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The Whole City Trembles, the Whole City Is on Fire

Ludovica Battista

«It seems as if the whole city is on fire,» that «the whole city trembles».
Giovanni Ambrogio Brambilla (1)

Midnight. A whole ascent of towns, people blowing their feasts(2) through the air, a myriad of buildings turn into vanishing points, like streets rising brightly from the ground to get suspended over Mount Vesuvius. Just as if the last dusk of the year – spreading a tell-tale cloth onto the houses of the city – exists to spell out the intimate war of survival happening at an urban level, to awaken its conflicts. Whereupon the territory in its entirety replies with a glowing laugh up in the sky: fireworks as brilliant images of the ongoing battles, as iridescent spectres(3) of their land.

Throughout one hour a luminous chart of sparks appears in the sky. The small rockets with their long trails weave a geodetic grid for this new topography. Under the festival's crossfire, one almost feels able to connect smoke and blazes and all their hanging lines, and thus to bring a retrospective order into the reckless urbanization by using them as a kind of measurement system, as if following indications of the mathematician Benjamin Robins for the great pyrotechnical show of 1749(4). He suggested, on the occasion, a geometrical use of the public spectacle. In an article for «Gentlemen's Magazine», he asked Londoners throughout the city to document the trajectories of the rockets from their viewpoints, including reached heights and angles, in order to test the cartographic potential of such an event.

The New Year's performance enacted in the Neapolitan area works in a similar way. Its explosive flight to its fiery double draws out with a high richness of detail an accurate representation of its internal structure – precisely by eluding any ordering sense and ending up in a turmoil of «Pyrotechnic Detonations PTABBOO PTABBOO PTABBOO»(5).

As a striking image of the economic paradigm which generates it, the perceptual machine of the spectacle takes over the aerial space, undisturbed, exactly as if it was the cement taking over the slopes of the volcano. Fireworks seem to reproduce the urban structure as well as the primary causes of the critical issues of its territory. The entire history of pyrotechnics is a history of territorial power representations.

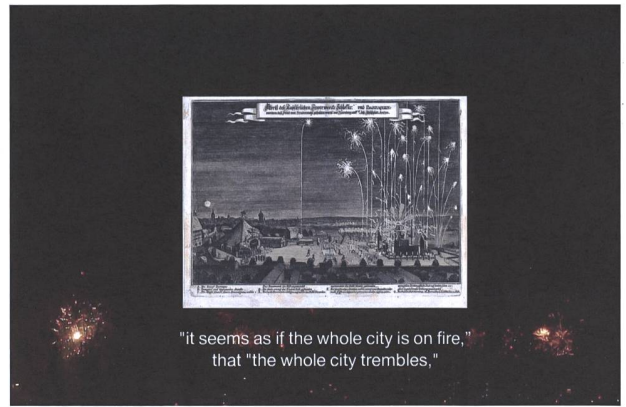
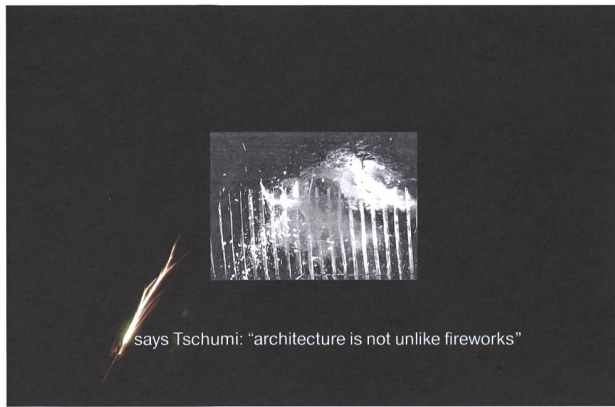
Throughout the modern era, fireworks have propagated in public gaieties the magnificence of the patron and the sumptuous triumph of power, whether of religious or civil sources. At the end of the 17th century, the Viceroy of Naples celebrated his sovereign's recovery with a glittering contraption that staged an erupting volcano and was as tall as the royal palace. Vesuvius, which had then just begun its open-conduit phase(6), is affectionately called «Il Grande Pirotecnico» (The Great Pyrotechnic) by the citizens, and the firework workshops at its foot are constantly involved in technical innovations, exporting them all over Europe.

The flourishing craftsmanship of the festival gradually emancipated fireworks from the architectural supports that had accompanied them until then. Their complexity had implied exorbitant construction costs and the entrusting of designs to court planners or skilled military engineers. Within a century, this turned them into a machine of pure light accessible exclusively to the wealthy aristocracy. Common people could still only set up grotesque imitations of the splendour enacted by the great lords. Their only option was to use small devices, play the prank, the «folgoretto», the «tricchetracche» at local festivals or in Pulcinella's(7) stories. On a collective level however, fire is still a spectacle to be indulged in.

It was the industrial revolution which brought the possibility of being the hero of the night to a wider audience of private individuals. Synthetic chemical compounds replaced ancient pyrotechnic powder, and it was no longer the «fresh, salty, and somewhat bitter-spicy taste»(8) of saltpeter that directed the sparks. Until today, the pyrotechnic material is colored with sulphates of barium (green), strontium (red), mercury (blue). These dangerous powders are nowadays mixed in a teeming sea of small, local companies, three-quarters of them located in southern Italy.

The production apparatus, the concrete origin of the festive air maps, is also capable of narrating the territory. «Fire is feast, fire is war».(9) Pyrotechnic mythography confirms itself as a figure of its time. The festival is an apotheosis that suspends and exposes social structures. Rockets race to burn off oxygen, while men

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A The whole city trembles, the whole city is on fire, 2022. Video stills: by the author

fight over the ground, outlining the economic and urban palimpsest that destroys the Vesuvian land in the thunderous trails.

Exploding in the air between the crater and the ports are thousands of twinkling lights. Every year the Christmas period is a sequence of seizures of unauthorised devices, or «bomb factories» – as they are called by the Italian institution INAIL in a report on the risk that is connected to them. They burst, making the earth all around vibrate, sometimes they even mimic the waking of the volcano.

We can speculate that what makes the explosive panorama of December, 31st, in Naples Bay so incredibly vast and chaotic, is the overtly individualistic, private nature of its detonations. Each of them belongs to the negotiation between the real and the fictive, as well as to an ostensive consumption paradigm. It ultimately is a conscious exhibition of a social status, an indicator, a «positional good» (10). As such it offers an instantaneous map of the underlying conflicts which have shaped the Vesuvian area as it appears now. The hypnotic pyrotechnic race speaks in the language of the city. It is the language of competition itself. The matter which gives it its everyday shape, is made of commodities, and the fireworks are its burning phantasmagoria.

«The history of festivals is intimately connected to the history of communities, to the urban vicissitudes of sites», writes Buttitta in his fundamental text «Le fiamme e i santi». (11) And so the flames, which from bonfire to stardust still shine at the liminal point between two years, marking the salient moment of the rite of passage, are today a machine that makes the actions of capital and their territorial function exceptionally visible. In the flames there is a semblance of revolt, of a suspension (of historical time, ed), where destruction, knowledge and collective appropriation take place, where «the individual really feels the city as its own» (12). At the same time, the light carpet over the gulf is expressive, and says that the culture of consumption is our state of reality.

In the logic of the potlatch (13), all societies have squandered and consumed more than necessary, finding in the superfluous a place of production of collective meanings and values. Now that, following Harvey's reading, the «increasing competition for survival in conditions of growing impoverishment» leads to «the erosion of the mechanism of mutual support», waste is no longer a founding act nor a renewal of a community identity.

The brilliant explosion of fire in the sky is carried out by the Vesuvian homo oeconomicus, the individual entrepreneur himself, with the same logic with which he shapes and defines territory: in competition with all other individuals.