

INTRODUCTION TO THE COMEDY OF MODERN ART

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The publication of *The Comedy of Modern Art*, 1945, with an extensive collection of Giorgio de Chirico's theoretical and critical essays appearing in English translation for the first time constitutes an unprecedented event in the publishing history of the artist's written work.¹ The present initiative represents an important contribution to furthering knowledge on the art and thought of the Great Metaphysician, a master of all forms of art, from painting to sculpture, to writing and poetry. In making the artist's written work available in English, the Foundation's aim is that of providing non Italian-speaking scholars more direct access to his intellectual work. De Chirico's theorisation of Metaphysical Art, his meditations on the Enigma and the Inexplicable that constitute fundamental aspects of his imagery are thus presented in words – *his words* –. In its full extent, the *Comedy* constitutes an authentic treatise on art history: from de Chirico's elucidations on his own art, critique on the work of artists his contemporaries, thoughts on classical art, sacred art, the representation of nature, painting technique, through to theatre performance.

At the end of the devastation and the dismay brought on by World War II, a turning point for all humanity, de Chirico laid himself bare as an artist and as a man in two self-portraits, one sitting and the other standing. The realism, frankness of the expression and physical stance of the artist without veils make both paintings masterpieces that can be considered a “manifesto” of the man in art and in life.² He had just settled permanently in Rome after a life on the move, including two fundamental Parisian periods, other sojourns in Milan and Florence and a significant stay in New York. He found an apartment in Piazza di Spagna where he would stay for the rest of his life with his companion Isabella Pakszwer, whom he would soon rechristen “Isabella Far”. Peaceful years of work and domesticity would follow in the apartment-studio in the centre of Rome. In this context, de Chirico also opened up on the literary front, publishing his autobiography *Memorie della mia vita* [integrated with a second part in 1962], as well as *1918-1925 Ricordi di Roma* [Memories of

1 Giorgio de Chirico's prolific literary activity traces the entire arc of his life and is characterised by a wide variety of genres and styles, ranging from theoretical and critical essays to numerous philosophic studies, treatises on painting technique, polemic articles and reviews, poetry and prose, autobiographies, novels, drama and personal and work-related correspondence. De Chirico's desire to formalise his art and theoretical thought harks back to his early manuscripts written in Paris between 1911 and 1915, which include also his earliest poems, the so-called Éluard-Picasso manuscripts and the Jean Paulhan manuscripts. His literary production (1911-1945) was published almost in its entirety, including his early written work, together with *Piccolo trattato di tecnica pittorica* [Brief Treatise on Painting Technique, 1928], *Hebdomeros* [original in French, 1929], *La commedia dell'arte moderna* (1945) and *Il Signor Dudron* (posthumous novel, 1998), in *Giorgio de Chirico. Scritti/1 (1911-1945)*, edited by A. Cortellessa, Bompiani, Milan 2008. The English-speaking world was initially introduced to de Chirico's written work by James Thrall Soby who published a selection of passages from the artist's Parisian manuscripts (*Giorgio de Chirico*, Museum of Modern Art, 1955). Since its foundation in 2001, a substantial corpus of de Chirico's written work has been published in English in this periodical.

2 In the standing self-portrait (Fondazione Giorgio e Isa de Chirico collection, Rome), the artist, in a frontal position, dons a white loin-cloth that softly falls over his legs. In the other work, painted in Florence during the war, de Chirico depicted himself sitting completely naked in a three-quarter pose with his legs turned towards the left. On occasion of an exhibition at the Royal Society of British Artists in London in 1949, de Chirico added a white drape around the figure's hips, perhaps considering the nudity of the painting inappropriate for the British public. The painting in its original version (of which a photo exists), was exhibited in 1945 at Galleria del Secolo in Rome. The work forms part of the 1987 donation the artist's widow Isabella Pakszwer Far made of 24 works to the Galleria nazionale d'arte moderna in Rome, in the collection of which it still remains today.

Rome] and the *Commedia dell'arte moderna*, from which derive the essays published here for the first time in English.³ De Chirico continued his work as a polemicist towards modern art, intellectuals and art critics with numerous articles published in the newspapers and periodicals of the day.

At the beginning of the 1950s, de Chirico had himself commissioned the English translation of his historical writings published a few years earlier in *Commedia dell'Arte Moderna*. One need only think of how demanding such an enterprise was to understand the artist's farsighted vision and dedication to making his theoretical and critical written work available to a vaster, international public during the post-war period, which was indeed a moment of stability in his own personal and professional life. A phrase from *Zeuxis the Explorer*, published in "Valori Plastici" in November 1918 and the first text in the chronological order of the 1945 *Commedia*, takes on its original meaning once more: "New lands appeared on the horizon". What better ambassador than the artist's own words, fruit of his sensitivity, clear sightedness and deep humanistic culture, expressed at times in the form of fresh, spontaneous reflections or with meditated, careful evaluations, to portray his artwork and thought. Publishing this extraordinary collection of texts in English today represents the realisation of an objective raised and set into motion by the artist himself 65 years ago, when he intuitively took the initiative to communicate directly with the English-speaking international public.

The typescript of the translation, carried out by an unknown translator at the beginning of the 1950s, is conserved in the Foundation's Archive and bears the handwritten title "The Comedy of Modern Art by Giorgio de Chirico and Isabella Far" on the frontispiece. An annotation in French appears on the third page: "Please leave with Mr. Gian Ferrari, Via Clerici 8, Milan". The gallery owner, a friend of the artist's, had possibly offered his assistance in getting the volume published. However, the English version of the *Comedy* never went to print. The typescript of over 150 pages with a number of handwritten corrections includes 35 of the 44 essays published in 1945. De Chirico's decision to omit a number of texts from the editorial project was presumably based on the consideration that certain essays were of interest chiefly to an Italian public, such as the essays on artists *Gaetano Previati* (1920), *Armando Spadini* (1925) and *Vincenzo Gemito* (1941). Other texts that were not translated include: *Observations on a German Art Exhibition* (1945, Palazzo Reale, Venice) and *Seventeenth Century Mania* (1921), the latter of which de Chirico may have considered outdated in the 1940s, a decade in which he applied himself to a careful in-depth reevaluation of 17th century painting. Four other texts published in "Valori Plastici" at the end of the First World War, including *Zeuxis the Explorer* (1918), *We Metaphysicians*, *Return to Craft* and *Impressionism* (the latter three of 1919) were also not translated in English at the time. In view of their fundamental importance, these have been translated and included in the present collection. Handwritten corrections appearing in the typescript copy have also been taken into consideration here. A careful revision of the original translation was done for each of the essays, some of which underwent minimal corrections, whilst for others a more extensive review was necessary mostly in order to clarify the contents. In a few cases an adjustment of specific vocabulary was carried out; an example of which concerns the use in the early translation of the word "picture" in reference to a painted work of art, which has been substituted here for the most part with "painting", a term more in line with the distinction de Chirico himself made between the image in itself and the painterly quality of its realisation.

3 G. de Chirico, *Memorie della mia vita*, Astrolabio, Rome 1945 (2nd ed. Rizzoli, Milan 1962); G. de Chirico, *1918-1925 Ricordi di Roma*, Editrice Cultura Moderna (Officine grafiche italiane), Rome 1945; G. de Chirico, I. Far, *Commedia dell'arte moderna*, Traguardi, Nuove edizioni italiane, Rome 1945.

The Comedy of Modern Art came into being with a game of masks. De Chirico compiled the essays in two parts in the volume, the first signed with his name (24 essays) and the second with “Isabella Far”, the pseudonym of his wife. The author was one and the same of course: de Chirico himself. The second section includes an introduction by the artist and 18 texts, ten of which had already been published under de Chirico’s name in 1942-1943 in some of the day’s most important periodicals such as “Stile” and “L’Illustrazione Italiana”. To keep up the pretence, de Chirico created historical depth in his brief introduction with regard to the signature “Isabella Far” assigned to the essays in the volume’s second part, stating that the texts had actually been written by Isabella and, for personal reasons, had only been signed by him in their previous publications. In sending the collection to press in 1945, he signed these essays with the name of their “true” author, along with a number of previously unpublished essays including one with a very appropriate title: *Masks and Disguises*. With the pretext of disclosing a previous “falsehood” he actually created *ad hoc* a new one: the double self-portrait “Giorgio de Chirico-Isabella Far”, the painter and the philosopheress.⁴ In the introduction he expresses his “great joy” at being finally able to present a writer “of such great talent” to the public, the same public who did not “doubt for an instant” that he was not the author when they were first published. As specified in his introduction, wise Isabella had indeed prepared him for such an eventuality, telling him that the men of the day noticed nothing, adding: “our contemporaries, in this respect, have given sufficient proof”. In stressing the fact that readers had been incapable of catching on to the original “deception”, de Chirico was actually laying the groundwork of a whole new charade.

We may wonder if the observation on the apathy of modern man was not indeed the keystone of the whole staging as a criticism aimed at the society of the time. So convinced was de Chirico of the lack of attention on the part of his contemporaries that he also prepared for the eventuality that they might *actually believe* in the signature “Isabella” he was posturing and introduced a clue that lends the fiction a whole new dimension. One of the texts, *Sensitivity* (one cannot fail to notice the coincidence of the title), included in the second part of the *Comedy*, was published in 1921 in “Valori Plastici” many years before de Chirico even met Isabella. Another even subtler hint is addressed to those capable of perceiving the irony in it. In expressing his amazement that nobody had noticed he had “not written” these texts himself (in reference to *Considerations on Modern Painting* published in “Stile” in 1942, an essay that caused much uproar in Italy), he stated: “Upon signing this article, I was afraid that readers would become aware that I had not written it, as my style and the *mechanism of my thought* [italics, *ed.*], in a word, my writing ‘technique’ are well enough known having written for over 30 years now”. *A Discourse on the Mechanism of Thought* is the title of a fundamental essay published in “Documento” in May 1943 that the artist was republishing in 1945 under the signature “Isabella Far”. In underlining “the mechanism of *my* thought”, he in fact affirms, in a subtle and elegant way, that the philosopher is none other but he.

After their initial cohabitation dating from the early 1930s, what one could call de Chirico and Far’s “intellectual” nuptial in 1945 took place one year prior to their civil marriage on 18 May 1946 in Rome.

⁴ A number of people believed the masquerade for quite some time. In the catalogue of the important exhibition *Giorgio de Chirico*, curated by Pia Vivarelli at Rome’s Galleria nazionale d’art moderna in 1981 (catalogue De Luca Editore, Rome), in reference to de Chirico’s use of the term “Vita-silente” (“silent-life”) for still life, in substitution to the Italian term “natura-morta” (“dead-nature”), one reads: “the new diction was created by Far herself and theorised in the essay *Still Life*, later republished in *Commedia dell’arte moderna*” (see biography-bibliography, pp. 41). German scholar Wieland Schmied, a great expert on de Chirico’s work and friend of the artist’s, was also convinced that Isabella had written the texts, and even Carlo Bo in his introduction to the reissue of the Italian edition of the artist’s *Memoirs* in 2002 wrote: “the artist’s theory was subordinated to Isabella Far’s naivety and spirit of negation” (Tascabili Bompiani, 2002, p. 11).

Their religious wedding would take place seven years later on 5 March 1952 at the San Francescuccio church in Assisi. So Giorgio and Isabella were indeed joined in marriage a total of three times: intellectual, civil and religious. The artist was to uphold the intellectual/philosophical pretence for the rest of his days, confirming and substantiating Isabella's contribution on various occasions (for those who knew Isabella the charade was not difficult to decipher). He would also base his autobiographic novel *Il Signor Dudron*⁵ on the literary expedient of a philosophical dialogue between a mature artist (de Chirico himself, though not expressly declared in the novel) and a young writer, Isabella Far, in the form of a stimulating theoretical conversation aimed at understanding the reasons behind the decadence of modern painting, which, according to the interlocutors, was afflicted by intellectualism and bad quality.

With the distinctive trait of a critical discussion embracing the great themes of art, *Il Signor Dudron* performs a pedagogic and popularising objective. In the exchange with the philosopheress, the artist puts himself in the background, leaving to Isabella the duty of arriving at a synthesis of the fundamental concepts of his work and thought. Starting from general problems that torment art, Isabella Far (but in reality it is always de Chirico himself who is speaking) moves on to fundamental issues pertaining to the artist's art and thought, connecting these in a harmonic circle: from "revelation" and the "metaphysical world" outside human logic to the manual work of the painter, and back. Various concepts introduced in theoretical form in *The Comedy of Modern Art* are taken up in their dialogue, as for example de Chirico's reflection on still life (a genre he preferred to call "silent life" rather than using the Italian term "natura morta" [dead life]), and the tradition of portraiture. The painter welcomes Far's elucidations with great consensus, specifying that although having reached the same conclusions, he had not succeeded in formulating the ideas in a way that was "so clear, so precise and also so philosophically logical".⁶

De Chirico animated his 1945 co-authorship charade by later casting Isabella in the role of answering the questions put forth in *Dudron*, where the dialogue takes on the form of a teaching expedient aimed at creating a comprehensible legacy of his theoretical and practical reflection on the art of painting to the public at large. In order to be heard, de Chirico lends his voice in a game of theoretical ventriloquism. In *Dudron*, the orderly and thematic formulation of ideas published in the *Comedy* takes on the rhythm of a regularly paced conversation set within the everyday working life atmosphere of a successful artist, nurtured by the experience and reflections of a life devoted to art.

The first part or "act" of the *Comedy* includes 24 essays signed by the artist, two-thirds of which date from the end of 1918 to 1921, a moment of change in the artist's life from his Ferrara Metaphysical Art period to his move to Rome on 1 January 1919 and his new interest in classicism and the Return to Craft of the Roman periodical "Valori Plastici". The abovementioned text *Zeuxis the Explorer* (November 1918, dedicated to the publication's founder Mario Broglio) and the opening text of the collection, *We Metaphysicians* (February 1919), stand out from the rest of the essays in the *Comedy* for their force of enunciation and the vivacious elucidation of fundamental concepts of Metaphysical Art. These intense texts present the prerequisites of a "truly new, free and profound" art, no longer based on the "logic of yesterday, of today and of tomorrow", an

5 The unpublished manuscript of the novel was discovered among de Chirico's papers by Paolo Picozza, President of Fondazione Giorgio e Isa de Chirico, and published posthumously in 1998 on occasion of the 20th anniversary of the artist's death. The text is illustrated with a number of drawings by the artist and the last page of the manuscript (Le Lettere, Florence, 1998; 2nd edition Abscondita Se, Milan 2014). The ideation and first French draft *Monsieur Dusdron* ('Sud-nord' or 'South-North', that later became 'Du-nord' or 'from the North') immediately followed the publication of *Hebdomeros* in 1929.

6 G. de Chirico, *Il Signor Dudron*, cit., 2014, p. 49.

art for which the craftsman “no longer receives impressions, but discovers, continually discovers new aspects and new spectrality”. It is quite significant that the word “artist” is not used in either of these texts and is substituted with terms closely linked to de Chirico’s reflection at that time. In the first one, they are the “new Zeuxis”, explorers dealing with the demons of Heraclitus of Ephesus, the eye of the ancient Cretans and the eye of everything in its primary stage: the foetus of a man, a fish, a chicken, a snake. A big zinc coloured glove points to “the hermetic signs of a new melancholy”, whilst the “papier-mâché skull in the middle of the hairdresser’s window” sings the “strident heroism of prehistory”. These are the demons of the city, the “announcing ghosts” the explorer lends an ear to whilst being called to action for the realisation of an art that is “more complete, profound, more complicated”. In *We Metaphysicians*, de Chirico uses the term “craftsmen” for artists, while retracing art history from the troglodyte to the metaphysical painter, distinguishing the latter from all preceding epochs. Artistic creation is seen in its “intricate psychic process” from the simple mind of the troglodyte who, driven by terrifying darkness, would produce an art of impression, to the new metaphysical painter who “knows too many things”. The metaphysical craftsman has overcome the fears and the *whys* of the primitives; he has raised art from the low sensuality Plato relegated it to and clarified the medieval mystical misunderstanding of art as “a kind of stairway, funicular or trampoline raising consciousness to the highest good”. In this fundamental text de Chirico announces the liberation of art, having reached its highest meaning through the conscious endeavour of Metaphysical Art, and moves on to the question of the material substance of paint, or matter, in itself:

“The new able artificers are philosophers who have surpassed philosophy. They have returned here; they stand in front of the rectangles of their canvases and their walls because they have overcome the contemplation of the infinite. The terrible emptiness discovered is the same senseless and tranquil beauty of matter.”

It is enlightening to place these two texts in relation, not only with regard to the magnitude of the writing and the manifold images that arise from them, but in order to grasp various references relating to the great ongoing change taking place in de Chirico’s artistic activity in that period. In particular one should notice how he contextualises Metaphysical Art historically for the benefit of the art world he found himself dealing with at that time. The first text, *Zeuxis the Explorer*, was written towards the end of the Ferrara sojourn, and the second, *We Metaphysicians*, soon after his move to the capital and was published in concomitance with his first personal exhibition in February 1919 at the Casa d’Arte Bragaglia. Though speaking in the first person plural of artists that are “mature for the new Metaphysical Art”, he does not fail to contextualise the origins of this art form that he developed on his own in his studio in Rue Campagne-Premiere in Paris, whilst around him: “the international gang of modern painters was stupidly striving between exhausted formulas and sterile systems”. In announcing a new pathway for art he also reveals the basis of his thought, the signs and the visions that led him initially to conceive and later formalise Metaphysical Art. He uses the metaphor of journey in the form of the clanging noise of a departing train, finishing the brief text *Zeuxis* with these lines: “We are explorers ready for new departures. / Below roofs echoing with metallic clanging the quadrants are struck at the sign of departure. / In the signal boxes the bells ring out. / It is time ... / Gentlemen, all aboard...!” De Chirico, the son of a railway engineer, is now the conductor of the powerful artistic means to which he himself has given life.

The title *We Metaphysicians* of the second piece, reiterates the idea of a group of artists. In the text, full

of proactive energy and pressing intents, de Chirico affirms, once again, his intellectual property regarding the invention of Metaphysical Art. At the beginning of 1919, at a time when the art world, artists, gallery owners, collectors and journalists were getting back into gear after the appalling disruption of the war, de Chirico obviously felt the need to publicly document the founding facts of metaphysical painting. With great refinement and subtle irony he declared his paternity of the iconography of his Ferrara works with particular reference to Carlo Carrà, though without directly mentioning him. He once again used the metaphor of travel, though no longer speeding along railway tracks, but at sea. The paintings known as the Metaphysical Interiors executed in Ferrara, a city he left at the end of December 1918 for Rome, are compositions in which a raised floor similar to the deck of a boat launches itself with accelerated perspective in a room, at the centre of which a construction of drawing tools, set squares and other incongruous objects, rises up. At the base of this new form of art, which de Chirico describes as “delightful *par excellence*”, resides the concept of the non-sense of life that he had grasped through the teachings of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche.

“It has something of an astronomical observatory, a financial revenue office and a harbourmaster’s cabin. All things without a purpose have been abolished; dominating instead, are certain objects that universal imbecility relegated among the useless. Few things. The squares and fine sticks that suffice the expert artisan to build a perfect work of art. The nautical reference suggested by the word ‘harbourmaster’ has deep meaning for those who want to penetrate the complicated psyche of this new pathos (it is indeed a question of pathos, although this time it is an entirely different matter). The packet-boats are the invention of we metaphysicians (I say ‘we’ *par délicatesse*).”

With the elegant and attentive French expression “*par délicatesse*”, de Chirico underlines with sophisticated irony that the indication “we” metaphysicians is a mere turn of phrase. The reference is aimed at ex-futurist Carlo Carrà, who had taken de Chirico’s metaphysical imagery as his model during his stay at Villa Seminario, a military hospital for nervous disorders near Ferrara where both soldiers were hospitalised for a period in 1917 (April to August). Carrà used many elements from de Chirico’s visual vocabulary – drawing tools, coloured geometric forms, maps, blackboards, mannequins, windows, porticos and shadows –, in addition to his theatrical arrangement of the raised perspective floor, in his own works, seemingly without grasping the profound meaning of Metaphysical Art and certainly without managing to give them the strong visual impact inherent in de Chirico’s paintings. In December of the same year, Carrà presented Metaphysical Art as his own invention in a personal exhibition in Milan (without exhibiting the three paintings by de Chirico sent for the occasion).⁷

In his 1945 *Memoirs*, de Chirico recounted what actually went on:

“At that time Carlo Carrà came to Ferrara. I do not know whether he came there by accident or otherwise, but he came to the same regimental depot as me. We met later in a kind of hospital, or rather convalescent home, which was a few miles outside Ferrara. I took advantage of the relative quiet of the place to work a little more. [...] I obtained the director’s permission to install myself in one of the little rooms, where I worked quietly for several

⁷ Two years later, at the end of 1919, Carrà published the volume *Pittura metafisica* (Vallecchi) without mentioning de Chirico’s name.

hours every day. When Carrà saw me painting metaphysical paintings he went to Ferrara to buy canvas and colours and began to re-do, but with some difficulty, the same subjects that I was doing, and all this with an effrontery and a *sans gêne* that were truly astonishing. [...] Carlo Carrà then procured a long period of convalescence and hastily returned to Milan, taking with him his metaphysical paintings he had done at the Ferrara convalescent home. In Milan he hastily organised an exhibition of these works [...].”⁸

In addition to attesting his primacy concerning the invention of Metaphysical Art – the paternity of which he would continually have to defend against Carrà –, de Chirico established a number of basic points in these two texts with regard to the entity of his 1911-1915 Parisian work through which he portrayed “the metaphysics of Italian architecture and cities”. He tells us how the term “metaphysic” with which he had christened his work at the time was negatively received by French critics, except for Apollinaire who was a great defender of his art and had spoken of him as “the most surprising painter of the young generation” (an observation de Chirico directly quotes in *We Metaphysicians*). He also gives a careful explanation of the Greek term *metà tà fisiká* (“after the physical”), so as to avoid further misunderstanding whilst newly promoting his art in Italy. It is a precaution he took against the suspicion that had arisen regarding this term among the “most conformist” of the French public. The concept is reversed by de Chirico, who disputes the idea of a “Nirvanic void” existing beyond physical things and clarifies that “an inexplicable state of X”, can be found not only beyond a “painted, described or imagined” object, but also *on this side*, and affirms that it is precisely what happens in his art:

“I do not see anything disturbing in the word ‘metaphysics’; it is the very tranquillity and nonsensical beauty of ‘matter’ that appears ‘metaphysical’ to me and even more metaphysical are certain objects which for their clarity of colour and the exactness of their measurements appear to me as the antipode of all confusion and indistinctness.”

The moment marks a crossroad in de Chirico’s artistic career. His first Parisian period had been over for a while and his Ferrara period had just come to a close. In this text there emerges for the first time the artist’s reflection on the “beauty of the material substance of paint”, a concept directly linked to Metaphysical Art and that would become the fulcrum of his research on painting technique in the years to come. De Chirico’s return to craft and search for “beautiful painterly substance” was also to be a constant in his theoretical reflection on art in the years to come. His fierce criticism of modern art was also based on this issue, among others.

Zeuxis the Explorer and *We Metaphysicians* are worthy of close attention for their intense poetic expression, for the full-bodied content of meaning and above all for the depth of thought conveyed. It must be noted how aware de Chirico was at the time of the extraordinary pathway he had undertaken and the importance of what he had achieved up to that time, something that “in spiritual power and painterly construction surpasses anything as yet attempted in the human arts”. It is also quite striking to note that he required neither critical recognition nor commercial success prior to affirming this. In this extremely significant historical moment he affirmed that: “No one before me has ever tried to accomplish in art what I have attempted. My work marks

8 G. de Chirico, *The Memoirs of Giorgio de Chirico*, Peter Owen, London 1971, pp. 83-84. The text continues: “probably in the hope of persuading his contemporaries that he was the one and only inventor of metaphysical art, while I in fact was an obscure and modest imitator. Naturally all these manoeuvres were incredibly naive, because it was known that I had painted metaphysical paintings in Paris several years earlier and that they had been exhibited, reproduced and sold”.

an extraordinary stage in the progressive elaboration and the complicated inner-workings of the human arts”.

Republishing the two texts in the *Commedia dell'arte moderna* in 1945 served the purpose of historically situating his work. It was a way of saying to the art world: “take note that certain affirmations were made as early as 1918-1919”. He opened the volume with *We Metaphysicians*, a bulwark against historical misunderstandings, followed by *Return to Craft* (“Valori Plastici”, November 1919), so as to introduce the two pillars of his art at the beginning of the collection of essays. This introductory structure prepares the reader for the publication’s substantial body of essays that includes in-depth examinations of his own art, elucidations on the material and spiritual essence of painting and an endless range of reflections on classical and contemporary art, together with pondered reflections and fulminating judgments addressed to art critics and intellectuals.

The reader will be surprised by the clarity with which the artist expresses himself on conceptually difficult subjects like “revelation” (a fundamental element in his work), the manifestation of the phenomena of the universe, the intelligence and intuition of genius, the image as a form of thought and the phenomenon of dream. Deep and attentive studies are devoted to the painters of the past, with texts on the work of Raphael, Tintoretto, Gauguin, Max Klinger, Renoir and Courbet, the latter of which was published in English in 1925 as an introductory text to the “Valori Plastici” volume dedicated to the French artist. In three remarkable essays on classical art de Chirico ascribes to Greek painting the discovery of the ghostly and eternal aspect of things (which by nature are changing and transient), through the “mysticism of line” thus giving form to a sort of “religious alphabet of signs”. Giotto’s circle, Cimabue’s perfect straight line and the hieroglyphic contours of Botticelli’s robes in the *Birth of Venus*, mark for de Chirico the classical spirit in Italian art. In the essay *On Architectural Sense in Classical Painting* (1920), he indicates architecture as a constructive element in painting, which, by enclosing the landscape within its lines: “allows one to feel a presentiment of cosmic mystery”, thus giving greater metaphysical strength to the painting. He indicates Poussin’s and Claude Lorrain’s work as the highest realisation of the architectural sense in painting with scenes in which the lines of the constructions embrace and complete the bodies of men, as well as the trees, plants, mountains and horizons.

We find in de Chirico, in addition to his acute visual sensitivity of the world and the phenomena of reality, an equally developed capacity for the observation and psychological analysis of the human experience. In three capital essays, *Desecrated reality*, *A Discourse on Seriousness* and *A Discourse on Mentality* (all from 1945), he reveals the evils of contemporary society with deep acumen.

This copious collection of de Chirico’s written work went to press at the beginning of July in 1945 and was printed on poor quality paper, ‘war’ paper, by Traguardi, Nuove Edizioni Italiane, Rome. The same month, the artist finished writing his *Memoirs*, as we learn in Jole de Sanna’s afterword *Form of the Work*, published in the *Commedia dell'arte moderna*’s reissue in 2002.⁹ From the first edition edited by the artist in 1945 to the second edition in 2002 edited by Jole de Sanna, this remarkable collection of essays had remained difficult to find. The present English translation of de Chirico’s literary work, in which 24 of the 39 texts included are previously unpublished in English, is accompanied and enriched by de Sanna’s in-depth historical, artistic and cultural analysis of the *Comedy* in her essay *Form of the Work*. In her study, she traces the elements that reveal the effective scope of de Chirico’s work, which in the *Comedy* constitutes an epistemological, anthropological and psychological study of his epoch and the conditions in which contemporary man lives. De Chirico puts forth a fierce defence of reality itself, declaring it as *desecrated*. In *Desecrated Reality*, an essay de Sanna indicates

9 G. de Chirico, I Far, *Commedia dell'arte moderna*, Abscondita, Milan 2002.

as key to the *Comedy*, de Chirico points out the principal causes of this desecration as ascribable to a lack of great artists from mid-19th century on, the penchant towards rational, objective sciences and the advent of progress. The word “reality” has lost its meaning by being used by politicians for propagandistic aims and through the nonsense spoken by intellectuals. De Chirico writes: “Reality has become invisible to the majority of men; the deplorable spirit of our time has totally deprived men of clarity of judgement and has caused them to forget even the notion of what used to be the true conception of reality”. De Chirico explains that reality is linked to the three manifestations of time: past, present and future; “enclosed in Eternity” it is identifiable with truth and wisdom. De Sanna underlines how de Chirico operated in an epoch situated between decline and reawakening, whilst his thought was: “in equilibrium with the history to which it turbulently belongs. Ideas pursue one another from one section to the other with a determined purpose: from a pessimistic judgment of the present (Nietzsche) to the reconstruction of the human being through the realignment of the hands to the intellect (he is an “active” nihilist)”.¹⁰

In Riccardo Dottori’s in-depth study published in 2014 entitled *On Philosophy and Painting: Giorgio de Chirico and “Desecrated Reality”*,¹¹ dedicated to this and two other essays published in the *Comedy: The Metaphysics of Dance* and *A Discourse on Mentality* (all three of 1945 and signed “Isabella Far”), he stresses how de Chirico’s painting is inseparable from his philosophical talent and how this “trilogy” of essays reflects the contemporary philosophy Heidegger and Hans Georg Gadamer with surprising correspondences. In the essay *The Metaphysics of Dance*, de Chirico narrates how dance represents the first revolt “of humanity against its destiny of being mortal”. Dottori underlines that for de Chirico, “art is a reality that surpasses terrestrial reality, a reality [that the metaphysical artist] does not contemplate, but rather, enacts in art. [...] The artist’s consciousness and cosmic voluptuousness in action transcend terrestrial reality. On earth, as Heidegger would later state, this transcendence produces a world, which is the world of art”. For Dottori: “Heidegger seems to speak in the same way that de Chirico draws and to say what he portrays”, whilst finding the artist in full consonance with the philosopher concerning man’s relationship to reality, which de Chirico refers to as an: “unstable and difficult phenomenon”. Like de Chirico, Heidegger identifies a “misrecognition of truth” in modern man’s will to lay claim to reality through technology for purely practical reasons and his subjection of reality to his needs. In the chapter: *Reality and Wisdom: Phronesis or Practical Knowledge*, Dottori unites the artist’s thought with Gadamar’s concerning man’s ethical relationship to reality, which both artist and philosopher consider “the duty of ‘wisdom’”. In addition to the word “wisdom”, de Chirico uses “prudence” and “reasonableness” with regard to the human being’s ability to “access true reality, or reality as truth, which allows us not only to bring reality into light, but also to not desecrate it”. For Dottori, the “desecration of reality not only hides the world from us, but brings wickedness to the world”. This is precisely de Chirico’s warning in 1945.

Jole de Sanna states that de Chirico’s aspiration is: “The reawakening of art aimed at the renewal of civilisation through art”. “Utopia?” – she asks – “Yes, utopia. Utopia lies at the heart of all Metaphysical Art”.

Through this extraordinary group of essays, the structure of which escapes a precise definition – formally neither a manual, treatise or handbook, nor comedy or autobiography –, but all of these: “The theory of art becomes an exact science”.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, J. de Sanna, *Forma dell’opera (Postfazione)*, published in English in this periodical.

¹¹ R. Dottori, *On Philosophy and Painting: Giorgio de Chirico and “Desecrated Reality”*, in “Metaphysical Art - The de Chirico Journals” n. 11/13, 2014, pp. 43-66.