



**Three Dogs, A Quartet,
Numerous Sculptors
And Some Dust:**
a late summer visit to Carrara

Sam Bell

Revised edition

Texts For Nothing Publications



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'Nothing is just what it is, nothing at all'

1.

It was my second night back and the late summer heat drove me out into the city. The daytime humidity had persisted in the apartment, a fug gradually developing the solidity of a mattress. I had returned to Carrara, in Northern Tuscany, as a sculptor, to do some work at studio Ponte di Ferro. It was a delight to be back. Carrara is one of the less famous of Italy's beauties. You would not come here on a tour of the Italian 'masterpiece cities', such as Florence, Venice, the Pope's Roman enclave and surrounds, or even the tiny Siena. You might arrive on a coach trip, though, and in fact tourists can be seen regularly wending their way up into the Apuan mountains that sweep away from the city's fringes, to see the famous 'Michelangelo cave' at Fantascritti, one of the places where the marble for the masterpieces



Above: backs of houses on the Via Carriona

in Florence, Venice, Rome and Siena can be seen in its natural state. The road up also offers the main concentration of tourist memorabilia, which says something. Because you don't stop here in the city itself. Like Florence, time has passed a lot of the city by, but in the less flattering way the absence of vast wealth entails. There is an air of poverty, a remnant of its industrial heritage, that lingers over Carrara. Whilst the city hardly stagnates culturally, despite being in perpetual thrall to the marble, (even its post-modernism is practised in this most traditional of media), it is almost fascinating to see the physical dilapidation as it

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becomes more severe, year on year. Of course, I live along the Via Carriona, which also says something. This is not affluent Carrara. Opposite my apartment in the old converted pilgrim ospedale, there are top stories and roofs of homes that, were they elsewhere in the world, would be deemed slums.

This in contrast with nearby Pietrasanta or more distant Florence. Florence's sheer wealth, of the consumer variety, guarantees that its austere quattrocento beauty remains pristine. Anything that might threaten the museum-like status of the city is pitched up on the periphery, and working your way into Florence by car or coach involves moving back in time from the industrial modernity of the outskirts to the Renaissance splendour of the Interior. Time, in the city's splendid heartland, stands still in the face of money when once it was transformed by such, in the form of the Medici bankers. Pietrasanta, too, benefits from its rich concentration of artists, home grown and foreign, its thriving commercial studios, where artists from across the world have their work made, and from the monied tourist in search of *Bella Italia*.

Carrara, however, seems truly bound to time's damage, an urban oddity, even at a time when stone mining is thriving. In reality, for those of us who return time and again, Carrara is probably like any other smaller Italian city. Its four and five-floor buildings militate against regular repair and repainting, and I suspect that residents here, as with suburban Florence or Siena, are less enamoured than we Brits with hollow notions of 'home ownership' and the maintenance regime that goes with it. Time's damage is always with the Carrarese, and perhaps correcting it is to add foolishly to time's dominion. Ironically enough, Italianate dilapidation is a thing of beauty for we otherwise pernickety foreigners. We are all drawn to the peeling painted exteriors, the damaged stucco, the buildings that seem to be made up of random variations of stone and rubble, as often as not revealed by the fallen re-rendering that has failed to take. We are drawn to it like a representation of something profoundly meaningful - an elaborate visual metaphor offered up by time's arrow. And then there are the rambling precarious terraced homes that balance their

verandas over the edge of the Carriona river, a daring raid on space not owned, over a river that threatens water from the very heights of the Apuans, a deluge that is coloured a medicinal creamy white as it works its way through marble gorges on the way to the sea. A river of stone is the result, in fact, as the rush of water escaping back to the



Above: the Carriona river after flooding.

sea thrusts a certain tonnage of loose material downstream, to be collected eventually by beady-eyed carvers to turn into immaculately honed objects. Damage, for once, reversed. One or two of these precarious-looking homes have actually succumbed to the torrent while I have been on other visits

(reclaiming them again from the river then takes many years, as though the time needed to do the damage should, in the interests of symmetry, take as long again to correct). It is, we must acknowledge, a beautiful city, quite beyond compare in fact, on a night like this as I walk out into the luxuriant, caressing heat. Only a few minutes, across the Torrente Carriona by one of its many bridges, and the mood is transformed. The fine civic building and piazzas, the tiny ristoranti and gelaterie, on street after street, offer a kind of traditional elegance, in spirit warm and engaging when compared to the chain equivalents in the UK. No wonder the evening is alive with people who seem alive rather than just shopping. Here, surrounded by the tired exteriors of the Piazza Alberica, we can see the city's setting against the mountains that rise above to the east, a white glimmer on the horizon as light fades. Of course, this white is another aspect of the damage here: a remnant of the exterior mining

of marble, the opposite of the snow covered mountains that it resembles. It is also a fine city because of its cultural commitment. Carrara is, after all, the very home of marble. And it is not just the marble that looms over Carrara, it is the ever-lengthening shadow of Michelangelo. He even had a house here, to facilitate his visits, and although he seems to have struggled with the obduracy of the Carrarese temperament - it was a place of hard labour, after all, and attitudes could be hard too - it was, geologically, where the Italian Renaissance of the sculptors had its foundations. That tradition lives on in Carrara's very own perpetual stone age, and outside Michelangelo's house that very day a 10-day sculpture symposium had got under way, a symbol of the city's commitment to sculpture and the arts. Its lingering poverty, for some, confronting its artistic



Above: an historic photographic record of mine workers.

antithesis. It is still a working city, a place once essentially dependent on the mining of marble, now also a point of pilgrimage for those who would carve the stone, or learn, and for those who need the technical services that have accumulated in the city. As often as not, the local studios will be working on sculptures that will end up on the world art market with someone else's name on them. At the world-renowned

Carlo Nicoli studio, a body cast of supermodel Naomi Campbell is currently becoming a marble artifact as I write. I have seen marble sculptures produced from photographs and roughly shaped clay models, and participated last year in a symposium here when a half-ton sculpture was hoisted into the air where it hung throughout the event on the finest of wires, and under which the public walked and talked with complete confidence in the studio technicians. A visit to the Museo del Marmo, however, rightly balances the beauties of the sculpted and polished stone with images of damaged mine workers from Carrara's past, with their missing teeth and their weathered poverty of appearance*. Charles Dickens, on his travels here in the 19th century, wrote of the contrast between 'the exquisite shapes replete with grace' of the Carrara studios and how paradoxical that they 'should grow out of all this toil, and sweat and torture.'¹ Earlier that day I had spent some time with Sandro Lattore at Ponte di Ferro, one of the last of the master tool-making craftsmen who once worked for the mountain mining industry, making tools for every job and every kind and hardness of marble. There is little need for traditional carving tools in the industry today, as the machines eat out vast echoing caverns inside the mountains - hidden emptinesses that the tourists can pay five euros to see by minibus.

On my way out of the Piazza Alberica I saw again an old poster for the May Day anarchico parade, which yearly celebrates a tradition that also grew here with the mine workers. Along with the Communists, they advanced the rights and working conditions of the miners, when, as with all such industries, the companies themselves appeared to care somewhat less. There are still substantial Communist sympathies here in Carrara, as a result, and a bold anarchist tradition in a city that houses the central offices of the International of Anarchist Federations.

* See online at cavedimarmotours.com for a fine short film from the mid-20th century on a day in the life of the cavatori.

2.

My route took me through a small piazza adjacent to the duomo, and therefore, by chance, to a quartet of formally dressed musicians setting up. A little spring of culturally engineered hope, as if from nowhere. It was warm and balmy, and only right that there should be music. So I sat on the steps of the duomo to take it in, along with, initially, about 15-20 others. My knowledge of the classical repertoire was tested to its narrow limits, but the recital began with two vaguely familiar and meditative pieces - perhaps by Beethoven and Mozart, I was inclined to think - that we all enjoyed quietly, within ourselves. After that some trouble struck up with one of the violinists, who lost all sense of pitch. This set off a loss of coherence that momentarily made one wonder if the concert was an amateur one, an opportunity to test oneself in public perhaps, which after all is as important as the ability to play. Sheer nerve is necessary in this life. Certainly so in Italy, where you may find that there is no safety net below your acrobatics. It all settled down again, though, and a few Italian popular songs were offered as the night progressed.

It then became clear that the quartet was a masterly one, as a series of jazzy arrangements reworked old favourites, culminating in their rendition of 'O Sole Mio', with a set of repeated variations at the end that extended the song, again and again, each variation seemingly a reflection on its predecessor. Notes seemed to be born and then fused into variations of themselves, the experience becoming a series of timed interactions rather than discrete events. The complex subtleties of the players, as they undermined and toyed with the mathematical accuracies of the melodies in our heads, created a vivid contrast with the ten thousand tons of marble that is the duomo, a place that has heard nearly ten decades of music and song, and is none the better for it. (I should say, the duomo's interior speaks powerfully to me, and is the most wonderful instance of the beauties of sheer neglect, its austerity a reminder that God is not

Baroque). And speaking of something that is no better for the music, the first dog emerged with a wandering owner. The listeners around me were drawn to the interlopers, our acquired musical beatitude



Above: the interior of the Carrara cathedral.

contrasting with this somewhat miserable little event, this moment from the lives we have momentarily set aside. This chore. Whilst many of us had aimlessly wandered into the piazza and found a higher calling there, here was a man on the end of a lead, led wholly by the demands of a dog's bowels, his stumbling steps following those of the dog as he anticipated its erratic movement. It was a runt of an

animal, like so many dogs here in beautiful Carrara - a living insult, really - and it led its owner to the front of the quartet without as much as a turn of the head in curiosity. Its nose secured to the ground, it was about to find, there at this sublime moment, a smell that would trigger urination. I was sure I wasn't the only one that was quietly pleased that it wasn't a shit - the bowed back, the straining, the empty eyes. Then, legs splayed, it leaked there in the piazza, staring aimlessly around as it did so, its brain momentarily at a loss, an utterly empty vessel. Unfazed by the gross public exhibition he offered us, the owner led the dog on, its nose immediately re-attached to the piazza stones, the brain once again engaged in the endless inspection of what was erroneously regarded as its territory.

A moment later, a young woman entered the piazza in the opposite direction, at some speed. Her larger, but no less ugly pure black animal created a dog-shaped hole in the soft evening light as it dragged her at the end of the lead after a nose no less securely attached to the need for a stink. They dived through the piazza, - a comic duo I would like to see rush through the set of *'Waiting for Godot'*, momentarily adding to the nonsense - then down a narrow street, the dog's head attached now to the lower walls of the houses. An obsessive, focused performance indeed (by the dog), at the end of which, as they disappeared from view, one felt at a loss as to why any human being would take part in this little act of self-denial. But how impressively the dog knew exactly what mattered, exacting in its ability to dismiss so much as it charged by, including its place in the complex structure of the modern world that it so demonstrably failed to grasp. No striving for effect here. No wrong notes. There are dream dogs, of course, in all our heads. That supreme loyalty, that friend, that absolute commitment. These, here in the streets, were the real thing, though - unseeing, maladapted brutes snatched from their natural environments as pack animals, their lives reduced to the tantalizing power of a faint stain on the air - reminder to them of what is lost, no doubt, as players now in our fantastic *modus operandi*.

Back at the quartet, outside the duomo, I suddenly felt that I had misconceived everything as I saw Angelina approach and sit

down beside me. She was a visiting sculptor I'd been talking to at Ponte di Ferro, and she had been in a little hole-in-the-wall cafe over the way. We had come to an impasse earlier, at Ponte di Ferro, when I spoke of Pietrasanta, where she planned to visit, how it had too much art there, too many galleries. I can think of no reason for this provocation. I'd once worked at Tate Modern, and I'd carried on to speak about the sheer glut of work there too. Angelina had seemed momentarily nonplussed, before replying: "I suppose you need to make more visits. Take in a few things at a time, then return again." A glut of galleries was clearly not a problem for her. And for a moment I thought that I was perhaps talking to a big dumb girl. She certainly was big, perhaps a stone and a half overweight, and I think lingering somewhere in the back of my mind was the thought that there was something fundamentally wrong with this. But, more like, setting aside this example of my bad nature, I was troubled somehow by the idea of art as a consumer end-product, as a collection of completed objects for consumption in galleries: looking as eating. Perhaps it was consumption that drove her. Visit Pietrasanta, enjoy a meal in the piazza; enjoy some art in the galleries.

So I ranted on about art as transformation, an idea I think I may have invented on the spot, for the occasion; about how artists transformed their relationship to the world through their work. Like slang, I'd said. We do not need new words for ones that already function perfectly adequately but we invent them anyway, as though our affair with the world around us had to be continually renewed. It's the opposite of the naming process in science, I said, always on the lookout for an excuse to attack the whole scientific project, - taxonomy underpins everything science achieves. Take away this elaborate naming process and the whole scientific adventure collapses. Language, I had argued, is unable to maintain a stable relationship with its subjects, in part because language itself is not stable, any more than its subjects. The human mind would simply die were we to apply, in actual life, a taxonomy so rigid and concrete as the sciences assert. The validity of words, beyond narrowly functioning nouns, has been abandoned by the scientific community, their inaccuracy

replaced with mathematics, with number. Your humanity, I pronounced, is now founded on a delusion, it would seem. Your words are the medium of an idiot. In fact, and rightly, our experience of the world is always slipping the words with which we try to grasp it. Taken too seriously words kill their objects and replace them with dead symbols. That's science, I'd argued: a complex interplay between dead symbols and the data you can generate from the interplay. It is the desire to commit suicide in the form of an academic discipline.* This problem applies to the visual arts too, I'd continued. (By now, you will be aware, how words can run away with you). There is a metaphorical space in the conscious mind that words cannot equate, an ambiguity in how we experience. You sense it now as we talk, the words like dumb stone blocks, trucked down the Apuans in a crude sequence. Empson was right when he demonstrated that ambiguity is at the heart of the human relationship to the world, not only in language but in the nature of the mind's workings.² The transformative moment in art is when we redeem the world in the teeth of the taxonomies we carry around with us. We return it to indeterminacy. There is a transformative moment for the viewer too, when everything is open and alive again. The thing is, galleries make a living by offering you objects that are mesmerizing in their objectivity and seeming completion. They are doctrinal. And if you have entered a gallery and found that hum of transformation, maybe you should turn and leave. Before the object seduces you into believing that it offers you finality. At that very instant, get out. Take that moment out with you and live better for it. The art has done its work. It's there that the art is, somewhere between the sculpture and the person you were a moment ago. Almost nowhere at all. I think I finished with Gombrich, who once wrote about how 'there really is no such thing as Art. There are only artists.'³ This has seldom been taken on board by observers,

* *It interests me that the objectivist mathematics of classical physics continue to be under attack, just as the use of ordinary language once was, as outlined by Alexander Wendt: 'whereas mathematical symbols in classical physics correspond to properties of real material objects and forces, in quantum physics they represent only the probabilities of finding certain properties when they are measured.' This is a significant compromise of the 'truth' claims of classical maths. See 'Quantum Mind and Social Science' by Alexander Wendt. Cambridge University Press.*

or seemingly, by many artists, and the myth of the art object has grown monstrously.

Naturally, this kind of talk just annoys people. It certainly annoys me. But Angelina had come over to sort of make up. She began, "I think I know what you mean by transformation, but I was wondering if that is an account of just about everything human beings do. Isn't it what a nice bottle of wine does, what wit achieves in conversation, what some guy does when he creates a new business? The transformative is what the brain does. It's building its landscape, its field of vision". Angelina, as you can see, is actually a bright girl. So, our conversation started up again here in the piazza.

"Yes", I returned. I lingered for a moment, unsure whether I wanted to do this any more. "You're right. The brain knows, deep down, that reality is a trick we play on ourselves, and as human beings we persist in disrupting its functions. We don't really want it. So, a glass of wine is a mind-changing act, a kind of sabotage; a witty conversation is a creative act, and I can imagine the thrill of creating a new business. But many everyday activities that are not art, like business, depend for their functionality on the objectification of the world. The world around us is built on the tyranny of the concrete noun and the seeming absoluteness of its relation to the world. Only when we have a collection of names and a set of defined objects that we attach to those names can we run a business. No matter how creative it all is, it is founded on a clunky world of definable brute objects. That's sculpture too. Things that can be priced. A falsehood. A taxonomy writ large across the face of consciousness. I've been known to criticize the sciences for only using that part of the brain that seeks flat, linear, shallow conclusions. But its bed-mate, Technological Development, perfects this, as does business life, as does the gallery. It is the attachment to the indefinable that distinguishes and characterizes consciousness itself, and it's art's difference that it seeks to offer that fluid, nameless non-thing. That's what we should be buying when we get something from a gallery. Not the manipulated block itself, but the transitory, evanescent aura that the artist has attached to it. That's why you can walk out of the gallery with the art,

without buying *anything*. That's also why Michelangelo could never have really meant that the subject of the sculpture was waiting there in the block for the carver to find. There is nothing at all in the stone until a human mind has added that mental thing. All the rest is just manipulation. Manual skill. And that's why we no longer believe in manual skill – it invites us to miss the point. It's a trick, like that fridge in the shop window is a trick. We all fall for it, but it's just going to tie us in deeper. Isn't it?"

I took a breath. 'Virginia Woolf sums it up for me: 'I insubstantize', she wrote, 'wilfully to some extent, distrusting reality – its cheapness'⁴. I looked away. It was also Woolf who said that there was something faithless about the human mind, maybe something we should be fighting, of course, if we are to get anything done. "Can I stop this now?" I said to her.

She smiled at me, as to a pet dog. And we returned to the humid night, and to a drink at the bar. In the bar there were the usual artists and makers that frequent this piazza, and there was laughter, talk, good conversation, stories being told, but nothing was being said about art.

3.

The next morning, heading up to the studio, I walked the length of the Via Carriona. Historically this street, that winds right up to the mountains, had been used by wagons and then trucks for the transportation of marble from the quarries down to the commercial stone yards and the port, some sense of which is in the name 'Carriona' and, incidentally, 'Carrara'*. And there are stories of the dust and pollution of the process, as these massive vehicles, as they have become, with their 20-tonne loads, trekked from the mountains to the sea endlessly supplying a world-wide appetite. A perpetual pall of dust apparently lay upon the city. Over the years, new routes have been

* *An fascinating essay could be written on these nouns alone, and the result would be a reminder of the taxonomies of active everyday language and its depth, richness and creativity.*

cut around Carrara and more recently through the mountain above Ponte di Ferro, (and a truck shower point to depress the dust on each and every journey), with the result that the street now carries a constant stream of Pandas and Picassos wending their way past the main city, to Massa, the sea and the very pleasant coastal resort of Paradiso. Same journey, then, but with purchasing and pleasure replacing need. It is still a working street, however, the well-heeled having chosen to keep their distance, and its cafes are for locals to eat and drink, my favourite now being a little smokers' cafe, occupied only by working men stopping for a quick espresso and a fag. I'm almost proud of being accepted there, being a stranger. But they have seen me coming back from work white with marble dust. They can't help but acknowledge the marble worker, the working man I might be.

The trattoria up the way is very different. I'm a foreigner and my every visit is a suspicious event, the more so, I think, for my stumbling attacks on the Italian language. (In Carrara every other person will offer you a different way of pronouncing the same words. I've come to think that there is a perpetual conflict between an official Italian language at work among the young and better educated, and a more primitive Carrarino dialect. In one cafe I like, one of the older attendants insists on correcting me daily for what I have just learnt at another cafe in the same piazza). On up the road is my favourite bread-maker, a tiny shop that sells only Italian-styled breads utterly fresh from the oven. Wet with olive oil these are strong, rugged salty breads, full of flavour, and good teeth are needed to get to the joy of eating. These breads offer a profound pleasure that can redeem the simplest of lunches - bread and wine, with perhaps a little pesto, cheese and olives.

At Ponte de Ferro there were three sculptors at work that day. Dania immediately hailed me from across the marble-strewn outdoor work space. She was sitting with Andeon, a sculptor I was about to meet for the first time. This in contrast to Dania, a Scandinavian enigma who has been living in Carrara now for three years or so, having given up a teaching career in her thirties, in her own country, to pursue a life of art, here in the most demanding and isolated of art

environments. She is one of the many puzzling foreign characters around Carrara for whom 'a terrible beauty' has been born, it seems, when they fall to the lure of art, an impulse that appears, on the face of it, to be a kind of Godless blind faith. I love all of them, mind you, because they have abandoned the collateral damage of ordinary life, and I hate it because they are often lost souls taking that inner insubstantial voice as their guide through this underworld. In the heights of an Italian summer, working in Carrara is being in Paradise, with the carving itself, the studio community, and its shared lunches, wine and good conversation. In the winter, living alone in a small apartment, with the city effectively closed down, and when the only life worth living is the communal one of the family, it is nothing, nothing at all.

Andeon was working on two pieces, when I got a chance to see what he was doing. He himself is a bit of an enigma as well, as it turns out. He seemed initially to be a native of Italy, with his flawless conversational Italian, and then, when he realized that I was an English speaker, his fine, fluent English. Add this to his native Serbian, where he actually originated, and we have something approaching the average itinerant Carrara artist: bright, buzzing, talented, an art gypsy. Perhaps a past student of the *accademia* here, citizen of the world, entirely disengaged from the pursuits of the ordinary world, and sculptural exhibitionist, as we shall see.

The first piece he showed me was being carved from a very fine piece of statuario marble. I say 'carved', in fact he had been taking an angle grinder to the block and seemed to be in the process of creating a ragged cliff-like structure, made up of the rhythmic lines of the action of the grinder itself as it melted the stone away in sweeping curves. I sensed that there may be a fine line, with this piece, between success and a heap of rubble. But, as if to find a tribute to his vision in what may simply be carelessness with good stone, I wondered if this was not the way with art: rescuing the work from failure and formlessness is a perpetual tension that often cripples the imagined simple pleasures of creation. So, tomorrow he may have arrived at something wonderful. Unlike some sculptors I have met I live in hope,

not just for myself, but for every other sculptor as well. For the failure of that other sculptor is a very visible sign of how hard the road is, how we may, horror of horrors, not even agree what the road is, and how all hope may, one day, have to be abandoned.

My mind is uneasy, though, at times, at the thought of the vast number of talented people here who are committed to the struggle with this old medium, this marble. They echo my own sense that what I do is an historical anachronism, the present moment given up to a form of expression from yesterday. There is just too much potential for



Above: work completed at Studio Ponte di Ferro.

dead metaphors and hackneyed forms in marble. Its history functions like a shroud laid upon the creative act. I have come to feel that whatever you do you need to offer it *in* the medium, not *through* it. Modernity demands expression in the equivalent materials, that is one of the lessons of 20th century practice. If the medium is mere vehicle, then the art is false. We must agree that the medium is equal to the message or we will end up with the old Christian dichotomy - of a fallen world of matter upon which the human drama is enacted. Spirit over body; idea over material. There is no meaning that sits in superiority to the medium, the relation of medium to artist being, perhaps, as the relation of brain to thought.

In most of my own work, minor figure that I am among the *maestri intagliatore* working here, I pursue the relation of what I am making to a larger modernist heritage that, from its beginnings in Cezanne and the Cubists, sought to recognize and validate the material, and to engage with radically new cultural and intellectual developments that lay quite beyond the object itself. A kind of cultural matrix, such that even I do not know the extent of the knowledge that the work exploits. Not being in control is a foundation stone in the arts

today. This is why the artist who ploughs new ground is also on safer ground - the world is redeemed in this breaking of the mould, just as art itself is reclaimed from the oblivion of its yesterdays. I have stood aghast at times at other people's failure to see anything in contemporary art, or acknowledge the artist's creative right to follow his own road, the matrix of his own understanding of things. The artist and the observer - roads taken in parallel, with no junction, no meeting of minds.

Lunchtime saw us all having pannini and wine to break up the day, and draw us back to other people, to each other, and the calming presence of a clear sky over mountains. We drifted off, then, to the Piazza Alberica for an espresso (simply a 'cafe' in Italy), where the third miserable act of the canine drama worked itself out. Sitting al fresco at the Bar Leon d'Oro, sipping the only cappuccino on display



Above: the Piazza Alberica facing towards the Bar Leon d'Oro.

(In Italy they say you can tell a tourist by the cappuccino, as Italians only drink them at breakfast), alongside sturdy cafe-drinking folk, there were the usual wanderers, sometimes walking with deliberation enough to suggest they were going somewhere, and those perennially on the ends of leads.

It was busy, and the sudden uproar of an hysterical dog broke the conversational tone. A young woman was dragged from her seat as her dog, on lead, tore after another dog it has seen some distance

away. The yelping neediness of the animal was compelling, and the dilemma of the groaning girl drew us all. With a stumbling effort she restrained the animal, and after settling, it all began once more, moments later, with the entry of another dog. This time the girl, on her feet again, restrained her dog by wrapping the lead around its neck to add to the collar. The dog itself seemed to be in hysterics now, barking and choking at the same time, reaching the highest note on its register - a helpless, perfectly defined peal. This was utter, driven need, quite enthralling in its unselfconscious purity, and entirely beyond anything that could be satisfied anywhere, let alone here in the polite scenario of the Bar Leon d'Oro. A voice called to the girl, the sympathies of the crowd now on the move, saying "You'll strangle that dog", whilst I quietly thought, Yes, strangle it. There is really no need for this. At which point the dog was released from the lead and dashed off, only to seek, it seemed, a polite nose-to-arse encounter with its opposite number. A puzzle, really, that so little satisfaction was necessary after such hysterics. So much need and so little needed. I felt almost tearful at the implications of the idea. I was reminded of the poem by Mark Doty, that I had in my bag, about a display of mackerel in a shop:

'They don't care they're dead
and nearly frozen,
just as, presumably,
they didn't care that they were living.'⁵

I can stand in awe of the mackerel, and its steely, multifaceted armoury of burnished blues and greens, as I still do of a hawk roosting in the Ted Hughes poem⁶, whose 'manners are tearing off heads', and for whom 'No arguments assert my right.' Doty sees something in this 'universe/of shimmer' that is the mackerel:

'- would you want
to be yourself only,
unduplicatable, doomed
to be lost? They'd prefer,

plainly, to be flashing participants,
multitudinous.'

There is no drawing the mackerel, or hawk, out of itself, and drowning it in sentiment and stupidity, as we have with the dog. No faux-friendships clutter our perception of these aliens in our midst.

Whilst there I told them about a dream I had had the previous night. I'd gone out to a bar to buy something, I can't remember what, but nothing to do with bars. The price had seemed expensive, but the barman said that I wouldn't have to pay that amount as I was a customer. In the dream my wife then wanted a computer, so she went to the bar and they told her that it would cost £1200, which was way too much for her. To which the barman responded, "But you won't have to pay that price, because you are a customer". Later I got a bag of cement, for almost nothing, because I was a customer. There was a moment of silence, and smiling quizzical faces. Vanna, a young sculptor who had joined us a few moments beforehand, said: "So, that's pretty good then. By just being a customer you get things cheaper! Which you would be anyway. An ideal world, seems to me!" To which everyone smiled once more. "Yeah, I like this dream", I said, still puzzled by it. "I'm making too much of it, I know. But we seem to have separated the commercial object from its value, and everything is determined by people hanging around in bars!"

"So, when are you joining the Anarchists, Sam?", someone asked.

By the time we returned to the studio, we were ready for work ("Lavoro, Lovoro", as Boutros Romhein would sing out across his studio site, on a regular basis, on up the road from here), but I found myself intrigued by Dania's application to the fine lines of the small abstract sculpture she was working. She had been attacking one particular elegant line yesterday, and all this morning, and applied herself once again. Her application bothered me. For as long as I have known her she has prevaricated about getting the work finished. Last time I was here, she had spent the whole two weeks I was around working the minor lines and forms of the base of a comic (and risibly cute) marble of a dog. I recollect wondering if this would ever

get finished and if it did how on earth she could hope to draw an income commensurate with the time spent.

More important, for the moment, however, was Andeon's other sculptural 'event'. He outlined it to me, over another espresso, as I saw that the initial sculpture had developed to completion, and was now a flowing, swirling ragged structure, a microcosm that echoed with immensity. I expressed approbation, although a few days later I heard two major studio sculptors cringe at the waste of good marble. "I found that beautiful block for him and he did that to it", one concluded.

Be that as it may, Andeon went on to show me the cube of marble that he would use for his upcoming public project. The stone is to be placed in a black interior, with seating for an audience. Andeon will proceed to attack the block with an angle grinder and disc, gradually reducing it to fragments and then to dust, in the process filling the air and tainting the black interior with a white that, with time, develops into a kind of entropic grey. Now, for all of us who frequent sculpture studios, dust is part of the environment. It's a pollutant that we have to guard against as we work, with masks and safety glasses. Indoors it covers everything in a fine white film, and outside we have to manage the clouds of dust streaming from angle grinders out into the local Carrara streets, and the consequent complaints of residents. At the end of a working day, sculptors use an air hose to blast away the dust from their clothing and hair, and it is a well-practised joke to compare them to bakers as they tramp home through the Carrara streets, only partly cleaned-up. However, I call the dust a pollutant, but it is in the main calcium carbonate, in itself an entirely harmless substance that is, by the way, stripped from the mountains by multinational companies in order that you can have your pack of indigestion remedies at hand and your toothpaste suitably gritty. (It is a commonplace in Carrara to be told that it is not the artists who are stripping the mountains, but the international conglomerates).

In Andeon's work, however, the dust takes centre stage and acquires a new significance as part of the making of the work. The creative process is reversed, the action of sculpting reducing the cube

from substantiality to formlessness and airy nothing. Paradoxically, as the destruction of the block is carried out, the dust becomes sculpture. This is Andeon's creative gambit and his 'Creation'. For the work, for a sensibility such as mine, takes on the analogical backdrop of the Biblical event, circuitously returning form to 'chaos', the created world back to dust, offering, in the process, a conflicted reversal of a dark present. Only a very modern sensibility could tender us a work of art that does not survive its own creation and leaves its audience fleeing its completion. My admiration for what Andeon proposed here stems from my being less and less impressed by the outcomes of art, as you may have already gathered, so that this work was a pleasure to me. It was about the process of creating; the sculpture was wholly bound into the process, and when the process finished, so did the sculpture. Literally, it was finished. It was also in the right material: the destruction of marble is a clearing of the ground, a refusal of art's establishment, something subversive, as with Rachel Whiteread, for instance, who made casts of the spaces under tables and elevated them, redeeming and democratizing them into positive presences.

Naturally, I didn't expect Andeon to think any of this. My Calvinistic Scots-Irish upbringing, reinforced in some measure by my literary education, with its focus on the great tradition from Dante and Milton to Eliot and Beckett, asserts a cosmology and symbolism I absorbed initially as a child of the North of Ireland. I suspect that 'dust', for many, simply cannot be as meaningful, as rich, as I'm capable of making it. After all, in my own defence, what would the mind be doing were not to be doing just this? What would the value be of recognizing dust as mere dust? A mistake surely, equal in a sense to seeing the finished sculpture without the event it was. Nothing is just what it is, nothing at all, and I'm sure that Andeon, in that complex mental world he inhabits, sees something of all this.

By mid-afternoon Dania and I had stopped for an espresso, and returning to where she was working I could see that she was still refining that particular line of this small wave-like marble. It looked like a perfect line already, and had done so this morning. And yesterday. I asked her about this, and she said that she just wanted to get it right.

Sitting down to drink (and a little wired by now, as I usually am by this point of an Italian afternoon) I wondered if she knew of Plato.

She said she didn't really, so I introduced her to the thought that the material world we occupy is made up of imperfection and inexactitude - a sad state of affairs really - and that the primary forms that give identity to each of these imperfectly individualized things around us lies, in some sense, beyond this flawed world or perhaps



Above: a marble tile cutting company, seen from the Miseglia.

only, as I would argue, in the mind. So, we can have many roughly circular things in nature, for instance, the wheel of a car, a potter's wheel, or a circular relief carving, such as we know from Michelangelo, but they are not perfect in their manifestations. Even Michelangelo failed here. All these things, I'd proposed, approximate to the circle as a form, without ever achieving exactitude, which resides only in the idea of it. Now, I smiled to Dania: you may be trying to achieve a Platonic line here, a line whose perfection cannot be realized, because it lies beyond the limits of our capacity to create in material form. I'd abandon this work now. We were both smiling by this stage in the exposition. If it's not perfect, I said, that's OK. My eye tells me it's done. Your mind seeks a line that your eye will never see. To which she laughed loudly, and fully. She liked the idea, and then promised me that she would only spend another hour or so on it, which was all she needed, and then finish. I shook my head, and she laughed again, and as I walked away I looked back at this lovely woman who sat nursing her marble, fearful it seems of abandoning it to reality, as she returned her gaze to its always impending completion. Carving is not a means to an end, I felt, and here was the

evidence. Dania, secreted away in Carrara, lives in a suspended state, and her pieces speak of the relation she would have between her ideal and real lives, with one difference: the final works she makes achieve an integration and wholeness created by Dania herself, in the visible absence of such all around. Hackneyed forms, perhaps, but the soul is calmed in the presence of the pieces, and the world given definition. There is a moment, in their company, when I just don't feel so, well, wired. Perhaps she is intent on living, as a character from Virginia Woolf once proposed, in 'that far more severe and exalted world, which was also so much simpler than this'.⁷ But my fear is that the finished sculpture will still be a relic, a fossil. It will lie at the end, a full stop, process having become product. The sculpture, one day, had to become an object out there in the world, and it was this that she delayed.

Later, early evening, in Carrara, we talked about Richard Long. Adrien and I were in a cafe, my having visited his studio in central Carrara, when Antonio came along with Dania. He is the President of one of the studios I work at, and Dania had been speaking to him about the thoughts I had offered earlier that day. These conversations jolly along our wanderings through the streets of Carrara, especially as there are always so many sculptures on public show to re-ignite the artist in us lest we forget. He began by pointing out that Dania's line was an edge, not a line, the edge of a plane. We all smiled at this. He went on to mention how Richard Long, my 'compatriot' as he put it, was very good on all this. We agreed immediately, but to Adrien's obvious puzzlement. I'm regularly surprised by my visits to sculptors in Europe to find that they often don't appear to know artists who seem, to me, to have been part of modern art history. Standing at the end of the Western Tradition, there seem to be many great contributors to those final phases of Modernist practice. Yet, when I am abroad I find that it is other, more local artists who are seen to be the inheritors of this great tradition, and not the ones I know. Not one historic line, then, but many.

It turned out that Antonio and I were fans of the early work of Long, in particular, when Long would create various simple linear and

geometric forms, such as lines, spirals and circles, by laying stone or by walking. So, a line could be created in a field by simply treading a line of grass flat or by picking a line of daisies, leaving a negative space where the daisies once were. With a more complex work, two parallel lines could be tramped in a field, with the result that there could be two lines, or alternatively there could be just one, the centre line being a kind of optical illusion created by the presence of the other two. We laughed about how the lines, in any case, may all be illusions in Long's work: they may in fact be planes, given their breadth. (It's an old artistic conundrum: when is a line a line and when a plane?). Some of Long's lines are created by placing a stone perhaps every 300 metres along, say, a 10 mile trek but it would not be a visible line in any practical sense. It would also gradually disintegrate as time and incident would move the stones. Other works include a line across undulating countryside that becomes exactly and perfectly straight at a certain angle, the angle in fact that stems from the artist's viewpoint when the work was created. All these lines, for Antonio, were as lines in our lives. We all recognize the lines of vines crossing the Italian countryside but each vine is a few metres from its neighbour. So what makes the line? Well, the presence of the human eye again, and he shrugged with palms to the sky in that Italian manner. You love the coast around here, Sam, Antonio continued. There are the coastlines and tide lines, lines that fracture and break up, and as far as a coastline is concerned, quite impossible to define close up, when you are actually there. All these things are evidence of the human presence, and of the human mind creating what we call 'knowledge'. There is also the line that is a sentence on the page, he went on, with a smile. There is the line in a logical argument, that may seem to lead us somewhere, or if Wittgenstein was correct, maybe nowhere at all. Stop for a moment, he continued, and the world we presume disappears under scrutiny.

Dania seldom involved herself in this kind of discussion, but she was interested in the parallels with literature, the narrative lines that stretch from beginning to end in novels as though events and lives were strung together in that manner, when in fact the writer takes bits

of this and that, elements of this person and that, and creates the illusion of a simple sequence. It's the novel's version of single point perspective. Perhaps this explains, she proposed, why the detective story is so popular and the 'literary' novel not: the latter is written with an awareness of the deceits of narrative lines, as if such an awareness was beneficial and the falsity of these lines important to understand. It is artifice that drives detective fiction, she said, not art. I wondered whether perhaps poetry evaded this trap most effectively. For although it is written in lines, it offers the full complexity of language freed from servitude to some limited, narrowing linear purpose and is not so completely trapped by the unconscious shaping that is grammatical convention and the forward thrust of the sentence. We cannot go to the modern essay for truth either, I'd said, expecting frowns from those around me, any more than the detective story. In the essay the demands of saying something narrow and specific involves the editing of the actual, if you believe in such a thing, or of consciousness, if you are a poet. By these crass means we objectify the world, I felt, and make it manageable. We are, after all, evolved creatures. The concrete world we witness around us is, in the end, the result of limitations set by us. It's the narrow product of our biological functionalism, or our need to survive, and by contrast art is our 'exploded view' of things. I may really have gone too far when I concluded out loud that the objects of the ordinary world are consciousness fossilized, and everywhere around us the living moment is being pinned to a board like a butterfly specimen as we speak. It works, so we all do it. Every animal has an eye that evolved to define a target; it is the artist who refuses to let the world shape up that solidly.

Over the next few days I worked on at the studio, in the main cutting up some fine 'Michelangelo white' to transport home, using a wonderful little box-making company just down the road, and then a small transport office in the Avenza district of Carrara that arranges for the material to arrive right at my doorstep in England, sometimes before I have even got home. Cutting stone is a joy in itself, without the demands of finding line and form. And with the sun shining the studio artists were all at work, coming and going, as were visiting sculptors, some from other parts of Europe and, in one instance, from America. Lunchtimes were busy, therefore, and full of anecdote and talk of art adventures across Europe, of symposia attended and works completed in the far reaches of the continent. These artists lived unfettered lives and the lunchtime get-together was a loosening of focus they sought regularly. Talk was a kind of release that allowed their creative needs to fly on nothing for a while, on the open fields of conversation.

That day they spoke of work commissioned by well known artists, for sums that would, with the Midas-like signature of the commissioning sculptor, increase ten-fold in value. These discussions could narrow suddenly, however, stirring one or two fine sculptors to ire, and tirades are encountered every so often about the poverty of contemporary and post-modern artists, working without traditional skills, dependent on others for the realization of what are sometimes seen, by these artists, as mere projects, perhaps not art at all. One particular Californian artist was oddly severe that day on modern trends in art, which puzzled me given that he is a recognized international maker of modern art in his own manner, albeit with an unselfconscious faux classical bent (that exploited, by the way, a set of carving skills second to none. Naturally this might, in itself, disqualify him from being deemed post-modern). His work spoke insistently of a classical elegance drawn, regrettably for me, from the kitsch of the modern fashion model as much as ancient Greek

models. So I was puzzled enough by his frustration to ask him what he felt about those lovely young girls, walking the corridors of art colleges when he was a young lecturer, with their feminine frizzy hair and frilly skirts, combined with coarse denim jacket and masculine heavy boots. Yes, we all agreed, with some amusement, we loved that. So where, I said, is your problem? These, I proposed, were the diverse aesthetics of the post-modern era, out there in the streets. We can jamb bizarre contrasts together and come up with a synthesis that denies the claim to singularity in the styles used. Singularity itself becomes an assertion, a power-grab even.

We talked about the changes we had all seen, but the American sculptor had a point to make. His condemnation of a lot of contemporary practice took a psychological turn. In effect, many of these so-called artists, as he would have it, had convinced themselves that they were making art because of an aspect of the mind that allows us to convince ourselves of almost anything. I must admit to having felt this in many contexts in my life, but it is a hard position to take, I said, without it also being applicable to your own position. Your view of art may be what is wrong here, not those you criticize. You may yourself be in the grip of a conviction that blinds you to the truth. I smiled to avoid the point being taken as more than a witticism, and the sculptor just threw up a hand, in a gesture of frustration. It reminded me that I really must read up on the history of the word 'art' and its applications, particularly as history had, for many thousands of years, seemed to have done without it. I have noticed my own use of the word vary and stumble. Not so very long ago I caught myself regarding Michelangelo's work as 'statuary' rather than art, only on closer inspection of my own prejudices coming to see that I had got to the point where only art freed from its traditional uses in religion, ritual and representation in general satisfied my criteria any more. So that was art of the twentieth century, specifically from abstraction on, a point when art had effectively chosen to float free from narrative. And I liked the fact that many so-called abstract artists have taken to calling their work 'non-objective', a denial that is close to my heart.

Angelo, the American artist, however, as he returned to argument, reminded me uncomfortably of myself at these moments. Michael Oakeshott, the British writer and thinker, once wrote of the conversation as a form, and how 'each voice is prone to *superbia*, that is, an exclusive concern with its own utterance, which may result in identifying the conversation with itself and its speaking as if it were only speaking to itself.'⁸ For me, reality, as Carlos Rovelli has argued, is best imagined as interaction.⁹ When we set forth with an idea, we begin a dialogue. The idea itself does not contain its own validity. That is an illusion any one position possesses within the dialogue. That day Angelo found agreement among the group, nevertheless, although agreement among artists such as these can be misleading. Their natural instinct, despite the bad feeling of the moment, is to withhold judgement. Argumentative closure is not an aesthetic driver.

At lunch the next day, Marchello struck up on a similar theme. His tirade brought laughter and good humour to the get-together. He is a performer, a 'ranter' with the class of a stand-up comic, but underneath, however, was clearly an undercurrent of profound rejection of art made in modern materials, in modern ways, and without a clear connection to the great carving traditions that sit ominously towering over every Italian sculptor. Even odder was his own practice, which seemed to me to be entirely post-modern. His astonishing multitudinous flower carvings, in a Baroque style, offered delicate ornamental arrangements interspersed uncomfortably with human (or animal) skeletal bones that protruded from the arrangements instead of leaves. In local galleries in Carrara you could see multi-media pieces by Marchello, combining wood, furniture, carving and musical instruments - Joseph Cornell released from the confines of the box. Other pieces were entirely in wood, carved roughly and evocatively in an almost expressionist manner, quite different from the flower and bone pieces. This seemed to me to be a contemporary sensibility, exploiting historic styles and enervated by multiplicity. It challenged the certainties of a singular artistic self embodied in a single style through bizarre juxtapositions of images and extant cultural objects. No longer tied to a single tradition, a

nomad let loose in art history. A genuinely post-Wittgensteinian 'I'. In his book (Everyone has a 'book' in Carrara, by the way, almost always self-published and usually self-serving drivel concocted by an inflated 'I') he refers to his post-Punk allegiances and the musical and other influences that inform what he does. I liked this guy and his work but, as his book hints at, there is an everyday world out there screaming for clarity and understanding rather than his art. To sell his work the book offers a verbal map it needed but should never have had. And he has a little bit of that frustrated world within him now as he struggles to make good.

The sculptors that day, though, reminded me of a lecture I attended by novelist Will Self in London some time ago, a writer who has interested me for many years and whose public persona almost rests on having a point of view. His dismissal of post-modernism on that evening was repeated here in Carrara, a dismissal that echoes around Western culture in a quite baffling way. It seemed to me that these guys have misunderstood something somewhere. The world has already *gone* post-modern. It is everywhere in the culture - in the music, in the clothing, in the cinema, in the architecture, in the politics, and in the fact that ordinary people today have achieved sovereignty over their own lives. They decide. They 'choose', to use the political jargon that itself mirrors the cultural climate of the age. There is now a multiplicity of roads, populated by individuals with their own stones dropped every 300 yards. The young are creating new lines of movement, without a second thought, as of right. It's done. There's nothing to be resisted here. All we can do now is try to grasp the implications.

For the next week I travelled down to the coast, to Paradiso, Marinella and then along the beaches and across inlets through to the Comunes di Sarzana and Emelia. The sun was shimmering gold in the sky, and the beaches clear of holidaymakers who are, in high summer, lined up in rented regular rows as far as the eye can see, like a kind of mass return to the womb. The sea swung around to coast towards a very fine estuario, its banks studded with the purest of white and fine little ristoranti. Along the way I came across a series of

circular stone and concrete platforms set just out from the beaches, with walkways out to them. Here was a version of Richard Long on



Above: one of the stone and cement circles reaching out to sea at Commune di Sarzana.

the edges of the Ligurian Sea, a Brutalist version, it has to be said. I had a few books in my backpack, and some days I took to a bike, following the thoughts of Joseph Cornell, not on art but on transport: 'Walking produces fatigue', he proposed, 'the car takes too much for granted, but on your bicycle you are both flying and part of the world.'¹⁰ The roads around the coast here are for flying, flat and perfect, and cyclists buzz along, only just about attached to everything and everyone around. Of course, it is important, as Will Self once wrote, not to remain sunk in your own solipcism as you go¹¹. I can recall mile upon mile of walking and cycling, up and down the Devonshire lanes and coastlines, all utterly ruined by the obsessive in me working and re-working problems in my head, to the point when I might have been better at home where I could abandon completely the pretence to being out and about. Now I'm more determined, and I can go for substantial distances without my brain kicking in to ruin it all.

Today, I gave myself 5 minutes, though, when I received an email from an artist in Cornwall, asking me to participate in a project. It was a kind of Feminist artwork, that was in part focused on the statue of Viscount Falkland in St Stephen's Hall in the Houses of

Parliament in London, the same statue that one of the suffragettes had chained herself to in 1915 and was damaged in the process of detaching her by force of law. The damaged item was a spur, and it is to be re-made in marble and displayed. At the end of the initial project, it will be ground to dust and mixed into the paint of the artist's other projects, the spur to also become a tattooed image on the heels of the artist and some friends. It was a fine idea, with a strong feminist statement in the de-spurring of the male. That inspired the desire for an espresso and a feeling of pleasure at the form the work takes: from marble made, then damaged, to its renewal, and then to dust again, and from dust to new form. Damage and renewal; entropy resisted. Dust, not toothpaste.

So, to the bike again. And I'm sometimes horrified by the thought of the poverty of lives not lived like this, in the saddle as the line of the road stretches and warps ahead, just as I know that other lives have no option but to achieve something like this, however it's done. Each day that week I

returned from the coast to some event in Carrara in the evening, to ballet in the grounds of the biblioteca, an Italian folk band that sounded like it was Irish right



Above: blocks of marble at the port awaiting shipment.

down to the fiddle, or to Canova at the newly renovated Palazzo Cucchiniari. I ended the week walking the beaches again with the Irish fiddler Martin Hayes's 'The Lark's March'¹² on repeat on my ipod, feet labouring in the heavy sand and my concrete Richard Longs with their terrible stability on the edge of the sea. In truth, I realize now that I should have thrown myself upon its shore, that we should offer

ourselves, burning upwards into the great mouth of the sky, where at least the lark is in its heaven¹³.

A point of clarification: all references to individuals are transformed by the fictional demands of the essay and should not be deemed to be portraits in any way. In recognition of this, the names of most individuals have been changed, with the exception of Boutros Romhein. All conversations are similarly workings and re-workings rather than representative of individual events. Everything else is as I understand it and experienced it.

Notes:

- 1 Charles Dickens. *Pictures From Italy*. Penguin Classics. 1998.
- 2 Ernst Gombrich *The Story of Art*. Phaidon. 1950.
- 3 William Empson. *Seven Types of Ambiguity*. New Directions. 1966.
- 4 Virginia Woolf. *A Writer's Diary (1918-1941)* e-artnow.
- 5 Mark Doty 'A Display of Mackerel' in *Atlantis*. Cape Poetry. 1995.
- 6 Ted Hughes. 'Hawk Roosting' in *Lupercal*. Faber & Faber. 1960.
- 7 Virginia Woolf. 'A Simple Melody' in *The Complete Shorter Fiction of Virginia Woolf*. Harcourt. 1985.
- 8 Michael Oakeshott. 'The Voice of Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind' in *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays*. Liberty Fund Inc. 1959.
- 9 Carlos Rovelli. *Seven Lessons on Physics*. Penguin. 2014.
- 10 Joseph Cornell. *Theater of the Mind: Selected Letters*. Ed. Mary Ann Caws. Thames and Hudson. 1994.
- 11 Will Self. *Walking To Hollywood*. Bloomsbury. 2010.
- 12 Martin Hayes. 'The Lark's March', from the album *Under The Moon*. Green Linnet label.
- 13 Intertextual reference is made to Lars Iyer's *Dogma*. Melville House. 2011.

The woman and child of the cover is from the Alberto Meschi memorial in the lovely Piazza Alberto Meschi, in central Carrara. Over the years I have been bemused by the purity and cleanliness of this image, on a memorial that has in every other respect become ingrained with natural atmospheric pollutants.

Sam Bell 2017

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