Il Grande Cretto di Burri, a question of meaning and identity

A focus on Gibellina's earthquake, reconstruction and re-semantization.

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Introduction

The catastrophic effects of seismic events that in the last decade hit Italian cities and landscapes have shown the urgency and topicality of a historically recurring issue [1]. The traumatic events affected various communities and stemmed different political and social responses according to the specific framework of each case.

The etymology of the word "catastrophe", from the Greek *καταστρέφω* (katastrepho), suggests a double meaning: *revolution* and *solution*, referring, in the one case, to an alteration (most likely a traumatic change) while, in the other, to a decisive reaction with respect to a previous status. Witnessing the results of these socio-political responses (proving more or less successful, depending on the cases), prompted me to try and consider the catastrophe as a generative event able to crate new spatial conditions in the landscape and in the built environment; a layer that gives both the space and the affected artifacts a different historical depth, identity and social value.

To examine this under a spatial and semantic point of view, I will focus my research on the case of Gibellina (Sicily) or, better to say, on the two cities of Gibellina: Gibellina la Nuova (new) and Gibellina la Vecchia (old).
New Gibellina was born as an answer to the earthquake that destroyed the Belice Valley in 1968; here, an impressive amount of artistic and architectural interventions were carried out between the '70s and the early '00s as part of a plan of cultural and identity re-birth. Ludovico Corrao [2] was a key figure in the debate developing around the city's reconstruction. His strategy to confront the trauma experienced by the Gibellinese community consisted in making an open-air museum of the new center by collecting works of art and post-modern architecture. His aim was that of creating a new history and identity away from the original place of the trauma [3].

On the other hand, the story of Old Gibellina after 1968 involves as a key figure the Italian artist Alberto Burri [4]. Contrary to Corrao, he demanded to act in strict physical proximity with the place of the trauma (Gibellina Vecchia), confronting it by creating a visual repetition of the catastrophe, making the traumatic experience perpetual and including the *wound* within its work with an action of *reversed archeology*; in other words, by creating *Il Grande Cretto di Gibellina* [5].

[1] Eartquakes that affected L'Aquila (2009), the Emilian territory (2012) and central Italy (2016).

[2] Italian Independent Left politician and lawyer, major of Gibellina from 1969 to 1972.

[3] The psychoanalyst Massimo Recalcati defines this action as a maniacal response to the *wound* caused by the trauma, an attempt to deny the experience of death through the physical detachment and realization of an artificial euphoria (with reference to the ISES plan and the successive implementation of Corrao's cultural program as a response).
"Alberto Burri. Il Grande Cretto Di Gibellina," YouTube (YouTube, November 6, 2018), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1813D4CTUQE.

[4] Alberto Burri (Città di Castello, 1915 - Nizza, 1995) is considered one of the most important artists of the informal trend that spread internationally after the Second World War.

[5] "Alberto Burri. Il Grande Cretto Di Gibellina," YouTube (YouTube, November 6, 2018), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1813D4CTUQE.

Chapter I of my thesis will draw a critical historical excursus through the most significant phases of Gibellina's process of destruction, re-location and reconstruction. The existing extensive literature on the topic and collections of architectural drawings will guide my analysis. They will illustrate how the city was abandoned, how the community was left for fifteen years in "temporary" shanty towns and how the projects produced for Gibellina Nuova (as well as for the other centers affected by the seismic event and by a successive process of total transfer) showed a pragmatic and anachronistic indifference to its original history, nature and cultures [6].

Furthermore, Corrao's concern on how to give a "sense of city" to the new urban plan will be analyzed together with his political and cultural responses. Examples of artistic and architectural productions generated in this context of cultural re-birth will illustrate and materialize Ludovico Corrao's vision as an answer to the trauma; a response enforced by professor Pierluigi Nicolin's initiative *Laboratori di progettazione Belice '80* [7], triggering collective mechanisms of cultural rebirth such as the inauguration of a long season of architectural redevelopment interventions, a phenomenon in full continuity with the action of far-sighted cultural promotion hatched by Corrao.

Chapter II will illustrate Burri's piece of art, representative of a different approach: when in 1985 the major Ludovico Corrao invited Burri to bring one of his works of art to Gibellina Nuova, the artist refused, and asked to visit the remains of the old settlement. He wanted to have a direct experience of the consequences of the earthquake, in order to feel the trauma [8]. The psychoanalyst Massimo Recalcati [9] draws a parallel between Burri's artistic experience and the psychoanalytic experience of the *grief* [10]. According to Recalcati, Burri reacted to the revived trauma in five steps that defined his masterpiece. The same decision by the artist to act in strict physical proximity to the place of the trauma is considered as the fundamental difference with respect to the municipality's decision to re-locate the new settlement twenty km far from its original position.

In order to make a critical comparative analysis of the two, nearly opposite, responses to the catastrophe with their spatial, historic and social implications (meaning the evolution of the community's perception over time and

[6] Ettore Sessa, "Architettura e forma urbana nella ricostruzione del Belice", in *Catasrofi e dinamiche di inurbamento contemporaneo. Città nuove e contesto*, ed. Marco Rosario Nobile (Palermo: Edizioni Caracol, 2012), 87.

[7] A design studio aiming at critically reviewing New Gibellina's urban plan, aiming at investigate how to give back an identity to an urban fabric considered as alien and inadequate.

[8] "Walking over the rubble, he was deeply moved, almost in tears". States Adrian Forty in "Happy Ghost of a Possible City:Il Cretto, Gibellina" reporting the words of the interviewed Alberto Zanmatti.

[9] Massimo Recalcati (born in Milan, 28 November 1959) is an Italian psychoanalyst, essayist and academic, author of *ALBERTO BURRI. IL GRANDE CRETTO DI GIBELLINA*, (Arezzo: Magonza Editore, 2018).

also the impact it had over people alien to the trauma), it is fundamental to define *what kind of a thing the Grande Cretto is*. Burri's work of art has been defined in a variety of ways: a piece of land art, a memorial, a burial, the "happy ghost of a possible city" [11], but none of these definitions seem to fully grasp its very essence.

Furthermore, to have a complete understanding of the present situation and the impact that the catastrophe had on the city and its community (in terms of spatial, semantic and identity change), an insight on the latest evolutions of the city and of Burri's work is needed. In Chapter III, through the lenses of documentaries, photography and art performances, I will highlight the present strong generational differences in the perception of the work of art and in the perception of the new city's image; a difference in the response to the trauma and to the loss of identity. Finally, I will analyze how people alien to the trauma perceived the products of the two strategies and engaged them.

[10] The experience of the loss is distinguished by several terms: the term "bereavement" (the loss of a person); the term "grief" (behaviors and feelings that arise as a result of a loss); the term "mourning" (the social expressions that the subject experiences in response to the loss). Terms that refer to the fundamental components in the experience of mourning: the presence of a loss; subjective emotions and socio-cultural aspects.
Isp, "Le Fasi Del Lutto: i Passaggi per L'elaborazione Della Perdita," Istituto per lo Studio delle Psicoterapie, October 13, 2020, https://www.istitutopsicoterapie.com/le-fasi-del-lutto-i-passaggi-per-lelaborazione-della-perdita/.

Grief is defined from a psychological point of view as "a psychological state resulting from the loss of a significant object, which has been an integral part of existence. The loss may be of an external object, such as the death of a person or internal, such as the loss of one's social image, a personal failure and other similar experiences." (Galimberti Umberto, *Psicologia*, (Torino: Garzanti, 1999.)

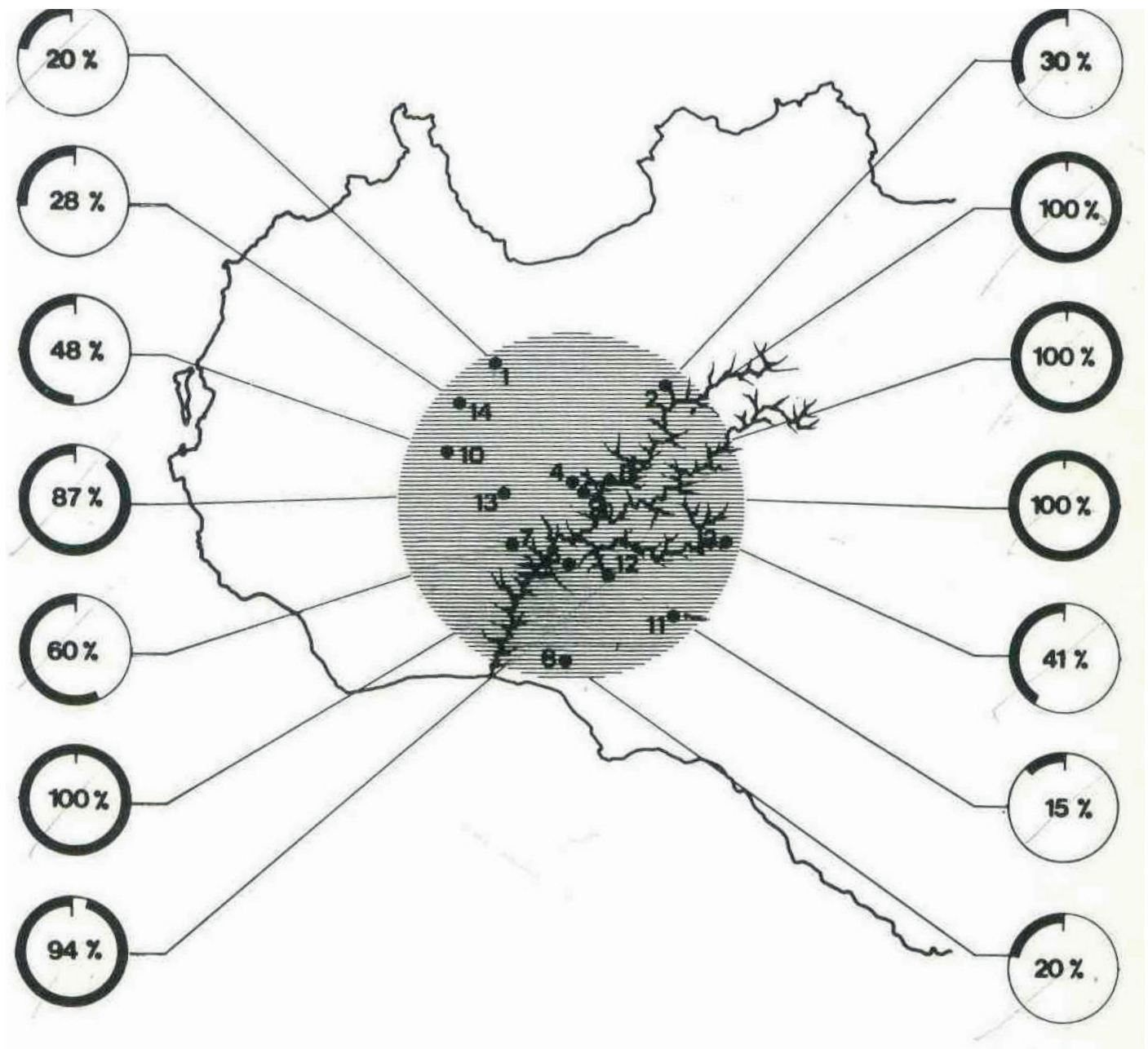[11] As defined by Franco Purini in an interview by Adrian Forty, Rome, April 2013.

Figure 1. Damages caused by the earthquake (% of destroyed dwellings), Gibellina indicated as n.4.

Chapter I

Gibellina is a small town located in the north-west of Sicily, in the Belice Valley, at the crossroads between the provinces of Trapani, Palermo and Agrigento.

On 15th January 1968, a catastrophic earthquake struck the Belice Valley affecting fourteen municipalities (see fig.1). Amongst these, only Gibellina, Montevago, Poggioreale and Salaparuta presented a nearly total percentage of damage and were subject to a process of complete transfer. Otherwise, Calatafimi, Camporeale, Contessa Entellina, Menfi, Partanna, Salemi, Sambuca, Santa Margherita, Santa Ninfa and Vita were affected only by partial transfer programs. Gibellina was the most damaged amongst the sites; the new geological map defined its territory as high risk for a new settlement and a state decree soon declared it unsuitable for re-building.

After approximately fifteen years living in the temporary shanty towns of Madonna delle Grazie and Rampinzieri, the inhabitants were finally transferred to Gibellina's new town. Differently from the near Salaparuta and Poggio Reale that were re-built in relative physical proximity to their original sites, Gibellina Nuova was built twenty kilometers away from the old settlement. Prior to this radical decision, a first hypothesis was made selecting as site of reconstruction the same district of Rampinzieri (already chosen to allocate part of the slums). The proposal was immediately rejected by the inhabitants of Gibellina opposing the idea of re-building in the same past conditions: the majority of the population, composed of peasants working in the fields, was forced to travel for many kilometers far from their houses to reach their working places. Eventually, the new center was moved in the flatter area of Salemi, in the valley of the Freddo river, in the attempt to take it away from the previous geographical isolation, economic depression and seismic condition [1]. The decision to create a new town in a different location was taken accordingly to criteria of proximity to infrastructure and favorable orographic conditions. Gibellina Nuova was then located where the highway and the railroad converged [2].

To draw a critical reading of the city's chronicles since the day of the catastrophe until the present day, three moments can be clearly outlined in Gibellina's history: the moment of the abandonment, the "pause-stage" [3] represented by the years in the shanty towns, and the reconstruction.

[1] Gibellina's old center, located in the hinterland of Sicily, had a marginal position in the social-economic context on a regional (and national level). The population, counting 6,005 inhabitants in 1967, was subsisting mainly on an agricultural economy. Gibellina's state of isolation was made worse by poor transport links with the towns on the coast caused by an inefficient road system. Although being on the edge of the territorial competence of the productive coastal reality that from Mazara del Vallo through Marsala extended up to Trapani, the city was affected by a considerable degree of economic depression.

[2] For details about Gibellina's relocation see:

Federica Scibilia, "The reconstruction of Gibellina after the 1968 Belice earthquake", in *International Planning History Society Proceedings*, ed. Carola Hein, (Delft: TU Delft Open, 2016), 313-314.

Ettore Sessa, "Architettura e forma urbana nella ricostruzione del Belice", in *Catasrofi e dinamiche di inurbamento contemporaneo. Città nuove e contesto*, ed. Marco Rosario Nobile (Palermo: Edizioni Caracol, 2012).

Maurizio Oddo, Gibellina La Nuova. Attraverso La Città Di Transizione, (Turin: Testo & immagine, 2003).

[3] Maurizio Oddo, *Gibellina La Nuova. Attraverso La Città Di Transizione*, (Turin: Testo & immagine, 2003), 24.

[4] At the time of the earthquake the area was not considered to be at seismic risk.

Figure 2. View of Gibellina before the earthquake.

Figure 3. Archival footage displaying the effects of the earthquake on Gibellina, 1968.

The abandonment

At the date of the earthquake, the old settlement of Gibellina presented a rather modest architecture in terms of typology, except for its main church Chiesa Madre and the Municipal Palace. The old settlement was part of an orderly sequence of medieval castles and Arab *Menzil;* farmhouses located along the Belice River, the main source of territorial communication. Positioned in a location not easily accessible, it presented evidence of a rich succession of civilizations. An example is the primitive village located in Gibellina's Finestrelle district with dwellings dug in the mountain. In 1968, Gibellina counted about 6000 inhabitants settled in a very dense urban fabric composed of houses (about 1980) built on two levels, on steep slopes, with rather modest construction features: limestone tuff for load-bearing structures, mortar and plaster to join the blocks. The roofs, in most of the cases, were made of wooden beams, showing a limited use of reinforced concrete and in no case adopting the criteria imposed by the anti-seismic legislation [4] [5].

The fact that the original center of Gibellina was abandoned and never re-inhabited can be inserted in the context of precise Sicilian political strategies, in some cases, already implemented after previous seismic events. The same relocation of a town to a new site after a catastrophic phenomenon can be drawn back to the experience of the 1693's earthquake in Noto [6]. According to the British professor of architectural history, Adrian Forty, another "traditional solution to hardship in Sicily" -indeed implemented in the case of Gibellina- was a governmental measure consisting in financial support to emigrate to other Italian regions or abroad [7].

Additionally, in Emanuele Svezia's documentary "Earthquake '68. Gente di Gibellina", inhabitants of Gibellina report -rather skeptically- that right after the 1968's earthquake most of the houses were still standing. It was only some days later that they were torn down with dynamite to create a safer environment for authorities and security forces to operate. The option of securing what was left standing was not taken into consideration with the result of denying the inhabitants of a "visual recollection" with their home-town [8]. According to the sociologist Monica Musolino, this event, together with the general political inertia and disregard for people's condition (considered as "earthquake victims to be somehow relocated"), resulted in a general disorientation and re-writing of collective memory as a consequence of the actual re-writing of the spatial reference coordinates governing the organization and practices of everyday community life prior to the event. As a consequence of the remains' destruction and successive abandoned, the urban trace of Old Gibellina assumed the mere significance of the catastrophic event's *trace*; the victims started considering and visiting it as a place of memory [9].

[5] Maurizio Oddo, *Gibellina La Nuova. Attraverso La Città Di Transizione*, (Turin: Testo & immagine, 2003), 14.

[6] On the 11th of January 1693, a terrifying earthquake devastated Western Sicily, especially the Noto Valley. Almost 20% of inhabitants died and twenty-five cities were entirely destroyed. Giuseppe Lanza, Duke of Camastra, was appointed general commissioner for the reconstruction. Almost all the cities were rebuilt on their ruins, Catania presented a radically new road map, while a dozen of other cities were transferred and rebuilt from scratch. The villages of Ferla, Sortino, Ispica, Buscemi were rebuilt by resorting the typical agricultural orthogonal subdivisions, while Noto, Ragusa, Avola and Occhiolà -lately called Grammichele- were designed with a more sophisticated urban plan. https://www.antoniorandazzo.it/ricordando/files/TERREMOTO-RICOSTRUZIONE.pdf

[7] Adrian Forty, "Happy Ghost of a Possible City: Il Cretto, Gibellina", *AA Files* , no. 66, (2013): 101.

[8] *Earthquake 68. Gente di Gibellina*, curated by Emanuele Svezia, Sottotraccia-Gruppo Informale, in collaboration with "Gioventù-Istruzione e Cultura" Commissione Europea and Comune di Gibellina, 2008.

[9] Monica Musolino, "L'arte Traumatica. Gibellina E La Risemantizzazione Delle Sue Rovine.", *Meridiana*, no. 88 (2017): 157.
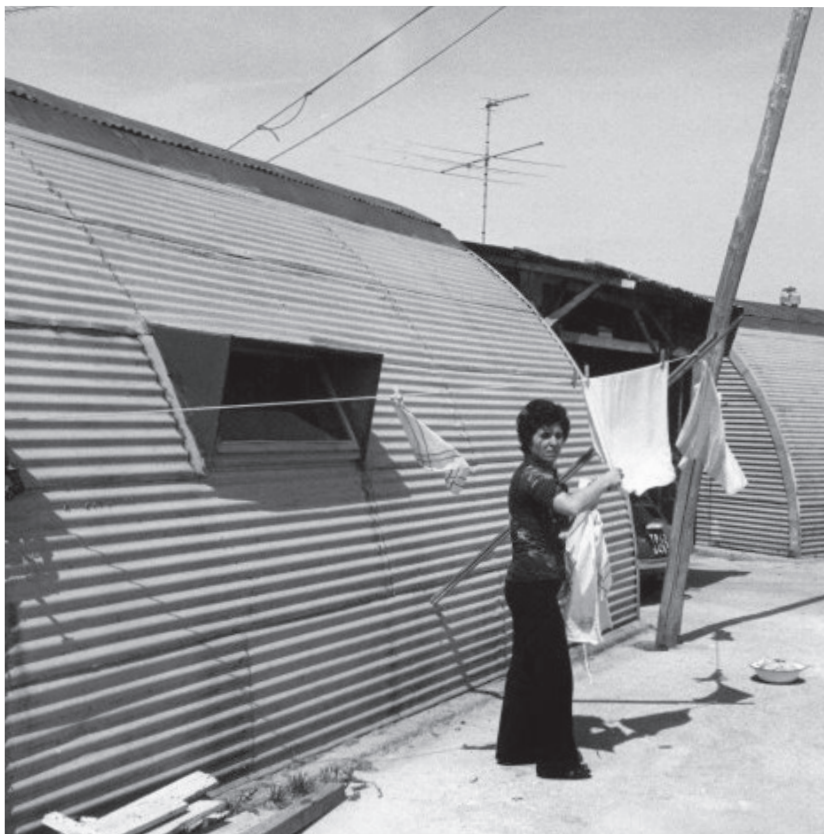
[10] Maurizio Oddo, *Gibellina La Nuova. Attraverso La Città Di Transizione*, (Turin: Testo & immagine, 2003), 22.

[11] Bruno Minardi, Pierluigi Nicolin, "Dopo il terremoto. After the earthquake", *Quaderni di Lotus*, (Milan: Electa, 1983): 21.

Figure 4. Life in the shanty towns: Camporeale, by Sergio Del Grande, 1968.

Figure 5. Life in the shanty towns, Poggio Reale.

The shanty towns

As mentioned, the victims of the earthquake, for twelve to fifteen years after the seismic event, were "temporarily" gathered in dispersed camps. This governmental measure could be, once again, blamed to have undermined the already wounded social cohesion. The shanty towns, made of metal corrugated sheets and faesite, were arranged following a regular rectangular grid structure and placed on concrete steps as a base (see fig.4-5). For more than a decade, these slums served the urban function of safeguarding the historical and traditional identities of the Belice cities [10], but most of all, of their inhabitants. In fact, although the planimetric layout of these temporary huts had a degree of rationality, the long duration of this "paused-stage" made it possible for the community to partially reproduce there their usual routine. It is interesting to note that, in some cases, even after the transfer to the new city, inhabitants still used the huts for those activities which the new dwellings made unsuitable for a population mostly composed of peasants [11].

Monica Musolino identifies this period as a "dilatation of time" to which Gibellina's victims (as well as the victims of the other ruined centers) were subject in the moment they were distanced from their towns and located in this temporary condition, a condition that made them become "the earthquake victims of Belice" [12]. It is interesting to note that not only people alien to the catastrophe used the expression to identify the victims, but also the same Gibellinese community adopted it to represent themselves in contexts of public discourses [13]. The narrative and the image of the collective self in terms of "victims of the earthquake" was maintained within the community for all the years of operation in the slums. On the one hand, on the level of social analysis, it led to a process of proper re-building of identity, while, on the other hand, it evolved into a self-representation difficult to overcome even afterwards, when the dwellings in Gibellina Nuova were built and ready to be inhabited.

[12] Monica Musolino, "L'arte Traumatica. Gibellina E La Risemantizzazione Delle Sue Rovine.", *Meridiana*, no. 88 (2017): 157.

[13] This was probably also due to the process of social stigmatization which they were subjected to, due to the lengthy and controversial management of the reconstruction process, as well as some actions of refusal of legislative and fiscal obligations.
Monica Musolino, "L'arte Traumatica. Gibellina E La Risemantizzazione Delle Sue Rovine.", *Meridiana*, no. 88 (2017): 155-74.

[14] Institute for the Development of Social Housing - ISES. The Institute for the Development of Social Housing assumed this name by the law of the 15/02/1963, n. 133, which transformed the committee UNRRA-CASAS (Administrative Committee for the Homeless).

The institution initially provided for building development programs to be carried out within the Administration for international aid. Subsequently, its activity was directed towards social housing, providing for the implementation of measures for the elimination of unhealthy housing, and facilities for the reconstruction of buildings damaged by the war. After the emergencies related to war destruction stopped, the institution was transformed by the law of the 15/02/1963, in the ISES. The institution was in charge of social housing throughout Italy and also had the task of intervening after natural disasters. The ISES was then suppressed in 1972 and entrusted to the Office for liquidations with the ministerial decree of the 1/06/1975.
Anna Pia Bidolli, "Istituto per Lo Sviluppo Dell'edilizia Sociale - ISES.", Beni Culturali, accessed January 5, 2021. https://search.acs.beniculturali.it/OpacACS/authority/IT-ACS-SP00001-00000177.

Figure 6. Aerial view of old Gibellina.

Figure 7. Aerial view of new Gibellina, 1978.

The reconstruction

The Roman Institute for Social Housing Development (I.S.E.S) [14] was put in charge for the development of the new plan. The new urban system proposed was articulated in plan into two major blocks located symmetrically with respect to a longitudinal east-west axis, dividing residential terraced areas from public facilities [15]. Ettore Sessa [16] argues that the projects produced for Gibellina Nuova (as well as for the other centers) showed a pragmatic and anachronistic indifference to its original history, nature, cultures, urban form and architectural typology; a limit that affected both the urban plans for the transfer of the individual municipalities and the housing and services design proposals entrusted to esteemed professional studies. In the majority of the cases, the architectural models proposed revealed alien to the identity of the local population and already proved obsolete, if not of failure. In accordance with the plan, the new town was built at low density, with single-family houses distancing up to 50 meters from one another (in the attempt of adopting new anti-seismic measures). It showed a constant alternation of driveway spaces and pedestrian avenues joined by transversal systems of broad voids, following a North-American garden-city model [17] (see fig.7-9).

On the other hand, according to the Italian writer and professor Maurizio Oddo [18], the new town's location, undeniably a crossing point offering more opportunities for exchange, opened Gibellina to the flow of possible connections on the highway axis proving to be a strategic position for the development of a new city rather than the denial of the original site and identity. Furthermore, alongside the inhabitants' habit of visiting the ruins, the political-administrative elite started developing the idea of having to symbolically rebuild them in order to somehow restore the Gibellinese lost identity. This process concerning how to give *a sense of city* not only involved the ruins, but also the new urban plan. The answers of Ludovico Corrao, major of Gibellina between 1969 and 1972 with a fundamental role in the debate that developed around the difficult problem of reconstruction, were art and architecture: he wanted Gibellina to become an open-air museum [19].

Even if it can be argued that the I.S.E.S. re-built Gibellina Nuova "at a table", not paying attention to the city's and its inhabitants' identity and culture, it is undeniable that Ludovico Corrao played an active role in the preservation and re-building of the social cohesion despite the new born, *un-sicilian* urban implant. He, nevertheless, defended it despite being "aware of its shortcomings and anachronism" [20]. He actively reacted by commissioning a range of avant-garde architects and artists to work at

[15] The site plan of the new city, coordinated by the engineer Marcello Fabbri and located in the district of Salemi, in Contrada Salinella, was designed according to urban models anchored to obsolete logics of zoning. The urban fabric was perceived as alien by the local population who, in the transfer between the old and the new center, had suffered a second alienation due to the new *forma urbis*. The new plan did not contain any reference to the old urban settlement in terms of morphology and typology. The new plan characterized by a *butterfly wing* planimetric shape was centered on an East-West longitudinal axis displaying all facilities, while the residential areas, made up of terraced, single-family detached houses, divided into four allotments. Along with the dissolution of their home, the earthquake had erased a way of living imprinted in the urban fabric of the old center.
Andrea Sciascia, "Gibellina: fra il piano dell'Ises e il Cretto", in *Catasrofi e dinamiche di inurbamento contemporaneo.*

Città nuove e contesto, ed. Marco Rosario Nobile (Palermo: Edizioni Caracol, 2012), 143-44.

[16] Sicilian Architectural History professor at the Faculty of Architecture of the University of Palermo, whose paper *Architettura e forma urbana nella ricostruzione del Belice* has been included in Marco Rosario Nobile's volume *Catasrofi e dinamiche di inurbamento contemporaneo. Città nuove e contesto* collecting reflections elaborated on a common subject by professors' of the Architecture's Department.

[17] Ettore Sessa, "Architettura e forma urbana nella ricostruzione del Belice", in *Catasrofi e dinamiche di inurbamento contemporaneo. Città nuove e contesto*, ed. Marco Rosario Nobile (Palermo: Edizioni Caracol, 2012), 87.

Figure 8-9. Terraced houses and school complex in new Gibellina.
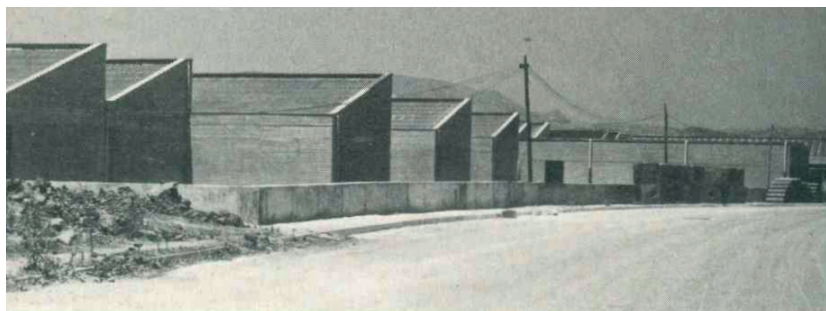

Figure 10. Gate to New Gibellina, *Stella* by Pietro Consagra, 1981.

Gibellina. He envisioned the re-building process as a pretext to experiment for many well-known architects and artists called on to produce works for the new centre (see fig.10). He believed that art had to be treated as a "basic necessity" for the town, a fundamental part of its infrastructural system [21], able to sew those physically distant rows of houses and out of scale avenues with qualified interventions of public interest, aiming at an urban re-connection and human gathering. It was his strong belief that public buildings designed by well-known architects such as Giuseppe Samonà, Ludovico Quaroni, Franco Purini, Laura Thermes, Francesco Venezia, Pierluigi Nicolin and Oswald Matthias Ungers could add a layer to the "out of human (and Sicilian) scale" urban scheme, finally creating a new identity for the Gibellinese community.

In such a way Gibellina Nuova assumed the status of new town, to be understood neither as the simulacra the old Gibellina, nor as the simple result of the spontaneous passage from ruins to re-built city, nor as a simple matter of public works and political strategies -contrary to the most diffused public's opinion. It is undeniably different in time and space from the old settlement; it did not re-write the old urban paths, but rather proposed a new principle of settlement that transcended it, modifying the scale and

measure of the spaces, basing its genesis/reason of being on two essential dimensions: the critical relationship with the past and the pragmatism of the present [22]. Although, at a first glance, the various art pieces and radical architectures might seem detached one from the other, an experimental expression of individuals, these works should be looked at in relation to one another and to the space they enclose and occupy.

Maurizio Oddo states in his book that by employing art, Gibellina, originally a peripheral site of a peripheral region, has succeeded in appropriating the typical prerogatives reserved today (by the artistic and cultural debate) to those cities historically recognized as cradles of art. This was achieved by means of continuous and systematic initiatives, stimulated by the presence/absence of a tragedy such as the earthquake [23].

[18] Maurizio Oddo, author of *Gibellina La Nuova. Attraverso La Città Di Transizione*, (Turin: Testo & immagine, 2003).

[19] The idea of Ludovico Corrao was that of looking for continuity and rootedness to heal from the identity fractures, caused by the new ISES urban plan, trough visions of a new architecture, a multitude of avant-garde works of art and installations, confidence in the progress and work of future generations and continuous cultural promotion with many initiatives such as the institution of the "Orestiadi foundation" and the Gallery of Modern Art, still active today.
Ettore Sessa, "Architettura e forma urbana nella ricostruzione del Belice", in *Catasrofi e dinamiche di inurbamento contemporaneo. Città nuove e contesto*, ed. Marco Rosario Nobile (Palermo: Edizioni Caracol, 2012), 97.

[20] Adrian Forty, "Happy Ghost of a Possible City: Il Cretto, Gibellina", *AA Files* , no. 66, (2013): 101.

[21] All public works in Italy had, by law, to include a two per cent allowance for art -a provision that the government suspended when it came to the reconstruction of the Belice towns. Corrao capitalized relentlessly, upon this piece of discrimination.
Adrian Forty, "Happy Ghost of a Possible City: Il Cretto, Gibellina", *AA Files* , no. 66, (2013): 101.

[22] Maurizio Oddo, *Gibellina La Nuova. Attraverso La Città Di Transizione*, (Turin: Testo & immagine, 2003), 20.

[23] Maurizio Oddo, *Gibellina La Nuova. Attraverso La Città Di Transizione*, (Turin: Testo & immagine, 2003), 28.

Figure 11. Portrait of Alberto Burri in front of the Cretto, by Vitturgo Contino, 1987.
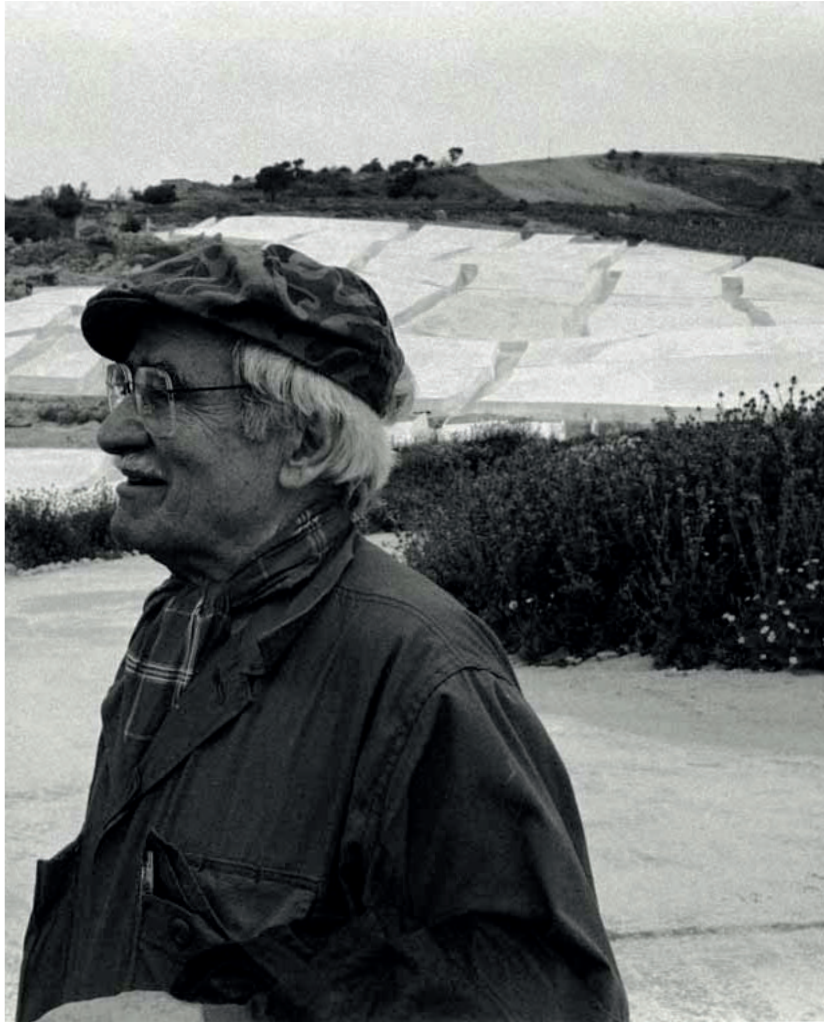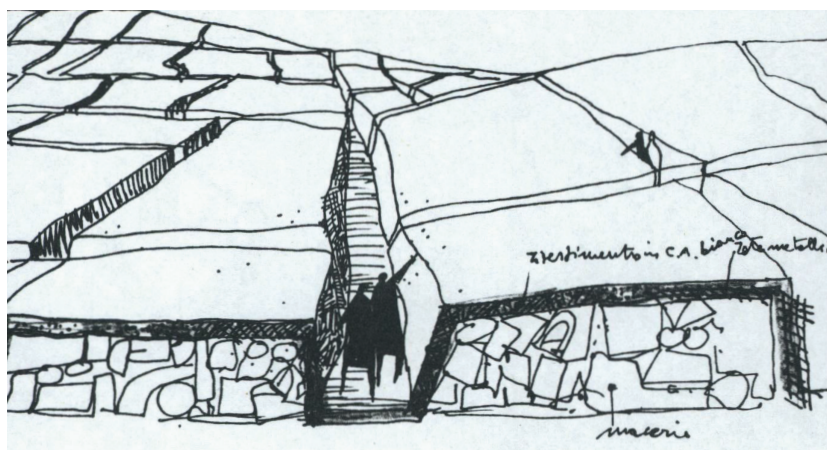

Figure 12. Sketch of the Cretto by A.Burri, courtesy A. Zanmatti.

Chapter II

The history of Gibellina's ruins does not end with the old city's abandonment, but rather, followed what Monica Musolino defines as a "first, involuntary semantization" corresponding to the memorial role that the ruins assumed for the victims, as mentioned in the previous chapter. Henceforth, a second semantization took place with the artistic intervention of Alberto Burri: *Il Grande Cretto di Gibellina* [1].

I ruderi di Gibellina: the process

In 1981 the major of Gibellina, Ludovico Corrao, managed, with the help of Alberto Zanmatti [2], to invite the italian artist Alberto Burri [3] to Gibellina Nuova. They hoped to persuade him to provide his artistic contribution to the re-birth plan of the new town center.
When Burri eventually arrived to Gibellina Nuova the sight of it left him very skeptical: the town was already half built and rather filled with art. The artist refused working in Gibellina Nuova.
Subsequently, Burri demanded to visit the old town of Gibellina, at that moment reduced to a heap of rubble. Upon arriving at the destroyed Gibellina, the change in the scenario was impressive -Burri was deeply moved, as he stated: "I almost felt like crying and immediately I had the idea: here, I think I could do something [...]" [4].

The overwhelming contrast between the old and the new Gibellina is addressed by psychoanalyst Massimo Recalcati. According to him, Burri perceived the new settlement of Gibellina Nuova to be born by taking distance from the horror of death. The catastrophe had to be erased through a series of works and new architectural projects that could confer the city a status of "blank page". The aim was to create a new history and identity away from the original site of the trauma so as to exorcise the still indelible presence of the *wound*.

Although the old Gibellina had become an empty place, defined by rubble and death, it was the only place in which Burri wanted to build his work. He was not interested in the reconstruction of the new city. He was struck by the horror of destruction and it is precisely where destruction had most ruthlessly manifested itself that he intended to rebuild. It is interesting to notice how abstraction never represents in his artistic *modus operandi* [5] a movement of emancipation from the reality of matter; beauty never arises from the exorcism of the *wound*, but rather, from its reception and inclusion [6].

[1] Monica Musolino, "L'arte Traumatica. Gibellina E La Risemantizzazione Delle Sue Rovine.", *Meridiana*, no. 88 (2017): 161.

[2] Roman architect, friend of Alberto Burri, collaborating with Pietro Consagra in Gibellina at the time Burri was invited to work there. Zanmatti realized for Burri the Museum of Palazzo Albizzini in Citta' di Castello and collaborated on the project of Essicatoi di Tabacco (permanent home of Burri's most recent works). In Gibellina he collaborated with the artist on the project *Il Grande Cretto* and directed the works. In 1980 he collaborated on the exhibition *Incontro Beuys Burri* at Rocca Paolina in Perugia.
https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fondazione_Burri

[3] Internationally known by the 70's as one of the most relevant figures in contemporary art with his scorched and sewn canvases, his burnt polythene works, his cellotex paintings and Cretti series made of a plastic substance, able to crack in random patterns, created in its components by the same author. "Burri's work could be said to have been concerned with rupture, and reparation." Adrian Forty, "Happy Ghost of a Possible City: Il Cretto, Gibellina", *AA Files*, no. 66, (2013).

[4] Stefano Zorzi, *Parola di Burri*, (Turin: Allemandi, 1995).

[5] Embodied in art pieces such as *Combustioni, Plastiche* and the *Cretti series*. The *wound* is a theme that Burri addresses during many phases of his artistic production. In *Combusioni* (1965) something is burning, corroding the matter that shows itself as frail and vulnerable. In *Legni* (1957) the *wound* is generated by fire, by the carbonization of the matter and is particularly showed by what survives

Figure 13. First portion of the Cretto, extract from aerial view demarcating complete proposal, courtesy A. Zanmatti.
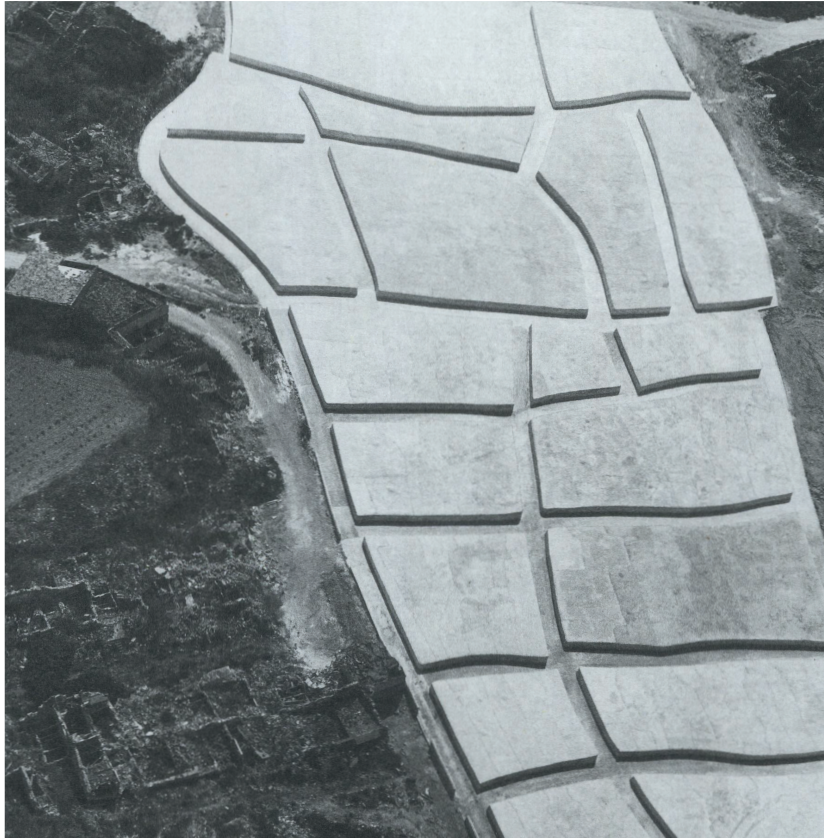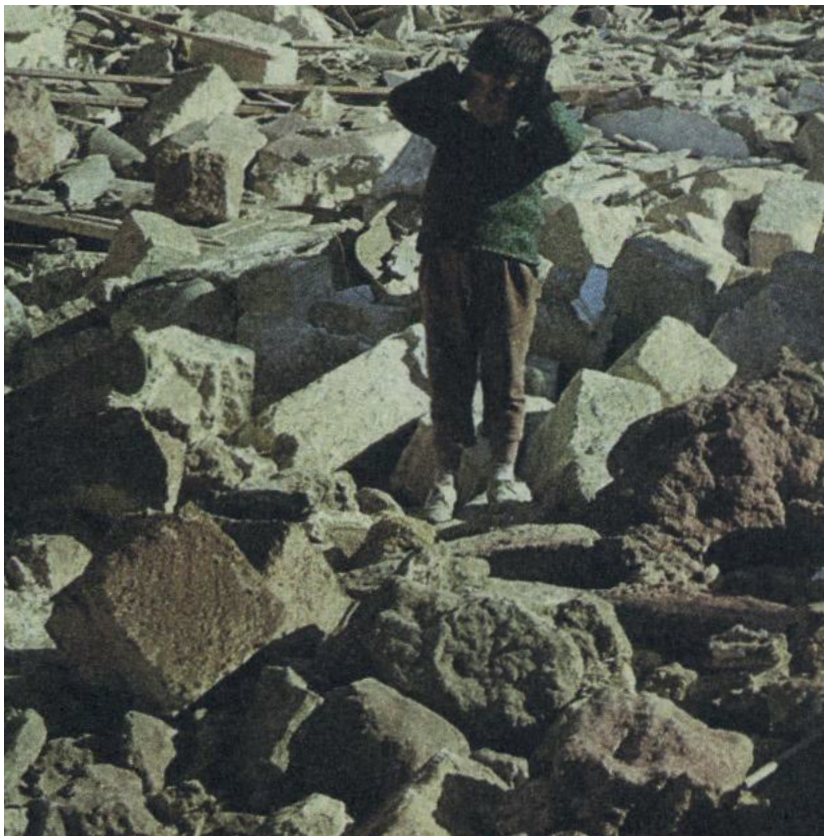

Figure 14. Local child walking through the city's remains.

Massimo Recalcati [7] draws a parallel between Burri's artistic experience and the psychoanalytic experience of the *grief* [8]. According to him, Burri reacts to the revived trauma in five steps that define his masterpiece. As a first step (fundamentally different from the decision of placing the new settlement twenty kilometers far from the old settlement [9]) the artist decides to act in strict physical proximity to the place of the trauma. As a second step, he confrontes the trauma by creating a visual repetition of the catastrophe (if we look at the Cretto from above, it reminds a seismic mass, nearly vibrating). In such a way, he makes the traumatic experience perpetual, not a cemetery consular remedy. The artist does not limit himself to the repetition of the traumatic experience, but takes a step forward (third step) and includes the *wound* within its work; Burri works on the remains, he does not remove them (see fig.12). The piece of art's materiality is composed of white concrete hosting the same remains of Old Gibellina; he *makes fertile* the remains of the trauma imparted by the catastrophe. By including the *wound* within his work he sublimes it to the state of art [10]. The fourth step concerns Burri's will not to have any *"gadgets selling stand"* next to his art piece, to create a feeling of recollection, contrasting with the noise of the earthquake. In the same way, also the white color of the concrete reflects this will of silence that gives space just to the sounds of surrounding nature.

By doing so, Alberto Burri reached the fifth step and elevated the wound to the dignity of beauty with an action of "reversed archeology" not bringing to light the lost reality, but rather keeping it covered [11].

On the other hand, it is also to be taken in consideration that, ever since the foundation of the new settlement, people who experienced and survived the catastrophe in 1968 developed the habit of visiting their former town and houses' rubbled remains in a context of precarious and dangerous structures (see fig.14). For the authorities, in 1981, this represented a problem of public safety; something had to be done to solve the condition whether it meant fencing the area or stabilizing the ruins. What Burri envisioned (other than representing a lasting record of the tragic event showing the horror of destruction, the broken soil, the falling walls and lost lives) was also a perfect solution to the problem of the dangerous site [12].

the burnt. Also in *Plastiche* (1964) the wound is imparted by fire and carried by what remains.

[6] Massimo Recalcati, *Il mistero delle cose. Nove ritratti di artisti*, (Milan: Feltrinelli, 2016).

[7] Massimo Recalcati (born in Milan, 28 November 1959) is an Italian psychoanalyst, essayist and academic.

[8] Grief is defined from a psychological point of view as "a psychological state resulting from the loss of a significant object, which has been an integral part of existence. The loss may be of an external object, such as the death of a person or internal, such as the loss of one's social image, a personal failure and other similar experiences." (Galimberti Umberto, *Psicologia*, (Torino: Garzanti, 1999.)

[9] "Alberto Burri. Il Grande Cretto Di Gibellina," YouTube (YouTube, November 6, 2018), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1813D4CTUQE.

[10] By including the remains in his artistic expression, Burri's modus operandi and work reminds a lot Hegel's *Aesthetic*; the characteristic form in which art captures the absolute is sensitive intuition, that is, knowledge obtained through the senses. The image is the form, while the absolute expressed by it is the content. The most perfect work of art is that in which a perfect unity between form and content is achieved, in which both are mutually adapted to each other.
Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, trans. Thomas Malcolm Knox, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998).
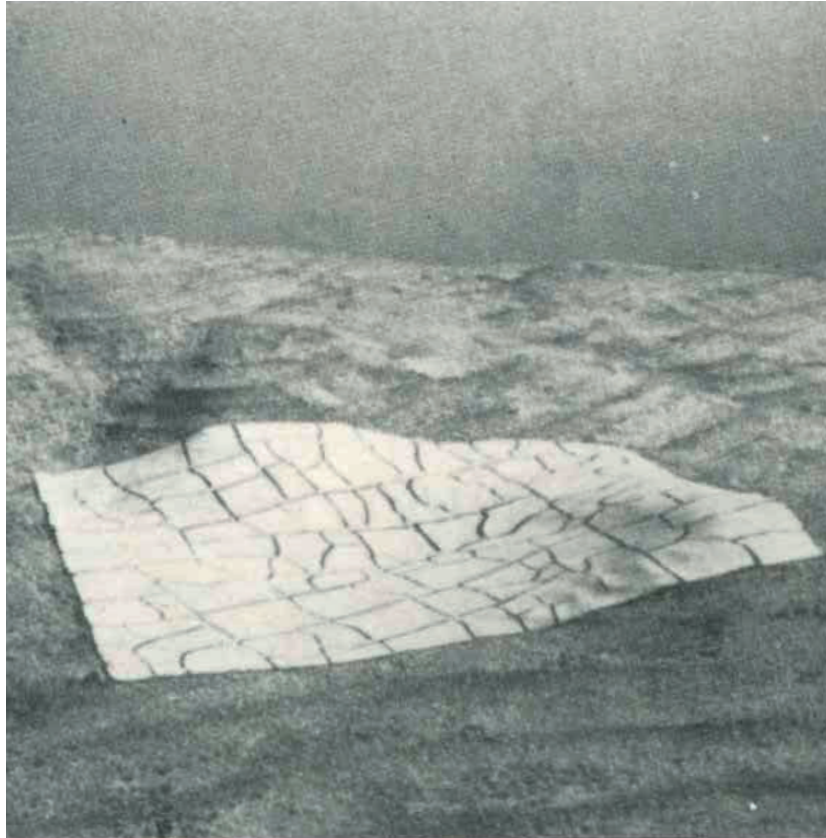
Figure 15. Model view of the Cretto.

Figure 16. Cretto's construction site: first portion.

Il Cretto di Burri: the description

The formalization of Burri's process of grief and artistic expression resulted, first of all, in the realization of a physical relief model of the hillside; this methodology enabled Burri to outline a flat rectangular *Cretto* (referencing his previous series of *Cretti*) [13], the lines of whose cracks followed the street pattern. As a second step, a plaster model delineating the actual shape of the works gave tridimensionality to his envisioned art piece; the cracks (the streets) and the roughly squared shaped blocks (the urban volumes) [14] (see fig.15).

In 1985 the works on the realization started and an enormous white concrete throw compacted the rubble in separate cubes crossed by passages representing the old plan of the city destroyed by the earthquake. The retaining sides of the blocks, and the pathways between -only approximately tracing its original plan- appeared in section as a unique reinforced structure (see fig. 16-17, 19-20); the tops of the volumes were covered with a thin mesh and sprayed concrete so to incorporate the old town's remains. The concrete throw was supposed to extend for 90,000 square meters -referring to the approximate dimension of the town. The expected height of the blocks was about 1.60 meters to allow the user to wander around the Cretto, submerged into the landscape while, simultaneously, keeping an overall view on the whole work referencing the size of the once existing old town. However, of the 90,000 square meters designed by the artist, only about 68,000 were actually completed, due to costs and missing funds for the works. This left a sense of a deep disappointment in the author who died before seeing the works completed. In 2015, after a long break -and thanks to the obstinacy of the Foundation Palazzo Albizzini Collezione Burri in Città di Castello, and the Sarteanesi family, as well as the municipal administration and a number of artists- funds were gathered and the dimension of the Cretto eventually reached the about 90.000 square meters originally envisioned by its artist (precisely 86.000 square meters) [15].

The process that led to the covering of the old settlement's ruins was, on the one hand, characterized by a path linked to Burri's artistic research [16] and, on the other, it was deeply rooted in the authorities' will to somehow make the ruined site safe and preserved. This was a justified concern since, as Franco Messina, one of Corrao's closest collaborators, recently reported "if you go 3 km away from the Cretto, to the old Salaparuta, the vegetation has eaten everything" [17]. By the time Burri's intervention was approved, the administration led by Corrao was concerned with how to preserve the structure and the architectural typology -maintaining the traumatic memory that was

[11] "Alberto Burri. Il Grande Cretto Di Gibellina," YouTube (YouTube, November 6, 2018), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I813D4CTUQE.

[12] Adrian Forty, "Happy Ghost of a Possible City: Il Cretto, Gibellina", *AA Files* , no. 66, (2013): 102.

[13] Beginning in the early 1970s, in between the celebrated series of the *Combustioni* and the *Cellotex*, the artist began executing his *Cretti*. These were thick surfaces onto which Burri dripped a thick mixture of white zinc and kaolin. He then left to them dry and fixed the work with vinyl glues. It was during this last process that the cracks "came to life". Burri arranged the space within which the material itself would start to act which, as Italo Tomassoni reminds us, "is formed whilst it gives out [...] brings space back into being, geometry to instinct, movement to an immobile event." https://www.sothebys.com/en/auctions/ecatalogue/2019/arte-contemporanea-mi0340/lot.10.html

[14] "Alberto Burri. Il Grande Cretto Di Gibellina," YouTube (YouTube, November 6, 2018), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I813D4CTUQE.

[15] Massimo Recalcati, *ALBERTO BURRI. IL GRANDE CRETTO DI GIBELLINA*, (Arezzo: Magonza Editore, 2018), 32.

[16] The *Cretti* series, culminated in the *Grande Cretto di Gibellina* (1985-1989), once again placing the material and its transformation at the center of Burri's artistic reflection, it was "not a starting point, but an arrival", as Cesare Brandi states. https://www.sothebys.com/en/auctions/ecatalogue/2019/arte-contemporanea-mi0340/lot.10.html

Figure 17. Cretto's construction site: completion works, 2015.

Figure 18. Aerial view of the Cretto, by Aurelio Amendola, 2018.

linked to it- without these disappearing over time.

Within this context, deciding to use concrete for the work seemed a paradoxical choice because concrete, as a material, was directly associated with memory erasure rather than memory preservation [18].

The sociologist Monica Musolino argued that the use of concrete endangered memory in two ways: firstly, the Cretto deprived the old town of the living experience and its old inhabitants of the functional memory, and, secondly, it denied the plurality of the memories through the attribution of a single meaning to the site.

Concerning the first point Musolino makes, the earthquake victims of Gibellina could no longer try to find their way through the ruins, either visually or physically, thus experiencing a further violence upon themselves, exerted precisely by this work of subtraction of their town's spacial memory; the past evoked by the ruins remains hidden, albeit for conservation purposes, in colossal blocks of concrete. Furthermore, the attribution to the site of a single meaning caused a dramatization of the disastrous event and the solidification of memory into history, crystalizing in the Cretto's cracks and blocks the moment of the trauma. By doing so, the artistic meaning of the Cretto constantly brings back "the time of the collective memory and its narration" [19] at that precise point in the local history, as if it was its point zero.

On the other hand, a possible interpretation of Burri's material's expression can be linked to concrete's durability and its "apparent absence of any iconography" [20]. Furthermore, its formal quality, sometimes criticized as too figurative [21], by emulating the effect of a sisma restores and renews the trauma so as to express that even a concrete throw could not cover and erase the trauma. It is not by chance that the remains of the trauma are not eliminated, but included in the work to the point that without these remains the work would not have even been possible.

In addition to this, the whiteness of the material plays a role in making the work "more absorbent of mental projection than other more symbolically redolent materials" [22]. Despite this, the researched roughness that the artist wanted to achieve in the material's surface contributed to the rapid deterioration of the art work, mainly caused by plants and lichens growing in its porosities. As Forty states "decay was consistent with Burri's own ideas of entropy", otherwise, in fact, it should be considered an *unicuum* since, during his whole artistic path, the artist dealt with temporality and decay. Nonetheless, the author also clearly demanded the Cretto to preserve its whiteness throughout time, to last perpetually. Notwithstanding, the process of decay soon caused a progressive loss of whiteness [23].

The subject of the *Cretti* series -and of the *Grande Cretto di Gibellina*- is clearly already anticipated with the previous *Combustioni*. I am referring again to the theme that goes through all the artistic work of Burri: the *wound*.

[17] Monica Musolino, "L'arte Traumatica. Gibellina E La Risemantizzazione Delle Sue Rovine.", *Meridiana*, no. 88 (2017): 165.

[18] Adrian Forty, "on the use of concrete for memorials", in *Concrete and Culture: A Material History*, (London: Reaktion, 2012), 197-223.

[19] Monica Musolino, "L'arte Traumatica. Gibellina E La Risemantizzazione Delle Sue Rovine.", *Meridiana*, no. 88 (2017): 166.

[20] Adrian Forty, "Happy Ghost of a Possible City: Il

Cretto, Gibellina", *AA Files*, no. 66, (2013): 103.

[21] Universiteit Gent, "Video: EXCURSIONS@HOME - Adrian Forty," December 18, 2020, https://www.ugent.be/ea/architectuur/nl/actueel/nieuws/video-excursions-home-adrian-forty.

[22] Adrian Forty, "Happy Ghost of a Possible City: Il Cretto, Gibellina", *AA Files*, no. 66, (2013): 103.

[23] A program of restoration and repair was begun in 2008 resulting in a cleaning of its surface that anyways sensibly lost its original white color. The Soprintendenza dei Beni Culturali is responsible for its maintenance.

Figure 19. Cretto's construction site.

Figure 20. Cretto's construction site.

Numerous readings of the work: the definition and re-semantization

Interpretations and critical readings of Burri's *Grande Cretto di Gibellina* are numerous both among those who analyze the artifact as a *distant* case study and among the inhabitants of the city who make daily, direct experience of it and of its influence. In order to clarify the various positions, a definition answering Forty's question "What kind of a thing this is?" [24] is needed.

It is hard to find an appropriate and fulfilling description for the Cretto both as a place and an object, thus, Burri's art piece has been defined in a variety of ways. Amongst the most significant ones:

the shroud

It is its same white color that recalls to the visitors and to its former inhabitants the most direct mental link and definition one could think of when looking at the site; the appearance of the Cretto in the Belice Valley is that of a funeral shroud, of a mortuary veil. Yet, just as it commemorates the horror of death, it reopens the wound and it brings, at the same time, life in the place of death [25]. This *new life* can be represented either by the vegetation trying to take over, the periodical commemorative events and pilgrimages organized by the inhabitants of Gibellina or the visitors alien to the trauma wandering around.

the sipario

Similarly to this first definition, the work was also referred to as a sipario [26], a theatre curtain, a covering that would have marked a sealing closure, the ending of the town. But, for the same reasons mentioned above, also this description fails to an extent. Additionally, the covering veil can be interpreted as a reference to the image of the Christian's sepulcher that per se implies resurrection rather than death.

the safety measure

Burri himself pointed out that the cement throw of the Cretto would have offered the advantage of solving the common problem represented by the dangerous and unstable ruins, acting as a safety measure. Nevertheless, the same fact that *Il Grande Cretto di Gibellina* explicitly recalls the author's previous series of *Cretti* linking and including it into his artistic research, makes the definition un-appropriate and incomplete.

the monument/memorial

If perceived as a memorial, the definition fails once again since a memorial generally implies the commemoration of a broader category of people, an event in a historic period

[24] Adrian Forty, "Happy Ghost of a Possible City: Il Cretto, Gibellina", *AA Files* , no. 66, (2013): 101.

[25] Massimo Recalcati, *ALBERTO BURRI. IL GRANDE CRETTO DI GIBELLINA*, (Arezzo: Magonza Editore, 2018), 47.

[26] Universiteit Gent, "Video: EXCURSIONS@HOME - Adrian Forty," December 18, 2020, https://www.ugent. be/ea/architectuur/nl/actueel/nieuws/video-excursions-home-adrian-forty.

[27] Aleida Assmann, *Ricordare. Forme e mutamenti della memoria culturale*, (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2015), 361-4.

[28] Franco Purini interview by Adrian Forty, Rome, April 2013.

[29] Adrian Forty, "Happy Ghost of a Possible City: Il Cretto, Gibellina", *AA Files* , no. 66, (2013): 103.

not specifically and solely linked to the place where it stands. Aleida Assmann defined monuments as symbols celebrating an absence through their content (conveying a mnestic meaning); by virtue of it, they are able to maintain their meaning regardless of the location [27]. The Cretto, otherwise, is extremely site-specific and refers to precise individuals, it could not exist anywhere else.

the happy ghost of a possible city

The Cretto neither could be described as allegorical, nor could be perceived by the visitor as melancholic or oppressive like a sepulcher (partially because of its formal features, the author's intention not to give any sense of claustrophobia), "on the contrary it seems cheerful and reparative, *the happy ghost of a possible city* as Franco Purini put it" [28]. This definition may be also linked to the idea suggested by Recalcati of an act of "inverse archeology" meaning the remains being covered instead of uncovered; the Cretto does not want to be a cemetery or a way to give a final burial to the dead and precisely because this burial does not exist, the city's history will never end because memory is there, crystallized perpetually.

the piece of land art

The Cretto with its 86.000 square meters of dimension has been referred to as the largest work of land art in Europe. Yet this description is hardly appropriate, "since the artistic trajectory within which land art developed abhorred literalism and association content. The Cretto, on the contrary, has content. It -literally- contains a town" [29].

the theatre

Reporting the words of Valentina Garavaglia, professor and researcher of theatrical and scenographic history, *Il Grande Cretto* acted also, within the cultural context of the Orestiadi Festival [30], as "the *skené* [31] par excellence, referencing the scene of the Greek theater of origins" [32]. Influenced by the ruins of Segesta e Selinunte, the artist made of the Cretto a scene in the Mediterranean landscape, able to annually bring back the Gibellinese community to the remnants of their city. In the interviews by Emanuele Svezia [33] it is reported that, on the one hand, the majority of the spectators were visitors alien to the trauma but, on the other hand, the festival was perceived with pride by the local population; the Greek tragedies strongly related to the Gibellinese tragedy and many inhabitants were involved in their preparation and execution as craftsmen and extras.

the site of trauma

Patrizia Violi [34] proposes to define Il Grande Cretto -by virtue of the commemorative character here attributed to the specific place of memory -as a *site of the trauma*. The artistic intervention carried out has transformed the place into a site of public traumatic memory [35], whose recipient

[30] International festival of theater, music and visual arts during which shows, concerts and exhibitions were carried out involving numerous artists, actors, directors. Twenty-five centuries ago, Aeschylus wrote the tragic fate of Orestes, the man who, in erasing the lives of his ancestors, rejected the theocratic despotism that denies reason and human freedom, affirming, for the first time in history, the rule of law and a new order of democracy. Twenty-five centuries later to celebrate the re-foundation of the city and mark the dawn of a destiny to be rewritten, on the ruins of the destroyed Gibellina, Ludovico Corrao proposed the put in play of Orestea in the 'Sicilian poetic' designed by Emilio Isgrò (1981): a vigorous message of cultural rebirth for all people threatened by the earthquakes of history and by the, no less powerful, earthquakes operated by war. The Orestea marks the beginning of a deep germination of cultural encounters between artists, architects, musicians, poets, farmers, artisans, workers, women and young

people who together re-found the city and rediscover the eternity of Art and Beauty: to the rediscovery of the roots of their identity and history.
http://www.fondazioneorestiadi.it/storia/

[31] In the theatre of ancient Greece, the *skené* was the structure at the back of a stage. The word *skené* means "tent" or "hut", and -it is assumed- that the original structure for these purposes was a tent or a temporary light building of wood.

[32] Valentina Garavaglia, "Lo Spettacolo Immersivo: Esperienze Di Teatro Mediterraneo," *Itinera*, no.13, (2017): 339.

is no longer only the Gibellinese community victim of the double trauma (the earthquake and city's reconstruction implying its relocation), but also the following generations and, most of all, the others, the wider audience.The expert in analysis and theories of changes in political, social and communicative institutions Monica Musolino stated: "It is to this interlocutor that we want to tell the story of a place that was in danger of being left in a state of abandonment and that, instead, has become and continues to be the object and theater of a complex memorial elaboration" [36].

I find these last two readings of Burri's piece of art particularly appropriate since they imply what Violi indicates as a fundamental characteristic of all those memory places founding their meaning on a spatial continuity with the traumatic event: the *sites of trauma* are almost never visited to know and learn, but rather to feel, to experience. The *sites of trauma*, if confronted to other places of memory such as the more traditional museums, present "hybrid characteristics: they are neither real museums, nor cemeteries or places of worship of the dead, nor monuments, but all these things at the same time" -plus an additional layer of meaning due to the particular relationship they present between death and the specific place of its occurrence [37]. The difficulty one finds

in defining the Cretto rests indeed in its nature of *site of trauma* presenting an overlap between what the place once was and what it has become. Another fundamental aspect emerges from this consideration; the *sites of trauma*, as well as a theatrical performance, require a fundamental actor: the visitor/spectator, that finds itself in this space of uncertain definition and whose identity and role (raging from first generation victims to audience distant to the trauma in time and space) I will investigate in the next chapter.

[33] *"Earthquake 68. Gente di Gibellina"*, curated by Emanuele Svezia, Sottotraccia-Gruppo Informale, in collaboration with "Gioventù - Istruzione e Cultura" Commissione Europea and Comune di Gibellina, 2008.

[34] Patrizia Violi (born in Bologna, 14 August 1949) is an Italian linguist and semiologist. She has collaborated with Umberto Eco. She is currently a full professor of Semiotics at the University of Bologna.

[35] By *site of trauma* I mean a memorial that "elaborates an existing trace and rises in the very place where horrors and mass massacres were consumed [...]. We could say that these sites are traumatic institutionalized and musealised places in the form of memorials or museums, places where access and visit become regulated and formalized as specific practices. The passages from place, understood in a generic sense as a portion of space where

traumatic events occur, to site, can be read as a semiotic transformation of public nature: a given place is invested of value, semiotically marked."
In Patrizia Violi, *Paesaggi Della Memoria: Il Trauma, Lo Spazio, La Storia.*, (Milan: Bompiani, 2014), 22.

[36] Monica Musolino, "L'arte Traumatica. Gibellina E La Risemantizzazione Delle Sue Rovine.", *Meridiana*, no. 88 (2017): 164.

[37] Patrizia Violi, *Paesaggi Della Memoria: Il Trauma, Lo Spazio, La Storia.*, (Milan: Bompiani, 2014),178.

Figure 21. Frames of dialogue between father (1st generation) and son (3rd generation) on the Cretto.

Figure 22. Frames of dialogue with Gibellina's museum employee (2nd generation) on Gibellina Nuova and its programs of cultural activation.

Figure 23. Franes portraying Alessandro reflecting on the Cretto's current condition.

Chapter III

In order to have a complete understanding of the present situation and the impact that the catastrophe had on the city and its community in terms of spatial and identity change, it is interesting to reflect on the generational differences in the reactions following the site's "re-semantization" [1] after Burri's intervention. Referring in particular to the interpretation of Burri's work as a *site of trauma* (meant as a site of public traumatic memory) we can, once again, reference the work of Monica Musolino to outline how three generations of inhabitants -the primary spectators of the Cretto- reacted to it. **(1)** The older generation corresponding to people who inhabited Old Gibellina and directly experienced the earthquake, the life in shanty towns, the reconstruction and the relocation; **(2)** the second generation corresponding to people who were born in the slums and grew up in the new town; and **(3)** the third and last generation, alien to the direct experience of the traumatic event that appears to them as "mythologizing the narratives of the elderly" [2].

The same generational categories are also clearly displayed in Emanuele Svezia's documentary. The film narrative, based on interviews, is conducted by a local man in his twenties encountering and confronting with representatives of each category: his father who directly experienced the earthquake in 1968 and second generation

citizens involved in the city's contemporary dynamics of cultural activation (see fig.21-23). The documentary provides both direct and indirect confrontations between the different voices displaying, in such a way, eloquent samples of the different understandings and perceived impacts of the artistic intervention.

[1] Meaning the attribution of a new meaning to an existing lexical element, which thus becomes a semantic neologism. The term is used by Musolino to draw a parallel with the attribution of a new meaning that Burri's intervention gave to Old Gibellina's site.

[2] Monica Musolino, "L'arte Traumatica. Gibellina E La Risemantizzazione Delle Sue Rovine.", *Meridiana*, no. 88 (2017): 167.

Figure 24. Cretto's construction site.

Figure 25. Cretto's construction site.

The first generation

Undoubtedly, Burri's work had the greatest impact on the first generation. This generation of inhabitants perceived the earthquake as a moment of diagrammatic change between what they remembered as *the golden age of Old Gibellina* and the new -debatable- history of Gibellina Nuova. The Cretto to them represented the physical expression of this change in narrative; they took it as a real violence to the collective past -not much different from the seismic event itself. Similarly, also the contemporary art works located in Gibellina Nuova were initially perceived as foreign bodies by a population composed mainly of peasants with no tools to understand it (other than expressing, at most, a positive or negative aesthetic feedback). However, with the successive proliferation of these works, inhabitants began to develop awareness on the role that art played in the revival of the city's character and image, as well as of their own image: everyone wanted to have a piece of art close to their home. They were part of a peculiar history and aware of the fact that this cultural program offered them a *special* living condition, interesting and stimulating, especially if compared to the condition of the other Belice communities [3]. Il Grande Cretto never shared this destiny due to the fact that it literally contained and hid the old settlement, in which, before the intervention, the elder inhabitants could still recognize the traces of their houses and streets. It was perceived as a political "top-down" decision; during its realization phase, no-one ever asked locals opinions or collaboration and, as a result, most of them showed -and still show today- a total refusal to the work of art.

The second generation

Second generation inhabitants -just as their predecessors- developed a problematic relationship with the work of art as it is clearly pictured both in some frames of Svezia's documentary [4] both in interviews to current inhabitants of Gibellina carried out by Musolino. Indeed, for them, the Cretto is "the site of memory from which to read their origins, the spatial text of the historical narrative to refer to, the knot of their identity-building since it rewrites their parents' sense of past" [5]. As a result, this generation has an ambivalent relationship to the site: misunderstanding and condemnation but, at the same time, fascination too. Whether representatives of this age group lean more towards the condemn or the understanding and praise of Burri's work mainly depends on how much they had the opportunity, as teenagers, to *absorb* and *internalize* the context of uncommon cultural effervescence. In fact, many of the artistic activities and workshops carried out in Gibellina Nuova (as a fundamental part of the city's cultural policies of artistic enhancement) had as privileged interlocutor the same community, especially the youngsters. Clearly, this climate of artistic and cultural movement (which had a place of choice in the Cretto especially for what concerns the Orestiadi Festival) significantly influenced the approach to culture of an entire generation.

[3] As reported interviews to employees of the Museum in Gibellina Nuova, so called, "Palazzo di Lorenzo" in *"Earthquake 68. Gente di Gibellina"*, curated by Emanuele Svezia, Sottotraccia-Gruppo Informale, in collaboration with "Gioventù - Istruzione e Cultura" Commissione Europea and Comune di Gibellina, 2008.

[4] Reference to the dialogue between Alessandro and the father Luigi on the Cretto in *"Earthquake 68. Gente di Gibellina"*, curated by Emanuele Svezia, Sottotraccia-Gruppo Informale, in collaboration with "Gioventù - Istruzione e Cultura" Commissione Europea and Comune di Gibellina, 2008.

[5] Monica Musolino, "L'arte Traumatica. Gibellina E La Risemantizzazione Delle Sue Rovine.", *Meridiana*, no. 88 (2017): 168.

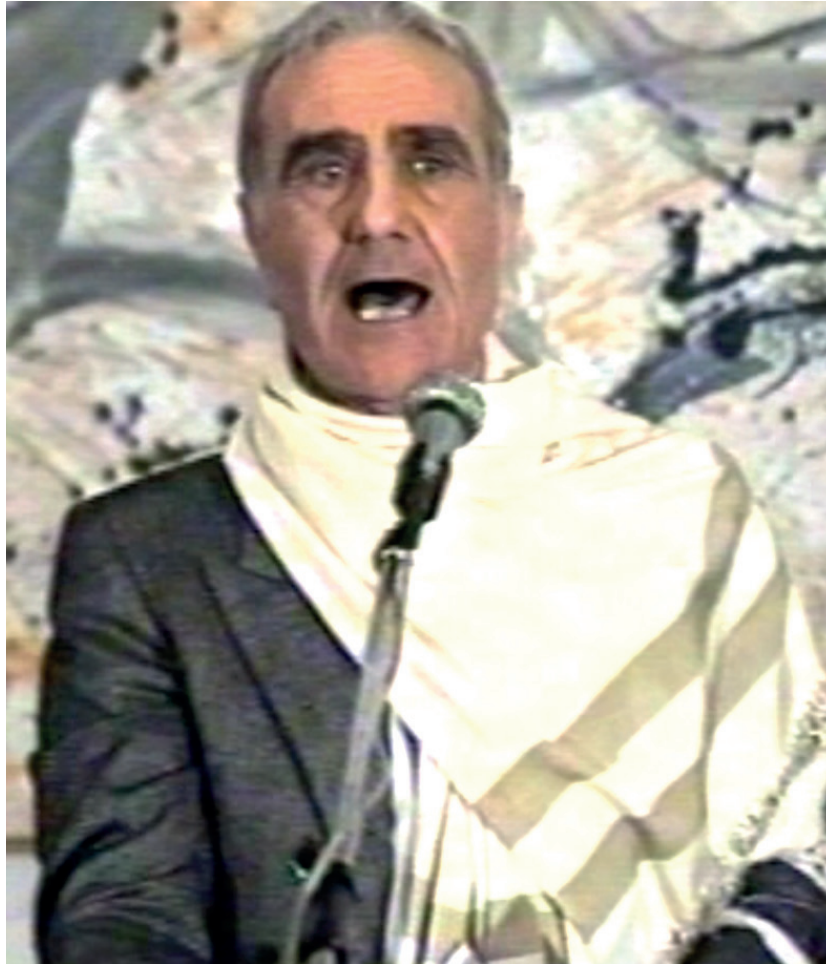Figure 26. Ludovico Corrao promoting Gibellina Nuova and its programs of cultural activation.

Figure 27. Set of a theatral play taking place during the Orestiadi Festival.

The third generation

With each new generation the distance from the moment of the trauma amplifies both under an emotional point of view and an identity one. The changing in perception clearly appears in Svezia's documentary when the narrator (representative of the third generation) engages his father (who directly experienced the catastrophe) in a provocative discussion. He focuses on the reasons why the father stopped visiting the old settlement after the Cretto was executed, the reasons why he gave up on experiencing a physical recollection with his past, whilst, the youngsters are proud of the Cretto as a piece of art and willing to make it profitable under a cultural and economic point of view. The father's hopeless answer "I have nothing to do with it", stems in the twenty years old narrator a reflection about the actual recent exploitation of the site's potentialities. He concludes that, for the most part of the year, it is an empty and still place that, indeed, does not serve the purpose of commemorating the earthquake -celebrated in Nuova Gibellina instead- and that, whenever tourists fill it during the summer months, keen on getting to know the history of the place, they can not find anything or anyone but the silent piece of art [6].

The others

Interestingly, the documentary was shot in 2008, two years prior to a further fundamental intervention carried out on the Old Gibellina's site: the completion of the Cretto [7]. This latest development, referenced in the previous chapters, is worth being investigated through the eyes of a fourth group of people experiencing the Cretto after its completion works in 2015: the others.

The others -that is to say the broader audience- are, according to Violi's definition of the Cretto (*the site of trauma*), the interlocutor to which "the story of a place that was in danger of being left in a state of neglect and that, instead, has become and continues to be the object and theater of a complex memorial elaboration" [8] is addressed. This category could be inserted in the context of a much earlier cultural phenomenon in full continuity with the action of the far-sighted cultural promotor of the city Ludovico Corrao. The origin of the phenomenon could be drawn back to 1980 when professor Pierluigi Nicolin started *Laboratori di progettazione Belice '80* [9]. A successive wide range of cultural initiatives followed Nicolin's drive (from the Orestiadi to the institution of the Gallery of Modern Art, to the promotion of artistic and scientific events as well as other creative activities [10]) always involving and addressing the "out-side audience" (see fig. 27).

Indeed, all the *sites of trauma*, are meant for a public, or better, as Violi states, for "a plurality of publics" [11]. In such places the categories of visitors we have previously mentioned acquire specific relevance: the victims, their families, the new generations, tourists, and subgroups of

[6] *"Earthquake 68. Gente di Gibellina"*, curated by Emanuele Svezia, Sottotraccia-Gruppo Informale, in collaboration with "Gioventù - Istruzione e Cultura" Commissione Europea and Comune di Gibellina, 2008, 0:41-0:43.

[7] Works for the Cretto's completion started in 2010 and ended in 2015.

[8] Monica Musolino, "L'arte Traumatica. Gibellina E La Risemantizzazione Delle Sue Rovine.", *Meridiana*, no. 88 (2017): 164.

[9] A design studio aiming at critically reviewing New Gibellina's urban plan, aiming at investigate how to give back an identity to an urban fabric considered as alien and inadequate.

[10] Ettore Sessa, "Architettura e forma urbana nella ricostruzione del Belice", in *Catasrofi e dinamiche di inurbamento contemporaneo. Città nuove e contesto*, ed. Marco Rosario Nobile (Palermo: Edizioni Caracol, 2012), 97.

[11] Patrizia Violi, *Paesaggi Della Memoria: Il Trauma, Lo Spazio, La Storia.*, (Milan: Bompiani, 2014), 182.

[12] Patrizia Violi, *Paesaggi Della Memoria: Il Trauma, Lo Spazio, La Storia.*, (Milan: Bompiani, 2014), 210.

Figure 28. Aerial view of the Cretto during AUDIOGHOST 68, 2015.

Figure 29. Aerial view of the Cretto during AUDIOGHOST 68, 2015.

specific collective actors [12] such as, in the case of the Cretto, architects [13] and artists ranging from performing arts to photography and cinema. In the sites of trauma the pathetic component is a highly emphasized factor, "they are real devices to arouse emotions in the visitor, to involve him physically in a path that often represents a sort of total experience, an immersion in a world of horror from which one emerges shaken and transformed" [14]. Sites of trauma, more than being (historically) informative, aim to be experiential.

In this context, it is interesting to focus on outstanding recent examples of artistic productions having the Cretto as their main subject. To involve the Cretto into a new artistic product means adding (to the per-se highly experiential space created by the Cretto) a further layer of interpretation and understanding functional to the final definition of *what kind of a thing the Cretto is* [15]. Worth of mention in this regard is AUDIOGHOST 68 [16] (see fig.28-29) by the Anglo-Italian musician Robert Del Naja and Italian artist Giancarlo Neri, a performance that in 2015 involved a thousand actors, interacting with Burri's piece of art on the occasion of the artist's 100th birth anniversary. One thousand actors -between locals and *outsiders*- moved lights in the night in all directions inside the *veins* of the Cretto, while, hidden in the dark, sounds

and voices of the 1968's catastrophic night resounded from radios scattered around the Cretto's blocks. This kind of exhibition fits the tendency towards spectacularization that increasingly characterizes our contemporaneity, "places of media entertainment" not so much finalized to an increase in knowledge of history, but rather, offering an emphatic experience [17]. This represents for the visitor or the spectator a traumatic experience in itself, a "secondary trauma" [18], term that generally refers to the effects that media and cinema have on viewers.

Furthermore, the work of Dutch film maker Petra Noordkamp *Il Grande Cretto di Gibellina* released in 2015, offers a great example of cinematographic translation of the site. From an analysis of the short documentary film's structure it is clear how the author wanted "to create a somatic sense of being present on site, giving the viewer the impression of experiencing the place and thinking about what happened there by walking through it" [19]. A first sensorial immersion in the contemporary landscape is juxtaposed by a sudden change of scenario: scenes of archival footages as well as photos of Burri's construction site manipulating Old Gibellina's remains that shock the viewer. This effect is further amplified by the continuous interweaving of such historical frames (see fig. 31-33) with original long takes (see fig. 30-32) portraying fragments

[13] *Laboratori di progettazione Belice '80* inaugurated a never lasting interest expressed by the architectural professional group especially in the academic environment. Worth of mention is the research *Topografia del Trauma* carried out by Laura Cantarella e Lucia Giuliano, born in 2008 and thought as a platform and a workshop with the aim of building "an atlas of the informal geographies of the Belice Valley" that can re-read and reinterpret the territory and contributing to the construction of a current imaginary of this territory. The territorial study aimed at generating different forms of exchange; professionals and researchers from different disciplines and professional fields working together to generate new visions of the places and to support knowledge-based actions in the political, economic and cultural field.

[14] Patrizia Violi, *Paesaggi Della Memoria: Il Trauma, Lo Spazio, La Storia.*, (Milan: Bompiani, 2014), 240.
[15] Adrian Forty, "Happy Ghost of a Possible City: Il

Cretto, Gibellina", *AA Files* , no. 66, (2013): 101.

[16] *"Audioghost68"*, curated by Giuseppe Lanno and Giancarlo Neri, Melqart Productions, 17 Ottobre 2015 (Sub Eng), Vimeo, 2021. https://vimeo.com/145176872.

[17] Patrizia Violi, *Paesaggi Della Memoria: Il Trauma, Lo Spazio, La Storia.*, (Milan: Bompiani, 2014), 214.

[18] To use the notion introduced in 1996 by Geoffrey Hartmann: "the media has turned us all into unintentional spectators of atrocities, reported from hour to hour. From this media coverage of traumatic events, from this uninterrupted transmission of violent images, a *secondary trauma* could take place, involving the spectators this time".
Geoffrey Hartmann, *The Longest Shadow: In the Aftermath of the Holocaust*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 152.

Figure 30. Long takes of the Cretto, 2015.

Figure 31. Archival frames portraying life in old Gibellina before the earthquake.

Figure 32. Long takes of the Cretto, 2015.

Figure 33. Archival frames portraying life in old Gibellina before the earthquake.

of the piece of art that "create a contemplative space where one can connect to the spirit of this artwork" [20]. The informative text accompanying some of the archival material does not overcome the experiential, pathetic power produced by the visual and auditorial juxtaposition of the scenes, corroborating, once again, Violi's definition of *site of trauma* as a place meant to feel rather than to know/learn.

The montage recalls what, according to Violi, is a common strategy adopted by museums and *sites of the trauma*: the show-case of photographic testimonies. The relationship between space and photography has a double truthful implication: on the one hand, the image attests to the veracity of the event it represents, while, on the other hand, the space presents itself as the authentic source of the photo's truth value. This synergy is perfectly embodied in Noordkamp's work.

Recognized Violi's *site of the trauma* as a possible definition for the Cretto (implying it being something that does not claim to represent or inform but, rather, merely exposes the material traces of the traumatic event, even if artistically manipulated) we could conclude that Burri ended up producing a re-presentation of Old Gibellina rather than a symbolic and artistic representation of it,

able to communicate specific feelings of empathy through the silence of art.

What could be said to have created the lack of understanding that made the Cretto fail to an extent (especially in the eyes of the elder Gibellinese generations) is the actual communication that has been made of it. *Il Grande Cretto di Gibellina* -and particularly the Cretto after its 2015's completion- has been presented to the general public precisely as the "representation of the renewed Gibellinese identity and, above all, as a symbol of the traumatized community's life renewal. A work able to rewrite the collective memory of a whole community, precisely acting on the site of the trauma" [21] establishing itself as the official narration of that collective memory, through an intensive act of spectacularization.

[19] Petra Noordkamp interviewed by Erdosi Aniko, *"Silence Buried in White Cement. Petra Noordkamp, Il Grande Cretto di Gibellina, 2015"*, Sculpturenature, November 22, 2016. https://www.sculpturenature.com/en/silence-buried-in-white-cement-grande-cretto-di-gibellina-2015/.

[20] Ibidem.

[21] Monica Musolino, "L'arte Traumatica. Gibellina E La Risemantizzazione Delle Sue Rovine.", *Meridiana*, no. 88 (2017): 173.

Figure 34. Advertising campaign by *Bottega Veneta, by Viviane Sassen,* 2016.

Figure 35. Advertising campaign by *Bottega Veneta, by Viviane Sassen,* 2016.

Figure 36. Advertising campaign by *Bottega Veneta, by Viviane Sassen,* 2016.

Conclusions

In conclusion, by choosing to interpret the Cretto as a *site of trauma*, and by virtue of these last considerations, I would argue, in the first place, that the strategy adopted by the local authorities in the communication of the Cretto's role and image was not legitimate with respect to Burri's presumed artistic intention and, most of all, to the community's memory and identity. This misunderstanding of the Cretto's meaning, due to its miscommunication, will, most probably, disappear right after the generation closer to the trauma disappears as well, and the Cretto's claim to be "object and theater of -continuous- complex memorial elaborations" [22] will surely be corroborated.

Secondly, it is to be noted that an excessive focus on the spectacular aspects, on the emotional solicitation and on the continuous tendency to produce an effect of shock (especially in the *outside* visitor), could prove counterproductive; it could lead to a neutralization of empathy and true understanding of the site. I believe this happened to the Cretto in the last years -contrarily to Burri's will not to have any "gadgets selling stand" next to his art piece- also due to its undoubted aesthetic qualities enhanced by the contrast in color produced by the chromatic leap due to the juxtaposition between the blinding white of the new blocks and the dark grey of the older ones. It is enough to look at the artistic advertising campaign carried out by the fashion brand *Bottega Veneta* in 2016 using the blocks of the Cretto as a monumental background (see fig.34-36).

Finally, the status of *piece of art* implies per se the realm of feeling more than that of learning. In this regard, also the third generation's aspirations to make the Cretto become somehow lucrative, spectacular and informative do not at all agree neither with Burri's vison nor with the elder generations' one.

It is also to be taken in consideration that Burri may have failed to an extent with his artistic translation of the trauma's *trace*. According to Violi, to recognize something as a *trace* means activating "a complex interpretative framework"; a *trace* is testimony of a complex story, it acts as a text, and the story that this text reports to us is not only the story of the *trace*'s very production (the traumatic event), but also a narration of the actors involved, their habits, values and identity [23]. Most likely the Gibellinese community needed to recognize itself in the *trace* differently. However, I believe Burri's intervention was legitimate since we may consider it an act of creative restoration for which *authenticity* does not imply *likelihood*. As I previously said, the local survivors called for an approach able to preserve as much as possible the state of things. In so doing, they considered themselves as the only legitimate recipients and, by virtue of that, the only ones able to decide on the *forms of memory*'s transmission [24]. Nevertheless they disregarded the fact that "an operation of restoration never coincides with the innocent conservation of a generic past, but rather, it is characterized by a selection process (insofar as it decides what needs to be restored) and, ultimately, of translation and invention" [25].

[22] Monica Musolino, "L'arte Traumatica. Gibellina E La Risemantizzazione Delle Sue Rovine.", *Meridiana*, no. 88 (2017): 164.

[23] Patrizia Violi, *Paesaggi Della Memoria: Il Trauma, Lo Spazio, La Storia.*, (Milan: Bompiani, 2014), 155-7.

[24] Patrizia Violi, *Paesaggi Della Memoria: Il Trauma, Lo Spazio, La Storia.*, (Milan: Bompiani, 2014), 183.

[25] Francesco Mazzucchelli, *Urbicidio. Il senso dei luoghi tra distruzioni e ricostruzioni in ex Jugoslavia*, (Bologna: BUP, 2010), 48.

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Figure 17. Myrrha. Acessed March 13, 2021. https://www.myrrha.it/lutopia-possibile-di-gibellina-di-nicolo-stabile-numero-1/

Figure 18. Recalcati, Massimo. *ALBERTO BURRI. IL GRANDE CRETTO DI GIBELLINA*. Arezzo: Magonza Editore, 2018.

Figure 19. Noordkamp, Petra and Bertacchini, Stefano. *Il Grande Cretto di Gibellina*. Directed by Petra Noordkamp. Vimeo, 2017. https://vimeo.com/217150507.

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