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DOCUMENTING THE ART WORK-FACTORY: BLACKOUT AND THE (POST) INDUSTRIAL ARCHIVE

In 1980, when post-industrial perspectives became tangible, the poet and artist Nanni Balestrini published Blackout.¹ The poem is built around four dictionary entries, each describing the notion of "blackout" in terms of memory loss, power failure, conclusion, forms of censorship or concealment. The works, images and documents collected by Balestrini tell the sense of an ending, the melancholy after the riots and the need to track unstable counter-chronicles of minor voices and micro-stories grown on the edges of most visible events. Texts and images are juxtaposed to retrace stories of disobedience and revolt: the key of the poem is a visual and textual photomontage of archival materials, photographs and voices associated according to a fine combinatory principle.

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Reading Olivetti's history to identify his deliberate or indirect collaborations with contemporary artistic practices implies an archiving process, much close to the poetic principle found in Blackout. The documents are organized in a quilt of archival materials activated by transdisciplinary research and subjective memories. Official and monographic sources collected in the institutional archives cross oral accounts of workers and memories from industrial history archives, as well as collections of cultural or personal institutions. The attempt to reconstruct the history of the relationship between Olivetti and the visual arts appeared immediately and paradoxically complicated given the hypervisibility of its cultural history. The presence of artists in advertising departments, patronage practices and cultural promotion, or even in the purchase of art works is widely documented in Olivetti's corporate history. In Guido Piovene's Journey to Italy (1957) the idea emerges that, because of its aesthetic and educational programs for workers, Olivetti was an "art work-factory", not only for the quality of the architecture and pieces that furnished the actual workplace, but also for its philosophy of an "art center" capable of stimulating the cultural production².

In June 1965, Italo Calvino, who was working at the time for the Einaudi publishing house, had talked about the Sixties as the decade in which "each of Olivetti's numerous literate officials (...) wrote a novel in which Olivetti became a mysterious and allegorical company"³. And it is a fact that the numerous writing poets, artists and intellectuals employed in the Olivetti factories had become an annex to both an official corporate culture, elaborated in the context of communication policies and



corporate patronage, and a specific post-Bauhaus atmosphere, where the “art work-factory” empowered the proposals of Olivetti’s corporate managers. In the folds of Olivetti’s history, however, there are traces of a potentially more extensive and less elitist vision of cultural production; for example, the choice to translate Simone Weil’s Workers’ Condition, published with the collaboration of Franco Fortini by the Olivetti owned publishing house Edizioni di Comunità⁴. The book includes a letter that the French philosopher addressed to Renault workers in 1936, inviting them to collaborate with Entre Nous magazine, to give their evidence on one hand, but to stimulate on the other, “avant la lettre”, an aesthetic reflection.

The objection to Renato Guttuso’s Boogie Woogie mural raised by the workers of the Olivetti Scarmagno plant constitutes a second moment of openness to the aesthetic response of the workers. In a letter sent out in August, the engineer Bruno Piazza complained about the “unjustified” presence of the “mural Boogie Woogie by the artist Guttuso [sic]” in the factory’s canteen⁵. The letter addressed to Renzo Zorzi, then in charge of Olivetti’s cultural activities, evoked the dangers to which the monumental fresco would have been exposed due to its position near the warehouse entrance, and its general state of neglect: “I suggest that you [Zorzi] examine the possibility of placing the painting in some area where it has meaning (obviously outside of Scarmagno)”. The “obviously” stated by Mr. Piazza revealed the perception of a dissonance between the fresco and the industrial context of the factories in Scarmagno. The letter did not clarify whether the judgment was an expression of a personal aesthetic taste or the utterance of a feeling shared with other Olivetti collaborators. Certainly, the fact that in 1979 the fresco and its location were considered meaningless was a direct consequence of the suspension of the spatial and historical site-specificity of the mural, conceived in 1946 for the Olivetti showroom in Via del Tritone in Rome and relocated twenty years later a few kilometers from Ivrea.

A post-war tribute to the popular dances of the new working class, Guttuso’s Boogie Woogie represented an incursion of socialist realism into the rationalist architecture conceived by Ugo Sissa in 1943. Covering an area of 8 square meters, the fresco occupied two of the three floors of the store, like a side rib. The mass of moving bodies was crossed by a metal and stone staircase that connected the underground warehouse with the exhibition space open on the street, and the mezzanine used for typing courses. The base of the fresco appeared as a collage of dancing gestures framed by a grid of cubic modules on which rested a row of Studio 42 typewriters. The sound of the street and of the keystrokes from the typing courses did contribute to materialize what the architectural theorist Manfredo Tafuri called the “architectural surrealism” of the Olivetti store⁶.

Boogie Woogie had arrived in Scarmagno on an un-



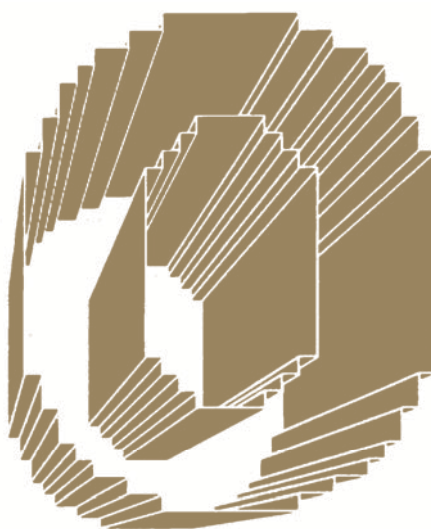
specified date in 1967, transported by a truck from Rome due to the closure of the shop in Via del Tritone after an arson. The placement of the mural in an industrial canteen fell under the tried-and-tested Olivetti vision. There were those who, like the magazine Notizie di Fabbrica in April 1967, were inclined to consider that the "social environment" of the industrial canteen could well accommodate this "document of an era", which depicted "a crowd of men and women, full of color, movement, life". Guttuso himself was in favour of the relocation, and recalled in a statement in July 1967 his meeting with "the unforgettable friend Adriano" when they discussed the possibility of decorating the Via del Tritone store with a mural painting'. Opened in 1964, the Scarmagno industrial complex stood about twenty kilometers from Ivrea and was a modular structure of buildings separated from the village by the highway. By then, not only the notion of architecture had changed, but also the scope of the factory environment as a cultural project devised by Adriano Olivetti, the same within which the commission of Guttuso's fresco had matured. And it had been a deeply symbolic commission considered, as Renzo Zorzi suggests, that Boogie Woogie is the only artistic work "directly" committed by Adriano Olivetti, perhaps advised by Musatti or Bruno Zevi or Quaroni.

Hence, the relocation of the mural was not a purely aesthetic and social act, since it took place under the sign of a deeply transformed workplace and a different political, industrial and cultural environment. On June 28th, 1967 IL tasto, published a letter sent from the "comrade" and painter Renato Guttuso. In a message entitled "Art and workers", the artist responded to the "substantial and inexplicable hostility" directed towards him, an artist who had been tied to the workers "by ideological convictions and by thirty years of faithful revolutionary militia". The letter highlighted the fact that his commitment was to be sought in the meaning that the artist put into a work, since "the function of art, even in a modest work like mine, is always indirect. Art is not "consumed" only by those who commission it, but by everyone; especially by those to whom it is targeted, in the ambition of the artist". Going back to the costs of the painting, Guttuso specified that the fresco had not cost 80 million lire, as suggested by the CISL press, but 80.000 lire; this notwithstanding, the workers should have not been denied their working gloves and could count on his solidarity.

The editorial published by IL Tasto in response to Guttuso specified that "in the conditions of our society, even in the most advanced companies such as Olivetti, the possibility (for workers) to benefit from artistic expression is very limited (...) since society denies both the level of preparation and the objective conditions necessary to actually enjoy it". It is in that context, it was argued, that often, "against the artist's will, the cultural value disappears and the ex-



ternal advertising value remains." Whether, as the last lines of *Il Tasto* hoped, Guttuso would have remained at their side in the battle for an art that was not "for the workers" but became "a weapon of their struggle" is not known.



**Rielaborazione del
manifesto pubblicitario
P 6066 personal
minicomputer Olivetti
Rossi Camillo, 1980**

Note

- 1 – Nanni Balestrini, "Le avventure complete della signorina Richmond e Blackout", Roma: DeriveApprodi, 2017.
- 2 – Guido Piovene, "Viaggio in Italia", Milano: Mondadori, 1957, p. 166.
- 3 – Giuseppe Lupo, "La letteratura al tempo di Adriano Olivetti", Roma: Edizioni di Comunità, p. 135.
- 4 – Simone Weil, "La condizione operaia", Milano: Edizioni di Comunità, 1952.
- 5 – Document n. 73, 1979/08/24, Associazione Archivio Storico Olivetti, Ivrea.
- 6 – Manfredo Tafuri, "Storia dell'architettura italiana, 1944-85", Torino: Einaudi, 1986, p. 38.
- 7 – The factory newspapers have been consulted at the Olivetti Historical Archive Association, Ivrea.