

On Fitness and Failed Escapes: Alessandro Agudio Isabella Zamboni

The objects of Alessandro Agudio echo the splendor of Milan's 1980s yuppie homes but aim to remain anchored to the city's northern province, the Brianza, known for factories that produce furniture for the average person. Art objects are commodities and need to remain frivolous—that is, bitterly beautiful. Hence the boyish irony of Agudio's titles, hence the allusions to sport, the cryptic details that complicate the narrative. In the following interview, Agudio speaks of family-run fitness clubs, exhausted art objects, wooden spaceships, and why Brianza is exotic, alien and melancholic, like Brazil.

ISABELLA ZAMBONI

I am intrigued by your allusions to the world of fitness, of sport, of wellness associated with the body. Many of your works—the latest ones presented at Fanta-MLN, Milan, for example—either appropriate gymnastic equipment, or they are sculptures that allude to the body and its functions or its relief—like the urinal *Un Angolo (Tipo Vespasiano)* (2018).

ALESSANDRO AGUDIO

I think I started contaminating my work with these elements in a somewhat unconscious manner. At the age of eighteen, I began working in fitness clubs, teaching stretching classes while I was still attending art school: I never imagined that this imagery would become so important for me. The nice thing is that I have always worked in gyms unlike Virgin or GetFit, which are franchises that feature a standardized “elegant” environment. I have always worked in family-run gyms. One in particular, in Milan, was furnished in a totally crazy way; the layout, the plan of the gym, had gradually developed over the years until it became a kind of maze. The reception was decked out with personal, newly received gifts. The experience, I realized, had already combined my interest in furnishings and my interest in sport and its connection with the body.

IZ

In these family-run concerns that you describe, I fully imagine how palpable the effort of appearing dignified, super-clean, must be. At the same time, though, one may perceive a bitter, somewhat unfortunate sensation, the same narrative coordinates that I find in your objects—streamlined but somehow melancholic.

AA

You are perfectly right, you always notice a certain dilettantism behind this effort. The furniture in these gyms is made of nothing, of hurriedly painted plywood. An interesting form of chaos is added to family-run concerns, a form of customization, an expressive desire that you don't really find in the big chains.

IZ

Hence this veneer of dignity often conceals a somewhat less noble nature. I read the phrase with which you often comment on your works, “a sophisticated facade.” I wonder, though, whether the sophistication should be defined in terms of materials, in the workmanship. In your works, I do find briar-root laminate surfaces that imitate “rich” furniture, a mere “facade.” However I ask myself if laminate today may still be considered a “poor” artistic material and, besides, I find that the objects reveal a certain narrative complexity through

several, not immediately decipherable visual and verbal details—literary titles and elaborate material features that complicate the process of signification.

AA

I am happy to hear you say that. Yes indeed, they are not simple. The construction of the object is very labored. The concept at the basis is often an invention that I would define as “baroque,” yet something I desperately try to weaken in the final, formal formulation: in this sense, they lack sophistication. It is only a facade, or rather a pose to be good enough for the event in which they are staged.

IZ

If I think of them as furnishing elements, then I am better able to follow your line of thought, less so if I think of them as art objects.

AA

I know what you mean, but I don't conceive them as objects of art; rather (as in some more specific cases, a lamp or a flowerpot) I already conceive them, how do you say, in their spent, exhausted form, which is easy to imagine as a piece of domestic furniture. I already think of their demise. This is my sadness, a sadness that I force upon myself: to build an object, done and finished, ready to play its role, which is that of being material, of being a commodity. For this reason, my desire to make it outwardly pleasant is not self-gratification, but it is my way of overcoming my unease and embarrassment in placing it on show as an art object. In this way, I mask myself a bit. The unease is also ironic. “Here you have another masterpiece.”

IZ

I am curious about your references to the exotic. You often speak of a “pseudo-South American Brianza.” In the exotic, I believe, one feels a desire for strangeness, yet a sense of relief for only being exposed to a risk and not to a real threat of danger. A sort of surrogate of an engagement, of an exchange, of a responsibility. I was wondering if you may see this as connected to the province—the Brianza—or to the status of the art object we were talking about.

AA

Indeed, the fascination of the exotic. I connect it to the idea of an artistic artifact, which has the charm of appearing strange, freak, or alien. In the series titled *One of the Most Famous Wooden Spaceships on a Brazilian Beach* (2015), I was metaphorically thinking about a work of art in an art gallery as an alien form made of wood on a beach. It is the melancholic image of a failed attempt to escape. It's a spaceship, it should be an alien form, but it is made of wood, hence something familiar, which lies on a Brazilian beach: it is an image that works because there are not many contrasts. In Brianza there are many of these spaceships: villas, single-family homes, fountains, and monuments on roundabouts. All kinds of architects and artists have been busy there! In his novel *La Cognizione del dolore* (The Experience of Pain, 1963), Carlo Emilio Gadda describes very well this kind of environment, masked with South American names.

171 Alessandro Agudio, *Hello, I know it might sound weird but I am wondering if it is possible to make sure that the surface of the item is as homogeneous as possible*. Many thanks, 2018. Courtesy: the artist and Fanta-MLN, Milan. Photo: Roberto Marossi

172 Alessandro Agudio, *O (Che Dolor)*, 2018. Courtesy: the artist and Fanta-MLN, Milan. Photo: Roberto Marossi

173 Alessandro Agudio, *One Of The Most Famous Wooden Spaceships On A Brazilian Beach*, 2015. Photo: Andrea Rossetti



