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Art on the threshold. Neapolitan metro stations in an international context

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Abstract

Artistic installations in metro subway stations can influence the daily use of public spaces. They are grafted into places that necessarily require, by those who use them, different ways of attention, between transits and moments of rest. After a brief summary of the main international cases, this essay focuses on the presence of art works in Neapolitan subway stations, dwelling in particular on those cases with a significant integration between art and architecture and where the relationship between the city and its corresponding underground part is highlighted. In the past many works of public art were intended as monuments or as decorations. By contrast, the works taken into consideration here go beyond these definitions, just as their framing in a specific museum dimension is problematic. The art stations in Naples open new questions on public art and can be a starting point for new aesthetic and relational experiences.

Le installazioni artistiche nelle stazioni metropolitane possono influenzare l'uso quotidiano degli spazi pubblici, in quanto si innestano in luoghi che necessariamente richiedono, da parte di chi li frequenta, diverse modalità di attenzione, fra transiti e

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momenti di stasi. Dopo un rapido sguardo ai principali casi in ambito internazionale, il testo si sofferma sulle “Stazioni dell’arte” a Napoli e, in particolare, su una scelta di opere in esse contenute dove è più esplicita l’integrazione con l’architettura e più evidente la relazione fra la città e la sua corrispondente parte ipogea. Se nel passato molte opere d’arte pubblica sono state intese come monumenti o come decorazioni, le opere prese in considerazione vanno al di là di queste definizioni, così come è problematico il loro inquadramento in una specifica dimensione museale. Le stazioni dell’arte a Napoli aprono nuovi interrogativi sull’arte pubblica e possono costituire un punto di partenza per nuove esperienze estetiche e relazionali.

In contemporary urban life and especially in what we can call the actual “town-world”, characterized by a blur between centres and peripheries¹, citizens experience new types of mobility. Mobility is always contingent and that runs parallel to and temporarily intersects with stillness. Recent studies on the topic consider speed and stillness as relational phenomena², and this may lead to a further comprehension of both conditions. This holds in particular for contemporary art reception, as the culture of mobility not only provides a new perspective for sociology and city planning, but also for contemporary art and art reception. Critical and historical studies have appeared on the relation between contemporary art and places of transition, like the subways³. This paper focuses on the localization of artworks in metro lines, and it pays particular attention to the case of the Neapolitan metro stations, constructed in the last two decades, in relationship with the surroundings and with the broader territory.

I will dwell in particular on the site-specific artworks in these stations, in the context of the relationship between contemporary public art and museum policy.

¹ By now the obsolescence of the traditional city-suburb dichotomy is widely recognized. On the present international scene, the phenomenon of the dissolving of the metropolis in a limitless territory has become strikingly evident. Among the various theoretical texts covering this development, see Ascher 1995. See also: Gravagnuolo 2006, p. 17.

² Bissel, Fuller 2011. See in this context an important conference about “Mobility” in Bruxelles (15 and 16 October 2015). The international conference, *Entering the City: Spaces, Transports, Perceptions, and Representations from the 18th Century to the Present* (<<http://micmarc.ulb.ac.be/colloque-micm-arc-15-16-octobre-2015-2/>>, 24.8.2020), is an initiative of the MICM-arc research project based at the Université Libre de Bruxelles. The conference has provided a forum for exploring the ways and means of entry into the urban space and the resulting impressions and representations of that experience, one closely related to the themes of mobility, culture and metropolitan identity at the heart of the MICM-arc research project.

³ See Ström 1986 and Harrison 1981, pp. 2-12, and more recently: Dell’Aira *et al.* 2015. The extant bibliography on the topic is mostly related to specific case studies in USA and in Europe.

1. *Mobility and contemporary art between past and present.*

From the end of nineteenth century, urban infrastructure, both above and below ground, proliferated: from tram rails and street lighting to sewers and pipes, and cables for water, gas and electricity, and, in some big cities, metro lines as well, which were often treated as an architectural task⁴.

Many historical and contemporary metro lines are points of reference, not only for their architectural outlook but also for the artistic interventions planned to cohabit or interact with architecture. Cases in point are the stations for the Stadtbahn in Vienna by Otto Wagner at the end of the Nineteenth century, those by Hector Guimard in Paris around 1900, the metro stations in Moscow dating back to the Stalin era (the so called “Metro-palaces”), and several metro stations built after World War II, such as the Milan metro designed by Franco Albini, Franca Helg and the architect/graphic designer Bob Noorda. Other examples include the projects, developed in the seventies and eighties⁵, for the renovation of the New York and London subways, and the numerous “landmark stations” strictly connected to the history of the cities (Stockholm, Athens, Mexico)⁶ or to the local social transformations (Amsterdam)⁷. Finally, worth mentioning are the architectural interventions by Norman Foster in Bilbao (1990-95) and Eduardo Souto de Moura and Alvaro Siza in Porto (2005), and the North-South metro line in Amsterdam (opened in July 2018), offering fresh examples of the interconnection between architecture and art in metro stations.

As is well known, these historical and relatively recent constructions had not been conceived as simply transit venues. Some of the afore-mentioned stations are great symbols of modernity with highly decorative values⁸, and strongly suggest that public art in metro stations can positively stimulate the viewers. To be sure, it is not always easy to draw a line of distinction between a “decorative” operation and a more “intimate” integration of art and architecture, as the

⁴ Ibelings 2011, p. 39.

⁵ To be sure, a so-called “Station Renaissance” was initiated by railways companies in Europe in 1980s as a response to various challenges of the railway sector, both as a result of technological potential of high-speed trains and as a factor of urban renewal (cf. Kido 2005, p. 4386). This “Renaissance” was developed «to satisfy customer’s expectations with respect to landscape, aesthetics and functional station spaces [...]»; see Cascetta, Carteni 2014, p. 10.

⁶ A chapter in Ström 1986 is devoted to “Les découvertes archéologiques et le metro” (pp. 144-48).

⁷ Ström 1986, pp. 128-131 in particular about the Nieuwmarkt station where the artwork by van Gasteren and Sierhuis was designed in 1975 to evoke the protests by residents against the demolition of homes to make room for subway constructions.

⁸ See the Guimard’s Art Nouveau subway entrances in Paris, defined “Style Metro”, in Ström 1986, p. 31. This artwork has been awarded the honor of being located in the garden of the Museum of Modern Art in New York City.

latter not only depends on a genuine relationship of the art project with the architectural design but also on a precise social and historical context⁹. A number of emblematic cases in some detail are considered above.

Keith Haring's black and white drawings for the subway in New York were realized between 1981 and 1984 on black paper panels and periodically replaced subway advertisements (Fig. 1). They were considered by the artist himself «more a responsibility than a hobby», because «the only way in which art lives is through the experience of the observer. The reality of art begins in the eyes of the beholder and gains power through imagination, invention and confrontation [...] There is something very “real” about the subway system and the people who travel in it», as can be read in a book dedicated to all people who use the New York City subway: «Perhaps there is no other place in the world where people of such difference appearance, background and life-style have intermingled for a common purpose»¹⁰. Thus, even a fortuitous phenomenon, as in Haring's case, can lead to an experience of ethical and aesthetic value¹¹, which, as a matter of fact, invites the traveller to connect the city's surface to its underground, even heading towards the museums in the city.

An interesting example of such an effort are the art and communication projects, recently developed not only in, but 'on' the underground in London. For the connection between metro lines and museums, in the “upper” town (and thus outside the metro stations), for instance, *The Tate Gallery by Tube* designed by David Booth in 1986 is worth being mentioned, designed to promote traveling to the capital's major contemporary art museum¹². It was clearly inspired by the London's Underground Map with the network's lines being squeezed like paint from a tube¹³.

In addition to a plethora of commercial products, souvenirs etc. in constant expansion from the 1970s, sold mostly at the London Transport Museum in Covent Garden (opened in 1980), also a creative approach of the Tube map started to develop. *Art on the Underground* was a new initiative of poster commissioning launched in 1986 by the London Transport's Marketing and Development Direction. By filling up empty advertising space (comparable with the ones chosen by Haring in New York some years earlier) with «vibrant

⁹ About the many meanings of 'integration' of visual art medium and the structural environment, in particular relating to the contribution of art in metro stations, see: Jonker s.d. [1981]. The artworks in the Amsterdam's metro stations started a discussion just about the 'integration philosophy'; see Graaf, Duyn 1981, pp. 18-23.

¹⁰ Haring 1984, unnumbered pages.

¹¹ Several other examples (realized in the 1970s and 1980s) can be mentioned, where artworks in metro stations were not only an operation of (more or less successful) 'lifting', in particular due to the attention of the customer for comfort (physical and psychological) and orientation of the travelers. See Ström 1986 and Welling 1987.

¹² Dobbin 2012, pp. 114 and 120.

¹³ Ivi, p. 101. The diagrammatic map was designed in the 1930s and gained instant success. It was widely adopted by other transport systems in the decades to come.

modern designs, the campaign aimed to improve the Underground environment and enrich passenger journeys, while also acting as a form of corporate art sponsorship»¹⁴. Furthermore, since 2004 the same program (originally known as *Platform for Art*) has commissioned artworks for the cover of new pocket maps: a tiny piece of public art, enabling rapid dissemination throughout the capital. «The inspired commissions (entrusted to well-known contemporary artists like Gary Hume, Liam Gillick, Richard Long and Barbara Kruger) reflect the dichotomous state of the Tube map, as both a design icon and a fully functioning navigational tool»¹⁵. Running parallel to the vibrant artworks commissioned, many contemporary artists have generated their own “Tube-inspired art” reflecting the shared experience of navigating and journeying along London’s Underground lines. In Susan Stockwell’s *Stitched Subway – London* (2007) the artist «using red cotton thread, stitched the distinctive image of London’s Tube map into calligraphy rice paper». And Stephen Walter’s *London Subterranea* (2012) is a «detailed hand-drawn map of what lies beneath the surface of the capital, from secret tunnels and burial sites to disused stations and lost rivers»¹⁶.

A similar project, on a more limited scale, has been developed in 2015, thanks to the twinning between the municipal administration of Rome and of Paris. Six French street artists have been invited to make wall drawings and color actions in the metro station *Spagna* in Rome and even to design a certain amount of metro tickets¹⁷.

Moreover, taking into consideration Barbara Kruger’s verbal slogans located not only in metro stations, like the one in Strasbourg (1994), but also on trams and busses like in Manhattan (1997) or in Siena (2002), one realizes that public art dealing with mobility not only concerns permanent installations in places of transition but also travelling artworks coming in close contact with the passers-by.

Indeed, in Kruger’s case «the allusion is charged to the receiver» with whom the artist, in a certain way, «signs a contract of intelligibility». The true recipient of Kruger’s words recognizes the artist’s work from the routine, commercial advertising: «an effort is required to get up on his toes»¹⁸.

¹⁴ Ivi, p. 120.

¹⁵ Ivi, p. 121.

¹⁶ Ivi, pp. 126 and 128.

¹⁷ The project has been promoted by the association “999Contemporary” in collaboration with ATAC. See <<http://www.arte.rai.it/a-roma-la-street-art-prende-la-metro/>> 30.09.2016. Already from 1996 to 2000 in Rome an initiative was launched involving 70 internationally artists in realizing large- scale mosaic works for the stations of line A and B of the underground. See <<https://luoghidelcontemporaneo.beniculturali.it/arte-metro-roma---linea-a->>, 20.04.2020 and <<https://luoghidelcontemporaneo.beniculturali.it/arte-metro-roma---linea-b->>, 20.04.2020.

¹⁸ Fabbri 2002, pp. 28-29.

2. *The metro station as an “obligatory museum”.*

«In a museum, or art gallery, the visitor is concentrated on looking at art. When travelling, one usually perceives the surroundings differently»¹⁹. Travelers, mobile spectators – and thus not professional critics or precise cultural circuits of people – can catch or appreciate an artwork just moving themselves from one place to another or even in moments of rest.

In several afore-mentioned locations, architecture, decorations and art made up a synthesis with a focus concentrated on the entrances, being thresholds between two different, but strictly related worlds: the upper surface of the town and the underground, the daylight and the dark world of the subsoil, with all its possible symbolic implications. Two worlds connected to one another²⁰, but also somehow in “competition”, if one takes into account the architectural structures of both as the typologies of semi-public places, such as walking and shopping areas, restorations, advertisements, and even art galleries and museums.

Beyond the merely architectural aspect of the problem, a topic of reflection still to be developed is the role of the artistic intervention in the places of transit in reference to clearly museological implications²¹, in particular where an explicit exchange between surface city and underground city is aimed at, as in the case of subway stations with strong architectural and artistic connotations.

Metro stations like those in Brussels, Moscow or Stockholm have been defined as a “permanent art gallery” (which, by the way, in the case of Brussels was lacking in the “upper” town)²². And some stations have been recognized as “landmark stations”, due to the presence of significant artworks, while the Louvre station in Paris has been defined as the “anti-chambre” of the museum²³.

In a similar vein, the new metro line in Naples has been explicitly conceived as an “obligatory museum”²⁴, characterized by plural dimensions: a clearly planned visual continuity from entrance to platform in most stations, the choice of transit and the possibility of rest²⁵ – looking at the art works in the dislocated venues at different levels – and, last but not least, the presence of installed artworks in the metro stations by artists whose works are also kept in local collections of contemporary art (Museo MADRE and Capodimonte).

¹⁹ Welling 1987, p. 23.

²⁰ For this aspect, in architectural terms, see Grimaldi 2015, p. 200.

²¹ See Guccione 2006.

²² Ström 1986, pp. 108-109.

²³ Ivi, p. 16 and p. 140.

²⁴ Bonito Oliva 2006, pp. 20-21.

²⁵ A true “obligatory museum” is formed – following Bonito Oliva – by the two dimensions of transit and rest: «In transit the viewer consumes what is fleeting, the time required to get from one point of the path to another. In rest or lingering he develops the aesthetic pleasure of an encounter with art, and with a surprise for the gaze» (Bonito Oliva 2006, p. 21).

The artistic interventions in the Neapolitan metro stations has been coordinated through direct assignment by Achille Bonito Oliva, artistic consultant for the Metro Company, who – active in this role from the mid-1990s²⁶ – has selected the artists and their works as far as possible «linguistically compatible in order to create a kind of connective tissue between three-dimensional architecture and work [...]»²⁷; artists who «come from different capitals/cities in the world, but also from different style schools: from the transavantgarde to “arte povera”, from pop art to minimal art, to conceptual art, and so on»²⁸ recognizable in site-specific paintings, sculptures, mosaics, ceramics, photographs and installations²⁹.

In these choices Achille Bonito Oliva linked the art of the 1960s and 1970s with that of the 1980s and 1990s, and meanwhile he guaranteed a strong conjunction of the city with Italian and international art³⁰. At the beginning of the new millennium, Bonito Oliva was going to reconstruct the history to which most of the chosen artists belonged in a wide-ranging historiographic synthesis³¹; contemporarily this juncture was seen as a «lasting peace between art povera and transavantgarde and between their respective theorists»³². A “peace” catalysed, in the meanders of the museum of the Neapolitan subsoil, by the personality of Alessandro Mendini, considered co-director of the metropolitan project and strategy³³.

The underground spaces of the Naples metro thus offered Bonito Oliva the ideal meeting place between different trends in international art, just as they had become the “theatre” of two creativities: of art and criticism³⁴. The latter embodied what the critic himself called, at the heyday of the Transavantgarde, the “moment of tolerance”: that which «arises from the awareness of those

²⁶ Bonito Oliva was charged directly by the metro company due to his reputation in art criticism at an international level. For a summary view of the Metro Art Napoli - Le Stazioni dell'arte, see: <<https://luoghidelcontemporaneo.beniculturali.it/metro-art---le-stazioni-dell-arte---linea-1>>, 20.04.2020

²⁷ Bonito Oliva 2011, p. 27 (my translation). The relationship with the architect Alessandro Mendini (designer of the Salvator Rosa and Materdei stations in 2001 and 2003) was important in this respect.

²⁸ *Ibidem* (translation by the author).

²⁹ Corbi 2016, p. 90.

³⁰ The figure of Lucio Amelio, gallery owner, collector and promoter of international initiatives between the 1970s and the early 1990s, had strongly contributed to this conjunction. See Bonito Oliva, Cicelyn 2004 e Viliani 2015.

³¹ This completes the historical manual by Argan published in 1970. Cf. Argan, Bonito Oliva 2002.

³² Cf. Trimarco 2012, p. 155, with reference to the exhibition curated by Ida Giannelli on the transavantgarde in Milan in 2002.

³³ Trimarco 2012, p. 236. Although in the distinct sectors of ‘Art’ and ‘Architecture and Design’, the young art critic and the architect had collaborated already in 1973, on the occasion of the exhibition *Contemporanea*: another hypogean space of the parking lot in Villa Borghese in Rome. Cf. *Contemporanea* 1973.

³⁴ Trimarco 2012, p. 122.

who have abandoned the tower [...]» and have planted «their own observatory at foot level»³⁵. A new awareness that would allow him, subsequently, to see «a soft and not geometric thread» between arte povera and transavantgarde art³⁶. In this sense, the metro stations in Naples could be viewed as «rooms of an ideal museum»³⁷ as well as «positive signs of public art»³⁸.

The choices of the permanent works and installations of the Neapolitan metro line taken here under scrutiny are specifically inspired by this joint consideration, focusing on the relationship between the above and below of the ‘porous’, ancient and stratified city of Naples³⁹ and thus paying attention to the thresholds, the junctions and the transition between the city and the subsoil from a point of artistic view. A path between art and architecture that is rather an «intertwining» between them «for the central role of institutional clients, of the public and, together, for the strong drive to regenerate the urban fabric»⁴⁰.

3. *The Neapolitan “Stazioni dell’Arte”.*

In the period immediately following upon the 1994 transport plan for the city of Naples, a process of close collaboration started between the City Council and the MN company⁴¹ which eventually lead to the RMS (Regional Metro System)⁴². This project started in 2000 and was an ambitious example of rail-based transport policy: it included new aesthetically high-quality terminals and transit venues⁴³, aiming at the integration of architectural and artistic design of the stations⁴⁴. For the design and the realization of the individual stations, Bonito Oliva, the afore-mentioned art director, collaborated with architects of international fame and involved artists for site-specific artworks. This large-scale project is now for the most part implemented, the last stations being under

³⁵ Bonito Oliva 1983, p. 10

³⁶ Bonito Oliva 1985, p. 16.

³⁷ Motisi, Tchou 2006, p. 90. Hence, «The interior of the station [Quattro Giornate] is practically a museum dedicated to the celebration of the Four Days of Naples» (p. 92).

³⁸ Trimarco 2002, p. 165 arguing about Bonito Oliva 2000, pp. 50-51, who writes about the artworks in the Neapolitan metro station, both as «open air museums» and as examples of public art. Furthermore, the Neapolitan subway, as a result of a synergic dialogue between architects and artists, engineers and committee, has been labelled as “Underground museum” in Brenici 2019, p. 12.

³⁹ Naples as a “porous city” (definition dating back to W. Benjamin) has prompted socio-cultural, philosophical, artistic and architectural reflections, as in: Cacciari *et al.* 1992.

⁴⁰ Trimarco 2012, p. 236.

⁴¹ Since 2000, MN Metropolitana S.p.A. See Silva 2000, p. 165.

⁴² Integrated into a so-called ‘mixed’ company with a public golden share (Comune di Napoli, Ferrovie dello Stato, Azienda Napoletana Mobilità - ANM). Cf. Cascetta 2014, p. 20.

⁴³ *Ibidem.*

⁴⁴ Corbi 2016, p. 90.

construction. At the beginning of the second decade of the new millennium, the program involves about 200 works of art, placed inside and outside the stations, by 100 protagonists of contemporary art that pushed the responsible art director to classify the concrete installation of a sizeable group of works both as “obligatory museum” and as born «under the positive sign of *public art*»⁴⁵.

The result has been labelled as *Stazioni dell’Arte*, “The Art Stations”, , being a part of the “transport challenge” on rails. They have been appreciated by the international press as some of the most impressive railway stations in Europe⁴⁶, as site-specific artworks «introduce subway riders to forms of art that are often accessible only to more limited cultural circuits and are part of an attempt to eliminate the psychological barrier represented by the museum or gallery itself. The project aims at a double break with tradition: the art works come out of their usual framework and the stations acquire and nourish a new identity in the city»⁴⁷. Indeed, «the Art Stations originated from a project formulated by the city government with a view to making the urban area’s public transport centres more attractive and giving everyone a chance to get an up-close look at prime examples of contemporary art»⁴⁸.

In the Neapolitan subway permanent installations of contemporary art have a special role, strongly integrated with architecture: the Art Stations often bridge the distance between two worlds, the upper town and the deeper space of the underground in close relationship with the citizens daily life. This relationship is highlighted where art works have been explicitly conceived as “mediators” between transit and rest, nomadism and contemplation⁴⁹, as in the few following cases taken into account.

The first stations of the Linea 1 date back to the early 2000s. *Vanvitelli*, opened in 1993 and restyled between 2004 and 2005: the station’s large interior was renovated in order to house works by eight masters of modern art. Other two stations, *Museo* and *Salvator Rosa*, opened in 2001 and were designed by Gae Aulenti and Alessandro Mendini, respectively. These stations reveal a new approach to the design of rail facilities, skilfully combining art and architecture. «The innovative quality has also had its effects outside, in the squares and urban settings redesigned in relation to the new facilities»⁵⁰. Other stations followed, designed by other well-known architects, including Karim Rashid for *Università* (2011), Oscar Tusquets Blanca for *Toledo* (2012), and

⁴⁵ Bonito Oliva 2006, p. 21.

⁴⁶ For the reaction of the press, both national and international (generalist and specialized) to the “Stazioni dell’arte” following the inauguration in 2005 and the most recent stations, see, inter alia: Erbani 2005; Ferlenga, Gravagnuolo 2005; *The most impressive underground* 2012.

⁴⁷ Motisi, Tchou 2006, p. 90.

⁴⁸ ANM Website Metro Art / Le Stazioni dell’arte <http://www.anm.it/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=687&Itemid=295>, 25.11.2018.

⁴⁹ Motisi, Tchou 2006, p. 90.

⁵⁰ Gravagnuolo 2006, p. 17 See also: Benci 2019, p. 13.

Dominique Perrault for *Garibaldi* (2013). “Stations of contemporary art” that indeed provide «erratic itineraries»⁵¹ between space and time.

The design and construction of these stations did not consist in a simple operation of “lifting” or restyling of existing areas, but aimed at implementing the formula of an intimate integration between architecture and public art. For both the architects and the artists – as stated by Mendini, who first suggested to integrate the new Neapolitan stations internally and externally with works of contemporary art – the overall direction called «for a range of different languages, colours and ideologies, corresponding to all the major theories and paths of research now present on the international scene [...] the design philosophy behind [aiming] at creating an entire, vast patchwork of images», in conclusion «a system of space that are museums of contemporary architecture, but also an urban exhibition of artworks scattered throughout public space»⁵².

Let us now take a closer look at some of those «erratic itineraries», examining specific “gates” to the underground through the filter of art installations.

At the stations *Vanvitelli* and *Dante*, neon lines define the space and the separation between darkness and light. At *Toledo*, natural and artificial light intersect. And at *Università* the station displays a special colour and light experience, between the square which bears witness of «the humanistic culture» and the underground which «underlines the digital age»⁵³.

In the *Vanvitelli* Station, the huge blue neon spiral installed in the vault by Mario Merz enters into a dialogue with two large steel stars by Gilberto Zorio, that are attached to the side walls. Together they fill the station’s space with an interplay of fullness and emptiness. Then, the “mouths of light” of Gregorio Botta, located at the intersection between two directions, are an invitation to slow down and have a look inside the eight cylinders⁵⁴.

At *Dante* – designed by Gae Aulenti and inaugurated in 2002 – the entrances to the station are conceived in clear crystal and steel, leaving intact the 18th century surroundings. The interior of the station contains the works of some influential figures of international contemporary art, among which one by Joseph Kosuth. Like a real descend into the ground, his neon light installation invites travellers to rest for a while and read a short quotation from Dante’s text *Convivio*. This conceptual artwork, titled *These Visible Things*, is placed above the stairs which lead down to the lower level (Fig. 2). The passage from Dante’s work actually regards the medieval view on visual perception, but is “written” with white neon tubes, linking history and technology.

⁵¹ Bonito Oliva referred explicitly to a philosophical concept of Martin Heidegger developed in *Holzwege*: «Sculpture is the materialisation of places which, fostering and conserving a community, gather round themselves a freedom which grants a dwelling to all things, and to men an existence in the midst of things»: quoted by A. Bonito Oliva, 2000, p. 169.

⁵² Mendini 2006, p. 19.

⁵³ Zunino, Orlandi 2006, p. 32.

⁵⁴ ANM Website Metro Art / Le Stazioni dell’arte, cit.

At the same station, Jannis Kounellis, a founding figure of Arte Povera, has connected the surface city with the underground, blending daily life with heavy signals of modernity. He has attached a series of iron beams resembling pieces of track to a strip of sheet metal with toy trains and numerous pairs of worn-out shoes on top of it: all referring to use, movement and travel⁵⁵. Passengers happen upon this installation going deeper into the ground, along the way to the platforms, as a midway stage between two parallel and interconnected worlds.

A more “embracing” experience welcomes the traveller at the “gate” of *Toledo* station which penetrates the underground realm through several levels, connecting street life with the spectacular lobby which is located 40 meters underneath. In this station the collaboration between the Spanish architect Oscar Tousquez Blanca and the American artist Robert Wilson generated special plays of light. The architect and the artist «have exploited the depths in which the subway is located to recreate the experience of entering the marine world, where it dominates the silence and away from the sunlight that filters through the urban potholes»⁵⁶. Through the 50-metre descent into the bowels of the station, where dark becomes light, the earth morphs into the sea and, at the bottom, the *Olas* (waves in the form of Wilson’s light-panel installation) carry passengers to the below-sea-level platform. The “thresholds” of the station is there a large cone, *Crater de luz* and *Relative light* is the title of the artistic intervention by Robert Wilson inside of it: 144 LED lights “full colors” programmed on the colour palette of blue create suggestive luminous and variable harmonies. The descent is emphasized by the spectacular mosaics worked out in a colour blue that is becoming more intense as one goes deeper, until arriving at a monumental “underground” hall⁵⁷ (Fig. 3).

The Anglo-Egyptian architect Karim Rashid designed the “gate” at the *Università* station «with university students and all metro users in mind», thus «envisioned spaces that embody the knowledge and language of the new digital age, that transmit the ideas of simultaneous communication, innovation and mobility»⁵⁸. As in a *Gesamtkunstwerk*, dominated by design, the visitor, when descending to the subway platforms via escalator, experiences a transition from the busy piazza to a more intimate, focused environment where various artworks and other graphic art serve as a focal point⁵⁹. The accent colours, lime and pink, indicates the direction and guide visitors through the descent to the final destination⁶⁰.

Also in the Garibaldi Station (designed by architect Perrault) the interior design perfectly intermingles with art installations: «the mechanized descent

⁵⁵ Brenci 2019, p. 16.

⁵⁶ Ivi, p. 13.

⁵⁷ ANM Website Metro Art / Le Stazioni dell’arte, cit.

⁵⁸ Brenci 2019, p. 14.

⁵⁹ Described in detail in Brenci 2019, p. 14.

⁶⁰ <<https://www.e-architect.co.uk/italy/napoli-metro-station>>, 30.4.2018.

systems place themselves in the space like large sculptures animated by the mirroring surfaces of the coverings with [...] the reflected image of the user who becomes a participant in the changing identity of the place»⁶¹ and lead to the underground area where another great protagonist of Arte Povera, Michelangelo Pistoletto has carried out colourful representations in which the protagonists are the passers-by⁶² (Fig. 4). Here, two long mirrors represent silhouettes of people in transit or just resting during their travel: photographed human figures who can be easily confused with the real passengers; «in this case the traveller enters the work and the latter takes on its value with interaction with the audience»⁶³.

This is a “door”, or a “gate”⁶⁴ connecting art and life, which establish a «relationship between two opposite worlds: the city’s surface, the everyday reality and the underground, semi-unknown and unusual space for the life of the contemporary individual»⁶⁵.

An «obligatory museum» is such only when it directs the gaze to look at something valuable, even though in an indifferent way, improving knowledge and progressive affection⁶⁶, just like «positive signs of public art» can do, indeed.

Now, as to the “philosophy” of public art, the significance of artworks in spaces of transit is not limited to the analytical aspects of the different cases, or to a classification of what can be recognized as an underground museum, gallery, Kunsthalle or artwalk. Indeed, matters of definition and labelling have a relatively limited value for the issue under scrutiny. Rather, one should aim at an analysis of the modalities of communication of the artworks, in and outside their venues. Also from this point of view, Neapolitan “art stations” had interesting, stimulating effects, triggering participation by the public, involving citizens and schools, in a systematic way, not in the planning phase, but with the organization of visits to the stations guided by art historians, with the publication of free bilingual booklets, with the agreement with the Academy of Fine Arts for a program of conservation and restoration of the works and, even with a training program aimed at “front line” operators (station agents). «For art to be public», as has been argued in this regard, «it is not enough that it is physically present in a public place, it must become a shared experience of a community»⁶⁷.

⁶¹ Grimaldi 2015, p. 203 (translation by the author).

⁶² Brenci 2019, p. 13.

⁶³ *Ibidem*.

⁶⁴ It is a theme to which Pistoletto has always inclined. In 1968, his poetics was significantly defined by Argan as «poetics of the threshold»; cf. Argan 1990, p. 40.

⁶⁵ Brenci 2019, p. 13.

⁶⁶ Bonito Oliva 2011, p. 28.

⁶⁷ Corbi 2011, p. 63. The ANM Company has implemented «actions aiming at the communications and teaching of art. Schools and associations operating in the city participate in those projects and in free guided tours for citizens and tourists». See the ANM website with

Concluding remark

Walking up and down, forwards and backwards through these stations leads one to looking at art in many different ways, resting or passing by, searching for new experiences or knowledge, or just pleased by nice, bright colours or involving lights. Both possibilities are allowed in public art venues, as the Neapolitan metro stations are inspiring public «artwalks» (as defined by Mendini), rather than an «obligatory museum» (as defined by Bonito Oliva)⁶⁸.

When the project will be completed, part of a “systemic” and not “baricentric” concept of transport⁶⁹, the “Gates of the City” (the Port, the National Railways, the Airport) will be connected by “art-gates” of aesthetic value to the ancient and the modern town, and its surroundings, in the spirit of the afore-mentioned “town-world”. They are and will be “thresholds” able to link the history buried in the ground with the everyday life running on the surface through streets and squares.

The pursuit of aesthetic seduction has been the distinctive characteristic of all the subway stations built in Naples at the start of the new century, together with the appreciation of both modern and ancient art, because of the ongoing dialogue between existing architectural, monumental space and new constructions⁷⁰. The construction of the metropolitan rail system has become «a work in which archeology and contemporary culture find a common denominator in the logic of wide-ranging urban intervention»⁷¹.

Subway, Underground, Gallery are indeed terms that, “conjugated” with the word Art, evoke Metro Stations with a special character: gates, doors, thresholds, descensions, interfaces, passages from internal spaces to external ones, from “places” to supposed «non-places»⁷². The same terms (Subway, Underground, Gallery), when related to the artistic realm, refer also to the kind of art that can be labelled as public art, which «by definition [is] not just decoration or commentary on the architecture context. Indeed, it is a structure that interacts with existing architecture space, a fertile stopping point for the gaze of the social body that crosses the spaces, attentively or distractedly»⁷³.

updating about the tours by “Team Metro Art” and, in particular: Corbi 2016, p. 95.

⁶⁸ This definition has been taken again from Trimarco 2002, pp. 167-173.

⁶⁹ A concept of transport that aims to connect all the city districts, from any point to another in the city. See Marone 2000, p. 166.

⁷⁰ Bonito Oliva 2006, p. 21.

⁷¹ Silva 2006, p. 4. For the so-called “catacombs of beauty” as a definition of some Neapolitan stations, see Brenci 2019, p. 13. Formidable archeological excavations and relative problems have been faced, in particular in the Municipio station by the Portuguese architects Alvaro Siza and Eduardo Souto de Moura and in the Salvator Rosa station by Mendini. See: Brenci 2019, pp. 14-15 and p. 18. The relation with the historical stratification of the town and especially with the archeological heritage cannot be analyzed here.

⁷² Referring to the notion of ‘non-place’ as theorized by Marc Augè. See Augè 1995.

⁷³ Bonito Oliva 2006, p. 21.

If this integration of art, architecture and archeology in the design of metro stations is a realistic scenario, then one probably should start to trust more in the potentialities of the viewer/traveller/passers-by in relation with artworks in places of transition or even on mobile supports. Indeed, an effort is needed similar to the one required for large-format exhibitions where the hardest of all tasks «is getting the ambulatory viewer to look at stationary objects without speeding by them»⁷⁴.

A potentiality of “private discovery” should exist in any exhibition format and setting, even designed for the milling masses: to offer the viewer the freedom, even in an “obligatory museum”, to look up and down, from above and below, for a fleeting moment or for a while, walking or resting, from inside or outside (the exhibition venue) to artworks that can stimulate their imagination and enrich multisensorial experience and knowledge.

Thus, “non-places” could transform themselves in anthropological places, where citizens could take care of their own daily scenarios⁷⁵ and would realize how much even a metro ticket may suggest a sense of freedom, like James Clifford wrote: the «subway pass gave him the freedom of the city. He could get on and ride [...] Three basic routes: one of exploration, one of everyday anxiety, one forbidden». Only from this very moment, according to a story told in the first person, Clifford concludes: «I started to break my lifelong habit of looking down at my feet as I walked along the street. There was always so much to see, and so many interesting and open faces to read, that I practiced holding my head up as I walked»⁷⁶.

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⁷⁴ Storr 2007, unnumbered pages.

⁷⁵ Trimarco 2002, pp. 165-167, qualifies metro art stations not as museums but as artwalks, public art works that are the result of a long period project: a project of a «very peculiar journey in friendship between art and architecture» along citywalks underground and on surface: a «scenario, in the buried space as much as in the surface, that needs still more care than ever» (translation by the author).

⁷⁶ Clifford 1997, pp. 96-97.

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Appendice

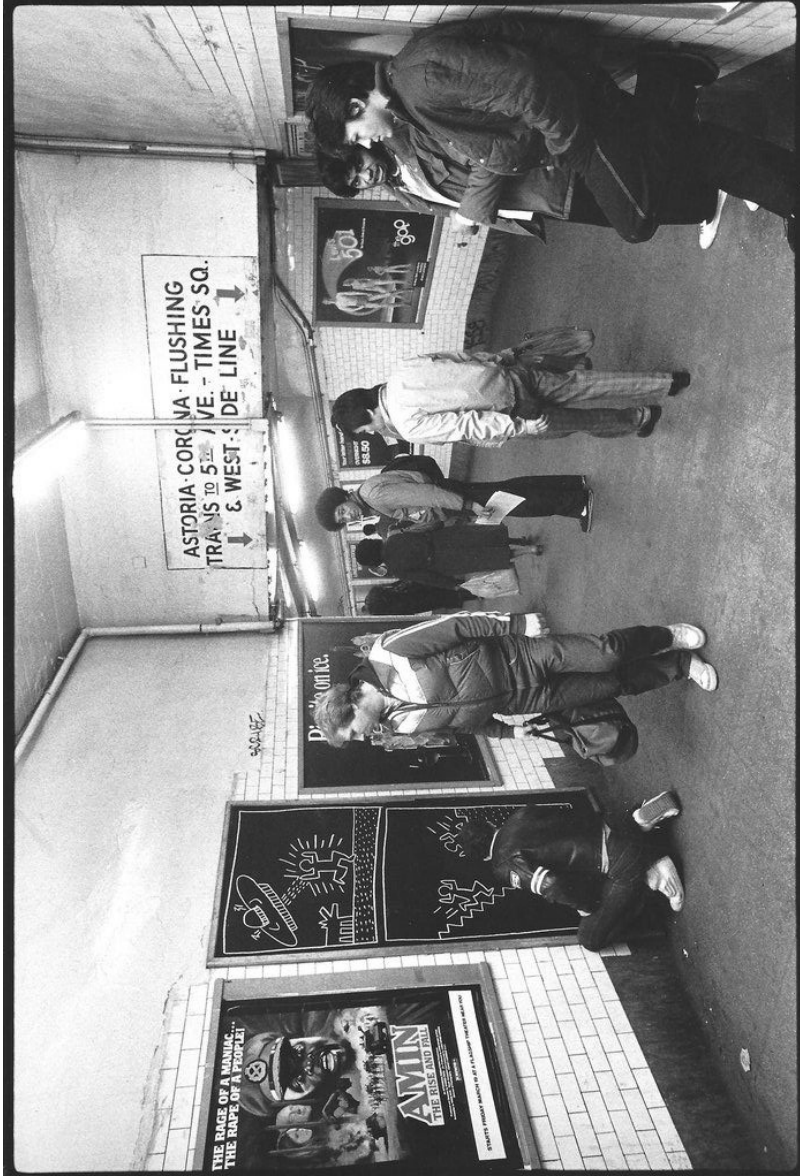


Fig. 1. Keith Haring, Subway Drawing, 1982 (from: The Downtown Decade NYC 1975-1985), photo: The New York Times

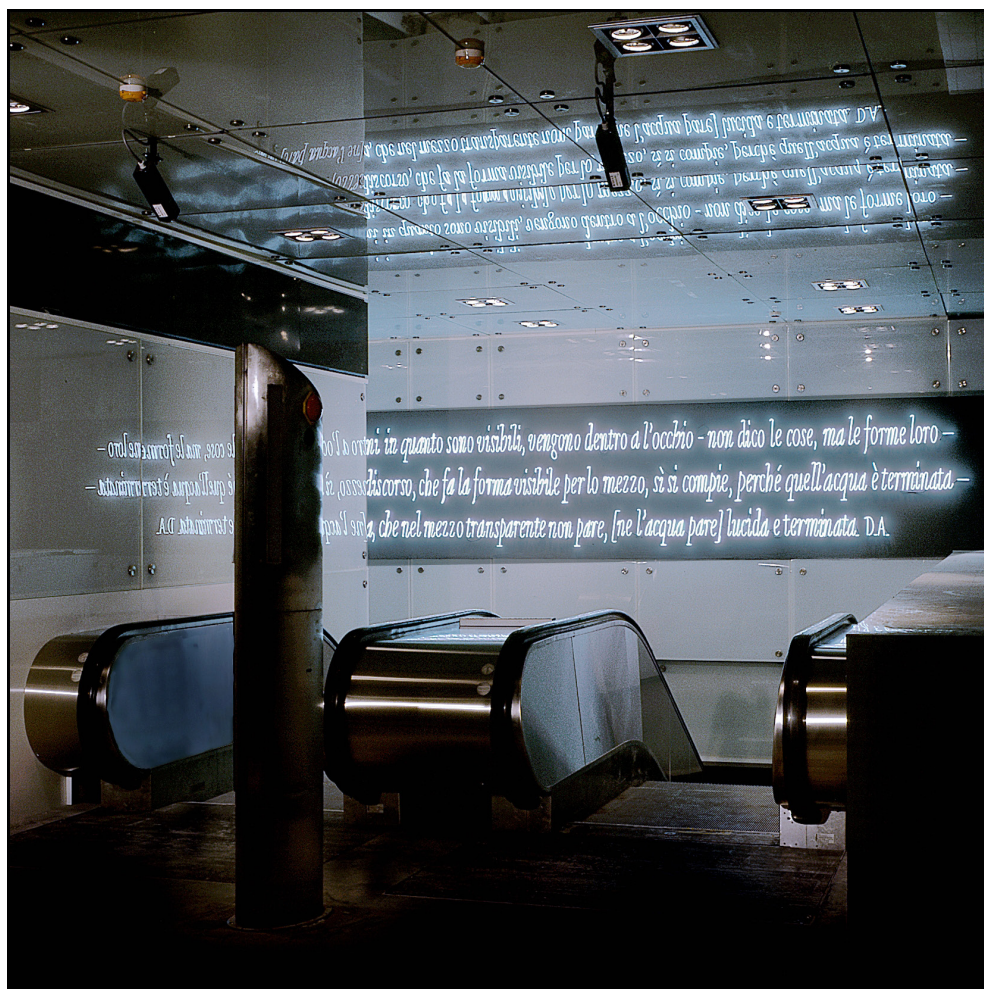


Fig. 2. Joseph Kosuth, *Queste cose visibili* (a Ferruccio Incutti), 2001, Napoli Metropolitana Linea 1, Stazione Dante, photo: Peppe Avallone

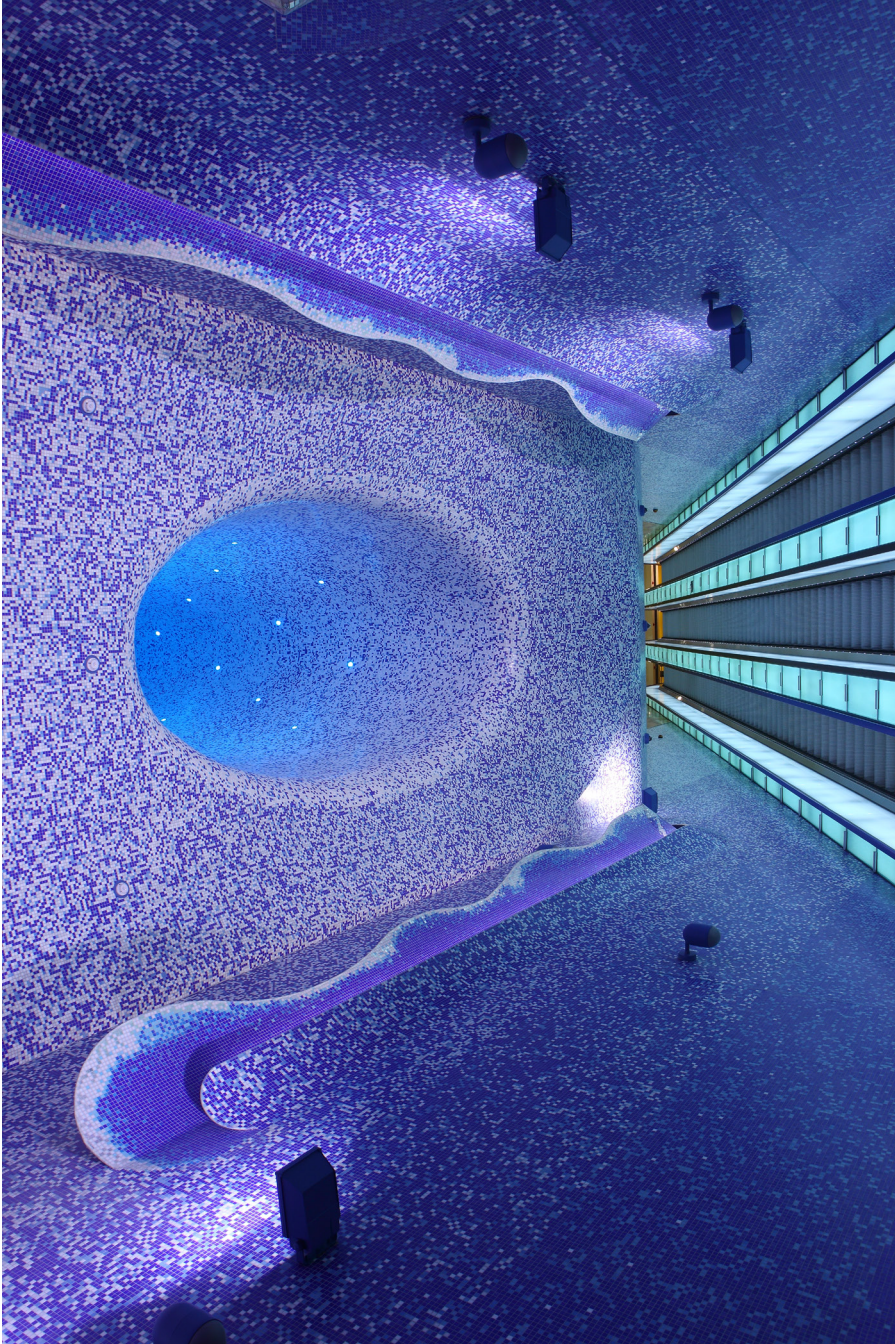


Fig. 3. Robert Wilson and Oscar Tusquets Blanca, Relative light e Crater de luz, 2012, Napoli Metropolitana Linea 1, Stazione Toledo, photo: ANM Stazioni dell'arte



Fig. 4. Michelangelo Pistoletto, Stazione 1, Napoli Metropolitana Linea 1, 2013, Stazione Garibaldi, photo: ANIM Stazioni dell'arte

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