

Naples

Cathryn Drake

AS ORSON WELLES'S CHARACTER famously observed in *The Third Man*, "In Italy . . . they had warfare, terror, murder, and bloodshed, but they produced Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci, and the Renaissance. In Switzerland, they had brotherly love, they had five hundred years of democracy and peace, and what did that produce? The cuckoo clock." Indeed, long after the Renaissance, Italian modernism continued that love affair with trouble—from Futurism's romanticization of war onward. And at present, Naples is much like a city at war; Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi recently deployed troops to stifle escalating Mafia violence in the city and clean up mounds of refuse left over from the recent garbage crisis. Meanwhile, vigilantes have been torching Roma camps in the wake of a national backlash against immigrants. Naples also lies in the shadow of an active volcano, of course; Mount Vesuvius last erupted in 1944—not so long ago—but that does not stop people from constructing illegal homes in its red zone. This is a sign of the indomitable spirit of the gritty, vibrating port city, which has attracted artists from Caravaggio to Joseph Beuys. The painterly backdrop of the volcano acts as a memento mori, adding an urgent frisson to Neapolitan culture. Here, the contemporary is always reminded of its impending obsolescence.

In fact, Naples has been experiencing something of a cultural renaissance since Antonio Bassolino, now president of the Campania region, became mayor in 1993 and initiated numerous projects promoting contemporary art. In 1994, he began an extensive expansion of the city's transportation system, including

new stations incorporating art from the likes of Luisa Rabbia, Jannis Kounellis, Sol LeWitt, and Mimmo Paladino—the first collaboration of its kind in the world. Anish Kapoor and the architectural firm Future Systems have designed the new Monte Sant'Angelo station, which is slated for completion in February 2010 and will feature a monumental sculptural entrance, augmenting the revitalization of the peripheral Fuorigrotta area. Downtown, the Piazza Plebiscito

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has hosted annual temporary installations; this past year, Michelangelo Pistoletto laid down a red silhouette of the Mediterranean that mapped and consolidated the regional cultures of its coasts. A similarly cosmopolitan impetus is behind the Museo d'Arte Contemporanea Donna Regina Napoli (MADRE), which opened in 2005 in a seventeenth-century palazzo near the Duomo to spur gentrification and draw tourism to the area. One floor is dedicated to permanent installations by artists of international prominence, from Rebecca Horn to Jeff Koons to Richard Serra; temporary exhibitions are installed on the floors above and below. The current presentation, "Robert Rauschenberg: Travelling '70-'76," includes the masterly "Cardboards," "Venetians," and "Early Egyptians" series—creating an unwitting visual connection between the local trash overflow and Rauschenberg's brilliantly recycled constructions.

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Although government initiatives have provided a hospitable context for contemporary art, the exchanges among public and private players have not been entirely tranquil, with the galleries accusing the institutions of needlessly borrowing from outside collections. This has caused ongoing tension between the two camps. However, Julia Draganovic, curatorial director of the government-funded Palazzo delle Arti





Napoli (PAN), is aiming for an integration of international exhibitions with shows exposing local talent. This past autumn, PAN featured the artist-curated “*Camera con Vista*” (Room with a View), featuring videos by Betty Bee, Piero Golia, Franco Scognamiglio, Lorenzo Scotto di Luzio, Marinella Senatore, and Vedovamazzei.

The ancestry of the current dialogue on the local and the global was humorously depicted this past fall at T293’s Piazza Amendola space, in a fitting collaboration with the City of Naples titled “*Perchè Napoli*” (Why Naples). The collective Lucie Fontaine, the fictitious little sister of the equally fictitious persona Claire Fontaine, created a puppet theater that staged conversations between key figures from the heyday of the ’70s and ’80s. For example, Beuys and Andy Warhol—both of whom were greatly inspired by the electric and explosive beauty of the city, its influence most evident in Warhol’s “Vesuvius” series of 1985—trade their trademark lines:

AW: I am a profoundly superficial person.

JB: We are the revolution.

AW: I believe anyone who knows how to do something well is an artist—a cook, for example.

JB: Every man is an artist.

AW: Thank you, my dear friend! That is exactly what I needed!

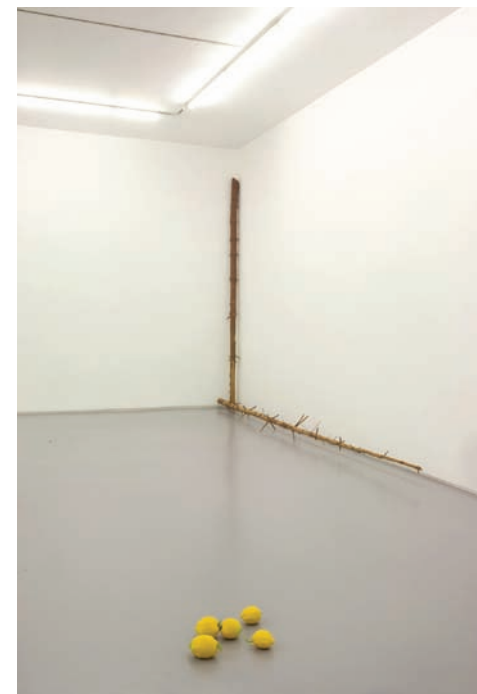
Other characters starring in the fictional vignettes included collectors Giuseppe Morra and Ernesto Esposito, curator Achille Bonito Oliva, and artists Hermann Nitsch, Marina Abramović, and Joseph Kosuth. This pastiche of encounters and alliances signaled an acute awareness of the city’s potent history, even as it disrupted it with farcical anachronism.

Indeed, led by the MADRE’s incursion into the historic (and famously chaotic and dangerous) city center, an increasing number of private venues have paved the way for a vibrant downtown scene that engages the relationship between contemporary production and the revitalization of the past. Fondazione Morra Greco, funded by dental surgeon Maurizio Morra Greco, is currently showing intimate video portraits by Estonian artist Mark Raidpere and an obsessive installation about the history of sea navigation by Sven Johnne in the raw spaces of the Palazzo Caracciolo d’Avellino. On a parallel street, the original T293 gallery was renovated and reopened this fall with “*Out of Sight*,” a show curated by Adam Carr that revived artists who have long since stopped practicing, often disappearing by design, and whose conceptual and performance-based work perpetually hovers between obscurity and discovery. Galleria Raucci/Santamaria, a pioneer in the neighborhood since 1992, has moved into a new space up the hill behind the National Archaeological Museum. In October, the gallery mounted a double exhibition—an evocative archive of twentieth-century

musical scores by Tim Rollins and KOS, displayed alongside Ugo Rondinone’s laconic sculptures of tree branches and lemons made of bronze and deceptively weighted with lead—otherworldly counterparts to the nearby museum’s artifacts.

But the most notable event of the year took place in September: the opening of the privately funded museum and archive dedicated to Nitsch, sponsored by longtime collector Morra. In a former electric plant with a panoramic view as far as Vesuvius and Capri, various rooms are dedicated to documentation of the Viennese Actionist’s blood-infused performances and the relics of his orgiastic crucifixion rituals (including the artist’s legendary *Aktion* at Morra’s gallery in 1974). Nitsch’s lurid and decadent iconography seemed to seep throughout the city; that same month, Alfonso Artiaco (who took over Lucio Amelio’s former space in the Piazza dei Martiri in 2003) featured a candlelit installation by Wolfgang Laib, which was forebodingly titled *The Cobra Snakes Are Coming out of the Well at Night*, 2008, and filled the darkened space with a display that resembled deviant religious votives. The Museo di Capodimonte, a former Bourbon royal palace, is continuing its contemporary art program with a survey of Louise Bourgeois’s work; here, however, the artist’s polymorphous objects are jarringly inserted into the museum’s permanent collection—just another fantastic instance of the formal and temporal volatility that is in keeping with the drama of the teeming streets below. □

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Opposite page: Lucie Fontaine, *T.D.P.D.T.*, 2008. Performance view, T293, Naples. This page, left: Street where trash had not been collected in more than two weeks, Naples, January 7, 2008. Photo: Salvatore Laporta/Associated Press. Above: View of Ugo Rondinone, “turn back time. let’s start this day again,” 2008, Galleria Raucci/Santamaria, Naples. Photo: E. Velo. Below: Interior of Museo Hermann Nitsch, Naples, 2008. Photo: Fabio Donato.

