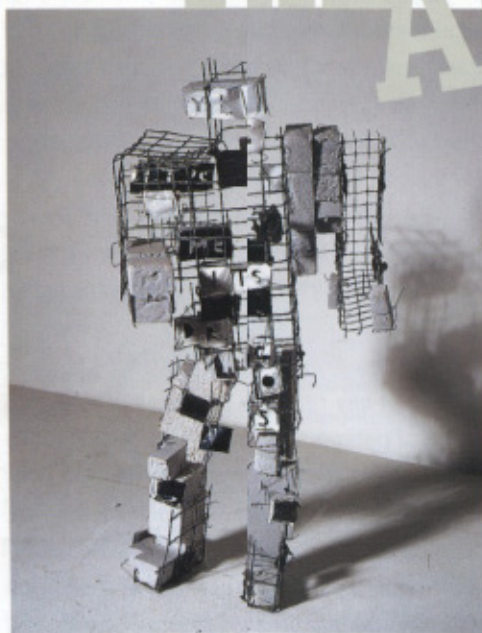




left to right: Comic Book "Not-a-Superhero" #3, "The Power of Pattern-Man", 1993 (detail), artist book, candy wrappers and other media on paper, 12 pages and cover, each 11 x 7 in.; Comic Book "Not-a-Superhero" #4, "The Return of Dr. Logos", 1993 (detail), artist book, candy wrappers and other media on paper, 12 pages and cover, each 11 x 7 in.; Comic Book "Not-a-Superhero" #7, "The End of the Origin," 1994 (detail), artist book, candy wrappers and other media on paper, 14 pages and cover, each 10.25 x 6.5 in. All images courtesy of the artist and John Weber Gallery, New York.

# THE ACCIDENTAL SUPERHERO



Dr. Logos Action Figure, 1995, rofoam, wire, plastic, netting and other materials, 20 x 11 x 9 in.



Pattern-Man Action Figure, 1993 (detail), vinyl, gauze, wire, candy wrappers and other materials, 14 1/2 x 190 x 8 in.

Luca Buvoli's protagonist, **Not-a-Superhero**, follows tattered narratives of melodrama and fragmentation. **Barry Schwabsky enters the fray.**

I knew that I was about to unmask myself when Luca Buvoli asked me whether as a boy I'd preferred D.C. comics or Marvel. "D.C.," I had to admit, though I knew what that meant in the eyes of someone for whom the truly fascinating comic-book protagonists were the more eccentric and alienated ones of Marvel rather than the square-jawed all-Americans of the aptly named D.C. Shamefully, I had admired the heroes more than the anti-heroes. But it seems that worse things are not only possible, but forgivable: "My wife can't even see any difference between superheroes and Mickey Mouse," Buvoli remarked in perplexity.

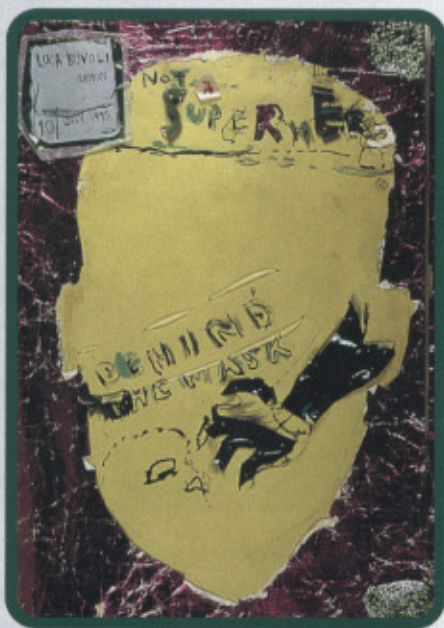
It was clear enough, of course, which side of the Marvel-D.C. divide Buvoli was on. The subject of this artist's work, in the form of drawings, sculpture, books and animated films, has been the ongoing adventures of a

very home-made comic-book character whose name is Not-a-Superhero – adventures chronicled in an eponymous series of (so far 12) comic books. Where else could he have found his models but in Marvel? Buvoli is an artist, not of triumphant identity, but of fragmented being, of existence as "a remainder, not properly determined in itself," to quote "Behind the Mask," episode #10 in Buvoli's series of *Not-a-Superhero* comics. (Likewise, Buvoli conceives of each of his exhibitions, he says, "as one episode unfolded three-dimensionally.")

The essential subject of the work is the tragicomic incommensurability between desire and reality. At the end of "The End of the Origin," episode #7 of *Not-a-Superhero*, Buvoli reproduces a drawing he made in 1973, at the age of 10. A single figure is split down the middle into two selves. On the left, "come



Comic Book "Not-a-Superhero" #10, "Behind the Mask", 1995 (detail, artist book, candy wrappers and other media on paper, 16 pages and cover, each 10.25 x 6.5 in.



3-D Cover of "Not-a-Superhero" #10, "Behind the Mask", 1996, wire, plastic and other materials, 11 x 9 x 6 feet. Collection of the Museum of Modern Art, New York. All images courtesy of the artist, John Weber Gallery, New York and ACME, Los Angeles



vorrei essere...," – "how I'd like to be...": a masked Superhero; on the right, "e come sono!" – "and how I am!": an ordinary little boy with a pencil in hand. The vertical line down the middle, just in case the idea isn't clear enough, likewise rends the child's signature. Child and hero – each is a part of him.

Subjunctive and indicative, being and desire, reality principle and pleasure principle – the self includes both, and therefore always the split between them as well. Not-a-Superhero believes that he was once "a true Superhero.... I used to fly in a liquid space and time, traveling through infinity. No margins could limit my actions. I was stronger than steel, lighter than paper. I was interior and exterior. I was the same, I was the other" (#6, "The Origin of Not-a-Superhero"). Yet the



drawing of the 10-year-old Luca reminds us that the split self goes back to the beginning; that the true fall may be not the split itself, but the illusory belief that there was a time before it.

Be that as it may, Not-a-Superhero tells us that he lost his powers, and his original identity as Supermark, when he met Dr. Logos and was betrayed by that villain's promise of absolute knowledge. We can well believe that it was the encounter with language that caused the transformation from the plenitude of the mark, the physical graphic trace, and yet, as the etymology of the word "mark" (from an old English word meaning both "boundary" and "sign") warns us, it always had a diacritical and linguistic potential inscribed within it. After the cataclysm that destroyed Supermark, the enfeebled Not-a-Superhero arose like a

phoenix from the ashes, albeit naked, so that he had to stitch together a new costume out of shredded bits of this and that, whatever he could find amidst the wreckage. And he made himself a mask out of words.

Other characters arise, among them A..., the amnesiac private eye who seems to be a stand-in for the viewer/reader trying to understand Not-a-Superhero's fate ("Too bad I got here too late," he mutters [#12, "Wherever You Are Not"]); the mysterious Met-Aphora, an elusive female presence ("I guess she saved me. A captivating illusion, something that might belong to the imaginary order," thinks Not-a-Superman [#11, "Silent Sight"]); and various antagonists, among them Patternman, who has no specific guise of his own but is always threatening to trap Not-a-



Superhero in the seemingly innocuous weave of some repetitive pattern he's taken on. (Since Dr. Logos himself looks something like a crossword puzzle, I can only wonder whether he may not turn out to be yet another of Patternman's guises – or is it that Not-a-Superhero is to Patternman as figure to ground, and to Dr. Logos as image to language?)

"I try to combine the bombastic tone of superhero comics with philosophical tones inappropriate to them," says Buvoli. Those who like Godard movies where schoolchildren can suddenly begin spouting phrases from Marx, or plays by Richard Foreman in which a heroine reminiscent of Lucille Ball seems to be channeling Martin Heidegger, will be right at home with Buvoli's cross-cutting between the idioms of comics and the seminar room. Not

only do echoes abound of the biblical Fall, and even of the shifting identities of the mythic personae of *Finnegans Wake*, but so do divagations into the idioms of heavyweight philosophical and psychoanalytical *maîtres à penser* such as Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Jacques Lacan.

For all that, the true story of Not-a-Superhero never becomes entirely clear. Bits of narrative crop up, revelations are promised, but the tale, not even elliptical, gets sidetracked, fragmented, plunged into obscurity. And it is so involved in flashbacks and flash-forwards that there is no stable sense of the present moment. Like the character himself, his story is always "a fragment which is trying to become ONE, a whole" (#7). The ramshackle construction of Buvoli's improvised,



self-revising tale flirts with insubstantiality and fragmentation on the one hand, melodramatic portentousness on the other, yet he somehow always scrapes through with his stylistic grace intact, just as Not-a-Superhero somehow gathers together the shards of his being sufficiently to survive for another episode.

So it would be misleading to give too much emphasis to these tatters of character and narrative, striking as they are, and even though they supply some of the threads that connect Buvoli's works in diverse mediums. There is an even stronger connection, though a less obvious one, and it resides in the idea of movement. Perhaps this shouldn't be surprising for an artist born and educated in Italy and who recalls a strong early attraction to the art of the Italian Futurists. Yet in contrast



to the Futurists' manically optimistic understanding of the idea of movement, Buvoli's work is saturated with the sense – as in classical philosophy – of movement as a problem, a symptom of imperfection. Being is perfect and therefore static, while becoming – and movement – reflects a fundamental lack.

Of course, for painting and sculpture, which are nominally static, movement is also a technical problem. Obviously, Buvoli's animated films, like his flip books, expand his drawings by putting them into motion, just as the sculptures expand them into three dimensions. And yet the idea of motion is always present in the drawings themselves, though it may have been through animating that this became clear to the artist. "Doing animation, I had to learn that each drawing



exists in relation to the previous and the following ones," Buvoli says. "I have to forget about making a good drawing, something that's complete in itself. Even when I make individual drawings, they're like isolated frames of a general movement. The idea of movement, of transition, has always been there."

Much of Buvoli's work approximates, in its homespun way, the condition of advertising. The drawings are often conceived of as "posters" for the comics, and the sculptures resemble neon signs; recently Buvoli made a video as a "trailer" for his new film (almost a third of the length of the film itself.) This is not simply a reflection of commercial culture, as in the slick "simulacra" of 1980s postmodernism. What's at issue for Buvoli is the idea of the

"coming attraction," of what has not yet arrived, of a desire that precedes its object – again, of becoming as a function of lack.

The odd thing is that a figure is likely to be represented in an awkwardly childish way that comically or pathetically conflicts with the apparent tendency to render it as being in motion – Not-a-Superhero shown with his arms stretched upward into the air to represent the leap into flight, though the body is so heavily rendered that any sense of motion seems absent – yet the flurry of delicate marks that make up the drawing as a whole communicate a vivid sense of movement.

Expanding the words and images from the Not-a-Superman narrative into three dimensions, Buvoli's sculptures – made of bits of cloth, wire, Plexiglas, and other random



materials, as though to instantiate Not-a-Superhero's precariously scraped-together costume – render them nearly unreadable. At first, the artist was surprised to find of the images in the sculpture that "they were not immediately recognizable. People used to see them as abstract. I was almost ashamed to tell people what they really were because it seemed so childish. I thought it was my private universe. I liked that the characters kept their secret identity."

These days, Buvoli seems particularly immersed in his latest animated film, *Inside and Outside Time*. He is particularly fascinated by the construction of movement in film, and to describe one of his preferred devices for this, he borrows from Sergei Eisenstein the use of the word "anadiplosis", literally "doubling

back." Originally a term in classical rhetoric that refers to the device of beginning a line or sentence with the concluding word of the one before, Eisenstein employed the word to designate a form of montage in which one shot does not represent a point in the flow of narrative subsequent to the preceding shot, but rather begins at a point somewhere before the end of the previous shot. The result is a back-and-forth movement, a sort of accordion time, paradoxically slowed down yet full of a more hectic movement than would be obtained by a smooth transition from shot to shot. Something similar happens in the nervous, back-and-forth graphic gestures that make up the forms in Buvoli's drawings, where smooth and continuous contours are unknown.



Perhaps the true irony of Buvoli's art, however, is that while it proclaims fragmentation over unity, desire over satisfaction, anticipation over fulfillment, lack over being, and childishness over maturity, he has produced an oeuvre of unusual consistency and rare reflective self-consciousness. Although his work impersonates the sensibility of the adolescent boy he once was, or thinks he was, there is an underlying strength of construction that is almost classical. Speaking of his way of depicting the figure, Buvoli remarks that "it's important that they're depicted correctly, even anatomically, though no one notices. But it's important to me." Can it be that behind the mask of alienation lurks a coherent identity, or even aesthetic plenitude – perhaps not in hiding, but sweetly reticent? @■