

"Italianicity is not Italy"

Questioning Contemporary Italian Art History



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12 (2023)

"ITALIANICITY IS NOT ITALY": QUESTIONING CONTEMPORARY ITALIAN ART HISTORY

EDITED BY | A CURA DI: Tenley Bick (Florida State University)

COVER IMAGE | IN COPERTINA: Ozmo, *Monumento alla sposa bambina Fatima Destà in Montanelli* (2020, inkjet on blueback paper, Milan)
after its defacement. Courtesy of Ozmo

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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*, September 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: Liverpool University Press, 2016); Ruth Ben-Ghiat, *Italian Fascism's Empire Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015); Stephanie Malia Hom, *Empire's Mobius Strip: Historical Echoes in Italy's Crisis of Migration and Detention* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2019); *Postcolonial Italy: Challenging National Homogeneity*, edited by Cristina Lombardi-Diop and Caterina Romeo (Basingstoke: 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), p. n. n. <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*, August 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 (New York: 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* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2023).

ANTJE GAMBLE

Italian Culture as White Culture in Postwar United States

When American art and architecture critic Aline B. Louchheim highlighted the work of modernist sculptor Marino Marini in an exhibition review for the *New York Times* in 1950, she began by describing the artist's physiognomy. It was the description, Marini's "gently sensual lips" and "high forehead" that told readers about the sculptor in her article.¹ These traits suggested, according to the critic, that Marini had an "ancestor [who was] one of the Florentines... whose pristine profiles was [sic] caught by Antonio Pollaiuolo [... or] a descendant of Verrocchio's 'David'." Louchheim's description stands out in the reviews of Marini's work, on both sides of the Atlantic, in the lengthy description of his physiognomy.² In the broader American context, this description of Marini is illustrative of the disjunctive acceptance of Italian modernism into the Western canon as dictated by American institutions.³ His physiognomy connected the modern Italian to the great humanist tradition of the Renaissance, of which the US saw themselves as inheritor.⁴ As part of their burgeoning Cold War strategies, the US wanted to be seen as inheritor of humanism because they were positioning themselves to lead Western culture.⁵

The US as humanist inheritor was also influenced by shifting racial politics in the US. For example, after Second World War, Italians started moving out of their urban enclaves, such as East Harlem (NY), into which they had been segregated.⁶ This is just one external marker to the shift of Italian Americans' place in America's racialized society. Marini and his work served as an ideal representation of the humanist heritage of Western culture and its constructed beginnings. The artist and his work also served as the face, quite literally, of broadening definitions of whiteness in America's racialized society. Italian artists and designers became the physical manifestation of the new postwar white Western culture that was being inherited by the Americans from European humanist traditions.

Italian modern art's patronage by US institutions was part of an effort to secure American cultural hegemony after Second World War. Support for Italian modernism was used to both present the US's place as inheritor of Western white culture and also to secure Italy, and its culture, as part of the

modern East/West divide of the Cold War. Importantly, it was not a natural nor neutral progression that led to Italian modern art being part of the Western art historical canon.⁷ Rather, key figures in elite cultural circles chose to include Italian modern art in order to uphold evolving ideas of whiteness and Western culture. The use of exhibitions at the beginning of the Cold War, oftentimes directly funded by the US government, worked to incorporate Italian modern art into the developing canon of Western modern art history. Exhibitions served as a way to present Italy and its culture as prime examples of capitalist democracies within the racialized-white West in this new Cold War global climate.

This article will focus on the moment of the American “Cultural Cold War” when Western culture was set up to be in opposition to communist Eastern culture in the USSR and its allies. The “Cultural Cold War” interacted with shifting ideas about race in the US with regard to Italians and Italian Americans.⁸ Exhibitions like MoMA’s 1949 *Twentieth-Century Italian Art* [fig. 1] and the 1950–53 *Italy at Work: Her Renaissance in Design Today* not only opened markets in the US for Italian material culture, but also helped establish this cultural link between the US and Italy’s humanist past. Though this work had begun before the war, the postwar shift to supporting modern art and design was important to solidifying America’s position as the Western cultural leader.⁹ As many have shown since Serge Guilbaut’s 1983 book *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art*, the US and its allies worked, sometimes in disagreement, to fight for American cultural supremacy within the West during the Cold War.¹⁰ Italy played a key role in this space not only because of the peninsula’s legacy (namely ancient Rome and the early modern period, or Renaissance), but also because of its strategic geographical location on the Mediterranean.¹¹ Recent scholarship by myself, Raffaele Bedarida, Elena Dellapiana, and others have shown that Italian modern art, design, and architecture was having a moment in the US after Second World War.¹² This paper builds on this scholarship by track how exhibitions of Italian art in the US after Second World War 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.

The intersections of politics, economics, culture, art, and race are at the heart of the importance of looking at exhibitions of Italian art in the post-Second World War US. Bringing in research from fields outside of art history are, therefore, necessary. In part, this study serves to add the context that scholars like Miguel Mellino have called for since the 2010s. As Mellino wrote:

what still needs to be done [in the study of postcolonial Italy's relationship to "capitalist modernity"] is to dislocate modern Italian history — particularly the nation-building process — and put it back into the global context of what Peruvian postcolonial theorist Anibal Quijano has called "the coloniality of modern capitalist power [...]." ¹³

Though Mellino considers constructions of "race, racism, and racialization" inside Italy, a broader look at Cold War-era geopolitics fits within his linkages between capitalism, colonialism, and racism.¹⁴ For example, the reassertion of Italy's place as a capitalist democracy after Italian Fascism's fall was important on both sides of the Atlantic.¹⁵ At the same time, Italy wanted to keep the political and cultural power that it lost with the war and with the dissolution of their colonies in North and East Africa.¹⁶ Likewise, the US wanted to shore up power in the Mediterranean at the beginning of the Cold War and make sure they were seen as the inheritors of the patrimony of Western culture.¹⁷

Conceptions of US racial whiteness in the first half of the twentieth century put Italians in proximity to whiteness. Positioning Italians as not fully white, specifically not culturally white in the US, served political actors as well as individuals. The construction of the Western canon of art history, for instance, relied on hierarchies of race, nationality, and even artistic medium (painting is art but ceramics are craft, for instance). These contexts are connected to the politics in Italy and the US that helped secure Italian cultural productions as part of the Western canon. From Fascism to the Cold War, Italy was strategic politically both for its physical proximity to the *East* and its Communism. At the same time, Italy was valuable for its humanist legacy. For the US to present itself as the inheritor of Western culture from Europe, it had to incorporate Italy into the colonial hierarchies of white and western. Just as Mussolini weaponized Imperial Roman and Early modern culture to justify his claims to establish a "Third Rome", the US deployed Italian art and culture in the Cold War. One way they did this was by supporting, overtly and covertly, postwar Italian art and design exhibitions in the US and throughout Europe. US exhibitions that packaged postwar Italian art and design as Western, democratic, capitalist, and therefore white, Italian modern art validated the Western art history canon as part of American-lead humanist culture.

Italian Americans and Their Proximity to Cultural Whiteness in the US after Second World War

Italian Americans and recent Italian immigrants to the US were experiencing a rapidly shifting political and social environment in the decade after the Second World War. This was, in part, because Italian Americans were becoming considered culturally white in the US. Since race is a cultural construct, it

works inside and outside of legal channels, often in seemingly contradictory ways. As sociologist Erik T. Writters notes, “whiteness is ‘done’ through culture” and “is in a constant state of working and reworking.”¹⁸ Whiteness is as constructed and ever shifting as the definitions of Western culture. Culture itself is used to construct racial hierarchies; and art is a powerful cultural tool in creating ideas about race.¹⁹ The integration of Italians and Italian Americans into whiteness is connected to Italian modern art and design’s integration into the Western canon after Second World War.

Race for immigrants to the US often shifted their own preexisting understandings of race, which were often different in their countries of origin. Even if they already held racial privileges at home, American writer and civil rights activist James Baldwin described how the American racialized system was paramount to US culture. He wrote: “It bears terrifying witness to what happened to everyone who got here, and paid the price of the ticket. The price was to become ‘white’. No one was white before he/she came to America.”²⁰ Baldwin was alluding to way in which immigrants to the US would leave behind practices, customs, and language, as they were made to embrace a hegemonic white racial identity within the US. Of course, many immigrants would have embraced cultural assimilation, but what is important for Baldwin is that the US racialized system was more endemic to culture than in Europe, for instance, because of the legacy of colonialization and chattel slavery.²¹ Over the course of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Italian immigrants became less segregated in the US. First, Italians segregated amongst themselves into regional groups, then unified in a national identity of Italian Americans, and then, after Second World War, into broader white communities.²² For Italians, a position as white became more urgent during and after Second World War because of the shifting international political landscape.²³

Within scholarship on race in the US, studies of race have extensively looked at the systems of oppression that affected Black, Indigenous, and other People of Color (BIPOC). However, there are a growing number of more studies that have looked at how various ethnic groups became white over time.²⁴ Unlike BIPOC immigrants, Italian immigrants had some legal protections but did not benefit culturally from whiteness until the second half of the twentieth century.²⁵ The first important shift came in the late-nineteenth century, when attitudes towards non-Anglican European immigrants started to change, bringing more European groups closer to whiteness; though they were the lowest in the nineteenth-century European racial hierarchy.²⁶ Italian American and Italian immigrants’ raised proximity to whiteness did not protect them from racial violence at the end of the century. For example in 1891, eleven Italians were lynched by a mob after a “acquittal

of nine alleged Mafia members believed responsible for killing New Orleans Police Chief David Hennessy.”²⁷ This event was closely followed by a national celebration of the holiday for Christopher Columbus in 1892 – it would not become an official national holiday until 1964.²⁸ This holiday became important to the Italian American population over time. As historian Thomas J. Schlereth shows, Columbus was first used as a symbol in a search for a national American identity by Anglo Americans since the 1790s.²⁹ It is not until almost hundred years later that celebrations of the historical figure within Italian American communities become popular and when they saw him as “an American ethnic saint in an era of unprecedented immigration.”³⁰ The shifts in the holiday symbolizing Italian American identity seem to follow the shifts in Italian American’s racial status in the US.

Though Italians were legally “white on arrival,” as historian Thomas Guglielmo has termed their legal status in the US, their experiences in the racialized hierarchies of American culture were more complicated.³¹ These legal privileges included the rights to naturalize as US citizens and have full voting rights, like other white Americans. This meant that Italian Americans did have many privileges within US society that their BIPOC neighbors did not, even if they still experienced discrimination because of their liminal status with regard to cultural whiteness. However, their legal status did not protect them from legal discrimination.

Scholar and memoirist Louise DeSalvo’s examination of her grandmother’s naturalization in the US in the 1890s illustrates the double-edged whiteness held by Italian immigrating to the US in the first half of the twentieth century. DeSalvo grandmother’s papers recorded her as “color White; complexion Dark.”³² As she emphasizes that this description as “complexion Dark” could not have been a phenotypical observation, because “my grandmother was most certainly fair.”³³ The coding of her visibly fair complexion as “dark” was meant to signal her otherness as an Italian in America. These distinctions were made to show immigrants that though they were able to gain citizenship because of their European whiteness they were a not fully-white American. The Immigration Act of 1924 specifically restricted immigration of Italian immigrants alongside other liminally-white European groups. Historian Peter G. Vellon shows that support 1924 bill highlighted specific anti-Italian sentiments among some “old stock” Americans.³⁴ This happened because the construction of whiteness was not so clear cut; “an immigrant might be considered white [legally], yet at the same time be perceived as racially distinct from other whites.”³⁵ It was not until the second half of the twentieth century that the 1924 bill was repealed.³⁶

With these shifting ideas about race, Italian Americans and recent Italian immigrants to the US were often “placed between whites and blacks.”³⁷ This started to shift more dramatically after Second World War at the beginning of the Cold War. Discussing the often-parallel Jewish-American experience, anthropologist Karen Brodtkin writes:

programs [helping GI’s] reinforced white/nonwhite racial distinctions even as intrawhite racialization was falling out of fashion. This other side of the coin, that white men of northwest European ancestry and white men of southeastern European ancestry were treated equally in theory and in practice with regard to the benefits they received, was part of the larger postwar whitening of Jews and other eastern and southern Europeans.³⁸

Italian Americans were not passive actors in these shifts either. Before and after Second World War, they began to make moves to differentiate themselves from the Black communities that they had once been an integral part. Rising anti-black violence among the Italian American community was one signal to the Italian American push to be perceived as culturally white in the US.³⁹ These “complicated and contradictory ways Italians have adopted and challenged the practices of white supremacy” showed they were gaining access to cultural whiteness in the US.⁴⁰ The colloquial knowledge of this shift to whiteness is still discussed by Black folks today, from the 2002 NYC radio deejay at WAXQ-FM Chuck Nice making the remark “Italians [*sic*] are niggaz with short memories” to the jokes about Italian Americans being People of Color in the film *Sorry to Bother You* (Significant Productions, 2018).⁴¹

These internal and external moves to secure a place for Italian Americans as culturally white became interconnected with American Cold War politics. For example, in response to the 1952 immigration act – which had replaced the 1924 law – the American Committee on Italian Migration (ACIM) critiqued the law by saying that “Italy would go Communist, and the already delicate equilibrium in Western Europe would tilt toward the Soviet bloc” if poor Italians were not allowed to emigrate to the US.⁴² Among other things, the predominant religion of most Italian Americans, Catholicism, played to their favor. A public anti-communist stance was being championed by key American Catholics, including Joseph McCarthy.⁴³ The church also supported groups like the ACIM with resources for their advocacy.⁴⁴ The immediate decade after the Second World War saw continued legal exclusion of Italian immigrants in the US, on the one hand, and moves by the Italian American community to be seen as fully white, on the other. None of these shifts, however, were neutral or natural. They were individuals, communities, and governments working to reorient in the new Cold War context of America’s capitalist democracy.

Western Culture as White Culture

The social status of Italians in the US was connected to the related cultural construction of so-called Western culture. Similar to the cultural dichotomy of black versus white in terms of race, the West is a social construction. Modern ideas of East and West are essentially a rebranding of Orient and Occident – terms still used in Italian today: *oriente* and *occidente*.⁴⁵ Neither sets of terms are neutral; both are constructed from the perspective of Europeans (more specify Northern Europeans) and facilitate various forms of power (colonial, religious, etc.).

As Edward Said outlined in his canonical text on *Orientalism*, the separation of Orient and Occident simplified the complexities of culture in order to create a hierarchical order.⁴⁶ Historian Georgios Varouxakis tracked the usage of terms like West and Western in the British lexicon to be a specific replacement for the term “Occident.”⁴⁷ It was used in the nineteenth century to reflect the geopolitical differences both between UK and their colonies specifically and also between Europe and Russia, the Ottoman Empire, and so-called “Oriental” Jewish people more broadly.⁴⁸ As Said had already alluded, the East/West construction brought in issues of colonialism, race, and religion that were all at (messy) play together.⁴⁹ These hierarchies overlap and informed racial hierarchies. It is this Eurocentric understanding of history that generated the modern ideas about Western culture – what fits in it and what does not fit in the Western canon of art history. The Ancient Greek states, the Roman Empire, and Ancient Egypt are part of the Western art historical patrimony, while the pre-Christian Germanic people, the Romani, Jewish Europeans culture are not.

Occident/Orient, West/East are distinctions that have guided the development of the field of art history since the European Enlightenment. Though the field has started to shift, most art history surveys have Italian art history include numerous Catholic altarpieces by everyone from Giotto to Verrocchio but not a single item now housed in the Museo Ebraico (Jewish Museum) in Rome. This shows that it was not just someone’s physical position in Europe or on the Mediterranean that situated their cultural patrimony within Western art history. Even within one location, Italy, not all their cultural patrimony would count as Western. Beyond religion, growing conceptions of race placed modern Italians outside the canon in the beginning of the twentieth century. In the books, Italian art is ostensibly omitted between Bernini’s Baroque sculptures and Boccioni’s Futurist paintings, as if the three centuries between those two did not exist. Just as Mussolini strategically chose Imperial and not Republican Rome to champion under Fascism, these canon choices within art history were political as much as aesthetic. Politics, economics, religion,

culture, and shifting ideas about race during the European Enlightenment influenced the Western art historical canon that was the foundation for American art historians and curators after Second World War.

The explicit connection between art history and race, at least in American scholarship, starts with the work of Kymberly Pinder, in her 2002 book *Racing Art History*.⁵⁰ Since this foundational volume, there has been more scholarship of both race inside art and art history and also the variety of art omitted from the Western canon.⁵¹ It is not just historical art that has been framed inside or outside the Western canon. For modernism in particular, “as a product of the Enlightenment epistemology, [modern art] has operated as self-evidently ‘universal’, silencing the histories of the non-West.”⁵² Therefore, it is important not only to recognize the constructed and biased nature of the canon, but also to understand the canon’s broader social and cultural impacts.

The construction of the West, just like the Western canon of art history, relied on a racial hierarchy to get and maintain power. Institutions like the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) actively used their exhibitions to shape these ever-evolving ideas about Western culture and whiteness before and after Second World War. One of the latest books on MoMA, by Caroline M. Riley, highlights the museum’s use of politics and culture in intentional canon creation.⁵³ Similarly, the often-contradictory nature of connecting modern Italian culture with the dominant white Western culture is evident in a variety of ways. The press around Cold War exhibitions illustrated the shifting position of Italians inside the American racialized culture in real time. As with the description of sculptor Marino Marini that opened this paper, images of Italian artists also reflected the othering of contemporary Italian people in the US.

For the 1950-53 *Italy at Work* exhibition in the United States, a photo of Lucio Fontana was used to entice exhibition viewership for the opening to readers of *Interiors* magazine [fig. 2]. The caption reads: “In a whitewashed cell at Albisola, on the Italian Riviera, Lucio Fontana works his sophistication into ceramics with a texture as rough as the bare walls around him.”⁵⁴ Fontana pensively looking at his ceramic creations reads as the old world, as a man connected to his past, to the land that made the clay. The only discussion of his work in the accompanying article reiterates the caption of the illustrated image: “Fontana showing his powerful achievements in clay in a vaulted, whitewashed stone cell in Albisola, lighted by a barred window and one light bulb.”⁵⁵ The text for this article reinforces this orientalizing view of Fontana, discussing the curatorial research trip to Italy as a “shopping trip” for exotic wares without broader aesthetic or historical context.

Of course, Fontana would have been keenly aware of the positionality in such a photograph. He had been working in ceramics for two decades, in part, as

Iria Candela has described, because “modeling [in clay] gave the artist room for spontaneous gesture and free experimentation with form.”⁵⁶ Beyond the materiality of the ceramic media, as Candela, Sharon Hecker, Anthony White, and others have shown, Fontana’s interest in the intersections of high and low connect this work to his work that was praised in high art circles.⁵⁷ However, Fontana’s voice and agency is missing from the *Interiors* article. Nowhere do they acknowledge Fontana’s really avant-garde use of ceramics, his experiments in media like neon, nor the broader import of his work internationally. I would even suggest that this is likely why the 2019 show *Lucio Fontana: On the Threshold* at the Met Breuer sparked so much discussion about Fontana’s American reception at midcentury.⁵⁸

By comparing this “Romanticizing” image of Italian aesthetic production, borrowing Paulo Scrivano’s terminology, to others made to represent Fontana as a genius artist, the framing of Fontana as other is stark.⁵⁹ Like the famous 1962 images by Italian photographer Ugo Mulas, the less often reproduced photographs by German photographer Charles Wilp [fig. 3] create a sharp contrast to the image used in *Interiors*. In Wilp’s photos, taken around 1960, Fontana is dressed in a tweed suit and red tie, standing to the right of a matching red slash paintings. Wilp’s photos of Fontana show an artist and his work in a more authoritative way. Fontana is shown looking out at the viewer, meeting their gaze. These are images of an artist-genius, an artist who knows his and his works’ value. In contrast to the image used to illustrate the *Interiors* magazine article, he is an artist and not a romanticized craftsman. For an American audience, the contemporary Italian artist Fontana was Western because of his artisanal connection to the Italian Renaissance. He was framed as other (not fully white) in the *Interiors* article because of the still liminal space Italians held in the US. Despite Fontana’s innovative use of ceramics in his contemporary artistic practice, his work was presented in proximity to folk art of the non-white groups in Europe (Jewish, Romani, Pagan, etc.). Distinctions of high and low, art and craft happening in the early twentieth century therefore likewise informed and were informed by other cultural constructions of East/West.

These images are coded with cultural as well as political value. The *Interiors* image was produced for the publicity, or better yet propaganda, for a US Marshall Plan funded exhibition of Italian design. It was meant to show the American public how quaint Italian producers were, how they were slowly starting to make work after the devastation of Fascism. These small simple people, making simple things, deserve the power of American consumerist support. On the other hand, Wilp’s images engaged with a contemporary trend of capturing artists, following the likes of Hans Namuth’s photographs of Jackson Pollock in 1951. These are images that fit Fontana into a

contemporary art context alongside the other greats of the postwar period. Despite Fontana's own connection between his ceramic work and those in traditional and non-traditional high art media, for an American audience, the *Interiors* magazine image and accompanying article does little to make that link.

Thought it was important to American cultural elites for modern Italian artist patrimony to become part of the Western canon, as I have discussed elsewhere, the lingering understandings of Italians as only liminally-white in the American racial hierarchy still peeks through.⁶⁰ Among other historical prejudices, the country's physical proximity to Africa and leftist political undercurrents both made the incorporation of Italian modern art into the modern Western canon tangled. Even as their work was being championed as part of the new modernist art history of the West, Italian artists still were held to the racist standards of the American racial hierarchy. This was only amplified during the Cold War, where distinctions between West and East gained even more political and cultural import globally.

Cold War Politics and Italy in the West

The US political interest in Italy started before the First World War as the popularity of leftist politics grew during the period of liberal Italy and continued in the interwar period as Mussolini took over and established the fascist state. American official support for Mussolini under pre-war Fascism see parallels in the postwar support for Italy. In 1929, German-Swiss author Emil Ludwig interviewed Benito Mussolini for the *New York Times*. In the interview, Ludwig outlined:

there seems to me to be a distinct contrast between the Italian and Russian methods, which formerly were so alike... [and Mussolini's] belief in his new form of State might bring him to the point of not desiring to see it established anywhere else.⁶¹

Fascism was modernizing the *backwards* and therefore liminally-white Italy illustrated in Grand Tour novels; however, fascists were not as much of a political threat as the Soviets. Not only would Mussolini not enact Italy's colonialism beyond interests outside the West (tellingly, it was ok that he was colonizing parts of North and East Africa), but his strong control of the peninsula would mean that Communism would not spread there from the recently established USSR.

The decade after the fall of Fascism the push to bring Italy into the fold of the West increased during the burgeoning Cold War. Communism was an *Eastern* political ideology, in opposition to Western capitalist democracy. For Italian

Americans and for the US Government alike, there were fears that Italy would fall the Communist expansion in Eastern Europe. This was immediately evident to leaders of both countries. Italian Prime Minister Alcide De Gasperi's 1947 visit to the United States reflected his use of this fear to vie for more US support of Italian reconstruction efforts. De Gasperi spoke publicly of a wish "to convince the American authorities that [Italian] economic necessities and the need to normalize political life [...] should be dealt with as a single problem."⁶² The equation of economic stability to political stability, both against resurgent Fascism and also against Communism, is inherent in the understanding of American Cold War ideals.⁶³ Economic, political, and cultural control linked here.

Italy's position in these early Cold War policies was central to the American project. As historian David Ellwood notes, "the Marshall Plan in a country like Italy was never just an abstract affair [...] Nor was it merely another weapon in America's Cold War anti-communist crusade."⁶⁴ This was because of the unique qualities of the new constitutional democracy as well as the country's important cultural history within the West (namely Italy's humanist history). One of the ways that the US Government worked within this complex postwar Italian context was by funding exhibitions of Italian art and material culture in the US. These initiatives not only served to bring Italian modern culture into the white West but also helped Italian cultural elites rebuild. This rebuilding of the Italian cultural elite class was both ideological and financial. They could separate themselves from any possible connections to either Fascism or Communism (the second was only in some cases), at the same time as they found new wealthy business connections in the robust American markets.

Italian Americans also participated in these Cold War initiatives as a way to both solidify their cultural power in the US racialized society as well as support the incorporation of the post-fascist Italian state into the Cold War alliance with the US. The leading figure in this is antifascist, Jewish Italian, and recent American immigrant and intellectual Max Ascoli.⁶⁵ Ascoli was founder of the Handicrafts Development Incorporated, a private organization to help artists and artisans in Italy, and the organization CADMA (*Commissione Assistenza Distribuzione Materiali Artigianato* or Artisan Materials Distribution Assistance Commission), headed by theorist and art critic Carlo Ludovico Ragghianti.⁶⁶ After the war, these organizations would be utilized by the Marshall Plan funded organization the CNA (*Compagnia Nazionale Artigiana* or National Artisan Company) and was funded through the U.S. Export-Import Bank under the Economic Recovery Program (ERP) starting in 1947.⁶⁷ The American arm of CNA was the New York City based House of Italian Handicraft (HIH) of which Ascoli was on the board.⁶⁸ In addition to supporting these organizations, Ascoli's writings also championed the Cold War ideals that capitalist

democracies not only made stable nations but were necessary for good cultural production.⁶⁹

These US Government funded initiatives (CNA and HIH) were one of the avenues in which American museums organized exhibitions of Italian Art and material culture. As these Marshall Plan initiatives were forwarding loans to Italy's various industries, American cultural elites were eyeing Italian modern art and design for incorporation into the still-developing modern canons.⁷⁰ This necessitated Italians, and Italian Americans with them, move from liminally-white to fully, culturally white.

US Exhibitions Presenting Italian Modern Art as White Western Culture

Through public and private ventures, exhibitions did political work. The postwar Venice Biennale, for instance, were not only a symbol of Italy's rebirth after Fascism, but also an international arena for political power.⁷¹ Exhibitions in the US also helped to secure American cultural soft power during the early Cold War.

American post-Second World War exhibitions were often publicly funded, though in most cases, the government support was covert. For example, initial investment in the Museum of Modern Art's (MoMA) important 1949 exhibition *Twentieth-Century Italian Art* [fig. 1] was kept hush-hush as to not sully the public presentation of curatorial objectivity. The exhibition's early curatorial research trip to Italy was funded by Marshall Plan funds through the Office of International Information and Cultural Relations (OIC).⁷² Yet, co-curator Alfred H. Barr, Jr. wrote to Charles Rufus Morey (Barr's former mentor at Princeton, who had become the American Cultural Attaché in Rome) that "if it were to appear that the exhibition was officially sanctioned or supported it would immediately be discounted by artists and critics everywhere."⁷³ The public perception that the MoMA's exhibitions were objective and not politically motivated is aligned to the ideal of the Western canon, one in which Barr was a key figure in developing.⁷⁴ As with earlier Orientalists described by Said, Barr weaponized the rhetoric of scholarly objectivity to make choices that had serious cultural impacts.

Exhibitions, like this one at MoMA, needed to be publicly perceived as politically neutral to keep their cultural authority. This helped the institution build its position as an authority in canon formation. MoMA curators were keenly aware of their role in canon formation: "[e]xhibitions are sites of experimental art history, where curators act as arbiters of taste, selecting artists, both new and old, for art critics and general visitors."⁷⁵ For MoMA's integration of Italian modernism into the Western canon, curators wrote that

Italian modern art had been “neglected” by Americans, in part, “because of two formidable counter-attractions in Europe – the Parisian present and the Italian past.”⁷⁶ This telling line in the exhibition catalogue’s introduction was not part of the canon *a priori* like “the Parisian present and the Italian past.”⁷⁷ In this case, Barr and co-curator James Thrall Soby, from their position as white arbiters of Western culture, were inviting Italian modern art into the modern canon through their show.

Their curatorial choices reflected this move to bring Italian modern art into this canon, which necessitated the perception of modern Italy as part of the white West. One way they accomplished to prove modern Italian art’s viability in the Western canon, and by proxy Italian’s *whiteness*, was by editing out key parts of fascist era art.⁷⁸ From reducing Futurism to its pre-First World War moment (this had already been done in the 1936 *Cubism and Abstract Art* exhibition by Barr) to separating artists like Lucio Fontana, Giorgio Morandi, and Marino Marini from the sponsorship that they received under the fascist state, the MoMA exhibition created an easily dismissed version of Italian fascist art for their American audiences. Other edits by Barr and Soby that helped to separate Italian modern art from Fascism, including the ratification of the Novecento group as the primary iteration of fascist art. This selection made it easier to expunge the deep connections many important modern artists had to the fascist state. *Twentieth-Century Italian Art*, conversely, came to present Italy and correspondingly Italian art as free, democratic, and, therefore, worthy of a place within the Western art historical canon.⁷⁹

Another way this was done at MoMA was by presenting Italian modern art as “formal exercises that allied Italian artistic production with that of America’s cultural (and political) allies.”⁸⁰ As art historian Kristina Wilson has shown, however, “Barr posited that a work of art whose formal sophistication was complemented by significant social content had a greater value to society than a work concerned only with stylistic experimentation.”⁸¹ By presenting Italian modern art as politically neutral, MoMA curators were using coded language understood by Western viewers that Italian art was part of their culture; the culture associated with white people of the West.

For *Twentieth-Century Italian Art*, this “value to society,” as Wilson puts it, was allied with the Cold War need to bring Italy into the fold. Museums were key interlocutors of these actions. In 1948, US Ambassador to Italy James C. Dunn wrote as much to Nelson A. Rockefeller (son of one of MoMA’s founders, then, current MoMA Museum President, and future Vice President of the US) that *Twentieth-Century Italian Art* was intended to “help our relationship with other countries, and [...] [give] to those who are really trying to improve their own situation and that of their respective countries.”⁸² MoMA and its curators

were part of a vast network of public and private entities supporting Cold War initiatives. These initiatives were invested in making sure Italy, Italians, and their cultural production were solidly part of the white West in the fight against the *Eastern* communists of Soviet Russia and their allies.

For other exhibitions, like the 1950-1950 *Italy at Work: Her Renaissance in Design Today* exhibition, the US State funding was overt. *Italy at Work* was produced under the auspices of the Marshall Plan, openly funded through the CNA. The exhibition came three years after the 1947 *Handicraft as a fine art*, organized by HIH. As part of their official mission as a state-sponsored exhibition, both *Italy at Work* and the earlier *Handicraft as a fine art* were meant to spark an American market for Italian goods to support their economic recovery. Again capitalism, democracy, and culture were being linked explicitly to bring Italy and the US together during the early Cold War.

Italy at Work was a huge exhibition, even by today's standards, with over 2,500 individual objects. Organized in collaboration between Meyric R. Rogers, Curator of Decorative and Industrial Arts at the Art Institute of Chicago (AIC), and Director of the Brooklyn Museum Charles Nagel Jr., their two home institutions were the first two legs of the multi-state tour that traveled to thirteen institutions between 1950 and 1953.⁸³ This exhibition had a far greater reach than the previous show at MoMA, with over half a million visitors across all thirteen venues.⁸⁴

Since this exhibition was openly funded by the US Government, organizers were more explicit in the political import of the show. They claimed the variety of objects displayed in the exhibition, everything from a Lambretta scooter to children's toys made of straw, was meant to reflect a newly liberated "Italian vitality that [...] stored itself up during the long, grey fascist interim, waiting for this day of sun again."⁸⁵ In short, Italy was no longer fascist and it had reignited the earlier heritage to become a productive member of the West.

Yet, the liminal space that Italian's held in the American racial hierarchy of whiteness still pervades the exhibition's texts, as already alluded to in the *Interiors* image of Fontana that was used to publicize the opening of the show at the Brooklyn Museum in 1950. In the introduction of the exhibition catalogue, Rogers writes that the show was "designed to give the American public the pleasure that comes from seeing objects made in our own time [and] that are at once useful and beautiful or stimulating to the imagination."⁸⁶ The various works created by Italian artists, architects, designers, artisans and craftspeople were there, ultimately, for American "pleasure." This can also be attributed to the complexities of the Western art historical canon, which categorized some media (painting, sculpture, etc.) as art and some media (ceramics, textiles, furniture, etc.) as craft. The exhibition

Italy at Work illustrates a complicated web of references in which knowledgeable white audiences would easily navigate Italy's previously outsider space in Western culture and their newly necessitated insider space during the early Cold War.

Italian art and design served the US Cold War initiatives in a variety of ways. It positioned the US as inheritor of the humanist heritage that Italy possessed, which itself was posited as the foundations of white Western culture. Not just inheritor either, the US was positioned as the savior of Italian culture (from both Fascism and Communism). Exhibitions like *Italy at Work* and *Twentieth Century Italian Art* helped to bring Italians and Italian Americans into whiteness, in part, because of the import of Italy (culturally and geographically) in the Cold War. If Italian artists and designers were fit to be showcased in major exhibitions at places like MoMA and the Art Institute of Chicago, then they had to be fully, culturally white. Therefore, their political alliance was strengthened as being on the side of white Western capitalist democracies and not the Eastern Bloc of communists and non-whites.

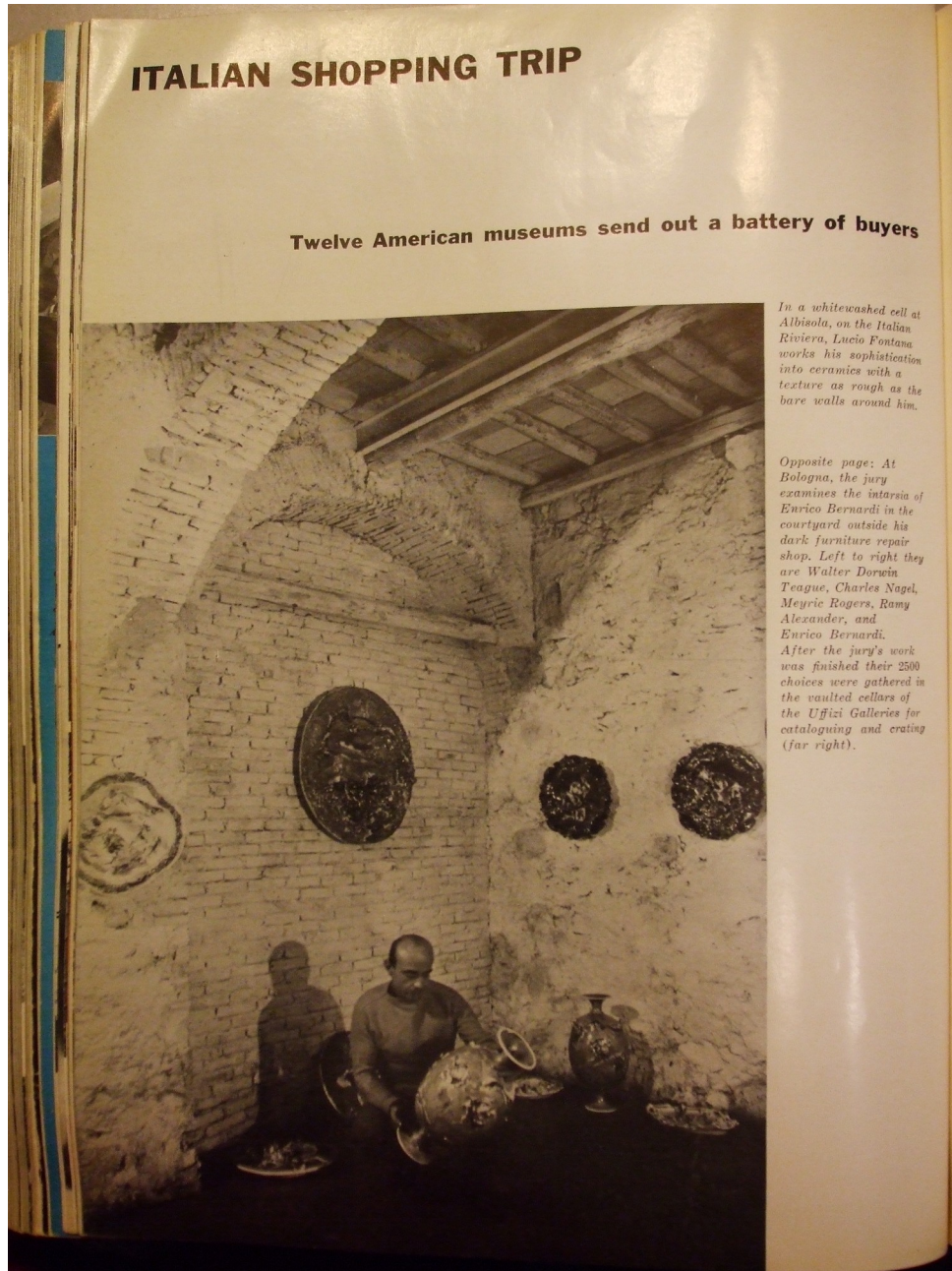
PLATES



Digital Image © 2011 MoMA, N.Y.

This image will display properly on a monitor calibrated to 5500 K, 2.2 gamma when using the embedded working space profile

1 Installation view of the exhibition *Twentieth Century Italian Art* (June 28 – September 18, 1949). Photographic Archive, The Museum of Modern Art Archives. Digital Image © The Museum of Modern Art / Licensed by SCALA / Art Resource, NY.



ITALIAN SHOPPING TRIP

Twelve American museums send out a battery of buyers

In a white-washed cell at Albisola, on the Italian Riviera, Lucio Fontana works his sophistication into ceramics with a texture as rough as the bare walls around him.

Opposite page: At Bologna, the jury examines the intarsia of Enrico Bernardi in the courtyard outside his dark furniture repair shop. Left to right they are Walter Dorwin Teague, Charles Nagel, Meyric Rogers, Ramy Alexander, and Enrico Bernardi. After the jury's work was finished their 2500 choices were gathered in the vaulted cellars of the Uffizi Galleries for cataloguing and crating (far right).

2 Walter Dorwin Teague. "Italian Shopping Trip: Twelve American Museums Send Out a Battery of Buyers." *Interiors* CX, no. 5 (November 1950): 144.



3 Wilp, Charles (1932-2005), Lucio Fontana with a painting. Ca. 1960.
bpk Bildagentur / Art Resource, NY © Copyright bpk/Charles Wilp.

- ¹ Aline B. Louchheim, "Tradition and the Contemporary," *New York Times*, February 19, 1950, X9.
- ² This is the only mention to Marini's physiognomy in reviews of the sculptor that I've found in my extensive research. However, Louchheim does use a physiognomic description for one other sculptor, German artist Gerad Marcks, who is compared to a "Gothic wood carving." See: Aline B. Louchheim, "A VETERAN SCULPTOR LOOKS FORWARD: MATISSE PORTRAIT FROM HIS FAUVE PERIOD," *New York Times*, June 4, 1950. This may suggest her reading of sculptors was set in this way. Perhaps also, this may have been a ploy to reintegrate these former-combatant cultures back into the fold of Western cultural hegemony. Her review of the work of African American artist Jacob Lawrence does not mention his visage but a photograph of him opens the article – Marini's portrait is not included in her article. See: Aline B. Louchheim, "An Artist Reports on the Troubled Mind: AN ARTIST AND HIS TIME An Artist Reports," *New York Times*, October 15, 1950.
- ³ Throughout this paper, I will use the term "American" to refer to citizens of the United States of America with the understanding that there are two American continents that can claim this moniker. Also, inverted comas are used strategically to signal to the reader the constructed and shifting ideas of things like race and cultural difference.
- ⁴ Antje Gamble, "Buying Marino Marini: The American Market for Italian Art after WWII," in *Postwar Italian Art History Today: Untying 'the Knot'*, eds. Sharon Hecker and Marin Sullivan (New York: Bloomsbury Visual Art, 2018), 155–72.
- ⁵ I want to note that terms like "Western" and "white" are cultural constructions and do not have fixed definitions nor attributes.
- ⁶ Gary R. Mormino, "'It's Not Personal, It's Professional': Italian Americans and World War II," in *The Impact of World War II on Italian Americans 1935–present*, edited by Gary R. Mormino (New York: AIHA and John D. Calandra Italian American Institute, 2007), 15.
- ⁷ The terminology of neutrality is being borrowed from the movement, and accompanying hashtag #MuseumsAreNotNeutral, created by cultural organizers LaTanya S. Autry and Mike Murawski in August of 2017 "to refuse the myth of neutrality that many museum professionals and others put forward." See "Museums Are Not Neutral," *Artstuffmatters*, <https://artstuffmatters.wordpress.com/museums-are-not-neutral/>
- ⁸ The term "Cultural Cold War" was seemingly coined by American historian Christopher Lasch in his description of the organization called Congress for Cultural Freedom (CCF). See: Christopher Lasch, "The Cultural Cold War: A Short History of The Congress for Cultural Freedom," in *Towards a New Past: Dissenting Essays in American History*, edited by Barton J. Bernstein (New York: Pantheon Books, 1968), 322–59.
- ⁹ For a brief overview of pre-war American exhibition of Italian art see: Francesca Romana Morelli, "Italian Art Exhibitions in the United States," in *Post Zang Tumb Tuuum: Art, Life Politics, Italia 1918–1943*. Curated by Germano Celant, (Milan: Fondazione Prada, February 18-June 25 2018). Exh cat. (Milan, Fondazione Prada, 2018), 208.
- ¹⁰ For an overview of the literature on this subject, see Robert Burstow, "The Limits of Modernist Art as a 'Weapon of the Cold War': Reassessing the Unknown Patron of the Monument to the Unknown Political Prisoner," *Oxford Art Journal*, 20, no. 1 (1997): 68–70.
- ¹¹ Lasch, "The Cultural Cold War: A Short History of The Congress for Cultural Freedom," 337.
- ¹² For example: Raffaele Bedarida, *Exhibiting Italian Art in the United States from Futurism to Arte Povera: "Like a Giant Screen,"* (New York: Routledge, 2022); Davide Colombo, "1949: Twentieth-Century Italian Art al MoMA di New York," in *New York New York. Arte Italiana: La riscoperta dell'America*. Curated by Francesco Tedeschi, Francesca Pola and Federica Boragina (Milan: Museo del Novecento, 2017). Exh. cat. (Milan: Electa, 2017), 102–9; Elena Dellapiana, "Italy Creates. Gio Ponti, America and the Shaping of the Italian Design Images / Italia crea. Gio Ponti, América y la configuración del la imagen del diseño italiano," *Res Mobilis. Revista internacional de investigación en mobiliario y objetos decorativos* 7, no. 8 (2018): 19–48; and Antje Gamble, "Exhibiting Italian Democracy in the 1949 'Twentieth-Century

- Italian Art’,” in *Modern in the Making: MoMA and the Modern Experiment, 1929–1949*, edited by Sandra Zalman and Austin Porter (London: Bloomsbury, 2020), 215–29.
- ¹³ Miguel Mellino, “De-Provincializing Italy: Notes on Race, Racialization, and Italy’s Coloniality,” in *Postcolonial Italy: Challenging National Homogeneity*, edited by Cristina Lombardi-Diop and Caterina Romeo (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 86–7.
- ¹⁴ Mellino, “De-Provincializing Italy,” 87.
- ¹⁵ There has been much recent work on the complexities of exhibitions of Fascism and fascist-era art and design, in particular, efforts to erase fascist connections to fascist-era art since Second World War. For example, see the recent volume *Curating Fascism: Exhibitions and Memory from the Fall of Mussolini to Today*, edited by Sharon Hecker and Raffaele Bedarida (London: Bloomsbury, 2023).
- ¹⁶ For a brief overview of the complicated nature of end of Italian colonial control, see Cristina Lombardi-Diop and Caterina Romeo, “Introduction: Paradigms of Postcoloniality in Contemporary Italy,” in Lombardi-Diop and Romeo, *Postcolonial Italy*, 1–29.
- ¹⁷ Alessandro Brogi, *Confronting America: The Cold War between the United States and the Communists in France and Italy* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 24.
- ¹⁸ Erik T. Withers, “Whiteness and culture,” *Sociology Compass* 11, no. 4 (2017): 1. <https://compass.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/soc4.12464> (emphasis original).
- ¹⁹ Just one example of a study of how visual culture was used to construct ideas about race is: Aston Gonzalez, *Visualizing Equality: African American Rights and Visual Culture in the Nineteenth Century* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2020).
- ²⁰ James Baldwin, “On Being White...and Other Lies (1984)” in *The Cross of Redemption. Uncollected Writings*, edited by Randall Kenan (New York: Pantheon Books, 2010), 136.
- ²¹ Baldwin, “On Being White,” 136.
- ²² Stefano Luconi, “Forging an Ethnic Identity: The Case of Italian Americans,” *Revue française d’études américaines*, no. 96 (May 2003): 91–92.
- ²³ For example, see: Matteo Pretelli, “The Useless Fifth Column of Mussolini in America,” in *The Impact of World War II on Italian Americans 1935–present*, edited by Gary R. Mormino (New York: AIHA and John D. Calandra Italian American Institute, 2002), 65–81.
- ²⁴ For example, see: Karen Brodtkin, *How Jews Became White Folks and What That Says about Race in America* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1998); and Noel Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White* (New York-London: Routledge, 1995).
- ²⁵ Jennifer Guglielmo, “Introduction: White Lies, Dark Truths,” in *Are Italians White? How Race is Made in America*, edited by Jennifer Guglielmo and Salvatore Salerno (New York-London: Routledge, 2004), 1–14. European immigrants were all considered legally white in the US since the 1790s because of the categorization at the time. Jenna Cushing-Leubner, “Discourse and Whiteness,” in *Encyclopedia of Critical Whiteness Studies in Education*, edited by Zachary A. Casey (Leiden: Brill, 2021), 134.
- ²⁶ Nell Irvin Painter, *The History of White People* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2010), 216.
- ²⁷ Jessica Barbara Jackson, “Before the Lynching: Reconsidering the Experience of Italians and Sicilians in Louisiana, 1870s–1890s,” *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association* 58, no. 3 (Summer 2017): 300.
- ²⁸ The official state stance is that the holiday was established in direct response to the lynching. Joseph R. Biden, Jr., “A Proclamation on Columbus Day, 2023,” press release, October 6, 2023, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/presidential-actions/2023/10/06/a-proclamation-on-columbus-day-2023/>. This is a justification commonly used against the abolishment of the holiday by contemporary Columbus apologists. For example, see William J. Connell, “Who’s Afraid of Columbus?” in *Italian Americana* 31, no. 2 (Summer 2013): 136–47.
- ²⁹ Thomas J. Schlereth, “Columbia, Columbus, and Columbianism,” *The Journal of American History* 79, no. 3 (December 1992): 938.
- ³⁰ Schlereth, “Columbia, Columbus, and Columbianism”: 955. Also see, Gerald McKeivitt, “Christopher Columbus as a Civic Saint: Angelo Noce and Italian American Assimilation,” *California History* 71, no. 4 (Winter 1992/1993): 516–33.

- ³¹ Guglielmo's book separates ideas of "race," which he uses in reference to Italian American's legal status, and "color," which he uses to describe the cultural prejudices against the group. Thomas A. Guglielmo, *White on Arrival. Italians, Race, Color, and Power in Chicago, 1890–1945* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2003).
- ³² Louise DeSalvo, "Color: White/Complexion: Dark," in Jennifer Guglielmo and Salvatore Salerno, *Are Italians White?*, 25.
- ³³ DeSalvo, "Color: White/Complexion: Dark," 26.
- ³⁴ Peter G. Vellon, "Italian Americans and Race During the Era of Mass Immigration," in *The Routledge History of Italian Americans*, edited by William J. Connell and Stanislao G. Pugliese (New York-London: Routledge, 2018), 212. The term "old stock" referred to "represented invitations to join a common north-west European group defined as "American" in opposition to southern and eastern European immigrants," which came to be used to differentiate Americans with colonial heritage and those from more recent immigrant lineages. Russell A. Kazal, *Becoming Old Stock: The Paradox of German-American Identity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 8.
- ³⁵ Vellon, "Italian Americans and Race During the Era of Mass Immigration," 213.
- ³⁶ Maddalena Marinari, "'In the name of God... and in the Interest of our country': The Cold War, Foreign Policy, and Italian Americans' Mobilization against Immigrant Restriction," in *New Italian Migrations to the United States: Politics and History since 1945*, edited by Laura E. Ruberto and Joseph Sciorra (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2017), 59. The 1924 legislation was replaced in 1952 with similar immigration curbs. However, this bill did make a loophole for naturalization to no longer reserved to solely immigrants be of European ethnicities. "The Immigration and Nationality Act of 1952 (The McCarran-Walter Act)," Office of the Historian, Foreign Service Institute, United States Department of State, <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1945-1952/immigration-act> (accessed June 25, 2024).
- ³⁷ Stefano Luconi, "Black dagoes? Italian immigrants' racial status in the United States: an ecological view," *Journal of Transatlantic Studies* 14, no. 2 (2016): 188; and Luconi, "The Bumpy Road Toward Political Incorporation," 319–336.
- ³⁸ Karen Brodtkin, *How Jews Became White Folks and What That Says about Race in America* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1998), 50.
- ³⁹ See: Gerald Meyer, "When Frank Sinatra Came to Italian Harlem. The 1945 'Race Riot' at Benjamin Franklin High School," in Jennifer Guglielmo and Salvatore Salerno, *Are Italians White?*, 161–76.
- ⁴⁰ Guglielmo, "Introduction: White Lies, Dark Truths," 2.
- ⁴¹ Antje Gamble, *Cold War American Exhibitions of Italian Art and Design* (New York: Routledge, 2024), 6; and Guglielmo, "Introduction: White Lies, Dark Truths," 1.
- ⁴² Marinari, "In the name of God... and in the Interest of our country," 59.
- ⁴³ McCarthy identified as Catholic. Robert S. Ellwood, *The Fifties Spiritual Marketplace: American Religion in a Decade of Conflict* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1997), 27–34.
- ⁴⁴ Marinari, "In the name of God... and in the Interest of our country," 60.
- ⁴⁵ Already in the 1970s, scholars were connecting ideas of Western culture to that of the Occident. This is now a universally accepted connection in the field of sociology. For example, psychologist Joseph Goertz wrote that "the philosophy which the West developed, and the science which grew out of it as its natural offshoot, are no chance products; they are essential constituents of the Occident." See: Joseph Goertz, "'Occident': Some Thoughts on the Self-Understanding of the West," *Philippine Quarterly of Culture and Society* 2, no. 4 (December 1974): 239.
- ⁴⁶ Edward W. Said, "Orientalism," *The Georgia Review* 31, no. 1 (Spring 1977): 166. Also see, Edward W. Said *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1978).
- ⁴⁷ Georgios Varouxakis, "When did Britain join the Occident? On the origins of the idea of 'the West' in English," *History of European Ideas* 46, no. 5 (July 2020): 569–81.
- ⁴⁸ Varouxakis, "When did Britain join the Occident?"
- ⁴⁹ The term Occidental is still used by white-supremacist groups to decry their perceived loss of Western civilization. For example, the journal *The Occidental Quarterly* (TOQ) is published by the Charles Martel Society. According to the Southern

Poverty Law Center, this is “a racist journal devoted to the idea that as whites become a minority ‘the civilization and free governments that whites have created’ will be jeopardized.” See: “OCCIDENTAL QUARTERLY,” Southern Poverty Law Center, <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/group/occidental-quarterly>.

⁵⁰ Kymberly N. Pinder, “Introduction,” in *Race-ing Art History: Critical Readings in Race and Art History*, edited by Kymberly N. Pinder, (New York: Routledge, 2002), 1-9.

⁵¹ For just a few examples: Suzanne Preston Blier, “Enduring Myths of African Art,” in *Africa: The Art of a Continent: 100 Works of Beauty and Power* (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 1996), 26–32; *The Routledge Companion to Decolonizing Art History*, edited by Tatiana Flores, Florencia San Martín, Charlene Villaseñor Black (New York: Routledge, 2024); and Tyler Stallings and Ken Gonzales-Day, *Whiteness: A Wayward Construction* (Laguna: Laguna Art Museum, 2003).

⁵² Elizabeth Harney and Ruth B. Phillips, “Introduction: Inside Modernity: Indigeneity, Coloniality, Modernisms,” in *Mapping Modernisms: Art, Indigeneity, Colonialism*, edited by Elizabeth Harney and Ruth B. Phillips (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 2.

⁵³ Caroline M. Riley, *MoMA Goes to Paris in 1938: Building and Politicizing American Art* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2023).

⁵⁴ Walter Dorwin Teague, “Italian Shopping Trip: Twelve American museums send out a battery of buyers,” *Interiors*, November 1950, 144.

⁵⁵ Teague, “Italian Shopping Trip,” 201.

⁵⁶ Iria Candela, “Fontana’s Odyssey,” in *Lucio Fontana: On the Threshold*. Curated by Iria Candela (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, January 23–April 14 2019). Exh. cat. (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2019), 15.

⁵⁷ See: Sharon Hecker, “‘Servant of Two Master’: Lucio Fontana’s Sculptures in Milan’s Cinema Arlecchino (1948),” *Oxford Art Journal* 35, no. 3 (2012): 337–61; and Anthony White, *Lucio Fontana: Between Utopia and Kitsch*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2011). The exhibition and accompanying catalogue for the *Lucio Fontana: On the Threshold* (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2019) at the Met Breuer contextualizes these interdisciplinary projects alongside with his Italo-

Argentinian heritage. My own recent book *Cold War American Exhibitions of Italian Art and Design* looks at how works by artists like Fontana were highlighted for their innovative form and use of media, while simultaneously being used for an American project that downplayed those aesthetic concerns.

⁵⁸ Holland Cotter, “Slashing His Way To Sublime: An innovator who made abstraction dangerous by breaking through the surface,” *The New York Times*, January 24, 2019.

⁵⁹ Paolo Scrivano, “Romanticizing the Other? Views of Italian Industrial Design in Postwar America,” in *The Italian Legacy in Washington DC: Architecture, Design, Art and Culture*, edited by Luca Molinari and Andrea Canepari (Milan: Skira, 2008), 156-161.

⁶⁰ See: Gamble, “Buying Marino Marini”; and “Exhibiting Italian Democracy.”

⁶¹ Emil Ludwig, “The Mussolini Behind the Iron Mask: Emil Ludwig Finds Him a Man of Nuances, Not Extremes, Who Controls His Nerves by Hard and Relentless Work,” *New York Times*, May 19, 1929.

⁶² Antonio Vasori, “De Gasperi, Nenni, Sforza and their Role in Post-War Italian Foreign Policy,” in *Power in Europe? Great Britain, France, Italy and Germany in a Postwar World, 1945–1950*, edited by Josef Becker and Franz Knipping (Berlin and New York: De Gruyter, 1986), 99.

⁶³ Victoria de Grazia, “Visualizing the Marshall Plan: The Pleasures of American Consumer Democracy or the Pains of ‘the Greatest Structural Adjustment Program in History?’” in *Images of the Marshall Plan in Europe. Films, Photographs, Exhibits, Posters*, edited by Günter Bischof and Dieter Stiefel (Innsbruck: Studienverlag, 2009), 25–26.

⁶⁴ David W. Ellwood, “The Propaganda of the Marshall Plan in Italy in a Cold War Context,” in *The Cultural Cold War in Western Europe, 1945–1960*, edited by Giles Scott-Smith and Hans Krabbendam (London-Portland: Frank Cass Publishers, 2003), 227.

⁶⁵ Ascoli was a central figure in American anti-Fascism and held a position in the so-called “university in exile” at the New School for Social Research in New York. See: Renato Camurri, “Idee in movimento: l’esilio degli intellettuali italiani negli Stati Uniti (1930–1945),” *Memoria e ricerca*, no. 31 (May–August 2009): 55–56.

- ⁶⁶ Nicoletta Comar, "Carlo Sbisà: Catalogo Generale Dell'Opera Pittorica" (Doctoral dissertation, Università degli Studi di Trieste, academic year 2008-2009), 23.
- ⁶⁷ *Relazione della X Commissione Permenente*, Ministero dell'industria (Roma: Camera dei Deputati, 1949) 6. Also note: this CNA is different from the still existent Confederazione Nazionale dell'Artigianato.
- ⁶⁸ Carlo Ludovico Ragghianti, *Handicraft as a Fine Art in Italy* (New York: House of Italian Handicraft, 1947). The Marshall Plan CNA is different from the *Confederazione Nazionale Artigianato* (National Artisan Confederation or Trade Union, also known as CNA), which is a type of trade-union that continues to operate today. See: Marco De Nicolò, *Storia della Confederazione Nazionale dell'Artigianato* (Bologna: Società editrice il Mulino, 2016), 16.
- ⁶⁹ For more on Ascoli and culture, see: Gamble, *Cold War American Exhibitions of Italian Art and Design*, 52–53.
- ⁷⁰ For details on what industries the Marshall Plan supported, see: *Country Data Book: All Participating Countries*, Economic Cooperation Administration (Washington D.C.: United States, 1950); and *Italy, country study, European recovery program*, Economic Cooperation Administration (Washington, D.C.: United States Government Print Office, 1949).
- ⁷¹ See: Nancy Jachec, *Politics and painting at the Venice Biennale 1948–64: Italy and the Idea of Europe* (Manchester-New York: Manchester University Press, 2007).
- ⁷² Monroe Wheeler, "Memo to Alfred Barr and James Thrall Soby," April 17, 1946, *Alfred H. Barr, Jr. Papers*, Museum of Modern Art, New York, microfilm, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington MF3153.
- ⁷³ Alfred H. Barr, Jr., "Letter to Charles Rufus Morey," March 25, 1948, *Alfred H. Barr, Jr. Papers*, Museum of Modern Art, New York, microfilm, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, MF3153. For more on Barr's relationships with political officials, see: Sybil Gordon Kantor, *Alfred H. Barr, Jr. and the Intellectual Origins of the Museum of Modern Art* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), 19–20.
- ⁷⁴ For more on both MoMA's creation of the modern art canon, see: *Modern in the Making: MoMA and the Modern Experiment, 1929–1949*, edited by Sandra Zalman and Austin Porter (London: Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2020).
- ⁷⁵ Riley, *MoMA Goes to Paris in 1938*, 7.
- ⁷⁶ Alfred H. Barr, Jr., and James Thrall Soby, foreword, *Twentieth Century Italian Art* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1949), 5.
- ⁷⁷ Barr's genealogy of abstract art in the 1936 exhibition *Cubism and Abstract Art* included Futurism. See: Alfred H. Barr, Jr., *Cubism and Abstract Art* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1936).
- ⁷⁸ The best description to date of *Twentieth Century Italian Art's* connection to the Fascist exhibition programs and aesthetic ideals and MoMA's curatorial agenda is Raffaele Bedarida, "Operation Renaissance: Italian Art at MoMA, 1940–1949," *Oxford Art Journal* 35, no. 2 (2012): 147–69.
- ⁷⁹ There have been numerous excellent recent studies, including my own, on *Twentieth-Century Italian Art*. See: *Methodologies of Exchange: MoMA's "Twentieth-Century Italian Art" (1949)*, edited by Raffaele Bedarida, Silvia Bignami and Davide Colombo monographic issue of *Italian Modern Art*, January 2020, <https://www.italianmodernart.org/journal/issues/methodologies-of-exchange-momas-twentieth-century-italian-art-1949/>; and Davide Colombo, "1949: Twentieth-Century Italian Art al MoMA di New York," in Tedeschi, Pola and Boragina, *New York New York*, 102–109; Nicol M. Mocchi, "Twentieth-Century Italian Art 1949: il caso Morandi," in Tedeschi, Pola and Boragina, *New York New York*, 110–16.
- ⁸⁰ Antje Gamble, "Exhibiting Italian Modernism After World War II at MoMA in 'Twentieth-Century Italian Art'," *Italian Modern Art*, January 2020, 5.
- ⁸¹ Kristina Wilson, *The Modern Eye: Stieglitz, MoMA, and the Art of the Exhibition, 1925–1934* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 108.
- ⁸² James C. Dunn, "Letter to Nelson A. Rockefeller," April 28, 1948, *Alfred H. Barr, Jr. Papers*, Museum of Modern Art, New York; microfilmed by Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, MF3153.
- ⁸³ The twelve museums that participated in displaying versions of *Italy at Work* were: Brooklyn Museum (30 Nov. 1950–31 Jan. 1951); Art Institute of Chicago

(15 March–13 May 1951); De Young Memorial Museum, San Francisco (19 June–31 July 1951); Portland Art Museum (5 Sept.–21 Oct. 1951); Minneapolis Institute of Art (27 Nov. 1951–6 Jan. 1952); Museum of Fine Arts of Houston (13 Feb.–27 March 1952); St. Louis City Art Museum (4 May–6 July 1952); Toledo Museum of Art (7 Sept.–22 Oct. 1952); Albright Art Gallery, Buffalo, NY (27 Nov. 1952–8 Jan. 1953); Detroit Institute of Art (12 Feb.–27 March 1953); Baltimore Museum of Art (1 May–15 Aug. 1953); and the Rhode Island School of Design in Providence (22 Sept.–15 Nov. 1953).

⁸⁴ Patricia T. Galla, “Memo: List of attendance numbers at each museum,” Feb. 18, 1953, AIC Archives 305-0003.2, Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, IL.

⁸⁵ “ENORMOUS EXHIBITION SHOWING ITALY’S RENAISSANCE IN INDUSTRIAL AND DECORATIVE ARTS OPENS AT BROOKLYN MUSEUM NOVEMBER 29th—TOURS U.S. COAST-TO-COAST FOR THREE YEARS,” November 29, 1950, in *Records of the Department of Public Information. Press releases, 1947–1952, 10–12/1950, 100–6*, Brooklyn Museum Archives, Brooklyn, NY.

⁸⁶ Meyric R. Rogers, “Introduction,” in *Italy At Work: Her Renaissance in Design Today* (Rome: The Compagnia Nazionale Artigiana, 1950), 18.

RHIANNON WELCH

Crisis, Deceleration, and the Visual Poetics of Refusal

Raphaël Cuomo and Maria Iorio's *Sudeuropa* (2005–7)

[T]he migration crisis is declared a new crisis with Western countries positioned as its victims, even though for four centuries nearly eighty million Europeans became settler-colonists across the Americas and Oceania, while four million indentured laborers from Asia were scattered across the globe and the transatlantic slave trade kidnapped and enslaved fifteen million Africans. Colonialism, genocide, slavery, and indentureship are not only conveniently erased as continuities of violence in current invocations of a migration crisis, but are also the very conditions of possibility for the West's preciously guarded imperial sovereignty.

Harsha Walia, *Border and Rule*

For going on two decades, photojournalistic and humanitarian archives have produced a spectacularized iconography of Mediterranean migration-as-crisis that is entangled with the exigencies of the securitarian state. Emblematic in this respect was Massimo Sestini's 2015 World Press Photo Award-winning *Rescue Operation*, which captured a boat full of migrants in aerial perspective from an Italian Navy helicopter as they awaited intervention by Operation *Mare Nostrum*. Sestini subsequently launched a campaign titled *Where Are You?*, which offered web viewers a high-resolution version of the image with powerful zoom capabilities so that anyone could identify individuals aboard the ship featured in his photo. The site prompts visitors, "If you recognize yourself or somebody you know on this boat, please contact us. We would like to hear your story and what happened after the rescue."¹ Paolo Pellegrin's photo essay *Desperate Crossing*, for the *New York Times Magazine*, deployed similar techniques, aimed at highlighting the mass migration phenomenon-as-crisis. These are two prominent examples, but this border crisis imaginary – relentless and chronic – is so ubiquitous, so embedded in many minds' eyes that displaying examples would be gratuitous. These visualizations are instantiations of a photojournalistic and humanitarian gaze that seeks to capture the suffering of black(ened) people on the move in moments of extreme distress and vulnerability, repeatedly, persistently, and without their consent.² They are examples of what Christina Sharpe has described as strategies of "containment, regulation, punishment, capture, and captivity and the ways that manifold representations of blackness become the symbol, par excellence, for the less-than-human being condemned to death."³ Like the

border regimes they subtend, these images of seemingly interminable – and, critically, anonymous – mass departures, shipwrecks, and arrivals are spectacular, and according to their makers, intentionally so; the crisis imaginary mobilizes spectacle to solicit empathy, action from within Fortress Europe and beyond.⁴ They are decidedly less curious about what anthropologist Cristiana Giordano has called the subjective and “stumbling” temporalities of people on the move. For Giordano, the trauma of border crossing does not sufficiently account for experiences of migration that register more subtle and enduring traumas – for instance, indefinite waiting in camps or detention centers, prolonged detours, or what Jonathan Echeverri Zuluaga has called “errance.”⁵ Privileging the trauma of border crossing fails to accommodate experiences of extended periods of “exploitation, repetition, or the unfolding of fragmented memories,” as Giordano puts it.⁶ So invested in trumpeting the urgent “here and now” of crisis, these press and humanitarian images fetishistically stage and reaffirm the thingness of borders, rather than stressing their status as bundled practices or global regimes of governance.⁷ Even designating human mobility across borders of imperial nation-states as *migration* risks participating in their reification.⁸ The photographic crispness of the images bespeaks the moral clarity they seek to engender among Europeans, prompting humanitarian and securitarian interventions alike. As Sestini’s high-resolution, zoom-ready *Where Are You?* project makes plain, “humanitarian reason is but the obverse of securitarian management,” as Debarati Sanyal has argued. Humanitarianism, like the securitarian state, “envision[s] the irregular migrant as a body to be saved, contained, policed, moved around, encamped, kept out, or expelled; in short, as a body to be managed,” she explains.⁹ In privileging masses, swarms, and “human flow” (as artist Ai Wei Wei titled his 2017 human migration epic), the border crisis imaginary also evokes and (re)produces what theorist Ariella Aïsha Azoulay has called “imperialism as unstoppable movement” – a naturalized and inexorable forward march, without possibility of interruption or reversal.¹⁰

In its seemingly incessant repetition, the visual archive of Mediterranean migration-as-crisis should thus be understood not simply as a collection of representations of border crossings, but also as material sites for the (re)production of borders themselves. Just what constitutes the nature of these borders has been called into question by those working within black studies to address the Mediterranean scenario. Taking Nicholas De Genova’s influential reading of the “border spectacle” as an example of how Marxist political economic interpretations of the border as a site of exclusion by and large fail to account for the constitutive nature of antiblackness and slavery in the emergence European colonial modernity, power, and policing, P. Khalil

Saucier and Tryon P. Woods have argued that borders are sites for the *preclusion* of black bodies. If in De Genova's formulation, the border spectacle is a "scene of [migrant 'illegality'] and 'exclusion,'" Saucier and Woods argue instead that "the scene," echoing Saidiya Hartman's landmark 1997 book, "is one of subjection – and more pointedly, an infinite reproduction and refraction of subjection, a *mise-en-abyme*."¹¹ Saucier and Woods thus argue that the consequential or primary border at stake today in the Mediterranean is not the one between imperial nation-states and their constitutive outsides, but instead the one separating blackness from humanity as conceived by a European humanism that was premised upon "slavery's mapping of human relations."¹² The thingness of the border enacted by the crisis imaginary thus refers as much to the materialization of the geopolitical boundary as to the dehumanization of black(ened) people in distress who attempt to cross it. Yet there is also a visual archive (or perhaps we might say, with Iain Chambers and Marta Cariello, "repertoire")¹³ that is at odds with the instrumentalization and immediacy of the one described here. Contemporary film and multimedia installations by Isaac Julien, Ursula Biemann, Andrea Segre, Elisa Strinna, Nikolaj Bendix Skyum Larsen, Charles Heller and Lorenzo Pezzani, Dagmawi Yimer, and the duo Invernomuto (Simone Bertuzzi and Simone Trabucchi), as well as the artists I will discuss below have long challenged Europe's patronizing common sense about blackness, borders and representation.¹⁴ Collectively, they employ diverse strategies that resist the realist, documentary mode that so often traffics in black suffering, as Saucier and Woods, Sharpe, Smythe, and other thinkers of the Black Mediterranean have noted.¹⁵ This counter-archive or repertoire deploys techniques such as disjunction, deceleration, abstraction, even concealment. If Giordano, an anthropologist, is interested in a subjective temporality that *exceeds the time of crisis* as it manifests in the lived experiences of those subjected to Europe's brutal border regimes, this essay asks about what it means for visual aesthetics and/or poetics to "stumble," or perhaps even to court stumbling as a *desired* mode, rather than an error.¹⁶ In what follows, I propose a connection between this "stumbling," by which I mean the decelerated and disjunctive tempos of the works under consideration, and an attempt to reinscribe, dilate, or unsettle the urgent, "here and now" temporality prescribed by border crisis imaginaries. My aim in doing so is to attend more fully to the continuities between contemporary border practices and earlier forms of antiblack subjection and colonial violence. Indeed, to return to Saucier and Woods, "What we are facing today is a new declination of an old and repressed issue that haunts and composes the European project and modernity itself: the 'black Mediterranean' is a constituent unit of analysis for understanding contemporary forms of policing Europe's borders."¹⁷ These are some of the

considerations that orient my thinking about cinematic *deceleration* (slow motion, long takes, disjunction between sound and image) as a counterforce to the border crisis imaginary, and they converge in a remediated colonial archival film from the 1980s that, as I have argued elsewhere, might be considered one of Italy's first (though belated) postcolonial films.¹⁸

Deceleration and 'Continuities of Violence': Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi's *Dal Polo all'Equatore* (1984-86)

Early film pioneer and colonial enthusiast Luca Comerio's (1878-1940) vast personal archive – which included his footage of everything from polar expeditions to popular processions in India and Russia, D'Annunzio's occupation of Fiume, a colonial mission in Eritrea, and big game hunting in Uganda, all shot in the first two decades of the 20th century – had been languishing on the verge of ruin until 1981, when the Milan-based art duo Yervant Gianikian and Angela Ricci Lucchi discovered Comerio's tattered reels [fig. 1; fig. 2]. Their feature-length experimental film *Dal Polo all'Equatore*, made between 1984 and 1986, is equal parts homage and critique, archival excavation and reinscription. Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi took advantage of a hand-cranked optical printer they'd purchased in the late '70s and named their "analytical camera" to re-shoot Comerio's footage, enabling them to scrutinize every frame, zeroing in on otherwise marginal subjects, adding layers of color, and adjusting the film speed, which was slowed down to last at least twice as long as the original footage.¹⁹ Images of unspecified landscapes, people, and animals from, as the title suggests, "the Pole to the Equator," reorganized and color-tinted make up the film's primary content. An eerie ambient score composed between San Francisco and Los Angeles by Keith Ullrich and Charles Anderson enhances the meditative, trance-like pace of the images' movement onscreen. No narrative voiceover or subtitles guide viewers or provide an authoritative take on the reworked images.²⁰ The film's poetics proceed by other means: immersed in the polychronic flow of image and score, visual rhyme and rhythm, at times synched up with the ambient audio and at others not, consistently remind viewer-listeners of the disjunctive present of the footage we are watching.

The film's memorable opening sequence is drawn out from two or three to roughly eight minutes in duration, and presents viewers with landscapes captured from a moving train – an icon of nineteenth-century colonial modernity's speed, forward movement, and progress, as well as an important symbol of the turn-of-the-twentieth-century colonial film history to which Comerio's original footage belongs.²¹ Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi's train moves through rocky Alpine landscapes in slow motion, lulling viewers into an altered

relationship to both the image and to the passage of time [fig. 3]. Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi's train, offered to viewers through a manipulated film speed, incongruous color tints, and an ambient score that are radically decelerated, thus stage an audio-visual suspension or delay of "imperialism as unstoppable movement," thereby pointing to an alternate or (to say it with Azoulay) "potential history," one in which the inexorability of racial capitalism and colonial modernity are called into question.²² *Deceleration* seems then to announce that the reworked film will deliver none of the all-encompassing tour of imperial spoils that its original title – and title card – promised. Instead, turned on its head, their film maps Western modernity's slow, corrosive, peripatetic march around the globe, illustrating, rather than mastery, its inherent and widespread violence.

Taking as a point of departure Harsha Walia's claim (transcribed in the epigraph above) about the "continuities of [colonial] violence in current invocations of a migration crisis," Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi's film might thus be read as a key point of entry into visual works about the Mediterranean border that resist the representational demands of crisis. As Walia charges, "crisis" as a category is deployed by contemporary nation-states as a means of shoring up their "preciously guarded imperial sovereignty." Similarly, Cristina Lombardi-Diop has remarked, "[T]he Mediterranean stages a 'crisis' that is not a state of exception [...], but a state of repetition of the subjection of Black life through the same old means: borderless apparatus[es] of surveillance, containment, captivity, forced displacement, forced labor, the slave markets, and dehumanization."²³ Crisis relies upon exceptionality or emergency, rather than continuity or contiguity with earlier colonial forms; *Dal Polo all'Equatore* dwells instead in the time-space of the latter. Here, in the early years of the great contemporary migrations of people from Albania, the Philippines, Morocco, Nigeria, Eritrea and beyond to the Italian peninsula, is a rare perspective that evokes the world's ongoing entanglements with a range of colonial mobilities – from the temporal (a present inhabited by the past), to the aesthetic (the motion picture as a tool of imperial dominance and its potential undoing), and the human (from settler colonialism to mass migration). *Dal Polo* thus troubles neat lines of distinction between colonialisms past and present; its deceleration refuses "the slicing of time into past, present, and future," challenging viewers to experience the present as inextricable from the histories of racial capitalism and colonial modernity first produced by Comerio's lens, and later remediated by Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi.²⁴ *Deceleration* emerges as a crucial aesthetic technique for foregrounding the continuities in antiblack subjection and colonial violence that subtend the visual rhetoric of crisis in today's border regimes.

“Live from Lampedusa”: Cuomo and Iorio’s *Sudeuropa* (2005-7)

Berlin-based artists Maria Iorio and Raphaël Cuomo’s *Sudeuropa* is an experimental film about Mediterranean crossings made between 2005 and 2007, set on the island of Lampedusa some years before it became a metonym for the world’s deadliest border.²⁵ *Sudeuropa* deploys varied techniques of *deceleration* – both literally (slow motion footage) and more figuratively (by making the present-tense of the audio-visual experience radically disjunctive). These techniques are used to stage, over the course of a rather quiet forty minutes, the thwarting of vision, the failure of representation. Their camera registers this failure in fleeting moments: in the background of a sequence of a hotel chef preparing food, a static frame lasting several seconds offers viewers an out-of-focus kitchen wall, before which sits an ambiguous object with the word Lampedusa scrawled on it; the final “A” is partially obscured by tape or a sticker and embellished with scribbles and indecipherable text [fig.4]. Later, the camera lingers on a close-up of a partially ruined wall painting depicting a boat full of migrants inside Rome’s Flavian Amphitheater (or Colosseum), full of scrapes and tears that expose the porous stone beneath. “Lampedusa” appears in the bottom right corner of the frame, its painted letters tattered and scuffed such that we can barely make them out. A yellow cord or hose runs horizontally across the foreground and seems to remind viewers of what remains outside both the painterly and cinematic frames [fig.5]. Both of these images, one blurry and partially obscured and the other composed of chipped paint on a crumbling wall, are fleeting and unremarked in their appearances. I read them as compelling distillations of the film’s decelerated counter-aesthetics, which refuse the representational tempos and transparency of crisis.

Cluttering the profilmic with vehicles, walls, fences, or the backs of journalists and their video cameras, Cuomo and Iorio consistently obscure our vision of the objects of both the mass mediatic and the touristic gaze, faintly evoking that famous paradox that characterizes Lampedusa in the collective imaginary: the “wretched” scenes of subjection, and the stunning beauty of its sparkling waters [fig. 6; fig. 7]. The film hinges on several similar disjunctions – between presumed grammatical correctness and an Italian spoken fluently by two voiceover narrators whose speech is subtly marked by foreignness: traces of accents, grammatical slippages like gender and number agreement inhabit and estrange the Italian we hear, in what the artists call “un italiano approssimativo.”²⁶ Furthermore, the subtitles in both Arabic and French evoke a multi- or trans-lingual space that produces the Mediterranean as what Franco Cassano has called a “multiverse,” as opposed to the “origin” of Eurocentric universalism.²⁷ Other disjunctive elements include a voiceover that

ventriloquizes tourist interviews: “I thought I’d see *clandestini* here, but I don’t see them;” “we see them on TV, but we don’t see them here.”²⁸ These perplexed observations about missed visual encounters are coupled with images of migrants at work for the tourist industry – setting up beach chairs and umbrellas, cleaning hotel rooms, cooking in a kitchen, making coffee in a hotel bar²⁹ [fig. 8]. Cuomo and Iorio’s camera regularly frames these working people partially obscured behind walls, or through tightly cropped close-ups that show arms, midsections, backs – rarely a frontal or full body view – thereby refusing the rhetoric of exposure that prevails in border crisis iconography [fig. 9]. These withholding images poetically refigure the oscillation between the mass-mediated hypervisibility of migration-as-crisis and the mundane invisibility of migrant labor. The disjunction between voice and image is compounded in several sequences, as the narration refers only obliquely to the images offered: as one narrator relates a story about a German journalist in search of a scoop to bring back to the capitals of the European mainland and who boards a helicopter accompanying a pushback mission, we observe a brusque cut from the blurred kitchen wall we saw earlier to a ceiling fan that recalls the helicopter’s propellor [fig. 10].

Further plays between mobility and stasis abound. For instance, the camera lurks at a great distance, “capturing,” with a shot that approaches photographic stillness, primarily black(ened) people going about their suspended daily lives – *waiting* – at a detention center, the antithesis of movement, while the voiceover lists off trucks, helicopters, and airplanes – speedy vehicles that are marshaled by securitarian regimes to track and discipline their past and potential future movements *giorno e notte* (day and night) [fig. 11]. Piles of grounded boats at Lampedusa’s *cimitero delle barche* (boat cemetery) are captured from a slow-moving vehicle [fig. 12]. Several seconds of dead time framing an empty tarmac from behind a gate is interrupted by an airplane taking flight, abruptly crossing our field of vision as the camera remains fixed in place.³⁰ Taken together, these elements have a cumulative effect that I am here calling *deceleration*, in so far as – like Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi – they disorient, or trouble, viewers with regard to time. Through the accumulative and disjunctive temporality of the audio-visual experience that they offer, Cuomo and Iorio draw us into an altered rhythm of reflection on the scene of Lampedusa, one that stands counter to its spectacularization in both the touristic and crisis imaginaries. In so doing, it interrupts the mediatic doctrine of immediacy, inviting viewers into contemplation of our uneven relationships to the sea and to historical time. The film’s opening sequence subtly produces the sea as a site of historical inscription. It opens with a black screen, and the audio of crashing waves situates us – despite the dark emptiness of the frame – on the beach, that

liminal space between sea and land that's irreducible to one or the other. After several seconds, this meditative state is interrupted by an out-of-focus aerial view of a harbor, in a seemingly cropped shot that stubbornly denies us a view of the built environment.³¹ Instead, placid blue water and the many small boats anchored in it occupy the frame. Rather than a windswept diegetic soundscape, or one dominated by a helicopter's propeller, we continue to hear the gentle rhythm of the waves, anchoring the acoustic to the shore while the visual field is suspended far above it. A serene voiceover narration, laid over the sound of the waves, welcomes us, pausing for several seconds before situating us in Lampedusa [fig. 13]. The narration goes on to describe, in part elliptically and in part verbatim, what we later gather is a TV broadcast promoting the tourist industry, featuring an interview with Lampedusa's then mayor Sergio Bruno Siragusa (*Forza Italia*, 2002-7), claiming that *l'immigrazione clandestina* ("illegal immigration") has had no impact on tourists' ability to have a good time. As we hear this narration of the broadcast, the visual field is dominated by the blurred edges of the island's coastline, captured from a helicopter – an instrument of both mediatic and military surveillance – but slowed down in parts such that as viewers we feel ourselves buoyant, as if bobbing on the sea's surface, rather than far above it [fig. 14]. In their description of this sequence, Cuomo and Iorio remark on the duality of the helicopter footage, which they repurposed from a Canale 5 Mediaset broadcast on regional folklore:

These are vaunting the beautiful panorama, the Mediterranean Sea, the wonderful landscape, propitious for holiday pleasures on the Italian island Lampedusa, the southern limit of the national territory. We can understand later that these images of the coastline at the same time attest to the surveillance of this territory. Filmed in close collaboration with the authorities, they actually trace the regular patrol routes of the military and police helicopters which secure the Italian border and prevent any uncontrolled arrival of people who left Tunisian and Libyan shores in order to reach Europe by boat.³²

The effect of these strategies of withholding, layering, and accretion is far from the swift, crisp, military-style aerial surveillance and exposure evoked in the photojournalistic imagination and exemplified by the photos by Sestini and Pellegrin with which this article began: it is decelerated, disjointed, disorienting. The narration refers to a visual field that is absent; the helicopter lingers contemplatively over the coastline, which is characterized not by boats full of people in distress but instead by the many geologic strata along the steep cliffs of Capo Ponente that have long registered Lampedusa's encounter with the sea.

Situated further south than Tunis and Algiers, it is often pointed out that Lampedusa is much closer to Tunisia than to Sicily or the Italian mainland, and

that the island lies at the symbolic “crossroads” between European and African cultures and continents. The connections here are not only symbolic; they have a material dimension, as well. Geologically, Lampedusa is formed by a limestone *horst* (“mass” or “heap” in German) – a term used to name a kind of topography created when the earth’s crust is pulled apart.³³ Lampedusa broke off from the African continent around two million years ago – sometime between the Neogene and the present Quaternary (which contains our current Anthropocene). The images of the steep edges of the striated coastline, which Cuomo and Iorio’s film foregrounds in the opening sequences, thus also register this relatively recent (at least on the geologic time scale) material connection and rupture between land masses, which interrupts the neat demarcation of past from present, as well as terrestrial and maritime imperial borders.

What does it mean to begin a film about the so-called migration “crisis” this way? To begin from a state of meandering suspension and blurred vision, rather than from the clarity of frontality and focus? These opening shots appear as approximate visualizations of what Iain Chambers calls in a related context “signs that blur the vision and scratch the lens of transparency.” For Chambers, transparency is the conceit of a “possessive, panoptical gaze,” and blurred vision and scratched lenses are instead instantiations of Deleuzian “lines of flight” from the mandates of colonial modernity.³⁴ By foregrounding the striated coastline as an image of geologic deep time and offering us the sea as slow space, this opening sequence asks viewers to consider alternatives to the accelerated, progressive temporalities proffered by racial capitalism and colonial modernity and the decisive crisis iconography they require – blurred, or decelerated temporalities, such as those found in Reinhardt Koselleck’s “sediments of time,”³⁵ geologic *deep time*, or *residence time*, a concept which Christina Sharpe borrows from oceanography and describes as, “the amount of time it takes for a substance to enter the ocean and then leave the ocean;”³⁶ the kind that remind us, like Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi’s film, of those many violent “pasts that are not past” (writes Sharpe, paraphrasing the late Haitian intellectual Michel Rolph Trouillot’s incisive claim that “pastness [...] is a position”)³⁷ – and offer us an image of time, inviting us to link today’s state-sanctioned mass drownings in the Mediterranean not only symbolically or analogically, but *materially*, to the purported pasts of slavery.³⁸ As Sharpe points out, “Human blood is salty, and sodium has a residence time of 260 million years.”³⁹ With *residence time*, Sharpe addresses the unfathomable breadth and *longue durée* of “the wake,” whose contemporary

antiblack manifestations she finds in both mass incarceration in the US, and in regimes of migration and detention in the Mediterranean. Cuomo and Iorio's blurred, sedimented coastline thus draws Lampedusa into these much vaster imperial currents and their recursive tempos.

In *The Black Maria*, poet Aracelis Girmay's elegy to the hundreds of primarily Eritrean victims of a shipwreck near Lampedusa on October 3, 2013 (and countless other histories of antiblack violence before and after), Girmay ponders: "How not to / assign all blackness near the sea / a captivity?"⁴⁰ Cuomo and Iorio's refusal of scenes of black subjection at the border seems to echo this question in a sequence that connects the carceral regimes of the Mediterranean border to a black humanity that contemplates the sea from land without being made captive by it. It begins with a sequence that couples blackness with self-directed mobility (rather than the passive status of shipwrecked victim in need of succor). It features Mansor Diouf driving a car across the island to Capo Ponente, which I have suggested appears in the film as a figure for the *longue durée*, insofar as its striated edges foreground geologic stratification as it meets the sea. Diouf is photographed in a tightly cropped side profile shot (evidently from the car's passenger seat) that features only his eyes, nose, and mouth as he drives along, looking out and including a few POV shots that approximate his vantage point as he surveys the barbed wire fencing, watchtowers, and police vehicles that characterize parts of Lampedusa as a carceral space [fig. 15]. The sequence picks up again some minutes later, this time with the long shot from a fixed and distanced camera of mostly black(ened) men behind a barbed wire fence at a detention center, described above as an example of the film's decelerated mode, and subtly evoking the carceral technologies we first saw observed from Diouf's perspective in the driver's seat. A cut opens a new sequence featuring Diouf, this time in a medium shot that includes his head and shoulders and reveals his bright collared shirt featuring a bold, contemporary Ankara, or African wax, print: a deep blue with white lines that cut through it, resembling undulating waves; a pattern made up of recurring green lips and what appears to be tubes of lipstick, akin to a kind of archipelago against an aquatic backdrop. Standing before Lampedusa's telecommunications control tower and an overcast sky, Diouf looks around at his surroundings once again. The faint sound of a helicopter forms a sound bridge with the previous sequence at the detention center, when the offscreen narrator had imitated the sound with a "ratatatatata," as he listed off the surveillance technologies deployed to track migrants' movements. The helicopter can be heard briefly above the sound of waves crashing and sea birds squawking; Diouf looks up to the sky, confirming the helicopter's existence within the diegesis. Then he turns his back to the camera, and with square shoulders faces the sea from on high,

atop the cliffs of Capo Ponente [fig. 16]. This sequence's eloquent conclusion thus evokes Girmay's pressing question about how to resist subsuming the encounter between blackness and the sea with horrors such as the Middle Passage or its contemporary afterlife in the mass grave of the Mediterranean. It therefore obliquely refers to an entire tradition of black diasporic (and more specifically Caribbean) thought that has contemplated this very relation, from Paul Gilroy and Édouard Glissant to Sylvia Wynter, Derek Walcott, Kamau Braithwaite, Dionne Brand, NourbeSe Philip, Rinaldo Walcott, and many others.⁴¹ Dionne Brand nods to this body of oceanic thought that places the "Door of No Return" of the Middle Passage at its center when she writes, "To look into this water was to look into the world," and "Derek Walcott wrote, 'the sea is history'". Brand continues, "I knew that before I knew it was history I was looking at."⁴² Perhaps in this brief but stirring sequence, so out of synch with the standard visual archive of black(ened) people on the move across the Mediterranean, Diouf's presence – with the sea inscribed on his body in vibrant hues as he contemplates the sea as a repository for the inscription of history – makes a similar suggestion.

Might *cinematic deceleration* as explored in these pages thus be an aesthetic mode capable of restoring the fractured etymological bond between crisis and critique (from the Greek κρίνω, or *krino*: to separate, judge, decide)? Much of what crisis rhetoric seems to accomplish is a stifling of critique, denying us the slow time needed to ponder, to speculate, to gather enough information to make a decisive judgment. Crisis – with its emphasis on the here and now – also forecloses duration, protracted experience, or wandering. And yet this is how crisis is lived for many of those subjected to it today – from COVID to the Mediterranean border, to "slow violence" (Rob Nixon) on the front lines of climate change, quiet mass expropriation in the wake of the 2008 financial collapse, or the chronic and quotidian undervaluing of black lives and futures. And yet, in another sense, there is something paradoxical about the durational quality of crisis itself. For Lauren Berlant, "the *genre of crisis* can distort something structural and ongoing [...] into something that *seems* shocking and exceptional."⁴³ Similarly, Janet Roitman has written about crisis as a *mode of narration* and has compelled us to ask if the concept of enduring, ongoing, seemingly eternal crisis is not itself an oxymoron.⁴⁴ In its contemporary formulation, crisis often functions as a nostalgic ideological fantasy, positing a future return to the ostensible normalcy of a projected past. Cuomo and Iorio's deceleration suggests an alternative method for comprehending the Mediterranean border today, one that carries us away from the crisp, decisive iconography of crisis and closer to its porous, contingent, and subjective dimensions. This passage from crisis to critique is evinced not only on screen, through their visual poetics of refusal, striation, and deceleration, but also

behind the scenes – through their production practice itself, which they have described as being composed of the slow time of daily encounters and connection – shared dinners, afternoon teas – with participants in their film project. “Siamo un po’ reticenti all’idea di una ‘visione etica,’” the artists have remarked, “Tentiamo di mettere in atto una *prassi* che sia etica – processo di trasformazione che contribuisca a *creare* una realtà.” In distinguishing an ethical *vision* from ethical *praxis*, they implicate themselves in a process of filmmaking that intervenes in the real in order to reshape or transform it, in relation. Cuomo and Iorio’s remark about the limitations of an “ethical vision” on the border, which appears in a 2020 interview conducted with the artists during a series of public screenings of their film in Palermo and Marseille, may or may not have been an subtle reference to a critically acclaimed film that was released about a decade after theirs, and which took “ethical vision” as its guiding metaphor.

Coda: Rosi’s *Fuocoammare* (2016) and Humanitarian Affect

Made some ten years after Cuomo and Iorio’s *Sudeuropa*, Gianfranco Rosi’s *Fuocoammare* (*Fire at Sea*, 2016) is also set on Lampedusa, and somewhat playfully foregrounds *vision* (and in particular the “lazy eye”) as central to its ethical project [fig. 17].⁴⁵ Upon its release, Rosi’s *Fuocoammare* was breathlessly hailed by enthusiastic critics as a revival of Italy’s most celebrated cinematic export – one that at the time of its emergence in post-WWII Italy was exalted by some for its unflinching drive to reproduce “reality.”⁴⁶ I’m referring here to that quasi-mythological body of films by De Sica, Rossellini, Visconti and others and that came to be known as Italian neorealism, and which renowned French film critic and theorist Andre Bazin memorably referred to as “reconstituted reportage.”⁴⁷ Another of neorealism’s renowned theorists (also a practitioner), Cesare Zavattini, described it thus: “The cinema’s overwhelming desire to see, to analyze, its hunger for reality, is an act of concrete homage towards other people, towards what is happening and existing in the world.”⁴⁸

Of course, despite its rhetoric of exposure, numerous blind spots characterized the neorealist moment, and have impacted the way it continues to function as a kind of common sense, or a necessary point of reference for any “serious,” historically informed discussion of Italian film.⁴⁹ As Lorenzo Fabbri has argued, neorealism “functions as a placeholder for a foundational [post-World War II] national fantasy” about Italy as an innocent and childlike nation.⁵⁰ As such, Fabbri writes, “neorealism contributes to a retelling of Italy’s past that avoids any decisive confrontation with Fascism.”⁵¹ Neorealist aesthetics and the myths that proliferated about it in the wake of influential

readings by Bazin, Deleuze, and others relied heavily not only on the “gritty” imagery of the ruined cityscape, the pile of rubble, or the bombed-out building, but precisely upon the brutalized (white) body. Parallels can be drawn between Rosi’s sparse method – characterized by a fragmentary, episodic structure, and a visual poetics of exposure, and a lack of voiceover narration – and what Karl Shoonover has argued is neorealism’s “use of physical suffering to dramatize the political stakes of vision and the need for extranational eyewitness”.⁵² It is in precisely such a frame that Rosi himself places *Fuocoammare*’s most horrific scenes of black(ened) death and dying.⁵³ The scenes in question, which I will not rehearse here, appear in a roughly 15-minute sequence of the film’s final quarter – a relatively extended period of screen time given that until this point there are only brief and sporadic intrusions of the migration narrative into the mostly quiet and at times quaint portrait of the lives of the tenderly humanized and charismatic white(ned) Lampedusan characters – Samuele with his lazy eye and slingshot; Zia Maria as she makes her bed under the loving eyes of Mary and Padre Pio; Pippo, the DJ, contemplating an aria as it plays for his listeners, all of whom are seemingly untouched by the mass tragedies unfolding nearby.⁵⁴ The sequence presents Rosi’s participation in a sea rescue carried out by the Italian Navy. Several stylized shots of helicopters, ships, control panels, and search lights aestheticize the border-as-militarized spectacle [fig. 18]. When asked in an interview how he responds to critiques that his film exploits the tragedy by making a spectacle of it, Rosi evokes his duty to expose the situation to an international audience: “ritengo sia doveroso che il mondo sappia di questa situazione.”⁵⁵ “The world must know about this situation,” insists Rosi, as he evokes the neorealist rhetoric of exposure proffered by Zavattini. *Fuocoammare* received exuberant international praise, culminating in its winning the Golden Bear at Berlin. One suspects that Rosi’s goal was achieved: that is, that the desired “extranational eyewitnesses” Shoonover describes with regard to neorealism’s challenge to global viewers had indeed been assembled and made to watch. Upon the film’s release, Italian Prime Minister Matteo Renzi brought 27 copies of the DVD to his EU colleagues, proudly declaring that the film represented “Italian values” and the “poetics of reception in Lampedusa.”⁵⁶ With *Fuocoammare*, critics applauded Rosi for continuing his cinematic search within the margins of global modernity, outside the limelight, to places like Rome’s ring road (*Sacro GRA*, 2013), the lives of boatmen on the Ganges (*Boatman*, 1993), the Juárez of shadowy hitmen and narcotraffickers (*El sicario - Room 164*, 2010), etc. And yet, at the time of Rosi’s filming, Lampedusa would have been hard to classify as a marginal space. For one, it certainly would not have been so if contemplated from the perspective of the tens of thousands who have died trying to reach

it. Furthermore, as Cuomo and Iorio's *Sudeuropa* had explored a decade before, the island has long been at the center of mediatic portrayals of the deadly Mediterranean route, and among the most spectacularized global borders; like Ferguson, its very name had already been made synonymous with the many (extra)legal tragedies and crimes – and local resistance and solidarity – that continue to unfold there. Rosi's film simply picked up where media outlets left off, taking viewers upon rescue missions in real time. The film indulges crisis spectacle and antiblack subjection rather than offering a critique of the policing of the island and the representational frenzy (mass media and artistic production alike) that itself (re)produces Lampedusa as a border between Europe and Africa. Rosi's film is thus complicit with the conditions it seeks to denounce.⁵⁷ Like the crisis imaginary to which it belongs, *Fuocoammare* shores up the thingness of both the border and the black(ened) people who die trying to cross it.

Part of what is so remarkable about Cuomo and Iorio's quiet film *Sudeuropa* is how it seems an anticipatory critique of Rosi's film – a proper decade prior to Rosi's work on what would become an international blockbuster. The critical reception that fawningly enshrined *Fuocoammare* among works by the neorealist “masters” was not off the mark; I would suggest, however, that the basis of the film's canonization as neorealist might not, however, lie in its radical ethics, nor in its “political *impegno*” (whose politics? Renzi's? the EU's?), but instead in its ideological function – as a means of mobilizing humanitarian affect in order to once again exculpate *italiani brava gente* from the border regimes that continue to make a mass grave of the Mediterranean.⁵⁸ Saucier and Woods' remark about this recurring strategy within humanitarian and securitarian discourse alike is apt to describe Rosi's project and Renzi's warm reception of it. “Black Africans are deployed in order to illustrate the tension between good and bad Italianness, and more broadly, Europeaness,” they write.⁵⁹ Cuomo and Iorio's decelerated film instead employs a poetics of refusal – suggesting not only that visualizing Lampedusa and its perilous waters through the lens of crisis (re)produces the border and the suffering of those who attempt to cross as “things,” but also drawing Lampedusa into the *longue durée* of broader histories of racial capitalism and colonial modernity, and their continuities with the present in a way that both anticipates and continues to animate discussions of “potential histories” (Azoulay) and alternate futures in and across the Black Mediterranean.

PLATES



1 Title card, Yervant Gianikian and Angela Ricci Lucchi, *Dal Polo all'Equatore* (1984-6).



2 Big game hunting in Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi, *Dal Polo all'Equatore*.



3 Slow moving train in Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi, *Dal Polo all'Equatore*.



4 Lampedusa as blurred background in Raphaël Cuomo and Maria Iorio, *Sudeuropa* (2005-7).



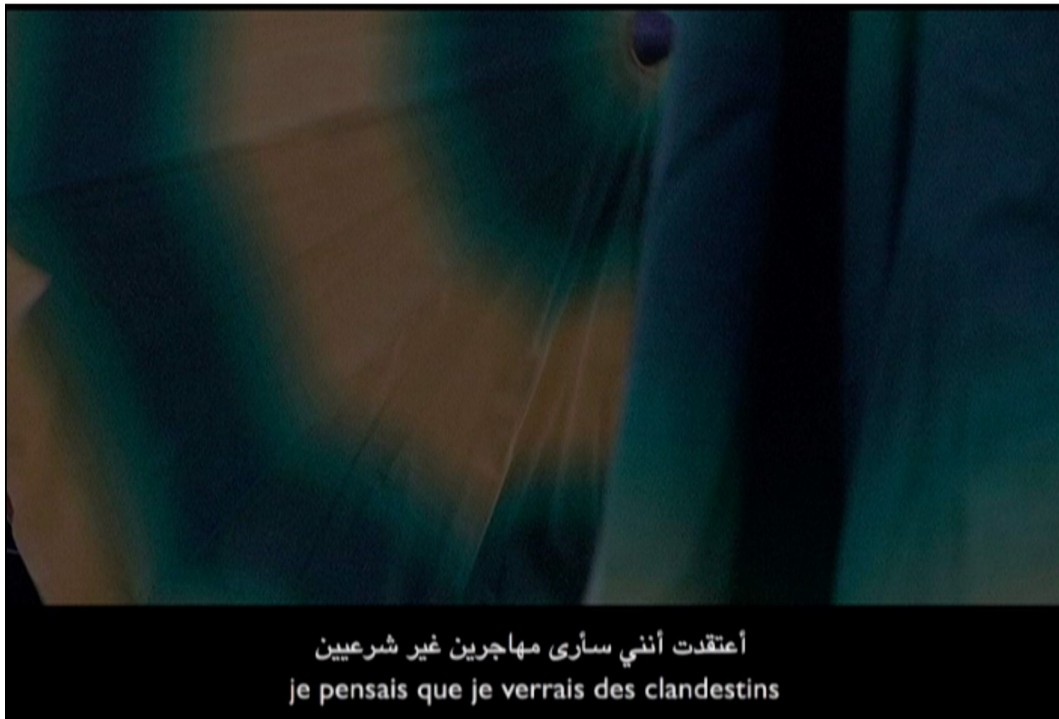
5 Tarnished Lampedusa in Cuomo and Iorio, *Sudeuropa*.



6 Traffic jam at the port in Cuomo and Iorio, *Sudeuropa*.



7 Denying mediatic capture in Cuomo and Iorio, *Sudeuropa*.



8 “I thought I’d see *clandestini* here,” Cuomo and Iorio, *Sudeuropa*.



9 Invisible labor in Cuomo and Iorio, *Sudeuropa*.



10 Fan as helicopter in Cuomo and Iorio, *Sudeuropa*.



11 Waiting at the detention center in Cuomo and Iorio, *Sudeuropa*.



12 Lampedusa's boat cemetery in slow motion, Cuomo and Iorio, *Sudeuropa*.



من لمبدوزا
de Lampedusa

13 “Welcome... to Lampedusa” Cuomo and Iorio, *Sudeuropa*.



14 Blurred coastline in Cuomo and Iorio, *Sudeuropa*.



15 Mansor Diouf in Cuomo and Iorio, *Sudeuropa*.



16 Mansor Diouf contemplates the sea in Cuomo and Iorio, *Sudeuropa*.



17 Samuele in Gianfranco Rosi, *Fuocoammare* (2016).



18 “Lazy eye,” Rosi, *Fuocoammare*.

- ¹ “Where are you,” accessed January 7, 2025. <https://www.massimosestini.it/wru.html>. I remain grateful to Valeria Dani for bringing this photo and the related project to my attention.
- ² For Achille Mbembe, “Blackness does not exist as such. It is constantly produced. To produce Blackness is to produce a social link of subjection and a *body of extraction*, that is, a body entirely exposed to the will of the master, a body from which great effort is made to extract a maximum profit.” Achille Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason*, translated by Laurent Dubois, John Hope Franklin Center Book (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 18. Similarly, Zakiyyah Iman Jackson refers to the ontological plasticity of “black(ened) people” who are “cast as sub, supra, and human *simultaneously* in a manner that puts being in peril because the operations of simultaneously being everything and nothing for an order – human, animal, machine, for instance – constructs black(ened) humanity as the privation and exorbitance of form.” Zakiyyah Iman Jackson, *Becoming Human: Matter and Meaning in an Antiblack World*, Sexual Cultures (New York: University Press, 2020), 35.
- ³ Christina Elizabeth Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 21.
- ⁴ The scholarship on Lampedusa’s spectacularization is considerable. For a representative sample, see: Paolo Cuttita, *Lo spettacolo del confine: Lampedusa tra produzione e messa in scena della frontiera*, Eterotopie, 144 (Milano: Mimesis, 2012); Nick Dines, Nicola Montagna and Vincenzo Ruggiero, “Thinking Lampedusa: Border Construction, the Spectacle of Bare Life and the Productivity of Migrants,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 38, no. 3 (2015): 430–45; Alessandra Di Maio, “Framing Migrant Memories: Lampedusa’s Fragmented Archives,” *Altre Modernità*, n. 27 (2022):1-17; Teresa Fiore, “From Exclusion to Expression in A Sud Di Lampedusa and Come Un Uomo Sulla Terra: Visualizing Detention Centres along Italy-Bound Migrant Routes,” *Journal of Italian Cinema & Media Studies* 6, no. 1 (January 1, 2018): 49–64; David Forgacs, “Coasts, Blockades and the Free Movement of People,” in *Italian Mobilities* (London: Routledge, 2015), 175-200; Giovanna Faleschini Lerner, “From the Other Side of the Mediterranean: Hospitality in Italian Migration Cinema,” *California Italian Studies* 1, no. 1 (2010): 1–19. <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/45h01oh5>; Aine O’Healy, “Imagining Lampedusa,” in *Italian Mobilities* (New York: Routledge, 2016) 152–74; Federica Mazzara, *Reframing Migration: Lampedusa, Border Spectacle and Aesthetics of Subversion*, Italian Modernities (New York: Peter Lang, 2019); Simona Wright, “Lampedusa’s Gaze: Messages from the Outpost of Europe,” *Italica* 91, no. 4 (2014): 775–802. See also: Alessandro Triulzi, “Working with Migrants’ Memories in Italy: The Lampedusa Dump,” *Crossings: Journal of Migration & Culture* 7 (October 1, 2016): 149–63 and *Border Lampedusa*, edited by Gabriele Proglia and Laura Odasso (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2018).
- ⁵ Jonathan Echeverri Zuluaga, “Errance and Elsewheres among Africans Waiting to Restart Their Journeys in Dakar, Senegal,” *Cultural Anthropology* 30, no. 4 (2015): 589–610.
- ⁶ Cristiana Giordano, “Catastrophes,” in “Refugees and the Crisis of Europe,” special issue of *Cultural Anthropology*, edited by Mayanthi Fernando and Cristiana Giordano (2016) (no page numbers).
- ⁷ On borders as repetitive practices, see: Nicholas De Genova, “The ‘Crisis’ of the European Border Regime: Towards a Marxist Theory of Borders,” *EuroNomade*, March 16, 2016, <http://www.euronomade.info/?p=6912>. On

borders as regimes of global governance, see: Harsha Walia, *Border and Rule: Global Migration, Capitalism, and the Rise of Racist Nationalism* (Chicago, Haymarket Books, 2021), 14.

⁸ Nicholas De Genova. *The Borders of "Europe": Autonomy of Migration, Tactics of Bordering* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 6.

⁹ Debarati Sanyal, "Calais's 'Jungle': Refugees, Biopolitics, and the Arts of Resistance," *Representations*, no. 139 (2017): 5.

¹⁰ The reference here is to photos of evacuees from Palestine during Nakba that inaugurated the modern Israeli state in a conversation about Azoulay's *Potential History* with writer and photographer Teju Cole at the International Center for Photography (2020).

¹¹ P. Khalil Saucier and Tryon P. Woods, "Ex Aqua: The Mediterranean Basin, Africans on the Move, and the Politics of Policing," *Theoria* 61, no. 141 (2014): 55–75 (59).

¹² Ivi, 64.

¹³ Chambers and Cariello write, "Thinking with the Mediterranean allows us to trace a history that questions and interrupts the institutional organisation of events and knowledge. Other scales of interpretation bring into play the potential of dissonance and a reworking of the inherited world into unexpected interpretations. Here, repertoires more than archives emerge as sites of constant re-elaboration and re-assembly". Marta Cariello and Iain Michael Chambers, "Mediterranean Blues: Archives, Repertoires and the Black Holes of Modernity," *California Italian Studies* 10, no. 2 (2020): 1–17. <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/4qg5h4dv>

¹⁴ Though I would characterize these works as experimental to distinguish them from commercially distributed documentary and narrative works, experimental does not always mean oppositional or subversive.

Even some among the examples I mention here as examples of a counter-archive or repertoire might be critiqued for operating in the mode of crisis spectacle. In addition, while most of the artists listed here have made works about Italian border regimes, part of how sovereign borders materialize as violence is through their reification, so I hesitate to categorize these works along national lines. I draw here from Ariella Azoulay, who writes that the logic of partition, "serves imperial ends by making it impossible to see one global regime that needs to be abolished". Ariella Azoulay, "Open Letter to Sylvia Wynter: Unlearning the Disappearance of Jews from Africa," *The Funambulist Magazine*, June 29, 2020, <https://thefunambulist.net/magazine/reparations/open-letter-to-sylvia-wynter-unlearning-the-disappearance-of-jews-from-africa-by-ariella-aisha-azoulay>

¹⁵ SA Smythe, "The Black Mediterranean and the Politics of Imagination," *Middle East Report* (New York, N.Y. 1988) 48, no. 286 (2018): 3–9.

¹⁶ Cristiana Giordano, "Exceeding Crisis. The Psychic Life of Drawings," *Anthropology Quarterly* 34, no. 1 (2020): 77–98.

¹⁷ Saucier and Woods, "Ex Aqua", 64.

¹⁸ The present article develops an earlier reading of Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi's film alongside Pier Paolo Pasolini's *Appunti per un'Orestiade africana* (1973) and Dagmawi Yimer's *Asmat* (2014) through the lens of haunting, spectrality and Homi Bhabha's postcolonial time lag. Portions of this description thus also appear in: Rhiannon Welch, "Anachronism, Displacement, Trace. 'Scarred Images' and the Postcolonial Time Lag," *California Italian Studies* 7, no. 1 (2017): 1–26. <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/4fw6g9m6>

¹⁹ Barbara Casavecchia, "Stop Forgetting. An Interview with Yervant Gianikian and Angela Ricci Lucchi," *Frieze*, February 22, 2006, video, <https://www.frieze.com/video/stop->

forgetting.

- ²⁰ This lack has led some to critique, misguidedly, in my estimation, the film's aestheticization and commodification of "the Other". For a cogent discussion and critique of this position, see Jeffrey Skoller, *Shadows, Specters, Shards Making History in Avant-Garde Film* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 21-22.
- ²¹ Robert Lumley, *Entering the Frame: Cinema and History in the Films of Yervant Gianikian and Angela Ricci Lucchi*, Italian Modernities 10 (Oxford; Peter Lang, 2011), 53-54.
- ²² "Potential history is a form of being with others, both living and dead, across time, against the separation of the past from the present, colonized peoples from their worlds and possessions, and history from politics". Ariella Azoulay, *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism* (London: Verso, 2019), 43.
- ²³ Cristina Lombardi-Diop, "Preface," in *The Black Mediterranean: Bodies, Borders and Citizenship*, edited by The Black Mediterranean Collective (Cham, Switzerland, Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), 4.
- ²⁴ Azoulay, *Potential History*, 43.
- ²⁵ Raphaël Cuomo and Maria Iorio, *Sudeuropa* (Belgium: ARGOS, 2007).
- ²⁶ This formulation is drawn from an interview with the artists conducted in the fall of 2020, accessible here: Maria Iorio and Raphael Cuomo, *Sudeuropa*. *Intervista con Maria Iorio and Raphael Cuomo*, intervista, ATP DIARY, August 23, 2020. <http://atpdiary.com/intervista-con-maria-iorio-e-raphael-cuomo/>.
- ²⁷ Franco Cassano, *Southern Thought and Other Essays on the Mediterranean* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012), 137.
- ²⁸ *Clandestini* is best translated with the English "illegals," both conceptually and in terms of the political affects it bundles. It does not exist as a legal category in international or European law. Its usage in Italian largely corresponds to the (racist) moral panic over immigration that began in the 1990s and culminated in the Bossi Fini law of 2002, which criminalized undocumented border crossing. It peaked in 2005—the year Cuomo and Iorio began making *Sudeuropa*—and has been dropping ever since. (This is an approximation I gathered with Google Ngram data.).
- ²⁹ The name of each person who appears in the film is listed in the credits, along with the jobs they are seen performing, in both French and Arabic: Abdelhamid Boussoffara, Bader Belrhazi, Mansor Diouf, Sebastian Groza, Csaba Szekeli, Sana Ben Mahmoud, and Hamouda Mejri. Crediting those photographed is another means of countering the anonymity that prevails in border crisis iconography. In her article calling for a politics of abolition rather than hospitality in the Black Mediterranean, Ida Danewid has argued that, rather than a new phenomenon resulting from global migration, "the birth and development of the world capitalist system depended upon the exploitation of racialised, coerced, and migratory labour". "'These Walls Must Fall': The Black Mediterranean and the Politics of Abolition," *The Black Mediterranean. Bodies, Borders, and Citizenship* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), 145–66 (148).
- ³⁰ In her reading of the film, Áine O'Healy reads the airport sequence as suggestive of the Italian state's secretive and illegal pushbacks to Libya, which were already likely occurring in 2006. O'Healy, "Imagining Lampedusa," 167.
- ³¹ These blurred, decelerated aerial views might be a subtle critique of aerial reconnaissance, documentary, and the Futurist avant-garde as colonial modes of seeing, evident in Futurist *aereopittura* in works by Tullio Crali, Gerardo Dottori, and Tato (Guglielmo Sansoni) and LUCE documentary reels aimed at surveilling the built environment or the fantasy of "empty land." See, for example, *Il viaggio del Duce*

- (1937) which includes aerial footage of Cyrenaica. See *Giornale Luce*, “Il viaggio del duce,” Archivio Luce, March 17, 1937. https://patrimonio.archivioluce.com/luce-web/detail/IL5000027122/2/il-viaggio-del-duce.html?startPage=100&jsonVal=%7B%22jsonVal%22:%7B%22query%22:%5B%22*.*%22%5D,%22fieldDate%22:%22dataNormal%22,%22_perPage%22:20,%22temi%22:%5B%22%5C%5C%22Regia%20Aeronautica%20Italiana%5C%5C%22%22%5D%7D%7D. For more on Futurist *aereopittura*, see: Emily Braun, “Shock and Awe: Futurist ‘Aeropittura’ and the Theories of Giulio Douhet,” in *Italian Futurism: Reconstructing the Universe*, edited by Vivien Greene (New York: Guggenheim Museum of Art, 2014), 269–73. For an analysis of contemporary artistic works treating Italian colonial temporality that take up the colonial legacies of *aereopittura*, see: Tenley Bick, “Postcolonial Retrofuturism: Alessandro Ceresoli’s *Linea Tagliero* Prototypes,” *Neo-Futurism*, Special Issue of *International Yearbook of Futurism Studies* 13 (2023): 313–343.
- ³² “Maria Iorio and Rapahël Cuomo, ‘Sudeuropa’ synopsis,” accessed January 7, 2025. https://www.parallelhistories.org/pages/Sudeuropa_MaghrebConnection.html
- ³³ The term was coined by Austrian geologist Eduard Suess. From 1883–1909, Suess composed a four-volume treatise known in English as *The Face of the Earth*, a text which is still considered one of the foundational texts of the disciplines of paleogeography and plate tectonics. The emergence of modern European scientific disciplines—particularly those dedicated to amassing ostensibly objective data about peoples and places and classifying them—is inextricable from imperial practices of expansion, extraction, and exploitation—of both living beings and the earth’s material resources.
- ³⁴ Iain Chambers, *Mediterranean Crossings. The Politics of an Interrupted Modernity* (Durham, Duke University Press, 2008), 11.
- ³⁵ Koselleck (1988) also stands out for having conducted the most extensive genealogy of crisis in European intellectual history.
- ³⁶ Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 41.
- ³⁷ Michel-Rolph Trouillot. *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston, Mass: Beacon Press, 1995), 15.
- ³⁸ This brings Cuomo and Iorio’s film into conversation with artist Christoph Büchel’s controversial installation *Barca Nostra* (2019), which shocked audiences at Venice’s Biennale because it consisted of the very boat that was once packed with between seven hundred and a thousand people and sank off the coast of Libya, en route to Lampedusa on 18 April 2015 (constituting the deadliest single shipwreck in the Sicilian Channel). Rinaldo Walcott writes: “*Barca Nostra* asks us to reckon with the history of the *Amistad* and the *Zong* as not behind us: in *Barca Nostra* the present and past meet, the Middle Passage is firmly globalized”. Rinaldo Walcott, “The Black Aquatic,” *liquid blackness* 5, no. 1 (1 April 2021): 63–73.
- ³⁹ Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 41.
- ⁴⁰ Aracelis Girmay, *The Black Maria: Poems*, American Poets Continuum Series 153 (Rochester, NY: BOA Editions Ltd., 2016), 33.
- ⁴¹ Kamau Brathwaite, *The Arrivants: A New World Trilogy: Rights Of Passage: Islands: Masks* (Oxford: University Press, 1973); Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993); Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, translated by Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press, 1997); Marlene Nourbese Philip, *Zong’!*, Wesleyan Poetry Series (Middletown, Conn: Wesleyan University Press, 2008); Derek Walcott, *The Poetry of Derek Walcott 1948–2013*, first edition (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2014); Rinaldo Walcott, “The Black Aquatic,” *Liquid Blackness* 5, no. 1 (2021): 63–73; Sylvia

- Wynter, "1492: A New World View," in *Race, Discourse, and the Origin of the Americas. A New World View*, edited by Vera Lawrence Hyatt and Rex Nettleford (Washington; London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1992), 5–55; and "Columbus, the Ocean Blue, and Fables That Stir the Mind: To Reinvent the Study of Letters," in *Poetics of the Americas: Race, Founding, and Textuality*, edited by Bainard Cowan and Jefferson Humphries (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1997), 141–63.
- ⁴² Dionne Brand, *A Map to the Door of No Return: Notes to Belonging* (Toronto: Doubleday Canada, 2001), 12.
- ⁴³ Lauren Gail Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 7.
- ⁴⁴ Janet L. Roitman, *Anti-Crisis* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 11.
- ⁴⁵ In contrast, as I discuss above, Cuomo and Iorio have expressed reservations about an "ethical vision" insulated from collective praxis and the conditions of artistic/cinematic production.
- ⁴⁶ This appraisal of neorealism – that it is somehow more "real" than the "escapist" cinema of Mussolini's fascist regime – relies upon a stubborn (and false) binary that is as old as European cinema itself: the "fantasy" of Méliès vs. the "reality" of Lumière.
- ⁴⁷ André Bazin, *What is Cinema?*, Vol. II (Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2004), 20.
- ⁴⁸ Cesare Zavattini, "Some Ideas on the Cinema," *Sight and Sound* 23, no. 2 (1953): 64.
- ⁴⁹ Ruth Ben-Ghiat's (2015) work on fascist "empire cinema" has shown that many of the techniques and practices celebrated as "neorealist" (non-professional actors, location shooting, etc.) are also common in the regime-sponsored films produced during the *ventennio*, well before the storied emergence of neorealism after WWII. Saverio Giovacchini (2011) has argued that the neorealist narrative of white male victimization subtended the erasure of Italy's then very recent and as-yet unresolved colonial past, by contributing to the myth of *italiani brava gente*, Italians as inadvertent or benevolent colonizers. And Noa Steimatsky (2011) has pointed out that as the neorealists turned their backs on the studio system in favor of the 'reality' offered by life on the city street, they seem to have willfully overlooked the vast displaced persons, or refugee, camp that *Cinecittà* – the Italian studio city – had in fact become in the immediate postwar years.
- ⁵⁰ Lorenzo Fabbri, "Neorealism as Ideology: Bazin, Deleuze, and the Avoidance of Fascism," *Italianist* 35, no. 2 (2015): 194.
- ⁵¹ Ivi, 184.
- ⁵² Karl Schoonover, *Brutal Vision. The Neorealist Body in Postwar Italian Cinema* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), 15.
- ⁵³ I refer here to the sequence capturing many lifeless bodies and people suffering from dehydration, all of whom appear to be from the Horn of Africa; for the white European audiences to whom this film is addressed, they would appear as dead and dying black bodies. They constitute what Saidiya Hartman calls in the opening of *Scenes of Subjection*, the "terrible spectacle" (she is quoting Frederick Douglass) and the routine nature, the causal display, of black suffering. Though people from the Horn of Africa may not identify as black, border regimes *blacken* them (in both Achille Mbembe's and Zakiyyah Jackson's terms) – in particular, people attempting to cross through Libya from East or West (sub-Saharan) Africa are routinely interpellated as black and subjected to violence as a result.
- ⁵⁴ The long, transnational history of the racialization of Sicilians and their inclusion in or exclusion from the category of whiteness between mainland Italy and the US is beyond the scope of this essay. Here, I use 'white(ned)' to refer to the subject position

that appears naturalized by Rosi's camera as those who belong in Lampedusa and its nostalgically rendered rural landscapes, as opposed to predominantly black(ened) migrants who appear in his film, who are instead marked as coming from elsewhere and photographed exclusively in relation to the state and its securitarian technologies (rescue ships, military helicopters, medical screenings and other forms of biopolitical surveillance, etc.). In a different but not unrelated context (mass incarceration in the US), Nicole Fleetwood (2020) has suggested "carceral visibility" as a term to describe a "set of rehearsed images created by the state and by nonincarcerated image makers" to "[reinforce] the idea that the primary relationship of people in prison is to the punitive state". Carceral visibility is also apt to describe the border crisis imaginary deployed in Rosi's film. Nicole R. Fleetwood, *Marking Time: Art in the Age of Mass Incarceration* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2020), 16.

⁵⁵ Giulia Rosmarini, "Gianfranco Rosi. L'intervista al regista di *Fuocoammare*, Orso d'oro a Berlino," *LifeGate*, May 13, 2016, <https://www.lifegate.it/gianfranco-rosi-intervista>.

⁵⁶ Renzi remarked that his goal in sharing the DVD was to "spiegare che questo è un pezzo dell'Italia, sia dal punto di vista del cinema che dal punto di vista dei valori che rappresenta," tightening the articulation between Italian national values and national cinema, whose global expression has long been neorealism. Salvatore Frequenti, "Migranti, Renzi: 'Porto 27 Dvd di *Fuocoammare* al Consiglio Europeo,'" *Corriere Della Sera*, March 7, 2016, https://www.corriere.it/spettacoli/16_marzo_07/migranti-renzi-portero-27-dvd-fuocoammare-consiglio-europeo-e8f1d986-e458-11e5-9e78-e03cf324c1ba.shtml. This was a period in Italian public and political discourse when *accoglienza* (or hospitality)

was among the "ethical" alternatives proposed to the criminalization of undocumented migration inscribed in the 2002 Bossi Fini Law. For more on this as it pertains to the (sculptural) arts at the Lampedusa border, see: Tenley Bick, "Porta di Lampedusa, Porta d'Europa: Contemporary Monumentality, Entropy, and Migration at the Gateway to Europe," in *Migrants Shaping Europe, Past and Present*, edited by Helen Solterer and Vincent Joos (Manchester University Press, 2022), 131–66.

⁵⁷ Similar arguments appear in: Federica Mazzara, "My Review of *Fuocoammare* (Fire at Sea) by Gianfranco Rosi," *MOVING BORDERS: Migration and the Aesthetics of Subversion*, June 10, 2016, <http://movingborders.blogspot.com/2016/06/my-review-of-fuocoammare-fire-at-sea-by.html>. See also: "Fuocoammare: Considerazioni Del Collettivo Askavusa," *Askavusa*, <https://askavusa.wordpress.com/2016/02/24/1428/>.

⁵⁸ For a similar argument, see: Miguel Mellino and Giuseppe Orlandini, "Fuocoammare. Frammenti di un discorso umanitario," *Opera Viva*, <https://operavivamagazine.org/fuocoammare/>.

⁵⁹ Saucier and Woods, "Ex Aqua," 67.

TENLEY BICK

Photography between Desire and Disillusionment

West African Studio Portraiture, Diaspora, and Italy in the Work of Silvia Rosi

Introduction: “To Visualize Representations of Black Subjects inside the Territory of Italy”

Only after leaving her native Italy, where she was born and raised, did Italian-Togolese artist Silvia Rosi (b. 1992, Scandiano, Reggio Emilia) begin making work about her family’s past and their arrival on the peninsula. In her practice, which is dedicated to photography and video, at times accompanied by textual elements, we can say that Rosi pictures – meaning she both imagines and creates images of – her West African parents (as well as archetypal figures of their broad association) before and after their migration in the late 1980s from Togo to Italy, all through the practice of self-portraiture.¹ Paradigmatic of this work is her *Encounter* series (2019–20), in which Rosi stages photographic portraits of herself in the space of the studio, posing as her parents. As these performed and embodied subjects, she holds objects and uses gestures, such as head-carrying, that cue us to cultural contexts and to experiences associated with her parents’ migration, and with the artist’s own heritage and diasporic position in turn.

In *Self-Portrait as My Mother in School Uniform* (2019), for example, Rosi balances tiny bundles of wood (used for teeth-brushing in West Africa), like those sold by her mother as a young girl in a Lomé market, the caption tells us, on a small tray on her head, while she looks at the camera and snaps the picture [fig. 1]. In *Self-Portrait as My Father* of the same year, we see Rosi-as-her-father, in business dress, jacket and tie, glasses on and books balanced on his head – all signs of his erudition. He is surrounded by scarlet-red quartets of plump tomatoes, neatly stacked in equally spaced pyramidal groups on the floor and step of the draped studio set [fig. 2]. The caption reads, and repeats: “He was an educated man from a good Togolaise family. He arrived in Italy with a few clothes, some books and the dream of finding a good job. A few weeks later he was picking up tomatoes in a field for a few cents a box.”

In other works, language, props and formal choices, as in the artist’s nods to analog photography, cue us to the time-period of Rosi’s parents’ emigration and immigration and to circulation of such subjects and images. Consider the recent series, *Disintegrata* (Disintegrated, 2024), in which Rosi also appears; its title, in the feminine singular form, points to the artist’s autobiographic

connection to diaspora and to her experience in her native country as a woman whose racialization announces her not only as having heritage from elsewhere, but as, contrary to fact, being exclusively from elsewhere. The title, in Italian, evokes two meanings: first, “disintegrated” as in “pulverized,” and second, “disintegrated” as in “not integrated” or “out of place” socially, typically put as *non integrata*. In these works, we see Rosi pose as a woman at a salon (*Disintegrata dal parrucchiere*), who turns to look at us while her hair sets under a vintage hooded dryer; as a 1970s girl on-the-go (*Disintegrata in bici*), her glance over her shoulder suggests, in positive and negative prints, Chelsea boots and bell bottoms on, bike in tow [fig. 3]. In another work (*Disintegrata che aspetta*), she is a young woman turned away from us, seemingly waiting for a ride, with two hand-carry valises at her feet [fig. 4]. In two other works, both black-and-white, one a triptych, Rosi poses as Italian and Togolese brides, respectively, distinguished by nationality through the artworks’ titles. The subjects are visually distinguished as “European” and “African” by differences in dress, a distinction that Rosi complicates with the constant of her own body [fig. 5; fig. 6]. The images thereby visually refute the typically concomitant divisor of race as such – that construction of difference long (and frequently) used, especially in the history of photography, to construct and separate “West” from “non-West,” not to mention “Italian” from foreign identity, since state formation with the Risorgimento. Sometimes spliced into polyptych formats or across positive and negative iterations, the works underscore the mobility, temporality, and transformation of photography as medium, which make it well-disposed to artistic contemplations on migration. The resulting images narrate, directly (by content) or indirectly (by form), Rosi’s family’s personal experience of migration to Italy, and her connection to it. The images are ultimately depictions of her through her connection to her family’s history and to the experience of a self-consciously racialized and diasporic life in her native Italy.² In these images and others, Rosi creates a family album and diasporic archive, at once real and imaginary. In the artist’s conceptualization of her practice, her work has been most inspired by her own family photo albums of the 1980s and 1990s (a point underscored by one work from *Disintegrata* in which she poses with family photos).³ These images include those taken in commercial portrait photography studios in Lomé, which she scans and enlarges, to enable her to study the small prints more carefully.⁴ They also include those taken of her family in Italy. In creating such an archive, she visualizes, and arguably telegraphs an effort to make common, images of Black people in Italy, never regularly seen by the artist growing up. As the artist has put it:

La mia pratica artistica inizia a partire della fotografia. Mi esprimo attraverso l'autoritratto, il video, e il testo, e utilizzo immagini che appartengono a un

archivio familiare – in particolare, immagini che ritraggono membri della mia famiglia, nel paesaggio italiano, quindi vanno a visualizzare una rappresentazione di soggetti neri all'interno del territorio italiano.⁵

Indeed, in video and photographs in *Disintegrata*, Rosi pictured (and re-pictured, as some videos run on a constant loop), herself and her mother in green, grassy hillsides, evoking the famed *colline* of her home region of Reggio Emilia. For Rosi, the practice counters a “certain absence” – that is, of Black bodies – in open landscape, a spatial trope often captured in nineteenth-century Romantic paintings. They also capture an absence of belonging sensed by Black people, namely her mother, in such environs despite their proximity to home.⁶ Additionally, and importantly for Rosi, her practice, which involves what she views as the privilege of presenting herself as others, gives her an experience of freedom that she has not experienced in her native country, where people might assign a role to her based on her race: the identity of migrant.⁷ Photography in this regard – through which the artist visualizes a representation of Black subjects in Italy – a key point for this essay – is an act of wish fulfillment. It homes in on the importance of visual representation and its cultural politics in relation to constructions of (and potentially, changes to) national identity and belonging.

Potential Narratives: The Family Album, Studio Portrait Photography, and Figuration in African-Diasporic and Italian Artistic Practice

Rosi's photographs intersect with numerous art historical narratives, some better known than others. First might be the use of the family photograph and related album, both imagined and readymade. The family photograph has long been a site of critical attention for contemporary African and African diaspora artists, undergoing what American artist and art historian Deborah Willis, writing in her canonical *Picturing Us* of the mid-1990s, noted was a “sharp increase” in then-recent years⁸ [in this history, we might think, for example, of Santu Mofokeng in South Africa (*The Black Photo Album: Look at Me, 1890–1950*); Zineb Sedira in Algeria, France, and England (see *Mother Tongue*, 2002); Carrie Mae Weems' *Family Pictures and Stories* (1981–82), Lorraine O'Grady, and more recently LaToya Ruby Frazier in the U.S.; and María Magdalena Campos-Pons, as in her *Spoken Softly with Mama* (1998), in the Caribbean]. This phenomenon is also associated with what the late Nigerian curator and art historian Okwui Enwezor framed as a broader phenomenon of “archive fever” in contemporary art. Building on Jacques Derrida's theorization of the *mal d'archive*, a conservational drive toward classification that counters the

threat of being forgotten, Enwezor theorized that the archive in contemporary art functions as “new kind of interpretive structure, as the place to examine collective memory,” even as it is associated with structures of power that exclude some histories.⁹ To that end, such practices proliferated with the postcolonial turn and identitarian concerns of art and artistic movements of the 1980s, in an increasingly globalized world, and with the generational expansion of diasporic populations, some of whom migrated to former métropoles following decolonization, others of whom, like Rosi, were born and raised in the diaspora.

The stakes of using the photo album for Black and African-descendent artists in Italy (who are often regarded racially as *soggetti neri*, whether they identify as such) are particularly fraught given legacies from colonial-era (both liberal and Fascist) mass culture. Advertisements and other print media depicted Black Africans (and Jewish people, among others), in journals such as *La difesa della razza* (1938–43), through a gross primitivist lens. Such images were integral to the project of whitening Italians for the sake of homogenizing national identity and competing with other European nations and imperial powers. In the postwar decades following the establishment of the Italian Republic and Constitution of 1948 and its promise of equality, racism nevertheless persisted, as did a long-inscribed “racial/racist imaginary,” as Silvana Patriarca has written, which excluded biracial and mixed-race Italians from national identity. This imaginary persisted in articulations of racial hierarchies in post-fascist Italian mass culture, as in cinema and television (such as *Drive In* and *Indietro tutta!*) of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s that exoticized Black actors’ bodies for white viewers, and orientalized and exoticized “femminilità non-bianca.”¹⁰ Even in films where race was dismissed by the filmmaker as of relevance to the story, citing Roman inclusion, for example, of racial diversity, representation of the non-white female body could only occur, some have argued, through discursive erasure of race. This is to say, as Patriarca has also argued, that Italians with darker skin are invisible; they are “una rappresentazione impossibile.”¹¹ Building on Patriarca’s point, it is not that representations of Black Italians are impossible, but that *visual apprehension* of representations of Black Italians as such is impossible through a national lens of perception. If race is perceived to mark the Italian body (perhaps positioned as such through iconography), the subject cannot be Italian. Instead, Black bodies have been deployed in spectacular, anthropological ways, even in the contemporary context, as Willis noted in her discussion of contemporary Italian advertising, as in Oliviero Toscani’s controversial “Breastfeeding” Benetton ad of the late 1980s, in which a white baby was breastfed by a Black woman (whose head was cropped out of the image).¹² Countering these legacies, Rosi’s works also align with practices by

other Italian artists (some but not all of African descent), such as Alessandra Ferrini, Aida Silvestri, Binta Diaw, Adjie Dieye, collective Fare Ala, and filmmakers such as Simone Brioni (who also uses family photos), who have used photography as a means to critically investigate memory (both personal and collective), European-African (and often more specifically Italian-African) relations, and colonial histories and legacies, documented or not.¹³

Studio portrait photography is also connected to other histories of migration in Italy. Emigrant Italian populations in new homes, as far away as Australia, would send photographs to family in Italy; some photographers in Italy, as Giorgia Alù has demonstrated, would even photograph these family members holding such photographs as signs of connection between diaspora and home.¹⁴ In diasporic contexts, “Italian migrants construed the photographer’s studio as a place where they could assert control over their own visibility and its fabrication,” using the construction of an idealized self-image as a way to “reinforce their presence within the host society, while situating their bodies and desire in opposition to dominating strategies of control and representation.”¹⁵ Italy’s own cinematic and photographic history has been approached as an archive by artists Italian and otherwise, as in the work of Renée Green and Yara Piras.¹⁶ But the artistic use of the family photograph and album has been far more limited in postwar and contemporary Italian art. The role of portrait photography as a means of connecting family geographically separated by migration is shared terrain between Rosi and a few other Italian artists who have worked with photography in this vein, as in Mario Cresci’s *Ritratti reali* (1972) – a body of thirty triptychs connected by Ilaria Campioli to Rosi’s practice, and namely to her work *Disintegrata con Foto di Famiglia* (2024), in which Italian families, including emigrants who have returned home during Ferragosto, pose with family pictures.¹⁷

A second art historical narrative for Rosi’s work might position them as part of the recent history of Italian artists of African descent, including Jem Perucchini and Luigi Christopher Veggetti Kanku, who have used figuration and its genres (such as realism, icon painting, and portraiture), to visualize and celebrate Black and multi-ethnic Italian identity, countering ongoing ethnocentric nationalism that has long positioned Italianness as both white and as racially unmarked.¹⁸ Other narratives still might position Rosi’s work in relation to genealogies of postmodernism. Much of her practice has been dedicated to photographing herself, in what we might call a deconstructionist model of self-portraiture, found in the work of Claude Cahun, Cindy Sherman, and Samuel Fosso, which destabilizes myths of originality, individual unitary authorship, and self-mastered, centered subjectivity conventionally telegraphed by the genre. But Rosi’s work notably departs from (and even counters) these artistic precedents by underscoring the significance of the

presence of the artist *as herself* in the staged tableaux of her images even as she is also playing someone else. She appears as a metonym for her own parents' pasts. These images, and their stakes, are personal.

A Foundational Visual Language, Underexamined: West African Studio Portrait Photography in Rosi's Work

Beyond these potential narratives, the genealogy that is perhaps most notable in Rosi's works is their demonstrative deployment of the genre and "visual language" of West African (meaning sub-Saharan West Africa) studio portrait photography, which developed in coastal and interior countries, most famously Senegal, Mali, and Ghana. Rosi draws upon formal, procedural, and iconographic tropes from the genre. It is arguably the works' primary art historical and cultural frame, the conceit around which they operate. Initially made familiar to her by the family photographs brought with her parents to Italy and seen by Rosi in Lomé, on holidays, West African portrait photography was made famous in art history through curatorial and commercial projects since the 1990s that championed the work of Malian photographers Seydou Keïta (the most famous of these photographers), Malick Sidibé, and others. Rosi's subjects (herself) are centered in the image field, in shallow spaces; she poses in highly staged, fixed stances.¹⁹ She often uses cloth backdrops (sometimes patterned, as in her ABC series of 2022) to create a *mise-en-scène*, as is typical of such images. She also uses props (historically, "modern" European objects, such as radios, wristwatches, clocks, pens, bicycles, motor scooters, as in this image by Keïta, that speak to subjects' cosmopolitanism and socioeconomic prosperity), which here, are a broader set of objects that function to different critical ends [fig. 7]. She uses dress (Western-style fashions and traditional West African garments, in West Africa worn by the subject for the occasion or provided by the photographer) and a studio set to stage aesthetically pleasing and often idealized portraits (as we all like portraits of ourselves to be), that speak to the prosperity (or not, as we will see in some of Rosi's images), cosmopolitanism, and modernity of the subject.²⁰

The history of this genre, both in development and reception, is also connected to the multigenerational temporality of Rosi's images. The phenomenon of Rosi's reference proliferated in sub-Saharan urban centers such as Dakar, Bamako, and Lomé (the artists' parents' hometown) in the 1940s, 1950s (at which point portrait photography was democratized and widely available), and 1960s, but has been on the Continent as long as photography itself (which is to say, nearly as long as photography has

existed).²¹ It came to international recognition by Western arts institutions in the 1990s when certain photographers, such as the aforementioned Keïta, the most famous from this history, and Sidibé, came to be celebrated in global art markets and institutions, and contemporary photographers, such as Samuel Fosso, working in this legacy, also came to international prominence. This shift was supported by postcolonial curators and art historians including Enwezor and others, in exhibitions such as *In/sight: African Photographers, 1940 to the Present* (Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, 1996, curs. Claire Bell, Okwui Enwezor, Danielle Tilkin, and Octavio Zaya) and *Snap Judgments: New Positions in Contemporary African Photography* (International Center for Photography, New York, 2006, cur. Okwui Enwezor), both of which were accompanied by major catalogs.

Despite the visual prominence of the photographic genre in Rosi's work, not to mention the artist's personal connection to it, it is striking how little this conceit has been seriously examined in the nascent discourse on Rosi's work.²² Though the influence of West African studio portrait photography is always mentioned in any discussion of Rosi's work – it is a guaranteed note in discussions on the artist – little scholarly attention has been dedicated to what Rosi's work does with this history in her reflection on diaspora, or to what the stakes of its engagement might be for histories of art and critical artistic explorations of contemporary African-Italian experiences. This gap is only more surprising given the relatively large body of literature on West African studio portrait photography (in Africanist art history, growing in recent years) and increasing attention to Rosi's work by major institutions of contemporary art (as indicated by the acquisition of many of her recent works by the Museum of Modern Art in New York).²³ The absence of serious attention to this area of her work, and especially to the art histories it engages, in my view speaks to larger divisions in art history and in worldviews that have held Africanist (and African diasporic) art history away from broader discourses on modern and contemporary art that have historically centered on the West (and in many ways still do).

What discussions have been made are varied. They have pointed to Rosi's engagement of West African portrait photography as a means of articulating her connection to the region.²⁴ Curators in conversation with the artist have brought it up as a foil to colonial photography that fashioned a primitive racialized Other,²⁵ and that, as such a foil, allows for a "reappropriat[ion] of one's own image, a way to control a narrative," or to ascertain whether she looked at such images to determine how much conscious influence these works had on her practice.²⁶ Others have connected it to her conceptualization of the studio as a place to negotiate reality and identity, as it is in West Africa.²⁷ Others still have made astute, if brief comments, that

nevertheless gloss over the complicated work of these images; they argue, for example, that Rosi is “reinterpreting the classic West African studio portrait, by stripping it down to convey the lived realities of her family.”²⁸ To grapple with Rosi’s work, and its use of a recognizably modern African strategy as a means of family connection and as a means to critically reflect on experience within the racialized African diaspora in Italy, compels closer attention to the advent of African photography, alongside other sources, that she engages as she constructs self-portraits, family photographs, and other images.²⁹

One major reason for this oversight, it seems to me, and for the research problem with which this article concerns itself, is that curators and scholars who work on histories of Italian art or on modern and contemporary art – or both – seldom if ever also work in Africanist art history. Indeed, the latter is typically held apart from still Western-centered narratives of modern and contemporary art in art history and in arts institutions, even after the so-called “global turn.” The exception would be scholars and curators who work on modern and contemporary African art, but very few of these individuals also specialize in Italianist art history. A second major reason for this problem then can be attributed to the racialized construction and Aryanization of modern Italian identity and nationhood as white, dating from the Risorgimento through the Fascist racial laws – legacies of which persist in Italy today, amid renewed anti-Black violence and xenophobia and a resurgence of ethnocentric nationalism associated with far-right populism of Giorgia Meloni and Matteo Salvini, and with the work of politicians such as Roberto Vannacci, the former general and so-called “fedele servitore della Patria” of the Lega and EU Parliament, whose best-selling books, widely criticized for homophobia, misogyny, and racism, urge for a re-Aryanization of Italy to restore a singular culture and ethnicity to the country.³⁰ These legacies also can be found in Italianist art history itself. Inattention to Black Italian artists by contemporary arts institutions has largely persisted, with some exceptions, namely in the curatorial work of Johanne Affricot, Justin Randolph Thompson, and Simone Frangi and in private arts foundations (Rosi at Collezione Maramotti, for example, and Binta Diaw at Fondazione Sandretto Re Rebaudengo, curated by Ilaria Bernardi), despite the growing prominence of Black Italian artists’ work extra-nationally, where they have more often found better support, and despite the region’s historical and increasing ethnic diversity today.

To do this kind of analysis, then, is to press against, as I have suggested above, an inattention to Africanist art history, and African-descendent people, within “Italianist” discourses. (The same might be said of the inattention within African diaspora art history to diasporas in Italy, particularly to modern and contemporary artists).³¹ This is especially the case for Italianist art history, a discourse that, as I have written elsewhere, remains behind the postcolonial

and transnational turns that have occurred in other areas of Italian cultural studies, including film and literature. This problem therefore also carries serious stakes for art history – itself fundamentally in many ways an Italianist discipline – and broader views of Italy and Italian art that would still position the country, Rosi's native country, and its culture as exclusively white.³² In response to this problem, I investigate Rosi's engagement of West African photography as a representational language through which she examines diasporic experience in Italy. Using formal, semiotic, and social art historical analysis, I consider these works, especially her *Encounter* and *Disintegrata* series, in relation to African and other art historical precedents, and in relation to the visual (and racialized) imaginaries around Italian nationhood, West African identity, and modernity in which they traffic, and to broader theories of photography.

Close Reading: *Self-Portrait as my Father*. An Image of National Destabilization and Diasporic Disillusionment

To elucidate the stakes of this problem, we might return to *Self Portrait as my Father* (see fig. 2). In West African studio portraiture, objects – whether belonging to the subject or selected from a group of props – are included as signs of the subject's modernity, cosmopolitanism, and economic plenitude (actual or imaginary). In this work, Rosi-as-her-father holds a tomato in one hand (lifted from a nearby cluster, destabilizing the visual and semiotic order of the arrangement and image), shutter-release in the other. A rogue tomato, out of place and on its own at bottom-left, echoes Rosi's gesture. It nags at us, out there on its own, leaving a trio of tomatoes to its right, now estranged from the other units; a sign of disorder, it tells us that things are not quite right. The text caption that accompanies the photograph confirms that the tomato in the image in this case, despite its history as a colonial import from America to Italy, is a sign of what Roland Barthes once called "Italianicity"; it calls to mind "a mass inventory" of signs and signifieds that connote all things that "could be Italian," that barbarously regulate that meaning and the ideology of its constitution.³³ In this work, the main prop – the one held up by the subject – the tomato, is markedly at odds with the visually relayed character of the subject; it is a dissonance that belies the out-of-placeness of Rosi's father (and Rosi) in Italy. Further underscoring this point is the tomato's simultaneous closeness to histories of migration in Italy, via histories of agricultural exploitation of immigrant workers. Consider the flashpoint cases of the murder of Jerry Essan Masslo, the Black South-African refugee who had spoken out against poor conditions for (mostly migrant) agricultural workers

in Villa Literno (in Campania), and again at Villa Literno in 1994, when clandestine housing for tomato field workers, mostly migrants, were burned by arson, catalyzing national attention to the exploitative conditions of migrant agricultural labor in Italy.³⁴ Headlines even then, however, further underscored the equivalence between phenotypic blackness and foreign identity in Italy: “Via i neri, causa dei nostri mali,” was one call from an anti-immigration protest in Caserta in the mid-1990s, which equated Black people with immigrants, to whom all ills were attributed.³⁵

Underscoring the picture’s self-conscious intermingling of disorder and order, pointing to the constructedness of Italian identity and to its potential disturbance, the caption and image also position that element and broader work (they direct us to it, in Barthes’ terms), as a sign of national destabilization and of diasporic disillusionment.³⁶ The appeal of Italy, the fruitful promise it offers, the photograph seems to say, is ready-at-hand – it is tangible, it exists – but it is unattainable for immigrants, especially those of color, who stand to destabilize *italianità*. This is especially the case for those who are racialized in Italy as “marked subjects,” following Mabel Wilson on Carrie Mae Weems’ own images of herself as a Black woman in Italy.³⁷ This status serves to perpetually jettison them and their families from national identity, even generations down the line. This tragic irony is underscored by the image’s composition. Migrants and immigrants, especially since the 1980s, have provided the low-waged labor that is foundational to Italy’s (and other countries’) agricultural industries.³⁸ The artist’s body in the work comprises the majority of the scene’s pyramidal composition; her gaze, confronting us as viewers, seems to tell us that her father’s realization continues in her own bodily experience of her own country.³⁹

Further analysis of the image, namely in relation to the artist’s use of West African studio portraiture, speaks to the complexity of the work’s navigation of diasporic life through this genre. Studio portraiture in West Africa is a language of idealized self-presentation, of transformation, as Manthia Diawara has described it; it visualizes how one wants to be seen. Photographers would be more commercially successful the better they were able to capture beautiful images of their subjects, to satisfy consumers’ “desire for an ideal self-image,” as Elizabeth Bigham has put it.⁴⁰ In conversation with Eric Otieno Sumba for *Griot Mag*, Rosi touched on this function of West African photography, noting that it allowed subjects to realize an idealized image of the self regardless of class.⁴¹ If we view Rosi’s use of West African portrait photography as therefore an engagement of a photographic language of idealized self-presentation, we can see that Rosi’s image also conjures the desire satisfied by such images, even if her image doesn’t satisfy it in turn. It is how, perhaps, its subject might want to be seen –

how her father (and she) wants to be seen, it might say, as Italian. Photography helps us see that the stakes here are *visual*. His belonging hinges, or fails at, visual constructions of difference that are maintained to preserve Italianness as white.

In this regard, Rosi's work in this case also traffics in Italian imaginaries – by which I mean, in images common in Italian mass media – in which case the image of a Black man, regardless of his education or class, regardless of his nationality, might not be so at odds with the tomato, precisely because he is read primarily as migrant (regardless of his citizenship). Sub-Saharan African migrants often work in tomato farming in Italy, as Rosi's father had to; mass-mediated images and stories of sub-Saharan men, who often provide such labor, are common in reports on the notoriously poor conditions of Italy's tomato districts. Images of such workers in the tomato “campi” or “ghetti” (or I might add, if less frequently, in burned clandestine migrant camps near them), are part of an “integral part of the iconography of international migration in Italy.”⁴² (We might also add to this history racialized brand images that used highly racialized images of Black women, recalling my discussion of legacies of Fascist mass culture in contemporary Italian advertisements, with arrays of tomatoes to advertise tomato sauce and other goods).⁴³ The image therefore performs an assignation of the role of migrant on her father, as it points to the hostile ideology of Italianness that would never accept him – an experience Rosi has also had.

As this analysis demonstrates, Rosi takes a key artistic language of African modernity and turns it into both a visualization of Black subjects in Italy that simultaneously points to the *visual* exclusion of Black diasporic subjects from that country, and to the impossibility of that visualization through an Italian lens. As Steven Nelson has written, diaspora in this work functions as a counter-hegemonic challenge and mode of complication that works against “homogeneous fictions of nation, nationality, and citizenship.”⁴⁴ In this function, African portrait photography is a politics that Rosi deploys, and re-deploys in her practice, to connect with family, memory, and to push against regulatory structures of power, including vision.

Dissonance and Disillusionment: Picturing African Diasporic Life in Italy

This argument is further supported by analysis of other images. Consider *Self Portrait as My Mother* (2019): a three-foot-square inkjet print of a photographic self-portrait by Rosi, staged in the draped set of a studio [fig. 8]. In the image, which is at-once self-portrait and portrait, we see Rosi, styled with a chic bob, posing as her mother in the late 1980s, shortly after she immigrated to Italy, the caption tells us. Dressed in smart low heels, black nylons, and a then-

fashionable teal-and-fuchsia floral-patterned dress (the shoulder pads of which cue us to the diegetic time-period of the image), Rosi stands against a cerulean-blue fabric backdrop and short platform that runs behind her in the otherwise empty studio set. On her head she balances, with apparent ease, a boombox with an antenna (a prop, like her dress, equally dated), which she holds lightly with her left hand. In the image, Rosi's (and via representation, her mother's) body is turned to one side, but she turns her head to face the viewer. Her somewhat-blank expression registers mild surprise or perhaps unpreparedness, an affect underscored compositionally by the slightly off-center position of the subject's body in the image field. The photograph, however, belies its own high degree of construction through the stage set of the studio, made visually prominent in bold blue monochrome, and by the presence of a shutter-release cable in the artist's hand. The latter signifies, for Rosi, the "intentionality in the act of self-portrayal."⁴⁵ Its cable runs down her leg, briefly coils in a pile, and leads out toward the camera (and us, as viewers) beyond the image field.

What the image constellates is a series of paradoxes, or better, dissonances: the image depicts at-once Rosi *and* her mother; it is at-once set in the 1980s and in the present day; and it is at-once, impossibly, candid and entirely controlled. But what strikes us perhaps upon further reflection is another dissonance still. As in *Self Portrait as My Father*, the object-as-prop and the accustomed way that the subject holds it are seemingly *incompatible* with the elegance of the figure. The image immediately reminds West African and many African diasporic viewers of West African portrait photography; its simultaneous prompting to and strangeness from those images points us to this incompatibility as the self-conscious distinction that Rosi makes in her tableaux. Rosi's images from those of her reference in West African photographic histories presents us with visual slant rhymes with critical messages.

As noted above, Rosi's selection of props, use of *mise-en-scène*, and centered composition in *Self Portrait as My Mother* recalls iconic images (and image types) in the history of West African studio portraiture – a history deeply connected to urban West African cosmopolitanism and the emergence of modernity in the region.⁴⁶ It reminds us especially, given the historicization of that genre, of Keïta. As Manthia Diawara has discussed, Këïta opened his studio in Bamako at the moment in which the city became a colonial center for France. Keïta helped urban residents achieve and express cosmopolitanism, and to realize, in idealized, beautiful portraits, their identity as Bamakois. (This idealized possibility is again what, per the artist, Rosi likes most about West African studio portrait photography).⁴⁷ Keïta's *Untitled (Man leaning on radio)*, from the mid-1950s, features a man in a jacket, collared shirt with wide lapels,

cuffed trousers, and leather dress shoes – as in other images by Keïta, he poses with objects, in front of a patterned-cloth backdrop that hangs closely behind him (see **fig. 7**). He looks straight ahead at the camera, even as he tunes a radio that sits on a small draped table to his side. A clock, another sign of prosperity, rests on top of the radio. The strange (and clearly posed) conflation of his interaction with an object and his attunement to the viewer is echoed in Rosi's balancing of the stereo and turn to face us.

In Rosi's image, however, the boombox, placed on the head of the elegant woman, is pointedly strange. The balanced object and its subject instead telegraph feminine physical capability and skill that the subject must have gleaned, the image implies, through habitual practice – even as that ability seems at odds with other signs of class in the image. Indeed, for the artist, this is an act of labor and ingenuity that recalls a frequent practice of women in various parts of the world. She observed it in an old photograph of her mother in Togo and in person, when visiting Lome's Assigame market, where her mother worked at a young age (see **fig. 1**).⁴⁸ Even if the gesture is out of place in the context of a studio portrait, here (and elsewhere in Rosi's work) it is presented, encoded even, as an iconographic sign of lost (and also African) knowledge, if perhaps initially unknown as such to some of the work's audiences.

For Rosi, posing as her mother (or father, as in other images in the series) is not performance, as her work has sometimes been described, but rather “an act of empathy, a way to put myself in their shoes and understand their stories.”⁴⁹ This is “an act of remembering”: a mnemonic practice, to recall, learn, and investigate not only her family history but her own identity and origins connected to it. As such a practice, Rosi's portrait photography facilitates the acquisition of would-be familiar skills, had she grown up in West Africa, that were lost (to her) as a result of migration by her parents to Europe.⁵⁰

Beyond the image, Rosi's story of personal identity, family, and African diasporic experience in Italy is told through a rectangular text panel that accompanies the photograph. The same width as the print, with the same blue color background as the studio set in the image, it hangs on the wall below the portrait, where it reads:

She arrived in Rome in 1989 to reunite with her lover and found a job straight away as baby sitter for a family. One day while she was cleaning their living room, she heard on the radio they were going to pass a law that would legalise every migrant on Italian soil. She was glad she listened to the radio that day.

With this story in mind, the critical dissonance internal to the image is amplified by the difference that the image registers from its initially suggested

position as an illustration of the caption, through its pairing with this descriptive text. The subject is not depicted cleaning or posed in a living room; she is not shown smiling as a result of hearing the news on the radio. We don't see children, which might suggest her role as a nanny. The blank space of the studio, save for the stereo, is instead a site of projection, of imagination, as it has been historically in West African studio portraiture, if for other ends. In this case, the studio is also an imagining of the artist's mother in Italy, armed with unrecognized African knowledge; it is also a space of *her* imagining, her ideation, of an Italy to come. At the same time, as a multigenerational self-portrait, as we might call this image – a self-portrait of the artist as her mother, which allows us to see the artist and to visualize her mother, notably embodied by the artist but not depicted in the photograph – the studio is also a space that ultimately registers multigenerational and deeply personal diasporic disillusionment with Italy.

Set in the late 1980s and made in the late 2010s, the context of the image (both the scene it imagines and the actual present-day image it is) is a time of intense political debate, surrounding Italian and European immigration policy, the latter at a moment of increased rates of cross-Mediterranean migration from Africa and the Middle East often accompanied by anti-Black and xenophobic violence in Italy. There is no such law, Rosi knows, and her image, seems to acknowledge, that legalized all migrants (and her mother) on Italian soil, in a country whose citizenship laws of *ius sanguinis* grant nationality to someone who has an Italian grandparent, but who has never lived in Italy and does not speak the language. Her gaze in the image (as self-portrait) seems to relay this disillusionment to us.

Visually paired with this image is *Self Portrait as My Mother on the Phone* (2019), another work from the *Encounter* series [fig. 9]. Printed in black and white, it registers the historicity of the scene, and, perhaps, the somber moment it captures. Staged on the same set, Rosi poses again as her mother. She wears the same dress, setting the image in the same time-period. Balancing a rotary telephone on her head, she holds the receiver to her ear with one hand and a tissue to her mouth in a gesture of self-composure, as if to stifle a cry. In this work, Rosi remembers a different, less promising formative moment in her mother's past – as suggested by the act of posing with an expression that registers fear and loss. The text caption reads: "She said she couldn't move, not again, not with a baby. She begged him to stay but he wouldn't listen. When she got home that night he wasn't there and his things were gone." Instead of using the idealizing language of West African

portrait photography to realize a fantasy version of the self, Rosi uses it to picture the most difficult, and therefore often the most private, moments from her family history. As she has put it: “I show the ugliest part of my family, the suffering and the struggles that brought us here.”⁵¹

Spectacular Concealment: Visual Refusal in Rosi’s Work

Rosi uses other strategies from West African studio portrait photography in other areas of her work. If we return to *Sposa Italiana Disintegrata*, we see a portrait that draws upon the use of props, but to different ends. In that work, Rosi holds a bouquet of flowers – typical props that are often found in West African studio portraits. Strangely, however, she holds them in front of her face. She holds a bunch of stems vertically; white peony blossoms block our view of her eyes. In the resulting portrait, the prop no longer complements but rather “conceals” (Rosi’s term) the subject.⁵² Rosi extends this practice of what we might call spectacular concealment – the use of a prop that draws visual attention to the act of concealing that which is meant to be seen (namely the face, in the case of a portrait) – to visually paired images in the series.

Consider *Disintegrata di profilo* and *Disintegrata altro profilo*, two independent but visually paired works – one in black-and-white, one in color, a difference underscored by the perceptual impact of the highly saturated scarlet-red background (of *Disintegrata di profilo*) that dominates the image field [fig. 10; fig. 11]. Installed on the same gallery wall in their debut showing, such that Rosi in each image faced herself in the other, the images function as estranged pendant portraits, made further strange by their capture of the same subject. They present quasi-mirror images of the same subject (Rosi again, though we cannot see her face) standing in right and left profile, one leg in front of the other, a slight bend in her knee. She is positioned centrally in the image field, posing in the same studio set. The photographs center Rosi, elegantly dressed in a long blazer, white button-up with pronounced cuffs, slacks, and black heels. She stands against a monochromatic background on a checkered studio floor, whose high-contrast pattern continues over a short platform that traverses the set behind her and image field of the photograph.

Further pairing these images is the artist’s use of the same prop across the works: a stack of two rectangular booklets, covers turned toward the viewer, one oversized, both propped up on their bottom edges so that they stand on the artist’s shoulder closest to the viewer. The artist balances the booklets with one hand; they fully block our view of her face and head. The first is a bright-red catalog, labeled “AGFA” twice, once in bold sans-serif font across

the header and again in cursive in a diamond-shaped logo in its upper-right corner. European viewers will recognize the branding; the continent's equivalent to "Kodak," the historic company has offered film, cameras, and other photography products to consumers since the nineteenth century and was one of the first companies to offer color film to consumers in the early decades of the twentieth century. The second is a smaller plain-covered album, placed in front of the Agfa catalog; the suggestion is that it is a photo album, perhaps containing sample images of Rosi-as-the-studio-photographer's work. The red background in Rosi's image doubles the color palette of the company brand. Other formal cues also recall (and depart from) an earlier iconic advertisement in Italy from the 1920s and 1930s that featured a (white) woman clad in red, centered in the image field, holding a camera with a shutter cable, which also appears in Rosi's image [fig. 12]. The styling of the catalog, its appearance in print, the presence of an old sales sticker, and presentation (in what seems to be a photo album sleeve), position it as an artifact of the 1970s or 1980s, apropos to the period of Rosi's artistic (and multigenerational diasporic) investigation.

Here, "photography" serves not to illuminate and record the subject, but to show the viewer that it fails to contain her. A black box replaces her head and occludes her identifying personal characteristics. There's a negotiation here: between Rosi as diasporic Italian subject (*disintegrata*), as African subject (the "twinning" images recall the familiar trope of the twinned or double image in West African photography, connected to the special spiritual value associated with twins), and within photography itself (itself also always a twin), between visual codes of "African" and "European" modernity.⁵³ The suggestion might seem to be that the subject is out of view, excluded from histories of photography, except as a racialized type. But Rosi's gesture plays a game with the viewer; it is humorous, at a basic level, that we cannot see her in the self-portrait, made even further humorous by the fact that we know that Rosi has made this decision herself. This refusal is amplified in critical valence at a formal and semiotic level. It calls to mind references to Italian interwar advertisements and Fascist print culture, which helped to codify Italian national identity as white while denigrating Black and Jewish people as sub-human and primitive, often with an emphasis on Black profiles and faces (shown in masks in colonial fairs, and in reproduction in gross stereotypes against white, classical, Aryan faces, as in the iconic first cover of *La difesa della razza*); but here the face is withheld, in a gesture of agency, concealed by a black box rather than being bound by it (as might happen in its use in Fascist design as a graphic element) [fig. 13].⁵⁴ The figure in this regard also strikes a pointed rejection of some of its art historical references. On one hand, Rosi's self-presentation might distantly recall the legacy of pastiche figures of Dada,

especially the photocollages of Hannah Höch, which themselves have been cited as modernist references for Fascist mass culture sources⁵⁵; on the other, instead of offering an ethnographic, primitive subject, as in many of Höch's images from the 1930s, Rosi offers us the cool, self-possessed cosmopolitanism of subjects from West African portrait photography: Sidibé's *A Yeye Posing* (1963), perhaps, and Fosso's self-portraits from the 1970s, among others [fig. 14]. Her confident pose, holding the shutter cable out, recalls the "ubiquitous hitchhiker pose" of West African studio portraits – a pose, as noted by Jennifer Bajorek, that spoke to the new on-the-go possibilities of faster transport and travel available to the modern subject.⁵⁶ The result is a refutation of the racialized Italian gaze that photography and mass mediation in Italy had constructed that might fix Black subjects in a primitivist position – a history that Rosi underscores with the prop of the Agfa catalog, and a refusal that she also underscores through an African visual language of cosmopolitanism, of belonging to modernity, and of family (as so many of these images were made to send to family). In this regard, if she is a type, her type is *fabulous* and entirely familiar to diasporic audiences: Black, African, and diasporic – and now, also Italian.

Conclusion: A Diasporic Archive

In the summer of 2024 there was a vitrine of photographs – all family snapshots – on display at the Collezione Maramotti, the contemporary art foundation of Italian fashion house Max Mara, located in Reggio Emilia. On view as part of an untitled installation, the vitrine appeared in the penultimate gallery of Rosi's solo exhibition [fig. 15]. Sourced from family albums and collections, the photographs belonged to and were gathered by the artist and her collaborators, who collected hundreds of images in the year leading to the exhibition from families of African descent, mostly in Emilia Romagna, who arrived in Italy before the 2000s.⁵⁷ Along with those images – all from the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s – other images were added by eligible visitors to the exhibition who were prompted to contribute images of their own – a point of invitational, participatory authorship underscored by an open slot on top of the vitrine. The photographs, and the archive of their composure, accumulated over the three-month period of the exhibition.

In addition to the vitrine, other photographs were installed as enlargements on the gallery walls, as staggered single pictures or in small groups of three, arranged in a row. Featuring different subjects but similar scenes, often in public space (as Pelumi Odubanjo has noted), the compositional format of the images recalled the tabular space of an album page (or perhaps a home's

gallery wall) as well as the narrative one of a storyboard.⁵⁸ Whether in a collective, unorganized pile in a vitrine, or as selected enlargements on gallery walls, the photographs indexed (and prompted the viewer to imagine) a real cartography and history of people of African heritage not migrating to but *living in Italy*. Recalling analog albums and boxes of photographs (after the digital turn, both outdated models of keeping photographs, most associated with older prints that never had a digital original), as well as image “atlases” from the history of art, the images telegraph their connectedness to albums (actual or possible, extant or not) from which they originated or might have – to albums and homes in Italy outside of the gallery. The work gets to the heart of the role of archives as a site of visualizing and constructing history, as a site of the (often idealized) stories we wish to tell through pictures.⁵⁹

While the installation’s material form and plural authorship positioned the vitrine (and archive) as a site of accumulation, its imagistic contents (of both its individual images and the genre of their association) positioned the photo pile and wall-mounted installation as more than a site of rote aggregation, but rather as a site of shared experience and of coming together. So too did the work’s identitarian and therefore collective, communitarian model of authorship, by local African-diasporic and African-descendent Italian families. More importantly, as family snapshots, having been taken on occasions both banal and celebratory that we mark with photographs, the images indexed their physical and sentimental connection to experiences of life, belonging to families who have long lived in Italy. For her part, Rosi sees this operation, of moving images from the space of the family to broader audiences as the means of transformation for the Italian vernacular, which only now might include images of African diasporic and descendent families in Italy.⁶⁰

At the same time, in the work’s slating as part of a body of work that appeared under this exhibition title – *disintegrata*, also the name of the series I discussed in this article – the vitrine denoted, especially under the sign of the original Italian, a literal and figurative state of having been splintered into tiny fragments, of having been deprived of any cohesion, of having come apart.⁶¹ If this mutual position – a coming together of that which has already come apart – is the procedural and visual logic of the work – it describes the construction and visual semblance of the work – then diasporic yet *emplaced* life, family, and home, is its poetics. In this regard, the works both engage and push against extant models that position migrant or diasporan subjectivity as the metaphor for existence in our postcolonial, globalized world, in which “rootless[ness], of living between worlds, between a lost past and nonintegrated present,” is the order of the day.⁶² Such poetics operate in dialogue with existing readings, namely by Odubanjo, of the work as a site of “implied containment,” in which the bodies brought together in Rosi’s

collection of photographs suggest a forced proximity, which we also cannot entirely access, as images in the transparent yet contained space of the vitrine occlude one another.⁶³

This is to say that the work is not all about displacement or a negative experience of diaspora – contemporary work (and theory) about diaspora often underscores the agency, multiple worldviews, and creative vitality of such positions.⁶⁴ Indeed, in this case, for viewers Italian or otherwise, the images telegraph a warm banality; taken on special occasions or not, they are familiar to us in their visual coding, through genre and medium, as personal family photos. At the same time, the images telegraph shared visual signs of *italianità*. They featured everyday people and telltale signs of quotidian and often, especially when observed collectively, distinctly Italian domestic and public life. Two snapshots taken in the same setting, for example, featured a home interior decorated with a printed portrait of Christ. Another photograph of a woman in a kitchen reveals a copper moka pot gleaming on a shelf. Others still were snapped in the parking lot of major Italian supermarket chain *ipercoop*; in front of a terracotta-colored *condominio*; next to marble monuments inscribed with “SPQR,” alerting viewers to their Roman setting. Other photos show people feeding pigeons in a piazza or posing on a balcony bordered by a Roman equestrian monument. A man is captured standing next to a row of Vespas. Other photos are more universal in subject: newlyweds ceremoniously cut their wedding cake; children play on lawns; a baby delights in kisses from a family dog. A woman smiles in the countryside; another on an urban street; another rides a bike past an auto service station with a Maserati logo in its window. Others still speak to the cosmopolitanism of the subjects and the different languages that often typify diasporic communities; t-shirts read “America” and “Nike”; a poster on the wall bears text in French. Among the images was a single photograph, resting at an angle amid the pile of photos, its flat surface and depicted subject pressed up against the clear glass container of the vitrine. The photograph captured a child, dressed in a yellow-and-mauve-colored mask and ruffled costume dress for Carnevale. Centered in the image field and photographed facing the camera head on, the child (and image of her) command some attention [fig. 16]. This photograph (and broader archive) addresses us first and foremost as a community-oriented artistic expression of familial experience and everyday life as immigrant African and Afro-Italian families in Italy. Such images, intentionally or not, ask us to see them, and to imagine their roles, in the intimate space and history of family.

Part of this banality comes from the works’ ontological position as snapshots – an entirely different aesthetic and photographic form than the highly staged West African studio portrait that Rosi references elsewhere in her practice,

even as those images possess a comparable familiarity as family photos. As such, these images are characterized by a “determined banality,” as photo historian Geoffrey Batchen has described the genre. They are part of a history of photography that, to some degree, standard histories of photography have long ignored.⁶⁵ In the context of contemporary Italy, which remains a place of anti-Black violence and white nationalism, they also mount a critique of persistent, and arguably resurgent, ethnographic nationalism on the peninsula. As Odubanjo has put it, the family album project underscores the important role of family photography for racialized diasporic communities, for whom the family photograph might be “crucial records of a fragmented family lineage,” a point of access to family histories of migration, and a means of important correspondence, as token sent to family elsewhere, as evidence and assurance of prosperity and community, even in their adopted homelands.⁶⁶ Rosi’s collection of them also examines “questions of how we can know a nation beyond the hegemonic narratives told about it.”⁶⁷

In this regard, the vitrine and its pile of snapshots models an accumulation of meaning that Blake Stimson has argued photographs can offer us “on the level of subjective affect.” The “formal iterability” of photography as a medium lends itself, for Stimson, to a model of expansive involvement, perhaps of the promise of universalist collective identity or partisan unity, or alternatively of the modern condition of alienation that makes us see photography “as a kind of alienation or baggage,” as a site of distancing and abstraction.⁶⁸ Rosi’s images seem to do both. By using the snapshot – “the most numerous and popular of photographic forms,” as Batchen described it – she takes the most common photograph, the most common image type, full of the most common conventions of bodily movement in photography, capturing a readily recognizable “social form of lived experience,” as Stimson might put it.⁶⁹ Yet for all this commonality, these images are still marked by difference; the family snapshot as genre offers us the viewer a phenomenological, embodied, and affective point of connection. These are not perhaps the bodies many expect – even in a vitrine, even one after the other, even en masse. In this regard, the persistence of difference through the model of race, itself codified through serial imagery and photography, over and beyond the universalist humanist site of the family photograph, is one critical message of this work.⁷⁰

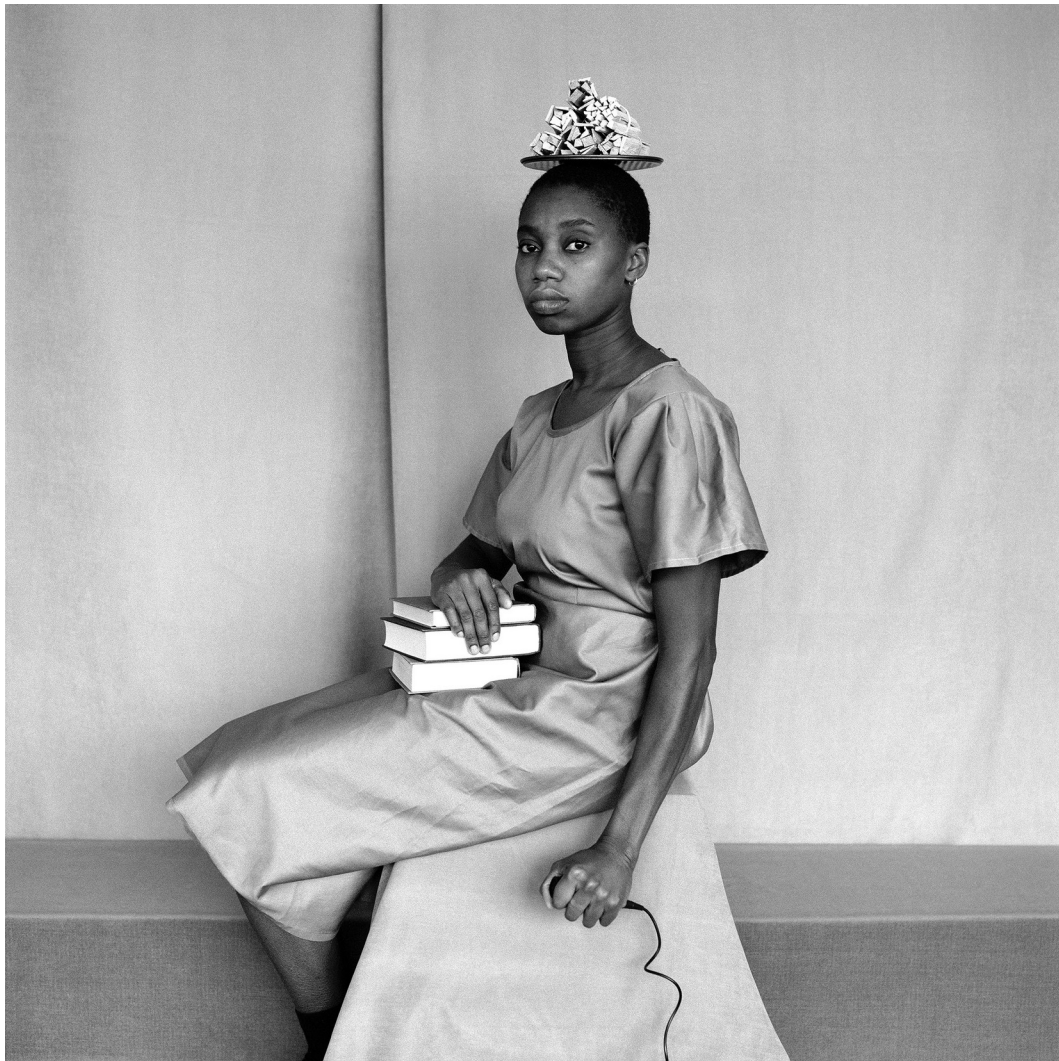
This archive, then, is not necessarily a construction of an archive that doesn’t exist. It’s the concretization of many archives, a meta-archive, that brings together images that have personal value for their owners. By bringing together that which exist in dispersion, in both family photographs and imaginaries, and that are tied to the lives of those who have had experiences like Rosi’s, the artist brings together a photographic archive of a local

diasporic imaginary. They demonstrate what we might understand as their syntactic function, by the collective screening they synthesize and generate, of diasporic home.

I emphasize these details because they demonstrate how Rosi's archive stages a visual recoding of the popular imaginary of Italy and captures images in Italy of Africa's diasporas. It stages a visual order of living in Italy that draws attention to persistent expectations of an Italy in visual representations that is (and has long been constructed as) phenotypically white. This syntax revises a symbolic order and popular imaginary of Italianness that, since the Risorgimento, has been explicitly and covertly racialized. As Italy was made "white," said whiteness was also naturalized; Italians see themselves, as Alessandro Portelli has written, as racially unmarked by this whiteness.⁷¹ The photos then, draw attention to that implicit and naturalized whiteness of Italianness that exists in tension with the images, in absentia. By bringing visual attention to people who have long lived in Italy – *de facto* Italians, by nationality or not – in the national lens of Italianness, in the warm lens of the family photo, the racialized visual code of Italian-ness is deconstructed and re-codified through the post-colonial and firmly humanist lens of lived experience.

In this regard, these two areas of Rosi's practice (the use of found snapshots, and the staging of multi-generational self-portraits) find common ground that potentially posits photography as the transnational, diasporic space of home, even as (or especially when) a sense of belonging in one's own home country isn't a given. West African studio portraiture is fundamental to understanding the stakes of this operation in Rosi's work in and about diasporic life in Italy. As Rosi once remarked: "The west African studio portrait has gained a sentimental value for me. I wasn't too familiar with its language at first. But now that I understand it, looking at pictures of my family album reminds me of home. It gives me a sense of pride and joy to look at my ancestors, who are looking back at me, almost as if they knew their photos would have traveled between continents to reassure me when I was lost and in search for answers."⁷²

PLATES



1 Silvia Rosi, *Self-portrait as my Mother in School Uniform*, 2019, from the *Encounter* series. Inkjet print, 89 x 89 cm. The image is accompanied by a text panel that reads: "She worked as a market seller from a really young age to support her mother. She would leave the house early in the morning with a tray of toothpicks carried on top of her head. She walked around the neighbourhood shouting loudly to attract customers' attention. After selling for about an hour she would go home, bathe, put on her uniform and walk to school with her sister." Courtesy of the artist.



2 Silvia Rosi, *Self-Portrait as my Father*, 2019, from the *Encounter* series. Inkjet print, 89 x 89 cm. The image is accompanied by a text panel that reads: "He was an educated man from a good Togolaise family. He arrived in Italy with a few clothes, some books and the dream of finding a good job. A few weeks later he was picking up tomatoes in a field for a few cents a box." Courtesy of the artist.



3 Silvia Rosi, *Disintegrata in bici*, 2024, from the *Disintegrata* series. Inkjet prints (diptych), 80 × 80 cm and 80 × 20 cm. Collection: Museum of Modern Art, New York. Courtesy of the artist.



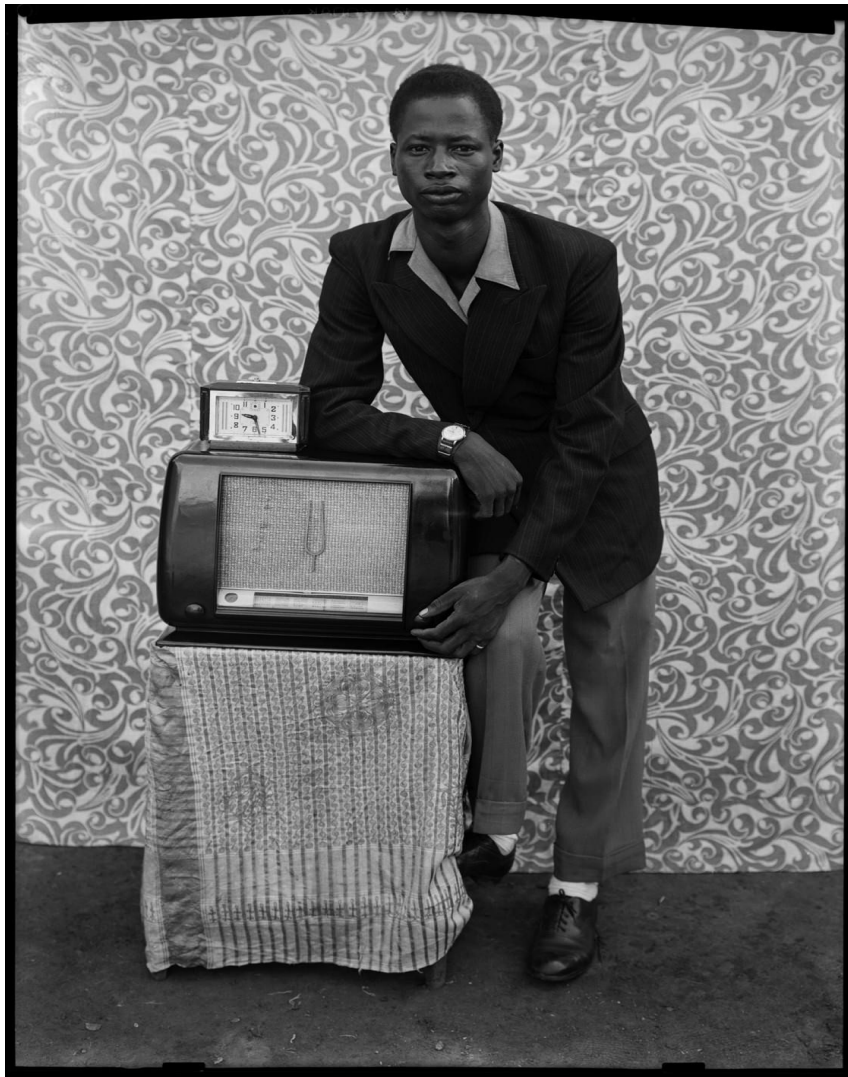
4 Silvia Rosi, *Disintegrata che aspetta*, 2024, from the *Disintegrata* series. Inkjet print, 80 x 80 cm. Collection: Museum of Modern Art, New York. Courtesy of the artist.



5 Silvia Rosi, *Sposa italiana disintegrata*, 2024, from the *Disintegrata* series. Inkjet print on Baryta paper, 80 × 80 cm. Collection: Museum of Modern Art, New York. Courtesy of the artist.



6 Silvia Rosi, *Sposa togolese disintegrata*, 2024, from the *Disintegrata* series. Inkjet prints (triptych) on Baryta paper, 80 × 20 cm each. Collection: Museum of Modern Art, New York. Courtesy of the artist.



7 Seydou Keita, *Untitled*, 1953/1957. Gelatin silver print. Fair use.



8 Silvia Rosi, *Self Portrait as My Mother*, from the *Encounter* series, 2019. Inkjet print, 89 x 89 cm. The image is accompanied by a text panel that reads: "She arrived in Rome in 1989 to reunite with her lover and found a job straight away as a baby sitter for a family. One day while she was cleaning their living room, she heard on the radio they were going to pass a law that would legalise every migrant on Italian soil. She was glad she listened to the radio that day." Courtesy of the artist.



9 Silvia Rosi, *Self Portrait as my Mother on the Phone*, 2019, from the *Encounter* series. Inkjet print, 89 x 89 cm. The image is accompanied by a text panel that reads: "She said she couldn't move, not again, not with a baby. She begged him to stay but he wouldn't listen. When she got home that night he wasn't there and his things were gone." Courtesy of the artist.



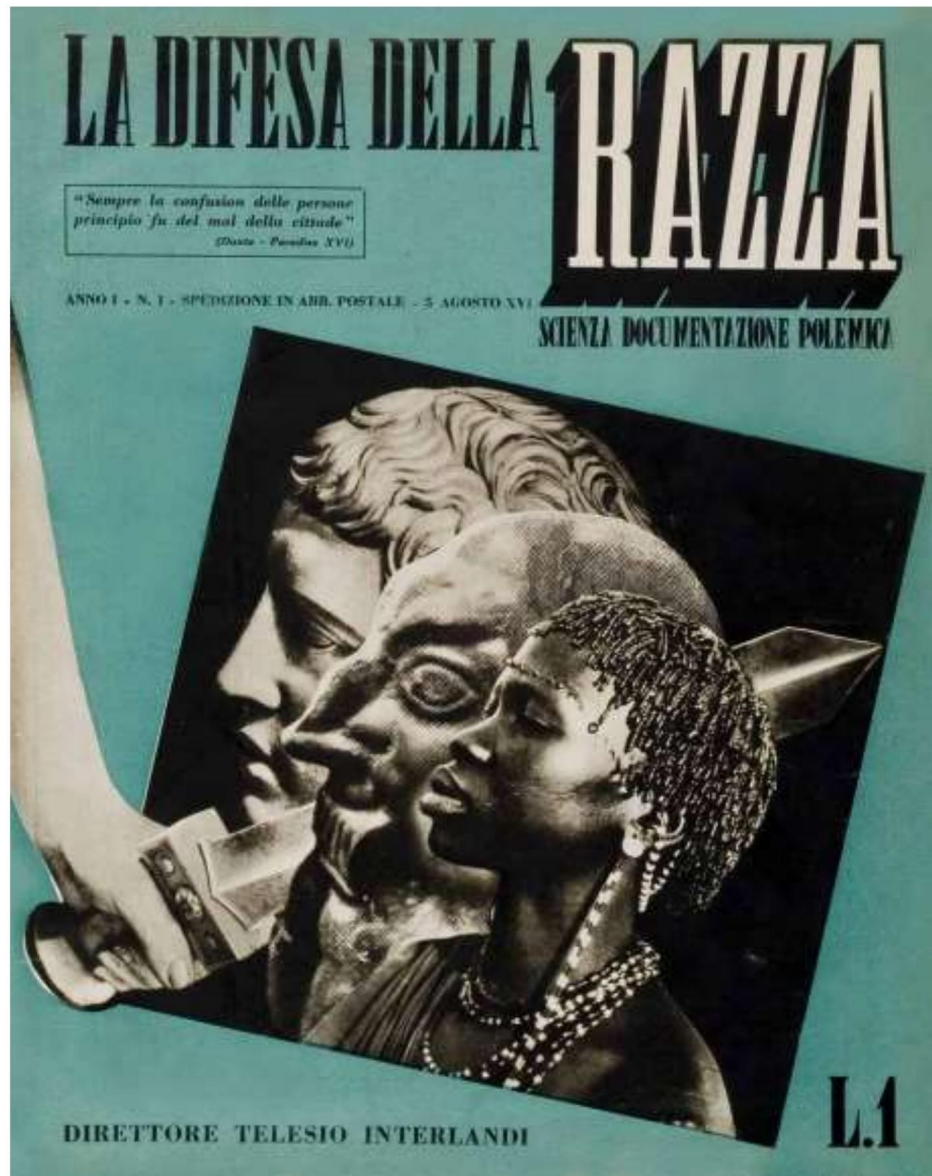
10 Silvia Rosi, *Disintegrata di profilo*, 2024, from the *Disintegrata* series. Inkjet print, 80 x 80 cm. Collection: Museum of Modern Art, New York. Courtesy of the artist.



11 Silvia Rosi, *Disintegrata altro profilo*, 2024, from the *Disintegrata* series. Inkjet print (diptych), 80 x 20 cm and 80 x 60 cm. Courtesy of the artist.



12 Marcello Dudovich, *Agfa-Film*, c. 1922. Color lithograph on paper, 195 x 130 cm. Edizioni Star, Officine I.G.A.P. Milano. Museo Nazionale Collezione Salce. Public domain.



13 Cover of *La Difesa della razza* 1, no. 1 (August 5, 1938), featuring an untitled photomontage by Idalgo Palazzetti. Fair use.



14 Malick Sidibé, *Un yéyé en position*, 1963. Gelatin silver print, 38.1 x 38.1 cm. This image printed 1996. Fair use.



15 Silvia Rosi, untitled installation, in the exhibition *Silvia Rosi: Disintegrata*, Collezione Maramotti, June 2024. Photo: Tenley Bick.



16 Silvia Rosi, untitled installation (detail), in the exhibition *Silvia Rosi: Disintegrata*, Collezione Maramotti, Reggio Emilia, April 28-July 28, 2024. Photo: Masiar Pasquali. Courtesy of the artist.

- ¹ Silvia Rosi, “Silvia Rosi,” *Tongues*, February 18, 2021. <https://tongues.cc/articles/silvia-rosi/>. Rosi began these works after moving to London, where she trained at the London College of Communication. The artist moved to London for school in the 2010s, where, along with Lomé, she lives and works. Silvia Rosi, in “MAXXI Bvlgari prize: I finalisti,” Youtube, 2022: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uL_VCvA3EqI.
- ² Silvia Rosi, “Silvia Rosi x Kimberly Drew,” interview by Kimberly Drew, Youtube, March 24, 2021: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f1fGUUKbRw>.
- ³ Silvia Rosi, “10 Questions with... Silvia Rosi,” interview, *Aesthetica*, June 20, 2024. <https://aestheticamagazine.com/10-questions-with-silvia-rosi/>.
- ⁴ Silvia Rosi, “Silvia Rosi is Inverting the Classic West African Studio Portrait to Retell Her Family’s History,” interview by Eric Otieno Sumba, *Griot*, July 8, 2020. <https://griotmag.com/en/silvia-rosi-is-inverting-the-classic-west-african-studio-portrait-to-retell-her-familys-history/>.
- ⁵ “My artistic practice takes photography as its point of departure. I express myself through self-portraiture, video, and text, and I use images that belong to a family archive – in particular, images that depict members of my family in the Italian landscape. The images therefore go on to visualize a representation of Black subjects inside the territory of Italy.” Translation by the author. Rosi, in “MAXXI Bvlgari prize: I finalisti,” 2:04 to 2:18.
- ⁶ Silvia Rosi, “Re-inhabiting Stories: A Conversation between Ilaria Campioli and Silvia Rosi,” interview by Ilaria Campioli, in *Silvia Rosi: Disintegrata* (Dario Cimorelli Editore: Milan, 2024), 43.
- ⁷ On remembering and freedom, see Samuel Fosso, Clothilde Morette, and Silvia Rosi, “Conversations on Emerging Photography,” Youtube, Novembre 11–14, 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-oayeuEI9Ls>.
- ⁸ Deborah Willis, “Introduction: Picturing Us,” in *Picturing Us: African American Identity in Photography*, edited by Deborah Willis, 11 (New York: New Press, 1994).
- ⁹ Okwui Enwezor, *Archive Fever: Uses of the Document in Contemporary Art* (International Center of Photography: Steidl, 2008), 38. See also Jacques Derrida, “Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression,” *Diacritics* 25, no. 2 (1995): 9–63. I’ve referenced these thoughts elsewhere in my writing on the archive in contemporary Italian experimental documentary film. See Tenley Bick, “Film review, *Oltre i bordi* (Beyond the Frame), by Simone Brioni and Matteo Sandrini (5e6 film, 2023),” *Italian American Review* 14, no. 2 (Summer 2024): 201–06.
- ¹⁰ Silvana Patriarca, *Race in Post-Fascist Italy: “War Children” and the Color of the Nation* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 1–12 (11); Id., “‘Gli italiani non sono razzisti’: Costruzioni della italianità tra gli anni Cinquanta ed il 1968,” in *Il colore della nazione*, edited by Gaia Giuliani (Milan: Mondadori, 2015), 32–45 (41, on 1960s film); Gaia Giuliani, “Bella e abbronzata. Visualizzare la razza nella televisione italiana 1978–1989,” in Giuliani, *Il colore della nazione*, 46–60; Giuliani’s “Razza e Bellezza nella Televisione e nel Cinema (1977–1987),” in the broader roundtable on race and beauty in modern Italy: Gaia Giuliani, Monica Di Barbora, Vincenza Perilli, Tatiana Petrovich Njegosh and Goffredo Polizzi, “Tavola Rotonda. Visualizzare la Razza e Costruire la Bellezza in Italia (1922–2018),” *Italian Studies* 73, no. 4 (2018): 432–60.
- ¹¹ Patriarca, “‘Gli italiani non sono razzisti,’” 38–43.
- ¹² Willis, “Introduction: Picturing Us,” 20.
- ¹³ On Silvestri, see Federica Mazzara, *Reframing Migration: Lampedusa, Border Spectacle and Aesthetics of Subversion*, Italian Modernities 32, edited by Pierpaolo Antonello and Robert Gordon (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2019), 151–57. Also see Simone Brioni and

- Gianmarco Mancosu, "Remediating Family Memories of Italian Colonialism: Beyond the Frame as Process and Product," *Forum Italicum* 57, no. 2 (August 2023): 512–35 and Bick, "Film review," 201–06.
- ¹⁴ Giorgia Alù, "Uncanny Exposures: Mobility, Repetition, and Desire in Front of a Camera," *Cultural Studies Review* 19, no. 2 (September 2013): 19–41.
- ¹⁵ Alù, "Uncanny Exposures," 23, 26.
- ¹⁶ On Green's *Some Chance Operations* and its reflection on the filmmaker, actress, and producer Elvira Notari, whose career was stopped by the Fascist Régime, see Giovanna Zapperi, "Woman's Reappearance: Rethinking the Archive in Contemporary Art – Feminist Perspectives," *Feminist Review* 105 (2013): 21–47, at 34–38. On Piras, see Tenley Bick, "Yara Piras," *Costell-azione*, March 11, 2022. <https://www.costell-azione.com/blog/yara-piras>.
- ¹⁷ Rosi, "Re-inhabiting Stories," 41.
- ¹⁸ On this subject, see Alessandro Portelli, "The problem of the color-blind: Notes on the discourse on race in Italy," in *Race and Nation: Ethnic Systems in the Modern*, edited by Paul Strickland (New York: Routledge, 2005), 355–63; Angelica Pesarini, "'Blood is thicker than water': The materialization of the racial body in fascist East Africa," in *Zapruder World: An International Journal for the History of Social Conflict* 4, edited by Irene Fattacciu and Claudio Fogu (2017): doi:10.21431/Z33S32; Tenley Bick, "A History of Black Diaspora Artists in Italy," in *The Routledge Companion to African Diaspora Art History*, edited by Eddie Chambers (New York: Routledge, 2023), 174–89; and Tenley Bick, "'Un sentimento di libertà': Toward a Transnational Italian Art History," *Forum Italicum* 57, no. 2 (August 2023): 431–42.
- ¹⁹ For a good summary of the genre's formal qualities, see Elizabeth Bigham, "Issues of Authorship in the Portrait Photographs of Seydou Keïta," *African Arts* 32, no. 1 (Spring 1999): 57.
- ²⁰ Rosi first saw such images at home in Italy and when visiting family in Togo as a child. On the commonness of this aesthetic to Rosi's generation, see Rosi, "Silvia Rosi is Inverting."
- ²¹ See Jennifer Bajorek, *Unfixed: Photography and Decolonial Imagination in West Africa* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020), 1–4. Also see Tobias Wendl, "Entangled Traditions: Photography and the History of Media in Southern Ghana," *Res: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, no. 39 (Spring 2001): 78–101; see also Giulia Paoletti, ch. 1, in her *Portrait and Place: Photography in Senegal, 1840–1960* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2024).
- ²² Morette has referred to Rosi's use of West African portrait photography as a "visual language." It is an apt phrase that I use here. See Fosso, Morette, and Rosi, "Conversations on Emerging Photography."
- ²³ The absence of serious art historical scholarship on Rosi is perhaps surprising, given the increasing prominence of her work as well as curatorial and institutional engagement with it, both commercial and otherwise. Indeed, her work has been showcased in exhibitions at major institutions of contemporary art, focused on subjects ranging from contemporary arts of Africa's diasporas (LACMA, 2024–25) to contemporary Italian art (MAXXI Bvlgari Prize, 2022), and featured in gallery exhibitions in Rome, London, and other major centers of contemporary art. Prominent institutions in the U.S. (Brooklyn Museum, MoMA) have followed with acquisitions.
- ²⁴ See Odubango, "Silvia Rosi: (Dis)locating the Family Album," in *Silvia Rosi: Disintegrata*, 68–71.
- ²⁵ See Rosi, "Re-inhabiting Stories," 42.
- ²⁶ Renée Mussai, "RPS Award Talks: Silvia Rosi with Renée Mussai," Youtube, March 22, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fSEHH5YgNIM>. While the aesthetic was

already familiar to her in family photographs, Rosi first saw Samuel Fosso's work in a lecture while a student in Bologna; they reminded her, she often recounts, of her own family photographs, carried by her parents to Italy.

²⁷ Fosso, Morette, and Rosi, "Conversations on Emerging Photography."

²⁸ Rosi, "Silvia Rosi is Inverting."

²⁹ Legacies of West African studio portraiture can be found in other diasporic contexts, as in the illusionistic backdrops used for staged photography in the Southeastern United States and Caribbean, among urban Black communities. See Krista Thompson, "'Keep It Real': Street Photography, Public Visibility and Afro-Modernity," ch. 1 in her *Shine: The Visual Economy of Light in African Diasporic Aesthetic Practice* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), Emerging scholars, namely Sahara Lyon, are also exploring the import of West African studio portraiture as a general source of "Afro-Pop visuality" for the work of contemporary African American artist Barkley Hendricks. It is a style that has even been used to signify and celebrate "African-ness" in mainstream contexts, as in Erik Heck's images of Lupita Nyong'o for *New York* magazine in 2009. Rosi's work, however, is more of a quotation of the style, posing, and material iconography of West African portraiture; she is also personally connected to the genre, which was first familiar to her originally through family photos.

³⁰ This description comes from the publisher's description of the author in Vannacci's autobiography, *Il coraggio vince* (Courage Wins) (Milan: Piemme, 2024). For an example of Vannacci's views on multi-ethnic Italy, see "La società multi-culturale e multi-etnica," ch. 4 in his self-published *Il mondo al contrario* (2023).

³¹ To that end, I've made efforts to forge that discourse. See Bick, "A History of Black Diaspora Artists in Italy," 174–89.

³² Bick, "'Un sentimento di libertà': Toward a

Transnational Italian Art History," 431–42.

³³ Roland Barthes, "Rhetoric of the Image" (1977), in *Image Music Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (Fontana Press, 1977), 32–51, at 48–49.

³⁴ On Masslo, see Alessandra Corrado, Carlos de Castro, and Domenico Perrotta, "Cheap food, cheap labour, high profits: agriculture and mobility in the Mediterranean," in *Migration and Agriculture: Mobility and Change in the Mediterranean Area*, edited by Alessandra Corrado, Carlos de Castro, and Domenico Perrotta (New York: Routledge, 2016), 1–2.

³⁵ The subtitle read: "A Villa Literno il corteo anti-immigrati, la gente si giustifica 'Non è razzismo'." Fulvio Bufi, "'Via i neri, causa dei nostri mali'," *Corriere della Sera*, September 25, 1994.

³⁶ Barthes, "Rhetoric of the Image," 40.

³⁷ Wilson in this passage addresses Weems' *Roaming* series (2006). See Mabel O. Wilson, "Spaces in the Shadows: Archives and Architectures in the Work of Carrie Mae Weems," in *Black Modernisms in the Transatlantic World*, edited by Steven Nelson and Huey Copeland (The Center, 2024), 201. Indeed, phenotypic blackness in Italy has long been associated with foreignness. See Portelli, "The problem of the color-blind," 355–63; Pesarini, "'Blood is thicker than water'."

³⁸ The literature on this topic is vast. Nick Dines has recently addressed this history with a focus on sub-Saharan African migrant workers and tomato farming in Italy. Mass-mediated images and stories of sub-Saharan men, who often perform such labor, are common in reports on the notoriously poor conditions of Italy's tomato districts. See Nick Dines, "After entry: Humanitarian exploitation and migrant labour in the fields of southern Italy," 76.

³⁹ Rosi remarks upon this embodied experience of family stories.

⁴⁰ See Manthia Diawara, "Talk of the Town,"

- Artforum, February 1998, 64–71. Also see Bigham, “Issues of Authorship in the Portrait Photographs of Seydou Keïta,” 57.
- ⁴¹ Rosi, “Silvia Rosi is Inverting.”
- ⁴² Dines, “After entry: Humanitarian exploitation and migrant labour in the fields of southern Italy.” I’m thinking of images that circulated of the destroyed camp in Caserta in the September 1994.
- ⁴³ Lucia Piccioni, “Images of black faces in Italian colonialism: mobile essentialisms,” *Modern Italy* 27 (2022): 392.
- ⁴⁴ Steven Nelson, “Diaspora: Multiple Practices, Multiple Worldviews,” in *Companion to Contemporary Art since 1945*, edited by Amelia Jones, Blackwell Companions to Art History (Malden: Blackwell, 2006), 298.
- ⁴⁵ Rosi, “Re-inhabiting Stories,” 43.
- ⁴⁶ Diawara, “Talk of the Town.”
- ⁴⁷ Rosi, “Silvia Rosi is Inverting.”
- ⁴⁸ On this gesture as a sign of labor, Rosi, “Silvia Rosi x Kimberly Drew.” On Rosi’s observations of the market, see Silvia Rosi, “Encounter – Silvia Rosi,” *No Wahala media*, September 16, 2020. <https://www.nowahalamag.com/post/encounter-silvia-rosi>.
- ⁴⁹ Rosi, “Re-inhabiting Stories,” 42.
- ⁵⁰ Fosso, Morette, and Rosi, “Conversations on Emerging Photography”; Rosi, “Re-inhabiting Stories,” 42.
- ⁵¹ Rosi, “Silvia Rosi is Inverting.”
- ⁵² For Rosi on concealment as a strategy in her self-portraits, see Rosi, “Re-inhabiting Stories,” 42.
- ⁵³ I’ve had brilliant students, namely Quentin Clark, write on the topic of the twin in the photography of Yoruba photographer Rotimi Fani-Kayode, for example, which would be a relevant comparandum to this work.
- ⁵⁴ Piccioni, “Images of black faces in Italian colonialism: mobile essentialisms,” 375–96.
- ⁵⁵ See Mariana Aguirre, “La Difesa Della Razza (1938-1943): Primitivism and Classicism in Fascist Italy,” *Politics, religion & ideology* 16, no. 4 (2015): 370–90.
- ⁵⁶ Bajorek, *Unfixed: Photography and Decolonial Imagination in West Africa*, 3.
- ⁵⁷ Exhibition information, *Silvia Rosi: Disintegrata*, Collezione Maramotti, distributed as brochure and online: <https://www.collezioneMaramotti.org/en/exhibition-detail/-/silvia-rosi-collezione-maramotti/339441>. Rosi was assisted by Mistura Allison, Theophilus Imani and Ifeoma Nneka Emelurumonye. The presence of digital stamps (with file names) on the back of many of the prints suggest the artist had new prints made of family photos gathered for the project. Image collection began with an open call distributed digitally. On the digital open call, see Odubango, “Silvia Rosi: (Dis)locating the Family Album,” 69–70.
- ⁵⁸ On the tendency to show people in public space, see Odubango, “Silvia Rosi: (Dis)locating the family album,” 69. Rosi has explored such compositional formats, that similarly recall photographic media, elsewhere in her practice. A recent video work, for example, is shown on a vertically oriented screen, divided into three rectangular fields bounded by a black border, each containing the same looped video. The format of that work, which belongs to the *Disintegrata nel Paesaggio* series, recalls the individual frames of film.
- ⁵⁹ Odubango also asserts this point, focused on the role of photography in racialized, diasporic families, especially. See Odubango, “Silvia Rosi: (Dis)locating the Family Album,” 68–69.
- ⁶⁰ Exhibition text, Collezione Maramotti, <https://www.collezioneMaramotti.org/en/exhibition-detail/-/silvia-rosi-collezione-maramotti/339441>.
- ⁶¹ “Disintegrare,” *Grande dizionario della lingua italiana* IV (Torino: UTET, 1961–2002), 689.
- ⁶² See John Pepper, “The Diaspora as Object,” in *Looking Both Ways: Art of the Contemporary African Diaspora*, edited by

Laurie Ann Farrell (Museum for African Art; Snoek, 2004), 29. This quotation is Iain Chambers, *Migrancy, Culture, Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 27.

⁶³ Odubango, "Silvia Rosi: (Dis)locating the family album," 70.

⁶⁴ See, for example, Nelson, "Diaspora: Multiple Practices, Multiple Worldviews," 296–316; Arjun Appadurai, on the diasporic public sphere, in his *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996); Edward W. Said, "Reflections on Exile" [1984], in *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002).

⁶⁵ Geoffrey Batchen, "Snapshots: Art History and the Ethnographic Turn," *Photographies* 1, no. 2 (September 2008): 123–24 (124).

⁶⁶ Odubango, "Silvia Rosi: (Dis)locating the family album," 68–69.

⁶⁷ Odubango, "Silvia Rosi: (Dis)locating the family album," 70.

⁶⁸ Blake Stimson, "A Photograph Is Never Alone," in *The Meaning of Photography*, edited by Robin Kelsey and Blake Stimson (Williamstown, MA: Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 105–15.

⁶⁹ Batchen, "Snapshots," 124.

⁷⁰ Stimson, "A Photograph Is Never Alone," 105–15.

⁷¹ Portelli, "The problem of the color-blind," 355–63.

⁷² Rosi, "Silvia Rosi is Inverting."

STELLA CATTANEO

Exhibiting Italian Art in the United States

Intervista a Raffaele Bedarida

Tra gli ultimi studi di Raffaele Bedarida, *Exhibiting Italian Art in the United States from Futurism to Arte Povera* “Like a Giant Screen” (Routledge, 2022), ricostruisce tramite *case studies* alcune vicende che hanno visto l’arte contemporanea italiana giocare un ruolo centrale all’interno di complesse e articolate relazioni tra Italia e Stati Uniti nel corso del Novecento. Strategie di penetrazione oltreoceano, modelli per nuove modernità e *lifestyles* a cui riferirsi, aspirazioni individuali e collettive a cui dare risposta sono gli elementi di sfondo di un racconto che procede attraverso punti di vista differenti, dal secondo Futurismo agli esordi dell’Arte Povera.

Il volume si inserisce all’interno di una sempre più ricca letteratura che da almeno un decennio concentra le sue energie sulla storia dell’arte italiana moderna e contemporanea intesa come momento “di una pratica estetica e geopolitica al tempo stesso.” Questi studi chiariscono e mettono in luce in che misura l’arte prodotta in Italia abbia preso parte nelle relazioni diplomatiche intessute a livello internazionale e in che modo abbia potuto contribuire al più ampio

discorso della costruzione di un’identità nazionale italiana.

Nel corso del Novecento, come tornava a sottolineare Stefano Chiodi nel suo *Genius Loci. Anatomia di un mito italiano* (2021), l’Italia è stata percorsa da una costante “ricerca di un punto di ancoraggio, di un centro di gravità identitario”², soprattutto nel momento in cui l’emersione di nuovi scenari internazionali aveva rivelato la posizione sempre più periferica del Belpaese. Proprio allora, le mostre all’estero venivano a rivestire un ruolo strategico su più livelli: per la diffusione della cultura italiana in primis ma anche per la riattivazione di flussi turistici e commerciali e per avviare scambi e prestiti con le altre istituzioni europee e d’oltreoceano, garantendo un costante dialogo internazionale.³

Esisteva poi una dimensione più strettamente personale ed individuale, legata ai protagonisti del mondo dell’arte. Pur tenendo ferme le contraddizioni, i limiti e le difficoltà di alcune esperienze, si trattava per artisti, critici e galleristi di mostrarsi su un nuovo palcoscenico e comparire in un nuovo mercato che avrebbe potuto garantire loro un maggiore riconoscimento anche in

Italia, definendo la loro posizione in un contesto internazionale. Il rapporto con gli Stati Uniti è cruciale in questo discorso e non a caso è stato oggetto negli ultimi anni di convegni, mostre e pubblicazioni.⁴ Il volume di Bedarida lo mette ben in luce. Affrontando e legando insieme vicende che accompagnano il succedersi di situazioni nodali per la storia del Novecento, l'autore contribuisce a mettere a fuoco le dinamiche di una nuova prospettiva transnazionale, ridefinendo e sfumando le nozioni di egemonia culturale e subalternità e mostrando quanto poroso e fruttuoso sia stato questo processo di scambio in entrambe le direzioni: dall'Italia agli Stati Uniti e dagli Stati Uniti all'Italia, mantenendo però fermo il punto di vista sulla capacità dei diversi attori italiani di ridefinirsi di volta in volta al fine di mostrarsi e presentarsi negli USA.

L'intervista che segue entra nel merito delle scelte metodologiche, delle nuove prospettive di ricerca che emergono da questo studio e tenta di superare i confini cronologici adottati per comprendere come la connessione imbastita nel Novecento tra i due paesi prosegua, secondo modelli in parte attuati e sperimentati in precedenza, al fine di favorire e sostenere la scrittura di una storia dell'arte transnazionale e momenti di incontro e approfondimento tra le due sponde dell'Atlantico.

Dal primo all'ultimo capitolo il lettore può seguire i rapporti Italia-Stati Uniti dalla fine degli anni Venti fino alla fine degli anni Sessanta circa. Ci sono le vicende degli individui, il ruolo delle istituzioni, le politiche di diplomazia culturale e il tutto viene a concatenarsi offrendo la visione di diversi spaccati di un'unica storia fatta di snodi successivi. Come è andata costituendosi la struttura del libro?

Il libro copre un arco cronologico ampio e mette in luce una serie di scambi tra due paesi, il cui rapporto è stato ricchissimo. Se avessi avuto dunque intenzione di scrivere una storia capillare ed esaustiva di tutte le iniziative, delle mostre e degli artisti che si sono mossi dall'Italia verso gli Stati Uniti, dagli anni Venti alla fine degli anni Sessanta, avrei dovuto stilare una specie di bibliografia estesa, che rischiava di essere molto arida, o un volume enciclopedico che avrebbe richiesto più dei quindici anni che ho dedicato a questo progetto. Non era comunque questo il mio obiettivo. Mi sembrava più interessante individuare momenti storici rappresentativi e di snodo. Momenti in cui sono venuti a convergere da un lato cambiamenti nei rapporti tra Italia e Stati Uniti e, dall'altro, sono emerse persone, mostre o iniziative che hanno introdotto strategie nuove, a livello individuale ma anche istituzionale e politico.

Si è trattato di ricostruire una vicenda intrecciata con la diplomazia, con i

rapporti economici, ma anche con i cambiamenti politici e culturali che sono avvenuti individualmente nei due paesi: la guerra in Etiopia, ad esempio, ha modificato tanto le politiche culturali all'interno dell'Italia fascista quanto i rapporti con altri paesi, tra cui gli Stati Uniti; oppure il maccartismo ha avuto un grande impatto negli USA, ma ha anche influenzato la percezione dell'America che si aveva in Italia e dunque i modi dell'autorappresentazione italiana oltreoceano.

Più che ricostruire gli scambi artistici nelle due direzioni, mi sono concentrato sulle iniziative italiane rivolte al pubblico statunitense. Se l'affermazione dell'arte italiana contemporanea nel mondo aveva giocato un ruolo importante nella costruzione dell'identità nazionale già in fase postunitaria (si pensi alla fondazione della Biennale di Venezia), con l'emergere degli USA come nuova potenza mondiale, non solo economica e politica, ma anche culturale, lo sforzo collettivo di portare l'arte italiana al di là dell'Atlantico acquisiva valore simbolico, oltre che pratico, su tanti livelli: si trattava di conquistare la fetta di un mercato dell'arte in crescita; di utilizzare l'arte come soft power per facilitare gli scambi diplomatici con un paese sempre più influente; di ricevere visibilità internazionale (per esempio, entrare nella collezione del MoMA significa guadagnarsi un posto nel canone

moderno con ripercussioni ben al di là di quell'istituzione); ma anche di proiettare, metaforicamente, la propria modernità in un luogo simbolo della modernità e dunque poterla vedere e misurare meglio. Di qui lo "schermo gigante" del titolo: una citazione da Cesare Pavese che nel 1947 parlava in termini simili dell'americanismo di prima della guerra.

Nel libro, dunque, si intrecciano Americhe immaginarie ed esperienze reali degli Stati Uniti, proiezioni utopistiche e operazioni pragmatiche. Le attitudini oscillano tra complessi di provincialismo e sentimenti di superiorità culturale, infatuazioni acritiche e rivendicazioni antagoniste nei confronti di un modello di modernità egemone. Il caso di Fortunato Depero, approfondito nel primo capitolo del libro, è emblematico. Benché il suo tentativo di conquistare New York sia stato di fatto fallimentare, la sua vicenda accompagna e in parte influenza gli esordi dell'americanismo italiano a cavallo tra anni Venti e anni Trenta, tra mito e scontro con la realtà. Arrivato a New York con l'aspettativa di immergersi in un'opera d'arte futurista totale memore del manifesto *Ricostruzione futurista dell'universo* (1915), Depero apriva la Futurist House a Manhattan non senza sentimenti di rabbia o di riscatto: era insieme il raggiungimento di una patria elettiva e una conquista militare. Ovvero un'ambivalenza frequente tra i

protagonisti del libro. Se da un lato si percepiscono le potenziali opportunità che l'America può offrire, immaginandola come un palco (altra metafora ricorrente) dal quale poter affermare la propria modernità a livello internazionale, dall'altro c'è un senso di svantaggio rispetto ai paesi già affermati come centri della modernità, quali la vicina Francia, più organizzata e presente sul mercato dell'arte, o gli stessi Stati Uniti con le sue moderne istituzioni artistiche. Nel 1939 Giulio Carlo Argan, inviato dal governo fascista, notava con ammirazione come i musei americani stessero costruendo, attraverso la raccolta di importanti collezioni, un discorso sull'arte moderna destinato ad avere grande impatto mondiale, mentre l'Italia non disponeva di strutture e mezzi affini e neppure della volontà politica per realizzare qualcosa di paragonabile. Altra caratteristica di cui gli osservatori italiani presero nota già negli anni Trenta era il ruolo propulsore delle gallerie private ed una sostanziale diffidenza per le mostre ufficiali: tanto che convinsero il governo fascista a sponsorizzare iniziative private in America per facilitarne la ricezione. Questi ed altri principi venivano adottati come strumenti pragmatici di propaganda all'estero, ma simultaneamente venivano assorbiti come metodi americani (e dunque moderni). Sarebbe però scorretto affermare l'esistenza di un complesso di inferiorità dell'Italia nei confronti degli Stati Uniti nel campo dell'arte: il

tentativo di promuovere la modernità italiana in America attraverso l'arte, emerge dalla convinzione diffusa che l'Italia sia depositaria di un retaggio artistico incomparabile e che possa competere sul piano artistico, anche contemporaneo, con un certo vantaggio sulle controparti francese o statunitense. Questa rivendicazione accompagna tutta la vicenda ricostruita nel mio studio, con risvolti anche patetici.

Si è parlato della vicenda di Depero, che seguendo la cronologia del libro, è posto subito in apertura. Nelle sue esperienze americane sembra tenersi distante dal mondo dell'arte in senso stretto, dai musei, dai critici, dai curatori e dai galleristi. Questi sono però i protagonisti dello scambio tra Italia e Stati Uniti all'interno della narrazione, mentre gli artisti, al di là di Depero, restano sullo sfondo, senza che emerga in maniera netta il loro ruolo. Quale funzione hanno rivestito in questo dialogo transnazionale tra i due paesi?

Questa questione è stata fonte di molti dubbi, anche in virtù della mia esperienza di docente all'interno di un istituto universitario che forma artisti. Chiaramente mi sono posto il problema del ruolo degli artisti in una storia fatta soprattutto di diplomazia culturale, rapporti economici e istituzionali. Ho dovuto fare i conti con il concetto di *agency*: come si muovono gli artisti in questo frangente? Che ruolo hanno? Che

marginale di impatto? O sono unicamente delle pedine? Si tratta, a livello metodologico, di uno dei problemi posti dalla storia sociale dell'arte: non solo la generazione di un Meyer Shapiro, ma anche un T. J. Clark. Da una parte sentivo l'esigenza di allontanarmi dalla mitologia dell'intenzione dell'artista come motore e obiettivo supremo del lavoro di uno storico dell'arte, così come dalla storia dell'arte celebrativa che, per quanto sofisticata o sottile, finisce per fare opera promozionale; dall'altra non credo in una storia dell'arte in cui gli artisti sono soltanto presenze fortuite o sostituibili. Per questo ho cercato di cambiare di volta in volta il punto di vista all'interno del racconto, ingranando marce diverse, e ho deciso di aprire il libro con la vicenda di Depero.

L'artista si trova per la prima volta in America in un momento nodale per le istituzioni americane, a cavallo tra anni Venti e Trenta, a partire dalla fondazione del MoMA, nel 1929. Ma, in linea con l'idea futurista di dar fuoco a musei e biblioteche, Depero si muove al di fuori delle istituzioni artistiche, guardando piuttosto alla città, ai grandi magazzini, ai mass media e ai teatri di Broadway, con cui collabora o prova a collaborare. Lo spettacolo delle parate pubblicitarie di Macy's e dei cinema commerciali lo interessano di più della cultura *high-brow*. Allo stesso tempo è testimone diretto del crash di Wall Street e della Grande Depressione economica, subendone le conseguenze in prima

persona. Ma per quanto sia fallimentare (di fatto rientra in Italia povero in canna), la sua esperienza mostra i tentativi da parte di un artista di affermare una visione e di dare avvio a idee, strategie e meccanismi che continuano tuttora: dalla scrittura di una propria mitografia (articoli, conferenze, programmi radio e altro in cui celebrava i propri trionfi a New York), alla visione di uno stile di vita futuro ispirato all'esperienza americana ma applicato all'Italia (dal manifesto della pubblicità alla famosa bottiglia Campari, che concepisce al ritorno da NY e che ancora troviamo nei supermercati). Depero è presente con la sua voce ed è in grado di impostare un discorso che avrà un impatto sulle generazioni successive, compreso il senso di antagonismo verso l'America.

Ho cercato poi di intrecciare e mettere in relazione l'operato degli artisti con quello di critici, galleristi e istituzioni culturali al fine di rendere conto di una vicenda corale che non è solo dettata dalle politiche governative. Parlando di migrazione e di esilio, ci sono in gioco storie personali e corpi in movimento ma anche oggetti che, spostandosi dal proprio contesto culturale di provenienza, attraverso mostre, pubblicazioni e mercato, si riconfigurano e trovano nel discorso identitario nazionale nuove vie attraverso cui significare. In questo caso gli artisti non sono colti all'interno del loro studio nell'atto di

“iniettare intenzione” nel proprio lavoro ma piuttosto vengono analizzati come persone che, mettendosi in rete con altre, avviano un dialogo transoceanico e trovano nuove strategie per gestire la propria carriera. E il discorso nazionale diventa un filtro inevitabile, non solo come spinta ideologica nazionalista, ma anche come condizione attraverso cui stare al mondo: dalla lingua allo status legale, dal network sociale alle infrastrutture di riferimento, fino alle aspettative e agli stereotipi con cui ogni loro azione viene inevitabilmente misurata. Oltre a Depero, sono diversi gli artisti che emergono come comprimari in questa storia: da Corrado Cagli ad Afro Basaldella e Michelangelo Pistoletto, ognuno arriva negli Stati Uniti per motivi e in circostanze diversissime, ma ognuno fa i conti con il proprio essere italiano attraverso l’esperienza americana. Ci sono figure di artisti che hanno fatto da ponte culturale aiutando altri artisti o le loro opere ad attraversare fisicamente l’oceano, o scrivendo del loro lavoro, o presentandoli ad altre persone al di là dell’Atlantico. E ci sono quelli che, invece, attraverso il proprio lavoro, hanno contribuito a creare un’idea di modernità italiana vendibile negli USA. Non sono esperienze unitarie e univoche. Hanno a che fare non solo con l’arte ma con sistemi di rappresentazione in senso più ampio: dal cinema alla letteratura, dalle riviste di moda alle pubblicità commerciali, ma anche

l’immaginario collettivo che nel corso del Novecento ha codificato un corollario di aspettative e di mitologie nei confronti dell’America.

In ogni caso il libro non è incentrato solo sugli artisti ma guarda anche alla trasformazione delle opere d’arte nel momento in cui si muovono attraverso i confini nazionali. In che modo il nuovo contesto ridefinisce la loro rilevanza culturale, politica e sociale in modo discorsivo: come vengono mostrate? A chi? Chi le compra e cosa ne fa?

I cinque capitoli che compongono il testo si muovono costantemente a cavallo tra imprese collettive e sforzi individuali. Tra questi ultimi, significativo è il ruolo di diverse figure femminili attive nei processi di americanizzazione dell’Europa ma anche di esportazione dell’arte contemporanea italiana negli Stati Uniti. Come si può leggere questa dialettica tra collettività e iniziativa privata?

È un aspetto importante, questo. Il libro è un insieme di *case studies* e, come tutti i testi con quest’impostazione, prende le mosse da vicende specifiche che devono essere rappresentative di fenomeni ampi ma che allo stesso tempo hanno un’eccezionalità tutta singolare. Il secondo capitolo, dedicato all’esportazione della cultura fascista, è l’unico a mostrare strategie di diplomazia culturale nel senso più comune di iniziative governative e

istituzionali. I capitoli successivi si concentrano, rispettivamente: su una mostra, *Twentieth-century Italian Art* tenutasi al MoMA nel 1949 (il perno intorno a cui ruota il terzo capitolo); sulle galleriste Catherine Viviano e Irene Brin (quarto capitolo); o su un libro, *Art Povera* pubblicato dal giovane Germano Celant nel 1969 (quinto capitolo). Ogni caso è il punto d'accesso e l'angolo attraverso cui affrontare la politica culturale del momento, i principali elementi di trasformazione e le principali strategie di autorappresentazione negli USA. Ci sono almeno due fatti storicamente significativi che mi hanno indirizzato verso queste scelte. In primo luogo, se il regime fascista aveva sponsorizzato alcune iniziative private per aggirare l'ostilità del pubblico statunitense per le mostre ufficiali, nel dopoguerra il governo italiano fa una scelta deliberata di facilitare iniziative di istituzioni estere (come il MoMA) o di lasciare alle iniziative individuali il compito farsi ambasciatrici della cultura italiana all'estero. Nell'Italia della Ricostruzione, la Democrazia Cristiana di De Gasperi interrompeva operazioni di diplomazia culturale diretta: ora percepita come propaganda e associata o associabile al fascismo, era anche economicamente troppo dispendiosa per essere attuabile all'indomani della Seconda guerra mondiale. Questo era possibile anche perché già a partire dallo sforzo post-unitario di costruire un'identità nazionale (la famosa frase

di Cavour, "fatta l'Italia, bisogna fare gli italiani"), e poi con il fascismo e addirittura con la Ricostruzione, in molti avevano assorbito e internalizzato individualmente il ruolo dell'arte nel progetto nazionale: in tantissimi casi è possibile rintracciare questo senso di responsabilità nei confronti dell'immagine del proprio paese all'estero. Negli scambi tra Italia e Stati Uniti, seppure in modi diversissimi tra loro, quasi tutti gli italiani si fanno promotori della causa nazionale: perfino Cagli, artista ebreo che deve lasciare l'Italia nel 1939 a causa delle Leggi razziali, non perde occasione per promuovere l'arte italiana contemporanea negli Stati Uniti. Tranne poche eccezioni, nel momento in cui gli italiani si trovano ad avere un piede in America o a ricoprire ruoli di influenza, cercano di dare visibilità all'arte italiana contemporanea, che ritengono di valore tanto quanto l'eredità storica italiana, seppure ingiustamente sacrificata.

Questo discorso deve anche essere letto da una prospettiva di genere, chiedendoci che ruolo hanno avuto le donne in questa storia e se la percezione reciproca del ruolo delle donne nei due paesi abbia avuto un impatto nel sistema di autorappresentazione attraverso le mostre, in un periodo storico che ha visto una sostanziale trasformazione del ruolo della donna e l'emergere del movimento femminista. Già negli anni Trenta gli inviati del governo fascista notavano come l'emancipazione delle

donne fosse una misura attraverso cui gli americani valutavano il processo di modernizzazione. Introducevano dunque quelle che decenni dopo sarebbero state orrendamente chiamate “quote rosa” nelle mostre americane, esponendo artiste come Adriana Pincherle o Leonor Fini per proiettare un’immagine di modernità, sebbene in Italia venisse promosso un modello ben più tradizionale di donna – dalla “moglie devota” e “angelo del focolare” alla “massaia rurale”. Incoraggiata da questo sforzo proiettivo, la scultrice Antonietta Paoli Pogliani si faceva promotrice e organizzatrice della mostra *International Women’s Art Exhibition* tenutasi a New York nel 1939, all’interno della quale dava assoluta preminenza alle artiste italiane. Ma la donna che, con le sue iniziative, avrebbe avuto conseguenze più longeve fu la gallerista Mimì Pecci-Blunt. Aprendo a New York nel 1937 una succursale della sua galleria romana, La Cometa, Pecci-Blunt era la prima ad esporre al di là dell’Atlantico artisti come Cagli, Mirko o Morandi, ovvero artisti chiave delle mostre del dopoguerra.

Il clima conservatore della Guerra Fredda fece sì che tutte le artiste donne presenti nelle mostre degli anni Trenta fossero eliminate dalla programmazione del dopoguerra: per esempio la mostra del MoMA del 1949 nominava Leonor Fini come figura influente ma non la esponeva. Ma la tradizione di donne galleriste

impegnate nello scambio Italia-USA trovava il suo sviluppo più importante in Catherine Viviano e Irene Brin, che sono le protagoniste del mio quarto capitolo. Se Viviano apriva una galleria a Midtown Manhattan e intrecciava rapporti con i grandi musei e collezionisti influenti della East Coast, lanciando la carriera americana di vari artisti (Afro è il caso più eclatante), Brin si mosse in modo creativo e originale per costruire una nuova immagine dell’Italia del boom economico, rivolgendosi ad un pubblico diverso, in zone diverse: soprattutto nell’ambiente della moda e del cinema, dal Midwest a Hollywood. Voglio precisare che Viviano e Brin non sono assolutamente le uniche donne a fare da ponte culturale nel dopoguerra, ma sono parte di una vera costellazione di protagoniste nella storia delle mostre, che sono rimaste ingiustamente ai margini e che andrebbero approfondite. Al momento sto studiando il ruolo di Margaret Scolari Barr. Storica dell’arte con grandi conoscenze linguistiche e culturali, rimasta nell’ombra del marito e spesso ricordata solo come moglie del direttore del MoMA, Alfred Barr. Non solo fu figura importante all’interno del MoMA, ma anche per le sue attività autonome di studiosa (i casi più noti sono la monografia su Medardo Rosso e lo scambio con Bernard Berenson, ma anche i rapporti coi futuristi e l’interesse per l’architettura razionalista sono

importanti). Inoltre, vorrei evitare di reiterare un modello storiografico in cui le donne giocano unicamente il ruolo di facilitatrici, preparando il terreno affinché l'artista uomo riesca nella propria carriera. In molti casi questo è avvenuto a causa del contesto sociale, delle costrizioni politiche e delle possibilità che una società patriarcale offriva loro come spazio di azione individuale. A maggior ragione è dunque significativo come Irene Brin abbia rotto questo modello, imponendosi come ambasciatrice culturale e come ponte per l'arte contemporanea italiana in America agendo fuori dagli schemi e utilizzando spazi tradizionalmente marginalizzati come femminili (le riviste di moda) per veicolare una nuova immagine dell'Italia. La sua visione è tanto originale da imprimere una svolta sulla stessa ricezione delle opere d'arte e dell'invenzione del Made in Italy negli USA. È emblematica in questo senso come si sia mossa per promuovere la ricerca di Alberto Burri. Nel contesto più canonico della critica d'arte, Brin e suo marito Gaspero Del Corso commissionavano al direttore del Guggenheim, James Sweeney un volume monografico in cui i suoi *sacchi* venivano letti in chiave penitente e redentiva in linea con la retorica della Ricostruzione: i sacchi di juta come le vesti di San Francesco, le cuciture come le ferite della guerra. Brin però presentava diversamente queste stesse opere attraverso le riviste di moda o la

American Federation of Arts che faceva circolare le mostre nei campus universitari della West Coast e nelle piccole gallerie di Beverly Hills; qui Brin cambiava il tono introducendo l'arte italiana (tra cui Burri) sofisticata, elegante e radicata nella tradizione artigiana, ma anche moderna e aperta all'America. Alla fine degli anni Cinquanta, con il cambio delle politiche internazionali dettate dal neatlantismo di Amintore Fanfani e con l'apertura degli Istituti italiani di Cultura, Brin emergeva come una pioniera, e questo ruolo, avviato in forma del tutto personale, le veniva riconosciuto in modo formale dallo stato italiano. Seppure involontariamente, la sua operazione di branding nazionale veniva a sostenere il messaggio di Fanfani, che si proponeva al presidente USA Eisenhower come ponte privilegiato di accesso all'Europa e come modello di espansione economica e culturale verso il Medio Oriente: presentava l'Italia come esperimento riuscito di un Marshall Plan esportabile in altre aree del mondo. Intanto le opere di Burri, ma anche di Campigli, Marini e altri comparivano regolarmente sullo sfondo dei film di Hollywood, sulle riviste di moda e di design, oltre che nelle collezioni e nelle gallerie d'arte, raggiungendo un pubblico vastissimo.

Per la vastità cronologica del volume e delle personalità prese in esame più o meno a fondo, si è reso necessario un

importante lavoro sugli archivi, dai quali sono emerse diverse fonti inedite. Tra queste alcune corrispondenze private accompagnano la narrazione. Da dove provengono e in che modo hanno aiutato la creazione di un racconto corale attraverso i decenni attorno ai temi dello scambio tra Italia e Stati Uniti?

Grazie a varie borse di studio e fondi di ricerca (soprattutto di CUNY, CIMA, Terra Foundation e Cooper Union), ho avuto la fortuna di poter lavorare nel corso degli anni sia negli Stati Uniti sia in Italia attingendo a fondi istituzionali, come quelli della Quadriennale (soprattutto le carte di Libero De Libero), GNAM (Maraini), Sapienza (Venturi), MART (Depero e Sarfatti) e del MoMA (Barr, Scolari, Soby, e le varie mostre), ad esempio, o gli Archivi dello Stato a Roma e gli Archives of American Art dello Smithsonian Institution a Washington D.C. (soprattutto AFA, Ashton, Castelli, Viviano, Solomon). Ma anche in archivi privati, selezionati come rilevanti per il mio studio. Tra queste hanno rivestito particolare importanza la consultazione degli archivi di Afro, Corrado Cagli, Irene Brin, Eugenio Battisti. Consultare le carte conservate da Eugenio Battisti prima che fossero accessibili al pubblico mi ha permesso di ricostruire gli scambi e la collaborazione con Germano Celant, protagonista del quinto capitolo, da un angolo nuovo. Come sempre, e

soprattutto per quanto riguarda l'eredità scomoda del fascismo, bisogna stare attenti alle zone d'ombra nei materiali d'archivio: dalla censura e autocensura all'impostazione dell'archivio stesso che inevitabilmente è un prodotto progettato, manipolato o filtrato dalle persone, dalle ideologie e dalle circostanze.

Tra la corrispondenza privata inserita all'interno del libro occorre distinguere tra diversi tipi di comunicazione: istituzionale, come quella tra Barr e i vari dipartimenti del MoMA; con carattere di ufficialità, come la diplomazia; o completamente privata, come la corrispondenza tra De Libero e Cagli, suo amante e collaboratore, in cui comunque bisogna considerare le autocensure, i codici, i silenzi necessari ad aggirare non solo la censura fascista ma anche l'omofobia e l'antisemitismo, presenti e radicati al di là delle politiche governative; oppure quelle della gallerista Catherine Viviano e i suoi artisti che seguono chiaramente altri codici e barriere culturali-linguistiche, a partire dall'italiano stentato della Viviano che era emigrata dall'Italia nel lontano 1901. Si parlava prima di intenzionalità: parlando di progetti come le mostre da esportazione e di rapporti diplomatici è bene tenere presente l'esistenza di vari livelli di comunicazione. Da una parte la retorica della promozione, di quello che si vuole comunicare all'interlocutore statunitense; c'è poi

il dietro le quinte di quelle che sono le elaborazioni della strategia di penetrazione tra gli organizzatori italiani. Ma il lavoro più interessante in questo caso è quello di cercare nelle pieghe del non detto e addirittura di ciò che trapela involontariamente dal linguaggio. Quello che rivela di più e che è più importante in prospettiva storica è ciò che è inconscio, talmente evidente e ovvio da non essere menzionato. Nella corrispondenza e in questi diversi livelli di comunicazione, è possibile intravedere che tipo di rilevanza potevano avere queste iniziative, cosa significava, in fondo, organizzare appuntamenti espositivi negli Stati Uniti.

Tutto questo naturalmente stando attenti a mantenere rigore e rispetto delle fonti: le corrispondenze vanno verificate e confrontate con i cataloghi, le fotografie degli allestimenti e altra documentazione per capire come la realizzazione delle mostre abbia effettivamente confermato o cambiato i progetti iniziali: questo è vero per qualsiasi mostra, ma nel caso di collaborazioni a distanza avvengono più spesso e in misura maggiore cambi di regia, compromessi o cambiamenti dell'ultimo momento. Non è solo una questione di ricostruire cosa sia stato effettivamente mostrato, ma soprattutto capire il processo di traduzione culturale nei suoi passaggi più concreti che possono andare dalla traduzione dei titoli delle opere ai

problemi doganali, e molto altro. C'è infine la questione della risposta critica e delle acquisizioni: sebbene il mio non sia uno studio della ricezione americana ma dello sforzo proiettivo italiano, è comunque importante vedere come le ambizioni e le aspettative degli italiani abbiano dovuto fare i conti con reazioni da parte americana spesso diverse dal previsto. Ricezione e reazioni che poi hanno influenzato le iniziative successive.

Lo studio si basa sul rapporto tra Italia e Stati Uniti e tiene conto di vicende ormai pienamente storicizzate. Volendo estendere cronologicamente la riflessione, dopo l'esperienza di Celant che chiude l'intero volume e sconfinando fino ai giorni nostri, esistono strategie di affermazione e esportazione dell'arte italiana contemporanea altrettanto significative e originali?

Il caso delle mostre italiane negli Stati Uniti è particolarmente interessante nel contesto internazionale e può aprire prospettive e questioni metodologiche utili anche ad altre dinamiche transnazionali, più o meno recenti. All'inizio delle vicende che ho studiato l'Italia è da poco unificata e indipendente; è una piccola, aggressiva potenza coloniale; ma è anche una nazione che ricorda bene il controllo di potenze straniere e che, già dal primo dopoguerra, vive l'influenza e il controllo degli USA con un misto di speranza e angoscia. Cosa

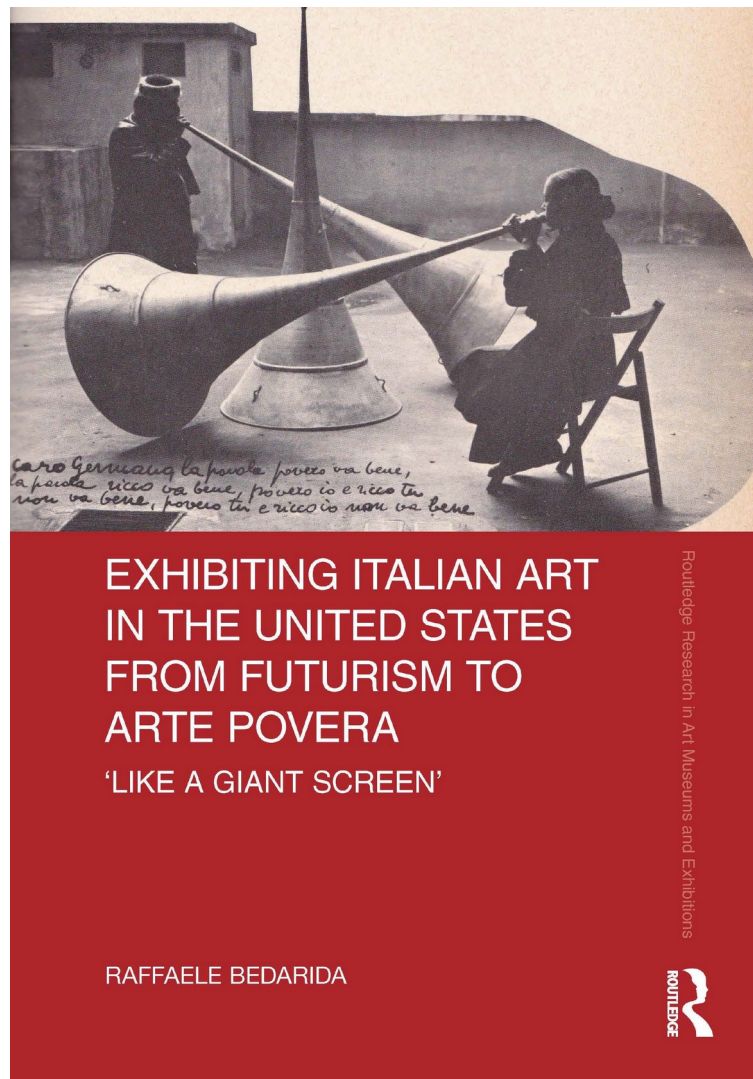
che dal secondo dopoguerra aumenterà esponenzialmente. Parzialmente industrializzata e in parte rurale, l'Italia attraversa un periodo di trasformazione economica, politica e sociale enorme nel periodo che tratto: dal fascismo alla democrazia, dall'autarchia al miracolo economico, dalle migrazioni transatlantiche a quelle interne (dal sud al nord, dalle campagne ai centri urbani). Insomma, in quanto anello debole d'Europa, che cerca di proiettare negli Stati Uniti un'immagine di modernità e di rilevanza internazionale attraverso un prodotto (l'arte contemporanea) culturalmente prestigioso, a basso costo di produzione e facilmente manipolabile, la vicenda dell'Italia anticipa alcuni fenomeni decoloniali e postcoloniali dei decenni successivi – naturalmente tenendo in considerazione le specificità di ogni caso. Da un lato c'è il complesso nei confronti di Parigi, che da parte italiana viene percepita come il centro egemone dell'idea di modernità ottocentesca e primo-novecentesca, contro cui affermare una modernità italiana indipendente e diversa; dall'altra c'è l'idea di conquistare New York come luogo reale ma anche simbolico di una modernità futura, che può avere l'effetto galvanizzante dell'utopia ma anche quello inquietante dell'incubo tecnologico. Se il libro si apre con Depero che, come abbiamo visto, va a New York con l'idea di spaccare tutto e conquistare la modernità a cui

anelava, si chiude con la vicenda paradossale dell'Arte Povera: nata con forti sentimenti antiamericani e terzomondisti, viene portata da Celant negli Stati Uniti rivendicando la posizione subalterna dell'Italia come modello di una controcultura trans-nazionale. Di fatto l'operazione di Celant agisce come un cavallo di Troia: un atto d'infiltrazione in cui, nonostante la retorica del nomadismo culturale (Celant parla di "arte apolide"), la riflessione sull'identità nazionale rimane centrale e col tempo diviene addirittura preponderante.

Se l'iniziativa di Celant è servita da matrice per operazioni successive di esportazione transatlantica (la più eclatante è la Transavanguardia di Bonito Oliva, nonostante i diversi presupposti ideologici), negli anni di gestazione del mio progetto sono sorte due istituzioni, tuttora attive, che sono per molti aspetti diverse dai casi che ho studiato, ma gettano le radici nel fenomeno storico di cui ho scritto: il Center for Italian Modern Art (CIMA) di Laura Mattioli, fondato a Manhattan nel 2014; e Magazzino Italian Art di Nancy Olnick e Giorgio Spanu, nato a Cold Spring, sopra New York, nel 2017. La mia posizione non è neutrale, avendo usufruito della borsa del Cima ed avendo collaborato con entrambe le istituzioni. Ma credo sia utile rilevare le linee di continuità tra i fenomeni storici delineati nel libro e queste due iniziative, nate parallelamente e indipendentemente dal mio lavoro. Come è successo in

gran parte dei casi storici da me studiati, sono entrambe iniziative private che si muovono con una agilità inevitabilmente assente nella diplomazia culturale attuata a livello governativo. Mi riferisco non solo alle iniziative di Pecci-Blunt, Viviano e Brin che ho nominato, ma soprattutto alla mostra del 1949 *Twentieth-Century Italian Art* al MoMA, il cui motore propulsore era un gruppo di collezionisti italiani. Il principale elemento di novità è che, oltre allo sforzo espositivo e promozionale, attraverso borse di studio per giovani studiose e studiosi, entrambe le iniziative diano spazio ad una riflessione sulla natura e i metodi della traduzione culturale: sulla storia degli scambi artistici, ma anche su come viene condotta la storia dell'arte nei due paesi. Dal mio punto di vista è significativo il fatto che il Cima abbia inaugurato la propria riflessione sull'arte del Novecento con una mostra di Depero, riportandolo a New York per la prima volta dai tempi della sua fallimentare esperienza americana; e che Magazzino abbia preso le mosse dall'Arte Povera e da Celant per una riflessione più rivolta al contemporaneo. Al di là di questi due esempi, spero che il mio libro riesca a sollevare domande e a problematizzare il ruolo delle mostre, il dialogo con gli Stati Uniti e la costruzione identitaria nazionale e che dunque fornisca una prospettiva storica e degli strumenti critici utili oggi.

TAVOLE



1 *Exhibiting Italian Art in the United States from Futurism to Arte Povera: “Like a Giant Screen”* (Routledge, 2022), copertina.

- ¹ Michele Dantini, *Geopolitiche dell'arte. Arte e critica d'arte italiana nel contesto internazionale, dalle neoavanguardie a oggi*, Christian Marinotti Edizioni, Milano, 2012, p. 8.
- ² Stefano Chiodi, *Genius Loci. Anatomia di un mito italiano*, Quodlibet, Macerata, 2021, p. 9.
- ³ Di questo avviso è Carlo Ludovico Ragghianti quando nel 1948 presenta il suo *Schema di una mostra tipo per l'estero di arte italiana* al Primo convegno internazionale per le arti figurative organizzato dallo Studio italiano di storia dell'arte a Firenze (1948). Il testo, pubblicato negli atti del Convegno (pp. 197-199), è ripreso negli approfondimenti di seguito: Michela Passini, *Ragghianti e le mostre. Strategie per l'arte italiana nel sistema internazionale delle esposizioni*, "Predella", anno X, n. 28, dicembre 2010; Annamaria Ducci, *Ragghianti e la promozione dell'arte italiana all'estero negli anni della ricostruzione: lo strumento delle mostre* in Silvia Massa, Elena Pontelli (a cura di), *Mostre permanenti. Carlo Ludovico Ragghianti in un secolo di esposizioni*, Edizioni Fondazione Ragghianti Studi sull'arte, Lucca, 2018, pp. 57-76.
- ⁴ Si citano ad esempio il convegno curato da Flavio Fergonzi e Francesco Tedeschi *Arte italiana 1960-1964. Identità culturale, confronti internazionali, modelli americani* (Museo del Novecento e Gallerie d'Italia, Milano 2013) a conclusione di molteplici eventi e mostre milanesi dedicati all'arte americana nello stesso anno; *New York New York. Arte italiana: la riscoperta dell'America*, curata da Francesco Tedeschi con Francesca Pola e Federica Boragina (Museo del Novecento e Gallerie d'Italia, Milano, 2017), mostra dedicata specificatamente agli artisti italiani in relazione alla riscoperta degli Stati Uniti come terra di opportunità e affermazione; i convegni *Narrazioni atlantiche e arti visive 1949-1972. Sguardi "fuori gioco", politiche espositive, "identità italiana", americanismo/antiamericanismo* (Università Roma Tre, 2022) o *Italy at work: the italian lifestyle on display* (Politecnico di Milano, 2022) o ancora i saggi di autori quali Sergio Cortesini, esplicitamente citato da Bedarida nella sua introduzione.