

FOCUS ON



ARCANGELO SASSOLINO

The aesthetics of wonder
and **instability**

Detail of The way we were (2018) by Arcangelo Sassolino | © Mattia Gregh



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Wonder of the world

The artistic and biographical evolutions of Arcangelo Sassolino

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Arcangelo Sassolino
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This "Focus on" is an exploration in depth of the work of Arcangelo Sassolino, from his childhood to his beginnings in the world of toys, and on to his latest works on oils and supersonic speed. An examination of his poetics, sculptural language, technique, art-historical links, philosophical, scientific and ecological aspects, through the eyes of eminent critics, curators, specialists and international museum directors (Ed.).

Arcangelo Sassolino, an artist with a very personal and surprising trajectory, talks to us about his childhood, his obsessions and the way he encountered art. A pure inventor and experimenter, Sassolino reconstructs his curious path, between New York, Tuscany and a large shed in Veneto. Through the artist's words we get in touch with the different stages of his research, from the first marbles made in Tuscany to the most recent works, dedicated to the question of instability, transformation and the perpetual becoming of things.

A.B: Arcangelo what kind of child were you? Looking at your works, I imagine you as a little inventor, a budding Leonardo da Vinci.

A.S: When I was a child, I used to come home from school and spend afternoons in the garage at home, building, cutting, gluing. I mainly built planes. My dad, who unfortunately passed away when I was a child, realised this; he was a good craftsman.

A.B: In that garage, busy building aero-planes and strange machines, you

were trying to make wonderful things, things that generated wonder or amazement. That's exactly what you continued to do when you grew up, it seems to me, in your role as artist.

A.S: The sense of enchantment at the world, thinking of things in three dimensions, the attraction for speed, are things that fortunately have never left me.

A.B: And then what happened? I read somewhere that once you graduated you embarked on an engineering course.

A.S: I was the last of five children. There wasn't much culture in the house: I grew up with this strong passion for doing without really understanding how to express it. Driven by this desire to build, I enrolled in mechanical engineering when I was 19, but I didn't attend a single class. I am not an engineer, but I patented a toy and it was the first breakthrough of my life. It was a three-dimensional puzzle and I sent the patent to the Milton Bradley Company. This first patent and the subsequent prototypes were crucial, as they allowed me to do a three-month internship in New York at Next Toy, an American agency representing various design studios. And the three months turned into almost six years. They were not interested in your CV or background: they needed new ideas and it worked for me, as I was churning out ideas.

A.B: Did you develop other games during this phase?

A.S: Yes, and after five years one of my toys was put into production by the Mattel group.

A.B: Designing toys allowed you to leave Vicenza, live in New York, and even travel. How did your encounter with art come about?

A.S: As often happens in life, by a stroke of luck. I found myself catapulted from the depths of the province of Vicenza to Manhattan, without going through university. Here I met a brilliant girl (today she creates crossword puzzles for the *New York Times*). She was the daughter of a great New York collector and a few hours after meeting me she said: "You're not a toy inventor, you're a sculptor." She had two tickets to the 1992 Henri Matisse retrospective at MoMA. It was like an electric shock. In the last room there were the 'cut-outs': thanks to these I realised that you could make art even without knowing how to draw like Raphael or Dürer. After two weeks, I enrolled in the School of Visual Art.

A.B: And did you continue working in the world of toys?

A.S: Yes, for a few more years, until they offered me a contract, a very lucrative one, to stay another three years, but by then I had decided to change direction. So I started from scratch. I continued on my path as an artist and rather than stay in New York, maybe with a small studio as many artists did, I preferred to move to Tuscany.

A.B: So you came back to Italy, between Carrara and Pietrasanta, and started from scratch. What kind of works did you produce in that period?

A.S: Fairly canonical works, being a self-taught artist. I started studying the classics, learning, travelling. They were years of apprenticeship and great experimentation, even though rather naive at times. It was a phase that ended after two or three years, when I bought a small shed in the province of Vicenza.

A.B: There is a tendency to think that only the so-called outsider artists, those for example in the Collection de l'Art Brut in Lausanne, were self-taught. In reality, many twentieth-century artists, even the so-called heroes of modernism, were self-taught. Among the Italians, I can think, for example, of Gianni Piacentino, who studied philosophy for a few years, and then at a very young age began to create minimal sculptures, applying techniques and knowledge he had learnt in a special paint factory, between 1967 and 1968. Like you, since childhood, Piacentino had a passion for speed and modelling, which never left him. In short, the self-taught artist brings to the world of art not only obsessions but also techniques, 'other' knowledge, which allow him to develop an autonomous and unprecedented language. Actually, you are not even self-taught because you studied art in

New York. But what remains fundamental in your work are your passions and childhood obsessions, the imagination of that child who used to build aeroplanes in a garage in the Veneto.

A.S: Being an artist means constantly going beyond. Sometimes getting into a system in a more 'naive' and 'disenchanted' way can be an advantage. In the world of toys, for example, the most revolutionary ideas that later became toy classics all came from someone who was not a professional inventor.

A.B: Your first solo exhibition dates back to 2001. During the last two decades, your work has gone through various phases. Let us try to go through them in chronological order. The first group of works are those in marble, made in Tuscany, right?

A.S: They are works born out of the joy of working with my hands, but there was not yet that urgency of what I wanted to say with my work. They are more naive, linked to the wonder of the technique.

A.B: Every four to five years your work changes, sometimes profoundly.

A.S: Yes. The marbles were followed by a series of works in which I began to interact with architecture, to cut pieces out of it, like the suspended gallery floor, or to cast masses of reinforced concrete and then suspend or prop them precariously. It was an important phase, I was fascinated by the energy exerted against the wings of an aeroplane, over a bridge, the intrinsic energy of matter that has to find its balance. I wanted to extrapolate it.

A.B: And from this phase came another, that of complex mechanisms.

A.S: Yes, I then started to make machines, to use pressure, gravity, friction, to exert these forces on materials, almost as if I wanted to 'grab matter by the neck' to make it say something new. Now, for a couple of years, this phase is also evolving, the use of violence towards the material is fading away, and my research is more centred on instability, transformation, perpetual becoming, a present that is never static.

A.B: Metamorphosis, mutation, the transformation of matter are very important in your work. Your machines exert enormous pressure on wood, steel and many other materials; they deform them, destroy them, even shatter them. In your latest works,



Arcangelo Sassolino's **Afasia 1 (2008)**
© N. Migueletz (Frankfurter Kunstverein, Frankfurt, 2016; Galleria Continua, San Gimignano, 2011; Palais de Tokyo, Paris, 2008)

however, you seem to be interested in the condition of matter in its dimension of instability, in its transitory condition.

A.S: That's right. In *Diplomazija Astuta*, for example, I was interested in showing steel in its liquid form. Molten steel is charged with energy and turns into something else: it becomes light, it is red-hot, dangerous, totally unstable and out of control. The work functions thanks to induction mechanisms. The steel is melted by the energy produced by a magnetic field, passing through it without even touching it. It is an invisible magic that takes it from zero to 1,500 degrees in the blink of an eye. From solid, dark and black it melts faster than wax. And it

drips, falls into the water, where it stays glowing for a few more seconds. I had originally thought of it without the cooling tanks, with the drops falling directly onto the concrete, where they explode into a hundred thousand parts, like an illuminated crystal. The transformation of the material interests me a lot. Metal has been used for thousands of years, even in the history of sculpture, but always in a static way. For a couple of years now, I have disengaged myself from this magnificent Italian tradition of Arte Povera, Informalism, Futurism, applying these new technologies, and I have started to create my own alphabet, my own phrasebook.

A.B: What are you working on now?

A.S: For example, I am working with

heavy oils: they are liquids in continuous transformation that float on slowly rotating machines continuously day and night, months and years. The painting becomes something liquid, totally unstable and constantly changing.

A.B: Even though these works are not finished, what result do you expect from this research into oils?

A.S: They are works that imply a display of loss, that announce their end in a certain sense. It is a work about transience, instability; it transforms as you look at it: the oil keeps falling and the rotation keeps it up, but over time it will dissipate. Lately I have also been working with the concept of supersonic speed, a speed so great that it disrupts the image, breaks it. I am designing a completely new machine, together with the company with which I developed the Venice work. There is always something archaic in my work, a desire to search for the initial point from which everything started. My work stems from the idea of synthesising thought via an action that is as simple as possible while taking it to the extreme.

A.B: Your ideal, perhaps your childhood dream, would be to reproduce the Big Bang in your shed in Veneto. An event, the starting point in fact, from which the entire universe originates.

A.S: There is a work that has never moved from the studio: it is a mass of steel that is lifted and held suspended by a magnet. Every so often the link opens and it falls, impacting against the floor. It is something I have only tested twice, because the impact on the floor creates a micro-earthquake, a wave that propagates within a radius of 200 m.

A.B: I imagine that you don't always succeed in realising the project, the machine, that you have in mind... Are there also moments of despair?

A.S: Yes, even of depression: there are these long waves of joy, enthusiasm, exaltation towards a new idea, then there can follow months of excruciating doubts, of stasis. And then it starts again, this sort of demon dragging you forward.

A.B: As we said at the beginning, you feel condemned always to arouse amazement in yourself and others, with each new project more amazing than the last.

A.S: Yes. There is this pull, this desire, this infinite void to fill.

Arcangelo Sassolino

Arcangelo Sassolino (1967) was born in Vicenza, where he currently lives and works.

Sassolino's work is the result of a close dialogue between art and physics. His interest in mechanics and technology opens up new meanings and possibilities for sculpture. Speed, pressure, gravity, acceleration and heat are the core of his artistic practice, which is always aimed at pushing the ultimate limit of matter's resistance. Sassolino's works usually consist of devices that generate inorganic performances. The materials involved, often industrial, come alive revealing contrasts and opposing forces. His works embody intrinsic conflicts and push us to contemplate the risk of the work's collapse as a fundamental part of its experience. By exploring different states of matter, Sassolino's works display a level of tension, suspension, unpredictability and danger. In-so-far as failure is always a concrete possibility, his works materially embed an inescapable aspect of the human condition.

Selected Exhibitions

Solo exhibitions: Arte Sella, Borgo Valsugana, Trento (2022); Contemporary Art Museum, St. Louis (2016); Frankfurter Kunstverein, Frankfurt (2016); Académie de France – Villa Medici, Rome (2016); Museo MACRO, Rome (2011); Z33 House for Contemporary Art, Hasselt (2010); Palais de Tokyo, Paris (2008); Galleria Continua, San Gimignano/Paris (2022, 2018, 2016, 2010); Galleria dello Scudo, Verona (2019); Repetto Gallery, London (2017).
Group exhibitions: 59th International Art Exhibition, Venice Biennale, Malta Pavilion (2022); Fondation Carmignac, Île de Porquerolles (2022); Spazi Capaci, Palermo (2022); Kunstmuseum Bonn, Bonn (2022); 17th International Architecture Exhibition, Venice Biennale (2021); Kunstverein Hannover, Hanover (2019); Grand Palais, Paris (2018); Broad Art Museum, East Lansing (2017); Palazzo Ducale, Venice (2017); Fundación Pablo Atchugarry, Punta del Este (2016); Le Centquatre, Paris (2015); CCC Strozzi, Florence (2012, 2010); Art and The City, Zurich (2012); Swiss Institute, New York (2011); Museo MART, Rovereto (2011, 2005); Tinguely Museum, Basel (2010); Peggy Guggenheim Collection, Venice (2009); Dunkers Kulturhus, Helsingborg (2008); FRAC Museum Regional, Reims (2007); ZKM, Karlsruhe (2006); Fondazione Bevilacqua La Masa, Venice (2001).

Absolute instability

Four-dimensional actions and transubstantiations introduce the concept of time into inert matter, making instability a memento mori, a metaphor for the human condition

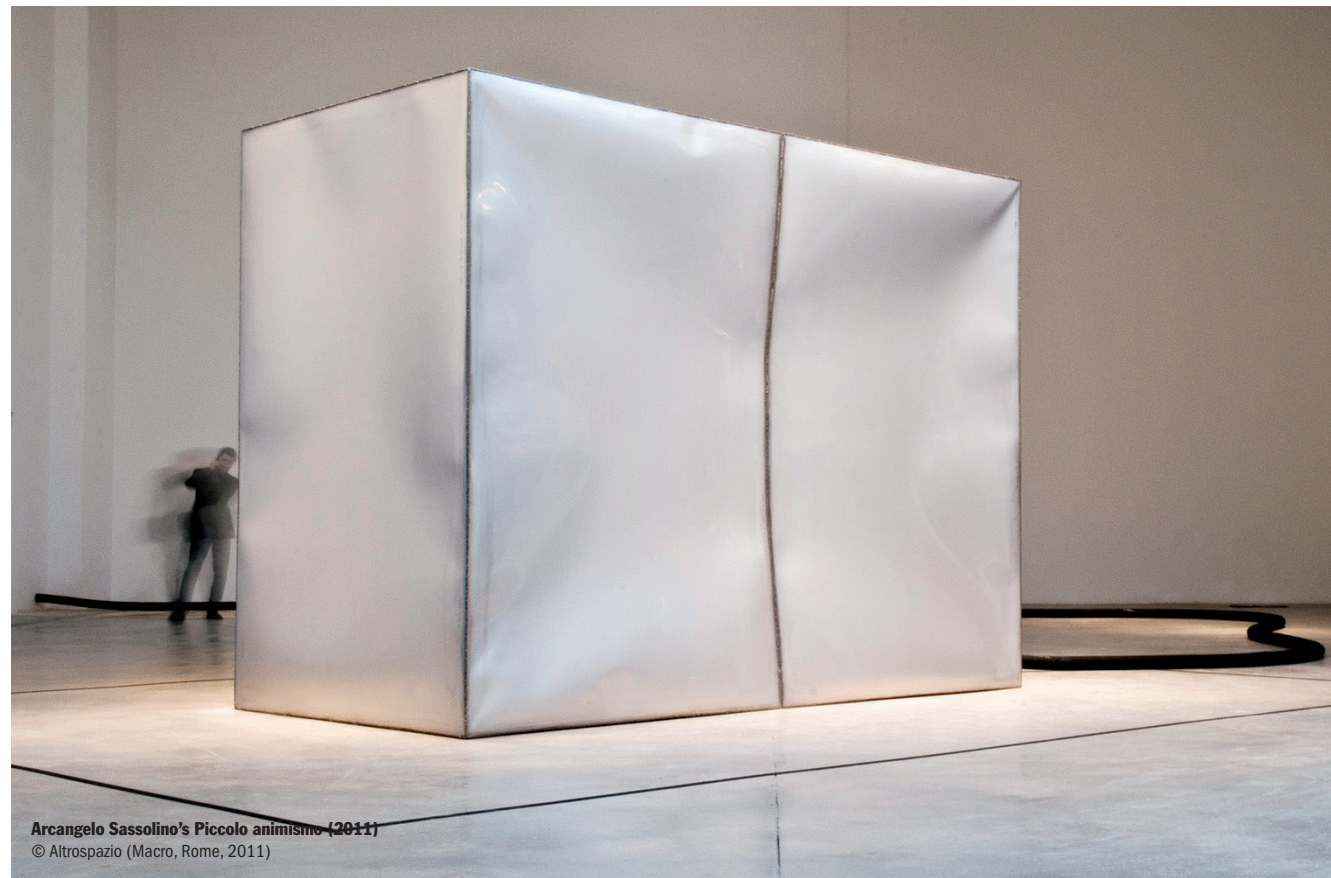
By **Francesco Manacorda**
Independent curator, London

Arcangelo Sassolino's work often involves the use of imposing and sophisticated machinery, capable of exerting immense forces on objects, materials and inert substances in their purest state. These naked and inanimate materials are subjected to an action designed to trigger a process of change in them. At the heart of this research, to which the artist constantly returns, lies his intention to enclose or, perhaps, better perform the shift between two states of equilibrium before the observers' eyes. Sassolino speaks of a liberation of matter, which he decides to manipulate from its 'closed, fixed and habitual form'.

On the one hand we have materials typical of the sculptural tradition that are normally considered stable, such as metal, stone or wood. This property of 'closed form' is fundamental to their role in the field of sculpture, as it allows the three-dimensional work of art to achieve a durability that guarantees it an almost complete suspension from historical time: monuments, statues, buildings are built to be handed down to future generations and to last, in theory and in the intention of their creator, 'forever'. At the other end of the spectrum, it is precisely the instability that Sassolino mechanically confers on such materials that introduces time into their ontological condition. A material that is subject to change is altered in historical time, and in that time the different degrees of metamorphosis that the material undergoes can be observed and measured.

Hence Sassolino's research is firmly rooted in the history of Italian art: the fourth dimension, that of time, was the cardinal point of the Futurist investigation of painting. Cubist research attempted to recapture the complete visual experience of a still object or subject, breaking it down into planes that acknowledge its semblance seen from multiple spatial points at the same time; while Futurism incorporated its relationship with the space traversed in time into the subject represented. While Balla and Boccioni sought to depict dynamism on a two-dimensional surface, Sassolino seeks to enclose the change of state of a material (solid, liquid and gaseous) from a mechanical point of view in a four-dimensional action, introducing time into inert matter. In full contrast with certain Futurist themes, the gesture is performed not by the human hand, but by mechanical tools.

The visualisation of the change of state remains the most reiterated key point of



Arcangelo Sassolino's *Piccolo animismo* (2011)
© Altrospazio (Macro, Rome, 2011)

his artistic practice; for him it is a matter of "capturing the instant of the change of state, the moment in which something is becoming something else, the energy and power that exists in that instant of absolute instability that is at the origin of those moments of equilibrium that are the before and the after". (Arcangelo Sassolino, *Dissipatio in Diplomazija Astuta, Pavilion of Malta at the 59th International Art Exhibition, Venice Biennale 2022*, p. 93). In mechanical physics, solid, liquid, gaseous and plasma are the main states of matter, and each state transition achieved through pressure or temperature absorbs or releases a certain amount of energy.

The transition from gaseous to solid is called, with non-negligible religious evocations, 'deposition'. In his work *Il vuoto senza misura* (The void beyond measure, 2022), Sassolino has constructed a fan of such power that the air is perceived, by those who face its flow, as solid matter capable of exerting pressure on the body.

Sublimation, in this case a word with both religious and psychoanalytic connotations, instead describes the transition from solid to gaseous. *Damnatio memoriae* (2016) is an action in which a machine pulverises the marble copy of a classical Greco-Roman statue. Marble, the paradigmatic material of Western sculpture, in its form as a relic surviving

from civilisations prior to the present one, is transformed into a penetrable, breathable cloud, formally unstable until the dust (changing state once more) settles on the earth's surface after its temporary aerial flight. With this, Sassolino questions whether sculpture, a discipline that transcends time through its enduring form, can flow like time and leave its mortal trace behind. As the title suggests, there is also an attack on memory and on the claimed fixity that sculpture, and the tradition of the monument, confer on a historical event, a situation, a person portrayed or an idea represented.

The same experiment of sublimation is at the centre of the works in which a glass bottle is exploded through the use of internal pressure, generated by a gas in *D.P.D.U.F.A.* (2016), or of speed in *Aphasia 1* (2008), in which bottles are shot against a metal surface, pulverising them. Speed clearly takes up the theme dear to Futurism by breaking it down into the relationship between space and time in front of the viewer: in everyday life too, speed is calculated by relating distance to the time it takes to travel it.

The relationship between solid and liquid takes on a more complex nature, as this transition can occur twice, resulting in a melting followed by solidification. The most memorable example is that of *Diplomazija Astuta* (2022) in which, in or-

der to create a rain of fire of biblical proportions, Sassolino makes a metal liquid and then returns it to a solid state. Both conversions are performed by altering the temperature of the material: melting through induction, and solidification through basins of water. In this case not only does the sculpture literally 'become' instead of statically 'being', but we can also venture to imagine that for the artist the sculptural material is in this case light, with an allusion to Balla, rather than steel. With this material Sassolino on the one hand links himself to Caravaggio, the master of light and darkness, and on the other generates an eschatological opening in the extraordinarily apocalyptic scenario in which he immerses us.

The huge work *Piccolo animismo* (Small Animism, 2011) also creates a circle of metaphorical fusion and subsequent solidification. A room-sized steel cube is 'inflated and deflated' with compressed air. During this operation, the cube 'breathes', turning our perception of the solidity of the immobile metal into an impression of elastic liquidity. During its expansion and contraction, moreover, *Piccolo animismo* produces a sound similar to thunder and the cube, almost taking on a life of its own, begins to rock as its base also swells, altering its linear surface. It is no coincidence that the title makes direct reference to the



A detail of Arcangelo Sassolino's *Damnatio memoriae* (2016)
© Riccardo Malberti (Galerie Rolando Anselmi, Berlin, 2016)

magical-religious practice of animism in which an inorganic entity is endowed, by projection, with properties typical of the divine and, by association, of the human.

An aspect of religious animism also comes into play in the infant's magical thinking that assigns human properties to objects, attributing them a soul. This happens, for instance, every time a child kicks a table to inflict pain on it in retaliation to having previously bumped into it. It is precisely on this projective capacity that the appeal and function of most toys are based. Similarly, Sassolino brings inorganic matter to life when he makes the sculpture take on anthropomorphic behaviour. In this way matter is made active: its being in the process of becoming places it in time and gives organic matter characteristics of materials usually characterised by passive inertia.

This last concept is useful when we look at its physical definition: inertia is the characteristic of an object that resists change, its tendency to preserve its state of stillness and stability or, in Sassolino's language, 'its closed form'. The focus on process and energy links Sassolino's work not only to the Italian Arte Povera generation, but also to the Process art that was the basis of Harald Szeeman's exhibition *Live in your head - When Atti-*

tudes Become Form (Kunsthalle Bern, 1969) or Jean-Christophe Amman's *Visualised Thought Processes* (Kunstmuseum Luzern, 1970). The artists involved in these two exhibitions had in common a certain propensity for the conceptual structure of the work and the transformative process at the expense of its stable conclusion. Some Arte Povera exponents also used the energy imprisoned in materials as an artistic medium and poetic instrument. The strongest resemblance with Sassolino's work is undoubtedly Giovanni Anselmo's *Torsione* (1968) or Richard Serra's precariously balanced metal plates. The forces enclosed in the becoming of Anselmo's sculpture are statically frozen, but potentially able to be released; for Sassolino, these same forces are in action, rather than in 'still-image' mode. In Sassolino's work, the trespassing of form yearned for by the group of artists of the 1960s, rather than being potential, is mostly actually under way.

In a far more pronounced manner than Serra, but perhaps comparable to an *Untitled* Anselmo work of 1968 (stones, electric cable, electricity), Sassolino also makes use of danger and a sense of threat as an additional sculptural medium. Many of the works involve the use of enclosed or released energy, placing the viewer in a potentially deadly condition, jeopardising his or her physical safety.

The tangible threat forces the viewer into a position of power, visualising the vulnerability of the human to the physical forces at play in the manipulation of matter. This mechanism of power is not intended to subjugate the viewer, but rather to present the energy and tension inherent in the transformation of materials as a palpable perception, thus activating pre-conscious bodily sensations of danger that become intrinsic to the experience.

A final element that plays a fundamental role in many works is sound, another discipline that makes use of time. Sassolino speaks of "making the material sing" as an accompaniment to the condition of instability in which the material is, once again, made anthropomorphic. In the works that put wood under tension to the point of breaking its fibres – from *Violenza casuale* (Random violence, 2007) to those with titles that are, not by chance, borrowed from Dante, *Purgatory* (2016) and *Canto V* (2016) – the artist puts wood and its ever-changing 'song' at the centre of the performance. Similarly, *The way we were* (2018) offers us the lament of stone using a press that reduces centuries-old stones to dust. Even though the artist declares that sound for him is a later element, a 'consequence', these are real concerts repeated like in an opera house.

Many questions remain concerning the threads we have identified in Sassolino's work. What do we deduce from this repeated visualisation of instability? Why does Sassolino seek to lead us to perceive this transitive state of metamorphosis? What purpose does the anthropomorphisation of materials and sculpture fulfill? On the one hand, the introduction of time into inert, inorganic material, giving it symbolic life and endowing it with human qualities, functions as a *memento mori* for the observer of the works: the unstable material is a metaphor for life, which as it is active in time is racing against its inevitable dissolution. The link between death and time was clearly thematised by Heidegger with the formula that being is always a lack: a 'being-toward-death'. The possibility of becoming is in itself a possibility of the end, which in the artist's words "transforms their aesthetics into the mortal connection with themselves" (Francesco Stocchi 'Conversation with Arcangelo Sassolino' in Jasper Sharp ed., *Arcangelo Sassolino*, Palais de Tokyo, JPRingier, 2006, p. 84).

On the other hand, the attempt to give life to sculpture and a soul to the inorganic has the effect of representing life as a state of continuous alteration, thus visualising the eminently human impregnability of existence, firmly encapsulated in the sculptural tradition by Gianlorenzo Bernini with *Apollo and Daphne*.

On, off and everything in between

The work of art as a place where the infinite possibilities of being can interact

By **Marc-Olivier Wahler**

Director of the MAH Musée d'art et d'histoire de Genève

“When does something become a work of art?” This famous question has haunted many philosophers who in the twentieth century have tried to solve the enigma of the ontology of the work of art. It has still not found a definitive answer. Indeed, when does a work of art begin? When does it become active? What is the magical moment when an ordinary object is transformed into an aesthetic object?

Is it when the work is conceived, exhibited or mediated? As we know, since Duchamp, artists have constantly experimented with the elasticity of this temporal notion.

Arcangelo Sassolino's works resemble 'sleeper agents'. They take on the identity of industrial objects, like those used in a construction site. But like any sleeping agent, these pieces one day become active, in accordance with a timeframe that it is impossible to decipher. At a given moment, they will cause a disappearance. The floor that supports them will collapse, the ceiling that shelters them will fall apart, the surrounding space will be swept away in a devastating explosion. It is only a matter of time. The visitor may have the illusion of accelerating the process of destruction, as with the hydraulic piston whose pressure on a wooden beam is activated and accentuated as the visitor approaches, but the precise moment of the 'accident', the very instant of the disappearance, seems to be determined by a process inscribed at the heart of the machinery imagined by the artist.

Arcangelo Sassolino's work makes a major contribution to this temporal enigma of the work of art and stands as a worthy heir to Duchamp's famous *machines célibataires* ('bachelor machines'). Such a work is careful not to assert any truth in relation to this problem. It is approached as a clue, an answer at the tip of one's tongue, a premonition of an event to come. It prevents the mind from resting on any certainty, which is a source of immobility and mental necrosis. It becomes a dynamic instrument in the service of a true clearing of the mind.

M.O.W: Let's start with this interesting fact: you didn't start with the standard education an artist would, like going right away to art school for example. Some of the best artists I know never went to art school: some went to an applied art school where they learned graphic design or photography, some studied architecture, carpentry or music. These artists happen to envision their work in a quite different way than the ones who went to art schools. Can you tell us

more about your education and your first jobs?

A.S: I think that to be an artist is mostly an attitude toward life, an approach to life. And from when I was a kid I have remembered to look at the world for a vision that for many years I could not understand, but that was between wonder, religion, mathematics and imagination. Around 20, I enrolled in mechanical engineer in Padova, but I didn't attend one single day. But at the same time I built a toy and that opened up a totally and unexpected new direction in my life.

M.O.W: What was that toy?

A.S: I was very fascinated by the Rubik's Cube and those 3D puzzles. Do you remember the '15 puzzle' also known as the "mystic square"? I turned it into a three-dimensional toy. First, I imagined it becoming a cylinder closed in on itself. Then I thought of vertically translating the rows that made it up and then I gave it the shape of a prism that could have a base of any geometric shape. Then, by rotating and translating the rows, within a couple of moves you would find a totally decomposed shape and the aim was to recompose the original shape.

M.O.W: During that New York period, as you recount in the opening of this Focus, you visited the Matisse retrospective at MoMA and it changed your life. Then what happened?

A.S: I was inside MoMA for several hours and as the retrospective evolved into the later years of Matisse, it was the cut-outs that really made me understand that making art doesn't necessarily mean being able to draw like Rubens, Raphael or Dürer, but it is more about a specific approach to life. That apparently simple action of cutting paper and putting everything together to make amazing collages was what I needed in that moment. I understood that all those years of having the ability to see forms and understand materials could become an abstract way of seeing life. And this connection in my mind appeared to me in a perfect and accomplished way.

M.O.W: Did it change the way you were looking at the work you were doing?

A.S: It made me understand that building things in 3D was easy because I think in 3D. But it could be transformed into poetry or philosophy, in any abstract way of thinking, like making toys. It took me many years to understand who I am as an artist and maybe I still have not understood it yet. Only in the last couple of years I have been walking into a field that is starting to be mine. It is only with the latest works that I have shown you in the studio, which are totally new works and involve the use of very high speeds or use

of fluid, that I feel I am beginning to tread into territory that is my own.

M.O.W: Can we say that between toys and Matisse's cut-outs you found your place?

A.S: This is what happened to me.

M.O.W: A week after the Matisse exhibition, you enrolled at the School of Visual Arts in New York. What did you learn there?

A.S: It gave me a lot of freedom. I started by osmosis to absorb, to feel that huge ignorance void that I had in my mind. Suddenly I needed to see as many things as possible.

M.O.W: So what was the first work you did?

A.S: It was a sculpture in wood that the owner of the company I worked for, my friend Robert, still has in his house. It was between a Picasso and Henry Moore, a three-dimensional, two-metre-high figure of a woman. *Gabrielle* is its title.

M.O.W: When did you become fascinated with this idea of movement that permeates most of your work? Is it because of the toy? Because the toy is something that has a usage value, you have to use it in your hands and it can be transformed from one state to another and is something that can't be static. What was suddenly the idea, this fascination, developed later, of transforming an object with a usage value into an object of aesthetic value, an artwork?

A.S: I can answer you exactly because in 2006, I had a show in Milan where I poured in the space of the gallery concrete directly on the floor. The result was a huge slab, 4 metre x 4 metre x 20 centimetres. When it solidified it was lifted and held in a 45-degree angle with a steel tube that I made an engineer calculate to be as thin as possible. To me, it was a kind of psychological trap for the viewer. It carried the idea of something that is unstable and can suddenly fall down.

M.O.W: This is a quite interesting work because it prefigures all the works followed where this idea of danger is constantly present, like in this case where people could walk underneath this massive slab.


A.S: Yes, people could go underneath. I like the expression that says that "weight never sleeps". The title was *Momento* because in physics momentum is the mathematical calculation for understanding the forces acting inside materials. So I liked the idea of the paradox of holding such a huge slab of concrete by a tiny stick, because it create a condition of anxiety in the viewer's mind. For me it was an attempt to pull out the soul of material. But in that occasion, I realised also that this thought was only in my mind, some

people understood the work, some other didn't. *Momento* helped me a lot to realize that in order to make people understand your ideas you have to really push them forward. This is why a few months after this experience I started making kinetic sculptures.

M.O.W: Machines can help us to understand this idea of transformation

A.S: Through machines I am able to transform, to make people perceive or see or feel the energy contained in materials. For example, the machine that I have in the next room is the first one that I built. It was a turning point for me. It is a nine-ton slab of steel that with a hydraulic system and electromagnet can be lifted and suspended from the floor and at an unexpected time drop on to it. When it hits the floor, the impact between the steel and the concrete creates energy like a tiny earthquake. The process of lifting the mass of steel and dropping it repeats itself at random, but eventually, as my engineer pointed out, it creates serious problems for the building. I guess this is why this work never left my studio.

M.O.W: When you go underneath a thin slab of concrete, you feel the structure could collapse. A 9 ton block hits the floor and sends waves that could lead to earthquakes and other consequences. In many of your works, there is sometimes a physical transformation from one state to the other or at least the possibility of a transformation. Sometimes it could go from static to dynamic, from full to empty, from solid to gas... The interesting part is not when it actually goes from one state to another, like in a computer program built with variation of 1 and 0. It's a system where opposites are interconnected with the possibility of getting transformed. The viewer feels immediately connected to all these different states. What I find interesting in your work is that it doesn't simply go from one state to another, from 1 to 0 and back. The signature of your work is that you can create a situation where 1 and 0 are just the walls that can hold all the possibilities in between these two opposites. Or if you think about electricity, energy doesn't lie in the + and - poles, but in the constant movement of the electrons in between the poles. Duchamp realised that it's quite easy to transform an ordinary object into an artwork, to go from A to B if you like, but he then spent the rest of his life trying to go backwards, asking "can one make works that are not 'of art'?" He kept saying, I'm not an artist, I'm an engineer, I'm a chess player, etc. He wasn't interested in



“What I am trying to capture is the change of state, that instant in which something is becoming something else, where energy and power exist in the flash of absolute instability between the preceding and following moments of equilibrium.”
Arcangelo Sassolino

going back to the opposite pole, ie. the ordinary object, he was actually interested in the energy that could lie between these two poles. I think that all artists somehow are trying to explore that field, where all the possibilities can happen. Like with the qubit, the quantum bit: you have the 1, you have the 0, and then you also have all the possibilities in between. When you really think of it, it explodes your mind. Having this feeling while watching a painting is extremely difficult, you don't see pigments on canvas, you immediately see a painting. You don't see the ordinary object, but an artwork. Your work is remarkable because it makes visible all the possible states of the object. You see the industrial object, you see the artwork and then you are kept in a dynamic field where everything could happen. You can feel, almost in a kinesthetic way, how an artwork is coming into life. Do you see what I mean?

A.S: I believe this is the crucial question of my practice. I am obsessed by the various stages of existence of even inanimate matter. I'm not sure I have an answer because I work by intuition but I always end up coming back to this point. While you were asking me the question my mind went automatically to Bernini's room at the Villa Borghese and his efforts to freeze the idea of movement in a block of stone. I thought of Boccioni trying to depict dynamism, the breaking through canvas of Lucio Fontana, the suspended weight of Anselmo, all these try to nail down time. Over the centuries, this is what Italian artists have tried to do.

When I look at one of Michelangelo's marbles for example I cannot disconnect myself from thinking about the process. It is like breaking the piece into different time frame: when the block was still buried inside the immense darkness of the mountain for millions of years, when it was broken away and separated into the quarry, when those unknown men slowly made it travel down the mountain with ropes and wooden slides, week after week, all the way to the studio. Then I think about the process of carving it, the artist's choice, the leaving it unfinished because obviously the colossal problem of time was obsessing him as well. Centuries go by but I still think of that masterpiece during the night in the silent darkness of the empty museum, another time again. Which is the time of a work?

In my installation presented at the Venice Biennale, melted steel at 1,500 degrees was dropping from the ceiling. Metal has been used for more than seven thousand years by humankind: spoon, weapon, monument, aircraft, bullet, scalpel, ring. Beauty and death. All the metal that we see, that we touch, that we use, has solidified in the darkness of a mould. I want to free metal from that closed form, to expose its luminous liquid origin.

Once melted, metal is no longer simply static, no longer something that merely exists, unchanging – instead, it expands within a chronological dimension of appearance and disappearance: it becomes time itself.

What I am trying to capture is the change of state, that instant in which something is becoming something else,

mation of the work.

A.S: This division of 'before', 'after' and 'in between' is my obsession. I cannot put words around this, but I like the idea of sculpture as time. I would like to transform forms into time. If you think about the concept of 'here and now', it doesn't exist, because it's constantly already gone. I'm happy that you see in *Damnatio*

ties. It's like looking at the horizon because everything seems possible. You can project all what you want on to horizons: failure, success, etc. A good artwork is one where you can graft all the interpretations, all the possibilities, the work would bend and bend. Would it collapse? Maybe, maybe not. It's what I call the *schizophrenic quo-*



Arcangelo Sassolino's *Momento* (2006)
(Galleria Galica, Milan, 2006)
© Giustino Chemello

that energy and power that exist in the flash of absolute instability between the moments of equilibrium that come before and after.

M.O.W: Let's take the example of the work *Damnatio Memoriae*. Here is a classic marble sculpture, an artwork that can easily be seen as something static. You designed a complex machine with a huge grinder disk that starts grinding the artwork from the top of its head. From being static, the work becomes a kind of living organism, loudly creaking and slowly saturating the whole space with suspended dust that blurs the vision and even gets inhaled by the viewer. It slowly becomes a kind of a Gesamtkunstwerk. This is a good example of a work that starts with this 'fixed point' which is an artwork and this is a fantastic answer to the question Duchamp asks about the possibility of creating a work which is not 'of art'. This is a very good example because you could see it as a piece of marble (an ordinary object) surrounded by mechanical tools, or you could see it as a representation because it is sculpted as an artwork. So you already have these two states. And then you create, with the dust produced by the grinding, an idea similar to the qubit, where every particle of dust is somehow a possible state of transfor-

Memoriae specifically not just an installation, but as an environment experience, smelling and breathing the dust is part of it. Dust is also memory: the solid image of the marble gets consumed, transformed and invades the space; some eventually disappears with the flow of air.

M.O.W: The idea of time is very important because your work is activated by the time. Like in the example of the work with the oils and fluids. This work could exist only with time and motion. The wheel is turning and the gravity and speed make the oil stick to the wheel. If it slows down, the whole work would collapse. Oil would drop and there would be no work. But there is this tension as you never know if or when it could suddenly stop. And at one point you feel this work is somehow doomed to turn eternally. This gives the notion of time its full importance in your work.

A.S: I am working on a dimension of both endurance and fragility. Time is both persistence and decline. I am working on the idea of persistence through dissipation, through loss. On the idea that there is no persistence without loss. There is no existence without loss, no life without loss. The time of life is not an abstract time. The time of life lives through the dissipation of energy and matter.

M.O.W: For the viewer, the idea of maximum tension is full of possibili-

ties. The higher the quotient the better. The piston pushing into the wooden log is as if it is pushing possibilities into material. The tension you create by elaborating all these possibilities is the meaning of a good work of art.

A.S: Before you came here I said to myself I would love to have my next work, the one I am producing, to be ready to show to you. In my mind unless you see the new work I am working on, it is like if all I have produced so far was not enough. I always feel that the work I am producing is a kind of final solution to the equation. Although then, in fact, and fortunately, every work is the opening of new possibilities, new problems, new anxieties. And this condition is an amazing advance.

M.O.W: Are you like Giacometti when trying to create a work: you create the frustration that helps you create the other work?

A.S: In the moment you forget about your survival in the art system, and you enter those existential questions like "who are we in this world?", "how is it possible that we are aware of being alive", and this absurd condition of life. Then immediately you start interacting with Giacometti or Duchamp and it is like you are in the same room with the same problems. And by doing so, of course, I'm creating the frustration for the next project I am working on.

Industrial Baroque

A sculptural alphabet of alteration, technical skill and astonishment

By Chiara Parisi
Director of the Centre Pompidou-Metz

Like wonderful scientific experiments, Arcangelo Sassolino's projects show us transparent sheets flexing under the pressure of huge rocks, reams of paper sheets held tightly by clamps and tyres deformed by the 'grip' of ratchet belts. Industrial materials thus manifest a secret life of compression, distortion, gravity and resistance. It is through 'cold' objects that Sassolino conveys a composed and tense emotion. In front of his works, one has the impression of imminent collapse; yet Sassolino never reaches the breaking point, but succeeds in finding a stability – a harmony? – between materials that force themselves upon each other, clinging together in an embrace that reminds me of those astonishing sculptures by Gian Lorenzo Bernini, *Apollo and Daphne* and the *Rape of Proserpine*.

It may be a distorted view – I am after all an art historian who grew up in Rome – but Arcangelo Sassolino's works have always made me think of an 'industrial' Baroque; how can we not read in his interventions the same tension that animates the best of the art of that time, a mix of torsions, soaring, alternating solids and voids, and a sense of wonder? Just as Baroque sculptors applied their technical knowledge to the creativity of their projects, so Sassolino has put his training as an engineer at the service of his art, together with collaborations with different technicians and craftsmen, which make each of his projects collective, a meeting point of multiple knowledges and skillsets. Just like a workshop of yesteryear, Sassolino's studio has been set up not far from the places where he was born, in the valleys around Vicenza, where the eternal measure of Palladio's villas coexist with industrial warehouses; a landscape from which the artist departs and to which he returns each time.

His is a constant movement, not so different from that also found in his works. For Sassolino, indeed, sculpture is dynamism, energy, even dissipation. A sculpture, in short, freed from purely monumental and representative purposes, in which the alteration of matter takes the place of modelling. It has something of the Baroque about it, as we have said, but also the rushing character of Futurism and a certain instability typical of Arte Povera, to recall two other currents that have marked the history of art.

From this point of view, the work designed for the Malta Pavilion at the 2022 Venice Biennale can be considered one of the high points reached by the genius of Arcangelo Sassolino. The artist started from a work by one of the greatest interpreters of the Italian Baroque, Caravaggio: the *Beheading of St John the Baptist*, preserved in the island's capital, Valletta. But let us start with the presentation of the intervention: Sassolino imagined a rain of molten steel, with the drops, generated by a machine that melts the metal by induction, falling in front of a monumental slab – the same size as Caravaggio's canvas, 360 x 520 cm – placed at the end of the pavilion. The drops fall into water-filled basins: seven, like the figures depicted in the *Beheading*. When the steel drop comes into contact with the water, a short hissing sound is heard, with the 'spark' extinguishing almost immediately, retreating into darkness. *Astute Diplomazija* – this is the title of the



A detail of Arcangelo Sassolino's *Tarquinio Prisco* (2018)
© Mattia Greggi



A detail of Arcangelo Sassolino's *The way we were* (2018)
(Villa Medici, Rome, 2019)
© Mattia Greggi

Pavilion – thus succeeds in creating a physical and temporal mismatch: the first, ideally 'splitting' Caravaggio's work and the space of the oratory where it is preserved; the second, instead, putting the subject of the *Beheading* to the test of today's sensitivity and technology.

Thanks to Sassolino's intuition, the biblical episode becomes an image in the light of which to read the tragic character that accompanies the history of human beings, amidst injustice, abuse, violence and loss. But that is not all: the artist gives his own interpretation of what, today, could be considered Baroque. The three-dimensional darkness of the room, the flicker of the flaming rain – which reminds me of the gilded bronze rays of Bernini's *Ecstasy of St Teresa of Avila* – the hypnotic and surprising spectacle given by the movement of the drops and their extinguishing once they touch the mirror of water: in Sassolino's translation, the Caravaggio painting takes on a new form. In making this translation, the artist has resorted to his repertoire of knowledge and methods: the scientific and technological apparatus that characterises many of his works is flanked by numerous collaborations, which have involved, among others, artist Giuseppe Schembri Bonaci and composer Brian Schembri, responsible respectively for the engravings on the aforementioned slab and for the rhythm of the falling drops that complete Sassolino's intervention.

As the artist stated when presenting the pavilion, "this radical contrast between darkness and brightness is what makes the scene something that is happening and not something that will happen or has already happened". These words express an irreducible attraction for doing, the pleasure of discovery along the way as a given phenomenon manifests itself. It is no coincidence that in one of his previous lives, Sassolino was a toy inventor in New York: his works take shape in the same way, through a process in which planning and intuition find their point of fusion.

But above all, Sassolino is a philosopher whom I like to imagine as a contemporary Hegel, in a somewhat chic restaurant in Vicenza, with Hölderlin and Schelling, elegant and detached, convinced that he has overcome his own naïveté thanks to his great 'system' that, through idealism, overcomes youthful feelings. Or, to go even further back in time, with a group of friends, a bit like Guinzelli, Dante and Cavalcanti. Hegel-Sassolino is the Dante of the situation who, through religion, has found a system that shelters him, that defends him from intuitions, from temporal joys, in order to strive for infinite beauty. This is how I imagine Arcangelo. The model pupil of his school, born into a family that urged him to study with great resolve. Grateful for his childhood, which gave him a certain innocence, but determined to overcome it, determined to build 'the system'. The philosopher of the art of agreement, of relationships, of assembling, of the cohesion of the world.

I don't know him well, but this is how I see him today with his friend from the University of Padua, a great Hegel specialist, Luca Illetterati. I like to imagine him recalling his dialogues with Hölderlin and Schelling with a certain pride in having imagined a system that would protect him from his weaknesses and childish fragility.

Enèrgheia

Sculptures in a state of flux, made up of conflicts and balances that produce and absorb energy

By **Eugenio Viola**

Chief Curator, MAMBO - Museo de Arte Moderno de Bogotá



Arcangelo Sassolino's *Damnatio memoriae* (2016)
© Riccardo Malberti
(Galerie Rolando Anselmi, Berlin, 2016)

This conversation was stimulated by a series of reflections concerning *Diplomazija astuta*, a work with which Arcangelo Sassolino represented the Malta Pavilion at the 2022 Venice Biennale. From there it extended to address some constants linked to the artist's work, proposing some interpretative and analytical hypotheses around and through some specific aspects linked to Sassolino's poetics and work. Originating in February 2023, it is the fruit of telephone and other remote exchanges, bounced through the ether between Madrid, New York, Vicenza and Dubai, to be finalised in October 2023 in Bogotá.

E.V: Dear Arcangelo, I find that your work, over the years, has consistently developed around a series of immediately recognisable elements: you often use materials linked to the industrial world, which give your works a cold and inanimate appearance at first sight. This impression is immediately contradicted by the use of massive forces that bend the materials to the limits of their physical character-

istics, thus generating an atmosphere of suspension, a precarious and apparently unpredictable equilibrium. Often, these sudden movements are accompanied by dry, equally sudden hissing sounds. Furthermore, in order to achieve the highest possible level of accuracy, you make use, as in the ancient Renaissance workshops, of the collaboration of a variety of skills drawn from the scientific world, such as mechanical engineers, physicists and mathematicians. All these elements return in *Diplomazija astuta*, the work you presented in the Malta Pavilion, in my opinion one of the most powerful national participations at the 2022 Venice Biennale. Would you like to tell me about the genesis of this work, starting with the title, which is so evocative?

A.S: The title of that work stems from the happy encounter between the American curator Jeffrey Uslip and the Maltese curator Keith Sciberras. We wanted to create, with the intervention also of Giuseppe Schembri Bonaci and Brian Schembri, a dialogue "without a safety net" between

Caravaggio's *Beheading of St John the Baptist* (1608) in St John's Co-Cathedral in Valletta and the contemporary world. A dialogue that was also geographical and cultural between the different countries involved. Of course, the challenge was to create a dialogue with Caravaggio without giving in to didactic temptations or mere rhetorical suggestions. The relationship between life and death is crucial in that work; the very instant of the end, the moment of action that acts as a boundary between existence and its end. I therefore worked on this. We designed and built seven machines (as many as there are figures in Caravaggio's *Beheading*) that melted steel by induction at 1,500°C and that none of the visitors saw, because they were installed above the scaffolding that served as the roof of the installation. The molten steel produced trails of light as it fell into seven pools of water, each placed under the machines that produced the castings, and at the same time found a new form of solidity, equal and different from the previous one. What interested me was somehow bringing steel back to its liquid, impalpable and luminous

origin. Working on the change of state, I was interested in bringing out what appears in the movement of dissipation associated with this process of change. The streaks of falling light are the outcome of the imbalance and instability produced by this metamorphosis. I wanted to make visible that contradictory and conflicting, luminescent and ephemeral instant, which at once divides and connects the darkness of Before with that of After. And I wanted to stress this idea that there is no appearance without loss. There is nothing concrete that is not also capable of becoming inexorably fluid and uncontrollable.

E.V: Even though they are inanimate, your installations always denote an effort to stretch towards something elusive, a tension that investigates the flows of energy inside and outside the work. The term energy derives from the Greek *enèrgheia*, whose original polysemy alludes to the manifestation of being, to the act, in the Aristotelian sense, to which is primarily attributed the sense of 'realising something'. *Enèrgheia* also implies being in the er-

gon, i.e. at work, but more appropriately it refers to the dimension of the unfolding of something that is still in the process of being completed; it implies the dimension of revelation. For the German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer, the work of art, referred to as the absolute work, is very much *èrgon*, because it has its being accomplished in itself and not in use, but it is at the same time *enèrghēia*, in that it has precisely in its unfolding, in its manifestation, the sense of its being accomplished. Indeed, I believe that one of the founding and basic elements of your work relates to the generation and exchange of energy. How do you consider this aspect?

A.S: I believe that art, all art, is always innervated by the spirit of the time, the time in which it acts and manifests itself. And ours is a time in which everything is burning, and burning fast. Starting with our planet. However, think also of all the news, events and photos by which we are bombarded on a daily basis, but which then vanish and incinerate the following day, as if they had never existed. It is this burning of existence that torments me in my work. And the burning is something that simultaneously produces and consumes energy. That is why my sculptures are not a static present, but are something that explodes, bursts, crashes, flows, rotates. They are something that is set in motion and that moves. My works are in this sense actions and only exist as

actions. By this I mean that the work is never already decided before the action, but takes shape and meaning within the very action that produces it.

E.V: It is no coincidence that you conceive "sculpture as an exploration of instability, of dissipation, of moments of rupture and transition". This statement of yours sounds like a declaration of poetics that highlights how your works, although inanimate, actually create images of inner mental conditions, ultimately stimulating questions about the precariousness of human existence.

A.S: Exactly, it ties in with what I was saying earlier. The moment I show the inalienable opposition between something that exerts a force and something else that suffers it and resists it, a conflict is created that, in its concrete manifestation, produces a situation of suspension, a condition of danger, of instability. The instability of what I enact with my works is an attempt to record this astonishing sensation of bewilderment that is life, its being always poised between permanence and vanishing, its never being something given and decided once and for all. Its being something that constitutes itself for what it is only in its very making, in which it is not possible to separate project and product. Art, as far as I am concerned, is a desperate relationship with being alive and at the same time allows each person to place themselves within this relationship, trying to find their own dimension in it, one

that is neither rhetorically consolatory nor equally rhetorically desperate. It is a way of clinging to life.

E.V: Your works often make reference to the courtly tradition of art history – I am thinking for example of works such as *Damnatio Memoriae* (2017) or *Diplomazija astuta* (2022), which recalls a tragic biblical event to narrate the anxieties and lacerations of the present. What is your relationship with tradition and art history?

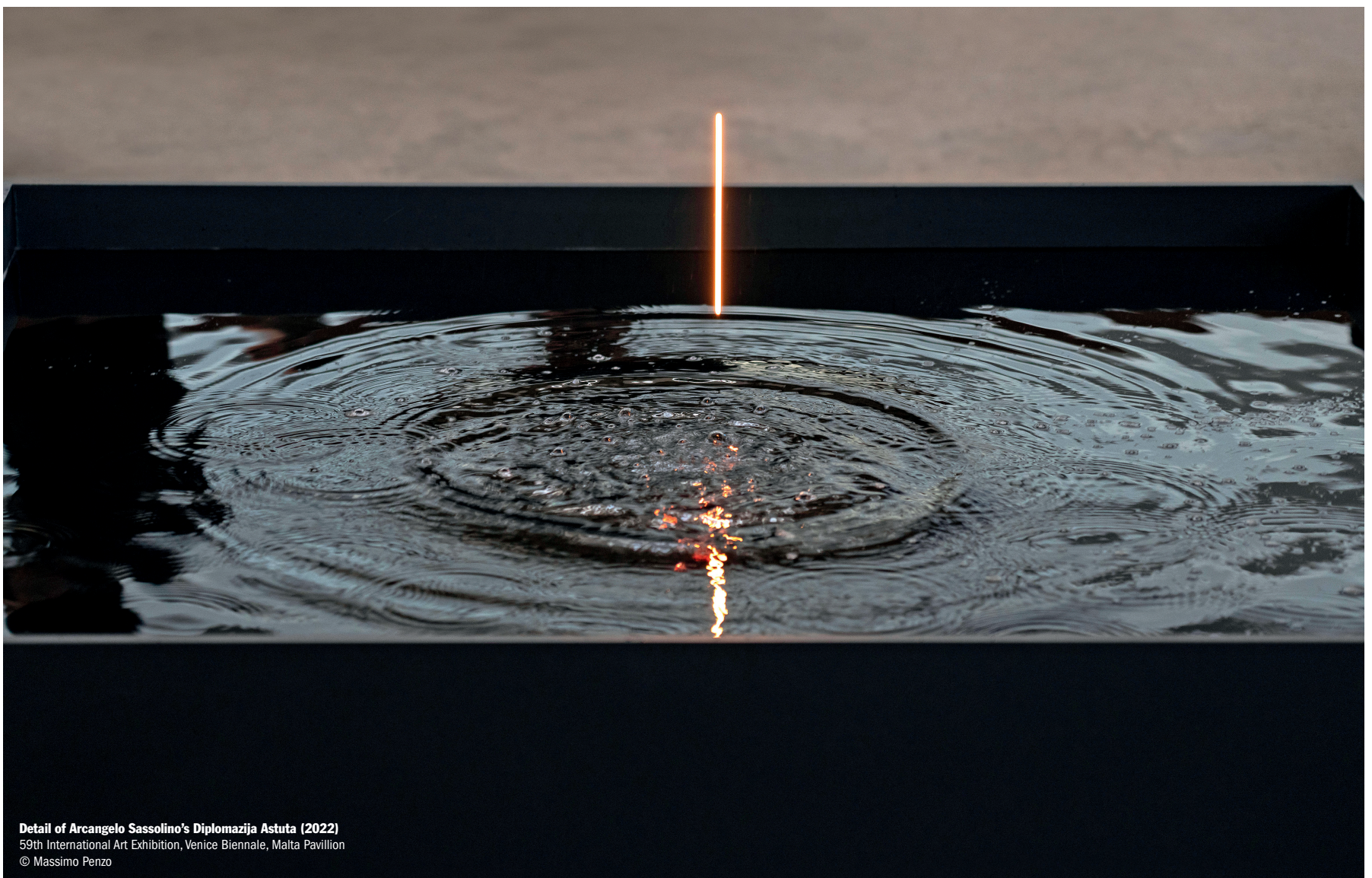
A.S: The relationship with art history for me is inseparable and constant and has an almost instinctive character. I very often find myself jumping centuries and from one continent to another thinking about specific works, images, styles, authors. If your nature is of the type that leads you to reckon with art history, you soon realise that the impact of time will be deadly for an artist and his work. In this sense, the art system tends in some way to protect you, placing you inside a sort of capsule with limited boundaries in which you are placed in a muffled condition that seeks to nullify the power of time that eats away at everything. History, however, is always there, waiting and relentless. In the end it is history that decides and it is important, I believe, to be aware of this.

E.V: Now for a delicate question. Which artists have been important in your education and which of your contemporaries do you find interesting and why?

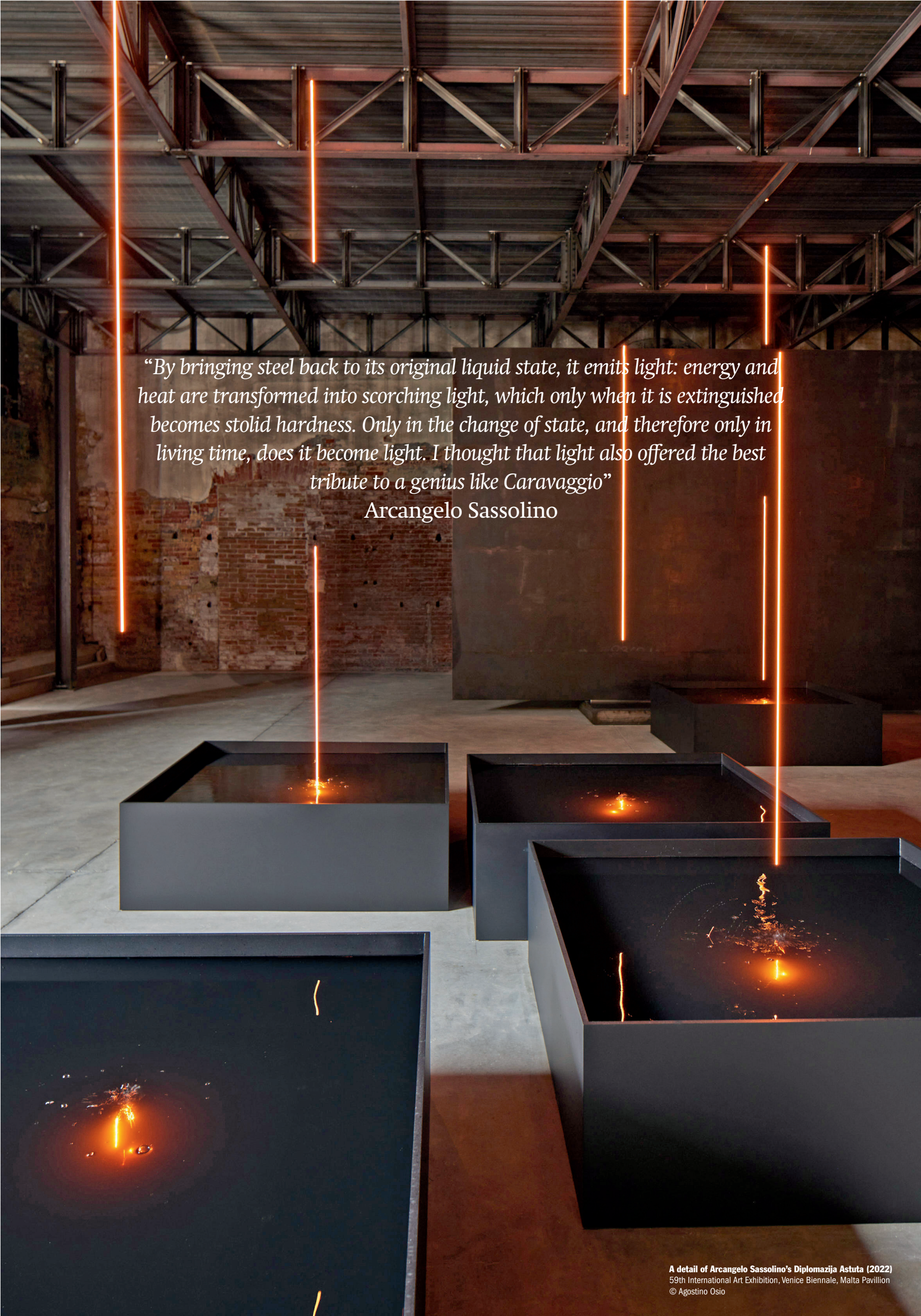
A.S: There are so many artists from the past and contemporary artists that I find extraordinarily interesting. I don't think it makes sense for me to give you a list of names because it could be endless and certainly different to what I could offer you tomorrow. However, I can tell you that I am often interested in artists who are far from my way of working and my aesthetics, because I find something in them that does not immediately belong to me, and it is as if I have the possibility of seeing the world from a really different perspective to my own.

E.V: Your works always have a minimalist aesthetic. You use materials such as iron, steel, glass, both in your kinetic installations, which are like real inorganic performances, and in your sculptural work proper. What is the relationship between your sculptural work and your strictly installation work?

A.S: I consider myself a sculptor and in this sense everything I do I consider to be within the tradition of sculpture. The reason is that I find it easier to think through three-dimensional rather than two-dimensional images. Then, of course, in my practice one can distinguish between works that have an explicit kinetic component and others where the action is contained within an implicit conflict or silent balance. In both cases, however, they are sculptures. And in both cases, whether they move in space or not, they are always, as I said, actions.



Detail of Arcangelo Sassolino's *Diplomazija Astuta* (2022)
59th International Art Exhibition, Venice Biennale, Malta Pavillion
© Massimo Penzo



“By bringing steel back to its original liquid state, it emits light: energy and heat are transformed into scorching light, which only when it is extinguished becomes stolid hardness. Only in the change of state, and therefore only in living time, does it become light. I thought that light also offered the best tribute to a genius like Caravaggio”
Arcangelo Sassolino

A flash of light in the darkness

Genesis, references and meanings in Caravaggio's *Beheading of the Baptist*

By **Maria Cristina Terzaghi**

Lecturer in History of Modern Art at the University of Roma Tre



If we were to indulge in a hit parade and mark one out for Caravaggio's paintings, Malta's *Beheading of St John the Baptist* would be in first place. And it would probably also be first in the hit parade of seventeenth-century European painting, if it is true, as Mina Gregori wrote, that: "Without this supreme masterpiece of European art, we would have neither Rembrandt nor [Gustave Courbet's] *A Burial at Ornans*." It is not unreasonable to imagine that Caravaggio himself considered it to be something special, since it is the only painting that the artist signed in his whole life – but we shall come back to that.

The huge canvas still completely fills the space of the rear wall of the oratory of the Conventual Church of the Knights of St John in Valletta, raised in the nineteenth century to the rank of co-cathedral with the Metropolitan of Mdina.

Built between 1602 and 1605, the building was used by the Knights to celebrate the most important events in the life of the Order, including the robing of novices. It was in front of his masterpiece that Caravaggio himself, on 14 July 1608, donned the habit of a knight with the great cross on his chest, and it was in front of the same painting that, a few months later, the friars were obliged to expel him for a violent brawl with one of them. But by then Caravaggio was far away, on the run in Sicily.

The story began a year earlier. In the late spring of 1607, Caravaggio sailed from Naples to Malta on board the galleys captained by Fabrizio Sforza, son of Costanza Colonna, marquis of [the town of] Caravaggio, with whom the artist had shared the streets of his childhood. He was accompanied by a host of famous people, including Ippolito Malaspina, the grand bailiff of Na-

ples, who was travelling with his nephew Alessandro Costa, son of Ottavio, a banker and great admirer of Caravaggio. The artist was travelling south with the intention of being knighted. It is difficult to believe that he was motivated solely by a desire for social status, which he had always turned down in Rome. It is more likely that he was seeking moral redemption, a second chance, a pardon that would facilitate his return to Rome. The fact is that this was anything but easy to obtain. In order to gain access to the most exclusive 'religion' of the age, it was necessary to show proof of several quarters of nobility: the rule stipulated that only eight Knights in the world could be without this. So there was therefore an exception to the rule that Caravaggio could have exploited, but the charge of murder hanging over his head made the situation much worse, and in such cases a letter from the Pope himself was required.

It took many months and all the influence of the Grand Master Aloff de Wignacourt at the papal court to get anything done: "Now that we have the opportunity to acquire for the service of our religion a person [...] whom we keep for our own special service so as not to lose him, we wish to console him in the extreme by giving him the habit of the knight of the Grand Master [...] and wish that his being guilty of having committed murder in a brawl be not a hindrance to this end." The Pope was well aware of whom he was talking about, but he was nevertheless prepared to open the doors to the brilliant painter, who was thus admitted to the Order.

It is impossible to understand Caravaggio's Maltese masterpiece without starting from this plea and consolation. Reading between the lines, a very special relationship

emerges between Wignacourt and the artist, who was given the robes of the 'Knight of the Grand Master' and was thus in his direct service. It is the *Beheading of St John the Baptist* that clarifies the mission that Wignacourt had assigned to the dangerous novice. Saint John the Baptist was the patron saint of the Order, and the Grand Master, who loved painting so much, finally had someone on those few square kilometres of land lost in the Mediterranean who could paint its history in a proper manner: he could not let him go. He asked him to paint the most dramatic episode in the life of Saint John: his ruthless martyrdom at the hands of the lust of a king who had lost his senses and the whim of a young girl. It was probably Wignacourt who decided that the painting should decorate the oratory of the Knights, but it was probably Caravaggio who decided on the extraordinary size of the canvas and its positioning, reconfiguring the entire wall of the room in such a way that architecture and painting merged, or rather that painting became theatre, or, better, cinema, since the space in which the painted figures moved was the real space of the room.

For a Milanese like Caravaggio, however, I think this brilliant invention has very deep roots: first of all in Leonardo's *Last Supper*. In Milan, in the refectory of the Santa Maria delle Grazie, with which Caravaggio, a pupil of Peterzano, could not have been unfamiliar, Leonardo had done the same thing, projecting Jesus and his companions beyond the walls of the room, itself also, not by chance, a monastic place *par excellence*. The second source of inspiration must have been Tintoretto: from him, in addition to the effect of darkness, came the use of the canvas to cover the wall completely

(as the artist had repeatedly done in Venice). With these precedents, Caravaggio reached the peak of the narration of the story, staging it of his own invention in the courtyard of a prison, with two prisoners watching from the window of a cell, reversing what had previously been his personal relationship between the figures and the space. Hitherto, architecture had bored him. Here, knowing that he himself would put on the garment that would bring him redemption for murder, Caravaggio's painting ceases to question only the fate of human emotion in order to frame itself more realistically in a lived space.

No longer are three-quarter figures caught in the dramatic climax of an action, leaving the details to the imagination. Here the figures play a precise role: some horrified, like the old servant: some holding the basin with an absorbed air, like Salome; some pointing at it, like the jailer. John, thrown to the ground by a sad executioner (the only sad executioner in the history of Western painting), is obviously Caravaggio himself, borne down by the weight of guilt, or perhaps just of life, and we can say so, because in the blood of the martyr the artist decides to write his own name, preceded by an 'F' for *Frater*, or 'brother'. This was the only time that Caravaggio had the courage to put his own name on a story he had painted. He who had been Bacchus, a musician, Pluto, Jupiter and Neptune, and then again a spectator in the *Martyrdom of St Matthew*, in the *Taking of Christ*, had seen many stories, but this time, in that banality of evil that had brought John low, Caravaggio wanted to render his name. Not as just [his first name] Michelangelo, but, proudly, or perhaps simply, *frater Michelangelus*, a man among men.

A 250-square-metre scaffolding with an ecological conscience

Exploring a work of art that intentionally compensates for the climate-altering gases emitted during its lifetime

By **Sergio Ferraris**

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A detail of Arcangelo Sassolino's *Diplomazija Astuta* (2022)
59th International Art Exhibition, Venice Biennale, Malta Pavilion
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Light and colour, i.e. energy. Matter. A relationship present in art from the earliest days, as in the cave paintings in the Lascaux Caves in France, where materials such as iron oxide were used.

A relationship indelibly established by physics in recent centuries with Albert Einstein's Special Theory of Relativity. $E=mc^2$, the formula that triggered a revolution in our knowledge of existence and changed our perception of the universe, opening the way to unprecedented perspectives. In the history of art, the equivalence between mass and energy was an established fact well before 1905, when the Special Theory of Relativity was published. It is a correspondence found in the work of Caravaggio, 300 years before Einstein's publication, in which light and colour – energy – merge with depth and volume – matter – in a symbiosis similar to that formulated by the German physicist. The work that best represents the relationship between energy and matter, both in terms

of the extent of the representation itself and its pictorial dimensional structure, is *The Beheading of the Baptist*, where these peculiarities are combined with those characteristic of Caravaggio. Often in the background but only apparently so, energy and matter have traversed the history of art. Michelangelo Buonarroti's marbles, Henry Moore's bronzes, Andy Warhol's screen-printing colours, for example, are all materials that contain energy in themselves and are forged by the energy of the creative act, which is nothing other than neuronal activity. The representation of art is made possible by light – one of the forms of energy – which becomes the vector conveying the art itself to the viewer who uses his or her neuronal activity to perceive and reinterpret the work.

Thus one could say that the entire artistic 'chain' is traversed by energy. And not just metaphorically. Energy in its various forms, geometries and expressions is the common denominator between Caravaggio's *The Beheading of St John the*

Baptist and *Diplomazija Astuta*, Arcangelo Sassolino's kinetic work installed in the Malta Pavilion at the Venice Biennale of 2022. The more than four hundred years that separate the two works mark a difference solely in relation to the sphere of technologies that mark the temporal difference. Caravaggio, with the limited technology of his time, focuses on the scene, the many shadows within it and the few glimpses of light that impart strength to the actions. Some of the energy in his works is not actual but potential movement. As if it were a spring, compressed, ready to express itself.

On the contrary, part of the energy in Sassolino's work expresses movement that is transformed, at the end of the process, into potential energy. It is the mark of time. The kinetic energy in *Diplomazija Astuta* is that expressed by Isaac Newton's law of universal gravitation. Fusion first and cooling later are the acquisition and transfer of energy, which in their obligatory one-directionality reaffirm the Second

Law of Thermodynamics on the irreversibility of state transitions. Sassolino thus addresses the concept of entropy, the most obvious mark of our age. In Caravaggio's work, gravity is also a dominant force. All the characters suffer weight, and therefore gravity, in the action depicted. The action is the murder of the Baptist who is now bloodless and on the ground, while the earth itself with its mass attracts all the actors in the scene towards itself. Once again, matter – the earth – becomes the protagonist of an energetic action – the fall. The energy in the two works also resides in the colours.

Sassolino explains: "This conversion into light – a special light, because only when steel is at 1,500 degrees does it generate that kind of light – was for me an attempt at dialogue with Caravaggio. Important because historically Caravaggio revolutionised the concept of light. So for me, in order to attempt a dialogue with such a giant, it was important to create a new light."

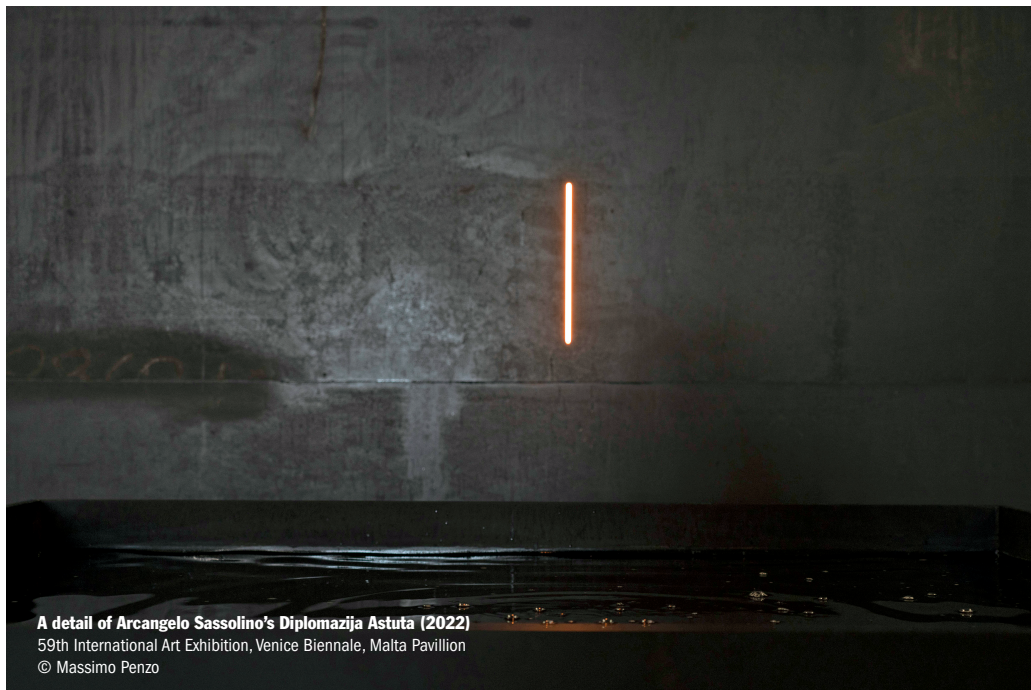
FOCUS ON ARCANGELO SASSOLINO 2023

Light and colour are, from a physical point of view, energy and its transformation, and optics is the discipline that studies their interaction with matter. And the circle closes. The interaction between all the elements in the works can be encapsulated in this circular energetic 'movement', to which is added the cognitive interaction that can also be traced, as we have seen, to the energetic one. The difference, however, is one of substance. While energy can be defined through a quantitative approach, cognitive interaction possesses quantitative values that cannot be

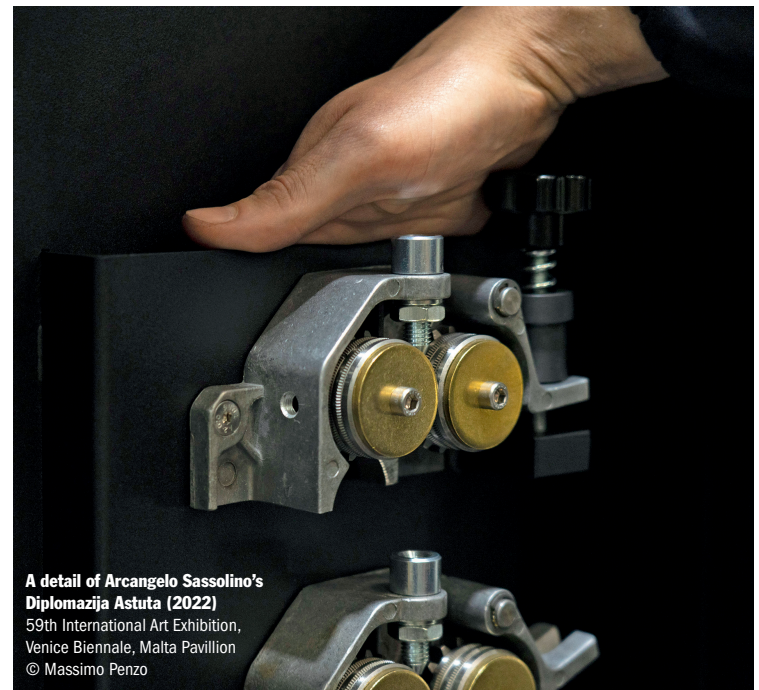
work itself. The signature style of the artist is to use the material as directly as possible. "Without shortcuts," Sassolino continues. "Then, of course, there are times that I use stainless steel or carbon steel. Often the problem is oxidation, so we do treatments, galvanising or painting. In the case of *Diplomazija Astuta*, it was possible to use raw materials so I did not do any treatment. In addition, the black enhances the appearance of light, which is the sign of the 1,500-degree molten steel falling in drops from the ceiling. And I repeat, it really is molten steel. It would have been

ments, because the matter, in this case the molten steel, irreversibly surrenders – and here entropy comes into play – its energy to the water. In this process, the matter, after being transformed by the induction furnaces above the ceiling, goes from solid to liquid again, changing state three times in a few moments. "Behind those falling drops of molten steel is a machine that is extremely sophisticated," Sassolino says. "We built a 250-square-metre steel deck to support the induction furnaces that had to be constantly fed with coils and for that there was a machine that fed the induc-

artist – in the light also of the fact that he exhibited in Venice, the most climatically fragile city on the planet – wanted to reduce the impact of a work that had a major impact on energy consumption on the climate to zero, thanks to an emissions offsetting project in Tanzania, and as regards the creation of the installation itself. This is the first time that a work of art has of itself compensated for the climate-altering gases emitted into the atmosphere during its lifetime. Limiting emissions without circularity of matter means having a one-eyed view on eco-



A detail of Arcangelo Sassolino's *Diplomazija Astuta* (2022)
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directly traced back to energy and matter flows, but to knowledge.

Diplomazija Astuta is a work that is a child of its time. A time made up of technologies capable of bending matter and energy to the limit of the Special Theory of Relativity, and Sassolino is aware of this. "Everything is in transformation," says the artist. "Whether this be slow or rapid does not matter. The fact that everything becomes something else for me is extremely fascinating and is at the heart of my work. The artist is a filter of his own time and cannot run away from that, he can only take that energy, those frequencies, that aesthetic that is in the air and transform it into works of art."

According to Sassolino, Caravaggio is an artist obsessed with reality who no longer uses the allegorical filters placed between the image adopted by previous artists and creates his own vision of reality. "Caravaggio effected a revolution that is total adherence to reality and this focus on reality is also my approach to making art. So for me it is important that all the structure is exactly as it comes out at the origin, where the material is born." This identity of approach has also produced a contiguity of colours between the two works, which for the artist was not a choice, but "happened automatically", adds Sassolino, whose artistic work over the years has focused on making interventions on matter using industrial systems that become both actors in the mutation of the material and in the representation of the

possible to drop drops of colour and the installation would have been technically much easier. But I wanted there to be the realism of the material being transformed, not a fiction." The work, like Caravaggio's, envelops the viewer. Once you enter what can be described as a space of the past, of industrial archaeology, you are enveloped by the low, overlapping sounds of the manufacturing process, which after a few seconds reveals its own product: a faint shower of molten steel, tracing lines of warm, reddish light close to infrared frequencies, ends up in the seven modern metal basins – like the seven figures in Caravaggio's *The Beheading of the Baptist* – containing water, in which it is extinguished after a few mo-

tor. On top of that there were chillers that cooled the inductor and a computer that managed everything in harmony and set the pace for the drops to fall."

Today, energy and matter management are at a crossroads and the watershed is the climate. We can either continue to accumulate energy in the atmosphere by increasing the concentration of CO² due to the use of fossil fuels, which would bring the global temperature in 2100 to a disastrous +3.7 °C, or we can limit our emissions and stay within the +1.5 °C safety zone that would allow us to exist as a species, without abrupt disruptions from an environmental and social point of view. It is clear that the

gy. And so Sassolino was concerned that the matter, the object of so many transformations in artistic expression implemented by technology within *Diplomazija Astuta*, should also be the object of circularity. The solidified steel after the incandescent fall was collected every evening when the installation closed and sent to the steelworks so that it could return in the form of coil and again become the main actor representing itself in the dialectic between energy and matter desired by Sassolino. Even the water in the seven tanks was filtered and reused several times. The only physical, irreversible loss was energy, as a result of the Second Law of Thermodynamics.

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“I conceive of sculpture as a material work about our experience of instability, dissipation, moments of rupture and transition. I am interested, above all, in capturing that precise moment when something is becoming something other than what it is. I think of sculpture not as a static present, but as a flowing of time, of incessant, ineluctable, and unpredictable change, just like life itself.”
Arcangelo Sassolino



**A detail of Arcangelo Sassolino's
Violenza casuale (2008-16)**
(Palais de Fontainebleau,
Fontainebleau, 2008; Essl Museum,
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