

MARBLE – AND AN ANARCHIST SPIRIT – RUN IN THE BLOOD OF CARRARA, OUR CRITIC FINDS

Few historical constants better define Italian art and architecture than the use of marble. From ancient Rome, through the Renaissance and Baroque periods, to the present day, the stone retains an integral relationship with commerce, design and the arts in Italy. The Museo Civico del Marmo (Civic Museum of Marble) in Carrara, which features displays of tools, marble samples and models of landscapes and quarries, alongside a multimedia centre organised by Italian collective Studio Azzurro in 2008, performs a crucial function in uniting the town's unique landscape with its history and its present. To this end, earlier this summer the museum hosted *Distopia: Right Now*, a solo exhibition of work by Spanish artist Avelino Sala, in which the artist responded to marble as a material and to the rich political history of Carrara, a town long associated with anarchism (indeed, the first anarchist group in Italy was founded there back in 1885).

Sala had four computer-generated designs – a near human-height freestanding ‘anarchy’ symbol, a hooded activist, a Molotov cocktail and a row of three 1:1 scale CCTV cameras – made up in laser-cut marble at a local workshop and then hand-finished by artisans. Also on display was *Cacotopia* (2011), a videowork made by Sala in collaboration with Daniel G. Andujar, which incorporates clips from dystopian films such as *Logan's Run* (1976), *Children of Men* (2006) and *Metropolis* (1927), stitched together and looped into a 23-minute montage of cinematic doom scenarios. As congested metropolises meet desolate militarised cities, as surveillance states meet overcrowded prisons, fiction blends into reality. In the 14th minute of the video, a



cinematic representation of a financial TV news bulletin portends ‘carnage on Wall Street’. Even as recently as 2010, when *Wall Street: Money Never Sleeps* (from which the clip was taken) was released, few realised the profundity of the economic crisis – still ongoing, and with no end in sight. Yet by now the language and postures of financial

hardship, the political response to it and the indignation of a hard core of the left are phenomena to which we are well accustomed. In the 20th minute of *Cacotopia*, real news footage of mass protests follows seamlessly from a sinister depiction of a police line waiting for a confrontation with the public as its commander wears a wry and disturbing smile. From here on in, footage of police brutality is interspersed with mob violence as the image of CCTV cameras being felled across various locations is repeated intermittently.

Here in Carrara – home to the International of Anarchist Federations since 1968 – the message conveyed both via marble and video in *Distopia: Right Now* is clear. A marble plaque in the main square of Colonnata, a satellite village close to the quarries, reads: ‘*Ai compagni anarchici uccisi sulla strada della libertà*’ (To our anarchist comrades who died on the road to liberty). In Carrara, marble – which has been mined here since ancient

Roman times – is in the blood. Indeed, fatalities in the dangerous quarries have been historically so high that one might even say that there is blood in the marble. A sense of solidarity fostered by such conditions has flourished across generations of political and social change. Even as the marble trade suffers the effects of globalisation – in Italy it is cheaper to source marble from China than from Carrara, where ever fewer people learn the craft of marble carving – the quarries, which are sublimely beautiful, continue to provide material for artistic reflection.

If there could be said to be a motif for this show, it would certainly be the surveillance camera. Those made by the artist in marble – *Camouflage* (2012) – reflect on the fact that there are materials that both precede our surveillance age and will endure far beyond it. Nothing about our times is a given, and art's continuity with the past suggests nothing need be permanent.