

'Terremoto: utopia, memory, and the unfinished in Sicily'

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'What is the relation of the dead to what has not yet happened, to the future? All the future is the construction in which their "imagination" is engaged' (Berger 1996: n.p.).

In the afternoon of Sunday 14 January 1968, shortly after the end of mass in the local churches, a series of major earthquakes (*terremoti*) shook through the Belice Valley in Western Sicily, a quasi-feudal and economically deprived agricultural area dotted with small towns, at the juncture of the provinces of Palermo, Trapani and Agrigento. The epicenter of these seismic events was the fourteenth-century town of Gibellina, and most of its 6,400 inhabitants fled their homes *en masse* in the early evening to seek refuge in the freezing open fields overnight: hundreds of blanketed groups huddling around fires under a clear sky, waiting for the light of dawn. In the early hours of Monday 15 January two further devastating shocks, the second of them measuring 6.7 on the Richter scale, ripped through the town, finally flattening and reducing it to a field of rubble on the hillside: stone, masonry, plaster, the debris of shattered lives. Only the town's cemetery, a short distance away on a neighbouring hillside, remained intact. Three other communities in the valley were also entirely destroyed - Poggioreale, Salaparuta and Montevago; others were significantly damaged, including Santa Ninfa, Santa Margherita, Partanna and Salemi. In this one catastrophic night more than 400 people were killed – over 100 in Gibellina – while thousands more were injured, and almost 100,000 people were left homeless. On the front page of the Tuesday morning edition of the Communist newspaper *L'Unità* (16 January 1968), above a photograph of the deserted, pulverised ruins of Gibellina, the headline read: 'Earthquake in Sicily: 500 dead? Entire region no longer exists. It was carnage' (*C'era una strage*).¹

¹ Unless otherwise stated, all translations are by the author. I am indebted to the staff of CRESM (Centro Ricerche Economiche e Sociale per il Meridione), and to Nicolò Stabile, for their help with initial research in Nuova Gibellina.

In the weeks and months that followed, as the dead were buried and survivors retrieved what possessions they could from the remains of their homes, gradually the emergency services and military personnel – struggling to cope with the aftermath of a disaster of such scale - constructed provisional shelters throughout the Belice Valley for the traumatised *terremotati*: gridded temporary communities of tents and then concrete fibre Nissan huts, without electricity, running water, heating, basic amenities. Ultimately these cramped, leaking, insanitary, barrack-like camps – *barracopoli* – would house the people of Gibellina for more than 11 years as they awaited a promised new town. Political in-fighting, bureaucratic indecision and inertia at local and State levels, disagreements about the location and nature of the new town, corruption, extortion and the embezzlement of State funds - all contributed to delays in planning and construction; and inevitably many *contadini* chose to abandon their *paese* forever, accepting local government's offers of free passports and one-way tickets, and emigrating to Northern Italy, Germany, South America and elsewhere, in search of a new beginning.

In what follows, and in the wake of this disastrous foundational event in the formation of a contemporary identity for the Belice Valley, my focus will be on Gibellina's relocation and reconstruction in the 1970s and 1980s as a utopian art-and-garden community, Nuova Gibellina, designed by renowned architects, urban planners and artists, and its present unfinished, partially inhabited status; and secondly, at the site of the old town, the refashioning of its remains and its memorialisation in Alberto Burri's vast sculptural land art installation, *Il Grande Cretto* ('The Large Crack'), conceived as a 'labyrinth of memory', but never fully finished and currently in a state of increasing disrepair. **[PHOTO 1]** These twinned sites shadow and ghost each other in their entangled doubling, and we will travel freely between them here. Each of them is rooted in and references a catastrophic past, while endeavouring to realise a vision of possible future identities and histories informed by a humanist ideology of art and culture's restorative centrality in the constitution of civic life: the dream of a 'concrete utopia', staging and enabling a community's 'memories for the future'. Furthermore, contemporary Gibellina is haunted by a range of other doublings

none of which settle into neat, mutually exclusive binaries.² In addition to the axis between the past and its unrealised dreams of futurity, underlying this account are the ambiguous relations between idealised conception and its material concretisation, between map-plan and the embodied realities of everyday lived experience, between *urbs* (the material fabric of a city, its physical manifestation) and *civis* (the social practices and networks of its citizen inhabitants), and between construction-rebirth-renewal and ruin.

Nuova Gibellina: a 'concrete utopia'

'What meaning does your construction have?' he asks. 'What is the aim of a city under construction unless it is a city? Where is the plan you are following, the blueprint?' 'We will show it to you as soon as the working day is over; we cannot interrupt our work now', they answer.

Work stops at sunset. Darkness falls over the building site. The sky is filled with stars. 'There is the blueprint', they say (Calvino 1974: 127).

Initial plans for the reconstruction of Gibellina and the Belice Valley were drawn up by ISES (Istituto per lo Sviluppo dell'Edilizia Sociale) under the aegis of the Italian Ministry of Public Works. The State proposed a zoned rationalist plan for regional development, within which Gibellina, relocated to a new site and aggregated with some of the other damaged communities in a much larger town, would become a hub for local industry. In opposition to the State's functionalist plans, Gibellina's mayor Ludovico Corrao, a charismatic, pugnacious and controversial Communist lawyer with numerous connections in the arts (and arguably the core protagonist in the history of post-earthquake Gibellina) began to lobby with unflinching conviction for a radically different vision of a new town, solely for the *Gibellinesi* and in a different location - 18 kms to the west of the old town on the plains of Salinella below Salemi, close to agricultural land worked by the people of the town, and to major transport infrastructure: the train station at Salemi, with direct links to Palermo, and a new motorway linking Palermo and Mazara del Vallo on the south-western coast. Drawing on disparate elements of

² Even the etymology of the town's name is uncertain, and signals complex cultural histories: either from the Arabic *gibel zghir*, 'little hill', or, perhaps more likely given the topographic location of the old town, from the Hebrew *gebel in*, 'between two hills' (Bignardi *et al* 2008: 37).

the utopian visions of François Marie Charles Fourier, William Morris, Frederick Law Olmsted and in particular Ebenezer Howard,³ Corrao conceived of the new Gibellina as a garden-city, open to the fields in the surrounding countryside, with art and culture as the generative foundation and 'redemptive' catalyst for elaborating new histories and civic identities from the (purported) *tabula rasa* enforced by disaster and displacement. Leading artists and architects would work closely with local people to produce a modernist 'concrete utopia' within which contemporary art and design would be embedded into the very fabric of the urban environment. Agriculture, craft and building work during the period of reconstruction would provide employment and seed new enterprises, and over time the town would take its place as a significant destination on the cultural tourism itinerary for Southern Europe: 'Where history has been destroyed, only art could rebuild the layers of a dispersed memory; only a strong death-defying cultural project could make the earth capable of bearing fruit and producing new flowers' (Ludovico Corrao, quoted in Pes and Bonifacio 2003: 4).

From the time of his appointment as mayor in 1969, Corrao began to marshal high-profile artists, intellectuals and activists, including Leonardo Sciascia, Carlo Levi, Cesare Zavattini, and the celebrated Sicilian painter Renato Guttuso. He organised a series of gatherings, demonstrations and a public appeal on the second anniversary of the earthquake in January 1970, in the form of a collectively authored text corrosively critical of the State and explicitly designed to embarrass the government into action.⁴ In such ways Corrao and his growing group of powerful cultural allies insistently lobbied to draw attention to the

³ For an informative account of Ebenezer Howard's influential concept of the decentralised garden-city, and its developments in Britain and the USA, see Peter Hall's 'The City in the Garden' (Hall 2014: 90-148). Corrao seems also to have been inspired by the possibility of a contemporary re-imagining of the spectacular reconstruction of the town of Noto, near Siracusa in Eastern Sicily, destroyed by an earthquake in 1693 (see Camarrone 2011: 16). Noto's luminous *tufu* town centre is now recognised as a masterpiece of the Italian Baroque, and is a UNESCO World Heritage site.

⁴ For the full text of this extraordinarily forthright 'Appeal for solidarity' (1970), co-authored by Sciascia, Levi, Corrao and others, see Pes and Bonifacio 2003: 150. At the time, Sciascia was widely respected as Italy's pre-eminent critical, moral voice in relation to Sicily and the inequities of the so-called 'Southern question', locating Sicily not as an anomaly within Europe but as metaphor or distillate of its contradictions and predicament *in extremis*.

predicament of the people of Gibellina, languishing in increasing frustration in the camps with construction still not underway, protesting as best they could through representations to politicians and church leaders (including the Pope), tax strikes, marches, and graffiti campaigns.⁵ Ultimately the initial ISES plans were abandoned, a compromise was agreed, and in the early 1970s building work finally commenced close to Corrao's chosen site.

The new plan, drawn up by the architect Marcello Fabbri through the ISES, entailed the construction of a modernist town in the broad shape of a butterfly, with the two curved 'wings' containing housing, schools, sports facilities and gardens, assembled around a central East/West spine for municipal buildings and public art works. Ultimately this zone, as initially conceived by the German architect Oswald Mathias Ungers in 1981, with Corrao and others, was also to include an ornamental lake, artisan workshops, green spaces, shops, pedestrian *piazze* and walkways, and a major new church on a small hill at the 'head'. (Formally this urban design configuration, graphically representing chrysalis-like metaphors of transformative emergence, renewal and liberation, closely resembles Lúcio Costa and Oscar Niemeyer's modernist plans for Brasilia, as detailed in Costa's drawings in the late 1950s of a city in the form of an aeroplane or bird-man, with two unfolded wings set either side of a central monumental axis). Every *Gibellinese* family was guaranteed a new house: low-rise, double-fronted domestic dwellings divided into equal-sized plots with private gardens, offering vehicular access to a road on one side and a tree-lined pedestrian street on the other. By the late 1970s, most of the housing in Nuova Gibellina was completed, and the first people were able to move from the camps into their new homes. However by 1979 work on the components of the town's central axis was barely underway, and it remained in large part an undeveloped void at the heart of the town.

⁵ Photographically documented examples of increasingly desperate graffiti from the early-1970s include e.g.: *Dobbiamo lavarci – ma l'acqua?* (We have to wash – but what about water?); *La burocrazia uccide più del terremoto* (Bureaucracy kills more than earthquakes); *Non vogliamo morire* (We don't want to die).

Although of course welcomed, the transition to an unfamiliar environment seems to have been profoundly unsettling, socially and psychologically, for many people. Despite the self-evident difficulties of the camps, years of having to navigate the shared and pressing problems of everyday life in close proximity had produced deep community bonds and relations of support. In this new context, with its radically dispersed lay-out and shift in scale, it seems many felt alienated and atomised by the wide boulevards, separated houses, and vast empty spaces. In the old town, population density had been at 3,200 people per hectare; in the spread of the new town, with a shrinking population of a little more than 4,000, there were now just 350 people per hectare (La Ferla 2004: 35). No provision seems to have been made for links with their former cultural mores and structures. Little possibility of conversations across the street or between neighbours. No meeting points on a human scale. No town centre, no shops. And the water supply was still unreliable, often interrupted without warning.

Rewriting 'dis-aster'

'Our culture thinks through disasters. Implicitly or explicitly, disasters mediate philosophical enquiry and shape our creative imagination' (Huet 2012: 2).

From around 1980, Corrao turned his attention to the realisation of a number of ambitious architect-commissioned buildings and environments, and a wide range of public art works for the new town. This process continued in piecemeal fashion into the mid-1990s,⁶ and in fits and starts to the present time, both developing some of the core commissions for the central axis and dispersing art objects throughout the town. From the outset, Corrao was insistent that art was not 'superfluous', but the essential cornerstone for the gradual emergence of a new post-earthquake civic identity and *genius loci*. Today Nuova Gibellina contains about 20 major buildings deemed to be of particular architectural note, over 100 public art works in the open air, and hundreds of other paintings,

⁶ Corrao was finally defeated in mayoral elections in 1994, then briefly reinstated between 1995 and 2000. He remained committed to the renaissance of Gibellina until his murder in August 2011 at the age of 83 at his home in the Fondazione Orestyadi. He is buried in Pietro Consagra's new cemetery at Nuova Gibellina, next to Consagra who had died in 2005.

drawings, sculptures, installations and textiles in its two major gallery collections on the edge of town (almost 2,000 works in total). Tourist brochures and catalogues produced by Nuova Gibellina's Museum of Contemporary Art proclaim it as 'the largest open-air gallery in the world', a living museum of the late twentieth-century avant-garde. At the same time, as the focus of fiercely polemical critical debates in Italy, particularly in the 1980s and 1990s, about the functions and forms of contemporary urban design and renewal, as well as art and architecture's relations to context, scale, and social responsibility, the town's projects have been condemned roundly by others as representing 'the cemetery of the avant-garde':⁷ a failed experiment in the spectacular, monumental and fragmented, and an unwitting and uncanny staging of Robert Smithson's notion of entropic 'ruins in reverse',⁸ further compromised by the scant concern apparently shown for the lived experience of local inhabitants.

One of the first major commissions, and the first art work one encounters at the entrance to the town today, is a startling 26-metre high burnished steel star straddling the main road: the Sicilian sculptor Pietro Consagra's *Stella: L'ingresso del Belice* ('Star: Entrance to the Belice', 1981). Both monumental and delicate, resonantly defiant metaphor and simple graphic outline, its colour shifting constantly between industrial greys and honeyed apricots in response to the movements of sun and cloud, it remains one of Nuova Gibellina's most iconic and poetically associative images (and one of few seemingly viewed with pride by many local people). **[PHOTO 2]** Consagra seems to have been inspired in part by a relatively obscure passage in Goethe's *Italian Journey*, written just a few miles away in Castelvetro in April 1787, after a night spent in an inn that was 'anything but elegant':

⁷ Antonio Stella in one of a series of savage critiques of Nuova Gibellina's cultural projects and aspirations, published in *Corriere della Sera* in 1998 (quoted in La Ferla 2004: 71). For further details of a wide range of critical perspectives, both affirmative and harshly dismissive, see Camarrone, La Ferla, and Bignardi *et al* 2008: 21-30.

⁸ In his influential 1967 essay, 'A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey', Smithson describes 'a zero panorama' that seems to contain 'ruins in reverse ... the opposite of the "romantic ruin" because the ruins don't *fall* into ruin *after* they are built but rather *rise* into ruin before they are built' (Smithson in Flam 1996: 72. Italics in original).

At midnight I woke up and saw over my head a star so beautiful that I thought I had never seen one like it. Its enchanting light seemed a prophecy of good things to come, and my spirit felt utterly refreshed ... It was not till daybreak that I discovered what had caused this miracle. There was a crack in the roof and I had woken up just at the very moment when one of the most beautiful stars in the firmament was crossing my private meridian (Goethe 1970: 265).

Etymologically the word ‘disaster’ suggests the loss of a protective star (*dis-astro*), and the calamitous repercussions of abandonment by distant agencies in a state of cosmic emergency. Consagra’s sculpture, however, rewrites the apocalyptic narrative, reclaims the errant star, and brings it to earth in palpable, material, enduring form. In this way, a public art work, its component parts welded and erected by the artist in collaboration with a team of local craftsmen, perhaps serves to humanise and politicise disaster, and, to paraphrase Marie-Hélène Huet in *The Culture of Disaster*, emancipate it from a discredited supernatural and root it in the *socius* (Huet 2012: 8). For Corrao, ever the advocate of a restorative mnemonics with one eye on the future, Consagra’s Christian and socialist symbol of rebirth at the entrance to the valley represented ‘the capacity of the people of Belice to sustain the memory of culture, despite all attempts to erase it’ (quoted in La Ferla 2004: 39).

Il Grande Cretto: memory and oblivion

‘The dead inhabit a timeless moment of construction continually rebegun. The construction is the state of the universe at any instant. According to their memory of life, the dead know the moment of construction as, also, a moment of collapse’ (Berger 1996: n.p.).

‘Where there is no past, there cannot be a future’ (Sicilian novelist Vincenzo Consolo, quoted in Bouchard and Ferme 2013: 168).

In 1979, Ludovico Corrao invited the celebrated Tuscan artist Alberto Burri (1915-95) to visit Gibellina, with a view to commissioning a major art work for the town. At that time Burri was perhaps best known for his monochromatic

cretti ('crack') paintings of the 1970s, in which he explored analogies to mark-making and drawing in the filigree of chance cracks (*craquelure*) deliberately produced in the drying processes of various materials combined with pigments, including plastic cements, resins, kaolin and tar. These works seem to reference landscapes, clay river beds, evaporated lakes and deserts, and to relate to those same entropic processes that so fascinated Robert Smithson. Trained as a medical doctor, Burri was also interested in creating the conditions for the appearance of unforeseen and barely controlled ripples, ruptures and 'wounds' in the surface plane of visual images, and harnessing the energy implicated in their processes of scarring and 'healing'. During his 1979 visit, Corrao took the artist to the devastated remains of the old Gibellina, to the work-in-progress of Nuova Gibellina, and to the nearby ruins of the Greek temples at Segesta; the latter seems to have triggered the seed of a creative response for Burri. Subsequently he proposed a large-scale memorial to the victims of the earthquake on the site of the old town, using the residual debris and rubble (*iruleri*) to construct a dramatic map-like installation *in situ* on the hillside. *Il Grande Cretto* (now usually known as *Il Cretto*) would be the largest work of contemporary land art in the world.

Over a period of several years from 1985, under the direction of the architect Alberto Zanmatti and with the assistance of army demolitions personnel and a team of engineers and builders, approximately 60% of Burri's proposal was realised before resources for the project from private donations dried up in 1989.⁹ The remains of the old town were bulldozed into compacted blocks over an area of about 12 hectares (29 acres: 300 x 400 metres), in an approximate, somewhat abstracted restoration of the former locations of streets and buildings. These roughly eye-level, irregularly shaped cuboid structures and the 2-3 metre wide walkways between them were then covered with a shroud or sudarium-like layer of white cement to produce an imposing minimalist environment, which looks from a distance somewhat like an exposed quarry zone undulating

⁹ Another section was added in the late 1990s; and further sections, funded by grants from the EU and the province of Trapani, were being constructed when I last visited *Il Cretto* in September 2014.

down the slopes at the top of the valley. **[PHOTO 3]** The play of light and shadow on the stone steps of the ancient amphitheatre at Segesta seems to have been central to Burri's conception of *Il Cretto* as a dynamic environment-object imbricated in time. The cyclical daily mechanism of the sun's passage would bring life and movement to his sculptural forms, and animate what he conceived of as an enduring poetic and thanatological testimony to a forgotten community in this manifestation of an 'archaeology of the future'. And at the time of a full moon, local people say, the *Cretto's* reflective spectral luminosity was visible at night from many miles away along the valley. The vein-like tissue of fissures in its surface resembled one of Burri's paintings anomalously amplified and writ large into/onto the landscape: an epic projection of *genius loci* valued anew, and, for Burri, in implicit dialogue (and alliance) with those of the culturally revered ruins at Segesta and Selinunte.

From within the *Cretto's* apparent muteness and pervasive silence, the network of 122 sarcophagi and corridors produces something phenomenally and affectively related to Peter Eisenman's penumbral *Holocaust Memorial* (2004) in Berlin. Burri's installation, texturally rougher than Eisenmann's, proposes a steeply angled, brightly lit and labyrinthine series of immersive passageways inviting exploration on foot, decelerating locomotion, and activating contemplation, associational memory and disorientation. Some degree of slumping in the concrete pouring and drying process has served to produce a vivid impression of the morphology of the surface walls as 'epidermal', their folds and creases evocative of ageing, somnolent or unfolding bodies. This tactile, organic quality within the material itself gives rise to a certain dynamism and liquidity in its apparently petrified, inorganic fixity, a corporeal lightness in its gravitied, monolithic, sublime mass. Wandering in proximity to the weathered distress of the surfaces along these crevasses, emergent shapes seem to drift to the surface of consciousness – ephemeral constellations, landscapes - while all the while one remains hyper-aware of this area of sculpted earth's openness and connectedness to the overarching sky and to the vineyards and orchards of the valley ribboning away to the horizon. **[PHOTO 4]**

Concrete's imperfections inevitably and unpredictably entail transformation over time. The effects of weathering sit uneasily with modernist architectural conceptions of uniform, planar 'beauty' (usually white), and its aesthetic ideals have more often than not resisted or repressed a work's imbrication in time and context. Such transformation has been located as a 'ruinous' deterioration of original authorial intent for a 'finished' work, rather than as the traces of a contingent openness to the assimilation of the particular, fugitive qualities of place in nature's ongoing process of finishing what is always 'unfinished' in time.¹⁰ Today, long-term exposure to the extreme weather conditions of Western Sicily and lack of funding for restoration work have meant that *Il Cretto* is indeed, from a modernist perspective, deteriorating and gradually becoming a 'new ruin' in its own right. After almost 30 years, the original glaring white of the concrete finish, with its visibly artisanal shuttering and formwork, has been mottled and stained towards a somber blue-grey-tan lichen colour range. Some of the cement has been eroded to expose patchworks of different aggregates used in the original concrete blend for the render; and a number of the steel reinforcement rods are now exposed or have sprung free from the netting around the rubble core. In many places moss, small flowering shrubs, trees and other opportunist vegetation have colonised and burst through ever-widening cracks in the spalling mineral surface.

In his remarkable historical study of concrete as modernity's emblematic medium, *Concrete and Culture*, Adrian Forty returns repeatedly to concrete's ambiguous status, and its resistance to stable classification as one of the recurrent features of its use and historical meanings: 'many of the usual category distinctions through which we make sense of our lives – liquid/solid, smooth/rough, natural/artificial, ancient/modern, base/spirit – concrete manages to escape, slipping back and forth between categories' (Forty 2012: 10-11). Its 'tendency to double' (11) proliferates in Burri's use of the material in *Il*

¹⁰ 'Finishing ends construction, weather constructs finishes' (Mostafavi and Leatherbarrow 1993: 5). Mostafavi and Leatherbarrow's book offers an elegant meditation on the expressive value of weathering, questioning modernist architectural assumptions about modification and transformation over time as failure and deterioration towards ruin, and exploring the productive possibilities of incompleteness and imperfection.

Cretto, a work which in its materiality and form activates the spaces between such binaries. In particular, the ambiguous blur between a progressive modernity and a residual craft archaism with elemental earthbound origins (concrete as a kind of mud), and between concrete's base inertia as devalued industrial material and its paradoxical possibilities for a metaphysical numinosity. As an object-event-territory with complex and plural associations, and an uncertain overall status as art work, *Il Cretto* slips elusively between categories:

Painting, sculpture, architecture, installation, land art, scenography, design plan, document, wasteland, edgeland, centre, performance, scar, sanctuary, votive, tomb, memorial, monument, *memento mori* ... *Il Grande Cretto* avoids all artistic categories, academic or otherwise, or perhaps unites them; its status remains wholly ambiguous (Casanova 2009: 121).

Later in Forty's book, in a discussion of the use of concrete in the construction of memorials, he reflects on the use of a substance 'so often regarded as the material of oblivion, erasing and obliterating memory, cutting people off from their past, from themselves, from each other ... How can a material so generally regarded as amnesiac become the medium of choice in the preservation of memories?' (Forty 2012: 197). With reference to the twentieth century's obsession with memory, and minimalist sculpture's resistance to all forms of representation, Forty endeavours to unravel what he perceives to be a 'circular puzzle – concrete the material of oblivion, avoided by artists hostile to mnemonic representation, but chosen by those seeking to represent memory' (198). He goes on to suggest that, for him, the most successful of concrete memorials *qua* memorial is Georges-Henri Pingusson's *Memorial to the Martyrs of Deportation* (1962) on the Ile de la Cité in Paris; and his description perhaps provides another perspective for understanding something of the paradoxical affective and memorial work that Burri's *Cretto* both does and doesn't enable:

not an object, but a void – and when you are in the void, there is nothing there to look at apart from yourself, the sky ... and the unbroken surface of the concrete wall ... there is no *sign* in this memorial; it is pure

experience, there is nothing to be read, only the concrete itself ... [it] creates a kind of sensory deprivation, which forces the visitor to concentrate upon the sky and the present ... memory, if there can be such a thing, is of the moment, it cannot be captured or preserved ... (214).

Unfortunately, however, local people felt they were not fully consulted about the demolition of surviving structures within the remains of their town, nor about the nature of Burri's radical proposal for the memorial - like their new town, so utterly different from other responses in neighbouring communities devastated by the earthquake.¹¹ Some former residents of the old town, understandably less familiar with the discourses and practices of contemporary art, and with quite other conceptions of memory and memorialisation, felt that the ground of their patrimony (and identity) had been appropriated, and, in an act of paternalist, even colonialist imposition, forcibly reconfigured into forms that they could no longer recognise. In response to what they perceived to be *Il Cretto's* obliteration and blanketing of historical remains, some suggested that the work had effected a kind of silencing. The enforced deracination from and veiled erasure of the recognisable traces of lived memory – a second violent 'disappearing', by art - had ultimately produced the ruins of memory in what had become, for them, quite literally a 'concrete u-topia', an alienating and impenetrable 'no-where'; and it is evident that today the work's function as sited civic memorial has been significantly eroded for many people in Nuova Gibellina.¹² Even for visitors without direct connection to the old town, within the insistent baroque in-folding of Burri's structure one senses a potent and unresolved tension between the revelation afforded by public memorialisation (for the future) and memory's concealment, the withholding of proliferative narratives, experiences and

¹¹ In the wake of the earthquake in nearby Poggioreale, for example, it had been decided to leave the remains of the shattered town intact as a crumbling 'ghost-town' memorial, the ruins of its buildings, streets and *piazze* given over to the forces of nature and the weather; a recognisably 'Sicilian' new town was built close at hand. For some remarkable aerial video footage of both Burri's *Cretto* and of the old Poggioreale, which effectively conveys a sense of configuration, scale and distressed materiality, see Sciosia 2014.

¹² For further details of the mixed responses of local people to *Il Cretto*, see e.g. Cantavella 2009: 221-35, and La Ferla 2004: 64-7.

orientations (from the past) buried beneath the centripetal opacity of these surfaces, never to be recovered.

Since the early 1980s, old Gibellina has been the site of an annual summer festival of performance and music, the Orestiadi, named in homage to Aeschylus's foundational theatrical narratives of emergence from abject catastrophe into the beginnings of a civic democracy. Initially the ruins of the old town, then Burri's structure, were integrated as backdrop and scenographic frame for events staged on a flat piece of bare ground at the base. Already in 1979, Dario Fo and Franca Rame had performed *Mistero Buffo* for the people of Gibellina. And for over a decade into the 1990s, the Orestiadi became firmly embedded in the European festival circuit as one of the most adventurous events on the cultural calendar. Curated and managed by the Fondazione Orestiadi from its offices in the renovated former manor house Il Baglio di Stefano on the edge of Nuova Gibellina, the festival attracted some of the world's best known contemporary artists;¹³ and many of the performances were produced within the community and involved local people, in particular in the construction of scenographic objects and other design materials for theatre and opera. Over the last 20 years or so, however, the Orestiadi has diminished drastically in scope and artistic ambition, and there has been little direct involvement from local people in the programme of imported productions and exhibitions.

'Town as gallery': notes on the architecture of the butterfly

Alongside the site of the bustling weekly market stretches a curved, cracked concrete bowl of almost 100 metres in length: an 'ornamental lake' with no

¹³ Visiting artists included Joseph Beuys, John Cage, Iannis Xenakis, Philip Glass, Iannis Kokkos, Robert Wilson, Silviu Purcărete, Peter Stein, Ariane Mnouchkine and Le Théâtre du Soleil, Emir Kusturica, Gruppo Stalker, and Christo. At the invitation of Corrao, Beuys visited Gibellina in 1981. The German artist's notion of 'social sculpture' was of seminal importance for Corrao, and their meeting has become one of the foundational myths in the renewal of Gibellina, with Beuys the third figure in a trinity of core cultural protagonists alongside Corrao and Consagra. Beuys proposed to plant a *Bosco Sacro* ('Sacred Grove') in Nuova Gibellina, associated with his *7,000 Oaks* project, but it was never realised.

water, just pockets of wind-blown litter and desiccated vegetation. Beyond the dry lake bed, a sprawling area of overgrown grassland with a small church at its edge, and then the town 'centre', the *Piazza XV Gennaio 1968*, another expansive and exposed void without shade. On one side, Samonà and Gregotti's *tuffo* and reinforced concrete town hall (*Municipio*), with its memorials to the earthquake; on the other, Alessandro Mendini's cement and iron *Torre Civica* (1987), a 28-metre, winged, lighthouse-like structure and sonic art work intended as the town clock. **[PHOTO 5]** At four predetermined times of the day, registering the rhythms of the working day, it is supposed to relay a 30-second burst of computer-generated amplified sound that never repeats – recorded fragments of traditional Sicilian songs, voices from the fields and from the past – but it has been out of operation for some time.

An elegant stone staircase that seems to lead nowhere slices through Ungers's *Carabinieri* building, framing a patch of sky like a James Turrell 'sky space'. Nearby, a number of free-standing floating walls pierced by empty windows, whose deconstructive function seems to be to frame ephemeral perspectives on the town for the passerby. An apparently unattached stone beam intersects with the roof of a building (*Casa Pirrello*) at an almost vertical angle, piercing it, as if suspended in mid-flight between falling and ascending; the beam casts a shadow across the façade below, like a sun dial. A series of immense, linear, de Chirico-like *piazze*, constructed formally and explicitly around a perspectival vanishing point (Purini and Thermes's unfinished *Sistema delle Piazze*, 1990); at night, lighting in the facades either side of the chequer-board stone paving suggests abandoned runways awaiting air traffic. **[PHOTO 6] [PHOTO 7]** Uncanny scale and monumentality, in conjunction with a radical heterogeneity of form and style, seem to privilege visuality and scenographic frontality, the simulacral, the interstitial, the fragmentary and discontinuous.

At the base of a small hill towards the top of the town, Pietro Consagra's *Meeting* (1983), an undulating steel and glass structure of great organic sensuousness and fluidity, like the back of whale or a camel breaching the surface; with only a small café at one end, it remains largely empty, a seductive sculptural shell. On

the other side of the archway in its midriff, the *Piazza Joseph Beuys* (2001): the most desolate and deserted of the town's stone and concrete voids, like an immense abandoned carpark. As well as the odd fragment of graffiti ('Du bis mein'), its stained framing walls contain some ceramic texts that signal its intended and wholly unrealised revolutionary function as *lo spazio della parola* ('the space of language'), an agora for collective gatherings, *passeggiate* and civic conversation. At one end of the square, and at right angles to the *Meeting*, broods Consagra's towering and sublime *Teatro*, a major performing arts and cultural centre first conceived in the 1970s and still unfinished today. **[PHOTO 8]** Architecture as permanent building-site, seemingly abandoned and suspended forever at some indeterminate mid-point between construction and abandonment. In the summer months the weathered concrete exoskeleton of this magnificent curvilinear monolith is colonized by darting flocks of sparrows, martins and migrant swifts.

Further up the hillside, Francesco Venezia's *Palazzo di Lorenzo* (1981), an enclosed, roofless cube whose walls incorporate the stone remains of the façade of a major feudal building retrieved from the centre of the old town after the earthquake. This contemplative, mnemonic space of refuge and connectivity with a recognisable past activates the displaced former *palazzo's* windows and balconies as optic frames for glimpses of the town and the neighbouring fields; its open configuration also dynamically registers the passage of the sun and of time in the movement across its textured surfaces of carved, material blocks of light and shadow. Finally, nearby on the top of the hill, Ludovico Quaroni's astonishing *Chiesa Madre*, with its dramatic staging of a metaphysical intersection/collision between a rationalist cube and a huge white cosmic sphere – as if a luminous planetary body had tumbled from the skies and embedded itself in the wall behind the church's altar. **[PHOTO 9]** First conceived in 1972, the church was nearing completion when the concrete roof of the nave collapsed in 1994, leaving it in a state of abandoned disrepair until its restoration and final consecration, almost 50 years after its genesis, in 2010.

Postscript: the unfinished

For all of its continuing problems (unemployment, diminishing financial resources and prospects for young people, etc.), its unfinished structures and art works urgently in need of restoration, and for all of its haunting melancholy at times, in reality Nuova Gibellina today is far from the state of 'ruinous abandonment' that initial impressions and fleeting contact might suggest. The more time one spends there, the more apparent it becomes that over the years local people have gradually found ways to inhabit pockets of their extra-ordinary urban situation tactically and to affirm its uniqueness. Social life goes on in homes, the few cafes and social clubs (*circoli*), in the weekly market alongside the empty lake, and on summer evenings in the milling conversational traffic and street vendors in and around the municipal square and the open-air cinema. On most days, sections of the deserted spaces of the vast *piazze* are noisily reclaimed as perfect all-weather environments for kids playing football. A scattering of small shops now operate from the ground floors of some dwellings; and the slow drift from house to house entailed in this dispersed, attenuated mode of gathering things for an evening meal inevitably generates surprise encounters and pleasurable conversations. After several visits in recent years, I have become increasingly attached to this town. For the courageous ambition and compromising blindspots of its original imagining, and for its present imperfections, fragilities and uncertainties. For the warmth of human exchanges it affords, and for its moments of startling, layered beauty in the everyday. Perhaps above all, for the enduring possibilities it still seems to contain, somehow and despite everything, as an ambiguous, provisional, slowly unfolding work-in-progress ...

IMAGES AND CAPTIONS

1. Alberto Burri, *Il Grande Cretto*. Photo: Archreportage, Creative Commons/Wikimedia

2. Pietro Consagra, *Stella: L'ingresso del Belice*, Nuova Gibellina. Photo: David Williams
3. Alberto Burri, *Il Grande Cretto*. Photo: Gabriel Valentina, Creative Commons/Wikimedia
4. Inside Burri's *Cretto*. Photo: David Williams
5. Alessandro Mendini, *Torre Civica*, Nuova Gibellina Photo: David Williams
6. Franco Purini and Laura Thermes, *Sistema delle Piazze*, Nuova Gibellina Photo: Tiberio Frascari, Creative Commons/Wikimedia.
7. Purini and Thermes, *Sistema delle Piazze*, night. Photo: David Williams
8. Pietro Consagra's unfinished *Teatro*, Nuova Gibellina Photo: David Williams
9. Ludovico Quaroni, *Chiesa Madre*, Nuova Gibellina: the sphere and amphitheatre, from the rear of the church. Photo: David Williams

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