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## ***The Poet-Painters: Francesco Clemente and Nicola De Maria***

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### ***I.***

The term *Transavanguardia* was first used by Achille Bonito Oliva in the October 1979 issue of *Flash Art* to call attention to five young Italian artists: Sandro Chia, Francesco Clemente, Enzo Cucchi, Nicola De Maria, and Mimmo Paladino. Beyond their commitment to paint and to images, which distinguished them from the previous generation of more conceptually minded Italian artists, these artists had initiated a distinct and far ranging dialogue with the history of art and, in the case of Clemente and De Maria, this included Indian and classical Chinese art. Thus, the artists of the *Transvanguardia* had embraced aspects of art history which had been rejected or ignored by many older Italian artists.

Another contrast would be the younger artists' high regard for the Metaphysical artists and other early Italian modernists, a source of inspiration that many artists of the older generation had more or less rejected. By the end of the 1980s, they had superseded the term *Transvanguardia*, which is as it should be; and each had become a highly regarded artist in his own right. At the same time, from the historical perspective afforded us by the passing of more than two decades since Bonito Oliva first used the term *Transvanguardia*, one can revisit the original group and discern other, smaller constellations within it. For in revealing unforeseen connections as well as strong differences among them, time has exposed a very dense, rich network of affinities, connections, differences, and parallels to be explored.

The focus of my inquiry is Francesco Clemente (b. 1952) and Nicola De Maria (b. 1954). For while it is immediately evident that they are very different in both the intention and execution of their work, a longer, more engaged look at their respective endeavors discloses numerous, unexpected affinities, connections and parallels binding them together. The deepest connection between them, and it is the one from which many others spring, is their strong connection to poetry. For them, poetry and language are essential elements of their work. In fact, I would argue that both Clemente and De Maria are poet-painters working within, redefining and transforming a dynamic tradition.

The tradition of the poet-artist, one could call it the "other tradition"<sup>1</sup> in art, extends at least as far back as Chinese classical art and Wang Wei, of whose visual art nothing survives. The 18th and 19th century visionaries William Blake and Odilon Redon belong to this tradition, as do seminal 20th century artists such as Paul Klee, Joan Mirò, Henri Michaux, Francis Picabia, and Kurt Schwitters. Here it should be pointed out that along with Blake, Michaux, Picabia, and Schwitters wrote challenging, innovative poetry.

Jean-Michel Basquiat, a contemporary of Clemente and De Maria who died young, is another poet-painter. Finally, there are four postwar artists more closely tied to Italy who have, in different ways and in different degrees, inspired Clemente and De Maria: Alighiero Boetti<sup>2</sup>, Mario Merz<sup>3</sup>, Luigi Ontani, and Cy Twombly. For all of these artists, poetry is an important component of their work. The two artists that have had an impact on both Clemente and De Maria are Ontani and Twombly.

In 1957, Cy Twombly left America for Italy. In 1958, Twombly had a show of paintings he had done in Italy at Galleria La Tartaruga, Rome. In the brochure accompanying the exhibition, Palma Bucarelli suggested that the meandering pencil and crayon inscriptions in Twombly's paintings were the direct result of the artist opening himself up to the layers of graffiti found on Roman walls and monuments.

While Bucarelli's view is too simplistic and reductive, it did propose a direct link between Twombly's work and his circumstances. And while the link might now be regarded as tenuous and abraded, like his lines, the connection Bucarelli made between Twombly's art and a world that is both ancient and daily is important for the permissions it would give a younger generation of artists. For in Twombly's work, Clemente and De Maria would see a world drawn over, erased, added to, and changed, a world of unmoored names and ceaseless naming, a world of sexual thoughts and fantasies, a world in constant flux.

What can be said about Twombly's paintings from the late 1950s onward is that formally they are a continuation as well as a subversion of the gestural current found in Abstract Expressionism, particularly as it coalesced in Pollock's drip paintings. In Twombly's hands, Pollock's explosive, energetic line has become laconic, discontinuous, and desultory. A private diaristic sensibility is introduced into the field of painting. Doubt and fantasy replace fervor and the movement that Pollock seems to be making towards the literal, which is certainly how the generation of Frank Stella and Richard Serra saw it. However, whereas Stella seems to be closing the door on certain possibilities, Twombly can be said to be opening the door on others.

For Clemente and De Maria the importance of Twombly does not rest solely in the formal, it is also in the poetic. They are among the only artists of their generation, both in Italy and elsewhere, to recognize that Twombly's art points to two distinct possibilities: polymorphous fantasies and a world where past and present exist simultaneously. It is this side of Twombly, one that is both allusive and learned, both reading and dreaming, that Clemente and De Maria are able to convincingly transmute into their own distinctive visions. Here, I would further suggest that Ontani's own polymorphous art, provocative performances and setup photographs are an important part of the heady mix Clemente and De Maria were absorbing as young artists. For in its outrageousness, excessiveness, and theatricality, Ontani's polymorphous art complements the austerities of Twombly's polymorphous images.

## II.

Quite early in their respective careers, Francesco Clemente completed *Francesco Clemente Pinxit* (1980-81), and Nicola De Maria completed *Chinese Words*, 1978-84; these were large, defining bodies of work that announced the presence of a fully formed sensibility. For while Clemente and De Maria may have been young artists chronologically, these works embodied a vision that was as complete as the one viewers encountered in Jasper Johns' first show at Leo Castelli in 1958. By defining, I mean that *Francesco Clemente Pinxit* and *Parole Cinesi* are complexly resonant, self-contained bodies of work which continue to cast an illuminating light on what the artists have subsequently gone on to do.

In these series, Clemente and De Maria invigorated as well as revitalized the difficult and challenging legacy of poet Arthur Rimbaud, who wrote *Je un Autre* (*I am Other*).

In doing so, they broadened our understanding of what is permissible in the field of painting and drawing, of the practice of art that many have denounced as being traditional or, worse, irrelevant and obsolete. For by stating that one must "systematically derange" one's senses and "I am Other," Rimbaud signaled a break with the history of the unified, lyric "I."

As Rimbaud grasped, the boundaries of one's being, one's self, were no longer fixed, like the

borders one sees on a map. Rather, he understood that the boundaries of the self were both porous and in flux. His radical assertion, so important both in the arts and in our understanding of ourselves and reality, is central to understanding the work of both Clemente and De Maria. For in their work, what emerges is an "I" that is full of doubles and personae, that is both fragmented and boundless, that is both autobiographical and fictive, that is both present and absent. It is an "I" that is a conduit, a receiver of dreams. It is an "I" that listens, and registers in color and line, image and mark, what it hears.

Done in gouache, and made up of twenty-four unbound sheets of antique paper, *Francesco Clemente Pinxit* is a book, complete with title page.

"Francesco Clemente Pinxit" appears on the first sheet of paper, "pinxit" being Latin for "painted (this)". Thus, the title reads, "Francesco Clemente painted this." It is both a claim of authorship and a sly comment on authorship, as Clemente worked with adolescent boys who were apprentices in a miniature-painting workshop in India. Working alongside the apprentices, he would describe particular images, which one of them would make in the style of an Indian miniature. In doing so, Clemente inhabits a style that is preestablished and not his own. What he does is introduce new images that are new, possibilities which have not been used before. He transforms a well defined, historical tradition into a capacious appetite.

Of course, to work with apprentices is a tradition that goes back to the medieval guild tradition and to the painting workshops that flourished throughout Italy during the Renaissance. Thus, Clemente is both using an ongoing Indian tradition and revitalizing a moribund Italian one. At the same time, the gouaches mix together fantasy images of a man with a tree growing out of his groin, naked men with telescopes peering in from the sides of the composition, allusions to a soccer field, sexual and scatological scenes, and dreamlike images of amputations.

One theme running through the work is power and the loss of power, gratification and the absence of it. And this conflict between power and the loss of it is echoed in the work on a formal level. Who, we might ask, made it? Did Clemente make it or was it made by the apprentices? The answer is neither could have made it alone, that it was a work that arose out of a decision to collaborate, which requires that one put aside one's ego. And it is this putting aside of one's ego in order to make art that is central to Clemente's approach to art. Thus, we should remember that Clemente collaborated with Jean-Michel Basquiat and Andy Warhol on a series of paintings, as well as illustrated a number of poems by Allen Ginsberg and John Weiners. In 1986, he and Raymond Foye started Hanuman Books which published more than fifty books by writers and artists such as Gregory Corso, Robert Creeley, Willem de Kooning, Henri Michaux, Cookie Mueller, Francis Picabia, and Patti Smith. It is worth noting that this distinguished list includes European and American writers and artists from different generations.

The interior of the block letters on the cover of *Francesco Clemente Pinxit*, are decorated by repeating the simple, stylized image of a flower, and the letters themselves are arranged like those we might see in a movie marquee. By working within the constraints of a highly refined, workshop style that has evolved over centuries, Clemente is able suppress his individualism. Thus, the repeated patterns and use of block letters subtly distances the artist from the work.

At the same time, because of the stylized settings and use of patterns, and because of its mixing together of nonwestern and western imagery, *Francesco Clemente Pinxit* strikes the viewer as an artifact from both a lost time and another world. The combination of sexual, scatological, and dreamlike images suggests that the book was made for private reasons by an artist named Francesco Clemente, rather than by a contemporary artist we call "Francesco Clemente." This sense that there is a *doppelgänger* or double is one of recurring preoccupations in Clemente's work, the self as both many and other. And, as *Francesco Clemente Pinxit* made so palpably clear, the *doppelgänger*

inhabits an interior world, a dream space where the ego and superego surrender to the id, to that side of ourselves we all too often keep hidden from others and, worse, from ourselves. Clemente is unafraid of exploring his many selves.

Nicola De Maria's definition of the self differs from Clemente's to the point that one could almost regard these two artists as going in apposite directions. For while Clemente's self seems fragmented, haunted and chthonic, De Maria's strikes us as various and infinite, on the point of disappearing into many others, and the elemental world. Clemente's self becomes the Other, the Double, while De Maria's self seems to be many Others.

In *Chinese Words*, a large group of paintings and works on paper, which has only been partially documented, De Maria writes the name of a Chinese Classical painter. In the seventeen works on paper which were shown at the Kunsthau Zurich (1985) and Kunstmuseum Bonn (1986)<sup>4</sup>, he wrote the name of a 17th century Chinese painter in red letters. The use of red can be read as allusion to the Chinese painter signing his painting with his seal. The red seal signified the painter's approval. But, in De Maria's *Chinese Words*, the writing is casual, unhurried, and unemphatic; and it usually occurs along the drawing's bottom edge. Within the composition, the name makes as strong a claim on our attention as the austere, sensual drawing of a plant-like form. Using a pictorial vocabulary that usually consists of one or two vertical lines from which a handful of lines extend, De Maria depicts a spare, plant-like form that evokes ideograms and signs. Here, the convincing power of De Maria's drawing becomes evident. We can read the drawing as an ideogrammatic presence, as linear abstraction, as sign or symbol for a plant. Rather than belonging to one category, De Maria is able to draw a form that collapses these linguistic categories together and renders them descriptively inadequate.

There are also different sized dots and circles, sometimes concentrically arranged. These circles allude to flowers in bloom, as well as to light moving and pulsing. The world De Maria evokes is not static, it is an active, highly charged place. The marks can be made with pencil, paint, watercolor, pastel. In a number of the works, a piece of torn paper, itself marked, has been attached to the larger paper. This attachment suffuses the work with a sense of fragility and enduring strength. All of this is inflected by the drawing, which is tender and gentle. A bundle of lines strike us as being as delicate as the few bare stems they allude to. Finally, in writing the names out in red, De Maria is consciously alluding to the Chinese classical tradition, where an artist signs his best work by using a seal of his name dipped in red ink.

De Maria does not try to work in the style of a 17th century Chinese artist. Rather, it's as if each of these artists has been able to inhabit his work and practice, and, for a time, become him. Li Sung, Li Shan, and Hsia Kui all visit De Maria. Thus, one feels as if the spirit of each artist works with De Maria's materials and vocabulary, making them his own.

That is why they are signed, the signature being evidence that the person had been there and wanted to make sure that those who came later knew that.

In working this way, De Maria extends a little known Italian tradition which originated in China. Giuseppe Castiglione (1688-1766) left Italy and arrived in China in 1715. His reason for going to China was to spread Christianity, but instead he became a painter who mastered the art of Chinese delicate brush painting and was well received in the court of the emperor. He worked in China for fifty years and took on a Chinese name, Lang Shi-ning, which means "World Peace." Castiglione's best paintings are of horses, where Chinese brushwork renders horses in a naturalistic setting. Castiglione's flawless synthesis of both western and eastern art is original and unmistakable, and his oeuvre forms a unique chapter in the history of art.

Without ever having gone to China, De Maria achieves something equally original and unmistakable. The fluidity of De Maria's vocabulary, and the fact that the lines never stop being

lines, even as they become images, signs, and symbols, is comparable to how we think of the Chinese ideogram. We both read and see the ideogrammatic lines in De Maria's work. And yet, even as we read and see De Maria's work, what distinguishes it is the oscillating color, the intensity that is simultaneously visual and physical. Thus, *Chinese Words* are works we see, read, and engage with physically. They are addressed to our intellect, our eyes and our physical being, all that we are. And they are done so on a scale that is both intimate and personal.

In *Yen Tz'u-Yu, Painter of China*, 1984, for example, there is the writing, the drawing, and the physicality of the white paint. Is the white paint, its fulsome drops, blossoms blowing in a flurry of wind or large flakes of soft snow? Both, I would say, and thus a world that is imagined to be real becomes as real as one's imagination. It is an idyllic world, a world to be both named (made visible) and protected, which is exactly what De Maria does. And what is remarkable about this act of naming is that the artist does so by becoming other artists, by losing himself in the spirits of painters who lived and worked in another time and place.

Assembled as a book, which accompanied an exhibition of *Chinese Words* in Zurich and Bonn, the individual works become a gathering of visual poems by 17th century Chinese artists, an act of preservation and recovery by an archivist, somebody working anonymously in the great library that is the infinite present. Time and timelessness have been made to intersect. As De Maria has repeatedly made clear throughout his career, art is not to be divided into past and present, and then and now. Rather, it is all part of what the great American poet Frank O'Hara called the "living situation."

### III.

Both Clemente and De Maria work in a wide range of scales and materials. It is as if they are alchemists turning everything they touch into art. And yet, I would also say that theirs is an art that is intensely human in its appeal, that there is a utopic drive behind everything they do.

For many years Clemente has done portraits in watercolor of friends and acquaintances, people he admires. In 1983, shortly after meeting Allen Ginsberg, he and the poet collaborated on *White Shroud*, a poem in which the poet dreams that his mother did not die in a mental institution, but is living on the streets of the Bronx, homeless. Ginsberg handwrote the poem on separate sheets of paper, while Clemente used ink, pencil, and watercolor to transform them into the pages of an illuminated manuscript.

In *Story of My Country* (1990), Clemente directed an Orissan miniaturist to depict scenes from different mythologies and countries, a world made up of fragments. Each of the eighteen sheets evokes a self-contained narrative, a world view. The echoes and mirrorings remind us that even in our separateness there are parallels and joinings, events common to us all.

De Maria has done groups of watercolors, often on very small sheets of paper. A series of 40 watercolors done in July and August of 1978 were exhibited nearly a decade later, in 1986, accompanied by a book (*Nicola De Maria. 40 Ladroni*<sup>5</sup>) which reproduces them all. Along with the reproductions are the artist's notes from that period. A delicate body of work, a work of delicacy, one senses that De Maria's art is one of offerings, of gifts made to the world. Finally, one suspects that both artists have made work which has yet to see the light of day, that they are working all the time, even when they are asleep and dreaming.

At the other extreme from their intimately scaled works are installations, large rooms which the artists have transformed into a compelling site (sight). In 1981-82, Clemente worked on a series of large oil paintings, *The Fourteen Stations*. In *The Fourteen Stations VIII*, he depicted himself lying naked in the upper part of the painting. Five different shoes and slippers are scattered across him, from his head to his knee. In the foreground, three large eared mice (or are they rats?) are cavorting,

unafraid. To varying degrees, the artist's awareness of mortality, his seemingly morbid preoccupation with decay, and his honest sense of the polymorphic nature of one's imagination have all been brought into play. We are both in and out of paradise, both in and out of our bodies.

A room that is a rich, luminous blue, a deep blue, the blue of the sky before dawn when the sun, still below the horizon, is making its way steadily upward. It is the hour of solitude and dreams. A few paintings have been placed high up on the wall. Another room, the blue more misty, punctuated by red circles whose edges are dissolving, a suitcase on the floor, near the wall. De Maria has painted suitcases white, the white of clouds and pillows and sheets. The suitcase can be opened or closed. It can contain a small, exquisite drawing or a painting can rest on it, while leaning against a wall. Again, we can see this room in counterpoint to Clemente's *The Fourteen Stations*. For while the body in all its manifestations is Clemente's recurring subject, De Maria's seems to be that place where the artist vanishes, leaving behind physical proof of his vision or dream. Thus, a painting for Jack Kerouac is a tondo placed below a window overlooking the landscape, Kerouac has vanished into the world outside. Both Clemente and De Maria are dreamers whose work suggests that the plenitude and variousness of the world has only been glimpsed, that there is always more to discover. This is the journey on which each of them set out over two decades ago.

#### IV.

I want to leave them with the final words. It seems fitting to do so with poet-painters. And it is worth noting how in their statements both artists mix together the senses. Is it simply coincidence? Or is synaesthesia a trait shared by poet-painters, by visionaries?

In an interview with Donald Kuspit, Clemente said: "To paint, to make images in general, is a form of listening, I am a believer in the voice of each land, the voice of the place itself. This voice comes before poetry, painting, music."<sup>6</sup>

And in an interview in the magazine *Domus* (1983)<sup>7</sup>, De Maria said that he was "someone who writes a poem with fingers full of colors."

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<sup>1</sup> *The Other Tradition* is the title of a poem by John Ashbery, which appeared in *Houseboat Days* (1977).

<sup>2</sup> Francesco Clemente, *A Fugue for Alighiero e Boetti*, exhibition catalogue, *Alighiero e Boetti* (Gagosian Gallery, New York, 2001) p. 69. In an interview with Louise Neri, Clemente stated that he met Boetti in 1973 in Rome.

<sup>3</sup> In a fax dated September 11, 2002, and sent to the author, De Maria states that he met Mario and Marisa Merz in Turin in 1977.

<sup>4</sup> Nicola De Maria. *Parole Cinesi*, Kunsthaut, Zürich-Kunstmuseum, Bonn, 1985 (text by U. Perucchi Petri).

<sup>5</sup> Nicola De Maria. *40 ladroni*, Kerin Bolz Galerie, Mulheim an der Ruhr, 1986 (texts by P. de Jonge, N. De Maria).

<sup>6</sup> Francesco Clemente quoted in "Clemente explores Clemente", *Contemporanea* (New York), no. 7 (October 1989), p. 41.

<sup>7</sup> Sandro Mendini, interview with Nicola De Maria in *Domus*, no. 640, Milan, June 1983.