

Renewing Prato's *Experience* of Contemporary Art: an opinion

by Miranda MacPhail

"The future doesn't exist,
the future must be created".

Zygmunt Bauman¹

L'autrice osserva come l'apertura del Centro Pecci nel 1988 fosse stata accompagnata dal messaggio che abbinava il dinamismo imprenditoriale del settore tessile all'arte contemporanea, forse limitando con questo, già da allora, la partecipazione di un pubblico più vasto. Il successivo lento declino dell'industria tessile, oltre che a generare un effetto rallentatore sull'attività del Pecci ha addirittura consentito l'insorgere di un racconto diverso imperniato su Prato come città d'arte rinascimentale. Necessariamente riferita al passato e ad una altrettanto ristretta cittadinanza autoctona, una tale auto-definizione della città ancora una volta non tiene in considerazione la trasformata situazione socio-economica del luogo.

L'arte contemporanea, fondata sulla partecipazione e sulla pluralità di



sguardi, può invece porre ottime basi per ricucire strappi culturali e fornire spunti costruttivi per il futuro.

In questa missione il ruolo della comunicazione e dell'educazione dovrà essere rinnovato con l'impegno di tutte le forze in campo a partire da quelle interne al Centro.

At all hours of every day hundreds of cars pass along Viale della Repubblica, one of Prato's main traffic arteries; here, in passing and in the most distracted way imaginable, the drivers encounter the gigantic ring of the future *Museo regionale dell'arte contemporanea* designed by Maurice

Nuovo esterno del
museo Pecci di Prato,
foto di Ivan Dali



Nio, known internationally for his self-styled "snake architecture". Even though post-war Prato has habitually portrayed itself in ceaseless movement to promote its modern textile industry, its attention to architectural innovation is a recent phenomenon. In a zone characterized by constructions lacking in courage and quality, Nio's new building is a welcome

sign of quality. (The Dutch architect has never concealed his interest in the genre of fantasy and other sources of inspiration plucked from today's societal pulsations, from Tolkein's trilogy to Pokemon cards.) Moreover, Nio crowns the museum roof with a hopeful sign: history teaches us that the most authentic artists are those able to capture signs of the future that they transmit to us via their artworks. The choice of Prato as the location to host the Regione Toscana's headquarters for contemporary art is clearly fitting. The presence of a museum structure with a strong permanent collection was a strong pull; the Centro Pecci had also played a regional role for years, even before the attempted institution of the SMAC². Our city has a strong history – through private initiative and public institutions – of collecting and promoting contemporary art; indeed initial attempts to found a suitable

¹ The words used by the Polish sociologist and philosopher to conclude his talk at the Meet the *Media Guru* conference (Milan, October 9, 2013) can be put in context at <http://www.meetthemediaguru.org/rivedi-lintervento-di-zygmunt-bauman>.

² The Sistema Metropolitana di Arte Contemporanea was a commission of collaborating venues launched by the Regione Toscana and all coordinated by the Centro Pecci (representing the City of Prato). The other participants were the Cities of Florence (the only member without a stable venue), and Pistoia (Palazzo Fabroni) and the private Gori Collection- Fattoria di Celle, Pistoia. All the SMAC venues hosted an individually curated part of the two Smac exhibitions: a travelling retrospective of Dani Karavan's work as well as the exhibition, *Continuità: Arte in Toscana 1945-2000* before the disbanding of the collaborative effort.



Museo Pecci, Milano
2014, foto di Zeno Zotti

institution for these purposes were begun as early as 1966³. That ambition was finally realised in 1988, when Prato became the first Italian city to inaugurate a building constructed ad hoc to host contemporary art. The Centro Pecci's ensemble of exhibitions, conferences, education and events immediately distinguished it from the Castello di Rivoli, which together with the Venice Biennale, was the only other contemporary art venue existant in Italy at that time.

³ The first attempt at founding a Galleria comunale di arte moderna, led by Giuliano Gori, opened inside Palazzo Pretorio in 1966 with an exhibition of artworks on loan from Prato collections. The municipality's indecision about covering the initiative's costs led to the dismantling of the exhibition and the Galleria soon thereafter.

The scope of this essay cannot contain the in-depth research necessary to uncover how Prato's relationship to contemporary art has changed over the last three to four decades. (The city's wealth of interested individuals and groups, associations and clubs weave a fabric that is worthy of closer examination in its own right.) However, in the light of the important reopening of the Centro Pecci as the Museo regionale in 2015, this opinion aims to highlight some of the most recent shifts in this historical tie and suggest some ways in which perceptions might be updated to achieve constructive framing of future policy. For instance, in considering the ties between our city and the art of today, it is useful to return to 1988 when the Centro Pecci inauguration exploded nation-wide in the mass media. While on a national scale the city

was enjoying wide acclaim for its dynamism and forward-thinking in the arts, the new centre was presented locally according to a narrative based on the centrality of Prato's textile industry which had involved all facets of the population and brought the city its wide-spread prosperity. Such a framing of the art/business discourse should be considered within a more generally Italian post-war self-representation of industry, which has generated an expression as widely accepted as it is used: "la creatività al servizio della produzione."⁴ Such generic use of the word "creativity" has clouded meaning and risked reducing the concept to a narrow definition. In fact it has resulted in a tendency to see creativity as an operational problem-solving mode for the production and promotion of goods rather than as a privileged intuitive investigation in its own right. A prime example of this dichotomy can be seen in Prato Expo's choice of Robert Mapplethorpe as one of the photographers for a fashion report launched in *Vogue Italia* in September 1986; by contrast the same artist's retrospective exhibition which reached the Centro Pecci in 1993-94 (after stops at the prestigious Louisiana Museum in Denmark, Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe in Hamburg, and Moderna Museet in Stockholm) was met with popular and institutional outcry. In Prato the original Centro Pecci narrative unfolded along these lines: textile entrepreneurs, perennially on the lookout to anticipate fashion trends to bolster their businesses, were portrayed as discerning eyes for creative talents and processes (read art); hence the presence of many such figures in Prato justified the boom of, simultaneously,

⁴ Web navigators may be amused to note that this expression uncovers business websites from Biella to Vicenza to Venice and, of course, to Prato.

the textile industry and contemporary art.⁵ What is striking about this kind of reasoning is the consignment into the hands of a few "select" people the responsibility for what—after Enrico Pecci's donation of the Centro to the City of Prato—would become a public institution with a mission and responsibility directed towards a much wider audience. Throughout the 1990s the Centro Pecci provided an excellent formation to anyone interested in the contemporary visual arts and the events organised at the same time were a key attraction to encourage local participation. Then at the opening of the twenty-first century three only tangentially related factors combined to upset Prato's traditions and to lower the Centro's visibility. Primarily, the processes of globalised production (such as de-localisation and the consequent decline the urban fabric dependant on industry) impacted the wider citizenship, "sweeping away the certainties of

⁵ The Unione Industriale Pratese's economic summary of the period supports the view of Prato's burgeoning textile business [which] "contrasts remarkably with the much worse progression of other textile districts nationally... At the end of the 1990s the Prato district was a rather vibrant area in terms of competition and was well set to better its progress..." (see p.4 <http://www.ui.prato.it/unionedigitale/v2/areastudi/Prezentazione-distretto.pdf>). In terms of referring to the tight connection between textile entrepreneurship and contemporary art in Prato, recordings of conferences as well as numerous institutional introductions offer their testimony in the 1990s. More recently the tie was re-formulated by the President of the Centro Pecci, Valdemaro Beccaglia, in his presentation to the Korean public of the exhibition "Italian Genius Now," (2008) an exhibition mounted by the Centro Pecci as our national contribution to the year devoted to *Italia in Korea*: "Non è un caso che questa mostra sia stata progettata a Prato, riconosciuta internazionalmente come il più importante distretto industriale tessile europeo, che è stata la prima città italiana ad aver scommesso proprio su un museo di arte contemporanea per promuovere la sua immagine con i binomi arte e industria, innovazione e moda." (p13)

the city-factory"⁶ and, as one consequence, also overturning the prestige of textile entrepreneurship. Secondly in the same period the social fabric was transformed by immigration⁷. The fabric sector's consequential loss of relevance and the city's weakened economic condition strained the relations, till then mutually beneficial, of art and industry. In an overlapping period of time, the Centro underwent budget and managerial cuts which greatly reduced the events it was able to generate and promote. The result was an interruption of public participation and a seeming disaffection for contemporary art, reinforced by local information more apt to herald specific faults than to offer constructive analyses. The upcoming 2015 opening of the Museo regionale must needs focus the debate on the perceived divergence between institution and city. It is, however, the author's opinion that, in order to recover something of the city's bond to the contemporary arts, Prato must shed some commonplace preconceptions that have been actively communicated in recent years, namely the "re-discovered" golden age of Medieval and Renaissance glory. The campaign announcing that the city's altarpieces would allow Prato to "take back its history"⁸ are a recent example of an

attempt to shift the pratese art identity to ancient forebears. Certainly the municipal art museum's re-opening, after twenty years of closure, was a major event for the townspeople; nonetheless the doubt remains whether Palazzo Pretorio, located a mere 10 kilometres from Florence, will succeed in surpassing its local glory to reach wider audiences. Such a desired result would seem to depend on finding, despite a disadvantaged position, mutually beneficial incentives with the Tuscan capital. Most importantly, the attempt to forge a strictly pratese identity, based on such an eminent figure as Filippo Lippi, risks undermining what could be the city's true cultural forte of contemporary art. The latter, with its emphasis on plural inclusion, seems more capable of reacting positively to the city's socio-economic upheavals of recent years. Indeed there are two particular aspects of contemporary art discourse which might prove "of service" to the collectivity not only in this particular phase of Prato's history but also in the creation of a future vision for the city. The specific reference is to the transformed roles of artist and viewer, which can no longer be strictly contained within the "white cube" museum spaces but which must necessarily extend into the urban fabric, informing the realm of daily experience and perception. To realise among the population a radical revision of the museum that casts visitors in a central role flanking the artists will require an impressive campaign of shared vision on the part of cultural and economic operators, educators and education systems, as well as

⁶ Quotation from the brochure for the conference *Economia*³ held in Prato from September 25-28, 2008, a useful source for understanding institutional reactions to Prato's plummeting industrial situation and its difficulty in diversification. The brochure is accessible at <http://www.centropecci.it/html/eventi/08/economia3/down/economia3.pdf>.

⁷ According to ISTAT statistics contained in the *Rapporto su Immigrazione* issued by the Provincia di Prato, between 1991-2011 Prato's local population dropped from 99,3% to 86,5% of the total demographic make up. By contrast, foreign immigrants grew from 0,7% to 13,5% during the same time period.

⁸ The taking back of the city's history -almost implying that someone or something was set on stealing it

- was the guiding concept behind an ad campaign for a series of printed materials, including large banners hung from the city walls between 2013 - 2014. Quite independently from their communicative efficacy, they demonstrated a city turned in on itself, more in search of its past than its future.



foto di Ivan Dali

organs of information (which would do well to remember that "formation" is part of their philological and cultural mission). Art's crucial lesson, from Modernism onwards, is that the viewer's experience should no longer be based on a remote admiration of objective Beauty but rather on a subjective participation in the artwork. Whether it be a material object or an evanescent action, art is realised via the viewer's presence. Of course visual art has always been predicated on the sensory experience; no reproduction, film or app can completely substitute one's being in the artwork's presence and honing one's senses to capture what Walter Benjamin termed its *aura*⁹. What is new for the general public today is the idea that, in order to extract significance from the artwork, observers are

⁹ Benjamin's most complete discussion of *aura* is found in *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (1936).

obliged to mediate its range of meanings in a personal way. The artists currently working around us are founding their poetics on the voices and impulses of our world; we, in turn, are called upon to suspend judgement in order to more fully immerse ourselves in that experience which is the contemporary artwork itself.¹⁰

Understanding this already historicised overturning of expectation is a fundamental step in capturing the more recent development – of significant proportions for the future of art and society – of the newly-honed role for artists. With increasing frequency they are invited to collaborate

¹⁰ Among the most authoritative and wide-ranging discussions of the contemporary artwork as experience, see Rosalind Krauss, *Passages in Modern Sculpture*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts 1981, in particular the chapter "Double Negative"; for a more general argumentation see *Off-Media* exhib. cat. a cura di Germano Celant., CentroDi Pub., Florence 1978.

with both public and private sectors to find creative solutions to societal issues:

“Organisations of all sizes and of all sectors are inviting artists to work on issues and to interact with employees for a few hours, days, months or even years. The objective of these interactions is not specifically the creation of a work of art, although works do emerge in and from the process. The driving force for the organisations is the search for ideas, for fresh perspectives, new practices, and the creation of social relations¹¹....”

The quotation sums up a vast range of attitudes, operational modes and concepts being brought forward in a new area of artistic investigation that is ripe for deeper academic study. No longer communicating to an audience over a sensory distance, the artist is actually, through shared ideas and interaction, “sculpting” certain sectors of society. In looking to its future Prato should decide if such kinds of action are pertinent and, if so, how an informed community can fully assume its participatory and responsible role.

Updated Conclusions

This essay was prepared from observations of the city's contemporary cultural life noted between 2013 and the spring of 2014. Since then the Museo regionale's new director Fabio Cavallucci has developed a programme that specifically addresses some of the issues highlighted here. In particular, Cavallucci has discussed the new museum's role with the community's constituents, from various professionals to ethnic communities, in numerous public meetings and has launched an education programme designed to jump-start the public's knowledge and engagement with the new museum.¹²

From this revised viewpoint the essay can only “photograph” the development of a situation, suggesting areas worthy of further interdisciplinary study, and testify to an initial solution to some of the main questions. In a few years it will be interesting to read in *Prato Storia e Arte* the next observer's reaction and documentation of how these current programmes will have evolved over time.

The author wishes to thank Ivan Aiazzi and Alessio Zipoli for their advice and support.

¹¹ From the exhib. cat *Contexts*, produced by the self-described “research/production agency and exhibition space” Contexts Agency, Paris, 2013.

Innovative artistic experiments in the field of social practice are too many to sum up in a constructive way but interested readers will find different attitudes and approaches in such well-known projects of urban renewal as L'Isola Art Center in Milan (artist Bert Theis) and of environmental sustainability at Q.I. Vedo Sostenibile in the Montesanto quarter of Naples (12 international artists). Pacci Milano venue in November 2014, with the artist's focus on the issue of physical and media violence against women.

¹² In interviews with the local press (see Riccardo Tempestini in *Il Tirreno/Prato-Pistoia-Montecatini* on June 6, 2014 and Elena Duranti in *La Nazione/Prato* on October 11, 2014) the director underlines the importance of communication strategies and comments on his mission to make the Pecci a “vero centro per le arti” by activating the public's attendance and participation, involving young people, addressing issues of integration and multiculturalism, and starting an education programme “di una vastità mai vista” based on “una serie di Bignami delle arti contemporanee..., aperti a tutti.”