

Breath is a Sculpture is a solo exhibition by Arte Povera artist, Giuseppe Penone. The works on display revolve around the relation between humans and nature, focusing on the body, as well as on breath, in Italian *soffio*, the most elemental proof to life's continuity. The exhibition presents drawings, sculptures, photographs, installations, as well as documentation that renders his artistic process visible.

What is Arte Povera?

Arte Povera is an artistic movement that developed between 1967 -1971, re-figuring Italy with prominence on the map of global art for the first time since the Futurist movement during World War One. The Italian art historian, curator, and critic Germano Celant named the movement during a period of political upheavals in the late sixties. He was inspired by the title of Polish, experimental theatre director Jerzy Grotowski's seminal essay «Towards a Poor Theatre» (1965). Celant aspired to the emergence of an experimental and politically engaged, Italian art movement that challenges the authority of the gallery space and the tradition of the art object. He reunited 12 artists including Giuseppe Penone, Giovanni Anselmo, and Michelangelo Pistoletto. These artists were inclined to seek simple materials and natural elements to produce, in large part, ephemeral, enigmatic, and poetic works that deal with time, nature, language, and space.



Michelangelo Pistoletto, *Cubic Meter of Infinity*, 1966

Michelangelo Pistoletto's *Cubic Meter of Infinity* (1966) is a sculpture that consists of six mirrors facing inwards, bound together with just a string so as to form a cube. Here we are faced with a dilemma: if light were to enter, it would bounce off of the mirrors endlessly and in all directions. But a paradox lies therein: how can light enter without breaking the perfectly sealed cube? Pistoletto created an enigmatic work that leads the viewer to imagine infinite light. The poetry of it all lies in the impossible plenitude awaiting in the darkness.



Giovanni Anselmo, *Untitled, Structure that Eats*, 1968

Another poetic work is **Giovanni Anselmo's** *Untitled, Structure that Eats*. A fresh lettuce is squeezed between two differently sized blocks of black granite. A copper wire embraces the whole. What happens when the lettuce begins to wilt a few days later? What are some of the questions raised in this work?

i "Towards a Poor Theatre"

Jerzy Grotowski, published in 1965 in the monthly *Odra* the essay "Towards a Poor Theatre" in which he describes the conditions that theater faced after the invention of cinema. For those familiar with the history of art in the nineteenth century, these are conditions that are not too far from those faced by painting with the invention of photography. Painting survived because artists radically changed its formal treatment and visual properties; they took painting to new grounds and freed it from the shackles of naturalism. They felt that naturalism had its place in the realm of photography. Similarly, the invention of cinema raised fundamental questions about the nature of theatre and its essence. How could theatre survive after the invention of cinema? He reasoned that in order to survive, theatre, like painting, had to re-model its form in such a way as to reflect its essence. It was this essence that would ensure the survival of theatre. But what is this essence, that which could not be found in cinema? Grotowski found it to be in the **meeting between actor and spectator**. This direct meeting (absence of a screen) is what makes the difference between theater and cinema. The immediacy of this contact is what makes theater unique, and it is only through it, that theater survives.

Giuseppe Penone

Many believe that Arte Povera is less about an intellectual activity and more about the senses. For the most part, the Arte Povera artist is engulfed in perceiving, feeling, working, and breathing. It is a return to being a human, a feeling subject that is in touch with the environment. The Œuvre of Giuseppe Penone crystallizes this idea. Unlike many conceptual artists working on the international art scene, Penone, the youngest of the group, respected the tradition of sculpture, employing it poetically to bring together art, the body, and nature, and to reflect on the essence of life in universal terms. That is why he sees many of his works as sculptures, even when they could easily be considered as performances or land art projects.

The title of the show, ***Breath Is a Sculpture***, provides the rationale for much of Penone's works. A breath emitted in the air is a physical, yet invisible trace of being. The artist seeks to render this trace visible first in *Soffi* (1975), presented in the show, a series of 19 black and white photographs of clouds of dust, resembling "breaths", hovering in a forest. Shortly after, Penone started experimenting with three-dimensional sculptures of breaths, and performances like *Soffio di foglie* (1979). First performed in 1979, Penone lies face downward on a pile of myrtle leaves and breathes into them, leaving a traces of his body and one of his breath.



Photograph from the series *Soffi*, 1975



Soffio di foglie, 1979

Alpi Marittime

Much of Penone's Œuvre is concerned with traces, and that, ever since he began his artistic trajectory with *Alpi Marittime*. While Italians of his age were protesting in the streets in 1968, Penone, the youngest of the group, went to the woods, perhaps heeding Pier Paolo Pasolini's call for a return to a lost agrarian society as curator Nicholas Cullinan suggests, to produce his earliest work, *Alpi Marittime* (1968). While *Alpi Marittime* is not presented in this show, it remains a fundamental work in Penone's Œuvre, and a few lines are dedicated to explain it.

Alpi Marittime is a widely known series of six action-performances conceived and executed over five days in December 1968 before a professional photographer. In these early action-performances, Penone measured and revealed the mass of his own body on natural surfaces, and recorded the intervention of his body on nature. The documentary images show how Penone tried to merge with nature, in one instance becoming one with a tree. In *Continuerà a crescere tranne che in quel punto* (It Will Continue to Grow Up to This Point), one of these action-performances, he carved into a tree and placed there a bronze cast of his hand. Years later, x-ray scans show how the tree adapted to the presence of "his" hand, continuing to grow—but, around it. **What is the role of this bronze sculpture? Why did he use bronze as a medium?**

Speaking of *Continuerà a crescere tranne che in quel punto*, **Frederic Paul**, art historian, writes the following: "In the interaction of humans with nature, Penone pretends they have a relationship of equality. This, as an ambition, is rather stupid, because the temporality of man cannot be compared with that of a tree." A tree outlives any human, if the latter does not cut it. Then he continues, "The hand had to become a sculpture in order to adapt to the temporality of the tree."



Photographs that document *Continuerà a crescere tranne che in quel punto*, 1968 -85

Penone devised this artistic strategy in order to reverse the inherent, age-old power dynamic between humans and nature. He had to «trick» nature, so to speak, and introduce an inorganic matter that replaces and takes the shape of his hand.

Reflect on Penone's artistic gesture. What do you think about the way the tree responded? Ultimately, who's more powerful, Penone or the tree, humans or nature?

Why is it said that Penone blurred the lined between sculpture, performance, and land art in *Alpi Marittime*?

i "Land Art"

Land Art is an art movement that began in the late sixties in the United States, and spread to the rest of the world shortly after. As the name suggests, art making and the landscape are inextricably linked. Artists intervened in the landscape using organic and inorganic materials. The movement emerged as a reaction to the commercialization of art and the confines of the gallery space. Land artists moved their practices out to nature, producing site-specific temporary or permanent sculptures and installations. Robert Smithson is a primary figure in this movement; then there are artists like Ana Mendieta, Nancy Holt, Christo, and Richard Long.



Rovesciare i propri occhi, 1970

Rovesciare i Propri Occhi

Rovesciare i propri occhi (1970) is Penone's most famous performance preserved in the form of a slideshow. The short sequence of slides depicts the artist standing in a tree-lined avenue near Garessio, the small town where he was born. As the sequence progresses, a close-up of his face reveals the custom-made, mirrored contact lenses he is wearing.

If Penone has effectively "blinded" himself, then how is he relating to the space around him? From where is he deriving knowledge? What does the title of the work suggest? How does this work relate to the haptic perception?

Since September 1970 Penone has worn reflecting contact lenses on more than one occasion, particularly in urban settings. The photographs that were taken are considered different versions of the photographic series *Rovesciare i propri occhi*.

Which sense do you rely on the most to understand a new environment? Can you think why?

i "Haptic Perception"

Haptic perception refers to the way a person can gain information about his or her environment through the tactile dimension. It involves skin sensors and receptors in other parts of the body like muscles, which recognize sensations. These work together to send signals to the brain, which interprets them to form a representation of the environment for the person to understand. Several artists work through the haptic perception, including Dennis Oppenheim, Vito Acconci, and Valie Export.

Respirare l'ombra

Respirare l'ombra (2000-2014) is an installation that occupies a room, consisting of laurel leaves stacked in wire cages. As you enter the space, you are seduced by a sensual phenomenon, a strong smell emanating from the leaves, and filling the rest of the space. Penone literally invites the viewer to "breathe" in the shadow, and experience the space not with the eyes, but this time by breathing and engaging his sense of smell.

How do you explain the title of the work? Does anything strike you about the setup of this work?



Respirare l'ombra, 2000- 2014

i "Demystifying Vision"

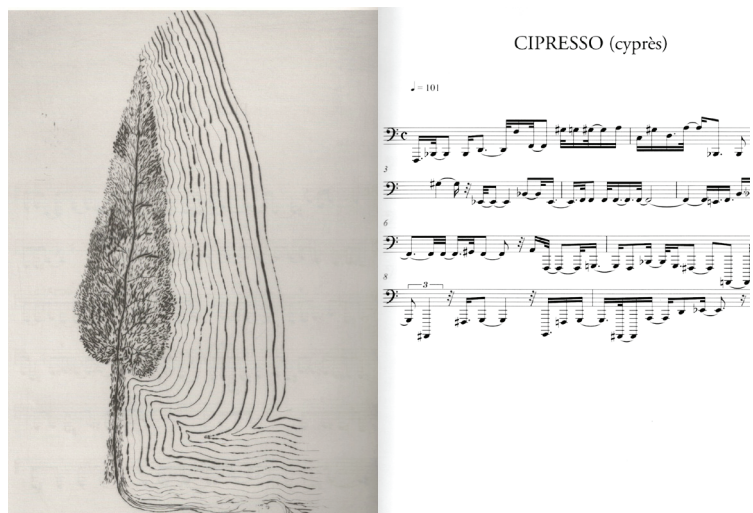
With the emergence of the different philosophies of knowledge in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, vision acquired a very prominent role, as it was believed to be objective. The sense of smell was deemed sensual and connected with a more primitive state of being, one that is unbecoming for 'modern man.' To be modern meant to increasingly rely on what was believed to be factual, vision, to observe, analyze, and make sense of the world. A while later, the myth of objectivity was shattered when it became clear that vision is subjective, as it is based on different people's perceptions.

Transcription Musicale de la Structure des Arbres

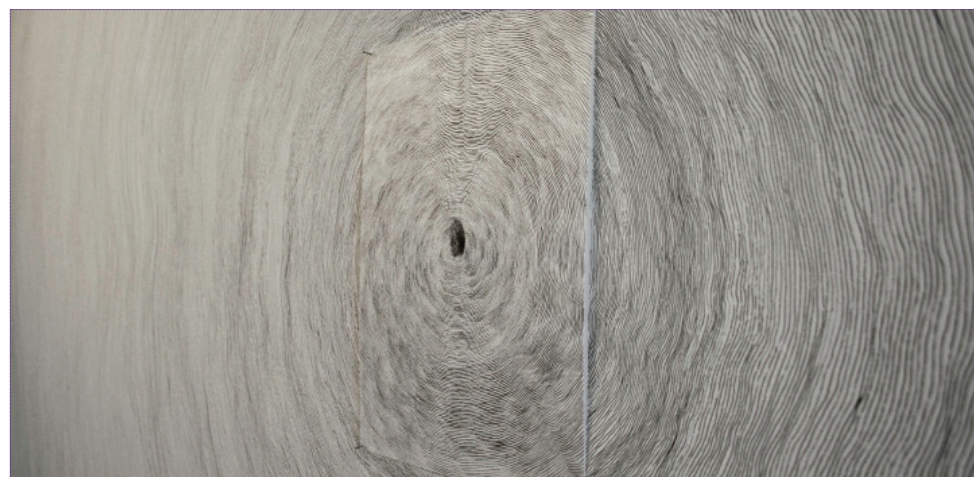
Penone again challenges sight as the primary sense to derive knowledge in ***Transcription musicale de la structure des arbres***. (2011) It is an experimental project in which he recorded the way sound travels in specific trees. In other words, Penone was curious about the tree as a musical instrument.

Penone led this experiment in Ardèche (France). There he chose 14 trees of various kinds, including cypress, boxwood, and mulberry, to figure out the sonic differences between them. His experiment consisted of introducing a sound into the trunk — by hitting, scratching, or tapping with his fingers on its surface — and recording the sound as it travels from the trunk to the tip of the branches before it is released in the air. With the help of sound artists, advanced equipment and software, he was able to expand the sound and identify the notes that the trees emit with each movement. Here Penone demonstrates that if we were to rely on sight alone much of knowledge would be left undiscovered.

In what way is this work similar to *Rovesciare i propri occhi*?



Transcription musicale de la structure des arbres (2011)



Propagazione (1994-2014)

Propagazione

Since 1994, Penone has been producing and showing ***Propagazione***, a site-specific wall drawing, at different exhibition venues. The artist dips his finger in typographic ink, stamps his thumb (or other fingers in other versions) in the centre of a parchment, places the later on a wall, and continues the propagation of his fingerprint over the canvas and onto the surface of the wall. With the help of an assistant, Penone spends several days tracing lines that are equidistant to those of his fingerprint, using graphite (pencil), a magnifying glass, and a ladder.

The work bares the idea that fingertips have a design that is universal, like the rings of a tree (visible in another work, *Nel Legno*), the travelling of sound, waves, or the propagations created when a finger touches water. This work also speaks to the fingerprints we leave behind everywhere we go, on every surface we touch, and the cycle of how these imprints propagate before they get lost or erased over time.

What other works in the show reveal lines or propagations?

What is the notion that relates works like *Propagazione*, *Nel Legno*, and *Essere Fiume*?

Essere Fiume

Penone brings to the exhibition space a beautiful stone he found in a river, which has been sculpted by the permanent flow of water, its movement against other stones, and the erosion caused by the passage of time. From the mountain that is the source of this river, Penone quarries another stone, and sculpts out of it an exact replica. Placed side by side in the exhibition space it is almost impossible to tell which one is which. Invisible and without value up to this point, the natural 'sculpture' has become visible now that Penone modeled its double.

Why did Penone place these identical stones side by side in an exhibition space?

Whom and what is he trying to challenge?



Essere Fiume (2000)