

## *Più là che Abruzzi*

Project record

by Simone Ciglia

«Adunque dèe egli essere piú lá che Abruzzi»<sup>1</sup> (It has to be farther than Abruzzi), utters Boccaccio to Calandrino, the main character in one of his novellas. The phrase refers to the city quarter of Bengodi, a legendary place where sausages grow like vineyards, mountains are made of grated parmesan cheese and rivers flow with Vernaccia grapes. The Basque Country was distant «più di millanta, che tutta notte canta». Now, the expression *piú lá che Abruzzi* (farther than Abruzzi) is able to encapsulate the sense of remoteness and the legendary that Mario Pomilio had already acknowledged as «the proverbial expression which describes the condition and history of Abruzzo»<sup>2</sup>. It is in this Boccaccio-esque reference that Eugenio Tibaldi stumbles upon during his research in the project: we had already been working on it for some time thanks to Elena Petrucci, who had wished to invite the artist to Abruzzo. We immediately acknowledged her as the needed revelation in order to give what we were doing a name.

I had met Eugenio several years prior, through a mutual friend who had invited me to visit him during his stay at the American Academy in Rome in 2013. I encountered an artist who, captivated by the light that flooded the large skylight-lit studio, had made the decision to return to the artist studio, adapting his design draft initially meant for his Roman venture. On that occasion, I was captivated by his accounts: stories of day-to-day marginalities set in the Neapolitan hinterland where he had been living for many years. His enchantment of story-telling – I confess – got the best of me: his work remained in the background, as a supplement to his narration. It was only later that I began to look at him with the same care I had reserved to his words during our first encounter and with the same fascination. Eugenio was able to see things which I had almost never dwelt on. I was thus able to discover a disregarded potential aesthetic, combined to the restraint of an analysis that weaves a diversity of views – social, economic, political, geographical – and which reveals the cognitive power of art. Our paths crossed more than once in the years that followed. During an exhibition in 2014<sup>3</sup>, I had asked him to present the intriguing *Acque Chete. Sillabario delle basilari possibilità di esistere*, a two-man book with the author Tommaso Pincio<sup>4</sup>. Several years later, the theme of the outskirts, which set the pace for an exhibition at the Palazzo del Quirinale<sup>5</sup>, would guide the curator Anna Mattirola towards Eugenio's work: the artist had decided to challenge the lavish spaces of Augustus with the precarious architecture of scaffolding pipes that *Seconda Chance* (2016) consisted of, a large installation containing a selection of projects developed throughout Italy, a

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<sup>1</sup> Giovanni Boccaccio, *The Decameron*, eighth day, p. 112.

<sup>2</sup> Mario Pomilio, *Abruzzo. La terra dei santi poveri*, collection of Abruzzo writings by Dora Pomilio and Vittoriano Esposito, Press Office of the Regional Council of Abruzzo, Aquila, 1997, p.

<sup>3</sup> *Vita activa. Figure del lavoro nell'arte contemporanea*, by Simone Ciglia, Palazzetto Albanese, Pescara, 12th July-12th September 2014.

<sup>4</sup> Tommaso Pincio, Eugenio Tibaldi, *Acque Chete. Sillabario delle basilari possibilità di esistere*, Mirror, Ascoli Piceno 2014.

<sup>5</sup> *Da io a noi. La città senza confini*, by Anna Mattirola, Palazzo del Quirinale, Rome, 24th October-17th December 2017.

sort of summation of his work. Eugenio had later called me to discuss together the project developed for the social cooperative Società Dolce in Bologna, involving employees and service users on the theme of *inclusion* (2018)<sup>6</sup>. In this new phase of his research, he seemed to address from the contrary the issues which he had always questioned, reflecting on the condition contrary to social exclusion. In that circumstance, he had renewed the encounter with Elena, entrepreneur attentive to the realities of the territory, and who had seen the opportunity to broaden the analysis in Abruzzo. Recently, in fact, the region had issued the public call *Abruzzo Include*<sup>7</sup>, with the aim of «integrating public and private entities in the social, health, educational and labour fields in order to offer tools and possibilities to those disadvantaged people currently under the care of social services, so as to allow them to emerge from the position of potential social exclusion»<sup>8</sup>. A program of traineeships was activated for the users in companies on the territory, which Elena participated in too. Issues raised by the call found an ideal convergence with Eugenio's research, for years focused on that complex knot which ties *marginality*, the *outskirts* and *informality*. From here, we were encouraged to focus on a project for Abruzzo. Frontrunner of the call was the council of Francavilla al Mare (CH), where Elena also conducted her own activities. The presence of a museum of contemporary art in the same town, dedicated to the local glory of Francesco Paolo Michetti, made it the natural site for the display of the project's end product. The coincidence in time with the regional elections (planned for 10th February of the following year) added a further factor of timeliness to what we were preparing.

From this juncture, the territory to be investigated was shaped, unprecedented in the artist's study which had always been focused on the outskirts of large and medium-sized cities – in Italy (Naples, Rome, Turin, Bologna, Verona) and abroad (Cairo, Istanbul, Thessaloniki, Caracas, Brussels) – this time confronted with a different kind of context, that of provincial Italy. The need for fieldwork was answered in the residential program that the Villa Maria di Francavilla Hotel had already been implementing for some years. The structure thus became the base for the repeated stays in Abruzzo. After the first survey, conducted in early summer and aimed at the understanding of the landscape, the design of the artist's chosen tool to conduct the study followed: the questionnaire. In this primary means of social research, Tibaldi identified the ideal vehicle in understanding the various realities to investigate, the starting point of an open process which embraces the contingency in order to determine its own vision. The constructed dynamic is intentionally placed beyond the related artistic methods, the common currency in the contemporary aesthetic horizon: although invoking something different, the artist does not abdicate his position as the process of formalisation is forever strong and consistent, able to modify the crudeness of his materials with wonder. Rhetoric, the greatest risk of this aesthetic line, is thus avoided. The forms, handed out anonymously to the users of the Abruzzo include call, would constitute the path on which to build the artwork upon.

In the questionnaire, Tibaldi mixes the rigour of the sociological research to the poetic vision of art. He began by asking the interviewees if they had any Abruzzo origins: if so, he urged them to indicate an element that would determine the concept of

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<sup>6</sup> Eugenio Tibaldi, *Inclusio*, Italian Centre for Documentation on Partnership and social Economy, Bologna, 2nd-4th February 2018.

<sup>7</sup> <https://urp.regione.abruzzo.it/ultime-notizie/217-abruzzo-include-nuovo-bando-per-l-integrazione-sociale?highlight=WyJpbmNsdWRlIl0=>

belonging; if not, he would ask the reason for their residency in the region. From here he would move on to their professional status, enquiring about their work specialisation or any specific acquired skill. A wider issue regarded the description of the concept of *outskirt* or *margin*. Later, he would ask the interviewees if they had ever considered leaving Abruzzo: if so, to where and why; if not, what would they change in order to live better. The following question consisted in the choice of a colour to match with their place of residence. The form concluded with the request of an image able to recount their current personal condition.

Thanks to the intervention of the municipality of Francavilla, the questionnaire was submitted during the summer to a representative sample of users from the call. The results, which arrived that October, were surprising on many levels: they spoke of a sense of unexpectedly strong belonging, despite the difficulties linked to the working conditions within an economic framework struggling to re-emerge from the depression. Abruzzo rose like a thermometer of a much wider national context, in a historical moment – perhaps renamed as *post-crisis* too hastily – in which the ruling classes were taking action by generating new possibilities and engaging those social groups affected by years of recession. If data indicate that the region is a median type compared to the national framework (on the basis of personal income and domestic migration), the perception of remoteness and isolation was showing something more widespread and subtle, and which characterises the present. «During my visits to Abruzzo – Eugenio said – I often happened to hear phrases like “he was a real promise in the sector, but he never moved away from here”, as if a place could determine a limit, a margin that does not allow for the development of people. I have encountered associations of Abruzzo peoples in Brussels, Caracas and New York, establishing a strong link to a territory that has the ability to incorporate both the concept of limit and that of nostalgia»<sup>9</sup>. Rather than the *real* fact, the artist’s interest is directed to the *perceived*, meaning the feeling of social exclusion. The restitution of an aesthetic dimension of this vision is precisely the intent from which *Più là che Abruzzi* is propelled, connecting it to the culture of the place generated.

From the words and images gathered in the questionnaires, the artist drew his material to create five new pieces, a cycle of installations designed for the occasion. Eugenio had initially presented it to us as envisioned by him, in the form of watercolour drawings which did not hide a certain pleasantness. The sense of surprise which had primarily struck the artist, had now spread to us: the artworks marked in many ways a change of pace in his work. The artist, moved by an aptitude «similar to that of a painter who paints or creates his image with a palette of colours determined by the historical moment or place, but who does not decline the aesthetic responsibility of the final result»<sup>10</sup>. In these works, the practice of assemblage is revived by the use of recovered materials which recount, in their humbleness, the pages of disadvantage gathered by the artist. The installations evoke household rooms inhabited by ghost-like presences, glimmers of human figures hinted by clothing – these too used – padded and sewn together.

In order to create the visions written down on paper, we quickly began gathering the materials needed through hectic days of research. The textile component was assigned to the association called Emozioni, a non-profit with its head office in Francavilla al Mare and in charge of numerous social activities. The manager Anna De Siati’s

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<sup>9</sup> Eugenio Tibaldi, unedited statement from the project *Più là che Abruzzi*, 2018.

enthusiasm put together a team of volunteers who, in the month of November, dealt with collecting and sewing together the pile of clothing, following the artist's plans. On Eugenio's subsequent return in December, the skeletons of the installations had made their entrance into the museum in order to be set up together with the other materials. In this phase, much help was provided by the pupils of the Art School of Chieti. They were engaged with the help of a teacher, Grazia Panara, in a dual course of education and work, allowing them to contend in the field creating an exhibition. The desire to engage in the territory was thus fulfilled, enlivening the project.

The new production, presented on the lower floor of the museum, is designed in relation to the space, treating it as a part of the work: an «active fund», described by Eugenio after initial inspection, that with its contradictions well represents modernity in a provincial context. For him, it was a «welcoming and opposing element at the same time», that in his hands became «a representation of the region itself. The artistic dynamic is achieved in a confrontation with the circumstantial limit of a place, without losing strength but by readapting itself and assessing new possible forms of confrontation»<sup>11</sup>.

In order to accompany the new projects for the public, the need to contextualise them in the artist's practice was immediately made obvious. We therefore made the choice to display a selection of recent projects on the basement level, founded on the same concept of creation through aesthetic inclusion and active participation of the community: from the already mentioned *Inclusio* – conceptual premise of the present project - and *Seconda chance* (that this time secures a third incarnation), to *Architettura minima*, a study on shelters for the homeless, with *Questione di appartenenza*, a research on informal living in Naples, and *Red Verona*, a project dedicated to the city of Verona.

After the inauguration, the exhibition was held alive by a schedule of events which reactivated the museum as a place for debates, musical performances, film screenings and presentations<sup>12</sup>. This catalogue, developed at the project's completion, aims at substantiating the exhibit and the considerations that accompanied it.

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<sup>11</sup> Eugenio Tibaldi, unedited statement from the project *Più là che Abruzzi*, 2018.

<sup>12</sup> The program was initiated on 3rd February after a conversation with Eide Spedicato Iengo, associate professor of General Sociology at the Università degli Studi “Gabriele d’Annunzio”, Chieti-Pescara and Andrea Di Berardino, judge of the Court of Chieti, who raised questions on the *Prospects of marginality between sociology and law*. The following week, a film forum was held by Professor Bruno Nasuti with the screening of the film *L'intrusa* by Leonardo di Costanzo (2017). The following Sunday was saxophone player Piero Delle Monache's turn, who presented his concerto *Solosé*. The schedule concluded 24th February with a conference by Professor Carlo Tataschiere – President of the Fondazione Michetti – entitled *(Philosophical) thoughts on margins*.