



ACCADEMIA NAZIONALE DEI LINCEI

Premio Internazionale “Antonio Feltrinelli” 2018 per le Arti Plastiche

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Quello che non Ricordo

Firstly, I would like to say how delighted I am to receive this prize. I am particularly happy to be amongst the extremely honourable list of previous winners.

Today I want to talk about the studio and what emerges from the studio, but also about things outside the studio that are given meaning by the work in the studio. I will constantly to return to the studio, to the work done there, as the work done there is the only justification for the ideas presented here on this stage. The studio always involves practical thinking. Both thinking of practical matters, the paper on the wall, the angle of the spotlight on the stage, the hardness of charcoal on the paper. But more than this, the studio involves thinking through material, thinking with your hands, thinking with charcoal, with the movement of an actor – not to illustrate an idea, not even to find the answer to a question, posed as an idea, but at its best, to find the questions themselves. And I want to think about this through the development of a specific project.

Let's move from the space of this lecture to the space of the studio, where the fragments of history, of ideas, have a physical form. The postcard of Marcus Aurelius on his horse on the Capitoline Hill pinned to the studio wall. A newspaper cutting with photographs of refugees on a boat in the middle of the Mediterranean Sea. Yesterday's drawing of the Widow of Rome pinned to the wall next to a list of studio tasks waiting to be done. The photograph of a World War I gas mask, notebooks

filled with sketches and phrases. A walk around the studio is a walk around these ideas.

We walk around the studio circling images and ideas, and with this peripheral vision of cards, sketches and notes there is a peripheral thinking at the edge of consciousness. These physical objects - the photo, the postcard, the notebook - stand in also for all the ideas we carry invisibly and intangibly in our heads. Not just these images, but memories, thoughts, yesterday's dreams, a vague remembrance of a line from an essay read years ago. These kinds of fragments are not the preserve of the studio artist, we all carry these with us and construct an understanding of the world, of ourselves, from them. Obliterating some fragments, highlighting other elements.

What the studio provides and what the artist in the studio does, not as a piece of instruction but of necessity, is a demonstration in a visible medium of what we all do all the time to make sense of the world – combining different fragments as if they had a natural meaning. The world is invited into the studio, which it enters in all its fragmented form, in fragments and half-completed gestures. There these fragments are taken apart even further, cut up into even smaller sections. The fragments are then recombined, orders changed, scale modified, tonality adjusted, contradictory elements forced together, a typewriter and the umbrella fused into a mechanical spider, words of anger and words of comfort put next to each other. This reconstruction is then sent back out into the world as a drawing, as a painting, as a performance, as a text. This collage, this making of a world from disjointed fragments, is the common technique of artists, not just in the 21st and the 20th century, when collage as an explicit form emerged, but as a working method employed by artists from time immemorial. Figures drawn in the studio are combined with landscapes observed years earlier, and we see this in all the renaissance paintings.

Caspar David Friedrich's landscapes are a construction made from sketches of different trees, branches, hills recorded in notebooks and put together in his paintings. Rodin had a box of arms and legs, some of his own, some copies of Greek and Roman sculptures, that he would keep on hand to use in his clay sculptures as he found the gestures in his figures. The technique of collage is not new, not even recent, but whereas for centuries the art was to hide the fragment, the art being to hide the art, now it seems the art must be to reveal the art. Not in order to show the technique or the tricks of the artist, but to show the work, the activity of making the image, that is to say, the making of sense of the world.

Let us look at the question of fragmentation and collage in more detail. Here is a man, a hero. We recognise him immediately. We shatter the man and we have a mass of torn pieces of black paper. We start to put them together, and we have Marcus Aurelius on his horse. It is not that we are able to describe or draw Marcus Aurelius, but when it is there, we cannot help recognising it. It is not an act of good seeing, or hard work; rather, we cannot **not** see the image. In fact, we are seeing three things. A collection of black, torn shapes - we know what we are seeing; we see a man on a horse; and thirdly, we are outside of ourselves, of seeing the paper and the image, of our pleasure, which is our pleasure of self-deception. Knowing it is just black sheets of paper and also unable to stop seeing the man on the horse. This is what I mean by leaving the white scars in the shards of pottery that we construct. This is the first kind of collage.

The Winged Victory on Trajan's column is another kind of collage. That figure is taken from a classical Greek figure (I think of a woman showing the invention of writing) and angel's wings were added to her by the Romans. Two images combined to make a new one. And then we can take this image further and break it up again. Cut up the Winged Victory, let it collapse on itself, as if we are showing the ravages of time, but in which we show both a torn-up drawing, a collapsed Winged Victory, and coming out of that an image of the folly of grandeur. Even the very emblem of

Rome, of the she-wolf and the two boys, is a collage. A Byzantine wolf and two much more recent boys added.

A third collage, of course, is a collage of different larger fragments. When the very disjunction is the heart of the matter, where it is impossible to miss the construction of the image. For example, taking the stone bath from outside the front of the Palazzo Farnese, together with Marcello Mastroianni and Anita Ekberg in the Trevi fountain from *La Dolce Vita*. We know we are seeing a construction and we are set a riddle that may or may not have an answer. We are at the edge of meaning. We can feel a pressure towards meaning without necessarily reaching the goal and relieving ourselves of that pressure. We may find a meaning or ascribe a meaning, but we are aware that we are doing this, that our biographies and our sets of associations are complicit in the meaning and so the meaning can, at best, be provisional.

I want to look at these questions in more detail in relation to a project I made, not a kilometre from where we meet today. A frieze on the walls of the Lungotevere between Ponte Sisto and Ponte Mazzini, a distance of some 500 metres. The project was many years in the making, it was promoted, pushed and brought to fruition by Kristin Jones, who has long had the idea and a wish for the bank of the river to be a space for public art. She introduced me to the technique used to make the frieze. We used a technique of erasure, the travertine stone - as all here are aware – indeed, talking at all about Rome seems absurd here, to this audience in this chamber, in this city. I ask you to indulge the mistranslations of an outsider. We could also talk about the productivity of mistranslation, of the words or phrases we don't know and are forced to invent, to constantly make a bridge over gaps in meaning.

But any rate, the travertine stone of the walls is dark from a mixture of pollution and bacterial growth, mainly the latter. To achieve the contrast between the figures in the frieze and the background, the background was washed. Let me describe the order of events.

From the mass of reference material, postcards, photostats of images in books, computer files sent from researchers in Rome, I would choose an image to draw. First there were charcoal drawings – drawn on the pages of an old cash book – the lines and margins over which the drawing was made approximating the lines of travertine blocks of the wall.

I then remade the drawing in Indian ink. The smudge and grey of the charcoal had to be resolved into the sharp ‘yes’ or ‘no’ of the white of the paper and the black of the ink.

This ink drawing was then traced into a computer and turned into a mathematical file, that could be enlarged or reduced as needed. This file was sent off to a factory outside Rome where the computer file was used to make a full-scale plastic stencil of the figure. The 40 cm drawing became a 10 m plastic stencil.

The plastic was placed against the wall – suspended from the parapet at the top of the wall and pressed against the wall by people on ladders holding large brooms.

Water from the river was pumped out, heated up and sprayed at pressure onto the stone and around the stencil, cleaning off the bacteria and pollution.

The temperature, the pressure, the type of nozzle all controlled by the monuments commission and river authorities. Nothing was added to the wall. This was done in the knowledge that over a few years the images would fade away. The wall would darken again, through natural ageing, pollutants, graffiti; leaving a ghost of an image and a fading memory.

This process is well underway. Some images are holding on – some have disappeared more quickly than I expected.

But I pause here to talk about doing the project in Rome. As I have said, meaning and biography cannot be separated. The world always comes towards us and we meet it halfway with what we recognise, with the associations it has for us.

My connection to Rome and Italy was shaped partly by my father's love for and enthusiasm for Italy and things Italian (in his case, formed by his experience in Italy during and after the Second World War as a soldier and then as a student). It was the first country outside South Africa I was taken to when I was six, and the memories of that trip are still stuck so deep in my consciousness; peach ice cream at the beach in Levanto, the terror of having my hand bitten off by the Bocca de la Verità, the Carabinieri hats, fettuccine Alfredo (remember, this was in 1961) - and so on. And through the good fortune of working with the excellent gallerist, Lia Rumma, I've been able to do many projects here - operas, theatre, exhibitions - in fact, more than in any other country. I thought I had a fair grasp of Italian history, a grounding in art history of the Renaissance, a high school understanding of Caesar's Gallic Wars, knowledge of the Risorgimento.

This was where the project started. A technique, a site, and a pleasure at the prospect of working in the city, but as to what I would do, I was stuck. I made some sketches, images from Trajan's column, I imagined the unrolling of Trajan's column along the length of the river, I made a drawing of Romulus; but essentially I was stuck. I could find no more than a tourist guide compendium of images. I read a book of poems about the ghetto, virtually across the river from where the frieze was to be, and read some of the history of the ghetto.

I was amazed.

I had always assumed the ghetto was a pre-modern, a medieval project, and that by the time of the regrowth of humanism in the Renaissance, it was an anachronism. My shock was in realising it was only established in 1550 and continued until 1870, only ending after Garibaldi conquered Rome. On the one side of the river you had St. Peter's, the Vatican, Raphael, Michelangelo. My grandfather had given me a book of Michelangelo's *Last Judgement* when I was twelve, I still have it on my shelves. All the glories I had studied in art history and visited on trips to Rome - and on the other side of the river, the ghetto.

If you draw a line from St. Peter's to the ghetto, it would almost bisect the frieze. I had never put the two together. There is the chronological link - the ghetto is established at the same time as St. Peter's is built, but I think there is more than a chronological coincidence.

To refresh our history. Bramante starts building the cathedral in 1506, Michelangelo takes over from Bramante and the church is eventually finished in 1626. At the time many, even in Rome itself, saw the church as an unjustifiable piece of vanity on the part of Pope Leo. Part of the financing was through the sale of indulgences, pushed hard by Pope Leo, and Luther's break with the hierarchy of the Catholic Church, his ninety-five theses, the "disputations of Martin Luther on the power and efficacy of indulgences", pinned to the castle church in Wittenberg, was about the expense of St Peter's church. His conflict with the church was over these indulgences that peasants in Northern Europe had to buy to fund this building. Only much later did Luther write his treatise on "Jews and their lies". This treatise was written at the same time as the Council of Trent was working out the response of the Catholic Church in the Counter-Reformation, to try to halt the loss of support in Northern Europe.

And then Pope Paul IV established the ghetto, partly as an answer to Luther's claim that the church was too soft on the Jews. I'm sure this is a simplification of history, certainly an abbreviation of it. We know that Pope Paul was tough on everyone, not just the Jews. He founded the Roman Inquisition to search out anyone who deviated from orthodoxy. As he said, "if my father were a heretic, I would gather wood to burn him". But nonetheless there was a pressure for connection. Coincidence was not an answer.

When this connection came to me, I didn't think. "how clever I am at working out this connection." Rather, there was an anger and a shame in myself at not having seen this connection earlier. There were three types of ignorance here. There was a

history hidden. Nothing I had been taught or had read about the glories of the Renaissance in Rome had ever mentioned the ghetto.

There was a second ignorance on my part, an ignorance in which I was complicit. Even if I knew about the ghetto, it was a footnote against the monuments, buildings, frescoes that so filled me. The context and even the meaning of paintings and sculptures was subsidiary to the pleasure of their presence, the carving of St Theresa, the frown of Moses in San Pietro in Vincoli. It is only half an answer to say I was an artist looking at artists' work.

A third ignorance was an ignorance of not being able to put the fragments together, even when I knew of the ghetto and of its humiliations and degradations placed on its inhabitants. This in the not too distant past, but right up to 1870 – even so I did not see its connection to other histories. I could not see that the glory and the shame were inextricably linked.

This became the starting point of the project, a finding of a history, both triumphant and lamentable. I think coming from South Africa is important. Our large, painful history is so present, even now, 25 years after the end of Apartheid, that the idea of history and shame is self-evident. The current dispute in South Africa over the status of bronze statues and monuments to the leaders of our *ancien régime* are appropriate. Every statue to a hero is a monument to the disaster that left thousands bereft.

The task of the imagery in the frieze – the seventy or eighty figures shown in the frieze - became to make a record, one of many possible records, of the imbrication, the unbreakable connection between glorious and shameful histories. These are thoughts that were clarified during the making of the project. The heart of it is always in the studio.

I've spoken about the shame, historical and particularly personal, of the embarrassment at my own lack of understanding and of my needing to keep the history separate, to hold on to the six-year-old's view of the city. But also, the art students need to hold on to those sculptures, drawings, frescoes, that were so much

part of the foundation of how I saw, how I see, and how I work as an artist. A need to hold on to the best ideals of the Renaissance and its consequences, and a need to not see its dark underbelly.

But when I realised this blindness, there was an energy that came with this anger. Anger, let me stress, not at the events of history, the ghetto, but at myself. This energy fills the studio. It's not an anger anymore, it's an energy of connection, of readiness to work, of wanting the project to get off the ground. This energy speeds up the walk around the studio. The dismantling and reconstruction of images. The shifting of different things pinned to the studio walls or on different pages of the notebook. It allows sparks of connection to jump from one image to another.

Here everything starts to speed up. There was the need to choose the fragments, to find a balance between image and history. I needed a procession to walk along the wall of the river. Like a triumphal procession or a historical procession, like unwinding the frieze on the Trajan Column. A team of historians and students in Rome sent me images. I had files of triumphant images and files of lamentable images. I would move one image from one side to the other, to try to find connections.

I wanted a mix of surprising, unexpected images, idiosyncratic images and a mix of images that the citizens of Rome, who would either walk or cycle past the frieze, would recognise. What was the balance? How many different Popes could be in the procession? I could have made the entire frieze just of images of Popes. There were historical needs – who were the cast of characters to be included in the procession? But there were also studio needs, formal demands. I needed people walking in profile. This made a lot of images that were sent to me unusable. I needed to have a sense that if they weren't walking themselves, they could be on a trolley and pushed along their journey. There was always a question of how would the image or the historical event turn into an image? What would the drawing be?

Many of the figures or groups of figures had very specific references, so that they would be recognisable. There were less familiar images from medieval manuscripts. Some I hoped would be instantly recognisable - Marcus Aurelius, Ana Garibaldi on a high horse. Rome is a wonderful city to work with, as it is so filled with its public monuments and its heroes. But there were many images I wanted to use, but which did not fit into the needs of a frieze, so, Georgiana Masi, killed by the police in a student demonstration on the edge of the Tiber in 1975 and her dying call, “*O Dio, che dolore,*” should have had a place on the frieze, but the portrait image was not possible. If I think of it now, it could have been a portrait on a flag carried in the procession like a religious image of a saint, but at the time I had no space for that.

There were connections. An image of the dead Remus from a Renaissance engraving, and a newspaper photograph of the dead Pasolini, were put together. There were many horses, from Marcus Aurelius, to Ana Garibaldi to a drunk pony from a sarcophagus, showing the triumphs of Bacchus, to the humiliation of Jews on a donkey during the carnival. One could do a whole frieze and lecture just on the horses and their riders. One could talk about the magnification of a man when he sits on top of a horse. This is one of the reasons why the procession had to end with the collapsed skeletal horse – a counter to the triumphal equestrian statues.

Images from the heroic file juxtaposed with images from the lamentable file. If there was an image I needed, but it was not in profile, I compromised by pulling it on a cart (like gods in Greek drama) or had a person or a horse pull it. But it is a personal choice, there were far more images than I had space for. In the end the choice is personal, biography and history mixed. Many glories, many triumphs were personal ones that I needed in the procession. Bernini’s *The Ecstasy of Saint Teresa*, Michelangelo’s *Jeremiah*, Haile Selassie, all were there. There were juxtapositions of people escaping a flood on the Tiber in 1934, together with refugees on a boat from 2014. The widows of Lampedusa mourning people drowned trying to get to Rome. I allowed myself personal favourites. This is a personal history of Rome. So Marcello Mastroianni and Anita Ekberg from *La Dolce Vita* have to be in, as does the Masaccio

painting of St Peter crucified upside down. In this case it was both a love of Masaccio, and also wanting to have an image that could come down from the top of the wall. I needed to bring down Michelangelo's *Jeremiah* from the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. He and a broken Winged Victory preside over the history.

Each figure had to earn its place twice. Once as a visual image and again as a marker of a historical moment. There were of course many hundreds of possible images. I made choices, some I'm sorry about, some figures I wish I could have fitted in, but in any event, it was only possible to fit in a certain number. This is only one out of many possible groupings of characters and figures. Only one out of many possible accounts of history. Ordering the figures is neither random nor scientifically worked out. The drawings of the figures were spread out in the studio, and moving quickly amongst the tables, I placed and replaced the drawings. Not interrogating each choice, but allowing the movements of the body, of the hand and the eyes to find the place for each figure. Relying on all the knowledge of the images, of the history they carried, to guide the physical placement. And then of course I stood back, looked, assessed, altered what had been done.

The heart of the project was made in my studio in Johannesburg, but of course it had to be achieved in Rome. When almost all the figures had been made, I saw there was a gap of several metres that needed to be filled. It was too late to make another complicated stencil, I had to leave it as a black square, just tracing an edge to it. I gave it the legend, "That which I do not remember." "*Quello che non ricordo*", that which I do not remember. This has to stand in for all our gaps and my gaps of understanding. That which we do not remember, because it was hidden from us, or because our heads were too filled with easier, more consoling thoughts, or because we could not summon the energy to find the connections in our histories.

The studio was a safe space for these thoughts to reveal themselves in the months of drawing, for history and drawing to find their connection. The city has been an astonishingly generous base to receive these considerations. I'm grateful to the City

of Rome, it's citizens, to have been able to give physical form to this history, and to you here today, to have allowed me to play these thoughts out. Thank you.

Roma, 9 novembre 2018