

IN MEMORY OF JOLE DE SANNA

Massimo Cescon

The thing I remember most about Jole is the way she laughed at times, a particular laugh that is difficult to describe, like the return of a singsong fairytale from childhood. She seemed in those moments like a child to whom a gift was given, enjoyed all the more for its unexpectedness. This is why she loved comedians, for their gift of laughter.

I met Jole de Sanna at the end of 1992 when she was writing her book on Fontana, which was then published by Mursia at the beginning of the new year. I spoke with her for the last time by telephone on the evening of June 23rd, less than 48 hours before her tragic death in a car accident. We talked about the legendary Mavrudis, the young drawing teacher who de Chirico took lessons from as a boy. To the best of my knowledge, only one newspaper article in memory of her came out at a national level, the lovely and fond tribute written by Lea Vergine published in the *Manifesto* on the 28th of July. It's not much at a time when even the least Mr. Nobody in art and literary circles seems to be in print. It is not much for a woman, scholar and teacher who always put others before herself, to the point of remaining captive out of politeness at times. One need only ask any of the many students, colleagues, artists and friends who knew her over the last 30 years.

She often spoke of death. In some way she sensed she didn't have a lot of time ahead of her. I now understand why she lived at such a frenetic pace, without pause, always departing for some destination or arriving from another. There were times when she seemed to be living elsewhere, in an undetermined place outside any geographical location, like an eternal child with wind under the soles of her feet. Yet with fierce determination. She had the lightness and grace of one who has neither regret nor remorse, tallying neither debt nor credit on life's account. She left life in the same way she lived it and most probably in the way she would have chosen – suddenly –, without preparation, warning, sickness or physical pain; a clean and sudden break before the slightest hint of decline could cast its presence on her

being. For those left behind, there is the memory of her and the heartache of speaking of her in the past tense.

She was an extraordinary mix of striking effervescence and unexpected silences, unwavering passions and absolute indifference. A modern woman with an ancient heart. As are all who are truly modern. As de Chirico, who was the most modern of the ancients and the most ancient of the modern. These last years she had dedicated herself almost exclusively to the study of the *Pictor Optimus*, after having intensively explored Medardo Rosso, Fontana, Melotti, Fabro and Nagasawa, as her numerous publications attest. In 1999 Costa & Nolan published her book *Forma. L'idea degli artisti 1943-1997*, which, though not an easy read, is an extraordinary book: a kind of "biography" of artistic thought in the second half of the twentieth century, where rigour dwells in a free structure expressed in brief chapters, like a theme suite with variations between history and critique. Her debut took place twenty-three years earlier in Verbania-Pallanza with the exhibition and book *Aptico: a new look at the meaning of sculpture*. In 1977, *Lettere raccolte in una società e pubblicate per l'istruzione di alcune altre* (The collected letters of one society published for the education of other societies) was published. The title, which is actually the subtitle of Laclos's *Dangerous Liaisons*, is proof of an unconventional character, unyielding to the flattery of 'the Establishment'. Three years later, *Breve Storia dell'arte Italiana dal 1895 al 1980* (A brief history of Italian art from 1895 to 1980) was published: it is eclectic, hermetic and modern reactionist. In 1978, with Fabro and Nagasawa, among others, she founded La Casa degli Artisti in Milan: a workshop for young artists, to which she remained the heart and soul right to the end. Just as she was, for almost thirty years, a loved and honoured teacher of art history at the Brera Academy of Fine Arts of Milan. Not to be forgotten is the Franciscan manner of her dedication to the collection and organisation of material for a contemporary art archive, which remains today one of her most precious legacies. It is yet another of the many manifestations of her inherent passion and vocation: a discreet presence, a quiet effort, pure and profound, far from the showiness of the art world's trumpeters.

Since 1997, de Chirico was, without doubt, a prevailing passion to which she came naturally in virtue of her predilection for the classical ideal combined with a propensity for the philosophical. Over time, the constant dedication with which she followed the mystery and magic of this passion became almost a demon: the same subtle demon, a particular alchemy of thought, enigma, uneasiness and memory that constituted the underlying force of a pictorial *corpus* – especially the miraculous decade of 1910-1919, in the *Philosophers*, the *Archeologists*, in the *Furniture in the Valley* of the

twenties, in the *Mysterious Baths* of the mid-thirties, which in the art of the twentieth century is without equal in its suggestive poetry and symbolic weight. She delved into the endless secret of that universe, suspended between childhood and play, among Heraclitus, Nietzsche and Pinocchio (a kaleidoscope of dreams where reasonableness and logic aren't of much use, as de Chirico would have said) with the same generosity she bestowed upon anyone who was, even if distractedly, witness to her life. A generosity which translated into concrete initiatives such as the restoration, set in motion a few years ago and still underway, of the shamelessly abandoned *Mysterious Baths* (1973) in the Sempione Park of Milan and overseeing the exhibition and catalogue in Taranto (1998), Buenos Aires, Milan (2000) and Charleroi (2001) dedicated to *Metafisica del tempo* and *De Chirico and the Mediterranean*, and to the ultimate neo-metaphysical period of the artist. She was the curator of the first edition of *Il signor Dudron* (Le Lettere 1998) and recent editions of other literary works: *Memorie della mia vita* (Bompiani 1998 and 2001), *Ebdòmero* (SE 1999), *Piccolo trattato di tecnica pittorica* (Scheiwiller 2001) and *Commedia dell'arte moderna* (Abscondita 2002). Among the exhibitions and editorial initiatives realized in collaboration with the Giorgio and Isa de Chirico Foundation, her dedication and unwavering passion was further expressed in the first edition of «Metafisica», published in 2002. Besides choosing the texts for publication, she contributed to this second edition with her essay *Metaphysical Mathematics*. It was meant to have a second part, though as it is, it gives full scope to a critical activity that has been, and is, above all a journey of thought. This quality of research is also apparent in the recent publication of *Giorgio de Chirico. Disegno* (Electa 2004), which, for the first time, systematically catalogues all of the drawings in the Foundation's possession and of which the introduction was completed just two days before prior to her last trip. On the whole, this corpus of work – written in the brief span of seven years – explores every aspect of de Chirico's universe (painting, sculpture and drawing), covering the seventy years of his creative parable.

Now, that path of study has been interrupted. Jole, a new Ariadne, has begun a voyage without end into the future of the past, somewhere in a panoramic metaphysical garden, with no nostalgia for the infinite: she now knows the enigma of the oracle and the enigma of the hour. We will miss her. She will be missed by all who have accompanied her in the art of life and in the life of art.

Translated by Katherine Robinson