Recording 49. Dominik Stroban

Lina: we send you a draft of this book Dominik, so you get a sense of where we are heading. Are you still working on sculptures?

Dominik: yes, it is interesting to see.

Lina: you too moved to Pietrasanta?

Dominik: Yes.

Lina: so we arrived at the end of the White Carrara.

Akos: We will look up for you on Internet. Dominikstroban.com

Lina: what is happening to Carrara Dominik?

Dominik: It is a general Italian demography. My sister who is now dead was a doctor in sociology and particularly in demography. She studied the French speaking part of Belgium and studied the demographic decrease. Somebody like that should do the same for Italy. She had a team working with her; they did fantastic discoveries; for example, they mapped child mortality in Europe before Pasteur, and they discovered a very strange map. It was high in the catholic regions, and lower in Jewish and Protestant communities. For being Jewish and Protestant, you needed to know how to read and write, while the Catholics memorized everything. And, it was a study funded by a Catholic private institution, it is very funny.

Akos: Demography has to do with today’s Italy, yes?

Dominik: That is definitely part of the problem. Italy needs a study in demography like that. Carrara’s problem begun in the 1970s. Today, I hope the new mayor will change things for good, but already in 1973 you had more raw blocks of marble sent away, than those worked on the spots. Nobody took care of that. Now, the pieces that are not worked here are more. The production of raw block has increased in the quarries, with enormous industrialization that substitutes workers. The “lingotto” market (raw piece of white marble) has been blocked, lot of companies closed. In the 1970s, Carrara and Italy in general, were still at the top of marble technology. Now you can find it everywhere. You can find the white marble only here, in Carrara, but you sell it and work it outside. So much is lost. Now only few people ask a work to be done in Carrara. The quarry Alfion was very popular in ancient times too. Laucoonte was made with marble from that quarry. The story of Ulysses too. In the blocks they reconstructed the story, and they worked this marble in Turkey, in Greece. Some years ago, they were analyzing the marble of these sculptures, and they found out that Plinius the Old described the same pieces and the marble came from Alfion. It is an enormous discovery, finding out that this material, this marble, identifies works that have such a long history. Carrara and Italy in general nowadays have numerous competitors on the market.

Akos: What do you think of the disappearance of the schools? The schools where to learn how to carve the marble.

Dominik: You still have the scuola del marmo incorporated in the academy. You learn fundamentals of trigonometry and so on. One of the good teachers left last year. It was a very important school and there were also many shops selling marble pieces. It is a demography related problem. There was an old building that was very big, after Via Santamaria, and they decided to rent it, but the price was very high. The tax office decides the price for the rent of the commercial building (fondo commerciale). The rent was so high that at the time and since the last ten years so many businesses inside this big building closed. They could not afford the rent. The only shop who survives are those who own the place and do not have rent to pay. Also you know, the small entrepreneurs do not exist anymore because either you are part of a big corporation or you cannot survive. When I moved to Carrara in the 1970s, I was a small entrepreneur, I registered at the Chamber of Commerce. The tax system was a paradise, it was very helpful, if you created a job back then you had detractions and you could be an artisan and provide job for others in your laboratory. It was affordable. Now it is very different. At a certain moment the tax system in Italy has changed and I was paying taxes of all sorts. I discovered that there were two categories that could be either freelance or artisans; and they are very different one from the other. They were the dentists and the sculpture. I decided to become a freelance, I went back to the Chamber of Commerce and registered as freelance, not anymore as a artist. And then everything started to become more complicated. A big part of. Italian economy rests on small businesses and artisans, and this current tax system is impossible for them to afford.

Akos: We remember hundreds of shops here in Carrara, they took apprentices.

Dominik: I also took apprentices, yes, young people with a regular contract that could learn a job. But now it is a nightmare, you cannot do that anymore. Now I am 75 years old, back then I was younger. And I have a pension now. There was a time that I paid so many taxes that I used my retirement money, the minimal.

Akos: at one time all the shops making sculptures also got impacted by economy and politics?

Dominik: Yes, and the families of workers at the quarries. The people who own quarries in Italy, they own quarries and workshops, but not in Carrara! Serpentino d’Italia for example, a kind of marble, was all stolen by the machines and now in Italy we do not sell blocks anymore. If I want it, I must buy precut stones, pieces. But it is not fresh, it must be freshly cut, like vegetables and cheese. But here it is a problem. After the war in 1945, many people started to go back to the quarries and work the marble, and since then there has been no preservation really, just consumption. The problem of rent of commercial industrial places is crucial to this topic.

Lina: But it is better to rent than stay closed, no?

Dominik: But it is too high to pay.

Lina: Does the Comune supervise it?

Dominik: No, the Agenzia delle entrate. It is the state, the government. I could go to the mayor and say to him “you are killing my city.” But it is the state, actually. And saying the same thing to the state would be starting a war with the state. Mobsters do it, they open conflicts with the state. It would be a conflict with the state, not with the town. It could be possible, but it is a question of politics. But then what about other cities with the same problems? It could be revolutionary. It is stupid to say like Salvini that all people need to pay less taxes, you really need to see the big picture. It is not all people, small businesses for example struggle with paying taxes, they are too high for them. I have hope in the new mayor; I voted in the latest elections.

Lina: there is hope for the new mayor.

Dominik: Yes. People are hopeful. See what happened in Verona, it turned left (to the left parties). Many cities are turning left.

Akos: People also say that the mayor cannot really do much.

Dominik: It is true and not true at a time. Of course, for major changes in the laws you must ask permissions to the government. But there are associations like the industrialists in Carrara who have a lot of power, they are privileged. I published a book about marble quarries and the marble trade.

Lina: how is Cesare?

Dominik: Still alive, all is well with him. You know I want to say something about the problem of the robots. There are robots that now work the marble. When you specialize in working the marble, there are different skills to develop, like the modellatore, the finitore. And the robot does what they do. A robot it is also a big investment. But with people you create knowledge.

Lina: what are the main challenges beside rent …

Dominik: Rent prices are an injustice. When you are an artist, and you have a business that creates job for others, and you must sacrifice everything for rent. It is a big injustice. There is a moment when you realize that you must quit because of the high rent price.

Lina: And beside rent, thinking of sculptures, what people seem to know about Carrara they say it is the marble that is pivotal here…

Dominik: There is a big problem of identity. You have sculptures all over the world. When I think of a friend who is passed, he was from Burgenland, he started to create the first international sculptures because he joined east and west European styles, it was 1958. He was interviewed for a film for the Biennale of Venice. His last project was recuperating the stone waste of the Third Reich. To change it and modify it, so you do not walk on it anymore. All kind of recycling. Like in the Gothic period they recuperated Roman stones from Roman buildings to make churches. When you speak about his work, and him, you speak about a European identity. Carrara needs to acknowledge a mixed identity, they need to believe in what they are, or in what they are not.

Lina: the identity of the city has to change, you are right. Sarzana e Pietrasanta also are case studies.

Dominik: Pietrasanta is doing well. Better than Carrara. The rent, however, is still a central issue for small businesses. Too much has been lost in small and big businesses. I have seen big businesses collapsing. And then there is also another thing; of course, in the 1970s there was a kind of technology in Carrara that was unique. It was for industries and for small businesses. I remember the first time I came here, and I was walking nearby Lorano and there was an enormous chimney. The owner was telling me that it was new, just made. The dispersion of technology is a problem. Sometimes when you analyze technology you need to think back of its history. What was making in the 13th century the economy going? Tuscany and Flanders were the banks of Europe, the origin of capitalism and they based their money on… the economy was based on wool. Washing and weaving the wool were skills that the British di not have. All the money were there. One of the most famous portraits at the National Gallery in London, Arnolfini from Lucca. Lucca was the most important part. In Western Europe for making silk. They brought the cocoon. For centuries silk went from China…

Lina: And India.

Dominik: From China mostly, it was for rich people. Silk came from China along the Silk Road, for thousands of years. In the fourth century under Giustiniano, some Monophysite monks travelled to China. There they stole the cocoons and run back to the West. One of the most fantastic stories of stealing and industrial skill. They brought it back to Byzantium. Arnolfini shows that it was not enough to have the silk, but for the “arazzi” they needed to blend wool and silk.