

30TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE MAFIA MASSACRES OF PALERMO 1992-2022
SPAZI CAPACI + COMUNITÀ CAPACI
A contemporary art project for social empowerment

Curated by Alessandro de Lisi

SALVIFIC IRRUPTIONS

Il Branco by Velasco Vitali in St Dominic's Church in Palermo
fr. Sergio Catalano OP



1992 - 2022 / LA MEMORIA DI TUTTI
L'ITALIA, PALERMO TRENT'ANNI DOPO.



Velasco Vitali, 2022



ST DOMINIC'S CHURCH
PANTHEON OF ILLUSTRIOUS PEOPLE OF SICILY

Palermo - May 23rd 2022

“ At the foot of Saint Dominic there is a dog that symbolises his mission. The fold of the Church, at certain times, needs shepherd dogs. In these hours, the Lord has always raised them up.

”

Madeleine Delbrêl

SALVIFIC IRRUPTIONS

Il Branco by Velasco Vitali in St Dominic's Church in Palermo

Salvific irruptions is the specific form that the installation *Il Branco* by Velasco Vitali assumes when entering St Dominic's Church in Palermo on the occasion of the *Day of Remembrance* on May 23rd 2022, the thirtieth anniversary of the mafia massacres in Capaci and via D'Amelio.

Precisely one year ago, *Il Branco* appeared for the first time in Palermo in the bunker room of the Ucciardone prison: 53 life-size dogs, just as 53 were Giovanni Falcone's years when he passed away; sculptures in iron, sheet metal and concrete, placed behind bars in order to symbolise the hunger of criminal organisations and the abuse of society by the mafia. At the same time, they were placed on the benches of judges or lawyers deputed to guarantee the law. Together with them, but on the sidelines, a golden dog watched in the *vault* where the investigation of the first historic *maxi-trial* against *Cosa Nostra* is kept.

I physically met *Il Branco* in the monumental courtyard of the Faculty of Law in Palermo, where many young people study and mature the ways of justice. The work of art had already been installed at the command of the Police Headquarters - the point from which all the investigations to dismantle organised crime began - and at the *Palazzo dei Normanni*, the seat of civil and institutional power. All of these are urban passages of a travelling exhibition in symbolic places of our society. A long paradigmatic journey.

Looking more closely at this work of art, I was struck by the artistic strength of the sculptural group as a whole and in relation to the space where it was placed, and by the plastic eloquence of each dog in the variety and differentiation of the materials of which they were made.

The dogs were, in fact, built and modelled with the scraps of unauthorised buildings; a linguistic choice, according to the anti-academic artist Velasco Vitali, embraced as an added value.

D'emblée I felt immersed in the history of my last twenty years. The work had pulled me into my hagiographic and iconographic world: the *Ordo praedicatorum*. I began to read the installation in the light of a new perspective. From there came the intuition: what if *Il Branco* broke into San Domenico, temporarily giving new light to the church, to the community of friars and to the world of the faithful and tourists who frequent it? After all, from an iconographic point of view, wasn't Saint Dominic depicted from the beginning as a dog running for the salvation of the world?

Domini-canēs. The mission of the Order of Preachers in the Church and in the world

"Before his mother Jane had conceived him, it appeared to her in a vision that she was carrying a little dog in her womb holding a burning torch in its mouth, which, once released from her womb, seemed to set the whole world on fire".

This is what blessed Jordan of Saxony, first successor and biographer of St. Dominic, reported in his *Libellus*.

"In the vision of the dog, the birth of an eminent preacher was prefigured, one who would carry the torch of an ardent speech, by which charity, now cooled in many hearts, might be inflamed with force, and with the barks of assiduous preaching he would have chased the wolves from the flock and prompted to the vigilance of the virtues the souls who slept in sins", as explained Blessed Humbert of Romans. Hence the "logo" of the *Ordo praedicatorum*.

From that moment on, the image of the faithful dog will embody the figure of Saint Dominic of Guzmán. Over time, the image will be strengthened by the play on words in Latin of the name that the friars following his steps, the Dominicans, will assume: *Domini canēs*, the dogs of the Lord.

In the history of the Order, among the many readings of the symbol, especially significant is the one by Madeleine Delbr el. In one of her letters to the Dominican friar Jacques Loew, the French mystic wrote:

When a flock is small and the sheep are docile, and there are few or no wolves at all, the shepherd can do without the dog. When the flock is large and the sheep are wandering, not just alone but in packs, and the wolves are numerous, the shepherd must have a dog and maybe more than one. Dogs always look like wolves, and often the best shepherd dogs are wolf dogs. It is what they have kept of the wolf that allows them to do for the shepherd what he himself would not do. But it is what the shepherd has communicated to them about himself that makes them shepherd dogs. It is by sharing the shepherd's life a little that the dog remains a dog and does not become a wolf. At the foot of Saint Dominic there is a dog that symbolises his mission. The fold of the Church, at certain times, needs shepherd dogs. In these hours, the Lord has always raised them up.

Reading these notes, in my view, enriched the opportunity to have Velasco Vitali's work in St Dominic's with a new light. *Il Branco* took on a new signification. In a way that is connatural to it, the installation

revealed the manifold meaning proper to each work of art. Isn't this also the task of art, especially when it enters churches: to bring to memory, through evocative images, the strength of *the salvific content*, keeping consciences awake and freeing them from the risk of amnesia? Does not perhaps *Il Branco* by Velasco Vitali collaborate in re-presenting the charisma of St. Dominic and his friars in a contemporary way and at the same time providentially disturbing the constituted quiet of the space by snatching firstly the friar and the faithful, then the tourist, from the danger of habit and of the *already seen or already known*?

Isn't this the mission of the Order in the Church and in the world: to announce the resurrection where death seems to be the only master?

Art in churches

To deal with a work of art in a monumental church space - such as St Dominic's in Palermo - in memory of such a significant event celebrated during the *Day of legality* is certainly an exciting undertaking.

Art, in order to communicate messages, must continually refer to the symbolic universe of human beings and their contemporary forms of expression. As Pope Francis reminds us: "We must not be afraid of finding and using new symbols, new forms of art, new languages, even those that seem uninteresting to evangelisers or curators, but which are actually important for people, because they know how to speak to them". This is an invitation to the Church to allow and facilitate dialogue between contemporary forms of expression, intended as places where the Christian message can come to life and be incarnated.

One of the interesting aspects of *Il Branco* installation is the spirit with which the artist materially conceived the work. The reuse and waste material chosen by Velasco Vitali - and of which the sculptures

are made - is thought of as an added value. In 2015, even Pope Francis affirmed this in the interview published in *My idea of art*. On that occasion, several times, the Pope repeated that "the creativity of which we are capable does not discard anything, it considers everything, in particular the poor raw material, often set aside and thrown away".

For the Pope - especially when art enters the church or deals with Christian themes - poor or recycled materials tell the world that "while waiting for the coming of the Son of Man, nothing is lost, nothing is discarded, everything has a meaning within the magnificent work of God. God's mercy, in fact, does not reject anything; the signs that he performs towards poor, excluded and suffering people are marked by mercy". The Pope concludes: "If God does not discard his children, not even an inspired art is called not to discard anything".

Art can thus shift the point of view and open a new, deeper vision. It can cause an overturning or conversion of the common perception of things, and transform a place by expanding its boundaries and multiplying its meanings - especially when it comes to a temporary work.

In the installation *Il Branco* in St Dominic's, the dog can be perceived as a trusted friend, or as a mongrel from which it is better to stay away. It can take on a positive meaning of strength or embody fear. Its precariousness puts the observer back in his precarious condition.

Il Branco by Velasco Vitali in St Dominic's

, thus, has the taste of a rediscovered community. The signification of the work in this space has brought out its Christic meaning, a sort of *semantic conversion*.

Conclusion. In the history of humanity

Initiatives such as welcoming *Il Branco* to St Dominic's are not meant to distract with artistic gimmicks or to hide the truth but to raise questions and challenge the demands of the Gospel and the world in contemporary ways.

Il Branco comes to the church not to exalt the power of death but to highlight the power of life through the continuous activation of memory and the power of conversions. Is this not perhaps the object of the mystery of faith?

Giovanni Falcone's body has been resting in St Dominic's in Palermo, Pantheon of the illustrious of Sicily, since 2015. He is with us as an illustrious man *in memory of all* the illustrious people engaged in the service of the community in the fight against the mafia. He is a symbol of the possibility of good and justice.

The *Day of legality* commemorates this by relaunching over time - now for thirty years - the strength of its memory. My work as a friar preacher with *Il Branco* by Velasco Vitali in St Dominic's Church is part of this story of responsibility, thanks to art. A work where *the triumphs of death* are turned upside down thanks to *salvific irruptions* that announce, in their own way, the human and social resurrection.

fr. Sergio Catalano OP
Palermo, May 23rd 2022

Thirtieth anniversary of the Capaci massacre

