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The Italian Transavantgarde: a Rereading

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A:... You want to use certain ideas, without the need to accept them.

B: Yes.

A: Are you an anarchist?

B: I don't know. I haven't thought about it.

A: But you wrote a book on Anarchy.

B: So?

A: You don't want to be taken seriously?

B: What does that have to do with it?

A: I don't understand.

(Paul K. Feyerabend, 1979¹)

Introduction

In the late 1970s a number of Italian artists such as Sandro Chia, Francesco Clemente, Enzo Cucchi, Nicola De Maria and Mimmo Paladino began to explore drawing in poetic, simple and lyrical ways that differed radically from Conceptual Art, Arte Povera, performance and other post-minimalist practices of the 1960s and early 1970s.

Known in Italy as the Transavanguardia, or the Trans-avantgarde, their art became a foremost example of postmodernist culture in the early 1980s, and spearheaded what would become the major focus of the international art world at the time, both in Europe and the United States. Variouslly defined as Transavanguardia in Italy, New Painting in England, Neo-Expressionism in the USA and Neue Wilden in Germany, the art of this period was generally heralded as a welcome break from what many felt was the excessively de-materialized and overly ideological art of the early-to-mid Seventies.

The Transavanguardia, and Neo-Expressionism in general, were by no means the only artistic movement happening in the late 1970s and early 1980s. However, it was the primary focus of the art world during a time when other practices such as deconstructive postmodernist photography, early video installations (some times based on feminist theory), as well as early object-based sculpture, "simulation" art and exhibitions exploring difference and multiculturalism were not as prominent as they would later become. By the mid-1980s, other practices began to capture the attention of the art world, and the artists of the Transavanguardia went on to pursue their careers individually. This exhibition at the Castello di Rivoli marks one of the first attempts to reassess the art of the Transavanguardia as a whole, bringing together major works from 1979 to 1985.

Rather than focus on its rupture with earlier artistic practices, I would like to explore those aspects of the Transavanguardia that actually developed out of ideas already present in 1960s art and philosophy. I would further like to argue that the Transavanguardia might be looked at, not in terms

of postmodernism, but as a continuation of a radical trend of Modernism itself - that aspect of Modernism that resists intellectual analysis, that explores skepticism and locates itself in the realm of the fool, the idiot, the brute, the radical other.

The Art

Though they began with drawing, which they saw as the most direct expression of subjectivity and individualism, and the form of expression furthest from the mechanical, these artists soon broadened their scope beyond drawing to address both painting and the relationship of painting to sculpture. Though these "new painters" worked individually rather than as a group, a common theme was their re-engagement with the art of early Modernism from Vincent van Gogh to Henri Matisse, from Egon Schiele to Paul Klee, from Giorgio de Chirico and Mario Giacometti to Marc Chagall, often addressing figuration and the representation of the human body. They avoided photography, installation art, assemblages of found objects and text-based art, and embraced hand-crafted, symbolic language and emblems. While rejecting open-ended process art, they expressed themselves in autonomous and 'finished' artworks.

In an article published in the fall of 1979, art critic and curator Achille Bonito Oliva defined the work of these artists as an "Italian Trans-avantgarde". For Bonito Oliva, they were the most interesting artists to have emerged during the 1970s because they moved away from the excessive rigor and moralism that he saw present in the art of the 1960s and early 1970s. Bonito Oliva remarked on a return to a notion of art's autonomy as well as to pleasure and opulence. In this article, he explicitly contrasted this "Trans-avantgarde" with the Arte Povera of the late 1960s, the other Italian art movement to have gained international recognition in the post war period. He also specifically rejected a notion of linear history by suggesting a backwards gaze as a positive value, even as a scandalous value: "The avantgarde, by definition, has always operated within the cultural framework of an idealistic tradition which tends to conceive the development of art as a continuous line, progressive and straight... Now the scandal, paradoxically, consists in the absence of newness, in the ability of art to adopt a biological breath made of acceleration and slowing down."² Furthermore, in contrast with the idealization of collective practice in the 1960s and early 1970s, he suggested the value of singularity and individual subjectivity ("The value of individuality, of making something alone, opposes a social and cultural system dominated by totalitarian and overpowering systems"). This art was "nomadic" as it meandered through history ("The work of art becomes a map of nomadism, of movement beyond any predefined direction"); it was overtly sexual ("Painting is an affirmative movement, a gesture no longer of defense but of fluid and active penetration during daylight") and it expressed a fluid subjectivity of fragments, differences, unbalance, catastrophes and constant transitions ("To move freely within all territories... to cross through the experimental notion of the avantgarde... an opening onto the intentional break of logocentricism in Western culture... a movement in all directions, including towards the past, the breakdown of the myth of a unitary self")³.

By doubting modernity and the avant-garde, and by adopting and layering different styles of nineteenth and twentieth century art from early Expressionism to lyrical abstraction, these artists created artworks that expressed an age of crisis and doubt, an age during which all certainties and utopias belonging to the Western cultural heritage - in politics, society, philosophy, science, film, art, music and literature - were being scrutinized and questioned. At the same time, however, they expanded their techniques to include oil painting and sculpture, murals, frescoes, mosaics, prints, artists' books and many other traditional techniques that expressed exactly that sense of Western cultural heritage that was subject to radical questioning throughout the 1960s and early 1970s. The paradox engendered by such a contradictory impulse is revealing of the complexity of the period.

Chia, Clemente, Cucchi, De Maria and Paladino came from various parts of Italy-Naples, Ancona, Florence and Foglianise near Benevento - and were living in Rome, Milan, Turin and Naples. The first group exhibition to signal the emergence of a new, and general, shift in artistic practice was *Three or Four Artists-Straight*, held at the Emilio Mazzoli Gallery in Modena in 1978. It included, among others, works by Chia and Cucchi. It was followed in 1979 by the group show *Arte Cifra (Art Cipher)* at Paul Maenz gallery in Cologne (with works by Chia, Clemente De Maria and Paladino, as well as Nino Longobardi and Ernesto Tatafiore), and by public exhibitions curated that same year by Bonito Oliva, *Opere fatte ad arte (Works Made to Art)* in Acireale, Sicily, with works by Chia, Clemente, Cucchi, De Maria and Paladino, and *Le stanze (Rooms)* in Genazzano in nearby Rome.

By 1979 these artists were already having solo shows in prominent Italian art galleries of the time⁴. Internationally, by 1979 gallerist Paul Maenz in Cologne was also already working with Chia (1978, 1979); Clemente (1978); De Maria (1978); and Paladino (1978). As early as 1978, Clemente exhibited at the Centre d'Art Contemporain in Geneva, and Paladino also exhibited there in 1979. But it was the year 1980 that truly marked the internationalization of the Transavanguardia, with a series of major international exhibitions throughout Europe and the USA; in public institutions such as the Bonner Kunstverein, the Mannheimer Kunstverein, the Museum Folkwang, Essen, the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, the Louisiana Museum in Humlebaek and the Venice Biennial. At this time, curators such as Jean-Christophe Ammann, previously associated with Arte Povera exhibitions, began to exhibit the artists of the Transavanguardia. In *Aperto 80* in Venice, co-curated by Bonito Oliva and Harld Szeemann, Chia, Clemente, Cucchi, De Maria and Paladino exhibited alongside Jonathan Borofsky, Susan Rothenberg, Julian Schnabel and other artists who signaled a renewed attention to expressionist drawing, painting and wall painting. After the summer of that year, a group show by Chia, Clemente and Cucchi (the three 'Cs' as the New York art audience began to call them at the time) was held at the Sperone Westwater Fischer Gallery in New York, and all five artists were at the Daniel Templon gallery in Paris at the end of the year. Cucchi held a solo show at the Paul Maenz gallery in 1980. In 1981 Cucchi, Chia and Clemente all held solo shows in New York (Sperone Westwater Fischer) and Zurich (Bruno Bischofberger) which were followed by major museum exhibitions throughout Europe. Paladino (1980), De Maria (1981) and Clemente (1979) all exhibited at Lisson Gallery in London, and Paladino also showed at Bruno Bischofberger in 1981, and at Marian Goodman's gallery in New York (1980, 1982). In 1981, *A New Spirit in Painting* at the Royal Academy in London, as well as *Westkunst* in Cologne were held. The year with the highest concentration of exhibitions focusing on Transavanguardia and New Painting was 1982. Curators Norman Rosenthal and Christos Joachimides organized the exhibition *Zeitgeist* in Berlin that same year, including works by Chia, Clemente, Cucchi and Paladino. Also in that year Rudi Fuchs exhibited Chia, Clemente, Cucchi, De Maria and Paladino at *Documenta 7* in Kassel, alongside other Neo-Expressionists such as Miquel Barceló, Jean-Michel Basquiat, Anselm Kiefer and David Salle, and a broad range of artists practicing various other forms of art, from Jeff Wall and Sherrie Levine to Cindy Sherman. De Maria exhibited with Annemarie Verna in Zurich and in Basel and held solo shows at the Kunsthalle, Basel, the Haus Lange in Krefeld in 1983 and, in 1985, at the Stedelijk van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven, at the Kunsthau in Zurich and the Castello di Rivoli, Turin. Paladino began to exhibit with Sperone Westwater in New York in 1984. Solo shows by Cucchi over the following years included exhibitions at The Salomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, and the Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, both in 1986. Overall, during this period, critics, collectors and museum curators embraced the Transavanguardia as part of the new postmodern movement in painting.

The Artists

Mimmo Paladino's art joins the figurative with the abstract, and painting with sculpture, through references to language and to myth, almost developing an art of pictograms, an art of origins. But there are no clear mythic origins actually evoked, it is more the sense of a possible myth that emerges. Paladino invents ciphers and symbols suggestive both of modernism and past civilizations, including the Byzantine, which express an allegorical impulse and an attraction towards alchemical imagery and spirituality. He calls his smaller works 'icons', suggestive of spiritual or monastic exercises. His artworks recall the immediacy, the pleasure and the flatness of Matisse's painting, as well as the essentialized representations of figures and masks in Picasso and the spiritual embodiment of Giacometti. A child's gaze, apparently naïve, pervades much of Paladino's art, as he takes us on a nomadic journey through various traditions and cultures. But Paladino's art is never exoticist or escapist in its "primitivism": he explores the cultures of the ancient peoples who lived in the Mediterranean area where he, too, resides. He looks at the agrarian civilization they created with a contemporary outlook, with the gaze of a modern artist searching for the origin of imagery. Human forms, geometric shapes and images of animals (horses and dogs) recur in his universe, as well as hybrid figures that are both human and animal, animal and plant-like. Esoteric and hidden elements join references to popular culture in his drawings, paintings, sculptures, installations and environments. He has often associated painting with sculpture by combining elements of both in works that are at once bounded by the format of a canvas or a frame, and unbounded by growth beyond those limits, as in *In Naples after January*, 1979, and *Silent Red*, 1980. Alongside oil paints and bronze, he can use poor materials such as salt and wood that evoke the art of Joseph Beuys and artist Jannis Kounellis, whose exhibitions he may have seen in Naples as a young artist. Among the Transavanguardia artists, Paladino is the least expressionistic, and the most interested in the continuity, rather than a break, with earlier conceptual and minimalist art. His evocations of signs and symbols never suggest a narrative but remain silent and undecipherable.

If Paladino is an artist of ciphers, Nicola De Maria is an artist who creates environments of a musical and quivering sensibility. He too has created autonomous paintings - often painted in a multitude of bright hues and in the round, that is, on all sides including back and front as if the small canvases encouraged manipulation and embrace. And he too, like many of the Transavanguardia artists, has created works that move outside of the limits of each individual canvas. His large wall paintings are often not frontal, but rather occupy all the walls and the ceiling of rooms (and it is interesting to recall how in Italian the word for 'room' - stanza - also indicates a portion of poetic verse). They create alternate universes and parallel geometries. Amongst all the Transavanguardia artists, De Maria is the most architecturally oriented, and the least oriented towards the representation of the human body. Our bodies are welcome in his world, though, as we enter into his 'rooms', and 'let go', as if in a dance. He suggests an architecture of emotions, rather than of functions, thus developing the notion of the organic growth of spaces present in the work an Arte Povera artist such as Mario Merz, whom De Maria knew well. Like music flowing through a room, De Maria's colors and images modify the atmosphere of a place, as if they could 'wash' the room in a special light. His gentle line - sometimes used to create repeated and simple decorative patterns, and sometimes to trace the silhouette of plants, small houses and stars-suggests Cy Twombly as much as the drawings of small children, infused with a sense of wonder and a love of landscape that recalls Klee's delicate draftsmanship and Joan Miró's biological vision and hidden alphabets. But in De Maria's universe, Klee's world is expanded out of the limits of the artwork as it 'colors' the world around us. One feels the artist's gaze, as it turns round and round in a space, falling onto one corner after another, one object after another, one wall after another, transforming them as it goes along, like a child filling all the pages of a coloring book. De Maria's gaze is a

spiritual and deeply religious one, an attempt to bridge the gap between reality and heaven. In rooms painted red, blue and yellow, he often hangs little canvases, suggesting the paradox of an artwork as a non-autonomous space in the real world in which aesthetic experience may occur. In line with the works of artists in the Sixties, De Maria conceives an artwork as an alternate and autonomous universe, cut out from the real world and to be experienced in detached contemplation. The mystery of transubstantiation is evoked in this paradox which cannot be apprehended through rational means only. Similarly, he scribbles words onto many of his works, words that become images, words that are embodied. In *Journey of the Kingdom of Flowers Within the Painter*, 1982, a wall painting exhibited in Kassel for *Documenta 7*, a landscape reminiscent of Kandinsky in red, blue and green is modulated by various old suitcases hung on the wall in various positions and painted in the same colors as the wall. They "become" a part of the whole design, and are incorporated inside De Maria's unique and delicate universe.

Francesco Clemente paints a multiplied self, a shifting self, a suspended self, often in dreamlike states. The subjectivity he suggests is obsessively present, yet weak and unauthoritative. In some ways, it recalls Egon Schiele's elongated and sinuous figures. It has many orifices and gaps, it enters into and slips out of bodies, it goes beyond distinctions of gender. A Chinese ink, pastel, and gouache on paper drawing of 1979, *Self-Portrait, The First*, shows the artist frontally, with an owl and other birds all around his head and shoulders. In this work there are many eyes joined together in a hybrid, dreamy self, a sexually morphing and breathing persona, somewhere between nature and culture. Clemente paints an up-rooted self, a wanderer. After leaving Naples for Rome, he began in the late Seventies to spend time in Madras in India, and his works became influenced by oriental suggestions. He moved to New York in 1981 and also began to travel to Mexico. He has made drawings, watercolors, oil paintings, frescoes, mosaics and numerous artist's books. He has also explored, though to a lesser extent, sculpture. Fragmentation and wandering are represented in the work, but they also generate techniques. For instance, Clemente joins different senses of scale in one work. Similarly, background and foreground are merged into a single space that is not, however, flat. The imagery is juxtaposed and evoked in ways similar to imagistic poetry, as in Ezra Pound's verses, a poet Clemente particularly liked. In *Two Lovers*, 1982, the head (the mind, rationality) is no longer the center of subjectivity, nor is the heart; we are rather determined by our desire, and our pleasure. In this picture, three spheres the size of bowling balls mark the breast and the genitals of one of the lovers, whose bodies are intertwined. "The luxury I desire takes intelligence away", Clemente confided in an interview in 1978⁵.

Sandro Chia's universe is a more violent, eventful, and truly exuberant one. In *Scandalous Pace*, 1981, a male figure attempts to stab a woman whose face is represented by a wicker mask. Her arm is raised and she holds him back. He is faceless. The self is a scandal in this painting, and figuration is treacherous. Chia's imagery is often transgressive: even when there is the absence of action, as in the many smokers portrayed by the artist, there is hidden action - sometimes even depicted as 'farting', as in *Smoker with Yellow Glove*, 1980. Chia's subjects are anti-heroes, the idiots of a bucolic primitivism. They suggest metaphysical stupor and suspension. They jump or float in a universe of Suprematist memory or of Chagallian innocence. They are clumsy and exist in a cloudy, treacherous, sometimes watery and moving atmosphere, rather than through intellectual juxtaposition. These figures are always doing something - kicking, stabbing, dreaming, fighting. There is much brushwork Chia's large and dense paintings that represent bizarre events in mysterious environments which connect back to early Expressionism and Italian Metafisica. Some times his anti-heroes have double or triple eyes, as in *Courageous Boy with Flag*, 1982, and it is impossible to know if they are moving their eyes nervously, or if we are unable to decipher their true position. The sense of monumentality in his art contrasts with the subject-matter, often anything

but monumental in an intentional contradiction - suggesting painting's proximity to, and also absolute distance from, life.

Enzo Cucchi is one of the most straightforward and instinctive painters - he paints the pictures that come to his mind and that move him, no matter how absurd and nonsensical they may seem to others. He invents his own iconography, at once simple and visionary, a universe where people are dwarfed in the landscape or, conversely, where they become overbearing giants in their surroundings. He shuns good taste, using acid colors and 'bad' painting very deftly. Aware of being amongst the few to continue the long tradition of painting in a technologically savvy world, he looks back through the Expressionists to van Gogh and from there to Eugène Delacroix, El Greco, Masaccio and Giotto. Like other artists of the Transavanguardia, he combines painting with sculptural elements, and often uses sheets of iron to create his paintings. He has made many large drawings on paper, and many artist's books. In this latter field he has been enormously prolific, creating books of all formats and shapes, with a myriad of different types of paper and graphic design. His imagery recalls the rocky landscapes, dramatic ravines and hilly seaside of the Marche region where he lives, sharing his time between there and Rome. In *Heroic Voyage*, 1980, a yellow person is depicted with jagged zig-zags on his legs, one hand is red, the other bleeding, Christ-like. He stands before a hilly landscape where a burning animal can be seen in the distance. Here and elsewhere, Cucchi often suggests physical or mental pain, the pain of existence, the pain of the body. These images of suffering figures suggest a fascination with martyrdom and saints. Drops, like drops of blood in a crucifixion, are enlarged in Cucchi's world, and become microcosms incorporating an infinity of figures of people or animals. Sometimes they are multiplied, and turn into many haunting skulls. His quick and forceful brushwork, by which he paints figures boldly and with simple contours, recalls the immediacy and roughness of graffiti art, while the houses and hills, the ships and pianos that he depicts shudder in his paintings, as if warped and twisted by gusts of wind. They are distorted, hovering in a Mannerist and fractured world.

The Context

Sharing parallel concerns, other artists in the USA (Julian Schnabel, David Salle, Susan Rothenberg, Jonathan Borofsky, Eric Fischl, and Jean-Michel Basquiat) and in Germany (Anselm Kiefer, A.R. Penck, Jörg Immendorf, Markus Lüpertz, Helmut Middendorf, Georg Jiri Dokoupil), as well as in the Netherlands (René Daniëls), Austria (Siegfried Anzinger), Spain (Miquel Barceló, José María Sicilia) and Denmark (Per Kirkeby) were practicing during the same period or shortly thereafter, while collectors and curators were looking also at the work of older artists such as Sigmar Polke, Martin Kippenberger, Gerhard Richter and Georg Baselitz whose art seemed to enter into significant dialogue with these younger artists.

A sense of liberation from a period of austerity and excessive rigor characterized the work of all these artists. However, this was not only characteristic of artistic practice at the time: Italian society - and the Western world at large - had undergone great changes during the postwar period, especially during the 1950s and 1960s. By the late 1970s, when the Transavanguardia artists were creating their first major works, these changes had ushered in new paradigms in all fields - including literature, philosophy, psychoanalysis, and science. These theories and ideas would then become dominant during the 1980s, in the heyday of the Transavanguardia and post modernism.

What was the context out of which these new painters emerged? What did they experience as youngsters, and what was the background to their personal, shifting, anti-rationalistic, poetic and often sexual drawings, somewhat reminiscent of Art Brut and Primitivism, while at the same time proud of their regionalist, local and 'grass-roots' nature?

The 1950s in Italy - when most of these artists were infants or small children were characterized by

the so-called "miracolo italiano" (Italian miracle) - a rapid growth in the economy due to cheap energy accompanied by a huge wave of migrations from the agricultural south to the newly industrialized north. Urbanization, with the development of a broad service economy, occurred later here than in other parts of Europe. It happened quickly though, and both urban and rural life changed radically after centuries of a more or less stable economic and social model based on a clear distinction between the two. The "miracolo italiano" went through some rough times in the 1960s, but overall development and economic growth continued. With the spread of sprawling suburbs, and little or no urban planning, the separation between city and countryside was irremediably lost. Smaller towns were joined together, and cities in the north, as well as some cities of the center and south such as Rome and Naples grew disproportionately - eroding the agrarian civilization of the south and the traditional rural landscape. Such uncontrolled development also brought ecological crises and hydro-geographic risks. Modernization and the notion of progress were thus embedded with feelings of loss and disillusion as well.

The end of the 1960s, when Chia, Clemente, Cucchi, De Maria and Paladino were all teenagers, was marked by political and social upheaval, as the "miracolo" came to a close. Beginning as a students' movement as early as 1967, and parallel to similar movements elsewhere in Europe and the USA, the 1968 upheavals were characterized by revolutionary politics, a generational break, non-violent and antiauthoritarian impulses that questioned both conservative bourgeois society and traditional Marxism. By late 1968, the students had joined with workers' movements. A series of strikes to increase salaries and workers' rights occurred during the so called "autunno caldo" (hot autumn) of 1969. While the '68 movement was egalitarian, libertarian, anti-institutional, and saw the birth of early feminist and ecologist theories, things changed in the 1970s: politics became radicalized between extreme right and extreme left, and violence and tension became common in Italy and Germany. If there is one event that summarized the new political atmosphere of the 1970s, it is the terrorist attack in Piazza Fontana, Milan, when seventeen people died and eighty-eight were wounded when a bomb exploded in a bank on 12 December 1969. The *Brigate Rosse* (Red Brigades) grew throughout the decade, culminating in the abduction and assassination of Christian Democratic politician Aldo Moro in 1978. The 1970s were thus a tormented decade, characterized by economic crises and political instability, by terrorism and violence. While during the "miracolo italiano," labor, raw materials and energy were cheap, and market conditions favorable, during the 1970s this situation was reversed. The 1970s were an austere decade, with international economies in crisis. Following the Arab-Israeli conflict came the oil crisis of 1973 that caused the price of oil to increase fourfold in a year, thus dealing a severe blow to the car industry in Italy. Successive governments in Italy lasted only a few months each; early elections for Parliament were held in 1972, 1976 and 1979. The lira was unstable, and public debt also increased. The parties of the political Left gained steadily in elections until 1976, yet began to decline towards 1979. While the Left was not in power politically, it exercised a certain hegemony in culture, and specifically in the art world. But these tendencies towards change were regularly counterbalanced. The country became ever more divided and a sense of being in a stalemate slowly overwhelmed everyone and everything.

During the 1970s and 1980s, the Italian economy went from being industrial to becoming post-industrial, that is, from being primarily centered on the production and distribution of goods to dealing with finance in a major way. Within this situation, innovations occurred that signaled a new, postmodern society, a world where flexibility and provisionality became positive values, and local, grass-roots impulses re-emerged. In 1974 the "Post-it" was invented. This simple invention of small colored adhesive notes would become highly popular in the Eighties, and well represent the emerging society of the time: post-its are provisional and can be reordered easily. They indicate a

way of thinking that is non-hierarchical and non-linear, they are the explosion of all ideas and the simultaneity of all ideas. While official political parties (majority/opposition) were at a stale-mate, autonomous impulses were on the rise. The small Radical party, for example, promoted the use of the referendum as a tool for social change, and in 1974 divorce was introduced. Feminism was on the rise, and with it the sense that the private sphere of individuals was important and able to cut transversally across political agendas, effectively questioning earlier binary distinctions between Right and Left, as well as distinctions by gender. Also, color television was introduced in 1977, and this too may have played a role in encouraging a collective change of aesthetic mood by the late 1970s. Although the oil shortage caused severe temporary regulations to be introduced, such as gas rationing; other pleasures, such as bicycle riding in the city, were introduced. The sense of belonging to a particular social class decreased rapidly, in favor of more provisional aggregations and communities. Smaller, local political parties were founded and achieved prominence. This general sense of 'locality' was also expressed through the emergence of local FM radio stations through out the late 1970s. Overall, institutions and ideologies weakened. And if post modernism was anything, it was the questioning of binary and institutional thought. Although technological innovation was slow, the roots of the new economy - which would characterize the 1980s - were set in the 1970s. This new economy was to be based on smaller and de-centralized companies, the diversification of products and flexible labor relations. Clothing, ceramics, leather and furniture industries, as well as other craft-based activities, became competitive internationally. By 1980, Italy was the third largest exporter of cloth in the world. This new importance given to smaller, local activities and movements was also on the rise internationally, with movements such as Solidarnosc developing around 1984 in Poland. The early 1980s were years of economic wealth and financial speculation on a global stock market, and this was reflected also in the art market with the tremendous rise of prices. Only with the stock market crisis of 1987 was this trend interrupted. The innovative aspects of the late 1970s and early 1980s were then outweighed by a sense of disorientation and disillusion. And with the new difficulties created by the collapse of the Soviet 'Empire' that arrived shortly thereafter, new impulses and problems characterized the late 1980s and 1990s, and these profoundly changed the cultural climate once again, radicalizing positions for and against globalization.

As a form of critique of the international language of the Modernist avant-gardes, which were felt to be irremediably implicated in the standardization and loss of local cultural identities through modernization, regionalist thought developed in various fields. The Transavanguardia painters, especially Cucchi, Chia and Paladino, were regionalists who expressed strong ties to their origins in their works. They did not however reject modern art, and their painting is not a shift outside of the contemporary into the anachronistic. Similarly, in the late 1970s and 1980s in architecture, Critical Regionalism explored how to synthesize the physical and cultural characteristics of a region with current technology; how to create an architecture that is rooted in regional characteristics while still utilizing the technological aspects of a modern building. It evolved as a reaction to the cultural disorientation that stems from a highly mobile and heterogeneous population in large metropolises. Kenneth Frampton termed this an "arrière-garde position, that is to say, one which distances itself equally from the Enlightenment myth of progress and from a reactionary, unrealistic impulse to return to the architectonic forms of the pre-industrial past."⁶

Other dominant ideas in the early 1980s were also rooted earlier. The antihumanism and collectivism of the 1960s was questioned by the artists of the Transavanguardia who forcefully posed the issue of subjectivity again, and thus represented a return to the private sphere after the utopias of collectivism. However, this return to subjectivity, to individual expression and private ciphers in the art of the Transavanguardia can paradoxically be traced back precisely to the

antihumanistic approaches of 1960s philosophy, where subjectivity was de-centered, absolute truth was declared impossible and interpretation became an infinite endeavor. In other words, if a fracture with modern subjectivity occurred in the 1960s, the awareness of this fracture, and the sense of belonging to a different age, matured during the generation of the postmodernist Transavanguardia. A general questioning of progress as a social good, as well as a questioning of the certainties that had existed since the Enlightenment, brought about the emergence of more relativistic cultural positions in the 1960s. The philosophies of Kant, Hegel and even Karl Marx were criticized as overdeterministic, and the traditional psychoanalysis of Freud and early twentieth century structural linguistics were challenged by the poststructuralist models in the work of Jacques Lacan, Jacques Derrida, Jean Baudrillard, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari. European eighteenth and nineteenth-century utopian ideas of a world where self-realization is harmonized with democracy were revealed as having evolved into structures of oppression in Western society. The notion of a diffused and de-centered subjectivity that creatively flows as well as the importance of pleasure and freedom in an aesthetic society, were all ideas that began in the 1960s. In the 1960s, and throughout the 1970s and 1980s, French philosopher Michel Foucault studied systems of thought 'genealogically' as expressions of systems of power in what he called an "archeology of knowledge"⁷. Influenced by Heidegger and Nietzsche, Foucault revealed the relativity of epistemic systems, therefore helping to dismantle the certainties of Modernism. The catastrophes of the West, including World War II and the Holocaust, led Jean Francois Lyotard to evoke the end of nineteenth-century ideologies based on the view of an ideal, perfect future, just as Derrida deconstructed traditional metaphysics. Poetic and aphoristic discourse, antithetical to linear and demonstrative rational speech of traditional metaphysics, became a way of pursuing an 'infinite hermeneutics', where no interpretation was ever final, thus developing the Heideggerian and Nietzschean positions. In Italy, "pensiero debole" (weak thought) was developed by the philosopher Gianni Vattimo. Similarly in epistemology, relativistic positions emerged: scientific truth was no longer felt to be absolute but dependent on the methodology and parameters of analysis adopted. The observer-dependency of all observations was noted. Omniscience and certainty were criticized, and complex systems studied by epistemologists and scientists such as Douglas R. Hofstadter, Ilya Prigogine, Paul K. Feyerabend, Edgar Morin, and Ervin Laszlo. By the mid-1980s these ideas had become dominant and a number of broadly distributed books were being published⁸.

The Idiot

"And springtime brought me
the horrible laughter of idiocy"

Arthur Rimbaud, *Une saison à l'enfer*, 1873

There have been few general essays written about the Transavanguardia as a movement. One reason for this is that the work of these artists tends to resist general analysis, by remaining in the spheres of regression, sexuality, fantasy and simplicity. It is an art that values anti-intellectualism, and locates itself in the arena of poetry rather than of coherent discourse. However, it is precisely this characteristic which allows us to view it in relation to earlier modernist artistic practices that have also pursued anti-intellectualism.

What if we were to look at the art of the Transavanguardia as a continuation and development of premises of an earlier form of modern art, rather than as a radical shift away from, and rupture with, both the art of the 1960s and with early Modernism? It differed from dominant trends in the late 1970s such as text-based and politically-engaged Conceptual Art and Performance, just as it obviously differed substantially from the use of natural materials and processes in Arte Povera and

other post-minimalist art. But there are attitudes in the work of these artists that do not contradict earlier art. For instance, organic aesthetics, a critique of Darwinian positivism, the embracing of uncertainty and complexity as positive values, and anti-intellectualism also characterized much of Italian Arte Povera, and distinguished it from the more rationalist tendencies of Minimalism and Conceptualism in the 1960s. Germano Celant, in writing about Arte Povera in 1967, speaks of 'de-culturare'-de-civilizing-as an important need in the Sixties. Similarly, in 1979, Bonito Oliva wrote of the Transavanguardia that: "Here concentration becomes de-concentration, the need for catastrophe, the rupture of social need" and speaks of these artists as "blind visionaries"⁹. Arte Povera was about impoverishment not only of means and techniques, but also of the mind, in order to open culture up to basic phenomenological experience. Furthermore, Arte Povera was not intent on eradicating cultural roots and the Arte Povera artists valued craft and tradition enormously. But by 1971 the Arte Povera movement had lost its impetus as a group, and the artists that had first shown as part of group exhibitions went their way individually. There was thus a cultural vacuum during the 1970s, filled by concerns that were mainly addressing issues outside of art itself - in society and politics. However, an artist such as Luigi Ontani, practicing in solitary fashion in the early Seventies, owed much to the work of Arte Povera artist Alighiero Boetti, to his fascination with decoration, drawing, pleasure and different cultural expressions. Ontani, together with Salvo, Vettor Pisani and Gino De Dominicis, may even be the missing links between this earlier generation of Italian Arte Povera artists and the Transavanguardia. He questioned the moralism behind the rejection of narcissism as well as the modern assumption of identity as a fixed set of characteristics. In a series of 'tableaux vivants', performances and staged photographs made since 1970, he explored a fictional dimension and referred to alterations of identity. He also focused on childhood, and the ludic quality of his art expressed the belief that regression was a mode of resistance against rationalism, opening the way to fantasy and irrationality, a tendency that can be seen in the later work of Clemente and Chia. Like a nineteenth-century dandy, Ontani posed himself as a hero dissociated from his own time, yet also acutely contemporary. His self-fetishization questioned male identity and explored a more uncertain and ambivalent sexuality well before such practice was deemed acceptable in the art world.

The figure of the dandy - like the idiot or the genius, the fool or the visionary - runs throughout modern culture, and is certainly not specific only to post modernism. It is the result of a revolutionary outlook based on a rejection of the image of the bourgeois male dressed in a sober dark suit, so prevalent since the nineteenth-century industrial age.

I therefore propose that the art of the Transavanguardia should be considered from this perspective, that is, as a continuation, rather than a break, with one of the most important traditions of modernity. In fact, notwithstanding all the post modernist theory published from the 1960s through the 1980s, it is possible to argue that Postmodernism does not actually exist at all as a separate cultural period. In time, it may be possible to view it more as a particular declension of Modernism. Not all Modernism was rationalistic and project-based, in fact, nor was it always grounded in predetermined and certain principles. Alongside Paul Cézanne, Piet Mondrian and the Bauhaus movement, there were also Matisse, van Gogh, Pablo Picasso, and Marcel Duchamp. In Italy there were the Metaphysical painters Giorgio de Chirico and Carlo Carrà. As it developed in art and poetry in the late nineteenth - and early twentieth - centuries, Modernism certainly represented a shift in aesthetic and cultural sensibilities, one that included some of the characteristics of postmodernism right from the start. The ordered, stable and inherently meaningful world view of the nineteenth century, grounded in historicism and positivism, was questioned by the modernists, and Modernism also signaled a break with bourgeois Victorian morality. And while some Modernists were revolutionary optimists, others presented a profoundly pessimistic vision of a

culture in disarray. They experimented with language and form and were generally forward-looking. But at every step of its way, Modernism has also questioned its notions of progress, and expressed crisis. Nietzsche, Heidegger, Picabia, Raymond Roussel and de Chirico are just as modern as Ad Reinhard and Malevich.

At the crux of this question lies the figure of the idiot. The idiot is constitutive of modernity, as it radically questions and strips down the Self to its bare, unbridled and defenseless essentials. It is akin to the Romantic genius - another topos of modernity. The idiot returns time and time again in modern times, whenever and wherever functionalism and productivism are questioned. Fyodor Dostoevsky's novel, *The Idiot*, 1869, explores the figure of the idiot, Prince Mishkin, as a compassionate, positive hero, whose compassion exposed the debased materialistic values of the bourgeoisie that surrounded him. "The rise of modernity coincided with the invention of laughter, which today is still the highest form of a truly felicitous and subversive art, up against both the moral preaching of the neo-conservatives and the dogmatism of the avant-garde", writes Jean-Yves Jouannais¹⁰. The idiot is he or she who is simple, particular, unique, existing outside superstructures, and therefore represents an irreducible subjectivity, a truly modern subjectivity. Herman Melville's character Bartleby, in his short story *Bartleby, the Scrivener* (1853), an office clerk who inexplicably refuses to comply with his employer's orders ("I would prefer not to"), to the point of letting himself perish from not eating, suggests a sense of Being as pure refusal. He is an irreducible and unfathomable idiot, on the verge of madness. Robert Musil, in the 1930s, explored idiocy in his writings. In *Madness and Civilisation* (1961), Foucault analyzed the way madness was criminalized and silenced during what he called the "classical age" (1650-1800), and suggested how it could live "in itself", outside the confinement of authoritarian reason, as in the works of Nietzsche, Rimbaud and Van Gogh. At the beginning of the century, the Viennese artist Schiele explored the portraiture of a fragile, tormented subjectivity. His overtly sexual and psychological self portraits are echoed in Clemente's many gazes upon his own body image, a shifting, multiple self of more recent times. Klee's draftsmanship is reborn in the hands of De Maria, suggesting childishness and the primitive. De Maria expands and explodes the inner vision of Klee to the point of absorbing the environment within it. His painting incorporates the walls of real spaces to map and even create another, alternate universe in the real world. Generally, the early Expressionists explored an idiot's vision of the world as a radical gesture. The drama of Edward Munch's tormented figures, the mystical movements of seaside landscapes in Emil Nolde's paintings, as well as the skewed perspectives and acid colors in paintings by Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, Karl Schmidt-Rottluff, Ludwig Meidner and Alexej van Jawlensky are echoed in much of Cucchi's wildest images. Marc Chagall's primitive floating figures find new formulations in Chia's imagery and in Paladino's emblematic figures. Giacometti, Picasso and Matisse are also echoed in Paladino's art. Of course, while the sizes of the early expressionists' paintings were rather small, the Transavanguardia, which came well after Abstract Expressionism when the canvas became a "field" rather than a window on the world, generally adopted much larger formats, thus altering the spatial relationship of the viewer to the artwork. None of the Transavanguardia paintings are copies or erudite quotes of earlier expressionist paintings, and this marks how distinct their practice was from the highly intellectual endeavors of postmodernist artists interested in repetition as a form of denunciation of the mediated nature of images¹¹. Instead, they reengaged in a line of modernist art that had been relegated to art history. It is interesting to note how, during the heyday of the Transavanguardia in 1984, the Museum of Modern Art in New York organized the exhibition *Primitivism in Twentieth-Century Culture* where many of the sources of twentieth-century Expressionism were charted in the art of earlier civilizations. In the postwar years, and in light of the disasters and destruction brought on by modernity, the idiot regained a renewed attention, with

movements such as CoBrA in the north of Europe and Art Brut in France. Rejecting suffocating utilitarian culture, Jean Dubuffet's Art Brut explored instinctive forms of art. He collected the art of the mentally deranged and admired art where idiocy is located at the limits of folly and pathology. "Art has nothing to do with ideas", he wrote, "when vision ends, ideas appear and so does the poisoned fish of their waters: the intellectual."¹² The idiot is without reason, without rationality. Idiocy is childish, and expresses gratuitous violence. In Cucchi's large painting *Inebriated Fountain* (1982), a long oval head in the shape of a vase is represented. Liquid flows from where the mouth might be. The face has only one large eye, with its pupil stuck to the top of the eye, as if the fountain/self were in a drunk or idiotic state. In Chia's *Three Boys on the Raft* (1982), a sleeping or unconscious figure rests on a raft. He is inactive and perhaps we see two figures of his dreams, two large and clumsy figures waving, we know not where, nor in what direction.

In sum, after a period in which layers of superstructures and 'intelligence' had immobilized subjectivity, the Transavanguardia proposed to place the idiot again in the foreground of culture, and resumed a tradition of modernity that had been left aside. From this perspective, the Transavanguardia pursued the radical anti intellectualism of anarchist and libertarian vanguards, not the refined, polite and conservative language of other highbrow returns to traditional painting, a certain return to order and power that were also present in the culture of the 1980s. They eliminated ideological discourse and substituted it with poetry and evocation. The idiot paints roughly, sometimes badly, and freely chooses subject matter and language. An intuitive figure, the idiot is not a formalist. Through of a contemplative, and inactive, nature, the idiot, like the angel, has an astonished and poetic gaze.

¹ Paul K. Feyerabend, *Dialogo sul metodo*, Editori Laterza, Bari, 1989, (1st edition 1979), p. 5.

² Achille Bonito Oliva, "La Trans-Avanguardia Italiana", *Flash Art*, Milan, nos. 92-93, October-November 1979, p.17.

³ Ibid., pp. 19-20.

⁴ Including La Salita (Chia, yearly from 1971-1977), Giuliana De Crescenzo (Chia, 1978; Cucchi, 1978, 1979; Clemente, 1979) and Gian Enzo Sperone (Clemente, 1975, 1976; Chia, 1977, 1979) in Rome; Tucci Russo (Chia, 1976, 1978, Cucchi, 1979), Gian Enzo Sperone (Clemente, 1976) and Giorgio Persano (De Maria, 1978, 1979; Paladino, 1978) in Turin; Franco Toselli (Clemente, 1975; De Maria, 1977 and 1978; Paladino, 1978) in Milan; Lucio Amelio (De Maria, 1975, 1976; Paladino, 1977, 1979; Clemente, 1979) in Naples; Mario Diacono (Chia, 1978, 1979; Cucchi, 1979; De Maria, 1979) in Bologna; and Emilio Mazzoli in Modena (Clemente, 1979; Cucchi, 1979; Paladino, 1979).

⁵ A. Bonito Oliva, *Dialoghi d'artista. Incontri con l'arte contemporanea 1970-1984*, Electa, Milan, 1984, p. 304.

⁶ Kenneth Frampton, "Towards a Critical Regionalism: Six Points for an Architecture of Resistance", in Hal Foster, ed., *The Anti-Aesthetic*, Port Townsend, Washington, Bay Press, 1983, p. 17.

⁷ Michel Foucault published *Histoire de la Folie* in 1961 and *Les Paroles et les Choses* in 1966.

⁸ In 1985 Gallimard published *La pensée 68. Essai sur l'antihumanisme contemporain* by Luc Ferry and Alain Renaut, in which the connection between Sixties philosophy and Eighties culture was traced. That same year in Italy Feltrinelli published *La sfida della complessità*, edited by Gianluca Bacchi and Mauro Ceruti, which collected important essays on complex systems by scientists from round the world.

⁹ A. Bonito Oliva, op.cit., pp.17-18.

¹⁰ Jean-Yves Jouannais, "Le siecle Mychkine ou l'idiotie en art", *Art Press*, 216, September 1996, p. 32.

¹¹ Such as in the work of Sherrie Levine.

¹² Quoted in *Jean Dubuffet 1901-1985*, Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna, Rome, and Electa, Milan, 1989, p. 16.