

FORCELLA REIGNS THE MEN WHO PLAY CARDS

A MULTIMEDIA ART INSTALLATION

BY

FRANCESCA BIFULCO + ALEX SCHETTER

SEPTEMBER 5-9, 2018



Gigino 'o Francese
THE FRENCHMAN

Giuseppe 'o Magliaro
THE PEDDLER

Ciro Gerozz
LITTLE CIRO

Salvatore l'Ispettore
THE INSPECTOR

Luigi 'o Cinese
THE CHINESE

Giannino 'o Barist
THE BARISTA

Peppe 'o Cassinese
THE ABBOT

Zi Mimi
THE UNCLE

Tonino 'a Mosk detto Zazà
THE FLY

Antonio detto Schiaffone
THE BITCH SLAP

ZJU THEATER • NORTH HOLLYWOOD

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There is a place, in Naples, South Italy, apparently outside this world.
Forgotten, put aside, crushed.
Where the seemingly ordinary actually suggests something more.

It is in this place, Forcella, that a Neapolitan card game reveals itself as something that goes beyond the simple routine and becomes pageantry, gestures, a pause.

The players of this game are actors in an improvised show put on every day at *Gradini Forcella*. This corner staircase is their symbol: a public space, a meeting place, a crossroads of lives.

An involuntary act of reclaiming a territory plundered from abuse, violence, and organized crime. Because, as they say in Naples, "*Furcella* can do better than that." In a city that bases its existence on a delicate balance of opposites, there is a swing between life and death, lights and shadows, beauty and degradation, rise and descent. It is about this particular neighborhood, Forcella, that Italian artist, Francesca Bifulco focuses her latest artistic research.

Born in Paestum, south Italy, in 1986, Bifulco grew up with the myth of local farmers fighting the appropriation of their land and finds a common thread in Forcella, "and so" -she says- "when you least expect it, that side of your roots comes out and it make so much sense." The city of Los Angeles adopted her in 2012. Yet, when she goes back home, nothing is more captivating than Forcella, where she is struck by the card players, a group of men that redeem their condition through the cards they deal.

Bifulco decided to witness this small yet powerful open-air theater: The

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card game. Day after day, cigarettes and coffee dictate the flow of time for what is the *mise-en-scène* of an unwritten script that is deeply imprinted in the identity and the cultural memory of these men. At *Gradini Forcella*, she studies their moves, inspects their motions, and habits and rhythms surrounded by white clouds of smoke. While she becomes the *other* player, the one that stays behind the scenes, identifying with the reality from which she is trying to collect information.

In 1922, Polish anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski published his essay, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*, in which he spoke for the first time about the *participant observation* method, a foundation for ethnographic fieldwork research. The anthropologist goes into the field and establishes a direct relationship with the people he is studying, grasping the native's point of view, creating empathy that allows a full immersion into the dimension of the "other", and traveling to a place repeatedly for cultural enrichment. To Malinowski, what gives rise to the line between direct observation and the author's deductions is undeniably valuable.

In this spirit, Francesca Bifulco arrives in Forcella under guise of the artist-anthropologist, filtering the reality she observed and stored up through her art. In *The Artist as Anthropologist* (1975), Joseph Kosuth says "The artist is a model of the anthropologist *engaged* since [she or] he operates within the same socio-cultural context from which he evolved. He [or she] is totally immersed, and has a social impact." Bifulco, as such, fully immerses herself in the cultural experience she is drawn to and emerges sensitively enriched.

Since 2014, Bifulco has been at work integrating the numerous inspirations of *participant observation* into *Forcella Reigns: The Men Who Play Cards*. With this site-specific installation, bound for the city of Naples after an initial test run in Los Angeles, the artist consolidates the card players as the leading characters in a collective ritual, a communal idea, the alternative to confirm themselves in their cultural identity through two distinctive Neapolitan practi-

ces: card games and theatre.

The first one grounds its roots with the Spanish Domination (XVI century). The depictions on the Neapolitan cards show people, colors, and objects of the everyday, a communal game that is close to the people. Four suits like the social classes: Clergy, merchants, aristocrats and soldiers, peasants. A pastime that in its own realization levels the socio-cultural gaps and legitimizes the illegitimacies.

The second practice, theatre, coming from ancient Greek history, finds the most direct and least polished peculiarity in Naples that is extremely raw, impolite, desecrating and spread everywhere as a common attitude. It is said "they are all actors in Naples" due to the fluent chatter, the gesturing, the spontaneity, the dialect. The *theatricality* is, in fact, one of the most discussed feature of southern Italy's people. Card games and this theatricality are what feeds *Forcella Reigns*.

The installation stems from the desire to share an oneiric experience, a journey through a camera obscura – a black box theater to be precise – that implies temporal suspension in a dark-walled atmosphere, accentuated by the apparent absence of spatial references. Here the audience is invited to follow this altered reality of *The Men Who Play Cards*.

Stepping in from the LA traffic, the audience is met with the sound of traffic of Naples setting the scene. From here, we are transported through Naples toward the stairway and the men, crossing an imaginary boundary and dropping into another dimension. Together, but detached, the sound of moving chairs, cards shuffling, and of the game taking place are interwoven with little regard to chronology, the sonic architecture of the card game fits together like the shuffling of a deck, summing up the overall image.

The theatrical sacredness within the rituals of the card players is expres-

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sed and highlighted by the set design. A reconstructed silhouette of the *Gradini Forcella* staircase stands at the far side, behind which the shadows of the men roam the scene; darkness and light of Naples. These are the same projections of Bifulco's imagination, almost stark and flattened memories of what the artist sees as she turns the street corner before *Gradini Forcella*.

Bifulco brings to the stage what she discovered in Forcella, dressing it in black to accentuate the shape. Four chairs, a broom to clean the scattered cigarette butts surrounding the table on which a deck of cards lays next to a scoring sheet; all with a red glowing outline. A *cardarella*, imported from Italy, sits under the table. This iron cement mixing bucket filled with charcoal is used to warm up the players' feet, playing the role of the bonfire around which the community gathers. The original "*Gradini Forcella*" street plaque becomes the beacon of the *other* dimension, of the parallel Forcella.

In the center of the stage, cutting spotlights drop over the four painted scenes emphasizing the main focus within Bifulco's work: overcoming two-dimensionality. Her visual language can be defined as sculptural through the constant search for interaction and movement. The subjects appear sketched yet are highly plastic. The sharp layered lines that define the figures dissolve into the surface, suggesting an incompleteness, leaving the image balancing between totality and absence. *Old Men Playing Cards part IV*, *Black On Black*, *Cards We Are Dealt*, *Stairway To Forcella* are close-ups of significant moments Bifulco experienced. They are the stories of the neighborhood, materialized and visible, getting to be told.

The audience is thus catapulted into a show in which they become actors; active observers of the social and cultural experience. The multimedia and multi-sensory set-up of *Forcella Reigns* confronts them with reoccurring images that manipulate the modality of interaction as they fold back on themselves, demanding contemplation.

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The impact of Francesca Bifulco's study lies in the aspiration to impart the wealth of these experiences to the same streets that generated it; steeped in history, theatre, coffee and anthropology of Naples.

Forcella Reigns brings to Los Angeles one of the most difficult realities of Naples. But now the decay and wretchedness that loom over it have their adversaries – art and beauty – through which Forcella can be reborn.

Marina Piccola Cerrotta

Neapolitan Art Historian and Anthropologist

FORCELLA REIGNS: THE MEN WHO PLAY CARDS is supported by



Francesca Bifulco

Creator/Painter/Designer

Francesca Bifulco (b.1986 Paestum) is a native Southern Italian artist holding a BFA in Visual and Performing Arts from the Academy of Fine Arts in Rome. She studied and worked in set design and special effects makeup for television and cinema under the historic Carboni Studio in Rome. The practice of these different disciplines led her to painting, going from large-scale backdrop canvases to sculptural textured wooden compositions and, most recently, incorporating immersive landscapes which surround the painted works in collaboration with LA sound and digital artist Alex Schetter. In recent years, her work has been focusing on cultural rituals which have sprouted up amidst social conflict, everyday routines that are transitioning or have transitioned into personal or local rituals and – whether or not the participants realize it – have become a beacon of light for a community, especially if that community needs it. Her creations have been collected and exhibited from California to Texas and from her homeland of Italy to Japan. Bifulco was awarded second place at the Los Angeles Municipal Gallery in occasion of their annual juried group show in 2016. Since 2012 she has lived and worked in Los Angeles.

Alex Schetter

Sound/Video/Fabrication

A musician and audio engineer first, Alex Schetter's (b.1985 Los Angeles) initial work in the art world was in sound, later branching into video and digital imagery as an extension of his sound installations. His work has been commissioned from private galleries to municipal events in the US and Italy. He has collaborated regularly with Francesca Bifulco since 2012. Schetter studied music business at Loyola University of New Orleans. He later studied Audio Production at the Art Institute of California. He has worked in music and sound since 2008 scoring for video games and television, operating a small commercial recording studio, and editing sound for the audio industry interview series, Pensado's Place. Currently, he does sound design and hardware service for the synthesizer manufacture, Elektron Music Machines.

Foley Recorded at Post Haste Digital

Additional Foley Performance: Alé Taboada

Location Video Assistance: Matteo Pronestino and Laura Ugolini

Exhibition Video Documentation: Muyinza Kasirye

