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Ella Littwitz: The Elephant in the Room

CENTRE D'ART LA PANERA

Waste

In the beginning was the waste – this is what is not explained with the history of this sea, written in spoonfuls of Mediterranean cuisine and swallows of sparkling wine. Under the fine lamina that characterises the *dolce vita* where waves of classicism have led for centuries, Ella Littwitz (Haifa, Israel, 1982) reveals the Mediterranean as a subsidiary leftover, completely dependent and lacking.

The biological impoverishment of a leafy Mesozoic ocean, the so-called Thetys – over 200 million years ago –, gave way to a precarious sea, meteorologically unstable, with serious salinity problems and satiated thanks to the small opening that keeps it in contact with the Atlantic on one side – known as the Strait of Gibraltar. Correspondingly, a rough landscape has been defined on its shores, sometimes barren and barely fertile.

This has been the price to pay for the placidity of the basin, which, otherwise, has been considered indispensable as a cradle of humanity: for all its poverty, the Mediterranean has been the ideal ecosystem for the development and exchanges of what has later been explained as the early human civilizations.

The Elephant in the Room works, on this point, by analogy. A question seems to cut through the whole project that Littwitz has undertaken on purpose for the hypostyle gallery of La Panera: how far is the determination of this remote waste still relevant today?

The tyres found at the bottom of the installation allude to the most precarious solution for sailing: the dinghies. Moreover the tyres as such are used as buoys by the fishermen of the shores of the Mediterranean and as a defence for their boats. By piling them up, Littwitz alludes to the precarious condition of this sea but also to the humanitarian crisis unleashed there since the turn of the millennium with the mass migration from the coasts of North Africa and the Middle East.

However, how far is the Mediterranean not only the means of the migrations but also the cause? For Littwitz, the bed of the Mediterranean, the fateful destination of many of the small boats that sail every day from its shores, is also the trigger. Or is it that the idiosyncratic mediocrity of this sea has no relation with the human mediocrity present at the expense of the so-called *civilized* world?

Nets

In the debate about the media, two positions are frequent: it is believed that either the media is completely determined by preceding circumstances or wholly determines a new landscape of social relations.

A recurrent case is Internet: some see it as a revolutionary communication system that has even changed “the way we think, read and remember” (Nicholas Carr). But there are those who also see the Internet as a system that has met the specific needs of its developers, the US Army and Department of Defence. Therefore, according to the acolytes of this interpretation, with the spread of Internet, what would have been achieved is only a use of society with ends related to militarisation and surveillance.

Nevertheless, a few years after developing ARPANET the network that anticipated the Internet the US army engineers started to experiment with another type of net, in this case made of polyethylene. It is known by the name geocells, and is currently used as a system of confinement: this net creates a barrier that prevents landslides on aqueous or unstable lands. Geocells impede the filtration of water and thereby facilitate good drainage and keep the land compact, enabling the construction of roads, pipelines and paving of all kinds on its surface.

Given the low cost, geocells have become revolutionary in remote areas of Africa, the Middle East, Australia and the Pacific. Their success is explained by their part in the development of rural populations faced with extreme poverty, enabling the building of roads that help improve links between population groups and, thereby, between respective micro-economies.

With An Elephant in the Room, Littwitz fully exploits the duality of the geocells as a net system: indeed, this mesh has great potential for connectivity in exchange for keeping substances confined.

The routes that have crossed the Mediterranean since time immemorial and have made this sea a great means of communication for humans can probably be explained in a similar sense: on the one hand, it is understood that this navigable network has been a key element in civilised development. But the Mediterranean, as an obstacle, has also been a trigger for the development of differentiated cultures on its shores, so, in the first instance, it has also led its peoples to remain in dispute and separated.

So how far does the Mediterranean civilize and change the determinations or has it simply served to put human miseries on a higher scale?

Drought

Littwitz also points to the start and end of times. Towards the archi-*fossil*, which is prior to the spread of human plague, and towards the utopias, which have sought to overcome it.

On the one hand, *The Elephant in the Room* refers to the Messinian Event, which happened 6 million years ago, when the current Strait of Gibraltar closed and entry of water into the Mediterranean was obstructed for a few hundred thousand years. This meant that the sea level quickly dropped between 3 and 5 kilometres and that the Mediterranean basin almost completely dried up.

On the other, Littwitz refers to the project with which the architect Herman Sörgel reconsidered, in 1927, this prehistoric episode, seeing it then as a way to eradicate the conflict created between the countries in the Mediterranean basin: for over twenty-five years Sörgel worked on defining Atlantropa, a project with which he wanted to encourage good understanding between the riparian Mediterranean countries by reclaiming kilometres of land from the sea. In this way the dreams of national and colonial expansionism would be satisfied without countries having to confront each other.

Although this was actually unlikely, it would be wrong to see Sörgel as a visionary, when at the same time the Zuiderzee was being developed, the construction of the immense dike with which the Netherlands has reclaimed thousands of kilometres from the North Sea.

Sigmund Freud lashed out against this: “Where *id* was, there *ego* shall be. It is the work of culture – not unlike the draining of the Zuiderzee.” With his “31st conference on psychoanalysis” in 1932, Freud used the initiative of draining the sea as an anti-example to describe the psychoanalytical cure: as interpreted by the Edit Suisse Group, psychoanalysis tries to reveal the feelings of guilt that remain at the bottom of conscious memory, and is never eliminated or drained.

This is not the case in the draining that Littwitz has caused with *The Elephant in the Room*. A certain Messinian Event is witnessed here as a great drained mass, which functions as a negative mould of the basins that come together in the Mediterranean and, at the same time, as a fossil of its seabed. Fernand Braudel’s words serve as a conclusion: “Nothing here recalls the classical and bright Mediterranean where the orange tree blossoms.” This drought facilitates the journey to the depths of its hidden face.