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Division of labour and creativity in artistic production: collaboration with artists in European factories in the 1960s

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This contribution to the debate about the division of labour in the creative process focuses on how artists collaborated with factory management, engineers and workers in European industries in the 1960s and, through this lens, on factors that contributed to a new understanding of creativity as an open notion. The art of the 1960s highlights creative invention rather than realization. While creative practice became more idea-oriented, artists were also increasingly interested in new industrial materials and techniques. This duality is not necessarily a contradiction, because the unprecedented development of technology entails the need for specific skills and therefore fosters the emergence of a new class of professionals.

There are some themes in particular that I would like to address in this text: the institutional or informal nature of these relationships with artists; how this affected the concept of authorship; the legacy of the 1960s experience for how creative collaborative processes are conceived in industry today; and the role of the actors involved, particularly that of the workers.

I will analyse those themes through three case studies: the Italian furniture maker Gavina, the French automobile company Renault, and the Italian steel and iron industries of Cornigliano and Italsider. These case studies reveal different visions of the collaborative process, variously attributing more space to the artist's relationship with factory management, engineers or workers.

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Each example is examined by interpreting the available sources, ranging from publications to audio-visual material and oral history. What these sources tell us, and also what they omit, helps to understand the perspective of all the actors involved in these collaborations. The study is therefore based on a critique of the sources, and especially on how one source impacts subsequent sources. In particular, this leads to a reflection on the circular process of corporate narratives. Briefly, a company wanting to offer some improvement to its workers, enhancing their satisfaction and creativity on the assembly line, might decide to set up a collaboration with an artist. The workers often had initial doubts about what they were doing, but if the company came up with a captivating narrative on the collaboration, this would change the workers' opinion and affect their memories of the experience and how they, in turn, would talk about it, for example, in a company periodical.

Gavina

The first case study is of the Italian furniture factory Gavina. The history of founder Dino Gavina (Fig. 1) is based on encounters and personal friendships which turned into professional relationships, such as his friendship with architect Carlo Scarpa. But the crucial encounter was with Lucio Fontana, who introduced him to artists and architects such as the Castiglioni brothers. Together, they started a revolution in Italian furniture design (a word that was not yet used in Italian) inspired by Duchamp's ready-made, "discovering" anonymous design and reinterpreting archetypical forms. Gavina went to New York to meet Marcel Breuer and suggested mass-producing his projects from the 1920s because he recognized them as perfectly designed for industrial production.[1] During his multi-faceted career he welcomed artists and creatives who were keen to collaborate with him and his employees, guided by a vision of industry that was not distinct from culture, art and engagement. In 1968 Gavina closed his factory and founded the Centro Duchamp, a cultural hub where artists were invited to work on their creations. He hosted figures such as Giuseppe Capogrossi, Man Ray, Julio Le Parc, Gianni Colombo and other kinetic artists.[2]

Lucio Fontana, then, was the most important encounter in Gavina's career. The manager hosted the artist not only in his factories but also in his homes. They collaborated and discussed the most crucial themes in art and

Fig. 1 Dino Gavina photographed by Man Ray, 1964, Centre Pompidou, Musée national d'art moderne, Centre de création industrielle, Paris

design, and it is interesting to retrace their relationship to understand how much almost shared authorship took place. Two examples are relevant in addressing this topic. First, in 1962 Fontana started creating a new series of works, the *Metalli*, shining metal sheets with cuts, incisions and holes (Fig. 2). After a show at the Gavina showroom in Milan in 1964, Gavina asked Fontana for a big printed metal sheet, a multiple to serve as a base for the artist's interventions. The project was suspended because of the high cost of the moulds, and was never finished due to Fontana's death. Left with just a wooden shape, Gavina invited several artists to work on it in Fontana's honour. Lacking interesting solutions, Gavina more recently created a lacquered polished shape, produced from 2004 and named *Periplo*. It is evident how in this environment the problem of authorship is simply not considered.

There is another, equally relevant example. In 1963 Fontana arrived at Gavina headquarters in San Lazzaro, Bologna, with the designs for two works later called *Teatrini*, which questioned the traditional division between picture and frame (Fig. 3). Interestingly, the realization came after long conversations in which the two discussed the issue together. And in fact, the project was finally implemented three years later, in 1966, when Fontana was hosted

Fig. 2 Lucio Fontana with a work from the series *Metalli*, Gavina showroom, Milan, 1964

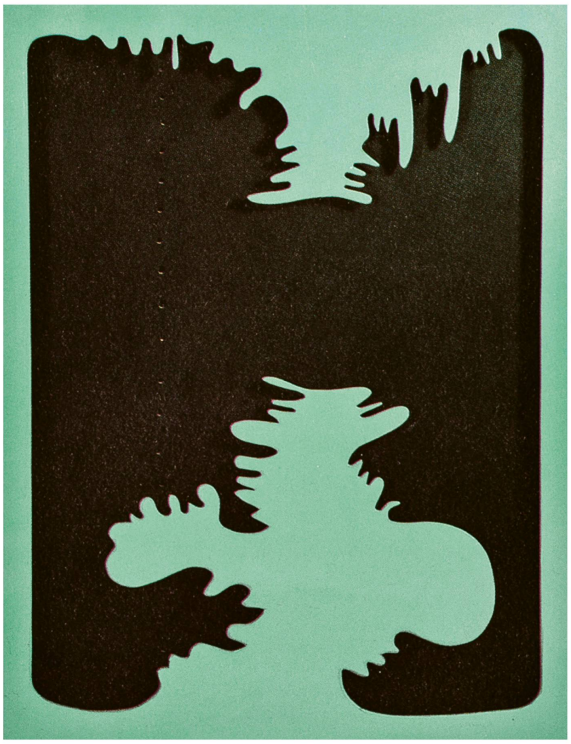

Fig. 3 Lucio Fontana, *Concetto spaziale. Teatrino*, 1964, dispersion paint on canvas (black) and lacquered wood (green), 105 × 76 cm, private collection

by Gavina in his Foligno factory and the artist used the industrial facilities to lacquer his works.[3] This, again, demonstrates how blurred the borders of artistic authorship can be.

Gavina's factory and house in Foligno were a reference point for many artists and a place for cultural activities. International architects and artists, as well as local figures, gravitated around Gavina, including the artist Gino Marotta and the young critic Giancarlo Politi.[4] In the winter of 1966, when Fontana was staying in Foligno, Marotta had just won a competition to decorate a ceiling at the Rome headquarters of RAI, the Italian broadcasting corporation, and he was also being hosted by Gavina while he worked on this. After the working day, they sometimes went to the house of Politi's parents in the evening and had dinner together. Politi reports that Gavina talked about his visionary projects with Man Ray, Marotta about his expensive car that he could not afford, Politi about poetry and television,[5] and Fontana about women. Finally, of course, they always ended up talking about art.[6] The title of Politi's article, "Fontana and Marotta liked my father's sausages", makes it

clear that the author has chosen an anecdotal discourse, and the scenes that make up his text are picturesque. It is legitimate, of course, to have some doubts about this reconstruction, but it is difficult to suggest a reasonable hypothesis, given that all the literature has now entered into the same spirit.

All the sources available stress personal friendships rather than the professional goals of the company. It is true that it was a small company, and probably everything was decided and controlled by Dino Gavina himself. As a consequence, there is much emphasis on his person, personality, encounters and friendships, but little if any information about the workers and the potential collaboration between workers and artists. The literature merely tells us that Fontana praised the professionality of the workers at Gavina.[7] No further comments on the subject are forthcoming, as if this aspect was not worthy of consideration. Interestingly, it seems that the whole collaborative process was subsumed under the personal relationships between Dino Gavina and the artists.

Renault

The second case study concerns the French automobile company Renault. In the mid-1960s, Renault's personnel manager was Claude Renard, passionate about contemporary art and well informed, thanks to a stay in New York, about forms of patronage in the United States. Influenced by the ideas of André Malraux, Renard believed in an art available for all and serving the common good. One can guess that he was also looking for a way to broaden the limited horizons of his job at Renault. Be that as it may, he persuaded Renault president Pierre Dreyfus to create a department called "Recherches, art et industrie". Instead of a classic patronage project, they established an exchange where the "Régie Renault" offered its technical and logistical support to invited artists. This approach coincided with a growing interest among artists and creators in new, inspiring materials and industrial production methods. The collaboration with artists was an attempt to bring together two worlds, that of industry and that of art. As we can deduce from the literature, at first the intention of creating a corporate collection was not clear. But as the project proceeded, it seemed natural to acquire a number of the works that were produced.[8] Some three hundred pieces created under the "Recherches" framework were acquired in the 1960s and 1970s, but in the following decade the

project came to an end. It was only in 1996 that art historian Ann Hindry was called in to revive the collection, and she is still in charge of its promotion and preservation. She also aims to position Renault's collection within the history of contemporary art. The project involved artists such as César, Jean Dubuffet, Jesús Rafael Soto, Takis, Jean Tinguely and Victor Vasarely.[9] But we will focus on the first artist who entered the factory gates in 1967, Arman.

His aesthetic lent itself particularly well to a collaboration with industry, considering his *accumulations* (Figs. 4, 5) of mass-produced goods, through which he reinterpreted the Duchampian aesthetic of the found object. In fact, what is clear from Renault's collection curator Ann Hindry and the company's message is that the factory workshops were used as flea markets *(marchés aux puces)* or department stores *(grands magasins)* full of objects to which artists could help themselves for free, just like ready-mades. Of course, those objects were made by the workers, but the impression from the literature is that Arman wandered alone in the factory as if in some fairy world, and indeed the stress is on "inspiration", "imagination", "emotions" and "surprise" at the magical industrial wonders he came across.[10] Only the artist's perspective is considered. There is no evidence of any direct relationship between Arman and the workers; he simply used what they produced. From this we can assume that the company itself had no specific interest in a collaboration process involving workers on the assembly line.

Apart from the principal literature, it is interesting to hear the live voice of some of the protagonists in video interviews.[11] Ann Hindry explains how Arman's creative process functioned: he was particularly inspired by parts of Renault vehicles, although he made his *accumulations* from all sorts of objects. She describes how he saw the plant as a palace, as we have already noted. And she strongly emphasises that he was totally free to do as he liked.

On many occasions Arman himself talked about his collaboration with the automobile company and how important it had been for his career. He once stated, for instance: "My cooperation with Renault has been a boon to me. My first love was one part. But a tour of the plant aroused my appetite. It was an important turning point in the way I work."

The above-mentioned Pierre Dreyfus, Renault's CEO from 1955 to 1975, is referring not just to Arman but to the company's artistic initiative as a whole when he claims in the same video interview: "Our role in this endeavour is quite unselfish. We do not commission works. We cannot. And we do not guide the work of the artists. […] We facilitate their work. We give them

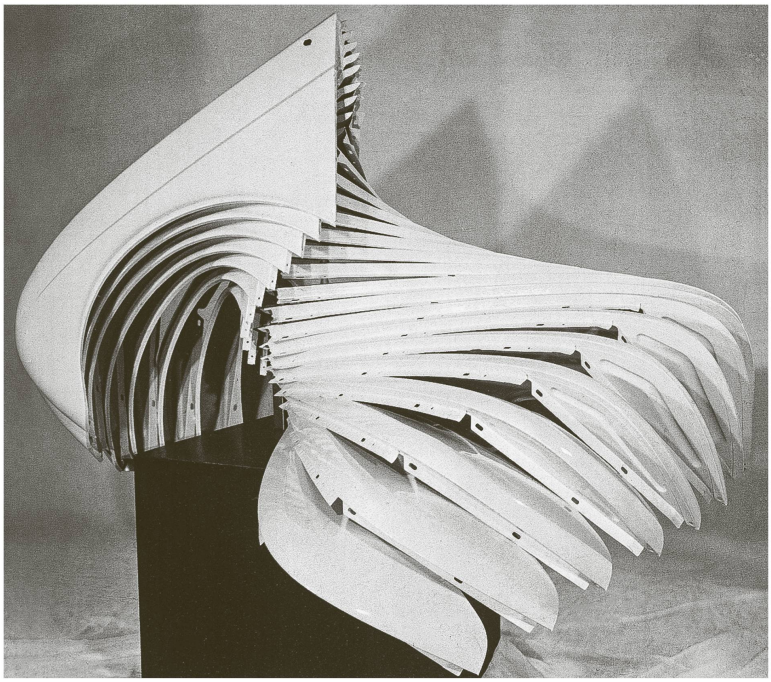

Fig. 4 Arman, *Accumulation Renault No 103 (Le Murex)*, 1967, white car wings welded together, 125 × 160 × 175 cm, Musée d'art moderne de Paris

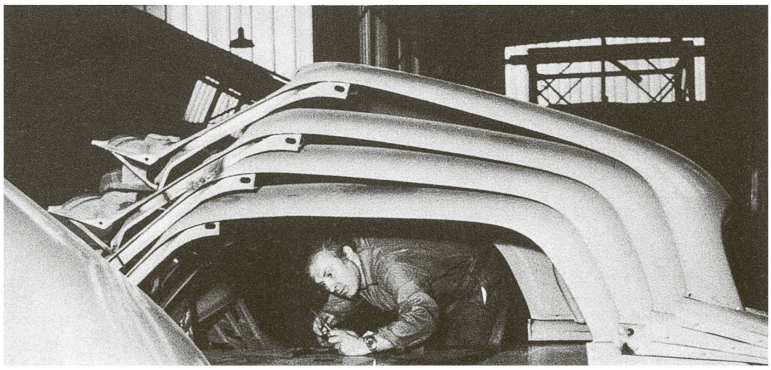

Fig. 5 Arman working on his *accumulations* at Renault workshops, Boulogne-Billancourt, 1967

resources: parts. We also arrange for them to meet our engineers." And true enough, engineers are often mentioned, suggesting that they were the main contacts for the artists.

In sum, what these interviews tell us is that, first, Renault arranged meetings between engineers and artists so that the former could support the latter in their work. Second, the company (the CEO at the time, Ann Hindry today, and the company itself by publishing the video) is keen to stress the artists' freedom to do what they liked.

But at this point we spot a problem: we have only the official narrative to go on. And it has of course been mediated and modified by the company to reflect what they want to communicate to the outside world. The video interviews, as noted, derive from the official channel, one of the main vehicles for promoting the corporate image today. It offers promotional material showing how much Renault cares about the wellbeing of its employees. Moreover, considerable attention is devoted to the notion of creativity as fuel for progress.

As for the present situation, artistic practice has been revived, but no artist enters the plant anymore. Works are sometimes commissioned for the collection and the project has turned to standard patronage. Nevertheless, some collaboration is still possible: in 2011 French artist Jean-Luc Moulène made use of Renault's technologies, design department and engineers to create his two works for the *Foire internationale d'art contemporain* (FIAC) in Paris.[12]

Italsider

Our third and last case study looks at the Italian steel company Italsider and begins with the artist and graphic designer Eugenio Carmi. In 1956 he was hired by the iron and steel works at Cornigliano in Genoa and placed in charge of corporate design until 1965. The company aimed, by means of an avant-garde visual language, to demonstrate steel's potential as a pillar of Italy's modernization. And inserting avant-garde art into the industrial world was Carmi's aim. The idea that industry must be involved in culture permeated all his activities, including the in-house periodical *Rivista Cornigliano*, which then became *Rivista Italsider* when the company merged with other steel producers in 1961. The peculiarity of Italsider's case is that Carmi, the manager responsible for cultural activities, was an artist himself. He believed in the encounter between art and industry, which brought new creative stimuli for artists and the possibility of social and cultural growth for workers and their families. Carmi also invited renowned artists and intellectuals to participate in the cultural policy at Italsider, among them Victor Vasarely, Umberto Eco, Max Bill, Konrad Wachsmann, Furio Colombo, Ugo Mulas and Kurt Blum.

When, in 1962, Giovanni Carandente organized the exhibition *Sculture nella città* to mark the fifth *Festival dei due Mondi* in Spoleto, Italsider participated, taking upon itself the role of a modern patron of the arts. Ten interna-

tional artists were hosted in steel plants all over Italy, where they created their pieces, subsequently shown in Spoleto, with the help of technicians and workers from Italsider's factories. David Smith worked in Voltri, Ettore Colla in Bagnoli, Arnaldo Pomodoro in Lovere, Beverly Pepper in Piombino, Alexander Calder, Pietro Consagra and Carlo Lorenzetti in Savona, and Carmi himself, Lynn Chadwick and Nino Franchina in Cornigliano.[13] In a video interview, Arnaldo Pomodoro affirmed that his technical knowledge at the time was almost non-existent and that without the workers' skills he could not have created his work.[14]

Eugenio Carmi reported that the artists had the opportunity to use types of machinery that they could not have had in their ateliers. And he goes on to recount how the sculpture he made with the workers at Cornigliano fell from a crane two days before shipping and shattered completely. The workers were so enthusiastic about re-making it that they worked day and night for forty-eight hours. Thanks to photographic documentation, the sculpture was constructed all over again and shipped to Spoleto in time. Gian Lupo Osti, Italsider's general manager at the time, noticed the positive reception of the artists by the workers. In the same video interview, published by the City of Genoa and Carmi's heirs, Silvano Carobbi, a former welder at Italsider, is shown talking with Eugenio Carmi in the now-empty factory and remembering the artist coming to the workshop with the material, where they welded it. What came out was, in his words, "something alive, something beautiful", expressing the fascination aroused in the workers by the art they contributed to making.

The film is the first of two records of Italsider's collaboration with artists which are described in this paper, and of all the sources examined here it is the only one in which workers were asked to express an opinion directly. We must bear in mind that their views can often be influenced by the company. Consequently, our understanding of this collaborative practice is contaminated by the editorial process underlying communication about the industry. It is essential to acknowledge the possible traps of oral history and to analyse this kind of source in greater depth. Low-income classes do not have a voice, they are excluded from handing down their perceptions.[15] And even when we have their testimony, it may have been modified over time, by themselves and by what they have read or heard. They may have learned that collaborating with artists was important to the company and, as a result of this discovery, felt that they had been part of something remarkable, but we cannot know if

they were aware of that when the collaboration actually occurred. As we saw above, the circular process of a corporate narrative affects its workers' opinions, and it may also have made other workers want to join the collaboration, aware by this time that they were participating in an exciting experience.

Be that as it may, in the early 1960s the enthusiasm generated by sculptors collaborating with workers in the steel plants for the exhibition in Spoleto led to further projects all over Italy. The first sculptor to enter Italsider's factory in the southern city of Taranto, in the spring of 1963, was Pietro Guida. Many other artists worked in the steel plant during the following years, and a positive feeling about the industry was common among local creatives at the time.[16]

In the book about the artistic experiment at Italsider published by academic Gianluca Marinelli, enthusiasm is reflected in the words of artist Franco Antonazzo (Fig. 6), who tells us that factory resources enabled him to conceive otherwise impossible works: "The workers were always on my side. I went there at 8 in the morning and left in the evening. I was grateful for this collaboration. There was a strong affective response to my presence." The same emotional approach is expressed by artist Bruno Costone (Fig. 7), who comments on his close-knit collaboration with the workers:

> I drew a line directly on the pipes, then thanks to the help of the cutters we obtained images. With the workers there was a beautiful relationship … The enthusiasm was in their faces, they actively participated and made enormous sacrifices, such as working eleven or twelve hours a day; even though their shift was over, they willingly stayed longer. They were ready to give me maximum collaboration.

To our ears, although more creativity is indisputably a positive outcome, the fact that the workers put in extra hours in return sounds like a contradiction, a manifest paradox. This should not be the norm, and it should be avoided in present (and future) creative practices. Artist Aldo Pupino (Fig. 8) gives us the most personal memory:

> I remember the noise of the beating and the feeling of the steel sheet, bent and thinned, crumpling according to the formal requirements. A worker … from Grottaglie, who used to shoe horses

Fig. 6 Franco Antonazzo, *Cerchi rotanti nello spazio*, 1974

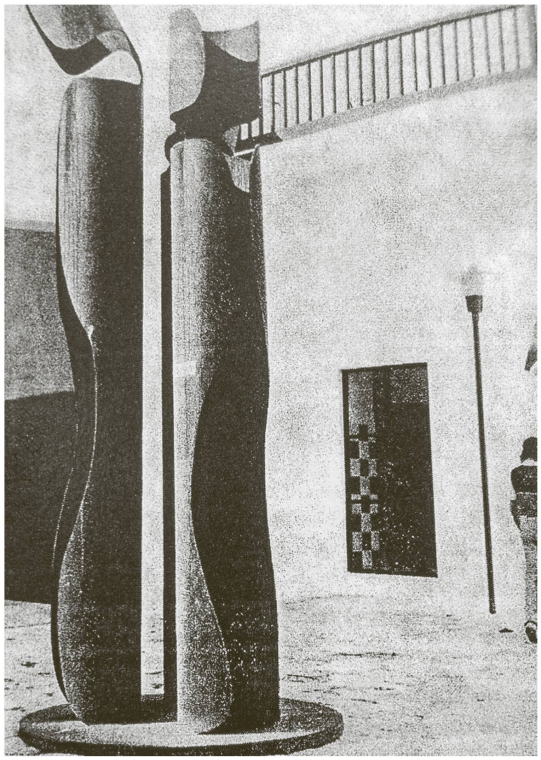

Fig. 7 Bruno Costone, *Personaggi*, 1974

> and donkeys, introduced me to this ancient technique *[iron forging]* with his typical Grottagliese accent and his ancient terms. All the workers […] were sympathetic and happy to escape from the monotony of their work; I constantly received suggestions that told me how excited they were to be part of the creative process as protagonists. Although not educated in the field, they perfectly understood the artistic value of the operation.[17]

What these artists' claims address is, first and as already underlined, the advanced technology made available to them by the factory, which allowed them to build pieces that otherwise would have been impossible even to imagine. Second, they demonstrate an emotional approach to collaboration with workers. We cannot know if all the artists were really interested in this kind of human collaboration from the outset, but the affective aspect is certainly engrained in their memories. They also stress the sacrifices that the employees made, working longer hours at the steel plant. It is for us to decide whether the cost to them in terms of time and personal life was a fair trade-off for this experience of extra freedom at work.

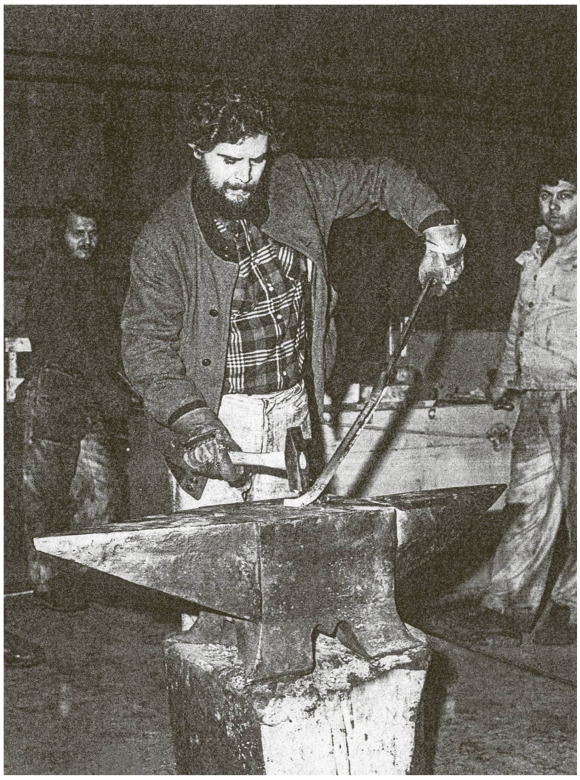

Fig. 8 Aldo Pupino at the Italsider plant in Taranto, 1974

The narrative presented by the book's author Marinelli, an independent researcher, is presumably untainted by corporate intentions. However, how much can we trust the artists he interviews when they are talking about the workers? First, the workers are not directly consulted and considered. Second, it could be that the artists' vision itself influenced the workers' opinions. Third, even the artists could have changed their opinions over time. Their (social and cultural, if not financial) status was higher than that of the workers; they were more aware of their role in society; their vision of the world was not as closely linked to the company's perspective as that of the workers (and managers). Some artists were sincerely interested in collaboration, others were not. They were probably happy about the chance to collaborate with the factory facilities in creating their works, and maybe they made the first move in seeking this collaboration. Nevertheless, their industrial experience was a fruitful yet temporary experiment, whereas for the workers and managers the company represented most of their life. Finally, we should note that there are far more sources on the experience of artists than on that of workers, and this in itself is meaningful.

Conclusion

Each case study has revealed a different kind of collaboration by artists with company managers, engineers and workers. In fact, not all these actors had their opinions recorded – which at the same time tells us something about what the companies wanted to achieve in terms of public image. The difficulties and paradoxes linked to the collection of those voices are therefore evident. In the first case the focus is on the relationship between artists and the corporate manager, Gavina himself; the narratives are the same in all the sources: a golden age of enlightened leaders, a bond of partnership that was personal before it was professional, where it is almost impossible to discern truth from probability and from legend. For Renault, the problem is that the available sources of information are mainly institutional: the CEO of the time, the present curator of the corporate art collection, the official corporate channels of communication. The artists speak, too, via their own channels. But we never hear the opinions of the employees. The third case is the only one in which some voices of workers are reported, albeit in a controlled and institutional context. In addition, the sources address the opinions of artists about the workers, which also provides an interesting perspective.

To conclude, I would like to draw on a testimony by a worker at Renault today. Although the company is clearly making an effort to highlight its attention to the wellbeing, training and working conditions of its employees at all levels, nothing new is happening here compared with what we saw in the 1960s and 1970s. The interviewed employee says: "When I started on the project I was working so flat out I didn't have time to think about it. But since New Espace is in the news, since the Paris Motor Show I realize I'm very proud of what we've managed to produce here."[18] In other words, at first she was not aware of the significance of what she was doing, but once she realized the corporate narrative, with its emphasis on being proud of the company, she felt the pride too. This confirms the point made above about the circular process of corporate narratives and how they affect subsequent sources: we have to be careful when dealing with these, because time and external factors, such as official narratives, can interfere with memory, opinions and ultimately the way we read history.

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Arbeitsteilung und Kreativität in der Kunstproduktion: Die Zusammenarbeit mit Künstlern in europäischen Fabriken in den 1960er Jahren

Der vorliegende Beitrag thematisiert vor dem Hintergrund eines offenen Kreativitätsbegriffs die Zusammenarbeit von Künstlern mit Führungskräften, Ingenieuren sowie Arbeitern und Arbeiterinnen in europäischen Industriebetrieben während der 1960er Jahre. In der Kunst der 1960er Jahre wurde die schöpferische Erfindung stärker gewichtet als deren Umsetzung. Während sich aber einerseits die künstlerische Praxis mehr und mehr an Konzepten orientierte, bekundeten Kunstschaffende andererseits ein zunehmendes Interesse an neuen industriellen Materialien und Techniken.
In meinem Aufsatz behandle ich Themen wie den institutionellen oder informellen Charakter der Beziehungen zu Kunstschaffenden sowie ihre jeweiligen Auswirkungen auf das Konzept der Autorschaft, die Lehren, die aus den Erfahrungen der 1960er Jahre für die Planung von Kooperationen mit Kreativen in der Industrie heutzutage gezogen werden können und schliesslich die Rolle der am Prozess beteiligten Akteure, namentlich der Arbeiter und Arbeiterinnen.

Meine Untersuchung beruht auf drei Fallstudien – zu dem italienischen Möbelproduzenten Gavina, dem französischen Automobilhersteller Renault und den italienischen Stahl- und Eisenwerken Cornigliano und Italsider. Was in den Quellen gesagt und was ausgespart wird, ist ein wichtiger Schlüssel zum Verständnis der Standpunkte aller Akteure in diesen Kooperationsprozessen. Die Studie beruht auf Quellenkritik und rückt in den Blick, wie sich eine Quelle auf die folgende auswirkt. Im Besonderen führt das zur Einsicht, dass Unternehmensnarrative sich im Kreis drehen.

1 Gavina refused to do the same with Le Corbusier's creations because in his opinion they were still conceived as artisanal works rather than for mass production. See Bologna 2010, pp. 8–9.
2 Photographic documentation available in: Milan 1998, pp. 75 and 86–89.
3 See Bologna 2010, p. 108, and Milan 1998, p. 33.
4 Vercelloni 1987, pp. 169–170.
5 He participated in a popular TV show called *Lascia o Raddoppia* as an expert in contemporary Italian poetry.
6 Politi 2010, pp. 50–51.
7 Fontana sometimes had his works manufactured for him. He would give his designs to an employee, who was then in charge of production. As Politi himself states, Lucio Fontana was at home in the new, highly technological Gavina plant in Foligno and used to praise the workers' skills. He also often had lunch or dinner with the workers. See Politi 2010.
8 Hindry / Renard 2009, p. 199.
9 Hindry 1999, p. 39.
10 Restany 1969.
11 Unless otherwise stated, the following quotes (and rephrasings) by Ann Hindry, Arman and Pierre Dreyfus are from Renault UK 2012.
12 Renault Group 2011.
13 Marinelli 2012, p. 23.
14 All the video interviews mentioned in this section can be found in the film Carmi 2006.
15 The fairness of the term "low-income classes" and its implications are open to argument, but it is intended here as a general statement.
16 Today local sentiment about the factory has completely changed due to environmental and health-related issues.
17 The original interviews were conducted in 2006–2007 and can be found in Marinelli 2012, pp. 28–33. Translations by the author of this article.
18 Renault 2015, min. 3'18.

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