

STONED AGAIN: NEW MARBLES BY MAURO PERUCCHETTI

By Peter Frank

It has been over the past few years that Mauro Perucchetti has fabricated this small but potent sequence of cultural references, a sequence that at once conflicts with and depends on the guidelines—or at least the tropes – of classic sculpture in marble. Having realized such an at-once elegant and parodic series, Perucchetti has recently turned his sights to the realization of more recondite sculptures. They are not harder to understand in their contemporary cultural contexts, to be sure, but they are harder to understand in the context of marble and its history. This slippage in context is precisely what gives them their edge, what hones, amplifies, and subverts their meanings to the point where we have to re-examine what they have meant in the first place, to us and to the civilization we sustain.

Damned if You Do, Damned if You Don't brings together four separate sculptural units on a fifth, a base whose blackness sets off the whiteness of the units placed thereupon. The white unit stake the shape of hands, hands in the act(s) of moving their fingers into crucial positions. The three reclining hands form their two most prominent fingers into the familiar "V" sign – a gesture first employed by Anglo-American forces during World War II as (literal) shorthand for "victory" and later adopted (perhaps ironically) by young people protesting the war in Vietnam (the sign again originating in the United States and adopted quickly by protestors around the world). Despite repeated attempts at co-optation by the very forces they oppose, anti-governmental protestors have retained the gesture. But their less political cohorts, at least in the United Kingdom, have further ironized the "V," converting it in to a rude gesture of defiance – to the point where it has become almost synonymous with the signal given by the one "standing" hand in *Damned if You Do*. That geste is the least beau of all, a one-digit salute whose sexual origins and resulting offensive meaning are globally recognized.

Perucchetti has left the elaborate hand speech of his native Italy, American Sign Language, and gansignaling for another day; he is more concerned here with digital semiotics gone viral. 18th of October 1968, *A Date I Still Remember* – an unusual combination of marble and leather, and pointedly black on black – memorializes a moment of protest in which no "bird" was flipped, but might as well have been. Two African-American athletes, having won first and third places in an Olympic race in Mexico City, raised their fist-ed arms in a black-power salute, affronting their government with a show of separatism. Perucchetti has "translated" their gesture in to a yet clearer expression of rejection. 18th of October contrasts significantly with *Damned if You Do*, beyond its reversal of color and expansion in size. While the larger sculpture commemorates a specific event that still resonates with Perucchetti – as it does for many others – almost a half-century since, the smaller reflects on a more general condition. 18th of October would seem to celebrate the effectiveness of protest; despite the outcry and subsequent censure of the athletes who raised their fists (getting treated as if they had extended their middle fingers), the gesture retains its sway. But most protest, polite and impolite alike, is quashed by its targets, governmental and/or corporate, cut off at least at the wrist by a power elite that, especially these days, has no compunction about destroying, not just quieting, its popular (as well as official) opposition.

The other two new marble works are rather more forth right in their meaning, or at least their imagery. The *Engraved Marble Dollar* is just that, a replication so faithful to the paper original – right down to the green seal and grayed serial numbers – that only its absurdly large scale and heft keep its inventor out of prison for counterfeiting. This is no paper weight: It is a representation, in size and in density, of America's economic clout. Conversely, *Fiato d' Artista* proposes a circumstance that is, by inference, lighter than air. A marble replica of a "whoopie cushion," the *Fiato* renders the original gag physically impossible to realize, but in doing so reformulates it as a conceptual proposal – and, not accidentally, an elegant homage to Perucchetti's proto conceptual country man, Piero Manzoni, who sold balloons filled with "artist's breath" and cans of "artist's shit." Here, in a loving reversal of Manzoni's impermanent offerings, Mauro Perucchetti has given the least aspect of the human body – and a similarly coarse mimicking device – the dignity of permanence. *Arse longa...*

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