

What was it that struck me when I read the paper based on the volume dedicated to the exhibition “Virus Group. Napoli New York Corviale”, from which came the need and, I’d say, the desire which pushed the two authors to write it; two superintendents, one who has accomplished her multifaceted cultural mission, while the other continues her journey?

Two worlds in one, because, with their national and international experience in coordinating various institutions with initiatives and interventions aimed at protecting and enhancing artifacts of historical, artistic, archaeological, archival and book interest, both decided to focus their attention and discussion on this particular exhibition housed in the Drugstore Museum in Rome.

I believe it is a special exhibition, which is why it attracted my interest, because it is the first in a cycle of exhibitions designed not only to enhance the heritage in the lesser known urban suburbs of Rome but also to further promote the city’s range of cultural activities, enriching them over time with conferences, guided tours, film conferences, events and so on. A practical incentive to meet the cultural needs of citizens and users in general.

In short, I consider what has been described, to be an effective and emblematic example of interpreting cultural reality by making it available to all, in an open and decidedly attractive and suggestive framework.

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VIRUS GROUP. NAPOLI NEW YORK CORVIALE

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1. Introduzione

The exhibition “Virus Group. Napoli New York Corviale”, held in the Drugstore Museum, in Rome from 14th October to 27th November 2022 [1], is the first in a cycle of exhibitions designed to promote, in all its variety and complexity, the knowledge, protection and enhancement of the cultural heritage in the territory that extends to include the historic suburbs in the west quadrant of the city of Rome.

However, to better understand the meaning of the exhibition project and its implementation in this particular context, a brief overview of the Museum is required, as it is a mix of archaeology and contemporaneity, which is manifested in a model of public and participative management.

The Drugstore Museum, with the Necropoli Portuense, is an exhibition in two parts, a territorial section and a cultural one, a place where the ancient and the modern are brought together. Through the applied arts, design, industrial productions of the twentieth century and demo-ethno-anthropological heritage, it has the potential to enhance contemporary tangible and intangible culture. It is located in the commercial area of the building in number 317 of the Via Portuense, a nine-storey-high residential complex, as mentioned earlier, in the north-west suburbs of the capital, known as *Il Serpentone* (literally, large serpent), due to its length of one kilometre (Figure 1).

When the structure was built in 1967, some imperial tombs were found in the necropolis on the Via Portuense, which were kept and incorporated into the basement of the building. Later, in the eighties, they tried to showcase the monuments by integrating them into what was the first Drugstore Museum in Italy.

But in the nineties, it failed, and the necropolis became inaccessible until 2005, when an agreement was made with the Archaeological Superintendence of Rome to transform the area into a state-owned museum.

Thus, during the period from 2006-2015, some restoration work and modifications were carried out to make the structure more efficient, and lastly, in 2019 some emergency work restored its full functionality.

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Figure 1. Rome, Il Serpentone, 1967.

Having recovered from the decline, Corviale and its Museum have been included in a redevelopment project which aims to give them a new lease of life, and in general terms, to recover and consequently enhance the lesser-known heritage of the city's urban and cultural suburbs, thus fulfilling its role as a neighborhood museum for the education and cultural needs of its citizens.

And it is above all contemporary art that has been called to play this role, due to its ability to explore and interpret reality, to include and strengthen identity, to rehabilitate places and people, and to help develop the territory.

The project – which provides for a wide cultural offer, in addition to exhibitions, conferences, courses, guided tours, film conferences, events and concerts – includes the Virus Group exhibition hosted in the Drugstore Museum, and is curated by Daniela Porro, Alessio De Cristofaro, Jonathan Giustini; it is dedicated to a historical group of artists who for many years have animated the cultural life of Corviale and the 11th municipal district of Rome.

The local authorities, alongside the Special Superintendence for the Archaeology, Fine Arts and Landscape of Rome, also participated in the setting up, preparation and promotion of the initiative, thus sharing in the administrative activity, worthwhile from various points of view, but above all they were able to create a network of institutional synergies, so that the best kind of public service was provided.

2. Virus Group

The Virus Group, born in Naples in the mid-eighties represents one of the most lucid and visionary experiences of applied art currently on display: painting, engraving, sculpture, ceramics, installations, performance, visual poetry.

From the beginning its main characteristic has been that the artists enable the visual and multimedia arts to interact with each other, in their desire to free contemporary art from what the group sees as being the market's lifeless network, in the name of a new visibility and a more active confrontation that goes beyond the different personalities it is composed of and the changes they have encountered along the way.

Its story starts in Naples, travels through Cuba and New York; it then disperses and separates, but without ever ceasing to create, even if only in an individual form; finally, it lands on the outskirts of Corviale after various adventures, where, in the 2000s it starts up again as a spontaneous and self-proclaimed collective, resumes its life and work, and produces by redeveloping places, compacting new experiences and pushing for a change in relationships.

Three of the four founders – Giancarlo Savino, Giulio Ceraldi, Consuelo Chierici – re-established the group with the sculptor Stefano De Santis, setting up an open studio, which is at the same time private, participatory and social. It is part of a heritage community where time is renewed by involving stratigraphies of stories where the focal point is the people, visitors, artists, operators, technicians, thinkers, authors, associations, whoever is part of a process of cultural growth and knows how to network and weave together creativity and projects.

The Drugstore Museum is the fulcrum of this path, solidly rooted in Rome's 11th municipality, from where it looks out onto the world. And it is to celebrate the re-opening of the local museum to the public of the Necropoli Portuense, that the exhibition "Virus group. Napoli New York Corviale" has been organized at the museum site in the historic suburb. A place in which you can experience art forms that are created only when life has met with its burden of pain, precariousness, discouragement, and sometimes violence, to then give back the most important parts.

2.1. *The poetics of the Virus Group*

The members of the group are Giancarlo Savino, Giulio Ceraldi, Consuelo Chierici, Stefano De Santis, three men and one woman, four artists always on the go; Stefano spent several years in Cuba; Consuelo moved between Torre del Greco and New York to study, at times going off to Senegal; Giancarlo lived for a long time in Denmark, while Giulio was always travelling to and from the beaches of Pozzovecchio, Procida and the world.

With this colourful, crazy exhibition, a quasi-modern catacomb, immersed in the ancient commercial centre that has been transformed into a modern museum, the four artists tell us something about their souls and their art, re-ordering their memory, tidying up the messy materials that contaminate and always become viruses. It is material they have decided, in part, to sort out and exhibit in a great representation of artistic life, of work that speaks of the man who realizes it, of how he feels about existing, thinking, at that precise moment.

You need to get closer to get to know these artists, their work, their thoughts. Imagine them as a river flowing downstream in a valley with such force, it bursts its banks and dam, letting themselves course along, carrying in the flow of their memory, in the current of life – viewed in a perspective of their very own – the life that is in their works, that tell of how and what they are made. They are shy, but they can scream at the top of their voices, they are able to inhabit abandoned places, like Corviale, clean them up and make them fit to inhabit again, they fight against the local underworld that wants to blackmail them and now no longer stands in front of their studio. Today it welcomes

other kinds of people: young boys and girls, art experts, gallery owners, budding artists and neighborhood friends, all those who want to know them better will always find in their immense studio, open to the wind and street noise, a good Neapolitan coffee, a piece of apple pie, or a dish they have prepared.

An open studio, it has been said, so it is a place you can actively visit, offering those who wish it, direct knowledge of the artists' work. It is, therefore, a centre for research and artistic culture, and thus claims the centrality of the figure of the artist, considered in the reality of interwoven contradictions and conflicts, as well as in the tensions of a clear critical conscience.

That is why their pieces are fragments, suggestions of memories that have returned, open studies, workshop products, stages in a journey of seeking of which they almost do not speak or, if they do, they do it indirectly, naturally.

Art that contaminates, but also abandons and takes pleasure in itself, art in which fear, envy, anger is never perceived, what is felt is only the contentment of doing it and of leaving a mark. What shines through in what they do is joy, irony, emotion and it is true for all these artists: extremely evident and almost poignant in Giulio Ceraldi; disguised in Consuelo Chierici; overlapping and layered in Giancarlo Savino; screaming, almost like incandescent lava in Stefano De Santis.

Viral events, as they have always called them, for which no cure or remedy exists because they are simply exchanges in experiences meant to salvage a moment of confrontation in the central point of the artist's work. Open studies, not to counteract the work of art galleries, but to foster a wider aggregation around the motives for modern art. And so, they have 'infected' men and women with an incurable virus.

Giancarlo Savino is the first to arrive in 2008, at Corviale, and to occupy a space, the same space in which the Virus Group has its headquarters and galleries today. A place that has a number of different entrances, snatched from the street, in the degradation and abandonment where he gradually brings together friends and artists from Corviale, he develops the idea for an urban museum in Rome, by creating art works to put into the urban fabric itself, a project for permanent public visual education.

Over the years, many artists arrive, and at a certain point are joined, first by Consuelo Chierici, Giulio Ceraldi and then, Stefano De Santis.

This is how the Virus Group came into being. It continues to adhere to the founding themes and the initial spirit of the chosen path, it carries out activities around Corviale, it spreads its own way of feeling, seeing, speaking, participating in everyday life, without, however, searching for a trend, but starting from a state of mind, an existential condition that unites its components.

The one idea they all share from the very beginning which has led them to seeking a relationship, not mediated by any role and, to invoke the primacy of the artist and his relationship with time, is that of restlessness, similar to a viral state when the body is affected by a virus and your senses are on the alert and your attention is at the maximum level: a circumstance in which normal conditions cease and a meeting point is determined.

One of their exemplary statements says that "*Many artists no longer work at their own rhythm, at being creative individuals, but anxiously follow the demands of the market. Their work is, consequently, similar to that of a salaried person and their creativity is subservient to the ever-changing trends of fashion and style and, in the end, are more or less prefabricated. Where the speed of communication does not equal the speed of goods, relations have slowed down. And it is for this reason that we claim the centrality of the artist as a person who lives in a continuous state of sickness, a person who produces tension and is conscious of the critical role they have*".

2.2. The artists and their work

Giulio Ceraldi

Giulio Ceraldi is an artist with a free spirit, who often cites whatever his thread of memories puts before him, like the sea on the edge of a current.

One of his large installations is included in the exhibition. A composite work, consisting of several sections, that the artist prefers to consider a multi-dimensional sculpture: its title "*Golfo mistico*" (Figure 2).



Figura 2. Giulio Ceraldi, *Il golfo mistico*, 1999 (wood, acrylic, aluminium, nails).

The work indicates a path: that of a child who sees the Gulf of Pozzuoli for the first time, and we feel his thought, emotion, physicality, grotesqueness, the life that flows along, the weeping and the pain, as well as the obscene part of existence.

You enter through a large door, beyond which we see the observer, and then finish up in front of the throne, the last shore, whose undertow is felt, the small fish that lightly jump, and finally the symbols of the great silence appear, of the infinite, where things are no longer explainable, where man is mute, after landing on the throne from who knows where, and whose power is contained within his thoughts.

He was once an important painter but is not keen on talking about that part of his life in Naples and does not even own a painting from that era. They were all sold and are now part of important collections; what remains are just a few blurred black and white photos left over from an exhibition in Naples from the early seventies. They tell the story of the transformation of the I and the journey of perdition and purification from something which, through his paintings, he has had to repudiate and overcome, to feel free.

Now he makes icons, and seems to speak using a hammer and nails, banging on wood, on thin sheets of aluminium, on which his word has become sound. And in the icons he produces today, photographic fragments sometimes appear of his old paintings, on which he works using new paints, graphite, glued colored papers, as if to want to establish a new relationship with his past as an artist. Thus, a new setting is created for the icon, on which the last thing to be added is the metal, an almost acute awareness of himself, of the inexorable questioning about the meaning of life and death. There is spirituality in these art works, but not peace. The icon represents the sacred moment of the work. The icon itself is sacred. His work, "*Le vie del sacro*" (Figure 3), narrate this very story, in which we ask ourselves about what values we can refer to today.

In 1986, Giulio Ceraldi meets Giancarlo Savino and Consuelo Chierici. It is in fact a re-union, since the group, during their many years of being apart, has continued to exist silently, even though each has had their own stormy experiences: different lives but always keeping contact, randomly separated from destiny, but always close.

At this point, Ceraldi's interest moves to the theatre, so he invents sculptures, scenery, props and costumes and works with Mario Martone, Claudio Collovà and Vincenzo Consolo.

It is through the theatre that he produces his first large metal icon, both a symbol and a decisive turning point in his new existence as an artist.

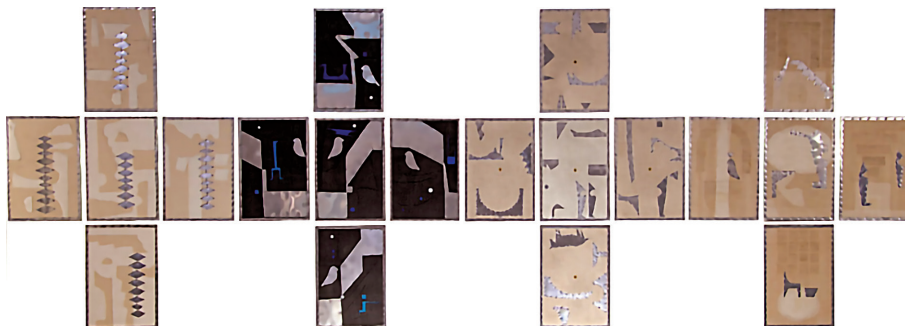


Figure 3. Giulio Ceraldi, *Le vie del sacro*, 2020 (wood, paper, acrylic, nails).

Stefano De Santis

Stefano De Santis, in contrast, is the artist who, before giving life to his works, tests the texture, softness or hardness of the clay of which they are made to understand what their state of conservation will be with the passage of time, not knowing whether the artifacts born from his hands are going to be gigantic or tiny.



Figure 4. Stefano De Santis, *Popolo in cammino # 1*, 2020 (polished terracotta, wax).

Cuba and Corviale are the places which represent the decisive phases of his life as an artist, always looking for suggestions, paths to clarify. A nomadic artist, looking for traces of the ancient, in the wake of legends he crosses territories that are vestiges of passages, meetings, stratifications of cultures. He's an archaeologist-sculptor who takes notes silently, writing them in his studio in Corviale, and working the clay quickly to avoid the material becoming too fragile.

He is almost a prisoner of his own creations, reliving through sculpture the events experienced in past times and being able, nevertheless, to absorb, interpret, share the spirit and research of the group of Corviale, humbly doing his daily work.

"*Il popolo in cammino*" is his latest cycle of big sculptures: a people that dares, that goes beyond nature, and abandons themselves to life (Figures 4-5).

Consuelo Chierici

In 1981 Consuelo Chierici, Milanese by birth and educated in Naples, collaborates with Giancarlo Savino on the urban painting project in Naples for the steps of St. Francis, entitled “*La caduta del re*”, which is also received as a critical response to the management of culture in Naples at that time. She participates in numerous multimedia events, working with different artists and founds the Cultural Association, “*Materiali in disordine*”. The event, however, is opposed by private galleries which, considering the initiative as interference in the city’s business and management of cultural information, take action to discredit it, but instead has the opposite effect and only arouses the great curiosity of the public.

Other initiatives followed until 1986, when she founded the Virus Group with Giancarlo Savino, Giulio Ceraldi and other artists in Naples, participating with them in the project “*Studi aperti*” to give an ethical and organizational response to the lack of visibility and to place their studio at the center of making art, without filters and mediation between the artists and the public. In 1987 she moves to New York where she stays for twenty years studying, carrying out various activities in the artistic sector, promoting cultural events, participating in numerous group exhibitions in galleries and putting on a personal exhibition at the Knitting Factory with a series of works in zinc plates and netting, chromed iron and lights, dedicated to the theme of the maze (Figure 6).

In New York, with the group “*Eutopia*”, she then reposes the same ideas as the Virus Group and a series of events in traveling spaces, helping to redefine the way art is exhibited, even in the Big Apple, where artists represent themselves, open their studios to the public, conceive the exhibition area as a welcoming place, but one closed to the market and its methods.

In the early 2000s she participates in several exhibitions in Italy and with other artists in Rome, and founds the associa-



Figure 5. Stefano De Santis, *Popolo in cammino* # 3, 2019 (polished terracotta, wax).



Figure 6. Consuelo Chierici, *La danza del labirinto*, 1994 (zinc plate, wire mesh, led lighting, series of 6).

tion “Comunità X-Artisti di Corviale” to produce works to be placed in the urban fabric. Finally, Comunità X’s new exhibition space is inaugurated with a presentation of the born-again Virus Group.

Giancarlo Savino

Giancarlo Savino was born in Naples, where he finishes his high school studies as a mechanical-technical designer. His passion, however, is art, which he begins to learn in the studio of the sculptor, Gabriele Zambardino. He then moves toward experimental theatre and goes through different experiences until his first collective in 1968, in the *spelunca* (cavern), a space belonging to Zambardino. In the same period, he plays as a drummer and percussionist in a number of evenings of free jazz and musical experimentation. Later, in Milan, he meets Dino Buzzati, and from this friendship springs his first solo exhibition, held at the Galleria Cortina (Milan).

In the following years, still in Milan, he is engaged in politics and culture, meeting artists and intellectuals, who have a significant role in his professional training. He returns to Naples in 1980 where, with Consuelo Chierici, he executes Naples’s first urban painting entitled “*La caduta del Re*”. Many other experiences follow until, in 1986, the Virus Group is formed with Ceraldi, Chierici and other artists. The group then launches the project “Studi aperti”.

Their work continues with various exhibitions until the end of 1991, when the Virus Group breaks up. In 1992, Savino takes up his work in Copenhagen again and is involved in different kinds of theatrical and pictorial events; in 1997 he moves to Rome. He participates in exhibitions and festivals and in 2008 with Chierici and other artists he founds the association “Comunità X” in Corviale.

Many other experiences follow which consolidate the importance of his art and, in 2019, when he meets up again with Ceraldi and Chierici, together with De Santis, they decide to once more found the Virus Group (Figure 7). Much of their art can be found in private collections, museums and trusts.



Figure 7. Giancarlo Savino, *Untitled*, 2020 (oil on canvas).

3. Public art

To better contextualize the exhibition in the Drugstore Museum at Corviale requires some brief considerations on the theme of public art [2-4].

What has been discussed above is presented, in fact, as a further opportunity for reflection on the mutual influence of the many experiences of public art and on the increasing role of institutions in the current situation. Increasing interest is being given to public art by different sectors that often intersect each other, thus generating new ways of interpreting and, sometimes, offering surprising indications.

At this point, it seems useful to dwell on some ethical and legal issues.

Public art is generally considered to refer to those artistic experiences that take place in spaces that are not usually reserved for the execution and preservation of artwork, its priorities being the dimension of space and open communication. In relation to this definition, issues to be addressed concern commissioning and protection, all areas in which the positions of the institutions are interconnected with multiple legal references and constraints, political and politico-cultural considerations, analysis of the historical-monumental context, evaluation of the urban environment, landscape, sustainability, and knowledge of the social situation in which one intends to take action.

Different elements that require the situation to be tackled from different angles, something that is often very difficult to achieve, but is the only one that can allow for a real dialogue with the space, the public, the community, the artist and their work.

As regards public procurement, it therefore seems necessary to review the whole process in light of actual interaction between the different actors moving within the public scenario, setting aside the idea of a design which, since it does not take into account the context and consequent insertion of a work in a public space that appears to have been “lowered from above”, is neither accepted nor welcomed by the community.

Indeed, only a process of preventive mediation can produce a project in which the planning is shared, and can consequently lead to acceptance and cultural growth, and finally to careful provision for the future maintenance and conservation of the art works.

Alongside this kind of vision, however, others are being added, centered on a context of shared experiences that start from society’s willingness to make forms of participatory democracy effective. And it is from these very needs that a set of regulations for the shared administration of common goods was devised. They represent the normative expression of a new cultural policy of collaboration between institutions and citizens to equally share the management of artefacts destined for collective use, today and in the future, aware they are jointly responsible for their well-being [5].

Relations between the administration and citizens is regulated by collaboration agreements. The latter presuppose mutual trust and common objectives, maximum transparency and a sense of responsibility, inclusiveness and combating all forms of discrimination, as well as overcoming the concept of ownership in favor of that of belonging, identity and proximity. The idea of proximity recognizes local communities as being the most suitable to take charge, together with local and decentralized administrations on the territory, of ‘commons’ (cultural and natural resources accessible to all members of a society), because they are the bearers of history and stratified memories, even when they have very different characteristics.

And it is in this wider context that artistic initiatives, that are not specifically public commissions, arise “from the bottom”, not in a preordained way, but as the result of the artist’s creativity; they are a strongly symbolic expression of the re-appropriation of abandoned and deeply devastated spaces that have often been taken away from criminal organizations and are now socially reclaimed spaces that have been returned to the community.

4. Final considerations on archaeology and contemporary art

In conclusion, it is worth pointing out certain aspects regarding archaeology and contemporary art which are ever more frequently found accompanying each other in the panorama of present-day cultural production.

For some years now, there have been many initiatives in which artists, contents and messages of contemporary art, combine with monuments, archaeological sites and antiquities museums, because of analogies between thought, archaeological method, art and the contemporary artist, as well as between archaeologists and artists in their way of investigating reality through material culture: both, in fact, dig through layers, observe and interpret objects, and tell stories by reshaping the individual and collective memory [6-9].

And it is due to this aptitude that exhibitions and performances by contemporary artists in archaeological sites and museums are becoming increasingly more frequent. The charm of the old combines with visual stories that have a strong aesthetic and media impact, even though the respective languages and messages may not always be understood by visitors. It is, therefore, the duty of both the archaeologist and the artist to interpret the ancient, tell its story, share it with everyone and, in doing so, bring harmony to the two different worldviews, while respecting both.

In the specific case of the exhibition of the Virus Group artists at the Drugstore Museum, the question immediately came up about whether or not an archaeological museum, which has very particular features and characteristics, was actually compatible with the work of a small group of artists who were little known to the public, but firmly inserted in the panorama of Italian contemporary art, territorially well-established in Corviale and in continuous dialogue with the resident community, who are directly involved in the creative act. The artists' way of making art and their creations, thus enter the life of the neighborhood, reviving the places and its people.

The Virus Group's art is for everyone – it is comprehensible, it communicates, it conveys messages, emotions, turmoil; it is art that is an experience and a learning tool for everyone; it is the result of craftsmanship, itself a language without words; it is art, as in all postmodern art, in which there is no didactic tale, there is no moral or edification, only images in which the past consists of the present, appearing so close to us in time, they seem everlastingly relevant.

Overall, the Drugstore Museum is a postmodern space that combines the ancient with the contemporary, a space in which the museum and the artists that make up the Virus Group are well-matched. The exhibited pieces seem to have the same structure as the museum, creating a picture of the past that blends perfectly with the present, one which brings memories to life through images, symbols and concepts.

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Biographical notes

Daniela Porro, is the Superintendent for Archaeology, Fine Arts, Landscape of Rome. She has held various managerial positions dealing with the protection of artistic-historical and ethnoanthropological heritage for the network of museums in Rome; her experience and professional work over the years has also involved numerous museums with initiatives articulated throughout Italy and the overseeing of many artists' exhibitions as well as the coordination of ministerial and cultural institutions, universities and local bodies.

Her scientific activity and cultural programmes in national contexts, and internationally in the USA, China, Russia and Brazil, have also addressed the valorization of heritage through exhibitions, educational initiatives, study and communication meetings, symposia and conferences.

Franca De Leo, formerly Superintendent for Artistic and Historical Heritage for the provinces of Modena and Reggio Emilia and Director of the Galleria Estense in Modena, was involved in collecting; she subsequently worked in the Directorate-General for book and cultural institutes in Rome, in the organization and installation, both in Italy and abroad, of a series of exhibitions dedicated to the most representative authors of Italian literature, such as D'annunzio, Pascoli, Ungaretti, Manzoni, Verga, Svevo, Longanesi, Brancati and Bassani, curating their respective catalogues.

She is currently part of the editorial staff of the historical-technical Journal "Conservation Science in Cultural Heritage".

Summary

Through a study of the catalogue that accompanied the exhibition "VIRUS GROUP, Naples, New York Corviale", the paper aims to raise awareness and foster appreciation for the ancient and contemporary heritage in all its variety and complexity, located in a particular area in the city of Rome, Corviale: heritage that is housed in the Drugstore Museum and represents a mix between archaeology and contemporaneity – an example of a public and participatory management model designed to train and provide for the cultural needs of its citizens.

This task is fulfilled mainly through the medium of contemporary art, due to its ability to interpret the reality of inclusion and to strengthen the idea of identity, to rehabilitate places and people, and to help the territory to grow. In this case, contemporary art is represented by a group of artists, the Virus Group, which established itself in Corviale after a series of varied experiences in Italy and abroad. Today, it is one of the most incisive and relevant voices in the field of applied arts.