

THEATRICAL INSURRECTION



This page:
Three bare-chested soldiers holding
knives in their teeth and grenades in
their hands, Fiume, 11 August 1920.
On the wall behind them is the slogan
"Fiume o morte."

Next page:
Gabriele D'Annunzio, Fiume,
31 October 1919

All images courtesy: Archivi del
Vittoriale, Gardone Riviera

If the place for performance is less art than real life, historical events can be reinterpreted as proto-situationist happenings. Like the utopian community founded by Italian poet Gabriele d'Annunzio after WW1, pervaded by hedonism and ambitions of mythical proportions.

**words by
FRANCESCO SPAMPINATO**



INFO

GABRIELE D'ANNUNZIO (b. 1863 in Pescara, Abruzzo – d. 1938) was an Italian poet, journalist, novelist, dramatist and daredevil. His role in politics is controversial due to his influence on the Italian Fascist movement and his status as the alleged forerunner of Benito Mussolini.

It seems that the time is now ripe to look back with the necessary detachment at the history of Italy in the early decades of the 20th century and to reinterpret the history of contemporary art through its events. Surmounting the differences between genres, such a history would encompass events that, even if not strictly artistic, generated strategies and languages that artists have since emulated and sometimes made their own.

For example, if the birth of performance art can be dated to the 1960s, its origins can be traced in both the recent and remote past of peoples and civilizations, and especially in their religious or heathen rites, at times interwoven with politics and war. Among the events worth mentioning from this viewpoint is the capture of the city of Fiume (now Rijeka in Croatia), led by Gabriele d'Annunzio in 1919 after the end of the First World War. The poet, already known for his gallant deeds and daring military raids, carried out the most spectacular of his exploits by occupying the city “unjustly” awarded to Yugoslavia under the terms of the Treaty of London. At the head of a band of “legionaries” inspired by his eloquent oratory, he claimed “mutilated victory” with the cry *Eia! Eia! Eia! Alalà!*

The events in Fiume, after the initial patriotic yearnings, represented a utopian community experiment that lasted for sixteen months, during which stamps were printed, manifestos and reviews published and the futuristic Charter of Carnaro or Constitution for the Free State of Fiume was drawn up by the syndicalist Alceste De Ambris. Great consideration was given to women, who were even allowed to join the legionaries. Divorce was permitted and relations of a homosexual nature were tolerated.

Fiume was a counter-society where revolt was sublimated through footraces and satirical parades, such as the mock funerals of the Prime Minister of Italy Nitti (dubbed by d'Annunzio *Il Cagoja*—the “Shitter” or “Coward”) and the philosopher Benedetto Croce, simulated battles on the beach, shows and concerts, like the one given by the orchestra of La Scala in Milan conducted by Arturo Toscanini. During these events, the Poet roused people's spirits with proclamations in which “every aspect of life in the city was mythicized.”¹

The hedonistic atmosphere that reigned in Fiume in those days was steeped in pagan values, first and foremost the classical exaltation of virile strength and beauty. This meant giving a chance to young people to shine, but preferably if they were daring, like the bold crack troops, orphans of the Great War who were happy to let themselves be immortalized bare-chested before the camera lens during Greco-Roman wrestling matches or in body-builder's poses, with a knife clenched in their teeth and “surrounded by an iconography made up of skulls and words of a funereal nature,”² in particular the phrase *O Fiume o Morte!*

The legionaries, many of them barely in their twenties, had an eccentric lifestyle. Some took cocaine and wore customized military uniforms that they adorned with fezzes, mantles, black neckties and the typical Roman dagger. Many shaved their heads in an attempt to resemble the Commander, while others let long forelocks grow. It was a hippie spirit ahead of its time, with mystical overtones laced with a good measure of arrogance, summed up in the motto, “Me Ne Frego” (I don't give a damn).

MAIN THEME: THE PERFORMATIVE BODY



Above:
Italian assault soldiers from the
22nd department, Fiume, 1920

On the right:
Poster announcing the birth of
the Yoga movement, led by Giovanni
Comisso and Guido Keller, 1920

All images courtesy: Archivi del
Vittoriale, Gardone Riviera

„YOGA”




Yoga - unione nel senso più aristocratico della razza; di quella aristocrazia che da Ronchi a Fiume oltre al Cerso, oltre all'acciaino, colle mascelle quadrate dal dominio dal volere più forte della morte, ci ha portati in pieno giorno ad annientare l'Europa.

Fummo ricoperti di loro!

Unione libera di spiriti in Fiume: **Gel-fone Itatico!**

Un' aquila trovata nelle Disariche presenza alle adunanze.

Lo stile e la forma dell' azione sono elette dalla bellezza, e vi obbediscono.

Nel centro della Città Vecchia di S. Vito v' è la piazza delle adunanze. Un grande albero protegge nella sua pienezza l' armonia nel parlare.

La vita è a contatto col pensiero: tra una discussione e l'altra si interrompono le donne delle case vicine con le loro faccende e i bambini coi loro giochi e le case coi loro aspetti di ombra e sole.

I nostri avversari sono i nostri migliori amici, che sono sin d'ora cortesemente invitati.

La **Yoga** vede nella differenziazione che ricerca e pone in continua cavalleresca tenzone un mezzo consistente di scoperta, affermazione e splendore.

Tutte le più contrarie sorgenti di energie al nascere devono cozzare istantaneamente l'una contro l'altra per rendere la giusta drittura e per avere il senso di se stesso nel mondo.

Contrariamente a tutti i partiti o scuole che ricercano la loro forza nella quantità dei proseliti la **Yoga** vuole solo [essere nella sua limpidezza come l'amore che porta gli uomini dal semplice connubio, attraverso i campi della conoscenza alla contemplazione stellare, alla rivelazione dei misteri e alla creazione dei nuovi.

Così la conversazione passa mirabile nell' antica piazza in armonia perfetta tra la prostituta e il poeta, tra il navigante e l'antiquario, tra il banchiere e l'astrato, mentre la presenza degli animali è apprezzata nel loro mufismo.

Nè legge nè ordigno!

La **YOGA** non posa sulla menzogna come i governi in genere o come un qualsiasi movimento spirituale creato da una sola persona.

Un uomo anche di immenso genio non può essere che l'esponente di un solo ambiente per necessità dello spirito che non può tollerare per la sua buona coscienza sdoppiamenti e contraddizioni.

In tal modo si eleva una sola massa che gravitando sulla razza crea l'uniformità: **NEGAZIONE DI VITA.**

Per questo la **YOGA** nega soltanto i falsi aristocratici ed i grandi arroganti mentre afferma nella varietà dell'ambiente terra e colla forza della gentilezza latina tutti gli altri che ritiene con certezza nobili esponenti di **RAZZA.**

ANNO MCMXX

„La Yoga”.

MAIN THEME: THE PERFORMATIVE BODY



Stamp of Reggenza Italiana del Carnaro, printed in Fiume on 12 September 1920. The leader's portrait is accompanied by the Latin saying "Hic Manebimus Optime" (We are here to stay) Courtesy: Archivi del Vittoriale, Gardone Riviera

AUTHOR

FRANCESCO SPAMPINATO (b.1978) is a visual artist and art theorist who works with painting, performance, installation and sound. He holds two degrees in Art History from the University of Bologna and an MA in Modern Art: Critical Studies Track from Columbia University in New York. He has participated in exhibitions and events at spaces like Viafarini in Milano, MAMbo in Bologna, Deitch Projects and e-flux in New York. He regularly contributes to contemporary art magazines *Flash Art*, *Impact* and *Artlab* and he is visiting professor of Performance Art at NABA, Milano, where he has organized happenings and public interventions. His book *Experiencing Hypnotism* was published by Atomic Activity Books in 2009. He lives and works between Bologna and New York.

FOOTNOTES

1. Paolo Santarcangeli, *Porto dell'Aquila Decapitata* (Udine: Del Bianco, 1988).
2. Matteo Guarnaccia, *Ribelli con Stile: Un Secolo di Mode Radicali* (Milano: Shake, 2009).
3. Mario Carli in *La Testa di Ferro* (Fiume, 1920).
4. Mimmo Franzinelli and Paolo Cavassini, *Fiume: L'Ultima Impresa di D'Annunzio* (Milano: Mondadori, 2009).
5. Claudia Salaris, *Alla Festa della Rivoluzione: Artisti e Libertari con d'Annunzio a Fiume* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2002).

An atmosphere of perpetual festivity held sway. Music was always present and any excuse would do to whip up a march that, in the majority of cases, turned into a frenzied orgy where the most unbridled sexual freedom was put into practice. There was a preference for a healthy life in touch with nature. All values that would be found in the generation of 1968 and, in general, many countercultural youth movements, were found in Fiume.

A group of futurist "freebooters," as d'Annunzio called them, also arrived in Fiume, including Filippo Tommaso Marinetti and Mario Carli, who saw it as a "city of new life—liberation of all the oppressed"³ as well as the fulfillment of their dream: a world led by an artist. Their unconventionality, however, did not go down well with the inhabitants of Fiume. Their *soirées* were booed and one after the other they left the city, except Carli, who stayed there for a long time, editing the newspaper *La Testa di Ferro*.

Praise and expressions of esteem for d'Annunzio's venture arrived from the Club Dada in Berlin, too, but Fiume had its own visionaries: Giovanni Comisso and Guido Keller, devoted advisors of the Poet and founders of the Yoga movement, whose ideals of "nonconformism, boldness, cult of the superman, love of the East, asceticism and spontaneity"⁴ were summed up in the pages of the journal of the same name to which various metaphysical artists like De Pisis, de Chirico and Savinio also contributed.

Comisso, a writer, and Keller, an aviator, vegetarian, nudist and enthusiast for all things esoteric, developed anti-hierarchical tendencies and organized demonstrations and assemblies in the streets, promoting an egalitarian reorganization of society and the army. These were values with their roots in Franciscanism that anticipated the spirit of the anti-globalization movement, which, as Claudia Salaris has put it, "[...] called for the liberation of mind from matter."⁵

Notwithstanding the subsequent Fascist accession of the events in Fiume, the occupation in reality reflected the confusion that held sway in Italy in the delicate period following the First World War. This is evident from the presence, among the ranks of the legionaries, of future members of the Fascist party as well as future partisans, and from the expressions of admiration made by both Mussolini and Lenin, who in those years described the Poet-Commander as "the only revolutionary in Italy."

D'Annunzio foreshadowed a critique of the society of the spectacle, of which he created a simulacrum in Fiume, staging a great proto-situationist farce. There was a sense of the theatrical in the air, one in which, to borrow Jacques Rancière's words, "the performance draws them out of their passive attitude and transforms them into active participants in a shared world."

So the events in Fiume can be treated as more of an insurrection than a revolution, in the sense given to this distinction by Hakim Bey, theorist of cyberpunk culture, who cites Fiume as an embryonic model of the TAZ (Temporary Autonomous Zone): a guerrilla operation which liberates an area (of land, of time, of imagination) and then dissolves itself, to re-form elsewhere/elsewhen."

In addition to a TAZ, however, Fiume has also been seen as a micronation. Unlike microstates, micronations are "eccentric and ephemeral in nature" and come into existence as actions of protest or on the whim of some quirky visionary, like the *Principality of Sealand*, located on an abandoned sea fort in the North Sea ten kilometers off the English coast and occupied by the Bates family, who have given themselves noble titles and minted their own coins.

Many artists are fascinated by micronations. In 1971 Robert Filliou created the *République Géniale* ("Republic of Genius"), where everyone could give free play to their own genius, and in 2001 the Atelier Van Lieshout set up *AVL-Ville*, an environmentally-friendly community in the port of Rotterdam that produces medicine and alcohol. Similar operations have been carried out by Suzanne Lacy, Superflex and Andrea Zittel, located in exhibition spaces or on public property, in the search for TAZs in which to experiment with new models of participation.

What distinguishes these projects from Fiume, however, is their fictitious character; they are replicas. Even if aimed at involving portions of the public unaware of taking part in an artistic happening, never again as at Fiume has an awareness been attained of affecting, through actions, the actual course of events to such a degree. The experience of Fiume, in fact, although concealed behind arms and militaristic rituals, was one of the few moments in which art has encountered real life, changing the history of Italy forever.