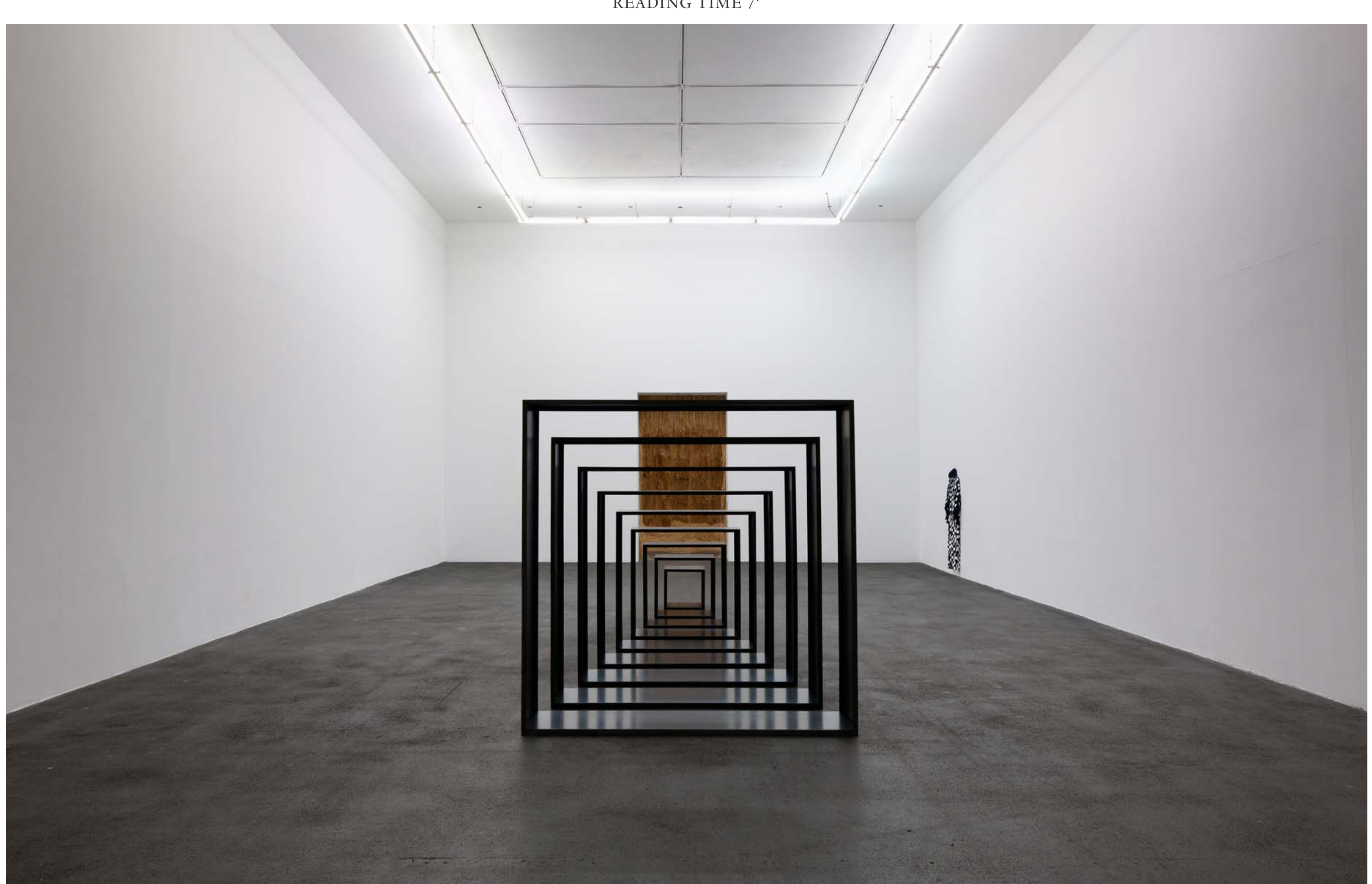


# Gianni Pettena “Anarchitecture” at Le Crac Occitanie, Sète

27.03.2024 READING TIME 7' SHARE



Gianni Pettena, *The end summer, 1966–2024*, Gianni Pettena “Anarchitecture” at Le Crac Occitanie, Sète, 2024. Courtesy: the artist and Salle Principale Gallery, Paris. Photo: Aurélien Mole



“Anarchitect”: it is by this provocative term that Gianni Pettena defined himself in a 1973 manifesto text. The unclassifiable figure has done his best to elude categories, choosing to create architecture without architecture, as he explores the wider field of art and critical theory. Between visual arts, performance, teaching and writing, he never stops questioning the foundations of architecture while challenging the established order, functionalism, and the capitalist logic at work in society. Asserting a non-professional, intuitive and often humorous stance, Gianni Pettena proposes ways of building which link human beings to their natural environment, working with earth, water, wind, or humble materials like paper or cardboard. Born in Bolzano in 1940, Gianni Pettena grew up amid the mountains of northern Italy, a formative landscape he would later call his “school of architecture.”

While studying architecture at the University of Florence in the 1960s, he fully participated in the creative and intellectual boom that took place in those years marked by an anti-establishment trend expressing a desire to overthrow the old order. He developed fruitful friendships while spending time with a broad network of designers and architects that would soon come to be known as the radical architecture movement. It included famous groups like Archizoom, Superstudio and UFO.

The radicals wanted to bring a more archaic dimension back into architecture and design, in the etymological sense of the term “radical,” which refers to the notion of roots (*radici* in Italian). In favour of a return to nature, critical of unbridled economic growth and blind consumerism: such was the state of mind in which Gianni Pettena developed his artistic practice. However, he remained on the sidelines of the groups, asserting his own singularity and individuality, often treating his body as a sensor, a measurement tool, a place of utterance. His residencies in the US cities of Minneapolis and Salt Lake City in 1971 and 1972 were defining moments in his career. In particular, his immersion in North American natural spaces left a deep impression on him. He created major works during that period. *Ice House* (1971) is an architectural performance that consists in covering a building in water at extremely low temperatures that cause the water to instantly freeze. It is a way for the artist to conceive a new ice-architecture based on something already there, but also a means of making that architecture disappear by returning it to nature. *Clay House* (1972) operates on the same principle by completely covering a house in earth. *Tumbleweed catcher* (1972) is a structure that, over time, gradually catches tumbleweed carried by the wind, thus building a random plant-architecture. Gianni Pettena subsequently returned to Florence, where he began a prolific career in teaching and writing. He never stops building bridges between his practices as teacher and artist, while also working very actively as an exhibition curator. He plays an important role in the transmission of knowledge about radical architecture, and also about the artists of land art, arte povera and conceptual art, with whom he shares frequent dialogues and many aesthetic affinities.

The exhibition at the Crac Occitanie offers a rare opportunity to discover Gianni Pettena’s iconic works, some reactivated at the scale of the art centre, and one produced for the first time. Moving from room to room, visitors discover several immersive installations, videos, and various sculptures that retrace the artist’s career from 1966 to today. The presence of the body is very prominent in the choice of works, as is the importance of nature, and a critical perspective on architecture.

The exhibition opens with *Sound Tunnel*, one of the very first works conceived and designed by Pettena in 1966, but never created until now. It consists of a series of metallic frames placed on the floor, forming a tunnel that narrows little by little. A suit covered in scales accompanies the installation. Putting that suit, going through the tunnel, and making it resonate by brushing against its edges turns the body into a sound medium. The sculpture becomes a giant instrument, and the body acts like a breath that shakes the leaves of a forest, as Gianni Pettena describes it in his statement of intent.

In this artist’s work, there is often a way of returning to simple forms, in connection with living things. The second room presents one work from the series *Archipensiero*: a wooden structure sits imposingly at the centre of a room completely covered in raffia. The structure reproduces the form of the classic Graeco-Roman temple, with its columns surmounted by a triangular pediment. Its complete form is only visible from a single point of view, and breaks up as soon as one changes position. Because the body actively participates in the structure’s way of inhabiting the space, the architecture is not a form drawn once and for all, but rather an object in constant motion.

In the next room, various sculptures converse with more elementary forms, like the corner or the wall. *Breathing architecture* is a detachment of the surface of the wall, and *Human wall* is a wall of earth totally covered with traces of the hands that sculpted it, a fusion of body and architecture, as if the latter had itself become a living, breathing body.

Several works in the exhibition evoke traces of a body that is absent and present at the same time, as suggested by the title of the work *Presenza / Assenza*. Dated 2020, it is the artist’s most recent sculpture, created as part of a commission for the Pompeii archaeological site. A body seated in a corner is represented by a depression, like a ghostly counter-form. Created in memory of a deceased friend, this sculpture could just as well be a trace of the artist’s body, a receptacle of its memory in the depth of a whole life. Just as one speaks of “shape-memory” when speaking of certain materials, this sculpture in turn becomes the archive of a memory, a dough layering everything that makes up a life.

The hollow presence of bodies is found again in the series *Wearable chairs* and *Ombra*. The chairs presented in the exhibition are intended to be carried on the back, enabling anyone who “wears” them to sit anywhere, anytime. Similarly *Ombra* consists of a long black coat like the one worn by the artist, concealing a foldable sitting device. These precariously designed objects, created with modest means, reflect the importance that Gianni Pettena places on nomadism. In nomadic cultures, dwellings occupy a subtle, transitory place on the landscape, in deep connection with surrounding nature. The works created by Gianni Pettena are often transient and destined to disappear. Most of them exist only for the duration of the exhibition.

This is the case with *Paper*, an installation made up of thousands of paper strips that fill a whole space, and must be cut to clear a path. *Paper* was first created in 1971 at the Minneapolis College of Art and Design. When Pettena had to deliver a lecture, he turned the classroom into an immense “penetrable” made of paper. He asked the students to cut the strips, and through this gesture they became fully-fledged participants. By thwarting the traditional relationship of authority in teaching, Pettena produced a reversal of the positions, making the act of transmission into a collective work in which everyone possesses a power of action. He has created this installation many times in different exhibitions, always dissolving the architecture and making it disappear while placing us at the heart of that landscape of paper, which we are tasked with inventing.

Pettena’s complex, ambivalent relationship with the architectural discipline is found in an outdoor installation that literally sets the building in motion. Like a formal echo of *Paper* inside the art centre, the installation is made up of white strips that cloud our view of the façade, which they animate under the effect of the wind. Pettena also sees this as a way of remembering that architecture, beyond being a tool of speculation or a piece of profit-generating capital, is above all a language, a culture, and a topic of cultural debate—a debate that he intends to leave wide open to collective discussion. Welcome into the anarchitecture.

—Marie Cozette

at Le Crac Occitanie, Sète until September 1, 2024

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