

Total institutions and the “boxification” of the invisibles

By Sergio Matalucci

Claudia Virginia Vitari gives artistic relevance to individuals outside of our everyday gaze, in the attempt to bridge the gap between us and complex social phenomena. She portrays human beings whose liberties are limited or altogether neglected because of geographical provenance, past crimes or psychiatric conditions.

She has worked with men and women hospitalised within mental health structures in Germany (“Melancholie”, 2002), inmates in Italy and the organisers of anti-psychiatric projects in Spain. Two light boxes from the series “Percorsogalera”, a light box and two preparatory drawings from “Le Città Invisibili” are on display.

She is currently engaged with political refugees and migrants seeking asylum in Berlin (“O-Platz, Interstitial Identities”, 2014-ongoing). The biggest installation in the exhibition comes from this series.

REPRESENTING TOTAL INSTITUTIONS

Well aware that the life of a young migrant has little in common with the experience of an elderly woman in a psychiatric hospital, she keeps a convergent intellectual and aesthetic approach to give a visual representation to all these examples of “total institutions”, a concept put forward by the sociologist Erving Goffman in the late ‘50s. In doing so, she presents the similarities between these places in which people are treated according to a fixed set of stringent rules.

“Total institutions” constrain their subjects with gelidity, inflexibility and stiffness. As such, in the show, metal cages and pedestals are cold ways to frame and separate people.

The artist does indeed develop a form of “boxification”, reflecting the mechanisms through which people are both saved and trapped by “total institutions”.

GETTING OVER IT, GETTING CLOSER

Her signature style and Goffman’s intellectual backing function to show the stories of these institutionalised invisibles. Sharing days, weeks and months with them, she accumulates documents: a mix of official papers, personal notes, and observations (portraits) then encapsulated in her installations.

The observations are sketches, hinting at the difficulty of unveiling the identity in “total institutions”. Human beings in hospitals, prisons, and migration camps do indeed seem to be perceived positively only when soft (or “dull and harmless” to put it in Goffman’s terms). They are worth a second thought only when kept at a safe distance.

Interestingly, the sketches of people in “total institutions” are rarely ever face-on, looking back at the viewer. Only in this way, offering themselves to a closer inspection without confronting the viewer, they can effectively reassure the spectator and invite proximity.

THEIR STRUGGLE, OUR STRUGGLE

Through her own years of engagement, Claudia Virginia Vitari implicitly asks the spectator to get closer, to observe and assess not simply the people but the overall social mechanisms that house them. The invisibles' struggle then becomes symptomatic of our overall difficulties with the exertion of power.

Her work is a remarkable example of art presenting a social message through poetic imagery, which is the result of extensive research and solid intellectual awareness. Her art provides a critical, yet not-idealistic voice. Claudia Virginia Vitari effectively questions our societies and societal structures. Suffice it to say that this mini-retrospective comes at the right time.