

**P** Daphne Vitali: Unpacking My History  
*Francesco Arena / Rossella Biscotti / Claire Fontaine*

# paesaggio

25/11/2023 – 21/01/2024  
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## Unpacking My History A Quest for Recent Italian History in the Art of the 2000s

Daphne Vitali

The landscape of historical memory in Italy has been shaped by gaps and discontinuities – with the country's difficult past often neglected or set aside. But contemporary Italian artists have also begun to react to this situation, confronting it through historical reconstructions and encounters. This essay investigates a tendency in the contemporary Italian art of the last twenty years, which could be described as Italian artists' relatively new interest in reflecting upon history and its position in the present. Indeed, in the last two decades many Italian artists working both in their homeland and abroad have addressed issues related to their country's recent past and its specific socio-political events. They did this using diverse mediums, methodologies and artistic languages.

In a moment when history has been used and abused for making decisions and shaping the future, I am here interested in artists able to question history with their imagination and to provide insightful, sensitive and penetrating viewpoints. These artists discover alternative continuities and uncertainties that diverge from the conventional and often one-dimensional readings of historical events. The way an artist can give voice to counternarratives and enlighten us as to the overlooked particularities of historical events can enrich our understanding of both the past and the present.

I decided to concentrate my research on this thematic direction of Italian contemporary art, as I wanted to delve further into a line of inquiry that I had already embarked upon when I was working on the exhibition *When the Present is History*, which I guest-curated for the contemporary art centre DEPO in Istanbul. That exhibition examined the ways in which artists from different backgrounds and geographies survey history and appropriate historical accounts in an effort to approach contemporary socio-political issues, using archival documentation originating not only from the past, but also from our present experience. By doing so, artists contribute to wider dialogues on history, remembrance, forgetfulness and collective memory. Among the international artists that participated, I also presented works by the Italian-born Alessandra Ferrini, Rossella Biscotti and the Malastrada film collective. Their works found their starting point in their country's diverse histories, in order to speak about broader social, political and economic issues and to propose new viewpoints and interpretations.

The artists involved in the Malastrada film collective (Maria Helene Bertino, Dario Castelli and Alessandro Gagliardo) examined Italy's 1990s history by looking through the archives of hundreds of the country's private TV stations. The film that we presented, entitled *An Anthropological Television Myth* (2011), was primarily created using footage from a local TV channel in Catania between 1991 and 1994. This was a period of major political upheavals, with the assassinations of Italian judges Giovanni Falcone and Paolo Borsellino, who specialised in prosecuting the Sicilian Mafia. In 1992 the Mafia killed both men. Two years later, Silvio Berlusconi was appointed Prime Minister following the 1994 parliamentary elections. In the film, the flow of images is unpredictable and random, thus creating a loose mapping of these political changes.

For her lecture performance titled *Gaddafi in Rome: the Expanded Script* (2018) that we presented in the exhibition, Alessandra Ferrini confronted another event in Italy's recent history. Ferrini revisits a meeting between Silvio Berlusconi and Muammar

Gaddafi in the Italian capital in June 2009. This summit between the two leaders took place to celebrate the Italy-Libya Treaty of Friendship and sign an agreement on migration and trade links; they sought to change the decades-long turbulent relations between the North African country and its former coloniser. Through archival texts and images, media footage and amateur videos from YouTube, the artist examines the way this event was presented by the media and the way politics is mediated. In 2018, the year the project was being developed, Italy and Libya agreed to reactivate the friendship treaty that allows migrants to be returned to Libyan territory. Ferrini's artistic research interrogates the enduring legacies of colonialism and fascism, focusing on the relations between Italy, Africa and the Mediterranean region.

Rossella Biscotti was the third Italian artist featured in the exhibition in Istanbul whose work is also presented in *Unpacking My History* (together with Francesco Arena and Claire Fontaine) that I proposed in the framework of the Quadriennale di Roma's *Paesaggio* exhibition series. Biscotti's research is deeply rooted in the important events of recent and contemporary history. Through her engagement with collective traumas, the artist brings to light details forgotten or intentionally silenced from the official historical narratives.

I will focus here on the work of Italian artists who tackle issues of identity, memory and history through a relationship with the present. Their works deal with individual and collective memory, in the attempt to make a forgotten past into something which is again present and visible, and to deal with amnesia, silence, and oblivion. The artists bring to light well-known or lesser-known narratives and historical knowledge. Their work creates bridges between the present and the past through deconstruction and retelling, and becomes a field for the creation of a visual discourse through which contemporary cultural, social and political issues can be identified.

During this research, I found out that around ten years ago Italian curators and art critics lay great emphasis on the fact that a younger generation of Italian artists was finally giving voice to the country's recent history and renewing the relationship between art and politics. As curator Alessandro Rabottini put it back in 2011: "[this] work is part of a wider interest that an emerging generation of Italian artists has recently been developing in national history, collective traumas and individual amnesias. [...] what is interesting is that artists such as Francesco Arena, Giorgio Andreotta Calò, Rossella Biscotti, Gianluca and Massimiliano De Serio, Patrizio Di Massimo and Matteo Rubbi are responding to a question that has been cropping up for more than a decade: why is Italian art lacking in political engagement? If previous generations of artists were mostly concerned with a hyper-subjective vision of reality, and produced images that seemed to portray a psychic and moral disconnection between the artist and society, young Italian artists today are ready to get their hands dirty, confronting repressed memories of colonialism, Fascism and terrorism – and the contradictions inherent in our current social landscape. [...] All these artists together represent a shift away from a previous tradition of a more metaphorical, non-descriptive approach to reality, where the 'political' was rather performed on the level of a subjective symbolism – a trajectory that still has its strongest historical precedent in the Arte Povera movement."<sup>1</sup>

Over the last twenty years, some of the most interesting Italian artists have addressed history and politics in order to rethink official narratives and engage with contemporary sociopolitical issues. While some artists are turning to the past in order to narrate the present anew, others are looking more directly into contemporary phenomena, social transformations and current political issues. Some of the artists refer to specific dates and events, while others deal with the changes in

Italian society through the years. In all these cases, Italian artists are contributing to the fact that Italy is a nation that is still negotiating its own past.

Apart from the names that I have already mentioned, I am also referring to artists such as Francesco Arena, Claire Fontaine, Eva Frapiccini, Flavio Favelli, Domenico Antonio Mancini, Gian Maria Tosatti, Giorgio Andreotta Calò, Luca Vitone, Goldschmied & Chiari, Daniela Comani, Giuseppe Stampone, and Nico Angiuli, just to name a few. Within the necessarily limited pages of this essay, I can only present the work of a small number of artists, to give some insight into their working methodologies, their processes, and the subject areas with which they choose to engage. However, I will discuss more extensively the work of the three artists presented in the exhibition.

Among the many different directions of artistic practices that I encountered through this research, it is interesting to note that it has been an increasing number of artists whose approach starts with research in archives and who deploy what has been termed an archival form of research like Rossella Biscotti, Alessandra Ferrini and Eva Frapiccini. Moreover, some artists are primarily concerned with visual, formal and aesthetic preoccupations like Francesco Arena, others, like Claire Fontaine, are predominantly interested in appropriation and the symbolic function of their politically engaged work, while others negotiate the public space, performative practices, personal experiences, site-specificity, educational purposes, etc.

As curator and writer Lucrezia Longobardi has noted: "[...] the 2000s were years in which two axes of political art emerged, the archival and the formal. The first, whose best results are to be found in the work of Rossella Biscotti, includes a whole wave of relatively colourless ransackers of libraries, newspaper archives and flea markets in which one can at least smell what Italy was like before the intoxication of the Second Republic [i.e. the period since 1994]. The second, which has its most sophisticated exponent in Francesco Arena, instead centres on more markedly artistic researches, more concerned with the aesthetic outcome than with documentary accuracy."<sup>2</sup>

The artists' reference to history can either concern past historical events, recent or contemporary history and often comprises issues that have not often been resolved by Italian society and there is a need for a renegotiation. As Longobardi put it: "Many of the works of these years, in fact, had the character of a re-appropriation of a history that had flown away, in the unhinged 1990s; like a dress left behind by the previous generation, which had tried to arrive at its destination naked."<sup>3</sup>

Here, I will focus on works by artists who reflect upon the period between the 1960s until recent years. Most of the works that I mention in this essay deal with the so-called Years of Lead. This was a period in recent Italian history characterised by social turmoil and political violence, lasting from the late 1960s until the early 1980s, even if the exact dates have not been defined. These years were marked by a series of both far-left and far-right incidents of political terrorism, violent conflicts and upheavals that in turn produced political struggles.

One of the most significant artists of her generation working in this vein is Brussels-based Rossella Biscotti, whose work deals with the exploration of forgotten or untraced events that reveal new ideas and values. Through archival research, fieldwork and the collection of testimonies and oral stories, Biscotti's work weaves together histories into new narratives. Through her sculptures, installations, film and video, performance and sound, she investigates the uncertainties surrounding past events and the way these events have been interpreted. Biscotti adopts a research-based practice based on archival research, thus deploying what Hal Foster calls "an archival impulse" as a means to construct alternative historical narratives and forms of knowledge.

In her extremely meaningful work *Il Processo (The Trial)*, from 2009-2013, Biscotti examined a major judicial affair in recent Italian history. This work focuses on the "April 7 trial" (1983-84) against members of the leftist revolutionary movement *Autonomia operaia*, which was held in the so-called Aula Bunker in Rome, the high-security courthouse in the Foro Italico, which hosted the most important trials of the Years of Lead. The artist visited this space during a research project in 2006 in which she explored the transformation and re-use of Fascist architecture. The site became the point of departure for this work, which the artist developed across various media, including an audio piece, concrete sculptures, a performance, and a film. The work has been presented in various different ways. The first installation that she made consisted of concrete sculptures made from casts of the architectural details of the Rome courtroom. The sculptural part of the work was accompanied by a six-hour edited audio recording of the trial, as well as performances that embodied the voices of the defendants.

Listening today to the court speeches of the defendants, who included, among other intellectuals, the philosophers Antonio Negri and Paolo Virno – accused of being responsible for the Italian terrorism of the late 1970s – interconnections can be made with present-day situations. Here, I do not intend to refer to specific or direct correlations, but rather to think about timeless questions: How do we define terrorism? Who decides if an act, organisation, or person should be characterised as "terroristic"? This project aimed not only at a re-reading of Italian political history – many aspects of which, as we already mentioned, are still unresolved – but also at exploring the themes and convictions of this era in history, a period that had a strong impact on the Italian collective memory. This work (like many others) also presents the artist's interest in the development of the left. In a moment when Italy and many other European countries are seeing the weakening of the political left, Biscotti's works gives insights into the formation of left-wing ideology.

Another work by Rossella Biscotti that also focuses on the notion of imprisonment through Italian history is *The Prison of Santo Stefano* (2011). Here, the artist looks at the psychological effects that solitary confinement has in destroying the prisoner's physical and mental capacities. The project concerns the first prison in Italy built for life imprisonment: the facility on the island of Santo Stefano, which opened in 1793 and remained in use until 1965. The installation includes a series of sculptures, based on imprints of specific parts of the prison floor, recalling its physical and existential restrictions. To capture the building's panoptical structure, the artist used sheets of lead and placed them on the floor of the prison, moulding them in order to create a negative imprint of the surface. A three-channel film brings together footage taken during visits to the location but also presents a political action that the artist and a group of activists carried out on-site. In this work Biscotti brings forgotten past stories to the surface and confronts us with mechanisms of power and control. As the artist has noted: "I'm interested in the traces of history: documents, films, photographs. They offer another vision of reality. Only when these images are interpreted, decoded and shared publicly with others do they develop new meanings. My works explore the gap between history and its interpretation, between experience and its archiving."<sup>4</sup>

A very influential artist who also refers to past events in order to create a place for discussion and critique is Francesco Arena. Arena's works stage dialogues at different times in Italian history. For his emblematic work *3,24 mq*, from 2004, the artist confronts an important event of the Years of Lead: the imprisonment and assassination of Aldo Moro. The number *3,24 mq* that appears in the title of the work, refers to the floor area of Moro's cell (i.e. 3.24 m<sup>2</sup>). The work is an exact reconstruction of the cell where the president of the Christian-Democratic party was held prisoner of

the Red Brigades, at Rome's via Montalcini 8, between 16 March and 9 May 1978. Which is to say, where Moro spent the last fifty-five days of his life.

*3,24 mq* is in my view, one of the most impactful political works in 2000s Italian art that tackles a seminal event in the country's recent political history: the murder of Moro, the apogee of Italy's Years of Lead, but also an event that remains a national trauma. As art historian Stefano Chiodi wrote: "the cell is a political work of art. ... It is a political work, not a work about politics. It is not about the said, the visible mechanism, the jargon, the symbols, and not even, although it might be its point of departure, the history of Italian politics. It is more about politics as a process of which art is a component (necessary, is the postulate)."<sup>5</sup> Arena created a reproduction of the cell, about which little is known, according to the statements and the memories of the Red Brigades members Anna Laura Braghetti, Prospero Gallinari and Mario Moretti. Through this work, Arena aimed at a retelling of this story by giving form to the gaps of Italian history.

Here, like in many of his works, Arena's reference to specific people aims at exploring the human condition and experience, even beyond the historical facts themselves. This interest is also evident from another important aspect of his art: the role of human measurements in his work. Many of his artworks are based on the human body: the height, the weight, the length of human parts. For *3,24mq*, he displays the dimensions of a space used to host Moro's body, which "has become a shared body, a crossroads for emotions and evocations".<sup>6</sup> Sometimes, the artist uses his own body and its measurements not only to talk about his viewpoint as an artist and individual, but also "to raise the issue of the absence of other bodies that have either been concealed or destroyed."<sup>7</sup>

In Arena's works, we are often presented with specific references, important historical dates, well-known events, places or people that have had a significant impact on society. As the artist has explained: "almost always the events that I cite are very well known. That's precisely why I am interested in them; they are in some ways exemplary cases, on which so many other stories can be overlaid. [...] human events are always the same: the context may change, but men repeat the same actions over and over again, even if the times and spaces are very distant."<sup>8</sup>

*Senza titolo (Bologna)*, from 2011, is another work by Arena that refers to one of the last events of the Years of Lead. Here, the artist chose to talk about another harsh moment in Italian history, a massacre that still constitutes one of this history's most obscure episodes. On 2 August 1980 eighty-five people were killed and many more injured in a terrorist bombing at Bologna Centrale train station. There is ongoing suspicion about the involvement of Italy's secret services in this massacre. As with many other unresolved cases of these years, in terms of public awareness, the Bologna massacre still forcefully resonates in the conscience of the Italian population. In 2011, almost thirty years later, Arena turns the lack of historical acknowledgment into a sculptural work of art. His work consists of a marble panel on which the 85 names of the victims were repeatedly inscribed until only holes in the stone were left, silhouetting the area where the names once were. *Senza titolo (Bologna)* provides space for reflection on this severe gap in the collective consciousness.

The various forms of Arena's works are the result of a series of steps. The artist often starts from a numerical suggestion linked to some story, event, place, book, etc., and then through a series of reflections condenses it into a form. This is also the case of the work *Marmo con 3274 giorni* [Marble with 3,274 days], from 2019, which talks about the case of Stefano Cucchi. Since his death in custody in 2009, at age 31, Cucchi has become an icon of the abuse of police power in Italy. To point out and condemn the police brutality, Arena created a work that consists of a piece of marble excavated in such way to contain a specific number of pages

from ten diaries of different dimensions which he found in second-hand markets. The number of pages, suggested by the title, correspond to the number of days between 23 October 2009 and 10 October 2018. The first date marks the day of the media announcement of Cucchi's death, while he was in preventive detention, and the second date the day of the testimony that incriminated four police officers for the beating that led to Cucchi's decease. For those 3,274 days this crime had been denied by the police and by many Italian politicians, despite being evident on the victim's body. Cucchi's story sparked a national debate about the police abuse of power and polarised the Italian public, as the story was heavily politicised and peppered with accusations, threats and cover-ups.

Another very significant and visually engaging work by Arena, which talks about police brutality is *Genova (foto di gruppo)*, from 2011. It refers to the Genoa G8 protests that took place between Thursday July 19 and Sunday July 22, 2001, during the G8 summit. During this forum which brought together the heads of the richest industrialized countries, the no-global movement and other pacifist associations protested against the summit. During the serious rioting Carlo Giuliani, a young demonstrator, was killed. In order to reflect upon these tragic events Arena created an installation for which he took as his starting point the official photograph of the ten leaders who attended the meeting. He produced ten blocks of mud taken from a quarry of marble. As the artist explains: "This slurry is waste from processing the marble, a fragile material that easily crumbles into dust. Once the slurry had dried out and solidified, I removed the moulds to create 40 x 40 cm square forms. The height of each form varies from between 0.5 cm and 22 cm, the difference in height between Carlo Giuliani and each of the leaders who attended the G8 meetings:

Junichiro Koizumi, Japan, height: 165.5 cm, difference 0.5 cm  
Tony Blair, Great Britain, height 183 cm, difference 18 cm  
George W. Bush, USA, height 182 cm, difference 17 cm  
Jacques Chirac, France, height 187 cm, difference 22 cm  
Silvio Berlusconi, Italy, height 167 cm, difference 2 cm  
Vladimir Putin, Russia, height 170 cm, difference 5 cm  
Jean Chrétien, Canada, height 183 cm, difference 18 cm  
Gerhard Schröder, Germany, height 174 cm, difference 9 cm  
Guy Verhofstadt, Belgium, height 185 cm, difference 20 cm  
Romano Prodi, European Commission, height 173 cm, difference 8 cm."<sup>9</sup>

Suggesting the relation among bodily dimensions, Arena's work expresses his ability to look into the human aspects of political events. This empty monument created for Carlo Giuliani by Francesco Arena is a sculpture that makes us imagine that if Giuliani could step on each of the pedestals, he would be able to look straight into the eyes each of the G8 leaders, one by one. And this is the imaginative power of this visual artwork.

In this specific moment in history, when police violence and other forms of violence are growing across the planet, these works by Arena denounce the savagery and remind us of the significance of recent historical events that took place in Italy but have had a major impact on a global scale. The Genoa G8 protests were a highpoint in the history of the alter-globalization movement, and police unleashed a brutality without precedent in the Western Europe of the previous two decades. The Genoa events, and the undermining of democratic codes during the riots, played a decisive role in Italians' relationship with political life and social involvement. As Francesca Disconzi and Francesca Guerisoli wrote in a recent article: "In Italy itself, the Genoa events of 2001 constituted a point of no return, a kind of caesura. It opened



a wound that has never healed, caused by the repressive force put in place in the name of public safety.”<sup>10</sup>

Thus, it is no surprise that the Genoa events affected the work of many Italian artists and curators. Among them, I will briefly reference here the works by Claire Fontaine, Giorgio Andreotta Calò and Alterazioni Video. However, I want to also remind the reader that some Italian curators have organised shows regarding the importance of remembering and thinking about this tragic moment. In 2021, Marco Scotini curated the exhibition *Insurgent Archive. Counter-narratives and representations: Genoa 2001* at Laveronica Arte contemporanea gallery, while the exhibition *Another world now*, curated by Anna Daneri, Francesca Guerisoli and Carlotta Pezzolo and organized by CHAN association, took place in the streets of Genoa itself.

In order to commemorate the events of Genoa, Giorgio Andreotta Calò performed *Genova Ventimiglia* Genova, 2013, a collective walk from Genoa to the Italian border city of Ventimiglia together with a group of young artists from Italy and France. For ten days, the group moved along the Ligurian coast up to the French border, as a gesture to bring together the physical and mental notion of the border. When they came back in Genoa, they walked in the city on the night of the anniversary of the G8, through the routes of the 2001 demonstrations. As Disconzi and Guerisoli put it, Calò made this two-hundred-kilometre walk: “with the intention of constituting a ‘social body’ and a movement, understood both as physical act and in an ideological and political sense.”<sup>11</sup> Another significant artistic gesture that aimed at underlining the importance of the Genoa events is the work *Legal Support* by Alterazioni Video, an artists’ collective founded in 2004 in Milan by Paololuca Barbieri Marchi, Alberto Caffarelli, Matteo Erenbourg, Andrea Masu and Giacomo Porfiri. Through a video installation that consisted of about ten video loops, the artists tried to recreate the chaos that was experienced in the square. Furthermore, a banner with the details of a bank account invited viewers to make a donation to the ‘legal support’ of the demonstrators implicated in the post-G8 trials.

Another artist who has also produced a series of works on the tragic results of the anti-G8 demonstrations in Genoa is Claire Fontaine, a duo founded in Paris in 2004 by Italian artist Fulvia Carnevale and British artist James Thornhill. Claire Fontaine describes herself as a ‘ready-made’ artist and has become known for her politically engaged neo-conceptual works. The duo’s name is itself a ready-made, as it is the name of a famous brand of French notebooks. As Hal Foster eloquently described her artistic persona: “Along with the readymade of Duchamp, she probes the estrangement effect of Bertolt Brecht, the dialectical image of Walter Benjamin, and appropriation strategies from Situationism and Pop to Conceptual and Pictures art, and hopes to render them salient again for the present.”<sup>12</sup> The texts she writes are crucial in the conception of her work and she has a deep engagement with contemporary political culture, protest movements and political thinkers.

Here, I will focus on a body of works that Claire Fontaine created to underline the tragic events in Genoa. *Visions of the world (Genova, 19. 07. 2001)*, from 2007, takes the form of a light box and consists of an enlarged image of a train ticket from Milan to Genoa issued on the very day of the violent repression during the no-global demonstrations. The second work from this series entitled *20.07.2001 Genova io c’ero* (“20.07.2001 Genoa I was there”), from 2006, consists of the writing of this declaration, created with smoke on the ceiling. This phrase appeared during the summer of 2001 on some t-shirts produced by the *carabinieri* who participated in the brutal violence.

Moreover, *Gênes brickbat*, from 2007, is a small brick sculpture covered with a book cover. The cover is that of the 336 pages book *Gênes, 19, 20, 21 juillet 2001: Multitudes en marche contre l’empire*, which covers brick fragments and are hold

together with an elastic band. As Hal Foster noted: "Claire Fontaine both updates Barthesian myth critique and repackages Andrean bricks as model weapons (literally so: she likes to wrap bricks like his in the austere covers of critical texts."<sup>13</sup> *Gênes brickbat* also seems to raise the question of intellectual resistance against violence. All the works described above were presented in the solo show titled *Taccuini di guerra incivile* (Uncivil War Notebooks) at T293 gallery in Naples in 2007, which "explores the blind spots of the political and sensorial perception of contemporary conflicts".<sup>14</sup>

These works by Claire Fontaine show the duo's need to underline the importance of these anti-globalisation protests that took place in the Ligurian city, with police violence that was in many ways unprecedented. It has been said that during those days, the police made use of an emergency law introduced under Fascism, which stated that the police need no warrant to enter a building if it is suspected that weapons are present. As Dario Azzellini explains this complex moment in Italian contemporary history: "the protests found themselves at a political conjuncture favorable for the extra-parliamentary left in Italy. The right-wing electoral coalition, composed of the authoritarian Forza Italia, Alleanza Nazionale (AN), which emerged from the fascist party, and the regionalist-racist Lega Nord, had won the election, and Silvio Berlusconi, a businessman embroiled in numerous scandals and criminal offenses, had come to power. Democratici di Sinistra (DS, the ex-Italian Communist Party (PCI)), and their electoral coalition, "Ulivo," had created disappointment first of all through their neoliberal policies and then with their weak opposition. The grassroots were in search of possibilities for expressing dissent. This was to be found in the mobilization at Genoa. [...] With the protests against the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank in Prague in September 2000, and against the European Union (EU) summit in Gothenburg in June 2001, the European movement had been "warming up."<sup>15</sup>

Found texts, images and reproduced objects are to be found in most of Claire Fontaine's works. The duo is aware of the symbolic function of their works; for them, art making is a way of engaging with questions that preoccupy them in the present. Claire Fontaine has been committed to the dissemination of critical ideas through explicitly political works that deal with contemporary history. However, as Foster has noted: "Her call to arms is also disarming, for her voice is always double-cutting yet comic, disabused yet committed, chiliastic yet hopeful."<sup>16</sup>

As we saw, in the exhibition *Unpacking My History* we are confronted with three different directions of political art. On the one hand, we have Biscotti's research-based methodology, with a strong archival practice. On the other hand, there is Francesco Arena, who is mostly preoccupied with the visual language and aesthetic concerns of his political works, as well as with the impact that his oeuvre has. Lastly, there is Claire Fontaine, who is using appropriation as its artistic strategy.

Another Italian artist whose work deals with the history of his country and is narrated through a personal point of view is Flavio Favelli. In Favelli's work, personal experiences are aptly integrated with literary and historical references, making continual reference to the past. As the artist put it in the introduction to his book *Bologna la rossa*: "The Italicus massacre on 4 August 1974, the killing of Francesco Lorusso on 11 March 1977, the Murazze di Vado incident on 15 April 1978, the Ustica massacre on 27 June 1980, the Bologna Centrale massacre on 2 August 1980, the Rapido 904 Massacre on 23 December 1984, the Salvemini massacre on 6 December 1990, the Pilastro massacre on 4 January 1991 and the Via Volturmo armoury massacre on 2 May 1991. All of these entered my daily life in Bologna in a different way one day; I have precise memories of where I was, what I was doing and sometimes what I was thinking. The images are almost sharper with the trag-

edies; and, after all, they made me see better; the 1970s and 1980s are the origin of many things, as if they constituted a mythology that supports my civilisation.”<sup>17</sup> Through his work on historical stamps, collages, drawings, murals, works in the public space etc., Favelli re-narrates the difficult history of his country, through personal stories which often regard his own family. The work *Itavia Aerolinee: Cerimonia (India Hotel 870)*, from 2007-2010, refers to the tragic Ustica massacre, when a plane was shot down over the skies of Ustica. On 27 June 1980, Itavia Flight 870, a civil aircraft travelling from Bologna to Palermo, crashed into the sea between the islands of Ponza and Ustica, killing all 81 people on board. The presence of military fighters in the area at the time raised the distinct possibility – though it has continually been denied – that war planes brought down the airliner. More than forty years after the massacre the exact truth about that night is still not known, but many studies now demonstrate that the Ustica massacre was likely the result of international intrigues. In 2010, for the thirtieth anniversary of this tragic event, Favelli’s work presented in Piazza Maggiore in Bologna consisted of a life-size airliner, referring to the trauma and the repression of the memory linked to this devastating episode.

With his work *Souvenir d’Italie – (lumières)*, Luca Vitone is another Italian artist who has engaged with the tragic 2 August 1980 massacre at Bologna Centrale station. This work develops a research that the artist has been carrying out for some time, in reference to historical memories and political events. The work was commissioned by curator Martina Angelotti to be exhibited in public space in Bologna itself. Vitone’s work is composed of a sequence of large luminous hanging sculptures that represent three ancient symbols: the triangle, the eye and the circle of rays. Vitone placed these sculptures on the bridge that crosses the tracks of the Bologna station. These symbols can be read individually, but when seen from a specific viewpoint in perspective, they form the Masonic symbol adopted by the P2 Masonic Lodge, which is linked to the attack that caused the Bologna station massacre. This is one more work that is dedicated to Italy’s collective memory and underlines the country’s hidden stories that still resonate in the present. It, likewise, calls for more light to be shed on this tragic event.

Another Italian artist whose work is dedicated to examining Italy’s recent past and in particular the Years of Lead is Eva Frapiccini. Her work investigates questions of memory through the creation of archive and research-based installations. Her *Muri di piombo* (“Lead Walls”), from 2005-2007, proposes an analysis of national and historical identity through a series of fifty texts and fifty photographs taken at scenes of the terrorist attacks during the Years of Lead. The piece recounts this often ignored chapter in Italian history. Each photograph is taken at the same time and on the same day that the original terrorist attack took place.

*Il Pensiero che non diventa azione avvelena l’anima* (“Words without Action Poison the Soul”), 2018-ongoing, is another important work by Frapiccini. It is the result of a large and complex project that involved historical archives and research centres on the mafia, victims’ family members, and libraries in different parts of Italy, in order to research the figures that fought against the mafia between the 1970s and 1990s. The artist aimed at creating a space where the everyday commitment and actions of the anti-mafia movement could be experienced through a visual and physical relationship with the work. Through photographic documentation, historical documents and personal notes, the project honours all those who have spent their lives fighting the mafia. The work invited the public to delve into this important history of individual and collective struggles and to reflect on the meaning of testimony and memory.

Italian history and the transformations that the country underwent in the 1960s and

'70s have been narrated by Gian Maria Tosatti in his recent and much discussed work *Storia della Notte e Destino delle Comete*, 2022. With this work, presented at the Italian Pavilion of the 2022 Venice Biennale, the artist narrates the changes of Italian society after the economic boom that the country experienced in postwar decades. He does so without referring to specific events or dates, but rather by trying to create an atmosphere where these changes are felt rather than described or portrayed. His empty and alienating spaces appear like scenes from a post-industrial landscape, which retraces the rise and fall of the "Italian miracle", the great Italian industrial development of the early 1960s. Although the artist refers to Italy's historical changes, using them as a metaphor for the present moment, it also seems that for Tosatti history is not only a means of explaining the past and the present but also a tool for investigating the future.

As Tosatti explains about his generation of Italian artists: "In my formative years, the dominant message – especially in Italy – was that the artist was a kind of court jester, a fanciful decorator, a somewhat lighthearted figure. It was fully consistent with a strategy of narcosis, which Italy applied after the Moro murder, a turning point that caused a transformation in the history of our country. When we awakened from a sleep that had lasted thirty years, we tried to understand who we were. These predecessors helped us find our way back, they gave us the courage to throw out the Carnival trumpets that had been imposed on us and to dig up an ancient voice, a thundering language, one that makes your wrists shake. And in walking this path, we understood that artists belong to an order whose mission is to keep the language alive, exact, so that it can still speak the truth."<sup>18</sup>

So, in an effort to search for the truth behind the scenes, many Italian artists of the 2000s focused on some of the turning points of Italian twentieth-century history. They did this in order to narrate anew the Years of Lead, the tragic massacres of those years, Fascism, the ambitions of colonialism, the intrigues of power that went on behind the scenes, the ambiguous events and the controversial facts, in an attempt to rewrite the collective memory and identity of their country. With a subtle language and an anti-monumental intent, but with specific principles and values, as well as a social and political conscience, the artists often focus on tragic events that have not yet been clarified or remain obscure. The past thus appears as something unfinished, which the artists must therefore renegotiate and mediate to contribute generating our images of history.

The title *Unpacking My History*, makes reference to an essay by Walter Benjamin who gave an end to his life in order to escape from the monsters of twentieth-century history. In his brief essay entitled *Unpacking My Library*, written in 1931, Benjamin narrates his experience of removing from boxes the numerous books from his personal library which had been in storage and thus out of reach for some years.<sup>19</sup> Similarly, contemporary Italian artists are going back to the history of their country that had been left aside, and uncovering hidden stories by excavating and unearthing, but also revitalizing and reconstructing. This generation of Italian artists, like previous ones, seeks to reframe the way in which the past is represented in the present, and invite their viewers to do the same. These artists urge us to remember, when others prompt us to forget, and create new expectations and new perspectives on the future through their ability to make something invisible visible.

Today more than ever, I believe that artists and curators committed to social issues must play a crucial role in society. They must engage in a debate concerning the re-reading of history, the ambiguities and discontinuities of the past, in order to understand the present and think about the future. What sort of discussions can emerge from the artists' re-telling of history? As Claire Fontaine has stretched out: "We need to 'keep present' (*fare presente*) the number of times the history of

Italy has been rewritten and erased. And by whom. We, the inhabitants of this time and this country, would sometimes like to be able to 'keep present' that stain that expands endlessly, which is the hemorrhaging of the meaning of our lives. Like an opaque cloud that tints the water of a basin but is constantly diluted."<sup>20</sup>

Artworks themselves don't bring change in society. Yet, creative voices can shed light on hidden narratives, get us out of our established positions, prompt reflection and give us new perspectives on things. Artists use a visual language — forms, research, archives, appropriation, actions, etc. — to do what words can't do. As Claire Fontaine explained: "If we make art, it's precisely because there are many things that we can't say with words. Because words have been emptied, of their significance by power, because in a democracy, one can express oneself, no doubt, but under conditions that make listening impossible and the sense of what one says insignificant."<sup>21</sup>

## Notes

- 1 Alessandro Rabottini interviewed by B. Casavecchia, in *State of a Nation*, Frieze, issue 140, June 2011.
- 2 L. Longobardi, *15 ipotesi per una storia dell'arte contemporanea*, Lit Edizioni, 2022, p. 10.
- 3 *Ibid.*, p. 12.
- 4 <https://www.zerodeux.fr/guests/rossella-biscotti-history-repeating/>
- 5 <https://nomasfoundation.com/en/mostre/francesco-arena-324-mq/>
- 6 Francesco Arena in V. de Bellis (ed.), *Francesco Arena, 5468 Days*, Skira editore, 2019, p. 5.
- 7 *Ibidem.*, p. 5.
- 8 *Ibid.*, p. 10.
- 9 *Ibid.*, p. 10.
- 10 F. Disconzi, F. Guerisoli in *#futuro*, no. 6, quaderni d'arte italiana, Treccani, p. 67.
- 11 *Ibid.*, p. 69.
- 12 C. Fontaine, *Human Strike and the Art of Creating Freedom*, semiotext(e), 2020, p. 10.
- 13 *Ibid.*, p.12.
- 14 <https://www.t293.it/exhibition/taccuini-di-guerra-incivile/>
- 15 D. Azzellini, in *International Encyclopedia of Revolution and Protest*, ed. I. Ness, Blackwell Publishing, 2009, pp. 1307-1312.
- 16 C. Fontaine, *Human Strike and the Art of Creating Freedom*, semiotext(e), 2020, p. 12.
- 17 F. Favelli, *Bologna La Rossa*, Corraini Edizioni, 2019, p. 7.
- 18 G.M. Tosatti in *Storia della Notte e Destino Delle Comete*, Padiglione Italia, 59° Esposizione Internazionale d'Arte, La Biennale di Venezia, Treccani, Vol. 1, pp. 122-123.
- 19 W. Benjamin, *Unpacking My Library. A Talk about Book Collecting*, ERIS, 2022.
- 20 C. Fontaine, *Human Strike and the Art of Creating Freedom*, semiotext(e), 2020, p. 125
- 21 *Ibid.*, p. 52.

Quotidiana is a programme of exhibitions conceived and produced by La Quadriennale di Roma in collaboration with City of Rome, Department of Culture – Superintendency for Cultural Heritage. The aim of Quotidiana is to explore a number of significant trends in 21st-century Italian art.

## **Q** uotidiana

Every two months, six curators (three Italian and three foreign) reflect on artistic trajectories of particular interest through a critical text and an exhibition of a few essential works.

## **P** aesaggio