

WORKING PRACTICE

PAOLA PIVI



Text by
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Paola Pivi's sculptures, photographs, and large installations appear uncomplicated, almost banal in their stark simplicity, yet they are profoundly unsettling, as though something went wrong inside the genetic code of reality, initiating a mutation that subverts any physical law and logical conclusion. Two zebras romping on a snowy mountain, a truck lying on its side in the middle of the road, 12 huge stadium lights glaring directly at the viewer: all of these are ideas for artworks that would likely seem destined to exist only on paper, but they have been successfully realized by the artist. For Pivi, images are ideas that need to be made real. Small wonder, then, that she identifies with Werner Herzog. "I saw him on TV once," she explains, "saying about *Fitzcarraldo*, 'I wanted to bring the boat on the other side of the mountain. I had to do it. I had to do it because if I did not do it I would have been a man without dreams, and I didn't want to be a man without dreams.'"

Of late, the 35-year-old Italian-born Pivi has had many opportunities to see her dreams become reality. A mid-career survey of her work, her first museum solo, opened last month at the Kunsthalle Basel, and last year her curiously titled exhibition *My Religion Is Kindness. Thank You, See You in the Future*, commissioned by the Fondazione Nicola Trussardi in Milan, opened to great fanfare. The show took place in the raw spaces of an old warehouse, where, among other works, Pivi "installed" a few dozen live animals (the piece had the slackerish title *Interesting*). One horse, two ponies, a cow, a llama, and an army of rabbits, dogs, lambs, goats, peacocks, and other birds wandered the vast rooms of the exhibition for the duration of the show. Although different in species, all of the animals were white in color—an ironic nod to the tradition of Minimal art and an homage to Pivi's compatriot Piero Manzoni and his monochrome paintings. According to Pivi, though, her references are to be found not in art history but rather in our everyday world. "Animals are just my friends," she says with a mix-

ture of modesty and faux naïveté. "They are marvelous creatures. I just use what surrounds us, and it can be objects, people, or, this time, animals."

The exhibition was all about being surrounded: outnumbered by the animals, enveloped in their strong smells, viewers felt strangely out of place. In this hallucinatory Noah's ark, humans were guests, or, more mysteriously, they became the living sculptures that animals seem to enjoy contemplating. "I don't know if animals have a soul," Pivi says, "but when I put them in these situations, I often wonder if they are living the experience of art."

Pivi's white menagerie was dramatically presented in front of one of her best-known works, for which she earned the Golden Lion at the 1999 Venice Biennale. *Untitled (Airplane)* is a menacing '50s-era military airplane that Pivi flipped upside down, "as though it were a person who has

lain down on the grass to look up to the sky." A little darker in its juxtaposition with the roaming creatures, *Untitled (Airplane)* sketched an apocalyptic landscape, as though the animals were the only survivors of a global catastrophe.

Pivi's seemingly simple installations often involve a great deal of technical research, her ideas for them requiring tortuous tours de force in order to become transformed into reality. Pivi selected the animals for *Interesting* via a casting call, working with a company specialized in domesticating animals for cinema and TV commercials. During the show, eight handlers and two veterinarians were on hand to assist the animals. A small stable was set up nearby, where the animals slept and consumed more than \$2,000 of feed a week.

With the way Pivi goes about making art, impossibility is an occupational hazard—and, to a degree, a part of the work's meaning. While living on Alicudi, a minuscule, remote island north of Sicily, Pivi began the colossal *Alicudi Project* (2001–). As is often true of her works, this one is easy to describe and yet tremendously ambitious to execute: it consists of a photograph of the island, printed life-size. Alicudi is approximately one and a half miles wide and 1,600 feet high; ideally Pivi's photograph, once printed, could cover the whole island like a blanket. So far she has completed only a small portion of this gigantic work. The image of the island is printed onto PVC rolls, 164-by-16 feet each: to complete the picture, Pivi will need to print 4,000 rolls, and lay them side by side on a giant plain or in a desert. But the printouts are so pixelated that the shape of the island will be recognizable only when seen from a great distance, from the sky, say, or from the moon—which, incidentally, the artist has said, she would like to see, at least once, covered in gold.

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