

Gianni Pettena

Licence to think



Io sono la spia (I am the spy) - Milan 1973

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"*Io sono la spia*": the man holding the sign bearing these words is a free man. Being free, from Pettena's standpoint, means ignoring the zeitgeist, soaring above burdensome conformism, and emancipating oneself from the group and its convergent views. This is a surprise event, free from all restricted thoughts, be they conventional or radical. With this unexpected gesture, Pettena puts us in mind of Marcel Duchamp's refusal "*to be an artist in today's sense of the word*", nor yet an "anti-artist", preferring instead the term "anartist". This stance allowed Duchamp to push to the limits all kinds of references which lead to associations that art (or anti-art) institutions would be all too able to pick up on. The same is true of Pettena, whose position is neither one of acceptance, nor one of flat-out refusal, but instead takes him into a place very few people venture into for fear that they may be unable to get out again. This is how Pettena, who stands at the junction between different worlds, opens our eyes to a kind of architecture that we cannot see. He is, and will always be, an "anarchitect".

The exhibition at Salle Principale looks back over 50 years of anarchitectural activity, which began in 1967 in Florence. At a time when it has become clear that the planet must be preserved more than transformed, it is striking that the five decades of Gianni Pettena's career have been inhabited by a fundamental understanding of our vulnerability with respect to the natural elements. Pettena's work recalls Jacques Ellul's cherished assertion that non-power authorises reappropriating our actions and taking control over our lives. Such a stance certainly does not exclude combat, since Pettena is always stepping into the fray, driven by a spirit of rebellion, benevolent humanism, and a genuine zest for life.

The works selected for this exhibition confirm this singularity, which emerges in his earliest work, proving that studying architecture does not necessarily lead to the mountains of self-assurance that have resulted in today's ruined landscapes. Being able to avoid building, in Gianni Pettena's case, means not wanting to submit, nor to make others submit, in order to build a way of seeing and thinking that is by turns clear-sighted and the work of a dreamer. Ultimately, his power is that of a child's eye, which sees what we no longer see and is able to experience magical instants of untamed imagination. Perhaps this is the shrewdest way of always being in harmony with one's time, flexible enough to espouse the twists and turns of a society that is constantly evolving. He is an architect who does not build, or hardly at all¹, so as to point his finger at the true issues and divert our gaze from easy trajectories. His work is that of an artist who is on familiar terms with conceptual art and land-art, most often bringing the human body into contact with the realities of the world. His approach has opened the way to an entire generation of architects and artists, making Pettena into a discreet yet fundamental figure for anyone born after the effervescent era of 1968. This was a period that gave rise to many rebellious movements, such as radical Italian architecture, of which Gianni Pettena, we can now observe with necessary hindsight, turns out to be the most forthright representative.

"Io sono la spia" sums up this discreet yet inexorable presence at the heart of the movement. Whether he is delivering a lecture standing in the sea (*Marea*, 1974) or climbing a mountain (*The Craft of the Architect*, 2002) Pettena always flings down a challenge to our intelligence, not to Nature. He assumed ideological positions forcefully and clear-sightedly in *Grazia & Giustizia* (Palermo, 1968), a performance featuring a slogan in the form of a series of giant letters whose size seemed to rival that of the surrounding architecture, and which finally sank to the bottom of the sea. By ending up dead in the water, this joyfully critical procession cleverly illustrated Pettena's understanding of the dead ends of revolt—a theme he would take up again ten years later with *Icons of the past*. Gianni Pettena, himself someone who clearly dislikes being hoodwinked, took a provocative dig at the audience in his performance piece *Applausi* (1968) by reducing them to the status of mere TV viewers. The power of the screen and the economic system that governs it are also the subject of his films *The pig "carsello italiano"* (1967) and *Random movies*² (1972), collages of sequences that take us into the heart of liberal doctrine and its misconceptions.

This dichotomy between authority and those subjected to it also appears in the performance piece entitled *Laundry* (1969), which he staged in the very heart of the city, with its concentration of architectural symbols of power, by hanging laundry between the high walls of official monuments. This seemingly frivolous installation possessed a playful social dimension that underlined the inequality inherent in a hegemonic economic system. "If you're sincere, you always show where you're coming from," says Pettena. Among the artist's recent works, *Vive l'architecture* (2013) reveals the distance Pettena manages to place between our reading of art history and its peremptory representations which place power, in this case religious power, in the foreground of a world where Nature and Architecture form a mere backdrop. And yet Pettena reveals the importance of

¹ The house he built for himself on the island of Elba and the extension to a public building designed by Ettore Sottsass senior which Pettena saved from destruction with much energy and determination.

² *Random movies* is a reel of film Pettena took from a dustbin outside a TV studio, which he screened during a lecture on his work without having viewed it beforehand.

these backgrounds, with their preciousness and the meticulous definitions intended by the artists. Gianni Pettina has spent much of his life passing on this mischievous devil-may-care approach to his students, just as he communicates it to us via his powerfully simple and benevolently clear-sighted work. Gianni, grazie mille per tutto!

Dominique Mathieu, February 2018