

https://dspace.org/

The Steel Fig Leaf: Exploring the Grotesque Ambivalence of the Male Body and Its Masculinities through Sculpture, Performance Art, and Theatre

Genovese, Nicola

2023-09

University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg

https://hdl.handle.net/10539/39951

Genovese, Nicola. (2023). The Steel Fig Leaf: Exploring the Grotesque Ambivalence of the Male Body and Its Masculinities through Sculpture, Performance Art, and Theatre. [PhD thesis, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg]. WIReDSpace. https://hdl.handle.net/10539/39951

Downloaded from a DSpace repository. https://dspace.org/

THE STEEL FIG LEAF

Exploring the Grotesque Ambivalence of the Male Body and Its Masculinities through Sculpture, Performance Art, and Theatre

Nicola Genovese

Student number 2175814

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Digital Arts at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa

Supervisor: Professor Christo Doherty

March 2023

ABSTRACT

The practice-based research described in this thesis sought to develop imagery in visual and performative artworks capable of engendering and embodying new perspectives on the male body and performed masculinities. The project involved three phases: pure sculpture, sculpture activation using the male body in performance, and theatre performance, the latter focusing on northern Italian masculinities. The key concepts to emerge from the investigation were ambivalence, parody, and the aesthetic category of the grotesque.

During the research, I developed a sculptural practice characterised by a craft approach and deploying heterogeneous materials – including textiles, a medium historically associated with the fabric art movement and feminism. As far as performative practice is concerned, my first approach was to challenge the rules of the white cube by attempting to transform spectators into an audience. My next approach was to engage with the specificities of the theatre as a performance context and the challenges for a fine artist working on a stage. The development of my practice was supported by theoretical reflection resulting from a critical engagement with feminism, queer discourse and masculinities studies, culminating in a partial affirmation of the direction taken by the new materialist strand of feminism.

This research approaches the male body and its grotesque features through the figure of the flaccid penis as the starting point for questioning the dominant theoretichal paradigm of the male body, the phallus, and violence. The materiality of my sculptures and performances addresses the entanglement of biology and culture, challenging the hegemony of the social constructivist approach in contemporary art. By exposing and highlighting the varieties of Italian masculinities, this research critiques the tendency in current academic discourse to depict straight white men as a monolithic category of oppressors. The imagery I develop through my sculptures and performance exposes behavioural, aesthetic, and bodily nuances that gesture towards the complexity occluded by contemporary understandings of masculinity.

Keywords: sculpture, art performance, activation performance, theatre performance, ambivalence, grotesque, male body, masculinities

DECLARATION

I declare that this thesis is my own unaided work. It is being submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the field of Digital Arts by creative project and thesis at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. It has not been submitted before for any degree or examination at any other university.



____

13 January 2023 at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg.

UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND, JOHANNESBURG

HUMAN RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE (NON-MEDICAL)

Registration number: REC-101114-044

14 October 2019

Re: Mr Nicola Genovese (2175814)
Waiver letter number: HRECNMW19/11/03

To whom it may concern,

Mr Genovese is currently registered as a PhD student at the School of Arts at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. This letter is to confirm that, at the time of writing, Mr Genovese does not need ethical clearance for his PhD study entitled *'White Italian masculinity in crisis through the frame of visual and performance art'*. This decision has been reached based upon a description of the project supplied by Mr Genovese to the University Human Research Ethics Committee (Non-Medical), which has been evaluated by the Chairs and Deputy Chairs. If, however, Mr Genovese changes the methods of data collection and analysis for this study, this decision may no longer be valid. If such changes take place, this should be communicated to the University Human Research Ethics Committee (Non-Medical) as soon as possible. This waiver letter is valid until 13 October 2022.

Please feel free to contact me should you require any further information.

Thank you.

Yours sincerely,
S Schoeman

Shaun Schoeman (Administrative Officer)
Solomon Mahlangu House, 10th Floor, Room 10004, Jorissen Street, Braamfontein, Johannesburg
Private Bag 3, Wits 2050
T + 27(0)11 717 1408 | **E** Shaun.Schoeman@wits.ac.za | hrec-medical.researchoffice@wits.ac.za
www.wits.ac.za/research/about-our-research/ethics-and-research-integrity/

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I want to express my deepest gratitude to my supervisor, Professor Christo Doherty, for his invaluable guidance and support throughout my PhD journey. His expertise, patience, and encouragement have been instrumental in helping me complete my research.

I am also grateful to my partner, musician Magda Drozd, for her unwavering support and patience as I worked on my thesis. Her feedback and perspective were invaluable and helped keep my work fresh and relevant. I would also like to thank the curatorial duo Francesco Urbano Ragazzi for our many engaging and thought-provoking conversations about gender issues. Their insights helped to enrich my research and deepen my understanding of these complex issues. I am grateful to artist Uriel Orlow for his helpful teaching and insights on the relationship between theory and practice. His guidance and support are greatly appreciated. I want to thank art historian Laura Arici for teaching me the importance of contextualising an artist's practice within the flow of art history. Thanks to art historian Jörg Scheller for his motivational support and open conversations about black metal, masculinity, and the nuances of white privilege. I would also like to thank curators Camille Regli, Francesca Brusa and Francesca Ceccherini, and artists Leila Peacock, Veronika Spierenburg, Eleonora Meier and Jürgen Baumann, for their stimulating discussions about my practice. A special thanks to performers Elia Meier and Dustin Kenel for their crucial contributions to my performances. I also extend a special thankyou to the Fabriktheater team for believing in my theatre projects and considering my background in visual arts as a plus. Finally, I am grateful to artist Ricardo Meli for his technical support and assistance in producing many of my artworks. Without his help and knowledge, I would not have been able to finalise them. A special thanks to Robin Grandy for teaching me how to handle metal, Louisa Goldman for teaching me the endless possibility of ceramics, and Sigrid Wick for patiently supporting my crazy textile projects. I am deeply grateful to the head of MFA at the Zurich University of the Arts, Judith Welter, and the head of the Department of Fine Arts at the Zurich University of the Arts, Swetlana Heger, for providing me with the space and support to complete my PhD.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT II

DECLARATION III

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS V

TABLE OF CONTENTS VI

LIST OF FIGURES VIII

INTRODUCTION 1

The Second chapter 5

The Third Chapter 7

The Fourth Chapter 9

The Swiss Visual Art and Theatre Context 12

An "Unconventional" Path 14

Writing and Artistic Practice: A Monstrous Relationship 19

CHAPTER TWO: SCULPTURAL PRACTICE AND AMBIVALENCE 21

Ambivalence, Hybridism, Liminality and the Paradoxes of Post-Structuralism 24

Cuddling cutting: A Case Study 33

The Grotesque Monster beyond Queer 51

CHAPTER THREE: PERFORMATIVE SCULPTURE ACTIVATION IN THE VISUAL ART CONTEXT 64

Achilles Heel: A Case Study 67

Performance Art vs Theatre 79

Performance and Attention within the White Cube 84

The Liminal Space between Props and Sculpture in the White Cube Context 87

The Exposure of the Male Body and *Achilles Heel* Magazine 94

Performance Activation: Other Possibilities 97

CHAPTER FOUR: A NOVANTA, A THEATRE PERFORMANCE 103

Performance Description 110
The Introductory Scene: The Peacocks 119
The First Scene: The Encounter with TMANG 128
The Fast Version aka the Shitty Noisy Car: The Male Grotesque 131
The Second Scene: The Inadequate Mama's Boy 134
The Third Scene: The Grotesque Warrior 136
Fourth Scene: Nostalgia as a Tool of Empowerment for "Threatened" Masculinities 143
The Complex Entanglement of Hetero- and Auto-Images of Italian Men 147
BIBLIOGRAPHY 165
APPENDIX 175

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: Paolo Veronese, Nemesis, detail, 1560, fresco, Villa Di Maser, Treviso, IT. p. 03
Figure 2: Nicola Genovese, Leak, 2017, iron, foam, concrete, ceramic textile, silicon. Photo Stefan Jaeggi. p. 16
Figure 3: Nicola Genovese, Leak, 2017, 15 minutes activation performance. Photo Stefan Jaeggi. p. 16
Figure 4: Nicola Genovese, When boundaries bite, 2021, copper, foam, ceramic, glass, metal, resin, wood, textile. Courtesy the artist. p. 22
Figure 5: Giuseppe Arcimboldo, Allegory of Winter, 1563, oil on canvas, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna, AT. p. 23
Figure 6: Jacopo Ligozzi, Chimera, 1590, grey-brown wash, white lead, pencil, couches of chalk / pencil on yellow paper, Museo del Prado, Madrid, ES. p. 25
Figure 7: A portrait of Tiamat Medusa, 2018. Source: San Antonio Current. p. 28
Figure 8: Ithell Colquhoun, Gouffres amers, 1939, oil on canvas. Photo credit: The Hunterian, University of Glasgow, UK. p. 30
Figure 9: Claes Oldenburg, Upside down city, 1962, mixed media, Mumok, Vienna, AT. p. 35
Figure 10: Nicola Genovese, Cuddling cutting, 2021, Le Commun, Geneve, CH. Photo Lisa Biedlingmaier. p. 36
Figure 11: Nicola Genovese, Cuddling Cutting, 2022, detail. Courtesy the artist. p. 38
Figure 12: Nicola Genovese, Cuddling Cutting, 2021, detail. Courtesy the artist. p. 40
Figure 13: Louise Bourgeois, Janus Fleuri, 1968, Bronze. Photo Albin Dahlström © The Easton Foundation/Vaga at Ars, Ny/Bildupphovsrätt 2023. p. 42
Figure 14: Dorothea Tanning, Nue couchée (Reclining nude), 1969-70, fabric, ping-pong balls, wool, cardboard, Tate Collection, London, UK. p. 44
Figure 15: Dorothea Tanning, Hôtel du Pavot, chambre 202 (Poppy Hotel, Room 202), 1970-73, fabric, wool, synthetic fur, cardboard and ping-pong balls, Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, FR. p. 45
Figure 16: Nicola Genovese, Cuddling cutting, 2022, detail. Courtesy the artist. p. 47
Figure 17: Nicola Genovese, Cuddling cutting, 2022, detail. Courtesy the artist. p. 48
Figure 18: Nicola Genovese, Cuddling cutting, 2021, Le Commun, Geneve, CH. Photo Nicolas Delaroche p. 50
Figure 19: Hieronymus Bosch, The Garden of earthly delights, 1490, oil on canvas, detail, Museo del Prado, Madrid, ES. p. 53
Figure 20: Marcantoni Raimondi, Il sogno di Raffaelllo, 1509, engraving burin, Musei Civici di Pavia, IT. p. 54
Figure 21: Anonymous German, The nightmare, 16th century, engraving. p. 54
Figure 22: Tiberius BV, circa 1040, illustration of cotton, Wonders of the East, British Library, London, UK. p. 55
Figure 23: A gargoyle at Westminster Abbey, 13th century, London, UK. Photo Deborah Smolinske. p. 61
Figure 24: Nicola Genovese, Pelvis the Pelvis, 2022, 30 x 30 x 110 cm. Photo Sebastian Lendenmann. p. 62
Figure 25: Nicola Genovese, Pelvis the Pelvis, 2022, detail. Photo Sebastian Lendenmann p. 63
Figure 26: Nicola Genovese, Once upon a time, beforehand, I don't know when, 2016. Courtesy the artist. p. 64
Figure 27: Nicola Genovese, Once upon a time, beforehand, I don't know when, 2016. Courtesy the artist. p. 64
Figure 28: Nicola Genovese, Achilles Heel, 2021, textile, Murano glass, pearl clay, metal, resin. Photo Sebastian Lendenmann. p. 68
Figure 29: Nicola Genovese, Achilles Heel, 2021, details. Courtesy the artist. p. 70
Figure 30: Nicola Genovese, Achilles Heel, 2021, details. Courtesy the artist. p. 71
Figure 31: Nicola Genovese, Achilles Heel, 2021, copper, textile, ceramic, foam, metal. Photo Sebastian Lendenmann. p. 72

Figure 32: Nicola Genovese, Achilles Heel, 2021, performance.
Photo Sebastian Lendenmann. p. 75
Figure 33: Nicola Genovese, Achilles Heel, 2021, performance.
Photo Sebastian Lendenmann. p. 77
Figure 34: Nicola Genovese, Achilles Heel, 2021, performance.
Photo Sebastian Lendenmann. p. 77
Figure 35: Nicola Genovese, Achilles Heel, 2021, performance.
Photo Sebastian Lendenmann. p. 78
Figure 36: Chris Burden, Shoot, 1971, Performance Documentation © Chris Burden. p. 80
Figure 37: Anne Imhoff, Faust, 2017, 57th Venice Biennale of Art, IT.
Photo Vincenzo Pinto/Agence France-Presse, Getty Images. p. 86
Figure 38: Marina Abramovich's "Rhythm 0" as displayed at Sotheby Auctions.
© Marina Abramovic. p. 89
Figure 39: Lee Bul, Sorry for suffering – You think I'm a puppy on a picnic? 1990,
still from the performance video documentation. © Studio Lee Bul. p. 90
Figure 40: Lee Bul, Solo Show Exhibition "Beginning"
at Seoul Museum of Art, 2021. © Sema. p. 91
Figure 41: Franz Erhard Walther, Gelbe Skulptur 1969/1979, still from the performance
at Haus der Künste, Munich, 2020. © Haus Der Kunst, Munich, DE. p. 92
Figure 42: Sophie Jung, performance at SCC, Paris within the group show
"Annemarie von Matt. Je ne m'ennuie jamais, on m'ennuie", 2021,
still from the performance documentation. © Centre Culturel Suisse, Paris, FR. p. 93
Figure 43: Nicola Genovese, Drowning me softly, 2022, textile, pewter, metal.
Photo Sebastian Lendenmann. p. 98
Figure 44: Nicola Genovese, Drowning me softly, 2022, performance.
Photo Sebastian Lendenmann. p. 100
Figure 45: Nicola Genovese, Drowning me softly, 2022, performance.
Photo Sebastian Lendenmann. p. 101
Figure 46: Nicola Genovese, Drowning me softly, 2022, performance.
Photo Sebastian Lendenmann. p. 101
Figure 47: Nicola Genovese, Drowning me softly, 2022, performance.
Photo Sebastian Lendenmann. p. 102
Figure 48: Nicola Genovese, Drowning me softly, 2022, performance.
Photo Sebastian Lendenmann. p. 102
Figure 49: Nicola Genovese, Drowning me softly, 2022, performance.
Photo Sebastian Lendenmann. p. 103
Figure 50: Ernestina Orlowska, Bodiy, 2019, performance, Fabrik Theater, Zurich, CH.
Photo Janosch Abel. p. 104
Figure 51: La Gaia Scienza, Cuori strappati (1983).
Stills from the performance video documentation. © Orf (Österreichischer Rundfunk) p. 106
Figure 52: Flyer, A Novanta, 2021. Courtesy the artist. p. 110
Figure 53: Nicola Genovese, A Novanta, 2021. Stage Set-Up. Courtesy the artist. p. 112
Figure 54: Nicola Genovese, A Novanta, 2021.
Still from the performance video documentation. Courtesy the artist. p. 119
Figure 55: Nicola Genovese, A Novanta, 2021. Still from the video documentation.
Courtesy the artist. p. 126
Figure 56: Nicola Genovese, A Novanta, 2021. Still from the video documentation.
Courtesy the artist. p. 128
Figure 57: Nicola Genovese, A Novanta, 2021. Still from the video documentation.
Courtesy the artist. p. 128
Figure 58: Ciprì E Maresco, Video Still from Cinico Tv,
Broadcasted on Rai 3 Channel on 1995. © Ciprì e Maresco. p. 129
Figure 59: Nicola Genovese, A Novanta, 2021. Still from the video documentation.
Courtesy the artist. p. 130
Figure 60: Nicola Genovese, A Novanta, 2021. Still from the video documentation.
Courtesy the artist. p. 133

Figure 61: Nicola Genovese, A Novanta, 2021, Video still of the “Mamma” video. Courtesy the artist. p. 136
Figure 62: Nicola Genovese, A Novanta, 2021. Still from the video documentation. Courtesy the artist. p. 137
Figure 63: Nicola Genovese, A Novanta, 2021. Still from the video documentation. Courtesy the artist. p. 138
Figure 64: Nicola Genovese, A Novanta, 2021. Still from the video documentation. Courtesy the artist. p. 142
Figure 65: Nicola Genovese, A Novanta, 2021. Still from the video documentation. Courtesy the artist. p. 143
Figure 66: Nicola Genovese, A Novanta, 2021. Still from the video documentation. Courtesy the artist. p. 144
Figure 67: Nicola Genovese, A Novanta, 2021. Still from the video documentation. Courtesy the artist. p. 145
Figure 68: Obos Ad Campaign, 2012, still from the Youtube video. © Obos. p. 149
Figure 69: Johann Heinrich Wilhelm Tischbein, Goethe in the Roman campagna, 1787, oil on canvas, Städel Museum, Frankfurt Am Main, DE. p. 151
Figure 70: “Tony the Italian” played by German actor Olli Dittrich in the Media Markt Ad in 2008. Source Süddeutsche Zeitung. p. 154
Figure 71: Nicola Genovese, A Novanta, 2021. Still from the video documentation. Courtesy the artist. p. 155

INTRODUCTION

When I was in a shop in Milan picking out fabrics, touching and smelling them, I felt more like a fashion designer than an artist. I told the woman at the store that I was looking for something shiny, metallic, elastic and particularly resistant. She asked me what that textile was for. When I explained that it was not for clothes but an art thing, she responded, "Ah, really, interesting." So, I took out my mobile phone and showed her one of my latest sculptures. Judging by the expression on her face, she liked it. Then we started conversing about textile quality, colour variations and sewing possibilities. When I buy fabric in Italy, it often ends that way. I enjoy being surrounded by the lightness of the materials: they seem to reverberate within my body, even though my supposedly hard masculine skin, commonly compared to armour, attempts to arrest the sensation. I left the shop with a full bag, though not knowing how I would use the textiles. After returning to Zurich, I injured my finger pretty badly while cutting a metal sheet in the workshop. The day before, I was choosing fancy fabrics with the shop assistant in Italy. Today, I am here in Switzerland with my dirty hands and finger bleeding to remind me that bodies are intrinsically fragile. I took a piece of violet fabric from that big bag, placed it on top of the metal sheet, and enjoyed the friction. This thesis has developed from such moments of exploratory practice and the spaces that lie between them.

Chronologically speaking, my practice has evolved from sculpture to performance and theatre, but I continue to work simultaneously in all directions. In this thesis, I consider my practice as an emerging series of questions that are used to give the research an intelligible structure. These questions give rise to three different visual and performative approaches in which an interrogation of the ambivalent, grotesque[1] male body and its masculinities emerges with varying intensities. The purpose of this thesis is thus to *articulate* the ambivalent, grotesque imagery produced through and in my practice in sculpture and performance. In the course of this practice-based research, the integrity of the male body is challenged and

[1] According to the Cambridge Dictionary, grotesque as an adjective describes an object, individual or situation that is "strange and unpleasant, especially in a silly or slightly frightening way" (Dictionary Cambridge). Grotesque in art history, according to Miriam Webster dictionary, is "a style of decorative art characterized by fanciful or fantastic human and animal forms often interwoven with foliage or similar figures that may distort the natural into absurdity, ugliness, or caricature" (Merrian-Webster). Those ornaments were first developed in Italy during the Roman Empire and then rediscovered during the Italian Renaissance. In addition, as I will extensively explain, grotesque is also an aesthetic category often used in the academic contemporary art discourse. Even though many scholars, among them Russo and Bakhtin, have attempted to define the term, the grotesque "is the slipperiest of aesthetic categories" (Harpham 1976, 461). To fall under the label of grotesque, it has to arouse a defamiliarizing sense of the "uncanny" of what is "alien" (Harpham 1976).

nuances of masculinity are highlighted to question the meaninglessness of a monolithic and oversimplified category of oppressor cis-straight men.[2] My visual practice should be considered as an initial set of artistic engagements that seek to restore some complexity to a somewhat reductive formulation. The main questions that I will attempt to address are the following:

- Can a male artist approach the question of the male body through a materiality historically linked to craft and feminism? The question acquires additional heft from the fact that the subject of the body in the discourse of fine art has for decades been the domain of women artists.
- Could returning attention to male corporeality be a starting point to interrogate the suppositions about men's power, considering that the body is not independent of culture but in fact deeply entangled with it?

The influential feminist Elizabeth Grosz notes that women have been construed as "somehow more biological, more corporeal, and more natural than men" (Grosz 1994, 14). Historically, the female body has been associated with irrationality, passion, hysteria and disgusting fluids, while the male body has symbolised rationality, control and spirituality.

[2] The category is deployed by the vast majority of academics who engage with gender queer discourse. In that perspective, cis-straight men have shaped a social, political, and economic system called heteropatriarchy. "To achieve dominance, institutions are manufactured and maintained to distribute power in ways that elevate cisgender heterosexual men above other identities, socializing people to believe and internalize that the cisgender heterosexual man is the ideal" (Kelley and Arce-Trigatti 2022, 1).



Figure 1: Paolo Veronese, Nemesis, 1560, detail, fresco, Villa di Maser, Treviso, IT.

Illustrated here is a fresco by Veronese depicting the Man of Virtue restraining the Woman of Passion with a horse bit. The female body as the site for women's emancipation was understandably for decades central to feminism, but since third-wave feminism, which is informed by a post-structuralist interpretation of gender and sexuality, women have sought to exclude the biological female body from the discourse to avoid being dragged into a determinism based on gender roles. Discourse about men and women has shifted towards the analysis of masculinities and femininities "with the intention of rejecting the simplistic dualism and essentialism that have plagued gender analysis" (Fournier and Smith 2006, 141). Gender identities, as a consequence, are produced in terms of "discursively constituted modes of being" (Kerfoot and Whitehead 1998, 8).

This proposition has opened the door to queer perspectives, in which biological sex is a spectrum.[3] Even the scientific journal *The Lancet* has published an article on the "misuse" of the concept of biological sex: "Sex as much as gender is culturally contingent and produced" (Karkazis 2019, 1899). As a reaction to the hegemony of such post-structuralist positions valorising fluidity over sexed bodies (while at the same time creating new essentialist categories), New Materialists like Rosi Braidoitti and Karen Barad have sought to bring the female body back into focus, asking what was supposed to be done with women's flesh, the corporeal matter that performs those identities. Gender-critical feminists like Kathleen Stock have gone further to declare that gender and sex are two different questions: a woman is an individual born with female genitalia, despite all the attempts that have been made to question that biological fact (Stock 2021). I wish to affirm, however, that unlike sex, gender is indeed a spectrum. As a male, having feminine elements in my masculine gender performance is simply part of that spectrum. I am unable to agree with those who are intent on re-introducing binary divisions to create new essentialist categories. The question for me is therefore, how do I engage theoretically with the male body and masculinities in the contemporary Western academic discourse? Studies on masculinities with a post-constructivist approach are numerous,[4] yet the male body remains largely absent from academic discourse. This appears to be primarily because the male body is still widely considered a homologue of the phallus and a metaphor for violence, aggression and oppression. What if the male body becomes a site for the acceptance of men's limits or limitations? Arthur Flannigan-Saint-Aubin suggests that men need to "rehabilitate the fullness of the experience of the male body and male biological sex" (Flannigan-Saint-Aubin 1994). According to Genia Pauli Haddon, "[t]he male

[3] It is a biological fact that sex chromosomes determine whether an individual will develop female or male primary sex characteristic. Estrogen for females and testosterone for males are the hormones responsible for the development of secondary sexual characteristics. There are some individuals who have intersex conditions, or differences or disorders of sex development (DSDs) in which chromosomal sex is inconsistent with phenotypic sex, or in which the phenotype is not classifiable as either male or female. DSDs occur in 0.018% of the population (Sax 2002). The crucial and polarising issue is whether the existence of a few intersex individuals renders sex a spectrum. According to sociologist Myra J. Hird, supporting a gender identity spectrum is not enough to disrupt the binary system of sex. Multiple genders often remain dependent on a morphological notion of 'sex,' and, as such, may not constitute a radical challenge to our current 'sex'/'gender' system. Evolutionary biologist Colin Wright argues that "The existence of only two sexes does not mean sex is never ambiguous. But intersex individuals do not demonstrate that sex is a spectrum. Just because sex may be ambiguous for some does not mean it's ambiguous for all" (Wright 2021).

[4] R.W. Connell's *Masculinities* and Victor Seidler's *Rediscovering Masculinity*, among others. Judith Halberstam's *Female Masculinity* is one of the more radical examples of the neglect and avoidance of the male body in appraisals of social constructivism. She claims that "masculinity […] becomes legible as masculinity where and when it leaves the white male middle-class body" (Halberstam 1998, 2)

issue is to accept our genitals the way they are most of the time (flaccid) rather than holding onto exaggeration of what the penis is like at erection as the proper image of masculine self-identification. We males need to celebrate our personal experience with our genitals. We men have often reduced women to their biological sexuality, while avoiding or denying the truth of our own biological sexuality. We have fabricated a steel fig leaf" (Haddon 1988, 23). I will use the ambivalent materiality of my performance and sculpture to explore the male body and the masculinities entangled with it as a potential site for interrogating the equation: male body = phallus = violence. The grotesque and the carnivalesque will be used as aesthetic and conceptual categories to expose men's attempts to hold and gain power, highlighting that the very last strategy to handle the threat of emasculation is the incorporation of femininity and the female body (Modleski 1991).

The Second chapter

The sculptural materiality that I have developed over the years is based on particular attention to materials and how those materials might communicate with each other. Some materials come from the craft tradition, like textile and ceramic, while others are more conventional sculptural mediums like metal and concrete. Although my approach is based on craftsmanship, craft emerges as a secondary aspect in the final output. The craftsman behind the work becomes visible but at the same time, his techniques are subordinated to the work's wholeness. Materials with their primary features (hardness, softness, flexibility, fragility, transparency) and their textures (glossy, rusty, opaque) are subjected to shaping and vice versa. The resultant shapes are, according to the degree of abstraction, recognisable as human and animal fragments that help to form more prominent body constellations. What characterises my sculptural practice is a strong interest in the ambivalent, hybrid and grotesque male body. The symbolic aspects of masculinities materialise in ambivalent bulky soft snakes, claws, muscled arms and flaccid penises. In addition, the friction between materials and shapes highlights the complexity of power relationships and hierarchies. I shall later be subject to intensive analysis a recent work entitled *Cuddling Cutting,* exhibited at le Commun (Geneve CH) in a group show focused on artists working with textiles. *Cuddling Cutting* contains all the critical points of my sculptural practice. The question of body obliged me to face the debate between, on the one hand, post-structuralist anti-essentialist positions that highlight the performative core of identities and, on the other, New Materialist scholars who criticise the hegemony of cultural tools and avoid facing the corporeality of the body. Scholar Judith Butler suggests that the gendered body is performative, that "it has no

ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality" (Butler 1990, 136). Unlike Butler, I think that behind "the various acts" is a fleshly gendered body with biological features that affect and are affected by the cultural context. Countenancing biological sex does not mean scientific determinism or outdated gender role theories but instead reflects the complexity of the topic. New Materialist positions are the starting point for my research to reflect on the relevance of the body in the construction of identities, the body as defined by anthropologist Vicky Kirby: "The corporeal substance, the very meat of carnality that is born and buried, the stuff of decay that seems indifferent to semiosis" (Kirby 2002, 277). New Materialist scholar Noela Davis accuses post-structuralist feminism of "biophobia" in its attitude to the body. Nonetheless, even New materialists do not know concretely how to deal with the body's "unruly responsive flesh and sensorium" (Sobchack 2004, 59).

Post-structuralism falls into the trap of anti-essentialist essentialism, claiming an endless fluidity while asking for new essentialist categories. In contemporary Western art, this approach manifests as an aesthetic devoted to the disruption of the normative[5] and the glorification of a fluid anti-normativity and in the appraisal of artists who are part of minorities or/and identify as non-normative. As Elizabeth Stephens has suggested, in this aesthetic the "fixed" is invariably aligned with the conservative and normative, while the "fluid" is associated with the positive, progressive, and resistant. And yet, despite this, "what is meant by fluidity itself is rarely subject to examination" (Stephens 2014, 186). I will engage with the artists Louise Bourgeois, Dorothea Tanning and Keith Haring by way of distinguishing and defining my aesthetic choices and my engagement with the male body. The main question that will arise is, what does it mean to be a heterosexual male artist who uses textiles as a primary material and whose practice refers to an aesthetic deeply interwoven with female artist positions and feminism?

The need to go back to corporeality led me to investigate the grotesque body and to engage with the tension between philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin's idea of the realist grotesque and the female grotesque of Mary Russo. The grotesque that reveals itself in my visual approach manifests through discrepancies, exaggeration, displacement, ambivalence, and

[5] In the current academic discourse, the cis-straight white is often synonymous with normativity (Kelley and Arce-Trigatti 2022). An excellent recent example is the 2022 Venice Biennale: it featured mainly artists who are part of minorities and artists whose practice's approach could be framed as a critique of normativity from a gender and racial perspective. Among many others, two good examples might be the artist Adina Pintilie who represented Romania with the video installation *You Are Another Me—A Cathedral of the Body*. The work features "diverse"/"non-normative" bodies in search of intimacy. The Polish pavilion featured artist Małgorzata Mirga-Tasan who proposed a massive textile installation that addresses the necessity to find the place of the Roma community in European art history.

awkwardness. It is not just the deployment of the abject in Kristeva's sense of the term,[6] but a more complex constellation of incongruent elements. I will in due course look into medieval illumination and early Renaissance art to explore the complexity of the grotesque and construct a comprehensive framework for my sculptural approach. In doing so, I will attempt to avoid the oversimplification of recent queer perspectives, in which the grotesque manifests in the marginalised other (see Steven F. Kruger and Glenn Burger, and Jeffrey Jerome Cohen).

The grotesque monster was, especially in the religious context, used to highlight the ubiquity of Evil and Sin in opposition to the beauty of God. But the grotesque also manifested as a totality that surrounds and permeates societies. In this sense, the grotesque body is not just, as Russo claims, a woman's domain: "The grotesque body is not separated from the rest of the world. It is not a closed, completed unit; it is unfinished, outgrows itself, transgresses its own limits" (Bakhtin 1984, 24). At the end of the chapter, I will briefly introduce a recent sculptural work, *Pelvis the Pelvis*, where I pushed my practice further into the realm of the grotesque and hybrid body through a more figurative approach.

The Third Chapter

The male body and its masculinities became more relevant when I augmented my sculptural practice with performance as activation. It was not because I mistrusted the agency of my sculptures but because I wanted to explore new possibilities. I decide in the design stage whether to activate a sculpture or not. Most of my sculptures have the potential to be activated because they are made up of detachable elements comprising shapes that are usable as tools to implement a performance. In this chapter, I will engage in particular with *Achilles Heel,* a sculptural work exhibited in a group show in Rapperswil, Switzerland, that was activated during the opening ceremony. The second performer is Elia Meier, a young, Swiss, Italian-mother-tongue performer, who was involved in the project to highlight the intergenerational aspect of masculinities and the continuous friction between homosociality and homoerotism. Putting our bodies in the role of activators encouraged reflection in this direction, questioning the sculpture's boundaries. In the activation stage, the grotesque radiates from the sculptures to the performers' bodies. The costume, the textile pattern, the Murano glass leaf and the music used in the performance highlight the relationship between my work and Venice and its Carnival. I will focus on the consequences of the performance for the sculpture's identity and

[6] The *abject* has a strong feminist context. According to philosopher Julia Kristeva, female bodily functions are "abjected" by a patriarchal social order (Kristeva 1982).

the body's impact on the sculptural work's visual economy in the white cube context. The double identity of the sculpture, activated and silent, allowed me to keep open the promise of a multi-layered reading. I will explore the liminality of such sculptures, poised between props/scenery and art objects. In this regard, I cite for comparison the example of Lee Bull's costumes/props exhibited as works of art in a museum. To contextualise my performance practice historically, I will engage with performance art endeavours that tried to bring theatre elements into the art context to explore liminality, like the Dadaists, and others who highlight their distance from theatre as the conservative context par excellence, like the artist Chris Burden. I will then look into art performance artists Sophie Jung and Franz Erhard Weber to reference my actual approach to activation. Weber activates his work with ritualised gestures that break the boundaries between his body and his sculptures. Jung uses text and her bodily presence to activate her sculptural landscape. As I will explain, *Achilles Heel* fulfils many of the criteria associated with art performance. However, elements in the dramaturgy refer to the theatre, like, for instance, the non-narrative structure that needs the spectators to witness the performance from the beginning to the end and a consistent narrative textual dimension that clashes with the context. Indeed, the white cube, as defined by art critic Brian O'Doherty, is "the empire of the Eye," and it does not like content (O'Doherty 1986, 42). Hence, I will face the challenge of transforming the spectators into an active audience within the white cube. In this context, masculinities emerge more precisely through the bodily and visual relationships among sculptures, text, movements and music. At the same time, within the empire of sight, even "the tactile is only the visual representation of tactility" (Krauss and Bois 1997, 25). In that sense, the white cube is a challenging, even hostile context in which to elaborate a new imagery of the male body.

The Achilles myth and the magazine *Achilles Heel* are the work's starting points. The Achilles myth, particularly the heel episode, offered me the perfect metaphor through which to approach masculinities and the fragility of the male body. I decided to make the myth visible through a series of almost illustrative gestures to highlight the body's involvement. The magazine *Achilles Heel*, published in England in the 1970s by a group of socialist male activists, was an excellent example of men acting against sexism and violent forms of masculinity without rejecting their own masculinities and biological bodies. At the same time, these men highlighted for the first time the paradoxes of dividing societies into oversimplified categories that do not consider nuances. Particularly interesting for my argument is the concept of "powerlessness and relative power" (Seidler 2011, 25), which considers men who are supposedly in charge because of their white men's status but are actually marginalised

because of their social class. The magazine sought to stimulate a rethinking of masculinity without getting rid of it. Such a process is not just cultural, since it begins with the physical acceptance of the male body. The magazine's point of view is expressed symbolically through movements that highlight or disrupt stereotypical masculine body behaviours without hiding men's corporeality. Music can also serve to stimulate reflection among members of the audience on the subject of masculinities, for instance, through song lyrics or a specific genre. Each element of performance (music, lyrics, text, choreography, props, costumes, audience interactions) might collide with another and change, validate or erase it. The *Achilles Heel* performance highlighted the potential and limitations of the white cube for my performative practice and led me in new directions that I will briefly discuss at the end of the chapter.

The Fourth Chapter

The performative experience in the white cube led me to research the impact of the theatre context on my sculptural practice. I wanted to bring my visual art baggage there, to challenge my practice and face what some performance artists still consider a conservative environment. At the same time, I wanted to address the topic of masculinities more precisely, capitalising on the more intense audience engagement that theatre affords. I produced my first theatre piece, *A Novanta AN*, in 2021 at Fabriktheater in Zurich. Again, I invited Elia Meier to be part of the performance. As in the earlier work, *Achilles Heel*, the intergenerational aspect of masculinities, rites of passage and the boundaries between homoeroticism and homosociality were at stake. In *AN*, Elia represented the young me and simultaneously functioned as a metaphor for uncorrupted masculinity. I decided voluntarily to maintain the classic stage audience set-up and challenge my art performance background. I will explore the challenge of exposing my sculptural work on a theatre stage that turns it into props, scenery and costumes, where materiality becomes less relevant, and the distance from the audience transforms it into a flat image. I will analyse how *AN* capitalizes on the potential of the theatre context, providing an immersive space that includes giant video projections, loud music and inventive lighting, eliciting a higher degree of attention and sensorial engagement from the audience. My background as a sculptor enables me to perform without acting. Even though I think authenticity is a myth, Elia and I perform an authentic version of ourselves on stage. We do not impersonate a character. Paraphrasing Lehman, we do nothing on stage to amplify the information arising from our presence (Lehmann 2006, 135). Non-acting is a crucial feature of art performance and also an essential tool in post-dramatic theatre for disrupting the figure

of the actor. *AN*'s starting point is *Ti metto a novanta gradi*, TMANG, literally translated as "I put you at ninety degrees," a crude vernacular expression and a set of bodily gestures used by some Italian males to refer to a doggy-style act of copulation. I emphasise that I am talking about gestures that *mimic* the doggy-style position, not the sexual act itself. I will engage with the Italian tradition of hand gestures to frame my use of bodily gestures and highlight the differences between the North and South of Italy. However, depicting Italians as people who talk with gestures reinforces a stereotypical image of Italian men as theatrical individuals intellectually incapable of using spoken language. Reducing a man to his corporeality might be a tool of emasculation considering the effect of the equivalent act on a woman's body; however, as I have already explained, the male body might also be a starting point for rethinking male sexuality. After the performance description, I will confront Italian masculinity, more precisely Venetian masculinity, through an autoethnographic approach. In *AN*, the male body and its masculinities in the Italian context are central. The Veneto region and Venice itself are the territories entangled with those masculinities and mine. Hence I will report on my experience with my colleagues at the gas company located in Padua where I worked for ten years, to draw models of white working-class masculinities in crisis or "broken," to better frame *AN* and the masculinities I perform. This model resonates with the work of scholars who have focused on Italian cinema (Reich 2004; Zecca and Saponari 2021), exploring forms of failed masculinities like the *Inetto* character (a sort of antihero unable to handle modernity and social changes). To theorise my masculinities and the ones that I have encountered, I will mainly use the framework of sociologist R.W. Connell and Men's Studies. (It is crucial to emphasise in passing that the topic of masculinities emerged first from my visual work and not within the gender studies context.) "The most general definition of Men Studies is the study of masculinities and male experiences as specific and the product of varying social-historical-cultural formations. Such studies situate masculinities as objects of study on a par with femininities, instead of elevating them to universal norms" (Brod 1987, 2). Connell's theory has been very useful to my practice in defining, even though roughly, the existence of plural masculinities as a set of behaviours and expectations that change according to the socio-cultural-economic context (Connell 2005). For example, "[t]he making of working-class masculinity on the factory floor has different dynamics from the making of middle-class masculinity in the air-conditioned office" (Connell 2005, 36). Connell's work has importantly served to raise awareness of the consequences of certain forms of traditional masculinity, not just on women but also on men. Performing and embodying these models often means, in practice, avoiding medical help, abusing drugs and alcohol, and being

reckless. Connell applied the Gramscian concept of hegemony to masculinity, analysing, as a consequence, non-hegemonic forms of masculinities that are subordinate, complacent and marginal to the hegemonic one. The concept of hegemony, however, has in recent years been strongly criticized (by Moller 2007 and Demetriou 2001, among others). In 2005, Connell published a paper in which she tried to answer the criticisms of her most successful book, *Masculinities* (1992). She acknowledged that her concept of hegemonic masculinities failed to address the complexity of gender power relationships and the stratification of different masculinities within one single individual (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). How to define one man who performs hegemonic masculinity within the family context and an inadequate one in his leisure time? Stephen M. Whitehead straightforwardly asks: "Who actually is a hegemonically masculine man? Is it John Wayne or Leonardo DiCaprio; Mike Tyson or Pele? Or maybe, at different times, all of them?" (Whitehead 1998, 58). My work *AN* responds to these arguments by questioning the monolithic figure of the hegemonic white man, exposing the complexities and ambivalence of the masculinities that he performs and the bodies that are entangled with them. Masculinities indeed intersect with other factors. Gender identity is a little puzzle within the complex entanglement of identities like those of nationality, religion, and social class. The axes of identities and how they interact with each other is the core focus of intersectionality, a concept introduced and developed by Kimberle Crenshaw to highlight the multiple layers of oppression to which black women are exposed (Crenshaw 1989). I will use the same approach to explore the nuances of power and challenge the notion of automatic privilege. Then there are other biological factors, relating to testosterone levels, like muscle mass, which are entangled with cultural elements. Even though New Materialists have attempted to unpack certain fleshly body-culture entanglements, their focus on the female body has left open many questions concerning the male body. Moreover, the post-structuralist core of Connell's theory led to inadequate reflections on the male body that I will try to address through my autoethnographic account.

Each scene in *AN* will be dissected to reveal the references behind certain visual and textual decisions, from the sinister ritual of gratitude to the "Mamma" to the lecture about Fonzies the chip and Fonzie the *Happy Days* TV series character, an Italian American boy depicted as a womaniser of few words, intellectually inadequate, who prefers gestures to spoken language following the Italian man trope. The lecture contents will lead me to discuss nostalgia as a tool for masculinisation, nostalgia for the uncorrupted masculinity of pre-industrial Italy, the antique republic of Venice, the roman Empire and *la dolce vita*. Italian men are haunted by the weight of an idealised past in which Italy loomed large in the world

scenario. Daydreaming about the past and the power associated with it becomes a means of reacting to the perception of being emasculated by an effeminate modernity. Since the Enlightenment, Italy has been depicted as an idealised land of beautiful ruins stuck in the past and, at the same time, the exotic within Europe. I will indeed engage with the northern European perception of Italian men, specifically, Goethe's *Italian Journey*, to understand better what it means to expose my Italian male body on stage in a German-speaking country. In Goethe's writing, Italy is the idyllic cradle of European civilisation where Germans can escape from the alienating modern world and return, reinvigorated and renewed. Italian men are a casualty to deal with. After the golden age, they are seen as fundamentally unable to build a civilised society and are therefore portrayed as lazy, theatrical individuals with a different perception of time, prone to dramas and illegal business. I will then explore the Norwegian OBOS TV ad series to understand the extent to which the "Mama's boy" stereotype still obtains nowadays, especially in northern European perceptions, and how this affects the self-image of Italian men through a process of self-exotification.

I will conclude this chapter by reflecting on possible scenarios for my next theatre project in the light of possibilities and limitations associated with the Swiss cultural scene.

The Swiss Visual Art and Theatre Context

The context (theatre or visual art) is crucial to defining the different approaches within my practice. Indeed, it interferes with and, at the same time, supports my decisions. For instance, as I will explain in the fourth chapter, the context of theatre only partially allows one to play with the identity of sculptures. Unlike in art space, sculptures in the theatre context become props with minimal room for their liminal identities. Conversely, visual art spaces oblige me to keep in mind the question of attention, as I will explain in Chapter Two. My idea of bringing theatre elements into art performances and using my Fine Arts background in the theatre has been possible because of the openness of the Swiss cultural scene. In Switzerland, the theatre and art scenes have developed a closer relationship in recent decades. It is important to note that theatres in Switzerland and Germany are divided into city theatres and free-scene theatres. City theatres are completely funded by the state, have a fixed team and seldom invite guest directors. Free-scene theatres offer to co-produce independent projects, but they are still mainly supported by the state. Probably the most recent and salient example of that dialogue is the hiring in 2019 of the artist and filmmaker Wu Tsang at Zurich's main city theatre, Schauspielhaus, in the director position. According to Joshua David, who worked at Schauspielhaus as a dramaturge, the interaction is a consequence of the advent of post-

dramatic theatre in the early 1980s, when visuality became an essential element and the dominance of the written text started to be questioned. He explains this phenomenon in terms of the will of theatre institutions to rejuvenate themselves and repudiate the reputation of conservativism (Joshua David, pers. comm., c. March 2022). Unlike in Germany, where this process is primarily visible in city theatres like the Volksbuhne in Berlin, in Switzerland, the openness towards the visual arts also invested free-scene theatres. This may have been because of the massive availability of funding from the state and private foundations. Magda Drozd, former director of the free-scene theatre Südpol in Luzern, traces it back to the need for authenticity and diversity (Magda Drozd, pers. comm., c. April 2022). Classic acting means speaking for others, which collides with the general tendency to promote "authentic" identities. This in turn manifests in the choice of non-acted performance. In addition, diversity materialises through particular attention to marginalised identities and collaboration with other disciplines.

Such a dialogue also appears within the education system. For instance, the art school in Bern offers a Master Class in "Expanded theatre" aimed at artists in theatre, dance, puppetry, performance, music and fine arts. Artists who graduate from that Master Class are active in the theatre and partly in the art scene. While theatres wanted to shed their conservative attitude, the contemporary art scene realised that there was a certain degree of aridity within the classic art performance. I will further explore the complex friction between art performance and theatre tradition in Chapter Two. In addition, the specific funding context of Switzerland allows theoretically visual artists to produce theatre pieces and theatre-makers and dancers to produce performances in art spaces as, for instance, Swiss choreographer Alexandra Bachzetsis did in 2020 at Kunsthalle Zurich.

While institutions appear to have accepted a certain degree of interdisciplinarity, such openness seldom materialises in real opportunities. The decisions of commissions that decide who to support financially are pushed in the opposite direction by other factors. Visual artists who are very established and command an audience can easily switch from one discipline to another. However, less established visual artists with a network in the art scene struggle to enter the theatre scene and be funded in both fields. In addition, professional theatre-makers, unlike professional visual artists, rely primarily on their job in the theatre. Giving money to visual artists would take away funding from theatre-makers who rely economically solely on that income. Visual artists in Switzerland often receive production fees and transportation reimbursement from museums, little institutions, or even off-spaces. Nonetheless, visual artists inclined towards performance realised that theatres could offer high-budget production;

therefore, thinking bigger was possible. Yet despite their openness, theatres require a degree of professionalism that few visual artists can provide. Indeed, theatres are built upon a complex structure of technicians and production managers fundamental to a theatre production. The treatment of labour in Swiss theatres has specific guidelines, unlike in visual art, where unpaid labour is unfortunately pretty common. This means that there is no space for improvisation. There is then the question of audiences, which, despite the institutional openness, still do not mix. Visual artists go to the theatre if a performance artist is involved. Theatre makers go to an exhibition if a colleague takes part in the performance programme. The audience of non-practitioners is more flexible but still largely loyal to one context. In my theatre production, I was able to bring artists to see my piece in the theatre, but the majority of the audience consisted of regular theatregoers. As one of the artistic directors of Fabrik Theater, told me, it is still challenging to attract the art crowd, especially when the theatre production does not involve visual artists.

An "Unconventional" Path

I was born on Venice Island but grew up in the Venetian countryside between Padua and Venice. The area is more similar to the American Midwest than the stereotypical Italian landscape described by Goethe. I will explore that territory and its men in the fourth chapter of this study. My mother was a teacher at the elementary school, and my stepfather was a technician at Venice harbour. I never knew my natural father, who fled after my mother got pregnant. The paycheck for a teacher in Italy was then among the lowest in Europe. Even though the north Italian context of the 1970s and 1980s conferred some benefits because of the area's economic boom, I would unhesitatingly define my family as working class. I studied Technologies for Tourism because my mother said that travel agencies would be the future. Unfortunately, I soon realised that she was wrong. When I was 18, I started working in a foundry. I experienced for the first time a very masculine working environment where my colleagues were melting aluminium bare-chested in defiance of security regulations that they considered just for "pussies." My department manager had, hanging in front of his workstation, a swastika made of aluminium. I was a punk, and rebelling against "the system" was an obligation; therefore, I melted his swastika in the kiln. The factory boss told me I must respect the beliefs of others, especially those who work hard, unlike me. With the money I earned, I travelled to London, where I lived for a year, working as a bartender. I then moved to Paris and worked in a restaurant.

When I was 21, I went back to Italy. Thanks to a friend of my stepfather's, I got a job at the *Compagnie Internationale des Wagons-Lits* (lit. International Sleeping-Car Company). The company provided sleeping wagons for long-distance trains. I was taking care of customers, travelling mainly back and forth between Venice to Sicily. My parents did not want to support my university studies, so I enrolled at the University of Venice to study philosophy even though I was working full-time. I stopped after two years because studying and working full-time was unbearable. When I was 25, I started to play alto saxophone in a local jazz school. I used to rehearse inside my car because my stepfather did not like music. After quitting the sleeping-car company, I wanted to be a professional musician, but because funk and jazz gigs did not provide me with enough income, I started to play for a "smooth dance" orchestra. It was a crucial formative experience. I learned that earning money from your art while disregarding quality was highly frustrating. Playing horrendous music in shabby disco clubs for elderly right-wing people was no better than working in a restaurant. I quit the band, and thanks to my girlfriend's father, I got a job at the local gas company. When I was 35 years old, after another failed attempt to pursue a degree in Psychology, I decided to approach visual art, starting with drawing. Saxophone remained for some time a side interest, but my new crush on visual art was too strong and I eventually stopped playing. Thirty-five years old for an artist in Italy is a turning point. The majority of open calls have 35 as the age limit for applications. In a nutshell, I entered the art world with no art education when I was too old to apply for grants and exhibitions. I worked for ten years at the gas company in Padua, 30 km from Venice. That experience provided me with the autoethnographic material that I use in the fourth chapter.

Meanwhile, I produced artworks, I initiated an art off-space called Superfluo in a parking lot in Padua, co-curated many shows at M.a.r.s., an artist-run space in Milan, and went for art residencies abroad instead of holidays. Since then, balancing my art practice with earning a decent and regular income has been challenging. At a certain point, living in the province became financially too tight, and my lack of art education did not allow me to be fully recognised as an artist.

In 2014 I decided to move to Zurich to pursue a Master's degree in Fine Arts at the Zurich University of the Arts. The school took me despite my not having a Bachelor's degree in art. I ended up working part-time in restaurants to make ends meet. During my studies, I began to use textiles to produce affordable massive sculptures. The need to reflect deeply on my practice started to take shape in 2017 for my graduation show. The work I made for that exhibition, *Leak*, strengthened my interest in soft sculpture and ceramic, which I will fully

explore in Chapter Two. I activated the sculpture during the show through a performance in which my body interacted with sculptural elements. Hugging that long soft snake with a marble pattern was a clear metaphor for my struggle with erectile dysfunction.



Figure 2: Nicola Genovese, Leak, 2017, iron, foam, concrete, ceramic textile, silicon. Photo Stefan Jaeggi.



Figure 3: Nicola Genovese, Leak, 2017, 15 minutes activation performance. Photo Stefan Jaeggi.

I realized I wanted to focus on my male body and the masculinities that resonate in my sculptures, and vice versa. In that same year, the MeToo hashtag was popularised by actress Alyssa Milano. #MeToo exploded like a bomb after the initial public accusations of sexual abuse levelled against American film producer Harvey Weinstein. I was deeply disgusted at the idea of men like him taking advantage of their positions of power. The original purpose of #MeToo, invented in 2006 by the survivor and activist Tarana Burke, was to raise awareness of sexual violence, empower women through empathy (especially young and vulnerable women) and highlight accountability on the part of perpetrators (Burke 2022). At about the same time, the phrase "toxic masculinity," coined by the mythopoetic men's movement of the 1980s and 1990s, entered popular currency. A significant gain from the virality of the phrase and the hashtag was the rapid emergence of a conversation about masculinity outside academia. This is the context that impelled me to investigate my masculinity and its relationship with my artistic practice. At the same time, I felt the necessity to claim my distance from those men who abused, harassed, and raped women because they felt entitled to do so.

In addition, the economic and other struggles associated with moving to a new country led me to suffer from erection problems. For the first time, I experienced the extent to which sexual performance was defining of my male identity. The world collapsed on me when I realised that the "malfunctioning" of my penis meant so much more. It was radically related to my self-esteem and my very existence as a human being, not just as a "real" man. It was like a spiral in which all my insecurities were engaged. I had to rely on Viagra to regain trust and slowly build confidence. That specific context has influenced my practice. I felt that introducing my body into my practice was necessary to register my fleshly personal involvement in the matter. Although I consider the discourse of gender and its assumptions questionable, I use the language commonly deployed within the field to address my perspective. But only my sculptures and performances can speak a language that transcends the superficial gender categorisations that neatly divide individuals into normative oppressors and the non-normative marginalised.

At the end of my studies, the university hired me first as a technician and afterwards as a mid-level member of the academic staff. In 2018 I enrolled in the creative work PhD programme at Wits. My mother was ultimately wrong about the relevance of travel agencies, but at least as a result, unlike many Italians of my age, I am fairly fluent in German, English and French. This has helped me to start a new life abroad. My artistic path has been unconventional for the reasons I have described in this paragraph. I ought to mention that I

have also been dealing with anxiety disorder and ADHD since I was a kid, so finalising projects has always been challenging.

The real turning point in my artistic practice was moving to Switzerland: I was confronted daily with contemporary art for the first time. Unlike Padua, where there was no art scene, Zurich provided a massive array of cultural events, from tiny off-spaces to established museums. Public financial support for artists is embedded in Swiss cultural policy. The opportunity to finance my production with external funding changed my perspective radically. For the first time, I did not have to pay for it out of my salary, which was barely sufficient to pay the bills. My practice has ever since been affected by this new context. On the one hand, I was inspired by the Zurich art scene, which I perceived as more open and fresher in terms of languages and references. On the other hand, the decision to explore the threshold between art and craft came as a reaction to the Protestant approach to art observable in Switzerland. Bare Protestant churches and the prevailing lack of decoration and obsession with minimalism and neat design triggered a reconsideration of ornaments and craft. A baroque approach to sculpture became more and more central to my practice, together with a growing interest in the grotesque. Probably there was a nostalgic feeling for the Venetian baroque churches and the outdated Carnival but, more generally, I believed that certain assumptions concerning the undervaluation of decoration need to be questioned. I slowly realised the necessity of looking with a different gaze at the country that I had left so full of resentment. The emotional distance allowed me to enjoy the Italian cultural tradition without feeling the unbearable weight of the past. I left Italy because I was looking for more efficiency and less triviality. I was overwhelmed by the sense of a Kafkaesque bureaucracy and the lack of attention paid to contemporary art. I felt, like many other Italians, radically inadequate compared to the generic north of Europe, where everything was more organised. At the same time, the proximity to Germany allows me to visit Gothic cathedrals and medieval and late-Renaissance art collections that, unlike the Italian ones, are characterised by a more radical idea of the grotesque (as I will explain at greater length in Chapter Two). It is perhaps crucial to point out that the relationship between contemporary Italian artists and the Italian cultural heritage is exceptionally complicated. Italian artistic tradition is mainly considered a burden rather than a well of endless references. The maintenance of archaeological sites and thousands of churches suck up all the financial resources of a country that generally has a bad relationship with the contemporary. In an interview with *La Voce di New York*, Italian curator Cecilia Alemani, the director of the High Line programme in NYC, provides a blunt snapshot of the Italian contemporary art situation: “Museums are desperate;

there are very few non-profit foundations, and there are no alternative spaces where artists can work and show their creations outside commercial galleries. Because of this, an artist who decides to stay in Italy has fewer opportunities to grow and gain respect than an artist who travels abroad" (Agresta 2015).

Writing and Artistic Practice: A Monstrous Relationship

Following the criteria of author Linda Candy, I would define my research as practice-based. "Practice-based research is an original investigation undertaken in order to gain new knowledge partly by means of practice and the outcomes of that practice. Whilst the significance and context of the claims are described in words, a full understanding can only be obtained with direct reference to the outcomes" (Candy 2006).

The relationship between my visual practice and writing is the most challenging aspect of this research. Ideally, the two should go hand-in-hand. The writing arises from the visual display, and, to a certain extent, the theoretical discussion in the writing enriches the visual display. The visual output is the contribution to the field, but the text that accompanies it is essential for a full comprehension of the research. I ought perhaps to emphasise that I am neither a gender studies scholar nor an art historian. My expertise materialises in my artistic practice. Nevertheless, some written reflections on masculinities and the male body contain perspectives that exist independently from the visual output.

Roger Conover, the editor of the MIT Press series *Writing Art*, introduces the collection by saying: "It is not just a matter of artists' texts filling discursive gaps between critical writing and artistic production; it is also a question of texts by artists creating intellectual, political, and cultural possibilities that would not otherwise exist" (Conover 2022). Plenty of open questions still haunt a practice-based PhD. Does pursuing this kind of research improve the quality of the visual display? Does a practice-based PhD produce new knowledge comparable to that of a scientific PhD? The debate about the relevance and the future of artistic research is still extremely lively and sometimes heated. According to artist Hito Steyerl, "The debate about Artistic Research lost me a couple of years ago, when it became clear that that debate tended to be much more about creating an academic/bureaucratic discipline, than attempting to figure out something for an artistic discipline" (Steyerl 2021, 13). Besides this, writing about one's artistic practice is crucial to facing unsolved issues and opening up new perspectives. At the same time, while reflecting on paper about my work, I might compromise the ambivalence and ungraspable aspects of my practice, thereby precluding unexpected interpretations.

I cite the example of the artist Jordan Wolfson, who usually refuses to provide context for his work and instead discusses formal or material choices (Gardner 2020). His work has often triggered controversy because he reproduced violence and misogyny without providing the audience with precise tools to grasp his intentions. I visited his solo show in Kunsthalle Bregenz in 2022, and on that occasion, probably to avoid further controversy, he decided to supply an explanatory text, printed on the museum's entrance wall: "I feel pathetic and defeated writing this because I feel that by explaining, I am surrendering my agency and power as an artist. I am also assuming here there isn't trust between us. But because we are in paranoid and reductive times, I am forced to remind you of my intentions so that you don't harm me for the art I make."[7]

How to organically combine reflections on my practice with the chosen theoretical framework remains a knot that I have been trying to disentangle. I found that I could not put elements of my practice fully into words, like the obsession with a specific material and the necessity to touch, cuddle and smell the fabric before choosing it. In addition, there are questions that I can only partially answer, like for instance, where specific shapes come from and what kind of associative procedure led me to combine this shape with that material, or why I chose a particular movement. And I am fine with this.

[7] No publication has been produced for Wolfson's show at Kunsthallle Bregenz. Wolfson's text was only available in that specific space.

CHAPTER TWO: SCULPTURAL PRACTICE AND AMBIVALENCE

As I explained in the Introduction, my MFA graduation work *When Boundaries Burn* was my first notable engagement with a specific materiality comprising textiles and other media like iron and ceramic. The title points to my interest in ambivalence. On the one hand, getting burned refers to the pain produced by trespassing beyond the human body's limitations, a pain that cannot just be forgotten through the fictions of art. At the same time, the notion of burning boundaries addressed my emerging desire to disrupt my biological destiny. I wanted to materialise these abstract concepts, while at the same time the concepts were emerging in the process, in the doing, in the "dirty work" of my sculptural practice. I have long been interested in the fragility of certain materials, despite their apparent solidity, and how such materials were the perfect medium to materialise a male body in trouble.

What does it mean to be a heterosexual male artist who uses textiles as one of his primary materials and whose practice refers to an aesthetic deeply interwoven with female artist positions and feminism? My awareness of so-called feminist practices grew together with the exploration of artistic perspectives like those of Louise Bourgeois and Dorothea Tanning, which in turn led me to a broader interest in surrealism and the grotesque. Bourgeois's and Tanning's representations of the body using grotesque and abject truncations speaks specifically to the female condition. Nevertheless, I could see that their vision might be applied to male bodies struggling with performance anxiety, "relative power and powerlessness" (Seidler 2011, 25). I could also see in these artists' works a broader reflection of the human condition, beyond gender. They engage only indirectly with feminism, as femininity and womanhood emerge symbolically through a painful engagement with their bodies. The materiality they propose is still extremely relevant in the field of contemporary art practice.[8]

In this chapter, I develop an analysis of my sculptures with specific theoretical considerations emerging from my engagement with this materiality, construed as the manifestation of an artwork in its wholeness. Art historian Michael Yonan defines materiality as "an elusive combination of physical substance, tactility, medium, and objecthood" (Yonan 2021). Theodor Adorno argues that, apart from the property that the material possesses (resistance and texture), historical context and historical use "accumulate" in it (Adorno 1965), while the art historian Monika Wagner adds that materials cannot be considered as just

[8] One of Tanning's painting, *Avatar* (1947), has been showed at the 2022 Venice Biennale. The work summarises Tanning's interest in metamorphosis, the transformative power of nature and the uncanniness of domestic spaces (Cuniberti 2022).

carriers of meaning but as something "indissolubly interwoven with it" (Wagner 2013). Engaging with materials, according to philosopher Karen Barad, is a way of generating and communicating meaning while criticising the dominance of written language (Barad 2015). The claim of art historian Petra Lange-Berndt that "[t]hings are often practiced long before written" (Berndt 2015), is an apt evocation of the development of my research. My sculptural practice is based on putting different materials and shapes in conversation to trigger an awareness of power relationships, friction and ambivalence. I have arrived at the term ambivalence to characterise the overall key for reading my sculptural work. It has emerged from questioning the symbolic aspects of masculinities, the limits of the hybrid body, the paradoxes of post-structuralism, and interrogating the grotesque in its historical manifestations. In this chapter, I will unpack these terms with an analysis of relevant art practices that have informed my work, together with specific analyses of my own sculptural works.

To introduce my approach to materiality, I wish briefly to discuss the wall sculpture series I started in 2021, entitled *When Boundaries Bite.*[9] It is a unique work, developed during the Covid-19 pandemic, in which I attempted to condense a sculptural idea into a very intimate format.



Figure 4: Nicola Genovese, When boundaries bite, 2021,
copper, foam, ceramic, glass, metal, resin, wood, textile. Courtesy the artist.

[9] The title recalls *When Boundaries Burn*. *When Boundaries Bite* addresses the sometimes-complicated relationships among the shapes and materials that I put in conversation. It is also a metaphorical reminder of the physicality of limits.

Placing a sculpture on the wall could transform a sculpture into a flat image, but I wanted to explore the boundaries between 2- and 3-dimensional representation and work on a portrait that recalls a puzzle/collage where each element depicts a different identity. The puzzle elements represent mainly body fragments, more or less recognisable according to the degree of abstraction I deployed. There are recurrent motifs like the claw and the snake that I will analyse in due course. I chose this work because the theme of the friction and hierarchies among different materials and shapes is central. The sculptural elements are obliged to enter into conversation, and they are, to some extent, monstrously and playfully arranged. In their formal arrangement, the series *When Boundaries Bite* references the mannerist Italian painter Arcimboldo and his famous grotesque portraits made up of vegetables and fruits. But unlike in Arcimboldo, where the entanglement of elements is presented organically and graciously, power relationships are at stake in my work. This is particularly visible in the strangling of the green textile that simultaneously penetrates the ceramic element. On the one hand, different identities try to converge in one stable form. At the same time, every single part claims its independence.



Figure 5: Giuseppe Arcimboldo, Allegory of Winter, 1563, oil on canvas, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna, AT.

Ambivalence, Hybridism, Liminality and the Paradoxes of Post-Structuralism

As in all my sculptural pieces, the materials used in *When Boundaries Bite* carry their own stories. For instance, metal is historically associated with architecture, monumental art in public spaces, and construction sites. Ceramic use is traceable to the domestic environment and craft. As I have already remarked, the stratification over the centuries that has given shape to our perception of many common materials has to be acknowledged. In addition, the quality of the medium enables me to play with its intrinsic ambivalence, highlighting, for instance, the fragility and resistance of ceramic. Even though ceramic embodies domesticity, a specific shape or glaze might clash with this. The same happens when the materials I use to depict motifs trigger a conflict with the motifs' historical baggage. It seems appropriate that I clarify in theoretical terms the concepts of ambivalence and hybridity in my artistic practice. Ambivalent feelings are provoked by an object that possesses ambivalent features.
As scholar Dario Cecchini argues, "a subject will feel ambivalence toward an object or a situation if he/she is aware that the two opposite evaluations are irreducibly opposed" (Cecchini 2021). Cecchini mentions the example of the Sachertorte, which is at the same time pleasant, tasty and unhealthy. When those opposite features have the same weight, the person cannot decide. Whereas in ambiguity, the conflict is temporary, in ambivalence, that conflict is insurmountable (Cecchini 2021). Ultimately, Sachertorte has ambivalent features, but it is universally recognised as a cake. There are then objects that trigger ambivalence and are hybridised, in the sense that there is an ongoing shift between a quality or identity recognisable as A and one recognisable as B, while the object remains neither A nor B. The term hybridity is deployed in a variety of fields, from sociology to biology. Historically, mythological hybrid creatures made up of human and animal features were used to depict the devil or other forms of human decay and perversion. The term chimaera originally referred to an imaginary animal formed by a blend of goat, snake and lion, though the term can describe anything composed of disparate parts. In contemporary visual culture, hybridism might refer to cyborgs, or amplified to invoke the various Instagram filters which use face recognition technology enabling, for instance, the merging of the user's face with the features of a fantasy character.



Figure 6: Jacopo Ligozzi, Chimera, 1590, grey-brown wash, white lead, pencil, couches of chalk / pencil on yellow paper, Museo del Prado, Madrid, ES.

I am a little reluctant to use the term hybridism within the discourse of fine art because it is mainly associated with postcolonial theory and specifically the critical theorist Homi K. Bhabha[10].

Outlining the exact boundaries where two or more elements together start to be a new entity, or even a sort of liminal third space[11], is at the heart of a never-ending debate in academia. It leads to the question of essence versus matter and of a stable identity versus a constructed, performative and fluid one. The main questions that concern my sculptural practice are: Is the hybrid sculpture located in an endless loop of transformation and, therefore, identity-wise unstable and undefinable? What is the matter/essence of that hybrid sculpture in a liminal stage? Is the liminal space just another fixed identity where the body matters? Why is there a widely accepted assumption within the contemporary art discourse that unstable, unconventional liminal identities are morally and qualitatively superior? To extrapolate my argument, one can find relevant correlates in biology. Biologically speaking, hybridisation, specifically introgressive hybridisation, might lead to the extinction of the

[10] "Bhabha displaced for the first-time hybridity from its racialized connotation to the semiotic field of culture" (Kraidy 2013, 318). He emphasises hybridity's ability to subvert and reappropriate dominant discourses (Bhabha 1994).

[11] Bhabha maintains that there is a space in-between, an interstitial passage between fixed identification that opens up the possibility of cultural hybridisation (Bhabha 1994). In an interview with academic Jonathan Rutherford, Bhabha calls this interstice the third space, claiming that this is the site where the colonised "give rise to something different, something new and unrecognisable," to disrupt the binary system of colonizer/colonized (Rutherford 1990, 211).

species that went through this process but hybridisation, especially in plants, is an overall adaptive strategy.

In most animals, in particular mammals, barriers to hybridisation are put in place to avoid the loss of genetic information and keep the specie "pure": "Barriers include morphological differences, differing fertility times, mating behaviours and cues, and physiological rejection of sperm cells or the developing embryo. Some barriers act before fertilisation; others after it" (Handwiki). In some cases, in a natural environment, barriers are not enough, and hybridisation takes place anyway. Hybrid offspring are not always intermediate between their parents (as if there were blending inheritance), but are sometimes stronger or perform better than either parental lineage or variety; a phenomenon called heterosis, hybrid vigour, or heterozygote advantage. Even though hybrids are mostly infertile, sometimes hybrid speciation takes place. It is a form of speciation when hybridisation between two species leads to a new species reproductively isolated from the parent species. Anthropologist Brian Stross refers to those mechanisms, particularly the hybrid vigour, to outline a dialogue between biology and culture. Hybridity in culture should be seen in this perspective as a way to initiate more complex, more open, and stronger cultural dynamics (Stross 1999). Brian Stross also introduces the notion of the "hybridity cycle," in which a hybrid form transforms itself into a pure form before helping to generate another hybrid (Stross 1999). The idea that transformations lead to temporary stability in order to initiate another process of hybridisation might be helpful to support my argument, even though referring to a "pure" form, especially in the academic context, is problematic. In the work of post-structuralist scholars, the essence, namely the fleshly body behind our socially performed identity, is refused as a sign of scientific determinism. Philosopher Judith Butler who represents one of the most influential figures in gender studies theorised the performative nature of gender. The following quotation from her book *Gender Trouble* highlights the potential confusion that Butler's theory has generated: "Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being" (Butler 1990, 33). I agree that gender is performed and internalised to the extent that a series of acts is perceived as part of an inner self. Nonetheless, gender is also performed by a body, not just an appearance of substance, a body that is biologically sexed. And sex implies substantial differences between males and females, for example in sport performances. Butler even quotes Nietzsche to support her idea: "there is no 'being' behind doing. The doer is merely a fiction imposed on the doing – the doing itself is everything" (Nietzsche 1996, 29). It is this claim about the fictionality of the "doer" that leads

to the denial of sexed bodies and physical body boundaries. Body modification is an example of a will to trespass the boundaries of our body, sometimes without considering its limits. For example, the transwoman, Tiamat Medusa, also known as the Dragon Lady, is an American performance artist who specialises in body suspension. Tiamat Medusa, in an interview, explains her "transformation" into a dragon: "My transformation has a multitude of meanings; I am morphing from just being a rattlesnake to becoming a dragon, which is what I evolved into. Like a Pokémon evolves." In the same interview, she claims: "I'm just conforming to my true nature as a reptilian" (Sweet 2018). Paradoxically, the need for a "true" essence that manifests precisely in a physical body is evinced even by Tiamat Medusa. She cut her tongue and underwent an orchiectomy, basically a castration, as part of her transformation into a genderless dragon in the flesh. She needed to embody her belief of being a dragon. This extreme example exposes the paradox of the fictionality of the doer and the human cognitive tendency to expect an equivalence between identity and corporeality, despite the theoretical possibility of endless fluidity. Challenging the boundaries of the physical body, from under-skin implants and external prostheses to hormones, is quite common in contemporary Western societies, although body modification practices also existed in antiquity. For instance, "[a]rtificial cranial deformation (ACD) is a practice deployed since at least the Neolithic period in cultures all over the world that involves binding a child's head from infancy to deform the skull" (Gannon 2019).

By bodily boundaries, I mean, for instance, the ageing sexed body we were born in. We can add or remove genitalia and secondary sexual characteristics or cure ED (erectile dysfunction) with Viagra or a penile implant, pretending our body is a perfect eternal machine. As I suggested in the Introduction, the reality of the biological body can provide the tools to rethink identity, but certain limits must necessarily be accepted. Everyone should be able to embrace the multitude of identities, with all their nuances, that have always been part of the complexity of each human being, long before the appearance of gender studies. I am not interested in discussing Tiamat's (belief in) her right to identify as a woman and a dragon. What I am pointing out is that, despite her self-ID, the power of fiction and imagination, and the excitement of playing with roles and identities, Tiamat Medusa is indubitably not a biological dragon and despite the idealistic fluidity of identities she needs to confirm her womanhood and dragonhood with body modifications that are hard to undo.



Figure 7: A portrait of Tiamat Medusa, 2018. Source: San Antonio Current.

What do these considerations mean for my practice, given both my critical stance toward post-structuralism and my insistence that my materiality can at least in part be described, in a way that art critic Rosalind Krauss would call "anti-monumental"?

When Krauss defined the expanded field of sculpture in 1979, she tried to explain the postmodernist approach to sculptural practices that emerged in the 1960s. But first of all, she identified the moment when sculptures, which are at their core related to monuments, became detached from their commemorative function and, as a consequence, from a particular site, becoming in a sense nomadic (Krauss 1979). Taking as an example Rodin's *Balzac Monument* (1892–1897) and *Gates of Hell* (1880–1890), she claims that this Modernist sculpture "crosses the threshold of the logic of the monument, entering the space of its negative condition" (Krauss 1979, 34). As Krauss argues, in the attempt to be non-architectural and repudiate landscape, sculpture became an "ontological absence." In her ideal expanded field, she proposed a complex in which architecture and landscape fuse together to avoid that negativity. She claimed that labyrinths and mazes occupied this complex long before postmodernist sculpture (Krauss 1979). "It is obvious that the logic of the space of

postmodernism practice is no longer organized around the definition of a given medium on the grounds of material or for that matter, the perception of material. It is organized instead through the universe of terms that are felt to be in opposition within a cultural situation" (Krauss 1979, 43). Krauss's line of thought, though relating mainly to the development of sculptural practices in the 1960s and 1970s, is very relevant to my argument. Indeed, sculpture as negativity, as a non-something in a permanent status of suspension from or opposition to the cultural context, is today still the core of contemporary art practices in general.[12]

Krauss later developed the idea of the post-medium condition, where her perspective on the consequences of the erasure of the medium seems to contradict her previous approach (Krauss 1999). In my anti-monumental practice, I try to avoid the deconstruction and negation of a subject. Instead, I embrace the challenge of combining incongruent elements, as I will explain in due course in the section of this chapter dedicated to the grotesque. Negating a substance goes hand-in-hand with fluidity, even though fluidity clashes with the need for stability. Contemporary artists with different perspectives about body transformation and who do not applaud uncritical fluidity are rare. Surrealist artist Ithell Colquhoun, for instance, depicts hybrid liminal bodies as something sinister. In her work entitled *Gouffres Amers* the male body transformation is a failure. As Tiffanie Bachet argues, "[t]he metamorphic process in *Gouffres Amers* does not lead to creation but to decay; the naked male body is that of a sea creature taken out of the water and left to putrefy in a hostile landscape" (Bachet 2020, 5).

[12] The opposition to the "hegemonic" cultural context suggested by Krauss still denotes the approach of most Western contemporary art institutions and practitioners. That resides on the assumption/belief that societies are neatly split between a hegemonic, normative, violent, colonial power structure, and marginalised, non-white, non-normative minorities. In order to exist, the Western contemporary art context must be in absolute opposition to the hegemonic power structure representing facts, theories, and exclusionary powers. The contradictions emerge when the "outside" of the structure is revealed also to be culturally hegemonic.



Figure 8: Ithell Colquhoun, Gouffres Amers, 1939, oil on canvas.
Photo credit: The Hunterian, University of Glasgow, UK.

The theoretical development of new materialism seems to be one possibility for overcoming the dominance of post-structuralist scholars. Materiality has indeed "been thoroughly overlooked and neglected in contemporary critical theory" (Stephens 2014, 191). Scholar Steve Garlick defines new materialism as "a collective term for a range of theories that aim to move beyond the critical focus on discourse, subjectivity, and culture often associated with both poststructuralism and social constructionism and, instead, to turn toward bodies, matter, and a more positive and dynamic conception of materiality" (Garlick 2017, 387). Even Butler, at a certain point, admitted the cruciality of bodies: as she argues in her book *Bodies that Matter*, "If everything is a discourse, what happens to the body? If everything is text, what about violence and bodily injury? Does anything matter in or for poststructuralism?" (Butler 1993, 28*).* This concern has been taken further by philosopher Rosi Braidotti, another prominent figure in new materialist theory, who explains what it means for a feminist to talk about a fiction that manifests as matter. Braidotti claims that even though the female identity is a product of cultural layering, that sedimentation materialises bodily: "If essence means the historical sedimentation of many-layered discursive products, this stock of culturally coded definitions, requirements and expectations about women or female identity – this repertoire of

regulatory fictions that are tattooed on our skins – then it would be false to deny that such an essence not only exists but is also powerfully operational" (Braidotti 2002, 41). Yet it seems that the intention to reduce the emphasis on the socially constructive role of discourse and language remains largely theoretical. As Vivian Sobchack suggests, "despite the current academic fetishization of 'the body,' most theorists still don't know what to do with its unruly responsive flesh and sensorium" (Sobchack 2004, 59). And Stacy Alaimo and Susan Heckman note that the ongoing approach in most contemporary feminisms "requires that one distance oneself as much as possible from the tainted realm of materiality by taking refuge within culture, discourse, and language" (Alaimo and Hekman 2008, 1). The 'tainted realm of materiality' refers both to the body and to the danger of supporting any position that sounds even a little bit deterministic. By determinism, I mean "a theory or belief where events, including acts of the will, occurrences in nature, and social or psychological phenomena, are causally determined by preceding events and natural laws. Determinism assumes that all events in the universe, including all the things that happen in human minds, follow laws of causality" (Baer 2008, 305). Biological determinism in gender studies automatically raises the evil spectre of sex difference. New materialist theorists have been trying to engage with the body's biology without falling into pure determinism. For instance, anthropologist Vicki Kirby has long questioned feminist attempts to theorise the body. In that regard, she prefers to use the term "corporeal substance" instead of "matter." She has tried to capture the concreteness of flesh by describing it as "the very meat of carnality that is born and buried, the stuff of decay that seems indifferent to semiosis" (Kirby 2002, 277). New materialist theorist Noela Davis characterises most recent and current feminist discourse as "biophobic." Sarah Ahmed, for instance, one of the most prominent figures in queer and affect theory, is criticised in this regard as one of the feminists who are "scared" of facing the biological body (Davis 2009). On the other hand, Ahmed claims that the accusation of "biophobia" against feminism is so common that it has become part of the mainstream discourse. "As a reviewer of papers for journals, I have lost count of the number of papers that have referred casually, usually without using examples, to how feminism or poststructuralism have not dealt with the body as a real, living, physical, biological entity or have reduced 'everything' to language, signification and culture" (Ahmed 2008, 23).

Aside from the internal quarrels, to find feminist positions that deeply engage with the biological body without downplaying the role of culture, one has to look at gender-critical scholars whose work has developed from radical feminism, like Kathleen Stock and Julie

Bindel, and who advocate sex-based rights.[13] Their approach finds itself accused of transphobia, and it may not be wise for me to enter this seemingly endless polarised debate between feminists who endorse queer discourse and social constructivism and feminists who distinguish biological sex from gender identity. Even though some academics are trying to question the hegemony of language over materiality, the visual output in the mainstream contemporary Western art scene has to be theoretically linked to a spectrum of concepts that, as we have seen, position it "in opposition within a cultural situation" (Krauss 1979, 43). The keywords that emerge as a consequence of that opposition are non-fixed, non-essentialist, non-deterministic, non-normative and, of course, non-binary. As regards fixity and the fluidity much-valorised in this perspective, Elizbeth Stephens remarks that the "fixed, in most contemporary arts/academic discourse, is invariably aligned with the conservative and normative, while the 'fluid' is associated with the positive, progressive, and resistant. And yet, despite this, what is meant by fluidity itself is rarely subject to examination" (Stephens 2014, 186). There is an underlying presumption among poststructuralists within gender studies that stability means fundamentally bonded to a binary normative system based on mandatory heterosexuality and, therefore both violent and qualitatively inferior. Fluidity, on the other hand, results in the fabrication of more gender identities, like the 37 options currently proposed by the dating app Tinder (O'Brien 2019). However, the idea of fluidity seems to clash with the need to self-identify in a distinct essentialist category. In addition, this number of nuances highlights the theory's neoliberal core, where categories quickly become unfashionable and have to make space for fancier and more exceptional ones.

In what seems to have become a frantic search for ways of being more exceptional and at the same time more marginalised, even homosexuality seems to have become part of the system of binaries. Paul Preciado perfectly summarizes that tendency. "I am not a man; I am not a woman; I am not heterosexual; I am not homosexual; I am not bisexual. I am a dissident of the sex-gender system. I am the multiplicity of the cosmos trapped in a binary political and epistemological system, shouting in front of you. I am a Uranian confined inside the limits of technoscientific capitalism" (Preciado 2020, 29). What does it mean, embodying the alleged multiplicity of the cosmos? What kind of body should materialise out of these poetic effusions? Besides the cognitive limitations of imagining a self as "the multiplicity of the cosmos," there is again an implied moral superiority on the part of these individuals trapped in supposedly culturally and intellectually inadequate binary systems. The gender self-

[13] The Declaration on Women's Sex-Based Rights was created to lobby nations to maintain language protecting women and girls on the basis of sex rather than "gender" or "gender identity." See https://www.womensdeclaration.com.

identification process enables anyone, on the basis of personal feelings and without any scientific criteria, to leave their outdated man or woman body, their heterosexuality, homosexuality and bisexuality, to embrace the enlightened but "trapped" community of "sex-gender dissidents" (Preciado 2020, 29).

Nevertheless, the fleshly body remains a barrier not always skippable through surgery, hormones and puberty blockers. The preceding reflections on the acceptance or denial of bodily boundaries are simultaneously a reflection on my sculptural practice. In making my sculpture, I need to find a balance between potentially endless shapes and the feasibility of those shapes. Sometimes while assembling my sculpture, I need to consider gravity, material resistance, and, for instance, whether those metal bars will be able to carry that amount of weight. I continuously face disappointment when realising that the draft I had in mind is not achievable in the face of the reality of the materials. Unlike with poetry or painting, the cosmos that I can create are limited. There are material boundaries that I am unable to surmount. Sculptural practice is a reality check.

Cuddling cutting: A Case Study

The lack of attention to corporeality in much contemporary art criticism, as discussed earlier, led me to talk about my approach in that regard. What does it mean practically to engage with materiality and the fleshy body without forgetting that the body is also the product of cultural processes? I wish to deepen the ambivalence that emerges from the materiality of one of my latest sculptures, by referencing the work of Keith Haring, Dorothea Tanning and Louise Bourgeois.

But before diving into my work, I need to contextualise my practice historically. A male artist who approaches textiles and crafts and refers to practices that have been benchmarked as feminist might have sounded controversial decades ago. Nowadays, there is a broad acceptance of male artists choosing these media and practices. Indeed, recontextualising such techniques in new constellations opens up sculptural possibilities beyond the question of the female body. The usual male sculptural preference for hard, durable materials like stone, marble and bronze has been widely challenged. Pennina Barnett suggests that "the soft, impermanent nature of clothing evokes the human form and its mortality" (Barnett 1999, 189). Textiles allow me to engage through their materiality with the male body: fragile, strong, and in power while powerless; they also encourage one to think about the ephemerality of the human condition.

It is nevertheless necessary to acknowledge the historical background that led women artists to use textiles. Indeed, since the 1960s, many women artists have made fiber art, specifically soft sculpture, a trademark of sorts in a context dominated by men, where the boundaries between Fine Arts and crafts were still quite clearly defined. Curator Elissa Auther has perfectly summarised how in the sixties and seventies fibre arts struggled for recognition: "In the West, a textile culture dominated by the mechanized loom, these techniques have largely fallen out of use since the Industrial Revolution or been categorized as native craft, occupational craft, women's handicraft, decoration, or domestic hobby work. "Fiber artists" in the 1960s and 1970s disregarded the low cultural connotations variously attached to these categories, namely, utility, femininity, domesticity, amateurism, decorativeness, and even primitiveness" (Auther 2002, 6). The relationship between fibre arts and feminist discourse has developed over the years. The Suffragettes displayed the connection between the banners embroidered for their protests and their demands for equality. In *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine* (1984), art historian Rozsika Parker has extensively investigated those practices historically as a crucial element in the construction of femininity and at the same time as a tool of empowerment. The so-called fibre art movement developed mainly in the USA after WW2 and peaked in the sixties and seventies. Even though categorising artistic movements in this way helps one to understand the development of artistic practices chronologically, defining artists through the material they use might threaten to create a sort of ghettoisation. Generally, artists whose primary medium was textile and who were directly involved in the production through techniques like sewing, stitching, weaving, and knotting were not considered 'proper artists' but makers. MOMA's 1969 *Wall Hangings* exhibition marked the crossover of fibre art into mainstream art. Then the show *Deliberate Entanglements* at UCLA Art Galleries in 1971 was the real breakthrough for three-dimensional fabric-based installations and sculpture. In an outstanding review of the exhibition in the *Chicago Tribune*, Jane Allen wrote: "It did not go unnoted that up until then, the fine arts museums had not exhibited this type of work because they considered it craft" (Allen 1972). *Deliberate Entanglements* gathered the work of women artists working in a medium classified as "inferior" when produced by women. Male artists who worked with textiles had achieved recognition earlier and did not have to face that relegation. Chronologically speaking, American pop-art sculptor Claes Oldenburg was the first recognised artist to focus on stuffed objects. For Oldenburg, the "soft sculptures" sprang out of props created for his happenings: for instance, *Upside Down City*, the first soft sculpture produced in 1962, is simultaneously a prop, a painting, a relic, and a sculpture.



Figure 9: Claes Oldenburg, Upside down city, 1962, mixed media, Mumok, Vienna, AT.

Oldenburg then started to exhibit his larger-than-life, everyday stuffed objects in museums and galleries, becoming a prominent figure in the pop art movement. Compared to Oldenburg's first stuffed object, his later soft sculptures are of little relevance to my practice.

There are, however, voices who disagree about Oldenburg's role as a pioneer. In 2018 the artist Yayoi Kusama, in the film documentary *Kusama Infinity* about her artistic life, describes how her work was "copied" by better-known male artists like Oldenburg, specifically her soft sculpture *Accumulation No.1* from 1962 (Abrams 2018). Stuffed objects were, at that time, considered crafty girlish artefacts rather than art, and I assume there was a failure to recognise women artists working in the medium. The overlooking of women artists has been common for decades, especially when those artists were in a relationship with male artists. Jan Haworth was the wife of the successful English pop artist Peter Blake. They are both responsible for the famous cover of the Beatles LP, *Sg. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band.* It is a matter of fact that her contribution to the design of one of the most famous record sleeves in history has been airbrushed even though her prominent stuffed object *Old Lady* (together with other elements) is visible in the bottom right corner of the picture.

Because fibre art is intimately associated with feminism, some women artists like Dorothea Tanning and Louise Bourgeois have been dragged into feminist discourse despite

their having never directly mentioned their involvement in the movement. This does not mean that they do not have feminist leanings. In an interview with critic Carlo McCormick, Dorothea Tanning responded sharply: “Women artists. There is no such thing or person. It’s just as much a contradiction in terms as ‘man artist’ or ‘elephant artist.’ You may be a woman and an artist, but one is a given, and the other is you “ (Cormick 1990). And Alyce Mahon, the curator of Dorothea Tanning’s exhibition in Madrid, claims that “she was nervous of being sucked into a particular feminist narrative and into the feminist movement of the 1970s and 1980s, and almost all the work she had done being neglected or being misrepresented in other ways” (Luke 2018). It would be extremely interesting to know what she would have thought after being invited in 2022 to the Venice Art Biennale to be part of an exhibition conceptually based on what she was struggling with.[14]



Figure 10: Nicola Genovese, Cuddling cutting, 2021, Le Commun, Geneve, CH. Photo Lisa Biedlingmaier.

Dorothea Tanning’s statement confirms my belief that art on the topic of the body and its ambivalence is not the domain of feminist women but rather a complex world to be

[14] Venice Biennale 2022’s title is “The milk of dream,” curated by Cecilia Alemani. The title is inspired by surrealist artist Leonora Carrington’s book written in 1950. Alemani’s show features 80% work by women. In an interview with *Vogue*, she claims: “So while I wish we were not here talking about gender because I don’t necessarily claim it’s a feminist show, it’s important to know that it’s been 127 years of an unequal representation since the Venice Biennale began” (Kazanjian 2022).

investigated, regardless of the artist's gender. I take *Cuddling Cutting* (2021) as an example to explore how ambivalence informs my sculptural practice and what kind of materiality emerges from it. The sculpture has variable dimensions because of the flexible shapes, but on that occasion, the sizes were 180 cm x 350cm x 40 cm. I exhibited the work within the group show *Stitches: Body, Scenes and Decorations*, curated by Collective Detente, at Le Commun, Geneve, Switzerland, in 2021.[15]

The sculpture is made of textile, glazed ceramic, copper, metal, concrete, Murano glass, leather and foam. *Cuddling Cutting* is frozen in a liminal transition space where the previous body is partly there, and a new body is taking shape. But this does not mean that the sculpture that we are looking at, at that precise moment, does not have a set of particular features that are recognisable and categorisable. A certain degree of recognisability is required, mainly to understand to what extent the "original" forms have been affected. Formally speaking, indistinctness might lead to pure abstraction, which would reduce ambivalence. Ambivalent features trick our cognitive system but, ultimately, salient features dominate. For instance, the ceramic shoe to a certain extent activates a stable image. By recognisability, I mean the extent to which one might recognise familiar or more extensively categorisable elements. Ambivalence, indeed, is inextricably entangled with uncanniness and the grotesque. The uncanny in my work manifests, for instance, through the deployment of textile that is traceable to a domestic context in opposition to plastic fabric that is part of the camp imagery of BDSM. Hence, some sculptural elements must be identifiable as familiar to achieve the uncanny and the consequent unpleasant feeling of discomfort. The discomfort one feels is related to the psychological need for consonance. According to Festinger's theory of cognitive dissonance (1957), "Two cognitions, held simultaneously, are psychologically inconsistent, the resultant tension drives us to alter our cognition to achieve consistency" (McLeod 2018). Some sculptural elements show resistance and independence; others accept their destiny as part of a totality. In its apparent calmness, the whole sculpture becomes almost decorative, but the friction within still needs to be resolved. Some elements are clearly inspired by human body parts, others are horns, claws, and snakes. On the one hand, the

[15] Here is an excerpt from the curatorial text: "Composed as an immersive universe of two and three-dimensional bodies, this space features a multiplicity of personae. From the Latin per-sonare (speaking through), "persona" defines the mask in both antique theater and in our relationship to the world (Jung's persona, Goffman's face or Winnicott's self), but also the prototypical entities used in usability engineering or marketing. The diversity of the works in this section creates an uncanny social space in which to wander. Characters and spectators meet within a collective narrative: archetypes, mythical or familiar figures, portraits and self-portraits, doubles, appearances and absences. A forest of anthropomorphic, mutant, abstract and écorchés beings unfolds and summons a frontal relationship to bodies" (Collective Détente 2021).

work's materiality, namely all aspects relating to its physical existence, should lead to an overall or total experience. On the other hand, dissecting the whole into single parts is crucial to understanding the salient features that define the work. The first level of ambivalence concerns the quality of the materials. If the spectator is not allowed to touch, the perception of the quality of the materials is the result of his or her background. I will clarify in the next chapter the nature of the white cube and the hegemony of sight that governs that context. The stuffed objects are most likely recognised as light, soft and flexible. This happens because the textile is used as external material. However, the amount of padding that I use to fill the pillows allows me to smooth out the form, giving the spectator the impression of being in front of a potentially heavy object.



Figure 11: Nicola Genovese, Cuddling Cutting, 2022, detail. Courtesy the artist.

The quality of the material is also about surfaces. The texture of the ceramic and the textile pattern can validate or neutralise other features of the sculpture. A textile with a metallic texture validates the perception of a heavy and inflexible object. Yet at the same time, the penetration into the ceramic object shows the versatility of the material. The seemingly hard

‘leg’ softly sneaks inside the ceramic shoe. In addition, the textile pattern is carnivalesque, while the oversized shoe is grotesque in its being out of place. The metal structure aims to support the leg element, but at the same time, the metal claws squeeze and gently strangle the textile, revealing its softness. The friction among the three parts (ceramic, metal, fabric) might be a playful coexistence or a forced relationship. Hierarchies are emphasised and simultaneously questioned in the relationship between those elements. The stuffed leg needs a metal structure, but the structure appears inadequate to support it.

In *Cuddling Cutting*, I employed a variety of heterogenous textiles: some have a kitschy, glitter, fetish carnival side; others are cheap fabrics associated with domestic items like towels and curtains; yet others are used in haute couture. The textile patterns and designs allow me to explore the relationship between plasticity and surface. When a stuffed object looks incredibly dense and resistant, a marble pattern might validate its appearance of being hard to the touch. I select the textiles according to the degree of ambivalence that they could generate in relation to the other materials. In an interview with Christian Meyer-Thoss, Louise Bourgeois said that materials offer a variety of silence and resistance, which a sculptor is free to exploit: “Materials are there to serve you, and you do not have to express the beauty of the material itself” (Meyer-Thoss 2016, 16). Avoiding the trap of the material’s beauty is sometimes challenging, especially when textiles have a catchy pattern or the ceramic has a shiny colourful glaze.



Figure 12: Nicola Genovese, Cuddling Cutting, 2021, detail. Courtesy the artist.

Ambivalence also manifests in the shapes, though ambiguous might better describe the image that results in the domain of shape. I often use shapes that remind me of horns, snakes, teeth, and body parts like penises and arms that might at the same time be saws or claws. The claw is a fascinating shape that I regard as archetypical. Claws, in their primary function, are intrinsically ambivalent, especially in animals, when they can be dangerous tools but at the same time useful for holding on. There is a potential violence in claws that can become a desperate attempt to hold onto a surface. Nails in humans are underdeveloped claws. Teeth and nails are the first attributes that are exaggerated if one wants to turn a human into a monstrous, grotesque creature. Long nails are a feature that allows humans to be closer to the human state of nature. They are, unadorned, almost an embodiment of wilderness. I consider claw-shape elements as body extensions or body prostheses that are illustrative of a process of hybridism or, rather, transformation into different life forms. The transformation process and the embodiment of the stranger elements I depict are partly a failure. I turn the attempt to appropriate more ‘authentic’ or ‘natural’ life forms without considering actual biological

boundaries into a sort of parody. Parody is a fundamental tool in my practice and definitive of my performative actions; I will therefore deepen it in Chapter 4.

Another archetypical recurrent motif is the snake. Artist Keith Haring is one of my references, especially the parts of his paintings that concern the surreal plasticity of the human body and its fanciful hybridisation with animals, especially snakes. At first sight, Haring seems to depict cheerful human bodies taking advantage of the lightness provided by the graffiti style. However, there is a much darker note that emerges with a closer look.
Art historian Ralph Melcher perfectly describes the monstrous, grotesque element in Haring's imagery: "The numerous scenes of perforation, in the concrete bodily sense as well as the figurative sexual sense, the monsters, absurd creatures, skeletons, snakes and beasts of prey which populate Haring's pictures, in particular almost always add a more or less tangible, nightmarish or violent character to his multi-figured, pattern-like works" (Melcher 2002, 42). Yet Haring's work establishes a degree of irony and parody that alleviate the violence at stake in the bodily perforations. Haring's snakes possess the archetypical strength of a motif that refers mainly in Western Judeo-Christian culture to sin and evil. However, the blurring of the boundary between the human body and the snake questions the clear-cut duality of God and evil, proposing an uncanny creature. According to Gregory Minissale, "Keith Haring's work has a comic sexual biomorphism wherein genitalia is reconfigured in bizarre transformations of the sex act, and bodies flow through and beyond each other" (Minissale 2015, 78). In the same paper, Minissale argues that in Haring's work there is a prevailing idea of bodies in trouble and a seemingly immanent imperfection in the male body (Minissale 2015).
In the image reproduced above, the leg that becomes a snake and then penetrates the stomach narrates a body in struggle, a body losing boundaries and control. The snakes of *Cuddling Cutting* have multiple heads. They developed organically like an infested fungus. They are harmless and limp and at the same time threatening: as in Haring, they attempt to penetrate while also being penetrated. At the same time, the soft elements of *Cuddling Cutting* recall bulky soft penises and intestines that are leaving the body and crawling on the floor. I acknowledge that Haring's works are also a celebration of gay male sexuality, but I am more interested in how his depiction of male bodies goes beyond sexual orientation. *Cuddling Cutting* suggests a body that attempts to assimilate feminine and masculine elements. That attempt might be a failure rather than the supposed triumph of the queer body. I do not mean failure in a moralistic way nor in terms of not being able to achieve normative status. Failure in my practice recognises the impossibility of reaching Preciado's multiplicity of cosmos, exceeding our biological body and at the same time accepting its limitations. The dream is the

only space where ambiguity does not have to confront the reality of flesh. According to Mark J. Blechner, we have an innate cognitive tendency to categorise, but in dreams, we may "find commonalities between objects that are normally kept in separate categories" (Blechner 2018, 98). Unlike in the dream condensation process, where several dream objects stand for several associations and ideas, with inter-objects, "the combination of objects is not fully formed into a new object with a complete 'gestalt' but instead remains incompletely fused" (Blechner 2018, 98). An inter-object may have a vague structure describable as "something between an X and a Y." Such an object as described by dreamers in clinical studies was either a stable double image or an image that shifted between two objects (Blechner 2018). According to psychoanalysis, that ambiguity has to be confined and handled in the realm of a dream.



Figure 13: Louise Bourgeois, Janus Fleuri, 1968, bronze. Photo Albin Dahlström
© The Easton Foundation/VAGA at ARS, NY/Bildupphovsrätt 2023.

Louise Bourgeois was fascinated by dream theory, especially Freud's. As Kirsten Drewes notes, "Bourgeois' own notes and artworks from this period [end of the 1960s] demonstrate her awareness of key elements of Freud's theory of the unconscious, such as reflections on dreams, fantasies, early memories and anxieties" (Drewes 2021).

Bourgeois was also intrigued by ambivalence and how to materialise it. *Janus Fleuri*, a bronze sculpture produced in 1968, is a perfect example: the synthesis of a vulva and

penises in a hybrid, ambiguous form. In this case, there is no hierarchy between the two "original" elements. It is not a simple juxtaposition but rather an organic transformation that occurs primarily at the juncture between the two penises. The two penises are ambivalent as well because they might be breasts. Even though she has been fully assimilated by feminist discourse, she preferred to describe her work as "pre-gender," as Jerry Gorovoy, her assistant for 30 years, confirmed in a YouTube interview (Proa TV 2001). In another interview with the San Francisco Museum, Bourgeois claimed that "some of my works are, or try to be, feminist, and others are not feminist" (sfmoma 2015). According to Bourgeois, the sculpture represents how she deals with polarised identities. *Janus Fleuri* is a reference to "the kind of polarity we represent…the polarity I experience is a drive towards extreme violence, revolt…and a retiring. I wouldn't say passivity…but a need for peace, a complete peace with the self, with others, and with the environment" (Russell 1989). Genitalia and sexuality are the starting points to talk about the complexities and ambivalence of identities, but not only that. Referencing the Greek Janus, the god of transitions and dualities, portrayed with two faces, one facing the past and one the future, *Janus Fleuri* shows the broad spectrum of subjects that Bourgeois addressed in her practice and might serve as an epitome of her work. As in Colquhoun's *Gouffres Amers*, there is something sinister in Bourgeois's work. It might explore the post-binary body, but at the same time, *Janus Fleuri* exposes the struggle, violence and limits of transformation. That is the main reason I can relate to Bourgeois's practice. There is a painful process of liberation and an almost nihilistic awareness of physical mortality. Sculpture, as I mentioned above, obliges the viewer to deal with the limitations of material reality. *Janus Fleuri*, like *Cuddling Cutting*, exists bodily in a liminal space, in the sense elaborated by the French anthropologist Arnold van Gennep. In his 1908 book *Rites de Passage*, Van Gennep coined the term "liminality" "to describe certain rituals found primarily in small-scale, pre-industrial societies, in particular, one that signified the transition from one social identity to another, such as from child to adult, from citizen to king, or from a living body to a corpse" (Skjoldager-Nielsen and Edelman 2014). The phase of transition is a potentially dangerous space of suspension where the initiates are particularly vulnerable because of their unstable identity. Anthropologist Victor Turner used the phrase "betwixt and between" to describe the state of the initiate, "neither here nor there": "During this period of transition between states, symbolic themes characteristically concern death and decomposition, or gestation and parturition, referring to the culturally defined person the initiate has been and will become" (Turner 1967, 338). A new identity is acquired through passage, a temporary transitional state that has to result in something new. The tension and

the friction cannot be endless, even though the pivotal moment is crucial. To eventuate in a stable form does not mean to extol the original's purity but rather to admit that the tension of transition has to be resolved in something that might be the starting point for new change. *Cuddling Cutting* refers to genitalia more symbolically and abstractly, but it reflects on the same topic of *Janus Fleuri*. Genitalia are, at the same time, a weapon, snakes and alien prostheses.

Another artist that I want to engage with is Dorothea Tanning. Even though Tanning is mostly recognised for her surrealist paintings, the series of sculptures she produced at the end of the sixties and beginning of the seventies is a milestone for my own practice. Tanning has always felt the label surrealist was too tight, considering the variety of mediums and genres she essayed. However, as Anna Watz argues, "her soft-sculptural oeuvre is thus both an embodiment and an extension of surrealism's aesthetic of touch" (Watz 2022). Biographer Katharine Conley has referred to Tanning's soft-sculpture period as her 'tactile turn' (Conley 2013, 121). In one interview, Tanning discussed her material motivations in the soft sculpture series: "These sculptures represent for me two or three kinds of triumph: The triumph of cloth as a material for a high purpose, the triumph of softness over hardness and the triumph of the artist over his volatile material, in this case living cloth" (Levi-Strauss 1976, 69).



Figure 14: Dorothea Tanning, Nue couchée (Reclining nude), 1969-70, fabric, ping-pong balls, wool, cardboard, Tate Collection, London, UK.

The decision to use softness doesn't imply lightness. Indeed, Tanning's installation *Hotel du Pavot* (see below), produced in 1972, is purely uncanny. PhD candidate Polly Hember, in her review of Tanning's Tate show, perfectly describes the work: "A dusty French hotel room with soft fabric limbs, bellies and shapes that capture a startling yet sensual sense of the uncanny valley as bulges of stuffed fabric are contorted in what might be pain or pleasure" (Hember 2019). The bodies that emerge from the walls are yet soft but still able to disrupt the tranquillity of a hotel room. The ordinary chair is in a process of hybridization with a human body, rejecting its status or being haunted by an awkward creature.



Figure 15: Dorothea Tanning, Hôtel du Pavot, Chambre 202 (Poppy Hotel, Room 202), 1970-73, fabric, wool, synthetic fur, cardboard, and ping-pong balls, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, FR.

Tanning's haunted domesticity goes beyond feminist discourse. It speaks of female bodies facing traumas and anxieties. Her soft sculptures are arguably even more sophisticated, evoking death and decay, which are of course also faced by male bodies. Softness does not have to be feminine, or a literal manifestation of the opposite of masculinity. Softness does not mean weak or unstable. Textile and padding have the potential to be a very resistant

combination compared to ceramic, say, which can easily break, or metal, which can quickly bend. However, softness is also associated with impotence, castration and, in general, effeminate behaviour. Having personally experienced ED (erectile dysfunction), I know how glib and facile it is to follow the anti-phallocratic approach in contemporary art discourse and dismiss its importance. But from a man's perspective, the feeling of inadequacy is hardly manageable using such tools as are offered by gender theory. That is why, as I discussed in the introduction, going back to corporeality might be the starting point for rethinking the performance of sexed roles. The stuffed object in a sculptural constellation allows me to trigger friction between other materials. The flaccidity of soft sculpture is the perfect metaphor for an unerect penis. Flaccidity might be construed as a moment of relaxation that implicitly contains erection or an appraisal of sexual impotence. The soft sculptures that I produced are half-hard. They might be read as bulky, massive, but useless penises. I use the term useless according to the definition of sexual potency that characterises a functioning penis according to its capacity to maintain an erection for satisfactory sexual intercourse. The penis is, for the vast majority of its life, flaccid. Still, in an ancient culture like the Egyptian one, to symbolise fertility and power, it has been depicted mostly in the erect position and extremely oversize.

Greeks and Romans developed a different imagery, especially in sculpture production, equating the erect penis with foulness and irrationality. On the other hand, a small soft penis was used to symbolise intellectual control over gross animal instinct. In his play *The Clouds*, Aristophanes summarised the salient feature of a Greek male thus: "a gleaming chest, bright skin, broad shoulders, tiny tongue, strong buttocks, and a little prick" (Aristophanes 2008, 72). There are rare Greek statues with large penises, for instance, likenesses of satyrs (goat men) and Priapus, a Greek fertility god so hated by the others that Hera cursed him with a permanent erection before the rest of the gods kicked him off of Mount Olympus. Soft penises in the classic era do not evoke soft power so much as a superior masculinity, beyond sexual performance. According to the art historian Johann Joachim Winkelmann (who had a decisive influence on the rise of the Neoclassical movement), to apprehend the Greek ideal of the perfect male body was crucial to understanding that form of masculinity. As scholar Alex Pott puts it, the male sculptures were, for Winckelmann, "a highly charged yet apparently empty point of condensation for a number of fantasies seeking to expunge anything that might disturb an ideal self's self-sufficiency and unity" (Potts 1994, 170). By contrast, as curator Glenn Adamson claims, "in [our] contemporary art context, the penis is mainly invariably erected. It manifests, for instance, in Brancusi's totemic sculpture or Murakami's sexual

potency explosions" (Adamson 2014, 54). In Western culture today, dimension and erection have again become a crucial concern for many men, especially given the disruptive popularity of porn culture. Porn culture defines the criteria for an adequate penis: size, duration and quality of the erection, and ejaculation times. My soft sculptures highlight the necessity to rethink men's sexuality so that it is not entirely based on performance anxiety and continuous comparison with porn culture standards. Yet the fact is that men and women are massively exposed to such content, which makes the advocacy of alternative perspectives a tough challenge. One might argue that the penises depicted in my soft sculptures reproduce the "size matters" trope. But in this context, significant size without hardness is worth nothing. To have a perfectly working penis, according to porn culture parameters, the size has to be accompanied by a stable and potent erection. The erection has to allow for proper penetration. But, ironically, grossly oversized erect penises don't allow penetration. An exaggerated penis, as in Greek culture, suddenly becomes a pathetic sign of useless sexual potency. My sculpture's penis/snake alien shape element must adjust to other shapes. For instance, the concrete part that supports the purple stuffed object suggests a prosthesis that should help the erection process. In addition, the little axe bent on the concrete element adds a layer of upside-down power relationship.



Figure 16: Nicola Genovese, Cuddling cutting, 2022, detail. Courtesy the artist.



Figure 17: Nicola Genovese, Cuddling cutting, 2022, detail. Courtesy the artist.

The soft body fragments I create are unheroic and unmonumental. At the same time, as is the case in Colquhoun's *Gouffres Amers*, the failed body contains decorative elements. Decoration is mainly associated with uselessness, and within the Western contemporary art context, it might be used as pejorative to point to a lack of content. The decoration issue is linked to the long-standing debate over the boundaries of Fine Arts. In recent art history, the Pattern and Decoration movement, or P&D, was one of the first cracks in the Minimalism-Conceptualism hegemony. The artists involved in probably the latest -ism in art faced strong criticism because of their core interest in ornament. In their "public manifesto" – which was originally part of John Perreault's essay published in the exhibition catalogue for the Venice Biennale's U.S. Pavilion – the founders of P&D, Joyce Kozloff and Valerie Jaudon, point to the relationships among decoration, feminism and domesticity. "The prejudice against decorative art has a long history and is based on hierarchies: Fine Arts above decorative art, Western art above non-Western art" (Stiles and Selz 1995, 154). Art critic Roberta Smith perfectly summarised the movement when claiming that "P&D disdained divisions between Western and Non-Western art; high and low and art and craft. It elevated women's work and included many female artists. It was casual and unpretentious, too easy to like perhaps, but

also proof that there was art after Conceptualism's death-of-the-object stance" (Smith 2021). Indeed, according to Anna Katz in her catalogue about the P&D show at MoCa Los Angeles, the unofficial Pattern and Decoration battle cry was "more is more" (Thackara 2020). Kozloff and Jaudon laud the potential of the domestic against male-centred Modernism, claiming that "the antithesis of the violence and destruction idolized by Modern Art is the visual enhancement of the domestic environment" (Stiles and Selz 1995, 156).

Ornamentation is not just there to please the audience: in specific constellations, it has the potential to trigger uncanny and disturbing feelings. Decoration in my practice first concerns the deployment of mediums that have been historically framed within the context of craft and decorative art, and secondly, motifs that are treated as ornaments. The Murano glass[16] piece that I used to connect two soft elements has a practical aim, but at the same time, it is an embellishment. The Murano glass creates a layer that might be unnecessary in the piece's visual economy, but a certain degree of "uselessness" is fundamental in my practice. In this sense, I am interested in visual displays verging on kitsch, baroque and camp, challenging the boundaries of bad taste. When Susan Sontag tried to conceptualise the term "camp" as a specific sensibility, she admitted that talking about it meant betraying it (Sontag 1966). Camp aesthetics in art, as theorised in her "Notes on Camp" is "often decorative; it emphasizes textures, sensuous surfaces and style at the expense of content" (Sontag 1966, 4). Sontag also talks about camp objects. She argues that they contain a "large element of artifice"; therefore "Nothing in nature can be campy" (Sontag 1966, 8). Scholar Andrew Bolton argues that the "Camp aesthetic converts the serious into the frivolous" (Bolton 2019, 24). It disrupts the well-known classification of High and Low art (Bolton 2019). As for the use of textiles, the deployment of a camp aesthetic obliges me to show that my practice is not just a form of appropriation. Sontag observes that "[t]hough homosexuals have been its vanguard, Camp taste is much more than homosexual taste" (Sontag 1966, 50). Moreover, "while straight people delight in over-the-top aesthetics too, they may not have categorized this pleasure because camp has historically grounded queer culture and bridged its isolated communities. Straight people haven't had a similar need for camp. Their vices are equally bonkers, but, as the dominant culture, they often go unquestioned – and thus unclassified" (McEntee and Cronin 2019). The concept of camp provides a handy point of introduction to the next topic, namely, the grotesque in my practice. I shall attempt to de-frame it from the queer perspective.

[16] In the third chapter, I will better contextualise the Murano glass elements that I deploy in my practice.



Figure 18: Nicola Genovese, Cuddling cutting, 2021, Le Commun, Geneve, CH. Photo Nicolas Delaroche.

The Grotesque Monster beyond Queer

Close observation of my sculptures suggests that their hybridity might also be read through the lens of the monstrous and the grotesque. Following this insight, I explored the grotesque body in art history. I slowly realised that my work might be situated in part in a broader scenario, in a pre-queer feminist context, where bodies were already problematised. Needless to say, art history offers a wide range of bodies that have been disfigured, transformed, torn apart and "monsterised" to varying degrees, from the slaughtered bodies of Francis Bacon to the playful distorted characters of Keith Haring. According to Wolfgang Kayser, "grotesque art can be defined as an art whose form and subject matter appear to be part of, while contradictory to, the natural, social or personal worlds of which we are part. Its images most often embody distortions, exaggerations, a fusion of incompatible parts in such a fashion that it confronts us as strange and disordered, as a world turned upside down" (Kayser 1963, 3).

As a wide-ranging adjective to describe the strange, the incongruous, and the fantastic, the "grotesque" originated in Germany and France in the 18th century. However, the story of the grotesque started in Rome at the end of the 15th century, at the beginning of the Italian Renaissance, when painters Pinturicchio, Filippino Lippi and Luca Signorelli descended into the ruins of what is now the Roman archaeological site of Domus Aurea to explore the remains of pictorial wall decorations. The word grotesque indeed derives from the Italian *Grotte* meaning caves. The disapproval of the Roman architect Vitruvius towards the *grottesche* was made clear in his labelling them as "bad taste" and criticising the people who were delighted by them. The response to the new form of decorative art in the Roman empire was seemingly ambivalent (Vitruvius 1914). "How is it possible that a reed should really support a roof, or a candelabrum a pediment with its ornaments, or that such a slender, flexible thing as a stalk should support a figure perched upon it, or that roots and stalks should produce now flowers and now half-length figures? Yet when people see these frauds, they find no fault with them but on the contrary are delighted, and do not care whether any of them can exist or not" (Vitruvius 1914, 250).

Nevertheless, the Renaissance's love for antiquity triggered considerable interest in this "awkward" form of decoration that preceded the advent of the baroque.
The Renaissance Grotesque shows unexpected combinations of animals, flowers and humans that mingle in architectural details, paying tribute to the power of the imagination. "The eccentric and transgressive aspects of petulant, monstrous and misshapen forms that characterized the Italian Cinquecento were in an open polemic with the idea of order and balance of classicism" (Lupu 2018, 5). But even though the *grottesche* were considered a

form of anti-Renaissance subversion, as theorised by Eugenio Battisti in his 1962 book *L'antirinascimento*, the decorations followed a neo-classical, symmetrical ideal of beauty.

The breakthrough contribution to the development of what we understand to be the monstrous and the grotesque started during the early Middle Ages, when bizarre ornaments began to appear in religious manuscripts as commentaries on the text. Some are descriptive, following the moralistic approach of the sacred contents, but some are satirical with an unmistakable anti-clerical slant. The letter by Saint Bernard to the abbot of Saint Thierry written in 1153 is a vitriolic critique of those "unclean apes and those half-men" as symptomatic of the progressive secularisation of the Church (Randall 1966, 4). With the increased demand for religious and secular texts accompanying the rise of a prosperous upper-middle class from the mid-thirteenth century, decorations started to proliferate in the margins of manuscripts, becoming an essential component (Randall 1966). Marginal illumination proffers a wide array of "hybrid creatures that allow an infinite variety of possibilities for ridicule" (Randall 1966, 19). The mockery concerned all social spheres, but especially the Church hierarchy. There are then specific scenes called upside-down worlds, where men are subjugated by creatures of inferior strength, for instance, where rabbits kill hunters (Randall 1966). From the first quarter of the fourteenth century, the genre of marginal illumination started to fade away, only to be revitalised in the early Renaissance by major painters such as Hieronymus Bosch and Peter Brueghel. In the canvases of the Flemish painter Hieronymus Bosch, one can discover a cosmos of grotesque and monstrous figures that still populate our contemporary imagery. Human bodies in Bosch paintings have unexpected cavities that contain disturbing underworlds or inner territories, like in The Garden of Earthly Delights, where troubled control-less humanity struggles in a frightening, chaotic, surreal environment.

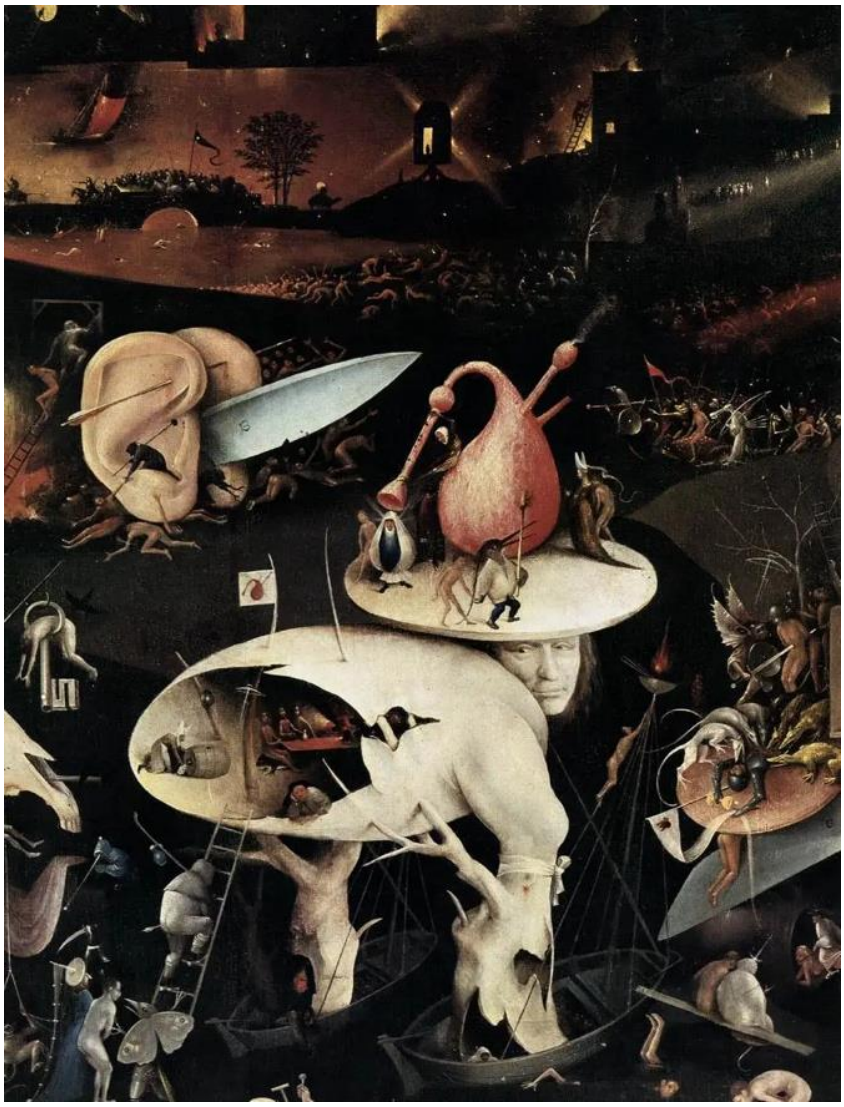


Figure 19: Hieronymus Bosch, The Garden of Earthly Delights, 1490, oil on canvas, detail, Museo del Prado, Madrid, ES.

Bosch was part of 'another' Renaissance rather than an anti-Renaissance figure. The bestiaries that came from the Flemish regions clashed with the canonical Tuscan-Roman classicism represented by Raffaello and Michelangelo (Aikema, Checa Cremades and Salsi 2022, 16-17). The impact of Bosch on Italian painters was nevertheless powerful.[17] In the works reproduced below, one can observe examples of how Bosch influenced Italian and German artists of the period differently.

[17] Paradoxically, Bosch didn't establish his fame in the Netherlands but in the South of Europe, thanks to Italian and Spanish collectors, in particular, the Venetian cardinal Domenico Grimani. It is documented that artist Giovanni Savoldo saw Bosch paintings at Grimani's mansion (Aikema, Checa Cremades and Salsi 2022, 14). In the early sixteenth century, the demand for Bosch-like paintings was so extensive that many Flemish, German, Spanish and Italian painters started introducing Boschian motifs in their works.



Figure 20: Marcantoni Raimondi, Il sogno di Raffaelllo, 1509, engraving burin, Musei Civici di Pavia, IT.



Figure 21: Anonymous German, The nightmare, 16th c., engraving, Muséee des Beaux Art, Strasbourg, FR.

Both artists engage with the theme of the dream. But whereas in Italian artist Marcantoni Raimondi, the distinction between the sleeping subject and the creatures that materialise

during the dream is clear, in the German drawing, the main subject appears to be mingling with the grotesque characters that surround him (Aikema, Checa Cremades and Salsi 2022, 56-69). The German illustration is a powerful point of reference for my practice, which is primarily inspired by a non-Classical idea of the body that developed in the northern European countries. This sort of imagery supports my perspective on the grotesque as a totality that blurs the boundaries of bodies, rather than a mode of representing the Other as monstrous. In theoretical terms, while the monstrous and the grotesque can indeed be characterised in terms of Kristeva's idea of the abject and the marginalised Other (Kristeva 1982), there are other possibilities. The organic shape of *Cuddling Cutting* reminds us of a creature in which animal and human parts are badly fitted together. The idea behind it is not to create a freak but to play with heterogeneous elements, following the rules of triggering frictions between incongruent materials and shapes.



Figure 22: Tiberius B V, circa 1040, illustration of cotton, Wonders of the East, British Library, London, UK.

Antiquity might be the perfect point of departure for a conversation about "monstrosity" and the grotesque that goes beyond an oversimplified "construction of the other" theory. By medieval times, the association of the monstrous with the devil was unquestioned. Indeed, in Judeo-Christian ideology generally, the monstrous corresponds to evil forces antithetical to virtue. The Krakow monster, reportedly born in 1540, has different heads on the joints of its arms and legs, a long-forked tail, claws, and a curving, crooked nose. It was seen as evidence

that demons could reproduce by human means. At that time, a widespread conviction that heretical beliefs were on the rise probably played a role in the appearance of this "beast." On the other hand, Christian tradition made another reading possible. Augustine, for instance, "traced the Latin 'monstra,' monster, to 'monstrare,' to show, declaring that monsters were a demonstration of God's powers" (Mittman and Kim 2009, 337).

In the medieval tradition, monsters were figures composed of various human and animal body parts. Each part was a symbol signifying a particular social symptom (Mittman and Kim 2009). A crucial example of monstrosity in the Anglo-Saxon tradition is the *Marvel of the East*, an Old English prose text, probably written around AD 1000. It is accompanied by many illustrations of odd, magical, or barbaric creatures inhabiting Eastern regions. The nouns 'marvel' and 'wonder' are often used as synonyms for monster. Or in combination with a monster, as in "a wonderful", namely a monster with 'something unnaturally marvellous'. In his essay "Monster Culture (Seven Theses)," Jeffrey Jerome Cohen claims that "the same creatures who terrify and interdict can evoke potent escapist fantasies; the linking of monstrosity with the forbidden makes the monster all the more appealing as a temporary egress from constraint…we distrust and loathe the monster at the same time we envy its freedom, and perhaps its sublime despair" (Cohen, 1996). Monsters live at the edges of our standard and accepted world classifications, and one of their primary functions is continually to challenge what we accept as normal. Simon Mittman and Susan Kim try to define the ambivalent concept of a monster in the Middle Ages: "The monstrous 'other' is not absolute, stable, or firmly outside the normative boundaries. On the contrary, the 'other,' like the monsters who often embody it, remains recognizable, strange yet familiar, a possible version of oneself" (Mittman and Kim 2009, 333). I want to use this quotation to question the monopolisation of the monstrous and the grotesque in recent queer feminist discourse. In the framework of this ideology, anything potentially disrupting so-called hegemonic heteronormativity might be considered grotesque and monstrous: thus non-white, non-heterosexual, non-man, etc. In 1995, Mary Russo published *The Female Grotesque*. Her book is rarely absent from the bibliographies of those writing on the topic. As she claims in her Preface, her primary aim was to "rethink the category of the grotesque about deviance, temporality, and liberation," specifically with reference to female bodies and femininity (Russo 1995). Russo identifies female bodies as the perfect site for emancipatory or subversive visions (Russo 1995). In the same year, in her book *The Unruly Woman*, Kathleen Rowe claimed that "the female body is the quintessence of the grotesque… the female and maternal body which, through menstruation, pregnancy, childbirth, and lactation, participates

uniquely in the carnivalesque drama of 'becoming,' of inside-out and outside-in, death-in-life and life-in-death" (Rowe 1995, 33). However, Russo and Rowe were not the first scholars to connect the grotesque to the female body. In his work about François Rabelais, the Russian literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin pointed out the centrality of the female element in the construction of what he calls grotesque realism, even though his definition of the grotesque body is not gendered: "The essential principle of grotesque realism is degradation, that is, the lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract; it is a transfer to the material level, to the sphere of earth and body in their indissoluble unity" (Bakhtin 1984, 20). That degradation has a positive, assertive character. The grotesque is indeed related to the cycle of life. Bakhtin goes on to claim that, unlike in canonical modernity, "the grotesque body is not separated from the rest of the world. It is not a closed, completed unit; it is unfinished, outgrows itself, transgresses its own limits" (Bakhtin 1984, 24).

In queer theory, as Claudia Schippert argues, "[m]ale bodies are understood as grotesque only to the extent they take on the appearance or function of female bodies" (Schippert 2007, 162). White straight masculinity is, in that sense, antithetical to the grotesque. I acknowledge that a key to the grotesque in the depiction of masculinity can be feminine elements that break the apparent solidity of the male body, reproducing the classic dichotomy of female histrionic body vs male controlled body. As Kathleen Rowe points out in criticising Bakhtin's idea of the female grotesque: "He falls into one of the most enduring and misogynist of philosophical traditions, that of relegating the feminine to matter and the masculine to spirit" (Rowe 1995, 34). According to Russo, in his analysis Bakhtin "fails to acknowledge or incorporate the social relations of gender" (Russo 1995, 219). She is particularly concerned about the "negative in Bakhtin's appropriation of the imagery of childbearing" (Gasbaronne 1994, 11) The issue of the Kerch terracotta well summarizes the core of the dispute between Russo and Bahktin.

"In the famous Kerch terracotta collection, we find figurines of senile pregnant hags. Moreover, the old hags are laughing. This is a typical and very strongly expressed grotesque. It is ambivalent. It is pregnant death, a death that gives birth. There is nothing completed, nothing calm and stable in the bodies of these old hags. They combine a senile, decaying and deformed flesh with the flesh of new life, conceived but as yet unformed. Life is shown in its two-fold contradictory process; it is the epitome of incompleteness. And such is precisely the grotesque concept of the body" (Bakhtin 1984, 25-26).

As Gasbaronne argues, Bakhtin's description is a "defence of ugliness or deformity – the grotesque – against what he considers the lifeless quality, the absolute stasis, of the classical

aesthetic". Russo instead perceived in Bahktin the well-known men's misogynistic fear toward the womb as a manifestation of the abject. I agree with Gasbaronne: "The source of fear in Bakhtin's discussion of the womb is neither woman per se, nor the maternal, nor the supposed mysterious power of pregnancy. The source of terror in the image of the womb is spatial: the fear of being swallowed up, the loss of "outsideness" that is essential to selfhood as Bakhtin defines it" (Gasbaronne 1994, 13). When I come to discuss my performative practice, I will return to the subject of the grotesque within the male body and how "grotesquisation" functions through feminisation. However, as Henrik Lübker claims, "the grotesque explores the limits of form and materiality" (Lübker 2012, 44) – which of course includes the male body.

Queer scholars have recently amplified the category of the female grotesque to include non-normative individuals. There are many puzzling examples, among them Norman Bates, the main character in the Hitchcock masterpiece *Psycho*. According to *The Scattered Pelican*, the official graduate student journal of Comparative Literature at Western University in London, Ontario, "Norman's gender-bending, expressed by dressing and living as his mother, threatens gender binaries, and thus creates a veritable monster" (Scattered Pelican 2018). This kind of argument started to appear as an almost natural consequence within contemporary art practices. Culture writer Tess Thackara defines the contemporary grotesque as "aberrant or monstrous bodies that are different from the (white, male) norm and deviating from impossible standards. Artists who touch the grotesque subvert and claim power in part by owning flesh and blood" (Thackara 2019). Even the monstrous in the medieval tradition has been dragged into a queer perspective. In their introduction to an important collection of essays, *Queering the Middle Ages*, Steven Kruger and Glenn Burger propose that we engage differently with the sexuality of medieval characters whose disruptive queerness has been obscured or ignored (Kruger and Burger 2002), Jeffrey Jerome Cohen outlines the paradigmatic monster as the marginalised other: "It will often seem that between those who have been 'othered' (represented as inferior, bestial, monstrous) and those who belong to some dominating collective exists a firm line of segregation" (Cohen 1996, 5).

I disagree with the oversimplified equation of the grotesque and the Other. The grotesque that haunts medieval imagery was embodied in society in a constellation where paganism and its myths were still relevant: an ambivalent cosmology of human and not-human where decay, ageing, death, and deformation were central and not marginalised as has happened subsequently. The grotesque was subversive and integral at the same time. Bakhtin coined the word "carnivalisation" to describe the penetration or incorporation of carnival into

everyday life, and its shaping effect on language and literature (Bakhtin 1982). In the medieval tradition of the carnival, the grotesque is expressed by its emphasis on the body as a source of meaning. As Lübker explains it, "the spirit does not come from above, but from the belly, buttocks and genitals, and there is, expressed in this manner, a mockery of the predominant Christian notion of truth and meaning. Such inversions of the sites of meaning most often explicitly express an increased interest in materiality instead of ideal content, which comes to the fore through the play between periphery and centre" (Lübker 2012, 44). Reading historical facts through the lens of queerness is, in my opinion, something of a stretch.

These considerations lead me to talk about a recent direction I have taken in my sculptural practice. At the beginning of 2022, I started to explore further the question of monstrosity and the grotesque, trying to find a visual language that does not refer uniquely to today's mainstream discourse on the grotesque. *Pelvis the Pelvis* is part of this new body of work that I will quickly introduce, where an uncanny sexuality emerges, supported by a more figurative approach. The title recalls the nickname of American singer Elvis Presley (Elvis the Pelvis), because of the singer's famous hip movements performed during his concerts. He faced controversy for a gesture that was considered immoral at the time. According to Yvonne Tasker, "Elvis was an ambivalent figure who articulated a peculiar feminised, objectifying version of white working-class masculinity as an aggressive sexual display" (Tasker 2002, 64). The sculpture is made of glazed ceramic, fake leather, padding and metal. The process of hybridisation is similar to that apparent in previous sculptures. There is a visible incongruence as a result of the variety of potentially confusing references. Incongruence is one crucial element in the construction of the grotesque. "Technically speaking, a grotesque consists of the presence and clash, incongruity, or juxtaposition of two or more different or even contradictory elements within the same work" (Kayser 1963, 20). Incongruence manifests through the unexpected juxtaposition of textures, materials and references. I chose a specific glaze that resembles a cheese pattern or a stained skin, to evoke fleshy materiality in decay. The claw shape made of hairy fake leather becomes a sort of Elvis Presley wig that highlights the grotesque/carnivalesque intentions. The "wig" is just propped on the ceramic. This gesture reinforces the idea of the masquerade. The open mouth between the two breasts that pops out from a sort of Texan boot might recall a gate and a medieval gargoyle. The facial expression is deformed and reveals a sort of anger mixed with pain. The female elements of the breast have been masculinized through the rigidity and the shapes that recall two testicles or two truncated legs. The mouth in that constellation becomes a *vagina*

dentata (Latin for toothed vagina). The grotesque that permeates the sculpture triggers an acceptable degree of attraction/repulsion in the guise of playfulness. I had never before used pedestals to place my sculpture, but on this occasion the plinth was necessary to provide sufficient height to give the viewer the perspective I wanted. The modest height of the plinth still obliges the viewer to bend a little bit to observe the mouth cavity. The metal plinth itself is an active sculptural element in which the motifs that recall a burning man and carnivore plants complement the already loaded constellation of images. *Pelvis the Pelvis* is a "Boschian" character; it could fit into a Bosch painting, among those creatures that spill out other grotesque hybrids from their mouths. At the same time, the similarities with *Janus Fleuri* are salient. The character that materialises has leaked from an imaginative landscape made of carnivalesque ambivalent creatures. Besides the sinister, grotesque character of the sculpture, what subtly emerges is a parodical element that is central to my performative practice. I want to emphasise that this work is about an imagined unconventional body and, simultaneously, a body that can partly overcome its boundaries. It is not a straightforward positive appraisal of the non-conforming grotesque body but a more complex perspective on the entanglement of fleshly and imagined bodies, situated in a generally grotesque scenario. In the next chapter, I will discuss how the concept of the grotesque in my sculptural practice is affected by the introduction of my grotesque body as an activator.



Figure 23: A gargoyle at Westminster Abbey, XIII C., London, UK. Photo Deborah Smolinske.



Figure 24: Nicola Genovese, Pelvis the Pelvis, 2022, 30 x 30 x 110 cm. Photo Sebastian Lendenmann.



Figure 25: Nicola Genovese, Pelvis the Pelvis, 2022, detail. Photo Sebastian Lendenmann.

CHAPTER THREE: PERFORMATIVE SCULPTURE ACTIVATION IN THE VISUAL ART CONTEXT

In the last chapter, I explored what emerged from the materiality of my sculptural practice that pushed me to engage with hybridity, ambivalence and the grotesque. In this chapter, the materiality of my sculptures will be the starting point for transforming aspects of them into props for performative action in a white cube context. The shift to "activation" and the inclusion of theatrical elements will oblige me to face questions about the nature of the sculptures, the boundaries between theatre and art performance, and the male body's presence. Adding my body was a choice resulting from the cultural and personal context that I adumbrated in the Introduction. The idea was to give more space to the physicality of the body, but I was not unaware that voicing a text required an intellectual engagement on the part of the audience that could distance them from the added corporeality. In addition, the gallery space, or the "white cube as the empire of sight" in Brian O'Doherty's influential formulation, works against content and at the same time against tactility.

The first question that I need to answer is why it has seemed necessary to add a new layer to the sculpture that questions its self-sufficiency. One of my first activation performances[18] featured a soft sculpture with a hole in which I placed my head. It introduced the idea of the 3D collage that I have developed over the years, where my body is also part of the sculptural constellation. As in my actual practice, the sculpture was activated just once during the opening ceremony.

[18] The exhibition performance occurred in an art off-space called ON/OFF in a disused factory in Winterthur, Switzerland. The site's history prompted me to develop a dystopian storyline in which the space was a videogame before becoming a production reality. I impersonated the videogame avatar. The elements on the floor were used as imaginative tools to strengthen the avatar's power. There was also direct interaction with the specificity of the site. The holes in the wall where the furnaces were, in the video game narration became special sites for healing the body's wounds. That is why I placed my head, legs and arms inside the holes during the performance. By then, I was already intensely interested in the fabrication of the past, nostalgia, and liminality. The fragility of the warrior male avatar predicted my future interest in masculinity.



Figure 26: Nicola Genovese, Once upon a time, beforehand, I don't know when, 2016. Courtesy the artist.



Figure 27: Nicola Genovese, Once upon a time, beforehand, I don't know when, 2016. Courtesy the artist.

One factor that pushed me to integrate my sculptural work with performative action was the apparent potential for activation that some of my sculptures contain. This is because the works consist of several elements that, despite forming a unity, remain to a certain extent independent. Technically speaking, many parts are detachable, and can therefore be used as props for a performance. That possibility changed my attitude towards sculptures. In the development stage, I am concerned about the material constellation and how certain elements of the sculpture could become bodily extensions. In the design stage, I decide whether to highlight the sculptures' second nature or to allow them to remain silent objects. The need to activate does not express mistrust of the sculpture and its agency but rather the will to open up unexpected contents that the sculpture suggests. The activation performance opened a new horizon where the sculptural work became prop and scenery within a more complex constellation of text, songs and choreographies.

A second reason for embarking on the activation process was my frustration with the spectator's limited engagement in or at art exhibitions. Something always seemed missing in the ritualistic attendance at contemporary art shows. I experienced this repeatedly as an artist directly involved in the project and also as a mere viewer of other gallery exhibitions. Standing with a plastic glass of cheap Prosecco wine in front of artworks, chatting about random topics, mainly not art related, often gave me the sensation of being in a void. Art performances as a side event, together with DJs and finger food, did not help me to overcome that void. That is why I started to attend theatre performances in Switzerland, looking for new ideas. I still remember performer Nils Amadeus Lange, founder of the company 666,[19] who started drinking water during his piece. That simple gesture switched off the sacrality of the stage for a few seconds. As explained by Lange himself in conversation, drinking water was natural because he was thirsty, but it was also a tool to expose the theatre's fictionality. While drinking, he stared at the audience for several seconds with a spontaneity that killed all my prejudices towards theatre and its allegedly conservative approach. I wanted to stare at the viewers in art spaces and transform them into an audience actively witnessing my performance. From a personal and emotional perspective, it is undoubtedly true that performing in front of an audience provides a shot of adrenaline that an intelligent discussion

[19] Nils Amadeus Lange is one of the most established performance artists within the Zurich art scene. Founded in 2014, Company 666's name alludes to the Devil's number. 666's performances are very controversial, with explicit content. Lange is one of those performance artists who could switch back and forth between theatre and the visual art context. https//nils.dance

with the fanciest curator in front of your sculpture will never offer. I will explore as a case study one of my latest performance activations, *Achilles Heel,* to expose the pros and the cons of my performance practice in white cubes.

Achilles Heel: A Case Study

Achilles Heel is a sculptural performative work produced in 2021 for a group show at Alte Fabrik exhibition space (Rapperswill, Switzerland). In analysing the work, I will respond to three main questions that arise. The first question regards my performance practice, which references both contemporary theatre and art performance, two disciplines historically opposed.

The second question that presents itself concerns what it *means* to activate a sculpture through performance, and what the consequences might be for the nature of the sculpture itself, especially in a white cube[20] context. It is crucial to note that I chose the white cube for this first case study because it exposes so clearly the friction between art performance and theatre tradition. I also performed in less conventional venues like private mansions (*When the Sky Was Full of Creamy Chainsaws)*, decommissioned factories (*Once Upon a Time, Beforehand, I Don't Know When)* and outdoor locations *(Backlash *2*) (for images of these, please see the list of works in the Appendix). In general, in those locations, there is an attempt to escape the white cube, although the white cube rules remain in force in the arrangement of the artworks and the viewer's behaviour.

The third question concerns how the topic of masculinity and the male body emerges from materiality, and how my bodily intervention affects the sculptures in the light of the research I pursued on the magazine *Achilles Heel*.

[20] The term white cube was introduced by the art critic Brian O'Doherty to describe an exhibition space with certain characteristics, as well an ideological approach in the artwork display (O'Doherty 1986). "White, undecorated walls, hidden sources of artificial light, polished wooden floors or homogenous carpets and a clean and discreet environment" (Eröss 2018) are the main features. The object is to create as neutral a context as possible to make the work of art central and isolate it from the outside reality, its historical, economic, and social context. "The outside world must not come in" (O'Doherty 1986, 15).



Figure 28: Nicola Genovese, Achilles Heel, 2021, textile, Murano glass, pearl clay, metal, resin. Photo Sebastian Lendenmann.

Achilles Heel is a sculptural work produced and exhibited in 2021 within a group show in the Alte Fabrik, a former factory transformed into a white cube space. The architect decided to leave intact some elements of the former structure, such as the metal pillars. The venue is a public institution with a focus on contemporary art, located in Rapperswil, a small town near

Zurich. The work was activated once during the opening ceremony. The sculptural part consists of two distinct pieces, one hung from the ceiling and one positioned on the floor. Both play specific roles during the performance. The hung sculpture is made of plasma-cut metal, ready-made Murano glass, textile filled with padding, and polystyrene covered with resin. It is a floating structure suspended from the ceiling by a steel cable. The metal shape holds the glass leaf shape. In turn, the glass element supports the soft sculpture that keeps the resin foot almost suspended. The resin foot appears heavy, but it is actually very light. The soft sculpture that has the shape of two arms gently sustains it, in place of the missing heel. There is a top-down hierarchy of materials, but each element has a fragility that questions its power position. The metal shape has been cut with a plasma machine. Cutting with that technique is almost like drawing, but unlike drawing, the result is very rough and inaccurate. During the cutting process, the plasma partly burns the metal sheet, creating unexpected details. I decided not to use a laser system because I wanted to avoid the aesthetics of industrial design. Inaccuracy in my practice means distancing myself from those contemporary artists, like Jeff Koons, who aim to erase the artist's gesture as a sign of outdated modernism winking at industrial design. Even though in the contemporary Western art scene, the handicraft approach has been widely accepted, even in the mainstream, as well as media like ceramic and textile, the dichotomy between lofty Fine Art and lowly craft is, to a certain extent, still present. When artist Grayson Perry won the Turner prize in 2003, he declared: "Well, it's about time a transvestite potter won the Turner Prize. I think the art world had more trouble coming to terms with me being a potter than my choice of frocks" (Bankes 2007). This moment has passed. In an interview published on the Saatchi Gallery web page, Perry summarises the fundamental distinction between pure craft and the craft approach in art by acknowledging that without sex, violence and social commentary, his work would be just pottery (Perry 2018). Craft in my practice has a strong DIY approach. I try to avoid "craft" in the sense of becoming obsessed with and skilled in a specific technique. Indeed, a certain distance helps one to dive into the medium more freely. Inaccuracy highlights the maker's presence and his or her refusal to be a proper craftsperson. Curator Glenn Adamson points out a necessary hierarchy in the economy of an artwork, where craft can be visible in the procedures but not explicitly in the contents: "Materials and processes should be seamlessly integrated with the final form of a work. However (and this is his central point) craft functions in this scheme as a transparent set of procedures, certainly to be deployed but not to be present in the content of the finished work: the means have their own logic, a logic that points beyond them. Craft always subjugates itself in the interest of the

overall work" (Adamson 2007, 13). The "amateur" tendency can also be observed, for instance, in the quality of the sewing and resin coating. Inaccuracy means accepting the mistakes, flirting with the creation of "badly done" works. Even though the viewer is unaware of the gap between the original project and the final output, a characteristic degree of inaccuracy emerges clearly. Inaccuracy complements the emersion of the grotesque imagery and the simple imperfections and fleshiness of human bodies.



Figure 29: Nicola Genovese, Achilles Heel, 2021, details. Photo Sebastian Lendenmann.

The motifs refer to my usual subjects: snakes, claws, and worms. The decorative aspect partly neutralises the subject's aggressiveness and the dangerous sharpness of the metal. As I suggested in the preliminary analysis of my sculptural practice in the first chapter, materials are, per se, ambivalent. The half-millimetre metal sheet that I used is extremely light, foldable, and, at the same time, sharp. The textile is made by an Italian company specialising in high-end products. The motifs are laces, and *animalier* screen-printed patterns that mingle. The protuberances are made with a zebra-looking textile. The ready-made glass is a found object produced in Murano, an island close to Venice. Murano is a world-renowned site for the production of high-end glass. The glass leaf shape is called *ciocche* and has been used to

decorate traditional Venetian chandeliers since the baroque era (Made Murano Glass 2021). I intentionally used that specific material to highlight the connection with Venice and its baroque carnivalesque tradition. The leaf is upside down to recall a fragile erected penis. I reproduced a raw flesh effect on the feet through different resin layers. The claws are made with pearl clay, commonly used to decorate cups.



Figure 30: Nicola Genovese, Achilles Heel, 2021, details. Photo Sebastian Lendenmann.

The grotesque element of my practice is particularly noticeable in the second sculptural work that lies on the floor next to the hung sculpture. The materials I employed in this work are bronze-glazed ceramic, textiles filled with padding, fake fur, copper, metal and different types of resins.



Figure *31*: *Nicola Genovese, Achilles Heel, 2021, copper, textile, ceramic, foam, metal. Photo Sebastian Lendenmann.*

The head-like traits are exaggerated to the extent that the nose becomes a bird's beak, recalling the long nose on the masks of *Zanni*, a group of characters of the *Commedia dell'Arte*.[21] The bronze glaze gives the ceramic an apparent solidity. The stuffed object depicts arms in a process of transformation. One hand is a sort of crab claw where the copper element is a prosthesis. The second protrusion is meant to explore the inner component of the sculpture underneath the skin's surface. The shabby resin leaf adds a carnivalesque element. The carnivalesque, briefly discussed in the context of the grotesque in the previous chapter, is closely associated with Venice, whose secular carnival tradition dates back to about 1150. According to the most notable scholar of the Venetian carnival, Gilles Bertrand, the carnival of Venice endured many transformations from medieval times through the Renaissance, the baroque, and the Austrian occupation, until the present day. That is why it is impossible to give a monolithic account of the phenomenon (Bertrand 2020). The medieval version of the Venice Carnival resembled those of other European cities. It was characterised, as the

[21] "*Commedia dell'Arte* can be defined as the earliest form of professional secular theatre in Europe developed initially in Italy during the Renaissance" (Jordan 2010). It was known for its use of "stock character types, which mostly fell into three distinct categories: masters, servants and lovers. Many of the actors wore masks and the dialogue was often improvised around a simple comic plot, involving various love intrigues with attendant complications and subsequent happy resolutions" (Jordan 2010, 207). Venice played a significant role in the development of *Commedia dell'Arte*. *Zanni* refers to a group of jester-like characters, part of the servant category. *Zanni* normally have a half-mask covering the upper half of the face and featuring an exaggeratedly long nose. "*Zanni* wore baggy, light-colored shirts and trousers, and a floppy hat. The mask was dark with a prominent nose. That outfit was even used by nobles to participate incognito in street festivals and attend theater" (Ternullo 2016, 10).

historian Peter Burke writes, by "the freedom to eat and drink gargantuan amounts, to wear a mask, to insult your neighbours, to pelt them with eggs, lemons, oranges, etc., and to sing songs full of political or sexual innuendos" (Burke 1982, 57). Besides being a moment of liberation from social rules, the medieval carnival was also "an opportunity to reinforce civic cohesion between all Venetians" (Bertrand 2020, 83). The form of the Venetian carnival that is familiar today began to develop at the end of the sixteenth century: "While continuing to contribute to civic cohesion, the carnival became increasingly controlled by the aristocracy. Its aesthetics became more and more refined, until, in the eighteenth century, it became the very symbol of urban carnivals, attended by princes and members of the elite from all over Europe" (Bertrand 2020, 79). During the baroque carnival, sartorial luxury, weapons, and excess gambling were controlled by sumptuary laws. The carnival became part of the highly regulated life of Venice, to the extent that its duration was extended to six months in 1739. Masks began to be used in official ceremonies and banquets as a marker of social class: "Poles apart from the idea of carnivalesque transgression, the Venetian mask was in fact used to moralize social life, regulate admission to theatres, and confine pleasures to closely supervised places, such as brothels, cafés, and gambling dens" (Bertrand 2020, 90). With the fall of the republic of Venice after the invasion of Napoleon, the carnival was banned as a public event until 1979. It continued to exist as a purely elitist festivity. "One of the forms under which it survived was as an artistic display of creativity centring on the world of princely palaces, stimulated by wealthy patrons, and expressing itself both in summer and in winter" (Bertrand 2020, 97). In brief, the carnival, with its disruptive agency that originally subverted the conventional order in highly controlled societies, became a parody of itself long before the advent of neoliberal consumerist society. Nowadays, the street carnival is a cheap re-enactment of the baroque one, entirely devoured by a tourism industry that has overwhelmed the city with hundreds of souvenir shops mainly selling affordable masks the whole year round. The Venetian mansions, though, are still hosting high-end international events in the official ten days of the carnival. The Carnival of Venice should be framed among those nostalgic phenomena that characterise contemporary Italy, and these will be explored further in the chapter dedicated to Italian masculinities. The aesthetic of the baroque Venetian carnival and today's nostalgic re-enactment of this manifest in my sculptural practice. They are visible in the choice of materials and shapes, from the exaggerated nose of the ceramic head to the high-end kitsch textile used for the soft sculpture and the glass leaf. The Venice carnival also inspires performative action, through the costumes and the music. Incongruity is a crucial element in the construction of the grotesque, so the multitude of

details and shapes and the heterogeneity of materials in my work might produce a fragmented perception of the sculptures. Nevertheless, I am interested in approaching sculpture as a composition of independent elements. This leads me to the performance, where just some parts of the sculptures become props for a limited time.

The *Achilles Heel* activation performance at the exhibition opening lasted approximately thirty minutes. I shall divide the performance into two parts for explanatory purposes. In the first part, the sculptures are scenery, and the activation is the textual part of the performance. For instance, when I refer to the Achilles myth, the relationship with the missing heel of the vertical sculpture gently becomes apparent. In the second part, specific elements of the sculpture become props that actively support the script. The other performer joining me in the activation was Elia Meier.

I started collaborating with him during the theatre production A Novanta (see Chapter 4). Elia was born in 2005 in the Italian part of Switzerland and is the son of an artist friend. Despite his youth, his spontaneity and talent make him a born performer. Like many young people of his age, Elia was hit extremely hard by the social restrictions applied during the Covid-19 pandemic and he went through a difficult time. Before involving him in the project, his mother and I discussed the pros and cons. Eventually, we both agreed that it might have been helpful for Elia to engage in such a project, mainly because he dropped out of school. We talked about that working with a boy in his teenage years might be demanding. Indeed, working with Elia has been challenging, but his contribution was highly refreshing. I did not have to explain the difference between acting and performing. He already knew that being himself would have been enough. In *Achilles Heel*, Elia's part is tightly scripted with little room for improvisation, but his presence allows me to engage with intergenerational masculinities and male rites of passage, and therefore issues of liminality. The performance starts with Elia sitting on the floor next to the sculpture. He is wearing boxer pants and has a boombox attached to his leg playing a drone loop. At this moment, Elia's body is highly present despite the absence of movement because of the sculpture's proximity, the sound and the nudity. The group show context might have reduced the impact of Elia's body because of the number of different artworks all over the space. The viewers do not perceive an actual start but realise that something might happen soon. After approximately ten minutes, I enter the scene wearing a costume with a hoodie and holding two metal objects covered by synthetic foam with a claw/horn shape. I immediately command attention. I cross the hall before entering the exhibition space. I walk, lifting my heel and using the objects as crutches. Because the objects bend easily, the walk turns out pretty clumsy and grotesque. I wear a

boom box attached to my ankle playing the intro of *Concerto per la solennità di San Lorenzo* composed by the Venetian Antonio Vivaldi in 1727.[22] The carnivalesque costume underlines the connection with the Venetian carnival.



Figure 32: Nicola Genovese, Achilles Heel, 2021, performance. Photo Sebastian Lendenmann.

After the clumsy walk, I sit on the floor. Elia takes out the arm extensions. He starts to walk like he is on a catwalk pretending to be wearing high heels. He stops once in a while, keeping his heels as high as possible. I read a text from my phone about heel pad syndrome:

> *You may not realise it, but your heels endure a lot. Because of this, it is normal for them to wear down a bit over time. Too much wear and tear can cause your heel pads to shrink in size or lose their elasticity. When this happens, they become less capable of absorbing shock. That is known as heel pad syndrome. With heel pad syndrome, standing, walking, and other everyday activities can trigger pain, tenderness, and inflammation in one or both heels. What causes heel pad syndrome? Ageing: The ageing*

[22] During the 18th century, the touristic vocation of Venice emerges. The city was visited by the most influential and wealthy European aristocrats. At the same time, the republic of Venice was on the brink of collapse. That was the context in which Vivaldi composed the piece, characterised by an "end of Empire" mood and referring to the festivities of San Lorenzo, celebrated in the eponymous church and accompanied by lavish Lucullan banquets.

process can cause heel pads to lose some elasticity. Foot structure: If your weight isn't distributed evenly across your heel when you walk, parts of your heel pad might wear down more quickly over time. Excess body weight: Carrying extra weight puts additional stress on the heel pad. As a result, it may break down more quickly. Repetitive activities: Any activity that involves the heel repeatedly striking the ground, like running, cat walking, basketball, or gymnastics, can trigger inflammation leading to heel pad syndrome. Hard surfaces: Frequently walking on hard surfaces can increase the risk of heel pad syndrome. Inappropriate footwear: Walking or running barefoot requires your heels to absorb more impact than they would in shoes. Achilles' heel.

At that precise moment, Elia lies on the floor before me. I switch off the music on his boom box. I voice a script.

According to Greek mythology, when Achilles was a child, everyone was sure that he would die very young. To prevent his death, his mother Thetis took Achilles to the River Styx, which was supposed to offer powers of invulnerability. She dipped his body into the water holding him by his heel; therefore, that part of the body was not touched by the miraculous river.

I hold Elia's heel mimicking the dipping in the water.

Achille grew up to be a man of war who survived many great battles, but he had a weak spot.

Elia gets up and moves towards the metal column a few meters away. He climbs it and stands still. I pick up the copper element from the sculpture on the floor, mimicking the arrow's trajectory, eventually hitting Elia's heel.

Achille was killed indeed by an arrow, shot by the Trojan prince Paris but guided by the god Apollo. According to the myth, Achille was shot on the heel while climbing the walls of Troy to raid the city.



Figure 33: Nicola Genovese, Achilles Heel, 2021, performance. Photo Sebastian Lendenmann.



Figure 34: Nicola Genovese, Achilles Heel, 2021, performance. Photo Sebastian Lendenmann.



Figure 35: Nicola Genovese, Achilles Heel, 2021, performance. Photo Sebastian Lendenmann.

At this moment, the performance shifts into the activation stage. After hitting Elia's heel with the copper element taken from the sculpture on the floor, I start crawling on four legs among the audience, hitting the males' heels with the same tool. Elia, in the meanwhile, has jumped down from the column. I walk towards the hung sculpture and replace the feet with Elia's head. The soft arm is now a prop that supports Elia's head, and his stillness enables him to become an integral part of the sculpture. I lie down and place the resin feet on my forehead, which becomes the missing heel. In the meanwhile, a fog machine has been activated, as well as the boom box I wear. In the final scene, Elia and I sing the song *Zucchero filato* (transl. candy floss) by Italian singer Gazelle.[23] Before leaving the room, I place the feet and copper element back in their original positions.

[23] Gazzelle is an Italian singer-musician, part of the new generation of songwriters. The lyrics, translated from the Italian: *"Do you remember the candy floss? The friends, the square, the ice cream. The night that burns the stuff that burns. The hands, the thirst that scratches the throat. The dawn that arrives threateningly. The sunglasses, the dark circles under your eyes. The bad days and moods, the bed, the shoes, the light, the stars. Boredom, the smell of things. Do you remember the candy floss?" Zucchero filato* contains all those elements that characterize Italian pop music today, in particular the melancholic and nostalgic reference to lost adolescence.

Visitors who did not see my performance can, after reading the exhibition text[24] written by curator Irene Grillo, experience the "unactivated" sculpture while imagining the interactive experience of the activation. The spectators who did experience the performance were brought face-to-face with the sculptural work's ambivalence. This in a way renders the sculpture more accessible and less distant. I saw spectators touching the sculpture after the performance without questioning whether they were or were not allowed to do that. After the performance, I restored the sculpture to its pre-activation setup.

Performance Art vs Theatre

My performances are inspired by both theatre and performance art, two fields historically opposed. This, according to philosopher Adrian Parr, is because "[p]erformance art in its early days tended to define itself as the antithesis of theatre, in so far as the event was never repeated the same way twice and did not have a linear structure with a clear beginning, middle and end" (Parr 2010, 29). As I have already explained in the introduction, the distinction between the two tends to survive on a bureaucratic, structural level and partly on audience expectations. A perfect example of the more recent interdisciplinary approach is William Kentridge's multimedia productions[25], where his visual art practice perfectly mingles into theatre and dance, fading the distinction within the discipline. As Krauss argues in her successful essay *A Voyage on the North Sea, Art in the Age of the Post-medium Condition,* the classification of the arts is rendered meaningless by recent technological and cultural developments (Krauss 1999).

[24] "The work of Nicola Genovese (*1971, ZH) moves between theatre, music and visual art. It includes performances and sculptures that revolve around the theme of masculinity and raise questions regarding corporeality, constructions of identities and male roles in today's society. The characteristic of Genovese's artistic practice is an unusual, almost eccentric use of materials: they are deliberately put together in a counter-intuitive way to emphasise ambivalence and awaken new associations in viewers. In the work *Achilles Heel* (2021), he focuses on the parodic staging of the stronger sex as a (constructed) threatening-damaging entity. Grotesque and carnivalesque stylistic devices, which were already used in antiquity to question consolidated power structures, generally characterise Genovese's work and gain additional importance here. The artist uses them to develop a post-queer aesthetic in which the strict division between normative and non-normative begins to fade. The sculptures will be activated in a performance at the exhibition's opening.

[25] The *Head and the Load* premiered at Tate London in 2018. "William Kentridge's exploration of Africa's role in the First World War combines music, dance, film projections, mechanized sculptures and shadow play" (Theofficearts).

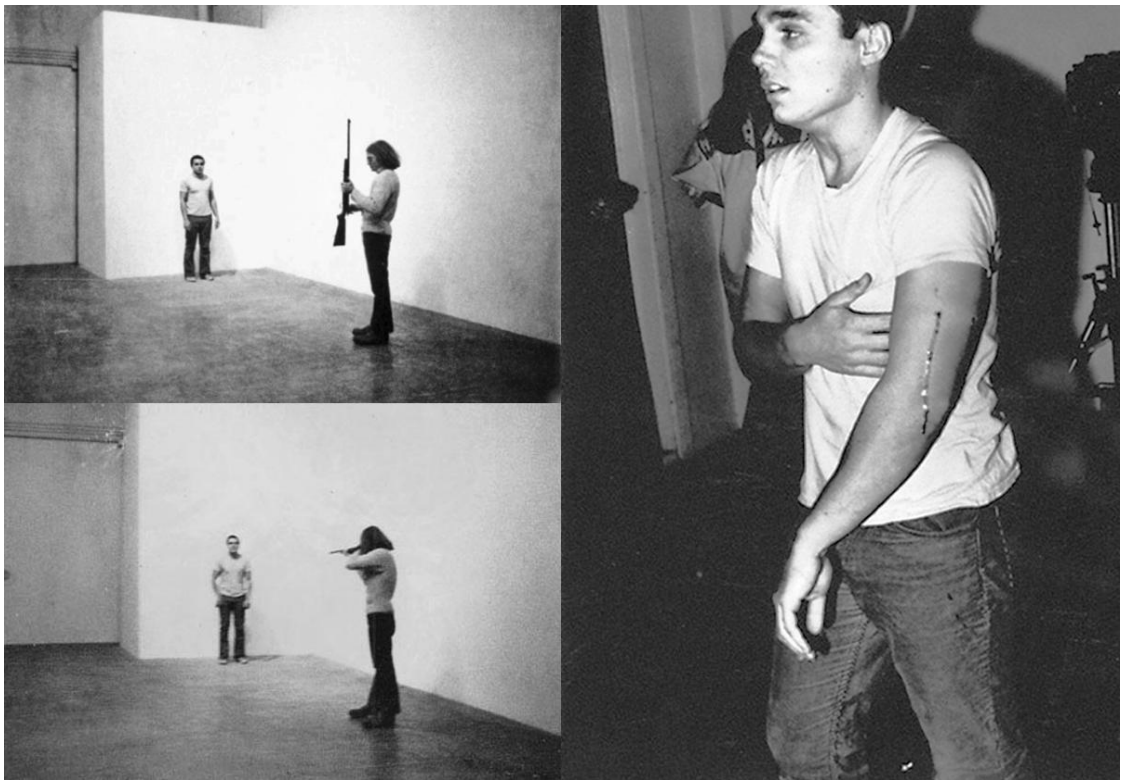


Figure 36: Chris Burden, Shoot, 1971. Performance documentation © Chris Burden.

Nevertheless, in order to locate more precisely my references, I need to mention some relevant performances, that fit in the past distinction between performance art and theatre like as for instance the iconic *Shoot*[26] by artist Chris Burden, which took place in 1971 at F-Space gallery in Santa Ana (CA).

Burden was shot in his left shoulder in front of a small audience. The performance was entirely video documented and photographed. In conversation with Jon Bewley, Chris Burden distinguished *Shoot* from theatre in terms of his desire not to repeat it: "I never saw myself as an actor. I'd never stand in front of an audience and do *Shoot* over again" (Searle 1993, 23). As a result, *Shoot* is considered the quintessence of art performance. However, in my opinion, *Shoot* partially transforms the viewer into a fully attentive member of an audience for some

[26] *Shoot* address the topic of the Vietnam war at a time when artists started to question the power of art images or objects to protest the war. The performance focuses on the male body: while facing the painful consequences of his performance, Burden embodies an ideal masculine strength. Actor Johnny Knoxville clearly references Burden when he gets shot with a beanbag projectile travelling at 250 foot per second in the movie *Jackass* (2002) (Walsh 2007, 48). In my performative practice, I prefer to avoid the *Jackass* aesthetic, depicting "males in trouble," for several reasons. Even though *Jackass* and *Shoot* parody the "strong man," they reproduce both a self-destructive, self-harming masculinity that cannot bear modernity and an invincible spiritual masculinity that can withstand all sorts of corporeal torture. "A central feature of *Jackass* is the exploration of the boundaries of male subjectivity through figurative castration and the violation of the male body." Despite the apparent "anti-phallic gestures," "the relationship between corporeal resistance and an essential, inviolable male core is reinforced" (Walsh 2007, 42).

minutes and recreates the rituality of the stage-audience dichotomy – probably because of the auratic presence[27] of the performer and the violence in the performance. The notion of antithesis to theatre is also crucial in the "happening" developed by artist Allan Kaprow at the beginning of the 1960s. Interestingly, Kaprow was initially "dissatisfied with the rigid separation of art and viewer imposed by the gallery space, introducing traditional theatrical characteristics[28] of plot into the performance" (Rabkin 1994, 81). But Kaprow realised soon that the actors invited to perform "turned out to be useless" because they wanted to act (Kaprow 1965, 48). Kaprow decided therefore to deploy nonprofessionals who would not "worry about their 'projectability,' their verbal ability and their 'onstageness'" (Kaprow 1965, 48). Kaprow's statement is very useful in pointing out my position. My lack of acting experience allows me to avoid the challenge to 'forget acting' that many actors approaching performance art must face. As I will elaborate, non-acting is a distinctive feature of performance art tradition and post-dramatic theatre.[29]

The "happenings" of the sixties were profoundly inspired by Dadaists, among the first artists questioning the boundaries between theatre and art. Cabaret Voltaire in Zurich was the epicentre of Dada between 1916 and 1920. The location itself was a hybrid space for art shows and performative actions. One of the most prominent figures of Dadaism was Tristan Tzara. His play *The Gas Heart*, which was first staged in Paris as part of the 1921 Dada Salon at the Galerie Montaigne, is an excellent example of Dada's approach to theatre. Tzara used a specific technique inspired by Simultaneism.[30] "In Dada Simultaneism manifested as plurality of actions at the same time. Abridged syntax and unpunctuated abruptness merged disparate moments into an *instantané*. Passages were set one next to another in order to stress the

---

[27] I will explore the issue further in the next chapter, because the auratic presence in the field of theatre has been extensively covered in the literature. The phrase can nevertheless easily be applied in performance art: "The auratic presence is another degree of presence, namely 'being present' as a person" (Power 2008, 47). "The auratic mode of presence is very different from the fictional mode; while the latter is concerned with the making-present of fictional phenomena, auratic presence refers to the having of presence (Power 2008, 47).

[28]Traditional theatre is defined by the presence of a stage, a clear separate space between spectators and scene, and the prominence of text and acting performances.

[29] German theatre researcher Hans-Thies Lehmann coined the term "post-dramatic theatre" in 1999 in his controversial eponymous book. In the Prologue he draws attention to the fact that a "simultaneous and multi-perspectival form of perceiving is replacing the linear successive" (Lehmann 2006, 1). "Neo-avant-garde art forms such as happenings, Fluxus events and performance art or live art all resulted in a renewed attention to the materiality of performance in theatre and in renewed challenges to the dominance of the text" (Lehmann 2006, 4).

[30] "Neither a movement, nor a group of loosely connected artists, Simultaneism instead describes a tendency in modernist avant-garde art and literature from roughly 1912 through to the 1920s, primarily but not exclusively in Paris. Simultaneist technique experimented with the concurrent presentation of elements from different places, multiple points-of-view, radically disconnected segments of time, and separate media" (Alvizu 2016).

conflict between them rather than the link" (Melzer 1973, 76). David Graver argues that *The Gas Heart* "pulverizes the elements of conventional theatre, reducing theatrical spectacle to a kind of white sound" (Graver 1995, 168). The play takes the form of an absurd dialogue with nuanced inferences between the characters, each named after human body parts: Mouth, Ear, Eye, Nose, Neck, and Eyebrow. A series of grotesque dances accompany the absurdity and non-linearity of the text. The costume by Sonia Delaunay, inspired by Picasso's geometries, aimed to "render the performers' bodies two-dimensional and immobile" (Melzer 1973, 160).

Dada's tools are nowadays integrated into post-dramatic theatre and art performance practices. In *Achilles Heel*, I often play with simultaneous actions and abrupt changes that break the narration's linearity. The text might describe an action, but suddenly it refers to another narrative layer. For instance, the text related to the heel pad syndrome describes Elia's clumsy walk in a couple of sentences, but it actually refers only to a medical study. The relation to the Achilles myth remains on an associative level.

The frictions that I have adumbrated between art performance and theatre tradition are part of my practice. I still question the boundaries between them, considering that my main interest in visual and performance art embodies a fascination with theatre tradition. My activation performances in white cubes might be roughly classified as performance art because they fulfil the majority of criteria, even though there are theatrical elements that emerge in the structure of the piece. My performances are indeed not repeated. The performance takes place once, usually during the opening ceremony. The narration is non-linear. Non-linear, in my case, manifests in a dramaturgy divided into scenes that are self-sufficient. The scene where Elia walks on imagined high heels while I read the text about heel pad syndrome is not conventionally related to the next scene where I tell the story of Achilles, holding Elia's leg. Within the scene, simultaneity collides with linear development. However, the audience must witness the performance from the beginning to the end. Finding strategies to convince the spectator to follow that rule in a white cube is always extremely challenging. In the case of *Achilles Heel*, the performance happened at the end of the curator's speech, in the course of which the audience was invited to stay and witness the entirety of the performance. In Switzerland, leaving during a performance might be considered quite disrespectful. But the stigma is not comparable with the one the audience faces in theatres. In the exhibition programme, the performance was scheduled at a specific time, not as an ongoing action. Despite those precautions, some people entered the space while I was performing, disrupting the already low level of attention. Closing the building's entrance was not feasible because other activities were going on at the same time within the venue.

Concerning our presence on stage, I would define it as non-acting, placing it squarely in the tradition of performance art and post-dramatic theatre. Professor Michael Kirby coined the term "non-acting" to refer to a performer who "does nothing to amplify the information arising from his/her presence" (Lehmann 2006, 135). The persona that manifests through the acting would create an unnecessary layer to the piece's economy. Performers who do not act offer their presence on stage for contemplation (Lehmann 2006, 135). Non-acting in *Achilles Heel* materialises through flat-tone text and non-theatrical gestures and expressions. Non-acting nevertheless allows the performer to engage in exaggerated and grotesque actions, as I will explore further in the next chapter.

The real challenge of my performative practice in the white cube is aimed at the status of the viewer/spectator. The white cube viewer has to attend to my piece from the beginning to the end to grasp the work. That would require a shift in role from viewer to member of a theatre audience. O'Doherty rhetorically asks, "Who is the Spectator, also called the Viewer, sometimes called the Observer, occasionally the Perceiver?" (O'Doherty 1986, 39). He tries ironically to describe the spectator, who used to have a "dignified pedigree" (O'Doherty 1986, 41) before the advent of the modern white cube. This can be traced to Alfred H. Barr's "Cubism and Abstract Art" exhibition at MoMa in 1936. The new concept of exhibition space introduced then, despite its alleged attention to the feelings and opinions of the spectators, does not need them. The white cube is indeed the reign of the Eye. "The eye has trouble with content, which is the last thing the Eye wants to see" (O'Doherty 1986, 42). My performance needs spectators who pay sufficient attention to follow a narration with a beginning and an end, not Eyes. The white cube is a space to be navigated without incurring any obligations. When O'Doherty explains the modernist conception of space and the collapse of the mythologies, threats and hierarchies that supported the pre-modern order, he argues: "this is not a 'degeneration' of space but the sophisticated invention of an advanced culture which has cancelled its values in the name of an abstraction called freedom" (O'Doherty 1986, 39). The viewer's freedom is considered necessary to overcome the violent structure of theatre that "obliges" the audience to follow the piece in its entirety. Needless to say, one is physically capable of leaving the theatre at any time, but unwritten standards of behaviour push the audience to think twice. I must admit that I have found myself in that position many times in theatres. Personally, therefore, as an audience member, I have mixed feelings. I would appreciate more engagement in the white cube while simultaneously valuing the absence of obligations.

I required the viewers to become an audience, but this did not happen for a series of reasons I will explore in the next paragraph.

Performance and Attention within the White Cube

Achilles Heel exposed a series of pros and cons that helped me take a more precise direction in my performance practice. As I have already mentioned, closing access to the exhibition space after the performance began was not possible, and so the precautions I took were largely useless. Besides the logistic issues, I overestimated the audience's knowledge of the Achilles myth – but this can also occur in the context of theatre. The curator told me that many people did not understand what the performance was about. The metaphorical strike on the heel had been perceived as somewhat cryptic. It was a mistake to have assumed that the myth of Achilles was part of the knowledge gained in high school. I needed to take the Swiss education system into account. Even though Italian schools are deficient in providing students with a connection with contemporaneity, a smattering of Greek mythology is guaranteed. In addition, the show took place in a small town thirty minutes away from Zurich. Despite the public funding that supports a tremendous number of cultural initiatives, art performances are still uncommon in many small Swiss towns. And in Italy and Germany, a town of about the same size would have no contemporary art centre or exhibition spaces at all.

The partial "failure" of the performance highlights another essential question: how to produce accessible content without interfering with any aspects of its creativity. For instance, explaining the Achilles myth and its connection to the topic of masculinity in the exhibition text or the performance text would have killed the performance. On the positive side, the viewers' proximity is definitely a plus when one is performing in a white cube context. The proximity allowed me to walk on hands and knees among them and hit their heels. That interaction highlights my desire to drag the viewers into the very core of the performance, breaking the division between us. Hitting the men's heels is a solid symbolic gesture that highlights the corporeality of both myself and the audience. Conversely, the white cube context generally leads to a lack of attention: as mentioned above, the eye does not like content. But needless to say, there are different degrees of attention. Being completely hypnotised by body movements is a form of engagement. Following a text, though, might be more challenging, according to its degree of difficulty. I am not so much concerned with the degree of the audience's attention as a consequence of the performer's capacity to attract it through a series of strategic choices (light effects, shocking content, etc.). I am interested, rather, in the relationship between context and content. The group show context does not help

the spectators to focus because of the amount of information available in the exhibition room: a solo show would have offered a better scenario. Art historian Claire Bishop argues that the low degree of attention to a performance in a white cube is part of a reconfiguration process relating to new technologies. “The white cube under the pressure of digital technology has been recalibrated as a space for unlimited documentation: taking installation shots (and selfies) and publishing them on hybridized public-private online platforms” (Bishop 2018, 31). In a white cube, the degree of attention is related to the freedom of movement within the space. The white cube is indeed “governed by a self-directed viewing that is unsynchronized in relation with others present, and by physical mobility rather than stasis: one can walk in and out of the exhibition at any time” (Bishop 2018, 29).

In a dance piece that I witnessed at the Tate Modern in 2012, *Fase: Four Movements*, choreographed by Teresa de Keersmaeker to the music of Steve Reich, attention is not a central issue. De Keersmaeker developed a piece that the dancers performed in the Turbine Hall area during the opening times, with movement loops partly scripted and partly improvised. The spectator can leave and enter freely. This freedom does not interfere with the comprehension of the piece. De Keersmaeker probably knew that she would have to deal with more or less attentive spectators who wanted to engage at different levels. While the medium of dance is closer to visual art than classic theatre, even the controlled theatre context does not automatically ensure a higher level of engagement. For instance, when I experienced the four-hour-long performance of *Internet* (2017) by director Marten Spångberg, the theatre space was disrupted by the absence of seats, with the stage accommodating spectators who felt free to talk, sleep and scroll Instagram. The question of attention was raised for the first time within classical theatre in 1870 when Wagner decided to remove the lateral views in the theatre of Bayreuth. The audience was obliged to sit in a frontal position, plunged into the dark to provide a total immersion experience (Bowman 1966).



Figure 37: Anne Imhoff, Faust, 2017, 57th Venice Biennale of Art, IT.
Photo Vincenzo Pinto/Agence France-Presse, Getty Images.

The textual part of my performance does not wholly fit the white cube context because the text I use is part of a narration that, despite being nonlinear, has a beginning and an end. The use of this type of text is contrary to the performative practice of someone like German artist Anne Imhoff, probably the most influential performance artist of the last decade. *Faust*, her five-hour performance, was repeated every day throughout the six-month duration of the 57th Venice Biennale at the German pavilion. The spectators are welcomed by "guard dogs secluded into a large cage" (Lusiardi 2017). A glass floor structure is installed all over the pavilion. Some performers walk slowly with catatonic eyes, like ghosts. Other performers are under the glass floor where there are also "restraint devices, makeshift beds, flasks, and prescription bottles" (Lusiardi 2017). Imhoff required the spectators to pay a different kind of attention, based on a solid audio-visual structure that slightly hypnotised them but left them the freedom to move, to be lost in their thoughts and to leave. Faust reproduces a sort of environmental scrolling mode. The performers' bodies inhabit the exhibition space as Instagram pictures. The never-ending documentation performed by the audience is part of the performance. Imhoff validates and foregrounds the already blurred fruition of artworks in art space in the social media era. And despite the continuous flow of spectators, Imhoff was able to develop an immersive space.

Artists have to decide what level of engagement they expect from their audience and, when possible and if needed, master the audience's attention. This means that there are certain situations in the white cube (for instance, group shows, huge spaces with inadequate

acoustics, a continuous flow of spectators or proximity to the entrance or the bar) that are not commensurate with performances where the textual part is relevant. Indeed, compared with theatres, art spaces might present a greater number of variables that artists must consider thoroughly before developing a project.

The Liminal Space between Props and Sculpture in the White Cube Context

Reflecting on the liminality between props and sculpture is not solely an attempt to categorize just for the sake of defining a medium category but rather understanding the nuances that allow me to play with the audience's expectation and norms that, despite the current interdisciplinarity are partly still in place. During the performance, the potential props are actualised. For some minutes, the copper element became the arrow of Zeus, the stuffed object a head support, and the resin animalistic feet a protuberance of my forehead. At the end of the performance, those elements are not relics of the action because they are immediately restaged as part of the inactive sculpture. I have previously reflected on the consequences of introducing elements of theatre into the white cube in the context of performance. The next step is to consider whether those sculptures, once activated, become something else. Unlike paintings that have the power to propel the viewer into another dimension, sculptures are, per se, determined by a materiality that seeks to engage the viewer's imagination. As I have already explained, sculptural practice is a material reality check. At the same time, it offers the audience the potential for a tactile experience that is most likely to be frustrated. Touching is generally prohibited in the context of art, mostly for security reasons. Spectators can and will still touch a work of art without being spotted by the security guard, intensifying their encounter with the work with the secret tactile experience. The prohibition on touching is part of a sophisticated system that regulates the distance between the audience and the artwork.

Cultural historian Gottfried Korf amplified Walter Benjamin's idea of Aura[31] to analyse distance in a broader sense. Distance, according to Korff, is part of what constitutes a

[31] I will not engage with Benjamin's concept of Aura primarily because his concept is strongly related to photography and movies and to the loss of Aura as a consequence of the mass reproduction of

museum. “The museum facilitates a brokering service as it regulates the distance between the experience of the visitors and the displayed objects or documented cultures. This distance exists not only in temporal terms (as in historical exhibits), but also in social (art museums), factual (natural history and technical museums), or cultural terms (ethnographic and folklore museums)” (Korff 1999, 269). Susan Stewart argues that museums put into practice “an elaborately ritualized practice of refraining from touch. As a consequence, they transform into ‘empires of sight’” (Stewart 1999, 28). According to art critics Rosalind Krauss and Yve-Alain Bois, the predominance of sight is a modernist creation where even “the tactile is only the visual representation of tactility” (Krauss and Bois 1997, 25). It was a radical shift from the carnal of the baroque to the retinal of the white cube (Krauss and Bois 1997, 25). According to scholar Mark Dorrian, there are curatorial approaches that attempt to reduce the distance between audience and artwork, “typically through strategies of immersion, to aim at the moderation of the atmospherics that emanates from the alterity of the objects themselves through the manipulation of the larger atmospheric conditions within which they are situated” (Dorrian 2014, 11). Both atmospheres, the amplified one that affects the whole exhibition space and the one that fluctuates around the work of art, can be encountered in every context dedicated to art to a different degree, from an iconic museum to an unknown off-space. What happens when the artist as performer touches and uses a sculpture within the performance frame surrounded by that atmosphere? That “use” might serve to drag the sculpture back into its factual reality,[32] the material reality that the white cube tries to keep out[33] to preserve its “purity,” especially when the sculptures contain recognisable elements. The degree of usability in sculpture is an essential factor that intersects with the atmosphere of the white cube, especially in ready-made art. “Duchamp’s urinal was displaced and put into the artistic context, but it remained identifiable and potentially usable” (Groys 2012). The potential to be

images. This provides the opportunity for Marxist politics to replace “the auratic foundation of traditional art” (Rochlitz 1996, 158). Benjamin saw the end of the Aura as a sign of social change and democratisation of Art. More recently philosopher Bruno Latour pointed out that because of that endless capacity of producing copies the frantic search for the original and the authentic has increased (Latour and Lowe 2010). I would quickly add that the need for authenticity is the other side of the coin of mass consumption. In a society where the authentic has become a commodity and the lust for rituality and sacredness has exploded, certain works of art might recover their Aura in spite Benjamin’s predictions. Anthropologist Denis Vidal used the example of artist Anish Kapoor’s practice as an example of restoring a rather classical conception of art where artworks are fundamentally defined once more by the aura. Kapoor “defies those who, following in the steps of Walter Benjamin or Theodor Adorno, believe that such a traditional conception of art has nowadays become definitely obsolete” (Vidal 2014, 54).

[32] According to Adorno the aura is something that allows the artwork to escape its factual reality (Adorno 1999).

[33] As I have suggested, the white cube is particularly hostile to corporeality, so that even the most disgusting image of bodies in full decay will be perceived as detached from its factual reality.

used has to remain a potential that is never realised. Ready-made art is based on the absence of activation. The viewer confronted with the ready-made has to forget the aim of that object. Placing bottles on Duchamp's bottle rack would highlight its purpose, even though it is common knowledge. *Achilles Heel* is not ready-made art, so the performer reveals the potential use of the sculpture. A spectator, though, can imagine possible activations before and after the actual activation. The "use," even in more abstract sculptures, drags the object back into its factual material reality, giving it an aim and simply reminding the audience that that sculpture has a bodily presence. After the performance, the arm-shaped pillow becomes an actual head holder. To gain a firmer understanding of the consequences of an activation process in a white cube context, it is necessary briefly to consider performance practices that deal with the multiple identities of objects, props, sculptures and relics. I will then engage with two crucial positions for my performance activation practice.

In classic art performances, the tools used in the actions are undoubtedly props. At the end of the action, those same tools might be considered performance relics, as Chris Burden called the bullet of his performance *Shoot*. In Marina Abramovic's *Rhythm 0*, initially performed in 1974, there were 72 ready-made objects, including a rose, needles, a hammer, and a loaded gun. The spectators were free to use those objects on Abramovic's body. The performance was interrupted when a man aimed the gun at the artist. Even though the artist and the active spectators have extensively handled these tools, the performer transfers her auratic presence to the props that then become valuable relics. The "artist's touch," the museum atmosphere and the art market validate those tools as art objects. As philosopher Theodor Adorno argues, "the aura has not been eroded but merely transferred from the work of art to star performers" (Adorno 2002, 298). Apart from the aura created by her success, Abramovic's performances have ritualistic aspects in terms of which the performer becomes a shaman. That element enhances the auratic quality of the whole performance.

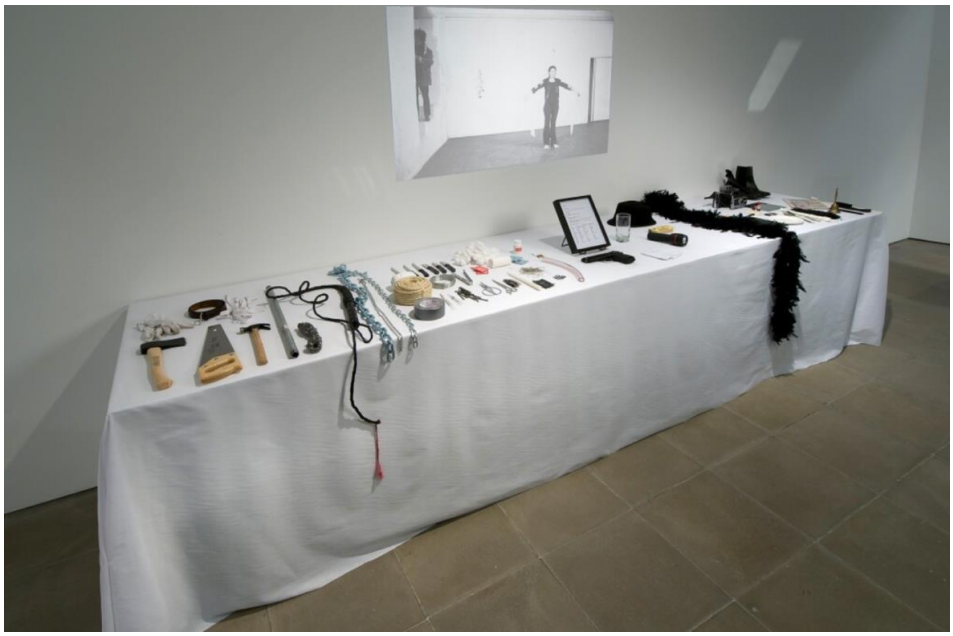


Figure 38: Marina Abramovich's "Rhythm 0" as displayed at Sotheby Auctions, NYC. © Marina Abramovic.

The costume prop worn by Lee Bul in the 1990 performance of *You Think I'm a Puppy on a Picnic?* formed part of her solo show at the Seoul Museum of Art in 2021, where many of her soft sculptures were exhibited. In the museum, one could watch the video documentation of her performances, plus costume drawings and wearable props. The latter were untouchable and staged as sculptural works, hung from the ceiling or slightly suspended above the floor. The evidence of wearability was shown in the performance documentation, but in the museum context, the fact that those artworks had been "used" is secondary. Bul's costumes are body prostheses and pieces of evidence of the performance, luring the audience back to a sort of physicality and prompting them to question their status as purely detached spectators. However, the white cube is at the same time working against this. As we have already seen in Abramovic, the auratic presence of the performer contributes to the atmosphere of the exhibition. It is what facilitates the exhibition as works of art of costumes worn and touched by the artist.



Figure 39: Lee Bul, Sorry for suffering – You think I'm a puppy on a picnic? 1990, still from the performance video documentation. © Studio Lee Bul.



Figure 40: Lee Bul, solo show exhibition "Beginning"at Seoul Museum of Art, 2021. © SeMa

These last considerations lead me to conclude that in *Achilles Heel*, the art space atmosphere is salient. However, the textual part that implements the activation requires a level of engagement not typical in white cubes, which, we have seen, do not like content. Conversely, the use of text works partly against my idea of highlighting corporeality. It supports body gestures, but on the other hand it obliges the audience to stay on an intellectual level. The sculpture's second nature, as revealed by the activation and the relationship between the sculpture and the performers' bodies, creates a new layer of reading that can be framed on symbolic and metaphorical levels as well. The music becomes crucial in supporting that

constellation, even when the song lyrics are not particularly relevant. The non-textual part of the activation is essential because, even though temporary, it returns the spectators at the performance to an awareness of its materiality/corporeality. Nonetheless, the white cube as the empire of sight, of the anti-tactile and of the return of the Aura, tends to work against any reminder of corporeality.

I want now to engage with two artistic positions that are close to my practice, though at different levels. German artist Franz Erhard Walther places his body or other performers' bodies within his sculptural work through minimal intervention. "By 1963, when Walther began calling on volunteers to 'activate' these fabric pieces, he was entering another artistic terrain that lacked a label, although it might now be called performance art" (Upchurch 2015). Walther defined his activation as "a kind of activated minimal art" (Upchurch 2015). There is an implicit distance in his actions. Unlike Abramovic, he is a composed shaman who knows a secret series of gestures that transform the fabric sculpture into a performance stage and ceremonial objects. Commenting on Walther's show at Tate London in 2008, Acatia Finbow writes: "by claiming a life for the static piece as an artwork, Walther also opened up a space for imagination to become part of the transformative artistic process." She suggests that "rather than viewing the static objects as incomplete, or unfulfilled, it is possible to read them as the same artwork, in a different state" (Finbow 2018). I witnessed the re-enactment of one of Walther's old performances at Haus der Künste in Munich in 2020. The yellow fabric (see below) is a unifier that enables Walther to question his body's boundaries. In *Achilles Heel*, the costume patterns and the sculptural textiles mingle with each other. As is the case with Walther's performance, it all becomes scenery that incorporates the performer's body. Walther's slow, ritualistic, choreographed movements and subtle activation gestures are a point of reference for my performance practice.

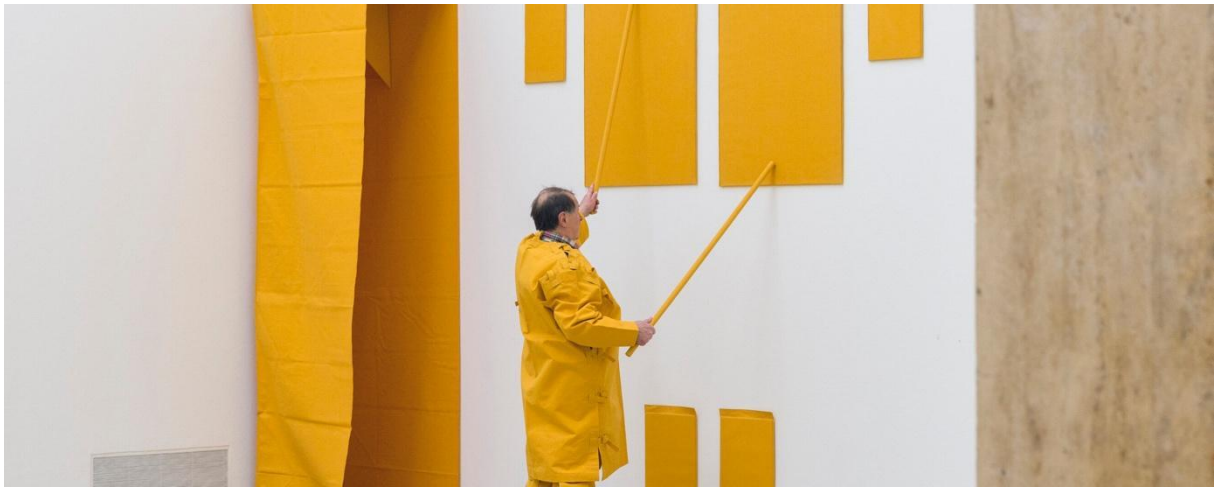


Figure 41: Franz Erhard Walther, Gelbe Skulptur 1969/1979, still from the performance at Haus der Künste, Munich, DE, 2020. © Haus der Kunst, Munich. Documentation link.

Besides Franz Erhard Walther, I consider the work of Swiss artist Sophie Jung the closest to my practice in terms of the relationship between text and sculpture. She activates her sculpture with her body's presence but especially with language. The introduction to the video documentation of the performance at the Swiss Cultural Centre SCC in Paris, within the group show *Annemarie von Matt. Je ne m'ennuie jamais, on m'ennuie*, clearly announces, "Sophie Jung performs her sculptures." The sculptures are installed separately from other artists' works. They become part of an activation for a precise period of time. At that moment, the constellation of objects supports the story with varying degrees of abstraction. Jung appears to be a sort of museum guide, who has mixed up the work's presentation with historical references and jokes in a linguistic Dadaist assemblage.[34]



Figure 42: Sophie Jung, performance at SCC, Paris, within the group show "Annemarie von Matt. Je ne m'ennuie jamais, on m'ennuie", 2021, still from the performance documentation. © Centre Culturel Suisse, Paris, FR. Documentation Link.

Art critic Philomena Epps talks about Jung's "expansive practice that combines performance, sculpture, and text … the sculptures often served as stage props, activated through her extensive live, linguistic performances" (Epps 2020). Even though Jung's sculptural practice

[34] During the performance, in front of one sculpture called Medusa, Jung says "I am just going to give you a short introduction to these pieces. This in particular is Medusa who evolved over time, to no longer having a neck. Because I don't know if you know the story of Medusa, it is quite dangerous to have a neck for a woman. So, she…." Jung suddenly moves towards another sculpture, saying "do you know what exaltation means?"

is close to ready-made tradition and her activations are not particularly physical, I see many similarities between how she approaches sculpture during her performance and the sort of dramaturgy she developed around those sculptures. In a review of her solo show in 2019 at Kunstmuseum Basel (CH), editor Chloe Stead writes: "As with those most famed Dadaists, Jung's brand of theatre doesn't allow for the easy pleasure of immersion: onlookers must participate with their full attention or, as was the case when I was there, leave" (Stead 2019). I am very inspired by Jung's use of text and her concern with whether the environment allows for the right degree of audience engagement. Spoken language and sculptural materiality interact very subtly. Jung's body almost disappears in the process to leave more space for the corporeality of her sculptures.

The Exposure of the Male Body and *Achilles Heel* Magazine

As discussed in Chapter 2, there is a paradox between the anti-essentialism advocated within contemporary gender discourse and the apparent obsession with defining identities as body matter. My position in that regard is clear. Gender is, to a certain extent, performed in the ways delineated by Judith Butler. But gender, as a social construction, inevitably interacts with the ineluctable fleshiness of the body. The flesh we live in is also subject to cultural stratification (Braidotti 2002, 41), but that does not mean that it does not exist physically. The fleshiness of the body is particularly dear to me, especially the male body. My sculptures become an extension of the performer's body, and at the same time while simultaneously being affected by the performer's body. Placing my and Elia's bodies in relation to the sculptures gives me the advantage of developing more precise storytelling. Elia's naked young white body close to the sculpture triggers an immediate connection. Suddenly the flaccid arms-shaped pillow and the fleshy feet might be read as a metonymy or metaphor for a troubled teenager's body. My ageing white male body and the costume close to the same sculpture might engender a sense of the grotesque. The performance leads the audience toward the issue of gender, but in a more abstract and indirect modality than in the case of the theatre context that I will analyse in the next chapter. The heel episode within the Achilles myth is the perfect mythic reference to stimulate some thought about the symbolic aspects of masculinity and its ambivalence, even though (as acknowledged earlier) I overestimated the accessibility of that myth. Other elements in the performance are more accessible, like the high heel. Elia's walking with imagined high heels and the resin feet sustained by the arms because of a missing high heel, seek parodically to question the common idea that the only way to disrupt normative masculinity is by behaving and dressing more femininely. The soft

element gently protects the resin foot heel, while Elia's walk is clumsy and grotesque in its exaggerated attempt to look feminine. The grotesque that emerged from the sculptural work radiates into the performance and vice versa.

The re-enactment of the Achilles myth is a grotesque, absurd parody that clashes with the seriousness of the myth. The incoherence among the text, Elia's attempt to walk in high heels and his boxer outfits also reveals the parodical and grotesque quality of the performance. For the spectator looking at *Achilles Heel*, our gender identities and sexual orientation might not be evident. Other factors like race, age and ability are more visible, unlike social class, which is difficult to detect.

Our exposing our bodies in the contemporary Western artistic and cultural context should conduce to a discussion of issues relating to identity politics[35]. Instead of further discussing the implications of that political approach, I prefer to focus on how the question of identity emerges in and through my practice. I am indeed interested in exposing behavioural and aesthetic nuances that problematise the alleged homogeneity of the "white man" category. However, the goal is not distancing myself from the white male group, which – like other superficial forms of generalisation – I personally do not recognise, but rather highlighting the complexity of any individual's identity. To be clear, I am not trying to compete in a race to decide who is most oppressed or least privileged. I am not claiming that I am also a victim because I am not 100 percent white or because I have a low, middle-class origin or do not perform like a "real man." Exposing the imperfections and the grotesque side of my ageing white male body is not an attempt to depict myself as less privileged so much as to expose the uselessness of oversimplified categories.

While researching the birth of interest in masculinity from the perspective of men during the development stage of the performance, I came across the magazine *Achilles Heel*. I wanted to understand how men positioned themselves in a pre-identity politics context. *Achilles Heel* was an anti-sexist magazine produced by a working collective of socialist men

[35] The term identity politics was used for the first time in the statement of the Boston-based women Black feminist lesbian socialist Combahee River Collective in 1977, which was originally printed in 1979's Capitalist Patriarchy and the Case for Socialist Feminism.
Identity politics is a slippery term. I found the definition of L.A. Kaufman quite exhaustive. She claims that identity politics is based on the belief that "identity itself, its elaboration, expression, or affirmation is and should be a fundamental focus of political work. She continues by saying that" identity politics politicized areas of life not previously defined as political, including "sexuality, interpersonal relations, lifestyle and culture" (Kauffman (1990, 67). In recent years identity politics has become, in the right-wing and far-left-wing political environment, synonymous with a liberal political agenda that avoid the social class issue by prioritizing race and gender. At the same time, as Nancy Fraser has observed, "the expression' identity politics' is increasingly used as a derogatory synonym for feminism, anti-racism, and anti-heterosexism" (Fraser 1997, 113).

and launched to coincide with the London Men's Conference in 1978. It is interesting to notice that the topics discussed in the 1970s are still relevant today, despite the current gender discourse that would label the magazine discussion as exhibiting white male fragility. "In the collective discussions that went into the naming of *Achilles Heel*, we thought of a point of vulnerability that was a source of change. It was partly a recognition that we had to be prepared, as men, to share our vulnerability if we wanted to change. We could not simply change as a matter of will and determination alone, as we had been brought up to believe …. But, within *Achilles Heel*, we were suspicious of a rigid and moralistic tendency within anti-sexism which involved a rejection of men and masculinity as irredeemably defined by their positions of power" (Seidler 2011, ix).

The experiment of *Achilles Heel* was part of a broader movement born in the US in 1970 called NOMAS (National Organisation for Men Against Sexism). The focal point of the magazine was to acknowledge the consequences for men and women of a specific type of traditional masculinity and to explore new strategies. I am particularly interested in this (not particularly successful) experiment for various reasons. Certain feminists placed an insurmountable barrier in the way of developing the NOMAS approach by re-creating a context of exclusion. During the seventies in Italy, there were similar experiences. The so-called *Gruppi di autocoscienza maschile* (self-awareness male groups) were a spinoff of the feminist movement, but they never accomplished full recognition from female activists. "Women were often suspicious of men getting together in consciousness-raising groups, assuming that this had to be a reassertion of male power in the face of feminism. It was argued that men had control of so many spaces within the public sphere that there was no need for men to get together in this way. But if it was right for women to be wary of the ways men seemed to be accommodating themselves to feminism, appeasing anger that supposedly fitted other men but not themselves, it was often unhelpful. It helped to isolate anti-sexist men as if they were to be despised or pitied for not being 'real' men" (Seidler 2011, x). *Achilles Heel* also focused on the oversimplification of equating men with oppression and introduced a proto-intersectional approach to tackle subtle power relationships before the advent of the term coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989. Intersectionality has been mostly used to explore layers of oppression in marginalised groups, on the assumption that all white men are part of a homogeneous dominating group.

"There is no simple equation between patriarchal power and men. In very complicated ways, sexuality, race, class cut across each other, producing subtle layers of relative power and powerlessness" (Seidler 2011, 25). The concept of relative power and powerlessness is crucial

in my practice, where sculptures and bodies play with nuances of power. The *Achilles Heel* magazine's perspective lent some support to my avoiding a rejection of masculinity, not just personally but also in my practice. To reject masculinity *in toto* would be to foster guilt and self-denial, and "[make it] impossible for men to explore our inherited forms of masculinity and the identification with a universal reason" (Seidler 2011, x).

Performance Activation: Other Possibilities

To conclude this chapter, I wish briefly to introduce a recent project developed after *Achilles Heel*, in which I explore another activation possibility that capitalises on the experience accumulated in previous performances. In 2022, curator Lorenzo Metzler invited me to a group show at Haus am See (Unterägeri, CH) called *The Interrupted Journey*. The exhibition space was a former school sanatorium built in 1873 on the shore of the Unterägeri lake, 40 minutes' drive from Zurich. The internal architecture is pretty unconventional for an art space: wooden walls, low wooden ceiling and wooden floor. But, as previously noted, the white cube approach can adapt to the most unconventional venues. The space is regularly used for art exhibitions, so the "atmosphere" allows us to define the objects placed in Haus am See as proper works of art, regulating forms of liminality. I produced a sculpture and a site-specific activation performance titled *Drowning Me Softly*. The sculptural part follows *Achilles Heel* aesthetically. The main element is a sort of bent stuffed bench covered with a baroque design textile that recalls a penis. The tiny metal legs make the bench extremely unstable and therefore unusable, even though it invites people to sit and enjoy the lake view through the nearby window. The second stuffed object is hung on a metal shape. The buttons on the central part suggest potential usability and the shape reminds one of an animal or perhaps a ritualistic object. A pewter medallion that depicts a grotesque face inspired by an ancient Greek coin called an Obol is also hung on the metal element.



Figure 43: Nicola Genovese, Drowning Me Softly, 2022, textile, pewter, metal. Photo Sebastian Lendenmann.

For the performance, I decided to take a new direction in which the sculpture is not physically activated. The performance took place in the public area just outside of the space that faces the lake. I hired two performers, one musician and one opera singer. I directed the piece this time without performing. The two performers, Elia Meier and Dustin Kenel[36], wear "replicas" of the stuffed object and medallion that are part of the sculptural work inside the exhibition space. The audience experiences the sculpture in the internal space and then a second incarnation of the object in another environment. That environment, an area facing the lake, is indeed a liminal space, both an extension of the Haus am See and a public area.

The idea for the performance developed around the myth of Charon[37] and fits within the frame of the exhibition concept. The two performers are stranded in limbo. They are waiting for the ferryman Charon on the shore of the Acheron. The stuffed object they wear is a costume and a prop, a sort of life jacket that simultaneously limits their movements. The

[36] Dustin Kenel is a Swiss performance artist born in 1997 in Bern (CH) where he lives and works. Dustin has a Bachelor degree in Fine Arts but moved quickly to performance art and theatre. I decided to pair him with Elia because of his experience in the performance between visual art and theatre and his interest in masculinity and gender issues.

[37] "Charon is a figure from Greek mythology where he is the boatman who ferries the souls of the dead across the waters of Acheron to the judgement which will determine their final resting place. The Greeks believed the dead needed a coin called Obol, to pay Charon for his service and so one was placed in the mouth of the deceased" (Cartwright 2021).

costume becomes, in some scenes, a bodily extension that adds an animalistic element to the performers' bodies. I used a particular type of satin that offer a variety of translucent effects. The colour is slightly similar to skin, even though that specific pink tonality might recall something alien. In the performance's first part, the costume floats, recalling the shape of a crocodile. When Elia and Dustin start to fight, the prop becomes a burden and, at the same, an armour. The textile is not water resistant; therefore, the internal padding got wet. In the final part, the performers squeezed the costume to eliminate the physical and emotional weight. The text appears just twice: when the performers come out from the water, they repeat in a loop for one minute, "*I don't know what we are doing here, we are just waiting for the ferryman.*" And then, almost at the end, while running and jumping with the increasing beat of the music they scream, "*The ferryman is late but who cares, we are dead as fuck*." The music by Magda Drozd starts with a drone loop that develops into a dark and repetitive beat where the sound of the violin becomes almost like a distorted guitar. The choreographies are centred on the homoerotic/violent/ interaction between Elia and Dustin. The playful "fight" in the water highlights the palpable tension that is observable when two men interact in the public space. At the end of the piece, they place the Obol coin attached to the necklace in their mouth to pay Charon, at last ready to cross the Acheron. Meanwhile, opera singer Claire Michel de Hass enters the scene abruptly, running and wearing a jogger outfit. She starts to train on the bannister while singing Cleopatra's Aria, *Se pietà di me non senti*.[38] The audience thought she was a real jogger who didn't realise a performance was happening. In *Drowning Me Softly*, I was able to achieve the level of attention I needed. There was a beginning and an end, but the performance provided many independent symbolic scenes that could also give people passing by and watching the piece for a while a sufficient quantity of visual information. The performers' bodies had a different degree of presence, highlighted by the reduced text. This allowed me to bring back the audience's attention to a body movement level. Unlike in *Achilles Heel*, the choreographies offer a broader spectrum of body engagement, where the performers expose their physicality sharply. I asked the performers to highlight body movements and facial expressions. In this work, I capitalize on Dustin's experience in contemporary dance. That helped to push Elia to focus on his teenage boy body. Confronting the lake water as a stage was challenging for both performers but productive because they were obliged to engage in an unusual environment. The shift is quite visible in

[38] *Se pietà di me non senti* (If you don't feel pity for me) is part of *Giulio Cesare*, an opera by the German composer Georg Handel. I combined the Aria with the moment when the performers are ready to reach the Underworld, the land of the dead. The lyrics can be translated as: *If you don't feel pity for me. Oh, Heaven, I will die. You need to give peace to my torment. Or this soul will cry.*

the photo documentation below. It is interesting that this was the last time Elia participated in my performances. In 2023, he enrolled in a school for electricians. He realized he wanted a stable job, and an art career would have just exacerbated his psychological instability. *Drowning Me Softly*'s activation method did not question the sculpture's identity directly but on an associative level. The sculpture exhibited in the space stays intact and untouchable in its silence. The costumes become copies of the "authentic" hung sculptural element. The performance's ritual aspects are reinforced by an alleged authentic prop being exhibited as an untouchable sculpture. In *Drowning Me Softly*, the carnivalesque and grotesque aesthetic categories manifested sharply through the materiality of sculpture and performance. In the next chapter, I will focus on my theatre performance practice, where I will engage with regional Italian masculinities and the body that performs them, exposing and subverting the complexity of the hyper-stereotyped Italian man. Unlike when I was working in the white cube of the gallery or museum space, I will address the topic of masculinities and the male body more directly, capitalising on the theatre environment's possibilities.



Figure 44: Nicola Genovese, Drowning Me Softly, 2022, performance. Photo Sebastian Lendenmann.



Figure 45: Nicola Genovese, Drowning Me Softly, 2022, performance. Photo Sebastian Lendenmann.



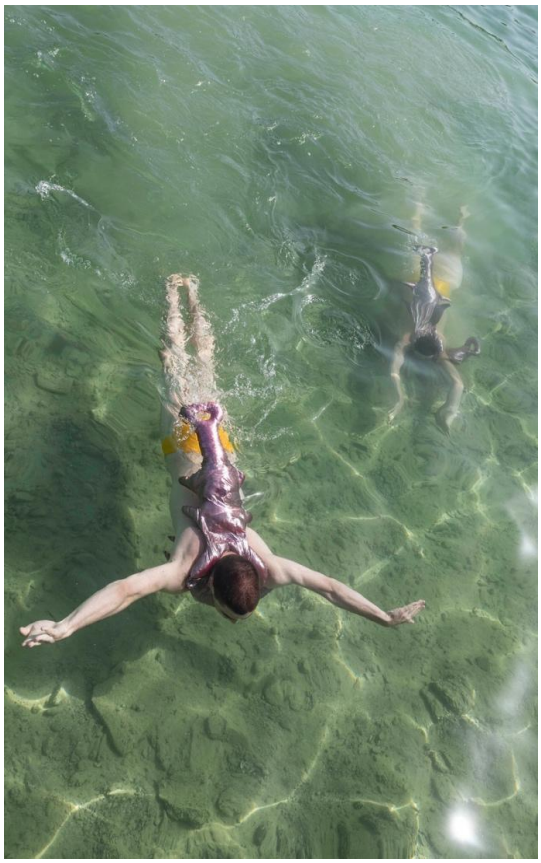


Figure 46: Nicola Genovese, Drowning Me Softly, 2022, performance. Photo Sebastian Lendenmann.



Figure 47: Nicola Genovese, Drowning Me Softly, 2022, performance. Photo Sebastian Lendenmann.



Figure 48: Nicola Genovese, Drowning Me Softly, 2022, performance. Photo Sebastian Lendenmann.



Figure 49: Nicola Genovese, Drowning Me Softly, 2022, performance. Photo Sebastian Lendenmann.

CHAPTER FOUR: A NOVANTA, A THEATRE PERFORMANCE

An investigation into male bodies and masculinities in the Italian context

Because of the limitations of the white cube context, as discussed in the previous chapter, I felt impelled to bring my visual art background to the theatre to explore new possibilities. As previously suggested, the Swiss theatre scene provided new energy and ideas for my performance practice in the white cube, but this was not enough; I wanted to fully engage not just with theatre language but with the physicality of the theatre context. Here I wish to mention in particular one work by Bern-based artist and theatre-maker Ernestina Orlowska that convinced me that a visual art approach in theatre could capitalise on the greater audience attention and immersive experience provided by that context. Orlowska presented her performance piece *Bodiy* in 2019 at Fabrik Theater in Zurich. What follows is a short report on the piece. In *Bodiy*, the auditorium is absent.



Figure 50: Ernestina Orlowska, Bodiy, 2019, performance, Fabrik Theater, Zurich, CH. Photo Janosch Abel.

The audience enters directly into the stage at the very beginning, where some objects/scenery/props have already been placed. Before the performance starts, the audience is allowed to walk among the objects, contemplating them as if they were sculptures in an art space. In that lapse of time, members of the audience might forget their role and become spectators. However, the deep blue curtains and the carpeted floor are clearly evocative of an immersive theatre space. Once the performers enter the stage, the spectators sit down at the stage's margins but are still very close to the objects. At this moment, they "officially" become the audience, even though their proximity to the performers and the intimate scale of the space breaks the dichotomy of stage and audience. As composer John Cage argues concerning the reconfiguration of the viewer's position, [m]ore pertinent to our daily experience is a theatre in which we ourselves are in the round, in which activity takes place around us" (Kostelanetz 2002, 103). Cage is referencing the theatre-in-the-round tradition, a form of theatrical staging in which the acting area, which may be raised or at floor level, is surrounded by the audience. As can be seen in the image above, there is a ceramic object that can be observed closely at the beginning. Suddenly it is rendered part of the scenery, and then, almost at the end of the performance, it becomes a sort of fountain exuding a sticky green liquid. As I have noted, the audience's experience at the piece's beginning is somewhat similar to that of a spectator in an art space. Nevertheless, it is the performers who signal the start of the piece by coming on stage, framing the audience's previous experience of the objects as time spent in a sort of limbo or a waiting room 2.0. The spectators who experience

the objects in that limbo have been waiting for their activation as props or scenery. The potential usability of the objects triggers expectations that the performers fulfil. The objects' status is uncertain, but the boundaries remain intact because the atmosphere generated by the context is more salient. Everything on stage is a prop. In Orlowska's performance, the proximity to objects and performers' bodies enhances the audience's bodily engagement. I exited the show feeling inspired and keen to develop a performance for theatre. Therefore in 2020, I applied to show a piece of 12 minutes duration within a platform for emerging theatre called *Inkubator*.[39] I presented the seminal idea of *A Novanta* (*AN*) at Fabriktheater,[40] an established venue for contemporary theatre in Switzerland. It was the perfect opportunity to confirm my idea that the theatre was a more appropriate context to develop complex narratives that would not work in the white cube. *Inkubator* was a safe space that allowed me to try out new ideas. In addition, the theatre funded the production in its entirety. I received excellent feedback, and the whole experience has been precious. The Fabriktheater staff urged me to pursue a path in the field. They found my visual art approach exciting and fresh. From their perspective, my total lack of experience in theatre was an asset. Like other theatres, they were keen to include different approaches and languages in their programme. I decided to go through the funding process and develop a longer theatre piece with other performers, technicians and a production manager. I wanted to take advantage of the openness of Swiss theatres in accepting practitioners without a theatre background, while challenging my own practice. The will to move beyond the conventions of theatre and bring to it a different performative practice recalls the words of Baz Kershaw, who perceived a shift to a "performative society": he argues that theatres have a certain "ecology" that in recent decades has been "threatened" by the shift to a "performative society" (Kershaw 2008, 32). Even Abramovic understood the potential of the theatre context to surmount common prejudices. Her last project *7 Deaths of Maria Callas*[41] was a 1 hour and 30 minutes opera piece. The time when she could assert that "[t]o be a performance artist, you have to hate theatre" is gone

[39] *Inkubator* is a platform organised by Fabriktheater to allow emerging theatre-makers and visual artists to present short pieces (from 5 to 12 minutes) on stage. It is the perfect frame to try ideas before engaging in a more significant production. During Inkubator, artists are mentored by the Fabriktheater team and external guests.

[40] Fabriktheater is part of the Zurich free-scene theatre. It has been active since 1981, focusing mainly on the contemporary Swiss theatre and dance scene. It is part of a more prominent cultural institution in Zurich called Rote Fabrik. This decommissioned blast furnace became a public cultural spot in 1977. It includes, besides the theatre, an exhibition space, two concert halls, a restaurant, artist studios and rehearsal rooms.

[41] In *7 Deaths of Maria Callas*, Abramovic performs on stage as a sort of reincarnation of Maria Callas. The show includes opera excerpts and short films. The premiere took place in July 2021 at the Bavarian State Opera in Munich after being postponed for two years because of the pandemic.

(O'Hagan 2010). Historically, the move towards the theatre by performance artists, as explained by art historian Rose Lee Goldberg, can be dated to the end of the 1970s in the US. Performance artists started to show attention to "décor, costumes, sets, lighting and to more traditional and familiar vehicles such as cabaret, vaudeville, theatre and opera" (Goldberg 2011, 195-196). Some of them gave shape to a "new hybrid" that capitalises on Fine Arts tradition while exploiting "traditional theatre craft" (Goldberg 2011, 196). As a consequence, the new theatre, commonly known as post-dramatic or media theatre, was authorised to incorporate dance, video and sound art, while the 'new performance' was allowed to use "fully fledged scripts." In the early eighties, a similar dynamic was discernible in Italy. Some very young artists with Fine Arts and architectural backgrounds, initially interested in short events and video installations, started to approach theatre. The most influential groups were *Falso movimento, La Gaia Scienza,* and *Krypton*. "Their influences were television and cinema, particularly the American underground films of the sixties" (Neff 1984, 87). In an interview for the *New York Times*, the executive producer of *Falso Movimento* claimed that: "In Italy, there is a very large young theatre movement mixing media. We call it media theatre, which is very much stimulated by mass media. The techniques are based on video, film, architecture and visual arts" (Bennetts 1984, 64).



Figure 51: La Gaia Scienza, Cuori strappati (1983) stills from the performance video documentation [42]. © ORF (Österreichischer Rundfunk).

[42] *Cuori strappati* transl. torn hearts, is one of the most successful productions of the Italian theatre company *La gaia scienza* active since 1976. The two still are examples of how objects and bodies on stage were entangled in awkward hybrids. The armchairs are, at the same time, scenery, body sculptures, costumes and props.

Goldberg claims that in the 1980s in the US and Europe, "the division between traditional theatre and performance became blurred" (Goldberg 2011, 199). Yet, as I have suggested, although there may certainly be more openness, the borders between the two are still discernible.

This chapter concerns *AN*, a 45-minute theatre piece performed five times within the main programme in the Fabriktheater in October 2021. The piece seeks autobiographically to explore the entanglements of hetero images, auto-images and the behavioural patterns of different Italian masculinities and the bodies that perform them. It uses parody, irony, satire, humours within the frame of so-called masculinity in crisis. Those are challenging terms to define because they often overlap and used interchangeably. Parody is not a simple imitation, it is an "approximation" to an original source where, like in sarcasm, "the subject is treated in a contradictory manner: elevated subjects are debased and low ones are elevated" (Kreuz and Roberts, 1993). Conversely satire, "as a vehicle for social commentary, address social criticism by shaming the powerful, the foolish, or the corrupt" (Kreuz 2020, 94). As Vladimir Nabokov claimed "Satire is a lesson, parody is a game" (Nabokov 1973, 74). In my performance practice the boundaries between parody and satire overlaps. The man in the doggystyle action is parodical figure but I critic at the same time is alleged superiority. I make fun of the warrior character by exposing his fears and anxieties and and I comment on the foolishness of populism. As I will explain further there is a sort of empathy that emerge towards the character that I criticized in order to avoid to be simply judgmental. Both parody and satire use humour and irony. Both appear more clearly after watching the performance. "Humor arises once people reconcile the incongruity between what speakers say and imply when using irony. Humor automatically emerges in these cases given the release of tension following a momentary sense of disparity" (Gibbs, Bryant, Colston 2014, 575). Irony unlike humor might not be funny and might be consider problematic (together with parody) in the actual political frame especially when it is unclear as to whether something is meant to be ironic[43]. I often use a form of ambiguous irony that has been defined in the early 2000 as post-irony. Art critic Jörg Heiser sees early precursors of Post irony in the American Camp movement. He argues that "post irony is something profoundly serious that permits overtones suggesting that it might be intended to be funny" (Hedinger 2011).

AN comes from the deep need I felt to address the topic of masculinities more precisely. It is crucial to remark that my background in visual art allowed me to develop the

[43] Irony is "a type of usually humorous expression in which one says the opposite of what one intends" (Dictionary Cambridge). To properly work the "real" intentions of the person who says something ironic have to be to a certain extent clear.

narration with a certain degree of abstraction, even though some of the content is bluntly addressed. The aim was to be accurate while avoiding, when possible, being too illustrative. Masculinities and male bodies in *AN* emerge through the entanglements of props, text, music, costumes, gestures, and choreographies. While I underline and exaggerate my Italian masculinities, I both confirm and confound the audience's expectations of the stereotyped Italian man. In theatres, the audience is usually possessed of concise but precise information about the piece they are about to witness. The *AN* press release declared straightforwardly that the performance was about Italian masculinities from an Italian straight white man's perspective. However, I decided to place on the flyer a brief excerpt from my script to maintain a certain degree of mystery. *AN*'s starting point is *Ti metto a novanta gradi*, TMANG, literally translated "I put you at ninety degrees," an obscene vernacular expression and set of gestures used by some Italian males[44] to describe a doggy-style position in the act of copulation. It is crucial to understand that I am talking about gestures that mimic the doggy-style position, not the sexual act itself. To avoid misunderstanding, the abbreviation *AN* will refer to the performance project *A Novanta*, and TMANG, *Ti metto a novanta gradi*, will be used to reference the set of gestures. Before diving into TMANG, I have to clarify the question of gestures within the Italian cultural context. Italian cultural fragmentation is so pronounced that any attempt to find some commonality among the 20 regions will most likely reproduce trite national stereotypes. Thus, in the northern part of Italy, the use of gestures, specifically hand gestures, is very limited compared with in the south. The use of gestures and the types of gesture used are crucial markers that define regional identities.

Therefore, you will rarely see Venetians males making the horn gesture[45] to avoid bad luck, unless they are mimicking someone from Naples or making fun of Neapolitans or Southerners. The first work dedicated to the exploration of gestures was published in 1832 in Naples.[46] The author Andrea de Jorio extensively investigates Neapolitan gestures, especially the ones that mimic those of the Greeks and Romans that are observable on reliefs and vase decorations. It is considered the first ethnographic study of gestures. Anthropologist William Washabaugh states, "Jorio demonstrated that gestural actions are sometimes juxtaposed, and

[44] It is difficult to pin down a specific demographic that deploys those gestures. I didn't find any research that explored the matter. According to my experience, TMANG is used regardless of social class and education. In general, among educated men, the gestures are performed discreetly in private contexts, whereas in a working-class environment, they are publicly deployed.

[45] The horn, in Italian, "le corna", is a gesture used to avoid bad luck. The fingers, in that case, are downward. When the fingers are upwards, the horn gesture indicates a cuckold. The latter is also pretty common in the North.

[46] It is important to remark that the Italian state was just born in 1861. In the book's release year, Naples was the capital of the *Regno delle due Sicilie* (The kingdom of the two Sicilies).

even superimposed on each other, to create significant combinations. He indicated that gestural expressions can be sensitive to social context so that identical gestural actions can signal distinct significations in different social circumstances" (Washabaugh 2001, 653). Gestures have to be read in more complex constellations where facial expressions, context and other body signs play crucial roles. I have to point out that TMANG is not one of those classic hand gestures that you can find in the famous book by artist-designer Bruno Munari.[47] Isabella Poggi, who classified more than 250 hand gestures in the Italian context, defines a communicative gesture as "any movement of hands, arms or shoulders used by a Sender for the goal of communicating some meaning to some Addressee" (Poggi 2008, 46). According to Poggi's categorisation, TMANG is an iconic gesture. "An iconic gesture is one linked to its meaning by a relation of similarity, in that some perceivable parts or aspects of the signal resemble (imitate, mime, are similar to) some perceivable parts or aspects linked to the meaning" (Poggi 2008, 49-50).

TMANG is a mix of mimicking the classic doggy style back and forth pelvic body movement observable in many countries and Italian hand gesticulation that enhances the body gesture and simultaneously introduces a parodic element. Within the frame of *AN*, TMANG is associated with northern Italian masculinity where the geographical proximity to Austria, Switzerland and France is, in certain respects, more relevant than the national association with the South of Italy. Gestures in that cultural context are meaningful but used mainly to enhance a situation. On stage, however, the physicality of the gestures evokes a pre-linguistic scenario that triggers stereotypes of Italian men among the audience. The gestures are nevertheless crucial in performance because they reduce the whole to a corporeal level. To be fair, gestures in Italy do not replace spoken language, not even in the South. As one notices from the English translation of Munari's book, *Speak Italian*, there is a tendency to depict Italians as people that speak through gestures.[48] That kind of narrative reinforces stereotypes of Italians as funny theatrical individuals who cannot use language and use their hands instead. I am bothered when non-Italian friends address me with the so-called "pinecone hand" (see image above). First, it is a subtle form of emasculation because it associates the dominance of the body with a feminine trait. Secondly, the gesture is made in the wrong context and with inappropriate expression. In the section on Fonzies, I will analyse the Italian American

[47] Bruno Munari collected a series of images of Italian hand gestures in his famous book *Aggiunta al dizionario Italiano* published in 1958 and translated into English with the title *Speak Italian: The Fine Art of the Gesture*.
[48] "When Italians Chat, Hands and Fingers Do the Talking" is the title of an article published in The *New York Times* in 2013. One can find hundreds of websites that validate the same narrative.

character Arthur Fonzarelli, depicted as a man of few words who communicates through gestures, thereby highlighting his intellectual inadequacy and his sexually objectified body.

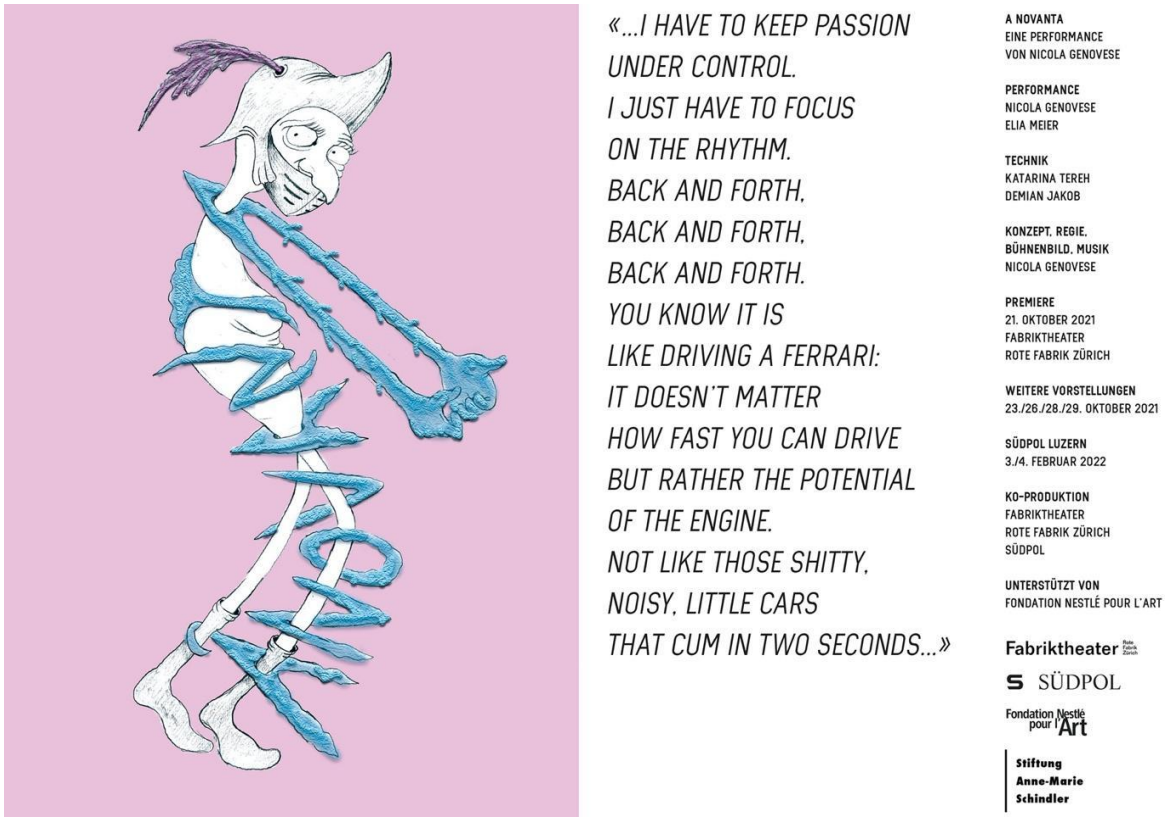


Figure 52: Flyer, A Novanta, 2021. Courtesy the artist.

I suggest that readers read the piece description before watching the video documentation. The basic description of the performance will be followed by reflections on the first four scenes that arise from videos, text, actions, songs, props, costumes, etc., and previous research conducted in the development stage.

Performance Description

The Stage

Even though Orlowska's stage solution was an excellent strategy to break from the classic theatre set-up, I decided to keep the conventional dichotomy between stage and audience. I wanted to explore the boundaries and potential of introducing my visual art approach while preserving the traditional theatrical arrangement. Before describing the stage, I need to discuss the question of props/sculpture in the theatre context. Andrew Sofer defines a stage property commonly known as a prop as "an inanimate object manipulated by an actor in the course of a performance" (Sofer 2003, 31). According to this definition, in *AN*, everything on

stage consists of props. However, some objects have multiple identities, serving – according to the scene – as scenery or costume or prop. Despite the sculptural quality of some objects, the context means that none of them can be considered sculptures. In *Achilles Heel*, the white cube atmosphere and the auratic quality of the performance "protected" my sculptures, defining them as artworks in their own right despite their temporary use as props during the performance. According to Cormac Power, the performer might have an auratic presence in the theatre too. He argues that the auratic presence might emerge in two modalities. The first is related to the fame of the actor, enhanced by the reputation of the play (Power 2008, 47). The second is more fundamental and independent of reputation: "the actor's auratic presence can be constructed through his manipulation of space and materials including his own body and posture as well as the way in which the actor confronts his audience and engages their attention" (Power 2008, 49). Even though my presence on stage is non-acted and I am not famous, I attempt to fabricate an auratic presence using the stage as if I was in a white cube. In theatre, the physical division between audience and stage tends to transform the bodies and props into a flat image; yet at the same time, the immersive space delivers a more intense audience engagement. The materiality of the costumes and props becomes less important. In addition, the moment that the spectator can experience the sculptural work without my activation and mediation is missing. The audience cannot contemplate the work outside of the performance frame. The fulfilment by the performers of the potentiality of usability means that the difference between props and sculpture remains intact.

To highlight the slight difference between certain objects on stage, I would use the term sculptural prop to define a prop that can also be a costume or piece of scenery with specific materiality. Such objects would be sculptural artworks when placed in the art context. I will use the term prop to define the other objects on the stage, and the term costume to define clothes that do not have multiple functions. Even though the context is dominant, those objects retain a liminal identity. Andrew Sofer reminds us that a prop, to be considered as such, has to be a sign or a symbol: "Simply by virtue of being placed on stage before an audience, objects acquire a set of semiotic quotation marks" (Sofer 2003, 31). A chair on the stage of *King Lear* is perceived as King Lear's throne. I will further analyse the consequences of this for my props in the performance section, below.

This is what the stage looked like: on the left side, there are several sculptural props developed purposively for *AN*: a series of pillows that will become a costume and a pizza; an oval pillow (OP), made with a shiny white fake leather textile; a ten-metre snake-shape pillow (SP) made with a brown fake leather/fur textile; and thirteen small glittery pillows in red

green, gold, pink and brown that will be used as a costume and as pizza ingredients (PI). On the same side of the stage, there is a ready-made plaster cast of a statue of a Roman gladiator's torso, a metal sheet with an animal skull shape and a golden leather hand-shaped pillow, an old Yamaha keyboard, a pair of Lidl shoes, Lidl socks, and a black and gold shiny t-shirt. In the centre front, there is a retractable silicon hand. On the right side, another sculptural prop lies on the floor, a black reflective textile pillow with a snake shape ending with a crab claw (CCP).



Figure 53: Nicola Genovese, A Novanta, 2021. Stage set-up. Courtesy the artist.

Second performer

I briefly introduced my co-performer Elia in *Achilles Heel*, where his contribution in the development stage was limited because the script was already very structured. Even though *AN* was Elia's first stage experience, he took an active part in the creative process. We developed some choreographies and chose costumes and some songs. Before working together, we had a long discussion about his hybrid identity as a Swiss Italian living in the German part of Switzerland, and his thoughts about being perceived as a boring white straight boy in a digital world where being "different" is a must. During the scene analyses, his role will be extensively explained.

Introductory scene

Elia and I are already on stage playing a ceramic bird-shaped water whistle when the audience enters the theatre. We stare at the audience, exchange stares, and perform *la passeggiata*. I wear high fashion silk clothes decorated with Murano glasses and Elia a souvenir t-shirt from Venice. When the audience is settled, a loop sampling a Ferrari engine starts up. The volume of the Ferrari loop increases slowly, becoming louder until almost unbearable. Elia approaches the audience with an extensible silicon hand. He lightly touches the legs of the spectators in the first row of chairs and stares at them. While Elia is busy with the silicon hand, I use the CCP to perform the same gesture: throwing it toward the audience, and then slowly dragging it back while staring at them.

Elia suddenly drops the hand and starts to bounce. I walk away from the CCP and slowly start to mimic a rhino/bull that is preparing an attack. The sound of the Ferrari is still thunderous. I slowly walk towards the audience, and Elia and I sing a part of *Un'italiano vero,*[49] a song by Toto Cotugno composed in 1993, while the Ferrari loop fades away.

First scene

I sit on the floor. Elia continues to bounce, but stops and moves his hips back and forth once in a while. I follow him with my gaze. Then I stare at the audience.

> *It was a boring foggy Sunday in a sad and miserable countryside village nearby Venice. I was 16. We were in a bar, in a shabby bar, we the boys. Giulio was there too. He said straightforwardly,* Ieri l'ho messa a novanta; *yesterday, I placed her, probably Sara by then, in a ninety-degree position. He started to move his hips back and forth, back and forth, back and forth. His hand was leaning on a sort of imaginary table. His face was extremely serious and contracted, even though a subtle pleasure was visible. A controlled pleasure. Everyone laughed out loud. I laughed as well. I did not know whether to believe him or not, but it did not matter by then. I just wanted to be part of that group. Suddenly Giulio stopped his movement and stared at me. Hey Nicola, what did you do last night? Well. I tried to explain, but he interrupted me. He said, "Probably you wanked the whole night." Everyone laughed out loud. I was eventually part of the group.*

[49] *Lasciatemi cantare, con la chitarra in mano. Lasciatemi cantare una canzone piano piano. Lasciatemi cantare, perché ne sono fiero. Sono un italiano, un italiano vero* (Let me sing holding a guitar. Let me sing a song softly. Let me sing because I am proud of it. I am an Italian. A real Italian.)

Elia, in the meanwhile, was lifting the CCP with a rope. I sit on my knees, mimicking a ninety-degree angle with my right hand.

> *Btw. Ninety degrees is the angle formed by the legs and the back of an imaginary passive subject, basically the same angle as a table, an imaginary table. This imaginary table allows men to lean their hands on to feel more comfortable while they perform.*

I stand up and in a sort of Tai Chi movement, I reach a stable position. I perform TMANG. My left hand is on my hip to help with the pelvic rhythm while my right hand is resting on an imaginary table. Elia lies on the floor like a referee for boxing, counting down before declaring a knock-out. He follows my rhythm.

> *I am doing extremely good. I have no performance anxiety. I do not need Viagra, and my dick is so hard that you can even break walnuts with it. I have to keep my passion under control. You know it's like driving a Ferrari; it doesn't matter how fast you can drive but rather the engine's potential.*

I mimic the sound of a slowly driven Ferrari:

> *Not like those shitty noisy cheap cars that cum in two seconds.*

I mimic the sound of a noisy little car. At this moment, I perform a fast pelvic movement. My tongue is out, my eyes are upside down, and my face is deformed. Elia hits the floor faster and louder, mimicking with me the sound of the noisy little car. I go back to the slow pelvic movement.

> *I can last for hours, days, weeks, months, years, centuries. To tell you the truth, I am bored. I am so bored that I could even watch a movie in the meanwhile or a soccer match,* arbitro di merda, [shitty referee]. *I can also drink a coffee or smoke a cigarette. In the meanwhile, I can even have a massage.*

Elia comes with massage gear to treat my shoulders while I softly sing *L'italiano*:

> *She has to be happy; otherwise, she complains. It is a sort of obligation. I do not want a problem. She is cute; she is nice, but she is not like my mother; otherwise, it would be really weird.* Mamma dove sei, mamma, mamma dove sei? [Mum, where are you?]

Second scene

There is a video projection with different Italian singers performing the song *Mamma son*

tanto felice.[50] The song turns into a sort of guttural Nepalese mantra. Elia and I kneel and move our upper parts up and down, following the mantra rhythm. My silk costume becomes a hoodie. At the end of the mantra, I take off my costume and Elia takes off his shirt. Elia sits next to the CCP and stares at me and the video.

Third scene

I approach the first sculptural element, and I slowly put on the PI. Then I stand in a proud warrior position, my left-hand bearing an imaginary spea*r.*

> *I have been busy for quite a while with the Roman empire and then with the fabrication and construction of the nation-state. I also had a short experience in East Africa, but it ended badly. Then I decided to focus on the northern part of my country and then on my region and then on my province and then on my town and then on my neighbourhood and then on my street, and then on my house. Nowadays, I am pretty busy with my garden, but there will be time to enlarge things again. We will come back like a huge tide. Ritorneremo come una grande marea, we'll come back like a huge tide, wir werden wie eine riesige Flut zurückkommen.*

I start a catwalk as the song "Marea" by Italian singer Madame begins to play.[51] Elia unrolls the ten-metre pillow, places it in a circular shape, puts on the golden black glitter shirt, and again sits next to the CCP. In the meanwhile, a video starts. It is a karaoke version of "Marea" sung by a guy that I filmed in a flea market and me, walking on the seashore with the same shirt worn by Elia. I pick up the OP and throw it into the centre of the round space delimited by the SP. I take off the PI and place them slowly in the imaginary pizza.

> *Mozzarella di bufala, pomodorino, rucola, salamino piccante, gamberetti and kebab.*[52]*Pizza is ready.*

I fall on the mozzarella. I mimic a swim holding a tomato and a salami with my hands. Elia voices a text in Swiss German. Here is the English translation:

---

[50] *Mamma* is a popular song composed in 1940 by Cesare Andrea Bixio, with Italian lyrics by Bixio Cherubini under the title *Mamma son tanto felice* (Mum, I am so happy). An excerpt from the lyrics: *Mamma ma la canzone mia più bella sei tu! Sei tu la vita e per la vita non ti lascio mai più!* (Mom, but my most beautiful song is you. You are my life and for the rest of my life I'll never leave you again.)

[51] Madame, born 2002, is part of the new generation of Italian musicians, but unlike Gazzelle her lyrics deal more with sexuality, identity issues and lives on the margins.

[52] [Buffalo mozzarella, little tomatoes, rucola, spicy salami and kebab.]

My friends call me 'tschingg.'[53] *I told them that I was born in the Italian part of Switzerland and not in Italy. For them, it doesn't really matter. They expect me to wear a leather jacket, a golden chain and sunglasses. Because I don't fulfil their expectations, they tell me that I am not a real man.*

After his speech, Elia carries out the pizza elements and brings me a keyboard. I sing a melancholic pop song composed by myself.[54]

Fourth scene

Elia brings an overhead projector onto the stage. He takes out a duvet from the OP that says "Fonzies" and a round-shaped pillow. He gets under the duvet and goes to sleep. I put on a kitchen apron with a print of Michelangelo's David (the central part of the statue) on an Italian flag background. I switch on the projector where I will write a scheme to illustrate my theory on Fonzies.

I was in Italy two weeks ago and as usual friends asked me to bring them something special. A Swiss friend of mine, Manuela, for instance, she asked me for Fonzies. Such a weird request; I expected something more Italian, which is not so easy to find in Switzerland, like a super limited edition of mortadella made with black pigs bred in the wilderness in the Apennines mountains blah blah. Nope, she wanted Fonzies, so for the ones who do not know what I am talking about, Fonzies are crunchy and stinky cheese chips. Why would Manuela be so interested in that product? She said Fonzies remind her of a holiday in Italy when she was a kid. Let's try to figure it out. Manuela from Switzerland uses Fonzies as a tool to trigger memories of her holiday in Italy. For me, as an Italian boy, Fonzies is completely something else. Fonzies used to convey American lifestyle advertisements in Italy in the late eighties and early nineties. So, the Swiss perceive Fonzies as something connected to the stereotypical idea of Italy. For me, Fonzies were the American dream. Concerning Manuela. In classic literature, the phenomenon is described very well in Marcel Proust's book In

[53] "Tschingg*"* comes from the Italian *cinque* [five] and *Morra*, an Italian counting game similar to scissors-stone-paper, except that one has to guess the number of fingers. The term "Tschingg" has become a derogatory term for Italians. "Morra" is a very theatrical game played in public spaces. Italians were depicted as lazy and unproductive while consuming Swiss national resources.

[54] Lyrics: *Something pretty weird is going on; I can tell you it is kind of strong. It seems to be the last time we can dive in the crystal water. Let's try. There will be a black horse in the yard running towards our son. And a crocodile would eat my guts while you look at me WTF. If you wanna throw me in the trash, I would rather burn myself. I won't stand your gaze for a sec, please come here and hug me like a pet.*

Search of Lost Time*, written in 1913. In one episode, he tells about an exceptional occurrence. Eating a piece of a Petit Madeleine, a traditional French butter cake soaked in lime tea, recalls lost memories about his auntie when he was a child. So Fonzies is a Petite Madeleine, a tool for Manuela to trigger an involuntary memory. But Manuela should know, though, that the madeleine moment is very fragile. With the first attempt, the effect is intense, as described by Proust, but with the second attempt, the intensity starts to vanish. To be honest, I completely forgot to buy Fonzies for Manuela. I was too busy eating my petite madeleine,* Vitello tonnato*. Or at least I tried to eat* Vitello tonnato *six times in a row to trigger the madeleine moment. But the madeleine moment didn't show up, and eventually, I was sad, melancholic and nostalgic. When I came back to Switzerland, I bought Fonzies in Lidl, a German supermarket quite famous for shitty food and fancy socks and shoes. Although sold in Italy,* Fonzies gli originali, *the originals are produced in Germany. But actually, the original Fonzies have a different name, the Twisties; it was launched in Australia in the fifties and then distributed mainly in Oceania. In England, Twisties were sold like Australia's Favorite Snack. I gave Manuela the Fonzies. I told her that I bought it in Italy in a tiny shop at the seaside.*

Elia has put on Lidl shoes and socks and shows them to me and the audience.

And that the owner, whose name was Mario, told me Hey di ciao alla tua amica svizzera, *say hello to your Swiss friend. The guy would have a leather jacket like Arthur Fonzarelli, aka Fonzie, the main character of the famous American tv series Happy days. Fonzie was an Italian American boy.*

Elia shakes the metal sheet. .

Girls would fall immediately in love with him; he would switch on the jukebox with a light punch.

I softly sing Hound Dog by Elvis Presley.

Fonzie was hot, horny but also a bit dumb. He would communicate with signs rather than with a proper sentence. That's how Italian Americans have been depicted for decades in the US: lovable but a bit stupid, creative but unreliable, fundamentally professional cheaters. Now everything makes sense again. My Swiss friend linked the Fonzies with Italy because Fonzie, the character, had Italian origin. Probably she does not know that, but it does not matter. This is probably part of a global short circuit. Fonzie was probably one of the last of the so-called Latin lover features in a TV series. Nowadays, such a character has been replaced by other exotic objects with

the same features. I grew up with Fonzies myself at the end of the eighties; I partly developed my Italian masculinity according to an American TV series set in the fifties. At the very beginning of my gender identity construction, nostalgia was already there as a fundamental factor. The message was clear. Good things are in the past. The connection with the Roman empire and so on was eventually established. What is really interesting to me is not the representation of Italian Americans in the US and the whole migration issue but rather how the narratives of Italian Americans in the US have actually partly affected my Italian masculinity. Eating a chip made in Germany, which originated in Oceania advertised through American-style publicity, partly shaped my masculinity rather than the white marble statues spread all over Italy. The story is perfect again. No friction, no resistance.

I lick my finger, take off the kitchen apron and switch off the projector.

Maybe, one day, Fonzies will be my stinky petite madeleine; one day, after eating Fonzies I will lick my finger, and this performance will appear to me as an involuntary memory.

Fifth scene

I approach the CCP wearing a t-shirt that says "Sad Boys" and that is somehow part of the long black pillow. Elia crawls on the floor holding the Fonzie duvet and the metal sheet. A video projection starts. It contains a phone video of my finger that mimic a Fonzies advertisement and a close-up video of a marble element of a Finale Ligure cathedral. Elia stands up and holds the white plaster torso, pretending to be a statue. When the video is over, I sing a song composed by myself in Italian.[55] Elia brings the CCP down from the ceiling, and we both exit the scene holding on to it. After the applause, we throw packets of Fonzies at the audience.

Here is the link to watch the whole performance.

[55] *No so che dirti quando vengo troppo presto. E' una questione di tempo, o di qualità, fa lo stesso. Non so che dirti, tutto questo non ha senso. Si mi sento in colpa, li nel mezzo quasi spento. Tu sul bordo del letto. Guardami imperfetto* [I do not know what to say when I come too early. It is a question of time or quality; it doesn't matter. I do not know what to say; everything makes no sense. Yes, I feel guilty, there in the middle, almost turned off. You, on the edge of the bed. Look at me, flawed].

The Introductory Scene: The Peacocks



Figure 54: Nicola Genovese, A Novanta, 2021. Still from the video documentation. Courtesy the artist.

The introductory scene brings in many phenomena relating to the performance of masculinities in public spaces and homosocial contexts. It is important to emphasise that the intergenerational relationship between Elia and myself is the *leitmotiv* of the whole performance. Elia might indeed represent a young me, my son or an apprentice.

Before diving into details, I must explain the partly autoethnographic material I employed to investigate these phenomena. *AN* refers to a variety of masculinities, mainly from the north of Italy, to which I was personally exposed. My involvement in the issue is, in general terms, a consequence of having lived in Italy for 44 years and participated directly in the gender dynamics that shaped my masculinities. Even though – as mentioned in Chapter One – Connell's clear distinction between hegemonic, complicit and marginalised masculinities has been strongly criticised, her attempt to reformulate the whole framework by recognising the geography of masculinities and "emphasizing the interplay among local, regional, and global levels" is still helpful in framing this research (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005, 829). Indeed, the remarkably heterogeneous Italian cultural landscape makes defining a single model of Italian masculinity extremely problematic. I will consider masculinities that are traditional or normative according to mainstream discourse but that embody nuances that cannot be classified as entirely traditional. One of my goals is to avoid as much as possible the equation of so-called white normative hegemonic masculinity and the white normative hegemonic body with violence, exploitation, colonisation, sexual harassment rape culture. On the other hand, I will expose, when necessary and not by way of generalisation, the sexist, misogynistic and homophobic behavioural patterns observable

among many Italian men – without minimising or excusing them. It is crucial to bear in mind that, in Italy, gender studies are underdeveloped by comparison with the vast bibliography available in English-speaking countries. Scholar Matteo Botto attempts to survey the situation of gender studies in Italy, noting a steady increase in academic interest in the field over the past ten years. He argues that the institutionalisation of gender studies in Italy started later because of a certain resistance on the part of the feminist movement (especially those women who acknowledge the importance of biological sex difference), and because of the rigidity of the academic system, which serves to slow down the approval of new curricula (Botto 2022). Italy, like other countries, is slowly aligning itself with the mainstream Anglo-American discourse on gender. However, there are still barriers to homogenisation. For instance, the Italian translation of the term masculinity, *maschilità* or *mascolinità*, gives rise to misunderstandings that can be avoided only through proper clarification. *Mascolinità* is the closest translation of masculinity intended as gender construction, but it has no plural. The term *mascolinità* entered the Italian language through the trending notoriety of 'toxic masculinity,' but the Italian translation, *mascolinità tossica*, sounds extremely contrived. Furthermore, the English translation of real man is *un vero uomo*, which in Italian refers to a biological man with features like honour, moral integrity, emotional detachment and control. *Un vero uomo* provides for his family and educates his children. But there is another ideal traditional model of being a man, namely *un vero maschio*. *Maschio* can be translated as male, but "a real male" is not idiomatic in English. *Maschio*, unlike *Uomo,* refers uniquely to the alleged instinctively wild nature of a man. *Un vero maschio* has connotations of sexual potency and, consequently, the ability to satisfy a female partner. It also references a man who is obsessed with "getting laid" and therefore at risk of losing control. In the Veneto region, the meaning of *maschio* fully manifests in the word *mascio*, which characterises both the male pig and the human male with bestial attributes. The comparison with the pig is unexpected, but I will explain later that behaving like *un maschio vero* is a reaction to feminised urban masculinities and to the idea of *un vero uomo* who is too weak to be a hunter. It is interesting to notice that the imperative form of the verb in the phrase "Be a real man" is being widely replaced by the verb to do, *fare* in Italian. Thus, *fai l'uomo* (do the real man) instead of "be a real man." On a linguistic level, this suggests that the attributes of individuals are perceived as performed rather than embodied. Moreover, such mention as I make of failed or broken masculinity highlights the impossibility of reaching the so-called normative hegemonic masculinity model.

Many scholars have focused specifically on Italian cinema, which offers plenty of characters that can help us to unpack models of masculinity that fall short of the hegemonic one.[56] Scholars Angela Saponari and Federico Zecca argue that the hegemonic model refers to a set of meaningless rules that do not generate an actual model of masculinity. But although traditional normative hegemonic masculinities may be unachievable, they generate real failed models (Zecca and Saponari 2021, 29). These "broken," inadequate masculinities are nevertheless continually obliged to cope with that unachievable model. Sergio Rigoletto maintains that defining unconventional models as a failure creates a binary system. The failed model is just a negation of a successful outcome rather than a model itself, and the resultant binarism does not allow other models of masculinity to emerge (Rigoletto 2014, 7-8). The masculinity cycles[57] that I propose work because there are unachievable models to pursue. The categories of failure and success that I deploy in my research are ephemeral. Attempts to empower masculinity follow a complex dynamic that manifests mainly subtly and with many nuances. The broken working-class masculinity that I will portray is suspended between cycles of empowerment and emasculation. Those cycles spill out into the body, so that performance anxiety and reckless behaviour are among the physical consequences that trigger endless behavioural loops. However, the term "broken" points to the failure of this attempt to maintain an actual position of power in a society where social class is crucial. Philosopher Martha Gimenez claims that class is not a simple axis of identity: "From the standpoint of Marxist theory, class is qualitatively different from gender and race and cannot be considered just another system of oppression" (Giménez 2018, 91).

I want to start this journey with an evocation of the masculinities I encountered in a working-class environment where TMANG was a common gesture. The autoethnographic account is necessary for a fuller understanding of the background of *AN*. even though the story I will tell does not emerge directly within the narration. The personal experience seems

[56] The Italian term *Inetto* refers to an incapable and lazy man. It is a crucial figure in Italian cinema, especially during the so-called *Commedia all'Italiana* period (from the beginning of the sixties to the end of the seventies), embodying a specific type of inadequate masculinity. As suggested by scholar Jaqueline Reich, *Inetto*, is "the Italian incarnation of the schlemiel or anti-hero. He is a man in conflict with an unsettled and at times unsettling political and sexual environment" (Reich 2004, 1). *Inetto* is a form of masculinity that caught on with the end of World War II, the defeat of the fascist regime, and the start of the Italian democratic republic as a reaction to the muscularity of fascism.

[57] Cycles of emasculation/masculinisation are the core engine of masculinity. The fear of being emasculated by women or stronger men triggers the masculinisation process. The endless friction between the two poles of emasculation and masculinisation constitutes the unstable core of masculinity. Masculinity, in that sense, needs to be chronically in crisis. As cultural critic Tania Modleski argues, "male power is actually consolidated through these cycles of crisis and resolution, whereby men ultimately deal with the threat of female power by incorporating it" (Modleski 1991, 7)

necessary authoritatively to point out the pluralities of masculinities without falling into the trap of superficial categorisation. In my twenties, certain aspects of my masculinity were empowered through working-class and "anti-system" identifications: listening to punk music, reading Marxist books, and dressing in worn-out clothes. But after thirty, I thought belonging to the working class was a failure. The anti-system revolutionary and petite bourgeois conflict that fed my masculinities for years slowly became useless. The clashes of the seventies were in the past, and political commitment was at a historic low. Regret about not pursuing an orthodox professional path began to haunt me. Being unsuccessful and not wealthy deeply affected my self-esteem and masculinity, to the extent that I began experiencing erection problems. After several little jobs, I found a "stable" one in a gas company in Padua (Veneto region). I worked there as a technician from 2004 to 2014. It was a full-time job, terribly paid but at least stable.

My clothes were dirty and worn because of my job. I was in charge of replacing old gas meters. That means working in dusty basements and outdoors, exposed to the weather. During lunchbreaks in little restaurants, I observed certain colleagues proudly showing off their dirty clothes and big bellies as a sign of "real working men" and "real breadwinners." Political affiliation was not particularly relevant because those masculinities and those bodies were to a certain extent beyond left- and right-wing affiliations. A famous saying in Veneto claims, "A man without a belly is like a villa without a garden." Their bodies were far from the image of the metro-sexual fit man observable in magazines, movies and ads. The big belly was a sign of wealth and the same time a statement against the cult of the fit body, but as I will explain, it was slowly becoming a sign of inadequacy. They were in a sense unconventional but at the same time the embodiment of normativity. One could see in their demeanour that their lack of personal corporeal care worked to reinforce their manhood. Personally, I was embarrassed to show up in dirty, unkempt clothing in a public space. I felt humiliated to be part of the working class even though I was one of them. I thought I deserved more. Sometimes, bankers and others of higher social status would come into the restaurant. Their gaze was highly emasculating. Those same men were themselves emasculated in other contexts because they paid so much attention to their clothes and physical appearance, approaching the threshold of acceptance that divides homosociality from homosexuality. What threatened the core of my masculinity was the widespread assumption that belonging to the working class automatically means being uneducated, ignorant, anti-intellectual and unable to handle a position of power. Again, the strong association of body, irrationality, anti-intellectualism and woman was apparent. Being working class in the northern Italian context

after the Marxist revolutionary mirage of the seventies was mainly not a choice but a sign of failure. Owning a warehouse and starting your own business in the North of Italy was and still is the main sign of successful masculinity. The breadwinner model was not just in crisis because of women's emancipation. The figure of the breadwinner was no longer enough to be a "real man" because competition with most successful men, or in Connell's terms, with hegemonic masculinities, was overwhelming. Being proud of belonging to the working class was replaced by shame or envy. My colleagues' pride in being working-class men has to be read as a defence strategy. The championing of anti-intellectualism and the attempt to emasculate the banker by playing the dirty "real men" was a palliative attitude. At the table, the conversations were often about women customers. Because I showed no interest in that topic, I have often been called *Recion*[58] (fag). Women customers in my colleagues' daydreams were 24/7 horny and ready to be "fucked" by the working-class man because they were unhappy with their effeminate banker husbands. This is in line with porn culture's most persistent narrative cliché, namely the plumber or pizza delivery guy who has intercourse with the client. In that working environment, extraordinary sexual performance and a 24/7 erect penis were fundamental characteristics for defining a real man, but this was unachievable. Hence, one of the classic topics at lunch or during breaks was the inability of customers to understand practical or technical issues. That knowledge was a source of empowerment for an otherwise failed sense of masculinity. In the case of women customers unable to open the gas valve, the cliché of the dumb woman manifested immediately. When the male customer showed inadequate handy skills, the emasculation process started. Indeed, such a man was "just good at reading books" or "speaking." According to the same trope of feminised urban masculinity, this man has a small penis or is impotent or gay and therefore unable to give decent pleasure to "his" woman. In a context where economic viability and social status are crucial, working-class men used empowerment narratives to rehabilitate their broken masculinity. Lunch-time conversations with my colleagues were a great opportunity to follow some of the meanders of masculinity narratives, but they were at the same time a painful source of confrontation. The TMANG gesture was a familiar ritual after lunch between one cigarette and another. Listening to them triggered mixed emotions: disgust, anger, pity, hatred, fear and growing self-awareness. In those situations, my identities were at stake, at least in those moments. Approving or not approving specific claims was part of the cycles

[58] *Recion* (literally, big ear) is one of the dozen homophobic slurs that one can encounter in Italy. *Recion* is the Venetian version of the Neapolitan slur *ricchione*. The origin of the term is unclear. According to one theory, men who wanted to indicate their homosexuality used to pull down the earlobe enlarging the whole ear (Wikipedia).

mentioned earlier. Whereas approving a comment (just through laughter) would have certified one's belonging to that model, a gesture of disapproval would have complicated the situation. Indeed, disapproval focused on the sexist and racist content of the conversation would have led to being classified first as gay and secondly as radical chic and friends of immigrants. At the same time, underlining their anti-modern conservative approach would have confirmed their inability to understand modernity and their economic status as unsuccessful men, again triggering the reactive process of masculinisation. One common reaction was pointing out the fact that I was one of them, despite my alleged superiority and inadequate practical skills. Some colleagues were, to varying extents, on my side, but their disapproval of sexist and homophobic language was for religious reasons. I met some of my colleagues in other contexts. I never hung out with them because I would have felt ashamed, especially in a non-working environment. However, I observed them when our paths crossed on the weekend. Saturday afternoon, in particular, is usually the shopping and *aperitivo* day when people perform *la passeggiata*.[59] In my region, the walk on the main shopping road is emblematically called *la vasca* (the pool). The pool refers primarily to the swimming pool because the shopping street is crossed back and forth several times, as a swimmer swimming lengths would do. The *vasca* is a ritual performed by everyone. For males it is the perfect context to perform masculinities in public. I saw my colleagues exhibiting better clothes and a completely different attitude. Their attention to the *bella figura*, superficially translated as "looking good," was excruciating. Their attempt to show off their social wealth in a context where performing "working class" masculinities would have been the wrong strategy demonstrates the multiplicity of masculinities that exist within one individual.

The *bella figura* phenomenon is observable not just in Italy but throughout the Mediterranean context. Scholar Jacqueline Reich gives an accurate insight into the topic: "Whereas the French flaneur is the subject of the gaze and the English dandy the object, the male who performs *bella figura* is both spectacle and spectator (Reich 2004, 4). The aim is both to be seen and to observe others recognising the achievement of the performance. "Bella figura" highlights the importance of the distinction between private and public space in the Italian context. Indeed, occupying the public sphere through the *bella figura* is an attempt to claim a difference from the feminine domestic context where, especially in Italy, masculinities are exposed to the bulky and threatening presence of women. The *bella figura*

[59] In Italian, *passeggiata* refers to the walk usually on the main shopping road or in the main square in the evening or weekend. It is a sort of public catwalk performed both by men and women. For men, it is the occasion to mark the territory and show off nice clothes and fit bodies.

shows the instability of those models of masculinity that are haunted by femininity. Those masculinities are intent on keeping their distance from femininity but are at the same time prone to use femininity to enhance certain traits of masculinity. One colleague, in particular, Mario, was proud of being a working-class man and old-school communist. He embodied a model of masculinity made up of excessive drinking, eating and carelessness about his health. He used to work in the toughest division of the company, managing the sewage system. His clothes and skin were impregnated with that unbearable smell. I met him many times in the city centre. He performed the *vasca* promenading in the nicest clothes and haircut he could afford. He was trying to escape the image of the savage man who did not care about the rules imposed by a feminised society – the same corrupted, feminised, society that he blamed the whole time. On such occasions, the big belly that was a sign of uncorrupted authentic masculinity in front of the feminised banker was just a burden. The tension and frictions between models of masculinity within one individual are complicated and difficult to unravel without falling into superficial categorisation. During the *vasca*, Mario exposed his inadequacy in the face of the mainstream masculinity model based on a fit body and gender-fluid look. In his research in the Terni steel factory, Alessandro Portelli describes the embodiment of various models of masculinity within one individual. One of the men he describes is a 28-year-old worker who evinces the friction between awareness of being a working-class man and the desire to escape the stigma of the working class. He attends local bars, hangs out with friends from the factory, and does overtime because he wants to buy cool brands and pay the monthly car rate. "His goal is to go to a disco on Saturday and hear everyone saying, wow, what a great car you have got" (Portelli 2008, 89).
For these workers, there is a particularly close relationship between masculine identity and social identity, for the most part, constructed around public spectacle. Thus, just as industrial production seems to become more and more marginalized (more so in collective representations than in the real world of manufacturing in fact) so the social figure of the worker also seems to have a declining place in the collective imagination, usually limited to moments of crisis in employment, where the worker is most often represented as a defeated man. (Sangiovanni and Finch-Boyer 2013, 117)

My colleague Mario represents the masculinities that I refused and the masculinity in which I nevertheless in part participated. Mario embodies powerlessness, despite being considered in charge according to oversimplified categories. As it is explained in *Achilles Heel* magazine, Mario represents the paradoxes of hegemony. Elia and I perform *la passeggiata* in the introduction scene while playing the whistle. We walk onto the stage,

exposing our bodies like shy peacocks acknowledging the threshold between showing off, inadequacy, shame and aggression. At this point, I need to clarify the choice to wear a feminine costume in terms of the economy of cycles of masculinities. When cultural critic Tania Modelsky claims that the last strategy to avoid the threat of feminisation is to incorporate it, she opens up a new perspective on male power and today's masculinities (Modleski 1991). By wearing those clothes, I wanted to reflect on the strategy of subverting traditional models of masculinity by embodying femininity and refusing one's maleness by looking as much as possible like a woman or even "becoming" a woman, despite biological limits. As early as 1989, Christopher Newfield was already reflecting on that strategy, pointing out that feminization allows men to maintain a power position: "Only feminization enables men to evade the one-directional domination of stereotypical masculinity to master the non-conflictual and to occupy both sides of the question. Whereas tyranny depends on male supremacy, liberal hegemony or 'consensus' depends on male femininity" (Newfield 1989, 66). At the same time, gender performance is a spectrum. As a male, having feminine elements in my masculine gender performance is simply part of that spectrum. I cannot agree with framing those nuances in terms of a division between binary and non-binary to create new essentialist categories.



Figure 55: Nicola Genovese, A Novanta, 2021. Still from the video documentation. Courtesy the artist.

Another crucial element in the piece of drama is the gaze. There is the gaze between Elia and myself and the gaze exchanged with the audience. Elia and I rehearsed thoroughly to achieve a certain intensity in the gaze, which is one of the main strategies in *AN* to attract and hold the audience's attention. The gaze exposes the homoerotic tension between the performers. The

gaze turned upon the audience fluctuates between flirting and provocation. The gaze, the whistle and the ear-splitting Ferrari give shape to an environment where fragility shifts into aggression, and vice versa.



Figure 56: Nicola Genovese, A Novanta, 2021. Still from the video documentation. Courtesy the artist.

The choice of the silicon hand was inspired by *mano morta*[60] (the dead hand). The attempt to touch with a prosthesis underlines the complicated dynamic of touching within a particular power relationship.[61] While Elia is busy with the silicon hand, I use the CCP to perform the same gesture. My attempt at touching is more aggressive, but the fragility of the pillow weakens the act of throwing. Dragging back the CCP is an apparent defeat and, simultaneously, a preparation for a new attack. The bull choreography suggests a sort of innate aggression even though the movements are clumsy. In addition, the costume diminishes the potential aggression and transforms the choreography into a harmless dance. Thus, the intimidating movement shifts slowly into a defensive posture, ending up as a squatting position. The lyrics of the song *Un'italiano vero* (a real Italian) introduce my

[60] The *mano morta* is a form of subtle harassment that some men adopt in crowded situations, mainly on public transportation. The term dead hand has been coined because of the alleged inactivity of the hand that touches a woman's body. The name *mano morta* points out a parodical aspect. Indeed, the man caught with his hands in the cookie jar would pretend that nothing has happened, and if he has actually touched someone's body, it was because of the overcrowded situation.

[61] Elia has reported different reactions to his attempts at touching. Some women were amused by it, and some were disturbed, even without actual contact. On one occasion, a woman was extremely bothered by the proximity of the silicon hand and violently pushed it away.

identity in the most stereotyped way possible. I used the song because it is widely recognised as a classic Italian song.[62]

The First Scene: The Encounter with TMANG

In the first scene, Elia hops on the stage, mimicking a dog that copulates while we stare at each other. The body movements referred to *Rocco Cane* (Rocco the dog), one of the characters in the cult television programme *Cinico TV*.[63]



Figure 57: Nicola Genovese, A Novanta, 2021. Still from the video documentation. Courtesy the artist.

[62] *Un'italiano vero* by Toto Cotugno is one of the most streamed Italian songs on Spotify (Domani 2022). In his career, Toto Cotugno sold more than 100 million records (*Wikipedia*).

[63] *Cinico TV* was broadcast in Italy in the nineties. It was scheduled just before the main news programme on RAI, the Italian national public broadcasting company. Having such a disturbing programme in the best time slot was very unusual. Scholar Arlindo Machado describes it as a "pirate intervention into television" (Machado 2011, 1). The show consisted of interviews and short sketches with marginalised men living in ZEN (Zona Espansione Nord), the poorest suburb of Palermo in Sicily. *Cinico TV* introduced "a host of absurd, somewhat eschatological characters. Some were catatonic, others aphasic, while still others were mute or stuttered so badly as to be incomprehensible. Those who could speak at all had almost unintelligible working-class Sicilian accents. All this in mournful black and white, in a strange peripheral neighbourhood of Palermo with an urban landscape of cadaver-like unfinished and abandoned buildings, trash dumps, and mounds of construction debris" (Machado 2011). *Here is the link to watch Rocco Cane clip.*



Figure 58: Ciprì e Maresco, video still from Cinico TV, broadcasted on RAI 3 channel on 1995. © Ciprì e Maresco.

The text describes my first encounter with the gesture TMANG and lets the audience slowly contextualise the performance. The story is located in the sad and miserable countryside of the Venetian province. Elia wears a souvenir T-shirt displaying a colourful *Madonna della Salute* church in Venice, which jars with the description of the shabby peri-urban setting studded with abandoned warehouses. The aesthetics of the T-shirt and the hat relate to the kind of decadent grotesque atmosphere that one can experience in Venice during the Carnival, when tourists, besides wearing masks, dress up with all sorts of souvenirs. TMANG is performed by men and among men. The TMANG performer mimics the active subject in the doggy style, imagining the passive subject in front of him. Many women might consider the doggy style a submissive position, besides the implication that I will discuss in this paragraph. At the same time, we must agree that a consensual sexual encounter in the doggy style is not morally blameworthy. TMANG refers to the angle of 90 degrees between the legs and back of the passive subject in the course of the sexual encounter. Interaction is fundamental to validating (or not) the masculinity of the performer and the witnesses. Every gesture can augment or reduce the level of masculinity of each participant. Fighting back, winning, losing, running away, breaking down in tears, refusing to fight: "Any one of these responses may be interpreted as enhancing or diminishing the masculinity of either or both parties" (Cornwall and Lindisfarne 1994, 14). For instance, if most of the audience laughs, the performer achieves confirmation of his status. On the other hand, when the audience is

speechless, it might be a sign of disapproval. The performer can accept that the validation process has failed, or react by accusing those who did not laugh of being effeminate. Masculinities need to be seen to exist. The theatre audience automatically becomes part of the cycle. When spectators laugh, they put themselves into the arena. Because of the grotesque dynamic, the laughter might subtly approve of the scene, while silence might be perceived as a form of disapproval. The target of TMANG might be both a woman and a man. The woman has not to be present, except when TMANG is used as a form of harassment to enhance catcalling. When the target is indeed a woman, TMANG describes to other men a sexual encounter that has already happened or will happen soon. It might be used simply as a strengthening within a conversation where a man wishes to have sex with a specific woman. The situation gets complicated when the target is a male. In that case, TMANG required the presence of the target to achieve the main goal, i.e., the emasculation of the subject.

The Slow Version, aka the Ferrari: Controlled Sexuality and Spiritual Masculinity

Speed is a fundamental element in understanding the implication of this set of gestures. The slow version is mainly used when the target is a woman. First of all, the pelvic movement that mimics a penetration is indeed slow and regular. The slowness and almost mechanical movement depict a male entirely in control who barely experiences pleasure or emotional engagement. Too much pleasure will put him in a similar condition to women, who, according to certain narratives, lose control during sexual encounters; or reduce him to the stereotypical Italian man as portrayed by Northern masculinities.

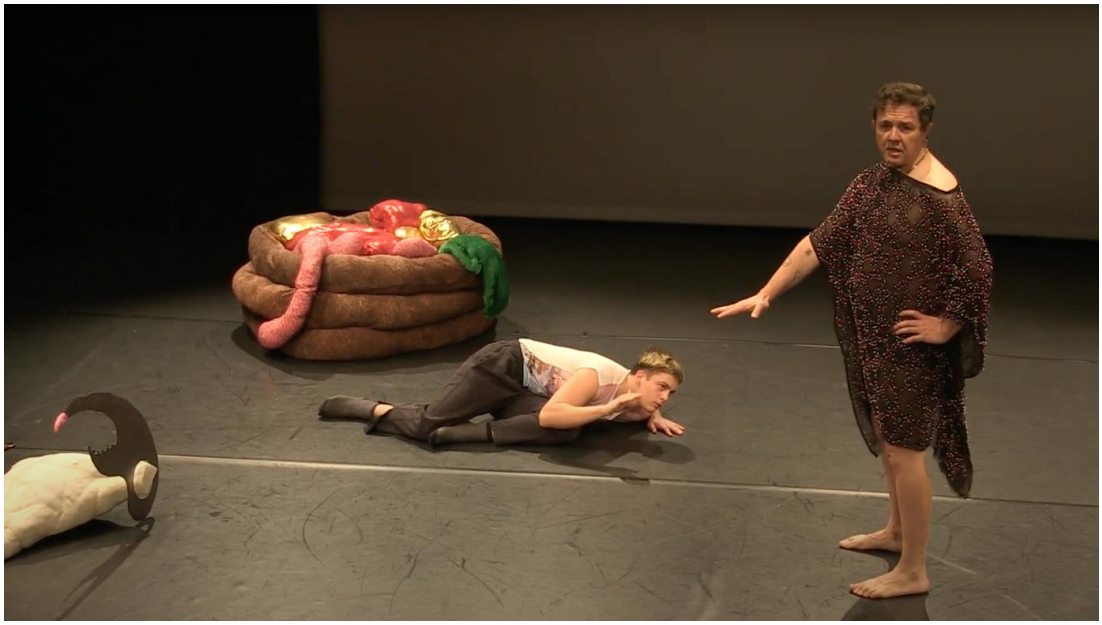


Figure 59: Nicola Genovese, A Novanta, 2021. Still from the video documentation. Courtesy the artist.

A man who controls sex is the quintessential form of masculinity; I would define it in its most radical manifestation as "spiritual masculinity" (see the paragraph below discussing the hetero image of Italian masculinity). It is a model of behaviour that considers sexuality as a potentially dangerous moment, not just in sexual encounters but also in situations where men risk being falsely accused of sexual harassment or worse. The left and right hands are used to accentuate the will to construct an overconfident man totally in control. First, the right hand is placed on the woman's imaginary back as corroboration of her submission. The hand position might also suggest the intention to use the back as a surface to support the weight of the body of the active subject, exhausted by the fatigue of the physical effort. That ambivalence underlines the paradoxes of male sexual performance and the objectification of the passive subject. Sometimes the right hand is even used to hold an imaginary remote control or cigarette. It suggests a character so confident as to be disengaged, to the point of watching a soccer game or smoking a cigarette during a sexual encounter. The left hand helps with the back-and-forth pelvic movement, but the mechanical aspect again evokes the idea of a man doing his duty, having little fun.

Elia, in the meanwhile, lies on the floor like a referee for boxing, counting a boxer out. Elia's gesture underlines the mechanics of the gesture through the regular beat on the floor. At the same time, it anticipates a failure, the potential imminent destruction of that fragile self-confidence. The facial expression is contracted and profound even though a subtle pleasure is evident: a controlled pleasure. The action purports to portray a man with no performance anxiety who is somehow obliged to have sex to keep his partner quiet.

The Fast Version aka the Shitty Noisy Car: The Male Grotesque

The fast version of TMANG points out the inadequacy of men who are too old, too young, who show signs of not handling passion correctly or are simply incapable of lasting during sexual intercourse. The fast pelvic movement that is sometimes accompanied by a silly facial expression and the tongue out is indeed used as a tool to emasculate other males to seal their inadequacy. The sexually adequate man shows the sexually inadequate one how bad he is in sexual intercourse. The fast-pelvic movement symbolises the total lack of self-confidence and control in its similarity to a dog's thrusting. TMANG clearly defines the hierarchy among men through the tool of parody. That parody escalates quickly, with Elia beating the floor faster to reach the grotesque peak. As I have already suggested, non-acting allows for strategically exaggerating certain elements without forcibly impersonating a character. The incongruence and the contradiction, as crucial elements in the construction of the grotesque,

manifest primarily in the ambivalent figure of the performer who, while emasculating the others, consciously makes himself ridiculous and pathetic.

Losing control is historically associated with females. The uncontrolled grotesque body is therefore automatically a female one, as Russo claims. Consequently, associating a man with an uncontrolled body is a method of emasculating him. But as I will explain, embodying femininity, even excessively, is a strategy to maintain power.

The boundaries between the serious, overconfident, adequate man and the inadequate man suddenly become blurred. To elaborate on this, I want briefly to point out the difference in manifestations of the grotesque in theatre and art. In *Achilles Heel*, the grotesque features of the sculptures radiate primarily into costumes and body gestures. In *AN*, the grotesque emerges instead throughout the piece as a sort of red line, from text to props, body expressions, body postures, costumes and videos. It manifests more straightforwardly, sometimes in combination with parody and self-parody.

I make a fool of myself when I perform the fast version while emasculating the inadequate man. At the same time, I become the dog that I am mimicking. My body loses its composure: the open mouth is among those orifices that, according to Bakhtin, "have a common characteristic; it is within them that the confines between bodies and between the body and the world are overcome: there is an interchange and an interorientation" (Bakhtin 1984, 316). The self-parody highlights the unstable core of masculinity that materialises through a tendency to self-victimise, as a strategy for regaining male bodily composure. There are indeed forms of Italian masculinity that borrow behaviours from the so-called New-Lad culture.[64] However, New-Laddism is observable not in self-injury or symbolic castration but rather through self-marginalisation and self-parody.

[64] Paul Willis's iconic study *Learning to Labour* (1977) associates Laddism in the UK with white working-class masculinities (Willis 1977). "He focused on rebellions against academia and authority performed by young men who had been constructed as failure" (Sundari and Lewis 2018, 46). New Laddism was coined in the nineties to define middle-class boys who attempt to embody a more traditional working-class masculinity in the frame of a backlash to the feminised "new man" (Whannel 2010, 255). The New Lad model is observable in the MTV series *Jackass*: According to scholar Sean Brayton, *Jackass* is "a spectacle of emasculation that is also a reassertion of the masculine" (Brayton 2007, 69). However, "the multiple and conflicting masculinities infused with the ironies of race, class and sexuality" that emerge in the series cannot be simply framed as white male backlash (Brayton 2007, 69).



Figure 60: Nicola Genovese, A Novanta, 2021. Still from the video documentation. Courtesy the artist.

In the Italian context, Silvio Berlusconi fully represents the entanglement of the grotesque man in power and the alleged feminisation of masculinity in the ageing process. There is no direct reference to him in *AN*, but his figure has shaped the masculinity of many Italian men since he entered the political arena in 1994: "He is nothing but the sexual autobiography of the [Italian] male nation" (Bellassai 2011). Bellassai's claim is obviously a generalisation, but he points out that many men could empathise with Berlusconi's approach towards sexuality and gender relationships, regardless of political affiliation. In Berlusconi, self-parody is a tool for validating his power and sexual potency. He has publicly alluded to the use of Viagra several times in jokes. In 2018, in the TV show *Matrix*, he ironically said that in his villa in Sardinia, there had been Viagra plants, but they were stolen by a group of elderly men and he had to buy new ones (Huffington Post 2018).

On the other hand, to validate the idea of a 24/7 sexually aroused man, he assembled a real harem in his villa in Milan, where orgies that included underaged prostitutes were held.[65] Scholar Lorenzo Bernini in *Queer Apocalypses* defines Berlusconi's body as "an omnipotent body that survives everything: sickness [...], old age, perhaps even death" (Bernini 2017, 88) and "Berlusconism" as the "catastrophe of virility" (Bernini 2017, 45). He is a living paradox, from sexual predator to puppy lover, from orgies with underaged prostitutes to responsible father and grandfather. Berlusconi used sex scandals to empower the myth of his sexual potency, fuelling the grotesque image of a powerful old man on the way down. Berlusconi and his feminised, thus degraded, version of masculinity became a model for many Italian males. "Berlusconi's supposed hypermasculinity and excessive sexual performance have been turned back against him and his presumed 'feminisation'" (Belpoliti 2009, 52). More "masculine" masculinities perpetually threaten masculinities, yet power structures among males or between men and women are barely questioned. The grotesque, ageing, feminised masculinity performed by Berlusconi has been targeted across the political spectrum in Italy and abroad. Voicing doubt about his sexual performance has been very common in attempts to delegitimise his power. But questioning his capacity to maintain an erection considering his age and the operation prostate cancer he underwent does nothing but feed the same old cycle of masculinisation and emasculation.

The Second Scene: The Inadequate Mama's Boy

The second scene is dedicated to the *Mammone*, which translates as "mama's boy." After performing TMANG and concluding the scene with "she is cute [the wife], she is nice, but she is not like my mother; otherwise, it would be really, really weird," Elia and I start to scream *Mamma, dove sei?* (Mum, where are you?) to highlight the deep dependency on the Mother figure in Italian culture. Our screams fade once the video starts. The video comprises various singers performing excerpts from the song "Mamma." They include Beniamino Gigli, Claudio Villa, Luciano Pavarotti and actor Stefano Dionisi impersonating castrato singer Farinelli in the movie *Farinelli: Voce Regina* (1994). I used the Instagram app on my phone

[65] This emerged through the well-known Ruby scandal. "Silvio Berlusconi was accused and initially formally convicted of paying 17-year-old Moroccan Karima El Mahroug, also known by the stage name Ruby, for sexual services between February and May 2010 when she was underaged." Prosecutors in the meanwhile charged Emilio Fede, a television anchorman, and Lele Mora, a well-known celebrity agent, with procuring underage girls in a "vast pimping network" to attend "bunga bunga" sex parties with Berlusconi. An appeal court overturned Berlusconi's conviction in 2014. However, in 2017, an Italian court ordered Berlusconi to stand trial on charges of allegedly bribing witnesses in order to silence them over accusations he paid for sex with young women (Wikipedia).

to shoot video from YouTube displayed on my laptop. I then added Instagram filters to give a new life to performances filmed decades ago. The filters I used added makeup and glitter, but also certain evil traits. The song *Mamma son tanto felice* slowly becomes a guttural Nepalese mantra. Elia and I perform a sinister ritual of gratitude while we undress. The *mamma* becomes a scary figure that needs to be worshipped to maintain the division in the power structure (public-domestic). Conversely, in the Italian context the *mamma* is always portrayed as an idealised extraordinary woman. Unlike the wife in the first scene, the mother is the "unquestionable" figure of domestic power.



Figure 61: Nicola Genovese, A Novanta, 2021, video still of the "Mamma" video. Courtesy the artist.

"Mammismo-style, over-mothering, could, perversely, be seen as a response to machismo and male power, in that it seems to give women power, albeit a limited form of power restricted to the family and the home" (Morris and Willson 2018, 19). Whereas the wife might be asexual because of alleged frigidity or hyposexuality, the mamma is beyond sexuality. She fully embodies motherhood. Like in the figure of Maria in Catholicism, she has a child, but the sexual encounter and the act of giving birth are not in the picture because this would highlight her carnality and, therefore, her sin. The gap between the wife and the mother is unbridgeable. The mother figure plays a crucial role in constructing many Italian masculinities, regardless of regional differences.



Figure 61: Nicola Genovese, A Novanta, 2021. Still from the video documentation. Courtesy the artist.

The term mama's boy highlights the ambivalence of Latin masculinities: on the one hand, a woman hunter, on the other, a man entirely dependent on his mother. The clear-cut division between public and domestic space produces opposing masculinities within the same individual. Men who embody traditional masculinity perform sectarian homosociality and sexism in the public space. At the same time, at home, they need to adjust to a different power scenario where their traditional idea of masculinity can be questioned without their losing face. Nowadays, *mammone* is a pejorative commonly used by Northern men to point out the inadequacy of Southerner males. In the meantime, *mammone* has become an ordinary tool of emasculation deployed by women and men within the Italian context to attack "weaker" men. Yet the fact is that *mammone* is far from being just a stereotype. Beyond any doubt, the absence of a proper welfare state has reinforced familial bonding, and a chronic lack of decent job opportunities has led to postponing the cut of the umbilical cord.

The Third Scene: The Grotesque Warrior

The warrior pizza scene might be analysed in different ways. Elia looks at me while I wear the warrior costume, suggesting the ritual aspects of masculinities still bonded to traditions. He admires me, but a certain degree of indolence is visible. The scene stages power relationships among generations of men. The costume might be labelled as queer or camp. However, I am more interested in using the carnivalesque or grotesque aspects to question power relationships, while acknowledging that power can use them to validate itself.



Figure 62: Nicola Genovese, A Novanta, 2021. Still from the video documentation. Courtesy the artist.

The grotesque seems to be a strategy to maintain power even though power itself should be erased by the grotesque. As Foucault claims in his lectures at the Collège de France: "I am calling grotesque the fact that, by virtue of their status, a discourse or an individual can have effects of power that their intrinsic qualities should disqualify them from having" (Foucault 2003, 11). Foucault is using the word in a different sense from Bakhtin. According to Foucault, Mussolini was a grotesque character "absolutely inherent to the mechanism of power" (Foucault 2003, 13). He was both comic and cruel, but these qualities served to enhance his position of power.

The myth of the warrior represents the most despicable manifestation of violence, but it might at the same time contain elements of parody and the grotesque. To undermine or discredit the myth is a necessary operation, and yet some residual attraction to the myth is crucial to creating new ambivalent imagery. The warrior that I impersonate is fundamentally scared of modernity. That is why he temporarily gives up his ambitions of grandeur to withdraw to his little garden, where he has complete control. This warrior is profoundly insecure, even when he threatens to come back like a tide to flood the feminized world. His weakness does not have to appear to be feminine. A scared man is not necessarily less dangerous. Every image of a powerful heterosexual man contains a flaw because there is no such monolithic category. This is especially the case when the hypermasculine becomes all of a sudden homoerotic or grotesque.



Figure 63: Nicola Genovese, A Novanta, 2021. Still from the video documentation. Courtesy the artist.

The warrior's speech summarises the continuous friction between nationalism and secessionism in the Italian context. This friction is the consequence of a country that has had to deal since the very beginning with a profound inability to fabricate a nation-state and a "stable" national identity. As I will elaborate, this instability has been fertile ground for populism, anti-political and secessionist movements, especially in my region, Veneto. The fabrication of *Patria*, Motherland, was the primary concern for successive governments after the unification of many small kingdoms into the bigger Kingdom of Italy in 1861. The Italian peninsula has a long tradition of atomisation and parochialism. Besides North vs South, there are other internal frictions within the North, for instance, between the two wealthiest regions, Lombardy and Veneto. In addition, within Veneto, the hierarchic distance between historic cities and cheap suburban areas is still evident. The Italian language has been deployed to homogenise a territory dotted with hundreds of dialects. Still, the gap between the north and south of Italy is the seemingly insoluble problem of the country.

La Questione meridionale, the Southern question, started even before the unification of Italy in 1861. Beyond the abstractions embodied in the definition of nationhood, "there are many Italies, with some internal differences sufficiently large to generate pressures for political fragmentation. An important driver of these internal differences is the contrast in economic performance" (Dunford 2008, 85).

The south-north divide has generated acute social inequalities within the country. But because of the uniqueness of the Italian territory, the north-south question is not exhaustive. Even within the wealthy north, undeveloped or rural areas like the northeast, especially the Veneto region, have gone through rapid and unsustainable industrial development and are now witnessing a profound economic crisis. The Republic of Venice, called *La Serenissima*, brought prosperity to that region for centuries. However, with the collapse of the Serenissima in 1797 after the invasion of Napoleon, the northeast experienced a dramatic wave of emigration like the south: three million people from Veneto left to seek their fortune in the US and northern Europe. The splendours of the past gradually faded into memory. Nevertheless, is crucial to remark that the city of Venice[66] (Veneto's regional capital) was able to handle the decay better because of the development of, first, elitist and then mass tourism. Until the 1950s, the northeast was considered the second most underdeveloped area after the south. The level of poverty was dramatic. Veneto's economic boom started at the beginning of the seventies through a fast transition from an underdeveloped economic system based on agriculture and chaotic industrial development that peaked in 2000. The Veneto landscape comprising historic little towns and agricultural fields slowly became a tangle of warehouses. This economic development, called *Modello Nord-Est* (the Northeast model), consisting primarily of minor entrepreneurship, became an example of best practice. The core of this new economic boom was *Il capannone* (the warehouse), which has become a symbol of successful masculinity (as well as of reckless development that did not consider urban planning and environmental issues). The questions of how to handle and overcome poverty and the fear of becoming poor again are key factors in understanding the cultural background of the Veneto region and its men. In this specific context (the beginning of the nineties), the independent right-wing party *Lega Nord*, nowadays *Lega*, tapped into a massive consensus among the disillusioned working class, little entrepreneurs and the new freelancer generation that felt betrayed by classic political parties and strangled by a south-centred bureaucratic state. The city of Venice became for the *Lega* voters living on the mainland the symbol of a glorious past to be re-enacted.

[66] Venice is built on a group of 118 small islands, located in the Venetian lagoon, that are separated by canals and linked by over 400 bridges. The historical island city of Venice (*centro storico*) and the rest on the mainland (*terraferma*) are connected by a rail and road bridge.

But the "real" Venetians, the ones who were born and lived on the island, were extremely busy distancing themselves from those nouveau-riche right-wing farmers (the *Lega* voters) who were occupying Venice with their political demonstrations.[67]

The primary goal of *Lega* was the independence of the north, and the primary strategy was pointing out the moral superiority of the north against the south, which was construed as a burden. "In Italy, the typology that opposes a masculine North and a feminine South emerged at the end of the nineteenth century, on the perceived weakness of the Italian state, which was linked with the North-South divide. Its masculine identity associates the North with Europe and modernity and expresses the intention to affirm the nation's status in a competitive international environment. In such a context, however, the presence of a feminine South can be perceived as a threat to Italy's respectability" (Huysseune 2000, 2). The decline of the so-called *Modello Nord-Est* began with the impact of globalisation and the financial crisis of 2008 and manifested through thousands of abandoned warehouses and a landscape laid waste. After 2017, the South of Italy officially disappeared from the main agenda of the *Lega*, which abandoned the idea of an independent North and started focusing on migration issues. This strategy enabled *Lega* to gain support from Southerners who felt threatened by North African migration. The softening of the *Lega* party on the issue of independence from Italy led to the formation of more radical secessionist groups. This development displays the well-known trajectory of many populist formations in Europe. As geographer John Agnew claims, "even the most determinedly Ethno-regionalist movements can get dragged into political arguments appropriate to the state as a whole, as it tries to expand its support and move from opposition to power" (Agnew 1995, 169). Secessionists brought up racial issues as cultural differences, claiming that Southern men were lazy and unreliable and Venetian men were, on the contrary, hard workers, efficient, independent and reliable. Indeed, after the economic boom, masculinities in the northeast of Italy started to be defined in part in opposition to southern masculinities. These same dynamics are observable within the European context, between the politically unstable Mediterranean countries and the wealthy Northern ones. In addition, in the most radical perspective of Northern supremacists, the Italian state is perceived to be an invader and a dictatorship run by Southerners who steal money from the productive part of

[67] It is crucial to note that summarising the vicissitudes of Italian politics in such a volatile context is arduous. Needless to say, the political and economic situation in Venice has wholly changed. A right-wing administration has lately been running the city. The inhabitants of the city are continuously moving to the mainland because of the rocketing cost of living on the islands. In the fifties, Venice Island had 120 000 inhabitants, whereas in 2022, less than 50 000 remained (Today 2022) The city is slowly becoming a museum city, where the mansions are mostly owned by foreigners and the few decent houses left on the market are used as AirB&Bs.

the country through a criminal tax system. These men, attracted by the efficiency, modernity and productivity of northern European men, are at the same time themselves regarded as inadequate, especially by Austrian and Germans: "Modernity has been at the same time a model to be imported to Italy from abroad and a model to be imported to Southern Italy from the North" (Orsina 2014, 11).

At the end of the warrior speech, I claim, "we will come back as a huge tide." Being emasculated and obliged to withdraw to a garden leads me to claim imminent revenge to regain my lost masculinity. It is worth mentioning that in 1997 the secessionist group *Serenissimi* attempted to "conquer" St Mark's Square bell tower in Venice with a homemade tank, but they got arrested after a few hours (Hilchey 1997). The attempt can undoubtedly be characterised as grotesque, as reported by journalist Francesco Merlo. Indeed, the police found them in possession of a salami, probably for celebrating the success of the operation (Merlo 2014). The clumsy catwalk I perform to the tune of the song "Marea" questions the invincible image of the warrior. I wanted to create an ambivalent image, and feminine elements are just part of the gender spectrum performed by males. At the same time, I staged a parody in which the attempt to be less hypermasculine becomes grotesque. According to mainstream categorisation, the Italian white man in the video represents the normative oppressor. His inadequate karaoke performance of "Marea" in a shabby flea market hardly belongs in that category! "Marea" was one of the Italian summer hits of 2021, a song that talks about same-sex relationships and desire.



Figure 64: Nicola Genovese, A Novanta, 2021. Still from the video documentation. Courtesy the artist.



Figure 64: Nicola Genovese, A Novanta, 2021. Still from video documentation. Courtesy the artist.

In the last part of the scene, I turn the warrior costume into pizza ingredients. That shift evokes the deep entanglements among food, regionalism/nationalism and masculinity. In Italy, political issues manifest in food choices. In one particular political advertisement from 2008 by *Lega Nord*, "traditional" food becomes a weapon of identitarian politics. Polenta was wrested away from its associations with poverty or, at the other end of the spectrum, fancy food, and mobilised in an identitarian campaign against North African migration.
The last ingredient I throw on the imaginary pizza is Kebab[68] (Middle-Eastern cooked meat). Disrupting the sacredness of the pizza is not just a provocation but a reflection on the paradoxes of authenticity (authentic men eat authentic food). Pizza only began to be part of northerners' culinary habits in the 1950s. Before then, it was perceived to be an exotic product. Pizza is nowadays considered a "traditional" Italian national food. Using the pizza eventually as a swimming pool suggests the relevance of "authentic" food in constructing Italianness and Italian masculinity. The pizza swimming pool becomes a comfort zone, but the song evokes the threat of drowning in an apocalyptic scenario where certainties collapse.

[68] Kebab is traditionally a Middle-east cooked meat. In 2011 the major of Cittadella, a little town in the Veneto region, issued an order to regulate the opening of new Kebab shops to "preserve culinary tradition" and to restrict situations with poor hygiene standards (Quotidiano Nazionale 2011).



Figure 65: Nicola Genovese, A Novanta, 2021. Still from the video documentation. Courtesy the artist.

Fourth Scene: Nostalgia as a Tool of Empowerment for "Threatened" Masculinities

This scene is a sort of surreal mix between a TED talk and an art performance lecture with a pinch of comedy. The starting point is an actual request by a Swiss friend Manuela before I left for a short trip to Italy. She wanted me to bring her back a packet of Fonzies, a crunchy cheese and corn-based chip. Fonzies is a perfect example of a global short-circuit involving "authenticity" and stereotypes about the construction of Italianness and Italian masculinity. Fonzies are produced in Germany but sold as an "authentic" Italian product. Actually, the "real" Fonzies were produced for the first time in Australia in the fifties with the name Twisties. The Italian company Saiwa that distributed the chips in 1979 came up with the name, referring to the main character in the American TV series *Happy Days*,[69] Arthur Fonzarelli, AKA Fonzie or "the Fonz."

Saiwa decided to develop several campaigns based on rock-a-billy, drive-in, fast-food aesthetic following the TV series concept. Fonzies have been sold in Switzerland as authentic Italian food, and Swiss people connect Fonzies to Italy. For Manuela, Fonzies remind her of her Italian holiday. A packet of Fonzies is her Proustian Petite Madeleine.

For Italians, on the other hand, Fonzies were symbolic of the American lifestyle. Arthur Fonzarelli was an Italian American boy who partly embodied the Latin Lover trope: hot but intellectually inadequate. Fonzie communicates with signs or his gaze; he also "has the ability to manipulate technology with just a nudge, bump or a snap of his fingers for

[69] Set in Milwaukee in the fifties and deliberately evoking the so-called American Dream, *Happy Days* was broadcast in Italy from 1977 to 1987.

things such as starting a car, turning on lights, coaxing free sodas from a vending machine, making girls respond, or changing the song selection on a jukebox" (Martone 2016, 11). Fonzie is a man of few words and seemingly limited intellect who prefers to communicate by gesture. He embodies the integrity and control of Northern protestant masculinities (as opposed to feminised Southern masculinities) while at the same time serving as an anti-intellectual sexual object. This stereotyped Italian American masculinity fabricated through a TV series affected my Italian masculinity more than other more obvious references, like the neo-classical marble statues of men spread all over Italy.

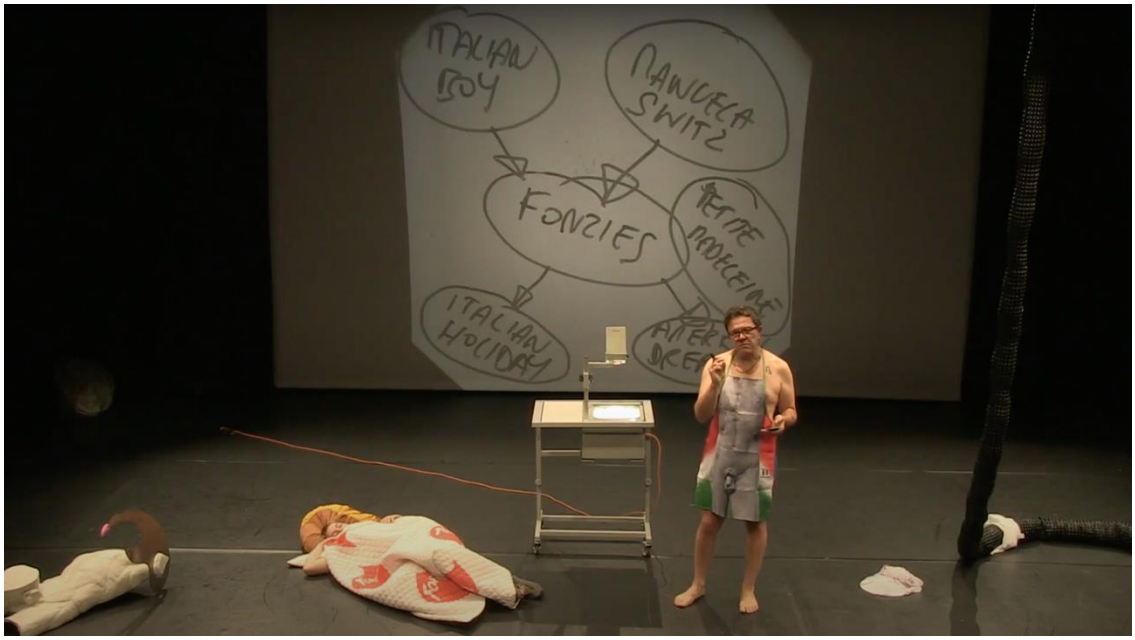


Figure 66: Nicola Genovese, A Novanta, 2021. Still from the video documentation. Courtesy the artist.

Nevertheless, Fonzie and the male marble statues have something in common. They are models that rely on an idealised irretrievable past when masculinity was still authentic. According to Kegan Gardiner, masculinity is a "nostalgic formation, always missing, lost, or about to be lost because its ideal form is located in a past that advances with each generation to recede just beyond its grasp" (Gardiner 2002, 10). Fonzie represents the lost masculinity of the 1950s when men could get girls with a simple gaze; the white marble statues are the relics of the unrecoverable powerful masculinity of the Roman Empire; the rare mortadella made of wild boar meat is a metaphor for an irretrievable uncorrupted society when men were still hunters. Of course, as philosopher Felipe De Brigard argues: "nostalgia can bring to mind periods we did not directly experience" (Brigard 2017, 160). The cognitive contents of nostalgia are mostly formed by mental simulations: autobiographical and collective memories play a secondary role (Brigard 2017, 161). I did not experience the fifties of Arthur

Fonzarelli; what is more, those "fifties" were a version of that time fabricated in the seventies. Elia, during rehearsal times, told me that his peers feel nostalgia for the nineties. According to the evidence of music videos, to them that was a better time.



Figure 67: Nicola Genovese, A Novanta, 2021. Still from the video documentation. Courtesy the artist.

In her book, *The Future of Nostalgia*, cultural theorist Svetlana Boym distinguishes two types of nostalgia: the restorative and the reflective. "Restorative Nostalgia does not think of itself as Nostalgia, but rather as truth and tradition. Reflective Nostalgia dwells on the ambivalences of human longing and belonging and does not shy away from the contradictions of modernity. Restorative Nostalgia protects the absolute truth, while reflective Nostalgia calls it into doubt" (Boym 2002, 13). In *AN*, following Boym's distinction, I embraced the reflective type, acknowledging that nostalgia surrounds contemporaneity. Indeed, nostalgia is perceived not as some external object but rather as something in which I am immersing myself while remaining aware of its paradoxes. Nostalgia has to be analysed in relation to our idea of the future, since the modern future and the nostalgic past have always been opposed. As philosopher Bruno Latour argues, "[w]hen the word 'modern,' 'modernization,' or 'modernity' appears, we are defining, by contrast, an archaic and stable past. Furthermore, the word is always being thrown into the middle of a fight, in a quarrel where there are winners and losers, Ancients and Moderns" (Latour 1993, 10). There is indeed a kind of co-dependency between the two. In order to exist, nostalgic feeling needs a modernity that has allegedly destroyed traditions. On the other hand, the modern revolutionary needs nostalgia to claim that modernity is in danger. "Maniacal destruction is counterbalanced by an equally

maniacal conservation" (Latour 1993, 69). Latour proposes that we think about what would happen if we thought of ourselves as having never been modern: "We have always remained pre-Socratic, pre-Cartesian, pre-Kantian, pre-Nietzschean. No radical revolution can separate us from these pasts, so there is no need for reactionary counterrevolutions to lead us back to what has never been abandoned" (Latour 1993, 67).

The carnivalesque warrior is mourning the loss of the splendour of Venice and the "authentic" Veneto before modernisation. The nostalgic tension cannot be resolved because the friction between the glorious imagined past and awareness of the impossibility of having it back is the necessary engine. Daydreaming about a premodern time, as we have seen, can provide temporary relief, but the process of retrieval is doomed to fail. The failure itself feeds the nostalgic feeling. Men whose masculinities are under stress, particularly economic stress, are more likely to have nostalgic feelings towards the past. Daydreaming about the breadwinner era might be not enough; the working-class men described earlier might find more relief in idealising the rural life of their grandparents. The relief does not last because the feeling of economic inadequacy will return. When pre-industrial society does not provide relief, the daydreaming might drift to more ancient times because the nostalgic past is a generic concept that shifts according to the context. The republic of Venice or even the Roman empire might become the point of reference.

The ideal classic male bodies depicted in marble statues, despite being a symbol of power and controlled masculinity, are, for most men, unachievable models. The David of Michelangelo printed on my souvenir apron from Florence deliberately points out the paradox of that model. Indeed, my unfit, overweight body clashes with David's 'perfection.'
At the beginning of the lecture, Elia is wrapped in a Fonzies duvet. He is plunged into nostalgia. Meanwhile, I stare at him, trying to connect with my boyhood. The nostalgic feeling lurks even though I try to gain emotional distance from the topic throughout the lecture. But how can industrially produced chips possibly occupy the same nostalgic bracket as grandma's recipes, especially in the Italian culinary and cultural context? In fact, if one looks at food advertisements from the seventies and eighties, Italy is far from being the land of tradition. I experienced the shift from the poor but homemade food prepared by my grandma to my mother's frozen pasta and pizza. Indeed, my mother was trying to manage both the household and her job as an elementary school teacher during my childhood. In the same period, the food industry was taking over and promising women liberation from endless days in the kitchen. There was a general disgust for tradition and home cooking in the seventies, as a pure sign of the petit-bourgeoise condition. In the eighties, the American fast-

food culture occupied Italy. In those years, innovation and modernity were the keywords. The idea of distancing oneself from the old rural cuisine led to horrific recipes like *Penne alla vodka* (pasta with tomato and vodka). My mother became obsessed with frozen food. Even the easiest recipe on earth, such as *pasta al pomodoro*, became a burden for her. Despite the widespread stereotype about the uncorrupted Italian culinary tradition, warming up frozen pasta or pizza in the microwave is a recurring memory of my childhood. Modern unhealthy food became a source of empowerment for my mother even though power relationships and gender roles were unquestioned. I became aware early on of the mirage of modern industrial food and therefore did not develop nostalgic feelings for the disgusting frozen pizza I ate as a child. My idiosyncratic experience notwithstanding, childhood and boyhood are the periods of one's life that trigger the most substantial nostalgic feelings. In the first scene, Elia's vitality and aggressive playful behaviour represent the ambivalent memory of that period. Staring at Elia while he performs an "uncorrupted" masculinity reveals my subtle nostalgic feeling for that irretrievable time. Seeking shelter in such memories is a classic strategy for some masculinities to make the present bearable. For instance, in *The Last Woman* directed by Marco Ferreri (1976), the relief is provided by personal memories. In one scene, the main character Giovanni (Gerard Depardieu) proudly shows his partner Valeria (Ornella Muti) various objects from his childhood.

In response to Giovanni's display of memorabilia, Valeria exclaims, "I am young; I don't want memories." She is suggesting that he is a man immersed in the past, incapable of adjusting to social change. Nostalgia is here framed within the so-called crisis of masculinity, a topic that became particularly trendy in the seventies: "*The Last Woman* reveals a vision of the present laden with deep anxieties about social decay and emasculation" (Rigoletto 2014, 22). In the very last scene, Giovanni cuts his penis to embody the threat of castration and to show that he is still in control.

The Complex Entanglement of Hetero- and Auto-Images of Italian Men

Whereas previously (see Chapter 2) I had exposed my male body without particularly underlining its ethnicity or nationality, in *AN*, my Italianness is foregrounded. The whole performance both feeds and disappoints the audience's expectation of the stereotyped Italian male. It is therefore crucial for the reader to understand the cultural context shaping the audience's perception of an Italian man on stage, which includes the processes of othering, exotification and self-exotification, and the power relationship between Northern European masculinities and masculinities that have been through a whitening process. In all this, the

distinction between what imagology[70] calls auto-image and hetero-image is getting blurred, the situation further complicated by the presence of "meta-images which are neither an auto-image nor a hetero-image, but the projection of something between the two" (Leerssen 2016, 24). The hetero image of Italy is inevitably entangled with that of its men. In their study on stereotypes of nationalities and gender, social psychologists Alice Eagly and Mary Kite argue that "[t]he tendency to equate men and nationalities derives from men's higher status because high status confers greater power and participation in the events and societal institutions that influence how their citizens are perceived" (Eagly and Kite 1987, 461). The hetero image of Italian men residing in Italy is also the result of the perception of Italian migrants, expats and second- or third-generation Italians living abroad. However, it is crucial to point out that there is a significant overlapping between the auto and hetero image of Italian men. In this paragraph, I will mostly refer to Italian masculinity in the singular to define, in particular, how Northern masculinities perceive Italian males. Italian masculinity, in this sense, is an oversimplification and generalisation that does not pay much heed to regional differences and tends to use an idea of Southern Italian masculinity as a generic national marker. Italian masculinity has been constructed as a foil to Northern masculinity because of a clear hierarchy within white masculinities. In the second scene of *AN*, I expose the trope of the mama's boy, one of the most popular negative depictions of Italian men. To better understand that trope and its consequences I want to analyse the 2012 TV advertisement series by OBOS.[71] The ad features several Italian men who, with their mother's complicity, have actively decided to stay at their parents' house. One ad starts by depicting protest action by mothers holding banners that say "Stop OBOS." After that, one of the protesters goes home to take care of her son, who is in his late thirties and has Mediterranean features. First, she accurately washes him in the bathtub while he reads the newspaper. Then while feeding him a forkful of spaghetti, she says, "my son is really an important man; he shouldn't cook his own dinner." The spot ends with a Norwegian man having breakfast proudly alone in his kitchen. It is interesting to notice that the part dedicated to the mama's boy has a retro filter that

[70] "Imagology, a long-established specialism rooted in Comparative Literature, analyses the discursive articulations of such national characterizations; it studies them as a cross-national dynamic and from a transnational point of view" (Leerssen 2016, 14). Recently imagology has developed towards the analysis of new media. In imagology, stereotypes are called "ethnotypes". Ethnotypes are discursive objects and arise in opposition to an "Other." They are the result of auto-images and hetero-images. An auto-image is a representation of the self, while a hetero-image is the representation of the Other (Leerssen 2016).

[71] OBOS is the largest housing developer in Norway and one of the largest in Scandinavia. The TV ad series promote the possibility of becoming a cooperative member to have more accessibility to the housing market. Youtube video.

emphasises Italians' anti-modernity: the vaguely sixties clothes and furniture evoke a society stuck in the past. Conversely, in the last scene, the lighting is bright and the kitchen has modern, minimalist design features. The blond Norwegian man looks out the window, suggesting a future-oriented attitude. The ad is in some ways exaggerated but, unfortunately, mostly accurate. It triggered mixed emotions among Italian men, as can be seen from the comments posted below the YouTube video. Many users appeared to accept their hetero-image, acknowledging a sort of ancestral inadequacy and assuming it as auto-image. Others pointed out the economic realities behind the Italian man's choice. At the same time, the advert triggered a nationalist backlash, with some users disparaging the inferior Northern "barbarians" who have no culture and no family tradition.



Figure 68: OBOS ad campaign, 2012, still from the Youtube video. © OBOS.

Besides being mama's boys, coming from southern Europe, Italian men are still considered by many Northerners to be inadequate, lazy and unreliable. These stereotypes re-emerged sharply after the European economic crisis in 2008.[72] In addition, Italy has been slowly constructed as the manageable exotic within Europe. The levels of attraction and disgust that the country evokes do not ultimately disrupt the comfort zone of North Europeans. In fact, "[t]he division between North and South has a long tradition in the European continent and has played a crucial role in developing cultural identities" (Arndt 2007, 387). Scholar Astrid Arndt argues that today's gap between an underdeveloped south and a wealthy north was defined during the European Enlightenment. Before that, in

[72] "In the popular narrative of the eurozone crisis, i.e., the story surrounding the event, the rich, hard-working north had to bail out the lazy, corrupt south in order to save the euro" (Godby and Anderson 2016, 75).

antiquity, power relations were the other way around. Even though the Greeks imagined their paradise as somewhere up north, the northern regions were thought to be cold and frightening and remained an extremely vague idea. But during the Roman empire, northern Europe began to be depicted as "economically, politically and culturally deficient" (Arndt 2007, 387). The Northerners became the barbarians who destroyed the Roman civilisation. But from the second half of the eighteenth century, the tide turned. A sense of moral superiority over decadent Roman cultures that had already passed their zenith increased sharply in the north of Europe (Arndt 2007, 388). In *The Spirit of the Law*, Montesquieu codified the superiority of the North over the South through his influential theory of climates. "If we travel towards the north, we meet with people who have few vices, many virtues, and a great share of frankness and sincerity. If we draw near the south, we fancy ourselves entirely removed from the verge of morality; here the strongest passions are productive of all manner of crimes, each man endeavouring, let the means be what they will, to indulge his inordinate desires" (Montesquieu 2001 [1748], 248-249).

The philosopher Étienne Balibar argues that there is a relationship of domination and exploitation between different parts of Europe that can be defined as "quasi-colonial" (Balibar 2015). He also claims that the European South is now entering into an organic relationship with a new and increasingly unsettled and unsettling "South" (Balibar 2015). Indeed, the borders between southern Europe and the global South are getting blurred. Italy, because of its geographical position, is more exposed to migration flows from North Africa, although migrants consider Italy as a land of transit on their journey to the wealthy Northern European countries. In some economic and political senses, Italy is becoming a geographical extension of the African continent.

I cite the example of Goethe's masterpiece *Italian Journey* to illustrate how Germans (and inhabitants of other European countries above the Alps) historically defined themselves in opposition to Italians and Southerners in a never-ending exoticising love and hate relationship. This depiction, formulated during the Romantic era, is still vital today in ads, movies, memes, and magazines, affecting the auto-image of many Italian men and shaping their masculinities as a reaction against or validation of that trope. "Auto-images, especially among subaltern nations, are really interiorizations of a hegemonic, exotic view from outside. The lingering echo of interiorized exoticism can be so strong that an auto-image can take the form of auto-exoticism" (Leerssen 2016, 22).

As I will show, Italy was and is still perceived as the "cradle" of Western civilisation and, therefore, some kind of common property. Italy has become the land of ruins and high-

end brands, whereas Italian men are just a casualty that northerners have to deal with. Despite being published in 1816, Goethe's travel diaries include a vision of Italy and Italians that is still key to any understanding of the exoticisation of southern Europe. The diaries are the result of the Grand Tour, a common phenomenon among young French, English and German aristocrats who undertook lengthy journeys in southern Europe (and Italy, in particular) for educational purposes. John Zilcosky argues that one of the main goals of Goethe was to get lost in Italy: "Goethe needs to disorient himself in order to experience an 'immediate encounter with being'" (Zilcosky 2004, 230). What better place to get lost than the maze of tiny streets in Venice? The unfamiliar labyrinth becomes a metaphor for internal exploration. Italy also helped Goethe to define his own nation. "The Italian journey taught Goethe that an idea of a nation involves not an unreflective adaptation of customs, traditions, and language; rather, the nation became for him the difference between Germany and Italy, between what is familiar and what is foreign" (Beebee 2002, 325). Italy is the perfect pre-modern scenario to undertake a process of rebirth or renewal: "Goethe imagines Italy as a pre-industrial pastoral idyll, an Arcadia where he can escape the pitfalls of the modern world" (Bauer 2012, 3). Goethe describes rural Italians as "authentic" people in tune with nature, unlike the northerners who have been corrupted by technological progress. The similarity with the trope of the "noble savage" is quite evident.



Figure 69: Johann Heinrich Wilhelm Tischbein, Goethe in the Roman Campagna, 1787, oil on canvas, Städel Museum, Frankfurt am Main, DE.

Goethe in the Roman Campagna, painted by Tischbein in 1787, clearly represents the German perception of Italy and, conversely, the German masculine ideal during the Romantic era. Despite his relaxed body posture, Goethe shows a clear confidence that seems at odds with the exotic experience of getting lost. The detached gaze in Goethe's portrait suggests the impossibility of adopting the exotic Italian lifestyle, even though his posture might suggest *il dolce far niente*, the sweet doing nothing approach. His lying on a marble piece, like a Roman sculpture, shows Goethe's will to assimilate the culture of the "cradle of Western civilization." But Goethe's corporeality is strikingly unlike that of classical nude male statues: "Masculinity in Western art, especially in the late eighteenth century, used to be visually represented not through the male sex, but through open facial expressions and poses that claim lots of space and signal freedom and superiority and by a 'specific manner of representing costume,' especially heavy attire such as coats and uniforms" (Rosenthal 1996, 263-264). Tischbein's portrayal of Goethe suggests the controlled, spiritual, protestant masculinity that I try to embody during the slow version of TMANG to avoid being perceived as overwhelmed by passion.

The absence of Italians in the scenario and the silent landscape studded with ruins allow him to form a subliminal inner landscape while highlighting his superiority. The archaeological remains in the background (the tower tomb of Caecilia Metella, the ruins of Tusculum, and the Roman aqueduct) indicate the Neoclassicist love of antiquity, and the perception of Italy, symbolised by Rome, as an idealised place frozen in the past. As Giulio Bollati argues: "there is a pitiless perseverance of foreigners in considering Italy as a country of ruins and memories and the consequent incessant confutations of Italians that respond to it" (Bollati 1996, 41). The torso replica that is placed on the stage of *AN* clearly references the stereotyped ruin landscape and the irrecoverable ideal of perfect classic masculinity. Elia's attempt to incorporate the torso has to be read as failing to become the perfect man. Italy fulfils the need of Northern Europeans to have the site of the "authentic" and the origin of their (German/European) civilisation just around the corner. The very fact that Italy is still perceived as a dysfunctional land of ruins reinforces the idea that a contemporary Italy does not exist. Instead, it manifests merely as an examplar of systemic political corruption and high-end brands (Ferrari, Lamborghini, Gucci, Valentino, etc.). When my Swiss friends claim to enjoy the fact that buses are always late in Italy because they are bored with Swiss punctuality, Goethe suddenly appears to be alive and kicking, voicing his view of how Neapolitans perceive time: "The person who lives here [in Naples] cannot be mad because

every enjoyment of his existence does not relate to the hour but to the time of day" (Goethe 2017 [1816], 51-52).

The stereotypical Italian landscape studded with ruins is entangled with a clear idea of Italian manhood. The shabby and lazy maintenance of the enormous artistic heritage translates into specific features of the Italian man: extremely bonded to traditions, fundamentally anti-modern but at the same time not able to manage and take care of the complex and fragile Italian architectural environment that is, according to Goethe, Europe's heritage. As in the *Italian Journey*, in contemporary northern European representation, Italian men are detached from the idyllic landscape that surrounds them, presenting as a casualty to be dealt with rather than as the creators of that artistic heritage. The approach towards the peninsula by Romantic writers like Goethe and Staël, as Joseph Luzzi argues, is based on an idea of "Italy without Italians." Italian men were described alternately as effeminate or criminals, fundamentally unable to build a civilised society (Luzzi 2008, 54-55). The same happens nowadays with fashion brands and costly limited-edition cars. They are connected to an Italianness partly detached from the people living there. Wearing Italian clothes or owning an Italian car allows a person to incorporate a quintessential idealised form of Italianness independent of its inhabitants. Returning to the notion of the cycle of masculinisation/ emasculation, it is crucial to reflect on the extent to which feeling emasculated by a negative hetero image might energise one to regain some allegedly lost masculinity. For instance, being perceived as a mama's boy might trigger the will to behave in a more masculine and independent way, adjusting to Northern standards; or it might instead engender a proud conservative reaction and a consequent desire to preserve a strong relationship with one's mother. The reaction to an accusation of not being masculine enough might become a claim to cultural independence. Being perceived as a lazy Southerner by Northern countries might conduce to the claim, for instance, of a cultural superiority that goes beyond productive efficiency. That might initiate a loop of validation, where Italian men transform the "sweet doing nothing" into a sort of political statement against the Northerner, confirming the latter's belief. In the end, though, Italians continue to be perceived as lazy and unreliable mama's boys just accidentally present in the exotic Italian landscape. The Latin lover and Casanova myths are long gone. Even the Italian Macho is no longer actual.

It has instead become a parody of itself, as highlighted, for instance, by a 2008 advert for Media Markt, a German electronics retail company.[73]



Figure 70: "Tony the Italian" played by German actor Olli Dittrich in the Media Markt AD in 2008. Source Süddeutsche Zeitung.

As journalist Silvia Marchetti writes in an opinion piece on the disappearance of the Italian Macho, "It's hard to act macho and find a quiet place to get frisky when you're living at home with mom and dad, slurping away on their pasta while woefully unemployed*"* (Marchetti 2015). As a form of exotic "authentic" masculinity, Macho became an idealistic model originating in the generic South that could serve as an example for Anglo-Saxon masculinity of how to behave like a "real man" and overcome the perception of being daily emasculated by controlling wives. Yet in the English-American context, Macho defines a male who, despite being hypermasculine and sexist, is fundamentally over-emotional and therefore feminine. During the Falklands War, English soldiers used to refer to Argentinian soldiers by the phrase "soft Latin" (Cornwall and Lindisfarne 1994, 12-13). This distinctive connotation implies a feminised core in the social construction of the Macho ideal. In *AN*, the slow version of TMANG depicts the protestant-controlled masculinities that the Italian wants to

[73] Tony the Italian is the main character in an ad series produced in 2008 by Media Markt, a German electronics chain store. The actor Olli Dittrich impersonates a highly stereotyped Italian man with a golden chain, sunglasses and moustache. In this specific video, Tony flirts pathetically with the saleswoman. Youtube video.

embody so as not to be mistaken for the over-emotional Macho. The apron with Michelangelo's David and the Italian flag printed on it does not correspond with the most common stereotype of Italian masculinity as I have described it. Although some Italian men might feel empowered by the image through the nostalgic process that I have explored, Northern masculinities have appropriated the body of David as an idealistic controlled masculinity born in Italy and Greece but no longer embodied by the over-emotional Italian mama's boys who furiously protest that "we invented the Renaissance".



Figure 71: Nicola Genovese, A Novanta, 2021. Still from the video documentation. Courtesy the artist.

Sad Boys

In *AN*, the question of the body is reinforced by the immersive context provided by the theatre, even though the distance from the audience tends to construct a flat image. The physical gestures frontally expose the male body, including its violent and grotesque aspects. The textual elements might redirect the audience to pay purely intellectual attention, but they enable me to contextualise the regionality of masculinities and point out nuances not easily reachable through bodily gestures alone.

In previous chapters, I introduced new projects developed towards the end of my PhD research to show how reflecting on my practice led me to improve some aspects and explore new directions. This last chapter, though, will not conclude that clear development. Fabriktheater will co-produce my next piece at the end of 2023, but many questions remain open. The project already has a title, *Sad Boys*, from the t-shirt I was wearing at the end of

AN. I want to explore nostalgia, melancholia and desire, in a broader sense, relegating the topic of masculinity to the background. Fabriktheater would be very keen to support the project in a white cube context because of the general tendency of Swiss theatres to brush off the image of a conservative context. Paradoxically I am seriously considering this option, despite my extraordinary experience in Fabriktheater. I realised how difficult it is to establish oneself in two disciplines that are still separate, in spite of Switzerland's privileged context of openness. Mixing theatre and art performance in my portfolio caused several misunderstandings when I used it for visual art open calls, even though I have extensively clarified that choice. With my degree of notoriety, I cannot risk the commission's feeling puzzled about that. It is also a straightforward question of networks that seldom communicate with each other. Strategically speaking, a white cube that can provide the possibility to use the whole space as a white box and control the audience access would be the best option. Performing in a more "controlled" art space with my hybrid practice would enable me to place the project in my visual art portfolio and strengthen my network in visual art, which is much more developed than that in theatre, while also inviting theatregoers to attend. In addition, the accumulated experience of theatre will allow me to rethink the power of bodies, props and sculptures, reducing the presence of text without abandoning it. The move I am contemplating would allow me to restore the materiality of my sculptures to the foreground, highlighting their multilayered symbolic potential to render the textual aspect partially redundant, while acknowledging the limitations of the "empire of sight."

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

In this thesis, I have engaged with a wide variety of topics associated in varying degrees with my practice. My practice-based research has resulted in this written text that has ultimately become essential for a full understanding of my visual and performative output.

I have focused on visual and performative works that I have developed and exhibited in Switzerland mainly over the past two years because they lend themselves to discursive treatment. Each chapter offers a case study of a work, contextualised historically and theoretically to produce reflection and the possibility of progress in my practice. Indeed, in Chapters Two and Three, I briefly introduced a second work as evidence of development resulting from new knowledge acquired through trial and error. The research analyses three different types of visual and performative output (Chapter Two, sculpture, Chapter Three,

sculpture activation and Chapter Four, theatre performance) in which the topic of the grotesque male body and its masculinities emerges with varying intensity.

To provide the reader with a more comprehensive overview of my practice, I have included an Appendix comprising photographs of works I have produced since my PhD enrolment in 2018.

In the first chapter, I engaged with the concepts of hybridity and ambivalence to frame the materiality of my sculptures, which resonate with the notion of bodies in a struggle with their boundaries. Partly human and partly animal bodies are instantiated in my sculptures through combinations of materials and shapes that highlight the complexity of the body as a biological and cultural entity. I have tried to emphasise the importance of the physical body, which cannot simply be dismissed as a social construction. "Human biology is constantly in motion, reacting to time- and site-specific contexts. Human biology is every bit as created by culture as it results from DNA. In a sense, human biology sits between, and in dialectical communication with, genetics and culture" (Goodman 2013, 360). The question of the body has historically been the domain of women artists and theorists, construed as a site of oppression that has the potential to be a source of empowerment. The hegemony of a poststructuralist approach in feminism, queer studies and masculinities studies has introduced an excessive emphasis on performed identities and neglected their entanglement with the biological body. The male body, in this perspective, is the source of violent phallocratic oppression. The imagery that I have developed does not represent yet another engagement with queer, non-normative masculinities. Indeed, in my performances and sculptures, the strict division between normative and non-normative begins to fade, exposing the paradoxes of oversimplified categories. As it is represented in my practice, the male body is not as intact and undamaged as it is commonly portrayed in feminist/poststructuralist discourse. In the trajectory of my works, I propose that the male body, as the site of a primarily flaccid and sometimes erect penis, might be the starting point for a recalibration of the image of the champion and the hero.[74] It is a damaging image for both women and men. I used incongruity, the main characteristic of the grotesque, across all of my practice to stimulate ambivalent

[74] I distinguish between the champion and the hero, as suggested by John Lash. Through investigating different antique cultures, Lash traces the hero's origin in matriarchal societies (Lash 1995). Whereas the champion's goal is "to ensure his power over others", the hero is "never power-mongering, but he is prey to arrogance abuse and flawed judgement" (Lash 1995, 11). The champion is an exponent of patriarchy, while the hero's code of power is rooted in moral independence and suffering acceptance: he confronts situations sometimes recklessly without embracing causes or ideology. The distinction is crucial to tackling power relationships. "Enlisting a hero as a model of Machismo and an apologist for male dominance is wrong, but the error persists due to a long history of misrepresentation" (Lash 1995, 11).

perceptions. In Chapter Two, I engaged with the concept of ambivalence and how it materialises in my sculpture. The variety of materials, shapes and aesthetic references highlights the complexity of the body and of performed identities rather than deconstructing or negating the so-called normative. In this regard, Rosalind Krauss has suggested in her proposal for expanding the field of sculpture *the complex* as a strategy to avoid the process of negation that started with Modernism (Krauss 1979). The sculpture *Cuddling Cutting* (2021), the case study in Chapter Two, pursues this notion of complexity: it is a grotesque alien body with both feminine and masculine features, embodying both violence and tenderness, and including the spectrum between these poles. In Krauss's perspective, it is an anti-monumental sculpture; however, its incongruity suggests that it incorporates a spectrum of elements that are not exclusively "in opposition within a cultural situation" (Krauss 1979, 43). I have inserted into the conversation shiny, metallic, carnivalesque textures with rough metal and fleshy, fragile ceramics, to set off unexpected frictions without being seduced by the materials' allure. As Louise Bourgeois has had occasion to remark, "Materials are there to serve you, and you do not have to express the beauty of the material itself" (Meyer-Thoss 2016, 16). I have arranged legs, shoes, snakes, claws, and other fragments in awkward bodily constellations to reflect on the boundaries between corporeality and fictionality.

I contextualise my practice by referencing Keith Haring's joyful and broken bodies; Dorothea Tanning'' uncanny domestic stuffed objects; Louise Bourgeois's sexualised, ambivalent sculptures; Hieronymus Bosch's surreal worlds and awkward characters, and the parodical figures from medieval manuscript illumination. My sculptures reveal themselves as fictional bodies where masculinities emerge symbolically, for instance, through sharp metal, penis/snake shapes, or textiles strangled by claws. I also position feminine elements that collide or mingle with the masculine parts, to the extent that the division between the two becomes blurred. In avoiding a binary depiction of gender identities, I have found myself focusing on ambivalence as enfolding a spectrum of possibilities that includes the opposing poles and all the spaces in between them.

In my discussion, I also focused on the craft approach that characterises my practice. I want to expose my presence as a maker by deliberately revealing a certain degree of "inaccuracy" that distances me from the contemporary art tradition that recalls industrial design. Glenn Adamson suggests that even though the procedure and the maker's presence might shine through, the craft approach should be in the background "in the interest of the overall work" (Adamson 2007, 13).

In the past, “craft” was a pejorative used to point to the minor value of objects made mostly of textile and ceramic and produced within the domestic environment by women. But in the contemporary Western art scene, the hierarchical division between Low and High art is no longer relevant. In recent years, for instance, renowned Instagram platforms like Ofluxo and Tzvetnik are proposing a selection of exhibitions mainly in Europe, Russia and the U.S., in which the craft approach, regardless of the artist’s gender, has become a statement. I have also observed at the University where I work a sharp increase in the number of students working with ceramic and textiles and a reduced interest in conceptual art.

I felt it necessary to engage with the origins of Fabric art and its relationship with feminism to discuss my position as a male artist working with a craft approach and using materials like ceramic and textile that are historically associated with the practice of female artists. In my work, I have capitalised on such approaches to reflect on the male body and the cultural stratification embedded in it. I then realised that different aesthetic categories were emerging from my practice that could not be exclusively framed in terms of feminist practices. The grotesque body, indeed, became a concept more and more prominent in my sculptural practice. I partly agree with Kathleen Rowe’s contention that the female body is “the quintessence of the grotesque” (Rowe 1995, 33) and with Mary J. Russo, who points out the potential for subversion of the female grotesque (Russo 1995). As a consequence of those perspectives, and as scholar Claudia Schippert argues, “Male bodies are understood as grotesque only to the extent they take on the appearance or function of female bodies” (Schippert 2007, 162). Indeed, in queer and feminist theory, the white straight man is the opposite of the grotesque.

But the grotesque also pertains to the male body and the cycles of life of human bodies in general. When, in *Rabelais and His World*, Mikhail Bakhtin defines the grotesque as a “process of degradation and decay from the spiritual and abstract to the sphere of earth and body in their indissoluble unity” (Bakhtin 1984, 20), he indicates the universality of the category. Indeed, the grotesque body is not separate from the rest of the world (Bakhtin 1984, 24). My interest in the grotesque led me to investigate the origins of the aesthetic category, going back to medieval illumination and late Renaissance painters like Hieronymus Bosch, where the monstrous grotesque was not simply the marginalised “Other” (Cohen 1996) but a more complex category, simultaneously integrated and subversive. The Boschian aesthetic manifests clearly in the sculpture Pelvis the Pelvis, a further development of my practice that I briefly introduced at the end of Chapter Two. But to dig into the murky category of the male grotesque, I needed to challenge my practice by introducing the male body as an activator of

sculptures, exhibited specifically in a white cube context, as part of a broader dramaturgy that includes text, music, costumes and choreography. Adding the performers' bodies expressed my desire to add more narrative layers to the sculpture. First, I wanted to link the symbolic aspects of masculinity that emerge from my sculpture with the fleshiness of the male body. Secondly, I felt the need to develop a form of performance art that borrows theatrical elements to intensify the audience's engagement, considering that the white cube, the so-called "reign of the Eye," abhors content (O'Doherty 1986, 42). *Achilles Heel* is the case study in Chapter Three, a sculptural work that was activated once during the opening ceremony in Altefabrik, a white cube space in Rapperswil, Switzerland, by myself and Elia Meier. Elia's presence enabled me to explore intergenerational masculinities and enact a simulation of male rites of passage. The points of departure for this work were the Achilles myth as a metaphor for male fragility, and the theorisation of this vulnerability in the discourse of the anti-sexist magazine *Achilles Heel*, launched in 1978 by a working collective of socialist men. The magazine's content has powerful relevance for my practice because the editors focused on men-oriented strategies to stop sexism and articulated the struggle with feminist activists about the importance of distinguishing actual power from "relative power and powerlessness" (Seidler 2011, 25). Although subsequently overtaken by theoretical gender debate, the discussions in *Achilles Heel* magazine helped to frame my artistic treatment of masculinities and the male body, and served as a point of reference for the overall approach of the *Achilles Heel* performance.

Within the performance, the sculpture temporarily became scenery and props. While using and touching the sculptures, I brought them back to their "factual reality", despite their aura (Adorno 1999). At the same time, revealing their mundanity did not affect their status as works of art. I briefly discussed why the aura of the artwork, in defiance of Benjamin's prediction, is still operational (Latour and Lowe 2010) The aura radiates in the art space to give shape to a sophisticated system that regulates the physical, temporal, social, factual and cultural distance between the audience and the artwork (Korff 1999, 269). The white cube atmosphere and the auratic presence of the performers kept material reality at bay and the activation acquired a ritual resonance. In this context, I mentioned Marina Abramovic's *Rhythm 0* and Franz Erhard Walther's *Gelbe Skulptur*. The white cube supported the ritual and symbolic aspects of the performance, but did not conduce to a high level of audience engagement –especially for a project like *Achilles Heel* that, because of its narrative impulse, required the audience to follow the performance from beginning to end. The lack of sustained audience attention was, first of all, because of the white cube's rules. As O'Doherty has spelt

them out, these rules sanction freedom of movement within the gallery space and allow people to walk in and out at any moment. Secondly, the specifics of the exhibition space, such as the bad acoustics and the group show situation, were challenging even for the most committed spectator. In this regard, I cited Anne Imhoff's Venice Biennale *Faust* as an excellent example of how successfully to exploit the pros and cons of the white cube: despite the continuous flow of people, the audience was hypnotised by the performers' bodies and the dark soundscape. In *Achilles Heel*, the white cube evinced contradictory effects. The ritual aspect of the performance was enhanced and, at the same time, disrupted by the rules. The same happened with the performer's body. The white cube allowed close proximity with the audience, but corporeality in the "empire of sight" (Stewart 1999, 28) was attenuated. As Krauss and Bois argue, even the tactility that emerges from a performance "is only the visual representation of tactility" (Krauss and Bois 1997, 25).

Last but not least, I assumed that there would be sufficient knowledge of the Achilles myth among the audience for them to understand the core topic. This assumption was mistaken. The still unanswered question is: how does one address a topic precisely, with the right degree of abstraction, while avoiding being didactic? In truth, the weakest point of *Achilles Heel* was not the heel but the text part! It was too complex and fragile to withstand the dynamics of the white cube. Artists should react accordingly when the context works against their intentions.

Achilles Heel helped me partly to retrace my steps, to reconsider the potential of the symbolic elements that manifest during the activation process without focusing too much on the textual part. *Drowning Me Softly,* the activation performance that I proposed as a development of my practice at the end of Chapter Three, is indeed an attempt to exploit the performer's presence more consistently, further to engage with the corporeality of the male body and explore the possibilities of interaction between my sculpture and physical bodies. I remain convinced that the audience should experience my performances for their full duration, but the context has to allow for this kind of engagement. I found that questioning the white cube's rules was like tilting at windmills. The frustration of working with sculptural activation within the context of the white cube led me to the theatre, to explore a more controlled environment for my performances. Here I was influenced by the visual artists, who at the beginning of the eighties, decided not just to use theatrical elements in art performance but bring their Fine Arts and architectural backgrounds directly to theatre, initiating the phenomenon of media theatre (Goldberg 2011, 196). My first theatre production*, A Novanta, AN,* was staged in the Fabriktheater, Zurich, in 2021. The theatrical context enabled me to

engage with the topic of masculinities more precisely and sometimes more explicitly, exploring Italianness and the male body through various means (video, choreography, text, interaction with my sculpture as props, soundscapes, songs, a lecture, audience interaction and costumes).

The role of Elia Meier, the second performer, allowed me to address more clearly the dynamics of intergenerational masculinities. The gaze that we exchanged in *AN* exposed the subtle line between homoeroticism and homosociality. And whereas in my white cube performance/activations, the male body signified only in relation to the sculptural works and only for the duration of the activation, in the theatre context, I was able to give the male body a pivotal role. Thanks to the immersion experience for the audience, enhanced by a lighting system and proper acoustics, I could engage more extensively with the text – even though the conceptual dichotomy of stage and audience prevented the proximity that characterised *Achilles Heel.* My Fine Arts background gave me the advantage of performing on stage without acting and enabled me to develop the materiality of my sculptures as different props, while asserting a nonlinear narration with sufficient abstraction. The abundance of media in the theatrical performance was meant to reach the same opulence of materials and shapes observable in my sculptural practice. The massive visual and sonic apparatus on stage did not permit the text to dominate the performance. *AN*'s starting point is *Ti metto a novanta gradi*, TMAG, a set of gestures that mimic doggy-style intercourse, used by some Italian men to emasculate other men and boost their own masculinity. TMANG was informed by the auto ethnographical research on broken, white working-class masculinities that I conducted while working as a technician for a gas company in Padua. In *AN*, I exposed the so-called cycles of crisis or loops of masculinisation and emasculation.

On the one hand, feminisation is the primary tool used by men and women to emasculate weaker men. It manifests in questioning sexual potency and, at the same time, productivity, degree of independence and emotional stability. What has emerged with the advent of the so-called "new man" in the nineties is the strategy of avoiding the threat of emasculation by embodying femininity at different levels. As Tania Modleski argues, "male power is consolidated through these cycles of crisis and resolution, whereby men ultimately deal with the threat of female power by incorporating it" (Modleski 1991, 7). While still perceived as hegemonic, the so-called normative, traditional forms of masculinity have been superseded by masculinities that find more subtle strategies to deal with the so-called cycle of crisis. As with my earlier purely sculptural work, *AN* reveals the spectrum of gender that a biological male can perform regardless of the division between normative and non-normative.

I developed the performance over five independent scenes, where other questions related more specifically to Italian masculinities emerged: the mama's boy trope, the warrior myth, and nostalgia. A parodic note was struck in *AN* by the series of grotesque characters that emerged during the performance. The theatrical medium allowed me to narrow the category of the male grotesque, exposing more precisely the behaviours, facial expressions and bodily gestures that embed the male in his corporeality. Highlighting grotesque male corporeality does not have to be considered a form of feminisation: it is rather an attempt to de-idealise the integrity of the male body. I nevertheless acknowledge that the category of the grotesque is entangled with power and that, as Michel Foucault pointed out, the grotesque might be used to enhance power rather than question it (Foucault 2003, 11). Italy has a tradition of grotesque political leaders, from Mussolini to Berlusconi, who more-or-less deliberately rendered themselves ridiculous and inadequate while maintaining undisputed sovereignty. The "pizza warrior" in *AN* embodies the ambivalence of the grotesque as a tool of power. Another challenge I faced in *AN* was the contradiction of using body gestures to drag the audience down to a corporeal level. In Italy, hand gestures, depending on the region, are relevant in varying degrees to social interaction. I used the TMANG gestures to focus on the male body as a national stereotype and as a grotesque character, to expose its ambivalence and nuances of violence and fragility; while acknowledging that their gestures are often used to emasculate Italian men by characterising them as intellectually inadequate. In this regard, I briefly introduced the fabrication of the image of the inadequate male Southerner, which took shape alongside the image of Italy as the manageable exotic during the Enlightenment, especially in the work of Romantic writers like Goethe. The hetero-image of Italian men as lazy, unreliable, theatrical, funny, family-dependent, and anti-modern individuals is still rooted among Northern Europeans. I showed this through analysis of the OBOS ad series about the Italian mama's boy stereotype. In *AN*, the mama's boy trope materialised as a sinister ritual of gratitude towards the bulky figure of the Mamma, confirming the stereotype and, at the same time, suggesting the awkwardness of when patriarchy turns into matriarchy. The hierarchy between white northern and southern masculinities reveals the power relationships within the allegedly monolithic white male category.

My practice has revealed that it is viable to construct – through sculpture, art performance, and theatre – more complex imagery of masculinities and male bodies than that associated with the binaries of normative and non-normative. Even though I am sceptical about the agency of art in the real world, some potential for change is undoubtedly created by valorising complexity through art practices, to avoid ghettoisation and polarisation and to

prevent the backlash of the more conservative forms of masculinity. However, the Zeitgeist of contemporary Western theatre and art scenes (the latter interfaced mostly with universities and museums, therefore less market-oriented) is far from accepting such a paradigm shift. It is strategically more convenient for them to maintain a system based on a clear dichotomy between the oppressors and the oppressed or marginalised. As Rosalind Krauss argues, "postmodernism is organized through the universe of terms that are felt to be in opposition within a cultural situation" (Krauss 1979, 43). The dogmatic approach of being non-something instead of embracing the complex constructs a continuous stream of precious and always new marginalised identities that find value in contrast with the neo-liberal framework within which the players are acting. To allow for complexity would subvert the process of negation and result in the disappearance of a clear (white, male) category of oppressor. Pointing out nuances is not to claim that everyone can be a victim of oppression. My lived experience as a member of the Italian working class has shown me that there are white straight men who are socially and economically marginalised by more powerful and visible men while still being considered oppressors. I hope that such detail as I have provided serves to problematise the scenario, and that my practice as an artist demonstrates that such experience should not be too easily dismissed as an argument defending white male privilege.

Yet I am aware that the imagery I have produced, once in circulation, is out of my control. My intentions might therefore be misinterpreted, especially given the fact that my visual and performative output tends to draw from the same aesthetic categories that generate the oversimplified discourse that I attempt to problematise. Indeed, soft sculptures and shiny textiles are automatically perceived as queer. Consequently, I have received appreciation because I have "deconstructed" (a term that I abhor) the white straight man trope. At the same time, other colleagues have criticised, for instance, the pizza warrior character, because it reproduces an image of violence and aggression. My sense is that my audience generally does not take sufficiently into account the parodic and grotesque elements that emerge from my practice. Incongruity in such a polarised context, it seems, needs to be oversimplified either for or against the hegemonic cultural discourse. Receiving contradictory feedback is a normal consequence of exposing your work publicly. On the other hand, this feedback reveals that the complexity and ambivalence of my practice seem not to belong to this Zeitgeist.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Abrams, Loney. 2018. *Artspace.* https://www.artspace.com/magazine/art_101/close_look/pop-art-ripoffs-the-3-yayoi-kusama-artworks-that-warhol-oldenburg-and-samaras-copied-in-the-60s-55636.

Adamson, Glenn. 2007. *Thinking Through Craft.* New York: Berg.

Adamson, Glenn. 2014. "Soft Power." In *Fiber: Sculpture 1960–Present*, edited by Jenelle Porter. New York: Prestel. Np.

Adorno, Theodor W. 1965. "Functionalism Today." https://thecharnelhouse.org/2011/11/19/theodor-adornos-functionalism-today-1965/

Adorno, Theodor W. 1999. *Aesthetic Theory.* London: Athlone Press.

Adorno, Theodor W. 2002. *Essays on Music.* Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Agnew, John. 1995. "The Rhetoric of Regionalism: The Northern League in Italian Politics, 1983-94." *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 20, no. 2: 156-172.

Agresta, Angelene. 2015. *Vocedinewyork.* https://lavocedinewyork.com/en/2015/03/15/when-art-speaks-italian-exploring-the-contemporary-between-cima-and-high-line-art/.

Ahmed, Sara. 2008. "Some Preliminary Remarks on the Founding Gestures of the 'New Materialism.'" *European Journal of Women's Studies* 15: 23-39.

Aikema, Bernard, Fernando Checa Cremades, and Claudio Salsi. 2022. *Bosch e un altro rinascimento.* https://www.artribune.com/mostre-evento-arte/bosch-e-un-altro-rinascimento/

Alaimo, Stacy, and Susan Hekman. 2008. *Material Feminisms.* Bloomington, IA: Indiana University Press.

Allen, Jane. 1972. "Unraveling the Weavers." *Chicago Tribune* 25 October.

Alvizu, Josh. 2016. "Simultaneism." https://www.rem.routledge.com/articles/simultaneism-simultaneisme.

Aristophanes. 2008. *Clouds.* Trans. Jan Johnston. Arlington, VA: Richer Resources Publications.

Arndt, Astrid. 2007. "North South." In *Imagology: The Cultural Construction and Literary Representation of National Characters: a Critical Survey*, edited by Manfred Beller and Joep Leerssen. New York: Rodopi.

Auther, Elissa. 2002. "Classification and Its Consequences: The Case of 'Fiber Art.'" *American Art* 16, no. 3: 2-9.

Bachet, Tifaine. 2020. "Parody and Femininity in British Surrealism (Ithell Colquhoun and Leonora Carrington)." *Polysèmes* 23: 1-14.

Baer, John. 2008. *Are We Free? Psychology and Free Will.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Bakhtin, Mikhail. 1982. *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays.* Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.

Bakhtin, Mikhail. 1984. *Rabelais and His World.* Bloomington, IA: Indiana University Press.

Balibar, Étienne. 2015. Interview with Grèce Hebdo. "The Relations Greece and Europe Need" (Part II). https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/2086-etienne-balibar-the-relations-greece-and-europe-need-part-ii

Bankes, Ariane. 2007. "The Transvestite Potter from Essex." *The Spectator* 07 July. https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/the-transvestite-potter-from-essex-/.

Barad, Karen. 2015. Cited in *Materiality*, edited by Petra Lange-Berndt. London: Whitechapel Gallery.

Barnett, Pennina. 1999. "Folds, Fragments and Surfaces: Towards a Poetics of Cloth." In *The Textile Reader*, edited by Jessica Hemmings. London: Berg. 182-190.

Bauer, Mark. 2012. " Auch ich in Arkadien? The Allure of Italy for the German Traveller in Goethe's *Italienische Reise*, Eichendorff's *Aus dem Leben eines Taugenichts* and

Heine's *Reise von München nach Genua*." *Publications of the English Goethe Society*, 81, no. 3:178-194.
Beebee, Thomas O. 2002. "Ways of Seeing Italy: Landscapes of Nation in Goethe's *Italienische Reise* and Its Counter-Narratives." *Monatshefte* 94, no. 3: 322-345.
Bellassai, Sandro. 2011. "Il Nocciolo Politico Del Desiderio Maschile." *Il Manifesto*, 8. February.
Belpoliti, Marco. 2009. *Il Corpo Del Capo.* Milan: Guanda.
Bennetts, Leslie. 1984. "Italian Theatre Festival Opening at La Mama." *The New York Times*, 6 September.
Berndt, Petra Lange, ed. 2015. *Materiality.* Whitechapel Gallery: Documents of Contemporary Art. Boston: MIT Press.
Bernini, Lorenzo. 2017. *Queer Apocalypses: Elements of Antisocial Theory.* London: Palgrave Macmillan.
Bertrand, Gilles. 2020. "Venice Carnival from the Middle Ages to the Twenty-First Century: A Political Ritual Turned 'Consumer Rite'?" *Journal of Festive Studies* 2: 77-104.
Bhabha, Homi K. 1994. *The Location of Culture.* London: Routledge.
Bishop, Claire. 2018. "Black Box, White Cube, Gray Zone: Dance Exhibitions and Audience Attention." *TDR: The Drama Review* 62: 22-42.
Blechner, Mark J. 2018. *The Mindbrain and Dreams: An Exploration of Dreaming, Thinking, and Artistic Creation.* London: Routledge.
Bollati, Giulio. 1996. *L'Italiano: Il Carattere Nazionale Come Storia E Come Invenzione.* Torino: Einaudi.
Bolton, Andrew. 2019. *Camp: Notes on Fashion.* New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art.
Botto, Matteo. 2022. "Gender Studies in Italy: Past, Present and Future of a Still Open Challenge." *AboutGender* 11, no. 21: 295-345.
Bowman, Ned A. 1966. "Investing a Theatrical Ideal: Wagner's Bayreuth 'Festspielhaus'." *Educational Theatre Journal* 18: 429-438.
Boym, Svetlana. 2002. *The Future of Nostalgia.* New York: Basic Books.
Braidotti, Rosi. 2002. "Becoming Woman, or Sexual Difference Revisited." In Rosi Braidotti, *Metamorphoses: Towards a Materialist Theory of Becoming*. Cambridge and Malden: Polity Press. 11-64.
Brayton, Sean. 2007. "MTV's Jackass: Transgression, Abjection and the Economy of White Masculinity." *Journal of Gender Studies* 16, no. 1: 57-72.
Brigard, Felipe De. 2017. "Nostalgia and Mental Simulation." In *The Moral Psychology of Sadness*, edited by Anna Gotlib. Washington: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.
Brod, Harry. 1987. *The Making of Masculinities.* (Routledge Revivals: The New Men's Studies. London: Routledge.
Burke, Peter. 1982. "Le carnaval de Venise. Esquisse pour une histoire de longue durée." In *Les jeux à la Renaissance*, edited by Ph. Ariès and J.-Cl. Margolin. Paris: Vrin 55-63.
Burke, Tarana. 2022. *MeToo.* https://metoomvmt.org/get-to-know-us/history-inception/.
Butler, Judith. 1990. *Gender Trouble.* New York: Routledge.
Butler, Judith. 1993. *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex.* New York: Routledge.
Cecchini, Dario. 2021. "Experiencing the Conflict: The Rationality of Ambivalence." *J Value Inquiry*. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10790-021-09859-1.
Candy, Linda. 2006. "Creativity and Cognition." https://www.creativityandcognition.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/04/PBR-Guide-1.1-2006.pdf.
Cartwright, Mark. 2021. "Charon." *Worldhistory.* https://www.worldhistory.org/Charon/#:~:text=Charon%20is%20a%20figure%20from,the%20mouth%20of%20the%20deceased.

Cohen, Jeffrey Jerome. 1996. *Monster Theory: Reading Culture.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
Conley, Katharine. 2013. *Surrealist Ghostliness.* Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.
Connell, R. W. 2005. *Masculinities.* 2nd ed. London: Routledge.
Connell, R. W., and James W. Messerschmidt. 2005. "Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept." *Gender and Society* 19, no. 6: 829-859.
Conover, Roger. 2022. "The MIT Press Writing Art Series." https://mitpress.mit.edu/books/series/writing-art.
Cormick, Carlo Mac. 1990. "Dorothea Tanning." *Bomb Magazine* 1 October. https://bombmagazine.org/articles/dorothea-tanning/.
Cornwall, Andrea, and Nancy Lindisfarne. 1994. *Dislocating Masculinity Comparative Ethnographies.* London: Routledge.
Courtenay, WH. 2000. Constructions of masculinity and their influence on men's well-being: a theory of gender and health. Soc Sci Med. May;50(10):1385-401. doi: 10.1016/s0277-9536(99)00390-1. PMID: 10741575.
Crenshaw, Kimberle. 1989. "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics." *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 1, no. 8: 139-167.
Cuniberti, Liv. 2022. "La Biennale: The Witch's Cradle." https://www.labiennale.org/en/art/2022/witchs-cradle/dorothea-tanning.
Davis, Noela. 2009. "New Materialism and Feminism's Anti-Biologism: A Response to Sara Ahmed." *European Journal of Women's Studies* 16, no. 1: 67-80.
Dictionary Cambridge, s.v. "grotesque," https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/grotesque.
Dictionary Cambridge, s.v. "irony," https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/irony.
Demetriou, Demetrakis Z. 2001. "Connell's Concept of Hegemonic Masculinity: A Critique." *Theory and Society* 30, no. 3: 337-361.
Domani, America. 2022. *America Domani.* https://americadomani.com/entertainment/10-of-the-most-streamed-italian-songs-on-spotify/.
Dorrian, Mark. 2014. "Museum Atmospheres: Notes on Aura, Distance and Affect." *The Journal of Architecture* 19, no. 2: 1-15.
Drewes, Kirsten. 2021. "Conflicting Resonances: Soft Forms and Materials in Contemporary Art." PhD Diss. University of New South Wales. https://unsworks.unsw.edu.au/entities/publication/0f80c33c-6eef-4116-a9fa-a3437f240763.
Dunford, Michael. 2008. "After the Three Italies, the (Internally Differentiated) North-South Divide: Analysing Regional and Industrial Trajectories." *Annales de Géographie* no. 664: 85-114.
Eagly, Alice H., and Mary E. Kite. 1987. "Are Stereotypes of Nationalities Applied to Both Women and Men? "*Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 53, no. 3: 451-462.
Epps, Philomena. 2020. "On Allies and Imposters: Sophie Jung." *Mousse Magazine* 29 Oct. https://www.moussemagazine.it/magazine/sophie-jung-philomena-epps-2020/.
Erőss, Nikolett. 2018. "White Cube." *Tranzit Curatorial Dictionary.* http://tranzit.org/curatorialdictionary/index.php/dictionary/white-cube/.
Finbow, Acatia. 2018. "Franz öhard Walther." *Tate Research Publications.* https://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/performance-at-tate/case-studies/franz-erhard-walther.
Flannigan-Saint-Aubin, Arthur. 1994. "The Male Body and Literary Metaphors for Masculinity." In *Theorizing Masculinities*, edited by Harry Brod and Michael Kaufman. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications. 239-259.

Foucault, Michel. 1997. “Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias.” In *Rethinking Architecture: A Reader in Cultural Theory*, edited by Neil Leach. New York: Routledge. 330-336.
Foucault, Michel. 2003. *Abnormal Lectures at the College de France 1974-1975.* New York: Verso.
Fournier, Valérie, and Warren Smith. 2006. “Scripting Masculinity.” *Ephemera* 6, no. 2: 141-162.
Fraser, Nancy. 1997. *Justice Interruptus: Critical Reflections on the 'Postsocialist' Condition*. New York: Routledge.
Gannon, Megan. 2019. “Can DNA Solve the Mystery of Europe’s Pointy Skulls?” *National Geographic* 21 August. https://www.nationalgeographic.com/culture/article/can-dna-solve-mystery-europe-pointy-skulls.
Gardiner, Judith Kegan. 2002. *Masculinity Studies and Feminist Theory.* New York: Columbia University Press.
Gardner, Allan. 2020. “How Divisive Artist Jordan Wolfson Makes Controversy an Art Form.” *Daze Digital* 11 Feb. https://www.dazeddigital.com/art-photography/article/47851/1/divisive-artist-jordan-wolfson-controversy-an-art-form-artists-friends-racists.
Garlick, Steve. 2017. “The Return of Nature: Feminism, Hegemonic Masculinities, and New Materialisms.” *Men and Masculinities* 22, no. 2: 380-403.
Gasbarrone, Lisa. 1994. " “The Locus for the Other." In *A Dialogue of Voices,* 1-20. University of Minnesota Press.
Gibbs, Raymond W, Bryant, Gregory A., & Colston, Herbert L. 2014. “Where is the humor in verbal irony?” *Humor - International Journal of Humor Research*, 27(4), 575-595.
Giménez, Martha E. 2018. *Marx, Women, and Capitalist Social Reproduction: Marxist-Feminist Essays.* Leiden: Brill.
Godby, Robert, and Stephanie B. Anderson. 2016. *Greek Tragedy, European Odyssey: The Politics and Economics of the Eurozone Crisis.* Opladen: Barbara Budrich.
Goethe, Johann Wolfgang. 2017. *Italienische Reise.* (1816-1817). Berlin: Nikol.
Goldberg, Rose Lee. 2011. *Performance Art from Futurism to the Present.* 3rd. ed. London: Thames and Hudson.
Goodman, Alan H. 2013. “Bringing Culture into Human Biology and Biology Back into Anthropology.” *American Anthropologist* 115, no. 3: 359-373.
Graver, David. 1995. *The Aesthetics of Disturbance: Anti-art in Avant-garde Drama*. University of Michigan Press.
Grosz, Elizabeth. 1994. *Volatile Bodies: Towards a Corporeal Feminism.* London: Routledge.
Groys, Boris. 2012. “Marcel Duchamp’s Absolute Art.” *Mousse Magazine* 1 Dec. https://www.moussemagazine.it/magazine/boris-groys-marcel-duchamps-absolute-art-2012.
Haddon, Genia Pauli. 1988. *Body Metaphors: Releasing God-Feminine in Us All.* N.p.: Crossroad Pub.
Halberstam, Judith. 1998. *Female Masculinity.* Durham: Duke University Press.
Handwiki. N.d. “Biology: Hybrid.” https://handwiki.org/wiki/Biology:Hybrid#Taxonomy.
Harpham, G.G. 1976. “The Grotesque: First Principles.” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 34, no. 4: 461-468.
Hedinger, Johannes, M. 2011. “Postironie.” *Kunstforum International* no. 2013: 112-125. https://www.kunstforum.de/artikel/postironie/
Hember, Polly. 2019. “Breaking Down Doors with Dorothea Tanning.” *Decorating Dissidence* 19 May. https://decoratingdissidence.com/2019/05/17/dorothea-tanning-review/.

Hilchey, Tim. 1997. “Northern Italy Separatists Seize Bell Tower in St. Mark’s Square. *New York Times,* 9 May. https://www.nytimes.com/1997/05/09/world/northern-italy-separatists-seizex-bell-tower-in-st-mark-s-square.html.
Huffington Post. 2018. “Silvio Berlesconi: Nella Mia Villa in Sardegna Cresce l’Erba del Viagra.” *Huffington Post* 9 January. https://www.huffingtonpost.it/2018/01/16/silvio-berlusconi-nella-mia-villa-in-sardegna-cresce-lerba-del-viagra_a_23334959/.
Huysseune, Michel. 2000. “Masculinity and Secessionism in Italy: An Assessment.” *Nations and Nationalism* 6, no. 4: 591-610.
Jordan, Peter. 2010. “In Search of Pantalone and the Origins of the Commedia dell’Arte.” *Revue Internationale de Philosophie* 252: 207-232.
Kauffman, LA. 1990. “The anti-politics of identity”. Social. Rev. 90(l):67-80
Kaprow, Alam. 1965. “A statement.” In *Happenings 1965*, edited by Michael Kirby. London: Dutton.
Karkazis, Katrina. 2019. “The Art of Medicine: The Misuses of ‘Biological Sex’.” *Lancet* 394: 1898-99.
Kayser, Wolfgang. 1963. *The Grotesque in Art and Literature.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
Kazanjian, Dodie. 2022. “Cecilia Alemani.” *Vogue* 18 April. https://www.vogue.com/article/cecilia-alemani-2022-venice-biennale-interview.
Kelley, Jacob, and Andrea Arce-Trigatti. 2022. “Heteropatriarchy.” In *Encyclopedia of Queer Studies in Education*, edited by Kamden K. Strunk and Stephanie Anne Shelton. Leiden: Brill. 256-259.
Kerfoot, Deborah, and Stephen Whitehead. 1998. “‘Boys own’ stuff: Masculinity and the Management of Further Education.” *The Sociological Review* 46, no. 3: 436-457.
Kershaw, Baz. 2008. *Theatre Ecology: Environments and Performance Events.* Cambridge University Press.
Kirby, Vicki. 2002. “When All That Is Solid Melts into Language: Judith Butler and the Question of Matter.” *International Journal of Sexuality and Gender Studies* 7: 265-280.
Korff, Gottfried. 1999. “Reflections on the Museum.” *Journal of Folklore Research* 36, no. 2/3: 267-270.
Kostelanetz, Richard. 2002. *Conversing with Cage.* London: Routledge.
Kozloff, Joyce, and Valerie Jaudon. 1978. “Art Hysterical: Notions of Progress and Culture.” *Heresies* 4: 38-42.
Kraidy, Marwan M. 2013. “Hybridity in Cultural Globalization.” *Communication Theory* 12, no. 3: 316-339.
Krauss, Rosalind. 1999. *A Voyage on the North Sea.* London: Thames & Hudson.
Krauss, Rosalind. 1979. “Sculpture in the Expanded Field.” *October* 8: 30-44.
Krauss, Rosalind, and Yve-Alain Bois. 1997. *Formless: A User’s Guide.* New York: Zone Books.
Kreuz, Roger.2020. “Irony and Sarcasm”. United States: MIT Press.
Kreuz, Roger, and Robert Richard. 1993. “On satire and parody: the importance of being ironic”. *Metaphor. Symbol* 8, 97–109
Kristeva, Julia. 1982. *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection.* New York: Columbia University Press.
Kruger, Steven F., and Glenn Burger. 2002. *Queering the Middle Ages.* Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
Lübker, Henrik. 2012. “The Method of In-between in the Grotesque and the Works of Leif Lage.” *Continent* 2, no. 3: 44-55.
Lash, John. 1995. *The Hero: Manhhood and Power.* Thames and Hudson Ltd. London.
Latour, Bruno. 1993. *We Have Never Been Modern.* Boston, MA: Harvard University Press.

Latour, Bruno, and Adam Lowe. 2010. "The Migration of the Aura or How to Explore the Original Through Its Facsimiles." In *Switching Codes,* edited by Thomas Bartscherer. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
Leerssen, Joep. 2016. "Imagology: On Using Ethnicity to Make Sense of the World." *Revue d'Etudes Ibériques et Ibéro-Américaines* 10: 1-19.
Lehmann, Hans-Thies. 2006. *Postdramatic Theatre.* London: Routledge.
Levi-Strauss, Monique. 1976. "Dorothea Tanning: Soft Sculpture." *American Fabrics and Fashions* 108: 68-69.
Luke, Ben. 2018. "Don't Call Me a Woman Artist." *The Artnewspaper* 11 Feb. https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2018/11/02/dont-call-me-a-woman-artist-overlooked-surrealists-plus-klimtschiele.
Lupu, Mircea-Ioan. 2018. *Grotesque as Aesthetic Identity: From Medieval Illumination to Contemporary Art.* 8th edition of the International Conference, European Integration: Realities and Perpsectives.
Lusiardi, Federica. 2017. *Inexhibit.* https://www.inexhibit.com/case-studies/faust-by-anne-imhof-the-german-pavilion-at-the-venice-art-biennale-2017/.
Luzzi, Joseph. 2008. *Romantic Europe and the Ghost of Italy.* New Haven, CN: Yale University Press.
Machado, Arlindo Ribeiro. 2011. "Television after the Hecatomb." *E-Compós* 13, no. 2.
Made Murano Glass. 2021. https://www.mademuranoglass.com/short-introduction-to-murano-glass-chandeliers/.
Marchetti, Silvia. 2015. "Italian Macho: Still Sexy?" *Ozy,* 15 Oct. https://www.ozy.com/around-the-world/italian-macho-still-sexy/62994/.
Martone, Eric. 2016. *Italian Americans: The History and Culture of a People.* Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO.
McEntee, Billy, and Cam Cronin. 2019. "Defining 'Straight Camp.'" *Observer* 25 April. https://observer.com/2019/04/defining-straight-camp-susan-sontag-met-gala-theme/.
McLeod, Saul. 2018. "Cognitive Dissonance." *Simply Psychology.* https://www.simplypsychology.org/cognitive-dissonance.html.
Melcher, Ralph. 2002. *Keith Haring: Heaven and Hell.* Berlin: Hatje Cantz Publishers. https://www.haring.com/!/selected_writing/heaven-and-hell.
Melzer, Annabelle Henkin. 1973. "Dada Performance at the Cabaret Voltaire." *Artforum* 12, no. 3: 74-78. https://www.artforum.com/print/197309/dada-performance-at-the-cabaret-voltaire-37407.
Merlo, Francesco. 2014. "Secessionisti." *La Repubblica.* 3 April. https://www.repubblica.it/cronaca/2014/04/03/news/reato_di_farsa-82602424/.
Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, s.v. "grotesque," https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/grotesque.
Meyer-Thoss, Christiane. 2016. *Louise Bourgeois: Designing for Free Fall.* New York: Distributed Art Pub Inc.
Minissale, Gregory. 2015. "The Invisible within: Dispersing Masculinity in Art." *Angelaki Journal of the Theoretical Humanities* 20, no.1: 71-83.
Mittman, Asa Simon, and Susan M. Kim. 2009. "Monsters and the Exotic in Early Medieval England." *Literature Compass* 6, no. 2: 332-348.
Modleski, Tania. 1991. *Feminism Without Women: Culture and Criticism in a "Postfeminist" Age.* New York: Routledge.
Moller, Michael. 2007. "Exploiting Patterns: A Critique of Hegemonic Masculinity." *Journal of Gender Studies* 16: 263-276.
Montesquieu. 2001. *The Spirit of Laws.* 1748. N.p.: Batoche Books.
Morris, Penelope, and Perry Willson. 2018. *La Mamma: Interrogating a National Stereotype.* New York: Springer.

Nabokov, Vladimir. 1973. "*Strong Opinions"* New York: McGraw Hill.
Neff, Renfreu. 1984. "Benvenuto: New York-Italy by Falso Movimento, Krypton and La Gaia Scienza Review." *Performing Arts Journal* 8, no. 3: 87-91.
Newfield, Christopher. 1989. "The Politics of Male Suffering: Masochism and Hegemony in the American Renaissance." *Differences* 1, no. 3: 55-87.
Nietzsche, Friedrich. 1996. *On the Genealogy of Morals (Zur Genealogie der Moral).* 1887. Translated by Douglas Smith. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
O'Brien, Sara Ashley. 2019. "Tinder Adds Sexual Orientation Feature." *CNN Business.* 4 June. https://edition.cnn.com/2019/06/04/tech/tinder-glaad-sexual-orientation/index.html.
O'Doherty, Brian. 1986. *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space.* Santa Monica: Lapis Press.
O'Hagan, Sean. 2010. "Interview with Marina Abramovic." *The Guardian.* 3 October. https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2010/oct/03/interview-marina-abramovic-performance-artist.
Orsina, Giovanni. 2014. *Berlusconism and Italy: A Historical Interpretation.* Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan.
Parker, Rozsika. 1984. *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine.* London: The Women's Press.
Parr, Adrian. 2010. *Deleuze Dictionary.* Rev. ed. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
Perry, Grayson. 2018. "*Grayson Perry*." Saatchi Gallery, London. https://www.saatchigallery.com/artist/grayson_perry.
Poggi, Isabella. 2008. "Iconicity in Different Types of Gestures." *Gesture* 8, no. 1*:* 45–61.
Portelli, Alessandro. 2008. *Acciai Speciali. Terni, la ThyssenKrupp, la Globalizzazione.* Rome: Donzelli.
Potts, Alex. 1994. *Flesh and the Ideal: Winckelmann and the Origins of Art History.* New Haven, CN: Yale University Press.
Power, Cormac. 2008. *Presence in Play: A Critique of Theories of Presence in the Theatre.* Amsterdam: Rodopi.
Preciado, Paul B. 2020. *An Apartment on Uranus Chronicles of the Crossing.* Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
Proa TV. 2001. *Proa TV channel.* https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=32bandih4TQ.
QuotidianoNazionale. 2011. *Quotidiano Nazionale.* https://www.quotidiano.net/cronaca/2011/08/06/558072-cittadella_sindaco_leghista_vieta_kebab_fast_food.shtml.
Rabkin, Gerald. 1994. "The Sense of an Ending." *Performing Arts Journal* 46: 75-85.
Randall, Lilian. 1966. *Images in the Margins of Gothic Manuscripts.* Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
Reich, Jacqueline. 2004. *Beyond the Latin Lover: Marcello Mastroianni, Masculinity, and Italian Cinema.* Bloomington, IA: Indiana University Press.
Rigoletto, Sergio. 2014. *Masculinity and Italian Cinema: Sexual Politics, Social Conflict and Male Crisis in the 1970s.* Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
Rochlitz, Rainer. 1996. *The Disenchantment of Art: The Philosophy of Walter Benjamin.* London: Guilford Press.
RosenthaI, Angela. 1996. *Angelika Kauffmann: Bildnismalerei im 18. Jahrhundert.* Berlin: Reimer.
Rowe, Kathleen. 1995. *The Unruly Woman: Gender and the Genres of Laughter.* Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.
Russell, John. 1989. "Art View: Touching All the Bases of Sculpture." *New York Times,* 9 April.
Russo, Mary. 1995. *The Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess and Modernity.* London: Routledge.

Rutherford, Jonathan. 1990. “The Third Space: Interview with Homi Bhabha.” In *Identity, Community, Culture, Difference*, edited by Jonathan Rutherford. London: Lawrence and Wishart.
Sangiovanni, Andrea, and Heloise Finch-Boyer. 2013. “Italian Working Men’s Masculinities in the Latter Half of the Twentieth Century.” *Clio: Women, Gender, History* 38: 95-119.
Sax, Leonard. 2002. “How Common Is Intersex? A Response to Anne Fausto-Sterling.” *Journal of Sex Research* 39, no. 3: 174-178.
The Scattered Pelican. 2018. “We Are All in Our Private Traps: Transphobia in Hitchcock’s *Psycho*.” https://thescatteredpelican.com/2018/04/29/we-are-all-in-our-private-traps-transphobia-in-hitchcocks-psycho/.
Schippert, Claudia. 2007. “Can Muscles be Queer? Reconsidering the Transgressive Hyper-Built Body.” *Journal of Gender Studies* 16, no. 2: 155-171.
Searle, Adrian, ed. 1993. *Talking Art 1 / Chris Burden [and others].* London: Institute of Contemporary Arts.
Seidler, Victor. 2011. *The Achilles Heel Reader (Routledge Revivals): Men, Sexual Politics and Socialism.* 1991. London: Routledge.
Sfmoma [*San Francisco Museum of Modern Art*]. 2015. “Louise Bourgeois.” https://www.sfmoma.org/watch/louise-bourgeois-work-isnt-always-feminist/.
Sharif, Raihan. 2016. “Beyond Metropolises: Hybridity in a Transnational Context.” *disClosure: A Journal of Social Theory* 25, no. 1: 157-173.
Skjoldager-Nielsen, Kim, and Joshua Edelman. 2014. “Liminality.” *Ecumenica* 7, no. 1-2: 33-40.
Smith, Roberta. 2021. “Pattern & Decoration: A Movement That Still Has Legs.” *New York Times,* 5 August.
Sobchack, Vivian. 2004. *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture.* Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
Sofer, Andrew. 2003. *The Stage Life of Props.* Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.
Sontag, Susan. 1966. *Against Interpretation.* New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
Stead, Chloe. 2019. *The Stage Life of Props.* Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.
“From Imaginary Waffles to Patriotic Songs, Performance Artist Sophie Jung is a Master of Misdirection.” Frieze Magazine, 5 February. https://www.frieze.com/article/imaginary-waffles-patriotic-songs-performance-artist-sophie-jung-master-misdirection.
Stephens, Elizabeth. 2014. “Feminism and New Materialism: The Matter of Fluidity.” *Interalia: A Journal of Queer Studies.* January: 185-202.
Stewart, Susan. 1999. “From the Museum of Touch.” In *Material Memories*, edited by Christopher Breward, Jeremy Aynsley and Marius Kwint. Oxford: Berg. 17-36.
Steyerl, Hito. 2021. “Response.” In *The Postresearch Condition*, edited by von Henk Slager. Utrecht: Metropolis M. Books.
Stiles, Kristine, and Peter Selz. 1995. *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art: A Sourcebook of Artists’ Writings (California Studies in the History of Art).* Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
Stock, Kathleen. 2021. *Material Girls: Why Reality Matters for Feminism.* Hachette, UK: Fleet.
Stross, Brian. 1999. “The Hybrid Metaphor: From Biology to Culture.” *The Journal of American Folklore* 112, no. 445: 254-267.
Sundari, Anitha, and Ruth Lewis. 2018. *Gender Based Violence in University Communities: Policy, Prevention and Educational Initiatives.* Bristol: Policy Press.

Sweet, Shannon. 2018. “Meet the Texas-Bred Dragon Lady.” *San Antonio Current.* 29 Oct. https://www.sacurrent.com/arts/meet-the-texas-bred-dragon-lady-tiamat-medusa-takes-body-modification-to-the-extreme-17105564.
Tasker, Yvonne. 2002. *Working Girls: Gender and Sexuality in Popular Cinema.* London: Routledge.
Ternullo, Dina. 2016. “Characters and Scenarios of Early Commedia dell’Arte.” *The Compleat Anachronist* 172: 1-63.
Thackara, Tess. 2019. “Why Contemporary Women Artists Are Obsessed with the Grotesque.” *Artsy,* 18 Jan. https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-contemporary-women-artists-obsessed-grotesque.
Thackara, Tess. 2020. “The Pattern and Decoration Movement Challenged the Machismo of Modernism.” *Artsy,* 13 Jan. https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-pattern-decoration-movement-challenged-machismo-modernism.
The Office Arts. https://www.theofficearts.com/portfolio/kentridge
Today. 2022. *Today,* 10 August. https://www.today.it/attualita/venezia-meno-50mila-abitanti.html.
Turner, Victor. 1967. “Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in *Rites de Passage*.” In *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press. 93-111.
Upchurch, Michael. 2015. “In Stitches: The Fabric-Based Art of Franz Erhard Walther.” *The Seattle Times,* 3 November. https://www.seattletimes.com/entertainment/visual-arts/in-stitches-the-fabric-based-performance-art-of-franz-erhard-walther/.
Vidal, Denis. 2014. “The Return of the Aura: Anish Kapoor: The Studio and the World.” In *Arts and Aesthetics in a Globalizing World*, edited by Raminder Kaur and Parul Dave Mukherji. London: Routledge.
Vitruvius. 1914. *De architectura.* C. 20 BC. Boston, MA: Harvard University Press.
Wagner, Monika. 2013. *Das Material der Kunst.* Munich: C.H.Beck.
Walsh, Fintan. 2007. “Fintan Walsh: The Erotics and Politics of Masochistic Self-Abjection in *Jackass*.” *Gender Forum: An Internet Journal for Gender Studies* 18: 41-62.
Washabaugh, William. 2001. Review of *Gesture in Naples and Gesture in Classical Antiquity* by Andrea de Jorio and Adam Kendon. *Language in Society* 30, no. 4: 652-655.
Watz, Anna. 2022. “Maternities: Dorothea Tanning’s Aesthetics of Touch.” *Aer History* 45, no. 1: 12-34.
Whannel, Garry. 2010. “Sport stars, narrativization and masculinities.” *Leisure Studies* 18, no. 3: 249-265.
Whitehead, Stephen M. 1998. “Hegemonic Masculinity Revisited.” *Gender, Work, and Organization* 6: 58-62.
Wikipedia. N.d. *Wikipedia.* https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lessico_dell%27omofobia.
Wikipedia. N.d. “Best-Selling Italian Music Artists.” *Wikipedia.* https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_estimated_best-selling_Italian_music_artists.
Wikipedia. N.d. “Silvio Berlusconi.” *Wikipedia.* https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Silvio_Berlusconi_prostitution_trial.
Willis, Paul. 1977. *Learning to Labour: How Working Class Kids Get Working Class Jobs.* New York: Columbia University Press.
Wright, Colin. 2021. “Sex Is Not a Spectrum.” *Reality’s Last Stand.* 1 Feb. https://www.realityslaststand.com/p/sex-is-not-a-spectrum.
Yonan, Michael. 2021. “The Materiality of Porcelain and the Interpretation of Ceramic Art.” *The Walters Journal* 75. https://journal.thewalters.org/volume/75/essay/the-materiality-of-porcelain-and-the-interpretation-of-ceramic-art/.
Young, Paul David. 2012. “Turning Theater into Art.” *PJA: A Journal of Performance and Art* 34: 169-182.

Zecca, Federico, and Angela Bianca Saponari. 2021. *Oltre l'inetto Rappresentazioni Plurali Della Mascolinità Nel Cinema Italiano.* Rome: Melteni.
Zilcosky, John. 2004. "The Writer as Nomad? The Art of Getting Lost." *Interventions* 6, no. 2: 229-241.

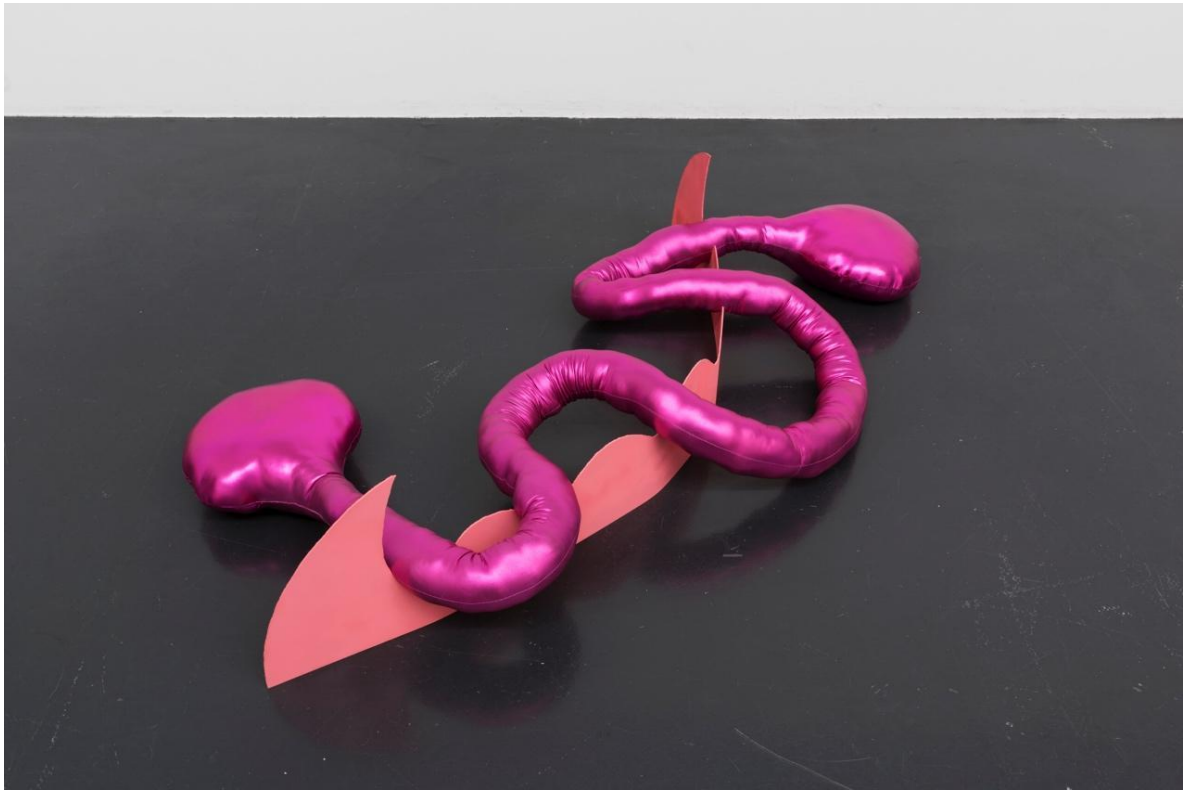
APPENDIX

I have gathered in the appendix images of the most relevant works that I have produced since 2018, to provide an exhaustive overview of my practice and the variety of contexts in which I have shown my projects.

I Was Shaking and It Was Fine (2018)
textile, padding, iron, ceramic, plaster, video, wood, performance, printed curtain
Photo: Stefan Jaeggi

This was my first solo show, where the topic of masculinities and the male body emerged symbolically through a series of sculptures that forms a single installation. The title suggested the will to face fear, anxiety and loss of control. Compared to more recent work, the performance was more informed by classic art performance tradition.











S.H.T.F. the Prologue / le Sauvage (2019)

45 minutes performance

Photo: Axel Crettenand at The Residency of Cabaret Voltaire Zurich, CH

performance documentation at The Residency ZH curated by Cabaret Voltaire

The myth of the frontier is still present in the narratives of white masculinity in crisis. According to this myth, the hero must leave civilisation behind and, in doing so, encounter the primitive in two important senses – internally and externally. The land beyond civilisation comes to represent both moral temptation and physical danger, and in winning both of these battles, through self-control and violence, the hero can return to civilisation spiritually restored. The piece is a parody of that myth and works on the ambivalence of the main character. On the one hand, the fear of being emasculated and the consequent reaction that aims to validate one's power. On the other hand, signs of fragility, awkwardness, and inadequacy. The performance is a sequence of actions and interactions, folk and pop songs, choreographies, short lectures, and sculpture activation. These accompany the audience in the paradoxical territories of masculinity in crisis. For instance, at a certain moment, I show a clip from Deliverance (John Bormann 1972) called *Duelling Banjos* that underlines the exoticisation of poor white people living in the South of the US. This is the regression stage that manifests through the encounter with the primitive. In another moment, I use the perfume Dior Sauvage to deconstruct the narration of the city guy who needs to reveal his untamed side.

S.H.T.F. le Sauvage is the prologue of S.H.T.F trilogy.







S.H.T.F. the Second Chapter (2019)
45 minutes performance
Photo: Christo Doherty

The last chapter of the trilogy SHTF, about apocalyptic manhood, is focused on the relationship between masculinity and melancholia.

Excerpt from the performance:

> *The time before the crisis, the so-called good old time, is ungraspable, once you get close, it goes backwards and then backwards again. Traditional forms of masculinities are based on that idealised time frame where things were going better, and males were fully in charge. This form of masculinity is always somewhere else, both in an imprecise spot in a forgotten past and in a dystopian future.*







I Tear Me Down Instead of Saying I Need You (2019)
Textile, padding, ceramic, wood, resin, polystyrene, bracelets and pins
Photo: Philip Frohwein

The work consists of two parts: one lies on the floor and the second is hung from the ceiling. This is one of my first attempts to develop a more complex assemblage of materials and shapes, in which the ornamental aspect comes to the fore.









When the Sky Was Full of Creamy Chainsaws (2020)
concrete, textile, ceramic, pearl clay, metal, 30 minutes performance,
second performer Magda Drozd
Photo: Axel Crettenand

This is a site-specific performance/sculpture developed inside the conference room of the headquarters of a law firm in Winterthur. The main topic of the work is the relationship between nostalgia and masculinity. Nostalgia is metaphorically presented as a sculpture that during the performance I dismember and activate. The paintings and the furniture in the room become part of the narration.



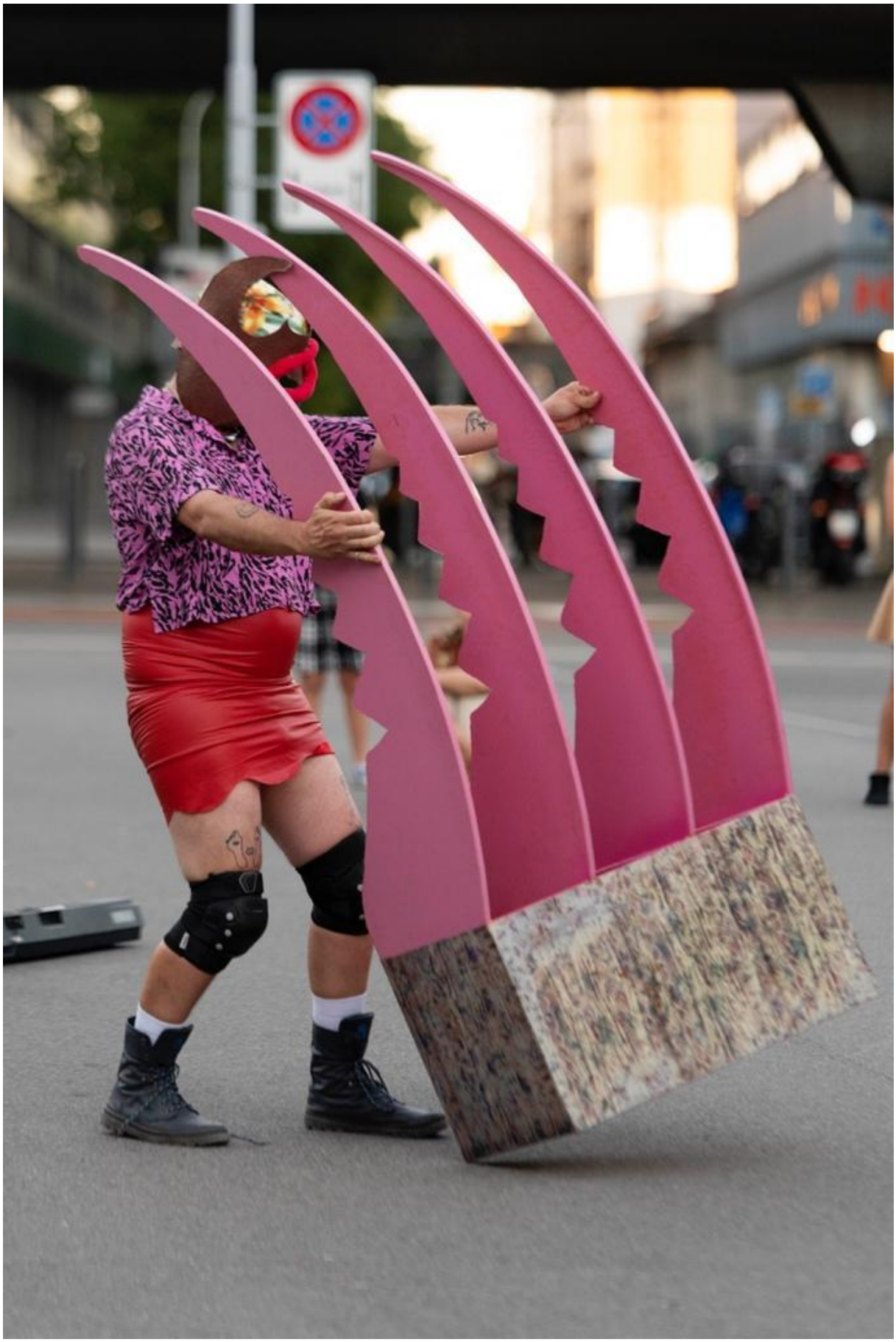




I Dragged out F.K. (2020)
Textile, padding, resin, iron, 30 minutes performance
Photo: Sebastian Lendenmann

I Dragged out F.K. is a sculpture and a performance at the same time. Zurich-based Italian artist Nicola Genovese uses the claw-shaped pink iron sculpture placed at Schiffbauplatz in Zurich as a prop for a scenic narration on the question of gender. In his sculptural performative pieces, Genovese deals with the socially ambivalent role of men. In doing so, he purposefully works with perspective shifts, thus thematising male self-perception, which is currently in crisis. The intervention at Schiffbauplatz focuses on the idea of the stronger sex as a threatening and harmful construct that still shapes our imagination. During his performance, the artist wears a crown that falls off his head, again and again, a parodic interpretation of hierarchical gender roles. In the act of over-staging, gender is not performed as a biological fact but as a normative role. As if in an exorcism ritual, the artist embalms, anoints, pushes and drags the pink painted claw. The sound produced by the friction between the iron and the asphalt is reminiscent of the soundscape of the classic eighties' horror movie, Nightmare on Elm Street. Dragged out of his cinematic nightmares into reality, Freddy Krueger (F.K.) is no longer invincible. Thus, the now vulnerable construct of masculinity, dragged by the artist turns to be a dangerous relic.
Christoph Doswald


NAZIS
RAUS



I Love the Skin You Are In (2022)
Textile, resin, metal, copper
200 x 55 x 50 cm
Photo: Brigham Baker

I Love the Skin You Are In is a site-specific sculpture that was installed in a forest near Winterthur on the occasion of a group show called Prison Break, organised by Hrüze Gegi. The metal arms hug the tree while strangling a body-shaped stuffed object. The face that emerges from the textile is one of the Boschian characters that populate my imagery.





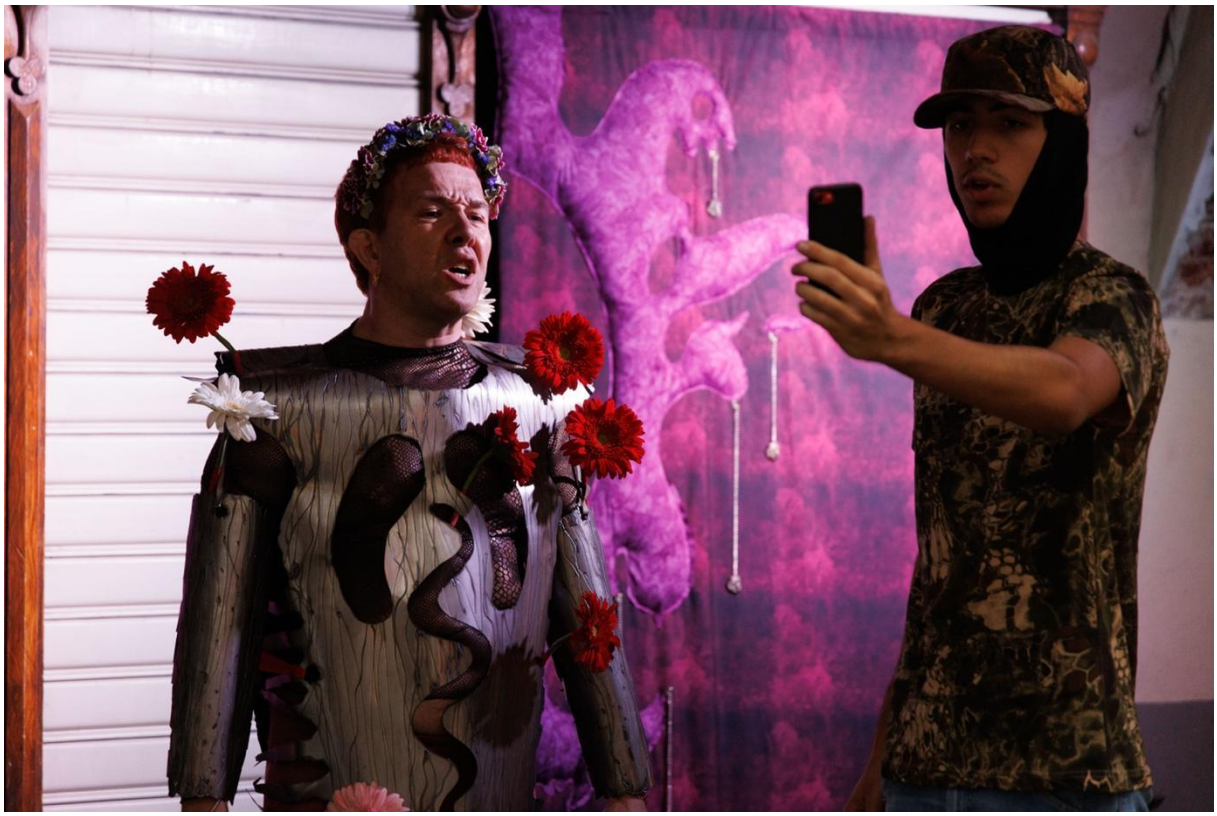
Backlash (2022)
Site-specific quilting tapestry, pewter, metal, flower
each 240 x 140cm
30 minutes performance with Niccolo L'Arco
Photo: Magda Drozd

*Backlash *2* has been produced for an Art festival in Cuneo IT after an artist's residence focused on a conversation with local handicraftsmen. I was paired with a tailor who developed his clothes as wearable sculptures. I was intrigued by his fashion approach, and after an inspiring exchange, I produced a quilting that I hung at the entrance of his shop in Cuneo's old town. The motif comes from a leftover of a mansion wall decoration which was located opposite the street. I have used the pre-existing wooden shop frame to frame the quilting that becomes the performance scenery. The performance started with a fictional story I told the audience about the motif that allegedly depicted one of the fantastic creatures that were secretly kept in the mansion's basement. The performance continued with a dressing ritual where the second performer placed a metal armour on my body piece by piece and then flowers. Ultimately, we sing the song *Tutta la vita* by Italian singer *Gazzelle*. The performance references the Tin man, one of the characters in the movie *Wizard of Oz* (1939)











Maciste (2022)
Textile, metal, pewter
110 x 90 x 30 cm
Photo: Nico Sebastian Meyer

The work *Maciste* is a sculpture representing my own confrontation with the social image of the virile man in the Italian context. Maciste is an extravagant fictional character who first appeared in the Italian movie *Cabiria* (1914), which was later adapted for a long series of Hollywood-made movies in the sixties. Maciste's commercialisation strengthens the image of the strong man, signalled by his big muscles and his incapability or unwillingness to show weakness. The most immediate reference is to the generation of Italian men, like my father, born after World War II. The stuffed object represents Maciste's arm. It lies downwards, in opposition to the phallic representation of virility and fertilisation used in pre-Christian artefacts and in the fascist era, which usually points towards the sun. At the same time, the sumptuous decorated metallic structure supports the floppy arm.









The following works are part of my solo show *Tinnitus*, which took place in 2022 at Material, an off-space in Zurich. Below is an excerpt from the text written by Swiss curator Camille Regli for the occasion.

> *The underworld and the realm of the dead are close to the terminology of the grotesque and the semantics of the monstrous. In medieval arts and literature, the 'deviants', queer or marginal characters, were often portrayed as fantastical or nightmarish beasts to emphasise their oddity and alienation from normative values. Often forced to live in the outskirts of society – in forests, oceans, caves – monsters were feared for their multiple selves, for their hybrid and transformative bodies, as well as for their antagonistic minds, which defied the hegemony. It's these multiple selves that Nicola Genovese's new series of works brings to the forefront. Researching on the topics of queerness, masculinity and gender roles is not new to Genovese. But rather than focusing on the othering, he explores the notions of juxtaposition and fragments, not only in regard to pieces and bodies but also to narratives. His fragments are set in scena to perform against normativity and linearity, with an attempt to go beyond 'queerness'. Genovese uses craft techniques such as ceramics, textiles, and decorative patterns as opposed to minimal, conceptual, male-dominated art forms. He also challenges – or purposely reinforces – gender stereotypes in blending dichotomies such as soft and hard; textiles and sharp metals; penetrating versus penetrated materials; coupling, rejecting, and encapsulating. Investigating the limits of the biological body in favour of fragmented selves, Genovese dives into the underworld to find an essentially alternative visual language and mythologisation.*

The Minstrel, the King and I (2022)

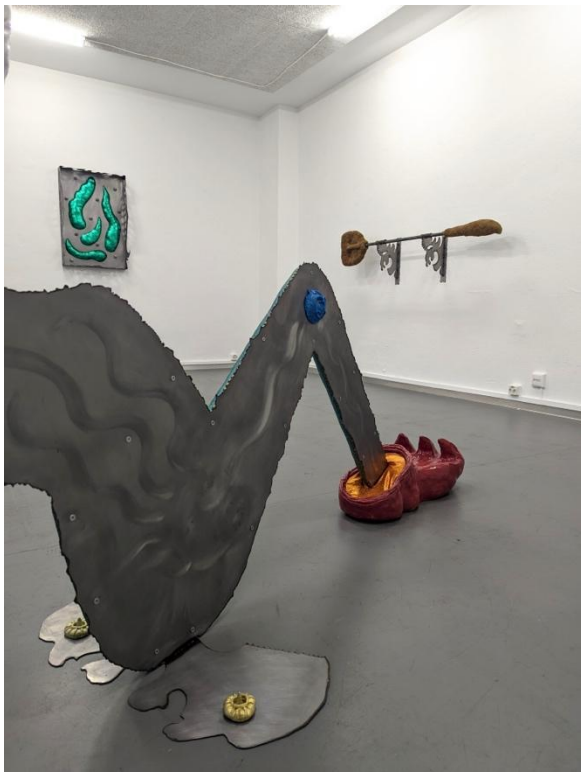
textile, metal, pewter, resin, ceramics

Photo: Nicola Genovese











Tinnitus *2 (2022)

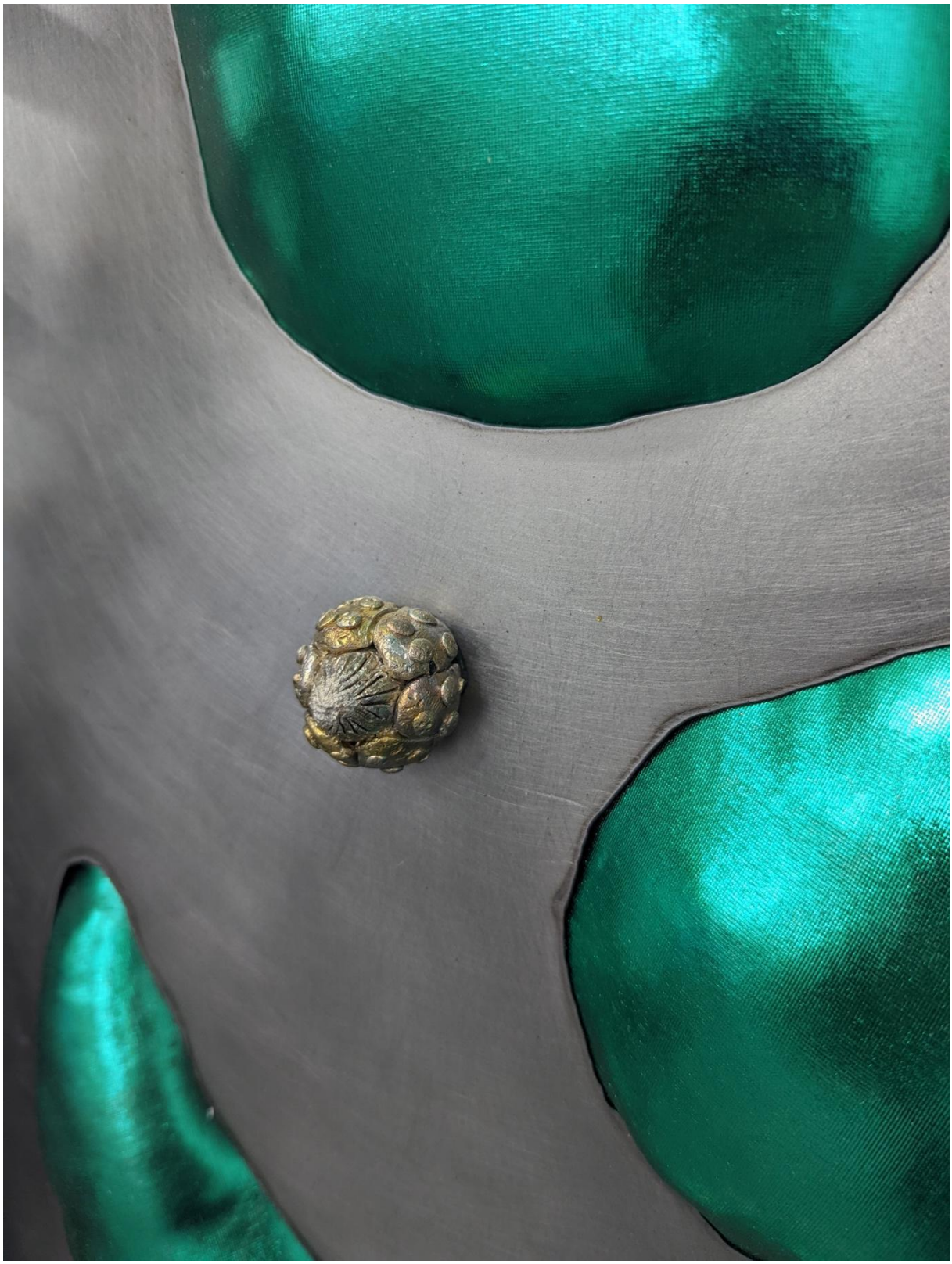
Textile, metal, pewter

100 x 80 x 25 cm

Photo: Nicola Genovese







Backlash *2 (2022)

Sea balls, leather, metal

120 x 32 x 37 cm

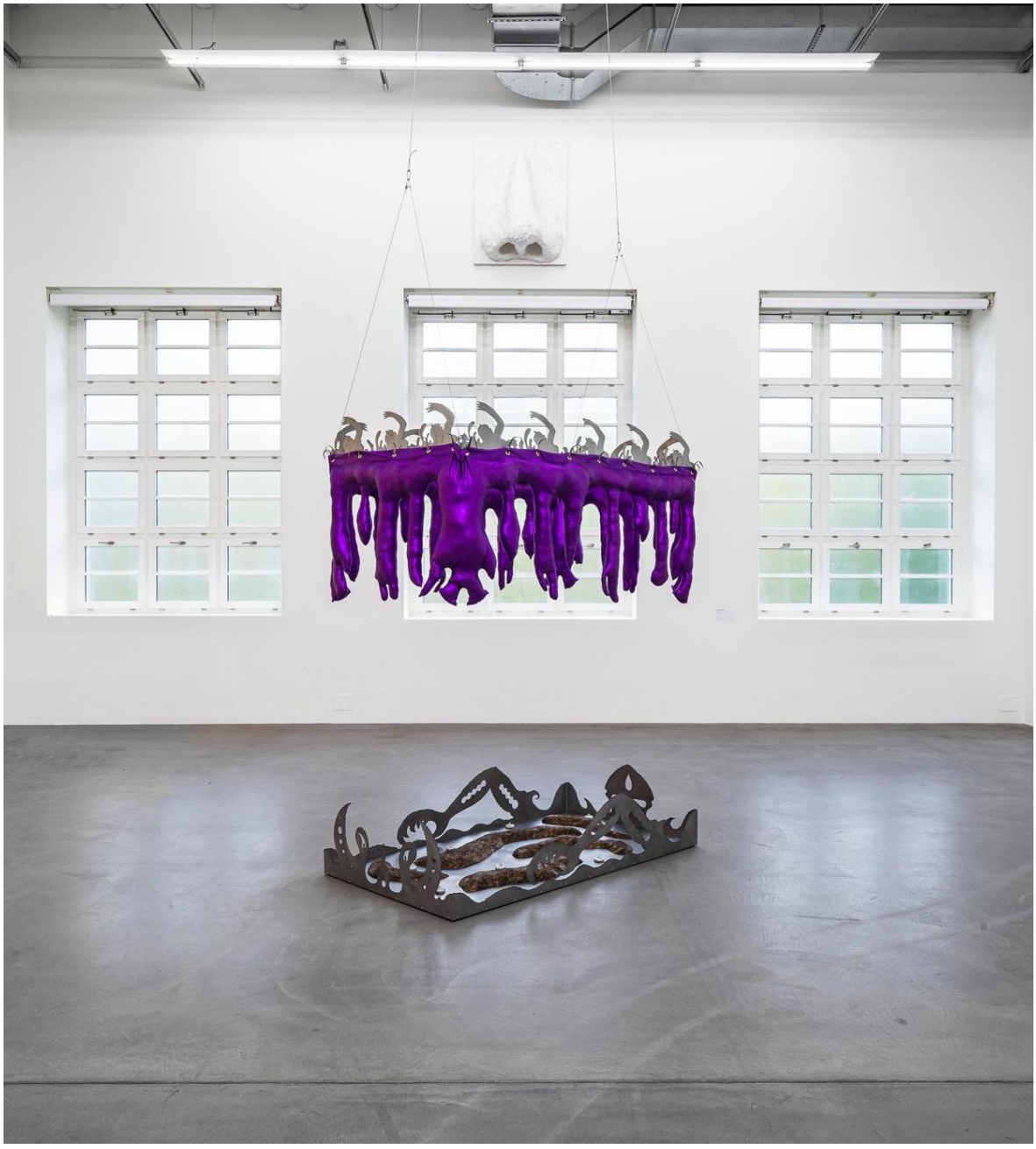
Photo: Nicola Genovese





Tinnitus (2022)
Metal, pewter, textile
Photo: Peter Baracchi

Tinnitus was my last sculpture produced in 2022. It was inspired by funerary art.
The part placed on the floor, which resembled a tombstone, is characterised by a frame that takes the shape of a monstrous body. At the same time, the soft elements emerge from the metal, like internal organs. The upper part turns the tombstone into a baldachin. The metal decorative pattern depicts a swimmer in a sort of loop, while the purple textile elements recall body fragments and imaginary tools.





Selected solo shows

2023
Sad Boy. – Wits Art Museum (Johannesburg ZA)
1000 Regrets. – Lokal-int (Biel CH)

2022
Tinnitus. Text by Camille Regli – Material (Zurich CH)

2018
I was shaking and it was fine. Curator Sara Izzo – Kunstraum Aarau (Aarau CH)

Selected group exhibitions/performances

2022
Werkschau – Haus Konstruktiv (Zurich CH)
Die unterbrochene Reise. Curator Lorenzo Metzler – Haus am See (Unterägeri CH)
Living Room. Curator Andrea Lerda (Cuneo IT)
Nach dem Winter taut der Schnee – Hrüze Gegi (Winterthur CH)

2021
Grosse Regionale. Curator Irene Grillo – Alte Fabrik (Rapperswill CH)
A Novanta. Theatre production co-produced by Fabriktheater Zurich, Südpol Luzern Werk, and Atelier Stipendium – Helmaus (Zurich CH)
Stitches: Scénes, Corps, Decors. Curators Gabrielle Boder, Tadeo Kohan, Camille Regli – Le Commun (Geneve CH)

2020
Intra-Muros festival. Curator Merly Knoerle (Winterthur CH)
S.H.T.F. the Trilogy. Curator Simon Maurer – Helmhaus (Zurich CH)
Gasträume/Art in public space. Curator Cristoph Doswald (Zurich CH)
Inkubator 2020 – Fabrik Theater (Zurich CH)
Performance lecture. Artistic Research Africa Conference,

Wits University (Johannesburg SA)
Artmangeddon, with David Knuckney – Espace Libre (Biel CH)
Performance A Novanta, within the exhibition Her Take – Photoforum Pasquart (Biel CH).

2019
Residency showing – Südpol (Luzern CH)
Prémiere S.H.T.F. Second Chapter – Cabaret Voltaire (Zurich CH)
Pitseng festival. Curator Gaby Saranouffi (Johannesburg SA)
Werk und Atelier Stipendium – Helmahaus (Zurich CH)
S.H.T.F. the prologue (le sauvage) performance – Kulturfolger (Zurich CH)
Withdraw*2. Curators Katja Baumhoff & Josip Zanchi – Meštrović Pavilion (Zagreb HR)

2018
Withdraw. Curators Katja Baumhoff & Josip Zanchi – Shed Eisenwerk (Frauenfeld CH)
S.H.T.F. Performance. Curated by Material - Haus Konstruktiv (Zurich CH)
In the tower of plastic feelings with Nina Emge – Klara Kiss offspace (Zurich CH)
It's not about power it's about comfort zone. Lecture/Performance
Corner College (Zurich CH)
2017
ZHDK master degree show. Curators Judith Welter & Ian Wooldridge – ZHDK (Zurich CH)
Carnage. Curator Francesca Brusa – Museum Rietberg (Zurich CH)
Entführung. Curators Lukas Keller & Irene Hediger – Zoological Museum (Zurich CH)

2016
Young lovers at the botanical garden – Schwarzwaldallee (Basel CH)
Jürgen Baumann / Nicola Genovese. Curator Anne Laure Franchette – (Winterthur CH)
X – Sonnenstube (Lugano CH)
Dilly boys. Curator Ian Wooldridge – Reto Ganz (Zurich CH)