

09. Defiant Sexualities: Queer Heritage in Palermo's Casa del Mutilato

Carlota Mir
Research: Carlota Mir + Rado Ištok

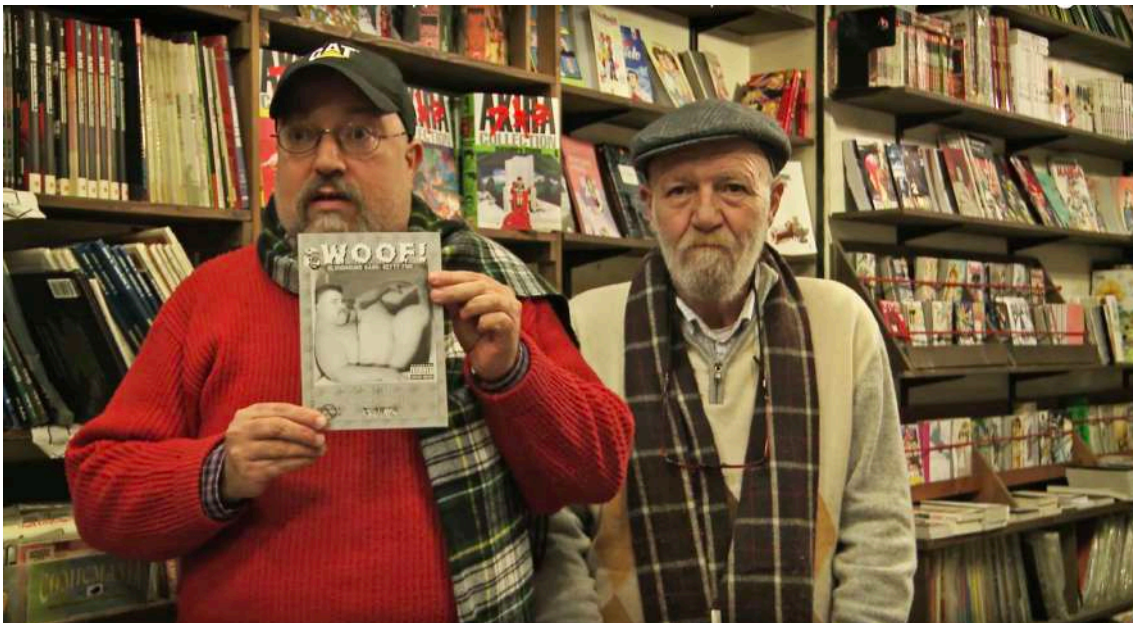


Figure 1: Filippo Messina and Salvatore Adelfio in old Altroquando with their erotic gay 'bear' zine 'Woof'. Source: Still from 2013 documentary 'Picchi chi è?' by Giuseppe Carleo

1. Undoing 'Heritage' Through a Queer Lens

'Somewhere every culture has an imaginary zone for what it excludes and it is that zone that we must try to remember today'.

*Francesco di Giorgio Martini, Trattati di architettura, 1470*¹

Heritage is not neutral. Indeed, notions of heritage are entirely political. Looking at Palermo from the perspective of its recent UNESCO nomination, it becomes evident that 'heritage value' is used in order to convey a sense of authority through global legitimation and a sense of common identity through the narration of an imagined common past. UNESCO heritage gives legitimacy to a specific identity or 'lived fiction' erected around specific cultural, architectural, artistic or anthropological assets, thus consolidating, asserting, and enlarging a city, a community or a nation's cultural capital.

In the case of Palermo, UNESCO nomination narratives gravitate around notions of Palermo as a multicultural historic city:

"Arab-Norman Palermo and the Cathedral Churches of Cefalù and Monreale bear witness to a particular political and cultural condition characterized by the fruitful coexistence of people of different origins (Muslim, Byzantine, Latin, Jewish, Lombard, and French). This interchange generated a conscious and unique combination of elements derived from the architectural and artistic techniques of Byzantine, Islamic, and Western traditions".²

But as Jorge Otero-Pailos argues, 'the authorized heritage discourse focuses on aesthetically pleasing material objects, sites, places and/or landscapes that current generations 'must' care for, protect and revere'.³ This practice excludes inconvenient objects, customs, identities or histories which can contradict the official narrative in anyway or visibilise the production costs of specific political and cultural regimes - which often amount to technologies of oppression, repression, destruction, extraction, or war.

Creating and sustaining a credible cultural narrative around the living body and DNA of a city can certainly be seen as an exercise in surgery, the result of which is, inevitably, a million painful absences. For Palermo's amnesic 'multicultural heritage identity' to resurface, other accounts have had to be erased. The question then appears to be: what happens when we subvert this notion of heritage in order to question the means of production of a certain narrative? How can we speak of queer heritage in the face of the Fascist heritage of the city?

¹ Francesco di Giorgio Martini, *Trattati di architettura ingegneria e arte militare* (1470-92) in D. I. Agrest, 'Architecture from without: Body, Logic, and Sex' *Assemblage*, No. 7 (Oct., 1988), p. 28

² 'Arab-Norman Palermo and the Cathedral Churches of Cefalù and Monreale', UNESCO [<https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1487>][accessed 04/06/2018]

³ Jorge Otero-Pailos, 'Experimental Preservation', *Places Journal* [<https://placesjournal.org/article/experimental-preservation/>][accessed 04/06/2018]

It seems clear that Palermo is indeed a city where opposites meet: where political and social avant-garde and deep provincialism live next door to each other. Despite having been a pioneering city in Italy in terms of minority rights and initiatives, the city's account of its own contemporary history remains completely oblivious to this reality. 'Palermo's biggest shortcoming is that it does not historicize itself, and it refuses its own children' said prominent LGBTQ activist Salvatore Rizzuto, a key actor in this research. 'Although Palermo's is an incredibly fertile ground in terms of culture, we tend to forget that the things we do in the city are important, so we just forget them. The city becomes ahistorical and cruel to its children'.⁴

Thinking of (invisible) queer heritage is useful for dismantling conventional notions of heritage in Palermo in which notions of gender and sexuality have been completely overlooked. Queering historical heritage, particularly the naturalized and depoliticised Fascist legacy of the city, and questioning the surgical processes behind the making of the 20th century healthy, masculine national body allows us to unpick a series of erasures that have a lot to do with one another. Histories of resistance, alternative gender models, subversive readings of urbanism, but also accounts of exile, oppression, displacement, trauma or censorship come to the surface in this quest.

2. On Palermo's Queer Heritage

'We are the product of the systematic erasure of subaltern modes of knowledge around the body.'

Paul B Preciado⁵

LGBTQ cultures have little tradition or historiographic support: they have been denied the intellectual instruments for self-reflection, preservation and development of their history and cultural values. Queer modes of knowledge around the body and sexuality have been routinely erased from art history and History altogether.

If cultural expressions of queerness have routinely been excluded from mainstream definitions of heritage, the situation of queer cultures under the prism of Italian fascism, postwar Europe, and its ideological legacy in terms of gender becomes even harder. When evoking the 'fascist heritage' of Palermo from a queer perspective, the city seems to carry the weight of a myriad violent absences. The strict, utilitarian gender binary which would turn men into warriors and women into birthing machines saw queerness as a complete abomination of all Fascist ideals. Queerness, was, then, particularly troublesome, and a reason for exile and extermination, as the deportation of queer men to San Domino⁶ shows (women, of course, were not even considered to have an active sexuality at all, let alone a lesbian or queer sexuality).

⁴ Carleo, Giuseppe, 'Intervista a Salvatore Rizzuto e Filippo Messina – Fumetteria Altroquando', February 2013 [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0BsMb5jJVt4>][accessed 04/06/2018]

⁵ Paul B. Preciado, '¿La muerte de la clínica?' MNRS [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4aRrZZbFmBs>][accessed 04/06/2018]

⁶ I am talking about Debora Inguglia's 2009 documentary 'Isola Nuda', which deals with this question through interviewing a series of survivors. To find out more, see R. Istok's article on this dossier.

Although particularly crude under fascist regimes, the setback in terms of individual rights was felt throughout Europe throughout these decades. After the nascent sexual liberation of the twenties and thirties, isolation and a strengthening of patriarchal values and the nuclear family caused the loss of possibilities of writing about queer art as well as possibilities of queer writing about art during the post-war period and beyond.

However, censorship has never stopped queer lives from doing politics by way of simply existing. The mid-20th century in Palermo saw the birth of tireless activists whose work has contributed to the well-being of the contemporary queer community in Italy and beyond, and whose legacy, lives, and cultural initiatives and spaces, most of them still operative today, have left a deep and long-lasting impact in the collective imaginary of Palermo and its inhabitants.

Our investigation on queer heritage in Palermo has led us to reclaim the cultural and political heritage of two key enclaves and figures: Salvatore Rizzuto Adelfio, first person to oppose doing the military service as a declared homosexual and co-founder of cultural space Altroquando, and Massimo Milani, founder of Arcigay in Palermo, the first LGBTQ association in Italy, and Cuir, an alternative leather atelier in the heart of the city. In their ability to lead and engage in a myriad resistance movements from the standpoint of sexual minority, both Salvatore and Massimo are loved, public referents in Palermo, not only for the LGBTQ community, but for the city as a whole.

2.1. Salvatore Rizzuto Adelfio, founder of Altroquando

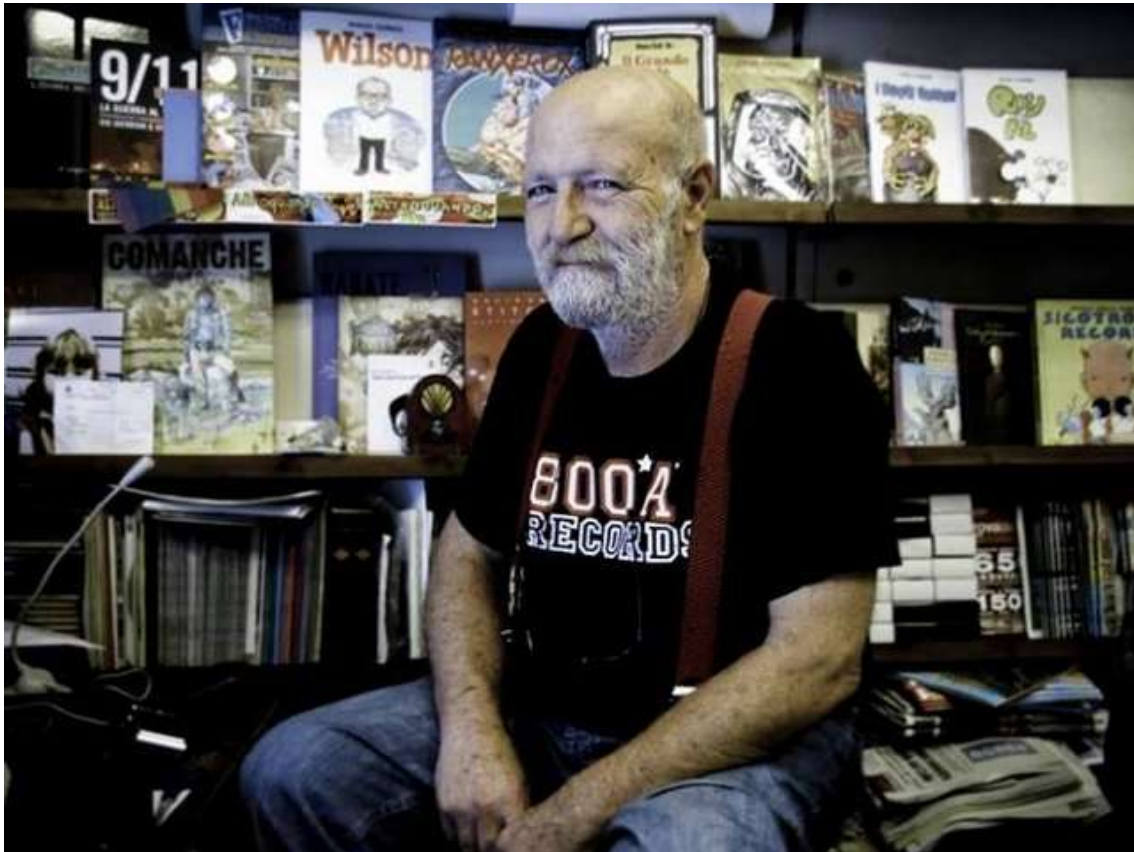


Figure 2: Portrait of Salvatore Rizzuto in Altroquando, Palermo
Source: Filippo Messina

Salvatore Rizzuto Adelfio (1951-2013) was a thinker, activist and LGBTQ referent in Palermo. A loved and dearly missed character in the city's public and affective life, he was forced to leave Italy in his youth for refusing to do the military service and subsequently became the first conscientious objector in the country on the grounds of being a homosexual.

A visible queer belonging to bear culture and a pioneer, in 1991 he founded Altroquando, a 'fumetteria' or self-managed comic library and bookshop originally located in Corso Vittorio Emmanuele, one of Palermo's main arteries, and a complete novelty in 90's Palermo. Now fully transformed into a library and a cultural centre and relocated to the TMO, a multi-legged countercultural initiative located in the abandoned exhibition complex of the Fiera Mediterranea, the space is one island in a constellation of self-managed cultural production centres located in the old fair, whose remarkable cultural value is slowly but surely winning the legal battle against eviction from the premises.



Figure 3: Interior of new Altroquando, Palermo, December 2017
Source: Carlota Mir

‘Altroquando was not only a library: it became a weird creature, a flagship of a different way of thinking and sharing. ‘For us, opening up every day was a powerful way of doing politics’ recalls Salvatore’s lifelong partner and Altroquando co-owner **Filippo Messina**, who has been running the space following Salvatore’s death from cancer in 2013. Messina welcomed us into Altroquando’s new space in December 2017: the fumetteria has now been completely transformed into the *Biblioteca Autogestita Salvatore Rizzuto Adelfio* - ‘self-managed Library Salvatore Rizzuto Adelfio’. He spoke to us about the space and its significance in Palermo, the powerful memory of his partner Salvatore, their life together, and running Altroquando as a way to preserve his memory, his legacy, and his commitment to the city’s grassroots resistance movements.

Through the production of music events, exhibitions, publications and more, Altroquando quickly became a referential space for intersectional political resistance in Palermo. The original Altroquando in Corso Vittorio Emanuele was home to the first lesbian-themed photographic exhibition in the city, and quite possibly, in the country. Similarly, Altroquando’s ‘bear’ themed art exhibitions would gather and exhibit artists from all around the country, becoming a hotspot for sexual dissidence. Although little documentation is left from these events, they are, in our opinion, very much worth remembering and bringing back: they are Palermo’s first collective artistic manifestations of queerness on a grassroots level.

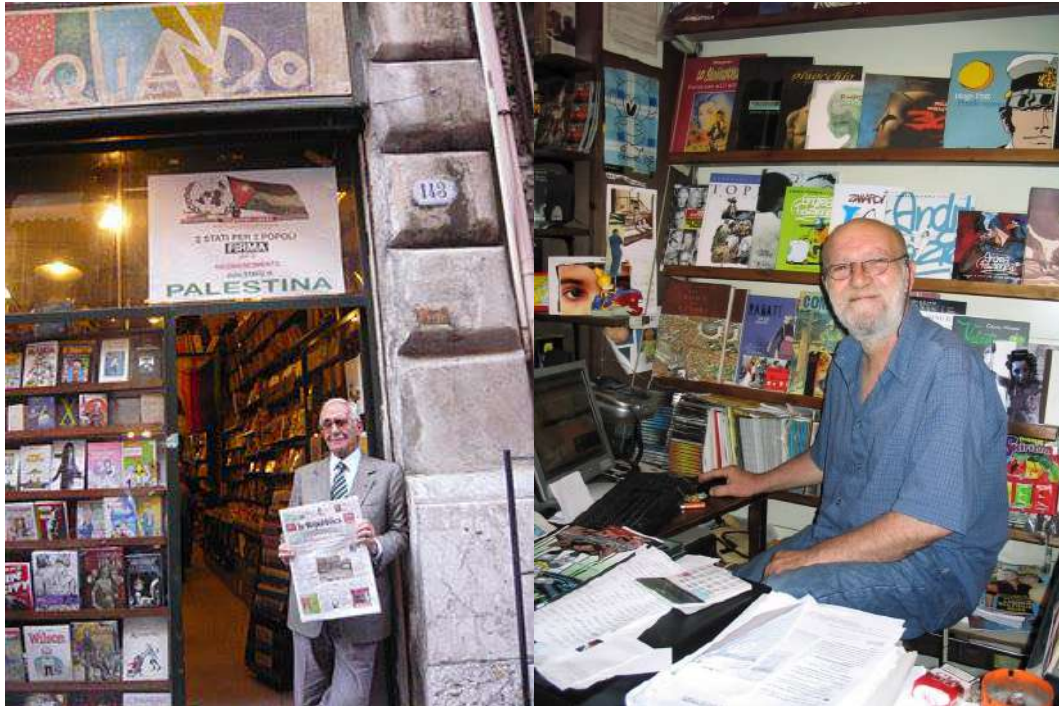


Figure 4: Some stills from original Altroquando in 143 Corso Vittorio Emanuele
Source: Altroquando

However, Filippo is keen to stress that they not only focused on specifically LGBTQ+ issues, but used a queer perspective to focus on an intersectional progressive agenda of resistance. For example, he recalls a moved, united crowd singing along at a concert by Giacomo Sferlazzo, a young musician from Lampedusa who uses his art to address issues of migration.

Altroquando became since the beginning a 'centre for LGBTQ listening', and a 'haven', in Filippo's own words, and following its success, another branch would open up in Rome years later. Browsing through Salvatore's collection of self-published erotic zines on gay bear culture, a couple of kids casually eavesdropping and hiding behind their comics in the background, he tells us that, since the beginning, people would come to Altroquando and talk about their daily struggles in a way that was impossible in all normative spaces in the city. Indeed, Altroquando functions as an open space of healing and caring, a bubble, and an informal school for the city's struggling artists, intellectuals, teens, queers, migrants, and just about anybody wanting to come in.

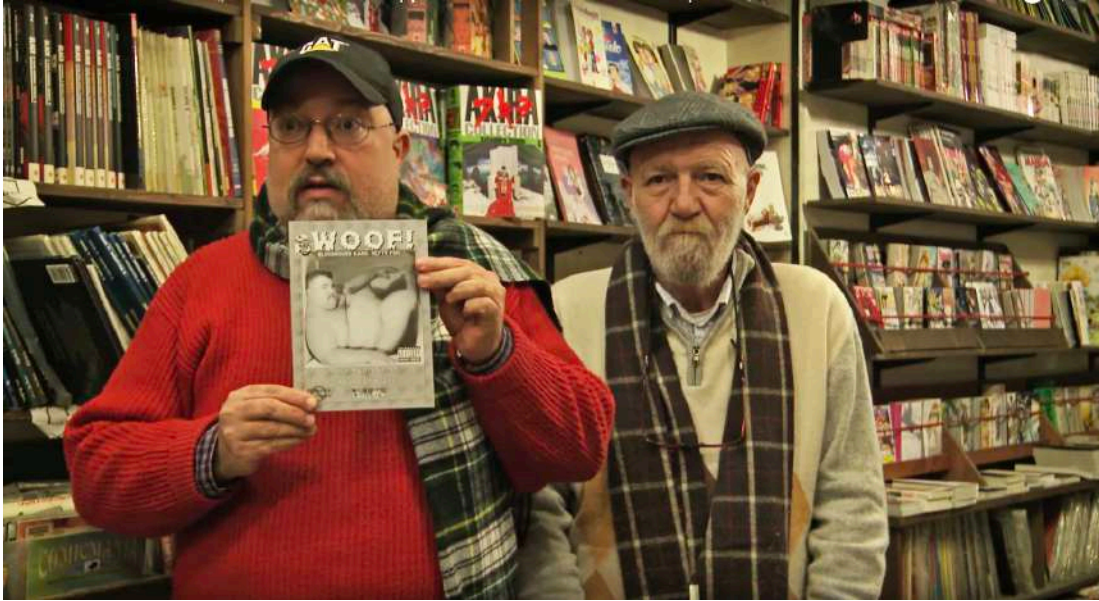


Figure 5: from left to right. Filippo Messina and Salvatore Rizzuto Adelfio in old Altroquando with their bear zine 'Woof'. Still from 2013 documentary 'Picchi chi è?' by Giuseppe Carleo

In 2016, the Biblioteca Autogestita Salvatore Rizzuto Adelfio, or the 'new' Altroquando was inaugurated. Specifically thought of as a living memorial space, the library hosts Salvatore's entire book collection, from travel and more personal accounts to numerous books, his zine collection, self-published zines, and so on. Messina described it as 'a piece of the soul of the man who did so much for spontaneous, true, living culture'.⁷ The library, a welcoming, open space of counterculture and cultural exchange – that which Salvatore loved most and dedicated his own life to - is a perfect example of queer heritage which needs to be nurtured and supported by public institutions in Palermo, its message amplified to reach a larger part of society.

Altroquando is an incredibly touching and potent living queer heritage site in Palermo: a strong yet vulnerable space which should occupy a key position in the city's cultural memory, along with the life and work of Salvatore Rizzuto Adelfio. Through supporting and spreading awareness around Filippo's experimental preservation proposal, we wish to spread Salvatore's and Filippo's story, as well as Filippo's quest to carry on Salvatore's cultural, political and emotional legacy and service to the city.

⁷ Inauguration of the Biblioteca Autogestita Salvatore Rizzuto Adelfio, *Altroquando Blog* [<http://altroquandoicon.tumblr.com/post/145369759151/c%C3%A8-aria-di-casa-intendi-dire-che-s%C3%AC-della>][accessed 04/06/2018]

2.2. Massimo Milani, co-founder of Arcigay



Figure 6: Portrait Massimo Milano in 2017
Source: Giornale Cittadino Press

Massimo Milani is a queer activist, Palermo Pride icon and a key figure in the city of Palermo. Still profoundly involved in the city's LGTBQ scene together with his lifelong partner **Gino Campanella**, he was one of the founders of Arcigay in Palermo in 1980, an association which would become one of Italy's most prominent LGBTQ clusters in the fight for queer rights as human rights, providing the LGBTIQ community with key spaces of socialization and reception, psychological support, legal and medical advice, and cultural dissemination.

Currently, Milani and Campanella run 'Cuir', a space in the Palermo district of Ballarò. Officially, it's an atelier of handmade leather products, but in reality it is much more. Milani defines it as 'a place from which to overlook a world that considers itself normal'.

Quir is a place where Massimo and Gino queer the world with their transversal and open vision of things. In our stay in Palermo, we were lucky enough to meet Massimo, who showed us around their space, and share a coffee with him and the wonderful team Sicilia Queer Filmfest, whose fantastic work is leaving an imprint not only in Italy, but in the international LGBTQ cultural scene.



Figure 7: Massimo Milano and Gino Campanella inside their atelier 'Quir'
Source: MeridioNews Palermo

'Quir is a laboratory but, at the same time, the living room of our friends, of the LGBTQ community. It can become a secular confessional, a photographic or cinematographic set, an information office, a place to gossip; a day hospital, a nursery school, a municipal kennel, tea room, cafeteria, call center, social center, laboratory of ideas, a place of encounter and confrontation, a reception center for all social and human categories, inhuman and superhuman'. 'Customers, friends, passers-by, artists, actors, poets, pass by us habitually: greengrocers, fishmongers, journalists, directors, lawyers, politicians, teachers, electricians, housewives, workers, freaks, alcoholics, priests, nuns, and wizards... Life passes us by!'⁸ Massimo points out.

Massimo and his partner Gino met in Rome in 1978 and remained together since then. One Roman, the other Palermitan living in Torino, the couple decided to move to Palermo, and in 1980 they founded Arcigay which would soon be followed by many in Italy, a battle that was fought with one single aim: the freedom to be happy. Or, in the words of Nino Gennaro, a poet and dear friend of the couple: 'We are either happy or complicit with the regime'.

⁸ Quir Fattoamano, Facebook page [accessed 01/06/2018]

3. Experimental Preservation Proposals for Casa del Mutilato

We believe in appropriation through inhabiting: occupying fascist heritage with living cultural manifestations and values around queerness is key to our approach. Therefore, our queer experimental preservation proposal would take place within the framework of a transformation and an eventual occupation and use of the building by minorized collectives, as an effective way to repair the damage caused by Fascism in Italy.

But because such a goal is not attainable overnight, we suggest initially hosting a public programme on queer heritage and history in dialogue with Altroquando and Quir (a reading circle, a talk, a screening of the film 'Picchi' chi' è?' and debate session, and a party) that would make it possible for queer agents in Palermo and beyond to begin inhabiting and reappropriate this heritage, in intersection with other associations and minorized collectives (such as Palermo's Moltivolti). This strategy would illustrate Paul B Preciado's idea of a hybrid 'parliament of bodies' where those who have been silenced and showcased finally have the power to write their own history.

Our spatial interventions to the architecture of Casa del Mutilato would tentatively include the substitution of the mutilees' tapestry in **Sala Adunanze**⁹ with pictoric interventions around the lives of Salvatore Rizzuto Adelfio and Massimo Milano, thus completely eschewing the Fascist rhetoric around heroic masculinity and mutilation as well as its visual and literary codes. **Francesc Ruiz**, an established Spanish artist working mainly with comic and pop culture who knew Rizzuto could be commissioned to make a tapestry on the topic of Palermitan queer heritage and its main actors. Another visual reference for the suggested intervention is British artist Grayson Perry's tapestry series on British society 'The Vanity of Small Differences' (2013).

Experimental preservation artifacts: Francesc Ruiz's pictoric interventions would substitute the mutilees' tapestry. They would be displayed alongside the source key heritage artifacts belonging to both and giving intricate accounts of queer subcultures, such as Salvatore's 'bear' zine collection, which he gave, before his death, to Francesc Ruiz, or Massimo's flowery bike, a true Palermitan icon for happiness through resistance.

Another suggested strategy in this experimental preservation proposal on an urban level is to pay homage to their work and lives through initiating a petition to the city council for them to extend honourable mentions for them. Although honourable mentions are symbolic, the main aim behind them would be that of spreading awareness about these cultural initiatives, as well as protecting and helping preserve the premises where Quir but most urgently Altroquando currently operate, which are not fully legalised, undergo frequent tensions and still run eviction risks from the local authorities despite the Mayor's consensus on the value of the cultural contributions of Altroquando to the city.

⁹ For a more detailed account on the relationship between mutilation, masculinity and queering heritage, see Carlota Mir's article 'Dildoarchitectures' in this dossier



Figure 8: Inside Casa del Mutilato's 'Sala d'Adunanze', our proposed experimental preservation space. Source: author



Figure 9: Francesc Ruiz, Installation Gasworks Yaoi, 2010



Figure 10: Grayson Perry, 'The Vanity of Small Differences', 2013. Tapestry. Source: Artfund



Figure 11: 'Woof' on a queer street display in Palermo. Source: unknown.



Figure 12: Covers of Altroquando's self-published gay 'bear' zine 'Woof' Source: Altroquando



Figure 13: Massimo Milano outside Quir with his iconic flowery bike.
Source: Oltre Mura Lab

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