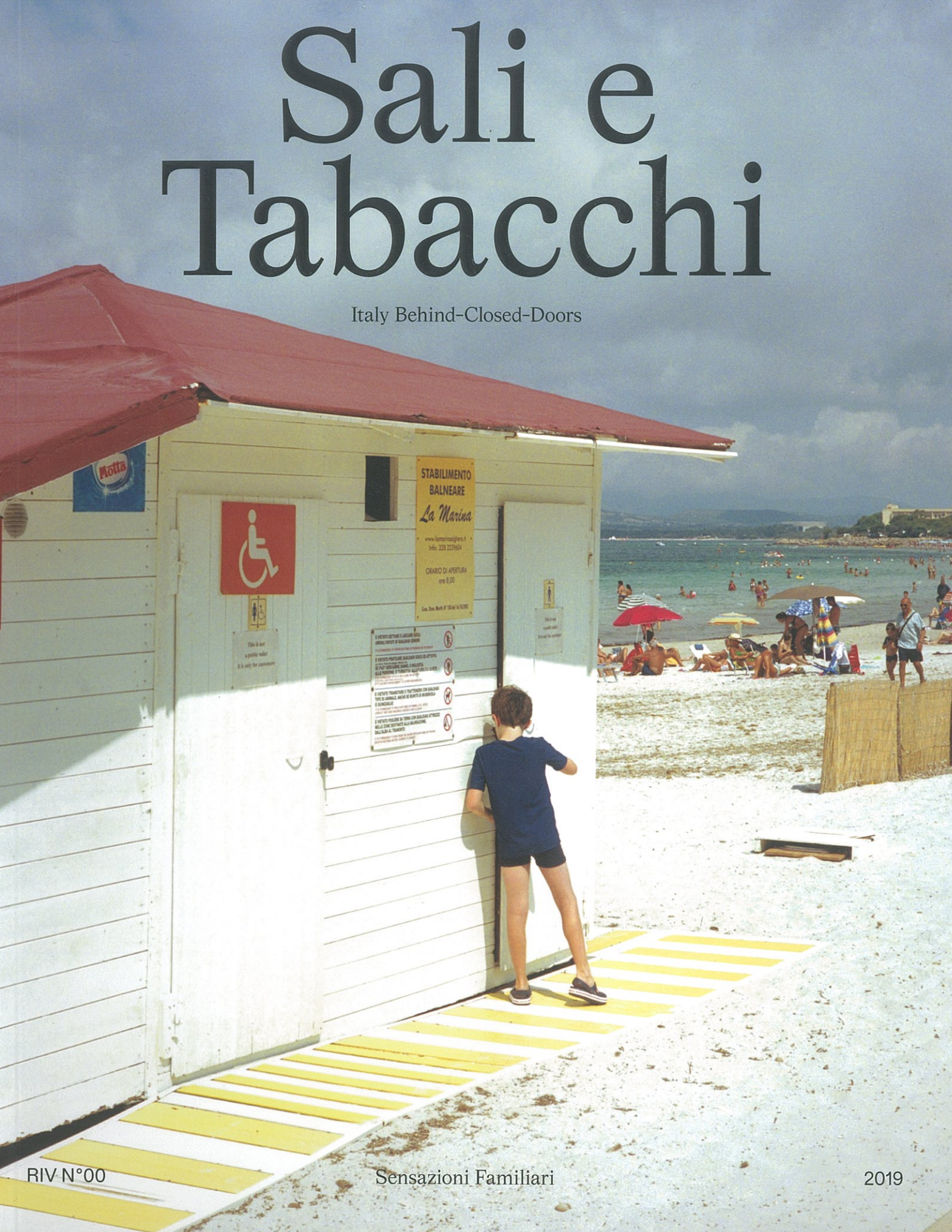
Sali e Tabacchi

Italy Behind-Closed-Doors



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R.G. "The first collections had no colour, as I initially worked so much on form and matter, and the manipulation of the latter."

Gigli explains when asked about his process.

R.G. "When I was finally content and realized I had dominated the shape, I started adding colour and print to the form."

From maximalist to minimalist and from sensuous to strict, Gigli's design increasingly became all about finding the balance in between extremes: by styling lighter, weightless fabrics such as organza and tulle with oversized knits; by combining a palette of earthy and dark tones with the occasional blast of blood red.

They say fashion should be about escapism, and in Gigli's case indeed it is. His women have travelled to space and back, been attendants of Byzantine Empress Theodora, turned into dandies for a day.

Thus Gigli's style and life's work cannot really be defined by words, but purely by a harvest of emotions. Romeo's doesn't draw thinking about a single woman in mind, he creates pieces of his collection as single items to be sold separately, as he wants them to have

R.G. "their own identity regardless of the other."

Nevertheless, what really happened to the man who used to be the king of the fashion world and then suddenly disappeared in the shadows for the last twenty five years?

Unfortunately, in the case of Mr Gigli, it is often true what they say when they say that you can only trust yourself and no one else. His truth has a bittersweet taste, mainly because the person who betrayed his trust was his girlfriend of the time, Carla Sozzani.

Sozzani, who at the time was also working for Gigli as his head of communications, had convinced Gigli to strike a business deal with her ex-husband Donato Maino. Gigli regrettably discovered the poor business decision he had made in an unexpected way, and fought for his name and his company in a bloody court battle against his business partners, in 1991. Alas, as he lost his Milanese headquarters and store (which Sozzani quickly remade into the now-iconic concept store 10 Corso Como), he was also shouldered with debt which deprived him of retrieving what was rightfully his in the first place.

In spite of these misadventures, Gigli's legacy has been inspiring young designers with his design sensibility up until today. A perfect example of this is the poetic sensitivity of the late Alexander McQueen, who before studying at Central Saint Martins, assisted Gigli on his mens and women's collections, and was influenced by Gigli's attention to tailoring, use of particularly luxurious fabrics and romantic models.

On the other hand, what does the future hold for the Italian designer doing today? What might we expect from this fashion alchemist after twenty-five years out of the limelight?

R.G. "I am a boiling pot full of ideas."

he says.

R.G. "I've curated exhibitions, designed furniture, carpets, chandeliers, so you'll never know what to expect from me."

Maybe now that his daughter is older he'll move to another country, and start anew, spreading his new poetic vision elsewhere. Yet, when it comes to a visionary like Romeo Gigli, you always have to expect the unexpected.

And indeed, what the Los Angeles Times remarked in 1988, still applies today:

L.A.T. "If poems could talk, they would say 'Romeo Gigli'".

BENVENUTI AL SUD

Words by Elisa Carassai

Italy has since forever, undergone an imbalance in shared resources between the northern and southern regions. The south, and especially regions like Sicily who most recently have been the centre and currently are in the eye of the media coverage about the migration crisis, have suffered the most from economic malaise caused by the seemingly unstoppable, and always hidden power of the mafia.

Yet it wasn't always this way. Throughout history, the south of Italy, notably the region of Sicily, has been a laboratory for diversity and cross-pollination. Continuous migration - from the Ancient Greeks, the Arabs and the Normans to the recent arrivals from North Africa, South East Asia and the Middle East - have been constantly redefining this particular region and its people. Sicily's streets, architecture, parks, cultural legacy and personal histories are the result of a long-lasting syncretism of cultures across the Mediterranean and beyond.

What changed? And how did one of the most beautiful Italian regions which used to hold such a rich and important cultural background end up letting abandonment and economic malaise take over? The answers to these questions have been debated far and wide, yet there never seems to be a light at the end of the tunnel, a conclusion to all this talk and no action.

What to do to fix things? Design as a social initiative or, as internationally re-known design critic Alice Rawsthorne has defined it, an attitude is, could be a possible and necessary solution to prompt a change in how we see things and make sense of the world, as it is the only particular practice in which culture and production merge and may create the most change in the world.

In light of this, we must ask ourselves the following questions: what are the urgencies and opportunities of these singular locations in terms of the design of social security and cultural sustainability, as well as housing and business? And how are current designers working towards bringing forth cultural and social change in these locations which are often off the beaten track, outside the turmoil of European politics?

Investing in cultural projects and the creative industries, which are always thirsty for unconventional locations is a seductive possibility in order to stimulate transformation in the locations that most need it.

A notable creative project which has emerged at the moment, is the one founded by Alessandro Montel, a Milanese businessman and creative professor, who decided to move to Syracuse on Sicily's Ionic coast in 2016, to devote himself to the 'revitalization' of the Accademia di Belle Arti Rosario Gagliardi, now called MADE Programs. Montel, a born-and-raised Milanese, had always worked in the design world in the north, yet it seemed superfluous to him to create another design school in Milan, as the chief town is already full of great design colleges such as the Politecnico.

A.M. "The idea that came to mind initially, had been to rework the existing idea of design education present in the south of Italy," says Montel. "The Academy had only three bachelor's degree courses: one of painting, one of classical decor and one of set design, and was falling apart. Thus, this is the reason why we came here: it was necessary to do something different in a place in need of it."

The two courses, one in design led by Studio Formafantasma, and one in visual arts led by artist Francesco Jodice, are formatted in a way which pushes students to not only take what they can from Sicily but also in a way give back to this land. The idea is to also push the students to rediscover local materials and work with the local communities by learning what they can from artisanal crafts, reinterpreting them for 21st-century use.

The Academy will now present its first batch of graduates, however, it has also been presenting short courses called Made Labs, for the past few summers in Ortigia, a district in the center of Syracuse, with a range of international design experts, ranging from curators, designers, editors, writers and collectives, such as Bethan Laura Wood, Max Lamb, Sabine Marcelis, Dezeen's Marcus Fairs, OMA's Ippolito Pestellini Laparelli and many more. The summer short course, which comprises a series of lectures and workshops with the guests, will also be happening this year, from July 22nd to August 3rd 2019.

Unsurprisingly, the course leaders of the design course are the founders of Studio Formafantasma, Simone Farresin and Andrea Trimarchi, an Italian duo who has been challenging and breaking the boundaries of what design is in the contemporary, since 2009. Based in Eindhoven, the duo has however been working with a series of international clients all over the world, yet they never seem to forget to include their Italian roots in their work.

From trying to establish what is the role of design within the tradition, with their project Moulding Traditions, to understand what is the role of materials in the shaping of local culture, in the case of De Natura Fossilium (01), the duo always approach projects with a keen eye to historical, social and political forces that have shaped their environments.

(01) De Natura Fossilium Photo: Luisa Zanzani

A.T. "The idea of going back to Sicily to give something back there was very important to us, In addition, it must be said that we must also try to break the clichè that design can only happen in Milan. So when Alessandro [Montel] invited us to be part of the project, we immediately said yes, because for us Sicily not only is one of the most important and interesting places in Italy but also in Europe. Other than being a cross-cultural melting pot of present and past populations, it is the place which incarnates all of the most important topics on a contemporary level."

The importance of Studio Formafantasma's design thinking is what must be taught to the future generations of young designers, as the duo's way of thinking and producing has shown to have produced a change in the world, for example through their project Ore Streams, an ongoing investigation in the recycling of electronic waste.

An example of another step forward came in the form of hosting Manifesta12, the European travelling Biennale, in Palermo this past autumn. Palermo had just been nominated as the city of culture 2018 and was chosen as the site of the travelling Biennale, in order to "rethink how far cultural interventions can play a role in helping re-shaping one of the most iconic Mediterranean crossroads in our history as a part of a long term transformation process," says Hedwig Fijen, Manifesta Director, on Manifesta's website. The Biennale has been an ideal playground to reimagine how to invigorate its local and international identity. On the other hand, although the event was extremely successful in terms of visits and cultural exchange, as many creatives are now moving to the city to open their studios and gallery Hauser & Wirth is in the works of opening up a space in Palermo, change isn't bound yet to be around the closest corner.

A.M. "Palermo is a capital of culture it showed itself in all of its beauty and contradictions, however, because of this, people understand that there is enormous potential on one hand, yet there are so many other organizational and bureaucratic problems on the other hand."

says Montel.

For now, these seem positive coincidences which may push Sicily towards a gradual ascent out of the continuous state of crisis it lives in. Still, the important outcome is all about helping the local communities grow, as just like Trimarchi states,

A.T. "things can grow and flourish in this local context, yet the importance is to see what will stay on land."

Pisani

Venezia