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# Tragicomica

**Perspectives on Italian art from the mid-20th century to today**

curated by **Andrea Bellini** and **Francesco Stocchi**

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Rome, 1 April 2026. “**Io sono un santo**” (*I am a saint*), reads the inscription in cursive on a canvas-backed paper, its surface torn by a series of cuts. It is one of the earliest examples of the unmistakable artistic gesture that would make Lucio Fontana famous.

The reverse, however, bears the phrase “**Io sono una carogna**” (*I am a scoundrel*).

This forms an ironic self-portrait, an irreverent take on the rhetoric that sees the artist capable of elevating both themselves and the viewer through art.

The work is the starting point of **Tragicomica. Perspectives on Italian art from the mid-20th century to today**, the largest exhibition on the history of contemporary Italian art by the National Museum of 21st-Century Arts.

Produced by **MAXXI** in collaboration with the **Centre d’Art Contemporain Genève**, the exhibition – curated by **Andrea Bellini** and **Francesco Stocchi** – brings together over 130 artists and 300 works to explore the ironic element that runs through Italian culture, which the philosopher Giorgio Agamben defined as a “stubborn anti-tragic intention” (*Categorie italiane*, 1996).

More than a mere attitude, it is a genuine national sensibility that finds its first and highest reference in Dante’s *Comedy*: the revolutionary approach of tackling the most complex themes through a tone rooted in everyday life, weaving ‘high’ culture and popular culture in a continuous and fertile exchange.

The exhibition spans over eighty years, from the post-war period to the present day, focusing on artists who have made this tension between the tragic and the comic the centre of their poetics and their view of the world.

What emerges is an alternative narrative of Italian art—one that disrupts the canon, expanding it and offering a layered and alternative reading of the history of national art.

In line with this spirit, the works on display are not presented in chronological order but engage in dialogue with one another, in a continuous and unprecedented juxtaposition of iconic works and others less frequently explored.

Among the artists featured: **Gianfranco Baruchello, Elena Bellantoni, Mirella Bentivoglio, Tomaso Binga, Alighiero Boetti, Monica Bonvicini, Maurizio Cattelan, Adelaide Cioni, Roberto Cuoghi, Gino De Dominicis, Luciano Fabro, Lucio Fontana, Chiara Fumai, Silvia Giambrone, Nicole Gravier, Piero Golia, Piero Manzoni, Liliana Moro, Valerio Nicolai, Paola Pivi, Giuseppe Penone, Carol Rama, Lorenzo Scotto Di Luzio and Gilberto Zorio.**

Tragicomica is also an interdisciplinary project. Thanks to the contribution of a **scientific committee**—Andrea Cortellessa, Davide Oberto, Annalisa Sacchi, Elettra Stimilli, and Giovanna Zapperi—it extends to various areas of contemporary creativity. These include cinema, literature, philosophy, theatre, design, and architecture.

The exhibition is complemented by a **catalogue**, published by Marsilio and designed as a study tool, and a comprehensive programme of **public events**.

**Maria Emanuela Bruni**, Fondazione MAXXI President: 'Life is a tragedy when seen in close-up, but a comedy in long-shot' This is how Charlie Chaplin captured and summed up human existence, where happiness and suffering alternate. Sixteen years after its opening, it seemed only right for the National Museum of 21st-Century Arts to take on the responsibility and honour of recounting the last seventy years of cultural production and critical thought in Italy. The hundreds of works on display explore a complex theme whose inextricable dualism explains the variety and depth of the extensive research presented in the museum's galleries.'

**Francesco Stocchi**, MAXXI Artistic Director and curator of the exhibition: 'To recount Italian art from the second half of the 20th century onwards means attempting to make sense of a subject that is inherently resistant to fixed categorisations; it means engaging with a diversity that constitutes one of the defining features of its vitality. Choosing the tragicomic as a narrative filter represents, first and foremost, the adoption of a broad perspective to trace the evolution of Italian art over time, emphasising in particular its consistent approach to the negotiation of the tragic and the use of irony as a paradox and an ambivalent deviation.'

**Andrea Bellini**, Director of the Centre d'Art Contemporain Genève and curator of the exhibition: 'The hope is that Tragicomica will help to outline a more nuanced and complex vision of our cultural output, enabling the public to engage with lesser-known works and, at the same time, to adopt a renewed way of interpreting what is produced in Italy, not only in the visual arts, but also in cinema, architecture, design, theatre and literature. From this perspective, the exhibition aims to convey the richness of a national imagination which, through its plurality of languages and modes of expression, continues to redefine the very coordinates of the contemporary world.'

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in collaboration with

**Centre  
d'Art  
Contemporain  
Genève**

## LISTA ARTISTI IN MOSTRA

1. Vincenzo Agnetti
2. Franco Angeli
3. Diana Anselmo
4. Giovanni Anselmo
5. Stefano Arienti
6. Atelier dell'Errore
7. Massimo Bartolini
8. Gianfranco Baruchello
9. Betty Bee
10. Vanessa Beecroft
11. Elena Bellantoni
12. Jacopo Belloni
13. Elisabetta Benassi
14. Riccardo Benassi
15. Mirella Bentivoglio
16. Simone Berti
17. Luca Bertolo
18. Tomaso Binga
19. Alighiero Boetti
20. Monica Bonvicini
21. Pier Paolo Calzolari
22. Marcella Campagnano
23. Maurizio Cattelan
24. Guglielmo Achille
25. Cavellini
26. Mario Ceroli
27. Sandro Chia
28. Giuseppe Chiari
29. Doriana Chiarini
30. Claudio Cintoli
31. Adelaide Cioni
32. Claire Fontaine
33. Francesco Clemente
34. Gianni Colombo
35. Daniela Comani
36. Pietro Consagra
37. Enzo Cucchi
38. Roberto Cuoghi
39. Gino De Dominicis
40. Ursulina
41. de Lombardia
42. e Luca Frati
43. Caterina De Nicola
44. Nori de' Nobili

45. Giuseppe Desiato
46. Paola Di Bello
47. Patrizio di Massimo
48. Chiara Enzo
49. Luciano Fabro
50. Roberto Fassone
51. Tano Festa
52. Giosetta Fioroni
53. Lucio Fontana
54. Linda Fregni Nagler
55. Chiara Fumai
56. Stefania Galegati
57. Francesco Gennari
58. Silvia Giambrone
59. Piero Gilardi
60. Domenico Gnoli
61. Piero Golia
62. Nicole Gravier
63. Laura Grisi
64. Grossi Maglioni
65. Gruppo XX
66. Elisabetta Gut
67. Petrit Halilaj
68. Emilio Isgrò
69. Ugo La Pietra
70. Ketty La Rocca
71. Felice Levini
72. Loredana Longo
73. Lovett/Codagnone
74. Saverio Lucariello
75. Emiliano Maggi
76. Marcello Maloberti
77. Piero Manzoni
78. Beatrice Marchi
79. Lucia Marcucci
80. Eva Marisaldi
81. Eliseo Mattiacci
82. Fabio Mauri
83. Libera Mazzoleni
84. Fausto Melotti
85. Maurizio Mercuri
86. Mario Merz
87. Marisa Merz
88. Ottonella Mocellin
89. e Nicola Pellegrini
90. Carlo Mollino

91. Aldo Mondino
92. Sukran Moral
93. Liliana Moro
94. Gianni Motti
95. Valerio Nicolai
96. Gastone Novelli
97. Adrian Paci
98. Mimmo Paladino
99. Rosa Panaro
100. Giulio Paolini
101. Claudio Parmiggiani
102. Clemen Parrocchetti
103. Pino Pascali
104. Luca Maria Patella
105. Giuseppe Penone
106. Diego Perrone
107. Gianni Pettena
108. Cesare Pietroiusti
109. Lamberto Pignotti
110. Giulia Piscitelli
111. Michelangelo Pistoletto
112. Paola Pivi
113. Aronne Pleuteri
114. Gianni Politi
115. Emilio Prini
116. Carol Rama
117. Moira Ricci
118. Cloti Ricciardi
119. Pietro Roccasalva
120. Sara Rossi
121. Mimmo Rotella
122. Cinzia Ruggeri
123. Laura Ruggeri
124. Andrea Salvino
125. Salvo
126. Suzanne Santoro
127. Sarenco
128. Mario Schifano
129. Lorenzo Scotto
130. di Luzio
131. Luigi Serafini
132. Lydia Silvestri
133. Grazia Toderi
134. Nico Vascellari
135. Vedovamazzei
136. Francesco Vezzoli

137. Sislej Xhafa
138. Gilberto Zorio

"Life is a tragedy when seen in close-up, but a comedy in long-shot." That is how Charlie Chaplin summed up a human existence in which happiness and suffering alternate and combine, finding a perfect balance in the tragicomic dimension of life.

*Tragicomica: Perspectives on Italian Art from the Mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century to Today* is the title of the major exhibition that the MAXXI is devoting for the first time to such a broad and crucial period in Italian art. Bringing together and putting on display hundreds of works, the exhibition sets out to investigate a theme of great complexity, one whose inextricable dualism explains the variety and extent of the long and exhaustive range of artistic research presented in the galleries of the museum.

Sixteen years after its opening, it has seemed only proper for the National Museum of 21<sup>st</sup> Century Arts to take on the burden and honor of presenting the last seventy years of cultural production and critical thinking in Italy. In doing so it has sometimes stretched the bounds of its field of inquiry, going back as far as the end of the last war and to such undisputed masters as Lucio Fontana, as well as less well-known artists like Nori de' Nobili.

We have been accompanied on this long journey by academics and scholars from various disciplines, ranging from art to architecture, from theater to the cinema, from literature to philosophy, who with us have retraced and examined the creativity of this country through the magnifying lens of the tragicomic, i.e. that distinctly Italian tendency to face up to adversity with humor, irony and absurdity.

Thus this project speaks of the singular Italian *anti-tragic* propensity, to use Giorgio Agamben's expression, pointing out the peculiarities and fecundity of taking an irreverent view of the dramas of the present.

A sense of humor that is used to question authority and conventions is subversive. Laughter is a potent

means of criticism and an antidote to every ill. While the laughter of Carmelo Bene or Skiantos is irreverent, Gino De Dominicis's or Giorgio Manganelli's is sarcastic and Giuseppe De Santis's is bitter, as is that of Alessandro Sciarroni's *Augusto*, to mention just a few of the best-known examples.

From satirical cartoons published in newspapers to the more recent memes appearing on the social networks, what the MAXXI's exhibition project reveals is the tragicomic nature of our existence, with its motley aspects and disparate guises, reminding us that, as someone once put it, "life is hard, and then it gets easy."

Maria Emanuela Bruni  
President of the Fondazione MAXXI

# TRAGICOMICA

HANDBOOK OF  
A NATIONAL SENSIBILITY

FRANCESCO STOCCHI

Comedy is tragedy viewed from the back.  
Mario Monicelli

To talk about Italian art from the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century onward means trying to bring order to a subject intrinsically refractory to stable categorizations, one that is characterized by continual shifts in language, position and rules. It means tackling a profusion that undoubtedly constitutes one of the distinctive traits of its vitality, but at the same time renders problematic the hypothesis of a unified or consistent view.

The MAXXI has approached the possibility of carrying out this exploration of Italian art, one that is as impossible in the complete sense as it is necessary, without any pretense to fully exhaust a complex field, or to offer a definitive interpretation of it. We have chosen to take an unusual approach, one that is in many ways courageous, open-ended and tragically incomplete but capable nonetheless of covering eighty years of works, languages and protagonists that have nurtured the history of expression in this country. It is in the awareness of these difficulties that the museum has found one of its mainstays, spurred on by the need to assume the responsibility to try to grasp, communicate and present to the public such a living, constantly shifting and dialectical subject as contemporary art and culture.<sup>1</sup> As a place for criticism, exchange of ideas and active education, the museum should not smooth out contradictions but acknowledge them and face up to them constantly, embracing the possibilities and different interpretations that are entailed in any attempt to give things a form. This awareness is an integral part of its critical

1. On the contemporary museum as a place for the production of criticism and not just a neutral one of conservation, see Tony Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum* (London: Routledge, 1995); Claire Bishop, *Radical Museology* (London: Koenig Books, 2013).

function in the present, a sticky ground on which tensions ought not to be resolved, but made visible.

From this perspective, choosing the tragicomic as a filter of analysis<sup>2</sup> represents in the first place the adoption of a broad view to trace the development of Italian art over time, underlining in particular its constant attitude when it comes to dealing with the tragic and its recourse to irony as paradox and ambivalent deviation.<sup>3</sup>

Analysis of this disposition has offered us the chance to look again at the most classical of the manuals of art history and above all to disarrange it, finally mixing up the known and the unknown, the canonical and the lateral, connecting iconic works with less familiar authors and works. Thus the exhibition *Tragicomica* can be seen as a montage, an anti-history of Italian art based on resonances, incongruences, well-known artists and rediscovered figures.<sup>4</sup> I would like to thank Andrea Bellini in particular for having proposed this hypothesis to the MAXXI, as well as the whole of the museum's team that has worked enthusiastically on the research for and production of the project and above all the artists and the array of collaborators who support their work, without whom we would never have succeeded in piecing together this story. *Tragicomica* may represent the first of a series of chapters devoted to the

2. Giorgio Agamben, "Comedy," in G. Agamben, *The End of the Poem: Studies in Poetics*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), 1–22; Italian ed., *Comedia*, in G. Agamben, *Categorie italiane. Studi di poetica* (1996) (Roma-Bari: Laterza, 2010), 3–26.

3. On the comic/ironic as cognitive attitude and means of "critical distancing" (not evasion), see Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (1965), trans. Hellene Iswolsky (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1968).

4. On montage as a way of thinking and on a history constructed around "constellations" rather than along lines, see Georges Didi-Huberman, *The Eye of History: When Images Take Positions* (2009), trans. Shane B. Lillis (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2018).

study and promotion of Italian art, understood as means of giving a voice to the experience of curators, in Italy and elsewhere, and in particular to our artists, something in which resides the reason for and meaning of our mission as a museum.

This catalogue, conceived as an integral part of the exhibition, takes the reader on a journey through the evolution of the tragicomic approach in Italian culture from the 1940s to the present day. The objective of the volume is not just to document the exhibition at the MAXXI but to offer an indispensable study tool that can be used to arrive at an understanding of contemporary culture from the perspective of the theme of the tragicomic. For this reason an advisory board made up of Andrea Cortellessa, Davide Oberto, Annalisa Sacchi, Elettra Stimilli and Giovanna Zapperi was set up from the outset: a chorus of voices coming from different fields and backgrounds to whom we have turned both for a dialectical exchange and to determine the subjects to be examined in the catalogue.

Scholars with expertise on theater, cinema, philosophy, literature and architecture follow one another in the volume, painting a composite and multifaceted picture of Italian cultural production, a panorama that embraces even broader areas of research than the exhibition in order to offer additional food for thought.<sup>5</sup> This wide range of previously unpublished texts is accompanied by over two hundred images: the ones on a small scale illustrating the essays and photographs that document the works of the artists on show at the MAXXI offer a sweeping visual survey of contemporary creativity that defies any kind of

5. For a methodological framework for the interdisciplinary approach (between visual arts, cinema, literature and media studies) to interpreting the culture of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, see Nicholas Mirzoeff, *An Introduction to Visual Culture* (London - New York: Routledge, 1999).

# THE COMIC AS POISON

GENESIS OF AN IDEA

ANDREA BELLINI

## AN ITALIAN CULTURAL CATEGORY

The idea of devoting an exhibition to the anti-tragic and comic dimension of Italian art was probably the first inspiration I had as a curator, over thirty years ago now. I have waited for a long time for the right place, and suitable moment, to realize this project. That initial intuition has been enriched over the course of time by a reflection on the relationship between the comic and the question of gender, as well as by a series of considerations—bitter ones at times—of a more strictly political nature, of which I will offer a hint at the end of this text. The exhibition has finally taken shape at the MAXXI in Rome thanks to its artistic director, Francesco Stocchi, who believed in the project and agreed to co-curate it with enthusiasm.

I was still a student of philosophy at the University of Siena when, in the spring of 1996, I came across a book by Giorgio Agamben, published only a few months earlier, with the title *Categorie italiane. Studi di poetica*.<sup>1</sup> Between 1974 and 1976 the philosopher, in collaboration with Italo Calvino and Claudio Rugafiori, planned the publication of a review, one section of which would be devoted to the category structures of Italian culture. Identified as pairs of contrasting concepts, they included: comedy/tragedy, structure/beauty, living language/dead language, biography/fable, style/subject. In the essay "Comedia," which would be included later in the volume *Categorie italiane* (1996), Agamben analyzed the comedy/tragedy polarity

1. Giorgio Agamben, *Categorie italiane. Studi di poetica* (1996) (Roma-Bari: Laterza, 2010). [The English translation by Daniel Heller-Roazen *The End of the Poem: Studies in Poetics* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999) is not always accurate: for this reason in some cases in this catalogue the decision has been taken to present the ideas put forward by Agamben without citing directly the published translation or, as in this case, making reference to the original Italian ed., *T.N.*]

on the basis of an exemplary case: the reasons why Dante chose to call his poem *Comedy*.

The assignment of a comic title had, in Agamben's view, been carefully studied in so far as for the poet it implied taking a stand with respect to a question of essential importance: man's guilt or innocence before divine justice. According to the philosopher, the fact "that Dante's poem is a comedy and not a tragedy, that its beginning is 'bitter' and 'dreadful' and its end 'propitious, desirable and agreeable'" expresses a precise condition: "man, who in his subjection to divine justice is the work's *subiectum*, seems at the beginning to be guilty (*obnoxius iustitiae puniendi*) but at the end of his journey he turns out to be innocent (*obnoxius iustitiae premiandi*)."<sup>2</sup> In so far as it is a "comedy," the poem would be a passage from guilt to innocence and not—in accordance with the dynamics of tragedy—from innocence to guilt: tragedy appears to be the guilt of the just, whereas comedy is the justification of the guilty. This title, argues Agamben, "is so little internal to Dante scholarship that it can even be said it is here that we find, for the first time, one of the traits most tenaciously characteristic of Italian culture: its essential pertinence to the comic sphere and consequent rejection of tragedy."<sup>3</sup>

The idea of Italian culture's pertinence to the comic sphere has represented for me—ever since my encounter with Agamben's essay—a sort of hermeneutic prism through which to observe not just the history of the country's art, but also that of its cinema, literature, theater and music. Preparing for the exam of admission to the Graduate School of Archeology and Art History at the University of Siena, I ended up convincing myself that the comic and the anti-tragic characterize not just the art of the 20<sup>th</sup> century but

2. *Ibid.*, 12.

3. *Ibid.*, 3.

the whole history of Italian art. In this sense it seemed clear to me that there was a sort of line of demarcation, running from as far back as the Renaissance, between Italian art, distinguished by a strong tie with classical antiquity, from which derives its attention to the beauty of form, to perspective and to harmony in an anti-tragic sense, and that of northern Europe which, although equally influenced by classicism, has developed a more realistic and perhaps more somber style, with a partiality for detail, the grotesque and the vernacular. It suffices to think of the works of artists like Jan van Eyck, Hieronymus Bosch, Albrecht Dürer, Rogier van der Weyden or Hans Memling, in which we find a strong emphasis on physical suffering, on the expression of pathos, in contrast to the more idealized approach of the Italians, who tend to place the accent instead on the spiritual beauty or serenity of their figures.

## THE EXHIBITION

Since we are dealing with an Italian cultural category, and not a characteristic that pertains exclusively to the visual arts, we felt it necessary—right from the first reflections on this theme—to think in terms of an interdisciplinary project, one that would also take into consideration cinema, literature, philosophy, theater, design and architecture. This idea led us to assemble an extraordinary advisory board, made up of various specialists in these subjects, who have been involved in reflection on the undertaking as a whole, as well as contributing essays to this publication and drawing up the program of events that have accompanied the exhibition. However ambitious and in some ways imposing, it does not aspire to be exhaustive. If we accept the basic premise, that the anti-tragic approach imbues and shapes every aspect of our culture, then the better part of Italian artists could—in one way or another—be involved in this project. Having necessarily to make choices, we have decided to concentrate on