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“*Tristezza Siderurgica*”

Jasmine C. Pisapia

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Résumé de l'article

Cet essai est le fruit de conversations entre une anthropologue et une artiste de la ville industrielle de Tarente, dans le sud de l'Italie — connue aujourd'hui pour être l'une des villes les plus polluées d'Europe en raison de la plus grande aciérie du continent. En approchant le travail photographique et théâtral de l'artiste Isabella Mongelli réalisé à son retour dans sa ville natale après avoir vécu des années à l'étranger, cet essai se penche sur l'expression d'une émotion spécifique imaginée par l'artiste sonore de Tarente, Alessandra Eramo : la *tristezza siderurgica*, la tristesse sidérurgique. Cette expression permet d'entrevoir, d'un point de vue ethnographique, de nouvelles perceptions et représentations d'un « chez-soi » devenu étranger, non seulement à cause d'une distanciation nostalgique, mais aussi parce qu'il est matériellement altéré et devenu toxique. L'article tente de montrer que de nommer des affects forge des paysages émotionnels spécifiques, peut-être même intraduisibles. Qu'est-ce cela signifie qu'être émotionnellement contaminé par le poison de l'acier? Alors que les textes contemporains sur l'expérience de la pollution environnementale ont tendance à osciller entre le matériel et le sémiotique / métaphorique en tant que pôles distincts, cet essai propose de tresser ces termes trop souvent polarisés à travers la pratique et l'écoute ethnographique. Passant par un processus dialogique entre esthétique et anthropologie, nous tentons de tracer la manière dont les artistes ont cherché à mobiliser l'expérience du sensible afin de mieux comprendre la crise écologique et les processus matériels du poison qui vacillent constamment entre visibilité et invisibilité.

“*Tristezza Siderurgica*”

JASMINE C. PISAPIA

[...] l'encre de la mélancolie, à force d'opacité et de ténèbres,
en vient-elle à conquérir un merveilleux pouvoir
de miroitement et de scintillement ?¹

The sadness of steel
that devours
that sinks
that changes
For it is true that everything is born
out of nothing or perhaps out of darkness
out of heat
out of torpor
out of pain.²

1. Jean Starobinski, *L'encre de la mélancolie* [1990], Paris, Seuil, coll. “La librairie du XXI^e siècle,” 2012, p. 623.

2. “La *tristezza siderurgica* / che divora / che affonda / che cambia / perché è vero che ogni cosa nasce / dal nulla o forse dal buio / dal calore / dal torpor / dal dolore,” Alessandra Eramo, *Good-Bye My Love*, poem as part of an installation for the Stuttgart Academy of Fine Arts, Stuttgart, Department of Intermedia Design, 2005–2006 (our translation).

This essay stems from conversations that took place over several years between myself and Isabella Mongelli, a visual and performance artist from Taranto where I’ve been conducting fieldwork since 2014. Situated in the southern Italian region of Puglia on the shores of the Ionian Sea, Taranto—whose history harkens back to the eighth century BC—became, in the early 1960s, home to Europe’s largest and most hazardous steel factory. The plant came to occupy an area more than twice as large as the city’s original footprint, proceeding to transform a Mediterranean landscape of pristine waters and olive groves into one of the most polluted cities in the continent.³ In the text that follows, I focus on Mongelli’s return to her hometown as a source of aesthetic revelation and experimentation. This return was marked by the joy of choosing art as a life-path and full-time occupation in a place that seemed to offer open, unexplored spaces for creation. Yet returning also involved, as she once put it, a profound discomfort in facing the “reality” (*la realtà*) of this place. This tension was explored through the capture of images she understood as “visions” (see Figs. 1 and 2).

One of Mongelli’s initial impulses in approaching Taranto after years abroad was to forge a glossary for the city. Amongst legal terminology (*sequestro*, *procura*), toxic substances (*dioxin*, *pcb*, *droga*), forms of labor (*trasfertista*, *turnista*), animals (*verace*), social structures (*comitiva*), and economic jargon (*dissesto*), I found one verb—*stare* (to stay)—and one emotion, *tristezza siderurgica* (the “sadness of steel,” an expression coined by Taranto sound artist Alessandra Eramo). “Staying,” *stare*, is to ensure one’s *presence*, to linger, to decide *not to leave* Taranto despite its forms of dispossession and limited futures. To *stay* (to be, to stand), as we shall see, is a state of being with correlative physical postures. *Tristezza Siderurgica* is a mood experienced by those who *stay*. It has to do with the atmosphere—an ironic twist on the pervasive affects of boredom and melancholy of the late industrial city where Mongelli had decided to live in order to dedicate herself to art.

As an anthropologist, I was interested in the aesthetic responses to Taranto’s environmental catastrophe as gateways into the perceptual and sensory experience of toxicity. Given industrial poisons’ continuous vacillation between visibility and invisibility, the relationship to the sensible world in zones of ecological devastation often consists—for residents and artists alike—in the tracking of changes and warning

3. The steel mill—which employs over 10,000 workers to this day and is currently managed by Acciaierie d’Italia S.p.a.—is strikingly close to, and perpetually enmeshed with, human life, putting 200,000 inhabitants at proportionately higher risk of premature death and health issues.

signs in the body, the city, and atmosphere.⁴ I was driven by the idea that the work of artists in Taranto could contribute to an anthropology of the senses in these regions through what eco-critic Serenella Iovino has called new “ecologies of words, of ideas, and of new possible material realities.”⁵ Indeed, the ongoing dialogue with Mongelli has, over time, provided insights not only on the aesthetics and environmental crisis nexus and the relationship between art (as an autonomous realm) and politics (as direct action)—but also on how the vision of artists holds the potential to expand the work of anthropologists.



Fig. 1. Isabella Mongelli, screenshot of *Visions in Taranto*, video, Italy, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qmUqShuxKNo> (accessed 26 October 2022).

4. This is what Nicholas Shapiro calls the “chemical sublime,” an affect that holds the potential for ground-level forensic exploration, intervention, and mobilization. Nicholas Shapiro, “Attuning to the Chemosphere: Domestic Formaldehyde, Bodily Reasoning, and the Chemical Sublime,” *Cultural Anthropology*, vol. 30, no. 3, 2015, p. 368–393.

5. Serenella Iovino, *Ecocriticism and Italy: Ecology, Resistance, and Liberation*, London, Bloomsbury, 2016, p. 4. The innovation of Iovino’s work is to provide an ecological *re-reading* of aesthetic productions in Italy harking back to the postwar period and moving into the present. When naming an “anthropology of the senses,” I am also thinking here of the work of sensory ethnography as theorized and practiced by Lucien Castaing-Taylor, “Iconophobia,” *Transition*, vol. 6, no. 69, Spring 1996, p. 64–88 as well as Lisa Stevenson and Eduardo Kohn, “Leviathan: An Ethnographic Dream,” *Visual Anthropology Review*, vol. 31, no. 1, Spring 2015, p. 49–53. Perhaps most relevant in southern Europe is the work of C. Nadia Seremetakis, *The Senses Still: Perception and Memory as Material Culture in Modernity*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1996.

Through an overview of Mongelli's photographic and theatrical work on Taranto, I will focus on *tristezza siderurgica* as an affective mode, tracing echoes and correspondences between what Italian anthropologist Ernesto De Martino called in the late 1960s the "crisis of presence"⁶ and what Mongelli expresses today as a profound sense of estrangement with regards to her city in crisis. This sense of estrangement (*straniamento*)—both endured and performed—is imagined by Mongelli as the point of view of "a person who was born there but who is now a tourist or a stranger, with a short-term passport."⁷ The "stranger" was a role she attempted to perform herself but also a place she assigned *me* in Taranto's theatrical geography. By drawing on the sustained interactions of Mongelli with anthropologists such as myself—but also her collaboration with Michael Taussig and his work on "global meltdown"—this article posits art and ethnography as possible modes of recovery and healing waged via aesthetic techniques meant to both *express* and manage the everyday life of environmental catastrophe.⁸

6. The concept traverses the book by Ernesto de Martino, *La fine del mondo. Contributo all'analisi delle apocalissi culturali* [1965], Torino, Einaudi, 2019.

7. This phrase is taken from Isabella Mongelli's own description of her performance *my personal taranto*, which will be analyzed in more detail below. Isabella Mongelli, "my personal taranto," Works, 2013, <http://www.isbellamongelli.it/my-personal-taranto/> (accessed 24 October 2022, our translation).

8. Isabella Mongelli's performance piece *Splendor Solis* (Bologna, 2018) was developed in conversation with Michael Taussig, in particular with his recent theories on the role of aesthetics in times of "global meltdown." These theories have been developed more thoroughly in the anthropologist's recent work *Mastery of Non-Mastery in the Age of Meltdown*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2020. In this work, Taussig suggests that the "mimetic excess" (at play in certain rituals, for example) has been—as opposed to the "disenchantment of the world" that Max Weber discusses in his famous 1917 lecture "Science as a Vocation," Munich University—*heightened* by the current moment, by global meltdown and its correlative environmental crises. It is, no doubt, a dark re-enchantment of the world Taussig is talking about, and yet his invitation (as I understand it) is to fully re-enter the play of mimesis as a way to counter its other disastrous, insidious effects. The study of the aesthetic relation to environmental catastrophe—and my own ethnography in Taranto, which unfolds in work of artists such as Isabella Mongelli—seems to confirm Taussig's hypothesis. In 2019, Isabella Mongelli, Michael Taussig, and myself co-curated a series of events and workshops exploring these themes at Rome's MACRO Asilo under the title: *Il Reincanto della Natura: Movimenti Sfuggenti e Oscuro Surrealismo: Tre Giorni tra Arte e Antropologia con Michael Taussig*, Rome, 15–17 May 2019. The event featured screenings, performances, and lectures by San Francisco collective Future Farmers, Berlin-based curator José Segebre, Los Ingravidos, and the collective epidemia. This exploration between art, anthropology, and environmental crisis conducted in Italy can be found in the second issue of collettivo epidemia's independent journal: *Epidemia: L'urlo dell'asino di Michael Taussig e altre storie da Taranto*, vol. 2, Jasmine C. Pisapia (ed.), self-published, October 2019. For an explicit articulation of Taussig's use of hybrid forms in anthropology, see the interview Jasmine C. Pisapia, "Behind the Scenes of The Sea Theater: Conversations with Michael Taussig (Columbia University) and Hélène Baril (Visual Artist)," *Seachange: Arts, Communication, Technologies*, vol. 2, October 2015.



Fig. 2. *Visions in Tarànto*, Isabella Mongelli, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qmUqShuxKNo> (accessed 26 October 2022). .

Let us evoke Mongelli's central work on Taranto: the theater play *my personal tarànto* (2014). In the opening scenes, we see a woman—played by Mongelli—wearing a rain jacket and yellow rubber boots who leans, like a gleaner, next to a blue plastic bucket. Slowly, she moves forward as she picks clams from the ground, placing them unhurriedly in the bucket, one-by-one. Her black hair is straightened by gravity as her head leans forward. On the right, a cloud of hazy smoke invades the space. On the left, a stray dog appears from the shadows. Lights turn off and on again in a flicker. A man and a woman make their entrance. They are hungry. The woman opens a backpack filled with *panzerotti*, a traditional bread stuffed with tomato and cheese. She rips it apart to eat it, but as it opens, red shiny dust pours down profusely as if in an hourglass.

A familiar air makes its way into the room—the music of the funeral march of the yearly Easter Procession. From obscurity, a familiar face emerges: the Madonna Addolorata—also played by Mongelli—with her porcelain skin, black veil, and her

pierced heart in her hand. She speaks English to a crowd that can hardly understand her and no longer feels the need to photograph her—she has been captured as an image too many times. “You waited all year in this shit!” She tells them. “Well now, in this fucking Week of Passion, you have the opportunity to have your catharsis.”⁹ Once the procession ends, the man and the woman return to their business. The man looks for drugs frantically in the bushes, and the woman—who is now wearing a blond wig—searches nervously for her own tomb. They sit down to rest at the kitchen table and listen to the radio. The mayor of Taranto is interviewed live and addresses his citizens proudly:

Recent analyses from the Zoo-Prophylactic Institute show that the mussels in the bay contain up to 7.5 picograms of PCB and dioxin per gram. A hoard of experts concluded that these mussels must be destroyed. But this represents over twenty thousand tons of mussels, amounting to four million euros. A hard hit for our economy. Thus, I warmly ask you to keep on buying and eating mussels. Soon it will all be over, he continues. Instead of the city there will be a crater, a gigantic black hole, and tourists will swarm. We’ll have our own Pompeii. Necropolis 1, Necropolis 2, Necropolis 3... We’ll be selling smokestack-shaped trinkets and souvenirs made of sparkling mineral earth...¹⁰

As they continue to listen to the mayor’s voice on the radio, the man and the woman are seized by spasms. Their bodies twitch like automatons, their necks twist, and their shoulders lift up and down in a jittery motion. Often, they ask each other whether to leave. Many times, we hear them determined to do so. But they cannot leave. They must stay. To get some relief, they walk to one of the beaches by the seaside. The woman picks up a dead octopus, untangles its tentacles, and holds it close to her chest. The cloud of smoke reappears, blocking sunlight. There, lying in their bathing suits, they ponder the meaning of catastrophe. “If only there were a catastrophe,” the woman tells the man, “we could all meet on that day, all together. And perhaps they’d name a street, a *piazza*, an angle, a wall after that catastrophe. That way, we would

9. This is taken from a videorecording of the performance *my personal tarànto* (Taranto, Teatro TàTà, 2014) generously provided to me by the artist for research purposes.

10. Videorecording of the performance *my personal tarànto* (Taranto, Teatro TàTà, 2014), courtesy of the artist Isabella Mongelli.

finally be S O M E W H E R E E L S E ... BUT NO! No end, no catastrophe, every day, slow. VERY SLOW”¹¹

These tableaux, cut-up into the flow of a dreadful dream, are part of a theater play in which Taranto is not merely the backdrop for Mongelli’s storytelling but a character in its own right. The title of the piece names the city anew: by displacing the accent on the second *a*, a word was invented: *tarànto*. This new word, Mongelli tells her audience by way of an introduction, is the signifier for a specific form of life as it emerges from the monotonous, slow process of toxification: “life that jumps amongst poisons.”¹² At the time of the performance, which was shown in Taranto at the Teatro TàTà located in Tamburi—one of the more polluted working-class neighborhoods—the public had mixed responses. There was a sense of unease. Apart from a handful of faithful supporters of her work, people were taken aback by the irony, by the blasphemy of portraying the Virgin Mary swearing in English, and by the fact that they were being reminded of how their local delicacies had been violated, of how the most familiar things had now become sensorially estranged and even lethal.

The atmosphere of the city was mirrored back to them in a moment of deep tension. In 2012, the factory had been seized by the judiciary. The city was punctuated by protests and demonstrations and saturated with media coverage of the ongoing disaster and the increasing exposure to illness and death. The play subverted the mournful yearly ritual of the Week of Passion, ironically displacing this “occasion for catharsis” into a direct invitation to catharsis in the space of the theater. But perhaps it was too close, too real. Or too soon. So soon that by the time I met Mongelli it was too late to see the performance in person, and I’ve resorted to watching it on video since.

I met Mongelli by chance in New York City around 2015 in the context of a theater workshop led by playwright and director Richard Maxwell. With what I later got to know as her seductive mix of fragility and valiance, she introduced herself as someone coming from a city in the South of Italy I wouldn’t know about. It turned

11. “Ci fosse almeno una catastrofe! Andremmo a metterci là...ci ritroveremmo là tutti insieme lo stesso giorno...E dopo magari ci intollerano anche una piazza, una strada, un angolo, un muro. E così, saremo finalmente ALTROVE ... E INVECE NO! Niente fine, niente catastrofe, tutti i giorni, every day, piano, piano, *slow*, *VERY SLOW*” (our translation). Here, the two characters are identifying a key differentiation between the “event” of a catastrophe (such as a nuclear explosion) from the process of a slow contamination. On the specifically “slow violence” of toxicity, see Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2011.

12. “*la vita che salta tra i veleni*,” Mongelli, “my personal tarànto,” 2014 (our translation).

out that she was one of Taranto's known performance artists, whose work for the past several years had drawn on extensive research of her hometown, where I was planning to move for fieldwork a few months later. We exchanged a few words on the challenges artists faced when engaging with ongoing environmental struggles in Taranto, as anyone who knows about the city would, and she laid out her position on the topic: "You know, I am not so interested in the usual rhetoric (*retorica*) around the place. I'm interested in the ways in which the state enters your skin, penetrates subtly into your cells, to the point of modifying them."¹³

As I became acquainted with her body of work, I realized this "penetration of the state" was neither limited to a biological understanding of the body's "cells" nor even to biopolitics per se¹⁴—although it was clear she *was* gesturing towards the material, chemical wounds the factory had inflicted on Taranto's residents for generations. Her aesthetic practice was invested in what she called the slow "subtlety" of this crisis—one which could not be read solely through the explicit language of contestation (what she called *retorica*) but was epidermal, connected to the senses. It was a subtlety that could be seized in the details of everyday life, in signs of popular culture, in the texture of uncanny scenes, surfaces, attitudes, and affects—a general atmosphere she translated into images and, she felt, was captured in Maxwell's plays. Mongelli's sensory exploration of Taranto's toxified landscapes (a home become inhospitable) was characterized by the process whereby what is familiar becomes unfamiliar. This perspective—very close to that of the "stranger"—brought her close to ethnography. And, indeed, I had materialized for Mongelli the role of the stranger she had performed herself, years before.

By the time I moved to Taranto, Mongelli had just moved to Milan. She would take the 12h-long train across the country to visit family and friends on several occasions throughout the years I lived in Puglia. I sometimes took the same train overnight in reverse to visit her in Milan, my backpack filled with freshly harvested broccoli rabe

13. Informal conversation with Isabella Mongelli.

14. The expression Isabella Mongelli uses of a "penetration of the state into one's body" of course resonates with Michel Foucault's (and others) conceptualization of biopolitics and the techniques of governance employed by the modern state to hold power over populations by asserting dominion over "life" and bodies. Michel Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975–1976* [1976], trans. by David Macey, New York, Picador, 2003. "At stake, is the biological existence of a population," Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, vol. 1: An Introduction* [1976], trans. by Robert Hurley, New York, Vintage, 1990.

(*rape*) from her vegetable garden in Mottola, which her father Frankie urged me to bring to her on my way up.

When we were apart, we remained in regular contact over the phone. She had provided me with detailed maps she had designed of the city (see Figs. 3 and 4), filled with black and white photographs of unconventional spaces to visit, bus rides to take through the city’s outskirts, hidden marketplaces, and industrial wastelands in which to roam. Tourism turned on its head. She urged me to immerse myself in her own curation of the city’s fabric, asked for frequent reports, and provided me with insights and ironic commentary via long monologue-like Whatsapp voice messages, which I’d listen to during my many walks across town.



Fig. 3. Isabella Mongelli, *Taranto Guide*, folded paper, 3 in x 5 in, Taranto, 2015.

TARÁNTO G U I D E



Fig. 4. Isabella Mongelli, *Tarànto Guide*, folded paper, 3 in x 5 in, Taranto, 2015.

Tristezza Siderurgica is, perhaps, akin to melancholia—in particular its material investment, the humoral parasitism of the poisonous black bile. *Siderurgia* brings up the material imagery from the bowels of the factory, which mainly workers have access to—incandescent ingots, blast furnaces, and liquid steel.¹⁵

In his wondrous study of melancholia, Jean Starobinski shows us how, once it is given a name, an emotion acquires an identity, and it is no longer exactly the same. “The name becomes a concept. It operates a definition and calls an addition

15. *Siderurgia*, from the Greek σιδηρουργεῖον, *sidérourgéion*, the black-smith’s workshop, is the specific sector of metallurgy concerning the technique of *transforming* minerals into different types of alloys containing iron, including steel and cast-iron.

of definition: it becomes the object of essays and treatises."¹⁶ Nostalgia was one such emotion, whose name was famously coined by a Swiss doctor who in 1688 decided it would be important to borrow from classical languages in order to name the illness of *Heimweh*, regret, *desiderium patriae*. He formed a word from the Greek *nóstos* (return) and *álgos* (pain).

By returning to this emotion in the Greek context of the late 1980s, anthropologist C. Nadia Seremetakis theorized the connection between sensory memory, history, and "nostalgia" among those on the southern European margins who were confronted with the rapid shifts of modernization. Seremetakis reads the event of the disappearance of a Greek peach, the "Breast of Aphrodite"—along with the vanishing of a set of other tastes and foods across Europe—as an event due to globalization processes and the joint expansion and centralizations of EU market rationalities. She describes the way this loss is experienced sensorially throughout the experience of *nostalghía*—reinscribing this term in its colloquial Greek use, showing how *nóstó* means the return to homeland, while *alghó* signifies the affect of pain in the soul and the body, "burning pain" (*kaimós*): "It evokes the sensory dimension of memory in exile and estrangement, it mixes bodily and emotional pain and ties painful experiences of spiritual and somatic exile to the notion of maturation and ripening."¹⁷

Of course, *tristezza siderurgica* is very close to such a rendering of nostalgia, to the pain and longing experienced when severed from one's "home." Its name came into existence through the experience of a *return* to Taranto—Mongelli and her artist friend Alessandra Eramo, who sit on the cement berth by the water and smoke cigarettes, met in their hometown during the holidays. They were *living* or *had lived* abroad. This "estrangement"—which as we shall see for Mongelli is deployed through the act of photography—is precisely born of the troubled relation to home and longing evoked by nostalgia. Yet, it is also *the imagination* of those who return *about those who stay*. It contains the desire to leave, the dread of being trapped in a home that has become unhomely and uncanny, and the fantasy about the affect of *staying* with others with whom they can only partially relate. The burden of staying has, in the expression *tristezza siderurgica*, the weight and quality of steel. Staying through

16. Starobinski, 2012 [1990], p. 284 (our translation).

17. C. Nadia Seremetakis, *The Senses Still: Perception and Memory as Material Culture in Modernity*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1996, p. 4.

the *slowness* of long-term poisoning and the anticipation—perpetually awaited but never actualized—of the factory's closure is captured here through the image of being emotionally laced by *siderurgia*.

Tristezza siderurgica emerges empirically as a *name* in the imagination of artists who return to Taranto and feel like strangers. It is simultaneously a fantasy about those who stay and about their own ambivalent desire and fear of staying. It is a mood tinged and produced by steelworks—at once a producer of emotion and the marker of pathetic fallacies—as much as it involves a fear of the loss of cosmic protection. Finally, it is an emotion crafted through the mixture of grief and irony as a protective elixir. It is the collective experience of being emotionally laced by steelworks, which manifests through a sensory landscape—a set of colors, images, gestures, and smells. It appears in one of Mongelli's performances via an anonymous collective of citizens she incarnates by lending her voice to a chorus inspired by Greek tragedy: "We are the children of the sadness of steel!"¹⁸

In a town dominated by unemployment on the one hand and mass steel production on the other, modes of being, occupations, and forms of economic sustenance are continually pitted against the factory's unstoppable productive rhythms and the complex social status it confers to its workers today.¹⁹ Local economy in Taranto is based on steel monoculture.²⁰ To do anything else, whether it's fishing on the side of the road or engaging in the practice of art or ethnography, is to *not*

18. "Siamo I ragazzi della tristezza siderurgica!" Isabella Mongelli, "LO SPLENDORE DEL SOLE, LO SPLENDORE DI TARANTO, I FICHI D'INDIA SI SCIOLGONO," *Epidemia: L'urlo dell'asino di Michael Taussig e altre storie da Taranto*, vol. 2, Jasmine C. Pisapia (ed.), self-published, October 2019, p. 50 (our translation).

19. There is a profound generational gap in the perception of workers in Taranto. Steel factory workers used to be much more present and involved in the city, even at a cultural level. People talk fondly of a "beautiful working class" who organized film screenings and fostered political debate. They were cultural and political actors, there was a high social status for them in the city, a sense of dignity—salaries were also proportionally higher. With the privatization of the factory, workers gradually came to be distanced from the social fabric of the city, and many of them live in peripheral towns where "the air is better."

20. See this expression as depicted in stunning interviews with activists from the association "Donne per Taranto" in Stefania Barca and Emanuele Leonardi, "Working-class Ecology and Union Politics: A Conceptual Topology," *Globalizations*, vol. 15, no. 4, 2018, p. 495.

be a steel factory worker. And thus, perhaps, to waste time.²¹ This representation of a binary division of statuses reflects how the city had been polarized during the height of protests in 2012 around the factory's predicted closure: "workers" on the one hand, who fought for maintaining labor, and "citizens" on the other, struggling for a healthier environment.

This polarization reflects what Stefania Barca has called an "ecological contradiction," whereby industrial *production* and social/environmental *reproduction* collide, and the source of economic sustenance and nourishment is also, simultaneously, an obstacle to life.²² This "contradiction" in Taranto entails a violently unequal distribution of the sensory experience of place: the entrails of the industrial complex are accessed only by the workers and remain extremely guarded from outsiders. Meanwhile those designated as "citizens"—barred as they are from the direct sources of production and contamination—suffer its material, biological consequences in the form of illnesses and death. For those excluded from the factory, its overwhelming toxic presence is noticed and tracked through a set of intermittently perceptible signs: dust, rust, dioxin smoke emissions, and smells.

One psychologist I met during my fieldwork in Taranto, Dr. Ettore Zinzi, began branding his practice as healing "*inquinamente*," a neologism of his own invention that brings together "*inquinamento*" (pollution) and "*mente*" (mind). This is a phenomenon he discusses in an eBook edited in 2015 by Narcissus Self Publishing, entitled "*INQUINAMENTE. Psyche and Pollution. Imagination or Reality?*"

21. Jacques Rancière's notions of "regimes of visibility" and experience of the sensible also extend to the questions of temporality and how the distribution of social positions and subjectivities forge the perception of time. Jacques Rancière, *Le partage du sensible : Esthétique et politique*, Paris, La Fabrique, 2000. My ethnographic work in Taranto is attentive to what Cressida Heyes calls the "edges" to experience, "our lives as unconscious subjects, or subjects outside normative regimes of time, or subjects whose subjectivity is fractured rather than consolidated by what happens to us," Cressida J. Heyes, "Anaesthetic Time, Pandemic Redux," *Duke University Press Blogpost*, 22 September 2020, <https://dukeupress.wordpress.com/2020/09/22/anaesthetic-time-pandemic-redux-a-guest-post-by-cressida-j-heyes/> (accessed 30 September 2022). See her book *Anaesthetics of Existence: Essays on Experience at the Edge*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2020.

22. Stefania Barca, "Ecologia Operaia," *Ecologie politiche del presente*, 2020, <https://www.ecologiepolitiche.com/percorsi/approfondimenti/ecologia-operaia/> (accessed 1 October 2022). See also her book *Forces of Reproduction: Notes for a Counter-Hegemonic Anthropocene*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2020. This perspective is inspired by the work of Silvia Federici who has profoundly questioned the binaries (and their political implications) that subtend much critical political economy, including the distinction between *production* and *reproduction* as value-producing and non-value-producing domains, Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation*, New York, Autonomedia, 2004.

*“Hypotheses” on the Psychological Causes and Effects of Pollution in Taranto. Stimuli and Traumatic Events and “Possible” Psychological Reactions of the Citizens.*²³ (see Fig. 5). He designed a lengthy table divided in two columns: environmental causes on the left and their correlative effects on mood and emotions on the right. The first item



Fig. 5. Cover from Ettore Zinzi, *“INQUINAMENTE”. Psiche ed inquinamento. Immaginazione o realtà? “Ipotesi” sulle cause ed effetti psicologici dell’inquinamento a Taranto. Stimoli ed eventi traumatici subiti e “possibili” reazioni psicologiche dei cittadini*, self-published, Narcissus Self Publishing, 2015, www.psicologo-taranto.com (accessed 26 October 2022).

23. Ettore Zinzi, *“INQUINAMENTE”. Psiche ed inquinamento. Immaginazione o realtà? “Ipotesi” sulle cause ed effetti psicologici dell’inquinamento a Taranto. Stimoli ed eventi traumatici subiti e “possibili” reazioni psicologiche dei cittadini*, self-published, Narcissus Self Publishing, 2015, www.psicologo-taranto.com (accessed 24 February 2021).

on the left column is the deprivation of natural beauty, which reiterates the well-known trope of the experience of early modern urban life:

To live every day surrounded by dark unnatural shades, with roads and buildings covered in red toxic dust. The sky is gray, enveloped by the factory’s smoke. The sea is “dyed” extravagant colors due to waste discharge and spills. Even the sense of smell is activated and bombarded by a bad smell, by a feeling of heaviness in the air.²⁴

The “psychological effects” of this landscape, on the right column, are explained by Dr. Zinzi through the notion of “meteorological” affects (“*meteoropatia*” is a widespread affliction that refers to the disturbances—mostly mood changes, anxiety but also physical pains—caused by meteorological variations such as wind, humidity, and atmospheric pressures). The weather was deeply entwined with the experience of the factory, as made clear by the English term “wind days.” In a coastal town with an intense attention to winds—the humid, warm Sirocco and the cutting Tramontane—the factory had come to bear natural qualities.

This dangerous mirroring between steel plant and nature was most explicitly described to me by Fulvio Colucci, a journalist in Taranto, during an interview.²⁵ During one of our many conversations, he described this strange poisonous exchange as follows:

You can see this is a “rust-colored” city (*rugginosa*), not rusty (*arruginita*). I am not talking just about oxidation here. *Rugginoso* refers to color, the same as the powdery toxic iron ores, *minerale*, this ochre color that you see in the city. The discourse around *rugginoso* may lead to passionate philological research—here the slightest linguistic split (*scarto*) could lead us to serious misunderstandings (*scarto*).²⁶ We need to understand each other and translate this city. In Kafka’s novella *The Metamorphosis*, Gregor Samsa is in his bed, and outside there is the sunset—a very important phenomenon for Taranto. Here, the sunset gives the city back that rusty color every day. Every afternoon the city is rendered what

24. *Ibid.*, p. 3 (our translation).

25. For a philosophical anthropology of the process whereby humans project their own interpretations and moral values onto nature and the epistemic dangers of these “naturalistic fallacies” where cultural values are transferred onto nature, see Lorraine Daston, *Against Nature*, Cambridge, MIT Press, 2019.

26. *Scarto* in Italian means both “waste” but also a “split” or an “opening,” as when there is a fork or opening juncture between two train tracks.

it has given in terms of rust. It is given back in a natural form, because nature is infinitely generous with us even if it should not be, given all the havoc we have produced. When the sun sets it gives us back this rust like a chlorophyll photosynthesis process. It is a chromatic paradox (*paradosso cromatico*). Trees give us back oxygen by absorbing carbon dioxide, sunsets give us light and a beautiful rust color, as a reminder of the beauty that every morning we transform in ugliness through the cycles of industrial production.²⁷

Industrial production was so encompassing that it even stained the sun—yet the sun, on its way out in the depths of the sea, emerged triumphant. It absorbed poison; it mimicked rust, while continuing to give back, generously. This stain was also a gift, the transformation of suffering into dark beauty. Like a stain on one’s skin, it was visually read by Colucci as a symptom, a manifestation of the excrescence of steel, which the sun and the sky ingested daily. In his study of the concept of infection, historian of medicine Owsei Temkin equated infection with pollution, a word he understood as concerning both moral and bodily debasement. He shows how ancient Greek physicians had secularized the concept, moving from religious or moral defacement of the air to the notion of a material degradation. Temkin also describes how the word *inficere* had as its first association “to stain” and “to color”: “The root meaning of the word is to put or dip into something, and the something may be a dye; or to mix with something, especially a poison; or to stain something in the sense that it becomes tainted, spoiled, or corrupted.”²⁸ And later on: “There is, indeed, no color except it has its origin in poison and is an indication and symbol of its poison.”²⁹

Color in Taranto had become the visible trace of the city’s trauma, the scar of its impact on nature, the sign of an unsettling reciprocity between burning forces—cosmic and industrial. It was the painful reminder of an uneasy collective burden and responsibility, which for Colucci surged before the human eye day-after-day through

27. Fulvio Colucci, personal interview, Taranto, 13 March 2018 (our translation). Michael Taussig talks about visions of sunsets as instances of the dark “re-enchantment” of the world wrought by global meltdown, Michael Taussig, *Mastery of Non-Mastery in the Age of Meltdown*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2020, in particular the chapter “Sunset,” p. 80.

28. Owsei Temkin, “An Historical Analysis of the Concept of Infection,” George Boas et al. (eds.), *Studies in Intellectual History*, Baltimore, John Hopkins University Press, 1953, p. 49.

29. *Ibid.*

tainted solar rays. For Georges Bataille, "the sun gives without receiving."³⁰ Yet perhaps the perverted, violated sun loses its omnipotence and is able to give—only to give back the poisonous color of rust, *rugginosa*. In Taranto, steel production follows the model of "cathedrals in the desert,"³¹ whereby what is produced and exported is incapable today of sustaining the area in which this production takes place. Its excess does not emerge from steel overproduction (i.e., from exceeding local need),³² but from its overwhelming production of waste. In the words of Colucci, the excess of unused dust produced a feedback loop within the cycles of daily production. Poisonous waste returned every evening through the mediation of the sun. Yet, was this surplus not also Colucci's alchemical crafting of that stunning image?³³

"The sun shines in Taranto!" The setting sun incidentally re-appears in one performance I attended in 2019, where Mongelli stood in front of a small audience in the small ZTA performance space in Naples, her chin up and straight ebony hair framing her face. On the wall behind her that night, she projected a sunset photographed with an analog camera in 1997 from the balcony of the apartment building where she grew up (see Fig. 6). The building was called *Siderarmoniosa*—

30. Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share: An Essay on General Economy* [1967], vol. 1, trans. by Robert Hurley, New York, Zone Books, 1988, p. 38. In his "general economy," Georges Bataille emphasized the illusory nature of growth as conceived through accelerated industrial development. He underscored the inability of having, on the one hand, an economic system based on profit and desirable growth, and on the other, the economy of social life, where energy was always in excess, awaiting to be released or destroyed. Beyond the phenomena of production and conservation, he was interested in the strange excessive nature of consumption, which involved a portion of radically unproductive expenditure. This expenditure, *dépense*, was epitomized by the image of the sun, which gives without receiving. See also Michael Taussig's analysis in "The Sun Gives without Receiving: An Old Story," *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, vol. 37, no. 2, 1995, p. 368–398.

31. Critics compare this development effort, fuelled by the creation of the Cassa Del Mezzogiorno (Bank of the South), to a colonial outpost of the northern economy. Historian Paul Ginsborg discusses the bank's role with regard to Italy's economic miracle in *A History of Contemporary Italy: 1943–1980*: "The siting of some of the development zones was widely criticized, as they seemed to be the result more of successful clientelistic pressure than of rational economic planning. Worse still, the major new industrial plants soon earned the epithet of 'cathedrals in the desert'. They were nearly all in capital- rather than labour-intensive industries, and as such made a limited contribution to the enduring problem of southern unemployment. They also had a limited effect in stimulating the local economies around them. Throughout the 1960s new factories, petrochemical and steelworks, the most dramatic symbols of the 'miracle' in the South, remained in splendid isolation," Paul Ginsborg, *A History of Contemporary Italy: 1943–1980*, London, Penguin Books, 1990, p. 231.

32. "A society always produces more than is necessary for its survival; it has a surplus at its disposal. It is precisely the use it makes of this surplus that determines it," Bataille, 1988 [1967], p. 106.

33. In "The Notion of Expenditure," Bataille counts artistic production—that is to say aesthetic productions—as forms of real and symbolic expenditure, Georges Bataille, "The Notion of Expenditure," Allan Stoekel (ed. and trans.), *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927–1939*, vol. 14, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1985, p. 120.



Fig. 6. Isabella Mongelli, *Sunset from Siderarmoniosa*, analog photography, Taranto, 1997.
© Isabella Mongelli

where “steel” meets “harmony”—a cooperative housing project started by factory workers and city administrators on the outskirts of Taranto. The camera is directed towards one of the city’s military bases, which forms part of the navy’s arsenal, though it remains imperceptible. What we see are the stunning colors of the fading sun. Along with the projected image, she recites a text written in the fashion of a Greek tragedy, and the imagined chorus of youth, the “children of the sadness of steel” (*i ragazzi della tristezza siderurgica*) continue to sing in unison: “The war industry! We have never been able to see beyond that wall. Yet at night, in our sleep and dreams, don’t we all interact?”³⁴

In *LO SPLENDORE DEL SOLE, LO SPLENDORE DI TARÀNTO, I FICHI D’INDIA SI SCIOLGONO* (2019), the chorus is made of the children of the sadness of steel. This younger generation voices its fears, hopes, questions and judgments while performing the voices in unison—a collective body that, in a city polarized by the tragic choice between “labor” and “health,” can only find common grounds in

34. Mongelli, 2019, p. 50 (our translation).

the realm of dreams. There is no tragic hero, nor a dramatic narrative—but one can imagine the chorus speaking to those who take an active part in the city’s fate: workers, politicians, soldiers, and the military, the older generations who support the project of steelworks. The chorus’s fear is diffuse, increased by *what it cannot see*. The “wall” the children are referring to is the *muraglione*—a massive wall that cuts through the city and hides a vast military zone (Taranto’s military marine is one of the most important in the country). In the collective imaginary, the military area and the steel factory are two realms (made and inhabited by male subjects) who escape most residents’ sight. Indeed, Mongelli’s photographic practice, even as a teenager, was directed elsewhere—to details and to the banal beauties of the everyday, which in her plays have become performances of the act of looking.

This staging of an estranged gaze—from hyper-seeing to being blind or looking away—is central to Mongelli’s overall work on Taranto. It begins with her photographic series *Visions of Taranto* (2012) and is pushed radically further in her performative works, *my personal tarànto* (Taranto, 2014), *Industrial Gran Tour* (Taranto, 2015), and *Splendor Solis* (Bologna, 2018). Her documentary practice, never veering far from the mythical, is premised on facing the city’s *reality*, which initially happened through the photographic medium:

My vision became something else. It made reality even more real, because in a way my perspective ended up being prophetic of future political events that then occurred. But initially I began working on Taranto *because I felt an emotional resonance with my inner state*. I wanted to transform this discomfort into an opportunity—so I began observing reality, and seeing what was unique, special, and interesting in what people called a shitty reality (*realità di merda*).

I started noticing things and photographing them. I didn’t know yet that photography was a filter that could make things more beautiful to me. I didn’t even know yet that I was doing research about Taranto. Looking at these images, I felt that I was not only creating an archive, but that I had *objects* in my hands. [our emphases]³⁵

35. Isabella Mongelli, telephone interview, 9 June 2020 (our translation). Unless otherwise noted, the passages of Mongelli’s transcribed speech in the remainder of this article are taken from this conversation.

Mongelli's "visions" are part of this process of observation of her hometown. They capture one of photography's truths—the way they seek out other images, bodies, or text, their hinting towards the phantasmatic temporal continuum from which they were extracted. In a gesture of inherent longing, the photograph simultaneously reveals what it also conceals: the moment before, after, and whatever stands out of the viewfinder.³⁶ The images she made are like pieces of a mosaic, but the totality they refer to is not the temporal axis from which they were extracted as photographs but rather the *space* of Taranto as an imaginary body. For Mongelli, observation went hand-in-hand with the process of photographing, which she describes as the expulsion of a *foreign* body:

From *enduring* that reality, I started—through the gaze, through the photographic medium—to *intervene* in reality, to objectify it, and make it external to me. It was like a protective mechanism: instead of hurting you from within, *you put the object outside of you, you expel it, so it hurts less because suddenly it is no longer part of you*. Looking at those images retroactively I made sense of my existence there, of my presence there.

Objectification had to do with my discomfort. My presence there was my presence at a social level, that social function of my presence inside that reality, and that city. I didn't have any function. I didn't contribute to anything. This is often the case for artists. In the performance *my personal tarànto*, I worked a lot on posture. On the attitude of the characters, their bodies in space. But the images came first. Take this practical example: a photograph of this walled-up door, with raw cement [our emphases].

Ariadne in the labyrinth was momentarily halted by a walled-up door, an impasse, the ultimate barring of vision and movement (see Fig. 7). Photography served to de-familiarize, estrange, objectify, and *expel*. Photographer Lewis Baltz had said something strikingly similar about the industrial landscapes that traverse his work: "I used photography to distance myself from a world that I loathed and was

36. Rosalind C. Morris, following Jacques Derrida and Samuel Weber, discusses the logic of the "border" of images and photographic enframement in its relationship to internality and exteriority in Rosalind C. Morris, "Two Masks: Images of Future History and the Posthuman in Post-apartheid South Africa," Patricia Spyer & Mary Steedly (eds.), *Images that Move*, Santa Fe, SAR Press, 2013, p. 187–218.



Fig. 7. Isabella Mongelli, *Porta Murata (Visions in Taranto)*, Taranto, 2012.
© Isabella Mongelli

powerless to improve.”³⁷ In Mongelli’s images, scenes unfold in which she witnesses the clear repression of the city’s ongoing crisis. In her photographic series, we see signs displaying ironic inscriptions during the height of the factory’s trial for lethal

37. Lewis Baltz, interview by Matthew Witovsky, Archives of American Art’s Oral History, Interviews of American Photographers Project, 15–17 November 2009, <https://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-lewis-baltz-15758> (accessed 1 October 2022). I thank scholar Benjamin Young for signaling this citation in his presentation on the photographic work of Allan Sekula in a seminar held at Princeton University by Eduardo Cadava in Spring 2021. In Baltz’s work, as in Mongelli’s, there is the notion of the “industrial park” as a site of imaginary leisure and a problematization of what is seen and unseen in the (post)industrial landscape.

contamination in 2012: “Taranto is beautiful, thank heavens! And clean...thanks to you!” (see Fig. 8). The instances she captured became signs that the *surface* was indeed expressing in full light a lack of self-awareness about the catastrophe unfolding. The city was always referred to by its residents in terms of lack, in terms of absence. As if *something* was clearly happening but the texture of the event was difficult to grasp. “The task was to see what is in this void,” she says, “this emptiness (*vuoto*): take ‘nothing’ and analyze it. What are the components here? Of this nothingness? What is it made of? I collected these shapes, these traces.”



Fig. 8. Isabella Mongelli, *Taranto è Pulita (Visions in Taranto)*, digital photography, Taranto, 2013.
© Isabella Mongelli



Fig. 9. Isabella Mongelli, *Queste Cozze (Visions in Taranto)*, © Isabella Mongelli digital photography, Taranto, 2013.
© Isabella Mongelli

Traces. Some of her images indeed display the material traces of toxicity: the dust, rust, the altered colors. Others seize public discourses about it. “THESE MUSSELS SHALL BE DESTROYED” (see Fig. 9)—a passionate headline tacked on one news stand announces the waste of thousands of poisoned mussels, one of the city’s traditional dishes suddenly coded as abject. Yet, beyond the traces of poison and its effects, the scenes *themselves* are traces—traces produced and left behind by her for our curious examination, testimonies of the act of looking, of collecting traces that shed intermittent light on the enigma of a world shaken by new sense perceptions, new reckonings that recode the past as damaged.

There was a fish market I photographed called Jesus Christ (see Fig. 10)—that’s the irony of Taranto. It was owned by the Caso Brothers (“Caso” means coincidence). Taranto’s irony of Jesus Christ that causes fish to multiply by chance. It’s like there were these *wide pockets of unencoded reality*. They weren’t given meaning by anyone, not even all the people who lived there and kept saying this place was a shitty reality (*realità di merda*). Because most minds that circulated in the city were obsessed with work, family and kids, and a whole set of things, like unemployment.

And that walled-up door, it was an absolute monument! That was the enigma: nothingness, the black hole. I delineated my cynicism then. That grey-black humor. *Let’s go in the black hole and see what happens. Let’s cut it open (lo svisceriamo)*. We come back to the power of making things external, making them become objects. Entering the black hole. This is an ugly reality, sure. But what is it made of? [our emphases]



Fig. 10. Isabella Mongelli, *Pescheria Gesù Cristo (Visions in Taranto)*, digital photography, Taranto, 2013.
© Isabella Mongelli.

This is a figuration of emptiness, and yet the photographs are ripe with detail. Mongelli insists on speaking of a “pocket of reality without a code” (*senza codifica*). This is, quite precisely, the way in which Ernesto De Martino had described the experience of end times as a crisis of presence. Of course, the particularity of his project was to bring together ethnographic materials and cases of clinical psychiatry, but one largely overlooked section of *La fine del mondo* (1965) concerns the study of modernist works of literature.³⁸ In an introduction to these sections, French commentators have explained why De Martino had partially relinquished his analyses of Charles Baudelaire, Arthur Rimbaud, Stéphane Mallarmé, David Herbert Lawrence, Thomas Mann, Albert Camus, Samuel Beckett, and Marcel Proust—to name a few.³⁹ The risk was to read art and literature symptomatically, thus implying the figure of the writer and artist as pathological. One might re-read these passages now as his understanding of what the aesthetic relationship to catastrophe could be. He finds hints of this in the clinical case of the peasant of Berne—a delirium that allows him to forge his concept of *spaesamento* (disorientation in the world/landscape) as well as the need for a process of *appaesamento* (a recuperation of this loss of positionality). He will dwell on the experience of emptiness via Pierre Janet: “Feelings of emptiness, so thoroughly analyzed by Janet, consist in the loss of authenticity of self and the world, where the flow of psychic life is accompanied by a sensation of alienation, artificiality, unreality, and distance.”⁴⁰

Digging further in the psychiatric literature, De Martino shows how this relationship between self and the world imbues everyday life with “an obscure semantic halo that is experienced as waiting for the catastrophe: the entire universe is in tension.”⁴¹ Perhaps the “feeling of emptiness” conceptualized by Janet concerns, indeed, the experience of psychiatric disorders. Yet, what if the world *itself* is indeed “pathological”—in the case of Taranto, the environment represents a continuous

38. De Martino, 2019 [1977].

39. See Daniel Fabre’s insightful comment on Ernesto De Martino’s readings of modernist literature in Ernesto De Martino, *La fin du monde. Essai sur les apocalypses culturelles* [1977], Paris, Éditions EHESS, 2016, p. 272.

40. Ernesto De Martino, *Magic: A Theory From the South* [1959], Chicago, HAU Books, 2015, p. 97.

41. De Martino, 2016 [1977], p. 143.

material threat—and artists are simply like a “radar,” as Nicola Andreace—an artist from Taranto who worked in the late 1960s—put it, that make this palpable?⁴²

Mongelli’s movement from photography to theater could be thought in terms of the tension between the visible and the invisible—yet it is not that theater allowed her to perceive the unseeable in ways photography did not. Rather, this *passage*, this transition from image to body, from captured to performed, was important; just as it was important to anchor the act of looking in a shared bodily presence. A similar step back into “that reality” had happened during her performance *Industrial Gran Tour* (2015) in which she rented a 55-seater coach bus to pick people up from the Taranto train station and bring them to the Massafra theater festival. She wore a sporty raincoat and a clip-on mic and like a tourist guide on an excursion described the industrial vista to a group of incredulous passengers—a combination of foreign theatre critics from across the country and extras she had chosen to play the part. She spoke as people admired the view from the window where “wide and bright visions multiply on a landscape made mainly of trees, pipes, smoke-vapors and incomprehensible structures.”⁴³ Chimneys, warehouses, and factories were but “structures,” shapes. She would have them get off the bus and smell the chemical whiff of the factory.

“The idea was to create a *presidio di presenza*,” she said when describing the performance. *Presidio*—from the Latin military term *praesidium* referring to an occupied, defended place—is a word I heard often in Taranto when artists and activists gave value to small actions, to meetings, to the notion of “holding the fort,” of *being there*, of *occupying* physically, of *staying*—even if in a small number. This idea is redoubled in one photograph of a protest that circulated online of young men occupying a public place with a banner behind them saying: “FOR A BETTER FUTURE... WE WILL NOT MOVE FROM HERE.”

42. In his wonderful study of Taranto-based artists working in the decade following the city’s industrialization, Gianluca Marinelli offers several snippets of interviews with Nicola Andreace. Gianluca Marinelli, *Taranto fa l’amore a senso unico. Esperienze artistiche nei primi anni dell’Italsider (1960–1975)*, Lecce, Argo, 2012.

43. This description was taken from Isabella Mongelli’s website, “Industrial Gran Tour,” *Works*, 2015, <http://www.isbellamongelli.it/industrial-gran-tour/> (accessed 1 November 2021, our translation).



Fig. 11. Isabella Mongelli, photograph of a statue over a tomb covered in toxic dust in Taranto's cemetery from the series *Visions in Taranto*, Taranto, 2012.
© Isabella Mongelli.



Fig. 12. Giuseppe Antelmo, photograph of the performance by Isabella Mongelli, *my personal taranto*, Casa dei teatri, Roma, 2015.
© Giuseppe Antelmo



Fig. 13. Isabella Mongelli, photograph of a clam picker from the series *Visions in Tarànto*, Taranto, 2013.
© Isabella Mongelli



Fig. 14. Martina Leo, photography of the performance by Isabella Mongelli, *my personal tarànto*, Teatro Tatà, Taranto, 2014.
© Martina Leo

Perhaps, then, the corporeal dimension of theater—akin to the *stare* of the *presidio*—was a way to counter the “crisis of presence.” To produce and perform the transmutation from absence to presence. *my personal tarànto* was a re-enactment of the photographs Mongelli had taken upon returning to Taranto in 2012. The tableaux she directed for the performance space (see Figs. 12 and 14) were taken from motifs and details of those images she collected, such as the ones above (see Figs 11 and 13). In the cemetery, we find the Virgin Mary holds Jesus’s corpse, sensuously lying in her lap under a veil of red dust (see Fig. 11). A man stands in the polluted bay, picking clams in that ever calm ancestral gesture of putting one’s hand under the sand (see Fig 13). From the stillness of these images, she meant to “bring back” (*riportare*) these scenes into the real, the *now* of the theater’s shared space. Her body, these objects, and the traces she collected were meant to be brought into contact with an audience.

Photography for Mongelli is a means to capture gestures, to seize details. Inner state and outer state converge, yet there is the need for distance, the need to master the affect through the creation of an image. For Mongelli, this process is continuous and dialectical; she objectifies “this reality” through photographs to later animate them, embody them, *re-enact* them. The theater became the locus for the incarnation of images she had “gleaned,” as Agnès Varda would put it,⁴⁴ like a clam picker in the labyrinth of the real. The clam picker—not unlike the improvised fisherman—were seen as images of a preindustrial past, and for Mongelli “they arose (*sorgono*) spontaneously,” were photographed with an aura of newness given that toxic waters should have interrupted their activity. This duality, Rosalind C. Morris tells us, “gives to life in the space of deindustrialization an aura of belatedness, of being ‘out-of-joint’ with time”⁴⁵ and is urgently pulled into the making of an image.

In the passage from photography to theater, layers of mimicry ensue in a Warburgian fashion—the *pathosformeln* of Mary in tears contains within her the ghosts of all the wailers in tradition of lament;⁴⁶ they travel through her all the way to

44. Agnès Varda, *Les glaneurs et la glaneuse*, France, 2000.

45. Rosalind C. Morris, “Shadow and Impress: Ethnography, Film, and the Task of Writing History in the Space of South Africa’s Deindustrialization,” *History and Theory*, vol. 57, no. 4, 2018, p. 107.

46. This is Ernesto De Martino’s argument. He writes: “The Mother of God—the Christian symbol of grief—assumed some of the forms of ancient lamenting women,” *The Land of Remorse: A Study of Southern Italian Tarantism* [1961], trans. by Dorothy Louise Zinn, London, Free Association, 2005, p. 7.

the filthy shores of Mediterranean steelworks. Yet, for Mongelli, *tristezza siderurgica* did not only emerge from the image of the mourning mother. It was also an affect born of a walled-up door.

In the performance, this image of a walled-up door translates in a passive attitude that I associate with the films of Roy Anderson, this Northern European attitude, with your arms hanging. It is a bodily posture in theatre. Taranto was like these characters in Anderson and Richard Maxwell. They speak of an existential void. Arms down. I see this walled-up door and it has a violent impact on me. I see this thing and feel moved by it. This contemplative emotion (*commozione*) is the basis of my activism. This *being in the presence* (*a cospetto di*) of something [our emphasis].

One might ask who can embody this position? Who can inhabit a time away from the obsession with "work, family and kids, and a whole set of things, like unemployment?" Who can see the painful irony in the southern trope of walled-up doors and stray dogs, in the trendy grittiness of what Hito Steyerl called the "poor image?"⁴⁷ Who can proceed to such an estranged detachment if not someone who has been able to leave, return, and leave again? What kind of "activism" is the contemplation of a walled-up door? Sianne Ngai sees in *Bartleby's* "powerful powerlessness" one of the modes of resistance exemplified by the aesthetic impulse itself.⁴⁸ On stage, the door translated into "an attitude," a bodily posture where Northern and Southern axes have been reversed through the violent spirit of industrialism. Objects have been pulled from the grittiness of the photographs into the theatrical space. One of the city's myriad stray dogs makes its way into the theatre in the shape of a stuffed animal. Newspaper headlines become acousmatic voices that resound in the performance space. A door found its correlatives in the films of Roy Anderson and its characters

47. Hito Steyerl, "In Defense of the Poor Image," *E-flux Journal*, vol. 10, no. 1, 2009. Steyerl describes the aesthetic of the poor image as follows: "The poor image is a rag or a rip; an AVI or a JPEG, a lumpen proletarian in the class society of appearances, ranked and valued according to its resolution. The poor image has been uploaded, downloaded, shared, reformatted, and reedited," p. 1. She refers to the sphere of digital imagery and its intense forms of circulation, which contemporary artists have used critically, sacrificing beautifully composed images in favor of a performative and critical approach to "poor" images—emphasizing their mobility, virality, permeability, and inscription in human life and bodies through digital media. Mongelli's photographs are not, indeed, driven by a notion of beauty and composition, and it is likely that her exposure to broader contemporary artistic discourses/practices such as those examined by Steyerl have inflected her aesthetic work.

48. Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2005, p. 2.

from Northern Europe, or what has been referred to as the “deadpan tone” of the hollowed-out bodies of Richard Maxwell’s plays.⁴⁹

In Mongelli’s work, contamination, feeling, and aesthetics, are all enmeshed: “Mineral dust penetrates our gaze; it goes down to the heart and comes back up again. Tears emerge from our eyes, and flow on our faces before the sky.”⁵⁰ Tears of grief and contemplation, tears of passion—like those plastic tears on the cheeks of the statue Mary Our Lady of Sorrows, which large processions follow through the narrow streets of the old town on the night of Easter. Toxins are absorbed through the eyes; the illness it triggers is of an emotional kind. Yet, what to make of these tears, this



Fig. 15. Isabella Mongelli, photograph of Taranto’s cemetery from the photographic series *Visions in Taranto*, Taranto, 2013.

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49. Sarah Gorman gives a compelling analysis of what has been called the “deadpan tone” in Maxwell’s plays, insisting on a radical reversal of Method Acting, which demanded the actor to fictionalize a situation with which he or she had to identify. Maxwell, in turn, demands that actors remain fully in their bodies’ vulnerability—that they remain open to the concrete “here and now” of the performance, the space, the environment, and all its unpredictable qualities. By avoiding adding layers of “emoting” and “intention,” the specificity of *bodily presence* in all its subtlety has space to emerge. Gorman analyzes Maxwell’s acting practice as a form of anti-humanism, Sarah Gorman, *The Theatre of Richard Maxwell and the New York City Players*, New York, London, Routledge, 2011.

50. This is taken from Isabella Mongelli’s tragedy-like script in “LO SPLENDORE DEL SOLE, LO SPLENDORE DI TARANTO, I FICHI D’INDIA SI SCIOLGONO,” 2019, p. 59.

excrescence of steel dust? Tears of irony evoked the new sensibilities brought by late industrial life—not only those brought by chemical wounds but by ironic detachment and emotional numbness.

This ironic detachment emerges from the continual knots of contradictions that ultimately spring from Taranto's theatrical/tragic geography. Her photographs captured these contradictions, this tension which yields both laughter and anxiety. Some of her images were so charged with dialectical force they drew me in physically as an anthropologist. Take the photograph above, shot in Taranto's cemetery. After the disturbing landscape of "steel among olive trees,"⁵¹ Mongelli had captured the shocking juxtaposition of the dead among steel (see Fig. 15). At the forefront, one sees framed photographs of the deceased placed over tombs—that older generation, which perhaps had contributed to and believed in the modernizing project—staring at the camera, and in the background, the factory's visually recognizable smokestacks. "You have everything in there," she said. "The dead, the dust on the dead who continue to suffer even after their death, and then the blast furnaces, cooking away."

While Mongelli, as an artist, had brought these photographs into the theater space, re-enacting and embodying the images in front of an audience as a way to "bring them back" (*riportare*) into presence, I was compelled by its ontic possibilities as an ethnographer. I entered the cemetery over a period of two years in search of the lived experience of those who worked and mourned in a contaminated space so proximate to the steel mill.⁵²

In the course of this essay, we have tried to provide a framework in which the insights of one artist can provide the anthropologist with new conceptual categories to understand a territory as complex as that of Taranto, which has often suffered from an excess of journalistic representation. This mediatic attention, while giving the city's environmental disaster high visibility, paradoxically, continued to leave the lived everyday experience of pollution in a state of invisibility. Through a sustained engagement with the work of Mongelli (years spent studying her performances,

51. AA. VV. *L'acciaio tra gli ulivi*. Genoa, Italsider, 1961.

52. The results of this ethnographic research on the cemetery of Taranto can be found in my book chapter, Jasmine C. Pisapia, "Visioni di polvere. Lutto, lavoro e bonifica nel cimitero di Taranto," Valentina Bonifacio & Rita Vinaello (eds.), *Il Ritmo dell'Esperienza: Dieci Casi Etnografici per Pensare i Conflitti Ambientali*, Padua, Cooperativa Libreria Editrice Università di Padova, 2020.

photographs, but also conducting interviews), I have tried to trouble the traditional ethnographic position of the “informant.” In this case, Mongelli is a citizen of Taranto whose life-history and perception is surely forged by the socioeconomic and cultural space in question, yet by adopting “estrangement” strategies through photography and performance, she places herself closer to the anthropologist, cultural critic, and theorist. This methodological effort could be thought as one possible effort to destabilize the longstanding images of a poisoned South by recuperating new “visions” provided by southern Italian artists and critics themselves, who are fully aware of, and actively contribute to, global discourses on ecological crisis and the Anthropocene.

In this case, we posited that the notion of aesthetics appears as a crucial lens with which to approach polluted landscapes and ecological crisis. In Taranto, the experience of space is mediated, of course, by the proximity to the steel factory, which is the most discussed material source of alterations to the sensible world; and yet even then, not everyone *sees* and *hears* the same sensible world. The most exposed citizens are no doubt more acutely aware of the sounds and sights of industrial contamination. What is of particular interest to me in exploring the aesthetic aspect of these differing degrees of awareness is how different fields of perception are seized not only through explicitly militant content and language but also through the notion—borrowed from Jacques Rancière’s writings on aesthetics—that the world of sensation and appearances is a crucial terrain of political struggle, particularly so in zones of environmental devastation.⁵³ *Tristezza siderurgica*—a term taken from the emotional substrata of a specific territory, which encapsulates within it the matters, bodies, and histories of one city—invites us to rethink carefully, at different scales, the lived experience of ecological crisis as one whose shadow is cast on what Mongelli calls “*all the tarántos*”⁵⁴ of the world, and yet is expressed in localized intonations, hues, and smells, where even the change of an accent can signify a radically different world.

53. See Jacques Rancière’s notion of the “distribution of the sensible” (*le partage du sensible*), Rancière, 2000.

54. Mongelli, 2019, p. 50.

“*Tristezza Siderurgica*”

JASMINE C. PISAPIA

McGILL UNIVERSITY

ABSTRACT:

This essay emerges from conversations between an anthropologist and a performance artist from the industrial city of Taranto, in southern Italy—known today to be one of Europe’s most polluted cities due to the continent’s largest and most hazardous steel factory. By focusing on artist Isabella Mongelli’s photographic and theatrical work conducted upon *returning* to her hometown after years lived abroad, this essay locates the expression of a specific affect coined by Taranto sound artist Alessandra Eramo: *la tristezza siderurgica*, the sorrow of steel. *Tristezza siderurgica* yields an ethnographic understanding of the perceptions and representations of homes that have become homely, uncanny, estranged because toxic or otherwise inhospitable. The article shows that the *naming* of affects contributes to forging specific, perhaps even untranslatable, emotional landscapes. What does it mean to be *emotionally* laced by the poison of steel? While contemporary texts on the experience of environmental toxicity tend to waver between the material and semiotic/metaphorical as distinct poles, this essay proposes that we braid these oft-polarized terms through the work of ethnography. Through this dialogic process between aesthetics and anthropology, we encounter the ways in which artists have sought to understand ecological crises through a mobilization of the senses, which are crucial for understanding toxicity as it vacillates between visibility and invisibility.

RÉSUMÉ:

Cet essai est le fruit de conversations entre une anthropologue et une artiste de la ville industrielle de Tarente, dans le sud de l’Italie — connue aujourd’hui pour être l’une des villes les plus polluées d’Europe en raison de la plus grande aciérie du continent.

En approchant le travail photographique et théâtral de l'artiste Isabella Mongelli réalisé à son retour dans sa ville natale après avoir vécu des années à l'étranger, cet essai se penche sur l'expression d'une émotion spécifique imaginée par l'artiste sonore de Tarente, Alessandra Eramo : la *tristezza siderurgica*, la tristesse sidérurgique. Cette expression permet d'entrevoir, d'un point de vue ethnographique, de nouvelles perceptions et représentations d'un « chez-soi » devenu étranger, non seulement à cause d'une distanciation nostalgique, mais aussi parce qu'il est matériellement altéré et devenu toxique. L'article tente de montrer que de *nommer* des affects forge des paysages émotionnels spécifiques, peut-être même intraduisibles. Qu'est-ce cela signifie qu'être émotionnellement contaminé par le poison de l'acier? Alors que les textes contemporains sur l'expérience de la pollution environnementale ont tendance à osciller entre le matériel et le sémiotique / métaphorique en tant que pôles distincts, cet essai propose de tresser ces termes trop souvent polarisés à travers la pratique et l'écoute ethnographique. Passant par un processus dialogique entre esthétique et anthropologie, nous tentons de tracer la manière dont les artistes ont cherché à mobiliser l'expérience du sensible afin de mieux comprendre la crise écologique et les processus matériels du poison qui vacillent constamment entre visibilité et invisibilité.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE:

Jasmine C. Pisapia holds a PhD in Sociocultural Anthropology from Columbia University in New York and has currently returned to her hometown of Montreal as a SSHRC postdoctoral fellow affiliated with McGill University and the Department of Anthropology's Critical Media Lab. During her master's degree in Comparative Literature at Université de Montréal, she worked as the assistant editor of *Intermedialités/Intermediality* (2011–2013) and as a curator for Montreal's Festival du nouveau cinéma. She has since conducted research on Italian anthropologist Ernesto De Martino as well as extensive fieldwork in southern Italy on the ecological crisis of Taranto. Alongside her ethnographic and curatorial work, she is an active collaborator of NYC-based independent theater company New York City Players. She co-founded Collettivo Epidemia, a research collective and independent magazine invested in political ecology, art, and grassroots organizations mobilized around food and agroecological practices in Italy.