

SOUVENIR D'ITALIE

Luca Cerizza

analyzes

the

impossibility

of

the

art

of

Hijacking funds for art production into the creation of hospitals in Africa, the Italian artist causes a disturbing short circuit between formalism and critical content, sentimentalism and truth.



MASSIMO GRIMALDI



Emergency's Bangui And Mayo Paediatric Centres Photos Shown on Two Apple iMac Core 2 Duos, 2010



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(previous) Emergency's Surgical Centre in Goderich Photos Shown on Two Apple iMac Core 2 Duos, 2008

LUCA CERIZZA I would like you to tell me about your projects in collaboration with Emergency, an independent, neutral Italian association created to offer free, high-quality medical and surgical assistance to the civilian victims of wars, anti-personnel mines and poverty. How did this collaboration begin?

MASSIMO GRIMALDI My first relationship with Emergency, though indirect, dates back to 2003, with the work *Igor Pesce's Life In Afghanistan Photos Shown On Apple 23-inch Cinema HD Display*. This was a slide show of the pictures my friend Igor had taken in Afghanistan, where he was working as an architect on the construction of a new Surgery Center for Emergency at Lashkar Gah. I then decided, with my gallery, Zero..., that part of the proceeds from the sale of the work should go to Emergency.

That was the first in a series of works that consist in juxtaposing groups of images from different

Author

LUCA CERIZZA is a curator, writer and art historian currently based in Berlin. Among his latest curatorial projects: "Scène Ouverte," Centre Culturel Français de Milan, 2011; "Alighiero e Boetti Day" (co-curated with Massimiliano Gioni and Francesco Manacorda), Turin, 2011; a solo show by Marcello Maloberti (co-curated with Pierre Bal-Blanc), CAC Bretigny and Nuit Blanche, Paris, 2011.

Biography

MASSIMO GRIMALDI (b. 1974, Taranto) is an artist who lives and works in Milan. He has had solo exhibitions at Castello di Rivoli, Turin (2009); Zero..., Milan (2006/2008); ARCO Projects, Madrid (2007); and Isabella Bortolozzi Galerie, Berlin (2005). His work has also been shown as part of group exhibitions such as "Italics" at Palazzo Grassi, Venice and MCA, Chicago (2008–2009) and the 50th Venice Biennale (2003).

Current & Forthcoming

In 2013, MASSIMO GRIMALDI will have a solo exhibition at Team Gallery, New York.

sources (photographs taken by me or by friends, or images downloaded from the Internet) with the latest model of Apple computer on sale in the moment in which the works were done. The idea was to create a strident contrast between two different planes: the impersonal plane of the industrial object and the emotional plane of the images shown by means of that object. In this way, I wanted to give up the possibility of deciding the appearance of my own works, subjecting them to dynamics of production beyond my control. My intent was to remit my authorial status, to question it. I don't choose the Apple computers, but in my worship of them I feel as if they chose me, instead. As if I were the real product, and my artwork a sub-product. This series of works follows the evolution of those computers over the years, and it will retrospectively produce reflection on the criteria of their obsolescence, and on our manic desire for them.

LC The first time I came across one of your works with/for Emergency was in 2006. I was on the jury of the Artegiavane Prize organized by the Chamber of Commerce of Milan for the creation of a public work, and you had been selected to participate. It was the first time you presented this typology of work for a prize.

MG Besides the prize for the winning project, 40,000 euros were set aside for the production of the work. But I certainly did not want to produce a big sculpture for a city square. My proposal suggested that the money should not be used for the physical production of the work, but as its inspiration. The idea was to give the money to Emergency for the purchase of biomedical equipment for the new Salam Center of Cardiac Surgery in Khartoum, Sudan. Then the work became low-cost, simply the iMac that would show my photographs documenting the activities of the Center to which the money would be donated.

LC That expedient really put the jury's backs up against the wall! Your proposal implied a dilemma, something like: "If you don't make me the winner, I cannot donate all that money for a good cause." I remember how awkward and irritating it was, for some, to be part of the jury, faced with what one of its illustrious members called "moral blackmail."

MG I think the intelligence of some of the jurors was to recognize that the moral blackmail was a structural part of the work, just like a painting technique. The lack of scruples, almost the violence of these projects that test the ethical character of an institution and even the moral character of the individual jurors is clear, confronting them with the question: "What is better: to make some artwork or to save human lives?" It was correctly noted that the problematic gist of these works has to do with the impossibility of art, in the traditional sense of the term, to balance that

issue. These works are fully artistic precisely in the moment in which they no longer seem like art.

LC In fact, this "blackmail" has worked, in other cases. In all, you have managed to convince four juries, and win four awards. The last two prizes you have won were organized by two of the most prestigious museum institutions in Italy: Castello di Rivoli and MAXXI in Rome.

MG I had the 15,000 euros of the Young Artists' Grant of Castello di Rivoli go to the Surgical and Paediatric Center of Emergency at Goderich, Sierra Leone. The resulting installation in one of the rooms of the museum, called for a synchronized double slide show of the photographs made in Sierra Leone, shown on two iMac computers, side by side. Another iMac showed a collection of short videos shot at the same time as the photos, less aesthetically pleasing than the stills, but more intimate.



Emergency's Paediatric Centre In Juba, supported by MAXXI, 2010

In 2009 the MAXXI 2per100 award permitted me to make a leap in quality. Instead of just supporting the activities of a hospital, this quantity of money made it possible to build a new one. The international competition organized by the MAXXI museum in Rome was a result of the "2% law," which states that public agencies that construct new buildings have to set aside no less than 2% of the total budget for the production of artworks. So there were 700,000 euros at stake, for the production of a work to put on the plaza in front of the museum. My project, *Emergency's Pediatric Center in Port Sudan Supported by MAXXI*, consisted of earmarking 92% of that sum for the construction of the facility in Sudan. The Center, which provides free pediatric assistance and has a clinic for diagnosis of heart conditions in children and adults, has been the subject of my photographic reportage, document-

ing all the phases of its construction and the start of its activities. The reportage can be seen in an evening video projection on an exterior wall of the museum, ideally blending the facility's architecture with that of the museum, the former existing thanks to the latter. In its first three months of activity the Port Sudan facility has provided care for 4,755 children.

LC It is certainly interesting to observe the way this work generates a long-distance dialogue between two buildings, between two works of architecture with very different symbolic and use values: a hospital and a museum. It is incredible to think that the hospital in Sudan was built with such a small percentage of the funds set aside for the construction of the museum. There seems to be an implied critique, on your part, of the vanity and vacuity of the art system, when compared to other, more urgent situations. How do you see

the relationship between ethics and aesthetics in your work?

MG I consider myself a hyperformalist, always ready to pursue the most extreme and artificial abstraction. But at the same time I have often thought what I was doing was sterile, so I wanted to find a way to make myself "useful," in the simplest sense of the term. An attempt to make ethics a new frontier of my aesthetics.

I call this series of works "Apple+Emergency." And the association of these two worlds, Apple and Emergency, is definitely my most accurate self-portrait. It speaks both of the way I undergo the charm of forms and my desire to concretely take part in the reality around me, in pursuit of a legitimacy I fear my role as an artist does not have.

LC Also the images you produce for these works, like the pictures you have been taking privately and sending to friends for several years now,

All images courtesy of the artist and ZERO..., Milan



Mariam Before the Image Rubine and Daba Before the Image Magenta, 2010

and the abstract images you produce for other works, have something of the Apple style about them.

MG More than just something. My abstract images remix pieces of the graphic interface of the iPhone. And my photographs also tend towards a model that is not the model of great photojournalism. Instead, it is similar to the photographs that appear in the advertising of Apple products. Photographs of trips, of family life, reassuring, extremely pleasant. Not the lofty beauty of the great "pro" photographer, but the kind of pleasantness that is accessible to all us "consumers."

Moreover, I have always defined my reportage as "affective." More exactly, they do not document the activity of the health-care facilities of Emergency that have received the prize money; instead, they describe the emotional link that is created, my way of regenerating myself through them. I see photography as a means, not an end. I am not

a vulture, as reporters often are: I do not photograph suffering. Instead, I try to show the hope offered by these hospitals, often the only structures that offer quality medical care, free of charge, in countries plagued by war or poverty.

LC One aspect that has always fascinated me about your work is precisely this ongoing, disturbing short circuit between formalism and critical content, sentimentalism and truth, factors that would normally be considered impossible to reconcile. Your works reveal a certain lack of faith in the modes of intervention of art, even those that are seen as critical and political. What is your idea of the role of the artist, its possibilities and limits?

MG It has always been problematic. At first I even refused to be defined as an artist. I must confess that had I not found this way of combining drives that are diametrically opposed inside

me, I probably would not have known how to continue to produce artworks. The commitment of my Dr. Jekyll balances my formalist Mr. Hyde.