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CATEGORIES

Beauty in Brianza



Un po' vivace (A Little Feisty), 2018

by Francesco Tenaglia

Brianza is an area north of Milan. It ends just before the now-glamorous region around the town of Como, with its famous lake and neighboring vistas. Like the rest of Lombardy, it prides itself on its industriousness and the reliability of its citizens. Nonetheless, many Italians—locals included—consider it a liminal area,

with its small family homes, prefabricated industrial buildings, and shopping centers. "Brianza" is an adjective with semi-negative connotations, evoking an excess of pragmatism and the atomization of the social fabric, bordering on narrow-mindedness. Not far from here, earlier than in the rest of the nation, the local variant of 'Alpine populism' emerged, taking the form of the now dangerously rising political party Lega Nord. Alpine populism was formulated in the late 1990s by Jean-Yves Camus, director of the Observatory of Political Radicalism at the Jean Jaurès Foundation. Says *Le Monde*: "On the fringes of Central Europe, this Alpine core conveys memories of the Ottoman threat, a fantasy Islam and the spectre of the War in Yugoslavia, the source of waves of immigration." [1]

I experienced some of this when, having recently moved to Milan, and returning from an engagement in Como, I voluntarily turned my scooter off the main road to have a look. The view was, at the same time, seductive and bleak: the remains of ancient villages now welded to one another, undertows of economic affluence, nice views lost between highways and building expanses. Since then, and for a certain time, I used to joke about it, speaking of Brianza as our local Los Angeles. The ironic effect lay primarily in the contrast in climate (the fog being one of the persistent characteristics of the region).

The joke once gave me a significant insight on the area: "Stop making fun of me," a former colleague who grew up there once said.

"How am I making fun of you? I myself come from a town of a few tens of thousands of inhabitants, in a region that a good number of Italians have never even visited."

"Sure," she replied, "but down there, you're from the main city, not from a province." The first piece of the puzzle.

It is said that at the beginning of the 19th Century, a local craftsman made a bed for a French military man residing in Milan during the Napoleonic occupation. The colonel was too tall for his current bed; his feet dangled in the emptiness of

the night, disturbing his sleep. The new bed made in Brianza was so comfortable and solid, he spread the word, triggering an increasing demand and, soon, a trend. The zone, not particularly generous climatically and therefore difficult for agriculture and livestock, thus found its vocation, becoming the engine driving an important luxury industry—one that still characterizes the nation. It is a sector that has resisted the difficulties of the last ten years of crisis, as attested by the approximately four hundred thousand visitors to the last edition of the Milan Design Week, an event that blossomed around a historic furniture exhibition. The biennale of the decorative arts moved to Milan in 1933 after being hosted for ten years at the Villa Reale of Monza, the capital of south Brianza, and found a permanent residence in the neoclassical and monumental architecture of the Palazzo dell'Arte, designed by architect Giovanni Muzio during fascism. A physical transfer and an ideal alchemical transmutation—from the workshop to presentations in sophisticated showrooms, from craft trade to the great designers, from sweat to contemplation—told as a process of modernization, of economic and symbolic valorization, which is certainly articulated by a dense bidirectional exchange between 'a province' and 'a city.'

The path of Alessandro Agudio's artistic practice intersects with some of this story: an important moment of institutional recognition for his work was his inclusion in *Ennesima* (2014), a group exhibition curated by Vincenzo de Bellis, which showcased a transgenerational look at Italian art in the majestic rooms of the Milan Triennale. Then his name appeared in "Brianza Eleganza," an article written by the curator and critic Michele D'Aurizio published in 2014 by the US-based "architectural entertainment" magazine *Pin-Up*. The piece was an overview of artists who live in Milan and whose work is in alignment with, or consciously takes into account, the history of product design: "In 1972, on the occasion of the MoMA exhibition *Italy: The New Domestic Landscape*, critic Giulio Carlo Argan noted that Italian design appeared to have assimilated the premises of Arte Povera; 40 years later in Milan, art seems to be taking its revenge." [2] But the perspective of Agudio exceeds these premises.

In Agudio's most recent exhibition, *Un po' vivace* (A Little Feisty) at the Milanese gallery Fanta, near Viale Monza (hence already inclined northward, toward Brianza), we are welcomed by a theatrical dramaturgy—or, if you like, a kind of metaphysical gymnasium. MI.LA.NO (Patinatissima tipo favela) (Sleek as a Favela) is a tall, three-level vase covered with metallic platinum that simulates a marble pattern ("extensible on the basis of the will of the eventual buyer") raising a Platycerium alcicorne (staghorn fern) to a monumental height. A climbing instrument sold by decathlon-ready made gymnastics is held in suspension by two ropes that anchor it to the floor and ceiling, in a work titled 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. Aluminum tubes contain balloons forced into their oblong shapes, which despite the tubes being pierced by nails do not explode, in O (Che Dolor) (Oh [What a Pain]). A sound piece materializes sporadically and reproduces the braking of a train, sometimes overlapping with the noise of an actual train (Fanta is immediately beneath a railroad), followed by a voice that tells us that, if it had been a rainy day, it would have be a perfect solution, alluding to the possible outcome of the narrative of another work in the exhibition, My Beautiful Backside (Sofa by Atelier Oi) at Fanta, an illustration that the artist commissioned from the Casatibuonsante architecture firm. In the drawing, the gallery is pictured from the outside, with the three owners-Gloria De Risi, Alberto Zenere and Alessio Baldissera in relaxed poses just in front of the door. If it rained, people could chill on the sofa, protected by the gallery's ceilings.

The punctum of the drawing is the sofa we can see through the open door. Agudio initially had the idea of producing a single work, namely a piece of furniture, for *Un po' vivace*. But the project was then shelved. Thus this is a 'show within the show,' a hint at the artist's interest in design, but perhaps also a reference to the history of the portrait, particularly the type picturing a 'client,' a form of representation that pays tribute to the represented, making the economic relationship explicit. The judgment that really counts, in the portrait, is that of the model. Quality is measured on the basis of how the canvas reflects the patron's image of her- or himself.

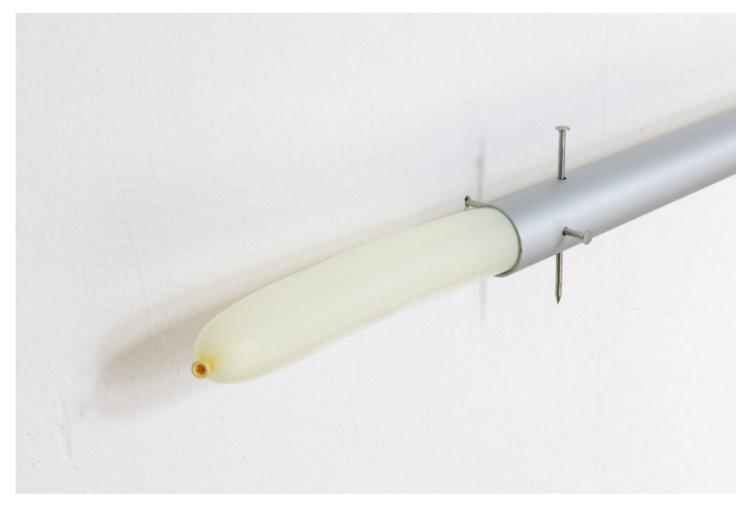


One Of The Most Famous Wooden Spaceships On A Brazilian Beach, 2015

One key to reading Agudio's work is the superimposition of two forms of 'beauty.' The first derives from the Romantic revolution of the eighteenth century, and particularly the idea of 'genius' that stresses 'originali,' as opposed to 'proper' declassed emulation, the boredom of repetition in learning a craft, the banality of 'decorative' objects. This 'beauty' was key to the production of the artist as an autonomous social figure, which, although tempered by the advent of formalist criticism and modernism, dominated Western contemporary art for much of the twentieth century. From Minimalism's outsourcing of production, to the progressive dematerialization of art identified by the prominent New York critic Lucy Lippard [3], this 'beauty,' as we are very aware now, doesn't necessarily hold relations with 'pleasantness' but with ideas of aesthetic advancement, renewal and invention, when not social change.

To this line of evolution and discovery, a heroic story of 'leaps' from previous styles that celebrates the equivalence of the 'new' with the 'innovative,' Agudio superimposes the 'beautiful' of clothes or furniture: functional, familiar, deriving

from a service culture to satisfy desires to look elegant, to gain peer approval. Agudio's work lurks in the confusion of distinguished *habitus*: the clumsy, cartoonish attempt of everyday objects of access the status of 'art' (we can almost feel their impostor syndrome in his works) or surreal hybrids reminiscent of surfaces and shapes of things in someone's house, just like minimal sculpture. Or it very subtly insinuates that the two beauties—the hermetic and rarefied post-Duchampian one, and the comforting and vain one obtaining in the world of commodities—were never so distant. Or better, that the fine-art narrative of continuous exploratory propulsion is now a noble selling point that protects recent art from (probable) perishability and the cyclical nature of fashion.



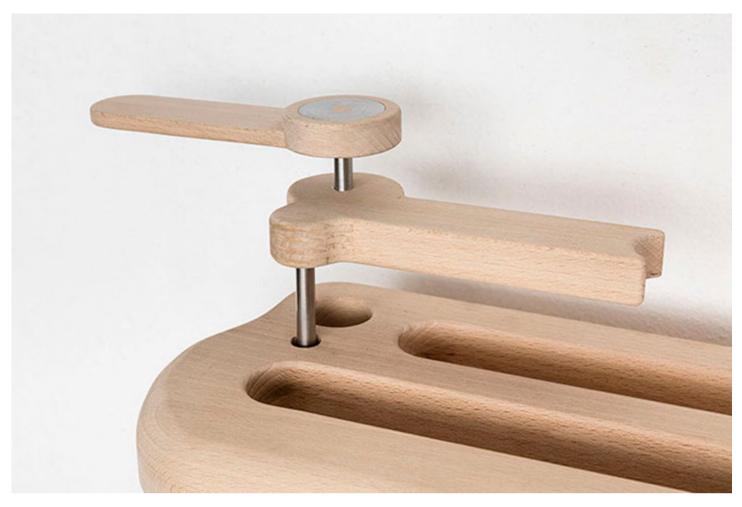
O Che Dolor, 2018

The spiritual fathers (and recurring artist's favorites) of the exhibition are the novelists Alberto Arbasino and Carlo Emilio Gadda. Invited to write for the accompanying publication, the playwright Luca Scarlini invoked Arbasino's *Supereliogabalo* (1969), a phantasmagoric and athletically convoluted book inspired by Antonin Artaud's *Eliogabalo* a play about the Roman emperor who

was frowned upon by the people for his sexual and religious eccentricities, and was killed when only eighteen by the Praetorian Guard. The 'crowned anarchist' eroded, or at least momentarily tarnished, power, ridiculing it from the inside.

Gadda, long a little-known author, wrote in the spare hours that his day job, engineering allowed, is today recognized as one of the major (if not the most important) exponents of Italian modernism, characterized by an impervious language that unites vernacular slang expressions, scientific language, and neologisms. Particularly relevant here is the *Cognizione del Dolore* completed in 1941 and set in a Brianza of fantasy, with language and cultural costumes that make it look like Latin America (perhaps in this, Agudio found his inspiration to name a sculpture containing Campari, one of the iconic liqueurs of Milan, *One of the Most Famous Wooden Spaceships on a Brazilian Beach?*), modulated by a malevolent divine providence, the dark side of the one that governs and aids *The Promessi Sposi*, the best-known Italian historical novel, also set in Brianza, by his beloved author Alessandro Manzoni.

Arbasino has been a devoted friend to the elder Gadda, and in his memoir (*L'Ingegnere in blue* [2008]) he states that the maestro did not have a line of filiation (apart from Arbasino himself, the art historian Giovanni Testori, and Pier Paolo Pasolini). He was too little interested in producing engaging plots, too taken by linguistic intricacies, and definitely too challenging for an era mostly defined by TV serial writing. Here lies perhaps some kinship with the young Milanese artist: the deep acquisition of the *terroir* of irony, restlessness, meticulous attention, and mastery of expressive tools.



Marjotta... My Dear I Haven't Seen You Since That Awful Incident, 2016

Agudio speaks of social classes without being a didactic 'political artist' addressing flatly societal problems for the consolation of those who have familiarity and access to the visual art industry, but question-somehow repulsively, the nature of the industry and the production of a legitimate, discerning taste; speaks of desires and aspirations promised by visual art without cynicism or disaffection; speaks of a local texture without being obviously 'Italian.' He manages complexity without cloying himself with the hermeticism (often unaware, spiritualist proto-romantic décor perfectly resonating with the implicit sense of entitlement of a fringe of the economic elite) that is reemerging internationally in the art-world. Like a spaceship, like a Salone del Mobile, Alessandro Agudio brings to the world seductive and playful sceneries that hide extremely sophisticated internal mechanisms. He is one of the most subtle exponents of a generation of Italian artists that has not bowed to a 'tellability' that turns many performances into mood boards of thematic references. Like Arbasino, like Gadda, he's not about the plot, catchphrases, themes or adequate good timing, he's about an almost hysteric, melancholic sophistication of the craft: choice of words (or material), construction and

composition, an inequitable fight with phantasms of history and canon. He now moved away, to Berlin, and Brianza probably is not the epicenter of his thoughts. We'll see in his upcoming shows, but in a time of Milan-led resurging interest in the nation—it is maybe time to pay proper attention to his work.

Alessandro Agudio, Un po' vivace (A Little Feisty), FANTA-MLN, 2018. All images courtesy of the artist and FANTA-MLN.

References:

- [1] Marion Van Renterghem, "La nouvelle droite populist européenne Prospère sur la dénonciation de l'islam," *Le Monde*, October 10, 2010, https://www.lemonde.fr/europe/article/2010/03/17/la-nouvelle-droite-populiste-europeenne-prospere-sur- la-denonciation-de-l-islam_1320455_3214.html, [my translation?]
- [2] Michele D'Aurizio, "Brianza Elegance," *Pin-Up*, Spring–Summer 2014, TKpage.
- [3] The reference is to Lucy Lippard, Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972 (New York: Praeger, 1973).

About the Author:

Francesco Tenaglia was born in Chieti and lives in Milan. He is the Editor-inchief at Mousse Magazine. He writes for *Rolling Stone*, *Esquire* and other publications.

<u>Alessandro Agudio (https://www.berfrois.com/tag/alessandro-agudio/), Art (https://www.berfrois.com/tag/art/), Design</u>

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Animal Spirits at the Nueva Burdalesa Bakery by Jessica Sequeira

(https://www.berfrois.com/2015/09/on-animal-spirits-jessica-sequeira/)

A few years ago all I had was a certain ambition and an understanding, more or less, of how things work in this world. I lived in the tiny room of a pension on B---- street. Funds were running low.

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Hannah Hughes: My Gray City

(https://www.berfrois.com/2017/06/hannah-hughes-gray-city/)

I was eighteen years old when I was introduced to the fascinating world of Alasdair Gray. I read Poor Things (1992) in the second year of my undergraduate degree at the University of Glasgow,

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<u>Aria Dean: #WanderingWILDING</u> (https://www.berfrois.com/2016/11/aria-dean-wanderingwilding/)</u>

It's easiest to start from the impulse to problematize the position of the flâneur. The ugly word privilege hovers around it, and we turn to questions that we know the answer to, "Who, exactly, is allowed to wander, like so?"

Read More (https://www.berfrois.com/2016/11/aria-dean-wanderingwilding/)

<u>'Poem of Philosophical and Parental Conundrums</u> <u>Written In An Election Year'</u>

(https://www.berfrois.com/2015/08/poem-of-philosophical-and-parental-conundrums-written-in-an-election-year-erin-belieu/)

From the backseat, Jude saying, Mama, I HATE Republicans, and the way he says HATE, saying it the way only a seven-year-old can.

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<u>Joseph Spece on Wonder Woman</u> (https://www.berfrois.com/2017/06/joseph-specewonder-woman/)</u>

That Diana and the Amazons speak 'hundreds' of languages is believable, given their situation and seeming enlightenment; that English becomes their go-to choice for daily chats off the Greek coast, less so.

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Lital Khaikin: To Justify Land

(https://www.berfrois.com/2017/06/lital-khaikin-justify-land/)

On the ancient river, seagull rock crests out of the waters. An outcrop within its sight is thorned by a few young silhouettes, taking turns plunging into the river some feet below. Riverboats and water taxis, white river cruise-ships weave short and cyclical tours between the two shores.

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Colin Raff: Variations on a Brandenburg Salamander
(https://www.berfrois.com/2017/07/colin-raffvariations-brandenburg-salamander/)

In the spring of 1793, the entomologist Johann Friedrich Wilhelm Herbst, as a means to supplement his lectures at the newly founded Berliner Tierarzneischule

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'Relentless' by Jeff Bezos

(https://www.berfrois.com/2014/12/merry-relentless/)

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