

“A self-respecting man is a man without a country” according to a famous aphorism by Emil Cioran. Luigi Ontani – turncoat, fluid, ambivalent – clearly has no country, his being, if anything, elsewhere. Who is this artist, if not the living negation of fixity, genre, style and even time?

Luigi Ontani, who writes of himself, “I am absolutely present: - unfaithful angel, androgyne, ephebe, hermaphrodite, hybrid, Sagittarius (...)”, is the guardian spirit of a continuous transmigration, the symbol of a fanciful and poetic resistance to social conventions and taboos that limit spontaneity of living. The artist, from the beginning, has been engaged in a voyage through geography and cultures, between east and west, sacred and profane. Starting with his own face and person, he time and again incarnates further identities, from Leonardo da Vinci to Krishna, from Christopher Columbus to Pinocchio. Ontani’s body is fundamentally one that is open to wearing the skin of the world, as the instrument and destiny of a constant metamorphosis, as a voyage in space and time.

The artist uses even his very early works, the *pleonastic objects* (1965-70), as a sort of extension of his body. These are a series of casts of “household” objects, such as a container of talcum powder, a soap dish, a bottle of perfume, an egg crate, made from sacagliola and hand-painted in bright tempera colors. It would be misleading to see the choice of material as touching upon Arte Povera, although Ontani came into contact with Luciano Pistoï’s Notizie gallery and some members of the movement as early as the ‘Sixties, during his military service in Turin. The pleonastic objects refer, rather, to a playful dimension of the plastic object, and not to an idea of the exemplary and radical nature of the form. The references for these early works should be sought elsewhere, in Futurism, Surrealism and, at most, in nouveau réalisme. The artist’s goal is to create something that is neither sculpture nor painting nor design, and which eludes the art academy even from the standpoint of the typology of the object and the material employed. And yet, as we have said, these are works that are fundamental for the definition and subsequent development of his research. If the pleonastic category announces the dimension of the frivolous and of play, the sculptures themselves become the motive and pretext for the further development of his language. Ontani locates them in space to constitute environments, he hangs them from trees as Christmas decorations, and he wears them as if they were a skin, to the point where they become an onanistic gesture. The need to record this behavior with photographic shots, to document the relationship between his body and objects, produces a series of images that, to his mind, end up being more interesting than the sculptures themselves. In short, these early “souvenir photos” give rise to the idea of being able to produce an emblematic image, the result of a direct relationship between art and life. During the second half of the ‘Sixties the artist creates a series of works by cutting out industrial corrugated cardboard and foam rubber used for packing. He extracts from them various stylistic features and ornamental

motifs, installing them in the space, or even wearing them, as he does in *Autoritratto (Mascherone leggìo)* [*Self-portrait (Lectern mask)*], 1968, or in *Gorgiera corazza [Ruff Cuirass]*, 1969. Wearing these forms, these waistcoats cut out from cardboard, the artist begins to embellish himself like a fairytale Prince or a surreal and vain idol. Instead of action and performance as an occurrence in time, as vitalism, Ontani makes his way toward an idea of a living image as painting and as work, choosing, in fact, the immobility and instantaneousness of the pose.

The fundamental narcissism that leads Ontani to celebrate his own face and body immediately takes the direction of an elsewhere, moving toward places of fable and myth, of stories about the world. At the close of the decade the artist begins to reinterpret images outside his everyday life, choosing art history as his selected territory and beginning a dialogue-comparison with it that persists to the present day. It is from here that his first celebrated poses emerge, such as *San Sebastiano [St. Sebastian]*, 1970, which is openly “*in the style of*.” Ontani commits to memory a famous work from art history and assumes its pose, providing a novel interpretation. The photograph recalls the painting, records the appearance of the image and “replays” the painting without being it. “St. Sebastian” in particular, the first simulacrum of his vanity, soon becomes a sort of self-portrait, like an image “incarnate,” belonging to the artist’s own life. In *Meditazione d’après de la Tour [Meditation after de la Tour]*, 1970, he restages a renowned 17th-century painting by Georges de la Tour, as he also does, that same year, with Caravaggio’s famous *Bacchus* (1597) and with *Maya vestita e Maya denuda [Clothed Maja and Nude Maja]*, inspired by Goya’s *Nude Maja* (1800). These are a physical reinterpretation – different and personal – of masterpieces from the past, where the artist’s body becomes the raw material of the work. From this point on, Ontani’s body traverses visual culture, high and low, with irony and lightness; it is a body that experiments with variants of time, identifies with and thus disembodies and repeats, not just any gesture, but rather the gesture of art, and thus continually returns to the sole form of the “infinite” that – to his mind – we are able to know: that of the work.

In April 1971, on the occasion of the exhibition “Spazio Teofanico” at the Diagramma gallery in Milan, he exhibits *Ange Infidèle [Unfaithful Angel]*, 1969, a photographic work that Ontani also thinks of as his first *tableau vivant*. Between 1969 and 1989 the artist creates approximately thirty works inspired by the genre of *tableaux vivants*, a term used to indicate a scene where actors in costume remain in still, silent poses, as if in a painting. *Ange Infidèle* is followed by *Tarzan*, created in 1973 in Rome for the exhibition “Contemporanea,” curated by Achille Bonito Oliva, and then the following year by *Pulcinella*, performed at Lucio Amelio’s gallery in Naples, up to the celebrated series shown at the L’Attico gallery in Rome, which included *Don Quixote de La Mancha*, *Don Giovanni* and *Superman*. These works represent one of the very earliest examples of

appropriationist practice in the second half of the twentieth century, and they anticipate methodologies favored by postmodernism, based on the question of the centrality of the gesture and the pose.

These are intense and productive years, when the artist tries out and passes through various directions in his research. Between 1969 and 1971 he creates a series of actions documented in black and white Super 8 film, such as *Svenimenti* [*Faintings*], *Tetto* [*Roof*], *Montovolo*, *Spirito di Patata* [*Potato Spirit*], *Saccombrello* [an amalgamation of the words for ‘sack’ and ‘umbrella’] and *Fuochino* [*Getting warmer*]. While more directly tied to a performative modality, these works are, in fact, very distant – in intention and method – from the research of artists such as Chris Burden, Marina Abramovic or Gina Pane. With the exception of *Svenimenti*, where the artist actually and repeatedly loses consciousness, in accordance with an extreme behavioral methodology that recalls contemporaneous work by Vito Acconci, the other works reveal, if anything, his interest in surreal action, in accordance with a language that is midway between cinematography and behavior. It is precisely his creation at this same time of the tableaux-vivants and the *d’après* works that leads him to gradually distance himself from this idea of performative action. The static image allows him to achieve a sort of isolation and equilibrium, a duration – infinite – in time.

Over the course of the ‘Seventies the artist also practices sculpture and painting, as an extension of the possibilities of self-representation and storytelling. After having used masks – both original ones and authentic examples of folk art, such as the Pulcinella mask shown at Lucio Amelio in Naples in 1974, Ontani begins to invent his own masks, using casts of his face as a point of departure. The idea of the cast gives rise to the possibility of a three-dimensional existence of his image, where the body of the artist is projected in the physicality of the sculpture, first as a Commedia dell’Arte mask, then as a mask devoted to a hybridization of art history and the geographies of the world. Thus over the past thirty years, moving from papier mâché to ceramic, from blown glass to marble, from wood to mixed media, Ontani has made his individual adventure specular and three-dimensional, oscillating between irony and narcissism, myth and fable. Sculpture, particularly the works in ceramic, offers him the possibility of merging the constituent elements of painting (I am thinking of the use of color, but also graphic sign and photography) with the fanciful projection into space of his own body. The material employed in this sense is always subordinate to the general discourse, to the defined needs of his projects. His recourse to wide-ranging artisan traditions, from Faenza ceramics to Balinese pule wood carvings, is not a gesture of devotion to and faith in “manual” specialization, but a conceptual adoption, an extrapolation of the virtuoso possibilities of applied art of every place and every geography. Ontani moreover does not simply “commission” the creation of the work, but rather establishes a dialogue with the various artisan workers, in a

relationship of collaboration that often leads to the development of new techniques and processes. In other words he creates a widespread laboratory, a great fairy-tale workshop without boundaries, extravagant and eccentric, open above all to every possibility.

Ontani utilizes ceramic for the first time in *Sapienza* [*Wisdom*], 1984, when, collaborating with the Roman ceramist Venera Fiocchiaro, he creates a mask that he wears in his intervention at the Università la Sapienza in Rome on the theme “The Italian idea of painting.” In the ‘Eighties he intensifies the use of this material, creating a series of works to furnish the Villino di RomAmor, as part of *Casa degli Ontani* [*House of the Ontani*], a utopian project in Grizzana Morandi. His first Ermetistiche [herm esthetic pieces] also date to this decade; these are two-faced and bivalent self-portraits in which widely divergent themes – ranging from popular to literary culture – always converge. The herms often result from special exhibition occasions; in this case they reflect elements and characteristics of the history and tradition of the places where they will be shown. The themes of dualism and ambivalence, as well as folklore and allegory, also characterize a series of masks created in papier mâché or wood.

Compared to his promiscuous approach to the world that typifies his sculpture, painting represents a more intimate space for Ontani, almost a place of withdrawal and contemplation. Around the mid-‘70s he begins to focus more consistently on watercolor, working in an almost calligraphic manner, in a style the artist himself calls “whimsical,” and thus not planned or too serious. The creative process follows the pleasure of doing, from writing to drawing, from drawing to watercolor, to, although less frequently, oil painting on panel. Watercolor, a diaphanous and light medium, is the specter of painting. It can be reined in by drawing, or it can frivolously accompany an erratic, labyrinthine calligraphy. The proliferation of signs and symbols ends up invading the passe-partout and above all the frame, which in his work assumes the same importance as the canvas or the painted surface. The frame is a plastic presence, a two-dimensional sculpture, which does not contain the image but hybridizes with it, defines and completes it. Ontani thus animates a long series of metamorphic elves and little devils that materialize as light presences on the paper, directly from regions of myth and a fanciful and free eroticism. The diaphanous landscapes that contain them refer to an idea of Nature as a source of elementary beauty, which only art can describe in an inspiration characterized by innocence. These figures, ironic and amused, often emerge from a pun or from their titles. In a sort of reverse journey, the artist often begins with a list of titles when creating his works. It is precisely the word and writing as drawing that represent the point of departure for developing an image, figure, story, allegory or myth. The “suitcase-titles,” as the artist calls them, are containers of other meanings, where the elsewhere always refers to psychology and to the journey. In Ontani’s work the play of language, according to a poetic tradition that is

simultaneously popular and cultivated, encompasses a great variety of verbal inventions, internal rhymes, anagrams, assonances and witticisms. In the beginning there is the word, understood as a fundamental element, not only in the ideation of the work, but also in writing and behavior. In the close relationship between art and life, and thus also in daily practice, onomatopoeia takes on central importance for the artist, almost crossing over into the invention of another language. Ontani cites, ironizes, evokes, transforms, describes, ornaments and crosses over into nonsense, often to return to his own titles; he modifies them in order to better exploit their phonemes, assonances or meanings. As early as the late 'Sixties, this linguistic play coexists with a recourse to the most varied expressive means, contributing to the establishment of a coherent and circular poetic Universe of which the artist is author and principal actor.

I would like to emphasize the extremely original position that Luigi Ontani assumes with regard to the major artistic currents of his time. This Italian artist obviously does not negate the dominant conceptual climate in the 'Seventies; indeed he appropriates it. But he also rediscovers elements of folklore, popular culture, the picturesque and myth, introducing them into the discourse of art through his great inventive freedom. In this sense we have one of the few artists in the second half of the twentieth century who – in addition to having developed his own language – has succeeded in establishing a parallel Universe, composed of an almost encyclopedic complex of images, symbols, learned citations, rituals, icons and popular myths with very different origins, in a sort of great carnival of the world, a bacchanal of cultures. The series of works that the artist has devoted to India, Guatemala, Thailand, Bali, Yemen, Japan, Indonesia, Mexico, Sri Lanka, Nepal and Burkina Faso – beginning in the second half of the 'Seventies and up to the present – is the result, not of a vague and mannered exoticism, but rather of a poetic confrontation with the themes, images and ideas of those cultures. To the uniform globalism of contemporaneity, Ontani opposes his own colored, solar and visionary ecosystem, a celestial kingdom in which there is a hybridization of faces and images, idols and street urchins, memories and passions. Ontani allows himself to be seduced by these encounters, but not influenced or conditioned by them; his individuality – curious and irreverent, ironic and situationist – always and unaffectedly remains central to the work.

Over the past thirty years his work has developed along these trajectories, following a logic that is profoundly consistent with its basic premises. For this reason his work ends up being curiously unified and always contemporary, even with the extraordinary variety of cultures involved and techniques utilized. On the occasion of his solo show at Castello di Rivoli we are presenting his most recent work: a wooden bridge, six meters long, on which there hovers a series of small figures, all inspired by real personalities or deities from the island of Bali. And yet *Grilli di Bali-ballerini* [*Crickets of Bali-ballet dancers*], 2011, curiously recalls Ontani's early works, the pleonastic

objects, which are also included in the exhibition. In both cases these are groups of small figures-objects, painted in bright colors, transitory, hovering things. Unlike the work of many other artists of his generation who have sought in sculpture a formal exemplariness and an idea of monumentality, Ontani's sculptures always represent further verifications of a precise, refined formal vocabulary and possible digressions of an underlying musical motif. Viewers can appreciate individual works, but even more, the centripetal force of his poetics and the implosive charge – coherent and circular – of his activity.

At the center of this total representation, this “map of the mask of the world,” there is the artist as body and his art as destiny. Ontani tends to identify literally with the artistic object, willingly performing in what he calls *operevento*, or “eventworks.” This mythology of the artist as epiphanic, or indeed theophanic, event is developed in a behavior that accompanies every aspect of his existence, from dressing to furnishing his dwellings, from walking to speaking. For Ontani, art is a constant and ongoing commitment, a delicate yet inflexible game intended to contaminate every aspect of life with a sense of wonder. This poetic intention entails a conviction that even within “esthetic seduction there is an ethic of behavior,” a desire and will to change. Thus, to return to the beginning of this essay: if Ontani has a country, it is the country of Art, mirror of his subjectivity and undying generator of new forms and of an extraordinary and artful beauty.

(Translated from Italian by Marguerite Shore.)

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