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Art for the Many

Martina Caruso, Jacopo Galimberti, Raffaella Perna

On the surface, the scene is a familiar one. A young man and woman sit together, chatting while she smokes. Their legs gently brush up against each other, their arms in mirrored poses; they lean their heads in close, and smile complicitly. The atmosphere is relaxed, with men standing around or dancing in the background. Within the frame of this photograph, which encapsulates an ephemeral moment of innocent tenderness between teenagers, the photographer tried to capture the hopefulness of an entire generation – that of the economic boom. Furthermore, the image somehow foreshadows the life and work of Pablo Echaurren.

During a speculative attack against the Lira in 1964, Italy experienced a brief recession, but in 1965, the year this photograph was taken, the economy rebounded, returning to full employment and pre-crisis levels of growth (around 6% of the GPI). The 1960 antifascist demonstrations seemed an ancient memory, and the workers' unrest of 1962–1964 was waning. The “economic miracle” had not yet subsided and Italians, governed for the first time by a center-left coalition, could still dance their fears away.

But why photograph this unknown couple? The answer is twofold. Their youth and carefree demeanor are a clear reflection of this renewed optimism, yet they also physically sit at the heart of a powerful symbol of it: the Piper, a celebrated club in Rome that had opened in February 1965. The miniskirts, scruffy manes, stroboscopic lights, the British beat sound (carrying with it the aura of Swinging London), and the bold colors of its interior design (including the large wall painting made by Claudio Cintoli) turned this venue into the very embodiment of the pop aesthetic that was conquering the culture industry and the art market. Popular bands played live in the space and several artists and experimental architects exhibited their work or organized performances both at the Piper club in Rome and in its counterpart in Turin, which would open a year later.

There is another element that probably attracted the photographer, who incidentally captured one of Echaurren's first artworks. The artist, then aged 14, had painted the trousers of his slightly older friend with symbols and words to celebrate the imminent arrival of the Beatles in the capital. Alluding to contemporary events, the clothes foreshadowed some of the salient features of Echaurren's future endeavors. They were meant for public use and display, steeped as they were in youth culture and marginal to the refined boundaries of the art world. In so doing, Echaurren's juvenile work was located at the crossroads of art, design, craft, and countercultural practice. It inhabited that liminal space between art and life through which the avant-gardes had first made their grand entry into the twentieth century.

Echaurren's deliberate and consistent decision to live out his practice in everyday life accounts for the perspective offered by the title of this book, *Art for the Many*. The term “art” connects to Echaurren's early years, when he was mentored by conceptual artist Gianfranco Baruchello and gallery owner Arturo Schwarz; it also connects other facets of his production, such as his large paintings, which can be categorized as “Art” with a capital “A.” In addition to this, there were numerous occasions in which his work was displayed from the 1970s on. He began by participating in Achille Bonito Oliva's historic show *Contemporanea* in 1973 and continues to exhibit today. Recent solo exhibitions include the Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea in Rome, the MAMBo (Bologna), the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes in Santiago (Chile), and the Galeria Zé dos Bois (Lisbon). The preposition “for” in the title signals both Echaurren's modes of address involving “the many” and the embedding of his art in the praxis of social movements. Like other Italian artists from Bruno Munari to Lucio Fontana and Pino Pascali, Echaurren made objects “for” the general public that, because of this, are usually viewed as being on the margins of “traditional” artistic media. He made clothes, watches (he worked with the Swatch brand), jewelry, postcards, stamps, book covers, posters, comics, and videos for television. Despite the commercial dimension of this production, for Echaurren “the many” rarely represented a public of consumers or a passive audience. In the 1970s and then again in the late 1990s, the artist lent powerful images to two of the most important social movements of the second part of the twentieth century, working for and with the radical Movement of '77 and the anti-globalization movement. “The many” also applies to the many outsiders, including political inmates serving a prison sentence for multiple murders.

The perspective we propose consistently combines high and low to the point where these two poles become indistinguishable. There are at least three routes that lead to this cross-pollination of elite and pop culture, of “the few” and “the many,” in Echaurren's work: the appropriation and re-interpretation of the historical avant-gardes; the postmodern aesthetic; and a pronounced interest in the margins that often pushed him to challenge a basically sexist, classist, and anthropocentric (or better yet “Homo sapiens-centric”) idea of art production.

Echaurren is drawn to the avant-gardes for the way they embraced the most disparate aspects of life as well as their interest, which has often been overlooked, in the late nineteenth-century working-class and sub-proletarian entertainment culture of cabarets and vaudevilles. While his work may originate from the avant-gardes, it is not so much in terms of their hubris and progressive temporality, but in their desire to explore the boundaries where the history of art (with its immense repository of images) and everyday life meet. As part of the Indiani Metropolitani (Metropolitan Indians), who formed a neo-Dadaist strand of the Movement of '77, Echaurren brought the avant-gardes and revolutionary politics closer together, contributing to what Umberto Eco called the last chapter of the historical avant-gardes. However, it is possible to question Eco's narrative and understand the avant-gardes as part of a discontinuous history, whereby a forward movement suddenly appears in the most unexpected circumstances and parts of the world. Some scholars have convincingly argued that the legacy of the historical avant-gardes has been pursued via the various strands of “activism” that emerged after the 2007–2008 crisis.¹ Pablo Echaurren's participation in the anti-globalization movement can thus be framed as a conscious effort to update and test the viability of an avant-garde ethos well beyond the Movement of '77.

There is a second socio-cultural trend that explains Echaurren's attempt to blend art history and pop references: the postmodern aesthetic. The visual culture of the 1970s and 1980s was shot through with this mix of registers. For example, the MoMA exhibition *High & Low* (1990), while focusing on the historical avant-gardes, revealed the extent to which the two previous decades had finally shattered a taboo:

Trousers painted by Pablo Echaurren for a Roman Beat enthusiast, 1965. Photograph taken in the Piper Club and published in the book *Ecco il Piper!*, Rome 1966



two sections of the show focused on graffiti and comics. Reflecting the growing artistic interest for these “low” media, Echaurren's 1980s work tended to concentrate on the street as a palimpsest of contrasting languages, including graffiti, stickers, and advertisements as well as the visual semantics of comics. In the last two decades of the twentieth century, his work engaged with a vertiginous variety of genres, from collages to novels, and from the graphic novel – something he pioneered in Italy – to new media such as the fax machine and the internet, which in the late 1990s was still a place open to countercultural experiments. Although the notion of Postmodernism in Italy did not quite have the same implications as in the English-speaking world, Echaurren's post-1977 work and critical exploration of the past strongly resonate with the intellectual debates on Modernism and its overcoming that informed the art world in the Global North.

1 Ramírez Blanco 2018, Grindon 2011.

The hierarchical distinction between high and low, the fine arts and crafts, is immersed in classism and sexism; more recently, the ecological crisis has also highlighted the limits of anthropocentrism. From his 1970s communist militancy to his dismissal of patriarchal models of masculinity and his recent works around the Neanderthal, Echaurren's oeuvre cannot be fully understood without considering his direct or indirect criticism of these three "isms." An example of how his research is informed by these pressing issues is offered by how Echaurren has sought to rehabilitate the figure of the artisan – or rather, the "pArtisan." Given his reputation as an artist, this is not and could not be without contradictions. And yet his eulogy of the makers who resisted the lures of the market should not be dismissed as a nostalgic revival of a supposedly pre-capitalist mode of production idealized as less alienated. The figure of the pArtisan, to which the artist devoted a book, will not be explored here, but it is important to recall how Marcel Duchamp (Echaurren's chief source of inspiration), who is often seen as a champion of art as a "mental thing," defined himself as a craftsman in his seminal interview with Pierre Cabanne. Echaurren's amalgamation of genres, registers, and techniques (including ancient ways of producing pottery) should be construed not as merely dictated by the circumstances, or as a futile postmodern pastiche, but as a fully-fledged political strategy, one aimed to explore the potentialities of less sexist and elitist forms of expression, and to break with an anthropocentric view of nature.

The powerful tensions between high and low, as well as the ways in which Echaurren addressed the concept of the "many," are just some of the thematic threads that an international community of scholars active in Italy, the UK, and the USA have analyzed here for the first time. Although this volume is by no means exhaustive, it attempts to do justice to the vast array of different artistic projects Echaurren undertook, simultaneously providing new insights into the history of Italian art from the late 1960s to our days. Echaurren's different roles as an erudite book collector (he holds the most complete collection of first-edition Futurist books) and a cultural historian (in collaboration with his wife, the art historian Claudia Salaris), as well as his complex network of relations, including Max Ernst, his stepbrother Gordon Matta-Clark, Jannis Kounellis, Cy Twombly, Italo Calvino, and Antonio Negri, are also carefully examined, as they are pivotal for exploring the manifold creative pursuits and intricate life paths of an artist, activist, intellectual, and pArtisan whose work deserves to be reassessed.

The structure of the book is at once thematic and chronological: the contributions explore issues that are central to Echaurren's artistic research, covering the entirety of his career, from the end of the 1960s to the present. Our idea was to compile one of the most complete overviews of his trajectory while also highlighting affinities and discontinuities among the various phases of his path. This is why the book opens with Chiara Portesine's essay on Echaurren's early verbo-visual practice. In her analysis of a significant production of mostly unpublished collages, Portesine highlights the importance of the artist's experiments in this field toward the late 1960s and early 1970s, considering his relationship with the Italian Visual Poetry scene and in particular with Gruppo 70, founded in Florence in 1963 and gathering artists, writers, and musicians. The exchanges between image and word in these first collages constitute an important crux in Echaurren's work, which significantly influenced the development of his more famous *quadratini* (grids). Daniel Spaulding's essay focuses on the latter, which date to the 1970s. He identifies three different aspects at the heart of these works: the geological and paleontological imaginary, the use of the grids as conceptual paradigms, and their intrinsically political character. These aspects return often and in different ways in Echaurren's subsequent production. The *quadratini* were indeed central to his work when he was the illustrator for Lotta Continua and an activist in the so-called "creative wing" of the Movement of '77. Raffaella Perna's essay is dedicated to this aspect: through Echaurren's experience, she re-rereads the history of the Movement of '77, seeing it no longer as the last avant-garde of the twentieth century (as was Umberto Eco's view) but as a phase, which is still alive, of the avant-garde as a method of subverting power. Echaurren's relationship with the first avant-gardes

not only influenced his own artistic practice, but, beginning in 1978, it guided his activity as collector and interpreter of the historical memory of the Futurist movement. Jennifer Griffiths's contribution explores Echaurren's interests regarding the Futurist avant-garde, and his exchanges with artists from that current, by tracing the genesis of his and Claudia Salaris's vast collection of Futurist books and documents. His passion for Futurism and for the historical avant-gardes also emerges in Echaurren's comics work, an area that Carlotta Vacchelli analyzes in depth, taking into account the artist's comics production between 1984 and 1996 and framing it within the specific scenario of the Italian comics of the period. The artist's predilection for popular and hybrid literary forms (such as comics) confirms his choice to transcend disciplinary boundaries and foster a less elitist enjoyment of art. This interest was consolidated in his experimentations with so-called "applied arts" as well as his ability to circulate militant messages within the culture industries, mainly through stencils and graffiti art. Francesco Maria Spampinato's essay analyzes these aspects, further identifying important connections between Echaurren's work and the Italian underground scene of the 1980s and 1990s. For Echaurren, the last decade of the century coincided with a complex historical and memorial reflection on the 1970s, in particular regarding his work as a militant artist within the Movement of '77. This retrospective gaze, which was never nostalgic, was accompanied by Echaurren's artistic activity within the No Global movement. This is the main theme of Jacopo Galimberti's essay, which investigates Echaurren's relationship with Renato Curcio, one of the founders of the Red Brigades, and Antonio Negri, who at the time were both in jail in Rome. The art workshops that Echaurren offered to political and common detainees at the Rebibbia Prison is the focus of Martina Caruso's contribution, in which she places Echaurren's controversial artistic and literary collaborations with former neofascist terrorists in the wider context of Italian politics in the 1990s, the anti-prison and anti-psychiatry movements, and the artist's interrogation of the art market and its systems.

While Echaurren's interest in Futurism has been amply recognized, his links with Surrealism have not been studied in depth. Marica Antonucci weaves new connections between Echaurren's research and the work of André Breton, Max Ernst, and Raoul Ubac, tracing a possible Surrealist genealogy from a visual re-reading of Echaurren's work, starting with the *quadratini* and ending on his latest series of assemblages, the *Neander Tales*. This new series of works, begun in 2020, is comprised of 50 shadow boxes containing disparate materials belonging to recent history and scientific research related to the Neanderthals. Pierpaolo Antonello's research covers this recent production, looking at both the caesuras and continuities with Echaurren's previous work as well as highlighting the "becoming paleo" idea, which expresses the potential for post-human transformation along the transversal lines of post-anthropocentric relationships. The book ends on an interview with Echaurren and Salaris conducted by Ara Merjian, in which the couple narrate their story within the Movement of '77, their shared interest in the early avant-gardes and counterculture, and Echaurren's projects and work in Italian prisons in the 1990s.

This book represents the culmination of the *Counterculture Project* conducted by the Bibliotheca Hertziana's Department for Art of the Modern Age in a Global Context, directed by Tristan Weddigen. The initiative started in 2019 with the digitization of 1,000 rare documents drawn from the Fondazione Echaurren Salaris archive, resulting in the open-access publication of 30,000 high-resolution scans of mostly underground magazines. Then, several Counterculture Fellows received funding to study these materials. They were also supported in organizing numerous scholarly events, such as Workshops and Research, Film, and Field Seminars. A video documenting the initiative was produced as part of the *Hertziana Insights* series. Without the support of many colleagues and friends, this new format of the "integrated research project," which includes the entire research pipeline from the digitized sources down to the present book, would not have been possible.