

Kounellis, Migration, and Graffiti: Notes on Arte Povera in Miami

Arte Povera: Postwar Italian Art from the Margulies Collection

Tenley Bick

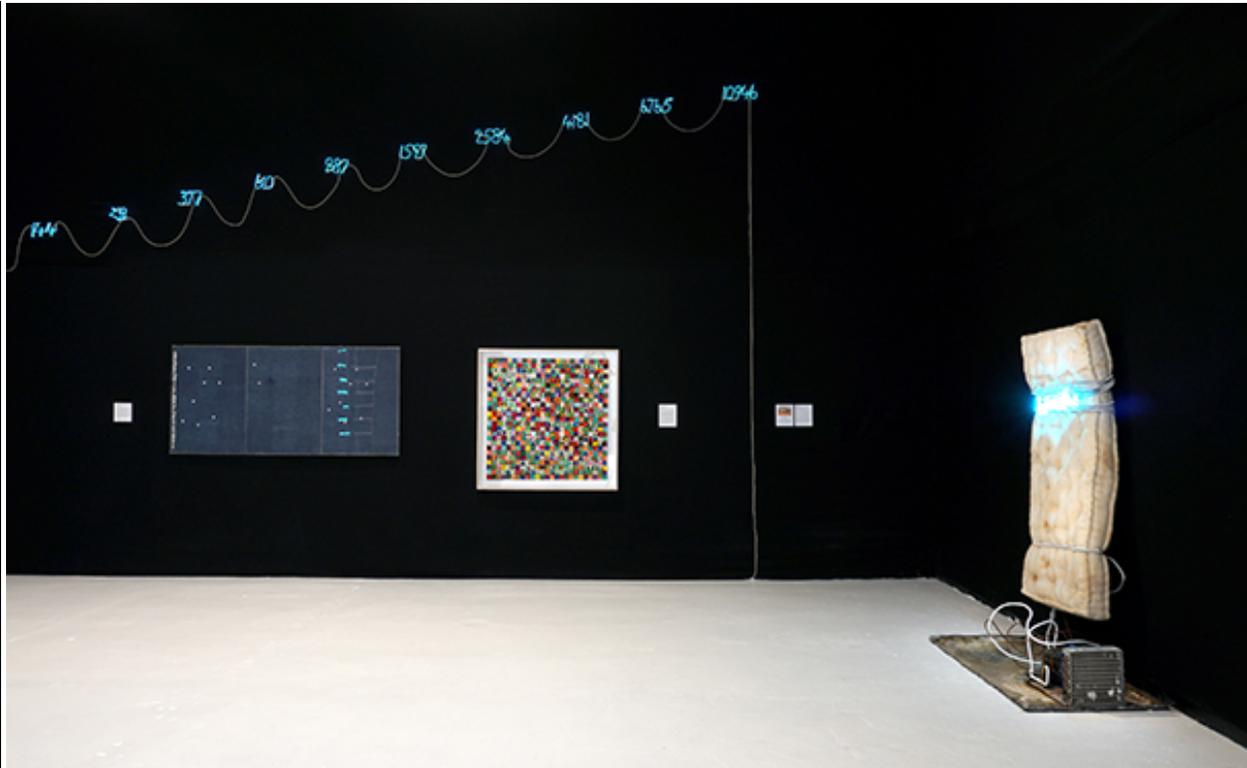
This season's exhibition at the Margulies Collection at the Warehouse is dedicated to works of Arte Povera, the primarily Italian avant-garde of the late 1960s and early 1970s coined by Italian curator and critic Germano Celant (1940–2020) in 1967, most famously in his now canonical essay for *Flash Art*: “Arte Povera: Appunti per una guerriglia” (Arte Povera: Notes for a Guerrilla War). While the term translates to “poor” or “impoverished art,” Arte Povera was less a literal engagement of inexpensive, discarded, or readily available “poor materials,” though these were often mainstay strategies, than an engagement with stripped-down, un-transformed material (organic and industrial), gesture, process, and language, “liberated” from the confines of discourse and convention. Countering the commercial practices (for Celant) of Pop and Minimalism and refusing the trappings of signature style, these artists were revolutionizing social and cultural systems from the inside.¹

Neither the historical context of postwar Italian art (per the show's title—though much of this work falls well beyond that frame) nor Celant's urgent notes for an artistic “guerrilla war” are captured in this exhibition. But the show offers a rare occasion to view Arte Povera in Miami, and in its broader intersecting geographies of the U.S.-American South and Caribbean. This point is not lost on Margulies the collector or institution, who have long (and admirably) strived to make a world-class private collection available to the public and, as noted in the signage, local students. Curated by longtime curator Katherine Hinds with research assistance by associate curator Jeanie Ambrosio, the exhibition includes works by eight of the eleven artists in Celant's eventual set. As a whole, the exhibition often favors hefty works of Arte Povera composed of industrial and natural materials (as in the *five* wall-oriented metal shelves and sculptural tableaux by Jannis Kounellis (b. 1938, Piraeus, Greece–d. 2017, Rome). The only non-Italian artist associated with Arte Povera, Kounellis' works here feature his often-used materials: metal panels and beams, discarded scraps of wood, musical instruments, burlap sacks, iron ore, and loose plaster.



Exhibition view, main room. From left to right, works by Jannis Kounellis, Michelangelo Pistoletto, Alighiero Boetti (2, right wall), and Luciano Fabro (foreground). Photo by Tenley Bick.

The exhibition also includes what might be considered trademark examples of these artists' practices. That is, while Arte Povera resisted signature style, style nevertheless settled into the work of many of its protagonists, paradigmatic examples of which can be seen at the Margulies exhibition. The exhibition showcases a wall-climbing sculpture composed of neon numerals by Mario Merz (1925–2003), who often drew upon the Fibonacci series as a compositional device, as seen here. We also find a *quadro specchiante* or "mirror painting" by Michelangelo Pistoletto (1933–), belonging to the artist's ongoing series of highly polished and mirrorized stainless steel panels begun in 1962, collaged and later silk-screened with everyday figures and objects. In this case, viewers will enjoy seeing their own reflections register alongside the panel's life-size photographic, serigraphic figure whom we encounter, in this case, climbing a ladder. In another example still, we find a canvas-and-photographic conceptual work on artistic "study" (as process, as space) by Giulio Paolini (1940–).



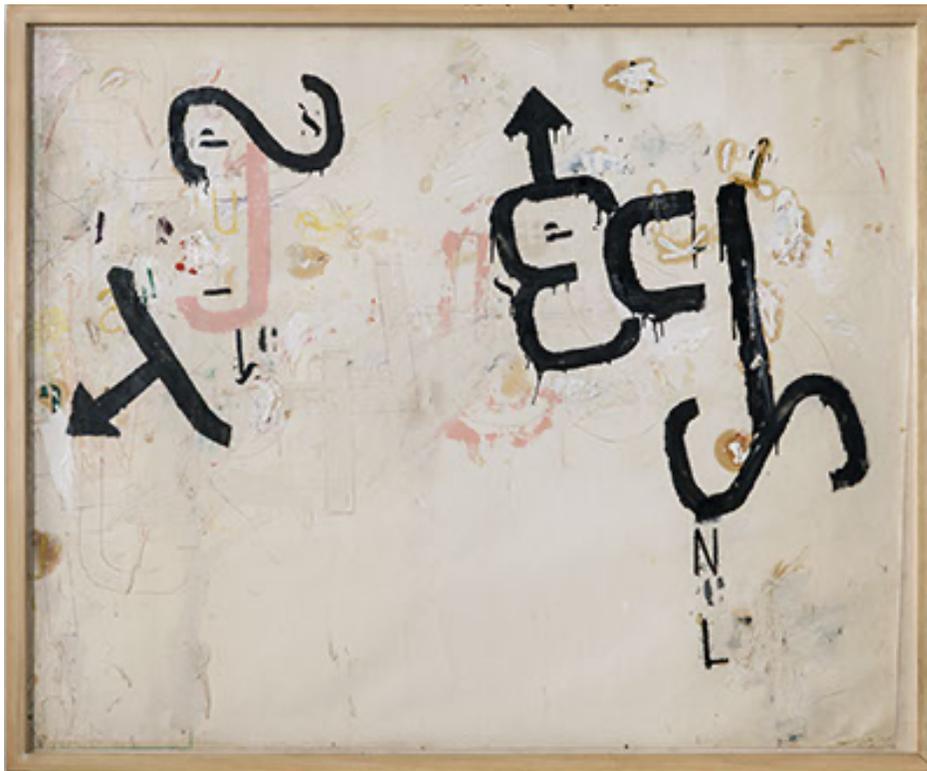
Mario Merz, *Fibonacci series 1/1/2/3/5/8/13/21/34/55/89/144/233...*, 1996. 21 neon numerals, cable, electrical transformer. Dimensions variable. Margulies Collection. Photo by Tenley Bick.

This exhibition of Arte Povera also highlights artworks that include textual elements—a common trope in Arte Povera, which often explored language as a system of meaning. Two works by Pier Paolo Calzolari (1943–) from the early 1970s exemplify the artist’s exploration of the poetics of language and nature. One sculpture includes a series of words in neon (“elastic,” “present,” and “nebulous,” among them), mounted on leather belts that horizontally traverse the two metal stanchions that support the work. The bare sides of the belts seem blank by comparison; with the assistance of a refrigerator unit, however, they accrue frost throughout the day; nature “speaks” alongside language. Also in the vein of linguistic experimentation, one of two floor-sited sculptures by Luciano Fabro (1936–2007) is at the exhibition’s center. In addition to the poetic inscription found on the surface of the work, its material elements also engage in linguistic play. It is composed of “marble” on “marble”: a marble column, positioned on top of glass marbles. Or we might consider a late-1980s work by Alighiero Boetti (1940–1994), from his *grandi Arazzi* series. Composed of large multi-colored embroidered textual grids in Italian, Farsi, and Dari, the works were embroidered by Afghan women (and from 1988 forward, by emigrants in Peshawar, Pakistan)² with whom the artist long collaborated. The work (like Kounellis’) reminds us here of global exchange of capital and culture, processes of human migration and collaboration, and the language of art that we all share despite our linguistic and geographical barriers.

Spanning the main space at the building’s entrance as well as a side gallery, the exhibition self-consciously underscores its own status as drawn from works in a single private collection. It connects the collection of Martin Z. Margulies (real estate mogul, philanthropist, and collector), through references to historic and contemporary collectors of Arte Povera who have been formative to its discourse in the primary and secondary contexts. The side gallery includes a 2020 video documentary on Christian (Margherita) Stein. Visitors can hear artists Giulio Paolini and Michelangelo Pistoletto reflect on the importance of Stein—a major dealer and supporter of Arte Povera. She sustained these artists through provision of exhibition space in her home and Turin-

based gallery (now located in Milan), the Galerie Christian Stein, as spaces to show their work, many of which she also acquired. The exhibition also includes an homage to Celant, who shepherded many of these artists onto an international platform, championing their work for decades until his tragic death from COVID in 2020. Other major collections of Arte Povera—namely that of Nancy Olnick and Giorgio Spanu, co-founders of Magazzino Italian Art, along with Munich-based collector Ingvild Goetz—are explicitly acknowledged in a short text by Margulies as the inspirations for this exhibition. At 55,000 square feet and with a now-familiar industrial aesthetic for contemporary art museums, the Margulies Warehouse echoes the often-industrial aesthetic of Arte Povera, which emerged in the wake of Italy’s postwar revitalization or “economic miracle,” driven in large part by a boom in its global commercial exports. It also echoes historic sites of Arte Povera exhibitions, namely the Deposito d’Arte Presente (Warehouse for Present Art, acknowledged in an exhibition text on galleries and dealers), established in Turin in 1968 as a space for these artists’ exhibitions and activities.

An extraordinary early work by Kounellis is the highlight of the show, with regard to the historical importance of the works exhibited. On view for the first time from Mr. Margulies’ private collection, to which it will return after the show,³ the mixed-media work on paper (mounted on canvas) belongs to the artist’s *Lettere* (Letters) or *Alfabeti* (Alphabets) series (1959–1962/3), first exhibited in 1960 at the Galleria La Tartaruga in Rome. Kounellis began the series while he was still an art student, having arrived in Rome in 1956 from his native Greece. This an exceptionally rare example of these works in color. A pale-pink “J” and yellow-ochre “u,” among other stains and partial markings—some teal, some red—distinguish this work from others. They more often have only the large black letters, numbers, and signs (arrows, in this case), seen here. The work hangs in its original frame, constructed by the artist.⁴



Jannis Kounellis, *Untitled*, 1960. Mixed media on paper laid down on canvas, 63 x 75 in. Margulies Collection. Photo courtesy of the Margulies.

Inspired by street signage in Rome and stenciled by the artist in different orientations onto the floating material and linguistic space of the paper, Kounellis' work recalls the "primordial realm of language," as scholar Francesco Guzzetti has written of the *Lettere*.⁵ It also asserts its sensibility as *graffiti*—from the Greek *graphein* (to scratch, draw, write) and then the Italian *graffio* (scratch)—as written marks, often illicit, in public spaces. In this sense, the work registers Kounellis' personal biography, moving from Greece to Italy, as well as the deep cultural and linguistic histories between these regions. It also underscores the artist's (and Arte Povera's) prescient experimentalism and its continued resonances today, in this case in Miami. The work hearkens to graffiti and street art in the immediate surrounding neighborhood of Wynwood and to the rich international cultural and geographic exchanges that distinguish the metropolis more broadly. While I regretted that the work is hung some fifteen feet above the viewing floor, which makes it somewhat difficult to see, its siting also creates an opportunity to contemplate not only the history of these works but their potential local dialogues, as well.

Also of great interest is a 1985 work by Kounellis, composed of stacked burlap sacks, walling off an iron portal; it suggests passage through the space of painting and architecture, even as it occludes it. Here, the suggestion is that painting as a "window on the world" takes a different form from the Albertian perspectival illusionism and humanism of the Italian Renaissance. In Albertian perspective, Man was the measure of the world, while Kounellis alludes to the unfettered materialism and neo-liberal capitalism of our globalized economy, in which capital is the measure of the world. As shared in the work's wall label, the piece has been re-installed at the Margulies in a slightly different format than its original installation at the CPAC Musée d'art Contemporain (Entrepôt Lainé, Bourdeaux, France). There, Kounellis stacked the sacks, as well as coal and stones, to fill the arches of the museum that in the early nineteenth century functioned as a warehouse for colonial goods for the French Empire. While the stated intention was to underscore the visual resonances with the untitled work above, this work's engagement of histories of migration and capital will lead viewers to contemplate resonances between Kounellis' and other works in the Margulies collection, beyond Arte Povera (which Margulies has collected since the late 1980s).⁶

Brazilian artist Ernesto Neto's hanging sculptural installation, *É ô Bicho!* (It's the Bug!), from 2001, full of spices that perfume the surrounding environment, seems especially close in this regard to Kounellis' long-term use of sacks, coffee, and other goods that conjure images of markets and exchange, while creating a multi-sensorial encounter with a work of art. Or we might consider the works' resonance with the glorious, demonstratively present, hulking *Trashstone 412* (2008) by German artist Wilhelm Mundt, in which the artist encased production waste in green-flecked neon-yellow fiberglass; the 2017 sculptural wall of industrial detritus by Ghanaian artist Ibrahim Mahama; and the nearby row of wall-mounted sculptures by another German contemporary artist, Florian Baudrexel, composed of folded cardboard shipping boxes.

Notably absent from the exhibition are works by Marisa Merz (1926–2019), the only woman artist of Arte Povera. Her hanging aluminum *Living Sculptures*, woven house slippers, and poetic sculptural and painterly tableaux would have underscored the domestic as a key critical strategy and proto-feminist element found in the otherwise patriarchal Arte Povera. The exhibition—as situated at the Margulies—nevertheless has much to offer. It is strongly recommended.

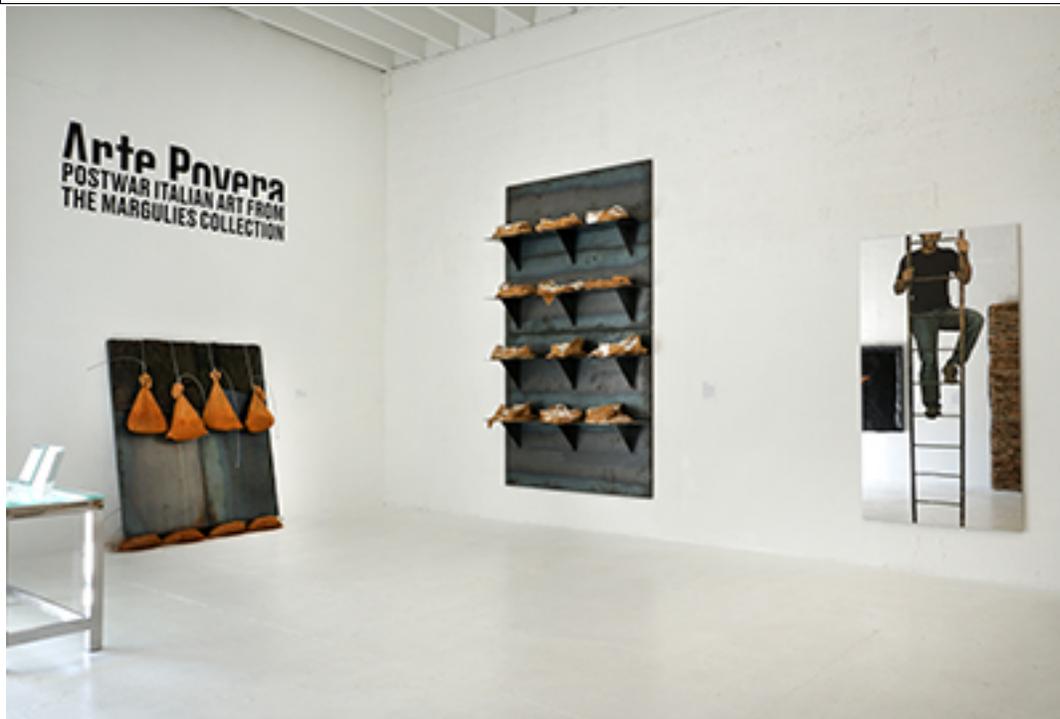
Arte Povera: Postwar Italian Art from the Margulies Collection is on view October 20, 2021 – April 30, 2022 at The Margulies Collection at the Warehouse, Miami, Florida, USA. Curated by Katherine Hinds.

Note: The Margulies Collection at the Warehouse is open to the public from October through April. An additional work by Giulio Paolini and a work by Gilberto Zorio were added to the exhibition in December. Visitors will have another opportunity to view works of contemporary Italian art at the Margulies next season, when their exhibition dedicated to the topic is scheduled to open.

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Footnotes

1. See Germano Celant, "Arte Povera: Appunti per una guerriglia," *Flash Art*, n. 5 (November–December, 1967): 3.
2. "1988," Archivio Alighiero Boetti: https://www.archivioalighieroboetti.it/timeline_slider_post/1988/.
3. Katherine Hinds, email correspondence with the author, Mar. 2, 2021.
4. I am grateful to Hinds for sharing the detail regarding the frame. Hinds, email correspondence with the author, Mar. 2, 2021.
5. Francesco Guzzetti, description of the works, "Segnali," in *Paper Media: Boetti, Calzolari, Kounellis* (Cold Spring, NY: Magazzino Italian Art, 2019), 21.
6. Collection history notes were shared by Hinds in e-mail correspondence with the author.



A seven-foot-tall untitled sculptural tableau in steel, burlap, and iron ore from 2012 by Jannis Kounellis—the only non-Italian artist associated with Arte Povera, who regarded his works as paintings—introduces the exhibition with an emphasis on materiality, bifurcated references to industry and nature, and contingent form—all familiar characteristics of Arte Povera. These characteristics are underscored here with Kounellis' signature references to nomadism, migration, and transit. It is the most recent work included in the show, which spans from 1960 (also a Kounellis work) forward. Jannis Kounellis, *Untitled*, 2012. Steel panel, iron wires, sacks, iron ore. 85 x 71 x 17 inches. Margulies Collection. Photo by Tenley Bick.



A poetic sculpture in marble and glass (see the glass marbles, underneath the marble column) offers viewers an opportunity to consider Arte Povera's interests in nature, presented as it is, and linguistic experimentation. Luciano Fabro (1936–2007), *Il giorno mi pesa sulla notte I* (The Day Ways on Me at Night I), 1994. Portuguese pink marble, red Levanto marble, gold, lead, glass, 39 1/2 x 101 x 14 7/8 inches. Jannis Kounellis, *Untitled*, 1983. Wood assemblage, metal shelf, 58 x 95 x 7 inches. Margulies Collection. Photo by Tenley Bick.



Jannis Kounellis, *Untitled*, 1985. Burlap sacks, iron beams. Dimensions variable. Margulies Collection. Photo by Tenley Bick.