

Introduction

by Tenley Bick

Not unified as a nation state until 1861, what we mean by “Italy” and “Italian” culture is often complex in temporality and even anachronistic with regard to the history it engages. Within contemporary Italy and Italian culture persist histories that inform Italy’s present but can also be, as Igiaba Scego has written, “uncomfortable traces of our [in this case, Italy’s] past.” Histories of colonialism, both liberal and Fascist, for example, continue to inform current debates surrounding migration on the peninsula and the increasing multi-ethnicity of the country’s demographic. Recent scholarship on race and biopolitics, empire and mobility regimes, and postcoloniality in Italian Studies has shed light on contemporary Italy’s understudied sites of identity and often negated histories.² Although this scholarship is bringing the so-called postcolonial (and, increasingly, transnational) turn to bear upon studies of contemporary Italian culture, more remains to be done – especially in art historical studies of contemporary Italian art.³ Indeed, although works by artists of color and themes of belonging and migration have been included and addressed in recent years by major exhibitions in Italy, these artists are almost always non-Italian. (Consider, for example, the recent installation in Florence’s Piazza della Signoria of the monumental bronze figurative sculpture *Time Unfolding* [2023]: a three-and-a-half-meter work by Thomas J. Price, the British artist of Jamaican heritage, whose depiction of a contemporary Black girl stands in contrast to the historic works in the adjacent loggia, such as the copy of Michelangelo’s *David*. The work is part of a multi-site exhibition of the artist’s work, curated by Sergio Risalti). The need for postcolonial art historical studies of contemporary Italian art history is marked and overdue.

This need is especially urgent given what has been the at-times hostile reception of work that addresses these themes when they have been made by Italian artists. We might recall the installation five years ago, in 2020, in Milan’s historic center, of a street photomural by Italian artist Ozmo [**fig. 1**]. The work depicted a young contemporary Eritrean girl, as explained by text linked to the image, standing triumphantly on top of a monumental base, marked with the inscription: “monumento alla memoria della sposa bambina in Montanelli” (monument to the memory of Montanelli’s child bride). It was installed by the artist in response to the then-recent defacement (since repaired) of a nearby public monument to celebrated journalist Indro Montanelli who, when a colonial soldier in East Africa, bought a twelve-year-old Eritrean girl, Destà, to

serve as his wife under the practice of *madamismo*, the system of colonial concubinage (in which the colonial woman is also known in Italian as the *madamato*).⁴ Montanelli's monument was marked "racist, rapist." In the context of the Montanelli debate, renewed amid anti-Black racist violence in Italy as a transatlantic counterpart to the murder of George Floyd in the U.S., Black Italian cultural figures, namely Igiaba Scego, in the same text as the one mentioned above, called for public memorialization instead of Destà. Scego called attention elsewhere to the colonial foundations of Montanelli's journalism career and masculine Italian identity, a fact often overshadowed by later areas of his career, even though he never hid (or apologized for) his past. Much is the same, Scego argues, for Italy. Its own colonial history are the shadows of the Italian Republic.⁵ Ozmo's mural was vandalized within two days of its installation, when someone pulled down most of the image of Destà's monumental base, destroying the image-as-monument while erasing the imagined inscription and QR code, which linked to an explanation of the work [fig. 2].⁶

Since then, two recent shifts, in the form of new institutional support in Italy and in changes in visual culture studies, suggest that some tides are changing. These shifts underscore the importance of contemporary art to postcolonial Italy while also thereby only further highlighting the continued delay, inability, or refusal of Italianist art history to reckon with this problem. First, in 2024, two landmark solo exhibitions were dedicated to contemporary Black Italian artists of African descent at major contemporary art institutions in Italy: *Silvia Rosi: Disintegrata*, curated by Ilaria Campioli at the Collezione Maramotti, the private contemporary art foundation of Max Mara in the artist's native Reggio Emilia, and Binta Diaw's installation and exhibition, *Binta Diaw. Il peut pleurer du ciel*, at the Fondazione Sandretto Re Rebaudengo in Torino, curated by Ilaria Bernardi. Both exhibits were the first solo shows for these artists in Italy. (Both artists were also previously nominated, in 2023, for the prestigious Bulgari Prize at MAXXI in Rome, as was Tunisian Italian artist Monia Ben Hamouda, who eventually won that year). Second, in visual culture studies, the important volume *Colonialità e culture visuali in Italia* (Mimesis 2021), co-edited by curators Simone Frangi and Lucrezia Cippitelli (the latter also an art historian) has fostered scholarship on this topic, if still predominantly from sociologists, Italian studies scholars, artists, and curators. That volume has emphasized methods of experimental pedagogy, artistic practice, and theory as means of making critical interventions into the relationship between coloniality and visual cultures in Italy.⁷

In support of this work, and its relation to this journal's examination of the contemporary, this issue of *Palinsesti* is dedicated to postcolonial approaches to contemporary Italian art history. The historical frame of the contemporary

for *Palinsesti* begins with 1960: a year that notably initiated widespread European decolonization of Africa. It was also the year that Italy lost its only remaining colony, Somalia, which it held under trustee governance from 1950 to 1960 (a point sometimes left out of timelines that focus on 1947 as the formal end of Italian colonialism). The contemporary for Italian art, then, is necessarily framed by a loss, by the failure of empire, and by a marked shift in ideas regarding Italy's cultural geographies and identity. Despite the rise in the 1960s of Italian activist movements for immigrant rights and groups that protested global authoritarianism and imperialism, especially during the Vietnam War, the 1960s and 1970s in Italian art were often a site of renewed artistic interest in primitivism, Orientalism, and tropes of racial difference as vanguard strategies. It is only now that Italy is beginning to take stock of the presentness of its colonial past, and that contemporary Italian artists are beginning to address this problem.

Drawing its title from Roland Barthes' famous description of "Italianicity" and the artificial, even "barbarous" regulation of connotative meaning, this issue invited scholarship in art history and related disciplines (architectural and design history) on contemporary Italian art that challenged dominant narratives of postwar and contemporary Italian art, specifically through attention to the exclusionary discourses that frame it as an area of study.⁸ Following Cristina Lombardi-Diop and Caterina Romeo's 2014 manifesto on "The Italian Postcolonial," this issue calls for a radical questioning of contemporary Italian art history – by which I mean art historical narratives of Italian art, as well as the practice of Italianist art history – and mapping of new critical, spatial, and temporal trajectories in Italian art history for today.⁹ Through this issue, this scholarship seeks to constellate new, radical futures, to borrow T.J. Demos' use of the term, for tomorrow.¹⁰

Central to this project and to the scholarship in this issue is reconsideration of Italian identity itself. Studies on the work of Italian artists of African, Asian, Latin American, and Middle Eastern descent were especially welcome, as were studies of works by immigrant artists in Italy. Also welcomed were studies of works by non-Italian artists, especially in former colonial contexts, who address legacies of Italian colonialism. Contributions bridge a rethinking of Italian identity through close engagement with its cultural geographies, past and present, and through examination of work by artists into the immigrant experience of their families and of migration experiences more broadly.

Diaspora is an overarching theme and subject of this issue. In the first article, Antje Gamble provides illuminating insights into two seemingly unrelated phenomena: the fashioning of Italian (and Italian American) identity in the interwar and postwar periods as racially white and the proliferation of U.S. exhibitions of Italian modern art and design in the post-WWII period. Situating

these exhibitions within the artistic context of the “Cultural Cold War” of the U.S., Gamble focuses on Italian modern art’s patronage and reception by U.S. institutions and how they functioned as politicized cultural operations. She finds ultimately that these exhibitions were a means to position the U.S. as “inheritor of the humanist heritage that Italy possessed.” With close attention to shifting conceptualizations in the U.S. of the race of Italians and Italian Americans, Gamble harnesses critical whiteness studies to help us better understand the context of exhibitions of Italian modern art and design in the Cold War period. Examining *Twentieth-Century Italian Art* (MoMA, 1949) and the massive exhibition *Italy at Work: Her Renaissance Design Today* (1950–53), a 2,500-object, traveling show organized in collaboration between the Art Institute of Chicago and the Brooklyn Museum, Gamble finds that exhibitions of Italian art organized and shown in that period by U.S. institutions served politicized cultural goals for the U.S. As she wrote, these “exhibitions of Italian art in the US after WWII presented Italian culture as white culture to strengthen American claims to Western humanist culture at the same time that Italian Americans were working to be seen as fully, culturally white in their communities.” Pairing well with Gamble’s article in many regards is this issue’s author interview, by Stella Cattaneo, of art historian Raffaele Bedarida on the topic of his book, *Exhibiting Italian Art in the United States from Futurism to Arte Povera: “Like a Giant Screen”* (Routledge, 2022). Bedarida and Cattaneo discuss the book’s examination of exhibitions of modern and contemporary Italian art in the US from the late 1920s to the late 1960s as a means of cultural diplomacy (and advertisement), and as a means of fashioning Italian national identity amid shifting international relations and cultural geopolitics in those crucial decades of the twentieth century. Of distinctive interest to readers who might be attuned to the issue’s broader engagement with gender will be Bedarida and Cattaneo’s discussion of the important role of women cultural figures in these processes.

In the second article in this issue, Rhiannon Noel Welch examines temporality and postcolonialism in Italian cinema, specifically cinema that addresses contemporary cross-Mediterranean migration in Italy. Through close formal and narrative analysis of Yervant Gianikian and Angela Ricci Lucchi’s feature-length experimental film *Dal Polo all’Equatore* (1984–86), Mario Iorio and Raphaël Cuomo’s experimental film *Sudeuropa* (2005–07), and Gianfranco Rosi’s feature film *Fuocoammare* (2016), the latter two both set on Lampedusa, Welch names and examines what she calls “cinematic deceleration,” situating it in relation to the presentist “here and now” temporality of popular imaginaries that envisions such migration as “border crisis.” Welch defines cinematic deceleration as the “stumbling” and often “disjunctive tempos” found in these films. While providing powerful new

readings of these films, Welch argues this slowed and unsettled temporality can operate as “counterforce” and artistic strategy that variously reinscribes or disturbs the presentist temporality of the Italian border “in crisis.”

Last, in my article, I examine photography and diaspora in the work of Silvia Rosi, the Italian Togolese artist who uses self-portraiture to visualize and embody the experience of her parents (and subjects of their association), who immigrated to Italy in the 1970s, and of herself, in the context of the racialized West African diaspora in Italy. In particular, I examine the artist’s long-term engagement of the tradition of West African studio portrait photography, a genre familiar to her through family photography, as an often-mentioned but under-examined strategy of her work. Drawing upon scholarship from Africanist and Italianist art history, I argue that the artist’s use of its tropes operates as a critical diasporic strategy in her images, which variously relay desire and disillusionment in the context of Italy’s African diaspora.

I hope this topic inspires readers to continue to contemplate these issues in their own studies of contemporary Italian art. It is but one step in what might be a broader reconsideration, if not dismantling, of the regulatory operations of Italianicity and *italianità*, and their effects on our understanding of contemporary Italian art and its histories.

PLATES



1 Ozmo, *Monumento alla sposa bambina Fatima Destà in Montanelli*, via Torino, Milan, 2020. Inkjet on blueback paper, measurements to site (*dimensioni ambientali*). Photo Gianfranco Candida, Walls of Milan. Courtesy of the artist.



2 Ozmo, *Monumento alla sposa bambina Fatima Destà in Montanelli*, via Torino, Milan, 2020, photographed after its defacement. Inkjet on blueback paper, measurements to site (*dimensioni ambientali*). Photo by the artist. Courtesy of the artist.

- ¹ Igiaba Scego, "Cosa fare con le tracce scomode del nostro passato," *Internazionale* (Sept. 6, 2020): <https://www.internazionale.it/opinione/igiaba-scego/2020/06/09/tracce-passato-colonialismo-razzismo-fascismo>. Translation mine.
- ² See, for example, contributor Rhiannon Noel Welch's *Vital Subjects: Race and Biopolitics in Italy, 1860–1920*, Transnational Italian Cultures (Liverpool University Press, 2016); Ruth Ben-Ghiat, *Italian Fascism's Empire Cinema* (Indiana University Press, 2015); Stephanie Malia Hom, *Empire's Mobius Strip: Historical Echoes in Italy's Crisis of Migration and Detention* (Cornell University Press, 2019); and Cristina Lombardi-Diop and Caterina Romeo, eds., *Postcolonial Italy: Challenging National Homogeneity* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).
- ³ For a discussion of transnational Italian studies in relation to art history, see Tenley Bick, "Un sentimento di libertà: Toward a transnational Italian art history," *Forum Italicum* 57, no. 2 (2023): 431–442.
- ⁴ On this practice see, for example, Giovanna Trento, "Madamato and Colonial Concubinage in Ethiopia: A Comparative Perspective," *Aethiopica* 14 (2011): 184–205.
- ⁵ Igiaba Scego, "Storia di un italiano: La luce dei chiarimenti per fugare l'ombra delle vendette," *Quaderni d'arte*, no. 3 (2022): <https://quaderni.online/quaderni-darte-italiana-3/>.
- ⁶ Tenley Bick, "'My world now is black in color': Pandemic-Era Programming, Activism, and Contemporary Art in Italy," *CAA International News* (Aug. 11, 2020): <http://www.collegeart.org/news/2020/08/11/international-news-my-world-now-is-black-in-color-tenley-bick/>.
- ⁷ Of particular relevance for readers of *Palinsesti* is part II of that volume, which provides readers an introductory overview of a range of artistic and cinematic practices that have examined Italian colonialism in the past three decades. The section is a valuable resource for teaching and research, composed of a series of object-focused annotations on individual works of art and cinema. Not all artists in the section are Italian, allowing for transnational critical approaches to the subject of study.
- ⁸ See Roland Barthes, "Rhetoric of the Image," (1977) in *Image Music Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (Hill and Wang, 1977), 32–51.
- ⁹ See Cristina Lombardi-Diop and Caterina Romeo, "The Italian Postcolonial: A Manifesto," *Italian Studies* 69, no. 3 (2014): 425–33.
- ¹⁰ See T. J. Demos, *Radical Futurisms: Ecologies of Collapse, Chronopolitics, and Justice-to-Come* (Sternberg Press, 2023).