



Arcangelo Sassolino
fragilissimo

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testi

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fotografie

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GALLERIA DELLO SCUDO
ARTE MODERNA E CONTEMPORANEA

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Now

Now

So begins *Richard III*, the last work in William Shakespeare's lesser tetralogy devoted to English history. A dramatisation of recent historical events, hence very *timely*, linked to a past close enough to directly shake consciences but also the events themselves that it relates. While events are recounted by history, it is in the story that they take shape. However, it is certainly not this closeness to its time that makes *Richard III* the most widely performed of Shakespearean dramas. We do not read it to be informed about English history in the Elizabethan age. In fact we should perhaps, before reading, learn about that historical period, discover more about the struggles between Yorkists and Lancastrians to understand the origins of the ties with Shakespeare's work and contextualise the genius of drama in its time. By giving value and weight to the content, the form gains in lightness, inventiveness and audacity.

What makes this work truly contemporary and still enchants the public is not even its memory, the historical reminiscences of the Elizabethan age, life at court or the pomp of apparel, but the way the author deals with universal themes, which everyone finds in their own personal experience. It is only the form that changes, its inwardness remains strongly relevant, which is in the nature of the Classic. The events attributable to a given historical moment therefore function only as a framework, subsidiary, interchangeable elements around feelings. Truths and reactions that escape the changing historical-political and temporal context.

This present switch is shaken by an explosive opening, *Now*, leading readers straight into current events, into *their own* present wherever it is. And it always does, whenever it is read. *Now*, which is used as an opening, first of all, so contextualising something unknown, has an uncurrent scope, lying outside any precise time to embrace the eternal one.

There is another factor that makes *Richard III* a work that is repeatedly

timely, though this is purely technical in nature. The way Shakespeare writes his verses is always the same, they follow a form (and a sound), that of iambic pentameter. The form reflects the harmony of the human soul, follows the beating of the heart, and while we read, dictated by that rhythm, the dark plots of the future King Richard, every reader/spectator can feel the spirit of the people traversing hell and savouring moments of eternal happiness. It's invariably the same emotion, with the strength and intensity of the first time.

Something similar occurs when we are faced with the works of Arcangelo Sassolino, an experience whose lived present imposes itself both on experience and on memory. *Now* I am here in front. Finding myself, repeatedly, in front of the work of artists that I have known or studied, the experience comes ever closer to that of the archaeologist. Once the initial amazement has eased, the surprise that accompanies the knowledge of the new at each subsequent meeting moves the previous reading towards a renewed gaze. With the work of Arcangelo Sassolino such a procedure is not possible. The intensity of the first meeting is renewed repeatedly. Between the subject, the object and the event (real or presumed), an emotional and sensory form of communication is created which, colliding with the cognitive sphere, leads each time to a short circuit that imposes itself on previous experiences. An art of *hic et nunc* that blends mechanics and feelings, strength and wonder, scientific rigour and abandonment to the ineluctable. But how can an art of rigorous research be formed, one that recognises the imposition of the tragic and fatal randomness that animates our experience? And what kind of linguistic evolution can it undergo?

The exhibition *Fragilissimo*, on the premises of Galleria dello Scudo, offers the rare opportunity to see three distinct groupings of Sassolino's work. Three voices of his dramaturgy on the effect of chance in predetermined, powerful and deadly situations. Ten works that define the decalogue of the artist's shadow line; the "machines", bearers of a dual state of being/non-being; the work of a continuing genre, which *always is*, inexorably; and

finally the works organised around a tension of forces, a continuous present in suspension between the moment before and the moment after. Glass and especially steel are the materials present in various forms and modes through the route of the exhibition. Two ubiquitous materials: glass, known as a solid-state liquid, and steel that combines properties of deformability and strength.

The best known category of Arcangelo Sassolino's works is that of "machines". Phenomenological works that present a binary mode, the active state opposed to the dormant one. A condition of dualism between action and stasis, heat and cold. Their often anthropomorphic character is underlined by the internal organisation of a discontinuous and apparently free working that repeatedly takes the viewer by surprise.¹ Even the "machines" that at first glance would seem most aggressive, if observed over time, present delicate gestures, reaching the point of revealing a humane soul. It is not so much the effect produced that is these works' reason for being, since the artist is not very interested in a demonstrative methodology. Rather, it is the conditions that lead to this transformation, and the variables within of cause and effect, that confer a humanistic dimension on them. The artist divides the successive versions of these works into "generations".²

In *Afasia 1* (2008), for instance, a machine that in terms of form could be compared to a large rifle is placed in a cage. A glass bottle is fired at a speed of 970 km/h at a steel sheet placed between 15 and 25 meters away, shattering it on impact. The pressure exerted on the bottle is such that, when it is fired, it is not even perceived; the viewer only hears the sudden crash and what the eyes are able to see are only the remains of fragments of glass scattered on the floor. The sequence of the shots is random, determined by a computerized aleatory program. It is an always latent instant that occurs only when it has already happened. The quiet of waiting is only apparent. The work offers a psychophysical metaphor for life. It does not allude to destruction in itself, rather to a transience, like any event that might happen, inexorably, before our eyes. The title of the work derives from a medical condition. Aphasia is

a language disorder, in which the ability to express or understand words is lost. An individual affected by aphasia is able to understand but not to speak, or is able to communicate but not understand. The work brings out this lack of communication, a lack of exchange between hearing and speech, as if our experiencing also meant waiting. Sassolino pushes the materials to their limits, takes control of the material and transforms it.

The way we were (2018) is a sculpture/machinery that shatters pieces of rock with its relentless force. With a slow and inexorable movement, the press compresses the stone into smaller and smaller bits, letting all the debris at the sides of the machine. Once it has reached its maximum extension, the press "takes a breath" and then starts again, gets up again, revealing a layer of flattened stone that actually seems soft. The irregular forms have been made uniform, the fragments of encumbrance have fallen. And the process starts again, in a continuous cycle. The title of the work alludes to the Hollywood movie from the seventies, a complementary romanticism to the inevitable and ruthless movement of the work. It reminds us that nothing remains as it is, we are subjected to a cycle of continuous change. The work riffs on the ephemeral nature of life, which with the inexorable passage of time leaves behind only debris and perpetual fragmentation. As in various works by Sassolino, we find a meta-control of the material, subjected to strong pressures predefined by the artist, which yet leave a margin that cannot be calculated. Control and unpredictability coexist in Sassolino's work, revealing itself in their form and sound.

The work *D.P.D.U.F.A. (Dilatazione Pneumatica Di Una Forza Attiva)* from 2019 could be seen as a synthesis of the various properties that compete in Sassolino's "machines": energy, elusiveness, randomness and "colour of sound". A glass bottle set in a steel case and insulated by polycarbonate sheets is connected to a high pressure nitrogen cylinder. Through a device that manages its flow, the gas slowly enters the bottle. The pressure keeps increasing until, at some imponderable moment, the glass explodes violently disintegrating. The resistance time is incalculable, the wait could last a few minutes or many hours.

The second category, which I would define of the *continuative* genre, consists of works belonging to a series that the artist has been carrying out since 2000. The “Concretes” present a more nuanced form (and thought) than the opposing dualistic one that characterizes the “machines”. They are sculptures hanging on the wall, which the artist describes as follows: “A polycarbonate sheet subjected to simultaneous compression on all four sides is forced to deform, generating unpredictable shapes similar to a liquid surface. Concrete, a mixture of cement, sandy aggregates and iron oxide, is launched onto this matrix. The back of these works always has a rough texture due to the frenzied and tempestuous action of this gesture. Once the material has solidified, the polycarbonate is torn off. Chance and chemistry run their course revealing unexpected surfaces, colours and forms. The result obtained can no longer be manipulated. The jagged and fragile edge is an attempt to push the boundary that every solid form imposes; it is like giving the sculpture an indeterminate time.”

The residual delicacy in a violent gesture, lightweight forms that resist laceration. The exhibition presents for the first time an inverse version of the “Concretes”, setting two distinct modes in direct relationship. *La gravità genera la forma* (2019) is a sculpture placed in the centre of the room, where poured concrete creates the shape of the plane until its implosion. A sculpture formed by its own weight, where the more the concrete, the more the form closes in on itself. A plane collapsed by the material that composes it. Weight itself is material.

This series of works announces new directions in Sassolino’s exploration of the medium and opens up new ways of analysing how he has worked in recent years. Constantly in search of new expressive languages, in 2000 the artist began to create, in close succession, series of “wall sculptures” which, although independent of his machines and of a different nature than the previous works, correspond to the above-mentioned foundational elements of his artistic language. His investigations focused on the production processes and the physical qualities of materials, but it is in the practice of the “Concretes” that Sassolino develops his explorations of

the space of perception. Concrete is understood neither as a quality nor a simple material, but as a property. An element that does not obstruct the gaze, but on the contrary enables on to enter the material, to penetrate the structure of the work itself. The “Concretes” have properties in common that are different but are in no way extraneous to the rest of his sculptural work. Works that can be analysed primarily through the common use of cementite, which offers an image of compactness and its (possible) dissolution. Concrete becomes a way to mark the sedimentation of the material – the process of creating a work – but it also opens up to a phenomenological experience of space. A surface that has the power to attract, absorb and retain energy. These qualities favour a contemplative attitude on the part of the viewer who, unlike when he is before a machine, uses sight as the only sense. Mass and density do not create space as purely physical phenomena. They communicate with a form of space made of sensible subjects and imbued with psychological qualities.

The exhibition at Galleria dello Scudo presents a creation of space through alternating rhythms of density, mass and time. This dialogue between the works is not illustrative; the “Concretes” do not implement the scale of industrial manufacture or the monumental scale that lies at the centre of Sassolino’s work. Yet they reveal a shared language.

Lucretius’ *De rerum natura* is the first great poetic work in which the knowledge of the world is a deconstruction of its compactness. Lucretius is the poet of visual concreteness, but above all he tells us the void is as concrete as rock. His biggest concern seems to be to avoid the overwhelming weight of matter. Compactness and density are manifested in Sassolino’s sculpture, whose imposing mass of cementite compresses the space circumscribed in dialectic with the internal tensions of the material, which acts as a vehicle for physical experience in space. His research focuses on the production processes and the physical qualities of materials, revealing a deeply physical activity that has its roots in the same type of material investigation and in the same logic of perception that defines his sculptural practice.

Understanding Sassolino's "Concretes" in this light means evoking the presence of a sculptural procedural practice even in non-dynamic works. By their nature, the "Concretes" are hybrids in form and matter. Yet they give rise to a transformative space – both physical and that of the cementite surface itself – creating an optical field that can be observed, and by which we can be engulfed. Space here is never neutral, but always created.

The "Concretes" are feelings of the perimeter that are not resolved. They are a work on the concept of the border, through a laceration in which lives the attempt to prolong the creative gesture. In stretching it to infinity, the material settles and accumulates in an apparently fragile way: it could remain precariously poised for twenty years, or two hundred. The conflict with time is only a matter of scale. It is an exploration of the non-manual boundary that arises from a vital action and properties of matter. It is a residue of life.

A similar work on the boundary, an attempt to cross the border of form, where matter becomes dust, is present in *Damnatio memoriae* (2016). A diamond sander gradually erases a marble statue, closed inside a room so as not to allow the marble reduced to dust to come out. In a fine but conclusive process, the sander destroys the material. *Damnatio memoriae* is the Latin formula for the "condemnation of memory", an act of cancellation reserved for those who betrayed the state in ancient Rome. The goal was to make them non-existent, removing all their traces from the historical records, including statues and monuments.

Sassolino draws a parallel between the machine and man's experiences: human impulses are fulfilled by a machine, and man is granted the view from the outside, enabling him to change his perspective. As the sander continues its relentless movement, the matter is transformed. It is no longer solid, or rather, it is still solid, but divided into innumerable fragments which gradually cover everything like a blanket of snow that conceals the features of things. In this way, the erasure of memory is twofold: the more the sander continues its work, the more the material that remains is covered. The work

alludes to the dematerialisation of matter, the limit of the border in reference to the bond that exists between matter and memory.³

The works on display cannot be understood as consequences of each other, but as in constant exchange, a reinvention of the fundamental principles of Sassolino's practice. Returning to the basic vocabulary of the form does not delimit the space of a practice, but pushes towards the extreme permutability of the principles of speed, gravitation, pressure and vibration. This offers the essence of a fairly conventional notion of sculpture: to perform an action on a material. The clarity of this definition is key in Sassolino's practice, to bring the work of art to a series of crucial principles: action, form, material. Sassolino addresses the essential characteristics of being, though in an existential rather than humanistic way. He is interested in the nature of sculpture and seeks to offer his own definition of what his language might be, projecting it towards the transformation of his own understanding.

The third category presents works that bring an ongoing conflict, but with a silent character. Energy is concentrated in tension, lasting over time, and not, as in the case of the "machines", dissipated in the instant of the liberating explosion. These recent works, such as *Qualcosa è cambiato*, *Incombente*, *Il vuoto attorno* and *La sola regola possibile* (all from 2019), present a state of suspension, taking stock of the general situation of the artist's work. The inevitable energy is inherent in the latent wait for the event. It is unimportant whether the event (the fall) will take place or not, its manifestation becomes marginal. Being used to considering Sassolino's work as a search for knowledge and not just as a sensory practice, to relate myself to existentialism I should extend it to Nature, the intelligence of matter and mythology.

From an existentialist point of view, the work of Arcangelo Sassolino can be related to the individual's tension towards the surrounding society. In existentialist thought the individual lives in a constant state of "otherness". This otherness derives from the single ego conceived in terms of predefined cultural values, external and extraneous concepts, which yet determine it.

This shift causes the individual to continually fall into what is impersonal, inauthentic, in the void of meaning that characterises modern man. In Sassolino's works this tension is felt, both psychological and physical, of an impetuous external agent that determines the connotations of another entity. The materials are brought to the limit of their resistance, so as to be shattered, crushed, pulverised. Physical strength is actually a harmless subject in itself. An exchange of power and conflict is established between materials, comparable to the existential condition of human nature. The material destroyed, a stone or a bottle, is defined by another, its state is the consequence of a force, of an action that leads it to transformation. A clash that can allude to the absurd precariousness of existence, defined by external agents.

In this sense, Sassolino's work effectively evokes Heidegger's thought. If the works themselves and the material of which they are composed retain this tension, it is precisely being present at this tension that defines their state. For Heidegger the subject's ontological condition is "being there" (*Dasein*), inextricably linked to a conception of time, which is not part of an infinite progression but is delimited by the experience of *Dasein*. This is why being implies time, and vice versa. Time in Sassolino's works is defined by the state of tension, it is compressed or diluted according to the relationship between two physical forces. Time in this sense is dictated by the experiential state of the materials that are part of the work itself,

also making the spectator's experience phenomenological in nature. In being placed before these works, the viewer is confronted with his own destruction and death – not just in a physical sense, but also metaphorically. As Heidegger argues, it is not possible to experience directly the death of another, but through observation of it from the outside we can relate to its inevitability. This is the feeling before Sassolino's work: being precariously poised, the awareness of being about to meet a decisive yet imponderable moment. In the words of Emil Cioran: "Clutch at the moments as I may, they elude my grasp [...]. When they abandon us, we lack the resources indispensable to the production of an act, whether crucial or quotidian. Defenseless, with no hold on things, we then face a peculiar misfortune: that of not being entitled to time."⁴

The same could be said for all art forms. Eternal contemporaneity is what escapes the contemporary. Following Nietzsche's untimely considerations, art embarks on a battle against the present state of things, a period of transition, enunciating theses contrasting with the dominant values to build a new future, rather than having immediate success and conquering current events. An outdated art that can be defined in the relationship between the essence of what is said and the technique in which it is expressed. The rest is chronicle.

Francesco Stocchi

1. "My work is situated at the intersection of physics and the natural world; I apply the properties of physics – including speed, gravity, pressure, and vibration – to natural materials in order to bring sculpture to life. I want to push the material past its physical limitations, allowing it to take on a new voice, a new form. It is a process of unbecoming and becoming."

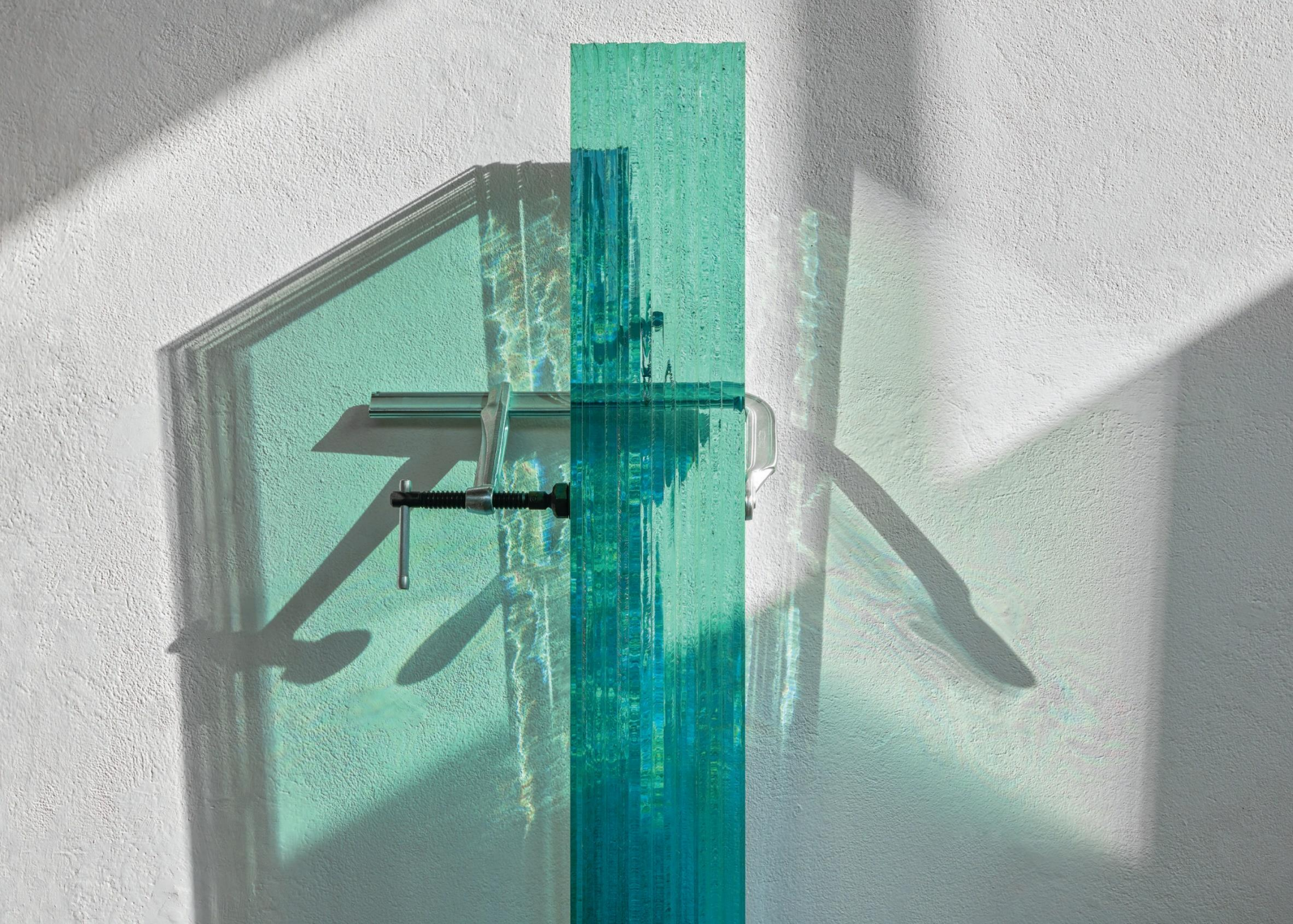
2. From a conversation between the author and the artist, November 2019.

3. "For example, marble and the classical process that the sculptor performs: he brings a block to the studio, he has a shape in mind that he makes or has made before roughing it out and then finishing it, in the end the result of these operations is put on display. Well, that piece of raw marble from which you start, was originally in the dark, embodied within the boulder/mountain, and at some point has broken away from the mother/quarry.

Now that wrench, that moment of detachment, that sound, that action necessary to isolate it forever, interests me more than everything that happens afterwards. I want, in a way, to stage that moment, that original action. Being able to recreate that feeling is like isolating a primeval truth, which would later be lost in subsequent processes. This is why I always look for actions stripped of their flesh, reduced to the bone, like a fall, a break, a friction, a throw. I hope to get closer to the truth by dealing with these basic actions. To do this I have to try to stage an overwhelming reality." Interview with Arcangelo Sassolino in Arttext (http://www.arttext.it/Arcangelo_Sassolino.html).

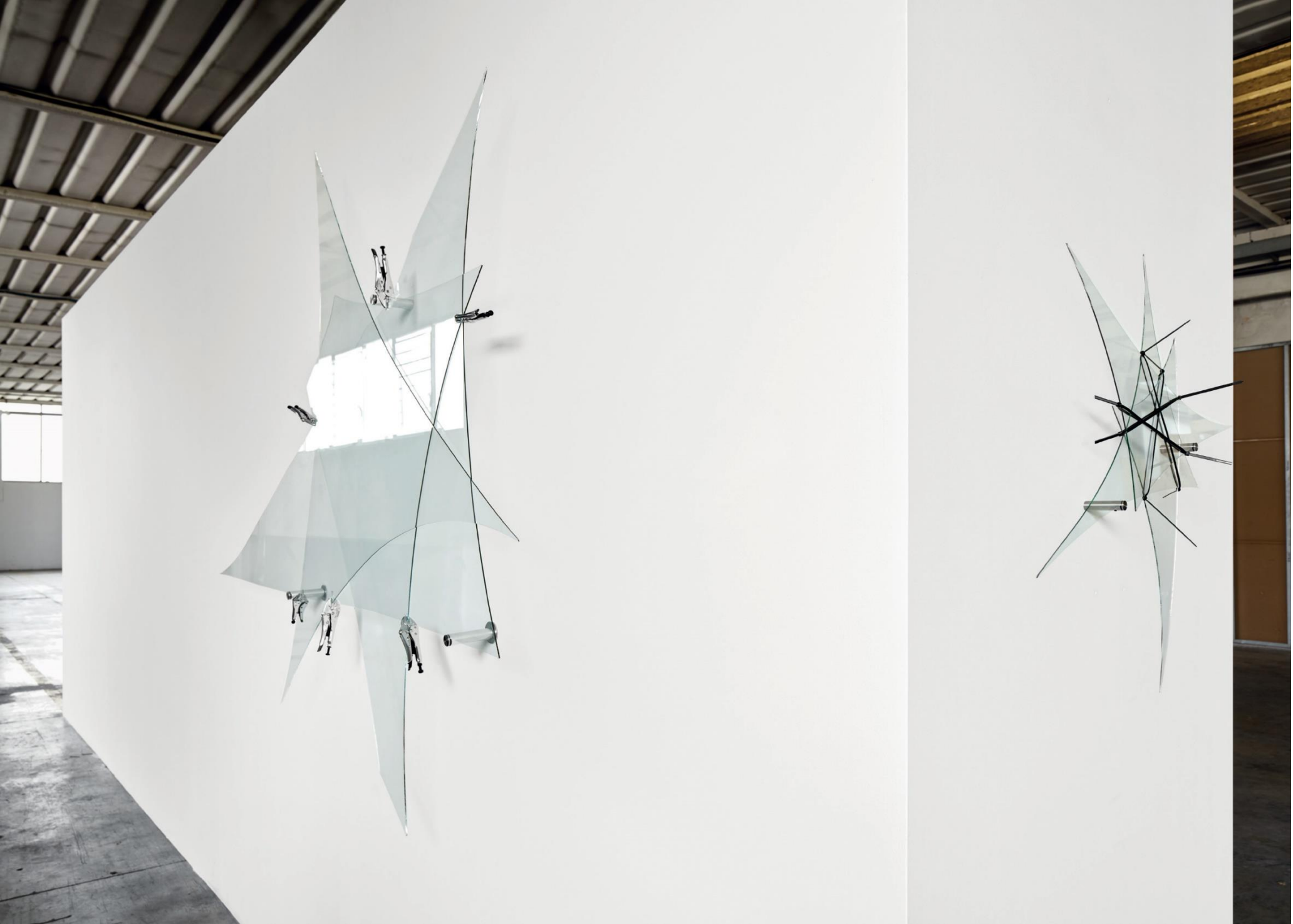
4. E.M. Cioran, *La chute dans le temps*, Gallimard, Paris 1964, p. 92; English translation, *The Fall into Time*, Quadrangle Books, Chicago 1995, p. 173.













Bare Life; Or, What Lies Ahead

As we embark upon the new decade, it may prove advantageous to re-evaluate art's potential for agency, criticality and transcendence. Aesthetic criteria in the aughts often served as lightning rods where communities debated the ways in which artworks – borne from challenging lived realities – could catalyze social progress. At the start of 2020, almost every aspect of our lives feels tenuous. Political frameworks are fraught, social tensions are palpable and our daily existences are subjected to innumerable pressures from the threat of virulent pathogens. If the signal role we assign art and aesthetics is to hold a mirror to our contemporary consciousness, then, what we see reflected in return are visual manifestations of untenable situations: artworks wrestling with their own internal logic and conflicted from within. Arcangelo Sassolino's sculptures are immanently imbued with these harrowing qualities. Employing industrial materials ranging from glass and concrete to steel and rubber, Sassolino creates artworks whose pristine finish and articulate construction embody a distressing resonance. Each sculpture manifests as a sphinx, suggesting clues necessary to reconcile what lies ahead.

Sassolino utilizes glass to allegorize the fragility of modern life and make legible our collective capacity to withstand pressure under seemingly insurmountable weight. In the artist's wall mounted glass sculptures, sheets of 12 mm glass are individually hand cut, organized into precise rectangular stacks and held in place by the force of an industrial steel clamp. The sculpture's edges are simultaneously seductive and razor sharp. Yet, while under extreme pressure from the clamp's grasp, the fragile material does not break, splinter or fracture. Rather, ripples – evocative of the ocean and calming in appearance – emanate from the vice's point of contact. Cantilevered from the wall, these sculptures manifest an equilibrium established between the *pressure* from the vice

and the *resistance* of the glass. Each material exerts the precise amount of force against each other necessary for the sculpture to hold its shape and refuse to shatter.

With titles including *Perdita di valori tradizionali (Loss of Traditional Values)*, 2018, and *Instabilità pretoria (Instability of the Praetorian Guard)*, 2018, Sassolino infuses his work with social resonance, suggesting a conceptual parallel between the collapse of the Roman Empire and the impending ruin of our contemporary consciousness. Events are echoed throughout history, even across millennia. The artist's most recent and largest sculpture in this series, presciently titled *Qualcosa è cambiato (Something Is Changed)*, 2019, is human scale, measuring six feet tall. Viewers are offered their *doppelgänger* – their aesthetic analogue – clamped and hung from a hook on the wall. Propelling the metaphor one step further, *La sola regola possibile (The Only Possible Rule)*, 2019, presents monumental sheets of plate glass site-responsively scaled to nearly the height of the room with only slivers of negative space remaining below the ceiling and above the floor. The glass column, held into place by two steel bars pushing against the gallery walls, creates a haunting cruciform: a sculptural specter of persecution, marginalization, criminalization and humiliation. In concomitant, and profoundly tenuous works, sheets of glass are laid onto steel frames and forced to support the weight of a stone boulder. Each stone, specifically chosen for its formal character, forces the glass to bow under its pressure, yet not shatter. Sassolino's proposition, here, requires viewers to believe in the veracity of his materials, and in turn, in themselves. For example, in the sculpture poignantly titled *Declino della virtù civica (Decline of Civic Virtue)*, 2018, a lichen covered stone culled from the landscape in Vicenza resides on a thin piece of caving glass, whereas *Incombente (Looming)*, 2019, offers viewers a harbinger for what is to come: our need to resist our own material failure. These sculpture's dichotomic elements present a dynamic equilibrium allegorizing empathy in our contemporary consciousness and illustrating a cautionary tale: we are the glass.

In Sassolino's oeuvre, materials associated with Modernism and industrial progress counterintuitively compel us to think through what it means to be human. Patently anthropomorphic in design and autobiographical in tone, Sassolino marshals industrial truck tires to examine the ways in which external forces shape issues of masculinity. *Marco, Antonio, Luciano* and *Cassio* (*Marcus, Antonius, Lucian* and *Cassius*), all 2018, comprise a series of fully inflated, free standing Pirelli and Marathon truck tires whose oiled surfaces glisten and whose fine rubber follicles suggest hair. Monumental in scale and robust in appearance, these sculptures maintain their commanding stature despite being squeezed by a constricting I-beam, keeling their once circular form into a permanent state of bent inflection. Each tire, named after a male figure of import, often Roman senators or statesmen, is frozen in a permanent state of subjugation. By subjecting these eroticized objects to several tons of pressure, Sassolino creates a sculptural encounter that embodies the ways in which external forces *shape* issues of masculinity.

Sassolino's practice can be defined by the alchemical transformation of matter and the axiom that particles are always in motion, seen (meta-mechanical sculptures) or unseen (atoms of air frenetically moving inside the tire). Sassolino's kinetic sculptures often perform choreographed actions that mime human motions, gestures and bodily responses, such as chewing, breathing and touching. Through Sassolino's signature visual language, the artist simultaneously updates and razes the tenets of both Minimalism and Post-Minimalism – including factory fabrication, the elimination of the artist's hand, seriality, the implementation of autobiographical and sensuous materials, and the exploration of weight and gravity – to allegorize the brutality of bare life. In one of the artist's signal works, *Piccolo animismo* (*Little Animism*), 2011, a monumental steel cube saturated with compressed gas is *further* inflated, forcibly expanding the material's otherwise rigid state past its material capacity, causing the sculpture to rumble, tremble and levitate off of the ground. The random influx of gas, injected

into the cube's steel frame, mirrors hyperventilated breathing. Sassolino formally embraces the Minimal art object and revels in its Post-Minimal defiance. The artist's concrete sculptures alchemically transform base material into transcendent entities. Influenced by the pervasive use of concrete across Northern Italy's landscape, Sassolino translates the industrial material's utilitarian applications into enigmatic objects evocative of black holes, curved space and warped time. The works are created from the weight of its own making: mounds of wet concrete are forcefully applied to bent Plexiglas, which when dry, reveal gem-like, polished, concave forms that appear to float from the wall as if portals to another dimension.

Often, Sassolino's sculptures are driven by hardware either programmed to articulate a choreographed set of functions or liberated to function at random; they are kinetic objects with the potential to be under our control or think for themselves. Conceptually akin to Jean Tinguely's "meta-mechanical" pursuit to reflect Postwar life, Sassolino animates sculptures that probe what it *feels* like to be alive in the present. Yet unlike Tinguely's embrace of voyeurism, Sassolino's sculptures neither "partially self-destruct" nor "detonate" in a "proposition" or "study" for an "end of the world," rather viewers are sometimes required to *participate* in the object's operational tasks. In *The way we were*, 2018, viewers insert black basalt stones into the "mouth" of a pneumatic machine. As the sculpture's pistons lower to pulverize the stone's once stoic and impenetrable corpus into dust, viewers are tasked to endlessly repeat this Sisyphean process, enduring mundane labor and physicalizing the tenor of bare life.

Sassolino's work embraces the visceral tension between fascination and anxiety by creating machines whose actions intrigue the viewer and likewise pose an immediate and tangible threat. These works create a moment that is imminent, urgent and captivating: Sassolino pushes the spectator's psyche into a strange and uncomfortable place – one that is cognizant and wary of the deconstructive actions about to take place yet fully absorbed by the

sculpture's aesthetic capacity. As a result, Sassolino's work allegorizes acts that unfold before our eyes; everyday events that have taken place throughout history or incidents (re)narrativized and broadcasted by the media.

Visually recalling a device culled from the Spanish Inquisition, *Damnatio memoriae*, 2016, is a monumental kinetic sculpture that pulverizes stone into dust, this time using a Classical marble torso. Hermetically sealed within an air-tight glass and steel cube, *Damnatio memoriae* stands over 3.3 meters tall, is constructed of milled stainless steel and employs an industrial diamond sander to methodically raze layers of a Classical marble torso. Rhythmically rotating at a rate of 2900 rpm, *Damnatio memoriae*'s circular grinder transforms its subject into mere particles. The sculpture's title, derived from the Latin *damnatio memoriae*, refers to a term developed by German scholars in the 17th century to describe the ancient Roman act of erasing those who committed treason from the historical record. Throughout the past two decades, Sassolino's signature sculptural vocabulary elucidates the complex relationships between industrial machines and humanist impulses, allegorizing human experiences and cultural conditions. *Damnatio memoriae* wicks many perilous conditions of contemporary life, including weaponized historical revisionism. Situated between the discourse of Jean Tinguely postwar self-immolating machines and Edgar Allan Poe's *The Pit and the Pendulum* of 1842, *Damnatio memoriae*'s "meta-mechanics" present an encounter where physical permanence is slowly dematerialized, physically reducing our present to memory.

Damnatio memoriae furthers Sassolino interest in visceral encounters, making us reconsider our collective memory and calls our humanity into question. In his work, however, it is often the incalculable that resonates with the viewer: the indefinite fate of a destroyed object or the potential failure of a daunting structure and how these unknowns impact the viewer *here* and *now*.

Sassolino's most recent kinetic work, *A True History*, 2020, is a monumental, free standing sculpture in which a hydraulic piston crushes a freshly felled tree log, 80 cm in diameter. As the hydraulic piston compresses the log between two massive sheets of solid steel, fluids are ejected as its corpus shatters under immense pressure. Evocative of a public execution, *A True History* thinks through the complex relationship between Modernism and Environmentalism: viewers bear witness to the traumatic and profoundly shocking display of raw industrial force on the natural world. In this work, ecological awareness is presented as a humanist impulse: the tree log serves as a surrogate for a body, raising issues of who is protected and who is not. Who has rights and who does not. *A True History* is both ethological and mechanized, poetic and menacing, pushing materials past their physical limitations to demonstrate Modernism's process of becoming and unbecoming. The tree log's anthropomorphic qualities allows viewers to experience the promise and perils of industrial progress, revealing the harrowing consequences and destructive actions in which societies engage to "evolve", eschewing empathy in our contemporary frame of reference. Using Lucian of Samosata's novel as its point of departure, Sassolino parallels the author's position that all history is a fiction, all identity is a construction and everything we believe as "true" is an exercise in delusion.

Taken as a whole, Sassolino's artistic corpus brings to the fore the oppositional notions of doubt and faith: doubt and faith in our capacity as a *polis* to rebuild and support the citizenry; doubt and faith in local, state and federal governance; doubt and faith in the "truth-value" of our positions. If we define representation in terms of visibility, then whose "true history" gets pride of place? While seductive in its form and often lethal in its function, Sassolino's diverse body of work offers no palliatives for the tyranny of the real and the fragility of modern life laid bare.

Jeffrey Uslip

