

Planning Maximum Impact: The Art of Davide Bertocchi

by Lillian Davies

In early January, I sat down with artist Davide Bertocchi at Caravan, a cozy café in Paris's 11th *arrondissement* down the street from his apartment. Bertocchi, whose performance and mixed media works often deal with the limits of scientific knowledge, has freed himself from the confines of a traditional studio space; he realizes the majority of his work on the computer. MacBook in hand, he told me about his recent participation in PERFORMA 09, where his video *Exhaust* (2009) was included in a screening series, WHITE NOISE III: Pandora's Sound Box, at White Box—and his current participation, with N.O. Gallery, Milan, in ArteFiera, touted as the oldest international art fair in Italy, as well as his upcoming shows at Neoncampobase, Bologna, the Museum of Contemporary Art, Shanghai, Galerie Pangée, Montreal and the Velan Center for Contemporary Art, Turin. We talked about science, politics and the ethics of collaborative work. Then he told me about a meteor he plans to launch into space in 2020.



MONUMENTO A D'IGNOTI, 2007. COURTESY BPS 22, CHARLEROI, BELGIUM

LILLIAN DAVIES: Science, or at least the trappings of scientific language, is often a starting point in your work. Yet you say that this is a "cynical starting" point—that your interest in science is more about the questions that science cannot answer, or ignores.

DAVIDE BERTOCCHI: Indeed, I often appropriate the aesthetic format of science in my work. Behind this reassuring façade I hope to introduce other elements that will subvert our general idea of Progress, which is based on the belief that reality is entirely explicable in scientific terms. It's a very naive idea that science could eventually explain everything -like, for instance, why we exist. Moreover, I wouldn't want to know. It's as if humankind cannot admit that some things simply can't be understood. The enigma is much more fascinating, being open to endless interpretations and possibilities.

DAVIES: Many of your recent works incorporate marble, a material, that has alludes quintessentially to the history of Italy. Why do you think you are drawn to this medium?

BERTOCCHI: It's true that marble is an archetypal material in Italy, omnipresent in architecture and art. My use of marble is linked more generally to ideas of public sculpture, monument and immortality. I realized *Telly* (CNN) (2008) with a special marble called transparent onyx once used, instead of glass, to make windows in Byzantine churches. Inside a kind of cubical sarcophagus made of this marble, I put a television connected, by satellite dish, to CNN live. So the sculpture broadcasts CNN, the worldwide news channel, but the only thing we see is a blur of amazing colors changing all the time. There is no sound, and the news becomes pure colors and abstract shapes.

For *Memorial* (2006), a series of LPs made entirely out of different types of marble, I wanted to make a monumental version of my twenty favorite records. Some titles I think inevitably influenced my life. The titles engraved on each record became philosophical statements.

DAVIES: For projects like *Are You Ready?* (2002), *Pizza Acrobatica* (2004), and *Monumento a D'Ignoti* (2007) you worked with non-artists-members of a metal detector club, a champion pizza pie spinner, and a lounge singer. As an artist, how do you negotiate these collaborations? What are their qualifications for participation?

BERTOCCHI: I never really plan the collaborations. Typically the beginning of a project will entail a long process of research, which comes to focus on certain elements. The people you mentioned are collaborators, but also generators of the projects. I model the project around them, and it's important to me to respect them and not make them feel like actors playing a role. *Monumento a D'Ignoti* was especially delicate because it's about a symbolic representation of an entire community, the Italian immigrants of Charleroi, Belgium, and also generally about all the forgotten and the unknown of the world. Using a single person to incarnate all that can be very tricky. But Glavidio, who I chose because he is a tenor singer and also because of his peculiar name (*D'Ignoti* in Italian means "the unknowns"), understood very well the project and was very enthusiastic.

He had to stand on a plinth that I built, which I based on my memory of a work by Piero Manzoni, *Base Magica*. I positioned him above four piles of records by unknown Italian-Belgian singers that I collected in Charleroi, and he just sang his song. At that precise moment the sculpture was completed, and it lasted only the time of the duration of the song. I want to make sure there is an element of exchange in the project between me and the collaborators. It's never one way.

DAVIES: And you are consulting with scientists for your current project?

BERTOCCHI: At the moment I'm working on quite an ambitious project, although it's based on the primitive gesture of throwing a stone. The project involves sending a big stone into space and the unpredictable consequences; it's meant to challenge the common contemporary logic of technology: maximum technology in minimum space. I'm effecting the opposite: minimal technology in maximum space. As you can imagine, the costs are extremely high, and for the moment the project is in a phase of fundraising and research. I'm collecting experts' opinions about the realization of the project, and after that we will need a space shipping agency for the delivery. The launch is planned for 2020... quite soon.