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The Sceptical Ecologist: Gianni Sassi and *Pollution*, 1972

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ABSTRACT

Questo articolo esamina una mostra poco studiata, *Pollution*, immaginata da Gianni Sassi, l'intellettuale di sinistra affiliato al network interdisciplinare Fluxus, nell'autunno 1972. *Pollution* (per una nuova estetica dell'inquinamento) è stato uno di una serie di eventi culturali sperimentali organizzati da Sassi durante il periodo post-bellico. Il punto di partenza della mostra è *Limits to Growth (Rapporto sui limiti dello sviluppo)* il rapporto di uno studio portato avanti da un team di scienziati del MIT (Massucchetts Institute of Technology). Commissionato dal Club di Roma, lo studio ha cercato di comprendere la situazione dell'umanità, delineata da vari studi come una vera e propria crisi.

Concentrandosi su uno degli elementi del rapporto (il deterioramento dell'ambiente), questo evento, in parte mostra, in parte protesta, ha portato insieme un gruppo diversificato di collaboratori di un ambiente artistico e culturale. Curato da Daniela Palazzoli e Luca Maria Venturi e installato nel cuore di Bologna, *Pollution* ha offerto una risposta estetica provocatoria al pensiero ecologico emergente, presentando i contribuiti di ventiquattro artisti e del cantante pop Franco Battiato per affrontare la questione della distruzione ambientale.

Questo esempio storico prende in esame un primo momento della storia della pratica artistica ecologica per esplorare come gli artisti e i curatori hanno risposto alla crescente consapevolezza dell'inquinamento e come hanno riflettuto sulla possibilità di modelli alternativi. Quali sono le lezioni imparate dal modo in cui la relazione tra l'arte e l'ecologia erano concepite da *Pollution* (1972)? Quale, se esiste, deve essere il ruolo delle arti nel cambiamento radicale e di fronte alla crisi globale? In fine, qual è l'eredità di *Pollution* (1972) per il dibattito contemporaneo?

KEYWORDS

Arte moderna italiana, Gianni Sassi, limiti della crescita, ambiente, crisi, qualità della vita

Introduction

In the face of irreversible change can retrospection be any more than a powerful rhetorical device? This article considers one historical case study, a response to a growing awareness of the limits of the planet's

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resources, to consider the use of historical reflection. That response came in the form of an exhibition in the heart of Bologna's Piazza Santo Stefano in 1972. It was conceived by an unlikely pairing: the avant-garde cultural promoter Gianni Sassi and Iris Foundation, a ceramics manufacturer based near Sassuolo. The open-air exhibition was underpinned by a belief that art could, or at least should, effect change in the face of a mounting sense of crisis. It subsequently fell victim to a cultural amnesia: this speaks not just to that historical moment but also the one in which we have found ourselves today. So, what lessons, if any, can we learn from this exhibition and its subsequent reception?

By the latter half of the 1960s, the concept of exponential growth (in the context of human activity) came under the spotlight and with it an increasing sense that it could not continue at its current rate. The informal international association, known as the Club of Rome, was born out of the impetus to investigate the problem.[1] The Italian industrialist Aurelio Peccei and Scottish Director General for Scientific Affairs, Alexander King, were joined by an initial group of thirty individuals including scientists, educators, economists and industrialists (characterised as an 'invisible college' by its members) who shared the conviction that there was a 'world situation' that needed redressing.[2]

Their aims were two-fold; to test the 'blind' assumption that the world's resources could support unlimited growth (and connected to this, the extent to which this was compatible with 'quality of life'); and secondly, to study the key elements determining growth and their interactions.[3] These aims were encapsulated in the 'Project on the Predicament of Mankind', which was financed and publicized with the ambitious goal to assess these questions on a global scale; to provide warnings of potential world crisis; and to offer an opportunity to make political, economic, and social changes to forestall such crises. The Club of Rome had its work cut out.[4]

As a first step the Club commissioned a team of scientists at the Massachusetts Institute of technology (MIT), under the direction of Professor Dennis Meadows.[5] A study was devised examining five variables determining growth—population, agricultural production, natural resources, industrial production and pollution. It was based on the premise that these seemingly divergent problems were in fact a single 'world

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[1] See Gunter Pauli, *Crusader for the Future: A portrait of Aurelio Peccei: Founder of the Club of Rome* (Oxford: Pergamon Press,1987), esp. pp.71–98; for an overview of the relationship between the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the Club of Rome, and King's role within the organisation, see Matthias Schmelzer, '"Born in the corridors of OECD": the forgotten origins of the Club of Rome, transnational networks and the 1970s in global history' *Journal of Global History* (2017), 12, pp.26–48. As Schmelzer puts it, what is worth underscoring is that an organisation that had overseen the implementation of the Marshall Plan in Europe and interested in promoting growth should give rise to a 'non-organization' dedicated to sustainability.

[2] 'The Limits to Growth: Interview with the President of the Club of Rome Aurelio Peccei', *The Unesco Courier*, January 1973, p.11; Dennis Meadows et al., *The Limits to Growth: A Report for the Club of Rome's Project on the Predicament of* mankind, first published in 1972 (second edition, London: Pan Books, 1974), p.9.

[3] Dennis Meadows et al., *The Limits to Growth: A Report for the Club of Rome's Project on the Predicament of* mankind, first published in 1972 (second edition) (London: Pan Books, 1974), p.185.

[4] Ibid, p.188.

[5] For an overview of the development of the Club of Rome, and the production and publication of *Limits to Growth*, see Pauli, *Crusader for the Future: A portrait of Aurelio Peccei Founder of the Club of Rome*, pp.75–81.

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problematique' that could be analysed with the help of computers, using techniques developed by MIT systems-engineer Jay Forrester.[6] The team at MIT adopted a model that would project the increasing demand of limited resources should current levels of growth continue (they were at pains to make clear that the study was not intended as a piece of 'futurology', a point that was lost in subsequent critical responses to the study).[7] The findings were popularized in a book for a general readership titled *Limits to Growth* (1972) in which the authors set a sand-timer of a hundred years on humanity's fate if present growth remained unchecked. The researchers went so far as to say that all projections based on unconstrained growth would end in collapse; any reasonable modification of their equations to account for new technology, pollution and population control might postpone collapse but would not avoid it.

The book quickly became a global best seller (and within less than a year was referred to as 'the now world-famous book').[8] It was the feature of many reviews and provoked sustained debates and much controversy throughout the decade. [9]

Only at some historical distance and in the climate of renewed ecological activism has that study since been assessed more favourably.[10] Celebrating its fiftieth anniversary, it is now regarded as an early moment in the development of the sustainability movement.[11] But at the time, the findings of the Club of Rome and its off-shoots were greeted with a mixed reception. It's lofty and wide-reaching ambitions certainly made it an easy target (for the basis of its modelling, its apolitical claims, the variables chosen and the global perspective that was underpinned by non-conflict).[12] Similarly, its doomsday forecasting, and its message to end growth was predictably met with some resistance.[13]

In a review of the book undertaken by economics professors Peter Passell and Marc Roberts (at Columbia and Harvard University respectively) for the *New York Times*, the *Limits to Growth* took quite a beating. At issue for them was the global and historical perspective:

> The *Limits to Growth*, in our view, is an empty and misleading work. Its imposing apparatus of computer technology and systems jargon conceals a kind of intellectual Rube Goldberg device—one which takes arbitrary assumptions, shakes them up and comes out with arbitrary conclusions

[6] Meadows et al., *The Limits to Growth*, p.10.
[7] Meadows et al., *The Limits to Growth*, p.185.
[8] 'The Limits to Growth: Interview with the President of the Club of Rome Aurelio Peccei', *The Unesco Courier*, January 1973, p.11. The report was published in twenty-six languages and as Pauli puts it 'throughout the world, more than seven million copies of *The Limits to Growth* were sold.' See *Crusader for the Future*, p.78.
[9] For an overview of the range of debates see *Crusader for the Future*, pp.84–94.
[10] See for example, Graham Turner, 'A comparison of *The Limits to Growth* with 30 years of reality', *Global Environmental Change* (2008), vol.18:3, pp.397–411. Schmelzer, '"Born in the corridors of OECD": the forgotten origins of the Club of Rome, transnational networks and the 1970s in global history' *Journal of Global History* (2017), 12, pp.26–48.
[11] Paolo Cresci, 'The Language of Sustainability', *Domus*, (2018), n.1027, pp.266–267.
[12] 'Young Scientists Round Table at UNESCO, Environment and Political Commitment', *The Unesco Courier*, January 1973, p.14–15.
[13] Gunnar Myrdal, 'The Limits to the Limits to Growth', *The Unesco Courier*, January 1973, p.12–13.

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> that have the ring of science. "Limits" pretends to a degree of certainty so exaggerated as to obscure the few modest (and unoriginal) insights that it genuinely contains. Less than pseudoscience and little more than polemical fiction, "The Limits to Growth" is best summarized not as a rediscovery of the laws of nature but as a rediscovery of the oldest maxim of computer science: Garbage in, Garbage out.[14]

The criticisms continued into subsequent decades, with reports commissioned to discredit the findings, methodology and approach and to justify the deafness with which the key message of sustainability was received.[15]

But there was also a chorus of supporters and Peccei defended his corner. In an interview published for *The UNESCO Courier*, he responded as follows:

> To my mind the optimists fail to consider two fundamental factors. The first is the accelerating pace of history; our institutions and our ability to react to problems are not fast enough for us to master these problems in time… But the second factor is even more fundamental; critical world problems exist for which there are no technical solutions. These are problems of reaction, adaptation and values. Solutions for these problems will have to be sought in the context of social and cultural development.[16]

The last sentence is more controversial than it might appear today. *Limits to Growth* was neither the first nor the only study in the post-war period responding to the view that 'mankind' was facing major problems (to borrow a phrase from one commentator, that the world was on 'a collision course with disaster was a foregone conclusion').[17] The question of how to effect change and check the dangers foreseen by those studies, however, was much contested, particularly as it related to the role of the arts. Amongst those studies calling for systemised control to alleviate socials problems was one carried out by the behavioural psychologist, Burrhus Frederic Skinner. In *Beyond Freedom and Dignity*, Skinner argues that entrenched belief in free will and moral autonomy of the individual hinders the prospect of using scientific methods to modify behaviour for the purpose of building a happier and better organized society. Skinner called for notions of free will and autonomy to be trumped in the name of survival.[18] This argument piqued the interest of the influential New York artist and critic Gregory Battcock. As Battcock recognised, Skinner's proposal foresaw

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[14] Peter Passell, Marc Roberts, Leonard Ross, 'The Limits to Growth: A Report for the Club of Rome's Project on the predicament of mankind', *New York Times*, April 2, 1972, n/p.
[15] See for example, H.S.D. Cole, *Thinking about the future: a critique of the limits to growth* (London: Chatto & Windus for Sussex University, 1974).
[16] The Limits to Growth: Interview with the President of the Club of Rome Aurelio Peccei', *The Unesco Courier*, January 1973, p.12.
[17] Gregory Battcock, 'Toward an Art of Behavioral Control: From Pigeons to People', *Domus* (1972), 513, p.44.
[18] F. Skinner, *Beyond Freedom and Dignity* (London: Cape, 1972).

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art's demise. (According to Skinner, 'Art is thus viewed as something possessing protective or tranquilizing qualities—it is at best, a holding action better eliminated.')[19]

In his review of Skinner's study for the Italian art and architecture journal, *Domus*, in which the *Limits to Growth* found an unexpected mention in support of Skinner's argument, Battcock was interested in whether there was a place still left for art and literature in the 'new "controlled" culture the behaviorists advocate?' [20] Battcock goes on:

> What then is the artist, a traditional champion of the autonomy of the individual going to do? How will he fit in? Is his role threatened? Indeed, is the artist, as he stands today, reactionary? [21]

If Skinner was deeply critical of artists, he nevertheless acknowledges the need for cultural designers. However, the description offered by him is surprising, and hardly corresponds to a recognised image of this latter: they invent "… better mousetraps and computers."[22] Battcock refuses the implications of Skinner's argument, offering a defence of arts' role. He notes that there is a long history of artists and thinkers interested in questions of behaviour and art's role in improving society (amongst these, he mentions, Morris, Marcuse, Morse Peckham). And moreover, as Battcock is keen to point out, Skinner appropriates this 'art cultural function' in the service of behavioural science.[23]

Moderating Skinner's attempt to do away with artists, Battcock instead points out a growing tendency within the arts (and a much longer historical tradition) of work whose aim is to shape behaviour; and which is critical of aesthetics (whether this is driven by free will and autonomy or not). That this had to be argued for, that art's role in politics was by no means a given, is all the more intriguing in this post-1968 moment. Battcock predicts art's 'move away from the area of traditional aesthetics to works or "situations" that cause man to observe and analyze or criticize his behaviour, in one way or another.'[24] He goes on:

> obviously, the education of the artist will have to change in a very complete manner. Instead of teaching the fundamentals of color, design and composition, the artist…to be effective and useful, will have to be familiar with such things as sociology, urban planning, industrial design and experimental psychology.[25]

[19] Battcock, 'Toward an Art of Behavioral Control: From Pigeons to People', p.45.
[20] Battcock, 'Toward an Art of Behavioral Control: From Pigeons to People'p.44.
[21] Ibid., p.44.
[22] Ibid., p.45.
[23] Ibid., p.45.
[24] Ibid., p.45.
[25] Battcock, 'Ibid., p.45.

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Pollution was a prime example of the new kind of artistic response that Battcock had seen emerging. It came within six months of the production of the MIT report. The cultural promoter and mover and shaker Gianni Sassi took *Limits to Growth*, and crucially, 'art's critical identity problem' to borrow a phrase from Battcock, as its point of departure. Somewhere between exhibition, political protest and happening style event, *Pollution: Per una nuova estetica dell'inquinamento* was staged on Piazza Santo Stefano in the historic centre of Bologna between the 8th and 14th October 1972. Envisaged as an open-air event (rather than in a gallery setting) and with Piazza Santo Stefano closed to traffic for its week-long duration, *Pollution* claimed the language and sites of political activism and positioned itself as the heir of the historic vanguard; the partly English title adopted by Sassi took the event beyond the regional context in which it was staged to signal its global ambitions.

The literal ground and support for the show was provided by Iris Foundation, a ceramics manufacturer based on the outskirts of Sassuolo. (Fig.1,2,3) Installation photographs taken by Emilio Simion, show a glossy ceramic floor covering the piazza; 10, 000 hand-made ceramic tiles (33 x 33 cm) designed by Sassi and printed with an image of a clod of earth (Fig.4) were produced specifically for the exhibition (in a numbered edition to be donated to different museums)[26]; an 'artificial' ground reproducing a patch of earth, returned the historic square into the field it once was onto which the contributions of twenty-four artists including some well-known names in the history of post-war Italian art and architecture such as Ableo, Mario Ceroli, Piero Gilardi, Claudio Parmiggiani, and Ugo La Pietra were installed. In addition to the sculptural works, there were performances by the radical architecture group UFO and two concerts by *Solo and Ensemble* and *Franco Battiato*, the experimental singer-songwriter that in subsequent years would be managed by Sassi (and who subsequently released an album with the same title as the exhibition, using Simion's photograph).[27]

Pollution brought together a diverse group of collaborators from an artistic and cultural milieu. This was hardly unusual for Sassi: he was loosely associated with the Fluxus network, the international and interdisciplinary movement of artists and musicians. Throughout the 1960s Sassi was involved in a number of projects marked by a collective spirit and radical thinking.[28] By the early 1970s, Sassi had founded his

[26] Simion the photographer responsible for creating the image that was printed on the tiles, talks about creating the 'clod of earth' in the studio because he did not want to have to go out to the countryside. Emilio Simion, *Pollution 2018 Reflection*, https://pollution.irisceramicagroup.com/contributi-1972/; see also J.R.G, 'A dilution of pollution', *Industrial Design*, New York, v.20.2, 1973, pp.54–56, p.55.

[27] An online archive produced by Iris Foundation can be accessed online at: https://pollution.irisceramicagroup.com/

[28] For example, the ten-day open-air experimental sound performance held at Fiumalbo, near Modena, in August 1967. For more on this see Sanne Krogh Groth and Holger Schulze (eds), *Bloomsbury Handbook of Sound Art* (London: Bloomsbury, 2020), Chap. 15. p.284.

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own alternative music label, *Cramps*, supporting experimental music including John Cage and Steve Lacy.[29] A number of individuals with whom he had collaborated in the 1960s—in the Milanese milieu in which he moved—contributed to the realisation of *Pollution*. It was co-curated by the art historians and critics Luca Maria Venturi, Carlo Burkhart and Daniela Palazzoli (the latter better known for her experimental exhibition *Con tem plazione* (1967)), with whom Sassi had founded the art publishing house ED912 alongside Gianni-Emilio Simonetti and Sergio Albergoni in 1965 (both also involved in *Pollution*)). The arts magazine *BIT* was one of the fruits of the ED912 enterprise, which earned itself the reputation as one of the most radical journals of the era.[30]

The exhibition was accompanied by a modest catalogue which reproduces, on the front cover, a photograph taken in the early 1950s of a McDonnell Demon on a USS aircraft-carrier (fig 5). The insignia of the American air force is unmistakeable and the jet carrying bombs in full view. The image is hardly a clue to the catalogue's content, but it does convey an impression of emergency, of warfare, and the extension of power outside its own land borders of a country that in the post-war period was synonymous with capital: the conceptual target for the exhibition. Sassi outlined his premise in the introductory essay, which reads like a manifesto.[31] The aims were threefold: firstly, to critically challenge the notion that ecology was solely concerned with 'the study of pollution'. Invoking the study carried out by the MIT researchers, which had taken pollution as one of an interdependent set of variables (or aspects determining growth), Sassi argues that this variable could not be viewed in isolation but rather as a measure of the health of the economic and political system. By issuing a call to overturn the existing system, he makes his position clear.[32]

Secondly, Sassi charges the arts with the responsibility of visualizing a problem that society had wanted to hide behind. He proposes a 'new aesthetics of pollution', calling on the arts to bring the effects and products of industry into full view; to deliver an image of the world that corresponds to the existing system of production and consumption. Whilst it was hardly a new strategy for twentieth-century artistic practice versed in modernism,[33] it is a pointed criticism of capitalism's aesthetic values: which perpetuates the notion of an 'unspoilt nature' so as to capitalise on it as an object for tourism.[34] Sassi deliberately rejects this perspective, and with it the aestheticization of the landscape that had underpinned the efforts of the

[29] Later on, Cramps issued records by Juan Hidalgo, Walter Marchetti, Cornelius Cardew, Steve Lacy, John Cage, and Demetrio Stratos (the Greek singer, famous for his vocal experiments, and leader of the crossover group Alea). See Sanne Krogh Groth and Holger Schulze (eds), *Bloomsbury Handbook of Sound Art* (London: Bloomsbury, 2020), Chap. 15. p.284.
[30] As Jacopo Galimberti puts it: 'Palazzoli's view of the artist's mission, caught between deferred action and guerrilla warfare, was articulated through *Bit*. Self-defined as 'the most aggressive Italian art magazine', *Bit* had been directed by Palazzoli since its inception in March 1967. One of its objectives was to achieve a provocative conflation of art, politics, sexuality, and youth culture. Unlike the vast majority of the press, which portrayed student activists as hooligans, *Bit* openly backed them.' See Galimberti, 'A Third-Worldist Art? Celant's Invention of Arte Povera, *Art History* (2013), 36.2, pp.418–441.
[31] Daniela Palazzoli (ed), *Pollution: Per Una Nuova Estetica dell'inquinamento* (Sassuolo: Fondazione Iris, 1972), p.8.
[32] Palazzoli (ed), *Pollution*, p.8.
[33] See for example, Charles Harrison, 'Modernism', in *Critical Terms for Art History* in eds by Robert Nelson and Richard Shiff (University of Chicago Press, 2003), pp.188–201.
[34] Daniela Palazzoli (ed), *Pollution: Per Una Nuova Estetica dell'inquinamento*, p.8.

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conservation movement in Italy in the twentieth century[35]; whereby areas were singled out of exceptional beauty to argue for their protection (and which, when applied to the conservation of historic centres, had, according to its critics, the effects of turning them into museums).[36] The point, rather, was to promote a form of artistic practice that could raise awareness of the issues that needed redressing.

Thirdly, Sassi takes aim at what he calls 'capitalist aesthetics' and, as he put it, *Pollution* represented a 'detournement'. This term, which had been made famous by the Situationist International registers Sassi's association with the Fluxus network. He wanted to reflect on the problem of environmental pollution differently, by refusing strategies such as 'recycling', that as he put it, were counterintuitive and only served to maintain the existing system; in this way he echoes the caution of the MIT researchers that reduction in growth alone would not prevent the collapse they had envisaged.

There was a rather unlikely pairing to be found in Sassi's adoption of the findings of MIT and the countercultural credentials he wanted to signal, in part through the illustrations that accompany his text. Sassi's article is illustrated with a series of sketches by the political cartoonist (fig.6,7) Ron Cobb (a regular contributor to the radical underground journal *Los Angeles Free Press* in the 1960s and 1970s). In one of these, Cobb satirized 'Man victorious over nature', by reproducing an advert for 'Your own private environment', which was offered for Christmas by a Houston department store. Cobb reimagined the advert as a cartoon, with eery prescience, showing an intubated skeletal figure sitting on a trolley—glued to a screen and plugged into an electrical supply.

Perhaps more surprising still, Sassi's essay begins with the reproduction of a communiqué produced by the Centre for Magnetic Studies in Imola (fig.8). The centre, founded in 1937, was the brainchild of the eccentric and controversial figure Pier Luigi Ighina. Ighina, whose work has often been described as 'pseudoscience', claimed to have worked as Giulio Marconi's assistant and spent his life dedicated to the study of magnetic fields (what he describes as 'atomic vibration'). He built a 'centre' on his family's estate in Imola and turned that space into an 'experimental laboratory'; recreating his 'inventions' in his garden—a kind of sculpture park—whose quirkiness coupled with the mysticism of his pursuits drew the attention of the artistic underground. Ighina devoted his time to creating contraptions such as the cloud stopper, evoking Wilhelm Reich's cloudbuster, the earthquake neutralizer, a device named 'Ellios' to purify food and the 'stroboscope'. The image of the latter is reproduced by Sassi (and picked up by Franco Battiato in the album design cover for the record that was released of his performance for *Pollution*). According to its inventor, the 'stroboscope' could disrupt the magnetic pulse emitted from objects and even be deployed to stop the traffic on a national or international scale.

[35] On the history of this movement see, James Sievert, *The Origins of Nature Conservation in Italy* (Bern and New York: Peter Lang, 2000), esp. Introduction, and chaps. 5–7; Marco Armiero and Marcus Hall (eds), *Nature and History in Modern Italy* (Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2010), chaps. 9–14.
[36] See for example, Lucia Allais, 'Disaster as Experiment: Superstudio's Radical Presevation' *Log* (2011), 22, pp.125–29; 'Salvages of Italian Historic Centers: Omens of Good Fortune for Your Cities', *Log* (2011), 22, pp.114–124.

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It is tempting to think that Sassi's reference to this work underscores the need for a leap of faith, of the kind Ighina had demonstrated, to think differently about the problems of the magnitude envisaged by MIT's study. The 'stroboscope' also reflects the exhibition's more modest ambition to stop the traffic (something Ighina had imagined possible with his stroboscope) with a pedestrianised zone in the heart of Bologna. In his claim for art's political role, Sassi draws from a range of approaches and underscores the need to think of the term 'pollution' differently, to include its invisible forms (such as radioactivity).

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There is a remarkable diversity in the range of work, artistic idioms and intellectual perspectives amongst the participants, from performance, experimental sound and happening-style events to work that drew on a conceptual vocabulary. While as some contemporary reviewers of the show remarked on the uneven engagement with the themes of the exhibition, there was a sustained interest in making visible what might, ordinarily, be hidden from view, although not always in the way that Sassi had called for in his introductory essay.

A number of works presented themselves as the outcome of research, including for example, Laura Grisi's *Sound-Cassette* (1971).[37] Grisi had produced a series of recordings of natural phenomena (a review of her work for *Data* describes it as 'field work' or 'research') based on a set of constants and variables.[38] The recordings were housed within a wooden box in Piazza Santo Stefano (fig.9) and included one of a tree (the sound of its sap and growth rings); one of ants on the ground as compared to the sound of the ground alone; and of ten stones of different weights dropped from the same height onto different surfaces. If Grisi's interest in seriality and permutation corresponded to what was, by the 1970s, the familiar language of minimalist and conceptual art practice, there is an aspect that cuts against the grain of these practices too; the artist draws attention to a world that is deliberately non-human; she asks the viewer to reflect on the scale and perspective of animal and plant life. It is an interest that was shared with Armando Marrocco, whose *Habitat per formiche* (1971) (fig.10), first exhibited at the Galleria Apollinaire in Milan, analyses animal behaviour using 4000 living ants and invites its audience to learn from their 'superior organization'.[39] Similarly, Amalia Del Ponte, *Presenza-assenza* (1971) (fig.11), an angled mirror, deflecting the viewers perspective, encourages its audience to view the world and its objects in relation to others and not themselves.

Another group of works offered a more tongue in cheek response to the question of what constitutes nature for contemporary society: these works picked up a theme that had received much attention, in part

[37] For an overview of the artist's work see Germano Celant, *Laura Grisi* (New York: Rizzoli, 1990)
[38] 'Laura Grisi in Studio', *Data Arte* (1976), 22, pp.69–71.
[39] See the review of Marrocco's work (the artist also went by Marocco) in 'For a Better Habitat' in 'Forum: Habitat', *Domus* (1981), 614: 2, p.5.

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through Gillo Dorfles's publication: *Artificio e Natura* (1967)[40] and reflected on by Filiberto Menna in his review of the exhibition for the Neapolitan daily *Il Mattino*.[41] Figures such as Piero Gilardi and Gino Marotta, who by the end of the 1960s had earned a reputation for works made using synthetic and industrially-produced materials, that took their cues from zoomorphic and phytomorphic forms were included and found their 'natural' home on the ceramic flooring: Gilardi's *Sassi* (1968) (fig.12), polyurethane foam stone-seating manufactured by Gufram; Marotta's *Siepe artificiale* (1968), the silhouette of a small hedge cut out of metal (fig.13) and Claudio Parmiggiani's *Zoo Geometrico* (1970) (fig.14), the serial repetition of uniform acrylic shapes onto which different animal prints were silkscreened (as short hand for variety) were organised in neat rows on the ground. The work of these artists deliberately plays with the language of industrial production and the unsettling effects of this language as it is applied to the natural world.[42]

The contributing artists did not always accord with the views of the organisers. A number of participants chose to include a critical statement alongside the reproduction of their work, or as in the case of Vincenzo Agnetti, Agostino Bonalumi and Concetto Pozzati in lieu of a work.[43] These indicate a widespread interest or desire amongst the artists to engage with the terms of the exhibition but in some surprising ways; refracting the perspective of the organisers through a distinctly critical voice. Pozzati refuses to participate and is sceptical of art's claim to politics. Echoing Bonalumi, he even identifies pollution as an appropriate metaphor for the institution of art. There were artists who were critical but offered an aesthetic response. In particular, Ugo La Pietra's contribution to *Pollution*, *Il Commutatore* (1969), is characteristic of his long-standing engagement with politics. It was one of the handful of works accompanied by a text, in which La Pietra critically interrogates the term 'public space', and specifically, the lack of any truly public space in capitalist society.[44] He makes the point that artists (which he refers to as 'operatore estetico' in a nod to the

[40] Gillo Dorfles, *Artificio e Natura* (Turin: Einaudi, 1967); Roland Barthes, 'Plastics' in *Mythologies* (London: Vintage,2000) pp.97–99; Bernadette Bensaude-Vincent, *The artificial and the natural: an evolving polarity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007), esp. introduction and chaps. 12 & 13; Esther Leslie, *Synthetic worlds* (London: Reaktion, 2005) esp. introduction

[41] Filiberto Menna, 'Venticinque artisti a Bologna: Arte ed ecologia in una mostra-intervento', p.11. Filiberto Menna acknowledges that nature in capitalist society is always corrupted. He echoes the call made by behavioural scientists, that society alone can effect change. Following this line of thinking, artists have two options: to hide the problem behind art or draw attention to the 'illness' (the problem), that is, highlight it, make it visible, effectively make 'pollution' the protagonist of the work. Menna recognises *Pollution* as an example of the latter; where artists refuse to produce modern public sculpture designed to glorify the city: art cannot produce miracles, nor can it give meaning to a society that has lost its values.

[42] Henry Martin, 'Technological Arcadia', *Art and Artists*, 2:8 (1967), pp. 22–5; Porcher, Benoît et al., *Piero Gilardi*; (Zurich: JRP/Ringier, 2012); Hou Hanru, Bartolomeo Pietromarchi and Marco Scotini (eds), *Nature Forever: Piero Gilardi* (Macerata: Quodlibet, 2017).

[43] See for example, Vincezo Agnetti's response in the form of statement of conceptual art, 'Vincenzo Agnetti: A1' and 'Concetto Pozzati: Una rinnovata speculazione (estetica)' and 'Agostino Bonalumi: Della Polluzione culturale' in Daniela Palazzoli (ed), *Pollution: Per Una Nuova Estetica dell'inquinamento* (Sassuolo: Fondazione Iris, 1972), pp.13, 14, and 32 respectively.

[44] 'Ugo La Pietra: Il Commutatore, Lo Spazio Collettivo' in Daniela Palazzoli (ed), *Pollution: Per Una Nuova Estetica dell'inquinamento*, pp.23–24.

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workerist movement) cannot change the status quo through a visual contribution alone.[45] Specifically, and of his own role, he points out that this is particularly challenging given his lack of connection to the city in which the exhibition was staged.

The installation photographs (fig. 15) rather than those in the catalogue demonstrate how *Il Commutatore* works: the viewer leans on the angled bed and sees the world from a different perspective (literally from a different angle). In a short film that La Pietra produced a couple of years later titled *Per Oggi Basta! / Enough for Today!* (1974)[46], La Pietra takes *Il Commutatore* around the city of Milan, on the back of a small truck. The camera follows La Pietra's eye-line, as he journeys across the city, along the tops of building, cornicing, aspects normally out of view, and that hide the city's identity (fig.16). The shift in perspective offered is slight, a micro-shift, that nonetheless transforms the perception of the city (it is no longer recognisable and away from the commerce at ground level); and represents a small victory over the control that is exerted through urban planning. Through works such as this, *Pollution* maps onto the phenomenon of *Arte Ambientale*, which emerged in the early 1970s, as Martina Tanga's research has underscored,[47] outside the established centres of artistic production and traditional circuits of display; it was characterised by its public setting and a critical stance towards politics and urban planning and espoused by artists that were interested in sociology and politics. Ugo La Pietra was a regular contributor to exhibitions associated with that movement throughout the 1970s: *Pollution* also extends the remit of Arte Ambientale, which as Tanga has argued, takes up the workerist movement's call for 'quality of life', by acknowledging that quality of life needs to take into consideration environmental degradation.

* * *

Sassi's exhibition belongs to a period of growing concern in the early 1970s around the issue of environmental degradation that counts the work of Gruppo 9999, Gianfranco Baruchello's *Agricola Cornelia*, the filmmaking of Michelangelo Antonioni (although in rather more ambivalent terms) amongst others, to its cause. *Pollution* corresponds to a specific strand of demonstration or exhibition as protest, which had already been seen two years earlier at what had been dubbed by the critic Lea Vergine as the first example of eco-art in Italy.[48] What concerned *Sagra Fuoco e Schiuma*, organised by Bruno Munari in 1970, and

[45] On the origins of this designation of the artist as 'operatore estetico' or 'operatore culturale' see Martina Tanga, *Arte Ambientale: Urban Space and Participatory Art* (New York: Routledge, 2019), esp. introduction, pp.14–15. As Tanga notes, the term was theorised by Enrico Crispolti in the 1970s amongst others, a proponent of Arte Ambientale, to signal the extension of art's remit to a 'social territory' which included neighbourhoods, schools and factories. As Tanga goes on, the term derived from leftist literature, which had defined the role of the intellectual 'who performed a cultural function within society.'
[46] The film can be accessed online at https://ugolapietra.com/en/art-cinema/
[47] See Tanga, *Arte Ambientale: Urban Space and Participatory Art* (New York: Routledge, 2019), esp. pp.14–15.
[48] Lea Vergine, 'A Sant'Angelo Lodigiano, Fuoco e Schiuma', *NAC* (1970), n.2, p.9. See also, Anon. 'Sul Lambro il palio del veleno', *Tempo*, 3 October 1970, p.64.

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involving over a hundred artists from Italy and across Europe as well as the grass roots organisation of the community of Sant'Angelo in Lodigiano (on the outskirts of Milan), was the detrimental effect of the by-products of industry on a local community.[49] Like *Pollution*, it was conceived as a series of happening-style events over a long weekend in October 1970. Its aim was to make visible the problems facing the inhabitants: most spectacularly, one of the performances, documented by a series of black and white photographs, involved casting a giant net suspended from the parapet of a bridge to create a damming effect for the polluted foam sent down from further upstream (fig. 17, 18).[50] As evening approached the rising foam began to accumulate in a mass along the height and width of the net—recalling a range of artistic precedents from the 1960s of process-based practices underpinned by the metaphorics of energy.

Despite the rollcall of well-known artists participating and the artistic innovations foregrounded, *Sagra Fuoco e Schiuma* and *Pollution* have been largely written out of the history of post-war Italian artistic practice. Their rediscovery helps to shake off Italy's image of a country that came late to environmental awareness or whose history of this issue is one of exceptions.[51] *Pollution* received a very limited amount of coverage in the press[52], but amongst these, did manage to secure an international reception in the review published for *Industrial Design* by an author who went by the initials J.R.G. The review traded on a well-worn image of Italy as the quintessential ruin in the European imagination.

> The rape of both natural and the manmade environment by modern technology has been well-documented and most people, governments and organizations at least evince concern about the rapidly deteriorating quality of life. In no country of the world has this deterioration been as rapid and as pronounced as in Italy.[53]

If *Pollution* offered an aesthetic answer and framework for thinking about crisis: its limited reception underscores the fact that you can bring things to view but still be met with a refusal to look. J.R.G. was, however, a little more optimistic in his assessment: 'the cumulative effect of their efforts may be difficult to measure', he writes, 'and may be immeasurable, nonetheless, it is through consciousness-raising experiences such as this that the public becomes aware of the problems facing twentieth century man.'[54]

---

[49] See Teresa Kittler 'Bruno Munari's Environmental Awareness' in Pierpaulo Antonello, Matilde Nardelli,& Margherita Zanoletti (eds.), *Bruno Munari: The Lightness of Art* (Oxford: Peter Lang,2017), pp.359–396.
[50] Ibid.
[51] See for example, Marco Scotini, *Earthrise*: Pre-Ecological vision in Italian Art (1967–73), catalogue of the exhibition curated by Marco Scotini, 9999. Artists: Gianfranco Baruchello, Ugo La Pietra, Piero Gilardi (Turin: Archive Books, PAV Series, 2016); Andrea Lerda 'Nature's Creative Balance: On Italian Eco-Art' in Serenella Iovino et al., *Italy and the Environmental Humanities: Landscapes, Natures, Ecologies* (Virginia: University of Virginia Press, 2018), pp.225–234.
[52] As far as I am aware mention of it was made in the following: Anon., 'Nelle Gallerie' *Domus* (1972) 516, p.41; J.R.G., 'A dilution of pollution', pp.54–56; and Filiberto Menna, 'Venticinque artisti a Bologna: Arte ed ecologia in una mostra-intervento', *Il Mattino*, LXXXI, n.291, 21 November 1972, p.11.
[53] J.R.G., 'A dilution of pollution', p.55
[54] Ibid., p.56.

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The momentum of the exhibition was sustained in the following years largely through the publication of *Humus* (the house organ in all but name of the Iris Foundation). There are historical precedents of industrialism with a conscience in Italy, perhaps most famously in the example of Olivetti, under the management of Adriano who also had their own house organ and system of community planning.[55] Iris Foundation continues that tradition, and like Olivetti has capitalised on that image in recent years (with its own museum that trades on its history of responsible business). It would be easy to think of *Pollution* as simply a publicity stunt for Iris Foundation. However, there are several accounts that underscore Sassi's ability to draw on the resources of big business but eclipse them from view.[56] As one of Sassi's close collaborators put it, Sergio Albergoni (with whom he founded the publishing house ED912) and involved in *Pollution*:

> If you consider the work that we did for Iris ceramics in piazza Santo Stefano in Bologna: the only thing that connects back to a company making ceramics was that we had entirely refloored piazza Santo Stefano, on top of which we had installed an art exhibition. No one even spoke about their products.[57]

Humus ran for six issues, starting sixth months after *Pollution* ended and continuing until February 1975. The aims of the publication were to reflect on the task of redefining ceramic production and to underscore the connection between material production and its effects on the environment. As the editorial puts it: 'The program of *Humus* becomes necessarily larger than a conversation about the product. It becomes a discussion about the environment and the categories … we normally use to think about the environment.'[58] This observation was not specifically related to the processes of production but also raises the point that our material environment affects our 'quality of life'; it is a theme that crops up time and again in the latter half of the 1960s and 1970—as we have seen in political, artistic and scientific discourse. *Humus* maps the

[55] See for example, Michael Marinetto, *Corporate Social Involvement: Social, Political and Envionrmnetal Issues in Britain and Italy* (Taylor and Francis Group, e-publication, 1998), part 3, chapter. 6–8.
[56] 'La capacità di stringere rapporti lavorativi col mondo dell'industria ed essere contemporaneamente un uomo delle avanguardie è, secondo Enrico Menduni, un aspetto brillante di Gianni Sassi, che pochi riuscivano a mettere in pratica. Fu tuttavia, come conferma Albergoni, motivo di contestazioni: "L'accusa in effetti era proprio questa, di 'farci belli' coi soldi chi aveva commissionato la campagna pubblicitaria. E, in effetti, a quel tempo, le tante riviste fuori dal sistema, e ce n'erano tante, quando accadeva qualcosa come quella di Bologna', per Iris Ceramiche, "se ne occupavano ma parlando di noi, di Gianni, dell'agenzia e quasi nessuno citava l'azienda.' See Gabriele Toma, 'L'avanguardia ricorda. Il ruolo di Gianni Sassi tra gli anni Sessanta e Ottanta', *H-ermes. Journal of Communication*, 8 (2016), 221–246, pp.237–38.
[57] 'Si pensi all'operazione da noi fatta per le ceramiche Iris in piazza Santo Stefano a Bologna: l'unica cosa che poteva ricondurre al fatto che si trattasse di un'azienda produttrice di ceramiche è che abbiamo ripavimentato tutto piazza Santo Stefano, completamente, e sopra ci abbiamo fatto una mostra d'arte. Non si parlava neanche del loro prodotto.'Quoted in Gabriele Toma, 'L'avanguardia ricorda. Il ruolo di Gianni Sassi tra gli anni Sessanta e Ottanta', pp.237–38.
[58] See Luigi Giampetruzzi 'Editoriale' in *Humus* vol 1, April, Cologno Monzese,1973, pp.2–3. Giampetruzzi puts it ever so slightly differently, as a 'talk on the environment' 'and on the categories according to which we are used to think of the environment', see p.3.

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question of environmental deterioration onto quality of life, carving out a place for industrial production and its relationship to housing, design and the environment. This opens up the possibility for a qualitative response to the question involving architects and artists and critics: and *Humus* was able to draw on established voices in those fields—Tommaso Trini, Achille Bonito Oliva, Gianni Pettena, Gillo Dorfles, Marshall McLuhan, Vittorio Gregotti—do to so.

The articles were translated into three languages echoing the international aspirations of *Pollution* (with its part-English title), while underscoring the global effort and appeal to an international readership; and keeping the memory of *Pollution* alive. The first issue recapitulated the premise of the exhibition with further commentary provided by architects, leaders of industry and politicians. The discussion was illustrated with images evoking the focus on insect life in Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (fig.19 & 20).[59] *Pollution* had reflected on a moment when the question of a sustainable future and quality of life (all terms which are familiar and central to the discourse on environmentalism) were brought into view and popularised. So much so, that Marco Maria Sigiani could write that people had stopped believing that 'quantitative growth was sufficient to guarantee an improved quality of life' in his reflection on that topic for *Humus*.[60]

Since then, *Pollution* fell out of view, seemingly unable to generate a sustained momentum in either artistic practice or the environmental debate. It is tempting to wonder what would have made a difference: perhaps we know the answer already as contemporary responses have called for the need for a progressive standard as the problems of environmental degradation become harder to export to an elsewhere. Proximity arguably has a more motivating effect. Nevertheless, *Pollution* has caught the attention of the press forty-six years later. It has taken a subsequent generation of artists and architects to reflect on its message: in 2018 a second iteration of the exhibition was organised by Mario Cucinella (School of Sustainability), putting the spotlight on the prescience with which *Sassi* was able to get us to think about pollution differently.[61]
Our understanding of the term has changed — pollution is no longer seen only as an undesirable by-product of industry but perhaps instead as the necessary consequence of industry and a system of consumption. After a generation of clean air and regeneration acts, the concerns of the 1970s may have been partly addressed, at least in some parts of the world, only to find ourselves confronting a whole set of new problems or at least, problems newly noticed. It has taken a global pandemic to press pause temporarily on what had seemed like an unstoppable system. Carbon emissions in 2020 have lowered but not nearly enough to bring about the kind of change necessary to avoid the effects of global warming, and at such massive human and economic cost. Across many sectors, including the arts, there is agreement that structural changes are necessary and that sectors predicated on a globalised system are unsustainable. Activists are calling for green recovery—that accelerates cleaner, net-zero emissions and strengthens the impact of climate change—to be built into economic recovery. The echoes of Sassi's call for a rethink of the economic system continue to be felt in contemporary debates that attempt to reimagine life after the pandemic. As

[59] Gianni Sassi, 'Pollution: per una nuova estetica dell'inquinamento', *Humus*, vol.1, April 1973, pp.24–26.
[60] Marco Maria Sigiani, 'Quality of Life', *Humus*, vol.1, pp.31–48.
[61] It was described as 'un eredità importante' by *Resto del Carlino*, 24 June 2018; and as able to put the cultural/artistic spotlight on problems which had never been voiced before (*Il Resto del Carlino*, 6 June 2018), p.21.

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many have since noted, the pandemic was inevitable, and not enough was done to prepare. To reflect back on a moment when something could have been done, from a time when the forecast for the future looks bleaker than ever serves to underscore a story of missed opportunities, false starts and the consequences of inaction. There is perhaps good cause to lament society's refusal to see or listen: but perhaps it is never too late to hope for better, to be (in the words of Thomas Hardy) not a pessimist but an ameliorist.

Figure 1, Installation view, *Pollution: Per una nuova estetica dell'inquinamento*, 1972. Photo: Emilio Simion. Courtesy Iris Foundation

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Figure 2, Installation view, *Pollution: Per una nuova estetica dell'inquinamento*, 1972. Photo: Emilio Simion. Courtesy Iris Foundation

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Figure 3, Installation view, *Pollution: Per una nuova estetica dell'inquinamento*, 1972. Photo: Emilio Simion. Courtesy Iris Foundation

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Figure 4, Gianni Sassi, design for ceramic tile. Photo: Emilio Simion. Courtesy Iris Foundation

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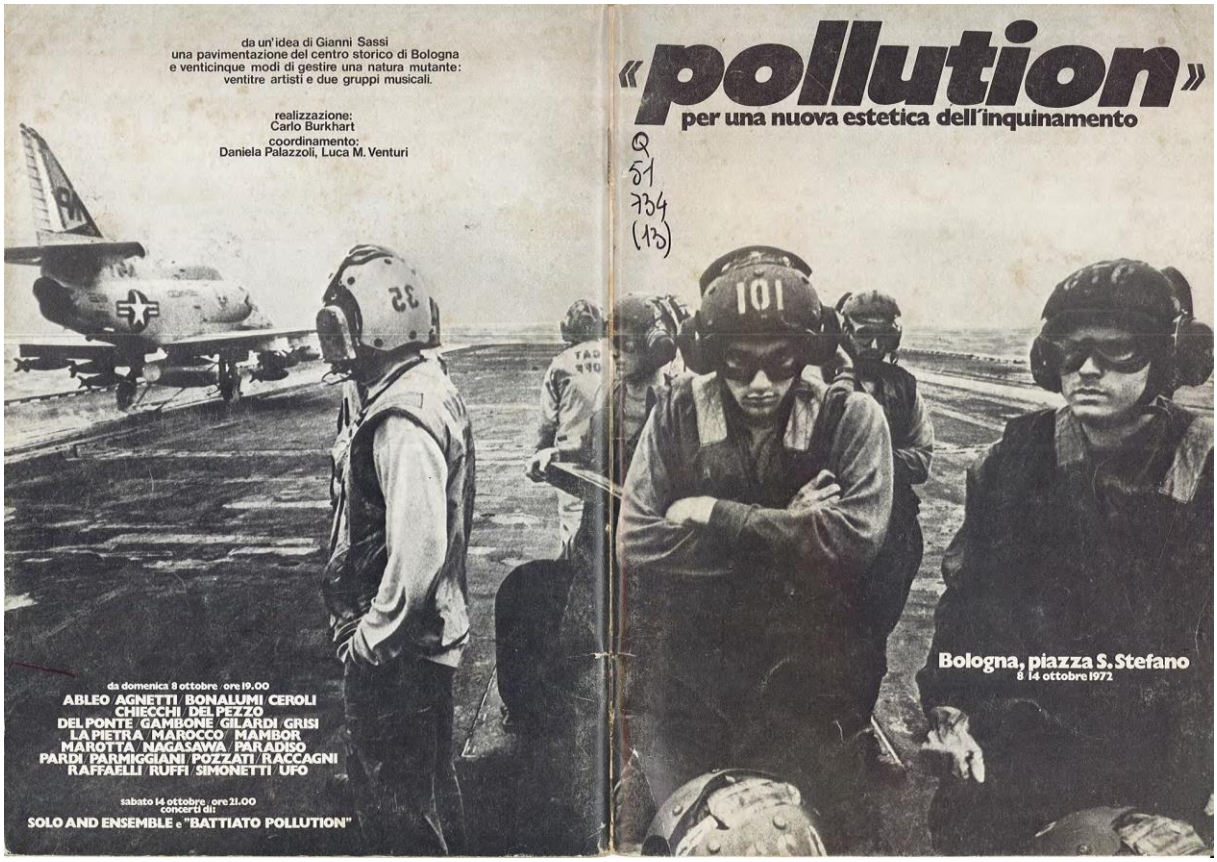

Figure 5. *Pollution Per una nuova estetica dell'inquinamento, 1972* Exhibition Catalogue (detail). Courtesy Fondazione Iris.

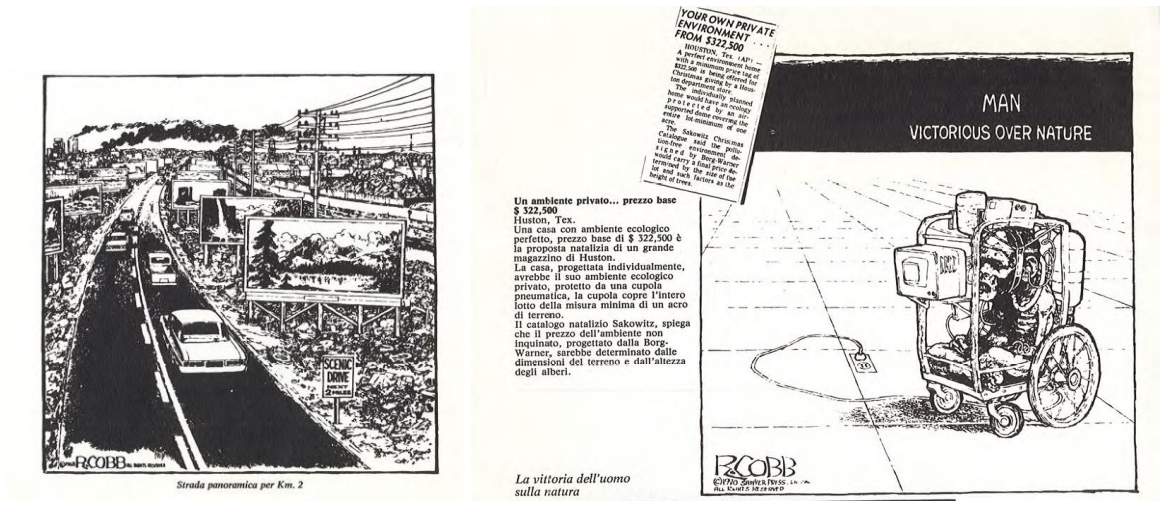

Figure 6. *Pollution Per una nuova estetica dell'inquinamento, 1972.* Exhibition Catalogue (detail) showing illustrations by Ron Cobb. Courtesy Fondazione Iris.

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Figure 7. *Pollution Per una nuova estetica dell'inquinamento, 1972* Exhibition Catalogue (detail) showing illustrations by Ron Cobb. Courtesy Fondazione Iris.

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GIANNI SASSI
Per una nuova estetica dell'inquinamento

CENTRO INTERNAZIONALE STUDI MAGNETICI
VIALE ROMEO GALLI, 4 - TEL. 23722
40026 **IMOLA** - ITALIA

AVVISO

Il 14 settembre 1972 in una località della Francia, vi è stata un'assemblea di quasi tutti i Centri Internazionali Studi Magnetici i quali hanno rilasciato il seguente comunicato.
Il 12 settembre 1972 ad Imola (BO) Italia, è stato inaugurato il più grande stroboscopio magnetico esistente sul globo terrestre ed ha già dato esiti positivi.
Da questi primi risultati positivi si è venuti alla determinazione di eseguire in data da destinarsi, un nuovo esperimento così concepito:
18.000 persone provenienti dai nostri Centri di studi magnetici dislocati in tutte le parti del mondo, (scienzati, tecnici, collaboratori, ecc.), si spargeranno su tutto il suolo italiano e con apparecchiature magnetiche eseguiranno concordemente fra di loro l'esperimento di bloccare per 24 ore tutti i veicoli a motore a scoppio e diesel circolanti in Italia.
Questo secondo esperimento di portata mondiale servirà per far conoscere, riflettere e far prendere in considerazione, il principio del ritmo magnetico sole-terra, per poter deviare l'umanità dalla catastrofe in cui sta per precipitare.

Imola, 25 settembre 1972

Figure 8. *Pollution Per una nuova estetica dell'inquinamento, 1972* (detail) Exhibition Catalogue. Courtesy Fondazione Iris.

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Figure 9. *Pollution Per una nuova estetica dell'inquinamento, 1972* Exhibition Catalogue (detail) Courtesy Fondazione Iris.

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Figure 10, Installation view, *Pollution: Per una nuova estetica dell'inquinamento*, 1972. Photo: Emilio Simion. Courtesy Fondazione Iris.

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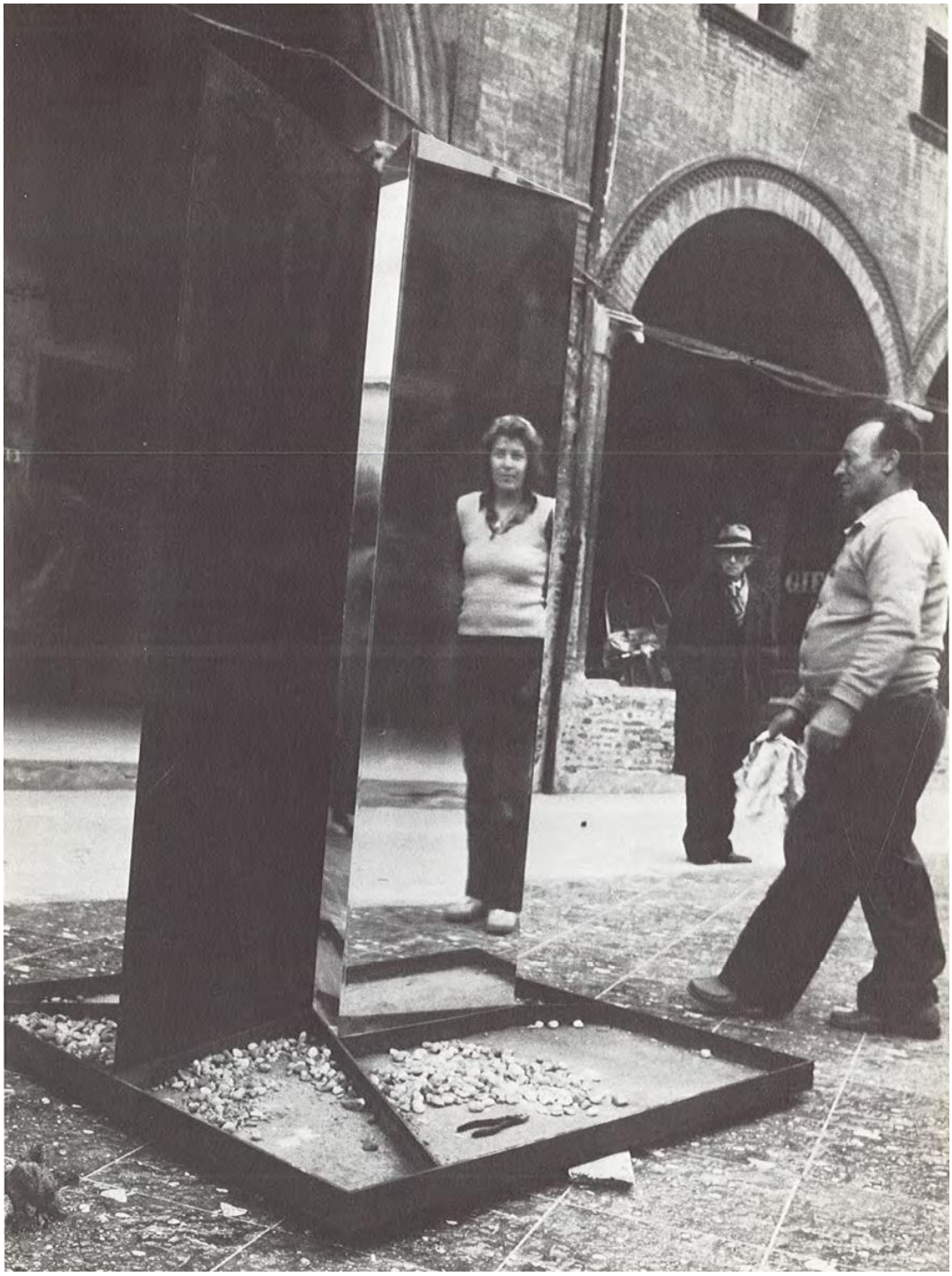

Figure 11. *Pollution Per una nuova estetica dell'inquinamento, 1972* Exhibition Catalogue (detail). Courtesy Fondazione Iris.

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Figure 12, Installation view, *Pollution: Per una nuova estetica dell'inquinamento*, 1972. Photo: Emilio Simion. Courtesy Iris Foundation

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Figure 13, Installation view, *Pollution: Per una nuova estetica dell'inquinamento*, 1972. Photo: Emilio Simion. Courtesy Foundazione Iris.

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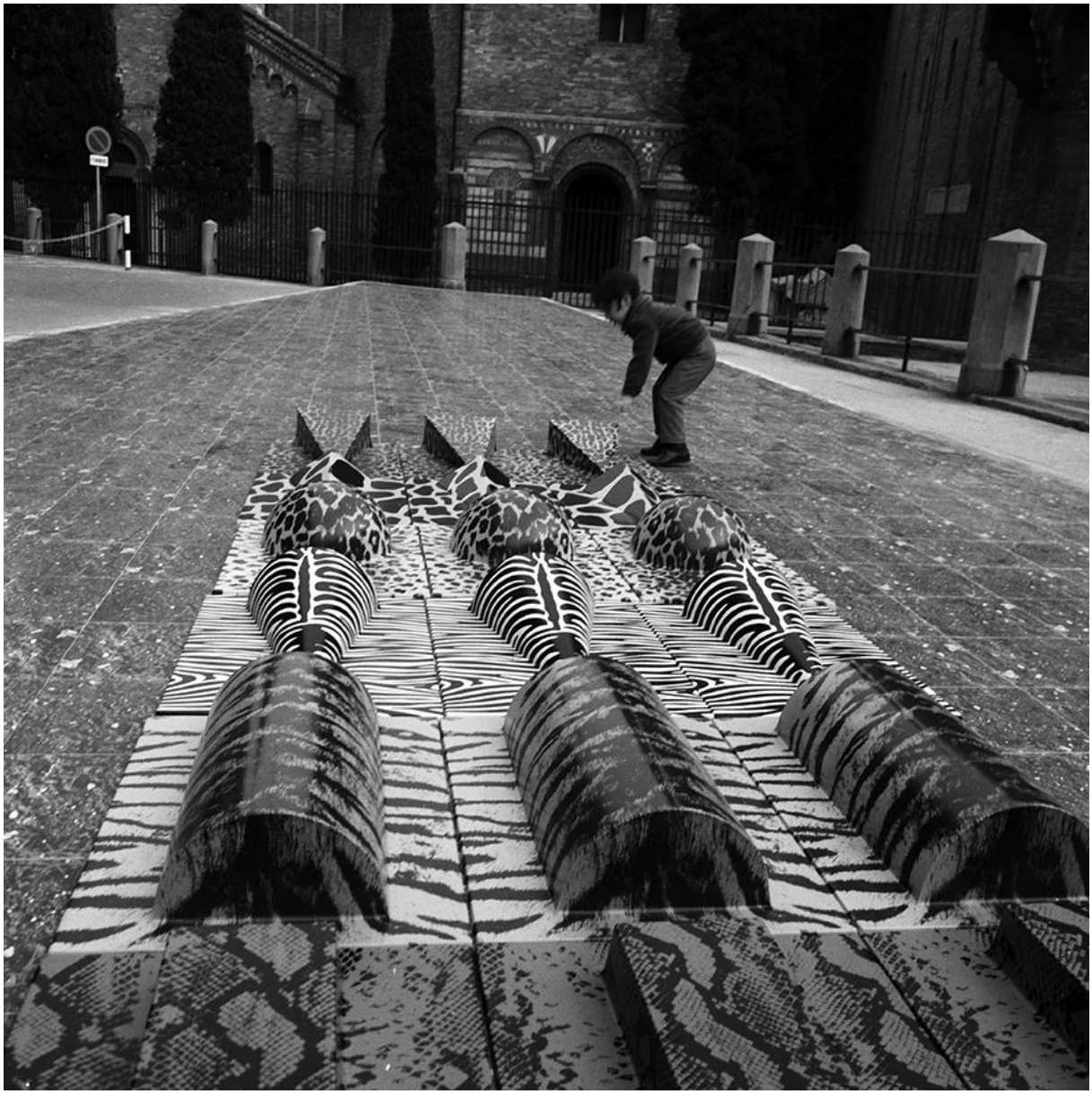

Figure 14, Installation view, *Pollution: Per una nuova estetica dell'inquinamento*, 1972. Photo: Emilio Simion. Courtesy Foundation Iris.

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Figure 15, Installation view, *Pollution: Per una nuova estetica dell'inquinamento*, 1972. Photo: Emilio Simion. Courtesy Fondazione Iris.

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Figure 16. Film still from Ugo La Pietra, *Per Oggi Basta! (*Enough For Today!), 1974, Ed. Jabik, & Colophon, Milano by Mario Livietti. Film 16 mm, b/w, sound, 14', music composed and performed by Ugo La Pietra 1974. © Ugo La Pietra Archives

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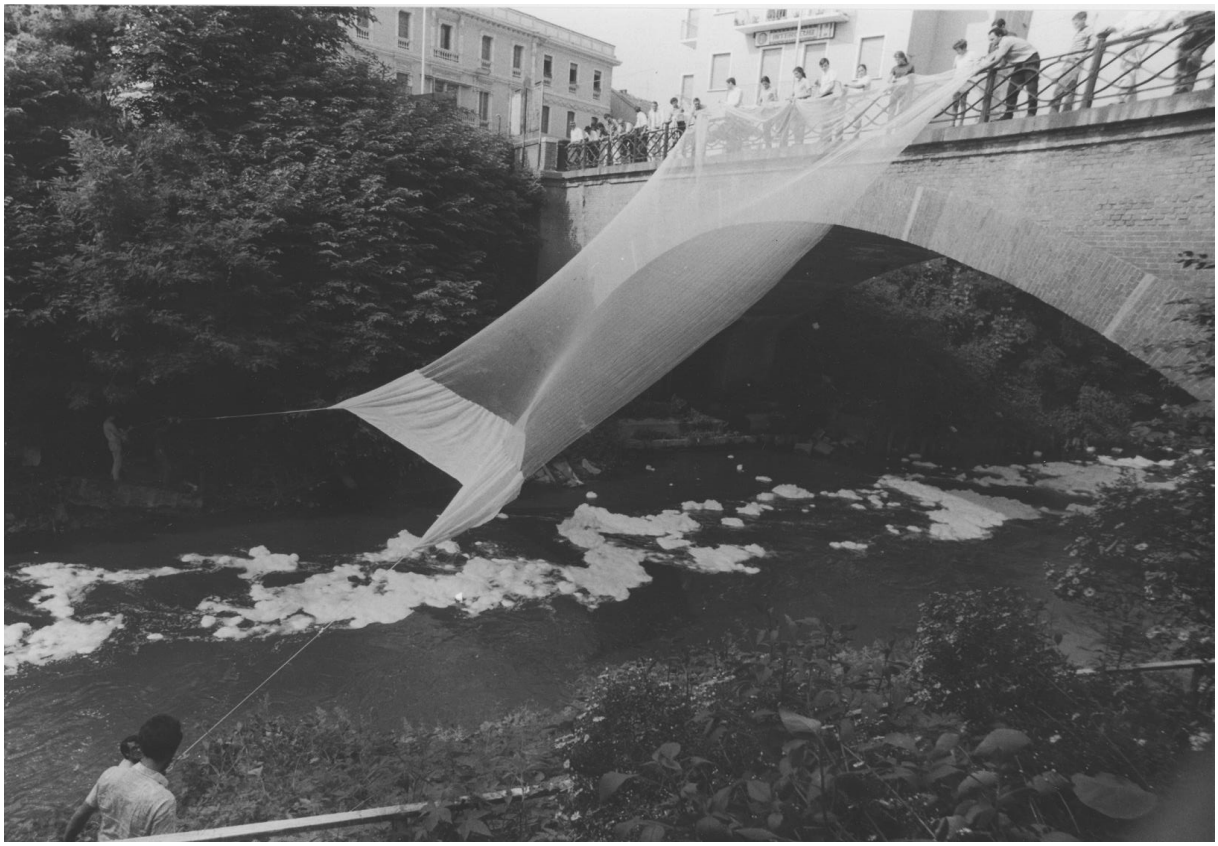

Figure 17: *Sagra Fuoco e Schiuma* (detail), 1970, Black and white photograph © Angelo Pozzi

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Figure 18: *Sagra Fuoco e Schiuma* (detail), 1970, Black and white photograph © Angelo Pozzi

di "progettazione dal basso", facendo intervenire gli utenti nel processo stesso della progettazione, si sono risolti per ora in una falsificazione. La "partecipazione" è puramente apparente; l'esperto proietta sugli utenti il proprio modello del sistema dei bisogni e crede che questo modello sia espresso "spontaneamente" dagli utenti. Siamo al punto di partenza, con una falsificazione in più. Nelle attuali condizioni dell'organizzazione sociale la "progettazione dal basso" non è possibile.

Parte terza
Lettera di SOCCO MANSHOLT e MALFATTI
Scritto pubblicato nel numero 14 di «Mondo Economico» aprile 1972

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Figure 19. Gianni Sassi, 'Pollution: per una nuova estetica dell'inquinamento', *Humus*, vol.1, April 1973, pp.24–26. Courtesy Fondazione Iris.

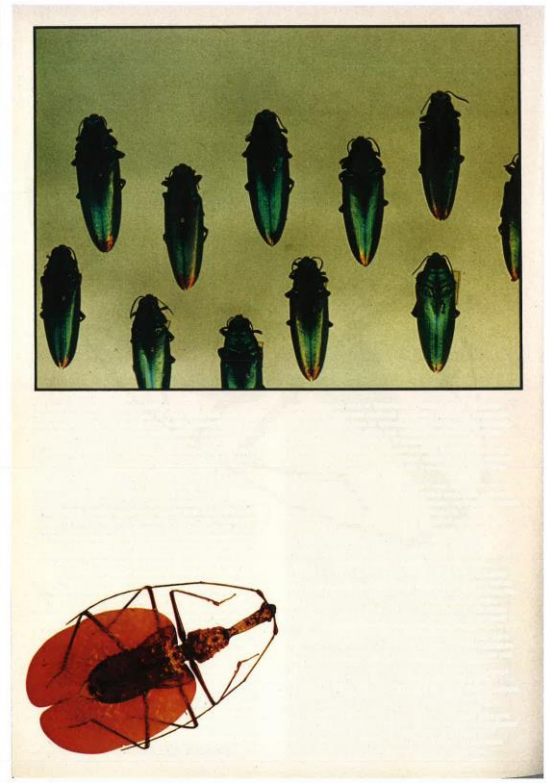

Figure 20. Gianni Sassi, 'Pollution: per una nuova estetica dell'inquinamento', *Humus*, vol.1, April 1973, pp.24–26. Courtesy Fondazione Iris.

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