

ALBISSOLA AND THE INTERNATIONAL AVANT-GARDE:
CERAMIC ART, DESIGN AND ACTIVITY (1929-1963)

Two Volumes

Volume I

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ABSTRACT

The coastal town of Albissola Marina has been the site of traditional ceramics production since the thirteenth century. During the twentieth century however Albissola became a prosperous hub for avant-garde ceramic art, design and activity. It's two central ceramics factories - the Mazzotti Factory and San Giorgio - attracted a large number of international artists and figures during this period, including Asger Jorn, Lucio Fontana, Wifredo Lam, Piero Manzoni, Enrico Baj, and movements such as Futurism, CoBrA, Nuclear Art and the Situationist International. They all experimented with clay in avant-garde ways, resulting in the production of some the most innovative and unorthodox ceramics of the twentieth century.

This thesis is the first scholarly study which demonstrates Albissola was a centre for avant-garde artist production during the twentieth century. It responds to an overwhelming lack of scholarship by examining the most vibrant and artistically revolutionary periods in Albissola, seeking to understand why artists were so interested in ceramics as an art form and why Albissola was such an attractive place to work. In answer to these two fundamental questions, this thesis combines original object-based research and fresh document analysis to explore some of the most important works of ceramic art created by artists in Albissola. This thesis hones in on the ways in which individual artists responded to ceramics using the various lenses of religion, mythology, technology, industry, artistic collaboration and collective activity, demonstrating that Albissola should be recognised as an important site of twentieth century ceramics, art and design.

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AUTHOR'S DECLARATION

In accordance with the requirements for the presentation of theses and dissertations, I hereby record that this thesis contains no material which: (1) has been submitted previously for any other academic award, and (2) has been submitted previously at the University of York or any other academic institution. This thesis is the product of the author's individual and sole research; it is not part of a collaborative project and no other individual has contributed to its content. This thesis does not contain any work which has been published elsewhere, in any format, prior to its submission for examination. All sources are acknowledged as references.

INTRODUCTION

Albissola Marina is a small coastal commune located within the Province of Savona, west of Genoa in Italy [Fig. 1].¹ During the Renaissance period, Albissola was a flourishing centre for majolica production and continued to produce increasingly distinctive pottery in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Important Italian families in the pottery business, such as the Grosso, Chiodo, Pescio, Levantino, to name a few, produced large quantities of polychrome plates, albarelli and vases inspired by silverware and contemporary Delftware.² In the late eighteenth century the principal potter in Albissola was Giacomo Boselli, who produced ceramics of yellow, olive green and turquoise colours. Wares were decorated in a calligraphic style with an emphasis on naturalistic motifs which later evolved into Baroque forms painted with soft, loose brushstrokes.

Albissola is particularly renowned for its production of ‘Decorum Antico Savona’, a style characterised by the decoration of dark blue figures in biblical and mythological scenes on white majolica [Fig. 2]. It was introduced by the Guidobono family in the sixteenth century to attract trade to the region. Since then, ‘Antico Savona’ is widely appreciated for its commercial rather than artistic value. This was first supported by Albert Jacquemart in his seminal, if now outdated, *History of the Ceramic Art* from 1873 in which he notes: “the region manufactured enormously [...] but, it was essentially a commercial fabric, in which blue camaïeu pervades, and where the traditions of high art rarely show themselves.”³ Today, Albissola is recognised as an important and historic site of traditional ceramics production, with ‘Antico Savona’ still being produced in many of its independent ceramics workshops, studios and ateliers.⁴

¹ It should be noted that there are two places in this geographic region called “Albissola Marina” and “Albisola Superiore”. This thesis refers to “Albissola Marina” throughout, as this is where the majority of the artistic activity took place, and therefore uses the spelling ‘Albissola’ rather than ‘Albisola’.

² Albarelli is plural for a type of maiolica earthenware jar, originally a medicinal jar designed to hold apothecaries' ointments and dry drugs. The development of this type of pharmacy jar had its roots in the Middle East during the time of the Islamic conquests. In the thirteenth century, ceramics production in Albissola and Savona were also heavily influenced by Middle Eastern designs, specifically in the making of tiles and mosaics.

³ Albert Jacquemart, *History of Ceramic Art*. (S.l.: Book on Demand Ltd, 2015), 308; Viana Conti et al., *Presenza di artisti degli anni ottanta nelle fornaci Albisolesi* (Albisola Marina: Museo d'arte contemporanea, 1986).

⁴ For further information on the development of this style of provincial ceramics see: Maria Signorile, *L'arte della ceramica a Savona e Albisola* (Cairo [Montenotte: L. Editrice, 2011]); Cecilia Chilosi, Eliana Mattiauda, and Civici musei Savona (Italy), *Museo Della Ceramica*,

Whilst Albissola is renowned for this traditional style of ceramics, during the twentieth century the town became an international hub for some of the most important and influential avant-garde artists at the time. From the late twenties to early sixties, it attracted a number of artists, including the Futurists, Lucio Fontana, Asger Jorn, Wifredo Lam, Piero Manzoni and Roberto Sebastian Matta, as well as international movements such as Spatialism, Nuclear Art, Situationist International and CoBrA, all of whom travelled to Albissola to experiment with ceramics. At two of the town's central ceramics factories, the Mazzotti Factory and the San Giorgio, artists explored new techniques with clay, incorporated fantastical and political subject matters into their work and produced new ceramic designs. Artists adopted unconventional methods and used clay in the same ways as paint or plaster, for smearing, sculpting, smudging, stomping on and even, as is evident in the work of the Danish artist Asger Jorn, using a motorcycle as a tool.

The methods adopted by these artists produced some of the most innovative and controversial ceramics of the twentieth century. In spite of this, no scholarship has attempted to explore this vibrant period in Albissola. Existing scholarship is overwhelmingly outdated and focuses either on the town's socio-geographical importance – principally as a site of trade, agriculture and fishing - or, as briefly described earlier, as a site of 'Antico Savona' production.⁵ Not only does this scholarship ignore the fact that Albissola was an important site of ceramic experimentation during the twentieth century, but, more specifically, scholarship fails to recognise Albissola as an important site of avant-garde artistic production.

Some recent exhibitions have introduced Albissola as a place of interest for avant-garde artists. In 2012, Lucio Fontana's early ceramics were included in the Gagosian exhibition 'Lucio Fontana: Ambienti Spaziali' as well as more recently in his exposition at Musee d'Art Moderne (2014) and the group show 'La Mia Ceramica' at Galerie Max Hetzler (2016) in

2015; 'Museo Della Ceramica (Savona)', *Museo Della Ceramica (Savona)*, n.d., <http://www.museodellaceramica.savona.it/>. The Museo della ceramica in Savona houses some of the most extensive collections of ceramics from this region, and its website is an excellent resource.

⁵ For a socio-historical context of ceramics production from the thirteenth century to eighteenth century, see Federico Marzinot, *Ceramica e ceramisti in Liguria* (Genova: Sagep, 1987); Cecilia Chilosi and Eliana Mattiauda, *Bianco-blu: cinque secoli di grande ceramica in Liguria* (Milano: Skira, 2004).

Paris.⁶ The latter strove to compare Fontana's ceramics to his sculpture of the same period, highlighting the fact that Fontana created many of his ceramics in Albissola, which consequently attracted many more artists to the town during this period. However, questions about whether or not Albissola was an important place for Fontana, and how Albissola may or may not have impacted his broader artistic practice and the work of other artists during this period, remain unanswered.

The recent exposition of Wifredo Lam at Tate Modern (2016) dedicated an entire room to Lam's artistic production in Albissola during the later years of the artist's life. The exhibition catalogue evidences Lam's time in Albissola through a series of photographs depicting his interaction with other artists.⁷ Furthermore, the 'Albissola years' were well documented online. In a lengthy memoir, Lam's son Eskil recalls how Albissola "was a hub of excitement, activity and artistic exchange" and "a place of meetings between friends, artists, writers, poets, all in lively discussion – a place of true creativity."⁸ Eskil's comments demonstrate that Albissola was an important place for artists during this period, yet the specifics of this exchange are uncertain: what sort of place was Albissola, what were the artistic exchanges that took place and who was there? These are the fundamental questions that form the basis of this thesis.

This thesis is the first scholarly attempt to examine ceramic art, design and activity in Albissola in the twentieth century. It contributes to scholarship in the first instance by providing such a resource, and secondly by arguing that Albissola should be recognised as an important site of artistic production in the twentieth century. This thesis examines Albissola as a popular site for artists and how their activity generated ideas surrounding art production, value, authorship and materiality that were not only in keeping with broader discussions surrounding 'fine art' at the time, but continue to be crucial questions for contemporary ceramic artists, practitioners and scholars of modern ceramic art. As well as arguing that Albissola was an important place of artistic activity, this thesis stresses that the relationship

⁶ Lucio Fontana et al., *Lucio Fontana - Sculpture: [... Accompanies the Exhibition Lucio Fontana: Ceramics ... at the Aspen Art Museum, July 27 - October 7, 2012]* (Aspen, Colo.: Aspen Art Museum, 2012); Choghakate Kazarian et al., *Lucio Fontana: retrospective : [exposition, Paris], Musée d'art moderne de la Ville de Paris, [25 avril-24 août 2014]* (Paris: Paris musées, 2014), 201; Eline Thirion Berg and Edmund De Waal, *La Mia Ceramica. Lynda Benglis [Und 13 Andere]* (Berlin: Holzwarth Publications, 2016).

⁷ Wifredo Lam et al., *The EY Exhibition: Wifredo Lam*, 2016.

⁸ 'Wifredo Lam: The Albissola Years', accessed 27 April 2017, <http://www.tate.org.uk/context-comment/articles/wifredo-lam-albissola-years>.

between handmade and industrial methods of ceramics production was an important point of contention for artists in Albissola. This was particularly pertinent to artists working in Albissola during the post-war period, when craft played a fundamental role in shaping the phenomenon of Italian design. During this period, the ‘handmade’ crafts, such as ceramics, glass, textiles and furniture, remained constant reference points for Italy’s architects, producers, commentators and consumers and was vital to the success of post-war Italian design.

This thesis will address the following key questions. Firstly, why were so many influential artists of this period attracted to Albissola and, more specifically, its ceramics production? What were their specific intentions in travelling to Albissola to make ceramics? Secondly, what sorts of ceramics did they produce and how did they go about making them? In other words, what designs, artistic processes and methods did individual artists and movements employ to produce their work? Furthermore, what does this tell us about the specific artistic relationship that existed between ceramics and fine art during this period? Finally, what are the broader implications of this study? Did critics at the time respond to these works as ‘fine art’ or ‘craft’, or neither? Does this case study of Albissola support or muddy the idea that the relationship between ceramics and fine art during this period was one of discord?

It is important to highlight that this thesis has approached this topic from an Anglo-American perspective. Owing to the author not being an Italian native, nor speaker, a large amount of the literature chosen for the introduction and premise of the thesis’ larger questions concerning ceramic art and practice have focused on writings by Anglo-American art historians and critics such as Garth Clark and Clement Greenberg. This thesis does not ignore the importance of the Italian art historical perspective, but attempts to explore Albissola within a larger, global context of ceramic practice during this period. In doing so, it is hoped that Albissola will become more familiar to non-Italian readers and scholars as a significant place of ceramic production.

This thesis has approached this topic with a multi- and interdisciplinary perspective. It has profited from the application of methodologies deriving from the different fields of history, ceramic-, art-, applied art-, design and architectural history and from information obtained from economic and naval histories to tourist guides. This has enabled on the one hand to situate the ceramic manufacturing sector and the objects made in Albissola within their socio-historical, economic and cultural framework and on the other to challenge dominant ideas

within contemporary design-, art-, craft- and ceramic history. It should also be noted that although these questions have been designed with the particularities of Albissola, they also serve to raise issues that have a relevance beyond this site, making their exploration useful for those studying the relationship between ceramics, art and design in diverse forms within this period and in others.

In order that this thesis can discuss what was produced in Albissola, by whom, and why, it must first contextualise some of the wider debates which surrounded ceramics production during the twentieth century. This overview will not only highlight the most important issues concerning ceramics practice during this period, but will introduce the pertinent questions of why artists were drawn to ceramics as a form of art practice and why Albissola was such an attractive place to visit. While this thesis focuses on ceramics produced by artists in Albissola, another key factor to consider is the broader identity of Albissola as a *place* of artistic production. An exploration of whether Albissola can be considered an artist colony, specifically in relation to other artist colonies of the twentieth century, will shed light on the importance of ‘place’ in ceramic art production in Albissola.

The status of ceramics

The most significant debate that underpinned ceramics production during the twentieth century was whether ceramics should be considered art or craft. This debate, which has circled among practitioners, scholars and critics of both art and craft since the mid-nineteenth century, is now widely considered outdated and almost irrelevant to contemporary ceramics practitioners and scholars. Today, ceramics are widely recognised and understood as objects that can bridge the gap between fine art and craft and forge new theoretical discussions.⁹ But during the twentieth century, ceramics were largely considered as craft, made by potters or ceramicists, who were understood as craftsmen rather than artists. While the history of ceramics as craft is not central to the main argument of this thesis, it nevertheless belongs to

⁹ There is a whole body of literature dedicated to reinserting craft into aesthetic and theoretical discussions, in which writers such as Louise Mazanti, Jenni Sorkin, Tanya Harrod and Glenn Adamson are principal leads in the field. See Glenn Adamson, *The Invention of Craft* (Oxford: Berg, 2013); Glenn Adamson, *Thinking through Craft*, 2013; Glenn Adamson, *The Craft Reader*, 2016; Jenni Sorkin, *Live Form: Women, Ceramics, and Community*, 2017; Tanya Harrod, *The Crafts in Britain in the 20th Century* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1999); Tanya Harrod et al., *Paradise Postponed: William Morris in the Twentieth Century* (London: Crafts Council, 1996).

the history and literature of ceramics of this period and therefore cannot be ignored. For the main purposes of this thesis, a few essential points with regards to ceramics and the terms ‘art’ and ‘craft’ therefore need to be clarified.

The words ‘art’ and ‘craft’ have never really been clearly defined and their meanings often change with time and context. For many decades the major debate within the craft world has been to do with the status of the word itself. For example, craft used to have the alternative meaning of crafty, as in the craft of the burglar or the thief. Johnson’s English dictionary of 1773 gives craft amongst other things as ‘fraud, cunning, artifice.’ For this reason, the word ‘craft’ has historically been interpreted as inferior or second-class to ‘art’. An underlying thread that runs through the word and practice of ‘craft’ centres around *use*, which also adds to the meaning of craft as something which is substandard to art. As Rob Banard argues, “the structure of crafts, that element that make its form, method, and material interact as a whole and separates it from other structures like painting and sculpture, is use.”¹⁰ Ceramic forms such as the teapot, cup, bowl and pot for example each have specific functions that fulfil and serve our daily lives. The fact that these objects are born out of a specialist, and often technical know-how to produce them, coupled with the fact that they have a function, has meant that makers of ceramics have traditionally been considered craftsmen and denied the status of artist.

During the twentieth century, the autonomy of fine art and its insistence on the unique rather than the uniform became an affirmation of the artists’ individuality in the face of an impersonal, mass-marketplace. Craft, by contrast, returned people to the realm of necessity, where workers spent hours toiling in order to survive. This essentially created a presumed unbridgeable gulf between art, which came from the artist’s personal vision and existed solely for aesthetic contemplation, and craft, for which utility trumped originality and, as the old adage goes, form followed function. As Suzanne Foley has argued in relation to the West Coast ceramics scene in the 1950s, “craft served the body, art served the soul: one arose out of necessity, the other out of freedom.”¹¹

For these reasons, ceramics held an ambivalent position in the twentieth century art world. In particular, it held a marginalised position in relation to Modernism, one of the major art

¹⁰ M. Anna Fariello and Paula Owen, *Objects and Meanings New Perspectives on Art and Craft* (Plymouth: Scarecrow Press, 2005), 64.

¹¹ William R Hackman, *Out of Sight: The Los Angeles Art Scene of the Sixties*, 2015, 68.

movements of the century. Its lack of mobility in terms of its physical ties to kiln, studio and local materials, its frequent provincial expression and commitment to ‘craft’ processes and, if even symbolic, functional forms, meant that during the twentieth century, ceramics were widely considered “not well placed to participate strongly in volatile, international avant-garde art movements.”¹² Within the formalist rubrics of Greenberg’s Modernism, art and craft adhered to the strict hierarchy of ‘high’ and ‘low’ art. ‘Fine art’ held a privileged position in the hierarchies of social practices. In this regard, artists considered themselves part of an avant-garde in which they saw their role as one of cultural leadership. In contrast, craft practitioners, which included potters, ceramicists and ceramic manufacturers, occupied a less significant and marginalised cultural order.

Thus, during the twentieth century, ceramics occupied a twofold position. As a practice, ceramics could either embrace ‘low’ culture by aligning itself with the mass productive potential of industrial capitalism, as Susie Cooper (1902-1995) did in England during the 1930s; or, at the other end, ceramics could reject the realities of industrial capitalism altogether. This was the case with British studio ceramicist Bernard Leach (1887-1979), who, in the 1950s, saw industrial capitalism as a force which negated individual creativity and produced an alienated psyche. Leach proposed that craft, in the form of ‘studio ceramics’, attached itself to the aesthetic of ‘high’ art in that it produced bespoke, and not necessarily useful, ceramics.

In recent years, writers and theorists have attempted to develop the notion of ‘craft’ by using the word as a verb, not a noun. As Glenn Adamson put it in an interview with American Craft Council, “there is no reason we have to categorise mugs – or tables, sculptures, buildings, anything at all – as craft or otherwise. It’s what people do, not the objects they make, that ought to be categorised.”¹³ Similarly, in “Super-Objects: craft as an aesthetic position,” Louise Mazanti proposes that craft as a practice can be thought of as essentially avant-gardist in its aims to bring art and life together. In craft, Mazanti argues, “there is a potential that has not yet been fully realised [which] constitutes an unrecognised category of cultural practice

¹² Garth Clark, Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, and Press, *Ceramic Millennium: Critical Writings on Ceramic History, Theory and Art* (Halifax, N.S.: Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 2006), 93.

¹³ ‘Can a Mass-Produced Object Be Craft?’, *American Craft Council*, accessed 27 January 2018, <https://craftcouncil.org/magazine/article/can-mass-produced-object-be-craft>.

when seen in the light of the avant-garde efforts to reconcile the split between art and life.”¹⁴ Mazanti uses the concept of the “privileged aesthetic object” to develop this argument, calling upon the need to combine two theoretical approaches – material culture studies of everyday objects and social relations, and the avant-garde theoretical approach to the relation between art and life.

To illustrate this theoretical position, Mazanti uses the Arts and Crafts Movement as a key example of a movement using craft as an avant-garde practice. Mazanti discusses how one of the main aims of the movement was its rejection of the increasing autonomy of visual art, a concept influenced by German Idealism and the writings of Immanuel Kant who categorised aesthetic knowledge as a separate, privileged field of knowledge. This aesthetic knowledge, which gradually manifested in the concept of “art for art’s sake”: a focus on the internal, formal premises of art, originated in early Modernist movements such as Impressionism.¹⁵ Meanwhile, the Arts and Crafts Movement was based on the idea that autonomy is incompatible with a social responsibility. It was born out of a concern for the effects of industrialisation: on design, on traditional skills and on the lives of ordinary people. In response, the movement established a new set of principles for living and working. It advocated the reform of art at every level and across a broad social spectrum, including turning the home into a work of art and the complete integration of art and everyday life through the organisation of utopian art colonies around the globe.¹⁶ The Arts and Crafts Movement attempted to reintegrate the art into life praxis by adding beauty and pleasure to the objects of everyday life, as well as the very process by which they were produced – a corrective to the Industrial Revolution’s alienation of the worker that William Morris had learned from the writings of Karl Marx.

¹⁴ Maria Elena Buszek, *Extra/Ordinary: Craft and Contemporary Art* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 73.

¹⁵ Slogan from the early 19th century, “l’art pour l’art” expresses a philosophy that the intrinsic value of art, and the only “true” art, is divorced from any didactic, moral, or utilitarian function. Walter Benjamin discusses the slogan in his seminal 1936 essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”. He first mentions it in regard to the reaction within the realm of traditional art to innovations in reproduction, in particular photography. He even terms the “l’art pour l’art” slogan as part of a “theology of art” in bracketing off social aspects. Thus, the slogan is often associated with Modern art because of its internal, psychological focus on art rather than on the bodily or senses.

¹⁶ Four of these art colonies have been included in this exhibition, including Darmstadt, Germany; C. R. Ashbee’s Guild of the Handicraft in Britain; Gödöllo, Hungary; and the Roycrofters of East Aurora, New York.

Peter Bürger's seminal work *Theory of the Avant-Garde* bypassed the Arts and Crafts movement, determining avant-gardism as an artistic practice that was an (even anti-) aesthetic, non-instrumental, and clearly subversive, phenomenon.¹⁷ Modernism, for its part, "defied affirmative instrumentalism by fully unfolding as l'art pour l'art."¹⁸ Both were artistic lines that opposed everything that craft stood for. Along the way, artistic forms perceived as craft, such as ceramics, were excluded from this early avant-garde position, ending up in the shadows of Modernism where one finds it now, struggling with a muddled identity. Mazanti thus posits that art that has aesthetic value but is tied to daily function, such as ceramics, serves to bridge the gap between everyday life and the art world, just as the avant-garde artists had attempted to do so during the early part of the twentieth century. Therefore, if ceramics as an avant-garde practice originated in an ideological climate that placed great importance on the friction between art and life, then ceramics can be understood as having original avant-garde intentions.¹⁹

Taking its point of departure in both Bürger and Mazanti's theories, this thesis analyses the history of Albissola during the twentieth century as an example of how its ceramics production could be integrated or transformed into social and community practice. One of the most obvious ways in which artists reconciled the split between art and life was to live, work and produce ceramics in Albissola for both aesthetic and utilitarian value. In other words, the

¹⁷ Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (Minneapolis, Minn.: University of Minnesota Press, 2011). Bürger made an influential contribution to this discussion by defining the critical mission of the "historical" avant-gardes as a will to "reintegrate art into the practice of life". For movements such as Futurism, Dada, Surrealism, Russian constructivism, fusing art with life was partly a reaction to the dandyism of 'the art for art's sake' aestheticism, and partly a move to counter the anti-technological stance of literary modernism. Embracing new technologies of media and mobility, such as photography, the cinema, the motor-car and aeroplanes (and everything else that was 'resolutely modern'), avant-garde artists like Marinetti, Tristan Tsara, Hans Richter, André Breton, Vladimir Mayakowski and Dziga Vertov wanted to shorten the distance between 'art' and 'life': usually by (a form of) direct activism that involved group movements and manifestos, but also by happenings, the provocation of chance, and the productivity of coincidence. Key techniques were montage and collage, i.e. techniques derived from engineering, but now applied in the arts, as the combination of seemingly unrelated elements or materials, the calling up of random associations, the incorporation of the ordinary and the everyday into the art-work, or by verbal and physical attacks on the institution of art itself.

¹⁸ Buszek, *Extra/Ordinary*, 75.

¹⁹ For a more detailed debate concerning the differences between "Modernism" and "avant-garde", and discussion of Peter Bürger's position, see Walter Adamson, *Embattled Avant-Gardes: Modernism's Resistance to Commodity Culture in Europe* (Berkeley [u.a.: Univ. of California Press, 2007), 17–20.

essential point of travelling to Albissola was, for many artists, to be part of a community of artists working with clay.

The idea of bringing ‘art into life’ was central to the artistic practice of one of Albissola’s main protagonists, the Danish artist Asger Jorn. As this thesis will discuss in more detail in chapters three and four, the idea of art as a communal and social practice was central to Jorn’s ethos as an artist. Jorn believed in the concept that everything had the potential to be art and that every aspect of life could be approached creatively and could be an extension of an artistic practice. He was particularly inspired by the Arts and Crafts principle of communal expression and social art-making. For Jorn, creating ceramics was not necessarily an individualistic pursuit, but a social event that could bring artists together in their everyday lives to not only create new work with aesthetic merit but establish new artistic dialogues and networks, thus redefining the ‘everyday’ function of ceramics as having a social or communal element. Jorn’s strategy in Albissola was to rupture the divide between ‘high’ and ‘low’ art forms and reconcile the separation between art and life through a collective approach to ceramics production.

To develop this point further, this thesis needs to address the specific reasons why avant-garde artists were attracted to ceramics as an art form and why Albissola was such an ideal place to produce them. As this thesis will demonstrate over the course of its four chapters, one of the fundamental threads that runs through each chapter is that artists and movements travelled to Albissola to experiment and create forms with clay. In other words, it wasn’t necessarily about creating traditional vessels, although in some cases they did so for practical, rather than artistic reasons, but that it was the essential materiality of ceramics that interested them. Before this thesis can begin to explore the ceramics which were produced during this period, it must first explain what exactly clay is, its origins and the physical properties that made it such an attractive material to artists in Albissola.

For centuries, clay has been used to make all manner of things. From bricks, buildings, pots, musical instruments, paper making, cement production, tobacco pipes, engineering, medicinal purposes and even sling ammunition, the list goes on. As a material, it can be gritty and earthy inviting a vigorous, robust response, but it can also have a smooth, silky quality that lends itself to a delicate touch. It has many colours that come from the minerals in the clays themselves or from the slips and glazes that coat the pots and make them rough or smooth, matt or shiny. Clay is all around us, it is relatively cheap and one can make just about any

kind of form with it. It can be used as a liquid, as a soft, malleable material, or can join it together in a leather-hard state. Painter, sculptor, craftsman, artist – a potter can be a little of all these – geologist, chemist, engineer, even businessman as well, and each individual or group will approach the clay accordingly. Some ceramicists delve deeply into the chemical and physical structure of their clay, while others simply take it straight out of the bag and use it without a thought for its composition or origin.²⁰

Clay is a raw material found abundantly all over the world because the granite-type igneous rocks from which they ultimately derive account for most of the earth's crust. The China clays of St Austell in Cornwall for example are white, free from impurities, large in particle size and therefore relatively 'non-plastic'. When clays are transported by the natural forces of wind, glaciers, rivers or seas, they pick up impurities like iron and other minerals as well as much organic matter. Their journey pounds, crushes, and further weathers them, until by the time they are finally laid down, they are changed in colour, texture and particle size. They have become what ceramicists term 'plastic'. The plasticity of clay is still something of a mystery, but clay's particles hold water between them, and like sheets of wet glass, they allow movement. As the water dries out they stop sliding and go rigid. So clay retains its shape, even when it is fired to a red heat as it undergoes a chemical and physical change to become a relatively hard and durable material.

Although some ceramicists only fire once, known as 'raw firing', the generally accepted procedure that they take is as follows: prepare the clay body; make the form; thoroughly dry it out, fire it to 'biscuit', glaze it and fire it again. Decoration can come in at any of these stages, even after the second firing (when another firing will be necessary to fix the decoration on the glaze, e.g. enamels). When the size of the work increases, clay becomes increasingly complex, hazardous and difficult to manipulate. Not only is the drying time extensive, but the metamorphosis of the material brought on by firing (which often takes a full week for each piece or part of a piece), shrinks, warps and distorts the shape, and finally, modulates and transforms the surface colouration. What may happen during firing is often completely unpredictable; months of labour may even be lost by fragmentation in the kiln.

²⁰ For an introduction into the physical properties of clay and its uses as a material, see Michael Casson and Anna Jackson, *The Craft of the Potter* (London: British Broadcasting Corporation, 1991), 4–6.

Between the start of a piece of sculpture, and its subsequent drying and firing, there is an inordinate interval of time.

The difference then between ceramics and most other sculptural techniques is an inability to envision and correlate the work at all of its stages during its creation. There is therefore an extreme level of chance and spontaneity inherent in the making of ceramics. A sculptor working in ceramics does so to an unusual extent through memory and prediction, often resulting in the creation of many tests or prototypes to achieve a final, desired effect. In both its soft, raw form as clay, and its fired hard form as ceramic, as well as an abundant array of colours, glaze effects and decorative surface embellishments available, artists are able to capture impulsive and spontaneous whims of expression. These points are true for any artist choosing to work with clay, but were particularly poignant for the artists who travelled to Albissola. As this thesis will demonstrate, the primacy, spontaneity and immediacy in which artists could work with clay, and, crucially, that these expressions could be forever captured in the firing process, is what made ceramics such an attractive art form.

Clay's naturally malleable properties can produce an instinctual response from the artist. This is often what ceramicists mean if they refer to clay as an "honest" material. In other words, clay captures the impulses of the artist more directly, than say bronze, which in the casting process can lose whatever distinction might accrue from the material being directly manipulated. This idea is one of the central concerns of the 'art versus craft' debate. For example, despite the fact that clay was a popular and accessible material for artists in the early twentieth century it was not considered serious enough for 'fine art'. Because of clay's physical qualities, the virtues of modelling in clay were weighed up against carving in stone, with clay often considered to be a deceptive or untrustworthy material that was more prone to express the whims of bodily impulses and impressions.²¹ Clay was understood - if at all - as only a means to an end, or as a prelude to working in bronze or marble.

Some recent scholars have contested the idea that clay was completely ignored by artists as a sculptural medium in its own right, claiming that a "truth to materials" – a term more associated with Modernist architecture - was actually being explored by artists as early as the

²¹ Penelope Curtis discusses this idea in relation to Rodin, but her analysis can be extended to ceramic sculpture, particularly in her discussion on 'carving vs modelling' in Chapter 3: 'Direction expression through the material'. Penelope Curtis, *Sculpture 1900-1945: After Rodin*. (Place of publication not identified: Oup, 1999), 77.

1700s. Philip Rawson argued that the primacy of clay was recognised by artists such as Marin (1759-1834), Roubiliac (1705-62), and Clodion (1738-1814) who created clay bozzetti, small scale studies of their full-scale works, which “were originally addressed not to the public eye but to the private imagination.” These small clay sculptures inspired “a whole series of artists throughout the eighteenth century” to work in clay by exploiting the possible qualities and textures of raw wet clay with almost infinite resource. Artists used smearing techniques, knife cutting, a multitude of shaved cockles for hair and leaves, and many kinds of impressing and twisting of wet clay, to produce “a delicate, sensuous and erotic texture.”²² More recently, Evonne Levy and Carolina Mangone have explored the idea of a “material Bernini” through the artist’s expressive and primal approach to clay in his own bozzetti.²³

In his own review of the ceramic section of the 1889 Universal Exposition, Gauguin famously argued that a wider range of materials could be applied to the term “truth to materials”:

“Let us get back to our knitting, sculpture like drawing, in ceramics, ought to be modelled ‘harmoniously with the material’. I will beg sculptors to study that question of adaptation. Plaster, marble, bronze and fire clay ought not to be modelled in the same fashion, considering that each material has a different character of solidity, of hardness, of appearance.”²⁴

Gauguin’s view was shared by the German Expressionist sculptors Ernst Barlach (1870-1938) and Paul Rudolf Henning (1886-1986) who argued that clay could preserve a primacy and spontaneity that was unique and that it should be modelled according to its own material properties. For Barlach and Henning, sculptors had become ‘blind to clay’ as the original expressions and intentions of the artist were destroyed in the process of casting in bronze. Indeed, in 1917, Henning wrote a manifesto championing the materiality of clay in *Clay: a manifesto*.²⁵ The Russian Constructivist Vladimir Tatlin (1885-1953), a contemporary of

²² Philip Rawson, *Ceramics*. (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014), 205.

²³ For a discussion on the methods and processes that Bernini employed to create his clay bozzetti see Evonne Levy, Carolina Mangone, and Maarten Delbeke, *Material Bernini* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016). The language which surrounds the ways in which artists worked with clay during the twentieth century is similar to the ways in which Levy and Mangone describe Bernini’s treatment of the material.

²⁴ Curtis, *Sculpture 1900-1945*, 78.

²⁵ For a translation of P. R. Henning’s *Clay: A Manifesto* (1917) see Stephanie Barron et al., *German Expressionist Sculpture: [Exhibition]* (Los Angeles, CA; Chicago: Los Angeles County Museum of Art; University of Chicago Press, 1985), 41–42.

Barlach and Henning, similarly paved the way for the belief that materials generate their own appropriate forms. Tatlin understood the inherent structure and intrinsic properties of any given material would dictate suitable forms and formats, including that of an artist who works with clay. His geometric sculptures were made in accordance with his belief in the “culture of materials.”²⁶

Within Modernism however, ceramics were evaluated according to a strict criterion of either/or. The primacy of clay and its dependence on memory and prediction ultimately condemned ceramics to a second-class status. Modernism discounted clay as a material that could generate unique forms or represent individual artistic expression and ingenuity. For Greenberg, painting was the highest form of art because of its relationship to the eye alone: “the Modernist painter,” argues Greenberg, “can only be seen into; can be travelled through, literally or figuratively, only with the eye.”²⁷ The inherent relationship between ceramics and the haptic (relating to the perception and manipulation of objects using the senses of touch) positioned it fairly low down in Greenberg’s hierarchy.

The picture that Greenberg provides of his regular encounter with the art exhibited in New York city during the 1960s, in combination with the absence of a sustained critique of craft in his work, can be interpreted as implicit approval of the traditionally low status of ceramics in the hierarchy of the arts. Furthermore, as Elissa Auther argues, one could conclude that “craft was simply beside the point for the critical questions Greenberg posed about art and culture.”²⁸ This was made quite clear when Greenberg made an appearance as keynote speaker at the *First International Ceramics Symposium* at Syracuse University in 1979. The transcript was recorded by ceramics scholar Garth Clark and presented in an anthology of papers and essays on ceramics titled *Ceramic millennium: critical writings on ceramic history, theory, and art* (2006). In his paper, Greenberg addressed the issue of hierarchy and status in ceramics in which he confirmed his prior ambivalence to the discipline: “in the past I

²⁶ Faye Ran, *A History of Installation Art and the Development of New Art Forms: Technology and the Hermeneutics of Time and Space in Modern and Postmodern Art from Cubism to Installation* (Peter Lang, 2009), 77.

²⁷ Clement Greenberg and John O’Brian, *The Collected Essays and Criticism. Vol. 4, Vol. 4*, (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1993).

²⁸ Elissa Auther, ‘The Decorative, Abstraction, and the Hierarchy of Art and Craft in the Art Criticism of Clement Greenberg.’, *The Oxford Art Journal.*, 2004, 343.

did give in to the notion that ceramics was largely craft, and that craft was just craft.” He continues that his stance on ceramics somewhat changed towards the end of the 1960s:

“[when] medium-scrambling and medium-mixing came in...the idea of the sanctity of the boundaries between the different mediums lost its hold [...] is ceramics getting – or going to get – as photography has, the benefit of this recent levelling of status? ...Let ceramists proper... contribute to sculpture proper. Let clay be a final, definitive medium for sculpture proper instead of it serving as paper used to serve painting proper.”²⁹

John Perreault argues that this “medium-mixing” and “medium-scrambling” resulted in a “seepage” between the two perceived ‘art’ and ‘craft’ worlds. This did not have a negative effect on ceramics, but meant that as a practice it was now able to take a central place within discussions on fine art.³⁰ Nowadays, for many artists working in clay, ceramics has the ability to be either and or: both infiltrate and resistant, both define and have the fluidity and freedom to move beyond discursive boundaries. In recent years, ceramic scholars have recognised this ‘fluidity’ in ceramics as artists calling into question the whole body, and not just the eye, as a means to understanding art. Philip Rawson suggests in the conclusion of his work *Ceramics* that ceramics is an art form which is better understood through its haptic qualities:

“Another revolution in art may well demand that work be addressed to the whole multi-sensuous man, hands and all, to awaken those important and intensely valuable regions of feeling and sensuous order which pure visual-abstract work ignores, or even affronts.”³¹

Mark Pennings further argues in *Ceramic Millennium* that this freedom may enable ceramics to move beyond an “ideology of embarrassment” to an “ideology of flexibility”. In other words, a position that no longer embarrassed by the connotation of function and form and provide the practice with a position of great strength in relation to other areas of cultural production.³²

²⁹ Clark, Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, and Press, *Ceramic Millennium*, 4.

³⁰ Fariello and Owen, *Objects and Meanings New Perspectives on Art and Craft*, 69.

³¹ Rawson, *Ceramics.*, 206.

³² Clark, Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, and Press, *Ceramic Millennium*, 128.

“If the idea that there can be art that addresses the whole body and not merely the eye was accepted, then old arguments about whether ceramics can be art will become moot. The question, then, will not be whether or not something is useful, but whether or not it speaks eloquently of the human condition...”³³

As this thesis will demonstrate, by the time Greenberg gave this lecture, artists such as Lucio Fontana, Wifredo Lam, Asger Jorn and Piero Manzoni were already recognising the potential of clay in Albissola as a material that could convey artistic ingenuity, spontaneity and unique forms and be considered as ‘sculpture proper’. Perhaps more so than any other period in Albissola’s history, during the post-war period the relationship between clay and artists was one that was focused entirely on the human condition. During this period, Lucio Fontana and Agenore Fabbri explored clay when austerity, poverty and war governed people’s lives. For these artists, clay could express and evoke human suffering which was on level with the masses – this was not an art for the mind, but for the body and soul.

So far this introduction has mapped out the status of ceramics within wider theoretical discussions concerning Modernism, the avant-garde and materiality during the twentieth century. Moving closer to ceramics production in Albissola, this introduction turns to an exploration of ceramics production in Italy. Prior to the Second World War, Italy’s ceramics production was firmly rooted in tradition. Production centred largely around provincial workshops, studios, and smaller, commercial ventures. The United States was Italy’s most important export market for majolica wares before the Second World War.³⁴ One of the most popular exports was ceramics in the Art Deco style – these objects were tailored to a craft or decorative arts market rather than a fine art one. During the interwar and post-war years however, Italy was among the first manufacturing sectors to resume production and was soon characterised by steadily rising export figures.³⁵ As a report from the Italian Institute for Foreign trade of 1948 stipulated: “These handicrafts, while representing a distinct contribution to the decorative arts by their beauty and good taste, at the same time contribute substantially to the volume of Italian exports.”³⁶ A brief overview of the context in which

³³ Fariello and Owen, *Objects and Meanings New Perspectives on Art and Craft*, 64.

³⁴ Grace Lees-Maffei, *Made in Italy: Rethinking a Century of Italian Design* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 130.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 127.

³⁶ Istituto nazionale per il commercio estero (Italy), *Handicrafts of Italy*. (Milan: A. Pizzi, 1951), 5.

ceramics were produced in Italy during the twentieth century will provide a necessary context for each chapter in this thesis.

Ceramics production in Italy

The 1902 Exhibition of Decorative and Industrial Arts in Turin represented the themes most prevalent to ceramics in Italy with regard to contemporary European production. The themes were international ones of style as a means of promoting social and cultural development, of industrial production and of the role of beauty in daily life.³⁷ It was no coincidence for example that the magazine created in Italy in 1902 as an alternative to the journal *Arte italiana decorative e industriale* (Italian decorative and industrial art), was called *Arte decorative moderna. Rivista d'architettura e decorazione della casa e della vita* (Modern decorative art. Architecture and decoration magazine of home and life).³⁸ Founded by the critics Ceragioli, Thovez and Reycent and the Symbolist sculptor Leonardo Bistolfi, who were immediately joined by Alfredo Melani, their aims were to mould the taste of the contemporary public and provide practitioners in the ceramics sector with the tools and resources to do so. In the national reality of production, however, ceramics remained fixed to regional traditions and craft workshops that continued to propose copies of models from the Renaissance and Baroque eras to a low standard, like Albissola's 'Antico Savona' style.

Two factories excelled in the Italian section at Turin: the Societa Ceramica Richard-Ginori of Milan and the Arte della Ceramica of Florence. These two factories can be considered the archetypal ceramics factories in Italy at this time and the work they produced influenced many others. Milan had boasted a significant and rich tradition of majolica (tin-glazed ceramics) during the eighteenth century, a tradition that continued into the nineteenth century and gained new impetus through industrialisation of the workshops towards the end of the century. The Richard-Ginori Factory were, adversely, well-acquainted with the stylistic innovations coming out of France and Belgium and presented a series of decorative objects in white porcelain, some of which were conceived by Bistolfi. Their ceramics were

³⁷ On the presence of the Italian ceramics at Turin, see 'La sezione italiana' in Rossana Bossaglia and Galleria d'Arte Moderna (Torino), *Torino 1902: le arti decorative internazionali del nuovo secolo : [catalogo della mostra Galleria Civica d'Arte Moderna Torino, 23.9.1994-22.1.1995]* (Milano: Fabbri Ed., 1994), 411–81.

³⁸ Valerio Terraroli and Paola Franceschini, *Italian Art Ceramics 1900-1950* (Milano: Skira, 2007), 14.

characterised by flowing forms, softly modelled female figures and portrait and plant motifs, reflecting a language of Art Nouveau but without any use of colour.³⁹

The Societa Ceramica Italiana factory at Laveno on Lake Maggiore boosted its industrial production by creating insulators for the new grid of electric power lines, as well as sanitary appliances. This was combined with the production of traditional decorative pieces. Designed by masters from Milan and Varese, including Luigi De Vecchi, Federico Paglia, Luigi Reggiori, Giuseppe Jacopini and Giorgio Spertini, these pieces drew on both the naturalistic repertoire of Art Nouveau, ranging from phytomorphic decorations to insects and wavy, whiplash lines, as well as themes of the Oriental origin or Far East imagery.⁴⁰

The real victor at the Turin Exhibition was Galileo Chini, director of the Florentine factory L'Arte delle Ceramica. His creations ranged from large decorative vases to display plates and from bowls to amphorae. They were a clear testimony to the influence of pre-Raphaelite culture and the models of William Morris on Italian decorative art.⁴¹ The craft-based dimension of the work, the indissoluble unity between art and life and the idea of the essential uniqueness of the individual pieces which, although mass-produced, were decorated by hand, demonstrates just how far Italy was at this time from the idea of industrialisation and the mechanical production of pieces, as was happening elsewhere.

The emergence of the avant-garde movements in art during the first decade of the twentieth century did not have an immediate effect on the problem of style and aesthetic value in Italian ceramics production. Problems relating to the reproduction of forms, the industrial production of everyday use and the widening of the market to include less affluent classes, remained, however, essentially unresolved. The economic crises faced by Europe at the end of the First World War, the modification in the taste of the middle class and an effort to overcome the hardships and horrors of the war in psychological as well as material terms changed such circumstances. The question of the choice between an exclusively industrial approach and that of high artistic craftsmanship, between beauty for all or just an elite, as well as those of

³⁹ For a more detailed and comprehensive analysis of the ceramics at Richard-Ginori factory, see the catalogue Società ceramica Richard-Ginori, *Società ceramica Richard Ginori 1873-1903: memorie*. (Milano: Tip. di Enrico Bonetti, 1904).

⁴⁰ For a comprehensive analysis of the ceramics produced in Laveno see Gordon Campbell, *Laveno* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

⁴¹ Galileo Chini, Corrado Marsan, and Italy) Galleria d'arte Il Fiorino (Florence, *Galileo Chini*. (Firenze: Galleria d'arte il Fiorino, 1972).

the utopia of total art and integrated art and the relations between function, material and aesthetics in the individual object, remained open and very much up for discussion.

In 1925, the *L'Exposition internationale des arts décoratifs et industriels modernes* in Paris marked a turning point in terms of taste in ceramics. Essentially, it represented the climax of the Art Deco style, not its beginning. Once again the idea of the beauty of the superfluous was accentuated in order to feed a market which needed something new and refreshing. The task of Art Deco seems to have been that of winning over the broadest possible section of the public to a modern style, as an alternative to the still very popular reproduced object.⁴² At the same time, the utopian desire to create 'total art' appeared to have been borrowed by the Futurist and Constructivist redrafting of the space of daily life. On the other hand, the work on view at the 1925 Expo sidestepped the harmonious and indissoluble relationship between everyday environmental and decoration - the linchpin of the modernist utopia - because preference was given to the individuality of the object and its maker.

The fact that Art Deco production in the decorative arts was aimed at a niche market is indubitable, but is equally true that the world of gilding, of boudoirs and lavish residences, of a combination of old and modern aesthetics in films, on transatlantic liners, in hotels and in cafes, penetrated deeply into the collective consciousness. This powered a desire for identification with these exclusive and glittering worlds, spawning a widespread production of forms of the 'twenties' style. These forms contrasted with production that, while mass-produced, retained a high quality of unique decoration, such as the majolica ware and porcelain designed by Giò Ponti for Richard-Ginori factory.⁴³ At the same time, Art Deco became a way of recovering ethical and aesthetic values considered lost, such as craft traditions and national and regional roots. In Italy, this manifested in seeking to marry rural culture and cosmopolitan elegance – in other words, a reflection of the pride in one's own history whilst also creating an international style.

⁴² For an introduction to Art Deco ceramics and decorative art see Charlotte Benton et al., *Art Deco 1910-1939*, 2015; Jane Hay, *Art Deco Ceramics* (Boston: Bulfinch Press, 1996); Howard Watson, *Collecting Art Deco Ceramics: Shapes and Patterns from the 1920s and 1930s*. (Place of publication not identified: Diane Pub Co, 1997).

⁴³ See Giovanni Ponti and Ugo La Pietra, *Gio Ponti* (New York: Rizzoli, 2009); Lisa Licitra Ponti and Gio Ponti, *Gio Ponti: The Complete Work, 1923-1978 /c/Lisa Licitra Ponti ; Foreword by Germano Celant*. (London: Thames and Hudson, 1990); Claudia Casali, *Ceramica déco / Déco ceramics. Il gusto di un'epoca / The style of an era*. (Cinisello Balsamo: Silvana, 2017).

The series of exhibitions specifically devoted to the decorative arts, held every two years at the Villa Reale in Monza from 1923-1927 and then again in 1930, demonstrated Italy's desire for artistic production to be a success at the European level. The updating of a style and its never forgotten relationship with tradition and for the forging of a close link between the decorative arts and the figurative arts, led to the foundation of the Istituto Superiore per le Industrie Artistiche in 1925. It is significant that in the Paris Expo in 1925 Italy achieved huge success with majolica and porcelain designed by the architect Giò Ponti for Richard-Ginori. These objects were extremely refined and demonstrated a combined effort of the designer, artist and craftsmen, thus legitimising ceramics as objects not made solely for function but also to be appreciated as art.⁴⁴

Much of Albissola's early ceramics production (from 1900 to 1929) was influenced by the fashions of the time including Art Deco and imitations of the Baroque. The Mazzotti Factory in particular was well-known for producing its 'Antico Savona' style in a way that can be considered sympathetic to Art Deco style. The lead ceramicist Tullio d'Albisola produced a range of tea sets and crockery which was clearly influenced by the Art Deco or International style, in a bid to join the mainstream production. The arrival of Futurism in Albissola in the late 1920s however dramatically shifted the course of ceramics production for the rest of the twentieth century.

Following half a century of economic uncertainty and hardship, based on the aftermath of the First World War, Italy's economic depression of the late 1920s and early 1930s, the strength of Italy's post-war ceramic industry lay in its small workshops' ability to draw on long experience in defying hard time with makeshift methods. Italian ceramics design became synonymous with quality craftsmanship and small-scale manufacture; the "Made in Italy" label was as much a part of the mythologising of post-war Italian design as its heroic architects and entrepreneurial manufacturers. In 1947, the designer Ettore Sottsass wrote what was arguably the first statement on craft and design in post-war Italy, 'Le Vie dell'Artigianato' ('The Ways of Craft'). What he termed Italy's "great tradition" of craft was facing an uncertain future, and it was up to architects to teach "a new way of being an artisan and a new tradition [...] teaching him these things, looking after him, fighting so that the

⁴⁴ For further information on Italian ceramics production, including Richard-Ginori and other local Italian ceramics manufacturers see L Hockemeyer, 'Italian Ceramics 1945-1958: A Synthesis of Avant-Garde Ideals, Craft Traditions and Popular Culture.' (Kingston University, 2008).

world of craft does not end up in a blind alley in which it will suffocate, this is our task.”⁴⁵ Sottsass was intent on building Italy anew. He believed that post-war reconstruction, design, craft and industry needed to work together to ensure Italy’s economic and cultural future on the international stage: “only when artists and technicians, craft and industry get together in an open and close relationship, will many things be resolved, even the “problem” of craft.”⁴⁶ By the 1950s, much credit for the dissolution of the artistic hierarchies within Italy’s interwar and post-war ceramic culture can be linked to Giò Ponti; he incessantly strove towards “the cross-fertilisation of the artisanal, artistic and industrial ceramic industries, from art objects to bathroom fixtures.”⁴⁷

However, as this thesis will demonstrate, whilst the rest of Italy and its ceramics factories were producing more traditional ceramic forms, Albissola was engaging with ceramics practice in an altogether different direction. When artists began to arrive in Albissola and experiment with ceramics, creating objects that were unlike anything representative of the aesthetics of Art Deco, they were engaging with clay in ways that had never been seen before in a traditional Italian ceramics workshop.

Albissola: artist colony?

Up to this point, this introduction has explored reasons why artists were attracted to ceramics as an art form and has given an overview of ceramics production in Italy during the twentieth century. It will now turn to an exploration of the relationship between artists and ‘place’ in the twentieth century, because, as this thesis will demonstrate, for many artists Albissola was a chosen destination where they wanted to make ceramics. To this end, an analysis of the relationship between artists, communities and places of artistic practice in the twentieth century is pertinent to a broader illustration of Albissola as also being a place of artistic production. Furthermore, how Albissola may, or may not, be classified as an ‘artist colony’ will be examined in relation to well-known artist communities and colonies in the twentieth century.

⁴⁵ Ettore Sottsass, ““Le Vie dell’Artigianato””, *Il Politecnico: Rivista di Cultura Contemporanea*, November 1947, 23.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 24.

⁴⁷ Lees-Maffei, *Made in Italy*, 130.

The phenomenon of the ‘artist colony’ was introduced by Michael Jacobs in his seminal work *The Good and Simple Life* from 1985.⁴⁸ Considered the first study of rural artist colonies in Europe and America, Jacobs’ work details several case studies of artists who travelled to rural locations during the late nineteenth to early twentieth century in order to produce art and live removed from modern civilisation.⁴⁹ Jacobs argues that this movement was essentially romantic, rooted in artists’ searching for “sun-drenched landscapes corresponding to visions of antiquity, or wild mountainous regions fulfilling notions of the sublime,” in order to develop the open-air painting which had become popular during the nineteenth century.⁵⁰ As well as being ‘romantic’, Jacobs points out, colonies were also exceptionally practical for artists. Artist communities were cheap and those who were insecure of their ideas could easily ask others on hand to informally criticise their work and offer suggestions.

The location of a colony as ‘rural’ was particularly important to artists during this period. The formation of innumerable experimental communities in the late nineteenth century was influenced in part by the fact that many artists believed modern civilisation had been corrupted by losing contact with the land. Tolstoy for example famously set up an estate at Yasnaya Polyana, a community run on the principles of self-sufficiency and the simple life. Tolstoy’s community was emulated across Europe and America, the most famous being the village of Whiteway in the English Cotswolds. Less extreme were the various Arts and Crafts communities that were formed at this time inspired by William Morris, such as Chipping Campden. However, while these colonies did exist outside the tourist circuit they were not generally considered picturesque or attractive by the travelling public. Furthermore, few were actually remote in so far as they were usually close to railway networks or other modes of transport.⁵¹

There was therefore another reason why artists chose to travel to places that were not considered picturesque or indeed popular. The retreat to artist colonies was as much a social affair as it was a professional choice. As Nina Lübbrens argues, it was a “creative sociability”

⁴⁸ Michael Jacobs, *The Good and Simple Life: Artist Colonies in Europe and America* (Oxford: Phaidon, 1985).

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 10–17. In the introduction ‘The Academy of Nature’, Jacobs introduces some of the main impetus behind artists travelling to rural locations. Jacobs includes examples such as Barbizon and Pont-Aven in France, Skagen in Denmark and Provincetown in Massachusetts, USA.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

that was a distinctive trait of rural artist communities.⁵² In other words, colonies were not simply random collections of individuals who happened to share the same space or inhabit the same place, but were “cohesive social entities with shared rituals and commitments.”⁵³ Lübbrens argues how being an artist in a community was “never only about putting brush to canvas,” but was also about forming “social networks which reinforce and support the individual’s sense of purpose as well as the activities and routines associate with cultural production.”⁵⁴ In other words, much of what artists’ produced was largely informed by the colony’s social environment. Furthermore, as well as creating individual art works, colonies were demonstrating a form of practice that captured what, in their view, an artist should be – experimenting with, and living out, new artistic identities.

As this thesis will illustrate, there are many reasons why Albissola can be considered an artist colony. Albissola was a place where artists, critics, gallery owners and theorists interacted and lived alongside one another. More specifically, their contributions established Albissola as a major centre of ceramic art from the late 1920s, arguably up until now. Within the terms offered by Jacobs and Lübbrens, Albissola’s geographical location was ideal to those seeking to retreat from nearby cities - such as Milan and Genoa - and simultaneously experience provincial Italian life and culture. Therefore, in relation to the industrial climate of Milan and bustling port of Genoa, Albissola offered artists a ‘back to basics’ style of artistic production, one that had not yet been consumed by modern industrialisation and still incorporated the tradition of handmade ceramics into the factory environment.

In a letter to his friend and artist Enrico Baj in 1954, Jorn for example writes, “I think it would be extremely important if we could go together to Albissola immediately...I believe it is just what we need [...] there are not too many tourists...it is not a worldly context...”⁵⁵

Similarly, Wifredo Lam’s wife, Lou Laurin-Lam, writes of the family’s experience in Albissola during the 1950s: “Why Albissola?...It’s not Venice. It is not a particularly picturesque place, it has no particular charm, but...there was an extremely lively internationalism.”⁵⁶ As both Jorn and Laurin-Lam’s testimonies demonstrate, Albissola was

⁵² Nina Lübbren, *Rural Artists’ Colonies in Europe, 1870-1910*. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001), 17.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ ‘Asger Jorn to Enrico Baj’, 1954, Museum Jorn, Silkeborg.

⁵⁶ Anne Egger and Galerie Gmurzynska, *Fire Tongues: Ceramics* (Zurich: Galerie Gmurzynska, 2012).

an ideal retreat for artists because whilst it attracted an international community it had not yet been turned into “a worldly context” by tourists. Thus, artists could explore new ideas and make work that was not necessarily for a wider audience or art market, but for personal reasons and without judgement.

Whilst Albissola was ‘remote’, in so far as its distance from Milan and Genoa for artists was a day’s journey by car, it was not ‘rural’ in the way that Jacobs and Lubbrems say was characteristic of artist colonies in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. As Jacobs argues, artists who lived in rural artist colonies were largely apolitical, as is illustrated in their attitude towards peasant lifestyle. The word ‘rural’ was therefore not only geographical, but also reflected the practices and beliefs of artists. As this thesis will demonstrate, artists who travelled to Albissola were engaged in more radical ideas. They were not particularly interested in reproducing Albissola’s traditional ceramics production, nor in creating their own style of ceramics in a traditional format, but instead wanted to create art that engaged with avant-garde ideas and practices happening elsewhere in major art centres.

While seminal, Lübbrens and Jacobs’ research only covers a small proportion of artist colonies, most of which were working within very specific ideologies or circumstances during the end of the nineteenth and early twentieth century. Indeed, little scholarship has been done to address the idea of how artist colonies emerged and developed during the twentieth century. Perhaps one of the reasons for this is that artist colonies have been discussed as ‘geographic communities’ during this period. One famous example is Black Mountain College where artists ranging from Joseph Albers to Charles Olson and Robert Duncan, from Buckminster Fuller to John Cage, Merce Cunningham, and Allan Kaprow gathered and created art. Marjorie Perloff argues that “Black Mountain was a movement that depended on residence at Black Mountain College for its definition.”⁵⁷ Whilst it was certainly a place where artists gathered to produce artwork, it was not necessarily an artist colony in the traditional sense of the term, but rather, as Marjorie Perloff argues, a manifestation of “the avant-garde as geographic community.”⁵⁸

Perloff argues that the most prominent form of ‘the avant-garde as a geographic community’ was the so-called New York School, an informal group of American poets, painters, dancers

⁵⁷ ‘Avant-Garde Community and the Individual Talent’, *Marjorie Perloff*, 29 April 2009, <http://marjorieperloff.com/essays/avant-garde-community-and-the-individual-talent/>.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

and musicians active in the 1950s and 60s in New York City. The New York school was also synonymous with abstract expressionist painting, attracting artists from Jackson Pollock and Mark Rothko to Helen Frankenthaler and Franz Kline, as well as the circle of poets the Frank O'Hara circle of poets - Kenneth Koch, John Ashbery, James Schuyler, Barbara Guest, all of whom were living and working in New York in the fifties. Mark Silverberg argues that "while the Abstract Expressionists liked to portray themselves as radical individualists, the history of the New York School shows that art is as much the result of the conversations of a community as it is the activity of solitary producers."⁵⁹ Silverberg highlights for example that 'gossip' was a major part of the social cohesion of the community.

Another 'geographic community' of this kind, which bears significantly more semblance to Albissola's artistic climate, was the West Coast art scene during the 1950s and 1960s. In particular, a group of artists known as the California Clay Movement, including John Mason, Billy al Bengston, Peter Voukos, Ken Price and Henry Takemoto, were prominent figures in the emerging Los Angeles art scene. They produced work in the ceramics studio of the Otis Art Institute and revolutionised ceramics by adopting a collective approach to increasing the scale of their ceramics to make large reliefs and sculpture. They exhibited their work alongside paintings, installations and sculptures by Ed Kienholz, Jay DeFeo, Sonia Gechtoff and Wallace Berman at the famous Ferus Gallery in L.A. (headed by Irving Blum and Walter Hopps).⁶⁰

It is useful to consider Albissola as an artist colony because of the ways in which artists were exchanging ideas, networking and communicating through artistic production during this period. A study of Albissola as a place of artistic exchange and not only as a place of ceramics production, for example, means that it can be compared to other sites of 'geographic artistic communities' such as the West Coast, New York and Black Mountain College. Whilst Albissola was a place renowned for ceramics production, Albissola developed into a site of

⁵⁹ Mark Silverberg, *The New York School Poets and the Neo-Avant-Garde: Between Radical Art and Radical Chic*, 2016, 45.

⁶⁰ Literature abounds on the Ferus Gallery and LA's brief but storied history during the 1950s and 1960s. See Rebecca Peabody et al., *Pacific Standard Time: Los Angeles Art 1945-1980* (London; Los Angeles, Calif.: Tate Publishing ; in association with the Getty Research Institute, and the J. Paul Getty Museum, 2011); Morgan Neville et al., *The Cool School: How LA Learned to Love Modern Art* (New York, NY: Arts Alliance America, 2008); Mary Davis MacNaughton et al., *Clay's Tectonic Shift, 1956-1968: John Mason, Ken Price, Peter Voukos* (Los Angeles]; Claremont, Calif.: J. Paul Getty Museum ; Scripps College, Ruth Chandler Williams Gallery, 2012).

exchange. This happened during the 1950s and 60s when Jorn organises Albissola International Ceramics Meeting in 1954, inviting artists, critics, and collectors to participate in an event that would bring together artists and like-minded individuals surrounding ceramics production.

Roadmap

This thesis has identified four periods that demonstrate Albissola was an important site of avant-garde artistic production during the twentieth century. Presented chronologically, this thesis begins in 1929 when the Futurists first arrive in Albissola, and ends in 1963, when Albissola's Council commissioned a large urban artwork to commemorate the many artists who travelled to Albissola during the twentieth century.

Chapter one examines artistic activity and ceramics production between 1929 and 1939 at Albissola's central workshop, the Mazzotti Factory. Specifically, it explores the activities of the Futurists who used the Mazzotti as their central hub of ceramics production during the early 1930s. Futurist artists, including Farfa, Enrico Prampolini and Fillia, among others, devised their own brand of ceramics based on the principles of movement and motion. This style, known as "Aeroceramica", was short-lived but inspired F.T. Marinetti and the owner of the Mazzotti Factory, Tullio d'Albisola to write the *Manifesto of Aeroceramica* (1938). This chapter explores Futurist ceramics production and its relationship to Albissola by analysing the ceramics they produced and the manifesto which was written to coincide with their production. This chapter also draws attention to the artist Lucio Fontana who arrived in Albissola for the first time in 1936. An exploration of Fontana's first experiments in ceramics in Albissola sheds new light on Fontana's artistic practice in this period.

Chapter two is an exploration of Albissola's post-war period. After the Second World War, Fontana returns to Albissola in 1947 and embarks on a new series of ceramics. During this period, Fontana forges new relationships with designers and architects in Milan and introduces religious and mythological subject matter into his work. His enthusiasm for the decorative and symbolic aspects of ceramics manifest in a series of molten golden crucifixes and a large glow-in-the-dark wall relief. This chapter focuses primarily on the ceramics produced by Fontana, however it will also explore the work produced by the Tuscan sculptor Agenore Fabbri at the Mazzotti Factory between the years 1947 – 1951. This chapter is an

attempt to locate Albissola's ceramics production within the political and artistic climate of Italy during the post-war period and will demonstrate that it was an important hub for post-war Italian artistic production.

Chapter three examines Albissola's most intense period of avant-garde activity. It begins with the arrival of Asger Jorn in Albissola in 1954 and his plans to organise the International Ceramics Meeting with the aim of transforming Albissola into an international hub for artists, movements and critics. The purpose of this meeting was to explore how exchange and collective activity could be paired with ceramics experimentation, resulting in the transformation of Albissola into a site of 'lively internationalism'. This chapter explores ceramics produced by Jorn and fellow CoBrA artists Karel Appel and Corneille, as well as exponents of Nuclear Art and Roberto Sebastian Matta. It also explores the activity of the Spatialist movement including Piero Manzoni, Milena Milani and gallery owner Carlo Cadazzo. This chapter examines how the materiality of clay offered artists a spontaneous and expressive mode of working which complimented their other artistic practices. Whilst ceramics experimentation sat at the heart of artistic exchange during this period in Albissola, it also inspired new opportunities for artists to network and socialise.

Chapter four will demonstrate how Jorn was a central protagonist in Albissola's later years and therefore focuses on his artistic activity during these years. The first part of this chapter explores two important projects that Jorn steered – the construction of his family home 'Villa Jorn', now an art museum in Albissola, and the making of a massive ceramic relief which is now on permanent display at a school in Denmark. Both projects have hardly received any critical analysis, and neither have been explored in relation to Albissola's international avant-garde scene. What this chapter will demonstrate is that both projects contributed to Albissola's international identity as a hub for avant-garde art production. This chapter draws upon many of Jorn's theoretical and political views and attempts to examine parallels between his ideas on *détournement* and 'counter-functionalism' with ceramic art. The final section of this chapter examines Jorn's friendship with the Cuban artist Wifredo Lam in Albissola and explores Lam's enthusiasm for the primal and provincial aspects of ceramic artistic expression.

Overall this thesis is an analysis of the many individual artists, movements and personalities who visited Albissola to specifically experiment with ceramics during these years. In doing so, this thesis fundamentally demonstrates that Albissola was an important site of avant-garde

art production. Prompted by the scale of its enterprise and the lack of clarity over the ceramics activities that shaped its rich artistic climate in the twentieth century, this thesis attempts to give Albissola, and its artists, the close attention it clearly demands.

CHAPTER ONE

FUTURIST CERAMICS AND LUCIO FONTANA AT THE MAZZOTTI FACTORY (1929-1939)

Between the years 1929 and 1939, Albissola's principal ceramics workshop, the Mazzotti Factory, became a centre for Futurist ceramics production and a place of artistic experimentation for the artist Lucio Fontana [Fig. 3]. In 1929, several Futurists travelled to Albissola after being invited to the Mazzotti Factory by its owner, Tullio d'Albisola. They created a new style of ceramics based on the principles of movement and motion known as 'Aeroceramica'. This style prompted F. T. Marinetti (1876 – 1944) and Tullio to declare Albissola the "ceramic capital of Italy" and the central site of Futurist ceramics production in the co-written *Manifesto of Aeroceramica* (1938).⁶¹ In 1936, at the height of Futurist ceramics production, Lucio Fontana also travelled to Albissola and produced a series of large animals from grès, a type of ceramic stoneware, followed by a series of colourful *gran fuoco* (glazed and high-fired) ceramic sculptures.

Despite the fact that the Mazzotti Factory was a central site of artistic production, scholarship has yet to explore the activity of Lucio Fontana and the Futurists' in Albissola during this period. This chapter is an attempt to insert Albissola into Futurist art history and discourse surrounding Lucio Fontana's early artistic practice. It aims to examine why ceramics was such an attractive art form and why these artists chose Albissola to experiment with ceramics. In doing so, the content of this chapter aims to place Albissola at the heart of any future scholarly research on Futurist ceramics production and Lucio Fontana's experimentation with ceramics.

The first part of this chapter focuses on Futurist activity in Albissola. It explores key Futurist ideas and analyses ceramics designed by the artists Farfa, Fillia and Enrico Prampolini, as well as by Tullio d'Albisola and his brother Torido Mazzotti. It will argue that ceramics were attractive to the Futurists for two main reasons: firstly, ceramics was an art form that could best show off central Futurist artistic representations such as aerodynamics, as well as invoke mechanical and technological ideologies. Secondly, that at the core of Futurist ceramics

⁶¹ F. T. Marinetti, *La ceramica futurista*, *Manifesti futuristi* ; 295 (Firenze: Spes-Salimbeni, 1980).

production was a problematic relationship between handmade and industrially produced ceramics. In their attempts to invent a new style of ceramics, one which celebrated Futurist ideologies, the futurists attempted to dispose of old Italian ceramics traditions such as the making of Albissola's famous 'Antico Savona' by hand, and incorporate new technological and industrial processes which emphasised the central role of machinery and the use of new design techniques.

From the outset, one of Futurism's key ideas was the need to make a clean sweep of the past. In Marinetti's *Founding Manifesto of Futurism*, published in 1909, he declares:

“It is from Italy that we launch through the world this violently upsetting incendiary manifesto of ours. With it, today, we establish Futurism, because we want to free this land from its smelly gangrene of professors, archaeologists, ciceroni and antiquarians. For too long has Italy been a dealer in second-hand clothes. We mean to free her from the numberless museums that cover her like so many graveyards.”⁶²

In the *Futurist Painting: Technical Manifesto*, published in 1910, the Futurists Umberto Boccioni, Carlo Carrà, Luigi Russolo, Giacomo Balla and Gino Severini exclaim: “All subjects previously used must be swept aside in order to express our whirling life of steel, of pride, of fever and of speed.”⁶³ A new expression of modern life based on speed, dynamism and mechanical civilization was to take the place of Italy's ancient past. As this chapter will demonstrate, the Futurists considered Albissola a place where they could transform traditions associated with Italy's past and create new legacies based on Futurist principles. A close reading of the *Manifesto of Aeroceramica* (1938) reveals that the Futurists' central aim was to present Albissola as a thriving, modern industrial port of Futurist ceramics production.

The second part of this chapter focuses exclusively on Fontana's early experiments in ceramics at the Mazzotti Factory. It begins with an exploration of his experiments using grès before examining his experimentation with *gran fuoco*. Closer analysis of these works reveal that Fontana's earliest explorations in clay can be considered a prelude to his later artworks such as his *Ambiente Spaziale* series. The fact that these early pieces by Fontana were

⁶² Umbro Apollonio, *Futurist Manifestos. Translations by Robert Brain* (New York: Viking Press, 1973), 22.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 30.

designed and executed in Albissola, and were possible sources of inspiration for his later works, further demonstrates the fact that Albissola was an important site of avant-garde experimentation. Importantly, this chapter does not seek to compare Futurist and Lucio Fontana's ceramics with each other, or imply that they were inspired by each other's ceramics experiments in any way. Instead, it argues that the Mazzotti Factory was an attractive place to work for both artists because it encouraged an experimental approach to ceramics under the aegis of Tullio d'Albisola.

Futurism in Albissola

Founded in 1909, Italian Futurism underwent two distinct phases. The first phase witnessed the formation of Futurist principles by the artist Umberto Boccioni (1882-1916) and consisted of several dozen members including F.T. Marinetti, Carlo Carrà, Giacomo Balla and Gino Severini. By 1915, in his manifesto with Fortunato Depero on the "Futurist reconstruction of the universe", Balla "inaugurated a unifying tendency" that the art historian and critic Enrico Crispolti has termed "second futurism", also known as *secondo futurismo*.⁶⁴ In this second phase, widely recognised as covering the period from 1920 to 1944, artists reached the hundreds and Futurists inhabited every town of any importance on the Italian peninsula, including, as this chapter will demonstrate, Albissola.⁶⁵

Walter Adamson claims that during this second phase F.T. Marinetti was driven by two passions: "to be acclaimed as the leader of an international avant-garde headed by Italian

⁶⁴ Adamson, *Embattled Avant-Gardes*, 228; Giacomo Balla et al., *Ricostruzione futurista dell'universo* (Modena: Fonte d'Abisso, 1989). For "second futurism" see: Enrico Crispolti, *Storia e critica del futurismo*. (Roma u.a.: Laterza, 1987); Enrico Crispolti, *Il secondo futurismo: Torino 1923-1938* (Turiijn: Pozzo, 1962); Emily Braun et al., *Italian Art in the 20th Century Painting and Sculpture 1900-1988 ; [on the Occasion of the Exhibition 'Italian Art in the 20th Century - Painting and Sculpture 1900-1988', Royal Academy of Arts, London, 14 January - 9 April 1989* (München: Prestel, 1989), 165–71.

⁶⁵ The Futurism exhibition, first held in Paris at the Centre Pompidou (15 October 2008 – 26 January 2009), then reconfigured in Rome at the Scuderie del Quirinale (20 February – 24 May 2009) and London's Tate Modern (12 June – 20 September 2009) focused only on the "ferment that Marinetti and his artist colleagues [...] generated in the period 1909-1915."⁶⁵ In 2014, the exhibition *Italian Futurism 1909-1944: Reconstructing the Universe* at the Guggenheim extended the movement's years to include the interwar and post-war period, thereby opening up new discussions surrounding Futurist activity during these years. See Vivien Greene and Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, *Italian Futurism 1909-1944: Reconstructing the Universe* (New York: Guggenheim Museum Publications, 2014).

futurism and to reshape an emerging commodity culture in a futurist mode.”⁶⁶ Whilst the first phase of Futurism was dedicated to art’s autonomy, in the sense that artists’ were in control of creative cultural production, the second phase used elements associated with both high and low culture in order to appeal to a cross-class, cross-gender audiences with the view to upsetting “the sacralised bourgeois culture of the day.”⁶⁷ Gunter Berghaus argues that “there can be no doubt that Marinetti feared that Futurism was going to be increasingly marginalized in Fascist Italy.”⁶⁸ Marinetti therefore had to think about his own and his movement’s survival under a Fascist regime and “rescue what he could of an artistic movement which he had built up and promoted for more than a decade.”⁶⁹ It is within this second phase of Futurism that ceramics production in Albissola really took off.

While the degree of ideological commitment varied from one Futurist to the next, Marinetti and his closest colleagues continued to be loyal citizens. Unlike later avant-garde movements, which were hostile to the political states in which they operated, Futurism was motivated by patriotic sentiments from the very beginning. Marinetti and the Futurists were proud of Italy, which had only recently been unified, and thus strove to forge a brand new national identity. In addition to revolutionising Italian literature and theatre, the Futurists sought to effect similar changes in dance, music, and a host of other disciplines, including household objects, furniture, and as this chapter will explore, ceramics. The Futurists were governed by the belief that as long as Italy continued to venerate the Renaissance and ancient Rome, neither modern art nor modern society could ever develop. Before either could completely embrace the present, it was necessary to bury the past.

⁶⁶ Adamson, *Embattled Avant-Gardes*, 233.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Günter Berghaus, *Italian Futurist Theatre, 1909-1944* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004), 333.

⁶⁹ Ibid. For further analysis on the complex relationship between Futurism and Fascism see Emilio Gentile, *The Sacralization of Politics in Fascist Italy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996); Mark Antliff, *Inventing Bergson: Cultural Politics and the Parisian Avant-Garde* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1993); Richard Humphreys, *Futurism* (London: Tate Gallery Publishing, 2006); Günter Berghaus, *Futurism and Politics: Between Anarchist Rebellion and Fascist Reaction, 1909-1944* (Providence: Berghahn Books, 1996); Germano Celant et al., *The Italian Metamorphosis, 1943-1968* (Rome; New York, NY.; Guggenheim Museum; New York, NY.: Progetti Museali Editore ; Hardcover distr. by Abrams, 1994); Willard Bohn, *The Other Futurism Futurist Activity in Venice, Padua, and Verona* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2016); Cinzia Sartini Blum, *The Other Modernism: F.T. Marinetti’s Futurist Fiction of Power* (Berkeley[Calif.]; Los angeles[Calif.]; London: University of California Press, 1996).

This ideology filtered down into the production of ceramics. At the Mazzotti Factory, the Futurists aimed to “overthrow...the old, ancient and prehistoric” methods used in traditional Liguria ceramics production and create “new Italian futurist ceramics” that were entirely “futuristic, violent” and “machine-inspired.”⁷⁰ The Futurists discarded Albissola’s traditional ceramics production – which they understood as part of the old Italy - and produced a new style which chimed with the Futurists’ vision of a new Italy. They abandoned the Mazzotti Factory’s traditional ‘Savona Antica’ ceramic designs and created “decidedly modern forms”, replacing the frills, foliage and fanciful cherubs that symbolised *romanitas*, an Italy of the past, with a representation of a new, revolutionised Italy fuelled by industry, machines and technology.⁷¹

In addition to being attracted to the traditional aspects of ceramics production in Albissola, the Futurists were also interested in the physical materiality of clay and how it could represent some of the earliest Futurist ideologies such as vibrating matter. Before analysing Futurist ceramics production in Albissola, for example in terms of what Futurist ceramics looked like and how they were made, the relationship between Futurism and the materiality of clay needs to be explained and further clarified. To do so, one must consider the founding principles of Futurism from its beginnings in the early 1900s.

In 1913, Umberto Boccioni declared a new, revolutionary mode of artistic expression: “We must free ourselves from the old formulas! We must destroy everything which is static and dead.”⁷² Through the depiction of motion and movement, Boccioni argued that art would no longer be ‘static’ but would become dynamic and truly representative of “life itself.”⁷³ For Boccioni, “the vivifying current of science” was the key to unlocking the “motionless profiles

⁷⁰ Quoted from the “Manifesto of Tullio”, a letter written by Tullio to his artistic circle of friends in Milan and Genoa, dated Feb. 5, 1930, in which he talks about the success of the exhibition “Thirty-Futurists” held at the Galleria Pesaro in Milan, 1929, and outlines his artistic research as a ceramicist. The same descriptions of Futurist ceramics are repeated in Marinetti, *La ceramica futurista*.

⁷¹ The appearances of these early pieces are very different to the more experimental designs that would arrive only a decade later. ‘Savona Antica’ is a highly ornamental and traditionally decorated style of blue and white ware and depicts scenes of ‘romanità’, which symbolised all that the Futurists despised. For descriptions of local, traditional ceramic ware see *Le città della ceramica*. (Milano: Touring club italiano, 2001); Cecilia Chilosi, *Ceramiche della tradizione ligure* (Cinisello Balsamo (Milano: Silvana, 2012).

⁷² Apollonio, *Futurist Manifestos. Translations by Robert Brain*, 95.

⁷³ Ibid.

we find in traditional statues.”⁷⁴ In particular, Boccioni sought inspiration from new scientific discoveries, such as the X-Ray and radioactivity for such inventions revealed that objects could no longer be viewed as opaque and inert, or as having distinct and resistant boundaries. Composed of whirring electrons, all objects and space itself were simply varying manifestations of a “universal vibration”.⁷⁵

The work by Henri Bergson was particularly inspiring to Boccioni. A contemporary scientific theorist, Bergson specialised in the dynamic forces and inherent energy in matter.⁷⁶ For Bergson, life and matter were in a continuous state of flux: “only changing states exist”, declared Bergson, and matter itself “envisaged as an indivisible whole, must be a flux rather than a thing.”⁷⁷ For Boccioni too, ‘matter’, the stuff that life is made up of, was an ever changing force. He declared that art should reflect life as these forces: “Instead of breaking up reality into individual natural elements, we want to render life as matter, revealing it in its quality as movement.”⁷⁸ Boccioni’s 1912 painting *Materia* [Fig. 4] and his 1913 sculpture *Unique Forms of Continuity in Space* [Fig. 5], are famous examples of his commitment to representing such ideas. His mother’s form in *Materia* is rendered as “vibrating atoms of matter that dematerialize into energy” and his sculpture unfolds “infinite forces and forms” through what Linda Dalrymple Henderson likens to the “particular effect of ‘ether drag’.”⁷⁹ For Boccioni “the metaphysical proposition that matter is an indivisible continuum” transpired in his works as more than just moving forms, but the depiction of “the form of forms”.⁸⁰

After Boccioni’s death in 1916, when Futurism moved into its second generation, the Futurists became increasingly drawn to the forces of the machine and its “power over

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Lawrence S Rainey, Christine Poggi, and Laura Wittman, *Futurism an Anthology* (New Haven [Conn.]; London: Yale University Press, 2009), 65.

⁷⁶ The relationship between Bergson and Boccioni is explored in a number of scholarly works, including Brian Petrie, ‘Boccioni and Bergson’, *The Burlington Magazine / Ed. Benedict Nicolson.*, 1974, 140–47; Antliff, *Inventing Bergson*; Linda Dalrymple Henderson, *The Fourth Dimension and Non-Euclidean Geometry in Modern Art*, 2013.

⁷⁷ Petrie, ‘Boccioni and Bergson’, 144.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Bruce Clarke and Linda Dalrymple Henderson, *From Energy to Information: Representation in Science and Technology, Art, and Literature* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2002), 126. “The term ‘ether’...was well known as the imponderable medium thought to fill all space and to serve as the vehicle for the transmission of vibrating electromagnetic waves.”

⁸⁰ Petrie, ‘Boccioni and Bergson’, 144.

nature.”⁸¹ Dynamic matter, previously extolled by Boccioni through largely organic terms, was symbolised in the energy and forces “locked within the functioning of machines...and physicalized by mechanical motion.”⁸² Whereas Boccioni “exalted the force and energy of contemporary life,” Futurism in the 1920s and 1930s “called for an art that glorified speed, violence and the machine age that reflected the dynamism of an engine-driven civilisation.”⁸³ In other words, Futurist art was beginning to celebrate new technology. In particular the excitement of flight produced a major expression known as *aeropittura*, offering airplanes and aerial landscape as new subject matter in painting.⁸⁴ As well as painting and sculpture, this new phase of Futurism ventured into artistic expressions that mingled everyday life with art including architecture, furniture, toys, posters, clothing, cookbooks, household goods and decorative objects.

The Futurists Ivo Pannaggi and Vinivio Paladini were instrumental pavers in this phase, in which crucially, they looked back at Boccioni to develop their ideas. In the Manifesto of Futurist Mechanical Art (1922), Pannaggi and Paladini site Boccioni as a direct inspiration: “What Boccioni and others intuited (*modernolatri*) has enchanted us with new forms imposed by modern mechanics.”⁸⁵ Modern machinery and technology were fundamental to shaping Futurist art and ideology throughout the 1920s and into the 1930s. Machines and “modern mechanics” were hailed as the new distinctive features of modern Italian life and therefore the source of new and vital sensations in art. “It is no longer nudes, landscapes,

⁸¹ Christine Poggi, *Inventing Futurism: The Art and Politics of Artificial Optimism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 265.

⁸² Rosalind E Krauss, *Passages in Modern Sculpture* (Cambridge, Mass.[u.a.: MIT Press, 1999), 46.

⁸³ Grace Glueck, ‘On a Trip Back to Futurism, Women and Settings Merge’, *The New York Times*, 3 July 1998, <http://www.nytimes.com/1998/07/03/arts/art-review-on-a-trip-back-to-futurism-women-and-settings-merge.html>.

⁸⁴ *Aeropittura* (aeropainting) was launched in a manifesto of 1929, *Perspectives of Flight*, signed by Benedetta Cappa, Fortunato Depero, Gerardo Dottori, Fillia, Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, Enrico Prampolini, Mino Somenzi and Guglielmo Sansoni (Tato). The manifesto states that “the changing perspectives of flight constitute an absolutely new reality that has nothing in common with the reality traditionally constituted by a terrestrial perspective” and that “painting from this new reality requires a profound contempt for detail and a need to synthesise and transfigure everything.” The historian Enrico Crispolti identifies three main “positions” in aeropainting: “a vision of cosmic projection, at its most typical in Prampolini’s ‘cosmic idealism’ ... ; a ‘reverie’ of aerial fantasies sometimes verging on fairy-tale (for example in Dottori ...); and a kind of aeronautical documentary style that is close to direct celebration of machinery (particularly in Tullio Crali, but also in Tato and Ambrosi).” See Pontus Hultón, *Futurism & Futurisms* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1992), 413.

⁸⁵ Rainey, Poggi, and Wittman, *Futurism an Anthology*, 272.

figures, symbolisms”, they write, but “the panting of locomotives, the scream of sirens, cogs, pinions, and all that mechanical sensation” which formed the basis of a new futuristic vision of art.⁸⁶ Geometric “cold, hard, metallic forms” and silvery surfaces emerge from the art of this period; Ivo Panaggi’s 1922 painting *Speeding Train* [Fig. 6] and Fortunato Depero’s *Train Born of the Sun* of 1924 [Fig. 7] for example, depict the arrival of a train as geometric forms hurtling across gleaming metallic rays of sunlight.⁸⁷ These paintings, when compared to Boccioni’s early *Passing Train* [Fig. 8], reveal the extent to which nature and landscape vanish before the image of the machine. The interpenetration of object and environment is abstracted to the point where, as Christine Poggi argues, “we now witness the latter’s near obliteration.”⁸⁸ The previously organic and scientific “vibrating” matter is now “machine-inspired” and entirely mechanical.⁸⁹

It is within this shift in Futurist ideology, from one focused on organic vibrating matter to one inspired by machines and mechanical sensations, that ceramics production in Albissola was developed. The Futurists used modern technology and methods in their ceramics production to symbolise the transformation of Futurism’s old ideologies headed by Boccioni into its new phase. This was done quite literally by taking the most primal, organic matter of earth, clay, and transforming it into a new piece of Futurist design or sculpture. Nowhere were such mechanical sensations more sculpturally developed than in the ceramic workshops of the Mazzotti Factory. Not only did the Futurists make ceramics that look like mechanical parts and machinery, but everything else that went into making and producing ceramics – such the preliminary designs, the measuring and weighing out of clay, use of tools, equipment and electric kilns - became an extension of the Futurist aim to synthesise art and technology into everyday practice. Having examined some of the possible reasons why the Futurists were interested in experimenting with ceramics, this chapter will now turn to an analysis of the ceramic objects the Futurists created in Albissola.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Poggi, *Inventing Futurism*, 233.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 236.

⁸⁹ Enrico Crispolti and Villa Gavotti (Albissola Superiore), *La ceramica futurista da Balla a Tullio d’Albisola* (Firenze: Centro Di, 1982).

Futurist ceramics

The development of Futurist ceramics as a style can be attributed to Tullio d'Albisola, the owner of the Mazzotti Factory. In 1925, the Mazzotti Factory presented its traditional 'Antico Savona' ware in the Hall of Liguria at the prestigious *L'Exposition internationale des arts décoratifs et industriels modernes* in Paris. Tullio travelled to Paris as an ambassador for the Mazzotti Factory, but he also had another motive. At the Expo, he approached the Futurists Giacomo Balla, Fortunato Depero and Enrico Prampolini, who were presenting new works of furniture, painting and design, and invited them to Albissola to create "a new style of Italian futurist ceramics" which would synthesise art, technology and machine aesthetics into ceramic forms.⁹⁰ The Futurists agreed and while Balla, Depero and Prampolini would not arrive in Albissola until the early 1930s, the artists Fillià, Tato, Nicolaj Diurlgheroff and poet Farfa, all travelled to the Mazzotti Factory in 1929.⁹¹

Tullio d'Albisola was born Tullio Mazzotti and came from a long line of traditional and commercial ceramicists. He acquired the nickname "d'Albisola" from F.T. Marinetti – which literally means Tullio from Albissola. When Tullio inherited the family business that was the Mazzotti Factory, he had very different ideas about what ceramics the factory would produce. Tullio was passionate about art, particularly Futurism, and saw his own ceramics as directly inspired by Futurist principles. He set these ideas out in a letter to the Italian Artists' Register in Milan in 1930 which officially presented himself and his ceramics as Futurist:

"Born in a family of ceramicists, I keep producing my art with great fervour and immense passion, sure to ultimately mark an absolutely new direction in the production of Italian ceramic art. Nothing that could even remotely recall the ancient, antique or prehistoric ceramics. I want to make ceramics that subvert tradition. I want to make forms that are polycentric, anti-imitative, mechanical. I want to create bright layers of colour that is Futurist, aggressive, dazzling. I want to define a perfect technique, developed around local Italian materials, which maybe poor, but carefully curated."⁹² [Fig. 9]

⁹⁰ Federico Marzinot, *Fabbrica casa museo Giuseppe Mazzotti 1903: primo catalogo minimo 13 luglio 1993* (S.l.: s.n., 1993), 26–30.

⁹¹ Tullio D'Albisola et al., *La ceramica futurista. Manifesto dell'Aeroceramica, opera e sintesi storica*. (Savona: Stamperia Officina d'arte, 1939).

⁹² Translation by the author from original Italian: "Nato da una famiglia di ceramisti proseguo nella mia arte con grande fervore ed immense passione sicuro di marcare un indirizzo

This letter, known to the Mazzotti Factory as “Tullio’s Manifesto”, presents Tullio’s ceramics as Futurist in his ambition to “overthrow tradition” and create “new Italian ceramic art”. At the top of the letter is the new Mazzotti Factory branding which was designed by Nicolaj Diulgheroff (his name can be seen under the large ‘T’ signed ‘Diulgheroff ‘29’, the year that the Futurists arrived in Albissola for the first time).

In spite of Tullio’s plans to create exciting, new ceramics, the Futurists were actually rather understated with their first experiments in ceramics. Their reasons were most probably practical. Their lack of expertise and experience with working in ceramics, combined with the fact they wanted to sell their work to the public, meant their ceramics needed to be easy to make, recognisable and popular to a wide market.⁹³ Thus, early Futurist ceramics were functional in form and classical in design, and comprised largely of simply decorated plates, bowls and vases. Nicolaj Diulgheroff took a functional approach to design and conceived works for serial production and produced the promotional ashtrays, pitchers, and boxes designed for Cora and Campari as well as a popular tea service [Fig. 10]. The artist Giovanni Acquaviva designed a series of plates to commemorate the life of F.T. Marinetti [Fig. 11].⁹⁴

In 1929, *The Manifesto of Aeropainting* had a significant impact on Futurist ceramics design. The manifesto declared that the newest inspiration for Futurist art was “up in the sky.”⁹⁵ “The shifting perspectives of flight”, they write, “constitute an absolutely new reality...constructed by perpetual mobility; the painter should not observe and paint except by participating in their very velocity.”⁹⁶ Point five of the manifesto instructs the artist to capture the experience of flight and depict the landscape as it is seen from above, as if one were plunging through space:

assolutamente nuovo nell’arte ceramica Italiana. Niente che possa, anche lontanamente, ricordare le ceramiche vecchie, antiche, o preistoriche. Voglio fare delle ceramiche che rovescino la tradizione. Forme policentriche, antimitative, mecca niche. Strati colorati futuristi, violenti, abbaglianti, luminosi. Tecnica perfetta, ottenuta con materie locali, italiane, anche se povere, curandone accuratamente l’esecuzione.”

⁹³ Karen McCready and Garth Clark, *Art Deco and Modernist Ceramics* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2006), 22.

⁹⁴ Acquaviva also produced a series of ceramic plates dedicated to the life of Marinetti titled *Vita di Marinetti* (1939). Important episodes from Marinetti’s life, beginning with the 1909 publication of the first Futurist manifesto and ending with his poetry were represented on individual plates. One of the most famous plates from this series is *Fascismo Futurismo* (*Fascism Futurism*), an octagonal glazed ceramic plate with multi-coloured abstract and geometric designs surrounding at centre a large letter “F”. The Wolfson Collection.

⁹⁵ Rainey, Poggi, and Wittman, *Futurism an Anthology*, 283.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 284.

“all parts of the landscape appear to the painter in flight as:

- a) smashed
- b) artificial
- c) provisional
- d) as if they had fallen out of the sky”⁹⁷

Ceramics seemed an unlikely art form for the Futurists to fling through the air like *aeropittura*.⁹⁸ But the Futurists were keen to synthesise the new craze for aeroplanes and aerial perspective with all of their artistic endeavours, and this included ceramics. How they did this at first was not exactly radical in style nor form. The Futurists interpreted the ceramic plate as a canvas onto which images of aeroplanes and landscapes could be decorated. A prime example of this is *Aeroplani* by Tullio d’Albisola [Fig. 12].⁹⁹

Keen to establish ceramics as an artistic faction within Futurism, Tullio and the Futurists began to exhibit their ceramics widely around Milan and across Northern Italy. In 1929, at the “Thirty-three Futurists” Exhibition at the Pesaro Gallery in Milan, Tullio exhibited his hand-painted decorated terracotta tea service for six. A photograph of the exhibition shows Tullio leaning forward over his tea service, surrounded by other works of contemporary ceramics [Fig. 13]. On the back of this photograph is an inscription from F.T. Marinetti: “To Tullio Mazzotti...on the evening of his triumph at the Pesaro Gallery Futurist Exhibition. With deepest sympathy and Well doneee! F T Marinetti” [Fig. 14]. The following year, three ceramic dishes made by Farfa at the Mazzotti Factory were included in the exhibition “Futurist Exhibition: Architect Sant’Elia and 22 Futurist Painters” at the Pesaro Gallery in Milan. One of the photographs from this exhibition illustrates that the group were interested in how ceramics could be paired with other Futurist work; the artists Farfa, Tullio d’Albisola and F.T. Marinetti (from left to right) are pictured in front of a group of Farfa’s ceramic sculptures and in the background are a row of Futurist paintings [Fig. 15].

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 283.

⁹⁹ For descriptions of *aeropittura* see Bruno Mantura et al., *Futurism in Flight: ‘Aeropittura’ Paintings and Sculptures of Man’s Conquest of Space (1913-1945)*; [London, Accademia Italiana Delle Arti E Delle Applicate, 4 September - 13 October 1990 (Rome: DE LUCA, 1990), 33–36; Hulton, *Futurism & Futurisms*. Tullio designed the *Aeroplani* plate to advertise the Mazzotti enterprise and an illustration of the series was also published in Marinetti’s famous *Futurist Olfactory Tactile-Thermal Words-in-Freedom (Parole in liberta futuriste olfattive tattili-termiche)* from 1932.

To put the scale and extent of Futurist ceramics exhibited at this time into perspective, a further nine exhibitions were organised in 1930: “Triennial Exhibition of Modern Industrial and Decorative Arts” in Monza, Italy; “Futurist Art” in Alessandria, Italy; “Symbols of the Palio” in Asti, Italy; “International Exhibition” in Anversa, Belgium; “XXXI Friends of Art Exhibition” at the Promotrice Museum in Turin, Italy, where they exposed both sculptures and ceramics together; “Futurists of Turin”, at the Codebò Gallery in Turin, Italy; “International Sacred Art Exhibition” in Rome, Italy; “II Italian Nativity Exhibition” in Genoa, Italy; “Unica” an exhibition which displayed Tullio’s ceramics arranged by Nicolaj Diagheroff simultaneously in Milan, Turin, Rome, Venice and Genoa.¹⁰⁰

The following year, a further seven exhibitions were organised: “Sintesi Group Exhibition” at the Vitelli Gallery in Genoa, Italy; “Futurist Exhibition: Painting, Sculpture, Aeropainting, Decorative Arts, Architecture” at the Art Gallery in Florence, Italy; “Aeropainting Exhibition” in Genoa, Italy; “II Exhibition of the Ligurian Artists’ Union”; “Futurist Exhibition” in Savona, Italy; “Futurist Exhibition of Aeropainting and Set Design” at the Pesaro Gallery in Milan, Italy; “Futurist Art Exhibition” at the Permanent Exhibition building in Chiavari, Italy, with ceramics and sculptures. By 1931 then, ceramics were an integral part of Futurist art production. As its official site of production, the Mazzotti Factory in Albissola was clearly an important place to Futurists who worked with ceramics and design.

In 1932, the Mazzotti Factory introduced new designs into Futurist ceramics. This time, ceramic designs became significantly more experimental and shifted from largely functional forms with *aeropittura* imagery to abstract, sculptural pieces. Dissatisfied with the technique of simply transferring imagery of aeroplanes onto ceramic ware, the artist Fillia decided to experiment with a new direction. To Fillia, clay could represent aerodynamic forms, in other words, the properties of a solid object regarding the manner in which air flows around it. Fillia’s *Aerovasi* from 1932 are prime examples of what Marinetti and Tullio would champion as archetypal Futurist ceramics: “spherical and cubic forms...supported by slender bases [that] combine constructive forms with plastic, rotational pull.”¹⁰¹ They go beyond the two-dimensionality of *aeropittura* and attempt to render aerodynamics in three-dimensions –

¹⁰⁰ ‘Tullio d’Albisola Official Site: Tullio the Futurist’, accessed 20 April 2016, http://www.tulliodalbisola.it/en/tullio_futurist.html.

¹⁰¹ D’Albisola et al., *La ceramica futurista. Manifesto dell’Aeroceramica, opera e sintesi storica*.

often by incorporating several structures, including spherical forms, to hold parts together [Fig. 16].

The spherical form was a reoccurring motif in Fillia's work. The historian Enrico Crispolti argues that these forms represented "an interior, psychological and subjective world, unlike other Futurists of the period such as Prampolini and Depero."¹⁰² The ectoplasmic forms which appear in Fillia's paintings of the late twenties and early thirties were taken up to explore the subconscious and his interest in the spiritual aspects of art. This developed into religious painting between 1930 and 1933. He had large exhibitions at Padua (1931), La Spezia (1932) and Florence (1933) and in 1932 co-authored the *Manifesto of Sacred Futurist Art* with Marinetti. It is interesting to see then that Fillia's experiments in ceramics at the Mazzotti Factory ran parallel with his exploration of religious painting, in particular his use of the spherical or ectoplasmic form. His *L'Adorazione* from 1931, for example, depicts a shiny, spherical shape in the foreground [Fig. 17]. The *aerovasi*, which Fillia made only a year after this painting, transfigures the same shape into a three-dimensional ceramic sculpture. He was even able to produce the sheen which bounces off the spheres in his paintings by applying a clear, reflective glaze on the clay's surface.

At the same time Fillia was producing his *Aerovasi* in the Mazzotti Factory, Tullio's brother Torido Mazzotti created forms that imitated car parts, machine cogs, tools, and even weapons of war. Torido's ceramics represent the most well-known Futurist ideologies of this period; their obsession with machinery, cars, technology and violence. Torido produced a series of ceramics that attempted to morph ceramic vases and jars into objects of modern machinery and warfare. For example, *Vaso 'il mondo'* imitates a cog in a machine, *Vaso* resembles a ceramic spark plug and *La Bomba*, as its title suggests, a potential weapon [Fig. 18]. What is particularly interesting about Torido's ceramics is that at once they have playful and serious connotations. For example, not only does *Vaso* visually imitate the form of a ceramic spark plug, but it has the potential to actually function as one owing to its ceramic properties. This is because the function of the spark plug is to deliver an electric current which generates energy and the ceramic nip of the spark plug insulates the heat of this current. Thus *Vaso* is not only symbolic of a celebration of Italian commerce – the ceramic spark plug was a

¹⁰² Crispolti and Villa Gavotti (Albisola Superiore), *La ceramica futurista da Balla a Tullio D'Albisola*, 21.

popular tool in the manufacturing process of cars in Italy during this period – but also represents the Futurists synthesise of art and modern Italian culture.

Futurist ceramics were decorated with playful, brightly coloured paints and glazes. *Vaso Motorato* is a bright turquoise and *La Bomba* is patterned with orange, yellow, black, purple, and white spots. To produce these colours would have required a high level of expertise in ceramic glazing, and also specialist, scientific knowledge in mixing together certain pigments to create particular glaze effects. The large majority of Futurist ceramics were hand painted. However, in some cases, the futurists experimented with new techniques taken from industry. For example, the rough, matte texture of the surface of some Futurist ceramics was a spray typically used for covering everyday objects in factories, such as cars, and was adapted by the Futurists to be specifically used in finishing their ceramics.¹⁰³ This method introduced new technology, synonymous with car manufacturing, into a ceramics workshop that had been producing ceramics using the traditional methods of hand-modelling and throwing until the arrival of the Futurists. The introduction of new machinery, tools and equipment, such as the spray gun, therefore elevated and assimilated Futurist ceramics to that of design.

It is at this point that the relationship between handmade and industrial methods of making and producing ceramics at the Mazzotti Factory should be noted. Clearly, the futurists wanted to introduce new industrial processes to their ceramics to appeal to the Italian, modern consumer, however their objects still needed, to a degree, to be ‘artisanal’ to reflect Futurist aesthetics, such as in the hand-painting of *aeropittura* onto plates, or in Tullio d’Albisola’s case, in the expressively hand-painted designs of his vases. Despite wanting to take advantage of new technologies and advances in industry, and thus make their ceramics more relevant to the consumer market, the reality was that they still had to decorate their ceramics using the traditional method by hand to create the desired decorative effects.

This relationship between Futurism’s handmade and industrial methods of making is also seen through a series of technical drawings which were produced alongside their ceramics. In 1999, a small exhibition titled *Albissola/Faenza: andata e ritorno (roundtrip)* between 28 April – 30 May 1999, displayed a selection of Futurist ceramics alongside technical drawings

¹⁰³ The effect was obtained by using an airbrush to spray a paste of shiny, crystalline, opaque majolica and white clay, according to oral testimony by Bepi and Tullio Mazzotti, Torido’s son and nephew, respectively. It was also applied to functional, everyday objects in the factory and to decorative panels. See Silvia Barisione et al., *Parole e immagini futuriste: dalla collezione Wolfson* (Milano: Mazzotta, 2001), 67.

from Torido Mazzotti's design book.¹⁰⁴ This exhibition is the only known attempt to connect and discuss the relationship between the technical drawings and Futurist ceramics. It is in these drawings that we see the Futurists engaging with ceramics as more than just decorative or symbolic forms, but as design.¹⁰⁵ Each drawing gives precise measurements, cross-sections, dimensions and even the amount of clay to be used in kilograms. These details make the designs appear accurate to the untrained eye, yet it is not known whether these measurements are true to the ceramics then produced [Fig. 19]. In comparison, Fillia's "aereoceramica" drawings are notably less detailed and inaccurate. His 'disegno esecutivo per Aerovaso' gives an artistic impression of what will be, seen in the inclusion of apparently random numbers, '17, 16, 20' omitting exact measurements, and colours, 'rosso', 'nero', and 'argento lucido' [Fig. 20]. This suggests the drawing was used as guidance, rather than a technical prototype. For example, in the finished work 'Aerovaso' from 1932, Fillia chose 'smalto nero verdastro', a greenish black enamel instead of using his original design for a red and shiny silver finish.

In the same year that Fillia produced his aerovasi, he stated: "Why, then, shouldn't mural reliefs also be consistent with revolution, when a picture on the wall of a house is the open window to the landscapes of the mind."¹⁰⁶ With this statement, Fillia introduced another phase of Futurist ceramic production in Albissola during this period: the production of mosaic and mural art. The mural offered the Futurists a much larger canvas to experiment with new materials and, ultimately, engulf viewers in their depictions of modern transport, aerial and telecommunications. Mural art could synthesise panoramic and panoptic visions of *aeropittura* with new technologies in mosaic making on a much larger scale than ceramic vases could.

The idea to produce ceramic mosaics at the Mazzotti Factory was not however an entirely new phenomenon, but was based on earlier Futurist experiments in mural art. In 1934, the

¹⁰⁴ Crispolti and Villa Gavotti (Albisola Superiore), *La ceramica futurista da Balla a Tullio D'Albisola*.

¹⁰⁵ The author found only one source that suggested "they were used by the potter for shaping", implying that the drawings were exhibited for the first time in Fabbrica Casa Museo Giuseppe Mazzotti 1903, *Prime catalogo minimo a cura di Federico Marzinot* (edito in occasione della I Festa della Ceramica), 1993. As there are no dates on some of the drawings, it is possible that the Futurists could have created the drawings after the ceramic objects to further enhance their reputation as designers, not craftsmen or potters.

¹⁰⁶ Rainey, Poggi, and Wittman, *Futurism an Anthology*, 295.

Futurists published three articles on the topic of mural art in their new magazine *Stile Futurista*.¹⁰⁷ They proposed that mural art could deploy the panoramic and panoptic visions of *aeropittura* whilst synthesising Boccioni's earlier theories of 'plastic dynamism' to maximum effect. Displayed on a wall or wrapped around the four walls of a room, murals enabled the Futurists to finally "realise the dream of a total environment"¹⁰⁸:

"Architecture has been directly tied to industry, to contemporary products, to science—in short, to life. Which is why it must possess its constructive complement...with motifs of form and color that are in harmony with the building and the environment."¹⁰⁹

The mural enabled Futurists to synthesise what they termed the 'plastic arts' (i.e. ceramics) with advances in modern Italian technology and architecture. One famous example is Benedetta Cappa's *Syntheses of Communications (Sintesi delle comunicazioni)* murals for the Palermo post office made between 1933-1934. Comprising of five detachable panels, and displayed on two walls in groupings of two and three, Cappa's murals are devoted to subjects of aerial, maritime, terrestrial, telegraphic, and telephonic and radio communications [Fig. 21]. The *Sintesi* depicts houses as tiny specks dispersed among geometric patterns of fields or organised in an urban grid; the tapered silhouette of a soaring metal antenna, the prow of a ship parting the waves of the sea, the sinuous patterns of radio waves travelling through the electrically charged ether, and, as if the viewer is rising higher and higher into the skies, earth itself and the orbs of the surrounding planets. To Marinetti they managed to "fix" onto the wall the dynamism and simultaneity of a new way of being on earth.¹¹⁰

In 1938, Prampolini and Fillia produced a large scale mosaic for The Palace of the Post Office in La Spezia, Liguria, a vital naval port and the site of major military installations [Fig. 22]. Similar to Cappa's imagery, their mosaic depicts rail and maritime transportation, telecommunications and aerial communications that spiral into the ceiling at dizzying heights. In all, not only is it a celebration of technological communication but a celebration of communication that takes place above ground; the La Spezia, despite being made of

¹⁰⁷ Fillia and F. T. Marinetti, *Gli ambienti della nuova architettura* (Torino: Unione Tipografico-Editrice Torinese, 1935).

¹⁰⁸ Romy Golan, *Muralnomad: The Paradox of Wall Painting, Europe 1927-1957* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 47.

¹⁰⁹ Rainey, Poggi, and Wittman, *Futurism an Anthology*, 296.

¹¹⁰ Golan, *Muralnomad*, 48–49.

ceramics, isn't earth-bound, but aspires to be ethereal. A macro/microcosm effect is produced in the formal composition of the La Spezia mural: tiny mosaic pieces individually make up larger patterns and shapes that visualise the terrain of the Italian landscape and skies filled with planes and wires. This schema of seeing patterns and shapes from the largest scale (macrocosm) all the way down to the smallest piece of tesserae (microcosm) captures the cosmos in one plane of view.

The use of mosaic and tesserae, particularly the use of local coloured glass and ceramics, also had historical significance. In 1934, Enrico Prampolini coined the term *polimaterici* to describe what the Futurists were interested in doing with mosaics. As he stated in his 1934 manifesto “Beyond Painting: Toward Polimaterici” (“Al di là della pittura: Verso I polimaterici”):

“What will be the nature of this new mural painting? A return to Byzantium and Middle Ages? We will prove that the Italian race does not believe in such returns [...] Polimaterici will spiritualise matter.”¹¹¹

Prampolini's idea of “polimaterici” was in dialogue with new architectural design. The idea to use unusual materials in new ways was part of a larger mission to “overthrow” historical artistic production. Byzantine mosaics for example were weighed up against Futurist mural art as inferior – the plastic mural is the ideal art form to synthesise art and architecture. As Eva Ori argues, Prampolini advocated that the plasticity of murals “would be understood as an innovative macro-category of painting and sculpture.” Plastic walls were a distinctive element of the Futuristic movement that “in the context of mural art applied to the new architecture of the Fascist regime [...] as an alternative to mural painting.”¹¹² As well as its historical significance, technological advancements in mosaic making were being introduced. Mechanisation was introduced with the invention of vitreous glass tiles in the 1930s, which

¹¹¹ Balla et al., *Ricostruzione futurista dell'universo*, 53. (“A Polemical Manifesto: The Futurist Plastica Murale” [Un manifesto polemico: La plastica murale futurista]; “Plastica murale”; and “With These Ideas, We Participate in the Exhibition of Plastica Murale” [Partecipiamo alla mostra di plastica murale con queste idee]).

¹¹² For a comprehensive analysis of Prampolini's engagement with mural art, mosaics and the term “polimaterici” see Eva Ori, *Enrico Prampolini tra arte e architettura: teorie, progetti e Arte Polimaterica*, 2014, 124–26. Translation by author: [dell'arte polimaterica, intesa quest'ultima come macrocategoria artistica innovativa alla stregua di pittura e scultura. La plastica murale diventa quell'elemento distintivo del movimento futurista nel contesto dell'arte murale applicata alle nuove architetture del regime fascista, in alternativa alla pittura murale e diviene elemento caricato di valenze oltre che sociali, anche politiche.]

allowed coloured glass, sometimes mixed in with ceramics, to be poured into a mould to form small tiles. As Romy Golan notes, “these tiles were then stuck onto a paper facing, to be sold in square sheets, as they are to do this day. In this way, mosaic could be fixed over large areas much more quickly.”¹¹³ This would have been attractive to the Futurists for a number of reasons – including speed and mechanisation - because it allowed artists to combine the newest technology with Futurist art.

As designs for the La Spezia mural were beginning to shape, Prampolini and Tullio d’Albisola had already begun preliminary designs for a larger ‘Plastic Mural’ that would be exhibited at the 1940 Triennale in Naples [Fig. 23].¹¹⁴ These designs manifested as smaller prototype tiles, such as Prampolini’s *Figure*, c.1936-37, a terracotta tile with bas-relief decorations incorporating colours such as light green enamel, light blue, pink, ochre, brown, and blue [Fig. 24]. The quasi-abstract forms and earthy tones that bubble to the surface recall Prampolini’s early paintings such as his *Spatial-Landscape Construction* (1919) where forms are made up of large, flat areas of bold colours, predominantly red, orange, blue and dark green.¹¹⁵ However, as the title suggests, these “cosmic bodies” do not depict earthly, human figures but instead, biomorphic forms that resemble growing bacteria in a petri dish. Similar forms can be found in Prampolini’s *Biological Apparition* of 1941 [Fig. 25]. The ceramic medium enabled Prampolini to break away from two-dimensionality of painting and tap into ideas of “cosmic idealism” in three-dimensions. The tile’s bas-relief means that organic shapes are not only depicted as flat, but emerge from the surface like the physical, earthy terrain of a landscape; they emerge from the wall and protrude into the immediate surrounding space.

Despite the fact that Futurist ceramics have received hardly any attention in scholarship on Futurism, or indeed ceramics of this period, it was, as Garth Clark argues, one of the few experiments of its kind which deliberately set out to locate ceramics within a major fine arts

¹¹³ Tessa Hunkin, *Modern Mosaic: Inspiration from the 20th Century* (London: New Burlington Books, 2003), 90.

¹¹⁴ Current location unknown. Possibly demolished after the 1940 Triennale in Naples.

¹¹⁵ In his proposals for Futurist stage design, set forth in “Manifesto della scenografia futurista” (“Manifesto of Futurist Scenography”), Prampolini incorporates Giacomo Balla’s ideas about mechanical dynamism and the dematerialization of bodies through light; fascinated with the possibility of using technical means to remove the boundary between observer and performance, Prampolini suggests giving the moving, illuminated stage the primary role and replacing human actors with coloured gas and explosive noises.

movement.¹¹⁶ A number of reasons jump out as to why it has been side-lined in scholarship. One is that an important paradox sits at the heart of Futurism's relationship with the ceramic medium. No matter how emphatically the Futurists professed to "overthrow tradition" their use of designs such as the tea pot, jug and vase meant that tradition was still at the centre of production. Their aspirations to imitate existing technology or functional machines, such as bombs, spark plugs or airplanes speeding above the earth, embedded, moulded, fired and transixed into hard-wearing, durable objects for generations to come is at odds with Futurism's commitment to "the depiction of the very latest technological advances and with their embrace of motion and change."¹¹⁷ Thus, the paradox of using ceramics to champion ideas of movement and motion provoked moments of uncertainty for the Futurists. For example, their ideas concerning speed and plasticity were complicated by the solid and motionless forms they produced and they frequently interchanged between functional and abstract ceramic forms.

The ceramics that were created during this period were composed using a number of Futurist stylistic elements which produced a myriad of forms and designs that reflected the different ideologies and strands of artists' styles. Futurist ceramics can on the one hand be considered experimental, in that artists explored many different forms for ceramics, rather than developing a coherent, universal style. Yet on the other hand, Futurist ceramics can also be described as a pastiche, in that the aesthetic and forms of the objects themselves were only ever variations on themes prominent within the Futurist movement such as flight, war and machines.

The Manifesto of Aeroceramica (1938)

One of the most interesting documents created during this period was the *Manifesto of Aeroceramica*, a five-page manifesto co-authored and written in 1938 by F.T. Marinetti and Tullio d'Albisola [Fig. 26 – 34].¹¹⁸ The manifesto explicitly cites Albissola as the "ceramic

¹¹⁶ McCready and Clark, *Art Deco and Modernist Ceramics*, 23.

¹¹⁷ Golan, *Muralnomad*, 318. Golan also expresses a similar idea about Futurist murals more generally: "Petrified into the surfaces of walls for posterity was at odds with their unswerving dedication to the depiction of the very latest technological advances and with their embrace of motion and change."

¹¹⁸ Marinetti, *La ceramica futurista*. Reprint from T. D'Albisola, *La ceramica futurista*. First published in *Gazzetta del Popolo*, Torino, 7 settembre 1938, article signed by F.T. Marinetti. The copy that is referred to in this thesis can be found in the special collections of the Taylor

capital of Italy” and an important site of Futurist art and ceramics production. It has been overwhelmingly ignored in scholarship, possibly due to the fact that it has never been considered a ‘critical’ text, yet the manifesto’s central role in the promotion of Albissola as a central hub of Futurist art production is indubitable.¹¹⁹ Because of its lack of scholarly analysis, its content is open for interpretation. One of the main themes which runs through the manifesto is the relationship between ceramics and touch, or more specifically, that Futurist ceramics should be understood as an “improvement on tactilism.” This brings to mind Marinetti’s early interests in tactile art, specifically his tin books and tactile panels, which suggests that ceramics were perceived as improvements on these early Futurist art forms. For these reasons it is worth exploring the manifesto in more detail and examining its content in relation to Futurist ceramics production in Albissola.

On whole, the manifesto presents Futurist ceramics production as synonymous with the idea of Albissola as a new, Futuristic “ceramic capital of Italy”.¹²⁰ One could argue that the manifesto’s aim was not only to spread the word amongst Futurists that Albissola was the movement’s headquarters for ceramics, but to also erase its legacy as a historical town associated with traditional Italian ceramics production. The manifesto re-writes a new history of Albissola which begins with a narration of Futurism’s thirty-year victory as a movement and ends with instructions to form a synthesis of new art and architecture in Albissola. Under this new aegis, F.T. Marinetti and Tullio propose that “ceramic simultaneity”, a form of tactile and environmental art, will flourish. They conclude by claiming that Futurist ceramics production in Albissola will “confirm the prophecy of Umberto Boccioni in his immortal work *Plastic Dynamism* of 1912.”¹²¹

The manifesto’s format is similar to most other Futurist manifestos. Presented as a set of alphabetised and numbered guidelines, the manifesto introduces a list of what the Futurists wanted their ceramics to represent:

Institute, University of Oxford. All quotations which have been taken from this document have been translated from the original Italian into English by the author.

¹¹⁹ The manifesto is not included in recent Futurist anthologies and critical writings, such as Willard Bohn, *Italian Futurist Poetry* (University of Toronto Press, 2005); F. T Marinetti, Günter Berghaus, and Doug Thompson, *Critical Writings* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2008); Rainey, Poggi, and Wittman, *Futurism an Anthology*.

¹²⁰ Marinetti, *La ceramica futurista*. “Agosto XVI Albisola capitale ceramica d’Italia”

¹²¹ Ibid. “[...]conferma la profezia di Umberto Boccioni che nel 1912 scriveva nella sua opera immortale *Pittura e Scultura Futuriste Dinamismo Plastico*...”

“A The synthetic, documentary, and dynamic *Aeropittura* of landscapes and urban areas seen from above.

B The lyrical transformative *Aereopittura* inebriated with space and danger.

C The essential *Aereopittura* mystical and symbolic.

D The stratospheric cosmic biochemistry astronomical *aereopittura* of the infinitely large and the infinitely small. ”¹²²

It then goes on to list four strategies that the Futurist collective should implement when they first come into contact with the ceramic medium:

“1. Multi-tactile ceramics (an improvement of Tactilism invented by Marinetti and Benedetta [Cappa])

2. We, the Futurists, want to make ceramic simultaneities of contrasting or harmonizing moods.

3. Square and streets of ceramic gold - terraces and fountains of indigo-ceramics.

4. Extensive authentic skies made of ceramics irrigated by fresh waters, and dripping fragrances, flowers and sunshine in abundance.”¹²³

The manifesto is written using a free-word poetry known as “words-in-freedom”, first popularised by Marinetti in his manifestos. While early Futurist poetry used free verse, Marinetti’s 1912 invention of parole in libertà (“words in freedom”) was a type of poetry liberated from the constraints of linear typography and conventional syntax and spelling. The first example of the technique, Marinetti’s ‘Battaglia Peso Odore’ (‘Battle Weight Smell’, 1912), evokes his experience of the Libyan War as confused simultaneous sensations:

¹²² Ibid. “A. L’aereopittura sintetica documentaria dinamica di paesaggi e urbanismi visti dall’alto; B. L’aereopittura trasfiguratrice lirica ebbra di spazio e pericolo; C. Il’aereopittura essenziale mistica e simbolica; D. L’aereopittura stratosferica cosmica biochimica astronomica dell’infinitamente grande e dell’infinitamente piccolo.”

¹²³ Ibid. “1. la ceramica multitattile (perfezionamento del TATTILISMO inventato da MARINETTI e BENEDETTA [Cappa]; 2. delle simultaneità ceramiche di stati d’animo contrastanti o armonizzanti [...] forza toni privi di verismo forme e colori non narrative né descrittivi ma suggestive; 3. strade e piazza d’oroceramico – terrazze e fontane di indacoceramico; 4. vasti autentici cieli di ceramic irrigate d’acque fresche e grondanti profumi fiori e sole da vendere o regalare[...].”

“Mezzogiorno $\frac{3}{4}$ flauti gemiti solleone tumbtumb allarme Gargaresch schiantarsi
crepitazione Marcia Tintinnio zaini fucili zoccoli chiodi cannoni criniere ruote
cassoni.

12.45 flutes groans heat tumbtumb alarm Gargaresch crashing cracking march
Jingling knapsacks rifles hooves nails cannons manes wheels ammunition-chests.”¹²⁴

Similarly, the Manifesto of Aeroceramica describes Albissola using nouns not linked together by logic but arguably by analogies:

“esempio servizio da tavola <vacanze> sintesi dinamica calda verde montano e blu
marino con sensazioni di sabbie rocce vento resina fumo altezze e gioia oppure
piscine voluttuosa con parete fondo e soffitto maiolicati che diano la carnalita
affascinante di una bellissima donna nuda senza particolari...

Example: an ‘holiday’ tableware warm dynamic synthesis between an alpine green
and a blue marine enriched by sensations of a voluptuous swimming-pool with
ceramic floor and ceiling that mimics the fascinating bodily sensuality of a naked
women, without details.”¹²⁵

This type of writing is littered throughout the manifesto, and is used to expand on the manifesto’s principal guidelines. For example, the fourth strategy – presented as “extensive authentic skies” is explained further by equating Albissola with Capri and the naval port of Portofino. In Albissola, the sea (“of Portofino”) and the sky (“of Capri”) will collapse into each other to create a whole environment of ceramics. They explain further that “irrigated water and fresh flowers, sun drenched perfume to sell or give away in this northern city” will synthesise with its “double speed cars, trucks, and trains and electric wires will connect the sea to the land.” In doing so, Marinetti and Tullio d’Albisola make it clear to the reader that Albissola is a perfect synthesis of all that the Futurists revered in a place fit for the production of Futurist art; a mixture of organic and natural forms, such as the sea, flowers, sun, with mechanical and industrial power, such as skies of electric wires and smoke bleachers.

¹²⁴ Laura Dondi and Luciano De Maria, *Marinetti e i futuristi: a cura di Luciano De Maria ; con la collab. di Laura Dondi*. (Milano: Garzanti, 1994), 89.

¹²⁵ Marinetti, *La ceramica futurista*.

The significance of the use of the term “tactilism” in this manifesto is important. It recalls the importance of touch in Marinetti’s earlier artistic practice. As Pierpaolo Antonello argues, Marinetti’s “tactilism was designed to become an instrument to implement a total revolution of perception, reconfiguring all social and living experiences of the human being, in order to obliterate the modern (and modernist) separation between art and life praxis.”¹²⁶ In 1921, Marinetti announced this new direction in Futurist artistic practice with the presentation of the first tactile panels in Paris, followed by two manifestos, the “Futurist Manifesto of Tactilism” (1921) and “Toward the Discovery of New Senses” (1924). These portable panels were covered with variously textured materials meant to be felt with open hands and impotent eyes (either covered with a blindfold or blinded by bright light). Only a handful of these panels remain. The most famous one, titled *Sudan-Paris*, is comprised of rough sandpaper, sponges, wire brushes, and slick oil paint, all of which Marinetti felt to be suggestive of one locale or the other. The “viewer” was meant to experience those places by touching the panel through a “journey of the hands.”¹²⁷

Lauren Kaplan argues that Marinetti’s interest in touch as a form of artistic practice can be traced back to his earlier time in the army: “Why this sudden concern... for tactile awareness? How can we square this sensitive experiment with Marinetti’s earlier truculence?”¹²⁸ Kaplan recalls Marinetti’s 1921 manifesto when he reflects on his time in the army: “It was precisely with giving myself over to this exercise [of touching] in the underground darkness of a trench in Gorizia, in 1917, that I made my first tactile experiments.”¹²⁹ Thus, in response to the effects of temporary blindness, while also seeing others become permanently sightless, Marinetti invented ‘tactilism’ as a way of rehabilitating wounded men by generating a form of art that did not depend upon vision.

It is not surprising then that Marinetti understood ceramics as an art form that could “improve” upon earlier forms of tactilism - one of the most tactile art materials, clay was not only satisfying to work with, texturally for example, but captured and preserved the touch of

¹²⁶ Elza Adamowicz and Simona Storchi, *Back to the Futurists: The Avant-Garde and Its Legacy* (Oxford University Press, 2015), 50.

¹²⁷ For a scientific reading of the tactile panels, and the importance of the sense of touch for Marinetti, see Domenico Pietropaolo, ‘Science and the Aesthetics of Geometric Splendour in Italian Futurism’, in Günter Berghaus, *Futurism and the Technological Imagination* (Amsterdam; New York, N.Y.: Rodopi, 2009), 41–61.

¹²⁸ ‘Reevaluating Futurism’, *Artsy*, 3 April 2014, <https://www.artsy.net/article/laurenalbie-reevaluating-futurism>.

¹²⁹ Marinetti, Berghaus, and Thompson, *Critical Writings*, 371–76.

the artist. To this end, the *Manifesto of Aeroceramica* can be read as a declaration of ceramics as one of the most important art forms that could not only engage with touch on an immediate level, but could perpetuate the Futurist's touch. At the same time the Futurists were exploring ceramics as a tactile art form, Marinetti was also experimenting with metal in book form. The 'Tin Book' from 1932, also known as *Parole in Libertà Futuriste Olfattive Tattili Termiche* ('*Futurist Words in Freedom - Olfactory, Tactile, Thermal*'), is made entirely of tin with text and colour designs lithographically reproduced over 30 pages [Fig. 35]. It is perhaps the most famous example of Marinetti's explorations with metal and was recently acquired by the British Library in 2014 to mark the centenary year of the founding of Futurism.¹³⁰

The *Manifesto of Aeroceramica* propelled a specific image of Albissola to the reader, one that sought to reinvent its history as a town fuelled by Futurist art, industry and power. Using *parole in libertà* the Futurists synthesised the natural Ligurian landscape with modern urbanisation - smokestacks, electric wires and bleachers pop up along the town's idyllic coastal terrain. One could argue that Futurist ceramics production was not only about the *making* of ceramics, but about creating an image of Albissola as a place representative of some of the most important Futurist ideologies of this period - a place that was essentially utopian, but held Albissola and ceramics at its core.

Of all the artists who are credited in helping transform Albissola into a Futurist hub, the name Lucio Fontana is one that seems unlikely. Yet he is championed in the manifesto as synonymous with "abstractionism", which Marinetti argues "created the early Futurists as was recognised by Mondrian." Even though Marinetti seems to pair Fontana's ceramics practice in Albissola with the efforts of Futurism, this was not exactly the case. Whilst both

¹³⁰ F. T. Marinetti and Tullio D'Albisola, *Parole in libertà: futuriste olfattive tattili-termiche* (Roma: Edizioni futuriste di poesia, 1932). More significant however is that not only does it contain a selection of texts by F.T. Marinetti exploring words and physical interactions with olfactory, tactile and thermal sensations, but each verse is accompanied with a small illustration by Tullio d'Albisola. *Parole in libertà* was the first of only two Futurist 'lithotin' books ever produced. The second tin book, *L'Anguria lirica* ('The lyrical watermelon'), was published in 1934 with poems by Tullio d'Albisola, drawings by Bruno Munari and Nicolai Diulgheroff, and a preface by Marinetti. Both books were printed in Savona by Lito-Latta, a tin products factory owned by Vincenzo Nosenzo, a former sea captain and a friend and patron of the Futurists who hoped that this publishing venture would earn him extra publicity as several copies of the book were intended for distribution to the political and cultural elite (of the 101 copies printed only 50 were offered for sale). Its publication was shared by Nosenzo's firm, which was responsible for the book's production and Marinetti's Futurist publishing house 'Poesia' in Rome.

Fontana and the Futurists experimented with ceramics at the Mazzotti Factory during the same period, they produced very different results. This is why this chapter has chosen to separate the two, despite the fact that they were working at the Mazzotti Factory in the same period. This chapter now turns to an exploration of Fontana's experiments in these early years.

Lucio Fontana (1936-1939)

In 1934, Lucio Fontana was introduced to Tullio d'Albisola by Edoardo Perisco during a visit to Genoa. Tullio invited Fontana to the Mazzotti Factory and offered to show him how to make ceramics and experiment with form and colour. Specifically, Fontana was interested in making a series of ceramic wild horses, however he did not arrive at the Mazzotti Factory until two years later in 1936.¹³¹ Between 1936 and 1939, Fontana travelled between the Mazzotti Factory and his art studio in Milan. The ceramics Fontana produced during this period were completely different in appearance and form to what the Futurists were producing at the same time in the Mazzotti Factory. While the Futurists were inspired by clay's capacity to represent their modern mechanical and technological ideologies, Fontana was more interested in clay's potential to represent changes in states of material, such as the flux and metamorphosis of material. This section takes a closer look at the ceramics Fontana made between 1936 and 1939 and teases out some of the main points that revolve around his ceramics of this period: anti-tradition, clay's natural agency, and the spectator's role in viewing his ceramics.

The working environment inside the Mazzotti Factory is captured in a photograph from 1936 [Fig. 36]. Fontana is joined by several local ceramicists, workshop assistants, and Tullio d'Albisola's father, Giuseppe 'Bausin' Mazzotti, founder of the first Mazzotti workshop in 1903. In the foreground, bisque-fired Futurist vases wait to be glazed and fired for a second time. At the centre, Giuseppe Mazzotti places a hand proudly on Fontana's *Cocodrillo* (*Crocodile*) [Fig. 37]. In the far distance, Fontana and an assistant work on a fresh mound of grès that shares a formal resemblance to the crocodile's companion, a giant turtle. On the far right, Eliseo Salino, the ceramicist who would eventually work with Asger Jorn in Albissola in the late 1950s, adds touches to a large mound of clay which would become Fontana's

¹³¹ Sarah Whitfield and Hayward Gallery (London), *Lucio Fontana* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1999), 176.

sculpture *Lions*. This photograph demonstrates the varied work which was being made by both Fontana and the Futurists at the Mazzotti factory during this period. However, one thing is quite clear from this image that the workshop has been entirely given over to Fontana's larger experiments by 1936. Hefty, rough and messy, Fontana's large mounds are the antithesis of Futurist ceramics, yet this photograph suggests they were welcomed by artists and ceramicists working at the Factory in the same period.

Fontana is shown working directly and impulsively with the material at hand – there are no prototypes, models or technical drawings in sight. Not only would this have been a new way of working with clay for the ceramicists at the Mazzotti, who were used to the precision and technology of the Futurists for many years, but suggests a new relationship with clay, one based on an instinctual, immediate and impulsive relationship with the material.

Fontana's first encounter with clay as an artist material was not at the Mazzotti factory, however, but much earlier when he was a student of Adolf Wildt at the Brera Academy in 1922. His relationship with clay began in purely traditional terms; modelling clay was a staple of sculpture classes in the academy and terracotta figures had a long and legitimate role in sculptural tradition as this thesis' introduction briefly touched upon.¹³² After leaving the academy, Fontana continued to work with clay. He produced a series of earthenware tablets, into each he cut drawings of human figures and painted after firing. This series resulted in his first solo exhibition of ceramic work in 1931 at the Galleria del Milione in Milan.¹³³

Fontana therefore had a working knowledge of clay when he arrived in Albissola, but this was in a relatively novice capacity, his understanding of ceramics was that clay was a prototype material that would develop the process of sculpting in marble. A turning point in Fontana's relationship with clay was at the Mazzotti Factory when he began to use the kiln in making his ceramics experimental glazes and surface treatment with the help of Tullio. He began experimenting with glazes and the results produced new forms and effects. Fontana's first series of ceramics was a group of large animals, some life-scale and some in miniature. This ceramic ark, comprised of lions, tigers, giraffes, crocodiles has been described by Garth Clark as "charming to the point of whimsy, like huge 3-D illustrations of children's

¹³² John Pagliaro, *Shards: Garth Clark on Ceramic Art* (New York: Distributed Art Publishers, 2004), 48.

¹³³ Whitfield and Hayward Gallery (London), *Lucio Fontana*, 175.

books.”¹³⁴ As his knowledge of ceramics progressed, Fontana began to produce more sophisticated and technical effects with his glazes and surface treatment. Fontana’s experiments at the Mazzotti can be separated into two explorations of a material known as grès and *gran fuoco*, a technique of high-firing ceramics.

Grès

Perhaps the most singular work that Fontana produced during this period is *Lions* (1936) [Fig. 38]. Installed in the garden of the Mazzotti Factory, among the rocks and plants where it continues to live today, *Lions* is a sculpture made from grès. Nowadays, grès is used as a binding agent in substances such as cement because of its vitreous, non-porous properties and resistance to easily change shape. It is an extremely solid and dense material, but also has a rocky, gritty texture that is similar to the surface of wet cement. Over time, the weathering process makes grès slowly disintegrate. Fontana’s unusual choice of material for *Lions* is anything but accidental: Fontana used grès to deliberately evoke ideas of disintegration. *Lions* is therefore less about the subject matter of large cats and more about the subject of what it is actually made from. Shapes are barely identifiable as animal and instead suggest “figurative elements understood as organic products or variations on the earth itself, and they merge with the earth without any precise line of demarcation.”¹³⁵ Instead of a clearly defined, realistic portrayal of an animal, *Lions* is a lumpy, indistinct form that “seems to be choking in rubble” whilst slowly erupting out of, and simultaneously sinking into, its surroundings.¹³⁶

These descriptions suggest a contradiction in the materiality of *Lions*; on the one hand they propose that the sculpture is made from a natural material, as if it is from the earth. This is contravened by the fact that it is actually made of a very non-natural material, a distant relative of concrete. It is this contradiction that projects uneasiness onto the viewer, like we cannot fully comprehend *Lions* materiality because it is neither natural nor synthetic. Adrian Forty discusses this effect in terms of the unpopularity of concrete and its inherent ‘imperfections’. He argues that the success of concrete “rests upon an imperfection” in that it does not “conform to the expectations that we have of synthetic products [plastic]. It is much

¹³⁴ Pagliaro, *Shards*, 52.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ Anthony White, *Lucio Fontana: Between Utopia and Kitsch*. (Place of publication not identified: Mit Press, 2014), 100.

more like a natural material in its failure to be perfect.”¹³⁷ Forty argues that concrete’s “defects are inescapable, indeed essential” because it has to crack in order to work properly. We can think of this as similar to Fontana’s efforts here - by exposing grès to the elements Fontana exploits the material’s “natural imperfections” which becomes the meaning of the work itself.¹³⁸

Lions creates a sense of uneasiness from its materiality by suggesting the idea of the potential to turn into something else or another state of matter than its actual fixed form. It is fixed to the earth but also expresses fluidity which evokes that of recently hardened lava or clouds of ash that cover the ground after a volcanic eruption. In 1939, some years after he produced *Lions*, Fontana wrote a short piece about his time in Albissola titled “La mia ceramica” (My ceramics). The ways in which he writes about clay suggests that Fontana was aware of the paradox innate in his work, declaring that “the material looked like it had been hit by an earthquake, yet it was motionless.”¹³⁹ This suggests that Fontana was keen to perpetuate the idea of sculpture as in a state of flux, or an object that was not separate from its environment but constantly evolving or reshaping into solid matter. Here, however, instead of matter being shaped by invisible forces of energy, Fontana presents us with solid, tangible matter that slowly disintegrates into its surroundings.

The shapeless quality to *Lions* inspired critics of the time to describe Fontana’s work as “like wild nature... that doesn’t find form or body” and “a kind of expressionistic use of matter that anticipates the informal.”¹⁴⁰ Yves-Alain Bois later interpreted this ‘formless’ quality in Fontana’s work as an instance of “base materialism” which attacks art’s tendency toward sublimation: “He took stock of what could be called, to use George Bataille’s term, his “base materialism”, [Fontana] rapidly arrived at sculptures that look like shapeless piles that seem to advocate the possibility of formlessness – what Bataille called the *informe*.”¹⁴¹ For Bois, Fontana’s ceramics inhabit Bataille’s sense of the *informe* “as anything that cannot be thought [and] that cannot be articulated. It is mud and filth, those substances.”¹⁴² Bois refers

¹³⁷ Adrian Forty, *Concrete and Culture*. (Place of publication not identified: Reaktion Books, 2016), 52.

¹³⁸ Fontana et al., *Lucio Fontana - Sculpture*, 43.

¹³⁹ Lucio Fontana, “La mia ceramica,” *Tempo*, September 21, 1939. Reprinted in Whitfield and Hayward Gallery (London), *Lucio Fontana*, 74–75.

¹⁴⁰ Antonio Corpora, ‘Lucio Fontana’, *La Ceramica* 11, no. 4 (1940): 245.

¹⁴¹ Yve-Alain Bois, ‘Fontana’s Base Materialism’, *Art in America* 77 (April 1989): 245.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*

to the idea of “base materialism” in his interpretation of the ceramics that Fontana made on his “permanent return to Italy” in 1947, yet his analogy also makes sense when applied to Fontana’s grès sculptures from ten years previous.¹⁴³ According to Bois, the sheer stuff of what it’s made from - the clay- stops us from transcending its scatological nature.¹⁴⁴

Fontana also experimented with much smaller works in grès, including pieces such as *Horse* [Fig. 39] and *Grapes, Vines, Leaves and Melon* [Fig. 40], also from 1936. The effect of using grès on a much smaller scale is arguably less powerful than presenting the untreated material in large, sculpted mounds. However, in small amounts, Fontana was able to accentuate subject matter in more detail. For example, in *Grapes, Vines, Leaves and Melon*, the Western tradition of the still-life and tableware made from decorative porcelain is represented as crumbling, disintegrating matter. In similar vein, *Horse* attacks Fontana’s own contribution to Edoardo Persico’s *Hall of Honor* of the same year, a sculptural group that had included two regal white horses made from marble [Fig. 41].¹⁴⁵ By descaling these objects, Fontana engages in wider discussions of the use of non-traditional materials to make sculpture. In the early 1900s, grès was used as a binding property in the making of high-fired porcelain (grand feu) made popular at the Sèvres factory under the guidance of the French potter Taxile Doat. Doat’s methods were used in creating some of the most exquisite and ornate ceramics of the first half of the twentieth century. His famous treatise, *Grand Feu Ceramics: A Practical Treatise on the Making of Fine Porcelain and Grès*, published in 1905, helped spread his discoveries internationally. Thus, by turning a material associated with grandeur and finery, into sculptures of large, lumpy and cumbersome mounds of earth, Fontana, literally, debases the splendour associated with grès and porcelain.

Gran fuoco

A year later, Tullio introduced Fontana to *gran fuoco* (glazed ceramics) which led him to make a series of ceramic work that incorporated fire and colour as expressive mediums as

¹⁴³ Ibid.

¹⁴⁴ Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind E Krauss, *Formless: A User’s Guide* (New York: Zone, 1998), 71.

¹⁴⁵ Penelope Curtis and J. Paul Getty Museum, *Patio and Pavilion: The Place of Sculpture in Modern Architecture* (Los Angeles; London: J. Paul Getty Museum ; Ridinghouse, 2008), 29–41. for a reading of Edoardo Persico’s *Hall of Honor* at the VI Triennale di Milano that includes an analysis of Fontana’s sculpture as “hallucinatory”.

well as the clay itself. His first series made between 1937 and 1938 comprised of approximately fifty individual pieces inspired by marine life. Subject matter included depictions of sea animals and plant life as well as more general subject matters relating to the sea. In later years, Fontana referred to this series collectively as his “shiny and petrified aquarium” and it is not hard to see why.¹⁴⁶ The appearances of these objects suggest that of found clay or the remnants of a scientific experiment gone horribly wrong. Each piece can be described as gloopy, slimy and amorphous in nature. Disfigured seahorses, algae, crabs and butterflies emerge from small mounds of sticky clay and ‘petrify’ into static shapes; green seaweed-like tentacles slither around on dark, viscous backgrounds and luminous glints, produced by light hitting reflective glaze, continuously shift and change as the viewer moves around each piece. Such depictions of marine life are unlike those found in traditional ‘still-life’: Fontana’s ceramic creatures wobble and shimmer as if one were looking at them through rippling water.

One of the most interesting effects that Fontana introduced into this series was that of a gloss-glaze - a thin, shiny, translucent glaze that gives off iridescent affect. The iridescence of the glaze creates the appearance of a wet and glistening surface, akin to the surface of the sea. This is most apparent in *Butterflies* from 1937 where the iridescence creates an impression of a sticky texture; instead of gaily fluttering above water, these insects seem to be disintegrating in their efforts to struggle out of an oil slick [Fig. 42]. This interpretation of the sea is not necessarily serene or calm, but overpowering and violent. Imagery of the sea in this way recalls motifs that the Futurists in their free-form, visual poetry.¹⁴⁷ Some similarities emerge between the Futurists’ rhetoric of the sea and Fontana’s descriptions of his marine ceramics: “a multitude of strange, shapeless fish, unknown corals and jellyfish” in Luciano Folgore’s poem *The Submarine* recalls Fontana’s “new and weird shells, rocks, and octopuses, and weird animals that have never existed.”¹⁴⁸ Likewise, Marinetti’s description of the sea as, “the gold detritus of seaweed refracts the rays of the sun, colouring the sea in

¹⁴⁶ Whitfield and Hayward Gallery (London), *Lucio Fontana*, 74–75.

¹⁴⁷ The most explicit reference to touch in Marinetti’s manifesto on tactilim: “I was naked in the silky water that had been torn by the rocks, by foaming scissors, knives, and razors [...]. I was naked in a sea of flexible steel,” in Rainey, Poggi, and Wittman, *Futurism an Anthology*, 264–70. This description evokes a variety of metallic objects, metaphors not only for the ‘cutting’ rocks but also for the water. See also Abbie Garrington, *Haptic Modernism: Touch and the Tactile in Modernist Writing*. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Univ Press, 2015), 33–34.

¹⁴⁸ Rainey, Poggi, and Wittman, *Futurism an Anthology*, 447–49; Whitfield and Hayward Gallery (London), *Lucio Fontana*, 74–75.

green, violet, orange, etc. in a thousand ways” could be mistaken for a description of Fontana’s vitreous ceramic forms and iridescent glazes.

Fontana’s ceramics arguably recall Roland Barthes’ description of the material plastic as “more than a substance...it is the very idea of its infinite transformation; it is ubiquity made visible.”¹⁴⁹ This effect, where one form changes into another, is implemented in two distinct ways in Fontana’s ceramics. The first is embedded in the surface, which is activated when one moves around the object as violet glints begin to shimmer in ways that appear to detach away from the surface. The second is Fontana’s deliberate revelation of the processes involved in making a ceramic work. Instead of using a thick, iridescent paint to cover his ceramic objects, Fontana chooses a transparent glaze that exposes the firing process. In other words, the clay’s metamorphosis from soft, wet earth to hardened ceramic in the kiln.

It is clear that Fontana was not only interested in the different physical states that clay could take, but how the artist could perpetuate colour, form and light through the different stages of making ceramics and how the artist was not always in control of the outcome. How the material is formed is subjected to powers outside that of the artist, as he describes in “La mia ceramica”:

“I could shape a submarine landscape...and press pure pigment on to it which the heat of the kiln would then amalgamate. The kiln was a kind of intermediary: it made the form and colour permanent.”¹⁵⁰

Fontana highlights the tension between the artists’ impression upon the clay, and the fire that needs to transform it into the ceramic form. Fontana was conscious of the fact that it is not the artist who makes these works permanent but that the fire could be an “intermediate” expressive medium in its own right.

Whilst Fontana’s ceramics appear to move and morph as the spectator moves around them, this is complicated by the fact that they are also motionless, having been fired and solidified in a hot kiln over a period of time. It suggests that to view these works is to encounter them and that the viewer a vital part of this process. The Italian poet and critic Raffaele Carrieri

¹⁴⁹ Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2013), 138–39.

¹⁵⁰ Whitfield and Hayward Gallery (London), *Lucio Fontana*, 74–75.

brings this idea out nicely when in 1939 he compared viewing Fontana's ceramics to that of "a fantastic voyage":

"We are spectators and performers at the same time; we walk around these bunches of petrified snails with a movement that is almost that of swimming. Minerals detach themselves from the surface and glimmer with a maleficent light; the material frees itself from the usual molds and lives autonomously, it progresses before our eyes, it is a continual metamorphosis. It is enough to walk around in order to witness the free expansion of the forms."¹⁵¹

Carrieri's description demonstrates the experiential nature of these objects. It is only by walking around these objects that the "material frees itself." As light bounces off the rugged and textured surface that is covered in an iridescent glaze, ultra-violet shimmers, or "minerals", begin to "detach themselves from the surface." Not only does this effect create the impression that the surface "lives autonomously", but it also makes the viewer aware of their own location as they move around the objects. The viewer becomes complicit in this effect. In other words, to gain better sense of them, one must travel around them.¹⁵² But this act of circumnavigating in order to understand these works, as Carreri put it, does not always allow the viewer to achieve a "direct and immediate comprehension" of his works.¹⁵³ This act of circumnavigating, carried out by the viewer, apprehends them as both "spectators and performers at the same time."¹⁵⁴ The glints appear only once the viewer begins to move around the object, making their movements complicit in the experiential encounter of these objects.

From September to November of 1937, Fontana was an artist in residence at the Manufacture Nationale de Sèvres. He wrote of his time at Sèvres later in mythic terms, as a collision between his art and the preciousness of the Sèvres court porcelains: "I took a Minotaur into the laboratories that had served the tables of all the Louis of France, a Minotaur on a lead that butted the porcelain baskets and the biscuit allegories with its horns."¹⁵⁵ In fact Carrieri noted in the same year that Fontana "had broken away from the old symbolism in majolica and

¹⁵¹ Raffaele Carrieri, 'Le maoiliche geologiche di Lucio Fontana', *L'illustrazione Italiana* 66, no. 2 (1939): 64.

¹⁵² Ibid.

¹⁵³ Ibid.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵⁵ Whitfield and Hayward Gallery (London), *Lucio Fontana*, 75.

porcelain, inventing new forms and solar compositions. It was as if Sèvres clay, which had been used to honour the court with precious and transparent polished surfaces, had been smitten by a devilish and capricious breath.”¹⁵⁶

Fontana took the techniques he had learned at Sèvres back to the Mazzotti factory. In 1938, Fontana stopped using reflective glazes in favour of covering raw clay with intensely coloured paint that gives a thick, matte finish. Despite covering the clay completely, the thick paint does not diminish its materiality, but emphasises it. This is exemplified in works such as *Banana and Pear*, and *Three Horses*, where Fontana’s use of colour goes further in challenging prevailing taste in art than the subject matter of his small grès sculptures or his “aquarium” [Fig. 43]. By covering his ceramics with a thick, painterly glaze, Fontana subverted the long standing tradition of Sèvres industry of the carefully crafted and hand-painted ceramics. Here, Fontana deliberately conjures up an excessive, luxurious use of sumptuous colour through his garish hot-pink and black lions, metallic bananas and slimy, decaying still-life’s, which contemporary critics read unequivocally as kitsch.¹⁵⁷ In doing so, Fontana loudly proclaims the ruin of those modes associated with the mass-produced decorative art object; the promise of aesthetic pleasure in these works, traditionally provided by the decorative object, is twisted and perverted.

Unlike his grès series, Fontana’s *gran fuoco* are sensuous and appeal directly to the viewer’s visceral encounter with the works. This encounter is something that Anthony White argues directly evokes “Arcadian memories of desire and...erotic pleasure in the art object that had been rendered taboo by modernism.”¹⁵⁸ White goes further in his analysis, arguing that this visceral encounter renders Fontana’s ceramics ‘fetishistic’ in nature, a term that was first used by Enrico Crispolti to describe Fontana’s ceramics in the 1980s.¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁶ Clarke and Henderson, *From Energy to Information*, 55.

¹⁵⁷ On the subject of ‘kitsch’: the standard English-language text on kitsch is Gillo Dorfles and John McHale, *Kitsch: The World of Bad Taste* (New York: Universe Books, 1975). Dorfles’ *Kitsch* brings together a number of essays on various subfields in the topic of kitsch, including essays by Clement Greenberg (whose “Avant-Garde and Kitsch” had reached quasi-canonical status), Hermann Broch, and Ludwig Giesz, interspersed with Dorfles’ introductions and commentaries.

¹⁵⁸ White, *Lucio Fontana*, 115.

¹⁵⁹ White uses Freud in his analysis of Fontana’s ceramics as fetish objects. He references an article by Freud from 1927 that details a young man who fetishizes the shine on the nose of a woman: “In fixating on this most elusive aspect, its capacity to reflect light, [he] had chosen as his erotic object something that cannot be possessed.” He continues, “similarly in the

In 1939, after a flurry of exhibitions of his ceramics in Paris and in Milan at the Galleria del Milione (1937, 1938 and 1939), Fontana reflected on his ceramic work and wrote “La mia ceramica.”¹⁶⁰ It suggests that Fontana was at times troubled by his ceramic pieces, and even defensive, leading him to announce “I am first and foremost a sculptor, not a ceramicist.”¹⁶¹ His work from this period is self-conscious. There is a definite tension between the scatological or earthbound on the one hand, and on the other the elaborate finery of porcelain figurines or sanitary surfaces of industrial ceramics. This period was not only experimenting with new materials, but working through ideas that were from a bygone era, Boccinoi, and looking towards the future and his own individual aesthetic. What is clear is that his dedication and fascination with ceramics stuck with him throughout his lifetime, as he came back to clay as an artistic medium in Albissola again some years later.

This chapter has situated Albissola at the heart of Futurist ceramics production and as a central place in Lucio Fontana’s early experiments in ceramics. It has explored the reasons why the Futurists and Lucio Fontana turned to ceramics and why they travelled to Albissola specifically. Two main reasons can be concluded. For the Futurists, their aims were to create a new style of ceramics known as ‘Aeroceramica’ and to transform Albissola into a thriving port of industrial activity and a site of modern Italian ceramics production. Fontana, on the other hand, had a different motive. He visited Albissola in order to experiment with ceramics in sculptural terms and to learn advanced technical approaches to ceramics to explore conceptual ideas.

Both Fontana and the futurists, however, shared an interest in exploring and subverting the relationship between handmade and industrial methods of ceramics production. In both of his *grès* and *gran fuoco* series, Fontana relished the opportunity to use his hands to create expressive forms, a technique which he would return to, and exaggerate, in his ceramics practice later in his career. Fontana understood his artistic relationship with ceramics and the handmade as not a return to tradition, such as the ceramics produced in Sèvres, but as essential to the creation of a new aesthetic, one which did not rely on machinery or technological processes to achieve new forms, but on the direct, instinctual relationship

iridescent shine on Fontana’s works, in place of a possession [...] of the object Fontana encourages recognition that the object’s appearance is entirely dependent on the [...] conditions of the viewer’s encounter,” in *Ibid.*, 119; Enrico Crispolti, *Omaggio a Lucio Fontana* (Assisi; Roma: Carucci, 1971), 60.

¹⁶⁰ Whitfield and Hayward Gallery (London), *Lucio Fontana*, 183.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 74–75.

between the artist and clay. In this respect, Fontana's work arguably juxtaposed the futurists, who, in their efforts to revolutionise ceramics production in Albissola, were less successful in their bid to synthesise art and industry. Championed as a traditional ceramics industry across Italy, the Mazzotti Factory was transformed into a Futurist industrial powerhouse by F.T. Marinetti and Tullio d'Albisola in their utopian visions of Albissola in the Manifesto d'Aeroceramica. In reality, the Mazzotti Factory lacked the proper resources to provide a state-of-the-art ceramics workshop, equipped with the machinery to make hundreds of identical Futurist ceramics on a daily basis. The factory's owner, Tullio d'Albisola, however, was a pivotal figure during this period. He actively encouraged artists to explore both handmade and industrial methods of ceramics production to achieve new and experimental forms. In all, this chapter has contributed to current and ongoing scholarship on Futurist artistic production and Lucio Fontana's ceramic activity by establishing Albissola as a central place where artists' explored both handmade and industrial methods of ceramics production to produce new artworks.

By the early 1940s, as ties between the Third Reich and Fascist Italy grew closer, Futurism became increasingly isolated and irrelevant. In spite of Marinetti's efforts to keep Futurism relevant - including an alleged plan to build a ceramic "Golden Road" at the Mazzotti Factory for the E42 in Rome - Futurist art failed to meet the totalitarian requirement for an art comprehensible to the masses.¹⁶² Marinetti's idiosyncratic style was not suited to mobilising the masses for war and as Futurism "played out its sad epilogue against the background of the devastation of World War Two," so too did its ceramics production in Albissola.¹⁶³ After a decade of fervent artistic activity, Albissola ceased its ceramics production for the entire Second World War.

Shortly after writing "La Mia Ceramica", Fontana also left Albissola for Argentina where he remained in isolation during the war.¹⁶⁴ While it had a devastating effect on Futurism, the war had the reverse effect on Fontana's relationship to ceramics. After the war, Fontana returned to Albissola and, with help from Tullio d'Albisola and the Tuscan sculptor Agenore Fabbri, sought ways to rebuild the town as a post-war hub for avant-garde ceramics. The impact of war on Italy, coupled with his friendship with Fabbri, inspired Fontana to tackle new subject

¹⁶² Greene and Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, *Italian Futurism 1909-1944*, 75.

¹⁶³ 'Tullio d'Albisola Official Site: Tullio the Futurist', accessed 20 April 2016, http://www.tulliodAlbisola.it/en/tullio_futurist.html.

¹⁶⁴ Whitfield and Hayward Gallery (London), *Lucio Fontana*, 183.

matters in ceramic form– specifically religion, the human figure and classical mythology. Characterised by Fontana’s significantly advanced ceramics practice and Fabbri’s raw approach to human emotion, this thesis now turns to an analysis of Albissola’s post-war ceramics production.

CHAPTER TWO

ALBISSOLA'S POST-WAR PERIOD: LUCIO FONTANA AND AGENORE FABBRI (1947-1951)

This chapter explores Albissola's post-war ceramics production between the years 1947 and 1951. Specifically, it explores the work of two artists who were active at the Mazzotti Factory during this period – Lucio Fontana and the Tuscan sculptor Agenore Fabbri. Fontana was certainly the more prolific artist of the two during this period, producing a medley of free-standing ceramic sculptures, bas-reliefs, figurines and decorative architectural features over a five-year period. After spending six years in Argentina during the war, Fontana returned to Albissola in 1947 with a renewed enthusiasm for the traditional and decorative aspects of ceramics. He tackled new subject matters such as religion, mythology, harlequins and war, and introduced new forms that explicitly referenced his interest in the Baroque. He explored rich, complex glazes and learned advanced firing techniques to create new effects. He also created ceramics for some of the most renowned designers of the time, forged new artistic alliances and was commissioned to produce work for some of the most influential art exhibitions, buildings and projects in post-war Italy. Prior to the war, Fontana worked with ceramics “only as a sculptor” – as he had so loudly proclaimed in ‘La Mia Ceramica’ in 1939. However, when he returned to Albissola he had mastered advanced ceramics techniques and became an influential figurehead in post-war Italian ceramics and design.

The first part of this chapter will examine the specific reasons why Fontana returned to Albissola after the war and analyses the most important works he produced at the Mazzotti Factory on his return – a series of fourteen figurines depicting the stations of the cross titled *Vie Crucis*, a large relief titled *Battaglia* and a large mosaic titled *Arlecchino*, both commissioned for the Cinema Arlecchino in Milan, and, arguably one of the least explored commissions that Fontana received during this period, a set of decorative relief panels he created for Giò Ponti's ocean liner project.

The second part of this chapter will examine the expressive, narrative work of the ceramic sculptor Agenore Fabbri. A member of the anti-Fascist “Corrente” movement, Fabbri was close friends with Fontana during this period and they travelled together to Albissola to make their ceramics at the Mazzotti Factory. This chapter examines two large reliefs created by

Fabbri during this period – *Battaglia* and *Il Mito d’Orfeo* – and explores their meaning within the context of his artistic practice at this time. This chapter closes with an exploration of the IX Milan Triennale – more specifically, it examines the atrium where Fabbri’s *Il Mito d’Orfeo* and Fontana’s *Spatial Light* were exhibited together in 1951. In doing so, this chapter will demonstrate that Albissola was a central place of artistic production for two of Italy’s most important artists of the post-war Italy. For these reasons alone, this short but fervent period of artistic activity in Albissola deserves closer scrutiny.

Lucio Fontana’s post-war ceramics

In November 1946, Fontana sent a letter to Tullio Mazzotti inquiring:

“I am also interested in knowing about the artistic world, and of ceramic in particular: what are my ceramic friends from Albissola doing? Days ago I received a newspaper clipping where they talked about some of my ceramics... do you think I could still make ceramics? I'm already a little old, but I always feel young when it comes to my work.”¹⁶⁵

This was the second letter Fontana sent to Tullio since he had left Albissola before the outbreak of the Second World War. It was promptly followed by another letter dated February 1947 stating that he was returning to Albissola later that year. In this letter, Fontana declares:

“Between the act of taking my own life and the journey [to Albissola], I chose the latter because I hope to realise again a series of ceramics and sculptures that would give me the pleasure or the feeling of being still alive.”¹⁶⁶

What these letters demonstrate is that Albissola was a place of significant importance for Fontana. Specifically, it was a place where Fontana felt he could create new, expressive

¹⁶⁵ Tullio D’Albisola and Danilo Presotto, *Quaderni di Tullio D’Albisola* (Savona: Liguria), 105–6. Author’s translation, original in Italian: “M’interessa anche sapere del mondo artistico e in particolare della ceramica: cosa fanno i ceramisti amici albisolesi? [...] Giorni fa ricevetti un ritaglio di giornale dove parlano di alcune ceramiche mie che esporresti alla Triennale, tu credi che potrei realizzare ancora ceramiche? Sono già vecchietto, ma sempre giovane per il mio lavoro.”

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 109. Author’s translation, original in Italian: “Fra il suicidio ed il viaggio ho scelto il secondo perché spero di realizzare ancora una serie di ceramiche e sculture che mi diano il piacere o la sensazione d'essere ancora un uomo vivo.”

works that would satisfy his need to feel “alive” once more. That Fontana would rather die than never travel to Albissola and make ceramics again clearly demonstrates the importance of Albissola to Fontana during this period.

Fontana’s return to Albissola after the war was prompted by a new artistic direction he had taken during his time in Argentina. His artwork from this period in Argentina has been described as an “expressionist kind of figurative sculpture,” which except for its emphasis on the textures and qualities of materials, was a definite departure from the abstract, amorphous ceramic forms which he had produced at the Mazzotti Factory in the 1930s.¹⁶⁷ A brief exploration of Fontana’s artistic activity during this period in Argentina gives a better understanding of the direction his art was taking when he wrote his letters to Tullio, and explains why clay was the perfect material to express these new artistic ideas.

Fontana lived in Argentina throughout the war period between 1940-1946. During which time he had been successfully appointed as Professor of Sculpting at the Escuela de Artes Plasticas in Rosario, Santa Fe and published his infamous *Manifiesto Blanco* (*White Manifesto*). He was also developing Spatialism, a movement which emphasised the importance of new technologies in integrating art and science, and in particular, sited the fluid space of the Baroque and the spatial dynamics of Futurism as inspiration. The sculptures he made between 1940 and 1942 however are strongly reminiscent of the traditionalist figures of Arturo Martini, such as the 1942 bronze *Little Boy of the Parana* [Fig. 44].

Fontana’s work shifted in a new direction when he relocated within Argentina to Buenos Aires in 1942. During this period, Fontana was exploring how the effects of excessive modelling could not only be translated into bronze, but how it could generate a response from the viewer – be that pleasure, or indeed, as the above critic cited, an uncomfortable feeling or sensation. He began to sculpt in bronze and part of the process of making sculpture from this material would have been to make a prototype from clay before casting. Thus, the expressive contouring and the fleshly protrusions on the surface of his bronze sculptures from this period are the result of Fontana’s direct, physical contact with the clay. If this was the direction that Fontana was taking his work, it would have been an easy decision to return to the Mazzotti Factory where he had experimented with clay before. By returning to Albissola, Fontana

¹⁶⁷ Ana Jorgelina Pozzi-Harris, *Marginal Disruptions: Concrete and Mad! Art in Argentina, 1940-1955* (Austin, Tex.: University of Texas, 2007), 66, <https://repositories.lib.utexas.edu/bitstream/handle/2152/3771/pozziharrisa92587.pdf>.

would be able to once again tap into the primal and tactile properties of clay in a bid to stimulate his artistic passion which, as his letter proclaims to Tullio, would give him the ‘pleasure and feeling of being alive’ once more.

When Fontana returned to Albissola, it was not only his relationship with clay that developed in new directions. He also began to explore glazes and ceramic processes for their intrinsic qualities. Fontana’s relationship to ceramics as an art form shifted to an appreciation of the more traditional and decorative means of making ceramics. He began to produce work that had poignancy and tackled subject matter deemed to be more serious and, simultaneously, expressive. The theme of religion was prominent and Fontana explored it – almost to the point of obsession - in his ceramics throughout the post-war period. Thinking back to the works that Fontana had made in Albissola prior to the war – the oily horses and underwater creatures – his decision to depart from this abstract animal kingdom and begin to use religious imagery was thus a conscious decision. In other words, it is clear that when Fontana returned to Albissola, he did not want to continue working with ceramics in abstract terms, but engage with one of the most important symbols in Christianity. So what exactly prompted Fontana to embark on a series of religious themed ceramics in Albissola?

At this point it is worth noting that some scholarship has explored the subject of religion in Fontana’s work, but this has largely been in terms of his interest in ideas of ‘infinity’ and ‘nothingness’, concepts which could not be further from his earthly, weighty ceramic work. These ideas are more in tune with the artwork Fontana produced in his later life, such as “The End of God”.¹⁶⁸ Fontana explained the choice of the title for the series to Carlo Cisventi in an interview in 1963, claiming “for me, they signify the infinite, something inconceivable, the end of figurative representation, the beginning of nothing.”¹⁶⁹ Fontana’s most explicit interests in religion, rather, manifest in his figurative work - the large majority of which is in ceramic form. Thus whilst the “End of God” series symbolised the “end of figurative representation” for Fontana, his ceramic work in Albissola arguably marks the beginning of his interest in figurative work. One of the first works Fontana created on his immediate return to Albissola was the *Vie Crucis* series. It is arguably one of the most important series of this

¹⁶⁸ Pia Gottschaller and Narayan Khandekar, *Lucio Fontana: The Artist’s Materials* (Los Angeles: Getty Conservation Institute, 2012), 88–89.

¹⁶⁹ Robert Brown and Lucio Fontana, *Black Holes, Dark Matter and the End of God: Lucio Fontana and the Mysticism of Space; [Auction Sunday 19 October 2008, Christie’s London (S.l.: s.n., 2008), 51.*

period because it represents a new artistic direction for Fontana during this period and demonstrates his renewed respect for clay and ceramics as an art form.

***Vie Crucis* (1947)**

Vie Crucis is a series of fourteen free-standing ceramic figurines depicting one of the most popular images of devotion in Christianity – the Stations of the Cross [Fig. 46, 47, 48]. Each figure represents the individual stations as Christ was led to his crucifixion and has a raw, visceral and dynamic immediacy. This quality is what Anthony White argues is Fontana’s “trademark” in terms of his transformation of “manual facility into a highly exaggerated bravura.”¹⁷⁰ In other words, *Vie Crucis* is not necessarily an artwork about religion, but could be seen as an exploration of the materiality of the work itself. As White notes, “this record of Christ’s passion translates the religious narrative of fleshly mortification and redemption into an outlandish extension of the medium’s possibilities.”¹⁷¹ Indeed, the subject matter of *Vie Crucis* is as much about Fontana’s engagement with clay as it is about one of the most important symbols in Christianity.

There are few critical analyses of *Vie Crucis* and therefore the exact meaning of it is open to interpretation.¹⁷² This chapter has chosen to interpret this series in the following ways: as an exploration of Fontana’s interest in the baroque through form, colour and technique, as an exploration of the traditional aspects of ceramics practice, including the use of lustre to create the effect of ‘liquid gold’, as a comment on the political and religious climate of the post-war period in Italy, and finally, as a portrait of Fontana’s artistic and personal struggles during this period. In doing so, this chapter argues that there is more than one way to interpret this series, and that each analysis adds to a broader understanding of the series which has been substantially ignored in scholarship on Fontana.

A central source of inspiration for Fontana which arguably shaped his entire approach to figuration, form and colour during this period was baroque. Both Enrico Crispolti and Giorgio Cortenova, have all argued that for Fontana, ‘baroque’ was essentially a protean

¹⁷⁰ White, *Lucio Fontana*, 143.

¹⁷¹ Ibid.

¹⁷² The most recent analysis of *Vie Crucis* can be found in Paolo Biscottini and Lucio Fontana, *Lucio Fontana: vie Crucis, 1947-1957 : [catalogo della mostra: Milano, Palazzo Lombardia 17 marzo - 30 aprile 2011* (Milano: Electa, 2011).

concept that allowed him to break away from traditionally figurative schemes and simplistic contrasts between idioms such as ‘classical’ and ‘romantic’.¹⁷³ This is evident in his *Manifesto Blanco* (1946) - where one can identify the very beginnings of what would develop into the *Manifesto Spaziale* (1947) - in which Fontana presents baroque as the predominant art movement, the one that, better than everything else, understood the centrality of time and movement. He writes:

“The baroque has guided us in this direction, in all its as yet unsurpassed grandeur, where the plastic form is inseparable from the notion of time, the images appear to abandon the plane and continue into space the movements they suggest.”¹⁷⁴

Baroque’s inherent dynamism and special relationship to space inspired Fontana to overcome classical static forms and enter into a dialogue with form where the notions of time, space and movement were inseparable. We first see this dialogue appear in Fontana’s plaster works. His *La silla barroco* (The Baroque Woman) from 1946 depicts a woman seated on a chair, her head, neck and upper torso are defined, slightly protruding from the chair, whilst her lower body - her legs and feet - dissolve into a solid mass of swirling plaster at the bottom of the chair [Fig. 49].¹⁷⁵ By making it seem as if the woman is simultaneously sitting still and suggesting movement, Fontana is able to overcome the idea of the static figure.

In *Vie Crucis*, Fontana employs a similar technique in that the figures appear to swirl and extend into the surrounding space. However, Fontana’s treatment of the clay is not pointless or excessive in nature, but purposeful and careful. Whilst the over-working of the clay creates an illusion of dancing limbs, the rippled nodules are formed by Fontana’s thumb indentations pressing into the surface. Equally, the extension of limbs into the surrounding space has been crafted by Fontana pinching and twisting the clay. Instead of approaching the clay in a random, spontaneous fashion, Fontana has worked the clay to give the specific effect of figures shimmering, twisting and extending outwards into space.

¹⁷³ Lucio Fontana and Giorgio Cortenova, *Lucio Fontana: metafore barocche* (Verona; Marsilio: Venezia : Palazzo Forti ;, 2002), 16–18; White, *Lucio Fontana*, 149–50; Enrico Crispolti and Forskellige udstillingssteder, *Fontana* (Milano: Charta, 1999); Crispolti, *Omaggio a Lucio Fontana*.

¹⁷⁴ Luca Massimo Barbero, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, and Peggy Guggenheim Collection (Venice), *Lucio Fontana: Venezia, New York* (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, 2006), 229.

¹⁷⁵ Fontana and Cortenova, *Lucio Fontana*, 16–20.

In *Vie Crucis*, one could consider Fontana's technique as 'calculated' or indeed akin to the idea of *bravura*. The idea of the artist using clay in such a fashion was put forth in Irving Lavin's interpretation of Bernini's clay bozzetti in his essay "Calculated Spontaneity" (1978). This essay has been the recent subject of a book-length study of Bernini's bozzetti, in which Nicola Suthor and Michael Cole both use Lavin's analysis of 'calculated spontaneity' to posit the idea that Bernini modelled clay using *bravura* "as a wilful demonstration of artificial sketchiness."¹⁷⁶ For Suthor and Cole, whether Bernini made these works speedily, or indeed with excessive spontaneity, was not the issue at hand. The *bravura* manner had more to do with effects than process, and thus, the clay work could be viewed apart from its place in production - as a separate art work and not just a process in the bronze casting technique.

This idea of *bravura* is useful when thinking about Fontana's approach to clay in *Vie Crucis*. Rather than working quickly, in an "excessive and glib" fashion, the idea that Fontana took careful precision in modelling the clay suggests a kind of performativity. For Fontana, *bravura* is a device that enables him to separate the idea of his ceramics being considered ceramics in the traditional capacity, or indeed with any 'negative' connotations of craft, and instead considered as art. Thus, *Vie Crucis* epitomises Fontana's will to separate the idea of traditional ceramics production from one of craft, to one of artistry.

A photograph from 1955 demonstrates Fontana's approach to working with clay in this way [Fig. 50]. Here he is seen working on a later series of the *Vie Crucis* (there are in total three series, of which the 1955 series is the third and final representation) for the doors of Milan's Cathedral. In this photograph, Fontana is seen using his fingertips to create individual figures in the work. He is also working with the medium at close range – and on eye level. This type of handling of the medium suggests a subtle, careful approach and a gentle application of pressure. Fontana's approach was not only to create a rippling effect, and a detailed sense of movement, but to expose the process of how these works were created. In essence, by leaving his trace through fingers and thumbprints, Fontana reminds the viewer that what we are essentially looking at is both an artist representation of the subject matter and a carefully considered manipulation of clay.

This brings to the fore another key device that Fontana uses in *Vie Crucis*: the concept of time. As the introduction to this thesis explored in some depth, the ceramic form is essentially

¹⁷⁶ Levy, Mangone, and Delbeke, *Material Bernini*, xix.

where an artist takes a soft, malleable, uniform material – clay – and manipulates it with external forces such as the artist’s hands, heat, water and chemical reactions that make up glazes, to create a fixed, static form or object. The ceramic form is therefore an object which, after it has been fired in the kiln, is fixed in time. Time is an important element in the process of making ceramics as it is an integral concept in baroque art. In conservation for example, silver, can be heated and melted down and reformed. In contrast, once fired, ceramics are a permanent fixture.

Equally, while there is no doubt that ‘baroque’ is commonly used to refer to ornate extravagance, magnificence and pomp, as well as eclecticism and fluidity of design, the term also foreground the notions of visual artifice and illusion. Glen Adamson’s essay ‘The real in rococo’ explores the context of craftsmanship in Rococo art through an exploration of the terms ‘artificial’ and ‘real’. He explores how technique was considered both an exposure of the craftsman skill and also a mastery of illusion of artifice.¹⁷⁷ For reasons that will become clearer in the next part of this chapter, Fontana’s relationship to ceramics was also an interest in the relationship between the surface treatment and the clay itself; in other words, that ceramics as a practice could be a form of art of illusion.

For Fontana, this effect was represented through the treatment of the surface, an important area of ceramics that allowed Fontana to separate surface from form, whilst keeping the two inextricably connected. Although Fontana sought to transcend the material properties of the object through dynamism, he also starkly drew attention to his material and techniques. One of the main ways he did this is in incorporating gold into the surface of *Vie Crucis*. Fontana’s use of gold in his work, however, was not an entirely new phenomenon. Encouraged by his tutor Adolf Wildt, he began to incorporate gold into his works as early as 1926 by applying it as paint to the surface of plaster. The decorative appearance of these early works speaks to a major religious tradition of Catholicism; it immediately brings to mind the use of gold-leaf in religious paintings commissioned by the Church and the use of gold leaf and gold plating in shrines and reliquaries. According to the ceramic art historian Garth Clark, Fontana’s love of gold was informed by the artist’s passion for the late period Byzantine painters of Siena and Florence and their use of gilding.

The critic Alberto Fiz had identified this aspect of Fontana’s ceramic work in the 1940s:

¹⁷⁷ Helen Hills, ed., *Rethinking the Baroque*, 2016, 145–47.

“The novelty in Fontana’s research [of gold], as it emerges from his ceramics is that gold is not ornamental but becomes an indissoluble part of the shape, in such a way that it alters, becoming pure emission of light in a process that tends to subtract the sculpture from the allurements of the material.”¹⁷⁸

This is particularly visible in Fontana’s use of lustre glaze in the *Vie Crucis* series where individual figures appear to be made entirely of gold. The technique of lustre is achieved by incorporating metallic oxides into an over-glaze which is then applied directly to the surface of the clay and fired.¹⁷⁹ As the heat from the kiln penetrates the surface of the clay and glaze, the metals melt and chemically fuse together both components – the end result gives the appearance of liquid gold. Lustre, then, enabled Fontana to wrap form in light and turn mud into gold.

Fontana’s ability to transform natural materials into mediums which resemble gold and reflect light makes Fontana’s ceramic practice some form of alchemy. Like the transmutation of “base metals” (e.g., lead, clay) into “noble” ones (particularly gold), Fontana is engaging with similar alchemical ideas of metamorphosis by transforming terracotta into gold. In using the term ‘alchemist’, this chapter does not infer that Fontana was influenced by the historical practice of alchemy, but rather that his ceramics created a synthesis of art and science that is similar to how the alchemists practiced their experiments. The critic Gillo Dorfles had also identified this aspect of Fontana’s ceramic work from this period when he commented that the *Vie Crucis* series was made up of “mysterious tangled messes obtained by throwing molten lead into water.”¹⁸⁰ Interpreted as the products of quasi-scientific, almost magical, experiments, Dorfles identifies an important aspect in Fontana’s ceramics research and production of this era that they imbue a symbolism of matter in the state of transformation and make direct attempts to fuse science and art together.

¹⁷⁸ Andrea De Marchi et al., *Gold, Gothic Masters and Lucio Fontana* (Milan, Italy: Compagnia di Belle Arti, 1999), 8.

¹⁷⁹ Pagliaro, *Shards*, 485. According to Garth Clark, Fontana would have learned how to successfully combine metallic oxides to create lustre and vibrant, luminous forms at the Sèvres Factory. However, as Clark notes, there is no record of Fontana’s residency at Sèvres despite him making many ceramics there: “I pursued the history of [Fontana’s] residency with the curator of the Sèvres Factory [who] could not find a single reference to his stay... There is no doubt that he did work at the factory – it is just a mystery that any documentation of his presence has disappeared.”

¹⁸⁰ De Marchi et al., *Gold, Gothic Masters and Lucio Fontana*, 15.

As he had proclaimed in “La Mia Ceramica,” none of Fontana’s pre-War work dealt with the tradition of pottery. In his earlier works, Fontana disregarded the more traditional methods of creating ceramics and favoured experimental techniques that were prompted by a “whorish fascination with the medium.”¹⁸¹ Here one sees that after Argentina, however, Fontana became enamoured of the pottery tradition and as a result he began to explore glazes for their intrinsic qualities, specifically their ability to interact with light. This may seem trivial, but it represents a radical change in the way that he approached ceramic form, spatially speaking it represented a new dynamic and allowed Fontana to successfully synthesise art and science and to use lustre technique not merely for decorative purposes but also for symbolic means.

The *Vie Crucis* series was not the only religious themed work that Fontana produced in ceramics during this period. Between 1949 and 1951, Fontana produced a series of crucifixes. Most of these pieces were created in his studio in Milan, and share some formal characteristics to the figures in the *Vie Crucis*. For example, a piece from 1950, titled *Crocifisso Barocco* (Baroque Crucifix), is a combination of thickly applied paint and dazzling lustre glaze [Fig. 51]. As this chapter will discuss later, this particular ceramic glaze and technique evokes Fontana’s ceramic relief work which was commissioned by Giò Ponti during the same period.

During this period, Fontana received a number of commissions for ceramic funerary sculptures.¹⁸² *Angelo*, a free-standing sculpture dated 1948, is one example that engages with the idea of religion in an entirely different way than the *Vie Crucis* series [Fig. 52]. Located in the Cimitero Monumentale in Milan, *Angelo* was commissioned for the tomb of Paolo Chinelli in 1948 and made in collaboration with Renzo Zavarella, an architect whom Fontana collaborated with during the 1930s. In its entirety, the tomb consists of a large glazed ceramic angel suspended on a pillar in bronze and placed in a white and grey granite structure. In the background is a series of geometric symbols representing the Passion of Christ. Whilst the *Vie Crucis* engages with religion and the baroque, the two themes which dominate *Angelo* are arguably classical forms and flight.

¹⁸¹ D’Albissola and Presotto, *Quaderni di Tullio d’Albisola*, 77.

¹⁸² Paolo Campiglio, Lucio Fontana, and Fondazione Lucio Fontana, *Itinerari di Lucio Fontana a Milano e dintorni* (Milano: Charta, 1999). This guide takes the reader through the streets of Milan and its surrounding areas in search of Lucio Fontana's celebrated works, finding examples in architecture, houses and places of civic importance. It has a section dedicated to the funerary works Fontana made, including *Angelo*.

In particular, there is no denying that *Angelo* vividly imitates the classical statue *Victory of Samothrace* – the messenger goddess whose statue honours a sea battle and is portrayed descending to alight upon the prow of a ship. One could argue that Fontana is making a reference between his work and the famous quote that Marinetti issued in his Futurist Manifesto in 1909 when he chooses to contrast Futurism with the supposedly defunct artistic sentiments of the Winged Victory: “We affirm that the beauty of the world has been enriched by a new form of beauty: a roaring automobile [...] is more beautiful than the *Victory of Samothrace*.”¹⁸³ However, rather than considering this sculpture in relation to Futurism, there is merit in considering that Fontana was returning to a theme which he had explored in the early 1930s. For example, *Angelo* shares formal similarities to an earlier work from 1934, *Victory of the Air*, in particular a similar depiction of fabric over the surface of the skin [Fig. 53]. In both statues, Fontana depicts flowing drapery, as though the figure is moving through, and against, a force of wind head on. Similarly, in 1939, Fontana had approached the subject of flight in his plaster ceiling sculpture the Flying Victories for the headquarters of the Federazione dei Fasci milanesi in the via Valpetrosa, Milan (now police headquarters) [Fig. 54].

Lisa Ponti, the daughter of Giò Ponti, argues that Fontana was responding to a pervasive sense in post-war Italy that the classical language of figurative sculpture was extinct. Although the inherited traditions of Greek and Roman statuary had for centuries been the bench-mark for all ambitious sculpture, and were regularly employed to promote the glories of an ancient Italian past, the heavy-handed use of the classical idiom under Fascism caused many post-war Italians to be eager to erase it from memory. In a review of the 1948 Venice Biennale, Ponti argues that “sculpture...remains in crisis: and we see our sculptor-ceramicists making the most of this crisis...in certain respects, this lively intervention of ceramics is somewhat like a florescenece of the baroque, provisional, capricious, in reaction to classical sculpture, which is exhausted.”¹⁸⁴

To what extent one can consider *Vie Crucis* a reflection of Fontana’s personal circumstances during this period is largely hypothetical. Letters he sends to his friends and family, specifically the ones he writes to Tullio and Luciano Baldessari in Argentina, suggest that he felt isolated and geographically dislocated from the artistic milieu in Milan and Paris. In a

¹⁸³ Rainey, Poggi, and Wittman, *Futurism an Anthology*, 51.

¹⁸⁴ Elisa Coppola, *Six wonderful days: un invito al viaggio sulle grandi navi italiane* (Genova: Tormena, 2003), 306–8.

letter to Baldessari, Fontana laments about the limited artistic opportunities in Rosario, describing the struggle to re-establish himself there as a “Vie Crucis”.¹⁸⁵ Furthermore, in a letter to his brother from Rosario, Fontana comments on the air raids in Milan, “how much sadness and pain for the bombing of the Italian cities – I feel terribly battered.” In 1944, he writes: “What do you think of war...what will happen to Italy? Will they leave us in peace, not condemning the future generations to bitterness?”¹⁸⁶

When Fontana returned to Albissola in 1947, Italy was in the midst of recovering from the atrocities of war and suffering under Fascism. In 1943, a month before Mussolini fell, the newly elected Pope Pius XII published the encyclical *Mystici corporis* which defines the Church as the mystical body of Christ. This document gave meaning to the suffering of millions in Italy – which for Pius was “not useless but fertile” because suffering is linked with Christ’s passion.¹⁸⁷ Furthermore, Pius offered the Church, which is at one with Christ and hence is “endowed with a legitimacy to which no earthly organisation like a state can aspire” as the principle of order.¹⁸⁸ As Charles de Gaulle, head of the Provisional Government of the French Republic said of Italy at the time, “after the collapse of Fascism, the Church, which exerts great moral influence in Italy, remains the only force for order and unity.”¹⁸⁹ Pius’ vision for post-war Italy was clear – the Church would donate resources to victims of war and offer human compassion and divine help to “a powerless, defeated nation”.¹⁹⁰ Despite Pius XII’s vision for ‘order’ in post-war Italy, however, the country was politically volatile and there were frequent changes of government. The eventual triumph of the Christian Democrats was resented by increasingly marginalised Socialist and Communist groups, and artistic positions reflected passionate political convictions.¹⁹¹

Whether one can argue that Fontana’s *Vie Crucis* is a response to the wider political and religious climate in Italy is largely based on an assumption that Fontana’s ceramics are in some way autobiographical. On the one hand, there is minimal evidence to suggest that

¹⁸⁵ Loredana Parmesani and Paolo Campiglio, *Lucio Fontana: lettere 1919-1968* (Milano: Skira, 1999), 208.

¹⁸⁶ White, *Lucio Fontana*, 132.

¹⁸⁷ Patrick McCarthy, *Italy since 1945* (Oxford [u.a.: Oxford Univ. Press, 2009), 135.

¹⁸⁸ Elisa Coppola, *Six wonderful days: un invito al viaggio sulle grandi navi italiane* (Genova: Tormena, 2003), 157.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 135.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁹¹ David Hopkins and Oxford University Press, *After Modern Art: 1945-2000* (Oxford [etc.: Oxford University Press, 2006), 13.

Fontana's religious, however, as his personal letters to friends and family demonstrate, he was keenly aware of the crisis in Italy at the time, and troubled by its effect on Italy as a country, and also his career as an artist.

A recent study of the *Vie Crucis* argues that Fontana exploited the theme of religion in his ceramics for financial gain. In an essay for a catalogue of the most recent exhibition of Fontana's *Vie Crucis* in Milan, the historian Enrico Crispolti argues that Fontana's "religious commitments [...] remained sporadic, and always substantially related to purchasing opportunities."¹⁹² On the one hand, there is evidence to support Crispolti's claim. In a letter dated December 1947, Fontana boasts to Tullio:

"I sold the "Cristo grande" for 80.000 and "Madonna verde" for 60.000; see how I made a big fortune!!! Smaller pieces, for now, have little success, so there's interest to make them a little bigger."¹⁹³

In another letter, dated only a few months later, Fontana implores:

"Obviously, tell [Agenore] Fabbri do not worry about the money drying up! We will continue to create statues and ceramics to order. Sculptures in all styles: Greek, Roman, Etruscan, Renaissance, Baroque, all abstract and at steep prices."¹⁹⁴

Fontana's attitude is not however so surprising when one considers that it would have been hard to sell artwork during this period in Italy when money was scarce. Furthermore, the fact that Fontana's work was being sold would not only have meant financial reward, but that it would lead to his work being more widely distributed and the opportunity to be noticed by art collectors, dealers and critics. Whilst Fontana would have been looking for opportunities to earn a living as an artist, his ceramics suggest that he was exploring a new subject matter and new forms. Simply put, if Fontana wanted to make religious sculpture for the only purpose of

¹⁹² Biscottini and Fontana, *Lucio Fontana*, 27. Author's translation from Italian text: "E tuttavia è un impegno che rimane un fatto sporadico, come sempre poi del resto, e sostanzialmente legato a occasioni di committenza."

¹⁹³ D'Albisola and Presotto, *Quaderni di Tullio D'Albisola*, 115. Author's translation from Italian text: "Ho venduto il "Cristo grande" in 80.000 e la "Madonna verde" in 60.000; come vedi un buon colpo! I piccoli pezzi, per ora, hanno poco successo, perciò ecco l'interesse di farli un poco grandi."

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 118. Author's translation from Italian text: "Naturalmente di a Fabbri che non si preoccupi per la pasta asciutta! Continueremo a creare statue e ceramiche su ordinazione. Sculture in tutti gli stili: Greco, romano, etrusco, rinascimentale, astratto e barocco e a prezzi salati."

making money, then why did he spend so much of his time and energy into making these sculptures look the way they do? As this chapter has discussed so far, *Vie Crucis* series can be interpreted in many ways to have many significant meanings.

Cinema Arlecchino

In 1948, Fontana produced two sculptures for the interior of the Cinema Arlecchino in Milan: a multi-panelled relief depicting an epic battle scene titled *Albissola ceramica: battaglia* [Fig. 55] and a large, polychromatic mosaic harlequin titled *Arlecchino* [Fig. 56]. The ceramic relief, as the title suggests, was produced at the Mazzotti Factory in Albissola, while the harlequin was produced in Fontana's studio in Milan. Not only do both of these works provide further evidence that Fontana travelled between Albissola and Milan during these years, but demonstrate that Fontana was keen to include and combine work that he was producing in both studios into one commission. It is worth exploring these sculptural works in more detail because they shed further light on Fontana's activity in Albissola during this period and, more specifically, on his artistic activity in Milan also.

Sharon Hecker's essay "'Servant of Two Masters': Lucio Fontana's Sculptures in Milan's Cinema Arlecchino (1948)" provides a detailed analysis of both works. Framing her argument within the wider cinematic and theatrical culture of post-war Milan, Hecker claims that like the figure of Arlecchino, an agile trickster who is the servant of two masters in the *commedia dell'arte*, Fontana similarly oscillates between two masters of his own: craft and art.¹⁹⁵ For example, Hecker cites Fontana's deliberate and unconventional choice of plaster as a material for *Arlecchino* as accentuating his "harlequinesque manipulation of technique."¹⁹⁶ Fontana's decision to decorate the plaster in ceramic mosaic, thereby denying viewers to see the real material underneath, is, Hecker argues, similar to a *commedia dell'arte* device: characters or situations that appear to be one thing turn out to be another.

¹⁹⁵ Sharon Hecker, "'Servant of Two Masters": Lucio Fontana's Sculptures in Milan's Cinema Arlecchino (1948)", *The Oxford Art Journal*. 352012 (2012): 344–48. As Hecker states in her article, there is no written account of how the works would have been received by audience, viewers, critics at the time.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 350. For example, when the sculpture was pulled down from the ceiling for restoration, it was found out not to be made from a ceramic base, as scholars had previously attributed, but from mosaic embedded into wet plaster.

While plaster might seem like an unusual choice for an artist working in dialogue with architecture during this period, for Fontana, it was a decision that was purposeful and strategic. His *Scultura spaziale* (1947), an abstract piece of work from the same period, formed of irregular lumps of painted gesso (plaster) in a circle, demonstrates that Fontana was working with plaster right up to the production of *Arlecchino* [Fig. 57]. Additionally, the fact that Fontana had used plaster extensively in earlier works, particularly during the 1930s, meant that he would have been well accustomed to its material properties – including an understanding of whether plaster could be scaled up for a project such as *Arlecchino*. Indeed, plaster was an ideal material for *Arlecchino* in many ways; it would hold its shape and be light enough to position on the ceiling, and it was a good material to construct large whole pieces instead of having to create a solid bronze structure. There are also the financial implications of using plaster instead of bronze as it would have been a much cheaper alternative. In summary, plaster would have been easy to manipulate, it was affordable and enabled Fontana to work in dialogue with the ceiling in addition to the wall – an important factor that will be addressed in the next few pages.

In contrast to *Arlecchino*'s playful subject matter and 'weightless' position on the ceiling, *Albissola ceramica: battaglia* (Albissola ceramic: battle), is a heavy and robust ceramic relief that was first installed under the cinema screen in the basement of the lower ground part of the building. According to Hecker, it is one of Fontana's "most significant, yet overlooked" ceramic pieces.¹⁹⁷ Indeed, Hecker's analysis seems to be the only scholarship which recognizes and analyses this piece in relation to Fontana's post-war artistic activity. The relief depicts a battle unfolding over several tiles which have been constructed together in a grid-like composition. A pink ribbon wraps and entwines itself through a landscape of black figures - a mixture of mythic animals and barely recognisable human forms. The exact meaning of the relief is ambiguous, however Fontana's inclusion of a rising sun on the far right side of the relief, which turns into the moon as the battle advances, suggests a narrative taking place over the course of a day. The depiction of animals such as the peacock and cavalry suggest an influence from classical art and mythology. Indeed, the use of the relief as a story-telling device is found in some of the most famous examples of Ancient Greek art, such as the Parthenon friezes.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid., 354.

Hecker's understanding is that "the frieze replaced the negative, fascist, Dionysian spirit of the war with a new message for a war-weary public, in desperate need of regeneration."¹⁹⁸ In using clay to depict classical subject matter, Fontana brings raw emotion to the subject, not so clean cut as the white purity of reliefs from classical era and the Fascist era. One could not call the relief colourful however. It is not like *Arlecchino*, a sculpture which sparkles and shines from the ceiling like a mirrored disco ball, but it has a relatively subdued palette. With its black figures set against a white background, the only pop of colour is the pink ribbon which dances through the landscape. It is not a depiction of a vital, euphoric warlike dance but a muted display of entangled human beings, symbols and animals. On a more practical note, the choice of ceramic glazes that would have been accessible to Fontana during this period would have been limited, considering the limited resources during the post-war era, the use of three or four colours – pink, black, blue, white matte paint and, as is true of the *Vie Crucis* series, a lustre glaze.

One of the most significant attributes of the relief is that it glows in the dark. This might be another reason why Fontana chose to keep the colours as monochrome as possible – the white background would have allowed the fluorescent paints to properly be illuminated. When the relief was first installed, Fontana placed mercury lamps (high-energy fluorescent UV lamps called 'black lamps') to illuminate the paint in the dark movie theatre. Like a theatrical performance, when the movie turned on, Fontana's figures simultaneously lit up and danced across the relief [Fig. 58].¹⁹⁹ Trademarked in the United States in 1946 as Glo-Craft and in 1949 as Day-Glo, the paints, along with the novel lamps, demonstrate Fontana's adoption of industrial wartime technology that was later harnessed to commercial purposes.

Fontana also used Day-Glo in his hanging papier-mâché sculpture *Ambiente spaziale a luce nera* (Spatial environment in black light) in 1949 [Fig. 59]. Hung from the ceiling of a dark room, the sculpture was coloured with fluorescent paint and illuminated by mercury lamps and was considered the first real demonstration of Fontana's 'spatial art'. Visitors to the exhibition remarked that the forms appeared not to be solid objects but rather open and

¹⁹⁸ Ibid., 357.

¹⁹⁹ Paolo Campiglio and Studio di consulenza per il '900 italiano, *Lucio Fontana: l'Arlecchino* (Milano: Charta, 2010), 20–42. Campiglio describes them as "Wood's lamps", which as Hecker explains are small, portable lamps that could not have illuminated a large theatre. It is thought that Fontana actually used mercury lamps, 'lampade a mercurio', which are essentially black lamps with a single fluorescent filtered glass tube. These lamps were patented in the late 1930s and put onto the commercial market in 1946.

spatially diffuse, as noted by the critic Guido Ballo: “The gallery was transformed ... [the spectator] did not contemplate a detached form before his eyes, he entered into the pictorial environment.”²⁰⁰ To this end, Fontana’s experimentation with Day-Glo in the *Albissola ceramica* relief had inspired his work to take a new direction, one that was about dematerialising the artwork and an installation work that had expanded to fill the entire gallery interior, breaking down the distinction between the art object and the space around it. Combining the many techniques he explored with the hanging harlequin and fluorescent frieze, Fontana arrived at the single radical installation. Fontana’s first use of Day-Glo can therefore be attributed to his ceramic relief *Albissola ceramica: battaglia*. The sculpture was made in February 1949, only 4 months after making *Albissola ceramica* and *Arlecchino*, and was exhibited for 5 days around the corner from his studio at Carlo Cardazzo’s Galleria del Naviglio.

It is clear to see how *Arlecchino* and the ceramic frieze can be seen to be in dialogue; while the harlequin hangs above movie-goers, positioned in the foyer above the stairs leading you down to the cinema room - *Battaglia* is positioned directly below the screen and meets the spectator at eye level. Unlike the gravity-defying harlequin, the frieze, as if releasing tension, drips downwards: matter begins to fall apart. Oscillating between painting and sculpture, the frieze makes discernible Fontana’s vigorous hands manipulating the clay, leaving the artist’s indexical sign on the object, unlike the harlequin whose tactile surface is far away, concealing and confusing the sense of Fontana’s touch. In contrast to the single plaster harlequin, this ceramic piece was broken down into tiles for shipment and those arbitrary lines are shown off as visible parts of the frieze. Given the similar properties of the two materials it is not hard to see why – the medium enabled Fontana to show the trace and process of working with the medium which is similar to his approach to figurative, expressive form in clay as argued earlier in this chapter.

It is worth pointing out the significance of the cinema during this period, and briefly exploring the reasons why Fontana might have been interested in creating works specifically for this environment. During the post-war period in Italy, the cinema became home to Italian neorealism, a film movement characterised by stories set amongst the poor and the working class. Italian neorealism films mostly contend with the difficult economic and moral

²⁰⁰ ‘No Form Can Be Spatial, The Origins of Lucio Fontana’s Spatial Concept | NGV’, accessed 30 May 2017, <http://www.ngv.vic.gov.au/essay/no-form-can-be-spatial-the-origins-of-lucio-fontanas-spatial-concept-2/>.

conditions of post-war Italy, representing changes in the Italian psyche and conditions of everyday life, including poverty, oppression, and desperation.²⁰¹ Neorealism came about as the Second World War ended and Mussolini's government fell, causing the Italian film industry to lose its centre. Its films presented contemporary stories that were often shot in streets as the Cinecittà film studios had been damaged significantly during the war. Thus, Neorealism was a sign of cultural change and social progress in Italy.

The installation of Fontana's artworks at Cinema Arlecchino during this period demonstrates that he was directly engaging with the cultural and social changes happening in post-war Italy. Fontana exploited new opportunities which arose during this period, such as the opening of new cinemas, public spaces of entertainment and the design and rebuilding of Italy's urban infrastructure. This was also the case for Agenore Fabbri, whose large ceramic relief *Battaglia* – to be discussed in more detail later on in this chapter - was also installed in foyer of Savona's only cinema. This study of Cinema Arlecchino has shed light on the numerous ways in which Fontana engaged his ceramic practice with a wider audience in Milan. Furthermore, it has also demonstrated how ceramics were an important and pivotal part of the ways in which Fontana developed his artistic practice during this period, for example his experimentation with other materials such as plaster and Day-Glo. This study places Fontana's ceramic experiments in Albissola at the heart of his post-war artistic activity and argues that any future scholarship on this era needs to take into consideration Fontana's relationship to ceramics in Albissola at this time.

The Conte Grande panels

In 1948, Ponti commissioned Fontana to create five large ceramic panels for the lobby walls of the Conte Grande. Fontana designed and executed the panels at the Mazzotti Factory in Albissola. Once finished, the panels were transported to the port of Genoa and installed on-board the Conte Grande. Out of the five panels, four are on permanent display in Albissola's contemporary art museum and gallery, the Museo Civico d'Arte Contemporanea. The panels

²⁰¹ For an introduction to Italian neorealism, see Laura E Ruberto and Kristi M Wilson, *Italian Neorealism and Global Cinema* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2007); Mark Shiel, *Italian Neorealism: Rebuilding the Cinematic City*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012); Carmela Bernadetta Scala, *New Trends in Italian Cinema: New Neorealism* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars, 2013).

are an exquisite example of Fontana's experimental practice with ceramics as an art form during this period, yet remain largely sidelined within his oeuvre. An analysis of the content, composition and form of the panels will demonstrate that Fontana was increasingly interested in using complex ceramics techniques in his artistic projects during the post-war period. Furthermore, Fontana was confirmed a serious artist during this period by working with high-profile Italian designers and architects like Giò Ponti and Nino Zoncada.

Each panel is a meter in height, half a meter in width and four centimeters thick. Composed of several interlocking pieces of glazed terracotta, the panels illustrate places that the Conte Grande passed through via its route from Genoa to New York. *Spagna* (Spain) is composed of seven sections depicting a bullfight [Fig. 60]. A matador gesticulates his red cape on the left side of the composition, swerving from a black bull that charges from the right. Directly below this scene is a murky, choppy river; a fish-like creature emerges from the depths in the bottom right corner. At the top of the composition is a rayed sun and a high-arched window, completing a colourful portrayal of a Spanish landscape. *Mediterranea* (Mediterranean) contains ten individual pieces and portrays a mythological scene complete with rearing centaurs, a writhing Medusa head and the scattered remnants of Greek columns with Ionic capitals [Fig. 61].

The panel titled *Brasile* (Brazil), formed originally of nine pieces, presents a large, vibrant sun at its centre [Fig. 62]. A sinuous snake features in the bottom right, whilst two purple butterflies flutter above. On the opposite side, flecks of blue, yellow, black and green form the outline of two colourful parrots. In the top left corner of the panel, clouds surround the Sugar Loaf Mountain with a rich, deep blue sea beneath it. In comparison to the other panels, *I Cavalieri dell'Apocalisse* (Horsemen of the Apocalypse) is less discernible in terms of its subject matter. The Italian writer Cecilia Chilosi has compared this panel to the "Dionysian narrative involving the four knights of the Apocalypse" as told in the New Testament.²⁰² Indeed, one can just about make out a frenzied uproar between horses and men surrounding a large black sun. Eight asymmetric ceramic pieces, like broken off spokes or rays, connect the entire composition together with dark, reflective shades of blue, purple, brown and black [Fig. 63].

²⁰² Coppola, *Six wonderful days*, 157.

The panels contain symbols and imagery that Fontana had been experimenting in ceramic form since his first visit to the Mazzotti Factory in 1936. For example, Fontana favoured the butterfly in his early ceramic work, and in 1939 produced several series of the head of Medusa.²⁰³ In these earlier pieces, Fontana had been experimenting with iridescent glaze coatings which made the ceramic objects glint and shimmer in the light or as the viewer moved around them. In these panels, Fontana incorporated the technique of ‘third-firing’ to create a more intense iridescence, incorporated within the layers of clay and glaze. Instead of merely coating the ceramic surface with a thin glaze, the effect of ‘third-firing’ the panels gives the appearance of light literally wedged in-between the recesses of clay [Fig. 64].²⁰⁴

Fontana’s decision to incorporate imagery from the classical world and biblical scenes was a deliberate effort to be part of Ponti’s vision for the interior decoration of the Conte Grande. Ponti stated that the premise behind the interior décor of the liners project was to “recall the legend of Italy,” whilst also instilling a strong sense of “the promising Italian artists and the crafts of today”.²⁰⁵ In particular, when *SS Conte Grande* returned to the Italian Line in 1947 with its sister ship *SS Conte Biancamano*, the reinstatement symbolised the prestige of the past and the overcoming of war as part of Italy’s reconstruction program. Ponti’s refurbishment of the *SS Conte Grande* was therefore symbolic of Italy successfully rebounding from the war. Fontana’s portrayal of the rich culture of the classical past using a traditional medium such as clay in a new and exciting way thus reflected this dialogue and the regeneration and rich culture of contemporary Italy. Even Fontana’s decision to create panels, instead of a traditional ceramic form, is arguably a nod to the traditional, prestigious medium of panel painting which was prominent in Ancient Rome. In their reminiscence of classic mythology and landscapes, the panels evoke the traditional, reverent past whilst simultaneously portraying Italy as a leader in modern art and design.

The panels on board *SS Conte Grande* were not the only example that Fontana had collaborated with maritime projects in his artistic career. In 1935, Fontana participated in the national poster competition for the Italian shipping group - Flotte Riunite, Cosulich - Lloyd -

²⁰³ Crispolti and Forskellige udstillingssteder, *Fontana*, 21, 159, 172,.

²⁰⁴ Fontana was assisted by an expert in lusterware and glazes at the Mazzotti Factory – possibly Mariano Baldantoni, who was noted as a celebrated master of lustre effects at the Factory for decades. (Information given to author by Giovanni Poggi, San Giorgio studios, Albissola, July 2014).

²⁰⁵ Coppola, *Six wonderful days*, 157.

Adria, to promote the worldwide propaganda of services by the Four Armies Society.²⁰⁶ Via a selection process, set up in the Rome office of the Circle of Arts and Letters, Fontana's poster was included in an exhibition in which over two hundred posters by artists from the major Italian centres or living abroad were exposed [Fig. 65]. At the conclusion of an accredited jury event, by unanimous vote, they decreed Fontana the winner of the competition, awarding him "the substantial prize of 10,000 lire." One magazine hailed the poster as "exquisite workmanship", writing:

"[it is] a wondrous work of art as well as effective advertising: a global vision in its essential elements, the girth and traces of parallels and meridians, and, on the equatorial diameter, the fleeting vision of a ship, which originated from a sunbeam."²⁰⁷

Furthermore, in 1951, Fontana designed a series of mosaics for the interiors of the *SS Andrea Doria* and *Achille Lauro*. In the very early years of the company, Fontana created a ceramic mosaic for the exterior of a veranda bar and swimming pool on-board the *Andrea Doria* in second class. While the original work is lost, a photograph depicts the mosaics in situ, depicting an organic design that curves around the bar and reflected in the pool [Fig. 66].²⁰⁸

The Conte Grande epitomised Italy's post-war optimism and spirit of renewal, an idea of the Italian lifestyle that united technological advances and new, post-war democratic ideals with luxury and the values of heritage, individuality, originality and art. To receive a commission for this project would have been a defining moment for Fontana as an artist as his work would have been considered among some of the best-known artists, designers and architects coming out of Milan of this period. The panels are a clear demonstration that Ponti valued their handmade quality and craftsmanship, and recognised this quality in Fontana's ceramics as a fundamental part of Italy's efforts to create new art and design. This commission in particular allowed Fontana to develop his ceramics practice by creating new forms and experimenting with new techniques. For example, whilst the panels were decoration, to adorn the ships walls, they also created an interaction with the passengers on board. The light for example would hit, reflect, and change colour as one walked down the corridor, thus

²⁰⁶ The events of the contest and poster reproduction are documented in the success of the great National Competition, appeared in the phone book *Varietas* in "The Sea", Trieste February 1935. The poster is kept at the Fondazione Lucio Fontana in Milan.

²⁰⁷ Coppola, *Six wonderful days*, 170.

²⁰⁸ Maurizio Eliseo, *Andrea Doria: cento uno viaggi* (Milano: Hoepli, 2006), 135–37.

exploiting the passenger's movements on board to create an experience. Fontana's sensitivity to the contemporary political inflections of classical characters and myths and his exploration of the rhetorical potential of light and shadow meant that the panels outlined the beginnings of an alternative pictorial language that his future architectural design and ceramic work addressed.

The ceramic relief

So far this chapter has discussed the ceramics that Fontana produced during the post-war period in Albissola. As well as producing a number of ceramic figurines and small sculptures, this chapter has identified a new genre which was popular with Fontana and his ceramic experimentation during this period - the relief. As the following section of this chapter will examine, the artist Agenore Fabbri produced two monumental terracotta reliefs in Albissola. It is therefore worth briefly examining why Fontana and Fabbri both turned to relief work in their ceramic oeuvre during this period. In other words, what was it about the ceramic relief as a medium that was so attractive to these artists? It would be impossible to provide a history of the relief as a genre, even in relation to reliefs made during the twentieth century. Therefore, the more specific question of why Fontana and Fabbri would have chosen to work in relief with clay during the post-war period in Italy needs to be explored.

As a medium, reliefs are typically understood as any artwork which projects *from* but which belongs *to* the wall, or other type of background surface, on which it is carved. Reliefs are traditionally classified according to how high the figures project from the background. For example, the Parthenon Frieze (c.443-438 BCE) can be considered an example of high relief sculpted in marble. Whilst the relief as a genre has historically been understood as a branch of sculpture, during the twentieth century it was considered to contain elements of the two-dimensional pictorial arts and the three-dimensional sculptural arts and therefore a medium that was able to function as an intermediate genre. For example, the relief owes much to painting, in terms of figurative expression on a flat plane, while at the same time plays a prominent part in architecture, on which it is most frequently deployed.

The relief proved to be a popular genre during the 1930s in Italy. Mussolini's initiative to "create the new art of our times, a fascist art," provoked a debate among artists and writers about what constituted the best artistic form to communicate fascist ideas to a broad

audience.²⁰⁹ Novecento declared itself to be best suited to achieve this goal because of its quest to make art popular by connecting it to architecture.²¹⁰ In 1931, the Italian critic Mario Tinti wrote in his article “Sculpture and Painting in Modern Architecture” that painting and sculpture should be harmoniously incorporated into the architectural environment to create a style that would effectively communicate to a wider public. While Tinti took it for granted that painting and sculpture would remain figurative, he also predicted that:

“modern architecture, on account of its severely structural character, will draw sculpture and painting... toward forms in which the concrete plasticity of the human figure, in itself, will prevail over illustrative, psychological, coloristic and dynamic accidents, to the point of refuting them completely.”²¹¹

Thus the concept of ‘plasticity’ was seen as essential to an art form that would communicate with the masses. Artists such as Mario Sironi produced a large number of murals and reliefs in tribute to the Fascist regime and Mussolini’s role as Il Duce. As part of plans to build the Palazzo della Civiltà Italiana (the Palace of Italian Civilisation), in the ‘Room of the Duce’, Sironi designed a projecting façade on a balcony which reflected the idea of public life of the piazza. Sironi framed the balcony with low-relief carving of the fascio and standard in polished porphyry, two reminders of Roman authority from antiquity. The front face of the porphyry balcony featured a low-relief sculpture, *The People of Italy (Il Popolo d’Italia)*, designed by Sironi and executed by Carlo Sessa. As Lucy M. Maulsby notes in *Fascism, Architecture and Claiming of Modern Milan, 1922-1943*:

“The study forms and deep shadows of the roughly carved farmers, workers, and soldiers marching towards the central figure of Italia reinforced the ritualised procession suggested by the piers of the façade and entrance hall. Directed towards the piazza, where the masses would have converged to hear the words of the Duce, the balcony and decorative program found its ultimate meaning in the piazza, a symbol and site of collective experience and action.”²¹²

²⁰⁹ Gabriella Brusa Zappellini and Paola Pellegrino, *Dal futurismo al realismo magico: arte e fascismo in Italia tra rivoluzione e restaurazione* (Milano: Arcipelago Edizioni, 1994), 179.

²¹⁰ White, *Lucio Fontana*, 77.

²¹¹ Cited in *Ibid.*, 78.

²¹² Lucy M Maulsby, *Fascism, Architecture, and the Claiming of Modern Milan, 1922-1943* (Toronto; Buffalo (N.Y.); London: University of Toronto Press, 2014), 157–59.

For the most part, the Novecento interest in making art ‘architectural’ was more a matter of style than substance. In reality, sculpture merely mimicked the style of the architecture by rendering the human body in an austere, geometric fashion as one would find in reliefs from ancient times.

After the fall of Mussolini and the end of the Second World War, there was a shift from the depiction of the human figure as austere and geometric to one which was emotive and gestural. This shift was not about invoking the classical forms of art – a “return to order” which saw artists come to prominence in Fascist art - but a turn to the pathos and the expressive quality of the medium. To repeat Sharon Hecker’s observation of Fontana’s *Albissola ceramica: battaglia relief* as an artwork that aimed to replace “the negative, fascist, Dionysian spirit of the war with a new message for a war-weary public, in desperate need of regeneration.”²¹³ Thus, one could argue that Fontana and Fabbri’s choice to work in relief might have been in reaction to a pre-war aesthetic of classicism and to create art which evoked meaning of ‘war-weary’.

As well as being a reaction against Fascist art, the relief was a considerably practical medium for novice ceramicists or artists to work with. For example, a relief sculpture can portray a far wider range of subjects than a statue because of its economy of resources. A battle scene, that, if sculpted in the round, would require a huge amount of space and material, whereas in clay, can be rendered much more easily and cheaper in relief. For novice ceramicists, the slab would have been easier and quicker to make (simply rolling out clay instead of throwing or coiling), and would have been an easy technique to master pretty quickly. Furthermore, because a relief is attached to its background surface, problems of weight and physical balance do not arise - unlike in statues and other freestanding sculptures where weight and balance can be critical. Reliefs can be carved directly onto walls, portals, ceilings, floors and other flat surfaces, they are ideally suited to architectural projects - typically the greatest source of sculptural commissions for artists during the twentieth century- for which, as this thesis demonstrates, they can provide both decorative and narrative functions.

The position of the relief as one on the cusp of the three visual arts was historically viewed as problematic. The art historian and archaeologist Johann Joachim Winckelmann (1717-1786) for example, acknowledged that ‘good’ artworks maintained the autonomy of the respective

²¹³ Hecker, ‘Servant of Two Masters’, 357.

media in which they were executed, and any overlaps were understood as signals of decline.²¹⁴ In the wake of his restrained and ultimately austere aesthetic, art historians continued to work with these prejudices. But as this thesis has illustrated, boundaries between art categories, including ceramics, painting, relief, sculpture, and design, began to slip during the twentieth century. It is precisely this intermediary position – the ceramic relief as sculptural and also like that of a canvas made from clay - that this thesis argues is what was so attractive to artists working with ceramics, specifically in relief, in Albissola. The ceramic relief could not be called a pot – it was neither functional nor had the traditional forms of ceramic vessel – and could therefore be used as a medium in which to engage with painting, sculpture and architecture all at once. The relief was therefore practical and symbolic for Fontana and Fabbri during this period: on the one hand it can be seen as a reaction against austere Fascist art and Novecento architectural decoration, whilst on the other it was extremely practical and affordable.

Agenore Fabbri

The artist Agenore Fabbri (1911-1998) was an Italian sculptor and a prominent figure in Albissola's artistic scene during the post-war years. His work can be characterised as rigorously expressionist, often portraying the suffering and trauma of people and animals in mythological stories and battle scenes. Fabbri's work rose to prominence in the early 1930s when he moved from Tuscany to Florence in 1932 in order to continue his education at the Accademia di Belle Arti. Whilst at the academy, Fabbri frequented the artists' Caffè Giubbe Rosse - a meeting point for the intellectuals known as the Ermetici Group (Hermetics Group), a literary movement who protested against the Fascist cult of heroism and optimism and included poets such as Eugenio Montale and Carlo Bo.²¹⁵

In 1933, Fabbri moved to Albissola and created his first terracotta sculptures portraying mainly biblical figures. He struck up a friendship with Tullio d'Albisola and from that year onwards was a regular visitor to the Mazzotti Factory.²¹⁶ In 1938, Fabbri participated in the

²¹⁴ Hills, *Rethinking the Baroque*, 41.

²¹⁵ Roger Griffin, *Fascism* 5, 5, (London: Routledge, 2004), 410.

²¹⁶ Marco Valsecchi, *Sei artisti milanesi 1960-1965: Cassinari, Fabbri, Fabris, Francese, Milani, Morlotti : Palazzo della Gran Guardia, Verona, 16 aprile-10 maggio 1966* (Verona: Cortella, 1966).

Mostra Nazionale in Naples and received the Bagutta-Spotorno Award for the bronze sculpture *Il piccolo pescatore* (*The Little Fisherman*), which was bought by the Museum of Modern Art, Milan on the advice of Arturo Martini. In the early 1940s, Fabbri made his debut with his first solo exhibitions of the work he created in Albissola at the Gian Ferrari Gallery in Milan (1940) and then in Bergamo and Savona a year later. His artistic career was interrupted when he was sent to Yugoslavia and Greece on military service for the duration of the Second World War.

After the war, Fabbri returned to Milan in 1946 and took up residence at a small studio which he established with artists Arturo Martini and Lucio Fontana. During the summer months he travelled to Albissola with Fontana and produced monumental works in terracotta and developed progressive solutions in reflective glazes. Such works included *Caccia al Cinghiale* (Boar Hunting) in Palazzo Sormani in Milan and large ceramic bas-reliefs such as *Battaglia* (Battle) in the Museum Manlio Trucco of Albissola and *Il Mito di Orfeo* (The Myth of Orpheus) which was on display at the Polo Tecnologico Libero Grassi of Quarrata (Tuscany) in 2010. In 1947, Fabbri had his first meeting with Picasso at his studio in Vallauris and created terracotta and ceramic works such as *Donna del popolo* (Lady of the People, name given by Picasso himself), *Uomo colpito* (Struck Man) and *La madre* (The Mother).²¹⁷

Fabbri has been overwhelmingly neglected in the history of art of this period, which consequently means a lot of his work lacks any scholarly analysis. Yet he is cited as an artist who was sympathetic to the vision of the “Corrente di Vita” (Current Youth) group in which he was allegedly an active member.²¹⁸ The Corrente group, which included the artists Aligi Sassu and Emilio Vedova, were dedicated to promoting anti-Fascist imagery and principles and advocated a strong position of opposition to some of the leading movements in Italy and across Europe. In one of their founding statements, they declared:

²¹⁷ Claudia Cappellini, Mario De Micheli, and Giovanna Uzzani, *Agonore Fabbri: il mito di Orfeo* (Pistoia: Gli ori, 2010), 47.

²¹⁸ Luciano Caramel, *Arte in Italia: 1945 - 1960* (Milano: Vita e Pensiero, 2013), 286; Cecilia Chilosi, *Ceramiche della tradizione Ligure thesaurus di opere dal Medio Evo al primo Novecento* (Cinisello Balsamo, Milano: Silvana, 2011), 197, 219, 272; Luciano Caramel, (Italie) Società per le belle arti ed esposizione permanente (Milan, and Italie) Palazzo della Permanente (Milan, *Scultura a Milano, 1945-1990: [Milano, Palazzo della Permanente, 1 giugno-22 luglio 1990* (Milano: Mazzotta, 1990), 15, 153, 169.

“We are opposed to metaphysics which invites the wonder and mystery. We are opposed to surrealism as it, in the excavation of a dimension beyond anything, has lost sight of the skeleton, flesh and heart. We are opposed to the expressionism of interiority background, isolation, convulsion...”²¹⁹

In other words, Corrente were committed to portraying realistic, raw human emotions in their work which they believed current art movements had ignored and abolished. As a group they adopted an anti-19th-century style of painting that rejected aesthetic indulgence and demanded the viewer’s participation by evoking and portraying strong images of trauma and suffering. The movement declared that ‘a new realism’, even in the wake of the figurative tradition, was to be introduced. Corrente quickly became a point of reference for Italian anti-Fascist culture in the late 1930s, offering itself as a democratic alternative to the official guidelines of the Ministry of Popular Culture, and strongly criticising the Novecento Italiano movement, the art of the regime and Futurism.²²⁰ The painting style developed by Emilio Vedova, for example, required the will to experiment and exact a great expenditure of physical energy. In his later creations, Vedova pursued investigations into physical space independently of any prejudged attitudes towards balance, logic and behavior. His paintings were “not a hymn to modern times,” as the Futurists had attempted to capture in their art, “but rather a confirmation of the feelings of alarm and distress that pervade contemporary society.”²²¹

Similarly, Fabbri had an appetite for passionate, expressive artistic language. He placed great emphasis on emotion in his artworks and restricted his colour palette to only a few muted shades. The reddish brown of terracotta was the most dominant, if not the only, colour of Fabbri’s entire oeuvre. For some of the same reasons outlined in the introduction to this thesis, terracotta was an attractive material for artists during this period for a number of reasons – it was cheap, accessible, expressive and symbolic of the earth and nature – in Latin, for instance, it’s literal translation is “baked earth”. Terracotta uses a far simpler and quicker process for creating the finished work with much lower material costs. The easier task of modelling, typically with a limited range of knives and wooden shaping tools, but mainly

²¹⁹ ‘Home’, *Fondazione Corrente*, accessed 21 March 2017, <http://www.fondazionecorrente.org/>.

²²⁰ Ruth Ben-Ghiat, *Fascist Modernities: Italy, 1922-1945* (Berkeley (Calif.): University of California Press, 2009), 168.

²²¹ ‘Emilio Vedova’, *Wikipedia*, 5 February 2017, https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Emilio_Vedova&oldid=763754414.

using the fingers, allowed the artist to take a freer and more flexible approach to the material, as opposed to materials such as bronze or steel. Small details that might be impractical to carve in stone, of hair or flesh for example, can easily be accomplished in terracotta, and drapery can sometimes be made up of thin sheets of clay that make it much easier to achieve a realistic effect.

In 1948, Fabbri created a monumental ceramic relief titled *Battaglia* (Battle) from terracotta using these processes [Fig. 67]. Produced at the Mazzotti Factory and weighing in at over seven tons, it is a massive thing to behold. Split into two panels, it depicts an apocalyptic narrative of men and horses engaged in battle which unfolds over one hundred terracotta tiles joined together. For years, possibly since it was created at the Mazzotti Factory in 1948, *Battaglia* was situated in the entrance lobby of Savona's Astor Cinema (now demolished) before being housed in the Hall Fabbri, at the headquarters of the Foundation Mosaic Liguria Onlus.²²² In 2012, it was transported to the garden of the Manlio Trucco Civic Museum in Albissola, where it was unveiled at the closing of the 7th International Majolica Festival and recognised as an important piece of regional art.

Three years after making *Battaglia*, Fabbri created another monumental ceramic relief at the Mazzotti Factory. This relief focused not on images of war or battle, but instead depicted a famous mythological story. *Il Mito d'Orfeo* (The Myth of Orpheus) from 1951 measures six meters by five, and in similar composition to *Battaglia*, is a huge terracotta relief composed of numerous individual tiles slotted together like a giant jigsaw puzzle [Fig. 68]. Both human and animal forms appear to float around a large black asymmetric hole in centre of the piece. *Il Mito* was commissioned for the IX Milan Triennale in 1951 where afterwards it was disassembled and stored in a warehouse in Varedo, near Milan, for over forty years. In 1998 it was acquired by the city council of Albissola and, more recently, exhibited in Fabbri's birthplace of Quarrata in 2010.²²³

Il Mito d'Orfeo, like *Battaglia*, tells a story. Its subject matter, which the title derives, is taken from the famous myth of Orpheus and his quest to bring back his dead lover Eurydice from

²²² For a description of how the relief was installed, see Cappellini, De Micheli, and Uzzani, *Agenore Fabbri*, 18.

²²³ 'La "Battaglia" di Agenore Fabbri per Il Futuro Municipio Di Albissola Superiore', *Savonanews.it*, 21 March 2011, <http://www.savonanews.it/2011/03/21/mobile/leggi-notizia/argomenti/altre-notizie-2/articolo/la-battaglia-di-agenore-fabbri-per-il-futuro-municipio-di-Albissola-superiore.html>.

the Underworld. Orpheus' mission fails however because he does the one thing he is told not to – he turns around and looks at Eurydice, and he immediately loses her forever. Orpheus swears to never love another, which causes the wild women of Thrace to tear him limb from limb in a fit of jealousy. The story goes that they throw his head into a river and it sings all the way to the sea. Fabbri's portrayal of this story seems to have been influenced by both Virgil's *Georgics* and Ovid's *Metamorphoses* narrations of the myth as Fabbri portrays characters that are present in both versions and locates the figures within a pastoral scene.²²⁴

The narrative begins at the bottom left side, where the naked figure of Orpheus is seen playing his lyre before Eurydice, portrayed as listening to Orpheus and seemingly enraptured by the melody. Orpheus is accompanied by many animals – birds, a dog, deer and a goat, which likewise seem to be fascinated by the divine music. Moving up the panel, the story develops and under a radiant sun, a bull and a mountain goat surround the shepherd Aristeo, who reaches out to embrace Eurydice. In a bid to escape Aristeo, Eurydice tramples a snake, seen directly below the two figures, whose bite is deadly. To the right of this scene, Orpheus is seen being led by a goat and creature into the realm of the Underworld. Fabbri omits the scene where Orpheus turns around to look at Eurydice and, instead depicts the moment that Orpheus standing with his arms wide open in embrace as he turns to look at Eurydice, so losing her forever. The final part of the relief's story, seen in the bottom right, is not Eurydice in the afterlife but the maenads who kill Orpheus by mercilessly bludgeoning him to death.

The story of Orpheus has been depicted in numerous paintings and sculptures through time, by artists like Titian, Poussin, and Rodin - many highlighting Orpheus and Eurydice's anguished final embrace, Orpheus's performance of music, or his fateful glance back. During the twentieth century, the depiction of Orpheus in art fell into two major categories, what Judith E. Bernstock identifies as, "those that idolise him and those that focus on his weakness."²²⁵ The first category portrays Orpheus according to the early Greek conception of his myth, as a figure of peace and calm and as a musician whose notes could move all of

²²⁴ Frederick A De Armas, *Ovid in the Age of Cervantes* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010), 205–7. Since antiquity, the myth of Orpheus was transmitted through various text, primarily Virgil's *Georgics* and Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Confusion between these two, at times contradictory, texts ultimately equated this particular myth with the pastoral. One variant of the story places blame on the shepherd Aristaeus (Aristeo) and his undying love for Eurydice.

²²⁵ Judith E Bernstock, *Under the Spell of Orpheus: The Persistence of a Myth in Twentieth-Century Art* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1991), xxiii.

nature – Orpheus becomes a humanist champion as the civiliser of nature and as the representative of suffering multitudes. The second category follows the Roman version as the conception of Orpheus as a flawed and fallible artist and lover.

Fabbri's relief can be considered an overlap of these two traditions, yet it does not only portray the myth through a narrative, but through the over exaggerated surface treatment suggests that Fabbri was attempting to reveal the relationship between terracotta and himself, the artist. Fabbri's gestural manipulation of the material, as well as the impression on the surface of the clay, relays the imperfect nature of human gesture, thus inciting one of the main symbols in the Orpheus story. The central black square is also key to reading the relief in this way. It serves as both a part of the story of Orpheus, symbolic of the gates of Hell in which Orpheus enters to bring Eurydice back from the dead, but it also opens up a dialogue with the spectator. When viewing the relief, the viewer naturally stands in front of the square to survey the relief in its entirety and to contemplate the unfolding narrative which surrounds the black square. In doing so, it is the viewer who becomes the center of the relief - and arguably the subject of the relief itself. By encasing the viewer in the square, the viewer become the final character in the relief's narrative.

Themes of violence, death and condemnation are common across Fabbri's oeuvre. His interest in representing human suffering and pain can be seen to span heterogeneous iconographic traditions, from mythology to classical and Christianity. His sculptures are harsh, hard, fleshless figures; some depict images of figures writhing around in fire. The jagged and cracked clay was the material that best allowed Fabbri to express the torment of war and the physical exertion needed to create these works was mirrored in the anguished expressions of the figures. Fabbri's sculptures are figurative and expressive, combining imagery from myth and faith that are related to the sacred composition, with crucifixions, painful piety and sacred conversations where the convulsion between space and figures naturally tends towards a dramatic saturation. Fabbri created scenes that were an homage to the suffering of humanity in war – something that was not other-worldly, but secular and human.

In addition to his relief work, Fabbri also produced a series of sculptures during this period. *Caccia al Cinghiale* (Boar Hunting) is made up of three large sculptures of men on horseback with lances, and a separate sculpture of a boar being attacked. The photographer Paolo Monti captured this series when it was first exhibited at the 1954 at the Milan Triennale (the same

Triennale in which Jorn and the International Ceramics Meeting showed their ceramics) [Fig. 69]. A terracotta bozzetti, known as the ‘Sketch for the War Monument of Albissola Marina’ is similar in style and form to Fabbri’s other works - three human figures are depicted with pained expressions on their faces, their skin appears burnt and scolded and their eyes harrowed. The final sculpture was never executed; however, the sketch is on permanent view at the Collezione Comune Albissola Marina [Fig. 70].

After working with terracotta for a number of years - a period which lasted at least until 1954 when he exhibited his sculptures at the X Milan Triennale - Fabbri moved on to an exploration of bronze characterised by convulsive modelling and deep cuts. This phase lasted until the 1960s, when he turned to wood as his material of choice, making figures marked by ruptures and cracks of the surfaces. In the same period he also executed many artworks using iron, tin and zinc, and steel, until 1981, when he discovered painting and combined classic oil and acrylic colors with materials such as sand, stones, rags and textiles and even tin cans.

Whilst a closer exploration of Fabbri’s time in Albissola has shown the variety of artists who visited Albissola so far in the twentieth century, it is curious that such an artist was welcomed by Tullio – a Futurist and friend of F.T. Marinetti, a man who stood for everything that the Corrente Group, and Fabbri, were opposed to. It serves the questions of why was Tullio and Fabbri friends when their values were so diametrically opposed? The answer to this, arguably was circumstantial. Was it now that Tullio realized the war was over and the Mazzotti Factory had to evolve with the times, thus inviting in a sculptor like Fabbri would mean that Tullio would have access to a whole new world of artists choosing to experiment with ceramics and coming to his workshop.

The atrium of the IX Milan Triennale

In 1951, Fontana exhibited his famous 100-metre-long entwined loop of fluorescent light tubing titled *Spatial Light - Neon Structure* at the IX Milan Triennale [Fig. 71]. Its suspension from the ceiling of the central staircase of the Palazzo dell’Arte, and its emission of a violet eerie glow, has led many scholars to describe it as a classic representation of what Fontana called a ‘spatial environment’- what Francesca Pasini argues is “an overcoming [of] the divisions in architecture, painting and sculpture to reach a synthesis of colour, movement

and space.”²²⁶ Whilst *Neon Structure* has received a significant amount of scholarly attention, it was not the only “spatial art” Fontana created for the IX Triennale. On the ceiling of the atrium of the Palazzo dell’Arte, Fontana suspended a second luminous tube structure, which for the purposes of discussion this chapter will title *Neon Structure II* [Fig. 72]. Instead of looping the tubing over a stairwell, like in *Neon Structure*, this second structure is a figurative line that lights up the vestibule and points towards another dominant work positioned on the far wall of the atrium - Fabbri’s large terracotta relief *Il Mito d’Orfeo* [Fig. 73]. By discussing whether these two works relate to one another in situ, and also how they might relate to one of the main aims of the Triennale, that of “synthesis of arts”, this chapter argues that Albissola can be considered an important part of the new artistic direction Italy was taking during this period.

One of the main principles of the IX Triennale was to bring new sculptors, designers, and artists together to showcase what Italy had to offer artistically. As the catalogue describes:

“Instead of pursuing a safe and easy result entrusting the decorative artists of a single trend, it is preferred to call men who, in the diversity of trends and attitudes, would mirror the variety and richness of the artistic climate of Italy today, and it attempts to resolve their differences on the level of a higher architectural direction.”²²⁷

The Triennale urged a new unity of the arts by advocating “a new completeness architecture” and proposing a methodical collaboration between the architect, sculptor, painter and decorator.²²⁸ Photographs of the Triennale at the time show that the atrium comprised of a number of works of art that had been carefully arranged into a grouping. Four works, including Fabbri’s relief and Fontana’s *Neon Structure II* share the atrium space: Fabbri’s large relief encompasses the entire wall at the far end of the atrium, a golden figure of Orpheus by the Italian sculptor Carmelo Cappello is seen placed in front of the empty black square in Fabbri’s relief, and the floor is a marquetry (parquet) vinyl designed by Attilio Rossi. All the works are grouped together in this space and illuminated under Fontana’s ceiling light strip.²²⁹ Together, they represent the different artistic categories coming together

²²⁶ F Pasini, ‘Document: Lucio Fontana’s Spatial Light-Structure in Neon for the 9th Milan Triennial It Is Not a Lasso, an Arabesque, Nor a Piece of Spaghetti’, *TATE ETC*, no. 14 (2008): 90–95.

²²⁷ Cappellini, De Micheli, and Uzzani, *Agencore Fabbri*, 46.

²²⁸ Ibid. Author’s translation from Italian text: “una nuova completezza dell’architettura”

²²⁹ Ibid., 48.

in one environment: design (Rossi's floor), sculpture (Cappello's *Orpheus*), ceramic relief (Fabbri) and, a new category, aerial sculpture (Fontana).

This was not the only grouping in the Triennale which included ceramics in dialogue with design and fine art. Gio Ponti also curated and exhibited a collection of new Italian ceramics by artists such as Fausto Melotti and Franco Garelli, displayed as part of Italy's new design, rather than decorative art. Lisa Hockemeyer has drawn attention to the reasons why ceramics were such an important feature in the Triennale. Hockemeyer argues:

“In the post-war years, Italian ceramics as a generic group embodied Italy's new image, combining modernity, fine art connotations and the ideals of heritage with aesthetic freedom. These exhibitions did not diminish the cultural value of the fine arts but helped to raise the appreciation of Italian majolica manufacture to the same level. This phenomenon was claimed to be unique to the Italian artisanal tradition, thereby creating an identity that associated both Italian pottery [...] with fine art ideals and set them apart from those of other countries.”²³⁰

Therefore, by positioning Fontana's Neon Structure II together with Fabbri's large terracotta relief, as if the two categories of decorative arts and sculpture were in dialogue, the Triennale demonstrated that Italy was at the forefront of creating new conversations outside the defined categories of arts. Similar to the ways in which Ponti had exhibited new Italian ceramics as design on the Conte Grande - his 'floating art gallery' – the Triennale demonstrated that Italy had rebound from the war and was at the forefront of synthesising the arts to create a new, avant-garde Italian aesthetic.²³¹

The fact that Fontana and Fabbri exhibited their works together in the same space at this Triennale is not surprising given that, as this chapter has demonstrated, they had been working together at the Mazzotti factory in Albissola since 1948. However, it is not only the positioning of these works together in the same space which reinforces Fontana and Fabbri's artistic relationship to each other at this time. Their works in the atrium can be seen as visually and materially complementary. For example, both works appear to enter into a

²³⁰ Lisa Hockemeyer, 'Manufactured Identities: Ceramics and the Making of (Made in) Italy', *Made in Italy / Ed. by Grace Lees-Maffei and Kjetil Fallan.*, 2014, 135–39.

²³¹ For a more detailed investigation into the role of craft in Italian post-war art and design, specifically in terms of artists such as Giò Ponti and Ettore Sottsass, see Catharine Rossi, *Crafting Design in Italy: From Post-War to Postmodernism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2015).

dialogue which is similar to the one Fontana created in the Cinema Arlecchino with his aerial *Arlecchino* and earth-bound *Albissola ceramica: battaglia*. This dialogue challenges the traditional way that a viewer would have experienced ceramics or sculpture during this period. Positioned on the wall and on the ceiling, both works challenge the traditional ways in which sculpture or ceramics were viewed as usually on the floor, or on a pedestal, surveyed from all angles. In doing so, their work becomes part of the architecture of the atrium and presents to the viewer an environmental way of engaging with the work. Furthermore, by bringing together two works which use unusual materials within a fine art context, such as neon (gas) and terracotta, both Fontana and Fabbri fulfil the aims of the Triennale to showcase Italy as at the forefront of new artistic ideas.

This chapter has shown that during the post-war period Albissola was an important place for Lucio Fontana's artistic development. Fontana's decorations of interior spaces, buildings, exterior architecture and public spaces directly connected the Mazzotti Factory to artists, designers, sculptors and architects working in Milan during the post-war period. Well-known designers and architects, such as Giò Ponti and Zoncada, were instrumental in providing a platform for new directions in ceramic art. Their commissions were driven by a need to create a distinctly traditional Italian art that referenced the past and looked to the future. Fontana, especially, was able to provide Ponti with ceramic art that did just that. His panels for example were a combination of classical and mythological narrative infused with some of the newest and dazzling glaze formulas. The ceramics that were produced at the Mazzotti Factory became a symbolic part of this 'rebirth' as envisioned by Ponti, who commissioned some of the best known ceramic artists in Italy to produce work that mirrored his ideals of an "Italy of the wonderful ceramics". Fontana's approach to ceramics was intricate, his knowledge and application was broad, but he was also sure to keep connected to important influential people like Giò Ponti.

Milan's rich post-war artistic culture had an impact on Albissola and the working environment of the Mazzotti Factory. On a very basic level, the physical appearance and aesthetics of the ceramic being produced was completely different than the ones Tullio had advocated when he set out to the International Exposition in 1925 to recruit futurist artists. The ceramic art now mirrored the attitudes and ideas of two artists who were working there. The mixture of Fabbri's harsh, emotional work and Fontana's luminous experiments produced an interesting dynamic at the Mazzotti Factory that was, in many respects, the antithesis of its early artistic alignments in Futurism. As Fontana's ceramics gained more

notoriety, stemming from the Factory as his base, Albissola attracted a new wave of artists and ideas to arrive in the early 1950s. How Albissola's environment metamorphosed into its next artistic phase as a hot spot for collective activity is explored in the next chapter of this thesis.

CHAPTER THREE

CONFLUENCE: PEOPLE, IDEAS AND ACTIVITY IN ALBISSOLA (1954 – 1959)

This chapter explores artistic activity in Albissola between the years 1954 to 1959. During this brief but intense period, Albissola became a lively place of internationalism and a hub for several avant-garde artists and movements. One of the most important events to take place in Albissola at this time was the International Ceramics Meeting in 1954, a ceramics workshop organised by the Danish artist Asger Jorn, the Nuclear artists Enrico Baj and Sergio Dangelo, and Tullio d'Albisola at the Mazzotti Factory. At this meeting, several artists gathered together with the sole aim of producing ceramics in experimental ways. Their aims were to engage with issues surrounding the mechanised production of art objects by creating hundreds of individually hand-made ceramics. In total, over one hundred and fifty objects were made, many of which have hardly received any scholarly attention.

Those who initially gathered in Albissola in 1954 were brought together by a shared interest in ceramics as a medium that could generate a spontaneous and expressive mode of making art. After the International Ceramics Meeting had taken place, Albissola soon developed into a place where artists could exchange avant-garde ideas more generally, including the organisation of exhibitions, locally and internationally, as well as bartering artists' ceramics for housing and food. Exponents of the Spatialist movement - the artist Piero Manzoni and writer and gallery owners Milena Milani and Carlo Cadazzo - also travelled to Albissola during this period to visit Lucio Fontana at his studio. This period can therefore be described as a melting-pot of meetings and exchanges between various leading artists, critics and theorists from across the art world. The aim of this chapter is to present and explore several case studies of artists and their work within this context.

The International Ceramics Meeting of 1954

In the summer of 1954, Asger Jorn, Enrico Baj and Sergio Dangelo organised a meeting between artists, critics and theorists in Albissola called the "Incontro internazionale della Ceramica" (The International Ceramics Meeting). Its central meeting place was at the Mazzotti Factory and its principle aim was to bring like-minded artists together to produce experimental ceramic art under the aegis of Tullio d'Albisola. In particular, Jorn wanted

artists to make ceramics in a collective capacity – to work not collaboratively, nor together on one single project, but separately with common goals that celebrated self-expression and individuality. The meeting itself lasted three weeks, during which time over one hundred and fifty objects were produced by several artists at the Mazzotti Factory.²³² The meeting is certainly worth exploring in more detail, not least because of the sheer scale and range of work that was produced as part of the meeting, but because it captures the lively internationalism present in Albissola during this period. Before examining the ceramics made by artists, it is worth providing a summary of events leading up to the meeting itself, the organisation of which began in 1953. This will not only shed light on the reasons why the International Ceramics Meeting was set up in the first place, but will also highlight what Jorn, Baj and Dangelo hoped to achieve by organising such a meeting.

In October 1953 Jorn received news that the Ulm School of Design (Hochschule für Gestaltung Ulm - HfG) was to reopen. The task of reopening the school was given to the Swiss artist Max Bill (1908-1994), who had plans to design the building and reformat the teaching program based on his particular interest in post-war design and industrial society.²³³ An architect and industrial designer by profession, Bill secured permission from Walter Gropius to model his new school on the Bauhaus, which led to the HfG's informal designation as a 'New Bauhaus'.²³⁴ Jorn's views on art and design were in total opposition to Bill's relentlessly functionalist approach. For Jorn, the Bauhaus represented some of the most important ideas of personal expression that were first developed by artists such as Paul Klee and Wassily Kandinsky.

Jorn wrote to Bill inquiring about the school, declaring that he was initially excited to see a revival of the Bauhaus, where he felt that some of the most important ideas of personal expression were first developed. However, Bill responded with a pamphlet on the HfG, adding that the "arts are understood differently here than at the old Bauhaus." In response, Jorn wrote back explaining how a collaboration between CoBrA – the artistic group Jorn was

²³² Ursula Lehmann-Brockhaus et al., *Incontro internazionale della ceramica*, *Albisola, Sommer 1954: Appel, Baj, Corneille, Dangelo, Jorn, Matta in der Werkstatt Mazzotti Giuseppe*, 2013, 9. Lehmann-Brockhaus notes this figure, her research catalogues a large number of the works that were produced in Albissola during this year.

²³³ J Ockman, E Eigen, and Planning and Preservation Columbia University Graduate School of Architecture, *Architecture Culture 1943-1968: A Documentary Anthology* (New York: Rizzolo, 1993).

²³⁴ Karen Kurczynski, *The Art and Politics of Asger Jorn: The Avant-Garde Won't Give up* (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2014), 111.

part of at this time - and the HfG would be a great opportunity. The idea however was not met with enthusiasm and Jorn quickly discovered that ‘art’ - as Jorn understood it - was the last thing that interested Bill. Bill’s objectives for the HfG were concrete: “real art” was part of industrial production. “By ‘art’”, he writes, “we do not understand any kind of ‘self-expression’, but rather objective art.”²³⁵ Unlike the CoBrA group’s objectives, whose understanding of art centered on the creation of spontaneous, expressive images and artworks for a social experience, the HfG was devoted instead to the production of timeless, universal designs for use or ornament. In the end, Bill suggested that Jorn apply for a job at an ordinary art school and asked that all correspondence ended.

It was in protest to Bill’s oppressive attitudes towards representational art, and his plans for the HfG, that Jorn decided to form an ‘anti-functionalist’ movement which he called the International Movement for an Imaginist Bauhaus (M.I.B.I.).²³⁶ The term ‘imaginist’ was key - it was not about an imaginary Bauhaus that did not exist, but rather a real intervention that celebrated the imagination.²³⁷ For Jorn, an individual’s imagination was the best form of self-expression, and, through what Jorn termed “methodical experimentation”, the imagination could be stimulated and express itself freely in art. The first gathering of the M.I.B.I was The International Ceramics Meeting in Albissola in 1954. The purpose of the meeting was thus set up as a response to Bill’s functionalist ideology, but, crucially, it was also an event that championed the “free artistic methodology” of the M.I.B.I. – a concept which underpinned the meeting’s main objective.

As Karen Kurczynski points out, the notion of a “free artistic methodology” did not mean the high modernist conception of individual expression, because, after all, how could a “methodology” be “free”? Rather, it was based on Jorn’s theory that artistic freedom required a collective context, out of which personal expression could develop.²³⁸ As this and the

²³⁵ Asger Jorn, ‘Letter to Max Bill’, Unpublished, (December 1953), Museum Jorn, Silkeborg.

²³⁶ Hopkins and Oxford University Press, *After Modern Art*, 13. Bill and Jorn’s exchanges highlight the conflict between liberty and function, and between expression and construction, a dialogue which runs through the history of the Bauhaus.

²³⁷ Ken Knabb, *Situationist International Anthology*, 2012, 16–17. Pierre Alechinsky suggested the “Imaginist” titled because, he observed, it was not about an “imaginary” Bauhaus that did not exist, but rather a real intervention that celebrated the imagination. See Asger Jorn, “Notes on the Formation of an Imaginist Bauhaus”.

²³⁸ Karen Kurczynski and Asger Jorn, *The Art and Politics of Asger Jorn: The Avant-Garde Won’t Give up* (Farnham [u.a.: Ashgate, 2014), 131.

following chapter will demonstrate, Jorn's artistic activity in Albissola was based on the understanding that the terms "personal" and "collective" were only meaningful in relationship to one another.²³⁹ This was one of Jorn's fundamental ideologies that underpinned his entire artistic practice. As Kurczynski argues:

“[Jorn's] attempts at collective artistic production depended on the singularity of contributions from individual participants, but at the same time deliberately challenged the notion that creativity means individual talent by basing his experiments directly on earlier avant-garde models of collectivity.”²⁴⁰

From his earliest days as a Communist youth organiser, Jorn actively sought collective contexts to develop artistic experiments in relationship to others. His actions deliberately challenged the notion of creativity as an individual heritage.

In June 1954, Jorn ran into his friends Karel Appel, Roberto Sebastian Matta and Sergio Dangelo in Rome at an exhibition of his work organised by Enrico Baj at Galleria Asterisco. It was here that Jorn proposed the idea of a meeting centered on producing ceramics in Albissola and asked the artists to help him organise the event.²⁴¹ Drawing on previous experience, Jorn was keen to replicate a congress that CoBrA had organised in Bregnerød in 1949. In a letter to Sergio Dangelo, he described how the meeting in Albissola could be styled on Bregnerød, only this time with ceramics as the meeting's main artistic output:

“In Bregnerød we organised an international meeting of painters, sculptors and architects together with the architect Dahlmann Olsen, we decorated interior spaces and published [articles], why we do not make use of local crafts and artists in a ceramics meeting where the great Futurists worked, [with] Fontana...and others?”²⁴²

The idea of organising a meeting based on local crafts, specifically ceramics, would not have been an unusual proposition from Jorn. In the 1930s, Jorn was taught ceramics at a local pottery studio in his home town of Silkeborg, Denmark, and had been interested in the ways in which experimenting with ceramics could engage with the traditional folk-art of Denmark

²³⁹ Ibid., 99.

²⁴⁰ Ibid., 67.

²⁴¹ Kurczynski, *The Art and Politics of Asger Jorn*, 120.

²⁴² Franco Tiglio, *Jorn e Albisola dalla ceramica alla cultura: [pubblicato all'occasione della mostra, Albisola Marina, 18 marzo-30 aprile 1989]* (Albissola Marina: Comune di Albissola Marina, 1988), 54–57.

from early on in his artistic career.²⁴³ However, as the above quote illustrates, Jorn's vision for the meeting was more than just to experiment and create ceramics in a local, folk-art tradition. Jorn's meeting was inspired by the "great" Futurists work from earlier decades. Bearing in mind that during the post-war period, Futurism was understood as an embarrassment to many in Italy, Jorn's 'celebration' of Futurist ceramics begs the question: why did he want to model his meeting on ceramics that were considered part of a history many would like to forget?

The answer arguably relates to Jorn's understanding of the past and his concept of *détournement* - the practice of rearranging pre-existing elements, such as artworks, into new situations which ultimately negates their original meaning. This concept will be properly examined in the following chapter, which explores Jorn's involvement in the avant-garde group Situationist International in Albissola. But in terms of Jorn's specific interest in Futurism, particularly in relation to the meeting of 1954, it was led by his theory of *détournement*. In other words, Jorn's intention was not really to celebrate Futurist ceramics, but redefine the meaning of these objects within the aims of the Imaginist Bauhaus.

In 1956, two years after the International Ceramics Meeting took place, Jorn curated an exhibition of Futurist ceramics from 1925-1933 with the artist Pinot Gallizio and other members of the Imaginist Bauhaus, at the town hall in Alba (a small village close to Albissola). The exact contents of the exhibition and how the ceramics were displayed are unknown, but the fact that Jorn exhibited Futurist ceramics as part of the Imaginist Bauhaus Movement – and in collaboration with the Free Artist's Congress – is evidence that he was attempting to recreate a new context for these objects, one that was built around artistic imagination, collectivity and individual expression.²⁴⁴

²⁴³ Asger Jorn, Troels Andersen, and Silkeborg Museum, *Asger Jorn: 1914-1973 : katalog over arbejder tilhørende Silkeborg Kunstmuseum* (Silkeborg Museum, 1974). In 1953, Jorn returned to Silkeborg and created a series of egg-shaped plates. It was during the same year that Jorn met the artist Knud Jensen, a well-known local potter and secured funding for a collaborative project from the Silkeborg Museum. The resulting work – comprised of approximately sixty vases, plate and sculptures – was a collaborative effort by Jensen and Jorn. Jorn painted playful forms inspired by figures of everyday life and the curvilinear forms of Danish Jugendstil designs onto Jensen's traditionally thrown pots. These ceramics form the collection at Museum Jorn in Silkeborg.

²⁴⁴ First World Congress of Free Artists at Alba, Italy. Participants: Enrico Baj (Nuclear Art Movement, Milan; excluded in the course of the conference on the Lettrist delegate's demand), Jacques Calonne, Constant (ex-CoBrA; Christian Dotremont does not attend,

After Jorn had secured support from Baj and Dangelo to organise the International Ceramics Meeting, he sent out invites to a range of artists, critics, theorists and collectors from across Europe. Jorn wrote to Pierre Alechinsky suggesting that the two major French critics of Informel and Tachisme, Michel Tapié and Charles Estienne, would be ideal contributors to the main aims of the meeting. When Alechinsky pointed out that the two critics would never appear at the meeting together, Jorn decided to invite the French poet and art critic Edouard Jageur instead.²⁴⁵

The International Ceramics Meeting was inaugurated on August 15th 1954. To commemorate its official opening, ceramicists at the Mazzotti Factory produced a vase which was decorated and signed by Jager [Fig. 74]. It reads in part:

“We welcome you to the big ceramics festival in Albissola. Here [...] we create together a new conception of art. We knead together the clay into shapes of men, plants and stars... In memory of this unique meeting, [this vase] will be the most vivid expression and most spontaneous of our commitment to the mythological and natural world.”²⁴⁶

The vase was also signed by some of the main protagonists of the meeting - Jorn, Baj and Dangelo and Appel, and can be considered a symbol of Jorn's vision to make the meeting a collective artistic experience. The use of the words “spontaneous” and “vivid expression” demonstrate that artists in Albissola had travelled to the meeting to experiment with ceramics in these ways. The fact that the meeting is presented on the vase as a “festival” suggests that it was supposed to be an enjoyable, social occasion and one which celebrated ceramics production in Albissola.

The playful atmosphere of the meeting was captured by the photographer Henny Riemens, the wife of fellow CoBrA artist Corneille, who had agreed with the Jorn that the photographs would act as a “report” of the meeting and payment would be made in exchange for one of

ostensibly because of illness), Giuseppe Pinot Gallizio, Asger Jorn, Piero Simondo, Ettore Sottsass Jr, Elena Verrone (International Movement for an Imaginist Bauhaus), Gil J. Wolman (Lettrist International/Potlatch), Sandro Cherchi, Franco Garelli (Turin), Jan Kotik, Pravoslav Rada (Czechoslovakia), Charles Estienne, Klaus Fischer, several others.

²⁴⁵ Kurczynski and Jorn, *The Art and Politics of Asger Jorn*, 120.

²⁴⁶ Ursula Lehmann-Brockhaus et al., *Incontro internazionale della ceramica*, Albissola, Sommer 1954: Appel, Baj, Corneille, Dangelo, Jorn, Matta in der Werkstatt Mazzotti Giuseppe, 2013, 214. Edouard Jageur, “Letter for the Albisolese - 15 August 1954”. Author's translation from photograph of the vase.

Jorn's paintings.²⁴⁷ In these shots one recognises Baj, Matta and his wife Malitte, Edouard Jaguer and his wife Simone, Corneille and finally Yves Dendal and Alechinsky. The CoBrA artist Appel was missing in all of the group photos, since he had been given the task of firing the ceramics which gave him no time for what he termed "amusements".²⁴⁸ A photograph from 1954 shows each artist with their ceramic creations outside the Mazzotti Factory [Fig. 75]. The grouping of these individuals in these photographs showcases a broad mix and spectrum of artistic ideologies coming together in Albissola, from CoBrA, Karel Appel, Jorn and Corneille, the Nuclearists Enrico Baj and Sergio Dangelo, surrealist Matta, to the writer and critic Edouard Jaguer.

Each artist was given a notebook by the Mazzotti Factory to record their ceramics designs, works and progress notes such as preliminary sketches, measurements and artistic ideas. This was something that Tullio d'Albisola put forward to Jorn in the planning stages of the meeting and formed an integral part of the International Ceramics Meeting. The documentation of the design and process of production was something that was obviously important to Tullio and ceramics production in general at the Mazzotti Factory. The notebook appears to be a long-standing tradition of the Mazzotti Factory – thinking back to the Futurists who created technical drawings and illustrations alongside their Futurist ceramics - the notebook is not only a way of recording designs, but can also be considered a document of art history in its own right.

The notebooks shed light on the ways in which artists perceived their relationship to ceramics during this period. Some artists evidently took their notebooks more seriously than others, for example some contain more detailed ideas and notes. Specifically, Enrico Baj's notebook includes a design for a 'Nuclear' workshop stamp to be printed on the bottom of each ceramic piece, whilst Karel Appel's drawings are methodical and organised, including dimensions and formulas [Fig. 76, 77].

To sum up, the International Ceramics Meeting was an important event that aimed to bring together and host artists and critics through strategic means to the objectives of its M.I.B.I. Since its inception in 1953, the M.I.B.I. reflected the nomadic nature of Jorn. In other words, the movement was established as a network of contacts and relations with no center and no periphery – it existed only a series of temporary operative platforms. The meeting of 1954 in

²⁴⁷ Ibid., 16.

²⁴⁸ Ibid., 9.

Albissola can be seen as one example of these platforms, one of the few tangible places attached to a largely ideological movement. Jorn also considered the meeting an important testament to the M.I.B.I.'s objectives. In a letter to Enrico Baj in 1956, Jorn reminisces: "The summer of 1954 is an important thing in the history of modern art, do not forget it and do not hide it."²⁴⁹ The irony being, as Ursula Lehmann-Brockhaus points out, that only now, more than half a century after the meeting took place, the importance of the meeting and its influence on the artistic practices of so many well-known figures of the twentieth century can be recognised.

So far this chapter has explored why and how the International Ceramics Meeting was organised. The overwhelming lack of scholarship on the International Ceramics Meeting has meant relying on research conducted by Ursula Lehmann-Brockhaus and Karen Kurczynski. Lehmann-Brockhaus' research is in particular a valuable introduction to the meeting itself, yet her work arguably opens up more questions about the ceramics that were produced by the movements and artists who participated in the meeting – how does this work relate to the wider context of each artist's practice? And why were they so attracted to ceramics, in Albissola? With these questions in mind, this chapter now turns to an analysis of the ceramics made by three of the meeting's core artists and movements - beginning with Jorn's former artistic alliance, CoBrA.

CoBrA: Appel, Jorn and Corneille

In November 1948, a group of artists from three Northern European countries came together to form a revolutionary international movement. The group was called CoBrA (derived from the initial letters of Copenhagen, Brussels and Amsterdam) and consisted of the artists Asger Jorn, Henry Heerup, Karel Appel, Constant Nieuwenhuys, Corneille and Pierre Alechinsky, among others. Their co-operative and mutually inspired practice created a common painting style known as 'typical CoBrA', characterised by its colourful and expressionist brushwork. CoBrA's fascination with mythological or folklore themes and their interest in the so-called 'outsider' art of children was combined with a broadly Marxist viewpoint. Constant in particular often expressed his pursuit of a radical social vision based upon experiment and

²⁴⁹ 'Asger Jorn to Enrico Baj', 1956, Museum Jorn, Silkeborg.

revolutionary consciousness.²⁵⁰ In his manifesto, “Our Own Desires Build The Revolution,” he notes:

“Any real creative-activity – that is, cultural activity, in the twentieth century – must have its roots in revolution. . . . Dialectical materialism has taught us that conscience depends upon social circumstances, and when these prevent us from being satisfied, *our needs impel us to discover our desires.*”²⁵¹

CoBrA did not aim to establish a new school or style in art, but understood their art as a search for the “deepest, extreme significance in life and art.”²⁵² Eight years after the group formed, Jorn declared the relevance of CoBrA to the Imaginist Bauhaus: “This conscious quest for novelty,” he writes, “is what is called experimentation. The point is to determine the terrain for such experimentation – to this end, the International of Experimental Artists (CoBrA) was formed in 1948.”²⁵³

Jorn’s theoretical and artistic practice was focused on a collective artistic value. A radical leftist from his earliest days, Jorn believed art was a collective experience, and saw personal creation as inherently tied to a particular social environment. He writes in his major late 1940s politico-aesthetic treatise *Blade of kunstens bog* (Pages from the Book on Art), for example, that a “genius” is “the most common person, the person, who most comprehensively can express the human, and stand as a symbol for being human.”²⁵⁴ Originality, he continues, is an individualist idea and a direct hindrance to genius. Therefore an artist must let himself be influenced by as many other artists as possible; this is the only way to come up with a genuine ‘personal’ style.

²⁵⁰ Simon Ford, *The Situationist International: A User’s Guide* (London: Black Dog, 2005), 39.

²⁵¹ Constant, “Our Own Desires Build the Revolution.” First published in *CoBrA*, no. 4, 1949, p.3. Reprinted in Charles Harrison, Paul Wood, and Blackwell Publishing, *Art in Theory 1900-2000: An Anthology of Changing Ideas* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2014), 659–60.

²⁵² Willemijn Stokvis, *CoBrA: An International Movement in Art after the Second World War* (New York: Rizzoli, 1988), 10.

²⁵³ Asger Jorn and Museum Jorn, *Concerning Form: Pour La Forme* (Silkeborg: Museum Jorn, 2012). “Image and Form” (1956).

²⁵⁴ Karen Kurczynski et al., *Expo Jorn: Art Is a Festival : [Exhibitions, Statens Museum for Kunst, Copenhagen, 28 February - 15 June 2014 ; Museum Jorn in Silkeborg, 1 March - 14 September 2014* (Silkeborg: Museum Jorn, 2014), 8.

The ceramics that each of these three artists created in Albissola reflect the original CoBrA objectives. Their work is expressive and individualistic - each artist has their own unique style for example - but their work shares imagery relating to human figures, animals and nature. One of the most important aims of the CoBrA movement was to collaborate with one another in practice. The idea that every person should be involved creatively with their environment and should surround themselves with self-made objects rather than industrial products, as first expressed in the mid-1800s by John Ruskin and William Morris, seemed to have taken on a new shape in the movement. Like their nineteenth century forebears, the CoBrA artists longed to revive popular creativity. However, their enemy was not so much industry, but academic convention in western art. CoBrA wished to return “to the fountainhead, the natural state, in which every person decorated their surroundings as they saw fit.”²⁵⁵ The studio environment of the Mazzotti Factory encouraged artists to critique and explore other artists’ experiments and creations when they were in the midst of creating a piece of work and when they had finished. Photographs from the meeting illustrate this collaborative working environment – for example in one image we see Matta working on a small ceramic relief whilst the artists Corneille, Jorn, Sassu, Scanavino and Tullio d’Albisola watch on, and in another we see the artist attempt to throw a vase on the wheel with assistance from Corneille and Matta [Fig. 78, 79]. Thus, whilst each ceramic piece was created by an individual, the process and experience of making the piece would have been a social rather than solitary affair.

Before he arrived in Albissola, Karel Appel already had some experience with producing ceramics. In 1948, with Corneille, Constant and Anton Rooskens, he visited a factory in Tegelen and produced a series of ceramics which he decorated with paint. With the exception of Constant, who created vases, Appel and the others were more interested in the act of painting images onto prefabricated objects of use like cups, plates or bowls.²⁵⁶ He returned to Tegelen in 1953 and created another series of ceramics, this time exploring figural forms and busts in clay. This previous encounter with clay and introduction to ceramics practice may account for one of the reasons why Appel was the most prolific in terms of ceramics production at the meeting Albissola in 1954. His oeuvre can be divided into five categories:

²⁵⁵ Janet Koplos et al., *The Unexpected Artists’ Ceramics on the 20th Century: [Karel Appel, Marc Chagall, Lucio Fontana ... Etc. (’s-Hertogenbosch; New York: Museum Het Kruihuis ; H.N. Abrams, 1998), 144.*

²⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 146–47.

reliefs, small plates, ‘masks’, sculptures, vases and ‘faces’. Of these five categories, Appel produced a significant number of reliefs – in total Lehmann-Brockhaus has suggested there are around twenty pieces.²⁵⁷

On average, the height or width of each relief reaches 50 cm or more and rectangular in shape. Each surface of the reliefs is like that of a volcanic landscape; the clay has been violently torn by a powerful gesture, creating deep protrusions and markings. Traces of the artist’s hands are scarcely visible, however in some reliefs there are smoother sections which resemble finger prints [Fig. 80]. In fact, Appel himself reported that he preferred to treat the surface of his reliefs using an iron rod:

“We were allowed to create plates...vases...but I preferred to pick up pieces of clay from the dirt, and strike them with an iron rod. I cut animals into the material, and after I had worked out the outline, I coloured the clay before it went into the kiln.”²⁵⁸

The act of breaking the surface using powerful blows created deep depressions in the clay – produced a surface with crater-like openings and rugged edges. The relief itself is reminiscent of the shape of a found artefact one might find on an archaeological dig, or the remains of a fossilised vegetation form, rather an object which has been than highly-stylised ceramics. In keeping with his rudimentary treatment of the surface, Appel decorated most of the reliefs using neutral, earthy colours and in some sections left the clay raw and in others unglazed. By contrast, in some of Appel’s smaller reliefs, the explosive force with which the clay is treated is also expressed in the glazes, which appear small islands bursting with colour. Despite the excessive approach to clay, Appel’s ceramics have a figurative, rather than abstract style. In this way, the subject matter of his oeuvre has a particular focus on animals. He formed a small zoo comprising of a dog, a horse, and a bird, which he cut out of the clay in outline. As part of this ‘zoo’, Appel formed a gigantic butterfly that has a much more refined colouring than the others.

Another popular theme that Appel produced was a series of works which he categorised as ‘masks’. The mask played an important role in modernity, especially since the beginning of the twentieth century, either as a formal motif, as in Picasso, or as a symbolic parable for the background of the phenomenon and the art of concealment. In the latter sense, it appears as a

²⁵⁷ Lehmann-Brockhaus et al., *Incontro internazionale della ceramica*, Albisola, Sommer 1954, 26.

²⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 26–27.

metaphor for the artists of the Danish pre-war avant-garde, whose paintings frequently show the motif of the mask. Jorn produced a series of works with masked characters during the 1940s for example. No wonder, therefore, that one of Appel's most pragmatic forms of masks was to be seen as an equal part of his work, as also, as we saw in chapter two, Fontana also played with the theme of masquerade in his large Arlecchino and smaller ceramics figurines.

Appel's workshop notebook gives a pretty accurate insight into his production in Albissola. In it he recorded fifty-six works, of which twenty have been formally identified. Appel records ten vases in his workshop notebook, five of which have been formally identified. One is a piece in which the artist painted a traditional top-form with an expressive gesture, while the rest are original transformations of twisted vase shapes. The two pieces, which are listed as No. 47 and No. 48 in his workshop notebook, are related to each other, in which Appel reshaped the spherical form of the vascular body. In one he created a multi-coloured structure with black indentations, which suggests a grotesque head with handles, while in the other work, with its circular openings of the abdomen and the handle-like outgrowths that extend around it, suggests the shape of a jellyfish.

As the person who conceived the idea to organise the International Ceramics Meeting, it comes as no surprise that Jorn produced a vast range of ceramics in 1954. It would be impossible to provide a detailed study of each work from this year here, but one of the most popular ceramic form, which Jorn revisits time and time again, was the relief. As the previous chapter explored, relief work was popular with Fontana and Fabbri because as a genre it sat on the cusp of painting, sculpture and architecture. By 1954, the Mazzotti Factory had become renowned as a place which specialised in the production of ceramic reliefs, indeed for avant-garde ceramics production in Italy more broadly.

In similar composition to Fabbri's *Il Mito di Orfeo*, Jorn produced a series of reliefs comprised of several individual ceramic tiles joined together. Two of these larger reliefs, *An Early Spring* and *Jutland*, were inspired by lithographs of the same names from 1953 [Fig. 81, 82]. In both reliefs, Jorn attempted to translate the black outline of form onto ceramic surface, keeping the muted tones of the lithograph with the main shape of the forms as greys or browns. The overall effect this gives is one closer to wood than ceramic. In 1955, when the architect Dahlmann Olsen presented Jorn's relief to the Danish public, he was impressed by the sheer monumentality of the works, declaring:

“[they] testify to the rich possibilities that lie in large-area image development... The result proves that spontaneous design in the ceramic form of expression is possible in much larger areas than was previously thought.”²⁵⁹

Commenting on Jorn's various solutions for ceramic wall decorations, he noted enthusiastically that the artist had attempted to place one of his ceramic sculptures on the wall, which was not met with initial enthusiasm. As the next chapter will illustrate, Jorn did eventually succeed in installing a relief on the wall, when in 1959 he produced the gigantic *Large Relief*. To this end, the reliefs he produced in 1954 can be interpreted as early test-runs for what would become arguably one of the largest ceramic reliefs in the world.

In contrast to the large, expressive work of Appel and Jorn, Corneille's ceramics can be described as generally quieter with graphic strength. He favoured traditional forms over abstract, sculptural work, choosing to produce a series of plates and vases. The surface of Corneille's plates are decorated with less expressionistic brushwork than that of Appel's work and fill up nearly all the space with compartments, some representing heads or bodies, and some whose meanings are less clear, but always with a feeling of vitality. After CoBrA dissolved, Corneille moved to Paris and began collecting African art. Such artifacts became evident inspirations in his painting style in his ceramics, which began to take on a more imaginative quality, like landscapes seen from a bird's eye view, as well as the inclusion of exotic birds and stylised forms as subject matters.

The CoBrA artists embraced clay as a new surface for painting whose earthiness gave an additional resonate to their primal figuration. A large majority of the ceramics that were produced by the CoBrA artists in the late 1940s can be found in the Stedelijk collection. Scholarship has tended to focus on these ceramics, and not much has been written about their work after this period. As is evident from the meeting in Albissola, CoBrA artists were continuing to explore ceramics with that of a social community aspect of the meeting. In Albissola, and at the International Ceramics Meeting, the CoBrA artists had the opportunity to make art in a place where artists could collectively create work on the same level.

²⁵⁹ Ibid., 107–9.

Nuclear Art: Enrico Baj and Sergio Dangelo

Among the many artists who visited Albissola during the Summer of 1954 were the founders of the Nuclear Art movement, Enrico Baj and Sergio Dangelo. To date, scholarship has neglected both artists' involvement in the International Ceramics Meeting in Albissola, including analysis of the ceramics they created at the Mazzotti Factory in 1954. An exploration of these objects offers an insight into the aims of the Nuclearists that extends beyond their paintings on nuclear warfare, which they are most widely recognised for, to an interest in ceramics and three-dimensional form. Before examining Baj and Dangelo's ceramics, it is first necessary to give a brief overview of the background of the Nuclear Art movement and explain why exactly the Nuclearists were interested in ceramics and how they came to be key instigators in the organisation of the International Ceramics Meeting.

The Nuclear Art movement was officially formed in 1951 by Enrico Baj and Sergio Dangelo in Milan, Italy. The movement's main aim was to create art that combined poetic and painterly visions of the impact of nuclear warfare on human life and the planet. Their painting style of the early 1950s can be characterised as gestural, using spiralling and spattered painting mode to depict images of nuclear war, psychological trauma and decimated landscapes. A prime example of their work is Baj's *Manifesto BUM* (1952), a painting created for an exhibition of 'Nuclear Art' at Amici della Francia Gallery in Milan [Fig. 83]. A black mushroom cloud rises against a dirty yellowed background, overlaid with various formulas and slogans including: "The heads of men are charged with explosives / every atom is exploding"; "thought = force / forces are electrical charges"; "forms disintegrate. The new forms of man are those of the atomic universe"; and "everything = electric charge." In the same year Baj created this painting, the Nuclearists declared that "the new forms are those of the atomic universe" in their 'Manifesto of Nuclear Painting' (1952), thus reiterating the slogans depicted in paintings such as *Manifesto BUM*.²⁶⁰

Poetry and politics were central to the Nuclear Art movement, however Baj and Dangelo were also keen on experimenting with gestural techniques and new materials in order to represent the disintegration of form. Many of their works consist of swirling movements from poured paint and included the process of mixing oil and water on canvas to produce spontaneous effects. In this way, Baj and Dangelo abdicated control over their work and

²⁶⁰ Arturo Schwarz, *Arte Nucleare* (Milano: Galleria Schwarz, 1962), 203.

allowed the materials at hand to determine form.²⁶¹ Because of this gestural approach to art, the Nuclearists were associated with Art Informel - Europe's answer to the New York school of abstract expressionist painting.

Like many other Informal artists, Baj and Dangelo's artwork provided an alternative to the prescribed compositional routines of geometric abstraction that had been popular in Europe after the war. As Mark Bugatti argues, the Nuclear Art movement was "one of the very first Informal painting experiments in Italy, and perhaps the only one which was fully gestural."²⁶² But in spite of the fact that the Nuclearists shared similar characteristics to those of contemporary currents in Informel painting, they differed from the American and other European examples of that style in that their ideas related to modern science and technology. Rather, the Nuclear Art movement was an attempt to do justice to what they saw as the new realities of nuclear fission and microbiology. Their vision was one of the world as matter in movement.

In 'Il Gesto: Global Art and Italian Gesture Painting in the 1950s', Mark Nicholls and Anthony White have argued that Baj and Dangelo's interest in atomic energy was essentially a continuation of the work of Futurism.²⁶³ As chapter one of this thesis discussed, the Futurists who were active in Albissola during the 1930s put great emphasis upon industrial and mechanical processes and were inspired by modern inventions such as the racing car and the machine to produce ceramics. Whilst the Nuclearists created images relating to contemporary modern warfare, they were interested in addressing the newer phenomenon of nuclear energy. Thirty years after Nuclear Art formed, in 1984, Baj wrote in his "Manifesto per un futurism statico" (Manifesto for a Static Futurism) that the Nuclear Art movement was not an attempt to develop earlier Futurist theories on movement and motion but rather to propose a new kind of dynamic in art – that of 'static' movement:

"Instead aspire to move dynamically and mechanically, the man of the future could cultivate the pleasure of stasis and contemplation, calm, serenity, boredom. The static

²⁶¹ Arturo Schwarz, *Pittura italiana del dopoguerra: (1945-1957)* (Milano: Schwarz Editore, 1957), 152.

²⁶² Caramel, *Arte in Italia*, 135–41.

²⁶³ Mark Nicholls and Anthony White, 'Il Gesto: Global Art and Italian Gesture Painting in the 1950s', *Humanities Research, Canberra* 19.2 (2013): 87.

nature, did not oppose the natural and some not natural movements but actually needed: are opposed rather violent movements.”²⁶⁴

The Nuclearists saw atomic energy as that of a devastating stillness, like that of a bomb wiping out an entire landscape, as opposed to movement envisioned by the Futurists as loud and violent.

In the Spring of 1952, Baj met the Belgian artist Pierre Alechinsky in Paris. This encounter sparked the beginning of an important network which led to an introduction to ceramics and a close working relationship with members of the recently dispersed CoBrA group, including Asger Jorn. Jorn’s critical attitudes towards functionalism and what he called “an academy of Informel abstraction” chimed with Nuclear Art’s political attitudes towards art.²⁶⁵ Indeed, Jorn’s scepticism of industrialisation and his emphasis on the importance of self-expression in art complimented the Nuclearists approach to Informel painting and their “desire to demolish all the ‘isms’ of painting that [...] lapse into academicism...”²⁶⁶ Together, the three artists united in their stand against impersonal, mechanised ways of making art and took an avid interest in materials and processes that enhanced individuality. Naturally, then, clay proved to be an ideal material for Baj and Dangelo to experiment with spontaneous effects in three-dimensional form.

Baj was a trained lawyer and often relied on the profession to supplement his artistic career. Tullio d’Albisola was initially reluctant to respect Baj as an artist in his workshop because of his other commitments. In a letter dated 1962, Tullio recalled his earlier reservations about Baj, claiming “Ai tempi dell’incontro ‘54 in Albissola, Baj non poteva ancora legittimamente considerarsi.../At the time of the meeting in Albissola ‘54, Baj could not legitimately be considered...” But now, Tullio explained in a letter to Dangelo, “Oggi considero Baj come uno dei piu interessanti artisti italiani e vorrei dire la punta massima della fantasia di tutte le avanguardie.../ Today I regard Baj as one of the most interesting Italian artists, and is said to be ahead of all the avant-garde with his imagination...”²⁶⁷

²⁶⁴ Enrico Baj, *Manifesto per un futurismo statico* (Milano: Henry Beyle, 2013).

²⁶⁵ Karen Kurczynski, ‘Ironic Gestures: Asger Jorn, Informel, and Abstract Expressionism.’, *Abstract Expressionism / Ed. by Joan Marter.*, 2007, 112–13. As Kurczynski notes, these kinds of attacks on contemporary art were already being launched in Paris among the critics who supported Lyrical Abstraction, Tachism and Art Autre.

²⁶⁶ Schwarz, *Arte Nucleare*, 203.

²⁶⁷ D’Albisola and Presotto, *Quaderni di Tullio D’Albisola*, 98.

Like Jorn, Corneille and Appel, Tullio d'Albisola gave a notebook to Baj to record his ceramic work at the Mazzotti Factory. Ursula Lehmann-Brockhaus has explored the contents of Baj's notebook and identifies more than twenty ceramic pieces, half of which can be connected to the sketches in Baj's notebook.²⁶⁸ Of the twenty-eight pieces that Baj recorded, twenty-three are medium-sized plates or reliefs, measuring on average 40cm x 50cm.²⁶⁹ The majority are rectangular in shape and only a few millimetres thick, with the exception of a few oval-shaped pieces. While Baj categorised his ceramics as 'piatto' and 'placca' in his notebook, it is unlikely that the artist intended these pieces to be functional 'plates'. The significant amount of attention Baj gives to the surface of the clay indicates that he favoured ceramics in slab-built form so that he could decorate the surface with his favoured nuclear images and motifs.²⁷⁰

Further scrutiny of the surface of Baj's ceramics reveals the artist used at least two types of surface decoration. The first method is the gestural painting of glaze and slip onto the surface of the clay after it has been biscuit fired.²⁷¹ This method is very similar to the ways in which an artist would apply paint to a canvas. In *Paysage nucleaire / Nuclear landscape* (1954), a large oval plate measuring 28.5cm x 56 cm, we see that Baj used large, gestural brushstrokes to depict a landscape filled with spiralled shapes [Fig. 84]. In particular, the sweeping brush strokes are most visible around the circumference of the plate, conjure up an image of parting thick, dark clouds to reveal a bare landscape. The second method is Baj's use of *sfgraffito* – the process of scratching or inscribing words and images onto an unfired clay surface using a sharp tool. A good example is *Nuclear figure with planet* (1954) where a fine outline of a skeletal figure has been scratched onto a black background [Fig. 85]. The protruding eyes, mouth and vertebrae of the figure suggest that the relief may in fact be double-sided and if one were to flip it over, the first indentations made by Baj would be visible.

²⁶⁸ Lehmann-Brockhaus et al., *Incontro internazionale della ceramica*, Albisola, Sommer 1954, 48.

²⁶⁹ The differentiation between the terms plate and plaque is dependent on the translation from Baj's notebook. He regularly interchanges between the terms "placca" (plaque) and "piatto" (plate) to describe his work. This may not be significant, but one suggests functional form, whilst the other not.

²⁷⁰ Slab-built ceramics, or 'slabbing', is a hand-building technique involving sheets of clay which can be rolled round other forms, or cut and jointed as in woodwork to make hard-edged forms.

²⁷¹ 'Biscuit' or 'bisque' is ware which is fired to a state hard enough to facilitate handling in glazing. In many cases it also makes some decorative techniques simpler to achieve.

Baj's surface decorations suggest that he was keen on exploring the many ways one could depict images onto clay. He was clearly interested in how graphics and images could be transferred onto the surface of clay not only by painting the surface but by carving and incising the surface to add depth and definition. At this point, it is worth highlighting some key comparisons between Baj's ceramics and his Nuclear paintings from the early 1950s, as there are many parallels that demonstrate his fascination with graphic and linear figurations such as vertebrae, spirals, gesticulated figures and arabesques – all of which were typical symbols that Baj used frequently in his atomic apocalypse paintings during the early 1950s.

The most common symbol is a spiralling, circular emblem that sometimes has a nucleus at its centre. In some cases, this circular symbol is attached on top of another spiral, forming a shape like a mushroom. This emblem is depicted, in one form or another, on almost every ceramic relief and plate by Baj. For example, he dedicated three separate reliefs to the symbol, two of which are titled *Spiralen* and one titled *Orbite atomiche* [Fig. 86, 87]. In many ways, this spiral symbol can be considered Baj's ceramics trademark. Just as the Mazzotti Factory had its own ceramics stamp "M.G.A.", which was branded on every ceramic piece fired in the workshop, Baj was also inspired to produce his own. On the last page of Baj's notebook, this is clearly an idea that Baj was contemplating, as he drew a sweeping, spiralled brush stroke - what Ursula Lehmann-Brockhaus describes as Baj's "nuclear seal" [Fig. 88]²⁷²

Another popular image that Baj used in his ceramic work was the figure with raised arms. Three reliefs with this image are listed in Baj's notebook, two of which, according to Lehmann-Brockhaus, are still preserved at the archive of the Mazzotti Factory. Baj first uses this motif in one of his emblematic paintings *Do Not Kill Children* from 1952, which also served as a pictorial manifesto for the Nuclear Art movement. In other cases, too, Baj transformed motifs from his painterly repertoire into ceramics. For example, skeletal and figures with large, bulbous heads feature numerous times in his ceramic plates and can be traced to paintings such as *Quamisado II* from 1951 [Fig. 89]. Baj took to incising the clay to create his skeletal figures, possibly to enhance their emaciated and bony forms. Perhaps inspired by the experimental environment of the workshop, Baj also experimented with three-dimensional forms [Fig. 90]. About 30 cm high, these figurines are rudimentary in

²⁷² Lehmann-Brockhaus et al., *Incontro internazionale della ceramica*, Albisola, Sommer 1954, 47.

appearance and show the typical gesticulation of the arms that characterises Baj's artwork during this period. Rather than modelling the clay, as is typical when creating sculptural figures for the first time, these figurines appear to have been kneaded together – in other words, instead of using his fingertips, Baj would have used his palms, creating less indentations and signs of overworking on the surface of the clay.

While Jorn and Baj's artistic relationship was evidently strong, there is little evidence to suggest that Jorn and Dangelo's relationship was the same. From the few testimonies available, including a personal testimony from Dangelo himself, one gains the impression that the two artists were more concerned with practical problems than with an artistic exchange. In Dangelo's personal testimony of the events leading up to the International Ceramics Meeting of 1954, titled *Fiorire in Eden*, he describes his role in Albissola in primarily organisational terms, noting, "...my task was to organise food and lodging for the participating artists; patiently I went to the search of private quarters, took up connections to artisans with a studio in the town or the surrounding area..."²⁷³

However, Tullio argues in a letter dated 1962 that Dangelo had a more significant role in the organisation of the meeting. He claimed Dangelo had been the "triggering" force for the meeting and presented the distribution of the roles as follows: "The Incontri Internazionali della Ceramica [International Ceramics Meeting] was conceived by Asger Jorn [and] organised and financed by Sergio Dangelo and Tullio Mazzotti alias "D'Albisola."²⁷⁴ On account of his previous ties to the region, in particular his friendship with the artists Aligi Sassu and Emilio Scanavino, Dangelo was the first person to officially make contact with the Mazzotti Factory and Tullio d'Albisola on behalf of Jorn.²⁷⁵

To date almost thirty ceramics from the year 1954 can be attributed to Dangelo. His ceramics oeuvre consists of many different shapes and sizes of ceramics, including vases, reliefs, plates and small pots, most of which are untitled. The shapes of his vases and pots are particularly strange and consist of contrasting forms that are essentially non-functional, despite appearing as traditional vase or pot forms. For example, a vase titled *Un arbre touche au sommet du*

²⁷³ Tiglio, *Jorn e Albisola dalla ceramica alla cultura*, 54–57.

²⁷⁴ Lehmann-Brockhaus et al., *Incontro internazionale della ceramica*, Albisola, Sommer 1954, 87.

²⁷⁵ Emilio Scanavino had introduced Dangelo to ceramics at the Mazzotti workshop in 1953. He was also a periphery figure in Albissola, and a large selection of his ceramics can be found in Albissola, Museo contemporanea civica.

silence / A tree touches the top of silence (1954) exhibits a large bulbous base and tall spindle-shaped neck with the words, “A tree touches the top of silence” written across its surface [Fig. 91]. Another vase, *Untitled* (1954) has a large base with a small, funnel-like hole at its top [Fig. 92]. The shapes are playful and humorous to look at, but at the same time make the viewer or holder question the nature of pottery and the traditional functional vase.

The ways in which Dangelo has treated the surface of his ceramics is similar to Baj's in that there is a mixture of painterly brush strokes and *sgraffito* techniques as well as combinations of the two. However, Dangelo's pictorial decorations are hieroglyph-like, consisting of repeated symbols. Two plates from 1954, both untitled, show this example clearly [Fig. 93, 94]. Against a muted, beige background are layering of glaze, the symbols have been scratched into the surface which makes them stand out against a muted, beige background with smudging of blue. The effect makes it appear like a group of buildings, or, such as in the two plates, where he overlaid irregular shapes with a dense pattern of lines, similar to a clutter of ideograms, and evokes the idea of aerial observations of extraneous states under cold, lightless suns. They have a graphic quality to them which has echoes of his ceramics master Emilio Scanavino. In fact, as his personal testimony, “I had already at the "M.G.A." Plates and vases painted in the manner of the shapes and colours of Emilio Scanavino, my master in the ceramic technique [...]” an artist who pioneered a similar scratching technique to Baj and Dangelo, seen in his *Il Muro* of 1954.²⁷⁶

The “nuclear” symbols also are visible in etchings on vases and in one untitled oval plate, Dangelo had used the wheel to turn the plate and draw black lines around the edges. This technique created an image when one looks down on the plate like that of Baj's spiralling circles. In many ways the plates become a tangible version of the black spiral. Of all Dangelo's ceramics, the plate - mostly with a diameter of 35 cm - is the most common form. In contrast to Baj, there was also a playful side to Dangelo's ceramics. From this series, a plate with the title “Karel Appel gewidmet” stands out. In contrast to the predominantly neutral colouring of the other works of this kind, the circle radiates in powerful pink, into which the artist draws Appel's face [Fig. 95].

The broad range of ceramic forms in Dangelo's oeuvre is testament to his claims that he had already had some ceramics training and was able to experiment with some sculptural forms.

²⁷⁶ Tiglio, *Jorn e Albisola dalla ceramica alla cultura*, 56.

Three of Dangelo's ceramics are still visible in Albissola today: a ceramic plate, placed in the passage leading from the beach promenade under Via Aurelia to the opposite street to the square in front of the town hall. Furthermore, Dangelo is not lacking representation among the artists in the town's Hotel Garden Museum, which conjugates hospitality and art. There, his ceramic decorations can be found on two outer facades as well as on a wall swimming pool.

After their involvement in the International Ceramics Meeting of 1954, Baj and Dangelo went their separate ways. Only decades later did Baj attempt to work with ceramics again. In 1991 Baj visited the Bottega Gatti workshop in Faenza where he created, in collaboration with his son Andrea, a series of figurines inspired by historical and mythological figures. These later works can only be considered as antithetical to the ceramics produced in 1954. Highly evocative, stylised and gaudy, these works appear to be inspired by the work of traditional Italian artists such as Luca Della Robbia. The series, titled "The Garden of Lust" incorporated the technique of Majolica. With their flawless skin, these structures reveal nothing of their clay substance, indeed, they appear to be made of plastic and representative of a contemporary "glorification of kitsch" [Fig. 96].²⁷⁷

Closer examination of the ceramics made by Baj and Dangelo has revealed that the Nuclear Art movement was not only interested in painting as its principal art form during this period, but also inspired by clay as a material to depict their apocalyptic visions. As this chapter has discussed so far, it is clear that both artists favoured more traditional forms such as plates and flat surfaces rather than sculptural or figurative forms. Furthermore, both Baj and Dangelo's ceramics can be considered the most graphic – in terms of their pictorial treatment of surface of the clay – than any other artists' ceramics produced at the meeting.

Roberto Sebastian Matta

The artist Roberto Sebastian Matta (1911 – 2002) was a seminal figure in twentieth century art. An "international provocateur," Matta was closely associated with the artists Salvador Dali and Andre Breton throughout the 1930s in Paris, becoming an official member of the

²⁷⁷ Gian Carlo Bojani and Luciano Caprile, *I Baj ceramisti* (Firenze: Centro Di, 1991), 10.

Surrealist movement in 1937.²⁷⁸ In 1939, he travelled to New York where he successfully charted his own brand of surrealism with American artists such as Jackson Pollock.²⁷⁹

Matta's early paintings exhibit fluid, biomorphic forms of luminous colours. A good example is a large untitled work known as 'Big Red' from 1938, where heavy black lines define and outline organic forms swirling around the canvas [Fig. 97]. During the forties, Matta's painting evolved and introduced graphic, cubic forms that gravitated around a central point, creating the impression of a circular shape like a vortex. Examples of his work from this period include *L'oeux* and *Ellminonde*, both from 1943 [Figs. 98, 99].

During his time in New York, Matta collected African, pre-Columbian, and Oceanic sculptures which influenced his paintings in the form of totems and tall figures. One example is *Le Pelerin du doute* from 1946 where a lone totem-figure with multiple protruding arms is depicted trapped within a swirling vortex of staircases [Fig. 100]. Another, titled *A Grave Situation*, depicts, "an eerie green, robot-like creature standing within a classic, expansive Matta space...Doors, windows, and pieces of machines hang about him and veer toward his body with its multiple, insect-like heads and excessively long arms."²⁸⁰ These paintings speak of a dystopian world, which Matta explained as his interpretation of a new civilisation:

"I was attempting to use a social morphology, not a personal psycho-morphology to move away from the intimate, imaginary forms...towards the cultural, totemic expressions of civilisations...the formations of cultures in confrontation with social landscapes."²⁸¹

The following year, in 1947, Matta was expelled from the surrealists' group. His work had moved away from the surrealist movement's emphasis on the unconscious and interpretation of dreams in favour of social politics. In spite of his expulsion, Matta's work remained close to his Surrealist roots throughout his life. He found influences in contemporary culture and continued to create large, cosmic and apocalyptic paintings of otherworldly habitats that

²⁷⁸ Roberto Matta, Elizabeth T Goizueta, and Mass.) McMullen museum of art (Chestnut Hill, *Matta Making the Invisible Visible: [Exhibition Organized by the Charles S. and Isabella V. McMullen Museum of Art, Boston College, February 1-May 24, 2004* (Chestnut Hill, Mass.; Bristol: Boston College, McMullen Museum of Art ; University Presses Marketing, 2004), 29.

²⁷⁹ Ibid., 32.

²⁸⁰ Ibid., 36.

²⁸¹ Germana Ferrari and Roberto Sebastián Matta Echaurren, *Entretiens morphologiques* (London ;Lugano-Svizzera: Sistan, 1987), 229.

commented on the atrocities of war and violence. After his expulsion, Matta established homes across Europe including Rome, Paris and London. Given his international lifestyle, it is not surprising that Matta knew or was acquainted with the circle of artists that gathered in Albissola during this period.

He was invited to participate in the International Ceramics Meeting in Albissola by Jorn in 1953 and the following year created a series of ceramic sculptures, plates and reliefs at the Mazzotti Factory. Matta's participation in the meeting is overwhelmingly unrecognised in scholarship. In none of his biographies, for instance, is the event mentioned. But closer analysis of the ceramics Matta produced at the meeting shows his interest in experimenting with clay to produce sculptural forms. His ceramics can be described as a blend between traditional forms, such as vases and pots, with uncanny, cosmic subjects. In comparison to the other artists working at the Mazzotti Factory, Matta's choice of colour was minimal. He favoured white or untreated, fired clay which he would contrast with bright red or yellow glaze markings. In some works, Matta etched figures and landscapes into the surface. The fact that little analysis of these sculptures exists, and that they stand apart from the work of previous artists, is worth closer exploration.

In Albissola, Matta experimented with several different types of ceramic forms which can be divided into four categories: totems, sculptures, plates and reliefs. His totems and small sculptures were made by firing parts in stages and then constructing the whole piece together. As is evident in several of his works, Matta's ceramics could be dismantled to form separate pieces. A photograph from the time shows Matta demonstrating this to his fellow artists in the Mazzotti Factory. One piece, made up of three white glazed components, are biomorphic shapes, that when constructed form a strange, cosmic totem consisting of protruding arms with round, egg-like shapes at the ends [Fig. 101].

Of all of his ceramics, this trio most resemble the otherworldly creatures that he painted in the same era. For example, in *Oeufficiency* from 1954, marbled globules of saturated colour swirl beneath five emaciated totem figures, contrasting sharply with the geometric, unanchored planes that, like an assembly line, deliver amorphous forms that variously resemble eggs, bones, and phalluses [Fig. 102]. The title merges the French word for egg, *oeuf*, with the English word "efficiency," perhaps alluding to the generalisation of mass production (including the production of eggs) in industrialised societies. Usually associated with rebirth and hope, eggs in Matta's work attest to the grimmer aspects of modern society.

The figure furthest to the background appears to press against an invisible current, suggesting entrapment and isolation.

While some of the pieces are decidedly neutral in colour, opting for browns and white glazes, other pieces have bursts of red and yellow. Some of the pieces have sharp protrusions with bright red markings, some of the plates are stained with bright red glaze, like droplets of blood or dye have been dripped onto the surface and organically bleed out to the edges. In some, the colour is more intense and he has integrated other colours which bled out onto the plate like microbes on a petri dish. His reliefs from 1954 are different in that they are very graphic, bold use of colours and forms. They share similar forms as the sculptures with long arms and small rounded tips.

Matta's ceramics exemplify the large range and diversity of work that was produced at the meeting in 1954. and that individual artist's works were created in a collective capacity., whilst his work remains very much in keeping with his own aesthetic and vision of art during this period. Yet they are fascinating objects, and in many ways like Nuclear Artists, show that Matta was willing to explore and experiment with media alongside his artworks of the same era. Overall, Matta's ceramics can be characterised as simple in design and inspired by biomorphic shapes. Artists, including some associated with the surrealist movement drew on this description and made artworks that combined familiar things in unexpected ways to create uncanny feelings. Matta's ceramics can be considered three-dimensional representations of the subjects he depicted in his paintings: cosmic creatures that resemble robots, totems and machines. His ceramics also evoke the paintings of this period, where his depictions of otherworldly landscapes and sci-fi, cosmic creatures are brought to life in clay.

The work produced at the Meeting was, as has been shown, varied and reflected the individual artists and styles associate with movements. This chapter will now turn to an exploration of the aftermath of the meeting, exploring the question of what happened, if anything, to these objects. It then turns to an exploration of the artists associated with Spatialism who arrived in Albissola after the meeting.

Ceramics at the X Milan Triennale 1954

The tenth Triennale in Milan took place between the 28th August and 15th November 1954,

during which time the International Ceramics Meeting had officially come to an end. The purpose of the X Triennale was to explore the ways in which modern decorative arts, industrial design and architecture could be used for the needs of post-war prefabrication. After the International Ceramics Meeting had taken place, Jorn was keen to create a legacy for the efforts of the artists, and saw an opportunity to promote the M.I.B.I. within an industrial design setting. With the help of Tullio and Fontana, Jorn organised an exhibition of a selection of ceramics produced in Albissola for the X Triennale.

The installation of ceramics was overseen by the industrial designer Joe C. Colombo, an artist who was first linked to the Nuclear Art movement in the early fifties before turning to a career in design in 1955.²⁸² Colombo designed a pamphlet to accompany the exhibition, which as well as providing explanations of the main ideas of the artists who created the works, also includes selected illustrations of the pieces in the exhibition [Fig. 103, 104]. The pamphlet also includes a statement from the art critic Agnoldomenico Pica:

“These ceramics, all created in Albissola, are determined and justified in the search for autonomous values. The very different attitudes, cultures and temperaments of the artists who created [these works] have come together in the firm belief that beyond the modest limits of our senses and our knowledge, there is a wonderful world of endless shapes, colours [and] images.”²⁸³

What is significant about this pamphlet is the ways in which the artists in Albissola perceived themselves as serious artists. What it also demonstrates is the ways in which, despite the Meeting being a gathering of artists, the ceramics was created collectively in so far as they reflected “autonomous values” of each artist. Furthermore, by describing their ceramics practice as a “world of endless shapes”, further demonstrating the importance of experimentation and spontaneity in their work.

Two photographs taken at the Triennale show how the ceramics were displayed to the public [Fig. 105, 106]. The pieces were arranged and displayed in a range of ways – some of the larger sculptures were freestanding, the flatter pieces are positioned on the wall and some of

²⁸² Mateo Kries and Alexander von Vegesack, *Joe Colombo: Inventing the Future* (Weil am Rhein: Vitra Design Stiftung, 2005), 30.

²⁸³ “Ceramiche: Incontro Internazionale Di Albissola” (1954) in *Internationale Situationniste Ephemera 1947-1975*, n.d., Special Collections, Getty Research Institute, accessed 18 February 2015.

the vases are displayed on top of a low, makeshift table from cardboard and glass. Many of the works are recognisable in these images, such as Matta's tall white totem in the right side of the image, as well as one of his smaller orb-shaped sculptures, positioned on the floor in the corner, left in the image. Taking up a large section of the back wall is one of Jorn's large reliefs which is surrounded by various plates and reliefs including a tile by Enrico Baj. What is also noticeable from these images is that there has been a conscious effort to display the work as a collective effort. The absence of artist labels, or any individual signposts, suggests that the collection was supposed to be viewed and interpreted by visitors as a collective operation.

Despite its positive impact on Italian critics and gallerists who visited the Triennale - one critic for example described it as "a remarkable exhibition of unique pieces from Albissola" - Jorn protested that the exhibition had been a complete failure.²⁸⁴ After the Triennale, Jorn wrote a lengthy letter to Fontana complaining that the works were poorly chosen by Tullio and merely framed as a group of childlike experiments from the Mazzotti workshop:

"Having achieved significant results, I would have thought that the presentation of our ceramics at the Triennale would be charged with some authority. The exhibition was meant to be a ceramics exhibition, not ideological exposure. It was only after a violent struggle that I forced Tullio and Colombo to put the reliefs in... I have nothing to do with this exhibition and I will not have any responsibility for his fate. I broke my health to get the best result and I feel betrayed."²⁸⁵

For Jorn, the exhibition lacked the necessary context and background of the work relating to the M.I.B.I., further complaining to Fontana that "no text... explains the view of the Movement for an Bauhaus Imaginist", while claiming that "Dangelo told me he was busy printing this text, but I think its existence is purely imaginary." But it was the arrangement of the ceramic objects that was of utmost annoyance to Jorn who claimed it to be "superficial"

²⁸⁴ Ursula Lehmann-Brockhaus et al., *Asger Jorn i Italien: værker i keramik, bronze og marmor* (Silkeborg: Silkeborg Kunstmuseum, 2007), 27–29.

²⁸⁵ Ursula Lehmann-Brockhaus, *'Incontro Internazionale della Ceramica': Albisola, Sommer 1954: Appel, Baj, Corneille, Dangelo, Jorn, Matta in der Werkstatt Mazzotti Giuseppe* (Roma: Campisano, 2013), 227–227. Translation from French text. Original letter in Museum Jorn Archives, Silkeborg.

and “catastrophic” in the choice of “childish colours”. Furthermore, he was not pleased with the pamphlet itself, finding it to be of amateur quality and the work of a “dilettante”.²⁸⁶

In Jorn’s eyes, the exhibition had failed in what it was supposed to do: as a pointed critique of postwar design culture exemplified by designers such as Max Bill at HfG. Dissatisfied with how the exhibition had turned out, Jorn set out to organise another exhibition in Albissola, this time without the help of Colombo and Dangelo, or indeed of any Italian artists. In the summer of 1955, an exhibition of ceramics by Appel, Corneille, Jorn and was organised in an open air courtyard next to the Mazzotti Factory in Albissola. Images of the exhibition itself, as well as a poster designed by Matta, were published by Jorn in the journal *Eristica* and later *Pour la forme* [Fig. 107, 108]. In Jorn’s view, the 1955 exhibition gave proper prominence to the reliefs he considered especially important. In these images, we see that the entire courtyard has been given over to Jorn, Appel and Corneille’s numerous plates and reliefs. On a makeshift wall at the far end of the courtyard, Appel’s large ceramic figure is given pride of place, while some of the smaller vases appear to be littered on the cobbled floor and arranged on a few of the benches.

These photographs document the final public event which saw the last concrete sign of life of the International Ceramics Meeting in 1954. By the time Jorn had organized his new exhibition in 1955, Albissola had already begun to attract other artists, giving rise to a new crowd closely associated with Fontana and his Spatialist movement.

Spatialism: Piero Manzoni, Milena Milani and Carlo Cadazzo

Three figures associated with the Spatialist movement made frequent visits to Albissola during the late fifties – the artist Piero Manzoni, the artist and writer Milena Milani and her partner, the Venetian art collector and gallery owner, Carlo Cadazzo. Their interests were not in creating ceramic works themselves, but visited Albissola to network and socialise with artists such as Lucio Fontana, Enrico Baj and Asger Jorn, as well as to buy and exhibit their artwork. By exploring the individual contributions of these figures to Albissola’s art scene during this period, one sees how Albissola developed into a larger hub of avant-garde artists and exchanges.

²⁸⁶ Ibid., 227.

The artist Piero Manzoni (1933 – 1963) was best known for his ironic approach to avant-garde art, using unconventional materials such as rabbit fur and human excrement to call into question the nature of the art object.²⁸⁷ Taking advantage of his father’s canning factory, Manzoni produced the work he came best known for: *Artist’s Shit*, a series of ninety cans, each numbered and signed, which, according to Manzoni, contained thirty grams of the artist’s own excrement. The piece was said to have been inspired by Manzoni’s interest in the relationship between art production and human production. The irony of the piece is that the contents of the cans remain a much-disputed enigma, since opening them would destroy the value of the artwork.

Four years earlier, Manzoni visited an exhibition of Yves Klein’s blue paintings at Galleria Apollinaire in Milan. Manzoni had been a fairly conventional painter up until this visit, but Klein’s display of canvas after canvas of unfaltering blue altered the way in which Manzoni saw and made art. If Klein’s blue paintings worked as art, then could other plain, lowly creations also serve as a freer kind of art? “Why not empty this receptacle, free this surface, try to discover the unlimited meaning of total space, a pure and absolute art?” he later questioned. “Expression, illusion, and abstraction are empty fictions. There is nothing to be said. There is only to be, there is only to live.”²⁸⁸

Manzoni began this new artistic direction in Albissola. From 1-15 August 1957, he organised a collective exhibition at the trattoria La Lalla in Albissola, a restaurant which had already been home to cutting-edge exhibitions of artists such as Piero Simondo and Giuseppe Pinot-Gallizio’s the previous summer. This was not the first time Manzoni had travelled to Albissola - he visited the town regularly as a child on family holidays.²⁸⁹ Furthermore, there is evidence to suggest that Manzoni had travelled to Albissola c. 1955/56 to produce two ceramic sculptures at the Mazzotti Factory [Fig. 109]. These two sculptures are made from terracotta, and are hand-painted with white majolica and flecks of black markings. Small, fang-like protrusions emerge from the sides of the clay. According to the Mazzotti Factory, these sculptures were made by Manzoni using a mixture of throwing (on the wheel) and

²⁸⁷ Kries and Vegesack, *Joe Colombo*, 30.

²⁸⁸ Harrison, Wood, and Blackwell Publishing, *Art in Theory 1900-2000*, 709.

²⁸⁹ Francesca Pola, *Una visione internazionale: Piero Manzoni e Albissola* (Milano: Electa, 2013), 9–17.

hand-modelling, meaning that Manzoni would have made the sculpture in several individual parts and then constructed the final pieces together.

Manzoni's exhibition at La Lalla was primarily inspired by the publication of *The Manifesto of Albissola Marina*, written in early 1957 by Manzoni and four other Italian artists, Guido Biasi, Mario Colucci, Ettore Sordini and Angelo Verga [Fig. 110].²⁹⁰ Written in a poetic style, the manifesto itself prefigures ideas Manzoni developed in his later writing and art practice. In many ways, the manifesto's language echoes the bio-organic imagery of the Nuclear Art movement, whom Manzoni was also associated with in Milan, in particular the artist Enrico Baj. This manifesto, however, takes the Nuclearists' imagery of bio-organic energy one step further by claiming that the canvas is a material which can be "living flesh":

"The canvas is no longer a barren meaningless invention, [nor] the utopia of an aesthetic order, a harmony of styles, the folly of a pure idealism without concrete and human origin, or an impersonal program: but will be living flesh, burning [with] the most intimate artistic dynamic...."²⁹¹

Arguably the closest manifestations of the manifesto's ideas can be found in Manzoni's series of 'achrome' paintings. His *Achrome* from 1958 was made by soaking the canvas in kaolin – a wet slip used in ceramics which Manzoni obtained from the Mazzotti Factory [Fig. 111].²⁹² Rather than applying it directly by hand, the process of soaking and drying the clay on the canvas itself caused natural wrinkles and creases. In other words, the clay was allowed to set without any physical intervention from the artist. The absence of colour, coupled with working methods that removed the need for any gesture or action, allowed Manzoni to further his aim of creating an artwork that was beyond its immediate materiality.²⁹³ The components combined, bonded, and deteriorated in a "mode specific to the caustic potential of materials... the "blank" surface, having gone through a physical process resulting in a textured distribution of substances, was then declared a finished work."²⁹⁴ As Jaleh Mansoor

²⁹⁰ Sordini and Verga would go on to form the Cenobio Group in Milan in 1962.

²⁹¹ Celant et al., *The Italian Metamorphosis, 1943-1968*, 718.

²⁹² Briony Fer, *The Infinite Line*, 2004, 31.

²⁹³ Tate, 'Achrome, Piero Manzoni 1958', *Tate*, accessed 20 April 2017, <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/manzoni-achrome-t01871>.

²⁹⁴ Jaleh Mansoor, 'Piero Manzoni: "We Want to Organicize Disintegration"', *October.*, no. 95 (2001): 31.

argues, “the visible disobedience of the surface” corresponded with Manzoni's idea that the clay canvas is itself “the living flesh”.²⁹⁵

A historical review of a collective show exhibited in Albissola described it as “a group of Milan artists, Angelo Verga, Piero Manzoni, Guido Biasi, Mario Colucci, Ettore Sardini, presenting a series of jaunty and whimsical works.”²⁹⁶ The only known artworks that were exhibited are two paintings by Manzoni titled *Arrivano cantando* and *Senza titolo*, both dated 1957 [Fig. 112, 113]. There are similarities between the ominous black forms and lingering horizons and the early Nuclear paintings of Enrico Baj. In particular, we know that Manzoni experimented with dark paint mixed with tar in his early works, predating his Achrome paintings in which brute substance and the presence of pure material do battle with lingering pictorial effects.²⁹⁷ Both of these works by Manzoni were purchased at the exhibition by the artist Rinaldo Rossello and his wife Esa Mazzotti (the niece of Tullio d’Albisola), whom Manzoni established an artistic and personal relationship which lasted for many years in Albissola. In a photograph taken by Emilio Colella, Verga and Manzoni are pictured in their studio, with the work *Senza titolo* displayed on the wall in the background [Fig. 114].

In the same year, Lucio Fontana exhibited a small selection of his most recent ceramics in his studio at Pozzo Garrita. A photograph shows Fontana outside his studio with these works exhibited on the back wall [Fig. 115]. One review of the exhibition describes these ceramics as “puzzling [...] reliefs on yellow, black, grey and red backgrounds... the grey is certainly more refined.... In these works, we find Fontana’s unmistakable pictorial and compositional language...his usual mysterious holes ...perfect representations of his “spatial concept”.²⁹⁸ As noted in this review, these ceramics relate to one of Lucio Fontana’s main contributions to

²⁹⁵ Ibid.

²⁹⁶ Pola, *Una visione internazionale*, 27.

²⁹⁷ ‘Piero Manzoni’, accessed 20 April 2017, <https://frieze.com/article/piero-manzoni-0>.

²⁹⁸ Pola, *Una visione internazionale*, 32. Pola cites the original review by Gian Carlo Ghiglione, *Mostra del ‘circolo artisti’ in comune ad Albissola Marina*, “Il Secolo XIX”, Genova (edizione di Savona), 7 agosto 1957, p. 4. Original text: “negli sconcertanti rilievi ceramici dai gialli su neri e gialli su rossi, e nella raffinatissima intonazione grigia di una terza composizione, che nonostante i consueti e misteriosi buchi che ritroviamo forse con altre funzioni nella stupenda nota grigia del Concetto spaziale affermano sempre piu la sua inconfondibile fantasia pittorica e compositiva. Nella bianca ceramica della Vittoria coi piccioni delicatissimi i passaggi tonali dal bianco grigio agli scuri contorni, briosa ed improvvisa come di consuetudine la indiolata modellatura.”

the language of art – his *buchi*, or holes. This involved the opening of the pictorial surface in the shape of hole or rents. In these simple ceramic reliefs and vases, Fontana had pierced the surface with pointed tools to create holes of small, equal sizes. Fontana worked on the surface of canvas and paintings and paper, but here in Albissola we see his first exercises in what he termed his “spatial research” in ceramic form.²⁹⁹ In the background of a photograph of Manzoni and Verga at Fontana’s exhibition, one can see some of these ‘spatial’ ceramics - a panel and two vases.

Two years later, Manzoni organised another significant exhibition in Albissola. From 18 to 24 August 1959, Manzoni presented his *Linee* series in Fontana’s studio at Pozzo Garrita. Only a few months earlier, Manzoni had presented some of his lines in Milan which he had drawn on rectangular sheets. However in Albissola, this was the first exhibition in which Manzoni’s *Linee* were presented as rolled up and enclosed in labeled cylinders. The *Linee* are temporal synthesis objects that record, through the trace signature of a line on the sheet, distances and real temporality, to be sealed in a cardboard cylinder, and on which a label affixed dated and compiled by the artist, which indicates their length. Of the works on display, Lucio Fontana purchased line ‘9.48’, dated July 1959. Fontana later considered Manzoni’s lines to be his most significant creation.³⁰⁰

Manzoni sent another of the exhibited *Linee* works – ‘11,40’, dated July 1959 –to his friend the artist Otto Piene in Dusseldorf on the day of the end of the exhibition on August 25.³⁰¹ The work is accompanied by an interesting letter from Manzoni in Albissola, which provides a number of key indications as to the correct interpretation of this series of works. He writes, “I had an exhibition of ‘lines’ in Albissola, with good success. I’ll send m. 11,40 to you in a tube. This is how it should be exhibited: you have to paste the sample and outside of the tube, in order that the tube is closed. Place the line on a card that changes with light.”³⁰² The letter, which also includes the first autograph Manzoni signed on *Linee*, was accompanied by a sketch of how the container would have to be sealed. It also shows some signs of exhibition

²⁹⁹ Gottschaller and Khandekar, *Lucio Fontana*, 21–25.

³⁰⁰ Pola, *Una visione internazionale*, 49.

³⁰¹ A founding member of the group ZERO, an artistic reaction to Abstract Expressionism by arguing that art should be void of colour, emotion and individual expression. Lucio Fontana and Piero Manzoni were both involved in the group’s activities in Italy.

³⁰² Pola, *Una visione internazionale*, 54–55.

projects that found concrete expression towards the end of the year with the opening of the Azimuth Gallery in Milan [Fig. 116].

The activity associated with Fontana and Manzoni attracted two more figures to Albissola's scene - the writer and artist Milena Milani (1917-2013) and her partner, the art dealer and collector Carlo Cardazzo (1908 – 1963). Their interest in visiting Albissola was largely due to their connection to Spatialism and their close relationship to Lucio Fontana which had formed the late 1940s and early 50s in Milan. In 1946, Carlo Cardazzo settled in Milan and in Via Manzoni 45 founded Galleria del Naviglio.³⁰³ Initially, the gallery promoted some of the leading figures in Italian art world such as Balla, Boccioni, De Chirico, Morandi, Severini, Sironi, among others, but by the late forties and early fifties the gallery began to promote the work of artists from across Europe and America, including Braque, Picasso, Pollock , Kandinsky , Miró, Dubuffet, and Jorn. Among this crowd was Fontana, who was exclusively represented at the gallery. It was here, at Galleria del Naviglio, that Fontana first presented the Manifesto Blanco in relation to his new Spatalist movement, signed among other artists, by both Milena Milani and Cardazzo.

Milani was from Savona and visited Fontana regularly at the Mazzotti workshop in Albissola during the forties and fifties. In addition to writing poetry, Milani also produced a series of ceramics during this period and was a peripheral figure in Jorn's International Ceramics Meeting of 1954. When Milani passed away in 2013, she donated her own, and Cadazzo's, vast collection of artwork to the Comune di Savona, which has since been turned into the *Fondazione Museo di Arte Contemporanea Milena Milani in memoria di Carlo Cadazzo* – a collection of European and American artworks on permanent display. This collection, which includes some pieces by Jorn and Fontana, demonstrates that Albissola was a centre for avant-garde artists and their work and shows the extent of the artists and works that passed through Albissola in the twentieth century.

Milani's collection is symbolic of the unlikely networks which were forged in and through mutual acquaintances in Albissola. The collection includes several artworks by Fontana, including one of his *Attese* slash paintings and ceramic pieces made in Albissola such as female statue titled *Fanciulla con il fiore* (1937) [Fig. 117]. Other works of mention include

³⁰³ The Galleria del Naviglio in Milan , located in Via Manzoni , at number 45, was founded in 1946 by Carlo Cardazzo who directed it until his death in 1963 .

another ceramic portrait by Franco Garelli from 1952 [Fig. 118], and a large ceramic piece by Picasso titled *Vaso donna ceramica* (1959) [Fig. 119].

In the introductory essay for the Fondazione Museo di Contemporanea catalogue of Milani's collection, Milani discusses her relationship with Fontana and the Spatialist movement:

“I was fascinated by Fontana. We hosted the first exhibition of Fontana's ‘Black Light’ [...] at Cardazzo's gallery in Milan. We joined the Spatialist movement along with artists and critics. They were memorable years, with discussions, meetings, collective exhibitions in Italy and abroad, solo exhibitions, books, pamphlets, etc. We wanted to print a newspaper, I would have to run with the title ‘Space’, but in the end it was too complicated to put in print. Each artist kept his personality, I mean I do not understand how in Futurism, where many works are affected by common trends. Spatialism, after all, was to Fontana. His inventions were too unusual [to] become a “school.” Fontana worked in the name of poetic freedom...”³⁰⁴

Milani and Cadazzo were regular visitors to Albissola during this period. Milani in particular was obviously considered fondly by Fontana who created several portraits of her in ceramic form, one of which is on permanent view at the Arte Contemporanea in Savona [Fig. 120]. The fact that four prominent figures associated with the Spatialist movement during these years – Fontana, Milani, Cadazzo and Manzoni - were also active in Albissola, demonstrates that the town was an important site and hub for leading figures in the avant-garde art world.

If in the first two chapters of this thesis we saw how Albissola attracted a handful of artists, then in this chapter we have seen how it fully developed into a hub for a vibrant, international community. This was instigated at the International Ceramics Meeting in 1954. This chapter has highlighted why Albissola was such a desirable place for these artists by exploring how it opened up opportunity for artists to preview and test their ideas and artworks on friends and fellow artists, as well as making important networks with artists and collectors. Practically, as well, it was a place where artists could create work in a collective space away from other cosmopolitan centers, but be close enough to places such as Milan.

The particulars of events and artworks produced in Albissola during this period have remained significantly unexplored. This chapter has attempted to trace both of these

³⁰⁴ *Fondazione Museo di arte contemporanea Milena Milani in memoria di Carlo Cardazzo*. (Milano: Skira, 2006), 44.

important data by creating a logical, chronological narrative of events during this period. In doing so, this chapter has explored the specific aims of the artists and movements that gathered in Albissola during these years and also traced the transformation of Albissola into thriving hub of artistic activity. More broadly, this chapter has explored the many ways in which Albissola became a hub for a social conception of expression and how the activities that took place here in the fifties directly challenged ideas of the official art world after the Second World War.

At the center of these exchanges was Jorn, a seminal figure whose wide spanning connections was one of the main reasons why Albissola first became a site of such international artistic exchange and acclaim at the International Ceramics Meeting in 1954. This is why we can consider Jorn a pivotal figure in Albissola's history from the 1950s onwards, particularly his interest in ceramics production as a social, collective activity. While Jorn's interest in Albissola was also to offer it as a temporary platform for the M.I.B.I., he eventually moved to Albissola permanently with his family. From the late fifties to the mid-sixties, Jorn developed his artistic career in Albissola, establishing new relationships with artists such as Wifredo Lam and continuing his pursuits of large ceramic reliefs. Jorn is a central figure in the following phase of Albissola's artistic activity, to which this thesis now turns.

CHAPTER FOUR

ASGER JORN IN ALBISSOLA (1957-1963)

This chapter focuses on the artistic activity of Asger Jorn in Albissola between the years 1957 and 1963. During this period, Jorn was involved in two important projects – the construction of his family home ‘Villa Jorn’, now an art museum in Albissola, and the making of a massive ceramic relief which is now on permanent display at a school in Denmark. Both projects have received hardly any critical analysis, and neither have been explored in relation to Albissola’s international avant-garde scene. Yet what this chapter will demonstrate is that both projects contributed to Albissola’s international identity as a hub for avant-garde art production.

This chapter will analyse these projects in relation to Jorn’s artistic theories and his wider artistic networks during this period. In doing so, not only does this chapter hope to shed light on two of Jorn’s most neglected projects, but will also establish Albissola as a central place in Jorn’s artistic production at this time. It was also during this period that Jorn struck up a close working relationship with the Cuban artist Wifredo Lam. After Jorn introduced ceramics to Lam at the San Giorgio Factory in Albissola, both artists became particularly taken to exploring the provincial and ‘primitive’ aspects of ceramics. While Lam produced a large repertoire of ceramics when he set up his studio in Albissola in the early 1970s, it was his earlier time spent with Jorn at San Giorgio in the 1950s and early 60s that inspired his return to ceramics later on in life.

The first part of this chapter begins with analyses of Jorn’s two main projects of this period. In addition to providing a formal analysis of the Villa, this chapter examines how concepts from Situationist International such as *psycho geography* and *détournement* were central to its construction. It will also assess Jorn’s relationship to architecture, taking into consideration his writing on the subject and the particular style of architecture at Villa Jorn - what Guy Debord terms Jorn’s “wild architecture”. This chapter then turns to an exploration of Jorn’s *Large Relief*, one of his most ambitious ceramic works of this period. Instead of only providing a visual analysis of the relief, as previous scholarship has done, this chapter argues that the relief’s relationship to its immediate architectural setting is important. It will take into consideration the making of the relief in Albissola, as well as its transportation to Denmark and relationship to Functionalist architectural features. It concludes that Jorn aimed to create a dialogue between the relief and contemporary theories on architecture and ornament, one

which perpetuated a dialogue between handmade and the industrial modes of art making, thus enhancing his own theory of ‘counter-functionalism’.

The second part of this chapter focuses on the artist Wifredo Lam. It explores the reasons why Lam specifically chose to visit Albissola during this period and, takes into consideration his other artistic endeavours and why he chose to experiment with ceramics with Jorn in Albissola. This chapter concludes with an exploration of Albissola’s *Passegia della artisti* – the ‘Artist’s Walk’ - a promenade which covers the length of Albissola’s sea front. Made up of twenty-one ceramic mosaics by Albissola’s main avant-garde protagonists, including sculptures by Fontana, Tullio d’Albisola, Fabbri, Wifredo Lam and Jorn, it was executed and inaugurated in 1963 to celebrate and commemorate Albissola’s ceramics avant-garde heritage. An analysis of the *Passegia* provides a fitting conclusion to nearly forty-years of vibrant, international artistic production in Albissola.

Villa Jorn: ‘the relief of a city never built’

In 1957 Jorn purchased a modest plot of land in the village of Bruciati in Albissola. The site - reached by a lane winding uphill from the coast, on about two acres, and with nothing but woods behind it and a panoramic view down to the sea - contained a pair of rundown stone-and-timber buildings as well as some outlying structures and a large cistern [Fig. 121]. Jorn worked on it until just prior to his death, transforming the landscape into a labyrinthine garden of stepped walls, flowering trellises, and pebbled grottos and walkways inlaid with shards of ceramic tiles and crockery. He embellished the rustic buildings with murals and plastered paintings, and embedded sculptures in assorted nooks around the plot – some depicting the strange, amorphous creatures that populated his abstract-figurative paintings and ceramics, others made of salvaged ceramic components produced by the local factories for industrial use. In the garden, following the undulating terrain, Jorn also went on to assemble panels, reliefs, vases, sculptures, and ceramics, made by himself and others, as well as adding objects he had found or the remains from other productions [Fig. 122, 123, 124].

Both a rejection of an elitist culture and a rebuke to a wasteful consumer society, Villa Jorn is a concrete example of how Jorn strove to combine and reinvent everyday life with art and architecture. The Villa is also a testimony to several important concepts and ideologies that formed Jorn’s artistic practice during this period and his involvement with the radical avant-garde group, the Situationist International. In the same year he purchased Villa Jorn, Jorn

became a founding member of the group along with the filmmaker and theorist Guy Debord. Whilst very little has been written on Villa Jorn itself, there is an extensive range of literature which explores the aims of the Situationist International group and Jorn's artistic practice at this time. It is within this context that Villa Jorn can be explored as an homage to both Situationist theory and Jorn's own artistic practice.

The main aim of the Situationists was to revolutionise modern consumer society by putting a stop to the commodification of art and channelling creativity into reinventing everyday life instead.³⁰⁵ They did this primarily through staging playful 'situations' and changing people's behaviour – prompting them to move away from being passive observers to become active participants in a social, creative everyday existence.³⁰⁶ For example, they would arrange experimental city walks intended to raise awareness of how our surroundings affect the human psyche. Key concepts included *psychogeography*, a term coined by the group as “the study of [the] effects of the geographical environment [...] on the emotions and behaviour of individuals,”³⁰⁷ as well as “unitary urbanism” - a critique of urbanism “in which separations such as work/leisure or public/private will finally be dissolved.”³⁰⁸ The idea of ‘derive’, an experimental and critical drift through urban terrain, was central to the Situationist premise of “letting go” in one's surroundings. It involved an element of aimless wandering and allowing people to “be drawn by the attractions of the terrain and the encounters they find there.”³⁰⁹

These concepts manifested in many artistic ways. Between 1955 and 1959, Jorn collaborated with Debord on collage works that brought together layers of fragmented text, graphics from newspapers and magazines and maps of Paris, Copenhagen and London.³¹⁰ The collages aimed to capture and re-configure urban space and experience from the individual's point of view by displacing and interrupting the process of reading established maps and travelling through the city via predetermined routes. In such works as *Guide psychogeography de*

³⁰⁵ ‘Situationist International Online’, accessed 31 May 2017, <http://www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/index.html>.

³⁰⁶ Sadie Plant, *The Most Radical Gesture the Situationist International in a Postmodern Age*. (London [etc.: Routledge, 2006), 26–30.

³⁰⁷ ‘Introduction to a Critique of Urban Geography by Guy Debord (Translated by Ken Knabb)’, *Situationist International Online*, accessed 15 August 2017, <http://www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/presitu/geography.html>.

³⁰⁸ Knabb, *Situationist International Anthology*, 56–58.

³⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 132–42.

³¹⁰ Tom McDonough, *Guy Debord and the Situationist International: Texts and Documents* (Cambridge, Mass.; London: MIT, 2004), 202–3.

Paris: Discours sur les passions de l'amour (1957), *The Naked City* (1957), *Fin de Copenhague* (1957) and *Memoires* (1959), Debord and Jorn used reproductions of pre-existing Paris maps such as the 1956 Plan de Paris a Vol d'oiseau, drawn by G. Peltier, and the 1951 Guide Taride de Paris, a conventional street atlas.³¹¹ Significant landmarks from these maps were cut out, pasted and joined together by “dribbled lines of coloured ink” or prominent red arrows [Fig. 125].

The significance of these *structures portantes* (‘load-bearing structures’ as defined by Debord) directly challenged the nature and status of the city in the wake of large-scale modernist city projects.³¹² As many scholars have argued, these collages represent the Situationist idea of *psychogeography*.³¹³ The collages, as argued by Greil Marcus in ‘Guy Debord’s *Memoires*’ (2008) and Peter Wollen, evoke Debord’s psycho-geographic concepts of ‘*dérive*’, the act of ‘drifting’ through an urban landscape. The coloured ink connects the fragments of maps, or “islands”, like “canals or a river might link landmarks within a city,”³¹⁴ whilst the red arrows describe “the spontaneous turns of direction taken by a subject moving through these surroundings in disregard of the useful connections that ordinarily govern [his] contact.”³¹⁵ The arrows remind the viewer, as Michelle Bernstein pointed out in 1954, of “cabs taking us from...one zone to another across an empty space.”³¹⁶ This was a direct

³¹¹ B Lans, *The Making of Fin de Copenhague & Mémoires: The Tactic of Détournement in the Collaboration between Guy Debord and Asger Jorn* (TU Delft, Architecture, Architecture, 2009); Michael Newman and Jon Bird, *Rewriting Conceptual Art* (London, UK: Reaktion Books, 1999), 32; Thomas F McDonough, ‘Situationist Space’, *October October 67* (1994): 60–66. In particular, Peter Wollen’s chapter “Mappings: Situationists and/or Conceptualists”: “The Peltier map shows the centre of Paris, with the two diagonal axes crossing at what seems to be a point very close to where the Mona Lisa hangs in the south wing of the Louvre. All the buildings, parks, bridges, stretches of river, etc., are depicted from a point of view apparently located high over Paris to the south of the area mapped, with the perspective adjusted so that there are no distortions.’ See also Thomas McDonough’s article ‘Situationist Space’ for thorough descriptions of the maps and their meanings in relation to the Naked City.

³¹² Schrijver L, ‘Utopia And/Or Spectacle? Rethinking Urban Interventions through the Legacy of Modernism and the Situationist City’, *Archit. Theory Rev. Architectural Theory Review* 16, no. 3 (2011): 246.

³¹³ Simon Sadler, *The Situationist City* (Cambridge, Mass. [u.a.: MIT Press, 2001), 76.

³¹⁴ Newman and Bird, *Rewriting Conceptual Art*, 32.

³¹⁵ McDonough, ‘Situationist Space’, 60.

³¹⁶ Bernstein in 1954 argued that a *derive* through one zone could best be continued by taking a cab to another and then stating again on another tour. ‘Only taxis allow a true freedom of movement...’, in Peter Wollen, “Mappings”, p. 32.

criticism of the totalising “distanciated spatial vision of Modernist planning” that Michel de Certeau, heir to the Situationist critique, would dissect in *The practice of everyday life*.³¹⁷

These collages were representative of the Situationist’s wider ambitions to reconfigure urban landscapes and eventually construct their own cities. Debord himself succinctly described the Situationist International as an attempt to “construct cities [and] surroundings that are favourable to the endless unfolding of new passions.”³¹⁸ As Lara Schrijver argues, the Situationists introduced the creative, psychological, desiring individual as a “counterweight to the utopian scheme of the modernist city.”³¹⁹ With Debord and many other Situationists were based in Paris, the rapid transformation of that city from the 1950s was a process with which they were particularly concerned. Large-scale rebuilding works led to the demolition and reconstruction of the city. Certain changes took on powerful symbolic significance, including the closing of the old markets of Les Halles and the removal of a widely celebrated metal and glass pavilions. Debord depicted the result as the sacking of the city, arguing that ideologies of urbanism were destroying cities and producing a new architecture for the poor shaped by modern means of mass construction and the interests of social control. He wrote: “At the core of these conditions we naturally find an *authoritarian decision-making process* that abstractly develops any environment into an environment of abstraction.”³²⁰

One response to this was Constant’s *New Babylon*. Whilst not “utopian” in the sense that it was abstract, it was utopian in that it “imagined a nomadic world of inhabitants free from the burden of work, dwelling in a labyrinth-city in permanent transformation.”³²¹ “New Babylon,” wrote Constant, “ends nowhere (since the Earth is round); it knows no frontiers (since there are no more national economies) or collectivities (since humanity is fluctuating). Every place is accessible to one and all.”³²² What we find in Constant’s models for this experimental utopia is not so much an exploration of possible future forms of urbanism but a concern with the very determinants of urban design after the demise of the traditional city.

³¹⁷ Cosgrove D, ‘Cultural Cartography: Maps and Mapping in Cultural Geography’, *Ann. Geogr. Annales de Geographie* 117, no. 660–661 (2008): 159–78; Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life. [1] [1]* (Berkeley, Calif. [u.a.: Univ. of California Press, 2013).

³¹⁸ McDonough, *Guy Debord and the Situationist International*, 90.

³¹⁹ Schrijver L, ‘Utopia And/Or Spectacle?’, 245.

³²⁰ McDonough, *Guy Debord and the Situationist International*, 90.

³²¹ *Ibid.*

³²² *Ibid.*

Jorn was perhaps a little more successful in attempting to find a concrete solution to the Situationists' problem of building a city. In 1960, thanks to his contact Paolo Marinotti, Jorn was able to obtain a licence for the group to use an island of the southern coast of Italy to create an experimental ludic city. This city, called 'Utopolis', related to the Situationists' program of "unitary urbanism" and was meant to stage all of the Situationists. For financial and technical reasons, this 'secret' project never took off and after that the entire outlook of the Situationists changed. The Situationist's desire to actual build a city was only ever a concept and their affirmations were reduced to failure.

In 1972, Guy Debord visited Albissola and, in a tribute to Jorn, declared Villa Jorn a "situation in which art, architecture and nature merge" into an "architecture sauvage" – a 'wild architecture'.³²³ He writes that "for anyone who has not forgotten the conflicted and passionate relations and has necessarily remained quite distant from both Situationists and architecture, [Villa Jorn] must appear to be a sort of inverse Pompeii: the relief of a city that was not built."³²⁴ Of course Villa Jorn is not a city, but for Debord, Jorn's house encompasses the aims of the Situationists in their strive to reconfigure landscapes and urban dwellings. For Debord, Villa Jorn is a microcosm of what a Situationist city might have looked like. The way in which Villa Jorn was designed appears to have the look of randomness, sculptures and shrubbery are spontaneously placed together in an environment that reflects Debord's "endless unfolding of new passions."³²⁵ No attempt, argues Debord, was made to "tidy up the natural tangle of power and telephone wires slung between house and seemingly chance poles."³²⁶ He continues:

"The paintings, sculptures, steps that are never identical leading from one level of the land to another, the trees, additional elements, the cistern and vineyard, the great variety of debris that is always welcome – everything left in perfect disorder: this is

³²³ Ezio Gribaudo, *Jorn, le jardin d'Albissola* (Torino: Fratelli Pozzo, 1974). Jorn left Denmark in 1953, settling the following year in Albissola in Italy with his second wife and four small children. From then on he led a rather peripatetic lifestyle across several European countries, setting up and contributing to a range of artists' groups including *Spiralen*, his *Mouvement International pour un Bauhaus imaginiste contre un Bauhaus imaginaire* and the Munich group *Spur*. Shortly before his Århus decorations he founded, together with Guy Debord the *Internationale Situationniste* and funded the first 12 issues of its journal.

³²⁴ Ibid.

³²⁵ Ibid.

³²⁶ J Ockman, 'Asger Jorn's Wild Architecture', *American Institute of Architects* 95, no. 8 (2006): 52.

what one of the most complex landscapes covering just a fraction of a hectare is made up of and, at the same time, it is one of the most superbly unified. Everything found its own space without any problem.”³²⁷

The garden is a true landscape labyrinth, an example of what Debord terms a “perfect disorder” in which plants blend with zoomorphic-shaped sculptures, ceramic insets and other left-over elements from Albissola ceramics factories. Pieces of ceramics are embedded in the steps and external walls of the house, and the informally painted murals, which can be found decorated throughout the interior of the house, share a similar expressive quality to the Villa’s exterior.

It is precisely because of the way in which “everything found its own space without any problem”, respecting the internal coherence of its maker’s thoughts, that Villa Jorn has also been considered on the one hand as a self-portrait and in the same light as an example of ‘accidental architecture’ – an architectural form from which the German Situationists claimed to revive in 1961.³²⁸ In Gunther Feuerstein’s accidental architecture:

“Accidental architecture is not determined by the rational but by the emotional...It renounces precision and excessive planning. It prefers poverty to convenience. The process of the anti-perfect fabrication of accidental architecture is once again accessible and imaginable. Accidental architecture productions are dynamic; they change, they are made up of ‘processes’. ‘cosmetic’ architecture is a mystification. As for accidental architecture, it uses materials ‘as they come’. Chance is an element of accidental architecture.”³²⁹

Villa Jorn’s ‘accidental’ style of architecture has illustrious precedents that are easy to identify at a formal level in Gaudi’s Guell Park, and at a significant level in Ferdinand Cheval’s naïve architecture, a postman in Hauterives. Debord also makes these assimilations in his tribute. However rather than leading it back to the outstanding work of one individual it must be traced back to the aims of Jorn’s ‘organic architecture’. Villa Jorn is not an architectural work in the closer sense of the term, but with the creation of an environment

³²⁷ Graham Birtwistle and Peter Shield, ‘Asger Jorn’s Solutions for Architecture’, *AA Files : Annals of the Architectural Association School of Architecture.*, no. 52 (2005): 34.

³²⁸ Ockman, ‘Asger Jorn’s Wild Architecture’, 52.

³²⁹ Luc Mercier, *Archives situationnistes. vol. 1, vol. 1*, (Paris: Contre-Moule : Parallèles, 1997), 54–55.

that, amongst other things, according to Jorn was not to remain a private sphere but rather was to be an open, collective place, an integral part of an active and creative community. While other S.I members such as Constant created an architectural utopia with a hyper-technical project; in Albissola, Jorn aimed the project, founded on a humanity that was still anchored to its most natural and ancestral values, at the organic relationship between man, land and nature. As Guy Debord noted:

“He was one of the first to understand modern criticism of the latest form of repressive architecture, which is currently spreading like wildfire...And putting himself to work yet again, it is in this Italian house that Jorn shows how on this concrete affair of our repossession of space, everyone can undertake the reconstruction of Land around themselves, Land that really needs it.”³³⁰

The first International Ceramics Meeting had attempted to rekindle the Bregnerød experience with a festive happening of coloured and material ceramics creation, clearly in opposition to the utilitarian and anonymous rigor of industrial design. At Villa Jorn, we see the centrality of architectural discourse also emerge as part of this dialogue. In particular, in the essay *Immagine e forma*, written in 1954, Jorn attacked Functionalism mercilessly. Jorn claimed Functionalism was based on platonic foundations that sacrificed any facet of human expressive complexity to the dogma of utility. For Jorn, the utility of many modern day objects was fictitious and necessity had imposed the system of goods and consumption and left out any room for artistic individuality.

Interweaving typically aesthetical considerations with others of a more political nature, Jorn denounced Functionalism as a tool of the economic-social and cultural reconstruction of the fifties. He emphasised the centrality of architecture in the project to transform the world, claiming that “creating architecture means shaping an environment and establishing a way of life.”³³¹ For Jorn, desire, dreams and imagination are fundamental for any technique that still believes it is human, since “objectively a house is nothing other than a mound of bricks and a machine, a totality of scrap. Only man can make it come alive.”³³² It was with great clarity of mind that Jorn saw the false promises of the progress of the capitalist mega-machine, attributing the new synthesis of the popular and anti-utilitarian arts with the task of inverting

³³⁰ Gribaudo, *Jorn, le jardin d'Albisola*.

³³¹ Ockman, ‘Asger Jorn’s Wild Architecture’.

³³² *Ibid.*, 52.

this baleful trajectory: an irrational architecture, and “new chaotic jungles”, were summoned to attempt this undertaking.³³³

Tied to this was another concept key to Jorn’s artistic practice during this period - *détournement* – a technique of putting a new spin on existing texts or images and imbuing them with new, critical significance. It was also a key objective of the Situationists, with Debord calling it “the integration of present or past artistic productions into a superior construction of a milieu.”³³⁴ In other words, literally ‘hijacking’ historical expressions of the capitalist system and turning it against itself. The technique was famously employed by Jorn in his so-called “modifications” where he would take old paintings sourced from flea markets and paint his own motifs on top of them [Fig. 126].³³⁵ While *détournement* has only been explored in relation to Jorn’s paintings, Villa Jorn can be considered an extension of this practice, in other words, Villa Jorn as ‘détourned landscape’. Jorn accompanied the paintings with texts rationalising this new form of sacrificial collaboration. The first was addressed to the general public: “Be modern, collectors, museums! If you’ve got old pictures, don’t despair. Keep your memories but modify them and bring them up to date. Why reject the old if it can be modernised with a few strokes of the brush?”³³⁶ When we take into consideration that Villa Jorn was an old building, how can we not see it in the same vein, Villa Jorn can be seen as “detourned architecture”; taking old buildings and reinventing them with his new paintings, ceramics, sculpture and gardens, giving old new meaning.

This idea was also put forward in a letter to Baj in 1954. Jorn states:

³³³ Ibid.

³³⁴ ‘Definitions by Guy Debord. Translated by Ken Knabb.’, accessed 7 May 2017, <http://www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/si/definitions.html>.

³³⁵ The first series consisted of landscapes peopled by fantastic monsters and other intruders. In his notebook Jorn called these pictures “kitsch”, and it was only later that they got their French name, Modifications. In 1962 he exhibited a new series consisting exclusively of portraits in which the amiable physiognomies of the bourgeoisie were transformed into grotesques. The pictures were intended as a provocation, which gives some of them an unprecedented severity which still has a strong effect. Jorn also satirised the concept of the avant-garde: in one of the pictures a girl candidate for confirmation is given a moustache, and on the wall behind her, addressed to admirers of Duchamp, is written The avant-garde does not surrender (*l’avant-garde ne se rend pas*). The modifications had the curious side effect of alienating Jorn once more from figuration. This can be seen in a series from the early sixties, which he called Luxury Paintings.

³³⁶ Elisabeth Sussman et al., *On the Passage of a Few People through a Rather Brief Moment in Time: The Situationist International 1957-1972* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1991), 140–42.

“I think it would be extremely important if we could go together to Albissola immediately...I believe it is just what we need, provided that there are not too many tourists, that it is not a worldly context, and finally whether it is possible to find a relatively cheap house...In Italy are there houses half in ruins, as in France, I mean abandoned? I like the idea of making ceramics.”³³⁷

The idea of a half-ruin house was therefore of interest to Jorn – taking the remnants of a building and creating a new context and meaning was integral to Jorn’s artistic practice of this period. This is perhaps further demonstrated in an account of the renovation of the project, given by Jorn’s son in which the accidental spilling of tar down the side of one of the walls was included in the final design:

“Once, when renovating the roof of the house, a craftsman dropped a bucket full of fluid tar from the scaffolding on a nice old wall. As the tar was running down the wall, he said, ‘Forgive me, I will clean up!’ But [Jorn] looked thoughtful and said, ‘No – stop - the tar is making such a wonderful figure!’”³³⁸

An anticipatory and progressive critique of the levelling effects of a global capitalist civilisation, Villa Jorn remains a demonstration that is ultimately local to Albissola. Villa Jorn can be seen as Jorn providing a model of this utopian way of life outside the cosmopolitan city. On the one hand, the criticism with which Jorn recognised the reflection of the deterioration of an entire civilisation in the developments of architecture at that time, on the other, the concrete example of a different way of shaping the environment and inhabiting the plant with simple and playful expressiveness: Villa Jorn is arguably one of the most personal of Jorn’s projects as it is a record of his relationship with architecture and ceramics. It is within this context that Albissola also, as the site in which Villa Jorn is, can be connected to SI activities and thus an international avant-garde.

Jorn’s *Large Relief* at Århus Statsgymnasium, Denmark

Set within the sleek, sparse and open Functionalist architecture of Arne Gravers Nielsen and Johan Richter, Asger Jorn’s *Large Relief* gives “a gust of life” to the entrance hall of Århus

³³⁷ ‘Asger Jorn to Enrico Baj’, 1954.

³³⁸ Jorn and Museum Jorn, *Concerning Form*, 303.

Statsgymnasium (ÅSG) [Fig. 127].³³⁹ Weighing eight tons and comprising of one thousand two hundred individual hand-cut tiles, the relief is a powerful and paradoxical thing to behold. It is simultaneously delicate, figurative and haphazard, as well as being heavy, monumental and grotesquely visceral. Up close, one is struck by the subtle decorative patterns of glaze that cover the relief's vast surface. Droplets of colour trickle over thick mounds of clay and tiny shards of glass poke out from beneath a muddy terrain [Fig. 128]. A few meters along and the surface turns violent and volcanic as explosive rivers of brightly coloured layered glaze, so thick it looks like paint, ooze out from crevasses and between large cracked ceramic slabs and boulders [Fig. 129]. Standing back from the relief, a completely new experience unfolds - the mottled, dissipated effect of the glaze dissolves and painterly, abstract figures emerge, recalling characters in Jorn's earlier "Silent Myth" paintings from 1953 [Fig. 130].³⁴⁰

Large Relief was the biggest artwork Jorn produced in his life and is arguably one of the largest ceramic reliefs in the world. It was made in the San Giorgio factory in Albissola with a team of ceramicists in 1959 and transported to Århus, Denmark and installed at Århus Statsgymnasium in the same year. Current scholarship on the relief removes it from its architectural setting, instead choosing to explore how the relief's visual and physical characteristics correlate with Jorn's tendencies toward more materialistic art practice during this period. While this is important, this reading essentially overlooks two important aims that Jorn thought was essential to the success of *Large Relief*: to be in conversation with Functionalist architecture and, in the process of its making and installation, to cultivate a collective and international artistic environment for artists then working in Albissola.

In addition to making *Large Relief*, Jorn also had plans to develop the entire school and architectural environment. Not all of these plans were realised, largely for contractual reasons, but nevertheless evidence the fact that Jorn wished the relief to be in dialogue with ÅSG as a whole. The remnants of these plans include a large tesserae wall made from Albissolan fired glass and clay made by Italian ceramicists [Fig. 131], a smaller ceramic

³³⁹ Jørgen Sørensen and Janne Yde, *Det store relief og den lange rejse: Asger Jorns udsmykninger på Århus Statsgymnasium* (Århus: ÅSG's Venner : Århus Statdgymnasium, .., 1996), 11.

³⁴⁰ Ibid. Jorn's friend Robert Dahlmann Olsen refers to the mural as "Den jyske myte" (Jutlandish Myth) in a 1964 text, implying its parallels to Jorn's "Silent Myth" paintings. Jorn himself referred to the relief as an expression of primordial powers or *urkraften*, relating to the Nordic culture's survival despite its marginalisation by Roman and post-classical culture.

relief by Jorn depicting the landscape view from the school hall [Fig. 132] and another ceramic relief created by students and Italian ceramicists made, also in 1959, in response to the installation of Jorn's *Large Relief* [Fig. 133]. Just as plans for Villa Jorn reflected Jorn's idea of art as a 'total vision' and critique of Modernist discourses, the *Large Relief* can also be considered part of Jorn's wider critiques and discussions on decoration, architecture and even pedagogy. This chapter will now turn to an analysis of Jorn's relief in situ and aims to shed new light and meaning behind the largest work Jorn ever produced.

Jorn worked tirelessly to secure a public commission in Denmark that would allow him to work in dialogue with architecture. In 1958, his break finally came through when he was commissioned by the national Danish Art Foundation (Statens Kunstfond) to decorate ÅSG's interior walls with a piece of mural art. Jorn initially accepted the offer, with a view to challenge the "impersonal" Functionalist architecture with an experimental and expressive piece of work.³⁴¹ Jorn first met with the ÅSG architects Nielson and Richter in the winter of 1954-1955, soon after they had won the commission to build it. Unfortunately, their meeting resulted in dispute as Jorn disagreed with the architects' plans for the building owing to 'fundamentally different views on the principles of combining architecture and 'decoration'.³⁴² Consequently, Jorn suggested his ex-Linien colleague Richard Mortensen, turned geometric abstract painter, as a more suitable artist for the project.³⁴³

However, by 1956, Jorn had changed his mind. He realised that the opportunity to provide such a large-scale public commission was not to be missed and in December 1957 the

³⁴¹ Guy Atkins, *Asger Jorn's Aarhus Mural*, (Westerham, Eng.: Printed by Westerham Press, 1964), 6. Ideally Jorn and the architects should have worked together on such a project from the beginning; however, such close collaboration were impossible in this case as the school building was already completed by the time the Danish Arts Foundation gave its approval for Jorn's relief to be made.

³⁴² *Ibid.*, 3.

³⁴³ Kurczynski and Jorn, *The Art and Politics of Asger Jorn*, 107; Lehmann-Brockhaus et al., *Asger Jorn i Italien*, 155–67; Sørensen and Yde, *Det store relief og den lange rejse*, 6–11. Linien (meaning "The Line") was an artist's association in Denmark in the 1930s and 1940s focusing on Abstraction and Symbolism. The group's exhibitions in Copenhagen created wide international participation. After the Second World War, the association was revived as Linien II with emphasis on Concrete art. Richard Mortensen was joint founder of the Linien school of abstract painters but his later work resembles concrete works of art characterised by large, geometric, bright colour surfaces. Mortensen did not take part in the last two Linien exhibitions held in 1951 and 1952.

Kunstford invited Jorn to submit a proposal in the form of a sketch for the ceramic relief.³⁴⁴ The ceramic sketch, which is kept on proud display in Villa Jorn, Albissola, gives “the impression of being a vision of things to come” rather than an actual working model. Yet the rhythm, colour scheme and many central figures of the finished relief are similar to Jorn’s sketch [Fig. 134].³⁴⁵

After submitting his sketch to the Kunstford, months went by without a decision being reached on whether he could go ahead and begin plans to create it. It was largely thanks to Jorn’s friends, Viggo Nielson in the Ministry of Education and P.V. Glob, artist turned professor of archaeology in Århus, that Jorn’s commission got the support it needed to be fully realised.³⁴⁶ Even more significant was the mayor’s viewing of Jorn’s “Silent Myth” paintings in Silkeborg of which he approved, and from then on keenly supported Jorn’s work. Eventually, after much debate from the Kunstford (who considered numerous other artists for the commission), the architects insisted on Jorn as the artist for the job.

It took Jorn several years to complete the ceramic relief because of the difficulty in trying to convince the city of Århus and negotiate the terms of his commission. Jorn insisted that the Kunstford commission should comprise not only of his ceramic relief which he would make with ceramicists in Albissola, but should also comprise of a large tapestry which was to be a collaboratively supervised art piece between Jorn and the artist Pierre Wemaëre in Paris.³⁴⁷ This resulted in a controversial double commission in ceramics and tapestry, the latter of which takes great pride of place in the great hall at ÅSG [Fig. 135].

In his earlier relief work produced at the Mazzotti Factory in 1954, Jorn had shown that it was possible to improvise on a much greater scale than people had previously thought possible for ceramics. However, Jorn’s plans for *Large Relief* were so massive that it seemed impossible for Jorn to produce such a work. The relief was made in the kilns at San Giorgio

³⁴⁴ The sketch which Jorn had made for the Arts Foundation was in the proportion of 1:20. Jorn also made another project draft by firing a working model of 1:10.

³⁴⁵ Atkins, *Asger Jorn’s Aarhus Mural*, 7.

³⁴⁶ Jorn knew Glob since 1937, when they met at the Kunstneres Efteraarsudstilling. Glob was a painter turned archaeologist who had shown work at the KE exhibition of 1934. Jorn then befriended Viggo Nielsen when Nielsen worked at the National Museum in Copenhagen, where Jorn often came to visit Glob or to study the collections.

³⁴⁷ For information on the collaboration between Jorn and Wemaëre on *Le long voyage* and its making see Kurczynski and Jorn, *The Art and Politics of Asger Jorn*, 133–39; Sørensen and Yde, *Det store relief og den lange rejse*, 36–42.

Factory in Albissola – a new factory which had opened in Albissola in 1958 under the aegis of Giovanni Poggi and Eliseo Salino, both local ceramicists. Salino had previous experience of working with Tullio at the Mazzotti Factory, as is evidence by a photograph of Salino working with Lucio Fontana on his large grès sculptures in 1936 (see chapter one). Jorn felt that Salino’s expertise would provide the necessary stimulus and support for the arduous task of creating the relief that lay ahead.

The relief took four months to create. Guy Atkins describes that when Jorn finally began work on the relief “it was like an explosion”. This amount of time was considered fairly quick for the size and enormity of the project. The clay was split into three large sections to be worked on individually and “was heaped up, flattened, stamped firm and cut up”. Salino and his colleagues first unfolded the initial sheet of monumental clay, which was “brutally or tenderly pressed, scraped, cut and kneaded from a thickness of fifteen centimetres to over sixty centimetres.”³⁴⁸ This was a process that had to be done by specialists to avoid cracking and creating air bubbles which would damage the clay. Once the clay had been rolled and laid out, Jorn could begin work on the surface of the clay.

Using a wide range of experimental techniques, “images began to rise over an area of more than eight cubic metres of clay, amounting to about one tenth of the whole relief.”³⁴⁹ He first applied techniques such as scraping, poking and incising the wet clay’s surface and then “pressed [coloured pieces of glass] into small secret pockets” into the mountainous crevasses that he had just formed. Sculpting out a clay canvas, Jorn then poured bowls of slips onto the surface and “with brooms [and] brushes the fresh clay was painted, splashed and sprayed with the light glazes to emphasise the shapes.” According to Guy Atkins’ account, this process was:

“a kind of overture” to the final glaze painting [...] which served to bring out the rough pictorial effect of the relief. In the finished work there are many places where the raw clay colours have been allowed to remain, dry and flat, as a powerful contrast to the shining glazes.”³⁵⁰

The idea to use glazed pieces of ceramics with raw clay was typical of Jorn’s experimental approach to ceramics and his untraditional artistic methods. It was also typical of Jorn that he

³⁴⁸ Atkins, *Asger Jorn’s Aarhus Mural*, 10.

³⁴⁹ Ibid.

³⁵⁰ Ibid.

did not begin at one end and work through to the other but rather he treated the relief as if it were a huge canvas, engaging with the clay across the whole ground simultaneously. The whole relief lived in his mind as a unified vision and progressed in a series of bursts. On the large middle panel Jorn apparently worked alternatively on the left and right sections.

Jorn's approach to clay was as improvised as possible and he adopted a particularly playful manner. For example, when Jorn needed to get his scooter out of the yard, he famously drove it across the wet clay a few times with the tyres imprinting marks across the relief's surface [Fig. 136]. For many years, people believed that the scooter had made the distinctive patterned marks on the right-hand section of the mural [Fig. 137]. However, the photographer Lars Bay identified in 2007 that the scooter marks are actually barely visible in the finished mural.³⁵¹ In reality it is arguable that they were made using another, much bigger and heavier, single vehicle tire.³⁵²

By mid-September 1959 the relief was finally finished. It was then prepared to be shipped across to Denmark with a team of ceramicists from the factory including Salino and ceramicist Pastorino from the Albissola factory, and the expert mason Sportorno. The relief reached Århus at the beginning of October where the installation of the relief began and was reportedly a mammoth and collaborative task. The one thousand two hundred hand cut pieces were laid out in front of the long bare wall of the school. Danish masons embedded iron supports into the wall and mixed calcium, sand and cement mortar to mount the ceramic relief on the wall. It was important that the work's rhythm had to be recaptured for the final effort however Jorn was not strict on whether the final relief looked exactly the same as the one he had laid out at San Giorgio. The joints between the fragments were filled in and deliberately indented to form a living accompaniment to the wall and architecture [Fig. 138].

At the end of October, the installation of all three sections was finished. The process of installing such a mammoth piece of artwork in a local comprehensive school provoked much excitement in the press and among the new pupils of the school which had opened that August. The Kunstford presented the relief to the school at a ceremony held on 5 November 1959. The press displayed rather more scepticism; on November 8th 1959, the Århus Stiftstidende wrote, "On the subject of modern school decoration: Now wasn't it easier when

³⁵¹ Lars Bay, 'En Igtagelse', *Billedkunst* 15, no. 2 (2007): 46.

³⁵² Janne Yde on Jorn's Large Relief at Århus Statsgymnasium, 12 December 2014.

we could tell children that one picture was Rolf Krake and the other Frederik VII?”³⁵³ Clearly they were baffled by its imagery. This scepticism was apparently shared by many visitors when the relief was opened to the public, the most common question being, what did the relief represent? Jorn, as ever, was characteristically vague in his reply: “What does it represent? ... I have no idea – and I have never made an effort to find out exactly. I don’t work with a fixed pattern in my mind, and so I shall let each individual use his conscience to decide what he makes of it.”³⁵⁴ Despite the relief causing such apparent controversy in the press, in its first on view to the public it attracted large crowds numbering eight thousand people came to see it in its first week.³⁵⁵

The installation of the *Large Relief* within a Functionalist architectural setting is connected to Jorn’s long-standing ambition to integrate the plastic arts and architecture. As early as 1944, Jorn had expressed his belief in the necessity that painting engage directly with architecture. In his essay ‘Ansigt til Ansigt (face to face) (1944), he declared: “We are interested in the walls, not to position decorations, but to spread beyond the limits that the frame sets out for us.”³⁵⁶ At ÅSG we see these ideas transferred into ceramic mural.³⁵⁷ As Karen Kurczynski argues:

³⁵³ ‘Det Store Relief - ASG’, *Aarhus Stiftstidende*, 8 November 1959. “‘Apropos moderne skoleudsmykning: Det var nu nemmere, dengang vi kunne fortælle børnene, at det ene billede var Rolf Krake og det andet Frederik den Syvende.’”

³⁵⁴ Sørensen and Yde, *Det store relief og den lange rejse*, 20 (“Hvad det forestiller? (...) Det aner jeg ikke – og jeg har aldrig gjort forsøg paa at finde ud af det ganske nøjagtigt. Jeg arbejder ikke med et fast forestillingsmønster, og jeg vil i øvrigt lade den enkelte afgøre med sin samvittighed, hvad han får ud af det.”); Shona Kallestrup, ‘Asger Jorn’s School Decoration in Århus Statsgymnasium, Denmark, 1959-61’ (European Social Science History Conference: Painted, Sculpted, Stitched, Tiled, Metallic, Glazed and Landscaped Schools as Learning Topoi: A Glance at the Range, Chronology, Functionality and Interpretation of European Decorated Schools (1870-2012), Glasgow, 2012).

³⁵⁵ Many colourful anecdotes are told about the Italians’ time in Århus, from their expectation of seeing polar bears in the street to the cases of spaghetti they brought with them. One of the most interesting stories concerns the third, smallest section of the frieze to the south of the second door which, for various possible reasons, had been brought in two versions. The extra version was sold, after some haggling, to the industrialist and art collector Aage Damgaard and now hangs in Herning Art Museum. These anecdotes illustrate how the installation was a social affair as well as professional.

³⁵⁶ Troels Andersen, Asger Jorn, and Museum Jorn, *Jorn i Havana = Jorn in Havana = Jorn en La Habana* (Rødovre; Silkeborg: Sohn ; I samarbejde med Museum Jorn, 2011), 12.

³⁵⁷ Catherine Burke, Jeremy Howard, and Peter Cunningham, *The Decorated School: Essays on the Visual Culture of Schooling*, 2013.

“For Jorn, the decorative environment was less a personal refuge to nurture the psyche in private than a radical reenvisioning of public and private space. His [relief] draws on the traditions of decoration in various cultures, such as the ancient Mediterranean ceramic designs based on sea life that influenced Picasso, or the significance of the humble mursten (brick) in traditional Danish architecture. At the same time, the [relief] pushes public decoration to its aesthetic limit, almost violently refusing good taste and any traditional definition of beauty, evoking instead the naivety of folk art and excessive organicism of Jugendstil.”³⁵⁸

Jorn’s *Large Relief* was as much a personal exploration of a material than it was explicitly about a revival of the turn of the century interpretation of the decorative environment as a critique of modern life. However, the relief does not necessarily nullify its architectural setting but arguably balances out its minimalist aesthetics. Jorn did not disagree outright with Functionalism but was interested in how it could be integrated with a natural living order. In his writings he developed this concept as “counter-functionalism”; “a new kind of functionalism, not an anti-functionalism but a further development of functionalism into its dialectically opposite position, a supplementary dialectic of early functionalism that was unilaterally logical with its other half, stylistic functionalism.”³⁵⁹ In other words, Jorn was interested in creating an expressive, artistic environment which synthesised function and a “natural style springing from the demands of life.”³⁶⁰ Furthermore, by literally fusing together an intensely hand-hewn and monumental piece of work with the minimalist aesthetics of Functionalist architecture, Jorn creates a new dialogue, one which attempts to reconcile the relationship between individualistic, handmade artworks and environments influenced by industry.

Jorn had included several other additions to his proposal for the redecoration of the school. In addition to the relief, he came up with an elaborate proposal to redecorate the entire school. His plans were submitted in five parts and included “a labyrinth in the garden in the centre of the building, external facades with coverings of ferro concrete case onto the surface, a tapestry across the end wall of the assembly hall, four groups of ceramic reliefs and an internal mosaic of large glass tesserae.”³⁶¹ He also made suggestions about the materials for

³⁵⁸ Kurezynski and Jorn, *The Art and Politics of Asger Jorn*, 129.

³⁵⁹ Birtwistle and Shield, ‘Asger Jorn’s Solutions for Architecture’, 43.

³⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 46.

³⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 49.

the various walls that were to bear his works as well as plans to decorate the part of the banquet hall which towered over the south wing roof with ceramic tesserae, as well as decorating each individual pillar in the south hallway in a similar fashion by students.³⁶² Unfortunately, Jorn's plans to create a ferro concrete labyrinth, decoration of the banquet hall south wing roof and pillars with ceramic tesserae, and four groups of ceramic reliefs were left unrealised.³⁶³ This was as far as he could go with a building already under construction. The contract, signed in May 1959, made it impossible for Jorn to have any hand in the building process. In the end, a large tapestry was designed for the assembly hall as well as several other ceramic reliefs were commissioned in addition to the *Large Relief*.

An internal mosaic of large glass and ceramic tesserae was produced, and still exists today. Despite its impressive size (it is equal in height to Jorn's large relief), it has been nearly omitted from scholarship surrounding ÅSG and almost entirely forgotten in surveys of Jorn's artistic activities in Århus overall. This could be owing to the fact that Jorn did not actually create the work himself. Approximately half the length of Jorn's large relief, the tesserae connects onto the far right section of the relief via a corridor door leading to the south hallway. According to Giovanni Poggi, an Italian ceramicist who was heavily involved with the group of Albissolan artists who installed Jorn's large relief, the tesserae is an exquisite example of Italian fired ceramic and glass work.³⁶⁴ The tesserae's existence at ÅSG, despite the lack of information available on it, is an important one. Its connection to Jorn's larger relief via a corridor is no coincidence or a matter of Jornian spontaneity. Jorn seems to have wanted a work to be present in this hallway to create a subtle transition between the larger relief and the rest of the school, particularly for passers-by to experience.³⁶⁵ In fact, the tesserae wall has similar design elements to the majolica mosaic walls at Cabaret Fledermaus

³⁶² Sørensen and Yde, *Det store relief og den lange rejse*, 22. Translated into English from original Danish: “- ideer: Den del af festsalen, som ragede op over sydføjens tag, skulle være dækket af en keramik, Jorn selv ville lave, ligesom søjlerne ned langs sydgangen skulle være dækket af keramik, lavet af elever – en søjle pr. argång.”

³⁶³ Janne Yde on Jorn's Large Relief at Århus Statsgymnasium.

³⁶⁴ ÅSG was visited by Giovanni Poggi in March 2014 to discuss the relief in situ - he claimed the tesserae is made from Albissola ceramic tiles and was meant to be in dialogue with Jorn's relief.

³⁶⁵ Sørensen and Yde, *Det store relief og den lange rejse*, 27.

which were designed primarily by Josef Hoffmann, but also other individual artists [Fig. 139].³⁶⁶

In response to the installation of the large relief in 1959, a smaller ceramic relief was made by current students at ÅSG with individually designed ceramic tiles and assisted by ceramicist Salino in the glazing and firing stages. As an observer to the event noted:

“Jorn thought it was funny that we had a ceramic furnace, but I could not lure him into the class. I asked him if he would be pissed if I let the kids [...] make a parody of his wall... He found this hilarious, and he even suggested that it was put up on the wall outside the form rooms. We had great fun making our own wall. Each student formed a few tiles, and when we learned that Jorn had let Salino run on scooter over the wade clay to his wall (imprint is clearly visible), we found it reasonable to have Eliseo Salino run by bicycle across our creation. He was in on the joke.”³⁶⁷

It is evident that the pupils and teachers at ÅSG entered into the spirit of the installation of the relief with some enthusiasm: contemporary photographs show Salino riding a bicycle over a line of small clay reliefs held by laughing pupils [Fig. 140]. In this particular example, the creation of the student’s ceramic relief is centred on the act of ‘playing’, a concept which dominated Jorn’s theoretical concepts on unity and community. For Jorn, ‘playing’ was a key role in synthesising artistic individual and collective expression. In his essay, ‘Magic and the Fine Arts’, Jorn speaks of the artist’s identification with things and matter and the importance of play in art and life in such identifications. He defines ‘play’ as “the fundamental element in art, the unconscious active enjoyment of life through play with matter, with colours, tones,

³⁶⁶ The Cabaret Fledermaus (also: Cabaret Fledermaus) is a venue in the 1st district of Vienna Inner City. The original , designed by Josef Hoffmann Art Nouveau cabaret was be between 1907 and 1913 in the Kärntner Straße, corner of John Street. The interior in the Art Nouveau style was designed by Josef Hoffmann, the execution was carried out by the Wiener Werkstätte, acting on their own behalf because financing was allegedly secured from advance payments for the construction of the Palais Stoclet. Apart from Hoffmann many well-known artists of the Vienna Art Nouveau were involved in the design, including Gustav Klimt, Oskar Kokoschka, Anton Kling, Koloman Moser, Czeschka and Eduard Wimmer. The interior including the stage and furnishings, but were also designed posters, postcards, cutlery and the pins of the ushers of the Wiener Werkstätte. The most striking design element of the cabaret premises was composed of 7,000 pieces of majolica mosaic, with which the walls were covered bar and cloakroom.

³⁶⁷ Sørensen and Yde, *Det store relief og den lange rejse*, 51.

clay, words etc. (...) Play is not consciously directed to any goal but is a delight, an identification, with things themselves.”³⁶⁸

The school’s involvement in the relief’s installation, and the creation of their own student-made relief, suggests an interesting relationship between Danish pedagogy and Jorn’s artistic practices during the 1950s. Shona Kallestrup’s essay, ‘Asger Jorn’s School Decoration in Århus Statsgymnasium, Denmark, 1959-61’ discusses Jorn’s *Large Relief* within the context of progressive changes to education in Denmark during the 1940s and 1950s.³⁶⁹ Kallestrup argues that despite his anti-authoritarian stance and his devil-may-care attitude to rules and conventions, artistic or otherwise, Jorn was an artist who understood the unique pedagogical traditions of Danish schools and their historical background. As a young man, he had spent five years training and working as a teacher, graduating from Silkeborg teacher training college in 1935; during this time he became deeply interested in the seminal ideas of the father of Danish educational reform, N. F. S. Grundtvig (1783-1882).

Jorn’s interest in pedagogy formed an important part of his artistic ideologies during this period. Not only because of Jorn’s plans to decorate the whole school environment, but also because the relief itself, compositionally speaking, seems to recall the decoration of Vallekilde Folk High School north west of Copenhagen inspired by Grundtvigian design.³⁷⁰ The one and a half storey, wooden, farm-like building with cross gables and steeply pitched roofs was dramatically painted in red and yellow, believed to be the colours of the oldest

³⁶⁸ Graham Birtwistle, ‘Living Art: Asger Jorn’s Comprehensive Theory of Art between Helhesten and CoBrA (1946-1949).’ (Reflex, 1986), 76; Peter Shield, *Comparative Vandalism: Asger Jorn and the Artistic Attitude to Life : A Study of Asger Jorn’s Attempt to Formulate ‘the First Complete Revision of the Existing Philosophical System’ from the Standpoint of the Artist in the Period 1961-67.* (Aldershot [etc.: Ashgate [etc., 1998).

³⁶⁹ The roots of Denmark’s, indeed much of Scandinavia’s, free educational system lay in the thinking of the 19th-century theologian, priest, politician, historian and poet, N. F. S. Grundtvig. Based upon the progressive, non-classical curriculum that would be open to all through its promotion of popular culture (folkelighed). Instead of Latin grammar, mathematics and rote learning, the emphasis was on the mother tongue, national history and poetry, personal development, teaching through dialogue between teacher and pupil, manual labour, gymnastics and instruction in ‘citizenship’. For further reading on the development of Nationalism in Danish education, see *Danish Vernacular – Nationalism and History Shaping Education* (Architectural Research Centers Consortium, 2014).

³⁷⁰ Founded in 1865 as one of the first schools to be organised according to Grundtvig’s educational ideas, it was extended with a gymnasium, built in 1884 by the father of Danish national romantic architecture Martin Nyrop (together with Andreas Bentsen). Designed to accommodate the new drill system of Per Henrik Ling (who believed that gymnastics were the way to revive Nordic virtues and vigour).

wood architecture in Scandinavia. Inside, a well-lit central space with a pitched roof supported by large wooden trusses gave the effect of a Viking hall. It was decorated with a line of motivational inscriptions above the climbing bars of the walls, together with symbols from Nordic mythology. The overall effect was of colourful, highly crafted simplicity, conveying a strong Grundtvigian sense of folk art and Nordic identity.

Jorn never offered a definitive interpretation of his relief as Nordic myth or otherwise.³⁷¹ Rather, what was important to him, and what distinguished his relief from earlier school decoration in Denmark, was that the work was not meant to instruct, edify or inform, but to release the imagination. The response it evokes is far less cerebral than it is tactile and almost viscerally physical. Against the smooth surfaces, straight lines, sharp angles, restrained tones and intellectual austerity of the school's architecture, the frieze bubbles outwards in a riot of vivid colour, swirling masses and contrasting textures. It is child-like, playful and humorous, a window on the unconscious that draws the viewer in with its massive energy, bulging masses, different textures and vivid colours. Many commentators remarked on the way it seemed to tap into the Nordic mentality with its fables, poems and dreams; how, after entering a building marked by clear thought, one "meets the demons of the underworld [...] a starker contrast between architecture and decoration can scarcely be imagined."³⁷²

Whilst certainly positioned on the wall, each relief's function is not necessarily a structural one, but of creating a total synthesised environment of art, design and function. In this respect, Jorn's plans to 'decorate' ÅSG have a problematic relationship to the term

³⁷¹ There have been attempts to interpret the relief, most often in terms of the relationship between man and woman and Jorn's own rather complicated love life. Divided into three unequal sections by the two doors to the school hall, it nevertheless was conceived as a single unit. The left-hand section appears to offer two couple-like groups to left and right, with smaller figures and possibly sea-creatures in between. Jorn's friend, the architect Robert Dahmann Olsen, suggested the couples represented Jorn's own experience of moving from one marriage to the next. The more complicated middle section, with its humorous, sea-creature forms, has been interpreted to show a ray-like female figure and a lizard-like male figure, no longer dancing like the couples in the left-hand section, but standing apart – according to this interpretation thereby suggesting the protracted dissolution of Jorn's second marriage in the late 1950s. The much smaller right-hand section, on the other hand, seems to be the figure of a woman with large eyes and a smiling mouth – perhaps referring to the 19 year-old Jacqueline de Jong whom Jorn met in 1958 and with whom he subsequently had a relationship. Such interpretations, however, can never be more than speculation. See Asger Jorn, Jens Erik Sørensen, and Aarhus kunstmuseum, *Jorn international* (Aarhus: ARoS Aarhus Kunstmuseum, 2011), 199–213; Kallestrup, 'Asger Jorn's School Decoration in Aarhus Statsgymnasium, Denmark, 1959-61'.

³⁷² Sørensen and Yde, *Det store relief og den lange rejse*, 25.

‘ornament’. Jorn’s concept of ‘organic design’ and a vision to create a ‘total’ artistic environment, based on individual, collective artistic expression, seems to have developed from his earlier thinking on ‘ornament’ and ‘decoration’. In Jorn’s 1949 essay ‘What is an ornament?’, he discusses “the tragic history of the ornament in art,” and the fact that in the western world, art itself became split into two categories: high art (also classical art) and low art, which Jorn refers to as “folk/banal or spontaneous art”. In relation to this, he states that there are two different interpretations of the ornament:

“1. The ornament as monumental decoration which seeks to form a finite whole, and becomes static ornamentation.

2. The ornament as spontaneous arabesque, which manifests itself as a set of elements within a greater whole. This is ‘moving’ and hence dynamic ornamentation. It is about organic cohesion.”³⁷³

Jorn’s ‘organic design’ may have evolved from his interests in the earlier Arts and Crafts movement in Europe. In his early essays (such as ‘Luck and Chance’, 1951-1952 and ‘On Natural Form’, 1952), Jorn was particularly interested in combining materials with the ‘immaterial’. The outcome, Jorn argued, ‘herald[ed] an age of organic design’:

“...an awakening sense of the specific characteristics of the material where it concerns materials used in conjunction [with] the literally immaterial and mathematical understanding of early functionalism.”³⁷⁴

Arguably this ‘organic design’, a synthesis of materials with the ‘immaterial’, can be seen best in Jorn’s inclusion and integration of colour into the school’s architecture. Each artwork and activity at ÅSG included colour as one of its main aesthetic components. Jorn used both violent and natural coloured glazes on each of the relief’s surfaces (the students’, Jorn’s smaller and large relief), and added a mixture of natural and synthetic coloured tiles to the tesserae wall. This creates an effect whereby the ‘colours escape their containers’, and ‘bleed into the street: a release from the surfaces and materials that support it, a release that leads to the fleeting magic of the ‘fiery pool reflecting in the asphalt.’³⁷⁵ It is also evident that Jorn

³⁷³ Asger Jorn, ‘Hvad er et ornament?’, *Dansk Kunsthåndværk* 21, no. 8 (1948): 122–24. Translated into English at the Museum Jorn.

³⁷⁴ Birtwistle and Shield, ‘Asger Jorn’s Solutions for Architecture’, 44.

³⁷⁵ David Batchelor, *The Luminous and the Grey*, 2014, 49.

had bigger plans for the use of colour at ÅSG. There is a similar relationship to colour in Jorn's unrealised plans. By adding coloured glass mosaics to the large windows and coloured cement decorations to adorn the exterior of the building, Jorn would have created an ultimate synthesis of natural and man-made colour and the effect of the whole school environment would have been one of a synthesis of colour (in the decoration of the artworks) and light (through the Functionalist architecture).³⁷⁶

For Jorn, these ideas were formulated as a starting point for a new materialistic theory of art, ornament and function based on the importance of involving artists in the design of working environments. As Jorn argues in his essay "Hvad er et ornament?" (What is an ornament?):

"what is needed here, is nothing other than life, a living environment, social living, a living rhythm of work, a meaningful cohesion to life and a real purpose to one's work...It is not a question of decorating a few public buildings... but first and foremost to make productive life a natural, organic, collaborative whole."³⁷⁷

In one of the most recent studies of Jorn's artistic practice, Karen Kurczynski argues that further exploration of "the ceramics [Jorn] produced in Denmark and Italy in the 1950s would further [an] understanding of [Jorn's] relationship between local tradition and international modernism, and personal to collective expression."³⁷⁸ This examination of Jorn's project at ÅSG demonstrates that the terms 'personal' and 'collective' could only be meaningful in relationship to each other. Jorn's experiments with the ceramic medium at ÅSG reflect a development in his engagement with ceramics as one starting from making individual ceramic objects in his early life in Silkeborg, to introducing ceramics into collective contexts, such as at ÅSG. The fact that Jorn chose to make *Large Relief* at the San Giorgio demonstrates that Jorn considered Albissola the best place to produce a ceramic relief of this magnitude and formal composition.

³⁷⁶ Jorn's interests in the use of colour in his work may have come from a life-long obsession with the Arts and Crafts movement, particularly the work and writings of Ruskin and Morris. In reality, Jorn was exposed to a multitude of architectural theories on colour and light. From Le Corbusier's concept of colour and architecture in his early career with him (as mentioned earlier in his quoting aphorism).

³⁷⁷ Jorn, 'Hvad er et ornament?'

³⁷⁸ Kurczynski, *The Art and Politics of Asger Jorn*, 130–31.

Wifredo Lam

The Cuban-born artist Wifredo Lam (1902-1982) is widely recognised as one of the most important artists of the twentieth century. He is perhaps best known for his large surrealist paintings and prints which championed the powers of the imagination and incorporated a hybrid style between surrealism and ‘magic realism’.³⁷⁹ Lam was a pioneer of multiculturalism, a forerunner in conceiving an international modern art and one of the first artists to poetically revisit Caribbean mythology in art.

Between the mid-1950s and the late 1970s, Lam produced a large body of ceramics at his studio in Albissola. In 1954, Lam was invited by Jorn to participate in the International Ceramics Meeting at the Mazzotti Factory, however he was in Cuba at the time and received the invitation too late.³⁸⁰ In 1957, Lam received another letter from Jorn asking him to join him in the ceramic studios of San Giorgio in Albissola. Lam travelled to Albissola that year with his wife Lou Laurin-Lam and family. When Lam lost his home in Mariano during the aftermath of the Cuban Revolution in 1960, he decided to purchase a house and build a studio in Albissola.³⁸¹ Lam and his family lived between Paris and Albissola for the next twenty-five years.

The years that Lam spent in Albissola during the latter part of his life, and the works he produced during this period, have received some recent scholarship. In 2012, Galerie Gmurzynska in Zug held an exhibition of Lam’s ceramics from the 1970s titled ‘Fire Tongues’.³⁸² Most recently, an entire room dedicated to “the Albissola years” was included in the exposition of Lam’s work at Tate Modern in 2016. In an interview for the Tate’s journal, *Tate Etc.*, Lam’s son Eskil described the family’s life during this period, declaring that Albissola “was a hub of excitement, activity and artistic exchange at the time my father was there. My mother called it ‘Albissolamania’.”³⁸³ Indeed, Lou Laurin-Lam’s memoir, titled

³⁷⁹ Luciano Caprile et al., *Wifredo Lam: Cuba Italia ; un percorso ; (esposizione) Galleria Gruppo Credito Valtellinese, Refettorio delle Stelline, Milano, 15 novembre 2002 - 25 gennaio 2003* (Cinisello Balsamo (Milano: Silvana, 2002), Daniel Abadie, ‘Wifredo Lam’s Black Magic,’ pp.212-213.

³⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 214.

³⁸¹ Lowery Stokes Sims, *Wifredo Lam and the International Avant-Garde, 1923-1982* (Austin, Tex: University of Texas Press, 2003), 165.

³⁸² ‘Wifredo Lam - Exhibitions - Galerie Gmurzynska’, accessed 24 May 2017, <http://www.gmurzynska.com/exhibitions/wifredo-lam>.

³⁸³ ‘Wifredo Lam: The Albissola Years’.

‘Meeting with Albissola’, is a detailed account of Albissola’s artistic scene during these years. Both Eskil and Lou Laurin-Lams’ accounts provide valuable insight into the reasons why Lam was so attracted to ceramics and why he chose to live and work in Albissola during this period.

Albissola was attractive to Lam for a number of reasons. Lou Laurin-Lam notes that in Albissola, Lam had “found a climate and landscape similar to that of Cuba... a locale [which] corresponded with his vision of nature and of Cuban life and culture.” Lowrey Stoke Sims argues that Lam once cast his presence in Albissola as “a matter of historical imperative” - noting the proximity to Genoa, the birth place of Christopher Columbus, Lam declared, “I have made the journey of Christopher Columbus in reverse: from the Antilles to Liguria.”³⁸⁴ For Lam, then, Albissola was a home from home and a place which became synonymous with the next phase of his artistic career when he began to incorporate new media into his practice.

“Why Albissola?” This is the question that Lou Laurin-Lam posits to the reader in her account of the years Lam and his family spent in Italy. “It’s not Venice. It is not a particularly picturesque place, it has no particular charm,” she continues, “but, there was also an extremely lively internationalism.” This “lively internationalism”, according to Laurin-Lam, is why so many artists travelled to Albissola. Artists who visited could devote themselves fully to all forms of experimentation with ceramics. Artists “from all over the world would come back to year after year, [...] stop off to spend a few days in Albissola for the ceramics which they could [...] have fired and ready for delivery on their way back from their Italian jaunt. Such organisation: it was perfect!”³⁸⁵

Furthermore, within this fruitful exchange, a sort of bartering took shape - something which was ‘in’ at the time. “Quite easily”, Laurin-Lam writes, “one could, in return for a painting or a piece of ceramic, rent a room or an apartment. You could also, over a short period, ply your wares at any number of little restaurants in Albissola. The visiting artists, often with a family in tow, could afford a relatively cheap holiday near the beach and, at the same time, experiment with ceramics.” She compares the artistic fervour that took hold in Albissola during that time to the heydays of Montparnasse in Paris or the Village in New York,

³⁸⁴ Sims, *Wifredo Lam and the International Avant-Garde, 1923-1982*, 165.

³⁸⁵ Egger and Galerie Gmurzynska, *Fire Tongues*.

describing how the artistic scene was “not unlike Montparnasse in Paris, or The Village in New York: a toads’ chorus of artists, croaking away, day and night.”³⁸⁶

Thus, Lam was attracted to Albissola not only because of the ‘lively internationalism’ that had begun to take shape, but because it offered a community where families were also welcome. As the previous chapter highlighted, one of the reasons that the artist Piero Manzoni was so interested in travelling to Albissola was because he had experienced many family holidays there as a child. Likewise, as Eskil Lam describes, whilst enjoying family holidays in Albissola, his father encouraged him to visit the ceramics studio. Eskil recalls how his father would invite him to the San Giorgio factory:

“[Albissola] is where we came together as a family over the holidays...After a long day at the beach, I would often join up with him at the ceramics factory of San Giorgio, where he was still busy at work. I wound my way around the workbenches to find him and Poggi bent over a still damp plate or vase, encrusted with strange materials...There was no small anxiety involved in that long wait: the slow rise to temperatures of 1000C and the long cooling down process, discovering how the glazes had turned out or if anything had broken.”³⁸⁷

What Eskil and Lou Laurin-Lam’s accounts further illustrate is yet another development in Albissola’s artistic climate in this period. At the International Ceramics Meeting in 1954, Albissola as an artistic hub was made up of a collective of individual artists. Towards the end of the 1950s and into the early 60s, Albissola had transformed into a more generalised artistic community, attracting families and friends. In many ways, during this period, Albissola fulfilled Jorn’s vision that the artwork is a link in a social network rather than an alienated object where art met everyday life. Jorn’s understanding of art as a fundamental human expression of community, rather than an individualist statement, makes his approach newly relevant to the context of Albissola during this period.

When Lam initially arrived in 1957 at the San Giorgio in Albissola, he was encouraged by Jorn to explore ceramics as part of Lam’s interest in new media. This was however not the first time that Lam had experience in working with clay. In 1950, he was invited to work alongside ceramicists at the studio of Dr. Juan Rodriguez de la Cruz in the town of Santiago

³⁸⁶ Ibid.

³⁸⁷ Ibid., 26.

de las Vegas, Cuba. Lam's response to this experience was not positive, however, and he appeared to lack confidence, admitting that "I didn't feel very comfortable with this medium I couldn't dominate."³⁸⁸ In Albissola, then, despite being invited by Jorn to specifically work with ceramics, Lam was still resistant to clay as a material. Lam later declared that at this time he still "didn't feel at ease with the material."³⁸⁹ However, Jorn and Lam did collaborate on a few pieces. According to Lowrey-Stokes Sims, Lam anonymously participated in the construction of Jorn's *Large Relief*.³⁹⁰ One of the more concrete examples of their collaboration was a piece displayed at the Fire Tongues exhibition - an untitled vase from 1959 [Fig. 141]. Traditional in form, the vase is decorated with abstract, circular and linear patterns that have been incised into the surface. Bright blue, grey and white paint is applied in a spontaneous pattern –some of which appears to be fingerprint markings – the terracotta surface which has been bisque fired is left untreated.

The vase graphic quality – its emphasis on incision and pattern – this type of imagery is similar in style to the work Lam was making at this time. He was experimenting elsewhere with a gestural style comparable to that observed in his La brousse series of paintings. In 1958, Lam produced a suite of eight untitled colour lithographs which included several images from Lam's repertoire reinterpreted in this style, overlaid one another and brandishing miscellaneous marks, brushes and gestures. In these images, Lam exploits different line widths, overlapping imagery, various drawing techniques, and brilliant colour to achieve images of great visual dynamism."³⁹¹ An important point is that the lithograph plates were prepared in Albissola at the instigation of Jorn, who had them printed in Denmark. These images are visible in his much later ceramics.

It was not until ten years later that Lam turned to ceramics with serious ambition. Eskil Lam credits Jorn as being the reason that Lam turned to ceramics in the end, noting, "In my father's case", his commitment to ceramics, "did not happen from one day to the next and may never have happened if it had not been for the insistent encouragement of Asger Jorn." In the summer of 1975, two years after the death of Asger Jorn, Lam suddenly came to terms with his doubt about working in ceramics. Within the year, Lam produced over 200 works. As Eskil accounts, "It was no accident of fate that he had just completed several trips to

³⁸⁸ Ibid.

³⁸⁹ Ibid.

³⁹⁰ Sims, *Wifredo Lam and the International Avant-Garde, 1923-1982*, 204.

³⁹¹ Ibid., 199.

India. In india, he had seen how earth as a material enters into every aspect of life, from religion to architecture and where numerous potters, all of lower caste, work with a wide variety of regional traditions.”³⁹² Beginning in 1975, Lam frequented the Studio Ceramiche San Giorgio on a daily basis to work with Giovanni and Silvia Poggi and their assistants. This time the direct contact with the clay fascinated him and he let himself be entirely guided by the material. He once said that he would often spend sleepless nights in anticipation of the colors and surprises that awaited him after the firing process was complete. In the documentary film by Barbro Schultz Lundestam, Poggi describes how “Lam was capable of working for hours on end, squatting on the floor in front of the ceramic plate without getting tired.”³⁹³

The subject matter of these ceramics contain variations of the *femme cheval* – the horse-headed woman that appears repeatedly in Lam’s paintings throughout the 1950s, as well as birds, and marine life such as snails and fish local to Liguria.³⁹⁴ These images were presented on vessel forms, plates and dishes. Sometimes the forms are painted onto the surface of plates, on others they are incised with sections removed from the surface of the plate, and in still others the forms appear to have been modelled in full before being applied to a relief. To create these pieces, Lam worked in collaboration with ceramicists and artisans at the San Giorgio Factory, as well as the artist Giovanni Poggi – the artist who had assisted Lam with the making of his Large Relief. Poggi and his team would produce the basic forms, on to which Lam would then paint, splatter with glaze, scour, score, incise and remove and, as is evident in a photograph from the time, roll over the surface with found objects such as a

³⁹² ‘Wifredo Lam: The Albissola Years’.

³⁹³ Barbro Schultz Lundestam et al., *Poussière d’atomes: la céramique de Wifredo Lam*.

³⁹⁴ Sato P, ‘Wifredo Lam, the Shango Priestess, and the Femme Cheval’, *J. Int. Women’s Stud. Journal of International Women’s Studies* 17, no. 3 (2016): 91–101. “One of the clearest examples of Lam’s idiosyncratic, anti-colonial modernism is the femme cheval or horse-headed woman that figures prominently in his Cuban paintings and that counters Gauguin’s representations of the domesticatable racial, feminine Other. Indeed, it was through his iconic figure of the horse-headed woman that Lam used the modernist idioms of Cubism, Surrealism, and primitivism to affirm the dignity of Afro-Cuban women and to oppose the myth, propagated by Bougainville and reiterated by Loti and Gauguin, of exotic colonized women as existing to fulfill the sexual desires of the western male. As mentioned above, Lam’s self-stated intention for his Cuban paintings was to “disturb the dreams of the exploiters,” which for him were largely Americans who had turned Havana into a brothel; and although Lam sometimes referred to the figures in his Cuban paintings as “monsters”, much more than that, they were expressions of feminine dignity and revolt in the face of degradation.”

pinecone [Fig. 142]. Over the next three years, Lam continued making ceramics and even produced his own line of porcelain, which he exhibited in Albissola and at various art fairs.³⁹⁵

For Eskil, “the medium [clay] was an ideal material for expressing that unique, personal world we are so familiar with in [Lam’s] paintings and drawings.” He continues:

“No wonder the surrealists, situationsists and CoBrA group took to this medium with such enthusiasm. By its very nature, ceramic work offers the skilled artist a full range of play and experimentation, and no small amount of humility – for things break and fail constantly. But this ancient tradition is also what suited these artists’ thirst for dialogue, for expanding their horizons, for changing the stakes of their achievement. This is a medium that cannot be fully dominated and it takes a certain trust, I imagine, to let oneself go and enjoy it.”

For Lam, then, like previous artists before him, what was so attractive about clay was its spontaneity and expressive qualities, but its relationship to history, tradition and its potential to break. As Eskil asks, “how could he resist getting his hands in clay, humanity’s most ancient, shall we say, “primitive” art form?”

To this day, Lam is recognised as a vital part of the avant-garde artist production in Albissola which flourished during the 1950s and 60s. Following on from Lucio Fontana (1952) and Asger Jorn (1959), Lam was made an honorary citizen of Albissola in 2003. In this year, Albissola Council dedicated a public square to be made in Lam’s name. One of Lam’s most famous paintings *The Jungle* (1943) was reimaged in ceramic mosaic, covering the floor and fountain of the square [Fig. 143].

The Artists’ Promenade

By the early 1960s, Albissola’s network of international artists had reached its peak. For this reason two members of Albissola’s Council, Adolfo Testa and the artist Aligi Sassu, decided to create a new artwork that would commemorate Albissola’s central role in the production of

³⁹⁵ Wifredo Lam and Mercedes Viale Ferrero, *Servizi in porcellana decorati da Wifredo Lam*. (Torino: Edizioni d’arte Fratelli Pozzo, 1970); Sims, *Wifredo Lam and the International Avant-Garde, 1923-1982*, 204–5; ‘Wifredo Lam (Cuban 1902-1982) , Dinner Service Set’, accessed 24 May 2017, http://www.christies.com/lotfinder/lot_details.aspx?intObjectID=5793786.

avant-garde ceramics production. *Il Passeggiata degli artisti* (The Artists' Promenade) was conceived in 1960. Over a period of three years, the Council collected twenty designs and reproduced the artists' work forming an art walkway of one hundred and eighty metres, consisting of thousands of mosaic tesserae, painted paving stones and free-standing sculptures by artists and ceramic reliefs. For Giovanni Poggi, owner of the San Giorgio Factory, the promenade "was not just street furniture but a real and proper open museum... anyone who walks over it will be able to recognise famous works of art from all over the world."³⁹⁶ The promenade was officially inaugurated in Albissola on 10th August in 1963, but since then it continues to grow with more artists being added each year.

To date the promenade has received no scholarly attention. Yet it is important because it shows that the town of Albissola, and the artists and people who lived there, recognised it as a centre for avant-garde production. Recently, Albissola's city council produced a document containing all of the original artists' contributions, including digitised aerial designs of each artist's square with descriptions of their work [Fig. 144, 145, 146]. This chapter will not go into the detail of each design, however one in particular is worth highlighting – Lucio Fontana's *Concetto spaziale (Spatial concept)* (1963).

Fontana's contribution to the promenade is a rectangular mosaic design consisting of five light blue spheres on a white tiled background [Fig. 147]. The composition, according to Albissola Council, "epitomizes the artists spatial concept" and includes three bronze copies of *Natures* from 1959-60 – the originals can be found at the Museum of Modern Art in New York [Fig. 148]. Fontana's *Nature* consist of sculptures in clay with a light glaze and sculptures in bronze (cast from the original clay). According to the Fondazione Fontana, the *Nature* series were first conceived and created during the summers spent at Albissola and made by creating large balls of clay and piercing them with a large metal rod – a photograph shows Fontana in the process of making these sculptures by piercing them with a large metal rod [Fig. 149].³⁹⁷

³⁹⁶ Italia Slow Tour, *The artists' promenade of Albissola* | *Italia Slow Tour*, accessed 31 May 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xY6eZ2iTXZI>.

³⁹⁷ 'Lucio Fontana's Nature', 13 May 2017, <http://www.fondazioneeluciofontana.it/index.php/en/nature-sculptures>.

Sarah Whitfield describes Nature as rich in associations, recalling both “giant bods that promise new life to lumps of interplanetary debris carrying signs of extinction...” Whitfield continues:

“When he made Nature he had been thinking of the ‘atrocious unnerving silence’ that awaited the first astronauts in space. The spheres, he said, stood for a living sign of man’s presence: ‘were these not the solid shapes that bore signs of wanting to make inert matter come alive?’ Many of these associations are violent, and many relate to the wound: to stab wounds, gunshot wounds, the gaping wounds left by explosives, the deep pocket of the gash.”³⁹⁸

It is worth pointing out that the hole also had a practical implication – it would have stopped these balls of clay from exploding in the kiln, and therefore are necessary to the form and success of the work. Outside the Mazzotti Factory are a number of these ball shapes painted white with many holes, similar to Fontana’s nature openings. perforated ceramic balls can be found in numbers in the gardens outside the Mazzotti Factory [Fig. 150]. He was exploring this process and method before deciding to take it up on a larger scale.

Why did Fontana want *Nature* to symbolise his presence in Albissola? Whether it was because they were the works he was engaged in at this time, and therefore, more recognizable to artists and critics, or, whether it had a more profound symbolic meaning, is unclear. For example, in the same year that they were installed on the promenade, some more *Nature* sculptures were exhibited at the Galleria dell’Ariete in 1963, presented this time in the middle of the room, surrounded by his eggs/ovals in green, pink, and gold.³⁹⁹ What is clear however is that the fact that they are here on permanent display in Albissola’s beachfront is symbolic. Not only does it account for Fontana’s reverence for Albissola, but it was a significant place for his artistic practice which began three decades earlier. By placing these sculptures in this square commemorating his presence in Albissola, Fontana returns us to the first works he made at the Mazzotti Factory in 1936, Lions grès forms – to make sculpture that seemed to be in throes of geological change, to make the clay reverberate with the great creakings of an earthquake.

³⁹⁸ Whitfield and Hayward Gallery (London), *Lucio Fontana*, 36.

³⁹⁹ Gottschaller and Khandekar, *Lucio Fontana*, 111.

The *Artist's Walk* is a unique example of collective urban artwork, conceived to be walked upon in a context of daily and original use of public art. Walking on these coloured mosaics, you will come across other important artworks by artists such as Leoncillo, Sergio Dangelo, Ansgar Elde, Carlos Carlé and Ignazio Moncada. Furthermore, as an urban artwork which encourages the act of walking along Albissola's sea front, stumbling across artworks, it evokes the Situationist concept of *dérive*, "a game in which urban space is reclaimed through wanderings coordinated by chance."⁴⁰⁰ Poggi describes the walk as evoking a collective experience: "This promenade allows us to discover how man has been able to get one step ahead of nature and to add something beautiful and concrete to it all for our collective benefit."⁴⁰¹

In 2005 the Artists' Promenade was extended with four new mosaics by Giorgio Bonelli, Aurelio Caminati, Edoardo Arroyo, and Guy de Rougemont. These last two artists did also two projects of urban design: the blue and white bench with the A of Albissola (Arroyo), and the colour plans for the street lights (Rougemont). In 1990 and 2005, as an homage to the two ceramicists and brothers Tullio d'Albisola (Mazzotti) and Torido Mazzotti, two mosaics made of river stones ("risseu" technique) completed the Promenade in the square devoted to Tullio d'Albisola.

This chapter has demonstrated that once again Albissola was a centre of avant-garde art production between the years 1957 and 1963. During this period, artistic activity centred primarily on the artist Asger Jorn, who was also a founding member of the avant-garde group Situationist International at this time. This chapter has argued that Jorn appropriated key Situationist concepts in the construction and design of his home, Villa Jorn - evidence that Jorn considered Albissola an important place not only for his own artistic practice during this period, but also as a site of Situationist activity. This chapter has also illustrated that Jorn's *Large Relief* must be considered as part of Jorn's wider vision for Århus Statsgymnasium to integrate art, architecture and modern lifestyle. Jorn's chaotic approach to ceramic form in this relief directly opposed the aims of Functionalist architecture. His expression was one of personal creation in a social context to produce a work that welcomed diverse interpretations, as opposed to individual creation aimed at a standardised collective reception. Jorn's relief is can therefore be interpreted as the public culmination of his reaction against Functionalist

⁴⁰⁰ Kurczynski and Jorn, *The Art and Politics of Asger Jorn*, 3.

⁴⁰¹ Italia Slow Tour, *The artists' promenade of Albissola | Italia Slow Tour*.

architecture, an attempt to give form to the irrational and unpredictable needs that Functionalists, as Jorn understood, often overlooked. As ceramics is a much more materially intense medium than painting, with its intimate link to the pleasure and freedom of moulding clay by hand, it is no wonder that Jorn used it to produce a work as far from notions of order, industrial, and premeditation as the material could go. Consequently, any future scholarship on Jorn's relief cannot isolate it from its architectural setting. This clearly shows that at this time Albissola was not only a hub for ceramic art production, but was a central place in Jorn's understanding of the inherent relationship between art and architecture, and more specifically, the relationship between handmade and industrial modes of artistic production.

In the case of Wifredo Lam, this chapter has demonstrated that artists were still making the journey to Albissola. Lam in particular was drawn specifically to Albissola because of its similarities to his home in Cuba, suggesting that artists travelled to Albissola not only for its thriving artistic scene and experimental approach to ceramics production, but because it offered artists a comfortable, affordable and relaxed environment to combine artistic production and family living, and why, as his wife declared, "this is why artists come back again and again to Albissola."⁴⁰²

An analysis of Fontana's contributions to Albissola's *Artist's Walk* has shown how the relationship between ceramic art and Albissola's urban environment was a central part of Albissola's identity as a centre for avant-garde artistic activity. As more artists continue to be added to the walk, it shows that Albissola is still recognised as a place where artistic inspiration and ceramics production come together.

⁴⁰² Egger and Galerie Gmurzynska, *Fire Tongues*.

CONCLUSION

The fundamental aim of this thesis has been to demonstrate that Albissola was a major centre of avant-garde art production between the years 1929 and 1963. To this end, the four preceding chapters have examined Albissola's artistic production in four very different arenas, examining in each case how individual artists and movements experimented with clay in ways that challenged the traditional role and status of ceramics.

By examining Albissola's most productive periods of artistic activity, four distinct strands of artistic production have been identified. These are when Albissola was established as a centre for Futurist ceramics production during the 1930s and, at the same time, was the place where Lucio Fontana created his earliest ceramics; when it became a post-war hub for Fontana and Agenore Fabbri, both of whom produced some of the most evocative ceramics of this era by inciting religious and classical forms; a place that was central to Asger Jorn's vision of creating a collective artistic community, attracting some of the most influential artists of this era including Roberto Sebastian Matta and Piero Manzoni; and, finally, an important part of Asger Jorn's artistic production in the 1950s and 1960s, and a place which inspired Wifredo Lam to produce an extensive body of ceramics on his return to Albissola in the late 1970s.

This thesis has not only identified periods of important artistic activity in Albissola, and therefore illustrated that it was a centre for avant-garde art production, but has also examined how the relationship between the handmade and industrial played an integral role in the making and exhibiting of each artists' work. In the work of the futurists for example, the relationship between hand-making ceramics and industrial processes was effectively played out through their attempts to incorporate new industrialised methods of making and decorating ceramics, such as the spray gun. Their efforts to make ceramics more 'modern' and appeal to a mass-market were however largely stifled by the fact that they had to continue hand-painting and modelling their ceramics to create truly new and unique forms that adhered to Futurist aesthetic principles. Unlike the futurists, Jorn believed that making art by hand could be unified with industry to reintroduce craftsmanship, skill and authenticity into, as he saw it, a mass-produced, impersonal society. Jorn's exhibition of ceramics at the X Milan Triennale in 1954 (works that were created during the International Ceramics Meeting by artists from CoBrA, the Nuclearists and Spatialism) was a deliberate attempt to integrate handmade objects into an exhibition devoted to the development of Italian art, design and industry.

This thesis has explored the reasons why Albissola was attractive for so many artists during the twentieth century. For the Futurists, in particular F.T. Marinetti and Tullio d'Albisola, Albissola was heralded as “the ceramic capital of Italy” and symbolised all that they hoped to achieve in their artistic endeavours. Their bid to “overthrow” the Mazzotti Factory’s old and traditional Italian ceramics production and replace it with ceramics that were “futuristic, violent and machine-inspired” was successful in that they created new ceramic forms that were not traditional ‘Savona Antica’. The fact that Lucio Fontana was inspired by the Futurists to travel to the Mazzotti Factory and create his own ceramics demonstrates that both played an instrumental role in transforming Albissola into a centre for avant-garde ceramics.

After the war, Albissola once again became synonymous with avant-garde art when Lucio Fontana and Agenore Fabbri travelled between their shared studio in Milan to the Mazzotti Factory in Albissola to create new work. Between 1946 and 1951, both artists worked figuratively and expressively with clay, drawing upon classical and religious symbolism to engage with Italy’s post-war artistic and cultural regeneration. Fontana was commissioned by the influential artist and designer Giò Ponti to create a series of five ceramic panels to decorate the interior of the Conte Grande as part of Ponti’s effort to re-establish Italy’s post-war art and design after the war. Both Fontana and Fabbri directly engaged with Italy’s post-war art and design world during this period and used Albissola as a base to create and distribute their ceramics.

In 1954, Albissola became a hub of “lively internationalism” when Asger Jorn organised the International Ceramics Meeting. Lou Laurin-Lam’s account of Albissola at this time describes why it was such an attractive place for artists, declaring that its sense of ‘internationalism’ was the key to its success. She recalls how “an extremely lively internationalism” is what characterised the artistic climate of Albissola during these years, noting that it was a specific place where “artists from all over the world would come back to year after year. Such organisation: it was perfect!” The International Ceramics Meeting attracted a number of influential artists, critics and theorists to Albissola, therefore opening up the town to an international platform. During this period, artists travelled to Albissola to be a part of this international community and they created ceramics which reflected the many different international networks in Albissola.

Asger Jorn considered Albissola his home during the late 1950s and early 1960s. Whilst this period of Jorn's artistic life has had some scholarly attention, the majority of scholarship has neglected Albissola as a key place where his artistic oeuvre developed. The role of Albissola in Jorn's life is overshadowed by his other artistic activity and practice and his essentially nomadic lifestyle. But Albissola was fundamental to the development of Jorn's artistic production and career. Jorn's experimentation with ceramics in Albissola was inextricably linked to many of his theoretical positions on materiality, folk art, collectivity and communal artistic expression in the arts. What this thesis has demonstrated is that Albissola cannot be ignored in any new discussion surrounding Jorn's artistic activity from this period.

One of the most important questions this thesis has explored is why artists were so attracted to clay as an artistic material. Whilst the attractive qualities of clay were explored more generally in the introduction to this thesis, each chapter has demonstrated that spontaneity was a common thread amongst all artists and movements in Albissola. More specifically, it was the attitudes of the people who worked at the factories in Albissola – Tullio d'Albisola at the Mazzotti Factory and Giovanni Poggi at the San Giorgio – which encouraged a spontaneous, experimental way of working with clay. The flexibility that clay offered to all of the artists discussed in this thesis produced a variety of ceramic forms. For the Futurists, clay stimulated a tactile response, yet it could also be moulded into machine parts, aerodynamic sculptures, and even function as a conductor and resistant material. Fontana used clay to explore form and colour, experimenting at first with abstract forms which 'disintegrated' into the ground, before exploring some of the most iconic symbols in Christianity. Arguably, for Fontana, clay could be a performative material – demonstrated in his *bravura* technique when modelling clay. For Jorn, clay could evoke an individual, "autonomous" artistic expression and, in its production into ceramic form, could also unite artists together in a collective capacity.

What was most attractive to artists working with clay in Albissola - the unpredictable, spontaneous and expressive qualities of the medium meant that artists were engaging with clay in ways that were unconventional for the time. Artists were not interested in engaging with ceramics in a traditional capacity, as it had been dealt with in previous and concurrent decades in purely decorative, ornamental and mass-marketed terms. Rather, artists engaged with clay and ceramics as if the two were another medium such as paint, sculpture or architecture. Their experiments in Albissola pushed the boundaries of what was considered appropriate for clay during this period – literally in terms of scale and form, but also in terms

of aesthetic and theoretical value – by undermining debates in Modernism concerning the lower status of touch in artistic production. In other words, artists in Albissola understood ceramics' artistic merit not in relation to its function or decorative purpose, but in terms of its ability to be conceptual, expressive and malleable, just like any other art form.

This thesis has contributed to scholarship on the history of ceramics, design and material culture in the twentieth century. It contributes to the field of art history by demonstrating how artists explored ceramics as an art form when clay was traditionally condemned as a second-class material. In Albissola, ceramics was an art form appreciated for its multi-disciplinary medium that could bridge and simultaneously dissolve the standard facets of art and design.

This thesis has demonstrated that the success of Albissola's internationalism, indeed, one the most important factors integral to how Albissola became a centre for avant-garde production was due to the activity of its three main protagonists: Tullio d'Albisola, Lucio Fontana and Asger Jorn. These three figures were central to Albissola's development as an avant-garde production site in their encouragement of artists to visit; Tullio to the Futurists, Fontana to Enrico Baj and Piero Manzoni, and Asger Jorn to the exponents of CoBrA and the other attendees of the International Ceramics Meeting in 1954. Most scholarship on Jorn and Fontana not only neglects the central role that both of these figures took in shaping Albissola into a centre for avant-garde art, but also ignores the fact that both artists championed the status of ceramics as fine art. Furthermore, in comparison to the scholarship surrounding Jorn and Fontana as influential artists, there is an overwhelming lack of scholarship on Tullio d'Albisola, who was responsible for opening up Albissola to the Futurists and the avant-garde world. This thesis argues that the life and work of Tullio d'Albisola deserves more attention in scholarship, specifically in terms of the role that Tullio had in shaping art in Italy during the early twentieth century.

The research that this thesis has done is important because it firmly illustrates that Albissola was a central place of avant-garde ceramics production during the twentieth century, yet it has been overwhelmingly ignored and neglected in scholarship on ceramics and in art history in general. This thesis has demonstrated that Albissola played an important role in many of the artists' lives who visited the town during this thirty-year period. The broader implications of this research, therefore, are that Albissola cannot be ignored in any future scholarship or exhibitions which focus on the artists and movements cited in this thesis, nor any future scholarship which examine ceramics as art or craft practice in the twentieth century. Without

an understanding of the ways in which Albissola and its ceramics production was integral to artists' practices during this period, the history of twentieth century ceramics remains fragmentary.

In recent years, Albissola has received funding from Savona Municipality to make its art history and ceramics production more accessible to the public. In 2015, the Mazzotti Factory was renovated to include a new ceramics studio for artists and a museum dedicated to the archive of Tullio d'Albisola. Following on from the 2003 Biennale of Ceramics in Contemporary Art, in which Albissola was host, each year in July there is a festival of ceramics which opens up local ceramics studios and ateliers to the public. The San Giorgio is still a working studio and its owner Giovanni Poggi continues to produce work and display exhibitions about Asger Jorn and Wifredo Lam. Albissola's central museum, Museo civico d'Arte contemporanea, has a permanent exhibition of ceramics by Fontana and Jorn. It is here that one can find the dazzling ceramic reliefs which Fontana made for Giò Ponti's Conte Grande project on display **[Fig. 151]**. To this day, Albissola is home to a thriving, artistic community which clearly celebrates its roots in both traditional ceramics and avant-garde artistic production.

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