

My name is Florian Mussgnug. For the “Interdisciplinary Italy” podcast series, I will present *Foreign Farmers* by **Leone Contini**: a 2018 installation and intervention in public space, in collaboration with Ibra Niang, Fratelli Biondi, Nazrul Islam, Mr Hu, Juan Rumbaoa, Chhote Sher Shah and J. Lin.

At the height of the covid crisis, many of us seem hungry to access art by any means possible. Galleries are experiencing record web traffic; virtual museum tours are enormously fashionable; artists have created magnificent digital works. But let us not be fooled: much of what we value in art has been lost, for now, and the future of the art world is uncertain. To convey a sense of what we are missing, allow me to recall my encounter with a work of art that, in many ways, marks the antithesis of our new age of mass lockdown. *Foreign Farmers* is an installation and public intervention by the Florence-born cultural anthropologist and visual artist Leone Contini. It was one of the forty-five projects on display in Palermo, in 2018, when the city hosted the itinerant, pan-European art exhibition *Manifesta*.

The Sicilian capital’s century-old botanical garden – half-way between the historical city centre and the sea – has long been one of my favourite spots. Its unique blend of grandeur, decay and exuberant plant-life provided the ideal setting for Contini’s project: an experimental garden, taking the shape of a ramshackle pergola, which visitors experienced as a bewildering maze of vegetable shapes, scents and multiple inscriptions. *Foreign Farmers* is the result of ten years of collecting seeds and stories. Inspired by the fundamentally hybrid genealogy of Sicilian nature and culture, Contini and his collaborators grew an astonishing tangle of vegetable plants from every corner of the world. As a highly constructed place, then, Contini’s installation reaches out to multiple locations and semiotic systems: the typically Sicilian snake-like summer squash – *cucuzza* – grows here alongside its Bengali, Sri Lankan, Philippine, Turkish, and Chinese

counterparts. Each cultivar is marked by the gardeners' inscriptions, in a variety of alphabets and styles. For the observer, this simultaneous presence of plants and letters recalls the interdependence of communities and markets, in a globalized and progressively more unequal world. But it also serves as a subtle provocation against the nativist fetishism that all too frequently resonates in food discourse. Instead of a topology of fixed identities - *denominazione di origine controllata* - Contini and his collaborators offer an ecology of flow, where chance encounter prevents the replication of the identical. Contini's pergola thus invites what the Irish translation scholar Michael Cronin has labelled *microspeciation*: a playful and ephemeral experience of place, which acknowledges planetary connectivity but moves away from the dichotomous standoff between the global and the local.

It is now nearly two years since my chance encounter with *Foreign Gardeners*, and my vivid, multisensorial memory of smells and shapes is only partially evoked by the photographic images which document Contini's provocation. There is an important lesson, I think, to be learned for our increasingly digital present: the serendipitous encounter between different artistic forms and languages thrives in the virtual space of the world wide web, but it also needs the humble and fragrant soil of a planetary garden.