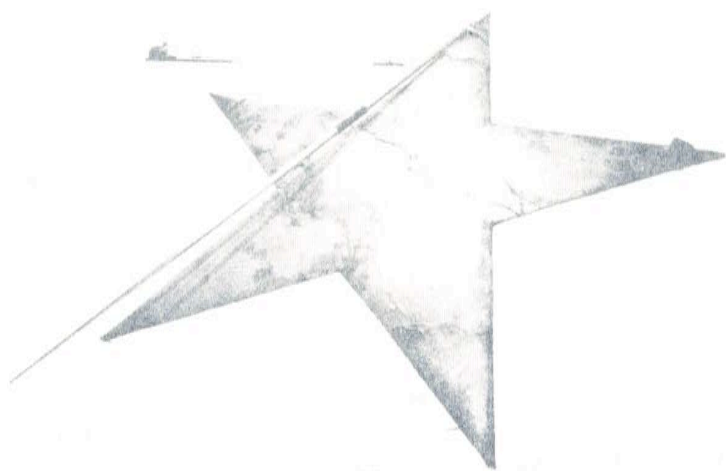


Stella per purificare le parole (Star to Purify Words), 1978



The Italian sculptor Gilberto Zorio developed his work in the context of Arte Povera, or “poor art,” a movement centered in Turin and so named (by curator and critic Germano Celant) for the humble materials the artists employed. The group of twelve artists which also included Giovanni Anselmo, Luciano Fabro, Jannis Kounellis, Giulio Paolini (MATRIX 101) and Michelangelo Pistoletto (MATRIX 31), began exhibiting together in 1967. They shared a dissatisfaction with the political and social status quo, as well as with the constraints of the then-dominant minimalist and Pop art styles. Like certain young American “anti-form” and earth artists of the time—Eva Hesse, Bruce Nauman, Richard Serra, Robert Smithson—and such British and German artists as Richard Long and Joseph Beuys, these young Italians began to create art that favored process over final result and informal arrangements over discrete geometric objects. They contested the critical value of the art object, conceiving their works in relationship to the exhibition site, and refused to accord a hierarchy to media or materials. Rather, they claimed for themselves the freedom to work with an unlimited range of materials in a raw state, sometimes mutable and unstable, and often taken in an unmodified form from nature.

Gilberto Zorio was born in Andorno Micca in 1944. His mother was a painter and his father had a construction business. From his earliest years, Zorio loved to model putty and plastiline. His parents responded to his passion for making objects by enrolling Zorio in an arts and ceramics high school; he received further formal training in the local art academy.

Along with the traditional artistic techniques and materials he was exposed to at school, Zorio drew inspiration from the building methods and materials he discovered at his father’s construction sites. Furthermore, through the culturally rich environment of Turin, he was well aware of international contemporary art developments. From the time of his first exhibition at the Galleria Sperone in Turin at the age of twenty-three, Zorio’s concern with the physical expression of energy, dynamism, and transformation has been apparent. Reflecting the general interest in the energy inherent in raw materials among avant-garde artists of the time, Zorio broke away from what he described as the “pleasure of tactility.” He began to make works that were formed by chemical processes, such as evaporation, distillation, or fire. Works like *Tent* (1967), in which sea water was transformed into salt through crystallization, have been called “events/sculptures” because they manifest mutation through time.

The four works that compose the current exhibition exemplify Zorio’s more recent emphasis on theatrical event and dynamic symbolism. The five-pointed star has been a part of the artist’s lexicon since a 1972 bas relief self-portrait on leather on which two red stars replace eyes. Since then, Zorio has fashioned stars from glass and terra-cotta and drawn them with blow torches and lasers. The star as a sign is said to have originated with Chaldean astronomers who derived its shape by tracing the union of the five points occupied during eight years by Venus (the Venus pentagram). To Zorio, it represents a perfect, almost immortal form

that suggests energy and flux, but also order and stability. He also views the star as a metaphor for the imaginable but unreachable. The star in *Stella per purificare le parole* (Star to Purify Words), 1978, is made of alcohol-stained leather and supported by a javelin, another recurring element of ancient origin in Zorio’s work. Two points rest on the floor and the other three are held aloft by a nylon filament attached to the ceiling and connected to the tip of the javelin. The javelin, first used by the artist after a trip to Japan in a 1969 work titled *Radical Fluidity*, was inspired by Japanese archers who, through intense interior training, can hit a target from hundreds of yards away as if guided by Zen spirit. According to Zorio, the javelin is an instrument whose “design has perfected through the millennia [and has] reached absolute beauty.” It relates to the body as an extension of the arm and a masculine symbol of movement and thrust. The star and the javelin coexist and support each other, for “if you remove the javelin, the star is left incomplete.” Dualities exist in all of Zorio’s work. The star itself is associated with both darkness and light. In its manifestation here it is both floorbound and suspended, “energy nailed to the floor.” It is fabricated of materials both vegetable (soft) and mineral (hard).

Per purificare le parole, 1989 (Zorio uses the title repeatedly), is one of a series of dramatic, aerodynamic works that look like alchemical laboratory instruments. A stainless steel rod, projecting from the wall in the shape of an arc, supports a terra-cotta vessel into which feeds a pyrex funnel. It is counterbalanced by a shorter metal rod with a rubber-sheathed knob at its end.

The funnel, containing a piece of copper tubing, is filled with alcohol. When the alcohol evaporates, a black residue forms at the bottom. The precariously balanced structure is the artist’s fantastic distilling machine, an apparatus that implies participation to perform its purifying function; in the artist’s words, it “inebriates and gives words plastic meaning.” It also functions as a metaphor for the human body; the artist once said, “Each human is a container of minerals and water; his veins, his lungs and organs are an extraordinary chemical laboratory made of tubes and alembics.” As in the star, Zorio has combined organic (alcohol, rubber, terra-cotta) and nonorganic materials (metal, glass). He has often used terra-cotta, a substance irreversibly transformed by fire, which, as the first moldable artificial stone, he regards as man’s original synthetic material. Another elegant work of the same year, *Serpentine*, also juts out from the wall, but the copper tubing that holds the glass container follows a convoluted, undulating course before straightening in its final extension. A group of Zorio’s works seen together has the aspect of a spectacle. The delicate equilibrium on which each sculpture is based and its attendant potential for risk generates a subtle metaphysical tension and exhilaration. Like a natural being, the work, in the artist’s words, “lives on its own...its essence is irreversible.”

Constance Lewallen
Guest Curator

Works in MATRIX:

Stella per purificare le parole (Star to Purify Words), 1978, leather, javelin, alcohol, 88 x 90 x 24". Courtesy of Margo Leavin Gallery, Los Angeles.

Per purificare le parole (For Purifying Words), 1989, stainless steel, pyrex, terra-cotta, rubber, alcohol, 42 x 112 x 65". Courtesy of Margo Leavin Gallery, Los Angeles, and SteinGladstone Gallery, New York.

Serpentine, 1989, copper, glass, wax, alcohol, 63 x 32 x 48". Anne and William J. Ilokin Collection.

Untitled, 1991, mixed media on two sheets of paper, 62 x 54". Courtesy of Margo Leavin Gallery, Los Angeles, and SteinGladstone Gallery, New York.

Selected one-person exhibitions:

Galleria Sperone, Turin, Italy '67 (catalog); '69, '71, '73, '74; Galleria Toselli, Milan, Italy '70, '74; Kunstmuseum, Lucerne, Switzerland '76 (catalog); Galleria Christian Stein, Turin '79, '82, '86; Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam '79 (catalog); Sonnabend Gallery, NYC, '81, '88; Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris '86 (catalog); Galleria Christian Stein, Milan '87, '90; Stedelijk van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven, The Netherlands '87; SteinGladstone, NYC '91; Centro per l'Arte Contemporanea Luigi Pecci, Prato, Italy '92 (catalog includes complete biographical listing).

Selected group exhibitions:

Leo Castelli Warehouse, NYC, *9 at Castelli* '68; Kunsthalle, Bern, Switzerland, *When Attitudes Become*

Form '69 (catalog); Kassel, W. Germany, *Documenta 5* '72 (catalog); Biennale of Sydney, Australia '76 (catalog); The Art Institute of Chicago, *Europe in the Seventies: Aspects of Recent Art* '77 (traveled; catalog); The Museum of Modern Art, NYC, *An International Survey of Recent Painting and Sculpture* '84 (catalog); P.S.1, NYC, *The Knot, Arte Povera at P.S.1* '85 (catalog); *Biennale di Venezia* '86 (catalog); Wexner Center for the Arts, Ohio State University, *Breakthrough: Avant-Garde Artists in Europe and America, 1950-1990* '91 (catalog); Kassel, Germany, *Documenta 9* '92 (catalog).

Selected recent bibliography in English (see also catalogs under exhibitions):

Westfall, Stephen. "Arte Povera at P.S.1," *Art in America* (May '86).

Wechsler, L. "Gilberto Zorio," *Artforum* (Oct. '86).

Zorio, Gilberto. "Gilberto Zorio," *New Art International*, n.3-4, Paris (March '87).

Smith, Roberta. "Arte Povera Installations: Engineering Alchemy," *The New York Times* (20 May '88).

Donald Kuspit, "Gilberto Zorio, Sonnabend Gallery," *Artforum* (Oct. '88).

Kimmelman, Michael. "The Alchemy of Gilberto Zorio," *The New York Times* (7 June '91).

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