

# A Gambling with Intellectual Ownership

## Die andere Moderne - De Chirico und Savinio

(De Chirico-Savinio. Another Modernity)

Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, Düsseldorf, September 15<sup>th</sup> - December 2<sup>nd</sup> 2001

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by  
*Viola Mangusta*

The director of the Düsseldorf Museum, Armin Zweite, declares that the title of the exhibition is equal to its program: the brothers de Chirico-Savinio as co-authors of a counter-revolution that transformed the art of the Twentieth Century; their common vision influencing modern trends up to the most recent, at the same time taking a place as a source of Modern Classicism. The curator of a museum of Modern Art, by taking such an angle, enlivens the exhibition panorama; in the first place by providing a diversion from the monotony of shows based on the usual model of Avant-garde vs. traditionalist art and vice versa, and secondly by demolishing one of the few certainties of twentieth century art: Giorgio de Chirico as the author of the equivalence of painting and philosophy, and in doing so, upsetting the course of western art. Armin Zweite embraces the two authors in one gesture. He does not even question that Metaphysics has a double paternity. The exhibition starts in 1909 and is divided in three sections - I. The prehistoric feeling; II. Modern myth and its symbolic language; III. The solitude of signs. The presupposition is that in the initial phase of Metaphysics, de Chirico had as a tutor his brother Andrea Alberto who, as it happened, was four years younger than him. However, the context is a exhibition in a museum, the purpose of which is to show paintings and sculpture. The visitor's task is to trace the methods of influence exercised on Giorgio by Andrea. Not even the usual posters giving us an outline of the artist's culture come to one's aid in this endeavour. The documentation of Andrea's theoretical contribution to Giorgio is in fact missing. Neither Savinio's annotations on such a work as Apollonio Rodio's *Argonautique*, nor those on Luigi Pulci's *Il Morgante Maggiore*, were taken into consideration as possible theoretical works useful to de Chirico. These are required reading for every high school student just as are *Aeneid* and *La Divina Commedia*. The exhibition catalogue states that Andrea, who at the time was a musician, had a leading role in the building of the intellectual bomb that was Metaphysics. Thus the visitor sets out on the quest of identifying the support supplied to de Chirico by his brother. De Chirico's paintings from the early Metaphysics period are on display in the first rooms. It is wonderful to see this ensemble of paintings for those who know the difficulty and costs of transporting and exhibiting works of this period. Absolute masterpieces, and other works that are fruit of the laboured attributive excursus, are organized in an offhand manner alongside somewhat problematic works and others

*Exhibition curated  
by Paolo Baldacci  
and  
Wieland Schmied,  
in collaboration  
with  
Maurizio Fagiolo,  
Pia Vivarelli,  
Pia Müller Tamm  
and Gerd Roos*

which are openly fakes. But this is the subject of a second discussion, required furthermore by this exhibition. Finally, when the dates of the works by Savinio and de Chirico coincide, as from 1927, they are positioned on opposite walls of the room. In the text by curator Paolo Baldacci the third person singular is rarely used, "he thought", "he executed"; the subject is plural, "they thought", "they carried out", "they gave", as if the Dioscuri de Chirico and Savinio, as opposed to Castor and Pollux, were Siamese brothers and granting that Siamese brothers think in unison. The visitor looks for supporting references only to find them in the events, exhibitions and writings of de Chirico. In reality, curator Baldacci's assumption is more pronounced than Zweite's: Giorgio de Chirico would never have conceived *Metaphysics* without his brother Andrea at his side. A sensational discovery that seems to be the reward for years of research, but it is not so. This idea doesn't emerge from the curator's office but is a tendentious rumour that has circulated for some time now in this scholarly environment, from a similar voice as that which was heard starting in the 1930's. André Breton in 1937, at the height of his offensive against Giorgio de Chirico, read to Savinio an article about him which was to be inserted in *Antibologie de l'humour noir* (1940) in which as the father of Surrealism, he affirms: "All modern mythology still in formation has its source in the two enterprises, almost indiscernible in spirit, of Alberto Savinio and his brother Giorgio de Chirico". Savinio, repeats the comment in *Tutta la vita* (1945), ratifying Breton's attestation as fact. In one swipe, the years of Savinio's work between 1918 and 1921 are cancelled. In order to illustrate the *Metaphysics* in his brother's work, as well as in Carlo Carrà's, Savinio's essay *Anadiomènon. Principi di valutazione dell'arte contemporanea*, is published in the April-May edition of "Valori Plastici", with which he collaborated along side his brother from the very first issue. In his capacity as an art critic and historian, Savinio supports Carrà's work, *Pittura metafisica*, which Vallecchi is at the same time the publisher of his book *Hermaphrodito*. The book by Carrà is the first attempt in history to deprive de Chirico of his role as the inventor of *Metaphysics*, as Carrà ascribes himself the merit without even mentioning de Chirico. The argument treated in *Anadiomènon* is "the origin of metaphysical painting". The essay proposes de Chirico and Carrà as the originators of the movement. Among other things, Savinio writes: "I see youngsters slobbering with rage at painters like de Chirico and Carrà who use the word metaphysic to attribute the just significance to a plastic work that avails to a superior comprehension of the forms reproduced". Savinio interprets the strength of this form of painting in contraposition to the visual, primitive, and abstract painting of the French. He accredits to Italy the recovering of spiritualism in the form of *Metaphysics* and a new Classicism which, "makes its first appearance in the work of Giorgio de Chirico and Carlo Carrà". In reference to his brother, he reinforces his affirmations with a testimony: "His aim was for a spiritualistic statement right from the beginning. Nevertheless, having had the opportunity to assist him during his period in Paris, I can say that even he, at a certain moment, felt an obligation to retrace for himself, the entire path of the transformation of formal pictorial art, and that this exhaustive itinerary aspiring the return to a spiritualistic end is now achieved in an organic plastic art". Savinio's declaration mathematically dismantles the exhibition's assumption that the spiritual construction was his own and not de Chirico's, proving in fact that it was the conquest of de Chirico. The

sole document of this conquest is, as always, the paintings themselves. One day in 1945, after having been crowned by Breton, Savinio declared the opposite. For the art critic it is obvious that it was another case of Breton, engaged as he had been since 1925 in his campaign of parricide in the person of Giorgio de Chirico, delivering the artist the umpteenth slap in the face, to stem his reach, to better manoeuvre himself in the market he still controlled with Paul Eluard, thus enjoying to the bitter end his sadistic passion for the painter. Breton's benediction gave Savinio the opportunity to make clear his place in Surrealism. He does just this in a magazine by the name of "Prospettive", dedicated entirely to Surrealism, which was released in Rome in January 1940 in conjunction with the release of Breton's *l'Antologie* in Paris (Sagittaire). Savinio's good faith is observed in his trying at all costs to insert into the magazine de Chirico's latest style, the one most disliked by the Surrealists, and in doing so, not only dilating the contours of Surrealism, but also distorting the work of de Chirico. In the introduction of *Tutta la vita*, in 1945, he distinguishes his painting from mainstream Surrealism, saying that his is a Surrealism of reverse direction, but Surrealism all the same. Even in this case, a solid base for his theory published in "Valori Plastici", is missing in parallel to the current events. The number 5 issue of 1921 was released at a time when de Chirico and Breton were in agreement on the value of the dream that Breton recognized in de Chirico's painting. Savinio wrote in *Primi saggi di filosofia delle arti*: "I say this particularly in regard to certain idealists, mystics and hollow heads: art has no point of encounter with dreams". It may be that he changed his opinion when he started painting or more over, when he started to show his work. Nevertheless, neither Breton, nor Savinio go much farther than a general mention of Metaphysics. One could just as well attribute the invention of Metaphysics to de Chirico as well as to Savinio, in the same way that one could to Arthur Schopenhauer and to the Pre-Socratics. Who's to disagree? It is quite another thing to anticipate by seventeen years the merits of Savinio's painting, which took its start in 1926, as the unpublished phenomenon of spirit, metaphysical painting, which Giorgio de Chirico gave birth to while his brother, four years younger than him, eighteen at the time, was occupied with his music and humanities studies. The Düsseldorf exhibit reveals to us that not even painting was out of the reach of Savinio's influence, due to the extension of Savinio's overwhelming conceptual strength. Practically, it would be more convenient to avoid considering painting as painting, and more exact to consider it a concept. Savinio's concept. There was no mention of Metaphysics when Savinio brought forth his first practical attempts, as we shall call them; *Carmela* and *Il Poema fantastico* in 1909 when he proposed himself, not as a Metaphysist, but as a late Romanticist and Symbolist. If we examine closely the exhibition catalogue, with respect to historians of the past and the writings of the brothers, we are confronted with the task of sifting through both the autobiographies and the theory work in order to separate illusion and truth. At regular intervals, one reads that de Chirico's poetic diversions are falsehoods and counterfeits. In the final analysis, the Düsseldorf show is a squaring up of accounts that claims two prizes: the first, in the repackaging of Breton's more or less poetic invention in the form of true history; but mostly, to have rewritten modern museology in dedicating a show not to an artist as such, but to an artist as the accused. A trial more than an exhibition. Such a determined resolution did not come unan-

nounced. Two books, *De Chirico 1888-1919. La Metafisica* by Paolo Baldacci, and *Giorgio de Chirico e Alberto Savinio* by Gerd Roos published respectively in 1998 and 1999, heralded the show and prepared the scoop. Roos, in the prologue of his book, takes from Breton in *Anthologie de l'humour noir* where he says: "Justly praised, is the Dioscuri's fundamental contribution to Twentieth Century art, during their years in Paris from 1911 to 1915". Baldacci, in writing his book declared himself grateful to the research done by Roos, (published later) but whereas the hypotheses advanced by Roos can be understood as personal interpretations of the period documents, with Baldacci they become unassailable and absolute: Savinio an undiscovered genius and de Chirico a common impostor. The investigative method employed in the book is to turn inside out de Chirico's poetic propositions, unveiling them as a falsifying and dispelling source of lies. There is no mention of the older brother's attentive support in respect to the younger brother's career and the innumerable interventions among the intellectuals, including in 1926-27 when he made the rounds of his merchants proposing Savinio as a painter. Silence. Quite a few other concealments of the truth shadow this soap opera. At one point in Baldacci's book, de Chirico, taken from his *Memorie*, is portrayed as having shed crocodile tears at the loss of his brother. André Breton must consider himself quite satisfied with this outcome, not even he could have imagined such a following, having set the wheels in motion in a game in which he was engaged with de Chirico. Nor did the owners of Savinio's paintings dare hope for more. Savinio's presence extends like an heavy frame, embellishing the truth around the rooms of de Chirico's work. His interest in other non-metaphysical pictorial movements and his acquaintance with other cultural events of the Twentieth Century are eclipsed by the continuous comparison with de Chirico: perhaps because the mother and father portrayed in the paintings are also the mother and father of de Chirico? Or could it be that the same household objects, the sofas and coffee tables, painted by the two make a conversational piece strong enough to build a theory on? No light is shed on the actuality of interior design of the Nineteen-twenties, though it was a sign of the time in which de Chirico painted these settings. Being Savinio's vision very often alien to de Chirico's progress on the new frontiers of Metaphysics, the average spectator, less informed than the curators, could even argue that Savinio did not grasp his brother's ideas, even though it may not even have occurred to him to do so. This concerns the entire period outlined by Roos of the younger brother's production, 1911-15 and his painting that followed. One of Baldacci's theories is that Savinio diffused the theory behind Metaphysics in different magazines from 1915-20, which he claims are unfortunately no longer to be found. These magazines, duly recovered and consulted, indicate an intellectual atmosphere in line with Dada-Futurists and not Metaphysics. In "291" of Alfred Stieglitz, New York, n. 2, April 2<sup>nd</sup> 1915 appears a musical score, *Bellovées fatales*, comic duet between a man and woman, "Ah, he touched me with his rubber leg"; in n.4, 1915, a test on music, *Give me the wanton anatbema*. In "Dada", by Hugo Ball, Zurich, n.1, July 1917, *A musical vomit*, a dadaist invective against traditional music; in n.3, December 1918, *The second origin of the milky way*. Sincerism is the appellative chosen by Savinio: true art, true life; in music it is noise as sound. In 1914 the audience of the suite *Chants de la mi-mort*, guests of the "Soirées de Paris", couldn't help but notice as the piano was hacked to pieces. Noise, in music, is

equal to "the thing", the Dada object, like Duchamp's bicycle wheel, or his urinal. It is likewise true that he wrote against the Avant-garde in "Valori Plastici" in 1919-20, during the moment of de Chirico's museum and pictorial material research. Let us take a look at just when the texts against the Avant-garde started to appear. Savinio's debut article in "Valori plastici" was released in the first issue, November 15<sup>th</sup>, 1918 (The official date of the edition must be slightly delayed). It was entitled *Arte = Idee Moderne* and determined the opposition toward Avant-garde starting from an antisocialist proclamation. He invokes a daring return to the value of making, "If the artisan spirit conceives the work as strong, pure, profound and well made". This statement illustrates among other things excellent cues to Giorgio de Chirico's work and the concept of Metaphysics. It is contemporary however, with the December 1918 article in 'Dada', already mentioned. Before accusing Savinio of double dealing, one must wonder if he saw himself on another side from his brother. In 1925, the *Morte di Niobe* is marked once again by Dada-Futurist provocation toward the public, according to the testimony of the spectators (Carlo Belli). *Arte = Idee Moderne* ties in with the text of *Le drame et la musique*, published in the Apollinaire's magazine "Les Soirées de Paris" n. 23, April 15<sup>th</sup>, 1914 pointed out by Baldacci as "The" manifest of Metaphysics. And that it is, as a matter of fact. When Savinio reveals art as "drama" he is speaking of his brother Giorgio's characteristic metaphysical painting, whilst in his article on "Soirées" in view of the upcoming representation of the *Chants*, he understands music and drama as independent one from another. Savinio, as an Avant-garde, endeavours to emancipate music from its own rules and from the traditional schemes of musical drama. It is enough to look at the *Chants de la mi-mort* score to understand what he meant: a "total" music, noise as the "thing" (the "thing" being Dada), and, the experiments in atonality that were being conducted at the same time. The Symbolist themes like *Le trésor de Rampséni* are dismissed of technical relationships with the sonorous text, in such a way that it is not possible to establish if the piece is symbolical or mystical. (In any case the two attributes are not equivalent to Metaphysics). Savinio treats text and sonority as two separate matters. His use of the term Metaphysics in his writing is due to the fact that it was the favourite term of Guillaume Apollinaire, director of both the magazine and the circle where the *Chants* were performed. De Chirico's notes on Metaphysics were available for consultation to Apollinaire's circle, and "Metaphysic" was the new keyword after Orphism for communication in that context. Why call "manifesto" the validation a term already in use? The term manifesto is what is meant by the public declaration of the launching of a new trend, not the ratification of a terminology. To deny this is to nullify the language of Apollinaire, Picasso, Max Jacob, J. Cocteau and Breton among others. Baldacci reports that the invention of the mannequin, a sure mark of Savinio's contribution to de Chirico, also found its origin in *Chants*. De Chirico revealed to Raffaele Carrieri, author of a 1942 monograph of the artist, that it was a drawing by Savinio of the "man without a face" for *Chants de la mi-mort* that had inspired the birth of the mannequin. Savinio confirmed this event to J.T. Soby in 1948 and also referred to it a number of times in other pieces since the key date of 1940, when *Antologie de l'humour noir* was released. This episode illustrates once again the protective manner de Chirico maintained toward his brother. Some knowledge would have come out beforehand if Savinio had in effect inspired the inven-

tion of the mannequin, which in truth came from the hand of Marcel Duchamp: the mannequin in *Nu descendant l'escalier* is from 1912. The man without a face or the woman (*Madame X*, if I remember correctly) is a work by Medardo Rosso picked up by Brancusi, artists of Apollinaire's circle. De Chirico was well aware of this as he mislead Carrieri. Lastly, a look at the more intimate side of the brother's relationship. In the text Baldacci wrote for the catalogue, we read that during the Ferrara period, Savinio was the theorist and promoter of Metaphysics. But during the period starting from the summer of 1917, Savinio was engaged as an interpreter at the front line at Salonicco. It is from there that he sent his letters full of solicitations to Giorgio, who remained in Ferrara and acted as his emissary in keeping alive his contacts with colleagues and publications. In a letter dated October 10<sup>th</sup>, 1918, Savinio asks Giorgio to proofread the rough copy of *Hermafrodito*, which was his first published literary work. Savinio at this time was involved with the Dada movement of New York, Zurich, etc., besides being a supporter of the Italian Dada where he collaborated with the Futurist Prampolini, among others. He is not exactly a herald of Metaphysics. Furthermore, it is de Chirico, engaged by Roberto Melli, who introduced Savinio to "Valori Plastici", the organ of diffusion of Metaphysics in Italy. This is a period of great theorization for de Chirico as he constructs a veritable theory of Metaphysics, and sets to work composing an autobiography validating his theory. He is compelled to do so by Carrà's attempt at appropriation of the term. Having said this, the show is a contribution to Savinio the painter. It is true that de Chirico acted as a guide to Savinio in taking his first steps as a painter, with many attentive suggestions as to gesture, colour and subject matter, etc. But the principal observation, besides the common ground shared by the brothers, family symbolism and what not, is the fact that Savinio with numerous connections to the Surrealists, didn't let go of his relationships with the Futurists. In the period between 1927-32, Futurists, in particular Enrico Prampolini, practice *Aeropittura* (Airpainting). This is not quite Metaphysics, but the show places Savinio's paintings bridging on Futurist Airpainting, to show how he influenced Metaphysics. From this angle, de Chirico's and Savinio's respective relationships with the Fascist authority are much clearer. Those accustomed to bad mouthing de Chirico would make him bear the burden of the introduction to Italy of the *Rappel à l'ordre*, of the reactionary painting movement and lastly, the "Novecento" *tren*. De Chirico found a way to remove himself from this issue in 1927 in Paris. The "Novecento" is not alone in being considered Regime art, the Secondo Futurism also falls into this category. Savinio holds a dialogue with *Aeropittura* which has as its pilot F.T. Marinetti and enjoys the backing of the Regime. As the Biennale of Venice of 1932 approaches, the brothers separate paths become more clearly defined and their roles more marked. This is most evident in the attitude toward the Surrealists. Giorgio de Chirico wrote to his brother on the April 24<sup>th</sup>, 1926 to inform him that he was sending his drawings around to his acquaintances, stating: "However, one must avoid mixing with the Surrealists. They are a hostile and imbecile lot." This is one point on which their mind is not expressed in the plural form.

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*English translation by Katherine Robinson*