
**Reviewed by** Elisabetta Mori (Archives of IT)

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*Arte Programmata: Freedom, Control, and the Computer in 1960s Italy* is a critical reflection on an art movement underrepresented in the literature. The book, by Lindsay Caplan, explores the complex relationship between freedom and control and politics in the context of art and the wider sociopolitical environment in Italy in the 1960s, through the work of a group of Italian art collectives and designers: Bruno Munari, Enzo Mari, Gruppo T, and Gruppo N, among others. The author aims to conceptualize Arte Programmata’s history in the context of the political position taken by Italy in the Cold War years, highlighting, in particular, the Italian artists’ relationship with leftist political discourse.

The book is not conceived as an informative piece of literature about the experience of Arte Programmata; it is destined for a scholarly audience already acquainted with the subject and with a general background knowledge of the movements of the programmed and computer arts. It shows how the concept of programming artwork was used as a metaphor to include spectators in the artwork or to program the audience who in a certain sense activated it with their presence.

The book positions the artworks of Arte Programmata within an international context, highlighting differences in the curatorial approaches encountered in two programmed arts landmark exhibitions: *Cybernetic Serendipity* (1968) at the Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA) in London and *Information* (1970) at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York City. Caplan describes the Italian art movement and its peculiarities and differences compared with the international context of kinetic and new tendencies artists and the computer art genre, guiding the reader from the early years to the end of Arte Programmata. The book also benefits from firsthand accounts obtained through interviews with artists and designers.

Given the title chosen for the book, the reader might appreciate a deeper discussion on the state of computer science, the computer industry, and computer business in Italy before and during the Arte Programmata years. This would be particularly welcome if it included the influence and support that the Olivetti company—at the time the main national manufacturer of mainframe computers—gave to Arte Programmata. There is indeed some information on computers manufactured by the company, though occasionally inaccurate, scattered through the book. For example, one might lightly point out that the Programma 101 was not a “personal computer” but a desktop calculator that had some programming capabilities (p. 55). Also, it was presented to the US public in 1965 so it might not have been that influential on the art movement that opened its first eponym-
ous collective exhibition in 1962. As an example, if we look at the contemporary work of the Italian poet Nanni Balestrini we discover that in 1961 he was using a computer (an IBM 7070) to compose his poems. Did Olivetti deny artists access to their mainframe computers? Or because it was a conceptual interest in a general notion of programming that moved the Arte Programmata artists, was no real use or contact with the machine pursued by artists themselves? The lack of depth in the analysis of the Italian computer industry is more striking in terms of the domain of industrial design, which plays an important role in the analysis across the whole book. The work of architect and industrial designer Ettore Sottsass Jr. is mentioned, but surprisingly the author does not acknowledge that he was the designer, with Andries van Onck, of the Olivetti computers (the ELEA series) that the company was marketing exactly at the time the Arte Programmata exhibition opened in the Olivetti showroom in Milan. I wonder if this was a deliberate choice of the author, as the artists were detached from using computers designed by Sottsass to produce their art. If so, it could have been made more explicit.

In conclusion, Caplan’s book expands our knowledge of how art, control, freedom, and politics intertwined in the Italian programmed arts in the 1960s and 1970s. It is nicely written and full of references that can stimulate the reader, and it represents one of the possible perspectives for scholars to critically navigate the experience of Arte Programmata in Italy during the 1960s.

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