

*ANNA MECUGNI

Queering identity: Luigi Ontani's camp tableaux

ABSTRACT: This article contributes to a queer historiography of 1970s Italian art by taking an unprecedented approach to the study of Luigi Ontani's artistic practice: it investigates the camp qualities and queer subtexts of a group of tableaux vivants that he performed in the early 1970s, either in front of a live audience or for the camera impersonating various iconic male and female characters drawn from high and popular culture. Situating the works in the context of the emergent Italian gay liberation movement, FUORI, this study builds on discussions of camp and kitsch by Susan Sontag and Gillo Dorfles in the mid- to late 1960s, as well as later articulations of gender performativity and queer theory by Judith Butler and others, to show how Ontani's enactments at once embrace camp – in its citational, ironic, theatrical, incongruous, non-hierarchical character – and posit identity as performative, queer, that is, as unstable, fluid, plural, thus undermining the patriarchal, essentialist, bourgeois model of identity predicated on binary oppositions and postulated as fixed, coherent, and natural.

KEYWORDS: tableau vivant; self-portrait photography; performance art; gender performativity; kitsch, camp, and queer aesthetics and politics; Italian gay liberation movement; 1970s Italian art

This article examines a series of tableaux vivants that Luigi Ontani performed in the early 1970s, either in front of a live audience or for the camera. In his poses, Ontani impersonated a series of iconic characters, both male and female, drawn from high and popular culture. Characters range from Saint Sebastian to Tarzan, from Leda to Pinocchio, and from Francisco Goya's *Maja* to *commedia dell'arte* stock types. These works are part of a much larger group of tableaux vivants Ontani realized during that decade and later. Furthermore, the hybrid genre of the tableau vivant – part performance and part fixed image, part citation and part embodiment – has been a constant of Ontani's practice throughout. Indeed, one may claim that what the tableau vivant was for the artist in the 1970s – a strategy of self-performance, embodiment, and enactment – informs his entire oeuvre, including later sculptural production in ceramic, wood, and other mediums.

The literature on Ontani's tableaux vivants from the 1970s has predominantly focused on their postmodern aspects such as the appropriation of the past and the transformation of the individual into an icon, fictional

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character, or simulacrum in the age of the mass media¹. For example, Carole Halimi casts the tableau vivant revival in twentieth-century art, particularly in works by Ontani, Cindy Sherman, and Yasumasa Morimura, as a phenomenon that, for its intermediality and theatricality, challenges “the purist logic of modernism” (2019: 22)². This line of interpretation owes much to art and literary critic Renato Barilli, Ontani’s first and foremost advocate, whose early writings highlight characteristics later codified as postmodern (1973; 1974). With Umberto Eco and others, Barilli was a member of Gruppo 63, a group of poets, novelists, and critics who, in the mid-1960s, set some of the primary coordinates for subsequent discussions of the postmodern (ECO 1983; BARILLI and GUGLIELMI 2003).

While these aspects are significant, my article investigates another meaningful facet of Ontani’s tableaux vivants that has yet to receive due attention: their camp qualities and queer subtexts³. Taking a socio-political angle, my study situates the works in the context of the newly formed gay liberation movement in Italy, proposing to view Ontani’s practice as a form of resistance to patriarchal norms of gender and sexuality. I contend that, in the early 1970s, his impersonations, presented as mutable, multiplied selves, offered a form of quiet counterculture undermining heteronormative, binary gender constructs and challenging bourgeois conformism and hierarchies, which, as he put it in his first published artist’s statement, have historically underpinned social and labor inequities and exploitation (ONTANI 1974c). I also argue that, with their camp aesthetic, these works prefigure the notion of gender performativity foundational to queer theory, that is, of gender identity as performative, embodied and enacted, rather than as the expression of an interior essence or stable core.

Ontani emerged on the Italian art scene around 1970, casting himself

¹ The literature on Ontani primarily consists of texts published in monographic exhibition catalogues, including WEIERMAIR 1996; CHRISTOV-BAKARGIEV 2001; GALASSO *et al.* 2003; MARANIELLO 2008; VECCELIO 2012; DI PIETRANTONIO 2014; MOSCHINI 2018. See also GALASSO 2004; MECUGNI 2011 (a comparative analysis of Pier Paolo Pasolini and Ontani’s tableaux vivants through the lens of mannerism as a meta-historical category); MECUGNI 2013.

² See also HALIMI 2014a; HALIMI 2014b. All translations into English are my own unless otherwise noted.

³ I first explored this key dimension of the works in my doctoral dissertation, MECUGNI 2013. In an article on postwar Italian art history methodologies, Denis Viva suggests that one might eschew interpretations of citational trends as “a symptom of postmodern nostalgia (or irony)” by focusing on what one may learn from artworks and wonders if it is possible to study Ontani’s from a queer perspective (2018: 45).

as an independent figure interested in performance art, photography, and the body. At the time, the artists gathered by Germano Celant under the label of Arte Povera were commanding national and international attention. However, there were also many independent figures such as Vasco Bendini in Bologna, Salvo in Turin, Gino de Dominicis and Vettor Pisani in Rome. Ontani lived in his hometown of Vergato, a mountain village south of Bologna, where he was employed as a factory worker at a local manufacturer of iron wire, part of the Maccaferri group, while making art in his spare time. He immersed himself in sophisticated readings of poetry and fiction that helped him transcend the constrictions of provincial life⁴. In the late 1960s, his practice centered on creating Neo-Dada-inspired, whimsical objects that could be performed or activated. It later shifted to performing actions with simple, everyday objects. Then, having elected as his school the fin-de-siècle traditions of dandyism and Aestheticism, it transitioned to making tableaux vivants. After quitting his factory job and relocating to Rome around 1970, he frequently returned to Vergato and Bologna to realize many of his photographic tableaux, coordinating the work with local practitioners.

SAINT SEBASTIAN

Ontani professes that *San Sebastiano nel bosco di Calvenzano (d'après Guido Reni)* (c. 1971; FIG. 1) is the first tableau vivant he ever realized. He dates it to 1970⁵. A commercial photographer from Bologna named Giorgio Gramantieri captured the pose. It was the first of a series of tableaux vivants dedicated to Saint Sebastian that the artist made over the years. He stated that he was drawn to the subject as “a powerful image of ambiguity and desire” (MECUGNI 2009a), calling Saint Sebastian “the saint of ambiguity, all ambiguities” (FREEDMAN 1980: 109), and referring to his first Saint Sebastian after Reni as “an image of my own story, like a self-portrait, in the sense that it expresses my own personality but also my origins” (STORACE 2003, in GALASSO 2004: 13). Both Reni and Ontani are from the greater Bologna

⁴ “I traveled with Petronio Arbitro’s *Satyricon*, I read Dylan Thomas and all Pirandello; I have not read the Bible, but I have been *en enfer* with Rimbaud . . . with Beckett to visit the dying Malone and with Kafka to the trial” (ONTANI 1968).

⁵ The dating of Ontani’s early tableau photographs is difficult to ascertain and often inconsistent in the literature. Ontani first presented these works to the public, in print and exhibition, in 1973-1974. Considering his earlier publications and shows, it seems feasible to hypothesize that his first tableau photographs date to 1971-1972.



FIGURE 1. Luigi Ontani, *San Sebastiano nel bosco di Calvenzano (d'après Guido Reni)*, c. 1971. Chromogenic print, 100 × 70 cm. Collection of Fabio Sargentini. Courtesy of Luigi Ontani.

area and although Reni was born in Bologna, according to a persistent popular tradition dating to the late eighteenth century, he was born in Calvenzano, a hamlet north of Vergato⁶. Regardless, the relationship between Ontani and the Baroque classicist painter extends well beyond their physical places of origin.

Among the earliest known representations of Saint Sebastian is a Byzantine mosaic panel dating to the 7th century in the Basilica of San Pietro in Vincoli in Rome (Beckwith *et al.* 1986: 152 FIG. 127). It portrays the Christian martyr as a Father of the Church in the austere style of early Christian art: a bearded man of mature years dressed in regal attire. During the Renaissance, however, his depiction transitioned to that of a handsome, languid, sensual youth, more akin to a pagan god than a Christian martyr. The painting Ontani used for his tableau vivant is in the collection of the Pinacoteca Nazionale of Bologna (FIG. 2). It is one of several that Reni realized with this subject and that are among the most ambiguous depictions of the saint for their heightened sensuality. As Richard Kaye has shown, since the late nineteenth century the subject of Saint Sebastian has inspired a great many works of visual art, literature, theater, and cinema that address themes of homoerotic desire, male victimhood, and sadomasochism (1996; 2003)⁷. One may think of authors Oscar Wilde, Thomas Mann, and Gabriele D'Annunzio; painters Odilon Redon and Filippo De Pisis; filmmaker Derek Jarman. In photography, at the turn of the nineteenth century, the subject was pursued by artists including Baron Wilhelm von Gloeden, Fred Holland Day, and Pietro Poppi, who posed their nude male models for some of the most erotically charged renditions of the saint⁸. A later example, dating from 1968, is a photograph of Japanese novelist Yukio Mishima, one of Ontani's favorite authors, posing as Saint Sebastian from another painting by Reni housed in Palazzo Rosso, Genoa. In Mishima's homosexual coming-of-age novel *Confessions of a Mask* (*Kamen no kokuhaku*, 1949), deemed autobiographical, the narrator recounts how a chance encounter with a

⁶ RODRIQUEZ 1954: 21.

⁷ See also WAUGH 1996: 96-97, 145; WYKE 2001. On Saint Sebastian's transformations in art since the Middle Ages, see JACOBELLI 2022.

⁸ For images of von Gloeden's *Saint Sebastian* (c. 1905), Holland Day's *Saint Sebastians* (c. 1906), and Poppi's *Ritratto come San Sebastiano* (1888-1890), see, respectively, AU BONHEUR DU JOUR 2008: 19; JACOBELLI 2022: 277; and KAYE 1996: 92. On Holland Day's treatment of the subject, see also ELLENZWEIG 1992: 55-56; SMITH 2013: 50-51. I wish to thank historian of homosexuality and gay activist Giovanni Dall'Orto for helping me locate a reproduction of von Gloeden's *Saint Sebastian*.



FIGURE 2. Guido Reni, *Saint Sebastian*, 1640-1642. Oil on canvas, 232 × 135 cm. Pinacoteca Nazionale, Bologna.

reproduction of this painting triggered an overwhelming sexual response, prompting his erotic self-awakening. Titled *Mishima as Saint Sebastian*, Mishima's tableau photograph features added streams of blood flowing down from the wounds of the piercing arrows in the chest⁹. The image circulated widely in print after Mishima committed suicide by ritual *seppuku*, or *hara-kiri*, in 1970, becoming a symbol of the author's sado-masochistic fantasies (NATHAN 1974).

Kaye calls Saint Sebastian “the single most successfully deployed image of modern male gay identity” (1996: 87). Homoeroticism, dissidence, and resilience are inscribed in the story of Sebastian as an army deserter and rebel with whom the Roman Emperor was infatuated and who miraculously survived his death sentence, in which he was shot by his fellow archers¹⁰. For Ontani, picking one of Reni's Saint Sebastians as the first character to enact in what was to become his signature genre meant claiming membership among a community of like-minded individuals while also establishing a kinship to a specific representational tradition. It was, too, an opportunity to assert his idiosyncratic place in that tradition. Ontani's pose is visually and affectively at the opposite extreme from Mishima's intense and dramatic impersonation. Instead, it resonates with von Gloeden's hedonistic rendering (also after Reni's painting in Palazzo Rosso), in which Saint Sebastian is impersonated by a Sicilian youth, who, leaning against a gnarled olive tree, basks in the warm sun, his arms gently crossed above his head, his lips lightly parted, his eyes half-closed¹¹.

Among the versions of Saint Sebastian by Reni that Ontani could have used for his tableau vivant, he chose the one without arrows. Traditionally, arrows pierce the body of the Christian martyr and make palpable the life-threatening violence inflicted on him. However, even without arrows, Reni's painting exudes a sense of impending doom, with Sebastian's intensely pale body silhouetted against a gloomy sky towering over a barren landscape. Ontani's recreation bears formal similarities with Reni's

⁹ For an image of this photo, see FETZ and MATT 2003: 78. The execution date of the work has been published as 1966, 1968, and 1970. My thanks to scholar of Japanese photography Yasufumi Nakamori for confirming 1968.

¹⁰ Sebastian's story was first popularized by Jacobus de Voragine in the *Legenda Aurea* (1265-1266).

¹¹ Ontani's and von Gloeden's photography also share kitsch and camp aspects, such as the mixing of codes and leveling of hierarchies. On these aspects of von Gloeden's work, see BARTHES 1978; ELLENZWEIG 1992; PERNA 2013.

painting, but the differences are striking and seem more significant than the similarities. Ontani substituted Reni's dark, gelid atmosphere with a bright, sunny environment of lush vegetation that embraces the saint's silhouette; the scene evokes the *dolce far niente* of a midsummer afternoon. We can almost hear Ontani's gentle whistling and the rhythmic, peaceful chirping of summer crickets. Ontani wears the traditional loincloth similarly to Reni's Sebastian. Yet, he replaced the neutral white with flamingo pink, reminiscent of the pink triangle with the peak pointing down that became a symbol of gay activism in the early 1970s, starting in Germany. Overall, Ontani's tableau vivant strikes us as lighthearted and fun, in contrast with other, more common renderings that highlight pain and suffering. Indeed, in Ontani's hands, Saint Sebastian becomes "a bird of paradise" (MATT 2003: 127). One may say that his impersonation looks to the possibility of emancipation and freedom from the cul-de-sac of Catholic guilt and self-punishment at a time when Italian society was overtly homophobic, publicly condemning homosexual behaviors as deviant, "unnatural", and a threat to procreation (MALAGRECA 2007: 97).

CAMP (AND KITSCH)

The sense of detachment and lightheartedness that emanates from Ontani's Saint Sebastian is typical of his tableaux and is distinctly camp, an aspect of the works that has generally been ignored in the literature¹². As Susan Sontag observes in her landmark essay, "Notes on Camp" (1964), "the whole point of Camp is to dethrone the serious. Camp is playful, anti-serious. More precisely, Camp involves a new, more complex relation to 'the serious'" (1966: 288). The use of color film, largely unconventional among artists in the early 1970s, is also camp. At a time when the photographic medium was still struggling to be recognized as a fine art, practitioners were generally suspicious of color photography, which was common in advertising, considering it kitschy for its association with consumer and mass culture, or spurious, for its association with painting. One may say that Ontani's choice of color film is part of a camp sensibility – an aesthetic

¹² A notable exception is Edit DeAk's review of Ontani's 1977 solo show at Sonnabend Gallery, New York. The critic calls his "transformations" camp, which she characterizes as "delicate, totally rarefied in beauty and almost angelically innocent" (1977: 61). A suite of Ontani's works, including three 1970s tableau photographs, is featured in the visual art section of the first anthology on camp published in Italian, but without accompanying text (CLETO 2008: 222-231).

of pleasure taken seriously. Another camp trait of these works is the paradoxical combination of aristocratic detachment and democratic leveling of social and cultural hierarchies, already present in a particular strain of *fin-de-siècle* dandyism (289). Most importantly, perhaps, Ontani's numerous tableaux, always declaring both the subject enacting and the subject enacted, speak to camp's ability to see everything in quotation marks and understand "Being-as-Playing-a-Role", camp being "the farthest extension, in sensibility, of the metaphor of life as theater" (280).

If Sontag's "Notes on Camp" left an indelible mark in the United States and United Kingdom, including prompting a reclaiming of camp by the gay community¹³, it fell flat in Italy, even after its translation came out in 1967. However, there was one critic who took notice: Gillo Dorfles. Having published on kitsch as a socio-cultural phenomenon since the late 1950s (1958; 1963; 1964), Dorfles discussed Sontag's essay in his seminal anthology on kitsch, first published in 1968. Considering both kitsch and camp as direct offspring of consumer society, he calls camp, alternatively, "a revival of kitsch", "anti-kitsch", and "the best of kitsch" (Engl. trans. 1969: 291-292, 294). Dorfles's anthology features various scholarly essays dedicated to aspects of kitsch in everyday culture and society. One of them, penned by semiologist Ugo Volli, presents the photograph of a tableau vivant after Rodin's *Kiss* as "the most blatant example of 'artistic' pornokitsch" (245 [caption]). Volli tells us that the photographic tableau appeared in Italian and French magazines for men with the title *Living Rodin*. He attacks the photo as "an obviously false interpretation which fails to respect even the fundamental aesthetic qualities of the original" (243). The silhouetted figures of Rodin's *Kiss* and *Living Rodin* were prominently featured on the cover of the 1969 second edition of the book (FIG. 3), along with Volli's words, nested between the two images, warning readers about the misleading, superficial similarities and inviting them to recognize differences in mediums, attitudes, and desired effects. This kind of cautionary-tale approach regarding the altered, inferior quality of kitsch objects recurs in the anthology. In his main text for the volume, Dorfles comments on the broad availability of affordable, high-quality color reproduction of artworks, criticizing them as a manifestation of kitsch (29-32)¹⁴. However, these were not only essential for the

¹³ On the essay's reception, see CLETO 1999: 4-5, 10, 46-47.

¹⁴ This was a recurrent topic in Dorfles's earlier writings on kitsch.



FIGURE 3. Cover of Gillo Dorfles's anthology on kitsch in its second edition, published in 1969.

realization of tableaux vivants by Ontani and others, such as Mighelangelo Pistoletto and Pier Paolo Pasolini, but they were sometimes included in the enactments, thus incorporating the process of making into their works and turning the tables on kitsch's common expectations of debased value¹⁵.

For his tableaux vivants, Ontani often relied on the "Maestri del colore" series – the first affordable artist monographs published in Italy by Fratelli Fabbri. These monographs were sold weekly at newsstands starting in 1963 and featured glossy, high-quality color reproduction of artworks printed full-page. Ontani displayed the issue he used, open to the page spread where the artwork was reproduced, in two tableaux (Figs. 4-5) in which he reinterpreted enigmatic naked figures from paintings that made history:

¹⁵ A prominent example is Pistoletto's short, *Pistoletto & Sotheby's* (1968), filmed by Pia Epremian and screened at L'Attico, Rome, during the closing days of the artist's 1968 solo exhibition. Here, Pistoletto stages several tableaux vivants, including one after James Ensor's *Self-Portrait with a Flowered Hat*. This enactment is preceded by a scene in which the "Maestri del colore" issue on the Belgian painter appears on a table.

Edouard Manet's *Déjeuner sur l'herbe* (1863) and Jacques-Louis David's *Intervention of the Sabine Women* (1799). Setups and props are minimal in these works, as is typical of Ontani's early tableaux; though unusually he picked paintings depicting not a single figure but a group of figures from which he chose one to enact. In *Déjeuner sur l'art* (c. 1971; Fig.4), Ontani, like Manet's model Victorine Meurent, gazes out at the viewer unabashed, at ease, with a subdued smile, while his naked buttocks rest on a small piece of white garment covering the grassy ground of the wood near his home in Vergato. The artist dates this photograph, taken by a friend named



FIGURE 4. Luigi Ontani, *Déjeuner sur l'art*, c. 1970. Chromogenic print, 83 × 83 cm (with frame). Collection Galassi Ferrari. Courtesy of Luigi Ontani.

Renzo Bressan and probably printed a decade or so ago, to 1969¹⁶. While it is difficult to know if Ontani performed this tableau prior to or following his Saint Sebastian after Reni, his statement that the latter was his first tableau acquires additional significance as part of a personal narrative.

From David's painting, Ontani picked a secondary male figure near the right edge of the painting: an ephebic groom glancing back at the battle scene before leaving it behind. His attitude is strangely detached and nonchalant given the chaos behind him. If Victorine engages with the viewer through her direct gaze, the young groom functions as a counterpart to the viewer; both help to connect the pictorial space of representation with the lived space of the beholder¹⁷. Standing against a white photographic backdrop, the artist mimicked the youth's striding pose and backward glance while pointing at the color reproduction of the painting from the "Maestri del colore" issue, held up to the viewer (FIG. 5). Casere Bastelli captured this pose; he was one of Ontani's most frequent collaborators in the 1970s. An experimental theater actor beginning to work for film director Pupi Avati, later his director of photography, Bastelli became friends with the artist. Bastelli's photos are some of the most powerful for their composition and lighting. The tableau after David is one of Ontani's best-known outside Italy, thanks to RoseLee Goldberg selecting it for the cover of the 1988 second edition of her popular book on the history of performance art.

PUBLIC PRESENTATIONS

Ontani's tableaux vivants were first presented to the public in the pages of *NAC: Notiziario Arte Contemporanea* in December of 1973, with an article by Barilli (FIG. 6). Here, as in his later texts, the critic focused on the recuperation of the past, not on camp or questions of gender. Accompanying the text is Ontani's *Saint John the Baptist*, probably after Reni's painting of the same subject in the "Maestri del colore" issue dedicated to the Baroque painter. The following year, 1974, was Ontani's breakthrough in terms of the public presentation and circulation of his tableau vivant work¹⁸. He staged

¹⁶ To my knowledge, this work was first presented in the exhibition *Luigi Ontani: "Le Déjeuner sur l'art"* at Le Consortium, Dijon, in 2012.

¹⁷ Writing about the pose after David, Robert Rosenblum remarked that Ontani "restored, with an acute intuition, the intense illusion of a theatrical spectacle that David himself had in mind when he presented his canvas to the public for the first time in 1799" (1993: 469).

¹⁸ For a chronology of Ontani's exhibitions and performances, see CHRISTOV-BAKARGIEV 2001: 88ff.



FIGURE 5. Luigi Ontani, *SabineRatto (d'après David)*, 1974. Chromogenic print, 176 × 131 cm. Collection of the artist. Courtesy of Luigi Ontani.

Aree di ricerca

Il comportamento frequenta il museo

di Renato Barilli

Luigi Ontani si è fatto conoscere attraverso due mostre milanesi (al « S. Fedele » sulla fine del '69 e al « Diagramma » nel '71) svolgendo fin dal primo momento quella che si deve considerare la sua tendenza caratteristica: un regredire, un ritornare alle origini. Queste origini, dapprima non erano trovate molto lontano, risiedevano in un'infanzia compiaciuta di sé, chiusa nel cerchio dei propri affetti; infanzia dell'individuo, o anche del gruppo umano, nel qual caso tutto ciò significava ritrovare i temi di un'arte ingenua e popolare, anch'essa apparentemente fuori della storia. Ontani produceva degli oggettini « di cattivo gusto » ricalcando le cose domestiche, o ritagliava aquiloni, sagome di animali, motivi decorativi nel cartone ondulato e nella gommapiuma, come per arredare un'ideale Kindergarten. Successivamente, come tutti i giovani, egli ha patito la crisi dell'oggetto, ha avvertito la non indispensabilità di procedere a concretizzazione materiali, e anzi l'urgenza di continuare più liberamente il proprio discorso agendo senza limiti e confini nello spazio, cioè « comportandosi ». Ne sono venute molte *performances*, affidate al film o più raramente al video-nastro: con qualche rischio di spersonalizzazione, poiché negli oggettini i colori vivaci e i materiali « di cattivo gusto » valevano di per se stessi a stabilire un'atmosfera del tutto particolare; mentre la « povertà » di mezzi consona alle *filmperformances* (il corpo nudo dell'operatore, il vuoto di stanze-contenitori neutri, la rudimentalità dei pochi strumenti impiegati) sembrava sintonizzarsi alla generale elegia della sterilità e dell'aridità propria di tante ricerche tra il concettuale e il comportamento. Eppure i temi stavano a indicare il proseguimento del filone infantile: tipico lo sketch del giocare alla corda entro un cerchio magico di fuoco, o del ricoprirsi il corpo con delle tegole, o del trastullarsi con delle uova, in una prestidigitazione volutamente goffa e pronta a trasformarsi (al rompersi delle uova) in una sorta di primitiva cosmesi. Ma l'intenzione, qui, non è certo di mettere a posto queste schede sul lavoro passato di Ontani; molto più interessante rilevare una svolta compiutasi negli ultimi tempi: o meglio, un allungamento di tiro nella regressione stessa, che non si ferma più, come era avvenuto finora, ai lidi un po' facili e stucchevoli dell'infanzia (dell'individuo o del gruppo, poco importa), al riscatto compiaciuto delle zone della non-cultura. In fondo, che cosa di più impossibile e lontano, oggi, della cultura stessa, di quella migliore

che una volta faceva il vanto della nostra tradizione? Che cosa di più sepolto, o se si vuole di più represso (rimosso) in un inconscio collettivo? Le splendide pose retoriche e declamanti della nostra arte dei secoli d'oro giacciono nei musei, fatte oggetto di un omaggio di maniera, ma congelate nel loro potenziale mitico, antropologico, iconologico, come tante « belle addormentate nel bosco » per effetto di qualche incantesimo. Occorre scioglierle da quel sonno, rianimarle magari cospargendole (tanto per valersi ancora una volta delle armi dell'infanzia) con la proverbiale vernice del Dottor Alambicchi. E quanto sta facendo Ontani, che rivive, riattualizza le pose ora di un Bacchino malato del Caravaggio, ora di un S. Sebastiano « alla Guido Reni », ora di un « Buon Pastore » « alla Poussin », su su fino alle pose eroiche e atletiche di un David. Si potrebbe obiettare che la « libera uscita » (nello spazio concreto del comportamento) di queste pose classiche è di breve durata, in quanto Ontani ce le fa giungere irrigidite di nuovo nell'immobilità di una foto. Ma sono ormai foto che, a differenza di quelle « povere », lavorano in aggiungere piuttosto che in togliere, non mirando a ridurre le sensazioni, bensì a ricaricarle di tutti gli splendori che ritenevamo ormai infrequentabili perché troppo frequentati nel passato. Invece della ricerca dell'autenticità assoluta, subentra la ricerca dell'inautentico, cioè l'assunzione di tutti gli attributi di cui il bosco, la natura, il corpo umano hanno via via goduto nel corso del tempo.

Conosco assai meno il lavoro di Giancarlo Croce, ma anche per lui mi sentirei di congetturare qualcosa di simile, e per esempio un periodo, negli anni passati, di collocazione nell'ambito delle ricerche « povere », con qualche pericolo di anonimata, come quando usava il neon, pur con pregevoli varianti personali. Ma in una mostra della scorsa stagione allo Studio Maddalena Carioni di Milano egli si è riproposto in termini assai più vivaci, e non molto diversi da quelli di Ontani (pur senza alcuna tangenza e influenza reciproca). Ci sono ovvie diversità tra il lavoro dell'uno e dell'altro, ma senza che venga meno un loro reciproco rinforzarsi. Croce, per esempio, non si colloca personalmente nelle pose del passato, ma vi pone degli amici (appartenenti come lui al mondo dell'arte). E neppure si può dire che egli visiti la pinacoteca ideale dove stanno i prodotti tipici delle « belle arti ». Visita piuttosto un museo etnico che raccolga costumi, ambienti e



L. Ontani, S. Giovanni Battista.



G. Croce, Ritratto di dama.

arredamenti. Ma resta lo stesso la tendenza che si è detto in aggiungere, in arricchire. Se cioè finora lo sforzo era di togliere disperatamente dal nostro campo percettivo e d'azione il « già fatto », in una ricerca parossistica del nuovo e dell'autentico, le operazioni di Croce e di Ontani sembrano risiedere esattamente nel contrario: nel recupero all'infinito del già fatto per dare spessore mitico, antropologico, culturale a ogni scena del presente.

FIGURE 6. Renato Barilli, "Il comportamento frequenta il museo", in *N.A.C.: Notiziario Arte Contemporanea*, no. 12, December 1973: 18.

six different tableaux in front of live audiences in Rome, Naples, and Turin. In Rome, he impersonated Tarzan, Don Quixote, Don Juan, and Superman. He posed as *commedia dell'arte* stock types in the cities where the characters were born: for Pulcinella in Naples he was completely naked but for a half-face black mask; for Gianduaia in Turin he dressed in a costume borrowed from a designer working for the theater and Cinecittà. Ontani had his first museum exhibition that year, participating in the legendary show that Swiss curator Jean-Christophe Ammann organized on cross-dressing and drag as an increasingly visible phenomenon in both the visual arts and popular music. Titled "*Transformer*": *Aspekte der Travestie*, the exhibition opened at the Kunstmuseum Luzern in Switzerland and traveled to Graz in

Austria and Bochum in Germany. It featured artists such as Andy Warhol, Urs Lüthi, Katharina Sieverding, and Pierre Molinier, together with rock and pop stars who played with androgyny, such as Mick Jagger and David Bowie. Ontani exhibited several works in “*Transformer*”, including his photographic tableaux after Francisco Goya’s *Maja desnuda* and *Maja vestida* (FIG. 9) and impersonations of Pinocchio and Dante. He also presented his tableau photos at the third Festival of Expanded Media in Belgrade that summer¹⁹ and in *La ripetizione differente*, curated by Barilli at Studio Marconi in Milan, in October. Then, in November, he had his first solo exhibition in Rome, at L’Attico of Fabio Sargentini, working with some of the most experimental artists of the time who shared an interest in performance, such as De Dominicis, Jannis Kounellis, Pino Pascali, Pisani, and Pistoletto. There, Ontani presented his Don Quixote, Don Juan, and Superman. Numerous tableau photos were shown on this occasion, likely including, according to Ontani, his Saint Sebastian after Reni, which Sargentini later kept for his collection (MECUGNI 2022a). In 1974 Ontani also published this work in two widely read art magazines – *Flash Art* and *DATA: Pratica e teoria delle arti* – and in a pocket-size artist book, released by Turin-based gallerist Franz Paludetto, featuring his poems (1974a, 1974b, 1974c).

TARZAN

Ontani’s first tableau vivant performed in front of a live audience – and probably the first tableau vivant ever to be included in an exhibition – was *Tarzan*, presented at *Contemporanea*, a show of international contemporary art curated by Achille Bonito Oliva in the underground parking lot of Villa Borghese in Rome²⁰. In late January of 1974, Ontani impersonated Tarzan naked but for a piece of leopard skin coming down from one shoulder to cover his genitals (FIG. 7). For two hours a day for five days, he rested on a large white platform, like the ones used to exhibit three-dimensional artworks or artifacts, either lying down or sitting up with his legs extended, always immersed in reading. He silently perused various publications: the novel *Tarzan of the Apes*, an anthology of Tarzan films, and Tarzan comics – all placed on the pedestal. A U-shaped configuration of temporary walls delimited the space, with the wall-size projection of a jungle photo, taken

¹⁹ Confirmed by Biljana Tomic, curator of the festival, in an email to me dated August 9, 2010.

²⁰ On *Contemporanea*, see LONARDELLI 2018.



FIGURE 7. Luigi Ontani, *Tarzan*, “Area Aperta” section, *Contemporanea*, Villa Borghese parking lot, Rome, January 1974. Photo by Massimo Piersanti. Centro Archivi MAXXI Arte, Fondo Incontri Internazionali d’Arte. Courtesy Fondazione MAXXI and Luigi Ontani.

from an image archive used by encyclopedia publishers, framing the scene from behind and determining the audience’s vantage point. As in his other live performances, he remained silent, anchored to a given position for an extended time, with background sound playing from a hidden source. In this case, it was a mix of animal sounds prepared by Angelo Lombardi, the former TV host of a popular 1960s show dedicated to animals called “L’amico degli animali”²¹.

In an interview about the performance a few months later, Ontani said that it was a sort of “anti-spectacle” and that he was interested in certain “heroes” that had become “symbols of collective projections and desires” (Ammann and Eigenhees: n.p.). Tarzan is, of course, the protagonist of the 1912 pulp novel *Tarzan of the Apes* by Edgar Rice Burroughs, one of the best-selling novels of the early 20th century. The character quickly became a global mass-media phenomenon through countless Hollywood films and comics series. Many have argued that Tarzan’s story is overtly ethnocentric, racist, and sexist, signifying the white male supremacist imagination of the

²¹ Ontani met Lombardi in the reptile store he ran in the underground of Rome’s Stazione Termini in the 1970s. Details about the performance come from MECUGNI 2009b.

post-Reconstruction era, much as in the American Western hero tradition²². It is a story that upholds the “powerfully appealing fantasy of perfect, invincible manhood” (BEDERMAN 1995: 219). Reviewing Ontani’s performance at *Contemporanea*, a critic asked if the artist’s “revival of a fallen hero” conveyed “irony and desecration” (RUGGIERO 1974). Indeed, the tableau vivant parodies Tarzan’s macho masculinity: physical strength, violence, or heroic action, customarily associated with the fictional character, are absent here. Instead, the artist’s slender, androgynous body takes the central stage; he is peacefully dedicated to the quiet, continued action of reading while taking ordinary, at times awkward poses. Rather than macho heroism, human vulnerability is the main subject of Ontani’s reinterpretation of Tarzan. One may say that, in debunking this model of male machismo and suggesting that other kinds of masculinity are possible, Ontani’s body becomes a site of queer resistance against patriarchal expectations of masculinity.

QUEER POLITICS

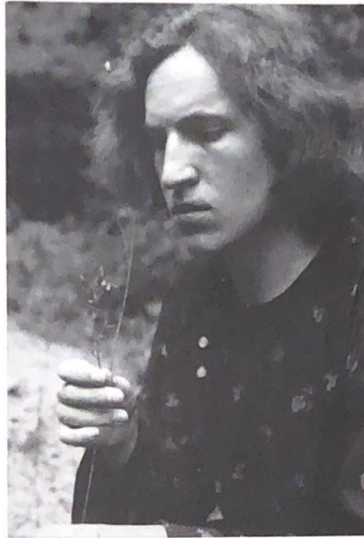
The first time that Ontani’s tableau photograph of Saint Sebastian after Reni was presented to a large audience was likely in April of 1974 in the pages of *Flash Art*, then the most popular magazine of contemporary art published in Italy and distributed internationally (FIG. 8). Accompanying the reproduction of this and other works was Ontani’s first general artist statement. Written in a non-linear, poetic style, sometimes convoluted and unintelligible, the text is also argumentative. The incipit emphatically reads “I am absolutely present: *ange infidèle*, androgynous, ephebe, hermaphrodite, hybrid, Sagittarius, heteroclitite”²³. Accusing bourgeois society of being “mummified”, “conformist”, “false”, and “repressive”, he suggests that gender and power divisions are at the basis of social inequalities and labor exploitation. His response to this as an artist is to welcome, in both his work and life, the “wonderful possibility of being at the same time . . . masculine and feminine”, stating that the unity of masculine and feminine is one of the greatest latent human aspirations. He adds that the point of view of homosexuality can be as limited as that of heterosexuality if homosexuality remains “an epidermic manifestation”, a matter of “taste” and “reaction/survival”. These ideas resonate with the work of FUORI, the Italian gay liberation movement

²² See LUNDBLAD 2013: 139-156; BEDERMAN 1995: 217-239; TORGOVNICK 1990: 42-74.

²³ The expression *ange infidèle* is French for “unfaithful angel”.

Luigi Ontani

Luigi Ontani, *Le tentazioni*, 1973, Photo Cesare Bastelli.



— Sono assolutamente presente: ange infidèle, androgino, efebo, ermafrodita, ibrido, sagittario, eteroclitto (implicazioni dall'iconico alla fisicità più agita); ed altre citazioni, segni, stilemi e di più: — autoidealizzazione, ossia testimonianza di mentalità, autosignificazione, ambivalenza, fluido di purezza, freschezza e ipersensibilità, atarassia, divinazione, trasmutazione, santità, doppio, comunione, ascetica, integrità, agape, energia, immaginazione, mistica, creatività, inventiva, conoscenza e memoria, ambiguità, incoerenza e non, oblomovezza, onfalistica, onanezza, ipostatica, fantasia, poesia, dolcezza, meraviglia, estasi, intensità, mancanza, penetrazione, consapevolezza; guardarsi allo

specchio che dice: « Ci hai creduto faccia da velluto » oppure fare coro, paesaggio, statua, stilista, fantasma, o da presenza umana. L'eccezione, il paradosso, l'anacronismo, l'euritmia, la coesione, l'afflato, il memento si ottiene nell'estrema astrazione/assenza o consistenza/presenza. Con un minimo di volontà, con una estensione di desiderio, la catarsi/sublimazione/alternativa è diffusa e la volgarità anonima, come parametro del già, è demoralizzata/annullata. E poi l'ambivalenza, la possibilità magnifica di essere contemporaneamente, a proprio piacimento e bisogno, obiettivamente pertinente alla contingenza, maschio/femmina, è la più delle aspirazioni latenti dell'umano che si celano ancora nelle sovrastrutture del civile repressivo.

— le separatezze sociali sono dovute alle separatezze del sesso
— attualmente questo porta: a una rigida divisione dei comportamenti e delle funzioni, e dei mestieri, alla supremazia del convenuto e alla serialità del banale. Il tattile e la concettualità + il fisiologico e il culturoso abbandonerebbero le parti per un coacervo totale liberatorio infinito. I termini di evoluzione/libertà, con i limiti definienti gli stessi, possono indicare la direzione che l'individuo non preso o perso o comunque teso senza esasperazione a realizzare desideri non della cronaca o dell'educazione pubblica e nemmeno del gratuito/volgare (il frainteso generico, omosessuale, è da considerarsi come manifestazione epidermica, fenomeno istico/isterico di costume, come reazione/sopravvivenza bassa e simpaticamente di gusto, a punto di vista limitato ed equivalente all'eterosessuale) ma come possibilità a concretizzare quelli che possono essere il meraviglioso personale/individuale nel più intimo dello spessore umano. Gli individui che pseudocomunicano presentemente hanno e danno considerazioni e possibilità depauperate, da sé al prossimo e viceversa, dovute alla mummificata prosemica; influenza del sessuale diviso e del potere/rispetto perbenistico fittizio. E poi nella totalità o quotidianamente le singolari iterate esplicazioni/specificazioni/precisazioni per una considerazione di se stessi

obiettiva, anche se soggettivamente esperita, del vedersi, elimina il super/iper maniacale o gli opposti banali e quindi per diverso si intende la capacità/possibilità/tentativo d'essere spontaneamente disinvolti, qualcosa che sente l'infanzia ma con pertinenza cosciente/adulta, lucidamente. Ricostituire l'unità originale, la follia controllata, il sorriso, il pianto, tutte le manifestazioni dei sensi, i segni dell'umore, creeranno una danza continua di felicità od altro o l'opposto completo e non ed oltre per una progressiva o repentina spogliazione dell'itinerario del tempo/storia/spazio/traccia e così una vita - spero l'impossibile -.

Luigi Ontani



Luigi Ontani, *D'après Guido Reni, Ippomene*, Photo G. Gramantieri.



Luigi Ontani, *D'après Guido Reni, S. Sebastiano*, Photo G. Gramantieri.

FIGURE 8. Luigi Ontani, "Luigi Ontani", in *Flash Art*, no. 44-45, April 1974: 11.

founded in 1971 in Turin, with Rome becoming a significant hub by 1972.

In its early stages, FUORI, which stands for *Fronte unitario omosessuale rivoluzionario italiano* (Italian revolutionary homosexual unitary front), and means “out” in Italian, from “coming out”, aspired to create a revolutionary subject, freed from the constraints of bourgeois morality and the oppression of capitalism. Activists upheld the slogan of 1968 – “power to the imagination” – proclaiming, in the editorial of the second issue of their namesake magazine, that “revolution is HAPPINESS” when “it becomes LIBERATION” (FUORI COLLECTIVE 1972: 1)²⁴. One of their fliers explained that “play, fantasy, collaboration, full capacity to enjoy are the political ends and means for a revolution whose final goal, the human being, does not remain abstract and unreachable” (ROSSI BARILLI 1999: 52). They warned against ghettoization and binaries. Later in the decade, FUORI’s primary concern shifted from the question of universal liberation to that of gay identity²⁵.

Ontani was not a FUORI militant. His 1974 statement remains one of his most explicitly political texts, with his preference being to adopt the persona of a dandy, seemingly disengaged and blasé. However, his continued engagement with camp aesthetics and the hybrid genre of the tableau vivant, at a time when the struggle for gay rights was gaining momentum, has evident political overtones. Indeed, his work suggests a consonance with some of the ideals informing the work of FUORI and other gay rights organizations at that time. Ontani’s tableaux vivants cast identity as malleable, changing, multifarious, intrinsically theatrical, in the sense of performative, constructed, historically, and culturally specific. Indeed, they embrace notions of gender performativity and radical difference and desire that became central to queer discourse in the 1990s and exemplary of what would be called queer politics.

Several of Ontani’s tableau photographs present the artist posing as a female figure from a past artwork. As with *Déjeuner sur l’art*, for *Maya-Goya vestito* and *MayaGoya desnudo* (c. 1972; FIG. 9), he picked paintings that had been regarded as scandalous for their unconventional presentation of the female body²⁶. Then, in his recreations, he further deconstructed

²⁴ The phrase “revolution is HAPPINESS” was already included in the manifesto-like declarations introducing the first issue, [FUORI Collective] 1971: 3.

²⁵ On FUORI, see CORTESINI 2019; MALAGRECA 2007; ROSSI BARILLI 1999.

²⁶ Goya’s paintings brought the artist before the Spanish Inquisition for the shocking depiction of the female body outside mythological, religious, or historical narratives.

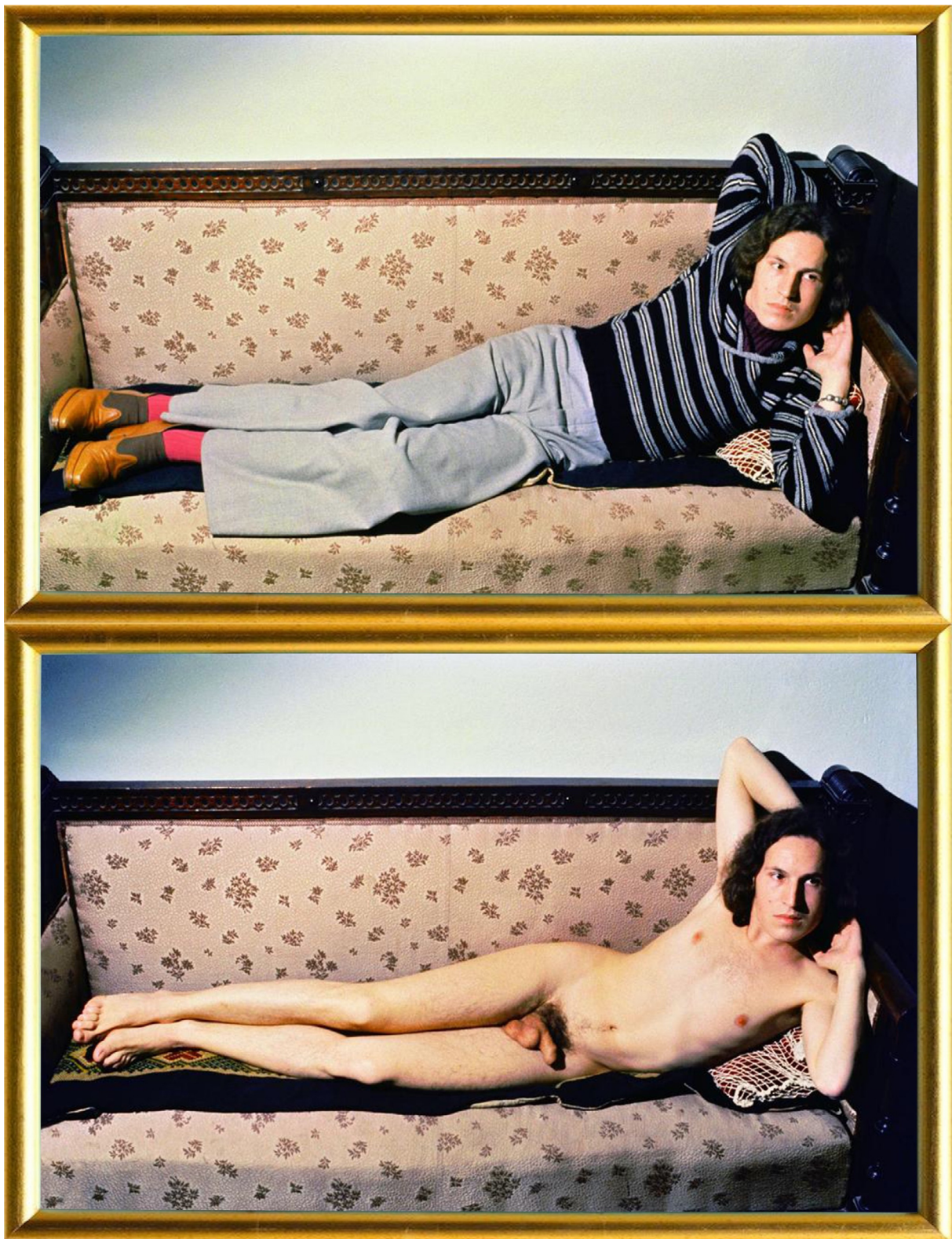


FIGURE 9. Luigi Ontani, *MayaGoya vestito* and *MayaGoya desnudo* (diptych), c. 1972. Chromogenic print, 100 × 200 cm (each photo). Collection of the artist. Courtesy of Luigi Ontani.

and denaturalized the controversial representations. While the protagonist of Goya's painting is seen lying comfortably on a plush chaise longue with large pillows supporting the torso, Ontani's tableaux show the artist awkwardly squeezing his elongated body to fit between the armrests of a stiff sofa (the sofa of Bastelli's studio in Bologna) with little extra cushioning. Looking sideways, rather than directly at the viewer, he appears aloof and disengaged, rather than intrigued and seductive, as does Goya's *Maja*. The overall composition feels locked in, almost claustrophobic: Ontani's feet nearly touch the edge of the picture frame to the left, and his head reaches the opposite end to the right; the sofa is sandwiched in a tight space between the picture plane and the bright white wall behind. The artist wears pastel blue bell-bottom pants with a tight, navy blue, striped sweater. His socks are magenta; his shoes are orange, high-heel, leather platform booties: two elements of cross-dressing that, with the rest of the artist's outfit and the setting, relate to his time rather than to Goya's painting.

Ontani's enactments of female figures from past artworks resignify and recontextualize gender by playing on the distinction between the anatomy of the artist and the gender of the figure enacted in a way similar to gay drag. In one of the most oft-quoted passages of *Gender Trouble* (1990), Judith Butler points out that, in gay drag, there are three "contingent dimensions of significant corporeality: anatomical sex, gender identity, and gender performance". Butler adds that "if the anatomy of the performer is already distinct from the gender of the performer, and both of those are distinct from the gender of the performance, then the performance suggests a dissonance not only between sex and performance, but between sex and gender, and gender and performance" (137). Without creating a unified picture of "woman", as in the case of drag and cross-dressing, Ontani's tableaux after female figures similarly function as gender parody through a process of recontextualization and resignification. Butler describes this imitative process as one that displaces the meaning of the original – of that causal unity of sex and gender that is naturalized through the regulatory fiction of heterosexual coherence. As they write, "in the place of the law of heterosexual coherence, [in drag] we see sex and gender denaturalized by means of a performance which avows their distinctiveness and dramatizes the cultural mechanism of their fabricated unity" (138).

Jennifer Blessing and Amelia Jones have drawn on Butler's theory of gender construction and performativity to analyze works in which artists

such as Claude Cahun, Marcel Duchamp, and Cindy Sherman stage fictional identities for the camera (BLESSING 1997; JONES 2002). For these artists, as for Ontani, the body is the primary vehicle with which to explore the repeated, performative acts and attributes through which cultural signification is shown or produced. Butler defines the “performative” as that which is “real only to the extent that is performed”, in contrast to the “expressive”, which is thought to express a preexisting identity (1988: 527). According to this constructivist model of identity, the performative constitutes, rather than reveals, identity. In his tableau vivant works, Ontani presents himself as another, but, as he emphatically asserts at the incipit of his 1974 artist statement, he is “absolutely present”. Recasting the genre of self-portraiture, Ontani’s enactments suggest that there is no stable, singular, essential identity, but that, instead, identity is performative, transient, incongruous, constituted through citation as Butler describes it, “not as a simple reiteration of the original, but as an insubordination that appears to take place within the very terms of the original, and which calls into question the power of origination” (1993: 45).

Ontani queers gender expectations and anatomical sex playfully in *EvAdamo* (c. 1973; FIG. 10), after Lucas Cranach the Elder’s *Adam and Eve* (1528; FIG. 11). *EvAdamo* toys with the viewer’s ability to identify which of the two figures is Adam and which is Eve, making the identification unstable. The artist accomplished this through a series of simple but meaningful adjustments. First, he swapped Adam and Eve’s positions; second, he contracted their names in the title – *Eva* (Eve) and *Adamo* (Adam) – indicating to the viewer that Eve is on the left. However, the viewer will tend to see Eve on the right because that is where she usually appears, not only in Cranach’s painting but generally in representations of this Biblical subject. Third, he kept the apple with Adam on the right, rather than with Eve, which is again the opposite of what appears in conventional depictions of the subject that, following the Biblical narrative, portray Eve as the primary sinner, either holding the fruit or in the act of plucking it. Essential to this play of mirrors is that Ontani poses completely naked, using body orientation, high-contrast lighting, and projected shadows either to hide his genitals completely or to allow just a glimpse of them. As the title suggests, Eve and Adam are one in Ontani’s queer imagery.

Another tableau in which Ontani enacted a female character is *Leda e il cigno* (c. 1975; FIG. 12), inspired by Michelangelo’s lost painting of the



FIGURE 10. Luigi Ontani, *EvAdamo (d'après Cranach)*, c. 1973. Chromogenic print, 63 × 23 cm (each photo). Collection of the artist. Courtesy of Luigi Ontani.

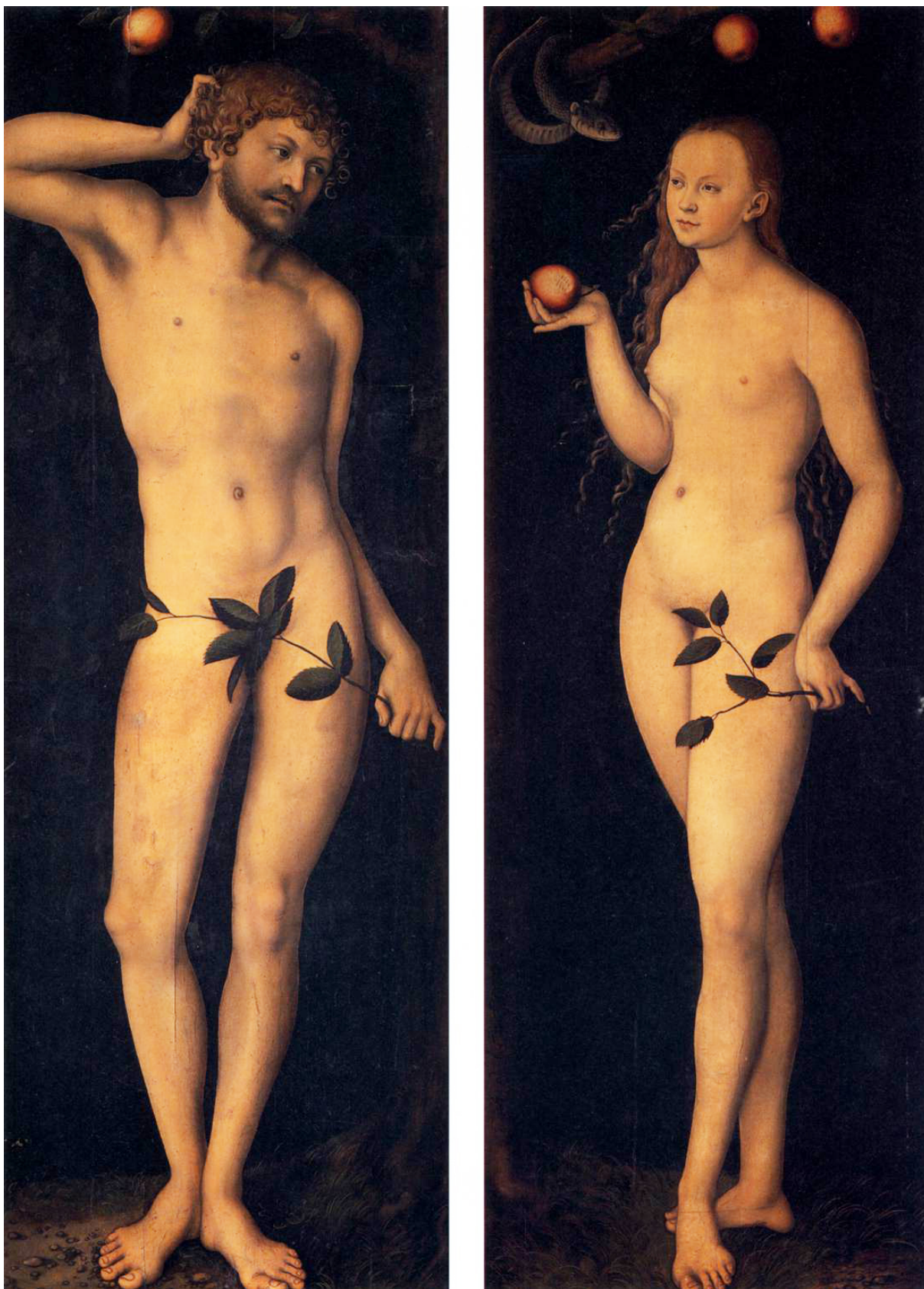


FIGURE 11. Lucas Cranach the Elder, *Adam and Eve*, 1528. Oil on wood, 172 × 63 cm (each panel). Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence.



FIGURE 12. Luigi Ontani, *Leda e il cigno*, c. 1975. Chromogenic print, 100 × 100 cm. Museo Ontani, Vergato (Bologna). Courtesy of Luigi Ontani.

same subject²⁷. Bastelli photographed this tableau, as well as *EvAdamo*. It is worth sharing his recollections as they afford a glimpse into the process of making these works (MECUGNI 2022b). He remembers that Ontani would always arrive from Rome “out of breath” (*affannato*), in a hurry, loaded with bags for his enactments. They would work together quickly to complete the photographs with whatever light conditions were present. Bastelli had the impression that when Ontani was posing, he was not doing something he was sure about, that he had tried before, as in traditional acting. He sensed

²⁷ The appearance of Michelangelo’s lost panel is known from coeval copies in various mediums. See CHAPMAN 2005: 186-189.

some uncertainty on the artist's part, almost perhaps some "awkwardness" (*imbarazzo*), but also a precise determination. For *Leda and the Swan*, they met at the beach in Rimini. It was a winter day, so the beach was deserted and cold. Ontani arrived with a stuffed swan borrowed from a taxidermist, quickly got undressed, and set up the scene on the shore near the water's edge. The photo shows fabric stoles of different colors neatly arranged on the right shoulder and ruffled underneath the artist. The colors are pale yellow, flamingo pink, and pastel blue. For Ontani, they stand for, respectively, the hermaphrodite, the feminine, and the masculine. The hermaphrodite yellow stole sits on top and falls from the shoulder down to the abdomen: it becomes like a membrane between the two bodies of the artist-cum-Leda and the swan, in a queer twist of the ancient Greek myth that Italian artists popularized in the 1500s as a love-making scene.

CONCLUSION

In queer theory and politics, the body is seen as the primary site in which social constructions of identity and difference are "mapped onto human beings" (BROWN and ALLEN GERSHON 2020: 1). Featuring minimal props and settings, Ontani's early tableaux vivants foreground his slender, androgynous body, making it the common denominator of his various impersonations. Recognizability is central to each work, for both the impersonating subject and the impersonated subject, that is, for both the artist and the character enacted each time. In the tableaux vivants I have discussed, Ontani recreated both male and female characters, playing with the dissonance of sex and gender, much as gay drag does. As gay drag, these works mock the expressive model of gender, the notion of a primary and interior gendered self, showing the mechanisms of those constructions on the surface of the body. Indeed, they acknowledge the subject as both inhabited by social codes *and* plural, transient. Drawing on camp aesthetic – citational, ironic, theatrical, incongruous, non-hierarchical – Ontani's tableaux vivants queer identity: they promote a strategic undercutting of the patriarchal, bourgeois, essentialist model of identity predicated on binary oppositions and postulated as fixed, coherent, and natural.

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