



# What Am I Doing Here?

Luca Vitone and the contemporary Italian landscape by Barbara Casavecchia

In 1988, at the age of 24, Luca Vitone began working on 'Carte Atopiche' (Atopic Maps), a series of 1:25,000 scaled maps from which he removed all topographic indications. By transforming a practical guide for orienteering into a personal manifesto of *dérive* and disorientation, Vitone expressed his feeling of being, in his words, 'without a place'. The disappearance of geographical certainty was in the air: the Berlin Wall was about to fall, the internet about to rise. In the same year, Italian philosopher Franco Rella came to similar conclusions in his essay 'The Atopy of the Modern', where he wrote that 'the absence of place is [...] what paradoxically allows us to "grasp" space in all its extensions, to capture its specific "reality"'. Bruce Chatwin summed up the zeitgeist in his last book, also published that year: *What Am I Doing Here?*

In medicine, 'atopy' is a syndrome characterized by a tendency to be 'hyperallergic'. And Italy was, at the time, a place where it was easy to feel unwell. In the late 1980s and '90s the Italian communist party was dissolved – it had been the largest in Europe – and the country was rocked by a wave of corruption-related political scandals that brought to an end the joint catholic–socialist rule of the so-called First Republic; it suffered brutal mafia killings and bombings, the rise of Silvio Berlusconi's political party, Forza Italia, and the secessionist xenophobia of the Northern League. In art, the decline of the Transavanguardia movement, which had mythologized the Italian *genius loci* (the pervading spirit of a place), confirmed the impatience, among younger artists, with the constraints of local boundaries and groupings.

'All my works reference a condition to which we are subject, which I call "topological loss"; Vitone explained in an interview with the critic Emanuela De Cecco in 1992.<sup>2</sup> So deep-rooted were his feelings that he had the geographical coordinates of his place of birth, the Galliera hospital in Genoa (Lat. N. 44°24'07"

Long. E. 8°56'31"), tattooed on his arm, while his website constantly updates his position with a tracking system. Travelling widely and regularly exhibiting internationally, Vitone (who is now based in Berlin) compensates for his placelessness through constant scrutiny of his relationship to the contemporary Italian landscape, which he transforms into minimalist installations, soundscapes and, more recently, monochromes and videos.

Vitone responds to the collective short sightedness of our current (social, political, economic, cultural) situation by annihilating images, especially those of the rose-tinted iconography of 'Il Bel Paese' ('the beautiful country', as Italy is nicknamed), which are far too often steeped in nostalgia. His exhibition 'Monocromo Variationen' (Monochrome Variations) at Museion, Bozen, in 2012, was epigrammatic, bringing together the artist's works on canvas, which are created *en plein air* with smog and various air-borne matter. Vitone uses the very substances that are often held responsible for the obliteration of art works as a medium. The cycle began with 'Finestre (Isola dell'Arte)' (Windows, Isola dell'Arte, 2004), a series of watercolours on paper based on *élevage de poussière* ('dust breeding', which was employed by both Man Ray and Marcel Duchamp) at Isola dell'Arte, a Milanese exhibition space that was squatted and run at the time by a collective of artists, curators and students to prevent its demolition and the gentrification of the surrounding neighbourhood (sadly, a lost cause). Subsequently, it evolved into a number of raw canvases, including *Io, Roma* (I, Rome, 2005) and *Landscape* (2007), while *Le ceneri di Milano* (Milan's Ashes, 2007) – a reference to Pier Paolo Pasolini's 1957 collection of poems *Le ceneri di Gramsci* (Gramsci's Ashes) – is made of Perspex cases enclosing toxic ashes from the city's incinerator. Half paintings, half sculptures, these works chronicle the passage of time via its least

Non siamo mai soli  
(Tavolo e sedia) (We Are Never  
Alone, Table and Chair),  
1994, installation view at Galleria  
Milano, 2013



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welcome leftovers: those of the failed modernist idea of progress, as well as of the conflict between our utopian aspirations to environmentalism and our rampant consumerism. Vitone's analytical and semiological approach led him to cross paths with sociologists, geographers, musicologists, poets and writers. In the late 1990s, he was part of Oreste, a network of Italian artists, critics and curators who didn't 'produce' work as such, but who generated meetings, residencies and panels; when invited to participate in the 1999 Venice Biennale – aptly titled *dAPERTutto* (Everywhere) – Oreste filled their space with a flux of communication and encounters, which were as lively as they were ephemeral.

Despite his fascination with immateriality, Vitone is also forensically interested in material culture. *Non siamo mai soli* (We Are Never Alone, 1994), shown again last year at Galleria Milano in Milan, comprises objects (such as a jumper or a metronome, for instance) paired with a hand-drawn map of the house in which the artist recalled seeing the same object in his youth. It is a private index of belonging as well as a compilation of domestic animism in an era of mass-production. Now that we spend hours at home communing with objects and electronic devices which transport us to new levels of reality, Vitone's anxiety about 'topological loss' resonates with new questions. Originally, *Non siamo mai soli* was published in the book *Non è cosa* (Not a Good Thing, reprinted by Elèuthera, 2013), co-authored with the anthropologist Franco La Cecla, who wrote: 'The objects of our daily life, all turned into commodities [...] nod to other worlds, even if the exoticism they sell us is a familiarity: our old coffeepot transformed in Italian style.'

Vitone's interest also extends to ethnographic clichés, which he physically manifests in order to test their veracity. For example, he translated the ludicrous 'pizza and mandolin' Italian stereotype into site-specific works based on food and folk music in order to produce experiential readings of the present, because, he told me recently, these are 'the first elements that allow us to meet a different culture, never mind all the common-places they imply'. Music has long fascinated him as a medium: *Sonorizzare il luogo* (Sonorize the Place, 1989), which the artist has re-created several times, is a sound installation that 'maps' an area by archiving its traditional songs. In 1999, for 'La ville. Le jardin. La mémoire' (The Town. The Garden. The Memory), curated by Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, Laurence Bossé and Hans Ulrich Obrist at Villa Medici in Rome, Vitone literally took 'the way of the shovel'<sup>3</sup>, to quote Dieter Roelstraete's brilliant essay on the archeological imaginary in art. He installed loudspeakers in a real archeological excavation close to the loggia and created two mock excavations in the park, complete with earth mounds, picks, shovels and barrows (*Fouilles*, Excavations, 1999), from which he broadcast a soundtrack of classical music that had been composed at the villa over the centuries (the Académie de France has been

housed there since 1803), and popular songs such as Roman *stornelli* (short rhyming folk tunes). *Hole* (2000), which took a similar form at MoMA PS1 in New York, is a sound system amplifying a compilation of Native American music and Dutch 17th-century songs, brought across the sea by the early settlers. Over the last decade, Vitone has been collaborating with some Ligurian *trallalero* ensembles, whose singers perform polyphonic harmonies without any instrumental accompaniment: a form of expression once enormously popular among the metal-workers, longshoremen and stevedores from the docks of Genoa.

In 1992 – the same year Rirkrit Tiravanija opened *Untitled (Free)*, which transformed 303 Gallery in New York into a restaurant serving free curry and rice – Vitone started working with food. For *Pratica del fuoco* (Site Practice, 1992), at the Castello di Rivara contemporary art centre near Turin, Vitone offered local specialties and tourist brochures to visitors, asking them to 'taste the territory' – the mantra of slow food, which has become, in a sense, another global brand. In 1994, Vitone developed a project in collaboration with the Romani and Sinti community of Cologne, inviting its members to join him at his opening at Galerie Christian Nagel (*Der unbestimmte Ort*, The Indefinite Place, 1994), to cook, palm-read and play traditional music, thus bringing together public, performers and stereotypes in a conventional exhibition space. For *Wide City* (1998), Vitone installed a map dispenser in the shape of the Velasca Tower – Milan's first postwar skyscraper – in the city's main tourist office. The maps listed over 500 addresses of cultural centres, associations, places of worship, restaurants, shops and open-air food markets. Most visitors never realized it was art, and simply pocketed it as an alternative metropolitan itinerary.

When Vitone exhibited *Itinerari intimi* (Intimate Itineraries, 1998) at Galerie Christian Nagel in Cologne, amongst the private memorabilia on show he included, with a good deal of irony, a restaurant bill for a meal by a famous chef. 'I had decided to use all the stereotypes in my work (the landscape, the place, the food, the tour, the sound element, the trip) as starting points,' he told me recently. Autobiography also played a role on the occasion of his first institutional solo show at Palazzo delle Esposizioni in Rome in 2000. Titled 'Stundäiu' (a word in Genoese dialect once defined by the poet Eugenio Montale as: 'A typical attitude of pride and shyness mixed with distrust; the daily practice of grumbling, a certain inferiority complex towards the other, balanced by a sense of moral superiority'), it brought together the theatrical reproduction of a typical *crèuza* (a small street) and a fountain sprouting water perfumed with the smell of the sea, with a collection of photographs of the houses of 'famous Genoese' in Rome. Vitone isn't into parody, though. If, on the one hand, ironic detachment is a way

of discussing subjects sensibly, on the other, Vitone subtly plays with the viewer's emotional responses by evoking sensations and atmospheres – an increasingly manufactured experience in the age of art-as-entertainment.

In his work for the Italian Pavilion of the 2013 Venice Biennale ('Vice Versa', curated by Bartolomeo Pietromarchi), Vitone focused on smell as an immaterial memory trigger. *Per l'eternità* (For Eternity, 2013) – which was developed into a solo show at Pinksummer in Genoa a few months later – was invisible, but whoever entered the space became aware of a strong sweet and sour smell. Created in collaboration with the master perfumer Maria Candida Gentile by mixing three rhubarb essences (from Switzerland, Belgium and France) it conjured the sensation of inhaling asbestos dust, a lethal substance whose dispersion in the air caused hundreds of deaths in the city of Casale Monferrato, Piedmont, where the multinational company Eternit had a huge production plant. A recent ruling by the Court of Appeal in Turin found the factory's owners responsible for almost 3,000 asbestos-related deaths, finally supporting decades of environmental campaigns. In the aftermath of Fukushima, the associations run free. For me, the work prompts another traumatic memory, from the years of Vitone's youth: the 1976 industrial disaster of ICMESA (a subsidiary of Roche group) in Seveso, near Milan, when the explosion of a chemical plant released enormous quantities of poisonous fumes into the air, contaminating kilometres of land and vegetation and killing thousands of animals. As many as 2,000 people were directly affected, while cancer rates drastically increased in the following years. As a disaster, it was second only to the tragedy in Bhopal, India, in 1984. The EU industrial safety regulations are now known as the Seveso Directive. Obviously, the illegal poisoning of the environment isn't new and Vitone doesn't elicit irritation or revulsion by documentary or didactic means: quite simply, he makes you feel it. ♦♦

1 Franco Rella, 'The Atopy of the Modern', in *Recording Metaphysics*, ed. Giovanna Borradori, Northwestern University Press, 1988, p. 137

2 Quoted in Stefano Chioldi, 'Anachronic Geographies', in *Luca Vitone. Presente Materiale*, Mousse Publishing/Fondazione Brodbeck Catania/Museion, Bozen, 2012, p. 143

3 Dieter Roelstraete, *e-flux journal*, no. 4, 2009

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Luca Vitone is based in Berlin, Germany, and teaches at NABA, Milan. In 2013, his work was included in the Italian Pavilion at the 55th Venice Biennale, Italy, and he had solo shows at Pinksummer, Genoa, Italy; Silvia Geddes, Rome, Italy; and Galleria Milano, Milan. In 2012, he had solo shows at Museion, Bolzano, Italy, and Fondazione Brodbeck, Catania, Italy. In September, he will have a solo show at NGBK, Berlin.



1  
*Per l'eternità (Venezia)*  
 (For Eternity, Venice), 2013, collage on paper,  
 37 x 28 cm



2  
*Finestra VII grande (Isola dell'arte)*  
 (Window VII Large, Isola dell'Arte), 2004,  
 watercolour made with dust on paper,  
 framed, 205 x 155 x 5 cm

3  
*Pratica del luogo (Site Practice)*,  
 1992, food, drink and free brochures at  
 Castello di Rivara, Turin



3