

“GREEN- LINE. Less light, more lightness”
7 December 2022 – 8 January 2023
SERGIO RISALITI, Artistic Director

Climate Change and Heritage, Forum
Palazzo Vecchio, Salone dei Cinquecento
15 December 2022

The events of the last few months – increased temperatures, very high and prolonged temperature spikes, sudden weather changes and the resulting natural disasters – are certain proof of an ecological and climate emergency. The changes taking place are not the fantasies of alarmist scientists. Issues of sustainability, migrant flows and inequality are interconnected, while shows of arrogance or disinterest get us nowhere. Cynicism and indifference need to step aside. Disasters that have done damage to tourism, agriculture, public and private buildings, commerce and our cultural heritage speak for themselves. They are clear signs of the urgent need for radical change in government decisions, the strategies of capital and consumption, our lifestyles and our ways of moving around the planet. We witness the crumbling of sections of mountains, the melting of glaciers, flooding and landslides. We look on hopelessly at tropical phenomena of unusual force and destructive capacity. Yet the next day the skies are clear again and we pretend that nothing has happened. In the short term, though, we are already forced to face the issue of preserving our artistic heritage in times in which climate change, energy crises and pandemics are not unrelated events.

Our artistic cities and our heritage of historic buildings, small churches, public monuments, archaeological areas and the natural landscape itself, including our coasts, are the ‘targets’ of ecological change. The invading enemy, though, is ourselves and certainly not some hostile divinity.

What can we do? Or rather, what must we do? How should we act, and above all what new scale of values should we adopt? Our outlooks and the perspectives with which we view, conceive and relate to the Other – nature – are in need of radical change: the anthropocentrism which has dominated our world for centuries must give way to a new idea of humanity. Indeed the new discoveries of science help us to understand how everything is interconnected. New cosmologies are emerging, which take their cue from the creation myths of ancient civilisations, according to which the universe is a single organism that functions holistically. For this reason, we need to improve our intuition and continue evolving our sensitivity and generosity to be able to act creatively and efficiently. We have to stop believing that we can go on maintaining our privileged position of dominance at the centre of the world.

In the middle of this perfect storm (you’ll forgive the metaphor), new aesthetic paradigms and different models of development are required if we wish to resolve problems which are interconnected on the level of preservation and enrichment of our artistic and landscape heritage. Here I’ll just give a few small examples, the result of my working experience. The temperatures of the last few months are not those of previous years, and places and works of art are suffering as never before. On the one hand, we need to safeguard artefacts, the things and material objects that are subject to the laws of entropy and the accelerated effects of climate change. But then there are also the visitors, not to mention the staff members of the various cultural sites. Each of these questions is closely linked to those of sustainability and energy conservation.

When we speak of cooling the spaces we inhabit, we are touching upon these sorts of complex and intertwined questions. Greater heat produces a greater waste of energy, especially with today’s technologies. More cloudbursts mean more damage to buildings, starting with roofs and gutters. Likewise, great flows of tourists to museums translate into greater waste of energy and resources, from transport to water use, from food – meat in particular – and detergents to rubbish. On the one hand, we boast about record numbers of visitors to our museums and cultural sites, while on the other we regret the damage caused to our economy by overheating. Our historic centres are old and fragile, while most of our facilities are unable to sustain climate change, if they exist at all.

In this light, it is clear that enormous quantities of resources must be invested to upgrade museum structures and conservation technologies. At the same time, we need to reassess a series of restrictions and limitations that have hampered initiatives that must be taken to improve mobility and draw on alternative energy sources, limitations which have often been motivated by an outdated ideology of aesthetic beauty and orthodox ideas of preservation. We need to think about the tramways and other infrastructure necessary for mobility and about public services; we need to consider how to protect our heritage from cloudbursts and torrid summers and how to reduce the energy load of certain historic buildings and the consumption levels of mass tourism. We need to redesign criteria and buildings and imagine new forms of urban development as well as new approaches to restoration, museum organisation and exhibitions.

We have to experiment with new materials, tools, display arrangements, forms of communication and exhibition strategies.

Cities cannot become greener when the planet is burning. The image of the great man, the miracle of existence with his anthropocentric values, is overshadowed by the awareness of the damage caused in the name of civilisation and progress. As a result, our scale of values and aesthetic models must also undergo drastic revision.

We should, though, be optimistic: during times of crisis, doors are opened to periods of creativity and virtuous evolution, as new visions and new horizons of development and improvement unfold.

Sergio Risaliti