

ENRICO R. COMI

ARCHAIC CONTEMPORARY

with Tony Cragg Mario Merz Bill Woodrow in the Land of the Samnites



MUSEO DEL SANNIO-BENEVENTO

THE BRITISH COUNCIL

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3 september - 8 october 1983

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An exhibition in the Land of the Samnites

When in mid-May, the civic authorities of Benevento first approached me with an invitation to draw up plans for an exhibition for their cultural month in September, I was quick to sense that this was an opportunity for doing something out of the ordinary.

Benevento, with the special magic of its quiet corners, its peacefulness and timelessness, its living architecture and archaism, could help us to communicate with the art of an earlier period, by offering us a new reading of certain tendencies in contemporary art, which found expression in archaism, fundamentalism and a return to our origins.

The *Museo del Sannio*, with its fantastic collection of top quality Graeco-Roman and Samnite works, had the effect of setting my imagination on fire. I seemed to have been waiting for years for this opportunity which was suddenly presented, and it felt as if I had been working for as long as I could recall on the realisation of this project.

By the end of May, I was already in a position to submit a detailed proposal for the exhibition to be realised in the Cloisters of *Santa Sofia* and the main rooms of the *Museo del Sannio*. Another ten days passed before I was given the official go-ahead. I was faced, by now, with an almost impossible series of deadlines, but set to work in a spirit of great enthusiasm.

Given the context, I considered that the exhibition might also serve, not altogether fortuitously, to prepare the ground for an examination of a number of wider issues; hence the problem of evaluating the various alternatives. As was to be expected, I found that there was no simple solution, in view of the fact that there is an archaistic tendency in much contemporary art and that the quest for primary meaning and primordial emotions, the rediscovery of magic, and the cult of the archaic are all characteristic of the work of those artists who, perhaps, most adequately express the spirit of our age...

I eventually narrowed down the choice to three highly significant contemporary artists, Tony Cragg, Mario Merz and Bill Woodrow, since their work showed great vitality and diversity and immediately suggested interesting comparisons with the works in the *Museo del Sannio*.

Tony Cragg, Mario Merz and Bill Woodrow eagerly responded to the proposal and their enthusiasm grew, when they were given the opportunity of seeing the Graeco-Roman and Samnite sculptures of the *Museo del Sannio* at first hand, and taking in the magical atmosphere of the Cloisters of *Santa Sofia*.

The exhibition does not aim at a confrontation between the art of to-day and that of yesterday; there is no competition and there are no battles or encounters. My sole objective has been to try and establish a relationship between works belonging to different historical and cultural backgrounds and to create the

conditions in which it may be possible for the languages of three, very different, contemporary artists to work on each other and interact with the works in the *Museo del Sannio*. Thus, the exhibition *Archaic Contemporary* was planned, and the work of the individual artists was conceived and executed, in the specific context and atmosphere of Benevento and the *Museo del Sannio*.

There is nothing arbitrary about placing the works by Tony Cragg, Mario Merz and Bill Woodrow in relation to the Graeco-Roman and Samnite sculpture. First, a rapport* had to be established, and this was then continuously developed and exploited, at all stages of the process.

I created this kind of exhibition, because it was suggested by the context and layout of the *Museo del Sannio*. The artists accepted the challenge, because they were extremely interested by the idea of placing their work in relation to the Graeco-Roman and Samnite sculpture.

This is the first time that an exhibition of this nature has attempted to establish a contextual relationship between artistic languages of such diversity. It is probably most important that we should go further in this direction, if we are to arrive at a better understanding of art and its different languages; in this way, contemporary art can serve as an instrument for enhancing our awareness of the value of institutions

* «feeling» in the original Italian.

such as the *Museo del Sannio*, which are little known and virtually neglected. It is incredible, and absurd, that such beautiful and important institutions, with all their cultural and artistic wealth, should be prevented from playing a more active part in our cultural life.

The very diversity exemplified by the splendid architecture of the Cloisters of *Santa Sofia* and the Graeco-Roman and Samnite sculpture in the Museum is evidence of their priceless artistic archaeological and anthropological value. The Cloisters of *Santa Sofia* offer a rich storehouse of associations, with their extraordinary architectonic rhythms, magical spaces and varied columns and capitals, each one of which is a true work of art and a jewel of indescribable beauty; they refer back to the past, at the same time as recalling the present and projecting into the future.

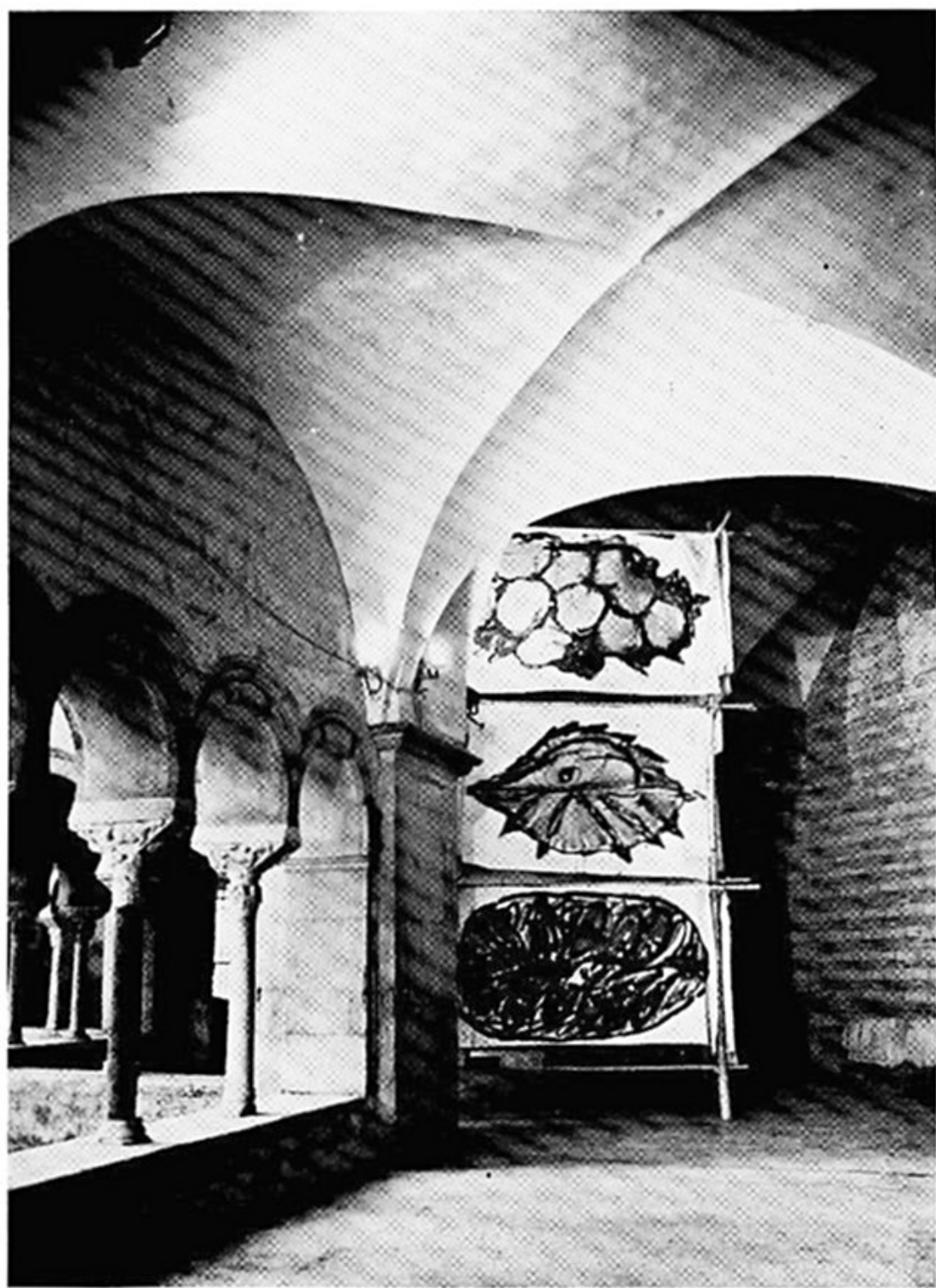
The material on display in the *Museo del Sannio* is rich in the one «quality» which distinguishes man as a cultural being: diversity. Everything that is beautiful, interesting, significant, fantastic, magical, and original in diversity is unrepeatable and the greater the differences, the more exciting and stimulating they are.

Given the widespread return to archaic values in all contemporary art and culture and the extreme, not to say remarkable, contemporary relevance of these archaising tendencies, this exhibition might come to be seen as a landmark and a pointer to the future.

When we look at the Graeco-Roman and Samnite works in the *Museo del Sannio*, we do not see, or imagine, them as works of thousands of years ago...

Some of these pieces, especially a group of small, spare, expressive heads of 2,000-3,000 years ago, could equally well have been made today or in 2,000 years' time and share, with the best contemporary art, an unchanging ability to express the spirit and the *anima* of living beings, situations, surroundings and objects.

Enrico R. Comi



Mario Merz, *Il castello di foglie*, Museo del Sannio, Benevento

ARCHAIC CONTEMPORARY

by Enrico R. Comi.

The two terms in the title, Archaic Contemporary, which are played off against each other, indicate two clearly defined approaches. One of these takes the form of an unrelenting search for our origins, in an attempt to discover *who we are* and *where we have come from*. This is expressed in all branches of culture and, especially, in the most symbolic language of all, art - that is to say, in all the arts, from painting to music, the theatre, cinema, literature and especially poetry, dance and all the other forms of expression which constitute language. The other approach, which has been favoured by some exceptionally important archaeological discoveries and by the notable progress made in the field of ethnology, consists in exploring the relationship between the arts and artefacts of the past and of the present and positing an awareness of our ancestral past, as the basis for an understanding of our present-day existence.

It is the implications and ramifications of all this, and a personal belief in the power of these interrelationships to unleash creative and liberating forces, which have impelled me to attempt this kind of approach to the artistic languages of historical and cultural periods of such diversity and distance from each other, in time.

Is there any possible *rapprochement* between the artistic languages of historical and cultural environments which are so separate and diverse? - only if we

approach the question without arrogance, with due respect and humility, and without attempting to force the issue or make qualitative comparisons. This must be in the knowledge that, for all that we are dealing with works from the past and present, a relationship cannot be established between works which have something to say and works which have had something to say, i.e. between living and dead works, but only between works which put us in touch with the present, at the same time as referring back to the past and projecting into the future.

It is only possible to establish a *rapport* between works of the past and the present in a natural, unmechanistic way. Clearly, it would not be possible, in every case, to establish a *rapport* between any kind of work of the past and any kind of work of the present.

What brings about this *rapport* between the art of the past and that of the present? What enables the languages of the art of the past to mingle with the language of contemporary art? Above all, the creative value of a work of art. Creativity is immune from the conditioning of time and space, and it is this immunity from conditioning which gives licence to communication and interpretation. Thus, it gives currency and relevance to situations far removed from our own.

In essence, we can say that only the creative value of a work enables it to communicate with us, and this applies to all art, of all period, from the Greeks and Romans to the Etruscans, Samnites, Egyptians, Maya, Aztecs and all other civilisations.

Once in existence the work of art acquires a life of its own, which is separable from the context and historical moment in which it was created.

The work of art is born in a specific context, but transcends this context, because the creative act eludes the control of the artist. If the artist had complete control over the creative process, his work would not be able to survive...

This is why works of earlier periods, from the Neolithic Age to the present, still have something to say to us. It is for this reason, too, that the works of contemporary artists, like those of the artists of the past, will also have something to say to us in the future and will be able to lead us back to our very origins, so that we shall be able to relive our ancestral past. Moreover, this accounts for the fact that works belonging to different contexts still have something to communicate, when we abstract the dimension of time and space. It is all a question of seeing if the works are creative, or not. If they are, a *rapport* can be established and communication is possible.

It is unimaginative, not to say arbitrary, to think of antique, classical, modern and contemporary art as all belonging to separate categories, since the idea that different languages can be hived off into separate, watertight compartments does not correspond to the reality of things. Art opens up the ghettos. It would be strange, to say the least, if in the historical becoming, it were condemned by our own inertia and mental idleness to end in museums-mausoleums increasingly resembling ghettos.

A work of art at its inception, is either creative and will remain so, or is not, and will never become so. Once it has come into existence, however, its creative value is such that it may be placed in any context and will, quite naturally, have the power of communicating its own intrinsic values.

The tendency of contemporary art, not so much to produce representative works as to imbue objects with a significance which is inherent to life, nature and the human condition, is characteristic of the work of Tony Cragg, Mario Merz and Bill Woodrow.

These three have not the slightest intention of representing any object, person or situation in their work, in a concrete or specific manner. Even when their works seem unable to retreat behind appearances they generally tend not to represent anything specific, but to explore the essence of things. What is characteristic of works such as these? - above all, a tendency of the object to go beyond the limits of functionality and mere appearances. The object comes to represent, not so much a thing, a person or a situation, as an inner attitude, which can relate to its context - space, time, things, people - and thus acquire existential significance for our individual and collective human existence.

Mario Merz is one of the protagonists of the 60's, whereas Bill Woodrow and Tony Cragg belong to the end of the 70's and early 80's, but all three are among the most significant and interesting of today's artists, because over and above their undoubted histo-

rical importance, they represent a number of vital tendencies in contemporary art, such as the return to origins, forays into the realm of magic, the risk of adventure, in opening up new frontiers, and a conception of society in which men are reconciled with themselves and their fellows and harmony is established between mankind and other creatures and things, nature and life.

These three artists recycle objects and make uninhibited use of them, but they do not produce only sculpture or painting; they achieve a synthesis of the visual arts, by means of a variety of techniques, used separately or in combination.

Clearly, their attitude to their materials is completely different from what it might have been when there was far less freedom, in the first half of this century. The same is true of the various techniques which they employ; these artists are not concerned with choosing their materials with an eye to exploiting their technical properties, to express a certain idea, theory or point of view.

There is no doubt that it is due largely to the liberating and profoundly innovative conceptions of *arte povera* that today's artists are able to make free and uninhibited use of the most diverse, unusual and even commonplace materials and the most unconventional and unprecedented combinations of technique, with the result that their language has gained in both conciseness and immediacy. It was *arte povera*, in the 1960's, which had made *tabula rasa* of everything which it knew to be old, static, sclerotic, amorphous, decadent, stifling and paralytic.

Merz and the artists of his generation made a radical break with the past, but they did not wish to create a total caesura. Their chief concern was to gain the necessary distance from the recent past, by resolutely turning their backs on what, for them, was nothing but tautology and fantasma...

This was a decaying world, with which they had to create a traumatic rupture, if they wanted to find a way forward. There could be no temporising or mediation; a choice had to be made between the malignant, lethal, soporific quiescence of continuity and the risk of the void and the abyss, of the leap into the dark, full of danger, but also of hope. Desperation alone could provide the courage to draw a deep breath, take a run and a jump, and fly... without ever stopping, turning or pausing to breathe, before alighting on the opposite shore, where language is purified, regenerated and transposed into a new key. Only later, after thorough reinvigoration, would it become possible to turn and look back...

Contrary to a widely held, but superficial belief, the use of ordinary materials is not the only distinctive feature of *arte povera*. *Arte povera* signifies a new and liberating attitude towards materials, context, technique and language; it represents energy, concentration, a desire to *confront* obstacles and to *overcome* them, a conscious decision to risk the Hell of vital, creative uncertainty, in preference to the paralyzing uncertainties of Paradise.

With *arte povera*, a page was turned in the history of Art...

Arte povera, together with conceptual art, land art, minimal art, body art and the videotape, made a de-

cisive contribution to the liberation of art from the arid and sterile linguistic modes of the first half of this century, whose vitality had been expended on the drama, poetry, tragedy and existential *Angst* of the period and played out in the unmitigated decadence and decay of the 1950's.

The 1960's were the years of the consumer society, the wars in Vietnam and the Middle East, the liberation movements, the French May, the Prague Spring, the student revolt and the struggles of the workers and the trade-unions... But they were also the years of the Beatles, the radical changes in social behaviour and man's journey into space.

They were a laboratory of life, in which fear most commonly found expression in hope, and only rarely in anguish. In the end, the headlong impetus swept everything with it, including the agony of some of the most devastating and disturbing tragedies in living memory and in the history of mankind.

Arte povera was the natural offspring of this context - not its slave. It was born into this context, but reacted against it, gave voice to this context, but transcended its limitations.

What is the background of Tony Cragg, Bill Woodrow and those of their generation of the end of the 70's and the beginning of the 80's? They do not, in fact, make a break with the past. They not only make use of the positive aspects of what was of great relevance to them in *arte povera*, conceptual art, minimal art, body art and video art, but increasingly seek inspiration in the past and especially the most

distance past, in the sources and origins of humanculture and civilisation. At bottom, this is what we mean by the search for identity - returnig to our own past and our own ancestral existence.

In the case of Tony Cragg and Bill Woodrow, we should exercise a degree of caution, in making comparisons with the work of previous decades, especially the 50's and 60's. This is because they use objects in a straightforward way, for their clear metaphoric potential, whereas the artists of an earlier generation tended, in a sense, to modify objects, as a means of giving them resonance. We should be still more wary of comparisons with Pop art, since these artists certainly do not share the same attitudes and the most that they may have in common is their use of similar materials.

Pop art is the sublimation of a given context. The Pop artist takes this context, both as his frame of reference and his point of departure, and goes on to expose all its positive and negative features. Similarly, Tony Cragg and Bill Woodrow are working within the context of the machine age, which has been cursed by so many and accused of so much, but they transcend this context and show the way to a new civilisation. They are attempting, in short, to make a qualitative leap... Their handling of the object is totally different from that of earlier decades. Where, previously, there had been an interaction with the object which made it seem more immanent, more physical, perhaps, and more prehensile and tactile, and where the object effectively provided the evidence of its own existence, we now find that it is called upon

to give evidence for the impending transformation of society and the need for the big step forward... Previously, it had merely represented the sublimation of a given society, at a given time, whereas it has now become an instrument for transforming that society. In this sense, the object comes to represent a departure from a pre-determined context and progress towards something different - something which is not any thing, in fact, but a plan and a design for change, and certainly no sterile or empty plan...

This something which starts as a plan, in which our participation is implicit, also implies a degree of emotional involvement. It is something which is capable of generating objects from other objects, situations and relationships from other situations and other relationships. It exposes another facet of the object and this, too, is an interesting factor. It is born of a certain finality and, in this sense, setting out from the here and now and advancing towards a there which already exists as a future design, succeeds, through the release of energy and changes of rhythm at the creative level, in generating the kind of poetry of suspense which arises from a dramatic confrontation between things which are destined to compose their differences.

Tony Cragg and Bill Woodrow behave as people who are anxious to be constructive and not flee from reality. They acknowledge the existence of a certain reality and all they have to do is examine it, in order to know what to do.

Flight would be the easiest, most simplistic and least demanding solution... As artists they find them-

selves in a certain kind of society, propose different alternatives and a different purpose to the kind of reality that is at hand and, in so doing, succeed in transforming that reality. This has ethical and moral implications. The aesthetic force of their work derives from precisely this attitude. Their critical stance does not amount to a rejection of the society in which they live. Society itself provides them with the elements that they need, to work for its renewal. These elements serve as a basis for launching out in new directions. These artists, when they are compelled to destroy, destroy not for the sake of destroying, but in order to construct. Here, nihilism in art becomes a positive virtue.

Mario Merz, with his ability to capture the spirit of the age and the essence of things, achieves in 20 years' work, from the 1960's to the 80's, a perfect synthesis of this attitude, which we can discern, not only in the visual arts, but in all forms of artistic language and all the most lively expressions of contemporary culture.

This is not negation for negation's sake or a manifestation of the nihilistic tendency, which is prevalent in contemporary society, to destroy, for the sake of destroying or of another, equally common, tendency to take refuge in an aimless, complacent narcissism. These artists have no desire to sever their connections with the past and present, but are impelled to put all their energy into working for a more humane society, in the future. They see this as a most important way of preserving their identity, since we are unable to say who we are, if we sever our close links with the past and present.

Tony Cragg and Bill Woodrow treat contemporary artefacts in a spirit, not of rejection, but of critical re-appraisal. They select objects and artefacts which have frequently been abandoned or discarded and handle them, treat them and put them together in such a way that we are practically obliged, to all contents and purpose, to revise our views on society. This does not, therefore, represent a complete dismissal of contemporary civilisation and it has nothing to do with preconceived ideas about technological society, any more than it is the expression of a desire to return to the cave. Rather, it is an attempt to ensure that the technological revolution goes hand in hand with the development of a culture capable of encouraging technology and making use of all its positive aspects, to further the notion of a civilisation which places much greater emphasis than ever before on life, nature and humanity. Tony Cragg and Bill Woodrow are both attempting, in their work, to make the transition from one kind of civilisation to another, by transforming and transmuting materials (whether by conceptual or physical means) and throwing all their sensibility and skill into the task of discovering a new, human dimension. They always succeed in achieving a sense of liberation from the products of the machine age. There is a clear direction to their attempts to get the better of technological society. They are not making a leap in the dark, but attempting to transform society with their eyes open and their feet firmly planted on the ground.

What we are speaking of here is an acceptance of technological civilisation as the basis for transformation

and change. Our present existence and past experience provide a convenient point of departure, but there is no room either for complacency about the past or for total rejection of it. This, then, is the rationale of these artists' efforts to work for a new society. In their works, we find drama, conflict and tension, but no anguish. There is openness, poetry and a sense of hope, even if these spring from a dramatic conflict. Even the road to freedom is fraught with drama...

In general, the works of Mario Merz have little in common with that of Tony Cragg and Bill Woodrow, from the point of view of context, technique, language and content, yet is it not the very diversity between the works of Mario Merz, Tony Cragg and Bill Woodrow which provides the justification for placing them in a relationship of creative tension with each other and with the Graeco-Roman and Samnite sculpture of the *Museo del Sannio*?

The ordinary aspects of daily life have not changed a great deal from neolithic times to the present day, despite the profound changes which have been brought about by technological progress. There is a fundamental sameness to human existence and people tend to behave as if they are obeying the dictates of an obscure ritual, which is magically re-enacted every few years, for tens of years, hundreds of years and thousands of years.

The young girl Crepereia*, playing with her doll and lavishing all her attention on it, was behaving in

* The allusion is to a young Roman girl who lived in the first century A.D. and was buried with all her possessions. When the contents of the grave were unearthed by archeologists, they were found to be in a miraculous state of preservation. Most touching of all was the doll which she still clutched to her breast.

much the same way as we would expect of a child of her age to-day. And it makes no difference, whether we take our example from technologically advanced or emergent countries, from the Third or Fourth Worlds, from the part of the world which has experienced both the causes and effects of the two great Revolutions of the 18th century, or from the increasingly impoverished, primitive communities still leading a pre-capitalist, pastoral and agrarian, tribal existence.

The young girl of to-day, like that of yesterday, still plays with dolls, on account of their symbolic value, not their supposed beauty, refinement, or whatever. It makes no difference to her whether they were bought in a supermarket, made in a craftsman's workshop or knocked up by someone in the family. Certain kinds of toy have a timeless quality, so we come across examples in the most diverse cultures, separated from us, and from each other, by thousands of years. Is it not possible that we use the magic of play to reproduce reality in the desired proportions by cutting it down to size, making it seem friendly and innocuous and giving it more manageable dimensions which are better suited to our enjoyment and conform more closely to our needs?

The Man of Oldway, the rock drawings of the Camuni and of Altamira and Lascaux, the artefacts of the Australian aborigines and the art of the Maya, Aztecs, Egyptians, Greeks and Romans, all bear witness to an existence similar to our own. It is possible that the fears, joys, pains and hopes of the natives of Matto Grosso, of the south Amazonian rainforests and of the Nambikwara, which are described so admi-

rably by Claude Lévi - Strauss, in his *Tristes Tropiques*, differ more in intensity and appearance than in kind from the fears, joys, pains and hopes of man in the machine age.

The urge to go forward is a peculiarity of human nature. It is this peculiarity which induced man to venture beyond the security of his cave, to negotiate ravines, cross deserts and follow the voice which led him to disregard all logic based on the desire for a quiet life and prefer the risky vitality of uncertainty to the quiet tranquillity of deathly, soporific security.

Man's creativeness enables him to overcome every kind of obstacle, preventing him from remaining the victim of historic experience, freeing him from the burden of the present, propelling him towards the future and helping him to understand his own past and discover his own origins.

We can only go forwards, however, if we know how to look back, without being tempted to make a clean sweep of everything that has gone before. Understanding our past, discovering our origins and reliving our ancestral history are ways of helping us to understand who we are, where we come from and what we want. This helps us to understand the meaning of things and to appreciate and love them, to grasp the true human dimension of problems and see them in the right light, and to identify and overcome the real difficulties.

Going to the roots of art is the same as going to the roots of life, because man had to learn to make art early on, in order to survive.

Art has a profound significance and gives concrete expression to an attitude which we all share in com-

mon - namely, the urge for novelty and the compulsion to find a way forward. All artists and creative individuals find a sublimated way of expressing this in their research, their works and their risky and courageous decisions. One is tempted to believe that they would still seek a way forward, even if they found themselves in the most perfect situation imaginable. They would simply keep going, in defiance of all bans and impediments.



Tony Cragg, *Grey Container*, 1983, Museo del Sannio, Benevento.

Tony Cragg, or the liberation of the object

by Enrico R. Comi

Tony Cragg brings together the past, present and future in a creative act, which results in the complete liberation of the object, from the point of view of content and meaning, language and technique.

I believe that his work is one of the best all-round examples of the new type of sculpture to emerge, after the break with the traditional canons.

His works exude a perfect naturalness. They all bear the imprint of nature. Beneath the surface, there is a concentration of energy which creates tension. Apart from the explosive creativity, I should say that this tension like potential energy ready to spring up in all directions was probably one of the most incisive and characteristic aspects of his work.

He makes very free use of the various techniques available to him and employs building materials, pieces of furniture, discarded or abandoned objects and pieces of wood, iron, glass and plastic, found lying on rubbish heaps.

He has made one of the most comprehensive, stimulating and significant contributions imaginable to the liberation of the object.

He seeks only the most hidden, intimate aspects of things and culls the truest essence of their reality; he makes it his natural vocation to place them in relation to each other, without arrogance or subjective distortion.

His work, which is the product of a highly dynamic process, is lucid and taut. It is constructed, but

full of movement; drama and poetry are linked to constant bursts of inventiveness.

The works are at once complex and simple. Their iconography demands a quick change of rhythm, from one to the next. They are flashbacks in time, fragments of memory... Even when only one process is employed, there is considerable complexity in the development of the narrative structure. The works are emblematic of contemporary civilisation. There is no doubt that they have a great deal to say about human existence. They provide a commentary on our lives, which goes beyond the immediate context; a commentary which starts with the here and now, but is based on the assumption that there is somewhere else, and, in other words, takes memory as the starting point and goes on from there...

Mario Merz or thinking in images

by Enrico R. Comi

Mario Merz is an artist whose pyrotechnical creativity is unbounded. His works, such as the igloos, the assemblages of natural elements, such as straw and bundles of sticks, the objects and sculptures and the drawings and canvases, all have a cavernous feeling and emit a vibrant note of disquiet. An effusive, expansive energy radiates outwards from the work into its surroundings and the surroundings are sucked in towards the work, in a similar, but contrary motion. This two-way process is both explicit and implicit.

Merz makes free use of a variety of techniques, from the re-use, adaptation and transformation of objects to the characteristic procedures of sculpture, painting and design. He uses these techniques indiscriminately, either alone or, more frequently, in various combinations, and incorporates in the work the most disparate materials imaginable, in much the same way as once, when, as one of the leading exponents of *arte povera*, he had placed neon lights with bundles of sticks and constructed igloos out of materials such as iron, wood, limestone and glass.

His works have the fascination of things which neither assert nor deny their presence. The introspectiveness with which he investigates his own feelings and his own emotional space gives added relevance to this. The literary discourse is frequently nurtured on myth and then takes the form of a magical narrative like a fairy tale. Mario Merz is capable of crossing the de-

serts of memory, filling the abyss of time and reconciling the space of the cave to that of the metropolis and that of the Eskimos to the of technological man. He thinks in images and his magical, mythical, fairy-tale images conjured up from timeless nights and boundless space, constitute a language and a dimension which are familiar to us and close, as projections of our intimate lives and real images of our daily existence.

The thoughts expressed in the iconography of this work are converted into literary language and vulgar parlance. But the circle is not complete. The arcane and mysterious forces in the work set in train an endless process, generating, in turn, the new thoughts and new conceptual images which are the life-blood of a universal language.

Bill Woodrow or the ability to fashion materials.

by Enrico R. Comi

Bill Woodrow is a *sculptor* who re-cycles objects and uses them for all his needs.

His work is compact and very free, at one and the same time. He creates a state of tension by combining careful planning and skilful execution with a constant freedom of invention.

Someone might be tempted to draw comparisons. Apart from casual references, however, it cannot be said that there is any true resemblance between his work and British, let alone American, sculpture of a few decades ago. His works are conceived in a very different spirit and are the product of an intelligent process of transformation and transmutation.

The material for his pieces is fashioned from an object by means of a completely individual technique. Any object would do, but most usually it is part of a car, or a washing machine. For example, he takes the door or bonnet of a car, a washing machine or a television set and cuts out all the parts that he needs for his composition, either for use on their own or in conjunction with another object. Whatever objects are used, either alone or in combination with each other, he keeps all the materials, utilizes everything and throws away nothing. Thus, even if he breaks open and disembowels an electric washing machine, he keeps all the materials and uses them in their entirety for the realisation of his piece.

All this implies, on his part, a deep sense of involvement with his materials. Even when they are hard and inimical, he shapes them, softens them and makes them amenable... In this way, the sheet metal of a car bonnet can be transformed into a telephone, whose receiver hangs from such a smooth and delicate-looking spiral cord that it seems to be transformed into something else, in another material.

His iconography reflects his strong, vivid and expressive approach to his work, in which elements of extreme rigour and harshness are combined with gentleness and tenderness, almost. There emanates from the objects a feeling of energy and tension, which has more to do with life than telling a story. The images are incredibly powerful. His work is dramatic. It is disturbing, but not anguished. It becomes truly liberating, because once the drama and anguish are over, the creative act follows its own course, in a quite different direction...

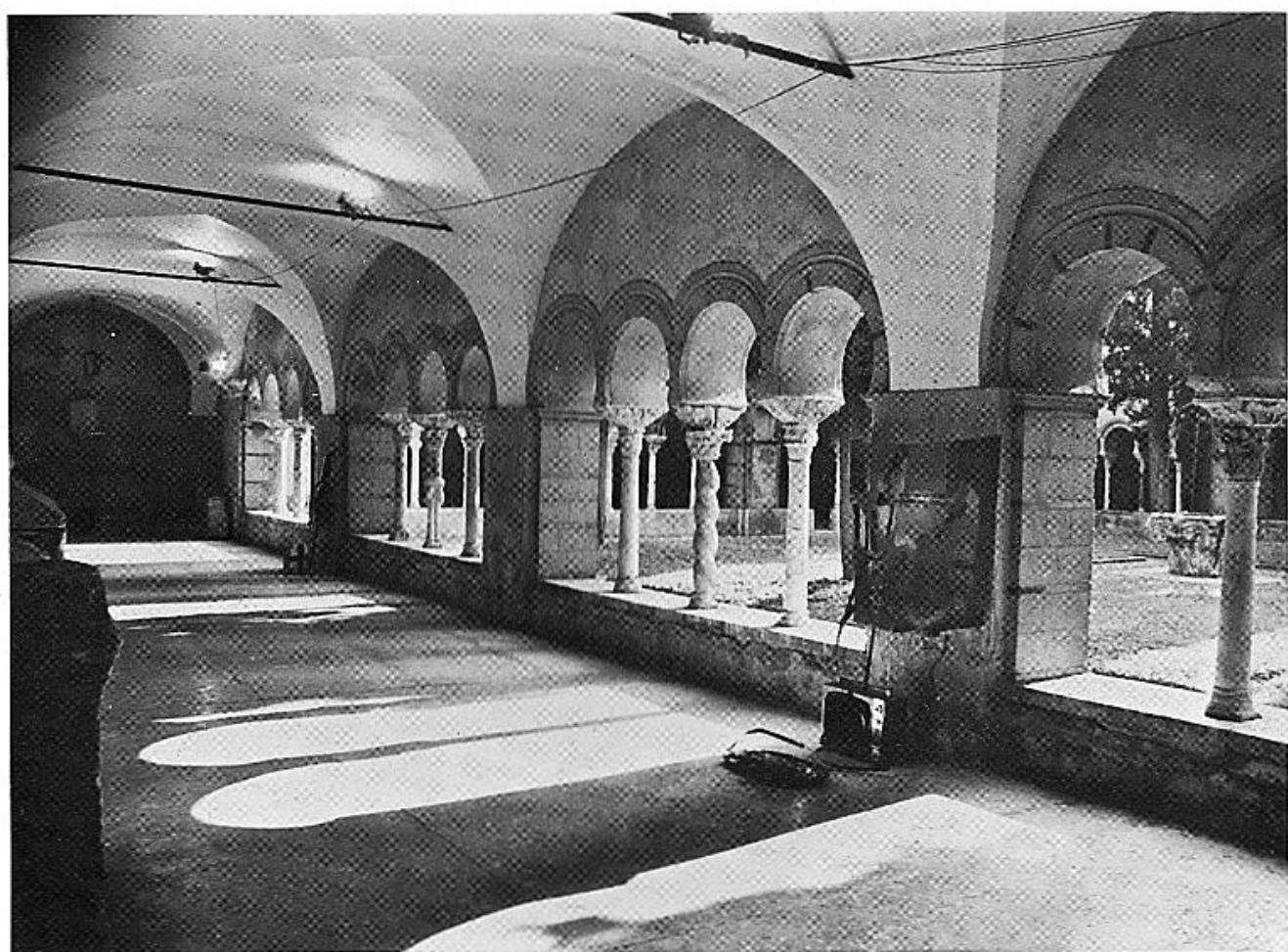
The exhibition

The exhibition is a collection of works by the artist, including a series of paintings and a series of sculptures. The paintings are in oil and watercolor, and the sculptures are in bronze and wood. The exhibition is a comprehensive survey of the artist's work, and it is a must-see for anyone interested in contemporary art.

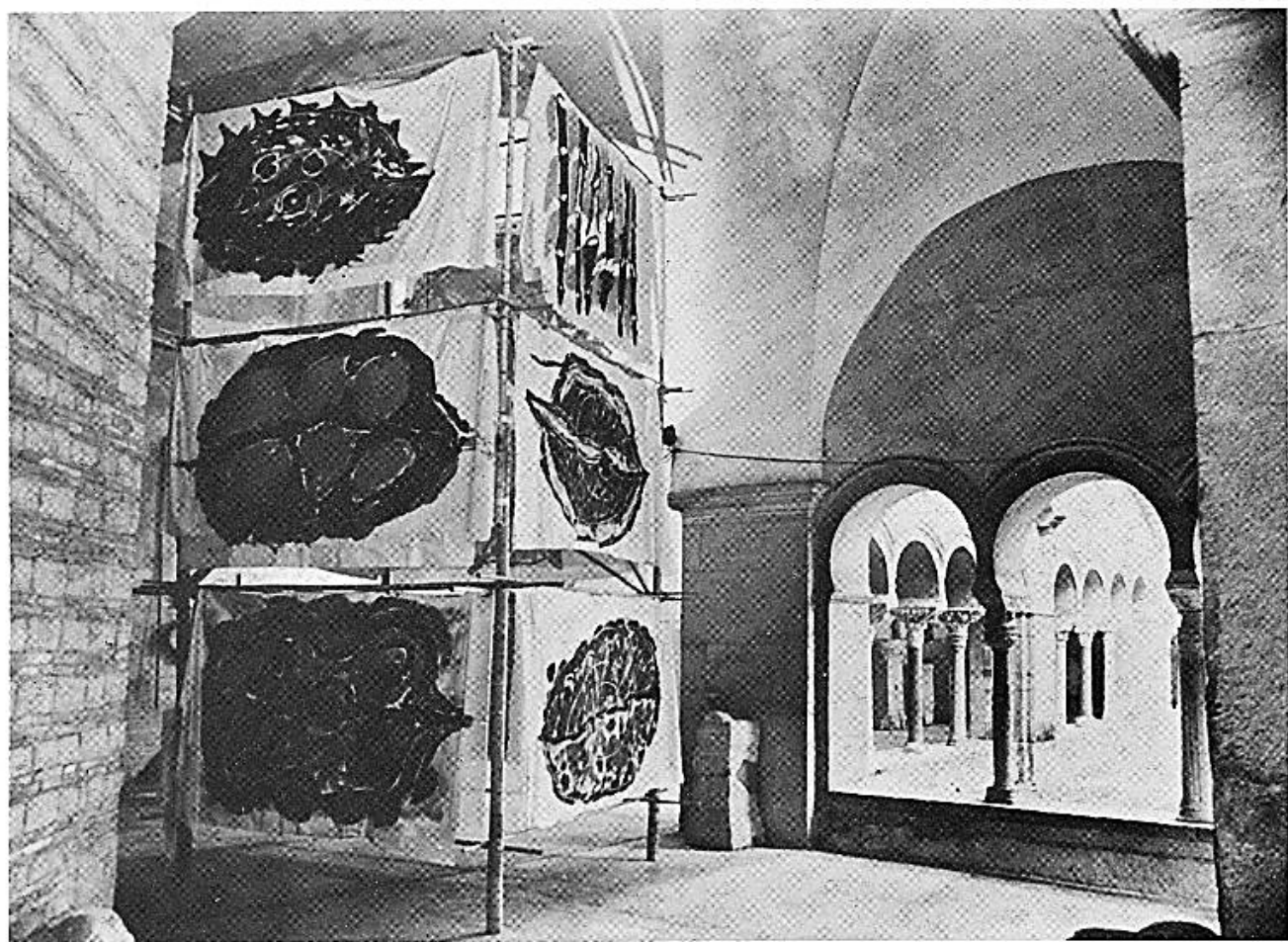
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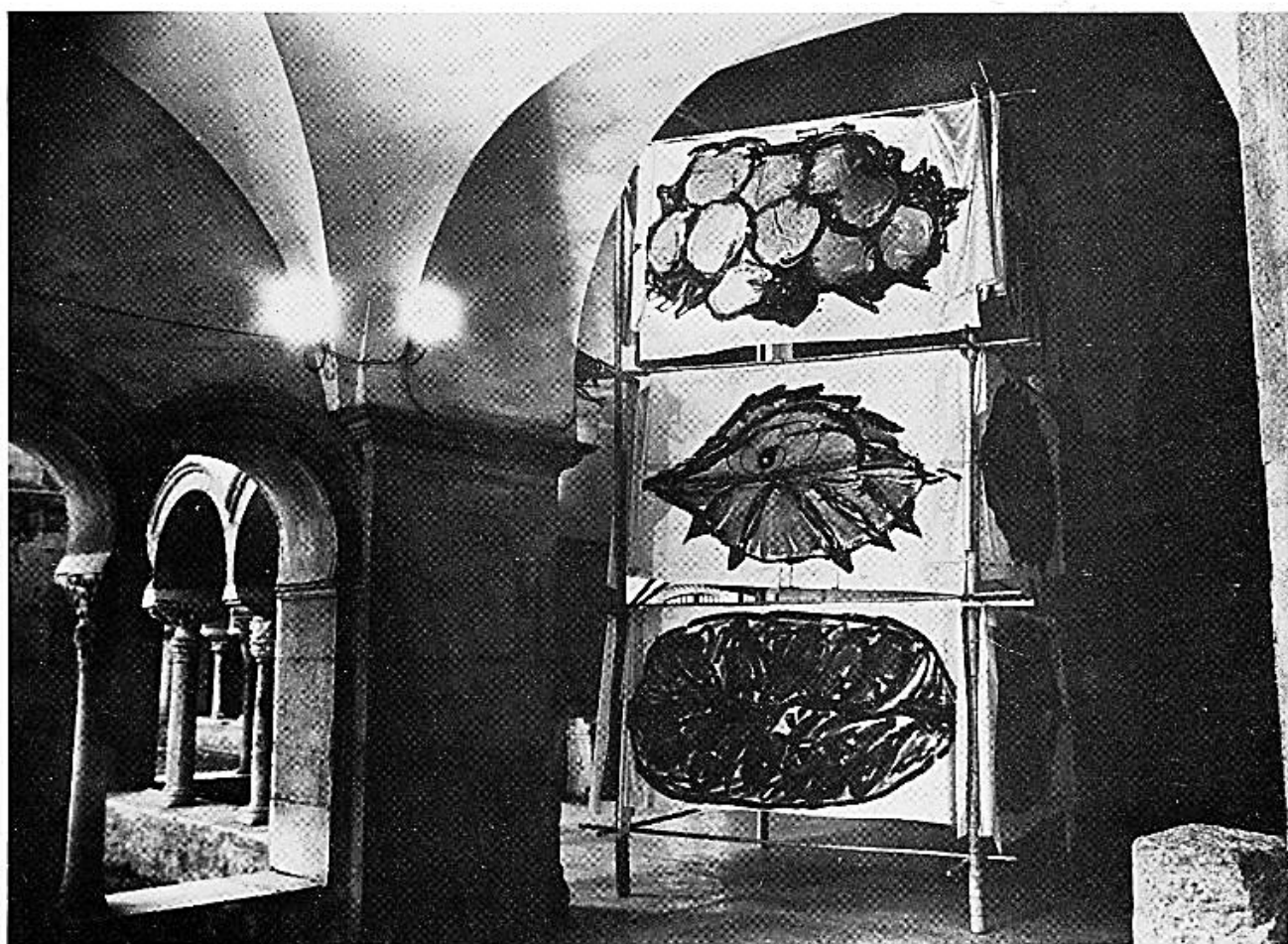
Il Chiostro di S. Sofia. Museo del Sannio, Benevento



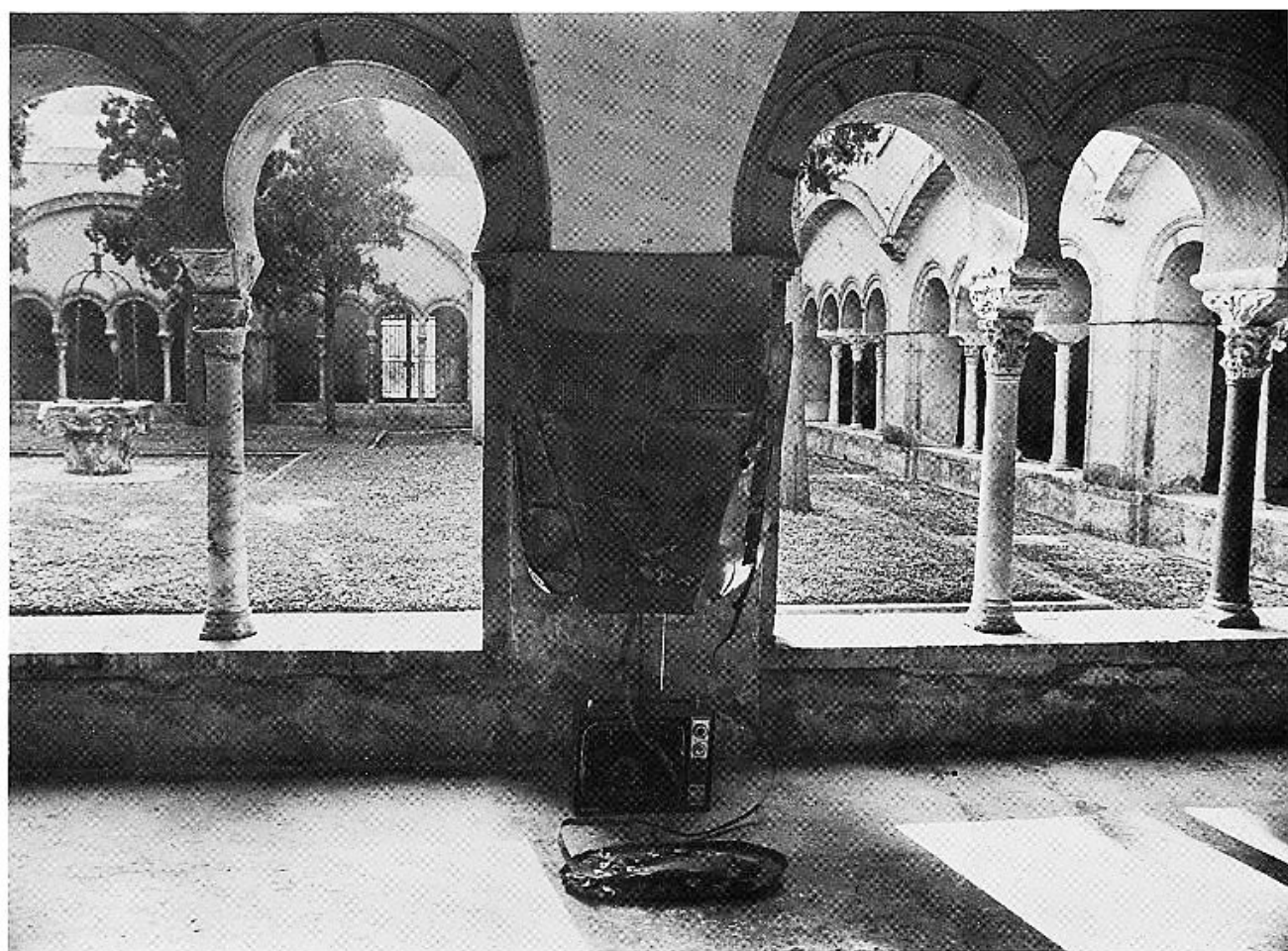
Il Chiostro di S. Sofia. Museo del Sannio, Benevento



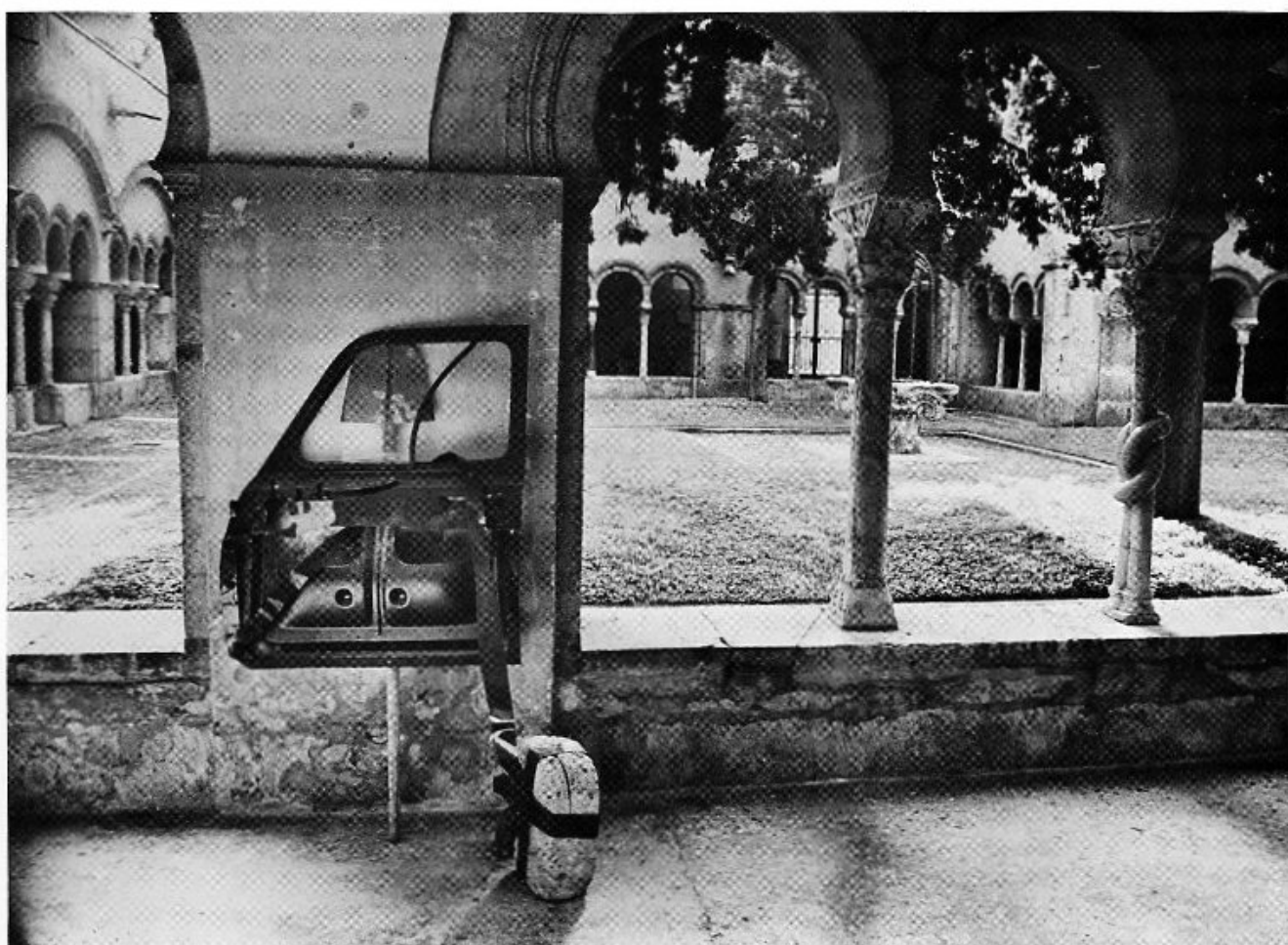
Mario Merz, *Il castello di foglie*, Museo del Sannio, Benevento



Mario Merz, *Il castello di foglie*, Museo del Sannio, Benevento



Bill Woodrow, *The second of the seven secrets of Benevento*, 1983, Museo del Sannio, Benevento



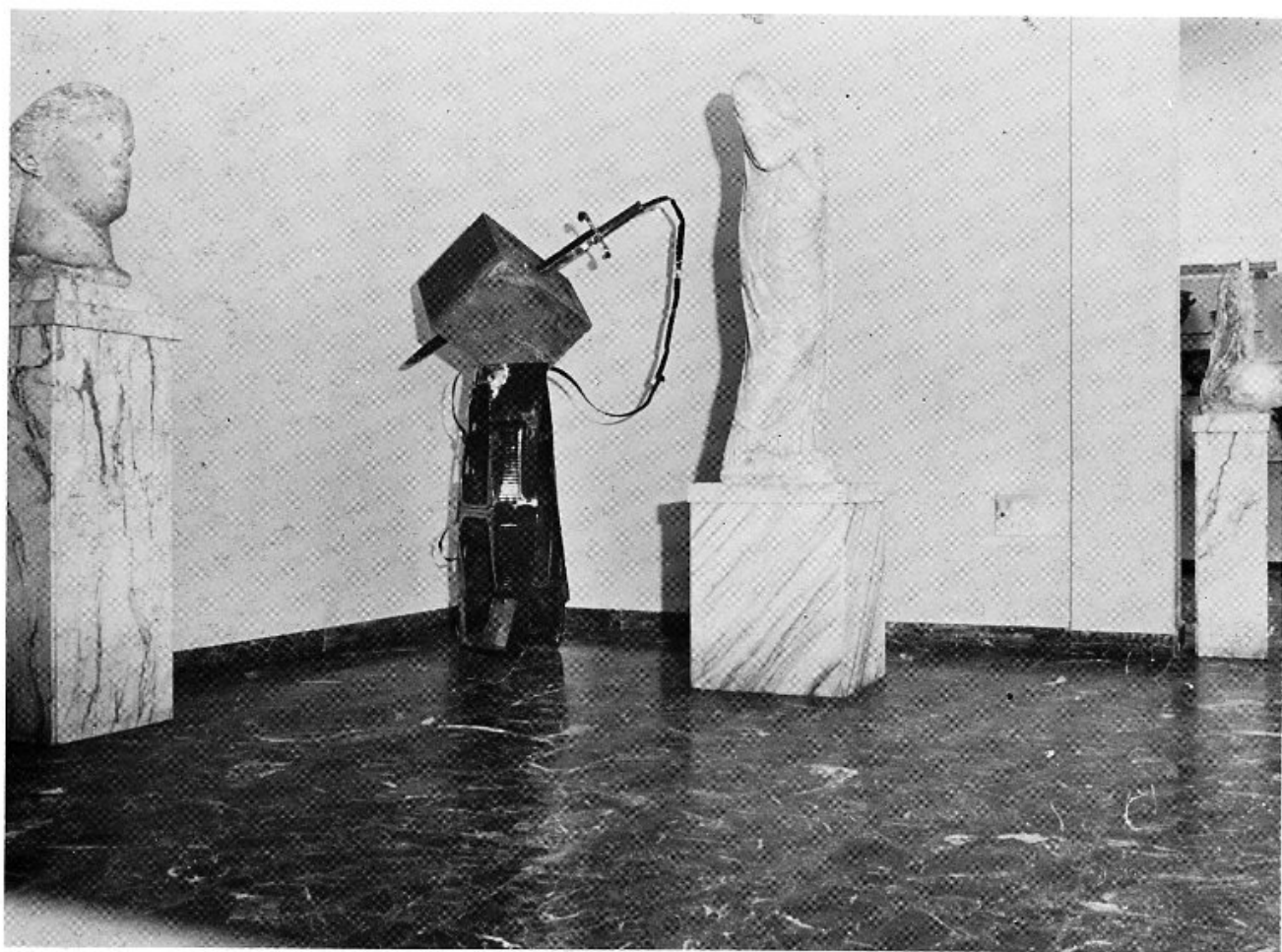
Bill Woodrow, *The first of the seven secrets of Benevento*, 1983, Museo del Sannio, Benevento



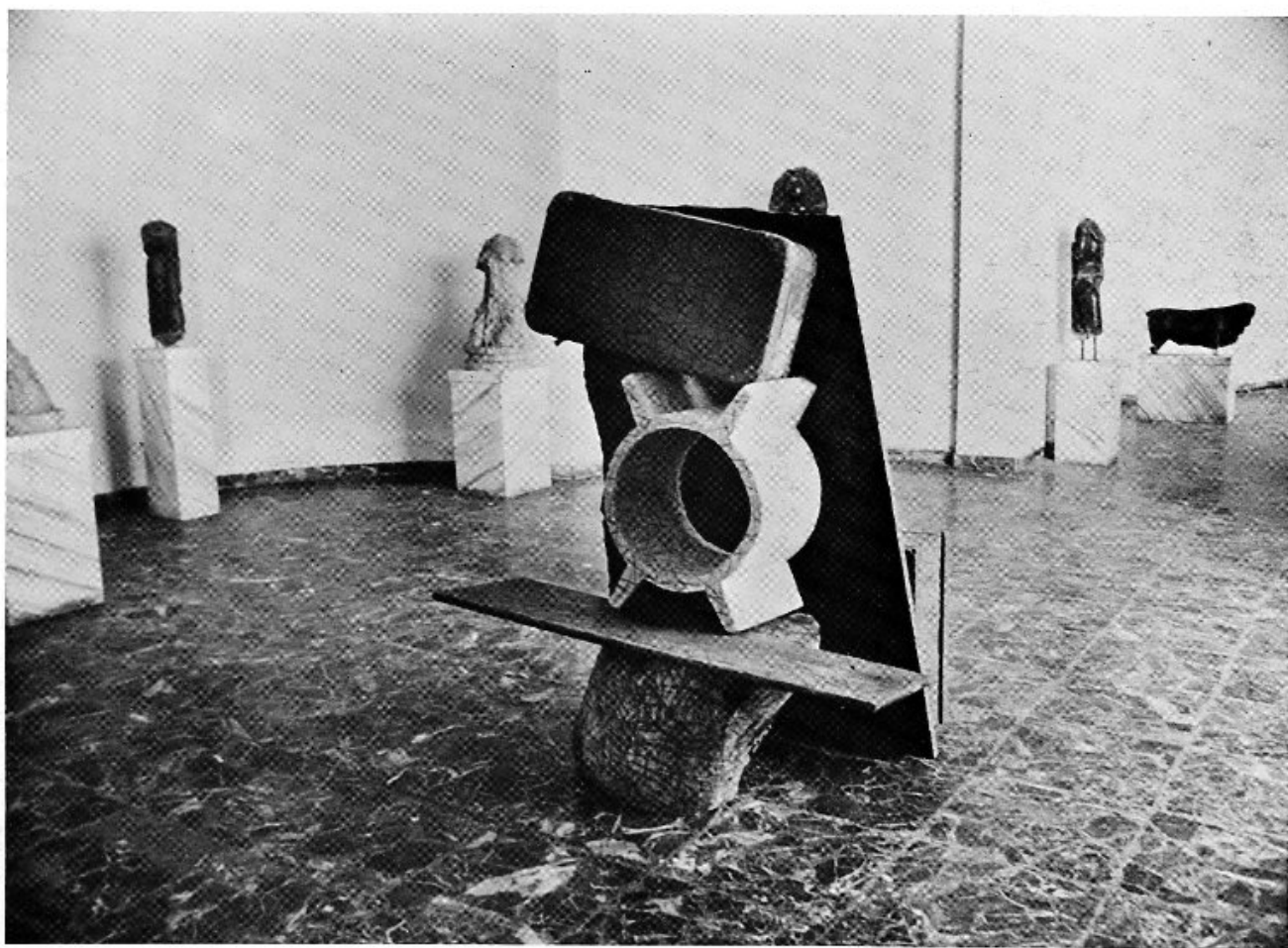
Tony Cragg, *Your moon, my moon*, 1983, Museo del Sannio, Benevento



Tony Cragg, *Grey Container*, 1983, Museo del Sannio, Benevento



Bill Woodrow, *The third of the seven secrets of Benevento*, 1983, Museo del Sannio, Benevento



Tony Cragg, *Drawn on object-going away*, 1983, Museo del Sannio, Benevento



Tony Cragg, *Drawn on object-going away*, 1983, Museo del Sannio, Benevento