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Giandante X: An Artist for Gramsci and the International Brigades (1920–1941)

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Abstract

Dante Pescò, also known as Giandante X, was a Milanese anarchist who participated as a militant, militiaman and artist in some of the major struggles of antifascism in the 1920s and 1930s, from the street clashes against the Blackshirts in Italy to the Spanish Civil War. The article retraces two decades of Giandante X's oeuvre, concentrating on his work for Antonio Gramsci's *l'Unità* and on his manifold agit-prop production for the International Brigades.

Riassunto

Dante Pescò, noto anche come Giandante X, è stato un anarchico milanese che ha partecipato come militante, miliziano e come artista ad alcune delle maggiori battaglie dell'antifascismo negli anni Venti e Trenta, dagli scontri di piazza con le camicie nere alla Guerra Civile spagnola. L'articolo ripercorre due decenni dell'opera di Giandante X, concentrandosi sul suo lavoro per *l'Unità* di Antonio Gramsci e sulla sua eterogenea produzione "agit-prop" per le Brigate Internazionali.

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“We are anarchists because of a feeling, which is the impulse of all genuine social reformers [. . .]. This feeling is the love of human beings”.

Errico Malatesta¹

Giandante X lived through some of the most important political experiences of the interwar period, and his art helped to define them. “Giandante X” was the moniker that Dante Pescò (1899–1984) began to adopt when signing his works around 1921.² For everyone else, including the fascist police, he went by the name of “Giandante”. If the “X” coded the refusal of his patronymic and an early break with his Milanese upper-class family, “Giandante” merged his real name with the figure of the “viandante”, the “wanderer”. His itinerant existence stemmed as much from a romantic *Wanderlust* as from his anti-fascist militancy, which was marked by exiles, concentration camps, prisons and jailbreaks.

Since the 1980s art historians have concentrated on the tentative and ephemeral alliance between the Italian far Left and the avant-gardes in the post-World War I period.³ However, Giandante, whose early art practice was embedded in these debates, has received little notice, and his artworks are rarely displayed in the major art exhibitions devoted to the interwar years—despite the fact that this was the period when the quality of Giandante’s art arguably reached its apex. Following the pioneering research of Antonello Negri in the late 1980s, the scholarship came to a standstill, which was only remedied in the 2010s.⁴ Over the past ten years some aficionados have found primary materials (from artworks to photographs and letters),

thereby shedding new light on Giandante’s life and artistic trajectory. Scholar Claudia Salaris, artist/bibliophile Pablo Echaurren, as well as the author, have brought rare documents to light. However, without the generosity of Roberto Farina, a writer, and Alessandro Capozza, the caretaker for a block of flats—who both spent years searching for Giandante’s traces in Italian, French, Russian and Spanish archives—this article would have not been possible.⁵ Indeed, Farina and Capozza shared their archival findings with me, and have been a constant source of advice and information.

My contribution, which is based on primary written and visual sources, aims to provide the first introduction to Giandante’s work in English, and to examine two crucial moments of his oeuvre that still deserve close analysis: Giandante’s graphic production for *l’Unità* (the communist newspaper launched by Antonio Gramsci) and his drawings for the International Brigades. If many—both on the Left and the Right—pursued the ideal of conflating art and life, hardly any far-left Italian artist embodied this mission with more consistency and courage than Giandante in the 1920s and 1930s. Dubbed “the mystic of communism” and “combatant poet”, he was first and foremost an avant-garde artist, one that relied on manifold media and modes of engagement to shape a “partisan aesthetics” in the service of antifascism and anarchy.⁶

Anarchism, Communism and Proletkult

When he was 16 years old, Giandante severed ties with his family, and may have fought in World War I (sources diverge on this point).⁷ After obtaining a diploma in architecture, Giandante organised his first solo show in 1920, which was presented by Adolf Wildt. Wildt’s influence is notable in

¹ Errico Malatesta, “Noi siamo anarchici per un sentimento, che è la molla motrice di tutti i sinceri riformatori sociali [. . .]. Questo nostro sentimento è l’amore degli uomini”, quoted in Elena Papadia, *La forza dei sentimenti. Anarchici e socialisti in Italia 1870-1900* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2019), 177.

² This article was written within the framework of the research project “Ré.Part. Résistance(s) Partisan(e)s: Culture visuelle, imaginaires collectifs et mémoire révolutionnaire/Partisan Resistance(s): Visual culture, collective imagination and revolutionary memory” (Initiative d’excellence de l’Université Grenoble Alpes, ANR-15-IDEX-02).

³ The bibliography includes Christina Brungardt, *On the Fringe of Italian Fascism: An Examination of the Relationship between. Vinicio Paladini and the Soviet Avant-Garde* (Pgd dissertation, Cuny, 2015); Umberto Carpi, *L’estrema avanguardia del Novecento* (Rome: Editori Riuniti, 1985); Umberto Carpi, *Bolscevico immaginista: comunismo e avanguardie artistiche nell’Italia degli anni venti* (Naples: Liguori, 1981); Giovanni Lista, *Arte e politica: il futurismo di sinistra in Italia* (Milan: Multhipla ed., 1980).

⁴ Antonello Negri, “Giandante X (1899-1984). Ricerca artistica pura e decorazione di agitazione”, *Studi di Storia dell’Arte*, 6 (1991): 209-227. Articoli Negri and Silvia Robertazzi, eds., *Giandante X. L’avanguardia dimenticata* (Milan: Fondazione Corrente, 1988).

⁵ Along with Farina and Capozza, I wish to thank Francesca Pensa, who wrote “Giandante X. Arte di un combattente per la libertà”, in *Artisti e resistenze* (Milan: n.p., 2015), 35-47, and Roberto Duillio, see Roberto Duillio, ed., *Giandante X* (Milan: Galleria Anna Maria Consadori, 2013). This volume includes the most complete bibliography of primary source about Giandante, which was authored by Capozza.

⁶ For the notion of “partisan aesthetics”, see Sanjukta Sunderason, *Partisan Aesthetics: Modern Art and India’s Long Decolonization* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2020).

⁷ For Giandante’s life, see Roberto Farina, *Giandante X* (Milan: Milieu Edizioni 2015).

Giandante's early engravings and ink drawings, which are steeped in the incipient art deco trend. Yet, with Wildt's growing proximity to fascism, it is improbable that his support of the young artist lasted into the 1920s. Indeed, the heated political situation soon resulted in Giandante's heroic torsos and saccharine motifs taking on an expressionist twist that evoked the political turmoil of "Biennio Rosso" (two red years).⁸ In the spring of 1919, Mussolini launched the Italian Fasces of Combat. In the ensuing months the Blackshirts began to attack socialists, stormed the headquarters of their newspaper *Avanti!* and harassed "Slavs" in Trieste. At the same time, revolutionary socialists and anarcho-syndicalists formed factory councils and organised strikes that culminated in the armed occupation of plants in Turin and Milan in 1920. While the majority of veterans looked to the Right, some of them launched the Arditi del Popolo (which referenced an elite shock troop of the Royal Italian Army, the Arditi, meaning "the daring ones"), only to signal that former soldiers now belonged to the people ("del popolo") and had to defend them from Fascists. Lacking any institutional support—not even that of the new-born Communist Party of Italy—but swelling to 20,000 members at their peak, the Arditi del Popolo engaged in armed street clashes to hinder the fascists militias' growing control of the territory. Giandante joined the Arditi del Popolo.⁹ After their disbandment in the summer of 1922, and the March on Rome (with the consequent appointment of Mussolini to the role of Prime Minister), Giandante was unwilling to surrender. Along with anarchists, communists, trade-unionists, former Arditi del Popolo and Fiume Legionaries, he contributed to the formation of the Gruppi Segreti d'Azione (secret groups of action), a clandestine network spearheaded by Guido Piceli. Giandante secured for this network hundreds of rifles that were intended to be used, among other things, to

murder fascist high-ranking officials.¹⁰ Around the same time, in late 1922, Giandante created the "setta delle cappe nere" (sect of the black cloaks), a small cultural, if conspirative, group that, according to Günter Berghaus, had "a public front called Umanità Universale—Comunità dei Cultori dell'Arte [Universal Humanity—Community of Art Lovers]" and operated under the slogan "Anarchica la Natur—Comunista la Scienza [Anarchist Nature, Communist Science]".¹¹ If Piceli's armed actions were short-lived, the anarcho-communist plots of Giandante's conventicles also came under police scrutiny. The artist was imprisoned in the spring of 1923, precisely when his work was on display, for the first time, at the Biennale of Decorative Arts in Monza.¹²

The five drawings made by Giandante for *Fiamme che ardono sempre* (Ever-burning flames), a 1920 book by Ettore Sciorilli (an anarchist-minded writer close to futurism), illuminates how the Biennio Rosso impacted upon his work. One plate displays a mutilated man roaming through a wasteland, a figure that can be read as a bleak self-portrait of Giandante. This eerie timbre reaches a climax in the following image (Fig. 1).

Set against a starry night, a stately sitting woman suckles two babies, but her glassy expression is that of an android, and she holds fasces (the Fasces of Combat's symbol) in her hand. The dark dripping liquid on her body suggests that a gruesome act may have been committed against the toddlers. The nation—the woman appears to be a variation on Honoré Daumier's allegory of "The Republic"—is seemingly slaughtering her children. The same motif is found in a drawing (Fig. 2) made that same year for *Avanti!* by Scalarini, one of the most influential caricaturists of the Italian left.¹³ A Socialist, Sca-

⁸ Elizabeth Kier, *War and Democracy Labor and the Politics of Peace* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2021), chapter 7; Fabio Fabbri, *Le origini della guerra civile. L'Italia dalla Grande Guerra al fascismo. 1918-1921* (Turin, Utet, 2009).

⁹ For Giandante as an Ardito del Popolo, see Andrea Staid, *Gli arditi del popolo* (Milano: Le milieu, 2015), 103; see also Aldo Bruno "L'enigmatico e strano Giandante X", *Libera Stampa di Lugano*, 11 December 1956.

¹⁰ Eros Francescangeli, *Arditi del popolo: Argo Secondari e la prima organizzazione antifascista (1917-1922)* (Rome: Odradek, 2009) 209-210. Günter Berghaus, *Futurism and Politics: between Anarchist Rebellion and Fascist Reaction, 1909-1944* (Providence: Berghahn Books, 1996), 179. Berghaus's otherwise excellent work seems to conflate the *Gruppi segreti d'azione* and the *setta delle cappe nere*.

¹¹ Berghaus, *Futurism and Politics*. For the legionaries, see Claudia Salaris, *Alla festa della rivoluzione: artisti e libertari con D'Annunzio a Fiume* (Bologna: Il mulino, 2019).

¹² For Giandante's trial, see the partly fictional account Leonida Répaci, *Storia dei Rupe*, vol. 3, "Sotto la dittatura" (Milan: Mondadori, 1971), 121-124.

¹³ For Scalarini, see Mario De Micheli, *Giuseppe Scalarini* (Milan: Edizioni Avanti!, 1962).



Figure 1. Dante Pescò (Giandante), untitled, image published in Ettore Sciorilli, *Fiamme che ardono sempre*, 1920.



Figure 2. Giuseppe Scalarini, *La Patria*, published in *Avanti!*, 1 May 1920.

larini denounced the assassination of two workers during the celebrations of May Day. The conventional attributes of Italy, the towered crown and the cross of the House of Savoy, are degraded through the addition of debasing iconographic elements,

notably the realistic sagging breast (meaning, fundamentally, “more of a vulgar sex worker than a mother feeding her children”), and the paraphernalia of a 1910’s thug—an arrogant visage, pipe, tattoos and broken handcuffs. Scalarini’s patria fully embraced the grotesque, and identified the victim as a factory worker; this asserts the class dimension of the murder, which is absent from Giandante’s children. While Giandante’s female figure retained a hieratic quality that might seem misleading, with hindsight his image nonetheless appears to be politically as accurate as Scalarini’s, for it unequivocally indicated fascism as the most pressing danger.

Giandante’s antifascism went hand in hand with his anarchism.¹⁴ A fictional anarchist inspired by him and named “Nullò Viandante” (“null wanderer”, a nod to nihilism) can be found in *L’ultimo Cireneo* (The last Cyrenian). This was a 1923 novel written by Leonida Repaci, one of Giandante’s closest friends and probably the Communist Party member that introduced him to *l’Unità*’s editorial team. In the book, Giandante is transformed into a psychopathic anarchist; caught between the ideal of class war and that of tyrannicide, he sets off a bomb in an upper-class café to exterminate the rich. The real Giandante was alien to this crude form of “propaganda of the deed”, but his eccentric aspect—ascetic lifestyle, extreme loneliness and the nailed boots (a putative symbol of errancy) with which he roved around Milan—made for an instant literary character. In his novel, Repaci combined a fictional depiction of Giandante with real events; namely, the 1921 bombing of the Milanese upper-class club Kursaal Diana that killed 21 people.¹⁵ In subsequent non-fictional accounts, he described Giandante as a self-taught thinker, and offered hints for understanding his intellectual world. In Repaci’s view, Giandante was as partial to Lenin and Trotsky as to Robespierre and, not least, Carlyle, whose presence in the political pantheon of a 1920’s leftist might seem odd only if one forgets the lasting fascination

¹⁴ The visual production and artistic proclivities of turn-of-the-century anarchists in Russia, France, Germany and America have been examined by several art historians over the last two decades. Despite this, no extensive study on anarchists in Italy has been conducted.

¹⁵ Repaci knew well the far-left milieu in Milan, as he acted as the lawyer of the anarchists who were found guilty of the attack.

that Carlyle's reactionary anti-capitalism exerted in the socialist movement in Italy.¹⁶ In *All'Universale Umanità. La Fede* (To the universal humanity. Faith) an 1921–1922 text with which Giandante expressed the postulates of his moral/political thought, none of these thinkers and revolutionaries are cited. Giandante's declaration of faith consisted of a poem where he swore loyalty to humanity and proclaimed to seek self-“Perfection” in the highest values (“Art”, “Truth”, “Progress”) and the “Universal Unity” that emerges from “Man + Pure = God” (*sic*). As his pronouncements suggest, Giandante's anarchism had little to do with property and the means of production, and more to do with the ideals of altruism and brotherhood, which pushed him to take up arms against fascism. Based on the limited sources at our disposal, it seems possible to ascribe Giandante to those strands of late nineteenth-century Italian anarchism that articulated a moral, if radical, indictment of social injustice in the name of humanity. Despite the temporal gap, Giandante's “sentimental” adherence to the cause of the far Left recalls the letter in which Engels declared his exasperation towards the Italian members of the First International; specifically, at their heterodox allegiance as much to Marx as to Garibaldi and Mazzini.¹⁷ Giandante's combatant humanism was distinctively eclectic and indeed allowed him to collaborate with Communists (including Stalinists) and Socialists. In order to understand his work for Gramsci's *l'Unità*, a brief detour is needed in order to contextualise the nexus between the avant-garde and the Communist Party of Italy in the aftermath of World War I.

If Marinetti sided with Mussolini's Fasces of Combat in 1919 (and momentarily distanced himself from him the subsequent year), some futurist artists espoused the October Revolution, and sought to gain Italian communists and “maximalist” socialists over to their cause. Among the party cadres, Gramsci was the most authoritative interlocutor of this small contingent of dissidents. Before the war,

the Socialist party members who would establish the Communist Party of Italy experienced strife opposing militants who gave absolute priority to the struggles on the workplace (such as Amedeo Bordiga) and those who were perceived as the “right-wing” of the party, including Gramsci, who wanted to shape working-class culture, viewing it as a powerful conduit for political change and a necessary prelude to the seizure of power.¹⁸ Following the post-war wave of factory occupations and the formation of the Communist Party of Italy in 1921, Gramsci contributed to the shaping of a “Proletkult” programme that looked to the work carried out, on a much broader scale, by the Bolshevik's homonymous institution in a bid to foster a revolutionary aesthetic from below, encourage working-class expression and discover genuine talents among labourers.¹⁹ Despite Marinetti's fervent nationalism and dismissal of communism, Gramsci detected a potential in the futurist movement until the March on Rome. He was not alone in doing so in the far Left, as demonstrated by the positive appraisal of Marinetti expressed in 1920 by Anatoly Lunacharsky, the Soviet People's Commissar responsible for Ministry of Education and one of the main proponents of the Proletkult.²⁰ In a 1921 article titled “Marinetti the Revolutionary?” published in *L'Ordine Nuovo* (the soviet-minded weekly that Gramsci co-founded), as well as in a letter to Trotsky, Gramsci showed expert knowledge of the movement and identified a common ground between futurism and communism.²¹ Notably, he praised the former's destructive ethos, lack of nostalgia for pre-capitalist societies and tireless challenge of the bourgeois given truths. In the cultural sphere, futurism represented a blueprint for what Italian industrial workers had to achieve, he argued; what is more, the workers' interest in the

¹⁶ Repaci, “Studio”; Leonida Repaci, *Compagni di strada* (Rome: Edizioni Moderne Canesi, 1960), 380; for Carlyle, see Papadia, *Forza*, 95–96.

¹⁷ Engels to Wilhelm Liebknecht, 2 January 1872, in Marx and Engels, *Collected Works* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 2010) vol. 44, 289.

¹⁸ Cesare Bermiani, *Gramsci e la cultura proletaria* (Milan: Archivio Primo Moroni, 2007), 39–56 and 121–155.

¹⁹ For Gramsci's position, see Dino Mengozzi, *Gramsci e il futurismo, 1920–1922: Marinetti e una mostra all'Ordine Nuovo* (Rome: FIAP, 1981).

²⁰ Anatoly Vasilievich Lunacharsky, “I futuristi” (1920) and “Un superscultore e un superpoeta” (1913), in Anatoly Vasilievich Lunacharsky, *La rivoluzione proletaria e la cultura borghese* (Milan: Mazzotta, 1972), 127–134, 135–139.

²¹ Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from Cultural Writings*, eds. David Forgacs and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, trans. William Boelhower (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1985), 89–93, 97, 98–101.

movement, Gramsci told Trotsky, was entrenched and widespread before the war.

Much like Gramsci, a number of intellectuals and artists sought to reclaim the emancipatory dimension of futurism. A succinct overview of their main initiatives provides a glimpse into these lively debates. In 1921-1922, the political rationale of futurism was intensely discussed in and around outlets such as *L'Ordine Nuovo*, *Avanguardia* and *Gioventù Socialista*, which were associated with the left wing of the Socialist party and with the Communist party. Echoing these exchanges, intellectual Franco Rampa Rossi (close to Duilio Remondino, a Member of Parliament for the Communist Party of Italy) and Carlo Frassinelli, a typographer and publisher, organised a futurist exhibition that opened in Turin in the spring of 1922. Not only did *L'Ordine Nuovo* encourage its readers to visit it, but printed a part of the speech that Marinetti gave at the opening.²² Under Gramsci's guidance, the Turinese section of the Proletkult went on to organise a guided tour of the exhibition for workers. A few weeks later, the tentative partnership between futurism and communism culminated in an article written by Vinicio Paladini, a painter and the foremost representative of the left wing of futurism. Paladini's resounding "Appeal to the Intellectuals" championed the need to overhaul the Communist Party's rigid position, and to gain for Bolshevism those Futurists who disapproved of Marinetti's anti-communist dicta.²³ Last but not least, the Turin section of the Proletkult published a booklet of futurist poems titled *Dinamite. Poesie Proletarie (Rosso + Nero)* (Dynamite. Proletarian poems; Red + Black). Its anonymous authors—futurist artist Fillia and communist post-office employee Tullio Alpinolo Bracci—signed the volume as "1+1+1= 1".²⁴ The party, still directed by Bordiga, showed little appreciation for these cultural forays. In an article published in its official mouthpiece, *Il Comunista*, a cadre excoriated both Paladini's appeal

and the booklet, reminding its readership that the Russian Proletkult had been launched after the seizure of power, not before it. Its Italian counterpart, the author contended, was both pathetically amateurish and politically premature. Despite this anathema, the events organised by the Proletkult sections in Turin and in some towns continued well after the March on Rome; this included art exhibitions, Fillia's play *Sensualità* and even the launch of a Futurist Syndicate of Artists in 1923.

Giandante took part in these discussions with a short article titled "Art and Revolution" that he published in *Avanguardia* in 1922.²⁵ In his customary emphatic tone, he expressed his partial agreement with a previous article by Duilio Remondino, and saluted the advent of an era of "perfect" individualities where the "absolute harmony of thought and music" would raise hymns to the "free community" of humankind. He had no doubts, the "geniuses", the true artists of tomorrow will be "universal and profound communists".²⁶ Without mentioning futurism, his article nonetheless subscribed to some of its principles: an unwavering faith in youth and a grandiosely optimistic vision of the future seen as a value per se. Giandante declared architecture as "the soul of all arts"; admittedly, the arts were moribund, but a "light" on the horizon would shape a novel universal art, the "soul of the people" (*anima del popolo*). Conflating Wagner, Lenin and Tolstoy's essay *What is Art?* (translated into Italian in 1904), Giandante's idiosyncratic radicalism would soon find an outlet in *l'Unità*, the official newspaper of the Communist Party of Italy that Gramsci, the new General Secretary of the Party, launched in early 1924.²⁷

Giandante and *l'Unità*

The working-class readership of *l'Unità* discovered Giandante in June 1924 when Repaci published an

²² For this debate and the various initiatives see, Giovanni Artero, *Futurismo comunismo proletkult in Italia tra dopoguerra e fascismo* (Naples: Autorinediti, 2009); Berghaus, *Futurism and Politics*, 172-217; Carpi, *L'estrema avanguardia*; Lista, *Arte e politica: il futurismo di sinistra in Italia* (Milan: Multhipla ed., 1980).

²³ For Paladini, see Brungardt, *On the Fringe*.

²⁴ Claudia Salaris, *Storia del futurismo: libri giornali manifesti*, (Rome: Ed. Riuniti, 1985), 261-283.

²⁵ Giandante, "Arte e Rivoluzione", *l'Avanguardia*, 8 January, 1922, 2.

²⁶ For the relationship between Italian anarchists and the Russian Revolution, see Franco Bertolucci, *A Oriente sorge il sole dell'avvenire: la rivoluzione russa vista dagli anarchici italiani (1917-1922)* (Pisa: BFS edizioni, 2017)

²⁷ Alessandro Capozza, ed., *Immagini Contro. Le illustrazioni di Giandante per l'Unità 1924-1926* (Milan: ready-made, 2012). For *l'Unità*, see Fiamma Lussana, "L'Unità 1924-1939: un giornale "nazionale" e "popolare" (Alessandria: Edizioni dell'Orso, 2002), 53, Lussana attributes the graphic design of *l'Unità* to Giandante.

article, titled “Study of the Man of the Future. Giandante”, that discussed Giandante’s latest exhibition.²⁸ Repaci argued that his work ought to be of great interest to Italian peasants and workers, as well as their Russian counterparts. A revolutionary aesthetic was not synonymous with a revolutionary political agenda, he conceded. In fact, Repaci anticipated objections; some of Giandante’s subjects, such as “Man-God”, “Sorrow”, “Crying”, might suggest rather abstract and confusing political ambitions. Yet, he pointed out, Giandante’s militancy and recent incarceration left little doubt about the meaning that was to be attributed to the cities and “men of the future” depicted in the hundreds of very small drawings on display. Giandante’s heroes had nothing to do with decadence and “romantic oddities”; there were no nostalgic “hypochondriacs” in his pantheon, Repaci assured, but rather wide barbaric visages and leonine manes that befitted the “soldiers of the new truth”.

Such allusive phrasing and Repaci’s cautious word choice were probably dictated by censorship. From 1922 until 1926, fascism—which had come to power in a legal way—had gradually eroded the last edifices of the liberal state, quashing dissent and murdering political opponents. *L’Unità* was subject to a strict control for approximately three years before being totally outlawed in 1926. Similar in this to *L’Ordine Nuovo*, *l’Unità* was graced by caricatures and drawings, including works by Piero Ciuffo (“Red”), Gino Simonetti (“Rebelle”), Bruno Zeppilli (“Terzin”).²⁹ This comes as no surprise. Indeed, images were considered to be a powerful conveyor of meanings by the communist and socialist press; for example, Gramsci held in high esteem and owned copies of one of the most refined far-left illustrated magazines in the pre-war years, the French *l’Assiette au Beurre*.³⁰ Until the summer of 1924, *l’Unità* featured vitriolic caricatures of Mussolini, but a series of decrees promoted by Aldo Oviglio and Gabriello Carnazza further curtailed civil liberties, putting a

definitive end to the last vestiges of the freedom of expression. It was at this point that Giandante’s highly symbolic work proved to be a useful tool to circumvent censorship. Between December 1924 and mid-1926, his figures began to punctuate the pages of the daily, and by the end of his collaboration he had made about 75 drawings for *l’Unità*. Given the quality of his work and the reputation that he enjoyed as an artist, Giandante can be regarded as the anarcho-communist counterpart of Sironi, who made drawings for the fascist *Il Popolo d’Italia*, and, incidentally, admired Giandante’s talent, notably the “hieratic”, “warlike”, “metaphysic” and “archaic” tenure of his work.³¹

Giandante’s towering buildings and stern, bold figures departed from the mordant irony of *l’Unità*’s caricatures and comics. Rather than denigrate fascism, his images endeavoured to conjure the ideals of communism, and to marshal the alliance between factory workers and peasants—the social “bloc” and the “unity” advocated by *l’Unità*—often setting it against a dramatic architectural landscape.³² His forceful style is well exemplified by a drawing (Fig. 3) that Giandante made for the anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution.

Two oceanic throngs of peasants (symbolised by a village and the sickles) and industrial workers (typified by the hammers and chimney stacks) converge on an obelisk-like structure and a rising sun, a widespread symbol of the workers’ movement. These dynamic depictions and the pyramidal monolith cannot help but call to mind a verse, between communist phraseology and romantic mysticism, that Giandante wrote fifteen years later: “The masses are a monolithic bloc of social monument”.³³ At times, Giandante’s boisterous crowds (Fig. 4) form, to quote Siegfried Kracauer’s contemporary analyses, a “mass ornament”, and ascend marching towards a radiant factory symbolising the “USSR”. Giandante locates the vanishing point of

²⁸ Leonida Repaci, “Studio dell’uomo futuro. Giandante”, *l’Unità*, 1 June 1924, 2.

²⁹ An excellent work on the illustrations of *l’Unità* was written by a student, Giorgia Rozza, “1924-1926: polemica, satira e propaganda comunista nelle vignette de *l’Unità*” (Laurea thesis, Università di Milano, 2003).

³⁰ Cesare Pillon, *Pia Carena Leonetti: Una donna del nostro tempo* (Florence: La Nuova Italia, 1969), 130.

³¹ This parallel was developed by Aligi Sassu in Marcello Venturoli, *Tutti gli uomini dell’arte* (Milan: Rizzoli, 1968), quoted in Farina “Tra i poveri”, 24. For Sironi, see Mario Sironi, *Il Popolo d’Italia*, 28 May 1928, 7.

³² I would like to thank Maxime Boidy for drawing my attention to the notion and metaphor of the “bloc” in this context.

³³ “La massa è blocco monolitico di monumento sociale”, Giandante, “Frammento. Ricostruzione resurrezione sociale”, in Giandante, *L’Eterno Viandante*, 51.



Figure 3. Giandante, untitled, *l'Unità*, 7 november 1925.



Figure 4. Giandante, untitled, *l'Unità*, 21 January 1926.



Figure 5. Giandante, *untitled*, *l'Unità*, 15 January 1926.

the perspective in a sort of sarcophagus—perhaps an allusion to Lenin’s coffin on display in the Red Square—but nothing in these inspirational masses betrays the tragic defeat of the communist movement in Italy.

Tapping into the iconography of nineteenth-century socialism, Giandante occasionally disrupted his hypermodern cityscapes with a drifting nude (Fig. 5). Although the normally voluptuous female creatures with guiding torches are here replaced by a balding man, the art and crafts quality of the figure was probably recognisable for the newspaper’s readership, who would have been exposed to the imagery indebted to Walter Crane’s work, a fixture of the socialist publications in Italy.³⁴ Testifying to his lucid understanding of the diverse readership that he was addressing—from aging maximalists to youthful red guards who had occupied the factories in 1920—Giandante shifted from an updated version of a late-nineteenth century visual idiom to the most recent graphic design of Russian constructivists. The influence of the latter is palpable in

³⁴ For Crane’s motifs, see *Almanacco socialista. Le immagini del Socialismo. Comunicazione politica e propaganda del PSI dalle origini agli anni Ottanta* (Rome: Partito Socialista Italiano, 1984), 232-237.



Figure 6. Giandante, *untitled*, *l'Unità* 15 September 1925.

the drawings (Fig. 6) where Giandante exhorted to *leggere* and *diffondere* (to read and to spread out) *l'Unità*. Party cadres such as Gramsci sojourned in Moscow, and it is not impossible to posit that, through them, Italian militants had first-hand knowledge of constructivist publications issued in the USSR.

The editorial team of *l'Unità* saluted Giandante’s work and contrasted his energetic and bellicose proletarians with those portrayed by socialist caricaturists such as Scalarini, who were deemed quietist and “resigned”—or beautiful but dead, as in Scalarini’s aforementioned drawing.³⁵ In any case, and for all Giandante’s militant pedigree, *l'Unità*’s anti-dogmatism is nonetheless noteworthy; indeed, the newspaper entrusted to an artist, who was by no means an orthodox communist, the role of devising the iconography of the party’s main outlet.

In August 1925, the newspaper organised a group visit of Giandante’s rooms at the Monza Biennale; in particular, *l'Unità* grouped together its “factory correspondents”.³⁶ In the early 1920’s USSR, Bolshevik journalists solicited proletarian readers

³⁵ R.P., “Manifestazioni d’arte proletaria. La Mostra di Giandante a ‘Bottega di Poesia’”, *l'Unità*, 13 June 1926, 3.

³⁶ Anonymous, “Una visita dei corrispondenti d’officina de *l'Unità* alla mostra di Monza”, *l'Unità*, 4 August 1925, 3.



Figure 7. Giandante's room at the Monza Biennale, 1925.



Figure 8. Giandante's room at the Monza Biennale, 1925.

to send letters, reports and memoirs recounting proletarian life. This immense volume of mail came to be known as “the movement of the workers’ correspondent”. Some factions of the soviet literary world considered workers’ correspondents to be gifted proletarians that the socialist state should support to become fully fledged writers; for others, and notably the avantgarde artists who published *Lef*, the attraction of workers’ correspondents lay instead in their being writers unscathed by “the literary traditions of the intelligentsia”.³⁷ In Italy,

however, the “factory correspondents” and the activities of the Proletkult were by then relegated to a virtually symbolic function, as the dictatorship was shutting down all the remaining spaces for working-class organisation. *L’Unità’s* daring visit, along with Giandante’s 1926 poignant depiction of two resolute workers’ correspondents, can thus be construed as a valediction to the ambitions surrounding the encounter between avant-garde and Italian Bolshevism in 1920–1922.

The impressions that Giandante’s work left on the workers remain unclear, but some of his exhibits can be discerned by examining the photographs (Figs. 7 and 8) taken at the show.

³⁷ Jeremy Hicks, “Worker Correspondents: Between Journalism and Literature”, *The Russian Review*, 66, 4 (October 2007): 568-585.



Figure 9. Giandante, *Galera*, ink drawing, size and whereabouts unknown, 1921.

These reproduce structures redolent of German expressionist architecture—such as the early work of Eric Mendelsohn and Walter Gropius—but also high buildings. The militant tenure was further confirmed by *Galera* (Prison) (Fig. 9) and *Tempio del lavoro* (Temple of Work), as well as by the drawings depicting agile figures whirling a sickle or a hammer, for which Giandante would have relied on the woodcuts of communist artist Gerd Arntz.

These imports are speculative, though, as knowledge of Giandante’s contact with Northern European artists is elusive. The only substantial trace of his networks is represented by a 1923 letter of Albert Boeken, where the architect of De Stijl asked Giandante to provide him with information about Italian modern architecture.³⁸

In *l’Unità*, the journalist reporting the group visit began his account with a critique directed to the left-wing members of the party, who by 1925 had

been ousted from their leading positions, a move that had been championed by Moscow and facilitated by the fascist police’s arrest of Bordiga. The Communist Party of Italy, now led by Gramsci, claimed the legitimacy of discussing how workers busied themselves in their “free time”. After this polemical premise, the author eulogised Giandante’s exhibits in terms that are reminiscent of the idealist aesthetics of Benedetto Croce. The article praised the artist’s ability to keep “art” and “philosophy” separated, and his endeavours were cast as “true art” insofar as they “represented a pure and spontaneous” expression of the artist’s personality. This reading, which was at odd with Gramsci’s materialist meditations on culture, failed to do justice to Giandante’s avant-gardist mindset, which never posited a divide between art and “philosophy”. In fact, in a 1924 gypsum sculpture reminiscent of Wildt’s and Ernst Barlach’s works, Giandante allegorised “Aesthetics” (Fig. 10) as an upset, scowling man (possibly a labourer wearing a t-shirt) thumping his fist on a stump. Furthermore, in Monza Giandante exhibited his

³⁸ Gino Traversi, *Giandante X: vita e arte* (Milan: Giuseppe Caruso, 1963), the letter is reproduced on page 23.



Figure 10. Giandante X, *Estetica*, 1924, gypsum, size and whereabouts unknown.

work under the moniker “Nucleo architetti e scultori della comunità dell’arte” (Nucleus Architects and Sculptors of the Artistic Community), a fictive collective. This choice encapsulated his refusal of individual authorship and his desire to signal the

communal nature of art production, which resonated not so much with Croce’s aesthetic but rather with the thought of several communist artists at the time, “art, both in terms of its origins and its effect, is something collective” stated Brecht in

1926.³⁹ Rather than giving voice to a self-enclosed personality, as Croce would have had it, Giandante's creative undertaking was imbued with a form of altruism that bordered on a mystical fusion with humanity. In his poem entitled *Work*, two verses read like an aesthetic and moral manifest: "and you shall win only by dissolving into humanity/fully accomplishing your mission".⁴⁰

In the ten years after the forced closure of *l'Unità* and the arrestation of Gramsci, Giandante avoided directly political themes but continued exhibiting his work, notably sculptures of armed concrete, and, at least on one occasion, he decorated the art deco façade of a building in Milan.⁴¹ In a retrospective account, he hinted at his collaboration with "legal and illegal avantgarde publications", but also at "about fifteen arrestations" and the relentless surveillance to which he was "sentenced" for ten years.⁴² The most telling document concerning his aesthetic vision in these gloomy years can be found in the transcription of a 1929 talk given by Marinetti in Milan at the opening of the exhibition *Futurismo e Novecentismo*. Although he had become a member of the Royal Academy of Italy (the most prestigious and official cultural institution of the regime), "His Excellency" Marinetti pontificated on the subversive force of the movement he had launched in 1909. Present in the room, Giandante took the floor and expressed objections to Marinetti's speech. Giandante defined himself as an "extra-expressionist-constructivist" (sic), arguing that these two poles ought to be united.⁴³ He conceded that Futurism had seized the potential inherent to "mechanic life", but its superficial cult of machines had pushed it to lose sight of the interior life "of men". For "extra-expressionist-constructivist", machines were instead "a means" to attain the new universal "morality" shaped by the "civilisation of

machines". In his reply, Marinetti first pretended that Giandante's comment was suggesting the latent compatibility of Futurism and Novecento, a vexed question of Marinetti's late 1920's cultural agenda. Then he dismissed the artist's reference to two "Nordic", and therefore "anti-Italian", art trends. Finally, he claimed that Giandante was himself a Futurist, as demonstrated by his décor (*fondali*) for a (yet unidentified) "sound film".⁴⁴ Giandante riposted that the style of his décor may well have been Futurist, but this did not equate with his adhesion to the movement. Rather, it stemmed from the specificity of the medium ("sound film is chiefly cinematographic and the décor could not be expressed otherwise"). Giandante reiterated his point: futurism was merely concerned with the "exterior world of machines". To Marinetti's prompt observation that machines would "spiritually" emancipate human beings, and empower their creative impulses, Giandante retorted that that was not the task of machines, but rather of "anarchy". At this point the exchange was becoming heated and the moderator, Senator Innocenzo Cappa, intervened, inviting Giandante to be quiet.

On 1 October 1933 Giandante escaped from Italy through Switzerland, and entered France undocumented. For about three years he lived between Paris, Belgium and Luxembourg, where he also spent some time in prison.⁴⁵ An Italian exile close to Giandante recalled his cooperation with the Villejuif section (in the "red banlieues" around Paris) of the French Communist Party, for which he made "large portraits of revolutionaries" that were paraded at the 14 July festivities.⁴⁶ To what extent was Giandante acquainted with the Parisian artistic scene? Currently, this question remains largely unanswered, but his 1934 solo show in the Galerie Charles August Girard suggests the need for further research.⁴⁷ What is certain is that on 28 August 1936 he was on Monte Pelado (in Aragon, Spain),

³⁹ Bertolt Brecht, "On Art and Socialism (Fragment of a Prologue to the Comedy Man Equals Man)", reprinted in Bertolt Brecht, *On Art & Politics* (London: Methuen, 2003), 37.

⁴⁰ Giandante, "Lavoro", in Giandante, *L'Eterno Viandante* (Milan: Rosa e Ballo, 1946), 52.

⁴¹ Rossana Bossaglia and Valerio Terraroli, *Milano déco: la fisionomia della città negli anni Venti* (Milan: Skira, 1999), 460. Traversi, *Giandante X* reproduces dozens of photographs depicting Giandante's exhibitions in the 1920s and 1930s.

⁴² Anonymous (probably Giandante), *Canto di dolore e d'amore* (Milan: centro di studi e ricerche, 1946), cited in Negri, "Giandante X": 210-211.

⁴³ Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, *Futurismo e Novecentismo* (Milan: Edizioni Galleria Pesaro, 1930), 18-20.

⁴⁴ Giandante made models that marketed a new media, sound film, at the XI Fiera Campionaria di Padua; see the black-and-white reproduction of one of them in Traversi, *Giandante X*, 34. Whether these models were meant to be used as décor for a sound film, as Marinetti suggests, is unknown.

⁴⁵ Traversi, *Giandante X*, 37. A short, poetic biography written by Giandante himself can be found in Viandante, "Giandante X", *Natura*, 11-12 (1930): 67-71.

⁴⁶ Recollections of Emilio Bolgiani quoted in Negri, « Giandante X »: 219 and 227.

⁴⁷ Deianira Amico, ed., *Giandante X* (Milan: Fondazione Corrente, 2015), n.p.

rifle in hand. At the news of Franco's failed coup, he rushed to Spain and joined the Colonna Rosselli (Rosselli Column), which comprised Italian volunteers. With his comrades and the anarchist column named after Francesco Ascaso, Giandante fought the Monte Pelado battle, the first of Italian Antifascism since the dissolution of the Arditi del Popolo. The Francoist forces were outnumbered, and the attack, backed by artillery fire, was successful. The approximately 650 Nationalists were decimated, and only a handful of prisoners were taken.

Agit-Prop for the International Brigades

Following the early victory of Monte Pelado, more decisive assaults were looming. The Nationalist forces and the Italian units sent by Mussolini launched an offensive to encircle and capture Madrid, which was controlled by the forces loyal to the Republic. Between the 8th and the 23rd of March 1937, battle raged around Guadalajara, a town located to the northeast of the Spanish capital. The Republican troops and the International Brigades first halted the assault, and then managed to launch a counteroffensive that inflicted heavy losses to the enemy. In Italy, the radio announced that Giandante was among the fallen in Guadalajara.⁴⁸ Not only did Giandante survive the battle of Guadalajara, but in Spain, in late 1937, he met Luigi Longo, an early leader of the Communist Party whom he had first encountered in 1923, in the Milanese prison where Giandante was serving his sentence for his post-war antifascist activities.⁴⁹ In Longo's memories, Giandante was now part of anarchist Catalan units stationed in Aragon. It would be tempting to surmise that Giandante's decision to join the anarchists resulted from the May Days of 1937, when Republicans and Anarchists clashed, marking some of the bloodiest and darkest days in the antifascist camp. But the reality is that Giandante never

directly mentioned these resounding events in his texts and poems, the absence of which perhaps reveals his trauma.⁵⁰ At any rate, Longo, who was Inspector General of the International Brigades, deemed that Giandante's role should not be on the front. He persuaded him to head to Barcelona in order to put his skills to the service of the Agitation and Propaganda Office of the International Brigades.⁵¹

Between early 1938 and the end of the hostilities, Giandante supported the Republican cause through his art. Despite this appointment, Giandante remained an extremely solitary man in Longo's recollection. And yet, his prolonged exile and constant collaboration with artists, soldiers and militants of several countries—the International Brigades represented a melting pot of ethnicities, languages and political creeds—had a deep impact on him. Longo observed that Giandante spoke little but his colourful expressions were often an admixture of Spanish, French and Italian.⁵² His ability to absorb the political and visual stimuli coming from the cultures with which he came into contact can also be appreciated in his work for the Brigades.

Giandante made postcards and posters, as well as hundreds of drawings for *The Volunteers for Liberty*, the main outlet of the English-language components of the International Brigades. A leitmotif of his production in Spain is his chameleonic ability to change style in order to engage with a vertiginously diverse audience made of French, Spanish, Italian, German, Lithuanian, Polish, American, Chinese and British soldiers, among others. Consider the frequently bulky body and small heads (Fig. 11) of his Brigadistas (recognisable by their three-pointed stars), which depart from Giandante's mid-1920s lean and bony anatomies.

It is not unlikely that, in an attempt to address the troops with an established repertoire, Giandante consciously opted for the style of artists already

⁴⁸ Traversi, *Giandante X*, 37.

⁴⁹ Luigi Longo and Carlo Salinari, *Tra reazione e rivoluzione. Ricordi e riflessioni sui primi anni di vita del PCI* (Milan: Edizioni del Calendario, 1972), 278-280. In Moscow, Longo found several drawings made by Giandante while he was in the French concentration camps. Longo published them in the final part of his book *Le Brigate Internazionali in Spagna* (Rome: Editori Riuniti, 1972).

⁵⁰ Farina hypothesises that, in his poem *L'uomo che ha visto*, Giandante alludes to these events, Farina, *Giandante X*, 157.

⁵¹ For visual propaganda during the Civil War, see Miriam M. Basilio, *Visual Propaganda, Exhibitions, and the Spanish Civil War* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013).

⁵² Longo and Carlo Salinari, *Tra reazione*, 280.



Figure 11. Giandante, *Mayo-Unidad Victoria*, 1937 or 1938, cm 99,5 x 69.

active in creating propaganda, such as Antoni Clavé's work in *Diez dibujos de guerra*. But Giandante's contribution to the visual language of the Republican camp was in no way a mere emulation of acclaimed models. In the poster, Giandante's expressionist architecture proved its ability to infuse the messages of propaganda with a religious-like gravitas. Giandante resumed his early-1920's bottom-up perspectives of *l'Unità* to stage the epic moment in which a soldier of the Spanish army and a member of the International brigade seal a pact of "unity" above a block of exposed bricks—the severe symbol of a working-class bond to be sure, but perhaps also a reminiscence of Ludwig Mies van der Rohe's *Memorial to Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht*. Giandante's visionary architecture also served the goal of conjuring the primordial defence of a sacred citadel, as in the case of a poster depicting a crenelated tower (Fig. 12).

For a large illustrated brochure (Fig. 13) celebrating the victorious battles of the International Brigades,

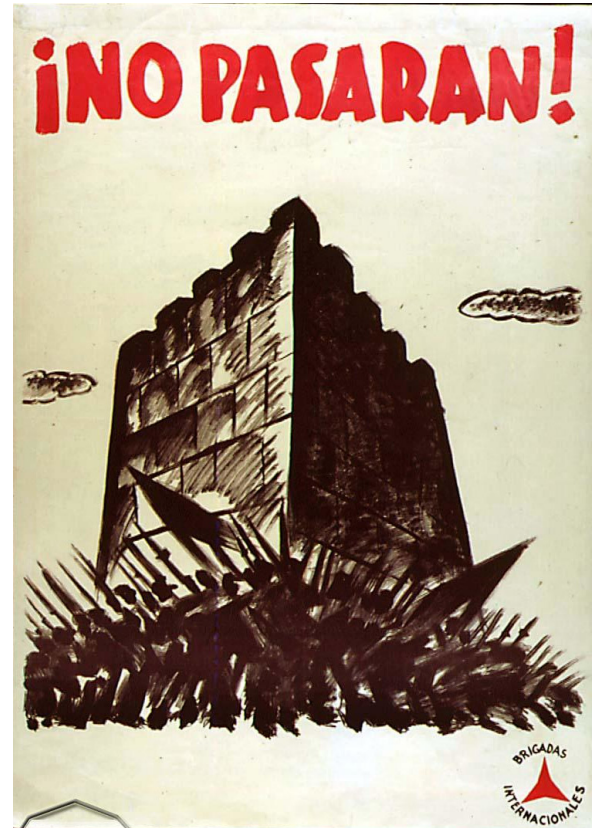


Figure 12. Giandante, *No pasaran!*, 1937 or 1938, cm 99,5 x 70,5.

Giandante again deployed his protean ability to combine expressionism, realism and the style of artists with whom soldiers were familiar, such as Teodoro Miciano (as for the close-up portraits of soldiers in chiaroscuro).⁵³

By contrast, the elongated physique of a man (Fig. 14) throwing a hand grenade at two advancing tanks suggests Giandante's possible exposure to the post-cubist assemblages of limbs that characterise the depiction of human bodies in Fernand Léger's paintings.

If for a postcard Giandante appropriated the style of amateur painters in order to cast "defeatist fallacies" as a folkloric monster, in one instance, he employed the most innovative visual language of 1920's–1930's political propaganda: photomontage.

⁵³ See the frontpage of *3a Brigada*, 16, 12 June 1937, reprinted in Miguel Ángel Gamonal Torres, *Arte y política en la Guerra Civil española: el caso republicano* (Granada: Diputación Provincial de Granada, 1987), 365.



Figure 13. Giandante, 19 Julio 1938 de independencia y libertad, 1938.



Figure 14. Giandante. *The Volunteer for Liberty*, special supplement, n° 17, 18 April 1938.

This medium first came to the fore in the context of a large-scale military conflict during the Spanish Civil War. Its effectiveness did not go uncontested, and photomontage elicited several debates, such as the famous exchange between Josep Renau and Ramón Gaya, which saw the former saluting John Heartfield as the Goya “of today”.⁵⁴ Giandante’s sole photomontage (Fig. 15) is the work of a beginner experimenting with the visual grammar of a new medium, and does not have the incisiveness that Josep Renau hailed as the chief contribution of photomontage to propaganda. Giandante outlines the silhouette of a soldier of the International Brigades, but what is the man’s relationship with the skyscrapers in the background and the segment of Doric temple located in his head? The association can be unpacked by drawing upon the dichotomy that Giandante had articulated when he confronted Marinetti. The glowing skyscraper, much like the technique of photomontage itself, can be read as an instance of the “civilisation of machines”, which Giandante posited as the inescapable material environment of modern art. However, the International Brigades had to avoid any technological euphoria, Giandante reasoned, and stand for a higher civilisation (symbolised by the Greek temple), aiming at a superior form of universal morality. The image suggests that, according to the artist, the Brigades’ historic mission consisted of mediating between Athens and New York, as it were, achieving a goal that entailed the embrace of social justice and freedom—what Giandante called “anarchy”. Framed within his dramatic bottom-up view, Giandante’s photomontage foregrounds, on the level of both subject-matter and form, the alliance of cutting-edge technology and humanism in the struggle against fascism, implicitly understood as a modern—not archaic—barbarity. Probably made in the first days of October 1938, the image should partly be read as a touching message for future generations. In order to convince European democracies to lift their arms embargo, in September 1938 the Republican government agreed with the request of the Non-Intervention Committee, and proceeded



Figure 15. Giandante. *The Volunteer for Liberty*, n° 33, 6 October 1938.

to disband the approximately 10,000 foreign volunteers fighting on Spanish soil.⁵⁵ Giandante bade farewell to the International Brigades, and sought to crystallise their legacy via an artistic medium that had characterised their visual propaganda.

Following the fall of Barcelona a few months later, Giandante joined the *retirada*, the almost half a million people who tried to cross the oriental Pyrenees to seek refuge in France. He lived for almost four years in three concentration camps: Gurs, Vernet and Saint Cyprien. Food was scarce, the hygienic conditions were deplorable and the guards’ arbitrary beatings not unusual. In these appalling conditions, and with the Nazis in Paris, Giandante nonetheless found the strength of spirit to impart

⁵⁴ The exchange was reprinted in Gamonal Torres, *Arte y política*, 166-180.

⁵⁵ There is an extensive bibliography for the International Brigades; see, for example the recent publication by Giles Tremlett, *The International Brigades: Fascism, Freedom and the Spanish Civil War* (London: Bloomsbury, 2020).



Figure 16. Giandante, untitled, 1940 or 1941, adobe, destroyed. Neither of the men pictured is Giandante.

courses on “the history of fascism”, an approach that recalls Gramsci’s tireless political pedagogy when he was in confinement in Ustica.⁵⁶ Giandante also made hundreds of drawings and even large sculptures using “mud, sand and straw which he dried in the sun, obtaining [. . .] adobe”.⁵⁷ One of them, a massive head of Garibaldi (Fig. 16)—a “folk art” piece likely completed with the aid of fellow prisoners—evokes the Garibaldi Battalion but also conveyed a message for the French authorities. The date on the pedestal, 1870, pointed to a specific event in Garibaldi’s life.

In the aftermath of the French defeat in Sedan and the capture of Napoleon II by the Prussian army, Garibaldi rushed to France and assumed command

of an army of volunteers that won a few battles before the French Third Republic capitulated. In Gurs, the mesmerising gaze of Giandante’s Garibaldi acted as a poignant reminder of a socialist “partisan”, of something akin to a “foreign fighter” (to pursue the analogy into the present-day Syrian Civil War), as well as of the Italian volunteers who had come to France’s rescue. But the Vichy government showed little gratitude, and eventually handed over the refugees of Italian citizenship, including Giandante, to the fascist authorities.

Antifascist Mass Communication

Giandante has received very little attention in art-historical accounts. And yet, in the timespan explored here, his work was appreciated by his peers (from Sironi to Carrà, Aligi Sassu and Ernesto Trecani), exhibited in prominent venues and acclaimed by renowned critics (such as Giovanni Titta Rosa

⁵⁶ Alessandro Capozza, ed., *Giandante X artista della libertà: dalla guerra civile di Spagna ai campi di concentramento di Francia, alla Resistenza in Italia* (Milan: AICVAS, 2014), 127. This volume is fundamental to appreciate Giandante’s work in Spain and in the French concentration camps.

⁵⁷ Roberto Farina, “Tra i poveri e le stelle. Vita e opere di Giandante X” (Laurea Thesis, Università di Milano, 2003), 110.

and Margherita Sarfatti). What is more, he lived through, both as an anti-fascist militant and as an artist, some of the most decisive political experiences of the 1920s and 1930s, from the tumultuous street clashes of Arditi del Popolo to Gramsci's *l'Unità*, and from the post-war World War I debates around Proletkult, Futurism and Bolshevism to the Spanish Civil War. While trying to disentangle the complex political references of his thought, two crucial moments of Giandante's work have been at the core of this analysis: his drawings for *l'Unità* and his agit-prop production for the International Brigades. Such focus on the entwining of art and politics has appeared to be necessary not only because this nexus was pivotal for Giandante's "partisan aesthetics", but also because the scholarly lacuna regarding him and his work has led some to present a biased picture of Italian antifascist art. For instance, in the blockbuster show *Post Zang Tumb Tuuum: Art Life Politics: Italia 1918–1943* held at the Prada Foundation in 2018, Giandante's work was conspicuous for its absence. As a result, the wide spectrum of antifascist artists on display appeared structurally unable to go beyond prudent dissimulation, reticence and "interior exile". Without dismissing the political valence of these forms of resistance, they cannot be presented as the only options available to Italian artists, as Giandante's case lays bare. Exhibitions concentrating on antifascism, such as *Against Mussolini. Art and the Fall of a Dictator* at the Estorick Collection, did little to redress this bias. Giandante's work was represented, but only with one sculpture, which was given an erroneous and misleading title.⁵⁸

In 1991, Negri focused on Giandante's 1920's–1930s work, and described his core "poetics" as the elaboration of a style serving the needs of "mass communication". Over the past years, Farina and Capozza (and to a much lesser degree Echaurren and the author) have unearthed previously unknown work and texts by Giandante, offering a more thorough perspective on his oeuvre. These findings, as well as the analyses developed here, confirm Negri's

early assessment, with the rectification that the word "style" should be in the plural form. From art deco to expressionism, cubo-futurism, constructivism and realism, Giandante never ceased to test the potential of these languages for mass communication between 1920 and 1938. In these decades, he never abandoned the drive, to use his terms, to say "with popular words, / crudely the Truth, with strength".⁵⁹ Likewise, the manifold media that he employed—straddling architecture, sculpture, painting, poster, photomontage, postcard and possibly comics—constantly searched for a dialogue with the specific visual cultures of his audience.⁶⁰ Giandante made art deco decorations for a building façade; possibly designed a futurist décor for a sound film; achieved realist banners for the 14 July festivities of the French Communist Parties; devised a finely calibrated iconography for *l'Unità*, and ingeniously addressed the cosmopolitan rank and file of the International Brigades, adopting styles and means of communication that had already gained purchase in the Republican camp. Of this kaleidoscope of works, some require more analysis, some yet need identifying, some may be lost but for fleeting glimpses in photographs that capture traces of them. A great deal of primary research lies ahead, and not only for Giandante's interwar production. His post-Spanish Civil War work also requires reassessment. Less political in spirit—in September 1943 Giandante joined the Resistance after escaping Anghiari concentration camp, but did not become a member of any party after the war—a large number of the paintings that he made in the 1940s and 1950s were reproduced in a hefty catalogue entirely devoted to him that was published in 1963.⁶¹ Giandante would live for another twenty years. But rather than lay the groundwork for his rediscovery, the release of this volume marked one of the last major public events of an artist who

⁵⁸ Ara H. Merjian rectifies this point in his forthcoming book *Fragments of Totality: Futurism, Fascism, and the Sculptural Avant-Garde*.

⁵⁹ "Con parole di popolo dire/rudemente la Verità con potenza", Giandante, "Arte", in Giandante, *L'Eterno Viandante*, 45.

⁶⁰ In Nino Francesco Arienti, « Il *Fanciullo proletario*, comunello, Giandante . . . veniamo da lontano », *l'Unità*, 27 December 1986, the author, a PCI member and the founder of the comics for children *Il Fanciullo proletario* (the proletarian kid), remembers that Giandante made drawings for his publication. In Juri Meda, *La stampa periodica socialista e comunista per l'infanzia tra età giolittiana e fascismo (1902-1930)* (Firenze: Nerbini, 2013), Giandante is not mentioned but he may have omitted to sign his comics. Further research is required.

⁶¹ Traversi, *Giandante X*.

increasingly plunged into loneliness, and whose work slowly fell into oblivion. While seeking solitude was a fundamental trait of his personality, this necessity had now reached unprecedented levels. Towards the end of his life, he even eschewed the company of his dearest friends such as Giovanni Pesce, a volunteer in Spain and a heroic figure of

Italian Resistance who repeatedly knocked at his door, but in vain. In the months before his death, Giandante, the “eternal wanderer” and undaunted anti-fascist, was seemingly living the life of an out-cast in and around the Milan train station. Aged 85, he died alone in a hospital. His body rests in Milan, in the Cimitero Maggiore.