

Leonardo Caffo [from now on LC]: It's quite common that a philosopher and an artist start chatting. But it is not so common that you, as an artist, have been nourished by philosophy. You've plundered it, you've read a lot and, at the end of the day, if one has understood your work, it's not so difficult to see an echo of some of the things that have been discussed in philosophy over the last twenty years. If you were to try to put in order or even simply say what you think have been some ideas that portray a particular worldview, where would you start?

Nicola Martini [from now on NM]: Well, let's say that in this conversation, wittingly or unwittingly, we will start talking about some paradoxes that I think are fundamental and it is thanks to these paradoxes that I encountered certain philosophical theories, or practices, a little by chance. Honestly, finding myself in front of some possibilities or seeing described, in a sometimes banal and didactic way, what I was experiencing in my work was quite exciting. Also because it happened at a time when I felt quite alone, both in terms of dialogue with other people—I'm talking about dialectics—and also clashes.

I have always thought that this was a serious problem. Many figures have always gravitated around me and around my work, and I think this has happened thanks to the work itself which, as I was saying a few days ago in a message when I was talking about mycelium, is a sort of human and nonhuman, organic and inorganic entity, from which we all draw. Therefore, every now and then, a little piece of it is discovered but clearly it is impossible to see the whole. In my opinion some research, more or less theoretical, was being done in that sense there.

LC: If you had to name just one?

NM: If I have to analyze the effectiveness, first of all I think of Meillassoux, of his work and then of his revival of Deleuze, but above all his discussion around "the correlative" as an instrument to break down a previous superstructure—which has undoubtedly both formed and screwed our generation. Starting precisely from Meillassoux, with his booklet—which is actually a recording of one of his lectures and is published by Mimemis—where he is very effective in my opinion, arriving then at Ferraris and the books preceding the *Manifesto of New Realism* and this attempt to free ourselves of something that has generated us.

Culturally, our generation—even if you're a bit younger—has grown up with that television idea of postmodernism: in the sense that the format of the pre-Berlusconi but also, unfortunately, post-Berlusconi language is a bit like that, in which the famous "transcendental fallacy" that Ferraris talks about is evident.

To find oneself in the position from which one experiences inorganic datum and gives metaphysical and ontological importance to this situation was an everyday practice for me. However, in the place of art, to hear me speak it sounded like [speaking] was a druid, a drifting Tuscan mystic—and you say, "but this one speaks with silicone, so what?" Some of the theories helped me understand, even though these things were already clear to me, they were not transcendental...

LC: I asked you this first question because one may find oneself in front of your work, as always, or with background knowledge or perhaps directly in the gallery, at Clima, where we are inaugurating the exhibition for which we are having this conversation. One could arrive there and find oneself in front of what are first of all objects. So in light of what you just told us, what matters is to see what remains beyond interpretation.

NM: Well yes, also because there is no escape...

LC: There is no escape. You mentioned Ferraris earlier, and Meillassoux, this idea of resistance to interpretation—that something is there regardless of whether we think it, interpret it, and devastate it through interpretation and thus give it a different meaning. One of the many limitations of this return to the real, that is supposed to have put postmodernism on standby, is that postmodernism was explaining things badly but it was explaining them.

NM: Definitely.

LC: Realism doesn't really explain much, it tells you that there is something that transcends us, and I think we have always known that. Instead, you in your work add something that I think is definitely worth explaining: that there is a movement of things, that this impermanence is not real, that materials move, are alive and inhabit space in a way that exceeds our ordinary conceptions of life, right?

NM: Definitely.

LC: In what way, let's say, in your opinion—to me there's a very clear way but I don't want to interpret you with you in front of me...

NM: [Laughs]

LC: In what way do these things, which you have been making for so many years now, portray a different way of understanding canonical life, animals, vegetables and so on? You seem to be telling us that in these materials there is something that exceeds our way of living also.

NM: Yes, absolutely. To wrap up this little introductory note to what we're going to say about realism, I, you know, think that as a layman you always feel a little guilty saying "to me it seems almost banal this thing they're saying," and at first I honestly thought that was a basic limitation of mine, and then a limitation of the author himself. Then you accept that "this thing" is indeed trite. That doesn't mean it's not interesting—I don't want to use the real word because it's prickly.

And it's like you were saying: compared to them [the realists] however, the postmodern explained, because anyway there was a different idea of abstraction. What they were doing corresponded precisely to the act of explaining. While on the other hand there was almost a fear of really explaining because they got to basically say that ("pointing to their books") is not enough. So to overcome this thing, as someone would have said, we need to create syntactic alliances between philosophers, between artists, between materials...with the same dignity, in short.

I seem to recall that I once heard you say that there is a daily practice of allying oneself with a geranium or with a badger, and that suggests that maybe we're kind of going in the wrong direction, or at least, that we're going in an abstract direction again. What I am saying is that [these alliances] with materials can be made, perhaps because they are a little more docile. In reality we start from an assumption of possibility. The moment it becomes possible to give not only an ontological and metaphysical status, because it is quite convenient, quite easy, it is a theory that you find yourself explaining and having to describe. It is clear that you also have to talk a bit about anthropocentrism and its questioning. In my case this also becomes questioning the concept of authorship and as our colleagues on the other side would say, *fathership*.

As I was saying before, to consider the work as a kind of mycelium that we all have to rely on in some way and every time to learn a new idiom, a new alphabet, a new language makes you find yourself in the somewhat paradoxical position of setting limits, constraints within which the work then fits.

And this is the *modus operandi* of some scientists, who perhaps deal with nanotechnology and laboratory research; it's the *modus operandi* of some philosophers who work on what one person whose book we both read defines as an interface, a layer where things happen. And in my opinion in art things happen and alliances are possible between people who start from a similar *modus operandi* and then arrive at ramifications and different directions from their work.

What I hope remains from my work is a possibility. But I don't give a damn about the preservation of the work, the fate of the work, the aura of the work. I don't give a damn about art. Jorge Peris, an artist who I used to work with and who is a dear friend, always told me that art is a place. And it's true, and it's thorny. So many things happen in this place. And in my opinion, if you look hard enough, you've been there; and people like Laura Tripaldi or people who deal with nanotechnology, people who deal with a certain kind of journalism, a certain kind of writing have been there. Maybe a doctor has been there too. That kind of research goes there, in my opinion. I don't know if I answered clearly...

LC: You did and there is no doubt that art is a territory where some things that are very complex to say in words, take a form. I have a very didactic and classical vision of it, but in my opinion contemporary art is the thing that gives substance to Wittgenstein's idea that you can't say anything except what you know, so in art you don't say it, you do it. You take that thing seriously.

NM: Yes, also because—I know I'm interrupting—you have often said that the fact that he [Wittgenstein] states in that proposition that one should be silent is beautiful, because it is an imposition. I will never say moral, but it is an imposition, and it is beautiful because [the fact that one should be silent] opens up other possibilities.

LC: Right now you are telling us about the adherence to a certain kind of philosophy that paradoxically resolves postmodernity, and the idea that there are no more narratives precisely by adhering to the fact that there are no more narratives—because what remains is reality.

NM: Yes, yes.

LC: We were citing Meillassoux earlier, he is also famous for that argument about the fossil, about the dinosaur. In fact, knowing that a dinosaur transcends us and was there before us tells us very little about our destiny, other than the fact that we will disappear.

NM: Yes, it's something that's there before the "I am."

LC: And it will stay there probably even after the "I am."

NM: By the way it's something that everyone is always a little bit afraid of but I actually find it fantastically comforting...

LC: Yes, death is comforting, definitely.

NM: It relieves you of all this great responsibility that art and the artist have always had. Responsibility that is extremely problematic, in the sense that however it goes, it is true that for many things it is totally useless...

LC: You, let's say, immediately rigged the stakes because you went from metaphysical things like postmodernism, realism, to sociological and cultural TV. After all, the language of postmodernism is also that of TV, that of Berlusconi. These languages have allowed us to survive and are still around us.

We have lived with the idea that a virus like any other has stopped us for two years thanks to fallacious narratives, *fake news*, the idea that this virus has arrived here because the aliens, the Chinese, the Americans wanted it...So in reality the postmodern is still with us, so much so that we consider equivalent the narratives of the WHO and some madman.

You, on the other hand, bring us to something inevitable: to the structure of things, to their substance, to the matter of which we see very little because then in reality these materials of yours, looked at with another eye, the eye of microscope, of another animal, generate other forms, other possibilities.

NM: Sure, that's also very interesting in the sense that however it goes, quoting you again, I know it's a bogus activity but I'm going to keep doing it...

LC: Well, we're just chatting.

NM: Great, no, it's actually interesting because we're going to assume different positions, different bodies...You said at one point, wait I want to say it right, I'll save it for later, go on, go on...

LC: No, I was thinking about the kind of narration, because for example the realisms, you know these things have many names, New Realism wasn't great because it is an old artistic movement and you start thinking about that stuff...

NM: That's no longer fashionable.

LC: It's not fashionable anymore. Then there were the Speculative Realisms, the New Materialisms, they invented all kinds of things...but why didn't they become fashionable like postmodernism? Because Postmodernism was a description, New Realism is a hope.

The idea that reality might actually matter more than our interpretations, alas, happens very little, because then you put the inevitable in front of it. So how do we build a good narrative out of the inevitable, and what's waiting for us next? Maybe it is no longer the language of Rai television, or the society of the spectacle?

NM: I think that if I was sure of that, I wouldn't work. Maybe it's a trivial answer, but...I would really love to be able to tell you a good future narrative. It's a power I would like to have, also maybe to stop doing these things here.

Every now and then I suffer a bit from the impostor syndrome: in the sense that first of all I start by saying that I build an environment, a field, within which the work can happen and I already feel a bit shitty saying this. Saying that "I build a field" has this demiurgic meaning that is pulsating for me. I find it arrogant in a really disgusting way but it is undoubtedly what I do.

Unfortunately, the spark that sets some things off is us. I still haven't managed to find a possibility that cancels even this, and maybe I will never find it, and maybe I will continue to work for this, that is to cancel myself...to cancel even this initial joke. Because no matter what, it's another paradox, another time.

For example, looking at these works here, these sort of slides where banal, very simple things happen, there is work on adherence, on friction, on viscosity, terms dear to many philosophers that we will not cite, but I would like us to experience them together on a scale of perceptions different from those we have. And this I cannot do, or at least it can be done probably through some practices or some substances, but basically you have to believe in it. Another paradox, because I am speaking as a preacher.

LC: One of the criticisms that is usually levelled at some philosophers and artists is that they seem to be like prophets and there's nothing wrong with that, it's not like the prophets said bad things, right? Or that the arguments about the future are far-fetched, and it's not like you can do more than that. Every time I look at your work I'm reminded of a hyper-pop movie that everyone has seen: *Cloud Atlas*, have you seen it?

NM: You know what...I don't think so.

LC: *Cloud Atlas* is a 2012 film, it won a bunch of awards. It's basically six interconnected stories in six very different temporal and spatial moments. *Cloud Atlas* is the name of a composer's symphony that in the story poses the idea that everything is connected and the future that seems most future of all is in Korea, in Seoul, in 2100.

NM: Korea is always the most future of all.

LC: But actually the real future is the one that is mistaken for primitive at the beginning of the movie. There are these guys on an island who live in a tribe and they call us ancient. The ancients were able to build skyscrapers. Then there was a return to stone because at some point you had to realize that the more you adhered to the land, the more you adhered to the materials, and the more humanity could survive. After all, a great symbol of postmodernism is the skyscraper, if we think about it. In my opinion, in your work, if one really has to make an effort to see a narrative—although I don't think one has to make much of an effort—there is this idea. [of returning to realization]. You show something very simple, very banal, but on another level, the idea that the real is more wonderful than its narratives.

Modern man has had to invent a system of false narratives, of ideals, of things that then actually have turned us away from the fact that the very stones upon which we lean are wonderful.

NM: Definitely.

LC: While we're very good at translating postmodernism into political thought, it's very difficult to translate the idea of realism, the idea of materialism, into political thought.

NM: But because it doesn't give weapons, it isn't convenient. The misdeed of having violated a little the "there are no facts, only interpretations" is a very convenient weapon, isn't it? It's the building block of fake news.

LC: Yes.

NM: Who does it advantage to say what we are trying to say?

LC: No one, but it's true that you're actually throwing a stone at them, like the Meillassoux fossil.

NM: Me, as it does others. Maybe we are apocalyptic. Surely we are not very integrated in the sense that [laughs] it's not at all cool, or at least, it was at a time but it remains a bit of a niche thing, often you are afraid.

People think of nanotechnology and say "no no no, they put the chip in me, they inoculated me with it during the vaccine," as if you need an injection to control the masses, which is crazy when you think about it, right? Then to guarantee what? The individual and the possibilities of the individual have never interested anyone because people are derived from that very postmodernism, as comfortable as a couch and Amadeus on television. That's another huge paradox.

LC: Yes. I think for example Coronavirus, which we'll understand something about in twenty years, was a driving force for these thoughts that you're inspired by whereas it wasn't for neo-postmodernist thoughts, because when the real emerges and tells you it's incontrovertible it's always a mess, isn't it?

One of the authors who most foolishly described postmodernism is Jacques Lacan who said that the real exists and when they asked him "what is the real?" he would say that it looks like the police car that stops you while you are speeding on the highway, drops the paddle and tells you: this is the limit. Somehow Coronavirus has been a limit and we've ignored that, we're ignoring it, we're speaking about very unfashionable things, like, New Realism.

NM: But they tried, didn't they? Ferraris himself tried to say: "look there is also a positive realism" otherwise the real is always the tree or the brick that falls on your head...

LC: Ah, that's what I wanted to ask you, what is the positivity of realism?

NM: As I was telling you before, I find it extremely comforting—and I'm amazed that it's not the case for many people—to take the weight off the individual, to take the weight off the author, to take the weight off the man. After all, the attempt to destroy or "pierce" as you say, anthropocentrism, is also a bit of this. Shifting weight and responsibility away from oneself, basically means that you stop being God. Because God is a rock, okay? This is actually extremely comforting, at least I find it extremely comforting. Think about these last works of mine that are basically nothing but containers—some are soft containers, some are crunchy containers...

LC: Why do you call them containers?

NM: Because they're literally pockets, aren't they? They're pouches that in this case again have a paradox within them, that of the picture. If you think about it, after all that's all function too. In the sense that if I have to iron a liquid into two fabrics I'll keep it taut, and to keep it taut there's nothing more functional than the frame of a painting. In my case it's always a bit of a function, it's part of that phase of the work that I'm still aware of and I'm

basically a worker who sets this thing in motion and makes it happen. After that...I'm the same as a goat watching it, or you. A philosopher.

LC: Yes, that's true, but in my opinion having the idea that art is a place doesn't necessarily mean not giving a shit about art. Let's say that it is evident that the narrative system within which you move is the one that allows you to consider a container interesting.

NM: Why do you think that when you approach a work, there is always a desire to isolate a narrative from it as if that is the comfort you seek?

LC: Because we don't care about the objects at all. That is, stones are stones, diamonds are simply minerals. For us, things become important because of the value we give them. This in my opinion is not necessarily something that leads...

NM: To something bad.

LC: To pure postmodernity...

NM: Well, it risks being a beginning, if it's exploited badly.

LC: Sure, but it's true that yours is a narrative. The stone or the material for the dog are just stones, while you bring us back to the value of this thing.

NM: Because probably for the dog the narration doesn't exist.

LC: Yes, but for us it does, so that we can consider a fossil only as a fossil...

NM: Right now I feel envy for the dog [laughs], who is free from this thing.

LC: We don't come out of it with this simplicity, do we?

NM: No, but obviously now, and unfortunately maybe this is going to slip into a more canonical conversation than you might've imagined, I don't know...

LC: No...

NM: But in that sense it's going to be a little bit about defining what narrative is. I agree with you on that. There is no escape because any chain of events has a narrative, for us who live time in this way.

LC: You think, now I don't want to be irreverent in this.

NM: Go on...

LC: Because they were geniuses back then? Today if you take a can of tuna and put it in a museum...

NM: It's not worth much.

LC: It's not worth anything because the most narrative object in the world at that time was the commercial object,

with the economic boom, and so you, *bam*, change the context of its use.

NM: To me it's kind of exploiting what someone who is a little bit dear to us would have called *affordances*. There was not only a narrative that was being used commercially but there was also a possible, potential, virtual narrative.

LC: There was the sacredness of this place.

NM: Exactly, exactly.

LC: Today ecology is a form of divinity, which none of us really understands how to grasp, and then we realize that actually the object to be worshipped is not Greta Thunberg, but instead the stone, the pebble, the material, the thing that we have around us; the thing that is normally just the joint between other things or that is in the interlude, that is in the interface. You take it, you stretch it, you bring it into a context and you amaze yourself in front of what you walk on, in front of what...

NM: It's there unfortunately.

LC: Actually, realizing that the stone is important involves changing the narrative around it...which is what so many artists are doing with water today. At the Fiorucci Art Trust they did a whole exhibition on the value of water, what does that mean? I mean, this. And so the narrative is actually what destroys us but it's also what saves us, not being dogs.

NM: Yeah, yeah I mean but we're screwed, we're assuming that we're screwed and there's no escape from that.

You talked about the water. Water has a connection, a beautiful surface tension and as long as we're there, metaphorically there are still paradoxes that we can shape, govern, and then as you say change the sign, give it another kind of narrative. But at some point when we realize what we're doing we're underwater. And we're screwed because we don't have that interface there anymore; and we have so many of them that we don't know what to do with them anymore. The gesture of having to change the narrative of a stone simply to explain to others that it is a stone is heavy, and the concept of changing the narrative of something else is dangerously close to saying: this stone exists only because you see it. Unfortunately that is always the consequence, we are on an inclined plane and we are sliding towards that thing there.

LC: Yes, but there is nothing wrong in my opinion, let's say I was and always have been skeptical about that.

NM: But because they've put themselves in a position of opposing that thing there and you can't oppose that, as I was trying to say, because it exists exactly as the rock exists.

LC: Yes yes, but the stone as a stone exists because you think it does, that's the problem. The stone that is not called a stone is there, understood, that's the limit.

NM: I don't know why but I've always felt a little comforted by the idea that the rock exists regardless of what we think of it. At least we need some comfort.

LC: No doubt, but the image of the stone, the point is to understand it.

NM: The point is to understand where the interface of what we do is.

LC: You know that human beings live wrapped in images, not objects. That's why you make art, because you wrap us in the image of the real.

NM: I was speaking about impostor syndrome before. I've always suffered from it and every now and then I have serious second thoughts about what I'm doing and I keep doing it anyway because however it goes, the moment you narrate, you always resort to a form of lying.

The moment you put yourself on the stage, you're representing and so as much as I say I'm so attached to ontology...damn, it's not true. [laughs]

LC: Ferraris and I have discussed this many times. It is not that ontology does not aim at things, it aims at the images that try to describe things. Then, there is no doubt that things exist regardless of the fact that you describe them.

You are not simply putting the materials in the gallery, you are putting a narration of these materials there, also because you are doing a very important job, you are not just taking things around and bringing them into places, but you are doing a very complex work of study, analysis and interpretation.

NM: You say that the moment the graphite enters the latex realms it's over, the misdeed is done and so the narrative...

LC: And that's not a bad thing at all.

NM: Let's say that in my opinion this interface, this...let's call it an in-frame which is a term I like even more because it feels a little more fantastical...[this interlude] that involves the reality of the stone and the postmodern theoretical misdeed, from an ontological point of view, exist in the same way. That is, talking about and mystifying a certain kind of idealism is in itself a bit of a micro-object. That too is a geode and if you break it you find many things inside, maybe even Berlusconi.

LC: [laughs]

NM: It [this interlude] exists as much as the rock exists, though. So consequently, does not getting out of the narrative as a possibility—which we realized we can't—exist as much as a tree exists?

That's why it's interesting to talk about the possibility of nanotechnological drift. I say this in an ugly and obnoxious way, and I'll hate myself later, but the creation of life from artifice, [laughs] let's leave Frankenstein out of it, but it's this. It's this possibility here. That thing exists too and it's on a dangerously small scale, so much so that it can enter human bodies and non-organic bodies and make them become something else. It's a narrative act.

LC: I very much agree with what you are saying and in my opinion, maybe even for those who will see this exhibition and for those who in general will then follow the path of the works regardless of where they are at the moment, it is important not to have the opposite effect.

On the desk in front of us you have placed some books that have become in their own way historical books for those who deal with this sub-niche and of which the normal world doesn't give a shit as usual, but....There is Karen Barad, a great feminist physicist, then there is Laura Tripaldi, a very good Italian researcher. For example, one of the things I have always found in Karen Barad is the idea of changing notions.

NM: Now, you say *weird*.

LC: Strange.

NM: [Laughs]

LC: [this idea of] Changing the notions of responsibility of what they call agency in relation to the fact that materials also do things, say things. That, in my opinion, is the most anthropocentric risk there is.

Paradoxically, in order to pierce anthropocentrism, they fall right back into it, like with jam, and then they speak of: the *agency* of lightning, the *agency* of silicone. Laura [Tripaldi] in my opinion is a person of monstrous intelligence, but this idea of reformulating the idea of life, that is, maybe these things don't live and who gives a shit, understand? We used to do it with the narrative of consciousness, then we did it with the narrative of mind, now we think it's more inclusive to do it with the notion of life but we're simply trying once again to understand things from the categories that describe us. I saw a talk by Karen Barad at Rivoli and I think all I understood was, "Good evening," and then after that she got lost in two hours of...

NM: [Laughs]

LC: That doesn't mean anything, there is genius there, in my case maybe not.

NM: It must be a hell of a thing to translate, opening and closing parentheses.

LC: A hell of a thing to translate, yes. Too bad, by the way, that these books are not widely distributed. In my opinion, your work is deeply connected to a kind of philosophy that, paradoxically, is less diffused— not western but eastern.

NM: Yes definitely, but I have always believed that.

LC: That is, I would see these works of yours, if they were inside a monastery, as a complete crystallization of the idea that the stone-shaped man, the one who stands still and feeds the silent mind, has the same power as the one who feeds the chattering mind, the rational mind.

NM: There's a substantial difference between what our practices are, what our drifts are—we simply never accepted certain things. I mean, the problem of why these philosophies as practices are interesting, the reason why we all find them a little bit incomplete is because they are philosophies that they don't accept. Whereas some of the practices that you were mentioning, I don't know, you're referring a little bit more to Shinto, maybe?

LC: Yes. Shinto suits you, I would say.

NM: In the case of some of the Zen practices we were talking about, it starts with an acceptance of your every gesture, your every possibility, even the fact that some things simply are the way they are and there is no other way, and you simply don't count for anything. Only if you accept this can you go, I'm not saying forward, because even to say that would be to say it from an extremely local position—as a white male, straight or not.

LC: Yes that yes, you don't even have to be scared of it. We are the least cool thing that exists right now.

We're male, we're straight and we're chatting with each other. If the cretinous feminist were to listen to us— because being a feminist doesn't necessarily save you from being a cretin, does it? There can be the cretinous feminist, even if feminism is an intelligent thing—well, a cretinous feminist would quietly say: "these people are speaking from a *dick-centric* perspective."

I consider your work powerful and revolutionary, because it brings us back to the idea and importance and wonder...There's a beautiful book by Chandra Candiani that is getting a lot of attention.

Her name is actually Livia Candiani and she is a Milanese poet of Russian origin who lived in India for a while. Chandra is the name given to her by her teacher. I think it's the best selling non-fiction book in Italy right now and it's called: *Questo immenso non sapere* (published by Einaudi), where she collected these short sentences about how she found wonder sitting next to the tree or looking at the little animal in her studio or meditating and feeling much closer to the stone she had next to her than to her fellow poets...

Because these things go like this, at some point a book like this becomes the best-selling book in Italy, in a country where the most interesting thing is whether Ambra Angiolini has cheated on Allegri or not—[in a country like this] then a book like this is sold. And so, in reality, a work like yours “breaks through” that time of anthropocentrism, that is, it makes you understand that something else exists, but it does not need to humanize it by telling us “the material lives” or “the feminist perspective explains quantum entanglement better,” which is a premature supercilious bullshit with leftist scaffolding, but it is telling us that the outside exists and this outside is wonderful, stupendous, enchanting exactly like Dante Alighieri, understood?

NM: Yes and maybe it's the inside.

LC: Yes, the outside and the inside are our categories. Your latex doesn't give a shit about outside and inside, it's there.

NM: But lucky him...But, this stuff is actually interesting, it's really very much ours. Last time, I keep on quoting you, I have to give you some binary...this is a conversation of total onanistic otherness, in the wild...You said that in any case the pre-Socratics were shamans.

LC: Yes, they were.

NM: But because it's true: it's impossible that there weren't and still aren't commonalities. It is trivial, the problem is that unfortunately it is simple and therefore it is not good.

LC: Yes, and therefore you have to complicate your life, but in fact the principle of everything is fire. It means that it is resolved there. You bring us back to the basic elements. Inside there is the air for having had to do the ironing...there is everything.

NM: The latex, the graphite and there's this attempt right...

LC: And this is what the author I was quoting earlier [Chandra Candiani] says. When you sit in meditation, you feel all these things that look New Age. You feel the gravity of your ass weighing you down, you feel the fire burning you and telling you to get up and go do something else...

NM: In fact, it's not possible, in my opinion, to try to pierce anthropocentrism, to consider feminism or gender studies as a possibility, if you don't struggle. If you aren't hyper-conscious—you have to use these prefixes and suffixes now, it seems—of your presence. Of how much you also shit, or of the fact that you have to change positions every five seconds because you're uncomfortable or because you have one muscle shorter than the other. I mean, you can't pass over this.

LC: Yes, there is no doubt about that.

NM: We were talking last time about the anechoic chamber, where you feel the muscles of your eyes pulling and emitting a sound. This is the only way you can talk to me about Capitalocene, otherwise it is not possible.

LC: We don't give a shit about the contemporary art system right now, we are talking about those who use contemporary art as an expression.

NM: Yes, as a category.

LC: We call it contemporary art because we don't know what to call it yet. In 100 years someone will say “those who made pre pricket art” [unintelligible] and give it a name.

But we take the fact that contemporary art is a way of trying to exceed language seriously and therefore to connect with all these things that you do without recounting them, or else the risk is, again quoting Barad, to use the category of performativity to explain the atom. It's silly because performativity is our own thing, understand? I mean, the atom will mind its own business.

NM: Besides, it's [performativity] a really ambiguous word, isn't it? I like words that mean many things, but it's also used a lot in the economic field, isn't it?

LC: Yes, what does it mean to be performative? The atom is as it is. Then the fact that our eye perceives it in one way, and perceives it in another way, is not telling us that the atom is performative or anything like that, it is telling us that we are inside a bubble and this bubble can be pierced in various ways. It can be pierced with feminism, it can be pierced with animalism...

NM: Sure, they're possibilities.

LC: They're possibilities.

NM: We were talking the other day about Preciado. It seems to me that then someone should or could talk about the performativity of his gesture of transition, it's really interesting. Some might connect it to body art but who cares.

The interesting part of that transition is that it simply is, every moment it happens and the way he handles it is just magnificent. But why is realism, or possible realisms, more or less speculative, not cool, why didn't they explain further? Because at some point you're in front of a wall that's not porous the way we like it, not porous my ass, and you find yourself talking about the concept of performativity of what is our stuff. You should stop considering it. Shut up and stand next to a rock, in a temple. Which is perfectly fine.

LC: In my opinion, the beautiful thing, period, without using complex words, to do in front of your work, and it would be the most revolutionary thing we could do right now—and that we won't do of course—is to laze around.

But we're not going to do that because we have to think about solving things another way. But every time we narrate possible solutions to the end of the world, we are in fact causing it. To avoid any kind of problem we should stop creating any kind of narrative.

NM: And unfortunately, sometimes, of action as well.

LC: And of action, yes. I would like to try and understand, before we end this conversation, how you choose from the infinite materials of the world, how you capture...

NM: This is a question I've been asked many times, and it's an important question. The simple truth is that I have no idea. Each time there is a different process through which [the materials] arrive. I don't want to sound completely mystical; I'm simply telling you what happened every time; and I'm always an external factor. Often it was people, who I maybe knew or began to know because I had changed studios and next door I had a neighbor who grew cabbage and fed hedgehogs, gave them Jocca, who at some point while chatting said to me, "You know there are some substances that are hard to mix like this, at this temperature" or "it's funny, one time when I was kneading this, this thing happened to me..." and automatically the possibility of that material coming to me is generated.

It also sounds a bit obnoxious what I'm saying, but it really is like this. There are some materials that are quite recurrent for me, right. For example, graphite is always present in my works and also in the works of some friends...Andrea Kvas often uses graphite...but because, as I told you before, I like container words, geodesic words, words that inside you keep on breaking without them becoming fractal and that's all. But they are all different and not always the same, they are little boxes, caskets. I really like "the third policeman," [I like it] that

at a certain point these little boxes come and they're full of light and you wonder what the fuck they are; and the words of some materials inside are like that.

Graphite is one of them and it's a material that we've all actually had at our fingertips. We all draw with pencils, with lapis we say in Tuscany, right? Stone. Actually, graphite is used industrially for a lot of things: it's a fluidizer that's used in cast iron castings; [graphite] resists crazy temperatures, it's basically pure carbon; it's a really incredible materia; it works in a very particular way with electricity. If you drop graphite on the ground and you put your foot in it you fly [on the ground...]

LC: I'll explain why I asked you that question. We focused, in this conversation, on an abstract conceptual implication...

NM: Yes, we flew around a bit.

LC: But then you are actually deconstructing the idea that materials are used to make something, and by something I mean to create a working object, an industrial object.

NM: I have always used materials in another way—not commercially.

LC: That's right, in fact there is something deeply political in what you are doing, isn't there?

NM: Yes, there is.

LC: It's easy to say that postmodernism is based on revolutionary-socialist thought—sometimes people say that Deleuze was a postmodernist and he was more or less a Marxist, Derrida was a postmodernist and it was more or less cool to say that he was a leftist. On this side it's not so much about translating into standard political categories, you are actually taking material that is usually used to produce the car and the angle grinder, and you are playing with it. Because in the end that's what we're talking about.

NM: Yes yes.

LC: You play to see how these materials mix, if they don't mix for you, if they adhere, if they add up, if they hybridize, if they stay adjacent, if they float on top of each other...

NM: Which, going back to before, is completely narrative, this language.

LC: It's completely narrative but you're deconstructing the idea that material experimentation is being used to build new cars, new airplanes, the new reactor for the airplane.

NM: Yes, of course. But just because they simply are [the materials], fortunately for them and so...

LC: You play with that.

NM: It's funny because unfortunately art is also a category like cars and so making art is a discipline, like making cars. The funny thing—and it's not new at all—is to make art like you make cars and vice versa. It is also interesting to talk about the preservation of many of my works, not all of them, otherwise they will hear us and I don't know...

LC: No, otherwise collectors won't buy anything anymore. They hold very well.

NM: It happened several times, it was also a problem and so...

LC: That there was a deterioration...

NM: That there was a deterioration. It's funny, I'm going to say something kind of ecologist, kind of hipster-philosopher: we make objects and these objects go around the world in those pine coffins you see, and they're closed and stay there for years in the hope that some curator will open them, create some sort of narrative and re-install them in a monographic exhibition, and if it goes wrong a retrospective, and if it goes well someone might even buy them.

And if someone buys them you open the case, do a condition report and see that the work is different. And how do you do that? And because I'm a little bit older, I've seen post-internet artists become sculptors and do bronze work. I mean, in the end you don't run away from that, that's it.

So it's difficult. I then tried to work on that, on remaking my work. For example I took a work from 2012, another from 2016, and another from 2018, and completely pulverized them, to the delight of everyone, young and old alike. I put them inside a container [like that] in a solution at a more or less controlled density, in that case water, clay and other substances that didn't make or make life grow inside a plexiglass container, and I made the particles of different materials collide. Cool right, I collapsed space and time.

I was actually trying to create a hybrid by taking those works back, stripping them of the idea of work, making them happily serious again and putting them back into something else, trying to make them work together. I don't have the power and potential of a dwarf technologist. I cook. [laughs].

So [this reworking] is definitely a language and I enjoy the possibility of using materials in politically non-canonical ways.

One time a piece of work broke and all we had to do was recast it, actually—it was a block of rosin, which is a very interesting material, which unlike graphite incredibly increases friction. Dancers and violinists know this because it's what you put on the tips of your shoes or, arranged in more or less soft waxes, on the bow so that the friction on the strings amplifies the sound. I made a block of it, of like 100kg, of 90kg, bringing it to these fantastic restorers who said, "but how did he do it? solvent, temperature controlled, vacuum?" No, with six pots, under some stoves of those canning ones that are in the country and then I pulled them into a mold. They [the restorers] were thrilled, "bullshit!" Yes, it's really bullshit. And so it set a precedent, and that's one of the things I'm most proud of in my life, to have set a precedent. [Laughs].

LC: In my opinion the risk of abstractness is not a problem, but behind what you are doing there is a social and political game of deconstructing utility.

NM: Well, yes, of course. I've said that I don't give a damn about art, and that's true enough. But my world, like yours—which we hope to bring together often and willingly, in another way—is a system that floats on a sea of shit and that's where we are. In my case it's the art world, and in your case it's...

LC: It's a world.

NM: It's the world, the academic world, the writing world...Simply our practice floats on top of these things, and sometimes it's enjoyable and sometimes it's not, depending on various criticisms. The point is that we understand the rules. So it is clear that the fact of making paintings, which are not really paintings because they are plastic bags with events of more or less dense materials inside, which solidify, which have their own narrative course, creates a problem because, in any case, "that looks like Burri." And I have always been a victim of "looks" and in art you are screwed if you "look" like something. Not that I'm complaining, I just surf on these things, I have a lot of fun.

LC: Yeah, sure.

NM: But it's clear that you have to consider the fact that it winks at a certain kind of informal, classic, that is, trying to pierce, yes, but if you don't know the rules you're a hypocrite.

LC: Well sure, you have to know the language.

NM: When you play poker, if you're looking for the Sucker and you don't find it, you're the Sucker. So unfortunately you kind of have to deal with these things.

LC: Well, basically I thought that even a cloud can look like a work of art. And this is the political and social message, the political and social correlate of your art that on one hand has a speculative function, a call to the new materialisms, but on the other hand also has a deconstructive function of utility.

NM: Actually they are all sides of the same coin, that is exactly how what I do winks perhaps at that discipline, which was a search for the possibilities of the new materialisms and at the same time it also has, as you say, a deconstructive function. If you compare it to a possible meeting between postmodernism and these new materialisms, you start to do a good job, in my opinion.

LC: Eh, that's why I wanted this meeting. In my opinion, the political and social function of your works is much more similar to some postmodern texts, because it has a revolutionary coté.

The speculative part is definitely much more like realism, and so how do you collapse these two kinds of worlds that, as you said, float? In my opinion you do exactly what you said about the pot—you throw something in and see what happens.

NM: Yes, yes of course. See, the interesting thing is that you open up tool storage spaces with lots of shelves. Neomaterialism is the tip of a drill, it's a tool. I don't give a damn about the individual work. And think you don't either.

LC: No.

NM: I mean, they're notes, they're notes. And notes are used, they get dirty, they get messy, they get thrown away, they get turned into something else, they get put into a pot...there's everything and the opposite of everything.

It has to "look like." The fact that that work looks like something informal, resistant, at this moment, for what the art system is, is a problem because it is not simple, because it is cumbersome.

But really, again, it's all geode, it has to look like that to make you think it's not. You once said, talking about anthropocentrism, you were actually saying back in the days of the Enlightenment...being with Adorno and Horkheimer...that there was a dialectic, and they also gave us the tools to criticize it. Here we are—this is the interface, this is the interlude.

LC: I agree, this is the interlude. Right now we are probably at the beginning of this dialectic, we won't see the end of it, but somehow the things you do will be fossils of this dialectic in the future.

NM: Yes, I hope so.

LC: That is, it is a beginning in which through a hyper-elaboration of form you are also trying to re-enter towards the wonder of the preformal.

NM: And it's only by embracing all these possibilities that it can be done. It makes sense to admit all these possibilities, not to go against them. For too long we've been divided. I was always taught to say, and I say this in a trivial elementary school kid way, that if you like postmodernism you can't like Graham Harman. What kind of bullshit is that?

LC: It's a centering of things, after all...

NM: So we are saying that what we are saying is something different from Vattimo's weak thought?

LC: Maybe not.

NM: Because, anyway, that is the principle of a possibility. Some [sciences] have been called—I like it a lot because it's annoying—the naive sciences, naive psychology, naive physics, the sun high in the sky...no, you're talking nonsense, but that works too.

LC: Yes, but in fact this is where future work together could start from. From this naivety, in my opinion, interesting things can be built.

NM: Absolutely.