

## Piero Gilardi obituary

**Italian artist, activist and environmentalist who founded and directed the Living Art Park outside Turin**



📷 Piero Gilardi at his 2020 solo exhibition *Dalla Natura all'Arte* at the Galerie Michel Rein, Paris.  
Photograph: Michel Rein

While taking a walk along the Sangone River on the outskirts of Turin one morning in the mid-1960s, Piero Gilardi came across an island of litter bobbing along the water edge. The artist, who has died aged 80, took the memory back to his studio and began to create idealised versions of nature, patches of archetypal terrain using, with some irony, carved and painted human-made polyurethane foam.

One of his earliest *Tappeto-Natura*, or “Nature-Carpets”, titled *Sassi* (Stones, 1967), mimics a patch of the stony riverbed, the sculpture a metre or so in length and shown on the floor. Another foam carpet recreates receding snow through which crocuses bloom; yet another a tangle of sunflowers against a lush green mossy surface.

In the same year, at the avant garde Piper club in Turin, the artist dressed guests in extravagant outfits, one engulfing the model in foam logs, another laden with rocks of the same material. More work with an ecological bent followed: tree trunks, rocks and igloos constructed in synthetic material, often made to a scale that visitors to galleries in Milan, Cologne and Paris could sit on or enter.



 Piero Gilardi's  
 Zuccaia (Marrow),  
 1966, polyurethane  
 foam under plexiglas.  
 Photograph:  
 Fondazione Piero  
 Gilardi and Michel  
 Rein

The work, the artist later noted, was not a paean to a lost arcadia, but embraced a techno-utopian future that he imagined might reset humans' relationship to nature. "My decision to use synthetic material, produced by the new chemical technologies ... considers the 'reparative' use of biotechnosciences as something that is necessary if we are to repair the altered ecological systems and therefore biodiversity," he wrote on the occasion of his 2017 retrospective at MAXXI Rome.

Gilardi was among the half-dozen names included in the curator Germano Celent's influential 1969 [Arte Povera](#) manifesto, a takedown of consumerism and the rapid commercialisation of art, alongside [Jannis Kounellis](#) and Michelangelo Pistoletto. Yet he was never entirely comfortable with the label, being as influenced by [land art](#) and [American pop art](#), and digital media, as much as his peers' use of cheap and organic material.

Between 1967 and 1969 the artist had made numerous trips to the US, Sweden, the Netherlands, Germany and Britain, working as a critic for various art journals, and upon return introducing names such as Richard Long, Richard Serra and Bruce Nauman to an Italian audience.

Over the following decade he moved his work out of the gallery towards direct action and protest, living with autonomous communities throughout the Americas and Africa, influenced instead by traditions of carnival and the strengthening workers' movement. "Civilisation today is in a great crisis," he said [in a 2018 interview](#). "We're heading straight towards the environmental collapse of the planet, which is dominated by inequality and social injustice perpetrated by neoliberalist capitalism. Art today can and must corroborate this political building, not limiting itself to denouncing the catastrophic social consequences of the prevailing ultra-liberal politics."

Nature had been important to Gilardi from a young age, its imagery long coupled with human destruction. Born during the second world war in Turin to Cecilia Lavelli, an artist and model, and Mario Gilardi, a Swiss painter and conservator, Piero soon fled with his family to the countryside to escape the allied bombardment of the city.



📷 Piero Gilardi's Igloo, 1964, on exhibition in 2020 at the Galerie Michel Rein, Paris. Photograph: Kleinefenn

In the early 1960s he attended Liceo Artistico in Turin, where he met Pistoletto. His first solo exhibition, in 1963, at Galleria L'Immagine in the city, was titled *Macchine per il Futuro* (Machines for the Future) and featured a series of interactive sculptures.

In 1967 Gilardi went on the first of several trips to the US, exhibiting the *Tappeto-Natura* at Fischbach Gallery in New York, but also connecting with local trends. This proved invaluable in the group exhibitions *When Attitudes Become Form*, at Kunsthalle Berne, and *Op Losse Schroeven* (on loose screws, in the sense of square pegs in round holes), at the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, in the spring of 1969, for which he both exhibited and acted as a curatorial adviser.

Despite this growing influence, amid the so-called hot autumn of strike action in Italy, the artist became disillusioned with the gallery as a place in which to speak about politics, and his attention shifted to agitprop, designing posters, masks, costumes and puppets, often lampooning politicians and industry bosses, for street protests, and immersing himself in the far-left workers' movements *Autonomia Operaia* and *Operaismo*.





📷 Performance during a demonstration against the nuclear power station in Caorso, Piacenza, Italy, 1987. Photograph: Fondazione Piero Gilardi and Michel Rein

This political commitment extended beyond Italy, and after the Sandinista revolution of 1979 Gilardi took a long trip to Nicaragua. Living in Managua, in 1982 he started a series of animation workshops with child labourers in the peripheral, low-income Saint Judas neighbourhood.

A year later, now in New York state, he was again working with children, creating protest costumes and theatre sets with young Native American Mohawks of the Akwesasne Reservation. “The federal government had authorised certain chemical multinationals to place in the territory of the reserve their most polluting factories that were poisoning the air, water, animals and vegetation,” Gilardi recalled. “In the spontaneous drawings of the boys of the Akwesasne Freedom school a tragic and deadly vision of the natural environment of the reserve emerged.”

In 1985 Gilardi went to Kenya, creating a series of theatrical events with the Samburu people of Barsaloi, complete with large silhouette cutouts depicting local mythologies. The fruits of these collaborations started to appear in galleries, and slowly Gilardi became re-engaged in the art world. In 1985 he held a retrospective at Palazzo dei Diamanti, Ferrara, and the works produced with the Mohawk children were exhibited at Studio Marconi in Milan in 1989.



 Piero Gilardi's *Mais sull'Aia* (Maize in the Farmyard), 1967, polyurethane foam under plexiglas.  
 Photograph: Galerie Michel Rein

The same year he opened the "Ixiana" project at the Parc de la Villette in Paris, a proto technology park in which the public could encounter the latest digital technologies. It led to the formation of Ars Technica, with his fellow artists Claude Faure and Piotr Kowalski, which staged a series of digital art exhibitions and conferences throughout the 90s. Gilardi's own 1989 *Inverosimile* installation was indicative of that ambition, featuring a kinetic recreation of a vineyard in polyurethane, the vines spinning and moving on motors activated by visitors' breath.

Gilardi's roles of artist, curator, activist and environmentalist came together in 2008, when he built the *Parco Arte Vivente* (Living Art Park) on the outskirts of Turin, a response, he said, to how "the city has been gutted and concreted over, and public green spaces are neglected, as is culture in general, apart from the spectacular kind that brings in tourist revenue". Incorporating a maze, space for workshops and a series of exhibitions, he remained its art director until his death.

In 2013 a retrospective was held at Nottingham Contemporary, in partnership with Castello di Rivoli in Turin and Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven. The artist's political work was surveyed in a show at Galleria Civica d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea, in Turin, 2016, a year before the wider MAXXI retrospective in Rome. In 2020 he exhibited his protest banners and costumes alongside older sculpture at the [Michel Rein Gallery](#), Paris.

He is survived by his sons, Elio and Leo.

● Piero Gilardi, artist, born 3 August 1942; died 5 March 2023