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Afterall / Online

Artists at Work: Piero Golia  
By Andrew Berardini

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Piero Golia, *Bus (Untitled)*, 2008. Bus crashed to fit the size of the booth. 3 x 6 x 3m. Collection of Eugenio Lopez, Los Angeles. Installation: ART LA, 2008

*Andrew Berardini:* So I think we should talk about the-

*Piero Golia:* -revolution?

*AB:* Why don't we talk instead about the bus (*Untitled*, 2008) installed at ART LA earlier this year? In a way, this exhibition in the booth of a New York gallery, Bortolami, was your local debut. Do you consider yourself an L.A. artist?

*PG:* You are right. I'd never had a show in Los Angeles so I thought maybe it was the moment to do something. L.A. is not an open city. You can live here for ten years and you will never be an "L.A. artist." If you think about it, the only people who ever invited me to exhibit in an "American" show ("Uncertain States of America: American Art in the 3rd Millennium" at the Astrup Fearnley Museum of Modern Art in Oslo) were Hans Ulrich Obrist, Daniel Birnbaum and Gunnar Kvavan, who are all Europeans. It was easier for me to get a green card than to be considered an L.A. artist! But I like that. Bas Jan Ader lived in Los Angeles, but he is never considered an L.A. artist.

*AB:* So the art fair was a chance for a lot of people who knew you in L.A. to finally see your work?

*PG:* A lot of people here know me as an artist, but in the end, almost nobody has seen what I do. I was

interested in doing a very cold, formal piece, but I was also interested in digging into the idea of the weird space of the art fair itself - in the end, it's *not* an exhibition space. I decided to focus on completely filling the booth. It was, in a way, a kind of territorial marking, to define the space with the physicality of a sculpture. I aspired to have the biggest space in the fair, so I bought this 10-foot by 35-foot passenger bus and I decided to compress it so that it would fit into the smaller booth that was assigned to me. Fuck, if this wasn't difficult! First, we had to torch cut and remove all of the safety armor that prevents the bus from collapsing during an accident. Then we used three bulldozers to compress it. Looking at the bus now, I still think you can feel all the energy we used to press it.

*AB:* How big is the bus now?

*PG:* Now, 10-by-20. The piece came out much differently than I'd expected, and that's typical of my work. Fortunately, I don't believe in expectations! I think art is all about the experience and the process: "Let's just compress it enough to fit it in the booth."

When I first met the guys at Zacher's Automotive, where we took the bus to be compressed, they asked me how I wanted it to look and I replied, "As it happens." And that's how it looks now. I think they did a perfect job. It is just as it should be. I don't believe in art as representation. My work belongs to reality and it is affected by reality.

*AB:* You recently completed a project for SITE Santa Fe. There was a long article on SITE Santa Fe by Jori Finkel in *The New York Times* saying that everyone complained about the exhibition design because all these big ramps had to be built, leaving no room for the art. Jori quotes you as saying, about the ramp design, "If I don't like it, I will simply pour concrete into the entire thing," to which she replies in her article, "It was not clear if he was joking."

[*AB* and *PG* laugh]

*PG:* I never joke.

[More laughter]

*PG:* Actually, the concrete idea sounds nice and I probably did say it. I think it would have been great, but they would never have let me bury their ramp in concrete. In the end, I decided to cut the ramp. In the center of a room it simply disappeared, and you could choose either to turn back or to jump onto a giant foam mattress. An intuitive and spontaneous decision on the part of the viewer - his or her decision made the piece.

*AB:* You seem to have an intuitive and spontaneous approach to art.

*PG:* I really believe that art is life, and that's how I live - if I don't like it, I try to change it. I think that's the exciting moment, when things shape up and it's not up to the artist to shape them. It's reality.

*AB:* Explain further what you mean when you say that you have an intuition and then reality shapes it. What do you consider to be an event that might shape your intuition?

*PG:* The people I find to fabricate a piece, and bureaucracy, and life, and physics and chemistry. In the SITE work this was evident in the title of the piece, *Manifest Destiny* (2008). The title is exactly how I dreamt it. And while we were fabricating the piece, we shifted away from my original vision. By shifting, we gave a shape to the work in reality.

In a way, everything pushes this matter to become something. When I say "matter," it could be a parade, it could be marble - it could be whatever. I just believe in evolution. And I'm also a Catholic. Isn't that funny?

*AB:* What is this work - an action, an addition, a gesture?

*PG:* There is never any addition, only what is necessary. This is typical of my work. It's more about the

gesture. My favorite painter is Cy Twombly because of the feeling of the gesture, because you can feel the movement of his hand when you look at the work. Every real artist has a gesture: Koons, Beuys, Pierre Huyghe - you can feel that there is someone behind the work pushing it, moving it. Aristotle talks about the difference between man, who is a "builder," and God, who is the "creator," but then there is this weird figure of the artist who is a man but is also a creator.

If you notice, in my work you can feel that all of the creative action takes place intuitively, prior to the process of building the work. The intuition is an action and then the production starts and things happen. The surface, the external part of my art, the temporal shaping of the material, is carried out by reality...

*AB:* I heard about a second project at SITE...

*PG:* I also did a "secret" permanent project at SITE. I installed a stainless steel structural column in the center of the space. The column got included in the wall and will likely be forgotten. One day, if I get a show at SITE, I'll tear all the walls down and leave my column holding up the roof of the museum, which is another kind of leap.



*AB:* I've been teaching an art history class lately that covers cave paintings to cathedrals. "What makes someone an artist?" and "What makes something art?" are questions central to the study of art history. According to Anthony F. Janson, the art historian whose book I'm using, art making requires an imaginative leap, a jump. There's a moment of intuition...

*PG:* Cave graffiti satisfied a need for representation. Art began to satisfy a need for cultural memory, but the industrial revolution diminished this need. With the advent of photography, the need for painting as a means of representation profoundly decreased. The industrial revolution in art happened in the 1920s with Man Ray and Duchamp.

*AB:* People point to Futurism as the first 20th century avant-garde art movement, and the Futurists were obsessed with machinery.

*PG:* Futurist paintings captured the feeling of the movement of machines, but I've never been a big fan of the Futurists. I see them as more important in terms of the revolution that led to Man Ray and Duchamp, Kosuth and Weiner, and then all the art from the 1990s in which the image becomes dominant. Then, at the end of the 20th century, there was a new industrial revolution in communication. I remember when I first moved to America 10 years ago I would call my mother once a week on Sundays, and that three or four-minute call cost me \$10. Now you can talk to China for six hours for 15

cents, and you can send any image you need over the Internet at no cost. I think the revolution in communication created a massive exchange of images, making them more ubiquitous than ever. Again, we've reached a moment in which artists must reevaluate their role.

*AB:* What about the dematerialization of the art object in the 1960s?

*PG:* That wasn't a poetic choice; it was a political one. Nowadays, it's a different contest. We don't need representation anymore and we don't need images anymore. We need a new art in the scale of life. Art should match the astonishing casinos in Vegas!

*AB:* Are you talking about art as spectacle? Entertainment does it so much better than art ever could. Art has to astonish in a way that isn't purely physical.

*PG:* Like the Watts Towers, Dodger Stadium or the eruption of a volcano? I stole the volcano example from Kant. I'm talking about the sublime. The eruption of a volcano is the most absolute example of the sublime for Kant, in the same way that the crowd at Dodger Stadium is an example of the sublime, or self-made monuments like the Watts Towers exemplify the sublime. Perhaps the sublime is to reality what the masterpiece is to art. Art should be connected to an experience of ecstasy. But please don't think that I am so naive or so full of myself. Maybe "breathless" is the word I'm looking for? It's all about the moment you get into the room. Don't you notice that in one second you instantly know whether it's good or bad? I've changed my opinion about art, whether I like something or I don't, but I've never had to change my opinion about whether it's good or bad - it's something you can smell. Francesco Clemente told me that once, when he was having dinner with Warhol and some other friends in Amalfi, the power went out, and he could *feel* where Warhol was in the room. That day he realized Warhol was the biggest of all of them, because he could feel his presence in the dark space. I know those guys were doing a lot of drugs, but I really believe that when I drive through New Mexico, I can feel Bruce Nauman!

*AB:* Did you hear he's going to be the next Venice Biennale artist for America?

*PG:* He deserves it.

*AB:* Did you like Gonzalez-Torres at the Biennale?

*PG:* I love the poster with the empty pillow that he made when his boyfriend died (*Untitled*, 1991). I think the two synchronized clocks they have at MoMA, *Untitled (Perfect Lovers)* (1991), is fantastic. You know I really don't normally get so excited by art. Fuck! But I remember that room at MoMA with Perfect Lovers, the chessboard by Orozco with all the horses, the white and gold Boetti embroidery of the thousand longest rivers in the world and a very good Matta-Clark. It's like the Michael Asher show that was up recently [at the Santa Monica Museum of Art]. It just seemed so seamless, like the transfer between art and life was almost nothing. There was no noise in the transfer. We owe a lot to artists like Asher, Beuys, James Lee Byars, Warhol and Allan Kaprow.

*AB:* Talking about art and life, I know you're planning to buy a gold mine with Pierre Huyghe. I also heard that you guys are going to produce a musical about it? I'm very curious about this project, especially the logistics and details.

*PG:* It's all about the experience. That is something that Pierre and I share. For a long time we've been talking about going to Alaska to look for gold. We postponed the trip for a year or two. Then, when Pierre was in L.A., we decided to buy our own gold mine here. After that, things shaped themselves. We thought, "Where the fuck are we going to get the money for this gold mine?" So we decided to produce a musical in Las Vegas about the story of the mine in order to fund the project. That's how everything started.

*AB:* Will you and Pierre write the songs?

*PG:* We have no idea what will happen. We'll start by opening an office for the mining company in Los Angeles and go from there.

*AB:* So opening an office is the first step. When is it going to open?

*PG:* Soon.

*AB:* When?

*PG:* We are trying to focus on "now."

*AB:* Where will it be located?

*PG:* We want a prime location, like a high-rise building. We're looking for something very specific, so it is not going to be easy to find the right place. We're considering Century City and downtown L.A. as possible search areas. It has to be magic.

AB: What's the musical going to be called?

PG: I don't know. What do you think about "Gold Diggers?"

AB: For Vegas, it can work! How much money will you need?

PG: Around \$6 million.

AB: When's the musical going to open?

PG: I don't know, and I'm very happy about that! It means we are still alive.

AB: \$6 million is a monumental amount of money.

PG: Yes, I agree! I'm very interested in the monumental.

AB: It's funny, because of the recent show at the New Museum called "Unmonumental." It seems that Rosalind Krauss sees the monument as a modernist gesture, feels that the last true monuments were modernist gestures.

PG: I've been thinking a lot about this. At the moment, many artists are making larger and larger works, but almost none are truly monumental. Monumentality has something to do with time and eternity. Art *should* be monumental.

AB: To me, the monumental artist currently *en vogue* is Richard Serra. In L.A., for example, I went to two openings at two different cultural spaces - one was at the Broad Art Center at UCLA and the other was at Segerstrom Hall in Orange County - and each featured a *Torqued Ellipse*. The Broad Contemporary Art Museum spent almost their entire \$10 million acquisitions gift from Eli Broad on a single Richard Serra piece. It seems that every time they open a big building, and unsavory businessmen sit around the table to ask themselves, "What should we get for an art work in the plaza? What would be a real crowd pleaser?" they slap their hands together and exclaim "Richard Serra!"

PG: I love Richard Serra.

AB: Really?

PG: Yes. When they decided to rebuild the border wall between the U.S. and Mexico, I submitted a project to the Border Protection Agency. I wanted to build this Richard Serra-style steel wall with a series of passageways that randomly open once a month for only a few minutes! But I never got any answer. And remember, as I told you before, I also love Jeff Koons.

AB: If I were to associate you with other artists, Richard Serra and Jeff Koons wouldn't exactly jump to mind.

PG: That means I have to work harder.

AB: One last question: You mentioned earlier that it's reality that tempers the work of art for you, and that within that there is an element of chance, because letting reality shape the work means that reality can really fuck things up. Are you ever worried by this element of chance?

PG: Do you know that [French Enlightenment philosopher] Blaise Pascal considered faith to be a risk? He compared having faith to a kind of gambling.

When reality shapes things and chance is involved, anything can go wrong, but if that is what naturally happens, it will still be good. It's not really about chance - or, better, it is *only* about chance. It's the life of a gambler. If I make it, I'll make it big. But if I fuck up, I fuck up big, and it will be too embarrassing to be alive. It's true!