

## Aroldo Marinai's *Frogmen* project: a pioneer of street art in Florence<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** Aroldo Marinai's (Florence, Italy, 1941) first – and, in relative terms, quite late - experience of the art world came through a street art project. Inspired by a recent work stay in New York, at the end of 1979 he decided to enact a creative intervention in his own city through a stencil image of a scuba diver. This act was subsequently followed by a gallery exhibition and the production of a book, entitled *Frogmen: Un segno sui muri come per caso* (1980), in which he collated all available documents related to the piece: a diary, photographs, newspaper clippings and a police report. As early as the 1980s, *Frogmen* had already begun to open up a conversation concerning the complex relationship between street art and advertisement, street art and the gallery space, or the ephemeral and its documentation (before social media). Marinai managed to capture these debates, that continue to provoke interest and discussion within the field of urban studies, – some of them not without a degree of controversy – making them part of *Frogmen*. This article aims to shine a light on and bring attention to a project that up to this point has been overlooked critically, and that merits analysis for its originality as well as its pioneering role within the context of Florence street art.

**Keywords:** Aroldo Mariani, *Frogmen*, Florence, street art, stencil, artist's book, pioneer.

### 1 - Introduction: Florence on the map of stencil art

When looking at the genealogy of stenciling technique within the context of street art, there are some names that tend to spring to mind,<sup>2</sup> such as John Fekner (\*1950) or Blek le Rat (Xavier Prou) (\*1951). In the tags-saturated New York of the 1970s, Fekner started using stencil to leave written messages that drew attention to urban decay (*Warning Signs*). He is considered one of the first to use this

technique for art (artivism) purposes. Some number of years later (1981), in Paris, Blek stenciled the silhouette of a black rat. He is usually considered in academic literature the father of street art and, more particularly, of the stenciling technique. As he has explained on his website and in various interviews, his choice was an adaptation of the New York graffiti culture that he had the opportunity to experience during a trip to the city in 1971. These names are also connected to big cities or centers for contemporary art, such as New York or Paris respectively.

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However, few people would include Florence (Italy) in this map. This article sets out to change that understanding; we are in 1979 and Aroldo Marinai (Florence, 1941), who has just returned from New York<sup>3</sup>, walks the streets of Florence with the stencil of a frogman in hand. His proposal was simple but very innovative. In a city whose walls were

3 - From the end of 1978 and the beginning 1979, Marinai had been working in New York in the area of Alphabet City where he had the opportunity of seeing the letters and signs that covered street walls. He specially remembers the case of SAMO (Jean Michel Basquiat).

2 - Yet much earlier, the case of Ernest Pignon-Ernest is less known. He stenciled the silhouette of a victim nuclear bomb in the South of France in 1966. There are further examples of pioneers in different cities considered by Ulrich Blanché in a forthcoming publication called "A Stencil History of Street Art" [Working title].

covered only with political graffiti, the sudden overnight presence of frogmen captivated the attention of city residents, triggering curiosity and provoking spontaneous creativity.

In Italy, stencils had previously been used for fascist propaganda during the Second World War, with images bearing the title 'Il Duce', in reference to Benito Mussolini, proving popular at the time (Manco 2002, 9)<sup>4</sup>. Blek le Rat also remembers having seen these stencils in Italy when he was a child<sup>5</sup>. Stencilling was also a precursor to serigraphy, a medium with which Marinai was familiar. As Tristan Manco explains, stencils are simple, functional and powerful since they at once connote both authority (fascism, military) as well as rebellious punk (D.I.Y culture) (2002, 12-13). Stenciled letters had been used on canvas since the Avant-Garde movements and the practice was later reclaimed by Pop Art painters. Therefore, Marinai's specific use of the medium for the project under discussion in this essay can be traced back to multiple sources of inspiration.



4 - "The origins of stencil graffiti are often associated with the Latin countries of Southern Europe and South America. During the Second World War, Italian fascists used stencils to paint images of Il Duce as propaganda. The Basques and the Mexicans used the same technique in protests during the 1970s. From these roots, stencil graffiti developed into a true art form"

5 - (after failing with American graffiti style) "So I suggested making stencils, an old technique, ancestor of serigraphy and later used by Italian fascists for their propaganda. I remembered having seen a little effigy of the Duce (Mussolini) with a helmet, a relic of the Second World War, in Padova (Italy), when I was there with my parents in the early sixties" (Blet, Manifesto of stencilism, <https://bleklerat-original.com/en/manifesto/>).



The creative process was documented with photographs, a written diary (both of them having an artistic value by themselves), a show and a publication, which is the only remaining material evidence of the project we hold today<sup>6</sup>. The book *Frogmen: Un segno sui muri come per caso* (1980) (Aka, *Frogmen*) includes all the mentioned related materials, along with a couple of newspaper articles and a police conviction notice.



6 - According to Stelle Confuse, there is at least one stencil that has survived in Florence protected under the official poster structures that the Commune of Florence installed some years later.

The recognition merited by the project is twofold; first of all, as one of the European pioneers in the use of stencilling for artistic purposes in public space and, secondly, as an early example of street art in Florence. The fact that the artistic interventions took on a larger dimension in the form of a happening and a book also allows us to situate this project within in the broader context of art practices in public space documented during the late 70s.

## 2 - The project: frogmen street invasion

The night between September 14 and 15, 1979, was the first time Marinai began to spray the silhouette of a frogman on the city's walls. He went out on a total of 15 occasions, each time during the night, with different company and using different spray paint colors. The book's co-author,

photographer Silvia Marilli, documented the process with her camera. The diary mentions some of the locations and areas of their itineraries, which created a constellation of markings that allow for a visualization of Florence as a mental map: via Zanobi (his address at that time), via Cavour, palazzo Medici-Riccardi, via Martelli, Piazza San Marco, Santa Croce, (and San Gimignano).

On November 4<sup>th</sup> Marinai wrote that his nighttime incursions had come to an end. However, he continued writing entries to explain how the project kept on evolving, eventually to the point by which it had grown out of his control. On November 10, he noted the presence of a blue mermaid next to some of his frogmen. After that first response to his piece, more interventions under other





forms would appear – whales, fishes and various forms of writing. Three days later, *La Nazione* published an article about the street interventions. The article conveyed a sense of curiosity and mystery regarding the project. Interestingly enough, if compared to the official attitude espoused by authorities with regards to mural writing at the time, the journalist analyzed these interventions on the historic city walls without any drama. In fact, anti-graffiti authorities were mentioned in the article only to wonder how the anonymous author had been able to avoid them. The article assumed that the story of this enigma was going to continue and, the piece finished by posing the question: “what will be born on Florence walls out of the encounter of a scuba diver and a mermaid?”<sup>7</sup> Today we know exactly what that project’s offspring ended up as: an unstoppable street art movement.



7 - “Cosa nascerà sui muri di Firenze dall’incontro tra un sub e una sirena?” (article of *La Nazione* reproduced in *Frogmen* 17) (translation by the author).

In view of the interest awakened by the interventions, Marinai planned a public event to “come clean”. He contacted the media and celebrated an opening in Studio INQUADRATURE 33, an art space in the outskirts of the city run by one of his friends. During the party, while guests were drinking and listening to (possibly punk) music, Marinai remained tied to a chair and dressed in a scuba diving suit. On February 5<sup>th</sup> *La Nazione* reported on the event, summarizing the creative process behind the project and revealing the author’s name.

### 3 - (Scuba) diving into *Frogmen* with art goggles

*Frogmen* is so unique and difficult to classify that it is simply not possible to make it fall under any singular narrative or generic category. At the same time, the project shares strategies with many other contemporary genres or schools, such as Street Art, Pop, Conceptualism or Arte Ambientale, to mention a few. It also draws on a number of earlier cultural references. *Frogmen* was Marinai’s first direct foray into art and he never felt part of any collective or artistic trend. Nevertheless, he was involved in the Florentine art scene and had many active artists among his friends. This cultural circle contributed to the project.

#### 3.1 - Art is life. No, viceversa. Life is art

As early as September 17, Marinai had already noted down the idea of creating a publication of some kind (*Frogmen*, 24). However, the author said<sup>8</sup> that there was no plan to produce a book or print publication – only that he intended to document the process somehow. As it has been said elsewhere, the written section of *Frogmen* deserves literary attention by itself. Some entries are obscure and impenetrable, such as one in which he depicts himself as ill and begins to imagine his own death (“... my cancerous cells, crazy and uncontrollable, continue to work in one direction”<sup>9</sup>, 25) or another where he makes reference to a dream – (“Something happened during the night. I know that. End of dream” (25). Perhaps he was describing those nights of tossing and turning, between painting outside and

8 - Interview with Aroldo Marinai, conducted by Isabel Carrasco and Stelle Confuse. 31 October, 2020.

9 - Translations into English of *Frogmen* by June Gale and Luciano Bardi. The edition is bilingual. The original translation is left.

sleeping, which confers a surrealist effect on some parts of the book. The connections to the early Avant-Garde can also be glimpsed in the nocturnal walks that Dadaist and Surrealist artists (1921 and 1924) had already set out. Other sections resemble elements of a collage, where reality seems fragmented: “Justin will be born in Tijeras, New Mexico; but look where Ellie ended up./ Sixteen red frogmen. (...) An elderly man COMPLETELY dressed in read fur” (28). In addition to these kinds of random and out-of-context comments, the text’s layout on the page appears almost like that of a poem (short sentences, shifted lines) in certain sections.

In other sections of the diary, a more apparently “objective” writing style reveals a genuine postmodern awareness of the art world and art system, such as the passage in which he ironically announces to Mario Spezi from *La Nazione* that he is going to ask for a lot of money for his carboard stencil (*Frogmen* 21). Through the project’s first press release, he – albeit rather playfully – revealed his expectations for the work: “I must confess that the article was *not requested*, but nevertheless, I always *hoped* that the article would come out, not only for me, but for the rest of mankind, naturally, because it signifies that there is still room for poetry and art and that the media still have some respect left for their public” (33). He even dared to define art, in the



following terms: "(...) art is the unfolding of a philosophy, an artistic product is essentially a product of thoughts and philosophical theories" (36) resonating Joseph Kosuth's essay *Art after philosophy* (1969). This is also the case when he writes: "Art as life. No, viceversa. Life as art" (24). All these comments exhibit a self-referential attitude towards the creation process, in line with many art trends of the time.

### 3.2 - Sub (aquatic) Culture

The shape of a *uomo rana* (frogman) was chosen arbitrarily; it could have been that or anything else. Another way to characterize the work is with the word *sub* (*un sub/ a sub*). *Sub* refers to the act of diving (downwards), as well as to *under* as a prefix<sup>10</sup>. As an under-water reference, imagination takes us to the flood of 1966 in Florence – an event that was not so far away in Aroldo's own memory. The Arno river invaded the streets, the city became a tank with aquatic creatures, the natural and mental boundaries of the metropolis were erased. Marinai's subs did something very similar, dissolving the boundaries that separate art and life.

As a prefix, *sub* takes us to the 'lower' or more peripheral parts of the system, the type of *subculture* Marinai witnessed in New York. From the *suburb*, from the margins of the system (the illegality of his interventions and the clandestinity of the night), Marinai reflected upon his position within the 'system' of the art world in the following way: "(...) ONE KNOWS that the system leaves some marginal space and, therefore, I AM IN this system, in fact, Christ, perhaps I am after all a reflection of the system, and therefore I AM THE SYSTEM. This is a very sad one" (33). As it has been pointed out, Mariani was not an outsider in the art world. But the first time he decided to become an artist, he did so with a considerable degree of transgression or, as he puts it, "a provocation of the great metropolis" that did not then exist in Italy<sup>11</sup>. *Frogmen* did not appear to follow any overt political agenda. However, analyzed in its social and political contexts, his experimental and playful<sup>12</sup>

10 - Marinai already clearly alert on the significance of the term 'sub' (with its verbal meanings, rather than its function as an image) in his interview with Spezi (21).

11 - Interview with Aroldo Marinai, vid note 8.

12 - Marinai seemed to enjoy the idea of getting dirty as children do without any complex: "I lift the sten-

open project, developed in public space without official authorization or sanction, can be understood as *subversive* in the wider sense of the word.

### 3.3 - Arte Diffusa<sup>13</sup>

During the convulsive years of the late 70s and the early 80s, Italy was witnessing a wave of protests - the so-called *Anni di Piombo* (leaden years), characterized by ideological polarization, political violence, terrorism, and students' and workers' strikes. As Pino Marchi explains and documents in *Italia Spray*, at the end of the 1970s, Florence was no different to other Italian cities in the sense that its walls were loaded with graffiti<sup>14</sup> inherited from the spirit of May 1968. Walls spoke of anti-fascism, communism, government, sport, anticlericism, education, abortion, divorce, labor and rights (4), sometimes using very vulgar language. Walls reflected the need of anonymous people (students, workers, football ultras, etc.) to spontaneously express themselves within hostile political contexts.

Of course, many artists were not indifferent to the social issues resulting from the authorities' deficient management and that led them to work in a more autonomous way, exploring alternative connections with the public towards a more active participation of the viewer, as well as creating in non-traditional spaces, especially in public space. As Martina Tanga explains: "Artists did not remain disconnected from these inequalities and, feeling a sense of urgency, made work that directly addressed Italy's social issues. They expanded their practice into nontraditional spaces" (6); "Activists and artists, as well as sociologists and academics from other disciplines, took the city as their

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cil and spray the color that leaves prints on my fingers, and my nails will remain yellow for several days. (This thing will fascinate me) (...) I am satisfied with what I am doing because I am enjoying myself" (*Frogmen* 24).

13 - This title refers to the concept "diffused network" (*rete diffusa*) that Tanga (7) uses to refer to the connection between artists who worked under the umbrella of the so-called *Arte Ambientale*. They did not feel part of a group, a trend or a movement. They were simply individuals who shared some principles about art and that led them to specific collaborations and to generate the idea of a network.

14 - Marchi also explains that these writings were frequently washed and re-written soon again (4).



subject during the 1970s because of the dysfunctional and exploitative way many Italian urban centers had undergone radical changes since 1945” (13). Some Italian artists who worked along the above-mentioned lines were part of the umbrella term *Arte Ambientale*: “Artists and critics alike started to use the term during the 1970s to define the expansion of aesthetic practices out of museums and galleries into streets and piazzas. This type of site-specific art engaged with the urban environment as a space of social relations” (Tanga, 2). Marinai wasn’t part of this or any other group, yet he had friends who were (Luciano Bartolini, Mario Mariotti, Paolo Masi, Maurizio Nannucci, Paolo Scheggi). It is fair to assume that certain understandings of art were shared among these intellectual circles. *Frogmen* thus adhere to many of the principles held among the above-mentioned network, such as the expansion of exhibition space outside the museum, the intention to alter the role of the viewer through participation, and the notion of escaping the commodifying logic of the art market by creating ephemeral artworks.

### 3.4 - Open minded frogs

Tanga states that many of the ideas theorized by Claire Bishop concerning participatory art in the 90s can be retrospectively applied to *Arte Ambientale* (5) because it offers new readings of it. And, we add that, by extension, the notion of participatory art also allows to reframe this unclassifiable project. Although Marinai probably did not know what exactly to expect, he acknowledged the direct connection to the public in his writings: “Certainly, it will take time before someone sees the figure on the wall, and stops to look at it, and then sees another, and then associates the two figures and triggers off an action where curiosity and/or disapproval acquire an active significance” (Frogmen 24). The frogmen not only established a dialogue with features of the urban environment such as posters, window shops, or street signs; it also connected to the passer-by who responded by reframing frogmen with anarchist or feminist signs or by introducing a narrative. For example, adding mermaids in positions that seemed to show these new figures being followed by the frogmen, or running away from them, or, for instance, by adding whales with open mouths in the direction of the frogmen. Another



form of creative response consisted of speech balloons being added to the images, giving the impression of the various characters being in conversation with one another.

This way of interacting with the public was relatively new and had the power to intrigue people. In 1991, Alessandro Vezzosi wrote: “We watched for months, stupefied and curious, as these signs on the backdrops of the streets proliferated. Sirens and figures from some unknown repertory, with mysterious meaning added by other anonymous artists, came to keep the scuba diver company and create parallel stories. With similar actions in the ephemeral ambience of the city, Marinai set off chain reactions which not even a court sentence, a happening in a gallery and a book [*Frogmen*] have succeeded in bringing to a close” (*Ars Levis*, page not numbered). The need to leave a mark is inherent to mankind. Marinai activated this pre-existing need in Florence, through his work on the city’s walls, in a way that had never been witnessed before. Encounters with the frogmen pushed residents’ and visitors’ exploratory impulses, encouraging them to continue the idea of leaving other pieces or interacting with the frogmen. This, in the process, transformed a personal project into a collaborative open one. Certain images from the beginning of the 1980 showed a level of saturation on some of Florence’s corners not unlike those of today, thus, anticipating a twenty first-century fashion.

Some artists from that time were creating participatory proposals in public space from the perspective of the cultural operator (Tanga 14), a term from leftist literature preferred by some artists at the time that helped them stress their role as cultural instigators. Art at the service of this type of activism could provide temporary utopias that



satisfied people’s need to claim and reclaim public space. *Frogmen* was not part of establishment art, yet nor it was an activist one. *Frogmen* was a subtle and poetic proposal that operated at a symbolic level making people feel engaged, rethinking the public’s right to the city walls and therefore setting up a new relationship with the city.

### 3.5 - Pop-Frog

*Frogmen* also abounds in references to Pop Art. The stencil provided the impersonality of the sign while the concept of repetition secured engagement<sup>15</sup> which resonates to Warhol’s enumeration titles. However, while the spontaneous responses to the frogmen transformed the work into something bigger, these responses, Marinai concedes, at the same time served to banalize it: “Mural responses proliferate. Multicolored fish appear, gold whales, more mermaids, false publicity for a “Frogmen club” (and these make my work remarkably banal to the unaware passerby, reducing it to conventionality and consumerism, thus annihilating curiosity)” (33-34). Similar to what is happening in our cities today, a high-level visual saturation can make interventions (and advertisement) invisible.

In *Street Logos* (2004) Tristan Manco reviews this transition from graffiti writing to illegibility, something that was later extended to logos and images in one of the multiple readings that can be made of street art (43). Guerrilla marketing or “brandarism” as Banksy put in 2003, “These logotypes or “street logos” work on both ancient and modern principles, communicating to us without words, like the geoglyphic symbols carved into the landscape by the pre-Inca people of Peru or the icons on a mobile phone. The pictographic

15 - “I am trying to say something to the city (...) Twenty-four frogmen in the neighborhood of Santa Croce” (*Frogmen* 24).





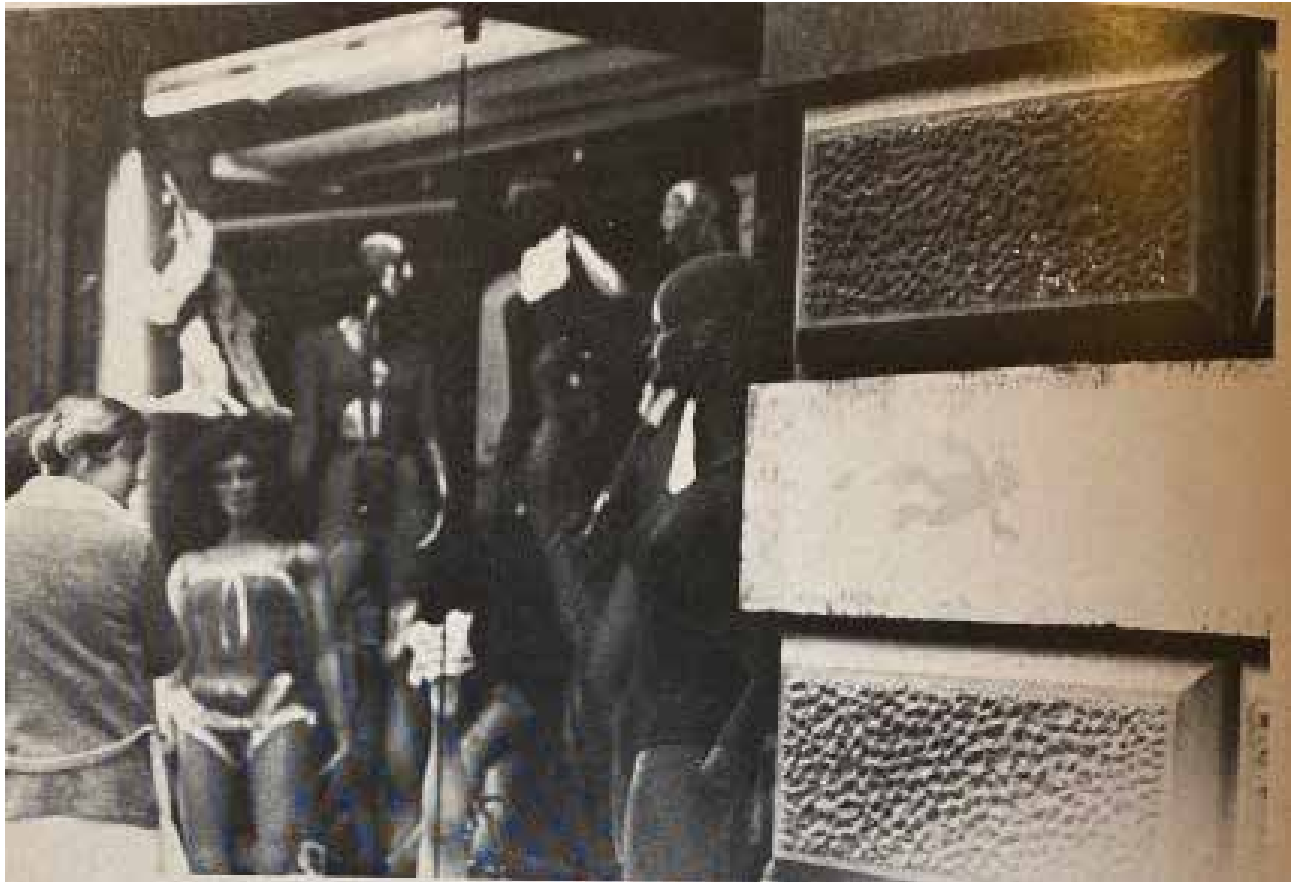
symbol has been at the heart of visual communication throughout history (Manco, 2004, 8). With a solid career as a graphist behind him, Marinai was not only familiar with the language of logos; he was also familiar with the theories that challenged this logic. In his interview with Spezi (21), Marinai mentions Barthes to explain the evolution of the frogman as a sign (whose meaning can be relocated and separated from the sign) to become a symbol, therefore part of a cultural code and for that reason less threatening and intriguing (he says that it becomes “less dangerous” 21). The analysis of frogmen as a sign in the context of advertisement and consumption permeates the whole book and includes himself as an artist: “Aroldo Marinai will live an artist’s life, will chance asserting a decent idea of art, he will die for you. Buy his work (Project for advertisement)” (26). The same goes for the stencils’ locations and the photographic angles. For example, on page 44, one picture shows a stencil on the space left by a

half-torn publicity poster. Another picture (44) displays the frogmen next to a shop window (that temple of Surrealism) where mannequins accumulate while a passer-by is looking at the spectacle<sup>16</sup>.

There is another reference to the Avant-Garde (Futurism, Dada) and the call to liberate signs from their traditional function with a poem whose signs have been cut randomly *WHATS A YA/ CALLA/ CONSUMAS/ S’CIETY/ IS WHATSA / UZ CALLA/ FANGULE*<sup>17</sup> (14)- “What you call consumer society, I call it shit/fuck it”.

16 - It is important to remember that the reflections about the spectacularization of the city as a space of consumerism art and philosophy was precisely developed in the context of the intellectual debate of May 1968 onwards, and particularly with the work, *La société du spectacle* by Guy Debord in 1967.

17 - “QUELE/ QUE VOI/ CHIAMA/ SOCIETÀ DI/ CONSUMO/ È QUELLE/ CHE NOI/ CHIAMA/ SCIT”



#### 4 - Conclusion:

*Frogmen* was not only a first for the history of stencil in the context of Florentine and Italian urban art. It was also the first time Marinai had used stencil, before returning to the medium in his later canvas paintings<sup>18</sup>. He never intervened in public space again, which made *Frogmen* an exceptional art piece in all senses. He continued his career as a painter participating in numerous solo exhibitions in Italy and abroad. In the last fifteen years of his work he focused on this role as a publisher (SMITH19). In addition, *Frogmen* brought to Florence the concept of tagging using an image, as well as that of the getting-up almost before the arrival of New York graffiti<sup>20</sup> in Italy.

*Frogmen* is a rare, solid and unknown project that nevertheless deserves recognition both in the field of street and institutional art because its elaboration and complexity allow also for an in-depth analysis in the context of contemporary Italian art in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This article hopes to begin to bring this project as well as this author the attention and relevance that both deserve. In the words of Marinai himself, as he put it on September 24: "I like to think I am uncovering the new or the forgotten (...)" (24).

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18 - Such as in the painting *Centaurus* from 2006.

19 - <https://www.aroldomarinai.net/>

20 - Lee Quiñones and Fab 5 Freddy were exhibited in the gallery Medusa in Rome in December 1979.



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