

Caterina De Nicola

Reek of past pitfalls

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Last week I visited Taranto—the ‘city of two seas’—in Puglia. Its historical centre is located on an island. Steel has been processed and machined in Taranto since the 1960s, and the smoke from the factories, filled with dioxins, is visible for miles around. There is something apocalyptic about the place. When thinking about Caterina De Nicola’s project *Reek of past pitfalls*, my thoughts keep returning to Taranto, the city of two seas. What future is conceivable, is feasible, in a place (in a world?) where utopian imaginings of a future are going up in toxic smoke, and where ghosts of the past (from the capitalist economic boom) are steadily returning? In a place that ‘reeks of the pitfalls of the past’, as the artist puts it? «What now?» asks the Marxist philosopher Franco ‘Bifo’ Berardi in his book, *After the future (Dopo il futuro)*, written in the first decade of the new millennium and published in 2011. What now? in a world where state authorities use brutality to stifle collective rebellion (I think of the G8 in Genoa, 2001), and the idea of a perfect future seems absurd? «Those enemies (who we felt in our nightmares) came to life, afterwards, in the future of no future we are inhabiting now», writes Bifo. Caterina De Nicola, who is also a music producer, describes her artistic practice as post-postmodern scepticism. She is driven by the ongoing presence of the period described as postmodern and the lack of new imaginaries for a future. An eternal recurrence of elements from the past. Working with a wide variety of materials often used and found, she produces most of her sculptural works herself. She is, she says, very attracted to the idea of DIY. For the exhibition at Istituto Svizzero in Milan, Caterina De Nicola developed a large sculptural work—a word made of countless found, already used objects and materials. For example, she sourced a complete bedroom set or letters from an Ernst & Young sign (hello international capitalism!) from a thrift store. ‘Reflux’, I read. The letters, over two metres tall, are partially visible outside, appearing through the glass front of the exhibition space. Reflux: a flowing back, backflow. I google the German meaning of the term and very quickly land on a very unpleasant topic: the reflux of stomach acid into the oesophagus, often caused by foods that are too fatty and too sweet. A disease of our (Western) civilisation in these times of supercapitalism. The eternal recurrence. Reflux also has a concrete meaning in the context

of capitalism as an economic system. Karl Marx describes it as the moment when, in the circulation of money, a purchased good is resold, and the money flows back to its starting point. In this (eternal) cycle of money-commodity-money, money turns from cash into capital. We have arrived at the heart of capitalism.

Caterina De Nicola also reflects on these aspects in terms of music (theory). For example, noise music is for her a mode of resistance (which defies a conventional definition of professionalism and creates spaces that can be experienced individually, especially in a culture that has long been capitalised). And the concept of hauntology, which emerged in music theory around 2006 in recourse to Jacques Derrida, plays an important role in *Reek of past pitfalls*. Referring to Marx’s spectre of communism, Derrida notes that society at the dawn of the 21st century will be haunted by things from the past, citing Marxism as an example that still haunts capitalism. In terms of music, the idea of hauntology (as described by Mark Fisher) refers to a ghostly crackling (often sampled from vinyl records) or other sound elements from the past, which are recontextualised to create a nostalgic yet eerie, undigested sonic atmosphere to accompany an uncertain present. I think Caterina De Nicola does something similar in *Reek of past pitfalls*, a sculpture made of recycled objects, re-contextualised to make a clear statement. She feels, she tells me, a sense of being stuck in this context. A stuckness in the present of a post-postmodernism that holds no euphoric visions of the future for the majority of people. An analysis of the present that is more virulent than ever in 2023—in the throes of war and the wake of the pandemic. And I think that for Caterina De Nicola, this experience is also tied to Zurich, where she currently lives and works. For some years now, we have been experiencing a rapid ‘Googleization’ of the city: the American corporation maintains its largest location outside the USA in Switzerland. Rents are rising to dizzying heights, while spaces for alternative culture are now few and far between. What may mean a promising future for the few poses a dismal outlook for many, with scant possibility of emancipation, exacerbated by anxiety about lack of space for living and thinking. Unleashed supercapitalism, which keeps catching up with us. Reflux. Acid regurgitation. As Bifo writes with an almost prophetic certainty: «The future becomes a threat when the collective imagination becomes incapable of seeing possible alternatives to trends leading to devastation, increased poverty

and violence. This is precisely our current situation, because capitalism has become a system of techno-economic automatism that politics cannot evade». For Caterina De Nicola, this sensation, she tells me, is mixed with feelings of nostalgia and melancholy. A turtle looks down on us from the huge photograph on the side wall in the first exhibition room. *For Reek of past pitfalls*, Caterina De Nicola photographed preserved animals at the Milan Natural History Museum, developing them into a series. She shows us close-ups of the eyes, i.e., the body part that must be artificially recreated in taxidermy. Here, in the eyes, the artist added subtle details from other photographs. In the pupil of this turtle, this somehow prehistoric creature that can live up to 120 years, perhaps something new shimmers after all—something like a future that is still barely discernible.

Gioia Dal Molin, February 2023

Quotes from:

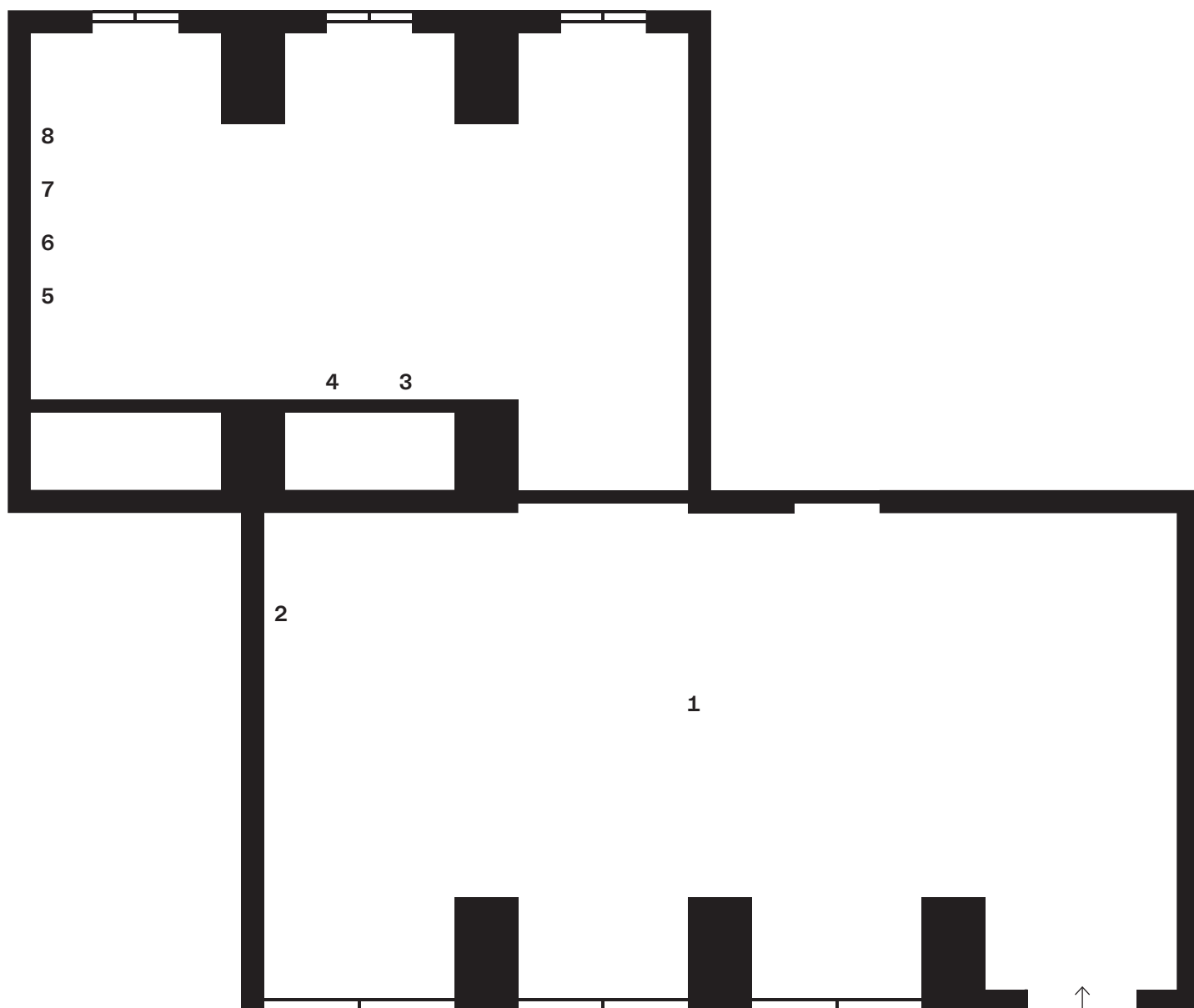
Franco 'Bifo' Berardi, *After the Future*.

Edited by Gary Genosko and Nicholas Thoburn.

Translated by Arianna Bove, Melinda Cooper, Erik Empson, Enrico, Giuseppina Mecchia, and Tiziana Terranova.

Edinburgh: AK Press, 2011, p. 9, 39, 46.

Caterina De Nicola is an artist born in Ortona (Italy) in 1991, currently based in Zurich. She studied at the Academy of Fine Arts of Brera in Milan and at ECAL in Lausanne for the Master's degree. A selection of recent solo exhibitions include: *Infedele* at Baleno International (Rome, 2022), *We Unleash Storms, Yet We Like The Sun* at Last Tango (due show, Zurich, 2022), *Lonely Fans* at Chickentown (Zurich, 2021), *Embarrassed and Conciliatory* at Il Colorificio (Milan, 2019). A selection of her group shows include: *Werkschau 2021* at Museum Haus Konstruktiv for the Werkbeiträge des Kantons Zürich (Zurich, 2021), *Lemania* at Centre d'Art Contemporain (Geneva, 2021), *FUORI!* at the XVII Quadriennale d'arte 2020 (Rome, 2020), *Capriccio 2000* at Fondazione Sandretto Re Rebaudengo (Turin, 2019). She was selected for the Swiss Art Awards in 2022 and took part in several residencies, including: La Becque (La Tour-de-Peilz, 2021), Cripta 747 (Turin, 2020), XXII CSAV (Como, 2016).



1
Caterina De Nicola, *To Become a Butterfly of the Capitalist Extracting Surplus-value*, 2023, variable dimensions, 6 sculptured letters spelling the word REFLUX.

- (R) Iron, leather pillow, polyurethane foam, stabilized dried flowers, branches, florist iron wire.
- (E) Reworked Ernst & Young wooden logo, welded metal, mdf board, paint.
- (F) 50s glass display cabinet, stabilized dried flowers, branches, florist iron wire, epoxy and screws spherical cast, rusty iron tubes, cans.
- (L) Reworked bedroom cabinet and bed.
- (U) Reworked bedroom cabinet and bed.
- (X) Plywood board, pigments, screws, reworked Ernst & Young wooden logo base.

2
Caterina De Nicola, *Reek of Past Pitfalls*, 2023, 295.5 x 394 cm, site-specific photographic print on vinyl.

3
Caterina De Nicola, *Only Cowardice and Exhaustion Prevent Curiosity (macaque)*, 2023, 38 x 47.5 cm (framed), 24.5 x 34.5 cm (unframed), photographic print on cotton paper, frame.

4
Caterina De Nicola, *Of Stark Decay (hare)*, 2023, 38 x 47.5 cm (framed), 24.5 x 34.5 cm (unframed), photographic print on cotton paper, frame.

5
Caterina De Nicola, *Of Going Nowhere (black bullhead)*, 2023, 38 x 47.5 cm (framed), 24.5 x 34.5 cm (unframed), photographic print on cotton paper, frame.

6
Caterina De Nicola, *The Orbit of a Dead Star (goose)*, 2023, 38 x 47.5 cm (framed), 24.5 x 34.5 cm (unframed), photographic print on cotton paper, frame.

7
Caterina De Nicola, *One that Disrupts One's Previously Optimistic Perception (bullfrog)*, 2023, 38 x 47.5 cm (framed), 24.5 x 34.5 cm (unframed), photographic print on cotton paper, frame.

8
Caterina De Nicola, *Of the Future, Who Holds no Interest in Finding a Way Out (macaque)*, 2023, 38 x 47.5 cm (framed), 24.5 x 34.5 cm (unframed), photographic print on cotton paper, frame.