Incidences of the void. Doubling and Mirror Images in the Art of Giuseppe Penone

Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev

Giuseppe Penone was born in Garessio, Italy, in 1947, not far from the Church of San Francesco in Cuneo, where this exhibition is hosted in dialog with the works in Castello di Rivoli. He currently lives and works in Turin and retains a house and studio in the Piedmontese countryside as well.

Originating in developments in sculpture in the late 1960s and 1970s, and specifically in the emergence of Arte Povera, Penone's work expresses its own distinctive character. It explores the fundamentals of making sculpture as a way of empirically knowing and understanding the world, and is grounded in the principle of embodying a tactile-visual awareness of all things and their transformations. He understands the world and life sculpturally, through touching the world—the tree as a fluid, growing, entity, similar to the human body but with its own specific intelligence and temporality; breathing as a form of automatic, involuntary sculpture. Sculpture is about carving out, producing a void, or casting, producing duplication or multiplication through a series of positives and negatives. Both addition and subtraction occur through gestures of encounter, and thus through relations of intention.

The term Arte Povera (literally 'poor' art) was coined in the summer of 1967 by Italian art critic and curator Germano Celant, who adapted it from the Polish experimental theatre director Jerzy Grotowski's concept of "poor theatre." Arte Povera was the first Italian art movement to gain international recognition since Futurism in the early 20th century. Like the Italian Futurists, the Arte Povera artists of the 1960s found the notion of movement to be essential. But whereas for the Futurists it was movement as velocity that was of prime importance, for the *poveristi*—as they are somewhat informally called in Italy—change, process, and the flow of primary energy are the focus.

Like Penone, the other Arte Povera artists came mainly from Piedmont (they include Michelangelo Pistoletto, Mario Merz, Marisa Merz, Giovanni Anselmo, Giulio Paolini, Alighiero Boetti, Gilberto Zorio), but also from Genoa (Emilio Prini), Bologna (Pier Paolo Calzolari), Rome (Jannis Kounellis, Pino Pascali), and Milan (Luciano Fabro). These artists expanded the fields of painting, sculpture, drawing, performance, and photography, often moving from one medium and technique to another without concern for a "signature style." They created bodies of works that were original, free-spirited and completely unconventional, building on earlier avant-gardes, including Situationism. They were not dogmatic. Their practices spearheaded what later became known as installation art, which they effectively invented. They employed everyday techniques to shape humble materials—both natural and artificial—into art works that generate meaningful experiences in the audience.

Generally, Arte Povera is defined as an art of heterogeneous and "poor" materials and techniques. But more importantly, the Arte Povera artists were interested in creating real situations of elementary energy, both physical-chemical as well as emotional-philosophical, and they combined this celebration of simple daily life situations with a respect for and an interest in the tradition and the history of high art through the centuries. Around 1969–72, they shared the platform of international exhibitions in Europe with many other artists in the fields of Post-minimalism, Conceptual art, Land art and performance art. But during the 1970s, most of them, including Penone, preferred to exhibit their work individually. They agreed, however, to "regroup" during the mid-1980s in a series of momentous group exhibitions that signaled a reengagement with the advanced art of the 1960s at the close of Neo-Expressionism in painting and sculpture.

Today, Arte Povera, and in particular the work of Penone, is enjoying yet another resurgence of interest. In some ways, this impulse towards the movement on the part of young artists, curators, museums, collectors, and intellectuals from different contexts around the world is related to an appreciation of the artistic freedom and ecological concerns shared by many of the artists— something to look towards when attempting to formulate an imaginative vision of a more balanced world and planet where nature and culture are once again in a state of equilibrium and respect. For the Arte Povera artists, indeed, nature and culture are mutually defined and related, since nature (all that is not artificial, not man-made, but springs up spontaneously) is a cultural concept, while culture is not exempt from nature but is subject to its laws. This attitude is particularly relevant today, in an age when decoding the genome implies more subtle and flexible boundaries between the natural and the artificial. The fiction and the real, the literal and the metaphorical, memory and perception are also continuous in their works. Such notions of interrelated systems are today our bread and butter. At the time when artists such as Penone started to make art, however, they were not.

The art of Penone embodies the interaction between human beings and the world. Nature and culture are mutually embedded and defined in his universe, which is both ecologically and anthropologically grounded. Since the late 1960s, the artist has explored notions of empirical knowledge and experience, focusing on human gestures such as touching, shaping or molding. In many of his works, therefore, the arts of imprinting, carving or casting form the basis of his technique. His art is rooted in a profound respect for, and love of, natural processes. Since the late 1960s, Penone has created works in the landscape itself, performing elemental gestures where the making of forms is shared between his agency and intentionality and the agency of other living beings, such as trees, or more slowly changing elements like rocks. These suggest the need for a slower pace than the speed of the advanced digital age, as well as a feeling of embodiment and rootedness in a location (versus the uprootedness and precarious living of global flows of people) and a remembering of more agrarian modes of living on the edges of the urban. He celebrates craft and the ability to follow the patterns and flows of the world, rather than imposing humanly conceived abstract mathematical forms and patterns onto the world.

In 1969, for example, in his studio in Garessio, Penone began to carve industrial wooden beams retransforming them into trees. With stubs shooting out in various directions where branches once were, these works seem at first glance like figurative sculptures. On a closer look, they reveal themselves to be the fruit of a very particular kind of labor: the artist has stripped away layers of softer wood following growth rings, until he has reached the shape of a younger tree at an earlier moment in its life, prior to being cut into the standard geometry of a beam. Artifice paradoxically reveals a more natural state of things. These works are thus based on the principle and process of "peeling back," reversing time.

Just as Penone explores and reveals the secret stories of a tree's growth by carving away layers of wood from a log to retrieve an earlier stage in the development of the tree from which it came, so too does he explore and map his own body. The body, like a tree, has a history of slow growth and change, marked for instance by the concentric circles of our fingerprints.

Simple techniques lie behind the scenes in Penone's sculpture, a celebration of each passage of matter, of each transformation involved, for example, in carving, molding and casting, from wood to crete to wax, to gesso, to brick ovens, to liquid bronze, to bronze entangled in the life and growth of laurel trees, where, like in the myth of Daphne and Apollo, the human and the non-human join their diverse temporalities and evolutions in the dance of the universe.

Because of this exploration of the notion of encounter, duality appears as a focus of Penone's work. Here, duality is not a concept detached from the real world—it is a question of the cosmos itself, related to the sun and how it falls on one side of a hill while the other remains dark; it is articulated through right and left, front and back, positive and negative. Duality can be a process of tending towards immortality through the generations, as in the making of a copy, a duplicate, like a cell splitting and producing another, or a body generating a son or daughter, or a tree a forest. The duplicate is never the same, and in the slow metamorphosis, the world is ever-changing and ever the same.

Duality can also appear as a mirror image, such as in the performance work of December 1970 when Penone walked up a country road, via Valcasotto, wearing mirror contact lenses, blinding himself, giving up his gaze to offer instead the mirror image reflected in the lenses covering his eyes, so that his audience would see the visual field that he would have observed without the lenses. In Penone's world, the mirror image is not immaterial, it is not produced in the mind; rather, it is a real substance made of light photons refracting off objects; its materiality, its consistency, is like a skin, an imprint. Here, a reflection is embodied matter, the liminal space of sculpture, the space of minimal touching of bodies.

Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev Let's go back to the genesis of the exhibition *Incidences of the Void*, which is conceived as a dialogue between works presented in the Church of San Francesco in Cuneo and the Castello di Rivoli Museum of Contemporary Art. In this double exhibition, the basic notions of the exhibition project seem to be the duality of the sites, which is reflected, both in their difference and their conjunction, through the duality between empty and full (a matrix in Cuneo and a double positive cast in Rivoli), but also through the relationship and difference between specularity, the mirror, on one side, and doubling, the copy, on the other.

Giuseppe Penone I would start by emphasizing the de-centrality of places. In the 1960s, the small museums scattered throughout Europe became de facto forges of thought. Centers like Mönchengladbach or Kleve in Germany—where I was able to present my work years ago—but also the Castello di Rivoli, appeared as apparently marginal realities, which however took on an international importance through the practices and personalities that gravitated around them. This phenomenon, perhaps due in Germany to the pietistic cells of German Romanticism, refers to a fictitious centrality, unhinged by the artistic commitment present within decentralized places. In my case, this commitment is also marked by my birth in Garessio, a small village in the province of Cuneo. And in Cuneo stands the Church of San Francesco— one of the two sites of this exhibition *Incidences of the Void*, built on a pre-existing building of the same name. The interior of the church has great impact, especially on the left side, where a part of the archaeological excavation is visible through a glass walkway. My first reaction when going through it was a sense of emptiness,

absence, but this void triggered the idea of presenting the horizontal work *Matrice* (Matrix, 2015) in this space. The perception of emptiness in *Matrice* is linked to the absence of a presence—that is, the preexisting church beneath. I wanted to recall this relationship through the work *Identità* (Identity, 2017), which I grafted onto the grounds in front of Castello di Rivoli.

It's also a relationship between positive and negative. I believe that the foundation of sculpture is the relationship between form and its model. The hand is the negative of the modeled clay; yet the clay in the hand is in some ways the positive of the hand itself. Such ambiguity, such passages, perhaps even unity, are present in *Matrice*.

CCB *Matrice* is a fir tree that, growing concentrically as trees do, has memorized its shape within its own material. You cut it longitudinally into two parts, almost like an open book, and emptied it. You thus created a negative of the tree at a specific moment in its existence. This negative presupposes its positive, which is present precisely through its absence, except for in one place, where a dark bronze form appears, a positive inside the hollow tree.

GP I cast in bronze inside of the alveolus, obtaining a positive of the same tree. As for the procedure, I made an impression with silicone. On the silicone, I poured the plaster, and wax was applied inside this refractory form. In the oven, the wax melts and the refractory plaster loses water. Bronze is poured into the void left by the wax. The bronze section has anthropomorphic shapes, and its length of about 170 centimeters is comparable to the height of an adult human being. This relationship between human and plant is also evident within the sculpture, where if you linger, you can see the fingerprints that shaped the wax as it was pressed into the form. It was also my intention to make clear that, once recomposed, the longitudinal sections and the bronze sculpture formed a single identity; the sign of this is the carbonation of the wood in the corresponding tree section in the second half of *Matrice*. Each of the parts that form the unity of the tree brings with it the traces of the process of its making. I had already experimented with the notion of identity and specularity in *Matrice di Linfa* (Lymph Matrix, 2008). In that case, the relationship between positive and negative, between full and empty, was also exemplary of any animate or inanimate subject of the cosmos. This natural logic of the evolution of things meets the human intention to visualize it, participate in it and even at times direct it.

CCB Could we speak, then, of an insertion of intentionality? Or perhaps better, an interference of the intention of an external subject, which in this case is the artist?

GP Yes, absolutely, keeping in mind that *Matrice* is also a reflection on the process of sculpture at work. The work is nourished by the process, by the action of sculpture. So it's about sculpture. I believe that sculpture is different from painting, or drawing, where there's a more immediate action. There are many actions, many passages, that aren't visible in the sculptural work.

CCB But if you think, for example, of the fresco-painting technique, there's also a series of actions —the preparation of the surface, the grinding of the colors, the problem of fixing. In this sense, there is an affinity with sculpture. Imagine the wonder of the shattered color! So I don't think that sculpture is so different from painting. Perhaps it is in a contemporary world in which everything can appear immediate, like squeezing from the tube of color and dipping in it with the brush.

GP However, sculpture has a precise characteristic. The theme of the double, of doubling, is typical of sculpture. From a model, you can reproduce two, three, four or more copies. You have an object

that can be duplicated, from negative to positive, from positive to negative, without losing content values.

CCB Yes, that is a specific problem of sculpture, while in photography, the problem is that of infinite multiplication, and of the gradualness of the gray transition. Photography has a whole history of variations, not doubles. Your sculptural practice emerges from a reflection on sculpture. And the work *Identità*, which you present at the Castello di Rivoli, establishes not only a direct correspondence with *Matrice*, but also with the installation you conceived in the Church in Cuneo, which includes your scale model earlier work *Identità* (Identity, 2003), and the preparatory drawings.

GP *Matrice* brings with it suggestions related to the notion of specularity, since rejoining all the sections of the pine recreates its identity. Specularity is the condition that defines the unity of a human body, animal and, in some way, even vegetable. *Identità*, on the other hand, is a work that plays on the level of duplication, understood as an action through which an entity is reproduced. When approaching two subjects obtained by duplication—the bronze tree with its aluminum copy above—these elements can't be integrated, because the principle of specularity doesn't apply. These are two entities with their own identity—a bit like Cuneo and Rivoli: they touch each other, since they're both exhibition venues where we've chosen to present the works, but each maintains irreconcilable distinctive features. The work *Identità* is a bronze tree, on which I grafted an albino upside-down aluminum copy that seems to dematerialize the wooden physicality of the plant. I imposed a sort of symmetry on these two non-specular trees using mirrors. By producing a refraction of the branches on both sides, the mirrors rejoin each tree with its own reflected specular identity.

CCB The mirrors are therefore inserted not in a physical space of emptiness to be filled, but in that ethereal place of specularity, the only one in which there can be symmetry. This isn't the first time that you've addressed the notion of reflection using mirrors.

GP In 1969, I presented an exhibition project in the spaces of the Toselli gallery, in which I asked myself about the mirroring of space and of the image. On that occasion, the gallery floor was reflected on the ceiling and vice versa, through mirrors aligned to the floor height, among other things. Also, on the occasion of *Between Man and Matter*, the Tokyo Biennale in 1970, I presented a work on the theme of image reflection, creating a relationship between exterior and interior through a series of mirrors that reflected the inside outside and the outside inside, in a rebound path. The play of reflections continued outside, in the water basin in the garden. In the series *Rovesciare i propri occhi* (Reversing One's Eyes, 1970) I used mirrored contact lenses. We also presented that work in the form of a slide show on the occasion of the 16th Sydney Biennial *Revolutions–Forms That Turn*, which you curated in 2008. I would have exhibited it during the Paris Biennale at the Parc Floral in 1971, but there were no conditions to do so, since the slide show couldn't be projected without walls. For the Tokyo Biennale in 1970, rather than reflection, the initial intuition was to connect two geographically distant points—Tokyo and Turin—by means of a tree whose trunk would have ideally crossed the earth's crust on an axis, emerging from one side with its branches and leaves, and on the other side with its roots—a sort of ubiquity or unity. The work wasn't realized, but a drawing of the proposal exists.

CCB If you draw a geographical and temporal axis between the trees you planted in Sydney in 2008 and Kassel in 2012 (in fact, on the occasion of dOCUMENTA (13) there was also a second tree in Kabul), you realize that we achieved a similar imaginary global operation in some respects forty years later. And now we're repeating the gesture with *Identità*, a vertical tree at the Castello di Rivoli and *Matrice*, a tree that cuts horizontally through the nave of the Church of San Francesco in Cuneo.

GP It seems so!

CCB The use of mirrors is a gesture that you've also used elsewhere, like in the halls of the Louvre museum in Abu Dhabi. *Leaves of Light – Trees*, 2016, which is part of the *Germination* sculptural ensemble, is the bronze reproduction of a wild cherry tree, whose branches are set with stainless-steel mirrors. This work precedes *Identità*, but in reality the drawings and the preparatory studies of the latter date back to years prior to the work for the Louvre.

GP Yes. *Germination* actually came to life from a series of drawings sketched out in 1968, in which I studied the growth of trees by inserting stones into the bifurcations of the trunks. This series was titled *Zona d'ombra* (Shadow Zone), referring to the point that would have been occupied by the growth of the tree's branches, where no light could shine. For the work presented at the Louvre Abu Dhabi, I instead followed a reverse process, inserting triangles made of mirrors into the bifurcations of the branches of a tree, whose thick branches extended to the point of looking for the light and establishing a dialogue with the "pluie de lumière" of the dome designed by Jean Nouvel.

CCB You mentioned earlier the bifurcations of the branches of the two trees that make up *Identità*, inside which you've set the mirrors. The phenomenon of the bifurcation is also present in *Suture* (Sutures, 1987–91), a form of skull exposed in the apse of the Church of San Francesco. I'm particularly struck by the emphasis you've placed on the skull, rather than on brain matter.

GP In the Church in Cuneo, *Suture* dialogues with the architecture of the apse, which seems to follow the features of a human skull, with the forehead turned towards the faithful. While *Matrice* represents the backbone of the church, *Suture* represents the brain of the tree, as if to indicate the continuity between human, natural, and architectural bodies. The monumental sculpture is modulated in the shape of the human skull structure, divided into four sections by steel blades, which connect the terminal points of the sutures. The work stems from my intention to make a sculpture through a sign, almost made with a pencil—a hatching that imitates cranial sutures, or rather those fixed joints between the bones of the human skull. This is the second time I've exhibited the work in a church. The first was in Reims, in the église de Courmelois, Val de Vesle, in 1991. But in that case, *Suture* wasn't in the apse. It was also exhibited in Rivoli on the second floor of the Castello on the occasion of the personal exhibition in 1991.

CCB Inside the sculpture, you've inserted a Y support, mainly for reasons of stability. This bifurcation is formed by a steel cylinder covered with Plexiglas; between the two materials you poured earth, alluding to the sedimentation and stratification of our memory. Clearly, the use of the internal support is linked to a structural problem, but it brings to mind the triangle that is one of the foundations of contemporary organicist architecture: energy-synergetic geometry, summarized by

Richard Buckminster Fuller's 1949 geodesic dome. Also in *Suture*, the skull-sculpture blades and the Y support work together to create a new, more stable structure.

GP It was the most functional and least invasive way to support this bronze skull. But there's more. The Y-structure mimics the bifurcation process that's present in the synapses or nerves of the leaves, one of the most frequently occurring phenomena in nature.

CCB On a level of instinctive perception, one might think that the two sculptures *Matrice* and *Suture* are respectively the body and the head of a sleeping giant, whose thought materializes in *Identità*, also exhibited inside the Church, recalling the monumental sculpture at the entrance of the Castello di Rivoli.

GP I can't imagine the brain as a "full" entity. For me, it's a mental space more than anything else. Furthermore, the differentiation between solid and soft matter isn't defined. The skull is a shell whose conjunctions, which I like to call "brain leaves," alter their volume in accordance with potential brain deformations. The skull is a solid and yet malleable material whose structure was a subject of study by Goethe. Starting from the paradigm of comparative morphology, the product of Goethe's scientific discovery is summarized in the foliar origin of the different flower structures, passing through the skull from transformed vertebrae up to the intuition of the existence of the intermaxillary bone in the skull human, so that the corresponding suture is today called the *sutura incisiva goethei*.

CCB The suture is therefore a point of conjunction, a site in which two parts unite. However, it's not linear, but a complex interlocking, a meeting in which the two sections once again maintain their own identity. If I think of the skull as an envelope, I imagine it as a sort of tree bark and I naturally remember your series *Gesti vegetali* (Vegetal Gestures, 1983–86) and the sculpture *Dafne* (Daphne, 2014), also on display.

GP Actually, *Dafne* dialogues seamlessly with *Matrice*. It was made by the same process, although inverted. If in *Matrice* the human imprint is present inside the bronze arboreal section and the imprint of the trunk of the tree is outside, in *Dafne* the human footprint is visible in the outer bark while inside, the sculpture reproduces the veining of the laurel wood that served as a model. It's as if, in making this work, I touched, almost caressed, the surface of the tree, wrapping its surface.

CCB The title of the work recalls the myth of Daphne and Apollo. The latter is infatuated with the nymph because of an arrow shot by Cupid. He begins to chase her, and Daphne, to escape his uncontrolled male desire, asks her father, the river god Peneus, to save her by dissolving her form. This is how the metamorphosis of the nymph into a laurel tree takes place, a plant that Apollo considered sacred from then on and used it to adorn his head, his lyre and his quiver.

GP Yes, I called this sculpture *Dafne* because it's modeled on a laurel tree. The story of Daphne and Apollo can be useful in understanding a purely natural factor: the laurel is a plant that reacts by releasing an intense fragrance, to defend it from insect and animal attacks.

CCB I believe that the myth of Daphne and Apollo, as opposed to the myth of the sculptor Pygmalion—who succeeds in satisfying his desire to animate his own sculpture—says a lot about

the condition of the artist, constantly intent on grasping reality and understanding it, yet this reality escapes; its vitality is never grasped. This myth is for me indicative of a certain human desire to obtain the elusive. In your *Dafne*, however, the physical contact between the material and the sculptor is predominant.

GP It's also in the *Gesti vegetali* series. These works start from a profound reflection on the relationship between human and plant, on their real and potential interaction. But to better explain, I could mention another of my works, *Trattenere 6, 8, 12 anni di crescita* (Holding Back 6, 8, 12 Years of Growth, 2004–16), which is a sculptural installation in which a bronze hand grasps the trunk of a tree. If the human breath were aligned with that of the tree and if that hand could actually hold the plant for a long time, the latter would be modeled, if not forced, to grow around the hand. This work dates back to my first artistic intervention, in the *Alpi maritime* (Maritime Alps, 1968), in which I grabbed a tree with a gesture — *Continuerà a crescere tranne che in quell punto* (It Will Continue to Grow Except at That Point). However, as human beings, we don't share a synchrony of growth with plants. I mentioned this work because, like *Gesti vegetali*, it starts from a reflection on the empty and full, on changing the identity of an organic being through human gestures. In *Gesti vegetali*, however, it's the plant that modifies the anthropomorphic sculpture, adapting itself to the body and modifying its features. Since the early 1980s, I've been experimenting, imitating the embrace of the vegetable world. Think of ivy or wisteria, anchoring to a surface. I covered mannequins with clay, on which I created furrows with my fingers. In these furrows I poured the wax and from the wax the bronze. I therefore obtained a partial wrapping of the shape of this body that looks like bark, inside of which I allowed plants to grow. Enveloping the sculpture, the latter directed and modified the final form. Sometimes, in order to guarantee its stability, I added bronze branches to the works, trying to reproduce figuratively the action of the plant. In the case of our exhibition in the Church of San Francesco, the *Gesti vegetali* dialogue with the side niches from which the light filters, continuing to grow and to knot spontaneously, without the live plant.

CCB: A precedent to *Gesti vegetali* is the work *Patate* (Potatoes, 1977), a heap of real potatoes among which the artist placed five bronze elements that stand out for their material and their recognizable shapes. Penone uprooted the young potatoes and placed them in casts of parts of his head— his nose, his mouth, his profile, his eyes, his ear—and then put them back into the earth. The potatoes grew in the shapes of the casts, adapting to those forms. Once cultivated, these "humanoid" potatoes were cast in bronze to preserve their forms and installed with other, real potatoes. This work suggests both the beauty of simple and "poor" materials or foods, and the ways in which nature is constantly modified by human efforts.

The relationship between positive and negative seems to link all the works displayed in Cuneo. *Gesti vegetali* suggests the negative of a human body; *Dafne* not only presents the negative of the laurel trunk but also that of the human hands that have touched the surface of the trunk; in *Suture*, the volume of the skull indicates the volume of the brain; in *Matrice*, the alveolus of the trunk is the negative of the internal marrow of the tree. And in the game of doubling, multiplication and duplication of *Identità* at Castello di Rivoli, the positive and negative are revealed on a level of mirrors and reflections. This is a universe of "Incidences of the Void," and their tension toward the constant potentiality of plenitude.