

“I AM ELSEWHERE”:

LUIGI ONTANI AND THE TABLEAU VIVANT IN ITALIAN ART, 1969–1979

by

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Vol. 1

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Art History
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

2013

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the
Graduate Faculty in Art History in satisfaction of the
dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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Abstract

**“I AM ELSEWHERE”: LUIGI ONTANI AND
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by

Anna Mecugni

Adviser: Professor Romy Golan

“I Am Elsewhere” posits Luigi Ontani as a leading figure and pioneer of the postmodern tableau-vivant revival in Italy, 1969 to 1979. The tableau vivant as an artistic strategy and subject concerned artists both independent and affiliated with Arte Povera. The primary medium for these artists was photography and, secondarily, live performance, film, video, and painting. The main forerunners of this revival were painter Giorgio de Chirico and filmmaker Pier Paolo Pasolini. Ontani donned the visages of figures and characters from past paintings and sculptures, cultural history, and contemporary popular culture in tableaux primarily staged for the camera. He pioneered the use of color photography and video in the early 1970s. In the second half of the 1970s he performed his tableaux in front of an audience and executed a series of hand-tinted black-and-white tableau photos in collaboration with commercial photographers in India.

This study combines object-based art history, cultural history, and critical theory. It connects Ontani’s tableau works with camp aesthetics and queer theory, and

investigates the economic, technological, social, political, cultural, and artistic circumstances out of which the tableau-vivant revival emerged and flourished in Italy. The tableau-vivant revival and Ontani's works are related to three contemporaneous socio-historical phenomena: image culture, or the saturation of everyday life with electronic and printed images starting in the early 1960s; the Italian gay liberation movement of the early 1970s; and internal terrorism from both left and right, afflicting the country from 1969 until 1980.

This treatise problematizes the reductive view of contemporary Italian art as structured around the binary sequence Arte Povera-Transavanguardia. It addresses the phenomenon of the tableau-vivant revival, yet to be discussed in the literature on contemporary Italian art. The importance of this phenomenon cannot be underestimated since creating tableaux has become a central artistic strategy in the visual arts of the past thirty plus years, and is commonly considered a hallmark of postmodern aesthetics. "I Am Elsewhere" also contributes a study of one of the earliest extensive collaborations between an Italian and Indian practitioners in the postcolonial world.

Acknowledgments

The origins of this dissertation are tied to my own. I discovered Ontani's work during my undergraduate years at the University of Bologna. The first course I passed in Bologna was taught by Renato Barilli, Ontani's main supporter since the late 1960s. Visiting Ontani's retrospective exhibition at Museum Villa Stuck in Munich the following summer got me hooked. When I came to the U.S. for my Ph.D. six years later I was surprised to find out that Ontani's groundbreaking tableau work from the 1970s was known to very few people in academia. One of them was Robert Storr, whose *Modern Art despite Modernism* (2000) convinced me to pursue my doctoral studies at the Graduate Center, where he had been teaching for several years while working as a curator at The Museum of Modern Art in New York. Rob's passionately independent thinking has been influential to my scholarly research. I would like to thank him first and foremost for having been such an inspiration and for having offered his unwavering support on my dissertation project, as an academic mentor at the beginning and as a dissertation committee member at the end.

At the Graduate Center, I am most grateful to my advisor, Romy Golan, who has sustained my work in its different stages over the years, trusting my intuitions, offering insightful research ideas, and challenging me to always do better. My gratitude also goes to the other members of the dissertation committee, Siona Wilson and Rose-Carol Washton Long. I am particularly indebted to Siona Wilson, who joined the project in its final phase, but offered crucial feedback that helped me substantially improve the

manuscript. I am also grateful to the Program Chair Kevin Murphy and his assistant Andrea Appel for their tireless help with all the technical, bureaucratic details of getting this job done. I would also like to thank the Research Grant Program for providing support on my lengthy research stays in Italy, the Alumni Dissertation Fund for a grant to go to India, and the Leon Levy Center for Biography for their generous Dissertation Fellowship.

Outside the Graduate Center, my deepest gratitude goes to Vidya Dehejia, whose course on Indian art at Columbia University initiated me to the field. Her vast knowledge and rigorous guidance on my research were essential. I would not have been able to develop the part of the project dedicated to the works Ontani executed in India without her magnanimous help. I must also thank Ontani for all the hours he dedicated to my endless questions, and his sister Tullia for her liberal hospitality at Villino RomAmor in Riola, on the hills outside Bologna.

I also wish to thank all the other people who generously shared with me their time and expertise at some point along the way. In India: Rahaab Allana, Jyotindra Jain, Pramod Kumar, Pankaj Mehta, Suryanandini Narain, Christopher Pinney (met in Delhi, but based at University College London), Inder Prakash, Pushpamala N., Varunika Saraf, Kavita Singh, Sonika Soni, Akshaya Tankha, Waswo X Waswo. In Italy: Cesare Bastelli, Renato Barilli, Laura Cherubini, Stefano Chiodi, Gabriele Devecchi, Francesco Faeta, Alessandra Galasso, Elisabetta Gulli Grigioni, Bruno Mantura, Achille Bonito Oliva, Ida Panicelli, Anna Paparatti, Vector Pisani, Salvo, Fabio Sargentini, Annemarie Sauzeau,

Monica Schifano, Lanfranco Secco Suardo, Antonello Tolve, Barbara Tosi. In the United States: Giovanna Borradori, Iftikhar Dadi, Jack Hawley, Amitava Kumar, Kajri Jain.

My gratitude also goes to all the archives, galleries, institutions, and private collections that granted me access to important primary sources and materials: in Belgrade, the archives of the Studentski Kulturni Centar and Biljana Tomic; in Biella, the Fondazione Pistoletto; in Delhi, the Alkazi Foundation and the Udaipur City Palace; in Graz, Austria, the archives of the Neue Galerie am Landesmuseum Joanneum; in Milan, the archives of Giorgio Colombo and the private collection of Gilberto and Rosa Sandretto; in New York City, the archives of The Kitchen and in particular John Migliore for his assistance, the archives of The Museum of Modern Art, and the Jack Tilton Gallery; in Rome, the Archivio Alighiero Boetti, the archives of L'Attico and of the Incontri Internazionali d'Arte, the Centro di Documentazione of the Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna, the gallery Lorcan O'Neil (my special thanks go to Serena Basso and Laura Chiari), and the private collections of Pino Calabresi, Gaia Ceriana Franchetti, and Giulio di Gropello; in Reggio Emilia, the Collezione Maramotti and Marina Dacci; in Rivara (Turin), the Centro di Documentazione Castello di Rivara and Franz Paludetto; in Turin, the Videoteca GAM and Elena Volpato.

My final, warmest thanks go to my parents, a few friends—Brian Lukacher, Michele Matteini, Casey Ruble—and especially my partner Justin Patch. They helped in many important ways with their intellectual and emotional support.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

VOL. 1

Abstract	iv–v
Acknowledgments	vi–viii
List of Figures	xii–xx
Introduction	1–28
1. Setting the Stage	29–112
Section 1: Ontani’s Early Work: From Object to Action and Pose	30–51
Object	
Action	
Pose	
Section 2. Precedents to the Tableau-Vivant Revival	51–71
De Chirico: Masquerade and the Return to the Museum	
Play between Reality and Fiction, High and Low in Pasolini’s Cinema	
Section 3. “We Eat the <i>Mona Lisa</i> on Chocolates”: Image Culture, Kitsch, and Italian Pop	71–83
Section 4. The Tableau-Vivant Revival	83–112
Pascali Performer	
Pistoletto’s Theater	
Tableau Vivant in Photography and Painting: Salvo and Others	
Tableaux Vivants at L’Attico	

2. Religious Kitsch and Camp Effects	113–180
About Camp	114–122
<i>Favola impropriata</i> (1970): A Fable of Improper Appropriations . . .	122–127
Queering Saint Sebastian	127–145
Gender Ambiguity	146–157
Annunciations	157–168
From the Passion of Christ to the Olympus with von Gloeden	168–176
Identity as Shifter	176–180
3. “Give Him a Mask and He Will Tell You the Truth”	181–237
The Mask that Reveals and the Mask that Conceals	182–194
Identity as Mask	194–205
Living Masks.	206–237
Standing	
Lying and Sitting Down	
<i>Christopher Columbus: A Tableau Itinérant</i>	
Immersive Environments	
Becoming a Pictorial Being	

VOL. 2

4. Made in India	238–329
Why India?	239–257

“En route vers l’Inde (d’après Pierre Loti)”	258–308
Introduction	
Subject Group 1: Looking Back at the West	
Subject Group 2: Splendors of the Maharajas	
Subject Group 3: Everyday Life and Fantasies	
Subject Group 4: Street Gods	
Merging Performance, Photography, Painting	
Echoes of “En Route” in Contemporary Indian Art	
The <i>Lord of Vanity</i>	309–317
Italian Picture Galleries and a “Certain Chinese Encyclopedia” ...	317–322
Nomadism: From Ontani to Transavanguardia	322–329
Conclusion	330–337
Appendix 1. Luigi Ontani: Interviews, Writings, and Artist Books	338–339
Appendix 2. Personal Interviews	340–341
Bibliography	342–390
Figures	

List of Figures

- Fig. 1 Luigi Ontani, *Oggetti pleonastici*, 1965–1969
- Fig. 2 Luigi Ontani, *Los Angeles: ReuccioMAgio, GaesAsio, AngeloSapiens, ItalBacco*, 1982–1983
- Fig. 3 Luigi Ontani, *Ermestetiche* (1995–2007), installation view at Museo d'Arte Moderna of Bologna (MAMbo), 2008
- Fig. 4 Michelangelo Pistoletto, *Rosa bruciata*, 1966
- Fig. 5 Vasco Bendini, *Come è*, 1966
- Fig. 6 Still from Luigi Ontani, *MontOvolo*, 1970
- Fig. 7 Still from Luigi Ontani, *MontOvolo*, 1970
- Fig. 8 Luigi Ontani, Ontani and his *Oggetti pleonastici*, 1967
- Fig. 9 Luigi Ontani, Ontani performing his *Cartoni ondulati*, late 1960s
- Fig. 10 Luigi Ontani, Ontani performing his *Cartoni ondulati*, 1970, cover of the exhibition catalogue for the Galleria San Fedele, Milan, 1970
- Fig. 11 Luigi Ontani, Ontani performing his *Cartoni ondulati*, from the exhibition catalogue for the Galleria San Fedele, Milan, 1970
- Fig. 12 Luigi Ontani, Ontani with his *Tavolozza con colori viventi*, 1969
- Fig. 13 Luigi Ontani, Ontani with one of his Styrofoam objects, late 1960s
- Fig. 14 Luigi Ontani, Ontani performing his *Oggetto pleonastico per onanismo controvento*, 1969
- Fig. 15 Luigi Ontani, *Le belle statuine ai Giardini Margherita, Bologna*, c. 1969
- Fig. 16 Giorgio de Chirico, *Autoritratto come torero*, 1941–1942
- Fig. 17 Giorgio de Chirico, *Autoritratto in costume del Seicento*, 1945–1946
- Fig. 18 Giancarlo Croce, *Ritratto (alla corte di re Cremsi)*, 1973
- Fig. 19 Still from Pier Paolo Pasolini, *La ricotta*, 1963
- Fig. 20 Still from Pier Paolo Pasolini, *La ricotta*, 1963
- Fig. 21 Still from Pier Paolo Pasolini, *La ricotta*, 1963
- Fig. 22 Backstage photograph from Pier Paolo Pasolini, *La ricotta*, 1963
- Fig. 23 Still from Pier Paolo Pasolini, *La ricotta*, 1963
- Fig. 24 Still from Pier Paolo Pasolini, *La ricotta*, 1963
- Fig. 25 Still from Pier Paolo Pasolini, *La ricotta*, 1963
- Fig. 26 Still from Pier Paolo Pasolini, *Il Decameron*, 1971
- Fig. 27 Still from Pier Paolo Pasolini, *Che cosa sono le nuvole?*, 1967
- Fig. 28 Still from Pier Paolo Pasolini, *Che cosa sono le nuvole?*, 1967
- Fig. 29 Luigi Ontani, *Pinocchio*, c. 1972
- Fig. 30 Still from Luigi Comencini, *Pinocchio*, 1972
- Fig. 31 Luigi Ontani, *Pinocchio*, 1982
- Fig. 32 Luigi Ontani, *Dante*, c. 1972
- Fig. 33 Luigi Ontani, *Dante*, c. 1972

- Fig. 34 Luigi Ontani, *Dante*, c. 1972
- Fig. 35 Luigi Ontani, installation view from *Transformer-Aspekte der Travestie*, Museum Bochum, Bochum, 1974
- Fig. 36 Invitation postcard to Luigi Ontani's solo show at L'Attico, 1974
- Fig. 37 Luigi Ontani, *Dante Grillo mediterraneo*, 1975
- Fig. 38 Luigi Ontani, *Dante Grillo nell'albero cavo*, 1975
- Fig. 39 Luigi Ontani, *Terza Grazia del dado d'après Tintoretto*, 1975
- Fig. 40 Luigi Ontani, *Ratto di Arianna d'après Titian*, 1975
- Fig. 41 Tano Festa, *Particolare della Sistina*, 1963
- Fig. 42 Tano Festa, *The Creation of Adam*, 1964
- Fig. 43 Luigi Ontani, *Creazione dell'androgino*, 1978
- Fig. 44 "I Maestri del colore"
- Fig. 45 Detail from Robert Rauschenberg, *Rebus*, 1955
- Fig. 46 Mario Ceroli, *Mobili nella valle*, 1965
- Fig. 47 Giorgio de Chirico, *Mobili nella valle*, 1927
- Fig. 48 Claudio Parmiggiani, *Notte*, 1964
- Fig. 49 Claudio Parmiggiani, *Yang-Yin*, 1969
- Fig. 50 Pino Pascali, *Colosseo*, 1964
- Fig. 51 Pino Pascali, Pascali interprets Pulcinella for a commercial, 1963
- Fig. 52 Pino Pascali, *Requiescat in pace Corradinus* (installation, Torre Astura, Nettuno), 1964
- Fig. 53 Pino Pascali, Pascali walking in the gap of his *32 m² di mare circa*, 1967
- Fig. 54 Pino Pascali, Pascali behind his *Cannone "Bella Ciao"*, 1965
- Fig. 55 Pino Pascali, Pascali atop his *Grande missile "Colomba della Pace"*, 1965
- Fig. 56 Pino Pascali, Pascali performing two works from his "Attrezzi agricoli" series in his studio, Rome, 1968
- Fig. 57 Pino Pascali, Pascali underneath a work from his "Attrezzi agricoli" series in his studio, Rome, 1968
- Fig. 58 Pino Pascali, Pascali wearing a pair of ox horns in his studio, Rome, 1968
- Fig. 59 Pino Pascali, Pascali and his *Vedova blu* at Palazzo delle Esposizioni, Rome, 1968
- Fig. 60 Pino Pascali, Pascali next to one of his *Bachi da setola*, 1968, cover of Pascali's exhibition catalogue for Galleria L'Attico, Rome, 1968
- Fig. 61 Pino Pascali, *Ale! Ale! Cita*, 1968, from Pascali's exhibition catalogue for Galleria L'Attico, Rome, 1968
- Fig. 62 Pino Pascali, Pascali performing *Trappola* in his studio, Rome, 1968
- Fig. 63 Michelangelo Pistoletto, *Donna nuda di schiena*, 1966
- Fig. 64 Diego Velázquez, *Venus at the Mirror*, c. 1648–1651

- Fig. 65 Opening of Michelangelo Pistoletto's solo show at Galleria L'Attico, Rome, 1968
- Fig. 66 Luigi Ontani, *Meditation d'après de La Tour*, c. 1970
- Fig. 67 Luigi Ontani, *Meditation d'après de La Tour*, c. 1970
- Fig. 68 Georges de La Tour, *Penitent Magdalene*, c. 1640
- Fig. 69 Still from Michelangelo Pistoletto, *Pistoletto & Sotheby*, 1968
- Fig. 70 Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, *Raphael and the Fornarina*, 1814
- Fig. 71 Raphael, *La fornarina*, 1518–1520
- Fig. 72 Still from Michelangelo Pistoletto, *Pistoletto & Sotheby*, 1968
- Fig. 73 James Ensor, *Self-Portrait with a Flowered Hat*, 1883–1888
- Fig. 74 Still from Michelangelo Pistoletto, *Pistoletto & Sotheby*, 1968
- Fig. 75 Salvo, *Self-portrait*, 1969
- Fig. 76 Salvo, *Self-portrait*, 1969
- Fig. 77 Luigi Ontani, *Nazi.sta.nasi*, 1974
- Fig. 78 Salvo, *Sette savi*, 1969
- Fig. 79 Gianni Colombo and Gabriele Devecchi, *Assemblea di lavoro*, 1970, from the exhibition catalogue of *Amore mio*, Montepulciano, 1970
- Fig. 80 Salvo, *Autoritratto (come Raffaello)*, 1970
- Fig. 81 Luigi Ontani, *Raffaello*, 1972
- Fig. 82 Giulio Paolini, *L'invenzione di Ingres*, 1968
- Fig. 83 Giancarlo Croce, *Autoritratto mistico*, 1973
- Fig. 84 Salvo, *Autoritratto con natura morta (dal ritratto del Dottor Gachet di Van Gogh)*, 1973
- Fig. 85 Salvo, *San Giorgio e il drago (da Cosmé Tura)*, 1975
- Fig. 86 Salvo, installation view of *San Martino e il povero*, 1973 at *Projekt '74*, Wallraf-Richartz-Museum, 1974
- Fig. 87 Jannis Kounellis, installation view of Kounellis's show at Galleria L'Attico, Rome, 1967
- Fig. 88 Jannis Kounellis, *Da inventare sul posto (To be invented on the spot)*, performed at Documenta, Kassel, 1972
- Fig. 89 Jannis Kounellis, *Table*, performed at Galleria La Salita in Rome, 1973
- Fig. 90 Gino De Dominicis, *Zodiaco*, staged at Galleria L'Attico, Rome, 1970
- Fig. 91 Vettor Pisani, *Eroe da camera*, performed at Galleria L'Attico, Rome, 1973
- Fig. 92 Gilbert & George, *Living Sculpture*, performed at Galleria L'Attico, Rome, 1972
- Fig. 93 Still from Luca Patella, *SKMP2*, 1968
- Fig. 94 Still from Luigi Ontani, *Favola impropriata*, 1970
- Fig. 95 Still from Luigi Ontani, *Favola impropriata*, 1970
- Fig. 96 Still from Luigi Ontani, *Favola impropriata*, 1970

- Fig. 97 Still from Luigi Ontani, *Favola impropriata*, 1970
- Fig. 98 Luigi Ontani, *Animalario*, c. 1970
- Fig. 99 Luigi Ontani, *San Sebastiano nel bosco di Calvenzano (d'après Guido Reni)*, c. 1972
- Fig. 100 Luigi Ontani, *San Sebastiano nel bosco di Calvenzano (d'après Guido Reni)*, c. 1972
- Fig. 101 Guido Reni, *San Sebastiano*, 1640–1642
- Fig. 102 Guido Reni, *San Sebastiano*, 1615–1616
- Fig. 103 Luigi Ontani, *San Sebastiano di Brooklyn*, 1985
- Fig. 104 Kishin Shinoyama, “Death of a Man” series with Yukyo Mishima, 1968
- Fig. 105 Still from Derek Jarman, *Sebastiane*, 1976
- Fig. 106 Film poster for Derek Jarman, *Sebastiane*, 1976
- Fig. 107 *San Sebastiano*, VII century, San Pietro in Vincoli, Rome
- Fig. 108 Frederick Holland Day, *Saint Sebastian*, 1906
- Fig. 109 Frederick Holland Day, *Saint Sebastian*, 1906
- Fig. 110 Pietro Poppi, *Martirio di San Sebastiano*, c. 1900
- Fig. 111 Luigi Ontani, *MayaGoya desnudo* and *MayaGoya vestito*, c. 1970
- Fig. 112 Francisco Goya's *Nude Maja* and *Clothed Maja*, c. 1800
- Fig. 113 Luigi Ontani, *Ippomene (d'après Guido Reni)*, c. 1972
- Fig. 114 Luigi Ontani, *Efebo Subiaco*, c. 1970
- Fig. 115 Luigi Ontani, *Saint John the Baptist*, c. 1972
- Fig. 116 Renato Barilli, “Il comportamento frequenta il museo,” from *NAC Notiziario Arte Contemporanea* (1973)
- Fig. 117 Luigi Ontani, published in *Flash Art* (1974)
- Fig. 118 Luigi Ontani, *EvAdamo*, c. 1973
- Fig. 119 Lucas Cranach the Elder, *Adam and Eve*, 1528
- Fig. 120 Lucas Cranach the Younger, *Adam and Eve*, after 1537
- Fig. 121 Francis Picabia, *Ciné-sketch*, Théâtre des Champs-Élysées, Paris, 1924
- Fig. 122 Luigi Ontani, *Bacchini*, 1973
- Fig. 123 Luigi Ontani, *Bacchino*, 1973
- Fig. 124 Luigi Ontani, *Bacchino*, 1973
- Fig. 125 Luigi Ontani, *Annunciation*, 1969–1970
- Fig. 126 Luigi Ontani, *Annunciation*, 1969–1970
- Fig. 127 Luigi Ontani, *Annunciation*, 1969–1970
- Fig. 128 *Virgin Mary* in a *santino* commercially available in Italy the late 2000s
- Fig. 129 Eberhard Roters, religious kitsch from “Trivialrealismus-Trivialembematik,” *Documenta*, Kassel, 1972
- Fig. 130 Luigi Ontani, *Scala della beatitudine*, c. 1970
- Fig. 131 Luigi Ontani, *Angelo custode a pedale*, c. 1970

- Fig. 132 Luigi Ontani, *Ange infidèle*, 1970
- Fig. 133 Luigi Ontani, *Ange infidèle*, 1970
- Fig. 134 *Angel* in a *santino* commercially available in Spain in the 1990s
- Fig. 135 Wilhelm von Gloeden, *Untitled*, c. 1900
- Fig. 136 Luigi Ontani, *Untitled*, c. 1973
- Fig. 137 Theater of the Passion, Calabria, 2002
- Fig. 138 Luigi Ontani, family album photo, from the artist book *Luigi Ontani*, published by Franz Paludetto (c. 1974)
- Fig. 139 Frederick Holland Day, *Crucifixion*, 1898
- Fig. 140 Luigi Ontani, *Pentagonia*, 1979
- Fig. 141 Still from Bernardo Bertolucci, *Novecento*, 1976
- Fig. 142 Wilhelm von Gloeden, *Untitled*, c. 1900
- Fig. 143 Wilhelm von Gloeden, *Untitled*, c. 1900
- Fig. 144 Wilhelm von Gloeden, *Untitled*, c. 1900
- Fig. 145 Luigi Ontani, *Olympus*, 1975
- Fig. 146 Luigi Ontani, *Pan* from *Olympus*, 1975
- Fig. 147 Luigi Ontani, *Cupid* from *Olympus*, 1975
- Fig. 148 Luigi Ontani, *Ecce Homo (d'après Reni)*, 1970–1972
- Fig. 149 Luigi Ontani, *Ecce Homo (d'après Reni)*, 1970–1972
- Fig. 150 Jacques-Louis David, *Sabine Women*, 1799
- Fig. 151 Luigi Ontani, *SabineRatto (d'après David)*, 1974
- Fig. 152 Luigi Ontani, *SabineRatto (d'après David)*, 1974
- Fig. 153 Luigi Ontani, *SabineRatto (d'après David)*, 1974, cover of RosaLee Goldberg's *Performance Art: From Futurism to the Present* (1988)
- Fig. 154 Luigi Ontani, *SabineRatto (d'après David)*, 1974, published in Caroline Tisdall's article "Performance Art in Italy," *Studio International* (1976)
- Fig. 155 Luigi Ontani, *Fantôme*, 1970
- Fig. 156 Michelangelo Pistoletto, *Bello e basta*, performed at Teatro uomo, Milan, 1970
- Fig. 157 Gino De Dominicis, *Immortalità*, 1971
- Fig. 158 Vettor Pisani, *Inclinazione al dolore*, 1972)
- Fig. 159 Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *The Blind Leading the Blind*, 1568
- Fig. 160 Luigi Ontani, *La caduta dei ciechi d'après Brueghel*, c. 1970
- Fig. 161 Luigi Ontani, *Untitled*, c. 1969
- Fig. 162 Luigi Ontani, *Superman*, 1974, at Galleria L'Attico, Rome
- Fig. 163 Luigi Ontani, *Don Giovanni*, 1974, at Galleria L'Attico, Rome
- Fig. 164 Luigi Ontani, *Pulcinella*, 1974, at Galleria Amelio, Naples
- Fig. 165 Luigi Ontani, *Gianduia*, 1974, at Galleria LP/220, Turin
- Fig. 166 Luigi Ontani, *Gianduia*, 1974, at Galleria LP/220, Turin
- Fig. 167 Luigi Ontani, leaflet accompanying Ontani's exhibition at Galleria

- LP/220, Turin, 1974
- Fig. 168 Luigi Ontani, installation view of *Gianduia* and the exhibition at Galleria LP/220, Turin, 1974
- Fig. 169 Luigi Ontani, *Tarzan*, 1974, at *Contemporanea*, Rome
- Fig. 170 Luigi Ontani, *Tarzan*, 1974
- Fig. 171 Luigi Ontani, *Tarzan*, 1974, installation view at the Festival of Expanded Media, Belgrade, 1974
- Fig. 172 Pietro Poppi, *Pastore a riposo*, c. 1912
- Fig. 173 Luigi Ontani, *Lapsus Lupus*, 1992
- Fig. 174 Invitation card to *Ginnastica mentale*, Galleria L'Attico, Rome, 1968
- Fig. 175 Installation view of *Ginnastica mentale*, Galleria L'Attico, Rome, 1968
- Fig. 176 Luigi Ontani, *Don Quijote*, 1974, at Galleria L'Attico, Rome
- Fig. 177 Luigi Ontani, *Dracula*, 1975, at Galleria L'Attico, Rome
- Fig. 178 Luigi Ontani, *Christopher Columbus*, 1975, New York City
- Fig. 179 Luigi Ontani, *Christopher Columbus*, 1975, New York City
- Fig. 180 Luigi Ontani, *Christopher Columbus*, 1975, New York City
- Fig. 181 Luigi Ontani, *Christopher Columbus*, 1975, published in *Il Resto del Carlino* (1975)
- Fig. 182 Luigi Ontani, *Endimione*, 1977, at Galleria comunale d'arte moderna, Bologna
- Fig. 183 Luigi Ontani, *Endimione*, 1977, at Galleria comunale d'arte moderna, Bologna
- Fig. 184 Luigi Ontani, *Endimione*, 1977, at Galleria comunale d'arte moderna, Bologna
- Fig. 185 Luigi Ontani, *Astronaut*, 1979, at The Kitchen, New York
- Fig. 186 Pierre Loti, postcard made after a visit to Egypt in 1907
- Fig. 187 Pierre Loti dressed as Osiris, 1887
- Fig. 188 Pierre Loti dressed as an Arab, c. 1880
- Fig. 189 Pierre Loti dressed as an Arab in his home in Rochefort, nd
- Fig. 190 Rocchetta Mattei, 1850s, Riola (Bologna)
- Fig. 191 Rocchetta Mattei, 1850s, Riola (Bologna)
- Fig. 192 Anna Mecugni and Rajendra Prasad in front of Studio Rajendra, Johari Bazaar, Jaipur, 2010
- Fig. 193 Luigi Ontani, *Untitled*, from "En route vers l'Inde (d'après Pierre Loti)," 1975
- Fig. 194 Guman Singh astride a traveling studio's Royal Enfield Bullet, c. 1983
- Fig. 195 Luigi Ontani, *Saint Luke d'après Guercino*, 1976

- Fig. 196 Luigi Ontani, *Monkey Mime*, 1977
- Fig. 197 Luigi Ontani, *Giovane con frutta (d'après Caravaggio)*, 1977–78
- Fig. 198 Caravaggio, *Giovane con canestro di frutta*, c. 1593
- Fig. 199 Still from Derek Jarman, *Caravaggio*, 1986
- Fig. 200 Luigi Ontani, *David and Goliath*, 1976
- Fig. 201 Caravaggio, *David and Goliath*, c. 1607
- Fig. 202 Donatello, *David*, 1430
- Fig. 203 Andrea del Verrocchio, *David*, 1473
- Fig. 204 Guido Reni, *David and Goliath*, 1605–06
- Fig. 205 Francesco Clemente, *Self-portrait*, 1980
- Fig. 206 Luigi Ontani, *Schiavo Liberieratico d'après Tintoretto*, 1976
- Fig. 207 Luigi Ontani, *Autoritratto nudo (d'après Chirico)*, 1978
- Fig. 208 Giorgio de Chirico, *Autoritratto*, 1943
- Fig. 209 Luigi Ontani, *San Sebastiano JaipurAno*, 1976
- Fig. 210 *San Sebastiano* in a *santino* in Ontani's collection
- Fig. 211 Luigi Ontani, *S. Sebastianum (d'après J. J. Henner)* (1978
- Fig. 212 Jean-Jacques Henner, *Saint Sebastian Attended by Saint Irene*, 1889
- Fig. 213 Luigi Ontani, *Shivaji*, 1976–1977
- Fig. 214. H. R. Raja, calendar image, early 1980s
- Fig. 215 *Shivaji*, Modern Litho Works Press, 1931
- Fig. 216 Luigi Ontani, *En route vers l'Inde*, 1978
- Fig. 217 *Gujarati Hindu*, nd
- Fig. 218 Payag (attributed), *Mirza Mukarram Khan Safavi*, Mughal period, c. 1645
- Fig. 219 Luigi Ontani, *Full con pallina di carta stagnola*, 1978
- Fig. 220 *Jahanghir Holding the Orb*, c. 1635, from the Minto Album
- Fig. 221 Luigi Ontani, *Dare una mano all'albero*, 1978
- Fig. 222 Alighiero Boetti, *Six Senses*, 1974
- Fig. 223 Giuseppe Penone, *Continuerà a crescere tranne che in quel punto*, 1969
- Fig. 224 Luigi Ontani, *Stilita*, 1977
- Fig. 225 *Prince and Lady Making Love*, Kangra, early 19th century
- Fig. 226 Fabio Sargentini and Anna Papparatti as the *Prince and Lady Making Love* in the Kangra miniature (early 19th century), 1977, cover for *India-America: Musica e danza* (1977)
- Fig. 227 Bazaar photo, early 1980s
- Fig. 228 Luigi Ontani, *Over the moon*, 1975
- Fig. 229 Luigi Ontani, *Temple*, 1978
- Fig. 230 Luigi Ontani, *Mountains*, 1978

- Fig. 231 Luigi Ontani, *Ganga Varanasi*, 1975
- Fig. 232 Claude Monet, *Bateau-Atelier*, 1874
- Fig. 233 Luigi Ontani, *Untitled*, c. 1976
- Fig. 234 *Portrait of a Seated Woman*, 1900s
- Fig. 235 *Group of Ayas*, nd
- Fig. 236 Luigi Ontani, *Indian Band*, 1976–1977
- Fig. 237 Luigi Ontani, *Arte Marry Age*, 1976–1977
- Fig. 238 *Shiva*, Brijbasi prints, commercially available in the late 1970s
- Fig. 239 Luigi Ontani, *ShivAshirvad*, 1976
- Fig. 240 Luigi Ontani, *HanUMAN*, 1976
- Fig. 241 Props for Ramlila and Raslila, Kinari bazaar, Old Delhi
- Fig. 242 Props for Ramlila and Raslila, Kinari bazaar, Old Delhi
- Fig. 243 Jyothy Karat, backstage before a performance of the Ramlila, Bangalore, 2009
- Fig. 244 Narottam Narayan Sharma, *Murli Manohar*, 1950s offset print of a c. 1934 image, published by Brijbasi
- Fig. 245 Luigi Ontani, *Krishna*, 1977–1978
- Fig. 246 Boy performing Krishna at a Raslila, Brindavan, mid-1970s
- Fig. 247 Krishna images from the early 20th century (used as displays for photo frames at a bazaar in Nathdwara, 1995)
- Fig. 248 *Boy Posing as Krishna*, c. 1930s
- Fig. 249 Poster for C. S. Rao, *Yashoda Krishna*, 1976
- Fig. 250 Poster for Girish Manukant, *Ramayan*, 1981
- Fig. 251 J. C. Dannenberg and unknown artist, Maharaja Jaswant Singh of Bharatpur, 1863
- Fig. 252 Pushpamala N., from the series “Dard-e-Dil—The Anguished Heart, a Photromance,” 2002
- Fig. 253 Pushpamala N., from the series “Native Women of South India,” 2000
- Fig. 254 Waswo X Waswo, *Sauresh playing Hanuman*, 2007
- Fig. 255 Waswo X Waswo, *Sapna Playing Sita*, 2007
- Fig. 256 Waswo X Waswo, from the series “New Myths,” 2009
- Fig. 257 Luigi Ontani, *Rugantino*, 1976
- Fig. 258 Luigi Ontani, *Rugantino*, 1976
- Fig. 259 Luigi Ontani, *Lord Vanity*, 1977
- Fig. 260 Procession at Jambukesvara temple, a statuette of Jambukesvara on a Nandi *vahana*, Srirangam
- Fig. 261 Painted wooden *vahanas*, Bhaktavatsala temple, Tirukkalukundram
- Fig. 262 The *vahana* of Lord Indra is brought out of the temple before the tableau vivant of Ontani’s *Lord Vanity*

- Fig. 263 Luigi Ontani, installation view of “En route,” Venice Biennale, 1978
- Fig. 264 Luigi Ontani, installation view of “En route,” Museo d’Arte Moderna of Bologna, 2008
- Fig. 265 Alighiero Boetti, *Il Muro*, 1973
- Fig. 266 Francesco Clemente, *Undae Clemente Flamina Pulsae*, 1978
- Fig. 267 Luigi Ontani, installation view of “En route,” Guggenheim Museum, New York, 1982
- Fig. 268 Luigi Ontani, installation view at *Made in India*, the Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1985
- Fig. 269 Luigi Ontani, *Flaying Carpet*, 1975

Introduction

“Everything straight lies,” murmured the
dwarf disdainfully.
“All truth is crooked, time itself is a circle.”
—Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke
Zarathustra* (1883–1885)¹

Modernism and Postmodernism are not
separated by an Iron Curtain or Chinese
Wall; for history is a palimpsest, and culture
is permeable to time past, time present, and
time future. We are all, I suspect, a little
Victorian, Modern, and Postmodern, at once.
—Ihab Hassan, “POSTFACE 1982:
Toward Postmodernism” (1982)²

This study contributes to a remapping of early contemporary Italian art and addresses a gap in art-historical scholarship. It proposes to interpret Luigi Ontani (b. 1943) as a leading figure in the tableau-vivant revival that took place in Italy in the late 1960s and 1970s. A decade of remarkable cultural and sociopolitical turmoil, the 1970s in Italy have suffered noticeable neglect. They have been overshadowed by Arte Povera and Transavanguardia, largely studied as the two main “movements” of postwar Italy and framed as binary opposites.³ Arte Povera hit its height in the late-1960s and Transavanguardia was founded in 1979. Ontani is one of the main independent figures to

¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. R. J. Holligdale (New York: Penguin, 1961), 178.

² Ihab Hassan, *The Dismemberment of Orpheus: Toward a Postmodern Literature* (Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1982). This was the second edition of the book, first published in 1971.

³ In a recent survey of postwar Italian art, Adachiara Zevi claims that Arte Povera and Transavanguardia are separated by an “abyss” (*Peripezie del dopoguerra nell’arte italiana* [Turin: Einaudi, 2005], 473).

emerge on the art scene in the early 1970s. Having come out of the cultural milieu of Bologna, off the map of common narratives of contemporary Italian art, Ontani was never officially affiliated with either group, although he was invited to participate in exhibitions featuring both. Through an investigation of Ontani's work from the 1970s in relation to the material culture and artistic production of the time, my study problematizes the reductive view of contemporary Italian art as structured around the binary sequence Arte Povera-Transavanguardia. It outlines the emergence of a trend in the late 1960s that concerned artists both independent, including Ontani, Giancarlo Croce, and Salvo, as well as affiliated with Arte Povera, such as Jannis Kounellis, Pino Pascali, and Michelangelo Pistoletto. This trend consisted in the resurgence of the tableau vivant as an artistic strategy and subject, involving staging of carefully arranged costume scenes and the enactment of artworks and characters from cultural history. Ontani was the main artist who partook in this revival, which has yet to receive scholarly attention in the literature on contemporary Italian art. The importance of this trend cannot be underestimated in light of the fact that since the 1980s creating tableaux has become a central artistic strategy, especially in photography, and has been discussed as one of the hallmarks of postmodern aesthetic.⁴

With roots in Medieval and Renaissance pageants, the modern tableau emerged in

⁴ Ann Thomas refers to the "postmodernist revival of the tableau vivant" in her essay "Modernity and the Staged Photograph, 1900–1965," in *Acting the Part: Photography as Theater*, ed. Lori Pauli (New York: Merrell, 2006), 130. This is the catalogue of a historical survey exhibition on staged photography and the role of the tableau vivant in photography from the mid-nineteenth century to the present. Ontani and other Italian artists who engaged with the tableau vivant in photography in the late 1960s and 1970s are not included in this historical survey—a sign of the marginality of Italian art history in the Anglo-Saxon world.

the eighteenth century as a theatrical genre consisting of still scenes of costume actors striking poses based on famous paintings and sculptures or scenes from literature and history. It flourished as a popular form of private and public entertainment in Victorian England. At the time photographers such as Hippolyte Bayard, Oscar Gustav Rejlander, Julia Margaret Cameron, and Fred Holland Day incorporated the tableau vivant in their work by constructing and then photographing tableaux vivants.⁵ It is this engagement with the tableau vivant as an integral component of making an artwork that has been recuperated and that justifies the use of the term “revival.” In the past thirty years the main medium for artists engaging again with this practice has been photography, as in the work of Cindy Sherman, Jeff Wall, Gregory Crewdson, Yasumasa Morimura, and Yinka Shonibare, although video and live performance have also been adopted by Bill Viola, Eve Sussman, Vanessa Beecroft, and others. In the 1970s the primary medium for Ontani and other Italian artists engaging with the tableau vivant, such as Salvo and Croce, was photography as well. Ontani also used live performance extensively in the second half of the 1970s, following earlier examples by artists such as Pascali and Kounellis. Pistoletto also used film in the late 1960s and Salvo painting around the mid-1970s. Among these artists, Ontani was the most committed to the tableau vivant as a strategy and subject, producing a consistent and large body of works in which he posed as figures and characters in costumes and settings based on artworks and other visual sources, such as cinema, comics, and the television. Starting in the 1980s he has expanded his mediums

⁵ Lori Pauli, “Setting the Scene,” in *Acting the Part*, 13–71.

and subjects significantly, but the interest in theatricality and donning the visages of figures and characters from cultural history and popular culture has remained a constant of his forty-year career.

I have chosen to concentrate on Ontani's production from 1969 through 1979 for three reasons. The first is that this decade coincided with the initial phase of Ontani's engagement with staging, role-playing, and citation, which coalesced into a coherent body of work. Second, this focus shows that he was one of the earliest and most dedicated of the artists involved with these strategies, which in the past thirty years have characterized one of the most enduring trends in the visual arts. Third, it allows me to outline a phenomenon in Italian art that has yet to be investigated in the literature. As a result, my study offers insights into a significant dynamic taking place in early contemporary Italian art, beyond the sequence Arte Povera-Transavanguardia. It also amends commonly accepted narratives, including the one that Ontani has promoted for himself as a maverick in the landscape of Italian art. As part of this remapping, I identify painter Giorgio de Chirico and filmmaker Pier Paolo Pasolini as the two primary precedents to the tableau-vivant revival in Italian art. I also introduce an American audience to figures that are yet fairly unknown to it, such as the main critic of Ontani's work, Renato Barilli, whose writings are either untranslated or poorly translated into English.

My theoretical contributions to the field of art history are primarily three. First, I situate Ontani's work from the 1970s and the tableau-vivant revival within philosophical

theories circulating in Italy in the late 1960s and early 1970s: Gilles Deleuze's concept of the "simulacrum" as that which forgoes the hierarchy of original over copy, essence over appearance; and Gianni Vattimo's work on Nietzsche and the theme of the mask. Second, I frame Ontani's work and the resurgence of the tableau vivant in the context of the material and visual culture of Italy following the economic miracle of the late 1950s and early 1960s, as well as in relation to the onset of internal terrorism from the left and the right, following the failure of the workers and students protests that in Italy peaked in 1968–1969. Finally, I suggest to interpret Ontani's commitment, throughout the 1970s, to theatricality and role-playing, for the camera and the spectator, in relation to his homosexual identity and issues of gender and class performativity. I propose that Ontani's work from the 1970s is an important early figuration of queer aesthetics, the theoretical outlines of which were elaborated most fully by Judith Butler and others in the 1990s. Ontani's staged costume poses as an always different historical, literary, artistic, popular culture character or figure embody Butler's notion of the performativity of identity.

My study frames Ontani's work and the revival of the tableau vivant against the backdrop of three socio-historical phenomena affecting Italy: first, what I have called image culture, that is, the saturation of everyday life with electronic and printed images starting in the early 1960s; second, internal terrorism, afflicting the country from 1969 until 1980; third, the first Italian gay liberation movement of the early 1970s. In the literature none of these phenomena have been discussed in relation to Ontani's work.

Image culture was a product of the Marshall Plan-backed *miracolo italiano* or economic miracle (1958–1963), which transformed the country from predominantly agrarian to industrial, putting it on the map of the main industrial powers of the West. Industrialization and modernization led to burgeoning consumerism and the widespread acquisition of domestic consumer goods such as the television. Technological advancements also revolutionized the printing industry, allowing the publication of the first art history books with full-page, high-quality color illustrations of artworks in the early 1960s, such as Giuliano Briganti's *La maniera italiana* (1961). The first artist monograph series to be sold weekly at newsstands and to feature large, luxurious color reproductions, came out starting in the spring of 1963, aptly entitled "I Maestri del colore." The availability of cheap, high-quality color reproductions of artworks was key for Ontani and other practitioners of the *tableau vivant*.

The multiplication of images through the printed medium and the television was a phenomenon common to other industrially developed countries. Tied to it is Deleuze's concept of the simulacrum as "the phantasm of the eternal return," that which subverts the hierarchy of model over copy, original over reproduction, essence over appearance. This is a concept that Deleuze first articulated in an article from 1966, later published in the book *Logique du sens* (1969). The connection between image culture, Deleuze's notion of the simulacrum, and Ontani's work and the revival of the *tableau vivant* has yet to be considered by scholars and is a fundamental point of my study.

According to historian Giorgio Crainz, the nature of the Italian economic miracle

was one of the root causes of the protests that precipitated terrorism in the 1970s: it was sudden, dramatic, and short-lived.⁶ Why? Primarily because it was based on a strong reduction of the relative cost of workers' salaries more than on technological innovation. The reduction of workers' salaries gave way to union conflicts and soon the country fell into recession. In the span of one year, between the summer of 1963 and the summer of 1964, the Italian economic miracle reached its apex and turned sour. In the second half of the 1960s productivity improved, but, again, it was based on an intensification of the workers' exploitation. This led to the first phase of collective protests that saw the workers and students as protagonists, peaking in 1968–1969. This phase is known as “the season of the movements” (*la stagione dei movimenti*).⁷ It was halted by the onset of neofascist terrorism, which opened the *anni di piombo*, in English translated as “years of lead” or “leaden years,” an expression dubbed by the press in reference to the period from 1969 through 1980, for the politically motivated killings and violence instigated by both right- and left-wing extremists.

Two phases can be identified in the *anni di piombo*. The first, from 1969 to 1974, was characterized by the formation of extra-parliamentary groups from the right as well as from the left, operating both publicly and clandestinely. Leftist activism tended to move from the factory and the sphere of production to the sphere of distribution and

⁶ Guido Crainz, *Il paese mancato: Dal miracolo economico agli anni ottanta* (Roma: Donzelli, 2005).

⁷ Nanni Balestrini and Primo Moroni, “La stagione dei movimenti,” in *L'orda d'oro, 1968–1977: La grande ondata rivoluzionaria e creativa, politica ed esistenziale* (Milan: SugarCo, 1988), 9–26. The title can be translated as “The Golden Horde: 1968–1977: The Great Revolutionary and Creative, Political, and Existential Wave.” All translations into English are mine unless otherwise credited.

consumption. *Auto-organizzazione* or “self-organization,” through actions typically violent and illegal, became the *modus operandi* of these groups, who rejected the power dynamics involved with worker unions and political parties. On the one hand there was a vast, informal network of spontaneous groups operating openly in society, on the other there were the terrorist groups, whose activities became increasingly more aggressive after 1974.

The second phase of the *anni di piombo*, from 1974 to 1980, was the most acutely violent. The word that historians have coined for it is *riflusso* or “withdrawal.” This period witnessed a bifurcation and crisis of leftist activism: to the paroxysm of violence by a few terrorists corresponded the withdrawal of many from organized activism. A major crisis developed in the Italian left—both the “historical left” of the PCI, the Italian Communist Party, and the left born of 1968—due to two main reasons: the loss of centrality of the Italian working class and the loss of faith in international Communism. It is not difficult to understand that the second half of the 1970s was characterized by anxiety, disillusionment, and alienation, in the sense of disconnectedness and uprootedness. Emblematic of the shift is the music album by Eugenio Finardi, *Diesel* (1977), and in particular a line from the love song “Zucchero” (“Sugar”): “what is political is also personal” (*ciò che è politico è anche personale*)—an important slogan of the feminist and gay liberation movements. At a time when Italy “burns,” so go the lyrics of another song in the album, the solution is to “go diesel,” i.e., to slow down and turn back the clock.

Ontani's artistic career started under the weight of the *anni di piombo*. And yet, because of its lighthearted playfulness, in the literature his work is not normally associated with the *anni di piombo*. I propose reading the works from the first half of the 1970s as harbinger of the *riflusso* and “culture of revival” characteristic of the second half of the decade. I also discuss interpretations of Ontani's practice as both mimetic of and counterposed to the *anni di piombo*. I argue for the latter, building on Vattimo's analysis of Nietzsche's anti-metaphysical project and his distinction between masquerading (*travestimento*) and mask (*maschera*), articulated in *Il soggetto e la maschera: Nietzsche e il problema della liberazione* (1974).

The beginning of Ontani's engagement with the strategy of the tableau vivant also coincided with another historical phenomenon: the emergence, in 1971, of the first Italian movement for the liberation of gays and lesbians, named FUORI!, the acronym for Fronte unitario omosessuale rivoluzionario italiano, or Italian Unified Homosexual Revolutionary Front, and also the Italian for “out.” Homoerotic references characterize Ontani's work in comparison to other practitioners of the tableau vivant in Italy in the late 1960s and 1970s. I suggest to relate Ontani's involvement with issues of performativity and theatricality through his tableau-vivant practice to the work of FUORI!, particularly in its first years. I show that both anticipated a theoretical framework for notions like identity politics, radical difference, and gender performance—what later would be called queer politics.

Background

Ontani was born into a working-class family from a small hill town named Vergato, in the Tuscan-Emilian Apennines, south of Bologna. His first exhibition was in the mid-1960s at an art competition hosted for employees at the factory where he was working. The owner of the factory, a large local manufacturer producing iron wire, called Industria Leghe Metalliche (ILM), part of the Maccaferri group, launched the initiative, reflective of the progressive entrepreneurship distinguishing the Emilia Romagna region. A group of prominent art historians and critics from Bologna were hired to serve on the jury, including Renato Barilli, Francesco Arcangeli, Andrea Emiliani, and Giorgio Ruggeri.

At Maccaferri Ontani exhibited a series of casts from small, everyday domestic objects, like egg cartons and talcum powder canisters, playfully combined together to form mysterious conglomerations (fig. 1). He made the casts using scagliola, a cheap, plaster-like composite, and tempera paint in vivid colors. These works reflect the wave of neo-dada that was gathering momentum in the late 1950s and early 1960s in Western Europe and the United States. They were later included in Ontani's first public solo show, which opened in 1967 at a small gallery in Bologna near the cathedral, San Petronio, and named after it. In 1970 they were exhibited in Milan at a non-profit cultural center run by Jesuits, the Galleria San Fedele.⁸ The Milan show was Ontani's debut in the art world. It was accompanied by a publication with a text by Barilli.⁹ In

⁸ The show traveled to the Galleria FranzP in Turin and then to the Galleria Ferrari in Verona.

⁹ Renato Barilli, *Luigi Ontani* (Milan: Galleria San Fedele, 1970).

1971 Ontani was offered a solo show at the Galleria Diagramma in Milan and performed a tableau vivant of the angel of the Annunciation on the opening day.¹⁰ A few months later the gallery became one of the first to support performance art, hosting shows by Urs Lüthi, Marina Abramovic, and Gina Pane, soon to become renowned on the international scene. Over the course of the following couple of years, Ontani was invited to participate in more and more group exhibitions. Eventually, after fifteen years working at Maccaferri (from age fourteen till his late twenties), he was able to move to Rome and dedicate himself completely to art in 1972.¹¹

Rome represented for Ontani an elsewhere, a “non-place,” where he could reinvent himself and realize his own dreams and ambitions. This was also the case for two other Italian artists: Alighiero Boetti and Francesco Clemente. Boetti, who was a member of the Arte Povera group, arrived in Rome from Turin also in 1972 and Clemente, later to be associated with Transavanguardia, came from Naples around 1970. As Clemente said about the three of them, “we didn’t want to be anywhere: we were looking for a ‘non-place.’”¹² In Rome Ontani was gravitating around the gallery of Fabio Sargentini, named L’Attico, which took the art world by storm with the presentation of twelve live horses as an art exhibit, conceived by Arte Povera artist Jannis Kounellis. Together with Inga-Pin, Sargentini was the other gallerist in Italy who was supporting

¹⁰ I was unable to find a documentary photograph of the tableau staged at Galleria Diagramma. However, Ontani posed again in this tableau for the camera (figs. 132–133).

¹¹ “Luigi Ontani,” interview with Angelo Capasso, in *Opere d’arte a parole: Dialoghi sull’arte contemporanea*, (Rome: Meltemi, 2007), 43.

¹² Francesco Clemente, “Conversation with Francesco Clemente, Danilo Eccher and Francesco Pellizzi,” in Danilo Eccher, ed., *Francesco Clemente: opere su carta* (Turin: Umberto Allemandi, 1999), 109-110.

European and American performance art. Starting in 1972, he invited Joan Jonas, Joseph Beuys, Gilbert & George, and others to L'Attico. Ontani had his first solo show at L'Attico in 1974 and this was the year that marked his rise to international fame. He participated in the legendary group show *Transformer-Aspekte der Travestie*, curated by Jean-Christoph Ammann and traveling from Switzerland to Germany—the roster of artists comprises David Bowie, Brian Eno, Katherina Sieverding, and Andy Warhol. The following year Ontani was invited to perform at the De Appel Foundation in Amsterdam and in 1976 he was offered a solo show at the Paris gallery of Ileana Sonnabend. Ontani's New York debut was at the New York gallery of Ileana Sonnabend in 1977. It was followed by a prominent participation in the Venice Biennale in 1978 and by the invitation to perform at The Kitchen Center for Video, Music, and Performance—one of the leading centers for performance art at the time—in 1979.

Work Overview

I argue that creating tableaux is a central strategy in Ontani's practice between 1969 and 1979. In 1969 Ontani moved away from three-dimensional objects, such as his early works in scagliola, and started to concentrate on posing for the camera, first performing his objects, and then constructing tableaux. Ontani used almost exclusively photography (film and slide) to record his tableaux throughout the 1970s. In one case, *Favola impropriata* (1970), he also used video, although in this case the tableau is only one action in an array of actions Ontani performed. In 1974 he began presenting his tableaux

to an audience, although he continued to hire photographers to record his poses and produce what he calls “photo souvenirs.” Ontani affirms that staging a tableau for the camera, in the studio, or in front of an audience made no difference to him.¹³ As for terminology, when the tableau is made for the camera, I call the work a tableau photo/slide/video; when it is made for an audience, I call the work a live tableau or simply a tableau. If I refer to works made in different mediums, I call them tableau works.

In the first half of the 1970s Ontani executed his tableau photos/slides in Italy. Between 1974 and 1978 he realized them in India, over the course of extended yearly stays. In both cases, he collaborated with local photographers, although in Italy he worked with both commercial and amateur photographers, while in India only with professionals, perhaps because he did not speak the language, and so it was more difficult to make friends who would then collaborate with him. For the Italian works, he opted for color photography and video at a time when artists working in these mediums were privileging black and white, generally perceived as a signifier for serious and critically engaged work. I argue that Ontani’s choice of color was motivated by his engagement with camp and its reevaluation of kitsch, tied to the dandy cultivation of an aesthetic of pleasure. In India Ontani tapped into the venerable local tradition of hand-tinted photography, which allowed him to achieve even greater kitsch and camp results in the artificiality and cosmetics of added watercolor paint.

The tableaux Ontani staged for the camera in Italy can be divided into two main

¹³ Ontani, personal interview, 23 December 2007, Riola, audio recording.

subject groups. The first comprises poses in which the artist mimics an artwork, usually paintings but also a few sculptures, culled from the history of Western art, from antiquity to circa 1800, as the *Ephebe from Subiaco* (Roman copy of 4th-century BC Greek original), Guido Reni's *Saint Sebastian* (c. 1640), and Jacques-Louis David's *Sabine Women* (1799). The second is constituted of poses in which Ontani impersonated literary, historical, mythological, popular culture figures or characters, such as Dante, Pinocchio, the divinities of the Olympus, a Nazi. For the former, Ontani used the full-page color illustrations in the popular artist monograph series "I Maestri del colore," sold at newsstands. He based the latter poses on a range of visual sources, including cinema, the TV, and readily available printed reproductions, as in postcards and popular publications. He also used descriptions of the iconographic attributes of specific characters and figures from dictionaries of symbols and subjects in art. The works made in Italy in the first half of the 1970s are about 40 in total—25 from the first group, 15 from the second.

Ontani normally made unique prints, but often printed different sizes from the same negative and varied the pose of a given tableau and its photographic frame (see, for example, figs. 32–35, 66 and 67, 99 and 100, 148 and 149). Ontani claims that his works are "*quadri-non-quadri*" or "paintings-non-paintings." Slightly different painting versions of the same subject are not unseen in Italian art, from the Medieval period to the twentieth century, as in the work of de Chirico. Ontani declared: "I thought of making painting by using my pose and enlarging it to life size."¹⁴ His prints, especially in the

¹⁴ Idem, personal interview, 30 March 2008, New York, audio recording.

first half of the 1970s, were rarely life size, in part certainly due to technical and budget limitations, as Ontani contends, but also because he liked to play with different formats. I propose to consider the use of unique prints in tandem with the production of versions and variations of the same tableau. These aspects of Ontani's practice have yet to receive due attention in the literature. Given that the works are based on pre-existent images and subjects, I interpret these aspects as playful problematizations of the notions of authenticity, originality, and authorship, tackled by Ontani from his first neo-dada series of objects in scagliola.

In the second half of the 1970s Ontani made his tableau photos in India. He realized about 45 works in total between 1975 and 1978. Western artworks continued to provide sources for his tableaux, although their relative proportion changed, as he realized about 10, all from paintings, ranging from the fifteenth to the twentieth century. I have divided the other 35 works in 3 subject categories: Indian princes, common Indians, and Hindu deities. In India Ontani could carry further his engagement with seriality by producing variations of unique works. Besides printing different sizes from a negative and changing the pose of a tableau slightly, as he did before, in India he could also play with the color scheme in the tinting process.

Ontani conceived the Indian tableau photos as an open-ended series. The period from 1975 through 1978 was the most prolific, accounting for about half of the total number of works at present. After an interruption of almost fifteen years, he resumed working on the series in the 1990s, involving Indian youths in his tableaux (he posed

alone in the 1970s). Currently he still adds works to the series, although at an ever-slower pace, due to the increasing difficulty in finding hand-colorists.

In 1974 Ontani started to perform his tableaux in front of an audience. Between 1974 and 1979 he presented over twenty different tableaux. After 1979 he performed only three more, the last one in 1989. Four of the tableaux from the 1970s are based on past artworks, the others are impersonations of figures and characters from history, literature, folklore, mythology, opera, and popular culture. Ontani performed both indoors—in unconventional spaces, such as a subterranean garage converted into exhibition space and a deconsecrated church, as well as in more conventional spaces, as in commercial galleries and alternative non-profit institutions—and outdoors—on the steps of an abandoned Italian villa on the island of Capri, on a boat navigating the Tiber river, in the sacred precinct of a Hindu temple in Tamil Nadu, or in New York’s Columbus Circle.

Ontani typically chose culturally specific characters for his tableaux. For instance, in New York he impersonated Christopher Columbus and in Capri Jacques d’Adelswärd-Fersen, a French writer, homosexual, and dandy who moved to Capri in the early 1900 after having been at the center of a major sex scandal that involved setting up tableaux vivants of half-naked teenage boys reenacting scenes from classical antiquity at his apartment in Paris. With a few exceptions, Ontani remained motionless and silent in his performances, as in a traditional tableau, and determined a specific point of view, such as a door or a window, from which the viewers could see the *mise-en-scène*, as if

they were in front of a painting. Over time Ontani's tableaux became more and more complex. While in his earlier indoor tableaux he posed in front of a single slide projection, later he created immersive environments with slide projections of his older works on the walls, ceiling, and floor, in a sort of *gesamtkunstwerk* or self-quotational pastiche.

Ontani's tableaux from the 1970s, whether made for the camera or an audience, in Italy, India, or around the world, share some common characteristics. He posed alone (in India, in rare cases, with a culture-specific animal, such as an elephant or monkey), with an attitude of detachment and a subtle sense of irony, in line with his dandy persona. He can always clearly be recognized as the actor. The works from the first half of the 1970s generally strike for their economy of means. For them Ontani used simple, low-budget props. One of his most frequent collaborators, Cesare Bastelli, said that often he arranged the tableaux quickly for the camera.¹⁵ For the works after past artworks, Ontani used Xerox copies that he handed to the photographer so that they could direct him in composing the pose. In the second half of the 1970s in India, Ontani realized more elaborate and staged tableau photos. However, he allowed much of chance in the process for two main reasons: the language barrier, as he and his collaborators did not share any common language; and the tinting process being delegated to the hand-colorists.

After 1979 Ontani's practice shifted. He suspended his collaborations with Indian practitioners and started to travel to Bali and work with local wood-carvers, tapping into

¹⁵ Cesare Bastelli, personal interview, 15 June 2010, Castello d'Argile (Bologna), audio recording

another venerable handicraft tradition. He returned to three-dimensional object making, producing large masks that merged his own inventions with Balinese traditional iconography. A constant of these masks is the presence of Ontani's distinguishing feature of his facial mole on the lower right cheek. Role-playing and characters impersonation carried on (fig. 31). In the early 1980s Ontani also began to work in watercolor. Bizarre, surreal, composite creatures—part female, part male, part animal, part human—typically populate his paintings, which incorporate references to his own previous works (fig. 2). Over time Ontani's watercolors have maintained their fantastic tone and arabesque linearity, but compositions have become more and more elaborate.

Tapping into local handicraft traditions has been a hallmark of Ontani's practice since the Indian works. Besides Balinese woodcarving, he has engaged a host of Italian regional craftsmanships. He has worked with, among others, Faenza ceramists, Murano glassblowers, and silk weavers from Como to produce a protean body of objects. The collaboration with ceramists from the Bottega Gatti of Faenza, a small town in the Emilia Romagna region, has been the most prolific since the early 1990s. It has given birth to a series of life-size herms entitled *Ermestetiche*, among other works (fig. 3). Each herm depicts Ontani donning the visage of a figure or character from popular culture and cultural history, though it combines multiple references. Ontani is identifiable through his facial mole or other attributes, such as a button-up shoe, of the kind the artist typically wears everyday, sticking out of the column base. In *Ermestetiche* the strategy of the tableau vivant is brought into the realm of ceramic, a medium as unconventional in

contemporary art in the 1990s, as color and hand-painted photography were in the 1970s. In comparison to the work from the 1970s, the more recent production has become increasingly kitsch and over-the-top.

A Case of American Amnesia and Literature Overview

Even if an attentive, perceptive art critic like David Frankel wrote in the late 1990s that Ontani's concerns in the 1970s were "prescient and ahead of their time," Ontani is still mostly unknown in the United States, regardless of a respectable exhibition history, which includes a New York debut at Sonnabend in 1977 and, most recently, in 2001, a retrospective at PS1 Contemporary Art Center, an affiliate of the Museum of Modern Art.¹⁶ In terms of scholarship, Ontani has yet to enter art historical discourse in this country, despite the fact that he is considered one of the main figures of contemporary art in Europe. A number of factors have contributed to the periodic erasure that has characterized the reception and study of Ontani's work in the United States. First and foremost, he has never been part of a movement like Arte Povera and Transavanguardia, promoted by Germano Celant and Achille Bonito Oliva, two critics/impresarios who had in Filippo Tommaso Marinetti their most notable model. Ontani's main supporter, Barilli, lacked the ambition to international recognition that drove the advocates of Arte Povera and Transavanguardia to construct marketable fictions. Also, a broad range of cultural and historical references populate Ontani's work. Ambiguity and multiplicity of meaning

¹⁶ David Frankel, "Luigi Ontani, Sperone Westwater, New York," exhibition review, *Artforum* 199 (summer 1997): 135.

inform both his work and his language. Ontani's titles and prose are rich in neologisms, metaphors, rhymes, alliterations, and puns that are next to impossible to translate.¹⁷

Most of the study on Ontani has been conducted in Italy and little of it is scholarly work, perhaps because of a twofold reason: on the one hand, there is a resilient, general tendency in Italian academia to research minor figures; on the other, the critics who wrote on Ontani's work in the 1970s, such as Barilli, have continued to keep the conversation at the level of art criticism, even if they are art historians with academic jobs. A scholarly study on Ontani's production from the 1970s is still missing and among the few subjects that have been dealt with more in depth, one of the least considered is the body of works executed in India, probably because Italian art historians of the contemporary period are typically unfamiliar with Indian history and culture. And perhaps also because of the anti-Orientalist sentiment following the publication of Edward Said's *Orientalism* in 1978.¹⁸

To date the main publications on Ontani are three: the PS1 exhibition catalogue from 2001, edited by Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev; the monograph *Luigi Ontani: OntanElegia* from 2004, edited by Alessandra Galasso; and the exhibition catalog of Ontani's last major retrospective held at MAMbo, the Museo d'Arte Moderna of

¹⁷ Ontani said that on the occasion of his retrospective exhibition at PS1, some works that at first were supposed to be included were eventually excluded because the titles were untranslatable (Ontani, personal interview, 24 June 2009, New York, unrecorded).

¹⁸ See Daniel Martin Varisco, *Reading Orientalism: Said and the Unsaid* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2007).

Bologna, curated by Gianfranco Maraniello in 2008.¹⁹ For a chronology of Ontani's work and his solo and group exhibitions, the PS1 catalogue is an excellent source.²⁰ Another good source of information on Ontani's life and work is included in the catalogue of an exhibition curated by Barilli a year prior to the PS1 show.²¹ The PS1 catalogue also features an anthology of texts on Ontani, written between 1970 and 2000 (Barilli's first text from 1970 is included in English translation). Given the cultural complexity and neologisms that characterize Ontani's work and language, a glossary of terms can be useful and Alessandra Galasso has put one together.²² For Ontani's work in video and film, Elena Volpato has become the main spokesperson.²³

In terms of primary sources on Ontani, the most sensitive interpreter of his work was Barilli. After the text for the San Fedele exhibition catalogue, published in 1970, Barilli penned an article for the art magazine *NAC Notiziario Arte Contemporanea* that

¹⁹ Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, ed., *Luigi Ontani 1965-2001 GaneshamUSA* (New York: MoMA PS1 Contemporary Art Center, 2001); Alessandra Galasso, ed., *Luigi Ontani: OntanElegia* (Torino: Umberto Allemandi, 2004); Gianfranco Maraniello, ed., *Luigi Ontani: Gigante3RazzEtà7ArtiCentAuro* (Bologna: Museo d'Arte Moderna di Bologna, 2009). Most of the essays in the Allemandi book, which is in Italian, were already in the catalogue published on the occasion of Ontani's retrospective in Gent the year before: *Luigi Ontani: GentHARA* (Gent: S.M.A.K., Stedelijk Museum voor Actuele Kunst, 2003). The Gent catalogue is in English. The MAMbo catalogue has texts both in Italian and English. On the MAMbo exhibition see my review published in *Art in America* (September 2008): 176. It gives a concise overview of Ontani's production in the past forty years.

²⁰ "Chronology," in *Luigi Ontani 1965-2001 GaneshamUSA*, 88–102.

²¹ Lia Durante, "Luigi Ontani. La vita e l'arte," in *Luigi Ontani: ciliElegia PineAlita: premio artista dell'anno 2000* (Milan: Mazzotta, 2000), 113–116.

²² Alessandra Galasso, "Glossario. Alcuni termini fondamentali per comprendere l'opera di Ontani," in *Luigi Ontani: OntanElegia*, 157–179. The English translation published in *Luigi Ontani: GentHARA* is not accurate.

²³ See for instance, Elena Volpato, "Tra pittura e fotogramma: Film e Video di Luigi Ontani / Between painting and photogram: Film and Video in the work of Luigi Ontani," in *Luigi Ontani: Gigante3RazzEtà7ArtiCentAuro*, 41–58 and 226–239 (English translation).

came out in 1973 and that was the first critical assessment of Ontani's tableau photos. One of the main contributions of this study is to underline Barilli's role as an attentive interpreter of the changes occurring in society and art in Italy in the early 1970s.

A literary and art critic and historian from Bologna, Barilli had been teaching aesthetics at the Accademia di Brera, the fine arts academy in Milan, and was about to relocate to Bologna, where he was offered an academic position, first in aesthetics, in the fall of 1971, and then, the following year, in art history, next to Arcangeli, who had been teaching art history at the University of Bologna since the late 1960s. As an art historian Barilli was on the faculty of a newborn interdisciplinary program named DAMS (*Discipline dell'arte, della musica e dello spettacolo*), dedicated to the visual arts, music, and theater.²⁴ Eco, who had also been teaching aesthetics, in temporary appointments at the universities of Milan and Florence, was one of the main promoters of the new program and became one of the faculty members.

Barilli's receptiveness to the changes taking place in art and society in the early 1970s was tied to his work as a literary critic and member of the Gruppo 63, and, in particular, to the ideas he matured as a theoretician of the Nouveau Roman, presented at the second reunion of the Gruppo 63 in Palermo, Sicily, in 1965. As Umberto Eco has explained, in his effective, lucid prose, the 1965 reunion revealed a shift in perspective among the writers and critics of Gruppo 63 regarding the equation "popularity = lack of value" (*consenso = disvalore*), they once embraced. After unacceptable content was

²⁴ I am a graduate of this program and one of the first, most impressive courses I took was Barilli's "Fenomenologia degli stili" (Phenomenology of styles).

codified as entertainment, it stopped serving as a criterion for experimentation in literature or any other art. The avant-garde dictum “*épater les bourgeois*” lost its effectiveness, as a shocking quality was expected. So the members of Gruppo 63 no longer found necessary to criticize the successful plot novel as escapist and praise the experimental novel rejected by the mass audience.²⁵ In his opening paper Barilli analyzed the work of contemporary writers such as Alain Robbe-Grillet, Günter Grass, and Thomas Pynchon, and concluded that it marked a new phase of narrative, sanctioning action again, though “an *autre* action,” non-naturalistic, “deeply concrete,” in the sense of banal, everyday, with circular, rather than linear trajectories. The plot was reintroduced, though not as a goal. It was exploited as commonplace, as writers employed plots that were among the most “inauthentic” in the history of the novel, in its different genres, resorting to narrative clichés.²⁶ What later became clear, Eco underlies in the account of the 1965 reunion he wrote in 1983, was that the plots of the new narrative were quotations of other plots and that “the quotation could be less escapist than the plot quoted.”²⁷ As Barilli remarked, the protagonists of the 1965 reunion delineated “the coordinates of at least one of the constellations of meaning that the notion of postmodern became associated with, as, almost a decade later, Ihab Hassan outlined it,” in his

²⁵ Umberto Eco, *Postscript to “The Name of the Rose,”* trans. William Weaver (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1984), 60–63. The text first appeared in Italian: “Postille a ‘Il nome della rosa,’” *Alfabeto* n. 49 (June 1983).

²⁶ Renato Barilli in *Gruppo 63: Il romanzo sperimentale*, Nanni Balestrini, ed. (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1966), 11–26.

²⁷ Eco, *Postscript*, 65.

Dismemberment of Orpheus: Toward a Postmodern Literature (1971).²⁸ Building on the myth of Orpheus, the book is dedicated to “the literature of silence”—Sade, Hemingway, Kafka, Genet, Beckett. In his “Postface” to the second edition of the book that came out in 1982, Hassan, an American literary theorist from Egypt, stresses how postmodernism, as an artistic, philosophical, and social phenomenon, should be perceived in terms of both continuity and discontinuity:

open, playful, optative, provisional (open in time as well as in structure or space), disjunctive, or indeterminate forms, a discourse of ironies and fragments, a ‘white ideology’ of absences and fractures, a desire of diffractions, an invocation of complex, articulate, silences. Postmodernism veers towards all these yet implies a different, if not antithetical, movement toward pervasive procedures, ubiquitous interactions, immanent codes, media, languages.²⁹

Together with irony, the coexistence of absence and ubiquity are a strikingly characteristic of Ontani’s works from the 1970s, as the artist plays hide-and-seek in his poses. His brand of theatricality, though, does not involve narrative, which is the equivalent of literary plot. But this is to say that Barilli’s work as a literary theorist exposed him to ideas and concerns that later contributed to his interest in Ontani’s work and his ability to frame it as part of a larger shift that involved both continuity and discontinuity, well before Bonito Oliva and others sanctioned this shift as a sheer turnabout.

Barilli was also one of the very few art historians who early on, in the early

²⁸ Renato Barilli, *La neoavanguardia italiana: Dalla nascita del “Verri” alla fine di “Quindici”* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1995), 203. On Gruppo 63 see also Renato Barilli and Angelo Guglielmi, *Gruppo 63: Critica e teoria* (1976; 2nd edition, Turin: Testo & Immagine, 2003).

²⁹ Hassan, *The Dismemberment of Orpheus*, 271.

1980s, recognized elements of continuity in the shift from Arte Povera to Transavanguardia.³⁰ I will briefly outline these “movements” and their common narratives. From their launching manifestos, published in 1967 and 1979 respectively, Arte Povera and Transavanguardia have been framed as diametrically opposed. The binary sequence was the product of promotional strategies adopted by the two critics who championed the groups, Celant and Bonito Oliva, in order to “sell” the story to an international audience. Arte Povera has being characterized by the use of unconventional, everyday materials in works that call for direct experience, unmediated by “culture,” codified languages, representation; Transavanguardia has being associated with the recuperation of traditional mediums, such as oil painting, and past artistic styles and subjects. These characteristics of Transavanguardia have been used to define it as a postmodern reaction and challenge to Arte Povera and many have despised it as a conservative, escapist regression from the alleged socio-political engagement of the Arte Povera artists. In fact, Arte Povera artists were not as politically involved, and some of them adopted strategies for which the Transavanguardia artists are known, such as theatricality, narrative, the use of quotation, and the revisitation of the past, identified as “postmodern.” Although research have been made on these aspects of Arte Povera,³¹ what is still missing and what my study contributes is a connection with Ontani and other

³⁰ See, for instance, Renato Barilli, “Una generazione postmoderna,” in *Una generazione postmoderna: I nuovi-nuovi, la postarchitettura, la performance vestita*, Renato Barilli, Fulvio Irace, and Francesca Alinovi (Milan: Mazzotta, 1982), 9–27. An American art historian and critic who has commented on the continuity between the Arte Povera and Transavanguardia is Marcia E. Vetrocq, “Utopias, Nomads, Critics: From Arte Povera to the Transavanguardia,” *Arts Magazine* 63, n. 8 (April, 1989): 51.

³¹ Claire Gilman, “Arte Povera’s Theater: Artifice and Anti-Modernism in Italian Art of the 1960s,” PhD dissertation, Columbia University, 2006.

independent figures, such as Salvo and Croce, and the recognition of the role of the tableau vivant in their practice.

A major source of information for my reconstruction of Ontani's life and work are the seventeen interviews I conducted with the artists over the course of four years. They have contributed an oral history on which I have generously drawn, although I have strived to remain independent in my interpretations. Inconsistencies in published information regarding Ontani's works and life are quite common, as Ontani delights in shifting dates and facts. This goes with the circularity of time and ambiguity of sense that inform his practice. The subject of Ontani's works from the 1970s is the fictional, not the factual, reality of history and culture; the constructed, not the objective, nature of history and culture. "*Sono altrove*," "I am elsewhere," is Ontani's recorded message on his answering machine and it could be the epigram for his tableau work throughout the 1970s. Ontani's position was consistent with the most advanced philosophical discourse of the time, such as French poststructuralist theory and Vattimo's work, which recuperated Nietzsche's anti-metaphysical project.

Chapter Outline

The thesis is divided into four thematic chapters arranged within a loose chronological framework: the first two chapters deal mostly with work before 1974–1975, the last two with work from 1974 through 1979. In the first chapter I make the case for the revival of the tableau vivant as an artistic strategy in Italy in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

Through a close analysis of Giorgio de Chirico's Baroque self-portrait series, painted in the 1940s and 1950s, and Pier Paolo Pasolini's short films *La ricotta* (1963) and *Che cosa sono le nuvole?* (1967), I provide reasons for considering de Chirico and Pasolini as the main forerunners of the tableau-vivant revival. In this chapter I also discuss the phenomenon of image culture and relate the proliferation of kitsch that accompanied it to the emergence of a citationist trend in the visual arts that concerned artists involved with the tableau vivant.

The second chapter is dedicated to Ontani's tableau works from the first half of the 1970s, all executed in Italy and in dialogue with religious kitsch. In this chapter I argue that camp aesthetic informs Ontani's practice and is fundamental to an understanding of his engagement with the tableau vivant. I frame this engagement in relation to the work of the first Italian gay liberation movement and later queer conceptualizations of identity as performatively constructed.

In the third chapter I examine a selection of Ontani's tableaux vivants, performed between 1974 and 1979 in front of an audience in Italy and New York City. I apply Gilles Deleuze's notion of the simulacrum and Gianni Vattimo's interpretation of the mask in Nietzsche to Ontani's tableau work. I also situate Ontani's practice within the context of the "years of lead," suggesting a political reading of the work.

The last chapter is devoted to the work Ontani made in India between 1974 and 1978: a series of hand-painted tableau photos and a tableau vivant. I contend that in India Ontani found his ideal environment. He plumbed the riches of Indian visual culture and

tapping into the local tradition of hand-painted photography. This tradition offered Ontani the possibility of furthering his engagement with kitsch and theatricality through the manipulation of watercolor paint.

Chapter 1

Setting the Stage

This chapter functions as an introduction to Ontani's tableau-vivant practice and an assessment of the tableau-vivant revival in Italy from the mid-1960s to the mid 1970s. It is divided into four sections. The first is dedicated to Ontani's early production, from 1965 to 1970. It highlights the shift from object making to performing the object to posing for the camera. It introduces to the American reader Vasco Bendini (b. 1922), the most prominent artist in Bologna in the late 1960s and a model to Ontani for his exploration of self-reflexivity in his work through different mediums. In the second section I argue that Giorgio de Chirico (1888–1978) and Pier Paolo Pasolini (1922–1975) are the two main precedents to Ontani's tableau work and the tableau-vivant revival in Italy in the late 1960s and 1970s. Building on Gillo Dorfles' writings on kitsch from the 1960s, in the third section I contend that the introduction of affordable publications with high-quality color illustrations of artworks in the early 1960s played a major role in the emergence of a citationist trend in the work of Pop artists and tableau-vivant practitioners. The fourth section surveys the phenomenon of the tableau-vivant revival. It examines and compares different artistic strategies embraced by artists as Pino Pascali, Michelangelo Pistoletto, Jannis Kounellis, and Salvo engaging with the tableau vivant. Most of these artists were based in Rome, the city of the theatrical Baroque. Unlike in other cases in the history of art, in the 1960s and 1970s the tableau-vivant revival in Italy

did not coalesce into a programmatic movement. The works discussed in this section are for the most part little-known. They stand out as important examples of the *tableau-vivant* revival.

Section 1

Ontani's Early Work: From Object to Action and Pose

1.1. Object¹

In the mid- to late 1960s Ontani was based in Vergato with a full-time factory job. He describes the cultural milieu of Vergato as a “totally provincial context.” He was surrounded by figurative paintings and sculptures in the style of socialist realism, a trend termed *neofigurazione* (neofiguration) supported by the Italian Communist Party (PCI), exceptionally strong in the region, Emilia Romagna, known as the “*cintura rossa d'Italia*” or “red belt of Italy” for its tradition of leftist politics and cultural production.² “I never thought of myself as a figurative artist,” declares Ontani, who admits to having disliked many of the exhibitions promoted by the PCI and being diffident and suspicious towards a certain local “tradition of ideological conformism.”

To the constrictions of provincial daily life, the young Ontani responded by “traveling” in his imagination. Books provided a limitless space for his journeys and he

¹ Citations and information contained in this sections are drawn from a series of interviews and conversations with Ontani: December 23, 2007; January 5, 2009; July 7, 2011. All translations into English are mine unless otherwise credited.

² Paul Ginsborg, *A History of Contemporary Italy: Society and Politics, 1943–1988* (New York: MacMillan, 2003), 295.

became an avid reader, delving into exciting novels on exotic travels and transgressions, esoteric books on alchemy, religion, and magic, and so on. More at home with anarchism, Ontani “pled alibi,” as he put it, with regard to political commitment.³ His “alibi” was an interest in mythology and allegory, considered taboos, “forbidden nourishment,” by the cultural and political mainstream of the region. So this interest was not holding up as an alibi, strictly speaking, but the reason why Ontani uses this term is to underline that this interest brought him “elsewhere,” that is, that it was the cause of an absence with regard to political commitment.

In the second half of the 1960s Ontani fed on the artistic and cultural life of the city of Bologna. The main city of the Emilia Romagna region, Bologna boasts a longstanding tradition of progressive intellectuals gravitating around the local university. Present in Bologna at the turn of the 1960s were Renato Barilli and Umberto Eco, both members of the literary neo-avant-garde called Gruppo 63, and two of Roberto Longhi’s most eminent students, Francesco Arcangeli and Andrea Emiliani. Perhaps best known as a scholar of Caravaggio, Longhi studied in Rome with Adolfo Venturi, one of the founders of art historical scholarship in Italy. In the 1960s the main cultural centers of Italy were Rome, Milan, and Turin, a few hours away by car from Vergato. Bologna, though, was also an artistically active center, with, at the forefront, the Galleria de’ Foscherari, which opened at the beginning of the decade and hosted a progressive,

³ Anarchism is part of Ontani’s family history. Ontani’s paternal grand-mother was one of the first Italian women anarchists. When Mussolini seized power, the entire family fled Italy by train and never returned, except for Ontani’s father, who at the time was too little to travel.

diversified exhibition program, featuring local and international artists, both modern and contemporary. One of the first shows was a happening that involved three local artists (Pirro Cuniberti, Concetto Pozzati, and Luciano de Vita) painting the gallery walls.

Ontani did not exhibit with the gallery, perhaps because he was too much of an amateur and outsider to be invited.⁴ However, he had the chance to see important shows, such as *Arte Povera*, curated by Germano Celant, the champion of the group, in 1968. The year before Celant launched *Arte Povera* in the pages of *Flash Art*, the internationally-read Italian art magazine, with a manifesto emphatically entitled “*Arte Povera: Appunti per una guerriglia*” (“*Arte Povera: Notes for a Guerrilla War*”).⁵

Key characteristics of the newly founded movement are, according to Celant, the use of unconventional, everyday materials in works that call for direct experience, unmediated by cultural, codified languages. However, in reality, artists such as Michelangelo Pistoletto and Jannis Kounellis were involved precisely with cultural, codified languages and even with theatricality. It was in these artists that Ontani was interested. This is an aspect of their work that exemplifies the narrowness of Celant’s definition. Despite his claim that *Arte Povera* was different from North-American movements like Minimalism, to which he refers as “primary structures,” after the title of

⁴ Even in 1974, when Alberto Boatto, a sophisticated writer and art critic, curated *Ghenos, Eros, Thanatos* at de’ Foscherari, inviting a mix of artists engaged with performance (Gino De Dominicis, Jannis Kounellis, Fabio Mauri, Pino Pascali, Vector Pisani, and others), Ontani was not included. At the time Ontani had started to receive considerable attention, but possibly only in limited circles. Boatto later wrote on Ontani in *Narciso infranto: L’autoritratto moderno da Goya a Warhol* (Rome-Bari: Laterza, 1997), 151.

⁵ Germano Celant, “*Arte Povera: Appunti per una guerriglia*,” *Flash Art* (November/December 1967): 3. The manifesto was republished with the English translation in *Arte Povera/Art Povera* (Milan: Electa, 1985), 35–36.

the Jewish Museum show of 1966 that sanctioned the movement, his invention of Arte Povera was modeled on Minimalism and also on “process art,” which some artists associated with Minimalism, as Robert Morris and Richard Serra, embraced around the mid-1960s. Process art was one of the tendencies later grouped under the label of Post-minimalism, which had its first consecration in another New York show that opened in 1966 entitled “Eccentric Abstraction.”⁶ Celant’s fiction was functional to establish Arte Povera as the Italian counterpart to these trends, so as to put Italian art in dialogue with the vastly more powerful North-American art world.

Whenever possible Ontani traveled to Rome, Milan, Turin, and other cities to see exhibitions. A stay in Turin for military service in 1963–1964 exposed him to the work of Paolini and Pistoletto. In Turin there were galleries that had an established international reputation, such as Galleria Notizie, owned by Luciano Pistoï, and Galleria Sperone, owned by Gian Enzo Sperone, perhaps Italy’s most famous art dealer.⁷ Upon his return to Vergato, Ontani began to occasionally attend the course taught by Vittorio Mascaldi at the Accademia di Belle Arti, the fine arts academy of Bologna. In the 1950s Mascaldi was a major figure of the *Informale* school, the Italian version of Abstract Expressionism. In the course of the 1960s he progressively moved away from painting

⁶ The show opened at Fishbach Gallery and was curated by Lucy Lippard. It featured works by Eva Hesse, Louise Bourgeois, Bruce Nauman, and others.

⁷ Ontani collaborated with both over the course of his career. The most important collaboration Ontani had with Pistoï was through Eva Menzio, Pistoï’s partner, in 1983–1984, when he showed the wooden masks made in Bali. The show, entitled *FacciaPule*, was accompanied by a publication with stunning color illustrations. The height of Ontani’s relationship with Sperone was in the 1990s, when the gallerist offered the artists a number of solo exhibitions in Rome and New York.

towards a practice marked by a resurgent interest in Duchamp.⁸ The revival of the ready-made inspired Ontani's first series of works, which occupied him from 1965 through 1969: his objects in scagliola, Styrofoam, and corrugated cardboard.

Collectively named *Oggetti pleonastici*, the pieces in scagliola were the centerpiece of Ontani's first solo show at the Galleria San Petronio in Bologna in the spring of 1967, which offered a selection of all the works he was making "as an amateur," including watercolors and paintings. I argue that the *Oggetti pleonastici* were made in response to Pistoletto's *Oggetti in meno* (*Minus Objects*, 1965–1966). The word "pleonastic" resonates with Ontani's work in general, the redundancy of the ready-made as object and, later on, image, as the tableau photos/slide/video works of the early 1970s are based on preexistent images. Some of Pistoletto's *Oggetti in meno* were executed using industrially-produced, everyday found materials, such as corrugated cardboard, used for *Rosa bruciata* (*Burnt Rose*, 1966, fig. 4), which is one of the most decorative pieces in the series, otherwise more aligned with post-Minimalism than Ontani's *Oggetti pleonastici*.

In January of 1970 the *Oggetti pleonastici* presented at Galleria San Fedele in Milan, together with the Styrofoam and corrugated cardboard objects. While the works in scagliola are small to minuscule casts of domestic objects painted in vivid tempera colors and joined together like odd Lego-like units, the Styrofoam and cardboard objects feature large cutout shapes of geometric forms, also combined in whimsical

⁸ On Mascalchi's work see Claudio Cerritelli, *Vittorio Mascalchi* (Ravenna: Essegi, 1982).

conglomerations suggestive of things from the make-believe world of children: a shield or kite, a fantastic costume, a snake-like chain, strange prehistoric creatures, fanciful architectural elements.⁹ As Ontani puts it, these are “archaic and ancestral forms with a bit of everything: the classical and the neoclassical, anatomy, abstraction, the gothic, technology, and contingency.”¹⁰

The San Fedele show was entitled “Stanza delle similitudini” (“Room of Similitudes”), in homage to Michel Foucault’s *Les mots et les choses: une archéologie des sciences humaines* (*The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, 1966), published by Rizzoli in Italian translation in 1967. *The Order of Things* proposes an “archaeology” of the episteme of Western culture, the episteme being the ways in which knowledge manifests a history of its conditions of possibility. Foucault identifies resemblance, or similitude, as the form of knowledge of Western culture up until the early to mid-seventeenth century. He discusses it as the Renaissance episteme:

Up to the end of the sixteenth century, resemblance played a constructive role in the knowledge of Western culture. It was resemblance that largely guided exegesis and the interpretation of texts; it was resemblance that organized the play

⁹ Although Ontani called *Oggetti pleonastici* only his works in scagliola, his other works in corrugated cardboard and Styrofoam, started a few years later, are so similar to the scagliola objects in terms of artistic strategy that in the literature they have often been mistaken to belong to the same group of works. See, for example, Laura Cherubini, “The Enchanted Room: The Sovereignty of the Similar,” in *Luigi Ontani 1965–2001 GaneshamUSA*, ed. Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev (New York: MoMA PS1 Contemporary Art Center, 2001), 20.

¹⁰ Luigi Ontani in Lino Cavallari, “Cento Muse: Nudo col tamburo,” *Qui Bologna: il settimanale della città*, 25 September 1970, 37.

of symbols, made possible knowledge of things visible and invisible, and controlled the art of representing them.¹¹

Foucault distinguishes four main similitudes in the “semantic web of resemblance in the sixteenth century”¹²: *convenientia* or convenience, *aemulatio* or emulation, *analogy* and *sympathy*. The most important of the four main forms of resemblance is the last one since it gives rise to all similitudes. It is “a principle of mobility,”¹³ as it articulates itself as “the sympathy-antipathy pair.”¹⁴

Sympathy is an instance of the *Same*. . . ; it has the dangerous power of *assimilating*, of rendering things identical to one another, of mingling them, of causing their individuality to disappear—and thus of rendering them foreign to what they were before. Sympathy transforms. It alters in the direction of identity, so that if its power were not counterbalanced it would reduce the world. . . to the featureless form of the Same. . . .

This is why sympathy is compensated for by its twin, antipathy. Antipathy maintains the isolation of things and prevents their assimilation.¹⁵

The constant play of sympathy and antipathy, Foucault continues, insures the identity of things, “the fact that they can resemble others and be drawn to them, though without being swallowed up or losing their singularity.”¹⁶

¹¹ Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Races* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 17. In Ontani’s PS1 exhibition catalogue, Laura Cherubini offers a brief consideration of the relationship between Foucault’s *Order of Things* and Ontani’s “Stanza delle similitudini” that inspired my analysis. See “The Enchanted Room: The Sovereignty of the Similar,” in *Luigi Ontani 1965–2001 GaneshamUSA*, 20–21.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid., 23.

¹⁴ Ibid., 25.

¹⁵ Ibid., 24.

¹⁶ Ibid.

Foucault describes convenience as the relationship of similitude between adjacent things. It is at the same time “the hidden reason” for the proximity of things and “the visible effect” of that proximity. “Resemblance imposes adjacencies that in their turn guarantee further resemblances. Place and similitude become entangled.”¹⁷ Emulation, on the other hand, is convenience functioning from a distance. “The relation of emulation enables things to imitate one another from one end of the universe to the other without connection or proximity: by duplicating itself in a mirror the world abolishes the distance proper to it; in this way it overcomes the place allotted to each thing.”¹⁸ Finally, analogy entails the more subtle relationships. Through analogy, writes Foucault, “all the figures of the whole universe can be drawn together.”¹⁹

Having entitled his San Fedele show “La stanza delle similitudini,” Ontani was thinking of these forms of similitudes. His objects bring together forms from the everyday world as well as from the world of fantasy and fairy tales. They are “archaic and ancestral forms with a bit of everything.”²⁰ In the aftermath of the “economic miracle,” everyday life was populated by new consumer goods. Ontani’s “stanza delle similitudini” offered a model for kinship and relatedness between things foreign and distant. What is even more interesting is that Foucault’s ideas of sympathy and antipathy percolated through and informed Ontani’s tableau-vivant practice. Ontani’s enactments

¹⁷ Ibid., 18.

¹⁸ Ibid., 19.

¹⁹ Ibid., 22.

²⁰ Ontani quoted in Cavallari, “Cento Muse: Nudo col tamburo,” 37.

involve both assimilation/identification and singularity/difference. He is there, but he is also not there, as he is donning someone else's visage.

Ontani's "Stanza delle similitudini" was also an extension of the make-believe world of children's games, as Barilli stated in the text for the exhibition catalog:

[the work] fundamentally consists in a willing and lucid regression into childhood, into a space free and available, in which certain categories have not yet been crystallized: that is to say, where play is not set against labor, nor usefulness is set against superfluosity, but the one is also the other. In other words, we find the notions of playful labor, vivified by fantasy, and of serious play, not disdainful of relying on intelligence, for [play] is not intended as an evasion and escape from adult intelligence become too rigorous and frozen.²¹

By recycling everyday forms and materials and turning them into fun objects for play, Ontani wished to demonstrate the usefulness of fantasy. "While many declare the futility of art—he asserted in an interview in 1970—I am predicating the utility of fantasy."²² In fact, the utility of fantasy was a key point of the program of the '68 student movement across Western Europe. In Italy, it was expressed with the slogan "l'immaginazione al

²¹ Renato Barilli, *Luigi Ontani* (Milan: Galleria San Fedele, 1970), np. [[Il lavoro] consiste fondamentalmente in una voluta e lucida regressione all'infanzia, a uno spazio libero e disponibile in cui certe categorie non si sono ancora cristallizzate: ove cioè il gioco non si contrappone al lavoro, né l'utile al superfluo, ma l'uno è anche l'altro. Ritroviamo insomma le nozioni di un lavoro giocoso, vivificato dalla fantasia, e di un gioco serio, non sdegnoso di affidarsi all'intelligenza, perché non inteso come evasione e fuga da un'intelligenza adulta divenuta troppo rigorosa e assiderante.] The notion of "serious play" brings to mind Pino Pascali's early work. Of his 1966 series of white animals, Luca Massimo Barbero writes that although at first they "might have appeared almost Disney-like," in retrospect they strike as a "serious form of playfulness" that contrasts with "the grave seriousness of the generation that emerged in the post-war period." Certainly Ontani is another artist whose work contrasts with that serious mood ("Roma: Territori di confine. L'Attico di Fabio Sargentini"/"Rome: Borderlands. Fabio Sargentini's L'Attico," *Macroradici del contemporaneo: L'Attico di Fabio Sargentini, 1966-1978/Macroroots of the Contemporary: L'Attico di Fabio Sargentini, 1966-1978*, Luca Massimo Barbero and Francesca Pola, eds. [Milan: Mondadori Electa, 2010], 27).

²² Ontani, quoted in Cavallari, "Cento Muse: Nudo col tamburo," 37.

potere.”²³ The Italian gay liberation movement FUORI! inherited this idea and invented a related slogan: “la rivoluzione è gaia,” which translates as “revolution is gay.” The double entendre in Italian relies on knowledge of the two meanings of the English word “gay” as homosexual and merry. Italian gay activists borrowed English vocabulary even for the movement name, FUORI!, which references the catchphrase of the British gay liberation movement, “come out.”²⁴

Ontani preferred not to associate himself with leftist and gay activism. He quoted from memory a passage from the *Scienza nuova* of Giambattista Vico as his artist statement for the San Fedele show: “The most sublime labor of poetry is to give sense and passion to insensate things; and it is characteristic of children to take inanimate things in their hands and talk to them in play as if they were living persons.”²⁵ A late-Baroque Italian philosopher of history and one of the most celebrated postmodern rediscoveries, Vico intrigued Ontani with his emphasis on the senses, fantasy, poetry, myth, and the perceptive and sensorial faculties of the body, to which he granted full speculative legitimacy.²⁶ For Vico poetic thinking is not abstract, but vivid, corporeal

²³ Having written on “the power of the imagination” in *One-dimensional Man* (1964), Herbert Marcuse was the most influential guru of the protest movement in Western Europe and also the United States.

²⁴ The slogan of the gay liberation movement in the UK, named GLF, or Gay Liberation Front, was threefold: come out, come together, and change the world. Between 1970 and 1973 the GLF published a newspaper titled *Come Together*. See Lucy Robinson, *Gay Men and the Left in Post-War Britain: How the Personal Got Political* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), 75 et seq.

²⁵ Giambattista Vico, *The New Science of Giambattista Vico*, trans. Thomas Goddard Bergin and Max Harold Fisch (Cornell: Cornell University Press, 1984), § 186. Quoted in Italian in Cavallari, “Cento Muse: Nudo col tamburo.”

²⁶ On this aspect of Vico’s philosophy, see Giuseppe Patella, *Senso, corpo, poesia: Giambattista Vico e l’origine dell’estetica moderna* (Milan: Gerini, 1995). See also idem, *Giambattista Vico tra Barocco e Postmoderno* (Milan: Mimesis, 2005).

thinking. In his main opus, the *Scienza Nuova*, Vico rehabilitated fables as expressions of the poetic imagination and a positive force in the history of humankind.²⁷ He categorized fables as “imaginative genera” (*generi fantastici*) and the “first histories of the gentile nations.”²⁸ History and poetry coincide for Vico as all histories are narrations and primitive narrations are myths, hence fable, poetry. Poetry, in Vico’s system of thought, has proper historical value, as it is evidence of the imagination that generated it. A journalist who reviewed the San Fedele show for the daily newspaper *Giornale d’Italia* called Ontani a “summoner and inventor of modern fables (good for both adults and children).” He stressing the ludic component of the corrugated cardboard pieces and ended the article with a wish: that “we will learn to handle (*manovrare*)” these objects, which seem to “have been put there without any rules, just to amuse us.”²⁹

1.2. Action

The Bolognese artist who most attracted Ontani’s attention in the late 1960s was Vasco Bendini (b. 1922), a protagonist of the local art scene in the the 1950s and 1960s, though now largely forgotten. Bendini was one of the main figures of *Informale*, the Italian version of Abstract Expressionism, in the 1950s. Some of the best known art historians and critics of the time, including Arcangeli, Barilli, Maurizio Calvesi, and Filiberto

²⁷ Ontani, personal interview, 30 March 2008, New York, audio recording.

²⁸ Giambattista Vico, *The New Science of Giambattista Vico*, trans. Thomas Goddard Bergin and Max Harold Fisch (Cornell: Cornell University Press, 1984), § 403 and § 51.

²⁹ Giuseppe Guarino, “Luigi Ontani,” *Giornale d’Italia* (Florence), 23–24 January 1971, 4.

Menna, wrote on Bendini's work for gallery exhibition catalogues.³⁰ In the climate of ready-made revival, in the early 1960s Bendini moved from painting to object, experimenting with the picture frame as object rather than painting support and conceiving works that consisted of bare stretchers leaning against the wall. A second shift, from object to live action, around the mid-1960s, proved greatly inspirational to Ontani, as he notes:

Having been born in a tiny town, the first artists I was fortunate enough to meet in Italy were from Bologna and the one whose work was most significant for me was Vasco Bendini, who in the 1960s, with great coherence, went beyond the picture frame and opted for *comportamento*, as the art historians of the time named this type of work.³¹

Literally meaning "behavior," the word *comportamento* became in the early 1970s the label for a type of art involving performance and actions that could be staged by the artist or other actors, or that could be improvised by participating visitors.³² For Italian art historians and critics, Joseph Beuys was the most important example of early

³⁰ For an anthology of texts on Bendini, see *Vasco Bendini. Opere 1950-2006* (Florence: Centro d'arte Spaziotempo; Siena: Carlo Cambi editore, 2007). On Bendini's work as a painter of *Informale*, see Francesco Arcangeli, ed., *Vasco Bendini* (Rome: Edizioni dell'Attico, 1963). This is the catalog of an exhibition held at the gallery of Bruno Sargentini. At the time Bruno's son, Fabio, was working at the gallery, but in 1966 he opened his own gallery, which he soon established as one of the most progressive venues for contemporary art in Italy. In the early 1970s Fabio became Ontani's main gallerist.

³¹ Luigi Ontani, personal interview, 23 December 2007, Riola, audio recording. "Essendo nato in un paesello, i primi artisti che ho avuto la fortuna di conoscere in Italia erano di Bologna e tra questi quello che per me fu più significativo era Vasco Bendini che negli anni sessanta, con grande coerenza, optò per l'uscita dal quadro e il comportamento, come dissero i professori." *Unless otherwise noted, all translations into English are mine.*

³² See, for instance, Renato Barilli, *Il "comportamento"* (Rome: Galleria nazionale d'arte moderna, 1973). The publication is the transcript of a presentation Barilli gave at a conference at the Galleria nazionale d'arte moderna in Rome. Already in use since the late 1960s, the term was canonized with the exhibition "Opera o comportamento?," curated by Arcangeli in collaboration with Barilli, at the Venice Biennale in 1972. See also Renato Barilli, *Al di là della pittura: Arte Povera, comportamento, body art, concettualismo* (Milan: Fratelli Fabbri, 1975).

comportamento. Known only by a small circle of art insiders in the early 1960s, Beuys's actions, at the various Fluxus performances in Germany, France and other Northern European countries, became progressively more popular in Italy between 1966 and 1969.³³ These were also the years in which Bendini made a series of installations requiring certain actions on the part of the public in order for the works to be completed and acquire meaning. The first one Bendini presented was *Come è (As Is)* (1966, fig. 5).

Come è (As Is) includes a long mat on which two simple household chairs—one bare, the other completely enveloped in thick red plastic cloth so as to mimic the presence of a person underneath—are placed in front of one another with a stretcher in between. A microphone connected to a recorder is suspended on top of the stretcher, and a dressing table mirror is placed on the floor, oriented towards the bare chair. The work was first exhibited in Venice in the summer of 1966, in conjunction with the Venice Biennale. The installation set up in a Venetian palace, Ca' Giustinian, inside a room surrounded by mirrors and thus called Sala degli Specchi. Visitors were invited to sit on the bare chair and speak into the microphone. Underneath the red plastic cloth covering the chair in front of them was a speaker that faithfully repeated what they said. The doubling effect is amplified by the mirror, oriented in such a way as to reflect the face of the sitter.

Although most were shocked by *Come è* for its apparent discontinuity with Bendini's previous work, some recognized a continuity. In a text from 1978, written for a retrospective of Bendini at the Galleria d'arte moderna of Bologna, Sandro Sproccati

³³ See Germano Celant, "Appunti per una cronologia delle tracce in Italia di Joseph Beuys," in *Beuys: Tracce in Italia*, ed. Germano Celant (Naples: Amelio editore, 1978), 5–6.

elaborated on that view, connecting *Come è* to Bendini's painting practice and to the human need to recognize one's own image reflected in water as in a mirror—"the need to understand and analyze the self from the outside, *objectively*, and projecting oneself outside of oneself, onto the *other*, in contemplation," as Pistoletto put it.³⁴ The mirror as a metaphor of doubling resonates with Ontani's tableau works.

For Ontani Bendini's performative installations brought artistic language to a "degree zero."³⁵ For Calvesi, they retained the "'ontological' vocation of Bendini's poetics" as a painter, "a Deweyan type of ontology, understood as a reflection on human reflection and on the experiential conditions that solicit it."³⁶ Bendini declared that the inspiration for his performative installations came from the writings of Maurice Merleau-Ponty on the relationship between knowledge, experience, and the body.³⁷ For Calvesi, Arcangeli, and others, self-reflexivity was the common denominator of these different moments in Bendini's production—a zooming in on the subject, on the relation of oneself to oneself. They saw the performative installations as "extreme 'self-portraits.'"³⁸ This comment resonates with the tableau works Ontani started to make around 1970. Posing in each of them as someone else, Ontani is both there and elsewhere.

³⁴ Sandro Sproccati, "1966–1969: Periodo oggettuale e comportamento," in *Vasco Bendini: Antologica*, eds. Renato Barilli and Sandro Sproccati (Bologna: Galleria d'arte moderna, 1978), 88.

³⁵ Luigi Ontani, personal interview, 7 July 2011, unrecorded.

³⁶ Maurizio Calvesi, "Bendini '65–68: oggetti e processi," in *Vasco Bendini* (Rome: Galleria Senior and Inarch-Palazzo Taverna, 1968); republished in *Avanguardia di massa* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1978), 144.

³⁷ Vasco Bendini, "Cerchio supremo," *CREATIVA*, n. 8 (May-June 1986); republished in *Vasco Bendini. Opere 1950-2006*, 83.

³⁸ Francesco Arcangeli, cited in *ibid.*, 143.

Bendini offered Ontani, who was aspiring to an artistic career outside of the academy and the mainstream, the important example of an alternative to painting “from within.” Although he changed mediums, conceptually Bendini continued to be engaged with the same issues. His consistency represented for Ontani a model and a possibility. This is a significant aspect of Ontani’s ideal relationship to Bendini, given that Ontani considers his own work to be grounded in the history of painting even if not realized in the medium of painting. As Barilli wrote in the text for the catalogue of the 1972 Venice Biennale, Bendini was an example for many, as he “bridged” painting with *comportamento*.³⁹

Around 1970 Ontani performed a series of actions for the camera at Studio Bentivoglio in Bologna, the artist-run space Bendini founded in 1967 together with other artists, critics, and poets who wanted a place to meet, discuss, make and exhibit work. Ontani’s actions include *Svenimenti (Fainting)*, *Tetto (Roof)*, *Saccombrello (Umbrella-Sack)*, *Fuochino (Little Fire)*, *MontOvolo (Ovolo Mountain)*, *Spirito di patate (Potato Spirit)*.⁴⁰ The titles refer to the action or object used in the performance. Ontani realized these works in collaboration with artists associated with Studio Bentivoglio—Lanfranco Calzolari, brother of Arte Povera artist Pier Paolo Calzolari, Gianni Castagnoli, and

³⁹ Renato Barilli, “Opera o comportamento?,” in *Catalogo della 36a esposizione biennale internazionale d’arte* (Venice: Biennale, 1972); reprinted in *Informale, oggetto, comportamento*, vol. 2, *La ricerca artistica negli anni ’70* (Milan: Feltrinelli,), 98.

⁴⁰ On these early works, see Elena Volpato, “Video Renaissance: Rule, Exception and Beauty in the Work of Luigi Ontani,” in *Luigi Ontani: 1965–2001 GaneshamUSA*, 25–29; and idem, “Between painting and photogram: Film and Video in the work of Luigi Ontani,” in *Gigante3RazzEtà7ArtiCentAuro*, Gianfranco Maraniello, ed. (Bologna: MAMbo, Museo d’arte moderna di Bologna, 2009), 226–239.

others—who provided a Super 8mm film camera.⁴¹ The Studio Bentivoglio was located in Palazzo Bentivoglio, which Barilli described as “a gloomy Mannerist building” with “a quasi-Piranesian internal courtyard.”⁴² The Palazzo Bentivoglio overlooks Via delle Belle Arti, along with the fine arts academy, Accademia delle Belle Arti, and the Pinacoteca Nazionale, with its collection of works spanning from the fourteenth to the eighteenth century, mostly by local artists. On Via delle Belle Arti many artists had their studios. It was a street in which contemporary art education, production, and display coexisted alongside the venerable past.

In Ontani’s actions the camera is always fixed. Actions are simple, repetitive, and carry symbolic and personal references. They unfold in real time, following conventions for artist video at the time. In *MontOvolo* Ontani is shown completely naked, playing with fresh eggs that he rolls over his body, puts in his mouth, squeezes between his toes, and so on until all eggs are crashed and he is covered in yolks and whites (figs. 6–7). An ancient symbol of creation in different world cultures, in Christian iconography the egg is associated with Christ’s resurrection, the Virgin’s immaculate

⁴¹ Luigi Ontani, personal communication, 7 July 2011, phone, unrecorded. Gianni Castagnoli appears behind Ontani in *Svenimenti*, where he is shown supporting the artist, as he faints. The super 8mm format was released by Kodak in the mid-1960s and quickly became the preferred low-cost film format. It remained such until the 1980s, when the advent of video significantly reduced its popularity. Pier Paolo Calzolari was the most famous of the two brothers. He was included in the newly launched Arte Povera group by its founder, Germano Celant, who invited him to participate in one of their most famous public appearances, *Arte povera + azioni povere*, a three-day tour de force with events and collective works presented in the old arsenals of Amalfi in October 1968.

⁴² Renato Barilli, *Prima e dopo il 2000: La ricerca artistica 1970–2005* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 2006), 32.

conception and other, more esoteric meanings.⁴³ As part of a folkloric tradition, during Easter people traditionally exchange eggs to date. The presence of symbolic and personal references differentiates Ontani's works from predominant international trends in performance and video art of the time marked by depersonalization. *MontOvolo* entails a direct personal reference to Ontani starting with the title, as the artist was born in Vergato, located at the base of Montovolo.

According to legends supported by recent historical studies, Montovolo was sacred to the Etruscans, the ancient inhabitants of the area before the Romans.⁴⁴ It was an important oracular center dedicated to the goddess Pale, hence the first name of the mountain, Monte Palese. The name Montovolo, traced in documents dating back to the fifteenth century as *Monte Ovuli*, "mountain of the egg" in Latin, may indicate the presence of a large egg-shaped stone, an *omphalos*, "navel" in Greek, that was typical of oracular centers in different cultures, including the Etruscan. As a youth, Ontani wrote a poem entitled "Onfalomane," a neologism that may be translated as "maniac of the navel" and that may be seen as a metaphor of the self-reflexive aspect of Ontani's 1970s practice, which always features the artist. In the poem, published for the first time in a

⁴³ A notable instance of an esoteric use of the image of the egg in religious painting is Piero della Francesca's *sacra conversazione* known as the *Madonna of the Egg* or *Montefeltro Altarpiece* (1472 c.) in the collection of the Pinacoteca of Brera in Milan.

⁴⁴ On the history of Montovolo see Graziano Baccolini, "Montovolo, il misterioso centro oracolare etrusco," in *La montagna etrusca: simboli e misteri. Dagli Etruschi l'origine dei Merovingi, del Giglio di Francia e di Firenze* (Bologna: Nuova SI, 2008), 7–82.

local daily newspaper⁴⁵ and subsequently in a collection of poems,⁴⁶ he wrote: “I want to kiss the navel of the world/so that all disperses in a concert of stone/so that everything takes on acceptable dimensions/and [I want to] swim in a perpetual sleep/elixir of beatitude/beatitude of the trifle (*nonnulla*).” This is an example of Ontani’s fascination with the legendary stories surrounding his place of origins and his ability to transform them into personal metaphors.

1.3. Pose

Ontani said that it was performing his early objects that the idea of “the self-portrait as a tableau vivant” came to him in the late 1960s.⁴⁷ He started to take pictures of himself posing with his *Oggetti pleonastici* “for pure fun,” as he said, in places at hand—“in my bedroom or basement,” “in the garden or the woods”—as “*foto ricordo*” or “souvenir photos” that he later donated to friends as gifts.⁴⁸ One of the earliest souvenir photos, taken by his sister Tullia around 1967, shows Ontani in bourgeois work clothes, with neat short hair—quite a different look from the eccentric, dandyish attire he was sporting just a few years later—standing next to a cluster of his *Oggetti pleonastici* hanging down from a tree branch like a colorful grape (fig. 8). These were playful activities he carried

⁴⁵ Giorgio Ruggeri, “Una poesia di Luigi Ontani, Onfalomane,” *Carlino Sera*, Bologna edition, February 26, 1968.

⁴⁶ Luigi Ontani, *Poesiae adolescentiae* (Turin: Galleria LP 220/Franz Paludetto Editore, nd), np. Possibly this artist book was published in 1975.

⁴⁷ Ontani, personal interview, 23 December 2007. See also “Luigi Ontani,” interview with Angelo Capasso, in *Opere d’arte a parole: Dialoghi sull’arte contemporanea*, (Rome: Meltemi, 2007), 43–44.

⁴⁸ Ontani, personal interview, 15 December 2007, Rome, audio recording.

out in his spare time. Later he began performing his *Cartoni ondulati* or corrugated cardboard pieces (fig. 9). The higher versatility of cardboard, as compared to scagliola and Styrofoam, allowed Ontani to make objects that could easily be worn and played with, as if they were “fetish-jewelry or micro-monuments-sculptures-objects,” as he put it.⁴⁹ Ontani’s cardboard pieces looked playable, inviting to be played with, so that a critic wrote that they were like “puppets without a puppeteer.”⁵⁰

The cover of the catalogue that accompanied the San Fedele show features Ontani posing with his corrugated cardboard pieces. He is standing near the corner of a room, surrounded by some of his cardboard pieces sitting on the floor, as he wears one around the neck—a serpent-like tether that loops around around his neck at one extremity and hangs from the ceiling at the other (fig. 10). His expression is slightly somber, eyes gazing away from the camera, lips slightly parted, hands in his pockets. He seems at once a punished schoolboy, confined to the corner, like a leashed dog, and a ghost presence—he is elsewhere, absorbed in thought. Other photos in the catalogue show Ontani in the process of making the works. The closing image is another picture of Ontani performing a *Cartone ondulato* near the same room corner of the cover photo. The object is a fantastical costume, part shoulder armor, part school uniform that Ontani wears with his arms outstretched (fig. 11). Two sets of chains made of large rings depart from the shoulders: one runs down towards the floor, the other is held up by the hands.

⁴⁹ Idem, “Luigi Ontani,” interview with Capasso, in *Opere d’arte a parole*, 43.

⁵⁰ Guarino, “Luigi Ontani,” *Giornale d’Italia*, 4. Guarino is reviewing the incarnation of the San Fedele show at the Galleria Flori in Florence the year following the Milan exhibit.

The collar part of the costume is decorated with semicircles in the lower rim that remind one of the lace collars used in children school uniforms. As Ontani explained, these “improvised photographs” were taken in late 1969 in a vacant house in Vergato, before the installation of the exhibition at Galleria San Fedele.⁵¹ In 1969 Ontani posed in other photos with his early works, including *Tavolozza con colori viventi* (*Palette with Living Colors*), a palette on which paint blobs have been substituted by id-type portraits of people with the names of colors as last names, like Rosa (pink), Rosso (red) or Bianchi (whites), picked from the phone book (fig. 12); a set of Styrofoam wings, an early version of one of his favorite subjects, the angel of the Annunciation (fig. 13); and *Oggetto pleonastico per onanismo controvento* (*Pleonastic Object for Upwind Onanism*, fig. 14). The last two photos exemplify the realms Ontani liked to inhabit at once in his work: the sacred and the profane. The *Oggetto pleonastico* performed in the photo was part of a totemic construction created for the large group show “Progetti di Arte Povera,” hosted at the gallery of Franz Paludetto in Turin in early 1970. Organized by Paludetto, “Progetti di Arte Povera” gathered a mix of international artists mostly not in the Arte Povera group defined by Celant.⁵² It was through the *foto ricordo* of his interactions with objects that Ontani reached a revelation: “the pose had a further, greater meaning than the objects

⁵¹ Ontani, personal communication, 7 July 2011.

⁵² Besides Ontani, the other artists participating in the *Progetti di Arte Povera* exhibition were Carlo Bonfà, Claudio Costa, Antonio Dias, Erik Dietman, Gianpietro Fazio, Giuseppe Del Franco, Hans Haacke, Alain Kirili, Armando Marocco, Plinio Martelli, Livio Marzot, Nagasawa, Bucci Nussbauer, Paul Pechter, Emilio Prini and Markus Raetz. This list is derived from the invitation postcard in the archives of Franz Paludetto at Castello di Rivara Centro d’Arte Contemporanea, in Rivara near Turin. According to Ontani’s description, the totem also included thin cardboard slips in the colors pink, yellow, and blue, symbolic of the feminine, the hermaphrodite, and the masculine. The slips were inscribed with ink handwritings and decals. This info is from a personal phone conversation with Ontani that took place on July 7, 2011.

themselves.”⁵³ This shift resonates with the move made by Boetti around the same time from three-dimensional to two-dimensional work.⁵⁴

Perhaps the first works Ontani made “as pure pose”⁵⁵ was *Le belle statuine ai Giardini Margherita, Bologna* (*The Beautiful Statuettes at the Margherita Gardens, Bologna*, 1969 circa, fig. 15). This work speaks to the ties that Ontani’s fascination with the pose have to the make-believe world of children and children’s games—a tie that already informed Ontani’s early objects. In *Le belle statuine* Ontani posed in a sequence of twelve photographs, dressed in blue jeans, white blouse, and colorful vest, against the backdrop of Bologna’s most popular public park, at walking distance from the train station and the university.⁵⁶ Each picture catches Ontani in a different, dynamic pose, like the one a child would hold when playing *le belle statuine*. In this popular children’s game a player turns away from the rest of the group and sings a song, while the others adopt whatever pose they like and hold it, as if they were statuettes. When the song ends, the child who was singing turns around, and whoever is not perfectly still is disqualified from the game. The North-American version of this game is called “Red Light, Green Light.” But in Italy, not even children’s games are exempt from references to what

⁵³ Ontani, personal interview, 15 December 2007.

⁵⁴ As Boetti explained: “There had been too much focus on materials. . . . I remember in the spring of 1969 I left the studio, which had become a warehouse full of asbestos lumber, cement, stones. I left everything as it was and started again from scratch, with a pencil and a sheet of paper” (Alighiero Boetti, interviewed by Perretta, “L’arte, gli artisti e il ’68,” *Flash Art*, 69; English translation in Robert Lumley, *Arte Povera*, [London: Tate Pub., 2004], 71).

⁵⁵ Ontani, personal interview, 30 March 2008.

⁵⁶ Fig. 15 reproduces a recent version of this work as a lenticular print.

Barilli called “the rhetorical poses from the golden days of Italian art.”⁵⁷ The song of the Italian version of the game refers to Renaissance art: “Le belle statuine d’oro e d’argento del 1500—eccole qua” (“The beautiful golden and silver statuettes from the sixteenth century—here they are”). The *souvenir photos* and *Le Belle statuine* were the incubators of the tableau works, which he later referred to as “atemporal rituals of *belle statuine* reborn from ruins.”⁵⁸

Section 2

Precedents to the Tableau-Vivant Revival

2.1. De Chirico: Masquerade and the Return to the Museum

In 1970 two retrospective exhibitions paid tribute to de Chirico. One was held at Palazzo Reale in Milan, the other at Palazzo dei Diamanti in Ferrara. The latter was organized after it became impossible to transfer the exhibit from Milan to Ferrara, the city where de Chirico developed Metaphysical Painting. The Milan show was an ambitious project, curated by an international curator, the German art historian Wieland Schmied, director of the Kestner Gesellschaft in Hanover.⁵⁹ The Ferrara show was not as grand, but it included a group of works rarely before seen, part of a series de Chirico painted between late 1939, on the eve of the outbreak of World War II, and the late 1950s. The series,

⁵⁷ Renato Barilli, “Il comportamento frequenta il museo,” *NAC Notiziario Arte Contemporanea*, n. 12 (December 1973), 18.

⁵⁸ Luigi Ontani in Luigi Meneghelli, “Luigi Ontani, scena e retroscena. L’Intervista. Dagli ‘oggetti pleonastici’ ai ‘Tableaux vivants’ il lavoro di un protagonista dell’arte degli anni ’70 e ’80,” *L’Arena*, n. 37, (7 February 1996).

⁵⁹ The show traveled to the Kestner-Gesellschaft of Hannover, where Schmied was the director.

generally known as the Baroque self-portrait series, comprises over fifty works that portray the artist in late Renaissance and Baroque period costumes (figs. 16–17). Paolo Baldacci and Gerd Roos identify two distinct groups of works in this series.

The first group comprises paintings for which de Chirico borrowed costumes from the Opera House in Rome, had them set up in his studio, painted them, and then added his own head. At first sight, Baldacci and Roos note, the works may look like portraits of actors in famous roles, a genre once popular, but references to known roles and actors are missing. The second group consists of works based on Baroque paintings and photographs of de Chirico pastiched together. The differentiation that Baldacci and Roos suggest is iconographic. It highlights that the works in the second group recreate specific visual sources, whereas the works in the first group are reminiscent of preexistent images, but do not recreate them. This distinction resonates with Ontani's tableau works, which can also be divided into two groups, as I propose in my introduction. In the first group of works Ontani enacts specific past artworks, in the second he impersonates figures and characters that do not come from any single image but that he makes recognizable by adopting their respective signifiers—iconographic attributes or visual conventions—hence the implication that each work refers to multiple, related images. In *Bacchino* (1973, fig. 123), for instance, Ontani uses grapes for Bacchus, and in *Fantôme* (1970, fig. 155) a bed sheet over the head for a ghost.

I suggest that de Chirico's paintings are "tableau paintings" in the sense that conceptually and visually they involve the construction and enactment of tableaux

vivants by the artist, comparably to Ontani's tableau photos. Another figure of the tableau-vivant revival in Italy named Salvatore Mangione and known as Salvo (b. 1947) engaged in the same tableau-vivant strategy as de Chirico in a series of paintings he executed between 1973 and 1976, discussed later on (for one, see fig. 85). The first group of works from de Chirico's series is also close to the practice of another figure of the tableau-vivant revival, Giancarlo Croce (b. 1945). A little-known eclectic artist from Rome, in 1973 Croce produced a series of photographic portraits of friends in costumes and settings reminiscent of Renaissance and Baroque portrait paintings (for one, see fig. 18). Each work in the series is entitled, somewhat comically, *Ritratto (alla corte di re Cremisi)* (*Portrait [At the Court of King Crimson]*), after the album "In the Court of the Crimson King" (1969) by the progressive British rock band King Crimson.

An important aspect of de Chirico's tableau painting series that is common to Ontani's tableau works is the recognizability of the artist as impersonator, from one work to the next, like a leitmotiv. In his paintings de Chirico depicted himself holding the same somber expression, his aged, unidealized face leaving no doubt about the identity of the sitter. Ontani's tableau works frequently feature the artist sporting a similarly austere facial expression. More importantly, in his works Ontani appears as a constant, a common denominator of all the different impersonations. With one or two exceptions, the play of hide-and-seek, masking and revealing, is part of the game.

The recognizability of the impersonator is not simply a formal quality that de Chirico's paintings share with the works by Ontani and other practitioners of the tableau-

vivant revival. It is tied to de Chirico's affinity with Nietzsche's idea that "all truth is crooked" and that "around every profound spirit there continually grows a mask."⁶⁰ De Chirico's involvement with theatricality and kitsch, not only in these tableau paintings but in his work in general, is related to this idea as well. In a groundbreaking text that Renato Barilli penned in 1974 on de Chirico's much dismissed post-Metaphysical work, he discussed the tableau painting series. In these works, wrote Barilli, "the de Chirichian self presents itself as holding a pose (*in posa*), or, if you will, wearing a mask (*in maschera*)." "The series of masquerades—he continued—is endless . . . in this universe there is no truth or authenticity, but only an infinite, always different repetition of what has been."⁶¹ Barilli did not elaborate on the connection with Nietzsche, but nonetheless touched upon some key aspects of de Chirico's impersonations that are relevant to my argument. It is in these aspects and in their relationship to Nietzsche's thought, on which I elaborate later on, that lies the most important reason for considering de Chirico a main precedent to Ontani's tableau practice and in general to the revival of the tableau vivant as an artistic strategy in Italy in the late 1960s and 1970s.

It was the Milan retrospective of de Chirico, which included a broad selection of paintings from 1911 to 1970, that sparked the interest of Barilli in reconsidering the trajectory of the artist's work. Ontani, too, visited the exhibition and remembers that it

⁶⁰ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. R. J. Holligdale (New York: Penguin, 1961), 178; idem *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, trans. H. Zimmern (New York: Macmillan, 1914), 56.

⁶¹ Renato Barilli, "De Chirico e il recupero del museo," in *Tra presenza e assenza: due modelli culturali in conflitto* (Milan: Bompiani, 1974), 288.

left a strong impression on him.⁶² Much proclaimed for his Metaphysical works from the 1910s, de Chirico, who was living in Rome since the mid-1940s, did not earn the praise of critics for his later work. Barilli was one of the first to convincingly rehabilitate de Chirico's post-Metaphysical phase. He first presented on this subject in a lecture delivered at the University of Salerno, in the context of a symposium on Surrealism promoted by Filiberto Menna in the spring of 1973.⁶³ The following year he published the text of the lecture in a book that constituted the theoretical basis of his curatorial project, launched a few months later.⁶⁴

Barilli's essay, entitled "De Chirico e il recupero del museo" (De Chirico and the Recuperation of the Museum) is organized in different sections. In "Originalità e originarietà" ("Originality and Innateness"), "Le altre stanze del museo" ("The Other Rooms of the Museum"), and "La rivisitazione di se stesso" (The Revisitation of Oneself), Barilli offered a reassessment of de Chirico's work, reconsidering his entire

⁶² Ontani, personal interview, 5 January 2009, Riola, audio recording. One of the few enthusiastic reviews on the show was penned by Renato Guttuso, the most prominent Italian figurative painter of the generation after de Chirico and a protagonist of the debate on realism in painting. In his review, similarly to Barilli, Guttuso rejected the common critical view according to which the Metaphysical works were praised and the rest was denigrated. But, unlike Barilli, he focused on formal aspects and celebrated the *forza pittorica* (painting strength) of de Chirico. Although he found his "remakes" of Metaphysical paintings "his least successful works because of their polemical spirit and forced nostalgia," he concluded the review by recognizing his place next to Picasso in the Parnassus of painters, together with the Muses ("De Chirico o della pittura," exhibition review in *Rinascita*, October 30, 1970, n. 43; republished in *Il mestiere di pittore. Scritti sull'arte e la società* [Bari 1972], 208–17; and then in *Storia moderna dell'arte in Italia: Manifesti, polemiche, documenti*, vol. 3, II, *Tra Neorealismo ed anni novanta 1945–1990*, Paola Barocchi, ed., [Turin: Einaudi, 1992], 362–273).

⁶³ Barilli's lecture was entitled "De Chirico e il recupero del museo" ("De Chirico and the Recuperation of the Museum").

⁶⁴ Barilli, "De Chirico e il recupero del museo," in *Tra presenza e assenza*, 268–303. This essay was republished with a few minor changes in the collection of papers delivered at the symposium held at the University of Salerno in *Studi sul surrealismo. Saggi/Documenti* n. 6, Filiberto Menna, ed. (Rome: Officina, 1977), 26–67.

production as marked by a coherent strategy of recuperating styles and subjects from art history. According to Barilli what changed in different periods of de Chirico's career were the styles and subjects he recuperated, not the the artistic strategy. While during the unanimously praised Metaphysical period he reverted to the archaic phase of classical antiquity and to the sharpest, driest moments of fifteenth-century perspective painting, in the following decades he revisited Baroque painting, especially Peter Paul Rubens, and nineteenth-century naturalism, Romanticism and Impressionism. In his travel through "the other rooms of the museum," as Barilli put it, de Chirico recuperated his own Metaphysical masterpieces, since they, too, had entered "the rooms of a conventional museum."⁶⁵ Barilli argued that the negative critical appraisal of de Chirico's post-Metaphysical works was not due to a change in artistic strategy on the part of the painter. Rather, it was due to the standards of taste that critics shared, according to which the Baroque and nineteenth century styles de Chirico recuperated were considered "bad taste" (*cattivo gusto*).

Taking his cue from de Chirico's autobiographical novel *Ebdòmero* (1929), Barilli hails de Chirico as an artist who consistently favored "*originarietà*" over "*originalità*"—a return to the origins over a search for originality. This makes him for Barilli the most important precursor of a new trend he identifies in contemporary art, of which Ontani is a main representative, and that privileges quotation and a return to the past art over the avant-garde strategy of the *tabula rasa*. Barilli argues that de Chirico's disinterest in

⁶⁵ Idem, *Autoritratto a stampa* (Bologna: Fausto Lupetti, 2010), 168.

originality came from being aware that the idea of history as an indefinite, linear progression is but an illusion, hence the deliberate choice of “revisiting the museum” and “repatriating” by quoting places, themes, and styles from the masters of the past.”⁶⁶ A curious lexical choice in this context, the verb “repatriate” seems to ensue from a conception of Italy as a country in which past and present are necessarily interwoven. Barilli used the idea of an artist revisiting the rooms of a museum in his first article on Ontani’s tableau works, published in late 1973.⁶⁷ After the retrospective of de Chirico’s work at Palazzo Reale in Milan in 1970 alerted Barilli to de Chirico’s post-metaphysical phase, a reflection on Ontani’s tableau-vivant practice, with its anti-linear modes of citation, contributed to a reconsideration of de Chirico’s work in that perspective.

2.2. Play between Reality and Fiction, High and Low in Pasolini’s Cinema

A common trait of the tableau work of Ontani and others is the problematization and destabilization of the relationship between world and image, reality and its representation or reenactment. The porosity, or instability of this relationship is thematized in two short films by Pasolini: *La ricotta* (1963) and *Che cosa sono le nuvole?* (1967). *La ricotta* is a

⁶⁶ Idem, “De Chirico e il recupero del museo,” 271. Barilli does not elaborate on the fundamental link between de Chirico and Nietzsche, particularly his notion of the eternal return. On this subject see Paolo Baldacci, “Appendice III: De Chirico e Nietzsche,” in *Giorgio de Chirico: Parigi 1924–1929*, eds. Maurizio Fagiolo dell’Arco and Paolo Baldacci (Milan: Arnoldo Mondadori Editore, 1982), 68; idem, “Theory and Iconography of Metaphysical Painting,” in *Italian Art in the 20th Century: Painting and Sculpture, 1900–1988*, ed. Emily Braun (London: Royal Academy of Art and Munich: Prestel-Verlag, 1989), 69; and Ara H. Merjian, “Untimely Objects: Giorgio de Chirico’s *The Evil Genius of a King* (1914) between the antediluvian and the posthuman,” *Res: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 57/58 (Spring–Autumn, 2010), 187–208. On the eternal return and its prehistory, see Ned Lukacher, *Time-Fetishes: The Secret History of Eternal Recurrence* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998).

⁶⁷ Barilli, “Il comportamento frequenta il museo,” *NAC*, 18.

low-budget film about the making of a Blockbuster film on the Passion of Christ. As part of the film within the film, two tableaux vivants after Mannerist paintings are constructed. *Che cosa sono le nuvole?* is a film about a performance of Shakespeare's *Othello* in the form of a puppet show. The viewer watches the audience watching the show and interrupting it to change its course and prevent the killing of Desdemona. Both films share with Ontani's tableau work the merging of elite and popular culture references, formalism and kitsch. This merging was typified as a distinguishing quality of camp aesthetics in the mid-1960s by Susan Sontag (see next chapter). Other important common aspects include: a fascination with color and its use in order to both aestheticize and kitschify; an engagement with theatricality that makes room for distancing, as through the use of irony; the ways in which past art is both quoted and alluded to in the construction of the image.

La ricotta was Pasolini's third film, after *Accattone* (1961) and *Mamma Roma* (1962). Thirty-five minutes long, it is part of a compilation of shorts entitled *RoGoPaG*, after the names of the contributing directors (Rossellini, Godard, Pasolini, and Gregoretti). It was filmed in Rome: the tableaux vivants in a theater of Cinecittà and the rest on the outskirts of the city, on the hilly ridge near the Acqua Santa spring, between the Via Appia Nuova and the Via Appia Antica, where pimps and other subproletarian folks lived. The film is in black and white, except for the opening sequence and the tableaux, which are in color. These were the first color scenes in Pasolini's cinema and I will return to this key aspect later on.

The plot of *La ricotta* is rather simple, though the film is permeated with visual metaphors and allegories, for which I refer to the insightful essay of Marco Antonio Bazzocchi.⁶⁸ While the director of the film within the film, played by Orson Welles, imparts orders to his crew from his director's chair, a subproletarian extra named Stracci (Italian for "rags") runs around in search of food, desperately hungry after having donated his worker's lunch to his family. In a tragicomic turn of events, he steals a little dog belonging to the main actress, sells it to a journalist, and buys a large wheel of ricotta with the proceeds, stuffing himself with the cheese and everything else the crew now throws at him. He then dies of indigestion on the cross during shooting, in front of the film producer and other representatives of the Establishment, who have come to celebrate the end of the filming and, in the final scene of *La ricotta*, witness the death of Stracci from behind a long table overflowing with food that was set in their honor.

As part of the Blockbuster film on the Passion of Christ, two tableaux vivants are staged. They recreate Depositions by Rosso Fiorentino and Pontormo, dated 1521 and 1526–1528 respectively, two of the best-known paintings of Italian Mannerism (figs. 19–20).⁶⁹ The scenes of the construction of the tableaux are specular to one another. Formally, both unfold through juxtapositions of still-camera shots—long shots, close-ups, and, in Rosso's tableau, medium shots—that are predominantly frontal, without camera movements or zooming. Each scene begins with a wide shot of the stage on which the

⁶⁸ Marco Antonio Bazzocchi, "Mangiare ed essere mangiati," in *Burattini filosofi: Pasolini dalla letteratura al cinema* (Milan: Bruno Mondadori, 2007), 57–82.

⁶⁹ Pontormo's painting has been referred to as a Pietà or Entombment for the high ambiguity of the spatial arrangement. See Leo Steinberg, "Pontormo's Capponi Chapel," *Art Bulletin* 56 (1974): 385.

tableau is being set. The actors playing the biblical figures, dressed in brightly colored draperies, take their positions, while a member of the crew, in gray, contemporary clothes helps with final touchups. The voiceover of the director's assistant loudly directs the crew member to leave the stage and music is played. But, on both occasions, it is the wrong music—pop (and “global”) rather than classical (and European)—and the voice of the assistant exploding in angry screams invades the stage.⁷⁰ It is through these elements, which highlight the fiction of the reconstruction, interrupting the absorption prompted by the aestheticized aspects of the recreations, that viewers of *La ricotta* realize they are looking at actors who are attempting to stage tableaux vivants from past paintings. And it is clear that the actors are failing in the process, repeatedly and comically.

The tableaux are highly aestheticized, in the composed still-camera shots, classical draperies, vivid colors. But they are also, at moments, irresistibly comical, unidealized, and kitsch. They feature a combination of professional and nonprofessional actors, such as male youths whose complexion and lineaments were far from flawless (fig. 23). The classical draperies were the result of a complex, meticulous production coordinated by a prominent costume designer, Danilo Donati, who had worked on Luchino Visconti's opera productions. They were held in place by structures of iron wire. Props, on the other hand, were blatantly cheap, as the cardboard dagger of the military figure in Pontormo's tableau, to the left (fig. 20). In his early tableau works Ontani used

⁷⁰ In both cases, the “wrong” music features dance hall styles of the day (Carlo Rustichelli arranged these pieces) and then the “right” music are pieces by late Baroque composers—Christoph Willibald von Gluck (Pontormo) and Domenico Scarlatti (Rosso). On the music in *La ricotta*, see Giuseppe Magaletta, *La musica nell'opera letteraria e cinematografica di Pier Paolo Pasolini* (Urbino: QuattroVenti, 1997), 243–253.

extremely simple, inexpensive props (see, for one, 132). In 1974 he began to borrow elaborate costumes and props from Umberto Tirelli, a costume designer for Cinecittà (for example, see figs. 163 and 180), but he continued to employ cheap props as well for his impersonations (fig. 145). The mingling of high and low culture in *La ricotta* starts from the title: it is a literary citation from Pontormo, who wrote in his *Diary* that he ate far too much ricotta (“troppo e maxime della ricotta”),⁷¹ but it also connotes a humble food, comically at odds with the grandeur of Pontormo’s Santa Felicita altarpiece, as well as with the riches of the world of cinema.

Because of its highly unconventional representation of a religious subject, *La ricotta* was censored before it was even released and was completely banned a few days after it was shown in movie theaters.⁷² Pasolini was subject to a trial for vilification of the state religion and was given a four-month suspended sentence. He stated that it was the tableaux vivants that costed him the trial.⁷³ As the argument of the public prosecutor in the trial’s proceedings reveals, the tableaux were the part of the film most vehemently under attack for their mingling of high and low, sacred and profane. The comical, unidealized, kitsch moments of the tableaux were perceived as irreverent and desecrating.

⁷¹ *Pontormo’s Diary*, trans. Rosemary Mayer (New York: Out of London Press, 1979), 110–111. Hervé Joubert-Laurencin discusses the relationship between Pasolini and Pontormo in depth in his “Miroir noir, coeur noir. Pasolini et Pontormo,” in *Le dernier poète expressionniste. Ecrits sur Pasolini* (Besançon: Les Solitaires Intempestifs, 2005), 143–154.

⁷² After the trial the film was subject to further censorship, which entailed cuts and modifications, and the film compilation was rereleased under a new title, *Laviamoci il cervello*, but today it is better known under its original title. On the trial, censorship, and reconstruction of the censored parts of *La ricotta*, see Tomaso Subini, *Pier Paolo Pasolini: La ricotta* (Turin: Lindau, 2009), 41–85.

⁷³ Pier Paolo Pasolini, “Una discussione del ’64” (transcript of the debate organized in Alessandria by the local Circolo del Cinema on November 21, 1964), in *Pier Paolo Pasolini nel dibattito contemporaneo*, Paolo Volponi et al. (Comune di Alessandria and Amministrazione provinciale di Pavia, 1977), 119.

By contrast, the everyday vicissitudes of Stracci, the subproletarian extra who dies on the cross by indigestion, acquire a distinct connotation of sacredness and solemnity: “the saint is Stracci,” wrote Pasolini.⁷⁴ Ontani’s work never costed him a trial, but museum directors and curators have censored his displays, as in the case of the Indian series of hand-painted photographs, by moving them to inconspicuous areas or ensuring that on the opening day government officials would not see them.

Pasolini’s tableaux at once endorse and transgress the defining characteristics of a tableau vivant. The entry from an Italian encyclopedia of theater published in 1961 defines a tableau vivant as “a silent and motionless theatrical scene in which one or more actors, usually amateur, recreate a figurative masterpiece or a historical, imaginary, or allegorical scene through their body position and facial expression.”⁷⁵ In the film within the film of *La ricotta*, the director conceives the tableaux as predominantly still and without dialogue, although with some intended movement and sound. Additional movement and sound result from the unintended failures and whims of the people involved in staging the tableaux vivants. They generate great amusement for the viewers of *La ricotta*, as well as for the characters on stage. The mistaken LPs, played at the beginning of each tableau vivant, are but one example. Additionally, in the tableau of Rosso, one of the Moors suddenly peeks from behind the main group and is immediately sent back to his position. Later, the elderly, white-bearded character atop the cross is

⁷⁴ Pier Paolo Pasolini, “Pietro II,” in *Poesia in forma di rosa* (Milan: Garzanti, 2010), 78.

⁷⁵ Sandro D’Amico, ed., *Enciclopedia dello spettacolo* (Rome: Le Maschere, 1961), 612.

caught picking his nose and is candidly rebuked: “Amorosi, stop picking your nose!” In the tableau of Pontormo, the film director scolds the actress playing the bare-headed woman, probably Mary Magdalene, for moving her arms: “Stop agitating those biceps. . . . Hold still, still! You are the figure of an altarpiece—got it? Hold still!” Then one of the two youths who are holding the actor impersonating Christ loses his grip, and the entire cast bursts into vigorous laughter when the three men fall to the floor (fig. 21).

Pasolini filmed the opening sequence and tableaux vivants in Technicolor. In these scenes color fluctuates between pictorial and garish. Influential on Pasolini’s adoption of color for these scenes was the publication of a book on Mannerism illustrated with full-page color illustrations. Written by Giuliano Briganti and entitled *La maniera italiana* (1961), the book was one of the first with color illustrations to be published in Italy. It was part of a series dedicated to Italian painting and edited by Roberto Longhi, Pasolini’s beloved teacher at the University of Bologna.⁷⁶ A backstage photo of the reconstruction of Pontormo’s *Deposition* features Briganti’s book in the foreground, opened at the pages that reproduce the painting and an enlarged detail (fig. 22), echoed in

⁷⁶ Longhi taught at the University of Bologna from 1934 to 1943, when he was suspended from his position for having refused to take the oath of loyalty to the Fascist regime. Pasolini had planned to graduate with Longhi with a thesis on contemporary Italian painting (another subject Pasolini proposed, not coincidentally, was a secondary Mannerist painter based in Friuli, the northern Italian region of Pasolini’s maternal ancestry where he lived when he was in his twenties). After Longhi was forced to leave, Pasolini decided to graduate in Italian literature and wrote a thesis on Giovanni Pascoli. Pasolini dedicated *Mamma Roma*, his second film to Longhi: “A Roberto Longhi, cui sono debitore della mia *fulgurazione figurativa*” (Pasolini, *Mamma Roma*, 8). Alberto Marchesini remarks that the absence of camera movements and zooming in the filming of the tableaux vivants in *La ricotta* is tied to Longhi and the standards he set on how to use the camera when filming artworks with his 1947 documentary on Vittore Carpaccio. See Marchesini’s *Citazioni pittoriche nel cinema di Pasolini (da Accattone al Decameron)* (Florence: La Nuova Italia, 1994), 50. On the decisive influence of Longhi on Pasolini, see also Galluzzi, “Le fulgurazioni longhiane,” in *Pasolini e la pittura*, 15–45; and Dario Trento, “Pasolini, Longhi e Francesco Arcangeli tra la primavera del 1941 e l’estate 1943,” in *Pendragon*, eds. Davide Ferrari and Gianni Scalia (Bologna: Pendragon, 1998), 47–66.

a close-up of the film sequence (fig. 23). Color in the tableaux vivants was rendered extremely accurately. Donati, the costume designer, said that Pasolini was so obsessed with recreating the rutilant colors of Rosso's and Pontormo's paintings that it took two months of painstaking attempts to produce fabrics that satisfactorily matched the colors in the paintings.⁷⁷ For the costumes of the biblical figures Pasolini opted for a "very exact reconstruction, very refined, very formalist," as in Visconti's work.⁷⁸

The other color scene in *La ricotta* is the opening sequence. It exemplifies the ways in which past art is alluded to in Pasolini's cinema. A still-camera shot shows the frontal view of a long and narrow table set up with large branches and still lifes of ricotta, fruits, and other Italian delicacies on densely draped cloths (fig. 24). A sustained closeup of the still life with the ricotta wheel brings to mind Caravaggioesque and Baroque still lifes (fig. 25). A group of people, partly dressed in the biblical costumes of the figures from Rosso's and Pontormo's Depositions, partly in everyday contemporary clothes, stand behind the table like a frieze, in a composition reminiscent of the scene of the Last Supper in early Renaissance paintings. The symmetry of this image is accentuated by the presence of a pole positioned right along the median axis of the composition. The pole supports a loud speaker that amplifies music. In both cases—the still life with the ricotta

⁷⁷ Danilo Donati, "Interview," in *Teoria e tecnica del film in Pasolini*, ed. Antonio Bertini (Rome: Bulzoni, 1979), 195. Donati was involved with several of Pasolini's later films. On the costumes of Pasolini's films see Bonizza Giordani Aragno, Gloria Bianchino, Piero Farani, Roberto Campari, Arturo Carlo Quintavalle, Lidia Signorini, *Atelier Farani. Pasolini: il costume del film* (Milan: Skira, 1996). After *La ricotta* Donati continued to design costumes for Pasolini's films. He also worked for Federico Fellini on *Satyricon* (1969) and *Casanova* (1976).

⁷⁸ Pasolini, quoted in Luciano De Giusti, ed., *Pier Paolo Pasolini: Il cinema in forma di poesia* (Pordenone: Cinemazero, 1979), 30.

and the frieze-like arrangement of people behind a long, narrow table—no single work is quoted, but several are alluded to. This visual strategy of constructing images according to formal conventions characteristic of the representation of specific subjects in certain periods of art history is typical of some of Ontani's tableau photos from the group of works not based on a single artwork (see figs. 29 and 32–34).

Direct and indirect references to paintings abound in Pasolini's cinema throughout his career. As he said during a public debate in 1964, speaking about *Il Vangelo secondo Matteo* (*The Gospel According to Matthew*, 1964), in which there are no tableaux vivants, when behind the camera he “could not forget to know and thus love, even venerate, the Italian painters of Humanism, the Renaissance, or the fourteenth century.”⁷⁹ In *Il Decameron* (1971), inspired by Boccaccio's mid-fourteenth-century book of tales, Pasolini staged a grand tableau vivant, recreating Giotto's *Last Judgment* in the Scrovegni Chapel in Padua with over a hundred actors (fig. 26). The tableau appears in a dream as a prefiguration of the painting-to-be to Giotto's best pupil, the protagonist of this episode of the film impersonated by Pasolini.

The crossing of the boundary that normally separates the lived from the performed, reality from its representation or reenactment, is a distinguishing feature of the tableau vivant that carries over to the tableau work of Ontani and others. It is also a central subtext of both *La ricotta* and *Che cosa sono le nuvole?*. Part of a multi-directed compilation of shorts entitled *Capriccio all'italiana*, *Che cosa sono le nuvole?* is about

⁷⁹ Pasolini, “Una discussione del '64,” in *Pier Paolo Pasolini nel dibattito contemporaneo*, 120.

twenty minutes long.⁸⁰ The main element of the plot is the interruption by the audience of the puppet play of *Othello* in order to prevent the killing of Desdemona by the hand of Othello, duped by Iago. Infuriated, the audience invades the stage and strangles Othello and Iago instead (actors impersonate the puppets).

The blurring of the boundary between reality and its representation or reenactment is characteristic of metatheater, or theater that reflects on its own nature and that by doing so reaches the awareness that everything is representation. In an off-stage sequence of *Che cosa sono le nuvole?*, the naïf Othello wonders why onstage Iago is so evil, while off stage he seems so benevolent. Iago explains, with the air of a patient philosopher and words halfway between literary citation and popular lore that “our life is like polenta. It takes the shape of the pot into which it is poured. . . . We are the polenta and people’s judgment is the pot,” as if to say that we act according to prescribed parts and social roles. And he concludes: “You see, my son, we are in a dream within a dream” (“*Eh, figlio mio, noi siamo in un sogno dentro un sogno*”). The reference to Calderón de la Barca’s *La vida es sueño* (*Life Is a Dream*, 1635) cannot pass unnoticed. As Lionel Abel indicates in his seminal book on the subject, metatheater first appears with the Baroque topos of *theatrum mundi* or “all the world is a stage,” in the plays of Calderón and Shakespeare.⁸¹ Theater becomes a fitting metaphor for life once reality is perceived as itself illusory.

⁸⁰ The other film directors are Mauro Bolognini, Pino Zac, Steno, and Mario Monicelli. See Gian Piero Brunetta, *Il cinema italiano contemporaneo: Da “La dolce vita” a “Centochiodi”* (Rome: Laterza, 2007), 420–421.

⁸¹ Lionel Abel, *Metatheater: A New View of Dramatic Form* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1963).

The Baroque painter Diego Velázquez also problematized in his work the relationship between world and image, reality and fiction. In *Che cosa sono le nuvole?* reproductions of Velázquez's paintings appear near the opening and closing of the film. The film starts with shots of the puppets being prepared for the play. Othello and Iago speak about the difference between their own world and the outside world, "the other world." Then a panning shot shows a series of posters that reproduce paintings by Velázquez. They are advertisements of previous and future shows. The camera stops on the poster for *Che cosa sono le nuvole?*, the show of today, "OGGI" (fig. 27). The poster reproduces *Las Meninas* (1656–1657), to which Foucault had just dedicated a detailed analysis in his *Order of Things* (1966), focusing on the painting's vertiginous play of mirrors between reality and fiction. Near the end of the film a small reproduction of Velázquez's *Rockeby Venus*, also known as *Venus at the Mirror* (c. 1648–1651) appears behind the garbage man, as he drives the dead puppets of Iago and Othello to the dump, singing a mournful love song (fig. 28). Iago and Othello are dead as puppets, but they are born to life. Lying on garbage in the dump, for the first time, they see the sky and the moving clouds. Iago has the last line: "Oh, excruciating beauty of creation!"

As in *La ricotta*, references to high and low culture are mingled in *Che cosa sono le nuvole?*. The film opens with the creation of the wooden puppet of Othello, played by Ninetto Davoli, a non-professional actor and one of the main actors in Pasolini's cinema. His face is blackened to resemble a Moor. The scene is strikingly reminiscent of another puppet creation, that of Pinocchio, the protagonist of a classic children's tale by Claudio

Collodi, *Le avventure di Pinocchio: Storie di un burattino (The Adventures of Pinocchio)*, first published in 1883.⁸² According to the story, Pinocchio was a wooden puppet that a poor woodcarver named Geppetto made from a piece of pine that talked. At first a living mischievous marionette, Pinocchio became, after many trials and errors, a living boy. The story of Pinocchio was adapted into comic book and film versions, including a Walt Disney production in 1940 and a popular TV series directed by Luigi Comencini for the Italian national network RAI. Broadcast in 1972, Comencini's series features Franco Franchi and Ciccio Ingrassia—the comedian duo starring in over a hundred films in the course of the 1960s and 1970s—impersonating the main characters of the Cat and the Fox. Pasolini hired Franco and Ciccio, as they were known then, to play two puppets in *Che cosa sono le nuvole?*.

Another famous comedian Pasolini hired for his puppet-theater version of Shakespeare's tragedy was Totò, in the role of the evil Iago. Heir to the Italian folk theater of the *commedia dell'arte* and one of the most popular actors of Italian cinema, Totò was famous for his puppet-like acting style—his disjointed gesticulation and emphasized facial expressions. Pasolini had him play the part of Iago with a green-colored face. The color green is associated to another character from Collodi's story, the ruthless director of a puppet theater called Mangiafuoco, Italian for “fire eater.” Mangiafuoco wears a green shirt and vest in Disney's film production of *Pinocchio*. In Collodi's story the angered Mangiafuoco meets Pinocchio for the first time after the

⁸² Claudio Collodi is the pseudonym of the Italian writer Carlo Lorenzini.

appearance of the marionette boy in the audience causes the interruption of his puppet theater show. Harlequin and Pulcinella are on stage and, as they recognize their “brother Pinocchio,” they stop the show to say hi to him and hug him. In Pasolini’s short the characters of Shakespeare’s drama are transposed from the sumptuous Elizabethan stage to the low-cost puppet theater of an Italian children’s novel.

Ontani donned the visage of Pinocchio in a tableau photo from around 1972 (fig. 29), wearing a white conical hat and ring-like collar that look like the costume used by the boy playing the title role in Comencini’s TV series, so he likely made the work right after the series was broadcast (fig. 30). Ontani’s impersonation features the character’s distinguishing quality: the extremely elongated nose that grows whenever Pinocchio lies. The artist used inexpensive, common white paper for the costume’s hat, collar, and nose. The work combines references to the world of children, their everyday life and play, and to early Renaissance Italian portrait painting.

Children punishment, school, and fun are all implied in Ontani’s version of Pinocchio. In Italy it is not uncommon for young children found lying to be threatened by their mothers that, if they continue, their nose will grow like Pinocchio’s. The black blouse of Ontani’s costume looks like a children school uniform. Making costumes out of paper is something that children do for fun during school breaks. On the other hand, the photographic framing of the tableau—a stark bust-length profile—is reminiscent of the great tradition of Italian Renaissance portraiture, which in the fifteenth century artists such as Piero della Francesca, Domenico Veneziano, and Antonio Pollaiuolo developed

after ancient coins and medals featuring bust profiles of Roman Emperors. In Ontani's tableau photo, as in Pasolini's films, high and the low are reconciled. The dialogue between high and low is also a characteristic of camp aesthetics, as discussed later. It was carried out by Ontani through a pairing of Pinocchio with Dante Alighieri, "sommo poeta" and founding father of the Italian language, author of the majestic epic poem *La divina commedia*, written in the early fourteenth century.

Around the time that Ontani posed as Pinocchio, he also posed as Dante in a series of tableau photos, in which he appears shrouded in red and crowned with a laurel wreath, as in the traditional iconography of the literary author established in Italian painting in the mid- to late-fifteenth century. The photographic formats include the same stark bust-length profile as *Pinocchio* (fig. 32), a head profile (fig. 33), and a three-quarter bust-length shot (fig. 34). *Dante* and *Pinocchio* in the bust-length profile version were presented as a diptych at the traveling group show *Transformer-Aspekte der Travestie* in 1974 (fig. 35). Ontani included reproductions of the diptych, with the works face-to-face, on the invitation postcard to the performances of his tableaux vivants at L'Attico Gallery in Rome that same year (fig. 36).

Ontani continued his engagement with pairing Dante with characters from Collodi's fairy-tale. Around 1975 he invented "Dante Grillo," part Dante and part the Talking Cricket of Pinocchio's story, the personification of the Pinocchio's conscience, Jiminy Cricket in Walt Disney's version. "Dante Grillo" is a photo collage that combines the tableau photo of Dante in three-quarter half-bust with a Ontani's feet and that appears

in different contexts—by the sea in *Dante Grillo mediterraneo* (fig. 37), nestled in the nook of a tree in *Dante Grillo nell'albero cavo* (fig. 38), both from 1975. The historical, authoritative figure of Dante has metamorphosed into a comical dwarf-like creature steeped in cultural references and ambiguity of meaning. With Ontani's "Dante Grillo" series, hierarchies between high culture (Dante), folklore (Collodi), and mass culture (Walt Disney) are all erased at once.⁸³

Section 3

"We Eat the *Mona Lisa* on Chocolates": Image Culture, Kitsch, and Italian Pop

One of the results of the "economic miracle" (1958–1963) was mass production of high-quality photographic reproductions in color. This gave life to two phenomena: first, affordable art history publications with color illustrations of artworks; second, the exploitation of artistic icons by industry. In a series of text that came out between 1958 and 1968, the art critic and philosopher Gillo Dorfles analyzed these phenomena as manifestations of kitsch. Building on the work of Frankfurt School philosophers Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, Dorfles defined kitsch as a product of consumer society and the culture industry.

A former founder and member of M.A.C., the Movimento Arte Concreta, a postwar movement for the promotion of abstract art, in the early 1960s Dorfles began teaching aesthetics at the university, first in Trieste and then, in the second half of the

⁸³ Ontani has continued to represent Dante Grillo, as in a wooden mask and watercolors in the 1980s and ceramic versions starting in the mid-1990s.

1960s, in Milan. A painter himself, Dorfles was also an attentive and prolific critic of contemporary art and design.⁸⁴ With an initial training in medicine and neuropsychiatry, Dorfles maintained an interest in psychology and anthropology in his work as an art critic and philosopher of art.

“Today the world is literally invaded by reproductions of artworks that attempt to render even the texture of the canvas, the thickness of the impasto, with effects at times astonishing,” Dorfles states in “Radio, televisione e i pericoli della meccanizzazione dell’arte” (“Radio, Television, and the Dangers of the Mechanization of Art”), published in *Le oscillazioni del gusto e l’arte moderna (Fluctuations of Taste and Modern Art, 1958)*.⁸⁵ He warns his readers against the dangers involved in the mechanical reproduction of art, summarizing them in one word: “*falsità*” or “fakery.” Reproductions are not “copies,” Dorfles claims, like the ones executed in past centuries by the human hand, “with a minimum of personal contribution.” “In today’s case—he continues—there is no direct human intervention; what intervenes, instead, is the mechanical act of replicating, by means of which a painting, a statue, a piece of music, human voice, are made into thousands of identical samples—but ‘fake.’” Dorfles concludes the essay distinguishing between the old photographic reproductions of artworks, “normal and ‘honest’ photographic copies,” licitly used for didactic purposes, and the new

⁸⁴ Dorfles published a book on 1950s art in Europe and the United States with Feltrinelli in 1961. Entitled *Ultime tendenze nell’arte d’oggi*, the book is at its nineteenth edition.

⁸⁵ Gillo Dorfles *Le oscillazioni del gusto e l’arte moderna* (Rome: Lerici, 1958), 158.

photographic reproductions, “counterfeits of masterpieces, a system to render taste more vulgar (*rendere più grossolano il gusto*).”⁸⁶

The aesthetic and moral hierarchy Dorfles establishes, between honest and fake, is indebted to Clement Greenberg, whose writings the Italian refers to in a footnote and discusses in the article “Kitsch e cultura,” published in 1963.⁸⁷ In “Avant-Garde and Kitsch” (1939), Greenberg wrote an invective against kitsch as the antithesis of modernism and the avant-garde, the degenerate by-product of capitalism. Greenberg blamed kitsch for being fake, morally and aesthetically corrupt. Kitsch represented for Greenberg the opposite of the values he espoused: purity, originality, the autonomy of art and its self-referentiality. The association of kitsch with fakery and lack of authenticity goes back to the first books on the subject that circulated in the 1920s.⁸⁸ At the same time, however, artists such as de Chirico started to engage with kitsch in their work.⁸⁹ By the 1950s, kitsch had become an integral aspect of the postmodernist project, as Emily Braun put it.⁹⁰ Dorfles’ publications on kitsch between 1958 and 1968 offer an elaborate

⁸⁶ Ibid., 159.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 178 n. 5.

⁸⁸ According to Friedrich Kluge’s *Etymologisches Wörterbuch der deutschen Sprache* (1890), the word kitsch “originated around 1870 in painting circles.” Possibly it derives from the verb *verkitschen*, to make cheap. See Winfried Menninghaus, “On the ‘Vital Significance’ of Kitsch: Walter Benjamin’s Politics of ‘Bad Taste,’” in *Walter Benjamin and the Architecture of Modernity*, eds. Andrew Benjamin and Charles Rice (Melbourne: Re.press, 2009), 39. The study by Menninghaus offers some interesting information and considerations on kitsch in relation to Walter Benjamin and early twentieth century.

⁸⁹ De Chirico wrote about kitsch as the “style 1880” in his novel *Hebdomeros* (1929). See Paolo Baldacci, “Giorgio de Chirico, l’estetica del Classicismo e la tradizione antica,” in Maurizio Fagiolo dell’Arco and Paolo Baldacci, eds., *Giorgio de Chirico: Parigi 1924–1929* (Milan: Arnoldo Mondadori Editore, 1982), 77.

⁹⁰ Emily Braun, “Kitsch and Avant-Garde: The Case of de Chirico,” in *Rethinking Art between the Wars: New Perspectives in Art History*, eds. Hans Dam Christensen, Øystein Hjort and Niels Marup Jensen (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, University of Copenhagen, 2001), 76.

and nuanced examination of the phenomenon of kitsch that is historically and culturally specific to Italy.

In his essay from 1958 Dorfles did not specify that the photographic reproductions of artworks he found dishonest were in color, as opposed to the earlier black and white. In the article from 1963 he clarified this point: the new photographic reproductions of artworks completely lack “any respect to ‘scale,’ color, and the totality of the image.”⁹¹ Although, technically, the problem of not being true to scale was not new, as any kind of reproduction, be it color or black and white, runs into that issue, reproductions of enlarged details from artworks greatly proliferated as technological advancements made possible the production of color images at lower costs, since in color details are much more readable. Similarly to Pasolini, who used enlarged details of Pontormo’s and Rosso’s *Depositions* from Briganti’s book on Mannerism for his film sequences in *La ricotta* (figs. 22–23), in the early 1960s Italian Pop artists such as Tano Festa (1938–1988) and Claudio Parmiggiani (b. 1943) based their work on reproductions of details from past art. Ontani, too, in the 1970s made a number of tableau works posing as the single figure from a group composition, as in a photographic detail. Two examples are *Terza Grazia del dado d’après Tintoretto* (*The Third Grace of the Dice d’après Tintoretto*, 1975, fig. 39) and *Ratto di Arianna d’après Titian* (*The Rape of Ariadne d’après Titian*, 1975, fig. 40), in which Ontani impersonated, respectively, one of the three Graces and Bacchus.

⁹¹ Gillo Dorfles, “Kitsch e cultura,” *Aut aut*, n. 73 (1963): 56.

Festa was part of a group of Pop artists based in Rome (Dorfles was based in Milan). Known as the “Scuola di Piazza del Popolo,” the group included Mario Ceroli, Giosetta Fioroni, Cesare Tacchi, and Mario Schifano.⁹² One of the first works by Festa based on the photographic reproduction of a detail from an artwork is *Particolare della Sistina (Detail from the Sistine)* (1963, fig. 41), which features the enlarged detail of the head of Adam from the *The Creation of Adam* in Michelangelo’s Sistine Chapel. It was exhibited at the Galleria La Tartaruga in Rome in May of 1963. The next year Festa made another work based on *The Creation of Adam*, zooming out to include the hands of Adam and God (fig. 42). His technique changed from the adoption of photographic reproductions to the use of a projector and enamel paint (in garish colors) to trace the image—the latter bring a process similar to the one adopted by Andy Warhol to execute his first “Campbell’s Soup Can” series in 1962.

The detail of Michelangelo’s *Creation of Adam* was featured prominently in a double-spread reproduction in the middle of the monograph dedicated to Michelangelo in the Fratelli Fabbri series “I Maestri del Colore,” which had just started being sold weekly at newsstands in the spring of 1963.⁹³ In Italy this was the first series of artist monographs offering high-quality color reproductions at a low price. Developed from an idea of Roberto Longhi, it contributed to a visual democratization of art historical

⁹² The name Scuola di Piazza del Popolo started being used around 1966, as the hangout of the group was Piazza del Popolo.

⁹³ Anna Forlani Tempesti, *Michelangelo* (Milan: Fratelli Fabbri, 1963), ill. VI–VII.

knowledge.⁹⁴ It features large and slim volumes (about 11 by 14 inches, 20 pages; see fig. 44), each including a brief, scholarly text and a selection of works reproduced as both black-and-white thumbnail pictures at the beginning of the volume, and as sumptuous full-page color reproductions.⁹⁵ As Calvesi noted in an essay on the Roman art scene in the 1960s, the Fabbri series signaled a major change in the circulation of art reproductions from small, often low-quality black-and-white images to full-page, high-quality color images. Calvesi indicates that this change was influential on the production of Pop artists.⁹⁶ I argue that it was also influential on the revival of the tableau vivant. Ontani and other artists, such as Pistoletto, used the Fabbri series to construct their tableaux.⁹⁷ Together with the emergence of television as a mass phenomenon in Italy in the early 1960s, the broad availability of color reproductions of artworks contributed to a culture of the image outside of which the tableau-vivant revival cannot be understood.⁹⁸

Festa talked about his works based on details of Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel in an interview. He explained:

⁹⁴ Carla Bianchi, "Art Book Publishing in Italy: The 1990s," *Art Libraries Journal* 17, n. 3 (1992), 43.

⁹⁵ When the series was sold out, it became a collector's item. It has been reprinted a few times, most recently, in the early 2000s.

⁹⁶ Maurizio Calvesi, "Cronache e coordinate di un'avventura," in *Roma anni '60: Al di là della pittura*, Rossella Siligato, ed. (Rome: Edizioni Carte Segrete, 1990), 19 and 35 n. 8. On the subject of the influence of art reproduction on art production in the 1960s, see Viva, "L'immagine rimediata. Diagrammi e riproduzioni di opere pittoriche come fonti visive negli anni sessanta," *Palinsesti* 1 (2011): 63–82.

⁹⁷ In particular, Ontani made a tableau photo after the same detail from Michelangelo's *Creation of Adam* that Festa used for his works, zooming in on the detail of the hands of Adam and God nearly touching and transforming the work into the *Creazione dell'androgino (Creation of the Androgynous)*, 1978 (fig. 43). Ontani executed this work in India in 1978.

⁹⁸ On the development of the TV in Italy as a mass phenomenon, see Franco Monteleone, "Vedere a distanza," in *Storia della radio e della televisione in Italia: Un secolo di costume, società e politica* (Venice: Marsilio, 2003), 268–294.

when I made these michelangelos (michelangeli), and, incidentally, I had never visited the Sistine Chapel, they were things deeply tied to Rome, to the kind of images that are consumed here. . . . an American paints a Coca Cola as a valuable contemporary image, for me Michelangelo is the same thing, in the sense that we are in a country where instead of eating canned food, we eat the *Mona Lisa* on chocolates.⁹⁹

Of course American Pop artists also incorporated citations from past art. An early example is Robert Rauschenberg's *Rebus* (1955), a combine painting that includes the full-page color reproduction of Sandro Botticelli's *Venus* (fig. 45).¹⁰⁰ More frequently, though, they turned to icons of consumer and mass culture as subjects of their works. As Festa stated, it is understandable that Americans would "elect as status symbols of their culture the Coca-Cola bottle or the advertisement sign," as "they have so little history behind them, but for an Italian artist from Rome who also lived within a stone's throw of the Vatican walls, popular is the Sistine Chapel, true logo of the Made in Italy."¹⁰¹

Dorfles condemned the exploitation of artistic icons by the industry. The image of the *Mona Lisa* was used not only to sell chocolates. It was also used to advertise other consumer items, such as prescription drugs, as Dorfles denounced in an article from 1964, "Per una fenomenologia del cattivo gusto" ("For a Phenomenology of Bad

⁹⁹ Tano Festa, "De Marchis e Festa," interview with Giorgio De Marchis, *Flash Art*, n. 1 (June 1967): 6.

¹⁰⁰ On American artists who took other art as their subject see Jean Lipman and Richard Marshall, *Art about Art*, introduction by Leo Steinberg (New York: Dutton, 1978). This was the catalogue of an exhibition held at the Whitney Museum of American Art and an interesting early publication on this topic, following by one year Douglas Crimp's *Pictures* exhibition at Artists Space, also in New York.

¹⁰¹ Tano Festa, interview with the journalist Antonella Amendola (1986), published in *Tano Festa*, Achille Bonito Oliva, ed. (Milan: Electa, 1988), 29. Of course there were exceptions on the Italian side of Pop, too. For example Mario Schifano used as found images both past art and the Coca-Cola logos.

Taste”).¹⁰² Dorfles continued to work on the subject of kitsch in the following years. He presented a compelling examination of the phenomenology of kitsch taking into account its anthropological and sociological implications in a series of essays that came out in 1968, as part of an anthology edited by him and gathering both venerable and more recent writings by different authors on kitsch in all areas of human activity—from architecture, interior decoration, film and the visual arts to literature, politics, religion, advertisement, and tourism. Entitled *Il Kitsch: antologia del cattivo gusto* (*Kitsch: The World of Bad Taste*), the book had an enormous success in Italy and was published in English one year later.¹⁰³ An essay by Karl Pawek is devoted to Christian kitsch, such as the *santini*, on which Ontani based some of his tableau works.¹⁰⁴ Twenty years after the publication of the anthology, Dorfles deemed it his “most successful book.”¹⁰⁵

Dorfles contributed eighteen essays to his anthology. Introduced as a “delicate and vague subject,”¹⁰⁶ the phenomenon of kitsch is presented by Dorfles as “one of the crucial problems in the history of art and aesthetics today.”¹⁰⁷ Perhaps then, Dorfles conjectures, art is “destined to adopt the kitsch aspect more than any other in the present

¹⁰² Gillo Dorfles, “Per una fenomenologia del cattivo gusto,” *Rivista di estetica* 9, n. 3 (September–December 1964): 32.

¹⁰³ Gillo Dorfles, ed., *Il Kitsch: antologia del cattivo gusto* (Milano: Mazzotta, 1968); and *Kitsch: The World of Bad Taste* (New York: Universe Books, 1969). Dorfles had been writing on kitsch since the late 1950s in *Le oscillazioni del gusto e l'arte moderna* (Rome: Lerici, 1958).

¹⁰⁴ Idem, “Religious Trappings,” and Karl Pawek, “Christian Kitsch,” in *Kitsch: The World of Bad Taste*, 139–150. Dorfles’s text is an introduction to Pawek’s.

¹⁰⁵ Idem, “Intervista a Gillo Dorfles, di Marco Di Capua,” in *Roma anni '60: Al di là della pittura*, Rossella Siligato, ed. (Rome: Edizioni Carte Segrete, 1990), 346.

¹⁰⁶ Dorfles, “Introduction,” in *Kitsch: The World of Bad Taste*, 11.

¹⁰⁷ Idem, “Conclusion,” 302

phase of western civilization.”¹⁰⁸ For Dorfles, the “central and most important factor in the identification of kitsch” is the transformation or “translation” of artistic or natural phenomena into something “inferior, false, sentimental and no longer genuine.”¹⁰⁹ Imitation and decontextualization, which often implies adaptation from one medium into another and a departure from the original function of the art object, are for Dorfles responsible for the banalization and emptiness that characterize kitsch and at the same time ensure a pleasing result that solicits curiosity and attraction. Historically, Dorfles writes, the advent of “mechanical and subsequently electric and electronic methods in the reproduction and transmission of art” played a fundamental role in “the appearance of certain kitsch factors.”¹¹⁰ This is what Dorfles calls “the industrialization of culture,” which is his version of Adorno and Horkheimer’s “culture industry.”¹¹¹ The industrialization of culture, through the new mass media of photography, cinema, television, and magazines, entail the lack of “an authentic ‘lived experience.’”¹¹²

Part of Dorfles’s main essay in the book, simply entitled “Kitsch,” is dedicated to the mass reproductions of works of art: “There is no doubt that the large-scale reproduction of works of art—both visual and musical, ancient and modern—by means of the new technical methods represents one of the most surprising and noticeable

¹⁰⁸ Idem, “Conclusion,” in *Kitsch: The World of Bad Taste*, 302.

¹⁰⁹ Idem, “Kitsch,” 29.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Adorno and Horkheimer introduced the concept of culture industry in their book *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, first published in 1947.

¹¹² Dorfles, “Kitsch,” in *Kitsch: The World of Bad Taste*, 31.

characteristics of the recent cultural evolution.”¹¹³ He comments on the negative aspects of such evolution: “Even if faithful reproduction has made it possible to spread artistic and historical knowledge to wide sections of the population... the mania for reproductions has resulted in the paradox of works and objects which are only apparently and extrinsically similar to the original being treasured.”¹¹⁴ Dorfles points out that one of the most problematic aspects of this mania is that the public ends up liking the reproductions better than the originals, finding the reproductions “more attractive, more beautiful and more effective than the originals,” which have been deprived of their “aura of mystery and sacredness.”¹¹⁵ Indeed, mass culture “has contributed to the spreading and triumph of kitsch.”¹¹⁶

In the “Conclusion” Dorfles deals with the “problem of the conscious and intentional use of kitsch by certain contemporary artists,” such as, he writes, Duchamp, Picasso, de Chirico and, more recently, the Pop artists.¹¹⁷ Dorfles does not discuss in detail any artwork dealing with kitsch and does not mention the work of Italian Pop artists such as Festa. But his point of view is clear and could be extended to Festa as well as to Ontani. For Dorfles kitsch can be redeemed when it is taken out of context intentionally and consciously: “kitsch elements have an undeniable charm of their own

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 32.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ Idem, “Conclusion,” 291.

which—where they have been used out of context—is translated into the authentic work of art.”¹¹⁸ This is one of the few instances in which, according to Dorfler, the presence of kitsch elements is positive.

All the artists of the Scuola di Piazza del Popolo, like Festa, made works based on past art. Mario Ceroli was the only one in this group that made three-dimensional objects. He worked with wood and around the mid-1960s executed a series in which he recreated the silhouettes of figures in paintings by Michelangelo and other Italian Renaissance artists, such as Leonardo and Botticelli, as well as by Giorgio de Chirico. In an autobiographical note Ontani published following a poem in the local daily newspaper of Bologna *Carlino Sera* in 1968, he listed Ceroli as one of his artistic models.¹¹⁹ In general Michelangelo and Botticelli were the most oft-quoted by the artists of the Scuola di Piazza del Popolo. Both Fioroni and Tacchi included details from Botticelli’s *Birth of Venus* in their works. Perhaps one of the most striking works of this kind is Ceroli’s *Mobili nella valle* (*Furniture in the Valley*, 1965, fig. 46), which recreates three-dimensionally de Chirico’s painting of the same title, giving substance to the uncanny bodily presence of the pieces of furniture in the painting, like frozen figures of a *Sacra Conversazione* (fig. 47).¹²⁰

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 298.

¹¹⁹ Luigi Ontani, “Una poesia di Luigi Ontani: La Mela,” *Carlino-Sera*, April 8, 1968, 5.

¹²⁰ De Chirico made a number of paintings with this subject in 1927–1928. He returned to this subject in 1966. See Achille Bonito Oliva, ed., *Nature According to De Chirico* (Milan: Electa, 2010), ill. 44–48.

Citation from past art was not a prerogative of the Scuola di Piazza del Popolo. Other Pop artists, such as Modena-based Claudio Parmiggiani (b. 1943), also engaged with this practice starting around the same time. For instance, Parmiggiani's *Notte* (*Night*, 1964, fig. 48), currently in the Maramotti Collection in Reggio Emilia, consists of the plaster cast of the head of Saint Teresa from Gian Lorenzo Bernini's *Transverberation of Saint Teresa* in the Church of Santa Maria delle Vittoria in Rome. This is a highly theatrical marble group and one of the most famous works of Baroque art. The emotionally charged detail of the ecstatic head looks like a religious relic: it is severed from the rest of the body, encased in a wall-hung wooden vitrine, set against a velvety black background, and wrapped in white cloth stained with yellow and red paint reminiscent of bodily fluids. In another work from 1969 entitled *Yang-Yin*, Parmiggiani used the reproductions of Piero della Francesca's portraits of the Duke and Duchess of Urbino, among the most famous bust-length portraits of early Italian Renaissance art. He photographed the reproductions from a book and reversed the profiles of the sitters using collage and tempera retouching. The result is a comical mix of traits stereotypically connoted as masculine and feminine: the Duchess's gentle nose graces the Duke's robust,

stocky figure, and the Duke's hooked nose toughens up the delicate, bejeweled head of the Duchess (fig. 49).¹²¹

Section 4

The Tableau-Vivant Revival

4.1. Pascali Performer

Pino Pascali (1935–1968) was the first artists to engage with the tableau vivant in a series of performances between 1964 and 1968 that entailed role-playing and enacting his own works. Pascali was the rising star of the Roman art world in the 1960s. Having studied scenography and sculpture at the art academy, he took on day jobs as a stage set and graphic designer in the television and advertising industry. These activities were influential on his art production, aligned with the international wave of new-dada and Pop, and in 1967 Celant co-opted him as a member of the Arte Povera group. In his first solo show at the Galleria La Tartaruga in 1965, Pascali exhibited a series of objects, hung on the wall and protruding from the wall. Part paintings and part sculptures, they are canvases stretched on wooden armatures. One of these objects was *Colosseo* (*Coliseum*, 1964), a miniature version of the Roman monument (fig. 50). The adoption of a sponge

¹²¹ The source of the reproduction and the use of collage and tempera have been confirmed by the Galleria de' Foscherari in Bologna that represents Parmiggiani (personal e-mail communication dated March 19, 2011). *Yang-Yin* was reproduced in the issue of *Flash Art* following the one in which Ontani's tableaux after past art were first published (Claudio Parmiggiani, "Untitled," *Flash Art International Review of Art*, no. 46 [June 1974]: 14–15). It was exhibited at Galleria La Bertesca in Genoa the year before. A review of the show by Daniela Palazzoli was published in *Domus*, no. 524 (July 1973): 50. On Parmiggiani see Arturo Schwarz, ed., *Claudio Parmiggiani* (Bologna: Grafis, 1985). The catalogue of a retrospective exhibition, this book includes a good interview by Schwarz and several contributions, most notably by Trini, Calvesi, Paolo Fossati, and Gianni Vattimo. On *Yang-Yin* see Ida Panicelli, *Arte e critica 1980* (Rome: De Luca, 1980), 122.

layer underneath the canvas ensured that the depiction of the architectural structure in white paint acquired a faux antique look. Originally printed with the words “Souvenir of Rome,” which Pascali removed as per the request of his gallerist, Pascali’s version of the Coliseum is in dialogue with kitsch, and, in particular, with tourist kitsch.¹²²

A work Pascali made for the advertising industry speaks of another aspect of kitsch in the age of image culture: the assimilation of artistic and cultural icons by the industry—a phenomenon that Dorfles condemned and Festa registered as a specifically Italian phenomenon when he said “we eat the *Mona Lisa* on chocolates.”¹²³ As part of a commission for the Cirio brand of tomato preserve, Pascali impersonated Pulcinella for a commercial in 1963 (fig. 52). The fact that the manufacturer Cirio was based in Naples justified the choice of the Neapolitan *commedia dell’arte* stock character. Eleven years later, in 1974, Pulcinella was one of the first characters Ontani impersonated in front of an audience at the Galleria Lucio Amelio in Naples, motionless and completely naked, except for the head, covered with the stock character’s typical black half-face mask and white conical hat (fig. 164).

Pascali’s own work as an artist also involved performance, often centered around the strategy of the tableau vivant. This is not an unknown aspect of Pascali’s practice, but

¹²² The words were removed after the request of the gallery director, Plinio de Marchis, who found them too reminiscent of American Pop (Claire Gilman, interview with Plinio de Marchis, March 1998, quoted in Gilman, “Arte Povera’s Theater: Artifice and Anti-Modernism in Italian Art of the 1960s,” PhD dissertation, Columbia University, 2006, 187).

¹²³ Festa, “De Marchis e Festa,” *Flash Art*, 6.

it has yet to receive due attention in the literature.¹²⁴ Pascali's performances involved role-playing and interaction with his own works, typically with effects oscillating between the playful, the comical, the sarcastic, and the tragicomical, not without ambiguity. They were influential on Ontani's move from object to pose, and they constitute a significant component of the phenomenon of the tableau-vivant revival. Pascali usually made his performances for the camera. In some instances they photos were published in the catalogue of the exhibition in which the works were presented, and in at least one case he performed for an audience.¹²⁵

The first tableau vivant Pascali staged was *Requiescat in pace, Corradinus* (*Rest in Peace, Corradinus*, 1964). In this tableau the artist played an ominous-looking Bishop officiating a commemorative celebration for Conrad Hohenstaufen, next to a wooden structure covered in felt and canvas painted in enamel, functioning as funerary monument (fig. 52). A historical and legendary figure remembered by Dante in a passage of his *Purgatory*, Conrad Hohenstaufen was the son of the German Emperor of Swabia, successor to his father at age two. Known as Corradinus or little Conrad in Latin, he was killed at age sixteen in Italy in the war between Guelphs and Ghibellines. Pascali's installation was set up in the crypt of Torre Astura, the twelfth-century fortified tower on the coast south of Rome where Corradinus was captured, before his death. (The final

¹²⁴ A show at L'Attico in 1991 was dedicated to this aspect of Pascali's work. See Fabio Sargentini, ed., *Pascali performer* (Rome: Associazione Culturale l'Attico, 1991). The catalogue contains short texts, presented as "testimonies," by Boatto, Bonito Oliva, Calvesi, and others.

¹²⁵ The actual circulation of many of the photos of Pascali performing his works remains to be clarified in the literature. The subject makes for an interesting future research project.

scene of the TV series of *Pinocchio* was filmed on the beach of Torre Astura.) Amidst “clouds of incense and rough bell shaking (*ruvidi scossoni al campanello*),” Pascali appeared standing to the side of the ersatz tombstone, disguised behind a menacing mask, underneath a comically oversized costume with miter. The performance lasted a few hours—long enough to make the attendees anxious about the artist’s well-being in the small crypt full of smoke.¹²⁶

The photos of Pascali interacting with his own works are generally more lighthearted in tone. He tiptoes along the zig-zag separating a section of his *32 m² di mare circa* (*Approximately 32 m² of Sea*, 1967) from the rest of the work (fig. 53). Floor-bound and room-filling, the piece is made of square metal tanks with water colored of different hues of blue. Pascali enacts the fantasy of walking on water, as in the Biblical story of Moses. In other photos he plays more specific roles, as a soldier in camouflage battle dress, positioned behind one of his ersatz cannons (fig. 54), or playing the bird on top of one of his fake missiles (fig. 55). Both works are from the series “Arms” (1965) and were taken by Claudio Abate, a photographer involved with documenting artists’ performances and installations in Rome. In another group of photos Pascali plays a “savage” (fig. 56), as the art critic Alberto Boatto put it, a chimpanzee (figs. 57), and an ox (fig. 58). In the first and second photos he performs objects from the series “Attrezzi agricoli” (“Agricultural Tools”). Francesco Taverna took these photos in Pascali’s studio in Rome in 1968. The chimpanzee Pascali impersonated was, in the artist’s mind,

¹²⁶ Alberto Boatto, [Untitled], in Sargentini, *Pascali performer*, np. The excerpt describes the performance, which Boatto attended.

Cheetah, Tarzan's friend, co-starring in several movies from the 1930s and 1940s, as well as in some TV shows from the mid- to late 1960s.

In some cases Pascali made tableaux vivants of his own works. He posed next to *Vedova blu* (*Blue Widow*, fig. 59) and one of his *Bachi da setola* (*Brushworms*) (fig. 60), mimicking each piece with a pose. Both *Vedova blu* and *Bachi da setola* are from the series "Ricostruzione della natura" ("Reconstruction of Nature," 1968). They are made of colorful acrylic fiber, the kind used in domestic cleaning. Gigantic creatures of an artificial world, they are celebrations of childhood make-believe. "Baco da seta" is the Italian for "caterpillar" and "setola" means "bristle," hence the title literally can be translated as "bristle caterpillar," which is to say that this caterpillar produces bristle instead of silk.

Some of these photos were published in the catalogue accompanying Pascali's last solo show at L'Attico of Fabio Sargentini while alive, *Bachi da setola e altri lavori in corso* (Pascali died in a motorcycle accident), although, as Sargentini recalls, none was exhibited.¹²⁷ In the catalogue Pascali also constructed a photographic diptych in a double-spread: on the left his own head, on the right the head of a chimpanzee (fig. 61). Popping up from the bottom of the white page, the silhouette of Pascali's head looks diminutive in comparison to the chimpanzee head, looming much larger in proportion and stacked up in two identical photos on the right. Shot in a three-quarter profile, Pascali's head reiterates that of the chimpanzee. In a tableau photo made in India, Ontani

¹²⁷ See Robert Brown and Fabio Sargentini, *Pino Pascali: Ponte, 1968* (London: Christie's, 2008), 27; and Anna D'Elia, ed., *Pino Pascali* (Milan: Electa, 2010), 222.

staged a similar visual pair, mimicking with his body posture the representative of another species of intelligent primates holding a typical crouching position next to him (fig. 196). The work is aptly entitled *Monkey Mime* (1977). In Pascali's photograph, the artist's mouth appears semi-open, in the process of uttering words, written above the image as in a comic strip speech bubble: "Alé! Alé! Cita" ("Yippee! Yippee! Cheetah!"). Cheetah is pointing her index finger to her temple, a gesture that in body language in Italy is understood as the signal of a new idea. A couple of pages later a poem is printed in a dialect from the region Pascali is from, Puglia, in the south of Italy, which was still predominantly agrarian even after the end of the economic miracle. "I love Cheetah, the monkey of Tarzan," the poem reads. "I want to devise a way of capturing her."

An object in the series "Reconstruction of Nature" could have been used to capture Cheetah. *Trappola* (*Trap*, 1968) is made of steel wool on a metal frame. Taverna took a photo of Pascali inside the trap, playing the part of the captured Cheetah (fig. 62). The art historian Calvesi commented on this photograph. He saw in it a tableau after an array of past paintings featuring plastic figures of men with their arms outstretched—from Michelangelo's Aman in the Sistine Chapel to the Crucified Christs of Masaccio and Piero della Francesca, to the old apostle of Christ who extends his arms in an expression of surprise and recognition in one of Caravaggio's most cinematic and theatrical paintings, the *Supper at Emmaus*:

The photo of Pascali inside the 'trap,' with his arms wide apart in the form of a cross that come out from the large-knit stitches (again that sense of imprisonment in a closed space from which one wants to escape, again that perforating energy, like his previous cut sharks, sunk into the wall) has always evoked in me the

overly powerful Michelangelesque invention of the Sistine Chapel, in the figure of the crucified Aman; or the aching images of Masaccio and Piero, or the apostle of Caravaggio in the *Supper at Emmaus*—they ‘break through’ space with the transversal of the arms wide open.¹²⁸

4.2. Pistoletto’s Theater

Michelangelo Pistoletto (b. 1933) embraced the strategy of the tableau vivant in a number of works. I examine two of these: one of his so-called mirror paintings, *Donna nuda di schiena* (1966), and a little-known film entitled *Pistoletto & Sotheby* (1968), in which Pistoletto and his partner, Maria Pioppi, staged several tableaux vivants after past artworks. In comparison to the tableaux Pistoletto and Pioppi staged in this film, which Ontani did not see, Ontani’s tableau works are more subtle, subdued, and ironic.¹²⁹ The affinity between Ontani and Pistoletto rests less on the results than on the premises, which bring Ontani’s tableau work closer to the mirror paintings than *Pistoletto & Sotheby*, as we shall see. Pistoletto is another artist whom, like Pascali, Celant gathered in the founding group of Arte Povera in 1967.

At first *Donna nuda di schiena* (1966) may seem an image like many others of a nude woman from the back lying on a bed (fig. 63). However, at a closer inspection, one realizes that the image recreates the position of the female figure depicted as Venus in Velázquez’s *Venus at the Mirror* (c. 1648–1651, fig. 64). The way in which the left thigh of the woman in Pistoletto’s work lies on her right leg leaves no doubt about the source of

¹²⁸ Calvesi, “Cronache e coordinate di un’avventura,” in *Roma anni '60*, 32.

¹²⁹ Ontani, personal interview, 30 March 2008.

the pose. This is one of Pistoletto's mirror paintings, which he began making in 1961, showed for the first time at Galleria Galatea in Turin in April of 1963 (when Ontani was in the city), and brought him international attention by the mid-1960s.¹³⁰ For *Donna nuda di schiena*, as for other mirror paintings of that time, Pistoletto silkscreen the photograph life-size on mirror-finished, polished steel.¹³¹

The connection between Velázquez's and Pistoletto's works goes well beyond formal similarities. Both works are centered around the presence of a mirror surface, the tool par excellence for the doubling of reality, together with painting, photography, and silkscreening. In Velázquez's painting a small mirror in front of Venus produces an image of her face. In Pistoletto's work the mirror has taken up the entire composition, becoming the ground on which the silkscreened image rests. Most importantly, it is an actual mirror surface that reflects everything but the face of the anonymous female figure. By means of an actual mirror surface Pistoletto makes the viewer and their surroundings, implied in Velázquez's painting by means of the representation of a mirror image (the face of Venus), an inevitable and changing component of the work. The relationship between world and image, reality and its representation is a subtext of this and other

¹³⁰ The exhibition was a success and only a few days after the opening Pistoletto struck a deal with Ileana Sonnabend, the American art dealer based in Paris who later bought the entire show and took over Pistoletto's contract with Galleria Galatea. Over the course of the following years Pistoletto was offered exhibitions of his mirror paintings around Europe and the United States.

¹³¹ For the mirror paintings Pistoletto experimented with different solutions. For the support, prior to mirror-finished, polished stainless steel, which he adopted in 1962, he used aluminum sheets applied onto canvas. He did not use common mirror because it presents several problems, included fragility, weight, and bulk. For the overlaid figures, Pistoletto first tried applying cutout photographic images or photographic gelatin directly to polished steel, but then preferred either tracing the photograph, enlarged to life size, with the tip of a brush, on tissue paper or silkscreening the photographic image onto the polished steel.

paintings by Velázquez. Pistoletto picked up on this in his *Donna nuda di schiena* and Pasolini did it, too, in his short film *Che sono le nuvole?* (1967).

Donna nuda di schiena was first exhibited at L'Attico in Rome in 1968.¹³² This was Pistoletto's first solo show at the gallery of Sargentini. The show featured four mirror paintings as well as stage set elements. Hung in two rooms, the works were part of a theatrical set-up. At the entrance, visitors were greeted with powerful stage reflectors pointed at them. Across from the entrance hung *Lo sgabello* (*The Stool*, 1966). In the next room *Donna nuda di schiena* was on display, together with *Lui e lei di schiena* (*She and He from the Back*) and *Gli amanti* (*The Lovers*), both from 1967 and featuring Pistoletto and Pioppi. The second room with the three mirror paintings were set up with props borrowed from Cinecittà: expanded Styrofoam columns, papier-mâché rocks—the epitome of kitsch. On the opening day, fanciful period costumes and hats, also borrowed from Cinecittà, were made available to visitors. Three cine-cameramen circulated among the crowd, filming the event. “Visitors—recounts Pistoletto—tried on two or three different attires” (fig. 65). “Then—he continues—they all became actors. I noticed that in that way the boundary between oneself and one's external appearance, the

¹³² Later *Donna nuda di schiena* was included in the exhibition *Vitalità del negativo nell'arte italiana: 1960/1970* (*Vitality of the Negative in Italian Art: 1960/1970*), a large group show that opened on November 30, 1970 and was curated by the up-and-coming Bonito Oliva at Palazzo delle Esposizioni in Rome. Ontani likely visited this show, as he was in town around the time of his birthday, on November 24.

theatricalization of oneself (*coreografia di sé*),¹³³ was revealed.”¹³⁴ Turning visitors into actors and making them aware of this boundary is also central to Bendini’s performative installation, *Come è* (1966), in which a mirror and microphone are turned onto the visitor, invited to sit down and take part in the theater of life (fig. 5).

The mirror is a central subject of one of Ontani’s first tableau works, entitled *Meditation d’après de La Tour* (c. 1970). Although the title tells us that the tableau recreates Georges de La Tour’s *Penitent Magdalene* (c. 1640, fig. 68), I maintain that it conflates three characters associated with mirror reflections: Mary Magdalene, the Biblical sex worker; Venus, the mythological goddess of love; and Narcissus, the time-honored homoerotic trope. In *Meditation d’après de La Tour*, Ontani is seated at a desk, in front of a large, framed mirror, towering imposingly above the little desk (fig. 66). His back is turned to the camera, his face clearly visible in the mirror, as in Velázquez’s *Venus at the Mirror* and unlike in La Tour’s *Penitent Magdalene*. On the desk there are a small volume, to the right, and a tall candle, near the center of the composition. Both appear only once, the former as an object, the latter as a reflected image. Ontani’s reflected face bears a serious, if not somber, expression, his gaze oriented sideways, towards an unidentified point to the upper right. Ontani made a few slightly different versions of this tableau. In one he appears leaning on his right elbow, like Venus in Velázquez’s painting,

¹³³ The word “coreografia” in Italian does not translate as “choreography” in English. Pistoletto is using it in its figurative sense, which in Italian is the most common, as “the spectacular scenography of a representation, a ceremony, an event, meant to produce on the spectator a strong impression, especially visual” (Hoepli Dictionary).

¹³⁴ Michelangelo Pistoletto in Marcello Venturoli, *Tutti gli uomini dell’arte* (Milan: Rizzoli, 1968), 342.

although there the hand is elegantly hidden away, while here the mirror shows that it partly covers the face, in a gesture of thoughtfulness, if not despair, which brings up the Ovidian myth of Narcissus (fig. 67).

As Claire Gilman has shown, the dialogue between painting, photography, reflected reality, and lived reality is a central aspect of Pistoletto's mirror paintings. Countering the prevalent interpretation of the mirror paintings as tools of live reflection that activate free, mobile perception, Gilman contends that the works are in fact about conventions, "the way in which people move, gesture, and take up positions within public space."¹³⁵ Building on Gilman's interpretation, I argue that Pistoletto's mirror paintings highlight the theatricality of lived experience—a project aligned with Ontani's tableau work. An insightful note from 1967 by Alberto Boatto exemplifies the shift in the arts that is the premise of this project:

Paintings—those antiquated windows that look out onto the beyond—have become increasingly incapable of containing the whole spectacle of the world within their frames. Duchamp thus decided to fling the window posts in our eyes, showing once and for all in his didactic, irritating extremism that the age of representation—of that sort at least—was well and truly over. The curtain thus came down on illusion and the show of the beyond was reversed into the show of the here and now. From then on simulation was no longer enough, and it was necessary to put on a show (*fare spettacolo*).¹³⁶

The "show of the here and now" is the show of Pistoletto's mirror paintings. "To be at the same time spectators and actors, producers and consumers—declared Pistoletto—is

¹³⁵ Claire Gilman, "Pistoletto's Object Theater," in *Michelangelo Pistoletto: From One to Many, 1956–1974*, ed. Carlos Basualdo (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 103.

¹³⁶ Alberto Boatto, "Lo spazio dello spettacolo," in *Fuoco immagine acqua terra* (Rome: L'Attico, 1967), reprinted in *L'Attico di Fabio Sargentini, 1966–1978*, 60–1 (translation amended). "Lo spazio dello spettacolo" was written for a group show that included Pistoletto's mirror paintings.

the show I propose on the stage of my mirror paintings.”¹³⁷ The “show of the here and now” is also the show of the tableau vivant, whereby the spectator—viewer of an artwork or reader of a story—is turned into an actor and producer who enacts a character or figure from an artwork or story. A distinguishing feature of the works that Ontani and others made based on the tableau vivant as an artistic strategy is precisely the overlap of spectator/consumer and actor/producer. This overlap is tied to the ways in which the tableau is staged—ways that emphasize role-playing and the fiction of the *mise-en-scène*, revealing the porosity of the boundary between the lived and the performed.

A work by Pistoletto that involves several enactments of past paintings is *Pistoletto & Sotheby* (1968), one of eleven films that the artist realized in collaboration with both professional and amateur filmmakers in Turin.¹³⁸ The films were shown at L’Attico in Rome during the last two days of Pistoletto’s solo exhibition, the same that featured *Donna nuda di schiena* (1966). Twenty-five-minutes long, *Pistoletto & Sotheby* was filmed in color by the friend Pia Epremi. In the film Pistoletto and Pioppi stage tableaux vivants from paintings, mostly by nineteenth- and twentieth-century European artists. I will analyze the two most complex ones: the first is based on Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres’ *Raphael and the Fornarina* (1814), the second on James Ensor’s *Self-Portrait with a Flowered Hat* (1883–1888).

¹³⁷ Michelangelo Pistoletto, interview with Francesco Prestipino, in *Pistoletto*, ed. Germano Celant (Florence: Forte Belvedere, 1984), 97.

¹³⁸ Marco Farano, “Dallo Zoo al Terzo Paradiso. Azioni e collaborazioni,” in *Michelangelo Pistoletto. Il varco dello specchio. Azioni e collaborazioni: 1967–2004*, Marco Farano, Maria Cristina Mundici, and Maria Teresa Roberto (Turin: Fondazione Torino Musei, 2005), 70. On *Pistoletto & Sotheby* see *ibid.*, 76–77.

Raphael and the Fornarina exists in different versions. It depicts the Italian Renaissance painter with his lover and model seated on his lap (see for one fig. 70). The scene portrays a moment of leisure in between painting sessions. The Fornarina is shown half-naked, wearing headgear, as in Raphael's portrait of her, *La fornarina* (1518–1520, fig. 71), which appears uncompleted on the easel in front of the artist and model in the painting by Ingres. Pistoletto and Pioppi staged the tableau in front of a floor-to-ceiling mirror—an unmistakable reference to the mirror paintings (fig. 69). More actor than muse, Pioppi commonly participated in Pistoletto's performances and contributed to his work in general. The enactment of the tableau is accompanied by a disturbing “noise track”: a raucous cacophony of atonal piano music, humming, wailing, howling, grunting, scratching—perhaps a homage to the intonarumori (noise intoners) of Futurist composer Luigi Russolo. The sound track lends the recreation a tormented, nightmarish overtone. Yet, as the frightening sound track unfolds, a lighthearted, playful scene takes place. Two little girls in their school uniforms—a dark dress with white collar, similar to what Ontani wears in his *Pinocchio* (1972)—make their appearance. They start running around the couple, motionless in their tableau—a pyramidal shape in the middle of the picture frame. The girls run in opposite directions, bump into one another, then play with their own reflections in the mirror, and then start running again, switching directions. After a few rounds, things begin to go wild. The girls start wrestling, first standing, then on the floor. The dynamics of their actions becomes increasingly disorienting: the girls run again, changing their directions quickly, almost like flipper balls, as the mirror multiplies the

figures and the camera moves around, at times capturing both live and reflected figures, at times subtracting one or the other. The entire scene ends after three and a half minutes.¹³⁹

The enactment of Ensor's *Self-Portrait with a Flowered Hat* (1883–1888, fig. 73) follows the presentation on a table of an issue of the Fabbri series “I Maestri del Colore.”¹⁴⁰ As the maker of the film notes, *Pistoletto & Sotheby* attempts to reestablish a link between art and life, “with impertinence to those images that the production of popular publications, like the installments of the Fabbri Editori art history series, made known to everyone for the first time.”¹⁴¹ The word “impertinence” hits the nail on the head, as the tone of the recreations of past artworks in the film is irreverent and caricatural. The sound track accompanying this tableau is even more harrowing, punctuated by irregular, excruciating, howling laments over the atonal piano music. Pistoletto appears seated on a simple foldable wooden chair in a three-quarter profile. The camera zooms in on the right eye, goes in and out of focus, and then zooms out to frame the bust. For a moment the camera frames the tableau of Pistoletto recreating Ensor's painting (fig. 72). This painting, like the one by Ingres, entails the construction of an ideal relationship with an artist from another era. In this case it is Ensor's

¹³⁹ The shifting point of view is reminiscent of Robert Morris's *Site*, first performed in 1964 with Carolee Schneemann posing as Manet's *Olympia*. In this context is not possible to do justice to this performance and attempt a comparison between the two works.

¹⁴⁰ The low resolution of the copy of the film I could watch makes it impossible to identify which issue of the “Maestri del Colore” series is put on the table, though, one would guess, probably it is the one on Ensor.

¹⁴¹ Epremián, quoted in Farano, “Dallo Zoo al Terzo Paradiso,” in *Michelangelo Pistoletto. Il varco dello specchio*, 76.

illustrious predecessor, Peter Paul Rubens. The eccentric Flemish-Belgian painter modeled himself after a self-portrait by the 17th-century Flemish master. Five years after he painted the work, Ensor added some elements to it: circular segments at the four corners of the canvas, a flamboyant flowered hat, and blue cat-like whiskers. Pistoletto recreates both the hat and the whiskers in his tableau. The circular segments in Ensor's painting allude to the tondo format of Rubens' self-portrait. They tell us that this is a painting about another painting. The hat and whiskers are de-facing or re-facing gestures. They are irreverent acts of reclamation, similar to the marks left by a graffiti artist over advertising posters in the subway. They are also marks of a gender queering masquerade.

After a sustained close-up of Pistoletto posing in the tableau after Ensor's self-portrait, the camera zooms out to let the entire figure appear. The viewer's attention is caught by an unusual action: Pistoletto is nervously curling the toes of his left foot up (fig. 74). It quickly becomes clear that he is striking a pose; he is mimicking the shape of a beaten-up leather boot with curled toe that stands on the floor, close to the wall. Here Pistoletto is staging two versions of a tableau after Van Gogh's still lifes of boots (a subject on which Martin Heidegger had written).¹⁴² For one version he uses his own foot, for the other an object. Since Pistoletto is still wearing the whimsical flowered hat and blue whiskers after Ensor's self-portrait, this is a pastiche of two tableaux.

¹⁴² Martin Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art," in *Basic Writings: From Being and Time (1927) to The task of thinking (1964)*, edited by David Farrell Krell (New York: Harper & Row, 1977). Later on Jacques Derrida also wrote on Van Gogh's boots in *La vérité en peinture* (Paris: Flammarion, 1978).

4.3. Tableau Vivant in Photography and Painting: Salvo and Others

Performance was not the only medium embraced by artists engaging with the tableau vivant. As seen in the case of Pascali and Pistoletto, photography was also adopted. An artist who also employed painting was Salvo. He stands out for the body of works, dealing with the tableau vivant as an artistic strategy, that he produced between 1969 and 1976. This makes Salvo the artist closest to Ontani, as Barilli aptly noted in his work.¹⁴³ However, the two of them developed their practice independently of one another. Based in Turin, Salvo is an independent figure, although he was invited to participate in a few Arte Povera shows in the early 1970s. The first works by Salvo involving role-playing and tableau vivant date from 1969.

In the series “Self-portraits” Salvo substituted the head of a figure in a found photo with a photo of his own head. This photo-collage series features photos of anonymous people, often workers and militaries, including a Nazi and a guerrilla fighter (figs. 75–76). Typically Salvo’s face jumps out at the viewer. In the work in which he collaged his face onto that of a Nazi military, his expression is serious, his gaze directed at the viewer. The eye contact he establishes with the viewer lends the photo a threatening tone and an eerie presence. By contrast, Ontani’s impersonation of a Nazi in a tableau photo from 1974 looks lighthearted and parodic (fig. 77). Entitled *Nazi.sta.nasi*, it is a frontal head-and-shoulder portrait photo in which Ontani appears wearing a faux

¹⁴³ See, for example, Renato Barilli, “Una generazione postmoderna,” in *Una generazione postmoderna: I nuovi-nuovi, la postarchitettura, la performance vestita*, Renato Barilli, Fulvio Irace, and Francesca Alinovi (Milan: Mazzotta, 1982), 13.

military outfit: a green shirt and tie, and a black helmet with an extra-large, white-painted Nazi swastika in the center. He stares out at the viewer, his gaze empty, as if hypnotized. The effect is unmistakably caricatural. The nonsensical title reinforces the comical tone of the work. *Nazi.sta.nasi* is a punning conglomeration of words that plays on the alliteration in Italian between Nazi and “nasi” (“noses” in English) and on the double meaning of “sta,” as both part of the word “Nazista” (the longer version of Nazi in Italian) and a word in its own right, so that in English the title translates as “Nazi noses” and “Nazi stays noses.”

Ontani presented *Nazi.sta.nasi* at the group exhibition *Transformer-Aspekte der Travestie*, next to his *Dante* and *Pinocchio* (fig. 35). Printed in the same square format, these tableau photos looked like a triptych, with *Dante* and *Pinocchio* turned by ninety degrees towards the Nazi soldier—the only impersonation in this cluster of works in which Ontani looks straight out at the viewer. *Transformer* opened in mid-March of 1974 in Lucerne, Switzerland, then traveled to Bochum, Germany. As lighthearted as Ontani’s jeering impersonation of a Nazi may seem in comparison to Salvo’s photo-collage, both works were ominously prescient of some of the most tragic neofascist terrorist attacks of the *anni di piombo*. Salvo’s anticipated by a few months the Strage di Piazza Fontana, which marked the beginning of the *anni di piombo* in December of 1969; Ontani’s preceded, also by a few months, two infamous massacres that occurred in May and August of 1974, the latter of which involved a bomb planted on a busy train. These

massacres were the deadliest since the Piazza Fontana bombing. They signaled the onset of the second and most violent phase of this period of internal terrorism.

Salvo's "Self-portrait" series relates to another work from 1969 in which the artist intervened on the photographic reproduction of a print found in a German book from the sixteenth century. Entitled *Sette savi* (*Seven Wise Men*, fig. 78), it was made retouching with biro pen two heads of the seven wise men so as to make them resemble Boetti ("his prominent cheekbones") and himself ("my round, childish face"). At the time the two artists were close friends. The modified photograph was then rephotographed and printed on canvas.¹⁴⁴ Parmiggiani, too, worked with art reproductions in a similar way around the same time with *Yang-Yin* (1969, fig. 49). Closer to Salvo's work is a photo collage series, also based on art reproductions, realized by Gianni Colombo and Gabriele Devecchi for the exhibition *Amore mio* (1970), the first curatorial project of Achille Bonito Oliva, later to champion Transavanguardia.

Associated with the Gruppo T, an artist group founded in Milan in 1959 and dedicated to kinetic and participatory art, Colombo and Devecchi produced the series collaboratively as images to be published in the exhibition catalogue and as a site-specific slide installation.¹⁴⁵ The latter was set up using a pair of projectors, equipped with two copies of the same slide, progressing through the images of the series. One was a regular projector, the other was modified in order to generate an aberrant projection that would

¹⁴⁴ Salvo, personal interview, 10 June 2010, Turin, audio recording.

¹⁴⁵ The show was held in Palazzo Ricci, a Renaissance palace in Montepulciano in Tuscany, over the summer of 1970.

“destabilize the morphology of the space and its perception by the spectator.”¹⁴⁶ The technique they used to create the works is similar to Salvo’s. In *Assemblea di lavoro* (*Work Meeting*), for example, Colombo and Devecchi took the photographic reproduction of a detail from a fresco cycle by Cosmé Tura in Palazzo Schifanoia (the cycle is dedicated to the months of the year, the detail represents the triumph of Volcano, and is from the month of September), then collaged the heads of the members of Gruppo T over the faces of the figures in the painting, and then rephotographed the collage (fig. 79). The effect of the replacements is decisively comical.¹⁴⁷

Salvo also made a series of tableau photos in which he enacted past artworks. The first work of this kind is *Autoritratto (come Raffaello)* (*Self-Portrait [as Raphael]*, 1970, fig. 80), after a self-portrait by the Renaissance artist. It is a black-and-white photograph, taken by Paolo Mussat Sartor, and printed on aluminum. Salvo and Mussat Sartor met at the gallery of Gian Enzo Sperone in Turin, where Salvo was offered a solo show early that year and Mussat Sartor was the photographer documenting exhibitions. Salvo donned the visage of Raphael wearing contemporary clothes. He appears with his lips parted, the position of the body inverted from left to right.¹⁴⁸ Ontani made a photo tableau after same painting by Raphael in a color photograph simply entitled *Raffaello* (1972, fig. 81).¹⁴⁹ Compared to Salvo and even to Raphael in his painting, in his work

¹⁴⁶ Gabriele Devecchi, personal email communication, dated August 1, 2011.

¹⁴⁷ The works were never shown again and have been lost.

¹⁴⁸ The photo was taken by Paolo Mussat Sartor. The work exists in two formats, the larger of which is the collection of Paul Maenz, in Berlin.

¹⁴⁹ Renzo Bressan, a friend of Ontani from Vergato, took this photo.

Ontani looks severe, rigid, distant, impenetrable. The photograph is in sharp focus, as opposed to the soft contours in Salvo's work.

In an interview Salvo indicated that he was motivated by emulation, as the discovery of this painting when he was a kid made him want to become an artist, so the tableau photo may be seen as a homage payed to Raphael.¹⁵⁰ However, there is another layer to Salvo's enactment, staged when he was in his early 20s, right after his artistic debut at Sperone. In 1968 another Turin-based artist named Giulio Paolini, who had gained prominence as a member of the Arte Povera group, made a work entitled *L'invenzione di Ingres (The Invention of Ingres*, fig. 82) that superimposes two images: Raphael's *Self-Portrait* (c. 1506) and Ingres's recreation of this work, *Portrait of Raphael* (1820–1824).¹⁵¹ The slight blurring, grainy texture, and parted lips in Salvo's work may have their origin in Paolini's work. Salvo started to exhibit in 1970 and his first group shows were in the company of the Arte Povera artists. Perhaps, then, he was emulating Paolini more than Raphael.¹⁵² In the late 1960s, Paolini's citationist work, as his *Invention of Ingres*, was, together with Pistoletto's mirror paintings, what Ontani found most stimulating.¹⁵³

¹⁵⁰ Salvo, interview with Floriana Piqué, in *Salvo*, ed. Luca Beatrice (Milan: Giancarlo Politi, 2003), 10.

¹⁵¹ Paolini's work is a black-and-white photograph printed on canvas. The work is now in the Pinault Collection. Perhaps the most famous work Paolini made using an art reproduction is *Giovane che guarda Lorenzo Lotto (Young Man Looking at Lorenzo Lotto*, 1967). A good reference book on Paolini's early work is his *Idem* (Turin: Einaudi, 1975), with an introduction by Italo Calvino.

¹⁵² The main publications on Salvo are Renato Barilli, ed. *Salvo: Archeologie del futuro. Opere 1972–1992* (Milan: Mazzotta, 1992); Renato Barilli and Danilo Eccher, eds., *Salvo* (Milan: Electa, 1998); and Pier Giovanni Castagnoli, ed., *Salvo* (Turin: Fondazione Torino Musei, 2007).

¹⁵³ Ontani, personal interview, 23 December 2007.

Giancarlo Croce donned the visage of another Old Master painter, Albrecht Dürer, in a way similar to Salvo. In his *Autoritratto mistico (Mystic Self-Portrait, 1973)*, he enacted the most famous self-portrait by Dürer, his *Self-Portrait as Christ* (c. 1500), wearing contemporary clothes—a casual, zipped-up, sweatshirt with a hooded jacket (fig. 83). The recreation is not acknowledged in the title and is not discussed in the literature, but the similarity is striking. The general composition, the position of the figure in relation to the frame, the posture of the body, with the right hand touching the outer edge of the jacket, and even the mustache with a short beard leave no doubts that this is a photo tableau after Dürer's *Self-Portrait as Christ*. Like Croce's works from the series "Portraits (At the Court of King Crimson)," this is also a color photograph printed on board.

In 1973 Salvo stopped using photography. His last photo tableau is a color photograph after Van Gogh's *Portrait of Doctor Gachet*, entitled *Autoritratto con natura morta (dal ritratto del Dottor Gachet di Van Gogh)* (1973, fig. 84). In this work Salvo did not recreate Van Gogh's painting closely. What connects the two works are, first and foremost, the title, then the general composition (a figure behind a table), the position of the arms in relation to the figure and the table, and the dispirited, dejected mood. The differences, however, are more numerous than the similarities. The most interesting aspect of this work is that Salvo chose to use color photography, like Croce and Ontani,

but unlike most other artists. As Salvo said, he was “tired of seeing black-and-white photos in art galleries.”¹⁵⁴

Salvo’s next step was to recreate the works of the past using color pencils and oil paints, first on paper and then on canvas. The strategy of substitution adopted for the photo-collage self-portrait series was applied to the paintings as well. Over the course of three years, between 1973 and 1976, Salvo made a series of paintings in which he impersonated two religious characters, Saint Martin and Saint George, both of whom are usually depicted on a horse. He mostly based his tableaux on fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Italian paintings. The style of Salvo’s recreations may be deemed anti-naturalistic: his compositions are simplified, his figures outlined, his palette at once lighter and more saturated than the models (for one, see fig. 85). Salvo associates the colors he chose for his tableau paintings with the world of children and fairy-tales, though Barilli has related them to the electronic image. They are like the colors of Ontani’s early objects in scagliola and Styrofoam. Often larger than life-size, in some cases mural-size—*Trionfo di San Giorgio (da Carpaccio)* from 1974 is almost twenty-three feet long—Salvo’s tableau paintings were first exhibited in December of 1973 at the gallery of Franco Toselli in Milan. It was on this occasion that Ontani saw Salvo’s works for the first time.¹⁵⁵

¹⁵⁴ Salvo, personal interview, 10 June 2010.

¹⁵⁵ Ontani, personal interview, 5 January 2009.

Invited to participate in a large international survey of contemporary art from the early 1970s held at the Kunsthalle and Kunstverein of Cologne in 1974, Salvo decided to show one of his tableau paintings at the nearby Wallraf-Richartz-Museum, housing a collection of fine art from the medieval period to the early twentieth century. From the Wallraf-Richartz-Museum's collection Salvo picked paintings by Simone Martini, Lucas Cranach, Rembrandt, and others—one for each century. He curated his own room by displaying his *San Martino e il povero* (*Saint Martin and the Poor*, 1973) alongside these paintings (fig. 86).¹⁵⁶ A black-and-white photo that documents the display shows that Salvo's lightly colored, larger-than-life-size painting stood in stark contrast to the other paintings in the room.

The year of Salvo's intervention in Cologne was the year that Barilli published his re-evaluation of de Chirico's post-Metaphysical work, entitled "De Chirico e il recupero del museo," hailing him as the precursor of the citationist trend that he identified as new in contemporary art. That same year he curated a show dedicated to this trend, entitled *La ripetizione differente* (*The Different Repetition*), at the Studio Marconi in Milan. It gathered a mix of eighteen artists, of whom two thirds were Italian. Ontani, Salvo, and Croce were included.¹⁵⁷ Although I argue that what was new in the late 1960s and early

¹⁵⁶ On the show see *Kunst bleibt Kunst: Aspekte internationaler Kunst am Anfang der 70er Jahre: Projekt '74* (Cologne: Kunsthalle, 1974); and "Projekt '74 (Kunst Bleibt Kunst). L'arte resta arte?", *Data* (summer 1974): 34–35.

¹⁵⁷ Besides Ontani, the other participating artists were: Valerio Adami, Andrea Arroyo, John Baldessari, Enrico Baj, Bruno Di Bello, Giancarlo Croce, Luciano Fabro, Richard Hamilton, Jannis Kounellis, Urs Lüthi, Paola Martelli, Ugo Nespolo, Giulio Paolini, Anne & Patrick Poirier, Gerhard Richter, Salvo, Emilio Tadini. Barilli divided the artists in three categories: iconic, conceptual, and performative. The list of works shown is lost.

1970s in Italy was the tableau-vivant revival, I share with Barilli the idea that de Chirico was a main forerunner and that image culture, which he calls the “civilization of images” (*civiltà delle immagini*), played a major role. After at least a century of avant-gardes, Barilli writes in the catalogue accompanying the exhibition, something is changing, mostly for “material and concrete reasons”:

Our seemingly “futurist,” neophilic culture has actually set in motion one of the vastest undertakings of recollection of the past ever. This was made possible, at a theoretical level, by historical relativism, receptive of cultures of all ages and places; at a technical level, by the unparalleled growth of the civilization of images, with the consequent accumulation of visual data (photo-libraries today, video-libraries tomorrow); and at the economic and industrial level, by the production of xerox copies, pocket books, encyclopedias, and so on. If the mass media have abolished the barriers of space and geography, they have contributed even more to breaking down the boundaries of time and history, rendering simultaneously present all periods and styles and forms of past art. Past itself stops being such and becomes some sort of expanded present.¹⁵⁸

With the “enormous deposit of stereotypes and ‘ready-made’ images” that consumer culture and the culture industry make available, artists, Barilli contends, have shifted from “subtraction” to “recuperation,” “starting the journey over again, going through the known stages a second time around.”¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁸ Renato Barilli, “Difficoltà nella ricerca del nuovo/Difficulties in the Quest for the New,” in *La ripetizione differente/The Different Repetition* (Milan: Studio Marconi, 1974), 1 and 13 (translation amended). [La nostra cultura, apparentemente neofila, “futurista,” ha in realtà dato vita alla più vasta impresa di memorizzazione del passato che si sia mai avuta: impresa resa possibile sia a livello teorico, con l’adozione di un atteggiamento di relativismo storico, più che disposto ad accettare tutte le forme estetiche di tutte le età e culture e razze; sia a livello tecnico con lo sviluppo senza pari della civiltà delle immagini e quindi l’accumulazione dei dati visivi (fototeche oggi, domani anche videoteche); sia a livello economico-industriale con i vari fenomeni di dispense, *pocket books*, enciclopedie ecc. Se i *mass media* hanno abbattuto le barriere dello spazio e della geografia, hanno contribuito in misura ancora maggiore alla caduta di quelle del tempo e della storia rendendoci compresenti tutte le epoche e le maniere e le forme d’arte del passato. Il passato stesso cessa di essere tale, per divenire una specie di presente allargato.]

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 2 and 14 (translation amended). For a review of the show, see “La ripetizione differente/The Different Repetition,” *Flash Art* n. 50–51 (December 1974), 11.

4.4. Tableaux Vivants at L'Attico

Several of the Arte Povera artists based in Rome, including Pascali, started their careers showing at the Galleria La Tartaruga, which was aligned with the Scuola di Piazza del Popolo and Pop generation. Then, by the mid-1960s, they moved to L'Attico of Sargentini, who for his interest in theater was closer to the concepts informing the work of some of the Arte Povera artists. This is the gallery that Ontani gravitated around after he moved to Rome in 1972. Sargentini became Ontani's gallerist in 1974. One of the Arte Povera artists who made the move from La Tartaruga to L'Attico was Jannis Kounellis (b. 1936). He started exhibiting work that involved staging tableaux vivants, first with animals and then with people, in 1967, two years prior to the show with live horses that drew the attention of the international art community.

One of Kounellis' first installations of this kind included a live parrot on a perch projecting out of a metal panel affixed to the wall for his second solo show at L'Attico, which opened in November of 1967 (fig. 87). The parrot, perch, and metal panel were part of a larger work that took up the gallery space and initiated Kounellis' project of transforming the gallery space into a "dramatic, theatrical cavity."¹⁶⁰ This was a project he unfolded in the early 1970s with a series of works in which dance, music and installations with casts from classical sculpture were alternatively integrated. For instance, *Da inventare sul posto (To be invented on the spot)* was presented at Documenta

¹⁶⁰ Jannis Kounellis, "Interview by Robin White," *View* 1, no. 10 (March 1979): 17.

5 in Kassel in 1972 and consisted of a large painting with bands of musical notations and a ballerina dancing in front of it at the notes played by a violinist standing next to it (fig. 88). Another example from this group of works by Kounellis is *Table*, also known under the title of *Apollo*. It was staged for the first time at the Galleria La Salita in Rome in 1973 (fig. 89). According to Celant's account, in *Table* the artist sat "behind a Greek mask, taken from a Roman copy of a sculpture" whose fragments were arranged on a table with a stuffed crow perching on one of them, and next to the table a flute player sat on a chair executing "a piece of antique music."¹⁶¹ For their recuperation of myth and ritual, these were important works, as Barilli stressed in an essay in which he linked them to Ontani's practice.¹⁶²

Other artists from L'Attico staged tableaux vivants around 1970: Gino De Dominicis (1947–1998) and Vettor Pisani (1934–2011). In 1970, on the occasion of his second solo show, De Dominicis exhibited the living *Zodiaco* (*Zodiac*). Over the course of five days, animals and people representing the twelve zodiac signs (a lion in a cage, two fish lying on the floor, a bull, an archer clad in a leopard's skin, a virgin, two twins, and so on) stood motionless at equal distance from one another along a semicircle around the open space of a new venue Sargentini opened in Via Beccaria, near Piazza del Popolo, in 1968 (fig. 90). This was an actual garage that Sargentini converted into a gallery,

¹⁶¹ See Germano Celant, "Jannis Kounellis," in *Studio International* 191–192 (January–February 1976): 41. On this work, see also Dieter Roelstraete, "Rhapsody of the Real: Mapping the Art of Jannis Kounellis," in *Kounellis* (Milan: Charta, 2002), 21.

¹⁶² Renato Barilli, "Dall'opera al coinvolgimento," in *Dall'opera al coinvolgimento. L'opera: simboli e immagini. La linea analitica*, Renato Barilli, Antonio Del Guergio, Filiberto Menna (Turin: Galleria civica d'arte moderna, Assessorato per la cultura della città di Torino, 1977), 20. On Kounellis's tableaux vivants, see also Thomas McEvelley, *Sculpture in the Age of Doubt* (New York: Allworth Press, 1999), 136–137.

offering an open space measuring over 3,000 square feet. It was the first underground space in Italy that showed art closer to theater than painting and sculpture. “The garage,” said Sargentini, “was an absolute tabula rasa.”¹⁶³

In 1972 Sargentini opened a second gallery space in a sixteenth-century palace in Via del Paradiso, south of Piazza Navona. He ran this space in parallel to The Garage until 1976. Still open to date, the venue of Via del Paradiso features small and large rooms. It was here that Pisani exhibited. When Sargentini offered Ontani a solo show of his tableau works in 1974, it was at this venue that the exhibit was presented. Pisani emerged on the Roman art scene in 1970 with works that involved object installations and performances in which he typically appropriated elements from art history, particularly from Duchamp and Beuys, injecting them with arcane, alchemical meanings. One of his works from the early 1970s is the action and installation entitled *Eroe da camera* (*Chamber Hero*), which included a tableau vivant and was presented at L’Attico in 1973 (fig. 91).¹⁶⁴

L’Attico also hosted performances by international artists and the most relevant in relation to Ontani’s tableaux were Gilbert & George, the British-Italian duo who staged a “Living Sculpture” performance in Via del Paradiso in 1972. Standing on a table dressed

¹⁶³ Fabio Sargentini, personal interview, 22 June 2010, Rome, audio recording.

¹⁶⁴ *Eroe da camera* was also published as *Oedipus*. The action involved the naked woman depicted in fig. 91 whacking dishes while seated on a table placed in the middle of a room, while guinea pigs were wondering around in another room. A photograph of Marcel Duchamp hung on the wall between the two rooms. The full title of this action and installation was *Eroe da camera. Tutte le parole dal silenzio di Duchamp al rumore di Beuys* (*Chamber Hero. All the Words from the Silence of Duchamp to the Noise of Beuys*), as reported in *L’Attico 1957–1987. 30 anni di pittura, scultura, musica, danza, performance, video* (Rome: Arnoldo Mondadori, De Luca, 1987), 178.

in the conventional businessman's suit-and-tie attire, with their faces and hands covered in metallic paint to look like bronze statues, as it has been written, but also like street mimes one may add, they sang or moved together in simple everyday-like actions at the rhythm of a music-hall song played by a tape recorder (fig. 92). Gilbert & George started to present themselves as "living sculptures" in a way similar to the one seen in Rome in January 1969, first in or around London and then outside England.¹⁶⁵ The two artists, named George Passmore and Gilbert Proesch, are exactly Ontani's age—they were born in 1943 and 1942 respectively. Similarly to Ontani, Gilbert & George are gay and have been opposed to any labeling of their work as gay. Their opposition was in line with the spirit of inclusiveness that animated the gay liberation movements of the early 1970s, discussed in the following chapter. If Gilbert & George made art out of their daily lives, Ontani shifted into a "fictional dimension," as Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev put it.¹⁶⁶ This fictional dimension was a common characteristic of performance art in Italy.

In an article on the scene of performance art in Italy, published in 1976 in a special issue of *Studio International* dedicated to contemporary Italian art, critic Caroline Tisdall notes that Rome-based artists in particular were involved with "ritual, masks,

¹⁶⁵ On Gilbert & George's "Living Sculpture" series see the essay written at that time by Lea Vergine, *Il corpo come linguaggio (La "body art" e storie simili)* (Milan: Giampaolo Prearo Editore, 1974), 31 and 33. See also RoseLee Goldberg, *Performance: Live Art, 1909 to the Present* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1979), 108–109. As an example of a recent study, see also Christoph Cherix, ed., *In & out of Amsterdam: Travels in Conceptual Art, 1960–1976* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2009), 90.

¹⁶⁶ Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, "Pose and persona in Luigi Ontani," in *Luigi Ontani 1965–2001 GaneshamUSA*, 15.

symbols, mirrors and statuary nudes.”¹⁶⁷ An early collaborative work that deals with myth and ritual is Luca Patella’s *SKMP2* (1968), a film produced by Sargentini and realized in collaboration with Kounellis, Eliseo Mattiacci, and Pascali (the initials of their last names form the title of the work). According to Trini, the film, which was Pascali’s last work, was “the most complete expression of Pascali’s aesthetic experience.” “On the edge of the sea—Trini wrote—he created a sequence of actions on mythical themes. Here the *homo ludens* is the artist himself”¹⁶⁸ (fig. 93). Outside of L’Attico, besides Pistoletto, another Arte Povera artist from Turin who engaged with tableaux vivants around 1970 was Giulio Paolini (b. 1940). Paolini staged tableaux vivants in productions for the theater (*Bruto II*, 1969), and the television (*Alessandro nelle Indie* (*Alexander [the Great] in India*) and *La fantastica storia di Don Chisciotte* (*The Fantastic Story of Don Quixote*), both broadcast on the national network RAI in 1970.¹⁶⁹

In the editorial of the *Studio International* special issue, Richard Cork remarks that in Italy there is a greater number of performance artists than anywhere else in Europe. He adds that they indulge in “a degree of artifice and melodramatic content almost unheard-of elsewhere.” Cork links the “outspoken theatricality” of Italian performance art to a “mediterranean temperament,” alien to more northern countries. He adds that given the near absence of support structures, artists “are unashamedly oriented

¹⁶⁷ Caroline Tisdall, “Performance Art in Italy,” *Studio International* 191, n. 979 (January–February 1976): 43. See also fig. 154, taken from this article.

¹⁶⁸ Tommaso Trini, “The Sixties in Italy,” in *Studio International* 184, n. 949 (November 1972): 168–69.

¹⁶⁹ See Laura Cherubini, “Giulio Paolini / Spettacoli teatrali / Theatrical Productions,” in *Sipario. Balla, De Chirico, Savinio, Picasso, Paolini, Cucchi*, eds. Maurizio Fagiolo dell’Arco and Ida Gianelli (Milan: Charta, 1997), 254–257.

towards a specialist audience of gallery-goers and seem cut off from any organic links with a wider social context.”¹⁷⁰ While certainly the lack of an institutional infrastructure in support of contemporary art in Italy has always been an issue for artists, their engagement with theatricality had motivations that were deeper and more complex than anything generically identifiable as “mediterranean.” Rather, it was tied to both the specific cultural context of Italy and the larger historical moment, involving changes in the material culture of industrially advanced countries. As shown in this chapter, a strain of theatricality coalesced into the tableau-vivant revival, which had in de Chirico and Pasolini its main precedents, and in the emergence of image culture and kitsch its fundamental premise. In the particular case of Ontani, it was also connected to his homosexual identity and his involvement with camp as an aesthetic strategy.

¹⁷⁰ Richard Cork, “Editorial,” *Studio International* 191, n. 979 (January–February 1976): 2.

Chapter 2

Religious Kitsch and Camp Effects

Camp sees everything in quotation marks....
To perceive Camp in objects and persons is
to understand Being-as-Playing-a-Role. It is
the farthest extension, in sensibility, of the
metaphor of life as theater.
—Susan Sontag, “Notes on ‘Camp’” (1964)¹

Are you genuine?
or only an actor?
A representative?
or that itself which is represented?
— Finally, are you no more than
an imitation of an actor.
—Friedrich Nietzsche,
Twilight of the Idols (1889)²

This chapter is dedicated to the work Ontani executed in the first half of the 1970s. It shows that Ontani’s primary concern was religious kitsch, spanning from Graeco-Roman mythology to Christian subjects, inscribed with homoerotic desire. These characteristics set him apart from other artists who employed the strategy of the tableau vivant in their works. I argue that Ontani’s engagement with kitsch and the tableau vivant is related to his involvement with camp in connection to his homosexual identity. Building on Susan Sontag’s landmark “Notes on ‘Camp’” (1964), I contend that in the early 1970s Ontani

¹ Susan Sontag, “Notes on Camp,” *Partisan Review* 31 (fall 1964); reprinted in *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1966), 280.

² Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols/The Anti-Christ*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (London: Penguin, 1968), 37.

fashioned himself as a “modern” dandy and “connoisseur of Camp” in the age of image culture, as it flourished in Italy in the 1960s. I read Ontani’s work and his position vis-à-vis the question of homosexual identity in the context of a burgeoning gay liberation movement in Italy in the early 1970s. Finally, I point out that Ontani’s staged subjects speak to notions of theatricality and performativity that anticipated key concepts of queer theory developed in the 1990s.

About Camp

In the introduction to *PopCamp* (2008), an anthology of texts dedicated to the subject of camp, Italian literary scholar Fabio Cleto states that “camp is the heir of dandyism” in the age of advanced mass culture.³ Inimitability distinguished the early-nineteenth-century dandy, whom Charles Baudelaire defined, in his *Painter of Modern Life* (1863), as an aristocrat whose superiority depended not upon birth, but upon the cultivation of “a personal originality” and a dedicated opposition to triviality.⁴ At the time Baudelaire published his essay, mass culture had just begun to emerge and became a hallmark of consumer societies over the course of the following hundred years. In the age of

³ Fabio Cleto, “Sipario,” in *PopCamp*, vol. 1 (Milan: Marcos y Marcos, 2008), 14. All translations into English are mine unless otherwise credited.

⁴ Charles Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*, trans. Jonathan Mayne (London: Phaidon, 1964), 27. Baudelaire claimed dandyism as a pose for the artist and poet, “a mysterious institution” that goes back to classical antiquity and “appears above all in periods of transition.” Baudelaire commended dandyism as an attempt to counter the social conformism and homogeneity of bourgeois culture at the onset of industrial capitalism. A reference book on dandyism is Ellen Moers, *The Dandy: Brummell to Beerbohm* (New York: Viking Press, 1960).

advanced mass culture since the end of the nineteenth century, Cleto continues, repetition and reproduction came to characterize camp, which “lives of replicas,” or kitsch.

Cleto’s definition of camp is indebted to Sontag’s essay from 1964. In her text Sontag introduces the notion of the “modern dandy,” an updated version of Baudelaire’s dandy. The modern dandy is a “lover of Camp” who appreciates, rather than hates, vulgarity. She identifies in Oscar Wilde a transitional figure who sought both the refined and the vulgar, and “formulated an important element of the Camp sensibility—“the equivalence of all objects”—when he announced his intention of ‘living up’ to his blue-and-white china, or declared that a door-knob could be as admirable as a painting.” Sontag highlights the connection between kitsch and camp, explaining that “many examples of Camp are things which, from a ‘serious’ point of view, are either bad art or kitsch,” but which merit “the most serious admiration and study.”⁵

The mingling of high and low culture is a defining characteristic of camp that Ontani embraced in his tableau-vivant practice. His adoption of kitsch ought to be understood as an aspect of his camp aesthetics and modern brand of dandyism. In line with what another scholar of camp named Scott Long wrote in “The Loneliness of Camp” (1989), “camp is a conscious response to a culture in which kitsch is ubiquitous” and thus can be defined as “an *attitude toward* kitsch.”⁶ In its characterization as self-conscious use of kitsch, camp, then, falls within the realm of what Dorfles defines as

⁵ Sontag, *Against Interpretation*, 289.

⁶ Scott Long, “The Loneliness of Camp,” in David Bergman, *Camp Grounds: Style and Homosexuality* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1993), 86. Long’s essay was first published as “Useful Laughter: Camp and Seriousness,” *Southwest Review* 74 (Winter 1989): 53–70.

“positive aspects of the presence of kitsch elements.”⁷ One of the very few Italians to have capitalized on Sontag’s essay, quoted in the conclusion to *Kitsch: The World of Bad Taste* (1968), Dorfles recognizes that both kitsch and camp are direct offsprings of consumer society and that the emergence of a camp attitude belongs strictly to “the best of kitsch.”⁸

Sontag’s text was the first devoted to a critical analysis of camp. It hails camp as the cipher for contemporary culture, a sensibility and style: an aesthetic taste for kitsch that is liberating in the discovery of “the good taste of bad taste,” a love for the unnatural, the theatrical, sexual transgression, irony. As Cleto has shown, the term camp gained currency in the early twentieth century in the slang of high society, underground city life, the showbiz, the fashion world, and the theater business.⁹ Its first appearance in print was in a dictionary of late-Victorian slang published in 1909. There it was defined as a quality of “actions and gestures of exaggerated emphasis,” “used chiefly by persons of exceptional want of character.”¹⁰ Since the 1920s the word has been used to describe a literary style, as in the writings of Oscar Wilde and Max Beerbohm, that enacts strategies traditionally associated with dandyism since Baudelaire, such as aestheticism and detachment, as well as new strategies, such as parody, theatrical frivolity, and sexual

⁷ Gillo Dorfles, “Conclusion,” in *Kitsch: The World of Bad Taste* (New York: Universe Books, 1969), 300.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 294.

⁹ Fabio Cleto, “Introduction: Queering the Camp” and “Section I: Tasting It—Introduction,” in *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject: A Reader* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999), 9 and 45.

¹⁰ James Redding Ware, *Passing English of the Victorian Era: A Dictionary of Heterodox English, Slang, and Phrase* (London: George Routledge, 1909), 61.

transgression. By the time Sontag's text was published, the term camp had entered the public sphere, having appeared in popular as well as literary magazines, such as *Life* and *London Magazine*. After Sontag's text was published, the term exploded as a mass media keyword, becoming a popular craze in the U.S. and the U.K.

In Italy the term camp did not enjoy any of this popularity.¹¹ Although Sontag's essay appeared in Italian translation in 1967, the term camp did not enter the vocabulary of cultural criticism.¹² This has continued to be the case until Cleto's recent work on camp, as both an author and the editor of the two-volume anthology *PopCamp* (2008), for which he commissioned the first critical essays on camp written by Italians.¹³ "The story of camp in Italy begins today," states Cleto at the end of his introduction to the book.¹⁴ *PopCamp* includes a section dedicated to contemporary artists who have embraced camp. (This section contains only reproductions, no critical texts.) Three artists are presented and Ontani is one of them, with a selection of works from the mid-1970s to the mid-1990s. However, this selection does not render him justice, as it does not include any of the tableau works from the early 1970s. The other two artists are Mirando Haz, pseudonym of Amedeo Pieragostini, active since the 1970s, and Francesco Vezzoli, a

¹¹ Cleto, "Sipario," in *PopCamp*, 10.

¹² Sontag's essay appeared in the Italian translation of *Against Interpretation: Contro l'interpretazione*, trans. Ettore Capriolo (Milan: Mondadori, 1967).

¹³ Essays by Gian Piero Piretto, Massimo Fusillo & Giulio Iacoli, Luca Scarlini, and Gabriele Monti are included in the second volume of *PopCamp*.

¹⁴ Cleto, "Sipario," in *PopCamp*, 16.

generation younger than Haz and Ontani.¹⁵ In the Italian context, Ontani's tableau-vivant practice represents a significant early example of camp aesthetics.

An important point in Sontag's essay is that although camp is strongly connected to homosexual culture, it is a phenomenon that pertains to 1960s culture in general.

Sontag acknowledges that homosexuals have "more or less invented" camp and constitute, by and large, "the vanguard —and the most articulate audience of Camp."¹⁶ However, she discusses camp as a phenomenon of the 1960s, part of the same cultural environment that produced Pop Art.¹⁷ She claims that the camp emphasis on artifice and surfaces, on the appreciation of failed seriousness, middle-class kitsch and "things-being-what-they-are-not," are a sign of the time. As Cleto points out, Sontag construes camp through a paradoxical combination of aristocratic detachment and democratic leveling of cultural hierarchies,

with the dandification of the (wildly over-educated, we might say) masses producing 'the equivalence of all objects,' and the transcending of the romantic disgust for the replica, be that the parodic repetition or the infinite technological reproducibility of an original which no longer holds its epistemic privileges. In other words, Sontag was depicting the new cultural scene of postwar culture as a camp landscape of *wild(e) indifference*: an indifference of original from derivative, of high from low culture, of subject from object; and an indifference to moral and political commitment, for camp required a detached vision making the degree of theatricality its only value parameter.¹⁸

¹⁵ Haz's primary medium is engraving and his work is inspired by literary sources. He is a little-known artist, while Vezzoli is one of the most prominent Italian artists internationally.

¹⁶ Sontag, *Against Interpretation*, 290.

¹⁷ "One may compare Camp with much of Pop Art, which—when it is not just Camp—embodies an attitude that is related, but still very different. Pop Art is more flat and more dry, more serious, more detached, ultimately nihilistic" (idem, 292).

¹⁸ Cleto, "'Section I: Tasting It—Introduction,'" in *Camp: Queer Aesthetics*, 46

The “homosexual” is, like the “dandy,” a mid-nineteenth-century creature, as Michel Foucault has shown in the first volume of his *History of Sexuality* (1976). The invention of “the homosexual” as an identity was the result of new theories of personality developed by the increasingly powerful medical professions. In Foucault’s words,

the nineteenth-century homosexual became a personage, a past, a case history, and a childhood, in addition to being a type of life, a life form. . . . Nothing that went into his total composition was unaffected by his sexuality. It was everywhere present in him: at the root of all this actions. . . . less as a habitual sin than as a singular nature.¹⁹

Both dandyism and camp have historically been associated with homosexual culture, though not exclusively. In her conceptualization of camp as “sensibility or taste,” Sontag aimed at capturing the contemporary *Zeitgeist*, according to principles on which she calls forth by mentioning “Huizinga on the late Middle Ages and Febvre on sixteenth-century France.”²⁰ Sontag’s essay elicited an angry, polemical response from the gay community and a reclaiming enterprise to re-appropriate camp as a homosexual mode of self-performance. This coincided with the beginning of gay activism and, as Cleto notes, Sontag’s essay unwittingly acted as a spur, giving rise to a counter-process in which the reclaiming of camp and the constitution of a confrontationist gay identity went hand in hand. The first study to assess the high significance of camp within homosexual subculture was Esther Newton’s *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America*, based

¹⁹ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume One: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage, 1978), 43.

²⁰ Sontag, *Against Interpretation*, 276.

on ethnographic research conducted in the late 1960s and first published in 1972. This was the first major anthropological discussion of homosexuality that used mainstream social theory rather than sexual psychology to theorize aspects of homosexual experience. With Newton's study, camp shifts from the Sontagian sign and expression of an era to an exercise in homosexual taste and a mode of existence. As Newton explains, the defining characteristics of camp—from theatricality to humor, aestheticism, and incongruity—are all relevant to the homosexual experience, from the theatricality of passing for straight to the alleged “incongruity” of same-sex desire.

Theatricality and the related notion of performativity are central to camp according to Massimo Fusillo and Giulio Iacoli. In their study, published in *PopCamp* (2008), they define camp as “a striking case of a nomadic subject due to its exasperated performativity.”²¹ This aspect of camp was captured by Sontag in her text. She states that camp is “the farthest extension, in sensibility, of the metaphor of life as theater,” and that “Being-as-Playing-a-Role” is intrinsic to camp.²² In the footsteps of Sontag, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick states that camp “undermines the depth model of identity from inside” by rendering identity, gender, and even the very notion of sensibility a question of spectacle.²³ In order to underline the performative quality of camp and its circulation within culture, Andrew Ross coined the expression “camp effect” in his text “Uses of

²¹ Massimo Fusillo and Giulio Iacoli, “Camp e nuove situazioni picaresche. Esposizione, mobilità e travestimenti dell'intellettuale,” in *Popcamp*, vol. 2, Fabio Cleto ed. (Milan: Marcos y Marcos, 2008), 565.

²² Sontag, *Against Interpretation*, 280.

²³ Jonathan Dollimore, “Transgressive Reinscriptions, Early Modern and Postmodern,” in *Sexual Dissidence: Augustine to Wilde, Freud to Foucault* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 310.

Camp” (1988).²⁴ I have adopted Ross’s expression for the title of this chapter because performativity is an essential aspect of Ontani’s tableau work, and one that anticipated queer theory.

Starting in the 1990s camp has been reclaimed by cultural theorists as a distinctive form of gay sensibility and a central issue of queer theory, one of its definitional objects of analysis.²⁵ In his “Notes on Queer” (1992), titled after Sontag’s “Notes on ‘Camp,’” Gregory Woods states that queer culture has “inherited the structures and stratagems of Camp.”²⁶ The history of the term queer parallels that of the term camp in that the meaning of the word began stabilizing at the beginning of the twentieth century, although its existence long predates that period. Just like camp, queer lacks a fixed grammatical function: it is adjective, noun, and verb. Following the Oscar Wilde’s 1895 trials for sodomy and immorality, queer started signaling the violence of the stigma of homosexuality. Beforehand, it seems that the term entered the English language in the eighteenth century with the value of “oblique, bent, twisted, crooked,” as Cleto notes.²⁷ Unlike camp, subject to intellectual inquiry since the mid-1960s, it was not until the 1990s that cultural theory addressed queer. It then defined a whole field of study devoted

²⁴ Andrew Ross, “Uses of Camp,” in *Camp Grounds: Style and Homosexuality*, ed. David Bergman (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1993), 54–77.

²⁵ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, “Introduction: Queerer than Fiction,” *Studies in the Novel* 28, n. 3 (Fall 1996): 277–280; Danuta Suzanna Walters, “From Here to Queer: Radical Feminism, Postmodernism, and the Lesbian Menace (Or, Why Can’t a Woman Be More Like a Fag?),” *Signs* 21, n. 4 (Summer 1996): 830–869.

²⁶ Gregory Woods, “Notes on Queer” (1992), reprinted in *This Is No Book: A Gay Reader* (Nottingham: Mushroom, 1994), 92.

²⁷ Cleto, “Introduction,” in *Camp: Queer Aesthetics*, 12.

to investigating the relationship of gender and sexuality to signifying processes, hegemonic culture, and ideological apparatuses. Sidestepping gay and lesbian studies, queer thinking promotes a sabotage of binarisms such as masculine/feminine and original/copy.

***Favola impropriata* (1970): A Fable of Improper Appropriations**

Ontani plays with religious kitsch in *Favola impropriata* (1970), a forty-minute color video. Forty-five minutes long, this was one of the first color videos made by an artist in Europe. Ontani realized it in collaboration with a studio in Rome that worked for the university and other research institutions.²⁸ The word “*impropriata*” in the title is Ontani’s neologism. It conflates *impropria* or “improper” and *appropriata* or “appropriated,” so in English it can be translated as “impropriated.” Ontani explained that “improper” here meant “non-identical,” oblique, inexact.²⁹ Shot with a fixed camera from beginning to end, *Impropriated Fable* unfolds in a series of uncomplicated, apparently unrehearsed, nonsensical actions that Ontani performs using a host of everyday objects, including toys the artist played with in his childhood, later presented inside a trunk at a solo show he was offered at the Galleria Diagramma of Luciano Inga-Pin in Milan in the spring of 1971.³⁰ The objects range from fruit and flowers to a wine

²⁸ Luigi Ontani, personal communication, 7 July 2011, unrecorded.

²⁹ Idem, personal interview, 30 March 2008, New York, audio recording.

³⁰ Ontani entitled the work (the trunk with toys and other objects from his childhood) *Selezione dell’ennesimo* (*Selection of the Umpteenth*).

glass, an LP record and player, a beauty mirror, pink and blue sugar-coated almonds, and plastic statuettes out of a home crèche.

According to Elena Volpato *Impropriated Fable* is a version of the Renaissance cabinet of curiosities or *Wunderkammer*. However, Ontani's version is a kitsch descendent of the *studiolo*, where princes collected and exhibited precious objects, cultural artifacts and exotica that retained a high symbolic and personal value.³¹ Neat arrangements of the objects are systematically disrupted by Ontani's actions, alternating making and unmaking, order and disorder, at once reminiscent of Boetti's work and the trial-and-error process often adopted by children in their extemporaneous games. In particular, Boetti's *Untitled (Radial Turntable, Zenithal Turntable)*, a diptych of Super-8 films from 1969, comes to mind. Although much shorter, about five-minute long, each video was also shot with a fixed camera framing a portion of the floor—like a magician's stage on which extremely simple actions, involving everyday object of personal significance unfold.³² The stage for Ontani's improvisations is a navy-blue moquette whose porous surface the artist diligently attempts to clean, as if it were a school blackboard, after each set of action, using a white cloth, his naked feet, and facial sweat.

³¹ Elena Volpato, "Tra pittura e fotogramma: Film e Video di Luigi Ontani / Between painting and photogram: Film and Video in the work of Luigi Ontani," in *Luigi Ontani: Gigante3RazzEtà7ArtiCentAuro*, ed. Gianfranco Maraniello (Bologna: Museo d'Arte Moderna di Bologna, 2009), 46. An abbreviated version of the essay is published in the catalog in English translation. This is Volpato's most recent contribution on Ontani's film and video work.

³² The objects include cigarettes, shoes, a telephone, an audio-cassette player, a drum, and a sheet of graph paper that reminds one of *Cimento dell'armonia e dell'invenzione (The Contest of Harmony and Invention)*, a groundbreaking work made tracing the grid of a sheet of graph paper with pencil, also from 1969.

The video opens with a pair of feet—navy blue socks in brown leather shoes, fashionable for children to wear at the time, topped by blue-jeans cuffs—walking up and down the diagonal of the blue field of color (fig. 94). Then something drops on the floor. It is a small cutout in gold of the Star of David. It is positioned near the center of the field. The feet attempt to walk around it. Then both shoes and the left sock are taken off. Two plastic animals, a sheep and a pig, are brought into the picture frame and placed near the star. They form an *impropriated* or “improperly appropriated” nativity. Next two boxes of tiny pyramidal color chinks are emptied on the floor. They are meticulously set up upright in changing arrangements, both linear and random. Then they are knocked down, a white cloth is momentarily laid over the mess, a black comb briefly put along the vertical median line, as some sort of intermezzo, before the chinks are rearranged, once again, this time to form a cross that takes over the blue field. Actions cycle in a similar way throughout the video. The following scene involves early Mass music by the fourteenth-century French poet and composer Guillaume de Machaut’s Mass music played in front of the pig and the sheep, while gladioluses are cut on the rotating LP. This is the same LP Ontani later played at the opening of his exhibition at Galleria Diagramma.³³ It is only in the third scene of the video that Ontani’s face appear, as he stages a tableau after a painting by the Italian Mannerist Giuseppe Arcimboldo (1526–1593), and one understands that the body parts seen thus far belong to him.

³³ According to published chronologies, a screening of the video was presented for the first time on this occasion. However, the artist does not remember having shown this video on that occasion. The gallerist passed away in 2009 and the archives of the gallery have not been located.

Following the regular cleaning ritual, fruit is carefully placed on the floor in this order: a red apple, a pear, a bunch of dark red grapes, a banana next to the apple, and then another red apple on the other side of the banana, making the fruit look like an upside-down face with a distinctive nose (banana), eyes (apples), and wisp of hair (grapes). Next each piece is removed, one by one, and Ontani lies down supine with his head occupying a large portion of the screen. He places the apples on his eyes, then attempts to put the pear in his mouth, but it falls out. He tries again and, for a moment, manages to stabilize the fruit atop his face and pose motionless in his tableau. At this point the tableau is interrupted again. Keeping the apples and pear pressed against his face with one hand, Ontani reaches out with the other to retrieve the bunch of grapes from offstage and places it on his forehead. As soon as he accomplishes this task, one of the apples falls on the floor, rolling out of the screen frame. Again pressing the other fruit against his face with one hand, he turns to the side and, after a few attempts, finally recovers the lost apple. For another short moment he poses again motionless in a tableau based on one of Arcimboldo's allegorical composite heads, made up of fruits (fig. 95). Ontani's clumsy attempts at posing still, as in a regular tableau vivant, produce the same comical effect of the similarly clumsy trials and errors that punctuate the reconstructions of the *Depositions* by Pontormo and Rosso Fiorentino in Pier Paolo Pasolini's *Ricotta* (1963).

Ontani does not recreate any particular work by Arcimboldo, which would have been impossible given the complexity of his paintings. Arcimboldo's heads, made up of flowers, vegetables, fish, birds, and other animals, besides fruits, are about twenty in

number and date from the second half of the sixteenth century. They have become increasingly popular in the twentieth century, ever since the Surrealists rediscovered them.³⁴ In the 1930s, *Vertumnus (Portrait of Rudolf II)* (1590), then known as *Il giardiniere (The Gardener)*, was used for the advertisement of a newborn Italian juice company named Bertozzi, giving birth to one of the first examples of kitsch.

Ontani's tableau vivant is followed by a display of postcard reproductions of artworks in a checkerboard arrangement on the blue moquette (fig. 96). The connection between Ontani's tableau and these images is clear: both speak of the dissemination and multiplication of images in the age of image culture. The postcards reproduce Western paintings of religious and mythological subjects, both lesser- and better-known, dating from the fourteenth through the eighteenth centuries. They include the detail of a music playing cherub from Fra Bartolomeo's *Madonna del Santuario* (1508–09), in the top right corner; *Cupid and Psyche* (1817) by a student of David, François-Edouard Picot, in the middle left column; Watteau's *Nymph and Satyr* (1715), in the bottom left; the central panel of the Ghent altarpiece (1432), in the bottom right corner. Prominently featured near the center of the video frame is another Mannerist work, Rosso Fiorentino's *Musical Cherub* (1521), a widely published image of a lost-altarpiece fragment in the collection of the Galleria degli Uffizi in Florence.

A few scenes later Ontani lays on the floor photos from his recent *Animalario* series (fig. 97). In these photos Ontani imitates different animals (fig. 98). Some of these

³⁴ Arcimboldo is of course featured in *L'art magique* (1957), the history of art according to André Breton.

poses also appear in Ontani's *Le belle statuine* (1969, fig. 15). They were likely inspired by Simone Forti's "dance constructions," which she presented in Europe for the first time at the gallery of Sargentini, in Rome, in October of 1968. One of Forti's performances, entitled *Sleepwalkers*, was based on animal movements observed at the zoological garden in Rome. Rather than carefully placing them in a checkerboard arrangement, as Ontani did with the postcard reproductions of artworks, he energetically piles them up, eventually making a heap. The accumulation of images is topped with the color photo of a giraffe in profile, which contrasts with the black-and-white *Animalario* photos, right before all images are swept away with a movement of the arm. The giraffe photo had inconspicuously opened this sequence of actions, appearing briefly in the top right corner of the screen. Self citation is a strategy that Ontani started to embrace more consistently in the later part of the second half of the 1970s.

Queering Saint Sebastian

Ontani claims that the first tableau work he ever realized was *San Sebastiano nel bosco di Calvenzano (d'après Guido Reni)*. The date of this work is uncertain, between 1970 and 1973.³⁵ It certainly was not Ontani's first tableau work, but his insistence that it was testifies to the work's high symbolic value. This tableau work exists in two slightly

³⁵ 1970 is the date Ontani claims, 1974 is the year when the work was first published and exhibited. When this work was executed, Ontani made two other tableau photos dated circa 1972 in various publications. Also, in an interview from 1981 Barilli states that 1972–1973 was the beginning of Ontani's photographic poses after past paintings—"le pose statuarie a carattere citazionista" (the statuary poses, citationist in nature). The interview is recorded in an unreleased video shot by Cesare Bastelli on the occasion of the fifth week of performance art at the Galleria comunale d'arte moderna of Bologna.

different versions, executed during the same photo session, in collaboration with Giorgio Gramantieri, a commercial photographer from Bologna.³⁶ In these photos Ontani posed as the figure of Saint Sebastian in a painting by the Baroque Classicist Guido Reni (figs. 99–100). One of the main representatives of the Bolognese school, Reni is the painter of Saint Sebastian par excellence. He returned to this subject many times in his life and produced some of the most ambiguous depictions of the Saint for their heightened sensuality and languid beauty (figs. 101–102). These images have inspired homoerotic fantasies in the visual arts, literature, theater, and cinema since the late nineteenth century, as Richard Kaye and Christopher Reed have shown.³⁷ I argue that Ontani’s work belongs to this lineage. I interpret Ontani’s *Saint Sebastian* as a signifier for the embrace of pleasure, both redeemed and redeeming, homoerotic and aesthetic. I contend that this work was Ontani’s coming out and I read it against the backdrop of the first Italian gay liberation movement, FUORI!.

Kaye has stated that “Saint Sebastian is the single most successfully deployed image of modern male gay identity.”³⁸ Both dissidence and homosexual desire are inscribed in Sebastian’s story, first popularized in the thirteenth century by Jacobus da

³⁶ Ontani, personal interview, 8 May 2009, Rome, audio recording.

³⁷ Richard Kaye, “Losing His Religion: San Sebastian as Contemporary Gay Martyr,” in *Outlooks: Lesbian and Gay Sexualities and Visual Cultures*, Peter Horne and Reina Lewis, eds. (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), 86–105; and Christopher Reed, *Art and Homosexuality: A History of Ideas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011). On Reni’s homosexuality, see Richard E. Spear, *The Divine Guido: Religion, Sex, Money, and Art in the World of Guido Reni* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 10 et sqq.

³⁸ Kaye, “Losing His Religion: San Sebastian as Contemporary Gay Martyr,” in *Outlooks: Lesbian and Gay Sexualities*, 87.

Voragine in his collection of hagiographies, entitled *Legenda Aurea*, or the *Golden Legend*. Da Voragine narrates that Sebastian was an archer and a favorite of the Roman Emperor Diocletian. At the time Christianity was outlawed and Sebastian's striding forth from the Christian closet brought about his death sentence. Diocletian condemned his favorite to death by arrow, to be inflicted by his fellow soldiers, but Sebastian did not die of arrows. He was later clubbed to death and his body was thrown into the sewers of Rome. Sebastian's story of survival made him a popular patron saint in the mid-fourteenth century when the Black Death was devastating Europe and then in the 1980s when AIDS was taking its toll on the gay community.³⁹

The initial iconography of Sebastian complies with the canon of representation for martyrs and fathers of the church in early Christian art: he appears as a severe, bearded middle-aged man, dressed in regal attire and holding in his hands a bejeweled crown (fig. 107). The representation of saints gradually changed to include the sources and circumstances of their martyrdoms. Sebastian was rarely ever portrayed in the process of being clubbed or dumped in the Cloaca Maxima. Piercing arrows became Sebastian's main iconographic attribute in the late fourteenth century, as his cult gained great popularity as the patron saint of plague and a powerful symbol of resistance to pain and death. During the Renaissance, in the mid-fifteenth century, the image of Sebastian transitioned from mature bearded man to exquisitely handsome and sensual youth, akin to

³⁹ With the onset of the AIDS epidemic, Sebastian became a "contemporary gay martyr," the "patron saint of homosexual men," as Kaye put it ("Losing His Religion," in *Outlooks: Lesbian and Gay Sexualities*, 98–101). In the United States and Europe, deaths for AIDS peaked in the mid-1990s, at the time when Kaye wrote his essay.

a Greek god more than a Christian martyr.⁴⁰ It became a prototype of ideal male beauty and a repository of the mingling of the sacred and the profane in Christian culture. It is this highly eroticized image of Saint Sebastian that since the late nineteenth century has excited the imagination of writers and visual artists.

In the history of the construction of Saint Sebastian as an icon of modern male gay identity, the paintings of Saint Sebastian by Reni occupy a privileged position. Reni produced three different compositions and multiple versions of the same composition. Of these three compositions, Ontani picked the one that does not feature any arrows piercing the body of the Christian martyr, dating from around 1640 (fig. 101; the other two Saint Sebastians by Reni are from the second half of the 1610s).⁴¹ This painting is housed in the collection of the Pinacoteca nazionale in Bologna and is the only one with this subject included as a full-page color reproduction in the artist monograph series “I Maestri del Colore,” which Ontani was buying at the newsstand every week.⁴² Reni’s painting is an imposing work, almost eight feet high. Ontani intended his photographic recreations to be life-size, but he ran up against the mechanical limitations and costs of the printing

⁴⁰ On the Renaissance iconography of Saint Sebastian see Saslow, “The Tenderest Lover: Saint Sebastian in Renaissance Painting.” On the history of the transformations that the iconography of Saint Sebastian undertook from early Christian art to the twentieth century, see Karim Ressouni-Demigneaux, “The ‘imaginary’ Life of Saint Sebastian,” in *The Agony and the Ecstasy: Guido Reni’s Saint Sebastian*, eds. Piero Boccardo and Xavier F. Salomon (Cinisello Balsamo, Milan: Silvana, 2007), 17–31.

⁴¹ On Reni’s different versions of Saint Sebastian, see Piero Boccardo and Xavier F. Salomon, “Two Museums, Guido Reni, and Seven *Saint Sebastians*,” in *The Agony and the Ecstasy*, 11–16.

⁴² Ontani, personal interview, 8 May 2009. See Andrea Emiliani, *Guido Reni*, (Milan: Fratelli Fabbri, 1964), ill. XII.

technology for large color photography, and both versions exist in prints that are about half the size of Reni's painting.

The lack of arrows piercing the body of the Christian martyr in Reni's painting is not a small detail, as without arrows, pain is not as tangible. Yet, in comparison to Reni's version, Ontani's version is one step further away from pain. In Reni's painting, Sebastian is depicted as an anemic youth, glancing up to heaven and placidly surrendering to his own destiny. In this painting Sebastian emanates an air of compliance with his own condition, between apathy and submissiveness. The figure almost seems caught in a mystical state of trance. Ontani's impersonation, on the other hand, leaves any references to suffering out of the picture altogether. The atmosphere evoked in Ontani's tableau is that of pleasant inactivity, carefree abandon—the “*dolce far niente*” of a mid-summer afternoon.

What signifies Saint Sebastian in Ontani's tableau photos are the pose, the setting, and the cloth, loosely knotted about the artist's loins. Both of Ontani's photos reference the posture of Reni's Sebastian: the artist is standing loin-clad in front of a tree, both hands are behind his back, one leg is straight while the other is bent. In one version, Ontani rests his bent right leg on a white rock (fig. 99), exactly mimicking Reni's Sebastian. In the other version, Ontani raises his eyes up to the sky (fig. 100), as Reni's Sebastian, and he appears whistling. In both versions, Ontani's gaze is lost in reverie. A pink cloth is wrapped around the artist's loins, rather than the traditional white, adding to

the fun of the scene.⁴³ All around there is lush vegetation and one can almost feel the pleasant warmth and hear the titillating sound of chirping crickets that fills the air of mid-summer afternoons in the Apennines, where the photograph was taken (the woods of Calvenzano, as the title reveals). By contrast, the scene in Reni's Sebastian is dominated by a gloomy, menacing sky that hovers over the figure, which appears isolated and tense. The atmosphere is gelid and petrifying. In comparison to Ontani's recreation, the painting by Reni is filled with anxiety and fear. Sheer relaxation and enjoyment characterize Ontani's enactment.

Ontani described how he approached Gramantieri, the photographer who took his Saint Sebastian poses: "I asked him if he could shoot pictures of me from my particular point of view, unlike the traditional photographic portrait of the artist in his exceptional everyday reality, either inside or outside the studio."⁴⁴ Thus for Ontani these poses were some kind of self-portrait. These photos, he said, are "an image of my own story, like a self-portrait," in the sense that they express "my own personality but also my origins."⁴⁵ Although birth records establish that Reni was born in Bologna, according to a persistent popular tradition he was born in Calvenzano, a hamlet of Ontani's hometown of Vergato.

⁴³ The person who assisted with this as well as with subsequent, more elaborate costumes, was Ontani's sister, Tullia, who worked as a professional tailor (Luigi Ontani, personal interview, 8 May 2009; and Tullia Ontani, personal interview by phone, 6 March 2011, unrecorded).

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Idem, "Intervista con Luigi Ontani (April 4, 2003)," in "Luigi Ontani," *laurea* thesis by Valentina Storace, Facoltà di Lettere, Università La Sapienza, Rome, academic year 2002–3, quoted in Alessandra Galasso, ed., *Luigi Ontani: OntanElegia* (Torino: Umberto Allemandi, 2004), 13. This excerpt was published in a slightly different English translation in Alessandra Galasso et al., *Luigi Ontani: Genthara*, trans. Anita Joy Weston and Alessandra Galasso (Gent: S.M.A.K. and Roma: Italtre, 2003), 47.

The woods of Calvenzano are a mountainous region that extends northeast of Vergato. For Ontani Sebastian is “the saint of ambiguity, all ambiguities.”⁴⁶ He stated that he was drawn to the character of Saint Sebastian because he saw in it “a simulacrum of ambiguity, desires, and illusions.”⁴⁷ Given the history of Saint Sebastian as a homoerotic icon, it is clear that Ontani’s poses after Reni’s painting were, on the one hand, his coming out, and, on the other, a way of establishing a queer lineage for himself.

Since the late nineteenth century authors and artists have come under the spell of Saint Sebastian. Oscar Wilde changed his name to Sebastian during his self-imposed exile to France (after his conviction and imprisonment for sodomy in the the UK) and, in a sonnet dedicated to Keats, “The Grave of Keats” (1881), he compared Sebastian to the British poet.⁴⁸ Frederick Rolfe, better known as Baron Corvo, dedicated to Reni’s *Saint Sebastian* in Palazzo Rosso in Genoa sonnets that glorify the beauty of the martyr’s youthful body, first published in *The Artist* magazine in June of 1891.⁴⁹ In the early twentieth century Pictorialist photographers Frederick Holland Day and Pietro Poppi

⁴⁶ Luigi Ontani in Adele Freedman, “Art and the Metamorphosis of Luigi Ontani: an Italianate Fusion of Life and Art,” *Toronto Life*, January 1980, 109.

⁴⁷ Ontani, personal interview, 24 June 2009, New York, unrecorded.

⁴⁸ Jeffrey Robinson, *Reception and Poetics in Keats: My Ended Poet* (London: MacMillan, 1998), 136. See also Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (Leipzig: Bernhard Tauchnitz, 1908), 181.

⁴⁹ “A Roman soldier/boy, bound to a tree,/ His strong arms lifted up for sacrifice,/ His gracious form all stripped of earthly guise./ Naked, but brave as a young lion can be,” quoted in Christopher Reed, *Art and Homosexuality: A History of Ideas* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 102.

dedicated to Sebastian a series of photographs infused with pathos and sensuality (figs. 108–110).⁵⁰

The Japanese writer Yukyo Mishima, one of Ontani's favorite authors, produced some of the most prominent appropriations of Saint Sebastian as a gay icon.⁵¹ In his *Confessions of a Mask* (1949), generally deemed autobiographical, Mishima traces the homosexual self-discovery of the protagonist, Kochan. His erotic awakening is prompted by the chance encounter with a reproduction of Reni's painting from Genoa (fig. 102). Kochan is captivated by the "remarkably handsome youth," whose body "might even be likened to that of Antinous, beloved by Hadrian." To his eyes, this image expresses

only the springtime of youth, only light and beauty and pleasure. . . . It is not pain that hovers about his straining chest, his tense abdomen, his slightly contorted hips, but some flicker of melancholy pleasure like music. Were it not for the arrows with their shafts deeply sunk into his left armpit and right side, he would seem more of a Roman athlete resting from fatigue, leaning against a dusky tree in a garden.⁵²

Sexually aroused to masturbation for the first time in his life, Kochan "acquired the unconscious habit of crossing my hands over my head whenever I happened to be undressed. . . . And a mysterious sexual desire boiled up within me."⁵³

⁵⁰ On Poppi see Italo Zannier, *Storia della fotografia italiana* (Rome: Laterza, 1986), 86–87; and *Fotografia pittorica, 1889–1911*, 74–75.

⁵¹ Luigi Ontani, "Luigi Ontani," interview by Giancarlo Politi, *Flash Art* (Italian edition), n. 136 (December 1986–January 1987): 27.

⁵² Yukio Mishima, *Confessions of a Mask*, trans. Meredith Weatherby (New York: New Directions, 1958), 38 and 39.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 88.

In 1968 Mishima posed in a tableau photo after the same painting by Reni (fig. 104).⁵⁴ Shot by Kishin Shinoyama, the black-and-white photo is part of the series “Death of a Man,” comprising poses of Mishima in other death scenes, such as drowning and hara-kiri, the ritual suicide by *seppuku*, or self-disembowelment, carried out by Japanese samurai. Mishima committed suicide by *seppuku* in 1970. Subsequently his tableau photo after Reni’s painting was widely printed in the popular press.⁵⁵ Exasperated in its theatricality, Mishima’s pose features added streams of blood flowing down the body from the wounds of the piercing arrows. Retrospectively, it came to symbolize Mishima’s sado-masochistic obsessions with pain and death.

The contrast between Mishima’s and Ontani’s impersonations could hardly be greater. As Mishima’s appropriation for his tableau photo proves, by 1970 Reni’s paintings of Sebastian had secured a preeminent place in literary and artistic work dealing with homoeroticism internationally. In this context Ontani’s Sebastian poses stand out for their adoption of Sebastian as a signifier of homoerotic pleasure, rather than the sado-masochistic nature of same-sex eroticism or the tortured closet case. Under this respect, Ontani’s tableau works anticipated later representations, as by Derek Jarman in his film *Sebastiane* (1976), which caused an uproar for its departure from prior representations of

⁵⁴ I ought to thank Yasufumi Nakamori, a scholar of contemporary Japanese photography, for confirming the date of this photo.

⁵⁵ The photograph, entitled *Mishima as Saint Sebastian (after Guido Reni)*, was included in the biography of Mishima written by John Nathan and published in 1974, *Mishima: A Biography* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1974). (This section of the book with illustrations is without page or illustration numbers.)

homosexuality in film, offering a portrayal of homosexuality as a source of pleasure rather than problem.

Historians of cinema have hailed *Sebastiane* as the first feature film with an overt depiction of homosexual desire and an important contribution to the gay liberation movement in the United Kingdom, in the aftermath of the successful decriminalization of homosexual acts.⁵⁶ Highly aestheticized, with dialogues in Latin (the title translates as “Oh Sebastian”) and a cast of all-male actor, *Sebastiane* was filmed on the island of Sardinia, in Italy. The young and handsome Leonardo Treviglio played Sebastian. At the time based in Rome, Treviglio attended events and opening at L’Attico, where Ontani met him.⁵⁷ In the arrow-shooting scene, Treviglio poses with his hands tied high above his head, as in Reni’s *Sebastian* in Genoa (fig. 105). A frontal shot of this pose served as the image for the film poster (fig. 106).⁵⁸

Through Ontani’s performing body the subject of Saint Sebastian came to symbolize the unapologetic embrace of homoerotic desire and pleasure, redeemed from associations with guilt and self-punishment common in a country where homosexuality

⁵⁶ See Michael O’Pray, *Derek Jarman: Dreams of England* (London: British Film Institute, 1996), 83.

⁵⁷ Luigi Ontani, personal interview, 24 June 2009. Prior to his hire by Jarman for the film, Treviglio had worked with the Living Theater, then also based in Rome, and, like many others at the time, including Ontani, had spent extensive periods in India.

⁵⁸ On *Sebastiane*, see Maria Wyke, “Shared Sexuality: Roman Soldiers, Derek Jarman’s *Sebastiane*, and British Homosexuality,” in *Imperial Projections: Ancient Rome in Modern Popular Culture*, Sandra R. Joshel, Margaret Malamud, and Donald T. McGuire, Jr., eds. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 229–248; and Rowland Wymer, *Derek Jarman* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), 36–48. There is another work by Reni in the collection of the Pinacoteca Capitolina in Rome that is almost identical to the one in Palazzo Rosso. It was thought to be a copy of the version in Genoa until the late 1970s, though now scholars tend to agree that it was executed earlier (see Sergio Guarino, “Saint Sebastian,” in *The Agony and the Ecstasy*, 90–93).

was still largely perceived as a form of deviance and a threat to procreation.⁵⁹ In such a context, the unapologetic embrace of pleasure was liberating. Ontani's choice of color photography, quite unusual in the 1970s, when artists generally opted for black and white, perceived as a signifier for critical engagement, should be related to the fact that he was going for pleasure. Color was perceived as both kitsch, for its association with consumer and mass culture, as in the glossy color reproductions of artworks published in "I Maestri del colore," and as aestheticizing, for its association with painting and painterly qualities. Ontani, like Pasolini before him, as discussed earlier, embraced color for all these associations, as part of his camp aesthetics.

In Ontani's oeuvre, the character of Saint Sebastian is the one he has most often impersonated. In the second half of the 1970s and then in the 1980s and 1990s, Ontani posed as the Christian martyr for over ten tableau photos staged in India, Italy, and New York City (fig. 103). In the second half of the 1970s the visual sources for his poses were mostly *santini* and other objects of religious kitsch that Ontani collects, like the polychromatic statuettes of Saint Sebastian from Goa, a former Portuguese colony in India.⁶⁰ Since the 1980s Ontani has also made a series of wooden masks and ceramic works based on the subject of Saint Sebastian. Camp artificiality, theatricality, and excessiveness come to the fore increasingly in the later works. What Ontani's tableau

⁵⁹ Miguel Andrés Malagrecá, *Queer Italy: Contexts, Antecedents And Representation* (New York: Peter Lang, 2007), 97.

⁶⁰ The two exceptions are Saint Sebastian poses after works by the French Salon painter Jean-Jacques Henner and Lorenzo Lotto, an eccentric northern Italian Renaissance artist that Caravaggio would later much admire. The former dates from the late 1970s and is part of the Indian series, the latter from the early 1980s and is part of a triptych that includes an angel of the Annunciation and a portrait also after Lotto.

works, from the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, have in common is gay camp. Through Ontani's performing body, the icon of Saint Sebastian has become a vehicle for the expression of homoerotic desire and pleasure.⁶¹

The first time Ontani presented his foremost Saint Sebastian to a large audience was in April of 1974 in the pages of *Flash Art*, at the time the most popular magazine of contemporary art published in Italy and distributed internationally (fig. 117).⁶² Ontani accompanied the reproduction of his Sebastian pose with other works from the early 1970s and a text that reads like an artist's statement. The main argument of the text is twofold and pertains to contemporary bourgeois society and to Ontani's response to it as an artist. Ontani claims that contemporary bourgeois society is "mummified," "conformist," "false," and "repressive." He contends that divisions of gender and power are at the basis of social inequalities and labor exploitation. His response as an artist is to welcome in both his work and life the "wonderful possibility of being at the same time . . . masculine and feminine." He states: "I am absolutely present: *ange infidèle*, androgynous, ephebe, hermaphrodite, hybrid, Sagittarius, heteroclitite." For Ontani the unity of masculine and feminine is one of the greatest latent human aspirations. Ontani claims that the point of view of homosexuality could be as limited as that of

⁶¹ Ontani's Sebastian poses have been included in books and shows dedicated to Sebastian as a gay icon. See, for instance, Jacques Damase, ed., *Saint Sebastien dans l'histoire de l'art depuis le XV^e siècle* (Paris: Damase, 1970); Wolfgang Fetz, Gerald Matt and Angela Stief, eds., *Saint Sebastian: A Splendid Readiness for Death* (Bielefeld: Kerber Verlag, 2003). Ontani's work was also included in the show (unaccompanied by an exhibition catalog) curated by Silvia Mantovan in Padua in 2008 and titled *San Sebastiano tra sacro e profano: un viaggio nella cultura figurativa dal Quattrocento a oggi*.

⁶² *Flash Art* was founded in 1967 by Giancarlo Politi and since 1979 is published in two separate editions, Italian and English. On the history of the magazine, see Giancarlo Politi and Helena Kontova, eds., *Flash Art: Two Decades of History, XXI Years* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT, 1990).

heterosexuality, if homosexuality remains “an epidermic manifestation,” a matter of “taste,” “reaction/survival.”⁶³

In his text and through his conversion of Saint Sebastian from emblem of gay suffering to signifier of gay gayness, Ontani makes clear his position vis-à-vis the question of homosexual identity, which can be summarized in two points. First, it is imperative to avoiding ghettoization; second, gayness means liberation.⁶⁴ These were the tenets of FUORI!, the first Italian movement for the liberation of gays and lesbians, in its initial phases. As Gianni Rossi Barilli and Miguel Malagrecia have shown, in its early stages FUORI! aspired to create a revolutionary subject, freed from the constraints of bourgeois morality and the oppression of capitalism.⁶⁵ It was only later in the 1970s that FUORI! became less interested in the project of universal liberation and more oriented towards the constituency of a distinctly gay identity.

FUORI!, or Fronte unitario omosessuale rivoluzionario italiano (Italian Unified Homosexual Revolutionary Front), was founded in the wake of the Stonewall riots that took place in New York in late June of 1969, considered by many responsible for sparking the gay rights movements of the 1970s.⁶⁶ The founding of FUORI! paralleled

⁶³ Luigi Ontani, “Luigi Ontani,” *Flash Art International*, n. 44–45 (April 1974), 11.

⁶⁴ It is in light of these points that Ontani’s reluctance to talk about his Saint Sebastian as a homosexual icon should be understood. He wants to avoid the assimilation of Saint Sebastian to the cliché of the suffering homosexual and tortured closet case.

⁶⁵ Gianni Rossi Barilli, *Il movimento gay in Italia* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1999), 47–54; and Malagrecia, *Queer Italy*, 98–102.

⁶⁶ Not unlike other nights, a group of New York City policemen busted a Greenwich Village gay nightclub on June 27, 1969, but this time the raid prompted a series of spontaneous, violent demonstrations by members of the gay community. The nightclub was called the Stonewall Inn and it gave the name to the riots. See Martin Baum Duberman, *Stonewall* (New York: Plume, 1994).

the birth of other organizations for the liberation of gays and lesbians in Europe: GLF, or Gay liberation front in the UK; FHAR, or Front homosexuel d'action in France; and MHAR, or Mouvement homosexuelle d'action révolutionnaire in Belgium. Although the socio-political and cultural contexts in which these movements emerged were different, some authors agree that some shared common liberationist ideals. "Gay liberation," argues Annamarie Jagose, "did not imagine a future in which everyone would be homosexual. What it claimed instead was that homosexuality has the potential to liberate forms of sexuality unstructured by the constraints of sex and gender."⁶⁷ Unlike in other European countries, in Italy FUORI! had no historical precedents. It was the first politically organized group of this kind and thus the efforts of its activists were more demanding than elsewhere.

As Rossi Barilli has shown, the development of a homosexual identity among gays and lesbians, a necessary premise to the birth of a liberation movement, took place late in Italy by comparison to other countries in Europe.⁶⁸ This was in great part due to the absence of strict laws against homosexuals, present in other European countries with a strong Protestant culture, such as Germany and the United Kingdom. In Italy homosexuality was typically tolerated if kept behind private doors. A mix of laxity and hypocrisy characterized social and political attitudes towards homosexuality. The leadership of the Christian Democrats, the party that most closely adhered to Catholic

⁶⁷ Annamarie Jagose, *Queer Theory: An Introduction* (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 40.

⁶⁸ Rossi Barilli, *Il movimento gay in Italia*, 1–17.

ideology and was the largest in Parliament from the postwar period till its dissolution in 1994, determined a general climate of sexophobia, which, however, was not contrasted by the Communist Party. Homosexuals were not criminalized if they kept their sexual preferences to themselves, but they were if they did not. The sex scandal in which Pasolini was involved in 1949 is an example of this double policy. Condemned for obscene public acts, he was sentenced to three months in prison, lost his teaching job, was banished from the Communist Party, and was forced to move out of Friuli.⁶⁹ In the 1950s things did not change and when, in the mid- to late 1960s, a number of surveys and reportages on the sexual behaviors, morality, family life, and romantic relationships of the Italians came out, they revealed a strikingly homogeneous picture of Italian society, characterized by conformity to conservative, stereotypical ideas about gender and sexuality.⁷⁰ It was this society that FUORI! activists confronted.

The first units of FUORI! formed in Milan and Turin in 1971. Rome became a major hub of the movement in 1972, when Ontani moved there. Founding members mostly included intellectuals and middle-class professionals, but also some students and a few workers. In the summer of 1972, the movement began the publication of its namesake magazine. From the first number, the editorial committee launched call: “we are convinced of the necessity of a ‘Sexual Revolution,’ paralleled and integrated to the

⁶⁹ Pasolini moved from Friuli to Rome. See Nico Naldini, *Pasolini, una vita* (Turin: Einaudi, 1989), 131–137.

⁷⁰ Pasolini contributed a reportage on these themes with his ethnographic documentary *Comizi d'amore* (*Love Meetings*, 1964). On these surveys and reportages, see Rossi Barilli, *Il movimento gay in Italia*, 39; and Malagrecia, *Queer Italy*, 92–98.

political revolution that is in place in every country.” Like the French FHAR, FUORI! tried to create a space for itself in the revolutionary left, adhering to its program of destruction of capitalism, but claiming that the fight had to be extended from the economic realm to the realm of bourgeois morality, as the oppression of the capital was one with the oppression of patriarchal society. FUORI! declared war to a “phallogocratic society.” De facto, then, the model of the gay movement was the feminist movement, which in those same years was questioning the domination of man over woman, equating it to the domination of the bourgeois over the proletarian. The feminist movement promoted the creation and experimentation of practices aimed at changing the relationships between individuals of different gender.

FUORI! made its own the slogan of the 1968 movement, “power to the imagination.” In the second issue of their magazine, the activists of FUORI! proclaimed: “The revolution is GAY (*gaia*),” in the sense of both homosexual and merry. It is gay, they continued, when “it becomes LIBERATION (*diventa liberazione*).” A flier provided suggestions on how “to practice the goal”: “Play, fantasy, collaboration, full capacity to enjoy are the political ends and means for a revolution whose final goal, the human being, does not remain abstract and unreachable.” FUORI! also strongly opposed ghettoization. Understanding the need for a revolution of society, it stated, loud and clear: “No to gay ghettos, nightclubs, bathrooms, cinemas . . . no to institutionalized sexuality, no to male and female roles, no to homosexuality, no to heterosexuality.”⁷¹

⁷¹ Rossi Barilli, *Il movimento gay in Italia*, 52–53.

As Malagrecia put it, the work of FUORI! was exemplary in what later would be called queer politics. FUORI! anticipated notions such as gender performativity, radical difference and desire that became central to queer discourse in the 1990s. I argue that it did so in parallel to Ontani's tableau work, whose significance can be summarized in two points. First, Ontani's reinterpretation of the subject of Saint Sebastian and his position vis-à-vis homosexuality open up other possibilities of gayness, beyond the cul-de-sac of Catholic guilt and self-punishment. Second, Ontani's sustained engagement with camp aesthetics and tableau vivant throughout the 1970s highlights the notion that identity and gender are intrinsically theatrical, performative, constructed, historically and culturally specific, rather than predetermined by some kind of interior essence and stable core. On this notion Judith Butler elaborated her theory of gender performativity, foundational to queer theory in the 1990s and inspirational to research in various disciplines, including art history.

Ontani did not engage discursively, as did Butler, with the political question of the potential and actual subversiveness of his enactments.⁷² Nonetheless, a parallel between Ontani's tableau works and Butler's theory proves productive in understanding the significance of Ontani's practice. Art historians such as Jennifer Blessing and Amelia Jones have drawn on Butler's theory of gender performativity to frame photographic work involving role-playing and the staging of fictional identities by artists such as

⁷² See Judith Butler, "Preface" (1999) and the chapter "Subversive Bodily Acts," in particular the section "Bodily Inscriptions, Performative Subversions," in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990; 2nd ed., New York: Routledge, 1999), xxi–xxiv, 101–180.

Claude Cahun, Marcel Duchamp, and Cindy Sherman.⁷³ For these artists as for Ontani the body is the vehicle through which identity and gender are constituted. So is for Butler, especially in her early work, prior to her engagement with the linguistic theory of the speech act, implied in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990), and articulated in *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (1993).⁷⁴ These two books are Butler's best-known work. As influential as Butler's theory of performativity as speech act has been, it has also been widely criticized for focusing on "the discursive means" of speech acts at the expense of the material dimensions of the body. It is in relation to Butler's earlier work that the parallel with Ontani proves most fruitful.

Prior to *Bodies that Matter*, Butler gives an account of gender performativity that is unmistakably corporeal. In *Gender Trouble* she calls "acts" and "gestures" "the various ways in which a body shows or produces its cultural signification."⁷⁵ She shows how these acts and gestures constitute gender and identity. These "corporeal acts," states Butler in "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and

⁷³ Jennifer Blessing, "Introduction," in *Rose Is a Rose Is a Rose: Gender Performance in Photography* (New York: Guggenheim museum, 1997), 7–17; and Amelia Jones, "The 'Eternal Return': Self-Portrait Photography as a Technology of Embodiment," *Signs* 27, n. 4 (Summer 2002): 947–978. See also Laurie J. Monahan, "Radical transformations: Claude Cahun and the Masquerade of Womanliness," in *Inside the Visible: An Elliptical Traverse of 20th Century Art in, of, and from the Feminine*, ed. M. Catherine de Zegher (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 1996), 125–133.

⁷⁴ Butler began to situate her account of performativity in relation to J. L. Austin's speech act theory and Jacques Derrida's deconstruction of it in *Bodies that Matter*. In *Gender Trouble* she occasionally used the expression "speech act," but did not address speech act theory. Butler's previous work drew on existential phenomenology and, in particular, on Simone de Beauvoir. Beauvoir's idea that "one is not born, but rather becomes a woman" was foundational to Butler's earlier articulation of gender performativity.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 180.

Feminist Theory” (1988), “bear similarities to performative acts within theatrical contexts.”⁷⁶ In this essay, Butler defines the performative as that which is “real only to the extent that is performed.”⁷⁷ She contrasts it with the expressive, which she characterizes as that which is thought to express a preexisting identity. The performative for Butler constitutes, rather than reveals, identity and gender. In his tableau works, Ontani presents himself as another. Through these works the genre of the self-portrait is recast as constructive, rather than revealing, of identity. Identity, in Ontani’s tableau works, is shown to be a performative act.

In some of his tableau works, such as *MayaGoya desnudo* and *MayaGoya vestido* (c. 1970), discussed below, Ontani played on the distinction between sex and gender, anatomic sex and performed gender. This distinction is central to gay drag performance, which Butler analyzes as an example of parodic identity in one of the most oft-quoted passages from *Gender Trouble*. In drag performance, Butler writes, the anatomic sex of the performer is not the same as the gender being performed. “In the place of the law of heterosexual coherence, we see sex and gender denaturalized by means of a performance which avows their distinctiveness and dramatizes the cultural mechanism of their fabricated unity.” As a result, drag effectively mocks the expressive model of gender, the notion of a primary and interior gendered self, and shows the mechanisms of that construction on the surface of the body. It displaces the meaning of the original,

⁷⁶ Idem, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory” (1988), reprinted in *Performing Feminisms: Feminist Critical Theory and Theater*, ed. Sue-Ellen Case (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 272.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 278.

revealing that “the original identity after which gender fashions itself is an imitation without an origin.”⁷⁸ What drag parodies, therefore, is not an original but the very notion of an original, in line with the idea that “gay is to straight *not* as copy is to original, but, rather, as copy is to copy.”⁷⁹ Along with camp aesthetics, gay drag subverts the model of original/copy, truth/falsity.

Gender Ambiguity

In the diptych *MayaGoya desnudo* and *MayaGoya vestito* (c. 1970), Ontani queered Francisco Goya’s *Nude Maja* and *Clothed Maja* (c. 1800) (figs. 111-112). These works by Goya brought the painter before the Spanish Inquisition for the scandalous depiction of female nudity outside of any mythological, religious, or historical narrative. Ontani imitated the posture of Goya’s *Maja* by appearing reclined and with his arms bent behind the head. He actualized the props, as the clothes and sofa are unmistakably from the early 1970s. Salvo and Croce did something similar when they posed in contemporary clothes after self-portrait paintings by Raphael and Dürer, respectively, in 1970 and 1973 (figs. 80 and 83). Unlike Salvo and Croce, Ontani queered the paintings he enacted through several changes that denaturalized Goya’s works.

The posture of Ontani’s body is perpendicular to the picture plane, rather than at a diagonal, as in Goya’s paintings. He is not lying comfortably on a chaise lounge, with

⁷⁸ Idem, *Gender Trouble*, 175.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 41.

large pillows supporting his torso. His body looks squeezed to fit the length of the sofa, unnaturally twisted to assume Maja's pose. The sofa underneath Ontani's body looks unyielding, only lightly padded with thin, narrow cushions. There is space surrounding the figure in Goya's paintings. The high-contrast chiaroscuro, with dark shadows all around the figure, deepens the picture plane. By contrast, in Ontani's photos the picture plane looks more like a jigsaw puzzle for the flatness and interlocking of forms from left to right, top to bottom of the rectangular surface. The body of Ontani is stretched to fill the length of the picture entirely, from left to right, and the frontally placed sofa occupies the picture from top to bottom. The floral pattern on the sofa upholstery accentuates the flattening effect of the composition. In terms of the color scheme, Ontani's photos are almost an all-over pink. The photo in which Ontani is posing clothed features camp apparel: magenta socks and orange, high-heel boots. In both photos Ontani sports an earnest expression and he is looking side-ways, unlike Goya's Majas, flirtatiously hinting a smile and gazing at the viewer. With his twisted body posture and oblique gaze, Ontani's tableau photos are queer recreations of Goya's portraits.

Building on Goya's irreverent upgrade of the age-long tradition of the reclining female nude in Western painting, descending from Titian's *Venus of Urbino* (1538), Ontani parodied that tradition with his impersonations. *MayaGoya desnudo* and *MayaGoya vestito* entail the dissonance characteristic of the practice of drag, that is, the discontinuity between the anatomy of the performer and the gender that is being performed. They combine Ontani's male anatomical sex with the female gender of the

character performed, Goya's Maja. Considered on its own, *MayaGoya vestito* does something different, as in this photo the anatomical sex is hidden. The mix of male and female clothes in this pose heightens the ambiguity and androgyny of the tableau. As a result, this destabilizes sex-role stereotypes more than does *MayaGoya desnudo*.

Ontani presented this diptych to the public for the first time at *Transformer-Aspekte der Travestie*, an exhibition curated by Jean-Christoph Ammann in 1974. A groundbreaking initiative, this was the first large group show dedicated to the subject of transvestism and gay drag as a phenomenon increasingly visible in both the visual arts and popular culture.⁸⁰ As the Italian art critic Daniela Palazzoli wrote in her exhibition review, Ammann's show surveys this phenomenon as part of general changes in society and culture. Although she does not elaborate further, these were changes brought about by feminist and homosexual liberation movements. In contrast with the bourgeois notion of transvestism as connected to mimicry intended as camouflage in order to conceal, "this exhibition accepts and supports the opposite logic: that of transvestism as exhibitionism and mimicry, understood not as obedience to the law of survival but to the pure and simple pleasure principle." What is brought to the fore with this exhibition, Palazzoli

⁸⁰ The show opened at the Kunstmuseum in Lucerne, Switzerland, where Ammann was director, and then traveled to the Museum Bochum in Germany. Apparently it did not go to the Neue Galerie am Landesmuseum Joanneum, Graz, in Austria (email correspondence from archivist dated June 4, 2010). The title of the show was derived from the second album released in December 1972 by Lou Reed, co-founder and main songwriter from 1965 till 1971 of the Velvet Underground, the band that caught the attention of Warhol, who collaborated with them for about two years in the 1960s. The album was co-produced by David Bowie. Both Bowie and Warhol were invited to participate in the show.

concludes, is the project of “imagining the body freed from a rigid obedience to social norms, roles, and fixed dress-ups (*travestimenti*).”⁸¹

Transformer opened at the Kunstmuseum in Lucerne, Switzerland, where Ammann was director, and then traveled to the Museum Bochum in Germany.⁸² Among the artists participating there were Andy Warhol, Katharina Sieverding, and Urs Lüthi. Sieverding showed works from her photographic series, “Transformer” (1973–1974), after which Ammann titled the exhibition. “Transformer” features large-format close-ups of the artist’s visage layered in different exposures, which contribute a marked sense of sexual ambiguity and artificiality. The works were presented as slide projections, highly contrasted, mostly black and white with some touches of color. Lüthi exhibited some of his staged, gender-crossing black-and-white photographic self-portraits, in which he posed in drag, with heavy make-up, a feather boa, a snakeskin jacket, and so on. Also included in the exhibition were Mick Jagger and David Bowie, among the first mainstream rock stars to self-consciously perform androgyny. Besides the diptych after Goya, Ontani exhibited three other tableau photos: *Dante* (c. 1972), *Pinocchio* (c. 1972), and *Nazi.sta.nasi* (1974), evidence of his chameleon-like transformism. The parody of the notion of identity as original, natural, abiding could hardly be more apparent. What emerges from these tableau works is the idea of identity as a performative, theatrical,

⁸¹ Daniela Palazzoli, “Libri,” catalogue review, *Data*, n. 12 (summer 1974): 112.

⁸² According to the catalogue, the show traveled to the Neue Galerie am Landesmuseum Joanneum, Graz, in Austria. However, according to archival records, the show did not travel to Graz (email correspondence from Alexander Fritz, archivist at the Neue Galerie in Graz, dated June 4, 2010).

“tenuous construction,” as Butler puts it, constituted in and through the repetition of acts and forms.

Probably during the same photo session in which Ontani posed as Reni’s *Saint Sebastian*, he also posed as two other characters from paintings by Reni included as full-page color illustrations in the artist monograph “I Maestri del colore”: *Saint John the Baptist* (c. 1620) and *Atalanta and Hippomenes* (c. 1625).⁸³ For these as for the Saint Sebastian tableau photos, Gramantieri was the photographer, the woods of Calvenzano the setting, and a silk pink cloth the only covering for the body (figs. 113 and 115). So these works can also be dated between 1970 and 1973. As he did with his Saint Sebastian works, for these, too, Ontani produced slightly different versions of each subject.⁸⁴ I suggest that Ontani’s different repetitions, through variations of the pose and also of the format of the unique photographic print, are important aspects of his tableau-vivant practice that contribute to the parody of the idea of the original.

In the tableau photo after *Atalanta and Hippomenes*, Ontani enacted only the figure of Hippomenes (fig. 113), as it would appear in the photographic reproduction of the enlarged detail from Reni’s painting. In his tableau Ontani rotated the position of figure of Hippomenes by 180 degrees. This is a manipulation not found in other tableau photos. The purpose of this manipulation was, as he explained, to impersonate both the

⁸³ The total number of color illustration is fifteen.

⁸⁴ The smaller format of the pose after Reni’s *Saint John the Baptist* was in the collection of Kynaston McShine, but was destroyed in a fire. McShine owned the work in 1982, when he lent it to the Guggenheim Museum in New York for the group exhibition *Italian Art Now: An American Perspective*. At the time McShine was a curator at The Museum of Modern Art. This was one of the first and few tableau photos by Ontani in an American collection. The life-size version of this work is in a Florentine collection.

masculine and the feminine.⁸⁵ Facing away from the camera he could play with sexual ambiguity. So Ontani's *Ippomene d'après Guido Reni* is a queer version of Reni's figure. In other works from the first half of the 1970s Ontani played with the pose, framing, and lighting in order to underline sexual and gender ambiguity. An early example is *Efebo Subiaco* (c. 1970, fig. 114), in which Ontani enacted the headless *Ephebe from Subiaco*, a Roman copy of a Greek work discovered in the late nineteenth century in a villa of the ruthless Roman emperor Nero.

Ontani's tableau works were first exhibited in 1974 at L'Attico and in a number of groups shows that introduced him to an international audience. Besides *Transformer-Aspekte der Travestie*, he was included in *La ripetizione differente*, curated by Barilli's at the Studio Marconi in Milan, and in the April Festival of Expanded Media in Belgrade.⁸⁶ The first time any of these works was published was 1973. *Saint John the Baptist* appeared in the December 1973 issue of *NAC Notiziario Arte Contemporanea*, as part of an article penned by Barilli (fig. 116).⁸⁷ An art magazine edited by Francesco Vincitorio and issued between 1968 and 1974, *NAC* was not as popular and internationally read as *Flash Art*, edited by Giancarlo Politi and printed to date. The article, entitled "Il

⁸⁵ Ontani, personal interview, 8 May 2009.

⁸⁶ Ontani participated in the Belgrade annual festivals in 1973 and 1974. It was in 1974 that Ontani exhibited his photographic tableaux, as Biljana Tomic, the curator of the festival, confirmed (personal email, dated August 9, 2010; see fig. 92, which shows the tableau of Ontani posing as Tarzan). In 1973 Ontani went with a Yugoslavian artist named Ilija Soskic who was based in Rome at the time. His guide in Belgrade was Marina Abramovic, as Tomic recalls. The second time Ontani participated in the festival, Clemente also joined them. This was one of Clemente's first exhibitions. Also invited to participate in the 1974 Festival were Marina Abramovic, who performed *Rhythm 5*, and Joseph Beuys, who presented a lecture.

⁸⁷ Renato Barilli, "Il comportamento frequenta il museo," *NAC Notiziario Arte Contemporanea*, n. 12 (December 1973), 18.

comportamento frequenta il museo” (“Performance Visits the Museum”), is dedicated to Ontani’s new tableau work, discussed by Barilli as a recent turn in Ontani’s artistic production, and to Croce’s new series of photographs of friends in costumes and settings inspired by Renaissance and Baroque paintings. For his poses Ontani “visits the ideal art gallery (*pinacoteca ideale*),” states Barilli, emphatically.⁸⁸ “The splendid, rhetorical poses from the golden ages of our art,” he continues, are brought back to life, “as if by a spell,” after having remained “idle,” frozen in their “mythic, anthropological, iconological potential, like many ‘*belle addormentate nel bosco*’ (‘sleeping beauties in the woods’).” *La bella addormentata nel bosco* is the Italian version of the French fairy tale *La Belle au bois dormant*, or *Sleeping Beauty*, in the English version. Given that the setting of Ontani’s *Saint John* was the woods of Calvenzano and that Ontani had a penchant for fairy tales, Barilli’s reference is fitting and amusing.

Barilli frames Ontani’s new work in terms of a different kind of “regression,” as compared to his earlier work: from regression to childhood, as in the *Oggetti pleonastici*, to regression to cultural tradition, the “repressed collective unconscious” of the avant-gardes. For Barilli the parallel between Ontani’s and Croce’s work suggests that we are witnessing a trend inversion: from the desperate attempt to subtract culture, what is already known, and find what is authentic and new, to its exact opposite: “an infinite recuperation of the already known in order to give mythic, anthropological, and cultural

⁸⁸ Ibid. [Le splendide pose retoriche e declamanti della nostra arte dei secoli d’oro giacciono nei musei, fatte oggetto di un omaggio di maniera, ma congelate nel loro potenziale mitico, antropologico, iconologico, come tante ‘*belle addormentate nel bosco*’ per effetto di qualche incantesimo.]

depth to every single present scene.”⁸⁹ Barilli links Ontani’s earlier work to a general tendency in art towards “non-culture.” It was Celant who framed Arte Povera as a movement that opts for “de-cultura,” or the rediscovery of the factual, the contingent, the culturally unmediated.

A tableau photo from the first half of the 1970s in which Ontani explicitly played with gender ambiguity is a diptych from around 1973 entitled *EvAdamo*. In this work Ontani posed as both Eve and Adam from the Genesis, in the moment, typically depicted in painting, in which Eve grabs the apple and Adam is about to eat it, marking the fall from grace (fig. 118). The tableau photo is based on paintings by Lucas Cranach the Elder and Lucas Cranach the Younger (figs. 119–120). In Ontani’s diptych, the apple is present only on Adam’s side and this makes the viewer read the two pictures in a temporal sequence. The arm gestures of the two figures look accurately specular to one another in relation to the picture plane, while the bodies are positioned differently—Eve’s is in a sort of profile while Adam’s is in frontal view, with the classical fig leaves covering his genitals. Bastelli took these pictures, which were printed in medium format and also life-size. Through the use of shadows, Bastelli was able to create the necessary sexual ambiguity for the impersonations of both the female and male character. The specularity of the arm gestures of the two figures, together with the sexual ambiguity entailed by the expert manipulation of photographic shadows, make Ontani’s Adam and Eve almost interchangeable and the work a queer reinvention of the Biblical subject.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

In the mid-1920s Marcel Duchamp posed as Adam in a tableau vivant based on the paintings of Adam and Eve by the Cranachs. The tableau was part of a one-time-only performance staged in Paris by a group of avant-garde artists. Entitled *Ciné-sketch*, the performance was produced by Francis Picabia and presented on the day of New Year's Eve in 1924 at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées. René Clair directed the sketch. As Picabia said,

I, Picabia, have written a review, a sketch to be more precise, to end the year on a happy note. . . . up to now the cinema has been based on the theatre; I tried to do the opposite, bringing to the stage the techniques and lively rythms of cinema. . . . I re-create a picture by Cranach, the only painter I can stand at the moment: suddenly in a kitchen you'll see this evocation of Adam and Eve appear.⁹⁰

The apparition of Adam and Eve in a kitchen sounds desecrating, in the spirit of the avant-garde. Bronia Perlmutter played Eve. Man Ray took a photograph of the tableau vivant (fig. 121). *Ciné-sketch* combined theater, cinema, painting, and music. As a form of total work of art that mingled high and low culture, *Ciné-sketch* anticipated Ontani's tableaux vivants from the second half of the 1970s. After Pictorialist photographers, Surrealist artists in the 1920s and 1930s embraced the tableau vivant and staged

⁹⁰ Francis Picabia, in an interview with Paul Achard, "Picabia m'a dit . . . avant *Ciné-sketch* au Théâtre des Champs-Élysées," *L'Action* (January 1, 1925), 4; reprinted in *Écrits*, vol. 2 (Paris: Belfond, 1978), 175; quoted in George Baker, "Entr'acte," *October* 105 (Summer 2003), 165. On *Ciné-sketch* see also Billy Klüver and Julie Martin, "Man Ray, Paris," in *Perpetual Motif: The Art of Man Ray*, Merry Foresta and others (New York: Abbeville Press, 1988), 125. Picabia did not specify whether he had in mind Cranach the Elder or the Younger.

photography again in works that emphasize role-playing and identity as masquerade, featuring the artist as primary actor, as in Ontani's tableau works.⁹¹

Ontani played with sexual ambiguity in a series of works from 1973 dedicated to Bacchus, the Roman god of wine, youth, and fertility, closely modeled after the Greek god Dionysus (fig. 122). Bacchus is traditionally represented as a naked youth, wearing grapes and a crown of vine leaves. Collectively entitled *Bacchino* (*Little Bacchus*), each pose consists of an antique purple sofa bench, adorned with feline-like metal feet and set in an empty room, a bunch of grapes, and the artist's naked body. The sofa is positioned in front of the camera, similarly to the poses after Goya's *Majas*, although here the camera is positioned high above the subject, so the space of the room around Ontani is more visible and we can see the intersection of the floor with the wall. These photos were taken by Bastelli at the pied-à-terre of an extravagant, aristocratic friend of Ontani, Marisa Capra, in Piazza San Domenico in Bologna.⁹² The works may thus be seen as a homage to Bologna and Bacchus a site-specific character given the fame of the city of the city as the "*godereccia*" (pleasure-loving).⁹³

⁹¹ Notable examples of this trend are Duchamp's photographs as Rrose Sélavy and Claude Cahun's series of self-portraits, began in the mid-1910s. For a framing of these works as a variation on the genre of staged photography, see Ann Thomas, "Modernity and the Staged Photograph, 1900–1965," in *Acting the Part: Photography as Theater*, ed. Lori Pauli (New York: Merrell, 2006), 102, 108–120. On Cahun see also Georgiana M. M. Colvile, "Self-Representation as Symptom: The Case of Claude Cahun," in *Interfaces: Women, Autobiography, Image, Performance*, eds. Sidnie Smith and Julia Watson (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2002), 263–288.

⁹² Cesare Bastelli, personal interview, 15 June 2010, Castello d'Argile (Bologna), audio recording.

⁹³ More than for wine, though, Bologna is known for its cuisine. It is the capital of the region Emilia Romagna, whose rich culinary traditions and food products—from ragù to lasagne, tortelloni, tortellini, cannelloni, prosciutto di Parma, Parmigiano Reggiano—have earned the region the nickname of "cholesterol belt of Italy." So perhaps one may say that Ontani's *Bacchino* is an obliquely site-specific character for Bologna.

Bacchus is a character Caravaggio famously identified with in his controversial self-portrait *Bacchino malato* (*Little Sick Bacchus*, c. 1593).⁹⁴ Compared to the jaundiced, unidealized Caravaggio-as-Bacchus, Ontani-as-Bacchus strikes as a figure of beauty, sensuality, and play. Ontani impersonated Bacchus naked, lying or seated on the sofa bench, playing with grapes, the main iconographic attribute of the deity, by alternatively placing them on his face, over his genitals, or on his feet. The feline-like sofa feet are related to the iconography of Bacchus, as tigers and leopards, together with goats, draw his triumphal car. A striking detail common to all the poses in this series is that Ontani's genitals are always hidden from view. When lying supine on the sofa bench, Ontani covers his genitals with both hands (top right and bottom left images of fig. 122). Given that Ontani was never shy about showing his genitals, this detail cannot pass unnoticed. Later on, in a tableau photo based on Titian's *Rape of Ariadne* in which Ontani impersonated Bacchus again, he made sure that the drapery would cover his genitals (fig. 40), while in Titian's painting Bacchus' penis is visible. The effacement of the anatomical sex in Ontani's works is no prudery, but a gesture of queer. It displaces sex as a signifier of gender.

The most dynamic of the *Bacchino* photos shows Ontani striking an awkward pose, seated with his legs bent, hardly balancing his body weight at one corner of the sofa (fig. 123). With grapes covering his feet and making them look like feline paws, he holds

⁹⁴ Sherman enacted Caravaggio's painting in her "History portraits" series (1988–1990). The distance between Sherman's over-the-top recreation and Ontani's minimal, playful impersonations could not be greater.

another bunch of grapes high above his head, about to bite into them. Ontani chose this photo as the image for the invitation card for his tableau vivant of *Pulcinella* at the gallery of Lucio Amelio in Naples in 1974. In another photo the artist appears prone, face down on the bent arms, with abundant green grapes over the lower back, a smaller bunch between the upper thighs, and a very small bunch towering over the right foot sole raised towards the ceiling. The way the foot is raised and the grapes arranged on the sole make that part of the body look like an improbable, though inviting and certainly comical tray (fig. 124). If sensuality and humor come across easily, it is probably only after careful examination that the formal sophistication of the composition will become apparent. The body of the artist is carefully positioned over the purple sofa in order to design two triangles that play off of each other: a larger one on the purple sofa that is formed by the line of the body diagonally placed to connect the two opposite angles of the sofa on the short sides, from the left elbow to the left foot; and a smaller black triangle that results from the shadow projected by the lightly raised left shoulder down on the sofa.

Annunciations

One of the characters Ontani has impersonated most often is the angel of the Annunciation. “Probably during my childhood I wanted to be an angel,”⁹⁵ he declared in a 1974 interview. Although in the course of his career, he has adopted different poses, the

⁹⁵ Luigi Ontani, interview published in *Transformer: Aspekte der Travestie*, Jean-Christophe Ammann and Marianne Eigenheer (Lucerne: Kunstmuseum, 1974), np.

most frequent is the one with his body in profile, one knee down, naked or dressed in contemporary clothes, with one hand holding a white lily or a candle, and the other making a gesture of blessing or welcoming, or pointing upward at the heavens. This is a posture commonly found in Italian paintings of this subject from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. However, nudity distinguishes Ontani's poses. Nudity is found frequently in Ontani's tableau works. He has said that for him "nudity is a way to exit time and history."⁹⁶ Perhaps, as Roland Barthes would put it, it is the exit out of time of the *puer senilis*, who, "having characteristics of all ages, [is] exempt from time because possesses all times at once."⁹⁷ Three of Ontani's *Annunciations* were published in the art magazine *Data* in the fall of 1974, accompanied by a poem Ontani wrote for the occasion.⁹⁸ These photographs were taken by Antonio Migliori, one of the best-known commercial photographers working in Bologna at the time and the first with whom Ontani collaborated. Migliori was known in town for his portraits of artists in their studios. However, with Migliori Ontani did not develop the kind of creative collaboration that he later established with Cesare Bastelli and Lanfranco Secco Suardo.

The *Annunciations* published in *Data* are usually dated 1969–1970. This dating can be confirmed by the fact that after Ontani met Bastelli, in the spring of 1970, he stopped working with Migliori, so these works must have been executed before that and

⁹⁶ Ontani, "È arrivato un angelo," interview by Franco Fanelli, in *Vernissage*, monthly supplement to *Il Giornale dell'Arte* (November 2003): 6.

⁹⁷ Roland Barthes, "Pierre Loti: *Aziyadé*," in *New Critical Essays*, trans. Richard Howard (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2009), 118.

⁹⁸ [Luigi Ontani], "Luigi Ontani," *Data* 13 (fall 1974): 70–73.

predating is the common problem with Ontani's work, not postdating.⁹⁹ In one of these *Annunciations*, Ontani wears a transparent plastic mask of the kind commercially produced and available at local stores (fig. 125). This is possibly the first instance in which Ontani adopted a real mask in his work. In general the inclusion of a transparent mask that covers and reveals at the same time, literalizes an artistic strategy that characterizes Ontani's entire production in its hide-and-seek play. A constant subtext of his work, the theme of the mask has taken on different forms throughout his career.¹⁰⁰

For the invitation card of his first solo show at L'Attico in 1974, Ontani chose another Annunciation pose, closer to the traditional iconography. It shows the artist in profile, one knee down, the face turned towards the viewer; he is dressed in a white altar-boy cotta that leaves the lower part of the body naked and holds in his left hand a lily flower, an iconographic attribute of the Virgin Mary, symbol of purity and chastity (fig. 126). The image was reproduced as a tondo—a Renaissance painting format.¹⁰¹ The image on the invitation card also functioned as a visual pun and camp parody of female virginity since the card announced Ontani's entrance into the privileged staple of artists

⁹⁹ Ontani, personal interview, 20 June 2010, Rome, audio recording; and idem, personal interview, 8 May 2009. The spring of 1970s is a sure time for when Ontani and Bastelli met, as it coincided with when Bastelli took his pilot diploma and this date is documented (Bastelli, personal interview, 15 June 2010).

¹⁰⁰ Since the early 1980s Ontani has made masks in collaboration with traditional Balinese wood carvers. The first presentation of these works was at the Turin gallery of Luciano Pistoï and Eva Mezio, great supporters of Arte Povera (*Facciapule* [Turin: Allemandi, 1983]). In his most recent works with these masks from the past decade, Ontani performs the masks in sets of three photographic poses that are rendered together in the same work by means of the lenticular printing technique, which lends the images a cinematic quality.

¹⁰¹ Ontani has used this format for a number of other works throughout his career.

represented by Sargentini and Ontani was no novice to the art world. The presentation of this same work as a slide projection in a darkened room that visitors could see from the entrance door carried over the tongue-in-cheek pun of the invitation card (fig. 127).

The slide format conveyed better than the photographic print the immateriality and extraordinariness of the divine vision of the angel of the Annunciation. Ontani is one of the first artists to have used photographic slides. What is most striking, besides a propensity to incorporate an unconventional artistic medium such as slides, used to teach art history in the classroom, is the way in which Ontani adopted it. For Ontani the photographic slide was interchangeable with the photographic print, in the sense that he presented the same image in different formats and mediums. This flexibility allowed him to play with scale and mimic the exponentially increasing dissemination of images since the introduction of affordable color image reproduction techniques in the industry.

Ontani's first solo show at L'Attico opened in November 1974 at the venue of the gallery located in Via del Paradiso, active since 1972 and still open today.¹⁰² This venue was chosen over the other exhibition venue of Sargentini, The Garage, since a single uniform space was unsuitable to Ontani's mix of smaller and larger photographs and slide projections. According to both Ontani and Sargentini, the two first met on the doorsteps of The Garage, and when Sargentini saw Ontani he exclaimed: "here is an angel fallen on

¹⁰² "Storia di una galleria," interview with Fabio Sargentini by Giovanni Carandente, Lamberto Gentili, Roberto Lambarelli, Bruno Mantura, Enrico Mascelloni, Bruno Toscano," in *L'Attico 1957-1987. 30 anni di pittura, scultura, musica, danza, performance, video* (Rome: Arnoldo Mondadori, De Luca, 1987), 15-16.

earth.”¹⁰³ Sargentini mentioned that what made him pronounce those words was the sexual ambiguity and androgyny of Ontani’s physical appearance. Ontani’s androgyny was something for which the artist would often be mocked even in progressive intellectual and artistic circles, as Sargentini recalled.¹⁰⁴

A work related to the *Annunciations* is *Ange infidèle*, French for “unfaithful angel”—a transgressive, camp version of the character of the angel that, as the Bible infers, is an androgynous creature. *Ange infidèle* was first realized as an extemporaneous pose at the opening of a solo exhibition entitled “Spazio teofanico” (“Theophanic Space,” meaning the space of the apparition of divinity), at the Galleria Diagramma of Luciano Inga-Pin in Milan in early spring of 1971. The pose involved an object by Ontani on view in the gallery, entitled *Aureola (Halo)*, and early Mass music from fourteenth-century French poet and composer Guillaume de Machaut in the background.¹⁰⁵ *Ange infidèle* prefigured the live tableaux that Ontani began to stage in 1974. *Aureola (Halo)*, the rigid oval dotted with little neon stars that Ontani wore atop or around his head in *Ange Infidèle*, was likely a commercially available prop adopted in popular religious reenactments like Nativity scenes, processions, and other forms of folk theater involving tableaux vivants. The *santino* reproduced in fig. 128 includes a similar object. Together with Sargentini, Inga-Pin was one of the very few gallerists in Italy to support

¹⁰³ Luigi Ontani, personal interview, 23 June 2010, Rome, audio recording. See also idem, “È arrivato un angelo,” interview by Fanelli, in *Vernissage*, 5.

¹⁰⁴ Fabio Sargentini, personal interview, 22 June 2010, Rome, audio recording.

¹⁰⁵ Ontani conceived the music to accompany the exhibition for its entire duration. However, Inga-Pin only played it during the opening reception of the exhibition.

performance art.

“Spazio teofanico” included several ready-mades, some of which were interactive. They included the *Scala della beatitudine* (*Bliss Ladder*, fig. 130), composed of a stepped candle holder of the kind found in churches, with four steps of increasing heights to host the candles that Ontani substituted with little plastic figurines of angels and shepherds. These figurines are the kind traditionally used for crèches, which Italian families would customarily set up at home in preparation for Christmas. Another work was dedicated to the character of the angel, with an ironic twist. Entitled *Angelo custode a pedale* (*Pedal Guardian Angel*, fig. 131), it consisted of an electric pedal that lit up a blue bulb when pressed with the foot. For this work Ontani modified a mechanism scavenged from the Maccaferri factory where he was working in Vergato.

Another interactive work that incorporated found objects was *Album di santini*—a handmade album Ontani constructed using pink, blue and yellow cardboard. The color combination of pink, blue and yellow is recurrent in Ontani’s work and stands for the female, the male and the androgynous respectively. In this hand-made album, the artist drew squares and wrote a list of saints in alphabetic order. He left a blank area for the saints he did not know. Then he invited visitors to glue their own *santini* under the name of the respective saint. *Santini* are small, kitsch religious images that are industrially produced and commercially available for individual worship. They usually come in postcard size so that they can be carried around. After the shows, the album continued to be expanded by people who visited Ontani at his studio and home in Rome.

The show also included a room with collages and decalcomanias on glass of works by artists such as Pellizza da Volpedo and Gino Severini. Another group of works in the show was a series of framed images of Ontani as a child, copies of photographs from the artist's family album. They were displayed in frames with the shapes of his earlier corrugated cardboard pieces—a form of self-citation, which recurs in Ontani's work. For wall labels they had the names of Ontani's favorite literary authors: Lautréamont, Pirandello, Joyce, and others. An unusual form of playful impersonation was to be found in the form of a personal anecdote presented in another work entitled *Selezione dell'ennesimo (Selection of the Umpteenth)*. This was a trunk containing several personal souvenirs including a Christmas letter written as a child, the little white cap knitted by his older sister and worn at a seaside holiday camp, and the ticket given by a police officer one time that he was caught driving without license with his first car, a red Fiat 500. On this occasion Ontani pretended to be Giorgio Morandi, the famous Bolognese painter, and gave the address of an artistic center he attended in Bologna.¹⁰⁶

In reviewing the Milan exhibition at the Galleria Diagramma, Tommaso Trini wrote that Ontani's "discourse" is related to "the properly Italian kitsch," what the artist calls the 'theophanic space' of devotional images. Trini mentions the range of works included in the exhibition—"from the all-saint calendar and the turquoise halo with

¹⁰⁶ Ontani said that he did this "for fun, instinctively" (personal interview, 12 June 2010, Riola, audio recording). This and the rest of the information on the works included in the show are derived from a number of personal interviews. For a brief account of the Diagramma show, see Francesco Vincitorio, "Luigi Ontani," *NAC Notiziario Arte Contemporanea* (June–July 1971): 32.

electrical light bulb”—and classifies them as belonging to “the provincial world of ‘homey’ materials and tools.” Ontani’s approach to kitsch, Trini concludes, is ironic, delightful, critical, and very personal.¹⁰⁷ “Spazio teofanico” traveled from Milan to Ferrara in late spring 1971. It was presented with a different title, “Teofania,” in a heterogeneous group show that Barilli curated at Palazzo dei Diamanti. Ontani’s “Spazio teofanico/Teofania” anticipated by about one year the display of religious kitsch at Documenta 5 in 1972, as part of the section “Trivialrealismus-Trivialembematik,” curated by Eberhard Roters and set between Jean-Christoph Ammann’s “Realismus” and Harald Szeeman’s “Museen von Künstlern” in the Fridericianum (see fig. 129).¹⁰⁸

Ontani’s conception of “Spazio teofanico/Teofania” was both indebted to religious kitsch and to mystic and literary sources, such as Guillaume de Machaut’s music, at the origin of Catholic religious rituality, and the “bible” of fin-de-siècle French Decadentism, *À rebours* (1884) by Joris-Karl Huysmans (translated as *Against the Grain* or *Against Nature*), a favorite reading of the Surrealists.¹⁰⁹ Ontani also mentions as an inspiration “the myth of the magic bird through whose song one can rediscover the world”—the mythical phoenix, symbol of the renewal of time in Classical literature from Herodotus to Ovid, and of Christ’s resurrection in Early Christian literature.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁷ Tommaso Trini, “Memoranda,” *Data* (September 1971): 78.

¹⁰⁸ *documenta 5: Befragung der Realität, Bildwelten heute* (Kassel: documenta GmbH, 1972), 3.1–16. See also Harold Rosenberg, *Art on the Edge: Creators and Situations* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983, reprint), 265.

¹⁰⁹ Ontani, personal interview, 12 June 2010.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.* See also Federico De Melis, “Luigi Ontani” (interview), in *Alias*, n. 1, weekly supplement to *Il manifesto*, January 4, 2003, 4.

Around the time of the Milan and Ferrara shows, Ontani recreated *Ange infidèle* in a garage that Bastelli set up as a studio in Riola, near Vergato.¹¹¹ As usual, Bastelli took a couple of photographs of Ontani in slightly different poses wearing his work *Halo* atop his head. One picture is half-figure, with the artist dressed in a white shirt of the kind sold to a hippie crowd at a street market in Bologna, arms behind the back and eyes turned sideways (fig. 132); another picture is framed right below the shoulders, the chest naked, eyes turned upward and hands placed atop the respective opposite shoulder to form an “X” (fig. 133). The position of the arms crossed on the chest that Ontani assumed in this pose can be found in several twentieth-century *santini* representing angels or saints alone (for one, see fig. 134), as it is possibly a symbol of communication with the divine through prayer. In the version of *Ange infidèle* in which Ontani crossed his arms on his chest, the positioning of his *Halo* seems perfected to resemble a divine halo, appearing from behind the head as if it were suspended in midair, while in the other pose the halo looks more like an infant cap knotted below the chin. According to Bastelli the model for Ontani’s *Ange infidèle* poses was possibly a *santino*.¹¹² The gesture of the arms crossed over the chest can also be found in depictions of the Virgin Mary in Annunciations in Italian painting from Giotto onward. In addition, the positioning of *Halo* in fig. 133 bears a striking similarity with that of the halo surrounding the head of a statue or statuette of the Virgin Mary reproduced in a *santino* found on the market in the

¹¹¹ According to Ontani, these photos date from around 1969. Since Ontani met Bastelli no earlier than the spring of 1970, although he might have conceived these poses even before that, he must have realized the photos in 1970 or later.

¹¹² Cesare Bastelli, personal interview, 15 June 2010.

late 2000s (fig. 128). These associations with the Virgin Mary add to the incongruity and ambiguity of *Ange infidèle*, at once angel and Virgin Mary, heightening the work's camp quality. Camp is also inscribed in *Ange infidèle* through its theatricality and references to both paintings and *santini*. As Sontag writes, camp “makes no distinction between the unique object and the mass-produced object. Camp taste transcends the nausea of the replica.”¹¹³

The history of the *santini* goes back to at least the late fourteenth century, when, in various European countries, images of the Virgin Mary, Christ or the main saints were printed on separate sheets of paper in small to medium sizes.¹¹⁴ Inspired by manuscript illuminations, these little devotional images could be purchased for individual worship and protection for a moderate cost. Over the course of the centuries, the *santini* have reproduced details from stained glass windows, sculptures found in cathedrals, and paintings by either famous or amateurish artists. In some case, the paintings reproduced were lost and the *santini* remain as the sole surviving visual evidence of those paintings. As Elisabetta Gulli Grigioni—an Italian scholar of the subject and one of the main collectors of *santini*—wrote in a study dedicated to the symbols of the heart, the anchor and the cross in these objects of popular consumption, a *santino* can represent an image

¹¹³ Sontag, *Against Interpretation*, 289.

¹¹⁴ On the subject, see Elisabetta Gulli Grigioni and Vittorio Pranzini, *Santini: piccole immagini devozionali a stampa e manufatte dal XVII al XX secolo* (Lugo, Ravenna: Pubblicazioni Srl, 2006) and Dolores Sella, *Santini e immagini devozionali in Europa dal secolo XVI al secolo XX* (Lucca: M. Pacini Fazzi, 1997).

inspired by folk religious theater and its tableaux vivants, with their dramatic, dynamic gestures, hence the double link between the *santini* and Ontani's work.¹¹⁵

Ange infidèle was reproduced on the front cover of a small artist book published by the Turin gallerist Franz Paludetto, who, together with Luciano Inga-Pin, supported Ontani before he entered the stable of L'Attico. Paludetto, like Inga-Pin and Sargentini, was also interested in performance art and was among the first to host performances of Gina Pane in 1969 and Joseph Beuys in 1972.¹¹⁶ The artist booklet bears the title *Luigi Ontani* and although it lacks a printed publication date, it can be dated late 1974, as it was presented in February of 1975 at Centro Di in Rome.¹¹⁷ Possibly around this time an exhibition with the works reproduced in the booklet was presented at Paludetto's gallery, called LP 220, in Turin.¹¹⁸ The images in the booklet were accompanied by poems mostly written by Ontani as an adolescent (they are listed in the table of contents as "*Poesiae adolescentiae*") and by a piece that the artist calls a "literary delirium on libertarian conduct," a stream-of-consciousness-like statement, first printed a few months earlier in *Flash Art*, as discussed below.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁵ On the link between *santini* and folk religious theater see Gulli Grigioni and Pranzini, *Santini*, 95.

¹¹⁶ The archives of Paludetto gallery are part of the Centro di Documentazione of Castello di Rivara, an art center located near Turin directed by Paludetto.

¹¹⁷ This information is derived from the invitation card found in the archive of L'Attico gallery.

¹¹⁸ As referred by Diletta Borromeo, assistant of Franz Paludetto at Castello di Rivara (email correspondence with the author, dated April 28, 2009).

¹¹⁹ Luigi Ontani, personal interview by phone, 6 July 2011, unrecorded. See *Luigi Ontani* (Turin: Galleria LP 220/Franz Paludetto Editore, nd).

The booklet was unfavorably reviewed in the art magazine *Flash Art*.¹²⁰ The poems were criticized as too serious, lacking humor and self-criticism. Ontani said that he did not mean to publish the poems as demonstration of literary talent, but as a way to leave his catholic upbringing behind. The words that art critic Luca Maria Venturi, attentive to Ontani's work from the early 1970s, wrote on this artist book contrast with the criticism by the anonymous author of the *Flash Art* review. Venturi extolled Ontani's artist book, in part for one of the qualities that the other writer found missing in the poems: "Ontani has remained faithful to his apparent ingenuity of ungrammatical catholic and to the irony pushed to the limits of merciless self-criticism."¹²¹

From the Passion of Christ to the Olympus with von Gloeden

The Paludetto publication includes a picture of Ontani hanging from a cross, as a crucified Christ, under the arch of a small niche, seemingly outside a church (fig. 136). This pose was realized in a non-touristic town on the Amalfi coast, such as Minori or Maiori, the artist remembers, and was the result of an extemporary decision, taken upon finding a cross he could climb on while he was going around with a friend in his swimming suit, and his friend took the picture.¹²² The cross features a stylized heart at the intersection of the arms and a large hook at its base, in the front, on which Ontani rested his right foot, while he pressed the other against the vertical arm of the cross,

¹²⁰ "Luigi Ontani," *Flash Art International*, n. 54–55 (May 1975): 13.

¹²¹ Luca M. Venturi, "Nuovi artisti," *Data*, n. 14 (winter 1974): 69.

¹²² Ontani, personal interview by phone, 27 September 2010, unrecorded.

hiding it behind the right calf. There are objects symbolic of Christ's Passion: the sponge on a reed, the ladder, the spear. They lean against the cross from behind and serve as partial support for Ontani, who clings with his hands to the ladder and spear. The material and presence of these objects reveal that this is a so-called *croce degli spogliati*, the name given in the South of Italy to the cross used to open religious processions during the Holy Week (the week before Easter), typically kept at a distance from the actual procession, perhaps a residue of the theatrical partition of the *sacra rappresentazione*, the liturgical drama popularized during the Counter-Reformation in which episodes from the Old and New Testament, and from apocryphal texts, such as the hagiography and martyrologies, were staged.¹²³ The type of cross that is carried around by a person in procession has a different hook in the back that serves to distribute the weight of the cross from the shoulders to the waste through a belt belt. Possibly, the hook in the front of the cross was placed by Ontani for the purpose of his pose.¹²⁴ The processional reenactment of Christ's Passion, once closely linked to its theatrical expression as another manifestation of popular religiosity, dates back to the Middle Ages and has survived to date in different parts of Europe—in Italy, especially in the south or in relatively isolated towns of the Alpes and Appennines. Called *teatro della Passione* (Theater of the

¹²³ The *sacre rappresentazioni* or mystery plays first became popular in the 15th century in central Italy. Their origins seem to lie in the thirteenth-century *laude* or “laud,” a dramatized mystical poem.

¹²⁴ I wish to thank the anthropologist Francesco Faeta for this insight and the information on the *croce degli spogliati* and the other type of processional cross used in live reenactments.

Passion), typically it includes dialogues, animated scenes, as well as tableaux vivants (as in fig. 137).¹²⁵

The Theater of the Passion is one of the forms of religious theater that involve staging tableaux vivants based on scenes from the Gospel for edifying and recreational purposes. Another form is the *presepe vivente* or living Nativity scene, staged during the Christmas season. I argue that these forms of religious theater were a model for Ontani's tableau work. With the *santini* they constitute another aspect of religious kitsch. Like most Italians of his generation, Ontani was raised a practicing Catholic and was an altar boy at the local church. A photograph of Ontani in religious vestments, carrying a tall candleholder in front of a religious procession, is featured on the title page of the artist book published by Franz Paludetto (fig. 138).¹²⁶ Ontani remembers being fascinated with the elaborate religious vestments that the local Monsignor wore before celebrating the mess. After the traumatic end of the war, which saw Vergato on the Gothic Line, religious celebrations in town were austere.¹²⁷ Ontani had access to complex popular religious reenactments in the nearby Bologna or through the media, as on television,

¹²⁵ See Claudine Fabre-Vassas, "Il teatro della passione," in *Nel paese del tempo: Antropologia dell'Europa cristiana*, ed. Giordana Charuty (Naples: Liguori, 1995), 105–141; and Francesco Faeta and Antonello Ricci eds., *Le forme della festa: La settimana santa in Calabria: studi e materiali* (Rome: Squilibri, 2007). In particular, for some general considerations on contemporary religious processions during Easter week, see Ignazio E. Buttitta, "La chiocciola della penitenza. La Settimana Santa a Caulonia," in *ibid.*, 308–310.

¹²⁶ *Luigi Ontani* (Turin: Galleria LP 220/Franz Paludetto Editore, nd). The book was presented in February of 1975 at Centro Di in Rome so it was probably printed in 1974.

¹²⁷ The Gothic Line was the final line of defense of the Nazis against the Allied forces towards the end of World War II. Its construction began in the summer of 1943, a few months before Ontani's birth. On the bombings of Vergato see the stories told by Tullia Ontani, the artist's sister, in *Le ragazze di Vergato: Racconti e ricordi*, ed. Gabriele Cremonini (Porretta Terme, Bologna: Arcobaleno, 2009), 56–62.

which was becoming an increasingly popular consumer good in the 1960s.¹²⁸ In general, in the 1960s Ontani had at his disposal a rich, broad repertory of folk culture and religious iconography that he could appropriate, mold, and draw from for his work.¹²⁹

I contend that, beside religious theater, Pictorialist photography provided Ontani with models for his tableau work. An American ex-patriate and one of the pioneers of the Pictorialist movement, Frederick Holland Day was part of the coterie of London dandies and aesthetes to which Oscar Wilde belonged. A contemporary critic named him “the leader of the Oscar Wilde School of photography” for the iconic corpus of homoerotic images he produced.¹³⁰ In the late nineteenth century Holland Day staged a number of Crucifixions with actors as well as non-professional models (for one, see fig. 139). Both Pictorialist and Victorian portrait photography included works that revived the tableau vivant tradition.¹³¹ *Ange infidèle* is strikingly similar to a work by Wilhelm von Gloeden, the Prussian aristocrat, self-declared homosexual and Pictorialist photographer who moved to Taormina on the island of Sicily in the early 1880s, when he was in his twenties, and lived there for the rest of his life. The picture by von Gloeden depicts a

¹²⁸ Luigi Ontani, personal interview, 20 September 2010, unrecorded. On the origins and developments of television as a mass phenomenon in Italy, see Franco Monteleone, “Vedere a distanza,” in *Storia della radio e della televisione in Italia: Un secolo di costume, società e politica* (Venice: Marsilio, 2003), 268–294.

¹²⁹ On Italian folk traditions, both secular and religious, an essential reference is Paolo Toschi, *Le origini del teatro italiano* (Turin: Einaudi, 1955).

¹³⁰ See Allen Ellenzweig, *The Homoerotic Photograph: Male Images from Durieu/Delacroix to Mapplethorpe* (New York and Oxford: Columbia University Press, 1992), 55, quoting from the *British Journal of Photography* (1900).

¹³¹ See Stephen Petersen, “Tableaux,” in *Encyclopedia of Nineteenth-Century Photography*, vol. 2, ed. John Hannavy (New York: Routledge, 2008), 1373–1375. See also Lori Pauli, “Setting the Scene,” in *Acting the Part*, 13–71; and Dominique de Font-Réaulx, *Painting and Photography: 1839–1914* (Paris: Flammarion, 2012).

local youth with his arms crossed on his naked chest, his hair covered by a piece of cloth, and his eyes turned upward (fig. 135).¹³² Ontani's library in the early 1980s featured books on von Gloeden.¹³³ Although Ontani said he did not know von Gloeden's work at that time he posed as *Ange infidèle* in front of Bastelli's camera, the similarity between the two is due to the fact that both artists had in mind the model of the angel or the Virgin Mary in the Annunciation for their mise-en-scènes.¹³⁴

In the early 1970s Ontani was familiar with the writings of the French author Roger Peyrefitte, who dedicated a romanticized biography to von Gloeden's life. He read his *L'exilé de Capri* (1959), also a fictionalized biography, devoted to another prominent *fin-de-siècle* dandy and aristocrat, the French writer Jacques d'Adelswärd-Fersen, who also moved to Italy. D'Adelswärd-Fersen established his residence on the island of Capri in the early 1900 after leaving Paris as a result of a sex scandal for his parties with half-naked teenage youths doing tableaux vivants based on scenes from classical antiquity. In Capri d'Adelswärd-Fersen built an eccentric, sumptuous house called Villa Lysis that became a center of the homosexual expatriate colony until his death in 1923. On August 15, 1974, on the day of the most important summer holiday in Italy called *ferragosto*, Ontani staged a tableau vivant at Villa Lysis in honor of

¹³² On von Gloeden and Holland Day see Ellenzweig, *The Homoerotic Photograph*, 35–64; and Francesco Faeta, "Wilhelm von Gloeden: Per una lettura antropologica delle immagini," *Fotologia* 9 (May 1988): 88–104.

¹³³ Goffredo Parise, "Il parapittore di Roma," *Corriere della Sera*, Milan, December 8, 1983, 3; reprinted in *Luigi Ontani: Facciapule* (Turin: Allemandi, 1983), in *Artisti* (Vicenza: Neri Pozza, 1994), and in *Opere*, 2 vols. (Milan: A. Mondadori, 1987–1989).

¹³⁴ Ontani, personal interview, 12 June 2010.

d'Adelswärd-Fersen. He entitled it *Pellegrinaggio alla Villa Lysis in ricordo del barone poeta Jacques d'Adelswärd-Fersen (Pilgrimage to the Villa Lysis in Memory of the Baron and Poet Jacques d'Adelswärd-Fersen)*.¹³⁵ As the art critic and gallerist Mario Diacono wrote, Ontani staged his tableau “seated on a bench of Villa Lysis in Capri, while reading Peyrefitte’s *The Exile of Capri*.”¹³⁶ A photograph of this tableau vivant was included in an object—a dodecahedron with twelve pentagons encasing a different image each (fig. 140)—exhibited as part of an installation entitled *Pentagonia* (1979) that was presented for the first time at the gallery of Diacono in Bologna in 1979.¹³⁷

In Bernardo Bertolucci’s colossal two-part film *Novecento* (1976) there is a reference to D’Adelswärd-Fersen’s and Von Gloeden’s tableau photos, at the beginning of the second part of the film, when the uncle Ottavio is taking an “artistic photograph”—a tableau vivant of naked local youths with crowns of laurel on their heads, up on the rocks of an island, perhaps Capri or Sicily (fig. 141).¹³⁸ In 1978, the Neapolitan gallerist Lucio Amelio hosted an exhibition of von Gloeden’s photos, alongside works by Beuys, Pistoletto, and Warhol. Amelio opened his gallery in 1965 with the name “Modern Art Agency,” which soon became one of the most progressive spaces dedicated to

¹³⁵ A photographic “souvenir” of the tableau vivant was published in Helena Kontová and Giancarlo Politi, eds., “Romanticismo Post-concettuale/Post-conceptual Romanticism,” *Flash Art*, no. 78–79, November–December 1977, 28.

¹³⁶ Mario Diacono, *pentagonia* (exhibition pamphlet), 14 May–4 June 1979, Via S. Stefano 20 Bologna, np. This pamphlet was published on the occasion of the exhibition that Diacono dedicated to Ontani at his gallery.

¹³⁷ *Pentagonia* is in the Maramotti Collection in Reggio Emilia.

¹³⁸ Roberto Campari, *Il fantasma del bello: Iconologia del cinema italiano* (Venice: Marsilio, 1994), 155. Campari calls the laurel crowns “*corone grecizzanti*” (“Grecized crowns”).

contemporary art in Italy, where institutional support for contemporary art has been notoriously minimal. He offered Beuys his first Italian exhibition in 1971 and in 1974 he invited Ontani to perform his second tableau vivant, *Pulcinella* (see next chapter).

A publication richly illustrated accompanied the exhibition. It opened with von Gloeden's Orientalist *Self-portrait* (nd, fig. 142). Roland Barthes contributed the catalogue essay.¹³⁹ "Is Baron von Gloeden 'camp'?"—Barthes asks his readers at the beginning of his text. Perhaps, Barthes surmises, but above all he is a kitsch-man. For Barthes what makes von Gloeden's photographs "artistic" is their *mise-en-scène* quality, as in the "poses and decors"; what makes them most compelling is a "carnival" of contradictions (figs. 143–144). To paraphrase Barthes, then, the tableau-vivant strategy embraced by von Gloeden makes his photos artistic and the camp quality makes them most compelling. Although Barthes does not recognize this (he disregards the question of camp at the beginning of his text), it is about camp that he is writing:

The Baron's photographs are of a *ruthless* kind. And the sublime legend enters in collision (one has to use this word to understand our astonishment and perhaps our great joy) with the realism of the photographs; for what is a photograph thus conceived none other than an image where *all is seen*; a collection of details without hierarchy, without "order" (the great classical principle). These little Greek gods (already contradicted by their darkness) have dirty peasants' hands, badly cured fingernails, worn out and dirty feet; their foreskins are swollen and well in evidence, no longer stylized, that is, pointed and smaller; they are uncircumcised, this is all one sees.

Von Gloeden is mixing codes and languages: the classical and the realistic, the "sublime"

¹³⁹ Roland Barthes, *Wilhelm von Gloeden. Interventi di Joseph Beuys, Michelangelo Pistoletto, Andy Warhol* (Naples: Amelio editore, 1978), 11–12.

and the “anatomic,” “the most ‘cultured’ culture and the most luminous eroticism.” It is precisely this that makes the photos camp. Von Gloeden’s photographs, the *santini*, religious theater, and Ontani’s works all have in common the quality of being kitsch. But in Von Gloeden and Ontani the engagement with kitsch is connoted by a camp sensibility, associated with the principle of “the equivalence of all objects.”¹⁴⁰

In 1975 Ontani made his own camp version of the Olympus. The work features something comparable to the carnival of contradictions that Barthes detected in von Gloeden’s tableau photos of Sicilian youths posing as Greek gods.¹⁴¹ In a series of eleven poses Ontani impersonated a mix of Greek and Roman deities: Pan, Mercury, Saturn, Diana, Vulcan, Neptune, Jupiter, Apollo, Mars, Venus, Cupid (fig. 145; the list corresponds to the characters from left to right, top row first). In Greek mythology the Mount Olympus is home to the twelve principal deities of classical antiquity. Ontani’s elected pantheon includes eight of these deities, either in the Greek or Roman version, plus three deities of his own choice: Pan, Saturn, and Cupid. Entitled *Olimpo*, the work consists of individual photographs arranged along a horizontal line, adjacent to one another, as in an early Renaissance polyptych in which the figures of saints have been substituted with the figures of deities from classical antiquity. The photos of Pan and Cupid open and close the sequence. Lanfranco Secco Suardo took all the photographs in

¹⁴⁰ Sontag, *Against Interpretation*, 289.

¹⁴¹ Barthes, *Wilhelm von Gloeden*, 11.

a room with white floor and walls.¹⁴² Ontani posed close to the wall again, as in the *Bacchino* photos. Here the photographic slide projection of a bright blue sky with large clouds functioned as the theatrical backdrop.

For his impersonations Ontani used a mix of cheap props, such as cotton balls for Saturn's beard and a toy bow and arrow for Cupid, with more sophisticated props borrowed from Cinecittà, like a trident for Neptune and a gladiator helmet for Mars. Ontani's drag version of Venus has the posterior exposed, which is the deity's only attribute (second to last in the bottom row). Every other deity is identified by one or more objects. Ontani impersonated Pan, the Greek god of woods and herds associated with Bacchus, crouched down and holding the syrinx with one hand and with the other a pair of goat horns above his head (fig. 146). A fake fur covering the lower extremities mimics Pan's goat legs. At the opposite end of the sequence, Ontani impersonated Cupid in profile, with one knee down like in his earlier Annunciation poses. With his head turned towards the rest of the series, he is ready to shoot his arrow (fig. 147). Anatomic and unidealized details are mixed with citations from paintings, as in Ontani's impersonation of Apollo, based on one of the most famous Neoclassical paintings, Anton Raphael Mengs's ceiling fresco, the *Parnassus*, commissioned by the employer and patron of Winckelmann, the Cardinal Albani, for his new suburban Villa in 1761.

¹⁴² In the 1970s and 1980s Secco Suardo, who was originally from Lurano, in the Lombardy province of Bergamo, was living in Rome. He attended openings at L'Attico, where he met Ontani and they became friends. Later Secco Suardo moved back to Lurano where he founded an association dedicated to the promotion of culture around the restoration of antique and modern works of art called Associazione Giovanni Secco Suardo.

Identity as Shifter

Two of Ontani's tableau photos include the photographic reproduction of the artwork being recreated, entailing a *mise en abyme* or internal duplication of the image.¹⁴³ They are *Ecce Homo (d'après Reni)*, executed sometime between 1970 and 1972, and *SabineRatto (d'après David)*, dating from 1974, also published as *Rotondo David* in its tondo version. In *Ecce Homo (d'après Reni)*, Ontani enacted Reni's scourged Christ literally, holding in his left hand a small photographic reproduction of Reni's painting (fig. 148). The reproduction looks like a *santino* or a museum postcard. As in the case of the Saint Sebastian, Reni painted several versions of this subject and the one Ontani used, once again, is the version in the collection of the Pinacoteca Nazionale in Bologna. Ontani also made a version of this tableau without the photographic reproduction of Reni's painting (fig. 149).

SabineRatto (d'après David) exists in two versions in which Ontani enacts two different figures from Jacques-Louis David's *Sabine Women* (1799)—a large, complex group painting of a convulsive fight, visually orchestrated by a combination of theatrical body gestures of figures in the foreground and architectural and landscape elements in the background that echo each other (fig. 150). In his tableau photos based on this painting, Ontani impersonated the two male figures that are near the margins of the scene, on the right and left. Both works feature Ontani completely naked with a red drapery falling down his neck or shoulder, as he holds open at the double-page spread reproduction of

¹⁴³ The term “*mise en abyme*” was coined by André Gide in a text from 1893 and it designates a work within a work or internal duplication of the same work.

the painting the issue of “I Maestri del Colore” dedicated to the French Neoclassical painter (figs. 151–152).¹⁴⁴

In the first tableau photo Ontani impersonated the figure of the Sabine King Tatius, under attack by Romulus (fig. 151). He staged the posture literally: the body is in frontal view, the face in profile, one leg is bent, the other straight, one arm is down, the other up. However, there are no sword and shield in Ontani’s recreation. All he is holding in his hands is the Fabbri publication, which takes the place of Tatius’ shield. In the second tableau photo Ontani enacts a much less virile figure, an ephebic groom (identifiable by the phrygian cap), who does not take part in the fight, but observes it from a distance, as he is about to walk away from it (fig. 152). Robert Rosenblum wrote that with this work Ontani “restored, with an acute intuition, the intense illusion of a theatrical spectacle that David himself had in mind when he presented his canvas to the public for the first time in 1799.”¹⁴⁵ In David’s painting, this figure functions as a counterpart of the viewer, bridging representation and reality. This is also a figure that lends a homoerotic touch to the scene. It comes to no surprise that Ontani’s recreation became his most reproduced works of this kind.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴⁴ Alvar González-Palacios, *David* (Milan: Fratelli Fabbri Editori, 1966), ill. X–XI.

¹⁴⁵ Robert Rosenblum, “Sur les Sabines,” in *David contre David: Actes du colloque organisé au musée du Louvre par le service culturel du 6 au 10 décembre 1989*, Régis Michel, ed., vol I (Paris: La documentation Française, 1993), 469.

¹⁴⁶ Most notably *Sabine Ratto (d’après David)* was on the cover of RoseLee Goldberg’s second edition of her book on the history of performance art, *Performance Art: From Futurism to the Present*, published in 1988 (fig. 153). To date this is still the main reference book on the subject. The first edition came out in 1979 with Oskar Schlemmer on the cover; the third edition, published in 2001, had Matthew Barney, substituted with Mike Kelley in the 2011 reprint.

In this tableau photo Ontani is pointing his finger at the figure he is redoing. This is what Umberto Eco calls a “deictic shifter.” As Eco explains in his *Theory of Semiotics* (1976), a shifter or “non-verbal pointer” has a deictic function when it includes a forward pointing gesture, as a pointing finger or directional arrow (“deictic” comes from the Greek *deiknynai*, which means “to show”). A champion of semiotics since the late 1960s and the first to teach it in Italy, starting in 1971 at the University of Bologna, Eco developed the idea of the “non-verbal pointer” from Roman Jakobson’s notion of “indexical symbol” or “shifter.”¹⁴⁷ Examples of shifters in linguistics are adverbs and pronouns such as “here/there,” “this/that.” In an article published in 1957, entitled “Shifters, Verbal Categories, and the Russian Verb,” Jakobson argues that a shifter combines both indexical and symbolic functions, hence the expression “indexical symbol.” In *Theory of Semiotics*, Eco expands the notion of shifter to include non-verbal signs, which he calls “non-verbal pointers,” and distinguishes between the “deictic” and the “anaphoric” function of the shifter. He transcribes the deictic function as an arrow pointing forward and the anaphoric function as arrow pointing backward since the anaphora is a sign that takes its referent from a previous or preceding object.

According to Eco’s scheme, Ontani’s tableau works are anaphoric shifters, while the tableau photos that include the photographic reproduction of the artwork being recreated are deictic shifters. Based on this semiotic distinction, all of Ontani’s tableau

¹⁴⁷ Umberto Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979), 115–121. A linguist and critic of poetry, Roman Jakobson was greatly influential on literary structuralism and semiotics. He adopted the term “shifter” from Otto Jespersen, who first introduced it into linguistics in the early 1920s (Otto Jespersen, *Language: Its Nature, Development and Origin* [New York: Holt, 1923]).

works are shifters. They highlight that identity cannot be assigned truth value out of context, as it is contingent, contextual, relational. The impossibility of a context-free shifter parallels the impossibility of a context-free identity. This connects back to Butler's notion of the performativity of identity and the idea that identity is construed in and through relations with others and a world. Like a linguistic shifter, identity, cannot signify in the vacuum. It is an effect, rather than a cause.

Chapter 3

“Give Him a Mask and He Will Tell You the Truth”¹

Everything that is profound loves
the mask . . . Every profound
spirit needs a mask; nay, more,
around every profound spirit
there continually grows a mask.
—Friedrich Nietzsche,
Beyond Good and Evil (1886)²

Neither at things, nor at people should one
look. Only in mirrors should one look, for
mirrors do but show us masks.
—Oscar Wilde, *Salomé* (1891)³

In this chapter I argue that a subtext of Ontani’s tableau-vivant practice is the notion of identity as mask. I show that this aspect of Ontani’s work was in line with the most advanced contemporaneous philosophical inquiries concerning the subject, which was no longer conceivable as singular, coherent, and stable. This chapter is divided into three sections. In the first I consider two types mask, that which reveals and that which conceals, in relation to Ontani’s tableau work, Achille Bonito Oliva’s writings, and the socio-political climate of the *anni di piombo*, or “years of lead.” In this section I also

¹ Oscar Wilde, “The Critic as Artist” (1891), in *The Artist as Critic: Critical Writings of Oscar Wilde*, ed. Richard Ellmann (New York: Random House, 1968), 389.

² Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, trans. H. Zimmern (New York: Macmillan, 1914), 54 and 56.

³ Oscar Wilde, *Complete Works of Oscar Wilde* (London: Collins, 1966), 228.

propose a political reading of Ontani's tableau work. In the second section I situate the notion of identity as mask within the philosophical ecosystem of post-1968 Europe, analyzing in particular the contribution of Gianni Vattimo. The third section is dedicated to the tableaux vivants Ontani staged between 1974 and 1979. These works furthered Ontani's investigation into the theatricality and performativity of identity, for with live performances the porosity between reality and fiction is all the more apparent.

1. The Mask that Reveals and the Mask that Conceals

One of Ontani's earliest tableau photos shows him covered in a bed sheet (fig. 155). Entitled *Fantôme* (1970), the work has had a "ghostly" existence, having been rarely published and exhibited. For an eye attuned to the history of Italian painting, the configuration of folds in *Fantôme* evokes the subject of the enthroned Madonna with Child. The black triangle in the middle of the composition adds another camp layer to this association, as it is at once a symbol of female genitalia and the shape of a male urinal (a connection on which Marcel Duchamp based his ready-made from 1917, *Fountain*). The red plastic cloth enveloping the chair in Vasco Bendini's *Come è (As Is)* (1966) comes to mind (fig. 5). There, the covering stands for the three-dimensional mirror image of the spectator, as underneath the cloth a speaker faithfully repeats the words of the spectator-turned-performer, seated on another chair in front of the one covered in red plastic. The performances of Michelangelo Pistoletto's theater troupe, named Lo Zoo, also come to mind. Pistoletto formed the troupe with a group of friends

and fellow artists in early 1968. Lo Zoo was active until October 1970. They staged scenarios dressed in Medieval costumes, typically outdoors, in the streets and squares of cities and villages in Italy and around Europe, like contemporary *trovatori* or *troubadours*. A prop they often used in their performances was a large, square white sheet. At the beginning a framing device, laid on the ground to demarcate the area of the performance, the white sheet was later adopted as a means to create a kind of collective sculptural group, dropped over the characters during the performances (fig. 156). The white sheet became a form of mask manifesting another entity, one that is collective.⁴

The notion of manifestation or revelation, as in making visible, is embodied in the title of Ontani's piece, *Fantôme*. In French there are two words for phantasm: *fantôme* and *fantasme*. While the latter designates the product of an interior activity, the former is its personification, objectification, or exteriorization.⁵ Thus *fantôme* is *fantasme* made visible. An expedient for the revelation of a *fantasme* is the bed sheet, which is the protagonist of Ontani's tableau photo. *Fantôme*, therefore, is the mask that reveals. Not without a comical twist, as bed sheets and ghost stories are part of children's games and fantasies, Ontani's *Fantôme* speaks of the truth that "there is no 'being' behind the doing, acting, becoming; the 'doer' has simply been added to the deed by imagination," as

⁴ Pan Wendt wrote on the uses and meanings of the white sheet in the performances of Lo Zoo. See his "Social Fabric," *Fillip Review*, n. 7 (Spring 2008): 3, 6, 26.

⁵ See Elizabeth Durot-Bouc , "Le fant me et le fantasme," in *Spectres des Lumi res : du frissonnement au frisson: Mutations gothiques du XVIII au XXI si cle* (Paris: Publibook, 2006), 167.

Nietzsche put it.⁶

Achille Bonito Oliva also engaged with the theme of the mask in his early writings and curatorial work. In 1970 he published an essay, entitled “Circostanze magiche,” that opens with a quote from philosopher Eugen Fink, who, in the footsteps of Nietzsche, wrote that “appearance is a mask behind which there is nobody, behind which there is nothing, if not the nothingness.”⁷ In this essay, Bonito Oliva articulates the notion of “the magic territory,” tying it to the question of identity, social reality, and appropriation:

To the impossibility of reality, the artist responds with the last frontier of the magic territory, where they can find an identity between image and fantasy [. . .]. Laing enunciates the procedures of magic acquisition of reality: *touching, copying, imitating, magic forms of theft*. [. . .] Theft, furthermore, consists of investing these forms of appropriation with a sense of identity that remains internal to aesthetic experience.⁸

In that same year, 1970, Bonito Oliva curated a show dedicated to the theme of the mask in relation to identity. Entitled *Persona*, the exhibition was part of the International Festival of Theater held in Belgrade. It was accompanied by a text that emphasizes the idea of identity as mask and the notion that mask is something that reveals, rather than hides:

The word *Persona* is Latin; [it] means disguise, or one’s external appearance simulated on stage, and in particular it often refers to a face disguise, such as a

⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), 45.

⁷ Achille Bonito Oliva, “Le circostanze magiche,” *Collage*, n. 5 (December 1970): 3. All translations into English are mine unless otherwise credited.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 4–5.

mask or visor. From the stage the term has been applied to every performance, in speech or action, in court as in theater. Thus *Persona* is the same as Actor, both on stage and in everyday conversation.

Personality is *persona*, a mask. The world is a stage, being [is] a theatrical creation. Thus being [is] an enacted character. [. . .]

A person is always make-belief or artificial, *persona ficta*. A person is never himself, he is always a mask; a person never possesses his own person, but always represents another by whom he is possessed.⁹

In his early work, Bonito Oliva drew on different intellectual sources, including Shakespeare. Bonito Oliva's sentence "the world is a stage" is another version of the oft-quoted statement "all the world's a stage," from Shakespeare's play, *As You Like It* (1623). A less apparent and less discussed influence on Bonito Oliva in the early 1970s was Ludwig Binswanger.

A student of Carl Jung, Binswanger was the first to apply Martin Heidegger's existential analysis and Edmund Husserl's phenomenology to psychiatry and psychology, giving birth to an anthropological approach to human behaviors that traditional psychiatry identified as pathologies of the individual, unrelated to the socio-historical context. He termed this approach *Daseinanalyse* or analysis of a person's *Dasein*, or being-in-the-world. In an essay on mannerism and the specific set of behaviors that clinical psychiatry associates with it, Binswanger provided a *Daseinanalyse* of mannerism.¹⁰ Considering both clinical cases of human behaviors deemed manneristic and the literature on mannerism as an artistic style, Binswanger concluded that

⁹ Idem, *Persona* (Florence: CentroDi, 1971), np. (translation amended).

¹⁰ Mannerism with a lower "m" distinguishes the term from Mannerism as a historical category. The word Mannerism gained currency in German scholarship of the 1920s in reference to Italian art produced between 1520 and the end of the sixteenth century.

mannerism “is possible in every epoch.” He defined it as a way of coping with the anguish derived from the loss or failing of meaning in a given historical period.¹¹

For Binswanger the main characteristics of mannerism are the use of citation, the pose, and the mask. The “mask” of the mannerists, Binswanger explains, is not the common mask that covers and hides. Rather, it involves full identification, that is, existing “as mask,” not behind it.¹² Binswanger’s study was first published in 1956, at a time when German-speaking historians of literature and art, such as Ernst Robert Curtius and Gustav René Hocke, were contributing articles and books on the parallels between historical Mannerism and the twentieth century. It appeared in Italian translation in 1964. Binswanger’s ideas started to circulate in Italy thanks to Gillo Dorfles and became particularly influential in the 1960s and 1970s.¹³ Although circumscribed to a particular set of historical and existential circumstances, the mask in Binswanger reveals, rather than hides.

In a presentation Bonito Oliva gave in March of 1972 at the Incontri Internazionali d’Arte, the main non-profit association in Rome to promote contemporary art, he spoke of the affinities between sixteenth-century Mannerism and the contemporary period. The lecture was entitled “La citazione deviata: l’ideologia” (“Deviated Citation: Ideology”) and was published a year later. It was part of a series of evening lectures

¹¹ Ludwig Binswanger, *Drei Formen missglückten Daseins: Verstiegtheit, Verschrobenheit, Manieriertheit* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1956), 131. The third (and last) section of the book is dedicated to mannerism (ibid., 92–197). This book has not been translated into English.

¹² Ibid., 115.

¹³ For this insight I ought to thank a young scholar of Dorfles’s work, Antonello Tolve. See his *Gillo Dorfles: Arte e critica d’arte nel secondo Novecento* (Naples: La Città del Sole, 2011).

offered throughout the month of March entitled “Critica in atto” (“Critics in Action”). All the main art critics and historians of the day were invited to present.¹⁴ In his presentation, Bonito Oliva said that

starting with Mannerism, the artist loses their *direct* relation to the world and acquires a poisonous position of *lateralità* from which to observe reality, which escapes them along tortuous and impassable paths, outside their sphere of influence. The present becomes an impracticable time, in which it is only possible to resort to memory and the past, thus to culture. Art does not have a direct grip on the world but only exists as possibility and *deviated citation*. Here deviating is a subversive tactic used on a codified language that simulates a reality already modified and unrecognizable.¹⁵

Bonito Oliva was building on Binswanger’s *Daseinanalyse* of mannerism and also on European art-historical and literary scholarship of the 1950s and 1960s that thematized

¹⁴ The list of presenters includes Giulio Carlo Argan, Alberto Boatto, Luciano Caramel, Mario Diacono, Germano Celant, Renato Barilli, Marisa Volpi Orlandini, Maurizio Fagiolo, Vittorio Rubiu, Filiberto Menna, Maurizio Calvesi, Daniela Palazzoli, Paolo Fossati, Tommaso Trini, Catherine Millet, and more.

¹⁵ Achille Bonito Oliva, “La citazione deviata: l’ideologia,” in *Critica in atto, 6–30 Marzo 1972* (Rome: Incontri Internazionali d’Arte, 1973), 157. [Col manierismo l’artista perde di *frontalità* col mondo e acquista una velenosa posizione di *lateralità*, da cui osservare la realtà che gli sfugge lungo vie tortuose e imprevedibili al di fuori della sua sfera di influenza. Il presente diventa per lui un tempo impraticabile, in cui è possibile solamente far ricorso alla memoria e al passato, quindi alla cultura. L’arte non è presa immediatamente sul mondo ma soltanto possibilità e *citazione deviata*. Dove la deviazione è la tattica eversiva su di un linguaggio codificato che simula una realtà ormai modificata e irriconoscibile.] In a text from 1998 Bonito Oliva ties Transavanguardia to Mannerism, arguing that they have in common an acknowledgment of the semantic catastrophe of all artistic languages and their relative ideologies of totality (“Prefazione,” *L’ideologia del traditore: Arte, maniera, manierismo* [revised edition; Milan: Electa, 1998], 17).

the parallel between Mannerism and the twentieth century.¹⁶ For Bonito Oliva the crisis that distinguished Mannerism is reflected in the modern condition of artists and intellectuals, in their “social uprootedness,” which prevents them from identifying a role and function they can have in society.¹⁷ Hence “schizophrenia becomes a normal way to live the conflicts of the world.” A fulfilling relationship with the world is impossible; making contact with external reality can only be a “halved possibility (*possibilità dimezzata*),” through parody, “*fuga*,” or flight, and “deviated citation.”¹⁸ These are strategies that Ontani embraced in his tableau-vivant practice in the 1970s. Mindful of these discussion of mannerism, Ontani said that his work is “a form of mannerism” that

¹⁶ The most important example is Arnold Hauser’s study from 1964, *Mannerism: The Crisis of the Renaissance and the Origin of Modern Art*, translated into Italian a year later. From the 1950s, see for instance Giorgio Melchiori, *The Tightrope Walkers: Studies of Mannerism in Modern English Literature* (London: Routledge & Paul, 1956); and also Gustav René Hocke’s *Die Welt als Labyrinth: Manier und Manie in der europäischen Kunst. Beiträge zur Ikonographie und Formgeschichte der europäischen Kunst von 1520 bis 1650 und der Gegenwart (The World as Labyrinth: Mannerism and Manner in European Art. Contributions on Iconography and the History of Forms in European Art from 1520 to 1650 and the Present, 1957)* and *Manierismus in der Literatur: Sprach-Alchimie und esoterische Kombinationskunst (Mannerism in Literature: The Alchemy of Language and the Secret Art of Combination, 1959)*. Melchiori’s book was published in Italian translation in 1974 as *I funamboli: Il manierismo nella letteratura inglese. Da Joyce ai giovani arrabbiati* (Turin: Einaudi). While Hocke’s first book was published in Italian translation in 1989, the second appeared in 1965 and a citation from it appears as the epigraph of Achille Bonito Oliva’s book on Mannerism, *L’ideologia del traditore: Arte, maniera, manierismo (The Ideology of the Traitor: Art, Manner and Mannerism, 1976)*: “The Mannerist attitude is the attitude of crisis, of peripeteia, of cosmic angst.”

¹⁷ Bonito Oliva was also building on characterizations of Mannerism, common in Italian art-historical scholarship of the 1960s, as a climate of acute instability and Mannerist artists as eccentric, aloof individuals—the first *artistes maudits* in the history of Italian art was dominant in art-scholarship scholarship of the 1960s. A preeminent example of this scholarship is Giuliano Briganti’s *La maniera italiana* (1961).

¹⁸ The adjective “*dimezzata*” may come from the title of Calvino’s novel, *Il visconte dimezzato (The Cloven Vicount, 1952)*, the first of a trilogy, which includes *Il barone rampante (The Baron in the Trees, 1957)* e *Il cavaliere inesistente (The Nonexistent Knight, 1959)*. Some intriguing thematic overlaps could be explored here. Bonito Oliva was also building on characterizations of Mannerism, common in Italian art-historical scholarship of the 1960s, as a climate of acute instability and Mannerist artists as eccentric, aloof individuals—the first *artistes maudits* in the history of Italian art was dominant in art-scholarship scholarship of the 1960s

helps him deal with everyday life.¹⁹ Bonito Oliva's lecture foreshadowed some of the themes he used later to promote the Transavanguardia group. In a text from 1998 Bonito Oliva tied Transavanguardia to Mannerism, arguing that they have in common an acknowledgment of the semantic catastrophe of all artistic languages and their relative ideologies of totality.

For the evening of his presentation, Bonito Oliva picked two works to be put on display as representative of his point of view on contemporary art: Gino De Dominicis's *Immortalità (Immortality)*, 1971, and Vettor Pisani's *Inclinazione al dolore (Inclination to Pain)*, 1972 (figs. 157–158). The work by Pisani consists of a photographic print of Caravaggio's *Narcissus* in which the artist obscured the reflected image of Narcissus. Pisani said that he installed the work "obliquely," at an angle, leaning forward, away from the wall, hence the title *Inclination to Pain*. The work represents a core aspect of the artist's thought, his interest in "the continuous shift between negativity and truth, paradox and doubt." It carries out the "fluctuating metamorphosis between life and death, one and many, reality and fiction."²⁰

When Bonito Oliva presented his lecture, Italy was going through the darkest period in postwar history, known as the *anni di piombo*, characterized by internal terrorism from both the right and the left, and great public confusion in terms of the responsibility for the bombing attacks perpetrated by neofascist groups throughout the

¹⁹ Luigi Ontani, "Ceri d'Ontano: A Dialogue between Cerith Wyn Evans & Luigi Ontani," *Nero*, n. 21 (Autumn 2009): 35.

²⁰ Vettor Pisani, personal written communication, dated March 3, 2011.

1970s. The tragic event that marked the beginning of the *anni di piombo* is the Strage di Piazza Fontana in Milan in December of 1969. An explosive planted inside the Banca Nazionale dell'Agricoltura resulted in seventeen people dead and over eighty wounded. At first investigators targeted as responsible anarchist groups on the basis of available evidence. Later they steered in the opposite direction and accused neofascist groups, which evidently acted in ways that would lead to blaming the extreme left. This is what was later called “the strategy of tension.”

The strategy of tension was aimed at destabilizing, creating panic, and diminishing support for the left and the workers movement, which had gained momentum in the fall of 1969, when nearly one and a half million workers went on strike in all the major industrial cities of Italy. Motivated by a strong anti-Communist sentiment, in the late 1960s and early 1970s the strategy of tension aspired to clear the path for an authoritarian type of government. One of the most infamous and forgotten initiatives of the strategy of tension was the Golpe Borghese, an attempted coup d'état aimed at forcing the President of the Republic to dissolve Parliament and form an emergency government of militaries and civilians. The Golpe Borghese was carried out by Junio Valerio Borghese, a former commander of the Republic of Salò in the final years of World War II.²¹ In recent journalistic and scholarly reconstructions, the armed struggles of the *anni di piombo* have been defined as an anomalous version of civil war—a “creeping civil

²¹ On the Golpe Borghese see Adriano Monti, *Il “Golpe Borghese”: Parola d'ordine Tora Tora, un golpe virtuale all'italiana* (Bologna: Lo Scarabeo, 2006).

war,” a “low-intensity civil war.”²² Some have preferred to avoid the controversial and emotionally charged expression of civil war, replacing it with the concept of “violent political conflict.”²³ According to statistics issued by the Interior Ministry, over 400 people were killed during the *anni di piombo*.²⁴ Specific to the Italian case was widespread political violence that brought about more than 11,000 violent episodes by nearly 600 different terrorist groups from both the left and the right. Overall about 47 per cent of the acts of terrorism have been attributed to the left and 53 per cent to the right.²⁵

An early tableau photo by Ontani can be interpreted as an allegory for the onset of the *anni di piombo* and of the mask that hides and remains the same, as in the clandestine activities of the terrorists, the cover-ups of the strategy of tension, and also bourgeois hypocrisy and conformism, which Pasolini in 1974 called “the true fascism.”²⁶ Entitled *La caduta dei ciechi d’après Brueghel (The Fall of the Blind after Brueghel, c. 1970)*, the

²² These expressions were popularized by the publication of two books in forms of interviews with Giovanni Pellegrino, Chair of the Parliamentary Commission for the Failed Identification of the Authors of the Massacres: Giovanni Fasanella and Claudio Sestieri with Giovanni Pellegrino, *Segreto di Stato: La verità da Gladio al caso Moro* (Turin: Einaudi, 2000); and Giovanni Fasanella and Giovanni Pellegrino, *La guerra civile. Da Salò a Berlusconi* (Milan: BUR Biblioteca Univerzale Rizzoli, 2005).

²³ William J. Long and Peter Brecke, *War and Reconciliation: Reason and Emotion in Conflict Resolution* (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 2003), 7.

²⁴ Cindy C. Combs and Martin Slann, *Encyclopedia of Terrorism* (New York: Facts on File, 2002), 99.

²⁵ On the intricate, sly dynamics of the strategy of tension see Anna Cento Bull, *Italian Neofascism: The Strategy of Tension and the Politics of Nonreconciliation* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2007); Virgilio Ilari, *Guerra civile* (Rome: Ideazione, 2001); and Philip Willan, *Puppetmasters: The Political Use of Terrorism in Italy* (Lincoln: iUniverse, 1991). The first two are scholarly books, the third is not, but it provides useful documentary evidence. For a day-by-day chronology of terrorist activities in the 1970s in Italy, see Tullio Barbato, *Il terrorismo in Italia negli anni settanta: cronaca e documentazione* (Milano: Editrice Bibliografica, 1980). Barbato was a journalist and editor for one of the most popular daily newspapers published in Milan called *La Notte*.

²⁶ Pasolini used this expression in the course of an interview aired on the RAI TV network on February 7, 1974. He wrote on homologation and conformism as a kind of fascism in a series of articles that appeared the following summer in popular daily newspapers such as *Il Corriere della Sera*, later published in *Scritti Corsari* (Milan: Garzanti, 1975), 46–52 and 53–59.

work transforms the figures in Brueghel's *Parable of the Blind*, also known as *The Blind Leading the Blind* (1568, fig. 159), into a series of body shadows cast on a white background (fig. 160). Ontani conceived this work in the form of a sequence of slide projections. He realized it in collaboration with Cesare Bastelli at a small experimental theater in Bologna called Teatro Evento.²⁷ Brueghel's painting, held in an Italian public collection, the Capodimonte Museum in Naples, depicts a story from the Gospel of Matthew that exemplifies the human tendency of blindly following leaders. In real life the painting looks out of focus, as if seen by a visually impaired person. At the time it was executed, in 1568, Catholics and Protestants used the biblical parable to accuse one another of spiritual blindness. In his impersonations of the figures in the painting, Ontani simplified their individual postures, making them either frontal or in profile. This simplification accentuates the sense of anonymity and grimness implied in Ontani's rendering of the figures as black silhouettes.

If *The Fall of the Blind after Brueghel* is an allegory of the onset of the *anni di piombo* and of the mask that does not change and hides, Ontani's tableau-vivant practice, together with the citationist trends of the 1960s, as in the work of Italian Pop artists, and the revival of the tableau vivant as an artistic strategy in Italy in the late 1960s and early 1970s, anticipated the "culture of revival" that characterized the period from 1974 to 1980. Writer Alberto Arbasino coined the expression "culture of revival" in his *Un paese senza* (1980), a text dedicated to the Italian 1970s. Bonito Oliva pitched the revival of

²⁷ Cesare Bastelli, personal interview, 15 June 2010, Castello d'Argile (Bologna), audio recording.

the past as the only strategy left to artists at a time characterized by ideological bankruptcy when he launched the Transavanguardia movement on the pages of *Flash Art* in 1979. He defined this strategy as the distinguishing mark and the historical justification of Transavanguardia, when, indeed, this strategy was far from being a prerogative of Transavanguardia. Bonito Oliva's idea was simply a convenient fiction to promote the group.

One gets a sense of the general perception of 1974 as a turning point by reading an article penned by Gianni Contessi, an art critic and historian from Turin. In this article, entitled "Nuovo manierismo/ New Mannerism" and published in the art magazine *Data*, Contessi addresses the great disillusionment with politics that was affecting Italian artists and intellectuals at the time. He argues that "a real mannerist 'outbreak'" has emerged in contemporary art, film, and architecture. He analyzes works that he identifies as part of this trend, and Pasolini's and Ontani's feature prominently in his account. For Contessi the common denominator of this trend is the adoption of "quotations within quotes." As limiting as this definition may be, Contessi's article contributes relevant insights into the loss of hopes that distinguished the most acutely violent phase of the *anni di piombo*, known as *riflusso*, or "withdrawal." At the end of the article, Contessi problematizes the view that considers these citationist works as "regressive, like a right turn in politics." In the wake of the failure of the 1968 revolution, notes Contessi, all hopes that art could have a strong impact on society seem to have waned, giving way to

skepticism. What may initially appear as “an art of evasion,” Contessi concludes, may actually stem from an awareness of art’s “‘operative’ limits.”²⁸

2. Identity as Mask

In the context of the 1970s, “the Golden Years of Performance,” as RoseLee Goldberg put it,²⁹ Ontani and the other Italian practitioners of the tableau vivant stand out for their engagement with theatricality and role-playing. This engagement brings out a notion of the subject as a bundle of masks rather than built around a stable core. It has been said that the notion of the subject as multiplied and fragmented is typical of postmodern sensibility. Cultural critics have recognized the experience of image culture with the consequent loss of the referent as key to the decentering of subjectivity:

The individual, represented, and reproduced by the technology of images, is transformed in icon and simulacrum, becomes a fictional character, enters a novel or a film, can migrate from that novel and film into another novel or film, or return to the world of lived reality.³⁰

Before the word postmodernism came into vogue, throughout the 1960s and 1970s

²⁸ Gianni Contessi, “Nuovo manierismo/ New Mannerism,” *Data*, n. 13 (fall 1974): 61–66. An English summary of the essay is on page 60. Apropos Italian artists and their political involvement, it should be noted that there is a diffuse misconception of Arte Povera artists as politically engaged due to the tone of Celant’s rhetorics in promoting the movement. Although in the launching manifesto he hailed the Arte Povera artists as “guerrilla warriors,” in fact they often did not get involved in protests. Boetti stated that he “witnessed all those political things in a detached way, without criticism,” and commented on the fact that the other Arte Povera artists were seldom involved. See Germano Celant, “Arte Povera: Appunti per una guerriglia,” *Flash Art*, n. 5 (December 1967): 3; and Alighiero Boetti, interviewed by Gabriele Perretta, “L’arte, gli artisti e il ’68,” *Flash Art* (Italian edition), n. 147 (December 1988–January 1989), 69.

²⁹ RoseLee Goldberg, “Performance: The Golden Years,” in *The Art of Performance: A Critical Anthology*, Gregory Battcock and Robert Nickas, eds. (New York: E. P. Dutton Inc., 1984), 72.

³⁰ Remo Ceserani, *Raccontare il postmoderno* (1997; second reprint, Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 2009), 142.

thinkers such as Roland Barthes, Gilles Deleuze, Jacques Derrida, and Michel Foucault questioned the Enlightenment idea of the subject as an autonomous agent and a transcendental source of meaning.³¹ They laid the foundations for subsequent theories that threw light on the connection between the decentering of subjectivity, the loss of the referent, and the proliferation of image culture, as exemplified by Jean Baudrillard's work.

An aspect of image culture with which Ontani's tableau work engages pertains to the upsetting of the hierarchy of original over copy. As Gillo Dorfles notes in his essay on kitsch from 1968, mechanical and electronic reproductions can appear "more attractive, more beautiful and more effective than the originals."³² Philosophers have theorized this epistemological shift. Most famously, in "La précession des simulacres" ("The Precession of Simulacra," 1981) Baudrillard claims that the mass media world in which we live is a world of simulacra, or images that have lost any stable relationships to any reality, leading to a state of hyperreality, or self-referential signs.³³ Prior to Baudrillard and far from his dystopian view, Gilles Deleuze wrote on the simulacrum in the mid-1960s and Mario Perniola, a lesser-known Italian philosopher, in the late 1970s.

³¹ For a survey on this topic, see Raymond Martin and John Barresi, "Paradise Lost," in *The Rise and Fall of Soul and Self: An Intellectual History of Personal Identity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 255–289.

³² Gillo Dorfles, "Kitsch," in *Kitsch: The World of Bad Taste* (New York: Universe Books, 1969), 32.

³³ Jean Baudrillard, "The Precession of Simulacra," in *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1994), 1–42.

Based on a rereading of Plato through Nietzsche, Deleuze's theorization of the simulacrum was first published in the essay "Renverser le platonisme (Les simulacres)," in 1966. It was later included in the book *Logique du sens* (*The Logic of Sense*, 1969). Deleuze's essay first appeared in the Italian translation of the book, published by Feltrinelli in 1975 as a paperback. This was eight years prior to the first English translation of the essay in the art history journal *October* and fifteen prior to the publication of the book in English.³⁴ This is to say that this text by Deleuze was made available to Italian readers earlier and more broadly. I maintain that Renato Barilli's response to and promotion of Ontani's tableau works in the early 1970s was informed by his knowledge of Deleuze's ideas.³⁵

In his text Deleuze argues that the simulacrum is not simply a copy of a copy, a degraded copy, as Plato had it. The nature of the simulacrum is different from a copy altogether: "the problem no longer has to do with the distinction Essence-Appearance or Model-Copy." The simulacrum internalizes "at least two divergent series," though "neither can be assigned as the original, neither as the copy."³⁶ While in the *Sophist* Plato divides the domain of images-idols in *copies-icons*, which are "well-founded pretenders,

³⁴ Gilles Deleuze, "Renverser le platonisme (Les simulacres)," *Revue de la Métaphysique et de Morale*, n. 4 (October–December 1966): 426–438; then reprinted in *Logique du sens* with the title "Platon et la simulacre." This essay was first translated into English by Rosalind Krauss and published in *October* 27 (Winter, 1983), 45–56. It was then included in *The Logic of Sense*, trans. Mark Lester and Charles Stivale, ed. Constantin V. Boundas (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 253–266.

³⁵ Barilli acknowledged that the title of his show from 1974, *La ripetizione differente*, was after Deleuze's *Différence et répétition* (*Difference and Repetition*, 1968), available in Italian translation in 1971 thanks to the Bolognese publishing house Il Mulino (Barilli, *Autoritratto a stampa* [Bologna: Fausto Luperti editore, 2010], 171 and 192.). Even in this case the English translation of Deleuze came out a lot later, in 1994.

³⁶ Gilles Deleuze, "The Simulacrum and Ancient Philosophy," in *The Logic of Sense*, trans. Mark Lester and Charles Stivale, ed. Constantin V. Boundas (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 262.

guaranteed by resemblance,” and *simulacra-phantasms*, which are “false pretenders, built upon a dissimilarity,” Deleuze proposes to rehabilitate simulacra for their subversiveness: they pretend “against the father”; they belong to aesthetic existence, not to moral existence.³⁷

Deleuze counterposes the model of the Other to the Platonic model of the Same and Similar: “If the simulacrum still has a model, it is another model, a model of the Other (*l’Autre*),” of “becoming always other”; becoming, rather than being, informs the simulacrum. These two models correspond to two visions of the world.³⁸ On the one hand, there is the Platonic model, which corresponds to the world of copies and representations, and posits the world as “icon.” It “invites us to think difference from the standpoint of a previous similitude or identity.”³⁹ On the other hand, Deleuze’s model corresponds to the world of simulacra and posits the world as “phantasm.” It invites us to think similitude and even identity as the product of disparity. Although engulfed in dissimilarity, the simulacrum produces, as a whole, “an *effect* of resemblance”: “Resemblance subsists, but it is produced as an external effect of the simulacrum, inasmuch as it is built upon divergent series and makes them resonate.”⁴⁰

A distinguishing characteristic of the simulacrum is that it upsets the hierarchy of original over copy, model over reproduction, essence over appearance. In this subversion

³⁷ Ibid., 256–257.

³⁸ Ibid., 258.

³⁹ Ibid., 261.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 262.

of hierarchies lies the positive power of the simulacrum as the “phantasm of the eternal return.”⁴¹ Far from being a new foundation, the simulacrum “assures a universal breakdown (*effondrement*), but as a joyful and positive event, as an un-founding (*effondement*).” Nomadism and anarchy are attributes of the simulacrum, which “establishes the world of nomadic distributions and crowned anarchies.”⁴² Deleuze calls the simulacrum a “non-hierarchized work,” a “condensation of coexistences”—what later postmodern critics would call “pastiche.”

The simulacrum “designates the power of producing an *effect*,” it is “the triumph of the false pretender. It simulates at once the father, the pretender, and the fiancé in a *superimposition of masks*” (emphasis mine). In the simulacrum masks never end. The simulacrum is a “sign,” a “costume,” or rather a mask, expressing a process of disguising, where, behind each mask, there is yet another.”⁴³ Deleuze is adapting Nietzsche’s subversion of Plato’s myth of the cave from *Beyond Good and Evil* to the notion of the simulacrum. Deleuze quotes from Nietzsche: “behind each cave another that opens still more deeply, and beyond each surface a subterranean world yet more vast, more strange. Richer still . . . and under all foundations, under every ground, a subsoil still more profound.”⁴⁴ In his application of Nietzsche, Deleuze posits the simulacrum as a mask that, like the cave, reveals infinite other masks. It is clear that the mask implies

⁴¹ Ibid., 265.

⁴² Ibid., 263.

⁴³ Ibid., 262 and 263.

⁴⁴ *ibid.*, 263.

the idea of a subject and that therefore in the world of simulacra the subject has no stable, unified, coherent core, but just other masks. As Deleuze states at the beginning of his essay, “we have become simulacra. We have forsaken moral existence in order to enter into aesthetic existence.”⁴⁵ Ontani states that in his work he is “constantly undertaking a journey into identity: a sort of mirage where I use my facial and physical appearance as a simulacrum for further identities.”⁴⁶ I argue that the concept of the subject as mask that Deleuze intimates and that defies the distinction between essence and appearance is one of the main issues with which Ontani’s tableau-vivant practice engages. As I have shown in the previous chapter, this is an issue that relates to camp in its subversion of the binarism original/copy, true/fake. The idea of subject as mask is connected to the notion of identity as “a question of aesthetics,” a notion that is central to camp. As Jonathan Dollimore writes in his “Post/Modern: On the Gay Sensibility, or the Pervert’s Revenge on Authenticity—Wilde, Genet, Orton and Others” (1991), camp comes to life around the recognition that what seems like mimetic realism is actually “an effect of convention, genre, form, or some other kind of artifice.”⁴⁷

In parallel to French poststructuralist philosophers, Gianni Vattimo contributed to a redefinition of identity in a book published in 1974 dedicated to concept of the mask in

⁴⁵ Ibid., 257.

⁴⁶ Luigi Ontani, transcript of a lecture presented at Temple University, Rome, 4 October 2000 (my translation). This excerpt is published in a slightly different English translation in Alessandra Galasso et al., *Luigi Ontani: Genthara*, trans. Anita Joy Weston and Alessandra Galasso (Gent: S.M.A.K. and Roma: Italtre, 2003), 43.

⁴⁷ Jonathan Dollimore, *Sexual Dissidence: Augustine to Wilde, Freud to Foucault* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 311.

Nietzsche. Vattimo's interpretation of Nietzsche's notion of the the mask is key to an understanding of Ontani's tableau-vivant practice. One of the most important Italian philosophers, later to emerge as a leading theorist of postmodernity in the early 1980s, Vattimo was one of the founding members of the Turin unit of FUORI!, the first Italian gay liberation movement.⁴⁸ I propose to relate Vattimo's interest in the theme of the mask to his involvement with issues of homosexual identity, gender performativity, and masquerading, as part of his gay rights activism. Vattimo dedicated a book to the theme of the mask in Nietzsche. Entitled *Il soggetto e la maschera: Nietzsche e il problema della liberazione* (*The Subject and the Mask: Nietzsche and the Problem of Liberation*), the book has yet to be translated into English, unlike other texts by Vattimo.

Vattimo first published on Nietzsche in the early to mid-1960s, in the form of journal essays, and his first book on Nietzsche, *Ipotesi su Nietzsche*, came out in 1967.⁴⁹ *Il soggetto e la maschera* investigates the relevance of the notion of the mask in Nietzsche's writings, following the metamorphoses of this notion over time and tying it to other important concepts in his thought, such as fiction, illusion, and truth become fable.⁵⁰ These concepts, Vattimo explains at the onset of the book, are generally adopted,

⁴⁸ His name appears in an article published in the weekly news magazine *Panorama*, dedicated to the newly founded gay liberation movement in the issue dated June 24, 1971 (Gianni Rossi Barilli, *Il movimento gay in Italia* [Milan: Feltrinelli, 1999], 51).

⁴⁹ Some of these early writings have been republished in Gianni Vattimo, *Dialogo con Nietzsche. Saggi 1961–2000* (Milan: Garzanti, 2000), which has appeared in English translation: *Dialogue with Nietzsche*, trans. William McCuaig (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006).

⁵⁰ Gianni Vattimo, *Il soggetto e la maschera: Nietzsche e il problema della liberazione* (Milan: Bompiani, 2007), 9. The term "mask," Vattimo elucidates, does not recur in Nietzsche's writings as often as others, but the notion of mask is of major importance in the German philosopher's thought because it is tied to the concepts of fiction, illusion, and truth become fable.

in the scholarship on the German philosopher, in order to define and discuss the problem of the relationship between human beings and the world of symbols. The problem of the mask in Nietzsche, Vattimo argues, corresponds to the problem of the relationship between being and appearing, a central philosophical question that Nietzsche tackles in the first significant new way since Hegel, taking his cue from Schopenhauer, but going beyond Schopenhauer in his rejection of metaphysics and the pathos for the thing-in-itself that Schopenhauer inherited from Kant and Plato. It therefore marks the radical originality of Nietzsche's thought.⁵¹

According to Vattimo, when Nietzsche writes that existence is justified only as an aesthetic phenomenon, he means that existence is necessarily deception, illusion and appearance.⁵² Rather than maintaining the dichotomy between appearance and thing-in-itself, Nietzsche considers the world of appearances and their transformative forces to be the only real world. Rejecting the fundamental assumption of the unity of being, he yearns for a non-metaphysical redefinition of the relationship between being and appearing. It is within the parameters of this redefinition that Ontani's impersonations operate. Illuminating in this respect is a contradictory aspect of Nietzsche's treatment of the theme of the mask on which Vattimo elaborates in the chapter entitled "La scissione tra essere e apparire" (the splitting between being and appearing).

⁵¹ Ibid., 15 and 26.

⁵² Ibid., 27.

As Vattimo argues, duplicity characterized the notion of the mask in Nietzsche's early writings, such as *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872). It is a productive contradiction that leads, in Nietzsche's later writings, to the mature configuration of his thought on the problem of truth and appearance, considered one of the most original aspects of his philosophy.⁵³ On the one hand, there is the conventional, stiff mask that modern man adopts out of insecurity. It corresponds to a stereotypical role and has "only one expression" (*una sola espressione*).⁵⁴ Vattimo refers to this kind of mask and the process it entails as *travestimento*, or masquerading.⁵⁵ He also calls this the "*maschera cattiva*" or "bad mask." This is the mask of the Platonic and Christian tradition of ethics and metaphysics. On the other hand, there is the mask that involves full identification and transformation in what is other than oneself. This is what Vattimo calls *maschera*, or the mask proper, also referring to it as the "*maschera buona*," the "good mask." For Vattimo this is the mask that in Nietzsche has a Dionysian association and ironically overcomes the prim opposition between true and false.⁵⁶

While "*travestimento*, with its ability of simulating and dissimulating, leaves the particular individuality of the person that adopts it intact and it even exalts it, together with the world of individualization within which *travestimento* functions," the mask

⁵³ Ibid., 39.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 18.

⁵⁵ The Italian word "*travestimento*" does not have the same meaning that the English "transvestism" has, as "the action of dressing in the clothes of the opposite sex" (Oxford English Dictionary). In Italian "*travestimento*" is any "exterior modification or transformation for the purpose of obtaining a particular effect" (Giacomo Devoto and Gian Carlo Oli, *Il dizionario della lingua italiana* [Florence: Le Monnier, 1990]). As such, it can be applied to both people and things.

⁵⁶ Vattimo, *Il soggetto e la maschera*, 75, 89, and 139.

proper “seems to leave without foundation any difference between being and appearing, as it comes down to a pure and simple identification of being with the becoming of appearances themselves.”⁵⁷ So if *travestimento* belongs to the world of consolidated reality, hierarchies and social taboos, *maschera* reveals reality as appearance. It belongs to the world of art as a symbolic activity that holds “the joyous hope that the spell of individuation can be broken.”⁵⁸ To revisit the previously proposed differentiation, *travestimento*, or the bad mask, is the mask that hides and does not change, whereas *maschera*, or the good mask, is the mask that reveals and changes over time.

In *The Birth of Tragedy* Nietzsche states that “fundamentally the aesthetic phenomenon is simple; one only has to have the ability to watch a living play (*Spiel*) continuously and to live constantly surrounded by crowds of spirits, then one is a poet; if one feels *the impulse to transform oneself and to speak out of other bodies and souls*, then one is a *dramatist*.”⁵⁹ The dramatic phenomenon, for Nietzsche, is the highest form of art. It involves a play of masks: “seeing oneself transformed before one’s eyes and acting as if one had really entered another body, another character.”⁶⁰ The importance of the dramatic phenomenon and its play of masks lies in the fact that these masks “unlike

⁵⁷ Ibid., 39. [Se la maschera non è travestimento, – e non può esserlo perché il travestimento lascia intatta e anzi esalta, nell’escogitazione e nell’abilità di simulare e dissimulare, l’individualità determinata di chi lo assume, e insieme a lui tutto il mondo dell’individuazione dentro al quale egli vuole che il travestimento gli serva – sembra non lasciar più sussistere alcuna differenza tra essere e apparire, riducendosi a una pura e semplice identificazione dell’essere con il divenire delle apparenze stesse.]

⁵⁸ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings*, Raymond Geuss and Ronald Speirs, eds. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 52–53.

⁵⁹ Vattimo, *Il soggetto e la maschera*, 43 (emphasis mine).

⁶⁰ Ibid.

travestimento, do not want to be confused with reality, and instead they reveal ‘reality’ itself in its quality of appearance, of mask that does not want to be seen as such.”⁶¹ In Nietzsche’s mature elaboration of the theme of the mask in *The Twilights of the Idols* (1889), the “true world” has become a fable and the “seeming world” has been eliminated, in the sense that no appearance exists as distinct from reality.

A question that Vattimo’s discussion raises pertains to the lexical choices he made. Why did he adopt these two Italian words, *travestimento* and *maschera*, to distinguish between the bad and good connotations of Nietzsche’s notion of the mask? What is the linguistic relevance of the Italian *maschera* in relation to the English “mask”? In Italian *maschera* does not only refer to “a covering worn on or held in front of the face for disguise” (Oxford English Dictionary). It also refers to the *commedia dell’arte* stock characters, like Pulcinella and Gianduaia. Each individual stock character of the *commedia dell’arte* represents the stiff mask of a social type that has only one expression. However, taken in the context of the theatrical fiction and the burlesque tone of the representation, the stock characters parody the stiff mask, and unlike *travestimento*, they “do not want to be confused with reality, and instead they reveal ‘reality’ itself in its quality of appearance, of mask that does not want to be seen as such.”⁶²

Italian dramatists, from Carlo Goldoni to Luigi Pirandello to Dario Fo, have borrowed techniques from the *commedia dell’arte* in order to question socio-political

⁶¹ Ibid., 40. [A differenza del travestimento non vogliono essere confuse con la realtà, e anzi svelano la stessa ‘realtà’ nella sua qualità di apparenza, di maschera che non vuol essere vista come tale.]

⁶² Ibid., 40.

truths and dogma. In particular, the late 1960s was a time when experimental directors and performers such as Fo and visual artists such as Pistoletto were making work inspired by the *commedia dell'arte* that aimed at exposing “the performative dimension of social life.”⁶³ Fo began to model himself as an actor on the medieval *giullare* or jester and the Harlequin around 1968. Ontani impersonated several *commedia dell'arte* characters in his tableau works, between 1974 and 1978, including Pulcinella, Gianduja, Rugantino,, Sganapino, Balanzone, Fagiolino.

A common aspect of Ontani’s impersonations is that the artist is always recognizable “behind” the *mise en scène* or *travestimento*. So, for example, a distinguishing facial mole that triangulates between lips and nose below the cheekbone to the right, is highlighted in the watercolor-painted photograph *David and Goliath* (1976), from the series “En route vers l’Inde (d’après Pierre Loti),” in which Ontani posed as both David and Goliath (fig. 200). Under this respect, individually taken, Ontani’s tableau works are like Vattimo’s “*maschera cattiva*,” a masquerade or *travestimento*. However, taken collectively, Ontani’s tableaux speak of the inseparability of being and appearing. They highlight the performative nature of identity and thus stand for the “*maschera buona*,” which stems from an acknowledgment that all is mask in the Nietzschean sense, that is, in an anti-metaphysical sense.

⁶³ Giorgio Strehler, “Un incontro con Bertolt Brecht,” in *Per un teatro umano* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1974), 114. On the influence of the *commedia dell'arte* on the theatrical work of Pistoletto see Claire Gilman, “Arte Povera’s Theater: Artifice and Anti-Modernism in Italian Art of the 1960s,” PhD diss., Columbia University, 2006, 73–76. Pistoletto formed a theater troupe named Lo Zoo with a group of friends and fellow artists in early 1968. The troupe was active until October 1970 and typically staged scenarios dressed in Medieval costumes in the streets and squares of cities and villages, like contemporary *trovatori* or troubadours.

3. Living Masks

In this section I analyze ten tableaux vivants out of the twenty plus that Ontani performed between 1974 and 1979. The characters Ontani impersonated are drawn from mass-media culture, *commedia dell'arte*, literature, mythology, and history. I have divided the tableaux vivants into four groups that reflect the structure of the tableau. The first group includes early tableaux in which Ontani was standing against the backdrop of a slide projection. The second group entails tableaux in which Ontani was either lying down or seated. The third is dedicated to a single performance, which I call a tableau *itinérant*, or itinerant tableau, that is, an expanded form of the tableau vivant implicating transportation. Finally, the fourth group involves two late tableaux that feature immersive environments. This section closes with a fifth subsection dedicated to Pierre Loti, Ontani's "alibi" for his first trip to India in 1974, and to Roland Barthes' interpretation of Loti's dandyism and dressing-up as a form of tableau vivant that is tied to the question of identity.

3.1. Standing

For his first solo show at L'Attico of Fabio Sargentini in Rome, in November of 1964, Ontani presented three tableaux vivants: *Superman*, *Don Giovanni*, and *Don Quijote*. In the first two, Ontani posed standing; in the third, he posed seated. The tableau vivant of *Superman* was performed on November 21 and 28 at 11 pm. An American cultural icon

and the first superhero in the history of comics, Superman has been around since 1938, when the character appeared in *Action Comics*, a publication by DC Comics.⁶⁴ Since its comic-book debut, Superman has appeared on the radio, television, daily newspaper, film, and, most recently, video games. In 1974 news about a new Superman feature-length motion picture being in the making was circulating. The film came out in 1978 as *Superman: The Movie*. It was followed by a sequel in 1981, *Superman II*, which became one of Warner Bros's most successful feature films.⁶⁵

Ontani impersonated Superman dressed in the character's iconic blue, red, and yellow costume, complete with cape and the stylized "S" shield on his chest. He appeared standing near the wall of a darkened room, his figure framed by a bright image of the galactic center projected behind him (fig. 162). As an anonymous reviewer of the performance wrote in *Flash Art*, Ontani "was reading comic books against the background of the Milky Way."⁶⁶ According to the story, Superman is not from Earth. He arrived here from the planet Krypton, hence Ontani's choice of standing in front of an image representative of Superman's extraterrestrial origins.

The format of *Don Giovanni* was analogous to that of *Superman*. In both cases Ontani posed standing in the middle of a large slide projection, more than twice his height. *Don Giovanni* was presented on November 20 and 27 at 11 pm. Ontani

⁶⁴ The character was created by American writer Jerry Siegel and Canadian-born American artist Joe Shuster a few years earlier.

⁶⁵ The director of the film switched from Steven Spielberg to Richard Donner after they heard that another film by Spielberg went over budget.

⁶⁶ "Luigi Ontani," *Flash Art International*, n. 52–53 (February–March 1975): 10.

impersonated the character of the aristocratic libertine, whose literary incarnations have proliferated since the early seventeenth century,⁶⁷ wearing an elaborate costume borrowed from Umberto Tirelli, a popular costume designer working for the theater and for Cinecittà, the Roman film studios and the largest film production structure in Europe at the time.⁶⁸ Mozart's *Don Giovanni* was played during the performance. As the anonymous reviewer of the performance at L'Attico wrote in *Flash Art*, Ontani was "well dressed, immersed in reading, and standing in front of a wall on which an image of the flames of hell was projected" (fig. 163).⁶⁹ Ontani was playing Dante by putting Don Juan in the *Inferno*. At the same time, given Ontani's public acknowledgement of his homosexuality, the association of Don Juan with hell could only come across as a parody of Catholic beliefs and morality.

Two other characters Ontani impersonated standing up are drawn from the *commedia dell'arte*: Pulcinella and Gianduaia. Deemed "a product of the Italian Renaissance," the *commedia dell'arte* is a form of theater that has been in existence in Italy since the mid-sixteenth century and is characterized by satire, caricature,

⁶⁷ Better-known in English by its Spanish name, Don Juan is the protagonist of a story that exists in many different versions since the early seventeenth century. Among the best-known versions of the story are Molière's play *Dom Juan ou le festin de pierre* (1665) and Lord Byron's epic poem *Don Juan* (1821). The most influential version is perhaps Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's opera, *Don Giovanni*, with libretto by Lorenzo da Ponte, first performed in Prague in 1787—a source of inspiration for literary, philosophical and theatrical works by Alexander Pushkin, Søren Kierkegaard, George Bernard Shaw, and Albert Camus.

⁶⁸ Cinecittà is located in the outskirts of Rome and has been in existence since the late 1930s.

⁶⁹ "Luigi Ontani," *Flash Art International*, n. 52–53, 10.

multilingualism, and improvisation.⁷⁰ *Commedia dell'arte* representations were mostly improvisational, based on a set of *maschere* or stock characters that remained unchanged from play to play and from actor to actor. The *maschere* embody narrative stereotypes and social types, such as the foolish old man, the young lovers, the comic servant. Over time, some characters have become representative of certain cities, portraying some of the allegedly pronounced characteristics of the inhabitants of that city or region in a burlesque, caricatural way, easily recognizable to the public. During carnival festivities, aristocrats as well as common people dressed up in the costumes representing the *maschere* that appeared on stage. The *maschere* of the *commedia dell'arte* have survived to date both in the form of carnival masks and in amateur and folk theater reenactments.

Ontani impersonated Pulcinella, the *commedia dell'arte* Neapolitan stock character, at the gallery of Lucio Amelio in Naples in late March of 1974. Pulcinella is the burlesque representative of the working class of Naples.⁷¹ The mask plays a gamut of roles, from rich merchant to cunning or idiotic servant. Generally Pulcinella's personality is marked by vulgarity and he likes to reveal truth through irony. Traditionally the character appears clad in a white, loose-fitting tunic, conical white hat and black half-face mask. Ontani impersonated Pulcinella wearing nothing but the character's hat and mask,

⁷⁰ Erika Fischer-Lichte, *History of European Drama and Theatre* (London, New York: Routledge, 2002), 130. A good scholarly study on the *commedia dell'arte* is Robert Henke, *Performance and Literature in the Commedia dell'Arte* (Cambridge, UK and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002). See also Fernando Taviani and Mirella Schino, *Il segreto della Commedia dell'Arte* (Florence: La Casa Usher, 1986); and Mario Apollonio, *Storia della Commedia dell'Arte* (Florence: Sansoni, 1982), which is a reprint of the original 1930 edition.

⁷¹ On Pulcinella see Paolo Toschi, *Le origini del teatro italiano* (Turin: Einaudi, 1955), 212–221; and Samuel McKechnie, *Popular Entertainments through the Ages* (New York: Blom, 1969, first edition 1931), 66.

standing to the side of the photographic projection of an apparently anonymous body of water, with a spotlight illuminating his torso (fig. 164). The sea in the photographic image could be read as either the sea of the bay of Naples or any other sea. Ontani performed the tableau immersed in reading the libretto of Igor Stravinsky's ballet, *Pulcinella*.⁷²

Ontani staged his tableau vivant of *Gianduja* at the gallery of Franz Paludetto in Turin the night of the opening of his solo show on November 25, 1974. Created in the eighteenth century, the Turinese stock character of *Gianduja* typifies the Piedmontese peasant. His costume reflects a common eighteenth-century outfit, with a cocked hat, long jacket, plus fours, and long socks. Wearing a modern version of the mask's colorful costume borrowed from Tirelli, Ontani stood in front of the slide projection of the neon signs with the Fiat logo, positioned above the factory building and photographed against the sky at sunset (figs. 165–166).⁷³ He stood right in the middle of the two signs, as if he were atop the factory roof as well. As in his other tableaux, Ontani appeared to the audience immersed in reading. This time he was reading a book on the story of *Gianduja* borrowed from a club based in Turin dedicated to preserving the memory of the Turinese

⁷² The dancer Léonide Massine created both the libretto and choreography, while Pablo Picasso designed the costumes and sets. The production was commissioned by Sergei Diaghilev and the performance premiered in Paris in 1920.

⁷³ Ontani said that it was Graziella Lonardi Buontempo who introduced him to Tirelli, “one of the greatest costume designers in the world who also had a museum-archive of historical costumes that he could adapt and modify, and that he lent me for free on several occasions” (Ontani, personal interview, 22 December 2007, Riola, audio recording). According to information provided by the Centro di Documentazione of Castello di Rivara that owns the archives of Paludetto's gallery, photographs of *Gianduja* were taken by the photographer Paolo Pellion. As for the slides of the neon signs, Ontani commissioned them so that they would not include the architecture below the neon signs (personal conversation by phone, 7 July 2011, unrecorded).

stock character. With this tableau vivant Ontani brought together the two most popular Turinese working-class icons: Italy's largest car manufacturer and Gianduia, after whom the *gianduiotti*, the Turinese sweet specialty of hazelnut chocolates, were named. The performance was accompanied by a leaflet reproducing a comic strip illustrating a made-up story of Gianduia. The story depicts Gianduia first in his own costume and then wearing different costumes as in a carnival parade. Ontani altered this illustration by adding himself at the end of the parade, impersonating Gianduia impersonating Adam, comically sporting a gigantic fig leaf to cover up his genitalia (fig. 167). The thin braid curled up to one side identifies this character as Gianduia. As the simulacrum according to Deleuze, this is a superimposition of masks: Ontani, Gianduia, and Adam.

3.2. Lying and Sitting Down

Ontani was either lying or sitting down in *Tarzan* (1974), *Don Quijote* (1974), and *Dracula* (1976). *Tarzan* was Ontani's first tableau vivant. He performed it in late January 1974, in the underground parking lot of Villa Borghese in Rome, as part of a large exhibition of international contemporary art entitled *Contemporanea* and curated by Achille Bonito Oliva.⁷⁴ Born literary, as the protagonist of the eponymous novel by American author Edgar Rice Burroughs, published in 1912, in the age of image culture Tarzan became a global mass-media character, popularized through films and comics. In

⁷⁴ See Francesca Pola, "Contemporanea: The Culture of Dialogue and Action at the Roots of Today," in *Macroradici del contemporaneo: A Roma, la nostra era avanguardia/Macroroots of the Contemporary: Rome: We Were the Avant-Garde*, eds. Luca Massimo Barbero and Francesca Pola (Milan: Mondadori Electa, 2010), 72–87.

1972, DC Comics began a series dedicated to Tarzan that ran through 1977. Ontani's performance took place on January 18, 19 and 20, from 6 to 8 pm, as announced by the invitation postcard that the artist himself produced. Ontani's tableau vivant staged a camp version of the popular hero.

Ontani impersonated Tarzan naked, clad in leopard skin, and lying on a low, large white base reading Burroughs' novel, an anthology of films on Tarzan, and Tarzan comics (fig. 169). Three adjacent walls defined a cubical-like space for the performance. A photographic color reproduction of the jungle was projected on the back wall, as large as possible so as to fit the entire available surface. Ontani found this image in an archive used by publishers of encyclopedias. The tableau vivant included sound recording that, as Ontani recounted, "was kindly prepared and donated by 'the friend of animals.'"⁷⁵ Named Angelo Lombardi, "the friend of animals" was an environmentalist who had become a well-known figure in the entertainment world of the 1970s, as he hosted a successful TV show dedicated to animals and called "L'amico degli animali" ("The Friend of Animals"). Lombardi had a store dedicated to items for pets at the Stazione Termini, the main train station of Rome, and it was at the store that Ontani got in touch with him.

In an interview published in the exhibition catalogue of *Transformer-Aspekte der Travestie*, Ontani talked about this performance and said it was a sort of "anti-

⁷⁵ Ontani, personal interview, 19 May 2009, Rome, audio recording.

spectacle.”⁷⁶ As in other performances, Ontani said, he was identifying with certain “heroes,” that is, with characters that have become “symbols of collective projections of desires.”⁷⁷ In 1974 Ontani staged three other tableaux vivants, impersonating Pulcinella, Superman, Don Juan, and Don Quixote. In the course of the same interview published in the catalogue of Ammann’s exhibition, he talked about his self-conscious use of kitsch: “it is an integral aspect of the presentation of clichés and thus unfailingly appears in my work.”⁷⁸ In reviewing the performance, the Bolognese art critic and journalist Giorgio Ruggeri, who had been following Ontani’s work since 1970, wrote in *Il Resto del Carlino*: “Irony and debunking in the re-presentation of an outdated hero? As you wish. But what Ontani sets out to do . . . is the paradoxical search for the inauthentic, mocking the blatant unreality of our times.”⁷⁹ Kitsch, parody, and theatricality are defining features of camp.

Contemporanea was a landmark exhibition for its unconventional venue and ambitious scope. It was held in the multi-floor parking lot underneath one of the largest public parks in Rome, home to the Galleria Borghese, featuring some of the best-known works of the Italian Renaissance and Baroque, including Caravaggio’s *Little Sick Bacchus* (c. 1593). Divided in ten sections with different curators selected by Bonito

⁷⁶ Ontani in Jean-Christophe Ammann and Marianne Eigenheer, eds., *Transformer: Aspekte der Travestie*, (Lucerne: Kunstmuseum, 1974), np.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Giorgio Ruggeri, “Linguaggio del corpo,” *Il Resto del Carlino*, edition published in the city of Bologna, 28 August 1974, 3. [Ironia e dissacrazione nella riproposta di un eroe scaduto? Come volete. Ma ciò che Luigi Ontani si ripropone con tale ‘Body-art-show,’ ossia ‘comportamento,’ è la paradossale ricerca dell’inautentico, irridendo l’avventante irrealtà del nostro tempo.]

Oliva, *Contemporanea* was an exceptionally ambitious initiative dedicated to contemporary visual culture, beyond the fine arts. It encompassed works of cinema, theater, architecture, design, music, dance.⁸⁰ The section in which Ontani's performance was included was called "Area aperta" ("Open area") and was dedicated to emerging artists. Another artist invited to participate in this section was Marina Abramovic, who performed *Rhythm 10*, an action involving self-inflicted pain, as she quickly hit the space between the fingers of her outspread left hand with knives, changing knife every time she cut herself. According to Ontani, it was thanks to Graziella Lonardi Buontempo that he was invited.⁸¹ Lonardi Buontempo was one of the main patrons of contemporary art in Rome. She was the founder of the Incontri Internazionali d'Arte, which provided financial and administrative support for the exhibition.⁸²

The photographer Massimo Piersanti took pictures of Ontani's tableau vivant from certain viewpoints decided by the artist. Ontani calls these pictures "souvenirs" of his performance.⁸³ For all his subsequent tableaux vivants Ontani produced one or two souvenirs of his performances. The term "souvenir" plays on the idea of tourist kitsch. Although, conceptually, Ontani's souvenir photos are close to his tableau photos, as in

⁸⁰ Achille Bonito Oliva, "Inevitable... Irreversible... Irrepressible," an interview by Francesca Pola, in Barbero and Pola, eds., *Macroradici del contemporaneo: A Roma, la nostra era avanguardia*, 106.

⁸¹ Ontani, personal interview, 19 May 2009.

⁸² On Graziella Lonardi Buontempo and her involvement with *Contemporanea*, see "Una vita per l'arte," intervista di Paolo Vagheggi, in *Incontri dalla collezione di Graziella Lonardi Buontempo*, Richard Peduzzi, Daniela Lancioni, Jacqueline Risset, Paolo Vagheggi (Rome: Académie de France, Villa Medici, 2003), 25, 27.

⁸³ The term appears in a letter to Peter Weiermair from 1975. See Peter Weiermair, *Selbstportrait als Selbstdarstellung* (Innsbruck: Galerie im Taxispalais, 1975), np.

both cases the camera immortalizes the pose, in controlling the presentation of his tableaux vivants after the fact with photos “representative” of the performances, as he puts it, Ontani carried his engagement with kitsch in the age of image culture one step further.

The souvenir photos for *Tarzan* are two. One features Ontani in the context of his tableau vivant, the other does not. For the second photograph Ontani actually posed in a different setting, standing against a black background (fig. 170). The first photograph (fig. 225) is strikingly reminiscent of *Pastore a riposo* (*Resting peasant*, c. 1912), a work by Bologna-based Pictorialist photographer Pietro Poppi (fig. 172). For this picture Poppi used the same model who posed for his *Martirio di San Sebastiano* (*Martyrdom of Saint Sebastian*, c. 1900) (fig. 110). In the second photograph (fig. 170), Ontani struck an unnatural pose, with his hands behind his head, as the reclining female figure in Goya’s *Mayas*. In its awkwardness, this pose parallels Ontani’s recreations of the Goya paintings (fig. 111). What distinguishes this photograph as a souvenir of the tableau vivant is the leopard skin. Standing in a three-quarter profile, Ontani wears the leopard skin like a drapery on his left shoulder, the one further away from the camera. His genitals are carefully hidden from view, as in the other souvenir photo. And as in other poses, such as *Bacchino* (fig. 122), the covering of the genitals lends gender ambiguity to the character impersonated. The second souvenir photo was used for the invitation card to the performance at *Contemporanea* and was also exhibited alongside Ontani’s tableau

photos. A few months later, in April of 1974, it was presented as a life-size print at the Festival of Expanded Media in Belgrade (fig. 171).

Usually Ontani's tableaux vivants were culturally site-specific. Although *Tarzan* may not seem to be at first, a connection to Rome existed and it was revealed by Bonito Oliva, the general curator of *Contemporanea*. When I interviewed Bonito Oliva about Ontani's tableau vivant a few years ago, he misattributed the character Ontani impersonated. He remembered that Ontani played the *lupa capitolina*, the she-wolf of the foundation myth of the city of Rome, instead of Tarzan.⁸⁴ According to legend, the *lupa capitolina* nurtured the twins Romulus and Remus, founders of the city of Rome and ancestors of the Romans. Ontani actually posed as the Capitoline she-wolf in a tableau photo he staged in India in the early 1990s (fig. 173).

Ontani's tableau vivant of Tarzan is also a homage to Pino Pascali, who played Cheetah, Tarzan's faithful friend in the film versions of the story, wearing above his head a work from his "Agricultural Tools" series from 1968 (fig. 57). The photo of Pascali's performance, staged for the camera, was published in the catalogue accompanying Pascali's solo exhibition at L'Attico in 1968, alongside the comic-book-like photos of Pascali talking to Cheetah (fig. 61). Pascali was also cast as Tarzan in a photo-collage that Sargentini created for the invitation card of an initiative he promoted at his gallery in October of 1968, right after the artist's tragic death in a motorcycle accident at age thirty-

⁸⁴ Achille Bonito Oliva, personal interview, 21 June 2010, Rome, audio recording. Bonito Oliva made the same mistake in other interviews, including the one recorded in the DVD accompanying the exhibition catalogue by Barbero and Pola, eds., *Macroradici del contemporaneo: A Roma, la nostra era avanguardia*.

three the previous month (fig. 174). The initiative, entitled “Ginnastica mentale” (“Mental Gymnastics”), consisted in turning the gallery into a gym (fig. 175). Because of this initiative, Sargentini was evicted from the respectable Palazzo Borghese and opened “the garage” in Via Beccaria, a large open space where he could better exhibit installation and performance art. This move reflected a shift in Sargentini’s interests. With his work Pascali was one of the most influential figures on this shift.⁸⁵ Sargentini’s photo-collage is a pastiche of a painting by René Magritte, *Perpetual Motion* (1935), and a male head from a comic book. With its regular, pleasing features this head stands for both Pascali and Sargentini, who were exceptionally good-looking. The photo-collage casts Pascali and his heir, Sargentini, as the Tarzan-turned-body builder of the art world. After “Ginnastica mentale” Sargentini was ready to take the art world by storm with his initiatives at The Garage.

The third tableau vivant Ontani performed for his first solo show at L’Attico in 1974 was *Don Quijote de la Mancha*. For this tableau he posed seated on a children coin-operated horse, positioned in profile in front of the audience. Behind him, framing the scene, was the photographic slide projection of a rainbow in the sky. Ontani performed this tableau for the opening of the show, on November 15 at 10 pm, then re-

⁸⁵ Fabio Sargentini, interviewed by Gabriele Perretta, “L’arte, gli artisti e il ’68,” *Flash Art* (Italian edition), n. 147 (December 1988–January 1989), 72. Sargentini also said that the initiative “was an attempt to transform the space of the ‘art gallery’ into another space, in this specific case, a gym (an invitation to action). . . . This helped me to consider with less reverence, more freedom and fantasy, my own work, the work of others, and the gallery space” (statement published in *L’Attico 1957–1987*, 136). See also Francesca Pola, “Tre domande a Fabio Sargentini/ Three Questions to Fabio Sargentini,” in *Macroradici del contemporaneo: L’Attico di Fabio Sargentini, 1966–1978/ Macroroots of the Contemporary: L’Attico of Fabio Sargentini, 1966–1978*, eds. Luca Massimo Barbero and Francesca Pola (Milan: Mondadori Electa, 2010), 204–205.

performed it on November 22 and 29, at 11 pm, like the other two tableaux, *Superman* and *Don Giovanni*. *Don Quijote* was one of Ontani's most parodic performances. The artist impersonated Don Quixote wearing nothing but a metal hat, immersed in reading Cervantes' novel from paperback publication (fig. 176).⁸⁶ Ontani described the hat as made of brass or golden metal, lightly rounded over the head, but otherwise rather flat, with an expansive brim that designed a circular form and made it look like a disc. The coin-operated horse was, as one of the attendees testified, "one of those mechanical horses with simplified design that swing outside cafes, in poor amusement parks, at the entrance of game rooms, surmounted by astonished children who see a piece of their dignity volatilize at each step of the machine."⁸⁷ While the hat stood for Don Quixote's armor, the children coin-operated horse stood for his skinny horse Rocinante, and the rainbow for his uncompromising optimism.

In Cervantes' novel, Don Quixote is a sorry, quintessentially antiheroic figure that suffers numerous humiliating defeats in his quest for knightly deeds. The word "quixotic" is used in different languages to describe anyone who is idealistic and dreamy. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, quixotic is said of a person "resembling Don Quixote; visionary; enthusiastically chivalrous or romantic; naively idealistic; impractical, capricious." In the company of his neighbor, the short and fat Sancho Panza, an illiterate peasant who only thinks of eating and drinking, Don Quixote sets off in quest

⁸⁶ Ontani, personal interview by phone, 23 October 2009, unrecorded.

⁸⁷ Giovan Battista Salerno, "Breve Luigi Ontanologia in due movimenti," in *Esercizi di lettura 7: Luigi Ontani*, Jean-Christophe Ammann and Giovan Battista Salerno (Bologna: Galleria d'Arte Moderna, 1982), 3.

of glory and in the hope to rectify the world's wrongs. However, his perception of reality is compromised, as his imagination and fantasies, stimulated by the readings, are projected onto reality. So he believes an inn to be a castle and a group of windmills to be giants. Ontani's nakedness, his metal disc-like hat, the image of a rainbow behind him, and the coin-operated children horse all speak to Don Quixote's delusion of grandeur.

Ontani's performance was accompanied by the audio recording of a real horse's neigh, which, according to one reviewer, went off once per minute for about an hour, accentuating the comical effect of the *mise-en-scène*.⁸⁸ In reviewing the performance for *Casabella*, an Italian magazine of international standing specializing in art and architecture, Corinna Ferrari stressed the lack of action. She wrote that the performance happened "in conditions of absolute immobility, from beginning to end—it is the fixity of the pose," and of the *tableau vivant*.⁸⁹ Author and poet Giovan Battista Salerno also wrote of Ontani's uneventful performance: "At regular intervals the little horse was recharged with a coin. I watched its gallop for its entire duration. . . . I stayed there until Luigi got off and left."⁹⁰ He remarked that his prolonged gaze in front of the uneventful performance revealed "the great artificial clowning on which the artist, seriously and meticulously, built his work."⁹¹ Ontani said that, in general, he would never establish

⁸⁸ Giorgio Ruggeri, "Cavalcata romana," *Il Resto del Carlino*, edition published in the city of Bologna, March 19, 1975, 3.

⁸⁹ Corinna Ferrari, "Luigi Ontani, 'Don Quijote de la Mancha,' Galleria l'Attico, Roma, novembre 1974," *Casabella*, n. 401 (maggio 1975): 14.

⁹⁰ Battista Salerno, "Breve LuigiOntanologia in due movimenti," in *Esercizi di lettura* 7, 3.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

beforehand the length of its performances. They would last as long as he could bear to hold the pose. He hoped that it would be long enough that viewers would get the impression that the performances would never end, that they were “out of time.”⁹²

Ontani’s interpretation of the character of Don Quixote anticipated a groundbreaking critical reading of Cervantes’ novel, which was originally published in two volumes in 1605 and 1615. This reading broke with the dominant exegesis that since the Romantic period had failed to recognize the satirical aspects of the story. Penned by Anthony Close, it that came out in 1977. Close construed Cervantes’ novel as “a satire which uses the techniques of burlesque.”⁹³ Close described the novel’s sophisticated narrative as based on “the opposition between an illusion-haunted hero and prosaic social reality.”⁹⁴ Ontani conveyed these aspects of the novel in his tableau, by using comically improbable props. One also wonders if besides the reference to Don Quixote, Ontani’s tableau is not also a parody of the genre of the bronze equestrian monument, whose tradition in Italy spans from classical antiquity to the Renaissance and beyond, including monuments such as the equestrian statue of Marcus Aurelius in Rome, Donatello’s statue of Gattamelata in Padua, and Verrocchio’s statue of Bartolomeo Colleoni in Venice.

In his lecture at the Incontri Internazionali d’Arte in Rome in 1972, Bonito Oliva

⁹² Luigi Ontani, personal interview, 23 June 2010, Rome, audio recording.

⁹³ Anthony Close, *The Romantic Approach to Don Quixote: A Critical History of the Romantic Tradition in Quixote Criticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 1. Indeed, the novel was greeted differently in different ages, as Manuel Durán summarized: “Cervantes’ novel was greeted in the seventeenth century with a laugh, in the eighteenth with a smile, and in the nineteenth with a tear” (*Cervantes* [New York: Twayne, 1974], 176–77). However, it was the nineteenth-century reception of Don Quixote as a tragic, misunderstood figure, that was most enduring.

⁹⁴ Close, *The Romantic Approach to Don Quixote*, 2.

wrote of Don Quixote in ways that partly resonate with Ontani's interpretation of the character:

The knight-errant, Don Quixote, lives a double situation: he applies the antique rules of chivalry to the vulgarity of the present. Chivalry is nostalgic tension in front of a present that can no longer be accepted but from which it is impossible to escape. Don Quixote continually oscillates between reality and unreality, the world is necessarily perceived as *self-deception* and only irony can be used as a defense strategy. The knight is a rootless being who is invested in preserving his dissociation from reality since he cannot not live in it. Thus individual fantasy makes up for historical impotence, it makes phantoms real and reality fantastic because reality greatly overtakes the imagination.⁹⁵

Ontani's version of Don Quixote has nothing of the nostalgic, if not tragic, connotation expressed by Bonito Oliva, but it has irony, which was not recognized as an aspect of Cervantes' character. The oscillation between reality and fiction is a fundamental element of Cervantes' story that Bonito Oliva interprets as a sign of "historical impotence," which reveals the critic's projection of the contemporary socio-political context of the *anni di piombo* onto the Baroque novel.

The story of Don Quixote has inspired innumerable theater and opera productions, artworks, and philosophical considerations. In *The Order of Things* (1966), Foucault dedicates an entire section to Don Quixote at the onset of the chapter entitled "Representing." He describes Don Quixote as the hero of a world inhabited by dangling

⁹⁵ Bonito Oliva, "La citazione deviata: l'ideologia," in *Critica in atto*, 158. [Il cavaliere errante, don Chisciotte, vive una situazione sdoppiata: applica alla volgarità del presente le regole antiche della cavalleria. La cavalleria è la tensione nostalgica di fronte a un presente che non può essere accettato ma a cui non si può sfuggire. Don Chisciotte oscilla continuamente tra realtà e irrealtà, il mondo viene percepito come *autoinganno* necessario da cui è possibile difendersi solo con l'ironia. Il cavaliere è un essere sradicato che ha interesse a conservare la propria dissociazione di fronte a un presente che altrimenti non potrebbe vivere. Così la fantasia individuale sopperisce all'impotenza storica, rende reali i fantasmi e fantomatica la realtà, perché la realtà sopravanza di molto l'immaginazione.]

signifiers. This is a world in which, states Foucault, “resemblances and signs have dissolved their former alliance.” They have become “deceptive and verge upon the visionary of madness; things still remain stubbornly within their ironic identity: they are no longer anything but what they are; words wonder off on their own, without content, without resemblance.” In such a world there is no “unmasking,” but only “putting on a mask,” as Foucault puts it.⁹⁶

In most of his tableaux vivants, Ontani appeared immersed in readings regarding the characters he was impersonating. In the case of his *Don Quixote*, the action of reading refers to two aspects of Cervantes’ novel that illuminate the meaning of Ontani’s reading in his other tableaux, particularly the second aspect. Both aspects pertain to the porosity between reality and fiction. At the beginning of Cervantes’ story, the protagonist is depicted as a retired, obscure country gentlemen obsessed with “books of chivalry” that narrate the great deeds and love affairs of knights defeating wicked enchanters and dragons. He is obsessed to the point that he would forget to sleep and became convinced of being himself a knight-errant. The second aspect of Cervantes’ novel that entails reading is an example of metafiction that has fascinated literary critics and theorists in the twentieth century, including Jorge Luís Borges. In the second part of the novel, the reader finds that the protagonists of the novel have read the first part. As Borges notices in an essay dedicated to the play of ambiguities that characterize Cervantes’ novel, entitled “Partial Magic in *Don Quixote*” (1952), there is something disturbing about the

⁹⁶ Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Races* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 47–49.

protagonists of the *Quixote* becoming readers of the *Quixote*. Borges compares this mirroring effect to other literary examples, such as the *Hamlet*, in which Shakespeare includes a play within the play that corresponds to the principal work and makes Hamlet a spectator of *Hamlet*. This inversion is disturbing, Borges suggests, because it implies “that if the characters of a fiction can be readers or spectators, we, its readers or spectators, can be fictitious.”⁹⁷ In his tableaux Ontani impersonates characters that typically read about themselves. These works embody the mirroring effect that Borges analyzed and that makes us, spectators, aware of our own fictitious nature.

At L’Attico, in 1975, Ontani impersonated another literary character that, like Tarzan, was made popular by the mass media: Dracula. The protagonist of the eponymous novel by Irish author Bram Stoker, published in 1897, Dracula became, in the course of the twentieth century, the most famous vampire in history, inspiring countless film adaptations. Ontani performed this tableau vivant as part of an event Sargentini organized, entitled *24 ore su 24 (24 hours per day)*, in which a group of artists took turns to present actions or works at the gallery. The show ran for one week in late January 1975, with presentations taking place at every hour of the day and night.⁹⁸ Besides Ontani, other participating artists were Gino De Dominicis, Jannis Kounellis, Vector

⁹⁷ Jorge Lu s Borges, “Magias parciales del *Quijote*” (“Partial Magic in *Don Quixote*”) from *Otras inquisiciones* (1952; *Other Inquisitions*); published in English translation in *Labyrinths: Selected Stories & Other Writings*, eds. Donald A. Yates and James E. Irby (New York: New Directions, 1964), 196; and Paul de Man, “A Modern Master: Jorge Lu s Borges,” in *Critical Writings, 1953–1978*, ed. Lindsay Water (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 127.

⁹⁸ The event ran from Saturday, January 25 to Friday, January 31.

Pisani, Alighiero Boetti, Sandro Chia, and Francesco Clemente.⁹⁹ In reviewing the event, Lorenza Trucchi wrote that the week “went by quickly in an atmosphere of fervid improvisation, despite the fact that the calendar was specified in all the details.”¹⁰⁰

Ontani appeared to the public between 6:30 and 7:30 am, “in a large, empty room, lying inside a beautiful crystal coffin near an open window, wrapped in his black cape,” as Laura Bergagna wrote in her exhibition review for the daily newspaper of Turin *La Stampa* (fig. 177).¹⁰¹ The time Ontani picked for his tableau vivant was sunrise, when, according to the story, Dracula goes to sleep. And, in fact, Ontani performed with his eyes closed, as if immersed in sleep. His mouth appeared semi-open, so as to let the vampire fangs protrude out. Ontani borrowed the crystal coffin from a furniture shop in Rome named Rancati that produced and rented props to the entertainment business, especially Cinecittà.¹⁰²

Ontani’s costume included a white bow tie, a citation from Béla Lugosi’s 1931 impersonation of Dracula in the eponymous Hollywood film directed by Ted Browning. Browning’s film came after *Nosferatu*, which was released in 1922 and directed by the German expressionist F. W. Murnau, and before a long list of adaptations of Stoker’s novel that continues up to the present day. Ontani’s version imparted to Dracula a

⁹⁹ For a complete list of the artists with their actions or works and their performance or exhibition times, see *L’Attico 1957–1987*, 194. For a description of some of the works and actions presented, see Lorenza Trucchi, “‘24 ore su 24’ all’Attico,” *Momento Sera*, February 5–6 1975, 7.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁰¹ Laura Bergagna, “Dracula in Via del Paradiso,” *La Stampa*, Turin, 20 February 1975, 3.

¹⁰² Fabio Sargentini, personal interview, Rome, 19 December 2008, audio recording.

uniquely comical, every-day life twist. As Bergagna recounted, “dreadful snores” came from the coffin, “at long, regular intervals.” So as viewers approached the tableau vivant, they would all burst into “a liberatory laughter.” They could also see that “Dracula fell asleep reading a graphic novel of his own story.”¹⁰³ Thus Ontani’s parody of Dracula also entailed a not-so-comical message about identity as mask, related to the mirroring effect observed by Borges in the *Don Quixote*.

3.3. Christopher Columbus: A Tableau Itinérant

For his first visit to New York City, Ontani donned the visage of Christopher Columbus. He left Rome wearing an elaborate Renaissance-period costume, borrowed from Tirelli, and holding a copy of Columbus’s travel journal, *Diario di bordo*.¹⁰⁴ It was August of 1975, and he was traveling with his gallerist, Sargentini.¹⁰⁵ Ontani stayed in New York for a few months, guest of John Jonas, whom he had met in Rome when Sargentini invited her to participate in the “Festival of Music and Dance U.S.A.” in 1972.¹⁰⁶ The tableau of Christopher Columbus represents a unique case in Ontani’s oeuvre. It was a

¹⁰³ Bergagna, “Dracula in Via del Paradiso.” According to another visitor, the artist and friend Giordano Falzoni, it was not a comic book that Dracula was reading: “Ontani Dracula was reading a book on Dracula from the fugitive’s pocket library before falling asleep” (*Luigi Ontani: “Sacro Fauno Profunny a Fano* [Fano: Galleria Enrico Astuni, 1998], 15). The excerpt is from a text that Falzoni wrote for Ontani’s 1977 solo exhibition at Sonnabend Gallery in New York, but that eventually was not published on that occasion.

¹⁰⁴ Columbus kept a journal of his first voyage to America. A copy of his original was made but both the original and the copy were eventually lost. The manuscript journal that survives and was published as *Diario di bordo (The Journal of Christopher Columbus)* is a partly quoted and partly summarized version of Columbus’s copy made by Bartolomé de las Casas in the 1530s.

¹⁰⁵ The time of the trip is drawn from a letter he wrote to Peter Weiermair, published in Peter Weiermair, *Selbstportrait als Selbstdarstellung* (Innsbruck: Galerie im Taxispalais, 1975), np.

¹⁰⁶ See Francesca Pola, “Spazi e azioni di creatività veloce / Spaces and Actions of Nimble Creativity,” in *Macroradici del contemporaneo: L’Attico di Fabio Sargentini*, 125–127.

tableau *itinérant*, consisting of three distinct moments: Ontani's trip from his home in Rome to Jonas' home in Soho, then from Jonas' home to Columbus Circle and back, and, finally, the tableau vivant in front of the Columbus Circle memorial.

Ontani performed two other tableaux vivants outdoors, namely, *Pellegrinaggio alla Villa Lysis in ricordo del barone poeta Jacques d'Adelswärd-Fersen* (Capri, 1974), discussed earlier, and *Lord Vanity* (Kanchipuram, India, 1977), examined in the next chapter. Unlike in these other cases, in *Christopher Columbus* traveling was part of the performance and this is why I call it a tableau *itinérant*. It is reasonable to hypothesize that Ontani knew of Joseph Beuys' performance from the previous year, also involving traveling. Beuys, whom Sargentini had invited to perform at The Garage in 1972, started his New York performance at John F. Kennedy Airport, where he was wrapped in felt and, without touching the ground, was transported in an ambulance to the René Block Gallery where he staged *I like America and America Likes Me*.

Aside from the structural similarity, Beuys' and Ontani's performances are significantly different. Ontani's tableau *itinérant* embodies the "exasperated performativity" of the nomadic camp subject.¹⁰⁷ Its injection in the everyday life of random transatlantic travelers and New Yorkers gives flesh to kitsch as displacement, spurious overlap of "high" and "low," that "equivalence of all objects" that Susan Sontag identifies as one of the main characteristics of camp sensibility.¹⁰⁸ There is also another

¹⁰⁷ Massimo Fusillo and Giulio Iacoli, "Camp e nuove situazioni picaresche. Esposizione, mobilità e travestimenti dell'intellettuale," in *Popcamp*, vol. 2, Fabio Cleto ed. (Milan: Marcos y Marcos, 2008), 565.

¹⁰⁸ Susan Sontag, "Notes on Camp," *Partisan Review* 31 (fall 1964); reprinted in *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1966), 289.

layer to Ontani's performance. His tableau *itinérant* is a parody of Christopher Columbus as a culture hero. The Genoese sailor and explorer never landed in North America. His legendary "discovery" of America is a fiction, despite the celebration of Columbus Day in the United States in early October (not in August, as Ontani's performance), and the existence, across the country, of several commemorative monuments. Columbus famously mistook the American continent for India and died discredited and dishonored in the Old Continent after his fourth transatlantic trip, believing he had reached India. Ontani's parody of Columbus also sounds a note of self-irony given the homosexual trope of the sailor in gay culture.

Ontani had several pictures taken during his subway trip from downtown Manhattan to the site of the Christopher Columbus memorial in Columbus Circle, in midtown (figs. 178–179). He traveled with Sargentini, Jonas, and her friend, the photographer Gwen Thomas, who took these and all subsequent pictures. Once at Columbus Circle, Ontani staged his tableau vivant. He climbed up the steps of the monument to reach the large square plinth that constitutes its base, and posed motionless and silent on both sides of the memorial with the commemorative inscription, in American on one side, in Italian on the other. In the photos of the tableau vivant that Thomas took, Ontani appears earnest in expression and stance, holding a copy of Columbus' travel journal with one hand, and with the other pointing at the inscription above his head (fig. 180). The pose exudes a sense of gravitas and theatricality, accentuated by the heavy Renaissance-period costume. Combined with the cheap

paperback of Columbus' travel journal and the context of the hustle and bustle of Columbus Circle, teeming with tourists and businesspeople on a hot summer day, Ontani's tableau could but produce an unmistakable camp effect.

Ontani calls the photographs taken in the subway "corollary photos," in order to distinguish them from the "souvenir photos" representative of the tableau vivant. The latter were sent as postcards to friends. The souvenir photo with the Italian inscription was also published in the Bolognese edition of the daily newspaper *Il Resto del Carlino* with a comment by Giorgio Ruggeri: "Luigi Ontani does not give up. Every occasion is good to be translated in 'performance.' . . . The photograph, signed, numbered and dated by the author-actor, is on sale for one million lire, like a painting"¹⁰⁹ (fig. 181).¹¹⁰ A short mention of Ontani's performance also appeared in *Flash Art*, accompanied by the comment "let us remember that the Surrealists as well went 'à rebours' in history."¹¹¹

3.4. Immersive Environments

Ontani's late tableaux vivants typically entailed the set-up of complex immersive environments. Two examples are *Endymion* (1977) and *Astronaut* (1979). Ontani

¹⁰⁹ Giorgio Ruggeri, "La Scoperta dell'America," *Resto del Carlino*, Bologna edition, September 3, 1975. One million lire corresponded to a net four-month average working-class salary. With that amount one could buy a Fiat 126, which was one of the smallest city car available on the market. This is what it meant for the value of Ontani's works to have become part of Sargentini's stable of artists.

¹¹⁰ The newspaper publication of Ontani's tableau photo is reminiscent of French Nouveau Realist artist Yves Klein, who, in 1960, published the photomontage *Le Saut dans le Vide* (*Leap into the Void*), which depicts him leaping into the air from a window over a Paris suburb street. Klein, though, unlike Ontani, produced this photomontage for publication in a single mock edition of the Sunday newspaper *Dimanche le journal d'un seul jour*, and he distributed it to newspaper stands in Paris.

¹¹¹ "Travestito: à rebours," *Flash Art International*, n. 58–59 (October–November 1975): 18.

presented *Endymion* at a festival of performance art at the Galleria comunale d'arte moderna in Bologna (now MAMbo). This was the first initiative of this kind to be organized by a museum in Italy.¹¹² Holding a wooden staff and lying on his side on the floor of the main museum hall, with his eyes closed and his body barely covered by a cloak, Ontani impersonated the shepherd Endymion (fig. 182). Somewhat of a Dorian Gray of Greek mythology, Endymion is a beautiful ephebe sent to sleep forever in return for perpetual youth. According to the myth, he is visited every night by Diana who helplessly kisses him in an attempt to wake him up. Next to Ontani stood an embalmed sheep that the artist bought on his way back from India, near the Delhi airport.¹¹³

In *Endymion* the tableau photos of the *Olympus* and photomontages from the series “Tappeti volanti” and “Mostro sette arti” pasted the walls (fig. 183). The projectors alternated these images with images of culturally site-specific works by Ontani and details of thematically related frescoes by Bolognese painter Annibale Carracci, a contemporary of Caravaggio (fig. 184). The works by Ontani were three tableau photos in which the artist impersonated three of the *commedia dell'arte* characters from Bologna: Fagiolino, Sganapino, Ballanzone. By Annibale Carracci, Ontani showed details from the frescoes in Palazzo Farnese in Rome, depicting mythological subjects.

The white floor and ceiling of the Galleria comunale were also pasted with slide

¹¹² Forty-nine performances were presented over the course of a week, from June 1–6, by a diverse group of international artists, divided into seven thematic groups dedicated to the body, the senses, hyperesthesia, music, the word, identity, the social. Ontani was included in the identity group. On this occasion Abramovic and Ulay presented their “door piece,” standing naked in front of one another at the entrance to the galleries so that visitors were forced to pass through them. This piece was recreated at the Abramovic retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art and PS1 in New York in 2010.

¹¹³ Luigi Ontani, personal interview, 5 January 2009, Riola, audio recording.

projections transforming the white cube of the museum into an outdoor scene: a poppy meadow was projected onto the floor and a starry sky onto the ceiling.

The performance lasted one hour and was accompanied by pastoral music. It was shown to the audience like “a sudden, miraculous apparition,” after climbing a long staircase in the dark and reaching the top floor, from which they could look down and see the “enchanted scene.”¹¹⁴ Ontani’s impersonation of Endymion speaks to the artist’s identification with the culture of dandyism. The character of Endymion is the quintessential embodiment of the dandy, who embraces distance and impassivity, who suspends time and is always *elsewhere*. The effect of the dandy’s distancing is, counterintuitively, emotional. It conveys “the pathos of distance,” as scholar Giovanna Franci, teaching at the University of Bologna, put it in a publication on dandyism that came out the same year of Ontani’s performance.¹¹⁵

The quotational pastiche of *Endymion* was preceded by earlier tableaux vivants presented on a wall adjacent to Ontani’s tableau photos, in their life-size versions, as on the occasion of his performance of *Gianduia* at the gallery of Franz Paludetto on the day of the opening of his solo show in 1974 (fig. 168).¹¹⁶ The tableau photos, being life-size,

¹¹⁴ The top floor extends outside of the perimeter of the main hall, to which it is visually connected by means of a balcony. See Francesca Alinovi’s description in *La performance oggi: settimana internazionale della performance: Bologna, 1–6 giugno 1977* (Bologna: La Nuova Foglio, 1977), np. The festival was reviewed by Deanna Farneti, “Performance: Settimana sperimentale al museo di Bologna,” *D’ars*, n. 85 (1977): 44–53.

¹¹⁵ Giovanna Franci, *Il sistema del dandy: Wilde - Beardsley - Beerbohm* (*Arte e Artificio nell’Inghilterra fin-de-siècle*) (Bologna: Patron, 1977), 27.

¹¹⁶ The souvenir photo of *Tarzan* can be seen in the background, between two other tableau photos (fig. 171).

were in dialogue with the tableau vivant and multiplied Ontani's presence. An Italian artist who famously quoted himself in his works was the Italian painter Giorgio de Chirico. On de Chirico's self-quotation Barilli writes that "at the end of his visit to the ideal museum, having arrived at the last gallery, understandingly the artist finds himself: by now even the de Chiricos must be museified, like the great masters of the past; and so he extends the strategy of the different repetition to them as well."¹¹⁷ Because of his use of self-quotation Bonito Oliva called de Chirico a "self-mannerist" in a 1983 article in which he hailed him as a model to Transavanguardia, the group of painters he was promoting and that has called "a form of neo-mannerism."¹¹⁸

In 1979 RoseLee Goldberg invited Ontani to perform one of his tableaux vivants at The Kitchen Center for Video, Music, and Performance in New York City. On this occasion Ontani staged one of his most complex tableaux vivants: a grand pastiche of references and citations from high and low culture. His impersonation was a camp reinvention of the popular culture figure of the astronaut. More from fantasy than space, Ontani's *Astronaut* brings together high and low culture in a grand pastiche of references and citations that are inscribed in the costume and the setting of the tableau vivant.

Unlike earlier performances in which Ontani staged his tableau against the backdrop of a single slide projection, as in *Tarzan* (1974) and *Superman* (1974), *Astronaut* featured an

¹¹⁷ Renato Barilli, "De Chirico e il recupero del museo," in *Tra presenza e assenza: due modelli culturali in conflitto* (Milan: Bompiani, 1974), 293.

¹¹⁸ See Achille Bonito Oliva, "Giorgio de Chirico and the Trans-avantgarde," *Flash Art International*, n. 111 (March 1983): 23; and Stefano Chiodi, "Memoria del dimenticare (a memoria): Conversazione con Achille Bonito Oliva," in Achille Bonito Oliva, *Territorio magico: Comportamenti alternativi nell'arte*, new edition, ed. Stefano Chiodi (Florence: Le Lettere, 2009), 260.

immersive environment, with image projections all around the artist, who was standing motionless and silent near the center of the gallery space. The performance was presented on November 1, 1979. Visitors viewed the scene from specific points. As Ontani's spokesperson explained in a letter to RoseLee Goldberg, the curator who invited Ontani, Ontani "has conceived his tableau vivant as having much the nature of a painting. As such he wishes that the public does not actually penetrate the tableau, but viewed the scene from fixed points outside it."¹¹⁹

Ontani's *Astronaut* alludes to American popular culture and Pop Art: the sci-fi craze of the late 1960s and 1970s, with the TV series *Star Trek* and the feature film *Star Wars*, premiering in theaters in 1977; food consumption of the quintessential American sweet, the doughnut; and Claes Oldenburg's soft sculptures of food articles, such as ice-cream cones and cake slices, from the 1960s. Ontani's tableau also implies references to characters from classical antiquity and Italian Futurism: Mercury, the Roman messenger of the gods; and the protagonist of Aldo Palazzeschi's novel *Il Codice di Perelà* (1911), "the man of smoke." Citations from Italian Renaissance to twentieth-century Italian painting and from Italian and German opera are also incorporated into Ontani's work. Finally, the Renaissance theory of temperaments, according to which artists are born under the planet Saturn and are therefore melancholic is referred to in *Astronaut*.

The main item of Ontani's costume was a large, helium-inflated balloon, worn around the waste (fig. 185). Light pink and ring-shaped, it looked like a gigantic, glazed

¹¹⁹ Attanasio Di Felice, letter to RoseLee Goldberg dated October 3, 1979, archives of The Kitchen Center for Video, Music, and Performance.

doughnut and a homage to Oldenburg's soft sculpture series. Ontani's head was encased in a transparent helmet. The costume was completed by little Mercury-like wings at the ankles. Ontani wished that the doughnut would make him float in space, like Palazzeschi's "man of smoke." Ontani's spokesperson, Attanasio Di Felice, outlined Ontani's plan in his letter to RoseLee Goldberg: "Of greatest importance is the construction of a helium balloon in the shape of a doughnut so that he can float or actually hover close to the ceiling. . . . Naturally an aeronautical engineer or other specialist will have to be consulted."¹²⁰

Unable to actually float in space, Ontani dissolved the structural space of the gallery by means of multiple projections of stellar masses, using sixteen slide and film projectors. As he did for *Tarzan*, he took the images for his tableau from an archive that provides materials to publishers of encyclopedias. Saturn with its rings appeared right behind Ontani. The helium balloon thus is both the American doughnut and the ring of the planet Saturn, under which artists are born, according to an enduring theory that held sway from the Renaissance to the Romantic era.¹²¹ Other images included de Chirico's stage-set design for Arrigo Boito's opera *Mefistofele* (1868), a series of paintings by the Bolognese artist Donato Creti entitled "Astronomical Observations" (1711), and a super-8 film featuring late Italian Renaissance paintings with cosmological subjects. Ontani adopted a composite sound track for the tableau, using five tape recorders. The

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ In 1963 an influential book on this subject came out, written by Margot and Rudolf Wittkower and entitled *Born Under Saturn: The Character and Conduct of Artists*.

gallery was filled with excerpts from operas by Verdi, Puccini, and Haydn, all thematically related, like the images, to the sky, the stars, the universe.¹²² For the invitation card, Ontani chose to reproduce one of his first works made in India, also thematically related, *Over the Moon* (1975), thus completing the visual pastiche with the inclusion of one of his tableau photos (fig. 228).

3.5. Becoming a Pictorial Being

Ontani said that Pierre Loti was the “literary alibi” for his first trip to India in 1974.¹²³ In a text that Roland Barthes wrote in 1971, as an introduction to the Italian translation of Loti first novel, *Aziyadé* (1879), which takes place in Turkey at the time of the Russo-Turkish war, he connected the strategy of the tableau vivant to the question of identity.¹²⁴ Loti is the nom de plume of Julien Viaud (1850–1923). Under the pseudonym of Loti, Viaud wrote a series of dreamy novels of foreign lands that represent the first considerable attempt in Western literature to deal with male homoeroticism. A member

¹²² Ontani used excerpts from Verdi’s *Traviata* (“dell’universo intero, misterioso, altero . . . dell’universo immemore . . . io vivo quasi in cielo”) and *Rigoletto* (“qual piuma al vento”), from Puccini’s *Tosca* (“e lucean le stelle . . .”), and from Haydn’s *Il mondo della luna* (the planetary chorus).

¹²³ Luigi Ontani, personal interview, 17 May 2007, New York, audio recording. Loti was also the alibi for other Western artists, such as Paul Gauguin, who traveled to exotic locales in search of an alternative to Western culture and modernization. See, for instance, Stephen Eisenman, *Gauguin’s Skirt* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 1997); and Edward Hughes, “Without Obligation: Exotic Appropriation in Loti and Gauguin,” in *Writing Marginality in Modern French Literature: From Loti to Genet* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 9–40.

¹²⁴ Roland Barthes’ “Presentazione,” in *Aziyadé*, Pierre Loti, trans. Leonella Prato Caruso (Parma: Franco Maria Ricci, 1971), 13–33. The essay was translated into English as “Pierre Loti: *Aziyadé*,” in *New Critical Essays*, trans. Richard Howard (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2009), 105–121. The original French version was published in *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. 2 (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1994), 1401–1411.

of the Académie Française, Loti was consigned to the literary margins until recently.¹²⁵

For his stories he drew on his stays in Turkey, India, Japan, China, Polynesia, and Africa as a naval officer at the height of France's colonial expansion.

The protagonist of *Aziyadé* is “a fanatic of dressing up” like the author of the novel, wrote Barthes.¹²⁶ Both are named Loti—the character is a British navel officer, rather than a French one. In the novel Loti dresses up both for practical reasons, as he needs to camouflage during his stays, and for ethical reasons, as part of his desire “to convert, to become a Turk in essence, i.e., in costume.”¹²⁷ Barthes argues that therefore dressing up ought to be understood as “a problem of identity”: “the goal of dressing up is *finally* (once the illusion of being is exhausted) to transform oneself into a describable object—and not into an introspectable subject.” It is born of the desire to be “a pictorial being,” “the one who belongs to the tableau (*celui qui fait partie du tableau*).”¹²⁸ The practice of dressing up, then, is comparable to the practice of making a tableau vivant. Through both practices one becomes a pictorial being.

Viaud posed in tableau photos in which he impersonated different characters: the mummy of the Egyptian Pharaoh Ramses II (fig. 186), the god Osiris (fig. 187), a generic

¹²⁵ See Edward Hughes's studies on Loti, such as “Exotic Drift: Pierre Loti between Contemporaneity and Anteriority,” in *Eastern Voyages, Western Visions: French Writing and Painting of the Orient*, ed. Margaret Topping (New York: Lang, 2004), 241–264.

¹²⁶ Barthes, *Oeuvres complètes*, 1407; idem, *New Critical Essays*, 115; translation amended. Barthes uses the French “*transvestisme*” here, but he does so improperly because this word, just like the English “transvestism,” means “dressing in the clothes of the opposite sex” (Oxford English Dictionary), and this is not what Barthes is discussing that Loti was doing. I am therefore translating this word with the expression “dressing up.”

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ Ibid., 1407–1408; and idem, *New Critical Essays*, 115–116.

Arab (fig. 188).¹²⁹ He also appears in photos in which he is dressed *à l'orientale* in his home in Rochefort, where he set up a *salon turc* and a *chambre arabe*, filled with furniture and objects brought back from his trips (fig. 189). It is known, states Barthes, that “the garment (*vêtement*) does not *express* but constitutes the person; or rather, we know that the person is nothing but this desired image which the garment permits us to believe in.”¹³⁰ This is an essential tenet of dandyism—“to be for the dandy is to appear or, rather, to appear is to be.”¹³¹ Dandyism informs both Loti’s and Ontani’s work and life.

What Barthes calls the “garment” in dressing up corresponds to what Vattimo calls the “good mask” in Nietzsche’s thought: it does not hide a preexistent identity, but it reveals identity, in the sense that it constitutes identity. The garment and the good mask, then, are comparable to what Judith Butler calls corporeal acts, which are inscribed “on the surface of the body” and do not express, but constitute identity. Similarly to Barthes’ garment, to Nietzsche’s good mask, and to Butler’s corporeal acts, Ontani’s tableau works constitute identity. Ontani’s practice of becoming “a pictorial being” found an ideal context in India. There he had the opportunity to forward his engagement with the notion of identity as mask by drawing on the longstanding local tradition of hand-painted

¹²⁹ On Loti’s tableaux see Jean-François Chevrier and Jean Sagne, “Etude: l’autoportrait comme mise en scene,” in *Photographies* 4 (April 1984): 48–49. On Loti see also Richard M. Berrong, *In Love with a Handsome Sailor: The Emergence of Gay Identity and the Novels of Pierre Loti* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003); Hélène de Burgh, *Sex, Sailors and Colonies: Narratives of Ambiguity in the Works of Pierre Loti* (Bern and New York: Peter Lang, 2005); and Peter James Turberfield, *Pierre Loti and the Theatricality of Desire* (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2008).

¹³⁰ Barthes, *Oeuvres complètes*, 1407; and idem, *New Critical Essays*, 115.

¹³¹ Franci, *Il sistema del dandy*, 32 n. 38.

photography and playing with a host of new loose signifiers.

“I AM ELSEWHERE”:

LUIGI ONTANI AND THE TABLEAU VIVANT IN ITALIAN ART, 1969–1979

by

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Vol. 2

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Art History
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

2013

Chapter 4

Made in India

There are many ways of traveling. Some people travel in their own memories, some in their own room or garden, some in their own mountains. Some travel to unknown places, through landscapes, memories, and visions that are not their own, and [...] in the vast expanses of the planet and in its innumerable memories, they look for their own shadow, their own identity, their own special nourishment for existence.

—Ettore Sottsass, *Esercizi di viaggio* (2001)¹

Ontani's travels to India were life-changing. They marked the beginning of his collaborations with local craftspeople. Ever since the late 1970s, drawing on regional handicraft traditions has been a hallmark of Ontani's practice, which has involved, among others, Balinese wood-carvers, Murano glass-makers, Pietrasanta marble carvers, and the ceramists of Faenza. This chapter is devoted to the works Ontani made in India over the course of five trips between 1974 and 1978: a series of sepia-toned water-color painted photographs and a tableau vivant. It is in India that in the second half of the 1970s Ontani continued to make his tableau photos after Western artworks. However, at this time European paintings were less a source for Ontani's impersonations than they were in the first half of the 1970s. In India Ontani was dazzled with the wealth of Indian visual culture at every street corner and nook. He delved into bazaar art and became a

¹ Ettore Sottsass, *Esercizi di viaggio* (Turin: Aragno, 2001), 7. All translations into English are mine unless otherwise credited.

passionate movie theater goer, even if he did not understand the language (English or any of the Indian local languages). Everything was visual for Ontani in India. The local tradition of hand-tinted photography offered Ontani the possibility of furthering his engagement with kitsch and theatricality through the manipulation of watercolor paint, which allows for heightened artificiality, like a mask added to the photo.

In regard to the question of exoticism, it should be kept in mind that Ontani was not coming from a country with a great colonial tradition, but from the exotic country of Europe (think of Von Gloeden with his tableau photos of Sicilian boys). Parallels I draw with texts by Pierre Loti, Italo Calvino, and Giorgio Manganelli illuminate the question of exoticism's associations to distance, difference, and desire that is relevant for Ontani's Indian experience.

Why India?

When Ontani left for his first trip to India in the winter of 1974–75, he was looking for “a different possibility,”² a place that would be “most definitely Other”³ from his country of origin, as he put it. Earlier, in the mid-1960s, he had already traveled from Vergato to Istanbul by car, via the former Yugoslavia and Greece.⁴ It was this first trip to Istanbul, the crossroads of civilizations where Europe meets Asia, that made him want to go

² Luigi Ontani, “È arrivato un angelo,” interview by Franco Fanelli, in *Vernissage*, monthly supplement to *Il Giornale dell'Arte* (November 2003): 5.

³ Idem, “Interview by Alessandra Galasso” (Vergato, January 25, 2003), audio recording, quoted in English translation in Alessandra Galasso et al., *Luigi Ontani: Genthara*, trans. Anita Joy Weston and Alessandra Galasso (Gent: S.M.A.K. and Roma: Italtre, 2003), 49.

⁴ Ontani, personal interview, 23 December 2007, Riola, audio recording.

further east a decade later.⁵ At the time, the *anni di piombo* were getting particularly “heavy.” Early in 1973 two college students were killed by the police during public demonstrations.⁶ And 1974 marked an escalation of political violence: the death toll from armed struggles rose from 6 in 1973 to 30, and the activities of the leftist terrorists shifted from defensive to aggressive when the *Brigate Rosse* or Red Brigades, the largest and strongest of the leftist groups, announced “an attack on the heart of the state.”⁷ Later that year there were two major neofascist bombing attacks: in May in Piazza della Loggia in Brescia, at a crowded anti-fascist demonstration, and in August on the train *Italicus* that ran express from Rome to Munich. These were the bloodiest massacres since the infamous Strage di Piazza Fontana in December of 1969. The escalation of political violence reached an apex towards the end of the decade. About 70% of all the leftist terrorist attacks that occurred over the course of the *anni di piombo*, between 1968 and 1982, took place between 1977 and 1979.⁸ This sociopolitical upheaval was aggravated by a bitter economic recession, inaugurated by the international oil crisis of 1973. The worst since the postwar period—Eric Hobsbawm talks about the early 1970s as the end of

⁵ Idem, personal interview, 8 May 2009, Rome, audio recoding.

⁶ The two students were Roberto Franceschi, killed by a gunshot to the head fired during a student demonstration at the Università Bocconi in Milan on January 23, 1973, and Vincenzo Caporale, hit to the head with a tear gas canister during a student demonstration in Naples one month later, on February 21. Caporale passed away the next day. For a day-by-day chronology of violent events in the *anni di piombo*, between 1969 and 1979, see Tullio Barbato, “Cronologia dei fatti,” in *Il terrorismo in Italia negli anni Settanta. Cronaca e documentazione* (Milan: Bibliografica, 1980), 41–191. Barbato was a journalist and editor for *La Notte*, one of the most popular daily newspapers published in Milan at the time.

⁷ See Paul Ginsborg, *A History of Contemporary Italy: Society and Politics 1943–1988* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 363.

⁸ Guido Crainz, *Il paese mancato: Dal miracolo economico agli anni ottanta* (Roma: Donzelli, 2005), 565.

“the golden age”⁹—in Italy it was particularly dramatic, as Crainz has shown, explaining the variables of the Italian situation in detail. They include the intensification of the exploitation of workers as the main booster of productivity with subsequent heated social tensions and the flight of capital abroad.¹⁰

It was during this period, in the second half of the 1970s, that Ontani traveled to India for extended periods, mostly alone, and collaborated with local craftspeople to produce a series of sepia-toned black-and-white photographs overpainted in watercolor and a live performance. Ontani had worked jointly with Italian photographers for his tableaux photos prior to his Indian travels. However, for the series realized in India, entitled “En route vers l’Inde (d’après Pierre Loti)” (“On the Way to India [after Pierre Loti]”), he drew for the first time on a longstanding local tradition—the tradition of hand-tinting photography.

A music album paradigmatic of this deeply distressed period, its ferocious political violence, and also its general confusion, is *Storia di un impiegato (Story of a White-Collar)* by Fabrizio De André, considered by many the Bob Dylan of Italy for his poetic, political songs. The album, composed in 1972, came out in 1973. De André at the time was spied on by the Italian secret services because of his texts, clearly against the establishment and the hypocritical, conformist, indifferent bourgeoisie of Italy. As the refrain of the first song of the album, “Canzone del maggio” (“May Song”), the most

⁹ Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes: A History of the World, 1914-1991* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1994).

¹⁰ Guido Crainz, “Crisi internazionale e crisi italiana,” in *Il paese mancato*, 416–419.

famous to date, reiterated, “anche se voi vi credete assolti, siete lo stesso coinvolti” (“even if you think you are absolved, you are in fact implicated”). A similar line—“per quanto voi vi crediate assolti, siete per sempre coinvolti” (“although you think you have been absolved, you are forever implicated”)—closes the album, as part of the song “Nella mia ora di libertà” (“In my free hour”), which lets us peak into the thoughts of a detainee, perhaps the white-collar protagonist, as he becomes aware of the system’s wrongdoings.¹¹ Another song in *Storia di un impiegato* entitled “Il bombarolo” (“The bomber”) reflects the confusion, widespread at the time, between the different strategies adopted by rightwing and leftwing terrorists.¹² It frames the bomber as an anarchist against the establishment, when in fact the explosions were plotted by neofascist groups as part of the strategy of tension. From the beginning the scapegoats were the anarchists, put under police investigation, and arrested as the suspect responsible.¹³ For the police as

¹¹ On Fabrizio De André and in particular the album *Storia di un impiegato*, see Enrico Grassani, *Anche se voi vi credete assolti . . . Fabrizio De André. Attualità del messaggio politico e sociale. Con un'intervista a Fernanda Pivano* (Pavia: Selecta, 2002). See also Crainz, *Il paese mancato*, 191.

¹² For the text of “Il bombarolo,” see Grassani, *Anche se voi vi credete assolti*, 98–101.

¹³ On the never-ending trials following the Strage di Piazza Fontana, for which the anarchist Giuseppe Pinelli was arrested and died under uncertain circumstances, see Licia Pinelli, Piero Scarmucci, *Una storia quasi soltanto mia* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 2009). The officer wrongly considered responsible for Pinelli’s death, Commissar Luigi Calabresi, was assassinated three years later (see Mario Calabresi, *Spingendo la notte più in là: Storia della mia famiglia e di altre vittime del terrorismo* [Milan: Mondadori, 2007]; published in English as *Pushing Past the Night: Coming to Terms with Italy’s Terrorist Past*, trans. Michael F. Moore [New York: Other Book, 2009]). On the trials following the murder, see Carlo Ginzburg’s book *The Judge and the Historian: Marginal Notes on a Late-Twentieth-Century Miscarriage of Justice* (London and New York: Verso, 1999). The mysterious death of the anarchist Pinelli, officially committing suicide by jumping out of the window during interrogations a few days after his arrest, inspired Dario Fo to write one of his most famous plays, the political farce *Morte accidentale di un anarchico* (Accidental Death of an Anarchist), first performed in December of 1970. It has continued to resonate with younger generations. Fifty years after the fact, in 2009, the up-and-coming artist Francesco Arena commemorated Pinelli’s death with a poignant room installation that rendered the total distance covered by Pinelli on his last day of freedom as parallels lines carved on slate slabs covering the floor, *18.900 metri su ardesia—la strada di Pinelli* (18,900 Meters on Slate—Pinelli’s Route; on this work see Anna Mecugni, “Francesco Arena, Monitor, Rome,” *Art in America* [May 2010], 168–169).

for the public opinion the bombers were anarchists. “Sono bombe anarchiche” (“They are anarchist bombs”) stated the heading of a local newspaper after a bomb exploded at Milan’s Fiera Campionaria on April 25, 1969.¹⁴ It took almost twenty years, many trials, considerable delays and obstruction of justice, before two neofascists were condemned for this and other bombing attacks.¹⁵ In other cases, as for the massacres of Piazza Fontana and Piazza della Loggia, it took until the early 2000s to establish that responsibility for the massacres was to be placed on neofascists.

As Anna Cento Bull outlines in her recent study on Italian neofascism, there were two main forms of political violence during the *anni di piombo*: *stragismo*, or the plotting of massacres (*stragi*), and guerrilla warfare, which consisted in kidnappings, shootings, robberies, beatings, and threats of individuals. While the latter was carried out by both extreme-right and extreme-left activists, the former, which was the most bloody and arguably the most traumatic, was a prerogative of extreme-right groups. However, no organization ever claimed responsibility for the individual massacres and interminable subsequent trials have not succeeded in reaching irrefutable verdicts. But on the basis of

¹⁴ *Il Giorno*, April 27 1969. For a reconstruction of the confusion surrounding these and other culprits of the bombing attacks as part of the strategy of tension, see Crainz, *Il paese mancato*, 342–346, 363–410. The arrest of ten Italian anarchists on June 13, 2012 for bombing attacks and explosive packages that targeted venues ranging from the Università Bocconi in Milan to the General Director of Equitalia (the Italian company in charge of tax collection), to the CEO of the Deutsche Bank and the Greek Embassy in Paris, one wonder if history is not repeating itself. The police operation happened right before the Greek elections, which resulted in a victory of the right, and links between the Italian and the Greek anarchists were stressed. Apparently investigators found letters in which anarchists claimed responsibility for the actions. In view of the cover-ups and false leads of the 1970s (think of Gianfranco Bertoli, arrested for the Strage di Piazza della Loggia and a self-proclaimed anarchist later found to have been in close contact with extreme-right members of the neofascist group Ordine Nuovo), one will at least suspect the truthfulness of those letters.

¹⁵ Anna Cento Bull, *Italian Neofascism: The Strategy of Tension and the Politics of Nonreconciliation* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2007), 21.

judicial evidence it can be argued that, at least until 1974, *stragismo* was carried out by anti-communist forces as part of a strategy that aimed at destabilizing the country and placing blame upon the leftist terrorists.¹⁶

It is not difficult to imagine that such a confusing, bloody, polarized, and economically collapsing state of affairs must have aggravated Ontani's restlessness and the estrangement he felt toward his own country for the conformist, hypocritical rejection of homosexuality as deviant that distinguishes Catholic culture, prompting him to look for his own Taxila in India. That, he said, was the "secret destination" of his first trip.¹⁷ In *Tristes Tropiques* (1955), which the artist read during the trip, Claude Lévi-Strauss describes Taxila as the place where, before the invasion of Islam, "three of the greatest spiritual traditions of the Ancient World, Hellenism, Hinduism, and Buddhism, lived side by side" for several centuries, and where the "Persia of Zoroaster was also present and, with the Parthians and Scythians, the civilization of the steppes." In the aftermath of World War II, Lévi-Strauss saw in Taxila the appeasing possibility of grounding himself in an idealized ancient past characterized by tolerant, peaceful coexistence:

With the exception of Christianity, all the influences which moulded the Old World come together here. Distant springs have mingled their waters. I myself, a European visitor meditating on the ruins, represent the missing tradition. Where better than on this site, which offers him a microcosm of his culture, could an inhabitant of the Old World, renewing the links with his part, meditate on his destiny?¹⁸

¹⁶ Ibid., 4–7.

¹⁷ Ontani mentioned this on several occasions in both personal and published interviews.

¹⁸ Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques*, trans. John and Doreen Weightman (New York: Penguin, 1992), 396.

Ontani did not visit the archeological site in northwestern Pakistan when he headed to India in 1974. By “secret destination” he meant “ideal.”

In the postcolonial world, it was with the Beat and hippie counterculture of the 1960s that India became a popular destination internationally. Allen Ginsberg traveled across India for fifteen months in 1962–1963. What did Ginsberg and other Beats hope to find in India? “Disillusioned Westerner goes to mystic East in search of . . . what exactly?” asks Deborah Baker at the beginning of her elliptical, evocative account of Ginsberg’s pilgrimage. “A guru?” continues Baker, “An unlimited supply of drugs? Young boys? Nirvana? A wife? Or, like every pilgrim, did he simply cherish the belief that beyond the known world there exists a place where ailments are healed, the heart is filled, and demons are vanquished?”¹⁹ The Cuban missile crisis and a border dispute between India and China were raising fears that the world might vanish in a mushroom cloud. After hopping from one guru to the next, Ginsberg found the spiritual insight he was seeking at the cremation ghats of Calcutta and Benares. As Baker seems to suggest, watching and meditating on the cremation fire—the burning of corpses garlanded in flowers amidst sadhus chanting, men invoking Shiva, performers dancing for money—led to the most powerful revelation, a rather simple thought: he “had no powers beyond those granted to the living over the dead. And like every other passenger on this journey, he was alive.”²⁰ An avid fellow traveler of the Beats, architect and designer Ettore

¹⁹ Deborah Baker, *A Blue Hand: The Beats in India* (New York: Penguin Press, 2008), 6.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 208.

Sottsass went to India in the early 1960s and wrote reportage on his travels that were published in the popular monthly magazine *Domus*, well known for its articles on modern architecture and decorative arts.²¹ If it was not with Ginsberg's travels that India entered the popular imagination (his *Indian Journals* were published in 1970), it was with George Harrison's trip in 1966. The Beatles member left London to study with the musician Ravi Shankar.²² But the Italian fascination with India has a history that goes well beyond Beat and hippie counterculture.

Film director Roberto Rossellini traveled to India in the late 1950s to film two documentaries, one of which was broadcast as a television series in ten episodes,²³ and, between late 1960 and early 1961, novelist Alberto Moravia and film director and writer Pier Paolo Pasolini also left for India. They wrote reportage series for two major daily

²¹ The articles appeared between 1962 and 1964, with the text printed on newsprint accompanied by several color photographs taken by Sottsass during his trips and presented on glossy, high-quality paper (a common combination throughout the magazine): "Viaggio a Oriente. Prima puntata: Birmania," *Domus*, no. 391 (June 1962), 37–42; "Viaggio a Oriente. II puntata: Jaipur e il Palazzo," *Domus*, no. 393 (August 1962), 37–42; "Viaggio a Oriente: Templi in India," *Domus*, no. 396 (November 1962), p. 40–45; "Viaggio a Oriente, quarta puntata: Agra e le pitture delle case," *Domus*, no. 410 (January 1964), 40–44. Recently the texts have been republished with some changes in the book *Esercizi di viaggio* (9–33, 41–44), which gathers all of Sottsass's travel writings.

²² For a firsthand account of beat and hippie counterculture in Italy, see Fernanda Pivano, *Beat hippie yippie: dall'underground alla controcultura* (Milano: Bompiani, 1977). Pivano was the first to translate into Italian the poems by Ginsberg and other Beats.

²³ Rossellini's 1959 documentaries are *L'India vista da Rossellini (India as Seen by Rossellini)* and *India matri bhumi (India Mother Land)*. On Rossellini's travels and works in India, see Rossana Dedola, *La valigia delle Indie e altri bagagli: Racconti di viaggiatori illustri* (Milano: Mondadori, 2006), 35–53. Dedola is an eclectic literary historian with a background in analytical psychology. Her book addresses the question of why in the late 1950s and 1960s India became a favorite travel destination for many writers, poets, musicians and pop stars, like the Beatles. "India revealed a reality completely different from the West—Dedola wrote—but it also lent itself as a sort of mirror for understanding the world from which one came and in which many young people could not live anymore" (idem, 1). The main focus of the book is on travel accounts from the late 1950s onward, mostly by Italians, but also by Allen Ginsberg, Octavio Paz and Günter Grass.

newspapers that soon afterwards were published in book form.²⁴ As Giuliana Benvenuti wrote in her recent, insightful study on Italian travel literature on India, Moravia and Pasolini left because they were “restless, critical towards what they left,” and they lived their experience as “a departure in search of difference.”²⁵ In the late 1960s, Pasolini went back to film a documentary funded by the national television network RAI.²⁶ A few years later, in 1973, shortly before Ontani’s first journey to India, Francesco Clemente undertook the first of numerous trips. Like Ontani, Clemente went to India because he was “discontented”²⁷ with where he was. He “wanted to be somewhere else” and he thought that India was as far as he could go.²⁸ For Clemente, as for Ontani, the terrorist

²⁴ Moravia wrote for *Il Corriere della Sera* and Pasolini for *Il Giorno*. Their books are *Un’idea dell’India* (Milano: Bompiani, 1962) and *L’odore dell’India* (Milano: Longanesi, 1962) respectively.

²⁵ Giuliana Benvenuti, *Il viaggiatore come autore: l’India nella letteratura italiana del novecento* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2008), 11. “Restless” (*inquieta*) were also those Italian “adventurers” who traveled to India and other faraway countries in the fourteenth century and later, after the golden age of sea commerce at the time of Marco Polo’s trips (Daria Perocco, “Fenomenologie dell’esotismo: Viaggiatori italiani in Oriente,” in *L’Oriente: Storie di viaggiatori italiani*, 148). In her book Benvenuti, who is professor of contemporary Italian literature at the University of Bologna, also discusses Guido Gozzano and Giorgio Manganelli.

²⁶ The title of this documentary is *Appunti per un film sull’India* (*Notes for a Film on India*, 1968). On this and other documentaries that Pasolini realized in Palestine and central East Africa, see Luca Caminati, *Orientalismo eretico: Pier Paolo Pasolini e il cinema del Terzo mondo* (Milano: Mondadori, 2007). An interesting book that gathers photographs from Pasolini’s travels and film sets, as well as from the travels east undertaken by Fosco Maraini, Roberto Rossellini, Alberto Moravia, Mario Schifano, Ettore Sottsass, Alighiero Boetti, Michelangelo Antonioni, Bernardo Bertolucci, and also Luigi Ontani is Monica Schifano and Luca Ronchi, *Viaggio a Oriente* (Roma: Zone Attive, 2004). The book accompanied a photographic exhibition held at the Acquario Romano. Monica Schifano is the widow of Mario Schifano and director of the Mario Schifano Archive. Mario Schifano—great provocateur, painter *maudit* and leading Pop artist based in Rome—traveled to India in 1970. A lesser-known documentary than Pasolini’s *Appunti per un film sull’India* is *Ladakh: il centro dei passi*, filmed by Gaia Ceriana and Marina Colonna, in 1975–1976. This was the first documentary ever realized on Ladakh, a center of Tibetan Buddhism with a peaceful integrated Muslim minority, in the region of Kashmir in northern India. The late writer and poet Giovan Battista Salerno collaborated on the texts (Salerno was one of the critics closest to Alighiero Boetti, who I will mention again in the course of this chapter). A friend of Ontani, Gaia Ceriana later married Giorgio Franchetti, one of the greatest Roman collectors and one of the first to be interested in Ontani’s work.

²⁷ Francesco Clemente, “Conversation with Francesco Clemente, Danilo Eccher and Francesco Pellizzi,” in Danilo Eccher, ed., *Francesco Clemente: opere su carta* (Turin: Umberto Allemandi, 1999), 130.

²⁸ Idem, Rainer Crone and Georgia Marsh, *Clemente: An Interview with Francesco Clemente by Rainer Crone and Georgia Marsh* (New York: Vintage Books, 1987), 18.

conflict in Italy was a motivating factor to leave the country. Clemente saw the 1970s in Italy as “a very dark period,” “a sort of collective abyss,”²⁹ and India as a place where “there are no totalitarian ideas”³⁰ and where anything “can stand on its own feet, without needing an adversary, without needing some enemy to lean on.”³¹ Had he stayed in Italy, Clemente said, he would have died, literally, as “history’s dead end in Italy in the ‘70s meant that people my age got very heavily involved in terrorist activities.” So he decided “to take a vacation from history into geography.”³² In 1977, Ontani and Clemente traveled together as part of a group journey named “L’Attico in viaggio” that involved producing and exhibiting works there. The trip was promoted by Ontani’s gallerist, Fabio Sargentini, who was a key figure in stimulating an interest in India among artists of his stable in the early 1970s.³³

In May of 1973 Sargentini hosted two initiatives of Indian art and music that resulted from his own travels to India in 1972: a show of Tantra art and a series of concerts. The exhibition, entitled *Tantra Yoga*, comprised twenty-five diagrams and mandalas from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries that Sargentini brought over from India; the concerts featured Pandit Pran Nath with his students from New York, La Monte

²⁹ Idem, “Conversation with Francesco Clemente, Danilo Eccher and Francesco Pellizzi,” 109 and 110.

³⁰ Idem, “Interview by Robin White,” *View* 3, no. 6 (November 1981): 5.

³¹ Idem, “Francesco Clemente,” interview by Barbaralee Diamonstein, in *Inside the Art World: Conversations with Barbaralee Diamonstein* (New York: Rizzoli, 1994), 44.

³² Francesco Clemente, “Francesco Clemente Talks with Brooks Adams,” *Artforum* 41, n. 7 (March 2003): 59.

³³ Information in this and the following paragraph is drawn from several unrecorded and recorded conversations I had with Sargentini and Paparatti in Rome, with Sargentini on December 12, 2007 and December 19, 2008; with Paparatti on December 19 and 20, 2008.

Young, Terry Riley, Marian Zazeela, among others.³⁴ The following year, in June of 1974, Sargentini organized a festival of Indian and American music, entitled *East-West Music*. He invited the most famous flute-player of India, T. R. Mahalingam known as Mali, to perform, and again Pran Nath, La Monte Young, Riley, and Zazeela, together with another American minimalist composer who studied with Pran Nath, Charlemagne Palestine.³⁵

The person who introduced Sargentini to Indian Tantra art and music was his partner, the painter Anna Paparatti. She bought LPs of the Daghar brothers, edited by the French musicologist Alain Danielou and published by UNESCO, at the Feltrinelli library in Rome (Sargentini later invited the Daghar brothers to perform at his gallery in 1978). Sargentini met Paparatti through Pascali, as the two were taking Toni Scialoja's scenography course at the art academy in Rome.³⁶ In turn, the incubator of Paparatti's interest in Indian culture was her experience with the Living Theater in 1965. For several months she joined the theater company, which had just left New York, where it was based, due to financial problems and conflicts with city authorities. She lived with the members of the Living Theater in a hippie commune in a villa in Velletri, in the province

³⁴ Both initiatives were a success. Sargentini recalls an American visitor particularly fascinated with the works. That was Sol LeWitt, who, as a conceptual artist, advocated for mysticism, rather than rationalism (see "Sentences on Conceptual Art," *Art-Language* 1, no. 1 [May 1969], 11). The American dancer Simone Forti introduced Sargentini to La Monte Young and Riley when he visited New York in 1969.

³⁵ The pamphlet accompanying the event includes interviews with the American musicians and an essay by French musicologist Daniel Caux.

³⁶ Pascali's partner of the time was Maria Pioppi, who had lived in Iran for years as the wife of a Persian painter. When Pioppi returned to Rome, she brought back trunks filled with marvelous Persian objects and clothes that she and Paparatti wore in Rome. Later Pioppi married Pistoletto.

of Rome, made available by a Communist politician, and participated in the performance of the Living's first production abroad, *Mysteries and Smaller Pieces* (1964)—an unscripted sequence of partly rehearsed and partly improvised scenes that included a woman singing an Indian raga and improvised tableaux vivants.³⁷

For Ontani India first represented the projection of an exotic desire that matured during adolescence in the provincial town of Vergato. Novels by early to mid-twentieth-century authors such as Alberto Savinio, Aldo Palazzeschi, and Giovanni Comisso had stimulated his imagination: “I read everything by Savinio, Palazzeschi, and Comisso, who have the frisson of the exotic, of travel, of transgression, of mirrors.”³⁸ With its fantastically decorated rooms and recreations of exotic locales, such as the Alhambra courtyard and the Cordoba Mosque's interior, the mid-nineteenth-century Orientalist castle known as the Rocchetta Mattei also excited the fantasies of the young Ontani (figs.

³⁷ On *Mysteries and Smaller Pieces* and the Living Theater during the exile period, see Giuseppe Bartolucci, *The Living Theatre: dall'organismo-microstruttura alla rivendicazione dell'utopia: saggio di scrittura scenica come movimento-azione* (Roma: Samona e Savelli, 1970); Julian Beck, Judith Malina and Franco Quadri, *Il lavoro del Living Theater (materiali 1952–1969)* (Milan: Ubulibri, 1982).

³⁸ Luigi Ontani, “Luigi Ontani,” interview by Giancarlo Politi, *Flash Art* (Italian edition), n. 136 (December 1986–January 1987): 27. [“Ho letto tutto Savinio, Palazzeschi, Comisso, dove c'è tutto quel sentimento dell'esotico, del viaggio, della trasgressione, degli specchi.”] In particular, Savinio's *Hermaphrodito* (1918), Palazzeschi's *Il Codice di Perelà* (1911), and Comisso's *Amori d'Oriente* (1948) come to mind. Well-read from an early age, Ontani has with these authors a special familiarity, which transpires in several works and interviews. For once, he realized eight works on paper for a special edition of Savinio's *Introduzione a una vita di Mercurio* (Brescia: Edizioni L'Obliquo, 1990).

190–191).³⁹ Located in the nearby town of Grizzana, the Rocchetta was built by the Count Cesare Mattei in Moorish Revival style on the site of a medieval castle. Mattei utilized inexpensive materials such as stucco and papier-mâché to imitate grand architecture from the past,⁴⁰ thus realizing an early example of kitsch as cheap imitation, as defined by Dorfles in his 1960s essays on the subject.⁴¹ An eccentric and eclectic figure, Mattei was part politician, part financier, and part physician, but he is best known as the inventor of electro-homeopathy.⁴² His medical books have been translated in several languages, including Hindi, and although they are generally forgotten in Italy, they are being sold in India to this day. Ontani remembers followers of Mattei's methods, mostly physicians from the Gujarat region, visiting the Rocchetta in pilgrimage.⁴³

³⁹ Although the Moorish Revival style is dominant at the Rocchetta, there are architectural and room details and decorations that are inspired by other styles, such as the Romanesque, the Gothic, and even the Pompeian. On the Rocchetta Mattei, see Mario Facci, *Il conte Cesare Mattei: Vita e opere di un singolare 'guaritore' dell'Ottocento, inventore dell'Elettromeopatia, costruttore della Rocchetta di Riola* (Porretta Terme [Bologna]: Gruppo di studi alta valle del Reno – Nuèter, Gruppo di studi Savena Setta Sambro, 2002) and Enrico Schiavina, "Rocchetta Mattei," in *Da Riola a Savignano Longareno: Idee per la valorizzazione di un territorio* (Venice: in.pagina, 2001), 46–77. See also Cosimo Mauro, "Il carattere particolare della Rocchetta Mattei" (*laurea* thesis, University of Bologna, 1990). A copy of the thesis is available at the archives of the Fondazione Carisbo (Cassa di Risparmio of Bologna) that purchased the Rocchetta in 2005 and has financed an extensive restoration.

⁴⁰ On the books that Mattei may have consulted for the design of the Rocchetta, as they were readily available in Bologna at the time, and on the buildings seen on his trips that may have inspired him, see Monica Bettocchi and Matteo Fabbri, "Rocchetta Mattei a Riola in provincia di Bologna. Dal rilievo al progetto di restauro per il recupero e la rifunzionalizzazione del complesso architettonico" (*laurea* thesis, University of Ferrara, 2002), 10–11.

⁴¹ See for example Gillo Dorfles, "Transpositions," in *Kitsch: The World of Bad Taste* (New York: Universe Books, 1969), 87.

⁴² As a financier, Mattei was one of the founders of the Cassa di Risparmio of Bologna, which recently acquired the Rocchetta and has funded its restoration.

⁴³ In the 1990s Ontani purchased a portion of the former properties of Mattei, a villa used as a dependence for his guests. Nearby he built a studio. Ontani named the villa "Villino RomAmor" (*villino* means "little villa" and "RomAmor" is a contraction of two words: *Roma* or Rome and *Amore* or "love"). On "Villino RomAmor," see Graziella Pederzani, *Obiettivo Ontani* (Vergato: Nuova Tipografia Ferri, 2007).

Given his working-class background, as a child and adolescent Ontani could only travel to faraway places in his imagination. When he was able to travel for real, as a young adult, he did so on a tight budget and his accommodations in India were those that served local travelers, not middle-class foreign tourists. Ontani's first trip to India proved a long, solitary, extreme trip that he described as a sort of "heroic undertaking" in which he put himself through "vital, existential tests" in search of "a total loss of bearings."⁴⁴ These words echo the "aching" and "shipwrecking" experience of India evoked by another Italian, the writer and Group 63 member Giorgio Manganelli, who went to India in late 1975 as a correspondent for the weekly magazine *Il Mondo*.⁴⁵ Ontani, like Manganelli, did not travel to India in search of a guru or to explore altered states of consciousness through the use of drugs, as many did in the wake of the Beat and hippie movements.⁴⁶ He went, as he said, driven by the need to make concrete the distance he already felt from his country of origin, "invent a different story," make his own limits explicit in order to discover "other possibilities of the ludic."⁴⁷ In part, however, Ontani's need to escape ran up against reality, as the socio-political climate he found in India was

⁴⁴ Luigi Ontani, "Luigi Ontani," interview by Politi, *Flash Art* (December 1986–January 1987): 25, quoted in English translation in *Luigi Ontani: Genthara*, 49.

⁴⁵ Giorgio Manganelli, *Esperimento con l'India* (Milano: Adelphi, 1992), 11. (Manganelli's reportages were published posthumously as a book.) Although Manganelli declared that, like those who have read *Siddharta* by Hesse, he was "suspicious of people who go to India in such a hypnotic, aching, nostalgic, shipwrecking way," he was, at least in part, one of them, as Benvenuti proposes in her study (*Il viaggiatore come autore*, 195).

⁴⁶ Luigi Ontani, personal interview, 17 May 2007, New York, audio recording.

⁴⁷ Idem, "Intervista con Luigi Ontani (April 4, 2003)," in "Luigi Ontani," *laurea* thesis by Valentina Storace, Facoltà di Lettere, Università La Sapienza, Rome, academic year 2002–2003, quoted in Alessandra Galasso, ed., *Luigi Ontani: OntanElegia* (Torino: Umberto Allemandi, 2004), 14. In a recent interview with Alessandra Galasso, Ontani said that traveling for him is a deliberate way of cyclically distancing himself from his own context (quoted in *Luigi Ontani: Genthara*, 49).

possibly even more troubling than what he left behind. As Salvo said, quoting from a short story by Silvana Gandolfi, “the elsewhere is an illusion, you always find the same things everywhere.”⁴⁸

After years of struggles and blood shed, in January of 1975 the Prime Minister of India, Indira Gandhi, proclaimed the State of Emergency, suspending all democratic and civil rights in order to suppress the Naxalite movement—a leftwing revolutionary movement. The State of Emergency was in place for one and a half years. Indiscriminate arrests and the violation of human rights, however, were not exclusive to the State of Emergency. Already in 1970–1 the Indian government started a brutal campaign against the Naxalites. Over the course of the decade, prisons became filled with political prisoners. The movement was named after the village in North Bengal, Naxalbari, where the first major revolt took place in the spring of 1967. Initially members of the Communist Party of India led the movement, which catalyzed the anger and desperation of starving peasants against landowners and usurers. Over time middle-class students and intellectuals joined the cause. The movement operated both violently

⁴⁸ Dede Auregli, “Intervista con Salvo” (Interview with Salvo), in *Salvo*, eds. Renato Barilli and Danilo Eccher (Milan: Electa, 1998), 89.

and peacefully: through acts of terrorism, carried out by armed squads hiding in forest areas in various parts of India, and through poetry written in local, vernacular language.⁴⁹

Ontani does not speak of the socio-political turmoil that India was going through when he arrived. One wonders what his perception of it was, given that he did not speak much English or any of the local languages. If the lack of proficiency in a shared language must have weighed in on Ontani's perception of what was happening in India, being in India must have shielded him from what was happening in Italy. When Moro was kidnapped, Ontani read the news on a local Indian newspaper, "in three lines."⁵⁰ Perhaps Ontani, like Palomar, the protagonist of Italo Calvino's homonymous novel, was "in search of harmony in the midst of a world torn apart and clashing."⁵¹ Published in 1983, *Mr. Palomar* first reached the daily life of the Italian people as a series of stories included in the popular newspaper *Il Corriere della Sera* starting in 1975. Neither Calvino nor Palomar, an alter-ego of the writer, go to India, though a Technicolor film on India seen at the movie theater provides a momentary escape from the depressing reality of urban life for Marcovaldo, another character of Calvino. After leaving the movie

⁴⁹ The British Mary Tyler left a shocking account of what she witnessed in Indian prisons, during the five years of her detention as a political dissident, between 1970 and 1975, in *My years in an Indian Prison* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1977). She fell in love and married a leftist activist, but had not yet become an activist herself. For another first-hand account of the political turmoil of these years, see Jan Myrdal, *India Waits*, trans. Alan Bernstein (Chicago: Lake View Press, 1986), particularly 318–340. Myrdal traveled to India several times between the late 1950s and the late 1970s. According to the Swedish author, the book is a travelogue of her last journey from the winter of 1979–1980, but it is one that includes a dense, complex discussion of the socio-political and historical reality of India. I ought to thank Amitava Kumar for having drawn my attention to these two intense, troubling books.

⁵⁰ Ontani, personal interview, 5 January 2009.

⁵¹ Italo Calvino, "Presentazione," in *Palomar* (1983), vi ["in cerca d'un'armonia in mezzo a un mondo tutto dilaniamenti e stridori"].

theater, Marcovaldo is still in India: “Coming out of the theater, he opened his eyes at the street, closed them again, reopened them: he saw nothing. Absolutely nothing. . . .

Bundled up in his overcoat, Marcovaldo felt protected from every external sensation, suspended in the void; and he could color this void with the images of India, the Ganges, the jungle, Calcutta.”⁵² Calvino wrote *Marcovaldo* (1963) during the period of great socio-economic transformation of the country, between the late 1950s and early 1960s. 1963 was the year when Italy’s “economic miracle” had started giving way to an economic downturn. In the mid-1970s Calvino traveled to faraway places like Mexico, Japan, and Iran.

In a book on the Italian 1970s, Marco Belpoliti considers six literary figures, including Calvino, Manganelli, Pasolini, Alberto Arbasino, and Goffredo Parise, in relation to the “long crisis” of the period and the effects it had on the way they lived their role as writer-intellectuals. In a section dedicated to the parallels between Calvino and Manganelli, Belpoliti discusses two aspects of their work and life that are relevant to our discussion of Ontani’s practice and travels to India: their interest in fantastic literature and their journeys to faraway countries, accompanied by travel reportages written for daily newspapers. In the mid-1970s Manganelli traveled not only to India, but also to China and Malaysia. “All this movement—Belpoliti remarks—must mean something with respect to the frantic events of that period.” And he wonders if they were both “looking elsewhere for what they could not find in the reality of Italy.” The fundamental

⁵² Idem, *Marcovaldo or the Seasons in the City* (London: Secker & Warbrug, 1963), 60–61.

question, for Belpoliti, is whether Calvino's and Manganelli's travels to faraway countries and interest in fantastic literature may be interpreted as "a way out of the deadlock of present reality (*una via di fuga dal vicolo cieco della realtà presente*)."⁵³ This is also the question that Ontani's work and travels to India pose. They ought to be considered in the context of the *riflusso* or "withdrawal" that characterized the mid-1970s, announced by De André's lines in "Il bombarolo" (The Bomber) from his LP *Storia di un impiegato* (1973): "chi non terrorizza/ s'ammala di terrore" (who does not terrorize, gets sick from terror).⁵⁴ Even among the "revolutionary left," wrote Enzo Forcella in late 1976 in *la Repubblica*, there is "air of *riflusso* and a bit of crisis."⁵⁵ As historian Giorgio Crainz has observed, the mid-1970s coincided with a general, radical mutation in the relationship with the present and the past. The daring rejection of the immediate past gave way to a diffuse sense of disorientation and a general fear of the present and future.⁵⁶

Ontani's travels to India, however, were not simply passive withdrawal, but an active choice that led him to be exposed to a different and even harsher reality than the one he left behind. Perhaps Ontani's travels to India may be seen as a form of downward mobility, a leap into marginality. He was coming from the margins and was exploring the

⁵³ Marco Belpoliti, *Settanta* (Turin: Einaudi, 2010), 184.

⁵⁴ Grassani, *Anche se voi vi credete assolti*, 99.

⁵⁵ Enzo Forcella, "Porci con le ali: perché il sequestro?," *la Repubblica*, 8 December 1976. The article is a review of an extraordinarily successful book, *Porci con le ali: Diario sessuo-politico di due adolescenti* (*Pigs Have Wings*, 1976) by Marco Lombardo Radice and Lidia Ravera. The book was published in English translation the following year.

⁵⁶ Crainz, *Il paese mancato*, 558 et sq.

margins. Ontani's condition in India was generally one of solitude because of the language barrier and the fact that he traveled on his own, except for the collective journey and exhibition project, "L'Attico in viaggio." India for Ontani was a sort of "negative mirror," a place where he could discover what he was not, what Marco Polo described as the "elsewhere" to the sedentary Emperor of China, Kublai Khan, in Calvino's *Città invisibili* (*Invisible Cities*, 1972).⁵⁷ It was also a through-the-looking-glass mirror, that is, an opportunity for exploring and identifying with the nonidentical, to borrow Neil Leach's term from his discussion of Herbert Marcuse's concept of narcissism.⁵⁸ In marked contrast to the struggle for power and control that political groups of the time were engaging in, Ontani's engagement with displacement, fragmentation, and multiplicity grew stronger in India.

"En route vers l'Inde (d'après Pierre Loti)"

Introduction

Ontani's first trip to India lasted much longer than initially planned. Started as a tourist's visit, it became a sojourn. Over the course of a few months, he made the first pieces of what then grew into a large series during subsequent stays in the second half of the 1970s. Ontani conceived the series as an homage to Pierre Loti. "En route vers l'Inde" is the title of the first chapter of Loti's Indian travel diary, *L'Inde (sans les Anglais)* (*India*,

⁵⁷ Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities* (Orlando, FL: Harcourt, 1974), 29.

⁵⁸ Neil Leach, *Camouflage* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT, 2006), 130.

1901).⁵⁹ (In the English translation it appears as the “Introduction.”) In this chapter Loti describes his journey to India on the Red Sea. It is the experience of a visual revelation:

It seems as though our eyes could appreciate new forms and colors in the increasing brightness which we had been unable to perceive before. From what a land of shadow we must have come, and what can this festival of light be that has sprung on us suddenly and unbidden?⁶⁰

As light pours relentlessly, languid and hot on the ancient ruins, present and past collapse in a circular notion of time: “This melancholy light is ever present, just as it must have been in the old, sacred times, and these things give our narrow imagination a sense of infinity, and tell of a time without beginning or end.”⁶¹ The notion of “infinite time” or “infinite present” recurs in Ontani’s statements regarding his practice. The fixity of the image—be it the pose for the camera or the *tableau vivant*—allows for the possibility of “balance myself on infinite time,” as he says.⁶²

Desire, wrote Roland Barthes in an essay on Loti published in 1971, shortly before Ontani’s first trip, “always proceeds towards an extreme archaism, where the greatest historical distance assures the greatest unreality, there where desires finds its pure form: that of an impossible return, that of the Impossible.”⁶³ Barthes calls Loti a

⁵⁹ Viaud visited India in 1899–1900. Reportages of his Indian travels were first published in the monthly literary magazine *Revue de Deux Mondes*. The English translation of the book bears the simplified, perhaps more politically correct title *India*.

⁶⁰ Pierre Loti, *India*, trans. George A.F. Inman (New Delhi: Rupa & Co, 2002), 1.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² Ontani, “Intervista con Luigi Ontani (April 4, 2003),” in “Luigi Ontani,” *laurea* thesis by Storace, quoted in *Luigi Ontani: OntanElegia*, 13.

⁶³ Roland Barthes, “Pierre Loti: *Aziyadé*,” in *New Critical Essays*, trans. Richard Howard (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2009), 117. This essay is a translation of Barthes’ “Presentazione,” in *Aziyadé*, Pierre Loti, trans. Leonella Prato Caruso (Parma: Franco Maria Ricci, 1971), 13–33.

“hippie dandy”:

Loti is something of a hippie dandy: like him, the hippies have a taste for expatriation and for transvestism. This kind of rejection or withdrawal from the West is neither violent nor ascetic nor political: it is precisely a *drift*.⁶⁴

The drift is a figure of desire and in-betweenness for Barthes, who sees it embodied in the sojourn or residence. Between the journey of the tourist and the naturalization of the citizen, the sojourn makes the country of residence a composite space in which “the subject can *dive*: that is, sink, hide, slip away, intoxicate himself, vanish, absent himself, die to everting which is not his desire.”⁶⁵ The sojourn represents travel as tableau vivant, at once *living* and *picture*, a space of desire and drift. And with this we are in Ontani’s territory. Sidestepping the traditional two-term paradigm of Orientalism—the dichotomy between the exotic Other and the colonial Same, Orient and Occident—the drift, the sojourn, the tableau vivant offer *another* space, not a synthesis but a “*translation* (*déport*): everything comes back, but it comes back as Fiction, that is, at another turn of the spiral.”⁶⁶

For Mario Praz one of the distinguishing features of exoticism is the poetics of distance from everyday life and habits. The association between distance, difference, and exoticism is folded into Italian language, as in the expression “*le Indie di quaggiù*” (the Indies of down here), which identifies the Italian South and in particular its rural regions.

⁶⁴ Barthes, “Pierre Loti: *Aziyadé*,” 118–119.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 118.

⁶⁶ *Idem*, *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes* (Paris: Seuil, 1975), 73. On this interpretation of Barthes, see Marie-Paule Ha, “Another Barthes,” in *Figuring the East: Segalen, Malraux, Duras, and Barthes* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000), 95–117.

The origin of the expression goes back to the late seventeenth century, when missionary Jesuits coined it in reference to the remote peasant areas scattered throughout the peninsula, though more common in the South.⁶⁷ Praz wrote on exoticism for the word entry in the *Enciclopedia Treccani*, published in 1932, at the height of Italian colonial ambitions.⁶⁸

In comparison to other European countries like France and England, Italy arrived late to the colonial race. Before unification in 1861, the individual states were simply not strong enough to compete with the established European Imperial powers. The history of colonial Italy lasted approximately sixty years, from 1890 to 1947, reaching its highpoint under Fascism in the 1930s, and involved portions of North and East Africa.⁶⁹ This is not to say that in the nineteenth and early twentieth century Italians did not travel East, to India and beyond, immersing themselves in the local culture and writing about it.⁷⁰ It is to say that there could be no Italian Kipling, nor a “journey to the East” (to use the title of Herman Hesse’s book) in extent and output comparable to that undertaken by Viaud.

⁶⁷ See Francesco Faeta, *Fotografi e fotografie: Uno sguardo antropologico* (Milan: FracAngeli, 2006), 23–25.

⁶⁸ Mario Praz, “Esotismo,” *Enciclopedia italiana di scienze, lettere ed arti* XIV, eds. Giovanni Gentile and Calogero Tumminelli (Rome: Istituto Giovanni Treccani, 1932), 341–343.

⁶⁹ For an outline of Italian colonial history, see Jacqueline Andall and Derek Duncan, “Memories and Legacies of Italian Colonialism,” in *Italian Colonialism: Legacy and Memory*, eds. Jacqueline Andall and Derek Duncan (Bern: Peter Lang, 2005), 9–28.

⁷⁰ For an overview of Italian writers on India and other countries to the east of Italy in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, see Isabella Pezzini, “Asia teatro dell’immaginario. Viaggi letterari, avventure, gusto e divulgazione tra Ottocento e Novecento,” in *L’Oriente: Storie di viaggiatori italiani*, eds. Gino Benzoni, Marica Milanese, Daria Perocco, Isabella Pezzini (Milan: Electa, 1985), 238–260. Among the various contributions that Pezzini considers, the most notable is *Verso la cuna del mondo: Lettere dall’India*, written by the *Crepuscolare* Guido Gozzano in the early 1910s and published posthumously in 1917.

Furthermore, the beginning of the history of colonial Italy coincided with another socio-historical phenomenon. Due to the absence of laws indiscriminately criminalizing homosexuals, enforced in other European countries of Protestant culture, such as Germany and the United Kingdom, Italy acquired the fame of “the paradise of homosexuals” in Europe. Italy became a favorite tourist destination for wealthy Northern-European homosexuals in search of mercenary love. Homosexuals from puritanical countries who had problems with the law were fleeing to Italy, as did Wilhelm von Gloeden and Roger Peyrefitte. This resulted in an eroticization and exoticization of Italy.⁷¹

An aspect of Loti’s work that Barthes emphasizes and that brings it close to Ontani’s poses is the “play of identity.” While a pseudonym is not uncommon in literature, Loti’s bold invention is that he takes his pseudonym from his hero, the British lieutenant Loti in *Aziyadé*:

So that, caught in a mesh of three terms, the man who signs the book is false twice over: the Pierre Loti who guarantees *Aziyadé* is not at all the Loti who is its hero; and this guarantor (*auctor-author*) is himself fabricated, since the author is not Loti but Viaud: it is all played out between a homonym and a pseudonym; what is missing, what is passed over in silence, what is wide open, is the proper name, the propriety of the name (the name which specifies and the name which appropriates). Where is the writer? Monsieur Viaud is in his house in Hendaye, surrounded by his Moroccan and Japanese antiques; Pierre Loti is at the Académie Française; the British lieutenant Loti died in Turkey in 1877 (at which time the other Loti was 27 . . .). Whose story is this? To whom does it refer? To which subject? In the very signature of the book there is a hole, a loss, determined by the addition of this second Loti, of this third writer—a loss much more insidious

⁷¹ See Gianni Rossi Barilli, *Il movimento gay in Italia* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1999), 1–5.

than mere pseudonymity.⁷²

Aziyadé generates a multiplication of subjects that parallels that of Ontani's poses, in which "author" and "actor"—or *auctor* and *scripteur*, to use Barthes' terms—overlap and confound each other.

The works in "En route" are all sepia-toned black-and-white photographs overpainted in watercolor. Ontani conceived the series as a permanent work in progress, a *quadreria* or picture gallery to be expanded on each subsequent trip. In fact, the history of Ontani's fascination with India has been life-long and after the first trip, he went back at least twice in the second half of the 1970s and innumerable times thereafter. Currently, the series comprises over one hundred works ranging from life-size to miniature. So while this study concentrates on the works realized in the second half of the seventies, which are about half of the total, Ontani continued to expand the series again from the early 1990s onward, although at an ever-slower pace, partly due to the increasing difficulty in finding photo colorists.⁷³

All works were realized in collaboration with photo studios based in Delhi, Jaipur, Varanasi, Mumbai, Goa, and Madras. The idea of collaborating with other professionals was not new for Ontani as he engaged in collaborative practices before for his early tableau photos, when, as he said, he was "directing" his poses by setting up the mise-en-

⁷² Barthes, "Pierre Loti: *Aziyadé*," 107 (translation amended).

⁷³ Ontani traveled to India in the early 1980s as well, but apparently did not continue to work on "En route." In fact, his focus was shifting to three-dimensional objects and in the early 1980s he began collaborating with Balinese carvers to make large pule wood masks according to a venerable local tradition. The iconography of the masks blends local motifs with Ontani's inventions.

scène and instructing the photographers, similarly to a filmmaker like Pasolini, who often directed and acted in his films.⁷⁴ One of the photo studios with which Ontani collaborated most in the 1970s was Studio Rajendra, a small local establishment still located in a narrow back street of the chaotic Johari bazaar in Jaipur (fig. 192).⁷⁵ This studio stopped hand-painting photos in the early- to mid-eighties.⁷⁶ Although Ontani usually exercised a certain degree of control in the enactment of the poses and the tinting process, he always allowed chance to play a role because, for him, art, like life, is an “adventure.” He would allow, as he said, “the adventure of enacting the poses” to contribute to the creative process.⁷⁷ The absence of a commonly spoken language between Ontani and the Indian practitioners must have contributed to chance results. It also heightened the significance of the body as language, which is something that brings to mind the visual intensity and reduced dialogues typical of Pasolini’s cinema.

Ontani’s choice of collaborating with local craftspeople had an important precedent in the work of Boetti, who in 1971 began commissioning Afghan women embroiderers based in Kabul to execute embroideries with world maps and square scripts. As Boetti explained, “The embroidery is done by Afghan women who look back on a long tradition in this area. Embroidery came to a stop in their country in the 1920s, but

⁷⁴ The expression Ontani uses, in Italian “fare regia,” is borrowed from the film industry.

⁷⁵ Rajendra Prasad, personal interview, 29 March 2010, Jaipur, unrecorded.

⁷⁶ The studio that later replaced Studio Rajendra in terms of large number of collaborations was Frontier Photo Center, located in the residential neighborhood of Lodhi Colony in New Delhi. This studio opened in the mid-1980s and still collaborates with Ontani.

⁷⁷ Ontani, personal interview, 23 December 2007.

started anew with my contracts.”⁷⁸ This age-old tradition was actually waning at the time of Boetti’s first trips to Afghanistan, though there were still workshops around. The first work he commissioned was a large political map of the world with the boundaries of the countries defined by their respective flags. This was the first of a series of about 150 maps, titled *Mappa del mondo* (*Maps of the World*) or *Mappa* (*Map*), executed from 1971 until Boetti’s death in 1994.⁷⁹ At the beginning Boetti gave specific directions to the embroiderers concerning size and yarn colors, but, with time, he allowed them more and more freedom, in line with his artistic poetics:

For me the work of the embroidered *Map* is the height of beauty. For that work I did nothing, chose nothing, in the sense that the world is made as it is, not as I designed it, the flags are those that exists, and I did not design them. In other words, I did absolutely nothing: when the basic idea, the concept, emerges, everything else requires no choosing.⁸⁰

Although impersonal, the *Maps* are not the product of industrial-like, mechanical serialization but of the human hand and a longstanding craftsmanship tradition.⁸¹ This is

⁷⁸ Alighiero Boetti, excerpt in Anna Mattiolo, ed., *Alighiero e Boetti. L’opera ultima* (Rome: SACS, 1996), 47, quoted in Luca Cerizza, *Alighiero e Boetti: Mappa* (London: Afterall Books, 2008), 55.

⁷⁹ After the Russian occupation of Afghanistan in 1979, Boetti stopped traveling to Kabul and started traveling to Peshewar, Pakistan. The women weavers with whom he was collaborating fled their country and went into exile in refugee camps in Pakistan. A good overview of the map series is in Rolf Lauter, “Alighiero Boetti: Mettere al mondo il mondo,” in *Alighiero Boetti: Mettere al mondo il mondo*, 65–77.

⁸⁰ Alighiero Boetti, handwritten note dated 1974. This excerpt has been published in several catalogues. For instance, it is quoted in the original Italian version in the catalogue of the first retrospective exhibition organized after Boetti’s death: Jean-Christophe Ammann, Maria Teresa Roberto and Annemarie Sauzeau, *Alighiero Boetti: 1965–1994* (Turin: Galleria Civica d’Arte Moderna e Contemporanea and Milan: Mazzotta, 1996), 199 (my translation).

⁸¹ A clear summary of the way the collaboration between Boetti and the Afghan women embroiders developed over time is given by Cerizza in his book (*ibid.*, 32–37).

what differentiates Boetti's work from that of his American counterparts.⁸² The first time a map circulated was in May 1972, when one of the first maps appeared on the cover of the recently founded art magazine *Data*, co-edited by Gilberto Algranti and Tommaso Trini, one of Italy's most perceptive critics of the time, particularly attentive to the work of Boetti and other Arte Povera artists.⁸³ Then in 1973 the works were exhibited at the Galleria Franco Toselli in Milan and the Galleria Sperone Fischer in Rome, where at the time both Boetti and Ontani lived. Ontani never traveled to Kabul, but he remembers hearing about Boetti's trips and seeing the little guide of the One Hotel Boetti opened in Kabul in the fall of 1971, even before the Sperone Fisher exhibition or the *Data* publication.⁸⁴

⁸² In the late 1960s American Conceptual artists such as Sol LeWitt proclaimed the primacy of idea over execution and so delegating the actual making of the work became one of the distinguishing traits of Conceptual art. As LeWitt wrote, in Conceptual art "the idea becomes a machine that makes the art" ("Paragraphs on Conceptual Art," *Artforum* 5, n. 10 [Summer 1967]: 80). Of course this was not a new idea in art history. An immediate precedent was the Duchampian ready-made and, in particular, Jasper Johns's and Daniel Buren's work based on ready-made, found images, such as the American flag and commercial striped fabric for awning and mattresses. But one could go much further in time to Renaissance Italy and the claims artists were making regarding the primacy of mind over hand, invention over execution, as part of the *paragone delle arti* or the controversy over the superiority of painting versus sculpture. As Michelangelo famously stated, "one paints with the brain, not with the hands" (*si dipinge col cervello, non con le mani*) ("Lettera a Monsignor Aliotti, 1542," in *Le Lettere di Michelangelo Buonarroti*, ed. Gaetano Milanesi [Florence: Le Monnier, 1875], 489). The parallel between the ready-made tradition (and Conceptual art), on the one hand, and Italian Renaissance art, on the other, seems particularly interesting given the general assumption of an irreconcilable contrast between the two.

⁸³ *Data* was founded in September 1971 and published throughout the summer of 1978. On *Data* see Lucy Lippard, *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object, 1966–1972* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1973), 247; and Giorgio Maffei, ed., *Libri e documenti. Arte Povera 1966–1980 / Books and Documents* (Mantua: Corraini, 2007), 278.

⁸⁴ Luigi Ontani, personal interview, 5 January 2009, Riola, audio recording. On the One Hotel, see Annemarie Sauzeau Boetti, *Alighiero e Boetti: Shaman/Showman* (Cologne: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König and Turin: Umberto Allemandi, 2003), 105. Ontani mentioned during an interview that he would have liked to visit Afghanistan. The king of Afghanistan was living in exile near Rome since 1973, when he was ousted by a coup d'état, and Ontani was friends with one of his sons (Ontani, personal interview, 17 May 2007). However, the 1979 Russian invasion of Afghanistan foreclosed any possible plan to visit. At this time, Boetti, too, stopped traveling to Kabul and followed the Afghan refugees to Peshawar in Pakistan.

Some of the works in Ontani's "En route" series are prints from the same negative overpainted differently or different poses of the same subject. They feature characters inspired by a variety of Italian and Indian visual sources, ranging from Old Master paintings and Mughal miniatures to early photo studio portraits (both British and Indian), to contemporaneous films and bazaar prints, including images of Hindu deities and Italian saints. The aspects of India that were just starting to make the South Asian country more similar to the "West," as, for example, skyscrapers and motorcycles, do not appear in Ontani's tableaux photos.⁸⁵ Desire was a major driving force of Ontani's travels and desire, as Barthes put it, "always proceeds towards an extreme archaism," so it is no surprise that traditional, pre-modern India would appeal to him more. Boetti and Pasolini were also after the archaic when they went East. In Afghanistan Boetti wanted to find an archaic place, a "pure place," untouched by capitalism, as Annemarie Sauzeau had it.⁸⁶ Noa Steimatsky has written illuminating pages on the archaic in Pasolini.⁸⁷

Pasolini's reportage book on India, *L'odore dell'India* (*The Scent of India*, 1962), includes accounts of his encounters with Hindu and Muslim Indian youths. He unabashedly declares his preference for the "sweetness and dedication" of the Hindus.⁸⁸

⁸⁵ For one contrasting example, see fig. 194. Other studio portraits from the early 1980s are published in Christopher Pinney, "Chambers of Dreams," in *Camera Indica: The Social Life of Indian Photographs* (London: Reaktion Books, 1997), 127 ill. 65, 181 ill. 111, 182 ill. 112.

⁸⁶ The quote is from a paper Sauzeau presented at the symposium "The Radical Decade: Alighiero Boetti between Italy and Afghanistan, 1969–1979," held at The Museum of Modern Art in New York on September 28, 2012.

⁸⁷ Noa Steimatsky, "Archaic: Pasolini on the Face of the Earth," in *Italian Locations: Reinhabiting the Past in Postwar Cinema* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 117–165.

⁸⁸ Pasolini, *L'odore dell'India*, 22–23.

Overall, elements from Hindu culture prevail over Muslim in “En route.” Ontani’s disaffection with the overbearing influence of the Catholic church over the moral institutions of his country made him more attracted to polytheistic Hinduism and its fantastic polymorphism, than to Muslim religion. However, this is not to say that Ontani’s works are devoid of references to present and past Muslim culture and heritage. Besides the tableaux photos inspired by Mughal miniatures, there is *Over the Moon* (fig. 228), which foregrounds a gigantic crescent moon cut-out.⁸⁹ In general, the poses staged in Northern India feature mixed cultural references, reflecting the Mughal heritage from the invasions in the region, in contrast to the more insular southern part of the country.

Against the backdrop of the socio-political unrest that troubled both Italy and India at the time, “En route” at first strikes one for its “distance” from that backdrop. There are no direct traces of any socio-political conflicts, disorders, violence. The body in Ontani’s photos is not the lacerated body. At first sight, it is a site of pleasure and beauty, not pain; it is the body of a dandy. But what is dismembered in Ontani’s work is the artist himself, disseminated as he is, his image multiplied in a possibly infinite play of mirrors, always different, yet recognizable in the various characters impersonated. Thus, even if there are no literal allusions to the socio-political context, its instability and fragmentation are quite tangible and concrete in the array of Ontani’s poses.

⁸⁹ The crescent moon is present in the cover for the pamphlet published to commemorate the exhibition project “L’Attico in viaggio.” See *L’Attico in viaggio* (Madras: B. N. K. Press, 1977. According to Ontani, the cover reproduced a postcard he found at a local market (personal interview, 26 December 2009, Riola, audio recording).

In terms of composition, the works depict Ontani posing either alone or with animals, in the studio or outdoors. Sometimes they incorporate manual montage, which, at the time, photo studios commonly adopted for wedding albums. Anthropologist Christopher Pinney stresses how the aesthetics of Hindi film posters influenced the adoption of photographic montage in wedding pictures. In both cases, this collage/montage technique functioned as a way of creating new worlds rather than duplicating the existing one.⁹⁰ Manual montage was used in one of the first works in “En route” featuring Pierre Loti (fig. 193). This work was executed in collaboration with a photo studio in Varanasi in 1975 and, to my knowledge, it is still unpublished. It depicts Ontani floating above a comparatively gigantic copy of Loti’s *L’Inde (sans les Anglais)*, on the cover of which Ontani had glued a reproduction of Henri Rousseau’s painting portrait of Loti from 1891. The book, a reportage of Loti’s travels through India, is informed by the author’s projections of his own desires and fantasies of an India unspoiled by British colonization and modernization. This resonates with Ontani’s own desires for a place that would be different from Italy, which had just turned from an agrarian country into one of the major industrial powers of the West as a result of its own economic miracle. Ontani’s decision to wear clothes made with traditional Indian khadi—a hand-spun and hand-woven cotton—should be read in relation to these desires. The position of Ontani’s right arm and hand is strikingly similar to that of Loti’s, thus suggesting a direct identification with the French author. Whereas this pose seems to speak of an attraction

⁹⁰ Christopher Pinney, *Camera Indica*, 190 and 213–215.

to India informed by the Orientalist trope of the untouched, authentic, genuine faraway land, the later poses in “En route” foreground Indian visual culture as unmistakably hybrid.⁹¹

In terms of imagery, the series features varying degrees of appropriation—from literal to freely inspired—and a broad range of subjects Ontani identified with—from the self-aggrandizing to the self-deprecating: Ontani identified with the first painter of the Holy Virgin Mary in *Saint Luke d’après Guercino* (fig. 195), after a group painting by the Baroque artist from the Bolognese school, while in *Monkey Mime* (fig. 196) he impersonated an elegantly dressed Indian miming a langur monkey crouched next to him, as could be seen in a film scene. Although diverse, the works have been grouped in four main categories according to a criterion that combines subject matter and sources used: while the first group features characters from Western images, the other three groups feature figures from Indian images—Indian princes (group 2), common Indians (group 3), and Hindu deities (group 4).

Subject Group 1: Looking Back at the West

In Italy as in India, Ontani’s reenactments are commonly oblique, inexact rather than straightforward. *Giovane con frutta (d’après Caravaggio)* (*Young man with fruit* [*after*

⁹¹ Although perhaps overused, the word “hybrid” remains a convenient choice over other terms like heterogenous. The main theorists of hybridity are Homi Bhabha, Paul Gilroy, and Stuart Hall. The work of these theorists has attracted the interest of many scholars in various disciplines over the course of the past two decades. For a partial list of publications in different fields that employ the concept of hybridity, see Marwan M. Kraidy, *Hybridity or the Cultural Logic of Globalization* (Philadelphia: Temple University, 2005), 164 n. 3.

Caravaggio], fig. 197) was realized in collaboration with Madras studio G. K. Vale in 1977–1978. Dressed in a white blouse, sensuously slipping down on one side to reveal a naked shoulder, as in Caravaggio’s painting (fig. 198), Ontani holds a bunch of mostly tropical fruits together with what looks like a little garland of jasmine flowers and a palm leaf, without a basket. Fruits are stacked up against the artist’s chest almost like a fruit blanket, reminiscent of the Arcimboldo scene in the video performance *Favola impropriata* (1970), in which Ontani covers his face with fruits as he lies supine on the ground. In *Giovane con frutta* Ontani gazes away from the camera, his lips closed, in an algid attitude of detachment and effortlessness that contrasts with the languid sensuality and warmth of the youth depicted in the late sixteenth-century painting. The eyes of Caravaggio’s boy, rather than turned away, search for the viewer, while his lips are softly open, in contrast to Ontani’s tightly closed lips. In both works the space looks narrow due to the positioning of the figure right in front of a wall (or photo-studio cloth), but seems surprisingly flatter in the photograph than in the painting, due to the latter’s dramatic chiaroscuro. Both subjects hold a pose that highlights androgynous beauty and sexual ambiguity.

In the pantheon of Ontani’s Old Masters for redoes, the presence of Caravaggio is unsurprising. The enfant terrible of the Italian Baroque whose excess of theatricality and realism scandalized and divided his contemporaries, was the subject of a groundbreaking and greatly influential study that American art historian Donald Posner wrote in 1971 on homosexual themes in Caravaggio’s early paintings, which include *Boy with Basket of*

Fruit (c. 1593).⁹² The Roman art historian Cesare Brandi, who in 1977 traveled to India with Ontani, Clemente, Sargentini, and other people as part of the trip and exhibition project “L’Attico in viaggio,” dealt with this aspect of Caravaggio’s work, expressing impatience about the general tendency to dismiss them, in his presentation at the conference on Caravaggio and Caravaggesque painters held at the Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei in Rome in 1973. The proceedings were published the following year.⁹³ In the 1980s, Caravaggio’s stormy life and works became the subject of a movie by the controversial director of *Sebastiane*, Derek Jarman. The film, titled *Caravaggio*, was released in 1986, at the height of the AIDS epidemic.⁹⁴ The poster for the movie consist of the photograph of an actor posing as the model for Caravaggio’s *Boy with Basket of Fruit* in the movie (fig. 199), but, in fact, it also functions visually as a tableau photo after Caravaggio’s painting, not unlike Ontani’s work. Another early work by Caravaggio that inspired a contemporary enactment in the form of a tableau for the camera is Caravaggio’s self-portrait in the guise of a strangely ill Bacchus, *Little Sick Bacchus* (c. 1593). Cindy Sherman has since redone it in 1990, as part of her “History portraits” series (1988–1990). Sherman too, like Ontani, played on Caravaggio’s sexual ambiguity, although her recreation is more literal and over the top than Ontani’s, from over a decade earlier.

⁹² Donald Posner, “Caravaggio’s Homoerotic Early Works,” *Art Quarterly* 34 (autumn 1971): 301–324.

⁹³ Cesare Brandi, “L’ ‘epistème’ caravaggesca,” in *Colloquio sul tema Caravaggio e i caravaggeschi, organizzato d’intesa con le Accademie di Spagna e di Olanda (Roma, 12–14 febbraio 1973)* (Rome: Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei, 1974), 9–17.

⁹⁴ Jarman was found HIV positive in 1986.

The first work that comes to mind when looking at Ontani's *David and Goliath* (1976, fig. 200), in which Ontani posed as both Goliath and David thanks to a manual photomontage, is Caravaggio's (fig. 201). As in the Caravaggio, in the Ontani the double impersonation—as both David and Goliath—may be interpreted as a visual literalization of the fact, allegorized in the biblical story, that in all of us the evil fights against the good, “in all of us the Goliath competes with the David,” as art historian Simon Scharma puts it in his documentary on Caravaggio from the *Power of Art* TV series (2006). Caravaggio famously included himself in his paintings—as a bystander in *The Martyrdom of Saint Mathew* (1599–1600), a spectator holding a lantern in the *Betrayal of Christ* (1602), or as the decapitated, grimacing head of Goliath in *David and Goliath* (c. 1605–06). Although the phenomenon of an artist presenting himself as a witness in the periphery of the religious drama to which his altarpiece was devoted had illustrious precedents in Renaissance Italian art, especially Florentine, the choice of identifying with the evil Goliath (or the sick Bacchus) was certainly unusual and has therefore caught the attention of many scholars, including, most recently, David Stone.⁹⁵

Several other representation of the subject come to mind when looking at Ontani's version. The positioning of Ontani's right arm with bent elbow resting on the hip reminds one of Donatello's *David* (1430, fig. 202) and even more of Verrocchio's (c. 1473, fig. 203), as the palm is wide open on the hip and in Ontani's tableau there is more

⁹⁵ David M. Stone, “Self and Myth in Caravaggio's *David and Goliath*,” in *Caravaggio: Realism, Rebellion, Reception*, Genevieve Warwick, ed. (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2006), 36–46. The dating of Caravaggio's *David and Goliath* is controversial and the one provided here, 1605/06, is not the most popularly supported by scholars but the one that seems rightly advocated by David Stone and Keith Christiansen.

of a sense of triumphant accomplishment than prim modesty, as in the Donatello. The pose of Verrocchio's *David* recurs in a film by Luchino Visconti, *Death in Venice* (1971). The ephebic Tadzio, object of desire of the much older, ailing protagonist, Gustav von Aschenbach, poses as Verrocchio's *David*, in several moments of the film, including the closing scene, infused with pathos, desire, unspoken love, and death.

In Ontani's tableau the elaborate, brightly colored plumed hat and the general arrangement of the upper garments remind one of yet another artwork, Guido Reni's *David and Goliath* (1605–06, fig. 204), which has been interpreted as a “classicizing makeover” of Caravaggio's work and also as a liberation of the “hidden homoerotic undercurrent . . . lurking in Caravaggio's *David*.”⁹⁶ Ontani's pose accentuates the artificiality and theatricality that are already present in Reni's depiction. His stance is stiffer, his face turned away in a somewhat disinterested, detached way. *He is elsewhere*. It is common for Ontani's poses to exhibit a flair for emotional detachment, which, since Baudelaire, has been identified as a hallmark of dandyism—“the dandy is *blasé*.”⁹⁷

Among the tableau photos after past artworks that Ontani made in India, *David and Goliath* is a unique example of pastiche. One wonder why the subject of David and Goliath prompted such a rich circulation of images and references that then merged into one work. Only the subject of Saint Sebastian prompted something comparable, though in the case of Saint Sebastian the circulation of images produced several tableau photos.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 40.

⁹⁷ “The dandy is *blasé*,” wrote Baudelaire in the “The Painter of Modern Life” (1863), republished in *Art in Theory: 1815–1900. An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, Charles Harrison, Paul Wood and Jason Gaiger, eds. (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishings, 1998), 496.

What these two subjects have in common, in gay culture in general, is the subtext of homoerotic sado-masochism, although in his recreations of Saint Sebastian Ontani embraced homoerotic pleasure instead of sado-masochism. By contrast, Clemente dealt with this subtext in the most intense, aggressive way imaginable in what looks like his version of David and Goliath. In a painting part of a self-portrait series from 1980, he depicted himself as a Goliath-like decapitated head engaging in fellatio—the penis belonging to a body that holds the head and is cropped by the picture plane so it is readable as both David and Goliath (fig. 205). It is a nightmarish vision, like a photographic negative in which the white areas are tinted vermillion red.

With regard to pastiche, a note by Pasolini sounds illuminating in relation to Ontani's *David and Goliath*. In discussing his film *Il Vangelo secondo Matteo* (*The Gospel According to St. Matthew*, 1964), he explains that there are no accurate reconstructions of specific paintings, as in *La ricotta*, because the risk with those is formalism, aestheticization, “insincerity.” Stylistic pastiche or, as he calls it, “stylistic magma” (*magma stilistico*), is related to a certain way of seeing, his “painterly eye”:

[In *The Gospel According to St. Matthew*] there is never Piero della Francesca, nor Duccio, nor Masaccio, there is a bit of everything, because they belong to my way of looking at reality. . . . I took the costumes, *not the taste* from Piero della Francesca in order to represent the ruling class and the soldiers; Christ has characteristics either archaic-Byzantine or Spanish-Baroque, especially El Greco . . . from a pictorial standpoint I knew that my film was going to be a cultural *pastiche* so I did not fear to bring together Piero with the Byzantines and other painters.⁹⁸

⁹⁸ Pier Paolo Pasolini, “Una discussione del '64” (transcript of the debate organized in Alessandria by the local Circolo del Cinema on November 21, 1964), in *Pier Paolo Pasolini nel dibattito contemporaneo*, Paolo Volponi et al. (Comune di Alessandria and Amministrazione provinciale di Pavia, 1977), 120–121.

If *David and Goliath* is an unusual work in the context of Ontani's 1970s other tableau photos based on past artworks, *Schiavo LiberieraticO d'après Tintoretto* (c. 1976; fig. 206) is also unusual. Not because it isolates a figure from a larger composition—the slave from Tintoretto's tumultuous *Miracle of the Slave* (1548) (another example in the “En route” series is *Saint Luke d'après Guercino*)—but because it includes an element that speaks to the process of making the work: the cord for the automatic shutter release of the camera. Here the photographic cord can be read as an umbilical chord of sort, connecting the character to what brings it to life: the camera. This particular pose recalls the pose of another figure, the supine Saint Paul in Caravaggio's *Conversion of Saint Paul* (1600), in the Roman church of Santa Maria del Popolo. In the 1990s Ontani made a tableau photo after this work. Struck by divine light on the Street of Damascus, the soldier Paul becomes one of the apostles. Similarly, in his tableaux photos Ontani becomes another by means of the light that captures the *mise-en-scène* on the photographic film.

Ontani impersonated de Chirico after a self-portrait from 1943 in the collection of the Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna in Rome in which the painter represented himself seated and loin-clad like a Christian martyr (figs. 207–208). He seems to have added to this otherwise straightforward recreation an extraneous element derived from Indian

culture: his dramatically pulled-in abdomen recalls a yoga breathing exercise.⁹⁹ This self-portrait by De Chirico is one of his most famous paintings. Compared to other self-portraits from this period, it is an unusual one. Iconographically it draws on the traditional representation of Christ seated and crowned with thorns. A trope in western self-portraiture, where the association of the artist with the figure of Christ points to the misunderstood and isolated, but also greatly inspired artist, famously adopted by Albrecht Dürer, Paul Gauguin, and many others.¹⁰⁰ Ontani's tableau photo may be seen as a tribute to De Chirico as the precursor of a trend that privileged *originarietà* over *originalità*, as Barilli put it.¹⁰¹

In India Ontani posed several times again as Saint Sebastian. The sight of a destitute, suffering Indian in a shady neighborhood in Gwalior, south of one of India's major tourist sites, Agra, had already evoked in Pasolini an image of Saint Sebastian on his trip to India in 1960–1961, as he recounted in his reportage book on India: “It seemed like the face of San Sebastian: inclined a little towards one shoulder, the lips swollen and almost white, the eyes as if glazed with a frozen lament, and an upper lid drawn back and

⁹⁹ There is a kind of yoga that focuses on breathing and is called pranayama yoga. Ontani seems to be doing one of the pranayama yoga techniques, Kapalbhata, which entails deep diaphragmatic breathing. Another pranayama yoga technique, Anuloma-viloma, involves alternate nostrils breathing and appears in “Francesco Clemente Pinxit.” Clemente twisted this reference by adding a flower, held below the nose by the figure doing the yoga exercise. The presence of the flower makes one think of agreeable scent as much as stinky stench that would drive one to close both nostrils.

¹⁰⁰ Ontani himself posed as the crucified Christ in the early 1970s and his fellow artist Salvo also impersonated the blessing Christ in a photographic self-portrait from 1970.

¹⁰¹ On De Chirico as “a precursor of postmodernism,” see Emily Braun, “Kitsch and Avant-Garde: The Case of de Chirico,” in *Rethinking Art between the Wars: New Perspectives in Art History*, Hans Dam Christensen, Øystein Hjort and Niels Marup Jensen, eds. (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, University of Copenhagen, 2001), pp. 73–89.

red.”¹⁰² Perhaps it was the combination of a somewhat peaceful acceptance and extraordinary dignity with which Indians bear the weight of destitution, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the personal projection of his own struggles with homosexuality that prompted this association in Pasolini.¹⁰³ Given the frequency of the subject of Saint Sebastian in “En route,” one may well assume that this was true for Ontani as well.

Ontani usually titled his Indian Saint Sebastians simply *San Sebastiano indiano*. But in one instance he titled it *San Sebastiano JaipurAno* (fig. 209). This is one of Ontani’s difficult-to-translate titles as it contains an amusing, transgressive word play. Here, the capitalization of the letter “A” suggests that *ano* be read as both the suffix and a word in its own right. As a suffix, it signals the name of a country’s national, as in *americano* (American), so the title would translate “Saint Sebastian from Jaipur.” As a word in its own right, *ano* means “anus,” hence the reference to homosexual pleasure, the Orientalist trope of licentiousness, and the conflation of the sacred and the profane, the latter of which is inscribed in the subject of Saint Sebastian since the Renaissance. Indeed, a distinguishing mark of Indian art is “the coexistence of the sacred with the secular, the profane, or the sensuous”—to borrow the words of Indian art scholar Vidya

¹⁰² Pasolini, *L’odore dell’India*, 59. The translation is from *The Scent of India*, trans. David Price (London: Olive Press, 1984), 51.

¹⁰³ In 1948, when he was in his late twenties, Pasolini wrote in a letter to a long-time friend: “My homosexuality has now been part of my consciousness and my life for some years and is no longer an Other inside me. I had to overcome scruples, feelings of intolerance and of honesty... but at last, perhaps bleeding and covered in scars, I have succeeded in surviving” (*Lettere 1940–1954: con una cronologia della vita e delle opere*, Nico Naldini ed. [Turin: Einaudi, 1986], 342, quoted in English translation in Derek Duncan *Reading and Writing Italian Homosexuality: A Case of Possible Difference* [Hampshire, UK: Ashgate, 2006], 95–96).

Dehejia.¹⁰⁴ Given Ontani's eagerness to overcome the dichotomy between soul and body that underlies catholic culture and is rooted in Christian philosophy from Augustine onward, this characteristic of Indian art must have appealed to him, and although it does not seem to transfer to everyday Indian life, since Ontani was more in touch with the visual aspects of the culture than the actual, lived ones due to language barriers, it must have struck a sympathetic chord in significant ways.

Generally Ontani's Indian Saint Sebastians are much smaller than the earlier Saint Sebastians after Guido Reni. Rather than Old Masters, these works reference kitsch, mass-produced, small religious images called *santini* in Italian, like fig. 210, which is in the collection of the artist. In the group of Indian Saint Sebastians there is also *S. Sebastianum (d'après J. J. Henner)* (1978, fig. 211), after *Saint Sebastian Attended by Saint Irene* (c. 1889, fig. 212) by the once-famous Salon painter Jean-Jacques Henner, whose idealized rendition of Christian saints, most notably Saint Fabiola, became images of large popular consumption.¹⁰⁵ Rather than standing, tied to a tree or pillar behind him, with arrows penetrating his body, Henner represented Saint Sebastian the survivor, seated in profile, his body seemingly unwounded, as Saint Irene finished extracting arrows from his body.¹⁰⁶ In Ontani's photograph, the pose echoes Henner's closely, although, since Ontani is depicted alone, as usual, the work seems more like an abstract, almost

¹⁰⁴ Vidya Dehejia, *The Body Adorned: Dissolving Boundaries Between Sacred and Profane in India's Art* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 17.

¹⁰⁵ Internationally renowned Belgian artist Francis Alÿs collected over 300 copies of Henner's version of Saint Fabiola and presented them in New York, Los Angeles and London in 2007–9.

¹⁰⁶ Sebastian was eventually beaten to death with clubs and his body thrown into the Cloaca Maxima, Rome's main sewer.

allegorical portrayal of Saint Sebastian and his symbolical associations with homosexuality.

Subject Group 2: Splendors of the Maharajas

Shivaji (1976–1977; fig. 213) is one of the most elaborately costumed and accurate tableau photos Ontani made in India. It involved the collaboration of a professional make-up artist employed in the Madras film industry and was executed with Studio Krishnan. The quality of the hand coloring is rather high compared to other works in the series. Shivaji was a seventeenth-century Indian king, ruler of Maharashtra, who fought against the Mughals at a time when they were dominating the Indian sub-continent. He became popular as a hero of the Hindu nationalist movement in the 1920s and soon images of him entered massively into calendar art (fig. 214).¹⁰⁷ An oleograph from the Modern Litho Works Press in Mumbai dated 1931 bears a striking similarity with Ontani's work (fig. 215). This is the kind of image that could be found in a textbook, which is what Ontani used as a model for this pose.¹⁰⁸

In the other works from this group, Ontani did not impersonate specific historical personages like Shivaji, but generic figures dressed in the attire of the maharajas from Rajputana, now Rajasthan, as in a work in the Calabresi collection in Rome that bears the title of the series and is dated 1977 (fig. 216). This work was reproduced on the front of

¹⁰⁷ A thorough book from this period that deals with the evolution of the Shivaji cult is Anil Samarth, *Shivaji and the Indian national movement: saga of a living legend* (Bombay and New Delhi: Somaiya Publications, 1975).

¹⁰⁸ Ontani, personal conversation, 27 September 2010, unrecorded.

the invitation postcard for the exhibition of the series at l'Attico in 1978. Like *Shivaji*, this photograph was finely tinted, but with the collaboration of Rajendra studio in Jaipur. Rajput princes have in common with Shivaji a legendary loyalty to Hindu traditions. They opposed the Muslim invasion, and, in colonial times, they resisted the anglicization encouraged by the colonial rulers. When Ontani started his series, Indian princes had just been dispossessed of their privileges by an act that was designed to bring to an end the last vestiges of kingly power and integrate maharajas as citizens in a modern democracy. The act, called the Deregulation of Princes Act, was passed by the government of Indira Gandhi in 1971. This was the final act of a chain-effect initiated by the interference of the British administration, which divested Indian traditional rulers of their chief duty of protecting their people, and brought about an increasing alienation of the rulers from their subjects, with the exception of a few enlightened princes who adopted progressive democratic principles after the British model and others, like the Rajput princes, who proved hostile to change.¹⁰⁹ In fact, the deregulation of princes did not end royal power, which has survived as a form of kinship and the title of maharaja, as in the case of European nobility titles such as count, have remained in existence to date.¹¹⁰

In this work Ontani juxtaposed two clichés or stereotypical scenes of Indian life and culture that, however, would not normally appear together: the ubiquitous sacred cow

¹⁰⁹ Charles Allen, "India of the Princes and Maharajas," in *India through the Lens: Photography 1840–1911*, ed. Vidya Dehejia (Washington, D.C.: Freer Gallery of Art and Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution; Ahmedabad: Mapin Publishing; New York and Munich: Prestel, 2000), 199–225.

¹¹⁰ See Marzia Balzani, *Modern Indian Kingship: Tradition, Legitimacy and Power in Rajasthan* (Oxford: James Currey; Santa Fe, N.M.: School of American Research Press, 2003).

or bull, associated with both Krishna and Shiva, whose *vahana* (vehicle) is the white bull Nandi, and the aristocratic person. Jyotindra Jain, an Indian art historian and cultural anthropologist, remarked that the bull is what makes this landscape “Indian.”¹¹¹ Ontani impersonated an aristocratic person by wearing princely clothes and holding a highly cultivated and mannered posture. The cloths had been purchased by Sargentini for his partner, Anna Paparatti, and then loaned to Ontani for this and other poses.¹¹² The posture Ontani held can be found in colonial period postcards from the early twentieth century depicting high status individuals. An example from the Alkazi Collection in Delhi depicts a Gujarati Hindu from the Gujarat state, south west of Rajasthan (fig. 217). This might not have been the specific model for Ontani’s work, but the parallel between the two may indicate a common source. Jain has suggested that this is a highly cultivated and mannered posture which is a sign of an aristocratic person keeping his body and clothes contained onto himself, in contrast to poor people, like farmers or laborers, who were photographed with both hands loosely hanging down and quite frightened in front of the camera.¹¹³ Jain also suggested that this posture might be the result of a stylization over time of aristocratic attributes, such as carrying a shawl over the bent arm, depicted in Mughal and Rajput portraits of noblemen (for one, see fig. 218).

¹¹¹ Jyotindra Jain, personal conversation, 6 April 2010, New Delhi, unrecorded.

¹¹² Sargentini found these clothes on the antique market and purchased them as clothes once owned by the maharajas of Jaipur (personal interview, 19 December 2008, Rome, audio recording).

¹¹³ Jyotindra Jain, personal email communication, dated October 3, 2010. Examples of the princely poses Jain mentioned can be found in the *Illustrated Historical Album of the Rajas and Taluqdars of Oudh* from 1880, as in the photos reproduced in Christopher Pinney, *The Coming of Photography in India* (London: British Library, 2008), 40 ill. 28 and 30.

Another work in the series more directly mimics painted portraits from the Mughal period. In this work Ontani poses like a maharaja or high dignitary, but instead of holding a gem or flower in the iconic profile posture, he holds a little ball of aluminum foil and looks earnestly in the direction of the viewer (fig. 219).¹¹⁴ A flower held up between the left-hand index and thumb is a typical attribute in Mughal and Mughal-influenced portraits of nobles and rulers from all over India. It was usually combined with a sword, held with the right hand, and is believed to suggest a combination of cultivated and war-like qualities in the sitter. It is interesting to see how both non-Mughal rulers and non-aristocratic Indians borrowed the flower motif for self-aggrandizement.¹¹⁵ It is at this tradition that Ontani's portrait looks back. Dated 1978, it is entitled *Full con pallina di carta stagnola* (*Full with little ball of aluminum foil*—here “full” stands for full-length portrait). The monochromatic background also recalls full-figure individual portraits of Mughal courtiers and kings.¹¹⁶ One wonders if Ontani's little ball of aluminum foil is not also a parody of the glob of power, derived from Christian iconography and depicted in Mughal portraits of emperors, such as Jahanghir, in the early

¹¹⁴ On the “perfect profile” in formal portraits of rulers and high dignitaries in Indian miniature painting, see the anthropological study by Jayasinhji Jhala, “Power and the Portrait: The Influence of the Ruling Elite on the Visual Text in Western India,” *Visual Anthropology* vol. 6, n. 2 (1993): 177 et seq. Jhala argues that the profile portrait was introduced by Muslim invaders and incorporated into local traditions. It is thus an example of how “the mutual interpenetration of cultures” gives rise to syncretic visual texts, “made up by a process of selective gathering of motifs and components.” Another example that Jhala offers is the frontal portrait, imported from the British.

¹¹⁵ For examples of Mughal-inspired portraits of this kind, see Rosemary Crill and Kapil Jariwala, eds., *The Indian Portrait: 1560–1860* (London: National Portrait Gallery Publications, 2010), 130–134.

¹¹⁶ For some examples of this type of full-figure portraiture, see *ibid.*, 80–82.

seventeenth century (fig. 220).¹¹⁷ Or a playful reinvention of nature, along the line of Pascali's late 1960s works such as *Bachi da setola* (1968), perhaps with a sardonic, slightly cynical touch. Certainly, that turn of the head from profile to a three-quarter position and that direct, penetrating gaze of the eyes convey a physicality and a presence that speak of the photographic medium and of the split second of the camera shutter capturing the image onto film.

Dare una mano all'albero (*Giving a hand to the tree*, fig. 221) has a similarly humorous, almost irreverent tone. Dressed in princely attire, Ontani is portrayed in an unprincelike pose that visually literalizes the idiom "to give a hand," meaning "to help." The poetic playfulness of Ontani's work brings to mind Boetti's systems, as his biro works, in which letters are transformed into commas apparently scattered randomly across the pictorial field, but in fact positioned in specific places and readable as letters according to a simple code system devised by the artist (see fig. 222). The parallel between the two artists in this case is conceptual, not visual. In a non-figurative way, according to an arbitrary system invented by the artist, Boetti's biro works also translate verbal language into visual forms, as Ontani's *Dare una mano all'albero*.¹¹⁸ As Boetti put it, the biro works function according to a system "for transposition of words into images."¹¹⁹

¹¹⁷ See Amina Okada, *Indian Miniatures of the Mughal Court*, trans. Deke Dusinberre (New York: Harry Abrams, 1992), 35, 39 and 43 ill. 43; and also Crill and Jariwala, *The Indian Portrait*, 76–77.

¹¹⁸ Alphabet letters of course have a visual aspect per se, but Boetti's biro works go beyond the visual aspect of letters, explored in his embroidered works, and transform them into commas on a pictorial field.

¹¹⁹ Alighiero Boetti, "Alighiero e Boetti – Cesare Pietroiusti," in conversation with Daniela De Dominicis, in *Arca* (Radda in Chianti: Castello di Volpaia, 1989), 79 (my translation).

Another parallel between the two artists is the use of idiomatic expressions that contain an infinitive for work titles, as in Boetti's *Mettere al mondo il mondo* (*Bringing the World into the World* or *Giving Birth to the World*) and *Dare tempo al tempo* (*Giving Time to Time*, or *Letting Time Work It out*).¹²⁰ The infinitive suggests timelessness, anonymity, no specific tense or actor. The title of Ontani's work also brings to mind another Arte Povera artist, Giuseppe Penone. Not only did Penone concern himself with trees as living organisms comparable to human beings—the idiom “to give a hand” refers to people so there is already a parallel here—but he worked on the idea of the interaction over time between his own hand and a live tree. For instance, in 1969, he made a steel cast of his own hand clutching a tree and positioned it on the tree so as to fixate the instant of the action, titling the work *Continuerà a crescere tranne che in quel punto* (*It Will Continue to Grow except for That Point*; fig. 223). The work is part of the series “Alpi Marittime” (Maritime Alps). In a way it reverses the idiom, as the hand hinders rather than help the tree's growth. In comparison to the apparent seriousness of Penone's enterprise, Ontani's seems quite lighthearted.

Dare una mano all'albero belongs to a group of works in which Ontani is depicted wearing princely clothes but striking unprincelike poses in the quasi-desertic landscape of Rajasthan. This group includes *Stilita* (*Stylite*, 1977; fig. 224), which makes reference, in a somewhat humorous way, to the Eastern order of Christian monks in the

¹²⁰ There are a few *Mettere al mondo il mondo* biro works and the first is dated 1972–1973. Boetti produced biro works between 1970 and 1988. A good reference on this series is Rolf Lauter, “Alighiero Boetti: *Mettere al mondo il mondo*,” in *Alighiero Boetti: Mettere al mondo il mondo* (Frankfurt: Museum für Moderne Kunst and Ostfildern-Ruit: Cantz, 1998), 47–60.

Middle Ages known as stylites, pillar hermits or columnar anachorites, due to their habit of living on a platform placed atop a pillar. Scholars of Indian cinema who have seen these works confirmed that many of these images reminded them of heroes in movie scenes and pointed to the fact that posing dressed as film heroes was not uncommon in India, both in studio and bazaar photography, although pictures were commonly taken indoors at the time.¹²¹

Stilita was realized at the time of “L’Attico in viaggio,” the group journey organized by Sargentini. After the conclusion of the journey, the group split and some people continued to travel independently, while others returned to Rome. Ontani went to Sri Lanka, whereas Sargentini and Paparatti stayed in India. In Jaipur, the capital of painting workshops devoted to the production of copies and versions of historical miniatures, Sargentini and Paparatti commissioned a double portrait of themselves in the characters of a prince and his lady engaging in sexual intercourse from an early nineteenth-century Kangra miniature (fig. 225).¹²² They provided photographic self-

¹²¹ Ontani, personal interview, 26 December 2009.

¹²² This information is derived from an unrecorded phone conversation with Paparatti, December 6, 2010. Paparatti had traveled to India with Sargentini already in 1975 and 1976. According to her, the workshop they hired was not making portraits in the characters of maharajas from original miniatures as a standard practice. However, although difficult to prove, it is not difficult to imagine tourists, who would stay in Jaipur long enough to have their photographic portraits taken, commissioning these works, as Varunika Saraf—a young scholar researching the practice of miniature painting in the context of the tourist trade—would infer. Saraf is at work on her doctoral thesis, supervised by Kavita Singh at Jawaharlal Nehru University in Delhi, and entitled “Souvenirs, fakes and heritage art: The Making of ‘Indian Miniature’ from the mid nineteenth century to the present.” Tourist commissions and practitioners from the 1970s are hard to track down (copyists typically change profession in their forties, as the eyes and hand start to fail, so the practitioners who were around in the 1970s are no longer around today), but the fact that the practice of making portraits of tourists as maharajas usually from Mughal miniatures is alive today in Jaipur (Shammi Bannu and Ajay Sharma are two of the most prominent master painters involved with this practice) and that the tourist trade of Indian miniature painting copies and versions burgeoned in 1970s allow for such an inference. Later in this chapter I will get back to this subject in the context of Francesco Clemente’s miniature painting series.

portraits and the reproduction of the miniature, which Papparatti found in one of the very few books on Indian art and culture available in Rome at the time—a publication by Philip Rawson on Tantra.¹²³ The work is a large painting (fig. 226), about six times the original miniature (8 by 6 inches), was possibly executed in the Pichhvai painting technique (tempera on cotton cloth), and was used as the cover for the publication accompanying the twelve-day event *India-America: Musica e danza (India-America: Music and Dance)*, organized by Sargentini and held at the Sala Borromini of the Chiesa Nuova in Rome in November 1977.¹²⁴ The publication offers historical overviews of the classical Indian music and dance traditions presented at the event, which featured Kumari B. Swarnamukhi, famous performer of the southern Indian Classical dance style *bharatanatyam* who mastered all 108 *karanas* or poses of Lord Shiva’s Tandava dance sculptured in Ancient Hindu temples, and renowned American performer Joan Jonas, whose poetic work, concerned with ritual and myth, made her stand apart from the main trends in performance art internationally.¹²⁵ Sargentini concluded the introduction by

¹²³ Philip Rawson, *Tantra: The Indian cult of ecstasy* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1973). This book developed out of the catalog for the exhibition *Tantra* held at the Hayward Gallery in London in 1971.

¹²⁴ The Pichhvai painting technique is an age-long Indian tradition from Rajasthan adopted for the production of temple cloths to be placed on temple walls behind an idol. On this tradition, see Desmond Peter Lazaro, *Pichhvai Painting Tradition Of Rajasthan: Materials, Methods And Symbolism* (Ahmedabad: Mapin and Ocean Township, NJ: Grantha, 2005). Lazaro studied under the late Bannu Ved Pal Sharma, a master pichhvai artist known as Bannu and father of Shammi Bannu, for over twelve years.

¹²⁵ Sottsass’s third article from his Indian travels—“Viaggio a Oriente: Templi in India,” *Domus*, no. 396 (November 1962), 40–45—featured, among the photographs accompanying the text, an image of a dancer from Madras, likely performing *bharatanatyam*.

addressing the importance of Indian culture as a model to the West for its “coexistence of tradition and modernity.”¹²⁶

The following summer, in July of 1978, Sargentini organized another Indian and American music and dance event at the Sala Borromini that juxtaposed “tradition and modernity.” He invited the Daghar brothers and Steve Paxton. For generations after generations, members of the Daghar family have performed the oldest existing form of Northern Indian classical music called dhrupad, which achieved its maximum development under the Mughal emperor and great patrons of the arts Akbar. An American dancer and choreographer, Paxton performed his “contact improvisations,” which he describes, in the pamphlet published for the event, as “two people freely improvising movement using the floor and each other as surface... the mind is kept empty of preconceptions and memories; it is in the present moments only.” Aptly entitled *Relax*, the event also included two film screenings from the World War II era: *White Savage* (1943) and *Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves* (1944), starring forgotten Hollywood diva and Dominican-born exotic beauty Maria Montez.¹²⁷ A brief text about her in the publication reminds the reader of her creepy epilogue: “in 1951, in Paris, she was found dead in her bathtub... she was only 31 years old.” The films are described as “romantic fantasies” and “landmarks of cinema escapism.”¹²⁸ One cannot avoid but making a

¹²⁶ *India-America: Musica e danza* (Roma: L’Attico, 1977), np. I consulted this pamphlet in the archives of L’Attico.

¹²⁷ She also starred in *Arabian Nights* (1942).

¹²⁸ The pamphlet is in the collection of Lanfranco Secco Suardo, a friend of Ontani and one of his photographers.

connection between this and the highly troubled sociopolitical times in Italy. *Relax* was presented from July 12 to 19 of 1978. Two months earlier, the politician and former Prime Minister Aldo Moro was killed by the leftist terrorist group of the Red Brigade. They had kidnapped Moro on March 16, as part of a plan to obtain the release of imprisoned leftist terrorists. The killing followed fifty-five days of captivity and failed negotiations.¹²⁹

Subject Group 3: Everyday Life and Fantasies

In the Satish Sharma Collection of photographs assembled from the street studios and flea markets, there is a bazaar picture, probably from the early eighties, of the kind Ontani could run into (fig. 227). Bazaar photography may be considered a form of escape, a way of imagining oneself as someone else that the lower classes can afford.¹³⁰ *Over the moon* (1975, fig. 228) belongs to the third group, which depicts everyday life and fantasies. This is one of Ontani's first works in the series and was executed in collaboration with a studio in Varanasi. The artist is shown wearing an iridescent lemon yellow sherwani, or long coat, with churidar pajani, or trousers—a typical upper-class Muslim attire. The pose was inspired by bazaar photos like the one in the Satish Sharma Collection, featuring cheap, cutout forms, similar to the ones used by actresses and actors in song-and-dance sequences that interrupt Bollywood and Indian popular films in

¹²⁹ On the activities of the leftist terrorists see Renato Curcio, ed., *La mappa perduta* (Roma: Sensibili alle foglie, 1994).

¹³⁰ See Pinney, *Camera Indica*, 175 et seq, 191.

general.¹³¹

Besides cutout shapes, another prop that can aid in this kind of fantasy travel is the painted or photographic backdrop. Commonly used at the time in Indian studio portraits, Ontani adopted it in *Temple* and *Mountains* (figs. 229–230), both from 1978. However, he did not use it in the usual way. Rather than having the picture taken in front of a backdrop in the studio, he had the silhouette of his body cut and pasted atop the photographic reproduction of the backdrop, which thus fills the entire space of the image. The resulting effect is a sense of dematerialization and two-dimensionality of both background and figure that is stronger than that effected by the disproportionate scale of the backdrop in relation to the body in studio settings.¹³²

Both *Temple* and *Mountains* were executed in collaboration with Madras leading photo studio G. K. Vale, which worked for the Tamil film industry. In *Temple* Ontani seems to be impersonating an attendant to the Maharaja, although with an unusual outfit for Indian standards that includes a reproduction of another work by him worn as a brooch.¹³³ In both works the photographic backdrops depict “a *type* of location,” i.e.,

¹³¹ On people posing as heroes from Indian films, see Wenda Garden, “Photographic Space and the Indian Portrait studio,” *Double Dialogues* (electronic art journal), n. 7 (winter 2007) http://www.doubledialogues.com/archive/issue_seven/garden.html, and David MacDougall, “Photo Hierarchicus: Signs and Mirrors in Indian Photography,” *Visual Anthropology* 5 (1992): 103–129. On the pervasiveness of song-and-dance sequences in Indian popular cinema, see Sanjeev Prakash, “Music, Dance and the Popular Films: Indian Fantasies, Indian Repressions,” in *Indian Cinema Superbazaar*, eds. Aruna Vasudev and Philippe Lenglet (New Delhi: Vikas, 1983), 114–118.

¹³² In her essay on Indian portrait photography, art historian Wendy Garden wrote that the typical out-of-proportion scale of the backdrop to the body “flattens both space and the body depicted before it so that instead of affirming a three dimensional physicality of the body, the person portrayed becomes a surface—an image” (“Photographic Space and the Indian Portrait studio”).

¹³³ Brooches similar to this one appear in other photographs as well, and the artist has worn them in his everyday life to date. They are kitschy items that parallel the self-quotation in the elaborate tableaux vivants of the late 1970s, discussed in the next chapter.

generic, rather than easily recognizable sites. As Pinney notes, the backdrop functions as “a space of exploration.”¹³⁴ It is a device that contributes to the transformation of photography in “chambers of dreams where personal explorations of an infinite range of alter-egos are possible,”¹³⁵ in contrast to the preference for naturalism that informs studio portrait photography in other countries. According to art historian Wendy Garden, the importance of photography in India reflects the Hindu beliefs in the power of the image and in the world as *maya* or an illusion and as a *leela* or an enacted theater.¹³⁶ Thus, in India, Ontani found a photographic practice that was consonant with his own interests. What film director Nishtha Jain said of studio photography in *City of Photos* (2005), a compelling documentary on small local studios in Indian cities, could well be said of Ontani’s work as well: both reveal a need to be “always looking for another space to inhabit.”

In a essay from 1997 anthropologist Arjun Appadurai also commented on the role played by backdrops in colonial and postcolonial studio portrait photography. Along the line with Pinney’s observations, he writes: “the backdrop resists, subverts or parodies the realist claims of photography in various ways.”¹³⁷ Backdrops, he goes on, promote “the fantastic, the arbitrary, the partial, the ludic and the utopian as accessories for the

¹³⁴ Christopher Pinney, “Notes from the Surface of the Image: Photography, Postcolonialism and Vernacular Modernism,” in *Photography’s Other Histories*, eds. Christopher Pinney and Nicolas Peterson (Durham [N.C.] and London: Duke University Press, 2003), 213.

¹³⁵ Ibid. In this essay Pinney focused on studio photography in Nagda, a small town half way between Delhi and Bombay, but he dealt with the subject more generally in *Camera Indica*.

¹³⁶ Garden, “Photographic Space and the Indian Portrait studio.”

¹³⁷ Arjun Appadurai, “The colonial backdrop,” *Afterimage* 24, n. 5 (March–April 1997): 5.

subjectivity of the persons in photographs and the persons who view and circulate photographs.”¹³⁸ Often monumentalized or miniaturized, the subjects depicted in the backdrop are metaphoric representations that “reference either nostalgias of some sort of past (pristine, romantic, historical, heroic) or some sort of future (technological, sartorial, official, moral or relational). But, whatever it is that they metaphorize, it is never an actual location, but always a *type* of location.”¹³⁹

Ganga Varanasi (1975), one of the first works in the series realized with the same studio in Varanasi that collaborated with Ontani for *Over the moon*, also portrays “a *type* of location,” a generic setting, as seen in *Temple* and *Mountain*. Generic settings lend themselves well to a multitude of associations. The scene of *Ganga Varanasi* was shot from two different perspectives, frontal and profile, and a few prints of the frontal view were over-painted differently. One version in particular, with pinkish sunset-like tones, reminds one of the Venice lagoon (fig. 231). Walking by the Ganges Ginsberg thought of Venice.¹⁴⁰ Like Venice, Varanasi is one of the oldest cities in the world. In both crumbling palaces overlooking the water are flanked by alleys leading off into darkness as well as to sudden glimpses of brilliant light. Varanasi is considered a holy city by the Buddhists and Jains, and the holiest by the Hindus, who believe that bathing in the river

¹³⁸ Ibid., 7.

¹³⁹ Ibid., 6. Apparently Ontani did not engage with the tension between modernity and tradition that characterized (and troubled) Indian culture so he never included in his works symbols of modernity such as the telephone, the motorcycle, or the television, which featured in contemporary bazaar photography. Perhaps this should be seen in relation to the distraught situation of Italy at the time. If one keeps in mind that Ontani’s travels to India were partly motivated by a need to escape from this situation, then it becomes understandable how in his works he would opt for more comforting scenarios than the tension-riddled ones.

¹⁴⁰ Allen Ginsberg, *Indian Journals: March 1962–May 1963* (New York: Grove Press, 1996), 122 and 126.

Ganges remits sins and dying in Varanasi ensures liberation from the cycle of death and rebirth. Given the sacred nature of the Ganges, Hindus traditionally cremate dead bodies on the riverbanks and disperse the ashes into it, or they offer whole dead bodies to the river. However, this seems hardly the Ganges of the burning ghats that brought about Ginsberg's enlightenment, as there is no sign of spiritual redemption in these images.¹⁴¹ In Ontani's rendition, the sacred Hindu city of the dead becomes the Venice of Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice* (1912) or Visconti's film adaptation.¹⁴² But *Ganga Varanasi* also recalls radically different images, like late-nineteenth century Impressionist paintings depicting leisure boat scenes. And given Ontani's fascination with painting, Claude Monet's self-portrait series *Bateau-Atelier* (1874, fig. 232), in which Monet represented himself at work in his boat studio, also comes to mind. The associations that *Ganga Varanasi* evoke can be endless, but one last should be mentioned by contrast: Venice was the city the Futurists hated as representative of that which is passé, kitschified by tourism.¹⁴³ But kitsch and passé did not bother Ontani, quite the contrary. On another note, *Ganga Varanasi* foreshadows an initiative that Sargentini promoted in Madras as part of the collective journey "L'Attico in viaggio" a few years later, in 1977. Called

¹⁴¹ On Ginsberg's travels to India and his enlightenment in front of the Gange ghats, see Baker, *The Beats in India*.

¹⁴² The association of Varanasi with Venice inspired a recent novel by Geoff Dyer, *Jeff in Venice, Death in Varanasi* (2009), whose story unfolds in these two cities in the present.

¹⁴³ See, for instance, the second Futurist manifesto "Uccidiamo il chiaro di luna!" (Let's Murder the Moonlight, April 1909) and "Contro Venezia passatista" (Against Past-Loving Venice, 1910), in Luciano De Maria, ed., *Teoria e invenzione futurista* (1968; reprint, Milan: Mondadori, 1996), 13–25, and 30–33; in English translation in Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, *Let's Murder the Moonshine: Selected Writings*, ed. R. W. Flint, trans. R. W. Flint and Arthur A. Coppotelli (Los Angeles: Sun and Moon Classics, 1991), 53–62, and 63–66.

“Look at India,” it consisted in borrowing a rowing boat of the kind used by local fishermen and navigate the Cooum river from the Marina Beach of Madras till the Bay of Bengal on March 13 at 5 p.m., looking at India from that particular vantage point.

Portraits in the studio, rather than outdoors, were the most popularly painted subjects in the 1970s, followed by wedding rituals and scenic beauties.¹⁴⁴ A work in “En route” draws on the conventions of early photo studio portraiture (fig. 233). Realized with Studio Rajendra, it depicts Ontani standing somewhat stiffly next to a curtain. He wears a dhoti kurta, which is the typical northern-Indian formal outfit, and a flower garland, normally worn by a priest or layperson on a special occasion, like marriage or a ritual. The side curtain was a common setting device in early photo portraits. It was adapted from British models, like inexpensive *carte-de-visite* cards, popular in the 1860s,¹⁴⁵ and its ancestor is to be found in Baroque portraits from Continental Europe that gave rise to the so-called swagger portrait tradition.¹⁴⁶ Examples of early photographic portraits with a side curtain similar to the one in Ontani’s work can be found in the Alkazi Collection in Delhi, as, for instance, a watercolor-painted photograph of a court performer from the first decade of the twentieth century (fig. 234) and an early twentieth-century postcard of a possibly late nineteenth century photograph depicting

¹⁴⁴ This information is drawn from an interview conducted with hand-colorist Inder Prakash, who in the 1970s was in his twenties and is still employed by Mahatta & Co. in Delhi, one of the oldest and most prominent commercial photography studio in the capital.

¹⁴⁵ On the *carte-de-visite* card, or “card photograph” as it was called in the United States, see Mary Warner Marien, *Photography: a cultural history* (London: Lawrence King Publishing, 2006, 2nd edition), 84–85.

¹⁴⁶ On the connection between the theatricality of the swagger portrait tradition and of the *cartes-de-visite* cards, see Christopher Pinney, *Camera Indica*, 74.

“ayahs” (fig. 235), which at that time meant either maids to Indian noblewomen or nursemaids to European children raised in India.¹⁴⁷

From the same group are the triptych *Indian Band* and *Arte Marry Age*, both from 1976–1977. In *Indian Band* (fig. 236) Ontani restaged one of the most bizarre phenomenons of postcolonial India, namely, the brass bands that still to date performs at marriages in faux military outfits derived from those of British military bands during colonial times, and playing European instruments such as the tuba, the accordion, and the drum. Apparently traditional Indian bands disappeared with Independence, when the princely patronage fell out as a result of the death of the princely states. Ontani interjected his camp sensibility by means of the black leg warmers and white platform shoes with chunky heels. In an earlier tableau photo after Goya’s *Clothed Maya*, the artist posed in his everyday attire, sporting similar shoes (fig. 111). Leg warmers and platform shoes must not have been part of the faux military outfits sported by Indian brass bands. The pink, yellow, and blue of the backgrounds are colors commonly used by Ontani as symbols of the feminine, the masculine, and the union of the two, or the androgynous. In *Arte Marry Age* (fig. 237) Ontani plays the role of the typical Indian bridegroom in traditional costumes in front of the pink walls that encircle the old city of Jaipur. This is a unique instance in which Ontani actually gives a smile that, although faint, seems to establish some kind of complicity with the viewer that is missing in most other works from the series.

¹⁴⁷ Photo-type postcards representing occupational types such as this one started to be produced around 1900 and immediately became hugely popular.

Subject Group 4: Street Gods

For his impersonations of Hindu deities, Ontani looked at popular images of deities that could be purchased at bazaars near temples, like Sivakasi and Brijbasi prints. For one, see fig. 238, which at the time was commercially available in different sizes, from postcard to poster size. It was in particular Sivakasi prints that the artist remembers having browsed on his first trip with great interest.¹⁴⁸ Sivakasi is a small town in the southern region of Tamil Nadu that established itself as the main center of the Indian printing industry in the second half of the twentieth century, while Brijbasi is a press based in Delhi.¹⁴⁹ They are the equivalent of the Italian “santini” and their kitsch quality must have similarly caught Ontani’s interest.¹⁵⁰ These bazaar prints have been studied by scholars such as Pinney, Kajri Jain, Erwin Neumayer and Christine Schelberger. They argue that god prints constituted a site for cultural identity negotiation in colonial and postcolonial India. According to Jain, “the realm of the bazaar” should be seen “as the space of a shared, pan-national visual idiom,” to which the famous Indian painter Raja Ravi Varma (1848–1906) first contributed with the chromo-lithographic prints of his own

¹⁴⁸ Ontani, personal interview, 17 May 2007.

¹⁴⁹ On Sivakasi, see Christopher Pinney, *Photos of the Gods: The Printed Image and Political Struggle in India* (London: Reaktion, 2004), 162.

¹⁵⁰ For a discussion of kitsch in Indian “calendar art,” see Ratan Parimoo, “Pop Art and the Problem of ‘Kitsch,’” in *Studies in Modern Indian Art (A Collection of Essays)* (New Delhi: Kanak Publications, 1975), 105–113.

paintings in the late nineteenth- to early twentieth-century.¹⁵¹

Ontani was so enamored of these bazaar prints that he decided to collaborate with a Sivakasi publishing house called The Orient Litho Press to produce an artist book. The result was a minuscule artist book—3 by 4.5 inches—with saturated pink pages framing reproductions of about 25 works from around 1970 onward, including tableau photos made in Italy and works from the “Tappeti volanti” (“Flying Carpets”), “Grottesche” (“Grotesques”), and “Mostro sette arti” (“Monster with Seven Limbs” or “Monster of the Seven Arts”) series.¹⁵² The placement of each work on the page varies from the more traditional full-page reproduction to a Lilliputian silhouette of Ontani’s body cut out of the original work and positioned near an outer corner of the page. The booklet was published in 1978 with the title *Acervus*, meaning “heap” or “pile” in Latin, as if to highlight the diversity of the works presented. Although it does not include details such as execution dates, it is nonetheless a great source of information as it provides the names of the different photographers, each followed by a list of the works they were involved with.

The three gods that Ontani impersonated in “En route” are among the most popular in the Hindu pantheon: Shiva, Hanuman, and Krishna.¹⁵³ In *ShivAshirvad* (fig.

¹⁵¹ Kajri Jain, *Gods in the Bazaar: The Economies of Indian Calendar Art* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 82, 93–114. Ontani encountered Varma’s work later than the 1970s and bought some lithographs (personal email correspondence, dated November 29, 2010)

¹⁵² 1,100 copies were printed, although the original plan was to print 2,500, which is the number indicated in the booklet. Both figures starkly contrast with the usual print run of 500,000 copies for a Sivakasi publication at the time. The booklet was distributed by Printed Matter.

¹⁵³ Hanuman is believed to be an avatar or incarnation of Shiva and Krishna of Vishnu, but they are commonly worshipped as gods in their own right.

239) Ontani posed as Shiva in the *abhayamudra* or blessing hand gesture—his right palm up facing outward and displaying the mystic Sanskrit syllable *om* that is the most sacred of all mantras and generally symbolizes the eternal root of creation and destruction. Blessing in Sanskrit is *ashirvad*, hence the work’s title, which contracts “Shiva” and “ashirvad.” As in anthropomorphic representations of the deity, Ontani-as-Shiva brandishes the *trishula* or trident, has matted hair on which the crescent moon sits, and a third eye placed vertically at the center of the forehead combined with the *tilaka* or sectarian mark of Shiva followers; his body is adorned with a cobra and his loins are clothed in tiger skin.¹⁵⁴

In comparison to *ShivAshirvad*, *HanuMAN* (fig. 240) seems more humorous, perhaps because of Ontani’s efforts to appear like the monkey-god: he wore a fake tail that comically popped out from behind his crouching body and blew his cheeks so as to imitate a monkey’s muzzle. The capitalization of the three final letters in the work title is typical of the artist’s creative manipulation of lower and upper cases to suggest double meanings. Unlike *ShivAshirvad*, *HanuMAN* exists in a few slightly different poses. They are all reminiscent of one of Hanuman’s most popular depictions, which portrays him worshipping Lord Rama, his consort Sita and his brother Lakshmana, as told in the epic of the *Ramayana*.

In *Hanuman* as in his other Hindu deity poses, Ontani wore props that Indians use in devotional theatrical traditions that are still alive today and can be purchased in places

¹⁵⁴ Real and fake could not be closer: while the cobra was alive (Ontani engaged a cobra enchanter to lend him his cobra), the tiger skin was painted.

like the Kinari bazaar in Old Delhi (see the clubs for impersonations of Hanuman and the trident for Shiva in figs. 241–242). Hanuman is featured prominently in the reenactment of the *Ramayana* called Ramlila, which lasts several days as part of a fall festival called Dusshera that takes place in October across northern Indian (see fig. 243). According to Kavita Singh, an art historian from Nehru University in Delhi, in Northern Indian this festival used to be quite popular and every neighborhood used to have its own reenactment.¹⁵⁵ So Ontani engages in a double mimicking, as he is mimicking an actor playing Hanuman.

While Ontani had both *ShivAshirvad* and *HanuMAN* shot indoors in a photo studio, he staged his *Krishnas* outdoors, in significantly different settings and poses. He nevertheless always impersonated Krishna as the flute player, possibly because of the great popularity of this subject in Indian visual culture. While at the time photographic portraits were taken indoors, Ontani chose outdoor settings, steered studio practice in a different direction so as to conform to the aesthetic of bazaar images with their pastoral landscapes. A significant example is a Brijbasi 1950s offset print from a painting from around 1934 by Narottam Narayan Sharma, a Nathdwara artist (fig. 244).¹⁵⁶ This is considered to be the best-selling image in the history of the printing industry in India.¹⁵⁷

The subject is inspired by the story of Krishna playing the flute and enchanting the

¹⁵⁵ Kavita Singh, personal interview, 25 March 2010, Delhi, audio recording.

¹⁵⁶ Nathdwara is a popular Krishna pilgrimage place not far from Udaipur and, as Pinney put it, is the ground zero of Indian visual culture.

¹⁵⁷ See Christopher Pinney, 'Photos of the Gods': *The Printed Image and Political Struggle in India*, 93; and Amit Ambalal, *Krishna as Shrinathji: Rajasthani Paintings from Nathdwara* (Ahmedabad: Mapin, 1987), 91.

cowgirls with his music narrated in the *Bhagavata Purana*. The first Indian artist who introduced natural settings in deity representations was Raja Ravi Varma in the late nineteenth century, in turn inspired by late-Romantic European landscape paintings, mostly seen in lithographic reproductions from Italy and Germany. Ravi Varma's work was extremely influential as he produced chromo-lithographic prints of his own paintings. Also influential on the reformulation of popular representations of deities were postcards of European paintings mostly coming from Britain, France, Italy, and Germany. So Ontani was intent at recreating in his photographs an aspect of Indian god pictures that had been inspired by European art. As *ShivAshirvad* and *HanuMAN, Krishna* also features Ontani with the main attributes of the god, with the exception of the peacock feather in the headgear (fig. 245). He is standing in the typical posture, with one leg bent over the other, and wears flower garlands over his characteristic bluish skin. The natural landscape in the background of the scene, as in Ontani's other *Krishnas*, otherwise more freely interpreted with respect to the posture, is reminiscent of the pastoral settings common in Krishna's poster images. However, the flowers that speckle the ground look more like the pattern representing a flowery meadow in miniature painting, sometimes found in carpet designs. Krishna as the flute player is featured in another devotional theatre tradition from northern India called Raslila. Only Brahmin boys, rather than adults, play the part of Krishna, as can be seen in a photograph taken in Brindavan (south of Delhi) in the mid-1970s (fig. 246).¹⁵⁸ Raslila performances occur during festivals such

¹⁵⁸ The picture is from a pioneering study by John S. Hawley, *At Play with Krishna: Pilgrimage Dramas from Brindavan* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1981).

as the Janmashtami in early September, celebrating the birth of Krishna. On this particular occasion boys are commonly dressed as Krishna independently of the theatrical reenactments. The Ramlila and the Raslila are the two main devotional theater traditions of India.¹⁵⁹

The literature on bazaar images of Hindu deities includes interesting examples of early twentieth-century hand-painted photographs of boys dressed as Krishna that could be used as cultic images for domestic worship and were inspired by festival performances (figs. 247–248). Photos such as these have continued to circulate in bazaars near temples over fifty years later.¹⁶⁰ Since Ontani was quite attentive and seduced by the world of Indian popular visual culture, besides god prints, theatrical performances and devotional hand-painted photographs, he could have also seen mythological film posters and movies in which actors dressed up not only as Krishna but also as Shiva and Hanuman (figs. 249–250). In fact he mentioned he went to the movie theater often.¹⁶¹ Moreover, given that Ontani is always simultaneously subject and object in his work, the Hindu notion of *darshan*, i.e., “seeing and being seen” by a deity, must have resonated with him. This is a key notion within Hindu religious practice that is responsible for the enormous stress

¹⁵⁹ On the Ramlila and the Raslila see Darius L. Swann, “The Devotional Traditions,” in *Indian Theater: Traditions of Performance*, Farley P. Richmond, Darius L. Swann, and Phillip B. Zarrilli (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1990), 167 et seq.

¹⁶⁰ See Kajri Jain, *Gods in the Bazaar: The Economies of Indian Calendar Art*, 89 ill. 43; Pinney, ‘Photos of the Gods’: *The Printed Image and Political Struggle in India*, 86 ill 61, 87 ill. 62–63; and Jyotindra Jain, *Indian Popular Culture: ‘The Conquest of the World as Picture’* (Kolkata: Apeejay Press, 2010), 24.

¹⁶¹ Ontani, personal interview, 17 May 2007.

placed on visuality and the ubiquity of god images.¹⁶² The representation of themes such as the androgynous, primarily incarnated in Shiva as the Lord who is half woman (Ardhanarishvara), and the animal-human composite, embodied in Hanuman and other deities, must have also appealed to him.

Merging Performance, Photography, Painting

One of the most remarkable aspects of “En route” is the way it combines performance, photography, and painting. An interest in breaking down the boundaries between these mediums is already evident in work prior to the series as in his tableau photos from the first half of the 1970s. In India Ontani’s interest in combining the media of performance, photography and painting found a fertile ground in the rich vernacular tradition of hand-tinted photography, in other words, photography used within the private (often domestic) sphere and charged with powerful sentimental meaning.¹⁶³ This tradition started to wane in the early 1980s, when the production of color photography became cheaper than hand-

¹⁶² On the notion of *darsan*, see Diana L. Eck, *Darsan: seeing the divine image in India* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998); Lawrence A. Babb and Susan S. Wadley, *Media and the Transformation of Religion in South Asia* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995), 6; and Pinney, 8–9.

¹⁶³ On vernacular photography see Geoffrey Batchen, “Vernacular photographs: Responses to a questionnaire,” *History of Photography* 24, n. 3 (fall 2000): 229–231.

tinting,¹⁶⁴ although it has survived to date, even after the advent of digital photography, in both commercial and artistic practice, as in the work of Pushpamala N. and Waswo X Waswo. In the commercial realm, Mahatta & Co., founded at the beginning of the twentieth century and considered an institution in Delhi, is a prime example of a photo studio that still employs a photo-colorist, Inder Prakesh, for works such as restoration of prints from damaged negatives through the use of hand-tinting. Ontani's fascination with the waning technique of hand-painted photography has a parallel and precedent in the interest of Boetti for the Afghan tradition of embroidery.

Ontani was not new to hand-tinted photography, as in Italy in the 1970s it was still surviving in small and remote places like his hometown of Vergato. The artist remembers the studio of Pierina Olivi and her brother, a landscape painter who was in charge of the hand-tinting process. Ontani collaborated with them on some early poses published in the artist book *Poesiae adulescentiae* (c. 1975). Unfortunately nothing remains of the studio, as the Olivi passed away and their heirs disposed of all materials. In Italy as well as in Europe, hand-tinted photography was generally not as popular as in India, even

¹⁶⁴ This information is the result of field research conducted in India—I interviewed the owners of the most important photo studios in Delhi, such as Mahatta & Co., Dass Studios and Kinsey Brothers (Mahatta & Co., for instance, employed four or five hand-colorists until the late 1970s)—as the literature on painted photography covers maximum until the 1950s. For instance, photography historian Judith Mara Gutman in her book *Through Indian Eyes* (New York: Oxford University Press and International Center of Photography, 1982) briefly mentions hand-painted photography as still alive, but then focuses on the period between the late nineteenth and the early twentieth century. In a more recent book-length study on bazaar images of deities, art historian Kajri Jain states that variations of this practice still persists in studio portraiture (*Gods in the Bazaar: The Economies of Indian Calendar Art* [Durham: Duke University Press, 2007], 383 n.12). However, nowhere in the book does she elaborate on this.

before the initial widespread availability of color photography in the fifties.¹⁶⁵ On the other hand, since the 1850s painted photography in India developed into “an independent genre” that “ranged from lightly tinted works to the slow transformations of photographs into paintings and finally into icons for worship,” as art historian Partha Mitter wrote in a recent study on painted photography’s legacy in miniature painting traditions.¹⁶⁶ As Christopher Pinney noted, “for Indian practitioners the application of paint to the surface of the photographic image did not appear to raise the same paradoxes that it did for many European practitioners.”¹⁶⁷ This was due to a specific socio-historical circumstance. When the British introduced photography in India in the 1840s, the courtly patronage of miniature painting had declined as a result of the deterioration of courtly culture due to colonial rule in the first half of the nineteenth century. Eventually miniature painters found new employment as photo hand-colorists. Naturally, then, the development of hand-painted photography drew upon miniature painting traditions. Indeed, as Indian textile expert and curator Pramod Kumar wrote, “The need for photographs to convey the colorful splendor and symbolism of Indian textiles quickly manifested through the new

¹⁶⁵ On the transformation of the role of hand-tinting from functional to artistic in Europe and the United States in the 1930s and 1940s and its revival in the 1980s, see Martin Judy, *Handtinting Photographs: Materials, Techniques, and Special Effects* (Cincinnati: North Light Books, 1989), 21–29. Although not a scholarly publication and more a how-to-do manual, it contains relevant information and a good collection of images.

¹⁶⁶ Mitter, “The Dawn of Photography in India: A Complex Legacy of the Photographic Studio,” in Partha Mitter et al., *The Artful Pose* (Ahmedabad: Mapin, 2010), 23. Gutman also discusses painted photography as an “Indian genre” in her book *Through Indian Eyes*, 103–132.

¹⁶⁷ Christopher Pinney, *Camera Indica*, 77. Ethnographic film maker and scholar David MacDougall told the story of the owner of a shop in Mussoorie in northern India, in the Himalayan foothills, who could not recognize whether the portrait of a maharaja he possessed was a painted photograph or a miniature painting because its surface was completely painted (“Photo Hierarchicus: Signs and Mirrors in Indian Photography,” *Visual Anthropology* 5 [1992]: 107).

medium of the painted photograph,”¹⁶⁸ as can be seen in watercolor-painted photos such as a 1863 example depicting a maharaja, in the Alkazi Collection in Delhi (fig. 251).¹⁶⁹

Echoes of “En Route” in Contemporary Indian Art

Ontani’s impersonations of real and fictional Indian characters and his adoption of hand-painted photography as an artistic medium resonate with contemporary art practice in India. Two of the most prominent artists active in India today—Pushpamala N. and Waswo X Waswo—have been producing works that echo Ontani’s “En route” series from the 1970s. In my interviews with both Pushpamala and Waswo, I was able to verify that neither had seen or heard of Ontani’s “En route” series before. Pushpamala’s and Waswo’s recent production indicates that the issues Ontani tackled early on in his work have truly come of age.

¹⁶⁸ Pramod Kumar, “The Evolving Modern, 1850–1950: Indian Costumes as Seen through Painted Photographs,” in Rahaab Allana and Pramod Kumar, *Painted Photographs: Coloured Portraiture in India* (Ahmedabad: Mapin and Ocean Township, NJ: Grantha Corporation, 2008), 39.

¹⁶⁹ Both Pramod Kumar and Rahaab Allana deal with the interconnected relationship between miniature painting and photography in the essays they wrote for the Alkazi Foundation catalog *Painted Photographs: Coloured Portraiture in India*. For a more recent, insightful study that investigates this relationship, see Partha Mitter, “The Dawn of Photography in India: A Complex Legacy of the Photographic Studio,” in Partha Mitter et al., *The Artful Pose: Early Studio Photography in Mumbai, c. 1855–1940* (Ahmedabad: Mapin, 2010), 8–25. Varunika Saraf, doctoral candidate at Nehru University in Delhi, is in the course of conducting archival research to prove this link with material evidence. Possibly, miniature painters were making copies and versions of Indian miniatures for the tourist market at the same time that they were hand-painting photographs. With the advent of photography, besides miniature painters, Company painters also found new employment as hand-colorists, especially of photographic portraits, with the as Mitter observed in the closing of his “Introduction” to the exhibition catalogue *Photography in India: 1858–1980, a Survey* (London: Photographers’ Gallery, 1982). On Company painting—the name given to Indian painting featuring a European style and palette under the rule of the British East India Company—see Mildred Archer, *Company Painting: Indian Painting of the British Period* (London: Victoria and Albert Museum, 1993). The terms Company painting and Mughal miniature painting, as historian and writer William Dalrymple noted at a lecture given at the Asia Society in New York City on February 13, 2012, are “retrospective labels added by historians later; they fail to capture the extreme porous and strangely unclassifiable quality of the art and society of this period”—the period of the Company rule, from the mid-eighteenth to the mid-nineteenth century (<http://asiasociety.org/video/arts/william-dalrymple-much-hindoos-christians>; last accessed on March 17, 2012).

Bangalore-born Pushpamala N. (b. 1956) has produced two series of painted photographs: “Sunhere Sapen (Golden Dreams) a Photoromance” in 1998 and “Dard-e-Dil—The Anguished Heart, a Photoromance” in 2002.¹⁷⁰ Based between Bangalore and Delhi, Pushpamala was an established sculptor before she turned to photography and performance in the late 1990s. In both of her hand-painted photography series Pushpamala, like Ontani, is at the same time the director and the main actress of her tableaux although her poses, unlike Ontani’s, have a quasi-narrative sequence. Of the two series, the more recent one has a clearer overall development with a beginning and an end. Through large prints (20 by 30 inches), it tells the story of an impoverished Muslim household of aristocratic roots in which family ties win over love. It is the kind of story that can be found in classical Urdu poetry as well as in contemporary reality. The other series consists of postcard-size prints that draw on the conventions of Bollywood sentimental films from the 1960s with their sugary romanticism and kitschy aesthetics (see for one, fig. 252). However, several scenes are injected with a sense of suspense more akin to a thriller or cliffhanger than a romantic film. Cindy Sherman’s “Untitled Film Stills” (1977–1980), inspired by movie publicity stills from the 1950s and 1960s, of course come to mind. Sherman too experimented briefly with hand-painted photography in 1975, when she was still a student at the State University of New York at Buffalo.¹⁷¹ More than the format of film stills, though, Pushpamala’s photographs recall snapshots

¹⁷⁰ See *Pushpamala N.: Indian Lady* (New York: Bose Pacia, 2004).

¹⁷¹ Some of these works were on view at the Metropolitan Museum in New York as part of the group show *The Pictures Generation: 1974–1984*, held in 2009. They are not reproduced in the catalog and one imagines that they have not been shown and published much.

taken on a honeymoon gone wild. Marriages in India are still arranged and in fact the poses oscillate between boredom and foreshadowed violence and escape. While the first series was realized in collaboration with photo colorist Virender Kumar, who at the time was employed at a small photo studio in a town near Delhi, the second series was hand-painted by Inder Prakash, one of the best surviving colorists still employed by Mahatta & Co. in Delhi.

Pushpamala has also impersonated characters drawn from pre-existing visual sources culled from Indian culture. In the early 2000, with British photographer Clare Ami, Pushpamala also conceived “Native Women of South India,” a set of four photographic series (in each series the works are either color or sepia-toned black-and-white photos), in which the artist, often alone but sometimes with other women, recreated the poses and looks of South-Indian women portrayed in a range of better- and lesser-known images—from Ravi Varma’s oil paintings and oleographs to film scenes, newspaper pictures and colonial-era anthropometric photos.¹⁷² For instance, in the subset “Native Types,” she impersonated the Hindu Goddess Lakshmi after an early twentieth-century oleograph of a painting by Ravi Varma (fig. 253). More literal than Ontani’s, Pushpamala’s works are accompanied by accurate acknowledgements of the sources and tools used for her recreations. This marks a clear distance from Ontani’s series, steeped in ambiguity and characterized by shifts and overlaps of meanings and visual sources. Pushpamala’s interests are informed by deconstruction and critical theory. Her main

¹⁷² Pushpamala N. and Clare Arni, *Native Women of South India: Manners and Customs* (New Delhi: Nature Morte; Mumbai: Gallery Chemoud; New York: Bose Pacia, c. 2006).

concern is to raise awareness, reveal historical memory and make types and stereotypes transparent.

In a recent interview Pushpamala explained her interest in play-acting and masquerading in relation to the Indian context, characterized by a constant “tension between the self and the Other, the mainstream and the marginal.” She made reference to a 1927 Bollywood movie (“In the silent film *Wildcat of Bombay*, the heroine Sulochana had eight separate roles—herself, a gardener, a policeman, a Hyderabadi gentleman, a street urchin, a European blonde, an old banana seller and an expert pickpocket who gives her money to charity”), to Gandhi’s birthday celebrations (“Every year on Gandhi’s birthday, people dress up as Gandhi and walk miles with a stick to garland his statue”) and to newspapers (“Indian newspapers always have pictures of politicians going to remote areas of the country and dancing with the tribals, wearing the local headgear, or masquerading as mythological heroes”).¹⁷³

The other prominent artist active in India today whose practice reminds one of Ontani’s “En route” series is the American Waswo X. Waswo (b. 1953). Born in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and based in Udaipur, Waswo moved to India in the early 2000s. He started to work with hand-painted photography in 2007, when he began to execute his works in India. He started to collaborate with Indian miniature painter Rajesh Soni, who belongs to an important family of photo colorists. His grand-father, Prabha Lal Verma, worked as a hand-painter at the court of the Maharaja of Udaipur in the mid-twentieth

¹⁷³ Pushpamala N., Interview with N. Rajyalakshmi (March 2004), in *Pushpamala N.: Indian Lady*, np.

century and his works are in the collection of the Udaipur City Palace. Waswo has produced two series of hand-painted photographs: “A Studio in Rajasthan” and “New Myths.”¹⁷⁴ Rather than sepia-toned black-and-white photographs, as Ontani’s, Waswo’s are digital prints. In both series he used elaborately painted backdrops executed by a local artist who specializes in painting backdrops. In fact, they are still used today in studio portraiture, as shown in Nishtha Jain’s documentary, *City of Photos* (2005). However, Waswo’s backdrops are more reminiscent of studio portraiture from the mid- to late-nineteenth century than contemporary. In “A Studio in Rajasthan” the tableaux are performed by people Waswo met in the streets and who play themselves. For instance, in the pair *Sauresh playing Hanuman* and *Sapna Playing Sita* (figs. 254–255) a boy and his sister pose as Hanuman and Sita, Rama’s wife from the *Ramayana*, but not for a Ramlila performance, rather as in real life since they are street kids who beg dressed as deities because this elevates their status in the eyes of the Indian people. In “New Myths,” on the other hand, the main actor is a professional fashion model. He plays Krishna both in traditional poses, like Ontani (in fig. 256 he is playing the flute in front of a landscape painting backdrop) and in funky contemporary re-contextualizations, with a saxophone or potato chips.

¹⁷⁴ Waswo X. *Waswo: A Studio in Rajasthan* (Pondicherry: Coromandel Art Gallery, 2009) and *Waswo X. Waswo: New Myths (First Incarnation)* (Mumbai: Bombay Art Gallery, 2010).

The *Lord of Vanity*

Ontani performed Lord Vanity—the imaginary umpteenth deity of the Hindu pantheon—at the Ekambaresvara Temple in Kanchipuram, a small temple town about forty miles south of Madras, in the southern state of Tamil Nadu, on March 10, 1977. This was his work for the trip and exhibition “L’Attico in viaggio,” which was probably Sargentini’s most ambitious project involving India. Earlier in March Sargentini left Rome with about fifteen people, including art historians Cesare Brandi and Vittorio Rubiu. Brandi wrote reportages for the daily newspaper *Corriere della Sera* then published in the book *Persia mirabile* and Sargentini wrote the foreword to the second edition of the book. “L’Attico was forcing the closed, circumscribed space of its galleries in order to venture into boundless spaces. These were the years of Jack Kerouac’s ‘on the road.’ So I gathered a group of friends, intellectuals and people from the art world, with the intention of going to India and realizing performances.”¹⁷⁵

The Indian trip was actually the second part of a project that first involved the navigation of the river Tiber from the city of Rome to the Tyrrhenian Sea on a boat on March 27, 1976. Sargentini invited a large group of Italian, American, and Indian artists and musicians on the Tiber navigation. The list included Gino De Dominicis, Jannis and Efi Kounellis, Mario and Marisa Merz, Joan Jonas, Simone Forti, and many others.

Ontani joined dressed as the Roman *commedia dell’arte* character Rugantino, with a

¹⁷⁵ Fabio Sargentini, “Prefazione,” in Cesare Brandi, *Persia mirabile* (Rome: Editori Riuniti, 2002), 9 (my translation). The book was first published in 1978 and gathers reportages from Brandi’s earlier travels to Iran as well. Sargentini wrote in his foreword that he was proud for having influenced those travels too. He recounted the postcard from Isfahan he sent to Brandi and Rubiu in August of 1970, encouraging them to visit (*ibid.*, 7).

costume borrowed from Umberto Tirelli. Rugantino typifies the common Roman man, overpowering and troublemaker. Pictures of the event show him holding the boat's steering wheel, perhaps in an attempt to embrace the character of Rugantino (see figs. 257–258).

Two years later, a much smaller group traveled to India. Over the course of two weeks, they visited Mumbai, the Island of Elephanta, the caves of Aurangabad, Ajanta, and Ellora, Madras, Kanchipuram, and Delhi. The artists on the trip—Ontani, Clemente, and Giordano Falzoni—were invited to produce and exhibit a work during the journey.¹⁷⁶ One of the last Surrealists, a painter and member of the Gruppo 63, with Barilli and Eco, Falzoni was an important figure for Clemente, having initiated him to theosophy in 1973.¹⁷⁷ Falzoni and Clemente executed works on paper that were exhibited in Madras for two days only—a span of time usually associated with performance work rather than objects—on March 12 and 13. Falzoni made some Rorschach-like, butterfly-like paintings, between image and calligraphy. Clemente, on the other hand, engaged a group of movie-billboard sign painters to execute twelve small oils on paper that were then shown in a small room of a humble building located in the Madras district of Mylapore.¹⁷⁸ Ontani staged a live performance, *Lord Vanity*.

¹⁷⁶ Ontani proposed to invite Boetti as well but Sargentini decided not to include him, and he also remembers that other Rome-based artists dissociated themselves from this project for unclear reasons (Ontani, personal interview, 17 May 2007).

¹⁷⁷ Falzoni translated into Italian writings by André Breton and the Indian guru R. P. Kaushik.

¹⁷⁸ This information is drawn from a personal interview with Ontani (26 December 2009) and from the publication *L'Attico in viaggio* (Madras: B. N. K. Press, 1977), np. My research did not yield any reproductions or descriptions of these works.

With flower garlands coiled all around his body and a large ovoid held above his head, Ontani stood on top of a polychromatic wooden statue of an elephant to perform *Lord Vanity* at noon in the precinct of the Ekambaresvara Temple, a popular Hindu temple dedicated to Shiva (fig. 259).¹⁷⁹ Ontani recounted that he was standing motionless in his “tableau vivant, naked, dressed in narcissus flowers.” And added: “I was sunbathing, doing the *gibigianna* with an ovoid of aluminum foil that reflected the rays of the sun in the temple’s water tank for ritual ablutions, balancing myself on a statue of Ganesha like a *bella statuina*, at the limit of the water.”¹⁸⁰ The *Gibigianna* and the *bella statuina* are two common children’s games in Italy. The first involves bouncing sunlight off of a mirror onto someone, while the second entails holding a perfectly still pose for the longest time possible. Ontani had dedicated one of his earliest works to this game (fig. 15).

Rather than on Ganesha—the Hindu god of beginnings and obstacles, depicted as an elephant-headed human figure—Ontani stood atop an elephant *vahana*. Just as an elephant *vahana* was mistaken for Ganesh, one wonders if indeed the flowers coiled around Ontani’s body were narcissus rather than jasmine, readily available at Hindu temples such as Ekambaresvara. Certainly narcissus flowers are more appropriate for a representation of the god of vanity. It also seems that the surface of the ovoid object Ontani held atop his head was opaque rather than reflective, as required in order to play

¹⁷⁹ Fig. 259 is the souvenir photograph of the performance.

¹⁸⁰ Ontani, personal interview, 17 May 2007.

the *Gibigianna* game. These, however, are not simply imprecisions to be dismissed or negatively judged. It is almost as if Ontani's narration could continue and actually complete the performance. His narration reveals a mythopoetic quality that is in tune with the blurring between citation and invention, fact and fiction that characterizes his work.

Vahanas are vehicles or mounts for deities and can be interpreted as emanations of those deities. There are different elephant *vahanas*, and the overall white color and four tasks of the one included in *Lord Vanity* identify it as Airavata, the *vahana* of Lord Indra, who is the chief god of the Indo-Aryan pantheon whose main characteristics are power and strength. *Vahanas* such as this one are commonly found in south Indian temples as they are used during annual festivals to transport small figures of deities in processions that involve circumambulation of the temple precincts (fig. 260). They are made from wood and either painted or clad in metal such as silver. The deity is placed on an inverted-U structure surmounting the *vahana* and the sculptural group rests on a platform that can be equipped with wheels for dragging the group along with thick ropes. When not in use, *vahanas* are stored in one of the temple halls or along the raised sides of corridors encircling the enclosures (fig. 261).¹⁸¹

Built under the Pallavas in what was then the capital of their empire, the Ekambaresvara Temple is a large temple complex that was expanded to its present size

¹⁸¹ On temple rituals that involve the transportation of deities atop *vahanas*, see Crispin Branfoot, *Gods on the Move: Architecture and Ritual in the South Indian Temple* (London: Society for South Asian Studies and The British Academy, 2007), 121–164.

during the Vijayanagar period, in the sixteenth century.¹⁸² A distinguishing feature of south Indian temples from this period is the presence of long, high and wide corridors that are used as grand processional aisles during festival circumambulations. Water tanks, such as the one near which Ontani performed, are another notable feature of south Indian temples. They are located in the temple courtyards, which are the least sacred space (the most sacred being the sanctum, which is very dark, with almost no natural light), and they were built for practical and ritual purposes, including cleansing of the devotees' feet and to provide a soothing and pleasant environment for the deities that inhabit the temple. At some ceremonies, the priest immerses in the water tank the statuettes of the deities that were carried around in procession before placing them back in their shrines.

By standing atop a sculpture such as the one used to transport a deity during a festival procession, Ontani was transforming himself into a deity—*Lord Vanity*. Even if he mistook the sculpture he used for his tableau vivant as Ganesha, he must have been aware of its use in temple processions. Considering that growing up in Vergato Ontani served as an altar boy and took part into religious processions (fig. 138), finding the adornments and vestments fascinating, the Indian ceremonies must have struck a consonant chord in him, as somewhat familiar and at the same time curiously different from what he was accustomed to. Given the highly unusual circumstance of a non-Hindu

¹⁸² Sottsass began his text on the temples of India with the Pallavas and their capital of Kanchi (*puram* means “city”) (*Esercizi di viaggio*, 27). The text, which is an intense account of the strong impressions that the Indian temples left on Sottsass, was first published in 1962 in the widely read magazine *Domus*. Perhaps, then, it is no coincidence that Ontani, almost twenty years old in 1962 and already immersing himself in art as a reader and exhibition goer, picked a temple in Kanchipuram for his Indian performance.

impersonating a Hindu deity, one wonders if Ontani commissioned a sculpture from the makers of *vahanas*, had it set up like a *vahana*, and then asked a group of Indian men to carry it out of storage before his *Lord Vanity* performance (fig. 262), as before a real temple procession. However, Ontani stated that he used a preexisting sculpture that belonged to the temple.¹⁸³ He must have obtained all the necessary permissions with the help of the Madras-based cultural association International Youth that assisted the group with all arrangements.

Ontani's "souvenir" photograph of *Lord Vanity* was published in *Flash Art* soon after the performance, in the last issue of 1977, as part of a group survey dedicated to "Post-conceptual Romanticism."¹⁸⁴ Unlike the series "En route," which was exhibited in India for the first time only in the early 1990s, *Lord Vanity* was presented by means of Ontani's souvenir photo at the Lalit Kala Akademi in New Delhi in 1978, as part of the Triennale of India, thanks to Bruno Mantura, assistant superintendent at the Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna in Rome and in charge of the Italian section of the Triennale.¹⁸⁵

¹⁸³ Luigi Ontani, personal interview, 12 May 2009, Rome, audio recording.

¹⁸⁴ Helena Kontová and Giancarlo Politi, eds., "Romanticismo Post-concettuale/Post-conceptual Romanticism," *Flash Art* n. 78–79 (November–December 1977): 23–51. The photograph of *Lord Vanity* is on page 29, followed by the English translation of a stream-of-consciousness-like text penned by the artist. Kontová and Politi borrowed the expression "Post-conceptual Romanticism" from James Collins, who used it in an article published in the June 1975 issue of *Flash Art* in reference to works that feature "romantic attributes such as beauty, aestheticism, feeling, love, mystery, etc. but which filter through the experiences of Minimalism and Conceptualism" (ibid., 23).

¹⁸⁵ Bruno Mantura, "Italy," in *Fourth Triennale—India*, ed. S. A. Krishnan (New Delhi: Lalit Kala Akademi Rabindra Bhawan, 1978), 34–35. The caption reads "photographic enlargement."

Italian Picture Galleries and a “Chinese Encyclopedia”

“En route” was first exhibited in May 1978 at L’Attico, in Rome, and in July of that year it was presented in the Italian section of the Venice Biennale.¹⁸⁶ While at L’Attico works were scattered throughout the rooms, in Venice they were arranged on one large wall in a dynamic floor-to-ceiling installation (fig. 263). The arrangement is reminiscent of Salon-style wall-paper hanging, common in picture galleries in Italy like the Galleria Doria Pamphilj in Rome or Palazzo Pitti in Florence. It is also reminiscent of early twentieth-century avant-garde experiments as well as current trends in exhibition design that reject the discrete, modernist white cube. This kind of layout, featuring pictures hanging above, at, and below eye level, has been a constant in subsequent installations of the series, always presented in different configurations, adding new pieces to the picture gallery or *quadreria*. The most recent incarnations of “En route” were on view in Italy at the Museo d’Arte Moderna in Bologna in 2008 (fig. 264) and the Museo d’Arte della città in Ravenna in 2009. On these and other occasions, the wall dotted with “En route” was paired with another wall displaying, in a similar collage-like hanging, the photomontage series “Tappeti volanti” (“Flying Carpets,” 1973–1975), inspired by the subject of travel and the posthumous, most famous tale of the *Arabian Nights*, “The Story of Aladdin and the Magic Lamp” (for one, see fig. 269).

¹⁸⁶ *La Biennale di Venezia 1978: Dalla natura all’arte, dall’arte alla natura. Catalogo generale* (Venice: La Biennale di Venezia, 1978), 140, 153. The catalog was published in English translation as well, but it is only in the Italian edition that a full list of Ontani’s works is included. The commission for the Italian section was composed by Luigi Carluccio, Enrico Crispolti and Lara-Vinca Masini. The exhibition designer was Piero Sartogo.

The layout of “En route” reminds one of two works by Boetti and Clemente: *Il Muro* (*The Wall*), which Boetti started in 1973 and continued until his death in 1994, and *Undae Clemente Flamina Pulsae*, dated 1978 (figs. 265–266). Both works were first exhibited in 1979.¹⁸⁷ Boetti’s *Wall* is a collection of 71 objects, framed under glass and gathered over time, until the end of Boetti’s life. They include Boetti’s own works, sketches and notes, travel souvenirs, photographs of friends and family, postcards, newspaper clips, and works by friends such as Salvo, Sandro Chia, and others (fig. 265). As Annemarie Sauzeau wrote in her memoir of Boetti’s life and work, *The Wall* “was born in the Trastevere apartment in Rome” in 1973 and changed shape in the course of its existence, “like an amoeba.”¹⁸⁸ So did “En route.” The work by Clemente, on the other hand, consists of 15 objects, partly executed by the artist, partly found, partly commissioned, and partly a combination of the three, ranging in size from coin- to billboard-size (fig. 266).¹⁸⁹ *Undae Clemente Flamina Pulsae* is also an artist book that contains postcard reproductions of the objects and was produced in India by Kalakshetra Press in Madras, after the model of postcard books sold at temples. Unlike Ontani’s “En route” and Boetti’s *Wall*, Clemente’s wall piece has a fixed hanging. The layout of the

¹⁸⁷ Boetti’s *Wall* was exhibited at Chiostro di Voltorre, Gavirate in northern Italy, as part of the show *Alighiero Boetti: La festa dell’immaginario visivo - L’art ventura*, curated by Tommaso Trini. A machine-typed pamphlet was produced on the occasion of the exhibition with a text by Boetti on each work. Clemente’s *Undae Clemente Flamina Pulsae* was presented in Amsterdam at Art & Project, the leading contemporary gallery in town at the time, mostly showing conceptual art.

¹⁸⁸ Annemarie Sauzeau Boetti, *Alighiero e Boetti: Shaman/Showman* (Cologne: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König and Turin: Umberto Allemandi, 2003), 16.

¹⁸⁹ The work is in the collection of the Groningen Museum, in the Netherlands. It was included in a retrospective exhibition hosted at the MADRE Museum in Naples, but otherwise it has rarely been shown. See Pamela Kort, ed., *Clemente: Shipwreck with the Spectator 1974–2004* (Milan: Electa, 2009), 28–29 and cat. 50–64.

piece is strikingly similar to the layout of “En route” at the 1978 Venice Biennale. Besides Italian picture galleries, something else might have inspired both artists—something they could encounter daily on a walk around town: the scattered decorations and commemorative marble inscriptions accumulated over the millennia that decorate the walls of Rome.

The first time “En route” was shown in New York was at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in 1982, as part of the group exhibition *Italian Art Now: An American Perspective* curated by Diane Waldman (fig. 267). The show proposed a mixed group of artists, including another outsider, Vettor Pisani, artists associated with Transavanguardia, and others with Arte Povera.¹⁹⁰ The catalogue offers monographic essays dedicated to each artist that were written by Lisa Dennison under Waldman’s supervision. This constitutes the first attempt in English language to present an account of Ontani’s works from the previous decade. The essay is preceded by a list of biographical information that includes the dates of Ontani’s trips to India: 1974, 1975, 1976, 1977, 1978. Given that the catalogue was published in 1982, they are probably correct, although it was not unusual for Ontani to make up dates and places of his life. The text introduces the artist’s work by stressing the range of characters impersonated: “Luigi Ontani reincarnates his favorite heroes from mythology, folklore and fairytales, history and art history by means of his own body. . . . Though most of Ontani’s figures

¹⁹⁰ Ontani remembers that a few works from the series were on view earlier at Sonnabend Gallery and went from there to the Guggenheim for Waldman’s show. As Sonnabend Gallery director Antonio Homem confirmed, although there is no record of a group show including Ontani’s works, in all likelihood they were shown informally.

are based in his Italian cultural heritage, the repertory is wide-ranging and immense.”¹⁹¹ Most valuable in this essay are the descriptions of two recent tableaux performed live in New York: *Medici Prince d’après Joseph Cornell* (1977) and *Astronaut* (1979), discussed in the next and final chapter of this study.

A few years later, in 1985, *David and Goliath*, *Saint Sebastian d’après Henner* and *Shivaji* would be exhibited at the Museum of Modern Art in New York (fig. 268) together with a few masks made in collaboration with traditional woodcarvers in Bali in the early 1980s as part of the show *Made in India*, organized by the Art Advisory Service in conjunction with the national “Festival of India.”¹⁹² To date, these are the only works by Ontani ever exhibited at MoMA. *Made in India* was an exhibition of works “created in India and inspired by visits to India by American and European painters and sculptors.”¹⁹³ The only other Italian artist included was Clemente with *Earth*, part of a series of foldable gouaches realized in collaboration with billboard painters in Madras using large sheets of Pondicherry paper joined with hand-woven cotton stripes.

It was only in 1991 that “En route” was presented in India. Curator Barbara Tosi invited Ontani as the artist representing Italy at the Triennale of India in Delhi.¹⁹⁴ For this occasion Ontani decided to print new photographs from the 1970s negatives, as it

¹⁹¹ Diane Waldman, ed., *Italian art now: An American Perspective* (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, 1982), 68.

¹⁹² The Art Advisory Service (AAS), in existence between 1964 and 1996, functioned as a sort of broker between dealers and the corporate members of the Museum. In fact, most works included in *Made in India* were available for sale.

¹⁹³ “ALS/AAS, II.D.2.20,” The Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York.

¹⁹⁴ Barbara Tosi, “Italy: The Thousand and One Note,” in *Seventh Triennale-India*, ed. Ananda Das Gupta (New Delhi: Lalit Kala Akademi, 1991), 42–43.

was too expensive to ship works from Italy. The new prints were painted by hand-colorists of Frontier Photo Center in Delhi.¹⁹⁵ He then hung the works above the entrance arc of the Lalit Kala Academy, where the Triennale was held. However, for the opening day, when government officials were visiting the show, the organizers took care to reroute the exhibition entrance.¹⁹⁶ Tosi reported that “the references to Hindu religion in the installation were not appreciated by the local authorities.”¹⁹⁷ This was no surprise to Tosi, since “every time an artist adopts any religious element in his work (regardless of which religion), aside from the art world insiders, the rest of the audience raises polemics with minor or major impetus.”¹⁹⁸ One may agree with this remark, but one also wonders if, in this particular context, the discomfort also had to do with Ontani’s “unideal” impersonations, which may be perceived as offensive by a religious audience.¹⁹⁹ In comparison to impersonations of deities in Hindu culture, Ontani’s strike as unadorned

¹⁹⁵ Luigi Ontani, personal phone call, 25 October 2011, unrecorded. This photo studio was established by Devendra Kumar in 1984. Ontani has made new prints from old negatives on other occasions. Perhaps one may say he has treated his photographic negatives like Duchamp has treated his ready-mades, making replicas of them over the course of time.

¹⁹⁶ Idem, personal interview, 12 June 2010, Riola, audio recording.

¹⁹⁷ Barbara Tosi, personal email correspondence, dated March 24, 2011. [“I riferimenti alla religione Indù contenuti nell’installazione non furono molto graditi dalle autorità locali.”]

¹⁹⁸ Ibid. [“Ogni volta che un artista usa un qualche elemento religioso (qualunque sia la religione) nelle sue opere, tolti gli addetti ai lavori, tutti gli altri, chi con maggiore o minore impeto, sollevano delle polemiche.”]

¹⁹⁹ These are not published responses, but feedback I gathered in conversation with Indian people, including Iftikhar Dadi, after a presentation of this material at a graduate-student conference at Cornell University in 2010.

and detached.²⁰⁰ However, it should not be forgotten that Ontani impersonated Christian saints from his own culture as well, and that spareness and detachment characterize those recreations as well.

Different aspects of the series may in fact disturb different audiences. Ontani remembers that recently in Italy the organizers of a group exhibition he did not name avoided showing the series to government officials on the opening day.²⁰¹ Why? A peculiarity of the series is that it brings together heterogeneous characters that are cross-cultural and culled from realms of collective life normally kept separate, as religion and mass entertainment. Most importantly, it connects them all through the body of Ontani, always recognizable behind the *mises en scene*. The effect, perhaps, is comparable to that evoked in the enigma of Isidore Ducasse or Comte de Lautréamont, adopted by the Surrealists: the juxtaposition and proximity of apparently unrelated things, like an umbrella and a sewing machine on a dissecting table. It is also comparable to the effect produced by the animal taxonomy from “a certain Chinese encyclopedia” that Borges quotes and Michel Foucault analyzes in the “Preface” to his *The Order of Things* (1966). The taxonomy divides animals into:

- (a) belonging to the Emperor, (b) embalmed, (c) tame, (d) sucking pigs, (e) sirens, (f) fabulous, (g) stray dogs, (h) included in the present classification, (i) frenzied,

²⁰⁰ This was suggested by John S. Hawley, a comparative religion scholar who specializes in the devotional traditions of Northern India. He authored the pioneering study of the Raslila performances in Brindavan *At Play with Krishna: Pilgrimage Dramas from Brindavan* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1981). Hawley’s fieldwork in Brindavan was conducted in 1976, around the time of Ontani’s photographic poses after Hindu deities from calendar art. A town in the region of Uttar Pradesh, some eighty miles south of Delhi, Brindavan (the name is spelled in half a dozen different ways) is the site of an ancient forest where, according to the *Mahabharata*, Krishna spent his childhood.

²⁰¹ Ontani, personal interview, 12 June 2010.

(j) innumerable, (k) drawn with a very fine camelhair brush, (l) *et cetera*, (m) having just broken the water pitcher, (n) that from a long way off look like flies.²⁰²

Foucault observes that it is not just the oddity of unexpected juxtapositions to produce a disturbing effect but their contiguity, “the sudden vicinity of things that have no relation to each other.”²⁰³ It is this proximity that threatens with collapse “our age-old distinction between the Same and the Other.”²⁰⁴ While in Borges’s taxonomy the alphabetical series links each category to all the others, in Ontani’s works the artist’s body connects each character to all the others. But then, the question is: Is Ontani’s body like the operating table of the Surrealist maxim, the common ground on which disparate cultural characters meet? Or does the dissemination of Ontani’s body in fact disperse any possibility of defining a stable relation between container and contained, subject and object, self and other? If so, then the operating table or common ground has been removed, as in the taxonomy of the Chinese encyclopedia according to Foucault. They similarly infiltrate

the suspicion that there is a worse kind of disorder than that of the *incongruous*, the linking together of things that are inappropriate: . . . the disorder in which fragments of a large number of possible orders glitter separately in the dimension, without law or geometry, of the *heteroclite*.²⁰⁵

Etymologically, heteroclite means irregularly inflected or bent (ἑτερόκλιτος). It indicates that which is anomalous and deviates from the standard, as a work that does not follow

²⁰² Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), XV. The passage is taken from “El idioma analítico de John Wilkins,” in *Otras Inquisiciones 1937–1952* (1952).

²⁰³ *Ibid.*, xvi.

²⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, xv.

²⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, xvii.

grammatical rules, or as a person who is eccentric, like a dandy. The heteroclite, for Foucault, is a state in which things are “‘laid,’ ‘placed,’ ‘arranged’ in sites so very different from one another that it is impossible to find a place of residence for them, to define a *common locus* beneath them all.”²⁰⁶ It is not the incongruous as a temporary state, but as a permanent, unresolvable lack of order, as in the nomad condition. In an early text that served as a personal statement of artistic intent, Ontani states that in his work he is “absolutely present—: ange infidèle, androgynous, ephebe, hermaphrodite, hybrid, Sagittarius, heteroclite.”²⁰⁷ His poses expose the dimension of the heteroclite, a condition they share with some of the main works of postmodern literature, such as Calvino’s *Città invisibili* (*Invisible Cities*, 1972), as Remo Ceserani, after Linda Hutcheon and Brian McHale, notes in his study on postmodernism, *Raccontare il postmoderno* (1997).²⁰⁸

Nomadism: From Ontani to Transavanguardia

The presentation of “En route” in Rome in 1978 was met with surprisingly little interest for the peculiarities of the series in comparison to Ontani’s previous work. Bonito Oliva, soon to become the advocate of Transavanguardia, reviewed the show for the Roman edition of *Corriere della Sera*, one of the most popular daily newspapers in Italy. He notes that “Ontani continues his cultural vicissitudes, his nomadism and transmigration,

²⁰⁶ Ibid. xvii–xviii.

²⁰⁷ Luigi Ontani, [Untitled], *Flash Art* 44–45 (April 1974), 11.

²⁰⁸ Remo Ceserani, *Raccontare il postmoderno* (Turin, Bollati Boringhieri, 2009; reprint), 170–171.

this time on the way to India... The only movement is the pose, understood as the fission of behavior into style, into the stereotypes of citation.”²⁰⁹ Pose and citation are constants of Ontani’s work since the early 1970s. Bonito Oliva did not comment on any of the specific aspects of the series, such as the use of visual sources drawn from Indian popular culture, the merging of mediums, and the collaborative nature of the production, involving local photographers and hand-colorists. He offered generic observations that suited “En route” as much as Ontani’s general production throughout the 1970s. What is most striking in this review, however, is Bonito Oliva’s use of a term that was just starting to populate his writings: “nomadism.” The review came out in early June on a major daily newspaper (the show opened on May 26).²¹⁰ Earlier in March, Bonito Oliva published a collection of his writings, thirty-three essays, under the title *Passo dello strabismo* (*Step of Strabismus*) and in the introductory text used the term “nomadism” in order to characterize the attitude of the contemporary artist and critic towards reality and history. In his typically evocative, poetic prose, rich in metaphors and double entendres, he claimed that both artist and critic use their “left hand,” the hand of the demonic side and marginality, that “practices the improvised curves of disorientation, the systematic and compulsory tension of nomadism”—what he termed the “step of strabismus.” Art, he elaborated, “is the left-handed blow (*tiro mancino*) that shoots the arrow beyond the

²⁰⁹ Achille Bonito Oliva, “Luigi Ontani. Galleria L’Attico,” *Corriere della sera*, Roman edition, 1 June 1978, 12 (my translation).

²¹⁰ The date is printed on the back of the invitation postcard and also included in the chronology of exhibitions at L’Attico published in *L’Attico 1957–1987. 30 anni di pittura, scultura, musica, danza, performance, video* (Rome: Arnoldo Mondadori, De Luca, 1987), 206.

target, as there is no target, that bypasses the everyday and rides history (*scavalca il quotidiano e cavalca la storia*). . . . Strabismus is the stray process of the arrow.”²¹¹

Prior to the notion of “strabismus,” around 1970 Bonito Oliva theorized another interpretative concept for contemporary art involving process and performance: the “magic territory” or *territorio magico*, which implies the notion of constant movement. “The magic territory,” Bonito Oliva writes, “is a mobile zone,” and the artist “moves continuously from one fantastic gesture to another, always modifying his behavior, like a schizophrenic.”²¹² This continuous movement, key in art as in schizophrenia, is counterposed to the immobility of society. Already implied in the idea of the “magic territory” and first used in 1978, in the introduction to *Passo dello strabismo* and the exhibition review of “En route”—the term “nomadism” acquired a definite, important place in Bonito Oliva’s writings in 1979, with the launching manifesto of the Transavanguardia group in the magazine *Flash Art* in October. The incipit of the manifesto establishes a link between the work of Transavanguardia artists and nomadism: “The work becomes a map of nomadism, of progressive movement outside of any

²¹¹ Achille Bonito Oliva, *Passo dello strabismo: sulle arti* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1978), 9. The expression “cavalcare la storia” may be translated as riding history or having a fascination with history. [“L’artista e l’intellettuale effettuano il passo dello strabismo [. . .] [usano la] mano sinistra, della parte demonizzata, quella emarginata . . . che pratica le improvvise curvature del disorientamento, la tensione sistematica ed obbligatoria del nomadismo. / L’arte è il tiro mancino che scocca la freccia oltre il bersaglio, perché non esiste bersaglio, che scavalca il quotidiano e cavalca la storia. [. . .] Lo strabismo è il procedimento scostante della freccia.”]

²¹² Idem, “Le circostanze magiche,” *Collage*, no. 5 (December 1970), 4, 5. See also *Il territorio magico: Comportamenti alternativi dell’arte* (Florence: Centro Di, 1971).

preconceived directions that artists, like the seeing blind, undertake.”²¹³ Bonito Oliva then goes on to distinguish between the “apparent nomadism” of the Arte Povera artists and 1960s art in general, on the one hand, and the “diverse and diversifying nomadism” of the Transvanguardia artists, on the other. However, Bonito Oliva’s definition of the latter is a direct descendant of the notion of “magic territory” he had conceived in relation to the former: “the art of the 1970s finds in nomadic creativity its own *excellent movement*, the possibility of freely transiting through all territories, without preclusions, with open references in all directions.”²¹⁴ One may argue that the word “references” is what connotes the Transvanguardia version of nomadism in its recuperation of the past, for which Bonito Oliva calls upon Nietzsche, quoting from *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883–1885). Already in the writings of Celant, who also launched Arte Povera in the pages of *Flash Art* twelve years earlier, the term “nomadism” had an important place, though it had a political thrust absent in Bonito Oliva’s late-1970s texts (his counterposition of the mobility of the “magic territory” to the immobility of society held political resonance).²¹⁵ In parallel to the publication of the manifesto in *Flash Art*, Bonito

²¹³ The manifesto was published both in the Italian version and the English version of the magazine: Achille Bonito Oliva, “La trans-avanguardia italiana,” *Flash Art* (Italian edition), no. 92–93 (October–November 1979): 17–20 and “The Italian Trans-avantgarde,” *Flash Art International*, 92–93 (October–November 1979): 17–20. The Italian version reads as follows: “L’opera diventa una mappa del nomadismo, dello spostamento progressivo praticato fuori da ogni direzione precostituita da parte di artisti che sono dei ciechi-vedenti.” I have preferred to offer my own English translation. *Flash Art* started to publish separate language versions in 1979 and articles rarely match up in the two versions so this double publication was likely due to a strategic maneuver on the part of the shrewd Bonito Oliva.

²¹⁴ Bonito Oliva, “La trans-avanguardia italiana,” 19.

²¹⁵ See for instance, Germano Celant, *Arte Povera* (Milan: Mazzotta; New York: Praeger, 1969), translated into English in *Arte Povera Art Povera*, trans. Paul Blanchard (Milan: Electa, 1985), 123: “Today life, art or politics find their highest degree of freedom in anarchy and in continuous behavioral nomadism.” In an earlier text from 1968, Celant characterized Pascali’s work as “continuous creative nomadism” (*Arte Povera* [Bologna: De’ Foscherari, 1968]).

Oliva curated the first museum exhibition of the Transvanguardia artists: Sandro Chia, Francesco Clemente, Enzo Cucchi, Nicola De Maria, and Mimmo Paladino. In the catalogue, the word “nomadism” has again a prominent place. He states that “the fundamental position of art is nomadism.”²¹⁶ Entitled *Opere fatte ad arte*, the show opened in November in the small Sicilian town of Arcireale, a stunning coastal location at the foot of the Mount Etna, in the province of Catania. Considering the international reputation the group acquired in the following few months, it is striking that their first institutional group show was held in such a place—culturally de-centered and touristic. The venue hosting the exhibit was the late-Baroque Palazzo di Città, which hosts the city picture gallery or *pinacoteca comunale*, with its collections of artworks from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century.

An experimental poet by training with a keen interest in psychoanalysis, anthropology, and philosophy, Bonito Oliva, similarly to Barilli, was familiar with the writings by Deleuze, from *Différence et répétition* (*Difference and repetition*, 1968) to his work with Félix Guattari. In the literature on this period, the reception of Deleuze’s writings in Italy has yet to be adequately assessed. Italian translations of Deleuze’s books

²¹⁶ Achille Bonito Oliva, “Opere fatte a arte,” in *Opere fatte a arte: Sandro Chia, Francesco Clemente, Enzo Cucchi, Nicola De Maria, and Mimmo Paladino* (Florence: Centro Di, 1979), np. One year prior to the Arcireale show, in 1978, Bonito Oliva promoted an exhibit and publication that involved two of the soon-to-be-called Transvanguardia artists, Chia, and Cucchi. The initiative was backed by the gallerist Emilio Mazzoli in Modena, also a decentered city, north-west of Bologna. Mazzoli later became the main gallerist of Transavanguardia. The publication was conceived as some sort of collaborative artist book, with a text that seems to have been composed according to the aleatory cut-up technique popularized by William Burroughs. The title of the exhibit and booklet is *Tre o quattro artisti secchi*, perhaps translatable as “three or four ‘peremptory’ artists” (the adjective *secco* is ambiguous in this context, its most common meaning in relation to a person is “skinny,” though it can also mean “peremptory,” as in *un no secco*), and it goes along with the participatory role Bonito Oliva was promoting for himself as “artist critic/curator.”

appeared much earlier than English translations. *Différence et répétition* took two years to come out in Italian and *L'Anti-Oedipe: capitalisme et schizophrénie* (*Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, 1972) less than a year.²¹⁷ In *Différence et répétition* Deleuze tackles the notion of the nomadic, which he defines as “a nomad *nomos*, without property, enclosure or measure.” In a nomad *nomos*, continues Deleuze, “there is no longer a division of that which is distributed but rather a division among those who distribute *themselves* in an open space—a space which is unlimited, or at least without precise limits.”²¹⁸ Perhaps this concept of the nomadic inspired Bonito Oliva’s idea of “the magic territory” as an interpretative model for contemporary art. Certainly the rhizomatic, horizontal model of thought Deleuze developed with Guattari influenced Bonito Oliva’s conception of his book on historical Mannerism and contemporary art, *L’ideologia del traditore: Arte, maniera, manierismo* (1976), articulated in forty-two thematic sections, each devised as a triad of notions, such as “Treachery, laterality, citation,” “Parody, melancholy, self-deception,” “Artifice, virtuosity, narcissism,” and so on.²¹⁹

Although Bonito Oliva did not include Ontani in the Transavanguardia group, his work anticipated strategies they embraced and, in fact, Ontani was invited to participate in the first great international exhibition of Transavanguardia organized by Jean-

²¹⁷ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *L’anti-Edipo: capitalismo e schizofrenia*, trans. Alessandro Fontana (Turin: Einaudi, 1972).

²¹⁸ Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 36.

²¹⁹ See Achille Bonito Oliva, *L’ideologia del traditore: Arte, maniera, manierismo* (Milan: Electa, 1998). For this revised edition, the author wrote a preface in which he links Mannerism to Transvanguardia.

Christophe Ammann. Titled *Sieben Junge Künstler aus Italien (Seven Young Artists from Italy)*, the show opened at the Basel Kunsthalle in May of 1980 and then traveled to the Museum Folkwang in Essen, Germany and to the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam.²²⁰ “Ammann—recounted Ontani—decided to invite me as he considered me a bridge in relation to the others since I had already adopted citation and other elements from history, mythology, and allegory in my work.”²²¹ Ammann was involved with the 1978 Venice Biennale, in which Ontani exhibited the “En route” series. He was also on the curatorial team of Documenta 5, directed by Harald Szeemann in 1972. One of the main sections of this exhibition was “Individual Mythologies,” which became a slogan for the entire exhibition, signaling a turn in artistic strategies that, however, took a few years to register in the art world internationally and that has yet to be adequately acknowledged in art historical discourse as an early 1970s turn. The section included works and performances by Beuys and several Italians, both independent figures like Pisani and de Dominicis, and artists associated with Arte Povera, such as Boetti, Kounellis, Paolini, Penone. For instance, Kounellis presented a tableau vivant with a violinist and a ballerina, entitled *Da inventare sul posto (To Be Invented on Site)*. About the title “Individual Mythologies” art historian and curator Daniel Birnbaum wrote:

²²⁰ The show was accompanied by a cardboard box containing a small catalog with essays by Jean-Christophe Ammann, Achille Bonito Oliva and Germano Celant and also seven individual booklets, each about an artist and designed by him. Laura Cherubini, who at the time was working closely with Achille Bonito Oliva, in a chronology of the Transavanguardia movement contained in the most recent and thorough publication dedicated to it, pointed out that the decision to have a separate booklet for each artist revealed a significant aspect of the new trend: the “return to subjectivity” (Ida Gianelli, ed., *Transavanguardia* [Milan: Skira, 2002], 293).

²²¹ Federico De Melis, “Luigi Ontani” (interview), in *Alias*, n. 1, weekly supplement to *Il manifesto*, January 4, 2003, 5.

Originally labeled “Mysticism and Shamanism” in an apparent nod to Joseph Beuys, who was at Documenta in a makeshift office answering questions about art, Szeemann ultimately settled on the title “Individual Mythologies,” a phrase he coined with respect to French sculptor and alchemist Etienne Martin’s hermetic cosmos—which seemed to him to be built upon an intricate yet impenetrable system of signs, a kind of myth unknowable to anyone but the artist himself.²²²

Although Ontani was not invited to participate in the section “Individual Mythologies” at Documenta, his early work fell in that category.

At Ammann’s later show in Basel Ontani was present with three of the most heavily painted works in the Indian series: *Saint Luke d’après Guercino*, *David and Goliath*, and *Saint Sebastian d’après Henner*—all executed in collaboration with Krishnan Studio in Madras (the latter two were exhibited at The Museum of Modern Art in New York a few years later). The other six artists in the show were Clemente, Chia, Cucchi, De Maria, Paladino, and Ernesto Tatafiore. All six artists were also included, a few weeks after the opening of the show in Basel, in the emerging artists section of the 1980 Venice Biennale called “Aperto” curated by Bonito Oliva and Szeemann. The “Aperto” section constituted the institutionalization of Transavanguardia as part of a larger international trend that became known under the general label of Neo-Expressionism.

²²² Daniel Birnbaum, “When Attitudes Becomes Form: Daniel Birnbaum on Harald Szeemann,” *Artforum* 43, n. 10 (summer 2005), 58.

Conclusion

The tableau vivant was a privileged site for Italian artists engaging with theatricality and role-playing in the late 1960s and 1970s. Among these artists, Luigi Ontani was the one most dedicated to incorporating the tableau vivant in his practice throughout the 1970s. Common narratives of contemporary Italian art are still tied to the accounts provided by Germano Celant and Achille Bonito Oliva in promoting Arte Povera and Transavanguardia since the publication of their founding manifestoes, in 1967 and 1979 respectively. The phenomenon of the tableau-vivant revival has remained off the radar screen. It anticipated the resurgence of an interest in the tableau vivant as an artistic strategy and subject in the visual arts internationally since the 1980s. This resurgence has been identified as a distinguishing trait of postmodernism in the visual arts.

The tableau-vivant impersonation of characters and figures drawn from cultural history and contemporary popular culture has continued to constitute the starting point for the conception of many of Ontani's works even after 1979. However, after this date, Ontani has turned to three-dimensional object making. It was only in the decade between 1969 and 1979 that Ontani's primary artistic medium was photography, which is the main medium associated with the adoption of the tableau vivant in the visual arts. This was the case in Pictorialist photography in the second half of the nineteenth century. It has also been the case in contemporary art in the past thirty plus years, as in the works of Cindy Sherman, Yasumasa Morimura, and Yinka Shonibare, among others.

A quality that distinguishes Ontani's tableau-vivant practice from nineteenth-

century examples is parody. This is a characteristic common to the later practitioners of what has been named the “postmodernist revival of the tableau vivant.”²²³ For the body of work Ontani produced in the 1970s, he ought to be considered a pioneer of this revival. A distinctive trait of camp, parody is also associated with postmodernism, as it was defined by a number of thinkers in the early to mid-1980s. In his “Postille a *Il nome della rosa*” (“Postscript to *The Name of the Rose*,” 1983), Umberto Eco stated that “the postmodern reply to the modern consists of recognizing that the past, since it cannot really be destroyed, because its destruction leads to silence, must be revisited: but with irony, not innocently.”²²⁴

The revival of the tableau vivant in Italy emerged out of a unique set of economic, technological, social, political, cultural, and artistic circumstances. An analysis of these circumstances has been offered in this study in order to account for this phenomenon. In terms of material and visual culture, I have argued that in the aftermath of the economic miracle in the early 1960s, the proliferation of electronic and printed images played a major role in the development of citationist trends in the visual arts. Central to this development was the availability of two consumer products that technological advancements made available to the masses: domestic TV sets and low-cost, high-quality color reproductions of artworks. Particularly influential on artistic production was the publication of the Fratelli Fabbri artist monograph series “I Maestri del colore,” sold at

²²³ Ann Thomas, “Modernity and the Staged Photograph, 1900–1965,” in *Acting the Part: Photography as Theater*, ed. Lori Pauli (New York: Merrell, 2006), 130.

²²⁴ Umberto Eco, “Postscript to *The Name of the Rose*,” trans. William Weaver (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1984), 66–67.

newsstands starting in the spring of 1963.

In the wake of the failure of the 1968 revolution, the collective, utopian thrust of the 1960s gave way to internal terrorism. The disguising of identity and truth came to characterize the socio-political climate of Italy. Right- and left-wing extremists carried out clandestine actions and lives; members of the state forces manufactured cover-ups for neofascist bombings and other activities. This state of affairs intensified an interest in the theme of the mask among Italian artists and intellectuals. Besides Ontani, Arte Povera artists Michelangelo Pistoletto and Jannis Kounellis were among the artists who made the mask the subject of their works in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Among the intellectuals, Bonito Oliva was one of the first to take on the theme of the mask in his curatorial and critical work starting in 1970, followed by Renato Barilli and especially Gianni Vattimo, both of whom published texts that dealt with this theme in 1974.²²⁵

In the field of the visual arts, Giorgio de Chirico and Pier Paolo Pasolini were the two main forerunners of the tableau-vivant revival. De Chirico contributed a model for embracing the tableau vivant in a medium other than photography with his post-Metaphysical painting series of self-portraits in Renaissance and Baroque period costumes, dating from the 1940s and 1950s. Pasolini, on the other hand, offered a model for the mingling of high and low culture, kitsch and formalism, theatricality and

²²⁵ Achille Bonito Oliva, "Le circostanze magiche," *Collage*, n. 5 (December 1970): 3–5; and idem, *Persona* (Florence: CentroDi, 1971); Renato Barilli, "De Chirico e il recupero del museo," in *Tra presenza e assenza: due modelli culturali in conflitto* (Milan: Bompiani, 1974); Gianni Vattimo, *Il soggetto e la maschera: Nietzsche e il problema della liberazione* (Milan: Fabbri-Bompiani, 1974).

distancing, with his recreations in Technicolor of the two *Depositions* by Pontormo and Rosso Fiorentino in his short film *La ricotta* (1963). Both de Chirico and Pasolini were based in Rome when they produced these works, and in the late 1960s and 1970s Rome became the main center of the tableau vivant revival. It was only after moving to Rome in 1972 that Ontani's existing tableau-vivant practice took off and his tableau photos were first published and exhibited, in 1973 and 1974 respectively. As in de Chirico's and Pasolini's tableau works, in Ontani's the theatrical is presented as fictional. The staged pose in Ontani's tableau works is typically accompanied by the artist's detached facial expression, a dandy feature that returns unchanged in every work, with unique exceptions.

In the context of the Italian revival of the tableau vivant, Ontani's practice stands out for an engagement with camp and dandyism. A love for the theatrical, the unnatural, the highly aestheticized, the playful, and "the equivalence of all objects" characterize camp as the sensibility of the "modern dandy," as Susan Sontag put it in her landmark "Notes on 'Camp'" (1964).²²⁶ All these features of camp are common in Ontani's tableau works. Ontani's involvement with kitsch and play can be traced back to his first artistic activities. His earliest works, made in the second half of the 1960s, are recreations and reinventions of domestic items using cheap packaging materials and scagliola, or faux marble. After staging poses for the camera wearing and performing his objects, Ontani focused on the pose alone as the work. With his tableau-vivant poses he emphatically

²²⁶ Susan Sontag, "Notes on Camp," *Partisan Review* 31 (fall 1964); reprinted in *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1966), 289.

engaged with high and low culture, and fully embraced the notion of life as theater that distinguishes camp.

The beginnings of Ontani's tableau-vivant practice paralleled the founding in 1971 of FUORI!, the first Italian movement for the liberation of gays and lesbians. Having inherited the spirit of the hippie and youth protest movement of the late 1960s, FUORI! called for non-normative sexuality, play, and pleasure. Another aspect that sets Ontani's tableau work apart from the work of other Italian practitioners is a homoerotic subtext. Homoerotic desire and pleasure are inscribed in both the choice of figures and characters impersonated and in the frequent display of the artist's beautiful, androgynous body. Pleasure in Ontani's work is both homoerotic and aesthetic. Together with kitsch, homoerotic and aesthetic pleasure is embedded in the medium of color photography, which Ontani pioneered in the early 1970s.

In the second half of the 1970s, Ontani deepened his engagement with kitsch, theatricality, and role-playing through two series of works, both started in 1974. The first series consists of tableaux vivants staged in front of an audience, the second of hand-painted tableau photos. The latter was executed in India, in collaboration with local practitioners, over the course of several stays. If the tableau photo conceptually bridges painting, performance, and photography, the hand-painted tableau photo literally brings these mediums together. In these series Ontani reversed the relative proportions of his impersonations. In the first half of the 1970s, approximately two thirds of all his impersonations were figures from past artworks and one third were figures and character

from cultural history and contemporary popular culture. In the series from the second half of the 1970s, about two thirds were figures and characters from cultural history and contemporary popular culture. For the Indian poses, Ontani mostly impersonated subjects drawn from Indian visual culture, from poster art to Bazaar photography to Indian popular cinema. The riches of Indian visual culture captivated Ontani's imagination and left an indelible mark on his dandy persona. After 1979 Ontani stopped working on his Indian series of hand-painted tableau photos (he resumed in the 1990s), but began the habit, still in place to date, of wearing outfits made with color-saturated Indian silks and fabrics.

What's Next? A Possible Future Project

My study may be expanded into a research project that privileges the thematic approach to the tableau vivant over the monographic focus on Luigi Ontani. This project would investigate the adoption of the tableau vivant in Italian visual culture between 1963 and 1983. The longer time span would facilitate a more thorough examination of the phenomenon of the tableau-vivant revival. For example, it would allow for a discussion of tableau works by artists such as Francesco Clemente from the Transavanguardia period. This discussion would strengthen the argument regarding the existence of elements of continuity between Arte Povera and Transavanguardia. This research project would consider, besides the traditional fine arts, works of cinema, TV culture, and popular religious theater. It would have the potential of attracting the attention of

scholars from multiple disciplines and be relevant not only to art historians, but also to people working in Italian studies, visual anthropology, and cultural studies.

As part of this project, archival research into both national and regional television programs broadcasted in the 1960s and 1970s in Italy would be necessary. This research would contribute to a deeper understanding of the state of image culture in Italy at the time. The second half of the 1970s was a key period for TV culture in Italy, when crucial transformations were taking place. A series of laws ended the State monopoly of TV networks. As a result, the first private stations began broadcasting nationally, and independent regional networks proliferated. Color TV was finally introduced in Italy in the late 1970s, much later than in other industrially advanced countries. This happened after the first programs in color were broadcast in the early 1970s, but the introduction of color TV was blocked in Parliament in 1972, as a choice against consumer culture. One of the first programs in color to be broadcast on the Italian TV was Luigi Comencini's *Pinocchio* (1972), based on Claudio Collodi's classic children tale *Le avventure di Pinocchio: Storie di un burattino* (*The Adventures of Pinocchio*, 1883). This serial inspired Ontani's tableau photo of Pinocchio (see figs. 29–30). The literature on the history of Italian television would serve as a guide, but no readings could compensate for watching these programs firsthand. I would be looking for examples of tableaux vivants in programs on religious folklore, advertisement, and film series made for the TV, as Comencini's *Pinocchio*. Archives to be consulted would include, in Rome, the Archivio Centrale dello Stato, the Archivio Cinematografico Luce, and the Archivi RAI, as well as

the Cineteche comunali of Bologna and other cities.

The time frame 1963 to 1983 covers two decades of intense socio-political and economic crisis. Both years, 1963 and 1983, were turning points in the history of Italy. 1963 marked the climax of the economic boom as well as its abrupt halt, following which the economy started spiraling downwards. 1963 also witnessed the beginning of the youth protest movement, with the first university occupations in Milan, and an escalation in the number of workers' strikes, with almost two and a half million workers protesting over the course of that year. This was a number that in the 1960s was surpassed only in 1968 and 1969. 1963 was also the year that Pasolini's short *La ricotta* and the Fratelli Fabbri series "I Maestri del colore" came out. 1983, on the other hand, signaled the beginning of an era of political stability under the newly elected President of the Council of Ministers Bettino Craxi. Internal terrorism had been declining in the early 1980s and 1984 signaled the onset of the so-called second economic miracle. As Paul Ginsborg put it, after two decades of acute social crisis, by the mid-1980s Italy was pacified, at least on capitalist terms.²²⁷ This research project would frame the phenomenon of the tableau-vivant revival against the backdrop of the restlessness, instability, and changes that characterized Italian society and culture in the two decades between 1963 and 1983.

²²⁷ Paul Ginsborg, *A History of Contemporary Italy: Society and Politics, 1943–1988* (New York: MacMillan, 2003), 407.

Appendix 1

Luigi Ontani: Interviews, Writings, and Artist Books

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Appendix 2

Personal Interviews

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Achille Bonito Oliva, 21 June 2010, Rome. Audio recording.

Cesare Bastelli, 15 June 2010, Castello d'Argile (Bologna). Audio recording.

Elisabetta Gulli Grigioni, 14 June 2010, Ravenna. Audio recording.

Jyotindra Jain, 6 April 2010, Delhi. Unrecorded.

Luigi Ontani, 17 May 2007, New York. Audio recording.

Luigi Ontani, 15 December 2007, Rome. Audio recording.

Luigi Ontani, 23 December 2007, Riola. Audio recording.

Luigi Ontani, 30 March 2008, New York. Audio recording.

Luigi Ontani, 5 January 2009, Riola. Audio recording.

Luigi Ontani, 8 May 2009, Rome. Audio recording.

Luigi Ontani, 19 May 2009, Rome. Audio recording.

Luigi Ontani, 24 June 2009, New York. Unrecorded.

Luigi Ontani, 23 October 2009, phone. Unrecorded.

Luigi Ontani, 26 December 2009, Riola. Audio recording.

Luigi Ontani, 12 June 2010, Riola. Audio recording.

Luigi Ontani, 20 June 2010, Rome. Audio recording.

Luigi Ontani, 23 June 2010, Rome. Audio recording.

Luigi Ontani, 20 September 2010, phone. Unrecorded.

Luigi Ontani, 27 September 2010, phone. Unrecorded.

Luigi Ontani, 6 July 2011, phone. Unrecorded.

Luigi Ontani, 7 July 2011, phone. Unrecorded.

Luigi Ontani, 25 October 2011, phone. Unrecorded.

Tullia Ontani, 6 March 2011, phone. Unrecorded.

Ida Panicelli, 18 June 2010, Rome. Audio recording.

Anna Papparatti, 19 December 2008, Rome. Audio recording.

Anna Papparatti, 20 December 2008. Rome. Audio Recording.

Inder Prakash, 8 April 2010, Delhi. Unrecorded.

Rajendra Prasad, 29 March 2010, Delhi. Unrecorded.

Pushpamala N., 21 March 2010, Delhi. Audio recording.

Salvo, 10 June 2010, Turin. Audio recording.

Fabio Sargentini, 9 December 2008, Rome. Audio recording.

Fabio Sargentini, 19 December 2008, Rome. Audio recording.

Fabio Sargentini, 22 June 2010, Rome. Audio recording.

Annemarie Sauzeau, 13 December 2007, Rome. Unrecorded.

Lanfranco Secco Suardo, 11 June 2010, Lurano (Bergamo). Audio recording.

Kavita Singh, 25 March 2010, Delhi. Audio recording.

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