

INTRODUCTION LABOR, (WORKERS') AUTONOMY, (ART) WORK

[Operaismo] emerged at the exact moment of transition when the greatness of the century turned on itself, moving from a permanent state of exception to a new “normal” epochless time.

Mario Tronti, “Memoir” (2012)

At Bretton Woods, the foundations of a new world monetary system had been established; at Hiroshima and Nagasaki new means of violence had demonstrated what the military underpinnings of the new world order would be; and at San Francisco new norms and rules for the legitimization of state-making and war-making had been laid out at the UN Charter.

Giovanni Arrighi, *The Long Twentieth Century* (1994)

Slashing [the painting] was equivalent, fundamentally, to finishing it. It meant that I had at last planted my foot on solid ground.

Alberto Moravia, *Boredom* (1960)

We want to organicize disintegration.

Piero Manzoni, Guido Biasi, Mario Corlucci, Ettore Sordini, and Angelo Verga, “For an Organic Painting” (1957)

Painting and Violence

In 1949, Lucio Fontana picked up for the first time the “already dead” practice of painting in order to proclaim its irrelevance anew.¹ This was also the year abstract painting made the cover of *Life*, “represented” by the work of Jackson Pollock. Already, the *Life* magazine cover signals the rapid assimilation

of the prewar European avant-garde into a culture industry funded by the ascendancy of American capital, exported to an international, rapidly globalizing world.² In this dialectical relationship, where expressive painterly gestures were quickly absorbed by official culture and while other acts, such as those intentionally incorporating technological reproduction matrices into the logic of the work (Dada) had to declare their own incapability of pushing past capture, historical conditions seemed to permit very few convincing aesthetic tactics.

Shifting the onus of a heretofore historically unknown proportion of state-sanctioned violence away from Europe and onto the United States, Fontana declared painting impossible in response to Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Sealing the deal, he demonstrated his conviction by violently puncturing a piece of paper, leaving a spiral-shaped constellation of holes. Having practiced ceramics and sculpture for three decades, he turned thereafter to canvas and metal surfaces, and to the discipline of painting, inaugurating almost twenty years of experimentation with ways to lacerate monochromatic surfaces (see figs. I.1 and I.2; pl. 1). Throughout those next two decades, Fontana maintained the tension of his initial inaugurating claim; in 1962 he said: “Trous? Les Trous n’existent pas [Holes? Holes don’t exist].”³

In Italy during the years immediately following World War II, Fontana was not alone in his search for gestures of impossibility that would be adequate to the contradictions characterizing the *miracolo italiano*—the years of reconstruction and recapitalization of Italy made possible by Bretton Woods and, through Italy, much of Europe—yet also faithful to the as yet unexplored radicalism and unrealized potential of the historical avant-garde. This book argues that the tension between loss and recovery signaled by the monochrome, one of the historical avant-garde’s most at once rigorously terse yet optimistic tropes, informs this gesture’s singular violence: rage at a field of received cultural appearances structuring a new era of culturally mediated struggle operating within and beneath the putative miracle of capitalism’s historical golden age, an era in which Italy came to act as a crucible for the next round of capitalist expansion. “Tension” here is a euphemism for a double movement describing the historical horizon against which Fontana and others were working, one of economic growth associated with “Americanization” (due to American economic aid) and symbolized through the cultural ubiquity of both television and Jackson Pollock on the one hand, *and* on the other hand, growing social



FIGURE 1.1. Ugo Mulas, photograph of Lucio Fontana, 1963. © Ugo Mulas Heirs. All rights reserved.



FIGURE 1.2. Ugo Mulas, photograph of Lucio Fontana, 1965. © Ugo Mulas Heirs. All rights reserved.

antagonism signaling an incipient civil war between labor and capital resulting from that rapid, sudden, and “miraculous” growth. But “tension” also describes the relationship between a political economic order in volatile transition and a cultural order nested within and against that political-economic horizon, at once mediating that horizon and resisting it. It describes the way artists in Italy situated the work of art as at once a repository of historical symptoms and as a form of resistance (indeed terror) against the very historical conditions it symptomatizes. A double movement within a double movement, then.

Returning to Fontana’s defaced monochromatic painting, I note the way it imagines anew the relationship between the field of the historical real and of the aesthetic *act*. The gesture’s contingency on the support on which it acts, a circular relationship in which cause and consequence cross, effectively challenges the traditional binary of passive and active, figure and ground; above all, it calls bluff to the anodyne and *passive* (what is gravity? what is nuclear annihilation?) abstract expressionist gesture. Hegemonic by 1950 in both

the states and Europe, this gesture came to be associated above all with Pollock. It came to connote the international triumph of the American “petit-bourgeoisie.”⁴ The cut signaled instead a roiling and resistant cultural undercurrent that would burst onto the street, beginning with the Piazza Statuto riots in Turin, in 1962. In July 1962, at the same time that Fiat was in the midst of union mediated negotiations with labor over wages and benefits, workers stormed the offices of the Italian Union of Labour (UIL).⁵ Many of the rioters were members of that union and worked for Fiat. They accused the UIL of betraying their interests by having signed a separate contract with management. The autonomous workers’ movement retroactively said of the event, “Piazza Statuto was our founding Congress.”⁶ It signaled a latent historical movement and prefigured a type of action that in turn would reconfigure the meaning of autonomy—both political and aesthetic autonomy, in mutual entwinement. This book tells the story of that undercurrent.

The gap between history, theory, and practice is nonetheless imagined radically otherwise from Theodor Adorno’s prohibitive, if also negatively generative, claim. If in 1949 Fontana echoed Adorno’s statement about the impossibility of lyric poetry after the Holocaust by declaring painting impossible as a consequence of the nuclear bomb, he nonetheless began to *practice* the medium. This stands in contradistinction to Adorno’s ultimately passive and ineffectual negative dialectic. Adorno was not a poet, however much he understood his statement to goad the literary explorations of others. Less preoccupied with mere endgames, Fontana got his hands dirty in a medium he had never previously practiced, declaring its foreclosure only to begin *doing* it for the first time. What did *in fact* actually issue from this declaration of impossibility was a new expressive genus (if not genre) born of cuts over the support, slashes, and holes, implicating the once passive surface in myriad surprising ways. Far from a nihilistic vacuity, these punctures *activated* the ground on which they were enacted, involuting figure-ground relations to reveal the surface’s enactment of the gesture. They affirmed the presence of the heretofore occluded (or absorbed, via the grid and the monochrome) material ground of painting, thereby imagining otherwise many of the stakes of the historical avant-garde.

Double Movement: On the Entwinement of Capital and Culture

The historical passage traced in this book tracks parallel with capital's golden age, its era of greatest growth and historically high profit rates, undergirding and underwritten by vertical organization and new forms of state integration mapped onto a world order. The years of the Marshall Plan (1948–1952), foundation of the Bretton Woods program (1947–1973) happen also to be the years of an eruption of painterly innovation, even though that moment has no proper *ism*.

Fontana is of course best known for perforating or slitting his canvases, thereby destroying the actual picture plane that had been the unquestioned ground of centuries of painting. Burri is best known for his roughly sewn-together sacks, which were frequently analogized to bloodstained bandages by postwar critics (although I focus on his lesser-known work in plastics, which he melted and reformed with a blowtorch). Manzoni is best known for the rigorously neutral white works he called *Achromes* as well as his more provocative, Dada-like gestures, such as canning his own shit or signing the bodies of colleagues and models as “living sculptures.” I refuse metaphorical readings of this violence that might analogize it with traumatic memories of World War II's death and destruction. Instead, I locate the motivation for these operations in both the history of the medium of painting—in particular its radical curtailment in the most extreme versions of abstract art that emerged in Russia just after World War I (notably with Kasimir Malevich and Alexander Rodchenko)—and in the social, political, and economic history of postwar Italy, especially as the latter was shaped by the Marshall Plan. The Marshall Plan is understood in its broadest sense as the reestablishment of global capitalist relations under an American hegemon after the interval of Italian fascism.

This double movement, striated by capital's progress and the forms of antagonism it engenders, within which is embedded a second-order double movement that at once mediates and confronts, might be productively differentiated or periodized by mapping those equally contradictory movements against one another. Capital's new era of integration, and US world making, might be understood against the oeuvres of the artists this study considers, just as the shockingly singular works of cultural production explored here

have much to tell us about the struggles specific to those years, an analytic circle as virtuous for the historical picture it can deliver as it is vicious in the way it seemingly defers an explanation of cause. Turning to the symptoms, then, in 1956 Alberto Burri began his experiments with plastic, a material infrequently used in sculpture or painting up to that point yet whose manufacture was burgeoning in the newly amped-up production of northern factories, financed by American dollars against the specter of communism. Referencing its own industrial production, this unlikely use of plastic within the parameters of the art work acted as an index of the culture of the *miracolo italiano*. Burri's interest in the irrecoverable base materiality of plastic motivated his investigation into a set of violent procedures, such as burning and exploding, forged at once as a critical analysis of the new material horizon of everyday life, a practice-based and materialist collusion with Lucio Fontana's procedural violence, and, not least of all, a crucial dialogue with the American artist Robert Rauschenberg. Not coincidentally, Rauschenberg had moved to Rome and was living mere steps from Burri's studio on the Spanish Steps. Alongside his own exploration of aggressively violent forms of mark making, Burri's aleatory tactics—attributed exclusively in the existing narratives to Rauschenberg and other American artists, strategies such as “chance”—became a fraught part of the dynamic of exchange between American and Italian artistic practices. We might cast this charged engagement as a kind of symptom of the real movement of capital subtending international relations, however occluded by the ideology of liberal democracy and “freedom.” In the dialogic tension that emerges between Burri and Rauschenberg's practices in Rome around 1953, “chance,” the “readymade,” and related forms recovered from the history of Dada and surrealism took on urgent meaning in the emergent debate about the meaning of autonomy and autochthony in art against the backdrop of reconstruction culture during the Cold War.

Cold War, or Culture as War by “Other Means”

This book rests on an understanding of the Cold War as one episode in the larger history of capitalism, one that delivers us to the present in a particular way and that, as a moment in a larger story rather than a discrete narrative, situates the cultural production that falls within its temporal boundaries. Far from a concluded narrative about simply opposed ideologies and equally far

from a claim that the western bloc, and therefore capitalism, finally and conclusively “won,” I situate the Cold War—borrowing Georges Bataille’s use of nineteenth-century military theorist Carl von Clausewitz’s phrase “diplomacy might be thought of as war by other means”—as a moment when the economy explicitly acted as the continuation of war by other means.⁷ During 1947–1973, the Bretton Woods arrangement became a system of international financial aid—to be distinguished from the standard practice of alienating capital through debt in order to facilitate its growth⁸—that deployed dollars to ward off the threat of communism without immediate interest or guaranteed returns, a process reflecting a motivation closer to warfare than to the standard practices of making “barren money” reproduce capital through isolated investments and predetermined forms of return. “A conflict is not necessarily military; one can envisage a vast economic competition, which for the competitor with the initiative, would cost sacrifices comparable to those of war and which, from a budget on the same scale as war budgets, would involve expenditures that would not be compensated by any hope of capitalist profit.”⁹ Bataille’s characterization of the Marshall Plan as a form of “war by other means” corroborates that of economic historian Giovanni Arrighi, who notes that “war making and state making were becoming an increasingly round-about business which involved an ever growing number, range, and variety of seemingly unrelated activities.”

Bretton Woods was one such policy that encompassed a range of unrelated and often internally contradictory strategies, a system of gifts and low-interest loans that behaved less like a classical capitalist investment and more like a form of total integration of state and capital within US interests. “In the world monetary system established at Bretton Woods, in contrast, the ‘production’ of world money was taken over by a network of governmental organizations motivated primarily by considerations of welfare, security, and power—in principle the IMF and the World Bank, in practice the US Federal Reserve System acting in concert with the central banks of the closest and most important US allies. World money thus became a by-product of state making activities.”¹⁰

The Vicious and Virtuous Cycle, Cumulative Causation

My account therefore relies on Arrighi’s work *The Long Twentieth Century*, in which the development of capital and the consolidation of the state as a domi-

nant world power are mutually entwined, each reliant on the other in a “process of circular and cumulative causation . . . a virtual and vicious circle” mediated by political *and* cultural struggles.

Locating the Cold War as an intersection where the United States was reaching political ascendancy while capital was beginning another cycle of accumulation displaces the narrative of culture’s reticulation to national identity and places it instead in a complex field of hegemony formation and dissolution. But situating cultural production made within and against the dominant hegemonic order in the aftermath of World War II, in the period when the United States came to be the nation-state that was coterminous with political hegemony during an era marked by previously unknown affluence in the part of the world protected by US “exceptionalism,” entails a specific understanding of the Cold War as another chapter in the much larger history of capital, itself historically and structurally parallel with art as we have come to understand it. As I will show, culture form may either serve prevailing interests or dialectically hold out the possibility and potential of futures yet to come or ways of understanding historical contradiction beneath hegemony. Fontana, Burri, and Manzoni’s work, at once timely and oddly out of step with what would become the official art of the period (all of which is American), insists that there are other horizons inscribed in historical and cultural memory that may have yet to fully resurface. This claim may initially sound like the umpteenth attempt at rehabilitating a wishful messianism against the catastrophe of history, so often evoked in the humanities through reference to Walter Benjamin’s “Theses on the Philosophy of History.” I am claiming, by contrast, that cultural forms, far from projecting what *should* be, hold out the proof of another movement, another world, roiling within and beneath the appearances that configure hegemonic order. Indeed, recent economic developments that have gone under the rubric of crisis suggest that there is a world, a history, beneath and against capital and state formation. The cultural historian can only search for and perhaps sometimes locate the symptoms of movement in the field of the real, structured by contradiction, within which a sense of striving toward another world, and a sense of what that world might be, may emerge. To that end, I will attempt to explain both what I mean by “culture” in this book and what role it may play within and against capital.

Form and Violence

The formal tactics enacted by the painting that I explore—cutting, burning, exploding, exceeding limits of mark making and of the relation between support and surface—have not been employed in the practice of painting before or after 1949–1973 or elsewhere than in Italy. This suggests form as a sedimented content, a mode of expression against *both* the ideology of free expression issuing from American painting in the late forties *and* the model of painting inscribing it within the limits of the commodity also issuing from the United States in the early sixties, both all too well known to Europeans and Italians, as I have demonstrated. Neither expressive in some naïve unmediated sense nor passively giving in to the total expropriation of expression required by advanced capital, Fontana, Burri, and Manzoni worked out forms of negative articulation as the only way to find a vehicle of expression outside its appropriation and expropriation. But these tactics also exceed expression, negative or otherwise, in the limited sense. They supersede individual interests, articulating instead what Louis Althusser called “the last instance” of the economic real coming to find a way of expressing itself in culture.¹¹ In other words, it is the violent expenditure of accumulation made manifest in war of a new scale, the atom bomb, and the ensuing continuation of that war in the excess of expenditure, that finds its way into Fontana’s slashes, just as the descent of productivism at great social, political, and cultural cost found its way into Manzoni’s best known work, *Merda d’Artista* (1962), cans labeled with the weight of their contents (artist’s shit), expressing (allegorical, cultural) immiseration at the same time that Warhol’s celebrated *Campbell’s Soup* (1962) paintings were made.

Following Fredric Jameson’s claim that “we can think abstractly about the world only to the extent that the world itself has already become abstract,”¹² which in turn relies on a definition of abstraction put forth by Marx in *Grundrisse* that “individuals are now ruled by abstraction,”¹³ I draw on a definition of culture as that which becomes a vehicle to mediate “the horizon of the mode of production by showing the form contradiction takes on this [cultural] level, and the relationship of the cultural object to it. . . . We will therefore suggest that this new and ultimate object may be designated as cultural revolution, as that moment in which the coexistence of various modes of production becomes visibly antagonistic, their contradiction moving to the very

center of political, social, and historical life.”¹⁴ To the description of culture as an etiology through which to make some kind of prognosis about the state of capital at a particular historical and geopolitical conjuncture, one structured primarily as “war by other means,” I would only add: while the object makes manifest the contradictions in the mode of production, and the expansive reproduction of capital, it also stands in excess to the very archive of symptoms it provides, an excess sometimes spilling over into symbolic protest: civil war by other means. But this merely echoes the degree to which aesthetic abstraction is only a mediation of abstraction at the level of the real, the “real abstraction” wrecked by capital that Marx elaborates in *Grundrisse* and against which he brackets off “aesthetic abstraction.”¹⁵

Already Fontana, Burri, and Manzoni’s shared cultural orientations (to the monochrome on the one hand and the readymade on the other) are indicative of the profound changes in the significance of the nation-state and national identity that were wrought in and after World War II. All three artists developed idioms that were indebted to the international avant-garde and to international modernism. If there were ever a time when national painting, the reactionary and figurative work of former futurists, would seem to express cultural resistance to the culturally colonial presence of the United States, the fifties and sixties would have been it. In the cacophony of references each artist listed, notably in the journals and galleries they ran (*Il Gesto* and *Azimut*), neither futurism nor the “rappel a l’ordre” (return to convention) that came after it were mentioned. Instead, the Duchampian readymade, international abstraction, French *art informel*, and American abstract expressionist painting were cited. The notable absence of futurism silently registers the obsolescence of the national state. This shift to internationalism, enforced by the real movement of capital on the one hand and formalized at the level of policy by the Marshall Plan on the other, already figures in the only artistic constellation that held any coherence for the Italian artists of the fifties and sixties. A shared preoccupation with the monochrome and the readymade, heretofore incompatible yet equally reflective of the interests of the avant-garde (in both its utopian and revolutionary modes) come to be collapsed, in a hybrid form that was already the sign of capital’s expansionist drive, with Milan as its miraculous epicenter. Following these artists’ cue, then, this book does not address Italian futurism.

Recursion and Historicity

The displacement of Italian futurism by a new round of reception of the international avant-garde (the readymade and Dada) and modernism (the grid and the monochrome), itself a complex conjuncture I explore throughout this book, poses anew the perennial problem of repetition so often codified in the history of art by the term “neo-avant-garde.” The standard argument about the neo-avant-garde, which Peter Burger, Benjamin Buchloh, and Hal Foster, among others, have offered is that the first instantiation of each trope responded to historical conditions in a compelling way, while each trope’s re-instantiation after the war became a mere passive rehearsal symptomizing the total administration of life within capital and spectacle, foreclosing any gesture of historical engagement. If my argument in this book makes any headway out of the aporia that dismisses the monochrome, the grid, and the readymade after World War II as so much passive repetition, it will do so through recourse to the recursive, yet no less dynamic, movement of history itself. My hope is that if this book makes any intervention at all, it moves past the received impasse of the Marxian prognosis of history as first tragedy and then farce. Tragedy and farce are coeval in the formation of continuity and rupture, both synchronically and diachronically, in each round of historical struggle.¹⁶ My reliance on an examination of the larger and equally cyclical development of capital across modernity would claim that repetition is itself already the index of history’s real movement. In retrospect, this is not repetition at all but part of the recursion of form as it mediates equally recursive historical developments, a relationship of cultural mediation that may be described as cycles nested in cycles.

Arrighi’s account of the historical development of capital through the dynamic of recursive cycles of accumulation, characterized by cumulative and contradictory motivation—mostly between state and market—that spurs its development on, and in which each historical cycle revisits aspects of former cycles, picking up some and rejecting others in the growing expansion of the capitalist world system, provides the strongest model available for thinking the entwined trajectory of culture. Arrighi calls these systemic cycles of accumulation. And while the fourth, “American” cycle concerns this book, the model of history he offers, in which empirical observation across “the long duree,” reveals striking patterns that have much to tell us about repetition—or

recursion — more generally. It offers much by way of explanation of the repetition of formal tropes as they resurface throughout the twentieth century to take up problems of historical relevance as those problems themselves recur, and in which some facets surface while others recede. For instance, while the monochrome is indelibly associated with the Soviet avant-garde, inaugurated by Aleksandr Rodchenko to mark the end of easel painting, its postwar recrudescence signals a “pattern of recurrence and evolution which are reproduced in the next phase of financial expansion and systemic restructuring” that is particular to the period of affluence 1949–1963. If it articulated a rupture and a new beginning in 1921, indicative at once of the start of a new economy to which the soviets of 1917 aspired and of a confrontation with the problem of *production*, one therefore caught between the radicalism of the revolution and a regression to capitalism via the New Economic Policy’s productivist mandate, in 1949 it was again the sign of another round of acceleration in the production sector, the moment in the cycle when capital is channeled toward expansion routed through the manufacture of commodities. But this time advances in the industrial sector were enforced exclusively from above, in contradistinction to the revolutionary self-determination of the soviets in the twenties. Bataille, quoting the French economist Francois Perroux’s description of the Marshall Plan, called this period of seismic transformation a “revolution from above.” Perroux’s characterization is foundational to Bataille’s analysis of the Marshall Plan, while dovetailing with Arrighi’s. I address this pattern of recurrence in chapter 1, on the monochrome.

The model of history (of capitalism and modernity) on which I lean thus traces the degree to which cycles of recursion are neither parts *subordinated* to a given totality nor autonomous cases of a given condition. They are interdependent occurrences that are constituted by and in turn constitute one another, in a larger trajectory of aesthetic responses that are reticulated, nested within, an equally dynamic capitalist development. This development, in turn, like the aesthetic responses nested within it, is the result of a “process of circular and cumulative causation, a virtuous and vicious cycle.”¹⁷ And this process is that of capital self-reproduction. Capital’s capacity to expand is not bound of necessity to either circulation or to (commodity) production alone but to the imbrication of the two. Arrighi notes Marx’s formula for how capital self-reproduces. Money (M) is invested in the production of commodities wherein value accrue through labor. Commodities (C) are then brought to market in

exchange for a larger sum of money (M). M has become M' in a cycle, with (') expression the swelling of sum. Again, the pivot in this increase of money, in this production of surplus value, is labor. This journey, or expansive cycle, can be extrapolated to describe not only isolated capitalist investments but also a recurrent pattern of capitalist expansion over the globe and over time to form a world system. A determinative aspect of this system is the undulation of epochs between material expansion in commodity production. The "MC" phases of capital accumulation in which commodity production generates surplus, together with that of (liquid) financial rebirth (CM'), describing a "double movement forward and backward at the same time." Notable here is that transformative expansion does

not proceed in a linear fashion, that is, through a series of simple forward movements in the course of which old organizational forms are superseded once and for all by new ones. Rather each forward movement has been based on a revival of previously superseded organizational forms. Thus, whereas the Genoese cycle of accumulation was based on the supersession of Venetian state monopoly capitalism by the alliance of Genoese cosmopolitan finance capitalism with Iberian territorialism, this alliance was itself superseded at a later time by the revival of state monopoly (Dutch) capitalism in a new enlarged form.¹⁸

This passage gives a crystalline description of the revival of forms that forge a relation to historicity because of, and not despite, recursion. It is through established historical forms that progress turns away from and returns toward the past, marking and remarking the degree to which change does occur. To this dialectic of capital and statecraft we might add culture, as it provides a metric for both. More important, I argue that art is part of the crisis of accumulation—channeled into warding off communism on the one hand and contributing to the American hegemony on the other—that opened onto capital's great triumph between 1949 and 1973. Here, in another doubled configuration within the state-to-market dynamic, art functioned at once as propaganda crossing the Atlantic for the myth of American freedom from ideology and, in counter-formation, as an arena of violent expenditure of and of negative luxuriance in defiance against the productive ethos of American culture. That culture merely *appeared* liberatory, while masking the productivist drive that pressed Italy into service, a contradiction that textured much of the American

art that came to dominate the era, a tension many came to recognize in retrospect. Here is Leo Steinberg in 1972, when the era had drawn to a close, making the stakes retroactively visible, a stakes already mediated by art: “American art has always been about adapting art as transcendental experience, with its hint of elitism and ‘snob appeal, with pleasure, wickedness, finesse’ to native values such as work and productivity.”¹⁹ Steinberg’s statement is situated in the context of his discussion of Johns’s and Rauschenberg’s work—of the victors of the dominant narrative—but nonetheless acknowledges, some thirty years after the fact, at the moment when the period in question is drawing to a close, the dynamic at the heart of this book: a violent luxuriance struggling against the aesthetic management of domination, the ideological disavowal of colonialism by other means.

“Miracolo” and/or Violence

Burri confronted the history of aesthetic modernism through the tension of violent excess against the results of capitalist growth, the proliferation of industrial materials born of the exponential rise of factory production in the North resulting from the *miracolo italiano*. Modernism’s primary paradigms recur: the monochrome, the readymade, chance operations. *Big Red P n 18* (pl. 7), for instance, presents aggressive color and lurid texture. Concretely evidencing a scene of violence, it acts on a forensic register, suggesting only the physical involved in its production. Vulgar and coarse, yet exasperatingly indeterminate, the object’s origin in a manifestly failed industrial matrix marks it as an anti-readymade, turning modernism and the avant-garde inside out, thereby pointing to a trajectory of radical and negative materialism.²⁰

In the specific context of the Marshall Plan, then, art was a second-order terrain of struggle. Fontana’s and Burri’s gestures express at once a calamitous surfeit in which “it is not necessity but its contrary, luxury, that presents living matter and mankind with their fundamental problems.”²¹ Fontana’s and Burri’s violence and, later, Manzoni’s engagement with the labor-to-capital relation on the factory floor—at the very moment of this relation’s collapse—are finally neither easily reflective à la social art history nor autonomous in the merely formalist sense. Again, form—understood as sedimented content—has much to say about the subterranean relation of capital to the world of appearances in each moment across 1949–1973: first as hot (and destructive

money), then as a refusal of productivism, and finally as an exploration of the failed wage relation; an unmanageable surplus roils to the surface, art its only conduit until the era of riots that begin in the seventies.

From Solid State to Liquid Capital

In his work *Living Sculpture* (1961) Manzoni signed “Manzoni, 1961” above the small of a studio model’s back (see fig. 4.6). The model—a scenario of exploitive voluntarism that trumps the conventionalization of voluntarist exploitation in many later art practices of the seventies to the present that involve actions and live bodies—is, needless to say, naked. However, the signature formalizes her as a product of the artist’s refashioning. The signature produces her as a *nude*, an object belonging to a genre of obsolete historical representation. By making an explicit reference to the expansive history of classicism in Italy, in a scenario questioning property, agency, and relations of dependency, Manzoni evokes the historical passage from an older form of authority associated with the paternal order of the nation-state—one that had resurfaced in the fascist art of the twenties, with its emphasis on the myths of Italianità, Romanità, and *antichità*—to the order of the commodity. The studio model is as much a memory of classical statuary as she is a canvas as a product for sale once branded by the artist’s signature. She is a mannequin.

The signature, a primary trope explored in the work, has contributed to an unfortunate misunderstanding of Manzoni’s project, in no small part due to the dominance of poststructuralism in art history of the past forty years. Those who wish to position Manzoni as an avatar of “conceptual art” (Marcel Broodthaers, one of the pantheon of art history’s heroes of the student uprisings of May ’68 in France and Belgium, for one, held him in reverence) might argue that *Living Sculpture* enacts a critique of the discursive structures that determine the work, as well as of the erasure that they enact on the body. While *Living Sculpture* certainly achieves this much, it also asks many more difficult questions about agency (the artist’s and the model’s), labor, and the move to dematerialized artistic practice celebrated by Lucy Lippard, among others, as somehow emancipatory rather than affirmative, if unconsciously so, in 1966.

This book, then, is an attempt to recover the historical struggle played out between on the one hand the trajectory of actual violence binding capital to the state and to its attendant affirmative cultural expressions and on the

other hand forms of counter-violence, restricted, as merely symbolic agency, against this real violence, until that moment in the late sixties and throughout the seventies when it erupted onto the street. This confrontation describes the conjuncture that made possible the century's last gasp of interesting, indeed formally *original*, painting at the very moment that the medium would finally cede relevance to other media and practices. As such, this confrontation understands the work of art as a form of warfare by other means, an expression used by Bataille and others to describe the Marshall Plan: warfare waged via dollars.

Prefiguration, or Mediation and Movement

If form is content, the expression of the final determination surfacing through layers of social mediation, repression, and displacement, it is also a place to prefigure forms of direct action, forms of violence, that the hegemonic order may conceptualize and categorize as “terror” in its self-preserving interest, even and especially when those cultural forms actualize the meaning of “freedom”—from the prevailing ideological and economic order. This account of historical movement, insofar as it traces that movement through the symptoms embedded in the cultural form of painting, locates different moments in the unfolding drama of capital between 1949 and 1973 in each of the oeuvres presented here. Each oeuvre symptomatizes moments along this development, from its genesis in war, World War II, to its fading out in the strikes, arrests, and insurrection of the 1970s. If in 1949 Fontana signaled the homology between luxury and the violence of expenditure as a cultural expression of crisis born of overaccumulation on the one hand and on the other as rebellion against the neocolonial managerialism of American interest posing as liberation in the process of world hegemony formation, by 1953 Burri moves through the then productivist ethos of reconstruction, exploding it literally at every turn, culminating in Manzoni's prescient articulation of the inevitable rupture between labor and capital under the pressure of immiseration, a rupture that also marks and is marked by the end of the period of the Bretton Woods agreement and the beginning of the end of historically high profit rates.

It ends with the end of those historic rates of profit, the end of the absolute hegemony of the United States, and significantly the final end of some of the

more compelling bids for painting's relevance: 1973. The years between Manzoni's death in 1962 and the year 1973 are those of the elaboration of Arte Povera in Italian art, in which the critique of colonial capital, or capitalism as neocolonialism under the American flag, is made most explicit. The end of those historically high profits coincides with the end of the medium's importance, marking a moment when history seems to part ways with the historically invested medium of painting. The year, 1973, that bookends the limit of this book also casts a shadow stretching to 1977, the year when labor's rebellion against capital, manifesting itself in violent insurrection and strikes, from the Piazza Statuto riots in Turin in July 1962 through to what came to be called the Hot Autumn of 1969 when labor resistance peaked in the Industrial North, and culminates in the arrest of numerous cultural and intellectual figures, among whom was the novelist Nanni Balestrini (whose work stands parallel to and in affinity with Arte Povera) alongside the political theorist Antonio Negri. This moment of state authority is the subject of the conclusion to this book.

Reversals

Along with tracing the singular gestures of artists whose work symptomized both the specificity of capital at that historical moment and the desire for its collapse as it was configured, this book might be understood to be attempting to tell the inverse story: it is a story not only about art but about the unfolding of capital itself, as a way of reconfiguring a picture of the world between 1949 and 1973. Each, capital's unfolding and its cultural mediation, acts as a vehicle through which to understand the other.

Manzoni's work pinpoints important paradigmatic shifts occurring in the political and social field that have yet to be fully explored in discourses of political economy, where they would seem to properly belong. But in keeping with any honest understanding of abstraction, it may be that the only way to understand the real abstraction brought to bear by capital in midcentury are forms of abstraction that make its effects brutally concrete. In other words, Fontana's slashes have much to tell us about what Arrighi, after Braudel, locates as the register of capital *above* the market, where aggressive capital seeks to ward off a crisis of overaccumulation by colonizing new territories, looking for new places of investment and expansion: "we have ventured to the top-floor of the anti-market where great predators roam and the law of

the jungle operates”²² in the intersection of capital and statecraft. Here, politics provisionally facilitates capital’s new directions, choreographing alternate forms of interstate aggression, marking the end of one cycle of accumulation as it tips toward another. Burri’s work engaged the phase of development and growth throughout the fifties and sixties by using the ultimate new material born of factory production, the stuff of the *miracolo*, generative of surplus value and of unassimilable waste: plastic. Manzoni marks the moment where the “hidden abode of production” resurfaces, convulsing forth in an insurrectionary moment against capital, when the labor to capital relation violently changes. After all, almost all of Manzoni’s oeuvre operates as a metonymy for change on the factory floor and in the relationship between workers and the PCI, articulating the last moment when it might have been situated as a site of change rather than full-blown antagonism. The latter would be the special province of Arte Povera.

Piero Manzoni volatilized the material surface of painting and then pushed his research toward practices that no longer relied on the frame, in a northern Italian cultural context, in which the myth of “economic recovery” was about to also explode the frame of the factory, the union, and the party. Crossing formal limits immanent to the medium occurred against, and in relation to, a historical backdrop against which political formations were also about to cross the formal limits immanent to party and state, as though in parallax. We need, then, to rewind, to tell the story of the PCI that was the predominant frame and was about to collapse under its own weight. Manzoni’s trajectory is intimately entwined with the contradictions internal to labor, class, and organization of class interests in the late fifties and early sixties, a knot requiring a look at the crisis between class and party.

A Story of Frames within Frames: The Italian Communist Party

One event in particular set the basic economic, and thereby social, cultural, and political coordinates that both upheld and later caused the failure of the Italian Communist Party (PCI): the Economic Recovery Act, which was drafted by George Marshall and signed into policy in the summer of 1947 with the explicit goal of resuscitating Italy for the purposes of US markets and investments.²³ Western Europe’s recovery radiated out, paradoxically, from the site of its greatest devastation, northern Italy. The stage of traumatic loss, then,

would double as the place for Italy's and Europe's reintegration into global capitalism organized around the US dollar. The larger program within which the Marshall Plan was forged, known as the Bretton Woods agreement, was premised on the reticulation of the economy to the American dollar.²⁴ It was to be set as the universal standard.²⁵

Intended to deflect the possibility of communism, the Marshall Plan contributed to a new stage of capitalism in Europe, and eventually globally.²⁶ This form of capitalist—coded American—retaliation against state-planned communism entailed mobilizing capital in contrary forms, as gifts and dispersed loans to western Europe that, as economists have noted, seemed on the face of it to contradict the properly capitalist logic of investment oriented toward expansion and monetary growth (what Marx called “breeding barren money” through debt). In addition to staving off the “threat” of communism, the Marshall Plan acted doubly to boost American economic interests by setting up export markets. It contributed to America's own economic boom. Milan, the city to profit most, rebuilt itself—quite literally—in the image of New York, the only Italian city of skyscrapers. Italy's Economic Miracle resulted from rapidly developed industry in the North, creating an economic and cultural disparity with the rural South. The Marshall Plan–sponsored *miracolo italiano* demanded a mass exodus from the poor South to the newly industrializing North, supplying pools of cheap labor to stoke the industrial machinery and leaving millions not only deracinated but barely accounted for in the new economy.

From 1949 to 1973, Italy transformed from an agrarian society into one undergirded by the most advanced industrial growth, of forms of capitalist acceleration competitive with Germany, France, and England in many economic sectors. While exodus enabled the miracle, the miracle did not enable an improved everyday life. To the contrary, as the violent strikes of the mid-1950s and the even more violent insurrections and arrests of the late sixties and seventies that preoccupy the final part of this book demonstrate, the winner in the miracle was ultimately a newly restructured capitalism capable of moving into the Global South, for which Italy, as Antonio Negri has argued, was the prefigurative crucible.²⁷

The Economic Recovery Act, this particular strand of Cold War history, pressed into service an Italy that, unlike France the century before or England the century before that, was only just entering industrial modernity. Italy, the

site of high culture from the Renaissance through the early twentieth century, suddenly found itself at once the center of, yet displaced by, a set of global relationships that textured everyday life in a singular way. That is, everyday life was caught up in a double spiral of uneven development: both belated in the introduction to modernity and in advance of the accelerations and changes that would soon come to be associated with globalization, the economic restructuring of the seventies that is often called “post-Fordism” or “globalization.” Theorized later by Negri, Michael Hardt, and others, Italy at this curious historical conjuncture, structured by belatedness and advances in capital, was a “kind of laboratory for experiments in new forms of political thinking, albeit one whose exceptionality comes to a close as Italy ‘converges’ with other countries . . . through the economic realm and the Americanization of social and cultural fields.”²⁸

The Economic Miracle was accompanied by the sudden hegemony of American artists,²⁹ a deionization of culture that reached its apotheosis in 1964 when (thanks to the CIA) the Venice Prize was awarded to Robert Rauschenberg. This irony was predicated also on the absence of any such American avant-garde prior to the war. What emerges, then, is another helix of entwined relation, a vicious and virtuous movement wherein cultural and economic unease informed and reflected one another. The Piazza Statuto riots of 1962, located between Jackson Pollock’s less-than-spectacular European premier at the 1950 Venice Biennale at the start of our timeline, and with Rauschenberg’s CIA-assisted³⁰ triumph as the first American to win the Venice Prize at the 1964 Biennale, texture the field in a way that compels us to ask after the relationship of culture and political economy anew, as each reaches after an occluded historical movement that subtends both vaguely propagandistic exhibitions.

Belated Acceleration: From Production to Sabotage

Broadly speaking, Italians at the time were well aware of the belatedness of their modernization. As Mario Tronti says, “it was only with the late 50s and early 60s that modern capitalism really took off in Italy, and the ancient little world of civil society, embedded in the memory of the nineteenth century, finally came to an end. . . . The whole of Italian history up to that point has been a minor history of the twentieth century.”³¹ For Tronti, it was only at this moment that Italy joined the rest of the modernized world. “In forced concen-

tration of industrial labor in Italy in the 1950s and 1960s, the needs of break-neck capitalist development created an unprecedented crucible of historical experiences, daily needs, union dissatisfaction and political demands.” With this accelerated concentration of development, “the fact is that the whole history of the first half of the Twentieth Century converged on the figure of the mass worker.” As a result of the Italian economy’s accelerated transition, “the northern Italian workers’ struggles of the early 60s were closer to those of New Deal America than to those of the southern Italian workers of the 50s.”³² Belatedness was also a form of acceleration that concentrated and clarified the nature of neoliberal capitalism. Setting the tenor for cross-cultural exchanges and accelerating them, the Marshall Plan thus became the hidden frame of postwar European culture, a matrix that resonated far past the immediate postwar era and into the 1960s and after.³³ In Tronti’s formulation, “the old ruling class, the wartime generation, was exhausted. A new elite was pressing forward into the light; a new ruling class for the globalized capitalism that lay in the future.”³⁴

Raniero Panzieri, Mario Tronti, Romano Alquati, and later Antonio Negri (among others, all of whom were associated with the Operaio, or workerist movement) saw the PCI as having aligned itself with the nominally and shortsightedly nationalist interest of growth, in obedience to international capital and ultimately in the interest of American financial planning. Arguing that capital had reached a new state of total integration through recourse to extranationalist expansion, this group charged the PCI with having betrayed the interests of the workers it was intended to support by tipping instead in the direction of nationalist and state interests.³⁵ The legacy of Gramsci, the Italian revolutionary who was formative of the PCI and active up to the Third International of 1926, when he was imprisoned for purported disobedience of the Stalinist line that was then calcifying, is particularly symptomatic in this regard. The numerous, successive inventions and erasures of Gramsci’s own voice in the official party record have been extensively recounted in recent scholarship.³⁶ What stands out in these accounts of the PCI’s “philological stewardship” of Gramsci’s work is the neutralization of his commitments to class struggle through the filter of *nationalism* after World War II. “Specifically, the immediate post-World War II period provided the party with an opportunity to stake its claim as the main torchbearer of a national and democratic party that was being threatened by the revival of clerical obscurantism,

American interference, and so on. In this context, making Gramsci available for public consumption was a way for the PCI to broaden its appeal as a national (before it was partisan) and cultural (before it was political) force.”³⁷

This postwar manufacture of an “intellectual” rather than a revolutionary Gramsci, dissociated from his previous image as the sole rebellious voice at the moment of Stalinist consolidation within the Communist Party in Moscow, operates as an obverse of the way Italian artists were extricating themselves from the specifically nationalist legacy of futurism to embrace the international avant-garde once again in the form of the monochrome and the ready-made. Chapter 1 asks after this relationship. How did the relative disinterest in Italian modernism—futurism—and the passionate embrace of otherwise contradictory modernist and avant-gardist practices, some of which were most explicitly linked to the Bolshevik revolution of 1917, articulate the volatility of Italian politics in relation to the Cold War? How are the nationalisms espoused by the PCI to launder its conciliations to “American interests” negatively reflected, indeed rejected, by the decision on the part of Italian artists to eschew Italian identity? How does the trope of the monochrome act as a kind of transit station negotiating these fraught political vectors? How does the monochrome’s refusal of national culture ramify in and against a political horizon acquiescing to American financial colonization under the false sign of national reconstruction? Chapter 1 explores these problems, and the manipulation of Gramsci’s legacy as a parallel movement, through an exploration of the recovery of the monochrome on the one hand and the ready-made on the other, both of which were understood to be incommensurable with one another in their first historical appearance, and neither of which had any grounding in Italian modernism.

Returning to a leftist refusal of the PCI’s compromise of class struggle during the period of interest to this book, Tronti explicitly positioned himself against the PCI as it had been theorized by Lenin, characterizing the PCI after the war as an agent of betrayal of workers through its integration of them into a social democratization that supported “capital’s reformism.” “It is not a matter today of using the PCI in a revolutionary direction. It is far too late for this; the goal is again completely negative.”³⁸ Tronti’s negative orientation toward the PCI, in the interest of Italian workers on the one hand and the international communist movement on the other, has won for itself the comparison to a “Copernican revolution,” for its parallax forward and backward

strategy. Tronti saw clearly, in an inverse formulation that nonetheless got at the heart of the dialectic, that the PCI had come to support capital's effort to emancipate itself from workers in the "miracle" brought about by US dollars in the name of Italian reconstruction. But Tronti's position, moving back to move forward, uncannily suggests an odd yet familiar parallel to the way Italian artists looked to the Soviet model of abstraction for a way out of the morass of Italian painting in confrontation with American art. From the perspective of this book, the "Copernican revolution" rhymes with the "regressive" mobilization of prewar modernism as a form of cultural mediation serving to help international capital run smoothly.

"Economia del Carnefice"

Uncannily tracking parallel, *in advance*, in 1960, Manzoni drafted a text titled "Economia del Carnefice" (The economy of the executioner; see fig. 4.4), an exercise in the perils of double negation, in which the artist charged the PCI, and the communist state, as personified by Stalin, with an economy of butchery in direct mimetic reflection of the equally barbaric capitalist state, tacitly the United States. Both, he argued, shared a productivist machinery expropriating any "organic" nationalism.

From Work to Autonomy: A New Reading of Marx

Sabotage and the destruction of the worker's identity qua worker is one strand in the development of a new (negative) strategy for which Tronti called. This negativity in the interest of cutting the cooperative relation between worker and capital via the party came to crystallize in the Operaio (workerist movement). This movement, under the often mutually conflictual direction of Tronti, Panzieri, Alquati, Negri, and others, came to theorize a concept of autonomy forged *within* the confines determined by the heightened contradictions of the historical and geopolitical conjuncture, most notably the PCI's betrayal of workers. The revolutionary tactic then entailed the workers' finding ways of locating a self-interest within and against the forms of organization, against the party, historically understood to "represent" the worker. Breaking with representation was a striking and bold position and effectively overturned decades of the PCI holding to Gramsci and Togliatti's positions

as its “founding fathers” in 1921—Togliatti having been present at the 1926 Communist International in Moscow, which sealed the strange and oblique relationship between the Soviet headquarters and Italy.³⁹ This is to say that Tronti’s vision of workers’ autonomy provided a definition of “autonomy” that was far from the much-discussed and much-debated contentious word “autonomy” that we hear so often in aesthetics and art history. It is high time that autonomy come to be differentiated and dissociated from its monopolization by the stale, dead-end, endgame discourse of modernist aesthetics.

I attempt to delineate the term “autonomy” against the horizon of autonomous Marxism as it developed through the 1950s, having begun in 1949, when the exploitation of labor began to intensify, and profits began to soar, fueling the *miracolo italiano*. The year 1953 is commonly located as a moment when a new grade of machinery was introduced into most sectors, from the textile and metal industries to those most invested (with Marshall Plan dollars), the auto industry, centered in the North between Turin and Milan.⁴⁰ At this time, many began to question the PCI and the Italian Socialist Party and to attempt to find not only descriptions of the working class that would be historically accurate but also new ways to access its autochthonous tendency toward struggle and self-realization. This entailed a radically new conceptualization of labor. Contra the century-long mantra that understood communism to be “the dictatorship of the proletariat,” new readings of Marx in Italy and elsewhere were beginning to suggest that labor itself, work structured under capital—as the extraction of surplus value from bodies reticulated to the hour and measured by a wage—had to be abolished. The collecting of living labor in a commodity was itself already, as Panzieri, Tronti, and Alquati all theorized independently of each other and together, the source of exploitation and the uneven value of human life. This “theorization,” which often evolved out of recording the experience of contemporary struggle in relation to a rereading of Marx, came to sew the matrix for what would be workerism (Operaismo). It saw the proletariat as an agent of change at the level of its difficulty to assimilate, its inherent antagonism: “The roots of the workforce’s potential antagonism lay, therefore, in ‘that very production which is the keystone of the system.’ Particularly decisive had been the part played by the massive socialization and deskilling of labor, which had served to empty work of its intrinsic content as concrete labor, rendering things ‘the same for all.’”⁴¹ A passage by Marx to which Panzieri returned, citing it in his “Surplus Value and Planning: Notes on a Reading

of Capital” and mobilizing it against the Leninist emphasis on planning that was so fundamental to the party:

Their union into one single productive body and the establishment of a connection between their individual functions are matter foreign and *external* to them, are not their own act, but the act of capital that brings them and keeps together. Hence the connection existing between their various labours appears to them, ideally, in the shape of a pre-conceived plan of the capitalist, and practically in the shape of the powerful will of another, who subjects their activity to his aims. If, then, the control of the capitalist is *in substance* twofold by reason of the twofold nature of the process of production itself—which, on the one hand, is a social process for producing use-values, on the other a process for creating surplus-value—in *form* that control is *despotic*.⁴²

Concluding that “it is in the sphere of production that capital’s authority manifests itself directly; and it is by despotically imposing proportionality over the various functions of labor that the system’s equilibrium is maintained,”⁴³ Panzieri, and ultimately Operaio, thus reversed the role of labor, from site of emancipation to object to be abolished. Then, with a fresh layer of a decade’s insights into changing conditions, *Autonomia* emerged. While Marx had stated plainly enough that labor “was the whole secret to the conception,”⁴⁴ the shared revision around the problem of labor entailed a break from the party. “Autonomy” as such became a new term, although it would not be fully articulated until the midsixties. Autonomous Marxism in Italy had its origins in the workerist movement of the early 1960s, when a far left group was forging a break from the party, the union, and forms of representation in the interest of a direct and spontaneous expression of class struggle. The term “autonomy,” elaborated in a completely different register from the theorization of consciousness, much less aesthetics—as in the conceptual framework of the Frankfurt School, where the term plays a prominent role, or in libertarian and anarchist antistatist terms, which nonetheless also influenced it—and developed in an emergent arena of direct action and new forms of antagonistic praxis in an equally emergent class war, does betray some intellectual debt to the Frankfurt School, above all to Adorno and Georg Lukács. Panzieri, a crucial figure mediating the break between the party and emergent leftist positions in his contributions to *Quaderni Rossi*, was indebted to

the work of Adorno,⁴⁵ although he applied this intellectual debt to struggles within the party, in relation to organizing workers' interests directly. Panzieri ran many of Lukács's and Rosa Luxemburg's texts when at *Mondo Operaio* in 1957–1958. "Autonomy" imported into this context means an understanding of the worker autonomous both from the labor movement as an endpoint affirmative of labor, and from the machinations of capital. Panzieri's position can thus be understood as a revivification of Lukács's work in *History and Class Consciousness*. Indeed, Panzieri was republishing many of Lukács's writings in *Mondo Operaio* in the late fifties. The task here was to understand workers as bearers of a special commodity, labor power aka living capital, while simultaneously seeing them as an agent of history *independent* of any external apparatus tasked to speak for them, an external apparatus such as the party or union in keeping with Lenin's conception of a representative party steered by sympathetic intellectuals. "The existence of a new working class with needs and behaviors no longer commensurate with those of the traditional labor movement was a theme that ran through nearly all the major essays of *Quaderni Rossi*."⁴⁶ This reversal of the primacy between capital and labor, placing labor first and as agent, figured something of a paradigm shift in the left in Italy and in Europe in the fifties and sixties. "We too have worked with a concept that puts capitalist development first and workers second. This is a mistake. And now we have to turn the problem on its head. And start again from the beginning. And the beginning is the class struggle of the working class."⁴⁷ This beginning with the working class would nonetheless be weighed down with the burden of history, the revolutionary period in the USSR ever the reference point. The quoted passage appeared in a 1964 piece by Tronti titled "Lenin in England."

While Negri stated in 1979 that workerism was the result of an attempt to reply to the crisis of the labor movement,⁴⁸ which resulted from a "prodigious progress made by the Italian economic system, the progress the like of which has never been seen in the economic history of Italy or any other country,"⁴⁹ it was technically born of the failures of the union (the Italian Union of Labor) in 1962 to stand up for workers' interests. These failures provoked what came to be known as the Piazza Statuto riots, a series of violent clashes and riots that started when a round of wage bargaining at Fiat's Turin plant went sour. Workers were furious that the Italian Union of Labor had signed a separate deal with management. Although *Operaio* technically began in 1962, after this

botched deal resulted in wildcat strikes, initiating over a decade of strategies and tactics no longer in keeping with traditional class representation, Operaio's inception might be traced through a series of positions formulated a decade earlier by Panzieri, Tronti, and Alquati. These positions can be traced through a series of periodicals and journals ranging from *Mondo Operaio*—for which Panzieri, over eighteen months in 1957–1958, was writing fervently and consistently, in a series of texts that would prove to be the matrix of later full-blown Operaio “theory,” in which he repeatedly insisted that the struggle against capitalism must originate autochthonously in the working class, not in Leninist organs structuring the struggle from above—and through his journal *Quaderni Rossi*, cofounded with Tronti in 1961, and to the subsequent *Classe Operaia*, begun by Tronti and collaborators, whose first issue appeared in 1963. This book asks after the ways in which painterly processes ensconced in the historical moment, born of the same historical contradictions, manifested many of the same questions about autonomy and agency, in other forms.

In this historical moment and geopolitical context, inside and outside the perimeter of “art,” autonomy took its place in the framework of an increasingly totalizing capitalism in which the American cycle of accumulation came to colonize every aspect of everyday life. Here, the wage comes to be understood as a mystified form of socialization, which the worker must break by abolishing the wage form rather than working within it, bringing about a split with the old worker movement centered around unions and mediating organs.⁵⁰ Instead, sabotage in the workplace, or any tactic that would upset the worker-to-capital relation and interrupt its smooth and insidiously seamless operations, were embraced.⁵¹ Now, turning to Manzoni's series *Linea*, begun in 1959, when the artist sat at an industrial apparatus and enacted something that might be called drawing, in a habituated state between active and passive, a worker on an assembly line, while a roller fed the paper through. The length of the precut piece of scroll paper determined the extension of the final line, which got rolled up and set into a canister marked with its dimensions and its time of execution. How might Manzoni's line, produced as if on an assembly line, be understood here? As a mimicry of the total expropriation of consciousness by surplus extraction, or, folded into the autonomous space of art, a form of sabotage?

Political Autonomy; Aesthetic Entwinement

Here, autonomy was predicated on an understanding of capitalism as its own autonomous entity separate from the state, or from the ideology of nationalism, or of “society.” Tronti and others came to theorize capitalism as its own autonomous machinery that nonetheless expanded within and absorbed living labor, zombie-like; as an automaton that could be justified through recourse to any number of false ideologies, and thus required autonomous forms of interruption. In other words, the new usage of the term “autonomy” had nothing to do with idealist categories, much less transcendence, as it had in the aesthetic theory of the utopian left, evolving from the Kantian notion of autonomy.⁵²

For the ultraleft, Italy during the Marshall Plan years and into the sixties came to be understood as a laboratory for capitalism’s development into new markets as it elaborated itself in its rivalry with the Soviet Bloc. The response of a dissident Italian left’s rejection of both the PCI *and* the US presence prefigures the third position—new forms of autonomous resistance, associated first with Operaia and later with Autonomia. Tracking parallel, the assembly line came to be a signal of the way the drive to economic success, the putative *miracolo italiano*, was as much the problem as the miraculous solution. It signaled the failure of the party, of Italian communism, of state communism as such.

In sum, the rapid and belated passage to industrial modernity on the one hand and the precipitous passage to postindustrial economies on the other caused young dissidents in the PCI to grow disenchanted with its emphasis on progress and productivity and its allegiance to the Central Communist Party in Moscow.⁵³ These young dissidents felt betrayed by the PCI and its entrenchment in prewar discourses that emphasized productivism. They felt that the PCI had ultimately accommodated their enslavement to forces that it was unable to engage critically. As one Fiat worker said about the PCI, it emphasized “the need to save the economy . . . the need to work hard because Italy’s on her knees. . . . We’ve been bombarded by the Americans, but don’t worry because if we produce, if we work hard, we’ll be fine. So the PCI militants inside the factory set themselves the political task of producing to save the national economy and the workers were left without a party.”⁵⁴

Whether understood in relation to a wage or outside the reticulation of the wage, the “enemy” was American economic reconstruction—of Italy first and

of Europe at large, or the phenomenon known as the “Economic Miracle” under the auspices of the Marshall Plan. To date, art history—in keeping with standard accounts of the cultural development in Italy, accounts that double and affirm an imperial narrative—has doubly scotomized the specificity of Italian cultural responses to the world-historical event of the Marshall Plan, first by acquiescing to the dominance of American artistic practices, and second, by breaking that narrative only to note the significance of the May 1968 protests in France. What follows in this book disrupts that account.

Tracking parallel, Burri, Fontana, and Manzoni responded to this situation by forging antagonistic dialogues with postwar American painting and one another—rather than solely responding to a parent generation whose artistic and political problems and concepts were no longer either germane or appropriate.

How, then, after Fontana, Burri, and Manzoni, might we see culture as part of a matrix beneath political narrative, at once symptomatizing a roiling latency and prefiguring the emergence of the new-leftist anticapitalist mobilization and the critique of production conditions that accompanied it? These developments preceded and form an important initial development of the phenomena—political and artistic—whose origins are usually now attributed to “le soixante-huite.” Yet Tronti and others have nuanced the mythological stature of May ’68 somewhat, characterizing it as a cultural transition and a (merely) generational changing of the guard—a cultural struggle wherein the notion of an “alternate subjectivity” was born, rather than a movement of politicized class struggle. In Tronti’s words, the issue in Italy, as opposed to Paris, was not “anti-authoritarianism, but anti-capitalism.” “Operaismo was, at least in Italy, one of the founding premises of 1968,” he has claimed, “but at the same time, it made a substantive criticism of 1968 in advance.” As Tronti would have it, the logic of the student protests of Berkeley and Paris in 1968, which inaugurated much art understood as institutional critique, was merely the logic of a reformist movement that allowed a new administrative class to emerge, along with the new managerial economy that was characteristic of the new economy that was put in place by the restructuring of the 1970s, otherwise known by the term “globalization” and its attendant term “post-Fordism.”⁵⁵

Italy's "May 1968": The "Creeping May," 1969–1977

Although one wouldn't know it from Sylvère Lotringer and Christian Marazzi's ahistorical accounts, *Autonomia* entailed a critical incorporation *and* rejection of May '68 and the student movement in Paris.⁵⁶ Tronti and Panzieri, with whom Tronti began the journal *Quaderni Rossi* in 1961, tried to formulate a Marxist praxis suitable to the specificities of Italy throughout the fifties and sixties. This praxis revolved around direct forms of sabotage on the factory floor while also theorizing the conditions for the possibility of dismantling forms of valorization beyond the factory floor. By contrast, accounts of the Anni Piombi (Years of Lead) struggles that Negri provided, which are now dominant in Anglophone accounts,⁵⁷ placed emphasis on rethinking the potential political role of the unwaged. In other words, where Tronti placed emphasis on breaking chains that resulted in capitalist reification, Negri shifted the problem onto ontological questions about the political subject. Negri's approach found affinities with leftist thinking in Paris, and with the elaboration of street politics played out around the barricades of the French May. By contrast, Tronti understood May 1968 in Paris to have been a compromise, insofar as it placed less emphasis on a materialist analysis in leftist political struggle and looked to forms of cultural and ideological critique, in part due to a new analysis of the technical composition of barricades and battles on the street in which students played as large a role as workers.⁵⁸ By 1969, Tronti's hope was to radicalize the "potential" of the Paris barricades.

Nonetheless, *Autonomia*—as Negri and later others, such as Paolo Virno and Franco Berardi, presented it—incorporated elements of the Situationist International on the one hand and of the Frankfurt School on the other, combining workerist class critique with anarchist praxis. As a theoretical formation, *Autonomia* departed from Operaio's emphasis on the factory floor as a site of value production informing the *totality* of life under capital (and not just on the factory floor), extending to the waged and the unwaged alike. After the Fiat strike in 1962, Operaio expanded the notion of the working class to include the nonwaged, women, immigrants, and students. In short, the difference between Operaio and *Autonomia* revolved around the centrality of the wage as the point of reference for organization. While Tronti's position claimed the wage as a point of departure for the waged and unwaged alike, thereby opening the door to Italian feminists of the seventies who posited

women's unwaged labor as the matrix of all capitalist valorization, *Autonomia* saw the struggle as dispersed, as in the hands of a "multitude" unmoored from any central reference point (such as the wage). *Autonomia* both radicalized and betrayed this insight by moving away from the problem of production and circulation, emphasizing instead cultural politics as forms of power. Looking at the subproletariat, the unwaged, the students, and the growing immigrant population, *Autonomia* coined the term "multitude" to replace "class" as such. This in turn paved the way for the concept of the "multitude," which was later elaborated and formalized by the autonomist Negri and his American ally Hardt.

The Italian ultraleft's resistance to liberal democracy's acquiescence to capital *avant la lettre* finds its way into the discursive landscape of Anglophone theory in the aftermath of Giorgio Agamben's *Homo Sacer*, which appeared in 1998, and gained force with Hardt and Negri's *Empire* (2000) around the time of the Genoa antiglobalization protests. Finally, *Radical Thought in Italy: A Potential Politics*, coedited by Paolo Virno and Michael Hardt, began to circumscribe a more adequate history. As Alberto Toscano and Lorenzo Chiesi have recently pointed out, "Italian thought confronts us with a parallax view or disjunctive synthesis of national and conjunctural idiosyncrasies, on the one hand, and a series of potent theoretical abstractions that have remarkable capacity for 'travelling' on the other."⁵⁹

Map of Marshall Plan Modernism

Chapter 1 of this book explores the recrudescence of the monochrome as a form through which artists could formalize the collapse of the historical project—at once political and artistic—of revolutionary painting and the need to come to terms with artistic models arriving from the new center of hegemony. As the standard narrative of art history would have it, painting in the revolutionary context collapsed to make way for design on the one hand and political agitprop on the other.⁶⁰ If the monochrome drove painting to its end in 1921, why did it reappear so prominently on the transatlantic art scene after World War II? Postwar artists, as that same narrative about the neo-avant-garde referenced earlier (Burger, Buchloh, Foster) would have it, succumbed to capitalist dogma (disguised as antidogma) through passive repetition. Through this kind of passive repetition, postwar artists participated in

the collusion of aesthetics with capitalism, and neutralized its historical critical charge, replacing it with apolitical affirmation.⁶¹

Chapter 1 poses the following questions. What determined, then, the compelling return of the monochrome? What drove the post–World War II recovery of prewar models of experimental thinking with such conviction and passion if it was a mere passive repetition? Was this insistent reappearance just the function of restoration? Or of unrealized potential? Why, or to what degree, could this persistence—far from a passive, much less a neutral, affair—signal an autonomous trajectory?⁶² Why was this return so frequently conjugated with gestural violence? To what degree was this seeming “recovery” part of a conflictual agonism signaling another motivation, and in turn suggesting an unrecognized relationship of the art work to the economic and social-political field?

During the rise of changing social movements such as Operaismo and a proliferation of groups splintering away from the PCI in response to changes in the modes of production and the distribution of capital, to what extent did cultural models mediate those changes? This book traces the complexity of that mediation. In the limited context of the history of painting, what can explain the sudden emergence and just as swift disappearance of violence, and why was this formal strategy specific to Italy? How is abstract painting related to the vanishing conditions of possibility of older forms of social and political mediation, and how does it augur new tactics of sabotage and resistance? Or rather, how could it be understood not to? How could the conditions of “recovery” and “reconstruction,” of capital’s triumph in 1949, not have motivated a new kind of investigation into the status of painting as a medium, one different from the analytical work of revolutionary painting from 1912 through the 1920s, when the horizon appeared utterly open to a utopian communism at best and a communist utopia at least? Finally, how did the monochrome signal a kind of (aesthetic) commons in a devastated wasteland of cultural possibility?

Chapter 2 considers Lucio Fontana’s at once glamorous and brutal engagement with the medium, signaling a form of expenditure, an accursed share, in response to the atomic bomb, situating the atomic bomb as an irrecoverable crisis in world-historical terms. To what extent does the painterly surface determine the gesture in ways unexplored by any artist before or after Fontana? Fontana’s act volatilizes the ground; it literally rises up under the impact of a physically enacted pressure. Its texture and tenacity respond to the mark-making tool to suddenly assume value as nonfungible, nonabstractable mat-

ter. To what extent does this tactical cut into the plenum of the surface look ahead to the way Fontana mobilized the logic of mediation introduced by television to foreground the problem of materiality in a moment of acceleration of real abstraction, articulated by the television on the one hand and the rapidly hegemonic idiom associated with Pollock on the other? Fontana's cut marks a dialectical response to Pollock and to the problem of "Americanization." I would like to take a step back and simply ask how Fontana's cut functions, how it is elaborated, and what it begins to do in response to the becoming hegemonic of American high culture. Chapter 2 addresses these problems through a close reading of Fontana's eccentric gesture, made alongside the *Television Manifesto of 1953* and his other textual production against the backdrop of the *miracolo italiano* centered in Milan.

Chapter 3 explores Alberto Burri's use of unorthodox materials, notably plastic, which was produced in northern Italian factories and was suddenly ubiquitous during the reconstruction, to ask the following questions. How does the artist's choice of material simultaneously resist the expressionism and self-determination of Pollock on the one hand and the "aesthetics of indifference," characteristic of Rauschenberg's generation, with which Burri would have been familiar given his exposure to that practice, on the other? Plastic comes to be associated with the Marshall Plan in a popular cultural imaginary. It becomes the focal point of cinematic articulations of the Marshall Plan, such as Antonioni's *Red Desert*, and of exhibitions for export meant to "represent" the national miracle, such as *The New Domestic Landscape* at the Museum of Modern Art in 1972, which focused on northern Italian design. Chapter 3 thus begins with an exegesis of *Red Plastic* (1963), which crystallizes historical change through material practice imminent to artistic problems of modernist "abstraction." I ask after the specificities of Burri's practice of burning and exploding a toxic material, and its ramifications in the geopolitical and historical context of Marshall Plan Italy, through a comparison with Rauschenberg's magisterial *Factum I* and *Factum II*. I attempt to argue that *Factum I* and *Factum II* dialectically articulate the logic, and specific tenor, of postwar capitalism's equivalence and interchangeability within a structure of verticalization and integration. In other words, if the work challenges aspects of authorial control, opening onto a liberatory model of mark making that dismantles and horizontalizes easel painting at the level of making, it does so in a way that responds to new forms of centralized integration while preserving a logic of equivalence all the more.

Economists have argued that what explains American ascendancy in the immediate postwar era is, in part, new organizational structures that fall loosely under a new “principle of substitution.”⁶³ As Rauschenberg’s most consequential works, *Factum I* and *Factum II* draw to the surface the relationship between iterability and equivalence, the absorption of singularity in accelerated market production, they begin to suggest something of the principle of substitution that appears “free” yet demands a second order of organization through the new forms of competition brought to bear by “freedom.”⁶⁴ Seemingly identical, the numbers added to the titles set *Factum I* and *Factum II* into a misleading relationship of model and copy by making the second a mimic of the first, suggesting a sequential order, when in fact Rauschenberg worked on both simultaneously throughout 1957. Far too clever to submit to the model of authenticity around which art had continued to revolve, despite many avant-garde challenges to those classical tenets, the works undermine the notion of both originality and its failure. While the term “factum” simply denotes “fact,” it also connotes the notion of a memorial. Rauschenberg’s memorial recognizes conditions of enforced obsolescence that make original or authentic expression impossible. Yet, I ask, to what degree does *Factum I* and *Factum II*, far from forging an idiom that would push back against this new condition, affirm if not embrace it as an accretion of empirical facts? To what extent does this imploded authorship emphasize the drift toward the totality of commodity objecthood and its attendant form of subjective apperception dialectically founded on and foundational to competition: anomie? This line of inquiry is anchored in the fact that Rauschenberg’s studio was just steps away from Burri’s on the Spanish Steps in Rome and that the two were exposed to one another’s work enough to motivate the comparative question of how each deployed materials and forms dialogically, consciously or otherwise—although I do ask after vectors of influence in the chapter. How does Burri’s toxic material and gestural violence ramify within and against this emergent dialogue, against the backdrop of the proliferating production of plastic?

Chapter 4 closely reads the work of Piero Manzoni, most explicitly to problematize the issue of production in relation to an increasingly dictatorial international art market on the one hand and a concomitant crisis between labor and capital on the other, a contradiction specific to Italy in the sixties yet responsive to the emergence of pop art, specifically Andy Warhol’s idiom. Likewise, Piero Manzoni’s *Merda d’artista* (*Artist’s Shit*; 1961), offered an analy-

sis of the dialectics of art in the frenzied economy of reconstruction Milan: *Merda d'artista* is precisely that which contemporary artists make: “stuff” whose value emerges only from the abstractions on its label, or from the artist’s proper name as brand. Manzoni’s own physical refuse is held up as aesthetic totem (in an edition of ninety). I triangulate Manzoni’s work with that of Johns, with whom Manzoni was familiar, owing to the Johns’s reception at the Galleria Naviglio, and about whom Manzoni wrote with vivid interest in his magazine *Azimuth*. Manzoni never presented “Economia del Carnefice” as a manifesto or among the many single-authored and collaborative texts to which his signature is affixed. This “underground” essay, which I found in the archives in 2002, stands as an accurate symptom of Milan and northern Italy by the time he wrote it in 1960. By the late 1950s, the “Economic Miracle” had achieved the reformatting of everyday life.⁶⁵ This accomplishment on the part of capital saw its counterpart in increasingly militant workers’ movements. As historian Paul Ginsborg points out in his well-known account of Italy from the immediate aftermath of World War II through the fifties and sixties,

There were many reasons for the new militancy in Northern factories. . . . Conditions of near full employment in the North gave workers a self-confidence they had lacked since the mid 1940s. Secondly, technological changes of the Economic Miracle had transformed the organization of work in the northern factories. In the 1960s mass production took the form of mechanical repetitive work executed at high speed with few breaks throughout a very long working day. The operaio reacted strongly against these conditions. As their confidence grew, they demanded changes in the work rhythms and pay and eventually greater control of the work process as a means of combating alienation.⁶⁶

Part of the interest of Manzoni’s oeuvre is the tragic quality of his timing. His work operates as a forensic device through which to understand the transitions occurring in the capital-to-labor relationship at a time when workers not only increasingly came to comprehend the betrayal of labor by the party and the need for autonomous forms of resistance, but when capital began to retaliate, first by recourse to the support of the state in whose interest it was for capital to run efficiently, and later by finding cheaper labor elsewhere. Manzoni’s work carves out a dialectical relation to the historical moment. His work is balanced along a fine line between reflection and a form of sabotage within

a false understanding of art as autonomous. If anything, his work is a clear example of the degree to which aesthetic form becomes the sedimentation of “the last instance,” or changes in the economic foundation of value production and circulation. Manzoni’s attention to the remaining gap between artwork and labor through the exploration of task performance, skill, and agency symptomatized the emergent question of worker autonomy, of labor as an autonomous question, against party, union, and program; dialectically, it also demonstrated the degree to which art simply became another thing in the total management of everyday life, losing what thin margin of critical vantage it had historically sought to maintain.

In 1960, Manzoni translated the residual trace of his own corporeal presence in an untitled series of thumbprints on paper and on eggs. Here, the thumbprint functions as a substitute for the authorial gesture or author’s mark, yet it refers to two contradictory understandings of that subject’s presence. On the one hand, as indexical trace of the artist’s body, the print points to a unique identity. On the other hand Manzoni presents the enlarged thumbprints in multiply run lithographs. Monumentalized, front and center, they function as a portrait of the subject. At the same time, they are the objectified residues of the maker’s purely externalized body—a body located through forensics posited as bearer of the psychological depth expected of “portraiture.” The thumbprints demonstrate the problematic introduced by the Duchampian readymade in 1915, positing the print as an original and originary yet automatic site of the mark-making process. Each print captures the body in a purely reified mark articulating the extraction of surplus value, the vanishing point of the laboring body in the production of value in a system of general equivalence. This imprint signals, of course, the process of making itself, that which is occluded in the commodity status of an object, negatively, or dialectically, articulating surplus value as the evanescent life of the maker expressed in his or her work, over which she or he may have no possession, binding together an otherwise heterogeneous range of objects, produced artisanally and industrially.

Chapter 4 thus asks after the logic of Manzoni’s production, noting the dialectical tension that runs throughout. In his series *Linea* (1959–1961), hidden lines dramatize the tension between material concretion and ascetic withdrawal of mark making. It radicalizes Fontana’s gesture of simultaneously offering and withholding process and its trace. Does Manzoni demonstrate immiseration as the very structural condition of the possibility of making

art in the mid-twentieth century in a financial colony of capital? Or does his work take its place as just another Dada gesture? How might this tension be understood in relation to practices crossing the Atlantic, notably Andy Warhol's *Campbell's Soup* cans, uncannily done after Manzoni's literally "canned" works, in 1962. How do these works forge a conversation between geopolitical sites about new trajectories of international exchange made possible by Marshall Plan-era capital, trajectories that deracinated and rearticulated the very notion of "context" so dear to social art history?

The conclusion investigates the generation of art making after Manzoni's death in 1963, the generation known as *Arte Povera*, which explicitly engaged with the student element that joined forces in support of the workers' strikes during the "creeping May" of 1967–1977. Among Italian artists of the post-WWII period, some of the figures associated with *Arte Povera*, such as Mario Merz, are notable for the way in which they took the legacy of Gramsci and the "organic" intellectual to be a central concern of cultural production. I trace this perceived debt to Gramsci (or the myth of Gramsci, a distinction I discuss), beginning with the recrudescence of the trope of the organic in Manzoni and his comrades' (Guido Biasi, Mario Colucci, Ettore Sordini, and Angelo Verga) manifesto "For an Organic Painting." Tracing its continued resonance in the work of Mario Merz, whom I discuss in chapter 1, I conclude the discussion of "the organic" as a trope specific to Italy with a reading of Pino Pascali and Jannis Kounellis's oeuvres. How might we understand the sudden fascination with the thematics of "organicism," a misreading of Gramsci, other than as a situated retort to American aesthetic practices, notably minimalism? The conclusion poses these questions.

At the same time, the creeping May and its violent repression of artists, writers (Nanni Balestrini, Toni Negri), and students produced another kind of "picture" of protest, which I organize around an exploration of Pino Pascali's *Canone Bella Ciao*, a figurative sculpture made in protest of American involvement in the Vietnam War, and by extension American Imperial power. Pascali's harassment and death at the hands of Roman police in 1968 augurs in an uncanny way the murders and arrests of the Red Brigades in the 1970s. My analysis of Pascali will allow me to link the problem set elaborated in this book to contemporary political struggles and the current economic crisis. Reading Pascali alongside Negri, and also alongside Balestrini's textual description of antistate and anticapitalist struggle, I will return to the problem of autonomy,

which has come to be entwined in the antiglobalization movement associated with the thesis of *Empire*. Having done so, I turn to the social, political, and economic history of postwar Italy. I thus situate my narrative in a genealogy of thinking currently emerging in the Anglophone world in which Italy is cast as a test site for larger shifts in the internal dynamics of capitalism. The conclusion asks after the reverberations in the present of the most radical development of the moment, Italian feminism's analysis of the hidden condition for the possibility of value production in the obfuscated realm of social reproduction. This paradigm shift in the understanding of the site of revolutionary agency folded negatively beneath visibility and representation informs a reformulation of the general strike. The general strike is, as I discuss, tracing it through contemporary cultural production, most insistently in the work of Claire Fontaine, who has been exploring it over the last decade, the limit of our present.

How and why did the period spanning the Bretton Woods plan generate striking form in the rarified space of art practice? How did the cyclical, contradictory relationships between art and capital take on a singular configuration in the equally contradictory political and economic field caught between the global and local, empire and autochthony? How did these polarizations and charges enable formal tactics unique to Italy at this time?

This book, if it is to meet its horizon of intention, reopens questions of analytical and interpretive method to pose a way out of the usual impasse between formalist autonomy on the one hand and social reflective history on the other. It asks how culture operates in relation to the real movement of history, as symptom or as arena for struggle marking the passage from symbolic to real, and from real to symbolic. Moving out in concentric circles, or ellipses, from the concrete to the abstract, the particular to the general, or from history to philosophy: What is the relationship between art, capital, and statecraft at the moment of the apotheosis of a hegemon? What is the relationship between form and history? Between art and time? Between art and violence? Walter Benjamin's assertion that the history of civilization is already the history of barbarism rings anew through Bataille's analysis of expenditure as warfare by other means during eras of accumulation crises. It is my hope that this book reopens those questions, basic to the Enlightenment discourse from which the discipline of art history issues, but from a historical materialist stance germane to the conflictual historical conjuncture under analysis.