

MADE IN ITALY - MADE OUT CHINA

2014

Lana Čmajčanin

Public intervention / performance

In her artistic practice Lana Čmajčanin always addresses the unpleasant reality that we usually try to hide. She forces us to confront with it, to take our part and to acknowledge our responsibilities. She uses the same approach to deal with Chinese immigration problem in Prato.

The opening of Chinese economy in the late 1970s caused, since the beginning of the 1980s, the rapid growth of immigrants from China to Italy. Prato has always been a popular destination for Chinese immigrants, as the city supports a large textile industry and a ready-to-wear garment sector, keen on flexible and low-cost labor. The Chinese now constitute over 45 per cent of all immigrants in Prato and, in per capita terms, represent the largest Chinese community in Europe.

Chinese immigrants are taking up a growingly prominent profile, social but also economical. The later affects mostly parts of textile sector on which the identity of Prato was built during the economic growth period, when the city represented a textile superpower as far as regenerated wool was concerned. Therefore the perception of citizens of Prato about themselves and their city started to change. That results in a loss of an important point of reference and a part of the identity. The fear of losing the identity along with multicultural transformation creates a potential conflict between the two cultures.

Lana's work shows a photograph made by photo-reporter of one of most distributed daily newspapers in Prato. A crowd of Chinese women is in line for the working permit. The mass of bodies squished together does not only show us how important this document is, but also tells a lot about the enormously of the immigration phenomenon and the conditions one has to undergo to get it. This photograph, installed on the façade of the Prato Province Palace, one of the centers of institutional powers of the city, was covered by wallpaper, the kind used in Italian noble mansions from renaissance on. The artist piece by piece removed the wallpaper during her opening performance, initially permitting both images to melt in one and finally discovering completely the one that was covered.

Acting in this manner the artist revealed how the official culture tries to disguise the hosted one, although that will always keep emerging as it has, in fact, became a part of the social tissue of the city. The institutions have the power to show whatever part of the image they choose whenever the desire, but the whole picture is rarely seen. It usually gets uncovered only when it can be used for satisfying the needs of the official one without claiming any kind of emancipation. Anyway, the two cultures are connected and one cannot interfere with any of them without influencing the other. The artist insists that we have to learn to interpret different layers that constitute our surroundings and take an active part in its formation. And that is why the installation in a public space was essential for this work.

The project Made in Italy – Made out China was produced in occasion of a project Prato-Sarajevo: Art Invasion. Prato and Sarajevo, cities firstly connected during the creation of Ars Aevi contemporary art collection in Sarajevo in 1990s, being both transitional economies that in the past invested consistently in contemporary art and culture, proposed a mutual exchange of artistic views on the strong points and weaknesses of both.

By Špela Zidar