An Exemplary Artwork

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An Exemplary Artwork

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EDITOR'S NOTE

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Historien et théoricien de l'art italien, Gabriele Guercio est connu en France pour avoir co-dirigé l'ouvrage *L'Art conceptuel, une perspective* (Paris-Musées ; Musée d'art moderne de la Ville, 1989) et aux Etats-Unis pour avoir notamment publié le recueil d'écrits de Joseph Kosuth préfacé par Jean-François Lyotard (*Art After Philosophy and After, 1966-1990*, MIT Press, 1991). Auteur d'un ouvrage analysant les métamorphoses de la monographie depuis Giorgio Vasari (*Art as Existence: The Artist's Monograph and Its Project*, MIT Press, 2006), il a rédigé de nombreuses études sur l'art italien contemporain (voir par exemple *Il confine evanescente: Arte italiana 1960-2010*, MAXXI ; Electa Mondadori, 2010). Gabriele Guercio est un fin connaisseur de Gino De Dominicis, artiste dont l'œuvre ne bénéficie encore que d'une assez faible reconnaissance internationale, même s'il obtint en 1985 le prix international de la Biennale de Paris.

Personnalité complexe, Gino De Dominicis a construit une œuvre autour de convictions et de propositions fortement affirmées, telle celle, reprise par Gabriele Guercio dans le titre de son ouvrage, que « L'Art n'évolue pas », ou celle, également mise en œuvre par plusieurs pièces, d'une recherche de l'immortalité ou d'un contact avec l'éternité. C'est ainsi que le livre, en quatre chapitres, tente de répondre à ces questions : « la pratique artistique a-t-elle la capacité de perpétuer, sinon de réaliser, un désir d'immortalité ? Comment et pourquoi une œuvre d'art peut-elle répondre à l'impératif de se faire immortels ? » (Gabriele Guercio, p. 24). Associé un temps à l'Art conceptuel, Gino De Dominicis s'est relativement tenu à l'écart du monde artistique, jusqu'à sa mort en 1998, au point de ne plus autoriser de publications d'illustrations de ses travaux – interdiction qui s'est assouplie ensuite.

Nous avons choisi de publier l'extrait ci-dessous car l'auteur y effectue une description inédite d'un « scandale » qui agita la trente-sixième Biennale de Venise (1972). L'affaire fut occasionnée par l'installation intitulée *Deuxième solution d'immortalité : l'univers est immobile*. Connue seulement aujourd'hui par une « photo souvenir » (désignée comme telle par l'artiste) et des documents d'archives, coupures de presse ou photographies publiées et commentées par Gabriele Guercio, la pièce, qui comprend entre autres éléments la présence d'un jeune homme souffrant de trisomie 21, parut manifester un cynisme insupportable. Son auteur, Gino De Dominicis invita cependant le jeune homme en tant que représentant d'une autre forme d'intelligence et de rapport au monde, percevant différemment, se situant hors des perspectives communes. Le livre, qui traite de l'ensemble du travail de l'artiste, s'articule autour de l'analyse de cette pièce.

Véronique Goudinoux

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Original text taken from *L'Art n'évolue pas : l'Univers immobile de Gino De Dominicis*, Paris : Ed. du Regard, 2016, p. 9-19

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Gabriele Guercio is an Italian art historian and theoretician, who is best known in France for having edited *L'Art conceptuel, une perspective* (Paris-Musées; Musée d'art moderne de la Ville, 1989), and in the United States for having published the collection of Joseph Kosuth's writings, with a preface by Jean-François Lyotard (*Art After Philosophy and After, 1966-1990*, MIT Press, 1991). He is the author of a book that analyses the transformations of the monograph since Giorgio Vasari (*Art as Existence: The Artist's Monograph and Its Project*, MIT Press, 2006), he has also written several studies of Italian contemporary art (for example *Il confine evanescente: Arte italiana 1960-2010*, MAXXI; Electa Mondadori, 2010). Gabriele Guercio is a specialist of Gino De Dominicis, an artist whose work has not reached international recognition yet, even though he was awarded the International prize at the 1985 Paris Biennial.

Gino De Dominicis was a complex character, who built his work around strongly asserted beliefs and propositions, such as "Art doesn't evolve", which Gabriele Guercio used as a title for his book, and the quest for immortality or a connection with eternity, which he carried out in several of his works. This is why the book, divided into four chapters, tries to answer the questions: "can artistic practice, if not realise, at least perpetuate a desire for immortality? How and why can a work of art respond to the imperative of becoming immortal?" (Gabriele Guercio, p. 24). Though he was at one time close to Conceptual circles, Gino De Dominicis stood relatively apart from the artistic world until his death in 1998, to the extent that he forbade the publication of any reproductions of his work, a restriction which relaxed with time.

The present excerpt was chosen for publication because it offers a new description of a "scandal" that disturbed the 36th Venice Biennial (1972). The incident was sparked by an installation, *Second Solution of Immortality: The Universe Is Immobile*. This piece, which now only exists as a "souvenir picture" (the expression used by Gino De Dominicis himself) and archives – press cuttings and photographs published and commented on by Gabriele Guercio –; seemed unbearably cynical as it involved, among other elements, the presence of a young man with Down's syndrome. However, Gino De Dominicis had invited the young man as the representative of another form of intelligence and of a different relationship to the world, who perceived things differently, outside of shared perspectives. The book, which examines all of the artist's work, is structured around the analysis of this piece.

Véronique Goudinoux

1 **Venice, June 8th, 1972**

2 With the very title of his work, ambitiously named *Second Solution for Immortality: The Motionless Universe*, and which he created for the XXXVIth Venice Biennial (1972), Gino De Dominicis asserted his exemplarity from the onset. A work of art can prove to be exemplary, for the artist who creates it, as well as for those, whether or not they are artists, who discover it and gravitate in its orbit. For artists, this takes place when it proves decisive for the definition of their poetics: when it opens onto something that, until then, had remained unformulated in their work, and that now takes on inestimable value. For artists of their generation, or of following generations, the work is a source of inspiration and emulation, or on the contrary of opposition and rejection. For everyone else, its exemplarity means that it contains useful elements to appreciate the artist's other works, that it is able to promote new ideas about artistic creation and that it can also offer revelations that will have an impact on the mind or on life. Lastly, a work is exemplary when its assertion seems unprecedented, or at any rate when its genealogy is hard to trace. In this sense, it displays archetypal abilities, and it carries so much innovation that the situation of the person who creates or sees it is no longer the same after it comes into being.

3 The protests and the calls for censorship caused by *Second Solution* during the inauguration of the Venice Biennial on the morning of Thursday 8 June 1972, prevented it from coming into contact with the audience. Several artists, critics and journalists attacked De Dominicis for using Paolo Rosa, a young Venetian with Down's syndrome, to create his work. Upset by these hostile reactions, De Dominicis decided to ask Rosa to leave, and when the outrage only grew, the room was closed to the public.

4 However, *Second Solution* is a key element in De Dominicis's poetics, as for the first time, this work displayed his deep belief that there is an indestructible connection between making art and the quest for bodily immortality. Two years earlier, he had expressed his thoughts on the subject, in a *Letter on Immortality* (1970) in which he argued that external and immortal things alone exist, and that everyone should work towards humanity's ability "to halt in time". This position, though its argumentation and offer was appealing, did not really distance itself from those that aim at extending the average human life span, if not warding off death. The same was not true of *Second Solution*, as the reference to immortality was more original and complex, and questioned the very concept of artistic creation. By proposing a "solution" for immortality, the piece proved to be the potential promoter of De Dominicis's conception of the work of art: an entity with no roots or conditions, thus detaching and projecting itself into a time with no future. In this way, it maintains its mysterious propensity to reduce – or even destroy – the barriers between the flows of time and eternity.

5 **The "Mongoloid" Incident**

6 Closing the room where De Dominicis's piece was on display was not enough to abate the outrage. The next day, the case of the "mongoloid" (the term used by the journalists at the time) exhibited at the Venice Biennial was all over the Italian media (newspapers and television), where it was commented on and deformed. For example, in an article by Giulia Borgese entitled "We've Hit Rock Bottom", the *Corriere della Serra* described Rosa as "blind and dumb", which was untrue. Even though this did not correspond to the real composition of the piece on display, a drawing of Paolo Rosa with the sign reading "

Second Solution for Immortality” attached to his neck was relayed again and again by most magazines and daily papers at the time. It was published in Natalia Aspesi’s article for *Il Giorno*, in which she described the chaotic morning of the opening: De Dominicis’s piece was an “outrageous artwork”, shocking both on the human and political levels. Firstly on a human level, because of the “poor, abnormal-looking man” on display, which irritated the audience and the organisers of the Biennial; and on a political level because of the four symbols De Dominicis drew in pencil on the wall. “A symbol can be magical for the body’s immortality, a cross for the soul, a hammer and sickle for the species and a swastika for the race.” The journalist describes how angry these symbols made some artists and journalists, to the point that they threatened De Dominicis and called him a Nazi.

- 7 On June 10th, *L’Osservatore romano* also took a stand. While never actually naming the artist, the editorial described the indignation of those who protested against the display of the “mongoloid” in Venice as “sacrosanct”, and spoke of offence and humiliation. *L’Unità* denounced the “stupidity” and the “sadism” of the event, which Dario Micacchi, while noting that one should not entirely reject all art and contemporary artists, defined as “idiotic and violent”. Enzo Tortora, the famous television host, also expressed his opinion in a vehement article published in *La Nazione*. According to him, this “terrifying farce” arose from the artist’s lust for fame, who chose “such a cynical way to become one of the ‘famous’ names”. The same day, the daily papers vigorously underlined the fact that De Dominicis and his assistant, Simone Carella, had been charged with fraudulent abuse of a person’s weakness by the Venice public prosecutor. In April 1973, the defendants were discharged.
- 8 During most of the summertime, and even up until October, the “mongoloid” scandal at the Biennial was brought up again and again by the Italian and international media, from *Lotta continua* to the French daily *Le Monde*, from *La Rinascita* to *L’Espresso*, from *La Fiera letteraria* to *Der Spiegel*. Despite the fact that on the evening of June 11th, De Dominicis had declared to the Ansa press agency that Rosa’s presence had to do with his wanting to draw attention to the themes of ageing and death, the prevailing opinion was still that it was an appalling provocation, or even a “freak-show”.
- 9 We should look for the reasons of the scandal of June 8th, 1972, in the alleged affront to the young disabled man, but also in the awkwardness and the mistrust that disabilities caused at the time, as well as their institutional, artistic and human implications. *Second Solution* was frowned upon by the institution because in June 1972, following the protests of 1968, the Biennial’s board leaned towards reform and did not want to support any cause for unrest: everything had to go towards illustrating the restored prestige of the Venetian institution, which explains why the message spread by the media was one of an unjustified transgression that was immediately repressed. The journalists noted, almost as a *leitmotiv*, how successfully the Biennial had renewed itself, and how deplorable the “mongoloid” incident was. In other words, the fact that the incident was immediately denounced and set right was a way of confirming that order and common sense had now regained the upper hand in Venice.
- 10 On the artistic front, even though a few fellow artists and intellectuals defended De Dominicis’s work, censorship was stricter. Firstly because *Second Solution* did not easily fit into the two dichotomous categories, “artwork” and “behaviour” implied by the name of the exhibition, curated by Francesco Arcangeli, Renato Barilli and Marco Valsecchi, and to which De Dominicis was invited. Indeed, in this case, the exhibited piece was not an

“artwork” in the sense that was given to the word by artists, critics, gallery owners and collectors since the 18th century; that is, at a time when paintings and sculptures were judged based on aesthetic appreciation and taste, and when, even when the artworks reached a hitherto unseen level of formal purity or even abstraction, they could still maintain a relationship with the world. As Arcangeli wrote in the catalogue of the XXXVIth Biennial, “the artwork, the canvas fragment or the panel, a flat surface, rectangular by convention, is a medium that, despite it all, can still receive everything.” On this point, it is noteworthy that in no way does *Second Solution* support a different position, that is, the absolute abolition of traditional artistic techniques to the benefit of the artists’ personal implication: this possibility was initiated by the historical avant-gardes, especially Dadaism, the first movement to try to invent a praxis of life inspired by art. The term “behaviour” was a reference to that movement, and in Italy it was used to describe Arte Povera’s installations as well as other tendencies involving happenings, actions or performances, such as Body Art. In the catalog, Barilli explains that “behaviour” “expresses itself at the programmatic expense of all our faculties, of all types of intervention on the world, starting with the most fleeting and precarious ones.”

- 11 The human implications of the scandal in Venice had to do with the disturbing display of the dissimilarity of a being, who, in some ways, seems familiar but that we do not recognise as our equal and that we keep at a distance. People with Down’s syndrome have one chromosome too many, which is enough to make them look abnormal. It may seem necessary to treat or even normalise them, according to notions of physical and mental “health” and “growth”. Seated in a corner of the room, the young Paolo Rosa contradicted our tendency to translate, domesticate or correct – from a cultural, artistic, political or medical point of view – any person or thing that violently contradicts our acquired definitions of identity or the ways in which it evolves or should evolve throughout time. These obvious facts were deemed unbearable in June 1972. But it was not *Second Solution* itself, even implicitly, that demonised Rosa’s presumed abnormality, but rather those who attacked the work of art, insisting that diversity should be hidden, or, at any rate, not displayed in an artistic context, especially in such a shocking way; and that disability should be approached based on social conventions, or relegated to the field of diagnosis and medical treatment.

12 **The Room of the Scandal**

- 13 At the time, the media’s reports were at once misleading and contradictory, as they were often founded on mere rumours. De Dominicis’s room was actually only open to the public for a few hours, and only a very few people really saw it. Moreover, one can only surmise that the artist was still working on giving it its final appearance. However, thanks to the accounts and contributions of Laura Cherubini and Italo Tomassoni, we do know that various other works were on display in the room, probably in order to give an overview of the artist’s work. These included, for instance, *Untitled; Twins; D’io* (1971); *Time, Errors, Space and Untitled (Immortality)*. But there is more: even though the pictures published by the papers showed Paolo Rosa as isolated, he was anything but pushed to one side. Seated in a far corner of the room, a sign reading *Second Solution for Immortality* was placed at his feet. A stone, a rubber ball and the outline of a white square were arranged from left to right on the ground in front of him. These were works that De Dominicis had shown at L’Attico, Fabio Sargentini’s gallery in Rome, in 1969. The stone was *Waiting for a Random General Molecular Movement in a Unique Direction, Likely To Make the*

Stone Move Spontaneously; the ball was *Rubber Ball (Dropped from 2 Meters) Just Before It Bounces Back Up*; and the cube was *Invisible Cube*.

14 **(souvenir picture)**

- 15 These three pieces, associated with Paolo Rosa, made up *Second Solution for Immortality*, as is shown in a black and white photograph that, on its left side, bears the hand-written words “(foto ricordo) De Dominicis”, 1972. Considered by the artist as a work of art in its own right, this is the only record of his dramatic feat in Venice, and it shows what was visible on the morning of June 8th, 1972. The picture helps to understand why without Rosa, the composition would have been meaningless, and why De Dominicis quickly decided to make the room inaccessible. During his and Carella’s trial, and during discussions or interviews in the following years, he insisted on the fact that *Second Solution for Immortality* was made up of Rosa and the three objects on the ground. He tersely repeated this view in 1995 during an interview with Franco Fanelli: “I never exhibited a mongoloid. However, I did create a work of art. It consists of several works placed in front of Mr. Paolo Rosa, who looks at them from his internal point of view, which is unique and specific [...], opposed to that of the viewers.”
- 16 This declaration reveals his attachment to this controversial work and his respect for Paolo Rosa, of whom it could be said that he represented a sort of ideal point of view from which to contemplate these works, or other works, from. What’s more, during a personal conversation with De Dominicis, he insisted on the fact that Down’s syndrome is not a disease but a different state of being. The young man sitting in front of the ball, the stone and the cube, should be seen as an “extraterrestrial”.
- 17 Finally, Matteo Smolizza, the director of *Quadri & Sculture*, indirectly confirmed De Dominicis’s attachment to the piece. When deciding which one of his works should illustrate the cover of an issue featuring some of his famous quotes, and which was released on November 30th, 1998, the day after the artist’s death; De Dominicis hesitated for a long time between a picture of *Second Solution* and one of him as a child, as though he felt they were identical and interchangeable. He finally chose the first.
- 18 Thanks to the image captured by (souvenir picture) in 1972 in Venice, one can still grasp how De Dominicis gave the work of art an unprecedented power. He did so by bringing up themes and creating dynamics, that, despite the “mongoloid” incident or even because they were emphasised by the hostility and incomprehension it sparked, took on an ever more paradigmatic value, strengthening his belief that artistic creation and the quest for immortality coincide. “Becoming immortal” became the constant ambition of his life and work. It had nothing to do, however, with securing a lasting reputation and a position in the memory of future generations, and least of all with crediting the artist with superhuman powers. Yet the belief that a work of art can powerfully exceed its own cause, or that it can even break the chain of causality and free itself from the alleged sequentiality of past, present and future, was crucial. [...]