

## THE WHOLE TOWN IS TALKING ABOUT IT.

Reportage on Modena Parade / Corteo Modenese

Cecilia Guida

All artists are alike. They dream of doing something that's more social, more collaborative, more real than art.

Dan Graham

It is Sunday 27 March 2022, the sky over the monumental cemetery of San Cataldo is clear and the mild spring sun gently warms everything it encounters, awakening the participants of the Modena Parade / Corteo Modenese.

Their eyes still full of last night's sleep

owing to the introduction of daylight-saving time, that little "debt"

that is made up in the space of a few days. The artist, Jordi Colomer,

looks as if he has been on his feet for several hours already and is

concentrating on giving directions to the cameramen and photographers who will be filming during the procession. Meanwhile Daniele

De Luigi, curator of the Fondazione Modena Arti Visive, and Federica

Rocchi, founder of the Amigdala Collective, who have worked

intensively with Colomer on the organisation of the event over the

previous months, make sure that everything is ready and that the

participants have arrived and are comfortable.

The scene before the procession is lively and surreal: two horses,

one brown, the other white, are grazing on the lawn in front of Aldo

Rossi's large red cube; a small orchestra is rehearsing with sticks

and drums; sweet music played by two flutes comes from one of the

wings on either side of the cube; a group of nine dancers in skeleton

suits with bells on their ankles is warming up as they move from one

part of the park to another; boys and girls dressed as members of

the Addams Family are sitting on benches exposed to the sun, and

standing next to them is a woman wearing Frida Kahlo's Mexican red

flower crown; in one corner is a small table where breadsticks, sweet

and savoury sandwiches, apples, juice and hot coffee are offered;

finally, a blue tractor carrying a cardboard replica of the famous cube

is parked under the arcades.

"The tractor is a reference to Aldo Rossi, who took part in the

1989 Universal Exhibition in Nagoya, Japan, with a tractor carrying the

parts of the Modenese Machine", Fausto Ferri tells me in

an amused tone. Fausto worked for 43 years at the Galleria Civica

and now calls himself a man "on indefinite leave". He collaborated

with Aldo Rossi on his 1983 exhibition at the Palazzina dei Giardini,

where the drawings, oils, and watercolours from the competition

for the extension of the nineteenth-century cemetery were presented.

A competition he won in 1971 with the very young Gianni

Braghieri, and the well-known work Modenese Machine, whose

superimposed elements clearly conveyed the meaning of Rossi's

architecture. A great connoisseur and admirer of the design, Fausto

reminds me that the cemetery was built slowly, that it is currently

unfinished, and that the municipal administration recently got in

touch with Braghieri to build the missing part, in the form of a real

ribcage, which will finally add the finishing touches to the cemetery.

Every element in Rossi's design has a symbolic meaning: the

interior of the cube containing the shrine to those who died in the

world wars and in the partisan struggle has a dramatic yet reassuring

character, the regular square windows are cuts in the wall without frames, and the reference to the porticoes, squares and architecture of the cities of Emilia drawn by the shadows reinforces the search for the emotional connection between the city of the living and the city of the dead. It seems to me that I can fully understand the fascination exercised on artists, from Luigi Ghirri – and I can't help remembering that beautiful photograph of his, the most poetic ever taken, which immortalises the red cube immersed in the snow – to Colomer, who has felt a sense of admiration for the project ever since he studied architecture in Barcelona. Fausto, describing to me the atmosphere of the place in the morning when the fog clears, says in a dry tone that not even Mario Sironi would have been able to produce a canvas of it. I look into his eyes and realise that these recollections have moved him a little.

Walking down the aisles, I think that cemeteries have never frightened me, I have always seen them as a place of great peace, of recollection, of memory. When I was a child, once a month my grandmother would ask me to accompany her to take flowers to her parents, and for me it was a very nice ritual because when we were there she would tell me about the graves, she would tell me who that family was, who that child had been: maybe they were people she had known or heard about. Now, on my way back to the main entrance, I notice an old lady and her grandson arranging a bunch of tulips of various colours on the tombstone of Oscar Goldoni, visionary director of the Galleria Civica between the 1960s and 1970s, and I am reminded of the scene in the cemetery from the comedy movie *Bianco Rosso e Verdine*, in which Mimmo and his grandmother, tired of looking for a name they can't remember, put flowers on all the graves that don't have any.

Modena Parade / Corteo Modenese begins shortly after 11 a.m. under the portico at the entrance to the Cimitero Nuovo with an orchestra of wind instruments playing the adagio from Mozart's *Serenade No. 10 in B flat major K 361*. Observing it in silence are the dancers, seated on the floor, the students and teachers of the Liceo Artistico Adolfo Venturi, the Istituto Superiore di Studi Musicali Vecchi Tonelli and the Museolaboratorio Quale Percussione?, the musicians of the Banda dei Tamburi di Reggio Emilia, the women of the *Le Chemin des Femmes* choir and the citizens, young and old, who in recent months have taken part in the open worksite and workshops held at OvestLab. They will later be joined by around one hundred children from the Cittadella Primary School who are anxiously waiting in front of the Foro Boario. Everyone is free to participate as they wish, as long as they interpret or represent death. Therefore, there are those who have a black or white mask over their eyes, those who wear a black pirate hat with a white skull on it, those who wear a sweatshirt or a suit with a printed skeleton, someone who has a black scarf on his head or simply a black mask over his mouth, someone with Halloween make-up on, those holding flags with hand-drawn skulls glued on them, those carrying red cardboard cubes, signs or banners with words and phrases about death... Everything (objects and actions) is the result of a long process of workshops, dialogue and collective creation.

For Colomer, Modena Parade / Corteo Modenese is, as the name suggests, a procession for the city, with the city, in the city. The scholar Claire Bishop would call it a participatory performance because people are "the medium and the material of the work of

art” and the final result cannot be defined in advance by the artist, who directs it, but literally happens in the collective unfolding of the event. Compared to processions in the past, this funeral procession is both *à rebours*, because its itinerary is reversed, i.e., from the Cimitero Nuovo to the Palazzina dei Giardini, the site of the “Strade” exhibition-survey, and turned on its head, because it is a noisy and festive way of reoccupying public spaces, which the state of emergency imposed by the pandemic had numbed and emptied. It engages citizens in an activity that gives visibility to death, recently and increasingly spectacularised, reduced to a series of numbers and detached from everyday life.

The main question Colomer has asked himself in conceiving this work, and which he in turn poses to the public, is whether contemporary art today can become a vehicle for reinventing popular traditions and ritual forms linked to death, which in the Mediterranean area are slowly disappearing and being replaced by Anglo-Saxon imagery. Because of the nature, composition, and intentions of the procession, it seems to me to be an activity with Dada overtones, all the more so because it reminds me of *Entr’acte*, a 1924 film directed by a young René Clair (he was 24 at the time) that contains all the essence of Dadaist poetics: nonsensical, irreverent and provocative. The film opens with Marcel Duchamp and Man Ray playing chess on the rooftops of Paris. Incidentally, rooftops are an urban and social space that Colomer is also interested in, if I think of the work in the exhibition *Crier sur les toits/Gridare ai quattro venti* on the rooftops of Rennes and Modena. Continuing with views from above, there are images of the city turned upside down and rotated, a bearded dancer filmed from below moving on a sheet of glass, and it ends with a sequence in which a group of people (most of them Dada artists) come out of a church where a funeral has just taken place and start chasing a hearse led by a camel. It is not clear where the picturesque procession is headed, but it crosses the town and arrives in the countryside, where the coffin falls off the wagon, tips over and a magician emerges, who with his magic wand makes everyone disappear, one by one, including himself.

The relationships between the objective representation of the city, the route, and the practice of walking (more precisely, discovering and knowing while walking) are central to Colomer’s artistic research. These make *Modena Parade / Corteo Modenese* a sort of situationist urban drift, a choral crossing of the city at a slow pace and with stages enlivened by dances, music, and various activities, aimed at making it an aggregating experience that celebrates life by giving bodies, faces, voices and costume to death.

While cemeteries were in the centre of towns and cities, in and around churches, death and its rites were not separated from everyday life, and cemeteries were not only the place where people buried themselves, but also places for meeting, strolling, fairs, business, trials, civil and military processions, celebrations, where the dead participated in the ordinary and extraordinary events of the community. This everyday relationship with death, which we find hard to understand today, was interrupted in the middle of the eighteenth century for reasons of health and hygiene by a series of decrees which, culminating in the Napoleonic edict of Saint-Cloud in 1804, attempted to regulate burials and prescribed that cemeteries be moved to the outskirts of towns.

*Modena Parade / Corteo Modenese* wants to re-include death

and its places in the social and community horizon and re-establish a collective relationship between the living and the dead through the performance of our imagination.

Horses open the procession (and bring to mind the horse at the centre of the fifteenth-century fresco *The Triumph of Death* at Palazzo Abatellis in Palermo, the city in which Colomer in 2018 created the work *New Palermo Felicissima* with the fishermen of the Sant'Erasmus district on the occasion of Manifesta 12), while the tractor closes proceedings. In the midst of this, children, young people, adults, the elderly and dogs, in total more than 400 participants, imitate the slow sinuous movements of the dancers and walk to the beat of the drums. Everything is cheerful, dense, fascinating, and somehow disorientating. Some wave sticks and flags, while others hold up placards with the words **TIMOR MORTIS, LAUGHTER WILL BURY YOU, END RIP AMEN FIN**. A strangely beautiful situation is created, and in the urban chaos generated by the procession, passers-by and cyclists stop to watch, intrigued, amused and in some cases surprised by the fact that this is a procession about death and not, as they thought, against the war in Ukraine. In front of Palazzo Santa Margherita, home to the FMAV and the Music Institute, the procession stops to listen to the *Triumphal March* from Giuseppe Verdi's *Aida*, and after a few minutes reaches the *Palazzina dei Giardini*, where it ends with a big collective dance and the throwing of sweets that makes all the children happy. Participants then go to visit the artist's exhibition presenting a selection of works created in the public space and the design table with ideas and the mock-up for *Modena Parade / Corteo Modenese*.

Colomer helps us to tolerate the intolerable thought of death, heals the unhealed wounds of the loss of loved ones, urges us to humanise, in one way or another, something unassailable in our understanding of ourselves and of reality, asks us to engage with death and to look into that dizzying abyss without fearing it. At a time when there is fear of viruses and wars both near and far that want to force us to remain still and afraid, the happy, dancing procession through the streets of Modena offers us a time without fear and without borders. A time in continuous movement, an animal time, the time of life.

Cecilia Guida

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