

Piercing the Darkness with Light: Fabrizio Dusi's *Don't Kill*

by Sharon Hecker

When Fabrizio Dusi first told me about his ideas for this exhibition, he said that he wanted to “pierce the darkness with light.”

This statement is completely understandable when coming from an artist like Dusi. It also is perfectly coherent with his artistic identity. For years Dusi has worked with neon, a modern material that, together with ceramics, marks his entire artistic career. At the same time, this was a new development in Dusi's art. Up to this moment he had always installed his works in interior and exterior spaces that were well-illuminated—gardens, living rooms, bedrooms, entrances to cinemas like the Cinema Apollo in Milan, on the walls of Milan's Università Bocconi and in art galleries. A new stimulus was now leading him to look for dark spaces to illuminate and animate with light.

I do not think it is by chance that precisely in this moment and context Dusi, who is not Jewish by religion, began to sense a closeness to Jewish traditions. Dusi became attracted specifically to Jewish spaces associated with dark moments such as death, such as the Cimitero Monumentale in Milan where Jewish families are buried. For Dusi, the genesis of the exhibition *Don't Kill* was his visit to the Shoah Memorial in Milan, a dark place both physically and metaphorically, dictated by the tragedy of the Holocaust. Reading the names and the history of the Jews killed between 1944 and 1945 led Dusi to a deep inner elaboration of an artistic process that I will return to in a moment.

Before I do so, I would like to pause to consider another artistic gesture made by Dusi that occurred not long before this exhibition but is certainly linked to it: his work on the “Chanukkiyah,” or the special Jewish candle-holder that Jews use to celebrate Chanukkah, known as the Festival of Lights. Dusi drew inspiration from the moment in Jewish history that commemorates the desecration of the Second Temple in Jerusalem by the forces of Antioch. As the story goes, the Jews found their temple miraculously intact despite the great destruction wrought by Antioch's soldiers upon the sacred objects and the altar inside the temple. Amidst the ruins, one small container of pure olive oil was found for illuminating the temple, but there was only

enough oil in the container to last for one day. The Jewish people accepted this uncertainty of lighting the lamp with the small amount of oil they found. Miraculously, the oil lasted for eight days, which was the time necessary to purify more oil to keep the lamp lit. This story is about believing in the force of a small amount of light that can produce an enormous transformation. Every year the Jews celebrate Chanukkah, lighting one candle each night to commemorate the eight nights of the miracle.

Dusi was deeply impressed by this story of light that pierces the darkness, and so he began to create a work called *Chanukkiah* that he would exhibit in the Synagogue of Casale Monferrato. Dusi's version of the Chanukkiah is wrought out of the word "Chanukkiah" itself. It is a gilded ceramic work that includes real candles. The golden color of the work recaptures the theme of light in another material and rethinks the traditional form of the Chanukkiah by illuminating not from above, as candles normally do, but rather from underneath the word (fig. 1).

Although I do not know Dusi's imaginal processes, it seems to me that this deep and multifaceted meditation on the role and power of light in a dark space is what led him to begin to work on the marvelous, powerful *Stella* (Star, fig. 2) that he originally wanted to install in the Shoah Memorial. For this work, Dusi recaptured the most humiliating symbol that marked the Jews during the Holocaust, the yellow Star of David that Jews were forced to wear on their clothing.

Dusi does not escape or hide from such a negative symbol so charged with tragic memories. Instead, he rephrases it in new terms, using his art to re-elaborate and return the symbol to the world in a new, positive and powerful way. The yellow color here is no longer part of the star itself. Rather, it shines from behind the star. Like a rising sun it becomes a symbol of light and hope. At the same time, Dusi does not forget the tragedy that the star represents. He covers the face of the white *Stella* with black lines that at first look like abstract graffiti-like doodles. The new light rises from behind the star. It co-exists with the darkness that was.

Dusi does not forget, deny, or repress this darkness. Although he was not conscious of this association when he made his work, *Stella* is strongly reminiscent of the *Sol niger*

from the alchemical and Hermetic tradition (fig. 3) which depicts a black sun. This paradoxical simultaneous appearance of light and darkness is an age-old image of light within darkness, as co-existing in us all.

Dusi's *Stella* is also a deeply human star. A closer examination reveals that the black doodles on the star are actually a group of dark, anonymous heads with their mouths wide open. These heads cry in pain but at the same time they breathe, they scream together all at once and thus give us a sign of life. On the one hand, these stars remind us the human lives lost. On the other hand, they lead us to think of the strong sense of belonging that converges in a single collective cry. I believe that it is from this cry that the imperative "DON'T KILL," which marks this exhibition, would be born.

By a strange combination of circumstances, the exhibition "DON'T KILL" ended up not being installed inside the Shoah Memorial, as Fabrizio had originally desired. Instead a new possibility came about, of installing this show in the space of the Casa della Memoria: a new dark space emerged for Dusi to "pierce with light." I remember that Dusi became attracted to the windows located in the upper areas of the Casa della Memoria building. These windows look outwards to the world. In an utterly instinctive artistic gesture, Dusi decided to hang his neon words "DON'T KILL" in the windows. By this act, his art was able not only to pierce the darkness inside the building but also the darkness outside. Not only does Dusi illuminate the night but also the darkness of the uncertain times in which we are living today. Through the light in the window, he invites people who walk by the building to enter and see the show while creating a visible manifesto to the outside world about what can be found inside this space.

Dusi certainly could not have known the symbolic, powerful nature of his gesture of placing a light by the windows at night. It recalls the Jewish tradition of placing the lit Chanukkah by the window of one's house on the ground floor, as close as possible to the street, and therefore visible to all who pass by. This should always be done, say the Jewish commentators, not only during historical times of danger when there is the risk that the lights will be stolen or will suffer from violent gestures.

The reasons given by commentators for putting the Chanukkiah at the window is to publicize the miracle of Chanukkah as well as to make a public statement that declares what one believes in. The gesture of Chanukkah is intended for the outside world (in contrast, the Jewish Easter or *Pesach* is intended for one's private family). It is a beautiful experience to walk along the streets from house to house on the evenings of Chanukkah and see the lights of the Chanukkiot lighting up the windows of each home.

Today, the Channukiah at the window is considered to be a perfect symbol of multiculturalism, in which I declare to the world what I believe in. The words "DON'T KILL" placed by Dusi in the window of the Casa della Memoria serve to pierce the darkness with light, both inside and outside. Others do not have to adopt his words, but by putting them at the window he asks people to accept them. The light of Chanukkah that has its origin inside the private home and is projected outwards to the world remind us just what we believe in.