

Three Foreigners Re(Make) Italy Greenaway, Kentridge and Straub in Venice: a tribute to both our ancient and experimental art by Stefano Bucci April 25, 2015

A tribute, actually three, to Italy in the upcoming Biennale. Among the 18 artists' contributions which Padiglione Italia's curator, Vincenzo Trione, has brought together for the Codice Italia exhibition, three in particular come to the fore. These are the works by Englishman Peter Greenaway (1942), South African William

Kentridge (1955) and Frenchman Jean-Marie Straub (1933), all foreign masters who have always been willingly seduced by the charm and aspirations of our country. Their contributions will stand alongside those of Alis/Filliol, Andrea Aquilanti, Francesco Barocco, Vanessa Beecroft (Italian born but now a U.S. citizen), Antonio Biasiucci, Giuseppe Caccavale, Paolo Gioli, Jannis Kounellis (of Greek origin, but now Roman by adoption), Nino Longobardi, Marzia Migliora, Luca Monterastelli, Mimmo Paladino, Claudio Parmiggiani, Nicola Samori', Aldo Tambellini (Italian born but a longtime resident of the U.S.).

Greenaway, Kentridge and Straub have been assigned the task of casting a somewhat innovative look on the unique, or almost, (Italian) way of making art, which has always intermingled its often cumbersome past of classical art with the desire for experimentation and new forms of expression: all perfectly poised between Remus and Pasolini, as Trione explains, but always (and above all) beyond anachronisms and nostalgia. Codice Italia presents a harmonious concert where the single instruments still remain distinct, the embodiment (ideal) of a seriousness which Italy (and its art) has long claimed, and a "Western" vision of the creativity intended to counterbalance the more exotic one associated with the universes of Africa and Asia. The exhibition includes artists from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds whose very diversity has allowed them to come up with an original variation of the concept of the avant-garde, one which is capable of reinventing the media as well as dealing with iconographic and cultural material already on hand. This should also (and here Pasolini's lesson is crucial) enable one to be in tune with the most daring results of international research and to sometimes find marginal moments in the history of art, when one can experiment and draw from that immense reservoir which is memory.

Thus, next to a series of (never previously exhibited) symbolic works which act as poetic manifestos, the curator has asked «his» 18 artists to accompany their works with the creation of unexpected wonder rooms, inspired by Aby Warburg's Mnemosyne Atlas. How have these artists—Greenway (trained as a painter, later screenwriter, film director, and visionary artist), Kentridge (who actively experimented with new aesthetic possibilities through the use of traditional techniques such as etchings or drawings), and Straub (filmmaker close to the Nouvelle Vague and always fascinated by new forms of language)—rendered homage to Italy? Greenaway proposes a journey through the history of art, from the frescoes of Pompeii, to the paintings of Morandi, encompassing Leonardo, Raffaello and Michelangelo. From each work, the director of *The Draughtsman's Contract* (1982) and the film-installation (2007) (which was intended to bring the Reggia di Venaria Reale back to life) "extracted visual pieces" (books, hands, blood, eyes) and then rearranged them much like on the grid of a periodic table, allowing them to interact with each other through spatial screens where painting, cinema, music and new media are all intertwined. Kentridge's tribute develops instead within a room inside the pavilion with a collection of charcoal drawings made on sheets of old ledgers, along with collages of figures which on a smaller scale reproduce the frieze of Trajan's Column. We begin with the preparatory drawings for the *Triumphs and Laments* (a project conceived for the embankment walls that run along the Tiber River, created in collaboration with the Tevereterno Association and the Lia Rumma Gallery). We then continue with a sequence of figures 12 meters high and 550 meters in length which evoke a journey through history and news reports, with an interweaving of images from the bombing of the San Lorenzo neighborhood during World War II, to the characters from *La Dolce Vita*, the plague of the 13th century, the death of Remus and that of Pier Paolo Pasolini (for which Kentridge cuts out, on the outside wall of a room for the length of 7 meters, a figure lying on the ground.

In his first time at the Biennale, Jean-Marie Straub in turn presents an installation built on three different elements (image, sound, working material) that reflect both on his film and on his intense and long-lasting relationship with Italy. The central corpus draws essentially on History Lessons, a film produced in Rome in 1972 (remade digitally in a room in New York by the Iranian filmmaker Amir Naderi) and refers more precisely to the last 7 of 56 shots of the film. All of this inside a small movie theatre which nonetheless allows the spectator to experience something he normally cannot: the film's dialogue and live recordings taken from the streets of Rome which narrate the life of a city, or better, let you hear it. And this is yet another piece of this Codice Italia that the Biennale endeavors to discover, but which, perhaps, has been (at least) in part, already successfully written.