Auto-Curriculum Vitae

Emilio Isgrò

Barcellona, Sicily, 1939.
Isgrò as a child with his grandfather Emilio, whom he was named after. His grandfather was a member of the San Pier Niceto band, in spite of the fact that he became deaf as a result of the war

1937-1959

If it is true that we are born and we die, then it is true that I was born and I haven't died yet. I was born on **October 6, 1937** in Barcellona Pozzo di Gotto, in the province of Messina; "at four o'clock in the morning," according to my mother and father. A wake-up call that I'm still trying to get over.

That's where I went to elementary school, middle school and "Luigi Valli" secondary school, a classical lyceum, which was located in what had once been a Basilian convent, at the top of a foul-smelling hill covered with bird-seed, on whose slopes the shepherds prepared ricotta to be eaten in the morning for a town that was still on its knees following the war shortages.

Of my ancestors I can remember that my maternal grandmother Rosina's father, my great-grandfather, Francesco De Francesco, had two jobs: in some seasons he bred silkworms—an important industry in the province of Messina in those days—and the rest of the time he was an antique dealer (perhaps more a junkman than an actual dealer, seeing that he left his family in poverty), which forced him to travel from Sicily to other countries situated along the Mediterranean Riviera, in search of objects and bric-a-brac that he could then bring back to Italy. Stories were told in the family about how he went back and forth from Malta, a tiny British island-colony just a few miles from the Sicilian coast, and more than once he had traveled as far as the coast of Tunisia, then under Ottoman rule. So that he once came back to Sicily with a print of Istanbul and I, as a child, saw that print for years in my grandparents' house, practically spoiled by the sun and the flies, until it vanished during one of our moves under the bombs of the Second World War. As for my father's side of the family, instead, suffice it to say that toward the end of the nineteenth century my grandfather Emilio's father (hence, my great-grandfather) was discovered to have gunpowder in the house (obviously illegal), which forced him to leave Sicily for Brazil, where he bought a lot of land which he intended to cultivate. Except that he never got around to doing so as Emperor Pedro II's gendarmes mistook him for a bandit they were searching for, and shot him as he was making his way into a thick bush to answer nature's call.

My parents were neither rich nor well-off. My mother Elisabetta Mazzullo, housewife, could hardly read, pronouncing each syllable out loud, but she was gifted with a generous, strong intelligence. My father Giuseppe, a cabinet-maker and saxophonist, was responsible for his own cultural education, and he wrote music of all kinds. Furthermore, as the manager of a small dance-hall band, he would play in the most fashionable venues on the Sicilian coast. I would often accompany him on his trips from one end to another of the island, announcing over a microphone in my childish voice the titles of the songs as they were played: *La Cumparsita, Papaveri e papere, El negro zumbon*, etc.

My father did not just play popular music. He had been familiar with opera ever since he was a boy, when he played the "piccolo in A flat" in the San Pier Niceto

band together with Nonno Emilio, who went deaf during the war and insisted on playing the bass drum off-beat, driving the band conductor, a native of Naples, crazy. "Ciuccio! Asino! Sceccu!" (Ass!) the Neapolitan would shout, and the son would be ashamed for his deaf father, who would smile at the insults as if they were compliments. Perhaps to make amends for this frustrating experience, my father enrolled at the Conservatory of Messina when he was eighty years old to complete his study of counterpoint and harmony. "You've all settled down now and I have to think of my future," he would say to us.

One thing is for sure: both of my parents saw the importance of education and made great sacrifices so that I and my siblings, Aldo, Bruno and Maria Rosa, all of whom were born after me in a Sicily where the smoke rose up from the debris, could study.

It was precisely during those years that, under my father's guidance, I began to take solfeggio lessons and write poetry. My first composition begins with these verses: "I dreamed of Venice the Lagoon / kissed by a nascent white moon," and ended with these: "I dreamed of a beautiful medieval castle / and inside a Bacchanalia was being held."

In that postwar atmosphere I loved to read the opera librettos in my father's book collection, in between *The Dusk of the Idols* by Friedrich Nietzsche, and *Fisiologia del piacere* by Paolo Mantegazza. One of the texts that impressed me the most was *Norma* written by Felice Romani for the music by Vincenzo Bellini. But I was also fond of Francesco Maria Piave.

Uncle Ciccio, my mother's brother and great opera enthusiast, took me to see one of Verdi's works (*La Traviata*) at the Teatro Massimo in Palermo. There was no highway at the time, and we had to drive there in a vehicle that needed to be cranked up to get it running. The trip took six, seven hours each way, while today it only takes two.

Rosanna Pirandello, a friend of the family and a poet who wrote in dialect, a member of the Messina branch of the famous writer from Agrigento, gave me my first books to read: *Gitanjali* by Rabindranath Tagore, *Madame Bovary* by Gustave Flaubert, and, of course, *Novelle per un anno* by Luigi Pirandello. Then somehow I laid my hands on *La giovinezza* by Francesco De Sanctis, a difficult book for a boy, for which I still recall the figure of Marquis Basilio Puoti: a "purist" straight out of comic opera, clearly described in the writer's strong style.

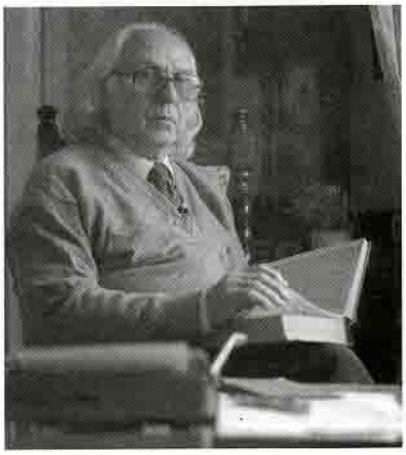
When I finished elementary school, as a reward for my grades, I asked my mother for copies of *The Betrothed* and *The Adventures of Pinocchio*. In middle school, thanks to the suggestions of Alessandro Manganaro, a professor of Modern Greek literature, I was already reading Kavafis, Ungaretti, Montale. However, this did not keep me from devouring the comic books and novels by Salgari that my friend and peer Anton Vito Maria Todaro lent me at the same time. My friend was the organizer of a wonderful lending library in which Gim Toro and Sandokan pulled more weight than the Innominato (the Nameless) and Don Rodrigo.

I bought the works of Berthold Brecht and Federico García Lorca, which I paid for in installments, from a motorized Einaudi stand: an amazing van filled with books touring across Italy, a land that was starving for bread and culture. Years later, in the country home of a friend, I told Giulio Einaudi the story of my first purchase, and he was so pleased that right then and there he offered me a job in his publishing house. But we were sitting at the table, in a pleasantly convivial atmosphere, and our words went not further.

About midway through the 1950s Vincenzo Consolo, who was destined to become a famous writer, was a student at "Luigi Valli" secondary school. He came from Sant'Agata di Militello and was enrolled in his last year when I was a first-year student. He would arrive in Barcellona riding in the family's citrus business truck—that boy authorita-

Barcellona, Sicily, 1946. Emilio Isgrò enjoys watching his father Giuseppe play the contralto saxophone

tively sitting in the cabin next to the driver—and proudly head toward the house opposite the church of Saint Cosma e Damiano where an elderly widow had given him a room to stay.
In the meantime I had begun to do volunteer work for the theater, collaborating with the representation of Plautus' *Trinummus*, mounted at the Teatro Mandanici in Barcellona by a company of students directed by Michele Stilo: among the actors, playing the part of a dissolute young man was the future lawyer Salvatore Trifirò, now internationally considered to be one of the leading experts in labor law.
The first things I wrote were very much appreciated by Nino Pino Balotta, an anarchic poet and the winner of the Premio Viareggio, as well as a professor of veterinary science at the University of Messina. Another luminous figure who I will never forget is Professor Aldo Ginebri. He was very young at the time, and perhaps he hadn't even graduated yet. He would lend me poetry books as well as art and literature journals.
I came into contact with Salvatore Quasimodo and with Bartolo Cattafi, a poet from my home town; both of them lavished words of encouragement and fondness on me. I remember seeing Cattafi for the first time in front of the old Caffè Duilio (famous for its coffee *spongato*) on a windy day in March. He was wearing a duffle coat and pair of hiking boots, perhaps not especially suited to the Sicilian spring that was on its way. It was at that moment that my calling as a poet and artist reached a point of no return.
I went to one of the town's clubs to hear a talk given by the Sicilian-Parisian writer Beniamino Joppolo, a signatory of Lucio Fontana's *Spatialist Manifesto*. I listened to him in awe as he spoke of the "three-eyed woman" by Pablo Picasso, and Ionesco's *Bald Soprano*, who "always wears her hair in the same style." My vocation was further strengthened.
My friend Salvatorino Stancanelli, heir and nephew to the Futurist baron Guglielmo Jannelli, showed me several paintings by Balla and Depero in his uncle's villa. I was particularly impressed by one of them: a mountain lake with swans struck by a magnificent Divisionist light. I asked who had painted it and Salvatorino said it was a work by Balla. "You see," he explained to me, "he was finding it hard to sell his Futurist works, and he thought that maybe if he changed his style and theme he might be more successful. My uncle ended up having to buy it, otherwise it would have remained in his studio along with all the others."
In **1954** and **1955**, for two years in a row, I was awarded (thanks to the enthusiasm of Giovannino Panella, the president of the jury and a lawyer) the unpublished poetry prize named after Luigino Gemelli, founded in memory of a young humanist who had died too soon in life. During that same period my Uncle Iris, a painter and my father's brother, taught me the rudiments of oil painting. I would paint a total of two tiny paintings, one of which (a guitar player sitting on the sidewalk with his instrument beside him) is currently preserved in the home of my childhood friend Cosimo Verde. I've tried to get it back from him, willing to give him something that's worth much more, but nothing doing.
In **1954** I left my island for the first time for a pilgrimage to Rome along with other people my age. Among them were two of my very best friends: Carmelino Motta, who was very excited when Pius XII looked out on Piazza San Pietro, and my equally excited friend Ciccio De Francesco, who still remembers the first time we met in a palm tree garden which was watched over by four huge turkeys. I was standing behind a gate when he asked me: "What do you do?" To which I replied: "I'm a poet." I was eight and Ciccio was seven.
In **1956**, again under the guidance of my fellow citizen Michele Stilo, I was involved in the reopening of the ancient Greek theater of Tindari after two thousand years of inactivity and silence. Sophocles' *Ajax* was performed (interpreted among others



Barcellona, Sicily, 1989.
An intense portrait of Uncle Iris, painter, who taught the young Emilio how to paint with oil

by Alberto Lupo and Gianrico Tedeschi) and I was the assistant director, assistant scenographer and odd-job man. However, due to an oversight on the part of the organizers (as well as to my masochism, as I had discovered the mistake in time to be able to correct it, but out of a sense of self-esteem said nothing), my name was left out of the advertising posters.

That same year I completed my diploma (*maturità classica*) and moved to Milan, where I had already sent some of my manuscripts to Raffaele Crovi, assistant to Elio Vittorini at the Milan branch of Einaudi publishing house. Crovi would pave the way for my entrance into the literary world by getting Vittorini to invite me to the legendary Sunday luncheons that the author of *Conversazione in Sicilia* and his wife Ginette offered in their house on Viale Gorizia close to the Navigli. Eugenio Montale was a regular at these events, and couldn't seem to get enough of the *pescestocco alla messinese* that Elio and Ginette would lovingly prepare for him.

For no particular reason I enrolled at the Faculty of Political Science at Università Cattolica, but I preferred to attend the History of the Theater lessons taught by Mario Apollonio. At the university I met the young poet Basilio Reale, a native of Capo d'Orlando in the Messina area, and he became my biggest, most inconvenient and generous friend, who introduced me to the editorial staff of the magazine *La Parrucca*: Giuliano Gramigna, Goffredo Parise, Nico Naldini, Giorgio Simonotti-Manacorda, Alberto Arbasino. The director of the magazine was Sandro Mossotti, as bald as an eagle, who, years later, would become the Shah of Persia and his wife Farah Diba's trusted photographer. I think he died after being run over by a truck.

My first book of poetry, *Fiere del Sud*, was published by Schwarz, and it was well received by Italy's literary world. Vittorio Sereni, one of the foremost figures in poetry during those years asked our common friend Bartolo Cattafi to arrange a meeting between us. Pier Paolo Pasolini wrote a favorable review of my work for *Il Punto*. Luciano Anceschi published three poems in the *Verri*. During that period I met Nanni Balestrini, the youngest member on the publishing staff of Anceschi's journal. Balestrini was thin, blond and mild-mannered, still distant from the somewhat military engagement that would make him one of the leading avant-garde figures.

In the home of Lina Angioletti and Fausta Squatriti, the haunt of artists and literary figures, I met Guido Ballo, Enrico Baj and the young Arnaldo Pomodoro, as thin as a rail, and already with a very visible receding hairline.

In the meantime I began seeing my old school friend Vincenzo Consolo, and was regularly spending time with Luciano Erba, Franco Fortini, Giovanni Giudici and especially Elio Pagliarini, who with a friendly and protective spirit invited me to collaborate on the cultural pages of the newspaper "Avanti!" I still haven't been able to fathom why Pagliarini would then go out of his way to express just how much he disliked me.

At the home of the art collector Violetta Besesti, on Via San Vincenzo just a few blocks away from the Università Cattolica, Piero Manzoni introduced me to Brigitte Kopp, a young German student from the Kunstakademie in Stuttgart. We got married a few years later. In that same environment I met Dadamaino, Nanda Vigo, Paolo Scheggi, Umberto Eco, and Lucio Fontana elegantly dressed in a lamé jacket.

I was a visitor of the home of Silvana and Ottiero Ottieri, who was convinced that I was a Don Juan, and he used me as a character in one of his novels, *Contessa*. In the novel he presented me admiringly as an irresistible seducer of women, without knowing, poor friend, that I was much more less at ease with women than he was.

The Socialist newspaper "Avanti!" sent me to cover the Premio Chianciano poetry prize as a special correspondent. Messina-born Giuseppe Longo, former director of the "Resto del Carlino," was a member of the jury, and he congratulated me on my report. A month later, having been appointed to direct the "Gazzettino," Longo summoned me

Barcellona, Sicily, 1948.
Emilio Isgrò as an adolescent (left) with his childhood friend Cosimo Verde, who will always jealously keep one of the two oil paintings made by the artist when he was seventeen

Milan 1957. Emilio Isgrò (right) with Basilio Reale of Capo d'Orlando. The artist met him at the Università Cattolica along with another friend, Raffaele Crovi, who introduced the young poet to the literary world

to Venice as head of the newspaper's cultural pages and supplements, after a short apprenticeship with the editorial department in Padua as a crime news reporter.
In Venice Brigitte and I went to live in a run-down building which had been designed by Mauro Coducci, the architect who had also designed the Procuratie Vecchie. Although the building was delapidated, it was located in a wonderful part of the city, between San Zaccaria and Santa Maria Formosa, and we were allowed to occupy the whole first floor for just thirty lire a month. This at least made us feel rich, even though we had to deal with the chilly temperatures inside, as the coffered ceilings were very high and the heat produced by inadequate heaters was dispersed.
My father emigrated to live in Switzerland to earn enough to be able to make the payments for the car he had bought for his cabinet-making business. He would only return to Italy many years later: first to the area between Milan and Padua, where my sister Maria Rosa lives, and then permanently to Sicily.

Fiere del Sud, Emilio Isgrò's first poetry collection, published by Arturo Schwarz in 1956

1960-1967

At the Fondazione Cini, I met Aldo Palazzeschi for the first time, and saw Eugenio Montale again, who would often come get me from the editorial room so that I could accompany him on his Venetian walks. I became a very close friend of Giovanni Comisso, Diego Valeri, Andrea Zanzotto. But I especially spent time with Ezra Pound and his circle of European and American admirers, including the Irish sculptress Joan Fitzgerald, who could be seen wandering around Venice in the company of a stout Dominican monk who had escaped from a monastery in Chicago. The University of Padua awarded Pound an honorary degree and the newspaper told me to get into the car the poet was traveling in to get him to say something during the trip. As usual, old Ezra replied with a terrible, never-ending silence, and no one knows whether this was because he was modest or for some other reason. Finally, exasperated by my insistence, he uttered an epic remark: "I've done everything wrong." That, of course, was enough to write up the interview.
I traveled through Communist Poland for two months, writing a series of articles for the "Gazzettino" about the new regime established by Gomulka after the Stalinist repression of the previous years. The climate appeared to be less oppressive than before, and I was able to take part in an Italian-Polish treasure hunt in the heart of Warsaw in the company of some odd people who, I would learn later, were actually the sharp-eyed secret service agents that the Polish Communist Party had hired to tail us.
I interviewed some of the most famous and influential figures in art and culture, such as Salvador Dalí, Vittorio De Sica, the Russian filmmaker Andrei Tarkovsky, the British musician Benjamin Britten, the German philosopher Ernst Bloch, and, lastly, Giorgio de Chirico, who marched through the rooms of the "Danieli" with a German priest at his side, introducing him to everyone as his pupil. An interview with Oswald Mosley, founder of the British Union of Fascists, led to a challenge to a duel with the Venetian patrician Alvise Loredan, a descendant of the Doges, who had organized my meeting with Mosley and was terribly offended by the tone of the article I published in the "Gazzettino." I had Adalberto Minazzi, secretary of publishing, reply for me that "ever since 1789 members of the bourgeoisie like myself have refused to take part in duels with aristocrats."
I mingled with painters like Emilio Vedova, Virgilio Guidi, Armando Pizzinato. Vedova and Pizzinato were at opposite ends in terms of their artistic and cultural choices, but each of them tried to be more of a Communist than the other. Guidi, the skeptic, was in the middle smiling, his Tuscan cigar hanging from his lips.
At the home of Luigi Nono I met the dissident Russian poet Yevgeny Yevtushenko, to whom the composer gave an autographed page of the opera *Intolleranza*, which had

been performed a few years before at the Teatro La Fenice. Yevtushenko appreciated the gift, but couldn't help asking his host (who was quite disturbed by this) for a bottle of whisky, which he would soon afterwards guzzle down in Piazza San Marco with two young American girls holding him up on either side. The fact that the *Intolleranza* score had been left on the piano did a great deal to bolster Nono's sympathies for Mao's China, seeing that the Soviet Union was becoming increasingly bourgeois. Assigned by the newspaper to Formentor for the first "Prix international des éditeurs," I had the chance to get to know, in what was still Francoist Spain, the writers Gabriel Celaya, Italo Calvino, Alberto Moravia, Hans Magnus Enzensbeger, who danced wildly with his very white-skinned, fair-haired wife. We journalists decided to create an Award for Antipathy, to be given to the most conceited of all of them, and of course Calvino won hands down.

Those were the years when I met Guido Costantini, a Triestine poet who was a relative of Slataper, and who lived in Mogliano Veneto. Besides Joyce and Proust, he taught me to read Freud and Marx, Einstein and Heisenberg, unquestionably contributing to my intellectual growth. Guido had spent the early years of his life in the Trieste of Gillo Dorfles, and he angrily confessed to me that Gillo ("obnoxious when he wore his brown velvet jacket with a white collar open at the neck") ended up ruining his childhood, as at the age of ten he was already kissing the hands of the ladies, and all the mothers would point him out to their own children as a model child. A real pain in the neck. Guido and I were separately friends with Andrea and Marisa Zanzotto. Except that the relationship had grown more intense, and for years, every Sunday, we would go visit them in Pieve di Soligo, together with our wives, Ali and Brigitte, who also became very close.

In addition to the cultural pages, the "Gazzettino" sent me to cover performances and other events. This meant earning an extra fifty thousand lire a month, which was a great relief for Brigitte and me as we still had problems heating up the house.

Having been sent to the Cannes Film Festival as a film critic I wrote an enthusiastic review of Luis Buñuel's *Viridiana*, which instead came under heavy attack by the "Osservatore Romano" and the Catholic press. The Venetian Curia, backed by the patriarch Giovanni Urbani, who had succeeded Angelo Roncalli, expressed its disappointment, but nothing more.

In **1963** the newspaper sent me to the United States for a month with a select group of European journalists, who had been hired by the U.S. government to follow JFK during his last journey across the country a few months before his assassination. At the end of the journey I was received by the President at the White House. He understood I was Italian because of the tie I was wearing, which I had purchased on Via Montenapoleone, and congratulated me for my style which was not yet the fashion.

The Einaudian journal "Il Menabò," directed by Elio Vittorini and Italo Calvino, published a set of poems I had written under the title *L'anteguerra*. Pasolini, who read them with interest, told our common friend Elsa de' Giorgi, that he didn't share my artistic and literary choices, but that all the same "Isgrò can afford them."

In **1964** I made *Volkswagen* and my first *Cancellature* (Erasures), stating in theoretical essays and other writings that "the word is dead." Montale and my old literary friends stopped saying hello to me.

Spontaneous visual poetry groups were formed across much of Italy, and my companions in Genoa, who were in the front line with the Galleria La Carabaga, called me to their city along with Achille Bonito Oliva and Franco Vaccari to consider the idea of founding a self-published magazine together. Besides ourselves, the editorial committe would also eventually include Luigi Tola and Guido Ziveri. And so as not to upset anyone we gave it a clearly meaningless name, "Istoboziva," an acronym formed by the initials for our names. But as we had very few resources, the under-

Washington, 1963. Emilio Isgrò at the age of twenty-five (to the left of President John Fitzgerald Kennedy) was received at the White House with a delegation of European journalists. The artist worked as a journalist until the 1960s, and was the special envoy and editor of the cultural pages of "Il Gazzettino."

Mogliano Veneto, 1964. The poet Guido Costantini, Emilio Isgrò's dearest friend, thanks to whom the artist was able to enhance his intellectual development

taking ended before it could even get off the ground. Our Genoese friends, however, were the perfect hosts, putting Bonito Oliva and I up at an inn on a narrow lane, where we slept in the same bed under a sheet of fly-killing paper that hung over our heads like Damocles' sword.

I first came up with the idea for my erasures in 1962. I was editing a difficult literary article by Giovanni Comisso when I realized that all the corrections that I and the author himself had made to the text (generally typos made by the secretary and syntactic contortions typical of Comisso's style) had created endless erasures which were stronger than the words themselves. That's when I first got the idea. But I've never been the kind of person who hits the ground running, so I waited another two years before officially leaping into the great adventure of erasing things.

When Pop Art arrived at the Biennale I had the privilege to observe—as the reporter for the cultural pages of the "Gazzettino"—the dramatic collapse of European art being hammered by the U.S. market. More than the one that had been set up at the Biennale's Giardini, the most sensational exhibition was at the U.S. consulate, whose opening saw the presence of U.S. Ambassador Frederick Reinhardt. You could see just how happy he was in the midst of the huge paintings by Robert Rauschenberg or Jasper Johns (I don't remember any of the other names), which had been unloaded in the night at Tessera from USIS planes, the government association for the dissemination of American culture in the world.

The inventor of Erasure in 1966, as he speaks with his friend the poet Andrea Zanzotto in the editorial offices of "Il Gazzettino" in Venice

The artist with the writer Ottiero Ottieri at a reception in the Bompiani home in 1974

One of those mornings, while on board a vaporetto, I came across the gallerist Leo Castelli, who was also headed for the Biennale. I tried to overcome my bashfulness and, already obsessed with the idea of erasures, as obsessive as Copernicus must have been, I described them in detail to him, as if they were already known to the world. He didn't understand, looked at me puzzled, and smiled politely. And I drew back just as politely. I would be luckier with the marvelous Michael Sonnabend, the husband of Castelli's ex-wife Ileana. Sometimes Michael and Ileana would invite me to their house in Calle San Maurizio, and he, who had already bought one of my erased books at the *Dritte Internazionale Fruhjahrsmesse in Berlin* from Schwarz, was trying to stir up his wife's enthusiasm as well. With little success, however. Nonetheless, after I had moved back to Milan permanently, whenever Michael was passing through, he would always find time to catch a cab and come visit me on Viale Monza, where I was living and had a studio. He would come in, put a wad of money on the table, and get back into the cab carrying one of my works under his arm.

Jacqueline was born, a conceptually "European" answer to Pop's invasion of the media, whose gestation clearly had a great deal to do with my meeting with President Kennedy at the White House. I was very young then, and had decided to fight the atomic bomb tooth and nail. On the other hand, my refusal to stare reality in the face allowed me to represent reality itself from every angle, that is, even from shores that others found to be less attractive.

Thanks to the help of Adriano Spatola, in **1965** the Bolognese publisher Enrico Riccardo Sampietro published my collection of poetry *Uomini & Donne*, whose last section is devoted to experiments in visual poetry. According to some of the critics my experiments foreshadowed the Conceptual. That same year I published four compositions in the visual poetry anthology edited by Lamberto Pignotti, whom I was spending time with in those days, along with Eugenio Miccini.

My *Volkswagen* was projected on a wide screen at a Palermo meeting of Gruppo 63. Cardinal Ernesto Ruffini, archbishop of Palermo, from the height of the cathedral pulpit, accused the work of being blasphemous. My mother, who was frightened by his reaction, despite the fact that she was in no way a bigot, went to see the archpriest of Santa Maria for an explanation, and he told her he felt sorry for her. This aroused a vein of anti-clericalism in my mother that I had never even suspected she could have.

The following year, invited by Giangiacomo Feltrinelli and Alba Morino, his closest collaborator, I organized and signed, along with Sampietro, a wonderful group show of visual poets at the Libreria Feltrinelli in Milan. One of the participants was the beautiful Ketty La Rocca, always my guest whenever she came to Milan. Ketty had breast cancer (there was no cure for it in those days) but she was still able to joke about her personal tragedy in an almost macabre way, encouraging her bewildered admirers to look at her naked even when she was dead because her bra, she said, contained two cups more solid than Saint Agatha's. "And when I say Saint Agatha," she added grinning, "I'm talking about Catania, your native land."

My meeting with Feltrinelli was disappointing. He invited me to go visit him at the publishing house because he loved my visual poems and wanted to promote them, but when I walked into his office he was standing there with a disgusted look on his face. I was on tenterhooks: "Three days ago you said you thought my work was beautiful and you intended to publish it..." He arrogantly replied: "Yes, that's true, but I don't know whether I'm still going to like your poems as much as I did three days ago three days from now." As usual I lost it and rebutted, with the pride of a beaten dog: "My works are made so that they will still be loved in three centuries' time." He looked at me as if I had come from some other planet and that was the end of that.

I became friends with the musicians Sylvano Bussotti and Giuseppe Chiari, and as a tribute to Guido Le Noci, owner of the legendary Galleria Apollinaire, I wrote an *Inno dell'Apollinaire* to be set to music by Bussotti. The project was driven aground, however, owing to my partners' lack of support.

The friendship with Pignotti and Miccini soon ended. I took my distance from those two Florentine friends with the theoretical text *Dichiarazione I*, where I moved away from concrete poetry and technological poetry to instead suggest the idea of poetry as "the general art of the sign" (Abbazia, Congresso nazionale di poesia, 1966).

During the same period, in Venice, I played a narrative voice in the musical opera *Words Words Words* written by Ernesto Rubin de Cervin. John Cage was also there as a guest of honor. I'll never forget him: featherless and kind of spinsterish looking, he was wearing a pair of desert boots with no socks, in spite of the mid-August heat. For a few days the Korean artist Nam June Paik and his American partner Charlotte Moorman stayed with me at my Venetian house. They had come to the waters of the lagoon with a performance "for gondola and cello." Nam didn't want to sleep in the bed I offered him: like a good Buddhist he preferred to sleep on the floor. He wasn't much of a Buddhist though, when he asked me for a bottle of gin, which the morning after, at the crack of dawn, he went to drink at the Lido on the still deserted shores of the Excelsior.

My activity as a linear poet had not entirely been interrupted: in **1966** Mondadori published *L'età della ginnastica*, a collection of a consistent group of unpublished poems as well as my previous collections of poetry.

In **1967** I had another solo show (*Le poesie visive di Isgrò*) at the Galleria Apollinaire in Milan. Fontana, who was a guest of the opening along with Fausto Melotti, bought a silkscreen version of *Volkswagen*. The German car manufacturer got angry and warned me not to use the brand, formally ordering me to withdraw the work from circulation. My answer to the company was: "I shall withdraw my work when you withdraw your cars."

My marriage to Brigitte ended and with it my seven-year period in Venice.

1968-1979

Hired by Enzo Biagi and Vittorio Buttafava as editor of the weekly magazine "Oggi," I settled in Milan permanently. The city was one of the leading international art centers at the time.

May 1968: in the legendary Galleria Apollinaire run by Guido Le Noci, in Milano, Emilio Isgrò presents the installation *Il Cristo cancellatore* (Christ Eraser) with a text by Pierre Restany

At the Teatro Verdi in Trieste (1968) the artist reads the verses he wrote for *Liebeslied*, composed by Carlo de Incontrera

In May **1968** I was again at the Galleria Apollinaire with an installation of books entitled *Il Cristo cancellatore*, accompanied by a text written by Pierre Restany and by my theoretical reflection called *Per una teoria del romanzo elementare*. The Swedish critic Pontus Hulten, who would always go see his friend Le Noci whenever he was in Milan, praised the gallerist for having put his trust in an unknown young man who only knew how to erase things. Le Noci, who was already an old and tired man, in telling me this story shed tears of joy; this was a man who had never had second thoughts about exhibiting artists like Yves Klein or Daniel Spoerri when no one else wanted to have anything to do with them.

Charlotte Moorman and Nam June Paik sent two erased telexes inviting me to the Sixth Annual New York Avant Garde Festival. Athough the show was generally reserved for artists close to the Fluxus movement, I would be invited to other future editions.

I prepared the texts for Carlo de Incontrera's musical work *Liebeslied* (Trieste, Teatro Verdi), taking part in the performance as an actor and the reader of my poetry as well. For the occasion I had bought myself a double-breasted green pin-striped jacket and, according to my friend Franco Vaccari, who was invited to the opening night, the audience was astonished more by my jacket than by the performance itself.

Although Enzo Biagi (but not Buttafava, the director of the weekly magazine) tried to keep me there, in **1969** I quit my job at "Oggi," once and for all abandoning professional journalism. My artist's voice, however, would continue to be heard from the pages of newspapers such as "Corriere della Sera," "L'Ora,", "Il Giorno," and "Il Sole 24 Ore."

With the severance pay I got from "Oggi," the maximum amount as long as I promised I would continue on my way, I could get by for a few years working only as an artist.

Renato Cardazzo organized an important solo exhibition at the Galleria il Naviglio, where I met Dino Buzzati, who gave me a copy of his *Poema a fumetti* with the dedication: "To Emilio Isgrò so that he can erase me," and did a review of my work for the "Corriere della Sera" with a touch of dissimulated sympathy that annoyed some.

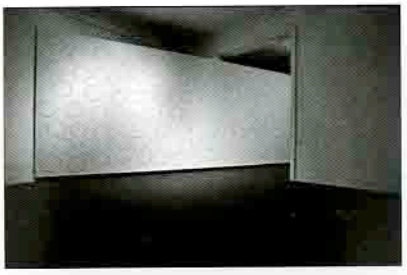
I was invited to *Liberarse. Exposition Internacional de la Nueva Poesia*, a show promoted and organized by the Facultad de Humanidades y Ciencias of Montevideo, receiving from Uruguay a series of letters and telegrams of admiration and praise. I never would have imagined that there were so many people willing to wear down their fingertips for a *Divine Comedy* erased from the first to the last line.

In **1970** I piled it on by presenting at the Galleria Schwarz the *Enciclopedia Treccani cancellata*. Unlike in South America, however, the public and the critics were divided in a storm of controversy that was not destined to end soon. One episode represents all the rest: at the opening, an angry Schwarz—my intrepid friend and defender—was forced to send away one of his most important, and indignant, collectors. "With considerable economic damage" (at least this is what he said to me as if he somehow wanted to be refunded).

At the end of the year, at a crowded press conference held at the Hotel Sonesta in Milan, with the actress Paola Pitagora by my side, I announced the filming in the near future of *La jena più ne ha e più ne vuole*, an "erased film." The film is completely black with a few frames in between. I also provided some details, emphatically telling the reporters that Giuseppe Rotunno, the trusted photographer of numerous filmmakers, from Visconti to Fellini, was working on the first "erasing camera" in the history of cinema. The morning that the filming was to begin, however, a terrorist attack shook Milan: a bomb went off at the Banca Nazionale dell'Agricoltura, leaving dozens of people dead and wounded. The city sank into a period of darkness, and the filming was postponed indefinitely. The film would, of course, never be made, it too in a sense erased by the terrible explosion. The news of the bold film project ended up in newspapers around the world, including the popular British tabloid "Daily Mirror," which

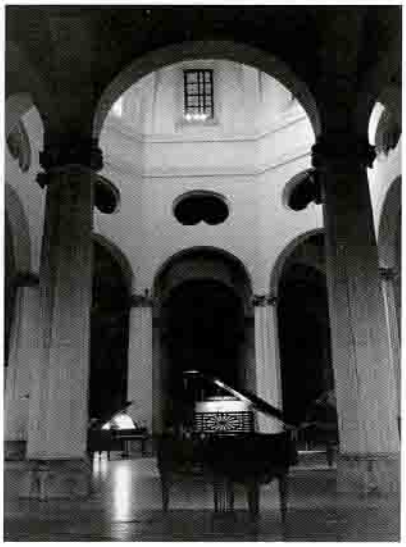
Emilio Isgrò with the actress Paola Pitagora goes to the press conference for the erased movie *La jena più ne ha e più ne vuole* (The More a Hyena Has the More It Wants), held in 1969 at the Hotel Sonesta in Milan

published a front page article about it along with two pictures. One of them was of a bare-chested Isgrò (with a Fu-Manchu moustache) covering the camera lens with one huge hand. "The erasing hand," I explained, as if I were Pythagoras. My friend Gianpaolo Polvani, on vacation with his family in South Africa, saw the tabloid in a Johannesburg hotel and phoned me. He could hardly believe his eyes.
This was followed by the *Concrete Poetry?* show at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam. The event had originally been called simply *Concrete Poetry*, without the question mark. But then I wrote an angry letter to the museum curator, Liesbeth Crommelin, refusing to take part in the event saying that I considered myself a "visual poet," not a "concrete poet." The question mark was promptly added, and I, quite satisfied, could thus present my *Cristo cancellatore* in Amsterdam, while the concrete poets of half the world were fucking mad with that little Italian guy who had spoiled their game. Fortunately, a few years later, between Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo I would have the great joy of being able to fraternize with the champions of Brazilian concretism, Augusto De Campos and Decio Pignatari. Although they (especially Pignatari) frowned at me, because the annoyance we Italians felt about Americans, they felt about Italians and Europeans in general. In other words, I was the American oppressor, and they made me feel this every way they possibly could, offering me the most delicious *feijoada* in the world, but looking down on me as they did.
In **1971** the installation-performance *Dichiaro di non essere Emilio Isgrò* was played at the Milanese Centro Tool, while for the Studio Sant'Andrea I curated the group exhibition of visual poets entitled *Proletarismo e dittatura della poesia*, penning the introductory essay that gave the exhibition its title.
I was back in the field with a *Cancellazione pubblica* at the Bitef in Belgrade, on the same days that Jannis Kounellis, in the city Auditorium, was fooling around with a piano in the company of Achille Bonito Oliva, who pondered and theorized. I took the trip to Belgrade together with Franco Vaccari, who drove his Volkswagen. The trip almost caused my friend to have a nervous breakdown because, as Vaccari recalls, I started fastening my seatbelt in Trieste but by the time we got to Belgrade I still hadn't managed to.
Spettacolo su una lavagna was held at the Galleria Flori in Florence. There was actually nothing spectacular about it, as the action simply consisted in a hand (mine) using white chalk to write some very common words on the black surface. "Love," "Wind," "Run," "Cry," "Laugh." Except that I, tired of Hollywood's overflowing spectacularization, attributed to that minimal theater, uniquely made up of candid, evanescent signs, the strength and racket of a tropical storm. In the end Eugenio Miccini said to me admiringly: "Stronger than Cecil B. DeMille's *Ten Commandments*." But the tone he used to say it was ambiguous, a bit mocking and typically Tuscan. So I, in order not to have to listen to him any more, erased my marvelous performance with my jacket sleeve.
I wrote articles and reviews for the weekly magazine "Tempo Illustrato," for which, as requested by the director Nicola Cattedra, I ended up curating the cultural pages as an outside collaborator. Cattedra was a very good director and a true gentleman. He understood that the severance pay I had in the bank was running out, and he wanted to help me out elegantly, without at all making me feel bothered by it.
At the 36th Venice Biennale, in **1972**, *Enciclopedia Treccani* was chosen for the section called *Il libro come luogo di ricerca*.
That same year the installation *L'avventurosa vita di Emilio Isgrò nelle testimonianze di uomini di Stato, scrittori, artisti, parlamentari, attori, parenti, familiari, amici, anonimi cittadini* was held at the Studio Sant'Andrea in Milan. Each element of the work (60 pieces in all) was illuminated by one of the flashlights that Hitler's or Stalin's secret police would shine into the eyes of those under investigation to force them to confess.



Detail of the installation called *Giap* at the Galleria Blu in Milan (1975). They were the years of the Vietnam War

Room dedicated to Emilio Isgrò for the *Sempre cose nuove pensando* (Always Thinking about New Things) show. Antwerp, ICC, Internationaal Cultureel Centrum, 1975



Milan, 1979. The installation *Chopin*, musical score for 15 pianos, at the Rotonda di Via Besana

Except that the batteries for my show would always run out as the public came in. Not all of them at the same time, of course. So, alongside very bright lights, there were others that were either dim or pulsed until they went out completely, creating a dramatic effect that I myself hadn't predicted. I maintained the same effect for the following installations of the work. Among the enthusiastic guests that night I especially remember Christian Boltanski, who had arrived from Paris for the opening night invited by the gallerist Gianfranco Bellora. Boltanski was a smiling guy, thin, certainly different from the massive image communication by today's media.

Then came two important solo shows: one in Germany (*Die Durchstreichungen von Isgrò*, Stuttgart, Galerie Senatore), the other one in Italy (*La 'q' di Hegel*, Milan, Galleria Blu). Peppino Palazzoli, founder and owner of the legendary Blu gallery, would come to the openings dressed in blue and wearing an eighteenth-century wig to match. His real passion was going hunting with Alberto Burri. Among the many stories that were told in the art world was the one about how the painter from Città di Castello had given Peppino one of his most beautiful *Sacks* in exchange for a wild boar that had just been killed by his friend. Now and again I would ask Palazzoli if the story was true, but he would always answer evasively.

At the beginning of **1973** the exhibition *Italian Visual Poetry 1912-1972* takes place at the Finch Museum in New York (the show was also held that same year at the Galleria d'Arte Moderna in Turin under the title of *Scrittura visuale in Italia 1912-1972*). The year continued with a retrospective show at the Italienska Kulturinstitutet "C.M. Lerici" in Stockholm. And it ended with my participation at the Contemporanea exhibition held in the parking lot of Villa Borghese in Rome.

I signed an exclusive three-year contract for Peppino Palazzoli and Arturo Schwarz. People have always said that Schwarz was a hard-nosed merchant. The truth is that he knew what the artists' weaknesses were, he knew exactly what to say to me to make me lower my price, telling me that I was already a great artist, one of the greatest artists of all at the age of twenty: perhaps even greater than Picasso, certainly more so than Duchamp. And I would give in, because he had in some way already repaid me for my work. The gallerist Christian Stein was very different. I had met her in Varazze at the home of Emanuela and Pietro Baglietto, boat builders and collectors. I remember, as if it were yesterday, that when she got me to go to Turin to talk about doing an exhibition in her gallery, she sat me down on a child's chair—the Jewish barber in Chaplin's *The Great Dictator* crossed my mind—while she sat as if she were royalty on a sort of throne covered with gold leaf. I decided not to do the exhibition, and it may have been a missed opportunity for both of us.

In **1974** I collected the apocryphal testimonies for the installation *L'avventurosa vita di Emilio Isgrò* in a volume for Il Formichiere, turning it into an artist's book. But Maria Bellonci, founder and patroness of the Premio Strega, mistook it for a traditional novel and officially entered it in the contest with two exceptional sponsors: Andrea Zanzotto and Silvana Ottieri. She soon became aware of the misunderstanding, however, and invited the publisher to withdraw the work. In the end, the book received seven votes, including that of Inge Feltrinelli, who personally handed me the voting card.

Arturo Carlo Quintavalle invited me to the exhibition *Della Falsità* at the CSAC in Parma, together with Luciano Fabro, Antonio Trotta, Hidetoshi Nagasawa. What I didn't like about Fabro was that he would always shove his big smile in your face without answering your questions. This made him seem even more Japanese than Nagasawa. Whereas Trotta, always kind and gentle, was clearly thrilled to have emigrated from his native, serene and relaxing Argentina to a "revolutionary" country like Italy.

In **1975** I was again at the Galleria Blu with the installation *Giap* dedicated to the strategist of the Vietnam War: 116 banal black circles on a large wooden wall with the

words, both in Italian and English: "From which of the 116 circles will general Giap move for the final offensive against American imperialism?" The work was too big for my studio, so it was sold to a businessman in pharmaceuticals who, in order to place it in his country house in Monferrato, lopped it off at the top and bottom without my knowing, so that he could insert it in the wall permanently with all its subversive strength.
I presented my installation of erased books entitled *Secundum Iohannem* at the ICC in Antwerp, a city of shoe salesmen in love with art. At the opening, in fact, they wouldn't stop asking me to explain my work. One of them, in exchange for a tiny sheet, gave me a beautiful pair of snow boots that were so tight I've never been able to put them on.
My first retrospective at the CSAC in Parma took place in **1976**, while at the same time I was designing, for the publisher Einaudi, the cover for the novel *Il sorriso dell'ignoto marinaio* written by my friend Vincenzo Consolo.
The following year Feltrinelli published my novel *Marta de Rogatiis Johnson*, and I was invited to *Arte in Italia 1966-1977* at the Galleria d'Arte Moderna in Turin.
Paolo Volponi, with whom I had been friends for some time, reviewed *Marta de Rogatiis Johnson* for "Avanti!" One time Volponi invited me to Urbino, where he put me up in his family's home. It was an amazing adventure. First, the car trip, with Paolo humming *Il Trovatore* in a baritone voice. Then the stop we made just off the highway to eat the most delicate tortellini and stewed meats ever to be found in a truckers' restaurant. Lastly, our stay between Urbino and Pesaro, where Enzo and Franca Mancini invited us to have lunch with them, while Guido and Milena Ugolini had us over for dinner. In other words, it was a prevalently gastronomic excursion, interrupted here and there by a few critical discussions. During that period, in fact, Volponi had fallen in love with a magnificent painting by Raffaellino del Colle. He had just bought it and talked about it all the time, just as he talked about politics and his work experience with Adriano Olivetti and Gianni Agnelli, for each of which he provided an identikit in which virtues and vices were not always balanced out. It was clear, nonetheless, that he preferred the manager of Olivetti.
I was awarded first prize at the 19th Biennial in São Paulo: if I remember correctly, the amount came to 80,000 cruzeiros which were impossible to exchange for lire. Vittorio Corna, director of the Banca Commerciale Italiana, in addition to being an admirer and a collector of my work, helped me to cash the money in, which added a small windfall to my nest egg.
In **1978** I was invited to the Venice Biennale for the second time.
The following year, instead, I filled the Rotonda di Via Besana in Rome with my installation for 15 pianos called *Chopin,* where the public came in crossing themselves although there was a lot that was profane and hardly anything that was sacred in the love story between George Sand and the Polish pianist. However, it was a lucky year, as in those days the City of Gibellina assigned me the planning and composition of an *Orestea* to celebrate the regeneration of the old city destroyed by the earthquake. Ludovico Corrao, mayor of the new city that rose up in the plains, came to pick me up in Milan, and the two of us went to Linate where we took an Alitalia flight to Palermo airport, to then head on by car to Alcamo, where Corrao lived. For dinner we ate broad beans and wild fennel from Monte Bonifato. This was followed by the usual olive-wood-roasted sausage.

During a party at the Hotel Diana in Milan Emilio Isgrò meets the journalist Scilla Velati, whom he would later marry

1980-2007

In Ghibellina, while I was working on the Sicilian *Orestea*—which I conceived of as the natural theatrical expression of my theories on visual poetry—I made a large iron sculpture for the city museum façade. I wrote and staged, along with Francesca Benedetti, *Gibella del Martirio*; I composed *San Rocco legge la lista dei miracoli e degli*

orrori, a "procession in verses" which for three years in row, on August 15, would be performed for the patron saint's day.
As part of the Venice Biennale's special project *Cronografie*, I installed the cold, detective-story-like *Biografia di uno scarafaggio*. The marvelous Ugo La Pietra, who had been the one to get me involved, vented his anger. "These people here," referring to the curators, "keep saying 'Oh this Isgrò is good, oh, he's so good!' But then, as soon as they see one of your pieces, they get pissed off and curse the day they invited you." He seemed to want me to apologize for all the bother.
My mother died at the hospital in Padua, on May 10, **1981**. It didn't affect me at all, not because I didn't love her, but because she has always been with me.
I met the journalist Scilla Velati, a fashion and interior decor expert. I was introduced to her, in the garden of the Hotel Diana in Milan, by my friend the collector Gianni Aglietta, who was sure that something might happen between us. I was especially impressed by her intelligence, but the truth of the matter is that she was also strikingly beautiful. During the party we went and sat on a stairway. I promised that I would call her to the newspaper, but I hesitated, because I was already overcome by her, and I was afraid that my natural apprehension and awkwardness would scare her off. I knew for sure, though, that somehow I would run into her again. Or else that she would contact me. In fact, as I didn't call her, she called me, annoyed at my silence, which she found offensive. But how could I confess to her that I was afraid of losing her even before getting started?
In **1982** I went to London with *Enciclopedia Treccani* and some *Particolari ingranditi* for the *Arte italiana 1960/1982* show at the Hayward Gallery. Enrico Baj was with us, and it was he, truly a man of the world, who accompanied Vaccari and me to an office in the City to exchange our lire for sterling. There was nothing left of the past nuclear painter, nor of the painter in general. "Avvocato" Baj (he was proud of his degree) had the self-assurance of a banker, the aloofness of an English lord just back from the colonies.
The *Oresteia di Gibellina*, destined to be performed three summers in a row to inaugurate the Orestiadi, debuted in June **1983** on the rubble of the old destroyed city, on a night where a chill wind whistled in the microphones and turned to a roar. Sitting in the audience was Inge Feltrinelli (shrouded in a poncho that Allende had given her), as well as the artisans and farmers of the new Gibellina, people from the theater and directors who had come from all over Europe, anti-mafia judges who had temporarily abandoned their Palermo offices to take part in a civic rite whose meaning escaped no one.
Scilla and I got married in **1984**. All I can remember is that Scilla, who was radiant in her blue outfit, kept laughing as if it was some sort of game.
In **1985** I went back to my exhibition activity with *Il tempo delle macchie*, which was held at Milan's Mercato del Sale, and with the multimedia installation *La veglia di Bach* commissioned by the Teatro alla Scala. The latter event was scheduled to be held at the former church of San Carpoforo on the Feast of Sant'Ambrogio (Saint Ambrose), in synergy with the opening night of the *Aida* conducted by Lorin Maazel and directed by Luca Ronconi.
In **1986** I was at the Museo Civico Archeologico in Bologna with *L'ora Italiana*, inspired by the tragic explosion that had happened at the train station. The clock that had famously survived the tragedy was multiplied in my work, so that there were twenty clocks all showing different times. A young woman present at the opening wept softly in a corner. Scenes like that would be repeated each time the work was presented in the various galleries and museums.
I resumed my theatrical activity in Barcellona, Sicily, with *Didone Adonàis Dòmine*, mounted amid the reinforced concrete pylons and the open-air stands of the new

Ruins of Gibellina, 1983-84-85. Emilio Isgrò with Achille Bonito Oliva, Mayor Ludovico Corrao and the gallerist Nino Soldano (in the background) during a break from the rehearsal for *Orestea di Gibellina*, written by the playwright artist to celebrate the regeneration of the city destroyed by the earthquake. The monumental Sicilian trilogy was replicated for three years with set designs by Arnaldo Pomodoro, music by Francesco Pennisi, directed by Filippo Crivelli

Teatro Mandanici which was still being built. The show was aired live on Raitre for a cycle of international representations that also included a work by Pavarotti broadcast from Beijing. One week before, the China of the great commander Deng Hiaoping; one week later, the Barcellona Pozzo di Gotto of the Christian Democrat mayor Carmelo Santalco. This was the astonishing news. And this caused the critics from the major newspapers to leave en masse the performance in Taormina, where they were accredited guests, and come to review my *Didone*. Nino Frassica was also in the audience; I had admired him on a TV show starring Renzo Arbore.

I was invited to the Venice Biennale. And I have no recollection of it. None at all.

In **1987**, in Locarno, at the Third International Meeting entitled *Dal profondo del pensiero: la creatività nella scienza e nell'arte*, I presented *Teoria della cancellatura*, which was of special interest to the cognitive scientist Douglas Hofstadter, who was there with his young wife and child, crying and clinging to his father's legs as he scribbled his mathematical formulas on the blackboard.

The performance *San Rocco legge la lista dei miracoli e degli errori* was installed again in **1988** for Città Spettacolo in Benevento directed by Ugo Gregoretti and Franco Gervasio, while in **1989** Memè Perlini brought *Giovanna d'Arco* to the stage, performed at the Teatro di Porta Romana in Milan. I don't know why but Memè chose to use an amazing "smoke machine," which filled the theater with smoke and had people in the audience coughing violently. Many of them rushed out terrified.

My novel *Polifemo*, published by Mondadori, came out, receiving good reviews by the critics and public. They especially liked my televised Cyclops, but were less enthusiastic about my Ulysses in the guise of a "wooden magistrate."

In **1990** I was invited to *New Art from the Mediterranean and Japan* at the Museum of Modern Art of Toyama, which was followed in **1992** by the exhibition *The Artist and the Book in XX Century Italy* at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. My wife Scilla, who worshipped good organization and efficiency, was deeply impressed by the experts sent to Italy by the Japanese, who literally took apart the erased books I kept in a display, and proceeded to invent the most appropriate packaging for them. When the works were returned to me a year later, their state of conservation was perfect, without a single scratch, as if they had never left my studio.

I returned to the Biennale for the fourth time in **1993** with my own room entitled *Guglielmo Tell*. For the opening days Francesca Benedetti and Anna Nogara, precious work companions in my Gibellina years, recited the *Preghiera ecumenica per la salvezza dell'arte e della cultura*, published in a special edition by Paolo Della Grazia's Archivio di Nuovo Scrittura. The project was funded by Pro Helvetia, and it was perhaps the first time that an Italian had managed to squeeze any money out of the Swiss rather than taking it to them.

A year later (**1994**) I was in Venice again for *I libri d'artista italiani del Novecento* held at the Collezione Guggenheim, while as part of the Rossini Opera Festival I installed the cycle *Prima della prima del Mosè*, or *La Bibbia di vetro* at the Galleria Franca Mancini in Pesaro. My Bible had been made by Vittorio Livi at the Fiam workshops in Tavullia, Valentino Rossi's native town. Every now and then he would whizz past us on his motorcycle. We had to wait a long time for the work to emerge from the kilns in perfect condition, with great apprehension on my part as well as on Franca Mancini's, who had gone with me to Fiam. The air bubbles caused by the acids cracked the crystal, but we eventually found a solution.

My novel *L'asta delle ceneri* was published by Camunia. The story is set between Milan and Sicily, the two extremes of my life. My original idea had been to write a love story. What came out instead was the story of a Northern League senator who is scared of the Arabs. This always happens to me: I start doing something one way, and end up doing something completely different.

An image of the multimedia installation *La veglia di Bach* (Bach's Vigil) realized for the Teatro alla Scala in Milan in 1985, the European Year of Music

RAI's Radio Tre channel aired *Il frutto senza nome*, a sort of film for the radio with music by Mauro Bonifacio. The work would later be presented at the Acquario Romano (October 27-30, 1994) and at the Teatro Studio/Piccolo Teatro in Milan (April 20, 1995). The audience particularly enjoyed the *Coro delle vergini emiliane* who lasciviously sang in a distinctly Emilian accent: "Cos'è questa trepida angòssia / che tutta mi divora / dalla testa alla cossia? / Quale sarà il cognome / del tortlën asciutto? / E com'era il prosciutto / delle nostre bisnonne?" (What is this trepid anguish / that devours me / from head to thigh? /What might the tortellino's / last name be? /And what was our great-grandmother's / prosciutto like?)

In **1995** I again installed *Chopin* at the Galleria d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea in Bergamo. There was less museum space than at the Rotonda di Via Besana, where the work had been set up the first time. But I lined the walls with a special fabric and the space became endless, while dripping on the piano were candles that illuminated the score with the smell of virgin wax. Just as had happened in Milan, when the members of the public came in they crossed themselves.

After thirty years I went back to linear poetry with my collection *Oratorio dei ladri*, published by Mondadori (1996). It wasn't really a return, because the poems in the book had actually been written over the years. It's just that I was waiting for the right time to publish them. And that moment came when we all realized that erasures and words are perfectly equal. For some it's a tragedy, for others a renaissance.

The exhibition called *Vetrophanie* opened at the Palazzo Ducale in Colorno (Modena), where I showed my work along with Kounellis, Merz, Penone and Zorio. I had never met the Arte Povera artists before, and they were very friendly, even though I was the only artist in the group who wasn't a so-called "poverista." It would seem to be true that artists are much fonder of each other than critics are of each other. Mario Merz especially wanted to chat with me, and I truly regret the fact that our meetings were so few and random.

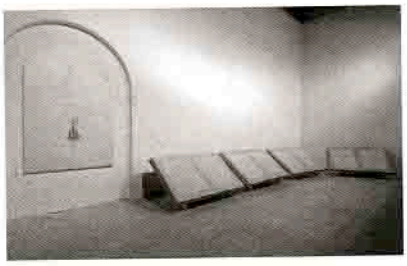
In **1998** I delivered a talk on the relationship between art, work and economic growth before two hundred mayors from all over Europe in Barcellona, Sicily, to inaugurate the huge *Seme d'arancio* I had donated to the city as a sign of civic and social redemption for the Mediterranean people. Nothing Dannunzian, of course. My talk was mostly a heartfelt testimony by an artist, filled with hope and expectations for a world that wishes to shake off the vices of the past. The official talk was given by Anna Finocchiaro, at the time the Minister for Equal Opportunities in the Prodi government. On that occasion I published, with Electa, the catalogue *Teoria del seme*, in which, among other things, I wrote: "Even money is in itself an abstraction, indeed, the greatest abstraction of all; these days we are witnessing how difficult it is to give birth to a Europe based solely on the parameters established by the most important bankers."

I took part in the *Minimalia* exhibition curated by Achille Bonito Oliva, hosted at the PS1 in New York in **1999**, after the previous editions at the Palazzo Querini Dubois in Venice (1997) and Palazzo delle Esposizioni in Rome (1998). The American critics liked my *Codex theodosianus*: perhaps they found that it contained some of the Europe they had lost.

In **2001** the City of Palermo dedicated a major retrospective to my work in the Gothic-Catalan church of Santa Maria dello Spasimo. The truth of the matter is that the show was supposed to be hosted by the Cantieri alla Zisa, but when we got there, with our trucks laden with artworks, the custodians stopped us because the space had not been vetted by the fire department. This caused a great stir in the newspapers, with interviews and declarations for and against the artist: for some he had been unjustly "humiliated," for others he had been justly punished for his arrogance. The show was held nonetheless: and present at the opening, thanks also to the incident

In 1998 Emilio Isgrò donated the sculpture *Seme d'arancia* (Orange Seed) symbolizing the rebirth of the Mediterranean people, to his native town of Barcellona, Sicily. Also present at the inauguration, together with the mayor, is the Minister for Equal Opportunities, Anna Finocchiaro

which had been blown up by the media, despite the pouring rain, was an audience of the kind you only see at rock concerts.
My friends Guido, Silvia and Ettore Guastalla asked me to make the installation *Le api della Torah* for the antique Libreria Belforte in Livorno, while some of my works were included in the exhibition entitled *The Vera Silvia and Arturo Schwarz Collection of Contemporary Art* at the Museum of Art of Tel Aviv. During the same period I was commissioned to design a container for the rolls of the Torah kept in the synagogue of Livorno.
A *Libro cancellato* was displayed at the Pergamonmuseum of Berlin in the room dedicated to the history of writing, from the Hittites to digital printing.
I went back to my theatrical activity with a rewriting in Sicilian dialect and Spanish of Euripides' *Medea*. Professors of Greek literature were not at all pleased at the idea that I had shifted the action from the age of the Argonauts to that of the Maya. A heated debate ensued. But the performance passed the test.
The collection of poetry *Brindisi all'amico infame* was published by Aragno (2003); it made it to the final rounds of the Premio Viareggio, and won the Premio San Pellegrino thanks to a popular vote that favorably influenced the jury, which had hitherto been undecided between the various titles.
Two years later, for *Le Opere e i Giorni*, the installation *Il Padrenostro delle formiche* saw the light of day in a monk's cell of the Certosa di San Lorenzo in Padula. Children would get up from their strollers to chase after the ants swarming on the walls. But that wasn't what worried me: I was afraid of the wrath of those mothers who blamed me for all the ruckus. Paolo Vagheggi, a reporter from "Repubblica," was the finally able to quell the storm, explaining to those angry women that, with my permission, they could embroider those ants on their sheets as well. It was a way to ease the tension by saying something funny. After all, Vagheggi was a true gentleman, and he held art in the highest regard, always being ready to lend a hand when necessary.



Il Padrenostro delle Formiche (Paternoster of the Ants) an installation realized for *Le Opere e i Giorni* (Works and Days) curated by Achille Bonito Oliva (Padula, Salerno, Certosa di San Lorenzo, 2004)

2008-2013

Between February and May **2008** Marco Bazzini and Achille Bonito Oliva presented the retrospective *Dichiaro di essere Emilio Isgrò* at the Centro per l'Arte Contemporanea Luigi Pecci in Prato, followed in **2009** by *Fratelli d'Italia* curated by Marco Meneguzzo (Gallerie del Gruppo Credito Valtellinese, Milan-Acireale). At last, after more than forty years I was able to see all my work together. Scilla and I could finally relax.
On October 24, **2009**, my father passed away in Barcellona Pozzo di Gotto at the age of 99 years and 6 months, leaving his heirs a rusty old refrigerator filled with his music: these included a vigorous Tyrolean waltz that he had written when he was playing in the Swiss National Circus (the famous Knie), and that is still being played today in the Confederation's dance halls. Indeed, we children, once or twice a year, receive modest sums for the copyright which we must share equally between the four of us.
To celebrate Italian Unification (2010) the City of Marsala organized *Disobbedisco. Sbarco a Marsala e altre Sicilie*, an exhibition with a performance followed almost at the same time by the retrospective *Var ve yok* at the Taksim Sanat Galerisi of Istanbul, officially invited by the **2010** European Cultural Capital, while the Boghossian Foundation of Brussels exhibited fourteen *Codici ottomani*, later shown at the Fondazione Marconi in Milan. For the Marsala exhibition I took a very risky step: that of disguising myself as Garibaldi so that I could personally read the verse monologue *Disobbedisco*. The text focused entirely on the value of dissent in a democratic society, and I was shouting this out from the roof of the Convento del Carmine to the public below in the cloister. The Minister of Justice, Angelino Alfano, had come to Rome so that he could personally open the exhibition. On the one hand I was flattered, but on the other I was concerned as the text wasn't exactly

pro-government. But to my surprise, not only was the minister applauding louder than anyone else, but he respectfully called me "Maestro" (I assume with a capital letter), emphasizing the social importance of dissent: "athough of course," he wished to make clear, "in order to build consent." In any case, apart from this clarification, Garibaldi was written into my destiny. Because one or two months later, when I showed my work in Istanbul, I couldn't help but remember something that I had already read in my school books: the Hero of Two Worlds, wanted by the Austro-Hungarian and Piedmontese police, between 1828 and 1831, had found a way out in Ottoman Constantinople, thereby authorizing the suspicion that the ferocious absolutism of the Sultans was actually more liberal than the Savoy monarchy. And I also remembered, on that occasion, the print with the Blue Mosque decorated by flies that I had seen as a child in Nonno Peppe and Nonna Rosina's house.

In May **2011**, *La Costituzione cancellata* was shown at the Galleria nazionale d'arte moderna in Rome, and almost immediately after, the educational work *Cancellazione del debito pubblico* was displayed at the Bocconi in Milan, presented by Mario Monti. Perhaps a few words on these two projects might be of use. The *Costituzione cancellata* had been exhibited for the first time at the Boxart in Verona, and I must acknowledge the fact that it was thanks to the synergy with the owner of the gallery, Giorgio Gaburro, as well as with his collaborator Beatrice Benedetti, that the work came out the way I wanted it to. Dry, uncomplicated, and most important of all devoid of the provocative tone that this type of operation usually involves. My aim was not to erase our civic agreement at such a difficult time or the country; it was to point out the risk of others doing just that.

As for the *Cancellazione del debito pubblico*, instead, it was an act of desperation, in that Severino Salvemini (the invaluable promoter of artistic activities at the Bocconi) and Andrea Manzitti (who, along with his wife Cristina Jucker, was to sponsor the work) kept asking me to present a project, an idea that would be good for the university students. At first I had thought of erasing Marx's *Das Kapital*, but that seemed to be rather trite. Nor was I convinced by the idea of erasing one of those classics of Neo-Liberalism (Milton Friedman, for instance) which have led the world to disaster. Until one day, having received Manzitti's umpteenth phone call, and not knowing what else to say, I simply said: "Yes, of course, I'll erase the public debt!" It was just something I said, but at that point I had no choice but to forge ahead. Because in the meantime Salvemini had told Mario Monti (then Rector of Bocconi), and he was so pleased that he had immediately said he would be willing to personally inaugurate the work: a little to exorcise the public debt, a little as a plain and simple good omen, seeing that he would soon have to deal with the problem in his role as Italy's Prime Minister: no longer as an artistic metaphor, but as the hard, implacable reality of the government.

In August of the same year (2011) my friend Ludovico Corrao was brutally murdered, a great Italian and a great Sicilian, the man behind the regeneration of Gibellina. And I also got some other bad news: unexplainaby the *Seme d'arancio* which I had donated to the city of Barcellona Pozzo di Gotto was taken down. The first to call me and tell me had been Corrao himself, at the last moments of his life. The truth of the matter is that after the great adventure of the *Orestea di Gibellina*, my relationship with Corroa had been interrupted, for a series of reasons that are both incomprehensible and unclear. It is also true that every now and then Ludovico would send me a postcard from the Arab countries he liked to visit. But silence had descended between us, and each attempt to break that silence failed, apart from the occasional odd encounter in the presence of others. Until one morning (the publishing house Le Lettere was about to publish my complete theatrical works) he called me from a Roman clinic where he was hospitalized

and asked me to visit him. We didn't meet in the clinic, but right in Gibellina, at the Fondazione Orestiadi. We were both very moved and any reserve we may have had was swept away. "We have to go back and pick up that project of yours for an erased Odyssey," he said during lunch, referring to an idea from ten years before that had also been crushed. "All I ask," he added, "is that you write a small part for me, maybe a prologue that I could recite from Burri's Cretto." And I, whose sense of drama was no less vivid than his, thought about that marvelous, tender old man who, with the shortness of breath of a sick man, would say the lines I had written for him: "Perché si parte da una strage bianca / di migranti che cantano sul mare. / Perché si viene da una strada nera / di anime scomposte di fame" (Because we depart from a white massacre / of migrants singing upon the sea. / Because we come from a black road / made up of souls disquieted by hunger). A soft voice that even there at the table, just a few days before he died, grew to be more determined and stronger as we remembered our *Orestea* from thirty years before. And as all this was taking place, a boy from Bangladesh, mild-mannered Saiful, wearing a white shirt unbuttoned at the collar, brought us cannoli and marsala with a smile on his face.

If what an ancient Eskimo proverb says is true ("Erasers are born, artists are made") then it is also true that the *Corso di cancellazione generale per le scuole d'Italia*, which I recently held at the MART in Rovereto as an introductory course to the installation *Cancello il Manifesto del Futurismo* set up in one of the museum rooms, was totally useless. But useless things are also the hardest ones. They teach you about life, history. I must say, in fact, as I momentarily end this auto-curriculum vitae, that the erasing of the *Futurist Manifesto* proved to be especially hard for two reasons. First, because the front page of the "Figaro," the Parisian newspaper that published Marinetti's text on February 20, 1909, was unfortunately brimming with microscopic letters, some of which were almost invisible, which meant that I had to work very hard with my felt-tip marker for months and months, ruining my eyesight and my hand. Second, because on that same page, besides Filippo Tommaso Marinetti's declaration of war, there were other no less important pieces of information, which led me astray. Like the news about the King of Bulgaria who ordered his ambassador in Paris to place a floral wreath on the tomb of Marquis Costa de Beauregard, who had recently passed away, expressing the king's sincerest condolences to the family. Or else the news, equally distracting, about the indefatigable couturier Henri Petit, who was scheduled to open his new salons on the Boulevard Malesherbes, promising "sensational revelations and creations." The fact of the matter is that the same sort of language had been used by Marinetti who was committed to challenging even the stars. And if you look at the temperatures for that February 20, 1909, you learn that in New York it was raining and the maximum temperature was 10 degrees; in London the weather was good and the maximum temperature was 8 degrees; in Berlin the sky was clear, but there was no mention of the temperature. While the Italian capital, Rome, was no where to be found, not even on the "today's weather chart." Yesterday, like today, that is to say, Italy was completely and hopelessly absent internationally speaking (even for the weatherman).

This is just the first part of my memoirs. I plan to write the rest when I'm a hundred years old.