

Wall Street International

ART

Claudio Parmiggiani - Naufragio con Spettatore (Shipwreck with Spectators)

3 JAN 2017 by NEIL POWELL



For a change this month I thought I would share with you my fondest and most memorable art-related impression of 2016, namely my encounter with Claudio Parmiggiani's installation *Naufragio con Spettatore* (Shipwreck with Spectators) in Parma, Italy.

Meandering in the bedazzling brilliance of Emilia Romagna's sunshine I arrived at the Chiesa di San Marcellino with a sense of some anticipation, partly because of the slight buzz of accustomed edginess I always associate through encounters with Parmiggiani's work, and partly because of the seeming impossibility of the image portrayed through the more prosaic suspicion regarding the Parma 360° festival marketing materials. And so it was that I entered, somewhat gingerly, the unprepossessing entrance and the dark chill of *la Chiesa*. Staring for long seconds, I waited for my eyes to adjust and witnessed, as it emerged from the musty shadows, the apparition of a ghost ship, seeming to approach me as if driven on a tide of books.

My sense of incredulity at this magic was only overshadowed by a feeling of melancholic immersion; my consciousness flooded and overwhelmed by the image, the presence and sense of sadness engendered by this indescribable 'thing', this 'entity', this spectacle. Upon regaining my sensory equilibrium I saw that the apparition was in fact a real Egyptian *Felucca* (apparently acquired in Genoa), afloat on some 60,000 hardback tomes on various subjects (I was looking for the titular symbolic of course). The *Felucca*, impossibly large to

clear the doorway or any other possible means of entry into the space. A ship in a deconsecrated bottle no less, aground or adrift on an ocean of literature - the potential for poetry and metaphor abound. In encountering this work, I think that for the first time I truly grasped the effects of the metaphysical in practice rather than in theory.

The title of this work by Parmiggiani is entirely related to the approach of the philosopher Hans Blumenberg (1920 – 1996) who attempted to alert us to the dangers of 'truth' as a revealed quality or commodity valorized by science. In his *Shipwreck with Spectator: Paradigm of a Metaphor for Existence* and other works such as *Light as a Metaphor for Truth...* [1] we see Blumenberg's thought develop, but, in my view, in *Naufragio...*, we see proof positive that Parmiggiani's grasp of the metaphorical and mythological dimensions of art that go way beyond theory. I would go further by arguing that the beauty divined of confusion by Blumenberg and *in principle*, is made real and live by Parmiggiani in a way that defies much of the known glossary for art history or of phenomenological positioning.

As I write this though, I am acutely aware that these are my words and not those of Claudio (who may in fact strongly disagree!). Claudio is known to value silence over wasted words, and whilst I am personally regretful of the artist's too-low profile in the English-speaking world, for him I would conjecture that the word-vacuum created by the absence of the artist's voice is part of the insuperable reality that is the life/the work rather than a failure to communicate.

Claudio's vernacular is borne variously out of the hot and heavy volcanic alchemy of molten bronze, the dry precision of plasterwork and the repetitive, subtractive numbness of stone carving; for me above almost any living artist he epitomizes the rare ability to cajole intractable materials into speaking with material rather than verbal eloquence. I will leave you to ponder his oeuvre in conjunction with an unlikely and disarmingly poetic quote taken from the opening of Marx and Engels' Communist Manifesto:

"All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind with sober eyes" [2].

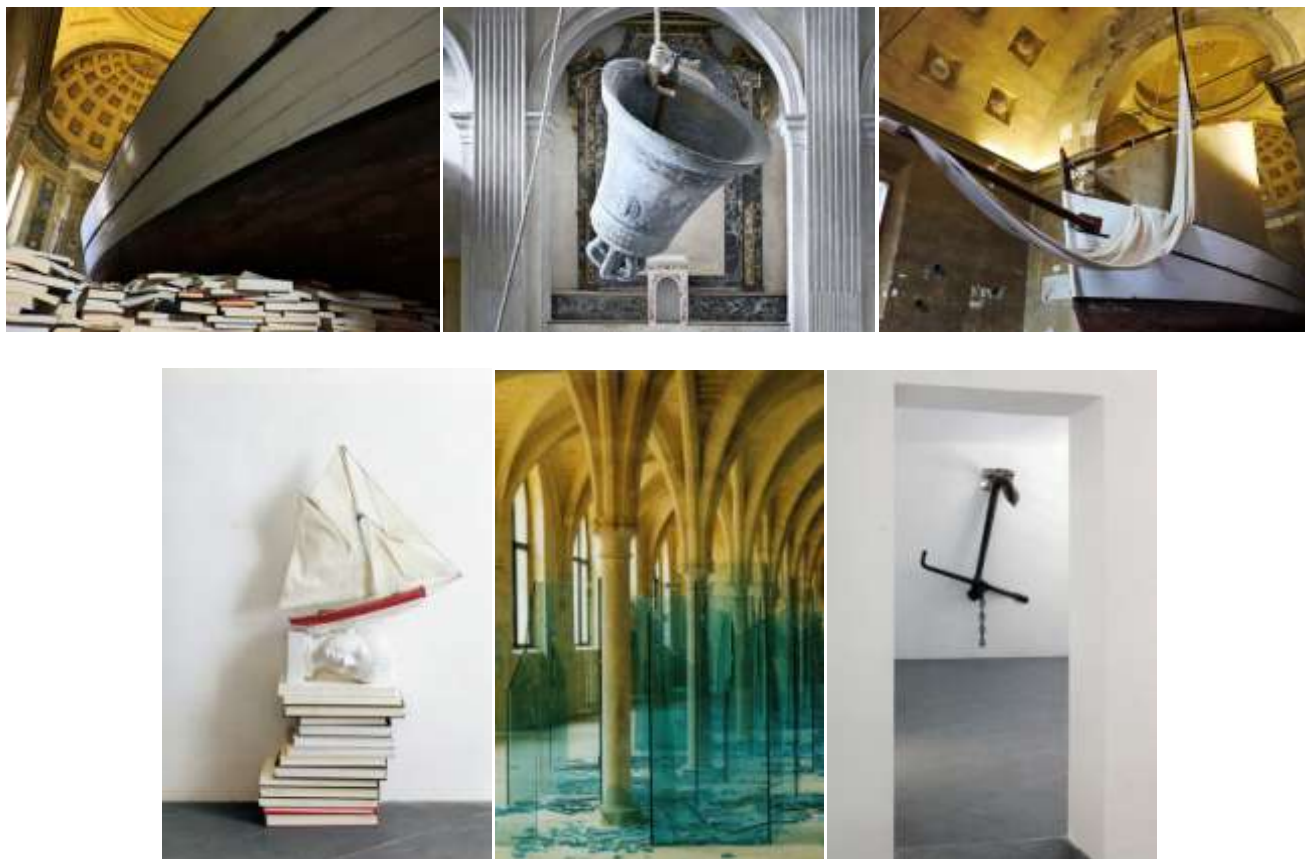
It is 23 years since I was first moved to write to Claudio, subsequent to seeing his *Iconostasi* [3] exhibition in Prague, an act of viewing entirely driven indoors by an intemperate February hail storm. His work has remained with me ever since.

Notes:

[1] The use of light, shadow, dust and soot are hugely important and significant aspects within Parmiggiani's oeuvre.

[2] MIA: Marxists: Marx & Engels: Library: 1848: Manifesto of the Communist Party: Chapter 1: Chapter I. Bourgeois and Proletarians.

[3] Galerie Hlavního Města Prahy, Prague, 10 Feb. - 28 Mar. 1993.



Captions

1. Claudio Parmiggiani, Naufragio con spettatore. Palazzo del Governatore, Parma
2. Claudio Parmiggiani a San Lupo, Bergamo. Installation View
3. Claudio Parmiggiani, Naufragio con spettatore. Palazzo del Governatore, Parma
4. Claudio Parmiggiani, Naufragio con spettatore. Palazzo del Governatore, Parma
5. Claudio Parmiggiani, College des Bernardins, Paris. Installation view
6. Claudio Parmiggiani, Naufragio con spettatore. Palazzo del Governatore, Parma