

ARTS

Soft soap and whitewash, Italian style

Rebecca Rose meets the artist who claims to have made a soapbar from prime minister Silvio Berlusconi's liposuctioned fat

If you are a well-connected artist in need of inspiration, you could do worse than "do a Duchamp". That is, take an object out of its everyday context, give it a cheeky title, and display it in the name of art, as Marcel Duchamp did in 1917 with his famous urinal. The significance of his "Fountain" has only grown over time: last year art experts voted it the "most influential work of modern art of all time". Artists have been hitting the headlines with Duchamp derivatives, often having their own *succès de scandale*, ever since.

The Italian artist Gianni Motti has provided the latest scandal in the name of art. His recent work "Mani Pulite" ("Clean Hands") is a bar of soap that he says is made from Italian prime minister Silvio Berlusconi's liposuctioned fat. After it was exhibited last month at Art Basel, the world's most influential art fair, a Swiss art collector bought it for €15,000.

The title of Motti's work has a tidy double meaning:

"clean hands" is also the name of an Italian anti-corruption campaign of the 1990s that caused the downfall of several politicians. This bar of soap is definitely on the dirty side – but what exactly is the artist commenting on?

"It is not an overly political work of art," says Motti. It is more a comment on the Italian prime minister's

'Berlusconi talks about himself and his appearance more than he talks about politics'

unhealthy obsession with his image. "He talks about himself and his appearance more than he talks about politics. And he is always having plastic surgery." (Motti is presumably referring to Berlusconi's avowed eyelift and hair transplant.) He now claims that Berlus-

coni had liposuction in a Swiss clinic. "I had a connection there, so I obtained some of his fat and took it to France, where an artisanal soap-maker and I turned it into a bar of soap."

Motti makes it sound surprisingly easy to create a marketable toiletry out of a head, or stomach, of state. But as he won't reveal his source, how can we, or the Swiss collector, be sure it isn't a hoax? He is prepared for my question: "I am willing to send a sample of the soap for DNA testing, if Berlusconi will comply and do a test too." An unlikely scenario; Motti and his integrity are probably safe.

In fact, authenticity hardly seems his main concern. "If art was all about what is real and what isn't then it wouldn't work," he says obliquely. "Half the works of art that we see in galleries today are fakes."

This playfulness is typical of Motti, who calls himself a "reality hacker". He is currently exhibiting at the Swiss Pavilion at the Venice Biennale, with a timepiece counting down the five billion years left until the sun dies. But Motti's works are often more actively interventionist. "The Guantánamo Initiative", co-created with artist Christoph Buchel, is a record of an attempt to provide the Cuban government with alternative tenants (Motti and Buchel) for the Guantánamo Bay area. This has a manifestly political aim, but other "works", including the times he has gone to the press claiming responsibility for, separately,



Image conscious: Gianni Motti says the work is a comment on Silvio Berlusconi's unhealthy obsession with his appearance

Reuters

the 1986 Challenger space shuttle disaster and an earthquake in California in 1992, make Motti seem like a jumped-up troublemaker.

Such acts, along with the soap, might irritate people enough to ask: "But is it art?" Motti responds: "Duchamp said, 'Le tableau est fait non par le peintre mais par ceux qui le regardent' – the painting is made not by the painter but by those who look at it."

This may sound like a cop-out, but he is right: if the public doesn't take an inter-

est, and the media don't get excited, then these bizarre acts and objects fall flat on their face.

Motti's Silvio soap is not wholly made out of hype, however – it has some weight as an aesthetic object. "It is mounted on black velour and plexiglass," the artist beams. "People were staring at it, and photographers were snapping it as if it were a top model."

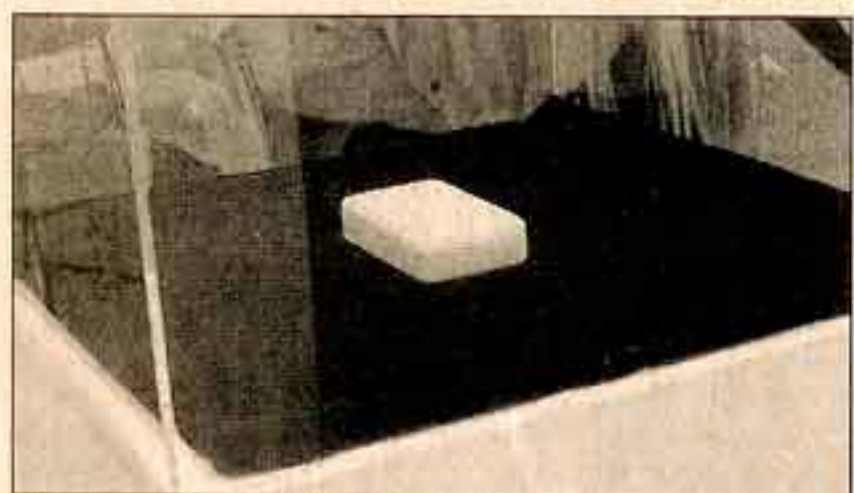
Motti says he intended it to be a simple, humble work. Above all, he considers it to be a strongly Italian piece –

following in the classic Italian relic tradition.

But what of other "human" soaps, such as those rumoured to have been made by Nazis? Did Motti not intend any comment on fascism past and present? "No, not at all. Hitler made soap, but he was also a vegetarian and a painter. So that means that every vegetarian and every painter also has something in common with him. Anyway, Berlusconi is still alive, it's completely different."

There is something vexing

about Motti and his bar of soap. It could be a neat contemporary commentary on politics, the media, image-consciousness and postmodern portraiture – and therefore worthy of its plexiglass pedestal. Or it could just be a tasteless, overpriced idea that dissolves in seconds, like soap in a hot bath. Motti feels that the high price the soap fetched in Basel is proof of its overwhelming success: "Berlusconi clearly makes so much money – it's good for someone to make a bit out of him for a change."



Cleaned up: the artwork fetched €15,000

Reuters