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A chiare lettere / Spelled out. Renato Guttuso's *Boogie Woogie* at the Olivetti

Federica Martini

The Olivetti archives in Ivrea preserve a letter type-written in 1979 by engineer Bruno Piazza to writer Renzo Zorzi, then head of cultural relations at Olivetti.¹ In his note, Piazza deplored the “unjustified” presence of the “mural painting” *Boogie Woogie* by the artist Guttuso [sic] in the refectory of the Olivetti factory in Scarmagno, some twenty kilometres away from Ivrea.² The memo enumerated the risks to which the monumental fresco was potentially exposed. Piazza regretted the dysfunctional position of the fresco next to the storage room and its general state of neglect: “I suggest that you [Zorzi] consider relocating the painting in a more meaningful place (obviously outside of Scarmagno)”.³ The peremptory nature of Piazza’s “obviously” betrayed his perception of a discordance between artist Renato Guttuso’s work and the industrial context of Scarmagno.

The letter did not explain whether this judgment expressed Piazza’s taste or a feeling shared by other Olivetti employees. The fact that, in 1979, the fresco and its position could be considered meaningless certainly had to do with the suspension of historical and spatial site-specificity of the work, which had been created in 1946 for the Olivetti showroom in Via del Tritone in Rome and re-contextualised in a factory.

A post-war tribute to the popular dances of the working class, Guttuso’s *Boogie Woogie* represented the first incursion of socialist realism into the rationalist architecture designed by Ugo Sissa in 1943. With a surface of 8x8 m, the monumental painting was articulated on two of the three levels of the store, like a lateral spine. A metal and stone staircase ran across the mass of moving bodies, connecting the underground storeroom to the exhibition gallery open

1 Ivrea, Archivio Storico Olivetti (ASO), Bruno Piazza, Letter to Renzo Zorzi “Quadro murale di Guttuso in Scarmagno”, 24 August 1979.

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid.

on the street, while the mezzanine was devoted to typing classes. Seen from outside, the base of the fresco looked like a collage of dancing gestures, framed by a network of cubic modules supporting a series of Studio 42 typewriters. The street sounds, combined with the clicking of the machines during typing classes, contributed to materialising what the theoretician Manfredo Tafuri called the “architectural surrealism” of the Olivetti store.⁴ The point, wrote Tafuri, was to erase the showroom’s “commercial character” in favour of a principle of “functional beauty” that also shaped all of Olivetti’s factories.⁵

After almost twenty years in Rome, some time in 1967, *Boogie Woogie* was moved by truck to Scarmagno, in Northern Piedmont. The decision emerged in the aftermath of the fire and subsequent closing of the store in Via del Tritone and the related need to find a suitably large space to accommodate the artwork. The decision complied with the 1960s tendency to put monumental art in relationship with factories – a relationship epitomised by the collaboration between the steel plants Italsider and the 1962 open-air exhibition *Sculture nella città* in Spoleto.⁶ Furthermore, placing the mural painting inside a factory refectory also respected Olivetti’s tried-and-tested Kunst

am Bau philosophy. As in the case of Costantino Nivola’s wall of the New York showroom in 1954, the Olivetti practice of public art interventions especially concerned social buildings and adhered to their transdisciplinary vision of arts as “applied human sciences”.

On the subject of the fresco in Scarmagno, we read in a 1967 issue of *Notizie di fabbrica* that some were prone to consider the “social environment” of an industrial refectory as perfectly suited to host this “historical document”, featuring “a mass of men and women, bursting with colours, movements, and life”.⁷ Guttuso himself was in favour of this relocation, and considered his work as compatible with an industrial setting because of the production and labour modes adopted in the enterprise. Indeed, at the time when Adriano Olivetti commissioned the piece, Guttuso and Olivetti discussed in detail the price and planning of the pictorial work. This was essential for an artist who, in 1940, had joined the Italian Communist Party: “We didn’t think about our work as a commercial object. Working with no interferences was our goal. We were not selling our paintings, and the idea of a mural was exciting”.⁸

The “us” implied by Guttuso encompassed a generation of artists who had been active in post-war resistance movements and the related political debates. The artist offered to be paid as a specialised worker, “plus expenses and support”: “we set no deadline, and I strenuously worked my regular 8 hours a day for 25 days”.⁹ The “support” was provided, among others, by artist Nino Franchina, author of *Commissa 60124* (1954), an iron obelisk temporarily erected on Genoa’s seafront. In the issue n. 5 of *Civiltà delle macchine* – an Italsider cultural magazine founded in 1953 by the poet Leonardo Sinigaglia – the abstract shape of Franchina’s sculpture was described as the encounter between the

4 S. Campus, “Architetti e artisti per l’industrial design. Lo show-room Olivetti a New York”. *ArcheoArte*, no. 1, p. 749.

5 Ibid.

6 Curated by art historian Giovanni Carandente, the project included a partnership with the Italsider steel factories for a series of ten production artistic residencies in various industrial facilities. Among artists included in the project, Ettore Colla produced his sculptures in Bagnoli; David Smith in the dismissed premises of the Voltri factory; Lynn Chadwick, Nino Franchina and Eugenio Carmi in Cornegliano; Arnaldo Pomodoro in Lovere; Pietro Consagra in Savona, where the workers also produced Alexander Calder’s contribution.

7 ASO, *Notizie di fabbrica*, Year VIII, no. 4, April 1967, p. 7.

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid.

10 “Commissa 60124 a Cornegliano”. *Civiltà delle macchine*, 1959, no. 5, pp. 50-51.

11 ASO, Gatto, “Guttuso in mensa”. *Il Tasto*, no. 8, 27 April 1967.

12 Ibid.

13 Archivio Cleto Cossavella, *Lotta di classe*, 1964-1968.

14 Gatto, “Guttuso in mensa”, cit.

15 Ibid.

fine arts and industrial production, starting from the reclamation of the “former Ilva ingot factory” and of the “Dalmine pipes”.¹⁰ The sculpture, continued the article, was the fruit of an intense collaboration between the artist and the Italsider workers in the Cornegliano factory. Differently, Guttuso’s *Boogie Woogie* did not emanate from cooperation with the Olivetti workforce but was rather a “tribute” to them, and an unexpected gift sent to Scarmagno in 1967 without any previous consultation.

The working gloves and the fresco

The *Boogie Woogie* fresco was mentioned again in an opinion piece titled “Guttuso in mensa” (Guttuso in the refectory) published in a 1967 issue of another factory journal, *Il Tasto*.¹¹ Starting on a polemical note, the article enumerated a series of current events: “River banks, if one can call them so, are collapsing; Italian cities are being flooded; speculators are plundering Agrigento; the centre-left government is making cuts in the already meagre salaries of our workers; the dirty Vietnam war is raging on; and what does Olivetti do?”.¹² The question “what to do”, “what is to be done?”, which Lenin borrowed in 1902 from a 19th-century social novel by Nikolay Chernyshevsky, bounced from the worker’s protests to art labour between 1967 and 1968. It resurfaced in Mario Merz’s work and in the framework of the Arte povera movement, whose manifesto evoked, in its formulation, the idea of art as an active guerrilla practice. In Ivrea, the question was far from rhetorical, in the speculative light of the 1969 workers’ struggles of the so-called “autunno caldo” (hot autumn). In 1965, a group of Olivetti workers seceded from the trade union and founded the journal *Lotta di classe*, active until 1973.¹³ In November 1969, the factory worker Mario Rossi, one of the founders of Gruppo

XXII ottobre, quit Ivrea to return to Genoa and take part in the beginnings of the armed struggle. In this context, the relocation of Guttuso’s fresco touched a raw nerve, that *Il Tasto* condensed in its vision of the Olivetti cultural policies as arbitrary philanthropy: “(The Olivetti) decided to introduce Guttuso to the ignorant Scarmagno workers by means of one of his large canvasses, placed on the back wall of the refectory, as if in a baptistry”.¹⁴ Following one of the topoi of cultural reflection in times of crisis, *Il Tasto* calculated the expenses for moving the fresco from Rome to Scarmagno – “about one million lire” – and compared them to the workers’ unmet demands, due to austerity measures: “Just think of the workers who are denied even security gloves because the company, striving as it is toward maximum economy policies [sic], cannot sustain any further wasteful expenses [...]”.¹⁵ The contrast between the paternalistic move and the controversial expectations on the social function of art echoed with some contemporary debates of the time. One relevant statement emerged in 1961 around Michelangelo Antonioni’s *La Notte* (1961) and the character of the industrialist Gherardi. Significantly located in the industrial Northern Italy, the magnate Gherardi invites the writer Pontano to “rejuvenate” his company and to establish, through his writing talent, an effective “communication between bosses and workers”, as an antidote to the demands raised in the protests. Antonioni’s stereotype of the industrialist-patron resonates in the closing of the article in *Il Tasto*, which ends with a close-up on a group of philanthropists “with their noses up in the air, engrossed in lively discussion or debates, as if they were famous critics, about contemporary art and its masters”.¹⁶ Again evidence, imply the workers, of the disconnection between art and the grounded reality of labour.

Art and workers

In 1976 Renato Zorzi commented on the two-faced social and cultural utopias developed in company towns such as Ivrea. "At a time when utopias can become true", wrote Zorzi, "the problem resides precisely here: in preventing them from actually becoming true".¹⁷ Despite pointing at the critical gap between experimentation and implementation, Zorzi held on to Olivetti's notion of utopia as "applied research" with a focus on the process rather than on the result. When extended to the factory, this notion translated into the image of an industrial site that did not necessarily produce art, but could produce in an artistic mode. The trend was often described through aesthetic and social oxymora such as "humanised assembly line" and "concrete utopia".

Inaugurated in 1964, the factories of Scarmagno were articulated into a modular structure of buildings, separated from the village by a highway. Whereas the industrial site in Ivrea was integrated into the city like a "citadel", Scarmagno returned to the model of a "daylight" factory detached from the urban fabric. What changed was not only the notion of architecture but Adriano Olivetti's very notion of the factory as a cultural project that had led to the commission of Guttuso's fresco. Furthermore, the symbolic value of the commission of *Boogie Woogie* derived from the fact

that it was the only artistic assignment "autonomously" decided by Adriano Olivetti.¹⁸ Therefore, moving *Boogie Woogie* to Scarmagno in 1967 was more than an aesthetic and social choice, but the sign of a radical change in the working, political, industrial and cultural environment.

In June 1967, *Il Tasto* published a letter of the "comrade" and painter Renato Guttuso.¹⁹ Guttuso's piece "Arte e operai" (Art and workers) was prompted by the "substantial and inexplicable" hostility that the artist received from workers to whom he felt connected "by ideological convictions and thirty years of faithful revolutionary activism".²⁰ In his article, Guttuso evoked the contract and the salary agreed upon with Adriano Olivetti to explain the fresco's intentions: "It was – and is – intended as the simple narrative of a worker's festivity, and certainly not as a celebration of neo-capitalism or technological development associated with the capitalist structure [...]. The fact that a painting of such explicit popular inspiration was saved and moved to a company refectory instead of being destroyed, I believe, can hardly be held against Olivetti".²¹ Thus, whereas in the workers' perception the Olivetti leadership considered their factories as "artworks", similarly to Antonioni's Gherardi, Guttuso brought the debate back to the question of his own artist's labour. This way, the role of the commissioner was redefined in the basic terms of salary, social responsibility and work opportunity.

The partial ambiguity of Olivetti's concrete utopias lied in their striking resemblance to known forms of patronage. However, as poet and Olivetti employee Geno Pampaloni pointed out, the vision for culture there elaborated was based on the plan for a future society and the parallel need for "an organic intellectual" to sustain this political and poetic project.²² Though adopting Gramsci's

16 Gatto, "Guttuso in mensa", cit.

17 R. Zorzi, "Olivetti: continuità e innovazione". *L'architettura, cronache e storia*, no. 249, 1976, p. 133.

18 The hypothesis is supported by Zorzi in 2002. See ASO, Paolo Vagheggi, "Mafai, Guttuso e Carrà. Artisti in casa Olivetti". *La Repubblica*, 22 November 2002.

19 R. Guttuso, "Arte e operai". *Il Tasto*, no. 12, Year XIV, 28 June 1967.

20 Ibid.

21 Ibid.

22 G. Pampaloni, "Architettura e urbanistica alla Olivetti".

Poesia, politica e fiori. Scritti su Adriano Olivetti. Edizioni di Comunità, Roma, 2016, p. 72.

23 R. Guttuso, "Arte e operai", cit.

24 Ibid.

terminology, Pampaloni consciously put the notion of “organic intellectual” between quotation marks, following Olivetti’s intention to position his program beyond the Cold War binary opposition of capitalism and socialism. The goal was indeed the creation of a third social and political space, where art would contribute to the articulation of meaning. A meaning that, suggests Guttuso in his letter to the Olivetti workers, was probably to be found in the function that the artist attributed to his work, since “the function of art, even in a modest piece such as mine, is always indirect, art being ‘consumed’ not only by the commissioner but by everyone; especially by the recipients of the artist’s inspiration”.²³ On the subject of the costs of the painting, Guttuso pointed out that the fresco did not cost 80 million, as suggested by another factory journal published by the CISL union, but 80.000 lire.²⁴ Nonetheless, he concluded, the workers should be getting the gloves that they demanded, and they could count on his support for this.

Il Tasto accepted Guttuso’s point that art was not only addressed to the commissioner. However, states the editorial committee, “in the present social conditions, even in the most advanced companies such as Olivetti, the possibility (for the workers) to enjoy artistic expression is quite limited [...], as society gives them neither the training nor the material conditions to enjoy it”. In this context, argued the workers, often “against the artist’s will, the cultural value vanishes, and the only thing that is left is the external advertisement value”.²⁵

We do not know whether Guttuso joined the struggle for an art that was not “for the workers”, but “a weapon in their fight”, as hoped for in the last lines of *Il Tasto*. Their wish somehow aligned with Adriano Olivetti’s view of an industrial project which tools were a publishing house and the practice of the

artists involved in the production. Without dwelling on a reflection on the pre- and post- Adriano Olivetti era, it is nonetheless possible to examine the actual survival of his utopias after the 1960s, particularly those regarding industrial culture. In hindsight, the hypothesis that the experimental stage of Olivetti’s cultural policies may have lost its sheen emerges from a letter written in 1985 by Olivetti-man Giorgio Soavi to art historian Giulio Carlo Argan. In the letter, Soavi declines to financially support the production of prints by artists associated with kinetic art and Arte programmata (Programmed art), whose visibility had been promoted in 1960s Italy by the joint efforts of Olivetti, Bruno Munari, and Umberto Eco. “Dear Argan, writes Soavi, your letter reminds me of countless and certainly pleasant initiatives to which we all took part with great enthusiasm. I am thinking for instance of the series of exhibitions of Programmed art [...], but at the time, [I was] thrilled about the objects and about those kids who were then at the beginning of their career. A career which, if I am not mistaken, culminated with (Julio) Le Parc being awarded at the Venice Biennale. I remember those initiatives quite well. But if I must tell you the truth, as I intend to do, I believe that those inventions, those contraptions as they were called, in other words, that kind of programmed art have done their time: or maybe I’m the one who’s changed. I must confess that I increasingly look for and prefer an artist who knows how to draw a tree or a face”.²⁶

After Scarmagno, the fragmentary accounts on the subsequent displacements of Guttuso’s *Boogie Woogie* fresco report its presence in the former “officine H” in Ivrea, in what is today a multi-purpose cultural centre. Eventually, since 2001, the fresco has been implicitly included in the itinerary of the open-air museum of Olivetti’s architectures. Today, its outline can be

discerned through the window of one of the study rooms of the BA in nursing studies, relocated since 2008 in the former ICO buildings of Ivrea. The fresco can be seen frontally on the wall of the bar of the multi-purpose room, in a background position analogous to the one it had in the Scarmagno refectory and the Olivetti showroom in Via del Tritone.

















Blackout

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