

The True Artist Is Down to Earth When Lofty Might Be Better: on Giorgio Sadotti

by Gilda Williams

In an unforgettable scene from the 1978 movie *Coma*, the film's protagonist discovers a secret hospital basement filled with floating humans, artificially induced into comas and delicately arranged in a grid – like a hanging garden of harvested bodies. They are alive but lifeless, silent, unseeing, hung horizontally from strings and gently swaying, like sleeping puppets.



Coma's forest of unresponsive bodies lie mid-air on their backs, rendering them especially dehumanized. The ability to stand upright is the defining essence of *homo sapiens*, whose vertical backbone represents the singular anatomical quality that sets it apart from all other species. In *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930), Sigmund Freud claimed that our unique psychological make-up derives from this very verticality: our minds' unconscious processing system results from humankind's 'erecting himself from the earth', an evolutionary move that permitted us 'to behold things in a plane perpendicular to the direction of our gaze' – rather than below or beside us. This upright posture, moreover, represents the necessary condition for observing traditional art, such as easel paintings and statuary. Traditionally, art stands before us as a kind of equal, as vertical as we

are. Galleries and museums regularly build small pillars, i.e. pedestals, with which to verticalize and dignify art objects that are by nature squat and, thus, barely human. When our egos are diminished we say we've been "knocked off our pedestals". To be 'spineless' is to be weak; to endure is to be 'left standing'; to have an opinion is to 'take a stand'. In sum, things held upright with a spine – our backs, our character, our books – emphatically point towards what it means to be uniquely human.

For this reason, to up-end an ordinarily horizontal object by turning it 90 degrees, standing it on edge, provokes a kind of instant anthropomorphism. In Giorgio Sadotti's installation HELL [WIR HABEN KEIN WORT DAFÜR] (2016), the overhead grid of 36 lights from two adjacent galleries have not only been repositioned upright on the floor but all clustered together in the second room, as if socializing in formation – like a row of soldiers, or a chorus line, or children ready for their school portrait. The lights are still umbelically attached to their distant mother-source of electricity via elongated cords, but the fixtures have been loosened and allowed finally to stretch their legs, see their surroundings from a new perspective, and commune brightly together. They stand facing the wall in the gallery – just as we might stand, when contemplating art. They have shifted from ceiling to floor but not been violently dropped: the lights have been carefully lifted down, just as one would gently carry and set down a living thing.

Standing about 150 cm in height, they are like a group of well-behaved, squared youngsters – and we might here recall David Foster Wallace's own de-animated description of himself as a small child, 'about the size of a fire hydrant'. For Lacan, at around that age – when we are just able to stand upright unaided -- we first catch a glimpse of ourself in an equally vertical mirror. From that fateful encounter with our reflection, says the psychoanalyst, we forever externalize not just the world around us, but our own selves. Once standing and looking, claims Lacan, we are condemned to a lifetime of unachieved self-idealization. But, to be honest, Sadotti's standing lights don't seem psychologically afflicted – just relieved, finally, to get together, share a moment, and stand on their own two 'feet': brought down to earth.

Sadotti's installation in Siegen might recall a classic Conceptualist such as Michael Asher, who in 1979 moved aluminium panels from the Chicago's Museum of Modern Art's facade to inside the building, similarly repositioning the building's existing lofty architectural features to an accessible, human scale. A contemporary Conceptualist, Giorgio Sadotti too doesn't add to the material world around us but reconfigures the existing order based on a new logic, producing heavily assisted readymades. Compared to the old-school Conceptualists, however, Sadotti's work occupies a more intimate place, much closer to the human body itself. In *Navel to Nipples* (2006), the artist took illustrated figure-heavy books and, on each page, cut a perfect circle between the navel and (nearest) nipple of a naked or semi-naked figure, allowing an obscene circular peek at the page beneath, turning books into a kind of randomly generated, peep-show collage. In ANOTHER ANOTHER RING OF BALLS (2010), the artist selected magazine photographs which happen to include a perfect circle – a basketball, a globe, an aerial view of a coffee cup, the moon. Having cut out the entire page, the artist sequenced the pictures in size order, from smallest to largest, and then hung them in increasing size round the room – the circle's diameter occupying an imaginary straight line 'drawn' on the gallery wall at about eye-level. In WOMAN MAN MAN WOMAN WOMAN WOMAN MAN MAN 1975 GEORGE M. HESTER (2010), the artist matched pages from two paired books published in the 1970s, one filled with male nudes and the other with females. The books have been taken apart and put back together in the same order, halving each body and combining one male, one female half together to produce a sequence of arbitrarily-yet-systematically-generated, mismatched hermaphrodites.

For Sadotti, everything in our world is a readymade worthy of consideration: out-of-date softporn, ceiling lights, marginal circular elements in magazine photos, you name it. Sadotti doesn't just invent systems and carry them out, but creates frames in which to notice what we might

otherwise overlook. In *Went to America and Didn't Say a Word* (1999) the artist made a vow of silence for his 24-hour trip to New York, silently recording all that happened around him: every voice around him mattered, every American sound was worth preserving – even the duff ones. Often Sadotti silently morphs the work of others artists into his art. For example – and once again using recorded sound – in *NOW* (2007) Sadotti extracted the oft-recurring word ‘now’ from some 300 Pop songs – from Michael Jackson to Roxy Music to Carole King – to produce a single ecstatic cacophony of ‘now’-ness. *NOW* is a bizarre collaged medley which draws our attention to the lyric’s insane ubiquity, the encyclopedic variety of its stylistic interpretations, and the oxymoronic ability for different singers to stretch ‘now’ over varying lengths of time.

THE TRUE ARTIST LIKES TO EAT ETHNIC. THE TRUE ARTIST WANTS TO KNOW NOW. THE TRUE ARTIST DOES NOT ACKNOWLEDGE TRUTH OR FICTION. These statements are among those in Sadotti’s list-like poster-work, *FIFTY TRUTHS* (1993). Riffing off Nauman’s noted spiralling neon signage (*The True Artist Helps the World by Revealing Mystic Truths*, 1967) – Sadotti’s expanded version reveals ‘the true artist’ is revealed as both an exceptional and ordinary figure. For Giorgio Sadotti many overlooked things are worthy of our interest, but nothing is quite so worthy of attention as art-making itself. On various occasions Sadotti has hosted other artists to produce art in his stead. In *THIS THIS MONSTER THIS THINGS* (2013), Sadotti commissioned 51 artists to produce individual body parts from which to assemble a monstrous being, concocted from many disparate parts. In *BE ME* (1996) Sadotti invited a different artist to stand in for him during the month of his exhibition; the results of their contributions formed the unpredictable content of this collectively formed ‘solo’ show.

In *The True Artist* (2008) a professional whip-cracker was invited by Sadotti to perform in response to the other works in the exhibition: in other words, the artist asked another kind of artist to think about artworks by still other artists. Admittedly, these chains of artistic observation can become so tangled as to border on the unreasonably pretentious. But **THE TRUE ARTIST IS NECESSARILY SO UNREASONBLY PRETENTIOUS AS TO CAUSE DIGUST AND ‘PITY**(truth no. 1), Sadotti writes, though interspersing these high-minded ambitions with lesser attributes: **MOST TRUE ARTISTS ONCE ATE STEAK AND KIDNEY PIE AND CHIPS IN A TRAY WITH GRAVY** (truth no. 32). Plainly, the artist detects a discreet dose of humour alongside the dead-seriousness of artistic endeavour.

Sadotti’s work seems always to formulate a novel system with which to observe the bare bones of art-making itself: the nude; geometry; colour and colourlessness; light and dark; high and low; verticality and horizontality. We could look at the work **HELL** symbolically, and notice how viewers move from a darkened room to one that is doubly lit – remembering moreover that the term ‘guru’ symbolically means ‘from darkness to light’, thus turning Sadotti’s work into a condensed and literal journey of spiritual **enlightenment**. Or, we could consider **HELL** on art-historical terms: as if the illuminated heavens painted on the ceilings of Baroque churches has been plugged in and brought down to our mortal level – perhaps even lowered to ‘hell’. And, of course, Sadotti’s standing lights could suggest a bank of non-human things too: the row of columns fronting a classical temple; books stood on a shelf; or 36 ever-ready bowling pins, awaiting their lucky strike.

The true artist accepts these and all interpretations of his work. The true artist takes nothing for granted, not even the lights overhead. The true artist gives everything its due credit. The true artist gives art-making itself a kind of standing ovation, as we might interpret the ritualized performance of handclapping that accompanies the installation, *Light Hand Clapping (For 36)*. The true artist is the very opposite of the unanimated bodies hovering mid-air in the film *Coma*: more observant and active than other people, upright and habitually inclined to look upwards, and ask: shouldn’t all the light above come down, closer to where we are?