





# Pompei@Madre. Materia Archeologica

Text by Maria De Vivo

Madre · museo d'arte contemporanea  
Donnaregina  
Via Settembrini 79  
Naples, Italy  
madrenapoli.it  
Through April 30

Arising from the unprecedented collaboration between the Archeological Park of Pompeii and the Madre Museum of Naples, curated by Massimo Osanna and Andrea Viliani, with the contribution of Luigi Gallo on the modern part, the exhibition *Pompei@Madre. Materia Archeologica*, “casts Pompeii into the embrace of the contemporary,” exposing it both to new hypotheses of interpretation and to further new narratives. A fascinating and imposing operation, the upshot of a long research work, the breadth and reach of which may be grasped by imagining a layering of senses and motivations. For the exhibition, in my opinion, expresses many things simultaneously.

It's the sharing of the idea, transformed into a planning platform, that exists both in archeological research and in the study into contemporary languages rather than a reverberation or a point of tangency.

It's a questioning of the perspectives and the disciplinary intertwining that may be generated from work on “matter,” meant as a series of relationships between the past, present, future, nature and culture, which must be investigated scientifically yet which may also be transformed into sign and language. It's an exaltation of the role and of the potential of the museum, a non-neutral space-time container that both preserves and produces memory.

It's a tale, full of twists and turns, of the fascination that Pompeii, buried by the eruption of 79 BC, has had on writers, intellectuals and artists ever since its unveiling in 1748 when, before their incredulous gaze, the ancient world emerged not only in all its magnificence but also in its most everyday vestige. It's an “extract” of the mass of findings held in the deposits of the archeological park, of the works, in many cases, from the museum collections of Capodimonte and the Duca di Martina Museum of Ceramics, and of that which, over recent decades, has been produced by artists, drawing inspi-

ration from that event, providing us at the same time with a unitary interpretation of the role and of the support of collectors, gallerists and private institutions in the implementation of this enormous creative impetus, rooted in the history of this very territory and yet universal.

And in all likelihood, it is also an ideal reference to key figures such as the gallerist Lucio Amelio who, by giving life to *Terrae Motus*, showed just how much the power of art could offer its own regenerating response to the destruction and wreckage of the 1980 earthquake. Revolving around two key ideas (the oxymoronic “museum as a contemporary *domus*” and the imaginary “museum as a time machine”), the exhibition itinerary has been structured as a circular investigation that draws comparisons between modern and contemporary artistic creations and the site-specific installations with findings, artifacts, works and documents from the Vesuvian site. The permanent collection of the museum has been reinterpreted as a *domus*, and as such, placed side by side with findings and everyday objects which, boldly decontextualized and repositioned in a pertinent manner in the various museum settings (the entrance, the stairs, the whole of the first floor), highlight the sense and “function” of the installations.

Similarly, the “archeological material,” located in a different space which it has also grown into, has prompted its re-signification, free from the limits of its context of origin. “New thoughts for old objects”: was this not also the sense underpinning Marcel Duchamp's ready-mades?

From the installation by Daniel Buren, *Axer/Désaxer. Lavoro in situ*, 2015, now part of the atrium, vestibulum and peristilium along with the “strongbox with inlaid decorations and relief figures” of the first century AD, to the “cast of a door with locking system,” c. 1860-1870, to the “rainwater butt,” first century AD, and to the marble table supports, decorated with fantastical winged animals, first century AD, via the *tablinum*, *triclinium*, *convivium*, the room of the *dominus* evoked through the furnishings and sumptuous frescoes by Francesco Clemente's *Ave Ovo*; via the *cubiculum* in which the archetypal and oneiric signs and the silent figure of Mimmo Paladino surround the playful embrace of a father and son, eternalized in the cast, up to

the *spatium* revisited and reappraised by Richard Serra's *Giuditta e Oloferne* (2005) and by two statues in bronze and terracotta, the comparison and thematic evocation reciprocally rewrite that which often the “specificity” of the installations crystallizes, as in the case of the environment recreated by Luciano Fabro, adding allusions to known works and procedures by the Milanese artist.

Instead, the “time machine” built on the third floor, bereft of any already strongly connoted context, offers another kind of crossing in which time is condensed, or goes back and forth ceaselessly, questioning the primacy of chronology and sequential ordering in favor of other thematic assonances.

In eighteen rooms, from that “0” dedicated not by chance to the “dig,” as a “hypothesis and narrative,” the starting point of all research into the past, the future and the self, up to that named after the “regeneration” of a Pompeiian garden thanks to the work of Maria Theresa Alvez, the constellation of contemporary works is immersed in the flow of time, placed in dialog not so much or not only with works, testifying to the greatness of ancient art (the fresco from the House of the Golden Bracelet is such an example) or of modern art that has drawn inspiration from it, like the nineteenth-century model of the Temple of Isis in Pompeii or the earthenware panel depicting the Battle of Issus, but everyday objects and damaged or fragmented artworks, which no longer had the completeness nor the stability of art as such, yet which were for this reason closer to a notion of “matter” to be shaped. The fulcrum both of the circular itinerary and of the synchronic contiguity which may be breathed throughout the exhibition is the central room dedicated to “a panorama of an eruption, 79-2017 AD,” in which through neoclassical, romantic or verist examples, right up to the *Vesuvius* by Warhol or Guyton's neo-Pop, the re-evocation of the eruption that buried yet which did not annihilate life, continues and multiplies. At the center of the room, poured into two tanks, we find fragments of clay containers bombed in September 1943 and fragments of architectural elements in marble and lime buried in the eruption, offering the greatest expression of uncertainty, potential and the scientific and artistic work which has yet to be done.

## The Szechwan Tale: Theatre and History

Text by Francesco Tenaglia

Anren Biennale  
Anren, Chengdu  
Sichuan Province, China  
anrenbiennale.org  
Through February 28

In the dressing room, at the entrance to the exhibition, you can dress up as a character from the Beijing Opera, as a Sichuanese peasant, or as a guard of the People's Republic during the Cultural Revolution. Looking at yourself in the mirror and broadcasting your carnival costume via the social media deemed legal in China (*Wardrobe*, 2017, by Michelangelo Pistoletto); then you pass through the stage-like structures of Céline Condorelli (*Theatrical Pieces*,

2017); you walk along a backdrop made up of traditional masks that look straight at you, laid out placidly on a plain white wall (Qiu Zhijie, *Greetings*, 2013); crossing a sequence of stage curtains, at various stages of opening, by Ulla von Brandenburg (*Curtain*, 2017); only to finally meet up once again with the theatre stalls photographed by Santiago Sierra that brings the itinerary to a close: *La Trampa* (2007)—an audience in front of which the artist made a number of Chilean notables parade at the end of a long corridor, without warning them what they would find at the end of their path. On the outer edges and inner proppings, *The Szechwan Tale*—the section curated by Marco Scotini for the first edition of the Anren Biennale, directed by Lü Peng—alludes to a path leading backwards,

compared to the canonical one of an audience going to the theater: it brings about a transitory metamorphosis of the spectator into an actor. The scenic device is dissected into its basic components: a stylized body, laid out on an anatomic table. The portions are not designed to be pieced back together in a primogenital unity, but provide clues: a thicket of conjectures on possible functions and combinations.

The primary source of inspiration for the curator is *The Good Person of Szechwan* (1941): a play written by Bertolt Brecht while in exile in the United States and, as the title suggests, inspired by the region in which the first edition of this Biennale is being held: the double life of a prostitute who, in order to maintain an irreprehensible

conduct, is forced to fabricate a predatory and “evil” alter-ego.

A reflection on socioeconomic preconditions, on the ambiguities in the production and social propagation of notions of “goodness”: The German dramaturge—who had never been to China—drew inspiration from the legendary performances of the actor Mei Lanfang, seen in Moscow and known most of all for his extraordinary vocal skills when playing female roles, and on which the exhibition provides extremely in-depth documentation. A second source of inspiration comes from the *Rent Collection*, an extraordinary set of more than one hundred life-sized sculptures that depict the vexations inflicted on the peasants by the local lord Liu Wencai (in whose mansion it is exposed): produced in the mid 1960s by a group of artisans and artists who frequented the Sichuan Academy of Fine Arts, it informed *Venice's Rent Collection Courtyard* presented at the Venice Biennale in 1999 by Cai Guo-Qiang. A diorama used by Chinese propaganda as a warning against the oppressive feudal system prior to the People's Republic and a remarkable example of national Socialist realism, the *Rent Collection* was an object of great fascination for Harald Szeemann, who unsuccessfully tried to feature it during the fifth edition of documenta in 1972. Among

the preoccupations of the exhibition there is the relationship between theater, mask and history, in particular, with the “writing of history” as a narrative format, of fiction: a theme present in the micro-theaters in which Marco Tadic' projects animated films produced “in collaboration” with preexistent materials—unimplemented projects by modernist architects, old postcards or photos found in street markets—or in *Shock of Time*: the brief but insightful video by Sun Xun in which the animation is always on the point of falling apart against the background of daily newspapers from the period of the “great step forward” which took place around the turn of the 1960s. The exhibition is also fascinated by toys, by marionettes—actors and at the same time the acted upon—which may tell brutal and grim stories, capable of condensing history into stories, as occurs in the videos by Wael Shawky, or as happens in the video by Pedro Reyes, to infantilize the protagonists of centuries gone by (Karl Marx and Adam Smith) depicting them in amusing yet petty rows in a contemporary café. Peter Friedl also uses marionettes in *The Dramatist: Anne, Blind Boy, Koba* (2013), among whom we may make out a young Stalin staring into the video *Bilbao Song*: here the artist produces a *tableau vivant* featuring a group of actors, all but immobilized, in framings that reference the history

of painting and cinema, while a pianist plays an instrumental version of a song by Kurt Weill from which the video title is taken. It is a dimension of fiction, of misunderstandings, of incomplete translations such as those of the paradoxical charm (if one takes into account the “compression” of the role of the intellectual during the Cultural Revolution) exerted over left-wing Western thinkers or even their adhesion to Maoism in the wake of the difficulty to support the post-Stalin Soviet Union: here, the Eastward movement is represented by the great British composer Cornelius Cardew and by a review of the work of the extraordinary filmmaker Joris Ivens, featured in the characteristic little movie theater of the town.

Masks, cyclopean transformations that with great mastery, like in classical Chinese theater, skillfully hide their movements from the spectators: the shadow or the secret whisper that follows us throughout the itinerary is that of the tale of a nation that blends in by applying the façade of the People's Republic (with its cumbersome structural residues) to its voyage towards a idiosyncratic format of market economy, while seeking points of historical communication with its own past and with the West. A Leviathan shedding its skin.

## H. C. Westermann

Text by Antonio Scoccimarro

Fondazione Prada  
Largo Isarco, 2  
Milan, Italy  
fondazioneprada.org  
Through January 15

Fondazione Prada simultaneously presents three projects that broaden the revision process of the historical-artistic narratives of the American post-war period—a trend that has been underway for some years now, with the progressive rediscovery of figures that have remained partially and temporarily in the sidelines, such as Jim Nutt (1938) and Kerry James Marshall (1955), the latter protagonist of a major cycle of shows staged over the last two years between the MCA Chicago, the Met Breuer, New York and the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles shifting the focus onto Chicago, the third largest driving force of wealth and culture in modern America.

In the exhibition spaces of the Fondazione, Germano Celant has devised a project split into three independent chapters: a group show, *Famous Artists from Chicago. 1965-1975*—an exhibition that features works, among others, by Nutt, Ed Paschke (1939–2004) and Christina Ramberg (1946–1995)—and two solo shows dedicated to the works of Leon Golub (1922–2004) and Horace Clifford Westermann (1922–1981), transversally dissecting three decades of this “alternative” parable, rooted in the urban fabric of the Midwest yet applicable on a global scale. As a final chapter to an articulated and multi-faceted itinerary, the exhibition dedicated to the work of H. C. Westermann features a selection of some fifty items, laid out rhythmically in the single architectural volume housing them: sculptures of small to medium format—in wood, metal and glass, painted, carved and inlaid with the formal light-handedness of the DIY *aficionado*—and a group of works on paper that determine

what is shown to the visitor almost as a martial gathering of somewhat tattered soldiers (with the artist as the “general” of this motley crew, as if hinting at the work *Strong Man's Chair*, 1970: the “throne” that remains empty and that dominates by virtue of its centrality, dictating the symmetry around which the exhibition itinerary unfolds) headed by two anthropomorphic figures à la Lewis Carroll: that of *Silver Queen*, 1960, and the *Swinging Red King*, 1961. A group of works which are the upshot of the craftsmanship of an editor sensitive to the American vernacular: war and warships, the sea and its sharks are just some of the recurrent elements in the iconography in this field.

Born in Los Angeles in 1922, over the first thirty years of his life, Westermann alternates his studies and artistic practices with the profession of carpenter, as well as his time on the frontline of the American military campaigns in Korea and Japan on the Marine ships: “I feel that life is very fragile. We're all just hanging by a thread; it's very spooky. I can best come to grips with it by doing my work. I guess that's why I'm an artist.” This is how Westermann himself sums up the vectors underpinning his artistic practices. The hallucinatory experience of sea battles, the horror felt in the face of the sacrifice of the Japanese kamikazes, launched on a suicide attack used as an “incomprehensible” weapon of destruction on the US frigates in service in the Pacific, and the instrumentalization and manipulation of public opinion by US policy at that time placed Westermann before a concentrate of the innate destructive forces of man and society (but also of their fragility), translating it into poetics that seems dictated by the profound mistrust of a man—the artist—with regard to the fruits of modernity, and more in general of civilization. Produced as if it were the work of a veteran struggling with paranoia and psychic regression, the consequence of a post-traumatic stress disturbance, Westermann's art thus appears to seek mental

refuge in a homely, crafts space, made up of modestly sized sculpture (often taking on the aspect of creepy gifts or homages: such as to some of his closest companions—Ed Ruscha as in the case of the sculpture *Ed's Varnish*, 1976 or Billy Al Bengston in *Billy Al & 7X*, 1970) modeled in warm and reassuring wood: an element of nature standing in contrast to the general “betrayal” of the Anthropocene.

A graphic and visual translation of the life of a member of a generation deluded by ideological constructs, Westermann seems to share with Ferdinand Bardamu—the protagonist of *Journey to the End of the Night* by Louis-Ferdinand Céline—an almost inconsolable pessimism concerning human nature and its institutions: “I tell you, little man, life's fall guys, beaten, fleeced to the bone, sweated from time immemorial, I warn you, that when the princes of this world start loving you, it means they're going to grind you up into battle sausage... That's the sign... It's infallible. It starts with affection.”

On the flat sides at the ends of *Negate*, 1965—one of the works on show—a sculpture made up of two parts chained to one another, modeled from a single piece of wood, Westermann carves out in capital letters: “WOOD IS A FINE RESOURCE BUT MISUSED & BECOMING XTINCT UNLIKE PEOPLE.” Why waste time with and for people, such an “overrated” commodity, when an ever scarcer and more precious resource such as wood may be so enthusiastically rewarding and time-consuming?

Westermann's delusion in the society he lived in, shaped by his war years and those of social and political unrest both in the US and on the world stage, is thus comprehensible both in terms of the individual scarred by the war years and as a reflection of his generation: forced to come face to face with the brutal reality of the post-war modernist promises. His art of disillusionment still resounds ever more strongly today.