

Doublings

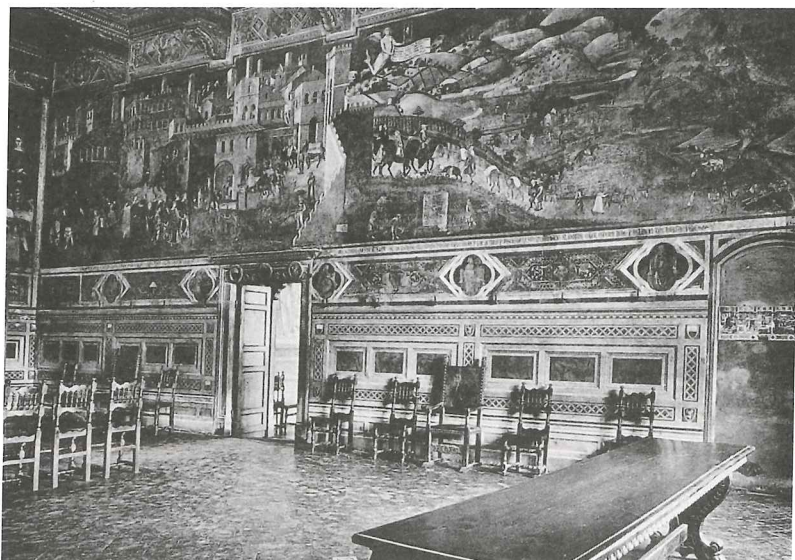
Room of Peace and Room of Pieces

Two rooms in Italy, each a reflection of their own time, tell a story across history about how territory is governed. One room is in the Palazzo Pubblico of Siena, the Room of Peace, where Ambrogio Lorenzetti painted his allegorical frescoes in the early fourteenth century to illustrate the effects of good and bad governance on both the city and the countryside. The other room is in the Corderie dell'Arsenale in Venice, where photographs by Bas Princen showing fragments of Lorenzetti's frescoes were displayed in the entry vestibule to the *Monditalia* exhibition of the Venice Architecture Biennale in 2014. Meant to mirror the room in Siena, Princen names his series "Room of Peace" and, by showing it in pieces, mirrors the fractured condition of our time as well, suggesting that the issue of governance today is all the more complex, insofar as clear distinctions between 'good' and 'bad' or for that matter between 'the city' and 'the countryside' no longer hold.

Lorenzetti's frescoes belong to the genre of 'how-to' manuals on governing that were then called "mirrors" or "eyes" for the magistrates. In line with this genre, the frescoes are made up of vignettes that were intended to instruct the city council on how best to govern and, above all, maintain peace in the republic. The Room of Peace is aptly named and, as mirrors for the citizen-rulers, the frescoes are placed in such a way as to provide a moral lesson on the virtues and vices of their actions. The governing body of Siena would sit facing the fresco entitled *City-State under Tyranny* as an ominous reminder of the evils that

would beset a people and their territory if the fresco's message was not heeded. From where they sat, the magistrates had the *Good City-Republic* fresco on their side, figuratively and literally. Between these two scenes, Lorenzetti painted the *Court of the Common Good*, a panel depicting the system of checks and balances at work to assure the proper and equitable distribution of power. The fourth wall of the Room of Peace has a window looking out over the town to the surrounding landscape as if to supplement the three allegories with a living panorama of the world and thereby bring reality into the picture. Reading this window as the fourth panel of the work, it seems that out there things have simply taken their course, for better or worse, to produce the amalgam that we inhabit today, the contemporary world having for the most part disregarded the earlier lessons of the frescoes.

Standing before Lorenzetti's account of a medieval setting, and given a glimpse into the complex ecology of governance and territory in play at his time, what strikes a contemporary eye most is the sheer multitude of agents drawn together to tell the story and, by extension, just how charged this ecology really is. And this is the case now more than ever. For in the amalgamated world that we inhabit, ever more people and things are drawn into the mix, while the conditions produced are becoming normative at an ever faster rate without ever cohering into a unified whole. We no longer even know where cities stop or start, let alone which constituencies they



Salla della Pace,
Palazzo Pubblico, Siena

actually serve or disown. Whereas we might still believe that we have the 'virtues of good government' on our side, we stand face to face with just the opposite and are confronted with a profusion of ills that, however detrimental, are all too often cloaked in virtuous guises and go unchecked.

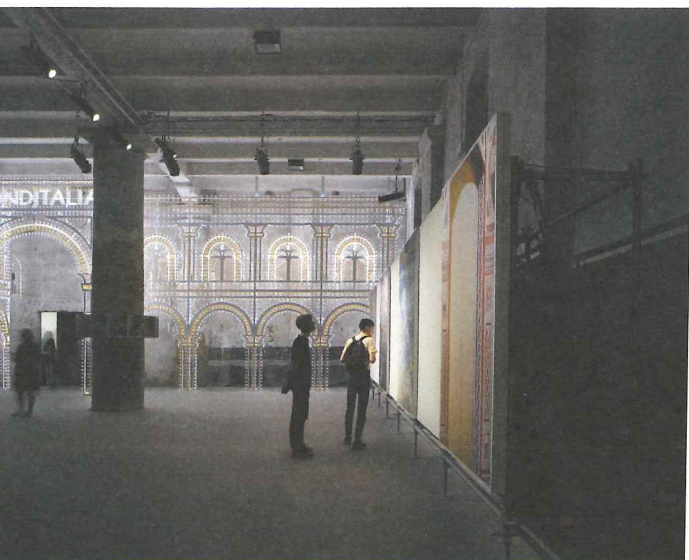
Alluding to the dialectics of Lorenzetti's work, good *versus* bad, ordered *versus* disordered, city *versus* countryside, etc., Princen himself photographed parts of the original frescoes in pairs, selecting portions that face each other across the room and thereby suggesting the skein of relations that had once entangled the magistrates in their deliberations on the course of the republic—a gate here, another over there; a landscape there, another one over here; a detail down here, another up there. In this sense, Princen's installation served as a timely prefatory space for Italy's splintered narrative of nation-building at the Venice Biennale, insofar as the *Monditalia* exhibition—a reflection on the state of a nation—was presented in an array of disjunctive vignettes of its cultural production, piece by piece, display by display.

Princen's individual photographs of details of Lorenzetti's work also include fragments of the Room of Peace in which the frescoes are situated—a walled-in door, part of a beam, the edge of a bracket, and so forth—and thus were an effective opening to *Monditalia* in that the photographs, like the rest of the exhibition, appeared piece by piece and never coalesced into a coherent picture. There was a generous amount of space left between

the individual photographs, inviting visitors to complete the scenes for themselves. There were even surprising moments of doubling, when elements of both rooms—the one in Siena and the one in Venice—coincided, with an edge of a beam, a column, or an arch in the Arsenale aligning with those of the Palazzo Pubblico captured in Princen's work, as if to suggest a mirroring or transposition of one space to another over time.

But, of course, there is more to mirrors than meets the eye, for the hordes of visitors to the Biennale were pulled into the work as well. Upon entering the vestibule of the *Monditalia* exhibition and finding themselves amidst Princen's mosaic of photographs, visitors were by implication put in the position of their fellow citizen-rulers who once sat in Room of Peace between the frescoes illustrating the effects of good and bad governance. In other words, those contemporaries who flocked to the Venice Biennale as so many passive consumers of yet another cultural spectacle were momentarily provoked instead to see themselves in Princen's 'fractured' mirror as active participants of today's body politic, that is, as stakeholders who are collectively responsible for making do with the pieces at hand in the hope of reactivating the spirit that once animated the Room of Peace in Siena.

Marc Angélil and Cary Siress



"Room of Peace" installation,
Corderie dell'Arsenale, Venice, 2014