

Chronicles MuSaBa 1970-2002

When Nik Spatari and Hiske Maas "land" in 1969 in Santa Barbara – a fascinating but ruined monastic complex that had belonged to the Carthusians of Serra San Bruno and dated back to the 10th century, only a few scattered walls remain of the ancient settlement. Everything is covered by thorn bushes and brushwood. But a stone bust of Saint Barbara still remains intact among the disconnected stones that had once been the ancient chapel.

Nik notices that there is a strange similarity between that sculpted face and that of his partner. It is a sign that their lives are to begin again in that place. They could leave behind them the years spent in Lausanne, New York, Paris, Amsterdam, London, and Milan without regret. The art world, the notoriety, and the money weren't worth anything in comparison with such silence and wild beauty.

Nik and Hiske transform the ruined ex-railway station at the foot of the Santa Barbara hill into an original building where the emphasis is on playing with the relationship between space, light, and colour, following techniques assimilated during Nik's friendship with Le Corbusier in Paris. At the same time, they begin to restore the ex-monastic complex. Stone upon stone, the area starts to take shape. It isn't quite like restoring the ancient walls, but it is the transfiguration of the ancient settlement into a new vision.

With recycled stones and material from the underlying torrent, Nik and Hiske once more raise the walls of Santa Barbara, salvaging courtyards, patios, and halls, not to mention the chapel that is Nik's masterpiece. The restoration requires long years of effort and fatigue and is almost solely sustained by the sale of Nik's paintings and the untiring activity of Hiske.

In 1973, the couple create the Manifestation "Struttura Ambiente" (environmental structure) for the Mediterranean Art Gardens, which have become one of the main features of MuSaBa, followed by other special events that annually promote sculpture, painting, and design, and involve artists, architects, archaeologists and environmentalists from all over the world.

In 1977, the Association "Museum Santa Barbara" is established, and the ex-railway station, plus the surrounding area, is purchased. However, Nik and Hiske's autonomy is interpreted as a hostile act by the Commune of Mammola, which has difficulty comprehending the mentality of the two artists who work without the logic of compromises. All this makes it difficult to obtain financial help and thus creates tension. For no plausible reason, unnecessary nocturnal house searches take place at Nik and Hiske's home. Spatari is arrested and then released following an absurd "denunciation" for the disappearance of several burnt tiles from a mill in ruins.

The writer Pasquino Crupi reports the event with bitter irony: *"We must confirm that certain cultural initiatives, which in Calabria are like an oasis in the middle of a desert of underdevelopment, are hindered, sometimes laughed at, and lastly muddied by these strange episodes..."*

One of the hardest battles that Nik and Hiske fought for the survival of the museum begins at the end of the 1970s: the deviation of the major road that had been projected to link the Ionian coast to the Tyrrhenian. The original plan would have meant that it crossed exactly where the ex-railway and monastic complex were situated, destroying the museum and residential site in progress. They fight for three long years against the local and provincial administrations, the fund for the development of Southern Italy organisation, and the planning firm together with the contractors.

Petitions, inspections, and appeals are made calling for the safeguarding of the ancient settlement and the archaeological area of Santa Barbara. As in past times, threats are made. The implied message is that Spatari and Maas would do better to choose another site for their museum. The Ministry of Cultural Affairs and the Presidency of Ministers intervenes and puts a stop to the works. Archaeological excavations and researches are done, and the final conclusion reached is that the area is, in fact, "a settlement of exceptional historic interest."

The hostility doesn't stop the activity of MuSaBa, which year after year increases its number of sculptures and becomes more interesting as a result. Spatari is the main executor of the

monumental works that are planned by artists from all over the world for the growing Mediterranean Art Gardens; he transforms drawings and plastics into monumental works (using so-called "poor" material) of great beauty and in perfect harmony with the surrounding area.

The art critic Achille Bonito Oliva comments: *"The Foundation should oblige, said without irony, artists to come to stay for a period of time. It is not enough to promote exhibitions by moving paintings and sculptures from one place to another; this would hamper rather than expand artistic consciousness in the cultural vacuum in which Calabria finds itself. Artists instead should produce their work directly on site as a reaction to the impact they will experience because of the geographical and cultural situation in deep southern Italy. In this way, they will produce more profound and more authentic works."*

In 1983, Spatari creates a great sculpture, "Concetto Universale," which has become the symbol of MuSaBa. Nik and Hiske began a collaboration with universities and schools, promoting stages (apprenticeships), work camps, and special events, including the annual Scholastic Meeting that is open to non-European countries.

The architectural-environmental reconstruction continues with Spatari and Maas' private funds, under the direct control of the Ministry of Cultural Affairs in Calabria. In a report, the superintendent writes, *"The singularity of this institution is the possibility to offer to the public art works not obtained through private galleries, collectors, or artists but that are specifically designed and created for MuSaBa with suitable flexibility and adaptability for these architectonic spaces that are, in fact, being restructured."*

In 1986, Nik Spatari and Hiske Maas establish the "Santa Barbara Art Foundation," which becomes a museum-park-laboratory, and, in 1988, at an international study meeting the experts agree on one point: Santa Barbara must be a laboratory and a artistic-cultural-tourist reference for Calabria. Architecture and design competitions are promoted for international universities, and teams from Ankara, Amsterdam, Antwerp, and Florence stay at the Foundation and carry out their projects under the guiding hand of Nik Spatari.

In 1989, the project AMA (Ambiente Mediterraneo Arte) is presented to the Region Calabria. The Foundation is awarded a grant from European funds (PIM – Integrated Mediterranean Projects) in the sum of 1.030.000.000 million (is the "million" extraneous?) lire, but the money will never arrive at its destination due to the premeditated mix-up about "responsibility" between the Region Calabria, the local Commune, and the Ministerial Superintendency.

The Superintendent – in total contrast to the previous reports done by the same body in the years before – claims that *"This particular philosophy regarding interventions that tends to suffocate the pre-existing Byzantine architectural elements calls for a superior opinion..."* This evaluation was quickly reversed by the statement of General Technical Inspector of the Ministry of Cultural Affairs in Rome: *"The Santa Barbara Foundation realises a perfect process of integration between the past and the present of great utility and interest."*

In 1990, the official acquisition of the monastic complex together with several confining grounds around MuSaBa is made official. But another difficult trial awaits Nik and Hiske. In 1991, local judges open an inquiry into presumed abuse and liability for damage to the archaeological patrimony. The damage concerns the ancient necropolis, where, however, excavations have been carried out by the Superintendency on behalf of the Foundation. Moreover, the "Byzantine monastery" Santa Barbara doesn't really exist because the only thing left are the remains of a Carthusian complex, which has been re-interpreted and re-structured by Spatari under control of the Ministry of Cultural Affairs. (but you write earlier of a 4th century remain)

Title to all of the Foundation's patrimony, the museum, the Mediterranean Art Park, the residential and artistic property, art works, collections, and private property – in short, everything! – is frozen, and both Spatari and Maas are placed under house arrest. They are accused of forgery, attempted fraud, illicit archaeological excavations, and corruption. According to the prosecution, the Foundation does not exist but is only a pretext for obtaining undeserved finances.

There are many acts of solidarity in favour of Nik and Hiske, among which is one by the President of the Region Calabria, who writes to Spatari: *"I'm by your side in this incredible situation that I hope will be settled soon. I will testify anywhere that with your art and your civil commitment you have honoured Calabria. Your initiatives have been a constant reference point for the most prestigious and important contemporary art circuits."*

Even the Mafia raises its ugly head with a long series of threats and attacks (and they still continue) that have devastated part of the Foundation's patrimony: trees have been cut down and ornamental plants destroyed, a Land Rover has been burnt and hundreds of fish have been poisoned. There have been numerous incidents of arson, of threats and physical abuse, and of thefts and damage.

Nik and Hiske prepare a 50-page exposé-denunciation that is presented to the Public Prosecutor's office, to the President of the Republic, to the concerned Ministries, to the Prefect, to the Procurator, and to the Anti-Mafia Commissioner. The result of this is that Spatari and Maas are denounced by the Public Minister of Locri for slander. In 2000, the Court of Justice in Messina acquits the accused because the facts do not support the Public Minister's complaint.

Nik and Hiske receive the prize "Anthium D'Argento" in Lamezia Terme for the following reasons: *"In Calabria it is easier to leave than to stay . . . To Nik Spatari and Hiske Maas, who, with their human, social, and artistic commitment, are creating their dream and ours through the efforts of the Santa Barbara Foundation. "*

In 1995, Nik finishes his work, "Jacob's Dream," which is inaugurated by Bishop Giancarlo Bregantini. Salvatore Santagata, the director of the monthly regional magazine "Calabria," comments: *"It has taken Nik Spatari years of mental elaboration and hard work to create that which will certainly become the most important modern work of art of our region."*

In 1996, the Foundation participates in the international exhibition "The World of Museums" in Venice, in the locale of the Biennale, with a large plastic-structure that is a diverse interpretation of "Jacob's Dream."

Bruno Zevi writes to Spatari: *"Both the quantity and the quality of the articles and essays written about you are very impressive. This success should, at least partially, compensate you for the all of the hard work, the misunderstandings, the absence, and the omissions. I actively and attentively follow you."*

The Museum Santa Barbara is included in a guide book on the six most important Museum-Parks in Italy, published in Florence. In an article entitled: "How green avant-garde is," the weekly magazine "L'Espresso" discusses how eight contemporary art parks in Italy, including MuSaba, are becoming part of the international cultural tourism itinerary.

MuSaBa serves as a natural doorway to the Parco Nazionale d'Aspromonte by facilitating a new kind of cultural and environmental tourism with a visitors' centre, a multimedia databank, and a research lab.

In 1999, the project for the "Foresteria" (Locride Territorial Treaty) is approved, but a series of acts by the local administration must be fulfilled in order to get the financial funds. The subscription of a protocol agreement is reached, but the work doesn't begin as a result of the evasive and negligent behaviour of the Commune.

In 2001, "Hiske's Island," the remaining part of the promontory, is bought, bringing the size of the museum -park to seven hectares and including it in the Development Plan of the Comunità Montana (territorial mountain community). However, the communal administration remains hostile and continues to obstruct the work of the Foundation, under the false name of public interests, all the while using the name and image of artist Nik Spatari and the ideas of MuSaBa for its own advantage and glory.

The latest events are a good example of this. Despite pressing requests, the Commune has not done anything to clear the only road that leads to MuSaBa.

Instead, as a reward, it has consulted about the construction of a road that would cross all of the park, ruining and disfiguring the area, demolishing (and this is the tenth time in the history of MuSaBa, a record!!) the latest installation, the monumental sculpture that is part of the project "SaBaLizards 2001-2006."

Luckily, an appeal to a court of law has thwarted once again the threatening plans of the Commune. However, in the meantime, acts of intimidation continue, including large fires that seriously damaged "Hiske's Island." For this very reason, Hiske herself launches bitter accusations that, however, still leave room for hope:

"Calabria and its administrators have once again shown just how indifferent they are towards us, even though we have been the first to operate on an international level to bring contemporary environmental art to this region and to promote a high level of cultural tourism.

"We have 'educate'" hundreds and thousands of people, and we have always been ready to share our innovative ideas and our talent. My wish is that in the future it will not be possible to speculate on fear, disinterest, on the power to corrupt and to be corrupted.

"I hope for all of this because Nik Spatari's life is an act of love for this land."