

DEN

TRIP TO DEN



FABRIC

this

is the joint work of a curator and artist, collaborating together as part of one of Manifesta 12's 5x5x5 collateral events: The Hidden City. The Hidden City is a workshop within and about Palazzo Abatellis to unveil, narrate and delve into the cultural stratification of this historic and important place of the city of Palermo. The title of our project, the 'Hidden Fabric' is inspired by Palermo's heritage and former past as a centre for silk production and trading. Since ever, the city has been a melting pot of cultures due to its strategic location in the middle of the Mediterranean Sea. The essence, and history of the city, could be unfolded like a long stole that is continuously woven with a complex pattern. Different civilisations were able to weave in their threads, disseminating particular characteristics that make up the city today, its population, its language and culture. The *Hidden Fabric* also expands on the notion of "social fabric", now including found objects from the streets surrounding the Palazzo, stories and knowledge shared during the workshop, cross-cultural artefacts of the collection, which are not made of fabric, but are able to convey and contextualise a transcultural approach to art commissioning and cultural production.

From ancient eras, textiles have been one of our first globalised trades and, at different times, textiles have been adapted, appropriated and re-appropriated functioning as cultural transfers to put cultures in communication. Based on the notion of cultural transfer, before and during the workshop, we researched the historical and present *hidden* threads of the multicultural-social fabric of Palermo in a dialogical framework within which parts of any given culture can be analysed with an emphasis on active reception and adaptation, in order to reveal problems and limitations of predefined concepts of cultural entities. Threads that we could think are new, for example, relating to the modern political history of the city and the island, at a closer look reveal to be much longer and that were interwoven in the fabric many centuries ago. We can recognise some parts of the fabric that seems to be stitched indistinctly together with other part of the fabric, like some parts of the history of the city get forgotten and we struggle to define new movements and dynamics in the city. At the same time, the dynamism of the people of Palermo keeps weaving in the cultural threads that they value, while bringing in new ones. This, for example, can be seen in the choice of preserving the memory of recent wounds in the landscape of the city, while bringing in new activities and visions to revitalise neighbourhoods. For us, the *Hidden Fabric* is an opportunity to understand better the existing social and cultural fabric of the city and how we can weave in cultural integration and cultivate coexistence. The workshop, the conversations, art making and, hopefully, this texts have helped to untangle some ideas around cultural production, the potential of art for transcultural communication, the hidden stories hold by artefacts and the artistic and curatorial processes to uncover them. Departing from the history of the palace and its collection, the research of the 'hidden fabric' brought us to considers the role of biennials and the cities that host them, as contemporary meeting points. What stories do they tell? Whose truth do they speak?





stitching together...

Our collaboration is based on shared themes and mutual understanding, in which our different working methods and processes help us uncover and stitch together the traces of the 'hidden fabric'. During the summer we have had a conversation that continued during the workshop, which helped us to base our work in a dialogical framework. This means that, while our individual works take different forms as text and images, they have heavily influenced each other and are thought as one piece in the form of this book.

While one could learn about the work of Scarpa from books, the Hidden City workshop was fundamental in re-discovering and engaging with his work. The discussions and visits of the Palazzo and its collection revealed a new way of seeing. The lines, the cuts in the walls, the use of light, the use of materials and colours and the attention to small details are used to create a singular narration that embed the visitor in a space able to transcend time. Stripped of frames and gifted with bespoke plinths, objects are positioned at different heights and in unconventional spots, so that the visitors can encounter them, almost stumbling upon, while his body and eyes wander around the rooms. The integration of modern architecture with pre-existing elements and new materials put in dialogue the objects and the Palazzo even though they belong to different times. As an architect, able to work directly the collection as well as the refurbishment of the Palazzo, Scarpa seems to be the ultimate curator. Not only he has curated the mode of display, but modifying the space itself, he was able to put in relation the artworks with their environment. The relationship with the artworks is immediate and it is this sense of immediacy, which exalts the artworks and Scarpa's display and architecture, that makes them talk to the visitor with clarity and simplicity. With trust in the materials, in the natural light and in the power of the works to speak directly to the viewer, he spotlighted details of old imagery to bring them under unprecedented ways of seeing.

The site-specificity of the workshop and its focus on Carlo Scarpa inspired the artistic development of a methodological framework for processing details in and outside the Palazzo. Antonia Beard appropriated this technique of visual processing to shed lights on details of the city that could reference, relate and dialogue with those in the collection. By processing the materials, she expands on their common use, revealing hidden qualities that usually go overlooked. The site-specific work speaks to details of Palazzo Abatellis and Palermo, while at the same time, working with mundane objects, it is compelling and evokes a sense of familiarity.

From a curatorial point of view, I am interested by the idea of exploring different approaches to understand the history of a place through the work of a contemporary artist. The curatorial and historical enquiry brought to the surface more or less known stories and facts around Palazzo Abatellis; what is interesting to me, is the process that the artist uses in their research to unveil hidden links between objects, shapes and colours around the collection and their presence in the life of the contemporary city. In the next paragraphs, I will discuss the work and power of artists at different times, starting from the transcultural value of the Arabic inscriptions at Palazzo Abatellis, to the importance of the work of contemporary artists. This text is a possibility for me to reflect on and work through a position, curatorial, that mediates to (or maybe, negotiate with) a wider public the meaning of contemporary art.

In turn, the work of the artist, Antonia Beard, is not limited and restricted to a specific end but takes the form of a finalised piece of art as well as of the process behind this collaboration, which stood on and valued sharing thoughts and experiences. She expands materially and conceptually the limits of the chosen detail, its significance in the context of the collection of Palazzo Abatellis and the city of Palermo. Various objects and paintings in the collection point out the importance of the complex mix of cultural threads and histories that have intertwined in Palermo, serving as an entry point into understanding the story of Sicily, its complex past and multicultural present.

arabic inscriptions

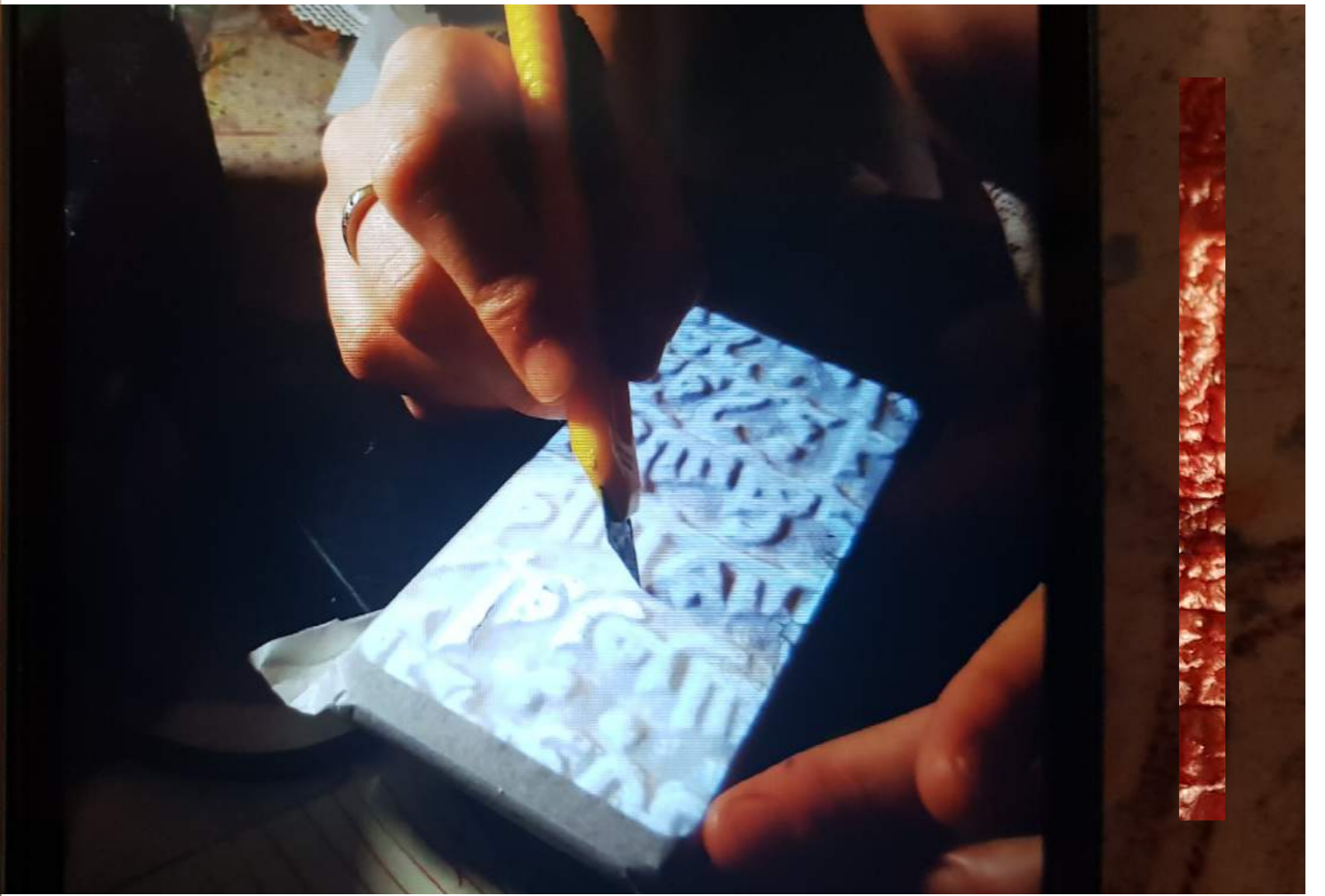
Textiles used to be so highly sought after, that the marks, patterns and inscriptions on them tell vastly rich stories of the societies in which they were made. The study of textile in the collection does not just stretch to physical pieces of textiles - but what textiles have been painted into the paintings, what symbols and meanings can we find through our examination of the fabric. We can think about the representative power of colour, language and symbols. Studying the references to and influences of textiles in the collections at Palazzo Abatellis, it is an entry point from where we can create past and future narratives and where we can better understand the cultural history of Palermo. Silk has clearly played an important role in the creation of Palermo with artisans' skills in silk crafts literally being forcefully migrated here because of their abilities.



The social fabric of Palermo has been made up of repeated conquests of Kings and empires each adding another thread to the interwoven lives of its inhabitants - this interwoven culture make up the landscape of Palermo's architecture and can be seen in the Palazzo Abatellis - and the city itself becomes like a cloth. During the XII, the particular interest of the Norman King Roger II in textiles, and his knowledge of Arab court practices, suggests that he was very in tune with the power that the textiles held - particularly as he ruled over a majority Muslim population at the time. His use of the textiles communicates the narrative of integration he wanted the political population to follow - and showed a willingness to learn and integrate systems from other cultures. In Palermo, he gathered distinguished men from different parts of Europe, such as the famous Arab geographer Muhammad al-Idrisi and the Byzantine Greek historian Nilus Doxopatrius. To administer his domain, he hired many Greeks and Arabs, who were trained in long-established traditions of centralized government. In the Nobiles Officinae, Muslims and both Greek-Orthodox and Roman-Catholic Christians were employed side by side. And just as they should probably all be classed as "local artists", the art produced at the court of the Norman kings of Sicily was able to rise to such uniquely spectacular heights because of this exceptional heterogenous cultural mixture. For Roger II holding onto power relied on a strong unified society and textiles played an important part of that process. When, in 1130, he was crowned as King of Sicily, Roger II commissioned to his artisans an elaborate royal mantle bearing Islamic inscription, with the date 528 of the Islamic Calendar. The pattern consists of a palm tree flanked either side by a Lion attacking a camel. The lion was an emblem of the Norman kings of Sicily, while the camel represents the Arab world.

While Arabic artisans worked in the Norman courts, Arabic inscriptions and ornamental motifs on textile are not present in Sicily until the late Norman period showing that this was not a tradition but an active aesthetic transfer to the Latin Christian court, motivated by a specific understanding of the function of textile inscriptions in Arabic courtly contexts. King Roger's mantle is kept today at the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna but Arabic inscriptions can be found everywhere around the Arab-Norman palaces in Palermo. Arabic inscriptions can be seen painted on a stole of a wooden statue of the XV century in one of the corridors of Palazzo Abatellis, evidencing that a 'new tradition' was formed, inherited and appropriated in later centuries as an ornamental motif. Transformed, the Arabic language can be seen in today's shops and streets' signage as the Sicilian language contains many Arabic roots.

Many funerary steles from the Norman period, and subsequently during the Holy Roman Empire, are kept in the collection at Palazzo Abatellis. These steles are quite exceptional for their almost intact quality; they use Arabic language and verses from the Kuran to convey the power of the king to the whole societal mix. The most colourful, and imposing for their sizes, are two fragments made in white marble with serpentine and porphyry inlay (*opus sectile*) of an inscription in cursive Arabic characters (*naskhi*), found in the crypt of the Palatine Chapel in Palermo but probably originally from the Royal Palace. The translation of the inscription is as follows: '(Come close), kiss the corner of this (building) once you have embraced it and contemplated the beautiful things that it contains - To God the power and the duration. Of his creatures it is written that they will perish; of this we have the example and the comfort of his Prophet'. The reference to the Ka'ba - which the faithful flock around in order to kiss, out of respect, the black stone built into a corner - can be understood in terms of the Norman sovereigns' attempts to identify with the divine authority. If the inscription does indeed come from one of the halls of the Royal Palace in Palermo, it was probably King Roger who took it to his residence to allude to the divinity of sovereigns through the traditional Fatimid link between palace and sanctuary.

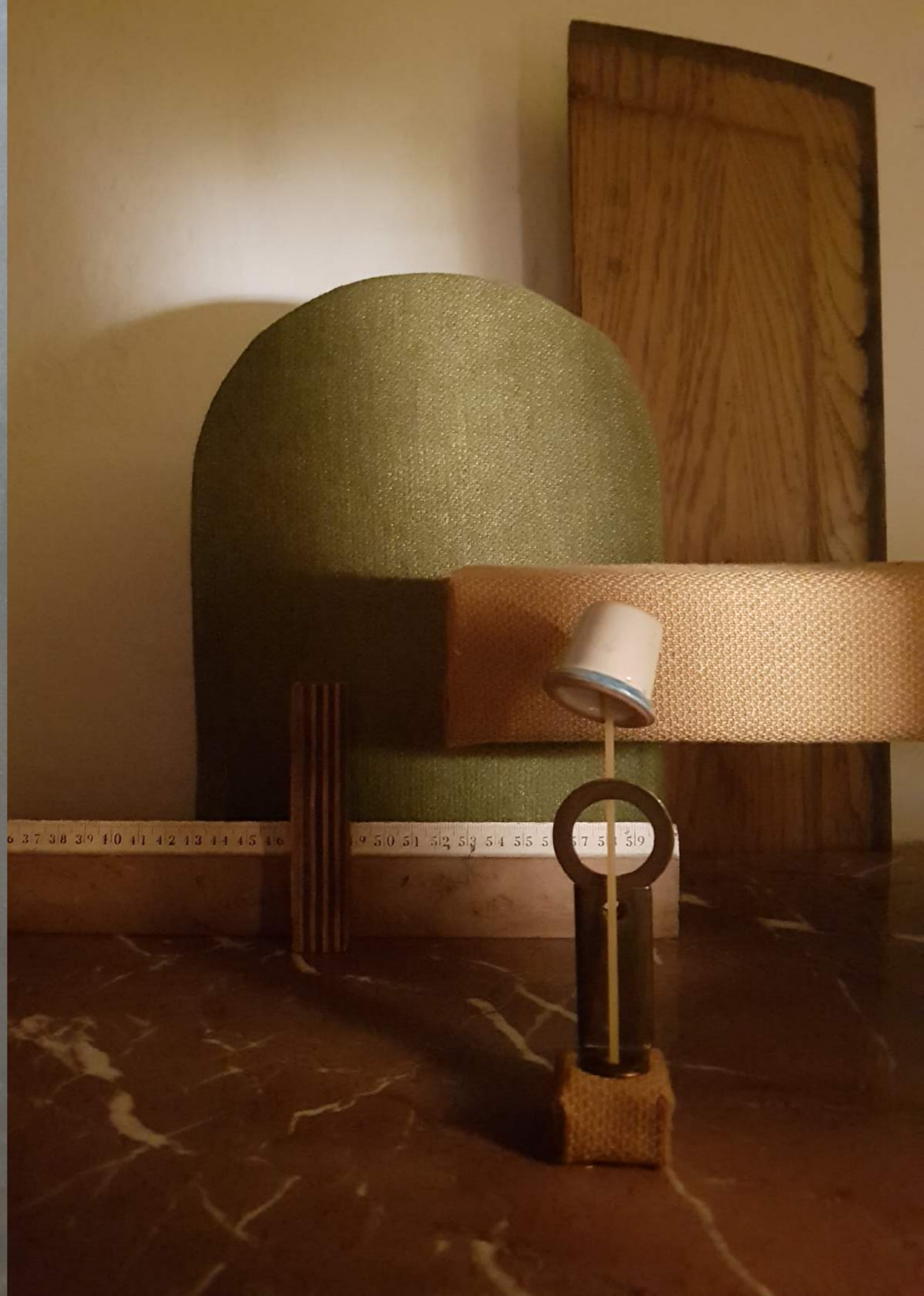


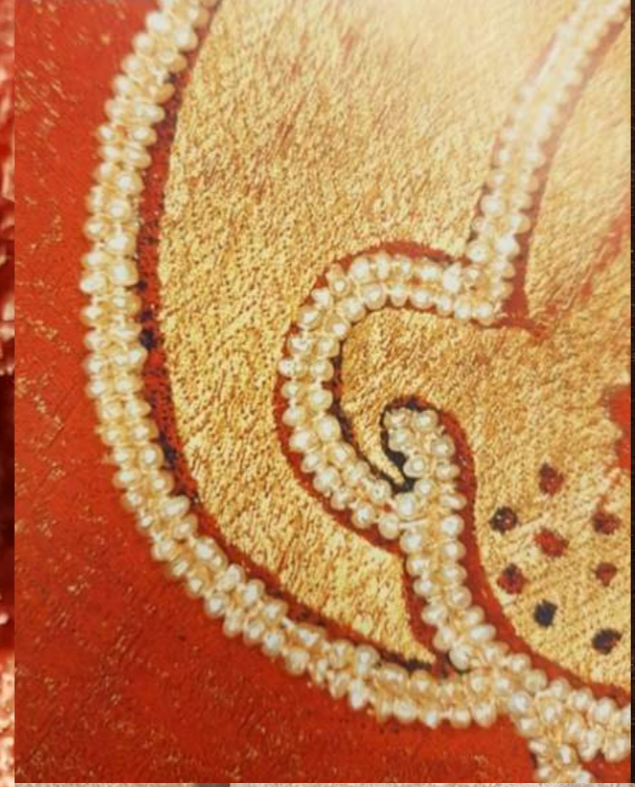
Maria Andaloro in her essay “Baciane l’angolo...e contempla le bellezze che contiene. Ruggero II e l’antico visitatore della reggia di Palermo” (2004), comments on the origin and the power of the inscriptions. The inscriptions were probably part of the architrave leading into Roger’s palace, they are symbols which are at the same time words and images. She argues that *nashki* characters in an *opus sectile* style functioned in a polysemantic framework, they were ambassadors of challenging political ideas, working between cultural and literary levels as well as artistic practices. She imagines the path of the visitors at the Palace, before entering the reception room, they would be able to see or read the Arabic inscriptions on top of the doors. The Arabic visitor would read, or at least recognise, the Arabic characters and feel welcomed and comfortable in an environment – the court of a Latin King - that would show signs that speak to their cultural identity. Dissimilarly, the Latin/Greek visitors would, at first sight, feel extraneous to those signs referencing to an unknown language. However, standing in front of those works of art, part of the architectural structure, they would feel engaged and recognise a technique that recalls a long tradition in Western Europe of serpentine and porphyry inlay. While charged with concepts, imagery and semantic levels belonging to the Arabic culture, through the use of the classic *opus sectile* style they would be familiar to cultures with Greek and Roman roots. The original positioning from the Scarpa’s refurbishment of the museum was on top of the concrete benches in the entrance courtyard; today, they are in mezzanine level, leading to the library of the museum, among other stoles they hide a fascinating and important narration of the artistic and cultural fabric of Norman Palermo.

interactive imagination

Past and contemporary artworks have never been accessible to the public like in the current times, museums of contemporary art and biennials attract millions of visitors and still, I am presented everyday with the questions “what does it mean? How is this a *beautiful* piece of art?”. Working in the field, I am lucky enough to closely engage with the work of young artists, they give the best education when it comes to provide the tools to being able to read, but more importantly, connect with a work of art. Whilst I deeply believe in the power of art to speak directly to the viewer, it is true that sometimes the whole image cannot be immediately read in full, but still there is something that catches our attention and sparks curiosity. Being able to engage with artistic processes, their *way of seeing*, made me understand that what is involved with art making, it is perhaps closer to us than we think. It is a specific *modus* of engagement with the world through our imagination, from which we seem to be detaching and instead we could understand and return to practice. An active engagement through our *interactive imagination* is vital not only to reconnect to arts but to meaningful production of meaning.

Pietro Montani in “Technologies of Sensitivity, Aesthetics and Interactive Imagination” (2014) distinguishes three types of imagination: reproductive, productive and interactive. His main reference is found in Kant’s Critique of Pure Reason: the reproductive imagination is able to recall images (what we can recognise through our memory); productive imagination rearrange and integrates plans and shapes to construct interfaces (schemes) that allow us to relate the logic forms in our mind to the reality in which we are immersed. In both cases, imagination does a relevant elaborative process, projecting coding schemes onto the external world and creatively interacting with it in a significant relationship with language. The work that imagination does is based on a specific quality of human *aisthesis* (perception, sensibility) and performances. The species-specific quality of human perception is to be open to all *stimuli*, differently to other species that focus on certain *stimuli* and ignore others. We are open to different and new things, contingency and unforeseen events of the environment in which we are immersed. On one hand, human sensibility performs the reception to stimuli through perception, on the other hand it is able to give impulse to the coding and understanding of the world. For example, if we compare a branch of a willow tree and of an oleander, we can recognise in both objects a degree of flexibility. At a deeper inspection, it will occur that after we stop applying pressure, the oleander branch would go back to position, the willow tree would remain curved. Having acquired this knowledge, we can transform, for example, the oleander branch in a bow. Montani argues that this would be the result of our *interactive imagination*, which has an impact on the modification of the environment, allowing itself to be guided by what is found there or by what it perceives or projects onto it.





Human sensibility has a tendency in extending in artefacts, which is one of the evidences of its essential link with interactive imagination. In classical terms, art is understood as aesthetics when it is a creative enquiry with the only end of exploring the possibilities of perceptions. Montani argues instead for an understanding of art as *techne*, where the creative enquiry is also a playful and interactive moment depending on the properties of the material. Interactive imagination submits to the needs of the material and at the same time it modifies and causes them. In this context, *techne* is an expert knowledge which tests, experiments and anticipate the possibilities of technologies aimed at producing objects that expand our presence in space and can modify it. From a positive perspective, we should be able to engage with technologies that are able to modify and produce the environment in which we live. For example, a flower is always organically exchanging and interacting with the environment in which is in; without this mutual relationship both the flower and the environment are put at risk. Humans perceive the world and perceive themselves as immerse in it, this produces a first interaction. Forms of technology and arts that are not able to enhance this interaction, evolve and mutually influence each other are not sustainable. In fact, we should consider the things surrounding us not as objects, (latin root ob-jectum) something still, external and different from me, but as *pragmata*, something dynamic with which we can have an exchange. Montani argues for a pragmatic approach to engaging with technologies and the world that, involving all senses, intensifies our “immediate perception of life”. From a negative perspective, our engagement with technologies could over-expose us to *stimuli*, which we are not able to organise and interact with. In this way, we limit the use and possibilities of technology and we assume standard protocols that produce self-referential objects that cannot dialogue with the environment. Calling for art as *techne*, Montani completely re-embeds the arts into daily life and overcomes the questions around art autonomy, in fact he critiques contemporary art as self-referencing and emptied of any interactive significance, quoting from Dewey (2005):

Experience is the result, the sign, and the reward of that interaction of organism and environment, which when it is carried to the full, is a transformation of interaction into participation and communication. Since sense-organs with their connected motor apparatus are the means of this participation, any and every derogation of them, whether practical or theoretical, is at once effect and cause of a narrowed and duller life-experience. Oppositions of mind and body, soul and matter, spirit and flesh all have their origin, fundamentally in fear of what life may-bring forth. They are marks of contraction and withdrawal.

By delegating too much of our interaction with the external world to technology, we exclude the possibilities given as a result of our relationship with the environment by our interactive imagination. We tend to produce a self-referential relationship, where we have limited the experience of contingent, unforeseen circumstances and the discovery of material properties that only occur through experience. Similarly to the gained knowledge about the flexibility of the branches, contingency can trigger our interactive imagination and the formation of new links to re-arrange knowledge and information.

A form of resistance to the way we currently tend to engage with technology, which is determined by optimisation and high level of consumerism, could start by re-imagining the interactions with the environment through our bodies and technological prosthesis to form the missing links between what we produce virtually and the material external world. In this way, we can reposition ourselves and our material and technological extensions in a relationship with the natural and technological environment, which guarantees the correspondence between the virtual objects with the real world. In the context of the arts, we could re-ensure the correspondence between objects and signs, and meaningful communicative results of what they intend to signify.



With this new understanding, we can reflect on Andaloro's imagined journey of visitors, that visiting the Royal Palace, would stand in front of quite emblematic Arabic inscriptions. Artists lived in a time in which art was not yet extracted by day-to-day life but it still functioned as *techne*, a collection of knowledge and technological processes artists could resort to with their techno-aesthetic sensibility to shape materials and politically influence their social context. They were able to create objects that would interact with the complexity of the environment, while ensuring a clear communication that would function on many semantic levels. Mastering a Western technique, and having a clear political vision in mind, these, now hidden but once on display, Arabic inscription were able to enact a powerful political message of integration and coexistence. Examining many examples contemporary art as self-referential, unable to transmit back to the environment/context, thus unable to speak to their viewer, Montani invites us to reconsider our relationship to material environment, and the subsequent making and production of images and a visual language that can be meaningful through a continuous exchange. It is emblematic that Montani (2015) argues, "it is a bad citizen who does not constantly exercise, renewing it everyday, his own ability to perceive".

The work that Antonia does re-appropriate technological forms of information to transform the primordial, playful interaction with materials into signs. Bringing back to life dead objects of the city, with a mix of analogic and digital techniques of image editing, the artist brings our attention to these details, that function as symbols able to transcend time, bridging between eras and referencing back to the contemporary city. Juxtaposing the details of found objects and artworks she able to highlight details, which reveal the hidden threads that run along history, costumes, people, places and cultures. Being a site-specific work, our main hope is for this work to show find the traces of the hidden city and its fabric to inspire new ways of seeing and to speak to people of Palermo, helping them to interactively imagine a sustainable future vision for the city.

Benedetta D'Ettore
&
Antonia Beard

Made of Palermo
2018



*Angelo D'Alagni
con Andrea per ton
e per Starpon!*

the

HIDDEN

CITY

