

The Politics of Everyday Life

Why Giulia Piscitelli needs Naples for her art

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When Giulia Piscitelli steps out onto her large balcony from her apartment, which doubles as her studio, she can see a slip road below and opposite, an open area accommodating the University of Naples's sports complex; she sees metal tracks and the sort of weeds that flourish on waste land; she can glimpse the sea in the distance. In time Naples will continue to develop and absorb this open space, its proximity to the sea and the beneficial traffic connections being attractive plus points, but the ruins of the Ilva / Italsider company, the erstwhile steel industry, are rusting away amid the scrubland and first modern buildings. Giulia Piscitelli, who has been living here with her family for a long time, is not the catalyst of this change, but an observer. She records in her art what is going on around her, how Naples, and with it the world as a whole, is undergoing a process of transformation. We can safely assume then that Giulia Piscitelli is assimilating into her art the ongoing appreciation of the piece of land directly in front of her in one form or another. It is conceivable that she might use her balcony to hang one of her banners from *Agenzia Delle Entrate*, 2015, adorned with the symbol for the biometric passport with a rectangle and a circle and thereby reminding us that the speedier handling of formalities at the border only benefits those who are biometrically inconspicuous. The banners are a further reminder that no human being is illegal, that human rights are universal, which could also mean that in a globalized world not only free movement of goods and data obtains, but also that of people. Giulia Piscitelli could use her banners to address the general theme of accessibility—access to this waste land in front of her apartment, but also in general to a more beautiful world, to a future. But it is also conceivable that Piscitelli rearranged the object *Scintilla*, 2010, somewhere on a shelf in her studio—a sole of a high-heeled shoe studded with

nails, itself a mnemonic for the fact that the elevation of a piece of waste land into an investment-worthy development site, the rise of a district with favorable infrastructure, good connections to the city center and simultaneous proximity to the sea or, indeed, good personal social standing, are never achieved painlessly.

The famous Amalfi coast begins to the South of Naples; its eponymous coastal road offers spectacular views of sea and land as it snakes along the jagged twists and turns of the rocky coastline. Of course, the sense of awe and excitement doesn't begin here, it has already kicked in a little further north in Naples itself in the apprehension of how the city has been completely integrated into its immediate geological and geographical environs. The buildings, constructed from volcanic rock, densely clad the steep slopes, Vesuvius dominates the panorama from every angle; in the suburban town of Pozzuoli, a campsite built on incredibly hollow-sounding ground adjoins the Phlegraean Fields with sulfurous steam issuing from numerous fumeroles and only a little further west lies Lago d'Averno, the volcanic crater lake, supposedly the entrance to the underworld; the restaurants studded along its shores have names like "Elysium" and "Abraxas", recalling the locality's mythological ancestry. The serrated coastline forms natural havens for seafarers, villas perch on imposing rocks, but in between there's a somewhat prosaic takeaway, or a petrol station on the aptly named street Via Lucullus, which arguably has the most picturesque view of all. The *Carrere manorial di Nisida* juvenile detention center capitalizes upon the natural features of the Nisida peninsula—accessible only via a narrow road—as a place of natural isolation. Towards the street, a metal fence segregates the inmates from the free world. However, the individual bars are bent in some places, so that the young offenders can easily slip through and swim in the sea, before returning to the center in the evening. This is how Giulia Piscitelli tells the story from her immediate domestic vantage point overlooking a piece of waste land out to the volcanic isle of Nisida just off the coast. In *Contested zones*, 2011, Piscitelli transfers the grid of the fence to the exhibition wall effectively

by drawing the individual bars using paper from streamers, that is to say, affixing them onto the wall. This abstract mural is reduced to such an extent that its formal beauty can only be decoded through the artist's explanations and thereby gain social relevance beyond its outward aesthetic appeal. This is characteristic of Piscitelli's approach. She has a penchant for beautiful materials and harmonious forms. The series *Rendiresto*, 2013, consists of eleven marble objects, which are modeled on the kind of cashier's change trays from a diverse array of counters and kiosks. The round shape and slight depressions in these marble objects are very attractive, both visually and haptically. As the original templates are usually made from unprepossessing materials, such as plastic or metal, we generally don't tend to pay much attention to these little things of everyday life. Fashioned from marble and placed side by side on a long table, Piscitelli awakens our curiosity about and alludes to commerce in general, to exchange and perhaps also to the ultimate disappearance of money in the form of coins and notes, as some states are already seriously considering dispensing with cash altogether. This would effectively exclude many people who have neither a bank account nor a credit card from an essential sector of everyday life in our society. Just recently during the summer holidays in Italy, we witnessed sweets being given as a proxy for the appropriate change for a transaction—here at least, money passing from one hand to another has been outmoded.

The associations offered by Giulia Piscitelli's art are never overly taxed, but they are invariably rich. Her aesthetic preferences for fine materials and abstract forms often contradict the raw, socially-relevant content of her works, but there is always enough mess in her art to avoid the risk of excessive heightening or descent into kitsch. Instead, Piscitelli is able to spark our interest in and attention for supposedly insignificant details of everyday life by means of her aesthetic approach. But it is by no means an insignificant particular whether money exists physically or just as a digital means of payment, or when at a newsstand or in a pasticceria, for example, whether we also trade a few words with the money we are exchanging or

whether we order the things for everyday life online and have them delivered anonymously to (the comfort of) our homes. Giulia Piscitelli's current work on the floor titled *Human Resources*, 2019, consists of 150 squares laid out at regular intervals. The grid of fourteen rows and eight lines becomes disjointed in the last third, as if a careless visitor had inadvertently disrupted the order upon entering the exhibition. In fact, the series is based on a drawing by Giulia Piscitelli's godson Elvis, who was told at primary school aged five to color-in every second field of a piece of squared paper. The deviation from the regular grid in the final third was also adopted exactly from Elvis's original drawing and documents the moment when he lost his concentration or the will to continue with this inane exercise and the point when boredom caused him to rhythmically break rank. The darkish squares on the dark concrete floor are visually reminiscent of Carl Andre's work and of the exquisite taste that the precision of Minimal Art generally also embodies. However, the title *Human Resources* is also a question about the meaning and value of such an educational assignment; what are we supposed to learn from it? Does this lesson seriously cohere with the interests of a given society and what kind of society that would be? In her series *Pittura Muta*, 2019, Giulia Piscitelli covers a number of small-format paintings, which she found at flea markets and in junk shops, with silver leaf. Dating from 1930s to 1970s, they are the kind of demotic artworks that once decorated people's homes. Landscapes, still lifes and portraits that betray a good deal about the taste, but also of the social class of their original owners. The kind of figurative paintings that tend to be left over when a household is dissolved, when an old aunt dies, a parent moves to a nursing home, an apartment is given up. Their value lies solely in the eye of the beholder, the viewer, and when she or he turns away, because life takes its course, the painting loses its value. There are several examples in contemporary art of how material of this kind is appropriated and processed further. This often happens with an ironic, if not superior detachment. For Giulia Piscitelli, appropriation takes a different route: by liberating the artworks from their frames, restoring the canvasses if necessary, and then silver-coating them, she is

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once more introducing a material and creating a patina which is both pleasing to behold and connotes a certain value. She doesn't apply a mock silver coat to the surface, she actually does it properly, risking the question of whether it is good or appropriate taste. If she had merely applied her technique to the odd couple of these random paintings, it might still have been taken as a sarcastic gesture. But because of the fact that she has silver-coated a large series of 43 paintings, the impression arises instead that Giulia Piscitelli is taking on these meaningless artworks, that she is, as it were, compiling an art archive for now superfluous paintings. She herself says that in Italian, "muta" can mean "mute", "silent" but also "molting" in a biological context. The silver leaf actually becomes the new skin for the artworks. With its reflective properties, the silver leaf is reminiscent of a mirror, the thick paint under it remains visible as a contour, some of the motifs are recognizable, Piscitelli speaks of a naked image, of the skeleton of the original painting, which she reveals. However, what she is really laying over these now impossible paintings is a cover, a conciliatory gesture. They no longer languish shamefaced in the corner and gather dust, instead they are hanging there in aesthetic splendor as a large-scale series of artifacts in Giulia Piscitelli's exhibition. By not turning her back on these unfortunate works, she also lays bare in what kind of subtly differentiated society we are living despite our much-vaunted equality. Pierre Bourdieu would certainly be delighted that someone—via confusing objects in an artistic modality—has independently implemented his astute analysis of cultural difference and structural competition. In her art, Giulia Piscitelli depicts class society in such a gracious, emancipatory, almost aggression-free manner that encourages us to recognize common interests beyond the boundaries of our individual backgrounds or heritage and, indeed, perhaps even overcome them.

Threads of commitment and loyalty to people and places run through Giulia Piscitelli's life and œuvre, because the kind of devotion typical for her is only possible in a small, familiar framework. If you want to embrace the entire world, you cannot but fail because of the sheer magnitude of the undertaking.

But that doesn't mean that Piscitelli's work is only of local importance or that the reception of her work must remain local. Instead, what she is enacting is called *glocal* in zeitgeist parlance. This is most evident in the two works *Todos*, 2008, and *La Mela*, 2000–2013. She treats the subject of her family background in both works, she shows us her family, her relations, their kindness and also their collections. Like the paintings hidden in *Pittura Muta*, the protagonists in *La Mela* and *Todos* each have their idiosyncratic collections. The video *Todos* follows Piscitelli's father as he rummages for useful items in the rubbish dumped on the roadside in Naples. Back in his apartment, her father repairs broken objects, lamps, radios and watches, the harvest of his "streetcombing". The film ends when her father exclaims in the direction of the camera: "Basta", which means "enough", but also "ready" in the sense of the clock in need of repair is now fixed. In one last shot you can see the countless mended items in the apartment. Basta, that's it, there are more than enough ticking alarm clocks and timepieces in this house, the repaired items rescued from the garbage are piling up. However, the smile Giulia Piscitelli elicits from us is less to do with the quirkiness of her father's passion for collecting than about showing us the care, patience and attention in his approach to everything, even defective plastic watches. Of course, implicit here is also a reference to the profligacy of our industrialized present whereby almost everything that is seemingly broken is discarded and replaced as if our resources were infinite.

The *La Mela* group of works refers to an Italian restaurant of the same name in New York, operating since 1985 in Little Italy as a kind of culinary family home to the Neapolitan community. Giulia Piscitelli is related to its proprietors, Mimmo and Pepe. So she knows the place, the cheap interior with plastic tablecloths and the collection of photos on the wall depicting the Italian community in New York carousing at their festivals. Giulia Piscitelli's marginal knowledge of English, which may often be an obstacle in her everyday life as an artist, has ultimately enabled her to realize how inspired this translation is: the congenial transformation of the *Big Apple* into the small,

red, crisp apple, which, in the guise of *La Mela*, is a kind of home far from home for people away from their familiar environment. Piscitelli, herself a stranger in New York, illustrates in *La Mela* the longing for that familiarity and a sense of home can always easily be conjured up by translating a term from one language to another.

The unique tectonics in and around Naples necessitate special devices equipped to register the slightest vibration and trigger an alarm if necessary. The permanent threat posed by the ring of surrounding volcanoes often serves as a foil for the precarious state infrastructure, the inherent *joie de vivre*, the great cuisine or the populace's talent for improvisation. Beyond these clichés, its sensitivity to Giulia Piscitelli's art is considerable. Perhaps had she lived elsewhere, she may also have developed a sensitivity for more metaphorical seismic activity. But now it's Naples. Giulia Piscitelli has a radar for the most miniscule changes, what is developing, what is disappearing and attends to these details in her art. In the series *Wide Rule*, 2015, she captures the characteristic instruments of vanishing trades. She paints these objects on velvet with javelle water, causing the implements of a changing everyday life to fade, echoing their demise. Or in the object *Planeta*, 2018, she combines the power of the church with the violence of everyday life dominated by organized crime. The religious robe has been fashioned from the innumerable, otherwise hidden layers of a bulletproof vest. This is not an indictment of society as such, but she likes to pitch into the debate and show how easy it would be to make our everyday lives different, more considerate and friendly. In her new video *Disarmo*, 2019, she demonstrates the dismemberment of a revolver. The individual parts of this weapon are calmly sawn asunder. It is at once the consummate metaphor for how simple a good life together can be.