

# ARTFORUM

DIARY

## MEMENTO MORRA

July 09, 2019 • Naples • Cathryn Drake on the reopening of the Morra Greco Foundation



View from Thomas Dane Gallery. All photos: Cathryn Drake.

**“MUSEUMS ARE DEAD,”** Andrea Viliani, artistic director of the Museo d’Arte Contemporanea Donnaregina, said over dinner my first night in Naples. “White cubes are devouring white cubes.” It was a daring declaration coming from a longtime museum curator who is collaborating on art projects sited among the literal ruins of Pompeii. We were at the raucous Ristorante Europeo Mattozzi with curator Milovan Farronato and artist Maria Loboda, both in town casting for “Death,” this summer’s Stromboli Volcano Extravaganza. Here for the reopening of the Morra Greco Foundation, I thought my own days would end in my first taxi, whose driver took traffic laws, namely one-way streets, as advice for the unimaginative—a trademark of Neapolitan motorists. While musicians and dancers performed around us, Farronato described his curatorial approach as “guided coincidence.” Paintings made by Lucas Arruda during a residency on the island of Li Galli—from which the mythical sirens attempted to lure Ulysses—will be displayed at Pompeii’s Villa of the Mysteries, where the extravaganza’s dramatic denouement will unfold. And so death and coincidence immediately set the tone in Naples, itself an immersive memento mori that has spawned more than its share of artistic genius.



Artist Maria Laboda, Madre artistic director Andrea Viliana, curator Milovan Farronato.

Ever since the 1960s—when collectors Lucio Amelio and Pasquale Trisorio invited artists such as Cy Twombly, Joseph Beuys, Mario Merz, Andy Warhol, and Sol Lewitt to reside in a Capri villa—Naples has been an essential stop on the contemporary grand tour. “Any artist living in Naples for any period of time will be moved by the experience,” said Maurizio Morra Greco as he made last-minute tweaks during the preview. In the 1990s, the collector started bringing artists to stay in the city, later mounting the first show in the dank, raw basement of the sixteenth-century Palazzo Caracciolo di Avellino. No tabula rasa, its walls are a palimpsest of frescos, friezes, and flourishes. I ran into the artist behind the Studio for Propositional Cinema, in residence next door until December. They are creating “site-specific fairy tales” inspired by the palace’s imagery—including a scene that Puccini poached for the opera *Turandot*—and the racy fables of Giambattista Basile (tamed later by the Brothers Grimm), who, it turns out, was court writer to the Caracciolos, the palace’s original owners, and thus the artist’s historical counterpart.



**Curator Achille Bonito Oliva and Gianfranco Maraniello, director of MART Rovereto.**

While we took in the trio of shows by Jimmie Durham, Henrik Håkansson, and Peter Bartoš, dealer Thomas Dane explained that his friend Allegra Hicks had urged him to consider getting a place in Naples: “I saw four spaces in one day, and the second one was Casa Ruffo,” he said. “It was instinctual. I did not know it would be a gallery.” Currently on show is a series of lushly stormy paintings by Cecily Brown inspired by shipwrecks, aptly titled “We Didn’t Mean to Go to Sea.” Thomas Dane Gallery also has a residence on the premises of its elegant nineteenth-century palace, where artists are encouraged to stay and simply absorb the decadent richness of the city. At Raffaella Naldi Rossano’s Residency 80121, hosted in her grandmother’s vacant apartment, fellow artist Zehra Arslan has extracted monoliths from the wall of a room and arranged them to evoke a pagan shrine. For the project, titled “Sulle Forme dell’Abitare (On the Forms of Living),” each artist will add to previous spatial interventions—Lydia Ourahmane is up next.

On Friday evening I walked uphill to the Hermann Nitsch Museum, where its Austrian namesake resides among the bloodstained relics of his orgiastic “Actions.” The annual International Film Show, organized by Raffaella Morra, was screening Ken and Flo Jacobs’s *Nervous Magic Lantern: Chaos Is Order Misunderstood* (2000), accompanied with live audio by Michael J. Schumacher, on a terrace with a panorama of the city. The electronic sound mingled with loud party music and intermittent fireworks from nearby rooftops, prompting Schumacher to stop the performance, announcing it could not go on with the ambient interruptions. An audience member protested, “This is Naples, you can’t stop the city!”



Artists Jimmie Durham, Maria Theresa Alves, Wilfredo Prieto and dealer Alessandra Minini.

Fondazione Morra Greco’s reception that evening was like a family reunion. In attendance were Gigiotto Del Vecchio and Giangi Fonti, who cut their teeth as advisors to the collector

before they became dealers. Curator Francesco Bonami had arrived from Milan, and critic-curator Achille Bonito Oliva, godfather of the Italian Transavantgarde, came from Rome.

Bartoš couldn't make it to Naples; after the breakup of Czechoslovakia in 1993, he refused to choose either Slovak or Czech passport, traveling along a circular route determined by animal tracks across the political borders of five countries, finally honing in on Bratislava. Curator Mira Keratová and artist Petra Feriancová presented the artist's studies—paintings, drawings, photographs, and collages—of his environment, primarily the Bratislava Zoo. Durham, who lives in Naples, was out in full force. Asked the title of an installation he had finished that day, a big wooden box jumbled with sundry objects—a caged animal pelt, a buffalo skull, an old travel trunk, the remains of a motorcycle bursting through its slots—Durham hesitated and then replied, “Minimalist Piece with Content.” In the basement, he had placed a stone altar opposite an ancient Greek wall, *Ceremonial*, 2019. “In honor of Jannis Kounellis,” he said.



**Artists Henrik Håkansson and Lotta Antonsson.**

The crowd moved across town in fits and starts for a lively buffet dinner at Palazzo Petrucci, in the swank Posillipo quarter. Suddenly there was a commotion in the middle of the room, and everyone turned their attention to Durham and Bonito Oliva, who'd gotten up and started to circle slowly around each other in a sort of ritualistic dance, hands in the air. As every night, fireworks were shooting off here and there. "It's either a birthday party or a signal for a heroin sale," artist Luca Di Bernardo explained. "I worship chaos, that is why I love it here." A few days later, the volcano erupted on Stromboli, killing a hiker while his companion watched helplessly. Farronato sent a nocturnal photo of the volcano with a glowing crown of fire. I asked a taxi driver if he was afraid of living so close to Vesuvius. "I cannot leave," he said. "I am Neapolitan."

— Cathryn Drake



**Curator Mira Keratová, collector Maurizio Morra Greco, artist Petra Feriancová.**



**Artist Jimmie Durham, curator Francesco Bonami, curator Achille Bonito Oliva, dealer Alfonso Artiaco.**





**Artist Luca Di Bernardo and curator Ludovico Pratesi.**



**Artist Maria Adele Del Vecchio, writer Adriana Polveroni, dealers Tiziana di Caro and Gianmaria Mazzeo.**



**Artists Raffaella Naldi Rossano and Federico Del Vecchio.**



**Basement of Fondazione Morra Greco with Jimmie Durham installation.**



**Photographer Luciano Ferrara, curator Lucrezia Longobardi, artist Gian Maria Tossati.**



**Collector Peppe Morra and daughter Isabella with curator Gigiotto Del Vecchio.**



Collector Peppe Morra with Jimmie Durham's *Un momento tranquillo*, 1991-2007



**Dealer Umberto di Marino, Federico Munga, director of Il Mattino, collector Maurizio Morra Greco, dealer Giangi Fonti.**





**Dealers Thomas Dane and Federica Sheehan, curator Douglas Fogle.**