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ART MATTERS

The Last Place on Earth

Culture | BY GIDEON LEWIS-KRAUS October 16, 2014 5:15 pm

What does it take for an artist to truly relax? Try one very wealthy patron, a group of eager assistants and an erupting volcano on a remote Italian island.



Nicoletta Fiorucci and her son, Andrea, off the coast of Stromboli, Italy, where she stages the Volcano Extravaganza, a collection of arts events, each summer. Gughi Fassino

The island of Stromboli, reputed seat of Aeolus, the Greek demigod of the winds, has for more than a millennium acted as a natural lighthouse, its near-clockwork bursts of brimstone and flame suspended 3,000 feet over the Tyrrhenian Sea. For Jules Verne's explorers, it presented the most convenient egress from the center of the earth. In some ways Stromboli is more convenient to the center of the earth than to anywhere else. The northeasternmost outpost in an archipelago, the island is some 40 miles north of Sicily and a 12-hour trip even from Milan. In excited seas, it's common to find oneself stranded. For a few decades following Roberto Rossellini's 1949 film "Stromboli (Terra di Dio)," the island attracted a fashionable international crowd, but the wealthy ultimately restrained themselves from building expensive vacation properties on the slopes of one of the few continuously active volcanos in Europe, choosing instead to settle on the nearby island of Panarea, where Stromboli can be appreciated and admired at a distance safe for contemplation and investment. Stromboli was mostly evacuated in 2002, after an eruption caused a submarine landslide and small tsunamis flooded one of the island's two settlements. It thus remains a tourist attraction of a particularly unaccommodating sort: there are no engines save for those of golf carts and *motorini*, visitors make their way along the narrow lanes after dark by flashlight and the volcano's undersea slopes, which meet the sea floor 7,000 feet down, fall off so quickly as to prevent most larger boats from easy anchor. The cruise ships go by in the dark to let their passengers admire the amaranth eruptions as they trouble the night sky, but continue on to dock and disgorge elsewhere.

For these reasons, among others, Nicoletta Fiorucci has chosen Stromboli as the stage for each summer's Volcano Extravaganza, a collection of art events that falls somewhere between a residency and a happening. Italians know the empires of two Fiorucci families: the Fioruccis of Milan and the Fioruccis of Rome. The Milan Fioruccis created a fashion label that invented designer stretch jeans and democratized the leopard print. They imported London fashion to Italy, then exported Italian fashion to New York before selling their company to the Japanese after a brush with bankruptcy. Nicoletta Fiorucci, however, belongs to the Fioruccis of Rome, known not for jeans but for ham. Supermercato mainstays, they were decidedly local kingpins; no Italian would eat a London ham. A retiring woman of distinguished manners, Fiorucci aims with the Extravaganza to redescribe art patronage in the age of the bland, globalized, paint-by-numbers collection. She has little desire to just toss things from the wall of a fair booth into a shopping cart; neither does she act like those collectors who, out of market ennui, buy work with the expectation that they've bought the artist, who can then be invited to the Hamptons to don a bear costume and roller skates and make omelets. She instead assembles a global cohort of young artists — along with a handful of the critics and curators who might later support them — to come to this most specific of places and do whatever it is the volcanic drama inspires.





Milovan Farronato (left) and Stella Bottai (right) who facilitate artists' work on the island, like that of Hassan Khan (center). Gughi Fassino

In 2008, Fiorucci bought a house on the sea, La Lunatica, which has become the command center and residence part of the residency. It seems to have been built as a hotel: There's a large common area below and half a dozen capsule rooms above, and a storeroom laid in with mineral water — the island has none of its own — as well as olive oil, salt, fusilli, corn flakes, paccheri, rusks, candles, soy milk and toilet paper. The fridge has one shelf of sun-dried tomatoes and another of salt-packed Pantelleria capers, as well as, at any given time, two shelves of wine. A young German artist, Josefine Reisch, had been called in to cook two weeks of vegetarian meals. Though she'd worked for artists whose cooking was their art, she didn't want to feel the pressure to make work on the island, so she'd decided just to cook as a cook.

A few months before she bought La Lunatica, Fiorucci bought another house, from Marina Abramovic, a little farther up the slope, near the line where clustered settlement gives way to sooty volcano in earnest. When new Extravaganza arrivals hear about "the Abramovic house," they tend to expect an airy glass box minimally ornamented with uncommon objects of taste bathed in expensive Mediterranean light. But the house was built to endure extreme summer heat and uninterrupted seismic activity — thickset walls, plastered and whitewashed; almost no windows — and has also been emptied of items an artist might break. Three rooms had been set aside as an exhibition and performance space. The artist Celia Hempton had gray-washed the walls of one with what resembled dishwater, which she'd then used as a backdrop for the naïve-looking paintings she'd done of the volcano; those paintings had been shipped off to either the Gwangju Biennale, in Korea, or the Guangzhou Triennial, in the Pearl River Delta, nobody seemed to know for sure. Another room, lined with turquoise foam cones and spikes, had been outfitted for the rehearsal and recording of music; a third had a mattress with unchanged sheets. When Fiorucci is on Stromboli, she leaves these homes to the generative routines of her artists, so that they might feel unimpeded by patronizing supervision. She often sleeps instead on the boat of her consort, the languid Sorrentine hotelier Giovanni Russo, and his peppery chamberlain, the dachshund Go*rrrr*don.

The necessary on-volcano administration is overseen by Fiorucci's lieutenants, Milovan Farronato and Stella Bottai, and a guest curator, the London-based sound and installation artist Haroon Mirza. "When we first started to bring artists here," Farronato said, "things were a little more casual than they are now." He paused to reset the single lacquered chopstick in his Alanis Morissette hair. "Not that they've become so formal now." Farronato, Bottai and Mirza find themselves playing a sort of zone defense to fulfill the needs of the artists there at any given moment. One Sunday morning toward the end of this year's residency, the three of them were split between the two houses. At La Lunatica, Bottai, a sturdily energetic, unfazable Bologna native, was trying to establish whether that evening's event, a performance by the British artist Ed Atkins, was going to be set up on La Lunatica's terrace, at a nearby hotel or in a craggy sea cave Mirza had discovered that morning on a dawn ramble. (Sunrise seemed to be the only time Bottai, Farronato and Mirza could take a break from their artists.) Mirza had just fetched an order of artisanal pistachio granita, and was now in the music room of the Abramovic house, trying to disentangle a vast apparatus of A/V cables for the departing band-in-residence Factory Floor, who'd spent a few days recording volcanic dyspepsia and integrating it into their next album, and re-entangle a slightly different set of A/V cables for the incoming band-in-residence Django Django, who would be playing a concert the next night on the rough basalt plinth between La Lunatica and the sea. Farronato was constantly in transit between the two houses, working with the Cairo-based Hassan Khan to figure out how they might employ capricious local fabricators to build sculptures of iron, ceramics and pumice to be shown in three days' time. Everything about the residency is played by ear, and is manufactured just in time for presentation, the structure seeming designed to thwart creative self-seriousness. The atmosphere of frustrated, inspired disarray resembles the comic dissipation of Fassbinder's "Beware of a Holy Whore."



The black-sand beach below the home where Farronato and Bottai reside. Gughi Fassino

Ed Atkins's needs were the most pressing, given that his performance, a reading of one of his hallucinogenic, epistolary prose poems by a C.G.I. avatar that would be projected on a large screen, was to be held in a matter of hours. Atkins had been having a busy few months; he'd shown another avatar-based piece as part of Klaus Biesenbach and Hans Ulrich Obrist's "14 Rooms" project in Basel and had opened solo shows at the Palais de Tokyo and the Serpentine. The Serpentine project was an ambitious Gesamtkunstwerk of HD computer-animated shorts, avatar heads floating in and out of resolution, overlapping soundscapes and printed posters of his densely allusive, arcane texts. Atkins's avatars, who deliver knotty monologues apparently inspired by Lacan, Blanchot, Neal Stephenson and Throbbing Gristle, look like hardened-convict versions of himself. He'd never used them in live projected readings, and was concerned that they wouldn't maintain the definition and control he likes them to have. He explained that, to make sure the software registered the proper expressions through his laptop's camera, he'd have to perform his reading with a rubberiness of which he wasn't entirely sure his face was capable.

Atkins's work is intellectually rigorous and at times intimidating, but on the island he was chain-smokingly serene and almost boyish, his gait springy, his eyes hidden behind black Prada coke-bottle sunglasses. He was slightly anxious that he hadn't had quite as much time for 3-D rendering as he might have liked, but at a certain point he set the anxiety aside. He seemed, however, really committed to this cave idea. Theoretically, nothing was off limits, but the trouble was running the electronics into the cave, and fitting a few dozen people into the space for the performance. Once the venue was established, Bottai would have about an hour to spread the word on an island with limited cellphone reception.

Bottai, in a bikini top and denim cutoffs and multiple communicative devices on a range of European cellular networks, paced La Lunatica like the veteran field marshal of a minor tropical campaign. She didn't mind the unabated frenzy, which she credited — along with the intense dreams the artists claimed to have been having — to the proximity of this open portal to the vitality at the earth's core. "The volcano is so active it's out of control," she said. "I mean, don't worry, it's under control." (But it wasn't wholly clear that it was. The volcano had been closed to hikers for three weeks, and soon after the end of the Extravaganza it would see its greatest activity in recent years.)



Clockwise from top left: Vincent Neff and Jimmy Dixon of the British rock group Django Django; the British artist Ed Atkins on the terrace of La Lunatica; the set-up for Atkins's performance, which features a C.G.I. avatar of the artist; D.J. Tabitha Thorlu Bangura (standing) on the terrace of La Lunatica at sunset. Gughi Fassino

In the meantime, Farronato was schlepping all over the island, tarnishing his magma-red pedicure on visits to fabricators with the shy, stout Khan, who suspected he'd been put on a secret exercise regimen. Some men have the knack of maintaining a continuous five-o'clock shadow; Farronato managed the even more mysterious trick of maintaining perpetually day-old makeup. He never had two minutes to himself to reapply his mascara. Khan, who has worked as a video artist as well as a sculptor, needed a lot of handling; he's ordinarily a meticulous planner, and Mirza's invitation to Stromboli was cause for considerable misgivings on his part. The threat of open-ended improvisation nearly prevented him from accepting. But in the end he decided that the uncertainty might be salutary, especially as it provided him with a break from the heat and the political complexity of Cairo, before he had to head to Liverpool for the Biennial and New York for the ceremony for those short-listed for the Hugo Boss Prize. "The way I work," he said, "I usually know where I'm going, but here …" he trailed off. "We're producing these objects and either I'll end up showing them or I won't."

Farronato and Khan strolled uphill to meet Tommaso, the local metalworker. In a compilation documenting the early years of the Extravaganza, an art writer and editor called Arianna Rosica wrote, "The typical tourist in Stromboli stays in a villa of which he hasn't the faintest idea who the owner is, does not mix with the islanders and frequently carries some alternative magazine under his city-stained armpit and sports an unkempt beard in which to hide all his shady ideologies." Correspondingly, the attitude toward locals borders on reverential. Just as former collaborators such as Rosica have been happy to cretinize the tourists, Farronato doesn't mind shoring up the impression that there are such things as actual "islanders," though he'll admit privately that most "locals" just overstayed their vacation, or were refugees from 1970s rehab clinics. Tommaso, who was born after the war in Basilicata, came to the island in 1971 for what was supposed to be two months. Now he's on his fourth wife. Farronato translated as Khan and Tommaso discussed the detailed specifications for a small iron bar. As they left, Khan fretted that the piece wouldn't be right. Farronato reassured him, with a tranquil, coquettish shrug, that all of this disorder was precisely the point.

La Lunatica is littered with evidence of what the volcano has done to and for the creative process — photographs and collages and paintings left behind, intentionally or not, by previous visitors. But artists need not feel they must produce anything at all. Time at the volcano, Fiorucci herself has written, ought to be a "means without an end." In an age where modern patronage has congratulated itself for its supersession of Florentine sycophancy and artists continue to sing for their supper while pretending otherwise, Fiorucci provides a residency that's "paradoxically a break from their work." The organizational genius of the whole apparatus is that an enormous amount of energy is expended, by Bottai and Farronato and Mirza, to create an illusion of industry that provides cover for an artists' holiday; the artists get the plausible deniability they need to stop worrying about whom they ought to please when. What Fiorucci gets in return is a little company for the Tyrrhenian sunset, a measure of youth and unpredictability on her terrace between the distempered earth and the water. Fiorucci herself remains a cordially distant, if legendary, presence. Extravaganza lore has it that she once climbed the volcano in heels. These days she arrives on La Lunatica's terrace in the early evening, lights and distributes the citronella candles and watches the performances with the slightly distracted, proud air of a doting aunt.



The northeast coast of Stromboli, a destination without cars, streetlights or easy anchor. Gughi Fassino

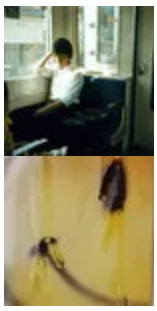
In the end, Tommaso presented an iron claw to Khan's satisfaction, although the block of pumice fashioned by the stonecutter hadn't come in to spec. But the time hadn't been wasted. The brute fact of the island, its environment igneous rather than sedimentary, had its own special power. "The context is bubbly, and it's stronger than tourism," Khan said. By which he meant, it seemed, that this had been a pretty terrific place to spend a few days lightly pretending he wasn't on holiday.

By midafternoon, the sea cave had revealed itself to be too cavelike to support the electronics Atkins would need, but some 60 visitors had crawled from their crags to watch his performance on the night terrace. The artists had mostly conceded their costume to the style of island life, in which one's legs were slathered in black sand like wet coffee grounds, and one's nose was black-boogered with ash, but Farronato and Bottai were unflagging in their sense of occasion; both appeared in pieces by the young London designer Osman, Farronato in a soft embroidered bolero and Bottai in a black, heavy-corded top that was equal parts Viking chest plate and S&M harness.

Everybody settled in to watch the avatar of Atkins's face light up and hover in the Mediterranean night, as Atkins himself sat hidden behind the large screen, reciting his poem. The performance was as inscrutable as it was absorbing, and nobody's cellphone was working so everybody had to pay attention. Atkins paused for effect during the bursts of volcanic activity somewhere close by overhead. After a lot of applause, the crowd was collected and parceled out onto boats to watch the totani squid fishermen work by starlight. Atkins's face hurt a little from the exertion. The island loomed as a hulking, conic absence of stars, a kind of photo negative of Mount Fuji, a velvet dark of high slumped shoulders from which showered forth, every few minutes, with a soft jet roar against the lapping sea, a brief torrent of melted rose. The eruptions fell like a discarded cigarette; their embers landed in a long wound across the volcano's flank, then smoldered out once more into the moonless night.

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