

Critical Essay

Backwards

The concept of *work in regress*, formulated by Claudio Costa (Tirana, June 22, 1942 – Genoa, July 2, 1995) in the late 1970s and central to his artistic practice throughout the following decade, stands as one of the most radical elaborations of the relationship between art, material culture, and history in the second half of the twentieth century. Unlike the idea of progress - understood as linear and accumulative advancement - *work in regress* marks a movement back to origins, not as pathological regression, but as a critical gesture capable of disarming dominant forms of modern rationality. It is, above all, an archaeological and symptomatological process: a form of research that takes crisis as its foundational and operative condition - crisis of form, of the subject, of presence.

The resonance with Ernesto De Martino's thought is evident in Costa's work: *work in regress* seems to emerge from the same "crisis of presence"¹ described by the anthropologist as the moment when a person loses their cultural and existential grounding. In this critical threshold - this end of the world - the real ceases to be familiar, symbolic coordinates collapse, and the subject risks dissolution. While for De Martino it is precisely in this liminal space that a ritual or symbolic act becomes necessary to restore meaning and orientation, for Costa it is peasant cultures, alchemical practices, and forms of knowledge erased by modernity that serve as tools to confront the unspeakable and to rethink the forms of life through art - an attempt to *make worlds otherwise*, to open spaces of resistance to the symbolic, social, and political disappearance of subjects and communities.

In this framework, Costa's artistic practice constructs a conceptual and visual system in which the origin is populated by primary forms and practices - understood as operative fields for triggering symbolic transformation. His works - as well as his para-institutional initiatives such as the *Museo di Antropologia Attiva*² - can thus be seen as a network of clues that articulate an *evidentiary paradigm* directed toward forms of knowledge³ that allow one to decipher an obscured reality and to reconstruct a set of dispositions shaped by cultural antagonism, through the use of organic materials, residual objects, and fragments of marginalized cultures.

The exhibition project *Haunting Spells. Fare mondi altrimenti* thus seeks to trace a genealogy between the pioneering practices of Claudio Costa and those of a generation of emerging artists who inherit, whether knowingly or not, his unresolved legacy. The work *Il cielo, guardando...* (1978), which opens the exhibition within this horizon, enacts a politics of the gaze - from below to above, toward the sky — evoking a politics of positioning: a way of inhabiting the world from below, inverting the hierarchies of knowledge.

Haunting Spells. Making Worlds Otherwise

The title of the exhibition evokes, on the one hand, *haunting*: the spectrological dimension of what returns in history - what was left unsaid or unresolved; on the other, *spells*: understood here as transformative acts capable of symbolically affecting reality. This conceptual concatenation emerges immediately in the site-specific installation *Inner Etnobotanic Cartography* (2025) by **Peng Shuai Paolo** (1995), which explores the relationship between nature, traditional medicine, and diaspora. The work consists of a constellation of objects and artistic interventions that weave together personal histories, shamanic practices, and herbalist traditions across cultures, with a particular focus on China and rural Italy. At the center of the installation are wooden crates engraved with natural patterns and bilingual symbols, including the phrase “即可杀既可生 / TO KILL AND TO CURE”, alluding to the ambivalent power of medicinal plants and traditional remedies.

¹ Ernesto De Martino, *La fine del mondo. Contributo alle analisi delle apocalissi culturali*, a cura di Clara Gallini, Torino, Einaudi, 1977.

² In 1975, Claudio Costa, together with Aurelio Caminati, founded the *Museo di Antropologia Attiva* in Monteghirfo (Favale di Malvaro), setting up a collection of material culture objects inside an intact rural house, displayed in their original context. The project aimed to preserve the anthropological significance of these objects and to resist their abstract musealization.

³ ³ Carlo Ginzburg, *Miti, emblemi, spie. Morfologia e storia*, Adelphi, 2023;

Natural and ritual elements converse with everyday objects and ancestral symbols: from *Artemisia verlotiorum* harvested and preserved using folk practices, to a bamboo pipe evoking pre-Cultural Revolution China, to a ceramic bowl used as an esoteric device. The presence of anthropomorphic lotus seeds, palm fans, and Moxa sticks triggers reflections on plant life cycles and their therapeutic function. The work is enriched by paintings and engravings depicting glimpses of the artist's birthplace in Xiangtan, with family portraits celebrating peasant and shamanic traditions, and ancient texts like the *Tao Te Ching*, here engraved in reverse - resisting the linearity of time and knowledge.

In **Ginevra Petrozzi's** (1997) work, sculpture becomes a tool for connecting ritual objects - amulets, talismans, ex-votos - to contemporary technological infrastructures. The project *Congregation of Mysteries (Ex-votos)* (2024), developed at the Jan van Eyck Academie, treats these forms as archaic technologies of desire and protection, questioning their symbolic efficacy in the digital age. Ex-votos and talismans engage with issues such as surveillance, data mining, and automation, while invoking specific, almost paradoxical miracles — from the liberation of Julian Assange as a global gesture of justice, to the improbable image of a tree growing from a data center.

Magical symbols from the Mediterranean tradition - such as the apotropaic eye or the horned hand - are recombined and presented in two registers: as precious objects displayed in a vitrine, recalling votive offerings and intercession; and in the series *Congregation of Mysteries (Amulet)*, as direct interventions on digital screens, where symbols are etched into the surface of the device itself. These are not folkloric citations, but an explicit attempt to fabricate contemporary talismans — devices inhabiting the threshold between protection and vulnerability, matter and enchantment, capable of reactivating magic as a way of relating to the invisible.

A curved scepter, cast in raw aluminum, marked by imperfections and casting residues: this is the object from which **Alessandro Di Lorenzo** (1996) begins his reflection on the foundational power of imagination. Inspired by the staffs of *augurs* — priests in ancient Rome who traced sacred spaces in the sky to interpret the flight of birds — Di Lorenzo treats sculpture as a tool for articulating the link between divinatory gestures and the symbolic construction of the world. In the project developed during a 2025 residency at Castro, this tool for imagining a possible world does not possess a fixed form but inhabits a liminal space between ruin and prototype.

Curved like the blade of the sacred plow used to mark the boundaries of the city, the scepter evokes a double movement: to found and to undo, to demarcate and to exceed. If originally this gesture served to establish the limits within which the *civitas* could arise, the same plow was later used to break those boundaries, to annul them, to make them reversible. Di Lorenzo works within this ambiguity, transforming an archaic tool into a speculative device - a prosthetic object for divining the present, a symbolic instrument for reading space, and perhaps, for refounding it.

Sentinel (2024) by **Sofia Salazar Rosales** (1999) takes the ambiguous form of something between a rose and a windmill: an object that might indicate direction, yet appears frozen in time. Lead, iron, and copper - oxidized materials - compose a form that seems to have emerged slowly from an alchemical process. It is unclear whether it is a natural fragment or a temporal detection device: *Sentinel* hovers in between, suspended between function and form, awaiting a breath of wind. The title suggests a silent vigil, and as often in Salazar Rosales's work, sculpture becomes a way of questioning what remains after motion, what - weary - seeks a root, however provisional.

STRESS (2024) by **Stefano Serretta** (1987) conceives the body as a liminal zone: a site of pleasure, of threshold, and of conflict — where the historical and political tensions of queer subjectivities are inscribed. The engraved marble pieces are accompanied by a series of drawings derived from early 20th-century erotic magazines and censored publications, sourced from the LGBTQIA+ archive of the Aldo Mieli Documentation Center in Carrara. These archival fragments acquire a spectrological dimension: they trouble the boundary between what has been deemed marginal and what we have preserved as worthy of memory.

They compel us to confront the ruptures, omissions, and contradictions of an incomplete, partial archive. What is a ghost, then, if not an interference - one that demands the act of revisiting, rewriting, and reimagining?

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