

REWIND 003

Lea Vergine

Art as a Mirror of
Fears and Desires

Fondazione Antonio Ratti
Archive 03.04.2009

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🔊) Listen in Italian

I would like to generally reflect on “us and them”, on “normal humans” and artists. But before getting there, I think we should start by saying that daily life, everyday life, is a sort of screen that we use to hide our real life. Real life is a mysterious and terrible thing. All of us, artists and non-artists, familiarize with it either in our dreams or when it occasionally breaks out into our consciousness, terrifying us, especially when we are awake. Things are not only what they are. We live on the edge of the surprising, on an extravagant platform set between a magical, absurd, ironic dimension, in a sort of enchanted sphere and motionless delirium. Giambattista Vico wrote: “give sense and passion to senseless things”. So one can wonder what artists do. They operate supported and fed by a form of unreasonableness that constitutes a different rule, a perspective on the real world that is very different from ours. We often question their behavior, their works, which seem to us quite pathogenic or pathological. And so we talk about self-worship, compensatory fantasies, forced needs, forbidden actions, perturbing extravagances. But we have to understand what is the origin of all this. I think it is the pursuit of the idea of Love. In my opinion, art is a shadow or an echo of love, an attempt to incorporate it, to embody it. The attempt is often destined to create only what we could call a maceration of the soul. Artists of all times have always played with a kind of quiet madness, often biting the edge of things. That’s how they manage – and so do we – to get around the knots of life, to drift along the tangents of the question at stake which is basically always the same: the fear and trouble of living. Works of art of recent decades contain a personal component (that can sometimes be excessive, but yet fundamental towards expression): memory, the impression held by memory, a sort of ambivalence; a multitude of minor episodes and daily events, kept in an almost journal-like manner, isolated to be preserved and presented devoid of any pathos, with the same cold and aseptic approach of an entomologist. Anything has been and could be used as recording-worthy material: sounds and noises, a greeting card from a friend, a sheet of chamber music, a video of a walk taken the day before, an artist’s shadow or his weight or wounds, or photos in the nude. In short, artists resort to dissonance- and incongruence-like effects: it seems that art exists only to prove to itself its very own existence. Therefore, what takes place is a sort of appeal to an ascetic experience, to a sort of negative theology, to an almost always present relationship between aesthetic activity and regressive pleasure. The discomfort of an unfulfilled need, the hassle of our precariousness, the hazard involved in existence itself, the continuous attention to perspectives that we do not know when and how we will accomplish: everything inevitably leads to a state of anguish of being alive in the world and of sorrow for the impossibility of establishing an authentic and satisfying relationship with the world and the things, the objects that are outside us and our own body, what happens inside us, what happens to us. For instance, the relationship between the artist and who is not an artist – the others, the artist’s interlocutors – is played out in being near or far from objects, objects that must serve as proof that the others are not isolated entities. Objects, things, must show that people are (or are not) together with us. Hence the impertinently insignificant inventions, the tortuous quotes and sarcastic inversions: all speculations on the edge of rhetoric: paradoxes, dilemmas, tautologies, sophisms and the like. It is as if we were wondering again: what is art for? In the first place, we could say that art’s purpose is finding oneself. The artist deals with a defeated self and loves it, saves it and then lets it go. And often this encounter between self and self, hidden in the game of dreams and art, seems to have the same meaning as death. The artist always feels, has always felt, death as something that romanticizes life. Sometimes he may be sadistic, in light and in darkness, in love and in blackness. Other times he may use a cold and fierce fury, other times he uses irony. Irony that, as we know, testifies secret tears and is the mask that pity wears for itself. We all do what we can, depending on how we manage to keep our balance, which is naturally always very unstable. And the artist, moreover, is a social error, he is already a figure of contrast and opposition. Each one of us is wrecked by a plurality of situations in life, and every morning we have to start putting the pieces back together, piecing together what is left of us. It is a human attitude that translates into art, which is nothing but the mirror of our fears and desires. But I don’t want to upset you too much, especially after dinner.

Now I would like to address a couple of lighter issues. Issues that have been much debated in recent years in the field between art and who receives it, so to say, between the artists and the public. So, let’s try to explore more practical topics such as the relationship between art and fashion (we are in Como, by the way), the explosion of the Chinese art phenomenon, and the difference between an art critic and a curator.

That of art and fashion, a subject that has been widely discussed everywhere, I think is a parody or, better still, a farce so to speak where art mocks and offends itself in a theme-park kind of framework, set in what I believe is a great and dangerous error of perspective. You have seen how in the great events and exhibitions, held even in museum spaces during the last 20 years, clothes are put side by side with works of art. But in this kind of context works of art appear as shop-window objects, products without any possibility of communication. The hypocrisy, as well as the ignorance, of those who unpick and juxtapose objects to be worn with other thought-inspiring objects – the hypocrisy, I was saying, of those who organize these events, allows for the writing and debating of subjects such as fusions, digressions, multimedia approaches. But what really comes across is just a great confusion and a sort of ideological scam. Now, we can even not be shocked if clothes (which are ultimately products) get displayed inside museums (places whose function is the preservation of ideas and inventions), but what started in Florence about fifteen or twenty years ago, for example – which was the starting point for this kind of project – was the juxtaposition of the work of tailors with that of sculptors and painters, of the highest quality, by the way. They were very good tailors, for heaven's sake. But everything was put on the same level and continues to be put on the same level, creating, in my opinion, an embarrassing and discouraging spectacle. Now, we all know that there are various levels of invention: the invention of a child, of a psychotic or mentally ill person who is given plasticine to exercise, of a good amateur, and so forth. Shall we try to remember, for example, the difference between a tailor, even a great tailor, and a creator? The creator is the person who first conceives a work, writes a text, composes a piece of music. Creating means producing from nothing and it has always been referred to as a noble practice, one that leaves us breathless and that certainly has nothing to do with the fine mixture of shapes and colors that we can see looking behind or around us. Tailor: today we use words without realizing their meaning. A tailor is someone who, with talent and a certain sagacity, fashions new clothes. Designer: another altogether different word that can give you heart attack. A word that is used – you know that already – to define shoemakers, butchers, hairdressers, barbers: everyone is a designer these days. A fashion designer is someone who industrially produces clothes based on criteria taking into account aesthetics. All the tailors of the past, the great tailors of twentieth century history – Vionnet, Poiret, Schiapparelli, Chanel to name but a few – were proud of their status, which has never interfered with the arts. The only legitimate relationship between art and fashion is the one that has always been practiced: those who make and dictate fashion buy works of art. Now, just to be clear, attention to clothing is certainly a respectable matter. As Count Chesterfield said "dress is a very foolish thing; and yet it is a very foolish thing not to be well dressed".

I will now talk about the Chinese phenomenon. It was major in the 1980s. At the time, Europe and the United States would look at Eastern art as a childish, illustrative and rather bastardized product: some political propaganda, mixed with a little chinoiserie, extravagance, forgery, illegibility, and malice, paired with plenty of West, Fluxus, Land Art, Body Art, Conceptual, etc. The East was looked at through adolescent memories, operettas, cruel tales, miscellany, cinematic junk. We moved in that crowded and stereotyped image of the East that Westerners have nourished for centuries. Despite our mistrust, however, the phenomenon of Chinese art broke out and was consumed everywhere. It lasted about 30 years and still occupies museums and markets throughout the West. And don't forget the bulimia of collectors: nobody would deny a Chinese diversion. From Los Angeles to Cagliari everyone has a piece of Orient at home or in their office. But what does Chinese art represent – especially the most popular one, the art of the generation in their 30s and 40s? I believe that these Chinese things you can easily find around, look like elegant rubble and speak about past glories with a certain nostalgia. Many works even channel archaic anxieties, but, above all, they always have a raving of death about them, as if stigmatizing the gap between the individuals' desires and the schizoid strategy of social customs and rules – I mean the new ones. In this sense violence – just think of the bodily ferocity of many images – becomes a language and often, for a sort of paradoxical prodigy, turns into a soft, tender, arcane, almost angelic communication. So we are left to wonder whether China, whose tradition of virtuosity and rarefaction remains remarkable, is either cultivating a project of conquest and re-appropriation of its illustrious past, or, having lost its mind in this crazy race frantically chasing the myth of economic wealth, is considering the possibility of rediscovering the pleasures and luxuries of Mandarin China.

Another topic I would like to address and that I mentioned earlier is the difference between the role of the curator and that of the art critic or, as it is claimed today, of the curator who is also a critic. So, once again, we need to clarify things a bit and be more precise. The curator is not supposed to know the science of what he is exhibiting. His duty is to collect material to be exhibited. The fact that the figure of the American-style curator should produce critical analysis is a rather peculiar notion, and nobody would dream of requiring it. No one even thinks about it. So ultimately, a curator is that person who doesn't invent anything but who is able, thanks to his managerial abilities, to put together an exhibition. Something all good gallery owners and merchants have always done. Many exhibitions in recent years, including Biennials, have been put together by curators, even in Italy. As we have seen, these exhibitions have no underlying idea, only the need to favor some authors and reject others. A necessity linked to the totally hegemonic figure of today's art system, who is no longer the merchant but the collector. It is the collector who decides the destiny of art and who represents the prevailing class. A class that no longer cares to show any specificity or superiority. It is the collector who determines the taste of the art market, of museums, galleries and art magazines. Critics are no longer so concerned about making people aware of the works' quality since typically they have morphed – apart from the usual exceptions that confirm the rule – into dedicated and complacent employees, small entrepreneurs and aspiring tycoons. The majority of Italian critics, for example, fall into two categories. The one that gets ahead through strategic alliances, at the service of the American and German collectors who have heavy currency, and the one that is ready to change team at all times just to score one point, no matter how short-lived. A newspaper that we all read, *The Art Newspaper*, sometime ago published a power map, a long article where many of these critics were called "the guys with the suitcase". The article certified with name and surname that so-and-so was employed in a multinational company, so-and-so was a consultant for a big industry, and so-and-so was employed by a group of collectors and so on. There were no retractions. The fact is that there is a constant conflict between those who face the burden of freedom and those who, dreading it, because freedom can be very hard, give it up. So there are those who defy the rules of general consensus, and those who self-censor themselves and surrender – and this is one of the saddest aspects, leading to fear of one's own thoughts and to self-censorship only to avoid the risk of lack of consensus. Therefore, in the context of new social realities, the new rich and the critic can only agree. German author Heinz Berger wrote something about Italian customs that I found quite fitting: "everyone must pay for privilege". He described the haggling approach Italians have to everyday life. "Everyone must pay for privilege": a client for a recommendation, a politician for votes, the gangster for protection, or the protégé who to remain so must in turn favor others. Nothing can be taken for granted. So going back to curators, a curator is not an art critic, but a gentleman who essentially spends his life travelling on airplanes in search of novelties and proposes them, so something quite different from the activity of those who read works of art to position them in a certain context. The only exception to this model was perhaps Harald Szeemann.

That's all. I'll take some questions now.

Mario Fortunato: Your lecture addressed various topics that I believe may inspire many questions. Some of the subjects you touched were simpler, more immediate, even closer to the news. Whereas the first part of your speech made me think of a definition by someone whose name I cannot remember: art should create life rather than reflect it. I believe that this idea fits well with the distinction you made between art and fashion: on the one hand, there is creation from nothing, an alchemical, mysterious, enigmatic transformation, as art always is. On the other hand, there is a noble trade that takes objects, existing materials, and transforms them. About what you said regarding the distinction between critic and curator: a few days ago, I read an interview with an American art critic, Barbara Rose, who made distinctions not so far from yours. She concluded in a disconsolate way, saying that at this moment we should talk about the market and not about art, because there is no art altogether.

Lea Vergine: Barbara Rose has always been and still is a rather extraordinary critic of everything that happened in America in the 50s and 60s. She is an extremely cultured Polish Jew. She has focused on a period that goes up to the 70s. I am discovering there is no one way to get old. Even Barbara Rose is getting old and she is doing what many old people do: turning in on

themselves, flattering old memories, getting nostalgic, deploring everything happening today in a sort of Elemire Zolla-style delirium. This doesn't mean that Barbara Rose isn't an extraordinary critic. She has written very important things, even anticipating many things that happened later. But we can't absolutely say that the art of today does not exist. Yes, there is an overflowing market – even if today everyone says this is a period of serious crisis, a notion that spreads every time money is not so easy to come by. It is unquestionable that Damien Hirst and Jeff Koons are market phenomena. The question is: why are they market phenomena if they are not even great artists? Because those who buy their work are the so-called new rich. In the past, the so-called "sharks", the wheeler-dealers who built their fortunes during and after World War I, were willing to learn all sorts of things, from culture to how to wear long socks. Today, the ruling class doesn't give a damn about what should be done, what shouldn't be done, what is good, what is bad. They rule and that's enough. Today, art buyers are so illiterate that even Panza di Biumo looks like an intellectual compared to them. I was talking with an art dealer seven/eight months ago. I asked, "Who bought this stove by Rosemarie Trockel?" She is a good artist, but the stove was ignobly a real stove standing on a baseboard.

"Who bought this?"

"A collector" answered the art dealer.

"What does he do for a living?"

"He is in trading."

"What does he trade?"

"Meat."

"How do you mean? Is he a butcher?"

"No, he is in wholesale" as if being a butcher were an insult.

"Fine – I say – but why did he choose Trockel's stove?"

"Ma'am he doesn't even know he's bought Trockel's stove. He comes here at the end of every month and asks me to decide what he should invest in."

Art dealers buy and store everything in a space called *magazzino* in Milan – a horrible word I have never understood. When trends change, you realize how such market phenomena can exist. Once rich people would care about taste, would study and read something. No one does that anymore.

Mario Fortunato: Isn't what you just said somehow similar to Barbara Rose's idea?

Lea Vergine: Sure. But we cannot ignore that thank God art exists anyway. Being art a gentle disease – as I said at the beginning – it is something that cannot be eliminated from life and cannot be eliminated from human beings, from our existence. In Italy we have some very interesting young artists, from Adrian Paci to Luisa Rabbia to Eva Marisaldi, and many others. There are many very capable people. Yet the number of artists has become exorbitant – this is another aspect of art that has changed so much, just as in literature. If there are hundreds of thousands of artists, clearly only a thousand will be interesting, really interesting.

Mario Fortunato: Then the question could be: let's admit, and I largely agree, that the situation is what you've just described. The proliferation of works and of producers creates an extreme confusion or even a loss of language, even for those who should recognize these works and place them in context. I am thinking of art but also of literature, music, theatre, cinema and all forms of artistic creation. How can we orient ourselves if even critics no longer have the tools?

Lea Vergine: No, I think that there are still critics, but curators have taken on the leading role. I used this concept to make a distinction. Art critics still exist of course, but they are decreasing in number. Since the collector is the one who decides everyone's destiny and since the collector is quite ill-equipped in terms of culture and education, these situations can come about. But it's not always like that, it's not all like that. This is also true in literature, as we know. What happens in art is that you only know the things that you frequent. Claudel or Valery, my memory fails me, said: "there are no dark things, there are just things that you need to frequent and then darkness will end". So I guess that's how it has always been. I don't think that for Jacobello da Fiore things were any different than today. There were lords and patrons protecting him and most people must have said, "Why didn't they call Duccio?" I think there are some differences, but things have always gone more or less the same way.

Mario Fortunato: What you say it's true, I think. Every historical period had its contradictions that may or may not get solved. Do you agree with this very

recent idea that the global economic crisis, in which we are all immersed, could paradoxically serve as a kind of purifying bath, especially for artistic languages?

Lea Vergine: I don't know, it seems an obscenity to me, but it could be. Who am I to say? To think that everyone has to starve to death to get a fresh new start is such a Catholic idea that it makes me sick.

Mario Fortunato: I was thinking about the first part of your speech, which was perhaps the deepest and most interesting.

Lea Vergine: Maybe I shouldn't have talked about those trendier topics. But I was afraid of making you fall asleep talking about death at 9 o'clock in the evening after dinner! Let's talk about fashion and art, about other things we hear every day, I thought.

Mario Fortunato: But those topics do have a certain relevance here in Como and we have already addressed them on other occasions. However, in the first part of your lecture, you talked about artists and I would like you to expand a little further on that. You began by saying "us and them". Them being those who create something out of nothing.

Lea Vergine: Yes. Every day we hear: "I don't understand what this artist has done, I don't understand art". I actually believe that both visual arts and music (literature is perhaps different) should be first of all felt. Just felt. That's how the so-called feeling with the work, or with the subject, comes about and how viewers can get passionate about art. They go on, ask questions, ask others. I don't believe anyone could ever say "I must study art history because I want to understand why Lucio Fontana got up one morning and cut the canvas with a razor blade". I don't believe in that. I believe in those fierce jolts, in those breathless moments one can experience while looking at a painting or at a film frame.

Mario Fortunato: You have to admit that this is an original, curious and perhaps a little uncomfortable position.

Lea Vergine: I am for total discomfort.

Mario Fortunato: Because you take an artist's point of view. While usually an art critic should stand for interpretation, study, philology.

Lea Vergine: Certainly, one must cover these activities if one wants to write, to specialize and work in this field. But I believe that every human being, for the very fact of being human, has the inherent ability, almost the instinct to perceive that sense of suspension – be it before a work by Donatello or any other artist – that thrill that may surface from the encounter with a sculpture, a painting or something else. I believe that this is inherent to each one of us. A person who goes through this experience two or three times will grow passionate about art and start studying.

Mario Fortunato: What do you think has happened in the transition from modern to contemporary time? Commonly, when talking about the past times – and I'm thinking in particular of visual arts – we have the impression that once there was room for some sort of communication. But at some point this communication disappeared and today you often hear people say "I don't understand what that means, I don't understand contemporary art, I don't know what to think when I enter a room and see stones". What happened?

Lea Vergine: Impressionism is what happened. We went from an illustration or narration of a story, of a situation... Photography, that's what happened. The world changed. On the other hand, I don't think that who looks at Bernardo Daddi or Jacopo Della Quercia should do it with a different attitude, thinking that things work differently. People look at Giulio Romano's giants in Mantua and find them so beautiful. But if you ask them "Why did you find them beautiful? What did you like about them?" nobody knows what to say. What they see is an illustration, a drawing, the spectacle of art. All this is over. It's logical that things have become much more complicated, not more difficult – we should remember that back then, when Impressionism exploded, there were endless debates, with Baudelaire and many others. Even its very name was controversial: you all know that the name Impressionism derives from the fact that the paintings were considered only impressions, in derogatory terms. Everything changed.

Question from the public: You mentioned Jeff Koons and Damien Hirst. I would like to know what you think about them.

Lea Vergine: What I said before. I don't know them personally, they're probably very cultured people. I don't believe in ignorant artists; I've been around for too long to buy into that idea. There might have been rare cases in the past, but not now. I think these artists are a product of today's trend of bulimic collecting. Pure cynicism. I'm sure that Koons would never keep his works in his own house: the little heart with the stars, the little red bow. No, if anything, he sells his stuff and then buys Salvator Rosa's drawings.

Question from the public: What do you personally think about them?

Lea Vergine: I do not care about them.

Question from the public: What do you generally think about the contemporary art scenario?

Lea Vergine: As I told you, contemporary art exists and I like it. I don't agree with those who say that today everything is a disaster. There is Vanessa Beecroft's exhibition, exceptionally held in Milan at the moment – I say exceptionally because in Milan there haven't been many exhibitions worth the name for decades – with videos, and some of her performances that are quite extraordinary, where painting and sculpture come into play with bucketfuls of red paint on a series of bodies arranged in a way that under some respects is very close to Carpaccio's details. There isn't much ignorance in artists who do these kinds of things.

Question from the public: Thinking about the difference between a critic and a curator you mentioned earlier, I would like to ask you what direction or approach an artist should take in a scenario like the one you described. You talked about cynicism related to Hirst and to Koons. This cynicism can also be a product of the circumstances in which these artists happen to live and work.

Lea Vergine: I can't talk about the approach that I think is convenient or that would be convenient. I cannot say anything on this subject. All I can say is that the artist as such does not care about this kind of calculation.

Question from the public: But a cynical work of art born in this context...

Lea Vergine: No, no, there is no such thing as a cynical work of art. There are cynical products, but that's something else. A work of art, provided it is a work of art, cannot be cynical, nor sadistic, nor masochistic. It is a work of art.

Question from the public: It seems to me, however, that cynicism exists, even in the art world.

Lea Vergine: Yes, it has always existed. It exists everywhere, why shouldn't it exist in art? Of course cynicism doesn't exist in great artists, it doesn't exist in classics, it doesn't exist in today's classics, but how do you avoid cynicism? It's a category of life, it's almost a feeling. There are people who feed, who live on cynicism, who make progress thanks to cynicism.

Mario Fortunato: I'm not convinced, despite what you said, I think cynicism is a form of stupidity, it can hardly lead to something. It's a form of short-sightedness – a partial, modest, very close view. But these are obviously just points of view, which could be discussed for hours. Perhaps the question was about how an artist can work under such circumstances.

Lea Vergine: He has to fend for himself! As he always has. And the same goes for the art critic!

Question from the public: The theme of the evening was "Art as a mirror of fears and desires". In a market ruled by art collectors, as you say, can outsiders save themselves?

Lea Vergine: When you say "outsiders", do you mean artists who are outside the official market?

Question from the public: No, I mean – take Art Brut for instance. When you with their particular historical and individual path – who indeed used art as a mirror of fears and desires – can these artists save themselves from these

market rules, for the very fact that they were outsiders?

Lea Vergine: But you are talking about Art Brut, which has had and still has a very considerable market. I am not sure I quite understand your question.

Question from the public: I am asking you this question because this summer I had a chat with Carlo Zinelli's nephew. He was irritated by the fact that his uncle was not considered a real artist, and only known because of his pathological life. He believed that were he recognized as an ordinary artist he would become famous.

Lea Vergine: You see, there is a limit, a margin, a threshold. It is true that all artists have some level of "mental" issues. In some cases these issues may reach a point where they are still acceptable, stopping at the artist's intelligence and talent where they can be used and therefore defeated. But in other cases mental issues can be overpowering. It's not the person's fault. They permeate everything and the person remains either an amateur or a weirdo or something else. That is when it is clear that the disease prevails – you have mentioned a case where the disease has prevailed in an almost lethal way. Looking at his drawings everyone thinks "All right, but this one is too much, too much". It's already beyond. Regarding the market, don't worry. That fact that someone wants his own uncle to be famous, that's just a matter of human misery.

Mario Fortunato: If there are no further questions, I would like to thank Lea Vergine for her spirit and irony in talking about such important aspects of contemporary art and its life in our time.

Lea Vergine

Curator and art critic of *Corriere della Sera* and *Il Manifesto*, Lea Vergine is the author of important publications about issues of contemporary art. Among them: *Attraverso l'arte. Pratica politica / pagare il '68* (1976), *L'arte ritrovata: alla ricerca dell'altra metà dell'Avanguardia* (1982), *L'arte in gioco* (1988), *Gli ultimi eccentrici* (1990), *Body Art: the Body as Language* (eng. ed. 2000), *Art on the Cutting Edge: A Guide to Contemporary Movements* (eng. ed. 2001), *Ininterrotti transiti* (2001), *La vita, forse l'arte* (2014), *L'arte non è faccenda di persone perbene. Conversazioni con Chiara Gatti* (2016). She curated numerous exhibitions, including *L'altra metà dell'Avanguardia* (Milan, Rome, Stockholm, 1980-81), *Geometrie dionisiache - in Italia oggi l'arte giovane* (Milan, 1988), *Trash. Quando i rifiuti diventano arte* (Trento, Rovereto, 1997-98). At FAR, Lea Vergine also gave the lecture *Mystical Body and Social Body* (July 20th, 2002) during the CSAV - Artists' Research Laboratory held by Giulio Paolini.

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Rewind

The temporary closure becomes an opportunity for the Foundation to reactivate its archive. Over the past 35 years FAR has presented numerous conferences, workshops, seminars and publications inviting thinkers from different fields: contemporary art, textile history, anthropology, literature and more.

Our *Rewind* project aims to spread and share this amazing resource. The selected materials, presented on a biweekly basis, range across different times and disciplines, offering a new perspective on themes and ideas that are still relevant today.

Looking back, re-hearing, re-learning become strategies to move forward and the archive is activated as a fundamental tool to imagine ourselves in the future.