Tactile Vision: The Work Of Giuseppe Penone

Dissertation

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By

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Abstract

This dissertation considers the early works of the Italian artist Giuseppe Penone. I argue that his works from the 1960s and 1970s are especially distinct from everything else he has made in the years since. The following chapters will show how descriptions and interpretations of Penone’s art from the 1980s and after have been folded back upon his earlier projects. It has become a common practice to consider the early works in light of the later – much to the former’s detriment. It is entirely because of this difference, generally unnoted, that I focus on *Alpi Marittime [Maritime Alps]* from 1968, then follow with a discussion of the first examples in a long series of *Alberi [Trees]* initiated in 1969. Analyses of two major works from 1970 follow: *Rovesciare gli propri occhi [To Reverse One’s Eyes]*, and *Svolgere la Propria Pelle [To Unfold One’s Skin]*.

These are exemplary works that stand out for their consistent interest in “outsidedness,” that is, how things (including ourselves) are exposed to the world. With them Penone confronts issues of exteriority and surfaces, the relationship of touch and sight, and the powerful notion that we understand our surroundings because of our embodied actions – that we are touched by the world even before we reach out to touch it, seen by it even as we see. Collectively, the early works are responding to and share in an underlying concern that is strongly phenomenological – or so I will argue. I “bracket off” Penone’s early works from his subsequent career because they are different in kind and
therefore deserve an alternative approach. What the early works call for is not so much interpretation as mere description: an attentiveness to what has been brought before our eyes. My interest is in considering them on their own terms. I provide an alternative language, one that articulates the works’ shared phenomenological concerns and aims not to invoke the subjective or the unseen, but simply to have us see them anew for the kinds of things that they – and we with them – really are.
Dedication

To Andrea
Acknowledgments

I would like to thank the faculty and staff of the Department of History of Art for offering me a place in their community, giving me opportunities to teach, funding for travel and research, and providing assistance through various bureaucratic processes. I am especially grateful for the wise direction of my advisor Lisa Florman. Her careful consideration of these ideas added focus and clarity. I am grateful for her thoughtful collaboration and guidance. Aron Vinegar and Stephan Melville also provided me with support, and challenging research and editorial learning experiences. They offered their insight into the importance of close looking and reading and I thank them for their teachings. Kris Paulsen generously offered her valuable time to serve on my committee. I would also like to thank the Graduate School for their support, including the Post-Prospectus Fellowship and the Presidential Fellowship during my dissertation writing process.

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Vita

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Giuseppe Penone (b. 1947, Garessio, Italy) has hit a groove. At 66 years old he is no longer a newcomer to the art scene. He has been exhibiting works since 1968, and is included in the history books as having been one of the youngest members of the Arte Povera movement, initiated and organized by Germano Celant in 1967. Interest in his work only seems to be increasing. In fact, over the past decade Penone’s career has taken off. In 2004 the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris organized a retrospective of his work that traveled to the Caixaforum in Barcelona, Spain. That same year The Drawing Center in New York City organized the exhibition “Giuseppe Penone: The Imprint of Drawing,” accompanied by an excellent catalogue of deft writing on Penone’s methods and processes. In 2007, Penone was selected to represent Italy at the 52nd Venice Biennale, and his *Sculture di Linfa* [*Sap Sculptures*] in the re-inaugurated Italian Pavilion attracted large crowds and general enthusiasm (Fig. 1). In that same year, Penone installed his *Giardino delle sculture fluide* [*Garden of Fluid Sculptures*] in the newly restored palatial gardens at the Reggia di Venaria in Turin (Fig. 2). In 2008-2009 The Museo d’Arte Moderna in Bologna collaborated with the Ikon Gallery in Birmingham, England to show

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1 See, for example, Marta Cardilla, “La Biennale dei record tra provocazioni ed eventi,” *La Repubblica*, June 25, 2007, 33.

2 Marian Goodman Gallery represents Giuseppe Penone and has featured him in solo exhibitions in 2012 and 2000 at the New York gallery and in 2008 and 2003 at both the New York and Paris
a wide selection of Penone’s work and publish the most comprehensive volume of Penone’s writing to date as the accompanying catalogue. This busy period included another large retrospective organized by the Toyota Municipal Museum of Art in Toyota, Japan and a series of exhibitions at Marian Goodman’s galleries.2

Penone’s massive Cedro di Versailles [Versailles Cedar], 2002-2003, was selected as the centerpiece for “Giuseppe Penone: The Hidden Life Within,” the inaugural exhibition in the Galleria Italia at the Art Gallery of Ontario in Toronto, which was on view between 2008 and 2012 (Fig. 3). In London, Penone had his first British retrospective at the Haunch of Venison in 2011, and was awarded The Bloomberg Commission to create Spazio di Luce [The Space of Light], a site-specific work for the Whitechapel Gallery in 2012 (Fig. 4). Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev initiated Documenta 13 in Kassel, Germany with a press conference under the outdoor installation of Penone’s Idee di Pietra [Ideas of Stone] in 2010, and a major installation of site-specific sculptures is planned for the gardens at the Palace at Versailles later this year. Two monographs were published between 2012 and 2013, both with the purpose of exploring Penone’s long, productive and successful career.

These are just the highlights. In the same period of time, Penone has had an active schedule of solo and group shows at galleries and museums throughout Europe, Japan and the United States. He has given several in-depth interviews with curators and

scholars, some filmed and others published in exhibition catalogues. He has been the subject of two documentaries, one produced by the Ikon Gallery in 2008, and another produced by RAI and shown on Italian television in 2012.³

Yet I want to suggest that, in the midst of this flurry of activity, something critical has been lost. The work Penone has been doing in recent decades is different both in its scale and, more importantly, focus than the pieces he created at the very beginning of his career. I want to provide an overview of Penone’s most recent projects in this first part of my dissertation precisely because they differ so radically from the work he undertook at the beginning of his career. Those first works deserve a new look, one that deliberately separates them out from Penone’s larger oeuvre; they are the central focus of my project.

While the early works are included in retrospectives and often referenced, it is typically through the lens of what has come since. Descriptions and interpretations of Penone’s art from the 1980s and after have been folded back upon his projects of the late 1960s and early 1970s. It has become a common practice to consider the early works in light of the later – much to the former’s detriment. The result is a major misunderstanding of many of the works Penone created just as he finished art school and emerged as a mature young artist.

³ “Memoria dei Fluidi. Giuseppe Penone scultore,” RAI Edu documentary, directed by Giampaolo Penco, accessed January 12, 2013, http://www.arte.rai.it/articoli/fluidi-giuseppe-penone-scultore/19216/default.aspx. There is a moment in the documentary (which aired in Italy on December 12, 2012) when Penone talks about the pleasurable experience of carving a tree. The physical activity makes him happy. He mentions how wonderful the wood smells as he goes about the process of stripping away exterior layers of wood. In all of the theoretical discussions to follow, it is important to keep this physical and pleasurable moment in mind. Whatever interpretation can be gleaned from this dissertation, I believe it is also fundamentally important to note the delight and satisfaction the work clearly continues to give the artist.
While it is often productive to treat an artist’s oeuvre as a unified whole, in this case there exists a palpable division between what Penone made through the late 1970s and what came after. It is entirely because of this difference, generally unnoted, that my dissertation focuses on Penone’s early works; my intention is to correct the misinterpretations that have now become widespread. I begin with *Alpi Marittime* [Maritime Alps] from 1968 (Fig. 5), then follow with a discussion of the first examples in a long series of *Alberi* [Trees] initiated in 1969 (Fig. 6). Analyses of two major works from 1970 follow: *Rovesciare gli propri occhi* [To Reverse One’s Eyes] (Fig. 7), and *Svolgere la Propria Pelle* [To Unfold One’s Skin] (Fig. 8). These are exemplary works that stand out for their consistent interest in “outsidedness,” that is, how things (including ourselves) are exposed to the world. With them Penone confronts issues of exteriority and surfaces, the relationship of touch and sight, and the powerful notion that we understand our surroundings because of our embodied actions – that we are touched by the world even before we reach out to touch it, seen by it even as we see. Collectively, the early works are responding to and share in an underlying concern that is strongly phenomenological – or so I will argue. I “bracket off” Penone’s early works from his subsequent career because they are different in kind and therefore deserve a kind of attention different from what they have received so far.

**The works**

In 1968 Penone returned to his home village of Garessio. He felt a sense of belonging to the woods, fields and farms that define that Alpine area’s character, and he began making sculptures that were deeply reflective of his relationship to that place. Six separate sculptures make up *Maritime Alps*, the subject of Chapter 2. Each work
incorporates Penone’s body, and either living trees or babbling brooks, and each was
documented photographically. The artist grasped and hugged trees in ways that affected
their growth, and employed natural forces to guide their subsequent response. Even at
this early stage, Penone felt a keen sensitivity to the reciprocity that existed between the
impact of his touch and the forces of nature. He understood that he was not the sole actor;
rather, he was always engaged with natural forms that were participants, even agents, in
the creation of the work. Maritime Alps shows us our being-in-the-world is
fundamentally relational.

In Chapter 3 I discuss Trees, a series that Penone undertook inspired by his work
with trees in Maritime Alps. He recognized that everything about the tree’s life remains
an essential material fact of the tree. Carving into a tree, he could expose its earlier form.
Penone chose to undertake this practice using industrially produced wooden beams,
observing the growth rings, choosing an age of the tree to reveal and then slowly carving
away at the surface until the tree was partly excavated. The geometric shape of the beam
remains visible alongside the uncovered sapling. Culture – in the form of lumber –
reverts to nature. But even as the artist removes layers of the tree, what he finds
underneath is not something that was always hidden. What he reveals is the fact that
throughout the tree are layers of its previous exteriority. Contrary to other discussions of
these works, mine emphasizes that the tree’s “inside” is indistinguishable from its
“outside.”

To Reverse One’s Eyes, the topic of Chapter 4, is perhaps the most famous work
of Penone’s oeuvre. For it, he inserted a pair of mirrored contact lenses into his eyes,
blocking his own sight. In the process he offered spectators the reflected image of what
he would have seen, were he not wearing the lenses. Penone’s vision is immediately re-transmitted and made into a spatial position – exhibited for the viewer. What is unique about the work and what does not appear in the existing criticism is that we experience what it is like to see from another vantage point, even as we remain where we are. Viewers are offered the rare opportunity to see what someone else is seeing. *To Reverse One’s Eyes* makes vision dependent upon a reversal or exchange of viewing positions. Penone presents spectators with the proposition that we understand sight not at a safe and detached distance but as an intersubjective phenomenon: we are bound together by the fact of our visibility. *To Reverse One’s Eyes* reveals vision to be a fully embodied phenomenon, one that we understand because we are seeing beings simultaneously seen by others.

In Chapter 5, I look at *To Unfold One’s Skin*, an exercise in contact where the artist had his entire body photographed in over 600 tiny sections, each given focus by placing a microscope slide on his skin. While it is primarily a work of photography, *To Unfold One’s Skin* shares with Penone’s sculptural projects an interest in absolute exteriority. It is especially concerned with the kinds of contact we all make with our outer surfaces and the rest of the larger world. It opens a discussion of the limits of our bodies as “contours of reciprocity” through which we are always touching things and leaving marks, while at the same time experiencing the pressures and impressions that the world leaves upon our skin. The work forces us to question whether we are really isolated individuals, made up of the privacy of our own contours and what we imagine to be our interior lives. It insists instead that we exist as beings always in contact with the world and made up of the same worldly stuff.
Penone’s early works share an interest in interacting with things. His touch (of wood, of body), his sight (offered over to others) and his skin (pressed against other things in the world) are fundamental elements. Each piece allows us the possibility of considering a wide range of issues, including Penone’s participation in contemporary investigations of body art, land art, photography, process art, ephemeral objects, and time-based projects. They provide ample opportunity to discuss the fact that despite his insistence that he is a sculptor, many of his works are accessible only through photographic documentation. Because of this Penone could and should be included in the roster of artists who challenged sculptural conventions in the 1960s and ‘70s. And while these topics are pertinent and will be touched upon in the subsequent chapters, my examination here is principally inspired by the fact that during the beginning of his career Penone made work that consistently focused on themes best described as phenomenological.

The Phenomenological Connection

My argument centers on connections between Penone’s early work and phenomenological accounts of our being-in-the-world. It is my central claim that the pieces are a meditation on encounters with the things around us, experienced through our “outsidedness.” The artist uses his body and the things it comes into contact with in order to defy traditional understanding of personal experience as a private internal matter. The works of art discussed in these pages offer examples of how we live, not as discrete individuals, but as engaged bodies that see and can be seen, touch and can be touched just like all other beings. We form all of our relationships (including the kind that derives from contact between surfaces) because we are exposed in the world. Our interactions
focus outward: our knowledge is gained through a kind of daily give and take. I have used the writings of Maurice Merleau-Ponty as a means to illuminate Penone’s work. *The Visible and the Invisible*, and in particular the chapter “The Intertwining – The Chiasm,” provides one of the frameworks to think about Penone’s actions and practices.⁴ The relationship between the works covered in this dissertation and Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology is strong and, for the most part, unexplored. It is also what distinguishes Penone’s early production from the later, the substantial shift occurring at the end of the 1970s and the beginning of the ‘80s.

Penone did not set out to create a body of work that was dictated or influenced by a theoretical framework. He has said time and again that politics, theory and philosophy are not integral to his life as an artist.⁵ Penone has rejected the idea that his work was ever tied to a particular ideology, even as it was being produced in the midst of the heightened political activism of the late 1960s in Italy.⁶ Unlike other members of the Arte Povera movement, Penone says he was never interested in political art; he doesn’t think

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⁵ In an interview with Markus Mascher, Penone says, “My work is not subject to the necessity of producing a piece based on a theory or from a comprehensive view of life. It depicts or characterizes nothing other than itself. It is created from a sense of amazement that comes about in the face of things. It is oriented on the human approach of projecting one’s hopes and fears that orbit the world.” “On the Logic of the Material,” in *Rudolf Steiner and Contemporary Art*, ed. Markus Brüderlin and Ulrike Groos (Köln: Dumont, 2010), 73.

⁶ “Penone recently remarked to me that an artwork can have political content if it coincides with the needs of the work – its raison d’etre – but one can’t force external content into the artwork’s integral language and form. Moreover, he suggested that since politics consists of direct action in society, its most effective language is certainly not that of art, which comes nearer to poetry in its logic and open address to the viewer.” Elizabeth Mangini, ”Parallel revolution: Elizabeth Mangini on Arte Povera,” *Artforum International* 46.3 (2007), 159.
that one can make political commentary with a work of art.7 “I wouldn’t do it that way…it would be an error…you can’t make a political action with a work of art,” he said in 2010.8 The most he will concede is that it might be possible through art to change others’ worldviews, which could then have political consequences.

Penone describes himself as a pragmatist and says that his interest in sculpture lies with finding its relationship to nature. He is at his most engaged and focused when he writes or speaks about his artistic processes. It should come as no surprise that he is a teacher and has led a studio at the École des Beaux Art in Paris for years. He describes his workman-like approach to materials with clarity and simplicity. When, in a public interview with the curator Daniela Lancioni, she tried to impute a theoretical basis to some of his works, both she and Penone let out nervous laughter as he repeatedly resisted

7 “Giuseppe Penone, intervista di Hans-Ulrich Obrist,” Castello di Rivoli.TV Archivio Contemporaneo, Filmed on July 18, 2010 at the Teatro del Castello di Rivoli, Turin, during the exhibition Gli Irregolari, accessed January 22, 2013, http://www.castellodirivoli.tv/tag/hans-ulrich-obrist/. See part ii, minute 5:30. It must be underscored that Penone was just coming into his own as an artist at the end of the 1960s and might not have felt the necessity of protest from his relatively isolated academic/agrarian communities in Northern Italy. However, the 1970s were the central years of the gli anni di piombo [the years of lead] and political violence and terrorism dominated Italian life no matter one’s position or personal views. One could, therefore, compare Penone’s work with more explicit examples: Mario Merz’s Igloo di Giap – Se il nemico si concentra perde terreno, se si disperde perde forza [Giap’s igloo – If the enemy masses his forces he loses ground, if he scatters he loses strength], 1968 with the famous quote from the Vietnamese general represented in neon cursive; Luciano Fabro’s Italia Rovesciata [Overturned Italy], 1968 with metal cut outs in the shape of the Italian peninsula hung upside down; or Alighiero Boetti’s Mappa [Map], 1972 consisting of embroideries of political maps made by Afghani weavers. Many of Penone’s fellow Italian artists were actively commenting on and organizing exhibitions based on the chaos they felt at home and abroad. Penone’s work does not have the same kind of engagement. See Nicholas Cullinan, “From Vietnam to Fiat-nam: The Politics of Arte Povera,” October 124 (Spring 2008).

8 “Giuseppe Penone, intervista di Hans-Ulrich Obrist, part ii” See minute 6:25.
her characterization of his motivations. He talks about finding the logic of materials while delving into wood, stone, leaves, and wind to find the meaning and the satisfaction of artistic production.

Penone has frequently referred to his work as “tautological.” He uses something to show the thing itself. “I create a tree again, not only in shape but with the same material created by the tree. In this way I think the tautology is almost perfect.” He works with wood to show a tree, he photographs his body to show his skin, and he gives us a reflection of his own experience of sight to make a comment on vision. The works in this sense are comprised of pure exteriority: everything is there to be seen. There is no hidden symbolism, no meaning deeper than the surface of the work itself. The works from the beginning of his career are, as Penone said, exemplarily tautological in that regard. This is as far as he will go in theoretical conversation.

The most direct evidence of Penone’s disinterest in theory came in response to a question posed by Benjamin Buchloh. He asked if Penone had read Maurice Merleau-Ponty or any French philosophy. Penone’s response was, “I’ve read very little


10 Responding to a question about his work with trees Penone says, “My work doesn’t have an aim; I don’t want to add other meanings. I use the tree like a material, not like a symbolic element.” Karlyn De Jongh, “Giuseppe Penone: Conversation with Karlyn De Jongh, Giuseppe Penone studio, Turin, Italy, 2 June 2009,” in Personal Structures: Time, Space, Existence, ed. Peter Lodermeier, Karlyn De Jongh and Sarah Gold (Cologne: Dumont, 2009), 338.

philosophy; I’ve read poetry and literature instead.” But even when asked about his relationship with literature, Penone played it down. He said he reads like everyone else with a preference for poetry. He has talked about his interest in the multiple meanings and synthetic interpretations to be found within poetry over prose. But, ever the pragmatist, Penone refers to the physical and temporal commitments required to make his own work: “you need time to read,” he said. Penone might want to brush off Buchloh’s question, but that does not mean we all have to. The very fact that Buchloh asked about Merleau-Ponty suggests that he, too, had recognized something “phenomenological” in Penone’s work. In fact, I believe Merleau-Ponty’s ideas often help illuminate the artist’s practice in positive and expansive ways.

My dissertation does nothing more, in some sense, than find and follow a common thread running throughout Penone’s early work. There is always a body, there is always a gesture of contact, there is always an interest in surfaces, and there is always an exteriority providing spectators with everything they need to know about the work. If Penone claimed not to have read any philosophy himself, it nonetheless remains the case that phenomenology has proven remarkably helpful in my efforts to describe and discuss the work. There is an almost uncanny connection between Merleau-Ponty’s ideas and the objects and images Penone made in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Penone’s works


correspond extraordinarily well with some of the complex and intricate descriptions of being that Merleau-Ponty offers in *The Visible and the Invisible*.

**The Shift of the late 1970s**

I do not believe that any radical event happened to set Penone’s work on its different course. There is not a single piece or a specific year that marks a definitive end to one line of inquiry and the beginning of something new. At some point around the late 1970s Penone started to understand or interpret his earlier work differently; his project changed. The things he made began to demonstrate an interest in interiority, representation, and symbolism, utterly foreign to his oeuvre up to that point. Alex Potts noted this trend in many of Penone’s colleagues:

> Arte Povera’s object making may largely have run its course by the very late 1960s and early ’70s, with the artists involved either going conceptual, as Alighiero Boetti did, or more commonly losing it with empty elaborations of their earlier ideas, frequently burdened by an aestheticizing portentousness at odds with their earlier informal gestures.¹⁴

Just as I am unable to point to any single precipitating event, I cannot offer an explanation for *why* Penone came to see his work in substantially different – indeed virtually antithetical – terms than the ones that had guided his early production. Nonetheless, the fact remains: the works from the late 1960s and most of the 1970s hang together as a group, and in ways that set them far apart from the work that followed. In them we find an attention to exteriority and the body’s relationship to the world. They are manifestly working through a phenomenological investigation that opens surfaces out to interact with the things they touch; the works hone in on what it means to experience the

¹⁴ Alex Potts, “Disencumbered Objects,” *October* 124 (Spring 2008), 170.
world as an embodied thing among things. Because of their consistent focus, the early works belong together more than they belong to the rest of Penone’s oeuvre. In many respects, his subsequent work renounces those early interests. They do not, however, make those interests (or those works) any less compelling.

The fact that this “rupture” I am positing within Penone’s oeuvre has gone unremarked by other critics may owe in part to the strong superficial similarities between the early and later work. Penone has not greatly changed the materials with which he works. He continues to carve trees and cast bronze. He keeps working in the forests around Garessio, taking the agricultural products of the land as his inspiration. His hands, leaves, water and breath are among the materials he persists in using. The *Trees* series proceeds for decades even though some of Penone’s carving techniques change. He begins to use felled trees as his primary source of material. His interest in skin pervades his work but he begins to project images of his skin on walls and create room-size murals and, at times, attach acacia thorns to those images, thereby adding a sharp and menacing three-dimensionality to the works (*Pelle di Marmo [Marble Skin]*, 2003 - 2007 (Fig. 9).¹⁵ He does expand his material choices to include working with terracotta, leather and marble but on the whole, but even these are really seen as products of the earth, like the natural materials that formed the basis of his early work.

¹⁵ At first the murals were made by Penone drawing directly on walls and subsequently on large canvases sometimes made of silk or thin slabs of marble. The result is that the works are more like paintings and representations of skin using multiple materials, than they are like Penone’s prior works where the skin showed only itself.
If my justification for focusing exclusively on the early works has to do with their shared external nature, the post-1980s pieces are notable for their emphasis on a usually subjective “expression.” The later are oriented towards the disclosure of some presumed interiority (either the artist’s or the materials’). After much insistence that he was not involved with the representations of things, by the early 1980s Penone began to cast tree bark in bronze and mold the pieces to resemble human forms. These figures, called *Gesti Vegetali [Vegetal Gestures]*, were then installed outdoors near trees, in potted plants or along garden paths (Fig. 10). He bound molds of his face to potatoes and squash, left them buried to grow and then dug them out months later to find the vegetal forms had conformed to the image of his own likeness (*Zucche [Gourds]*, 1978 – 1979) (Fig. 11). Penone talked about carving into trees to find their secrets and their memories. He filled the interior of trees with deep red resin that suggests nothing if not human blood (*Matrice de sève [Sap Matrix]*, 2009) (Fig. 12). He created a series of marble sculptures in which he followed the veins of the marble and carved forms that resemble the human circulatory system (*Anatomia 1 [Anatomy 1]*, 1993) (Fig. 13). He installed large curved glass panels titled *Unghie [Toenails]* against growing trees or over large piles of leaves, not only representing a part of the human body but, because of the transparency of the glass, putting into evidence an interior he wanted to make visible and legible (Fig. 14).

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16 The first installation of *Vegetal Gestures* occurred in 1984 at Merian Park in Basel, Switzerland.

17 “My artwork shows, with the language of sculpture, the essence of matter and tries to reveal with the work, the hidden life within.” This quotation by the artist provided the thematic core to the exhibition “Giuseppe Penone: The Hidden Life Within” at the Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto. For a description of the exhibition see the museum’s website, accessed February 20, 2013, http://www.ago.net/giuseppe-penone-the-hidden-life-within.
If the beginning of Penone’s career is distinguished by its focus on the surfaces of things, the later works that I have been describing demonstrate a distinct turning away, a turning inward. The artist directs attention to an object’s hidden interiority. In doing so he loses much of the phenomenological force that provided the foundation for his original and complex vision. We are no longer confronted with works that comment on engagement and interaction between body and world. Secrets, mysteries, references to mythology, and inwardness are the common themes of Penone’s post-1980’s production. I do not believe these works merit the same examination and attention.

**Major Exhibition Catalogues and Monographs**

One result of Penone’s consistent thematic and material focus is evident in the major exhibition catalogues and monographs of the past fifteen years or more. Because Penone uses a limited number of elements in his work, the tendency has been for curators, art historians, and critics to group pieces together not chronologically but rather by medium or thematic narrative. These editorial decisions result in groups of works brought together but created decades apart. In some cases these publications gather all works that deal with trees into one chapter while other sections focus on works showing skin and fingerprints. A theme like “memory” assembles works regardless of medium or chronology. I find these choices have led to a harmful acceptance of a rather arbitrary cohesiveness of Penone’s entire oeuvre. What seems like purposive equivalences result in unjustified coincidences. The thematic designations so typical of these publications do not remain consistent from one to another; each makes up its own structure of labels and categories. For example, in the 1999 catalogue accompanying the exhibition *Giuseppe Penone 1968 – 1998* at the Centro Galego de Arte Contemporánea in Santiago de
Compostela, the works are grouped under headings like: “Works about Time,” “Memory of Time,” “To Surround Limits,” “Memory of Experience,” “Automatic Sculptures,” “Fluid Structures,” “Light Structures,” and “To Breath Shadows.” But these are imposed titles that encapsulate the ideas of the interpretive essays and do not come from the works themselves.

In the latest monograph, *Giuseppe Penone*, from 2012, editor Laurent Busine has divided works under the categories: “Breath,” “Sight,” “Skin,” “Heart,” “Blood,” “Memory,” and “Speech.” His rationale for these categories is a comparison between Penone’s entire oeuvre and the human body. There is no precedent for this kind of description. The titles’ function is consistently less than clear as descriptive of Penone’s entire oeuvre. Across the range of publications there is a kind of random assessment that claims an invented totality/coherence.

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18 Busine says, “I have tried to bring order to the diversity of Giuseppe Penone’s works, their varied approaches and differences, using a logic applicable to human beings, human bodies, and, by extension, to imagine these bodies as comparable to those of the works, in order to move from the visible to the invisible, the supposedly known to the sensed unknown.” “Breath, sight, skin, heart, blood, memory, speech,” in *Giuseppe Penone*, ed. Laurent Busine (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2012), 7. Penone also commented on Busine’s justification for the monograph’s organization, “It’s a reading that Busine made by looking at the works. These works were not created with any specific logic and therefore it wouldn’t make sense to give them a chronological structure. There was a need to create some kind of order and structure but one that rejected the rigid organization that otherwise would have occurred. It is a reading that defies the typical monograph and it provides the possibility to think more broadly about works that are otherwise considered finished. In this way we can pay attention to the process of thinking about and making works rather than simply their reproduction and representation.” Angela Madesani, “Penone: la scultura, la natura e l’artista,” Art Tribune, accessed January 14, 2013, http://www.artribune.com/2013/01/penone-la-scultura-la-natura-e-lartista/

19 Another example of arbitrary groupings comes from Catherine Grenier’s exhibition catalogue *Giuseppe Penone*, published in conjunction with Penone’s 2004 retrospective at the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris. The chapter titles include: “La Nature éprouvée,” “Travail des limites,” “Projections,” “Le monstre,” “Mémoire et attestation,” “Mythologies,” “Narcisse,” “Saturne,” “Beauté et delectation,” and again it seems that these categories come out of the
Penone’s Writings

Adding to the complexity of this discussion is Penone’s prolific writing. His work is intricately connected to his copious notes, which are almost always reprinted with reproductions of his art. Some publications pick and choose selections but the majority of exhibition catalogues reprint significant collections of his writing. It is as if his writing were a central and essential part of his artistic practice, nearly as important as the sculptures themselves. Some publications—such as the 2009 catalogue, *Giuseppe Penone Writing 1968 – 2008*, published in conjunction with exhibitions at the Museo d’Arte Moderna in Bologna, Italy and Ikon Gallery in Birmingham, England—are focused on a complete reprinting of Penone’s essays and notes. Confoundingly, the arrangement of the art works and writings in that catalogue is completely non-chronological. In fact, there is no obvious organization governing their appearance. In addition, the editors do not make any concerted effort to explain why specific texts accompany specific images. Writings from the 1980s are in physical proximity to photographs of works from the 2000s. Notes from the 2000s are paired with works from the 1960s. One account from 1969 follows another from 1993. And this tendency has, unfortunately, become the norm for publications on Penone.

A word about Penone’s writing itself. At times he writes about current projects, at other times he reflects on works done in years past. They are a combination of thoughts and observations. Penone is not a daily chronicler of his life. When he writes, it is curator’s interpretations rather than anything the work evidences. At least Guy Tossato’s catalogue *Giuseppe Penone* from a 1997 exhibition in Trento, Italy based the critical essays on the titles of the works examined in each section: “Tree,” “Eyelid,” “Unraveling One’s Skin,” “Breath of Leaves,” “To be a river,” and “Anatomy.”
because he needs to work through ideas about pieces that he is considering making or about pieces he has already made. His intent is to make notes about his artistic process, as he explains in a 2010 interview that touches on the subject of his writing,

Mine is not a daily practice. It is an activity I do when I need to understand something that I am making or to think about a previous work. Or I might have an intuition and make a note. Otherwise the writing is a reflection on a work done in the past. I am not writing literature, I am merely taking notes to remember things. They help make connections between ideas and perhaps even aid in the evolution of my works. It is not a diary because I don’t write every day. These are little notes, fragments even. I am not writing a piece of literature – there is no structure to the notes. They are small pieces gathered together. They have their own logic but only when considered in light of specific works.

We have to be careful, when reading Penone’s writings, to place them within their proper context. Associating texts from the 1990s with Maritime Alps, for example, isn’t always helpful, at least not if the original intentions of the work are what’s at stake. The writings don’t necessarily give clues or answers about what a work means. And because Penone’s work took the turn that it did, anachronistically folding later writings back onto earlier works can lead to wholesale misconstruals of his art. I find that after the 1980s the artist was much more willing to write about anthropomorphizing trees, or to cite mythology, or to pick up on past suggestions from curators and academics, making comparisons that he never communicated at the time he was actually engaged in the making of the work.

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20 Jeremy Watkins thinks that the writings, “certainly provide some keys to our understanding of what Penone does but they are not literary interpretations of a more elliptical visual art; rather they are manifestations of the same set of fundamental propositions. The writings should be considered separately and, at the same time, as being integral to the artist’s work overall.” Jeremy Watkins, “Penone’s Writing,” Giuseppe Penone Writings 1968 – 2008, ed. Gianfranco Maraniello and Jeremy Watkins (Birmingham, England: Ikon, 2009), 331.

21 “Giuseppe Penone, intervista di Hans-Ulrich Obrist, part i” See minute 3:45.
There is, in short, a consistent tendency to see Penone’s oeuvre as all of a piece, which has led, I believe, to a radical misunderstanding of his work from the 1960s and 70s. It is why so many descriptions of those early pieces center *incorrectly* on interiority, mystery, the revelation of hidden secrets, and anthropomorphic gestures. In what follows, where I have used quotations from Penone’s writing, I have been careful to use passages that clearly relate to specific works within his oeuvre and that were written, for the most part, at the same time the work was being made.

**Giuseppe Penone and Arte Povera**

Before I turn to explore specific works in the following chapters, there is one other issue I need to address: specifically, the historical moment at which Penone began his career. As I mentioned at the beginning of this introduction, Penone has typically been categorized as a member of the Arte Povera movement. His participation coincided precisely with the apex of Arte Povera’s popularity and relevance. The question we cannot dismiss is how to discuss *Maritime Alps, Trees, To Reverse One’s Eye, and To Unfold One’s Skin* through the lens of Arte Povera.

In some ways Penone was one of the movement’s most articulate practitioners. His use of natural phenomena, his direct engagement with the living things of the world, and his intent to produce unencumbered actions, thereby foregrounding the process of art-making – all these concepts were part of the Arte Povera ideal. But consideration of...

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22 “Animals, vegetables, minerals have entered into the art world. The artists is attracted by their physical, chemical and biological possibilities and turns again towards the things of the world…” This is the opening sentence of Germano Celant’s essay in *Arte Povera* (Milan: Electa, 1969), 225. It is less a description of what artists were actually making and more of an aspirational imagining of what a new art movement could be.
Penone’s early works should not be limited by the label of Arte Povera. The challenge is to carefully acknowledge Penone’s role within that movement, as well as its influence upon him, without imagining Arte Povera as the only context for his work.

Penone’s engagement with the contemporary art scene began through his friend Gilberto Zorio, while the two were studying art in Turin. Zorio introduced Penone to Gian Enzo Sperone, the young and ambitious gallerist who was one of the first dealers in Italy to support young Italian artists while at the same time seeking out the latest trends on the international scene, and exhibiting major American Pop artists. Sperone was a crucial connection and educator for Penone, providing him (and all of Turin) access to some of the most avant-garde artwork of the time. Penone was included in the group

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23 Sperone traveled with the artist Michelangelo Pistoletto to Paris to meet Ileana and Michael Sonnabend in 1963 and a friendship/collaboration ensued. Sperone subsequently began showing American artists in his own gallery: Robert Rauschenberg in June 1964, James Rosenquist in 1965, Andy Warhol in 1966, Jim Dine and Tom Wesselmann in 1967. “The dates indicate the rapidity and perspicacity of Sperone’s choices: the exhibitions of Pop artists at this gallery follow on the heels of the arrival of the U.S. artists on the European scene in both private and public venues. The Venice Biennale of 1964, for example, awarded Rauschenberg the Grand International Prize for Painting, and here was an artist that Sperone had presented in his gallery on June 16 of that same year, that is to say, a few days before the opening of the Venetian event.” See Anna Minola and others, *Gian Enzo Sperone Torino Roma New York: 35 Anni di Mostre tra Europa e America* (Turin: hopefulmonster, 2000), 18 – 19.

24 In addition to his gallery, Sperone partnered with two Turin industrialists to open the Deposito d’Arte Presente [Depot of Present Day]. From 1968 to 1969, this large industrial garage offered space for experimental art exhibitions, theatrical productions, and interactions between artists, collectors, and critics. Penone had a solo show there in 1968. “The aim of the association was the creation of an exhibition space that was free of market concerns, in which artistic and theatrical activities could be undertaken exclusively with the purpose of encouraging the new forms of art that were taking root in Turin, and to make them better known. It was also the aim of the promoters to break the rigid hierarchy of roles and try to obtain the direct involvement of artists and public, making the DDP a place in which to produce, to exhibit and to meet for all those interested.” Ibid., p. 26.
show “Disegni progetti” at Sperone’s gallery in May of 1969, and had a solo show there in December of that year.\footnote{Ibid., p. 139, 152. \textit{Maritime Alps} was shown at the group show and a series of three pieces Penone made while still a student were shown at his solo show. A review of the solo show describes its contents, “Penone in the large spaces of this gallery, presents three forms that are clear-cut and decisive in their elemental nature and axiomatic, fantastic verification of the three elements of the room itself: wall, floor, air. A cement parallelepiped to indicate the floor on which it is placed; a barrier in brickwork set into the wall to indicate a possible variability in the thickness of the wall itself; an “air barrier” in the form of a long glass, square-sectioned tube set into the wall which bears air and sound from the external world.” Originally published as Mariela Bandini, “Mostre a Torino,” \textit{Gala} no. 40 (February 1970).}

It was in the buzzing atmosphere of the Sperone Gallery that Penone met the powerful and charismatic art critic and curator Germano Celant. The story Penone tells is that one day Celant was visiting with Sperone when Penone walked into the gallery to show the dealer photographs of \textit{Maritime Alps}. Penone was still in his early 20s and had produced little previously that seemed especially innovative.\footnote{Penone has been successful in setting up a narrative about his study of the history of art. Perhaps he has done so to prevent any kind of need or necessity to discuss his influences but also to present himself as an artist unaffected by that world, a sort of tabula rasa on that day he entered Sperone’s gallery. When asked about his studio art and art historical training, Penone consistently says three things. First, his maternal grandfather was a sculptor so he sometimes claims to have art making “in his blood.” See “Meet the Artist: Giuseppe Penone,” March 3, 2010 Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, accessed February 25, 2011, http://artmatters.ca/wp/2010/03/meet-the-artist-giuseppe-penone-audio. Next, he pushes back against discussions of theory: “I’ve never studied the history of art, I learned by buying art magazines and looking at images.” See “Benjamin Buchloh Interview with Giuseppe Penone,” 13. Penone also says he was introduced to major Italian artists in his elementary school textbook, called the Sussidiario, that was filled with pictures from the Italian Renaissance. His first museum trips were organized through his high school when he went to the Uffizi in Florence and the Vatican Museums in Rome at 16 or 17 years old. See “Giuseppe Penone, intervista di Hans-Ulrich Obrist.” These, Penone claims, were his only interactions with the art world before he moved to Turin and enrolled in art school, which completely bored him by the end of the first year.} But the new project fascinated and charmed Celant profoundly enough that he immediately included
Maritime Alps in his 1969 publication, Arte Povera.\(^{27}\) The book collected together examples of the radical shifts that were happening internationally along with the group of Italian artists who would subsequently be classified as the major Arte Povera figures.\(^{28}\)

By 1968, Celant was busy organizing exhibitions in support of Arte Povera. After a few initial shows in Bologna and Genoa, he published “Arte Povera: Notes for a Guerilla War,” which came to stand in as the manifesto for that movement.\(^{29}\) Celant saw young Italian and European artists making work with extremely varied materials, processes and concepts. Although he used the terminology “poor art,” what Celant was actually pointing to was not a poverty of materials or ideas but a radical acceptance of the

\(^{27}\) Answering a question about how they met Celant says, “I met Penone, if I remember correctly…naturally it was in that atmosphere of collecting and information gathering that was happening in around 1969. I didn’t have any official role but I was a participant on the scene, I knew Richard Long, I knew many international art figures and to find [Penone] in Garessio, which is a small village near Liguria in the sense that it is an agricultural setting…I could relate to him because my mother’s family comes from a similar agricultural background. Penone immediately interested me – whether it was because we met or because he heard that I was interested in him, but anyway our interests immediately dovetailed and I put his work in my first book, he showed the first works where he braids three trees together, the beginning works – Maritime Alps…Naturally we became friends in the sense of being cultural accomplices and I always liked to develop friendships with the artists with whom I work. I wanted to met his parents, I wanted to go to meet this the myth of the father who made dried mushrooms and lived with dried chestnuts, I went to visit him and naturally his mother made this delicious meal but what was clear to me was a desire to understand his sense of archeology.” “Memoria dei Fluidi. Giuseppe Penone scultore.” See minute 13:00.

\(^{28}\) Celant’s Arte Povera (Milan: Electa, 1969) includes many Italian artists who would come to be considered the major practitioners of Arte Povera: Michelangelo Pistoletto, Mario Merz, Jannis Kounellis, Luciano Fabro, Giovanni Anselmo, Pier Paolo Calzolari, Giulio Paolini, Alighiero Boetti, Giuseppe Penone, Gilberto Zorio and Emilio Prini but also expanded the field to include European and American Conceptual, Minimalist and Fluxus artists: Walter De Maria, Stephan Kaltenbach, Richard Long, Douglas Huebler, Joseph Beuys, Michael Heizer, Ger Van Elk, Lawrence Weiner, Bruce Nauman, Joseph Kosuth, Jan Dibbets, Robert Barry, Dennis Oppenheim, Barry Flanagan, Robert Smithson, Reiner Ruthenbeck, Keith Sonnier, Franz Erhard Walter, Hans Haacke, Robert Morris, Marinus Boezem, and Richard Serra.

endless possibilities in art-making unencumbered by conventional forms, locations, or media. Celant celebrated a wide group of artists who used natural materials or direct actions, experimented with living things, made eclectic performances, or incorporated in their work energies and elements such as sound, water, and time. He recognized that a revolutionary artistic turn was underway, which would challenge the institutions and art forms that had previously guided artistic production and closed off a staid art-world from the larger popular, political, and cultural experiments happening throughout the 1960s.

In retrospect, Celant’s “movement” seems to have been largely theoretically imposed, rather than something that had organically arisen. His writings and exhibitions appear as ambitious, utopian, but ultimately impractical calls for unity. Celant desired to gather together a concrete coterie of artists from the post-war generation whose work would stand in open rejection of American-style consumerism and the increasing commodification of the art market. His expressed ambition for Arte Povera was that it

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30 Alex Potts explains, “The ethos of open experimentation in Arte Povera, which distinguishes it from Minimalism and Conceptualism, had affinities with the earlier assemblage-based art of the late 1950s and early ‘60s, even if the look of the work is rather different. The individual art work in Arte Povera usually takes the form of a simple entity rather than an ensemble of objects and substances; and while certain strands in Arte Povera may have something of the impoverished look associated with its misleading name, this is the case because the materials involved are relatively raw, untreated, semi-processed, or naturally occurring ones …” Potts, “Disencumbered Objects,” 170.

31 Elizabeth Mangini wrote one of the best summaries of the problematics of Celant’s text and top-down formation of the Arte Povera movement, “The field is still plagued by the idea that its artists were primarily enamored of low, or literally "poor," materials, and by the argument that Arte Povera's antitechnological bent is a misinterpretation of American Minimalism. Given the apparent distance between Celant's formulations and those of later historians, we are left to wonder where to locate this work. Has time proved Celant's claims about the revolutionary potential of these artists and their works to be naively overblown? Or, instead, have mistranslations of the term Arte Povera, and misreadings of the works that the slippery term purports to describe, obscured our view?” "Parallel revolution: Elizabeth Mangini on Arte Povera," 159.
would destroy the divide between art and life, yielding “an art that [would] astonish…by challenging every certitude, by destroying the stability of bourgeois societal values and structures.” But the idea of working under a unified idea, project, or purpose did not always align with the artists’ own interests and art-making. By 1971 Celant himself realized that his efforts had gone as far as they could, and he called for the conclusion of Arte Povera as an organizing force.

What, then, do we need to take from Penone’s inclusion in this group? What aspects of his engagement in its exhibitions and publications had an impact on his early work? Penone never resisted attempts to associate that work with the Arte Povera movement, and he has talked positively since about its practical consequences for his career. It helped elevate Italian artists to inclusion in an international exhibition circuit; it opened doors for them with collectors and gallerists, and it served to motivate an Italian museum system that was previously not particularly supportive of contemporary work by young Italian artists. Penone explained,

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33 “…on the occasion of an exhibition held at Munich’s Kunstverein in 1971, Celant announced the official dismantling of the group and entreated the director of the museum to replace the now ubiquitous title Arte Povera with the artists’ individual names. It was important, he maintained, that each artist be allowed to grow independently and to develop, as he put it, ‘a private and personal identity.’” Claire Gilman, “Introduction: Reconsidering Art Povera,” Arte Povera’s Theatre: Artifice and Anti-Modernism in Italian Art of the 1960s (PhD diss., Columbia University, 2006), 3.
The Italian artists who were grouped under this name never really criticized Arte Povera, because it became a structure, and, what is more, a structure with a cultural value it was easier to identify with than a structure of the market would be, for example...Among other things, it provided the means for expressing oneself. The collective name made it possible to be present in different contexts, which the individual name might not have been able to do, because afterwards each artist gave something to the others, since they were associated...The term came to embody a structure that in itself was much stronger and able to maintain a dialectic – during a very long period – with what was happening, in relation to other things, or other events.34

This dissertation is, in some ways, meant to disengage Penone’s Maritime Alps, Trees, To Reverse One’s Eye, and To Unfold One’s Skin from their usual interpretive frameworks, including that of Arte Povera. My interest is in considering them on their own terms. If I have focused exclusively on Penone’s early works, I have done so because they hang together; they belong to each other more than they belong to the rest of Penone’s oeuvre, or necessarily to the work of fellow Arte Povera artists. The following chapters will show just how distinct they are from everything else Penone has made in the years since. The specificity of the early works is not accounted for in the current literature, and what does exist is inadequate for a thorough discussion. My goal is to provide an alternative language, one that might articulate their shared phenomenological concerns and help to see them anew – for what in fact they are.

Chapter 2: *Maritime Alps*

Giuseppe Penone was twenty-one years old when he completed his studies at the Accademia Albertina delle Belle Arti in Turin and returned to his hometown of Garessio in northwestern Italy (Fig. 15). His return had a purpose. Penone wanted to make sculpture that put into evidence the physical place that he knew and call attention to his connection with it. From its very beginnings, his practice was always and explicitly sculptural. His interest was its “fundamental problems.” He began by making something that was deeply reflective of his relationship with the wooded Alpine area he called home.

Part of Penone’s need to make something familiar and personal came out of a reaction to fellow art students whose own sculptures were, he thought, too much like formal exercises in the style of Henry Moore or Alberto Giacometti. These other students were working in a modernist tradition where sculptures could be easily construed as objects that remained self-contained. Penone saw his fellow classmates adhering to that tradition and valuing works where a distance between the object and the artist or viewer

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35 Penone said, “Ultimately I’m interested in getting back to the fundamental problems of sculpture, the same could really be said of all my works. What interests me are the questions regarding the specifics of sculpture, and of material. And whenever I get to that point, then the works function.” Christoph Schreier, “The Form of the Tree is its Memory. Interview with Giuseppe Penone, 1997,” *Arte Povera from the Goetz Collection.* ed. Rainald Schumacher (Munich: Sammlung Goetz, 1997), 159.
was the norm. This resulted in sculptures that were, as Rosalind Krauss noted about similar works from the same period, “functionally placeless and largely self-referential.”

Penone found his contemporaries’ modernist projects to be based on their art historical studies and hence derivative and irrelevant to their own life experiences. He reacted against this practice while sensing a need for a new kind of approach, in favor of art making that drew upon his own lived experiences - things and places he knew deeply, almost instinctively. Penone chose to return to the area whose terrain, products, and even structure helped form his thinking about how sculpture could be made. It was out of his deep-felt desire for a sense of belonging, as well as a need to feel more

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37 “I also had a few classmates who were more aware of the work of Giacometti and his style. But there was something that didn’t make sense to me: how could one make work in the style of Giacometti when one didn’t see the war, when one lives in a completely different world than he did? I thought it was wrong, in the absence of those experiences, to adopt someone else’s reality.” “Entretien avec Catherine Grenier,” *Giuseppe Penone* (Paris: Éditions du Centre Pompidou, 2004), 257.

38 Penone explained: “It was a particular situation because there was a rejection of the old conventions connected to the old system. There was a global change in economic, social, cultural, political situations. We needed to redefine the conventions of artwork, art in general, and the role of the artist. Because of this there were so many different kinds of work being made, artists taking many different directions, and a general abandonment of the old traditions of painting and sculpture.” “Incontro con Giuseppe Penone,” Palazzo GrassiTV, Interview with Daniela Lancioni filmed on May 23, 2012 at the Punta della Dogana, Venice, accessed November 6, 2012, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wYd44hulEDE&list=UUSP7pPFvaCSZv2ERzwjkHg&index=3&feature=plcp. See minute 6:38.

39 Penone said, “I was not convinced to repeat the work of someone that...I remember my friends...someone was doing sculpture like Henry Moore the other was doing sculpture like Giacometti and for me it was strange because I was not English, I was born after the war, so it was not my...I don’t understand why you have to repeat something that was already done from other people and I started to think about what can be my identity and for that reason I come back to the nature, to the tree, to the elements that I know more than art history.” “Meet the Artist: Giuseppe Penone,” audio recorded March 3, 2010 at the Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, accessed February 25, 2011, http://artmatters.ca/wp/2010/03/meet-the-artist-giuseppe-penone-audio. See minute 34:00.
physically connected to his art, that Penone returned to Garessio and created his first mature work, *Alpi Marittime* [*Maritime Alps*], in 1968.

*Maritime Alps* is a group of six separate sculptures created in the woods of Garessio. Included in the project are: *Continuerà a crescere tranne che in quel punto* [*It will continue to grow except in that one spot*] (Fig. 16); *L'albero ricorderà il contatto* [*The tree will remember the contact*] (Fig. 17); *Ho intrecciato tre alberi* [*I braided three trees together*] (Fig. 18); *Albero, filo di zinco, piombo* [*Tree, wire, lead*] (Fig. 19); *Crescendo innalzerà la rete* [*Growing it will lift the net*] (Fig. 20); and *La mia altezza, la lunghezza delle mie braccia, il mio spessore in un ruscello* [*My height, the length of my arms, my width in a stream*] (Fig. 21).

*Continuerà a crescere tranne che in quel punto, [It will continue to grow except in that one spot] is perhaps the best-known work within the *Maritime Alps* series. It began with Penone taking hold of a sapling with his right hand (Fig. 22). He then attached a replica of his hand, made with steel wire, to the tree (Fig. 23). Subsequently he replaced the wire version with a bronze version cast from his own grasping hand.\(^{40}\) When the bronze surrogate was installed, the grip of the hand fit comfortably around the tree’s exterior (Fig. 24). Over time the tree grew around the bronze cast. Temporally, the work began at the moment of contact and continued as the impact of the hand affected and deformed the tree’s growth (Fig. 25).\(^{41}\)

\(^{40}\) The metal wire version appears in early photographs of *It will continue to grow except in that one spot*

\(^{41}\) “Memoria dei Fluidi. Giuseppe Penone scultore,” RAI Edu documentary, directed by Giampaolo Penco, accessed January 12, 2013,
In *L’albero ricorderà il contatto* [The tree will remember the contact] Penone embraced the trunk of a tree and marked the outline of his body by hammering wire into the bark (Fig. 26). He said, “I grabbed on to a tree and later I transcribed the outline of my body with nails and wire cord where my body touched the tree. The tree will be forced to remember my action.” Penone’s hug determined the placement of the steel wire. His squeeze was replaced by a metal outline, which impacted the tree’s growth while simultaneously serving as a memory of Penone’s action.

In *Albero, filo di zinco, piombo* [Tree, Wire, Lead] Penone marked the outline of his hand on a sapling with nails and then hammered twenty-two metal balls to the surface of the tree (corresponding to the artist’s age at the time he created the work). He then connected the metal balls with a spiraling wire. His intention was to add a new ball during every year of his life. He also planned to have a lightning rod attached to the top of the tree after his death, with the hope that a bolt of lightning would hit the tree and fuse all of the metal.

In *Crescendo innalzerà la rete* [Growing, it will lift the net] Penone enclosed the thin branches of a sapling within a wire cage topped with pieces of cauliflower, pepper

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http://www.arte.rai.it/articoli/fluidi-giuseppe-penone-sculitore/19216/default.aspx. Penone is currently making another version of *It will continue to grow except in that one spot*. He attached a bronze cast of his hand to a sapling in around 2005. Once a year he films the tree to record its growth. He mounts a camera on a tripod and places that tripod on a circular track he has installed at the tree’s base. Each year’s film consists of one rotation around the tree. Based on the rate of growth, Penone imagines that the filming will continue for sixty years, until the hand has been completely engulfed in the tree and the tree’s exterior will reach and overgrow the camera’s track. See minute 27:00. There had been a plan to create such a film in 1968 but it remained unrealized.


43 Ibid., 173.
and pumpkin covered in concrete (Fig. 27). The cage provided a way to visualize and mark the evidence of the tree’s growth. The work was a celebration of an upward thrust of natural energy.\footnote{Speaking of Growing, it will lift the net, Penone said: “Fantastic events: we say: if only we could harness the energy in a bolt of lightning...if only we could use the movement of the sea...if only we could capture the energy of a hurricane...if I could gather the energy of growth in the blades of grass in my garden, we could also save energy. The caged energy of growth of a tree.” Giuseppe Penone Writings 1968 – 2008, ed. Gianfranco Maraniello and Jeremy Watkins (Birmingham, England: Ikon Gallery, 2009), 37.} The chicken wire allowed light to enter. And as for the seemingly random and unconnected cauliflower, peppers and pumpkins placed atop the cage? Penone poetically referred to them as: “an elevation, a sacrifice, an offering to the light.”\footnote{“Entretien avec Catherine Grenier,” 261. Two years after he installed the cage, the sapling’s slow growth forced the artist to dismantle the work and only the documentary photographs remain.}

La mia altezza, la lunghezza delle mie braccia, il mio spessore in un ruscello [My height, the length of my arms, my width in a stream] is the only work from the series that does not directly involve trees. It was created at a different moment and uses a creek bed as the location. In the creek Penone installed a concrete structure based on the dimensions of his body. The frame’s length was based on Penone’s height. Its width was based on the space of his outstretched arms. Its depth was based on the width of his body, back to front. The inside panels of the concrete slats bear the imprints of his palms, feet and face (Fig. 28). To install the block of cement, Penone undertook a labor-intensive process of diverting the direction of a creek and then submerged the frame onto its muddy floor.
(Fig. 29). Once the frame was immersed into the creek bed, the flow of water was restored and water returned to course over its surface.46

With these works Penone began his mature artistic career. They are the foundation out of which his subsequent work has grown. *Maritime Alps* is an exploration of the profound intertwining of human being with nature (with both organic and inorganic beings). The work, which uses the artist’s own body, living trees and flowing streams, demonstrates Penone’s keen sensitivity to the reciprocal relationship between human being and nature, the impact of touch, and the force of time. With *Maritime Alps* Penone put forth a founding statement about a new and different kind of sculpture, one where the actual material object is less precious and ideas about place, action, and connection to nature become essential.

In so doing, *Maritime Alps* participates in a larger sculptural moment. While born out of Penone’s stated needs to make work that reflected his own experiences, the project engages in a larger contemporary discussion about what sculpture could be. *Maritime Alps* shared in the then-pressing challenge to the “homeless” modernist work, and responded in contrast to the idea of an autonomous object unresponsive and unconcerned

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46 In notes for the project, Penone anticipated that the frame would eventually be filled with sand. Even though the work itself would becomes invisible, a human form and a kind of order would exist in the natural movement of the stream. A drawing from 1968 shows the imprint of his face, hands and feet among the rush of the water and the trees and rocks of the forest. The notes and drawings for the project that appear in Germano Celant’s *Arte Povera* from 1969 include a plastic wire netting that was to be placed on top of the concrete structure, making it visible once the stream was flowing over the box. See also “Incontro con Giuseppe Penone,” minute 16:41, where Penone talks about the fact that when you discard culture, conventions, art history and try to get back to something primal, something basic, what you have left is the body and that is what the work is all about - the form of the human and its interactions with nature. In fact, by 2011 Penone himself has a difficult time finding the location of the work, as seen in “Memoria dei Fluidi. Giuseppe Penone, scultore,” minute 18:00.
with its surrounding location. Penone was not alone in pushing against works like those of Moore or Giacometti. He shared with artists like Robert Smithson, Robert Morris, Richard Serra, Alice Aycock, Michael Heizer, Mary Miss, and Robert Long the belief that site-specific pieces, installations and actions could make the discipline of sculpture an expanded field of possibilities. But while many of these artists were contesting conventions of medium, object permanence, location, or scale, what makes *Maritime Alps* stand out is its focus on eliding the contrast between man and nature. Penone sought a way to make sculpture that highlighted how the artist and the world around him worked together so that anything (any object, any action) was the result of reciprocal engagement and a deep sense of belonging.

**A Sense of Belonging**

Garessio is located in the Maritime Alps on the border between the regions of Piedmont and Liguria. It is surrounded by verdant hills about forty kilometers inland from the Italian Riviera. The mostly agricultural town is known for its rich vegetation, pure spring waters and abundant chestnut trees (Fig. 30). Like most of the Italian peninsula, the area around Garessio has been populated for millennia. Stone tools, ceramic pots, and carvings dating from between 5000 and 2000 BCE have been found in area grottos and caves. Ruins of Roman empire-era outposts are scattered throughout the territory. For centuries, the land around Garessio has been divided up into plots assigned to viticulture, grain production, or the growth of root vegetables. Those who worked the

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land shored up the hills to physically impose order on their terrain; their lives depended upon its shape and its produce.48

One of Penone’s grandfathers was a farmer; the other was a sculptor. The artist draws inspiration from both, saying that he has “two roots, one in sculpture, one in the soil.”49 Penone grew up aware of the seasons and their accompanying products: the time of vineyards, potatoes, chestnuts, cherries, or mushrooms that made up his grandfather’s harvests and his father’s buying schedules.50 Maritime Alps came about in part by contemplating and adopting the timeline of crops, the natural growth cycles of trees and the physicality of manual labor. Penone drew on familial knowledge of working the land and knowing its rhythms. He moved in ways that were similar to the physical force and attention that a farmer gives to his crops. He called on gestures that have been repeated for centuries - the actions that form the land and its products. His work grew out of an awareness of the deep connection between man’s touch and nature’s response.51


49 “Meet the Artist: Giuseppe Penone,” See minute 31:30.

50 Ibid. Penone’s father became a food merchant/middleman, buying from farmers and selling to stores.

51 So much of Penone’s work is a meditation on being like something else: being like a river, the wind, breath, or the forest. The action of Maritime Alps is something like being like a farmer, being like the forest, being like a sculptor. The material objects are important but I think this initial work makes an important statement about Penone’s attitude towards being an artist - the objects are the result of meditations about how one is in the world.
Penone’s bond with Garessio is evident in the 1969 narrative he wrote about his grandfather’s 1881 purchase of land. The text describes its shape, the kind of work done and the transfer of that land from one generation to the next. It enumerates the hours spent cultivating the family property over eighty-eight years. Penone concludes by asking, “Is the accumulation of brute force such that this land, with eleven thousand one hundred and sixty more hours of work of the same nature, might resemble and express what is human?”52 The visible shape of the family property is important to Penone. He pairs this text with images, either of himself making his work or his family working their land. In one publication the text is accompanied by two landscape shots overlooking hills and one photograph showing a detail of the garden with his father bent down at work (Fig. 31).53 The artist wants it known that he is thoroughly conscious of his roots, intimately aware of what it means to work the soil and mindful of man’s impact on the shape and look of the terrain (Fig. 32). He belongs to this land; it is a part of him. Any work that comes out of his activity is not Penone marking the soil with a cultural stamp generated by art school or artistic influences but rather an outcome generated by a long-standing attachment and a sense of belonging.

52 A section of this essay is reproduced in Giuseppe Penone, Rovesciare gli Occhi (Turin: Einaudi, 1977), 4 and is strategically printed next to an image of the artist creating one of the Alpi Marittime works *I braided three trees together*. The artist is at work using the movements of a farmer to create his sculpture.

Penone chose to make *Maritime Alps* in an easily accessible spot in the woods near his home.\(^{54}\) Over the course of a few days in December 1968 Penone manipulated and altered trees and a stream by engaging with them, touching, leaning, moving and changing them.\(^{55}\) As he recalls, the initial process of making *Maritime Alps* was relatively fast. At the beginning of each work, there was some kind of contact between Penone’s body and the woods. Subsequently, the tree or the stream took over and continued its actions based on Penone’s intervention. The artist observed and photographed the eventual modifications over time. His gestures remained, the mark of his body persisted, and the traces of his actions became an intimate part of the vegetal growth. The tree and the stream transformed into mutual partners on par with the artist.

Penone was interested in the fact that nature is not static. Even after his interventions, the trees he selected for the *Maritime Alps* project would continue to grow and mature. Their growth became like the action of a sculptor. The trees’ transformations were actions of sculpture, carried out over time. They had an agency similar to that of the artist. However, it is important to note that by making this choice, by isolating and identifying the actions of a tree, Penone was highlighting what he, as an artist, shared with the growth and cycles of trees. He was showing how much man worked in ways that reflected natural rhythms and movements rather than making claims about the ways trees behaved like human beings. Again, the impetus behind *Maritime Alps* was about breaking

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54 “I chose a location by a creek because it was easy to access and not completely secluded in the middle of woods.” “Entretien avec Catherine Grenier,” 259.

55 Five of these interactions took place between the 16th and the 20th of December 1968. *My height, the length of my arms, my width in a stream* was created the subsequent spring.
down distinctions between man and nature rather than underscoring any purportedly anthropomorphic qualities in the trees.\textsuperscript{56}

From the very beginning Penone’s work shows us the mutual imbrication of man and nature. Their connection, which had formed the land for millennia, was important to Penone and the way he saw his engagement in the process of making his first works. In Garessio, as in all of Italy, the relationship between man and nature has been profoundly interwoven. Asked about his choice to use natural materials and locate works in the woods, Penone responded,

> Often when we speak about nature we are thinking of something that lies outside the activities of man, and when we define the work of man, it is usually in terms that refer to the urban. The natural retreat is seen as just that, as something else. But in fact in Europe we don’t have a nature that is really nature, we have a nature that is a product of man. As far as material is concerned, there is not such a big difference between a piece of steel and a rock or a tree, if you think about the fact that the form of the landscape and the forests have resulted from thousands of years of work by farmers and other people who have worked on the land for countless generations. The distinction between the two is not so big.\textsuperscript{57}

Penone knew that engaging with trees in the woods was neither a brute gesture nor an innocent encounter with a virginal environment. He also knew that whatever the works

\textsuperscript{56} Beginning in the 1980s Penone took to making works with trees based in such anthropomorphism, most notably, his Gesti Vegetali [Vegetal Gestures] series. It is important to note this so that the differences between the early and the late works are clear. The early works are breaking down distinctions between growth and cycles of the life of tree and human. Whereas a work from 1985 titled Quattro paesaggi [Four landscapes] uses bronze casts of bark to form bodies that look remarkably human and even imitate familiar gestures like Rodin’s The Thinker. These anthropomorphic figures are placed amongst terracotta pots. The pots hold planted trees which grow around the bronze humanoid forms. To set Four landscapes in comparison with Maritime Alps should offer a sense of Penone initial rejection of and subsequent embrace of anthropomorphism.

would be, they would most often be seen via photographs shown outside of the woods in a social, urban context.\textsuperscript{58} But his pointing out the particular qualities of nature in Europe was not a straightforward description of landscape as man-made as opposed to a mythic untrammeled Eden, either. Rather, his efforts seem to have been intended to elide or soften the antithesis usually drawn between man and nature.

By choosing to reject the derivative sculptural forms of his classmates and instead turn to nature and the organic forms he knew instinctively, Penone made a significant and decisive statement that would guide much of his early production. His work suggests that the conventions separating man and nature are just conventions. He says, “What I saw when I began was that the distinction between man and nature is false. Man is part of nature; it is our desire to conserve distinctions that has kept us separate.”\textsuperscript{59} At the heart of his early work is Penone’s emphasis on the continuity and, in fact, the same-ness that he felt between his own human being and nature itself. Man \textit{is} nature. His behaviors in the actual art-making process reflect both the actions of the farmer with his hoe and those forces of energy evident in lightning and waves. It is as if he wanted, with \textit{Maritime Alps}, to show how one might merge those together. He says, “This is the thing that fascinates me: the moment that reveals that man is nature and that all his work is nature.”\textsuperscript{60} Even


\textsuperscript{60} Françoise Jaunin, \textit{Giuseppe Penone: Le regard tactile Entretiens avec Françoise Jaunin} (Laussane: La Bibliothèque des Arts, 2012), 32.
though our tendency is to see man as distant from - if not opposed to - nature, with *Maritime Alps* Penone wanted to un-do those distinctions, reorient our understanding.

*It will continue to grow except in that one spot* and *The tree will remember the contact* stand as the two clearest examples of the central and powerful claim at the heart of *Maritime Alps*: that we need to overcome learned oppositions (between subject and object, human being and nature, active and passive gestures). The works work at counteracting the rather entrenched position that sees these forces as distinct or at odds with one another. Penone’s initial intimate actions of grasping, hugging and embracing trees and then monitoring, observing, and photographing nature’s reactions are his means of showing how a human being is a part of, or belongs to, the natural world. And, too, that nature has its own agency, that its reactions are indeed equivalent to the artist’s own.

Penone described his own physical apprehension of the trees in *Maritime Alps*:

I feel the forest breathing and hear the slow, inexorable growth of the wood, I match my breathing to that of the green world around me, I feel the flow of the tree around my hand placed against the trunk. The altered sense of time makes what is so solid, liquid, and what is liquid, solid. The hand sinks into the tree trunk which, owing to its rapid growth and the plasticity of its matter is the ideal liquid element for shaping. 

Important in this project was Penone’s effort to eliminate the distinctions between artist as active subject and tree as passive object, and to highlight the reciprocity at work between man and nature. But it is a tricky situation. Even Penone talks about the significant ways that man has altered a sense of the natural landscape in Italy. In the quotation just cited, he offers a description of the woods as possessing human characteristics. We need to take care *not* to read Penone’s description of the forest

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“breathing” as an effort to anthropomorphize the trees. The emphasis in his description seems to fall on the actions of both artist and tree over time. Penone’s grasping hand and embracing body have become surrounded by (and eventually embedded in) the trees he touched. What we typically observe as inert (i.e. the tree trunk) can no longer be seen as such. The artist is not alone in creating the outcome of Maritime Alps. The tree has its own active role as it works towards incorporating Penone’s grasp/hug into itself in what is a rather concrete instantiation of the phenomenological concept of “the flesh of the world.”

Towards a tactile vision

[T]he work in which I formed my way of thinking for myself, was made at a certain moment, at the end of the 60s – a moment when there was a refusal and a rejection of culture. At the same time there was an attempt to search for some basic values or notions that were not necessarily part of the patrimony of a society, which, for its part, was rather exhausted…And in this sense I base my work not on the image of the body, but on the image that my body gives to things with which it comes into contact – that is, a pile of leaves in which you can lie down, or the imprint you automatically leave everywhere you go. It is an automatic, animal, primordial image that does not pose the problem of intelligence or culture. This way of doing things was also a way of putting into question a conception and a convention of culture in order to reflect on the reality of our relation with things. I think that this was the moment, during those years, when there was this need.

[Penone himself would later succumb to this anthropomorphizing temptation, but it does not seem to be a part of the early work. Those works are about undoing subject/object oppositions – not imparting subjectivity to the trees. Later works actively search out connections between the form of man and the form of a tree and impart onto the tree, human gestures and actions. For example see a work like Respirare l’ombra [To breath shadows], 1999.

With this statement, Penone organizes the goal of his work against a standing tradition. He uses words: *culture, image, intelligence, convention* that, for him, stand as a way of explaining art that relied on existing visual-epistemological models. Penone did not want to make images of things or representations of thing. Creating *images*, Penone believed, meant creating a distance between artist (or viewer) and object. This was a deeply ingrained convention of sight that he rejected. Instead, he sought to make art that exposed what he called the *reality of our relation with things*. That reality was found through direct physical contact with the world around him. Art came out of that contact. He explains this contact as *imprint, automatic, animal, primordial*. He sought to feature touch as the foundation of his artistic process and therefore to rethink how we know and experience works of art.

As Penone mentions in the quotation above, his focus on creating an index, impression or automatic image results from direct physical continuity with nature. The imprint is what happens when the artist’s body comes into contact with and touches the things around it (and they press back). And indeed, *Maritime Alps* initiates an insistence within Penone’s oeuvre about our physically belonging to the world, where touch is the fundamental means by which we learn about it. He identified touch as offering a kind of access to the world that sight - or at least “sight” as conventionally understood - could not give.

Penone’s skepticism about sight is a skepticism towards a Cartesian organization of sight, which imagines the work of the eye as detached from the actions of the body. Penone’s distrust of sight arises from his sense that the optical experience, as we commonly understand it, implies precisely separation and distance while touch offers
access and instant familiarity. Sight, as it is normally construed, sets up a division between subject and object, seer and seen, interior and exterior, which simply does not pertain to touch. The viewer stands in one place and is distinctly separate from the things that he or she gazes upon. It is this distance that purportedly guarantees the objectivity of our observations.

For Penone, however, our tactile knowledge of the world is at once more straightforward and more truthful. In his interviews and writings he says that touch is a kind of knowledge that comes before thought, before interpretation, before language. He explains, “If I were to ask you what distance there is between you and the wall, you could only give me an approximate measurement. In order to understand the actual distance, you have to cover it physically. The same applies to materials: when you see a shiny object, it could be a solid or a liquid; in order to verify the material, you must touch it. This demonstrates that sight is deceptive, a convention.” For Penone, touch is the antidote to a total reliance on a visual understanding of our relation to the world.

However, his is not a denigration of vision tout court. Rather, Penone wants to use his understanding of touch to create a new model of vision, one that is based on intimacy. He says, “What I have tried to do is not to accept conventions, neither the conventions of the image nor of culture. An observation or a practice utilizing the haptic sense, because it is a sensation that is closer to a given reality, is less conventional than a

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practice based solely in the gaze, which can present or create distortions.”

Touch becomes the new model for sight, emphasizing our continuity with the world instead of our detachment from it.

*Maritime Alps* presents an understanding of vision that is based on tactility and the realities of the seeing-body. Penone wants to arrive at knowledge gained through sight that accounts for the eyes’ embodied position. The project constitutes a kind of model, one presumably meant to question our usual understanding of the relationship between seeing subjects and the objects of their gaze. Penone’s work proffers an alternative to the previous system, concretized in linear perspective and the camera obscura, both of which predicated vision on a certain distance or detachment from the things surveyed and represented.

In many ways the camera obscura is the perfect structural analogue of the Cartesian understanding of vision. In fact, the technical requirements of the camera helped to normalize the idea that viewers were separate – indeed, held in isolation - from the objects of their attention. The camera obscura works by opening a hole in one wall of a darkened self-contained structure. The structure is completely closed off from the world around it except for that one small pinhole. The opening allows light to enter and project

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65 “Conversation: Giuseppe Penone/Catherine de Zegher,” 34.

66 Penone says, “The act of touching is an act that helps understanding the reality of things, the strength of materials, the peculiarities that are missed by the glance. We learn how to see, for example, if you see the space of a room to measure the size of it you can use your eyes but that is not exact. But to have a more precise idea of its dimension it would be better to walk. Therefore it is the body that gives us the precise information in comparison to the visual perception. Therefore touching is complying with reality, in a more precise way rather than with our eyes. And this was one of my first reflections, that I continued in time.” “Giuseppe Penone Documentary,” *Ikon Gallery*, Birmingham, England, 2009, accessed November 12, 2012, www.ikon-gallery.co.uk/programme/past/gallery/299/giuseppe_penone/. See minute 5:20.
an image within the internal space. An image appears on the interior wall of the enclosure as an inversion of whatever exterior thing is in front of the pinhole. The resulting picture the camera obscura offered was only available to a viewer within the structure, and the viewer was necessarily detached from the surrounding world.

Subsequently, the pinhole of the camera obscura came to be seen as analogous to the pupil, the light projected on the wall opposite to the retinal image. These are the parts of the eye (indeed only one eye) that were understood as constituting vision. The rest of the body played no part in the experience of sight. This discussion of the camera obscura is important because the model of vision on which it is founded implied not only a subjectivity wholly separate from the world it surveyed but an incorporeal vision where eye and body were distinct. It came to be understood as offering a model, not simply of vision, but of our relation to the surrounding world at large.

Within the camera obscura, the body has a diminished role. What is important is the ocular experience. As Jonathan Crary puts it, “The body then is a problem the camera could never solve except by marginalizing it into a phantom in order to establish a space of reason.” The physiological realities of the seeing subject are dismissed in favor of a theoretical monocular and supposedly objective viewpoint that is ordered, rational and primarily of the mind.

The viewing experience the camera obscura staged then became a paradigm for thought. Physical separation between viewer and world that the camera obscura proffered

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showed a specific consideration of how we think and how we gain knowledge. “The camera obscura, with its monocular aperture, became a more perfect terminus for a cone of vision, a more perfect incarnation of a single point than the awkward binocular body of the human subject. The camera, in a sense, was a metaphor for the most rationalist possibilities of a perceiver within the increasingly dynamic disorder of the world.”

Descartes celebrated this idea: I am here, the world is over there. I think about things, I learn about the world, but I learn about them at a remove - not connected, not enmeshed - but at a safe distance where observation happens in isolation. The price paid for this development was an estrangement from our bodies: the self became ever more identified with the mind. Any kind of physical connection with the world, any kind of tactile learning, was downgraded (or at least considered secondary) to thoughts and ideas. The goal was to arrive at a kind of complete, objective view of the world that led to understanding its truths. “The orderly and calculable penetration of light rays through the single opening of the camera corresponds to the flooding of the mind by the light of reason...”

The significance of the camera obscura’s role in establishing sight’s superiority as the primary and optimal route to knowledge meant not only a denigration of the body but also a distortion in our understanding of our being-in-the-world.

Penone’s Maritime Alps works against this radical separation of optic from haptic experience. As he grasped the young sapling in It will continue to grow except in that one spot, he strove to put forth a different model of perception. Perception occurs because we

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68 Ibid., 53.

69 Ibid., 43.
are a body and because that body is part of a world. It is impossible to separate the two. Our perception is always reciprocal and dependent. Our experiences and engagements with the world are possible “because we are both a part of the world and coextensive with it, constituting but also constituted.” These are the words of French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty, whose ideas I will discuss in the following section. Again and again, they provide apt descriptions for the kind of experiences called to our attention by Penone’s early work. Thinking about *It will continue to grow except in that one spot* and the actions of a hand and tree pressing up against one another, there seems to be no better way to describe the reality of Penone’s relation to things than with these words by Merleau-Ponty:

> When I find again the actual world such as it is, under my hands, under my eyes, up against my body, I find much more than an object: a Being of which my vision is a part, a visibility older than my operations or my acts. But this does not mean that there was a fusion or coinciding of me with it: on the contrary, this occurs because a sort of dehiscence opens my body in two, and because between my body touching, there is overlapping or encroachment, so that we must say that the things pass into us as well as we into the things.

**Penone and Phenomenology**

From the beginning of his career, Penone identified and rejected cultural norms surrounding the art-making process that held viewers at a distance. He recognized that viewers/spectators are used to accepting certain conventions about observations of our world and he set out to challenge these deeply established notions in favor of a more

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physical and immediate engagement with the world. He turned away from systems of vision that defined viewers as distinct from and external to the world they survey - especially a Cartesian stance stressing the separation of mind and body as two discrete entities. Cartesian vision normalized the idea that perception of the world is a wholly mental activity, the province of a self identified exclusively with an “interior” cogito. Rejecting this, Penone wanted to highlight the automatic interaction between his own body and the world around him, without dividing conscious perception from the body. He understood sight as something more in line with how we understand our sense of touch. *Maritime Alps* was his way of calling attention to the fact that our bodies, their actions and perceptions, are primary participants in our engagement with and subsequent understanding of the world around us.

In the mid-twentieth century Maurice Merleau-Ponty was one of the thinkers challenging these established theories of vision by putting forth his notion of embodied perception. He claimed that we are able to have perceptions and gain knowledge about the world because we are an embodied part of that world. Immediate perception and initial experiences with the world are different from thought and language about those same things; indeed the latter are founded on the former (despite all claims to the contrary). Merleau-Ponty wrote, “[T]here is no doubt that, in what concerns the mind and truth, they rest on the primary stratum of the sensible world and that our assurance of being in the truth is in line with our assurance of being in the world.”

72 Ibid., 12.
Whether or not Penone was consciously aware of Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological writings, which in the 1960s were just being translated and gaining traction (in Italy as elsewhere), their ideas offer a helpful platform from which to survey and consider *Maritime Alps*. Phenomenology insists on lived experience over and above the pre-existing conceptions of perception. Merleau-Ponty stressed an embodied awareness guiding one’s consciousness of and engagement with things. He wrote, “In so far as, when I reflect on the essence of subjectivity, I find it bound up with that of the body and that of the world, this is because my existence as subjectivity is merely one with my existence as a body and with the existence of the world, and because the subject that I am, when taken concretely, is inseparable from this body and this world.” Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology resonates with and aids in grasping the significance of Penone’s insistence on the breakdown of any subject/object opposition, his intense interest in touch, and his skepticism about traditional accounts of vision.

In particular Merleau-Ponty’s essay “Cézanne’s Doubt” is a useful lens through which to consider Penone’s immediate bodily engagement with things in the woods of Garessio. As Merleau-Ponty points out, Cézanne was deeply troubled by the question of how we see. He wondered if it were possible to think about looking as a way of touching the world, as a way of understanding our deep continuity with the things around us. Merleau-Ponty, who spent his career thinking and writing about how we perceive, saw

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Cézanne as struggling to communicate this kind of phenomenological engagement. I think it is helpful to examine Cézanne’s painterly choices about recording perception because Penone was similarly pondering how to communicate the experience of touch and his engagement with the things around him as he went about creating *Maritime Alps*.

Cézanne was a trained artist; he knew how to use tools like linear perspective to describe the three-dimensional world on the two-dimensional surface of a canvas; he understood the Impressionists’ attempts to capture the moment as it happened. But, as Merleau-Ponty points out, Cézanne still felt that these techniques could not adequately depict the actual bodily sensations that occurred when we are immersed in a landscape or in the presence of familiar objects or people. He sought to break through learned but artificial systems. Margaret Iversen and Stephen Melville outline these systems in their analysis of “Cézanne’s Doubt,”

This sense of physical immersion in visibility is normally obstructed by our habitual, workaday, instrumental relation to things and also by philosophical, scientific, and cultural divisions between thought and sense perception, mind and body, thinking and seeing. These artificial divisions are imposed on us, just as geometric perspective had imposed itself on our relation to the visible, barring a more immediate or authentic relation to the world.\(^75\)

Cézanne favored a perceptual expression where, through brushstroke and color choices, he could depict things as they appeared to him over time and as he examined the world around him from various points of view.\(^76\) In so doing, he departed from more traditional

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\(^{75}\) Margaret Iversen and Stephen Melville, *Writing Art History: Disciplinary Departures* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 112.

\(^{76}\) “I think one of the central questions Cézanne struggled to answer is this: How does one create a pictorial world faithful to nature when what one has to work with is color, a quality traditionally
techniques of representing volume, form or shadow. Indeed this break with tradition is what Merleau-Ponty points to as one of the lessons learned from Cézanne’s oeuvre: we must recognize how these constructions have normalized and organized sight, but we must also develop new forms of representation without the aid of these apparatus.

Cézanne’s work stands in contrast to the Impressionism of Claude Monet, for example, whom Cézanne regarded as “only an eye, but what an eye.” Both men were presenting models of vision but in radically different ways. Monet worked to capture a direct and, importantly, optical transcription of the scene he observed while painting en plein air. Whether he was painting the hustle and bustle of a busy Parisian street or autumnal trees along the banks of the Seine, Monet sought to paint just what he saw in any particular instant (Fig. 33). He put aside established techniques of modeling and shading in favor of capturing the atmospheric effects of light and ephemeral movement through color juxtapositions and flickering brushstrokes. He wanted to make the canvas a faithful representation of his immediate perception. Monet found a useful coincidence in the fact that nineteenth-century optics regarded the retina as a flat surface. This meant that the flatness of the image on the picture plane would be relatively analogous to the image reflected on the retinal surface. The resulting painting would be a faithful record of an instant of perception but it had no claim on the experience of depth or the body’s role in that experience of vision. Cézanne, on the other hand, painted with a recognition that he was seeing from within a body able to take up different positions in relation to the

categorized as a ‘secondary’ property of matter?” For a discussion of Cézanne’s struggles to use color to interpret nature see Kathryn Tuma, “Cézanne and Lucretius at the Red Rock,” Representations 78 (Spring 2002), 68.
objects or landscape. As his body moved around and engaged with things from different positions, he captured the experience of vision over an extended period of time. It was this *embodied* model of vision that his paintings sought to convey. Merleau-Ponty wrote that Cézanne,

> wanted to paint matter as it takes on form, the birth of order through spontaneous organization. He makes a basic distinction not between “the senses” and “intelligence” but rather between the spontaneous order of perceived things and the human order of ideas and science. We perceive things; we agree about them; we are anchored in them; and it is with “nature” as our base that we construct the sciences. Cézanne wanted to paint this primordial world, and this is why his pictures give us the impression of nature at its origin, while photographs of the same landscapes suggest man’s work, conveniences, and imminent presence.”

Cézanne’s paintings feature irregular horizon lines, elongated or distorted shapes, tabletops lifted up into the air, and forms lacking the definition to help distinguish or define their place within the world of the painting. Outlines of objects change, marking the artist’s changing vantage point. In works like *Still Life with Apples* (1894), vases, bowls, plates and bottles seem brought together on one tabletop and yet recorded through different moments and positions (Fig. 34).

Cézanne’s works are a departure in tradition for viewers who were used to seeing a rational, perspectivally organized representation. But Cézanne believed his paintings revealed a truer account of how we really see. If volume, shape, or depth appear in his work, it is not because of Renaissance perspective but because of the artist’s experience of looking at different parts of a still life or landscape over time and from various positions. Iversen and Melville point out that Merleau-Ponty celebrated Cézanne’s choice

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“to think and describe in paint a relation to the world that is ‘prescientific’ or, as he often put it, ‘pre-reflexive.’ According to Merleau-Ponty, Cézanne accomplished the task of painting from nature without resorting to the tools of perspective, thereby depicting not artificial but ‘lived’ perspective.”

Cézanne’s paintings are a working through of how to communicate our bodily engagement with the world and the ways we are enmeshed within it.

*Maritime Alps* might seem to have little to do with Cézanne’s paintings of bowls of apples or Mt. Ste.-Victoire. Unlike Cézanne, Penone was not using one material to make a representation of nature and he was clear about that from the get-go. He never wanted to make a representation of an object, probably because the resulting thing would stand too much in a relation of “object” to the viewer’s “subject” - the contrast he was trying to undo. Penone’s project of embracing trees and moving streams was working to point out the ways that Cartesian distance and detachment have (mis)informed our conception of lived experience. The young artist in the woods initiated a project that was designed to show us both the embodiedness of vision and our imbrication with the world. Penone shares with Cézanne an attention that gives oneself over to the sensations of the surrounding world. His choice to make “sculptural actions” was his way of breaking down the detached position of artist or viewer in front of an object. With *Maritime Alps*

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78 Iversen and Melville, *Writing Art History*, 110.

79 Christoph Schreier, “The Form of the Tree is its Memory. Interview with Giuseppe Penone, 1997,” in *Arte Povera from the Goetz Collection*, ed. Rainald Schumacher (Munich: Sammlung Goetz, 1997), 159.

80 Penone has frequently referred to his art making process as *gesti di scultura* [sculptural actions]. For example, “Giuseppe Penone Documentary,” *Ikon Gallery*. See minute 1:58.
a finalized self-contained object is never quite available to a viewer. The difficulty of determining the work’s exact (spatial or temporal) status resembles the difficulty of determining outlines, edges and definitive shapes within Cézanne’s paintings. They are never quite within our grasp to fix in place. Penone’s sculptural series that results from documentation of the reciprocal action of artist and nature shares with Cézanne’s paintings the phenomenological desire to call attention to the things around us as they are encountered through the changing positions and sensations of a body. The six different pieces of Maritime Alps, their accompanying drawings, and related texts constitute an extended meditation on the ways that we are enmeshed in the world and the ways sight is deeply informed by our bodies’ engagement with that world.

As an example of that engagement, let’s look at I braided three trees together, where Penone intertwined three close-growing saplings. As he undertook the process of making the piece, he stood in the snow holding the saplings together, concentrating on the braiding process (Fig. 35). He was engaged and at work. It was as if he were a farmer manipulating a tree to encourage an increased fruit production, sowing crops or harvesting a yield. He was physically involved in a task, which, he suggests, is like the agricultural work of his father and his grandfather. The initial action was Penone’s braiding, the subsequent - but just as essential - action was the trees’ growth.

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81 “Incontro con Giuseppe Penone,” See minute 13:03.
sculpture grew out of a combination of the artist’s input and the trees’ reaction over time.\(^82\)

What stands out about *I braided three trees together*, and what makes it such a poignant example within the *Maritime Alps* series is the mutual imbrication of the three saplings with one another. The three trees were once distinct things but through Penone’s action they ceased to be independent entities. As they grew, their forms knit together. Three seemingly distinct units combined into one so that over time it was virtually impossible to tell where one tree ended and another began. The artist’s touch and the trees’ growth are equally vital forces.

There are a couple of remarkable drawings related to *I braided three trees together*. One example, from 1968, reveals the cross-section of three trees whose respective cores are connected by three lines, creating a triangle (Fig. 36). The roughly round shape of the cross-section becomes the crown of the tree resting over a depiction of the braided tree trunks and the following inscription lays across the paper at an angle: “Three words uttered at the same time by three people that look at each other, are three interwoven trees.”\(^83\) This drawing is often republished with photographs of *I braided three trees together*.

\(^82\) The fact that this sculpture came about through a multi-step process is highlighted in three photographs published in Germano Celant’s 1969 text *Arte Povera*. The first shot shows three closely growing saplings in the woods. The next photograph records Penone braiding the trees. The artist is gone in the third image, which reveals the tightly wound saplings bound together. The documentation of all of the works in *Maritime Alps* highlights the importance of Penone’s physical actions, his presence in the woods and his engagement with the works and their continuing development over time. He follows *I braided three trees together* though the years and a later photograph, taken in 1972, documented the three trees’ progress as they added new shoots and grew in width. The artist inspects the work, as a farmer inspects his vines, checking the trees’ shape with a curious and patient eye.

three trees together. Penone compares the relationship of the braided trees to three people in conversation, joined together through the shared medium of language. The interconnectedness of their actions results in a unification. If three people speak at once, the sound of their voices unify in a sound wave radiating outward. Penone connects the image of the cross section of the tree rings to the image of radiating sound waves. The action of man and the action of tree are compared and found to look and act alike.

The drawings related to I braided three trees together demonstrate how Penone continues his phenomenological meditation but now the emphasis is less on our belonging to nature (our indistinction from the ‘flesh of the world’) than on the way that, like braided trees, we are literally joined to each other by our shared imbrication in language. The idea of a monadic self-hood is undermined by the consideration of language not as an instrument taken up to express our personal, interior thoughts but the very vehicle to those thoughts – a vehicle not of our making.

Up to this point I have pointed to the ways I believe Maritime Alps considers how our ability to see and be seen integrates us into the fabric of the world in opposition to an understanding of vision as expressing our distance and distinction from one another. I braided three trees together extends the discussion in a way that is perhaps more allegorical. Now the artist points out how language does something like vision - it binds

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84 Penone says, “Just as a growing tree occupies a space, a volume, we are also a volume. There is an relationship: three trees become one, like three people who speak at the same time are one. Sound propagates in space in concentric waves; the sounds of words pronounced simultaneously by three people intersect to form a unique sound. In the same way, the three trees pushing into each other are becoming a single volume, a single tree.” “Entretien avec Catherine Grenier,” 260.

85 This overlapping of human forms and other natural forms will become an important trope in Penone’s oeuvre. In many works the shapes merges into one another. Fingerprints become tree rings, tree resin becomes blood, a handprint becomes the bed of a stream.
us to one another, as a kind of medium in which we are all suspended. The three braided trees become a model for how it is that, despite imagining our selves as unique individuals - discrete subjects - we are all subject to something larger than us, and how that *something larger* pre-existed our arrival in the world.

We tend to think of language as something we possess and use to express our interior states of mind, emotions and thought-processes. We think about it as something we have command over, as independent individuals. But the drawings of *I braided three trees together* ask us to consider language in a manner analogous to how other works within the *Maritime Alps* project ask us to consider sight – as something that embraces us as part of the entire visible world. The drawings would have us understand language as Merleau-Ponty discussed it in *The Visible and The Invisible*, as a pre-existing medium that passes through all of us, that we take part in just as all those in our community take part in it. *I braided three trees together* is not only showing the experience of natural growth and three trees’ embeddedness into one another. By making reference to language and conversation, the work is also showing us how we as human beings are embedded in language and how in communicating with each other, we are sharing in something that is common to all of us. It gives the lie to the idea of “personal” or “private” thoughts contained within each discrete individual.

Just as *It will continue to grow except in that one spot* points to the ways that man and tree take part in the same experience of being - not as opposing subject and object but as equally engaged players - so too does the drawing of *I braided three trees together* point to the ways in which we share in the experience of language. As Merleau-Ponty notes,
In a sense, if we were to make completely explicit the architectonics of the human body, its ontological framework, and how it sees itself and hears itself, we would see that the structure of its mute world is such that all the possibilities of language are already given in it.\textsuperscript{86}

We are joined together through our use of words because we share in the larger experience of the world. Just as the three braided trees are joined together and become one tree, so the sharing of words exposes language as a shared experience. And just as the trees grow to the point where it is impossible to tell the original trunks apart, so does the sharing of language create, in the three-part conversation to which Penone alluded, a thoroughly interwoven whole. The bottom line is, then, that there is no thought without language - a language that we share. It is not ours to possess but something in which we are already embedded.

This analysis of Penone’s drawing related to I braided three trees together and the discussion of the question of language that it raises now leads back to a brief comment on perception. In perception, as in language, Merleau-Ponty believes we find a sense that we neither initiate nor constitute. We are part of it, it courses through us. He says,

Each time I experience a sensation, I feel it concerns not my own being, the one for which I am responsible and for which I make decisions, but another self which has already sided with the world, which is already open to certain of its aspects and synchronized with them. Between my sensation and myself there stands always the thickness of some \textit{primal acquisition} which prevents my experience from being clear of itself. I experience the sensation as a modality of a general existence, one already destined for a physical world and which runs through me without my being the cause of it.\textsuperscript{87}

\textsuperscript{86}Merleau-Ponty, \textit{The Visible and The Invisible}, 155.

\textsuperscript{87}Merleau-Ponty, \textit{Phenomenology of Perception}, 251.
In Maritime Alps Penone shows us just this kind of engagement. We share a common experience of perception. Sight and touch are not senses we instigate but something in which we participate. Let’s return for a moment to Penone’s description of being in the forest of Garessio: “I feel the forest breathing and hear the slow, inexorable growth of the wood, I match my breathing to that of the green world around me, I feel the flow of the tree around my hand placed against the trunk.”88 This passage is meant less to anthropomorphize trees than to articulate his own “lived experience.” The works of Penone’s Maritime Alps come out of an essentially phenomenological understanding of our being in the world. Their shape and their meaning derive from ideas of shared perception, shared action and shared place – the being together of man and nature.

Maritime Alps was Penone’s first mature attempt to present the reality of our experiences with things. By holding on to a tree trunk and contemplating the relationship between man and nature, between artist and work, Penone shows how that relationship is one of equality and reciprocity. He says,

The decision to work with natural elements is the logical consequence of a thought which rejected the products of society and searched for relationships of affinity with matter. The desire for a relationship of equality between myself and things is the source of my work. Man is not a spectator or actor, he is, simply, nature.89

Whether it started as a rejection of his art school colleagues’ derivative works or a keen sensitivity to a larger trend of expanding possibilities for a sculptural practice, Penone felt a need to make sculpture that showed the different kind of engagement he

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experienced between himself and the things of the world. This meant focusing on a sense of belonging to a particular place, using his body, rejecting the idea that he was making a representation of something using materials as tools, reevaluating the experience of sight as something that distances the artist or viewer from the object, and finally encouraging the experience of touch as a fundamental guide. Penone’s actions in the woods of Garessio became a series of works that explored perception and man’s role amongst the things of the world.

*Maritime Alps* continued after that original moment. Through the years, Penone returned to the trees in order to photograph them and document nature’s continuing work on the project. Photographs of *It will continue to grow except in that one spot* from 1978 show the bronze cast of Penone’s hand *both* affecting the growth of the tree and at the same time being subsumed into its form (Fig. 37). The photos depict a reciprocal grasp: of tree by hand and hand by tree. It is a remarkable celebration of an idea that runs throughout *Maritime Alps* (as well as much of Penone’s subsequent work): that we perceive the world with our whole bodies, and as much as we reach out and touch it, it turns around and touches us, for we are as much a thing in this world as any other. To understand perception we must not think of ourselves as detached subjects analyzing distant objects; instead we must consider ourselves participants in events where both seer and seen, touching and touched impact one another. Penone works to elide these optic and haptic differences that have been cleaved apart. And the theories of Merleau-Ponty are a helpful companion to the artist’s actions, so that we look to Penone’s hand grasping the tree as the tree integrates the hand within itself and read, “Through this crisscrossing within it of the touching and the tangible, its own movements incorporate themselves [or
are already incorporated] in the world that they interrogate.\textsuperscript{90} Maritime Alps begins Penone’s work of reevaluating perceptions by proposing that the subject, be it artist or spectator, consider herself a part of (and affected by) the natural world that surrounds her.

\textsuperscript{90} Merleau-Ponty, \textit{The Visible and The Invisible}, 133.
Chapter 3: Trees

*It continues to fascinate me to find the form of something at an earlier stage of its growth. It’s like a film backwards. Removing the rings, one after another, we eventually found the tree as it was originally. This is a recovery time, a rediscovery of the origins.*

From Maritime Alps to Trees

One of the most powerful messages to come out of *Maritime Alps* was the connection between man and tree and their reciprocal relationship in the art-making process. Essential too was Penone’s insistence on our continuity with the world, and his privileging of the tactile over the visual, precisely because vision implies distance and detachment. As we saw with *It will continue to grow except in that one spot* - the hand that grabs as the tree grabs it right back - reveals that in perception we are constantly maneuvering a reversibility. We are both seeing and seen, touching and touched throughout our daily encounters. *Maritime Alps* delved into the possibilities of showing this imbrication with the world. Growing out of *Maritime Alps* and moving through some of the complexities thereby raised is a work entitled *Gli anni dell’alberi più uno* [The
years of the tree plus one] from 1969, which, in turn, gave rise to a new series *Alberi [Trees]* and a new direction in Penone’s young oeuvre (Fig. 38).  

In *The years of the tree plus one*, Penone worked with the more static form of a single tree branch several feet in length. To create the piece Penone counted the growth rings in the cross section of the branch and then added a layer of wax to its surface, working the material with his fingers. The fingerprint-imprinted wax coating became, in effect, the branch’s outermost growth ring.

Even if the wax is a foreign addition to the tree, it does, importantly, mold its shape to the tree’s form. The fact that the wax is relatively transparent means that even the color of the bark is not entirely masked by the new surface addendum. Penone’s wax layer emulates nature to the point of being almost indistinguishable from it. In fact, Jessica Bradley points out the reciprocity between the wax layer and the bark: “The pressure of Penone’s fingers was recorded in the wax as it simultaneously received the fine detail of the surface irregularities of the bark.”

Penone’s finger pressed onto the tree and it pressed back. The wax bears the mark of both tree and fingertip; it is, in some sense, 

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nothing but a record or manifestation of their contact. Such a gesture demonstrates an equivalence between Penone’s body (or the traces that he leaves as he goes through and touches the world around him) and the growth of the tree. The material he transfers onto the branch in a methodical and purposive way is like the tree naturally expanding itself into the world by adding annual growth rings.

*The years of the tree plus one* is a continuation of Penone’s meditation, begun with *Maritime Alps*, on the (in)distinction between human being and nature, and ourselves and the world surrounding us. The meeting of the wax layer and the outermost surface of the tree is partly about limits. The surface of the tree is its outermost layer, its exposure to the world. When Penone adds wax what he is really doing is materializing the traces of contact that he has when he reaches out and touches things in the world. His addition extends himself (his touch, his perception) just as the tree extends itself out and into the world every year by adding a ring.

The semi-transparent wax layer on the tree branch both retains our view of the exterior surface and reveals Penone’s fingerprints. His gesture is personalized, identifying the source of that contact. The wax layer shows what we don’t typically see, the continuity between self and world, nature and culture, man and tree. And once again, Penone’s gesture or extension of his body towards the tree underscores a phenomenological affinity with Merleau-Ponty who said, “Things are an annex or prolongation of my body; they are incrusted in its flesh, they are part of its full definition;
the world is made of the very stuff of the body.”95 In The years of the tree plus one Penone continued his idea about how a body extends out into the world and is simultaneously a part of it. He carried on the theme begun in It will continue to grow except in that one spot where solid distinctions between things that were supposed to be separate - man and tree - were, in fact, troubled, put into doubt, or questioned.

The fingerprint plays a significant role in The years of the tree plus one. It is the recognizable human trace left on the branch of a tree. In general, fingerprints remain on the surfaces our hands touch throughout our day. They are evidence of human presence and traces of tactile actions.96 Increasingly for Penone, they also served as a model for a different kind of vision, that could be described as anything but detached from the objects it scrutinizes. In 1969, around the time Penone made The years of the tree plus one he wrote,

To touch, to understand a form, an object, is like covering it with prints. A trace formed by the images that I have on my hands. You can say ‘rest your glance’ but it is only after having rested your hands that you rest your glance and the glance records, deciphers the form and sees it with the handprints. A tree’s year of growth made up of fingerprints, fingermarks, traces of oil, rested upon its bark, felt, followed, touched, point by point.97


96 In everyday life these fingerprints are either not considered (or seen) at all or are considered something to clean, something that must be removed. On the occasion of the exhibition “On Line: Drawing Through the Twentieth Century” Penone explained, “We all leave behind thousands of fingerprints everyday, so it’s an extremely trivial image. It’s also an image that disperses very quickly and one that we also erase.” “Behind the Scenes: On Line: Giuseppe Penone,” at The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 2010, accessed November 12, 2012, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2EVexMckdY4. See minute: 00:44.

Penone gives much power of comprehension to the fingerprint as the locus of knowledge. He persists in suggesting that touch is somehow more complete than sight but, again always while working towards a re-imagining of sight on the model – or as a continuation – of touch.\textsuperscript{98} Sight and touch seem to comprise yet another opposition Penone is working to un-do.

Following this line of thought: each fingerprint can be considered a discrete moment of perceptual engagement, like the \textit{petit taches} of Cézanne, those myriad brushstrokes were, for the painter, like a caress of the landscape, the notes of color a registration of his bodily presence on the canvas. Cézanne was attempting to lay down the sensations as he lived them. As Yve-Alain Bois put it, Cézanne wanted to “splice vision and touch together at the very moment when the two sensory fields were in the process of splitting apart: in some way to invent a tactile vision.”\textsuperscript{99} Penone’s brief is along those same lines. Remember, he once claimed to “have tried…not to accept conventions, neither the conventions of the image nor of culture. An observation or a practice utilizing the haptic sense, because it is a sensation that is closer to a given reality, is less conventional than a practice based solely in the gaze, which can present or create

\textsuperscript{98} For an alternate reading of Penone’s reliance on touch see \textit{Giuseppe Penone}, ed. Daniela Lancioni (Paris: Éditions Hazan, 2008), 90. Lancioni posits that it was the popularity of Guy Debord’s theory of the Society of the Spectacle and the growing unreliability of the images within the visual world ruled by appearance that brought Penone to rely more on touch for a true understanding of the world around him.

In short, what he seems to have been working towards was a thoroughly unconventional gaze, one modeled on the Cartesian understanding of vision, but closer to vision as understood by Maurice Merleau-Ponty, vision as a palpation, a touching of the world.

The Early Trees

With *The years of the tree plus one* Penone took a step towards his next major project after *Maritime Alps*. The first piece of the group collectively known as *Alberi* [Trees] is generally accepted to be *Il suo essere nel ventiduesimo anno di eta in un’ora fantastica* [*Its being in the twenty-second year of life during a fantastic hour*], 1969 (Fig. 39). This work and the *Trees* series that follow involve carving into trees and beams, a project that began in the late 1960s and continues today. I focus on the *Trees* created in the late 1960s and early 1970s, as I believe they are of a piece and different in intention from the series as it continues later.

With *Its being in the twenty-second year of life during a fantastic hour*, Penone began by carving into wood instead of physically imposing his body onto works as he had with the *Maritime Alps* series or adding something to the surface of the branch, as he did with *The years of the tree plus one*. He said,

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101 Despite the fact that the general tendency (of the artist, art historians and art critics alike) is to categorize the entirety of the *Tree* project as a unified and cohesive (and ever growing) group, I insist on separating the early examples (up through the mid-1970s). This group is distinguished physically by the fact that Penone retains a large part of the beam in the final state of the carvings.
To recover the form of the tree inside the mass of the wood is an action of sculpture. This idea came after I had worked with the growth of trees by modifying their forms through my actions. Considering how trees record their experiences within their growth, I thought that these trees would contain traces of my gestures. I then transferred this idea to blocks of wood, thinking that I could rediscover the form of the tree inside the wood. In 1968-69, I used industrial beams. The idea was to discover the lost characteristics inside a material and a form. Wood equals material; wood equals forest. I wanted to find the forest inside the material “wood.”

Penone started with a twelve-foot wooden beam and carved around the growth rings to uncover an earlier form of the tree from which the beam was later hewn. The tree is only partly excavated and the geometric shape of the beam remains visible. What the viewer sees is the restoration of part of the beam to its sapling form. We see its earlier, and more natural, trunk and parts of branches. The work itself rests horizontally on the floor with the flat un-carved portion of the beam as its base. The industrial form of lumber is not discarded in the process of recovering the tree. Both are present.

The choice to use industrially formed beams of wood rather than just carving into a larger tree comes out of Penone’s negative reaction to Minimalism. He found the geometric forms typical of that movement to be “aseptic.” Penone’s decision to cut into and find form within a geometric block was a retort to works that retained their

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103 A not uncommon reaction, as Roberta Smith noted, “Young artists with vanguard ambitions were confronted with the finality of the Minimalist box which did not leave much to do in the way of form-making and which seemed to offer incontrovertible proof that conventional painting and sculpture were exhausted.” See Smith, “Conceptual Art,” in *Concepts of Modern Art: From Fauvism to Postmodernism*, ed. Nikos Stangos (London: Thames and Hudson, 1974), 258.

industrial and mechanical shapes, even celebrated their inert state (and perhaps excluded
the role of human interaction). In this way, Penone was participating in a general
artistic trend of the moment encompassing Arte Povera artists, conceptual artists and
performance artists who were resisting what they considered the impersonality and
formalism of Minimalist art. Penone could have been reading the Italian art critic
Marisa Volpi, who in 1968 claimed, “In Minimalism, size, repetition, sonority and length
are designed to draw into a total physical experience. With the Italians...what is at issue is
perhaps less assertive and more profound. What they share is the fact that they carry out
their work in real space, eschewing the flattery of a facile appeal to emotions, but instead
standing in firm opposition to the perceptual expectations with which we ordinarily
approach art...”

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105 Penone explained: “Those were years when certain trends ruled - the use of the geometric
forms and industrial materials of minimalism, for instance, which did not envisage the
‘manipulative’ intervention of the artist. However, though I was also interested in starting from an
industrial element, from anonymous matter devoid of a subject, I wanted to recover what had
created it in the first place from within the element itself.” Gianfranco Maraniello, Giuseppe
Penone Instant Book_1, (Bologna: Museo d’Arte Moderna di Bologna, 2008), 4.

106 There was also a strong political message in this rejection of Minimalism (and Pop Art as
well), which Italian artists saw as an American movement and “as another exported product from
a technological and industrialized country...furthermore these American exports were placed in
opposition to a sensuous Arte Povera rich in references to Mediterranean culture, history and
memory, the materials of which were invested with a heavy freight of political and ideological
associations, while its titular signification tied it to notions of political economy.” Nicholas
16 – 17.

107 Marisa Volpi, “American Art and Italian Art: New Directions,” in Arte Povera, ed. Carolyn
Christov-Bakargiev (London: Phaidon, 1999), 196 - 197. Originally published as “Arte americana
e arte italiana. Nuove tendenze,’ Flash Art, no. 7 (March/April 1968), n.p. Translated by Liz
Heron.
Turning away from Minimalist trends, Penone’s goal (one that he admits might even have been unconscious) was to make a work in which he could recover the natural form of a tree. Penone would examine industrially produced wooden beams meant for construction projects, search for the knots in the wood, identify those knots as traces of branches and then slowly carve into the beam, following the knots and growth rings to reveal the branches and trunk of the tree. He would count the growth rings and determine how many layers to remove. By close observation of the characteristics of the beam (things like the density of the wood grain) Penone learned to identify the bottom from the top of the tree. As is evident in works like Albero di undici metri [Eleven meter tree] from 1975 (Fig. 40) and Albero di 3,5 metri [Three and a half meter tree] from 1970 (Fig. 6) he became more and more adept at the subtle and careful gestures needed to carve thin branches of wood and follow the curves and bends of the shape of the tree.

In Three and a half meter tree, the recovered trunk runs up the middle the beam. At the base of the beam the tree trunk is thick with branches expanding from the main vertical post (Fig. 41). Some thin branches extend out into space several centimeters, others remain attached to the beam and still others are truncated, cut flat just at the point

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109 In an essay written in 1976 Penone explains, “Technically, to give it back the appearance of a tree at a specific moment of its plant life, I first must establish where the top is, where the bottom is. I can determine this based on the growth rings, which correspond to the two layers always traceable in the wood, one denser, one softer. The base coincides with the hard, broader layer. From there I begin to dig and it suffices for me to continue scrupulously, following this harder layer, to recover the form of the tree.” Maraniello and Watkins, Giuseppe Penone Writings 1968 – 2008, 92.
where they can be distinguished from the tree trunk. Following the form upward, we see small branches pointing out in their organic randomness until the trunk expands in width and four stubby branches reach outward (Fig. 42). Along the tree’s upward extension there is one point where the trunk bends away from the beam and then abruptly breaks off. A dark patch of wood signals a deformation. From this space one thin branch grows up and out, taking an elegant wide turn to the left before being itself truncated at the top of the beam (Fig. 43).

When this work was on view at the Ikon Gallery in Birmingham, England in 2009, Penone toured the space and talked about the various pieces on view. He spoke about the tree being an amazing sculptor in and of itself, its own gestures fossilized into its structure as sculpture. Everything that it has been and experienced is part of its shape. Specifically discussing *Three and a half meter tree*, Penone noted that the top of the tree had broken off at some point in its life and only in carving the beam did he restore that moment to view.¹¹⁰

Penone’s description gives substance to his claim that he is not using the tree simply as material out of which to sculpt the idea of a tree. He is using the tree to show a reality “beyond the conventions of language or a system of signs. It’s almost a tautology. A piece of wood that becomes a tree.”¹¹¹ His is not a project of making a tree, but


showing the tree. Fabien Faure expands on this idea (perhaps with too much emphasis), “The artist limits his role to that of a skilled performer, his deliberately servile gestures are literally dictated by the material and at this moment of interpretation, his body and his name are absent from the sculpture itself.” Penone’s approach in the Tree project recalls his relationship with trees as he worked on Maritime Alps. His gestures and his actions were the initiation of a process that valued and equalized the work of the tree as sculptor. In Trees, Penone’s work as sculptor is to recover and reconstitute a form that already exists.

Penone is a persistent pragmatist. He stresses his interest in material, working with wood, bronze and stone, and remains committed to certain traditional carving and casting techniques. It is not surprising to see his fascination with closely studying and then finely working large rectangular blocks of wood. Originally he used a basic chisel and hammer. Subsequently he refined the tools used to recover the form of the tree in the beam. The result is the attentive preservation of the tree as it had been at an earlier

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113 In this way Penone is harkening back to one of the primary claims in Germano Celant’s description of Arte Povera works: “Tautology is the primary instrument in one’s understanding of reality. By eliminating superstructures, one begins to know the present and the world.” Germano Celant, “Arte Povera: Appunti per una guerriglia,” Flash Art, no. 5 (November/December 1967), 3.

114 “Incontro con Giuseppe Penone,” See minute 14:00.

stage of its life. It is a straightforward return of a beam, which we generally regard as solid wood and relatively undifferentiated throughout, back to the organic and irregular appearance of a tree.

**Aktionsraum 1, 1970**

A particularly interesting example of the creation of one of the early *Trees* occurred in 1970 when Penone participated in Aktionsraum 1, a newly opened avant-garde collective in Munich dedicated to displaying the activity and processes of contemporary art-making. In that first year of programming over fifty events took place in a large abandoned warehouse where artists were provided with ample space to perform and exhibit their work. Several Arte Povera artists were invited to participate. Penone proposed the production of one of his *Trees*. The time it took him to complete the work would be the action and the totality of the event. He estimated that the tree would take fifteen to twenty days to carve and when he was done, he would leave and take the tree back to Italy. If someone were interested in buying the completed *Tree*, he would sell it for one thousand dollars.

The documentary shows Penone in his studio carving into a beam over the course of several days. He is now equipped with mechanical lifts and uses a chain saw to do some of the preparatory carving into the beam at the early stages. See minute 21:00.

116 “Aktionsraum 1,” an exhibition held at the Museum moderner Kunst, Vienna between March 4 – May 29, 2011 brought together archival material from the activities at Aktionsraum in 1970. Aktionsraum was described as, “a space for young artists in which conventional works of art and forms of presentation were to be avoided in order to provide a place where new art–performative art and art critical of social and art-related institutions–could be presented to the public to great effect.” Accessed November, 13, 2012, http://www.mumok.at/programme/archive/exhibitions/exhibitions-2011/aktionsraum-1/?L=1.

117 Hans-Ulrich Obrist asked about the events surrounding Aktionsraum: “In Germany we often speak of your mythic action of a public work in ’70 when you went there.” Penone responded,
Documentary photographs show the work through its various stages. Penone and assistants carried a twelve-meter wooden beam into the Aktionsraum warehouse and placed it on a series of crates (Fig. 44). Penone carved into the beam every day from three to nine in the evening until part of a tree was exposed. Nine photographs, reproduced in the Aktionsraum 1 catalogue, capture the beam in various stages of carving (Fig. 45). One photograph shows the artist at work and several others display the progression of work along with an explosion of wood chips across the floor. The finished piece was exhibited in the same spot where it was carved (Fig. 46).\textsuperscript{118}

The process of making the beam into the final \textit{Albero di 12 metri} [12-meter Tree] was constantly on view.\textsuperscript{119} Like all of the Aktionsraum pieces, audiences were invited to come into the space while the artist was at work. Because Penone doesn’t speak German, he couldn’t interact with the approximately 150 people who visited over the ten days he spent carving. A description of the event recalls that some visitors brought instruments and played jazz. In reviews, visitors reported that \textit{Tree} did not work particularly well as

\textquote{That was a work I created at Aktionsraum, which was an exhibition space in Munich sponsored by Eva Mattelung. It was mostly a location for theatrical productions and different kinds of happenings. They invited me and I proposed the “action” of creating a work. The “action” would be the time it took me to make the work. I recovered the form of a tree from a twelve meter wooden beam. This was my contribution to Aktionsraum and when Pontius Hulton saw it, he immediately bought it for the Museum of Modern Art in Stockholm.” “Giuseppe Penone Interview with Hans-Ulrich Obrist, part iii” See minute 00:44.}

\textsuperscript{118} Doris von Drathen and others, \textit{Giuseppe Penone 1968 - 1998} (Santiago de Compostela: Xunta de Galicia, 1999), 127. Photographs and text from the Aktionsraum 1 catalogue are reproduced in this volume. All photographs from the event are credited to Peter Nemetschek.

an action. There was no engagement with members of the audience, who felt relegated to the role of passive spectators.

This description of the event only serves to strengthen Penone’s claim that his fundamental interests are sculptural. Whatever else might come out of discussions about his work as action, happening, performance or metaphor - they are not of interest to the artist. Penone specifically denied that his Tree was what he called a “meditative action.” His focus is always on the material and the physical process. The rest, he says, happens “without thinking.”

In 1975 Penone again organized an event around the creation of one of the Trees, but this time in the private space of an abandoned building in the woods in Garessio (Fig. 47). He considered the carving of Albero di undici metri [Eleven meter tree] from a very specific point of view. I will quote his 1976 description of the event because it reflects the ways Penone considered himself an artist coming out of an agricultural tradition, doing manual labor rather then being informed by a performative or conceptual art practice:

For 20 days every day, following a labourer’s schedule, I work near Garessio, my town, in an abandoned shed; the fact that it is a former sawmill, while accidental, is significant; it is a place for working wood. There I work extracting from a beam, originally 11 meters long, 22 centimeters wide and 10 centimeters thick, the form of a tree that is fossilized within it. Of course everything made of wood was once a tree, and I could just as easily start with a door or a table leg; here I chose a beam because I needed a significant dimension.

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Like *Maritime Alps*, Penone’s *Trees* were inspired by place and history. He called on gestures, behaviors and beliefs to explain his own choices: “In the region where I was born on a farm, the agricultural community did not separate itself clearly from the world of animals and plants, but experienced that world in a continuous state of symbiosis to the point of bodily fusion and exchangeability with the elements. Motivated by a common vital force, man sought an existential union and felt himself to be a tree, a river, a stone...”\(^{122}\) Being like a farmer, being like a laborer, Penone approached the carving process through his physical actions and an understanding of the properties of wood so that he could arrive at a recovery of the tree.

Like the Aktionsraum event, Penone documented the creation of *Eleven meter tree* with a series of photographs (Fig. 48). They show the various stages in the production of the work. We see the long rectangular beam carried into the shed through a window; details of the beam with some initial rough carving (Fig. 49); Penone with a large chisel and mallet at work at various moments in the process; the tree resting alone amidst the wooden shards; and finally the finished work in the middle of the spotless empty shed (Fig. 50). Whatever Penone was doing, these photographs are a way of insisting that he was not putting on a show.\(^{123}\) He was focused on the material, interested in repetitive daily engagement with wood, and eventually the recovered tree. He was documenting the

\(^{122}\) “Conversation: Giuseppe Penone/Catherine De Zegher,” 35.

time that he took to reconstitute the tree, making reference to the fact that it took time for the tree to grow, to become the form he would restore. In fact he still remarks that he considers the work he does in Trees to be “like a film sequence, shot in reverse and strongly speeded up.”

The Trees change

Trees retained the shape of the beam through the mid-1970s. Only part of the block of wood was removed so that the excavated tree rose out of a board, which came to serve as the backdrop for the carved form, like a bas relief with contrasting foreground and background. The remaining block offered a foil for the carved tree. The geometric shape of the block was sometimes rough with chisel marks and uneven surfaces (Albero di 12 metri, 1970), and other times sanded to a smooth finish (Albero di 5 metri, 1973). The carved element took on the natural organic shape of a tree, which was punctuated at intervals by its original branches.

As Penone continued to make Trees, after 1975 he began to vary their format. Some trunks sit in their beam as though in a water trough. Others come out of the beam in a spiral, as Penone exhibited his mastery of the carving techniques needed to show a tree inside a block of wood (Fig. 51). Sometimes he left the top and bottom of a beam un-carved, removing all but the form of the sapling in the middle, and then cut the whole thing in half. The two parts were meant to be exhibited side by side, two opposing images that use the un-carved blocks as bases. By the 1980s, Penone started exhibiting groups of


previously carved *Trees* under the title *Ripetere il bosco* [To repeat the forest] (Fig. 52). Works are arranged in gallery settings, propped up against walls, laid horizontally on the floor, and placed in the middle of the room. *To repeat the forest* has the natural irregularity of any grove in any forest, with overlapping branches, tight groups of saplings, and felled trunks.\(^{126}\)

But this is where I make *my* cut and say that works created up through the middle of the 1970s engage in a discourse that is of a unit and distinctly different from what came after. I accept that, chronologically, *Trees* continue to be produced into the 21st century; but they are of another kind, take a different form, and, frankly, cut against the grain of what seemed so novel and significant in the earlier iterations. I see my work in the rest of this chapter as providing a description of the early *Trees*, highlighting what was especially interesting about this group.

**Trees** and exteriority

Each year in a tree’s life results in a new concentric ring of wood formed by the addition of new cells to the space between the previous year’s growth and the protective tree bark. This cambium cell layer grows quickly in the spring, producing a lighter color wood. As the summer and fall progress and less water is available to the tree, a darker wood forms. The tree’s new growth in diameter becomes a layer over the hardwood of the previous year and is recognizable by the changes in wood color. Penone’s process in

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\(^{126}\) The first exhibition of *Ripetere il bosco* [To repeat the forest] was at the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam in 1980. It was also shown at the Castello di Rivoli Museo d’Arte Contemporaneo in 1991; at the Kunstmuseum in Bonn in 1997; at the Toyota Municipal Museum of Art in 1998; at the Centro Galego de Arte Contemporânea in Santiago de Compostela in 1999; and at the Centre Pompidou in Paris in 2004.

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making his early *Trees* focuses on removing a certain number of these annual rings from the exterior part of beams so that a younger version of the tree is once again visible. The biological explanation matters because the tree’s “insides” are entirely comprised of what were formerly its *external* layers. The part that is exposed to the world, the winds, the rain, and the touch of a human hand is covered by a new layer of growth every year. This means that, fundamentally, the tree’s “inside” is indistinguishable from its “outside.” Throughout the tree are layers of its previous exteriority.

In *Its being in the twenty-second year of life during a fantastic hour*, Penone made the choice to carve into the beam so that the reconstructed tree would have twenty-two growth rings. Penone was twenty-two at the time he made the work. This decision seems intended to provoke an analogy between the artist and the tree; a gesture to comment on their similarities. But surely here the work is not primarily about anthropomorphizing the tree. Instead the tree has priority. The tree’s growth rings are of interest. If the title of the work leads us to a comparison between human beings and trees, then the *work itself* should lead us to a conversation about externality. If the tree is an accumulation of layers of exteriority, it should be hard to talk about its inner being or any kind of interior.

Human beings have a tendency to conceive of our “selves” as located in an interior space separate from our surrounding world. We are used to thinking about our subjectivity as residing in our mind, our thoughts, and played out through inner emotions. As I discussed in the previous chapter, we have even learned to think about sight as a distancing from the things that we observe. Any direct analogy between human and tree is therefore complicated. What do we do when we put aside a consideration of our selves as interior beings and instead partake in the world through an exteriority that might seem
unusual to discuss and awkward to imagine? *Its being in the twenty-second year of life during a fantastic hour* seems intended to challenge us to re-imagine how we engage our world.

Above all, the work is about exteriority, exposure. Let’s think back for a moment to the drawings of *I braided three trees together* and the discussion of language as one of the things we share. There I posed the idea that language is something greater than ourselves, in which we take part, but that we cannot claim as personal. Belonging wholly to ourselves. We partake in language, a larger system. *Its being in the twenty-second year of life during a fantastic hour* puts forth a comparable claim about being in the world but this time, rather than language, the topic is exteriority. The work examines our exposure to the world that envelops us. Its claim is that we know about things not because of an inner understanding but because of the sensations and palpations and engagement our *being externally* provides.

But what does that mean, *being externally*? Here again a turn to Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology will help guide us through an understanding of the experience the *Trees* shows us. It is our *visibility* (our bodily existence and the fact that we perceive with that body) that most concretely testifies to our ex-posure. We are in the world with our bodies and it is through them - their visibility and accessibility - that we come to engage with, interact, and know things. It is not as though we are living, trapped in a metaphorical camera obscura where perception is a thing of the mind, gazing upon the world but detached physically from that experience. Rather, as I discussed in the previous chapter, we are embodied beings, embodied seers. What we do with our gaze and our touch are parallel experiences that speak to a closeness, even an intimacy, with the world around
us. We are in the world because we are visible and touched, just like all other objects. As Merleau-Ponty says, “our own movements incorporate themselves into the universe they interrogate, are recorded on the same map as it; the two systems are applied to one another, as the two halves of an orange.” Our perception connects us to the world around us, holds us to it and makes us part of it.

_Trees_ act to make that experience material. There is no part of the tree that Penone recovers that was not, at one time, its most external layer. It is surface upon surface upon surface, all the way down. So when, as he often does, Penone remarks,

> From the knots in the wood, it is possible to determine the way a tree rose into the sky, from which side it absorbed the southern light, whether it was born in a crowded forest, in a meadow or at the edge of a wood. The forest, a slow factory without leaves, which still preserves a memory and the smell of it. A dried, metallic, hard forest which has lost some of its elasticity in the air but which has conquered the tension of the sound in its crystallized, sculptural matter which ensures quivering and musicality.

he is telling us about the life of the tree that it already and always has shown. His is not an effort at a discovery or a revelation, even though the work is interpreted this way quite often. Rather, _Trees_ show what has always been there. There is no secret exposed.

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129 Throughout the critical literature, in interviews and in exhibitions, the notion that Penone’s carving into the tree results in a revelation of the tree’s secret life, identity, psyche and even memory are repeated. See for example: _Sculture di linfa_, ed. Ida Gianelli (Milan: Electa, 2007), 225; _Giuseppe Penone_, ed. Guy Tosato (Turin: Hopefullmonster, 1997), 163; “Meet the Artist: Giuseppe Penone,” as well as the entire theme of the exhibition “The Hidden Life Within” at the Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto.

130 A comparison to Michelangelo does present itself here, that in the act of carving, the artist just reveals a form already present inside the block of marble. Penone himself makes this same
There is no anthropomorphized action that is uncovered. Penone’s work is putting into evidence the tree as it has been. And so, returning to the idea that we humans are in nature as trees are, we should consider that it is our externality, our surface, our exposure, and visibility that allows us to be in the world, perceive it, and be perceived by it.

Trees and Phenomenology

Penone talks about shedding conventions, discarding notions of culture and freeing oneself from mythology and symbolism in order to return to a natural state of being. He says that once you’ve gotten rid of all of that, you are left with the body “and the space it is in and the world that surrounds it.”¹³¹ The act of making art with that body is about connecting through what is left when you have shed everything else. What you have are your perceptions - seeing and touching the space and the things around the body.

But it is a funny balance. On the one hand, Penone insists that his interest in sculpture is very practical and intent on its procedures and the realities of the material. On connection in several interviews. He points out the long tradition in sculpture of looking at a material and seeing something familiar in it: “Consider the example of the prehistoric stone (as in the area of my native Garessio, with its caves and rocks), in which someone simply carved a little hole for the eye and it became an animal form. The form is already - and very concretely - there. The gesture of engraving the hole to indicate the eye is a gesture that marks a presence - that makes an indication that something is there - but it isn’t some kind of reverie. It is a form that is there and that already belongs to man; it is not something that has to be imagined: It is there. This is what Michelangelo said: ‘The sculpture is in the block, my role is to disclose that which is inside.’” “Conversation: Giuseppe Penone/Catherine De Zegher,” 46.

¹³¹ Daniela Lancioni asked: “What did you find interesting, even essential, about using your body?” Penone responded, “It was connected to the fact that in the 60s there was a redefinition of the values of art and if one eliminated all cultural references, academic teachings, and a whole series of other values then all one was left with was one’s own body in contact with the space around it. The idea was to begin by using the most basic elements and to reconstruct a language of art using only the body, one’s own essential form.” “Incontro con Giuseppe Penone.” See minute 15:46.
the other hand, his approach to sculpture often reminds us of Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological discussion of the *flesh of the world*. To understand this concept we have to understand what Merleau-Ponty means when he says, “my body is of the same flesh as the world (it is a perceived) and moreover that this flesh of my body is shared by the world, the world reflects it, encroaches upon it and it encroaches upon the world...”

Reversibility is at the heart of the idea of the flesh of the world. It is an understanding that the intertwining of the sensate and the sensible is a constant and immanent force in our lives. Just as we feel our hand touching something, our hand can be touched. This constant potential crisscrossing of sensation is what embeds us in the world. In considering our interactions, therefore, we must relinquish the deeply entrenched division between subject and object. We have to allow our bodies to be a part of the world that we observe and touch, as Merleau-Ponty says, “the body is a thing among things.”

*Trees* are already showing us that mode of being, by the very fact of their biological growth, they are always showing us everything they are on their outside. Penone’s *Trees* are, as the things that surround them, tactile, seen, experienced, and part of nature.

Penone allows his direct bodily perceptions to be what suture him to the surrounding world. In 1968 he wrote an essay on how sculpture happens. It is when the sculptor opens himself up to the sensations of the world and becomes part of them,

To make a sculpture, the sculptor must settle down on the ground, letting himself slip down slowly, softly and little by little. Then, stretched out, he can concentrate his attention and the forces upon his body which, pressed

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133 Ibid., 137.
against the earth, allows him to see and feel earthly things; then he can stretch out his arms to delight fully in the coolness of the ground and achieve the degree of calm required to produce the sculpture.\textsuperscript{134}

The state of being externally and the imbrication of his body with the world it senses are both parallel to the phenomenological position where our act of sensing is in fact the way that the world perceives itself.

It is my claim then that the early \textit{Trees}, those created through the mid-1970s, are works about exteriority. Not only is Penone strengthening his sculptural practice and methodology by focusing on a specific kind of material and technique but he is also deepening its phenomenological foundation. The mode of being in the world, where we are constantly exposed, constantly showing and constantly seen, impacting and impacted by what we encounter - this is part of what the \textit{Trees} reveal to us, as Penone recovers the shape of trees from their industrial beams. No matter how deeply we think we have to delve into an interior to find hidden truths, and even knowledge, in reality all of that is always recorded and always available on a surface.

The emphasis on this constant state of our exposure to the world continued to drive Penone’s work beyond the \textit{Maritime Alps} and \textit{Tree} series. His interest in the direct physical connection with the world led him to re-evaluate what it meant to create sculpture, and what sculpture could be. Just as he used touch in \textit{Maritime Alps} and \textit{Trees} to think about the reciprocal relationship between man and nature that powered his sculptural practice, he moved on to think about vision - its role, its conventions and its limitations in the process of making art. This led to works that are perhaps even less

allegorical than those that preceded them. In the subsequent chapter I turn to the ways that a meditation on the physical realities of vision led to a work, *Rovesciare i propri occhi* [*To Reverse one’s eyes*] that functions to manifest the reversibility of the gaze.
Chapter 4: To Reverse One’s Eyes

The idea was to close off the eyes with a mirrored surface that would reflect the things that one should be able to see. This action offers spectators the possibility to see what the person wearing the lenses would have seen. This was the idea but I also wanted the spectator to have that image before the author could take possession of it. These were my intentions but naturally the reality of a work is always different and it can take on meanings that become much more complex than the ideas that initially inspired its production.135

While Penone continued to work on the Trees series throughout the 1970s, he was also developing different lines of inquiry. The ‘70s, in fact, saw the artist working on other projects that focused on the human body and the senses. He turned his attention to sight, skin, breath, and touch. He worked with his own skin and plaster casts. He used his own body as the location for solutions to questions he had about sculpture. How do we obtain a volume? How do we distinguish solid from liquid? Are the shapes we make by breathing or by simply covering our eyes things that can be called sculpture?

Perhaps Penone’s best known work of this era, Rovesciare gli propri occhi [To Reverse One’s Eyes], 1970, arose when the artist asked an optician to make a pair of mirrored contact lenses (Fig. 7). The technology at the time required two pairs of lenses, one mirrored and the other transparent to cover the first (Fig. 53). Penone then inserted

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the doubled lenses over his cornea. The contacts were thick and, according to Penone, very painful to wear.\textsuperscript{136} He was photographed by Paolo Mussat Sartor, Claudio Basso, Dina Carrara and Paolo Pellion di Persano in various settings around Garessio and Turin over a two-year period. There are over 740 images in the series (Fig. 54).\textsuperscript{137} The resulting photographs share several features. Many compositions are limited to framing Penone’s head and shoulders and the background appears indistinctly monochromatic. Penone wears plain white t-shirts or dark nondescript clothing; his mouth is closed and he looks directly at the photographer. He is not gesturing with his hands or moving his body in any evident way. He appears to be sitting or standing still.\textsuperscript{138} When the photographs focus on Penone’s face - and there are some extreme close-up photographs of the area around his eyes - viewers can see the photographer reflected in the mirrored contact lenses.

In 1970 Claudio Basso photographed Penone as he wore the lenses and stood in the countryside outside of Turin. The resulting five images are now exhibited as a continuous slide show (Fig. 55). After the title slide, spectators see an image of a landscape with towering mountains in the background. In the foreground the small figure of the artist stands on a narrow gravel path. Leafless trees run along one side, power lines run along the other and farm buildings appear in the distance. It is a bright and slightly

\textsuperscript{136} Ibid. See minute 9:30.


\textsuperscript{138} Paolo Mussat Sartor’s gelatin silver print measures seven inches tall by five and a half inches wide. See Esso Gallery, accessed March 8, 2013, www.essogallery.com/ARTE%20POVERA/Images%20Photo/010.html
hazy day. Penone stands still, wearing dark sweaters and pants while holding his hands behind his back. Each of the five images of the slide show brings the viewer closer to Penone’s mirrored eyes. In the final slide, viewers can see an image of the photographer, the country road, trees, and the horizon line in the distance all reflected in the lenses.

The following year Claudio Abate and Massimo Piersanti took photographs of Penone wearing the lenses at the Incontri Internazionali d’Arte held at the Palazzo Taverna in Rome. In these images, viewers see the artist standing in a gallery space, wearing a dark shirt and blazer. Like all of the previous photographs within the *To Reverse One’s Eyes* project, the gallery images depict a serious and calm Penone. While they show more of his body, Penone seems relatively motionless and appears to be looking directly at the photographer. In one of the photographs, we are also able to see the final image from Claudio Basso’s slide show of *To Reverse One’s Eyes* projected on the wall (Fig. 56).

At this point it would seem as though *To Reverse One’s Eyes* is a work primarily experienced through photographic means. Penone used his body to make the work, but it is encountered through the photographs that were taken by others while the artist was wearing the contact lenses. And so we return to the question about medium that arose in *Maritime Alps*. What form are we talking about when we discuss *To Reverse One’s Eyes*?

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139 See “Achille Bonito Oliva: Le Arti della Critica,” accessed November 14, 2011, www.achillebonitoliva.com/incontri/71.htm. The photographs were taken on December 1, 1971 at an event featuring Italian artists whose work was on display at the 7th Paris Biennale. The exhibition was part of a series called “International Encounters with Art” meant to publicize Italian artists’ international recognition and inclusion in foreign museum and gallery exhibitions. This particular exhibition ran from November 25 through December 18 and was curated by Achille Bonito Oliva with the help of Bruno Corà.
How do the various shapes of the work fit into Penone’s claim that he is a sculptor and his efforts are towards the production of sculpture that, at times, challenges conventional notions of the medium? These questions will be played out in this chapter and are complicated by the fact that To Reverse One’s Eyes has become an iconic image as well as a representative thematic idea about Penone’s oeuvre and a certain narrative about the work has been widely established.

Take, for example, Rovesciare gli occhi, a monograph of Penone’s work up to that point published by Einaudi Press in 1977 (Fig. 57). The book gathered together the artist’s writings and reproductions of his work from the previous nine years, including eight pages dedicated to To Reverse One’s Eyes. It is significant that Rovesciare gli occhi is the title of this publication. By 1977 Penone’s body of work had expanded beyond Maritime Alps and the Tree series to include large scale murals based on impressions of his skin (Pressioni [Pressures]), sculptures based on copies of river stones, and a large group of plaster casts of his body exhibited with superimposed photographic images of those same parts. And yet, To Reverse One’s Eyes stood as emblematic of his entire sculptural practice up to that point. At an early moment of his career, Penone and others had already identified this work as consequentially representative of the big ideas driving his artistic project. The work emphasizes issues of sight, the importance of the spectator facing Penone, and the undermining of everything viewers traditionally assume about their vantage point at a distance from a work of art.

140 Penone said, “My work springs from a reflection on sculpture as an action, not on the invention of form - it is an indication of form arising through action.” Gianfranco Maraniello, Giuseppe Penone Instant Book_1 (Bologna: Museo d’Arte Moderna di Bologna, 2008), 6.
In the book, reproductions of *To Reverse One’s Eyes* by Paolo Pellion di Persano, Paolo Mussat Sartor and Claudio Basso are grouped together and paired with writings, including the following description of the work:

The mirrored contact lenses cover the iris and pupil; when I wear them, I am blinded...placed on the eye, they indicate the dividing point, the separation from everything around me. They are like skin, they mark a border, the interruption of a flow of information which uses light as its medium. Their mirroring reflects all information which reaches my eye.  

These writings have become the standard texts that are repeatedly printed and quoted in descriptions and interpretations of the work. As I will address in the following section, Penone’s choice of words have had a powerful impact on the way the work is discussed. In fact, his words – or a particular misreading of them – have done more to shape reception of the work than the photographs of Penone wearing the lenses. I’ll return to this point momentarily.

The final two pages of the section of the book dedicated to *To Reverse One’s Eyes* reproduce extreme close-up photographs of each of Penone’s eyes and are given the title *Il Mio Vedere Futuro* [*My Future Sight*], 1970. The mirrored contact lenses take up most of the composition and Penone’s eyelashes frame the reflected image of Dina Carrara, the photographer and the artist’s wife (Fig. 58). What sight is and how we experience it are central to *To Reverse One’s Eyes*; at minimum, we might say, it presents vision as an embodied phenomenon. Even when all we see are close-up images of eyes (as with *My Future Sight*), the lashes and the reflection remind us that those eyes are in a body with a particular point of view, a body that stands in a place and is seen by others.

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To Reverse One’s Eyes is one of the earliest contributions to Penone’s oeuvre, and it has become one of the most famous. Penone introduced the work just two years after he left art school. Photographs of it are often used in publicity materials for retrospective exhibitions of Penone’s work as well as Arte Povera exhibitions (Fig. 59).\(^{142}\) Similarly, To Reverse One’s Eyes is often the first work texts engage with, and in interviews it is defined as a radical turning point in Penone’s career.\(^{143}\) Art historians, curators, critics and Penone himself have all helped to establish this work as emblematic of his work at large. And yet, despite all the attention, discussion of To Reverse One’s Eyes has been incomplete or has danced around the complexity of the work itself. Interpretations have focused on Penone’s personal experience and his emotional reaction to being temporarily blinded by the mirrored contact lenses.

The goal of this chapter is to present an alternate reading. To Reverse One’s Eyes remains at the forefront of Penone’s oeuvre because it forces viewers to ask fundamental but difficult questions about the nature of vision, the sculptural medium, and what it means to have an experience with a work of art. This task is aided by again turning to

\(^{142}\) Various versions of To Reverse One’s Eyes have been used to publicize exhibitions including “Giuseppe Penone” at the Ikon Gallery, Birmingham, England, June 3 - July 19, 2009 and “Giuseppe Penone” at the Centre George Pompidou, Paris, April 21 - August 23, 2004. To Reverse One’s Eyes was also used in publicity materials for the exhibition “From Zero to Infinity: Arte Povera 1962 - 1972” at the Tate Modern, London, May 31 - August 19, 2001. As if to underscore the work’s priority, the slide show version of To Reverse One’s Eyes was installed in the entryway to the exhibition of Penone’s work at the Ikon Gallery. Visitors had to walk through that darkened room to see the rest of the show.

phenomenological theories of sight as they are described in the writings of Maurice Merleau-Ponty. *To Reverse One’s Eyes* reveals vision to be a fully embodied action, one that we understand because we are seeing beings even as we are simultaneously seen by others. Penone presents spectators with the unconventional proposition that we understand sight not at a safe and detached distance but as an intersubjective phenomenon - we are bound together by the fact of our visibility. Much of the discussion of *To Reverse One’s Eyes* turns on Penone’s use of the term *rovesciare* (to reverse), which is often taken to mean a turning in or an internalizing of experience. I reject this reading and insist that the choice of the word *rovesciare* suggests the reversal or exchange of viewing positions implicit in a phenomenological understanding of space and vision.

**Existing Interpretations of To Reverse One’s Eyes**

Existing interpretations of *To Reverse One’s Eyes* tend to focus on Penone’s own experience while wearing the contacts, highlighting their concealing properties, and so Penone’s isolation on the other side of the lenses. Instead of attending to viewers and their encounters with the work, these interpretations focus on Penone’s subjective interiority, imagining him shut off from the world, blinded by his mirrored contacts. The visual evidence in photographs and slide shows that show Penone wearing the lenses receive minor attention as the direct objects of description and interpretation. What the work shows seems less interesting than what it implies, or so the majority of extant criticism suggests.

It is misleading to focus primarily on Penone’s experience at the expense of that of the spectators’. The fact of the piece, with its reflective lenses, indicates that the
experience of the artist is not complete without the experience of the viewer. This is a significant lacuna in the criticism of *To Reverse One’s Eyes*. An example of such interpretation is Doris von Drathen’s claim that Penone’s “own inner vision opens from this state of blindness onto an interior world, onto a universe with frontiers which lie beyond this planet.”¹⁴⁴ She suggests that Penone is engaged in a private vision, unavailable and unknowable to others. The assumption that the work is primarily about Penone’s concealed encounter with the world appears often, as in this question from a 2009 interview:

> One of your most famous works is *Rovesciare I Propri Occhi* (*To Reverse One’s Eyes*, 1970) in which you are portrayed wearing mirror-like contact lenses. I was wondering, when reversing your eyes, are you better able to understand what surrounds you or to experience it? How do these two spaces of inside and outside relate to one another?¹⁴⁵

For the interviewer, Penone’s vision and his private knowledge are the a priori subjects of the work. Penone’s response to the question, tellingly, focuses first on his theory of vision and only secondarily on his personal experience:

> Works of art are the result of life experiences and that which we see in life. To interrupt this flow of images into our mind and instead project them externally with a mirror is like retransmitting the work. Instead of receiving images, re-elaborating them and then making a work of art, in this way you retransmit the work immediately. In addition to reflecting images, the body is defined as a volume and becomes sculpture. This is the fundamental idea of the work.¹⁴⁶

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¹⁴⁶ Ibid. Note: the Italian to English translation printed in the book is not a straight translation and has some errors, including the strange and unfounded comment that the lenses Penone was
Penone’s answer here suggests that von Drathen and others have gotten hold of exactly the wrong end of things: rather than being about Penone’s private vision, *To Reverse One’s Eyes* makes his vision immediately available, there on the surface of the contact lenses. Any subjective reflection is eliminated. In his remarks, Penone is decisively contrasting his art-making process with a more traditional method of art marking, thoroughly bound up with subjectivity. He wants to distance himself from the artist who takes in images and experiences, reflects upon them and then creates work that is an elaboration, a personal interpretation of that vision. Penone’s transmission of the work is immediate and automatic, without mediation and governed solely by the lenses’ reflection. His insistence that the work was a work of *sculpture* is equally important. Discussion of his personal experience makes no more sense than speculation in what Polykleitos’ *Doryphoros*, say, might be thinking or feeling “there inside.” I will return to this point later in the chapter.

In the 2010 exhibition catalogue “Che Fare? Arte Povera: The Historic Years,” Christiane Meyer-Stoll writes that Penone’s lenses “reverse his gaze, turning it inward on the boundary between subject and outside world. An impenetrable gaze that excludes the viewers. They can only see themselves mirrored.”¹⁴⁷ Parts of this statement/description are factually incorrect. The mirrored contact lenses do reverse his gaze, but in doing so, wearing had a small hole in them. Penone did not say this during the interview and there is no historical evidence that there was any hole in the lenses.

turn it outward. The mirror does not exclude viewers. It literally includes them, showing them to themselves. And they do not only see themselves. They see Penone and they see the space of the work. In addition, if the mirrors are a physical boundary - because they are a layer upon Penone’s eyes - they also undermine the notion of boundary by sharing what would have been Penone’s vision with viewers. The lenses are not borders that deny access, rather they give us access to what Penone would otherwise have seen.

Other writings call the lenses a barrier;\textsuperscript{148} they are a refusal;\textsuperscript{149} they offer a magical vision;\textsuperscript{150} they are “windows of the soul.”\textsuperscript{151} Some suggest that the work references an emotional world within the artist or that the artist is busy attending to the limits that mark self and not-self. Many readings of the work are greatly interested in Penone’s blindness rather than the fact that his vision still exists, even if displaced. By focusing on the experience of the artist, such interpretations ignore the shape and the facts of the work while imagining that Penone’s blindness leads to transformative yet private, unknowable or extraordinary visions.\textsuperscript{152}

\textsuperscript{148} Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, \textit{Arte Povera} (London: Phaidon, 1999), 148.

\textsuperscript{149} “By wearing mirrors that reflect external reality, the artist reveals the mirror imagery and mutual dependency of ‘external’ and ‘internal’ worlds. The mirrors also throw viewers back on themselves, for they are refused access to the artist’s inner life and his imagination. That refusal indicates that the perception of art depends on the convergence of ‘superficial’ factors and what ever is ‘hidden behind them.’” Nike Bätzner, “Pictures in Space and Spaces of Pictures,” in \textit{Che Fare Arte Povera - The Historic Years}, 26.

\textsuperscript{150} Elisabeth Vedrenne, “Penone à vif,” \textit{L’Oeil} 7 (1997), 38.

\textsuperscript{151} “Giuseppe Penone Documentary,” See minute 7:58.

\textsuperscript{152} Graziella Leonardo Buontempo described her encounter with Penone in Rome in 1970: “Palazzo delle Esposizioni held the exhibition \textit{Vitalità del negativo} and Giuseppe Penone showed \textit{Rovesciare i propri occhi}. It was my first encounter with him. In those crazy inventive years, I
Jean Christophe Ammann writes about the “mysteriousness” of Penone’s experience: “He distances himself from the object to return to himself, entering the ‘shaded areas’ of his own historicity.” Since he does not describe or define what he means by “historicity” viewers may feel Ammann’s comments are shaded in their own mystery; nevertheless it is clear that, for him, the work is about narcissistic self-reflection. Briony Fer, in an otherwise excellent essay written on the occasion of Penone’s 2004 exhibition “The Imprint of Drawing,” says that the “intensely utopian image of the artist as a kind of seer who can see into the future is like an alien from a science fiction movie.” While Fer does not imagine Penone’s interior world, she does describe his experience as thoroughly other than that of any potential viewer, and she does persist in foregrounding Penone’s experience over and above what it might have been like for the viewer to share the images reflected in the mirrored contact lenses. The problem with these interpretations is that they do not describe what the work is or what the viewer sees when in front of “Penone.”

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Some of these interpretations might indeed derive from Penone’s own writing about *To Reverse One’s Eyes*. In the 1977 Einaudi publication, he describes one of the difficulties of the work,

> When the eyes, covered with mirrored contact lenses, reflect back into space the images they gather with the usual movements one has when observing, the ability to see is deferred. Thus, one trusts to the uncertain results gleaned from photographic memories for the chance to see in the future the images gathered by the eyes in the past. The image which in traditional imagery the author perceives, memorizes and retransmits, with a work at a later time is, in this case, transmitted by the work before the author has seen it. The delay with which I capture an image makes mirrored contact lenses into diviners of future sight.\(^{155}\)

Penone deals with the problematic of his not being able to see the work in the same moment as others. He has lost his agency and must wait until a later moment to view the photograph that records “his vision.” If in his comments he focuses on his own experiences, it is only to show how his subjectivity has been entirely circumvented in the visual circuit set up by the work. By the same token, if he describes the lenses as “diviners of future sight,” it is only to emphasize his own belatedness in relation to a sight we continue to think of as “his.”\(^{156}\)

In his comments on *To Reverse One’s Eyes*, Penone is also comparing its mode of working to a traditional art-making model where the artist reflects on the world around

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\(^{156}\) It is also interesting to note that in a recent interview Penone has moved away from making references to the lenses as somehow prophetic and instead calls the images “automatic, immediate art.” “Giuseppe Penone, intervista di Hans-Ulrich Obrist,” Castello di Rivoli.TV Archivio Contemporaneo, Filmed on July 18, 2010 at the Teatro del Castello di Rivoli, during the exhibition *Gli Irregolari*, accessed January 22, 2013 http://www.castellodirivoli.tv/tag/hans-ulrich-obrist/. See part ii, minute 04:50.
her and then reflects that view to an audience. What is different here is that the reflection is immediate for the viewer and that reflection is not the result of a subjective reflection by the artist. It is Penone’s vision, immediately re-transmitted to another in a different spatial position. What is unique about the work and what does not appear in the existing criticism is that we see what it is like to see from another vantage point, even as we remain where we are. Viewers are offered the rare opportunity to see what someone else is seeing. *To Reverse One’s Eyes* breaks with subjective points of view and makes vision dependent upon a reversal or exchange of viewing positions. This idea is what has been missing from the interpretations of the work up to this point.

My claim is that what happens when viewers encounter *To Reverse One’s Eyes* is never about Penone’s experience. Whatever happens to the artist while he is wearing the contact lenses is not the point. Indeed it is not a part of the work. Penone’s vision has been wholly externalized. Vision is shown as public and shared. Penone’s reflective eyes do not signal an interior experience outside of or hidden from what is visibly available. Rather than realizing something personal or unique about Penone, spectators recognize a vantage point, but nothing else. A viewer standing in front of Penone sees exactly what Penone would have seen, were he not wearing the lenses. An assumption that the work provides a view of Penone’s private experience is simply unfounded. And, as I will show in the following section, *To Reverse One’s Eyes* functions as successfully as it does - as descriptive of vision as a vantage point - specifically because it is a work of *sculpture*.

*To Reverse One’s Eyes* as sculpture

How do viewers encounter *To Reverse One’s Eyes* as sculpture? The work is available to a public through photographic prints or slide shows installed in galleries and
museums. The fact that Penone’s body is central to the work could lead some to perceive it as Performance Art. And yet, Penone insists that all of his artwork, no matter the medium, is about sculpture.\footnote{Penone says: “[A]ll my works operate in the context of sculpture. Of course you could argue whether a photograph of three trees tied together is sculpture. I don’t know. Well, whatever the case: my basic thinking was always about sculpture, it’s not a problem of language or of language systems. In any case I like to use things that are typical or characteristic of sculpture.” Christoph Schreier, “The Form of the Tree is its Memory. Interview with Giuseppe Penone, 1997,” in \textit{Arte Povera from the Goetz Collection}, ed. Rainald Schumacher (Munich: Sammlung Goetz, 1997), 159.} \textit{To Reverse One’s Eyes} is no exception. Penone writes that by wearing the lenses, “the closed, sightless body is defined in space. And becomes sculpture.”\footnote{“Trappole di Luce,” in \textit{Giuseppe Penone}, ed. Guy Tosatto (Turin: Hopefulmonster, 1997), 51.} With his eyes open, Penone says that his sense of self extends as far as his vision will allow. By restricting vision, his newfound sense of solidity leads to the idea of making himself a sculpture.\footnote{“When one has one’s eyes open, one’s body extends as far as the eyes can see. With eyes closed, one loses this perception but at the same time, one can better sense the body as volume, a closed static volume.” “Entretien avec Catherine Grenier,” \textit{Giuseppe Penone} (Paris: Éditions du Centre Pompidou, 2004), 266.} Part of the significance of the claim is that it forecloses the possibility of seeing the work as performance or as a photographic project.

Admittedly, \textit{To Reverse One’s Eyes} is a sculpture that only intermittently exists as a physical thing. Penone wore the contact lenses a limited number of times. Only a small group of people actually stood in front of the artist as he wore them. For the most part, the experience of this work happens through photographic documentation. Penone claims that this was always his intention. In various interviews he calls the event of inserting the lenses \textit{an action}, but he specifies that it was an action only ever meant to be photographed. The resulting series of images were intended as installations in gallery
spaces; the work was to be experienced through documentation. In 1997 Penone admitted that his insistence on calling his works sculpture could be problematic when all that remain are photographs. But he did not elaborate on any kind of solution to this medium conundrum.

After wearing the lenses at the previously mentioned gallery event in Rome, Penone realized that wearing the lenses in a public space could be regarded as performance and subsequently refused to wear the lenses in front of an audience. He consistently points out that To Reverse One’s Eyes was never meant to be a piece of performance art, body art or a happening - even though these art forms were gathering a larger share of interest at that historical moment (Fig. 60).

Indeed, several of Penone’s

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160 During a discussion of To Reverse One’s Eyes at Ikon Gallery Penone said, “I made this work in 1970 as an action, documenting it with photographs. The photographs were meant for display in a gallery setting. It was intended as a photographic work to be seen via these slide projections.” But Penone was speaking through an interpreter and he did not like her translation. He interrupted and clarified, “no...no...I didn’t mean that the work was a performance. I documented the work with photographs and the photographs were the work, the projections were the work.” Exhibition Tour, Ikon Gallery, June 1, 2009. Penone makes the following claim about his work in general: “It is not a work made for public interaction, it is not intended to create an action-reaction dynamic with the public. I am skeptical towards works that need public involvement in order to exist. I believe that a work of art is the documentation of an action, an action that provokes many emotions, including the act of touching, but it is not made with that aim.” “Giuseppe Penone: Conversation with Karlyn De Jongh, Giuseppe Penone studio, Turin, Italy, 2 June 2009,” 332.

161 Schreier, “The Form of the Tree is its Memory. Interview with Giuseppe Penone, 1997,” 159.

162 Penone said: “I only wore the lenses in public once, in Rome at the Incontri Internazionali. I put them on and stayed in the gallery for about two hours. But then I realized that the work was becoming a kind of performance, close to theatre…” “Entretien avec Catherine Grenier,” 267.

163 It is important to distinguish Penone’s sculpture from something like Gilbert and George’s Living Sculpture even though both see their own bodies as the locus and impetus to the work. We must take care to make a distinction between the artist as sculpture and the artist using his body to make a sculpture without necessarily thinking about the artist as the final result. Gilbert and George want their audiences to think about their experiences and be transfixed by them. Penone, on the other hand, doesn’t want his viewers to consider him at all. “Starting in the late 60s, the
Arte Povera colleagues were in the midst of exploring the possibilities of performance and the body as a location for artistic intervention (Fig. 61). But, as Briony Fer explains:

Penone himself saw *To Reverse One’s Eyes* as engaging with a sculptural problem. It was never a performance and although it became a photograph, photography was only ever an expedient, a means of documenting the event. Inevitably, in retrospect, the resistance that this reveals to the performative and the photographic looks less clear cut and signals Penone’s more complex and ambivalent relation to both. 

inseparable pair of Gilbert and George brought a nostalgic, but rigorously formalized gentility to Performance and Body Art: they simply designated themselves and every aspect of their proper English lives a ‘Living Sculpture,’ and then proceeded to segment their existence into highly artificial, exhibitable form. They presented mannequin-like performances and also mailed cards and announcements, used large captioned drawings and finally photographs, to isolate various events and pastimes as *Singing Sculpture, Relaxing Sculpture, Drinking Sculpture* - narrating the entire undertaking in language which is the height of cheerful, old-fashioned impersonality, as summed up by their repeated refrain, ‘To Be With Art is All We Ask.” Roberta Smith, “Conceptual Art,” in *Concepts of Modern Art: From Fauvism to Postmodernism*, ed. Nikos Stangos (London: Thames and Hudson, 1974), 266-67.

164 At the Arte Povera exhibition “Arte Povera+Azioni Povere” in October of 1968, “a number of actions were performed in the streets and public spaces of Amalfi. Alighiero Boetti installed his *Shaman Showman*; Gianni Piacentino installed his *Black-Violet Marbled Object with Handrails*; Gino Marotta organized an action in the public square with Henry Martin, Valeria Ferrara, Michelangelo Pistoletto, Colmaghi and Ger Van Elk. Ger Van Elk produced an *azione* which included glue poured onto the floor with trash dropped on it; Pietro Lista, Albeo and an unknown woman ceremonially uncovered the light buried in the sand on the beach; Emilio Prini and Richard Long played football.” During the same exhibition Richard Long also performed a work by standing in a piazza and shaking hands with passers-by. Michelangelo Pistoletto’s theater troupe Lo Zoo was winding down from an active two-year series of performances. And finally, as an example of body art, Gilberto Zorio, one of Penone’s closest friends in the Arte Povera community, made several works like *Odio* [Hate], 1971 by pressing a small metal plate onto various body parts. When the plate was removed, his flesh was temporarily impressed with the word and photographed for documentation. See *Arte Povera*, ed. Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev (London: Phaidon Press, 1999), 58.

Up until now a careful discussion of Penone’s resistance to these alternate definitions has not been the subject of much scrutiny. I want to insist, however, that seeing the work as sculpture is crucial if we are to understand its radical implications for vision.

Penone’s insistent claim that the work is a work of sculpture is meant to shore it up against other plausible descriptions. To Reverse One’s Eyes is a sculpture over and against something else. We cannot escape the fact that like Penone’s earlier Maritime Alps series, this work relies on Penone’s body, photography and various forms of reproduction. Calling it sculpture means that other labels like conceptual art, performance or body art do not adequately respond to what the work is doing. Those labels would instead focus on the event as the artist experiences it. The goal of my interpretation is to stop the flow of speculation about Penone’s individual experience in the process of wearing the lenses. The most effective way to do this is to insist on its fundamentally sculptural nature.

By calling himself a sculpture Penone says to viewers “don’t think about me or my experience at the moment when I wear the contact lenses.” Viewers must put aside any interest in what Penone is thinking or feeling because we usually don’t attend to what sculpture is thinking or feeling. A few examples can help here. When viewers encounter Brancusi’s Bird in Space there are no concerns about the work’s thoughts (Fig. 62). Upon finding Robert Smithson’s Spiral Jetty, there are no questions about the emotions of the massive rock formation (Fig. 63). When spectators come across Richard Serra’s One Ton Prop (House of Cards) they are not typically focused on the experience of the metal plates as they lean against one another (Fig. 64). Important in each of these three examples is the viewer and their encounter with the work of art or the active space of
exchange between the piece and its public. *To Reverse One’s Eyes* falls into this category of encounter.

If this is not yet enough to convince spectators that *To Reverse One’s Eyes* is a sculpture, my claim is that its pure exteriority is the best argument for its sculpture-ness. What the viewer sees when encountering the work is the surface of Penone’s body. Even his eyes, those *windows to the soul*, are covered and alter a viewer’s typical engagement with Penone as a seeing person. His mouth is shut; he is not talking. Everything his body has to offer is there on its surface.

A more extreme example can also be given. In 1972, Penone made another work closely related to *To Reverse One’s Eyes*. *Project for Contact Lenses* is a collaged photograph of Penone in which he removed the almond-shaped space of his sclera and iris and in their place put photographs of his closed eyelids (Fig. 65). In *Project for Contact Lenses* his open eyes reveal images of lids that are basically a wall of flesh. It is an uncomfortable and unusual image. He resembles nothing so much as a Greek sculpture, whose once-polychromed but now sightless eyes express only the solidity of the work, its lack of an interior.

At this point, G.W.F. Hegel’s discussion of sculpture – particularly sculpture in its most fully realized form, in the statuary of ancient Greece - may aid in negotiating our understanding of what it means when Penone talks about the sculptural concerns of his work. Hegel considered classical Greek sculpture as complete exteriority, a total self-showing. The gods of the ancient Greeks could be fully bodied forth in sculptural form because theirs was a religion and philosophy in perfect alignment with sensuous materiality. Classical sculpture involved no hidden or indirect meaning as had earlier
symbolic (i.e. Egyptian) art. Hegel dismissed the separation of form and content as inapplicable to the ancient Greek practice. It was an historical moment when content and form aligned harmoniously. This was even reflected grammatically; Hegel pointed out that the Greeks did not say Helios is the god of the sun but rather “Helios is the sun as god.”

A sculpture of Helios, therefore, was not conceived as an allegorical representation. Hegel said, “the content is determinate and the free shape is determined by the content itself and it belongs to it absolutely, so that the artist seems only to execute what is already cut and dried on its own account in essence.”

To Reverse One’s Eyes is consistent with Hegel’s description of sculpture in that it offers a similar kind of harmonious alignment that does not acknowledge an exteriority separated from an interior meaning. The mirrored lenses aim at nothing that resembles an interiority - much like Hegel’s claim that the blank eyes of classical Greek sculpture are not portals to a world inside - that “one simple soulful point” that should lead us elsewhere. Although carvings might indicate the sculpture’s iris and paint might have shown the direction of a sculpture’s glance, Hegel contends that the blank eye of Greek sculpture “still remains only the wholly external shape of the eye and is not its animation, not a real glance, the glance of the inner soul.”

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167 Ibid., 439.
168 Ibid., p. 732.
169 Ibid.
Hegel discusses our tendency to look at each other in the eyes and to feel we have access thereby to the other’s personality and emotions: but he says this is explicitly not our experience standing before an ancient Greek sculpture. This body of work, Hegel explains, “has no inwardness which would manifest itself explicitly as this ideal glance, in distinction from the rest of the body or thus enter the opposition between eye and body...”\(^{170}\) Similarly *To Reverse One’s Eyes* makes no indication that there is anything to know beyond its sensuousness self-showing exteriority. The “content” of the work is there to be seen wholly on its surface, as its form.

It is precisely by defining *To Reverse One’s Eyes* as a sculpture that we understand the centrality of its exterior. *To Reverse One’s Eyes* functions as Hegel claims the sculptures of classical Greece functioned; they were necessarily always about their exteriority - even the “soul” had to be made visible on the very surface of the work. If most of the writing about *To Reverse One’s Eyes* has emphasized Penone’s interiority or his subjective experience during the “performance” of the work, taking seriously his claims that the work is sculpture demands instead a wholly contrary understanding. A description of *To Reverse One’s Eyes* as sculpture means that we see it as displacing Penone’s “interiority,” evacuating it, making it completely visible for all to see. Everything the work offers is on its surface.

*To Reverse One’s Eyes* and Phenomenology

If we understand *To Reverse One’s Eyes* as sculpture, what does that mean for the interaction between the viewer and the sculpture? What kind of viewing experience does

\(^{170}\) Ibid.
this entail? We’ve shed concerns about Penone’s emotions or experience while wearing the lenses; we are left with a sculpture and the viewer’s experience of that encounter. I propose that To Reverse One’s Eyes makes such an intriguing statement about vision and the viewer because of its successful challenge to the way we think about vision. The work complicates our learned tendency to engage the world visually by safely detaching from it, imagining that we are safely ensconced “in here.” Indeed, like the works in the Maritime Alps series, To Reverse One’s Eyes contests the tenants of Cartesianism, which situate each individual as a distinct consciousness, wholly separate from the world that she surveys.

As I’ve discussed in the previous chapters, a whole host of technologies aligned over several centuries to create an understanding of vision that reaffirmed the subject/object dichotomy of Cartesian thought. The viewer as subject stood apart and gazed at objects (including art objects) from a distance. Linear perspective gave spectators a sure and fixed place from which to experience a world that seems to open up before them. There was a right place to stand and observe. Subsequently the development of the camera obscura embedded the notion that vision and experience were physically detached things. The model of vision on which the camera obscura is founded implies a subjectivity wholly separate from the world it surveys. And even though this is a most un-natural mode of viewing - as compared to human eyes - the camera obscura helped determine a standard of understanding viewers as detached figures, always at a remove from the world that they surveyed.

In their examination of ways of thinking that have defined art historical writing, Steven Melville and Margaret Iversen point out that “according to an oft-repeated
argument, perspective consolidates a gaze that secures the position of the viewer and stabilizes existing power relations. It represents vision as disembodied, monocular, distanced, cut off from more tactile relations to the world."\textsuperscript{171} It is my claim that \textit{To Reverse One’s Eyes} disrupts learned ways of seeing, undermining the system of perspective or the technologies that grew out of the camera obscura that have become central to any spectator’s experience.

\textit{To Reverse One’s Eyes} is in a position to upset such entrenched assumptions about vision because it rests on a strange turn of events. Penone inserts the lenses and gives up his sight. But his temporary forfeiture allows spectators the chance to take possession of Penone’s vision as it reflects back to them from the surface of his lenses. He is offering what he could have seen.\textsuperscript{172} Penone’s mirrored contact lenses give spectators the strange experience of both observing the work and seeing that they are being observed in the reflected lenses. Penone’s sacrifice allows spectators to occupy two positions simultaneously. There is no way to remain at a detached distance from the work. There is no longer a fixed, mathematically-determined position from which the viewer has the best and clearest view of a scene. How could there be if the spectator occupies two places at once?


\textsuperscript{172} Penone said, “Closing eyes not by closing eyelids but by covering the eyes (that should have been able to see) with a mirror that redirected and reflected the image permitted me to offer to others what, theoretically, I would have seen, had I been able to see. That was the intention of the work. It was very logical based on what I had thought about and created previously.” “Incontro con Giuseppe Penone,” See minute 21:00.
The exchange of gazes in *To Reverse One’s Eyes* shows viewers something akin to what Maurice Merleau-Ponty calls the chiasmus. The chiasmus is that overlapping of the senses, a crossover moment when we simultaneously experience the reversibility of the senses — to see and be seen, to touch and be touched. This reversibility shows us our state of being in the world, not viewing things from a distance or experiencing things at a remove (as linear perspective and Cartesianism have taught us) but feeling ourselves as participants in the larger world. Merleau-Ponty wants us to understand how we are fully incorporated into the fabric of the visible world, belonging to it like every other visible thing we encounter. We are seeing beings but we are also seen. This is part of our lived experience, however unusual it feels to talk about sight in this way. Merleau-Ponty’s famous example of the chiasmus moment focuses on the right hand being touched by the left hand while the right hand is touching another object. It is an uncanny sensation when we attempt it, as our touching hand simultaneously tries to take on the quality of a tactile object. The chiasmus functions with visible moments as well. To *Reverse One’s Eyes* points out what Merleau-Ponty suggests can happen with the overlapping of vision, the exchange of gazes. And that exchange results in a strangely unnerving experience of the reversibility of sight.

173. “Already our existence as seers (that is, we said, as beings who turn the world back upon itself and who pass over to the other side and who catch sight of one another, who see one another with eyes) and especially our existence as sonorous brings for others and for ourselves contain everything required for there to be speech from the one to the other, speech about the world. And, in a sense, to understand a phrase is nothing else than to fully welcome it in its sonorous being, or, as we put it so well, to *hear what it says* (*l’entendre*).” Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible* (Evanston, ILL: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 155.
To Reverse One’s Eyes displays phenomenological reversibility. It shows that our vision is of a piece with our own visibility. It is the placement of the mirrored contact lenses on Penone’s eyes that makes this experience of vision such an important and odd instance. The lenses reflect back to us the position occupied by another individual in space. Spectators of works of art are not typically offered the experience of being aware both of their act of seeing and simultaneously of the fact that they are seen. Penone’s radical gesture of inserting the contact lenses offers exactly this scenario. Penone’s vision is made visible - available - to the spectator. Viewers can point to the reflected world and say, “there it is; there I am. I am seen and I am seeing at the same time.”

Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology helps us to see, and to explain, what is at stake in To Reverse One’s Eyes. Even though Penone’s eyes are covered, the coverings are in fact screens on which we share his vision. That sharing of experience is pointing to a shared way we are in the world, as embodied beings who are visible to others. Our experience and Penone’s are both that of seeing and of being seen. The two aspects go together and cannot be pulled apart. As Merleau-Ponty says, “he who sees cannot possess that visible unless he is possessed by it, unless he is of it, unless in principle, according to what is required by the articulation of the look with the things, he is one of the visibles, capable, by a singular reversal, of seeing them - he who is one of them.”174 Our visibility marks our intertwining with others, with the world in which we exist, and in Penone’s case, in the world reflected in his eyes. That singular reversal is exactly what viewers are

meant to take from the title of the work. *To Reverse One’s Eyes* is not a turning inward, but a recognition of our shared chiasmatic belonging to the world.

I have aimed at offering a description of the spectator’s experience with *To Reverse One’s Eyes* by making links between the work and Merleau-Ponty’s concept of the chiasmus. I have tried to point out the disorienting position spectators find themselves in as they encounter the work. However, if Penone’s claim that this work is sculpture remains confounding, another suggestion is to focus on a mode of thinking that has come out of the phenomenological discussion of the chiasmus, the idea that vision is something we *express* rather than *possess*. What is expression other than a gesture outward? It is a pressing forth of something. Penone makes a powerful *expression* out of his indication of the state of seeing and being seen. Can we think about sculpture as something created in that space, that place where we stand in front of Penone but also realize that we take up his position and our own simultaneously? Can sculpture be based on the notion of that reversibility of the look?

Penone’s gesture of inserting the contact lenses makes the space where he stands and the position of the spectators an essential relationship. Having activated those locales and upset the idea that the spectator has only one position from which to observe the work, it is possible to say that *To Reverse One’s Eyes* is a sculpture by being an

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175 Jean-Luc Nancy, “Res Extensa,” in *Multiple Arts: The Muses II* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006), 166. Nancy’s essay discusses expression as a pushing outward, as expulsion. Nancy sustains that the outside (of sculpture) is not a translation or version of an inside. He uses terms like extension, a pushing or stretching to work through what it is that sculpture shows.
expression of vision. It is a sculpture because the work rests on creating relations between two positions of viewing. He has activated physical space.176

Similar to the case I made about Maritime Alps, this discussion inserts Penone into a larger art historical moment when what is defined as sculpture is no longer a monolithic centralized thing, a vertical form elevated on a pedestal, but a concept of artistic practice where dispersal of form and relations between things become sculpture’s logic.177 To Reverse One’s Eyes might be discussed in relation to the “expanded field” of sculpture Rosalind Krauss saw emerging in the 1960s and ‘70s. Such works were no longer monolithic entities, but made themselves out of the relationships scattered across a field of production marked by an astonishing diversity of practices. In fact, during this period, Krauss says that modern sculpture gave way to a postmodern practice wherein sculpture “entered a categorical no-man’s-land: it was what was on or in front of a building that was not the building, or what was in the landscape that was not the landscape.”178 It seemed easier to define a sculpture by what it was not (not landscape, not architecture) than by what it was (for example, a certain material or a memorial to an


177 “More that at any other time in the history of modern art, medium - both in its formal sense, and in the sense of the physical matter from which a work was made - presented itself as a key concern. At the same time, more perceptive critics and artists of the time are very contradictory on the subject. On the one hand there is a privileging of medium and the literal materiality of the art work, and on the other, a powerful impulse to move beyond the constraints of medium as traditionally defined, to the point where the formal categorization of works of art as either painting or sculpture begins to seem irrelevant.” Alex Potts, “Tactility: The Interrogation of Medium in Art of the 1960s” Art History 27, no. 2 (April 2004), 284.

event, person or place). Krauss points out that Merleau-Ponty’s recently translated text *The Phenomenology of Perception* offered artists a theoretical language that mirrored or supported the changing nature of sculpture.\(^{179}\) Phrases like “a spatiality without things” and notions like the centrality of embodied perception in the creation of works had real purchase with artists such as Robert Morris, Robert Smithson, Richard Serra, Walter De Maria, Christo, Richard Long and, I would assert, Penone.

*To Reverse One’s Eyes* has not typically been included in discussions of this period, whether in the context of postmodern sculpture or conceptual art, but it should be. It is a work formed around the idea of the reversibility of the gaze between artist and spectator and therefore fully engaged in the contemporary climate of the reconsideration of the art object. It feels right to compare Penone’s work with pieces that were challenging the limits and categories of artistic practice. *To Reverse One’s Eyes* was born at the exact moment when, internationally, definitions of art and medium were being challenged.\(^{180}\) Ideas, descriptions, actions, happenings and photographic documentation all combined with a general de-emphasis on materials in favor of relationality. This made


\(^{180}\) “The ease with which many artists managed, some ten years ago, to change mediums - from sculpture, say, to film (Serra, Morris, et al.) or from dance to film (Rainer) - or were willing to ‘corrupt’ one medium with another - to present a work of sculpture, for example, in the form of a photograph (Smithson, Long) - or abjured any physical manifestation of the work (Barry, Weiner) makes it clear that the actual characteristics of the medium, per se, cannot any longer tell us much about an artist’s activity.” Douglas Crimp, “Pictures,” *October* vol. 8 (Spring 1979), 76.
for an uncertain but prolific moment where a Duchampian mode of choice, minimal gestures and collocation replaced traditional aesthetic descriptors of art.

Richard Long was a peripheral participant in Arte Povera’s early activities. His sculpture, *A Line Made by Walking* [1967], can act as a good comparative to *To Reverse One’s Eyes*. It was created by simply walking back and forth over a patch of grass in a field in Wiltshire, England, until Long’s movement flattened the grass, making an indentation. A photograph of the site documents his physical and temporary intervention (Fig. 66). Both *A Line Made by Walking* and *To Reverse One’s Eyes* share a built-in acknowledgement that most spectators will come to the work at a subsequent moment. The impermanence of the initial act, its general immateriality, and the importance of documentation shape both pieces. If there is no lasting sculptural object, the artists nonetheless insist upon the sculptural nature of their work. And while the artists’ embodied actions drive each work, both Penone and Long share an insistence that their actions not be construed as performance. The works are not meant to focus on the artists’ experience but on what the artists’ actions show and share publicly.

Another comparable work is Richard Serra’s *Shift* [1970-72], which was formed “as the recorded trace of the mutual sightings of two people as they walk opposite sides of a hilly ground but struggle to keep each other in view…its construction…a network of

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181 “His forays into the expanded realm of sculpture nearly approximated performance art, although this is a tag that Long has always, vigorously and tellingly, rejected, precisely because of its allusion to a quality of theatricality and expressive subjectivity which the decidedly non-personalist or depersonalized aesthetic of his work seems to contradict.” Dieter Roelstraete, *Richard Long: A Line Made by Walking* (London: Afterall, 2010), 9-10.
perspectives that would establish an internal ‘horizon’ for the work.”

Richard Serra and Joan Jonas spent five days traversing a field outside of King City, Ontario. The shape of their walks was determined by their desire to keep sight of each other. Their positions eventually determined the shape of a structure, which was subsequently created with concrete (Fig. 67). It is interesting to note that while Shift depends on movement through a field, subsequent writing about the work does not remain wholly focused on the personal experiences, thoughts, or emotions of its author. What is interesting is Serra’s choice, the embodied action that created the piece and marked “the mutual, motile engagement that is at the heart of perception.” What becomes important in a consideration of Shift is the balanced combination of the idea behind the work, its physical manifestation (although its remote location means it is more often encountered photographically), and the spectator’s engagement with the work. While Shift is a sculpture it is also a work about embodied experience, which it attempts to share with others. “Shift’s viewer is represented (through the sculpture) as in constant motion; and this bridging between the body’s horizon and that of the world, this abstract transitivity - ‘foreshortening,’ ‘contracting,’ ‘compressing,’ ‘turning,’ - must be seen as the subject matter of the work.”

Both Serra and Penone share phenomenological interests and concerns which make their work comparable. How the body sees and acts and how that


183 Ibid., 132.

184 Ibid., 133.
becomes translated into a sculptural form are questions at work in *Shift* and *To Reverse One’s Eyes*.

Discussion of Penone’s work alongside that of Long and Serra’s shows how *To Reverse One’s Eyes* approaches the significance of works by a larger international selection of artists. This is not his typical position as Penone’s early work – when it is discussed at all in relation to the works of others – is seen as belonging to the Arte Povera movement. Although Penone’s use of poor or natural materials and his direct physical engagement with them was in many ways in line with Germano Celant’s description of the Arte Povera project, Penone’s oeuvre sets him apart. *To Reverse One’s Eyes* is the culmination of the artist’s early career. It is defined by his desire to rid himself of conventions and to investigate and undermine traditional ways of seeing; it conveys his phenomenological interest in embodied actions. These factors exist around his choice of materials (or lack thereof). A comparison of *To Reverse One’s Eyes* with fellow Arte Povera artist Michelangelo Pistoletto’s series of mirror paintings can point out just how distinct Penone’s project was.

Pistoletto’s *Quadri Speccianti* [Mirror Paintings] are large polished stainless steel panels on whose surfaces Pistoletto fixes life-size photographic reproductions of figures. This series, begun in 1961, depicts mundane or everyday scenes of individuals in contemplation, small groups in conversation, women holding babies, protestors marching and reclining nudes, often shown from the back or in three-quarter view. A key component to the experience of Pistoletto’s Mirror Paintings is the viewers’ entrance into the space of the stainless steel panel. Their bodies are then reflected on the slightly uneven surface of the work and become part of the depicted scene. Viewers are
confronted with Pistoletto’s figures in the reflected field and thereby engage with them on that de-realized plane. The spectators’ experience shifts from the space outside of the painting to the image within. They enter into a pictorial illusion where, for a moment, they inhabit the world of the painting.

For example, in Sacra Conversazione (Anselmo, Zorio, Penone), 1973, three of Pistoletto’s Arte Povera colleagues stand in conversation, glancing at each other. The artist has left a space in their grouping so that a viewer, standing at an appropriate point in front of the painting, can seem to join in their discussion (Fig. 68). For a moment the world outside of the painting is subordinate to the image on its surface. That image might be in motion, it might be recognizably transient, but it is an image that belongs primarily to Pistoletto’s work. Viewers symbolically jump through the surface of the painting and enter into the wholly believable and systematically depicted world on the other side.

Pistoletto replaces canvases with mirrors but the spectator’s experience remains fundamentally the same. The mirror paintings were never meant to dismantle the idea of painting as a window onto another world. Spectators are allowed to see themselves at a

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185 “When we look at many of his early mirrors with the figures turning their backs to the viewers, their faces averted modestly from our scrutiny, they seem instead to be looking directly at our reflections in the polished stainless steel, and then fully enclosing us in the space of representation. Our space then becomes fully theirs, and the space between us and them collapses.” Carlos Basualdo, “Michelangelo Pistoletto: From One to Many, 1956 – 1974. Edited by Carlos Basualdo (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 2010), 7.

186 Silkscreen on polished stainless steel. 90 9/16 x 47 1/4 inches (230 x 120 cm) Collection of the artist. Reproduced in Michelangelo Pistoletto: From One to Many, 1956 – 1974. Edited by Carlos Basualdo (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 2010), 265. The idea of the Mirror Paintings as depicting worlds separate from that of the spectator is aided by the fact that Pistoletto’s painting Sacra Conversazione, for example, has a title which refers to a specific religious genre and thus offers an otherworldly sainthood to its figures. Not only is a viewer a literal part of the painting, s/he is given a role to act out as well.
remove (i.e. they see themselves “over there” only at the price of attending to their presence “here”). This is a very different experience from the one that a viewer has in front of Penone in To Reverse One’s Eyes. The implications of Penone’s work are fundamentally different from what Pistoletto offers, where the spectator remains isolated and separated from the work itself. In To Reverse One’s Eyes the reversibility of vision that is at the heart of the work is not accompanied by an illusion of a world beyond the one in which the viewer already exists. In fact, To Reverse One’s Eyes offers that strange experience of showing and offering the simultaneity of two viewing positions. Penone’s work offers a public vision of what it is like to be in this world - not a private space constructed by the imagination of one artist.

To Reverse One’s Eyes offers viewers a radical and difficult experience of vision where vantage point is key to understanding sight. In 1973 Penone wrote,

187 It is interesting to note that subsequent to the early Mirror Paintings, Pistoletto became interested in theater. From 1968 through 1970 his troupe Lo Zoo [The Zoo] took to the streets to perform, improvise and engage spectators in a celebratory rejection of what Pistoletto saw as staid art world traditions and an ever solidifying commercial art market. But regardless of the counter-culture nature of his troupe and their avant-garde performance choices, Pistoletto never sought to dismantle the basic structures of theater. “In other words, unlike the Happenings, which aimed to eradicate distance - ‘the line between art and life should be kept as fluid, and perhaps indistinct, as possible,’ Kaprow observed - Lo Zoo retained a separation between audience and actor while encouraging conversation. Indeed the idea of division is implicit in the group’s title. ‘The goal was not to break down the barrier,’ Pistoletto has explained, ‘but to recognize it.’ Again and again, Lo Zoo’s performances relied on scenic devices such as chalk circles, bed sheets, curtains, ladders, and baskets to reinforce the separation between actors and spectators.” Just as Pistoletto’s troupe retained the established norms of theater, his Mirror Paintings never meant to dismantle the idea of painting as a window onto another world. Claire Gilman, “Pistoletto’s Object Theater,” in Michelangelo Pistoletto: From One to Many, 1956 – 1974. Edited by Carlos Basualdo (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 2010), 86.
There is a moment when you rid yourself of conventions and acquired knowledge in order to redefine your own identity and your own space of thought and rediscover the genuineness that learning has caused us to forget. Your own identity is a space, the space of your own body that only later becomes the space of your own ideas, the space into which the person is projected.¹⁸⁸

Viewers of To Reverse One’s Eyes are meant to slough off what they know of vision and take on an exciting exchange of gazes, a challenging reversal of the eyes.¹⁸⁹


¹⁸⁹ “The work of art can never appear ‘in itself,’ for it is inevitably part of a complex ‘installation’ we call the history of art, which encompasses both viewer and viewed.” Melville and Iversen, Writing Art History, 108.
Chapter 5: To Unfold One’s Skin

Unrolling one’s skin against air, water, earth, rock, walls, trees, dogs, handrails, windows, roads, hair, hats, handles, wings, doors, seats, stairs, clothes, books, eyes, sheep, mushrooms, grass, skin...

This chapter will look at Svolgere la Propria Pelle [To Unfold One’s Skin] from 1970 (Fig. 69). With this work, Penone turns from the explicit sculpture-making process of To Reverse One’s Eyes towards a photographic practice. The lived body continues to be the subject of To Unfold One’s Skin, however, the shape of the work shifts towards an acute attention to the body’s contact with the world through a series of photographs of skin (Fig. 70). In this way it shares with Penone’s more properly sculptural projects an interest in absolute exteriority. To Unfold One’s Skin is especially concerned with our embeddedness in the world and how our skin marks the beginning of our extension into it. The work opens a discussion of the limits of our bodies as “contours of reciprocity” where we are always touching things and leaving marks, while at the same time experiencing the pressures and impressions that the world leaves upon our skin.


191 The Italian verb svolgere has several different possible translations, including: to unroll, to unwind, to unravel, to unfold, to develop, and to carry out. I have chosen the English verb unfold because I believe it best describes To Unfold One’s Skin as an image that continuously and repeatedly opens itself out or unfurls onto a variety of surfaces.
If with earlier and other works Penone insisted on their fundamentally sculptural nature, we find no such insistence here. *To Unfold One’s Skin* engages with photography in ways and for reasons that, I hope, will become clear as we proceed. The kind of contact *To Unfold One’s Skin* explores has to do with its indexicality.

From the beginning of his career, Penone has used photography to document his works. *Maritime Alps* and *To Reverse One’s Eyes* are encountered primarily through photographs, though according to Penone, those photographs are in some sense incidental to the work. *To Unfold One’s Skin* does not have any existence apart from the photographs and in this way marks something of a departure from the others. It too is a work that is typically encountered as photographic prints framed in galleries or as a limited edition artist’s book. And yet, the medium of photography plays a more significant role in *To Unfold One’s Skin* than it has in the other works I have discussed. In its exploration of the surfaces of the body, *To Unfold One’s Skin* is a work of photography that comments on issues of our exposure to the world and our lived experience as fundamentally shaped by that exposure.

**The making of *To Unfold One’s Skin***

Penone has said that *To Unfold One’s Skin* began with the idea of touch as an “automatic image.” The basic act of touching other things in the world creates “images” – fingerprints and other traces – whether we intend them or not. *To Unfold One’s Skin* attempts to register that kind of contact with the world. Claudio Basso, one of the photographers involved in the *Maritime Alps* and *To Reverse One’s Eyes* projects,

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photographed the entirety of Penone’s naked body. The process involved isolating individual sections of the artist’s skin and covering them with a small glass microscope slide. It took over six hundred shots to photograph all of Penone’s body. In the version of the work that consists of photographic prints, the prints are typically displayed in a grid of equally sized images grouped in eighteen framed panels (Fig. 71).

There are several unusual aspects about the large group of images making up To Unfold One’s Skin. On the one hand, the systematic photographing of the entire body, combined with the use of the laboratory slide, results in a sort of clinical regularity. On the other hand, the images are inconsistent in their quality. They are not all in focus. Some of the photographs are beautifully detailed with every pore, every wrinkle, and every hair crisply in focus. Others feel poorly lit and blurred. A gloved hand pressing down on the glass slide is sometimes visible. Occasionally, the photograph seems to have been taken while the gloved hand was not completely still. The glass plate presses unevenly across the different shapes of the artist’s body.

The one consistency among all of the photographs is that, in each, a glass slide is being pressed down onto skin or hair. Otherwise, there is a great deal of compositional variety from one photograph to the next. The slide is not always in the center of the photograph, either. At times the entire slide is visible, at other times only one edge can be seen. When a series of photographs document the same body part (for example, a hand), the photographs are not always oriented in the same direction. Penone’s skin appears

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193 The gloved hand adds to the overall “clinical” feel of the work as it prevents any marks being left on the slide that do not belong to Penone. It also makes clear that the work is not so much about human interrelations as it is about our belonging to the space of the world.
alternately very dark or very light. What emerges is akin to a puzzle arranged somewhat at random. The presence of the slide offers consistency in an otherwise haphazard group of images.

What emerges from this description is the importance of the several functions of the glass slide. It flattens the skin beneath its surface and in so doing negates our awareness of the body as volume. That moment of pressure leaves marks, thereby facilitating the repositioning of the slide over the next patch of skin to be photographed. It allows for comprehensive coverage of the entire body. Using the glass slide also carries connotations of scientific exactitude with its regularity and systematic presence.

The slide serves, too, as a reminder of photography’s history, of the era when glass plates were used instead of film. Photographic images were created by the light of the world directly impressing itself on a glass surface coated with a thin emulsion of silver. The glass plate’s presence in To Unfold One’s Skin references this past and underscores the indexical nature of the photograph. Technically the photograph is both an icon and index of the thing whose image it captures. As Rosalind Krauss emphasizes,

Every photograph is the result of a physical imprint transferred by light reflections onto a sensitive surface. The photograph is thus a type of icon, or visual likeness, which bears an indexical relationship to its object. Its separation from true icons is felt through the absoluteness of this physical genesis, one that seems to short-circuit or disallow those processes of schematization or symbolic intervention that operate within the graphic representations of most paintings.194

As Penone’s body and the glass plate press against one another, a mark is left on Penone’s skin. At the same time Penone’s skin leaves its indexical trace on the glass slide every time it is repositioned on his body. And then that moment is photographed, creating another imprint. The photograph too becomes an index of an instance of contact between skin and slide.

The work’s distinctive character is also shaped, in part, by the flatness of the photographic print. Presumably Penone decided to use the glass slide to “level” the skin in order to point to an equivalence between that flattened surface and the form of the photograph. He said,

They are photographs taken by pressing a glass onto different parts of the body and therefore pressing down against the skin. These areas become flat and that corresponds to the tactile experience of surfaces. In these photographs there is a moment of coincidence between vision and touch. The flat part of the skin corresponds to the sensation of the flat surface one would experience touching the surface of a photograph.

Here again is another instance in Penone’s oeuvre where the optic and the haptic

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195 To Unfold One’s Skin was one of the first instances of the artist using the surface of his body to make works. In later years Penone added a black powdery substance to various parts of his body and then applied a translucent tape to transfer the mark created onto sheets of paper. Typically the artist then continued drawing around the image of his skin that was left on the paper. These works, many from the early 2000s, seem especially relevant in that they reference the little bits of us that are dispersed into the world. The graphite “pressings” are like our fingerprints in that sense, or even the rings of a tree, except that with us, we are leaving our traces along the things we touch throughout our lives. See, for example, Untitled (Spoglia d’oro su spine d’acacia [labra]) [Untitled, (Skin of Gold on Acacia Thorns [Lips])], 2001 in the collection of the Philadelphia Museum of Art, accessed February 23, 2013, http://www.philamuseum.org/collections/permanent/265294.html?mulR=187092

experiences are meant to be considered together, as overlapping sensations that help to create and then to apprehend the final work.

**Penone’s Casts**

I’d like here to take a momentary step away from *To Unfold One’s Skin* in order to consider another series of Penone’s works, which were also made in the early 1970s. So far I have been stressing Penone’s interest in the index as it relates specifically to the photographic characteristics of *To Unfold One’s Skin*. But early in his career Penone was also making other works clearly evincing an interest in the index, though primarily by way of molding and casting. By looking briefly at a couple of these other works, we may be able to see just a bit more clearly what phenomenological significance Penone may have drawn from the indexical trace.

*Guanto [Glove]*, 1972 was a latex glove made from a plaster cast of Penone’s hand and arm. The glove had the impression of his skin, hair and fingerprints. Penone then wore that glove, inside out, on his opposite hand. The subsequent experience of touching his hands together meant that he filled the cavities and crevices of one hand with their positive forms made material on his gloved hand.¹⁹⁷ He photographed both hands (one with and one without the glove), palms up, to record the details and differences between them (Fig. 72).

¹⁹⁷ Penone’s describes wearing *Glove* from 1972: “Grasping my hands together, the marks of my right hand’s skin fit into the marks that cover the skin of my left hand. That complete connection gave me the feeling of completely smooth hands, without wrinkles or fingerprints. My hands fit into one another and became one – knowing how to separate one from the other became impossible – like the unnatural act of removing one nostril. In its reacting and touching, the right hand created the negative of its skin that the left hand took on in its reactions and in its touching.” Germano Celant, *Giuseppe Penone* (Milan: Electa, 1989), 64.
Glove created a second skin out of latex, repeating the visual form of his skin. The latex behaved like the glass slides in To Unfold One’s Skin – it both held the skin’s imprint (on one side) and made material the world’s constant adherence to us. Glove drew an analogy between the world’s embrace and the touch of our own hands. Rather than considering ourselves separated from the world, Glove shows us how we are always embedded in it, always and literally surrounded by it.

Here the connection between Penone’s work and the writing of Maurice Merleau-Ponty is remarkably evident. Guanto comes about as close as possible to materially describing Merleau-Ponty’s concept of the chiasm. Glove emphasizes the connection between self and other where touch opens us out to the world. In fact in The Visible and the Invisible there is a working note from November 16, 1960 entitled “Chiasm – Reversibility” that could act as an account of Penone’s Glove:

Reversibility: the finger of the glove that is turned inside out – There is no need of a spectator who would be on each side. It suffices that from one side I see the wrong side of the glove that is applied to the right side, that I touch the one through the other (double ‘representation’ of a point or plane of the field) the chiasm is that: the reversibility…In reality there is neither me nor the other as positive, positive subjectivities. There are two caverns, two opennesses, two stages where something will take place – and which both belong to the same world, to the stage of Being.

Guardare l’aria [To look at the air] from 1973 was one of a series of works consisting of plaster casts of parts of Penone’s body. There are nine casts of part of his

198 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, The Visible and the Invisible (Evanston, ILL: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 263. Another striking connection occurs between Guanto and The years of the tree plus one with surfaces coming into contact with one another to the point of loosing sense of their distinction. Again, Penone’s project in the early years seems to have had this undoing of difference at its core.
face including a closed eye. The white casts were originally exhibited on a wall onto which full-color photographic images of those same body parts were projected from nine slide projectors aligned on tall bases\(^\text{199}\) (Fig. 73). This work suggests a separation between the tactile and the visual but also their inevitable indistinction. Casts were made from indexical traces (molds) of the body that stand in for the tactile experience of contact with the outside world. The presence of the projectors suggests in turn how vision knits us into the world – as a result of our visibility to others standing elsewhere. If the cast makes concrete the physical impression of our bodies on the world (and its reciprocal impression on us), the projector makes the fact of our being seen clear. As I discussed in relation to *To Reverse One’s Eyes*, our visibility is always a visibility to others, and so less something we possess than evidence of our belonging-to-the-world.\(^\text{200}\)

**Penone’s Body**

Returning to *To Unfold One’s Skin* we now have to consider the use of Penone’s body in the photographs. To reveal one’s naked self is an intimate act, but the visual effect in *To Unfold One’s Skin* is less sensual than clinical, matter-of-fact. The images are

\(^{199}\) Another example is *Torace* [Torso] from 1972 with a black and white slide photograph projected onto the plaster. (Fig. 74)

\(^{200}\) Penone’s casts stand in contrast with what Jasper Johns did several years previously (for example *Target with Four Faces* of 1955) (75). The casts of parts of Johns’ face were entities separated from the space they inhabited. Because the casts were separated in a box on top of the painting and because there was a cover that could be closed over them, they seemed even more like objects apart from the world. Penone’s casts show how space is a medium that envelops us all - that we have form because the world presses on us and leaves its impression upon our skin. In addition Penone’s casts are visible only because there is an external source of vision, materialized in the work via the projected photograph. *To look at the air* promotes the idea that objects do not exist as independent autonomous entities but rather as the result of their subjective experience of being in the world.
succinct, neither mysterious nor provocative. They are arranged in several rows and columns. Their programmed organization is determined by the hard edges of each equally sized reproduction. *To Unfold One’s Skin* transforms and flattens the body’s curves and crevices into something akin to a series of film stills. The body’s original shape is lost. One does not get a sense that the framed or printed images follow the physical body from head to toe. Briony Fer says, “The work becomes indecipherable as the body is systematically mapped out in this way, with the very process of mapping rendering the body illegible.”201

While I do not necessarily agree with her claim of illegibility, the work does offer a sense of the body as flat, unfurled, and opened out in ways that are unusual. We see all of it at once, laid out as a surface. But even through all of the manipulations, and the uniformity of front and back, curve and crevice, *To Unfold One’s Skin* is legible as the parts that make up a body. It makes no attempt to disguise or dissemble that fact. What is far less clear is whether it makes sense to regard the work as a portrait. Are we supposed to know that we are looking at (all of) Giuseppe Penone?

If *To Unfold One’s Skin* constitutes a kind of self-portrait, it is decidedly not one that conveys subjective interiority. It provides scant autobiographical information (especially if the work’s spectators do not recognize the artist) and does not reveal anything like interior experience. And here the connection with *Maritime Alps, Trees,* and *To Reverse One’s Eyes* is at its most clear. These are works that are concerned with

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the outsidedness of things. What they show is how things – including the things that we are - are exposed to the world. *To Unfold One’s Skin* undermines the notion of a “self” as something constituted by and as a private interiority. What we see is what we get: image after image of the skin’s surface, unfurled so as to suggest there is nothing “inside.” And while all the images show Penone’s external features, it is not particularly clear that he wants viewers to know that the images show his body. Viewers see only a male body, part by part, without specific identification. The presentation is generic in its sheer totality. And what we are shown about this generic everybody is precisely its ex-posure – the surface that joins it to the flesh of the world.

That sense of anonymity is closely aligned in this case with the act of touching. Penone has said, “at the moment when you touch something, there is a slight loss of identity. As you are touching a flat surface, your finger becomes flat, whereas normally your finger is not flat. You undergo a change.”

As I mentioned earlier, in *To Unfold One’s Skin* parts of the artist’s body take on the flat shape of the glass plate, creating a kind of repeated regularity to sections of his skin. In doing so, his skin partly loses its form and fuses with the glass. That momentary transformation means a forfeiture, however brief, of the distinct nature of that particular section of the body. The body takes on the form of the glass. Such action might contribute to the sense of anonymity that pervades *To Unfold One’s Skin.*

The piecemeal nature of the skin’s “mapping” defamiliarizes it so that rather than

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viewing an enclosing volume, viewers are presented with an aggregate of small surfaces. None of these sections are more or less than any of the others. The images are given equal importance, regardless of what part of the body they show. There is no particular difference between a section of skin from the artist’s back or thigh or side of his neck. This equivalence of all parts of the skin’s surface upends the experience of a legible three-dimensional body and is unsettling.

*To Unfold One’s Skin* asks viewers to contemplate the body as always in relation to itself and other things. Just as the photographed skin is always pressed against and is pressed by the glass plate, so the body (my body, your body) is always pressed by/interacting with that which extends beyond our skin. The work asks us to examine the limits of self. Are we really isolated individuals, made up of the privacy of our own contours and what we imagine to be our interior lives? Or, rather, do we exist as beings always in contact with the world and made up of the same worldly stuff? *To Unfold One’s Skin* insists on the latter understanding of the “self.” As Andrew Mitchell claims,

> Our concerns extend beyond ourselves, our bodies do not end at our skin, our bodies are beyond ourselves, our concerns make up our skin…skin understood as surface of sense, as unfurling sheets of sheer phenomenality. We so fully belong to this world that it bears our scent, our taste, we dissolve into it…

*To Unfold One’s Skin* unravels the notion of self-portraiture. And this is not a new theme for Penone. Ever since his interactions with trees for the *Maritime Alps* project, he has been trying to address the limits of self and other, and how the body impacts and is impacted by things in the world. *To Unfold One’s Skin* makes explicit the notion that we

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are permeable to the world. Everything about us, our thoughts, our encounters, our exchanges, and especially our skin is dispersed out into the world. The space where skin touches glass (or anything else) is where being happens. That liminal place of exchange is essential and inevitable.

Whether or not we chose to rely on phenomenology to help describe and interpret the work, it is clear that we are given images of skin touching something. To Unfold One’s Skin is a meditation on that action. Everything that we are, everything that we know comes from that moment of touch, that moment of contact. Rather than necessarily making a work about a body, Penone is showing the experience we all share, of daily touch and interaction forming our existence in and our engagement with the world.

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204 The art critic, curator and Penone biographer Daniela Lancioni has offered another point of departure for reading To Unfold One’s Skin. She suggests that it makes reference to a contemporary cultural tendency where fragmented images permeate the visual field and where we share in the task of constructing works by giving ourselves over to a language/visual culture that is not solely ours. As artists and as spectators we, collectively, are part of and have access to the general residues and contents of all the artwork (and all the critical language used to describe it) that has come before us. Lancioni cites Roland Barthes’s Death of the Author as so diffuse an influence that it is possible to consider To Unfold One’s Skin in light of its message - that a work of art requires the viewer’s participation as well as a complicit understanding that subjectivity makes way for a more phenomenological state of being. Lancioni noted, “It isn’t solely the artist who creates with an individual gesture. The act of the artist is a dispersal of all of the art works that have been created in the past and the atmosphere in which the artist lives. It isn’t the death of the artist as much as it is a vision of the artist as taking a more expansive role in his or her contemporary society and culture as well as that of the past.” Lancioni sees the artist as fundamentally participatory. Barthes was interested in underscoring the fact that “our” words are never really our own; they always belong fully to the larger world of language and that gives them their sense. Writing, therefore, is never “expressive.” In this way Barthes notions can be paired with To Unfold One’s Skin’s refusal of any kind of subjective interiority in favor of an understanding of our belonging to the world, our skin becomes yet another thing we share with the world. Roland Barthes’ “Death of The Author” was translated into Italian in 1968. “Incontro con Giuseppe Penone.” See minute 27:00.
Versions of *To Unfold One’s Skin*

In 1971 Penone published a limited edition book entitled *Svolgere la propria pelle* through Enzo Sperone’s gallery. Its 112 pages are surrounded by a book jacket made of textured paper that, although bright white in color, feels and looks like skin. The act of holding and perusing the book inevitably includes the tactile experience of touching and being touched by someone’s skin. While the book jacket paper is slightly translucent, it allows only for an obscured reading of the black letters of the book title on the upper left corner of the front cover of the book. Otherwise the translucent book jacket lies upon the white book cover, a further extension of that white surface into the world (Fig. 76).

The book includes 655 black and white photographs. They are the same images that are framed and displayed as photographic prints. The first page opens with images of Penone’s forehead, hair, ear, eyes and nose. The subsequent pages show arms, then wrists and then fingers, although sometimes it is quite difficult to ascertain the part of the body that the photograph captures. Like the prints, the book does not appear to be narrating a systematic journey from the top of Penone’s head to the bottom of his feet, although all of those things are shown. At times the images show skin that could equally be depicting the artist’s stomach, side or back. Other times, the parts are quite clear and it is obvious that we are looking at a penis or toes. As I’ve mentioned, all of these images are given equal weight within the work. That lack of a privileged, hierarchical, or organic

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*Svolgere la propria pelle (To Unfold One's Skin)*, 1971/73. 104 b/w photographs (cm. 20 x 20 each one) mounted on 7 paper panels (each one cm. 70 x 100). Edition of 25 published by Edizioni Multipli, Turin.
organization of the body makes every image subject to the same kind of looking and the same kind of touching.

Unlike the print versions that, framed on a wall, do not allow for physical engagement, tactility is a central concern of the book version. Holding it, turning its pages, and thumbing through the images create moments of contact and closeness. The book’s publication, although limited, means circulation. It is distributed, passed out, handed from person to person. The contact displayed in every photograph becomes the reality of the object. It moves through the world, touching and being touched.

*To Unfold One’s Skin* also exists in a version where the same images of skin are printed on glass plates instead of paper and installed in windows of gallery spaces or doors between rooms. These transitional spaces become full of pictures of the artist’s body, flattened and fit into the geometric panes or sections of rectangular windows or doors. The selection of the doorway or window is meaningful for neither is an absolute limit; rather they are both sites of liminality. “It was like physically occupying space,” Penone said, “On a wall, these impressions would have had the effect of a representation.” Penone was interested instead in showing how doorways, windows

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206 *To Unfold One’s Skin* was shown at “Saturne en Europe,” an exhibition on “modern melancholy” curated by Roland Recht and Françoise Ducros at the Ancienne Douane, Musée de l’Œuvre Notre-Dame in Strasbourg from September 17 to December 4, 1988. In this version the glass plates filled ten glass sections of a door that separated two rooms containing other work by Penone, including versions of *Maritime Alps*. The works dismantling of the inside/outside opposition on which our understanding of the self is usually founded was particularly effective here, in that one’s sense of what was “inside,” what “out,” was wholly variable, dependent on which room one was in at that moment (Fig. 78).

and skin are structurally homologous. All three articulate limits but permeable ones, places where something begins.

A striking version of this installation occurred at Documenta 5 in Kassel, Germany, at the Museum Fridericianum. Penone was included in a section of the exhibition titled “Self Portrayal” along with works by Vito Acconci, Joseph Beuys, Gilbert and George, Rebecca Horn, Yoko Ono, and others. Penone exhibited To Unfold One’s Skin. Window, 1970 - 1972, a version made entirely of glass panels set in a window, which let light into the gallery but also made visible the images printed on the glass (Fig. 77).

Documenta 5, entitled Interrogation of Reality - Picture Worlds Today (June 30 - October 8, 1972), was a controversial and groundbreaking exhibition - radical in its scope and prophetic of the large-scale blockbuster exhibitions and art fairs that would develop in subsequent decades. A wild mixture of eclectic styles and genres - Performance Art, hyper-realist sculpture and painting, and Installations including Claus Oldenberg’s Mouse Museum, full of kitsch objects - the exhibition as a whole became a spectacle and an art curiosity in and of itself.208 In light of the extreme body art that was on view at Documenta V (Edward Kienholz’s Five Car Stud panorama of a scene of castration and

208 Lawrence Alloway described “Documenta 5” as “something between a supermarket and a wunderkammer”. The exhibition included works by nearly 200 participants despite the public resistance to the methods of Harald Szeemann, who was appointed the exhibition’s general secretary. Szeemann aimed to systematically trace the relations between reality and forms of visual representation: his attention was drawn not so much to the individual artworks as to ways of seeing, including those of nonprofessional artists. Acknowledging the growing importance of media, he also included images from advertising, fashion and cinema alongside the artwork associated with most radical new art movements of the time, such as Arte Povera, Viennese Actionism and American conceptual art. “Contemporary Art Center, Vilnius, Harald Szeemann. Documenta 5,” accessed December 18, 2012, http://www.cac.lt/en/exhibitions/past/11/4625.
extreme racism as well as Rudolf Schwarzkogler’s disturbing photographs of supposed self-mutilations) some have wanted to see *To Unfold One’s Skin* as suggestive of flaying. But that is clearly a reading-in. *To Unfold One’s Skin* has nothing to do with violence – though it does work to unsettle our traditional notion of the self as a contained and discrete entity. Its claim is something like: however much we might imagine ourselves “in here,” we are constantly exposed. That we are always already “spilled out” into the world – dehisced - is a deeply provocative proposition.

*To Unfold One’s Skin*, as installed at Documenta 5, was like a coating on the window (Fig. 79). As viewers looked at/out of the glass panes, they were confronted with piece after piece of skin permeated with light from the outside. As with the photographic prints, the glass plates were arranged so that the body appeared not as a whole but fragmented, displayed in such a way that the sensual forms and volumes of the body were insignificant, if not completely eradicated. The idea of skin as a permeable membrane was foregrounded.

The window is a physical division between inside and outside but because of its transparency, it gives us access to both realms. Skin is like the window; it is the place where we extend beyond ourselves into the world. It is the place where our reaching out begins. It is how we encounter the things in the world and at the same time, as *To Unfold One’s Skin* reminds us, it is the medium through which we leave our trace on those same things. Skin takes and leaves parts of itself and so is a permeable open locus. If we think about skin as a limit in Heideggerian terms, then it

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marks the beginning of things, not [an] end. Things begin at their limits for it is here that they enter into relationships with the rest of the world. Thinking limit in this manner, not as a border of confinement but one of introduction, ties the thing in question indissociably to its surroundings. Thinking limit permissively, in other words, leads to a thinking of the ecstaticity of the body, all bodies, simply by their virtue of appearing in a world. To appear is to be drawn out beyond oneself in a multiplicity of relations, to appear is to “radiate” throughout these relations.\footnote{Mitchell, \textit{Heidegger Among the Sculptors}, 1.}

\textit{To Unfold One’s Skin} stresses permeability with the world by putting an imprint or index of the body in a place where light can pass and radiate through the plates. The outside world can be seen through the marks of the skin and is thereby affected by it. The notion of a discrete self, unaffected and unattached to the world is directly disputed. Instead, the work promotes the idea that we always ex-sist outside ourselves – which is to say “we” are extended into the world in such a way that (our) being must be understood as fundamentally relational. \textit{To Unfold One’s Skin} and the world “outside” it exist in a mutual relationship, where each presses against the other. The glass plates are not self-contained but depend on their place in the world for their coming to be seen.\footnote{It is possible to consider the glass plates as the most successful version of \textit{To Unfold One’s Skin} because they show how both world and self impact each other without either isolating the self as an autonomous figure or seeing it dissolve into the world as indistinguishable from it.}

\textit{To Unfold One’s Skin}, also and finally, exists as a version made of metal photogravures, created from the same photographic negatives that were then printed on paper and on glass.\footnote{This version, in the Rachofsky Collection, Dallas, Texas, is made of copper and wood panels. They measure 3 – 31 ½ x 55 1/8 inches, 1 – 23 5/8 x 1/8 inches.} Its patina and textured irregular surface make this particular version more like sculpture, with hollows and crevices (Fig. 80). The work takes on the
effect of a bas-relief. Its copper surface reflects light and forms shadows. However, it is linked to the other versions because once again it underscores indexical processes. These plates created images through physical contact. As I have discussed, the choice to make a photographic work with *To Unfold One’s Skin* had to do with that medium’s relationship with the indexical nature of touch and the mark our skin perpetually leaves on various surfaces. These photogravures are even more extreme in their insistence on the act of touching. The plates are evidence of contact producing images.

Contact with the World

Skin is a limit, a boundary, a reality of division, an extreme surface containing the possibility of addition, subtraction, division, multiplication or destruction of everything that surrounds it. It is the extreme surface able to physically embrace enormous spaces, it can be contained and it is a container. Man’s mobility permits him to contain an incredible quantity of things with the same skin in different and continuous moments. With contact, imprints, consciousness, discovery, grip, and refusal…these actions are constantly developing or unfolding the skin on exterior surfaces as well as on oneself.\(^{213}\)

We are constantly in the process of leaving parts of ourselves with the world that we touch, as a mark of our continuity with it. We leave fingerprints on breakfast juice glasses, palm prints on door handles, smudges of forearms on the heavy doors we lean on to push open, impressions of our knees on the floor as we kneel to collect children’s toys. Traces of our physical activities are left, often without much notice. They are involuntary automatic marks of action - of life - and rarely do we give them much thought and, if then, only as something to wipe away.

But Penone sees these traces as more than smudges to be erased. I have already discussed Penone’s interest in tactile knowledge, his belief that it is in the physical interaction with things that we come to know them.\textsuperscript{214} And so it is, too, with the body’s prints. The mark left by a body’s contact with the world has pride of place as evidence of our having touched and been touched by something. Penone says, “As soon as one begins to touch a thing or an object, to feel it, to understand it, one covers it with fingerprints. The fingerprint is memory left by the body.”\textsuperscript{215} The imprint is an animal gesture, it is part of our body, our flesh, but it also marks of our way of knowing things, thinking about them and thinking about the world. Touch is an all-encompassing tool. Just as we impress upon things, they impress upon us and teach us about the world. In fact, touch can be considered the beginning of the way we know about things as Penone claims,

A child first learns to touch, then to see. When you need to verify something, it is necessary to touch it – sight isn’t enough. The tactile sense is very important. With touch, there is a greater adhesion to the truth.\textsuperscript{216}

Touch opens the human body onto the world.

In 1970, Penone contemplated the way that we leave traces of ourselves, primarily as fingerprints, throughout our dealings with the world: “The trail of grease indicates an itinerary, the use, property, territory, identification, self-depiction and depiction of one’s

\textsuperscript{214} Although, I have tried, up to this point, to underscore the fact that Penone does not favor tactile knowledge as superior to a visual experience. Rather, he sees the visual experience as having much to gain from understanding its occurrence like touch, like a phenomenological palpation with the eyes.

\textsuperscript{215} Jaunin, \textit{Giuseppe Penone: Le regard tactile}, 43.

physical position in the surroundings.”

Like the exchange of gazes that connects two different positions in *To Reverse One’s Eyes, To Unfold One’s Skin* is marking the reciprocal experience of touch, where the surface of the skin interacts with the world around it. Our fingerprints are extensions of us, physical, chemical - as Penone says, *greasy*. They are small indexical marks that we scatter about the world, in the places we visit and explore. Because of these actions and the relationships they expose, we can come to think of the fingerprint as more than identifying markings. They are not only ours but also part of the world. Kathryn Tuma called Penone’s attitude a “metaphysics of reciprocity” where, “the hand of the artist – and by extension the artist himself – undergoes a subtle yet tangible metamorphosis in contact with those surfaces it reaches out to touch.”

Through touch we disperse ourselves across the places we dwell and therefore become part of them. But even more importantly, those surfaces that we reach

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218 Penone has been fascinated with the fingerprint as a phenomenon throughout his oeuvre. He considers fingerprints to be both universal and banal; simple and vital. It can resemble sound waves, the growth rings in a cross section of a tree and even the concentric ripples in water. Penone uses its mark as the starting point for many works. Some are entirely drawn on paper – like the ten large drawings shown in 2004 at The Drawing Center in New York in “Giuseppe Penone The Imprint of Drawing” (Fig. 81). Other fingerprint works begin on paper and extend as a mural on a wall. The Museum of Modern Art, New York included *Propagazione* [Propogation] one of Penone’s fingerprint murals in the exhibition “On Line: Drawing Through the Twentieth Century” in 2010-2011 (Fig 82). One of the primary features of Penone’s “Garden of the Fluid Sculptures” at the Reggia di Venaria is a body of water, a fountain, whose flat surface is disturbed at regular intervals by an eruption of bubbles that forms the shape of a fingerprint (Fig. 83).

out to touch become part of us. Distinct notions of inside and outside, what is only mine and what is only outside of me break down.

Part of To Unfold One’s Skin’s project is to make us conscious of the fact that contact with the world is constructed through the reciprocity of touch. The work questions the idea of isolated, singular figures formed outside of the tactile impact of our habitats. As Michael Newman writes, “the emphasis on tactility that we find in the work of Penone and his contemporaries brings to the fore the adherence of the subject to a place in the world. The subject is “stuck” to the world, and to its things, by its hands and its skin.”

To Unfold One’s Skin emphasizes the extension of Penone’s skin into the world. It is an “unfurling” that suggests precisely not the outer limit of a closed-off interiority but a de-centering, an ex-posure of the “self.” Openings can make one vulnerable, but can also be welcoming and accepting surfaces. To Unfold One’s Skin acknowledges the way that skin touches the world. It is a process of unfolding exterior surfaces that results in continued impressions of skin. The proximity of the camera lens to the skin suggests a closeness that assumes confidence, warmth, and familiarity. But these are not words that seem to describe the work to its fullest. Such characterization of the images do not, in my mind, hold well to the visible facts. While we see a whole body, presumably Penone

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221 “It is with our skin, sensitive and permeable, that we penetrate the world and that we are penetrated by it. Everything occurs on its surface. Everything essential happens there…It is the definition of the body; it is its volume and its boundary.” Jaunin, Giuseppe Penone: Le regard tactile, 42.
means *To Unfold One’s Skin* less as a self-portrait than as a kind of statement about our collective condition as beings-in-the-world.

Being, as a phenomenological concept, is inextricably bound up with not only other beings but also space itself. Understanding this, we recognize our being as explicitly not self-contained. We are not discrete entities; rather we are always already “spilled out” into the world. We always ex-sist “outside ourselves.” Even though Penone repeatedly insists that he has not been influenced by any particular philosophy or theory, it is hard to deny these general phenomenological positions as formative of *To Unfold One’s Skin*. The unfurling of skin against surfaces suggests not a loss of the body, but rather awareness of the body’s constant contact with the world in which it is embedded.

*To Unfold One’s Skin* deals with distinctions – or, rather our general indistinction from the world to which we belong. While our skin covers our bodies, it does not create a protective barrier to ward off the world. While it gives us some sense of delineation, it only does so while at the same time being penetrable and responsive to its surroundings. Didier Semin considered Penone’s career-long interest in skin in his thoughts about a later work, *Scultura di Linfa* [Sap Sculpture], shown at the 2007 Venice Biennale (Fig. 1.01). While that mature work instigated this reflection, Semin’s overarching ideas point to the potent use Penone continually makes of skin as opening, accepting, the locus of a shared experience. He says,
What we call the ‘skin’ is in part presented as a covering, a boundary, ‘the definition of the body and container of our thoughts,’ ‘the definition of the individual’…For Penone it is neither inert nor waterproof: a boundary between an I and a world that we imagine to be distinct, it is also a space of contact, infinitely sensitive and permeable, through which we are in the world and an integral part of it.\textsuperscript{222}

Semin is in part quoting Penone’s writing and part expanding on a theme that I hope has become the main thread running throughout this chapter. Skin is the visible surface of our belonging to and being-in-the-world.

*To Unfold One’s Skin* shows us how the body touches and is touched. It puts into evidence the reciprocal nature of our lives - the fact that as we go about caressing, grasping, and learning from the things around us, they leave their mark on us in equal measure. How else would we know air from water, earth from rock, dog from handrail than from their force, their grasp upon our surfaces, our skin? As Merleau-Ponty points out,

Between the exploration and what it will teach me, between my movements and what I touch, there must exist some relationship by principle, some kinship, according to which they are not only like the pseudopods of the amoeba, vague and ephemeral deformations of the corporeal space, but the initiation to and the opening upon a tactile world. This can happen only if my hand, while it is felt from within, is also accessible from without, itself tangible, for my other hand, for example, if it takes its place among the things it touches, is in a sense one of them, opens finally upon a tangible being of which it is also a part.\textsuperscript{223}


\textsuperscript{223} Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and The Invisible*, 133.
Each photograph that makes up the entirety of *To Unfold One’s Skin* shows skin making contact with the world. Each image documents a unique place or point of contact, yet there are over 600 such unique images in total. By the same token, although the taking of each photograph was a discrete event, the photographs themselves are easily reproduced. In that sense *To Unfold One’s Skin* easily lends itself to repetition, to dispersal. It is extended into the world, just as we ourselves are. *To Unfold One’s Skin* is a totality of bits and pieces – bits and pieces of skin but also bits and pieces of everything it comes into contact with. It is a kind of dehiscence – to use Merleau-Ponty’s phrase - where Penone shares himself with the world.

Penone’s fascination with exteriority, with surfaces, led him to create *To Unfold One’s Skin* and the act of extending himself as far out into the world as he could. In a way he completed a project he had begun with *Maritime Alps* where he sought to perform that same action by literally grabbing onto tree branches and embracing trunks with this entire body. He went from relying on a sense of belonging to provide him with the security of contact to a more theoretical realization that we are always already outside of ourselves – the very fact that our skin presses up against anything shows how we live relationally. We are affected by all that we engage. Maybe then Penone realized he had gone as far as he could with this exploration. It is telling that *To Unfold One’s Skin* marks a concluding moment in Penone’s career. As the 1980s approached, Penone was less and less interested in showing our fundamental exteriority and more interested in investigating and representing sensations and forms from within the interiors of things.

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224 This ease of repetition and dispersal is especially true of the book form of *To Unfold One’s Skin*. 

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Chapter 6: Conclusion

Much of the writing on Penone in the 1960s and ‘70s attempted to account for his work within the context of Arte Povera, seeing it, that is, in the terms laid out for it by Germano Celant. As I mentioned in Chapter 1, Arte Povera started out in the late 1960s as Celant’s personal vision of a collective and revolutionary artistic practice.\(^{225}\)

Borrowing from the language of militant leftist politics, experimental theater, and environmental activism, Celant wrote that artists were working towards a re-discovery of magic (of reactions and chemical compositions), inexorability (of vegetal growth), precariousness (of materials), ingenuousness (of the senses), violence (of natural places – the desert, the salty lake, the sea, snow, forest), and instability (of biophysical reactions) to discover themselves as instruments of consciousness in possession of a great intuitive understanding of nature.\(^{226}\)

Celant saw the potential for radical new art open to the widest possible variety of natural

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\(^{225}\) The term poor art was partly inspired by the ideas of theater director Jerzy Growtowsky who staged many productions in Italy in the 1960s. Growtowsky wrote a treatise entitled “Towards a Poor Theatre” stressing that contemporary theater must remove all excess and as much simulacrum as possible in order to offer as direct an encounter between the actor and the audience as possible. “Arte Povera: Notes for a Guerilla War,” Celant’s 1967 publication borrowed from Growtowsky’s premise as well as from the vocabulary of protesting youth and militant activists in the highly charged period of the late 60s. Celant also adopted an almost animist attitude about the powers and products of nature, filling his descriptions of art works with elements of magic and alchemy. While Celant was based in Italy and promoted many young artists from Turin, Rome and Milan, his initial premise of Arte Povera included European and American artists.

forms, “poor” materials, and direct engagement with the things of the world. Arte Povera would, like Pop Art and Minimalism, challenge the conventions of tradition and discard with formalities of medium (mostly painting). The distinctions between life and art were to diminish, opening up attempts “to create a subjective understanding of matter and space allowing for an experience of the ‘primary’ energy present in all aspects of life as lived directly and not mediated through representation, ideology or codified languages.” As such, Penone came to be included among a group of artists who were working in an astonishing variety of ways and producing works with little coherence beyond their imposed label.

Celant wrote about Penone as exemplary of Arte Povera’s (desired) goals,

“His search for intertwinings with a stone or a tree, in order that they should bear visual ‘fruit,’ coincides in the history of contemporary art with the need that was felt by European and American artistic communities to find forms and images that are not derived from natural products and materials but are direct results of nature... He manipulates materials, but lets them grow and develop according to their climatic rhythms and flows.

227 Although, unlike Pop Art and Minimalism, Celant stressed an anti-consumerism that accepted and embraced art’s potential not as a commodity but, rather, as an expression of life.

228 Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, Arte Povera (London: Phaidon, 1999), 17.

229 “A cursory glance at the artists’ individual oeuvres proves Celant’s rhetoric of poor materials and unmanipulated objects to be sorely inadequate. If we accept his interpretation, for example, Pascali’s trompe l’oeil weapons made out of found machine parts or Pistoletto’s mirror paintings traced from photographs appear utterly incongruous. Far from eschewing technology and mimetic representation as Celant claims they do, Pistoletto and Pascali deal in artifice, technocracy and theatricality. Even works that do involve natural materials, such as Kounellis’ bale of cotton placed inside a steel container or Merz’s sandbag igloos adorned with neon slogans, manifest a complex awareness of the relationship between nature and technology that contradicts Celant’s definition.” Claire Gilman’s thorough and critical analysis of Celant’s sometimes contradictory definitions and explanations of Arte Povera points to its ambiguity and even failure. See “Introduction: Reconsidering Art Povera,” Arte Povera’s Theatre: Artifice and Anti-Modernism in Italian Art of the 1960s (PhD diss., Columbia University, 2006), 5.
He preserves the dynamism of nature and prolongs its ardour until he finds a maturation where sculpture lives and pulsates, constructing an object of aesthetic investment that is the fruit of the balance between human labour and earthly energy.”

Whether Celant had Penone’s art specifically in mind as he articulated his aims for Arte Povera, it happened that Penone was making work that Celant singled out as explicitly characteristic of the movement’s ideals. These included a deep connection to Italian history, a holistic engagement with natural “energies,” and a body melded with things of the world. When Celant described Penone’s methods as a giving over of himself to his environment, he was offering an example of how an Arte Povera artist should be. Often, Penone’s own descriptions of his early career do not deviate far from the concepts Celant was championing, “My work began in the second part of the 1960s with a decision to work with natural elements - the logical consequence of an idea that rejected the products of society and searched for affinities and connections with materials. Man isn’t spectator or actor but, simply, nature.”

Even though Arte Povera as a movement was declared dead in 1971 it still holds as a historical definition. Exhibitions like “The Knot: Arte Povera at P.S. 1: Giovanni Anselmo, Alighiero Boetti, Pier Paolo Calzolari, Luciano Fabro, Jannis Kounellis, Giulio Paolini, Pino Pascali, Giuseppe Penone, Michelangelo Pistoletto and Gilberto Zorio” and “Zero to Infinity: Arte Povera 1968 – 1972,” mounted by the Walker Art Center and the

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Tate Modern in 2001, have helped to maintain an interest in its historical importance as well as Penone’s prominent role within it. Many critics have challenged the cohesiveness of Arte Povera and have increasingly sought to discuss its artists in isolation, beyond its limits and descriptions.232

Dissatisfied with that interpretive framework, and increasingly aware that the “movement” was united less by a shared set of aesthetic concerns than by practical interests and Celant’s own desire to raise the profile of contemporary Italian art, subsequent critics and historians have tended to treat Penone separately, focusing on what is distinctive about his art, on those concerns running throughout his oeuvre as a whole.233 The danger, however, is the creation of a unity where none exists, and consequently, a tendency to present Penone’s oeuvre as continuous from beginning to end. Critics say things like, “His entire oeuvre emerges out of the darkness of a barely existent ‘contact space’ between hand and surface…Penone shifts the horizons of space and time almost imperceptibly – just enough to illuminate the shadowy realms of

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232 For one example of an art historian rejecting Celant’s framework while exploring a member of the Arte Povera movement, see Christopher G. Bennett, “Substantive Thoughts? The Early Work of Alighiero Boetti,” October 124 (Spring 2008), 76. Bennett sees Boetti’s work as often “at odds” with Celant’s claims and so offers, “an alternative to Germano Celant’s theorizations of the artists production as an art of ‘pure presence’ that is ‘stripped of ambiguity’.”

233 Penone’s oeuvre was judged “steady” by Lisa Liebmann. See “Giuseppe Penone at Salvatore Ala” Art In America (December 1981), 147. Roberto Daolio goes so far as to connect all of his works from the late 1960s through the late ‘80s into “a constant physical and material reappropriation of natural elements.” See “Giuseppe Penone: i confine del vedere e del sentire sono dilatabili oltre la misura codificata dai sensi,” Flash Art Italian edition, n. 155 (April/May 1990), 127. Luisa Perlo called him “an artist of extreme consistency, keeping himself at a distance from trends and market pressures.” See “Giuseppe Penone: Sotto il segno dell’arte povera,” Arte 322 (June 2000), 120.
immediacy…” Perhaps creating a total narrative for Penone’s oeuvre means being able to forgo a discussion of Celant’s sometimes contradictory and utopian descriptions of Arte Povera and, in a way, separate Penone from that “movement.”

If I have focused exclusively on Penone’s early work – projects dating to the late 1960s and ‘70s – it has been less with a view to re-situate him within the context of Arte Povera than to show how different his early works are from the later ones, how fundamentally separate their concerns. If a bit too vague, the claims made for Penone’s early work on behalf of Arte Povera accord far better with the work than do many of the interpretations offered subsequently. Still, I am, on the whole, less interested in re-instating the old interpretive framework of Arte Povera than I am in pointing up the essential differences between Penone’s early projects and much of his more recent production. If the tendency has been to see his oeuvre as a whole, it is that continuity that this dissertation aims to challenge, by insisting on the fundamental difference between his early works and more recent production.

Penone’s work from the late 1970s and since has tended towards a kind of nouveau romanticism, in which individuality and its expression are paramount. *Nero assoluto d’Africa [Absolute Black of Africa]*, 1978-79 is a block of black granite into which Penone sculpted a negative image of the back of his own body (Fig 84). This utterly

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235 At times Celant takes Penone’s interest in nature to an extreme and his hyperbolic writing can meander off course. For example, he writes “Penone gives carnal density to nature, it infuses it with a formal blood or lymph that re-awakens and remoulds it. He suggests an almost sexual relationship.” Celant, *Giuseppe Penone*, 1978, 267.
strange work was initially exhibited with *Gourds*, 1978-79, pairing cast shapes of his face molded in squash with the negative space of a figure inside a massive block of stone. In the work, it is as if the artist is walking away from an audience and into the sculpture. His back is turned, we do not see his face and he leaves us with nothing but a “fossil.”\textsuperscript{236}

Works about sight from the 1990s include *Trappole di Luce* [*Light Trap*] and *Sguardo vegetale* [*Vegetal Gaze*] (Fig. 85). Penone’s eyes become the location for an extension out into space. Glass branches and living trees stand in for sight. The works suggest a kind of vision that emanates from within and expands outward, proposing the artist’s vision as generative of the world.\textsuperscript{237} In *Spazio di Luce* [*Space of Light*], 2008, Penone has taken a section of lumber, carved out its central core, thereby creating a negative of the tree, and then added a layer of dark red resin to the bottom of the hole (Fig. 86). It is physically difficult to see the work, as spectators have to gingerly look over the top of the object while balancing themselves, or else crouch down and try to peer through some of the emptied-out knotholes in order to see the resin. The work emphasizes an interiority that is mysterious and difficult to access.


\textsuperscript{237} “In the series titled *Sguardo vegetale* [*Vegetal Gaze*], begun in 1995, Penone made a direct comparison between seeing and vegetation. ‘The way a branch expands through space has the same structure as sight,’ he writes in 1994, anticipating with that thought later works created by mixing, yet again, man-made elements with natural ones from the plant world. Photoceramic plaques bearing a detail of his face, framed so as to emphasize the eyes, are attached to plants. Two holes replace the pupils, and are pierced by branches, which then expand through space in their search for light.” Daniela Lancioni, “Sight,” in *Giuseppe Penone*, ed. Laurant Busine (New Haven and London: Mercatorfonds and Yale University Press, 2012), 132.
The latest incarnation of *Spazio di Luce [Space of Light]*, 2012, commissioned by the Whitechapel Gallery, demonstrates a fixation on an inside that was once an outside (Fig. 1.04). Inspired by the 1969 work *The years of the tree plus one*, where the artist added a layer of wax with his fingers to the exterior of a tree branch, this latest work also shows a tree covered with fingerprints. But there are stark differences. The recent work is actually a gold-lined bronze casting of a larch tree. Six separate hollow sections of the tree are displayed in a gallery where viewers can peer into the tree’s “inside.” What viewers see is what was once the tree’s exterior, now made interior. Where the wax of *The years of the tree plus one* had made Penone’s touch both palpable and structurally homologous with the tree’s bark, suggesting that it too was simply the foremost aspect of his extension into the world, the casting and gold-lining of the later *Space of Light* suggests an interior surprisingly different from the face it presents to the world. William Corwin has described the differences between the two works this way:

> What was in 1969 a spontaneous, messy, cheap, and irreverent landmark of the Arte Povera movement has become a luxurious and static shining tunnel of light. It feels a bit as if the roles in the Garden of Eden have been reversed. A yearning mortal being—longing to engage somehow the beauty of creation, the Tree of Life—has now become the deity; it is the same piece, inverted.²³⁸

Another commentator has suggested apropos of *Space of Light* that “Penone perceives that we are both in thrall to nature and terrified of it; organically bound to its rhythms yet constantly struggling to escape them…his sentiments gesture at a neo-romantic awe that

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summon the ghosts of Friedrich and Turner.”

As I have tried to argue, the early works were radically different. Indeed they seem to have been aimed precisely at subverting a whole set of oppositions – human being versus nature, self versus world, subjectivity versus objectivity, inner versus outer – that the later works actively reinstate. Over the past decade or two the subjective inner world appears to have become Penone’s preferred (and most popular) theme. *Space of Light* is only the latest and most obvious demonstration of this discord with the past.

There is a story about Penone observing a sculpture class during his years at art school in Turin. As he watched the instructor mold a piece of clay with his hands, Penone suddenly saw the possibility of an inverse concept of sculpture. The object might be construed as the negative to a positive that included not only the instructor’s hands but also all the world around the unformed clay. This moment, whether apocryphal or not, can been seen as fundamentally formative to Penone’s thinking about subverting oppositions and creating sculpture that would make itself out of indistinction, reversibility, exteriority, and openness or exposure to the world.

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240 Penone himself talks about *Space of Light* not for what is there, but for what the materials and form suggest. The gold leaf interior is representative of light and the experience of sun hitting the tree. The tree’s branches, cut so that the trunk could be self-supporting, conjure up images of legs. Penone says the branches supporting the trunk make the tree like an animal and so evoke a merging of the animal and vegetal. See Whitechapel Gallery, “The Bloomberg Commission: Giuseppe Penone: Spazio di Luce.” September 4, 2012. Directed by Martin Hampton. http://www.whitechapelgallery.org/exhibitions/the-bloomberg-commission-giuseppe-penone-spazio-di-luce
The earliest of the works to follow, *Maritime Alps*, might be construed as simply being *about* the fundamental lack of separation between human being and nature, self and world. The various parts of that work presented nature as the active agent, folding Penone into its embrace, to the point that the two became indistinguishable. In his working notes to *The Visible and the Invisible*, Maurice Merleau-Ponty asserted that “every relation with being is simultaneously a taking and a being taken, the hold is held, it is inscribed and inscribed in the same being that it takes hold of.” Like *It Will Grow…*, he seems to have wanted to call our attention to the way that, as our thought reaches out to grasp the world, it simultaneously discovers itself already within the world’s grip.

*If Maritime Alps* focused on the blurring of distinctions between the actions of man and nature, the early *Trees* take on a subversion of oppositions. Man-made lumber reverts to its natural form, indeed to an earlier, even primordial state of being. Importantly, nothing is *expressed* in these works – or *all* that is “expressed” or exposed is exteriority. The tree is wholly comprised of its earlier “outsides.” There is no hidden meaning to be interpreted here: the work engages in a pure (sculptural) self-showing, the wood simply revealing itself to be the thing that it is.

*To Reverse One’s Eyes* (which Penone has emphatically stated is a *sculptural* project) is similar to *Trees* in that all it expresses or exposes is what Penone would have seen were he not wearing the mirrored contact lenses. His “interior” vision is made to appear on the surface of the contacts, ex-posted to view. In a sense, the work does nothing.

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more or other than concretize the “reversibility” of vision. Rather than imagining a constitutive subjectivity surveying the world in isolation, *To Reverse One’s Eyes* places before us a very different understanding: that, for each of us, there is always another (more or less analogous to myself) to whom I am addressed.

Like both *Maritime Alps* and *To Reverse One’s Eyes*, *To Unfold One’s Skin* underscores the way that we are *not* monadic entities “in here,” but are instead constantly open or ex-posed to the world. In it, human being is presented as the *Trees*: as exteriority (our skin, like the tree’s surface, being but the foremost plane in our continual contact with the world). In *To Reverse One’s Eyes*, all sense of “subjective interiority” has been evacuated – Penone’s “self” made wholly visible, open to inspection. Again the resonance between this work and the ideas of Merleau-Ponty is palpable. “What is constitutive of the subject,” Merleau-Ponty declared, “is to be integrally with the things, with the world, to have no positively assignable interior, to be *generality*.”

Again, the fundamentally phenomenological concerns shared by Penone’s early works (exemplified by the four projects on which I’ve focused) mark them as radically different from the artist’s later and ongoing projects. As I mentioned in the introduction, I am unable to point to any specific reason why Penone came to see his work in such a substantially different way. Speculation can only get us so far, but it is worth noting two possibilities. First, Penone’s early works were largely unmarketable. Much of what he created, despite its fundamentally sculptural character and concerns, was accessed solely

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through photographic documentation. Photographic documentation was not, as yet, recognized as the commodity it would become in the following decades. As I mentioned in Chapter 3, two of Penone’s early Tree projects were sold almost immediately upon exhibition, which may have led him to focus increasingly thereafter on making materially available objects.

It is also possible that Penone’s interest in making works about the fundamental lack of distinction between human being and nature, self and world was too extreme a challenge to the way we normally organize oppositions. The artist’s requirement that we undo deeply established, and tenacious, ideas about sight and touch and how we approach works of art was, perhaps, too onerous an undertaking. Uncanny sensations, an undermining of the idea of a monadic self, and the constant emphasis on exteriority might have been too much of an obstacle in the face of the allure of an artist’s ability to reveal the hidden and magical life of his materials.

The later works hint at meanings that the interpreter must somehow try to bring to light by accessing imagination, mythology, and symbolism – all things that the early works not only avoid but even seem to refute. Penone’s recent work is made on the model of art as expression (of some purportedly interior, subjective vision), whereas Maritime Alps, Trees, To Reverse One’s Eyes, and To Unfold One’s Skin are in some sense all exteriority. And what those call for is not so much interpretation as description: an attentiveness to what is there before our eyes. Those works aim not to invoke the subjective or the unseen, but simply to have us see them for the kinds of things that they – and we with them – really are.
Appendix: Figures

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Fig. 4.02
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