

THE RESONANCE OF THE VOID

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Improbable Sculptures and New Ruins

One of the most evident materializations of failure in Gibellina Nuova is the unfinished theater designed in the early 1980s by sculptor Pietro Consagra, one of the protagonists of Italian postwar sculpture. Conceived as a huge liveable sculpture, today the theater is abandoned, inaccessible, and surrounded by a surreal wasteland. This colossal cement skeleton – economically and ecologically unsustainable and oversized compared to the needs of the decreasing population – demonstrates the gap between a building and a sculptural work – that Robert Venturi and his partners dubbed “duck-architecture” – a visionary project and the real financial possibilities of a provincial town, the needs of the few inhabitants of Gibellina and the huge structure, planned and never finished.

At the XVI Venice Architecture Biennale in 2018, this abandoned theater was presented at the Italian Pavilion, within Mario Cucinella’s project *Arcipelago Italia*, together with other projects, as the symbol of the future growth of Belice, and a possible trigger for a process of completion and rebirth. This process is graphically visualized as a centrifugal force that starts from the theater – the ‘epicentre’ of regeneration – and extends to the city of Gibellina and the entire region.

The theater is featured with curved and continuous lines, without right angles, its plasticity thus emphasized. In order to understand this monumental, sculptural building, it is necessary to refer to its theoretical underpinnings, i.e. the concept of ‘frontal sculpture’, first theorized by Consagra in 1952 and later explored through various materials and at various scales, including architecture and urbanism. In his ‘frontal sculptures’, Consagra creates thin, almost two-dimensional pieces that can be experienced from a single point of view, thus rejecting the conventions of three-dimensional, traditional sculpture. In these works, Consagra abolishes the third dimension in order to create a more direct and freer relationship between object, observer and space, as an alternative to the rhetoric of authoritarian classical sculpture in the round, the emblem of power and hierarchy. This new interaction between art, audience and environment corresponds to his utopian idea of a democratic and egalitarian society.

Consagra later conceived the ‘frontal city’ as provocative extension of his ‘frontal sculptures’, understanding the city as plastic theme. Theorized in his book *La città frontale* (1969) and materialized in two buildings in Gibellina, the theater and the Meeting, Consagra’s ‘frontal architectures’ were exhibited for the first time at the Galleria dell’Arte in Milan in March 1969 and at the Marlborough Galleria d’Arte in Rome in the same year. The models of the ‘frontal buildings’, in stainless steel with identical transparent facades and a curved profile, represent habitable sculptures that reject traditional architecture and propose a new type of building: Open, full of light, visually and conceptually related to other buildings and the horizon line. In this innovative project, Consagra undertakes an aesthetic-anthropological experiment motivated by the need to determine new human values generated by inhabiting a “mobile, temporary, transparent, paradoxical” space, “amenable to fluctuating ideas”, opposed to the traditional cubic structures characterized by rigid forms and a dark ‘core’ inside.

The Meeting (1976), a sinuous, steel and glass structure designed as a museum but currently used as a bar and bus station, is the first building developed from Consagra’s ‘frontal city’ proposal as a large-scale architectural sculpture. The theater is a ‘frontal building’ in reinforced concrete whose construction began in 1989 but has been interrupted several times. Its structures were last secured in 2017, while in 2020 the two-lane road passing through the theater was inaugurated, as envisioned in the original plan. Technically, it is an unfinished building already in ruins. Franco Purini reminds us that “there is a stage in the construction of a building in which it anticipates what it will look like when it becomes a ruin. Joseph Michael Gandy, a collaborator of John Soane and an excellent draftsman, executed a magnificent watercolor showing the Bank of London reduced to ruins while it was not yet built. It is no accident that Auguste Perret said that ‘beautiful architecture makes beautiful ruins’. Showing a ruined building before it was built is proof of its aesthetic value”.

Is the theater proof of its aesthetic value? What does this gigantic ruin convey? What does Gibellina teach us? In its ambiguous, intermediate state between construction and ruin, Consagra's theater embodies the incompleteness of Belice and its poetic suspension between the catastrophe of the earthquake and the disaster of the reconstruction. Gibellina's reconstruction is often criticized as a failure, but some see an immense potential in the emptiness of these places, in the ambition of the projects (realized and not), in the utopia of making a small inland Sicilian town a new center of the artistic and cultural avant-garde. Regardless of its short- and long-term developments, Gibellina is the only Italian new town which, after World War II, bet on culture, theater, modern art and architecture to construct a specific identity.

Theatricality and a Fragment of Hope

The unfinished, empty and abandoned theater can be taken as a symbol of Belice and its contradictions, but also of the potential hidden in the metaphysical void of these places. In contrast to a frozen image of old and new ruins, what emerges by approaching this microcosmos is a complex picture rich in tensions, not only in the sense of conflicts, but also in the sense that various perturbing elements create a latent energy propitious to redirection. This is why so many contemporary artists and architects find this region interesting and instructive, a laboratory for 'cultivating the future' of post-earthquake environments.

Two impressive artworks have recently been produced there: Elisa Giardina Papa's "U Scantu": A Disorderly Tale (2022), a video-installation shot in Gibellina and presented at the 2022 Venice Biennale, which reinterprets the Sicilian myth of the 'donne di fora', and an audiovisual performance by Nico Krebs and Tayio Onorato, entitled *È tempo ormai di dirti addio* (2020). The 'donne di fora' – which in the tradition are hybrid beings between fairy and witch, feminine and masculine, human and animal, magical and criminal – are envisioned as a gang of teenage 'tuners' who ride through the city of Gibellina and its empty buildings and urban spaces: From Ludovico Quaroni's church (Chiesa Madre) with its great white sphere to Francesco Venezia's Palazzo di Lorenzo, to the Sistema delle Piazze by Franco Purini and Laura Thermes, a sequence of big interconnected squares seek in vain to convey a 'city effect' with scenic backdrops in the heart of the settlement – empty and desolate as the rest of the city. This ride, which explores the magical, the ritualistic, and the primitive as forces that generate imagination, ends in Consagra's works: The theater and the star *Ingresso del Belice*, a huge steel sculpture placed on the road at the entrance of Gibellina.

The theater is also the protagonist of a site-specific installation realized by Nico Krebs and Tayio Onorato on the occasion of the Gibellina Photo Road Festival in 2019. "We felt that the theater is representative for the whole town – declare the artists – massively oversized with unclear purpose, unfinished but already crumbling, conceptionally daring but depressingly unfunctional". The piece is an audiovisual performance which uses the city as a stage and Consagra's theater as the main actor: A hyperreal model of the building on four wheels casts off and starts its journey across the empty streets of the city accompanied by a beautiful, melancholy Italian song: "the theater makes its last rounds, shouts its farewells, abandons its long status quo and departs into a different, more hopeful existence. It was heartbreaking to see the inhabitants of Gibellina coming out onto their balconies and front porches to bid their farewells as if it were JFK's funeral train or the Queen last procession. Intuitively, the people knew what all this meant".

In this piece, the evocative power of the theater conveys the overall meaning of Gibellina as a field of experimentation in (post)modern urban theories and design practices, whose result is one of complexity, contradiction, and fragmentation. "Gibellina is a magnet for artists because of its history and the histories' visible traces", say Nico Krebs. "It feels like there was so much hope and enthusiasm invested in its creation, that the echo of it is still there, a bit like a shooting star which leaves a glowing trail in the night sky, long after the impact has happened and its body has vanished. Sometimes when a lot of energy is invested in a place, it emanates this energy for a long time and it attracts susceptible people to come and feed on it. The contemporary ruins are intriguing because they tell a story of failure and tragedy, something like a stageplay of human ambitions. And obviously the stage design itself is very spectacular, too. Gibellina feels like an unused theater with amazing acoustics. Whatever you say will be amplified and reflected and echoed back". These extraordinary acoustics are the reverberation of the void, a void that – as in physics and cosmology – does not coincide with nothingness, but is the result of many opposing forces, positive and negative, which nullify each other, giving way to infinite possibilities.

The artists' statement on the acoustics is interesting because it evokes the concept of resonance, recently explored by Hartmut Rosa in sociology, but already theorized by Stephen Greenblatt in 1990 in connection with theatricality and agency of objects, relics, cultural artifacts, and art works. According to Greenblatt, even where the charisma of an object has been largely exhausted, it can still radiate "cultural energy". By "resonance" he means the power of an object to reach out beyond its formal boundaries, to call forth in the viewer the complex, dynamic cultural forces from which it has emerged. This is what Consagra's theater (and its *Bilderfahrzeug*) discloses: Its precarious condition, the precariousness of a seismic territory, such as the Belice Valley, and, indirectly, our fragility and vulnerability. "Precariousness is a rich source of resonance", states Greenblatt, like alteration and destruction. In the case of Gibellina, the buildings are witnesses of the violence of nature and human intervention, creating a powerful resonance, including the literal resonance of voices in the huge void of the theater or in the empty squares.

Looking back to the fifty years that followed the catastrophe, theatricality is a common trait that emerges as a sort of *fil rouge*, the result neither of design nor chance but the dynamic interaction of people and places involved in the reconstruction as well as the 'soul' of the place, the *genius loci*. In the ensuing decades, especially in the 1980s, the *Orestiadi* and the spectacular theatrical events organized in the Cretto have drawn the flower of Italian and international intelligentsia to this remote region. This vocation, which goes back to antiquity and survives in the Greek and Roman theaters still in use today (Siracusa, Segesta, Eraclea Minoa, Palazzolo Acreide, Tindari, Taormina) combined with the inherent theatricality of urban spaces, architectures, and (land) art masterpieces, and with buildings and spaces conceived, perceived or used as open air theaters (Quaroni's church, Burri's Cretto), may become the new 'destination' of Gibellina and the whole valley. Among the distinctive features of postmodern architecture, theatricality is one of the most striking – think of the *casa del Farmacista* and the many postmodern buildings and urban spaces scattered in the Belice new towns that resemble scenographic sets. Beyond utopias and progressive dreams, the "fragment of hope" remains that Gibellina with its visionary radicalism, intrinsic theatricality, and powerful resonance can still become a possible place.