

Sant'Andrea de Scaphis

SALVO

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Socrates and Hegel, Giotto and Breughel, Kafka and Che Guevara. We encounter them among the figures memorialized by Salvo in *40 Nomi*, 1971. A list that begins with the name Aristotle ends with that of the artist himself, provocatively though not unexpectedly. From early points of departure, Salvo sought to connect himself with the past, with those who came before him in art and letters, science and philosophy, politics and poetry. His was an act of inscription, not only engraved in marble, but within history, and eventually with the history of painting. In both body and mind, Salvo inhabited a living museum, a vast library, a repository of knowledge where traces of the past were, and to this day remain, visibly alive. This was the heady air that he inhaled, as a marble from 1972 observes: *RESPIRARE IL PADRE*. From one day to the next, as those around him, he passed through centuries: the past ever present. Within this elastic spatial realm, Salvo was first of all his own subject. In his work between the late '60s and mid-'70s, we see him equally as its author, narrator, and conductor, as well as, on occasion, a "body double"—his *Autoritratto come Raffaello*, 1970, notably. Over and again he set a stage on which to perform, an evolving performance that would come to embrace painting years before its return in the '80s. Salvo's were acts that did not require time travel, since for this artist the world of antiquity was ever-present, palpable, and deeply felt. In 1972, he represented himself, by way of a black and white photograph, *Autoritratto tra le rovine*, in a scene that we can imagine to have been painted by Caspar David Friedrich one hundred fifty years prior. Appearing from behind, the artist is poised in a misty landscape, lost in thought, lost in time and space, gazing upon a temple's ruins. The romanticism of this image is seemingly at odds with a period marked by political upheaval, along with a questioning of art's status, the artist's role in society, and of the art object itself.¹ And yet as an image of collapse and disappearance, as much as of longing, Salvo, observing this site—the past brought into the present, and so in a Smithsonian sense a non-site—entwines classicism and conceptualism.² The image can thus be seen as having as an undertow, a political dimension. This is an artist who was wholly of his time while also "out of time," pursuing parallel tracks followed over the course of more than forty years.

In relation to the Conceptual Art with which Salvo's early work is associated, the marbles in particular, we would come to understand that he occupied a unique position at the time, chameleon-like, iconoclastic. Who else, post-'68, the year of global revolt, with its seismic repercussions, would make the statement *RISPETTARE LE LEGGI*, 1971/72—which translates

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as “Respect the laws”—and set it in stone, as if it was a commandment? This is all the more surprising since Salvo, who had lived in Paris in late '68, experienced the aftershocks of those events, the unprecedented protests against the government, first-hand. And so his is a provocation perhaps not without a measure of irony; certainly if exhibited directly on the floor rather than hung on the wall, with viewers/readers looking down on this statement, its meaning may shift. Salvo himself, at times guided by humor, his position shifting, could be mercurial, and in this respect he is part of a line that extends from Piero Manzoni to Gino De Dominicis to Maurizio Cattelan, all involved in the game of art, meant to be played seriously. Salvo's close friendship with Alighiero e Boetti, another iconoclast, was surely consequential for them both. Salvo's 1969 work, *Salvo e Boetti come I sette savi che scrutano il moto degli astri* (*Salvo and Boetti as the seven wise men who scrutinize the motion of the stars*), based on a Renaissance engraving into which their faces have been inserted, pairs the two as early astronomers, while echoing Boetti's twinning of himself, and, not coincidentally, in the very year of the Moon landing.³ Salvo's temporal reflection reminds us that another century's curiosity for the heavens and worlds beyond our own led to the exploration of space.

Despite Salvo's affinities with artists in Italy, elsewhere in Europe, and in America in this period, between 1969 and 1972, we identify a restlessness, along with a resistance to remaining within a defined, confined area—demarcated not so much by the artists as by those who framed their work. Salvo seems to articulate this with the marble, *PIÙ TEMPO IN MENO SPAZIO*, 1972, which translates: More time in less space. With it, he also refers directly to the physical object that carries this statement; although measuring a modest 25 by 36 centimeters, it speaks volumes against the backdrop of idea art and its supposed “dematerialization.” Salvo grasped the power of language as a material, engaging its assertive, ambiguous, and poetic qualities, imbuing it with solid form. He knew that art and architecture, particularly realized in marble, can withstand the vagaries and violence of time, even if all that remains is a ruin. Humans, mere mortals, passing through this world only briefly, may leave something of themselves behind, even as many of the authors, artists and builders of the past are unknown to us. In modern life this is not the case. We live perpetually in the present, shadowed by what is referred to as the recent past. The existence of the artists, and their achievement is a matter of record. There is a marble from 1972 engraved: *SALVO È VIVO*. This finds correspondence with the artist On Kawara's most famous statement, I AM STILL ALIVE, which he sent as telegrams to people he knew in the art world between 1970 and 2000. Salvo's marble, however, had also been engraved on the back, which was not meant to be publicly revealed until after his passing. There it states: *SALVO È MORTO*.

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Exhibited in Sant'Andrea de Scaphis, a deconsecrated church dating to the 9th century, Salvo's marbles may at first appear to have always been there, memorial plaques within its walls as if part of its architecture, its history, the inscribed element to a funerary relief. Even the illuminated *Tricolore* of 1972, spelling out the artist's name in green, white and red, finds its place here: neon as the votive candle of our time. The reading of the marbles will inevitably shift in the context of this environment, not least *L'uomo che spaccò la statua del dio*, 1972, a gravestone which translates: "The man who smashed the statue of the god." Salvo adapted the text from Aesop's "The Statue of Hermes."⁴ According to the fable, a craftsman prayed to a wooden statue of Hermes to get ahead in life, to earn a better living, but without success. According to Salvo, "the more he prayed the poorer he was." In frustration the man threw it against the wall, and when the head shattered, gold coins poured out of it. Although the man's prayers had not been answered, his anger was richly rewarded. Salvo may well suggest to the viewer, as Aesop had long before him: Draw your own conclusions.

Salvo's art presented in Sant'Andrea de Scaphis—a resonant coming together.

- Bob Nickas

Notes

1. Romanticism exists within Conceptual Art in Europe, most notably in the early works of Gilbert & George, as well as in the figure of Bas Jan Ader who, *In Search of the Miraculous*, was lost at sea in 1975.
2. The reference is to the American artist Robert Smithson. Salvo realized this image in black-and-white, rather than in color, so as not to break the spell—the past within the present.
3. Boetti, by placing an e between his first and last names, changes it to Alighiero and Boetti, a coupling made visible with his 1968 photograph, *Gemelli*, which means twins, in which he appears alongside himself, hand-in-hand.
4. Two additional marble gravestones, *La donnola e la lima*, and *La tartaruga e l'aquila*, both realized in 1972, are also based on Aesop's fables.