

Sunday, June 5, 2016, 00:01

On the banks of the Tiber



Photos: Matteo Nardone (www.matteonardone.com)

Naima Morelli visits a highly-different Roman river bank than she remembers as the site is transformed with William Kentridge's work, titled *Triumphs and Laments*.

"Nè pubblico, nè privato, comune." (Neither public, nor private, in common.) This was the writing that appeared on the walls of Porta Maggiore, one of the main traffic intersections of Rome over a year ago.

It was recently erased by an association of citizen calling for urban decorum. A few days later, the writing stubbornly re-appeared. Promptly, a series of ferocious commentaries and articles was churned out with titles such as 'Crying with rage' and adding to the graffiti v cleaners collection.

It is a story that never grows old. In the digital era, it's comforting to know the walls of the city are still the mirror of a society and its ideologies. The freedom of writing on a wall and the freedom of cleaning it. Who owns the walls? What does 'common' look like in a city like Rome?

So, the latest from the Eternal City are that South African William Kentridge, one of the most prominent artists on the international scene, has decorated the walls of the Tiber with a procession of figures from episodes of Rome's history.

The project is called *Triumphs and Laments: A Project for Rome* and is a 500 metre-long frieze composed of characters over 10 metres high. It is located in one of the most beautiful and touristic parts of Rome, the neighbourhood Trastevere, near Piazza Trilussa, Campo dè Fiori and the Isola Tiberina.

The artist has always combined the political with the poetic in his work. In South Africa he tackled apartheid, colonialism and totalitarianism with dreamy and ironical undertones. In Rome he worked on suggestions, re-fashioning figures from Cicero to Mussolini, from Pasolini to La Dolce Vita, according to his own imagination.

The technique that he used to work on the ancient travertine embankment walls of Rome's urban waterfront consists in erasing the biological patina. With huge stencils he will then produce reversed graffiti.

The non-profit organisation which sponsored the project is called Tevereterno. The organisation, founded by American Kristin Jones, wants to reactivate a public space that they think has been forgotten. They want to change the way Romans think about the river, acting as a catalyst for change along the river's lengths.



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The project has been privately funded by Kentridge's own pockets, two galleries representing the artist (Lia Rumma and Marian Goodman), some private sponsorship and even a kickstarter campaign. Manpower for the creation of the event/performance on the opening day was 99 per cent voluntary. The latest estimate of a budget is around €800,000, including shows at the vernissage, VIP boats and the like.

It took years to get the approval to realise the project, because of bureaucratic hurdles and the request – as is always the case for public events – to pay for the occupation of public soil.

At one point there was a lingering expectation from Tevereterno that the city would not only not ask for money, but also contribute to the project. In this regard, Kristin emphasised that the project is “for Rome”, and she and Kentridge have created a gift for the city. “Rome deserves it,” Kristin said to the magazine *Travel and Leisure*.

It's always obnoxious to use the word “deserving” in relation to a city or a community. Whether you are a New York native like Kristin or you are born and bred in Trastevere, it's about imposing your narrative to the community that might or might not share it. It goes back to the freedom of writing on a wall and the freedom of cleaning it.

As for this specific case, it's unclear why Kentridge's deserves a special treatment, so much so that Tevereterno managed to unblock the bureaucracy around Rome's historical centre. Is it really a project for the city or is it more a dream to appease the artist and Tevereterno's ego?

The collateral Kentridge's exhibition at the Macro, showing the preparatory drawings, hints to an answer. A giant neon installation at the entrance announces: “Kentridge Ego”.

What Tevereterno, just like the graffiti cleaners in Porta Maggiore, have failed to acknowledge is that the walls of Rome are – and always have been – a theatre for multiple narratives at play.





Graffiti artists might take their walls with a surreptitious operation. They impose their world view in the shadows whereas Tevereterno does it in the light of the day. It's only that Tevereterno has to deal with bureaucracy in the process, obtaining writing on historic walls in a more laborious way.

In this scenario, the only person who really got it right is Kentridge himself. He repeatedly said it in the numerous conferences around the city preceding the opening, but no one really got the drift: "There's no specific narrative, except that everyone's triumphs and glories are someone else's laments and shamefulness".

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Cleaning the walls of Rome for the dream of a pristine city is a great Sisyphean battle, so is the impulse of a skinny adventurous girl with a black hood to go out at night and dreaming up a city covered with her name. You can't stop what writer Jorge Amado called "the anonymous hand, the hand of the people". In this continuous building and destroying, the city lives.

As for the white panama-hatted Kentridge and the skinny black-hooded girl, their motives and egos might not be that different. Only their means are.

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