

Fabulae Romanae is a body of work by the artist duo Lucy + Jorge Orta that takes the viewer on a symbolic excursus across the city of Rome, drawn from archaeological and historical research conducted by the artists and their observations on the cultural and social map of the city and its seven hills. Starting from the most cherished form of the artists duo's language: the tent, Dome Dwelling and accompanied by the protagonists of their research the Spirits, who take on the form of ethereal and mysterious figures that inhabit the city. This publication brings together the installation of Lucy + Jorge Orta's work in MAXXI, the National Museum of XXI Century Arts in Rome and the video performance in which the contemporary sentinel Spirits silently explore the Roman city accompanied by the poetic verses of Mario Petrucci: we encounter the Traveler under the Castel Sant'Angelo bridge and in the Trastevere back streets; the Observer overlooking the Sacro Cuore dei Monti and the Isola Tiberina; the Tunneler and the Myth Maker in the Villa Gregoriana Park; the Flying Man, Chariot Rider, Memory Man, Bale Maker... Fabulae Romanae assumes the meaning of "homage" to Rome and was commissioned by ZegnArt with the curatorial advisor by Maria-Luisia Frisa.



LUCY + JORGE ORTA FABULAE ROMANAE



FABULAE ROMANAE

LUCY + JORGE ORTA

Marsilio

ZegnArt | Marsilio

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FABULAE ROMANAE
LUCY + JORGE ORTA

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Century Arts, Rome
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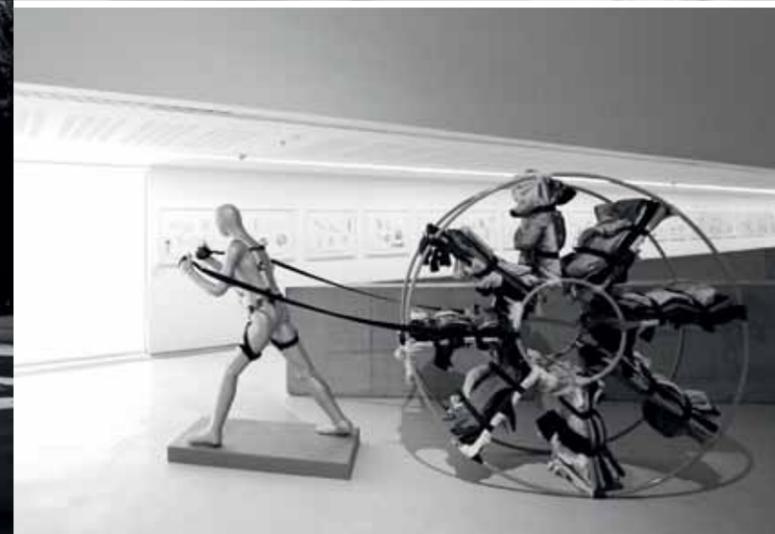
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MUSEUM INSTALLATION



FAILING BETTER

by **GIANNI BIONDILLO**

With Rome you always lose. It's not even worth trying, you're bound to fail. For years I've been trying to talk about the place, for years I've had to give up on the task. Each time I sneak up on the city, as quiet as a mouse, hoping not to be noticed. I almost always arrive by train in the evening, when the generous sun is turning the sky red and hurts your eyes, when the fawning westerly breeze blows cool air under your shirt, but as soon as I risk my feet on the unstable basalt cobbles of the station square, at my very first steps, Rome crashes down on top of me, smashing my fragile defenses, crushing me. The urban analyst renounces, the writer is struck dumb, I let myself be overwhelmed. Perhaps I will never really be able to understand this city.

Romans are born, not made. That's all. Not in the sense of belonging to a particular ethnic group or some other bit of racist lunacy. Romanity is a frame of mind. I know a lot of Romans who were born in Milan, or Madrid, and who've never seen Rome. Too big, too illogical, too all for me. Sometimes I realize that I don't even know whether the place is beautiful, whatever that adjective means. Of course, no one can argue with the statement—it's almost tediously obvious—that Rome is a beautiful city, but can this be enough, even just as a first, offhand comment? For me, every time I come there (you come to Rome, you don't go), it feels like being a diabetic in a pastry shop. You need to have a character of steel not to be overpowered by its history, its traffic, its air of despondency and cynicism. I see the Romans as a heroic people, obliged to pitch camp on the ruins of a myth; floating on a raft of doubtful stability, loaded with cumbersome monuments, they are barely able to sail close to the wind by day and seek shelter for the night. A tough city. Not a nasty one. It's even easygoing, with that climate which brazenly shows off the splendor of its limpid sky for months on end. But difficult. In the end I have the sensation that it will never be possible to embrace it all, as Bernini's colonnade rhetorically suggests. From the square the optical effect brings the façade of St. Peter's closer to the people, making the Holy Roman Apostolic Church feel wiser and more maternal. But

from the façade, from the viewpoint of the clergy, it shows its hand: the optical illusion pushes the people back where they should be, at the right distance. It's the same with the cinema, politics, the government, television. Everyone knows it and everyone pretends not to know it. This is the difficulty of living in a succession of suburbs that make themselves out to be a city.

For Rome is not a city in the strict sense of the word, and still less a metropolis. It's not just a matter of size. Paris, for instance, is a metropolis, but is not much bigger than one of Rome's many districts. Rome, in fact, is an enormous, immeasurable city. Its topographic gigantism is reflected in its inhabitants. If we were to ask a Roman what the population of the capital is, he would have no hesitation in telling us, with pride, that it's over four million; although it's not in fact true. Rome has two million seven hundred thousand inhabitants in a boundless urban area. The provinces of Milan and Monza, together, would not be enough to equal the area covered by the administrative limits of the capital; the density per square meter is very low, no comparison with that of other built-up areas. I've always found something to admire in the gigantism of the Romans, the conviction that they live in an out-of-the-ordinary city. But Rome, with all its merits, cannot really be considered a contemporary metropolis, in the usual sense of the expression. It doesn't have the frenzy of New York, the economic clout of London, the creative class of Berlin.

Only I don't know what it is, I don't know how to define it. The residual, the more obvious and predictable aspects are the ones that can be defined straightaway. Like the fact that Rome is a city worn out by a politics that resembles a farce, where the least of parliamentarians strolls arrogantly arm-in-arm with a TV starlet or high-priced call girl (who, out of love of all things foreign, is called an "escort" in Italy. As if a word borrowed from another language could ennoble the profession practiced). A panorama of arrogance, a parade of effrontery, a scenario from the Late Roman Empire. But Romans would be happy to do without this blurred and undeserved photograph. Even though,

when the city is brought into focus, we are dazzled, lapsing into the cliché, into the postcard. Bridges, churches, monuments, ruins, parks, sky, clouds: taking pictures of it is crazy, you inevitably sink into the picturesque, into the saccharine.

Even the feeble Italian cinema of recent years—which means Roman cinema, given that nine out of ten films are made in the capital—carefully avoids telling us anything about the city. It is presented to us, taking the part for the whole, in the usual middle-class districts—Prati, Parioli—inside reassuring apartments, with hazy forays on the Tiber or into some park, as if to anesthetize the immeasurable size of the city. Already a scene in Trastevere, a sequence in the Borghi, leaves you weak at the knees. Even when it's been tried by someone like Woody Allen, with his *From Rome with Love*, it's an obvious flop. The Americans think they know the place, but in reality they don't understand it. No one understands Rome. But no one, at the same time, can resist trying to unravel its meaning, its Gordian knot. This is the challenge. Piece after piece, from the neorealist *Roma città aperta* to Fellini's surreal *Roma* and from Pasolini's peripheral and extreme *dérive* to Nanni Moretti's tour of the city by scooter, every view adds more confusion, multiplies the doubts. It's not a logical city, Rome. No one can really map out its soul, as the Stalker urban art workshop has been trying to do for years. Losing yourself in its commonplaces is almost obligatory. It is curious, in fact, that the inventors of European planning, of the military *castrum*, should have had as their capital the apotheosis of urban confusion. You need to go to Turin, for instance, to comprehend the order, the rationality of empire. Rome instead is irrational, pre-logical, instinctive. Erotic. Yes, erotic. Catholicism in Rome is not punitive, castigatory. The naked bodies of the saints, tortured, bleeding, martyred, never appear deformed, sick, diseased, dying. The arrows that transfix St. Sebastian look like darts shot by Cupid, the ecstasy of St. Teresa exposes her sensuality to everyone's gaze, sculpted actors and passersby in prayer, without the least embarrassment. It is no coincidence that—as I have been told by

“people acquainted with the facts”— the highest concentration of links to gay porn sites in the world is from the Vatican City.

The poems of Attilio Bertolucci, of Giorgio Caproni, tell me that Rome is an emotional, sexual city, as do the almost classical verses of Sandro Penna where eroticism is part of everyday life, flaunted, just as in those of Pier Paolo Pasolini. Rome in poems is the backdrop to continual amorous, physical, carnal quests, it is a paradise that gives no peace to its inhabitants; even in the light verses of Valentino Zeichen or the ethical and homoerotic ones of Franco Buffoni.

It is curious, thinking about it... none of the poets I have mentioned was born in Rome. Could it be that you have to be from somewhere else to speak of it? The truth is that Rome Romanizes. Everything and everyone. You don't leave Rome, you arrive in Rome, you decide to live there, to make it your life. People become Roman, like the Lombards Caravaggio and Borromini or the Neapolitan Bernini did. You accept its incomprehensible logic of settlement.

It is as if it had always been there, before us, before our ancestors even; this is the feeling I get every time I land in the city. I know it's irrational, but this fanciful impression helps me make my way through Rome: Rome was there before us, that's it!

It's not simply an old city. There are older ones in Italy. People have been living in the Sassi di Matera without a break since the Neolithic period, Syracuse was a city when Rome was not even a village. Nor is it something linked to the monuments of the past. Rome is full of them, of course, but it is brimming over with modernity too. There is nowhere in the city, no view, that makes me feel as if I had been projected into a hypothetical immaculate past. Other cities, in Italy, can offer me this imaginary journey in time: cities frozen at a given moment in history, unmoving medieval, Renaissance cities. But in Rome history is not immobile. Rome is ancient, medieval, baroque, modern... History—all the world's history—is in Rome, simultaneously. But this overexposure to time becomes almost ultra-historical, inhuman. Alien. That's it: alien.

Now I've got it: Rome has always felt like a city founded by aliens. The legacy of a mysterious, nonhuman people, vanished millions of years ago. A ruined city, an extinct city, of which we understand neither the inner logic nor the significance of some of its monuments, so different from one another, in their style, in their execution: vast ovals of openwork stone, forests of towering domes, skyscrapers slumbering on the horizon. Over the centuries, groups of nomads have found shelter in the alien ruins, inhabiting them; gathering in hamlets, in villages, they have restored some kind of road system, turned mausoleums into workshops, traded, borne children and lived, without ever really understanding where the alien civilization that constructed this wonder came from. They found it the way it is and adapted it to make it a temporary refuge. That's how I see the Romans. The city was there before them, it will be there after their passing. They are vagabonds who have found a home. Sedentary nomads. They have built at random on top of the ultra-historical ruins, infestations on a human, not an alien scale. The urban carapace accepts without concern the wounds inflicted on it, the disparate concretions, the untidy campsites, as if it could, if it wished, shake them off with a shrug, with a jolt. In Rome you can only live day by day, seizing the moment, just as Horace taught us: “*quam minimum credula postero*” (“putting as little trust as possible in the future,” is how I like to translate it). Tomorrow Rome will be there, anyway, regardless of us, but it is today that we live, suffer, dream. There's no point in trying to compete with the city, its measure is not human. Disfiguring it, with unauthorized building, with illogical traffic, with neglect, feels like blasphemy, a puerile challenge to the divine.

How do you “do art” in a city like this? You're wasting your time and you know it. You can't design in Rome, defeat is inevitable. Imitating an alien tongue, without knowing its vocabulary, means babbling, in vain. Try to manipulate space, to model form, and you fall straight into the unsuccessful emulation of a monument.

And yet some have succeeded. Lucy and Jorge Orta have succeeded. Because they've understood that you

can't make sense of Rome, it doesn't work out.

In Rome mystery is piled on mystery. Their works shun bronze, dressed stone. They are fragile ideas that seek shelter in urban byways. They are temporary tents that house the fugitives, the nomads, who come to Rome from all the land masses of the globe (for, as I was saying, you don't leave Rome, you arrive). Lengths of cloth heaped up like bundles to be dragged around as if they were days, the domestic history of every fugitive, the weight of frail memory each of us carries with us. And they are deformed travelers, the ones imagined by Lucy and Jorge Orta, infantile centaurs, urban spirits, *genii locorum*. But not of this earth. There we are. Not simply human. They are metaphorical witnesses that connect other worlds. As if the alien builders had finally come home; not to ask for it back, no! They are here as if they were witnesses to our actions, oracles to be deciphered, poetic observers of reality. Which grows unreal, aesthetic, eternal. And here is the apparent contradiction: in the Eternal City, in the city of stone, you can make art only with the temporary. With textiles, wool, wood, balloons, rags. The eternal is sought in the fragile, in the everyday, through an allegorical and at the same time anti-rhetorical gaze. A gaze full of pietas for the children of this difficult, unique, absolute city. This incomparable city. Yes, they pulled it off. But I am forced to admit defeat again. Rome calls me, asks me to untie the knots of its mystery, but the ball just grows more tangled. Or perhaps it's me who wants to believe that, perhaps it's me who is not yet ready to answer a question never posed. With Rome you always lose. I tried, as I do every time, and like every other time I failed. But it's not a problem. I have the whole of my life in front of me to fail again. As Samuel Beckett put it: “No matter. Try Again. Fail again. Fail better.”

GIANNI BIONDILLO (Milan, 1966), an architect, has published the essays: *Carlo Levi e Elio Vittorini. Scritti di Architettura* (1997), *Giovanni Michelucci. Brani di città aperti a tutti* (1999), *Pasolini. Il corpo della città* (2001), *Metropoli per principianti* (2008). His first novel, published by Guanda in 2004, was *Per cosa si uccide*. Also brought by Guanda: *Con la morte nel cuore* (2005), *Per sempre giovane* (2006), *Il giovane sbirro* (2007) and *Nel nome del padre* (2009). He has written, with Michele Monina, *Tangenziali. Due viandanti ai bordi della città* (2010). His latest novel *I materiali del killer* (2011) won the Premio Scerbanenco-La Stampa. In 2012 he published the collection of short stories *Strane Storie*. His novels have been translated into Spanish, French and German. He is a member of the editorial staff of *Nazione Indiana*, the most widely read cultural blog in Italy.

















