



# *Working in Regress and Beyond, with Rural Material Culture* [1]

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**Abstract.** This contribution brings together and compares selected works by artist Claudio Costa, architects collective Superstudio, and photographer and designer Mario Cresci. It discussed the way in which they engaged with rural material culture in 1970s, a time when Italy was rehabilitating its pre-industrial heritage. Despite their respective differences, these works adopted multiple media to make rural artefacts talk and provide existential, educational, socio-political, and cultural models.

**Keywords:** Rural Material Culture · Anthropological Art · Radical Design · Anthropology · 1970s Italy · Craftsmanship

## 1 Introduction

Whilst becoming an industrial and soon after a post-industrial country, Italy saw the material heritage of its rural world either abandoned or sold in antiquity shops and flea markets or displayed in private or public museums. In 1978, over a hundred such collections were counted across the country [2]. The post-war period saw not only an extraordinary rise in the number of local museums of vernacular culture to accommodate these objects; studies around the history of things and material culture, adopting different theoretical frameworks [3] especially in relation to folkloric culture, also proliferated. Commenting on this phenomenon, historian Carlo Ginzburg wrote in his introduction to the Italian edition of Peter Burke’s *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe*: “Cultural fashions sometimes burst suddenly in Italy; they burn rapidly and then fade without leaving traces. However, it is easy to foresee that the studies (historical and not historical) about folklore will survive the trend that currently surrounds them” [4]. This interest spanned from the early 1970s well into the 1980s and, in Italy, it unfolded in a dialogue with history, semiotics and anthropology [5] – all pivotal disciplines in the cultural and political discourse of the time [6].

Several architects, artists and photographers also engaged with the material and immaterial living heritage of the countryside beyond the neo-realist paradigm of the 1950s [7]. This contribution briefly presents three of these works: *Indagine su una Cultura – Monteghirfo* by artist Claudio Costa; Alessandro Poli’s and Christiano Toraldo di Francia’s contribution, *Zeno Fiaschi*, to Superstudio’s *Cultura Materiale Extraurbana*;

and Mario Cresci's book *Misurazioni. Oggetti, Segni e analogie fotografiche in Basilicata* (Matera, 1979). Despite their respective practices differing substantially, the artist, the architects and the designer each examined rural artifacts with and within the local culture and community. They mobilized consolidated hierarchies between high and low art, architecture and design elevating these artefacts to existential, educational, and cultural models and giving voice to these mute objects.

### 1.1 Claudio Costa's *Indagine su una cultura*

Initially exploring material metamorphosis and then intrigued by paleontology's study of human features, artist Claudio Costa (Tirana, 1942 - Genoa, 1995) developed an artistic practice connected to cultural anthropology (1974–1977) [11]. Participating in the international artistic trend of "Arte Antropologica" [12], his work embraced suggestions from Levy-Strauss's cultural anthropology and heterogeneous practices of handmaking to delve into the cultural relevance of artefacts and rituals [13]. *Indagine su una cultura – Monteghirfo*, conducted in the autumn of 1975 with painter Aurelio Caminati (Genoa, 1924–2012), epitomizes Costa's practice as developed within the context of Monteghirfo, a small village in Valle Fontanabuona in the hinterland of Genoa [14].

As part of *Indagine su una cultura*, Costa created several pieces, such as: an artist's book collecting photographs of "Uomini, Oggetti, Abitazioni, Paesaggi" ("men, objects, dwellings, landscapes") taken by the artist himself, Aurelio Caminati and photographer Cesare Ferrari in September 1975 [15], and several assemblages later displayed in galleries and museums (i.e. *Analisi su un oggetto di Monteghirfo* [hook; hammer, or chestnut pan]; the *Natura naturata* series). In Monteghirfo, the artist set up the *Museo di Antropologia Attiva di Monteghirfo*. Later integrated in a 1978 government-led survey of folkloric (in Italian: *demoetnoantropologico*) heritage [16], the *Museo* was a conceptual artistic intervention that pursued the idea of moving museums' *dispositive* to a place of anthropological relevance. Openly overturning Marcel Duchamp notion of art coefficient, the key principle underpinning Costa's artistic enquiry in Monteghirfo was the "Statuto Antropologico" [17]. Costa defined it as "the ancient trace left by the gesture of making" that is able to "suggest the natural movements it was created for and that are the reason for its survival" [18].

In his several *Analisi su di un oggetto di Monteghirfo*, Costa adopted mechanical reproduction – photocopies on paper – or the process of casting in different materials, using wax and clay, displaying these different representations together, either loose or aligned, on a wood panel. Reasoning with conceptual works where multiple visible languages coexist to unveil the limits of representation itself [19], these artworks testify to his research, one that constantly sought to recover their silent connection between artefacts, their human makers, and their environment. Art historian Enrico Pedrini commented on Costa's practice: "Reconstructing the forms of the past by means of supports other than the original object, thus operating both a displacement of forms and cultural models, indicates the remaking of the structures of these civilisations, and does not mean restoring them to their original state by means of mere restoration techniques alone, but emphasises the metaphor of art aimed at a reinterpretation of the entire profound and enigmatic culture encapsulated in these forms" [20].

Costa's artistic research primarily appeared to have had an existential and an ethical purpose. It was grounded in a criticism of contemporary society's fetishization of "an abstract reality" and of its "material-scapes" of mass-produced objects, furnishing and appliances that have lost "the sense of contact" [21]. In 1975, the artist wrote that "the only trace that brings the existential data of a non-alienating human situation remains the narrative that these simple manufactured objects tell in their mute language, linked to the earth and nature, but free from the impositions and false tasks of a civilisation that is operating, by its own means, its complete obliteration" [22]. Practicing and reproducing these tools allowed for the possibility to reconnect with their essence. According to archaeologist André Leroi-Gourhan, objects could function as holders of a social memory: "when man cannot speak, when archives are lacking, two witnesses continue to survive: art and techniques" [23]. Through his artistic processes, the artist could apprehend the culture that these artefacts retained, not as one of an obsolete and forgotten civilization, but as the "matrix and the origin of our time" [24].

## 1.2 Superstudio's *Cultura Materiale Extraurbana*

In 1974 the architects collective Superstudio (1966–1978) began a research project that appears far from their most known checkered surfaces and radical provocations [25]: titled *Cultura Materiale Extraurbana*, it was elaborated as part of the seminar Adolfo Natalini was running within the module of "Plastica Ornamentale C" at the Faculty of Architecture, University of Florence [26]. This didactic activity was the new route taken by the collective following what was perceived as the end of "radical architecture" and the impasse following the controversies at the Triennale in 1973 [27], but also a response to changes academic institutions were undergoing since the previous decade [28].

As part of their practice-based module, the architects invited their students to focus on pre-industrial or rural material culture, possibly going back to their families roots to do so. Cristiano Toraldo di Francia and Alessandro Poli – who was briefly a member of Superstudio between 1970 and 1972 – were particularly involved in teaching of the seminar. Parallel to their academic commitment, they researched the material culture of farmer Zeno Fiaschi, Alessandro Poli's neighbour in Riparbella, near Florence [29]. The outcome of their project was presented at the Venice Biennale in 1978 as *La coscienza di Zeno* [30]. It was also published with the title "Zeno Fiaschi" in *Cultura materiale extraurbana* (Florence, 1983), the book presenting results of the seminar and a catalogue of tools curated by Michele de Lucchi [31]. In Venice, *La coscienza di Zeno* was presented with *La Moglie di Lot*. Commenting on the two projects in the catalogue, Natalini wrote: "On the one hand, the pessimistic crisis of architecture's mechanisms and destiny; on the other hand, an optimistic analysis of new foundations of design, construction and use practices, through collective creativity" [32], therefore suggesting how this research into rural material culture related to Superstudio's previous practice.

The architects' project was grounded in the criticism of the contemporary city expressed in previous works, such as, for instance, Piero Frassinelli's 1972 visual tale titled *Le dodici città ideali*. Embued with Marxist cultural analysis, the city was conceived as an expanding hegemonic mode of production and cultural model, that fragments labour as much as our apprehension of reality, and where creativity has become a marginal tool confined to amatorial activities and leisurely time [33]. *Cultura materiale extraurbana*

also acknowledges the social and cultural transformation the city-countryside relationship was undergoing at the time and its effects on the latter. Yet, instead of focusing on elements of this transformation, they led their enquiry into pre-industrial and rural tools, as Fiaschi's. Spared from the urbanisation, the work tools, domestic appliances, and the living environment under their scrutiny were questioned as testimonies of creativity and of a non-alienated way of life and appreciated for their intrinsic use value [34].

To study these artefacts first and then to present the results of their research, the architects and their students adopted architectural drawings and tools as well as communication strategies pertaining to other disciplines, such as visual communication and advertising [35]. They also enriched their analytical and interpretative method with ethnographic research tools to understand the meanings and values of these objects [36]. Together the diverse yet cohesive materials delineated the interconnected galaxy of objects constituting the living, working and cultural environments of their makers. For the publication, these objects were also organised into systems and "inventari critici" (critical inventories) based on their processes of making, their uses and successive improvements, and the possible activities they allowed [37].

All these documentary materials, however, were only envisaged as traces of a deeper and transformative educational activity: engaging these artefacts was not only meant for the sake of documentation, but – as they wrote at the time – it aimed to develop processes of reappropriation of the collective creativity these pre-industrial and rural tools embodied [38] and to be a "research work [...] not preparatory to a design practice as currently understood, but [one that] prefigures a different activity in which design, construction, use and recycling ought to coincide" [39]. Possibly drawing on the experiments conducted with the informal educational platform "Global Tools" of whom Superstudio was a member [40], their educational activity focused on practices of direct experimentation and making, inviting students to use, remake and reinvent rural tools.

"By referring to this reality, we can correctly analyse the direct relationship between man and nature, between man and the objects that serve to satisfy his real needs using cognition, intelligence and creativity that the division of labour has made useless for the production of goods... it is in this enormous wealth of knowledge that we can trace not only the roots of our science, but also the possibility of a different science" they wrote highlighting the additional potential of the project [41]. In *Cultura Materiale Extraurbana*, the countryside and the surviving pre-industrial cultures were conceived as a huge "encyclopaedia" and body of knowledge excluded by the high official culture, and an environment where to find remains of a pre-urban non-alienated society and to learn from it to imagine a different way to design and to live.

### 1.3 Mario Cresci's *Misurazioni*

In 1979 photographer and designer Mario Cresci (Chiavari, 1942) published *Misurazioni. Fotografia e territorio. Oggetti, Segni e Analogie Fotografiche in Basilicata*, a book coalescing elements of his research about peasants' material culture in Basilicata [42]. Following work experiences in Rome and Paris, in 1967 Cresci moved Tricarico, a small Southern Italian town near Matera, to join the Venice-born interdisciplinary research team Polis, with sociologist Aldo Musacchio and urban planners Raffaele Panella

and Ferruccio Orioli. At the time, Polis (later renamed “Politecnico” in 1970) was commissioned the Piano Regolatore for the town [43].

In the immediate post-war period, Basilicata’s peasant culture had been considered an element that held back the modernisation of the region [44]. In the 1960s it was disappearing due to the failure of the Agrarian Reform [45] and the heavy migrations to Northern industrial cities fuelling the so-called “Economic Miracle” [46]. As Nicoletta Leonardi underlines, Polis worked with no nostalgia for this rural past on the verge of disappearing but aimed at giving a contemporary form and identity to the town whilst respecting its traditional values [47]. They did so by developing a long-term participatory process with and within the local community. Cresci’s visual and photographic work had manifold uses in this process. It documented the complex socio-cultural and economic stratifications of the town for research purposes. It played a crucial role in public engagement activities, facilitating communication with locals in public meetings, supporting didactic activities connected to the urban planning intervention and disseminating results of the research via exhibition making.

Although it appeared few years after this experience was over in 1974, *Misurazioni* stems from over a decade of visual design and photographic work in Basilicata developed alongside this interdisciplinary initiative. The book, which had a soft cover and was small in format, is essentially organized in two parts. Following a brief introduction setting forward the contents of the book and delineating the geomorphological and geographical features of Basilicata, the first part provides examples of Cresci’s photographic enquiry into the region since 1967. Specifically, the designer’s visual research mainly focuses on toys reproducing traditional ways of life in small-scale olive-wood figurines crafted by local elderly for their grandchildren. To depict these objects, he adopted photography in different ways, demonstrating an understanding of this medium as a language with its own grammar and power of alteration but also moving beyond both traditional neo-realist and folkloric photography [48].

Cresci depicts the wooden figurines both in their original context and in his studio. He portrays the objects from different perspectives, provides their measurements, selects and magnifies details, and records their essential shape through photograms. Adopting visual analogy as a research method, the designer also includes photographs depicting the real-life tools and activities that the toys replicated, and series of images that retrace visual motifs into the local environment and in different crafts. In the book, this constellation of images narrates these toys at the intersection within the complex entanglement of vernacular culture, affection, collective identity, cultural memory and local natural environment to whom they belong.

Despite testifying to the past and present socio-cultural landscapes of the area and their materiality, *Misurazioni* does not aim to provide a comprehensive inventory of these objects, but examples of an analytical method conducted through photography and illustrations. Drawing on the methodology that emerges in the first section, the second part of the book consists of a selection of visual materials referring to the informal educational program Cresci conducted with the “Cooperativa Uno” s.r.l. in Matera between 1978 and 1979 [49]. In the educational programme, Cresci’s visual enquiry methodology became the guiding principle for an education programme aiming at the rehabilitation of local craftsmanship. In 1982, Cresci wrote in the magazine *Campo*: “In southern Italy,

material culture is wrongly understood as the production of the ‘subaltern culture’ of the peasant world. [...] The *Mezzogiorno* has expressed: rituals, festivals and popular traditions, indigenous objects and languages that are collective expressions of a deep historical memory and that, in my opinion, should have long since become reference systems for design culture and in the analysis of new behaviours and working methodologies” [50]. Not only *Misurazioni* experiments with photography at the intersection of material culture, territorial cultural identity, design and crafts making, it also lays the groundwork for alternative models of socio-economic and cultural development of the South rooted in its material culture.

## 2 To Conclude

At a time when rural tools and artefacts were finding their way into museums, Costa, Superstudio, and Cresci embraced them in their creative practice. Anthropology provided not only a field of enquiry (Costa), but also an analytical practice that could either complement their methodologies (Superstudio) or be adopted and reconfigured (Costa, Cresci). By engaging with rural material culture, Costa, Superstudio and Cresci proposed alternative practices of making and of making sense of the material heritage left behind or still surviving the industrialization and modernization of the country. From their perspectives, these objects retained an essential connection – lost to mass production and to the urbanization of the country – with their function, their cultural context of origin, and the creative potential they embed. Costa’s works sought to capture and restore this connection. Despite their different practices, Superstudio’s and Cresci’s works allowed for the mute language of rural artifacts speak again, not only about the past but about alternative futures and practices of design.

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