art
renews
life

"L’arte rinnova i popoli e ne rivela la vita."
"Art renews the people and reveals life to them."

—inscriptio on the Teatro Massimo in Palermo, Sicily
Gibellina: An Uncommon Collaboration

by Virginia Maksymowicz

Alberto Burri, Cretto (Crack, detail), 1963–64. Concrete.
To American eyes, Italy seems full of contradictions, and Sicily even more so. The crusty facades of 500-year-old buildings contrast disconcertingly with modern marble and ceramic tile interiors. One of the most beautiful Liberty Style mosaics (Palermo’s version of Art Nouveau) graces a bakery in the Capo market, amid trash piles of rotting vegetables and bloody animal bones. A monumental, foul-smelling paint factory, built a few years ago, overlooks one of the prettiest beaches on the northern coast. Sicilian-produced oranges shrivel in their orchards (the cost of harvesting and bringing them to market is greater than the price they can command), while Spanish and Israeli imports are sold in Northern Italy. Thousands march in the streets publicly demanding an end to the Mafia but many shopowners still privately pay their pizzo (protection money) to the local don. It is a land of deeply rooted economic poverty (the unemployment rate hovers around 25 percent), but its people possess a seemingly inexhaustible wealth of personal generosity, courage, and historical and cultural resources. Against such a backdrop, it is no wonder that the town of Gibellina and its public sculpture embody a wide range of incongruities.

When a severe earthquake hit the Belice Valley in the western part of the island in 1968, many towns were damaged; Gibellina, which had been situated on the side of a hill, was hit hard. Its inhabitants were moved to barracks, where they continued to live for the next 14 years. One year to the day after the tragedy, a group of artists, writers, scientists, sociologists, priests, journalists, and contadini (peasants) gathered at the ruins to discuss the recreation of Gibellina, and the direction that it would take. Although these foreigners must have been viewed with suspicion by the locals, a movement began that found its vision in the person of Ludovico Corrao, Gibellina’s mayor. A new town would be built, it was decided, 12 miles to the northwest, on level ground. And its reconstruction would somehow incorporate art into the everyday lives of its people: theater, music, dance, painting, and sculpture. “Art isn’t only a superstructure,” Corrao is quoted as saying, “but it can become a structure, an instrument for understanding reality...” Art would put Gibellina “on the map,” so to speak, and ensure that the world would remember its Phoenix-like rise from the ashes.

This belief that “art is not superfluous” resulted in the new Gibellina’s becoming a sort of open-air museum. It currently has over 50 public sculptures (with more on the way), two museums, and a theater still under construction, as well as a performance space at the site of the destroyed town, now memorialized by a major earthwork. Internationally renowned artists such as Joseph Beuys, Philip Glass, and Robert Wilson have performed there, and major Italian sculptors like Alberto Burri, Arnaldo Pomodoro, Pietro Consagra, and Mimmo...
Palladino have contributed works. Gibellina represented Sicily in the 1993 Venice Biennale. Yet this tiny hamlet of 5,000 farmers and shepherds essentially sits in the middle of nowhere, miles from the two major airports at Palermo and Trapani or the vacation beaches at Taormina and Mondello.

According to Enrico Stassi, the director of the Museo Civico D’Arte Contemporanea and a member of the Fondazione Orestiadi, which oversees the artwork, the town’s first museum was formed by a group of printmakers while the townspeople were still living in the barracks. From 1979 to 1981, when the move back from the barracks began, the sculptures were gradually installed (many of them having been donated by the artists themselves). Over the past 15 years both the buildings and the artworks have grown organically, their placements a collaborative decision between the artists and the town’s administration. Stassi emphasizes that the new Gibellina is a “work in progress,” that it will continue to transform itself and that change is part of the vision.

For those interested in public sculpture, Gibellina is an experiment worth studying—for its successes, its failures, and its efforts to maintain what Stassi terms, a “finestra aperta” (an open window) to the world. A number of the sculptures are remarkable. Pietro Consagra’s Ingresso al Belice (Entrance to the Belice Valley, 1978–81), a 26-meter-high, stainless steel star rising up out of the valley and acting as a gateway into the town is nothing less than spectacular. Alberto Burri’s earthwork, Cretto (Crack, 1983–84), entombs the ruins of the old town in 120,000 square meters of white concrete. The title means “crack,” and from a distance the sculpture indeed looks like a furrowed glacier slowly sliding down the hillside; when approached at close range, however, it becomes evident that its crevices map the streets of the destroyed village. Walking through the stark whiteness, weeds poking through the seams, one can almost hear the voices of the dead...

and incorporation of salvaged elements from the ruins by Nanda Vigo, Tracce Antropomorfe (Anthropomorphic Traces), and Francesco Venezia, Giardino (Garden), maintain a sense of continuity and history.

There are significant problems, however, and the artists, the townspeople, and the administrators are not unaware of them. The layout of the new Gibellina itself poses aesthetic and functional problems. While the old village was perched somewhat precariously on a slope, its winding streets and varying levels provided shelter from the weather and enhanced the feeling of community. The choice of an earthquake-safe location along with anti-seismic building regulations

Paolo Schiavocampo, Doppia Spirale (Double Spiral), 1973. Steel.
requiring wider streets, gives the new site a barren, dust-blown look. The avant-garde architectural styles of the theater, city hall, and church clash with the plainness of the houses, and make it hard for the smaller outdoor sculptures to hold their spaces. Many of the artworks are mediocre, and a number of them are already deteriorating badly—some because of faulty design and fabrication, some because of little or no money for routine maintenance. (Contrappunto) is rusted through, due in part to its hollow construction; Consagra’s gates to the new cemetery look as if they’ve only received one coat of primer and paint since their installation in 1977.) In some cases, inferior building materials have been used: the roof of Ludovico Quaroni’s Chiesa Madre (the main Catholic Church in town, whose large spherical dome makes it look like a planetarium) was begun in 1972 and collapsed in the summer of 1996, shortly before its scheduled completion, because of substandard concrete.

Then there are the social questions: How do these structures integrate themselves into the lives of those who live and work in Gibellina? How does this great experiment in public art extend beyond the municipal borders? What is the impact upon local economics? What are the political issues involved?

On June 21–22, 1996, a group called “SOSArte,” the heirs to those who had convened at the ruins 27 years earlier, attempted to address some of these questions. They described Gibellina as “frutto ancora acerbo,” an “unripe fruit,” admitting that “It’s difficult to understand…what still remains to be done, what is provisional and what is already defined.” They also stressed that a town’s formation is a processo, a term in Italian that means both process and trial.

The paper they produced, “…oltre la prima impressione” (“Beyond the First Impression”), outlines their concerns about reconciling the “scholarly and programmatic preciousness” of contemporary art with the “conservation of good taste”; about continuing the sense of Gibellina as a “permanent laboratory, a simmering of ideas and artistic and cultural elaborations”; about embarking upon “interventions of restoration and maintenance” without “interrupting the evolutionary processo”; about safeguarding the history and soul of the town; and, ultimately, about recognizing the contradictions inherent in trying to embody the “testimony and expression” of contemporaneity while still dealing with the legacy of the past. By American standards, the document is more theoretical than practical, and it will be interesting to see how such concerns will be implemented.

While Gibellina’s “open window” indeed looks out upon an international art scene, whose devotees jet from Rome and Milan, northern Europe and America for summer performances, it is hard to say how the local populace fits in. Enrico Stassi hopes that the town’s efforts might attract young people who normally drive to Palermo or Trapani for a bit of high culture. However, my own college-educated cousins who live not more than 20 miles away were only dimly aware of the goings-on in the rebuilt Gibellina.

Tourists in this part of Italy are still a rarity and the few restaurants have plenty of empty tables. If anything, the sculptures seem to have been more of an economic drain than a boon to the municipal economy. Mayor Corrao was booted out of office in the last election and the new local giunta wants to have the regional government evict the Fondazione Orestiadi out of the Case di Stefano, and move its art collection elsewhere. And in the labyrinthine world of Italian politics, it becomes virtually impossible to uncover the “truth” in any situation. Why the church’s concrete crumbled remains.

a mystery. The administration of the project and the funding came from centralized sources, according to Stassi, and the local government was not involved. If and to what extent corrupt politicians and organized crime are implicated will never be known. A Palermo architect, who was involved with the post-earthquake recovery, feels that the reinvention of Gibellina was the result of political maneuvers. He insists that the destruction of the old town was not as complete as generally maintained, and that reconstruction on its original site was more than possible. And despite Corrao’s goal to put Gibellina “on the map,” as late as 1993 most of Italy’s road atlases did not indicate its current location!

In some ways, however, Gibellina’s commitment to contemporary art is a resounding success. Its public sculpture does provide the town with a structure to “search for and recover an identity,”7 and its myriad problems and contradictions are an all-too-accurate “revelation” of real life in contemporary Italy. Furthermore, in their struggle to deal with these issues, the Fondazione Orestiadi, the artists, the government, and the townspeople are engaging each other to find solutions. In the final analysis, perhaps this type of processo—as inefficient and slow-moving as it seems to us Americans—is turning Gibellina into a model for a truly public art.


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Notes


3 From an interview with the author, July 15, 1996.


5 From an interview by the author with Giulio Ippolito, vice president of the Fondazione Orestiadi, also noted by Fulvio Abatte, “Patrimonio a Rischio,” 1996, in an article posted on the World Wide Web at http://www.mclink.it/unita/960102/un02.htm.

6 From a conversation between the author and an architect (name withheld), July 16, 1996.

7 From “... oltre la prima impressione,” SOSArte.