

Piero Gilardi, Arte Povera Artist Who Briefly Left the Art World Behind for a Career in Activism, Dies at 80



Piero Gilardi, 2007.
PHOTO ALESSANDRO LERCARA

Piero Gilardi, an Italian artist associated with the Arte Povera movement who temporarily stopped making art altogether during the '60s, has died at 80. His passing was announced on Monday by his gallery, Michel Rein.

“His commitments for decades to social, political and ecological issues are essential in today’s world,” the gallery wrote.

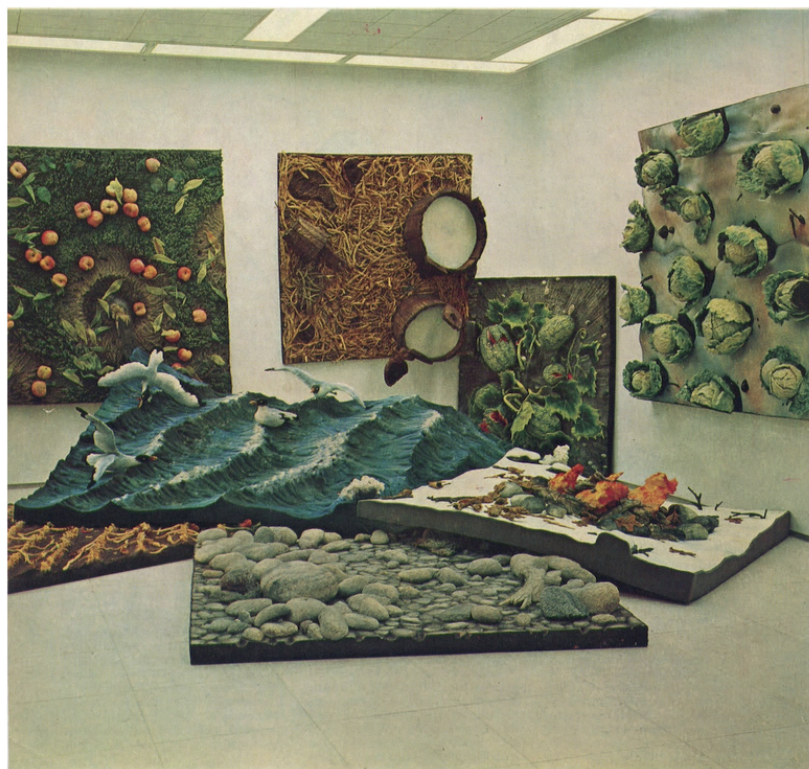
At the height of the Arte Povera movement, Gilardi became well-known within his home country and abroad, both for his sculptures that envisioned a total merger of technology and nature, and for departing the commercial art world just as his work had found a solid collector base. When he did so, he launched a career as an activist, returning to the gallery scene around a decade later.

Museums in Europe and the US have become increasingly interested in his work in the past two decades. For many Americans, a 2022 show at the Magazzino Italian Art museum in Cold Spring, New York, provided wider exposure to Gilardi's practice. The show largely centered around Gilardi's "Tappet-natura" ("Nature-carpets"), shaped polyurethane sculptures featuring images of natural objects like rocks, water, and grass.

Louis Bury **praised** the show in *Art in America*, writing, "The paradox is that, in a career dedicated to moving beyond visual art's conventional values and uses, the carpets bear the closest resemblance to traditional artistic output, and thus more readily lend themselves to museum display than the less object-focused aspects of his practice. This makes the exhibition an effective, if necessarily partial, introduction to an underappreciated artist: an incitement for visitors to see and learn more about an oeuvre whose ambitions are starry-eyed even as its politics remain down-to-earth."

The "Nature-carpets" gained Gilardi fame during the '60s alongside his compatriots in the Arte Povera group, which sought to reflect on the Italian postwar condition by way of arrangements of natural materials set within the gallery space. Suddenly, horses, rags, and other miscellaneous objects occupied the spaces that highly refined paintings once had.

But the "Nature-carpets," which Gilardi began producing in 1965, differed in that they relied upon polyurethane, which is more commonly associated with mass-produced mattresses than sculpture. He had meant for these works to be stepped on and even slept upon. He also used polyurethane as a clothing material for some wearable works that resembled trees.



Piero Gilardi's 1967 Sonnabend Gallery show in Paris.
COURTESY THE ARTIST

In 2010, David Ebony **wrote in A.i.A.** that the “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.”

The “Nature-carpets” appeared at the Piper Club in Turin, the city where Gilardi was based for the entirety of his career, and in international galleries, where they obtained a collector base—a rarity among the Arte Povera artists at the time. Taste-making dealers like Gian Enzo Sperone and Ileana Sonnabend had been among those to exhibit his art early on.

Everything changed in 1968. When Gilardi presented Sonnabend with another body of work ahead of a solo show in Paris, she said no and requested more “Nature-carpets.” A displeased Gilardi responded by cutting ties with her altogether. The year afterward, he began distancing himself from institutional curators like Germano Celant and Harald Szeemann, whom he felt had become swayed by corporate interests and the whims of the market. By 1970, he was no longer focused on making art.

Piero Gilardi was born in Turin in 1942 to a Swiss family. He studied at the Liceo Artistico in that city. He credited his meeting other Turin-based artists, such as Michelangelo Pistoletto, with the direction he ended up taking in his art.

While artists like Pistoletto rose in the world of biennials, museums, and galleries, Gilardi took up an interest in labor and the conditions of work in the auto industries that powered Turin. During the '70s, he took part in workers' protests, at one point even creating a rubber effigy of Gianni Agnelli, the owner of Fiat.

He also traveled widely during this time, absorbed what was going on in art scenes outside Italy, and brought it back home. Many have named Gilardi as the person who first introduced Italians to the art of Bruce Nauman, Eva Hesse, and Joseph Beuys.



Piero Gilardi's 2022 show at the Magazzino Italian Art museum in Cold Spring, New York.
MARCO ANELLI/TOMMASO SACCONI

When Gilardi made his return to art in the '80s, his work was far more collaborative than it used to be. Within Turin, he was known for presenting a theatrical production every May Day.

Technology increasingly wound its way into his later art. His 2004/8 installation *Bioma* featured six interconnected parts that each dealt with the senses and perception. *Vegetal Mutation*, one of those components, featured physical leaves and digital ones; the latter would disassemble into fractal images when activated and could even be analyzed.

That work appeared at the Parco Arte Vivente, a Turin art space that Gilardi initially unveiled in 2008. It includes an art gallery, a study center, and a large, outdoor space that has been used for earthworks and other ecologically minded pieces.

Gilardi's wrote throughout his career, publishing articles early on in *Flash Art* and later assembling his essays in other books dealing with bio art. Many of these works have not been translated into English.

His works were the subject of a 2017 retrospective at MAXXI in Rome. Unlike many of his colleagues, he was never included in Documenta or the Venice Biennale, Europe's two top biennial-style shows.

He believed some in the art world—and Italy writ large—were unreceptive to his non-“Nature-carpet” art because it proposed something too radical, and he urged others to change.

Asked by Artshake in 2018 about what museums should do, he said, “I think museums should increasingly welcome the ‘Art of Living Things’ and equip themselves to handle complex artistic projects involving permaculture, for example.”