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Q&A With Pier Paolo Calzolari

By Juliet Helmke
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One of the seminal figures during the mid 1960s in what became known as Arte Povera, Pier Paolo Calzolari has lived the life of a near-recluse since his relocationvin the late ’80s to the small town of Fossombrone in the Marche region of Italy. In 2012, after years of gentle persuasion, Marianne Boesky Gallery organized the artist’s first New York exhibition in nearly 25 years. It garnered attention not only for bringing Calzolari’s work back to the fore, but also for the effort that saw Boesky partnering with Pace Gallery to present the show across their respective spaces, breaking through a wall in their abutting locations to do so. After several shows with Boesky, Calzolari is now gearing up for an exhibition of new work, slated for this May in the gallery’s Chelsea location. The artist spoke with Juliet Helmke of Modern Painters—with his wife, Karine Arneodo Calzolari, translating—about the ideological underpinnings of his work, which spans a career of more than 50 years.

Juliet Helmke: Tell me about the 2012 show that was presented at both Marianne Boesky and Pace galleries.

Pier Paolo Calzolari: I did it because Marianne was really effective in pushing me to do it. She insisted. It had been a long time. I live what I call semiretired in the countryside in Italy, and for a long period, almost 30 years or so, I had no real interest in exhibiting, especially in doing big shows. Marianne has a great capacity to involve you in the project. And so because of her persistence over a few years, I accepted. The show was about a different period of my work; it was older works as well as recent works. A mixture of different things, but very sculptural.

How did you feel about the reaction to it?

It was a happy surprise. It had been so long since I'd faced a U.S. audience. When I said OK to doing it, I didn't know the audience would be so enthusiastic. It was really great, and a really strong moment to live.

How did you get people to knock down their walls?

I did nothing! I believe it was all due to Marianne's efforts. Do you know the story of Jericho? The Israelites raised a great shout and caused the walls of the city to fall—perhaps it was something like that. It was important for that to happen, to make the show what it was. To have this long visual perspective for the works with the two connecting spaces, and this project became an integral part of the show. The reaction at the opening was surprising. The idea to crash down the wall to make one show between two different galleries seemed to shock a lot of American people. In Europe, it would not be such a big deal. In the U.S., because there is often more discordance between the galleries, I guess people assumed it would be a hard thing to do. But for Europeans, it's something that can happen, two galleries working together for a big show. And I think, from working on the project, the relationship between the two galleries seemed relaxed.

Being semiretired, as you say, what does that mean for your practice? What does a usual day for you look like?

My life is like that of a monk. I wake up in the morning, I have my breakfast like a normal person. I go immediately to the studio. To say it's a studio is perhaps misleading: It's five big places—just to walk through them is how I get my exercise. I work all day in these different spaces. When I'm done, I go home, I read, I watch TV, and I inform myself about what is happening in the world. It's a calm and quiet life, and where I live is very tiny, a village really, so sometimes when I feel too retired, I take an airplane or taxi and I go to meet people somewhere. Nowadays, even if you are retired and living in a remote area, you're not out of the information loop. You have technology that provides all the information you need. But there's not really a social life—not really an opportunity to have a discussion with someone on art or literature. In a way, it makes it easy to concentrate on your work. You don't have distractions, you don't have the publicity or overwhelming images, or even just the pace that you find in city life. You don't have the contamination of fashionable well-being, where things are changing all the time. Obviously, that doesn't mean you aren't conscious of these changes, but you have your distance. It's distilled.

That, of course, differs from when you started making art during the 1960s, when you were working in Bologna, New York, and Paris. Tell me about that time.

Casting my mind back that far is like archaeology. You have to consider what was happening in Europe after the '50s: Bourgeois culture had disintegrated, and during this, there wasn't an immediate new artistic expression. Italy was in disarray; part of the country was a colony because it had lost the war. The fracture of this moment presented a great opportunity, and so for my generation at the beginning of the '60s, we had the opportunity to move without the heavy weight of the past, to explore a lot of directions. And see, we needed to explore at that time to rediscover the meanings of things—everything had collapsed, the old values had collapsed. So in that moment, we had to define again, anew, the value of what was around us. Obviously, I have to acknowledge what else was happening then, such as the work Alberto Burri was doing, as well as French New Realism. At that time the traffic of information was very different; we did not have art magazines to inform ourselves. The way to receive information was like the game of telephone. For example, Gutai was from Japan, but with our communities talking about it, we felt very close to the work. This method of knowing what was going on in the world was important for Italian visual artists at that time, as well as for certain writers of literature and poetry, like Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot.

So you can see why then, community was imperative. Today we don't have such community. But it's also important to note that I, and my fellow artists, we're not like a group, we were more like stray dogs. What was moving us toward information and toward a way of working was not just curiosity but a necessity to survive. What felt important to us was redefining the use of material. So, for example, here are two glasses, regarded for their use, and their design. [Loudly clinks glasses together.] But for us, the stray dogs, it was about this noise made between two things.

We strove to see things in the world on a primary level and to reject the past, the formal view of things that were already established. Or perhaps not reject, because the present was not necessarily in conflict with the past vision, but it was both of these living together. So the vision at that time was a democratic vision of the world. The question was how to reinvent the palette from the world.

And how do you feel about being grouped with the movement of Arte Povera?

I have to be very clear, the way things are written by art historians and critics can be very different from how things exist in reality. Arte Povera has never been a movement, really. It was a constellation of many individuals, all of us strays, as I was saying before. And while we were going in the same direction, we were very much single entities moving alone. We had a common vision of this necessity to redefine the world. I participated and worked as though in symphony with some of these artists. But we had no common ideological project together, even if the critics say that we did. In fact, after six or seven years of this psychological communion, we all began naturally to evolve away from each other. By ’72 what was known as Arte Povera was over, though we were all working and had not had any radical break from each other or the ideas.

How have the ideas you formed during those years carried through in the work you do now?

That, for me, is really a metaphysical answer. I have a way of speaking about how I make work that has been consistent through these years. It comes in the form of questions. First: Who made me an instrument? Then the second question: Who is playing me as an instrument? And so, what I feel I do, is be in the situation of listening and waiting to be played. I can give cultural, literary explanations, but I prefer to give this reading on my work. For me, it’s difficult to talk about style.

I also keep a lot of my own works. I’m very jealous of my works, and I like to live with them and see them regularly. So I’ve even bought some of my own works back over the years. It’s not a very good economic deal! Of course, you can’t hang on to everything—you have to sell some things. But occasionally I will return to a work that I made in the ’80s or something and modify it, because I’ve been living and working around it and my vision for it changed. So it will have two dates. Because my works are not traditional painting—they’re made of different materials—they have the sense of time passing. Sometimes they need an intervention. Then at the end, works are like music. And you like to listen. These five different studios that I have all have different functions. Some need to be very clean; another space is for working with metal, fire, and lead, for example. So I work between them, and it’s like moving from one sound to another.

Tell me about what’s planned for the upcoming show at Marianne Boesky.

This will be a new body of work that flows from a 360-degree exploration and from a reflection on the history of art as a whole. The focus shifts from Mannerism to Baroque, from the analysis of Japanese decorative arts to the remaining signs of Cretan and Pompeian paintings, and even primitive African. These “paintings” are made from lead, dyes, burned felt and paper, flower petals, and pigments on paper and canvas.

In April I’ll also be included in a group show at Palazzo Grassi, François Pinault’s foundation in Venice. Pinault owns three different important works by me; one was bought recently and two haven’t been exhibited before, and they will be in the entrance space. This is an especially important exhibition for me because, though I was born in Bologna, I grew up in Venice, and because I didn’t go to school, I spent so much time finding my way around the city. When I was young, the Palazzo Grassi was a place that had been partly destroyed and was being used for storage. I used to go there when I was a child.

Why didn’t you attend school?

I didn’t grow up with my parents. I was raised by my grandmother, and we moved constantly. Because of that, and because my grandmother was such a special person, she didn’t want me to

go to school and so I was educated at home. I was born in ’43 during the war, and during that time things were very different. I was actually not registered to the state when I was born, and so for many years I technically had no nationality, or really any official existence.

When were you eventually registered?

In ’67, when the Accademia di Belle Arti di Urbino asked me to become a teacher. They needed documents from the place where I had lived. Well, you see, I had never lived in one place. So
they asked the church, but I never went to church and so nobody had any information to provide. So at that point, I eventually filled out all the paperwork and applied.

Pier Paolo Calzolari. *Untitled*, 2014-2015. Pigments, flower petals, milk tempera, canvas on wood. 260 x 500 x 500 cm