

ARTFORUM

JANUARY 2016

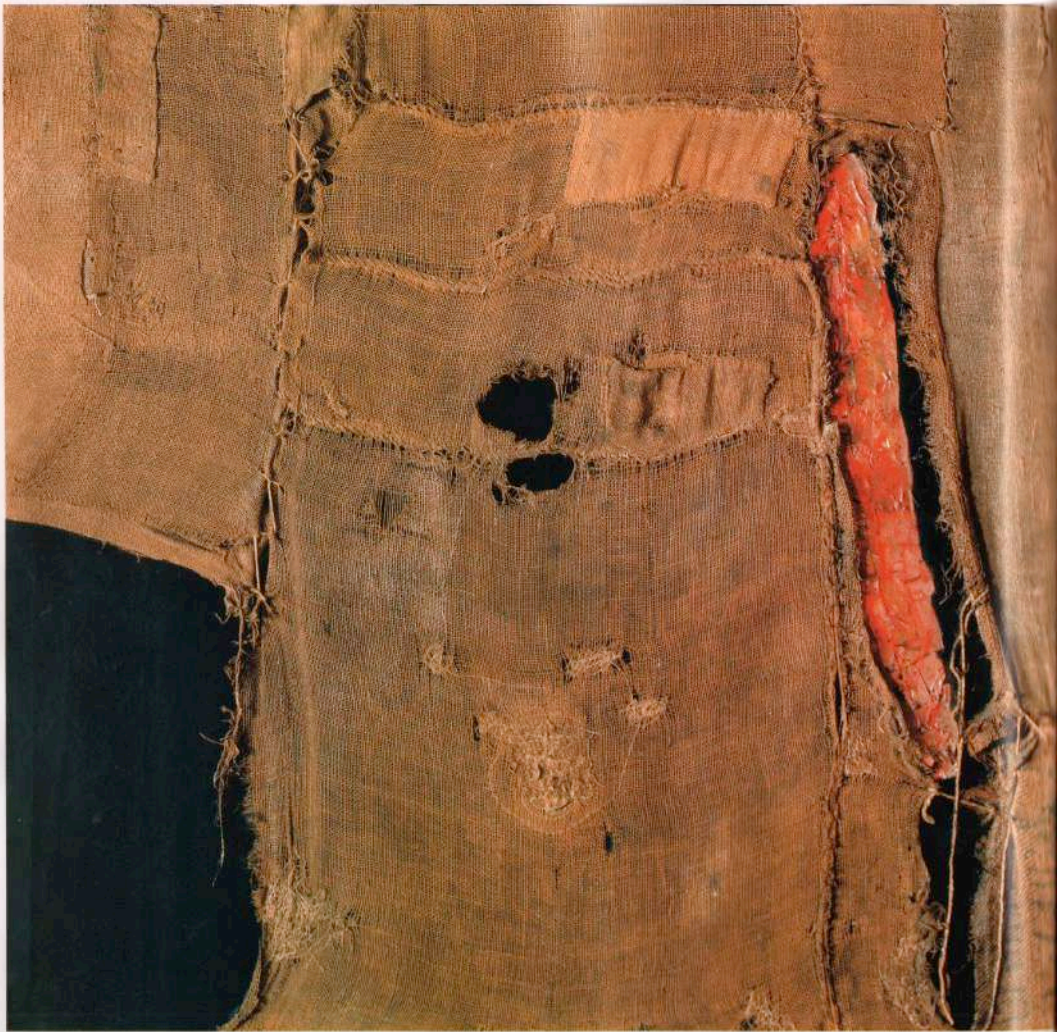
INTERNATIONAL


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Alberto Burri, *Sacco S3* (Sack S3),
1963, burlap, canvas, vinyl, and
oil on canvas, 50 1/2 x 70 1/2"

BURNING MAN

ANTHONY WHITE ON ALBERTO BURRI AND ARTE POVERA

ART WOULD NEVER BE QUITE THE SAME: ripped open, on fire. ALBERTO BURRI demystified painting through radically simple means, but his legacy remains complex and little understood. Here, scholar ANTHONY WHITE finds renewed force in the postwar artist's combustible innovations—on view in the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum's major retrospective in New York until January 7—tracing a surprising afterlife for the work in GIOVANNI ANSELMO's investigations of matter, nature, and ecological crises.

EVEN AS THEY UNRAVELED abstract painting's identity, Alberto Burri's torn and soiled burlap sacks were largely ignored or greeted with disdain when they were first exhibited in Italy in the 1950s. Their reception on this side of the Atlantic was a little better, but in the ensuing decades the artist's work fell out of favor, was deaccessioned by institutions, and came to be viewed as a dated sidetrack to the broader historical narrative of modern art. We are now in a critical moment when we might revisit those very culs-de-sac of modernism—and chart a more nuanced turning point for painting. By tracing Burri's long career, which stretched over five decades and a broad range of media and scales, the Guggenheim Museum's exhibition begins a process of coming to a fuller understanding of the artist's oeuvre. It is now possible to correct some of the misapprehensions that plagued Burri from the earliest days of his career and to better grasp the significance of his subtle if pervasive reorientation of painting's poles for a subsequent generation of artists—particularly the Arte Povera movement in his native Italy.

Burri's first exhibitions coincided with the emergence of European Informel painting, which was wreaking its own havoc on convention. Jean Dubuffet's filthy and masticated trowelings of brown paint onto canvas, openly repellent to the French traditions of *belle peinture*, were intended to escape the perceived decadence of prewar cultural and artistic traditions. Seeking a sense of existential authenticity evoked by an uncompromisingly raw otherness, Dubuffet enabled the materials of the artwork to conjure a pre-cultural authenticity through their denial of form, part of his project to "rehabilitate deprecated objects."¹ In fact, by staging their spontaneous painterly gestures in or on the material surface, many artists aimed to take on the role of restoring society. If Informel uncoupled the artwork from the feverish rebuilding of capital in postwar Europe, it still insisted on the primary psychic power of man's mark as fundamental to that rebuilding. In Germano Celant's summation, the Informel venture was one in which "the surface of the canvas and the volume of materials were viewed as the fields of unconscious battles, in which it was hoped that the remnants of the social and private self would be redeemed."²

Can Burri's work be seen as part of this redemptive project? The artist's use of burlap signifies a debasement of the tools of the trade. In this, he shared something with Informel painting and its suspicion of traditional materials and techniques in favor of a kind of antediluvian authenticity. But a work such as *Sacco SP* (Sack SP), 1953, demonstrates just how much the artist needs to be distinguished from his contemporaries. While the abject brown surface has certain formal affinities to Dubuffet's dirty and debased surfaces, Burri's work turns away from the primordial. A construction of coarse sacking material, the canvas—essentially a found object—takes on the property of a manufactured readymade. Burri thus suggests that the support that all painters employ is a prefabricated, anonymous product. This implicates painters in the industrialized society that fine art has traditionally sought to oppose. Thierry de Duve has argued in these pages that Duchamp subverted painting's claim as a bulwark against industrialization by reading its reliance on prefabricated tubes of paint as lending it the status of a readymade, like any mass-produced product.³ Likewise, Burri asserts the ready-made condition of canvas in order to highlight the impossibility of the viewer imagining a painting as a living presence magically endowed with the creative energy of the individual. The neutrality of the support is also placed under question: The edges of the burlap, whether sutured together or left open and frayed, are aligned on a horizontal or vertical axis, directly referring to the rectangular format and orientation of the conventional picture. And in other works, a wire or iron bar pushes out a section of the canvas from

Burri's blowtorch creates a violent erasure—a mutilation that eradicates surface, and a mark that is its own removal.

behind, thus alluding to the space contained by the canvas and disrupting any illusion of a pictorial field.

Between the edges of the torn sacks in *SP*, one can glimpse bright-red paint applied to a wrinkled, apparently underlying material and emerging from a torn chasm in the burlap that runs from the top almost through the whole length of the overall picture, like a jagged tear. Whether or not Burri had seen or heard of Jackson Pollock's "cutout" paintings of the late '40s and early '50s, this represents a significant subversion of conventional painting practice for its time, even as it works within the minimal palette preferred by so many modernist painters. The holes in the canvas allow the paint underneath to be read as figure, but a figure that





Opposite page: Alberto Burri, *Sacco SP (Sack SP)*, 1953, burlap, acrylic, fabric, thread, glass, and Vinavil on canvas, 59 x 51 1/4".

Above: Alberto Burri, *Rosso gibbo (Red Hunchback)*, 1953, acrylic, fabric, and resin on canvas, metal rod, 22 1/2 x 33 1/4". From the series "Gobbi" (Hunchbacks), 1950-55.

has been created negatively—under cancellation, as it were. At the same time, the material typically used as support has come to the fore. The effect of this reversal is to offer up canvas as meaningful in and of itself. The notoriously taciturn Burri argued in a rare public pronouncement that his painting should be viewed as "an irreducible presence that refuses to be converted into any other form of expression."⁴ As Judith Rozner has argued, the implication is that canvas is not a mere vehicle for symbolic expression, but rather a material with its own inherent properties presented to the viewer for their uniquely tactile character.⁵

THIS IS NOT how Burri's paintings have generally been understood, as curator Emily Braun points out in her catalogue essay for the Guggenheim show. Critics have summoned Burri's biography, including time spent as a doctor in the Italian army and in an American prisoner-of-war camp in Texas, as evidence of his art as an expression of war's suffering. As one commentator argued: "His visual surgery becomes a valid metaphor for the wounds of mankind which we try to conceal."⁶ What's more, associations between the stitched and frayed canvases and human poverty were all too easy to make in a country whose postwar economy was undergoing major structural changes, including an increasing urbanization that left families abandoned in the south and living in squalid conditions

in the north. The resulting hardship was a focus of the Italian Socialist Party's election campaign in 1953, which produced posters showing bedraggled children dressed in rags as part of its stand against poverty. And the fact that certain of Burri's works include surplus bags that were used in American aid shipments has led critics to see the works as a comment on contemporaneous humanitarian efforts to provide food to Italy and the geopolitical power asymmetries that this implied.⁷ In other words, Burri's work was often thought to constitute a metonymic form of social realism.⁸

Admittedly, certain aspects of Burri's approach to painting do indeed seem to support such symbolic readings. In many of these works, Burri's scraps of burlap rest on an intact and, in some cases, finer-grade



Giovanni Anselmo, *Torsione* (Torsion), 1968, iron, fusion, dimensions variable.

fabric.⁹ This is significant because it creates a visual distinction between foreground and background suggested by differing qualities of material, a means by which the sack, rather than being presented in and of itself, becomes involved in a pictorial drama and transposed from mere stuff into a vehicle of metaphor. *Sacco 33* of 1953, like many other works, exploits the neutral quality of an evenly applied black ground over which the sacking can be understood as figure. The sack is placed on a stage, with the theatrical device of the black background creating the illusion of deep space. In this sense, the Italian critic Alfredo Mezio

Painting could not represent or even absorb the postwar condition, but it *could* acknowledge how that tremendous trauma's repercussions rendered its formal conventions inadequate or even irrelevant.



Above: Alberto Burri, *Combustione plastica* (Plastic Combustion), 1958, PVC plastic, acrylic, fabric, staples, combustion, and Vinavil on canvas, 47 1/2 x 55 1/2".

Right: Alberto Burri, *Grande bianco plastica* (Large White Plastic), 1952, oil, tempera, fabric, burlap, thread, and Vinavil on canvas, 59 1/2 x 99".

was not far off the mark when, in 1958, he criticized Burri's use of burlap as an anachronistic throwback to Expressionist theater design.¹⁰ The failure of the burlap to fully cover this space also reads as tragic inadequacy, reinforced by the titles of other works: The "*Gobbi*" (Hunchbacks) series, 1950–55, suggestively refers to a human abnormality of posture and the pathetic antihero of European literature.

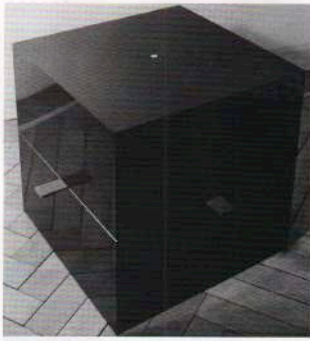
The more radical implication of Burri's use of canvas—that the materials lack symbolic connotations to any world outside of art—was sidelined by such associations. On one level, the debased materials and blasted surfaces certainly spoke to the contemporary Adornian perception that the horrors of war had so degraded Western culture as to invalidate its aesthetic languages. However, these works also promised to redeem that loss by staging painting's own demise in a tragic key and by arranging and organizing the

various elements on the canvas in such a way as to memorialize the compositional order of earlier-twentieth-century abstract painting. In other words, painting could not represent or even absorb the postwar condition, but it *could* acknowledge how that tremendous trauma's repercussions rendered its formal conventions inadequate or even irrelevant.

IN THE LATE '50s and early '60s, Burri abandoned the historical conventions of compositional structure along with his grim metaphorization of burlap, more completely repudiating any unique artistic gesture. As if underscoring the industrial ready-made material of canvas in his earlier work, he now turned to plastic, employing a new product of Italy's rapidly expanding industrial sector. Instead of suturing cloth, Burri burned away the plastic support with a flame: Composition becomes

combustion. The blowtorch creates a violent erasure, as in *Combustione plastica* (Plastic Combustion), 1958—a mutilation that eradicates surface, and a mark that is its own removal. The shriveled lip of plastic has an air of impossibility about it; the trace of the artist is neither on its precipitous edge nor in its void nor behind it. Burri's working method, then, involved an abdication of artistic control over the final product. Plastic eradicates the sign of those who burn it; it melts away disappointingly, in an uncontrollable yielding that becomes a meaningless hole, uniform with other such apertures. The material itself determines its shape, according to a principle that is relatively indifferent to human intervention. By simply melting sheets of plastic with an oxyacetylene blowtorch until they formed an undifferentiated mass, Burri fully rejected the Informel movement's connection between gesture and the artist's psyche that his burlap works had already begun to question.





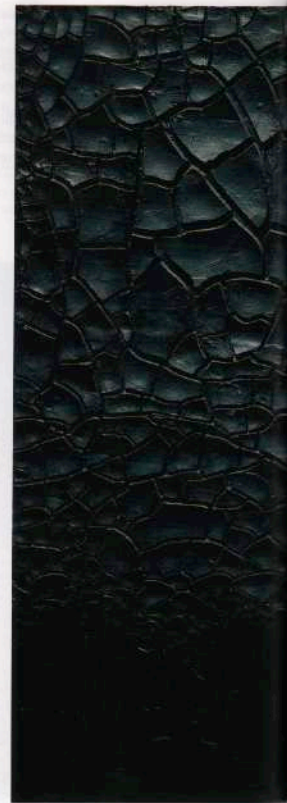
Above: Giovanni Anselmo, *Diritted*, 1967, wood, Formica, steel wedges, spirit level, 27 1/4 x 27 1/4 x 27 1/4".

Right: Giovanni Anselmo, *Lit'Eded*, 1984-81, stones, canvas, steel table, dimensions variable.



Left: Giovanni Anselmo, *Dirazione (Direction)*, 1967-68, stone, compass, glass, 7 1/4 x 63 x 23 1/4".

Right: Alberto Burri, *Grande cretto nero (Large Black Cretto)*, 1977, acrylic and PVA on Colobox, 56 1/2 x 98 1/2". From the series "Cretti," ca. 1970-79.



In her review of Burri's 1964 show in New York at the Marlborough-Gerson Gallery, Dore Ashton commented, "Quite aside from the utterly unpleasant cellulose surface, I find the imagery—if it can be called that—devoid of interest. . . . The objectness of these canvases refuses the symbolic and therefore refuses infusion of meaning."¹¹ What Ashton highlights, if in the negative, is the degree to which the plastic radically asserts itself as substance. Contrary to the humble and



very human associations of the sacks, the cracked and pockered colored surfaces in works such as *Rosso plastica* (Red Plastic), 1963, create a baroque field of vinyl polymer that is both repugnant and sensual. The glistening and drooping swaths of shriveled plastic are not simply abject; they are also strangely luxuriant. Cement, plaster, and sand, the materials employed by Dubuffet and other Informel artists, can claim a crude, workmanlike authenticity. Plastic, on the other

hand, smacks of the false and artificial, of a growing market for postindustrial packaging, and when combined with the sinister quality of a surface that appears tortured and damaged, it suggests a perverse glorification, obliterating any humanist pathos (wounded skin, starvation).

What Ashton saw as the "objectness" of these works is her means of containing the utterly disturbing sensation that the plastic produces. The scorched and molten

PVC presents the material of modern industry as an odious, shiny mass that defeats the viewer's capacity to find any bodily corollary there. This is why Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss associated Burri's plastics with George Bataille's concept of base materialism and the "wholly other."¹² In these works, the artist demonstrated that *il miracolo economico*—the economic miracle—perhaps even more than the global conflict that that reconstruction had sought to overcome, had

Burri makes possible the intransigent objects of Giovanni Anselmo and a host of postwar artists.

brought about a break with inherited cultural traditions, ultimately ruining art's redemptive function.

IF THE CRITICS were slower to respond to the radical rupture suggested in Burri's work, his example was enormously important for regional and international artists alike. Robert Rauschenberg was deeply affected by his experience of visiting the Italian painter's studio in Rome, confirming the young painter's development of newspaper collage and his sludgy first monochromes.¹² The Greek-born Italian Arte Povera artist Jannis Kounellis was also indebted to Burri, arranging burlap bags in various works and employing fire in his working process. And then there is Giovanni Anselmo. While not typically associated with Burri, Anselmo's Arte Povera practice presents ample opportunity to better understand the demystifying program of both artists, as they worked in the seat of the Renaissance tradition.

On the level of materials and process, Burri's example was a key precedent. Anselmo, like many of his Arte Povera contemporaries, utilized preexisting materials in their raw state, including Plexiglas, iron, and granite. Moreover, Burri's use of natural elements such as fire subjected the artwork to the effects of physical forces, thereby subordinating traditional means of artistic intervention and diminishing the role played by the artist in manipulating materials on a surface. Drawing on decomposition, gravity, and electromagnetism—all of which are completely independent of the artist—Anselmo's sculptures further depart from traditional understandings of composition and authorship.

But Anselmo's work departs from Burri's in telling ways, too. As we have seen, the older artist's paintings, with their insistence on an internal organization to the artwork (albeit one that alludes, at times, to its own degradation or purposefully off-balance equilibrium), remain in dialogue with proportion. In contrast, the natural forces that determine the structure of Anselmo's work exist beyond their frame or immediate context. Anselmo takes Burri's degradation of the symbolic order one devastating step further: We are no longer in the realm of the relation of parts to a whole but, as Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev has argued, witness to a desire to repudiate "the mediation of symbolic representation" altogether.¹⁴ Whereas Burri's burned plastic exceeds the symbolic domain through its simultaneously luxurious and abject quality, Anselmo's sculptures break with the traditional bounds of the artwork, incorporating physical forces that literally ground the work in the here and now, this contemporaneity invalidating the (false) separation of form and content in the symbolic.

A case in point is Anselmo's *Untitled*, 1967, in which two wooden boxes covered in black Formica

are placed one atop the other. The relationship between the objects evokes the geometric compositions of Burri's canvases, which, as we have seen, often involved a rectangular bifurcated arrangement along a horizontal axis or, in his "Cretti" cracked paintings, ca. 1970–79, diptych and triptych compositions. However, whereas Burri's work preserves a pictorial scenario of elements, Anselmo moves his object out into real space—abandoning both the frame and the pedestal traditionally used to distinguish the artwork from its surrounds—and makes the work constitutionally dependent on a force that exists outside it. Leveling the top plane by inserting steel wedges between the two boxes, and making this evident to the viewer by virtue of the carpenter's spirit level embedded in the work, the artist ensured that the sculpture would be perceived as existing in dynamic relationship with the broader conditions around and beyond it. Rather than a relationship of proportion or balance between the two components, then, what we perceive is the fact of the artwork's contingency in relation to extra-aesthetic forces, including gravity and the nature of the floor on which the sculpture sits.

A similar situation emerges in Anselmo's best-known work, *Untitled*, 1968, in which a head of lettuce is sandwiched between two pieces of granite held together by a copper wire. As the lettuce decays, the work collapses, making clear that the work's composition is dependent not on the artist's will but rather on the climatic conditions of the gallery, the organic propensity of lettuce to shrivel, and the gallery staff, who reassemble the work by inserting new lettuce at the moment of collapse, thus beginning the process over again. The combination of the solid stone and the flimsy vegetable does not create a symbolic polarity or surreal disjunction—as their material incongruity might suggest—but rather brings together natural decomposition and elapsed time by highlighting the extreme contrast of the eternal quality of the stone and the ephemeral nature of the vegetable.

Anselmo's work leads to the perception of broader energies and impulses that do not discriminate between human subjects or material objects: As physical beings, we are inevitably prey to gravity, decay, and magnetic attraction. But Anselmo's interest in these forces studiously avoids any symbolism: Nature here is not a subjective actor in an archetypal narrative or in relation to a form but is rather a phenomenological experience. The subject is not wholly evacuated, though: These works encourage the viewer to explore and investigate how her own bodily existence relates to what Anselmo calls "other poles and centers of the universe."¹⁵ And here we find Burri's extraordinary plastics, particularly the red and black versions, as the progenitor of this externalization and decentering, both in their deployment of materials and processes

Giovanni Anselmo. *Untitled*, 1968, granite, lettuce, copper wire, 25 1/2 x 9 1/2 x 9 1/2".





Alberto Burri, *Rosso plastico (Red Plastic)*, 1963, PVC plastic, acrylic, combustion, and Vinavil on black fabric, 31 1/2 × 39 1/2".

connected to industry well beyond the confines of the artwork or the traditional gallery space, and in their shiny, reflective, stretched surfaces, which magnify and concentrate the ambient light, projecting it into the surrounding space in such a way as to make it virtually impossible to correctly perceive the work's surface.

We cannot understand Burri's work, then, without understanding its reception and transformation in the work of others, without understanding his outsize impact—his art becomes a precondition for that of

later pioneers like Anselmo.¹⁶ In other words, we cannot understand Burri as simply a stand-alone subject: His work demands a wider horizon. He makes possible the intransigent objects of Anselmo and a whole host of postwar artists. It's an art marked by a new sensibility only just dawning in the '60s, an ecological consciousness that has characterized our current, waning historical period as the Anthropocene and that dwells in the *longue durée*, in vast spatial and temporal fields—in relation to which human existence is necessarily insignificant. □

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For notes, see page 268.