

## Comizi di Donne

Video installation - curated by Maria Teresa Annarumma

Opening 30th of June 2022 h.19.00

Complesso Museale Santa Maria delle Anime del Purgatorio ad Arco-Naples

Via dei Tribunali 39

During the pandemic thousands of women lost their jobs (in Italy, 98% of the people fired as a result of the pandemic have been women and it has been calculated that globally women have lost around \$ 800 billions in income) and of these very many came to be overwhelmed by the lack of effective welfare support (the series of lock-downs pushed women in many cases to be the only one taking care of their children or of their elderly and infirm parents). Now we are living at a time of a new war in Europe in which we see men in conflict with other men, men trying to negotiate, men trying to flee but being turned back and driven to war by their own people. And women? Women escape with their children, women wait, and women become part of the landscape of war. It is a scenario that we could have seen through centuries. It is a scene my mother knew as a child and one from which I have been spared.

Women's lives have been always under pressure, across centuries, even if with different consequences depending on the specific context. They have needed to fight social, economic and political structures which set apart the participation of women and which exploit their work (domestic and not).

Nowadays, in our societies, it's common to imagine women as emancipated and as free to shape their lives as they choose, but, of course, the daily reality for the great majority of women is very different. Much of daily life is experienced as an obstacle course in which the problems to be negotiated, economic, social and political, are still very much present, even where the cultural and societal circumstances can be said to have changed. If we have, for example, almost universally overcome the limited access to jobs (recognizing at the same time that there are many countries in which this is not yet the reality) because of political decisions shaped by economic as well as by wider social pressures, there are still very significant differences in the levels of wages between men and women.

But if we are generally aware of wage disparities, or that women are still very often victims of a double morality in society in which they are judged very widely for their sexual choices or even

their clothing style (thinking of the way in which this is put under a magnifying lens in sexual harassment cases, the judgement being decided on the evidence of a too short dress or the contents of a mobile phone that betray a too eager interest in carnality), I believe that it is even more important to give attention to the daily efforts that women have the habit to face even just to get the most basic of equal opportunities in life: how many times should women still have to face the life determining choice between maternity or career? How many times should women have to substitute for the lack of welfare to support children or elderly people in care, sacrificing their own hopes and aspirations? And how many times will a business plan, reorganization, a "downsizing", inevitably result in the women employees being "let go" while the men get to stay? It is in these daily decisions, and in many others like them, that the imbalances and inequities that persist deform lives and betray not only individual hope but the hopes of society, of men as well as of women.

We have all experienced directly or indirectly situations of gender inequality, it is sadly evident that this is a social injustice commonly accepted as the normality, maybe regrettable, but just the way things are. After the "golden age" of the feminist movements and the several achievements that they got, we haven't seen a wider cultural revolution. Instead, there has been a progressive polarization of the female fight for a personal agenda, always recuperated and contained by the lack of a collective determination. The wave of attention to women's predicament ebbing in the face of overfamiliarity, economic recession, the next big thing, gender disparity, and the assumption that everything had changed - when, as we see from where we are today, the look, the dress, the means of expression, may not be the same but so much that we hoped and believed would be different remains much as it was. It's well into the twenty first century and still this is how things are. The promise of a way forwards through the economic demands of society for a larger and better educated work force, or the seeming invitation of new technologies that would free women in every part of their lives, in the home, in their families, in the new work place, even in dating and in pleasure, bringing with it a new limit, a new condition, so much like the old one.

The pandemic and the consequent economic and social crisis showed us how much the belief in a new society built solely on the promise of new technologies capable of freeing people, was a chimera, as the promise has always been, the new freedoms and benefits opening to new cages, new brutalities, and the same old inequities, but yet more extreme. It was the first time since the start of the industrial world, and its globalization, that production was everywhere curtailed and the workers forced to stay home where they were dependent on technologies that both enabled their lives and developed dependencies that constrain them. And this didn't only help to push forward new, and sometimes more dramatic, forms of worker's exploitation, the consequences of which are yet to be played out, but was able to create a polarization of individuality - the yet more isolated mother and career, the home office worker, the gig economy worker waiting for a call that may come just one day a week, the on-call taxi driver, etc. A world that emerges from the sense of personal and societal danger and the feelings of the lives of family, friends, neighbors, and fellow workers, being precarious and uncertain, emerges from the isolation that many experienced, maybe for the first time, into a precarious present. There is both the memory of a very recent past and a collective social and psychological hurt, and, for many, loss, as well as an uncertainty about the present. What we have witnessed through this time, everywhere and throughout society, was the need of care and relation: the care which many missed because social relations were limited, and the care that many others were in need of.

The large project of *Comizi di Donne*, of which this is the final part, began with Pier Paolo Pasolini and his understanding that we need to attend to the living, and to lives for too long overlooked. And, with this, relating Pasolini's thought to that of Fernand Braudel and the social historians of the "longue durée". The work taking as its base a conception of history as being traced through everyday lives and not, as convention had for long determined, of history as a chronicle of events, of great men, and great victories. For Braudel history as the everyday is the history of the world that carries all being, of which great events are only one, and by no means the most significant, part.

"*Comizi di Donne*" aims at the revolutionary possibilities of what art can be, how it may act, with us as protagonists in its making. And to do that, we propose from this also a revolutionary reading of the history of Naples and of Neapolitan women supporting the idea of the New Neapolitan Republic: The Republic of Women, a step that was prefigured by the female voices of the sound installation by Marco Messina that marked in its revolutionary assertion the transition between the past, of Pasolini and Braudel, and the contested present.

Of course, Naples is the city where this project takes place, but I also believe that the history of Naples and of the first Neapolitan Republic, as well as the history of a part of the Neapolitan feminist movements, can give us a possible alternative settlement in a new shared awareness.

This is the proposal of *Comizi di Donne*: an affective art of caring and relation, and a new republic of Naples.

## Why Naples

### Historical background

Naples has several historical and social sides which can be seen as being particularly helpful in this. The revolution and the establishment of the Republic of Naples in 1799, even if can be seen as very distant from us in time, had several aspects to it that have significance for us now. And one in particular: despite its having been a revolution from an intellectual "elite", it was totally focused on the idea that the core of every democracy was the education of all the citizens. Those who later in the century will be called proletarians. The fatal irony of course is that this republic that was founded in the notion of the emancipation of the people was to be overthrown by the very citizens it longed to free, as the populous, manipulated by the deposed monarchy and estranged from the revolution, rose up against it and brought it down. In doing so opening the way to the return of a corrupt and slowly degenerating regime that would last until the events of the later part of the century, and the coming of another, more equivocal, revolution, a republic that would come to diminish Naples and the Neapolitan world.

Looking at this history alongside the path of the feminist movements of the later part of the twentieth century in Naples, we can see so many parallel experiences, even across the almost two centuries that separate them. And these can be inspiring for a different historical understanding. It is because of this that our conversation began with the association "*Madrigale per Lucia*" concerning what I believe is a significantly interesting part of the history of Italian feminism

reflected in the life of Lucia Mastrodomenico and the "Mensa dei Bambini Proletari" (Canteen of proletarian children) of which she was one of the founders.

A laboratory of activism born in 1973 the Mensa showed, in the 10 years of its life, that political consciousness needs to be able to develop pragmatic answers responding to people's needs, to help and to be useful. It was set up when several leftist intellectuals decided to challenge the difficult reality of what was one of the poor districts in Naples (actually feeding and giving educational tools to hundreds of children). With it they experimented in the forming of a feminism that could look without illusion or prejudice to the everyday life experience of women in attempting to understand in what pragmatic ways they could be helped to free themselves from the struggle simply to survive.

The story of the "Mensa" can show us that even when there is at the center of a feminist approach to society an interpretation of women's skills, like the practice of caring and the attention to relations, skills in which they are already valued, it is possible to see an alternative way of living daily life which can free them from much that oppresses them. A change which makes a giant difference to individual lives and to a community. In fact, through the testimony of some women who were part of this group (between them also Cinzia Mastrodomenico), we will see that education, caring, and attention to relation, which are still significantly a part of women's daily lives, can be democratic instruments in the forming of a new society, as it was hoped by the first Neapolitan Republic.

But it may also be imagined that the gap of recognition of the reality of this part of female experience, so widely overlooked, can be seen to be one of the reasons in which the cultural revolution hoped for by feminism found an incomplete outcome. It may be that the distance between intellectuals and the simple practical issues that women face and from which many intellectually engaged women, through education, inherited wealth, and familial security, are distanced, however sincere their purpose, could be the reason of this incomplete revolution. It is of course true that these are not only matters of class and inequality, arguments continue to rage around race and ethnicity, cultural distinctions, religion and historical division. That which separates, and which traps us in an unbroken cycle of disappointed hope, has deep roots.

Messina's Nuova Repubblica Napoletana asserts that while the great promise and possibility of the first Neapolitan Republic was in the strength of its people, however it and they were betrayed, its base were, and continue to be, in its women, in general and in particular, in female social being and in individual lives. That is, in this hidden and essential part of the society that in the past would have been identified with the proletariat, but, in a time in which capitalistic exploitation is spread across every social class, it comes to stand for, to represent, and to most clear speak for, the reality of the female condition, and, from this, it comes to be the ground for revolutionary change.

What Nuova Repubblica Napoletana, as well as the stories that I have spoken about here, and that we are going to hear about in *Comizi di Donne*, show is also the attitude that is maybe peculiar to this city and which relates to the history of Neapolitan women. As becomes ever more evident: there is a Neapolitan incapability to go beyond the present, and the past, in near total blindness to the future. At the same time tradition, and of course superstition, are a part of daily life in constant conversation with the experience of each inhabitant. It is as though there is always

a sense of there being no horizon, and an awareness that it is pointless to plan for the future and that all experiences get lost beyond the life of those who live them.

The common rule is to get the best from the present without thinking too much about the consequences.

But women are about creation and future! And might it not be that part of this cultural and social malaise comes from the displacement, the denial, of the truth of the female condition which still looks in vain for social, cultural and political recognition?

### Cultural reason

Pasolini had a curious affection for Naples, writing, almost fifty years ago now: *"(...) Although it has been a long time since I last visited Naples, Neapolitans are for me the kind of people that I really find likeable, and in addition to this they are ideologically likeable. They are the ones who have not changed during this time (the last ten years), and in fact they have always been like that (...)"* (Lutheran Letters, 1976). What Pasolini could well have been describing is the kind of dramatic, direct and possibly theatrical way in which Neapolitans are used to live without filter, beyond the one of expression.

Naples, in terms of its urban development, doesn't really have at its center a distinct separation between districts that can be characterized by social class: it's possible, in many cases, that wealthy people and poor people live not only in the same districts but even in the same buildings (there are districts where this is not the case but they are outside of the center). This cohabitation, together with the high density of the city, allows for this kind of easy dramatic expression in the face of often significantly different cultural backgrounds. Diversity is, or has been, welcome (as in every port city) but alongside this there is the near impossibility of building the kind of bubble of protection, the separation, that contemporary cities have increasingly constructed around wealthy neighborhoods.

In fact, this peculiarity is considered by many a fundamental influence that Naples has had on Italian culture in the early XIX century and it's important to remember that it was significantly influential in post-war Italy of the twentieth century in the development of the cinema of Neorealism, and its reading of society and history which shaped in part Pasolini's filmmaking, and inevitably "Comizi di Donne".

Naples, until the First World War (until Mussolini decided to build up Cinecittà in Rome), was the center of Italian film production. The first Italian company of film studios, "Partenope Film", was Neapolitan. The city had an illustrious history of theatre, production and performance, and the infrastructure to support the newly developing industry, it was also of course the base for the vibrant and prolific production of Neapolitan songs (which until now are internationally recognized). The films that were being made in the new studios were based on stories of social injustice and a dramatized reality that was familiar to the audiences of the day. It's not by chance that the Neapolitan Peppino Amato who grew up in Naples, as an actor, and who then became a

producer in Rome, was the one who helped Vittorio De Sica in his career and supported Roberto Rossellini for his films.

The Neapolitan way to live, and maybe even to overact, forms a part of the inheritance of Italian cinema as it does for theatre and popular song, and it's a background that was deeply influential for Pasolini and his conception of realism. Specifically, in his "Comizi d'Amore", which is one of the references for my work. It was a film in which Pasolini, travelling across Italy, through conversations with people of every social background, was asking about love, which he believed to be the most sensitive part of human being, and that which can give an understanding of social change at a level that was beyond the reach of all other means.

"Comizi d'Amore" is a reading of history which relates to the work of the social historians like Braudel. It may appear at first to be dealing with quite another reality than that described by these historians but there are significant parallel meanings. And it aims at the kind of art without authorship - or of radically shifted authorship - towards which Grotowski struggled in his work and life. As we examined in an earlier part of our project.

"Comizi d'Amore" is a film which looks at history as a lived present, listens to people whose voices and stories shape the meanings that develop within it, it does not rely on research through documentation, it is informed by those who speak in its conversation about love, and in its effect, it comes to describe a society and a world that we share, at once familiar and profoundly strange. It is not polished or sophisticated in its filming, but it touches on things that art, until today, rarely speaks to. And it asks of us as the audience a way of seeing, and an attention, that we don't have the habit of. It asks that we can conceive ourselves as being within the conversation of the film in our attention to it, becoming complicit through our recognition, the experience and relationships that we bring to it, and our shared sensibility. It asks us to be open to an unfamiliar language, an affective language, of sensibility and shared being. It is a precursor to our present understandings of the common place and of community but through the revolutionary perspective of an affective aesthetic: recognition, empathy and caring.

### "Comizi di Donne"

Taking place over several hours, Comizi di Donne is made from intimate accounts of life, fragments of other lives, other histories, stories of place, of families, of generations, of friendship, stories of hope and of fear. Two things happen in the long duration of the work, those speaking become, over time, both the protagonists and authors of their stories, strongly individual in their telling of their own lives, and, at the same time, and in the same action of telling, there is a correlation that tells of community and of the social world.

How does this happen? It may perhaps be seen as being analogous to the weaving of a tapestry in which the threads of individual lives, when woven together, are seen to form an image through their interrelation with others, in some ways resembling society itself. But it is more than that, the effective power of each person, their fierce individuation, understood in correlation, both asserts the singular volition of the person, and their particular experience, while bringing into being a community of shared experience. And this is not such an easy perception in Naples, which can so

often be seen as lacking the civic activism, the consciousness of shared purpose, or a notion of consequence beyond present need, that other cities, other societies, more clearly have. It is often difficult to imagine Naples as having a coherent society beyond family or allegiance to a football club. This is why attention to an overlooked present can be both the beginning of a vivid tapestry of voices and impressions, to be woven over time, and a manifesto, a premonition of a coming community.

This is not the Naples of too familiar stereotypes. Made from the everyday, the voices of the women of Comizi di Donne are not the voices of lives at the margin but bold and passionate voices that assert their presence, the presence of a world too long ignored.

Just as Pasolini does in *"Comizi d'Amore"*, I aim to cancel every possible form of conventional authorship and to make women within the sphere of Comizi di Donne protagonists and authors of history itself, of their own history and that of society, as they are actually in the world. In this it will be the present talking through the lives of women who fight daily between economic, social and cultural difficulties. Pasolini's fascination with Geoffrey Chaucer's *"Canterbury Tales"* and Boccaccio's *"Decameron"* concerned the telling of stories in which the social or economic circumstances of the protagonists do not determine the truth or effect, the narrative is carried not through heroic identification, or through hierarchical conventions, but through lived experience and by the accumulation of individual tales and fragments that are glimpsed of the everyday world. What matters in this reading is the capability to understand the world looking at the relations that inform it, and in attention to the ways in which people shape their own histories, and in this way our history and the world in which we also live. This is both a simple and a complex notion. We are all of us aware of how great events may shape our lives, pandemic or war, in ways over which we feel that we have little control, and even within the day to day of lives distant from war, and freed from immediate fear of contamination and infection, there can be, for many, a sense of only having a tenuous hold on how we can shape our lives as we may wish them to be. Nonetheless within the possibility of our lives there is a negotiation of the day to day that not only sustains us but which comes to form, in its commonplace of relation, work, shared effort, and persistence, the basis of community and of society in large. In this is the deep history of the *"longue durée"*, the for long unacknowledged present that underpins the world. And its meanings matter to us now.

In gossip, in conversation, in the day to day of relation, there is an unattended present, a world that can often be overlooked, as something too familiar, too mundane, that is in the background but which is of little significance. But in attention to the ways, we are together and to the ways we tell our world, and our relationships, to each other, we may discover a world that is familiar and moving also in its difference, affecting in this tension between a place we know, a place we inhabit and recognize, and the dissonances, the half noticed things, and strangeness at the margin of our own lives. It doesn't make the evening news, and may appear to be just another part of the *"static"* in the air, like texting, or the constant online of a phone we carry, it is the unconsidered stuff of other unacknowledged lives. But in hearing these stories juxtaposed, just as they are in life, there emerges the trace of a society that exists alongside the official, *"legitimate"*, the established, world. Just as Braudel's deep history existed unacknowledged alongside the story of kings and queens, power and wealth, alongside it but underpinning everything. Its aspiration and its betrayal were equally evident in the first Neapolitan Republic.

Because the most unacknowledged voices within this long history have been those of women in their everyday, which is the commonplace that we share with them, the world which I have written about here. *Comizi Di Donne*, in brief testimonies and in its conversation, happens now in our time, as immediate living history - the history that is shaping each of us - and as present: in its hope, its subdued rage, its assertion of life, and even in the curious melancholy that it sometimes evokes. And in this, even in its contradictions, there is the frame of the missed cultural female revolution, its obstacles, of course, but also its possibility.

This is the material of the new Neapolitan republic, a republic that may finally speak for all of its citizens, equally.

If we believe, as many of us do, that inside the recognition of what is the peculiarity and strength of the female identity, like care and relationality, as Lucia Mastrodomenico used to say, (and these are neither elemental characteristics nor simply culturally determined attributes. At a time when even having a womb is seen as a relativism there nevertheless can be imagined to be a female principle that informs our humanity) there can be found a way through this struggling contemporary time. We need a reading of history which allows this understanding, and looks to what must be done to free the potential of it in our present. And a new sensibility, a thoughtfulness about the present that continues beneath the surface of great events, of political dramas, pandemic, and of war.

And this comes to the most difficult part.

Corresponding to these meanings is a way of looking at art that works, that acts, differently. There are forms of art that ask us for a familiar reading, and forms of art that ask of us rather different kinds of attention. Attention in which we are conscious of being a part of a conversation. The artist Craigie Horsfield, whose thought has helped to inform this project from its beginning, describes an affective attention, a way of seeing and of listening that opens to caring. An attention that relates to what the feminist theorist Bracha Ettinger has called "withnes

s', a witnessing, an attention, in which we too are protagonists, we too are engaged and are complicit. An attention without separation or distance. The look of the film is conventional but what is happening and what it asks of us is different in this way.

And about duration. I have written earlier in the project about long form work in relation to Marco Messina's four hours soundwork. I have described the changed relation to reading and experiencing art that it creates. But still for many the idea that there should be the choice to stay watching throughout the duration of the film or to simply only watch a part, or return day after day to watch in sections, can feel uncomfortable, a kind of false or knowing disruption in the way that some books are published with loose leaves so that the reader might rearrange the story. But, of course, throughout the twentieth century, and since, long form film works have existed, from Abel Gance to Andy Warhol, and each invited a different attention. And it has continued with artists as diverse as Aleksandr Sokurov, Christian Marclay and Craigie Horsfield. In fact, even with these precedents the film may appear too long for many of us because we have the habit of watching short videos through social media, or because we have become familiar with video in art which is most often structured in loops of just a few minutes so that the fickle attention of the viewer might not wander to other distractions. There is quite widely reported a kind of panic



about shortened spans of attention that new media supposedly encourage. But set against that there is evidence of a different dynamic in the popularity of multi episode series on streaming services, in which narratives develop over very much greater length than ever they did in even the most elaborate of Hollywood epics, and "binge watching" that during the pandemic could consume whole days for many marooned in isolation. The duration of Comizi Di Donne looks first of all to none of these antecedents. I would describe it in another way, a way that corresponds with what I have returned to again and again in writing this, Comizi di Donne is meant to be a date with a group of women, and an experience of closeness and empathy: it's possible to watch it for all its length or just a part of it because what matters is the will to meet, and to give time to a different awareness of the hidden history of women, which is familiar but also not ours, in the recognition of other lives. There is also an effect that may just be a very personal reflection, the cumulative impression, over time, is one of melancholy, a touching sadness. It doesn't come from these often vivid lives but from the feeling of our own stories still held between seemingly irreconcilable forces.

What does any of this mean beyond description, critique, and exhortation? Its substance and its true thesis is in the voices of the women in the film who have made it from their own lives. And whoever sees it, and is open to it, will bring their own recognitions and understandings to it. This is its lived consequence, as a continuing conversation.

"Comizi di Donne" shows us a deep history and the choice for a revolutionary path which asks first of all an action of awareness: female awareness of their own condition, of our own condition, and a collective awareness of what is necessary to change to free a real shift in a social revolutionary change. It is why, as rough and as provisional as Comizi di Donne is, it is a manifesto born from the present.

Maria Teresa Annarumma

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