GIANLUCA BERARDI’S TOTAL WORK OF ART AND CRAFT

By Florence Derieux

In Western societies, the notion of ‘artist’ did not exist before the 13th century. Art makers were called artisans before artists (i.e., creators) distinguished themselves from craftsmen (i.e., producers) through commissions from European courts. During the Renaissance, artists were elevated to a different social rank by their commissioners, who in turn used them to assert their authority and power. Soon, they asked artists to create not only objects but entire living environments; as a result, artists inevitably became more versatile. Working as personal artistic directors to their wealthy protectors, they not only had to simultaneously create paintings and sculptures, but also mosaics, stained glass, jewelry, tableware, decor, and eventually tapestries. Since they couldn’t learn and master all the necessary techniques, designed the requested items through drawings and subcontracted production to artisans who worked for them.

This major shift led to a lasting compartmentalization of the arts. In fact, it was not until the late 18th century—through the Romantic movement and the contributions of artist and theorist Philipp Otto Runge (German, 1777–1810) and composer Richard Wagner (German, 1813–1883)—that the concept of 'total work of art' (Gesamtkunstwerk) emerged in Germany and Austria, challenging the hierarchical and conservative distinction between applied and fine art. This concept sought to synthesize the arts while also emphasizing craftsmanship and the opportunities presented by modern industrialization. Throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries, this idea was further developed by various artistic movements across Europe. These included Arts & Crafts in England, Art Nouveau in Belgium and France, Jugendstil in Germany, Vienna Secession in Austria, and Arte Liberty in Italy. Later, Dada in Switzerland, Germany, and France, as well as the Bauhaus in Germany and De Stijl in the Netherlands, also embraced these principles. Modernism is inseparable from the multimedia and interdisciplinary approach that defines the notion of “total work of art.” By the 1920s, the Nazis co-opted the concept to advance their nationalist and racist ideology, leading most artists and artisans to abandon the utopian ideals that Gesamtkunstwerk had once represented. In the 1930s, many of its key figures fled persecution in Europe and moved to the U.S., where the Studio Craft Movement emerged after WWII. It spread across the country until the late 1960s, when the Pattern and Decoration movement arose.

In many ways, the concept of “total work of art” anticipated today’s multimedia and multidisciplinary practices. Contemporary artists and audiences alike show an unprecedented, growing interest in large-scale installations, site-specific works, and performative and immersive experiences. At the same time, perhaps in reaction to 'art for art’s sake,' many artists—after decades of Minimalism and Conceptual Art dominating contemporary developments—are rediscovering and appropriating ancestral art forms, predominantly ceramics and textiles, long regarded as utilitarian and decorative—and, by extension, feminine—and consequently dismissed. Our post-industrial societies have unsurprisingly sparked renewed interest in crafts and in everything handmade, unique, traditional, authentic, and tangible. The long-standing division between arts and crafts is now widely seen as obsolete. In this new context, Italian-born artist Gianluca Berardi’s work uniquely aspires to reconcile decorative arts with contemporary creation.

Gianluca Berardi was born in 1964 in Foggia, Puglia, Italy. He began his career as a silk designer for interior design and haute couture, quickly mastering Lyon’s prestigious silk-weaving tradition, which dates back to the 16th century. Determined to preserve this heritage, Berardi sought out the few remaining craftsmen skilled in handloom weaving and the Lyon silk tradition. Many ancestral techniques had been lost to time and forgotten. He revived these techniques and passed them on to the weavers in the group’s workshops. Inspired by haute couture, he set out to revitalize the production of luxury fabrics for high-end home furnishings and fashion. In 1997, Berardi moved to London, where he began working with interior designers like Tessa Kennedy (b. 1938, England) and architects like Thierry Despont (b. 1948, France) for his New York City-based firm. As he began receiving commissions from U.S.-based clients, he spent more time there and eventually founded his own textile studio, Macondo Silks, in the summer of 1999. Named after the fictional town in Gabriel García Márquez’s One Hundred Years of Solitude (1967)—a utopian place where beliefs become reality and a symbolic birthplace for artistic calling—Macondo Silks moved into a loft in New York City’s TriBeCa neighborhood in 2001. At this stage, he worked primarily with interior design firms, antique and art dealers, collectors, prestigious family estates, and the hospitality industry.

Berardi oversaw an international operation, working with a trusted network of handweavers in France and Italy, as well as specialist dyers and embroiderers in India. There, he established handloom workshops and trained artisans—not in traditional Indian techniques, but in the refined Lyon silk-weaving tradition. He aimed to revive the grandeur of 18th-century Lyon weaving in India. As his techniques evolved, he began incorporating embroidery into his luxury silk fabrics. From dyeing plants to spinning mills, his goal was to revive the production of embroidered brocade fabrics woven on handlooms, achieving the same floating effects and intricate details once lost to time. He explored a wide range of embroidery techniques that had long been abandoned.

For twenty years, Berardi worked at the highest level of technical mastery, collaborating with renowned architects, interior designers, fashion designers, and other creatives to produce custom-woven and hand-embroidered textiles for the world’s most prestigious residences. They entrusted him with their visions, which he translated into colored threads. From 18th-century-style brocades and classic Art Deco patterns to his own contemporary designs, each of his commissions was entirely unique and custom-made. These commissions could include reproductions of historical archives, site-specific creations inspired by clients' collections of Period, modern, or contemporary art and furniture, or designs drawn from the architecture and interior design of the properties themselves. Clients often requested designs based on paintings, sculptures, or photographs by contemporary artists. Fashion designer Diane von Furstenberg (b. 1946, Belgium) once approached Berardi with a watercolor she had received as a gift. He reproduced it on a silk headboard.

When he began collaborating with architect and interior designer William Sofield (b. 1961, U.S.) of Studio Sofield in Manhattan, he created silk replicas of Frank Lloyd Wright’s mosaics for the Martin House (1903–1905) in Buffalo, NY. A few years later, during another trip to India, he was inspired to recreate a wisteria mosaic by Frank Lloyd Wright (1867–1959) on silk. To ensure his design captured every shade of green in Wright’s nature scene, he collected leaves from a park in New Delhi, matched their colors through dyeing, and brought them back to his studio in New York. His team of embroiderers then worked with him on his sketches for several months, using 200 shades of thread to achieve precise color accuracy. The finished panel was eventually installed in a private residence in Los Angeles, positioned behind an original Tiffany lamp. Similarly, when clients of designer Paul Vincent Wiseman (b. 1954, U.S.) wanted all the fabrics in their home to reflect the sea life they had encountered while snorkeling in Hawaii, the decorator flew Berardi to Kailua-Kona so he could dive and study the colors and patterns of marine life in the North Pacific Ocean. Berardi then designed and embroidered an exquisite series of 30x30-inch pillows for a private residence on the island. He later repeated this experience to create a new set for the same clients’ San Francisco residence.

Now famous for his one-of-a-kind creations—meticulously tailored to each space—and his extensive knowledge of weaving and embroidery traditions across eras and cultures, he was even commissioned for a personal project by architect-decorator Juan Pablo Molyneux (b. 1946, Chile). For their Paris apartment, he and his wife Pilar asked Berardi to design an entire room—walls, drapes, headboard, and bedspread— in a breathtaking chinoiserie-inspired ensemble. In 2006, Berardi collaborated with fashion designer and painter Ralph Rucci (b. 1957, U.S.) to create four silk organza panels with polychrome embroidery, inspired by The Four Seasons: Spring, Summer, Autumn, and Winter (1993–94), a series of large canvases by Cy Twombly (1928–2011). The American artist would eventually gift these works to The Museum of Modern Art in New York. Rucci used Berardi’s panels to produce a suite of gowns titled Le Quattro Stagioni, inspired by Twombly’s masterpiece. These dresses were emblazoned with color, movement, imagery, and even text drawn from the original paintings. A few years later, Berardi went on to create 12 silk panels inspired by Cy Twombly’s work for a prestigious private residence in Geneva, Switzerland.

Over time, the commissions Berardi received became increasingly creative, challenging, and inspiring, granting him greater artistic freedom. Yet, the weight of professional responsibilities and routine began to take its toll. He felt a growing urge to break away and develop a personal project. Throughout his career, Berardi had consistently overproduced for his commissions—always keeping an extra five to ten meters of fabric in case of last-minute issues. As a result, he had accumulated a vast collection of unique and precious textiles. One day, he spontaneously gathered the first pieces he had set aside over the years and began experimenting with them. Each fabric reflected different historical influences. Early in his career, his work was primarily inspired by the 18th century, later shifting to the 15th and 16th centuries, followed by the Directory period, and eventually the Art Nouveau and Art Deco movements, the 1940s, and beyond. Instead of using these fabrics in their traditional form, he began painting on them, creating photographic collages, and layering various techniques to produce juxtapositions, superpositions, and fractures. Through this process, Berardi embarked on a journey through time, revisiting his own biography—his emotions, sensations, and memories. Ultimately, he succeeded in liberating textiles from their purely utilitarian or decorative role, elevating them to an artistic medium in their own right.

The symbolic and financial value of these fabrics was immense; each piece required months of meticulous, slow, and labor-intensive manual work, representing the pinnacle of craftsmanship. To apply oil paint to such flawless creations—sumptuous handmade embroideries, for instance—was not a decision Berardi took lightly. He could not help but fear that his artistic intervention might be seen as an act of desecration. Yet, he remained committed to bridging the worlds of craftsmanship and artistry. His deep sense of moral responsibility toward the artisans' work never wavered. By preserving the aesthetic excellence of their craft within his own creations, he honored both its artistic value and the process behind it. Over time, his aesthetic and conceptual explorations evolved rapidly, eventually becoming the dominant force in his work.

For a long time, the artist and the craftsman observed and measured each other, gradually understanding what set them apart. Berardi’s artistic practice was driven by a deep desire to reconcile art and craft. To him, needles were like paintbrushes, and embroideries like paintings. The colors, textures, and techniques each played an equal role in the creative process. In 2014, Berardi rented an entire 13th-century palace in Venice, Italy, where his work took on a definitive form. The Palazzo Donà della Madoneta, located on Venice's Grand Canal in the San Polo neighborhood, became the setting for his artistic vision. He occupied all four floors of the building to showcase his creations alongside designers’ furniture, objects, and architectural elements. His works included hand-embroidered and woven silk designs for wall installations, window treatments, furniture upholstery, and accessories, as well as woven and hand-woven textiles, hand-embroidered fabrics, and painted textiles. Woven and hand-embroidered silks were cut into panels of specific sizes and painted with natural dyes, acrylic inks, and oil pigments.

Gianluca Berardi’s erudite blend of references from all eras, cultures, and domains of creation culminates in the Palazzo Donà della Madoneta. In one fully embroidered room, for instance, the artist sought to create a textile world of his own, drawing inspiration from iconic images of Japanese culture, particularly from antiquity. He crafted textile collages by incorporating found fabrics, such as an antique kimono, which he then enhanced with intricate embroideries. In another room, cushions are embroidered with a design inspired by an inlay Berardi once admired on a daybed by decorator Émile-Jacques Ruhlmann (French, 1879-1933). In the main entrance, a large silk panel evokes the famous La Fontaine (c. 1924) by blacksmith Edgar Brandt (French, 1880-1960). Elsewhere, two nine-by-seven-foot panels depicting a storming elephant are created in all-over silk-on-silk embroidery. These massive works took two years and fifty people to complete. Throughout the space, Berardi continuously references the history of modern and contemporary painting, with notable allusions to the works of Pablo Picasso, Mark Rothko, Egon Schiele, and Cy Twombly.

Berardi paints without a paintbrush, using textile materials and needles instead. He creates directly within a given space, without relying on traditional supports. Like any painter, he prepares his canvas: the walls of his building are draped with embroidered and painted fabrics. He then juxtaposes, layers, or covers them with other fabrics to form complex collages of abstract and figurative patterns—such as insects, animals, religious and mythological figures, women, dolls, and flowers—drawn from diverse origins. Unsurprisingly, the crossing of vertical and horizontal lines—the principle that governs weaving—is a constant in his work. Forms, colors, techniques, and structures are meticulously chosen to create a fully immersive, large-scale installation that spans all four floors of the building. For visitors, the experience is both visual and physical.

Each work created by Gianluca Berardi could be meticulously described and analyzed for hours. However, what truly defines him as an artist is not just his boundless erudition or mastery, but his extraordinary practice and his ability to conceive it as a total work of art. While each piece thrives perfectly on its own, it is through its connections to others and its integration into the surrounding environment that it truly comes to life. This idea is reminiscent of the work of painter, architect, and interior designer Henry Van de Velde (Belgian, 1863), who designed entire houses where architecture, furnishings, and fittings complemented one another to produce a complete artistic effect. His own home, Flowery Garden (Bloemenwerf, 1895), represented the definitive synthesis of all the arts—so much so that he even designed specific outfits for his wife to wear depending on which room she was in.

Within the Palazzo Donà della Madoneta in Venice, Berardi’s works seem to weave seamlessly into each other, collectively creating a unique, splendid, sumptuous, extravagant, and hedonistic world. The artist blends a fascinating mix of references from all eras, cultures, and domains of creation. Draperies, paintings, curtains, sculptures, rugs, chairs, lamps, sofas, tiles—everything appears as if it were created by Berardi himself. Each piece exists fully through its interconnections and its relationship to its surroundings. Similarly, any attempt to distinguish between the architecture and the artist’s creations would be futile, as they have merged and blended into one cohesive whole from the moment he set foot on the premises.

Unlike architect and designer Carlo Mollino (Italian, 1905–1973), who spent eight years furnishing and decorating an apartment in Turin that remained a secret throughout his life, even to his closest family and friends, Gianluca Berardi has never intended for his Venetian palace to be a secluded shrine. On the contrary, it is open to visitors and is meant to be reinstalled and reconfigured elsewhere. As the ultimate synthesis of the arts, Berardi’s palazzo literally embodies the limitless scope of his ideas and desires. It also successfully bridges art and craft to create an extraordinary immersive experience. One can only imagine his Gesamtkunstwerke in action… It most certainly took immense effort and courage to embark on such an extraordinary artistic project—and, most importantly, to share it with the world. Now, these words from Anni Albers (American, 1899–1994) seem to speak directly to him:

*“Works of art teach us what courage is. We must go where no one has gone before us.”*