From: *Gilberto Zorio*, curated by M. Beccaria, exhibition catalog (Rivoli-Torino, Castello di Rivoli Museo d'Arte Contemporanea, 1 November 2017 - 6 March 2018), Skira, Milano 2017, pp. 72-83.

Gilberto Zorio: Before the Words Burn Up. A conversation

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> "*Here, again, are two forms of energy: mental energy and physical energy. [...] Sometimes I dream that I*
> *am a thief who opens a safe with a blowtorch, not to steal the jewels but to steal some of the safe's interior. Sometimes I dream, or perhaps this isn't true, that I am traveling to the center of the earth, where I see birds covered in asbestos flying amid the lava. In my work there are no birds, there is no lava, there are no airplanes. There is my life..."*
> *Gilberto Zorio, 1969*

A channeling of primary energy expressed at the moment of the transformation of materials lies at the heart of Zorio's practice. By analogy, he also explores the energy and effects of revolutionary human actions, where words are language, physical matter, the expression of emotions. His works liberate energy through the transformation of materials and celebrate the human species' most ancient desire to create synthetic materials and revolutionary technologies. For some Arte Povera artists, energy is gathered and suspended in a state of potentiality; for Zorio, instead, it is made manifest and expresses itself.

Zorio is interested in the spark, in the sound that two materials produce when they touch each other, in the moment in which energy is charged and appears as an explosion. It is in the beginnings of chemistry and of *techné* that he rediscovers the most archaic inventions which, as prostheses of our bodies, have characterized our earthbound lives, such as fire, ceramics, or the canoe.

Violence—like the word *odio*, hate—is not a negative notion for Zorio: like an erupting volcano that radically modifies the landscape, it is the expression of a surge of intention transformed into creative action. Energy, when it is consumed, is not lost but simply transferred from one element to another. Zorio's exhibitions reflect this sense of energetic eruption and constant vital mutation. Displayed neither frontally nor traditionally, the works are juxtaposed according to difference, dynamically relating floor, ceiling, walls, and corners; at times, they create new shapes of informal architecture inside exhibition spaces. The attempt to reach the original, archaic nature of materials is a recurrent theme for Zorio; his work with lights on the floor or evidently placed on the walls springs from the idea of returning light back to its original function, which is not that of lighting but to be a source of heat, of energy. Like fire, like the sun.

In his early pieces, such as *Sedia* (Chair, 1966), Zorio used colored polyurethane, in contrast and relation with the heaviness and opposite character of concrete. He also "toughened" his materials using scaffolding tubes, like in *Tenda* (Tent, 1967), where the cloth and the structure contrast with the slow dripping of crystallizing salt water. *Rosa-blu-rosa* (PinkBlue-Pink, 1967), another process-oriented work, comprises a long fibro-cement semicylinder filled with a cobalt chloride mixture that changes color according to the relative humidity in the air. In later years, Zorio built complex anti-

productive and ludic self-propelled machines in which the movement of air and sound recalls the archaic atmospheres of pre-modern science: alchemy, acids, cruets, leather, javelins, stars.
We spoke of this together.

I

Bakargiev-Carolyn Christov Who are your favorite artists from the past?
Gilberto Zorio As a boy, I was really keen on Masaccio... Saint Peter collecting the tribute money from the fish... You can feel he is intense. When he made mistakes with a stroke, he corrected it very very fast.... Maybe he felt he was going to die soon. Masaccio died very young, at twenty-seven... You can see the intelligence applied by this divine act that is art, in certain moments...
CCB Applied intelligence, you call it?
GZ Enlightened. That is, a worker or a blacksmith are extraordinary appliers of intelligence, which is very dangerous for society, for those in power. That's why they invented assembly lines, to make them still more...
CCB ... to divest them of their intuition and ability to apply intelligence, a sort of lobotomization. So, the transition from craftwork to industrialization happened as a form of social control...
GZ That's what I think.
CCB It wasn't necessary for the population...
GZ Absolutely not.
CCB And applying intelligence to resolve physical problems, or chemical and engineering problems, is comparable to your work as an artist?
GZ I look at this kind of intelligence because if I have to make a work with iron, I don't do it in the studio. I go to a skilled artisan...
CCB But you, Gilberto, how did you get to know other artists, the art world? That is, how did all this we're going to discuss actually come about?
GZ By chance... we sought each other out... I would go to see exhibitions, for example, at Galleria La Bussola. Then there was the Galleria Il Punto, which was directed by Gian Enzo Sperone.
CCB But before that, I mean, why go to La Bussola? How old were you?
...seventeen ,Eighteen **GZ**
CCB How did you find out that such a thing as an art gallery even existed?
GZ There was an association on Via Roma called Piemonte Artistico Culturale. They staged exhibitions that were very interesting on the social level. You paid a thousand liras a year to register and then you could participate in their competitions. You would go in and see all the artists in Turin who were members and exhibiting. I saw Pistoletto there!
CCB But why did you join?
GZ Because I went to an art institute so I was...
CCB But why did you go to the art institute?
GZ For ceramics. Ever since I was a kid, I went around with some wax. Modeling clay was always in my pocket... I used to shape things out of clay, all the time.
CCB More than drawing?
GZ When I was sick—and I was often sick—I did a lot of drawing...
CCB And so in these periods when you were home, in bed, you would draw. And when did you begin to work with clay and create pieces that were more sculptural and material?
GZ I made them at the same time. I mostly used glazing putty that has the coarse formula of modeling clay, and then I used Longo made in Biella, and then Pongo.

CCB And so this boy getting older, not so sick anymore, comes into this space on Via Roma and sees a painting by Pistoletto... what year was it?
.1962 **GZ**
CCB When you were young did you know Mario Tazzoli's Galleria Galatea or was that associated with an earlier generation?
GZ The Galatea? Are you kidding? Of course
I knew it!
CCB But didn't you link it with de Chirico, Picasso, and Kandinsky? I mean, it was a gallery that showed art from the generations that came before you.
GZ Yes, but my art history teacher was named Campi Davico. She was great. She told us about Paul Klee and Goyas' *Caprichos*.
CCB And he took you on school trips to see exhibitions, to the Galleria d'Arte Moderna, for example?
GZ I remember museums in the north of Italy, the trip to Florence to visit the Uffizi and the Bargello..
CCB What exhibitions do you remember seeing in Turin?
GZ The Egyptian Museum... and the Galatea had wild exhibitions. I remember the Sutherland show. Sperone was already working there, he was eighteen. He worked as a secretary, and then he became director of the Galleria Il Punto. I saw Jim Dine there in 1962 and his work really fascinated me.
CCB How? I don't see the connection between Jim Dine and your work...
GZ No, of course... but I realized that I wasn't used to seeing that kind of things...
CCB But your work has nothing to do with Jim Dine's, or does it?
GZ Maybe I understood at that point that we had to do something different...
CCB Ah, in opposition.
GZ No... a side step... But I liked him... the heart...
CCB That is, you liked contemporaneity... so to speak, modernity...
GZ Yes... I liked everything that later turned out to be beautiful too... I also liked Bernard Buffet... I saw Bernard Buffet at the Bussola...
CCB But that makes sense, because in fact Buffet loved the wind and little waving flags, you probably loved what he represented, the effects of air and wind... Actually, a boy could think that Buffet was dynamic. And then we can say that your work is very three-dimensional, obviously, with materials and space, but it doesn't seem to emerge from the history of sculpture. You mentioned Jim Dine, Buffet... but you didn't mention any great sculptors.
GZ I looked toward the Futurists, Boccioni's sculptures, and Medardo Rosso.
CCB And among historical sculptors?
GZ Donatello.
CCB What do you remember of your mother's drawings or paintings? I mean, did she want to be an artist?
GZ No, she was just having fun. She loved it.
CCB And what do you remember about her art?
GZ I remember such beautiful, funny and even tragic things. My mother got seriously ill and almost died very young. Then when she got better, she took up painting again... and my father would come home exhausted in the evening because he worked twelve hours a day between the office and the construction site, or he was traveling. I'll always remember once when my mother hadn't cooked anything because she had kept painting instead. So my father did the cooking and

told me (in Piedmontese dialect), “Your mother is painting...” He was all happy about it.
CCB That’s nice. And what did she paint?
GZ She had an eclectic style... In the 1960s, the work she did after her illness was abstract...
CCB But were they works on canvas or paper, notebooks?
GZ On canvas... There’s a curious detail about that... I lived in Via Cristoforo Colombo in Turin, in the Crocetta neighborhood. On the corner there was a fantastic paint shop, really great... they sold things for fine arts, they had the good paper. I bought paints for my mother there, and Pongo clay for me. [*He laughs*]. Every now and then the painter Piero Ruggeri would pass by, he lived right nearby. I always ran into Piero Gilardi and Alighiero Boetti there. Lots of artists were living in that area... also Plinio Martelli. Around 1963 they opened a gallery. You would go into the paint shop, go up three steps and there was the Piccola Galleria d’Arte Moderna. I did my first exhibition there when I was eighteen... It belonged to engineer Bartolomeo, the owner of Galleria Il Punto that was directed by Gian Enzo Sperone.
CCB And was the engineer Bartolomeo also a collector?
GZ Yes, he was becoming one.
CCB And he was the owner of the space, including the paint factory?
GZ Yes, but you never saw him. Actually, I met him at some point. But it was his daughter who directed the Piccola Galleria, and she invited me to show there.
CCB And what did you show?
GZ Terracotta and polystyrene sculptures, and drawings.
CCB Were you still studying?
GZ Yes, I was studying... there at the Piccola Galleria they introduced me to Piero Gilardi...
CCB ... who wrote the text...
GZ ... who in the meantime was preparing his own show at Galleria L’Immagine, which was owned by the painter Antonio Carena.
CCB So this was the neighborhood where everything started, Crocetta, where at the Piccola Galleria you had your first show when you were eighteen, with terracotta and polystyrene objects, which Gilardi wrote the text for. Not long after that you began to work in his studio, right?
GZ Well, I started to work for him much later. Gilardi was making his carpets and foam rubber sculptures...
CCB But were you using polystyrene before he used foam rubber?
GZ Yes, I was generally using polystyrene...
CCB Polystyrene is not the same thing as foam rubber. They have different consistencies; the first is hard and the second is soft... but they both come from hard coal, from oil...
GZ Right. And I liked polystyrene because it was easy to sculpt... Polystyrene interested me for the ease of shaping it, but at a certain point I stopped using it because it didn’t correspond to what I wanted to explore anymore. At the Academy of Fine Arts I made many pieces, like for example a sort of gigantic open book, almost two meters, that already included a chemical reaction, with a really dangerous material (ammonium dichromate)—but I didn’t know that at the time. The book was placed in a wood tank covered with polystyrene and containing a liquid obtained by dissolving red-orange crystals in water. Thanks to a chemical combustion, which I considered a form of alchemy, the light wood turned black.
CCB What year was it?
GZ 1965, I think it is still at the Academy of Fine Arts.
CCB So you studied at the Academy of Fine Arts after the art institute?
GZ Yes, for eight years. I studied sculpture and painting.

CCB But what was the first work that included a liquid? *Tenda* with the salt water?
GZ The first use of liquid was with the open book, but *Tenda* was a more specific work, and that was in 1967.
CCB But between the book in 1965 and *Tenda* in 1967, were there other pieces with liquids?
GZ No.
CCB So this work is important, in its way...
GZ Not really. But there's something you should know. In that period I was working on a number of projects at the same time. That is, I was making *Tenda* and in the meantime I was making the structure that changed color, you see? I interrupted one job to work on another... my physical energy in those years was unbelievable. If I really think about it, it was downright mad... I worked twelve hours a day. Then maybe I would go to teach in Cuneo, in the school, getting up at 4.30 in the morning. Then, an incredible thing. I needed to photograph my work but it wasn't possible in my place. So Gilardi offered his studio for me to use. One evening, while I was setting things up, Sperone came and saw them. The next morning I got a phone call. He said to come right away to Gilardi's studio because the Sonnabends wanted to meet me. Sperone had brought Ileana and Michael Sonnabend... It was incredible. They spoke excellent Italian and I spoke French. From 1963 to 1966, I wasn't helping Gilardi yet. I worked on my own, making my sculptures and painted scarves with a Japanese stamp and bracelets engraved with acid...
CCB Tell me about the works that were photographed in his studio.
Colonna **GZ** was 2.85 meters tall. At first I stored it on my landing. I needed another studio, so I rented two rooms in the courtyard of Gilardi's place.
CCB And at what point did you begin to work for him?
GZ In 1966. I would take blocks of polystyrene to my attic, which was also my studio, and I would model stones, pears and cabbage for Gilardi's carpets...
CCB Tell me about *Sedia*, that you made in 1966 with scaffolding tubes, colored polyurethane and concrete.
GZ Concrete is an opaque material, it can fill up holes, whereas foam rubber is elastic, it takes a shape and then refuses it and goes back to the shape it was. If color is abstract for some artists, I don't care. The reality of color is important. Red is strong; blue is infinite and makes me dream; yellow makes me think of the sun. They are not the debris of a Mondrian, a utopia separate from the material. Materials speak to us; we just have to listen. Foam rubber is a breath, a froth, a cream, a beaten egg. If you are prepared for it, it is exciting just to feel the clay that then, with hours and hours of firing, becomes terracotta.
CCB Then came Arte Povera and its idea of authentic experience.
GZ In Arte Povera, there's no theory. There were the accounts of Germano Celant and Tommaso Trini. There was action, but actually nothing decided at the drawing table. There was the experience... The public accused me of being a materialist because I was investigating materials and that seemed to put me in opposition to Conceptual Art. The language of Arte Povera rejected consumerism, in a positive sense. Turin was also a city where every day the newspapers were writing about protests by the working class. As early as 1964 they talked about the first student movements in the Humanities and Mathematics faculties and at the Academy of Fine Arts.
CCB The protest... but were they protesting against the war in Vietnam?
GZ Yes, against the bombing, and in favor of school for all. And against Fiat.
CCB In the United States, the first protests started around 1964–65. It's as if the anti-war movement triggered an anti-capitalist movement...

II

CCB In *Progetto per cesto di rete metallica* (Project for a wire-mesh basket, 1968), you heated a copper plate on which you threw papers with writing on them. Why?

GZ I wrote words with invisible ink on a piece of paper, then let it fall onto the hot plate and it burned up. But before it burned completely, the words appeared and became legible. So it had the same time frame as the spoken word. You could read it and then it burned and disappeared, like our voices, like a spoken word.

CCB Some materials are poisonous or toxic, such as lead and asbestos. Why?

GZ I don't use asbestos anymore. Lead is poisonous, but if an atomic bomb fell, it would be convenient to have some lead, it protects you from radiations. Lead is malleable, you can sculpt it. It's been used for tubes and pipes for millennia. The work can be appreciated by all the senses—not just vision, but touch and hearing come into play as well. We have lost much of the sensitivity of our senses, which are specific to animals. I'm not campaigning against vision, but in favor of an expansion of sensitivity in general.

CCB Who made the first canoes, and how many thousands of years ago?

GZ Think of people of the oceans, or of the northern hemisphere; they created canoes everywhere. The canoe represents voyage and discovery. It is associated with the curiosity to know what is on the other side of the mountain, on the other side of the sea, of the cliff... and then let's not forget the countless voyages undertaken because of hunger or war. The canoe is desire; it is like the javelin, letting you reach places you could not normally reach.

CCB I am thinking of the Columns of Hercules, of Ulysses's voyage. Today, on the other hand, voyage is associated with escape from war, often by sea, and with refugees.

GZ It is appalling, because now it represents salvation. Maybe you save your life and have a future. I made my first canoe at Castello di Rivoli in 1984, for *Ouverture*. Now I am going back to it. There will be a new 18-meter one on display at the Castello, the largest I've ever made, and also *Barca nuragica* (Nuragic Boat, 2000), which is made using the shape of a boat of a very ancient design. The same shape can be found from India to Machu Picchu in Peru.

CCB But what do they do with them in Machu Picchu in Peru?

GZ They travel...

CCB On rivers?

GZ On Lake Titicaca. The canoe can be made quickly and when it starts to rot, they burn it. Then other reeds are used to make a new one, but strangely, the shape is always the same, everywhere in the world.

CCB Or not so strangely...

GZ It's wonderful, actually, because it means that necessity creates an aesthetics shared around the world. But that doesn't mean that it didn't matter to people whether the canoes were beautiful or ugly. In fact, they were very beautiful.

CCB Do you think they knew, when they made them, that they were making something beautiful, not just something functional?

GZ I think of beauty as a consolation, as the bearer of memory, as an act in defiance of death... It's a sign that I leave, that I leave to you as a legacy.

CCB Making a canoe is a legacy of a knowledge, a collective knowledge... So this voyage on rivers and oceans, done with this technology—a canoe is basically a technology—harks back to the first moment that an animal, the human being, created technology. I understand that this idea of an ancient technology has always fascinated you...

GZ So much. That's why I work with ceramic, the first synthetic material.
CCB Tell me about that.
GZ Ceramic always outlasts us. It emerges from history, going back to pre-history, to the Toirano caves, and into the future.
CCB Does the emotion it gives you have something to do with overcoming the limits of mortal life?
GZ I always hope so... I could say that I had planned on 130 years of life; now I'm willing to accept 128, 125... Art has been a necessity for me. I discovered this desire at a very young age, because, for example, my mother painted, as a hobby. Her family lived in France; my grandfather built dams, she studied drawing with a Paris correspondence school... My father, who was a master builder, made roads and prefabricated houses in Africa.
CCB Michel Serres is the French philosopher (and professor of Bruno Latour) who spoke about cosmic energy and the idea of not always placing humans at the center of everything, but instead putting him in relation to a field of energy... Well, Michel Serres's father made the openings and closings of the canals in France that allow boats to pass... It seems to me that this explains all his thought, that is, when he speaks of water, flows, and circulation.
GZ Our human body is a laboratory of physics and chemistry. And even the world has veins, which are the rivers; it has a stomach, it has everything, even pimples, which are volcanoes!
CCB That's true... A micro- and macro-cosmic vitality.
GZ And we are not an extinguished star! Oh my friends, we have a fireplace under our feet... a fireplace there below... And so the voyage is desire. And art is necessary because it is also a consolation, and during dictatorships, during our social life on earth... During the terrible Stalin years, art was in the service of power, and Futurism too served propaganda during Fascism: it was advertising, lies that make us think everything is just fine.
CCB But propaganda is not a consolation; social realism was not a consolation. It was at the service of the government, of power.
GZ Yes, but that's what I mean. Maybe one Sunday, you went to the inauguration of a monument in the square and saw a strong rugged figure, half nude, with an ice pick in his hand. It was cold, and everyone was skinny and undernourished. It consoled you...
CCB I understand... like the gold backgrounds in Medieval paintings while the plague was raging...
GZ Desperation... Art is necessary to me; it is as necessary as the voyage.
CCB It is a need for you as an artist, and for me as a fellow traveler.
GZ And talking about the cosmos, I say that the star is the most common image in the entire globe.
CCB Really? The star?
GZ Yes, it is everywhere. On San Pellegrino water, Negroni salami, in politics, in religion. The star is everywhere.
CCB But there are so many types of stars.
GZ I am talking about the five-pointed star, the normal star, that we always see around us. They are there because apparently they have served us for our travels; they served us to see where to go at night, for orientation. There were no compasses in the beginning, there were only stars.
CCB Yes, the North Star, the constellations. It is an image of a dynamic, original, archaic way of getting oriented. It is an image of an intention, of a tension toward...
GZ And then, we brought the stars from beyond the world, from the sky, onto the earth. We couldn't touch them, so we drew them. Often, we forget that we are walking on a star: but volcanoes are there to remind us.