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***Conversation Piece | Part VII***

*Towards Narragonia*

**Jos de Gruyter & Harald Thys, Benedikt Hipp, Apolonia Sokol**

An exhibition curated by Marcello Smarrelli

**Open to the public**: February 8th – July 1st 2021

**Fondazione Memmo**

Roma, via Fontanella Borghese 56b

**PRESS RELEASE**

The *Fondazione Memmo* presents ***Conversation Piece | Part VII***, the start of a new exhibition cycle curated by **Marcello Smarrelli**, which is dedicated to Italian and foreign artists who are either temporarily residing in Rome or who have a special relationship with the city.

The exhibition features **Jos de Gruyter & Harald Thys** (a Belgian duo), **Benedikt Hipp** (Rome Prize Fellow at the German Academy Rome Villa Massimo) and **Apolonia Sokol** (currently an artist-in-residence at Villa Medici – the French Academy in Rome).

The series of exhibitions entitled ***Conversation Piece*** tells a story in chapters addressing various different aspects of the critical debate as regards contemporary art, including the broader history of art as well as more topical issues, and the artists are invited to engage in an open discourse between each other and the curator.

***Towards Narragonia*** is the title of this, the seventh chapter of *Conversation Piece*. It refers to “Das Narrenschiff” or the*Ship of Fools*, by the Alsatian humanist and satirist Sebastian Brant, the first edition of which was published in 1494 and illustrated by Albrecht Dürer. This satiric poem tells the fantastic story of a ship crammed with madmen, on its voyage to Narragonia, the fools’ paradise or Land of Cockaigne – a place of abundance and utopian delights – culminating in the tragic epilogue in which the ship is wrecked.Thisallegorical text is a moralizing fable and a forceful critique of what Brant saw as the human flaws and weaknesses of his time. Over the centuries it has been reinterpreted in various ways, notably by the French philosopher **Michel Foucault**, whose book *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason* (1961), an analysis of the theme of madness from the late Middle Ages until today, starts with a chapter entitled *Stultifera Navis [Ship of Fools]*.

In ancient times people suffering from mental illness were fairly well integrated into society and, although most people were mistrustful of the mad, attitudes towards them were ambiguous, with some thinkers proposing that crazy people might be endowed with particular abilities. One of the most striking literary cases of tribute being paid to madness (although in a heavily ironic way) is the famous work by Erasmus of Rotterdam *The Praise of Folly* (printed in 1511), and the apocryphal quotation: “The best ideas do not come from reason, but from a lucid, visionary folly”, commonly attributed to him. However, at a certain moment in history there was a radical change and the mad were treated like lepers, being put away, incarcerated, marginalized and pushed to the periphery of society, in much the same way that the madmen in Brant’s poem are abandoned to their fate. Meanwhile the visual arts thrived on the images generated by *Ship of Fools*, ranging from the well-known painting by Hieronymus Bosch (c. 1494), with its host of crickets, grotesque and ironic mythological creatures, to the drama and tragedy of Théodore Géricault’s*The Raft of the Medusa* (1818-1819).

The works of the three artists invited to exhibit their work in *Towards Narragonia* will explore the theme of madness as a source of inspiration for artistic creativity, as well as the attraction exercised upon artists by everything that is different, strange and perturbing. If it is true that art is able to overturn or derange prevailing customs, ideas and opinions, disorienting us and forcing us to reflect on our existential condition, then it must also be true that the unprecedentedly alienating times in which we now live can in some way be considered as “artistic”.

The exhibition starts with an installation realised by the duo of **Jos de Gruyter** (Geel, Belgium, 1965) and **Harald Thys** (Wilrijk, Belgium, 1966). A group of 23 small sculptural busts made of plaster, fakehair and paint represent a weird gathering of internationally known politicians, dictators, B ­movie actors, murderers and their victims, public and familiar figures and historical people living or dead. They are presented without any hierarchy or moral judgment. They all appear equal. Equally frightening and equally innocent. Equally flat, motionless and stereotyped. Each face is placed on small shelve throughout the gallery space. On each shelve the characters name is written. A short biography of each character can be found in a booklet that one finds on a small table. In two comfortable chairs around that table, the visitor can read it, surrounded by 23 heads staring at them with a relentless look.The gallery space of the Fondazione Memmo forms a perfect setting for this installation. A historical building in the centre of a city loaded with history makes it an excellent occasion to show 25 busts or characters who are frozen in time. Similar to caricatures, the form and the arrangement of the heads are reminiscent of imperial Roman busts in an archaeological museum or noble *palazzo*, as well as giving the sinister impression of a deviant scientific laboratory.

For *Conversation Piece*, **Apolonia Sokol** (Paris, France, 1988) has produced a painting that is over five metres wide, directly referring to the iconographic theme of the exhibition. This canvas depicts a boat filled with figures, which recalls Dürer's engravings from the first edition of *Ship of Fools*. The subjects portrayed by Sokol, although they are clearly arranged according to patterns taken from the history of art, are in fact people of the contemporary world: a population formed by the artist's friends, acquaintances, loved ones that pose question about gender and sexual orientations, while updating the references to the artistic tradition, by exploring some pressing contemporary themes. The painting has the particular feature of a convex frame: a formal characteristic with several conceptual aspects that are correlated to the history of painting and to the idea of offering a “distorted” vision of the work.

**Benedikt Hipp** (Munich, Germany, 1977) has created an environment consisting of his previously unexhibited paintings and sculptures, which are displayed as if they were the separate parts of a dismembered or dissected body. The ceramic sculptures, fired in a kiln that the artist installed in his garden, are the result of a “deformation” of the clay by means of an ancient, almost primordial, process that produces the effect of a skin wrapped around the surface of the artefacts, which remind us of anatomical, organic details and residual elements, almost as if they were the vestiges of an ancient long-lost civilization. Also the artist’s paintings have the same expressive power, and they strengthen the prevailing atmosphere of an alchemist’s laboratory, a perturbing and magical space that transcends the normal limits of logic and rationality.

Due to the kind consent of the *Biblioteca Oliveriana* of Pesaro, a rare copy of Sebastian Brant's *Ship of Fools*, the Basel edition of 1572, will also be on display. The exhibition will be accompanied by a catalogue, which is scheduled for publication in April 2021.

**Conversation Piece – the project**

Conversation Piece stems from the desire of the Fondazione Memmo to constantly monitor the Roman contemporary art scene, particularly the activities of the foreign academies and cultural institutes, where new generations of artists from all over the world traditionally complete their training and education. Through these exhibitions and other initiatives, the Fondazione Memmo intends to act as an amplifier for the work of these institutions.

The title of the exhibition cycle is inspired by one of Luchino Visconti’s most famous films, *Gruppo di Famiglia in un Interno* (in English *Conversation Piece*, 1974), a vivid metaphor of the encounter between generations and the love-hate relationship between ancient and modern; besides, *Conversation Piece* also refers to a painting genre, widespread in the 17th and 18th centuries, characterised by the depiction of groups of family members in conversation with each other or the typical situations of daily domestic life.

The exhibition cycle, apart from representing an opportunity for engaging in a dialogue with the city of Rome, provides an occasion of interaction between different artistic personalities, with the intention to bring together their energies, know-how and various artistic methods into a single exhibition event.

Over the years, almost forty international artists have participated in the project, including Yto Barrada, Eric Baudelaire, Rossella Biscotti, Piero Golia, Francesca Grilli, Invernomuto, Jonathan Monk, Philippe Rahm, Julian Rosefeldt, Marinella Senatore.

**Fondazione Memmo**

The Fondazione Memmo was founded in 1990 by the desire of Roberto Memmo to establish a cultural activity aimed at bringing the art world closer to the large public by providing the direct knowledge of masterpieces of all times and of the most varied civilizations.

Since 2012, thanks to the initiative of Fabiana Marenghi Vaselli Bond and Anna d'Amelio Carbone, a new exhibition program has been active, which is entirely dedicated to the contemporary art scene. Contributing to the development of the cultural fabric in the area, connecting to international realities, opening a dialogue with other institutions and promoting interaction between artists and the city of Rome are among the objectives of the Fondazione Memmo.

Performances, residencies, talks, educational workshops and publications are therefore an opportunity to promote the present, as an observatory dedicated to the contemporaneity, contributing to the development of our future.

In 2018 the Fondazione Memmo won the prestigious Montblanc de la Culture Arts Patronage Award thanks to which, in January 2020, a residency programme dedicated to Italian artists will be launched in London, in collaboration with Gasworks, thereby continuing the process of interaction, exchange and connection between artists and institutions of different contexts. Until now, the artists involved in the program are Diego Marcon (2020) and Moira Ricci (2021).

Rome, February 2021

**Press materials and photos at the following link:**<https://www.dropbox.com/sh/g81v1otfguni7ay/AACyr5MX2C41FBVbNVqr7T8Ia?dl=0>

**INFORMATION**

Exhibition: ***Conversation Piece | Part VII – Towards Narragonia***

Curator: Marcello Smarrelli

Assistant curator: Saverio Verini

Venue: Fondazione Memmo, via Fontanella Borghese 56/b, 00186 Roma

Open to the public: February 8th – July 1st 2021

Hours: Monday - Friday 11:00 – 18:00 (closed on Saturday and Sunday)

Free Admission

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**Thanks to:**



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