



## The Artifact: A Serious Game

MATTEO BERTELÉ

The logo of the current exhibition is an artifact revealed as such, a kind of meta-artifact. It is also evident from the very name of the series from which it was extrapolated, the only one among the many produced from 1968 until the present day to contain the term itself: *Artifacts near Podgoretsky Castle*, 1998. The logo reveals the mimetic claims of art, especially of its most classical expression, painting: *trompe l'oeil* is just sketched, so the artifice is discernible from its “unfinished” state and from the shadow of the paper projected on the turf.

The artifact wishes not to overwhelm or compete with nature, it does not tend towards the sublime as Western land-art does: on the contrary, it puts itself at play, in what Infante himself has defined as “a playing field”, revealing – in the grid of transparent wires that we see in many of his works – both its limitations and its vertebra. The interest in structure and construction, as well as the explicit use of geo-

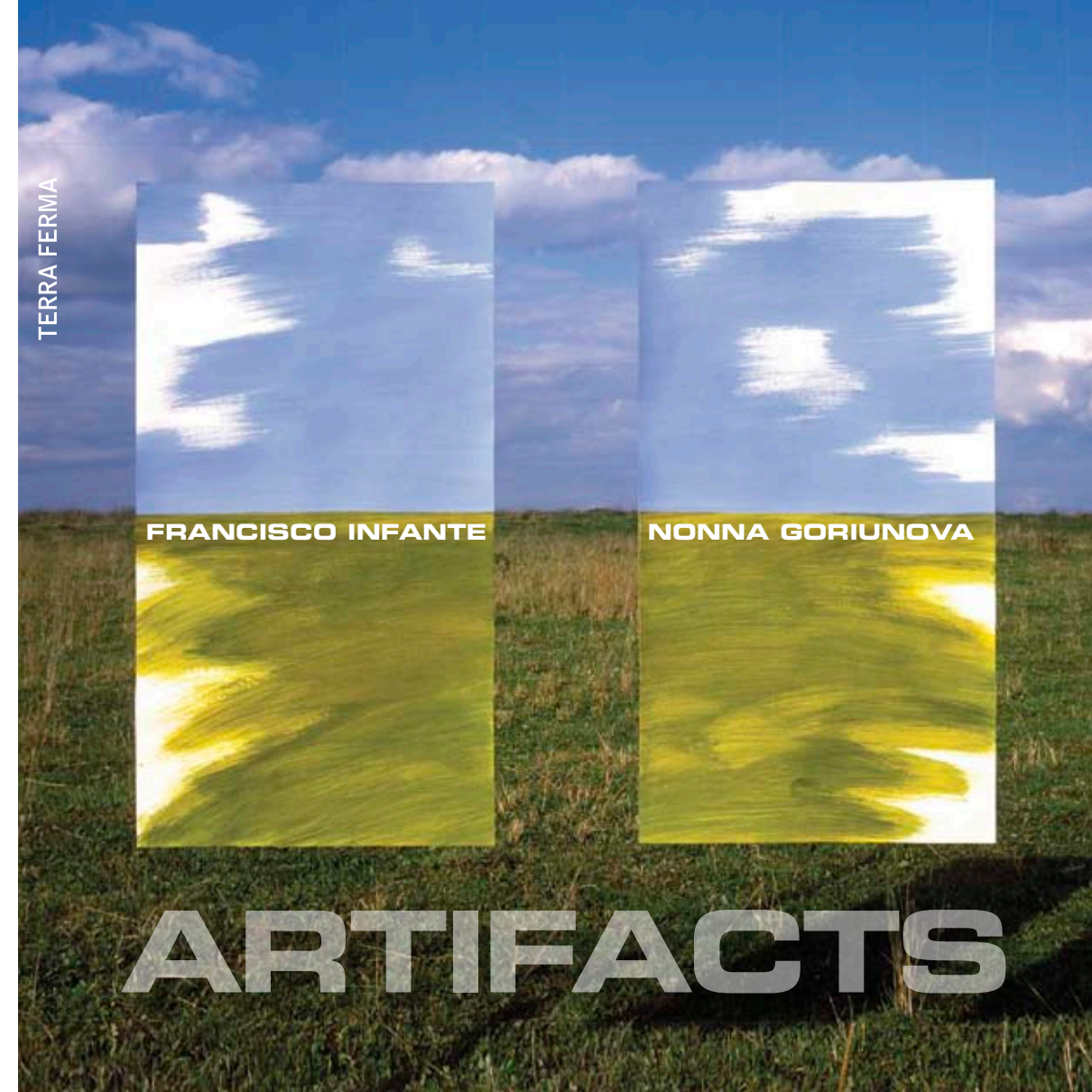


*Goriunova and Infante as Artifacts. Montalto Ligure, 2002*

metric shapes refer to the Constructivism of artists such as Rodchenko and then continued in the 1960s by Kinetic artists, primarily the Dvizhenie (Movement) collective, of which Infante was a member. The intention is to restore and retie the threads of memory of an artistic tradition that, to paraphrase the title of his series, is *Nearness inside*

*Remoteness and Remoteness inside Nearness*. For Rodchenko, as well as for Infante, photography, as a result of human design, will always be subject to a degree of randomness. This duality is overcome only in synthesis – that for both has culminated in the “point of view” – and then in the camera. For Rodchenko, both as recording medium for the new society and for experimental application, the camera was the most authentic artistic medium of his era, but for Infante, on the other hand, the camera is merely a “tool” which enables him to register and document forever the dialogue between nature and the artifact.

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## Art and Nature in a Dialectical Relationship

MATTEO BERTELÉ

The artifact arises from a constant dialogue between an artistic object – artificial and ephemeral – and nature, the bearer of eternity, i.e. of that characteristic whose perception has led Infante to become an artist. The selection of “Artifacts” on display represents many stages and modes of this dialectical relationship, both in time, due to the chronological sequence of the works themselves, and in space, in accordance with the changing positions between the two parties: the direct contact of the geometric forms resting on the snow of *Suprematist Games* and the horizontal suspension of reflective surfaces wrapped around themselves like a spiral in the series *Threshold of Curved Space*. In other circumstances we observe a circular embrace of nature, such as metal foil wrapped around the branches in the series *Lining up a Sign*, or the dynamics that surrounds it, to prolong it indefinitely, as in the *Continuations*. Finally, in the last series, we notice a certain verticality in the geometric shapes that, suspended between the artist and the landscape, come to steal, extend, replace or outline the morphological elements, which can be rock or sea, sky or earth. Snow is the ancestral element of Russian nature: snow opens the cycle of “Artifacts” here in a homage to Malevich dated 1968, where the white and opaque background of the latter’s compositions is crystallized in a snowy mantle, becoming a support to crosses and quadrilaterals. The snow also closes the cycle, being outlined in a multitude of textures and landscapes in a series made in the Alps.

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Above, left: from the series *White Buildings*, 1996  
Above, right: from the series *Signs in the Landscape*, 1997  
Below, left: from the series *Applications*, 1993  
Below, right: from the series *Continuations*, 1992



## Nature Is Not Nature Is Nature

JOHN BOWLT AND NICOLETTA MISLER

**Art is Infinity.** The primary material of Francisco Infante's and Nonna Goriunova's art is infinity. For them the borderlessness of time and space constitute the enigma of our universe, while justifying, our fragile attempts to capture and crystallize every moment. Of course, the condition of infinity is unimaginable and incomprehensible to our finite apparatus of perception, but the history of our civilization is the history of our construction of metaphors that tell of the state of eternity: fairy tales end with "happily ever after", myths and legends play havoc with calendar time, and, while accommodating the emperor for his final journey, the ancient architectures push upwards to celestial heights. "Nature is not nature", observed the poet and philosopher Andrei Bely in his 1910 anthology *Symbolism*, summarizing the Symbolist argument that the material world is a faint resonance of an ulterior one and that outward nature merely concealed the inward and more essential one. In their artifacts Infante and Goriunova seem to be repeating the affirmation that nature is not nature, for the ultimate effect of their art is to question and undermine the sequences of time and space that guide our approaches to the phenomena of landscape, water, and sky. While supporting the notion of the fundamental ambiguity or dichotomy of existence (day and night, dawn and dusk, the seasons of the year, here and there), the two artists seem also to follow the Symbolists' search for transcendental powers and absolutes, investing the artistic enterprise with a spiritual and religious dimension. Like modern fairytales, Infante's and Goriunova's artifacts also serve as metaphorical descriptions of what he calls "something that CANNOT BE".

**The Geometry of Appearances.** Another avenue of the artists' enquiry is the geometry of appearances. They commence this discourse with the rigour of a

bidimensional square suspended enigmatically on the surface of the sea between two symmetrical cubes of concrete on a jetty, investigating the perspectival vanishing point of this perfect Renaissance image; and then arrive at the open air or gallery installation where laws of perceptual ambiguity are carefully reconstructed as if "real". Infante and Goriunova further developed this idea out of elementary geometrical signs – the triangle, the circle, and the square – to the letters of the alphabet, something that they accommodates under the more generic heading of *Lining up a Sign*. Certainly, for them the problem of perceptual illusionism remains crucial and it is closely related to their preferred medium, the camera, which by its very nature tends to mystify the perception of real space. Nonetheless, the structure of the photographic vision that Infante obtains with a normal lens (he refuses to use any optical device that would differentiate, deform, and, therefore, annihilate the "objectivity" of the registration) is of a linear perspective vision and any inversion here alludes not to optics, but to the existential presence of the artist, who in creating the situation is not beyond the camera, but at the centre.

**Basic Geometric Forms.** Although Infante and Goriunova apply colour as an integral component of their expression, it is clear that basic geometric forms, often crystalline or translucent, are at the centre of their visual universe. The spiral, the triangle, the ellipse, the rhomboid, the square, and the circle are frequent concepts in their theoretical and practical vocabulary and, while incorporating them into nature, they seem to be asserting that, ultimately, the artifact and the natural phenomenon depend upon parallel geometric configurations and that, therefore, the two components are, indeed, *Complements*. This is manifest, for example, in the *Reconstruction of the Firmament* series, in which



From the series *Suprematist Games*, 1968



From the series *Threshold of Curved Space*, 1979

the artists "artificialize" the constellations by regrouping the stars in symmetrical, geometric arrangements. In this context, the artists are paying homage to the supreme Designer, for they are implying that our entire universe, organic and inorganic, natural and artificial, is obeisant to a single scheme that is simple and systemic, devoid of beginning or end. That is why Infante, in particular, is drawn to the Suprematist geometries of Malevich, especially by the *Black Square* of 1915, for this encapsulates both an ordered symmetry (the rectilinear contours, the framing, monochromes) and a disordered asymmetry (white as Malevich's symbol of infinity).

**Artifacts into Nature: from Infancy to Infinity.** There are numerous historical examples of the artistic and ritualistic insertion of artifacts into nature, although our contemporary appreciation of them may have nothing to do with their original intent. The mysterious stone maidens that dot the steppes of Southern Russia, for

example, no longer fulfil an ideological function, but are regarded as objects of historical or aesthetic information; petroglyphs, rock gardens, wind bells ~ such artifacts also interact with nature. Some are more enduring than others, but all are influenced by currents, erosion, and accident. In Infante's and Goriunova's art this idea of fortuity and absurdity is especially intriguing because of the rigorous external organization, structural discipline, and sober calculation characteristic of the constructions, photographs, and utilitarian projects of their creative development. Indeed, this very combination of the formal (e.g., the early kinetic structures of the 1960s) and the utilitarian (e.g., the designs for industrial fairs of the 1970s and early 1980s) underscores this surprising collision of priorities. Ultimately, like any inspired creator, Infante and Goriunova wish not only to reconstruct the world of appearances, but also to act upon a prophetic vocation, replacing our nature with their nature, infancy with infinity.

## Francisco Infante and Nonna Goriunova: Student Days

KIRILL GAVRILIN

In remembering their days as young students, Francisco and Nonna often point to the special atmosphere that surrounded their creative undertakings. The artistic duo started working in the 1960s, when Francisco and Nonna, students of the Moscow Higher School of Arts and Industry, began to entertain the notion of an alternative course in art. This came about in the peculiar atmosphere of the School, where conservative traditionalism combined oddly with daring experimentation, fostering an underground culture less controlled by censorship. At that time, such a combination was unthinkable, for instance, in the Surikov Art Institute, which, in focusing on easel painting, supported and transmitted the postulates of official ideology.

On the advice of his fellow students, Francisco also attended the Library for Foreign Literature, a small enclave of Western culture in the Soviet capital, cut off from the world by the Iron Curtain. As Infante affirms, here he first saw glossy albums with copies of abstract works by artists such as Soulages, although at that moment he saw nothing special in that kind of art. Still, Francisco now understood that there existed an unfamiliar, parallel dimension, one with deep sense and meaning – and so began his personal discovery of the abstract world with its unseen metaphysical categories. Thinking about the past, Francisco tells us that at the time he began reflecting on the very metaphysical basis of existence that makes life itself possible. To him the metaphor of infinity is hidden in geometrical abstraction: "The inner view touches reality... Abstraction is a real phenomenon linked to Plato's «eidosis»". Plato became the favourite philosopher of Francisco and Nonna, so they read and reread the *Socratic Dialogues*. That is how these young students went beyond the circle of their immediate peers and conventional interests, literally nurturing new meanings that they found within themselves.

In total cultural isolation, a natural condition for most Soviet citizens, and relying only on their own intuition and reflection, Francisco and Nonna rediscovered abstraction – a strange, but fully justified, development. While young people in Italy and Germany were gathering in the "Zero" group or holding exhibitions like "Monochrome Painting" (Zurich, 1960), where, according to Western critics, "Malevich's spirit still lingered", Francisco and Nonna sought their own ways outside both the Russian avant-garde tradition and the international mainstream. Often quoting writer and philosopher, Viktor Shklovsky, who claimed that "art is oddity...", Francisco also considers the artist to be "an odd creature that sees the world from a peculiar viewpoint that others do not understand." But with the lapse of time the artist's own world, once apparently paradoxical, becomes objective, and his language becomes a common heritage. Art turns into a way of expressing the artist's vision and is born out of seeming ugliness, like a newborn baby that has just left his mother's bosom and looks more beast than human. This mother's bosom, the starting point and the first laboratory for the young artists in the early 1960s were student exercise books and notes on art history that happily combined lectures on Classical Greece and the Italian Renaissance, Antique philosophy and the Mediaeval scholastics with the latest, innovative ideas. Strong testimony to this aesthetic and intellectual synthesis was rendered by the full auditoriums during Francisco and Nonna's lectures at the Stroganov Academy in 2010, returning there after an absence of fifty years (the number of attendees was in the region of 400), by their 2011 exhibition of "Artifacts" in the Stroganov Academy, by graduate projects inspired by the exhibition, and by the laudatory texts on Francisco and Nonna taken by the students. Who knows? Maybe it is in a student notebook that a new art laboratory is being born, a laboratory which, once again, may allow us to glimpse the infinite universe.