

**Beatrice Merz, *Dedicated to Clara\* and her voyage in Europe (1741-1758)*, Marzia Migliora. Velme, hopefulmonster Editore, Torino, 2017**

*Chief among these motives was the overwhelming idea of the great whale himself. Such a portentous and mysterious monster roused all my curiosity.*

HERMAN MELVILLE, *Moby Dick*<sup>1</sup>

In the wake of the proposal of organising an exhibition for Ca' Rezzonico, and after a short delay resulting from the suspected difficulties of dealing with a museum packed with such a rich historical content, Marzia Migliora took up the challenge. An artist who has always tackled projects associated with locations that are stimulating yet contradictory, she starts each new adventure with some thorough research: she reads, documents, takes notes and draws, gradually defining the issues that might arise from the place and time.

To respect this procedure and pass on its principles, I have chosen to accompany this brief introduction with several of her sketches followed by the ironic and significant text written by Alberto Salza with the artist, before concluding the volume with images of the works in situ.

Attracted by the charm of the lagoon city, with its complex history and its most current contradictions, the artist relates Venetian affairs and those of the world of labour through a series of legendary, literary and social implications, conceiving a project steeped in elements drawn from history and current events, making use also of some works conserved in the historic building. The artist accomplishes this by extrapolating some elements from the collection, making them 'her own', using them in installations and including them under a new guise: she starts with the crest of the Rezzonico family and the sculptures of the vase-holder 'Moors' by Andrea Brustolon, and then collects a series of stimuli, passing from the fresco of the 'New world' by Giandomenico Tiepolo (the Younger) to paintings by Pietro Longhi depicting scenes of daily and family life, from the workplace to occasional or exceptional moments.

The works that result from this approach are marked by a strong ideological and emotive intensity and shift the visitor's point of view back to our own times: upper-works, wetted area.

Ca' Rezzonico is thus transformed into a meeting place between old and contemporary, where the stories appear to us in all their complexity, packed with differing values: our gaze turns toward the horizon and accompanies the decline of glorious eras, like the one represented by the *palazzo* or that of today. The *velma*, which gives the exhibition its title, is the 'place' of conjunction between water and land, the symbol of something submerged that must never stop emerging, 'an urgency of the present' and a bridge that connects us with the past.

The synthesis of the monopoly, the art of possession and the symbols of power.

*Now I exist. This certainty gives me justification and the freedom in which I believed on my own and which I have found the means to obtain. All distinctions, the categories that expressed the formation of my identity from dissent onwards no longer belong to me; I do what I want, this is the content that appears to me under any circumstances; I adhere to nothing else but that.*

CARLA LONZI<sup>2</sup>

Throughout history, the words of St. Paul (Romans, 8, 31) *Si Deus pro nobis, quis contra nos* (If God be for us, who can be against us?) have been used to justify criminal acts, war and mass extermination by the great dictators and men of power. And the Rezzonico family used a part of the phrase in its coat of arms, with the part omitted repeated by the artist on some mirrors.

In the *Mondo Novo* installation, vase-holder Ethiopians are moved forward and turn their backs like the spectators in Tiepolo's *mondo novo*, a move highlighted by the sort of measuring rod used in

documentary photography of archaeological finds. And in doing so, these figures effect a change: from slaves and chained objects to symbolic human presences.

Migliora also reproduces an antique mask used only by women and depicted in numerous paintings: a simple black oval with two holes for the eyes called the *Moréta*. Women could only keep it over their faces by clutching a gag bit between their teeth, which, of course, obliged them to utter not a word.

The mask reproduces the cast of the artist's own face and is suspended in the air so that it can be seen in all its entirety, including from the back. The very title of the work, *Taci, anzi parla* (*Be quiet, no speak*), is a quotation from the book by Carla Lonzi, and the 'gesture' in *Mondo Novo*, or the question that emerges from the mirrors, all reveal a fact and at the same time the artist's desire to combat it, to reverse the roles of the other and of ourselves. We all often peer through a keyhole to see what there actually is on the other side, but bound to our flags, we remain slaves to our inability to see freely.

A sharp confrontation without mitigating factors.

*Among the events noted in the chronicles of the eighteenth century are the constant and almost daily arrivals of princes and prelates. The arrival we want to recall today, however, is that of a rhinoceros. (...) If there is a moral to this story, it springs from itself: do not underestimate the rhinoceros. If you are historians, pay close attention to the contexts; if you are noblemen or important, respect the dignity of the monster and resign yourself to being less important than it. Moreover, the Mastai family had to wait to have a pope elected before becoming more famous in the world than Clara, whom they admired at the price of a silver coin as she ate her oats and drank from a bucket in her pen in the old fair.*

LEONARDO BADIOLI, *Il rinoceronte*<sup>3</sup>

The rhinoceros, understood as animal but also as iconographic reference by Migliora becomes quotation and revelation for the *Remains* sculpture, comprising a reproduction of its horn.

The animal is helpless prey, attraction, showpiece, and today increasingly threatened by poaching and illegal hunting because of its financial value. Torn from nature for possession, success and power, we mutilate and kill it in the name of healing.

Is it not for the same reasons that the human race in danger?

The gold that marks history, the oil of yesterday and today that marks our path.

*I am, by a flood, borne back to that wondrous period, ere time itself can be said to have begun; for time began with man.*

HERMAN MELVILLE, *Moby Dick*<sup>4</sup>

*La fabbrica illuminata*<sup>5</sup> (*The illuminated or enlightened factory*) is a metaphorical workshop that confronts and cohabits with the remaining Venetian splendour in the Portego, a long corridor that connects the water gate with the land gate. Each workbench is composed of a jeweller's bench illuminated by neon lamps and of a salt block ready to be worked.

Salt, 'white gold' in Venetian history, was used as currency to buy grain or other commodities. Rock salt is also time, very long time expressed in the six million years it has taken to form it, remaining hidden until extracted.

The factory is light and darkness, noise and silence, passion and pain, accumulation and dispersion; an alchemical place of transformation and creation.

The work refers to industrial urban 'landscapes' which here contrast boldly with the splendid atmosphere of the noble palaces.

Decays compared.

In these recent days during the preparation of the exhibition and the drafting of this catalogue, a succession of very worrying events are taking place: the thousands of deaths in the Mediterranean, the referendum in Turkey, Trump's 'proofs', winds of war in Asia, Daesh, the European election results, the endless tensions in Syria... this is a period in which democracy really is seeing its stability shaken.

I do not know what will be different tomorrow; what I am certain of is that we are all a little bit slaves, powerful, silent, resistant, clowns, submissive, aggressive... and rhinos.

16 April 2017

## Notes

\*Clara, the rhinoceros depicted in Longhi's painting, *The Rhinoceros*, 1571.

1. Herman Melville, *Moby Dick*, W. W. Norton & Co., New York and London 1967.
2. Carla Lonzi in *Taci, anzi parla. Diario di una femminista*, Milan 1978.
3. Leonardo Badioli, *Il rinoceronte*, libri senza carta.it.
4. Herman Melville, *op. cit.*
5. The title is a quotation from Luigi Nono's 1964 composition, *La fabbrica illuminata*.