

Border Crossings  
December 2013

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

# BORDERCROSSINGS

GIUSEPPE  
PENONE

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04

One Hour  
The Clock

## The Perfection of the Tree and Other Material Concerns



# An Interview With Giuseppe Penone

by Robert Enright

In London this summer at the Whitechapel Gallery, I experienced something close to the aesthetic sublime. In the main gallery, stretching 12 metres in length, were eight tree segments, all of which were positioned parallel to the floor and standing on limbs made from branches. The initial effect was a feeling of having interrupted the ambulatory movement of some chthonic tree creature. It was as if it had unearthed itself and was setting out on a journey.

But whatever primitive apprehension I might have had was quickly replaced by a sense of wonder. The tree segments revealed themselves to be made of cast wax. They had a raw, handmade quality and everywhere on their surface—evidence of manual labour—were visible fingerprints. The inside of the segments were tree-bark covered in gold leaf. As you looked down its length, or into separate sections through holes where branches had once been, you experienced a combination of dizziness and dazzlement, as if your body were being drawn inside the hollowed spaces of the sculpture, and then transported away. As I said, it was some kind of sublime.

The piece, the fourth Bloomberg Commission in which an international artist is invited to make a work of art specifically for the Whitechapel, was called *Spazio di luce* (*Space of Light*), and it was installed in the gallery from September 5, 2012 to October 26, 2013. Like all Penone's best work, it embodied a rich layer of complementary meanings: the space of light described the gold interior of the tree; it acknowledged the space of the architecture it occupied (the Whitechapel is a converted library); and it formed a material connection to the book itself, a holder of the light of knowledge, and an object made from paper, a product of the tree's transformation.

*Space of Light* returned Penone to an early work from 1969 in which he had decided to add a ring of wax to a tree. In the process, he realized that the wax registered two impressions; the bark of the tree and the press of his finger. That double identity, of nature and man, is fully expressed in this recent work as well; the hot-wax casting replicates the outer surface of the bark on the inside of the sculpture, and on the outside it records the labour of the foundry workers who prepared the tree for casting by covering it in wax. Their fingerprints are both the representation and the memory of touch.

Penone is the most hands-on sculptor of his generation; given the opportunity he would alter the Cartesian ontology to "I touch, therefore I am." In an interview with Benjamin Buchloh in 2012, Penone said, "the print of skin is for me the most democratic image that can be conveyed...It's an image that leads human beings back to matter, to nature."

Penone's own origins made it clear that nature mattered. His earliest works, realized when he was only 21 years old, were interventions in nature that were simple in execution but complex in implication. In 1969 he wrote that he wished "the relationship between myself and things to be equal." In conjoining his hand with a tree, and in measuring the imprint of his body and breath in nature, he was already working towards that equality of self and world. More than two decades later he would recognize the importance of those early enactments in nature: "In the month of May 1969, I entered the forest of wood and began walking at a slow tempo, reflective and surprised, attentive to every small form enclosed within the fluid wood. It was then that this cathedral rose up from the silent world of matter, to enter into the world of sculpture and the poetic use of reality." For the last 45 years the poetic shaping of reality through inhabiting a world of sculpture is the combination that has characterized his astonishing achievement.

Giuseppe Penone has had over 160 one-person exhibitions around the world since 1968. His most recent exhibitions are "Penone Versailles," 22 sculptures in the formal gardens of the Palais Versailles (on exhibition from June 11 to October 31, 2013), and three 30-foot-tall bronze sculptures installed in Madison Square Park in New York City until February 9, 2014.

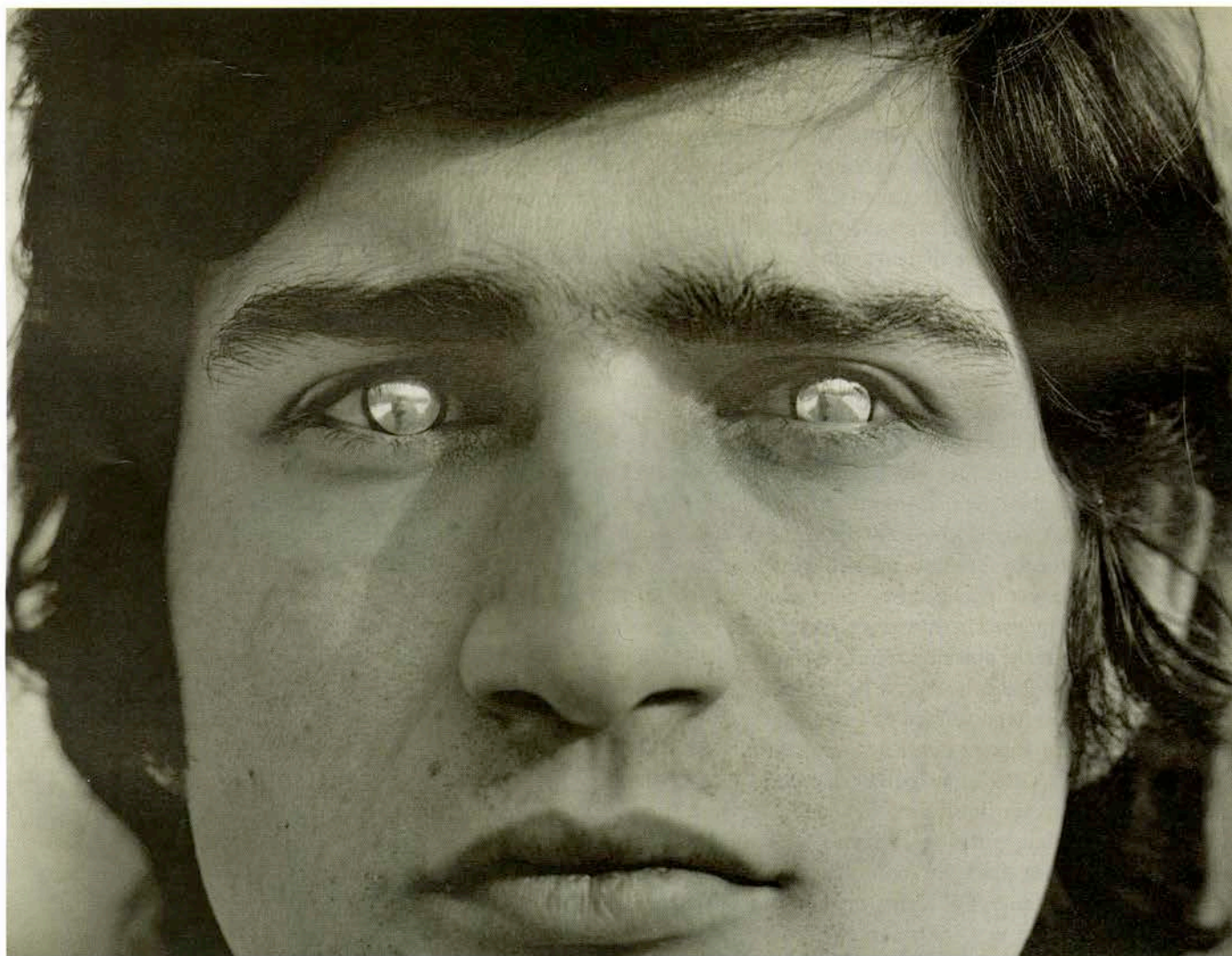
The following interview was conducted by phone to Giuseppe Penone's studio in Torino, Italy on Thursday, October 3, 2013. *Border Crossings* would like to thank Ruggero Penone for his help in translation.

**Border Crossings:** You have continued to live in the area around where you were born. Has that been for practical or emotional reasons?

Giuseppe Penone: It is true. I was born 120 kilometres from where I live now, in a little mountain village between Piedmont and Liguria. Liguria is closer to the sea. But when I started making work,

with them until 1970 in Bologna. But were you already sympathetic to the kind of work they were making?

Yes. I started my work in 1968, but I was very young, only 21 years of age. My work was selected by Germano Celant for a book with the title *Arte Povera* that was published in 1969. It was mainly a book about Italian artists but there was also an international component that included artists from Germany and America. It was about what was happening in that moment in the determination and situation of art. From 1969 on, my work was presented along with the artists of *Arte Povera*.



Torino was a very interesting town for art with a strong community of artists, including Mario Merz, Giovanni Anselmo, Michelangelo Pistoletto, Gilberto Zorio and Giulio Paolini. It was very active, similar to the situation in Düsseldorf with Beuys and Richter and Polke. I'm speaking about the end of the '60s and the beginning of the '70s.

By 1967 the Italian artists you mention are designated as *Arte Povera*, although you didn't show

You also start showing with Gian Enzo Sperone in Torino. Was his gallery instrumental in galvanizing the activity that was happening in Turin?

Absolutely. Sperone was very young, too, and his gallery catalyzed things. What was interesting was that he worked very closely at that time with Illeana Sonnabend who had a gallery in Paris from 1967–70, and many artists of this group showed with her. She also had a relationship with Leo Castelli in New York.

1. *To turn one's eyes inside out*, 1970. Photograph: © Archivio Penone.

2. *Pumpkins*, 1978–1979. Photograph: © Archivio Penone.

How were you so confident at such a young age? I'm thinking of the "Maritime Alps" series ("Alpi Marittima") from 1968, works like *My Height, the Length of my Arm, my Breath in a Stream* and *The Tree Shall Remember the Contact*. This was very rigorous work for such a young artist.

I didn't go to art school but instead went to a commercial school. When I was 19, I attended the Academy of Art in Torino, but after one year I realized I was not interested in the kind of art production the school was suggesting. I asked myself, what can I do, and I started to think about my identity. My interest even then was in sculpture,

elements as a way of understanding the reality that surrounds us.

Minimal art was in evidence; in America Michael Heizer and Robert Smithson were doing land art; and using your own body introduces the idea of body art. Were you aware of these movements in other countries to which you had a parallel relationship?

I had some information but the difference for me, with land art for example, started from an idea of form. Heizer has this large surface of land to do the work but the form in my view was closer

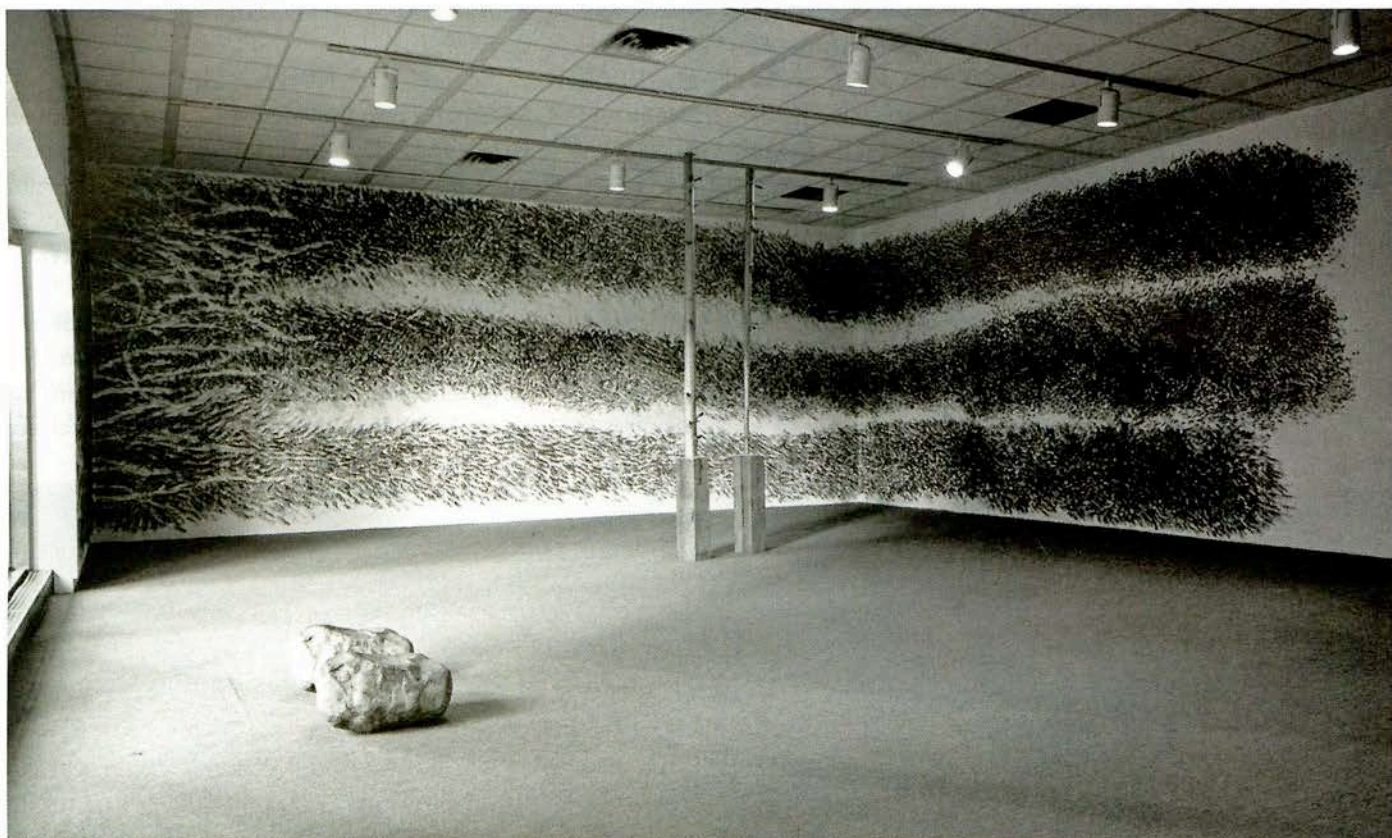


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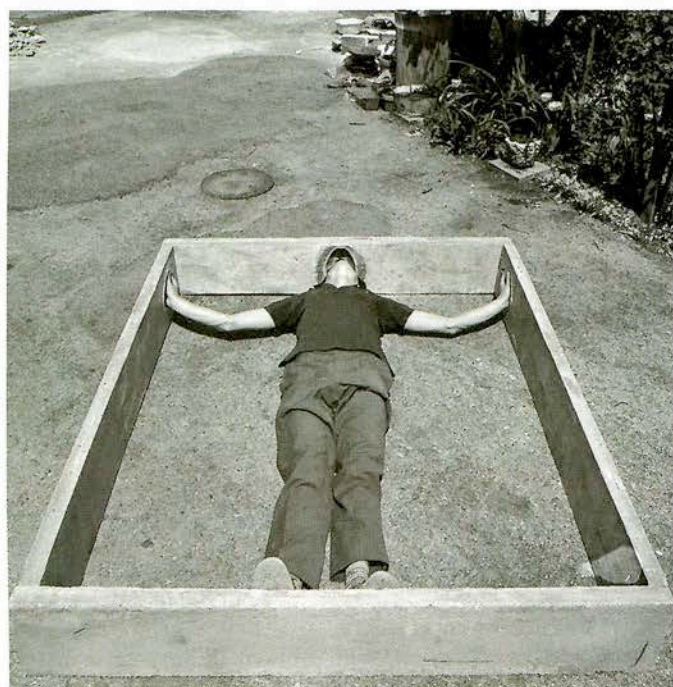
which is what all my work has been about. The idea of the hand in the tree was to take a piece of clay in the shape of the negative of my hand and make a gesture inside the material; this very simple gesture but with a different material. It was a simplification of the idea of sculpture, something that was in the spirit of the time. Minimal art was also a kind of simplification; there was a necessity to find a new vocabulary to do art, so it was necessary to start with a *tabula rasa*, to start with very simple

to Malevich, who worked in very little space. Malevich would start from the idea of something that you see from the sky, like the land art work. We have to remember that at the time satellites were being used more, and NASA was in full operation. I think those things were a big influence on the conception of land art.

But your work was so much more intimate. It quite literally is about touch. Is that why skin,



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1. Foreground: Giuseppe Penone, *To Be River 2*, 1981, 1 river stone, 1 quarry stone, 2 elements, 40 x 40 x 50 cm each, *7-meters Tree*, 1980, fir wood, 2 elements, 350 x 30 x 30 cm each. On the wall: *Pressure 9*, 1983, charcoal on wall, installation view, National Gallery of Canada. Collection of National Gallery of Canada.

2-3. *Maritime Alps. My height, the length of my arms, my width in a stream*, 1968. Photograph: © Archivio Penone.

4. *Breaths*, 1978, terra cotta, installation view, Centre Pompidou, Paris, 2004. Photograph: © Archivio Penone.

5. *Eyelids* (detail), 1989-1991 charcoal on felt, plaster, 18 elements, total dimensions 500 x 1500 cm. Toyota Municipal Museum of Art collection, Japan. Photograph: © Archivio Penone.

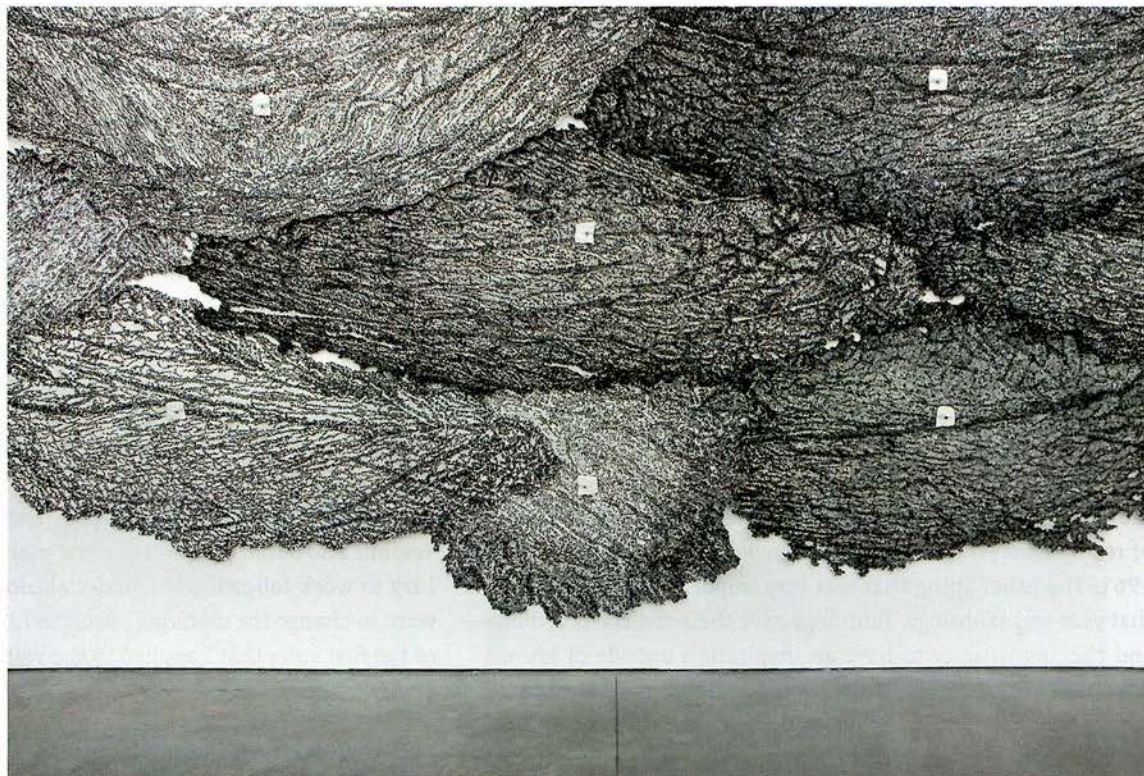


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Following pages:

1. *Potatoes*, 1977, 5 bronze elements, potatoes, Garessio. Photograph: © Archivio Penone.

2. *12-meters Tree*, 1980, larch wood, 1200 x 50 x 50 cm, installation view, Guggenheim Museum, New York, 1982. Photograph: © Carmelo Guadagno.



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which is the surface that separates the inside from the outside, is so important to you?

There is a very simple reason. In my thinking, touch is the first form of understanding reality. With a child there is first of all touch and from there he starts to learn to see. Through touch you can alter your understanding of reality because you can think, for example, that material is hard but it is actually soft. Viewing something can give you the idea it is hard but touch can correct that perception. But the body is the first instrument that man has with which he can do something, so it was the idea of trying to reach a simplification of all the processes of sculpture. I was also dealing with the eye and the reflection of the image; when I put the mirror on my eye in *Rovesciare i propri occhi* (*To turn one's eyes inside out*), 1970, I closed my body. The space of my body became something like a sculpture because when you have your eyes open, the space outside goes inside your mind.

I think of your work as profoundly phenomenological. In addition to touch, I'm trying to figure out which of the senses you most heavily engage in making the work.

I think that phenomenology in art was related to the problem of our desire to understand how reality was changed. Basically, the big change occurred after the Second World War, when people could travel anywhere in the world and communication became very fast. It completely changed the sense of limits that we'd had before. But the social and political structure was not ready for these changes. Artists understood that and they began to reflect these changes in contemporary reality. The work was related to physical or chemical phenomena and to the necessity of finding a new language for art that was not conventional. The most interesting work was being done by artists who were moving in that direction. I think of Manzoni's understanding of reality when he did the *Socle du monde* (*Base of the World*) in 1961. The other thing that was very important in the work of that year was tautology. Tautology gave the artist the possibility and the opportunity to have an inspiration outside of known structures. For example, artists could use objects or they could use material. Jasper Johns painted the flag with the colour of the flag, so it became a kind of tautology. It was in Manzoni and also in Yves Klein, whose blue is a kind of tautology. So there was a complexity of reasons. I don't entirely understand how it happened but there was an intuition about what made up reality.

You eroticize art and nature in a way. I think of your small, fired clay sculptures, the *Pages of Earth*, from 1987, that look like

the female sex. Do you have the sense that one of the things you were doing was to eroticize the whole idea of material and nature?

Sure. I think there is a kind of pleasure in making the work and this pleasure is inside the material. When you touch the material it gives you one good reason for doing the work. So in

that work I moved the clay and a kind of human skin appeared on the surface of the material. This was also related to the form of my hand. It is true that I am interested in the sensuality of the material. I also think that understanding the material is something that is very important in the work of any artist. I don't personally believe it is possible to do a good work of art if the artist doesn't know the material. It isn't sufficient if the work is done through a mechanical or intellectual process. The

material gives you a different understanding of reality than the one you might have when you understand the image as something that pre-exists.



Does the material speak to you directly?

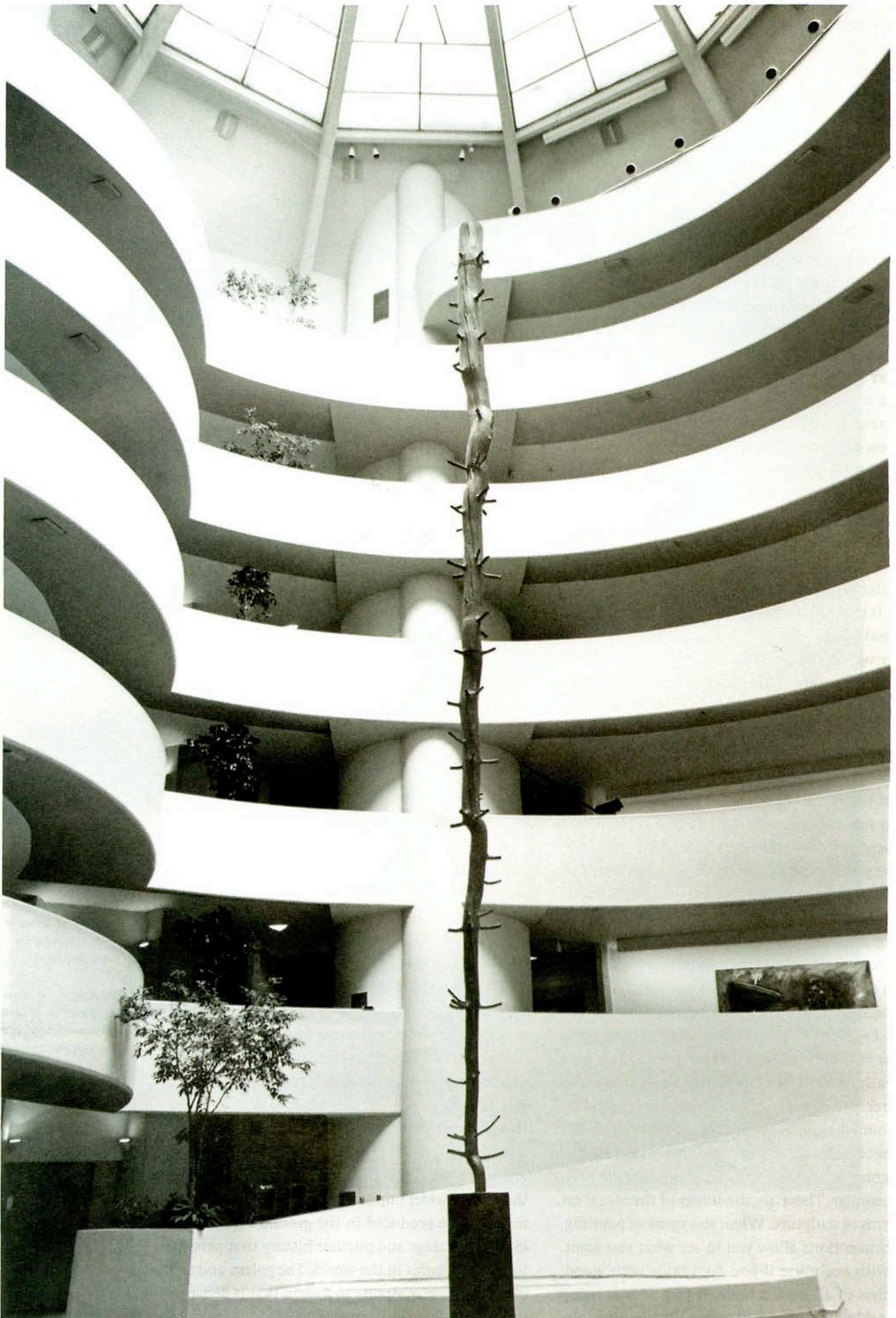
The material is always the same in its sensuality. One of the reasons why someone would want to do a sculpture with clay comes from that attraction. It is related to the myth of Pygmalion and Galatea where he falls in love with the sculpture he has made. This is just an example but it is true that if you do a figure in clay the material is very sensual, because the clay is in water, so to speak. It's like living material and it changes when you touch it. When the clay becomes dry you lose that vitality. For that reason, the process is very important in my work. Sometimes the process itself is the content of the work.

You have said that without the process the work can't get made. In one way, you are a kind of pragmatist. You are very practical in the way you come at the making of art.

Yes, but also because I don't use one material to do all the work. I try to work following the material, not against it. So I don't want to change the material; I want to follow its lead. It was one of the first rules that I applied to the work. After, you can move in any direction.

There is another Greek myth in which Zeus transforms himself into a cloud so that he can seduce Io. You've even made work out of breath, which is about as intimate as sculpture can possibly get. What compelled you to make work out of something as delicate and insubstantial as breathing?

It was the same reason that made me want to work with touch and the image of skin. Everybody generates a large number of



images when their hands touch objects; it is a kind of dissemination of images in the world. This image is the identity of the person, and strangely, we spend a lot of time cleaning away the images that we produce. We have to make the surface clean again before we do another image. This is something that has given me a lot of ideas for the work I do, this idea that the image is not a product of thinking but a product of the body. It is like an animal image. The breath is something that is close because when you breathe, you take the air inside and you change its composition. When you put it outside the air is different. It's visible in winter-time, for example, when we can see the form. It is very similar to the process of traditional sculpture when you have a plaster mold and you put the plaster inside the mold, and after you break the mold to have the sculpture. You introduce a different form in the air around you and this process will follow you all your life. So I was influenced by the idea that we produce a lot of sculptural images throughout our life.

I'm intrigued by the breath works, like *Breathing the Shadow*, as well as the gourd sculptures, where you literally impress your own face in the vegetation. Is that piece about you as much as it is about the material?

In answer to the first work that you mentioned, *Respirare l'ombra*. This "Soffio" work was from 1998. The idea was that I would breathe the form of my breath out into space; through the leaves I put the outside space inside the body. That was the reason behind the work. To answer your question about the gourd: in that case I had done a mold of my face and I put a plaster mold close to where the vegetable was growing; I had a form, the fruit of the growing pumpkin, and it took the shape of the negative of the mold that was there. This was in 1978. A year earlier, I had done a very similar thing with potatoes. I put a little mold of my face in the soil close to the potato and the potato took on the form of an eye, a mouth or a nose. The idea was to produce a sculpture without touching the sculpture. I wanted to give an anthropomorphic form to the vegetable in a way that was continuous with my early work, in which the hand was growing in the tree. But it was also because our understanding and our interest in the image is very limited. We can recognize the form of our body and we can recognize geometric form. Trees, for me, are basically similar. These are the limits of the visual art in terms of sculpture. When you speak of painting, the conventions allow you to see what you want. But with sculpture if you do a table with wood, you first of all have a table; if you do a drawing of a table, you have a drawing. In this way, the



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possibility of expression in sculptural language is very specific and different from the possibilities of expression in the other arts.

I always felt the earth vegetables—the pumpkins and potatoes—were a tribute in part to your upbringing.

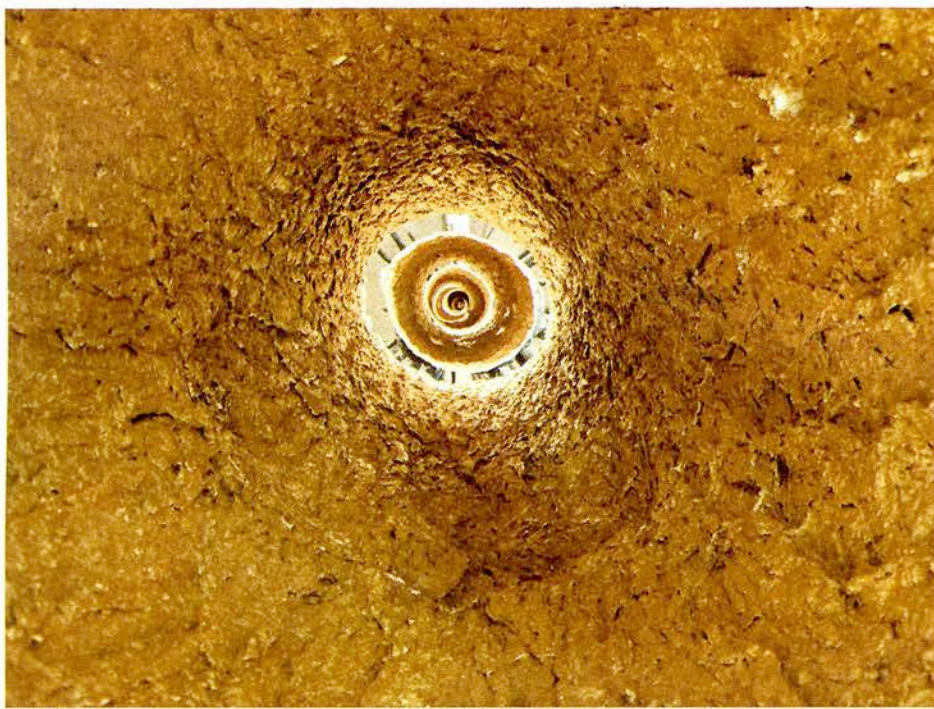
It is true that my family were farmers and I know the process of growing vegetables. But for me, it was related to the surprise that you can have when you take potatoes out of the ground; you have found something that is inside the earth. And in terms of sculpture, to do a work outside of seeing and touch pushed me to do this kind of work. But there was a wider implication; the idea that human form can be produced in the ground related to a lot of mythology and popular history that persists in many cultures in the world. The golem and the mandragora give vitality to a form that is between the human and the vegetable.

1. *Breathing the shadow*, 1998, bronze, gold, laurel leaves, 185 x 350 x 1100 cm, installation view, Centro Galego de Arte Contemporánea, Santiago de Compostela, 1999. Photograph: © Xenaro Martínez Castro.

2. *Breath of Leaves*, 1979, boxwood leaves, photographic documentation of the artist performing the action, Centre Pompidou, Paris, 1987. Photograph: © Archivio Penone.

3. *Ideas of stone – 1303 kg of light*, 2010, bronze, river stones. Courtesy the artist, Marian Goodman Gallery, New York, and Madison Square Park, New York. Installation for Madison Square Park, New York.





1–2. *Space of light*, 2008, bronze, gold, 8 elements, total dimensions 250 x 2000 x 180 cm, installation view, Whitechapel Gallery, London, 2012–2013. Photograph: © Archivio Penone.

Specifically, you have said one of the attributes of Italian culture is that it is pagan, which then gets translated through Catholicism into a tendency towards representation. In that sense are you a pagan Catholic?

Even if you don't go to church, the culture in Italy is Catholic, so the religion gives this kind of suggestion. If you live in Arab countries you don't think in terms of image. But there is something older than Catholicism in the Mediterranean in that all the countries have a strong history related to images and the form of the body. To produce my work I had to assume an identity that came out of that awareness.

Haven't you discovered near your home paleolithic stones with the faces of a bull and a snake? Yes, but it was because in the village where I live there is no historically important Roman vestige, so I spent two or three summers looking around in the mountains and I found many stones that were probably worked by man. You cannot have proof of how old a stone is, or even if it is real. But I am interested in images that are persistent in human history. If you can find an object that is five- or six- or seven-thousand years old and that is still interesting, it indicates a significant possibility for visual art. In language you don't have that. Last year I was in a cave in Ardèche, France, called the Grotte Chauvet. I was very lucky to be one of only 25 people invited there each year. The paintings on the wall of that cave were 32,000 years old. It is incredible; inside you have an image that was done by one man, or perhaps many men, and this communication exists over that vast expanse of time. This is fantastic for human expression and art. If it was written language we wouldn't understand it, but the image is there and can be read. For me, this is the interest I have in all objects and images.

Is there a mystery in looking at a 32,000-year-old drawing? Does its freshness also bring with it a certain sense of enigma?

The mystery is the reality. You don't know why it was done but that reason is not important. The astonishment is recognizing what pushed this man to stand in front of the reality he is surrounded by and to reproduce his astonishment in painting or in sculpture. This is similar to the feeling you can have looking at landscape. Our body is very primitive and art is also something that is very primitive and closely related to our basic physical emotion. I believe that. In a way, the main problem of art is no longer a problem of power but a problem of poetry, of astonishment.

It's an appropriate word to use because the root meaning of the word astonishment is "to be turned to stone."

Yes, it's true. But in Italian it is different because the word is *stupore*, which is very similar to stupid. A stupid man is someone who doesn't understand what happened, which is what you feel when you see an artwork you don't understand.

You refer to astonishment and in talking about the potatoes you used the word surprise. You've also said that each time you do a work with trees, it is a new adventure. Do you still have that sense? This is the basic reason why I work. Over time you can become cynical, so I try to find reasons to be astonished, even now, in the reality and in the making of the work. This astonishment can be very simple; it can be just a line on the paper. If you work in a large space, like I have done in Versailles, for example, I used work in proportion to the place but also work that related to the astonishment I have in looking at a tree. Because I believe that a tree is a perfect sculpture. So this pushed me to reproduce the tree in bronze, a material that is not organic, but that is mimetically very similar to the vegetable because the patina takes on the colour of the tree and the vegetable.

You say that colour oozes from the patina of the bronze. You seem to see bronze as an organism that has a vitality of its own, that is alive.

Bronze is a fantastic material that has been used by man for thousands of years. It is still used for the production of sculpture but it is difficult because it is so charged with meaning. What interested me when I started to do the potatoes was that the bronze was very similar to the colour of the potato. This was my first idea but then I understood that the relation the bronze had to the vegetable was somewhat deeper. For doing sculpture in bronze you have to make a structure that is like branches, that can give a sense of limitation to the surface of the sculpture. The sculpture comes about through the force of gravity because you have to pour the bronze inside the mould. The process reverses the way the tree grows. So to produce a sculpture you have a kind of tree that grows inside the earth. The vegetable is the reverse; it grows outside the earth. So you have these two forces—the force of gravity and the force of the light of the growing—and this contra-position is basic to the concept of the sculpture. A standing sculpture is just a stone that is standing up. It is already a sculpture and it is astonishing. This is what we have in Stonehenge, a standing sculpture and a process related to the vitality and the life of the material.

This composition is between the vertical and the horizontal, and between life and death.

Is it inescapable that sculpture becomes anthropomorphic? I'm thinking of pieces of yours like *Space of Sculpture – Skin of Cedar*, and the Bloomberg Commission at the Whitechapel Gallery in London. Those works seem more like creatures than other of the tree pieces you have done.

I think it's a projection of our understanding of reality when we become interested in the way a form becomes another form. It is true that this work became like an animal walking inside the space. But the basic concept of this work related to something I had done in 1969; the idea was just to put one ring of wax on the surface of a tree. This ring of wax was cast in bronze, which gave me the negative of the bark of the tree inside and the negative of the skin of my hand outside the sculpture. I also showed the piece that way because the idea of the animal was interesting to me; it gave me the possibility to understand something about the tree that I didn't know before. I think my work is never just one thing; I do the work for a reason and afterwards the work takes on its own life. The job of an artist, then, is to understand what he has done. And if he understands what he has done, then perhaps he can do another work.

Is one of the reasons to do the work also a pursuit of beauty? The Bloomberg Commission is ravishing beautiful.

I believe that beauty is a fact of the function. If you follow a logic doing the work, you have a kind of beauty. The problem of aesthetics is always related to the function of the object; it is not something that is abstract. It is contained in the process of the work. Take one tool, a knife, say. There are many knives; there is the knife that is perfect and beautiful, but there is also the kind of knife where the function is stronger. The object that is more aesthetically attractive is also the object that has the stronger function and is better to use. When the object loses its function, then it becomes more attractive in terms of its beauty. So it is related to the process. And a good work is a work that is done following a logic. This applies as well in terms of economy; the less number of gestures to produce the work, the better the work produced.

What is the logic of having trees and rocks in the unusual combination you engineer in *Ideas of Stone (Idee di pietra)*?

When a tree grows up because of its attraction to the light, it escapes the force of gravity. You can think of this as something of a banality but it is actually astonishing. The weight of the leaves is a

real weight; we have the idea that it is really light because the leaves are moved by the wind. So to mark this reality of the tree, I decided to put a stone in the branches where the structure of the tree is, to mark the structure of the tree and with just one stone, to mark the weight of the leaves.

How do you get the stones to stay there? Is it an act of balance?

They are real granite stones but this is not so remarkable. Inside the bronze there is a pin that comes up and there is one hole inside the stone, so I can install the stone on a part of the bronze. I also try to find a stone that fits the shape of the tree and I adapt the shape of the tree to the stone. This is a technical problem.

You have talked about finding a new language but you use bronze and marble. Those are the two most traditional sculptural materials. Is there a

*Versailles Cedar*, 2000–2003,  
cedar wood, 630 x 160 cm,  
installation view, Art Gallery of  
Ontario, 2008–2012. Photograph:  
© Art Gallery of Ontario.



contradiction in using these materials in your search for a new language?

I don't think so. I use bronze and marble and clay precisely because they have existed for so many years and they will exist in the future. In terms of technology, the life of a product is related to economic need; a material currently in demand may cease to be produced because it becomes too expensive, or for some other reason, but stone, clay, wood and the tree remain permanent. Sometimes you see a stone from prehistory that looks like an animal and the intervention of the sculptor was simply to mark the eye. Then things evolve; Michelangelo, for example, dictated that the sculpture was inside the block of the marble; Duchamp's idea was that you have the sculpture and you have the image inside the shop. So attitudes change but the technology remains very limited. Because of that, the stability of clay and marble and bronze suggests the possibility of the work's survival over time.

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**When you do sculpture do you find the form in the material more than you make the material into something?**

Yes. My work indicates the form that is already there.

**I want to ask you about the "Skin of Graphite" series. Are they all mineral based?**

This is drawing that I have done from the skin of the body. All this work is graphite on black canvas or black paper. The basic idea is that the skin is the real limit of our existence in the universe. Because when you close your eyes the space outside your body doesn't exist. The concrete reality of the body is defined by the skin, so the skin is in contact with the universe. I gave the name of minerals to this series of work because in our imagination minerals relate to the cosmos more than other materials. And graphite is a dark mineral that is shining with light. If you put graphite on a dark surface you can see it is shiny. It is also material through which electricity can go, so it has a kind of vitality.

**Do you make a distinction between sculpture and drawing? You have drawn so much over your**

**career, and I wonder about its role in relation to the sculptural work you have done?**

I don't make a difference. Sure, you can anchor one to a wall, but for me drawing follows a logic of production in which the process is very important. With drawing you can have something that you cannot have with sculpture and the only way this idea can be produced is through drawing.

**You've talked about "the sacred banality of things," and you've referred to what you call "commonplace holiness." Is there a way in which you find a kind of secular religion in material?**

I believe that religion is a liturgical understanding of reality, and for this reason it is boring. But the thing that first produced religion is a kind of poetic astonishment. When you see the sunrise in the morning it is fantastic and beautiful; you see it one time and you write a poem about it. But if you go to see the sunrise every day, then it becomes a kind of obsession. It becomes liturgic. You start to have another understanding of reality that is related more to power. I don't like this so much. I believe that inside the material there is an astonishment related to an idea of life. This life is in the material and also in the work of art. A good work of art is an object that has an energy and life. When I see a photo of a person I see the person is not there anymore because it is a specific moment of a life. Right after, the person has already changed. But when I see a painted portrait I don't question whether the person is alive or not. I look at the painting and think of the action and the energy of the painter who made this image. The life of this material is the base of an artwork. You cannot do art if you are not related to the idea that material has a life. The attraction of sculpture is because of the energy you feel inside the material.

**Are you involved in a kind of alchemy?**

It is not about transformation; it is more an indication about something that is already visible, or that can be made visible in the material. Alchemy is an idea about a change in reality, which is not what I do.

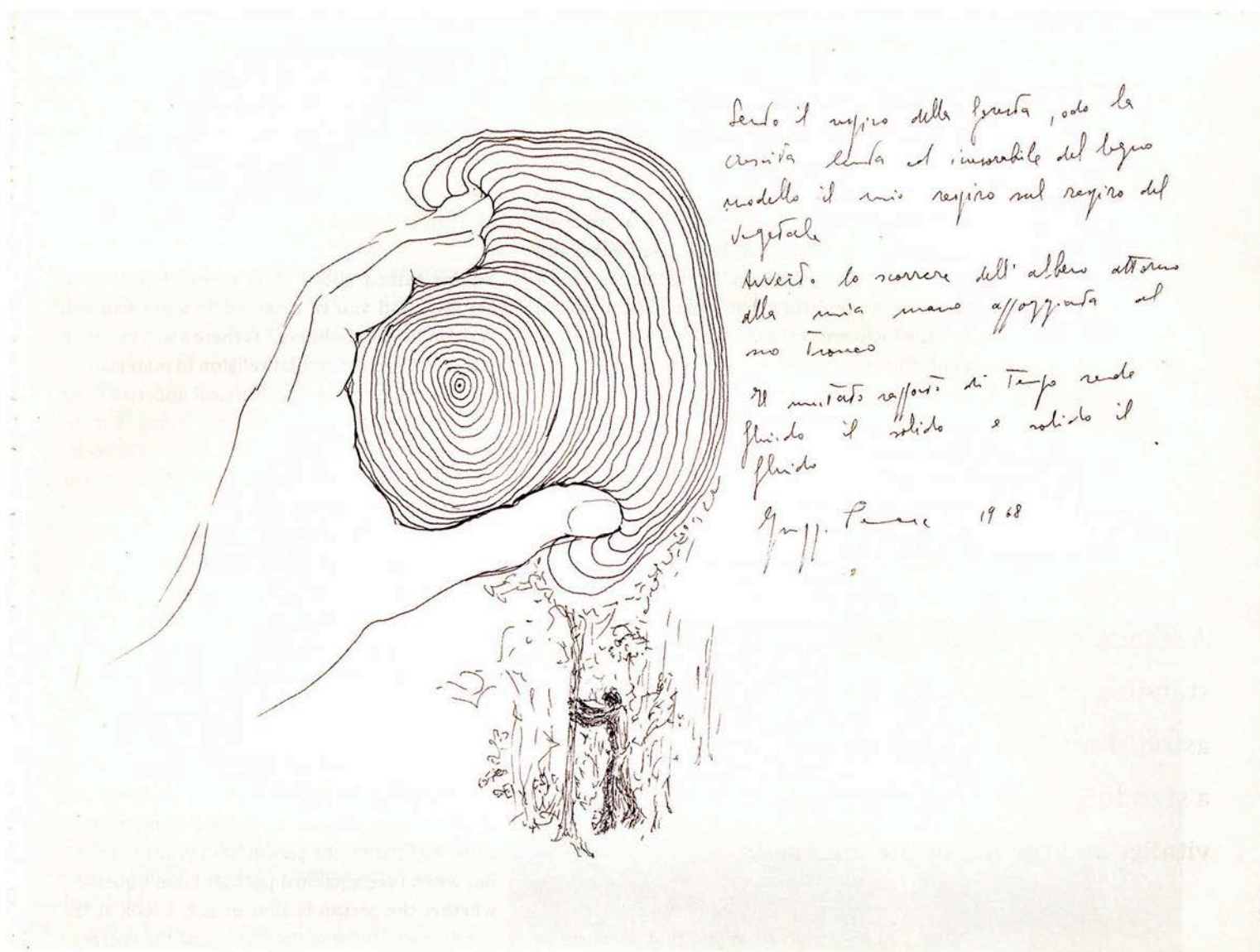
**In "The Knot," the exhibition of Arte Povera curated by Germano Celant at PSI in New York in 1985, you compose a poetic tribute to greenness.**

I have done many works where I find the form of the tree inside the wood, which is the aesthetic material. My action reveals the form of the tree inside the wood. The piece that you mention at PSI was a silhouette of a bronze shape. The vegetal followed the bronze shape, which was an anthropomorphic form; so the vegetal became active and the animal was static.

Following pages:

1. *I Feel the Breath of the Wood*, 1968, India ink on paper, 30 x 40 cm. Photograph: © Archivio Penone.

2. *Versailles*, 2013, India ink, watercolour, acrylic paint and pencil on paper, 25.5 x 36 cm. Photograph: © Archivio Penone.



One of the lovely things about your vegetal gestures is the movement that gets embodied in sculpture. Is the idea of the gesture important to you?

The idea of the gesture is obviously important in any kind of sculpture because it is the movement that is memorized in the material. You can imagine a sculpture in clay where I just touch the sculpture, so what you see is the trace of the hand on the sculpture's surface. I fixed this gesture with wax. I fill the space of my finger on the clay with wax and I cast it in bronze so it becomes a gesture around an existing sculpture. Then the vegetal follows the sculpture as it grows and gives a kind of life to this gesture.

How is *Eyelid* made? Is it the imprint of your eyelid?

Yes, it was my eyelid for the first one. I took the form of the skin of the eye and drew this enlargement from a projection. The reason I enlarged the image is that when your eye is closed you don't have a perception of the size of the face. If you touch your body and your eyes are closed, the least sensation and the least touch have no limits. They can be as vast as the universe. I did

this work with pencil and charcoal, making each point like a touch, as if I were using a pointillist technique.

Robert Motherwell called painting "the skin of the world." It occurs to me that you would say that sculpture is the skin of the world.

That is true. I think skin is very important because it is the limit between the hand and the surrounding reality. Sculpture speaks always about the reality and not the illusion. Painting is more about illusion than sculpture.

You talk about "the logic of the wind" and about how the wind blowing in from the sea in Garessio helped the mushrooms grow. Has the wind also helped you make work?

I relate the wind to the leaves of the tree because the leaves form the negative of the wind. They have to find a space between their existence and the tension of the wind, otherwise the wind will take them away.



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**I think of the wind as nature's breath.**

Yes. In 1979 I did *Soffio di foglie* (*Breath of Leaves*), where I collected a lot of very little leaves of a bush, I put them on the floor, lay down in the leaves and I breathed. After I got up, what remained in the leaves was the form of my body, the negative print of my body and the print of the breath. In a way, they had the same weight because repeated over time, the breath moved the leaves. It was the print of the breath with the print of the body.

**You went to business school where you read Dante and Catullus. Did you get lucky?**

No, this was a tradition in Italian schools. There was a very strong humanist study, so literature was important, and I also had a very good professor of Italian literature.

**I wonder if your work is about a poetry of objects.**

I like poetry because it demands an action in your mind that is similar to how you think when you are making an artwork. Poetry synthesizes a lot of related elements in a few words. An

artwork does the same. It is synthetic thinking that is inside an artwork. And if it is a good work, the simplicity of these synthetic elements offers people the possibility to extend their imagination, and for objects to take on a meaning that is perhaps a little different from what the artist was thinking. It takes on another status in the mind of the viewer. But I do believe that poetry and sculpture are very similar in terms of conception.

**What drives you to work as hard as you do?**

For me it is a kind of amusement. I am always astonished when someone buys a work of mine because I am ready to spend my own money to produce the work. When someone pays for what I make, it gives me the possibility to make another work. In what we do, we all work to affirm our identity. The best way to do that is to take pleasure doing the work. It is what I try to do. I don't think about what the work will become. I can show a piece in New York but if I can't, it is no less interesting. If you tell me my work is good, then I am very happy. But I also know that the most important artist in one moment is the least important in another. So I don't care too much about reputation. ■