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Sicily Rising

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Tekst jest udostępniony do wykorzystania w ramach dozwolonego użytku.

Sicily RISING

Foreword
by Cornelia Lauf

Though I have resisted writing an essay, at the gentle insistence of the editor of *Sztuka i Dokumentacja*, here are a few thoughts on this special section, also in written form.

My hesitation is not due to any artful pose. It's a form of deference toward twelve wonderful creators (really, 13, since we count both Ingrassia twins) who are able to say by showing, and whom I have collected, with a gifted young curator from Palermo, in order to demonstrate the living nature of excellence in contemporary Sicilian visual practice.

A reticence to write is also the fruit of long years spent at the side of wordsmith artists, where I have been faced with the perplexing fact that despite maximum implementation of concept and language, it is the image and material matters which prevails in art. The triumph of image has somehow muted my desire to write.

And since I may not sing, though perhaps that is the medium in which I would most like to pay tribute, here a few more modest phrases: "Arte e un fatto materico," says Emilio Prini. "Art is meaning in a concrete form," states Joseph Kosuth.

Over fifteen years of life in Italy and some travel in Sicily, I have come to realize that not only do artists from this peninsula recognize a fundamental split between idea and iteration, but have managed to bridge the two better than most.

Whether it is because Italy is on the cusp between North and South, East and West, or because of its peculiar land shape, or because of millennia of invasions and the sweep of tribes and peoples, or even because the reach of the Roman Empire extended so far and is still determinant in establishing our modern legal, transport, fiscal, artistic codes – for whatever reason, contemporary Italian art is both a beginning and an end in itself.

Nowhere is the autotelic nature of Italian art more evident than in that self-absorbed, self-contained island called Sicily, whose rotten perfection are so seductive and clouding to the senses that it seems unnecessary to seek anything at all further than its fabled shores. Despite claim as one of the world's greatest exporters of immigrant labor, the island is as close to Paradise as any spot on earth, -- replete with Snake and apple -- and continues to elicit marvel even in contemporary times. Its increasingly imperiled beauty has served as a pole to the imagination in a way that has preoccupied very few other immigrant ethnic groups, much more eager to shed their origins.

If we accept to believe in some kind of ping-pong of art history, with moments of great heights, and centers of production, with dialogue between artists, writers, and curators, and the creation of schools and movements, then it is just that we naturally look around for heirs to some of the great art movements of the past half century. I personally believe that now is the moment for Sicily.

Weaned on the canons of Conceptual art, I have happily accepted the beautiful tyranny, of that "prison-house of language," to quote Frederic Jameson, for many decades. But the Anglo-Saxon post-Wittgensteinian crop of artists, though in themselves still volcanoes of activity, has yielded generation after generation of followers that have become a new orthodoxy rather than innovation.

Post-conceptual artistic practice took the form of institutional critique and "relational aesthetics" as an answer to the challenges posed by the work of artists such as Marcel Broodthaers and Hans Haacke. But also Fluxus, or the work of more minor artists such as Bas Jan Ader or Andre Cadere. Its history is well-known and mapped. However

today, we stand at a point where such critiques must necessarily take place within institutions themselves, for to witness them is impossible without an obliging framework to be ruptured. A colossal example of this tendency was the Venice Biennale pavilion, in which Haacke destroyed the Fascist era marble floor, and left it in Caspar David Friedrich-iceberg rubble, when he was selected to represent Germany. Another example, was the choice of Tino Sehgal to immaterially and performatively articulate "contemporaneity," once again in the confines of the German Venice Biennial pavilion. A plethora of other practices oblige us to seek art within the participating frame, without which the work of artists who use alienation, appropriation, or the vernacular, would be non-existent.

But what if life itself were the frame? Where would we then be, if dead horses hanging from rafters, gentlemen politely crapping on theater stages, or soiled dolls on baby blankets, had no other bulwark than the horrendous yawning hole of everydayness? No artist using military paraphernalia, or thrift shop materials actually wishes to install in the museum of police arms (Rome) or a county fair. The frame is the actual location and defining characteristic of much art, as necessary to its completion as the speckles going out beyond the borders of a Signac, the fanciful carving encasing a Gauguin, the holes pointing to another dimension in a Fontana. By going into outer space, there was ironically an insinuation that there is no further work to be done, that there is no progress, and no final mark to be made, in the spiraling life logic of a Prini or Kosuth or Robert Barry, or Mario Merz, or many other artists.

In Italy, in a place where there ARE very few institutions to rupture, and where art has for

so long been a part of the everyday, the strength of these gestures seems all the more determined and specific, if they are made without a frame to rupture.

Often, it is said there are very few young artists in Italy, let alone Sicily. That it is impossible for artists here to measure up to Antonello da Messina, to Michelangelo and Raphael. That they are only comfortable in groups, tend not to travel, and do not obey the rules of the Miami-Basel-New York-London-Hong Kong art world. That is a fallacy.

In this Italian and in specific, Sicilian terrain, there are wonders being wrought precisely because of the relentless confrontation with the past. In a country where traces of civilization go back thousands of years, it is simply a higher standard that necessarily forces one to discriminate against banality and thus encourage a kind of modesty that would do well to be practiced elsewhere.

In a country where the drawings of Leonardo still set a standard today, it is impossible to love only the word, or the reproduction, even in a post-Duchampian century. And thus Italian artists, perhaps the foremost lovers of an art that is conceptual, find in the making of form a vibration and electricity, which is visual and synaesthetic, creating sparks and currents, as good art always has.

Futurism captured this well in its polyhedral investigations.

The conductor for making art continues to be the hand, despite great efforts to obscure this fact. The great artist must master materiality and is condemned to exercise this bravura eternally, no matter how far he or she may run to escape a relation to craft.

“There are many excellent craftsmen, but

few practical dreamers,” said Man Ray.

Today, there is less prejudice towards the stupidity of the paintbrush. The enemy (or great father) Pablo Picasso, has finally been answered, whether it is in the works of Warhol, Lichtenstein, or Polke and Richter. Other artists have stepped up to bat, to become conductors, in the way that Picasso gave rise to generation after generation of response.

It is no longer forbidden to use the hand, reduced to a machine in much Conceptual and post-Conceptual art.

Sicilian artists that I met over the course of a month with the kind assistance of Maria Giovanna Virga, agreed to articulate their ideas on place, on art and its utter most essential building block – drawing – for the purposes of this special essay.

Their works are extremely varied, and many of the artists do not even know one another. And yet, I am convinced that by looking at their drawings, we are affirming what art is, and that a making visual artist can indeed be distinguished from a cultural operator, or a theorist of postcolonial practice who uses artistic forms to paper together a body of work.

I am tired of the use of outsider artists and the drawings of the insane, begun so many years ago in the landmark exhibition of Harald Szeemann, or the collections of Art Brut. I love folk art, but distinguish it from the kind of high science I detect in the work of that person that has the ability to picture.

This editorial section is a call to arms and proof that Italian and specifically Sicilian artists can fight, and above all, have the magisterial ability right in their hands, to move the soul and mind with beauty, surely the highest purpose of culture.