



PIERO ORGANIC TECHNOLOGY GILARDI

A pioneer of Italy's Arte Povera movement who left the art world in the early 1970s, Piero Gilardi is in the midst of a revitalized career, with new works and a "living art" park in Turin.

BY DAVID EBONY

ONE OF THE MOST IDEALISTIC—and elusive—figures associated with the early Arte Povera movement, Turin-based artist Piero Gilardi was widely recognized in the early 1960s for his experiments with unorthodox materials and sculptural forms that radically diverged from the avant-garde mainstream. His much-acclaimed and often controversial "Tappeti-natura" (Nature-carpets)—floor installations and wall reliefs made of meticulously molded and painted polyurethane foam that take the form of rocks, plants and a wide variety of nature studies—brought him substantial critical and commercial success through the '60s. He grew disillusioned with the art world, however, and, by the early 1970s, ceased making art, abruptly exiting the scene.

Gilardi (b. 1942) spent the next 10 years traveling in Italy and abroad, writing theoretical analyses of society and culture, the focus of his thinking during this period of civil upheaval. A number of these essays appeared in *Flash Art*, *Arts* and other art publications. He organized street theater, actions and protests in factories, and participated in various community outreach programs and political initiatives, particularly during extended stays in Nicaragua and Kenya, as well as in the U.S., on the Akwesasne Reservation of the Mohawk Nation in northern New York State, along the Canadian border.

Just as suddenly as he had disappeared, Gilardi reentered the art world in

1983, to begin a new series of works and also to prepare for retrospective exhibitions held the following year at Galleria Toselli, Milan, and the Palazzo dei Diamanti, Ferrara. He worked on a fresh series of Nature-carpets, although his main focus was on new-media works, including virtual reality pieces, interactive installations and what would now be called relational art projects that encompass political activism and community-based endeavors, all centered on the precarious bonds between nature

Piero Gilardi: *Beach Fire*, 2007, polyurethane foam, 59 by 59 by 9 3/4 inches. All photos, unless otherwise noted, courtesy Biasutti & Biasutti, Turin.

CURRENTLY ON VIEW

Early works by the artist in "Che fare? Arte Povera: The Historical Years," at the Kunstmuseum Lichtenstein in Vaduz (May 5-Sept. 9). "The Lesson of the Things," a Piero Gilardi survey, opens at the Centre de Création Contemporain (C.C.C.), Tours, France (June 26-Nov. 1).

THE ARTIST MAINTAINS THAT THE CONCEPT FOR THE NATURE-CARPETS WAS TO MERGE TECHNOLOGY AND NATURE—NOT TO SET THEM IN OPPOSITION.



Above, "Nature-carpets" in Gilardi's 1967 exhibition at Galerie Ileana Sonnabend, Paris. Photo courtesy the artist.

Near right, Gilberto Zorio lying on *Stones-bed*, polyurethane foam, 78 3/4 by 39 1/4 by 11 3/4 inches; in Gilardi's Turin studio, 1967. Photo courtesy the artist.

Far right, four "Nature-carpets," all polyurethane foam. Clockwise from top left: *Fire Mountain*, 2008, 39 1/4 by 39 1/4 by 9 3/4 inches; *Bamboo Forest*, 2004, 70 1/4 by 106 1/4 by 11 1/4 inches; *Corn*, 1988, 59 by 55 by 11 1/4 inches; and *Undergrowth*, 1967, 35 1/2 by 52 by 9 3/4 inches. *Undergrowth* courtesy Galerie Semiose, Paris.



and society. Critics and public alike have found new relevance in his environmentalist themes. As his interests have shifted toward Bio-art, or what he terms "living art," Gilardi has settled into his new roles as a "rediscovered" doyen of Arte Povera and a mentor for younger artists. Since the mid-1980s, he has had numerous gallery shows throughout Italy and abroad (including a 1991 exhibition at New York's Sperone Westwater), featuring interactive installations and performances as well as the Nature-carpets. Earlier this year, the Nature-carpets were on view at Galleria Russo venues in Rome and Milan [Mar. 9-Apr. 9]. A Gilardi career survey, "The Lesson of the Things," opens this summer at the Centre de Création Contemporain (C.C.C.), Tours, France. His early works are included in "Che fare? Arte Povera: The Historical Years," now at the Kunstmuseum Lichtenstein in Vaduz.

For the past eight years, Gilardi has been preoccupied by Parco Arte Vivente (Park of Living Art), or PAV, his most ambitious endeavor to date. In late 2008, Gilardi unveiled the work in progress, and last year a series of educational programs







Above, *Igloo*, 1964 (foreground); *Mare con Gabbiano*, 1967 (left wall); *Anguire*, 1967 (back wall); and *Nature Dress of Birches*, 1967 (right).

Right, view of the installation "Stream in the Snow," 2006, polyurethane foam and Plexiglas casés, 10 parts, each 39 1/4 inches in diameter.

Far right, *Tronca Sonora*, 2000, interactive sound installation, polyurethane foam and audio equipment.

Opposite top, Gilardi's friends in his studio with *Mountain*, 1967, polyurethane foam, approx. 10 by 26 by 10 feet overall. Photo courtesy the artist.



were launched. A collaborative effort that he conceived and designed (he currently serves as its artistic director), PAV is a monumental undertaking situated on an approximately 6-acre green space in the heart of the Lingotto section of Turin. Surrounded by high-rise housing and industrial buildings, PAV encompasses a new museum and study center with laboratories, workshops and spaces for temporary and permanent exhibitions, including "Bioma," a permanent, multi-gallery, new-media installation by Gilardi. The grounds are reserved for sprawling earth art and ecologically engaged outdoor installations by an international group of invited artists, with a special focus on young and emerging talent. This season, PAV hosts a variety of exhibitions, outdoor installations and performances [details available on the park's website, www.parcoartevivente.it].

GILARDI'S CAREER HAS had a unique trajectory. In his early 20s, he garnered substantial critical attention as a participant, with Michelangelo Pistoletto and Gianni Piacentini, in the exhibition "Arte Abitabile" (Live-in Art), held in 1966 at Sperone Gallery, Turin.¹ With its emphasis on reductive forms and mundane materials, the show was perceived by many Italian observers as marking a clear break with the pervasive consumerist iconography of Pop art, which then dominated the international scene. The exhibition featured a large rectangular Nature-carpet that resembles a dry rocky riverbed. After experimenting with polyurethane foam to produce a sculpture in the form of an igloo (1964), Gilardi, with the help of assistants, adapted the material for the Nature-carpets. The works have an interactive element, as the artist invited viewers to walk across or lie down on the soft pieces in an attempt to evoke the experience of being in nature.

Gilardi's work in the Sperone exhibition was lauded by influential critics such as Maurizio Calvesi, Tommaso Trini and, most significantly, Germano Celant, who recognized Gilardi's kinship with a new movement in Italian art he dubbed Arte Povera (Poor Art) in 1967. Included in major Arte Povera exhibitions with Alighiero Boetti, Mario Merz, Marisa Merz, Giulio Paolini, Jannis Kounellis, Gilberto Zorio, Giovanni Anselmo and Pistoletto, Gilardi's sculptures were attuned to the movement's radical efforts to merge art and life in a wide variety of mediums and materials, and in live performances.

Much was written at the time about Gilardi's ironic choice of high-tech industrial materials to evoke organic forms and natural environments. This ambiguous nature/artifice dichotomy still lends the works a certain degree of tension and contributes to their provocative allure. The artist maintains, however, that his concept was to merge technology and nature—not to set them in opposition—and to suggest a homeostasis whereby industrial processes and materials could actually help in focusing society on the nascent environmentalist movement.² Also misunderstood is the work's relationship to hyperrealist sculpture, whose Pop art roots are far removed from Gilardi's thematic concerns.

Surprising some of his peers, the Nature-carpets (at times delivered to the galleries in huge rolls and sold to collectors by the yard) had broad commercial appeal. Life-size and lifelike sculptural renderings of bucolic scenes, such as a leafy garden of ripe tomatoes, a cornfield at harvest time, tangled

GILARDI CONTINUED TO ORGANIZE EXHIBITIONS, BUT BY 1969 HIS DIFFERENCES HAD GROWN WITH EUROPE'S CURATORIAL ELITE.



strands of seaweed undulating above a sandy ocean floor, a bamboo forest, a cabbage patch and a verdant field of melons proved irresistible to collectors. In the two years following "Arte Abitabile," Gilardi presented Nature-carpets in over a dozen solo shows in Italy and abroad, including major exhibitions in Paris, Brussels, Amsterdam, Cologne and New York.

One of the more peripatetic Italian artists of the time, Gilardi traveled extensively throughout Europe to gather information about experimental art and artists, and to help organize shows of their works in Italy. He is widely credited with introducing Italian viewers to the work of, among others, Richard Long, Eva Hesse, Bruce Nauman, Jan Dibbets and, perhaps most notably, Joseph Beuys, whom he met in Düsseldorf. Gilardi advocated artists' autonomy within the art system and resisted the commercialization of the Arte Povera movement. Feeling increasing pressure from dealers to produce more of the ever-in-demand Nature-carpets, he tried to expand the scope of his work. Gilardi created a costume resembling tree branches and a series of folksy bricolage pieces, such as a wheelbarrow and sandals made of found materials, as well as polyurethane foam sculptures of logs and tree stumps that serve as seats and benches, all in keeping with the initially self-effacing tone of Arte Povera. After one of his principal dealers, Ileana Sonnabend, rejected these pieces for a 1968 solo show in Paris, demanding instead another series of Nature-carpets, Gilardi decided to call it quits. He continued to organize exhibitions, but by 1969 his differences had grown with Europe's new curatorial elite, including Celant and Harald Szeemann, who, he felt, were allowing commercial interests to infiltrate too far into the exhibition process. Gilardi withdrew his support and assistance for a number of exhibitions when corporate sponsors like Philip Morris were allowed to dictate details of museum shows, and collectors and dealers, such as Leo Castelli, to buy out entire gallery exhibitions prior to public openings.³ He felt that the revolutionary spirit and idealistic purpose of Arte Povera were



THE PAV GROUNDS ARE RESERVED
FOR EARTH ART AND ECOLOGICALLY
ENGAGED OUTDOOR INSTALLATIONS BY AN
INTERNATIONAL GROUP OF INVITED ARTISTS.

fast being diffused and diluted. So began Gilardi's long self-imposed exile from Italy and the art world.

GILARDI DREW ON his "real world" experiences of the previous 10 years when he re-launched his art career in the early 1980s. He favored collaborative art projects aimed toward stimulating community involvement. Working with scientists and engineers, he developed elaborate installations incorporating virtual reality, interactive video and other electronic devices to stress the importance of technological research in raising environmental awareness. He has also revisited the Nature-carpets, and continues to produce increasingly elaborate and fanciful compositions in that series. The recent pieces are typically shown as wall reliefs of varying sizes encased in Plexiglas boxes. "Ruscello nella neve" (Stream in the Snow), a 2006 installation, features 10 circular Nature-carpets, some hung on the wall, others placed on the floor. Counter to the artist's initial aims, the works no longer have an interactive element, since one cannot walk or lie on them. Presented as rarefied art objects, they continue to be the works for which the artist is best known. Gilardi bluntly admits to feeding the marketplace with the Nature-carpets by fulfilling collectors' demands. Although to some degree compromising his youthful ideals, he directs the proceeds from the Nature-carpets toward his less marketable but more challenging new-media pieces, Bio-art experiments and other endeavors.

He also continues to be engaged to a certain extent with writing (particularly for PAV's growing series of publications), performing and street theater. He presents a new theater piece in Turin each May Day and sometimes on other special occasions. Last year's May 1 presentation, for example, addressed the worldwide banking crisis. Several performers on bicycles weaving through the May Day rally wore artist-designed animal costumes. According to Gilardi, the savvy Turin audience grasped the point that the costumes in the form of crocodiles, wolves and snakes referred to local banks and multinational financial institutions.



Above, view of Parco Arte Vivente (PAV), showing (left) Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster's earthwork *Trefle*, 2006, and (right) the Bioma building.

Left, view of Lara Almarcegui's earthwork *Scavo*, 2009, 15 feet deep and 250 square feet overall. Courtesy PAV, Turin.



AFTER SEVERAL YEARS of negotiations, the Turin government in 2004 accepted Gilardi's proposal for an art and education facility and a recreational area accessible to the surrounding working-class community. It occupies abandoned industrial park, and is financed through a combination of local government funding and private donations. Working with a team of conservationists, landscape designers and curators, Gilardi commissioned for the park an expansive site-specific earthwork, *Trèfle* (2006), by French artist and landscape architect Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster. The first work completed for the park and still the most prominent of the half-dozen outdoor installations at PAV, *Trèfle* features an enormous clover-leaf-shaped earth-and-stone mound several feet high. Gonzalez-Foerster based her overall design for the PAV installation on the floor plan of a medieval Coptic church in the holy city of Lalibela in Ethiopia.

Covered with grass and bordered by tall, meticulously manicured wall-like hedges, the artist's quiet green enclosure is accessible by means of two stone paths on opposite sides of the mound. One passage leads from the park's ground level, while the other meanders alongside the mound, gently sloping for part of the way some 12 feet into the ground. A meditative stroll along this path is enhanced by the cascades of vines, flowering shrubs and other vegetation that have been carefully planted on the mound's steep sides. The piece's title ("three-leaved" in French) refers, in part, to the three elevations at which one can experience the work.

A more recently completed earthwork, *Scavo* (2009) by Spanish-born, Rotterdam-based artist Lara Almarcegui, is similarly engrossing. The work, a large (approximately 250-square-foot) trench, appears to be remnants of an archeological dig. The artist, who specializes in urban excavations, painstakingly

AFTER THE GRITTY AMBIENCE OF THE WORKS OUTSIDE, THE INTERACTIVE EXPERIENCE THAT GILARDI OFFERS IN "BIOMA" SEEMS OTHERWORLDLY.



removed layers of soil to investigate the various strata, and to analyze the natural and social history they reveal. In the process, she uncovered in successive layers of earth the ruined foundations of an early 20th-century factory, a 19th-century brick fountain, a medieval well, fragments of an ancient Roman wall and evidence of a Neolithic settlement. Finally, Almarcegui reached a level of "natural terrain" some 15 feet below the surface that is uncontaminated by human-made debris. As suggested in press material, visitors are to make their way down gradually into the pit to view the earth's Ice Age stratum as part of a metaphoric exploration of memory and the unconscious.

Echoing these earthworks, the largest structure at PAV, the Bioma building, is surrounded by berms, making it appear to be a subterranean structure. Designed by Gilardi with architect Gianluca Cosmacini and interior designer Massimo Venegoni, the 9,500-square-foot facility features a 17-foot-high entrance hall off the main parking lot. The earthen berms are planted with grass and other vegetation so that, from a distance and certain angles, the structure completely melds with the landscape. Earthworks are planned for the structure's grassy rooftop, and a large central courtyard is to be used for performances during the spring and summer.

Tall windows on two sides fill most of the interior with natural light. But one area of the building contains Gilardi's "Bioma" (in the artist's translation, "hybrid"), which is installed in an interconnected series of six small darkened galleries. Visitors part heavy black curtains to move from one intimate chamber to the next, each containing a large video screen built into one wall and, in the center of the room, a cluster of miscellaneous objects and electronic equipment. After the gritty ambience of the works outside, the interactive experience Gilardi offers here seems otherworldly. A sign above the entrance to "Bioma" invites visitors to "Please Touch." At times, "Bioma" recalls the zany museum of curiosities assembled by the eccentric science professor Martial Canterel, the protagonist of Raymond Roussel's 1914 novel *Locus Solus*. Each of five segments of Gilardi's multifaceted installation, developed in collaboration with software designer Riccardo Colella, is devoted to one of the senses: *Vegetal Mutation* (sight), *Odor Essences* (smell), *Nature Reliefs* (touch), *Mutable Sounds* (hearing) and *Waterplay* (taste); a sixth display, *Invisible Energies*, imaginatively addresses the workings of the brain and extrasensory perception.

In *Vegetal Mutation*, the visitor finds a tiny video camera mounted on a pole set before a tall, leafy plant. Nearby is a touch-sensitive computer screen attached rather incongruously to a large terra-cotta pot—designed by the artist—which resembles an ancient artifact. Placing a finger on a leaf image on the screen, the viewer activates another video projected on one wall in which the struc-

This spread, three multimedia installations from Gilardi's "Bioma" series, 2008.

Left, *Odor Essences*; right, *Vegetal Mutation*. Both courtesy PAV.

Below, *Nature Reliefs*. Photo David Ebony.





ture and contours of the leaf are transposed into a mesmerizing, psychedelic-colored series of morphing fractal images. According to the artist, the images represent a detailed analysis of the plant's cellular structure.

A group of organic objects in *Nature Reliefs*—a sponge, a cactus, a conch shell—is placed in shallow pans of water set on a table. Touching the items triggers electrodes that send signals to a computer, which in turn gauges the pressure and heat of the touch, and transposes it into a colorful and frantically morphing series of abstract video images projected on a large screen.

Perhaps the most haunting installation of all is *Mutable Sounds*. Feeling their way into a completely dark room with only tiny pin-lights in the floor as a guide, visitors arrive at a small circular enclosure with shelves of objects all around. One can grasp faintly

illuminated items such as branches or piles of small stones. Thanks to some unseen electronic rigging of phonic sensors, rubbing the stones together, for instance, causes the room to fill with loud amplifications and reverberating mutations of the subtle sounds the action would normally emit. Also surprising are the bunches of sticks embedded in one area of the floor that, when stepped on, instigate an echoing clatter. Of all the installations, this one seems to engage the body fully in the way the artist intends.

In the most ambitious works of his nearly 45-year career, "Bioma" and PAV, the artist offers a unique experience of nature within the context of art. Remaining steadfast to the idealism of his youth as well as the innovative spirit of Arte Povera, but with the addition of electronic-age implements, Gilardi succeeds in merging art and life. ○

1 See *Arte Povera* by Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, New York and London, Phaidon, 1999, p. 49, for more information on this key exhibition. **2** This and other Gilardi comments are from the author's conversations with the artist in Turin, Nov. 7, 2009. **3** See *Piero Gilardi: Interdipendenza/Interdependence*, Angela Vettesse, ed., Milan, Silvana Editoriale, 2006, p. 28.