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## **Marco Cavallo, 1973**

*an empty format experience of communication in the psychiatric hospital of Trieste directed by Franco Basaglia*  
by Giuliano Scabia

With Vittorio Basaglia, Stefano Stradiotto, Ortensia Mele, Federico Velludo, Vittoria Basaglia and others  
Trieste, December 1972. January/February 1973.

### **Premessa<sup>1</sup>**

by Giuliano Scabia

Christmas 1972. Venice in the holiday season is a must see for all those who have gone to work outside the city. There is a kind of strange appointment. In this atmosphere, and at Franco Basaglia's home, the idea was born to do a group project at the psychiatric hospital of Trieste.

The idea was immediately welcomed, first by Vittorio and Giuliano, then gradually by Federico, Ortensia, Stefano and Vittoria. Thus took shape a group of persons that, for various reasons, made available their various kinds of expertise, determined to use them especially to find a new way of being together.

None of us had ever been in a psychiatric hospital or had any psychiatric knowledge. We were painters, directors, writers, animators, teachers, photographers, etc., and we didn't know how our crafts, our knowledge could be useful. Could we devise projects: teach how to draw? Teach how to sculpt? It wasn't easy. We wouldn't have a public to show our works to, or students to instruct in special techniques, or children to entertain, but a human reality that we wanted to help modify. Temporarily, in passing, with no precise work obligation or payment, we entered for a time a hospital undergoing change.

We were "artists," a definition we chose precisely for its ambiguity, which would enable us to be recognized by the patients as persons not undergoing treatment or detainment: not interned in the mental institution. We wanted above all to start up a kind of uncodified and uncodifiable communication, which would gradually take shape over time. We worked in a difficult, stimulating and absolutely new situation, refusing however to establish a relationship of experimenters on guinea pigs.

What counted was to live out the experience, conscious of having to give up an entire mental structure, conditioned by our daily habits and relationships with "normal people," in order to cultivate them with persons who were ill, imprisoned and excluded.

We realized that two types of creativity existed: what our profession obliged us to have and what was born from a constant confrontation with reality. In our work in Trieste we tried to use these two creativities together, convinced that only in this way could the individual truly amplify all his faculties in order to understand and solve the problems that were placed before him.

We lived among the patients for two months (the period we were given and which we gave ourselves). We turned out, through the construction of *Marco Cavallo*, drawings, songs, dances and discussions with the patients, doctors and nurses, which stimulated an atmosphere of vibrant communication among all of us. This atmosphere charged the figure of *Marco Cavallo* with a weight of collective liberation that was expressed with our trip into town, through the streets of Trieste, in San Giusto, in the neighborhood of San Vito. We lived for a single day what we would have liked to live always: we sang the song *Marco Cavallo lotta per gli esclusi* with the verve, anger and knowledge that we were all far from being liberated.

Writing the Marco Cavallo story was also an itinerary, as was also (of research and communal living) our lab experience. We had started from the idea of writing together (Vittorio Basagli and I), starting with the notes I took each day.

Our writing together proved impossible. We decided that I would be the curator of the "chronicle" and the communication with the others of what we had done in Trieste (information that was being requested from all over, amidst the circulation of distorted versions). As the narration progressed I increasingly felt the need to have my collaborators and witnesses verify it, as in turn my companions felt the same need. Thus a chain reaction got under way. The "chronicle" was reviewed, analyzed, revised, first of all by Franca Basaglia. At this point we thought that the doctors that had worked with us should also review the "chronicle." In the end, all those who had visited the lab became part of our group.

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<sup>1</sup> Giuliano Scabia, *Marco Cavallo. Un'esperienza di animazione in un ospedale psichiatrico*, Einaudi, Turin 1976, pp. 17-19.