



Piero Golia

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It's not easy to get a straight answer out of Piero Golia. A spry, wiry Neapolitan with a full brown beard and eyes that rarely stop laughing, he is a consummate talker, given to rambling, heavily accented anecdotes that tend to bypass a question altogether, only to swing round and pick it up again at some unlikely moment, or else veer into a sort of philosophizing that eventually serves to illuminate the question's fundamental irrelevance. His talk weaves sincerity and irony, audacity and self-deprecation in unpredictable measure, such that one never knows quite where one stands. It would be irritating, perhaps, if it were not so thoroughly entertaining.

When I first met Golia, last fall, and asked about his background, he replied: "I'm a chemical engineer. And then for money I became an artist. Yeah, it's weird because everybody does the opposite, I don't know why. Because it's like – I'm a loser, I can't do nothing else, and you have to make money. You work from home, so why not? I mean, the alternative is phone sex or making, you know, little bead necklaces. But China destroyed the market for working at home. India destroyed customer service and phone sex, so in America you can just be an artist."

The funny thing is that most of what he says turns out to be true, and it's typically the most outlandish stories he's especially serious about. Like, say, rowing across the Adriatic Sea to become the first illegal Italian immigrant in Albania. Or disappearing from New York, where he was living at the time, with nothing but a tremendous quantity of cash and getting his assistant to pose as his mother and convince the Italian consulate to investigate his whereabouts, only to reappear in Copenhagen a month later. (When I ask how he managed to cross the Atlantic without a passport, he replies simply: "bribery.") Or smashing a 35-foot bus down to the dimensions of a 20-foot booth at Art LA in January. Or opening a phony Beverly Hills office from which to produce a lavish Las Vegas musical in order to finance the acquisition of a gold mine in Nevada. (This last project, a collaboration with French artist Pierre Huyghe, is currently in the works – they've gotten as far as the office.)

Golia, who was born in 1974 and moved to L.A. six years ago, is the sort of artist the nonart world tends to shake its head at in bewilderment. His work eschews traditional media, hinges largely on the force of his personality and tends to involve large quantities of money, necessitating a coterie of indulgent dealers (he currently has five) and thriving in the rarefied world of the biennial (SITE Santa Fe and the Orange County Museum's California Biennial are the most imminent). "Conceptual bullshit," he (ironically?) characterizes it. As is often the case in his conversation, however, the logic tends to sweep around and land you somewhere you might not have expected – closer to life, in many ways, than to the hermetic sphere of the art world.

"When I went to Santa Fe, I got very depressed," he says. (Imagine this in a rolling, lilted Neapolitan accent.) "I saw this couple, they went into a store and they bought a painting. A shitty painting. They weren't art collectors, they just saw it in a window, like you see a sweater – you go in, you buy it, you leave. And that made me very depressed because I was, like, no one will never fucking do this with my work. Like, who the fuck is going to pass by and say, 'Oh, dear, what do you think about this? That's so cool, let's get it home!'"

"Then something weird happened. This Mexican guy who bought the bus promised me that he didn't know who the artist was when he bought the piece. He didn't ask nothing – nothing! So that was, like, Oh, maybe I'm not completely wrong. And

that's what I like about the mine, the musical – they are completely readable. Like if you say to your cousin who doesn't give a fuck, who doesn't even know Jeff Koons, he's going to say, Well, fuck, maybe I can come to work in the mine! It's like Vegas, it completely belongs to reality, it's so weird – when fiction becomes more real than art, you know?"

Photo by Kevin Scanlon

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