

Decolonizing the imaginary¹

The revolution of minor histories

“Profound changes need to be made in the psychosocial organization of Western Man, in his attitude to life, in substance in his imaginary. [...] It is necessary to abandon the capitalist imaginary of a pseudo-rational pseudo-control of the world, of unlimited expansion. This can only be brought about by men and women together. An isolated individual or an organization can, at most, prepare, criticize, stimulate and outline possible orientations.”²

This is how Cornelius Castoriadis expressed his positive proposal in the analysis of the drifting consumer society conducted in the 1970s. In stressing the need for the emergence of a collective subject to tackle the task of changing the imaginary, the writer also outlined the potential of individuals – seen in the context of their shortcomings – to carry out a possible *détournement* of their actions and of their thought. An indirect, intellectually present guiding function, which takes shape in the individual histories of those who perceive, in one way or another, the impossibility of remaining within a narration of the “best of all possible worlds”. The Leibnizian saying, already ridiculed by Voltaire in *Candide*, seems to be as topical as the incapacity to really acknowledge the impossible linearity with which an idea of progress, intrinsic to the supports of what has been defined as modernity, continues to be read.

The work that Michelangelo Consani has been pursuing for many years now appears to fit into the genealogy of individual histories that look towards possible orientations rather than conceiving of themselves as being part of a narrative already written and tried out by others. This applies both to his view of himself as an artist and to the positioning of his work on the contemporary art scene. Indeed, his work has long been articulated in terms of minimal breaks in the reading of the existent: simple gestures that operate on the grammar of images, of discourse, of being an artist in the years of the crisis in industrial production, with the certainties of its products, be they pre-packaged food items, designer lights or art works.

At the start of his career, Consani worked in the tradition of the Tuscan context from which he comes: drawing as a grounding in the legacy of the masters and sculpture as an exploration of material and the techniques controlling it. From this initial experience, when he was something of an atypical sculptor, he moved towards an exponential slowing down of his output, understood as the creation of material goods, of objects to consume, of fetishes, and began to concentrate on questioning the categories that determine our Western condition as modern consumers, destined, that is, to be constant producers.

Whether it is a question of recording, in low-resolution video, the improvident song of a cicada, as in *Progetto di disperdere energia*, 2006 (‘Project for Dispersing Energy’),³ or a sudden act of bullying on the pier of a Croatian island (*Beat on the Brat*,⁴ 2009), the existence of a work remains subordinate to the creation of an interval, of a pause in

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- 1 The title of this essay on the work of Michelangelo Consani openly cites Serge Latouche’s *Décoloniser l’imaginaire: La Pensée créative contre l’économie de l’absurde*, Parangon, Paris, 2003. Latouche and his concept of degrowth have had a significant influence on the artist’s work.
 - 2 Cornelius Castoriadis, *Une société à la dérive*, Seuil, Paris, 2005, p. 244.
 - 3 *Progetto di disperdere energia* “was filmed in a semi-abandoned village in the region of Mani, in southern Greece”, the artist relates. “Just one old lady was still living in the village, the custodian of a landscape that now seemed suitable only as a photographic set for marriages.” A single fixed camera filmed a cicada and its song, a tribute to that poetics of “non-doing” which the animal has always embodied.
 - 4 Against the rebel sound track of a Ramones song, we see a small instance of bullying by a boy at the expense of one of his peers, for the control of a bollard-trampoline for diving next to a small pier. The victim seems to accept his subjection to the other boy’s will, as if demonstrating that he has already introjected an inevitable code of behaviour

the inevitable flow of things. This serves to make more evident and less opaque the fact that they belong to a background which seems to be as everyday as it is little worthy of note. The artist's space of intervention – in constant mediation with the intrusive and protracted effects of the art market as financial investment – are to be regarded as an integral part of the work. Not so much in order to conduct a belated institutional criticism, but rather to cyclically escape from the normative nature within which a destabilizing practice tends to be absorbed. Co-opting elementary operative modalities, sometimes formally the reflection of the process-based legacy of Arte Povera, Consani rediscovers the subversive power that those simple actions often evoke, and in so doing is able to resume a discourse either partially interrupted or altered in the course of its historicization.⁵

In 2005, the artist was asked to intervene in the context of the Isola Art Center in Milan, where civic groups and artists were fighting for the survival of a neighbourhood arts centre, in opposition to the plans of a multinational, supported by the city council, to gentrify the area. In the work he produced on this occasion, *Tensioni urbane* ('Urban Tensions'), a steel cable was stretched across the spaces of the self-run centre, connecting them with the neighbourhood. The cable was under tension, like the subjects of the conflict that was under way, and the existence of a space that eluded urban planning dictates represented the possibility to express a different reading of the building trade and the related economy, of the management of public affairs and of its representatives, and finally, of an idea of culture that addresses and connects with the requests of the neighbourhood, as emphasized by the taut cable. The following year, likewise tuning in to the context and interested in restoring the responsibility of the gesture to an artistic intervention, Consani symbolically put his work in the background with respect to the social frame that was to house it. In *Kill the Butterfly*, he decided to highlight the truth of the event that led to the arrest and repatriation of a young Albanian without a residence permit, due to a fire started by the latter following the request of the exhibition organizers to burn the rubbish occupying the open area where the sculpture was to be positioned. This was not then exhibited, and the work took shape starting from the documentation of the fire. The artist felt that it was in part his own, that he was an involuntary co-author of an unplanned action, for which he seemed to want to ascertain the specific value of a widespread social responsibility.

Continuing almost to explore the voids left by sculpture, and the significant absences that this can inhabit, in 2008 Consani produced *Colonna finita* ('Finite Column'), where the Brancusian axiom, which the title mimics, is rendered in a series of marble-powder casts of plastic cups piled up one on top of the other. Marble, the quintessential sculptural stone, is reduced to the pure calcium carbonate of which it is composed and from which it profits today, destroying with explosives the quarries and with them the delicate relationship linking the material to the history of its extraction: an equilibrium between use and resource which has described the orography of a landscape and the art history of a whole sculptural tradition.

The finiteness of the column alludes to the exhausting of modernity and its premises, for which Brancusi's famous work provided inspiration, fuelling all the hopes the minimalists had in the relationship between mass industrial production and art. The chain of objects that remain standing in Consani's work make reference to a series of disposable

whereby it is better for him to give in rather than fight.

5 When he was training as an artist, Consani worked for a brief period as an assistant to Emilio Prini, an exponent of Arte Povera described by Celant, in a text written in 1968, as a figure in who "artistic operativeness is reduced to his way of being and acting". It is interesting to note that a certain trait of instrumental investigative absence, together with a detached approach to the liturgical standards of the artist common to Prini can often be found in the *modus operandi* of Michelangelo Consani. In a celebrated comment, the Arte Povera artist said: "I have no programmes, I proceed by way of experiments, I see no trace of the birth of art (nor of the tragedy), because the C.S. is not the fruit of pure human labour (because I did not make the chair, the table, the sheet of paper, the pen with which I write), I do not create, if possible."

cups, the emblem of a consumerist model of using resources and of the material which, better than any other, represents this model: plastic. Rayon, Bakelite, celluloid, resin, nylon, Teflon, Plexiglas – evoking the names of plastic materials takes us through a long history of modern industry, encompassing design objects and mass manufacturing. And it takes us back to that lowest common denominator: the processing of oil, the origin of them all.

Exactly forty years ago, in 1972, the Meadows Report was published. Better known as *The Limits to Growth*, it in fact dealt mainly with the unsustainability of growth.⁶ With the onset of the first great oil crisis, the aim was to stress that the rates of growth in the population, in industrialization and in production were out of proportion to the available resources, and that the failure to change perspective would lead to a rapid decline, in the twenty-first century, of the society taking shape in the period. Although mathematical studies, such as the Hubbert Peak Theory, demonstrated that the exploitation of a finite resource such as oil, once it has reached a peak, must necessarily decline, the Club of Rome, when the years of the oil crisis were over, was not taken seriously, and oil extraction continued and indeed grew in intensity, as in the “best of all possible worlds”. The updates of the report, in 1994 and 2004, were more drastic, with the predictions of decline becoming certainties. In this scenario, the degree of economic dependence on exhaustible resources does not seem to have changed in an equally drastic manner, and, despite a more widespread awareness of the problem, the Kyoto protocol remains a timid and abstract superfetation of the problem.

The spectre depicted by the Club of Rome, and the scientific truth of Hubbert’s Peak have long been familiar to the artist, who, with the passing of time, has expressed more and more clearly his active dissent towards the idea of growth and the ideology of production, the driving forces of the “aggressive totalitarianism of the globalized consumer society”, as Serge Latouche puts it.⁷ In the years’ of the ferocious greenwashing conducted by the big multinationals, and the confusion created around the multiplication of labels and life styles revamped as green, Consani has grasped the importance of rooting his practice and his development as an artist in historic terms. In doing so, he prefers to anchor his work to those individual histories which looked and look to possible orientations, as Castoriadis writes, and to those with which he feels a basic affinity. Thus began a structured sequence of exhibitions combining the decolonization of an imaginary distinguished by a “religion of unlimited economic development”⁸ with the gaze of those personalities who lie outside history, who, to paraphrase the thinking of one of them, Masanobu Fukuoka, are against history, and before and after history. They are one-straw revolutionaries, that revolution which is possible for each one of us, as a matter of choice, as was sustained by the Japanese pioneer of “non-doing”, who conceived a method of cultivation that “completely contradicts modern agricultural techniques”,⁹ and reduces to a minimum human intervention in natural biological growth processes.

Fukuoka was one of the first “revolutionaries” that Consani “invited” to be part of his work, and he was followed by John Herbert Dillinger, Barbara Kerr, Ivan Illich, Arthur Hollins and Gogliardo Fiaschi, to mention just some of the names that began to appear in his various works from 2007 onwards.¹⁰ In 2011, some of them were

6 *The Limits to Growth*, also known as the Meadows Report, was commissioned in 1972 by the Club of Rome, a non-governmental organization formed by the Italian businessman Aurelio Peccei and the Scottish scientist Alexander King, together with Nobel prize-winners, political leaders and intellectuals. Its mission is to act as a catalyst for global change, identifying the main problems humankind will have to deal with, analysing them in a world context and searching for alternative solutions in the different possible scenarios. In other words, the Club of Rome is intended to be a kind of circle of thinkers devoted to analysing changes in contemporary society.

7 From Serge Latouche, “La festa è finita”, published in this volume, p. XX.

8 Serge Latouche, *Come si esce dalla società dei consumi. Corsi e percorsi della decrescita*, Bollati Boringhieri, Turin, 2010, p. 51. Originally in French as *Sortir de la société de consommation*, Les Liens Qui Libèrent, Paris, 2010.

9 Masanobu Fukuoka, *The One-Straw Revolution*, New York Review of Books, New York, 1978, p. 3.

10 Consider, as a point of reference, *Barter. The Solar Project*, in which the artist began to become interested in the

transformed into “special guests” at *La festa è finita* (‘The Party Is Over’), the first exhibition of the cycle *The Caspian Depression. And a One-Straw Revolution*, and then became personalities for a “new ecological memory” in the second episode at the Kunstraum in Munich.¹¹ The year before that, the artist dedicated an entire project to Marshall Walter Taylor, the first African-American sportsman to win the title of world champion, in 1899. The project was entitled *Dynamo*, and in it the history of the black cyclist who won every race despite physical and moral restrictions imposed by the prevailing racism, became a device for illuminating the exhibition space. Bicycles hidden behind a fake panel were used by African immigrants who, by pedalling, activated a dynamo, which produced the energy required to power the light in the room. The peripheral history of an instance of social emancipation was projected onto the unfolding of the show, where focusing attention on a minor subject resulted in the very existence of the exhibition event entering into a subtle relationship of dependence on the subjects – marginal in terms of their social condition – whose work made it possible. Here the dynamo was both an allusion to the bicycle as an instrument of possible degrowth for Illich, and the symbol of a small revolution which introduces social emancipation into a wider discourse spanning the creation of energy and the environment in which it is produced.

I had occasion to work on the project which in some way concludes *The Caspian Depression* series, and which this publication is intended to document. Entitled *Ancora ancora la nave in porto. Amoco Milford Haven files* (‘Still Still the Ship in Port. Amoco Milford Haven Files’), it dwelt on oil and its century of reference, in relation with a contemporary art collection and its value as an accumulation of wealth. This is the Cozzani Collection at the CAMEC of La Spezia, a collection of minor works of a local head physician and his wife, who collected the works of leading twentieth-century artists. Sometimes these were just drawings and prints, but on other occasions they were more valuable pieces. This contextual material was loaded ideally onto that ship, which, in the *calembour* of the title, never seems to leave the port in which it is moored.

The incipit to the whole show was the video *Amoco Milford Haven Files*, featuring footage of dives around the famous wreck of the *Amoco Milford Haven*, a petrol tanker which sank twenty years ago in the Gulf of Genoa, causing the biggest ecological disaster ever to have occurred in the Mediterranean. Over ninety thousand litres of oil spilled into an ecosystem which, very shortly beforehand and not far away, had suffered an equally large spillage from the *Agip Abruzzo*, the ship involved in the Moby Prince disaster in April 1991. Starting with the underwater video exploration of the ship, which, metaphorically speaking, is the corpse of an entire age, the work dwelt on the ambivalent image of the wreck, which seems to recall, in its dynamic of descent, the visualization on the wall of the Hubbert Peak Theory. This was painted, black on white, on the wall, forming an infographic wall painting over which were placed the video and the work *Ob-ject. (Art as Idea as Idea)* by Joseph Kosuth, which is part of the Cozzani Collection. These were counterpoints of the extension-peak-decline formula linked to any economy dependent on exhaustible energy sources. Mounted on the maximum curve was *1972*, an audio installation expressing the considerations of the Club of Rome, elaborated in the same year, with a voice over illustrating the dynamic described by Marion King Hubbert. The two sound tracks came together and dispersed, as happened in the year in question, when they went virtually unheard and were written off as conjectures. Kosuth’s work, a tautological apparition of the object in its etymological form, marked the physical start of the peak and the metaphorical beginning of a vicious circle of dependence on objects – in a word, consumerism.

The production-object pairing also made reference to the second room, in which it was possible to see the

collaboration between Barbara Kerr and Sherry Cole in the realization of solar kitchens.

11 For more about the first two exhibitions in the cycle, see the texts respectively of Pier Luigi Tazzi and Paolo Emilio Antognoli, published in this volume.

relationship linking an economic system in its ascent to the artistic production contemporary to it, through a picture gallery of works set out according to a classical model of a connoisseur-style museography. An expanse of artworks were hung close together to emphasize the corpus of the collection, and were chosen by the artist for their varied capacity to talk of nature and consumption at the same time. Alongside this string of celebrated names from the 1960s and 70s, a slumbering post-atomic imaginary was aroused by the insertion into the room of the film *Il seme dell'uomo* ('The Seed of Man', 1969) by Marco Ferreri – a film about the possible survival of human beings following a nuclear fallout – from which Consani extrapolates the idea of a museum of humankind, in which every refusal becomes a rare exhibit. The museographic operation performed by the artist on the Cozzani Collection therefore dialogued with the apocalyptic vision of Ferreri, where that division of contemporary art history was mixed up with the exhibition of everyday objects; if for the director these were recollections of a lost world, in this new reading they became simulacra of a consumerist ideology, to the same extent as the works were associated with their fetishistic added value. Design objects realized in plastic materials on one hand, and art works accumulated to recount an age and the market that has sustained it, acted as witnesses to a television in the middle of the room transmitting a sequence of the last possible and feasible images of the drifting condition of humanity taken to its extreme consequences. Like in a meta-exhibition, the chosen works created a further narrative sphere, in which the common denominator was the constant undermining of the categories of modernity by means of a historiographic experiment, covering the twentieth century, in the synthesis of the artworks of a minor and peripheral protagonist of collecting.

The third and last room could only be looked into and not entered. Two large wooden planks forming an 'x' barred access. This represented a speculation by the artist about elements belonging to previous works, which served to see, in imaginary terms, the ship setting sail once again. It was a further act of recovery with respect to his own previous output, which referred to the fragility inherent to degrowth, based not so much on a reconversion as on the acceptance of the exhaustibility of resources. A series of pallets, a constant waste product of goods supply, acted as a raft for a work dating to 2007, *Fragili Equilibri* ('Fragile Equilibriums'). This features a chair, one of the legs of which is so notched that it is almost unstable. For the four months of the exhibition, an onion was left on the chair to grow, rot and sprout again. It is an organism which, even in the absence of a constant supply of nutrients, finds within itself the resources necessary to its own existence. Hubbert's Peak was eclipsed, the function of art accumulation dissolved, and in this final vision, Consani chose to offer a tautology of his work, revealed in the critical cultivation of his own militant observation.

Consani appears to respond to the decolonization of the imaginary evoked by various degrowthers with a self-aware artist's gaze which has offshored his own work outside globalized contemporaneity, before and after history, as desired and taught by the myriad of minor histories that each time sow his work with other fruits.

"Many people do not understand that the natural world is not a free world as Westerners understand liberty. The natural world functions according to natural laws, and there are many cycles of the natural world with which one must live in harmony. What needs to be sought is a liberty within these cycles and laws. It is a liberty that is hard to imagine and which is much bigger than that which many people have experienced to date."¹²

12 From Gary Snyder, *The Old Ways*, City Lights Books, San Francisco, 1997, in Masanobu Fukuoka, *La rivoluzione del filo di paglia. Un'introduzione all'agricoltura naturale*, Quaderni d'Ontignano, Firenze, 2011, p. 199 [translator's note: my translation from the Italian].