Italian artist auctions off invisible sculpture

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20 June 2021

In May, Italian artist Salvatore Garau sold his "immaterial sculpture" *I Am* at an auction. The invisible piece of art consists literally of nothing. Even though the work has no material existence, the Art-Rite auction house estimated its value at between €6,000 and €9,000 (that is, between approximately $7,000 and $11,000). During the auction, bidders pushed the price up, and Garau walked away with €15,000 ($18,300).

In exchange for this sum, the buyer—a private Milanese collector—of the putative work, the latest version of the Emperor's New Clothes, received a certificate of authenticity and the artist's instructions for displaying the sculpture. Garau stipulated that the work must be exhibited in a private home in an area of approximately five square feet that is free of obstruction. Special lighting and climate control are optional.

How is one to conceive of an invisible sculpture? Garau had a ready pseudo-scientific explanation for Spanish tabloid *Diario AS*. "The vacuum is nothing more than a space full of energy, and even if we empty it and there is nothing left, according to the Heisenberg uncertainty principle, that nothing has a weight," he said. "Therefore, it has energy that is condensed and transformed into particles, that is, into us."

For those confused by this double-talk, Garau appealed to mysticism. "When I decide to 'exhibit' an immaterial sculpture in a given space, that space will concentrate a certain amount and density of thoughts at a precise point, creating a sculpture that, from my title, will only take the most varied forms. After all, don't we shape a God we've never seen?"

I Am is not Garau's first invisible "sculpture." In February, Garau exhibited *Buddha in Contemplation* in Milan's Piazza della Scala. It was allegedly displayed inside a taped square on the cobblestone. "It is a work that asks you to activate the power of the imagination," said Garau.

Laughable as it is, this is the artist's most pertinent remark about his "work." Taking this nonsense at face value, Garau has entirely abdicated the artist's responsibility to communicate something important about the world through his or her art. With *I Am*, Garau has provided nothing of value, taken the money and forced others to create the ostensible work themselves.

This aesthetic charlatanry belongs on the same historical plane as the rise of financial parasitism generally and most recently, since the onset of the pandemic, the "vast escalation of speculation promoted by the Fed and other central banks," in the words of a recent WSWS article. "Debt, corporate bonds and other financial assets are what Marx characterised as fictitious capital." Reflecting these economic and social processes, we now have arrived at highly speculated upon, fully "fictitious art." As this may suggest, an enormous, unstable asset bubble in art and collectibles presently exists.

Garau is prospering while artists in the United States alone have lost an estimated average of $34,000 each, and hundreds of millions collectively, in creativity-based income since the beginning of the pandemic.

The Italian artist (born in 1953) did not emerge out of thin air (although "thin air" seems to be very much his stock-in-trade). His "work" has some connection to the tradition of Conceptual Art, a trend that emerged in the mid-1960s. Conceptual Art rejected the traditional art object, in the words of critic Roberta Smith, in favor of "a vast and unruly range of information, subjects and concerns not easily contained within a single object, but more appropriately conveyed by written proposals, photographs, documents, charts, maps, film and video, by the artists' use of their own bodies, and, above all, by language itself."

The claim was made that in Conceptual Art the idea behind a work now took precedence over questions of

material, technical skill and aesthetics. The idea is everything, and "the execution is a perfunctory affair," in the words of Sol LeWitt, one of conceptual art's earliest theorists and practitioners.

But art had always been based on ideas. What seemed to be new, or more pronounced here, following on the empty efforts of Andy Warhol and the Pop Artists, was a thoroughgoing "relinquishing [of] the expressive potentialities of painting and sculpture," in the words of British critic Peter Fuller. Conceptual Art codified and legitimized the artists' worshiping of the accomplished social and aesthetic fact. Despite their radical pretensions, the Conceptual Artists displayed tremendous passivity in the face of existing realities, including advertising, the media and official information distribution.

Roberta Smith cites the remarks of Conceptual artist Lawrence Weiner made toward the end of the 1960s. "Art that imposes conditions—human or otherwise—on the receiver for its appreciation in my eyes constitutes aesthetic fascism." She continued, "Weiner did not care if his 'Statements,' succinctly phrased Process-type proposals, … were executed by himself, by someone else or not at all; that was the decision of the 'receiver' of the work. … And Douglas Huebler, who was one of the first artists specifically called Conceptual, along with Weiner, Joseph Kosuth and Robert Barry, wrote in 1968, 'The world is full of objects, more or less interesting; I do not wish to add any more. I prefer, simply, to state the existence of things in terms of time and space.'"

This sort of comment reflected the disorientation and degeneration of the artistic intelligentsia, overwhelmed by tumultuous events, having been cut off from genuine left-wing thought, or consciously rejecting it, and deeply distant from wide layers of the population.

Instead of sculptures or paintings, Conceptual artists produced documents and photographs that recorded their investigations or symbolic interventions. They viewed these documents as mere evidence; the supposed idea was the work itself. Other artists, such as Barry and Yoko Ono, exhibited or published instructions for creating work.

Conceptual Art claimed to be anti-establishment. And no doubt there was a certain sincerity in the rejection of the work as a commodity that could be exchanged on the market. Weiner, for example, explicitly sought to create work that could not be sold, but that anyone could "own." Many Conceptual artists also attempted to question the authority of the gallery or museum to endow work with the status of art. However, this "democratic" stance was far less significant in the long term than the refusal—or inability—of the artists to honestly confront and criticize in artistic terms, in concrete, convincing imagery, the world around them.

In this context, the refusal to create a work of art that could become a commodity was as much a gesture of despair as one of rebellion, and, in all too many cases, an all too easily "marketable despair." On the whole, Conceptual Art accelerated the diminution of the artist's critical presence, and, despite its superficially rebellious aspects, represented a further withdrawal from the fray.

The emergence of postmodernism in the late 1970s and beyond only deepened the problems and made a portion of the artists more cynical or confused.

Garau claims to have begun "a new, small, authentic revolution" with his invisible sculptures. The sale of *I Am* does seem to represent a new development in Conceptual Art. He has embraced the dematerialized art object and the commodification of art simultaneously. Like a financial speculator, he has realized a profit without creating any value. At a time when art institutions have lost billions of dollars and artists are struggling to survive, Garau's intellectual fraudulence, as well as the fraudulence of wide portions of the art world, stands out in full relief.