

# "Fragments of a Conversation with a Counterfeiter": Diego Tonus

## Diego Tonus in Conversation with Lorenzo Balbi

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Diego Tonus and Anonymous, *Fragment of Diego Tonus* (detail), 2019. Courtesy: the artist and MAMbo Museum, Bologna, Centro Walter Mapelli.

This interview between Diego Tonus and Lorenzo Balbi presents documentation images of the solo show *Fragments of a Conversation with a Counterfeiter* (2019) by Diego Tonus, curated by Huib Haye van der Werf and promoted by Jan Van Eyck Academie Maastricht and Stroom Den Haag. The series of artworks presented entered the permanent collection of the MAMbo – Museo d'Arte Moderna di Bologna, Italy, and was realized thanks to the Italian Council (3rd Edition, 2018) and the Directorate-General for Contemporary Creativity of the Italian Ministry of Culture.



LORENZO BALBI

*A Moment of Darkness* (2019) is one of the most photographed and intriguing artworks in the MAMbo permanent collection—part of *Officina d'Arte Italiana: Nuove creatività*, a section dedicated to artworks of the last three decades that entered the museum's public heritage through exhibitions, commissions, acquisitions, donations, and free loans, entering an important path of expansion, enhancement, and preservation of the collection. This work is a sculpture portraying a human-sized figure, sitting on a pedestal, caught in the moment of concealing his face. Who is this person, and why did you decide to portray him in this position?

DIEGO TONUS

This sculpture is part of *Fragments of a Conversation with a Counterfeiter* (2019), a series of artworks derived from an assumed conversation with a forger (“Anonymous,” for practical reasons) that happened in London in 2017. Each artwork is a visual translation of this conversation manifested through the act of presenting objects, actions, and words experienced by Anonymous (presented as coauthor) within his practice of reproduction of value and ways of transporting it, hacking systems of control, and dealing with the definition of individuality. During our meetings, I realized the potential creative power of the conversation, especially in relation to the transformation of value. How to relate to his counterfeiting practice with my artistic practice? Using various reproduction techniques, I thought of appropriating the ideas and the intellectual properties of the forger to question what was “countering” the practice of counterfeiting. *A Moment of Darkness* is the first of these fragments. It is a copy in 1:1 scale of the forger's body, containing two secrets: his fingerprints and his face—impressed by the casting process—and the password granting access to the value of one Bitcoin that is engraved on a metal plate hidden inside the sculpture and that characterizes its daily floating economic value. The tension of *A Moment of Darkness* resides in the relationship between its cultural/artistic value and its floating economic value. Its title refers to the position of the figure that creates an actual shadow in front of his face, a counterportrait that bears the iconoclastic aspect of this figure concealing his face to keep his identity undercover.

LORENZO

While through a purely visual analysis, the artwork could be described as a hyperrealistic portrait, from the technical point of view and from the choice of materials you used, the work results in something more complex and somehow impenetrable. Could you tell me more about the conceptual and sculptural processes that led to the making of the sculpture?

DIEGO

Convincing the forger to pose for the mold-making of the sculpture was not easy, and I consider this persuasion as part of the work. Our discussion diverted to the



idea of the copy and how to question an *original* through the act of copying it and presenting it with a different material. Somehow, when I presented him with the idea of being cast, he was more fascinated by the materiality of the sculpture and how to transport it rather than the idea of being cast in a full-scale copy. What he didn't realize is that by applying the silicone used for the mold-making directly on his skin, I would steal his fingerprints, thereby appropriating his identity—a process in which I could gain control of the forger in order to later reveal his practices. A paradoxical situation in which he could not intervene and express himself, otherwise he would reveal his identity. The sculpture is in aluminum cement, a material that is at the same time solid and fragile, so as to potentially suggest to a spectator the eventual susceptibility to being broken and destroyed so as to give access to the hidden value. I used cement with powder of aluminum to create almost a paste I could brush on the silicone mold and obtain the detail of the skin together with the textures of his clothes—a complex process that lasted months after the making of the silicone mold. Complex, for the series of tests I realized using this nontraditional material and for accomplishing the result of a sculpture without visible seams. A material that supports for me the idea of antimonumentality that is at the base of *A Moment of Darkness*, for which future destruction is potential but not licit. If someone tries to access the inner value of the Bitcoin, he/she would destroy both the sculpture and the metallic plate immersed in the layer of cement, causing the annulment of the artwork. Its inner tension between the cultural value and the economic value would cease to exist. The artwork exists to remove the value from the existing cryptocurrency chain and to let that value enter the art market by putting the sculpture in circulation, thereby affecting its estimate. The sculpture contains that value, but it's not possible to have access to it, to finally influence and transfer the BTC value to the artistic value—which remains inserted in the work, as a secret.

#### LORENZO

I'm intrigued by this meeting with the forger and the various issues you had to face to involve him in the process. How did you get to know him? How did you track him down, and how did you gain his trust and availability to take part in the project? Did you have to take legal safety measures? Did he have some interest in contemporary visual art practices? Or was he distant from that world?

#### DIEGO

The encounter with the forger happened almost by chance in London, while I was with a friend in a pub in Mile End. We drank some beers, and throughout the night I recognized that Anonymous was talking about value in a very peculiar way. He started discussing the importance of transition as a state of change, a movement that is able to generate value both in natural and in economic transactions. We discussed the case of the bank Goldman Sachs back in 2011, in which investors bought 80 percent of the aluminum in the USA, and then GS bought the warehouses to store the aluminum, and they made the workers move



it from one warehouse to the other so that extra work would increase the price of the aluminum. At that point, I realized he was referring to the political nature of materials. I decided to ask him if we could meet again to continue our conversation. He didn't know much about art; he was actually naive about it. I realized I had to pay attention in directing fragments of our conversation into a series of artworks, deciding what to include or not in the works. In particular, I had to stay close to my interest in unveiling his counterfeiting and hacking strategies but through my artistic process, more than creating counterfeited objects myself.

LORENZO

How did the conversation continue?

DIEGO

The second meeting led to the work *I Want Everyone's Money* (2019). We discussed the paradox of a city like London in which people had three jobs at a time so as to be able to pay their rent and survive with a minimum income. For Anonymous, it was a stressful cycle in which *rent* became a new form of power for the state to control individuals—"renting spaces" and "renting collective knowledge" as forms of speculation, from the rental of actual physical spaces (offices or houses) to the rental of virtual spaces such as clouds or render farms, which gather and redistribute the general intellect, not to mention that the archived information could become a form of power for those who retain them. Anonymous preferred working while traveling to avoid being tracked. In that way, even if a country wanted to take the time to rent him citizenship, it would have meant only wasting its time on bureaucratic processes of filling in papers for a ghost whose identity was not defined. He said also that we can be many things at the same time, but even in this nomadic and transitional life, the state, through rent, controls individuals, allowing basically the right for them to be citizens of a certain country. Almost to take control of this situation, he continuously mentioned a sentence I find exhilarating "I want everyone's money." He said he was using this sentence as his life motto, and at that point, I asked him to write it down on a napkin so I don't forget it. I walked away with a sentence that contained his calligraphy and that we imagined—almost jokingly—could become a neon sign for a company or a new enterprise. I realized I wanted to appropriate the secret veiled behind the sentence "I want everyone's money"—a motto that at that point could have become almost a password to have access to the value of the secret. A password that should have been visible since it was so charged and meaningless at the same time.

LORENZO

You appropriated the forger's sentence and handwriting, together with the secret behind "I want everyone's money," to turn his thoughts into an artwork, and you shared them with the public. When you show this work, you also display a three-page document that functions as a caption but that is also a legal document



registering these ideas. Could you explain what it is?

DIEGO

In order to share the appropriated forger's ideas with the international audience, I've registered them at the *Benelux Office for Intellectual Property*. At this office, both private individuals and companies have the possibility to register trademarks and record drawings, as well as register ideas. Once I read about the possibility of recording ideas as trade secrets (a secret such as Coca-Cola's hidden recipe), I realized I could describe Anonymous's ideas as secrets related to the trading of value. I could register the secrets related to the series as "confidential materials" and use these documents as captions to be exhibited in the show so as to present the artworks. Each artwork in the series is accompanied by these dedicated registered documents. *The Benelux Office for Intellectual Property states indeed that:*

The secret XXX was deposited in the Benelux Office for Intellectual Property and regards a business information and valuable know-how. This trade secret is protected since the information is confidential, has commercial value and reasonable measures have been taken to keep it secret. Since an idea as such cannot be protected, it may well be possible to protect a tangible expression of the idea. This i-DEPOT [digital safe-deposit box] serves as proof that the original secret was deposited regularly, the secret remaining confidential and actively protected. There is no time limit on the validity of a trade secret. It is a trade secret as long as it remains confidential.

LORENZO

What emerged in your conversation with the forger is an image of a society run by debt more than credit—a sort of expropriation of our future, in which the years to come will be devoted to reimbursing debts. What kind of economic vision emerges in the series?

DIEGO

For Anonymous, the new economy was driven not by goods or by commodities, but by experiences. The present-day economy is based on creating memorable events that could create a personalized and individual experience of time. For him, people who create services want convenience; instead, when someone offers an experience, the time spent together is valued. At that point, my attention went to the wristwatch he was wearing. He referred to it not as a watch but as a timepiece. He seemed to be obsessed with it—an obsession that started in 1969, while watching the moon landing on TV. The wristwatch was a later edition of an Omega Speedmaster Professional cal. 321 column wheel. The original was actually worn by Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin during the first NASA expedition to the moon. It was the first time that a watch entered space, and Omega took the occasion of creating a business model around this collective memorable event. By proposing the same watch used in that unique situation, they created an object of desire for many. A desirable experience. When looking



at that watch, you don't see just a watch, you imagine the universe out of the cockpit of Apollo 11.

Anonymous revealed he was trying to reproduce this timepiece in detail. A single perfect copy of this wristwatch. A personal object of desire. It was not a matter of making a fake of this watch, but of arriving at an exact copy, unique and authentic exactly because of the intention behind that gesture and the craftsmanship put in to realize it. It was not a matter of getting money out of this action but observing this iconic object in depth. He referred to a very peculiar experience, that I still cannot quite understand in its nature. He said there are people reproducing fake wristwatches and hiding original parts within. They then ship these hybrid objects across borders so as to disassemble them and recompose/assemble them again to have complete originals in other countries. Listening to this story made me question the meaning of a duplicate and how this could function even if "copied" and "original" parts coexist in the same object; the meaning of "original" within a series, especially the way Anonymous wanted to create a unique copy as a perfect reproduction. The silent film *Timepiece* (2019) derives from this conversation and documents the process of dismounting and reassembling the fascinating mechanics of an Omega Speedmaster Moonwatch Professional, taking into account this discourse between an *original* and a *series*. The film unveils, piece after piece, the complications of this chronograph being dismounted in a choreography of precise and almost hypnotic hand movements. What it is possible to see is time taken apart that stops for a period until the watch is carefully reassembled; the mechanics restart after the mainspring and the barrel wheel, considered by watchmakers the core of the watch, have been replaced with their duplicates.

#### LORENZO

These are private insights into a practice that otherwise could not be disclosed, if not within the framing of this conversation. Listening to these stories seems like witnessing a series of clandestine discussions . . .

#### DIEGO

Well, this is the main thought from which the work *Private Conversations* (2019) derives from. The value of the word—and the value of creating a platform for a discourse that could potentially exist—is at the base of this installation that consists of a series of briefcases positioned on the floor of the room in which a conversation would potentially take place. These briefcases, as used by the forger, conceal a device to alter radio frequencies and prevent any type of audio recording (digital or analog). The device has the capability to discreetly prevent unauthorized recordings by altering radio frequencies in the range of ten meters. This installation characterizes a space as a very public and, at the same time, private space in which every kind of conversation will be possible, creating a platform for potential speeches and discussions.



Once the device within the briefcases is switched on, it deactivates and shuts down the wireless system of the institution in which it is installed for the duration of the encounters in which it will be activated—thereby creating a state of exception for the institution and its employees, who won't be able to access the web. The device is a security spy device that was conceived appositely for this installation, and it is based on the description given by Anonymous. This installation becomes possible only through a contract signed by the directors of the museums hosting the installation and acknowledging the nature of the work. As stated in the document, the briefcases and the device will be activated and become a platform for these discussions, only within the institutional spaces and collections related to this museum system.

#### LORENZO

Were there moments in which Anonymous directly referred to his practice as counterfeiting? How do you know this person was really a forger? And did you ever see the objects he was referring to? This makes me wonder: are the interventions you realized exact replicas of his ideas, or did you interpret them in your remakings?

#### DIEGO

There has been an act of trust on my part in which I've trusted this person who presented himself and these ideas in this peculiar way. But what if these ideas were a fiction in the first place? What if he made up all these stories and his identity as well? I've assumed he was a forger since, of course, he never presented himself as such—who would do that? I've assumed shapes and visual presences of the objects he mentioned. The interesting aspect is that from this ephemeral conversation—for which I'm the filter—there has been a fiction that modified reality, even if it happened with Anonymous's personal concept of truth. This is valid also for *The Added Value* (2019), an installation in which the hardware of money—euro bills—is directly presented on the surface of special plates. According to the story told by Anonymous, he needed to hide the typographical plates/cliché to reproduce banknotes of 50 euros in order to transport them easily across borders of different countries. In order to do so, he needed a boxlike shape, maybe a piece of furniture. Searching on the web for potential forms, he stumbled upon a perfect object. I couldn't believe the image he showed me: it was an artwork of Minimalist artist Donald Judd. In particular, it was one of the first studies of the famous *Stacks* dating from 1969. He liked the minimalist shape of these boxes, and their material could camouflage perfectly the plates he had. He started reproducing these objects in stainless steel as the originals and, instead of the colored plexiglass he saw in Donald Judd's piece, he placed his typographical plates to reproduce money. He would then have described these objects as artworks and paid shipment for art objects, making the transport to different countries easier. I am sure he was not aware of the potential artistic value of his gesture and of those objects. The discussion with Anonymous didn't



go that far, but I kept in mind his description of these objects so as to reproduce them myself. *The Added Value* is my interpretation of Anonymous's *Stacks* since, of course, I didn't see his "original" objects. In this interpretation, I made some decisions, among which was using photosensitive plates used for printing. The material used for the making of these plates changes color according to the exposing time under the light—so that these reproductions of *Stacks* continue to be exposed even during their exhibition. These plates display on their surfaces a phantasmic image of the 50 euro bill. They are mirrored negatives, so that they cannot be used directly for printing and can be exhibited as artworks, existing as a quotation of the original objects—which I still don't know if they ever existed. I became a copyist myself—not a forger. Copyists make perfect replicas of artworks that they see as their masterpieces in which they achieved perfection in *becoming* the artist they wanted to imitate. For copyists, their work becomes almost a "new original." In this case, I became a copyist of Donald Judd, camouflaging my practice with his and trying to think as if I were him in the making of the *Stacks*. In a larger sense, I've been Anonymous's copyist as well, to report his practice to the public.

#### LORENZO

If euro bills are the hardware of money, cryptocurrency could be considered their software. How does the performance *Business Related Strategy* (2019) deal with these dynamics?

#### DIEGO

Anonymous knew about cryptocurrency. He discovered Bitcoin back in 2008—a particular moment in which the stock market crashed and banks failed. Digital money was then a type of currency associated with cybercrimes, in particular related to the so-called Silk Road, the first model of the darknet market—a platform that allowed online users to browse anonymously and securely without being tracked and monitored while trafficking. Decentralization, anonymity, and privacy have always been a priority. Anytime anyone with a crypto buys a coffee, that transaction is kept in something called *the public ledger*. While there are no names attached, the behavior is out there for anyone to see. It's not that difficult to match this string of characters with the person that it represents out in the real world. There are companies that actively deanonymize people. Anonymous imagined using this process in a creative way and said that actually it is possible to mine for everything in the web and create value through that action of mining. What if you get money just by the mining of your name and surname on the web? What if our daily searches on the web could create actual monetary value? What if you could create a self-authored currency and self-authored system of creation of value? In particular, we started thinking about a personalized system that later I would realize with two professors specializing in human-computer interaction and a specialist in Stockholm, to have a system for a performance in which a series of unemployed workers would get paid just by pronouncing their name



and surname—agreeing to be publicly recognized and have their identity exposed. During the exhibition, they would pronounce their name and surname into a microphone while a customized PC would search the web for these results (the presence of their names in public platforms and networks). This data would then be translated and used to mine an Altcoin, which would determine the actual monetary value the performers were going to be paid. This is the idea behind the performance *Business Related Strategy*: a personalized and closed-circuit system that would create the power for the customized PC to mine the web for their names and create monetary value based on the real-time value of the Bitcoin. The accumulation of these values and their floating history during the show would determine the payment of the performers. An LED scroll display, such as the one used in stock market tickers, then displays the updated value for each performer, according to their performance. This is what I find interesting: both the psychological aspect of performers deciding to take part in this work, and the strategy they would use to feed this speculative system, as an alternative stock market.

Diego Tonus (b. 1984) lives and works in The Hague, Netherlands. He studied visual arts at IUAV University, Venice, and at Sandberg Institute, Amsterdam. His solo shows and presentations have taken place at Whitechapel Gallery London (2020); STROOM Den Haag (2019); Van Eyck Maastricht (2019); Ellen de Bruijne, Amsterdam (2018); ar/ge kunst, Bolzano (2017); and SMBA Amsterdam (2013). He has participated in group exhibitions including TENT Rotterdam; Quadrenniale, Rome; WIELS, Brussels; De Appel, Amsterdam; CCA Singapore; Fondazione Sandretto, Turin; and Palais de Tokyo, Paris. His films have been presented internationally, including at the Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, and Kunsthalle Gwangju. Tonus has been awarded residencies at Van Eyck Maastricht (2017); WIELS, Brussels (2014); and Spinola Banna Foundation (2011), among others. He has been nominated for awards including the Italian Council (2018) and Premio Furla (2012). Tonus's work is in the permanent collections of MAMbo - Museo d'Arte Moderna di Bologna; MAXXI Museum, Rome; and MOMA, Moscow. His publications include *Fragments of a Conversation with a Counterfeiter* (Roma Publications, 2019).

Lorenzo Balbi has been the artistic director of MAMbo - Museo d'Arte Moderna di Bologna since 2017, when he took on the role of head of the Modern and Contemporary Art Area of the Istituzione Bologna Musei. He studied cultural heritage conservation at Ca' Foscari University in Venice and specialized in contemporary art at the University of Turin. His texts and articles have been published in various magazines including *Il Giornale dell'Arte*, *Mousse*, and *La Stampa*. He was formerly the artistic director of Verso Gallery in Turin. He taught Methodology of Curatorship at Campo at the Fondazione Sandretto Re Rebaudengo, Turin (2006–17) and was curator in charge of the Residency for Young Foreign Curators (2015–17). Since 2018 he has been the artistic director of ART CITY Bologna. Professor of Art Systems at DAMS Bologna, he is a member of the board of directors of AMACI and of the coordination of the Forum Arte Contemporanea Italiana.