

Arte povera and politics essay sample

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Arte Povera is a name given by Germano Celant to a group of artists in 1967. According to Celant, the goal of these artists was to overcome the “dichotomy between art and life.” These artists accomplished this breakdown by working with everyday or “poor” materials and by fostering a closer relationship with nature. Therefore, they used materials such as rocks and paper and made use of the force and gravity and electricity. The artists continued to foster a relationship between art and life and by 1968, Arte Povera was thus heavily influenced by the student protests that commenced in Paris and spread all over Europe. These protests were caused by the disenchantment of students at the rigid institutions that outlined formal relationships in society. They were discontented with the methods of education, consumerism and capitalism. Artists of the Arte Povera built a bridge between art and life by integrating these sentiments into their artwork. Their concern for the changes happening in society also influenced the way in which they presented their art.

Because contemporary radicalism was concerned with breaking down conventions, the Arte Povera artists wanted to deconstruct the conventional presentation of artwork in a gallery and form new relationships between the art and the audience. This included new media, performance art and life size images to name a few. Artwork of the Arte Povera movement made use of themes, materials and methods of presentation that all alluded to the political climate of the time thus breaking the barrier between art and life. The political climate of the late 1960's is marked by the famous student protests that took place all over Europe in 1968, known in Italy as the

Sessantotto. Mario Merz, an artist of the Arte Povera movement was inspired by these student protests.

His work thus coincides with the political climate of the time. It is composed of everyday objects and forces of nature: an aluminum casserole dish, beeswax and neon writing. A casserole dish and beeswax are objects that are commonly found in households. In addition, beeswax is a result of a natural process and the neon lights are a result of the force of electricity. Thus the mediums in this piece reflect the aims of the Arte Povera movement to develop art that has a strong relationship with nature. It also mirrors the political climate because written on the beeswax is a slogan from the Paris student protests: " Solitario Solidale" (Solitary Solidarity.) Therefore, this art piece by Merz is coherent with the aims of Celant to deconstruct the barrier between art and life because the art itself is composed of everyday objects and scrawled upon it is a real political slogan.

The years of the Arte Povera movement also overlapped with the politically charged years of the Vietnam War. During these years, America was trying to prevent the spread of Communism around the world. In order to achieve this, they interfered in many countries and tried to impose American ideals of consumerism capitalism. Many Italians, who were members of the Socialist and Communist political parties, were enraged by America's policies and values during the Vietnam War. Arte Povera artists challenged the largely accepted American values. One way they did so was through their emphasis on nature. Nature often runs contrary to consumerist culture because nature is often exploited to produce mass products for society to consume. The artist Jannis Kounellis is an example of an Arte Povera artist

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who challenges consumerist society by use of nature in his 1967 Untitled piece. This work features cacti spread out evenly in metal bins. Although nature is present here, the cacti are not growing in a natural environment. They are indoors at an exhibit rather than in their natural environment with sunlight and water. In this artwork that is characteristic of Arte Povera, nature is being exploited to serve society, something typically done by consumerist societies. Kounellis is making use of nature in his art in order to highlight the negative side of consumerism that was predominant in daily life.

In addition to consumerism, capitalism was another conventional institution that many Italians criticized. Artists of the Arte Povera movement were concerned with challenging conventions in their artwork and thus contested widely accepted forms of art such as paintings as well as widely accepted establishments such as capitalism. The artist Emilio Prini knocks conventional practices in a twofold manner with his 1969 work L'USA Usa. Firstly, this piece of art is not a conventional painting that is hung up in a gallery. Instead it is a tape machine that keeps recording the sound of its own device. Therefore it forms a new relationship between the artwork and the audience. Rather than just viewing the tape recorder the audience listens to it. It is also not stagnant like a painting because eventually it self-destructs. Secondly, L'USA usa attempts to knock down the convention of capitalism that was being spread around the world. The name of the artwork is a play on words that translates into "the USA uses," commenting on the materialistic nature of capitalism. The tape machine continuously records its own sound until the constant usage causes it to self-destruct. This negatively

suggests that the nature of capitalism in the United States is to boundlessly use up its own resources until it destroys itself from within. Prini is using a new medium of art to defy commonly accepted practices such as capitalism.

After being ruled under a fascist regime that collapsed, Italian society was in scrambles. While the ideas of capitalism and consumerism were considered to be unnatural to the Italian citizenry, these policies were embraced by mainstream politics. However, the sentiments of a large portion of the Italian citizenry were not being expressed in the country's political policy and as a result massive protests broke out in the late 60's. Germano Celant, put together the Arte Povera movement to express the discontent of many Italians. In the opening line of his manifesto, *Arte Povera: Notes for a Guerilla War*, he wrote: " First came man, then the system. That is the way it used to be. Now it's society that produces, and it's man that consumes" (p. 3). He is criticizing the culture of capitalism and consumerism and aligning Arte Povera with a political counterculture. Therefore, the artists included in the Arte Povera movement all include an aspect of poor, everyday materials as well as materials found in nature in order to move away from the materialism that stems from capitalism. Many of the artists are even explicit in their work, such as Mario Merz, who includes political slogans in his art. Arte Povera was thus a result of the politically charged nature of the times.

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