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On disturbing the comfortable



*Should art ever be censored? **Naima Morelli** ponders the question as she views an exhibition by highly controversial artist Hermann Nitsch in neighbouring Palermo.*

The other day my Sicilian friend was walking through Palermo and she found half a horse in the rubbish. “It was an entire horse split in two, and it had been left to rot in the bin. It smelled like hell”. Such surrealistic visions are not uncommon in Palermo, where - from illegal horse races to spleen sandwiches (*pani ca meusa*) - life is anything but pristine.

This is why a petition to ban Hermann Nitsch’s show ‘Das Orgien Mysterien Theater’ from Palermo has left some people perplexed. If you’re not familiar with the guy, Nitsch was one of the pioneers of Action art and Body art in the ‘60s. Google him and you find blood, animals torn to pieces, naked bodies and strange rituals.

Of course, behind the gory façade there is much more to the artist. Drawing on the concept of popular religion and the Dionysian, Nitsch creates extreme performances where people free their most suppressed instincts. Blood, animal bowels, naked bodies, religious vestments and ampoules are part of cathartic rituals.

Nitsch’s art is very close to the pagan version of Christianity which has developed in the south of Italy. At the same time, Palermo’s intelligentsia and animal rights activists seem to be horrified by the use of animals and the darkness of Nitsch’s work. By organising a petition, they hoped to boycott the show at Zac (at Cantieri Culturali alla Zisa) - replicating what had happened at the Jumex Foundation in Mexico City a few months earlier.

The petition cites the Universal Declaration of Animal Rights of 1978, an ethical code which says that no animal should be used for human amusement. Nitsch argues that the animals in the performances have

been killed beforehand by the meat industry, but animal rights activists don't want to hear excuses. To them Nitsch's performances are simply not art.

The polemic inflamed Facebook. One of the most potent arguments against 'Das Orgien Mysterien Theater' I have gathered was that Nitsch has small and evil eyes - a judgement in the best Lombrosian tradition.

I'm happy to admit that poor, seventy-year-old Hermann is not the most handsome man in the contemporary art world. For a guy eliciting Dionysian impulses, he's definitely more of a Silenic figure. The question is: should activists have a say in what is art and what is not?

The answer is right there in the text of the petition, written by Nicolina La Ciura and Antonio Leto. They start off by pondering the aim of Nitsch's art. The aim, you know. The *message*. They then try their hand at a critical interpretation of the work. In their understanding Nitsch wants to "slip into the individual's subconscious, hitting it with images of bloody animals sacrificed on crosses, drunkenness, nudity and blood."

The petition concluded with a sort of manifesto for a new avant-gardist conception of art. "NO to the showcasing of violence in a city like Palermo. NO to the 'artist' creators of the same evil they want to reflect upon. YES to the artists documenting the reality of violence without causing further violence. YES to the artists creating beauty because it generates good."

While these points might look pretty simplistic, they actually raise deep questions. For starters, what precisely is this "good" and "evil" which the writers are talking bandying around with such confidence? And who said that art must generate good?

Obviously art itself can't generate anything. It is by definition beyond good and evil. The response to art is entirely up to the person looking at it. Do the writers of the petition really think kids will start torturing lizards as a result of seeing the show?

The peak of absurdity is reached when the petitioners say they don't want violent art in Palermo. Walk into any church in Palermo, and right there in front of you is a life-size crucifix, suffering and bleeding, along with countless depictions of martyrdoms. Should we take them down too? Should we basically erase all art history? Should we turn Palermo into Switzerland? It ain't gonna happen.

According to the petition, documenting the "reality of violence" is okay. On the other hand, "creating the same evil that the artist wants people to reflect upon" is not on. Of course, Nitsch's performances are anything but reflection. They are about throwing the audience into ecstasy and excess - approaching death through joy, and feeling both as part of life.

Someone once said that art should comfort the disturbed and disturb the comfortable. Thus it can't always be pristine, politically correct, disinfected. Much like Greek tragedy, art represents the cathartic outlet of all these passions.

Despite the outcry, 'Das Orgien Mysterien Theater' opened on 11th July and has been successful so far. On show are 41 canvases, a series of objects used in the performances and photography and videos documenting the artist's work. Curators stuck to their initial decision not to stage actual performances. Much ado about nothing.

Clearly Nitsch's work jars with most people's sensibilities. You might even think the artist's eyes are too small. But censorship is never the answer - think what could happen if it prevails. Today Nitsch, tomorrow: *pani ca meusa*.