

TOMATO PROJECT

BODY. WORK. POVERTY.

Edited by Eduarda Neves



Giulio Verago

"It may be said that Milan represents a broad, perhaps extreme, image of the more general situation of Italian artistic production and policy over recent years, of the uneven relationships between private and public initiative. ... Milan—city of the entrepreneurial and cultural bourgeoisie—is the extreme reflection of Italian arts policies: built largely on private initiatives and the patronage of certain individuals and sponsors However, such private subjects, those concerned first and foremost with their own economic interests, cannot and should not reasonably be expected to carry out the work that public bodies normally do in democratic countries."

[LUCA
CERIZZA¹]

PAUPERTAS AUDAX BOLD POVERTY

Postcards from Milan's independent art scene

¹ Luca Cerizza,
“(Thinking) outside the
box — Private initiative
and public slowness in
Milan (1985–2010),” in
Souvenir d'Italie.
A non-profit art story
(Milan: Mousse, 2010),
pp. 178–180.

What I want to recollect here are some quick, flickering glimpses into the Italian independent scene in Milan. I have chosen iconic, ever-changing places whose precarious and resilient examples deal with the concept of bottom-up change.

Being an artist in modern Italy has never been child's play.

Carla Accardi and Nanda Vigo, Antonia Pozzi and Alda Merini, Umberto Bindi and Luigi Tenco, Franca Rame and Giulietta Masina, Pier Paolo Pasolini and Laura Betti are just past examples of the bittersweet way to success.

In the field of visual arts today, many young graduates from Italy's best art academies struggle against irrelevance in the mainstream media, balancing life and work in a society that does not fully recognise visual art as a reliable profession.

Many of the best stories of contemporary art in Italy started from small-scale initiatives, run by private citizens.

In Milan, in the last quarter of the 20th century, artists, intellectuals, curators, and visionary philanthropists tried to fill the void left by the institutions; the lack of a proper, independent, continuously funded office for contemporary art; the lack of a place to nurture research outside the Academy, the artist studio, and the *salotto*.

One of the outstanding characteristics of Italy is the interdependence of its centres, the profound bounds between different and somewhat complementary approaches to cultural production. Milan has always been a lively and engaging city: it hosts seven universities and is the richest metropolitan area in Italy and in Europe.

In this fragmented, precarious framework, Milan remains a place where the clash between opposite views has emerged in all its incendiary and grotesque magnitude.



[Franz Gerald Kruppl performing at PAC—Padiglione Arte Contemporanea on the occasion of *As soon as possible*. Performance loop. The Class of Marina Abramovic Braunschweig School of Art, 2003]

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Late 1970s: Casa degli Artisti (1909–), Corso Garibaldi, 89/A

*"L'artista era ormai solo nei confronti della società, e la sua solitudine poteva portarlo alla sterilità o alla pazzia, come mai era successo nella storia. Rimaneva la possibilità di associarsi tra ricercatori, tra dispersi con gli stessi interessi. I gruppi nascono per ragioni elementari, per necessità di lavoro e di difesa comune."*²

² Claudio Verna, *Figurative arts in the industrial society*, unpublished academic dissertation, University of Florence, 1961, p. 20.

³ Gian Paolo Prandstraller, "Osservazioni sul destino della professione," in *Arte come professione* (Venice: Marsilio Editori, 1974), pp. 211–222.

In 1974, Italian sociologist Gian Paolo Prandstraller (b. 1926) published interesting research about the status of visual artists and art workers in Italy from a sociological point of view: *Arte come professione*. The book is one of the first works of this type ever done in Italy, and recollects a mosaic of different points of view through a series of interviews with 64 Italian artists, 24 critics, and aesthetics scholars, as well as nine gallerists, notably including only nine women in total. Among them are major figures such as Bruno Munari, Umberto Eco, Palma Bucarelli, Simonetta Lux, Gillo Dorfles, and gallerist Arturo Schwarz.

In a pre-globalisation, post-68 scenario, the author foretold the big change underway, the slow, tectonic shift towards the recognition of the artist as a researcher.

After Prandstraller's sociological survey, countless others followed, before the creation of curatorial studies classes and the evolution of sociological studies helped this kind of researchers be more effective, detailed, specific.

In his final remark, Prandstraller recognised that the problem in Italy resides on both sides: on the one hand, Italian artists of that time seem to have a tendency toward conscious self-harm, as they deployed experimental and research-based practices that did not challenge the market-based status quo, and on the other side art is not recognised as a public service, unlike many other fields of intellectual research in modern society.

"Art can be recognized as a public service only as a result of a bottom-up movement, only if it's recognised by a growing number of people who reclaim the need for art."³

Casa degli Artisti is an anomaly. Built in 1909 by two philanthropist brothers as a compound for artist studios, it was one of the earliest examples of artist studios in Europe before Mussolini took power, as well as a place to connect the Milanese scene with the rest of Europe. Casa degli Artisti lived many lives and was visited by 20th century icons, like painter Renato Guttuso, writer Dino Buzzati, designer Angelo Mangiarotti, and jazz legend Chet Baker.

Among all the possible snapshots (including a recent renovation in a well-gentrified urban scenario), I choose to focus on 1979, when a group of young visual artists that included Giuseppe Spagnulo, Luciano Fabro, Hidetoshi Nagasawa, Paola Brusati, and critic Jole De Sanna founded a cultural association, aiming to bring new life to the building in the Brera district and irradiate that energy beyond the physical space inside the city itself.

⁴ Cf. https://www.wikiwand.com/it/Casa_degli_artisti.

In 1979, the very same idea of cross-fertilisation between visual art and the wider cultural landscape gave younger visual artists the chance to learn, experiment, and take risks in a safe environment, in the dilapidated building.

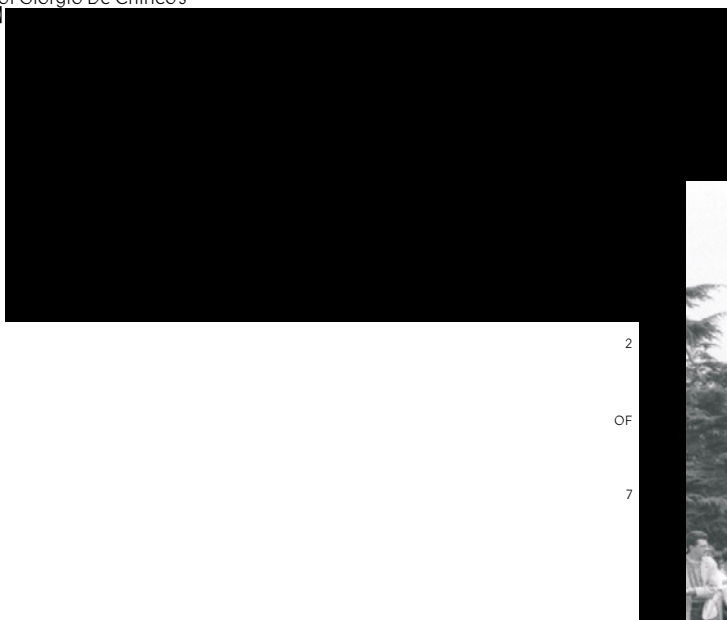
Casa degli Artisti let the voices of artists be heard—for instance, in the struggle for the restoration of Giorgio De Chirico’s *I bagni misteriosi* in 1994. The cultural association still exists and curates projects nowadays, long after the death of that group of founder artists.⁴

It is undeniable that the legacy of that group of artists and intellectuals lives on as a symbol of survival and resilience, *un’isola felice*, as it continues to push us to reconsider the dialectic between political institutions and artists, between private and public space.





[Sit in for the restoration of Giorgio De Chirico's
I bagni misteriosi in 1994]



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1980s: Brown Boveri (1984–1985), via Confalonieri 30

When I was born, in April 1980, Italian contemporary art scene was some kind of beautiful, sleeping beauty. The shocking waves of the *anni di piombo* had disrupted the social fabric, and an uncanny sense of impotence characterised the political spectrum.

⁵ Rosario Assunto, "Demitizzazione, fine della natura e morte dell'arte (giudicate secondo una prospettiva schellinghiana)," *Flash Art*, March–April 1980, pp. 11–14.

In 1980 the Italian Ministry of Culture was a new-born political body, having been established just six years earlier; there were no contemporary art museums in sight (the first one, Centro Luigi Pecci in Prato, opened in 1988). The April–May Italian edition of *Flash Art* (no. 96–97) included a lengthy piece about the "the end of Nature and the death of Art,"⁵ as well as articles about sacred monsters Salvador Dalí and Barnett Newman; and the February opening of one of the most important group exhibitions that have ever taken place in Italy—*L'altra metà dell'avanguardia*, 1910–1940, by Lea Vergine—was given a rather short review.

Like elsewhere in Europe, in the 1980s, Italy lived an ephemeral spring of economic growth, fuelled by a corrupt system. Milan has always been the main centre of contemporary art, and a new generation of private galleries would open later on, during that defining decade.

Regarding the Milanese independent art scene, the watershed moment came when a number of students from the Architectural Composition course held by Corrado Levi at the Politecnico di Milano occupied the abandoned Brown Boveri factory (1984–1985), using it as a test ground for investigations into the relationships between form and meaning.

The factory had been abandoned 20 years before and covered 20,000 square meters near the Garibaldi train station.

Levi, an architect, an artist, and a leading intellectual, successfully translated into the Italian discourse some elements of New York's New Wave scene.

The relatively short-lived experience at the Tecnomasio Italiano Brown Boveri Factory connected Milan with the international scene by inviting artists to regard the city as their studio. The same energy characterised other artist-run spaces like Spazio di Lazzaro Palazzi in Porta Venezia (1989–1992) and less structured experiences like the Via Fuggi artist cluster.





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FP.3 ILFORD

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F24 ILFORD

[Brown Boveri, photo by Salvatore Licitra]

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F24 ILFORD

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Early 1990s: Viafarini (1991–), via Carlo Farini 35

In the first of his American Lessons: Six Proposals for the Next Millennium (1985, published posthumously in 1988), Italo Calvino spoke of lightness, and identified it with great precision and determination. He stated that he supported the subtraction of weight, that he had come across significant testimonies of it in the literature of the past and present, and above all that he considered it to be a dominant value of the future. A lesson—almost a manifesto—for many of the artists of the 1990s generation, some of whom had trained under Lucio Fabro at the Brera Academy of Fine Arts, or had met at the Casa degli Artisti or had founded the space via Lazzaro Palazzi. They were all aware of the ideological value of the materials that Arte Povera had sanctioned, and set out to contrast this with lightness, precision, and determination. Not through weak thought [pensiero debole n.d.] but weightless 'poverista' materials.⁶

⁶ Milovan Farronato, "Italian Area," in *Souvenir d'Italie*, p. 308.

Viafarini opened in 1991 inside an old printing press. At that time, the Isola district was a popular neighbourhood with a bad reputation—a frontier. It has since been dramatically changed by gentrification, but there remains a peculiar livelihood within the city.

The idea that inspired the founder Patrizia Brusarosco was to bring the experience of New York's artist spaces and German *Kunstverein* into the Italian context.

It represented a turning point for the Italian independent scene for many reasons.

In the 1990s, its programme was mostly devoted to the idea of presenting ambitious large-scale installations as solo presentations, along with comprehensive group shows linked to a programme of workshops, roundtables, and panel discussions.

But above all the core idea was to start an archive of the contemporary scene in Italy, to gather the information about the most deserving artists (later digitised through a database)—a relational archive where the best research is put into dialogue with curators based in Italy and abroad.

The space itself was founded together with a group of then emerging artists: Maurizio Cattelan, Letizia Carillo, Alberto Garutti, Liliana Moro, and later on the generation of Paola Pivi, Diego Perrone, Claudia Losi, and Pietro Roccasalva, just to name a few.

The foundation of the space was the foundation of its archive, with the exhibition *Immagini Proiettate*, where people could take a look at the carousel of projected slides and read the portfolios of the artists made available in the physical archive.





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[Immagini Proiettate,
opening of Viafarini, 1991. Photo by Alberto Callari]





"Viafarini has been the experimental Kunsthalle that Milan had never had and still does not have.

A place where artists can go and talk to a critic without this being a humiliating experience.

A place where an artist in search of information can find out about how to apply for study grants abroad. A place where a student can go and study books and catalogues that cannot be found in any other public library in Italy, purchased year after year and dutifully archived.

A place where it is understood what it means for a young artist to learn how to display their work, leading in certain cases—such as that of Margherita Manzelli—to memorable solo shows, while in others—such as the Transatlantico series, the general rehearsal for the Via Fiuggi group—to group shows that have marked the beginning of an era, not to mention the presence of such figures as Alberto Garutti and Giacinto Di Pietrantonio.

A place that has never shied away from dealing with training projects and which, therefore, has made room for exhibitions by students from the Academy over the years.

...

A place that has learnt to cope with forms of funding based not on the sale of works but on contributions, striving to make the best possible use of the money provided by public bodies and banking foundations. Working in this fashion is tiring, yet it is the only way that makes it possible not to sink to compromises when

dealing with young artists without a guaranteed market.

A place that has been frequented by the best Italian curators, be it only to write a text, and that continues to be a training ground for many. Not everyone knows that a lot of support has come from Maurizio Cattelan, that Vanessa Beecroft worked here as an assistant, that many curators and artists of the most recent generations also made their debut right here. Art economists such as Pierluigi Sacco, stylists such as Martin Margiela, architects such as Stefano Boeri have passed through here before going on to become references, setting the tone for a deliberately interdisciplinary approach to looking at contemporary art.

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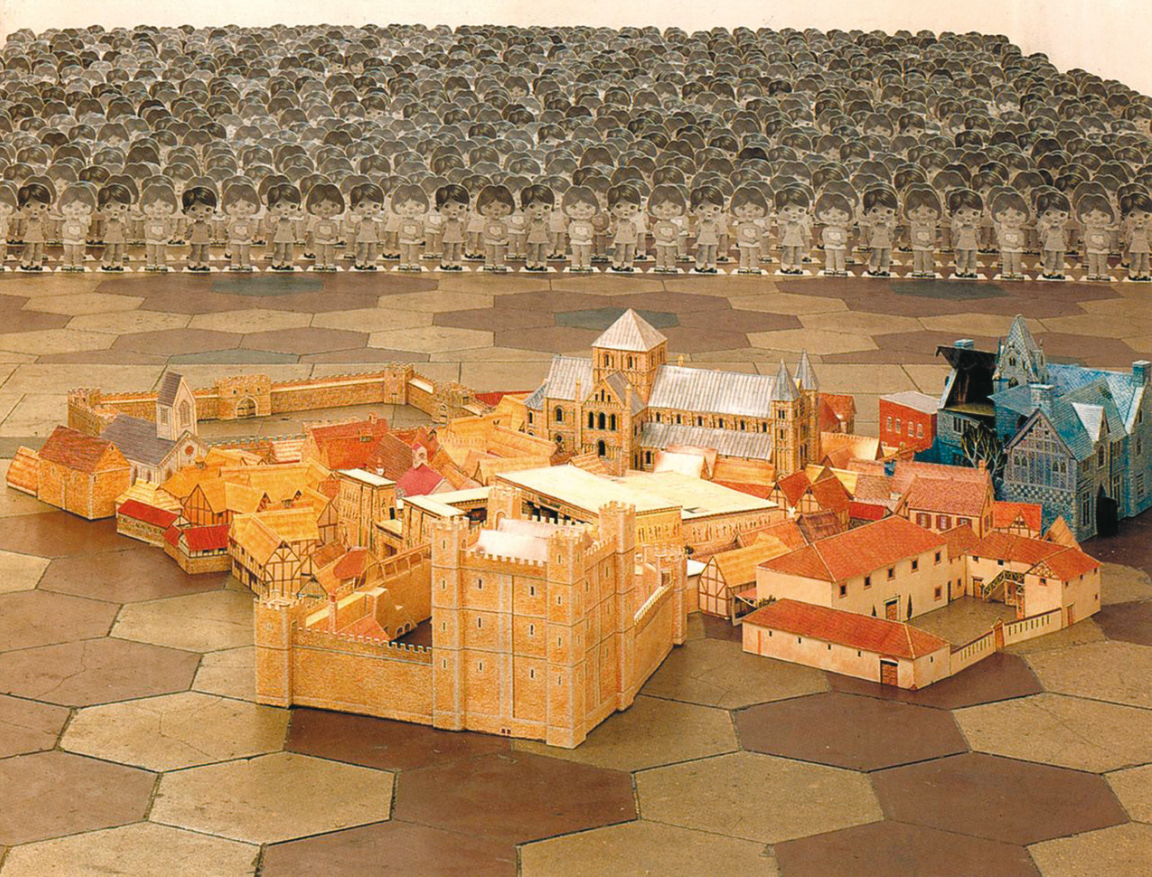
A place that has been ostracised and envied by magazines and galleries, simply because none of them could muster the flexibility to move on so many different levels.

A place where none of those who have contributed to the artistic programming have ever really been paid. The enthusiasm with which people have worked here shows just how much the space has been able to communicate its own ideal values. The secret? Learning costs. At Viafarini we have been able to make mistakes free of charge. We've had a place—both in physical and moral terms—made up of relationships, information, artworks, and people.

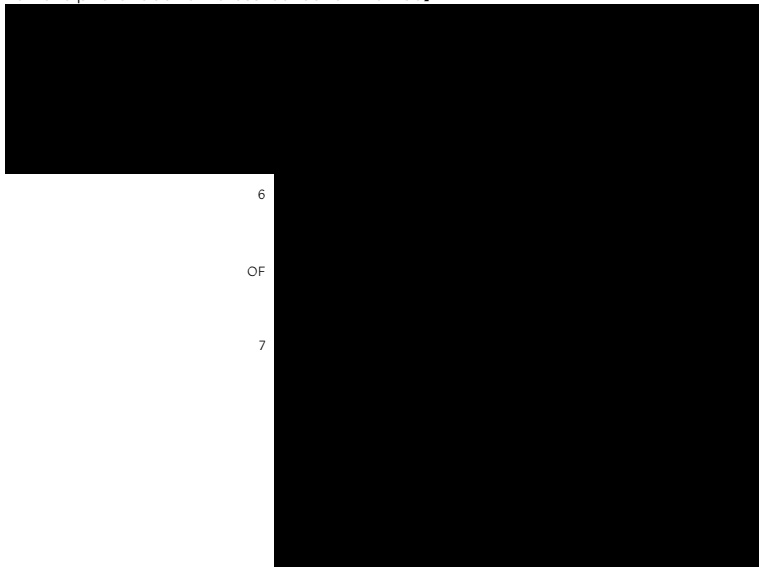
Happily stable and dynamic, Viafarini has been and is, above all, a place.”⁷



⁷ Text by Angela Vettese published on the occasion of *Viafarini's* 20th anniversary, 2010.



【Liliana Moro Abbassamento, 1992. Dolls and paper constructions installation view at via lazzaro palazzi courtesy galleria emi fontana photo roberto marossi collection mambo】



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New Century, New Wave

The new century gave rise a new wave of openings. In the 2000s, the city's social and urban fabric changed enormously. Big development projects created brand new central and gentrified neighbourhoods such as Porta Nuova and City Life, raising the value of every building and rent, thus pushing the independent scene and artist studio towards the outskirts.

Connecting Cultures (2001–), a venue and documentation centre founded by curator and researcher Anna Detheridge, with a special focus on sustainability in arts and design; Assab One (2002–), founded by another woman—editor and journalist Elena Quarestani—as a project space inside a former factory in the outskirts of Milan; MARS — Milano Artist Run Space (2008–), a participatory project conceived by a group of artists inside a small garage in the lively NOLO neighbourhood; the Brown Project Space (2008–2012), a small project space that published a book and devised an editorial platform; the new operative venues of Viafarini (2008–) and Care Of (2005–), organisations at Fabbrica del Vapore in the Chinatown district; the Peep-Hole (2009–2016), a project space that opened in the former studio of Patrick Tuttofuoco and was then moved to an artist foundry; Gasconade (2011–2016), co-founded by critic Michele D'Aurizio and a group of artists and friends; MEGA (2016–), a microscopic space co-founded by photographer and publisher Giovanna Silva; and Edicola Radetzky (2016–), a small newsstand located in the iconic Navigli neighbourhood, built in the early 20th century, which was completely renovated by artists and has been artist-run ever since.

Different missions, different tools, same goals. Different voices in the Milanese white noise: some of them are still singing, some of them have decided to turn that energy into something else.

This list does not seek to be a comprehensive one. I have simply included some highlights, different examples that have shared the constant longing for new formats, the constant craving for opportunity, for representing Milan as the gateway to a wider European cultural debate.



Conclusions

The findings of Prandstraller's research in 1974 are (unfortunately) still relevant for many reasons. Even if the art world has changed everywhere, Italy included, I can still relate to many of the contributors' statements as they endure scepticism, hesitance, and resistance in recognising the proper role of contemporary artists within Italian society.

On the bright side, the large funding initiative Italian Council, activated by the Ministry of Culture, is gradually trying to fill the void and promote the inclusion of Italian artists' works in the museums' public collections.

Yet, the post-covid crisis Italy is currently facing forces us to face what has not been done in the recent past. The failed accomplishments. All the missed opportunities and mistakes made by politicians, as well as by artists and art workers themselves. Groups like the AWI — Art Workers Italia,⁸ born amid the first covid lockdown, are putting time and energy in much-needed lobbying actions to change the mindset of legislators.

⁸ Cf. <https://artworkersitalia.it/about/manifesto/>

Many talented Italian curators and critics who were born in Milan or started their careers in the city have successfully pursued them abroad: Milovan Farronato, Cecilia Alemani, Vincenzo De Bellis, Francesco Garutti, and Massimiliano Gioni are just examples of a wider phenomenon. Among Milan's many museums, there is still no contemporary art museum, and the emerging Milanese artistic scene has to cope with this bothersome absence of "the" institution. Good museums are not a cemetery of artifacts, but rather a central piece of the social and cultural fabric of a community: a place to pass on knowledge and skills, to redefine and update collective memories and narratives.

Much more than the lack of contemporary art museums, funding, and resources, what scares me the most about my country is the evanescence (if not invisibility) of contemporary culture in the mainstream debate, especially post-covid.

I think the resilient stories of independent cultural production, especially the Milanese one, can be an inspiring example for young generations as they face the paradigm change that is to come.



[Draft by Maurizio Cattelan
for Viagarini Fundraising, 1997]



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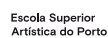
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