

II

Incisive

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A readymade is a found object, usually industrially manufactured, which lends itself to infiltration into a given art context. As is widely acknowledged, Marcel Duchamp demonstrated before anyone else how, in the modern era, the readymade, with its coolly operational, strategic *gesture*, could be elevated to the rank of a contemporary artwork in its own right.

In the meantime, it seems as though the whole world is a readymade, challenging us all in an unprecedented way—a relentless deluge of objects and signs that pour down on us and immediately connect us anew with everything and everyone on a daily basis and in a non-material way.

In contrast to Duchamp, an entirely opposite impulse operates in Giulia Piscitelli's art. Instead of cool detachment, her works are perennially endowed with a warmth, indeed, a psychological heat factor no less: anything and everything in this world can be her point of departure and, at the same time, a projection surface for the emotional and mental energy in her reaction.

She carefully selects these objects from the infinite mass available in order to subject them to surprising transformational processes, which she does in a considered manner. This can be as rapid as a karate chop, as in *Guerra / e pace*, 2013, in which she cleanly and elegantly cut an edition of Tolstoy's *War and Peace* into two unequal pieces. A resolute intervention that revolves around the topic as an energetic discharge of escalating thoughts: why is there no end to the misery of war? The book as an allegorical beacon is now lying flat on its face, so to speak, whereby the red rectangle on the spine of the book bearing its title can be read as either an open wound wrought with gold lettering or a pool of blood.

You can literally hear the shrill sound of the electric saw because noise also belongs to the repertoire of Piscitelli's readymades.

Indeed, we see the saw and hear its screeching in the video *Disarmo*, 2019, in which a revolver is neatly sawn into pieces, dismembered. We look, understand—yes, understand all too well that this is the very thing we have to endure, like the relentlessly insistent, piercing sound that makes you physically cringe.

Or the loud clattering of a warning flag as it flutters violently in the video *BRICST*, 2013, a fierce rattling of the wind, whose roaring sound connotes red alert. Is it not possible to recognize a corresponding hyped-up awareness of life in this? The title of the work, which refers to the emerging economies of the BRICST countries, an acronym for Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa and Turkey, accentuates the timeliness of this visual conflation. Ideas of wind speeds, the forces of nature, high seas collide with those of economics, geopolitics and mind mapping: the range of meaning expands exponentially, starting from an ordinary everyday object – a pole with a piece of fabric attached to it – only to veer off to thematically far-reaching regions, to momentarily assimilate spatial, temporal territories, aimed at the microstructure of the psyche.

For Giulia Piscitelli, art is a magic wand that suddenly and surprisingly short circuits our senses and our minds with explosive content that is lying dormant, latent, even repressed in our collective memory. Her works are full of associations that leap out at us with the force of a tenebrous poetry, raw, unpolished and fragmented, relics and references dredged from the depths of time.

It is not far-fetched to think about the fertile soil of Neapolitan superstition when contemplating Giulia Piscitelli's special relationship to the everyday objects and the simple gestures that attend them. Nor, indeed, to think about a culture that endows things – their and our movements – with proverbial

superpowers of as yet unimagined magnitude. Opening an umbrella indoors brings you bad luck.

Staged in 2013 in Naples, Piscitelli titled one of her shows *Sim Sala Bim* after one of the typical spells amateur magicians enunciate as they pull a rabbit from a top hat. Invariably, something is conjured into or out of existence with a swift, deft flourish.

Likewise, Giulia Piscitelli magically attempts to transform the state of everyday objects in her work, such as stiffening a crocheted blanket by soaking it in a sugar solution. This creates an ambiguous image that gradually becomes uncannier as you ponder it. The doubly warming aspect of the lovingly crocheted blanket has evaporated, replaced by a stiffened boxlike receptacle. And then you are suddenly taken aback: is the blanket now a tomb?

The work *Planeta*, 2018, is the outcome of one of these interventions that combine contradictory elements to create a memorial, a charged image. It comprises pieces of bulletproof material, which have been painstakingly removed from one vest and reassembled to create a resplendent priestly robe replete with shimmering golden aura. Just the ticket for a menacing, spectral ceremony. The martial provenance of this fine, metallic fabric is still evident. The surface, with its recalcitrant folds, merely simulates the very suppleness that the material, in its strangely scarred, dented and dismembered anatomy, will never, ever possess.

Piscitelli plays with the magic of ritual, religious and cultish, subjecting things to an influx of energy as a kind of alchemical process, a passage into the world of objects and thoughts in order to viscerally mutate them. The highly ambiguous work *Una nuvola come tappeto*, 2019, shows the extent to which our thought patterns and assumptions can be challenged. The poppily upholstered church pews suddenly radiate a freshness contrasting sharply with the received perception of the fusty, antiquated counterpart beneath. In addition, the artful

fusion of plain prie-dieux from a Catholic church and the colorfully-patterned velvet of their Muslim prayer-rug upholstery recall not least the theological intersections of these two Abrahamic religions.

In the work *Spyhole*, 2012, Piscitelli draws on precious church silk damask drapes with tasseled borders. Using bleach to obtain a lighter shade, she distributes a number of circular dots around this magnificent, almost square salmon-colored image carrier. As the title suggests, the pattern of circles replicates the holes in the doors of prison cells, which enable the guards to secretly watch the inmates. The radial and axial symmetry of the arrangement of the circles in their "understated", indeed, centuries-old, sun-bleached tonal neutrality mingles perfectly with the antique-like appearance of the baroque material. And yet we know the extent to which this beautiful object harbors the barb of a deeper, more harrowing truth: the clash of two profoundly separate realities that are nevertheless so intertwined, as Michel Foucault describes in *Discipline and Punish*.

Giulia Piscitelli's visual vocabulary is always extremely elementary, but in her series titled *Spica*, 2011, she chooses a quintessentially archaic motif, which she runs through every permutation in a total of eleven works: the symbol of fertility and rebirth, the ear of corn. The work comprises eleven portrait-format canvases, which are actually large narrow silk scarves in a range of colors, to which Piscitelli has applied bleach as her paint. As a gesture, extracting paint from as opposed to applying it to a canvas is as simple as it is complex.

The earliest ear of corn cited by Piscitelli dates back to a fossil from 1800 BCE; others range from ancient coins to the GDR 10-pfennig coin from 1949.

Whereas on the one hand the color of the image carriers derives from some found material and, as such, another instance of a readymade, namely a piece of silk taffeta that iridesces wonderfully in the light, on the other hand the resulting design

or picture has been burned, etched into the fabric. This process also vaguely trespasses on the territory of drawing. The wetness of the bleach causes it to diffuse immediately, effectively prohibiting the tracing of crisp outlines. What is imperative here is an intuitive grasp of the material; it requires a certain amount of persistence—but not over-compensation—to create the image, which gradually emerges in increasingly light and delicate nuances as the fabric dries. The suspended banners are also sensitive membranes; only when facing the light do they come to life. Delicate folds reiterate the ear of corn motif via the vertical emphasis on the center.

Etching a picture finds a parallel in *Idem*, 2010, the cluster of agave leaves in which anonymous individuals have carved their names, initials and messages into the succulent plant leaves. Less lyrical than *Spica*'s silk banners, the note struck here is harsher and more directly influenced by life. Piscitelli discovered the agave with its "tattoos" in the Naples Zoo, bundling the scarred leaves together for her installation and hanging them upside down from the ceiling of the sublime basement dungeon of the *Fondazione Morra Greco* in Naples.

I went to see the work in the winter of 2010 at a time when it was bitterly cold in Naples. Nearly ten years have elapsed in the interim; the plant sculpture has since shriveled somewhat and hardened into a woody, fibrous thing on which the inscriptions are still legible. Thus, the sculpture *Idem*, which, like an archaic variant of social media, once captured all sorts of ephemeral yet impassioned human communications as a kind of organic screen, has maintained its impressive physical existence. The traces, the signs of life and the innate melancholy of transience are indelibly etched into its withered flesh.