

### **The monument as evidence of the historical, cultural and mythical dimension of matter**

Matteo Fraterno creates since the 1980s works with a strong materiality, most probably influenced by the geomorphic characteristics of his place of residence, at the foot of Mount Vesuvius. In these early works, the interaction between place and inhabitants is evident. Since then, his entire work, however it differentiates while evolving, is based on relations, associations and references, in which matter, as a real element, metaphor or reference, has a constant role. The search for the interaction of man with the environment, social, fixed or geographical, and for a common reference in the depths of time, prompted him to embark on an experiential journey through the world, far from the trends of the times however. He moved to the fringes of the "centres", seeking fellow travelers and collaborators with an inquiring disposition and methodology that leaves room to the incidental. The signs of the past in the present, both material and immaterial, made him to search for old associations and continuities, some indisputable, some obvious, that are confirmed by unaltered constants in human everydayness, and others that through myth or legend are verified only by their survival. However, both the one and the other testify to a collective memory and therefore to truth. Nevertheless, his aim is not the confirmation of a hypothesis, but the identification of issues that remain crucial, and of ways that stood the test of time and relate to the communication of people with each other, as they were shaped by their habits and movement, regardless of borders and language.

His artistic practice focuses on the collection of experiences and presupposes also his own regular movement. As a "relational artist" (artista relazionale), co-founder of the *Nomadic Observatory* (Osservatorio Nomade) - Stalker Roma and *The Engine of Research* (il motore di ricerca), two workshops that use and promote relational practices, his field of action is geographically extended. The method he follows, besides being anti-hierarchical, is also uncontrollable, as the incidental and subversion lurk. However, in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century he managed to realize a major goal: a journey to the stations of the Roman Via Egnazia, the homonymous documentary that Davide Berletti directed and the publication Radio Egnazia.

An Italian conscious of the organic relationship that links the Roman civilization with the ancient Greek, particularly in Naples, his special homeland Terra Annunziata, next to Pompeii, and Magna Grecia, but also an active artist, it is only natural that he finds great interest in archaeological sites, monuments and Museums, which are depositories of evidence of human contacts and relationships; all the more so in a museum in Greece that preserves evidences of the conceptual and material beginning of a written advanced code of human communication. This code remains to this day a main component and connecting element of the "western civilization". He focused on it during a creative residency project in the fall of 2023, at the Epigraphic Museum of Athens.

In this particular case, his method of approaching changed, as a shift of the centre of gravity happened from the animate to the inanimate, from the social to the material element. But the technique also changed, since in this case M. Fraterno applied the "Frottage technique", which is based on tactile contact with a relief surface, resulting in its imprint on an intermediate sensitive medium, usually paper. This technique gave him the possibility of a

physical, yet not direct contact, approach of the ancient inscriptions and objects. This offered him an experiential experience in which the historical evidence sometimes functions as signifier and signified and levitates simultaneously between past and present. The forced repetitive movement of the hand on the paper that is placed on the surface of the stone or marble allows the "reading" of the surface, as in Braille. The emotion that the artist feels with the direct contact to an object, which apart from its artistic and linguistic value, is also a "Signal", namely it signifies the timeless power of language and art, as well as the relationship of living people with the dead, is riveting. The controlled pressure, to avoid damaging the paper on which an image is imprinted and gradually revealed, simulates a mother's tender care towards her child. The "dressing" of the surface in preparation for frottage, gives human characteristics to the monuments. The tactile contact with the matter offers an experience, different from that of painting, drawing or camera, which can only be compared to classical sculpture, but without the use of the tools that wound the material. As the artist writes: "As I approached the surface, I began to feel something like vertigo, such a conflation that made me forget the discontinuity between my body and matter".

However, this was not the first time that M. Fraterno used the technique of frottage. It began when he was offered a stock of paper by Professor Valentino Pace, heir of the Verzocchi family, producers of Fabriano paper, considered the most suitable for frottage. He used it in 2022, for the first on-site imprint with frottage of parts of the limestone walls of the still-operational Ucciardone prison of 17<sup>th</sup> century in Palermo, Sicily. I believe that this first imprint is more connected to the experience of confinement, which we experienced almost globally due to the pandemic, from 2020 to 2022, and which the artist included later in a section under the title *The Matter of Myth*. Moreover, in the same spirit and condition, was his previous voluntary monthly confinement in the Contemporary Arts Library of the Morra Foundation in Naples, where, as its librarian and sole "tenant", he replaced its conventional function with an arrangement of furniture and objects of his own choice and with the taking care of the space, allowing limited entrance to few visitors. There, he was painting his dreams, which followed his daily and long hours of reading books.

The second time the artist used frottage – and so far the most important – of the section *The Matter of Myth* took place at the Epigraphic Museum in Athens, in the autumn of 2023, while a smaller-scale action followed in Italy at the Italian archaeological site Grumentum, in Potenza 2024.

The *Matter of Myth* evolves into a project that grows and branches out. Perhaps, it is the result of the freezing of physical and tactile communication during the pandemic, when digital communication spread worldwide and with great speed. For an artist like Matteo Fraterno, whose entire work is based on the synapse and development through art, relationships and associations, individual, social and intercultural, the somatic approach to the matter of the work may have been the antidote to human isolation during the period of forced confinement. Perhaps, this was the reason he was looking for to extend his research from the space of a reality that is changing at breakneck speed, excluding many and for different reasons from the new mode of communication, to that of myth, whose undisputable characteristic is the supremacy of man and a-Lethe-a (*ἀλήθεια*: truth), as in Greek a-lithia where *λήθη* – lithi – means oblivion.

With the exhibition at the Epigraphic Museum, from December 2024 to April 2025, of a number of the Frottages M. Fraterno made on surfaces and tombstones, mainly located in the courtyard of the museum, in addition to what has been mentioned above, he highlighted the level of the knowledge, the habits and the advanced aesthetics of a small but large, in terms of its achievements, community. However, their imprint, despite the strong for him experiential experience of direct contact with originals of the beginning of the "mother" of most European languages, would not have much to offer to others. It is certain that the presence of the imprint is interesting next to the original, on the one hand because it can by no means be its faithful copy, and on the other hand, because in it the artist's technical, physical and emotional presence is captured. However, what the latter is searching for is not his own creative rendering of the imprint of a human creation from a distant era. It is the trace of the human presence, intellect and art that was inscribed in the matter and ensures the continuity or at least the meeting of the then and the now, that the artist wants to reveal. In these works, communication with man can only take place through the objects he left behind. Relation can only exist because his Word, by becoming his work, acquired material substance. It became the post-carrier of information related to both reality and myth. The issue of communication and relationships of people today, the codes and their contemporary everydayness in different places and under different circumstances, which the artist has been observing for years, how different is it from what he studies today, capturing the image of fragments that are equally about the fact and the case assumption?

The frottages, in some of which M. Fraterno intervenes with a creative, pictorial, sometimes even "playful" mood, are interwoven, even under difficult conditions of presentation in a museum that – perhaps fortunately – maintains the patina of its years and does not leave much room to contemporary art and its complex interpretations. In any case, both ancient and contemporary works are products of the intellectual and manual history of the genre. In other words, people, on the matter of their works, which over time become monuments, apart from the historical and cultural dimension, they inscribed and its most charming, the mythical one.

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