



Arte Povera, an insight into sustainable art

“Extensions” series as a case study

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ABSTRACT

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The objective of this study was to collect information on contemporary artists in dialogue with Arte Povera to have a better understanding of the relationship between Arte Povera and sustainability, and the ways in which artists approach this relationship. The study was used as a theoretical framework for the series "*Extensions*"

The data for this thesis were collected from a variety of sources, including articles, books and video interviews about relevant artworks and exhibitions of Antoni Tapies, Michelangelo Pistoletto and Benjamin Sabatier were analyzed.

Arte Povera as an evolving movement can help to rethink the term sustainability towards the arts. This would suggest that artists can bring awareness and contribute to our understanding of ecological, social, economic, and cultural change.

Key words: Arte Povera, materiality, sustainability, x-rays, contemporary art

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1 INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this thesis is to have a better understanding of art in dialogue with sustainability. This thesis considers the ways in which artists reacts to sustainability within the Arte Povera language. My aim is to create a theoretical basis for my Extensions series which is made together with this research. I intend to discover joining elements in the artworks that I can apply to my own artistic process. The working process is documented, and a report of the final artwork is presented in this thesis.

It was 1967 when the term "Arte Povera" was first used to designate a new tendency among a generation of Italian artists. Far from a unified group, these artists nevertheless held in common an understanding of the work of art as radically contingent-married to shifts in material and context. They shared a preference for precarious and provisional materials.

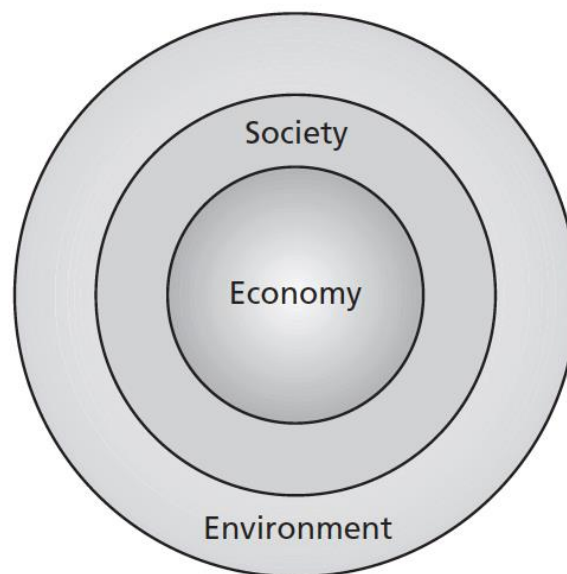
In our present, several key tendencies of Arte Povera remain strikingly relevant among artists that are essential to my own artistic process and have affected the way I reflect on my work such as Michelangelo Pistoletto, Antoni Tapies, Benjamin Sabitier, and Stane Jagodič. My objective is to find connecting factors in the artworks that, in my opinion, successfully portray the nature of Arte Povera in dialogue with sustainability.

2 ART AND SUSTAINABILITY

2.1 Defining sustainability

In 1983 the United Nations created the World Commission on Environment and Development, known as the Brundtland Commission, defined in 1987 the concept of sustainability, described as "meeting the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs" (Brundtland, 1987).

Sustainability is a rather new and broad concept which is constantly evolving. It draws a framework for different disciplines and fields to coexist with the environment.



PICTURE 1. Sustainable development, 2021

2.2 Sustainability in arts

Although the term "sustainability" was coined in 1987, sustainability in arts can be traced in many of the art movements of the late 60's such as land art, environmental art and arte povera, to mention some. These movements were born as a response towards socio economic, political, and ecological problems during this period.

According with Eleonora Cerasoli, the art world is no stranger to the increasingly discussed concept of sustainability. Sustainability in art can be simply defined in two different yet sometimes interconnecting ways:

1. Art made using sustainable materials and methods.
2. Art that encourages conversation on sustainability.

Sustainable art is about creativity to find new ways to make art that can benefit the environment, whether that is by using accessible and natural materials, or by inspiring social awareness on pressing issues. (Cerasoli n.d.)

Sustainable art is an art form that is in harmony with the principles of sustainability such as social justice, ecology, grassroots democracy and nonviolence.

The environmental art movement emerged at the end of the sixties to raise awareness and inspire communication on the dangers our planet is facing. Artists across all media create art to encourage commitment to fight global warming and its impact on our planet, fighting for its conservation. (Cerasoli n.d.)

Art has the power to inspire action. Artworks, sculptures and installations, made from waste materials which are damaging to the environment, such as plastic, can help to highlight the problem and open conversations to bring about change. (Watson&Wolfie n.d.)

3 ROOTS OF ARTE POVERA

In September 1967, the Italian critic Germano Celant coined the term “Arte Povera”, to describe a number of Italian artists which shared a common interest in rising awareness towards post war ideologies that provoked a series of ecological and social catastrophes.

Celant initially conceived Arte Povera as an art that rejected consumer society and that saw the artist not as a “producer” but as an individual dedicated to the “free self-projection of human activity”. (Celant 1967,3)

Arte Povera’s richness lies in this very variety; at once conceptual and sensual, literal and metaphoric, poetic and down to earth, it is close both to the natural processes of the present and at the same time aware of the past through memory. Radically transforming the language of contemporary art, Arte Povera has changed Western art-historical premises whilst pursuing broader definitions of cultural practice. (Christov-Bakargiev 2014,18.)

In Arte Povera, the alliance between artwork and nature is indissoluble and the concept of recycling, in a context related to sustainability, becomes crucial.

Arte povera teaches us that with humble, natural, discarded and rejected elements we can confess and promote the human condition.

3.1 MATERIALITY

The arte povera artists linked nature and culture through the juxtaposition of mundane manufactured materials with organic natural materials or elements. Arte Povera artists were interested in the way in which it is possible to maximise the experience of beauty with a minimum of linguistic transformation and cultural imposition. These provided a new alphabet for a non-mediated language of real experience. The scale is often determined by the dimensions of the human body. (Christov-Bakargiev 2014,18-19.)

Re-use of materials from one artwork to another is a theme also utilized in Arte Povera works. The artist Christo, for example, uses the materials in his work over and over, moving, transforming and transfiguring them through reapplication and wrapping.

There are many reasons for artists to use “poor materials”. I feel that the use of such materials is not only because of their ability to “impoverish” each persons experience of the work, but the use of these materials also helps the individual to free themselves from precon- ceived notions through a recontextualization of the materials in a new form. (Conger 2007, 23).



PICTURE 2. Alberto Burri, Composition, 1953

4 ARTE POVERA NOW

Since there is no manifesto nor definitive list of names, no undisputed roll call of Arte Povera artist exists. It may even be legitimate to question whether Arte Povera should be evaluated within a broader perspective of post-minimalist strategies of the 1960s. Undoubtedly, this generation shared certain broad principles: that a work of art is an “attitude” become “form” through a wide range of materials; that they are flexible and transformable; that any medium, technique and location may be used; that art is related to a quest for authenticity and truth, and that it should engage with social concerns stemming from an anti-authoritarian position and rejecting the ideology of consumer society. However, the more one considers the diverse works of Arte Povera, the more one becomes aware of certain shared characteristics: a reference to domesticity and habitat, a human scale, a layering of diverse cultural references, a rejection of coherent style and artistic signature, as well as the distinction between the literal and metaphoric, real and virtual, natural and artificial, live and inert, through the transformation of the installation into a type of “poor theatre” where nature and culture coincides. (Bakargiev 2014, 18-19.)



PICTURE 3. Jannis Kounellis, Untitled, 2003

4.1 ANTONI TAPIES

The repressive atmosphere of Francoist Spain present between the years of 1936 and 1975 profoundly influenced Tàpies's early and recent artistic output. Tàpies employed a variety of post-modern techniques in his works, including the rejection of the use of traditional art media such as oil paint. Tàpies states that his move away from classical materials could be read as spitting in the face of a conservative Francoist society. His dislike for the topical quality of oil paint is clearly expressed, as his belief is that this medium is reflective of an accepted, conceited and classical world. (Terziyska 2012, 26.)

Tàpies quickly turned towards the use of non-traditional media, such as found man-made and organic objects, and became obsessed with the material-ness of this particular kind of matter. The artist interpreted his interest in use of thick, full-bodied, raw matter as a manifestation of his desire to convey things in their truest form. This drive did not arise from a desire to portray an ideal. Rather, it aimed to represent a total and veritable reality of which everything is physically composed. (Terziyska 2012, 26.)

The independent objects which Tàpies began to employ in the creation of his pieces thus suggest that paintings no longer describe things – they become things in themselves. This drive and desire to represent his contemporary world as it was, through the utilization of objects found in this natural world, is suggestive of the artist's direct orientation towards the presenting of reality – rather than its representation. What there was to be presented was a world laden by political unrest and turmoil which could not be avoided, but rather, addressed. (Terziyska 2012, 27.)

Tàpies's work is marked by roughness, rips, cracks, crosses and numbers and signs of his personal mythology. His line is enigmatic, his will intricate, but his style is unmistakable. All this makes up the work of an essential artist (Anton 2012.)



PICTURE 4. Antoni Tàpies, The Hands (Les Mains), 1969

4.2 MICHELANGELO PISTOLETTO

Pistoletto is considered one of the leading exponents of Arte Povera. In the first place for his works: from the *Minus Objects* (1965-66), which preceded the official birth of the movement, in October 1967, to ones like the *Venus of the Rags* [*Venere degli stracci*] (1967), which have come to be seen almost as its emblem. (Pistoletto n.d..)

The artist commented in 1967: 'As far as I am concerned ... all forms, materials, ideas, and means are available and to be used' (quoted in Flood and Morris, p.306). Cheap, adaptable and colourful, rags or discarded clothes appear in a number of Pistoletto's works. (Tate 2009.)

Venus of the Rags juxtaposes an over-life sized classical statue of the Roman goddess of love, beauty and fertility, with a large pile of brightly coloured, discarded clothes that are heaped on the floor. The Venus statue is positioned with its back to the viewer. The figure's face and body press lightly against the pile of fabrics that rises up before it, so that the front of the statue is hidden. (Tate 2009).

Pistoletto has made several versions of *Venus of the Rags*. (Fondazione Pistoletto, Biella, reproduced in Christov-Bakargiev, p.157.). Pistoletto's use of a sculpture of Venus in these works, as an iconic motif of the canon of Western art, invokes Italy's cultural past in an ironic way. By combining the classically-inspired statue with piled-up rags the artist announces a series of oppositions: hard/soft, formed/unformed, monochrome/coloured, fixed/movable, precious/disregarded, historical/contemporary, unique/common and the cultural/the everyday. In their 'poorness' the rags demonstrate a willingness to deploy any and all aspects of life in art. This was a characteristic of Arte Povera. (Tate 2009.)

Just as *Venus of the Rags* comments on cycles of consumption, it, too, has had its own history of change through the making of the new versions of the work, which could involve modifications to the piles of rags. In 1997, Pistoletto explained:

In the various existing versions of the Venus, or their re-installation, you can use the same original rags or you can change them, but they must maintain their multi-coloured and ruffled character. One of the plaster Venuses of 1967 was broken. My project was to put the pieces together, leaving the signs of breakage evident, like the tears in the rags. (Christov-Bakargiev, p.157).



PICTURE 5. Michelangelo Pistoletto, *Venus of the Rags* 1967, 1974

4.3 BENJAMIN SABATIER

Benjamin Sabatier (born 1977 in Le Mans, France, lives and works in Paris) develops in an almost exhaustive manner a concept as astonishing as innovative, that places the work of art at the heart of contemporary socio-economic reality and interrogates us on different features of our society—standardisation, excessive consumerism, the alienation of work, the infinite repetition of gestures—and the place that these essential sociological reflections occupy in current art. (Sabatier 2013).

Peinture en kit, SAV, 2PackAge, Chantier (Painting kit, After-sales service, 2PackAge, Site)... all the titles of his personal exhibitions refer to these key concepts of company life and of economy today. With International Benjamin's Kit (IBK), created by Benjamin Sabatier in 2001, the artist places himself at the heart of the social and economic realities that he questions. Designed as a work and a company, IBK refers both to the world of business (IKEA) and to the history of art (International Klein's Blue). Sabatier, too, creates a work with materials that cost very little and that are understandable and accessible to everyone thanks to the voluntary affordable prices of these “ready to install” creations that sometimes require the collector to become involved. By placing objects and waste engendered to excess by our consumer societies, such as adhesive cylinders, nails, cardboards and paper packagings, at the heart of his creations, Benjamin Sabatier, in his own original way, pursues the questioning led by Walter Benjamin concerning the work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction. (Sabatier 2013.)

His postulate is based on direct contact with matter to develop the faculty of perception. Through his work, the artist incites us to question the notions of fabrication and know-how. Always lying at the core of his reflection, experimentation, assembly and autoconstruction lead him towards emancipatory utopias and commitment to the Do It Yourself movement, at the same time, the shapes he deploys revisit the great questions posed by modern sculpture, ranging from Constructivism to Arte Povera. (Maison 2016.)



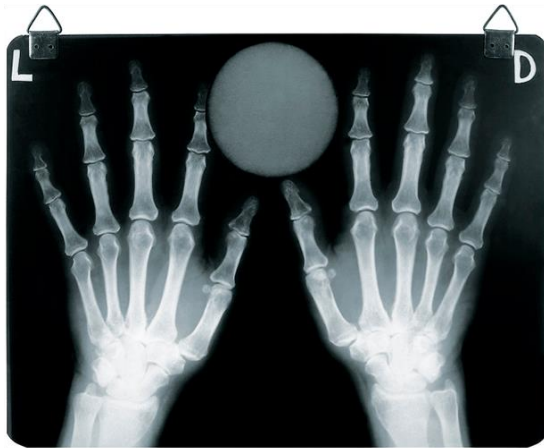
PICTURE 6. Benjamin Sabatier, *Mode d'emploi*, 2016

4.4 STANE JAGODIČ: X-RAY ART

Stane Jagodič concentrates on combining the scientific use of the photographic media and its artistic perception, which is based on adding and sublimation of useful everyday products, their transformation and re-evaluation of their initial meaning. (Jagodič n.d..)

The x-ray photographs thus become an irreplaceable segment of the author's creation and one of the methods of many expressive experiments of penetration into the inner structures of organic and inorganic elements of the world, human or machine. (Photon 2008).

During further processing, the x-rays are additionally equipped with selected elements. These elements are taken out of everyday life – waste materials of the modern world are placed into the integrated image of his projects and so adopt fresh values and symbolic meanings. It is based on thematic and aesthetic grounds connected to the historical avant-garde, especially to the two main influential protagonists and role models Marcel Duchamp and Man Ray. (Photon 2008).



PICTURE 7. Stane Jagodič, Solar Eclipse, 1972

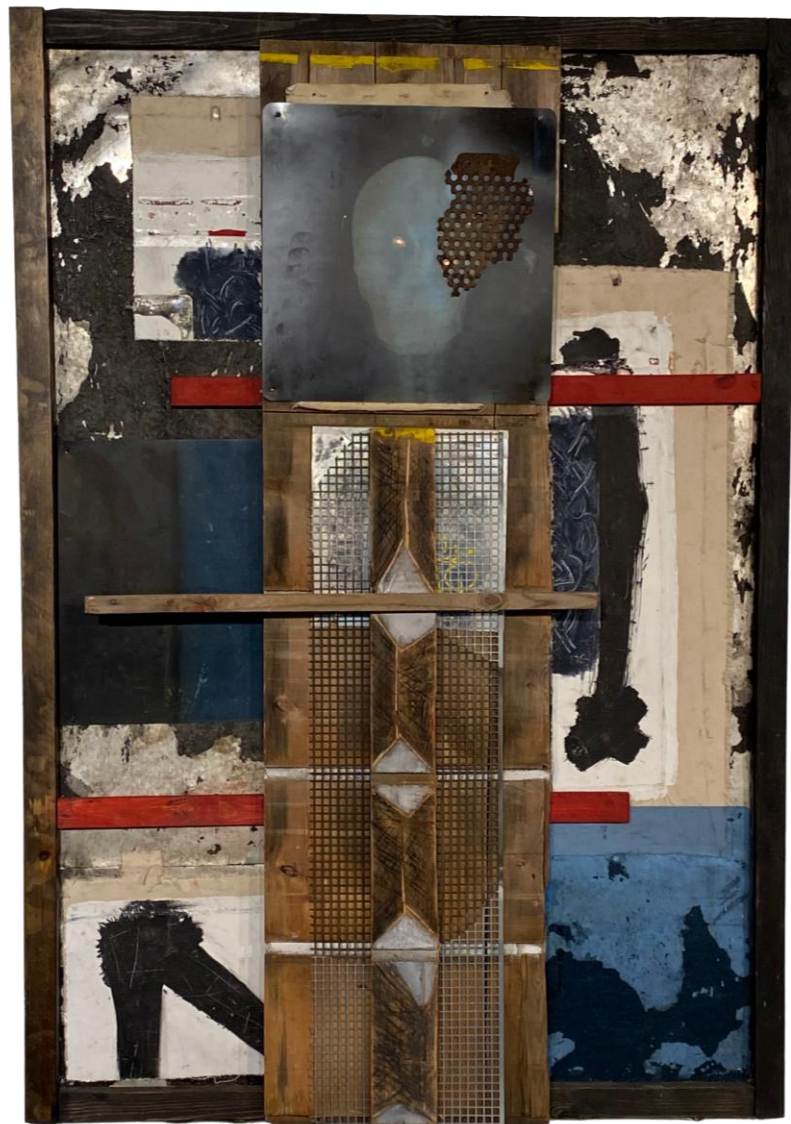


PICTURE 8. Stane Jagodič, Your Corpse will turn into Ashes!, 1972

5 EXTENSIONS

I have explored Arte Povera in many of my past artworks and its artistic language still keep me intrigued. In my thesis artwork, I wanted specifically to focus on how sustainability is represented in the context of contemporary art and Arte Povera, focussing on techniques and materials.

The controlled re-use, upgrading and transformation of materials into a new context is the key to these spatial design experiments. Processes of aging and decay, speculative projections, uncertainties, and the deliberate integration of the uncontrolled play crucial roles. This forces a radical paradigm shift for designers of built environments towards a building culture of improvisation, repairing and recycling. (Straub n.d..)



PICTURE 9. Alberto Reza, Self-Portrait, 2021

5.1 WORK STATEMENT

From Latin extensive, extension is the action and effect of extending or extending (making something take up more space, spreading or spilling what is together, unfolding, unwrapping). The term can be used to name the size of the space that a body occupies and the ability to occupy a part of the space.

In this series of works, I try to accentuate the material as an extension of reality. The materials have been exposed to scrapes, burns, amputations, the fabrics have been torn, the woods have been nailed, broken, cut, the metals are oxidized, bent, the sheets corroded by cold and heat, by the passage of time and climate. The materials are loaded with violence and dramatism. The materials themselves speak of a dramatic past, they are pieces of waste, recycled, collected from empty fabrics or forgotten in a construction site or a hospital. These materials have a new extension of life, a new value, a new opportunity.



PICTURE 10. Alberto Reza, Extension I, 2021

5.2 MATERIALITY

Materiality plays a central part in my work. I always start with the discovery of the qualities of the materials, I work with raw materials that are recycled or easily available, like soil, nails, wood, metal, cardboard, etc. mostly found from my

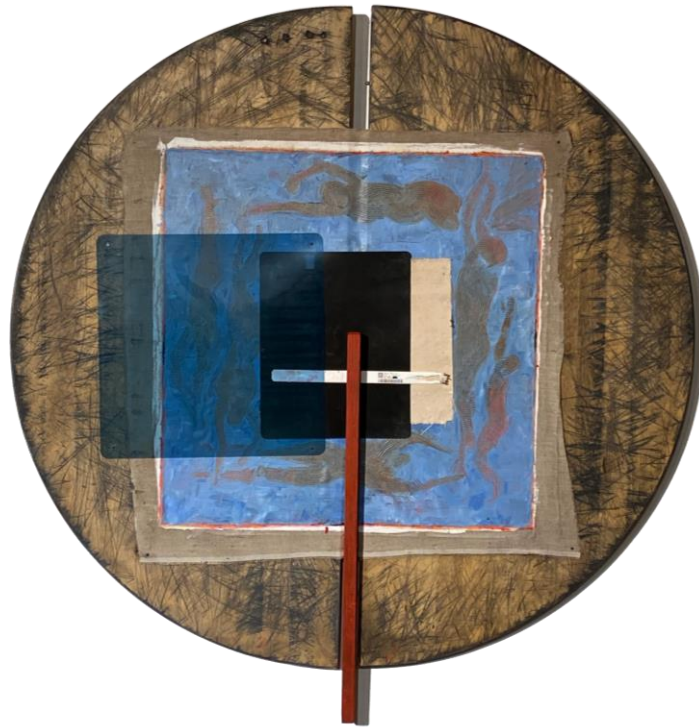
nearby environment, like the abandoned factories around Pispala, like anthropologist of the scraps.

The way I manipulate the materials are often radical, and even “violent”:

“The materials have been exposed to scrapes, burns, amputations, the fabrics have been torn, the woods have been nailed, broken, cut, the metals are oxidized, bent”, with readable gestures, is a way to inscribe my work in a social dimension.

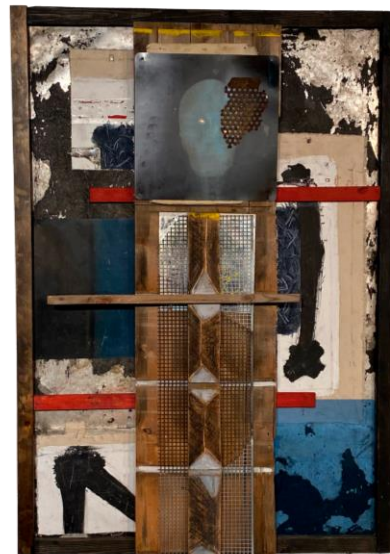
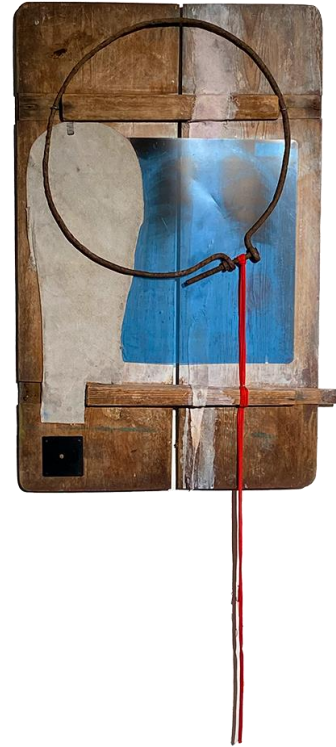
By using “poor materials” I have sought to create art pieces. My approach was based on praxis. I like to begin experimenting with the materials, and learn from them. In my works I sought balance through the combination of materials, this association tries to arise questions on sustainability and subject matter, ranging from Constructivism to Arte Povera. The “*Extensions*” series consists of five pieces.

Despite the transfiguration, gestures and matters are always visible at the artwork’s surface. I do not paint or hide the characteristic nature of the materials, or their condition. If the material is old, I utilize the ‘old’ nature of the material and I accept and celebrate its qualities.



PICTURE 11. Alberto Reza, Extension V, 2021

During the process, I experimented with shapes, trying to get balanced compositions with only a few elements, the colors and hues of the materials played a significant role. In many of the works, I repeat materials and reused old oil paintings.



PICTURE 12. Alberto Reza, process documentation I, 2021

PICTURE 13. Alberto Reza, process documentation II, 2021

5.2.0 X-RAYS

As a metaphor, the materials I combined, x-rays belongs to the living, while the wood and metal, to a cold and warm world. Within these dualities, each one has its own roughness and softness. x-rays can be seen as a statement against against superficiality in todays world.

The x-rays I use in my works are collected from a mexican hospital, these are photographies from people we dont know, but brings figurative dramatism to the work. As Benjamin Sabatier says, “Matter transforms: heavy becomes light, solid becomes fragile”

The approach taken by Arte Povera artists was at once conceptual and sensual, poetic and earthy. Their themes and comments included past and present, nature and culture, and “high” and “low” art. A number of these works had a particular appeal. (Oslo National Museum n.d..)



PICTURE 14. Alberto Reza, process documentation III, 2021

It is imperative to change peoples’ predilection toward throwing things away when they are old or out of fashion! Treating the urban ground with reverence upholds a magnificent union of human work and nature. This design philosophy values

the worth of the worthless, the aesthetics of the 'poor' and the invention of humble projects that produce innovative insights, knowledge and practices. (Straub n.d..)

6 CONCLUSION

The aim of my research was to define how Pistoletto, Tapies, Sabatier, and Jagodič explore sustainability in their artworks. I focused on analyzing the artists' relationship with Arte Povera and defining different approaches towards sustainability. Though all four artists utilize different mediums, their works have several connecting elements, such as the use of recycled elements, and the awareness of sustainability.

My starting point was to look for artists that are linked with the Arte Povera movement. Pistoletto produced the Venus of rags, which evoke criticism of consumerism and the fashion industry, an industry that is dangerous for the environment. Tapies artworks were influenced by Spanish civil war and the loss of Catalanian culture this could evoke the importance of local cultures and their fight against globalization and standardization. Jagodič combines the x-rays with every day or recycled elements in a very pleasant way although the x-rays could remind us to our inside, or even the death. Sabatier works with materials that cost little or are recycled, his works through experimentation and improvisation. Sabatier works aims to interrogate the consumer society.

The artists I analyzed encouraged me to adapt a minimalistic approach. I did multiple experiments between the shapes, sizes, positions, and qualities of the materials. Using only a few of them I achieved my purpose better.

The repetition and reuse of certain elements in my works like x-rays, fabrics, or old artworks is a theme in Arte Povera and close to sustainability. I found Benjamin Sabatier's and Jagodič's works aesthetically appealing and it helped me accept that my work is based on praxis.

Arte Povera explores the pillars of sustainability; economic, social, and environmental. I hope my series raises reactions towards sustainability in art using the methodology of Arte Povera.

It is important to mention that my works did not produce any waste, it is a way to be part of an initiative to raise awareness of the amount of waste we generate and the importance of giving objects a second life.

Artists can involve new perspectives on how to produce art in a more sustainable way by reducing and recycling, and still create stunning art pieces that subject matter.



PICTURE 15. Alberto Reza, process documentation V, 2021

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8 PICTURES

PICTURE 1. Sustainable development, 2021

PICTURE 2. Alberto Burri, Composition, 1953

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PICTURE 3. Jannis Kounellis, Untitled, 2003

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PICTURE 4. Antoni Tàpies, The Hands (Les Mains), 1969

<https://www.moma.org/collection/works/69161>

PICTURE 5. Michelangelo Pistoletto, Venus of the Rags 1967, 1974

<https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/pistoletto-venus-of-the-rags-t12200>

PICTURE 6. Benjamin Sabatier, Mode d'emploi, 2016

<https://www.lexploreur.com/en/blog-en/benjamin-sabatier-mode-demploi/>

PICTURE 7. Stane Jagodič, Solar Eclipse, 1972

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PICTURE 8. Stane Jagodič, Your Corpse will turn into Ashes!, 1972

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PICTURE 12. Alberto Reza, process documentation I, 2021

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PICTURE 14 Alberto Reza, process documentation II, 2021

PICTURE 15 Alberto Reza, Himmelblau exhibition, 2021

