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'Art Can Be as Effective as Surveillance Cameras': Why an Italian Fashion Capital Is Commissioning Artists to Relieve Racial Tensions

The city of Prato has invited artists including Rainer Ganahl and Yoko Ono to help bridge the sociocultural divide between its Chinese and Italian populations.

Naomi Rea (<https://news.artnet.com/about/naomi-rea-419>), June 21, 2018



Models for Rainer Ganahl's fashion show, *Please, Teach Me Chinese, Please, Teach Me Italian. Marx a Prato, Gucci a Prato*, on June 22 in Prato, Italy, presented by the Luigi Pecci Center for Contemporary Art. Photo courtesy of the artist.

The central Italian city of Prato is famous for its luxury textile industry, producing garments for labels like Gucci and Prada. But in recent years it has gained notoriety (<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/04/16/the-chinese-workers-who-assemble-designer-bags-in-tuscany>) for a growing conflict between the city's native Italians and the Chinese migrant workers who largely manufacture the high-end clothes. To help resolve these tensions, particularly in the culturally isolated industrial neighborhood of Macrolotto Zero, also known as Prato's Chinatown, the city has come up with a creative solution: art.

“The city thinks that social art can be as effective as surveillance cameras,” Simone Mangani, the city’s councilor for culture, told artnet News. Rather than focus on security, “the most important thing to address is the huge cultural divide, the coexistence, and the distrust.”

Prato, which has been known for its textiles since the 12th century, is where the “Made In Italy” label receives its cachet. But the fabric of the industry shifted in the postwar period, amid the mounting pressures of globalization and the influx of Chinese migrants, who, since the 1980s, have transformed the city’s dying luxury textile industry into a hub for fast fashion.



A still from Rainer Ganahl's video about the Italian-Chinese fashion industry, *Snakehead* (2018). Courtesy of the artist.

Today, Macrolotto Zero is home to around 4,500 Chinese companies that import cheap materials from China to be assembled and sold across Europe. Many of these businesses operate under the radar, supported by laborers working long hours for little pay in Dickensian conditions (at least seven people died in a factory fire in one such business, [Teresa Moda](https://www.nytimes.com/2013/12/08/world/europe/deadly-factory-fire-bares-racial-tensions-in-italy.html) (<https://www.nytimes.com/2013/12/08/world/europe/deadly-factory-fire-bares-racial-tensions-in-italy.html>), in 2013). Although some migrants have traveled to Italy legally, many others were smuggled into the country by so-called “snakeheads” and the city has become infamous for its gang activity. (Police consider Prato the home of the Chinese-Italian mafia.)

Tensions between Prato’s Chinese community, which is now the second-largest in Europe, and the city’s native Italian population are rapidly worsening, particularly as Italy’s far-right Lega Nord party gains ground and spreads its anti-immigrant rhetoric (in the run up to the 2018 election Lega Nord rebranded as just “Lega” (league), without officially changing its name). As a result, Prato’s left-centrist government, with funding from the Tuscany Region, has made Macrolotto Zero the focus of an €8 million (\$9.3 million) redevelopment project aimed at making the area “more livable, more attractive, [and] more socially and economically lively,” according to a mission statement on [the city’s website](http://www.cittadiprato.it/) (<http://www.cittadiprato.it/>).





Models in Rainer Ganahl's fashion show *Please, Teach Me Chinese, Please, Teach Me Italian. Marx a Prato, Gucci a Prato*, which will be staged on June 22 in Prato.

Between 2019 and 2022 the city hopes to build infrastructure for public services and spaces that will facilitate socialization. In the meantime, it is hoping that art can help bring the community together. As part of that plan, the city's Luigi Pecci Center for Contemporary Art (<https://www.centropecci.it/en/center>), which turns 30 this year, has invited artists to engage with the sociocultural issues specific to Prato. The artist Rainer Ganahl, who was born in Austria near the Italian border and now lives in New York, is addressing some of the neighborhood's problems with an ambitious project that involves a fashion show (<https://www.centropecci.it/en/events/rainer-ganahl-please-teach-me-chinese-please-teach-me-italian>) tomorrow, June 22, which will later be made into a film.

Since the 1990s, Ganahl's artistic practice has involved learning languages—so far he's mastered nine and is currently studying Chinese (http://ganahl.info/s_chinese_ind.html). He's also previously designed artistic fashion lines, including "Comme des Marxists," which debuted in New York at White Columns (<http://www.ganahl.info/whitecat.html>) in 2013. Fittingly for Prato, Ganahl plans to unveil a new clothing line that has a logo with poetic invitations to "Please, teach me Chinese" and "Please, teach me Italian" in several different languages.



Rainer Ganahl's "Comme des Marxists" at White Columns, 2013. Courtesy of the artist.

To produce the clothes, Ganahl worked with the local Marini Industrie SpA (<https://www.marini-industrie.it/>) group, which manufactures for luxury brands including Gucci. He also retrofitted his logo onto clothes purchased directly off the backs of migrant workers in the neighborhood. He named the project *Please, Teach Me Chinese, Please, Teach Me Italian. Marx a Prato, Gucci a Prato*.

The performance will take place along a stretch of active factories connected to the so-called "Piazza dell'Immaginario" (Imaginary Square), an old supermarket parking lot that has been reclaimed by the local photography company Dryphoto Arte Contemporanea in response to the dearth of public space in the area.

The event is part of a wider street festival that 1,500 people are expected to attend—in itself a significant feat for a neighborhood that has historically been ignored by city initiatives. "My performance is now just a part of the event, which is already an accomplishment," Ganahl told artnet News. "So far the only people who really knew [the Chinese community] were the tax collectors and the police, basically."

Ganahl will collaborate with the local dance collective Kinkaleri (<http://www.kinkaleri.it/kinka1.htm>) as well as Chinese performers, and has encouraged the participation of local Chinese groups to sell traditional clothing and play Chinese music at the event. He hopes that spectators communicate with one another and are encouraged to share phrases in their native languages.





Rainer Ganahl's designs for *Please, Teach Me Chinese*, *Please, Teach Me Italian*. *Marx a Prato*, *Gucci a Prato*. Courtesy of the artist.

Ganahl, who has shown several times in the Venice Biennale, is not the only high-profile artist getting involved. Earlier this month Yoko Ono installed billboards marked with the word "DREAM," and her signature, throughout the Macrolotto Zero neighborhood, with the hope of prompting residents to imagine their desires and, ideally, realize them. The project is part of Ono's larger "In a word" series, which she launched after winning the Golden Lion at the Venice Biennale in 2009. The billboards will remain in place until December.

The wider effects of Prato's ambitious art initiative have yet to be seen, but officials say that the engagement with the Chinese community has already been a meaningful step.

"It was not so easy to get in touch with the property of the houses that are hosting Yoko Ono's Dream project; it was not so easy to get in touch with Chinese companies," culture councillor Mangani told rtnet News, adding that the city encountered similar hurdles in engaging the area's Italian population. That said, Mangani says the city would readily try a similar project in the future. In fact, its already made the city's Soccorso neighborhood, another cultural melting pot, its next target.

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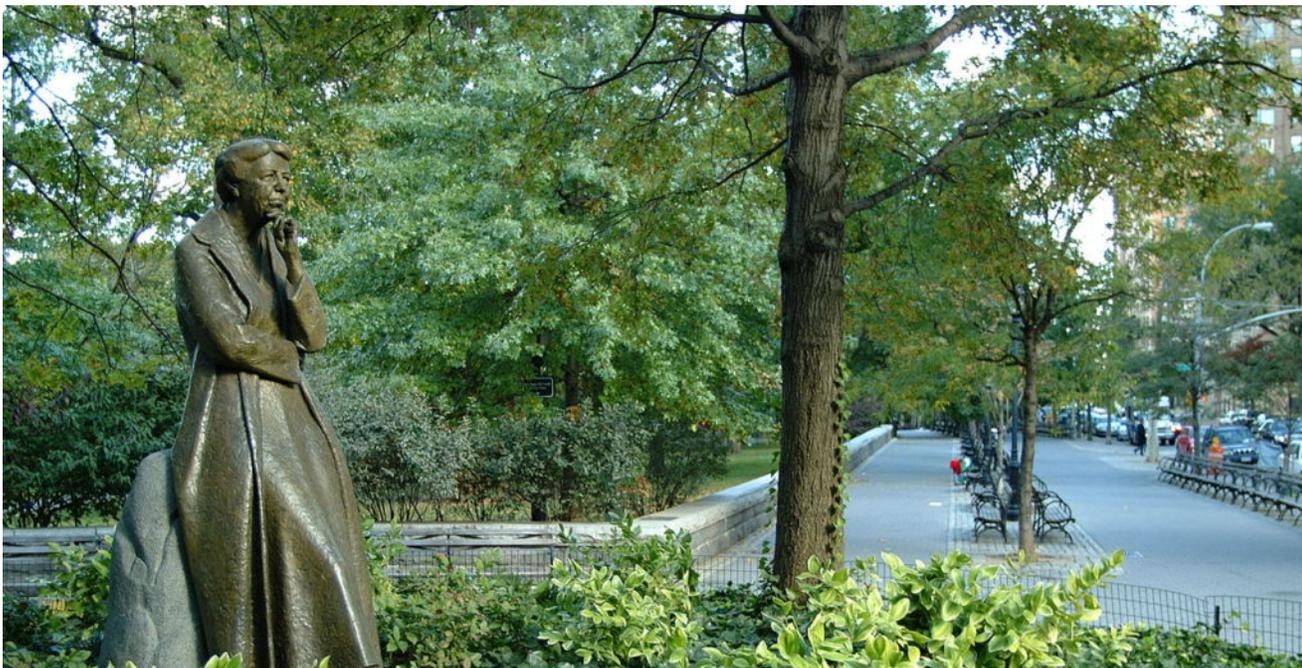
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Grow Up, 'Fearless Girl': New York City Wants to Create Monuments Honoring Its Fearless Women, Too

What historic New York women should the city create monuments for?

Sarah Cascone (<https://news.artnet.com/about/sarah-cascone-25>), June 20, 2018





Statue of Eleanor Roosevelt in Riverside Park. Photo by C.M. de Talleyrand-Périgord, via Wikimedia Commons.

It's about time: New York City is taking a concrete step to correct the imbalance among city monuments, which overwhelmingly honor the achievements of men, rather than women. First Lady Chirlaine McCray and Deputy Mayor Alicia Glen have announced a new effort, She Built NYC, that will commission a new public monument or artwork on city property honoring women's history in New York.

"This is a first step to creating a public art collection that more accurately represents the diversity of New York City's history," McCray said at a press conference, according to the [New York Post \(https://nypost.com/2018/06/20/city-officials-look-for-nominations-for-monument-honoring-women/\)](https://nypost.com/2018/06/20/city-officials-look-for-nominations-for-monument-honoring-women/).

The effort, led by the [Department of Cultural Affairs \(http://www.nyc.gov/culture\)](http://www.nyc.gov/culture), is kicking off with an open call for nominations, running through August 1. New Yorkers are invited to submit their suggestions on [women.nyc \(http://women.nyc\)](http://women.nyc) of worthy women who are no longer living, as well as groups of women and milestones or significant moments in women's history from at least 20 years ago.



Statue of Harriet Tubman in Harlem. Photo by denisbin, via Flickr Creative Commons.

An advisory panel will create a list of nominees based on submissions, with [Cultural Affairs and Percent for Art \(http://www.nyc.gov/percent\)](http://www.nyc.gov/percent) making the final decision. The honoree and site of the monument will be announced in January 2019.

If the effort is admirable, it's also long overdue—and many more like it will be required to achieve equality among New York's male and female monuments. In 2015, [Hyperallergic \(https://hyperallergic.com/226186/the-only-five-public-statues-of-historic-women-in-nyc/\)](https://hyperallergic.com/226186/the-only-five-public-statues-of-historic-women-in-nyc/) found that there are only five public statues of historic female figures in the entire city ([Fearless Girl \(https://news.artnet.com/exhibitions/fearless-girl-wall-street-art-installation-extended-904112\)](https://news.artnet.com/exhibitions/fearless-girl-wall-street-art-installation-extended-904112), for the record, doesn't count as a monument). In Central Park, where there are 29 statues, not one is of a historical woman; there are only tributes to fictional female characters like Alice in Wonderland. In contrast, [Gothamist \(http://gothamist.com/2017/01/18/more-female-statues-in-nyc-please.php\)](http://gothamist.com/2017/01/18/more-female-statues-in-nyc-please.php) found nearly 150 historical statues of men. (In November, [the Parks Department dedicated a site \(https://www.nycgovparks.org/parks/central-park/pressrelease/21516\)](https://www.nycgovparks.org/parks/central-park/pressrelease/21516) for future sculptures of suffragette leaders Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony)



Kristen Visbal's *The Fearless Girl* statue on Wall Street. Courtesy of Logan Hasson via Instagram.

She Built NYC follows in the footsteps of the [Mayor's Advisory Commission on City Art, Monuments, and Markers](http://www1.nyc.gov/site/monuments/index.page) (<http://www1.nyc.gov/site/monuments/index.page>). Established last fall, the commission was convened to [take a closer look](https://news.artnet.com/art-world/new-york-monuments-promote-hate-survey-1129991) (<https://news.artnet.com/art-world/new-york-monuments-promote-hate-survey-1129991>) at figures currently honored by the city, with an eye toward [removing potentially objectionable statues](https://news.artnet.com/art-world/new-york-controversial-monuments-hearings-1145702) (<https://news.artnet.com/art-world/new-york-controversial-monuments-hearings-1145702>). The [commission ultimately opted](https://news.artnet.com/art-world/nyc-controversial-statues-1198181) (<https://news.artnet.com/art-world/nyc-controversial-statues-1198181>) to leave all but one of the questionable monuments in place, but add plaques providing additional information about the misdeeds of controversial subjects such as Christopher Columbus. (There are also plans to erect a monument to indigenous peoples to present a counternarrative.)

The only statue that was removed was a Central Park monument to 19-century physician J. Marion Sims, a man once praised as the father of modern gynecology. His medical advances, however, were made in no small part at the expense of the enslaved black women on whom he experimented. That fact led to widespread [calls for his statue to be torn down](https://news.artnet.com/opinion/j-marion-sims-statue-museum-of-the-city-of-new-york-1059308) (<https://news.artnet.com/opinion/j-marion-sims-statue-museum-of-the-city-of-new-york-1059308>). [It is being moved](https://news.artnet.com/art-world/art-industry-news-april-18-2018-1268351) (<https://news.artnet.com/art-world/art-industry-news-april-18-2018-1268351>) to the site of Simm's grave in Brooklyn's [Green-Wood Cemetery](https://www.green-wood.com/) (<https://www.green-wood.com/>).

The commission also delivered an official recommendation that the city erect new monuments that honor currently overlooked communities and histories, noting that the current crop of statues does not reflect the rich melting pot that is New York, a metropolis built by people of all races, colors, religions, and sexualities. In an effort to rectify this situation, Cultural Affairs will spend up to \$10 million over the next four years on new permanent public monuments.

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