

The practice of the Slovak artist Petra Feriancová can be seen through mythical lens. Among other ideas, her work explores eternal returns, continuous transformations touching religious, mythological, political, autobiographical references, corporeality as well as airy, intangible matters. In her 2013 project for the Venice Biennale an archive of objects conveyed a shared inner space; in her intriguing show at Off Biennale Budapest everyday rituals were turned into historical gestures, and the domestic space became a political one. In 2014 she exhibited at the Fondazione Morra Greco in Naples, in a show entitled *Things that Happen. Things that Are Done. On Beginnings and Matter*. Through a vast variety of materials and media, at Morra Greco the artist succeeded in transforming the gallery in a diverse site for open-ended reflection, inspiring a feeling of veneration and wonder towards the act of creation. In the following interview, conducted in April 2015, we discussed her work in Naples, the immortality of the object, fascinating cosmogonies and the potential of the arts to expand the human soul.

GD- *Dear Petra, in your exhibition Things that Happen. Things That Are Done. On Beginnings and Matter stones, casts of clay, egg boxes supporting shells, air chambers, passages from texts by Xenophanes and others, carved elephant tusks forming stalactites and stalagmites as well as totems, black and white prints and videos from different times were dispersed among the rooms. The show took its visitors through different historical periods and human attitudes; some objects seemed to ask for contemplation, others for empathy and identification..*

I generally work with found, already existing images. I believe an image is meant to be found, observed and associated with some literal, historic, or political reference. I am essentially playing with the possibility of sharing the same feeling that I experienced when I found it. I am also exploring the possibility of people seeing as if through my eyes, even though I often work with quite complex or intimate topics. [...] My work is closely related to my life, which is tremendously boring sometimes. There are even times when I willingly do not set foot out of my flat for periods of time and then even the act of taking out the rubbish becomes an emotional experience. That is perhaps why the more prevalent themes in my work are the internal space belonging to ideas in relation to the empirical experienced one. [...] At Morra Greco I pondered the idea of the immortality of an object. There is a myth, according to which people are made of rock, or more precisely inorganic matter, which makes them immobile, but also allows them to live eternally. The material of vegetation is different – it moves only during growth and it too endures. In the myth it is also written that people were formed of rock and tears.

GD- *In the exhibition you gathered texts written in the Sixth and Fourth century BC, through extracts from Xenophanes, Pythagoras, Anaximenes, Anaximander, Thales and Archelaus; how did this ancient literature become involved in the unfolding of the show and how do you integrate written sources with your practice?*

For me, text is a material – almost matter, suitable for handling. I need to work with text alongside images. When I was thinking about the exhibition, I was studying the surroundings and the history of Naples. At first, I wanted to base the whole project on invention and the ability to improvise, which are typical traits for Naples. I started with Winckelmann, moved onto the Eleatics and ended up at Giordano Bruno. Naples is incredible in the way it endures the force of exceedingly diverse outside influences. No wonder, the inhabitants of Naples live with a permanent sense of the presence of an active volcano – under such circumstances one probably starts to view things differently. Last year I worked with a text from Greek mythology; I used the parts, which mention birdlife and comprised them in a guidebook [Bird Guide II]. I studied biotopes and collaborated with my aunt, a professor of ornithology, who determined the species of the birds and presented them using this mythology as if these living creatures were a human invention. The process was similar when I worked with the text on cosmogony and the system of the world by pre-classical philosophers. I tried to depict their ideas through drawings, which I made very quickly, because my children do not sleep long. I only get to work when they are in kindergarten or asleep. Most of my work reflects my time, my being, my possibilities and also my limitations. They are ideas that I consciously work with; for example the small pebbles, which were piled up next to the texts. They appear to be various sorts of stones, but in reality they are all out of clay. I do this almost therapeutic action whenever I get a free moment during the day. These pebbles manifest my attempt to appropriate the flawlessness of nature through the simplest of actions – molding out of clay – something anyone might do if they would get their hands on clay. On the other hand, the artificial stones are about the pressure a human hand exerts against the force of air and water. How much force would my hand have to apply to form a stone into shape, not out of soft clay, but out of actual stone?

GD- *Materiality was indeed a strong element of the show. Stone, metal, books, paper, film, shells, clay, glass, marble, wood and animal skin*

expressed the powerful representation of a world created through successions of human acts and crafts. These different materials were repeated across the space, skillfully reiterating ambivalent feelings: on one hand the continuity of time and eternal returns; on the other, the delicate quality of some of these materials communicated a feeling of fragility, of precarious balance among these constituents..

Materiality is the main theme of this exhibition. It represents corporeality. Material as an antagonizing yet also existential part of a thought. Pneumatics are actually containers for the soul. Air, a breeze or a breath were considered to embody the soul – ‘pneuma’ – in Ancient Greece. I worked with raw animal skin, which I would immerse in water and leave to dry in a desired shape, which would then be exhibited. Some skins were pierced from a fatal wound and the spectator could either see right through the opening or see into the cavity within them, or rather that, which they were enclosing – air itself. Right at the entrance of the exhibition I had clay spread out across the floor, this pertains to an Eastern European cosmogonic myth on the creation of the Earth, in which God sends Satan to retrieve mud from the depths of the ocean, when there is still only water everywhere. Satan dives several times, but without succeeding, because he never makes his attempt on behalf of God. At his last attempt he finally obeys and manages to emerge with some muck under his fingertips and thus the Earth is created. Further along in the myth, God falls asleep and Satan begins to roll him down a hill, in an effort to drown him, but all the surfaces that God touches, turn to land. Just as dough stretches when you knead it; or the clay in my exhibition, which took some time to dry and cracked in the process, as if creating a lunar surface and diminishing its volume. It moved away from the wall as much as 10 cm, which speaks greatly about the space and its shape. This notion was something I wanted to explore, together with the piece involving animal skin – the corporeality of air. I wanted to find the contours, to be able to define the void. When I was little, I would wave a paintbrush around and wondered why the paint would not stay floating in air, why I could not painted on air. I was also interested in matter from the point of view of alchemy; living matter, a Golem, and also matter determining the character of the first civilizations. The rooms themselves are variations of one theme; they resemble a series of one kind. Repetition and returns remain important themes in my work, which I also deal with in relation to the archive, collecting and a recurring

summarization of older works. This relates to the fact that I work with limits and with a restricted amount of material, which I keep evaluating and post-producing. A return disputes the idea of moving forward and opposes narration. The 24 hour film [an archive of old videos from family trips, unedited and in chronological order] was linked to this idea and next to it a 5 minute film projection comprised of various materials, shots lasting one second. Both films were projected next to each other, interchanging images were very evocative, even though they were never in synch. That combination could never be realized. The films disregard a storyline; rather they replace time with their rhythm and a never-ending story, which does not progress, but rather runs in a circle. Up until now I dealt with the theme of repetition in many projects, for example the exhibition *Why Do I Keep Reading the Same Books*.

GD- *Your work on myth and cosmic orders, on the irruptions of the sacred into contemporary reality and humanity tells something incredibly meaningful about the present time. The rise of religious fundamentalism has generated extreme reactions, and in many Western societies atheism has been turned into a state religion; the fear of clashes and the fear of the 'other' have lead religious believes and spirituality to be considered as private affairs. Yet paradoxically sacred rituals, spiritual devotion and forms of worship are fundamental ways to bring people together. What role can your art play in this discussion?*

Occidental culture is built on pragmatic protestant liberalism– it can hardly defend itself against the dogmas of fundamentalism. We [the occident] constantly judge and assess the rest of the world according to our values. I think socioeconomic fusions only contributed to the religious secularism. I do not dare to define how can art have an influence on this issue. There are such awful things happening every day. One only starts to feel the immense vulnerability and mortality once he or she is under immediate threat and that is where art is quite powerless. I personally have ethical restraints and feel there is need for respect when discussing issues, which are too sensitive or too recent. Art is influential and its fundamental intent is to create a discourse, which is only possible in certain conditions. I do hope that the circumstances [under these conditions] will persist. I am interested in the history of religion; in *Things that Happen, Things That Are Done. On Beginnings and Matter* I worked with it on the façade of Fondazione Morra Greco, where I placed large-scale portraits of well-

known heretics: John Wycliffe, Jan Hus and Martin Luther. Naples has always been a sort of refuge for those persecuted by the Vatican. At the same time it is also a place, which combines paganism with Catholicism – and both are widely depicted in various ways on almost every building. I have childhood memories of that peculiar aesthetics [perhaps also in the spirit of the Potemkin village]: devastated façades covered by large posters depicting heroes of the time. I used the same approach to commemorate my heroes. A discussion as to who the depicted figures were quickly arose at the public square. Since the locals are apprehensive about the unknown and value reverence and respect, I decided to tell them the figures were clergymen, which seemed to please them.

GD- *In his essay 'In Praise of Profanity' Giorgio Agamben affirms that the spiritual potentialities that once defined people's lives - such as art, religion, nature, philosophy and politics – have withdrawn into the Museum, which is described as the exhibition of the contemporary impossibility of using, of experiencing and thus of profaning. Another striking aspect of your exhibition was for me its relation to Naples, to its mysteries and mythical landscape. The exhibition was indirectly saying something revealing about the city..*

My projects are always made for their specific context. [...] The exhibition in Naples is a study of the location, its periods but also its lava layers, which one peripherally perceives just by walking through them. It is all a rather functioning symbiosis. The city used to be an enormously multicultural center and, in a way, it still remains one today. The exhibition used the city itself as a theme, also through the installation of the handmade large-scale photographs hanging on the wall enclosing the room, creating a narrow corridor so that the spectator could only view the photographs up-close, which is a similar experience as the one of the grand façades of palaces in Naples. Here, the contrast is also present: the sheer size of the inner space in comparison with the outer space, which is only given a small distance to perceive it. The photographs are falling apart; we are unable to perceive the image as a whole. This somewhat deals with the perception of experience, which is very strong in Naples.