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WHAT WILL IT HAPPEN TO
EARTH IF SEEDS GO CRAZY?
A CONVERSATION ABOUT THE
'BANK OF THE MIGRATING
GERMPLASM'

ABSTRACT

*The conversation is mainly investigating conceptual and methodological aspects of the artwork *The Bank of the Migrating Germplasm* (2016) developed by the artist Leone Contini for the second edition of the program *Connective Residency at Cittadellarte Fondazione Pistoletto* (curated by Cecilia Guida and Juan Sandoval). The bank is built on the relations, the stories and the moments of conviviality and dialogue with local actors, including the temporary guests of the asylum seekers centers near Biella. It's a paradoxical device, able to record social interactions in the form of foreign seeds from displaced gardens, created by migrants for migrants, and scattered around Biella and beyond its territory, in many other Italian regions.*

KEYWORDS

Experience, Community, Migration, Participatory Art Practice, Anthropology

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Biella; 2nd Tbilisi Triennial, Georgia; D-o Ark Underground Biennial, Bosnia; Kronika, Bytom, Poland; Delfina Foundation, London; MART, Rovereto; Galleria Civica, Trento; Khoj, New Delhi; Kunstraum, Munich; Villa Romana, Florence; Viafarini and Careof, Milano; Kunstverein, Amsterdam; Tirana Art Lab, Tirana; Centro per l'Arte Contemporanea Luigi Pecci, Prato. He took part to the following residencies: Akademie Schloss Solitude, Stuttgart; Residenza connettiva at Cittadellarte – Fondazione Pistoletto, Biella, Italy; The Politics of Food, I and II edition, at Delfina Foundation, London; Kronika, Bytom, Poland; InContext public art ecology at Khoj, New Delhi.

In 2017 he collaborated with “TRACES - Transmitting contentious cultural heritages with the arts”.

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Germogli di wá wá càì e la mia ombra,
sotto un frizzante sole alpino.
Dunque esisto.

Mr. Hu
Südtirol, 2016

Leone Contini casts a jingle: he happily merged in his work the ethnographic work and the art's languages, by exploring the potential of this generative symbiosis.

His investigation of friction, intercultural conflict and power relations is finalized in a wide range of formalizations: lecture-performances, interventions in public spaces, installations, field-sketches, ethnographic writings and audio/visual narrations.

His playful visions, sometimes imbued by childish recollections, are recurrent in his research: a baobab or a 'cucuzza' seed, a quotation from the Little Prince, dumplings of uncontrolled origins merging together – such as jiaozi, manti, ravioli or khinkali –, a recipe written in Wolof language, a sketch of a vegetable – incomprehensible fragment –, a gift from a bagger in Turin and whatever object is intercepted by his emotional sphere, and at the same time by the grid of his *theoria* – in its original meaning of contemplation and speculation.

His apparently chaotic and compulsive collection, which seems to be guided by the categories of the unexpected and the incongruent, establish in fact a new 'space', where different social fragments lay on a common ground; it's a playful, participatory platform, where to share the everyday existence and engage in dialogues with the Other.

The 'cohabitation' of the ethnographic approach with the aesthetic practices was the main reason why we invited Leone Contini at Cittadellarte Fondazione Pistoletto for the second edition of the program Connective Residency. The artwork which sprouted out of it, entitled *The Bank of Migrating Germplasm* (curated by Cecilia Guida and Juan Sandoval), was built on the relations and the moments of conviviality and dialogue with local actors, including the temporary guests of the asylum seekers centre of Pettinengo; the association Pacefuturo; the farmers of the network Let Eat Bi; the multicultural staff of the restaurant LuogoComune at Cittadellarte, where Contini organized together with Mr. Hu several syncretic banquets, including lecture-performances and the creation of recipes which embodied 'unknown' ingredients, recently arrived on this territory as an outcome of the current migrations.

The Bank of Migrating Germplasm aims to protect the agricultural bio-diversity and to test ‘minor’ economies.

It is a truly collective space, an archive in-progress of migrating seeds, the ending point of an artistic practice founded on the involvement of specific communities and, at the same time, the starting point of new exchanges with new communities – or ‘becoming communities’ – which are extending in more and more complex networks.

The bank is a crossroad of stories, meetings and ‘survival practices’, and investigates the future of our society, by collecting ‘germs of possibilities’ for a not yet imagined (social) existence.

The interview here below is mainly investigating conceptual and methodological aspects of the research process on the field and its aesthetical codification in an artwork.

A special attention was given to the paradoxical interaction between economy, current migrations and the agro-culinary ‘dispositif’ chosen by the artist to access a space of dialogue with the Other.

Cecilia Guida: Let’s start our conversation about your artwork *The Bank of the Migrating Germplasm* (2016) developed for Cittadellarte’s Connective Residency with the initial idea: where did it come from?

Leone Contini: There is a paradoxical economical sector growing in Italy, related with the temporary accommodation for asylum seekers. The complex of this activity generates an injection of EU money in often impoverished territories. Motors of this new economy are the bodies of the migrants, housed and fed till the verdict of the commissions: the integration process starts for the few recognized as refugees, the ones receiving a negative response automatically become ‘clandestine’. In a span of time lasting for many months, the bare existence of these men determines a paradoxical situation: while their ‘uncertainty’ produces a real economy, their ‘agency’ is nullified by their being kept ‘on hold’. The counter-strategies I have arranged in order to (re)build a ‘discourse’ together with the (so called) Other originate from the archetype-image of a seed, coming from a distant geography, which reactivates its own vital potential in a foreign land. The subsequent constellation of sub-narrations flowing from this original ‘seed’ marks a subversion of given power relations: the migrant appropriates a plot of land, he sows it (with informally imported seeds), he harvests the fruits

and process them through his own cooking skills and traditions.

It might not be by chance that agricultural activities are flourishing in some of the asylum centres, and that more settled migrants often creates a 'garden of nostalgia', whose minimal form is a simple pot on the balcony with an aromatic plant from 'the motherland'.

The Bank of the Migrating Germplasm, around which I structured my project for Cittadellarte's Connective Residency, is a collection of migrating seeds present on the national territory. The aim of this living archive is to represent/protect/implement the heritage of an asset of 'foreign' biodiversity that is generally perceived in negative terms by the agro-culinary policies (and common sense) – in contrast with the ancient varieties, which are presumed to be 'ours'.

My impatience toward this sort of bio-essentialism entered into a generative phase after a visit to the Bank of the Germplasm in Lucca, where I came across the Gallicano ficus bean, a pillar of the local gastronomy, illegally imported in the hat of a migrant returning from the US at the beginning of the 20th Century. What is the minimum time for a new vegetable to be 'naturalized' (i.e. for its full integration in the agro-culinary heritage of the community)? I started to imagine the near future and the perfume of 'okra flower risotto', pride of the Biellese, possibly protected by a Slow Food stronghold.

C.G.: The artworks on display were the results of the networking and participatory process you built during your residency on the territory with the bank of seeds of 'hybrid' plants representing the dispositif through which the relationships were born and gradually developed. How did the exhibition narrate these meetings, dialogues, links and affections?

L.C.: Partly through the seeds themselves, since none of them was acquired through an economic transaction. Almost all of them had in fact been gathered thanks to gifts and exchanges. But the archive was only the tip of the iceberg, as most of the work was carried out in the fields where Mussa, Rafaquat, Gemma, Yosuf and Marco were taking care, every day, of the plants germinated from those seeds.

It was impossible – and somehow pointless – to represent the everyday life of these farmers in an exhibition, and this is why we decided not to use video documentation, nor pictures of the people I worked with. However

FIGURE 1: FLORENTINE
BANGLA SEEDS. BIELLA
2016. FOTOGRAFIA DI
LEONE CONTINI.



in the installation are presented many tangible traces (drawings, recipes and other texts, seeds and dried crops) of the meetings around which took place the production of a transitional food - from foreign to local.

C.G.: During your Connective Residency at Cittadellarte, you established relationships in particular with the migrants of the shelter for asylum seekers in Pettinengo. In what way is the project Bank of the Migrating Germplasm connected to this community?

L. C.: My main connection with the community is Y.K., a refugee who has created a paradoxical Afghan farmed garden in the sumptuous park of the 19th century villa, site of the shelter. From my point of view, this 'out of context' garden is a place of negotiation of identities. I have in fact entrusted Y.K. with some plants, themselves germinated from 'migrant' seeds given to me

by H.M. and Y.H., my Wenzhounese neighbours in Tuscany, or found while wandering in markets, mini markets and gardens in Turin, Rome, Milan, Florence, Merano and Biella. Once the vital cycle of these plants is completed, part of the seeds will be returned to the bank as 'naturalized' seeds – without of course defining the 'nature' in question: Afghan-Italian? Biellese? Piemontese? From the Po Valley? The seeds will definitely belong to this place, and to the people that grew them.

But there is also another centre in Pettinengo, which I'm familiar with. Here I met, in January 2016, a few youths mainly coming from various countries in West Africa. They invited me over for lunch several times: hearty meals of meat and peanut paste, rice and a sort of wheat flour *polenta*. I enjoyed this unpretentious hospitality, but I also realized how conviviality was locked within macro-regional identities: the majority of West Africans rotated the daily meal during the week, alternating Ghanaian, Nigerian and Malian recipes.



FIGURE 2: TURKISH BAMJA IN PETTINENGO. BIELLA 2016. FOTOGRAFIA DI LEONE CONTINI.

These dishes are slightly different but the structure is similar, both in organoleptic and anthropological terms: ingredients, percentage of meat/vegetables/carbohydrates, way of cooking, quantity of food eaten per person, way of sitting around the table and eating etc. I remember that the few Pakistani guests present in the centre were patiently waiting their turn to cook, after the Africans had finished their meal. But when I went back in March the power balance around the kitchen was radically changed: majority of West Africans were moved elsewhere and by then there were almost only Pakistanis. They immediately took control over the cooking-convivial space, and the

FIGURE 3: SKYPE CALL
LAHORE. BIELLA 2016.
FOTOGRAFIA DI LEONE
CONTINI.

¹ Bitter melon is the 'international' most common denomination for this bitter universal vegetable considered beneficial for the blood in many cultures, from the Indian subcontinent to China.

few Africans left in the centre adapted to the new food-habits. This is how I lost all the work done during three months with the previous community; on the other side, I better understood the harsh existential conditions of these young men, trapped in the kafkaesque nightmare of the asylum procedures. It is really impressive how people are moved around, stored here and there, a series of sudden micro-displacements within a big displacement.

From the Pakistani I learnt how to roast *roti* on a piece of found metal sheet.

They had the privilege of a temporary sedentariness and, in July 2016, their little garden was growing some of 'my' cucurbitaceae, especially a variety called 'kugua' by Chinese in Prato, 'ampalaya' or 'bitter melon'¹ in the Filipino mini market in Biella and, most important, 'karela' in Pettinengo, by the pakistani neo-farmers.

C. G.: I can glimpse in your words the presence of an economic 'concern'... Can you clarify what is just an intuition?

L. C.: The source of my current research consists in a wide spectrum of informal/rural economies, developed within migrant communities in Italy: these hidden econ-



omies live within,² next to, beside, and around the dominant economy.

This liminal rurality usually takes place in the space in between the rural and the urban, within urban/periurban voids or just ‘niches’ of soil, ranging from ‘identity’ activities, such as a balcony-grown *xian gu cai* (the wenzhounese denomination for what Linneo called *brassica rapa chinensis*, known internationally as ‘bokchoy’), to informal enterprises based on monetary incentives.

Pecuniary pay-off and identity utility are interwoven in various ways, in this grey zone.

At the core of my practices is the constant attempt to trigger a shift in the real, and the incongruence between minor and major farming activities in Italy is the ‘space’ where this kind of *poiesis* takes place. I will be clearer: it’s commonly known that in Italy many migrants work in the intensive farming industry such as the tomato plantations. The conjuncture of underpaid labor, Italian organized criminality and racism creates, together with media over-exposure, an essentialist trap where both stereotypes and exploitation are reproduced.

My ‘answer’ to this dystopian impasse is to search for such ‘minor’ economies, which are on the contrary able to create, beside the actual food, original social relations.

Even if they are not considerably affecting the main economic parameters, these farming practices are able to fulfill both the alimentary and the identity needs of several migrant communities, defining an original, intimate-collective space of symbolic and economic becoming.

In the last years I travelled around Italy, collecting ‘episodes’ inherent these counter-economies (see the video *Un popolo di trasmigratori*: vimeo.com/205058082 password: 12345) and connecting them in order to trace a constellation of alternatives, a coherent counter-narration.

C. G: How this economic ‘concern’ is dealing with The Bank of Migrating Germplasm?

L. C.: As I said, a paradoxical spin-off is flourishing in Italy around the so called ‘accoglienza’ of the asylum seekers, a sort of ‘temporary hospitality’ which usually consists in placing these young men in remote locations for several months, until their asylum request is accepted or discarded. In this limbo, the subjectivity of the migrants is suspended, while their bare existence produces many satellite opportunities for social workers, cultural mediators, translators, psychologists and any sort of suppliers (from food to clothes, to wifi etc.).

² Within the intersection of migrations and hidden economies, I especially focus on agricultural, culinary and convivial practices.

I strategically elected the micro-farming activities, often present in these ‘camps’, as the Troy Horse to overall this passive economy. Illegally imported seeds and illegally farmed vegetables are in fact reactivating (metaphorically?) the dormant agency of these men, creating a bridge between their previous existence, often rural, and a new land in which they are still foreigners. This reinvention of a familiar landscape became a pivotal guideline of my research.

In these gardens, the migrants grow vegetables that are not available on the mainstream market, such as – named in different languages: *okra*, *bamja* or *bindi*; *lauki*, *lau*, *dudi*, *slawi* or *kalabasa*; *korla*, *kugua* or *karrela* etc. This activity is mainly addressing identity urges. Even if Italy is a country with a thick grey zone of economic possibilities, their condition of marginality makes in fact the selling of these vegetables almost impossible.

Far beyond the edge of documentation/interpretation of the real, my approach is always ‘poietic’ and I often played the role of ‘seeds spreader’, facilitating the exchange of the seeds between different communities (since the varieties are often the same for different communities, under different denominations), and ending up creating the bank as a concrete tool to store and circulate them, on the basis of a barter agreement: the bank is accessible to everyone with the promise that, at the end of the life-circle of the plant, the ‘user’ will return to the bank some of the next generation ‘naturalized’ seeds.

C.G: Can you mention how the local scale, consisting in the asylum seekers, interacted with the wider context?

L.C.: I have a good example which also will explain how the bank works: a consistent part of the seeds present in this living archive is a present from H.F., a Senegalese farmer based near Venice.

H.F. created a Senegalese garden on the land of his Italian father in law. Unlike the precarious gardens of refugees, this little farm is well organized and, despite the fact that he’s using informally imported seeds, he never had problems, being well settled in the local community.

This garden gradually became the space for a botanic-social experiment *de facto*, and the occasion for this Italian-Senegalese farmer to represent his condition in between. He welcomes friends, occasional visitors and school groups. The garden is a sort of open lab, an informal manifesto, how to make habitable a foreign land.

But this garden is more than a political/existential gesture: its over-production is sold to local markets, mainly run by Bengali migrants for a very diverse audience: his *okra* is appreciated, with different names, by West Africans, Sri-Lankans, Pakistani and Bengali people, Arabs (especially Syrians and Egyptians), Pilipinos and Afghani migrants. This 'local' *okra* is now consistently integrating the salary of this farmer. But there is a third layer of meaning, which paradoxically re-scale the private and local dimension of this garden on a wider, public level of interest: this garden grows in fact on the Piave river, which gained the status of a war monument since WW1, when it became the defense line on which the Austro-Hungarians invaders were stopped in late 1917, just few kilometers from Venice. During the fascist time a song was composed about this river: the core-strophe stated that the 'foreign' will never cross the Piave river. 'La Piave' was however turned into 'il Piave', since the gender itself of the river was turned from feminine to masculine, to serve the cause of war/regime propaganda.

This oxymoronic "Piave okra" is somehow able to comment the epochal transition toward a multicultural society, by generatively questioning the pillars of the Italian identity itself, often drenched in mystified narrations.

C. G.: During your residency in Cittadellarte I realized that your whole 'strategy' was based on a sort of geographical binary system: two weeks in Biella and two weeks in Tuscany. Every time you arrived at Cittadellarte your car was literally stuffed with little plants, sprouts, seeds, etc. Majority of this organic material was coming from the farms of your Chinese neighbours. I would like you to focus on the strong ties that connect you and your neighbourhood, which in many occasions you defined a sort of permanent field work. I had the impression that you somehow recreated this displaced landscape also in Cittadellarte. Can you spend few words about your major field?

L. C.: There is a 'no man's land' between the cities of Florence and Prato; here lives one of the biggest Chinese communities in Europe: fragments of a rural landscape, like fossils of a previous era, are scattered around the residual space between factories, residential neighbourhoods and malls. Here a gigantic clothes industry is working day and night: it is the Chinese labour, hidden pillar of the Made in Italy.

For years I searched for crackles in the structure/ dominant narration and, again, the key to twist the dystopia was provided by neo-rural practices:³ since 2009 little Chinese gardens sprouted in the interstitial spaces between the industrial buildings, close to the living working spaces of the migrants. The outcome is a hybrid landscape where residential facilities overlap with manufacturing and rural ones. The gardens, being markers of cultural ‘otherness’, are embodying a condition of liminality which is the main anthropological feature of this territory.

The majority of local Chinese migrants come from the rural areas of Zhejiang: their agricultural skills were re-activated once their traditional seeds were transplanted in the Tuscan soil. The vegetables are a metaphorical umbilical cord with the motherland but, at the same time, they represent a transformative and generative force: a familiar landscape was re-invented, as a surrealist collage where the *bokchoy* cohabits with cypresses, olive trees and vineyards.

FIGURE 4: LEONE CONTINI, THE BANK OF THE MIGRATING GERMLASM, OPENING PERFORMANCE. CONNECTIVE RESIDENCY AT CITTADELLARTE FONDAZIONE PISTOLETTO. BIELLA 2016. FOTOGRAFIA DI PIERLUIGI DI PIETRO.



³ Since 2011, I have documented the evolution of these unexpected activities. Meantime, I carried a series of interventions in public space including workshops, lectures, food classes, exhibitions, exhibitions, blogging, launching of informal ‘restaurants’ and walks: www.research-catalogue.net/view/66263/66264

On another level, this unexpected rural activity cracks the vitrified iconography of a region branded as a luxury product by the touristic/food&beverage industry and it is paradoxically reactivating the pre-industrial Tuscan anthropological landscape, once based on self-sufficient agriculture. Eventually the Chinese farms – although often perceived as uncanny by the Italian natives – are revitalizing the Tuscan agriculture, previously impoverished, in terms of bio-diversity, by decades of abandonment of the rural activities.

The locals and the authorities contested this self-subsistence agriculture, since the very beginning. Vegetables

varieties where in fact unknown to them, and the seeds where claimed to be imported illegally. Gardens where constantly destroyed, but constantly re-appeared. Later they developed into little farms. Now farms are bigger. When a farm is confiscated another one is founded. Thousands of Chinese migrants create a constant demand for this type of vegetables.

This economy takes place between the family labour (all farms are family-based), the micro-climate (season, rain, drought, hail, temperature etc.), and the final consumer, always Chinese. This structure, locked within the community, tends to be independent from the wider food-industry. The price of a 30x45 cm basket of *bokchoy* in season can be 2 euro, much less than a similar vegetable imported from kilometers away, for the mainstream market. From farm to fork, almost utopian. Especially because alternative economies usually take place within small groups of people – usually urbanized, food-aware young people, well-educated and well-to-do. But this informal zero-miles-food-industry feeds thousands of people everyday, with cheap, locally grown vegetables, restoring on a large scale an economic system that was extinct, at least in Tuscany, since the 50ies-60ies - and this is more than a metaphoric twist in the representation of the Other.

C. G.: So your economic 'concern' and your constant attempt to question the dichotomies such as foreign-domestic somehow hang together in this little, paradoxical microcosm?

L. C.: The success of Chinese agricultural enterprises subverts such dichotomy, since this unexpected economy is something intimately inherent to the 'place' that we inhabit all together; at the same time the model of producing food locally, based on medium scale family-farms, points out a radical alternative to the mainstream food industry.

The spreading of Chinese varieties beyond the Chinese community is just a matter of time. Such vegetables are already Tuscan since many years. Many of my projects aim to accelerate the sociological processes.

C. G.: There are already many seed banks around the world. How The Bank of Migrating Germplasm is different?

L. C.: The aim of seeds banks is usually to preserve a botanic biodiversity that comes from a rural past, being in danger of disappearance.

The Bank of Migrating Germplasm aims instead to investigate the future, the making of bio-diversity, as a process in progress.

There is a progressive force in the past, which created the whole variety of edible vegetable products that we have today, this force somehow lays frozen with the 'saved' seeds, in the vaults of seeds banks. What is here defused is the essence itself of agriculture, nested in the early stages of the domestication of wild varieties, manipulated by selection and hybridization, year after year, in order to slowly shape new varieties, suitable to fit specific micro-climates, plus a wider range of anthropological needs. Agriculture has always been progressive, inventive, and the practice to preserve the best seed always aimed to 'reinvest' them the subsequent year. My impression is that this force is more and more monopolized and distorted by the neo-capitalistic economy, while the seed bank tend to merely preserve the heritage of the past, like museums, protecting something precious and rare. In 'my' bank there is nothing objectively valuable, at least in genetic terms. During my residency in Cittadelarte I just realized that migrants were often craving for seeds, usually unknown in Europe, but easily accessible in Tuscany among Chinese farmers.⁴ I ended up becoming a vector to spread these seeds: at the beginning of summer Tuscan-Chinese bottle-gourds, pumpkins and other vegetables sprouted in gardens in Biella, farmed by Pakistani, Afghani and West Africans. Many of these vegetables accomplished a full reproductive circle, generating the seeds for the next year: these 'second generations' embody the paradoxical notion of 'becoming native'. And if they are all kept in a refrigerator is not to preserve them for future generations, but to sprout them the next spring.

The bank doesn't map the migrants' rural activities, it implements them, beyond UE bureaucracy, copyrighted seeds and the current logic of labour, to keep agriculture as a living tool of the human becoming, instead of a museum of fetishes, and to enable the new inhabitants of Italy (the migrants) to play a generative role in shaping our rural, culinary and convivial future traditions.

My utopia is that, out of this neo-farming activities, some original varieties will be *created*. But this will be possible only if farmers will re-plant the seeds from their previous harvest, instead of buying them from standardized lots. That's the only safe way to adapt vegetable varieties to new geo-anthropological sets.

⁴ However, these gardens are controversial and contested, since the seeds are introduced in the UE informally, if not illegally. Not only a bitter metaphor of the migrants' existence in Italy.

C. G.: During the opening of The Bank of Migrating Germplasm in Cittadellarte you also curated a dinner based on several fusion recipes mixing foreign and local ingredients. All the recipes were 'narrated' by Mister Hu. Who is Mister Hu? I had the impression he's a sort of alter ego of yours. Can you confirm this?

L. C.: Well, first of all I'm very suspicious regarding the term 'fusion'. I associate this word with fancy restaurants, where super-chefs play a virtuosic and hedonistic game across luxury, exoticism and organoleptic excitement.

About Mister Hu, he's more real than me! And he is for me a constant source of new ideas. He comes from a former rural village, now part of Whenchen conurbation, not far from Wenzhou. He moved from China to Tuscany with his family when he was six years old. He's speaking Italian with a strong tuscan accent, plus a regional Chinese dialect. He's both a poet and a gourmet, and all the recipes presented in Cittadellarte are memories of his hybrid childhood, spent between the industrial building where his family was living and working, and the old sangiovese vineyard owned by their neighbour, an old Tuscan peasant, Egidio. He became for Hu a sort of private guide to a foreign world. The Hu family comes from a rural background, as well as Egidio, so their common language was based on earth, plants and seeds. Sometimes I feel like the ghost of this ancient peasant still haunts him, with a bitter and irreverent sarcasm, typical of Tuscan-born people.

C. G.: One of the recipes proposed by Hu was based on a Sicilian squash, which is also Chinese, and you told me that you explicitly asked him to insert such a vegetable in the menu. Can you explain me why? What is the bond between you and this squash?

L. C.: In the narrations of my mother's family the 'cucuzza', a Sicilian elongated courgette, has always been a vegetable with an aura surrounding it. My grandmother, originally from Agrigento, Sicily, moved to Florence in the 60ies. She used to cook cucuzza. When it was served at the table it was always something more than just a sweetish and mild tasty aubergine. For the Sicilian Diaspora, the cucuzza pertains to the realm of nostalgia. In particular, in the Italian-American imagination, the cucuzza assumes almost mythical connotation – the tale of the seeds, passed on over decades from one generation to the next until today, is one of the subjects of family narratives among the descendants of Sicilians who have emigrated to US.

Eating cucuzza in a foreign land is a familiar and convivial ritual, a moment of reconnection within a situation of displacement. The cucuzza is an exclusive link between the emigrated community and an 'intimate-collective'; it is the lost Sicily, fantasised by the Diaspora. Several websites, blogs and Facebook groups are dedicated to the cucuzza. Even the various versions of its name seem to proliferate on the web. Pronunciation variations differ: kah-gootz-ah or goo-gootz. Spelling variations include: cagutsa, cagutza, caguzza, cuccuza, cucutsa, cucutza, cucuzza, cugutsa, cugutza, and cuguzza. The cucuzza, declined into its different sub-regional pronunciations, is a category of the soul and an infallible sign of the presence of Sicilian or other southern Italian migrants, in the new as well as the old world. In fact a strong internal migration affected also Italy, and my family is an example of this inter-Italian displacement. And cucuzza was the comfort food of my displaced Tuscan-Sicilian family for all the 80ies until it disappeared from our table when our supplier, a Sicilian farmer migrated in Firenze, passed away. For many years since then our family tradition was interrupted, until the same squash was finally back in our daily life: but now it was named 蒲瓜 (Púguā) being unexpectedly cultivated and traded by Wenzhounese migrants. The Chinese migration, usually perceived as a threat for 'our' identity, was on the contrary able to re-activate a dormant family/regional ritual. The Self was re-activated by the Other, but now was a new Self, hybrid and inclusive.

Two identity narratives – Sicilian and Wenzhounese – are merging in the same vegetable, as the universal need for a comforting reconnection with home.

C. G.: Well, this makes me think about the future of the Bank, since now it represented mainly a symbolic gesture...

L. C.: I would define it as a pioneering gesture instead of a merely symbolic one – even if the border between the two is blurred. I like to imagine the bank evolving into a web platform where to exchange 'displaced' seeds. Every free seed, with a journey behind it, would be welcomed – and every seed is potentially a traveller, or a former traveller, intrinsically.

The platform would implement a smuggling original attitude, like for the illegally imported bean of Lucca that, beside its controversial origins, it's now fully embodied by the local community as something to be proud of. The web-platform makes me able to imagine how a pioneer-

ing gesture could expand and happily grow out of the confined space of the art world.

C.G.: In the exhibition, Baobab seeds became an instrument for a collective symbolic action on the occasion of the opening. A few months before you also planted a Baobab sprout in Biella's high security jail, what was the reason for this gesture? What was the link between the seeds in the exhibition and the plant in the jail?

L. C.: The idea of playing with baobab clearly originated from the compulsive phobias of the 'Little Prince', obsessed with eradicating the seeds of what represents a threat to his solipsistic planet. The Baobab is a beautiful plant that lives for over a thousand years, surviving dry-



FIGURE 5: LEONE CONTINI, THE BANK OF THE MIGRATING GERMLASM, OPENING PERFORMANCE WITH BAOBAB SEEDS. CONNECTIVE RESIDENCY AT CITTADELLARTE FONDAZIONE PISTOLETTO. BIELLA 2016. FOTOGRAFIA DI PIERLUIGI DI PIETRO.

ness by storing up to 120 thousand liters of water, a true promise of future, at least in West African imagery. But not for the little despot of a private empire: for him it represents the end of the established order. There is a strong post-colonial implication in this little grain.

The plant has entered into the jail premises – a place of control and constriction – as a gift of mine and, growing, will ideally destroy the institution, even if over an extremely long period of time. Hopefully the detained will take care of this little living being, and its promise of freedom. This Troy-horse has arrived in Italy as a grain naturally sealed inside a sweet and slightly sour fruit, extremely beneficial, called *bouye* in Wolof language.

This product usually circulates for little price in the so called 'ethnic' mini-markets, a sort of grey-zone of the

food distribution. At the same time the growing industries of super-foods vampirized it, turning *bouye* – with different name, packaging and texture (often powdered) – into an exotic elixir of life and a luxury product.

But the baobab-project grew beyond the jail: what will happen when these seeds will be dispersed in our ecosystem? Will they be able to sprout, root and grow? Will they be aggressive and invasive or will they represent an opportunity? The core of the second branch of this project exactly consisted in playing with such tangle of fears, expectations and hope, leading to a final formalization: Baobab seeds were thrown into a river from the exhibition spaces of Cittadellarte, using a slingshot or just spitting them after having chewed the fruit.

Following a loose chain of connections, and to answer your last question, isn't the xenophobe fear of the Other aiming to turn our mixed society into a narrow, monocultural prison?

In these actions, a gigantic system based on fear and control is challenged by a little grain/plant, projected into the future.

Biella – Prato, February 2017

FIGURE 6: LEONE CONTINI, THE BANK OF THE MIGRATING GERMLASM. CONNECTIVE RESIDENCY AT CITTADELLARTE FONDAZIONE PISTOLETTO. BIELLA 2016. FOTOGRAFIA DI PIERLUIGI DI PIETRO.



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