

## ONLINE PRESENTATION

### THE ZERYNTHIA BOOK, (Ed. Di Paolo)

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for Contemporary Creativity of the Ministry of Cultural Heritage and Activities and Tourism  
as part of the *Italian Council* programme (2019)

#### Marika Rizzo – Moderator

Hello, welcome.

My name is Marika Rizzo and I will be moderating this meeting for the presentation of “The Zerynthia Book”, published by Di Paolo Edizioni in 2020. The project was realized thanks to the support of the Directorate-General for Contemporary Creativity of the Ministry of Cultural Heritage and Activities and Tourism as part of the *Italian Council* programme (2019).

I would immediately like to thank the Academy of Fine Arts of Frosinone and its Director Loredana Rea who welcomed us with enthusiasm.

The book we will be speaking about is an unusual volume: it is not an art catalogue, though it is about art, nor is it a private diary. It is an account of everything that was experienced, with the aim of shedding light on the atmosphere that Mario Pieroni and Dora Stiefelmeier, over time, have created. The idea driving this publication is the communion, the continuity that exists between life and art.

The Zeynthia Book, but what is Zerynthia? It is a voluntary Contemporary Art Association, with its administrative office in Paliano (Frosinone), born under the presidency of the Nobel Prize winner Rita Levi Montalcini in 1991.

Since then, Zerynthia has curated, promoted and organized contemporary art events in Italy and abroad with the aim of broadening its borders towards the social context in which it operates.

It organizes conventions and seminars in its own spaces or in public structures, with particular attention to didactic activity for young artists and students.

## **Loredana Rea – Director of the Academy of Fine Arts of Frosinone**

Thank you for having proposed to the Academy to collaborate on your project and for allowing the construction of a dialogue that I think, hope, can lead to important developments. Firstly, because the Academy of Frosinone stands on a particular land, the same in which Zerynthia works and has worked, the province of Frosinone, in Southern Lazio, an area that is certainly “peripheral” in relation to the contemporary art system and that in recent years has invested little in culture. Zerynthia’s experience between Rome and Paliano, that has allowed different generations of artists and others to enter into contact with the experience of contemporary art, has been fundamental. In this territory, the Academy of Frosinone in recent years has not only dealt with an educational role but has willingly opened up to a relationship with the area in order to stimulate experiences of art and of culture, precisely because in lacking designated structures the Academy decided to also assume the role of cultural promoter, with experiences of varying nature, above all through fruitful collaborations with associations both local and beyond.

The importance of the experience with Zerynthia for the area is fundamental because it has stimulated other art experiences, functioning as a place of encounter and exchange for art. The experience conducted between Rome and Paliano, of which today the other speakers will talk, is a moment in the history of contemporary art that cannot be missed, it must be an integral part of the memory of this place to allow for growth, a different opening. Now that the pandemic emergency forces us to rethink our way of connecting and to reformulate the modalities of communicating art and of making art, I believe that tying the threads of this long tale of Zerynthia is important. Already the choice of the name “Zerynthia”, the name of a butterfly from the Ager Romanus, is significant. It indicates lightness and above all mobility, with the only difference that the life of a butterfly is brief yet that of the Zerynthia Association has lasted for some time and continues so as to affect our territory. For this reason, it is fundamental to reread the story of Zerynthia so that it may stimulate us to find the instruments with which to rethink the present according to a sustainable future for art and for the everyday. This coincides with the role of Academy of Fine Arts of Frosinone in taking charge of this peripheral province, even if speaking today of peripheries can seem rather unrealistic given that the capillarity of digitalization allows us to be simultaneously here and in the entire world. I hope that by building experience from what we are going through now we may in the near future give rise to important new projects such as those that Zerynthia in these last decades has been able to create and to leave as an admonishment and inheritance for all of us.

I address all of you, but especially Mario and Dora, in renewing the Academy’s availability – even when we go back to in-person study – for experiences of contamination between education and experimentation with our students, with our teachers who today are participating in number in this event. Many of them are already an integral part of the story documented in this important volume.

## **Felice Levini - artist**

This butterfly is truly a beautiful thing! I have a kind of faunal vision and for me this book is almost like a book of fairy tales and it is almost the compendium of a series of experiences that has seen not only artists involved but many situations that have been transversal and that have created a type of great melting pot in which everything has gone in and everything has come out. Over these thirty years, I have been a mere small representative passing through, but of the things Zerynthia has done I have seen a great many, all of them beautiful in their ability to pass through the most impossible places: this butterfly that settles not only on the main locations and public structures but often on unthinkable places. One of these was a travertine marble quarry in Serre di Rapolano, a terrifying, almost infernal place, and yet the artists approached it with an ability, a courage, with a desire to go beyond their own themes and their own languages. One of the characteristics of Zerynthia is precisely that of unleashing in the artists the desire to face not only the spaces of the possible but also of the impossible. The fundamental thing in my opinion is having each time created a branch of togetherness, and this is not something that happens every day; I would say it has not happened often in recent years. I am happy to have participated in this vortex, a vortex that, thanks to great courage, fortunately has not yet ceased, despite all the difficulties brought about by the pandemic. I believe this is not just down to the courage of bringing together the artists, but also the determination in uniting and putting together something that is not obvious, of making the impossible achievable. It is like the place in a fairy tale, an imaginary place that then comes to life. The Zerynthia Book is not introduced and commented on by great art critics, it is presented only by Mario and Dora who speak of the world they have traversed, that they have built, and of which us artists are a part, along with our paintings and our sculptures. This is precisely the location of utopia; this book is utopian, and it is also beautiful to hold. It is an object of art made with art. Along with the artists, the photographers, the poets, it is a book based on the goodwill of those who for thirty years continue heroically to think that art is one of the territories in which there is still the tiniest amount of hope, the tiniest amount of humanity and also of inhumanity.

Question by Marika Rizzo to Felice Levini: I would like to ask you to recall the experience at the School of Sculpture in Boville, where in 2014 you did an exhibition and I remember there were a great many students.

FL At Boville it was quite an undertaking and I did not expect it to be so busy. Mario and Dora had loaned the pieces I had presented in '88 at the Venice Biennale. In this new context and with the vitality of the students it became a new experience. Zerynthia was capable of organizing all this, of giving life to contaminations that are important forces. Who better than the Academy of Fine Arts to approach contemporary art and the research of artists? So, long live these ventures.

## **Donatella Spaziani - artist**

This volume is precious, it is quite beautiful in its binding, its paper, its embossed cover, and it is a thrilling book. As for me, I was present from the beginning of that powerful experience in Paliano that was so important in my life. I started as an assistant in Sol LeWitt's group, I had just finished the Academy of Fine Arts and I found myself in that situation that so many students find themselves in, so many ex-students and new graduates, when they don't know what to do with their lives. Perhaps they have aspirations, but they live in the suburbs. I made ends meet by working as a bar girl. The extraordinary thing for me was finding out by chance, by coincidence, that Sol LeWitt was looking for assistants for a piece he was doing in Paliano. For a young Fine Art student it was like telling a young musician: "David Bowie is coming to Frosinone". And so I found myself having this unique experience of being able to contribute to the creation of a project by a great artist. I had the opportunity to understand the work methods of someone of the calibre of Sol LeWitt! And so I found myself having this fantastic experience. Equally extraordinary for me was starting to frequent the world of Zerynthia that was so far from what I had intuited and studied in textbooks in my years at the Academy. At the time we lived in a world that was very distant from the reality of contemporary art, and in many Academies this is still the case. Frosinone today is the exception, the teaching staff includes many artists and a strong bond with the students has been created. Today's intervention proves it: there is a close relationship with the life of contemporary art. So, a twenty-year-old me found herself having lunch with Carla Accardi, Adachia Zevi, Mario Merz, Vettor Pisani, Kounellis... Michelangelo Pistoletto challenged me when I said I wanted to restore a Balla credenza. "You will never be able to restore it. I'm telling you because my father was a restorer, I know something about these things." So there I was, at such a young age, talking about it with Michelangelo...

In this book you will find a great deal of images, of Dora cooking, everyone cooking, Mario Merz and Mario Pieroni watching the news. A strong friendship that bound all those present. Over the years I have only seen this in the world of Zerynthia, the "non-distance" between young artists and the older ones, this absence of competition stopping you from feeling the generation gap. When I happened to live abroad, to travel, I always found a fracture between the world of young artists and that of the more accomplished ones and often a great distance between art and life.

In this book I see myself even when I am not directly involved, but when I was in some way a witness. I think for example of Cuba where I didn't go but it fascinated me, I think of the earliest experience of RAM radioartemobile with Federico Fusj: I was in the car with Dora, between Paliano and Piglio, when the radio went on air for the first time and we tuned in shouting together "Hurray! It works!". As the director said earlier, the province of Frosinone was not very open to art, let alone contemporary art. It is a great fortune to be able to experience art, to not have to declassify in order to find art, but instead to have art move and surround us, and to see the world around us through art with a profoundly different gaze. And so, when I started teaching at the Academy it was normal for me – at the time I was an assistant for the Sculpture Course and the Frosinone Academy had several branches beyond the central one – to host some exhibitions at the branch of the sculpture course and involve Mario and Dora once more with the artists proposed by them. Unfortunately, Günther Förg had recently passed away when we held his exhibition. The sculpture by Levini, taken to Boville, I remember it being installed in another situation, precisely at the RAM space. Seeing it in another context and reliving it was wonderful because the kids were involved in setting it up.

## Maurizio Savini - artist

I am taken by this great kaleidoscope of images and memories, because I was so lucky – that's how I define it – when I was still a boy and I would cycle to see their exhibitions in Via Panisperna. Later, after a few years when I had the fortune and possibility of meeting Mario and Dora, starting to collaborate with them for me was a great thrill and I have wonderful memories of it. Such as, for example, the encounter in Serre, as Felice Levini was saying earlier, inside that horrid travertine quarry. I had been invited by Ettore Spalletti, who for me was a great artist, I greatly respected him. I found myself thrown into a reality that was apparently simple but that, in fact, was absolutely not: a febrile laboratory in which you could easily wake up at 7 in the morning without really knowing what you were meant to do and you'd already find Mario and Dora at full tilt. We had a sketch of what the intention was, maybe we had talked about it at dinner.

Printed on the cover of the Zerynthia Book, this fantastic “container” – because you don't really know how to define it, whether it is a book or a container – is an extract of a text by Daniele Pieroni: “In which flame will the Zerynthia butterflies burn? What is certain is that it is a sacrifice that contains the promise of poetry”. Inside you find a series of memories and of emotions, of great experiences one after the other over the years, right up to today. I have always seen Mario and Dora – recalling an opera by Bizet from 1863 – as two pearl fishers diving to search for and find a gift of nature and take it to the surface and give it to others. A world in which the idea of profit does not emerge.

With them you always found yourselves in close contact with renowned artists, finding yourself on the same level. I have always felt their affection, and for me those who love artists are a very important thing. I have had a lot of experience over the years, like a butterfly, with short flights in '96 and in '98 and then in the library of the University of Sassari or perhaps in Milan with the work on bicycles dedicated to the Giro d'Italia... a series of memories that now overlap each other, the Paliano library, a piece that I'm not sure if there was a project or if everything happened with adjustments for the Contrada Cervinara, reaching in the end the town where I was lucky enough to be able to do a wall-painting in the antechamber of the Library of Contemporary Art.

I would like to read you a brief poem written by a young poet that Mario, Dora, Donatella and Felice know, Donato Di Pelino:

*The Zerynthia butterfly floats  
and settles on common flowers,  
From now on at the peak  
of other seasons  
rising along the current  
of a river not known  
But a stream that flows in secret  
beneath the carnal temple. Call her,  
unfold her wings,  
convince her that she is made  
to exist.*

So, we always return to the theme of the butterfly that like a serpent changes skin, or like a larva is transformed into a butterfly. Zerynthia has continued to transform itself. It was also born again as RAM, but of this perhaps we should speak another time.

## **Alfredo Pirri - artist**

This is an extraordinary story, enclosed within the book that we are talking about today, as if inside a precious treasure chest. Closing the story of the existence of so many people into a chest is not easy but it is worth remembering certain moments of this tale that fortunately has no end and the beginning of which is still uncertain. It is like a temporary lapse in the mind of each of us, an infinite lapse. The moments that come to mind: from the Venice Biennale to Paliano, from Valmontone to Serre di Rapolano, to Havana etc.

Some of these ventures, actually all of them, have revealed a character that up to now has not been much spoken about: the ventures of Dora and Mario have a very strong political character, albeit at times in a solitary manner, of involving territories hitherto untouched by the wind of contemporary art so that this renewing wind may blow towards where there was once stagnant air or to extraordinary places already touched by art so that they may be more so.

I remember for example Palazzo Doria Pamphilj in Valmontone that oddly enough disappeared from our radar the moment it was restored, whereas before the restoration it was at our complete disposal. We all remember it as an extraordinary place, as a vital place, a true political bastion. The artists who participated in that exhibition were even offered honorary citizenship by the town council in gratitude. It may be small thing, but it is significant because it meant that the political action of Zerynthia, of Mario and of Dora, obtained profound results in the consciousness not only of us artists and the public but even of the administrators who occasionally were involved and were touched by their grace and their ability in engaging others and in making it clear how profound an artistic action can be within the most diverse social realities.

The memories are so many.

What has stuck in my mind are certain little things, maybe details, for example the dinners, the lunches, one in particular at my house with Dora and Mario and Mario Merz, Federico Fusj, Carlos Garaicoa, Paola Pivi and others speechlessly witnessing the collapse of the Twin Towers, asking ourselves what was happening to the world and immediately having the capacity to react, in the sense of asking ourselves what art could do straight away in response to that mystery that was involving the entire world. And all of this is in the book. It is an irregular book that I have beside me, that I have with me, but that I must confess I have not read in a classical sense, and not because it is illegible and not because its almost biblical bulk frightens me, or because of the quantity of things it contains, the cognitive effort required in reading them one by one, but because it is a book that fortunately does not let itself be consumed either by reading it or with a superficial look through. In this sense it is a book – I have thought long and hard about how to define it – it is a biblical text, made up of many interlinking narratives, of stories that abruptly, all of a sudden, rise up to the heights of theory, even when, as is the case in some biblical books, it is limited to listing names (and this book contains an incredible number of names). These names now take on the role of eye witness of something that really happened, giving life to an infinite tale that brings together escape points and perspectives that are poetically so diverse and multiform as to be considered, luckily for us, limitless.

## **Federico Fusj - artist**

I concur with what Alfredo said about the quality of the book, right from its cover hosting a passage of a poem, and I like this very much: this writing must however be read by turning the book, it is intelligible, but it is also a picture. I would like to highlight that the author of this poem, Daniele Pieroni, precisely today will receive the Eugenio Montale prize for poetry.

I would now like to tell you about my experience with Zerynthia. At the time, I was working for the Italian State and in breaks I would go to Milan where I spent much of my education. I remember that I saw a short piece saying that the Pieroni Gallery was to close and that they would be starting a cultural association to take the contemporary art experience out of the institutional spaces of the galleries. This struck me greatly because in a certain sense it was also the experience that I too had had during my studies, with my first exhibitions, working away from home, in public and civic spaces. Afterwards we met up again at the '93 Biennale, in the Venice Casino with all the fanfare of the Biennale. It was night-time and there was a poetry reading. Going up the staircase of the building leading to the main floor you walked into an extraordinary space, an atmosphere of presence that was quite different to all the other spaces of the exhibition. I perceived that there was a difference. The following year, when I was on holiday in Osimo, a friend said: "look, you have to go to Pescara because there is an encounter organized by Zerynthia: 21st Century, art and architecture". I followed the conference as a spectator and now I find myself here in the book. The meeting with Mario and Dora came about physically via Belgium because Jan Hoet introduced us. He said: "Look, there's Mario Pieroni's who's doing an exhibition in Serre di Rapolano", and I said: "Serre di Rapolano, are you sure?" I live in Siena, Serre di Rapolano is a little town nearby. Jan and I went together to Serre one Sunday and we found a situation that was completely unrelated to the context of the town. It was then that my dialogue with them began.

An exhibition of theirs that is particularly close to my heart was Verso Sud (Southbound). It was a very complex exhibition, that presented a multiple theatre of operations: one part took place inside a historical building in Valmontone, other parts also in rather distant places, in other Municipalities. There was also a collaboration with the students of the Academy, a place where not only you study art, but you learn to practice it. I, in particular, found myself in Carpineto Romano, a place with no work background, in which there wasn't even the possibility of having a closed space. I was projected into an exterior reality and initially it was a somewhat complex situation that nevertheless sparked in me a new attention to my work. And this was one of the operative prerogatives that within Zerynthia I saw many times, that is that the artists involved find ferments, humus, with which to put their work into a new operative dimension. That is what happened to me: setting up a piece at Carpineto Romano, on quite a tight schedule because there were expectations from the town which was nonetheless involved. They had indicated some areas that I didn't feel corresponded and Mario would call and ask "How is the work going? We have to get started here." I was undecided until my eye fell upon some large outcropping masses in the centre of town. There, I had found what I was looking for, which was to enter into the morphological development upon which the town was constituted.

It was on that occasion that the desire to do the radio was born. As we were all isolated – me in Carpineto Romano, Bruna Esposito in Piglio, Alfredo in Valmontone etc. – it seemed to us as if we were in tactical, operational outposts, but we had an urgency to relate, to talk. It made us say that it would be interesting to create a radio so that we could bring everyone together, and by talking about it in the end this thing actually came about. Our first broadcast was in September 2001 precisely for the conclusion of Verso Sud (Southbound) on Radio Onda Libera. It was the first RadioArt programme on afternoon FM radio, with links every hour from various places: Alfredo in

Cosenza, Gülsün Karamustafa in Istanbul, Mona Marzuk in Egypt..., contacts from around the world from a platform in Frosinone. Zerynthia pre-empted the modality of a platform in which each person, while maintaining their own individuality, is within a shared reality. Again in Paliano, shortly afterwards, as a part of the exhibition *Edito/Inedito* (Edited/Inedited) I created for Zerynthia the “Pomarte”, a minivan hosting the radio station that was to go around Europe between the various artistic realities broadcasting live via web each time. Radioartemobile was born.

### **Dora Stiefelmeier – President of RAM radioartemobile**

As I wrote in the preface of the book, the choice of Paliano came about through a series of coincidences that so often reveal themselves to be most favourable. The landscape, extended greens, mountains, the availability of the inhabitants, our friendship with the Mayor at the time Giuseppe Alveti, the magic of the immense Woods, the vicinity to the city of Rome were all conditions leading to the choice for Zerynthia’s head office. The “Italy of Communes”, and so Zerynthia, this butterfly of the Ager Romanus that beyond Paliano has settled at Piglio, Serrone, Colleferro, Boville, Carpineto and in many more places.

Thank you for your question that touches an aspect of our work that is very dear to me, the experimental side. I believe that artists have an important role of innovation in society that we must pick up on and highlight.

There is a little book by the great American writer Gertrude Stein written around 100 years ago. Its title is “Picasso” who was a great friend of hers. It attributes precisely to him the statement: the artist is he/she who is capable of living in the present and seize its potential while all others live with their heads in the past.

This capability of artists of understanding where the world is heading is often intuitive, at times the self-same artist is not fully conscious of it.

The project *Sinfonia Specchiante* (*Mirrored Symphony*) is an example of this. It was conceived at a meeting at Zerynthia in Paliano between Michelangelo Pistoletto, artist of the Arte Povera movement who was already well known, and the then-young composer Carlo Crivelli. Talking about space – a concept that has been very dear to Pistoletto since his earliest mirrored works – came the idea of creating together a cosmic concert, not only in content or in terms of listening, but in its very execution. Or rather: an orchestra split into four locations – later pinpointed as a factory in Paliano, the stadium in Pescara, the Marstall Theatre in Munich where Pistoletto had an ongoing project, and one of the studios at the BBC in London – playing in unison: the violins in Paliano, the percussion in Pescara, the brass in London and the Soprano and more strings in Munich. Each location had a conductor with a telephone receiver tied to his head communicating with the other orchestra leaders. Like something out of the “Lumière Brothers”. To give you an idea, at the time – it was 1995 – internet did not exist yet, or rather it existed but it was reserved for the very few, so the most modern means of communication was the fax machine, and of mobile phones there was still not even a trace.

If today we are brought together via Zoom it is also because someone many years ago imagined a new way of communicating and the world then went in that direction.

### **Mario Pieroni- President of Zerynthia Association for Contemporary Arts (OdV)**

A Centre for culture does not exist, instead it is you with your energy, even with no experience, who can make any place “the Centre”.

I have always been confused and so I seek to be close to artists, because artists have their own perspective and they help you comprehend and see the world.

Look at the images of the film by Jimmie Durham *The Pursuit of Happiness*, which he had not been able to shoot anywhere else, and see how the road between the exit to Colleferro and Paliano becomes Colorado. In the Valmontone woods the artist's camper van home/studio catches fire and he abandons it to fly off to the United States and to his dream of fame and success.

In the film I play the role of the gallery owner and Anri Sala is the artist. I mention this film conceived and directed by Jimmie Durham, *The Pursuit of Happiness*, because it begins with an extract of the 1776 American Declaration of Independence:

*We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.*

Always relevant, today more than ever.

I thank the Director of the Academy of Frosinone Loredana Rea for having made this encounter possible and I greet the students with whom I hope a project can be born for us to work on together.