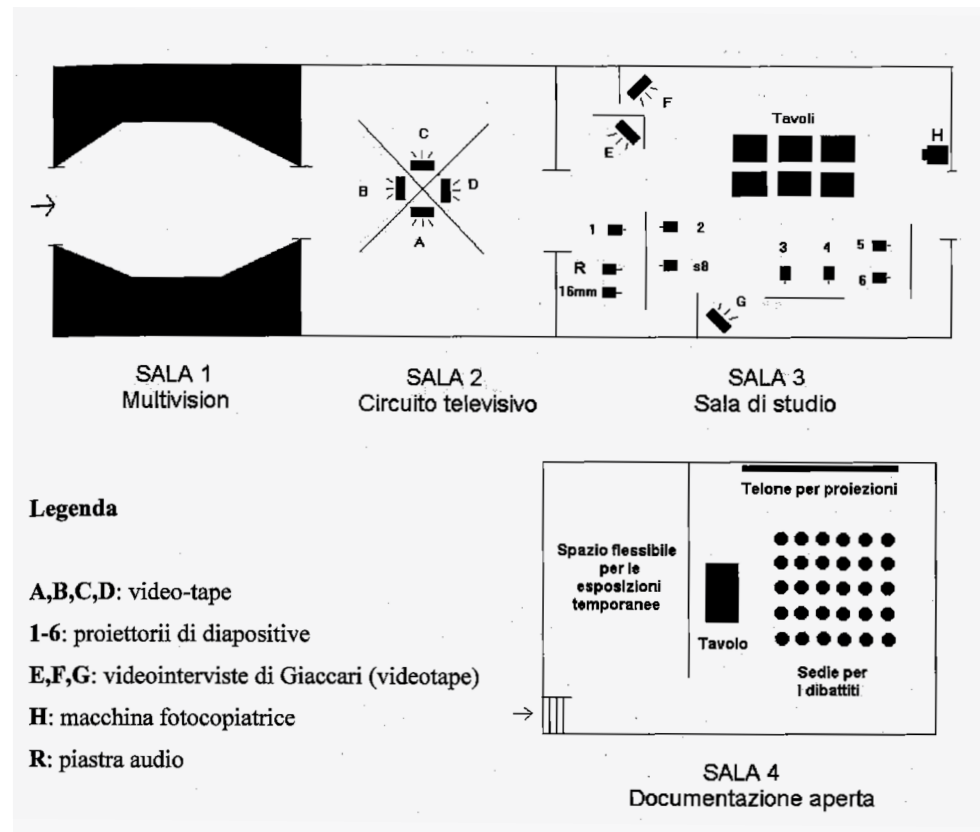
Sara Catenacci, “Un esperimento di rifondazione co-operativa: Operazione Roma Eterna, 1974–1976,” in *Arte fuori dall’arte Incontri e scambi fra arti visive e società negli anni Settanta* (Milan: Postmedia Books, 2017), 277–86.



[fig. 2]. In other words, Crispolti conceived the layout in alliance with environmental art and its ideological project – the exhibition was about the interpretive processes of information and the creative solicitation of the visitor.<sup>39</sup> In practice, all five hypotheses were shown in the first room, *Sala 1* (Room 1), which served as an introduction. With media designer Umberto Santucci, Crispolti curated what might have been perceived as an expansive room, comprising six continuously alternating projected images, or *multivision*. Visitors found themselves completely immersed in a space that was fast paced and engaging.<sup>40</sup> Summa, one of the artists, recalled that “Crispolti presented my urban environmental artworks with a series of colour slides that proceeded in automatic sequence (there were several Kodak Carousel projectors that were projected at the same time)”.<sup>41</sup> Through these images of environmental art projects, visitors could travel in urban space, visitors could travel to different sites – from Milan to Palermo – simultaneously as the projectors cycled through their inventory of photographs. There was also an audio component of urban sounds, electronic notes, and short musical excerpts.<sup>42</sup> It must have been at once dizzying and exciting to be transported to familiar and unknown locales.

The following room, *Sala 2* (room 2), consisted of four television screens set facing outward in a cross-like configuration with walls diagonally dissecting the space. In the spiral flow of the exhibition, this space was meant to deepen visitors’ knowledge of the hypotheses and introduce them in more depth to

fig. 2  
Design for the Italian Pavilion,  
Exhibition *Ambiente come sociale*, Venice Biennale, July  
18 – October 10, 1976.  
© L'Archivio Enrico Crispolti



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See Regorda, *Biennale di Venezia 1976*, 81.

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Catenacci, “L’ambiente come sociale alla Biennale di Venezia 1976”, 320; Crispolti records the content of the room as: “informazione multivision sui cinque aspetti di ricerca documentati (livello di sintesi informative)”. See Crispolti, *Ambiente come sociale la Biennale 1976*, 2.

41

“Le mie opere d’arte ambientali urbane erano presentate con una serie di diapositive a colori che procedevano in sequenza automatica nella sala delle proiezioni, (vi erano diversi proiettori Kodak Carousel che proiettavano in contemporanea)”. Franco Summa, email to the author, May 22, 2019.

42

Regorda, *Biennale di Venezia 1976*, 84.

different environmental interventions. Visitors could linger here and view documentary footage or videos of artists' work, like Riccardo Dalisi's *Esperienze al Traiano* (*Experiences at the Traiano*), Ugo La Pietra's *Monumentalismo* (*Monumentalism*), Franco Summa's *Un arcobaleno in fondo alla strada* (*A rainbow down the street*) [fig. 3], or Giuliano Mauri's *Intervento presso la Palazzina Liberty, Milano* (*Intervention at the Palazzina Liberty, Milan*).<sup>43</sup>

In both the first and second rooms, Crispolti relied heavily on *multivision* for the show, bringing artworks situated elsewhere into the Biennale galleries with the effect of immersing visitors in an environment that connected to the outside. He might have been inspired by the significant exhibition *Artevideo e multivision* at the Rotonda Besana in Milan in March 1975, curated by Tommaso Trini, where the exhibition space consisted almost entirely of videos and projected

fig. 3  
Franco Summa, *Un arcobaleno in fondo alla strada*, 1975,  
acrylic paint on the ground  
Image courtesy of the Artist.



images.<sup>44</sup> As a direct influence, Crispolti cited the exhibition *Avanguardia e cultura popolare* at the Galleria d'Arte moderna di Bologna, 1975, which also included projected images.<sup>45</sup> Crispolti was looking to create an experience outside the canonical terms of art consumption, an explicit critique of the traditional modes of display of the Biennale.

In the third room, Sala 3, Crispolti laid out ephemeral materials – such as exhibition catalogues, artists' statements, written texts, drawings, photographs,

43

On screen 1 were: Nino Giammarco, *Volterra '73*; Ugo La Pietra, *Per oggi basta e Monumentalismo*; Gruppo Salerno '75, *Gessificare, Venezia 1976*; Fabio De Sanctis, *La Traversata delle Alpi*; and Riccardo Dalisi, *Esperienze al Traiano*. On screen 2 were: Eduardo Alamano, *Al quartiere Traiani e in laboratorio a Pomigliano d'arco*; Vincenzo De Simone, *Teatrini di campagna*; Franco Summa, *Un arcobaleno in fondo alla strada*; and Humour Power Ambulante, *A Bagnoli*. On screen 3 were: Giuliano Mauri, *Intervento presso la Palazzina Liberty, Milano*; Giuseppe Sciola e moralisti sardi, *San Sperate, Paese museo*; Collettivo Autonomo Pittori di Porta Ticinese, *Interventi al Parco Vetra, in via De Amicis, in via Lenassini, al Pallido*; and Laboratorio di Comunicazione Militante, *Strategia d'informazione*. On screen 4 were: *Operazione Roma eterna, esperienza al Testaccio e all'Ostiense, Rapporti all'Ostiense, Progetto per un libro figurato; Riappropriazione del Mattatoio*; and Gruppo M. Fiorentino, *ICAP, Piano di Zona n. 61, Corviale*. See Regorda, *Biennale di Venezia 1976*, 85.

44

The Rotonda della Besana is also known as the Complesso di San Michele ai Nuovi Sepolcri. For a review of the exhibition, see Tommaso Trini, "Artevideo e multivision", *D'ARS*, no. 75 (July 1975): 12–21.

45

Crispolti, *Arti visive e partecipazione sociale*, 294.

and other types of documentary materials on six large tables [fig. 4]. In this installation photograph, we see a dozen visitors sitting and reading, standing and casually observing, and generally absorbing the material on display. Around these tables were more television screens showing videotapes with artists' interviews, created by Luciano Giaccari, bringing the artists' voices directly into the exhibition space.<sup>46</sup> Projectors showed additional images. Summa remembered that in this space, he pre-

fig. 4  
Sala 3, Research Tables,  
*Ambiente come sociale*, curated  
by Enrico Crispolti, Venice  
Biennale, July 18 – October 10,  
1976.  
Courtesy: Archivio Storico della  
Biennale di Venezia - ASAC



sented “photographic enlargements of [his] works along with a large-format album (70x50 cm) with study sketches for the interventions”.<sup>47</sup> In this deep research space, visitors could make photocopies of any of this material thanks to a free photocopy machine near the far end of the room.<sup>48</sup> The public could create their own personal catalogues of the exhibition from this readily available information. The spirit of this space was free, and accessible information could be shared at will.

In the last room, Sala 4 (Room 4), Crispolti conceived of the most radical presentation of what an exhibition space could be. He installed a completely fluid and ephemeral component to the show, which he called *Documentazione aperta* (Open Documentation).<sup>49</sup> Here, he organised additional programming to create a forum for open-ended debates and exchanges of information that would bring socio-urban issues into the gallery [fig. 5].<sup>50</sup> This space saw a frequent changeover of content; each temporary display, like *La riqualificazione della zona 1 a Milano*

46

Crispolti describes Sala 3 (Room 3) as “tre canali video con interviste di protagonisti, film di azioni, alcuni tavoli con ulteriori documentazioni, documenti stampati e fotografici.” Crispolti, *Arti visive e partecipazione sociale*, 294.

47

“C'erano dei pannelli con riportate ingrandimenti fotografici delle mie opere insieme ad un album di grande formato (cm. 70x50) con fogli-busta trasparenti in cui erano inseriti i miei schizzi di studio per gli interventi e anche una delle magliette SENTIRSI UN ARCOBALENO ADDOSSO che nel corso dei giorni della mostra fu rubata da un visitatore”. Franco Summa, email to the author, May 22, 2019.

48

Catenacci, “L'ambiente come sociale alla Biennale di Venezia 1976”, 320.

49

Crispolti describes Sala D (Room 4) as “materiale video, filmico, fotografico e stampati relative ai diversi argomenti di ‘documentazione aperta’.” See Crispolti, *Ambiente come sociale la Biennale 1976*, 2.

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Crispolti, *Ambiente come sociale la Biennale 1976*, 44.



(*The Requalification of Milan's Zone 1*), lasted about ten days.<sup>51</sup> This provisional space consisted of papers and photographs that appeared to have been quickly affixed to the makeshift walls, chairs arranged haphazardly in the centre of the room so that they could be easily rearranged to accommodate group discussions, and signage that could be displaced to make way for either people or objects coming into the gallery.

This area was Crispolti's most innovative contribution to reconceiving the exhibition as a site of debate, and the core of his decentralizing exhibition strategy. In this space, the artist group A/Social shared their social and participatory

fig. 5  
*Documentazione Aperta*  
Courtesy: Archivio Storico della  
Biennale di Venezia, ASAC



work from the psychiatric hospital Frullone in Naples, which blurred the boundaries between art and activism. The artist Enzo Mari led a presentation of the sculptural monument to Roberto Franceschi, a student of Milan's Boccioni University shot point-blank by the police on January 23, 1973. This collective initiative involved two dozen or so artists in protesting the extreme violence overtaking the nation through the integration of art in public space.<sup>52</sup> Additionally, *Documentazione aperta* highlighted a number of grassroots activities in institutional structures and redevelopments of city centres. Most importantly, this section drew attention to legislation on the public funding of artworks, known as the “*legge del 2%*” (Law of 2 percent), which stipulated that 2 percent of every state-funded building had to be put toward a public art project.

What made Crispolti's exhibition appear so cutting-edge was its placement next to Germano Celant's show, *Ambiente/arte: dal futurismo alla body art* (*Environment/Art: From Futurism to Body Art*), also in the Central Pavilion. These two exhibitions were physically adjacent, and their shared subject, *Ambiente*, invites comparison not only in terms of content but also exhibition methodology. Exploring

51

The programming for “*Documentazione aperta*” was as follows: 14–25 July: *Un'esperienza nell'ospedale psichiatrico “Frullone” di Napoli: a/social group*; 28 July–8 August: *Esperienze di animazione nelle scuole primarie*; 10–19 August: *La riqualificazione della zona (centro storico) a Milano*; 22–31 August: *L'esperienza del Monumento a Franceschi, a Milano*; 3–12 September: *L'operazione Palazzo di Arcevia: ipotesi di comunità esistenziale*; 15–26 September: *L'ecomuseo: l'esperienza del “Cracap” le Creusot, e il lavoro di Carlo Pomi a San Marino di Bentivoglio*; 29 September–10 October: *I risultati della legge del 2% suo rinnovamento, e problemi della committenza pubblica*; Settembre: *Dibattito sul piano regolatore particolareggiato di Venezia*.

52

The artists who collaboratively created a monument to Roberto Franceschi included the coordinating group: Alik Cavaliere, Paolo Gallerani, Enzo Mari, Lino Marzulli, Fabrizio Merisi, and Pino Spagnuolo, as well as Mauro Staccioli, Francesco Somaini, and Tino Valeri.

this theme historically throughout the twentieth century, Celant's exhibition, I argue, adhered to the conventions of art history and museum orthodoxy, while Crispolti's exhibition extended into the sociopolitical realm with alternative means of display. In other words, Celant's exhibition inhabited a position of institutional centrality and tradition, while Crispolti's assumed a peripheral posture and embraced innovative possibilities.

Celant's *Ambiente/arte* offered a diachronic study of what is now known as installation art.<sup>53</sup> He was concerned with the breakdown of physical barriers between the object and its surrounding space, where art becomes an environment.<sup>54</sup> Critically, with the artworks on view, Celant addressed physical space, not social or political issues. He organised the show in two parts: a historical section that reconstructed primary examples of installation art in the early to mid-twentieth century and a contemporary section that centred on new site-specific installation art by thirteen contemporary artists. At the centre of the exhibition was Celant's aesthetic vision, a show that claimed Italian movements as central to the history of installation art.

The show's chronology began with Futurism and traced the relationship between art and its environment in movements such as Constructivism and de Stijl. Celant installed a total reconstruction of Piet Mondrian's 1923 *Salon de Madame B* as well as photographic reproductions of Kurt Schwitter's 1923–43 *Merzbau*, Duchamp's 1942 installation at the *First Papers of Surrealism* exhibition in New York, and Theo van Doesburg's *Café Aubette* from 1927. Visitors also encountered contemporary site-specific installations by artists including: Blinky Palermo, Daniel Buren, Dan Graham, Joseph Beuys, Sol LeWitt, Mario Merz, Bruce Nauman, Jannis Kounellis, Vito Acconci, Robert Irwin, Maria Norman, Doug Wheeler, and Michael Asher. The majority of the artists Celant included were well established in the contemporary art world by 1976. Kounellis, for example, brought live horses into the gallery space in the piece titled *Horses*, a work that had already debuted in 1969 at L'Attico gallery in Rome. *Ambiente/arte*, therefore, strengthened the practice of installation art in what was already an accepted art-making method.

While Celant's curatorial choice to allow artists to use these rooms as a live studio space was new to the Biennale, his exhibition form had an important precedent in Jennifer Licht's *Spaces* exhibition held at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), New York, from December 30, 1969, to March 1, 1970, which also included artist Michael Asher, as well as Larry Bell, Dan Flavin, Robert Morris, Franz Erhard Walther, and the Pulsa group.<sup>55</sup> This was an early exhibition of installation art, and given Celant's keen attention to the New York art scene, as is demonstrated by his line-up of artists in *Ambiente/arte*, it is reasonable to assume that Celant was aware of this show.<sup>56</sup> Further, there had been other similar recent exhibitions, such as *Figures/Environments* at the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, in 1970 and *Aesthetics of the Environment* at the Stedelijk van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven, in 1971.<sup>57</sup> Celant's *Ambiente/arte*, therefore, institutionalised this once-radical medium by establishing it within a historiographic lineage. Moreover, Celant relied on conventions of display already accepted by curators and museums. As such, his exhibition remained confined by the boundaries of traditional exhibition practices. Crispolti, on the

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Celant's exhibition *Ambiente/Arte* is cited by Julie H. Reiss, *From Margin to Center: The Spaces of Installation Art* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1999), xxii, as a first important attempt to historicise installation art as a genre.

54

Germano Celant, "Ambiente-Arte", in *Settore Arti visive e Architettura, Ambiente, partecipazione, strutture culturali. Catalogo generale*, vol. 1, ed. Barbara Radice and Franco Raggi (Venice: Biennale di Venezia, 1976), 189.

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Artists William Crosby, William Duesing, Paul Fuge, Peter Kindlemann, and David Rumsey made up the Pulsa group.

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Reiss, *From Margin to Center*, 87.

57

Regorda, *Biennale di Venezia 1976*, 47.



other hand, went far beyond tradition, bringing new artists into the foreground of the art establishment in a way that did not compromise their aesthetic autonomy. He integrated their institutional critique into his curatorial practice.

### Decentralisation

As noted above, to successfully present environmental art at the Venice Biennale, Crispolti adopted a decentralised exhibition strategy. He not only made the daring decision only to show documentary material and not to display original artworks onsite – in comparison to Celant who recreated many of the installations in his exhibition without fully acknowledging the consequences of building these artworks in a different context – Crispolti also applied the power dynamics of decentralisation to the exhibition format and the social relationships that exist in a space of display. He levelled hierarchies between the curator, artist and viewer. In this regard, he practiced an audience-centred curatorial practice that was only later adopted by mainstream curators in the 1990s.<sup>58</sup>

It was essential to Crispolti to present the artwork as ongoing research findings. The exhibition itself was meant not as a point of arrival for visitors, but one of departure.<sup>59</sup> In the galleries, the focus was not the unilateral experience of the viewer receiving information or absorbing an aesthetic experience, but a dialogical relationship with the material. Crispolti envisioned the space alive with debate and with the artists themselves – more so than their actual work – present. For Crispolti, the artists' role, therefore, was one of collaboration, and the power dynamic within the exhibition was non-hierarchical, democratic, and open ended. The intent of the exhibition was to provoke questions, not provide definitive answers.<sup>60</sup>

Moreover, Crispolti applied the same rules to his role, effectively decentring the curator as well. He presented artworks under hypotheses rather than final formulations, leaving room for others – visitors or artists – to rearticulate and reinterpret. By levelling hierarchies within the gallery, Crispolti made space for reciprocal communication. This experimental social format long anticipated the relational art-making practices of the 1990s when the social component of the art experience became much more prevalent.<sup>61</sup>

The drive behind Crispolti's support for environmental art and his exhibition strategy must be understood in terms of political decentralisation, and its effects on the Biennale throughout the 1970s. The move towards the periphery in the art world paralleled the impulse to decentralise the nation's governmental and administrative structures after the fall of Fascism, which resulted in the legal regionalisation of the country into twenty distinct entities in 1970.<sup>62</sup> This process was part of the effort to democratise the nation and give greater decision-making power – such as municipal boundaries, urban and rural police forces, health and hospital assistance, local museums and libraries, urban planning, tourism and

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Curators such as Marcia Tucker and Mary Jane Jacobs. See for example, Paul O'Neill *Curating and the Educational Turn* (London: Open Ed., 2010).

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Crispolti, *Arti visive e partecipazione sociale*, 292.

60

Ibid., 295.

61

Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* (Paris: Les Presses du réel, 2002); Claire Doherty, *Contemporary Art: From Studio to Situation* (London: Black Dog, 2004); and Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (London: Verso, 2014).

62

Article 116 of the 1948 Italian Constitution and acknowledges regional power in relation to legislation, administration, and finance to: Sardinia, Sicily, Trentino-Alto Adige/Südtirol, Aosta Valley, and Friuli-Venezia Giulia. In 1970, under Article 131, Article 132, and Article 133, the other fifteen regions were established. The constitutional mandate was carried out almost immediately in the five "special" regions, as they were areas that threatened separatism. The creation of the fifth special region, Friuli-Venezia Giulia, was complicated by the Trieste dispute with Yugoslavia and was postponed until 1964.

hotel industries, and regional transportation networks – to regional administrations, rather than being beholden to the centralised bureaucracy of Rome.<sup>63</sup> The constitution, written in 1948 under the nation’s fledgling democracy, had stipulated the division of the country into twenty areas, conceived as sub-governmental administrative territories.<sup>64</sup> It was a decisive shift from the historical centralisation of Italian governmental power that was solidified under Mussolini. However, the legal realisation of the regions did not occur until twenty years later. The new law gave regional governments superior legal status, more money, more civil servants, and, most important, directly elected assemblies.<sup>65</sup>

Many leftist thinkers saw potential for the regions to become laboratories for a revised governmental system based on direct participation.<sup>66</sup> Additionally, they considered the centralisation of the government as a vestigial link to Italy’s recent fascist past.<sup>67</sup> Fear of hierarchical power structures was still present in the 1970s as the *DC - Democrazia Cristiana* (Christian Democratic Party) maintained many fascist governmental and administrative structures long after the demise of Mussolini’s government.<sup>68</sup> Thus, the process of political decentralisation was more than merely streamlining Italian public policy; it was about firmly breaking with the country’s authoritarian past and implementing a democratic present.

Likewise, demands to democratise Italy’s cultural institutions reached an apex in 1968. Recognised as the longest-running biennial exhibition in the world, the Biennale was a target. At the exhibition that year, one placard read, “The Biggest and Worst Exhibition in the Biennale is the Police”, and another described the exhibition as “the Biennale of the Bosses”.<sup>69</sup> Protesters – who included artists, writers, curators, critics, and cultural producers – labelled the Biennale as an arena for wealth that vaunted the commodification of culture. What’s more, it was charged with operating as still a fundamentally fascist institution, dependent upon and managed by governmental and political parties rather than as an autonomous art entity. As the only art institution in the country to respond to such charges, the Biennale undertook a comprehensive reform and, in 1973, legitimated a new statute, a document that had been unchanged since the Mussolini era.<sup>70</sup> This gave the Biennale more autonomy from the government, which allowed it to make more democratic decisions and, crucially, elect its own leadership.<sup>71</sup>

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Robert Putnam and Raffaella Nanetti, *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 25.

64

The regions in alphabetical order are: Abruzzo, Basilicata, Calabria, Campania, Emilia-Romagna, Friuli-Venezia Giulia, Lazio, Liguria, Lombardia, Marche, Molise, Piemonte, Puglia, Sardegna, Sicilia, Toscana, Trento-Alto Adige, Umbria, Valle d’Aosta, Veneto.

65

Sidney Tarrow, Peter Katzenstein, and Luigi Graziano, *Territorial Politics in Industrial Nations* (New York: Praeger, 1978), 29.

66

See, for example, Filippo Barbano, *Regioni e domanda sociale* (Torino: Stampatori, 1978) and Ettore Rotelli, *Dal regionalismo alla regione* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1973).

67

Franco Levi, “Regioni e Pluralismo,” in *Le Regioni tra Costituzione e realtà politica* (Torino: Edizioni della Fondazione Giovanni Agnelli, 1977), 23.

68

Raffaella Nanetti, *Growth and Territorial Policies: The Italian Model of Social Capitalism* (London: Pinter Publishers, 1988), 40.

69

Lawrence Alloway, *The Venice Biennale, 1895–1968: From Salon to Goldfish Bowl* (London: Faber, 1969), 26.

70

Mussolini finalised the Statute for the Venice Biennale on July 21, 1938, under law no. 1517.

71

For recent scholarship on the Venice Biennale’s institutional transformation, see Vittoria Martini, “Come la Biennale di Venezia ha istituzionalizzato il Sessantotto” in *Arte fuori dall’arte, incontri e scambi fra arti visive e società negli anni Settanta*, ed. Cristina Casero, Elena Di Raddo, and Francesca Gallo (Milan: Postmedia, 2017), 203–208.

After the new statute, the 1976 Biennale was an opportunity to show the world how much the institution had changed.<sup>72</sup> Indeed, in the opening paragraphs of the 1976 Venice Biennale official catalogue, the president Ripa di Meana asserted that the institution had been turned from a fossil to an energised and forward-thinking organisation.<sup>73</sup> It was in this historical context that the Biennale, like Crispolti, chose to promote decentralisation – politically and artistically – as a theme, practice, and methodology.

By decentralisation, the Biennale organisers meant the reaching of new audiences, especially the working class. They assembled a select committee headed by sociologists Giovanni Bechelloni and Franco Rositi to study the question of cultural decentralisation.<sup>74</sup> For instance, the institution coordinated a series of colloquia and debates on this theme.<sup>75</sup> The Biennale's culminating efforts crystallised in a major conference titled *Il decentramento culturale in Italia* (Cultural Decentralization in Italy) organised in Mirano, a small city outside of Venice, October 1–3, 1976. The meeting included artists, trade union members, representatives of grassroots associations, and local organisations. One of the main issues raised during this gathering was how to understand the process of decentralisation as more than merely moving out from the centre.<sup>76</sup> Ripa di Meana delivered the closing remarks, in which he emphasised that the Biennale, as an institution, must provide both the stimulus and support for decentralised initiatives.<sup>77</sup> Overall, the Biennale organisers wanted to highlight institutional social responsibility and turn the institution into a platform where societal issues could combine with aesthetic production.

In addition to the conference, other decentralised cultural activities took place in Mirano from July through October 1976 with the collaboration of the Biennale and Mirano's Centro per Iniziative Culturali (CIC, Center of Cultural Initiatives), adding new depth and breadth to the Biennale's capabilities. The Venetian theatrical group Brigà, working together with local inhabitants, organised a show on the writings of Angelo Beolco better known as Ruzzante – a playwright and actor who lived in the region in the sixteenth century. His writings, grouped under the name *Sprolico*,<sup>78</sup> which means speech or prayer in the local dialect, portray peasant life and celebrate the marginalised *campesini* (peasant farmer)

72

In fact, there were Biennale events in 1974, but that year was not given a Roman numeral, as is customary, nor were there national pavilions, and no catalogue was produced. While themes of democracy and decentralization were implemented in 1974, in effect, the exhibitions, organised to support Chile and critical of Pinochet's military takeover, had a very different sensibility than the official 1976 Biennale. See Lorenzo Capellini and Alberto Moravia, *Cronache della nuova Biennale: 1974–1978* (Milano: Electa, 1978).

73

Carlo Ripa di Meana, "Introduction", in *Environment, Participation, Cultural Structures: General Catalogue* (Venezia: Alfieri edizioni d'arte, 1976), 9.

74

"Attività del Gruppo permanente di lavoro per i convegni", reprinted in English in *La Biennale di Venezia: Annuario 1978: Eventi del 1976–77* (Venice: La Biennale di Venezia, 1979), 437.

75

Ibid., 437.

76

"Si sono posti fin dall'inizio il problema degli interlocutori istituzionali con i quali affrontare il decentramento: mondo sindacale, associazionismo, cooperativismo, quello dei canali attraverso i quali operare se non si vuole intendere il decentramento come banale operazione itinerante a partire da un centro propulsore e se non ci si accontenta di un semplice spostamento orizzontale delle manifestazioni o della valorizzazione di spazi abbandonati". (From the outset, the problem has been posed of who are the institutional interlocutors to deal with decentralisation: trade unions, associations, groups, channels through which to operate if we do not intend to understand decentralisation as a banal itinerant operation emanating from the centre, if we are not satisfied with a simple horizontal manifestation or the enhancement of abandoned spaces). *La Biennale di Venezia: Annuario 1978*, 405.

77

Ibid., 426.

78

Angelo Beolco, [tre Orationi Di Ruzzante (angelo Beolcho) Recitate in Lingua Rustica Alli Illustris. Signori Cardinali Cornari & Pisani. Con Vno Ragionamento Et Vno Sprolico, Insieme Cō Vna Lettera Scritta Allo Aluarotto Per Lo Istesso Ruzzante, Etc.], Ff. 31 (Venice: Appresso G. Bonadio, 1565).

ridiculed by wealthy and powerful Venetians for being simpletons.<sup>79</sup> The theme of these individuals' transformation into modern workers had a timely relevance given the visibility of Italian workers' struggles throughout the 1970s. The play highlighted the importance of dialects and the celebration of local traditions in their contextual setting, themes that were central to the politics of decentralisation. This is just one example of the many initiatives implemented during the Biennale that sought to cross new frontiers in addressing elitism and reaching new audiences.

In many ways, Crispolti's exhibition *Ambiente come sociale* bolstered the Biennale's goal of decentering its role as a site of the production of culture. Unconventionally, the institution welcomed the avant-garde experiments occurring in the nation's peripheries. However, Crispolti kept a critical stance *vis-à-vis* the institution and, thanks to his novel exhibition strategy embracing the temporary, the haphazard, the volatile, and the contingent, audiences looking to see and experience art at the Biennale were sent right back out into the city streets and piazzas through photographs, videos, and other documentary media. In keeping the galleries empty of actual artwork, Crispolti left a void at the Biennale's institutional centre. This was a calculated choice, flipping the exhibition inside out to get visitors back *out there*, to experience the artwork *in situ* for themselves in the social environment where it really mattered.

Crispolti's exhibition and the Biennale institution were, for the 1976 presentation, allied in embracing decentralised practices, valuing a non-hierarchical structure, and promoting the ideals of democracy. Environmental artists and the Biennale organisers were both reacting to the nation's fascist past and the structures that the regime had institutionalised for cultural production. However, while Crispolti's artists had been operating on the margins, since the beginning of the decade, to critique the centrality of the nation's institutions, the Biennale joined this effort only in 1976. Due to a shift in the internal organisation as well as the national politics, this striking confluence would not recur in the subsequent Biennale of 1978. A series of new crises in leadership and domestic terrorism forced a retreat to orthodoxy.<sup>80</sup> The institution withdrew to a non-political position as social engagement became associated with increasingly violent and radical stances. Crispolti, however, continued to champion environmental art, and practice curation as a form of institutional critique throughout the 1970s.

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79

*La Biennale di Venezia: Annuario 1978*, 442.

80

The new political formula of the *Pentapartito* and the influence of three figures in particular – Bettino Craxi, Giulio Andreotti and Arnaldo Forlani – ushered Italy into the 1980s, and a stifling of social problems at the heart of 1970s activism. The New Left suffered considerable defeats as the country became more conservative. See Paul Ginsborg, *A History of Contemporary Italy* (London: Penguin Books, 2011), 410-412.

## Author's Biography

Martina Tanga is a curator and art historian, with an interest in art that engages with social concerns, feminism, and the built environment. She is a specialist in Italian twentieth-century Italian art, and her book, *Arte Ambientale: Urban Space, and Participatory Art*, released by Routledge Press, examines radical artistic practices

sited in Italy's 1970s urban landscape. She held positions at the Worcester Art Museum, deCordova Sculpture Park and Museum, and is currently at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Tanga earned her BA and MA in the History of Art from University College London and a PhD in the History of Art and Architecture from Boston University.