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## Giovanni Copelli in conversation with Mark Nash

"Ontologies of the present demand archaeologies of the future,  
not forecasts of the past"  
Frederic Jameson

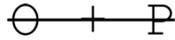
**Mark Nash:** You have recently embarked on a series of works which take inspiration from Roman mythology, first with *L'Amore Vince Tutto* and *Eros Capitolino* both 2016 and now with *Amanti* 2017. Here you focus on the legendary relations of Mars and Venus: Mars, the pre-eminent god of war - after whom the Campus Martius in Rome is named, is one of the founding deities of the city of Rome itself.

Venus on the other hand is the goddess whose functions encompassed love, beauty, desire, sex, fertility, prosperity and victory.

Marsilio Ficino, one of the most influential humanist philosophers of the early Italian Renaissance, offers the following explanation of the union of Mars and Venus in his Commentary on Plotinus, "For the forces of concupiscence and wrath are almost brother and sister: for those who are inclined to lust may be even prone to wrath and vice versa".

The Renaissance view of Venus and Mars is perhaps best summed up by the Botticelli painting in the National Gallery in London: *Mars and Venus* c 1485. In an elongated canvas Mars (screen right) is in post coital repose, watched by Venus (screen left) The message is very clear.' 'Love conquers all' Venus conquers Mars'. The art historian Aby Warburg wrote his doctoral thesis in 1893 on another Botticelli work, *The Birth of Venus and Spring* (1893) with the subtitle 'The Renewal of Pagan Antiquity' Warburg argues 'If the title of the work known as 'Spring' is to be taken from the repertoire of ideas current in the artist's own time, then it ought to be called 'Il regno di Venere' (The realm of Venus)" - The realm of Venus being that of love, beauty, desire, sex, fertility, prosperity, peace and so on. Your exhibition makes reference to that exegetical tradition and the same time it broaches a more general question, that is whether pagan antiquity has any contemporary relevance.

Over time the complex tissue of mythological thought has become reduced in the Western imaginary to simple structural oppositions:



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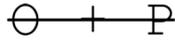
war and peace; male and female and so on. One of the starting points for your work is to remind us of the fluidity of these significations. Indeed, to the complexity and fluidity of the semiotic process itself. Despite our fascination with Roman culture and history, it is very difficult to move from a monotheistic (Christian) frame to polytheistic one. In Bali (a predominantly hindu island) women make offerings to the various deities and spirits several times a day. It's a whole process of symbolic maintenance which we have abandoned in the West. You invite us to re-enter this world and establish different kinds of connections within it.

**GC:** *This at least is what I'm trying to achieve, right now at this stage of production I have come to the conclusion that what I really want to channel through the works is this fluidity of forms and meaning. The polar opposition Mars/Venus, masculine/feminine lost ground and now any gender charged character whather male or female is a cross dresser, because in fact the continuation of Mars is Venus and vice versa. The polytheistic understanding of the world is one of circularity and through the many images I am presenting in this exhibition I tried to channel my fascination for this notion of circularity.*

*Mars can produce a blind fury and hence why the god bore the epithet Mars Caecus or Mars Insanus. If for the Romans such ferocity would provide "the surest bulwark of Rome against any aggressor", they would also recognize that Mars Caecus was a dangerous guide, capable of "destroying friend as well as foe". Pagan religion was not about opposition of forces such as good versus evil. Venus comes in to balance Mars energy with the delicacy of love. Mars and Venus are not enemies, they are brother and sister and they are lovers, their two energies must find a way to coexist.*

**MN:** *Amanti involves as you have said a kind of archeological fantasy - a mix of wall painting, masks, sculptural heads and warfare paraphernalia something 'between folk art and an archeological find, such as you might discover in a Pompeian house or tomb'.*

The work comprises a number of plaster heads of different colours (reds and blues) that are used to connote different genders, earrings or longish hair firm up these differing identities. Various painterly sketches suggest amorous or war- like struggles. The style here is reminiscent of the *informel* style of the CoBra group who used 'unrestrained strong colors, along with violent handwritings and figuration which can be either frightening or



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humorous'<sup>1</sup>. Two kinds of figuration are in play here - that of the two dimensional loosely improvised sketch and that of the more formal three dimensional mask with unexplained hieratic properties.

The installation sets up a tension between the performative masks and the illustrative sketches. War and love intermingle, indeed as they often are in the Western tradition ('the battle between the sexes). The masks on the other hand might suggest connections to religious rituals. Whatever the case we are presented a series of fragments which though they may make indirect connections with antiquity do not allow us to read the installation in simple terms. Despite the sexual implication of the paintings for example, those in Roman brothels were much more explicit so we can't read the gallery installation as recreating a space with a specific function.

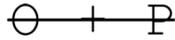
Archeology has two competing modalities currently - that of presenting a reconstructed whole and that of displaying the fragments without attempting this synthetic gesture, leaving them open to interpretation. Your installation takes the latter position. However, you insist that you are not an 'expert - a wise choice given the almost three hundred years of art historical commentary on Greece and Rome. You have created a space which is familiar (Greco- Roman antiquity possibly) but difficult to read. Unhomely.

The Victorian painter Lawrence Alma Tadema based his representations of ancient Rome on detailed research in Pompei and other archeological sites. His spectacular representations formed the basis of cinematic representations through the following century. Their sentimental saccharine tone is what disturbs this contemporary viewer - no violence, no cut between past and present rather a resolutely patriarchal and heterosexual rendition of the past as if one might stroll from the London drawing rooms of his Holland Park circle into those of the Roman elite two thousand years ago.

Your assemblage of fictive artefacts in *Amanti* suggests as you said, a 'loss of meaning of the iconographic heritage and myth'. Since the work obscures any reading of a supposed iconographic heritage the meanings 'hidden in this same heritage' remain for us to propose. Archeology has two modalities - that of simply presenting a reconstructed whole and that of displaying the fragments without attempting this synthetic gesture.

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Wikipedia



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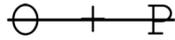
I prefer to see the work as more a form of amorous discourse, iterative, repetitive, quizzical. Even though the installation contains sexual representations we are not sure how to read them.

**GC:** *Alma Tadema was already making cinema for the audience of his time. 19th century History painters, with their large canvases, were trying to reconstruct a moment in the past by literally staging it with the help of sitters and any sort of prop. In Tadema's case that was achieved also through the most advanced scientific research in the field of archeology. I guess I tried to reconstruct a moment myself, but rather than worrying to find an archeological correspondence I opened up this moment and I projected it on some alternative dimension, or alternatively I reconstructed the past as it always happened in cheap period pieces where myths and concepts get easily mixed for the sole purpose of producing some plot for the show. I am with the spectator, I try to make sense of images I find and add something of mine.*

**MN:** One image stays with me from your Facebook - one of the *papier mache* masks being burnt. This reminds me of the Canadian first nations practice of burning objects after they have played a symbolic role in a particular ritual. I am also struck by your remark about the ambiguous sexuality of the plaster masks. That they can be either feminine or masculine or both. But I'm not quite sure how to formulate this.

**GC:** *An original idea I had for the Roma project was to build a big paper mache Mars Caecus and burn it. To create images (very much like in folk art) means to give life to characters, and this is something I see developing as a performative practice in a very broad sense. It is significant that when it comes to my interest in mixing gender all the best examples I have come from theatre. I think of Japanese Onnagata in Kabuki, Shakespeare's transvestite theater or contemporary shows with drag queens.*

**MN:** In his essay on *The Open Text* (1984) Umberto Eco describes a text which allows multiple or mediated interpretation by its readers. Similarly, in his 1976 text 'The death of the Author' Roland Barthes makes a distinction between readerly and writerly texts, between texts which are easily consumed and those which compel the viewer to work and reflect on them. In my view the role of the critic and curator (of contemporary art) is to foreground the writerly, the contradictory demands of the artwork, not cocoon it, (like those velvet-lined boxes in which Victorians kept their daguerreotypes (Walter Benjamin 'A Short History of Photography')).



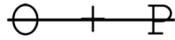
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To write about an artist's work is an intimate process. One might worry about saying the wrong thing, being too critical or too indulgent. Its intimate in the literal sense in which these words fold themselves into the tissues of the work itself. Art has a discursive dimension, writing such as mine here becomes if not an integral part of your work, nevertheless part of a textual cloud which sustains the work in one way or another.

We are all familiar with the perils of the gallery hand out or exhibition catalogue entry, where the written text 'stands in' for the experience of the work itself. The aesthetic function (what Barthes calls the obtuse meaning) which is precisely not reducible to written language, gets short circuited out, as the explanatory text replaces the aesthetic experience. Aesthetics has such an idealistic heritage that it's probably safer to talk about the 'work' of the work of art - a work which is essentially to pose questions to the viewing subject, fragmentary questions which can be explored psychoanalytically if need be.

**GC:** *I have been thinking about this quite a lot, let's say at this current stage I try avoiding giving too much explanation for everything. I don't particularly care about making people know that this is Venus and this is Mars, this is derived from this and that thing, this is real this was made up. The more I produce all these images, the more I want them to speak by themselves, in the same way you find a graffiti on a wall. It can be a silly or vulgar image, it can be a beautiful one, and still you don't know who made it and there is no press release to examine; we are left with our thoughts, our unconscious understanding of things, our knowledge. In terms of viewership this is really inspirational. I make use of images that derive from archeological artifacts because I find them fascinating precisely because we don't really know much about their original meaning. To expose what I understand of the image becomes my art practice.*

**MN:** Outside of the intimate realm of psychoanalysis, I'm increasingly drawn to working with the notion of affect, to the emotional effect/affect of works of art, cinema etc. Hence the title of this essay drawn from the 1977 Barthes book 'Fragments of an Amorous Discourse'. Love in romance languages has many contradictory meanings. The (ancient) Greek is more precise - agape, philia, Eros and storage \_ we can go into this further if we need to. In this book Barthes develops a theory of the romantic, amorous subject possessed by fragmentary texts, which have nothing really to do with what is euphemistically called love making and are all about anticipation, delay, frustration, anxiety and so on. These are iterative texts which occupy the subject,



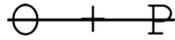
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indeed are constitutive of the subject. All the different figures which Barthes delineates are about love in one way or another. For me the concept of the amorous is constitutive of our emotional, sensual, erotic selves. The world of so to speak realistic, documentation of sexual coupling whether its so-called erotic, pornographic cinema or the 'soft core' romance of gay cinema completely misses the work of desire, which depends fundamentally on absence and repression. Kenneth Clark's distinction between the naked and the nude in discussion of Greek or Roman statuary is relevant here. It could perhaps be added that if your work is queer it is so precisely in its mixing or muddling of these perspectives (amorous and erotic).

**GC:** *Before coming up with figures from the myth, I had already started channeling a lot of interest for the erotic in my work and Greek Roman imagery was there to provide a systematic cosmogony of desire. Mars and Venus are a couple of lovers and they have become the protagonists of my images, but I see them very much as "ideal" lovers, lovers representatives, and I feel that this is also why I chose to give the exhibition an archaeological look: lovers from a distant past come to represent anybody, precisely because they represent even those who have died. I find Roman or shunga art extremely inspirational because it very much channels this sense of universal intimacy. And of course, there is the clear lack of distinction between erotic and pornographic, which feels very refreshing coming from a modern Western country.*

*Like you were saying before, images of Pompeian brothels are way more explicit than most of my works. I wouldn't say I try to paint erotica, I am more interested in the erotic, which feels slightly different. This thing of 'what is love' is something that I keep questioning myself and I can already sense that in the near future I will eventually approach it from a very different perspective. With this exhibition, I wanted to evoke a sense of 'attraction', and I chose to represent it primarily in the form of sexual desire. I like to play with suitability.*

*I find it very interesting what you say about the queer aspect of my work, and in a strictly political sense. I like to play with expectation, for instance I can show a factor that gets easily linked to love and life, like that of desire, and perhaps by placing it - as I recently did in Milan - in a context of death. What I love about images is that through imagery we find ourselves continually and in a very direct way, and often in a very naïve way, to question and rethink concepts that we feel are well-asserted and internalized. Every attempt to define and conceptualize develops into an axiom that can be easily denied at the expense of its solidity, while the image maintains a*



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*extraordinary openness to interpretation. Talking about naked or nude figures, I love the fact that in the many churches of Rome, visitors are asked to cover themselves, and then these same visitors are found strolling alongside a multitude of naked women and men.*

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**Mark Nash** is an independent curator and writer.

He collaborated extensively with Okwui Enwezor on Documenta 11, and *The Short Century: Independence and Liberation Movements in Africa, 1945-1994* both in 2002, and most recently on *The Arena* project at Venice Biennial 2015. He also collaborated with Ute Meta Bauer on the 3rd Berlin Biennial (2004). Together with Joshua Jiang he has curated *The Shadow Never Lies* at M21: 21st Century Minsheng Art Museum in Shanghai (2016). In 2017, assisted by Giovanni Copelli, he curated *Viva L'Italia*, an exhibition of film and video for Artefiera Bologna focussing on the legacy of the 1970s socialist culture in Bologna.

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