

GILLIAN BRETT

Umarell

Text by Patrick Marcolini

Umarell: this is the name given to the pensioner in Bologna who, usually with his hands folded behind his back, observes the work in progress, checking, asking questions or making suggestions. This could be a good image of the man of our time: doomed to obsolescence by technical "progress", all that remains is for him to wander around in the middle of the universal construction site, giving advice to a system that does not need it.

However, a historian of the future (will there be one?) will perhaps describe how, from the end of the 20th century onwards, a new political current, the anti-industrial movement, was formed, which aimed to counter the technological onslaught, considered to be a social phenomenon as determining and alienating as the expansion of capitalism. Influenced by the analyses of unclassifiable thinkers such as Lewis Mumford, Simone Weil, Hannah Arendt, Günther Anders, Jacques Ellul and Ivan Illich, the anti-industrialists have for the past thirty years waged their struggle on a wide variety of fronts, from the sabotage of GMOs to the criticism of the digital age, via the fight against "large, unnecessary and imposed projects".

Recent history has often seen art taking up the political issues of its time. But if we can see what an anarchist or communist aesthetic might have produced, it is difficult to say what an anti-industrial art would be. There is, of course, the memorable precedent of William Morris and the Arts & Crafts, and the temptation would obviously be to return to tools and materials from the "eotechnical" world: wood, stone, linseed oil, Indian ink, etc., and with them all those gestures enshrined in tradition, which the plastic arts have inherited from the crafts. Gillian Brett, whose work is driven by a radical defiance of technology and who is familiar with anti-industrial currents, has not chosen this path. She prefers not to look away from the on-going disaster, and to look the machine squarely in the face.

As she herself tells it, the singular turn of her practice was born at Goldsmiths, when she discovered that this prestigious institution, which prides itself on its avant-garde ecological positions, sends its computer equipment to the scrap heap every 18 months. From these graveyards of microprocessors, screens and keyboards, destined to endlessly pollute some desolate region of Africa or Asia, she has drawn the material for her art. The "plastiglomerate" is her medium. Everything that is going to perish and harm away from sight must be brought back before the eyes of the spectator, underlining its monstrosity and absurdity. Contemplating her *Bionic Leaves*, an allusion to the artificial silicon leaves designed in the laboratory to improve the efficiency of photosynthesis, and *Phusis, Hubris, Debris*, a lake of liquid crystals in which metallic fragments are floating, one is reminded of the analyses of the Marxist theorist Amadeo Bordiga at the end of his life: it is indeed *the mineralisation of nature* that we are witnessing under the reign of advanced capitalism.

Gillian Brett also takes a disenchanted and sarcastic look at *junk food*, defrosted kebabs and hormone-fuelled chicken, the enchanting flip side of which is so-called *smart food*, meal replacements in the form of pills or powders that are supposed to provide the body with all the nutrients it needs in one go. Here, too, she exposes for all to see what these chimeras marketed by the food industry are really made of: the real basis of their production are these glazed electronic components, captured in the icy amber of synthetic resin, like the insects whose delights the same industry promises to soon make us taste.

Gillian Brett's work, however, is free of the fatalism that marks most contemporary art productions focused on the notion of the Anthropocene. In the same way that some twentieth-century art tried to rescue objects from their fate as commodities in order to restore them to the dignity of *things* (in the words of Günther Anders in *Homeless Sculpture*), she rescues the substances imprisoned in the machine gangue from their fate as toxic filth, in order to bring them back to their origin, to restore their intrinsic beauty. Her *Witnesses* already showed this a few years ago: operating a kind of palingenesis of the material, behind the cables, printed circuits and other motherboards, Gillian Brett finds gold, silver and copper in their virginal purity.

In doing so, she goes against the logic of the ready-made that has become established in contemporary art. The imperative need she feels to make her works herself is destined to shatter the integrity of the industrial product she finds before her. It re-establishes the hand in its artistic prerogatives, both destructive and creative, perhaps echoing the gesture of the Luddites of the 19th century, who dismantled machines to defend their freedom.

The resulting works are sometimes double-bottomed, and the naïve viewer can be taken in: see the LCD screens in her *After Hubble* series. With their abysmal night, pierced by glimmers, their silver glitter, their quartz dust, the image of the cosmos that they deliver seems to correspond to the one given to us by the technology itself, that of the giant telescopes sent into space. But insofar as these screens have been skilfully broken, or even burnt, by the artist, the title of this series can also be understood as a post-Hubble, the announcement of a post-technological era where we could finally, far from the light pollution of the metropolises, and without the mediation of satellites, rediscover the poetry of the starry sky.