

ICI

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the architecture & interior design international magazine | middle east

THE ART[IST]HOUSE

Focus: a quartet of art-houses
Jimmie Durham & Maria Thereza Alves
Giuliano Gori, Luca Pignatelli
Studio M Abboud Malak

INSIDE



Kengo Kuma
Westway Architects
Exclusiva Design
Renata Picone

Italo Rota
Haworth Tompkins
kellerArchitettura
Nicolas Robert





It is not easy to imagine a more layered place, on the historical and social level, as the 16th century complex of the Dominican convent of Santa Caterina a Formiello, near Porta Capuana in Naples. Better known as the "Lanificio" (wool mill) – due to the secular use to which this old complex has been converted during the Bourbon rule – the place exudes a unique charm. But, above all, it epitomises the contrasting mood of the historic centre of Naples: on one hand, the richness of its history, testified by the vivid authenticity of its secular stones, and on the other, the degradation and misuse of precious spaces.

Here, a few years ago, a dreamer and strong-willed architect – Antonio Martiniello – started carrying out a project just as ambitious as fascinating: the reconversion of abandoned and under-used areas of the ancient cloisters into a cultural hub for visual arts. Considering that a large part of contemporary art is made today with the not secondary help of highly skilled craftsmen and traders, the idea of Martiniello is to stimulate the encounter between the creative world (artists, designers, filmmakers) and crafts, which in Campania boasts centuries-old traditions, however, threatened in their survival by difficulties to create a network and counteract the global market. It is the "Made In Cloister" project, supported by a successful crowdfunding, which is taking its first steps with concrete results. One of them, surprising in many respects, is the realization of the house-studio for a couple of world-famous artists, Jimmie Durham and Maria Thereza

Living and creating in the history: a house-studio in the heart of Naples

An interview with Jimmie Durham and Maria Thereza Alves



kellerArchitettura

Work

House-studio of Jimmie Durham and Maria Thereza Alves

Client

Jimmie Durham and Maria Thereza Alves

Location

Naples, Italy

Project Year

2012

Architecture and Design

kellerArchitettura

Architect

Antonio Giuseppe Martiniello

Project Team

Antonio Giuseppe Martiniello
Mario Nasti

Engineering

Luigi Fedele

Building Management

Antonio Giuseppe Martiniello

Landscape

Alessandro Cirillo

Size and total area

Covered area: 350 m²

Terraces: 130 m²

Total area: 480 m²

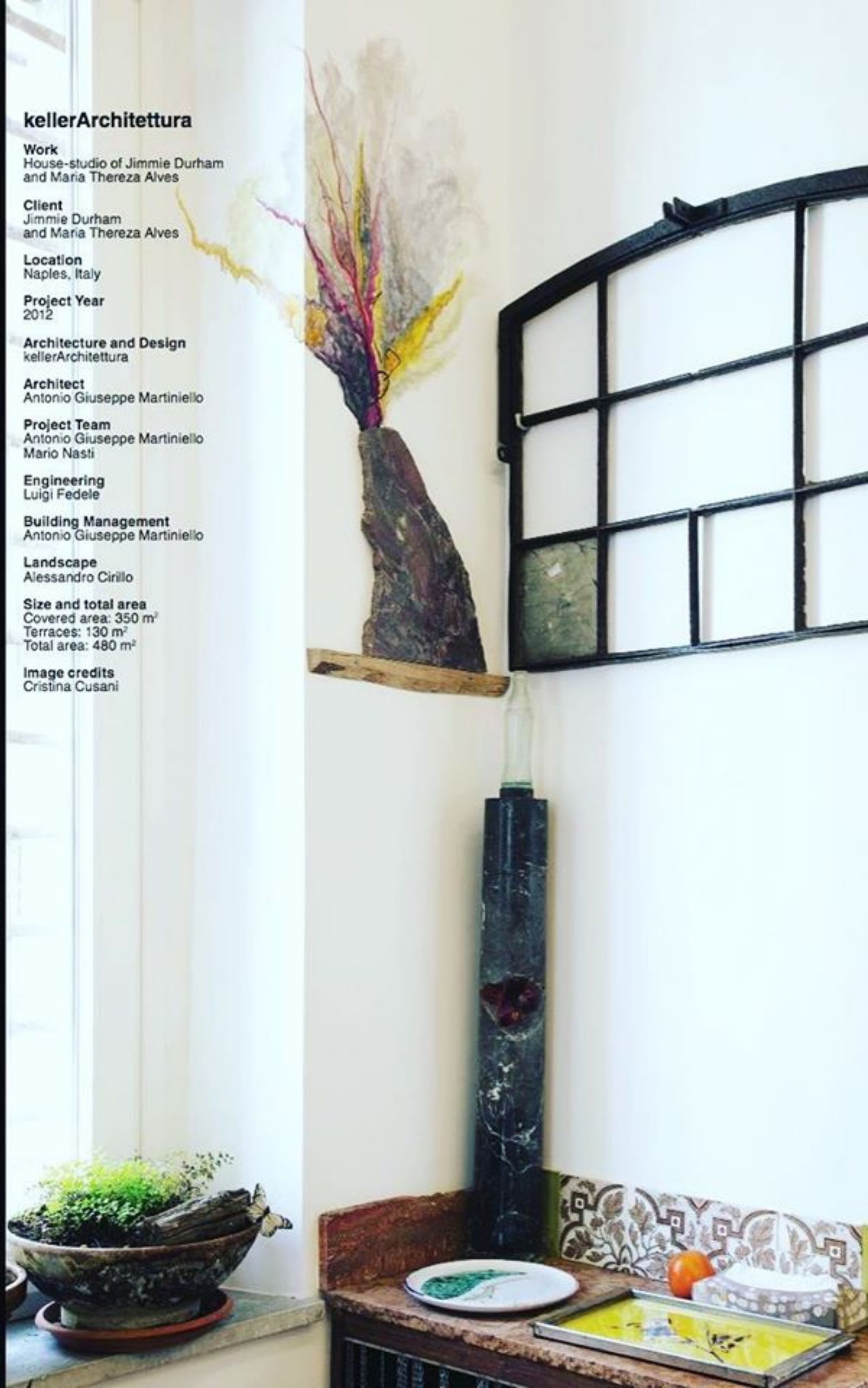
Image credits

Cristina Cusani

Alves, made by the same Martiniello through his atelier kellerArchitettura which is author, among other works, of many successful interiors in and out of Naples.

Of course Durham and Alves do not need presentations, but a few words about their work can help better understand the meaning of their home-studio. Born in Washington, Arkansas (1940), Jimmie Durham is a world-famous artist, essayist and poet who had a very important role throughout the 1960s and 1970s in the American Indian Movement for civil rights. His artist's career is mainly focused on wood and stone sculpture which he intends as an anti-architectural performance in order to liberate architecture's privileged material, stone, from its association with monumentality, stability and permanence. He has also a radical and ironical relationship with industrial artifacts. A clear example of this are his site-specific installations that involve car or planes crushed by big stones. He has exhibited worldwide, mainly in Europe. Born in San Paolo, Brazil (1961), Maria Thereza Alves is an artist strongly related to the themes of ecology. Her work is based on the idea that soil, both in industrialised and developing countries, is largely covered from plant life migrated in the territory or introduced from outside. Her main project, called "Seeds of Change", involves the leading European harbors on the topic of the cargo ballast that was involuntarily transported by ships crossing the oceans. Once arrived in port, the ballast was discharged and the seeds germinated and consequently changed the European landscape. Among her many exhibitions, it is relevant to mention the one entitled "Wake: the flight of birds and people", devoted to the Liwa Oasis and commissioned by Art Dubai projects in 2015.

Durham and Alves both live in Europe since 1994. In 2011, after meeting Antonio Martiniello and his dream about the cloister of Santa Caterina a Formiello in Naples, they decided to have a house and a studio there. Thus they bought a property that was formerly a 16th century library, later converted in a shoes factory. They committed to kellerArchitettura the design of their home, which comprised conservation and refurbishment works. In addition to the private residence and >



studio features, the clients required the construction of temporary housing and related workshops for artists engaged in workshops offered by the association Durham Alves created by them and very active in social projects linked to the territory.

The main design challenge was therefore to combine the artists' needs with the restoration of the spatial integrity of a structure heavily altered over time through accretions and alterations. The project is spread over four levels with adjoining terraces, for a total of 480 m², connected by the new lift and existing stairwells. The first two floors are occupied by features related to the association's activities, such as workshops and a small loft, while on the upper level private spaces open onto terraces overlooking the "great cloister" of the complex. The spatial structure of the architectural system tends to a rarefaction that accentuates the essential dimension, where light and structure play an important role. Starting from the entrance on the ground floor – a real cave occupied by the sinuous stairs – all spaces are strongly marked by the presence of the works of the two hosts: sculptures in wood and stone by Durham, paintings and photographs of installations by Alves fill the space without saturating it. Even the furnishings are unique pieces marked by the work of the two artists, whose presence confers a "domestic" dimension without losing the expressive figure of unusual combinations. Proof of this is the dining table, which contrasts with the "console" made up of an old shoe factory machine. The result is an interior that is both welcoming and radical, where no detail is left to chance.

Thus, two internationally renowned artists, both coming from the "new world", find themselves living and creating their works close to the beating heart of the history of a layered and complex city like Naples. The meaning of their presence here is explained by their own words, from which emerges a profound knowledge of their adopted city, along with a detached and objective look at its potentiality. The text that follows is the result of the exclusive interview that we had the opportunity to have with Jimmie Durham and Maria Thereza Alves, who welcomed us in their atelier-refuge nested in the heart of Naples.

AP: Andrea Pane
MTA: Maria Thereza Alves
JD: Jimmie Durham

AP: Why did you decide to come to Italy and why, among many Italian cities, did you choose to have a studio and live in Naples?

MTA: First of all our full time residence and studio is in Berlin, Germany. This is a place we come because we like it. The studio is in Germany because our assistants are in Germany also. So yes, we have a studio here, where we do more research and thinking, because we have no assistants here, they are all based in Berlin. We came here because we have been in Rome but we found that there things don't happen actively in the street, one might say it's very calm city. Since we live in a calm city, Berlin, another calm city to spend some time was a bit too calm. Moreover we had friends that we knew in Naples and we had good experiences here so we thought we should get a second place in Naples.

AP: So you feel all right here in the core of Naples' history. I guess that it might influence your work. Can you tell me if it does and how?

MTA: I am in a show in Fondazione Morra Greco and I will be working with some buildings in this neighborhood, which are not being used or are underused, for example the palazzo of Castelcapuano – the former court which is under used – and the prefecture, which is not used. So I am thinking of different situations that could work for the community, not as exhibition spaces, not to exhibit my work as an artist, but to make a proposal for the community.

AP: It's true. All the sites that you have just quoted need to be used as spaces for the community and art could help and improve a lot all this.

MTA: That's what I am making as a work for the Fondazione.

AP: And what about you, Jimmie?

JD: For me the future does not exist. It may or it may not, we don't know, but there is no future, there really is no future. But the past is absolutely the present, we live in the past, that is





what the present is, is just in the past. So all of the past, wherever we are, is super important because it is now.

AP: Right. Moving to architecture, you decided to commit to Antonio Martiniello the design of your house. Did you make any specific requests? How was your relationship with him?

JD: In the process of making it, the yearlong process, it was a really close contact all the time. But his kind of dream of this entire neighborhood is very infectious and we caught the disease. This neighborhood is so potentially important to Naples and therefore to Europe, to Italy, but not yet. Antonio guesses the weight of all the nonsense but he still has this beautiful dream of what would happen, so we are following his dream.

AP: Now you are a very important part of this dream, I guess. I read that in recent years your interest in architecture has grown increasingly. Perhaps you are more interested now than you were at the beginning of your career.

JD: That's because first I lived in the US and then Mexico. In the new world architecture is a dirty joke, is not real anywhere, is always just something foolish. But then we moved to Europe: we moved here in 1994, first to Brussels, then to Marseille, then to Berlin, and then to Rome, and then to every place. Architecture is so controlling here, it is the definition of Europe. The cities are made of architecture and the cities are Europe. The cities mean architecture and it means that your body is dictated to/ by architecture. As you walk down the street you must just walk down the street, you can't walk through the building and into another street.

MTA: And that was one of the interesting things in Berlin, because it had been so bombed that you saw a city very differently, because you would stand in one street, very far away from Alexander Platz, and you could still see the Alexander Platz tower and had the city been built normally, as it is now, you would never have been able to see that. You no longer have that idea of space, in which you could have gotten very easily to Alexander Platz by directly walking towards it.

AP: It is true, this makes Berlin a very contrasting city. As you know even Naples had been bombed during World War II and we still have traces in many parts of the city. So this is architecture in cities, but what about architecture in your work? Is it part of it or not?

JD: When we moved to Europe I saw what architecture is in Europe and said: «It has to be my main subject, my main drive». In many different paths I might go off, like a work I am doing for Zurich this year, you won't see anything about architecture, but it is about architecture all the same.

AP: I can tell that the materials you use in your work are mainly building materials: you use stone, cement, all materials coming from the building process. I am interested in this aspect of your work.

JD: There are also many facets to that. I am a very good craftsman in stone and in wood, I can sculpt wood very well, I can sculpt stone very well, but if you sculpt stone now you cannot sell it, because you cannot get the right price for the number of hours put in it, no matter what the subject is. And if it is a very nice piece, a collector does not want a very nice stone sculpture anymore, instead of working he would rather have something machine made that looks like a stone sculpture made by a computer in Carrara. So there is still very much work to do, I love to work and most of the work now has to do with the same materials that builders use. Anything that we make is in the same stuff, and that was also true when people were working in stone and they were building buildings out of stone at the same time. It was the common material.

AP: Normally in the building process now there is a factory that does the work with the stones. The interesting thing is that you do your work with your hands.

JD: Because my body is all one piece, my brain, my heart, my stomach and my hands are all one piece. I can't make these separations... I can't think well without my entire body involved and I can't work well without my brain involved, it's one piece.



MTA: There is a book on handcraft and more specifically on human being and craftwork. In it the authors cited a sociologist who said «we are wired, just wired, to make things with our hands and to do it well. We are wired as humans to do that».

AP: So you believe, both of you I think, that the work of art has to be physical, must have a "materiality". Is this important to you?

JD: It always is, for it always is there, even if we pretend it's not. We love to pretend that when you look at the television, and watch movies or the Internet there is no physicality. But there's a physicality right in front of you!

MTA: It takes a lot of space in your space.

JD: And in your body! It takes up space in your brain, in your body.

AP: It's true. I've seen downstairs that you also worked in China with a project in Guangzhou.

MTA: Yes, what I did was to take I took a chunk of earth, put it in the museum of contemporary art and waited to see what seeds would grow. At the same time I did a research on

where I took the earth, for about one square block. I did a research on the whole history of how the seeds could have arrived there. What you see in the photograph is a very small part of the artwork because the installations were much bigger, it is just about one third of the photographs I used and I also had texts and thirty paintings that I made. This is just my favorite part, so I put it there and I tried to add variables from way back when emperor Qianlong had his birthday parties and the place I took the earth from is the only place in China where a non-Chinese was allowed to come in. So if you were an investor invited to Qianlong's birthday party, you had to come into there, Guangzhou, debark and go by land to the court. So you came with gifts, elephants, lions, whatever. All of them came out and the idea is that the seeds could come out when they got on land.

AP: I have now a question for Jimmie. If I'm not mistaken, you exposed your work in the Church of Santa Maria Donnaregina here in Naples, near the Madre museum a few years ago. Would you like to comment this experience?

JD: It was quite marvelous. I don't know if they ever use it or not.

AP: Yes, they use it. Did you feel the space particularly appropriate and fascinating for your work?

JD: Very appropriate. I did an exhibition in Venice and it was in that church very close to the fresco painting by Filippo Lippi or somebody at that time anyway. A beautiful wall painting, and I just loved that mix, all artists are contemporary to each other and that is so encouraging to me so, to be next to those paintings.

AP: So continuity is important to you. I think that living here could also be intended as a sort of continuity in history, this is very stimulating and interesting. Last question: what do you really love about Naples? What would you suggest, what do you feel perhaps could be changed, or improved here? What makes you feel comfortable living here or, on the other hand, what makes you feel distant as an American or as a Brazilian? Do you actually ever feel so?

MTA: What I love here very much are two things. The first is to feel a lot of energy on the street and a part of it is also that you begin your day and you never know what it's going to happen, never. You don't know who is coming by, what you are going to do and I am

very happy with it. Berlin is the exact opposite, you make appointments six months in advance and there's no spontaneity. As a Brazilian this makes me very depressed because it's like a wall that does not move. You go and say: «Come on, let's go have a drink, let's stop by for a cake!» «Oh, it's too complicated». Everything is just too complicated! So I like this very much. What I have a problem with is the transportation system, I'm sorry to say this!

AP: What about Jimmie? Is it the same for you?

JD: It is similar. I love the constant generosity, people on the street and friends have such a good spirit, that's not really like Berlin, you don't find it everywhere in the world. But we've lived nearly for thirty-seven years in many places, and I've never felt at home before. In Naples I feel like home and it's much more than I'd ever dream of. I like to feel a homeless orphan, but it's good to feel at home too.

AP: Well this is very important!

MTA: One other thing is that we have a cultural association and in April we have invited a publisher of art books to be here for ten days,



and then in October will come an artist from Brazil, Icaro Lira, who has been here already.

AP: So they actually stayed here?

MTA: Yes, they stayed here. They had the use of the studio to do what they wanted and we tried to introduce them and showed them different things, like the amazing archive at the Banco di Napoli. I guess this artist would think it's very interesting, so I would take him there. Moreover, the publisher wanted to

establish a connection between Naples and Rome so he would come here to meet young artists and writers and stay ten days trying to make a bridge.

AP: Ok, this is very interesting and important to stimulate also our artists, other people, to come here. As a Neapolitan, thank you for all of this.

JD: But Naples it's a very lively city for the arts.

AP: It is. I think that Naples is growing in this field, perhaps we had a period with a lower artistic scene, as in the 1980s, but now I see new visions of the art in the street, in the community, and your presence here is the testimony of all of this. Finally, many thanks to both of you from myself and on behalf of the staff of Compassesworld for welcoming us in your home and also for your time. It has been a wonderful conversation!

Andrea Pane