

— JUNE 1980 : McMillen in Naples —

There was the breath of a pause when McMillen sent his mind back thirty years, trying to remember why he went to Naples from Milan and Rome, before reaching the Venice Biennale, the major goal of his trip to Italy. It was June, no doubt. But now, in 2010, an almost desiccated place in his mind would only show him only two scenes: his limbs stretched out on the bed at the Hotel Mediterraneo – the local habit of resting after lunch – and only one meeting, at the end of the day. Some Italian friends had introduced him to an almost invisible, and yet respected Neapolitan artist, an artist who liked to spread and abandon most of his sculptural work on the shore, in the wilderness, or in the wastelands of Naples' outskirts: a personal necessity of defending art against the force of money or success. Doggedness? Pride? The man was so perfectly out of sight in the local art scene as to be unrecognizable. Oreste Selvatico was his name. To be an amateur, one needs courage.

That's the man McMillen was about to meet. But he couldn't escape the melancholy of the southern contr'ora, the "stop in time" in the middle of the day, to an American almost inconceivable. Maybe Naples was a proper place for him; an ancestral sense of belonging crept into his body, as if he were a lost piece of a puzzle that had found and filled, for a few minutes, its own spot in a family history. McMillen's mother was born in Naples to Italian parents. Feeling suddenly light, he fell into the twilight between awake and asleep. "I was a few floors above the ground, the ceiling was moving. I could see little cars going across the ceiling." A tiny aperture in an iron shuttle had pierced the camera obscura in his mind, as well as the penumbra in the room. He was and is the artist staging the mysteries of inner spaces or furnishing them with found objects; they might add to the imaginary scene a scent of past lives. In California, and in other sites all over the U.S., his sculptures merge into a train station, or a playground, even in a museum, suggesting imaginary trips we had sometimes in our dreams, and we start remembering, and life is kicked out of perspective, and we are allowed to let fat, golden bumblebees suck the juice from reality. At every new piece, he is an amateur. What a naked reality!

McMillen did not know that a few weeks before, on April 1st 1980, Andy Warhol and Joseph Beuys cut through the Neapolitan crowd at the City Hall Café. Their fingers, icons of contemporary art as well as San Gennaro's blood, or the kings' thaumaturgic hands, were the only part of their persona looking alive: Beuys signing hats, Warhol drawing \$ on the naked, hairy chest of young Neapolitan men. The art king for the occasion was Lucio Amelio, who had made his gallery an international court since 1965. The amazing energy and inventiveness of the city was organized by a dreamer convinced that New York and Naples were the only capitals of the arts. "Fragmentation, racket, camorra, or the boy bringing you coffee at home, are better than any Milanese manager," said Amelio in an interview in 1985. Be that as it may, the new kingdom lasted only as long as Amelio's lifetime, and then crumbled under natural and political disasters. But, in the meantime, Selvatico and the Neapolitan

population had experienced first hand Rauschenberg, Paolini, Beuys, Buren, and many other masters of our time. A devastating earthquake was about to hurt Naples and the area of Irpinia from the sea to the mountains on Sunday, November 23, 1980.

It took twenty years for McMillen, after that first meeting in a café near Piazza Plebiscito, to convince Selvatico that his artwork could cross the ocean and land in a California art gallery. In return, Selvatico opened McMillan's eyes to a secret Naples: the city of books, of an immense number of collections exiled from the libraries of decayed aristocratic families, volumes from Romans and Greeks, along with modern travels, legal documents and simple recipes. Eggplant or zucchini Parmesan: with eggs or not on the final layer? Rhetorical arguments would be appropriate. The city itself is a book, a book engraved in a fragile landscape that heat and sunlight, along with bullets and vandalisms, try every day to scrape away.

Books became a major component of Selvatico's art. To bring them back to their spirit, he boiled their pages in alcohol. To make sculptures, he burned books like the future Neapolitans of the year 2000, who burned the Italian flag during the visit of the Italian president. "This is not our flag!" they screamed. After the bloody unification of 1860 the South was treated as a colony. "These are not my books," Oreste Selvatico seems to say. His sense of time is extremely ancient. Then he soaked twelve volumes in black paint calling them The Twelve Sisters, congealed hours, irreversible.

Eventually, Oreste Selvatico's artwork slipped into the California summer as smooth as a phantom: July-September, 2001. The last day of his first exhibit at Gallery Luisotti, Santa Monica, at about 5 p.m. of the closing party, the room was shaken by a strong bump of an earthquake, as if the two volcanic coastlines, Italian and Californian, had joined in their impatience. The most fragile of the sculptures, an almost completely burned book on a music stand, disintegrated into a pile of ashes. The ashes of a bigger explosion obscured that evening: it was September 10, 2001. A lot of angels would die the morning after. And New Yorkers felt, all of a sudden, the same as Neapolitans feel almost every day, attacked by destiny, with no answers, no more.

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