

# Naples REBORN



Once a highlight of the Grand Tour, Italy's southern hub is red-hot once again, attracting artists, curators and collectors with its irrepressible energy. Lee Marshall meets the leaders of the city's latest cultural revival

Photographs by Mattia Balsamini



In *Italian Journey*, Goethe's account of his travels in Italy, the author described Naples as a paradise. 'Everyone lives in a state of intoxicated self-forgetfulness,' he wrote. 'Yesterday, I thought to myself: Either you were mad before, or you're mad now.'

Not all visitors to Naples had their sense of world and self reset as Johann Wolfgang von Goethe did in 1787. But there was universal agreement back then that the southern Italian city was one of the world's great centres of art, archaeology and music – one with an umbilical link to Greek and Roman civilisation, an essential stop on a Grand Tour undertaken by artists, men of letters and scions of the aristocracy.

The city in the shadow of Vesuvius may have lost that primacy today, after long decades of economic decline, cultural contraction, and organised crime. But Naples still punches above its weight as a destination in which to absorb both ancient and contemporary art. Indeed, in recent years it has blossomed. Any Neapolitan will tell you to be wary of stories about the city's cultural renaissance, which seems to happen more often than the liquefaction of the blood of San Gennaro, the city's miracle-working patron saint, and with about as much lasting effect. But there's a solidity in the current revival, one forged by a confluence of public and private energies, of museums, galleries, foundations, curators, collectors and artists.

The decision of influential gallery owner Thomas Dane to open a branch in the southern Italian city in 2018 – his only foothold outside of his London base – is one sign of Naples's increasing influence. Both Dane's gallery and the new permanent home of collector Maurizio Morra Greco's art foundation and exhibition space – the big opening of 2019 – are housed in historic buildings. The Thomas Dane Gallery occupies the airy, neoclassical first floor of 19th-century Casa Ruffo, with sweeping Bay of Naples views, while the Fondazione Morra Greco drapes itself across the four floors and basement of Palazzo Caracciolo d'Avellino, a deliciously weathered 16th-century palazzo in the city's historic centre.

Another former aristocratic townhouse in downtown Naples houses Madre, the Museo d'Arte Contemporanea Donnaregina, which rivals Turin's Castello di Rivoli for the title of Italy's most dynamic public-run art space. Some

of the more venerable institutions, among them the Museo Archeologico Nazionale, the Museo di Capodimonte, and the archaeological sites of Pompeii and Paestum, have also thrown open their doors to contemporary art (the former Bourbon palace of Capodimonte was a pioneer when it did so in 1978). Even the charitable order of the Pio Monte della Misericordia, where one of Caravaggio's most celebrated works is housed, has begun to work closely with living artists and art students.

Meanwhile, Dane is not the only pillar of a gallery scene that was launched in the 1960s by the legendary Lucio Amelio, a man capable not only of engineering a Neapolitan meeting between Andy Warhol and Joseph Beuys, but of persuading them to work together. Today, younger galleries like Thomas Dane, Galleria Fonti and Casamadre thrive alongside established players from an earlier era, among them Lia Rumma, Studio Trisorio, Alfonso Artiaco and Casa Morra – the cultural engine room of another Morra, Peppe, responsible among other things for bringing the Viennese Actionist artist Hermann Nitsch to Naples.

Famous for his bloodstained *Theatre of Orgies and Mysteries* performances – arguably a perfect fit for a superstitious, ritualistic city in which skulls found in catacombs are still adopted as good-luck charms by locals – Nitsch is not the only international artist to have made the city his home, at least temporarily. Recently, both Jimmie Durham and Pádraig Timoney have spent significant chunks of time in the city. The tide in the other direction is equally strong: Naples is good at nurturing artists like Francesco Clemente who go on to find fame elsewhere.

In Naples, contemporary art has even ventured underground. In a municipal project coordinated by the art critic and curator Achille Bonito Oliva, 15 of the city's metro stations have been turned into what he has called an 'obligatory museum', with the help of around 90 artists, designers and architects including Joseph Kosuth, Karim Rashid, Lawrence Weiner, Mimmo Paladino and Alessandro Mendini.

In the following pages, six leading figures – two museum directors, a collector, a gallerist, a curator and an artist – talk about the joys and challenges of nurturing, promoting, displaying and creating art in Naples.

Installation view of Lynda Benglis: *Spettri* at Thomas Dane Gallery, Naples. Previous pages: a view of the city; Mimmo Paladino, *Vasca*, 1984, at the Museo di Capodimonte

Opposite: Lynda Benglis: *Spettri*/installation view, Thomas Dane Gallery, Naples, 17 December 2019-14 March 2020. Artwork: © Lynda Benglis/WAGA at ARS, NY and DACS, London 2020. Previous page, artwork: Mimmo Paladino, *Vasca*, 1984. Courtesy of the artist







Adriana Rispoli on the roof of Quartiere Intelligente with Mariangola Bruno, *The Dot*, 2018 (detail), also pictured opposite

## Adriana RISPOLI

**Born in Naples, where she lives in between international projects, Adriana Rispoli is an independent curator and art historian**

By training, I'm straight out of the Neapolitan baroque! It was probably this that led to my interest in contemporary performance and installation – after all, theatricality is embedded in the DNA of this city. If there's a leitmotif in most of the projects I curate, it's to do with taking art out of galleries and inserting it in the urban fabric. I like to work on site-specific projects that reach out to people who have had very little exposure to contemporary art.

A public project I co-curated back in 2008 called *Sistema Binario* involved inviting 20 artists, mostly from Naples and Campania, to produce works in and around the Napoli Mergellina train station. I've also worked in the inner-city Montesanto district, organising performances and video projections in urban spaces. In 2013, we opened a cultural

centre there called Quartiere Intelligente, in a former glove factory. There's a big garden, in an area that has no green spaces. We promote artists' residencies. It's all about creating a sustainable future for the neighbourhood.

There are some great young Neapolitan artists, but they get very little support. I advise them to do what I do – get out, work abroad, come back. The problem is that a lot of the really talented ones stay away, and they become almost invisible in their home city. People like Danilo Corrales, who is based in New York, Lorenzo Scotto di Luzio in Berlin, and Piero Golia, who has lived in LA for almost 20 years.

I'll say one thing, though: Naples definitely gives you an extra gear when it comes to problem-solving. If you can make a project work here, you can make it work anywhere!

This page and opposite: artwork, courtesy the artist and Quartiere Intelligente, Naples

'Most of the projects I curate are to do with taking art out of galleries and inserting it in the urban fabric'

