

Q&A with Elisa Giardina Papa

Andrea Nitsche-Krupp

The poem asserts the island's identity in the lines, 'we were a proposition', 'we never stabilized, we could not be measured.' Does this relate to your decision not to picture the island in the video, although you visited the land where it remains, 8 metres below the surface of the sea?

Elisa Giardina Papa

The island is still there, outside both Italian and Tunisian territorial waters. As long as it remains submerged, it cannot be claimed. Yet, if the volcano erupts and the island re-emerges, we could once again find ourselves in the geopolitical drama of competing claims.

Before starting the film, I went there with fishermen from Pantelleria. To understand its full extent, I had to dive to about forty metres. There you find a natural fish nursery. I decided not to film the island.

Ariella Aïsha Azoulay, my colleague at Brown University, writes about the violence of forcing everything to be shown and exhibited to the gaze. This film is about withdrawal and refusal. It refuses the idea that land, or an island in this case, is simply a given object available for capture.

So, my approach was indirect, askew. Instead, we filmed other Sicilian volcanic formations and the underwater terrain of the Aeolian Islands, off the coast of my village, which I have known since childhood. Rather than placing the island itself at the centre of the story, the film follows an ecosystem of unstable, submerged, and resurfacing volcanic matter, always on the verge of emergence and disappearance.

ANK

Your work often develops through archival research; can you tell us something about that process with this work?

EGP

Everything you hear in the film's narration comes from historical records. Nothing is invented, yet everything is rearranged.

I spent more than a year working in archives, libraries, geological collections, and scientific institutions across

Sicily, Naples, Paris, London, and Zurich. If you spend enough time with nineteenth-century geological reports, hydrographic surveys, diplomatic correspondence, and military accounts, you notice a strange shift. The language of measurement starts to fail. Faced with an incomputable geological event, every measurement becomes provisional. The island keeps changing: its circumference, its height, even its material composition.

Once these attempts fail, other forms of observation emerge. They smell the island. They taste its waters. Scientific description slips into something bodily and sensory. Constant Prévost fills five bottles with water. Someone else tries to ignite the gas escaping from the sand. Benedetto Marzolla touches the yellow water with his tongue, noting its spicy, salty taste.

In early nineteenth-century geology and chemistry, taste was considered a legitimate observational tool. Yet it almost seems they want to consume the island, as if ingestion were the ultimate form of territorial possession. There is something unsettling and slightly absurd about these records.

ANK

The imagery of the blue sun comes from historical accounts as well, yes?

EGP

Yes, the final stanza of the film's poem, the litany of colours and their occurrences, violet, lilac, purple, indigo-blue; three times..., comes directly from historical records – eyewitness accounts of the changed colour of the sun. The eruption survives not only in geological and military archives, but also in these scattered acts of witnessing. In Palermo, the sun appears as 'a pale whitish-blue disc.' In Saint-Sever, France, it is 'round and white like a moon' before becoming 'a pale blue colour.' In Guangzhou, a newspaper reports 'a pale green sun on both rising and setting.' Margaret Hess records in the margin of her family Bible in Trenton, Tennessee, that the sun had become a 'clear blue culler.'

ANK

You translate these historical accounts into imagery, and into poetry. Can you say a bit about the latter?

EGP

Poetry never exhausts the tale. As in oral culture, a story can always be retold. I think of stories, and even history itself, not as fixed official accounts but as fields of unrealized possibilities. Every retelling can activate the emancipatory possibility most needed at that moment.

The poem that shapes the narration of the film was written by Megan Fernandes, the most brilliant poet I know. She is based in New York, and we also collaborated on my previous film, *U Scantu: A Disorderly Tale*. Once I complete the archival research and draft the film script, Megan has an extraordinary ability to trace the path, find the glimmers, and find the voice in all my notes.

ANK

Specifically, that poetic voice is deliberately Sicilian in the video, with English subtitles for our audiences.

EGP

Megan's poem was then translated into Sicilian by Elisa Puleo, whose work with the Teatro dei Pupi Cuticchio is rooted in the Mediterranean oral storytelling tradition. The whole video trilogy uses Sicilian as its narrative voice. Sicilian is both a contact language and a language of the undercommons.

Sicily has historically been a contact zone, an island positioned between continental Italy and Tunisia that has been traversed by different peoples, cultures, and dominations. The language itself carries the traces of this history, retaining words from Arabic, Greek, Latin, Catalan, French, and Spanish. At the same time, Sicilian is now a subaltern language. You learn it from your mother or your grandmother, but you cannot use it to speak or write in school.

ANK

Is your process for the score similarly collaborative?

EGP

The score was composed by duendita, with whom I also collaborated on *U Scantu*. Once I have a rough cut of the film, duendita plays and composes while watching the images. Late at night and early in the morning, the score emerges from what they see and feel. Once they have finished, my own edit is different. The music

changes the visual rhythm, the weight, and the affect of the images. They are a musical genius.

Another fundamental collaboration was with Ippolito Pestellini Laparelli, Francesca Lantieri, and Sara Barbini of 2050+, who designed the exhibition for the ICA. We immediately found ourselves thinking in the same direction. They have a rare sensitivity for amplifying the atmosphere, the pacing, and the mood of the film throughout the space.

ANK

Would you also characterise nature, and the geologic landscape of the Mediterranean as a collaborator?

EGP

Rather than a collaborator, nature was a constant reminder of both a deeper timescale and the limits of our own sensory attunement. Last summer, Mount Etna was in near-continuous eruption, and we had to keep postponing production. A reminder that human affairs, and really human history at large, are only one timescale among many.

The underwater cave produced a different kind of displacement, a perceptual one. At a depth of about fifty metres, we had only a limited amount of time to film because of decompression limits. It is cold, and red, orange, and yellow disappear, leaving you in blue. Melody Jue writes that blueness is not an abstract feature of the ocean, but an experience that emerges through a particular embodiment. At that depth, light is also extremely scarce, and the image was always on the verge of slipping out of focus. That instability, that almost dreamlike quality, was not an aesthetic decision. Nature shaped the scene physically and optically.

ANK

And as we are speaking, Mount Etna is once again erupting! Could you speak more about the place of material and geologic agency in reasserting non-human timescales?

EGP

The island unsettles historical time. It is always already new, always already gone. It stages a tension between eruption and erosion, accumulation and dispersion. Derek Walcott writes that the strength of the sea gives

you an idea of time that makes history absurd. By history, he means a progressive, linear direction of time. Against geological time, the idea of historical progress begins to unravel.

If you spend enough time in Sicily, thinking through clashing temporalities feels inevitable. You cannot really ground your thoughts in Sicily because the ground itself is always shaking. Earthquakes and volcanic eruptions are constant reminders of another timescale, unfolding over millions of years, a time that preceded us and will outlast us.

ANK

The island existed above the sea for a brief five months, a timeframe you characterise as ‘after Homer and before the Bomb King’; why these bookends?

EGP

The Homer reference was prompted by rereading Deleuze’s *Desert Islands*. He writes that ‘islands are either from before or for after humankind.’ The ‘Bomb King’ refers to Ferdinand II of the Two Sicilies, known as *Re Bomba*. When the island emerged in 1831, he claimed it, naming it Ferdinandea after himself. Seventeen years later, during the Sicilian Revolution of 1848, he ordered the bombardment of Messina, including its civilian neighbourhoods. The revolution, which began in Palermo on 12 January 1848, deliberately on Ferdinand’s birthday, became the opening act of the Springtime of the Peoples, the revolutionary wave that spread across Europe against absolute monarchies. The poem lets the island’s elemental resistance resonate with that revolutionary horizon.

ANK

The video is acutely compelling as a model of refusal: the volcanic event asserts a new value system with such force that it disrupts what counts as legitimate order and remakes the terms of belonging and historical time. The work positions the analogy in relation to past events, and potential future ones.

EGP

The island is incomputable and resistant to capture and measurement. It unsettles the imperial ordering gaze and renders projects of conquest, past and present, absurd. For all of us involved in the project, it became a framework

for rethinking sovereignty, borders, and belonging. That is why, toward the end of the film, we create a provisional slippage between elemental and political antagonism: moments in which a 'we' emerges and destabilizes existing structures of power.

We suggest some of those moments in the poem by naming dates: the Stonewall riots (1969), the Tunisian Revolution (2010), the Algerian War of Independence (1954), and *Ni Una Menos* (2015). These, and others referenced in the poem, are moments of anti-colonial, anti-patriarchal, and anti-heteronormative antagonism. The list itself emerged through a collaborative process among the people who worked on the film. But a list is never conclusive. It can always be expanded, revised, and continued.

ANK

Remaining open and the idea of ungovernability is likewise present in the sculptural elements of the exhibition, which we have yet to address.

EGP

I'm happy to talk about the sculptures because, although the film has travelled to other venues, the sculptural installation was conceived specifically for the ICA. It emerged through our ongoing conversations, Andrea, and by thinking together about the space.

The *cotisso* sculptures are made from an unstable form of Murano glass traditionally destined for remelting. I use it here in its raw state. Because of its internal tensions, it will continue to crack and change over the course of the exhibition. Its deep blue recalls the altered suns we spoke about earlier.

I made the *Linguacce* from hand-shaped *vetro massello* in Murano. In Italian, *linguaccia* is the insolent act of sticking out one's tongue in refusal. I'm only realizing now, talking with you, that they echo the repeated acts of tasting through which nineteenth-century scientists attempted to know and measure the island. Ironically, although *vetro massello* is considered a stable material, I had to remake the tongues twice because they cracked during the stabilization process. Somehow, they too resisted behaving as expected. With *cotisso*, there is no failure. Whatever the material does becomes the work.

ANK

Thank you, Elisa, for everything. Before we finish, do you want to fill our audiences in on the place of this work within the planned trilogy?

EGP

The trilogy explores forgotten and erased Mediterranean histories through counter-history and oral culture. The first work, *U Scantu: A Disorderly Tale*, confronts the archival records of the Spanish Inquisition in sixteenth and seventeenth-century Sicily through the queer, multispecies vernacular myth of the *donne di fora* (the women ‘from outside,’ and ‘beside themselves’).

As for the third work, I don’t know yet. Maybe it will be about the Cyclopes. Last summer, rereading the *Odyssey*, I realized that the Cyclopes are sometimes associated with the Sicani, traditionally considered the earliest known inhabitants of Sicily. Odysseus despises them because he believes they exist outside *nomos* (law), outside the *polis* (civic order), and outside *technē* (the capacity for agriculture and navigation). I’ve been thinking about the Cyclopes as inhabiting the outside of... But I still don’t know whether, or how, this will become a film.