

An Attempt to Create an Existential Community in 1970s Italy: Territorial Intervention, Cultural Decentralisation and Social Participation in *Operazione Arcevia*

Abstract

The attempt to repopulate the village of Palazzo d'Arcevia in the Marche region of Italy was initiated in the early 1970s by an Italian entrepreneur, assisted by architect and artist Ico Parisi. Parisi promptly turned the project into a utopian proposal for an existential community, involving thirty-three cultural operators and intellectuals including the art historians and critics Enrico Crispolti and Pierre Restany. Through archival and bibliographical research, this article contextualises *Operazione Arcevia* in the participatory moment that marked civic and cultural life in 1970s Italy, against the backdrop of movements of social and political contestation and cultural decentralisation. A rich corpus of critical writings, sketches of artistic interventions into public space and visual and written archival materials document the collective process and will here reconstruct the trajectory of this unrealised attempt. While outlining the singularity of *Operazione Arcevia* – in particular, the financing from the private entrepreneur, the unique convergence of artists with distinct trajectories and proposals and the participant's elaborate communication and dissemination strategy – this study will also highlight the shared objectives and concerns of the proposal with other practices rooted in social and territorial action. Beyond Parisi, figures like Crispolti and Francesco Somaini with previous experience in similar projects operated as connecting agents between this project and others at the same time in Italy. The operation raised issues concerning architectural and artistic intervention and the risk of “cultural colonisation”, the relationship between avant-garde art and local artisanal and agricultural traditions and the relationship with local and national political representatives. This article examines the artistic proposals for Palazzo d'Arcevia and Parisi's photographs of the process, which reflect the desire for self-representation and the valorisation of the work, but also reveal the gender imbalance and the lack of contact with the indigenous population. While underlining the contradictions and difficulties that eventually led to the project's abandonment, this study highlights the exceptional confluence of cultural operators and their desire for social transformation at a complex time in Italian history.

Introduction

In the introduction to his 1977 book *Arti visive e partecipazione sociale*, the art historian and critic Enrico Crispolti observed that Italy, at the time of his writing, was experiencing an important moment of political and social growth, which he attributed to a “participatory presence” (Crispolti 1977, p. 7) in the social field. Initiatives to establish horizontal relationships between cultural operators and citizens and also enhance self-conscious actions from the base flourished in a broad range of urban and rural contexts across the peninsula, often with the active support of municipalities and regional administrations. Despite the previous decades of economic management based on privatisation and speculation that had contributed to keeping the country in what he described as a “marginalised and subaltern” position, Crispolti was convinced that these experiments placed Italy “at the avant-garde in the European context”.¹ He proposed some explanations for this popular impulse and its subsequent participatory phenomenon, of which he was both an agent and an essential witness: this progressive situation was less a consequence of the formidable wave of protests by workers and students around 1968 than of a greater implication of the institutional left at different levels of public life. While the protest movements had undeniably opened up spaces for collective action and the questioning of the existing order, Crispolti suggested that the victory of the Italian Communist Party (PCI) in the 1975 and 1976 elections had consolidated the involvement of public entities in this participatory impulse, which he saw as both a cultural and a political phenomenon.²

The idea for *Operazione Arcevia* arose in 1972 and cohered with the socio-political conjuncture described in Crispolti’s book. The demise of the project late in the decade coincided with the so-called *riflusso* (Crainz 2003; Masini 2018). I would like to reframe this singular and understudied enterprise in the context of what Crispolti described as the “participatory moment” (Crispolti 1977, p. 10) that transformed Italian civic and cultural life in the 1970s. Due to the exceptional conditions informing its emergence and implementation, *Operazione Arcevia* cannot be considered a paradigmatic case and this article will indeed highlight the singularity of its financing, its collegial organisation, its transnational dimension connecting participants based mainly in Italy and France, as well as its conscious strategy of documentation and promotion. The unique history of *Operazione Arcevia* nonetheless also refracts issues and concerns shared by numerous artists, critics and cultural workers from the same period who operated *nel sociale*, with and within the social field. Significantly, the term “social” in this expression loses its character as a qualifying adjective to become a noun, therefore acquiring the properties of an active and autonomous entity which syncretically absorbs and contains, alongside the individuals that have been

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1 Crispolti 1977, p. 7. *Arti visive e partecipazione sociale* brings together a selection of twenty-five texts Crispolti wrote while involved in various projects of social participation across Italy between 1973 and 1976. This untranslated volume, ranging chronologically from Volterra ’73 to the 1976 Biennale di Venezia, should have been followed by a second opus, the manuscript of which is conserved at the Archivio Crispolti in Rome. All unattributed translations are the present author’s.

2 Crispolti 1977, pp. 8–9. Recent scholarship on intervention and social participation in public space in 1970s Italy includes Arte 2017; Catenacci 2016; Pioselli 2007; Pioselli 2015; Taccone 2017, pp. 62–70; Tanga 2019.

transformed into a collective body, also the territory they operate in and the elements that mediate their interaction.

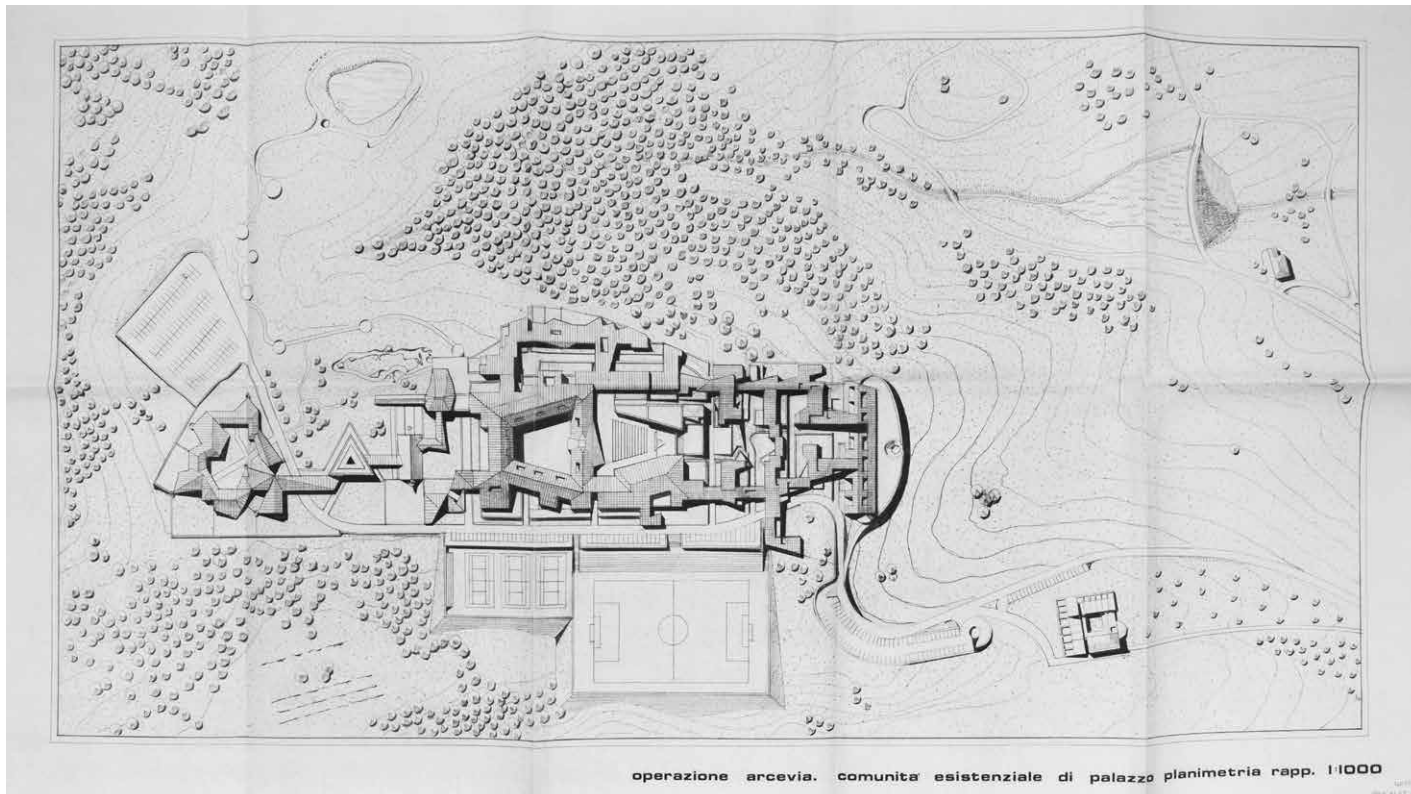
Contradictions and tensions inevitably surfaced over *Operazione Arcevia*, as the project assembled many agents – from the initiator and private sponsor, Italo Bartoletti, and the architect in charge of urban planning, Ico Parisi, to the members of the technical commission who coordinated the operation and the cultural operators invited to intervene through art – all of whom had different intentions and aspirations. The desire for social transformation and the experimental and creative impulse expressed by the avant-garde artists involved were not always compatible with the concrete objective of building a new residential complex and the need to collaborate with local political entities. The *Operazione Arcevia* participants were also confronted with the risk of perpetuating a form of “cultural colonisation” through their intervention into a radically new context, a risk colored by a specific meaning of “colonisation” that, as we shall see, differed from its usual imperialistic connotations and resonated with the particular social and territorial issues in Italy. Finally, the project was also characterised by a gravely unbalanced gender distribution. Although the reduced presence of women merely reflected the composition of the artistic and political scenes of the time, this gendered aspect deserves to be further examined and discussed in the light of Italian feminist activism and its multiple initiatives for shaping communities outside the art field dominated by male protagonists.

A Private Initiative with a Collegial Dimension

The origins of *Operazione Arcevia* date to August 1972 and are closely connected to the will of Italo Bartoletti, a Como-based entrepreneur. To stem the inexorable process of depopulation that affected his native village of Palazzo d’Arcevia in the Marche region – Palazzo is a small *frazione* of the municipality of Arcevia in the province of Ancona – Bartoletti decided to build a new urban and architectural complex that could attract and accommodate a new permanent population. This renewal would also stimulate the local economy anew, by encouraging activities related to tourism and crafts, among others. In early 1973, Bartoletti commissioned the study and execution of this new *insediamento* to the architect Ico Parisi, who proposed to develop an existential community (*comunità esistenziale*) in collaboration with artists from different disciplines (*Operazione Arcevia* 1979, pp. 6–7). Bartoletti enthusiastically received and supported the idea.

The recovery and revitalisation of a village emptied by the rural exodus involved the implementation of a way of life “isolated from the noise and pressures of the system”, designed to be “as self-sufficient as possible” and based on the reorganisation of agricultural, craft and residential resources.³ With this perspective, Parisi drew up an urban plan in which the infrastructures for the permanent population of Arcevia coexisted alongside those for temporary visitors, oriented towards rural tourism and spiritual activities (fig. 1). Besides housing, the plan included a secular retreat, an ecumenical church, a public square, shops, craft workshops, a hostel-restaurant (*auberge*), a kindergarten, a *casa della cultura* (house of culture), pools, a playground, a craft school and sports fields. In Parisi’s mind, all the buildings, spaces of circulation and collective gathering-places would be punctuated by artistic interventions from aesthetic operators, selected for their ability to interact with the local context.

3 See the letter, dated 14 March 1974, in which Bartoletti invites Pierre Restany to be part of the technical commission of Operation Arcevia in ACA, Fonds Pierre Restany, PREST. XSIT31/2: “isolata dal rumore e dalle pressioni del sistema e il più possibile autosufficiente.”



These material and psychological conditions were to allow the development of the “existential community”:

‘Existential community’ [...] simply expresses a model of life closer to the deep needs of man in today’s world. Hence not a simple escape from reality (such as a ‘residential village’) nor a model determined by rigid pre-established schemes (the so-called care centres, etc.). In fact, it must be the inhabitants themselves who discover this ‘new dimension of life’. Consequently, the essential criterion of settlement must point in the direction of developing sociality.⁴

Operazione Arcevia would “give a new human dimension to the area” (*Operazione Arcevia* 1979, p. 10), improving the quality of life through the responsible use of local resources and respect for both the landscape and architectural heritage. Whereas Parisi early on proposed the ideas of an “existential” and “therapeutic” community in such a way as to suggest their equivalence or proximity, his vision would slowly evolve towards privileging the “existential” over the “therapeutic”. He would explain that therapeutic action still required “intervention from above” (*Operazione Arcevia* 1979, p. 10) and therefore implied establishing a hierarchy between participants with supposedly valuable knowledge and participants without. The “existential” path was instead less authoritarian and supported the search for alternatives to a capitalist economy and to the emerging environmental problems of those who endorsed it (*Operazione Arcevia* 1979, p. 10).

4 *Operazione Arcevia* 1979, p. 10: “‘Comunità esistenziale’ [...] esprime semplicemente un modello di vita più vicino alle esigenze profonde dell’uomo del mondo di oggi. Quindi non semplice evasione con la fuga dalla realtà (tipo ‘Villaggio residenziale’) neppure un modello determinato da rigidi schemi prestabiliti (così detti centri di cura ecc.). Infatti devono essere gli stessi abitanti a scoprire questa ‘nuova dimensione di vita’. Quindi il criterio essenziale dell’insediamento deve puntare nella direzione dello sviluppo della socialità.” Though unsigned, this general presentation of the project was presumably written by Parisi.

1 Ico Parisi, plan for the Arcevia residential centre, n.d. (ca. 1974). Rennes, INHA-Collection Archives de la critique d’art, PREST.XSIT31/54 (photo Archives de la Critique d’Art)



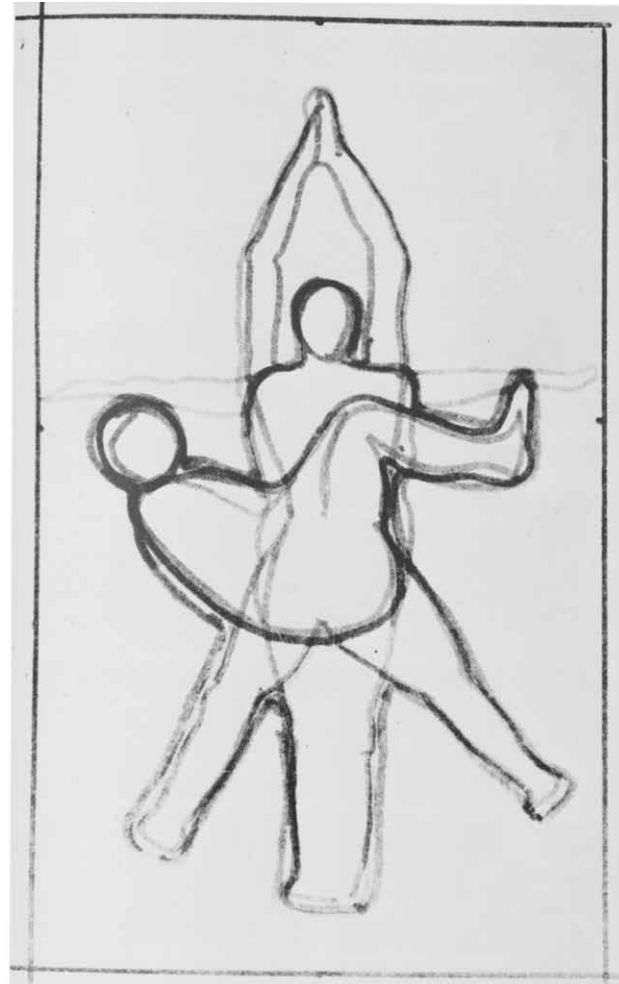
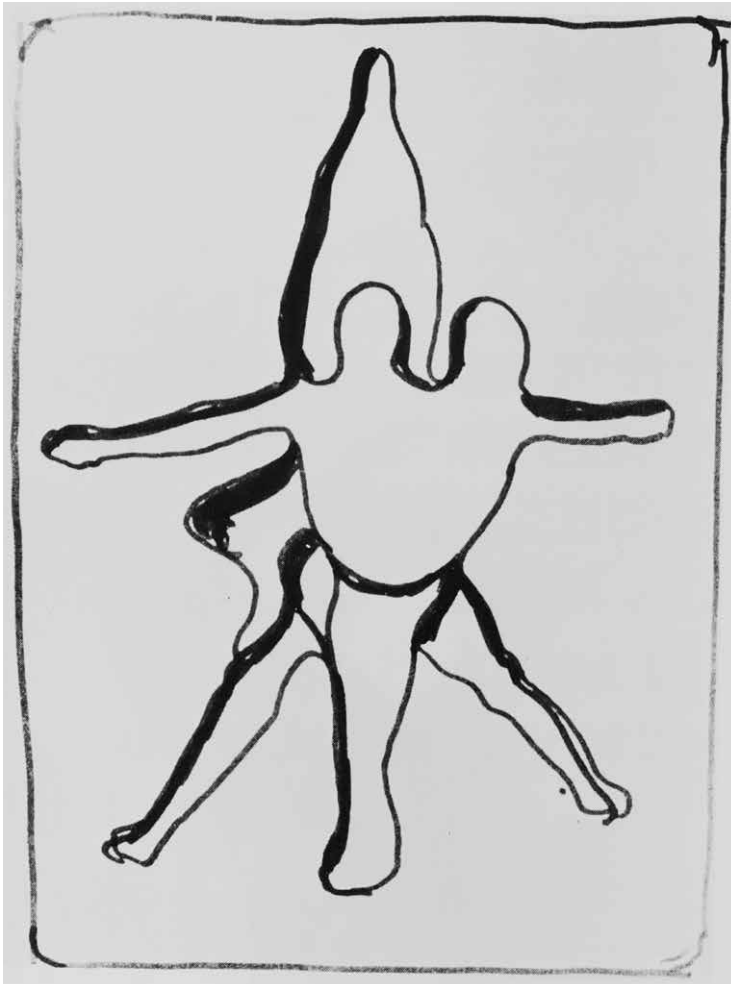
2 Italo Bartoletti, invitation letter to Pierre Restany, 14 March 1974. Rennes, INHA-Collection Archives de la critique d'art, PREST.XSIT31/2. (photo Archives de la Critique d'Art)

Bartoletti and Parisi invited different individuals to form a technical commission (*commissione tecnica*) that would help carry out this interdisciplinary undertaking, which they repeatedly emphasised had a collegial and choral dimension: the art critics Enrico Crispolti, Pierre Restany, Jole De Sanna and Mario Di Salvo, as well as the psychologist Antonio Miotto (fig. 2). There is no record of De Sanna's involvement, which suggests that she declined the invitation, while De Salvo stopped collaborating in late 1974.⁵ The first meeting of the commission took place in Como on 19 April 1974, where they drafted a list of aesthetic operators to invite. Throughout that year and the next, meetings were organised with those who agreed to participate, at their homes or studios in Paris, Milan, Rome, Como and elsewhere. All collaborators were expected to produce a reflection on the integration of their proposal in the context of Arcevia and its social impact. In all, thirty-three visual artists, painters, sculptors, filmmakers, musicians and composers were involved: Michelangelo Antonioni, Arman, Emanuele Astrengo, Iginio Balderi, Alberto Burri, Nicola Carrino, Alik Cavaliere, Mario Ceroli, César, Aldo Clementi, Giuliani Collina, Vittorio Consoli, Corneille, Lucio Del Pezzo, Bruno Di Bello, Rod Dudley, Nato Frascà, Tonino Guerra, Milvia Maglione, Teodosio Magnoni, Edgardo Mannucci, Nikos, Francesco Pennisi, Aldo Ricci, Chrissa (also spelled Chryssa or Chrysa) Romanos, Jean-Michel Sannejouand, Francesco Somaini, Vito Sonzogni, Jesús Rafael Soto,

Mauro Staccioli, Shu Takahashi, Joe Tilson and Valeriano Trubbiani.⁶ Most already had a consolidated trajectory and many had previously collaborated with commission members, in particular Crispolti and Restany. The premise to include in the commission Italian and French art historians and critics, professionally recognised and in close contact with different generations of artists, would have guaranteed the operation attention from a broad range of interlocutors, either future contributors or other cultural agents, and also explains the predominance of a transnational axis between Italy and France, with artists based mainly in one of the two countries. While several had emigrated from other countries in Europe (Belgium, Greece, Great Britain) and beyond (Australia, Venezuela, Japan), the variety of experiences, the interdisciplinary approach and the transnational exchanges undoubtedly allowed a wide range of perspectives to coexist within the project and thereby enrich it.

5 The idea of a technical commission and a first list of names were validated during a meeting in Como between Bartoletti, Parisi, Di Salvo and Antonio Parravicini on 3 March 1974. Although the composition of the commission evolved over the course of the project, its core members can be identified as Bartoletti, Parisi, Crispolti, Miotto and Restany, who together with Parravicini and Di Salvo participated in the first meeting on 19 April. Other collaborators are mentioned in the catalogue – including Gabriella Bairo, Gianfranco Sabatini, Giuseppe Serrini, Vito Sonzogni and Artemio Strazzi – but their implication was only peripheral or occasional. See ACA, Fonds Pierre Restany, PREST.XSIT31/2; see also the detailed chronology in *Operazione Arcevia* 1979, pp. 282–483.

6 Among the artists who were initially mentioned but did not participate in the project were Valerio Adami, Marcel Broodthaers, Rafael Canogar, Christo, Jan Dibbets, Luciano Fabro, Giulio Paolini, Niki de Saint Phalle, Jean Tinguely and Andy Warhol. See the undated manuscript, unattributed but probably by Restany, in ACA, Fonds Pierre Restany, PREST.XSIT31/20–21.

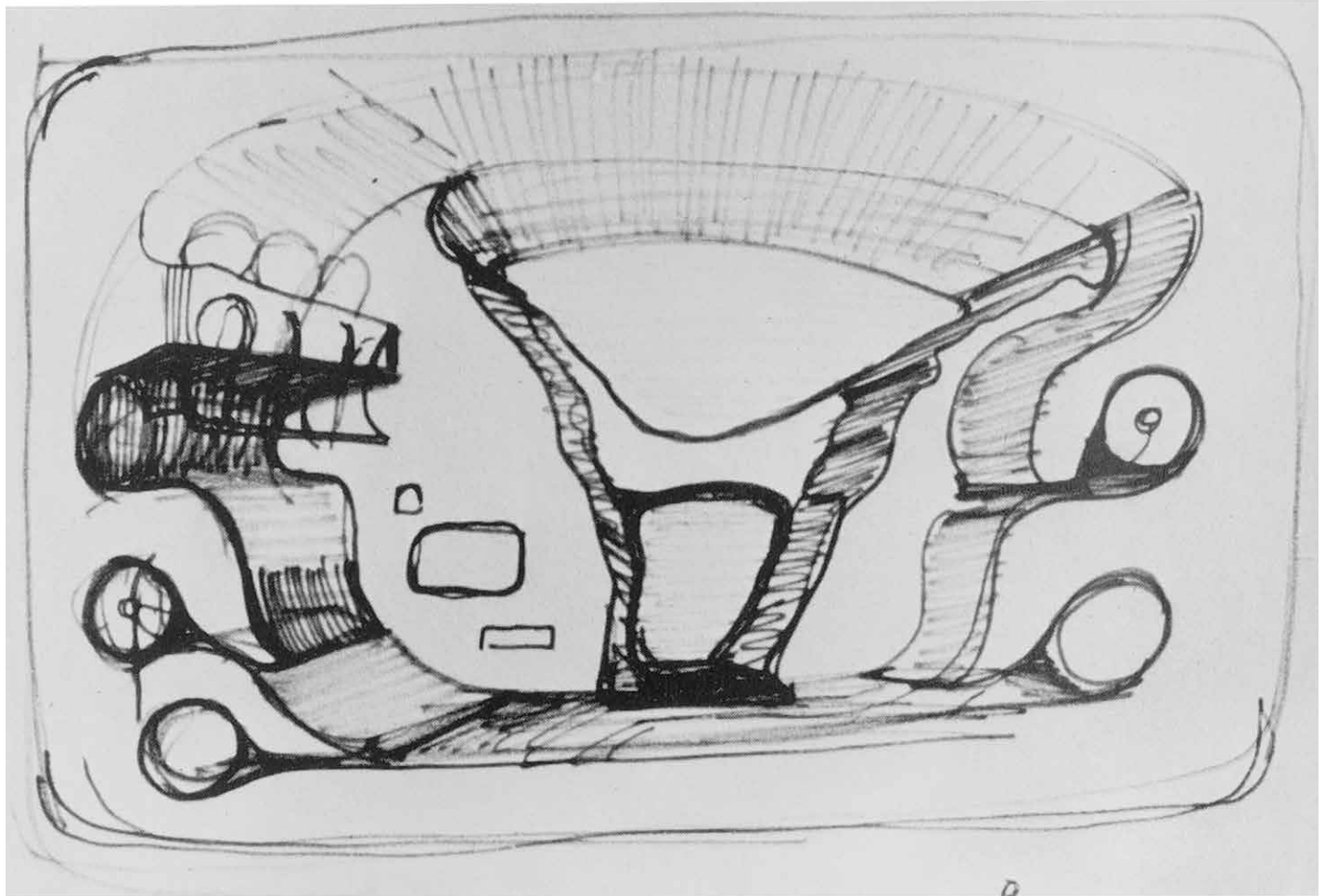


In Pursuit of Productive Conflict

By 1972, Parisi had more than four decades of experience in the field of architecture and design. Born in 1916 to Sicilian parents who had settled in Piedmont and then moved to Como in 1925, he studied building engineering and began his career with the rationalist architect Giuseppe Terragni, famous for the Casa del Fascio, the headquarters of the Como branch of the National Fascist Party and an emblematic achievement of modern Italian architecture that he designed in 1932–1936. During the Second World War, Parisi was sent to the Russian front, returning in 1943. The post-war period marked the beginning of a prosperous period for him, founding of the La Ruota studio with his wife, Luisa Parisi, and realising numerous architectural and interior design projects.

The existential community central to the idea of *Operazione Arcevia* can be traced back to Parisi's practice in the late 1960s, which gradually became more utopian and speculative. Evidence of this change can be seen in *Contentitori umani* (*Human Containers*, figs. 3a–3b), designed in collaboration with the Gruppo T and sculptor Francesco Somaini and exhibited in 1968 at the Salone del Mobile in Milan. These polyurethane modules were prototypes of minimal living structures for one or more people. As mobile designs, they could be assembled and, ideally, at some point connected to health and education services (Parisi 1978, pp. 142–155). Remaining in the same vein as the *Contentitori umani* but advancing the collaboration with artists a step further, Parisi in 1972–1973 elaborated the *Ipotesi per una casa esistenziale* (*Hypothesis for an Existential House*), a housing unit conceived to psychologically and cognitively stimulate the subject who experienced it by incorporating “semantic solicitations” from the artists César, Rod Dudley, Giuliano Collina, Duane Hanson, Chuck Close and Giorgio Bellandi

3a, 3b, 3c Ico Parisi, *Study for Contentitore Umano n° 1 and 2*, ca. 1968, from Parisi 1978, pp. 144–145

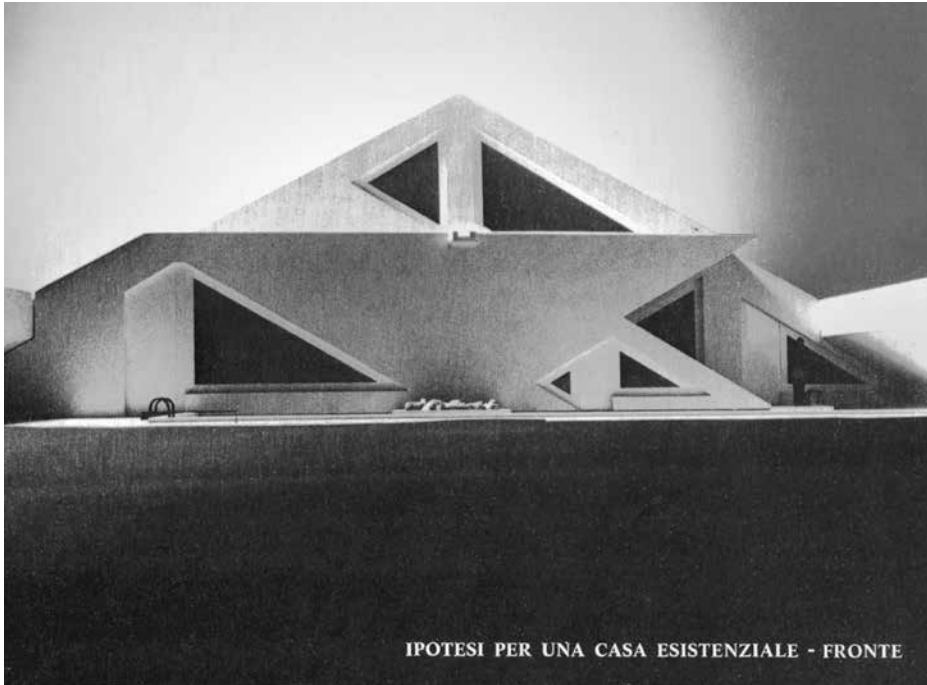


(fig. 4).⁷ It is tempting to compare Parisi's experiences with those carried out by representatives of so-called radical architecture active at the same time. No evidence, however, exists to establish a relationship between his activities and collectives like Archizoom or Superstudio, among others. While the question of their respective differences cannot be dealt with in depth here, it can be suggested that such a divergence lies both in a generational difference, in a distinct ideological approach – Parisi had no relationship with workerism or the sphere of autonomy – and perhaps also in the fact that the epicentre of this tendency was Tuscany.⁸

Anticipating *Operazione Arcevia*, the alliance between architectural planning and contemporary art visible in the *Ipotesi* surpassed the imagination of the housing unit and was also manifest in its exhibition of plans and studies, in the publication of a catalogue and in a public roundtable organised to discuss the piece, first in February 1974 at the Galerie Germain in Paris and then in May at the Istituto Nazionale di Architettura in Rome. On both occasions, Crispolti, De

7 Parisi 1978, pp. 171–185. Another important antecedent that reflects Parisi's attention to the cognitive dimension of architecture and its relationship to a specific environment is the complex comprising the Hotel Corte dei Butteri and the church of Santa Maria dell'Osa in Fonteblanda di Grosseto (1962–1965), where Parisi collaborated with Somaini and the painter Mario Radice, who produced artwork integrated into the architecture.

8 Parisi's work was not included in *Italy. The New Domestic Landscape*, the famous exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1972. On radical architecture, see Celant 1972; *Architettura* 1974; Wolf 2012; Catenacci/Galimberti 2017; Galimberti 2022, pp. 100–149.



4 Ico Parisi, *Ipotesi per una Casa esistenziale*. *Fronte*, n.d. (ca. 1972–1973), from *Operazione Arcevia* 1979, p. 29

Sanna, Restany and Miotto debated Parisi’s unusual project.⁹ Reflecting on the kind of experience the *Ipotesi* intended to provoke, Crispolti observed that the crisis it produced was not so much methodological as semantic, resulting from the conflicting and dissonant relationship between architectural and visual elements coexisting in the same space (Crispolti 1978, p. 12; *Operazione Arcevia*, pp. 10–11). Parisi’s search for productive conflictuality in the field of architecture undoubtedly resonated with an approach Crispolti himself had been willing to implement in exhibitions since the early 1960s, an approach he described with the Marxist-sounding expression of “dialectical relationship.”¹⁰

Among the numerous exhibitions organised by the art historian and critic, the series *Alternative attuali* held at the Castello Spagnolo in L’Aquila between 1962 and 1968 specifically aimed to enable and explore the dialectical relationship between different artistic tendencies, the “alternatives” or “problematic polarities” (Crispolti 1962, p. 11), as well as different generations of artists (Crispolti 1965; Crispolti 1968; Nicoletti 2018). Crispolti described the program of the first edition:

The exhibition is articulated by alternatives, in such a vast problematic arc that it embraces very different, almost contradictory motions. However, it seemed more useful to bring together, in an albeit very broad hypothesis of convergence, different problematic expressions, than to exemplify only these or those of greater affinity. This contrast is intended as an advance warning of the danger of formal or content fetishisation, with consequent monopolistic pretensions, which is far more dangerous – for our current experience – than the opposite possible danger of an exaggerated eclecticism, due to not entirely reasonable concomitances.¹¹

9 See *Ipotesi* 1973. The exhibition at the Galerie Germain in Paris was probably organised with Restany’s mediation. In a letter to Restany from 18 April 1974, Bruno Zevi, director of the Istituto Nazionale di Architettura, specified that he wanted to invite the same participants from the Galerie Germain to the roundtable in Rome; see ACA, Fonds Pierre Restany, PREST.XSIT31/3. See also the invitation card for the presentation at the Istituto Nazionale di Architettura, in ACA, Fonds Pierre Restany, PREST.XSIT31/1.

10 For a complete biography of Crispolti, details of his career and links to his publications, see “Biografia” 2021.



5 Francesco Somaini, illustration for *Urgenza nella Città*, from Crispolti and Somaini, *Urgenza nella città*, Milan 1972, p. 50

This resolutely eclectic perspective refused “the single direction, the single truth, the obligatory and constraining meaning” and favoured the cohabitation of different styles and languages over the defense of a single line of work, defining “alternatives” – “the open dialectic, the result of different possibilities, the range of hypotheses, the fertility of contrasts” – as the most suitable answer to an “infinitely varied, multiple, stratified, refractive” reality.¹²

We can suggest that this intellectual and cultural approach, crystallised into a particular methodology for exhibition, was influenced by Crispolti’s close contact with and interest in post-informal art that accentuated his desire not to close himself off from the multiplicity of artistic expressions that were emerging in Italy and elsewhere in Europe in the 1960s. Crispolti’s singularly eclectic and dialectical approach, first focused on painting and sculpture, would in the 1970s be transposed to the field of cultural cooperation with the use of art as a privileged vehicle for social participation. His interest in non-hegemonic, plural and eventually peripheral artistic expressions was also reflected in his choice to operate in localities outside the orbit of cultural and economic centres such as Rome, Milan or Turin. Crispolti was in fact one of the critics and cultural operators most committed to cultural decentralisation in his time. This commitment was particularly visible in his professional and curatorial trajectory between L’Aquila, Volterra, Gubbio, Salerno and the Campania region in Southern Italy, drawing what Luca

Pietro Nicoletti has described as an “excentric geography”.¹³

Crispolti’s interest in artistic intervention into primarily urban public spaces was also expressed in the publication he realised in collaboration with Somaini. Their 1972 book-manifesto *Urgenza nella città* (Crispolti/Somaini 1972) was the result of a transdisciplinary dialogue that addressed the centrality of the city as a social issue and a battlefield. More than an art critic, Crispolti assumed the role of Somaini’s “cultural collaborator” and “fellow traveller” (*compagno di strada*) to clarify the theoretical foundations of his sculptural projects in the city. The 262-page book was composed by a long and amply documented essay by Crispolti divided into five sections that discussed the place of the city and its instantiations in the context of post-industrial and capitalist societies. The text, which referred to twentieth-century theories of sociology and urbanism, accompanied Somaini’s contrasted black-and-white ink drawings and photomontages (fig. 5) and tackled issues like sculpture “as a vehicle of emotional healing and cognitive stimulation”, the “choral dimension” of the street and “collective self-representa-

11 Crispolti 1962, p. 10: “La mostra si articola per alternative, in un arco problematico molto vasto, tanto da abbracciare mozioni diversissime, quasi contraddittorie. È sembrato tuttavia più utile riunire, in un’ipotesi sia pure molto molto lata di convergenza, espressioni problematiche diverse, che non esemplificare soltanto queste o quelle di maggiore affinità. Questo contrasto vuole essere un preavvertimento del pericolo di feticizzazioni formali o contenutistiche, con conseguenti pretese monopolistiche, ben più pericoloso – per la nostra esperienza attuale – dell’opposto eventuale pericolo d’un eclettismo esagerato, per non del tutto ragionevoli concomitanze.”

12 Crispolti 1965, [n.p.]: “Ed ancora una volta alternative, perché si rifiuta la direzione unica, l’unica verità, il senso obbligatorio e obbligante che sia, e si propone invece la dialettica aperta, l’esito a diverse possibilità, the ventaglio di ipotesi, the fecondità dei contrasti, se la nostra realtà – alla quale queste esplorazioni si applicano – è infinitamente varia, molteplice, stratificata, rifrangente.”

13 Nicoletti (2018) 2019, p. 9. Having started in 1973 as the Chair of History of Medieval and Modern Art, Crispolti was the Chair of History of Contemporary Art at the University of Salerno from 1974 until 1973, when he left for the Scuola di Specializzazione in Siena. For his activities related to Southern Italy, see Crispolti 2019.

tion” through urban intervention.¹⁴ Crispolti observed that Somaini’s *modus operandi* as a sculptor, when confronted with the crisis of the city resolutely “engaged on the human scale”, privileged the “permanence of the city, its non-abolition, its non-dismantling”, and focused instead on its “requalification”.¹⁵ Artistic solicitations thus aimed “to counteract the loss of sociality” caused by “the loss of central meeting places, social spaces and political agency”.¹⁶ These concerns would reappear in the projects related to social participation and intervention into concrete territories and public spaces Crispolti would coordinate between 1974 and 1979, such as Volterra ’73 and the Gubbio Metal and Ceramic Biennials. Unsurprisingly, these experiences, developed in concomitance with *Operazione Arcevia*, made him a particularly valuable contributor for the project.

Three Programmatic Axes

A native of Como, Somaini served as a connecting agent between Crispolti and Parisi and introduced them in the late 1960s (Avanzini 2013, vol.2, p. 14). In common between Somaini’s speculative drawings in *Urgenza nella città* and Parisi’s *Ipotesi* was their condition of a mental operation still underpinned by the ambition to alter the way people envisaged their relationship with a monumental and architectural environment. Both Somaini and Parisi sought to involve the subject actively through visual solicitations, in way that would resonate with the later *Operazione Arcevia*.¹⁷ At the same time, if the three projects shared the same idea of a productive and dialectical conflictuality, *Urgenza nella città* and the *Ipotesi* differed from *Operazione Arcevia* in their scale and their relationship with the environment: they were self-referential and, in a way, fictional projects devoid of concrete connection with the outside world, while *Operazione Arcevia* responded to “territorial, economic, environmental and social realities” that required a work of “permanent verification”, both psychological and critical (Parisi [1976] 1979, p. 28).

14 The many authors mentioned in Crispolti’s text include Alexander Mistcherlich, Henri Lefèbvre, Serge Chermayeff and Christopher Alexander.

15 Crispolti/Somaini 1972, p. 20: “permanenza della città, la sua non abolizione, il suo non smembramento, e invece proprio la sua riqualificazione [...] impegnato a scala urbana.” The English version was published the following year by the same publisher, Mazzotta, under the title *Urban Urgencies. City Projects by Francesco Somaini*; see Crispolti/Somaini 1973. On Somaini’s monumental sculpture, the genesis of his interest in the city and his collaboration with Crispolti, see Esposito 2022.

16 Crispolti/Somaini 1972, p. 43: “La sollecitazione è dunque a contrastare la perdita di socialità, della quale già s’è detto, e che avviene nella perdita di centri d’incontro, di spazi sociali, e di esercizio politico.”

17 Parisi (1976) 1979, p. 28: “The existential house was, in a declared way, a project turning on itself and, as such, it gathered all the elements allowing it to be complete and finished; although hypothetical, it provided a real solution to personal needs that found an echo and reflection in similar human situations, common enough therefore to allow its reading; a mental operation that needed only the verism of the image to give it a dimension, a self-diagnosis and a self-therapy” (“La casa esistenziale era dichiaratamente un’autoprogettazione e come tale disponeva di tutti gli elementi per essere completa e conclusa; era, benché ipotetica, una reale soluzione a necessità personali che trovano echi e riscontri in situazioni umane simili, quindi abbastanza comuni da consentirne la lettura; un’operazione mentale per la quale era sufficiente il verismo dell’immagine per dotarla di una dimensione, una autodiagnosi e una autoterapia”).

18 These three *orditi* were formally defined at the presentation of *Operazione Arcevia* in the framework of the section “Documentazione aperta” at the Venice Biennial in 1976. This anonymous press release was then reproduced and attributed to Parisi in the catalogue of the exhibition dedicated to *Operazione Arcevia*, held at the Galleria Nazionale d’Arte Moderna in Rome from 5 June to 30 July 1979. See Parisi (1976) 1979.

Operazione Arcevia was structured around three programmatic threads (*orditi*) – social, urban and cultural – intended to be developed in parallel or, following the textile metaphor, woven together.¹⁸ The social thread covered the type of community envisaged for Arcevia in accordance with the resources of the territory and the objective of self-sufficiency. Parisi saw the settlement of this new community as a beneficial action that aimed to revitalise Palazzo d’Arcevia and its territory by developing activities related to agriculture and handicraft. The urban thread dealt with the methodology of architectural and artistic intervention. Committed to respecting the topography of the place and maintaining a continuity with the existing landscape and architecture, Parisi opted for a horizontal monostructure: he conceived an urban plan in which the distribution of infrastructures and services spread outwards to the housing from the core of the village occupied by the craft centre and elements of associative life comprising the spatial and symbolic heart of the community. The plan prescribed that the horizontal and democratic spirit of the community and its inner relationships should be reflected in a “continuous and unitary” discourse that eliminated any “single built object”.¹⁹ Parisi, however, did preserve a few “signposts” (*tracce segnale*) with specific characteristics, like the sports and craft centres and the reservoir. The architectural journey was punctuated by “poetic presences”, and this is where the third thread, the cultural, came into play.

Community life could imply the risks of flattening and homogenisation, as commission-member Miotto noted. Artistic interventions into the public space would theoretically prevent this risk through the many creations that would stimulate and enrich the experience of each member of the community (*Operazione Arcevia* 1979, p. 23). Under the auspices of socialisation and collective experience, the cultural thread thus aimed to establish a “visual dialogue [...] that forces the viewer to consider the architecture, the image, the environment as an interactive element”.²⁰ This dialogue intended to “replace the usual commercial pathways with more flexible pathways of circulation connected to the sensibility and affective motivations of the future inhabitants”.²¹

Experienced first at an individual level, artistic interventions should also benefit the whole community and enable the rise of a collective consciousness, without any mediation from elitist cultural institutions:

By distributing poetic presences in both the internal and external pathways of the community throughout the structures of the buildings, the designers aim to restore the public values of art as a collective heritage, in opposition to the treasuring or confining of the work of art in the museum, or in the intent to distance it from these values of ambiguous transcendence in favour of the humble, everyday good.²²

19 Parisi (1976) 1979, p. 31: “Nell’insieme viene cancellata qualsiasi percezione del tradizionale edificio, scompare l’oggetto edilizio singolo, per assumere invece l’aspetto di discorso continuo e unitario in tutte le direzioni e per tutta la durata dei percorsi.”

20 Parisi (1976) 1979, p. 32: “Viene impostato un dialogo visuale che obblighi lo spettatore a considerare l’architettura, l’immagine, l’ambiente come elemento interattivo.”

21 See “Operazione Arcevia. Synthèse de travail (projets et interventions artistiques)”, undated but from before March 1976, in ACA, Fonds Pierre Restany, PREST.XSIT31/8–10, p. 9: “Peintre [*sic*], sculpteurs et musiciens contemporains ont été invités à proposer des solutions particulières qui permettent de substituer aux parcours commerciaux habituels, des axes de circulation plus flexibles et liés à la sensibilité et aux motivations affectives de futurs habitants.”

22 Parisi (1976) 1979, 32: “I progettisti distribuendo le presenze poetiche in tutti i percorsi interni della comunità e in alcuni esterni nelle strutture degli edifici, si propongono il ripristino dei valori pubblici dell’arte come patrimonio collettivo in opposizione alla tesaurizzazione o alla relegazione nel museo dell’opera d’arte o nell’intento di allontanarla da questi valori di ambigua trascendenza in favore del bene umile e quotidiano.”

One of the challenges of *Operazione Arcevia* – and one of its paradoxes – resided precisely in this attempt to balance collective and individual aspirations: while the social, urban and economic planning of the community followed an ideal close to socialist collectivisation, the experience of “existential urbanism” sprung from a conception of art as a source of individual fulfillment, an experience not fully translatable or transferable to the collective.²³

If the promoters of *Operazione Arcevia* proposed art that could be reappropriated by the masses and made to serve the common good, they were still reluctant to definitively abandon the idea of culture as means of intellectual and emotional elevation and escape, the secret of which was guarded by a handful of original creators. Parisi was certainly “convinced of the necessity and possibility of a collectivisation of the work of art at all levels” (ACA, Fonds Pierre Restany, PREST.XSIT31/8–10, p. 9) but we will see that, in practice, *Operazione Arcevia* crystallised a very heterogeneous set of approaches to creation which, in turn, reflected different visions for expressing engagement with the collective and the community while still maintaining an avant-gardist posture.²⁴ One extreme kept the idea of this heritage as a driving force for a social and collective good, while the other privileged above all else the exclusive and disruptive character of artistic gesture as the highly original expression of its individual author.

The Risks of Cultural Colonisation

The numerous transcripts of the preparatory meetings of *Operazione Arcevia* are valuable, not only for illuminating its participants’ different approaches to artistic intervention into a given territory but also for revealing persistent concerns. On 12 and 13 July 1975, all the collaborators gathered for the first time at Palazzo d’Arcevia to survey the site and share thoughts on the project. Their discussions encompassed many topics, including the role of craft and agriculture in the shaping of the community, the transformative potential of art versus active politics and the differences between the model of the modern village and a more traditional model based on agriculture.²⁵ The participants also tackled the complex relationship between avant-garde and craft practices and admitted their limited knowledge of the territory of Arcevia and the living conditions of its inhabitants. As creators invited to confront this unfamiliar context and the inhabitants’ “locational identity”, they had legitimate doubts about the attitude they should adopt.²⁶

According to Restany, artists should have total freedom and “absolute priority” (*assoluta precedenza*) in their creative process (ACA, Fonds Pierre Restany, PREST.XSIT31/26–35, p. 27). Although he readily admitted the “extremist” nature of the conditions of free choice he preconised, he wrote in the following months a text entitled “Arcevia: un appel d’offre à l’imagination” (“Arcevia: a tender to imagination”) in which he continued to defend the primacy of all poetic motivations.²⁷ For him, an existential experience could only be reached

23 On individual and collective needs in socially and politically engaged art from this period, see Galimberti 2017. On the attitude of political and artistic avant-gardes in relation to the masses, see Galimberti 2022, pp. 211–268.

24 ACA, Fonds Pierre Restany, PREST.XSIT31/8–10, p. 9: “Parisi est convaincu de la nécessité et de la possibilité d’une collectivisation de l’œuvre d’art à tous les niveaux.”

25 See also “Débat sur l’Operazione Arcevia, Casa della Gioventù, Palazzo d’Arcevia”, the transcription of the discussion among the participants, dated 12 July 1975, in ACA, Fonds Pierre Restany, PREST.XSIT31/26–35; and in *Operazione Arcevia* 1979, pp. 381–401.

26 On site-specific artistic intervention, its integration in public space and the tensions it generates, see Kwon 2002.

27 See Restany’s handwritten and typed text, the first version of which is dated November 1975, in ACA, Fonds Pierre Restany, PREST.XSIT31/60–69.

through the materialisation of artistic proposals. The artists should therefore receive the unconditional moral and material support of the architect and the sponsor – here, Parisi and Bartoletti, whose position Restany did not hesitate to qualify in the strong terms of *servitude*, meaning “servitude” or “obedience” (ACA, Fonds Pierre Restany, PREST.XSIT31/60–69, p. 67). Following this logic, the architect was at the service of the artist’s poetic idea and should negotiate with the sponsor a socioeconomic pact aimed at preserving “the rigour and the human impact of the project” (PREST.XSIT31/60–69, p. 65).

Restany’s resolutely idealist position conveyed a vision of the artist as a quasi-demiurgic creator, with the art critic accompanying not only as a fellow traveller like Crispolti, but even more as a complementary figure that literally “help[ed] him to be himself” (Ragon 1968, pp. 9–10). This vision had underpinned Restany’s active theorisation and promotion of *nouveau réalisme* since 1960 and, ten years later, it was patently evident in the spectacular and festive demonstration organised in the centre of Milan on the tenth anniversary of the movement.²⁸ While such complicity between critic and artist offered the potential for seamless communication, it also tended to exclude those outside this restricted circle of initiates, countering the goal of social participation. The spectacular character of the anniversary in Milan and its lack of connection with the context was in fact criticised by cultural operators like Crispolti and Luciano Caramel, who observed that “bringing artists to the square” was “not enough [...] to provoke an approximation between aesthetic operators and urban communities”.²⁹

Crispolti, for his part, was convinced that any action for Palazzo d’Arcevia had to be guided by a pursuit of horizontality and a relationship with the “base”. Recalling the complexity of territorial interventions, he warned about the risk of “going as colonisers” and suggested that a dialogue with the local political representatives would allow for more respect for the context and a closer relationship with the grassroots.³⁰ If this kind of operating model was not new, Crispolti recalled, at least this particular resulting experience was. His pragmatic position concerning the role of local authorities was eventually seconded by Restany, who admitted that the metamorphosis promised by the project was primarily the responsibility of the Marche authorities (ACA, Fonds Pierre Restany, PREST.XSIT31/60–69, p. 68).

It is worth considering the recurrent terms “colonisers” and “colonisation” in the context of *Operazione Arcevia* and the meanings attributed to them. In *Arti visive e partecipazione sociale*, Crispolti had also written that “traditional models of cultural management” reflect a “unilateral, parteralistic and, in short, colonialist” form.³¹ Both Crispolti’s references relate less to the annexation of a territory

28 The tenth anniversary of *nouveau réalisme* in Milan was organised by Restany in collaboration with Guido Le Noci, director of the Galleria Apollinaire, and with the participation of the artists Arman, César, Christo, Thierry Dufrêne, Raymond Hains, Martial Raysse, Mimmo Rotella, Niki de Saint Phalle, Daniel Spoerri, Tinguely and Jacques Villeglé. Of these, César and Arman were also involved in *Operazione Arcevia*. See *Les nouveaux réalistes* 1968.

29 Caramel 1971, cited in Di Raddo 2017, p. 11: “Non basta con portare gli artisti in piazza [...] per provocare un avvicinamento tra operatori estetici e collettività urbane.” Caramel had organised the *Campo urbano* event in Como in September 1969, another attempt to realise interventions into urban space. See Tanga 2019, pp. 24–62. On Crispolti’s critique, see Catenacci/Drovandini 2017, p. 279.

30 ACA, Fonds Pierre Restany, PREST.XSIT31/26–35, p. 28: “Questo ci richiama su una situazione di cui è indispensabile prendere atto, cioè il problema di un intervento urbano è molto complicato; il primo scrupolo è di avere un contatto con la base, non andare da colonizzatori, l’operazione che noi conduciamo qui non nasce da un’istanza di base ma di progettazioni elaborate al vertice.” See ACA, Fonds Pierre Restany, PREST.XSIT31/26–35, p. 34.

31 Crispolti 1977, p. 12. The same idea would be formulated in the context of the Venice Biennial, when Crispolti claimed “Dialogo e non dominio culturale, partecipazione e non colonizzazione”; see *Biennale di Venezia* 1976, vol. 1, p. 106.

and its transformation into a European colony than to the imposition of a cultural model based on intellectual and cultural hegemony and perpetuated by a more educated and cultivated population within the same national territory. This type of colonisation also followed a single direction, from the cities to the countryside still considered backward and less developed, with the case of Italy complicated by further discrimination against the South. From this perspective, we can suggest that the claim for cultural decentralisation expressed in projects like *Operazione Arcevia* was part of the struggle against the colonising velleity from the centers, and the injunction against any type of colonising attitude had more to do with the thinking of Italian anthropology around the *questione meridionale* (“Southern Question”) and the marginalisation of people in rural areas than with the critique of European colonialism articulated by North Atlantic academics.³²

Crispolti’s writings on the Gruppo Salerno 75 prove his position regarding the danger of cultural colonisation:

In other words, it is a matter of inventing each time ways and possibilities to solicit and allow the response to be minimally organised, beyond spontaneous immediacy, precisely so that the dialogue deepens and lasts, and leaves a deep mark.

Only in these terms will the operator be truly a co-operator, and not a cultural colonialist. The greatest evil from which the Neapolitan and Campania cultural area has suffered so far has not so much been that of disinformation, but precisely that of information – and avant-garde – imposed unilaterally, from the outside, as a ‘necessity of adaptation’ (on the push of the commonplaces of international or non-avant-garde critics, and the market that uses them); a necessity that could only be received as such – that is, detached from any motivation if not one of abstract cultural elitism – other than by a few apparently ‘enlightened’ and ‘progressive’ bourgeois.³³

Rejecting colonisation implied rejecting cultural models from distant centres of power and their benevolent emissaries. Still, the project for a new existential community in Arcevia needed a roadmap that would develop cooperatively and mind the specificities and needs of the territories concerned, particularly if they were subject to marginalisation.

32 The present study cannot adequately treat the “Southern Question” from its crucial discussion by thinkers like Ernesto Di Martino and Antonio Gramsci to its impact on social and cultural policies in Italy at the time of *Operazione Arcevia*. On recent debates, see Cassano 2011; Chambers 2008. Regarding Crispolti’s involvement in Southern Italy and his transversal reflection on it, see Crispolti 2019; Avanzini 2013, vol. 1, pp. 75–77.

33 Crispolti 1977, p. 207: “Si tratta cioè di inventare ogni volta modi e possibilità di sollecitare e di permettere alla risposta un minimo appunto di organizzazione, oltre l’immediatezza spontanea, proprio perché il dialogo s’approfondisca e duri, lasci un segno profondo. Soltanto in questi termini l’operatore sarà appunto co-operatore, e non colonialista culturale. Il maggior male del quale ha sofferto finora l’area culturale napoletana e campana è stato non tanto quello della disinformazione, ma proprio dell’informazione – e d’avanguardia – imposta unilateralmente, dall’esterno, come ‘necessità d’adeguamento’ (sulla spinta di luoghi comuni della critica d’avanguardia internazionale o meno, e del mercato che se ne serve); necessità che non poteva che essere recepita come tale – cioè disgiunta da qualsiasi motivazione se non di astratta elitaria culturalità – altro che da pochi borghesi apparentemente ‘illuminati’ e ‘progressisti.’” The Gruppo Salerno 75, formed in 1975 by Antonio Davide, Ugo Marano and Giuseppe Rescigno, realised urban and territorial actions including *Errata corrige* and *Gessificare* in Campania and other sites – Gubbio and Venice, among others, on Crispolti’s invitation. They sought both to transcend institutional or traditionally art-related spaces and rely on a close collaboration between co-operators and users (“co-operatori i fruitori”).

Besides the members of the technical commission, the artists were also circumspect about the purposes of *Operazione Arcevia* and several showed skepticism regarding some aspects of the project. Frascà expressed the doubts of the majority when he warned that the operation was “not just a question of inscribing a work of art in a topological situation or in a landscape, but of bringing into play our possibilities of cooperation with craftsmanship, with sociality in a totally new and experimental way.”³⁴ Staccioli echoed Crispolti’s observations on the vertical structure of the project and questioned the viability of an operation based on expensive interventions into a depressed area, born of the demands of an entrepreneur and an artist-architect. He pointed out the danger of altering the balance of the territory posed by letting the theories and speculations of intellectuals and artists run free (ACA, Fonds Pierre Restany, PREST.XSIT31/26–35, p.32). Just like Frascà, Somaini and Trubbiani, Staccioli had been involved in events such as Volterra ’73 and the Gubbio Biennials, experiences that certainly informed his realistic and pragmatic approach.³⁵

The debate also revolved around authenticity, as many of the operators exposed their intention to establish a genuine relationship with the occupants of Palazzo d’Arcevia and their territory. Some, like Nikos and Del Pezzo, sought a better understanding of the psychology of the local population and the future members of the community to adapt their artistic proposal to concrete needs. Of the commission members, Miotto was best qualified to address concerns about the psychosocial balance of this heterogeneous community. A professor at the Università degli Studi di Milano, he was the author of studies on social and work psychology and specialised in propaganda and publicity. For Miotto, the threat of acting as colonisers could be avoided by limiting the number of inhabitants to 600, a number that “automatically neutralises the dangers of any chaotic agglomeration, precisely thanks to the strengthening of the interpersonal networks that can and must develop between the members of the small group.”³⁶ Beyond the consolidation of local ties, Miotto advocated “deprivatisation” as a suitable method for producing common spaces and a local economy based mainly on agriculture and craft. Such a restitution of the common good allowed for greater autonomy and the abolition of all forms of inter-individual competition. At the same time, Miotto carefully avoided terms like collectivisation, probably as any obvious reference to a Soviet-style economy might have scared off local and national entrepreneurs – chief among them Bartoletti, whose undeniable profits

34 ACA, Fonds Pierre Restany, PREST.XSIT31/26–35, p. 28: “Non si tratta soltanto di iscrivere l’opera d’arte in una situazione topologica o in un paesaggio ma di fare intervenire le nostre possibilità di cooperazione con l’artigianato, la socialità, in una maniera completamente nuova e sperimentale.”

35 Among the artists involved in *Operazione Arcevia* who participated in the Gubbio Biennial were Somaini, with a retrospective, and Staccioli in 1973; Emanuele Astengo in 1974; and Dudley, Magnoni, Frascà and Takahashi in 1975. In 1973, Crispolti was entrusted with the artistic coordination of the seventh Gubbio Biennial dedicated to metal, alternating with the Ceramic Biennial. He proposed a new formula moving away from the model of the prize exhibition that had previously characterised the event and continuing the tradition of the *Alternative attuali* in L’Aquila, mixing different artistic trends and generations. Crispolti placed the Biennial in a long-term perspective with a museum that would perennially transform the local social fabric. The 1975 Biennial of Metal also included a proposal for a one-off rehabilitation project (“progetto intervento sperimentale di restaura”) of a local district, with the aim of achieving a “social, patrimonial, monumental” recovery of the historical centre; see *VIII Biennale d’Arte del Metallo* 1975, [n.p.]. On the Gubbio Biennial and discussions around *arte ambientale* with respect to Mirella Bentivoglio’s participation, see Rattalino 2020.

36 *Operazione Arcevia* 1979, p. 22: “Una comunità di seicento abitanti può rappresentare un insediamento che neutralizza automaticamente i pericoli di un qualsiasi agglomerato caotico proprio attraverso il rafforzamento delle reti interpersonali che possono e devono svilupparsi tra i membri del piccolo gruppo.”

from the operation, after recovering the large investment, would hardly compare with shared ownership and the redistribution of wealth.

The number of 600 inhabitants was established as the most suitable for a community, according to the spatial capacities of the territory and the agricultural resources that would allow self-sufficiency. This number was also inspired by the work of René Dubos, a US-based and widely renowned microbiologist who had committed to environmentalism in the late 1960s. Considered a pioneer in thinking about the diminishing resources on the planet and the environmental impact of industrial societies, Dubos found the appropriate size of a social unit to be 500 people. After having experienced “the explosion of urban concentration neurosis and the increase of pollution and epidemics”, humanity would return to this model.³⁷ This idea was complemented by various viability studies commissioned for the occasion that confirmed the applicability of Dubos’s theory to Palazzo d’Arcevia, while also revealing the serious material and economic constraints of *Operazione Arcevia*. A first socioeconomic study based on 600 “residential presences”, half of which were professionally active, and 400 “temporary presences” proposed distributing the active population according to the production needs and disclosed the costs such activities would imply. Professional activities were distributed within the community – 190 jobs of a commercial, service, agricultural, artisanal or educational type – with another 110 outside (*Operazione Arcevia* 1979, pp. 319–322). Another study on agroeconomic data calculated the food requirement and consumption of the estimated population, as well as the agricultural area that would satisfy these needs.³⁸ The conclusions of the socioeconomic study were particularly informative of the difficulties of establishing a truly self-sufficient and horizontal community: the authors, observing that artisanal and agricultural activities alone could not ensure the economic viability of the community, suggested that the residential structures should be occupied by inhabitants with higher incomes who would work outside the community and, therefore, belong to a higher socioeconomic category than the artisans (*Operazione Arcevia* 1979, p. 322). Though *Operazione Arcevia* was developed empirically and evidently teemed with contradictions, the approach that transpired through these studies and their concern to work with the most precise data possible contributed to making it a pioneering enterprise in social ecology in Italy through its reflection on habitability, the equitable redistribution of resources and degrowth, just as these issues were starting to surface and stimulate policy globally.³⁹

Communities and Cultural Cooperation

With its pursuit of rural community life and its close relationship to local craft and agricultural practices, *Operazione Arcevia* may be likened to the model of artist colonies or schools, which emerged in Europe in the nineteenth century and were intimately connected with nature, popular and craft traditions and local cultural identities (Dmitrieva/Laučkaitė 2017). The impetus behind the community-building effort of *Operazione Arcevia*, however, was the result of a decision made not by the totality of participants but, instead, by a single sponsor and an execu-

37 Parisi (1976) 1979, p. 30: “sicuro, secondo la sua teoria, che l’uomo troverà questa dimensione dopo aver visto esplodere la nevrosi della concentrazione urbana e aumentare gli inquinamenti e le epidemie, perché esso ha dato la prova nei millenni di ritrovare la ragione tutte le volte che è in gioco la sua sopravvivenza.” Dubos’s publications include the Pulitzer-winning *So Human an Animal* (Dubos 1968) and, with Barbara Ward, *Only One Earth* (Dubos/Ward 1972), translated into Italian in 1973 (Dubos/Ward 1973).

38 *Operazione Arcevia* 1979, pp. 342–347.

39 *Only One Earth* (Dubos/Ward 1972) was a report commissioned by the General Secretary of the United Nations Conference on Human Environment, realised with the contribution of 152 consultants from fifty-eight countries.

tive commission he appointed. From this perspective, the project for Palazzo d'Arcevia maintained a pyramidal organisation that prevented any true self-management. This dynamic distinguished it as well from the intentional communities or communes fueled by the alternative, hippie and countercultural movements flourishing in the 1960s and 1970s with the intention of escaping the authoritarian and normative regimes of family and church, as well as the controlling structures of the state (Bandini 2016; Serenelli 2009). Such a variety of communitarian experiences must also be contextualised in the post-war reconstruction of Italy, marked by a consumption boom particularly pronounced in domestic space and urban planning. The traditional family model remained the same but was inserted into an increasingly modernised space of living and consuming that generated multiple and often contradictory experiences. Along with an imagination informed by the visual and popular culture of the post-war decades (Bottinelli 2021), these experiences were partly criticised by various projects of collective and communal life as attempts to inculcate an acritical and consumerist culture.

Another aspect of *Operazione Arcevia* deserving further exploration here is its relationship to the cooperative tradition in Italy, a singular phenomenon particularly prevalent in Northern and Central Italy. If the origins of the cooperative movement are usually dated to the mid to late nineteenth century, its deepest roots resided in the mutual-aid associations between workers of the same profession established in the eighteenth century (*Società* 1976, p. 87). These initiatives were characterised by the introduction of a social economy based on solidarity and democratic sharing (Fornasari/Zamagni 1997). The first national body to unite cooperatives was created in 1886, following the first congress of Italian cooperators in Milan. From its initial structure as a federation, the association became the Lega Nazionale delle Cooperative e Mutue in 1893. It was dissolved under Fascism but gained renewed strength afterwards (Zangheri/Galasso/Castronovo 1987).

The Associazione Nazionale della Cooperazione Culturale was founded in 1975 in the framework of the Lega Nazionale with the aim of promoting cooperation in the cultural sectors in response to growing demand from the population. The activity and scope of action of the Associazione were established during its constituent assembly, held on 27 and 28 May 1975:

The Association intends to pursue an open and unitary policy, autonomous from the parties and the government, in which compliance with mutualist principles and the vocation to an authentic cooperative spirit is constant, in the awareness that it is possible and necessary, indeed urgent, to develop a deep mass cultural action in the forms of cooperation, generalising the previous experiences and paying particular attention to the structural difficulties that stand in the way of socio-cultural initiatives in the south of Italy.⁴⁰

Significantly, the programme of the Association emphasised its will to avoid any form of “alternativism” and, therefore, to act in collaboration with the local social and political fabric to influence the conditions of access to and production of culture by the masses and produce a “free and liberating” culture (*libera e liberante*). The organisation openly supported a civil society in an Italian state supported by strong autonomous regions and hoped to establish a dialogue

40 “Documento” (1975) 1976, p. 475: “L’Associazione intende perseguire una politica aperta e unitaria, autonoma dai partiti e dal governo, in cui sia costante la rispondenza ai principi mutualistici e la vocazione ad un autentico spirito cooperativo nella consapevolezza che è possibile e necessario, anzi urgente, sviluppare una profonda azione culturale di massa nelle forme della Cooperazione, generalizzando le esperienze già fatte con una particolare attenzione alle difficoltà strutturali che nel Mezzogiorno si frappongono all’iniziativa socio-culturale.” See also “Statuto” 1976.

with national and regional interlocutors, from the parliament to cultural institutions like RAI and the Biennale di Venezia (“Documento” [1975] 1976, p. 475; fig. 6).

In their search for alternatives to the forms of urban and social planning born of capitalist and post-industrial societies, the promoters of *Operazione Arcevia* similarly sought to work closely with local and national political entities and cultural institutions (Crispoliti 1977, pp. 25–27). Instead of directly criticising the power and institutions in place, they wanted to benefit from a wide cultural and political network. Hardly protest or even antagonism, their action on the territory can be described as affirmative, in that it relied on the introduction of new infrastructures expected to positively impact the demography of the depopulated village by stimulating its socioeconomic development and self-sufficiency. Tourism also factored into the equation and, if this idea suggested an intensive and destructive exploitation of the territory and the production of stereotyped images and products intended to seduce visiting consumers, the form of tourism envisaged in *Operazione Arcevia* relied on a more sustainable scheme that promoted activities related to rural and spiritual tourism, which should enhance local craft production beyond stereotyped artefacts. Still, it is hard to figure how the future population would have coped with the pressing demands of tourism seeking quantifiable rural and spiritual experiences.

The involvement of experts from different fields also contributed to the strategy of legitimising and advertising the operation though conveyed occasionally unclear or ambiguous messages. Relatively consensual was the renowned architect and theorist Bruno Zevi, who had hosted the exhibition dedicated to the *Ipotesi* in Rome and who was asked on several occasions about Parisi’s architectural and urban design for Palazzo d’Arcevia. Together with Bartoletti, Parisi also met with a politician, Giovanni Malagodi, to discuss the modalities of insertion of the craft industry within the community (*Operazione Arcevia* 1979, pp. 351–355). Such a meeting, with the then president of the Italian Liberal Party (PLI), once again reveals the degree to which the political, economic and artistic interests at stake in *Operazione Arcevia* were intertwined, even contradictory.⁴¹ More generally, the will to take affirmative action on a given territory raised not only the threat of cultural colonisation but also the question of the first beneficiaries of this exploitation of local resources, primarily Bartoletti, the entrepreneur behind the project.

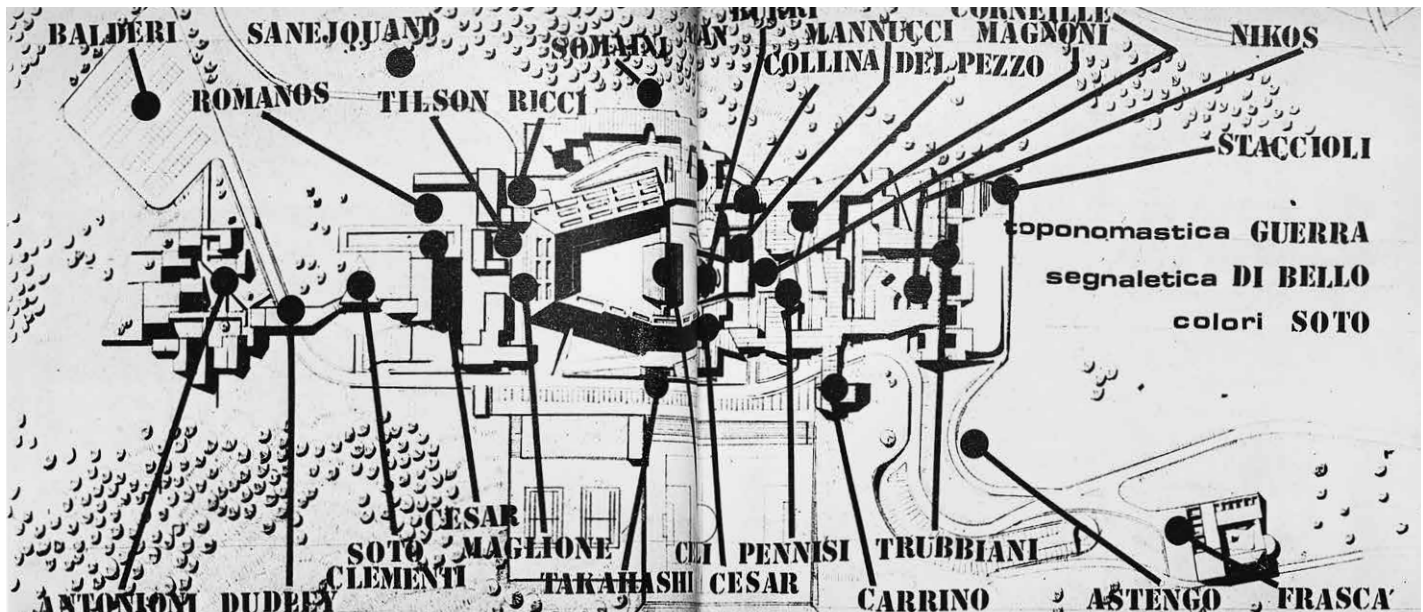
Artistic Solicitations for *Operazione Arcevia*

In his study of Cold War-era poetic communities, Stephen Voyce argues that community “persists as a problematic of central importance” in the practices of post-war poets, “both as experiments in social action and in the invention of

41 The meeting with Malagodi took place in May 1975. Malagodi was a member of the Italian Liberal Party (PLI), a deputy in Parliament starting in 1954 and a senator starting in 1979. He was president of the PLI from 1972 to 1977 and President of the Senate for several months in 1987. He played an important role in the rapprochement of his party with the Cofindustria, the Italian employers’ federation, and served as Minister of the Treasury under Giulio Andreotti (1972–1973), anti-communist and wary of any collaboration with the centre-left, the Italian socialist party. See Orsina 2006.

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<p>Riforma della Rai-Tv Documento del Consorzio Nazionale delle Cooperative Cinematografiche. Data: 20/3/1975 pagina 7</p>	<p>Consiglio Generale Relazione di Enzo Bruno, segretario generale dell'Associazione al Consiglio Generale. Data: 22/3/1976 pagina 21</p>	
<p>La cooperazione teatrale Documento approvato al termine del convegno: “La cooperazione teatrale: teatro pubblico, territorio, qualificazione, drammaturgia.” Parma 13/10/1975 pagina 11</p>	<p>Segnalazioni Iniziativa Rai/Adezioni all'Associazione pagina 26</p>	
<p>Documento delle cooperative teatrali emiliane in merito al convegno di Parma del 13/10/1975. Data: 15/11/1975 pagina 13</p>	<p>Intervento di Aldo De Jaco, membro del Consiglio di Presidenza dell'Associazione, al Consiglio Generale. Data: 22/3/1976 pagina 23</p>	

6 Bollettino dell'Associazione Nazionale della Cooperazione Culturale, no. 1, 1976, from *La società attraente. Cooperazione e cultura nell'Emilia Romagna*, Bologna 1976, p. 474



7 Ico Parisi, plan of Palazzo d'Arcevia with artistic interventions, from *Operazione Arcevia* 1979, pp. 90–91

poetic forms” (Voyce 2013, p. 8). He consequently proposes that the structure of poetic texts needs to be examined in the light of “the emancipatory projects they potentially embody and enact” (Voyce 2013, p. 8). If we apply this question to *Operazione Arcevia*, can we affirm that the artists’ engagement with the social transformation of the given territory was reflected in specific artistic forms and expressions? Can we find an equivalent to what Voyce describes as an “ensemble of agents, locations, techniques, and texts that together come to constitute practices of community” and, thus, a rather homogeneous set of cultural operations (Voyce 2013, p. 20)? And, finally, can the interventions projected for *Operazione Arcevia* be seen as conscious proposals for alternative forms of social existence?

The cultural thread of *Operazione Arcevia* was governed by two principles: the integration of the arts and the collectivisation of the work of art. On one hand, any kind of “abusive monumentality” resulting from the imprint of an all-powerful artist was proscribed. On the other, the collaborators should avoid falling into purely decorative interventions (ACA, Fonds Pierre Restany, PREST. XSIT_{31/8-10}, p. 9). The creative solutions should also include enough flexibility to ensure that future residents have a greater say in the design of their living space (*Operazione Arcevia* 1979, p. 11). The beginnings of this project may recall the Sicilian town of Gibellina, destroyed by an earthquake in 1968 and rebuilt with the help of architects and artists on the initiative of the then communist mayor Ludovico Correa, but the difference lies in the status of the main sponsor, here Bartoletti, and the typology of the contract established with the artists. The interventions at Gibellina were largely motivated by solidarity and emotion in the face of the large-scale disaster. For Palazzo d'Arcevia, artists had a more formal mission, to be fulfilled according to specified criteria (it is unclear whether they were remunerated or not). The involvement of artists like Burri, Staccioli and Nino Franchina in both the reconstruction of Gibellina and *Operazione Arcevia* demonstrates their enduring interest in the general issue of art in a specific territorial and social environment.⁴²

Various themes and methods recur among the artists’ responses to these firm requirements (fig. 7), including the search for a cognitive experience that evolved through time and space and, more generally, the attention paid to senso-

42 On the reconstruction of Gibellina and its aftermath, see Trapani 2013.

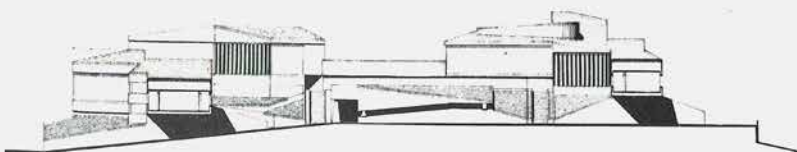
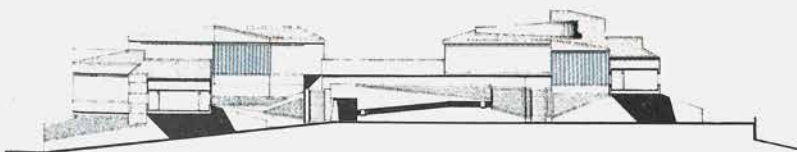
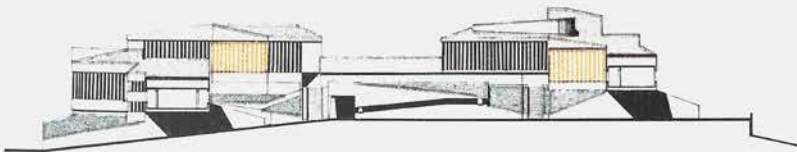
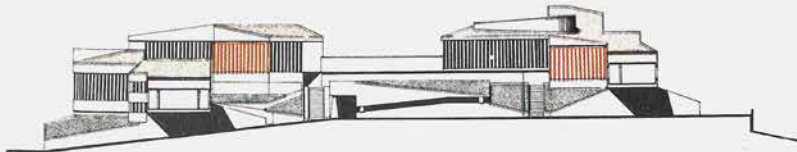
Fronti Nord - Sud



Fronti Est - Ovest

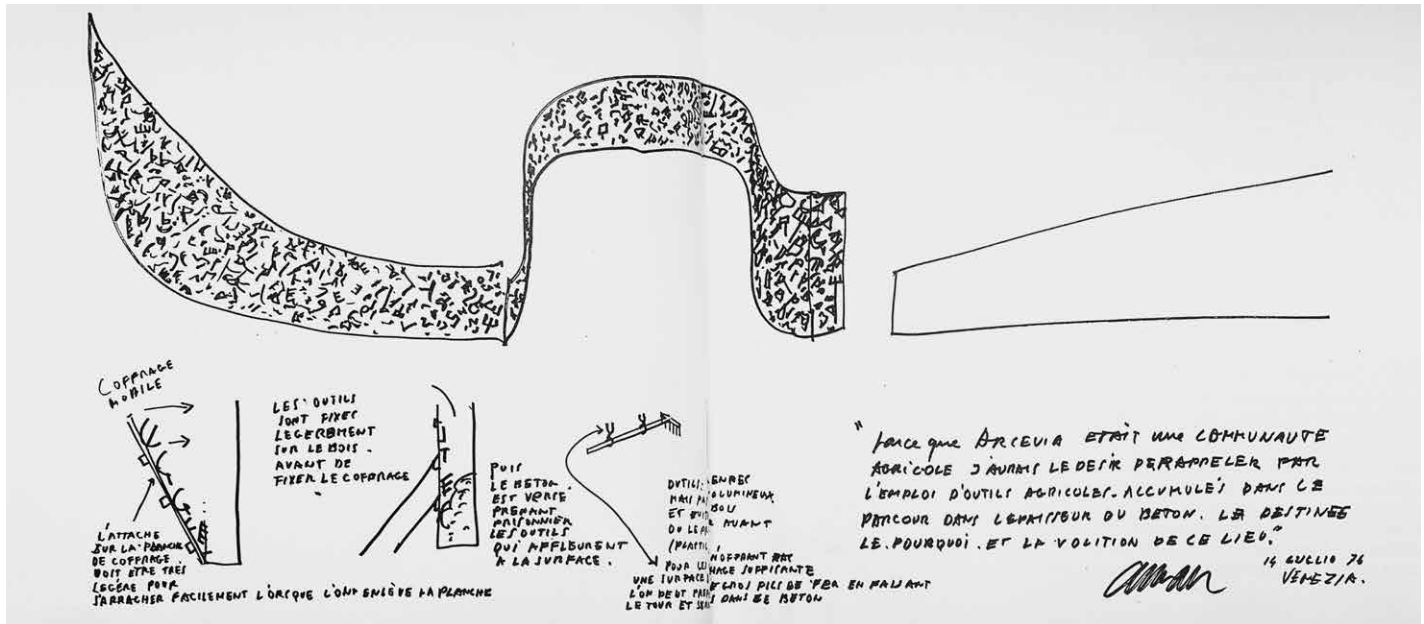


Colori proposti per la comunità. La loro applicazione dovrà essere fatta in maniera di dare la possibilità di variare il colore di tutto il villaggio o di parte di esso secondo scelte collettive.



Esempi di variazioni cromatiche

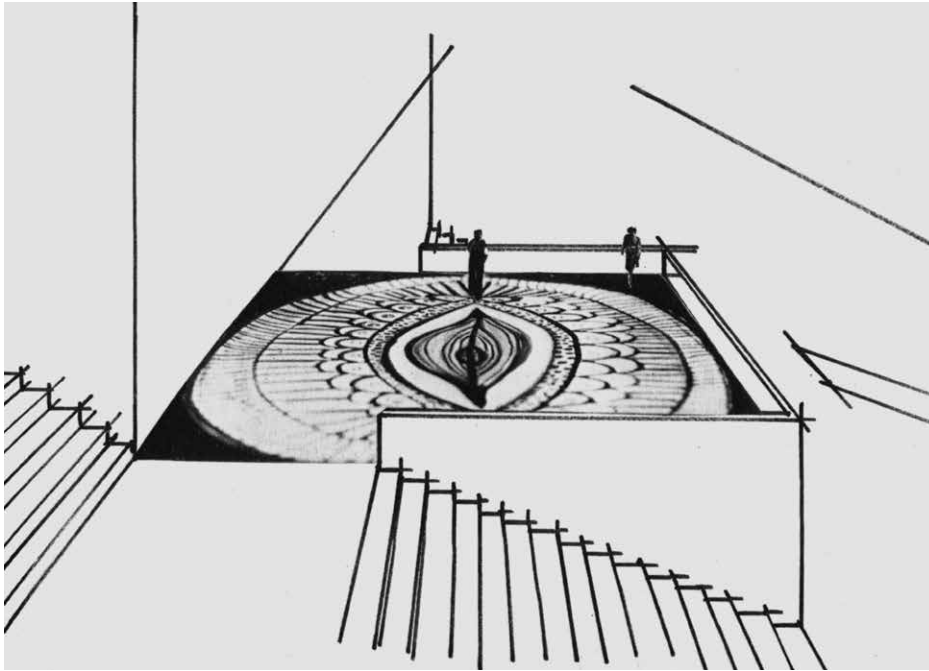
8a, b Jesús Rafael Soto, proposal for *Operazione Arcevia*, 1976, from *Operazione Arcevia* 1979, pp. 250, 252



9 Arman, proposal for *Operazione Arcevia*, 1976, from *Operazione Arcevia* 1979, pp. 100–101

rial perception. In his project for *Operazione Arcevia*, the filmmaker Michelangelo Antonioni designed various covered paths that connected the living area to the car park and acted as “psychological filters”. These spatiotemporal units would alter the user’s perception and rhythm through floor coverings, apertures to elements of landscape and light and walls that changed with the seasons. Invited to work on the secular retreat (*ritiro laico*), the artist and multidisciplinary scenographer Nato Frascà proposed a labyrinthine pathway that symbolically marked visitors’ new condition of isolation and contemplation. He also envisaged a collective room the volumes of which would unexpectedly appear to the guests “like a secret revealed to those who have made a choice”, small gardens in front of each cell that explored the relationship between exterior, interior and landscape (*Operazione Arcevia* 1979, p. 81). The connection to the landscape was also contemplated by the kinetic sculptor Soto, who carried out a photographic survey to document its chromatic variations. His project focused on the façades of the houses, the colours of which would change according to season, weather conditions and the orientation of the houses, as well as through the adjunction of rotating elements (fig. 8). Soto also insisted that the chromatic synthesis of the façades had to be chosen through a participatory process involving the inhabitants.

Other proposals looked at the cultural and historical heritage of the region and incorporated vernacular elements, either objects connected to local history – as with Arman’s cement wall, which incorporated agricultural tools on its surface in order to evoke the pre-existing community of Arcevia and its future (fig. 9) – or local materials, as in the *Progetto per una piazza pubblica* Corneille initially formulated in 1955 in ceramics before opting for marble and coloured cement. The square would have consisted of a circular space lined with pink marble, with elements in relief that refer in turn to a flower, a mirror and a female sex (fig. 10). *Seminare l’uomo e i suoi oggetti* was conceived by the sculptor and ceramist Emanuele Astengo as a series of episodes articulated around the notion of “circulating” (*transitare*) and its multiple meanings. From a first series of casts of people and objects connected to the local crafts and agriculture of Arcevia, he would fabricate positives in terracotta and place or “sow” them in furrows dug into the ground. Astengo insisted on the social and existential significance of his project:



10 Corneille, *Progetto per una piazza pubblica*, 1955–1976, from *Operazione Arcevia* 1979, pp. 164–165

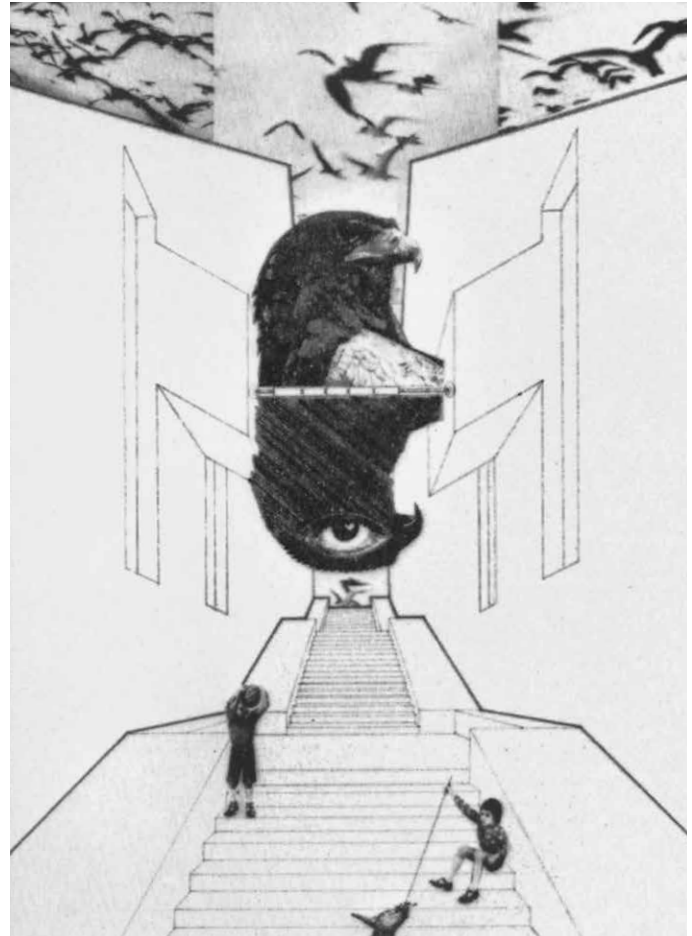
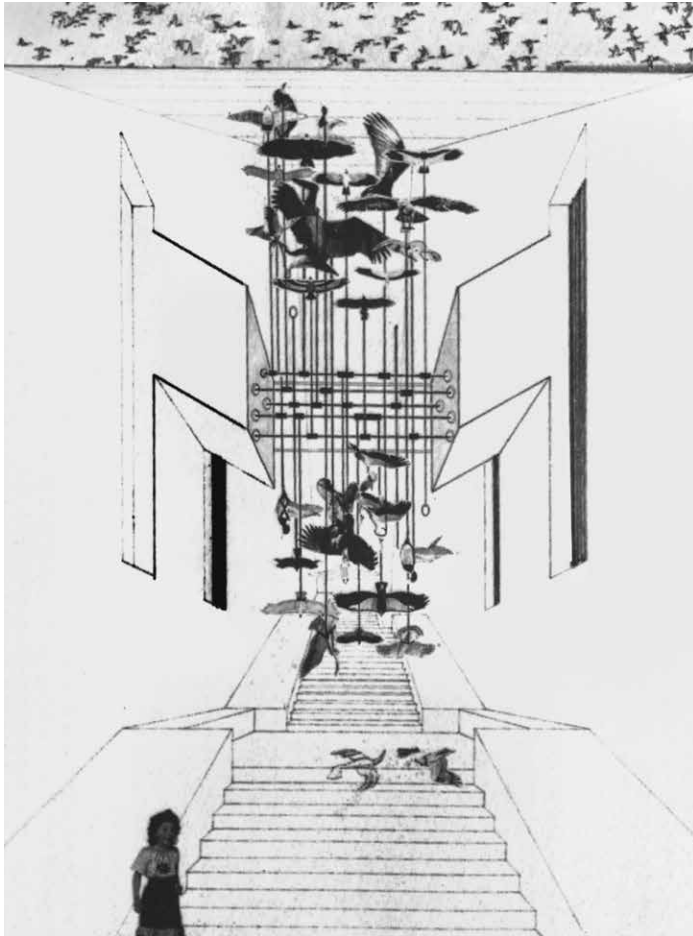
It will thus be possible to initiate a process of shifting attention to more complex functions and conditions, facilitating a qualitative leap from a distracted, standardised and therefore degraded human condition, both in an urban and in a less urbanised context, equally subject to dehumanising attacks.⁴³

He conceived his intervention as a counterproposal or humanist alternative to a society suffocated by consumption and automatised work and social relations.

Several other projects convoked the landscape and the urban space as scenographic elements in dialogic exchanges. The scenic space designed by Burri was a real sculpture-stage, created with reinforced cement arches that highlighted the landscape in the background in the manner of Greek amphitheatres opening onto spectacular natural backgrounds. Staccioli imagined a sculptural-architectural element of concrete terminating in a sharp point like a foreign body permanently provoking its peaceful surroundings. Playing with the narrowness of the existing historical streets, Trubbiani's mobile sculptures of birds recalled his previous contribution to Volterra '73 and generated surprise, an effect that would likely be coupled with a more ominous feeling when inhabitants were faced with these obscure birds (figs. 11 a–11 b). A similar if more ironic spirit of theatricality ran through Dudley's anthropomorphic sculptures, mostly female, intended to be set in a bridge house as if they were trapped in the architecture. Still, the most enigmatic and poetic proposal was probably Somaini's *Antropoammonite*, a sculpture seemingly close to a human fossil. This mobile artefact would roll away from the medieval city walls and leave traces in its wake, in the manner of a "continuous bas-relief; a memory, a bodily imprint sinks and melts into the earth, the landscape" (fig. 12).⁴⁴

43 *Operazione Arcevia* 1979, p. 105: "Sarà così possibile avviare un processo di ribaltamento dell'attenzione su funzioni e condizioni più complesse rendendo più possibile una volontà di salto di qualità rispetto ad una condizione umana disattenta, massificata e per tanto degradata sia in un contesto urbano che in uno meno urbanizzato, ma non per questo meno sottoposto ad attacchi di tipo disumanizzante."

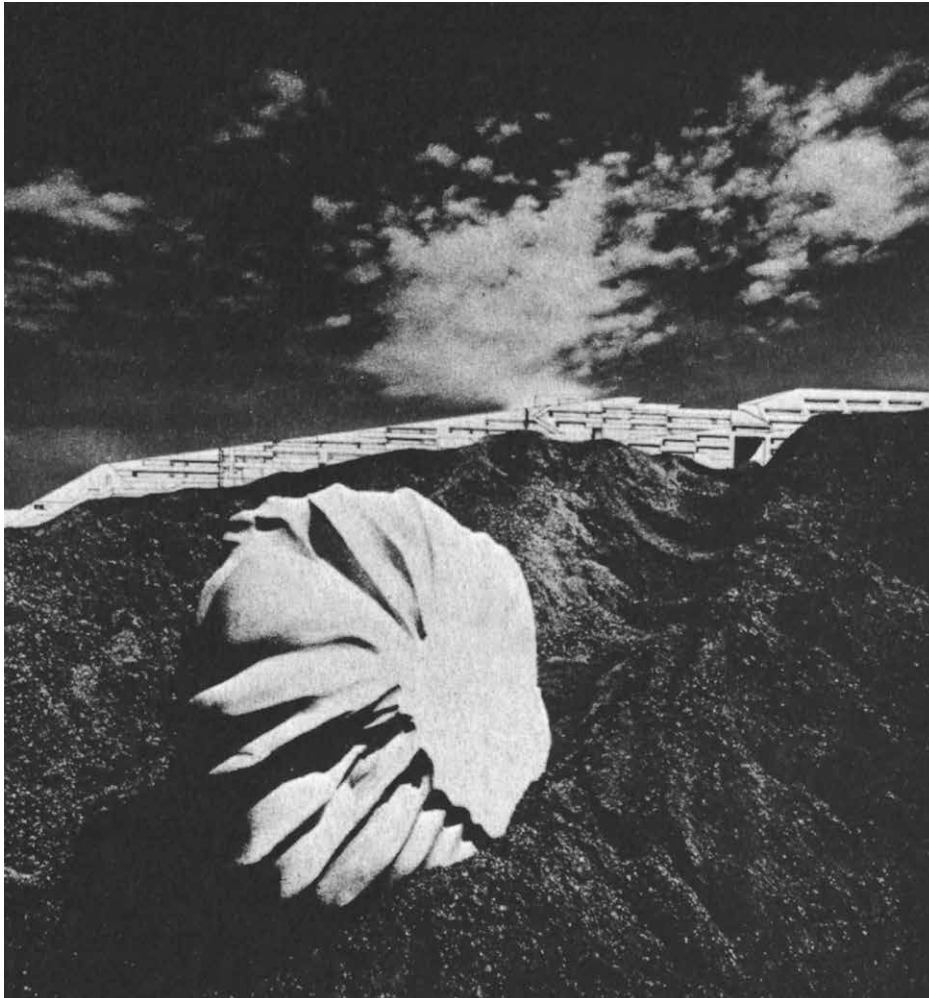
44 *Operazione Arcevia* 1979, p. 239: "un bassorilievo continuo; una memoria, una impronta corporea affonda e si fonde alla terra, al paesaggio." The *Antropoammonite*, never realised in Arcevia, was reworked by Somaini in several sculptural pieces between 1977 and 1980.



11a, 11b Valeriano Trubbiani, *Intervento 1* and *Intervento 2*, n.d., from *Operazione Arcevia* 1979, pp. 277, 279

Media and new technologies, though a minority in the *Operazione Arcevia* proposals, were integrated by Nikos and Ricci. Nikos planned to occupy a street with a three-dimensional anamorphosis created through the superimposition of projected images. The images perceived by the spectators could be abstract or figurative depending on their vantage. Nikos wanted the subject and colour of the anamorphosis chosen collectively, with Miotto's professional advice on the psychological implications. Ricci's technological proposal consisted of spectacular Multivision projections on various supports (walls, gardens) that would animate the spaces. Ricci, who had successfully experimented with the Multivision system in an installation at the Rotonda della Besana in Milan in 1975, would use it again at the 1976 Venice Biennial, for the scenography of the Italian section "Ambiente come sociale".

Nothing escaped the interventionist fever in Palazzo d'Arcevia, not even the names and signs of the streets (by Di Bello) or the organisation of the cemetery (by Guerra). Deeply eclectic, the whole set of creative proposals resisted any association with the style of a particular movement and this heterogeneity contributed to the richness of *Operazione Arcevia*. Parisi warned against interventions that merely enlarged a work of art for the public space and were contrary to the spirit of the project, insofar as they formed a "recognisable presence" without allowing for a true involvement or *coinvolgimento* (Parisi 1978, p. 35). But he also recognised that, for artists accustomed to smaller sizes in painting and sculpture, shifting to the larger scale of architecture and urban planning entailed some difficulty. César's two giant sculptures, a gigantic thumb and a phallic cast that served as architectural support to the roof of the gymnasium, are telling examples of such an approach to monumentality, which also reveals the challenge faced by certain aesthetic operators in prioritising the interests of the community over their own "mark" or artistic identity. César was not alone: the



12 Francesco Somaini, *Antropoammonite*, 1976, from *Operazione Arcevia* 1979, p. 244

issue of sculpture in public space highlights this problem with the elusive balance between the artists' creative mark and the territorial requirements. Yet these "recognisable" works could have presumably conferred additional value to the project by attracting visitors interested in discovering interventions by important names.

Other projects expressed scientific approaches through different systems and calculation methods. Magnoni's intervention into a public square took the form of a minimal play of shapes and colours on the ground, following mathematical calculations of the dimensions of the site. Invited to create a "sound presence", contemporary musicians Francesco Pennisi and Vittorio Consoli designed a staircase that connected two levels. Its thirty steps built a musical system through surfaces of determined and undetermined sounds and silences. Pennisi made a distinction between raw sound ("suono grezzo") and organised sound ("suono organizzato") and evoked the specific sonority of Palazzo d'Arcevia, its "global timbre" the sum of the sounds present on site, including human and animal voices, sounds of footsteps and human work and activities. His considerations around the "responsibility of raw sound" in Arcevia constitute a rare and therefore valuable example of reflection on the sound identity of a site in the context of public artistic interventions from this period (*Operazione Arcevia* 1979, pp. 357–360). Finally, Balderi, in his pursuit of an effective way to integrate the car park into the landscape and remove it from view – the park was located outside the city walls, with cars forbidden inside – collaborated with Herman De Wolde, a mathematician. After they identified the volume that could better accommodate a vehicle, in this case an egg, they employed a special computer program used to generate shapes and developed two modules: Parking Flower and Parking Big Flower.



13 Ico Parisi, *Operazione Arcevia Comunità Esistenziale - Eugenio Baldieri, Azione-collocamento di un uovo nel futuro centro della Comunità*, 18 January 1976. Pinacoteca Civica di Como, Fondo Ico Parisi, AP32F314 (photo Pinacoteca Civica di Como)

When all the participants met in Arcevia, in July 1975, Baldieri placed a 1.5m-tall fiberglass prototype egg on the site of the future village, as an expression of “hope for the beginning of a journey towards more advanced social balances” (fig. 13).⁴⁵

While most of the projects for Palazzo d’Arcevia had a strong material and sculptural dimension, the artists also frequently referred to symbolic or metaphorical elements, which reflected their awareness of and sensitivity to the idea of participating in a process of territorial and social transformation. In addition to Baldieri, Carrino explored the idea of a “transformable architecture as an indispensable hypothesis for a collective architecture”, with iron modules that could be assembled in different configurations. Ceroli’s large wooden staircase with a triangular section aimed to connect the craft centre and the square for performing arts, metaphorically “the worlds of work and culture”. Romanos worked on a path that connected the nursery school and the cultural centre, including elements somewhere between sculptures and toys, either fixed or mobile and transformable. Conceived as a dialectical space between two places, this promenade would contribute to the formation of a “new, free and creative man, as we want the population of the ‘Palazzo d’Arcevia’ community to be”.⁴⁶

It is striking, however, that the expression of this social concern stayed circumscribed within the field of monumental, sculptural or plastic works. Despite the participants’ recurrent interest in greater interaction with the local population, nothing like a sociological survey or a documentary project was ever proposed. In this regard, Palazzo d’Arcevia and its region were not envisaged as a field for socioethnographic artistic exploration nor as a space that could be activated

45 *Operazione Arcevia* 1979, p. 115: “auspicio per l’inizio di un viaggio verso equilibri social più avanzati.”

46 *Operazione Arcevia* 1979, p. 230: “nuovo, libero e creatore come noi vogliamo sia la popolazione della comunità ‘Palazzo d’Arcevia.’”

through cultural action as with the French *action culturelle*, durably connected with processes of cultural decentralisation across the Alps (Gaudibert 1972). The preliminary investigations carried out by participants like Soto, Parisi, Corneille and Sannejouand served above all to fuel their plastic interventions. This focus on material intervention was also radically different from other initiatives carried out in the same years, which involved surveys and information-gathering from different populations. Significant examples of this approach were *Operazione Roma Eterna*, launched in 1974 in Rome under the aegis of Crispolti with the aim to “act with its inhabitants to initiate processes of investigation that are ‘cognitive’ (exploration and knowledge of places and their inhabitants) and ‘emancipatory’ (capable of activating, on the basis of this knowledge, proposals for autonomous action)” (Catenacci/Drovandini 2017, p. 277), or the audiovisual survey carried out by the Environmedia group on Giudecca island in Venice in 1975.⁴⁷ Was sociological enthusiasm hindered by the rural context and the depopulation of Arcevia? The urban context where other socioartistic investigations often took place may suggest the difficulty of executing social actions in a rural area, especially when the collaborators had no personal connection with the site or could not reach it easily. Moreover, the origin of *Operazione Arcevia* and its main purpose, centred primarily on urban and architectural revivification, may have restrained this sociological trend, as artists were asked to propose a plastic presence.

Strategies of Mediation and Self-Representation in *Operazione Arcevia*

In parallel with the creation process, the members of the technical commission carefully orchestrated a campaign aimed at publicising *Operazione Arcevia* in the media and among a targeted public (ACA, Fonds Pierre Restany, PREST.XSIT 31/8–10, p. 10). The first presentation took place in October 1974 in Palazzo d’Arcevia before a gathering of politicians from the Marche. In the autumn of 1975, the commission started working on an information bulletin (*Notiziario*) that would be presented to the public on 18 January 1976 in Palazzo d’Arcevia. The systematic and organised nature of this public projection distinguishes *Operazione Arcevia* from contemporaneous collective or community experiences less concerned with – even opposed to – media coverage and the production of derivative informational material.

The strategy of dissemination for *Operazione Arcevia* was clearly defined:

This material, comprising models on different scales, sketches, studies, and various materials related to the different interventions, as well as written and iconographic documentation of the various phases of discussion of the project in all its aspects, will be subject to an information process that will be implemented both through travelling exhibitions in Europe (and possibly beyond) in museums or primary cultural institutions, and through a publication, a volume that will gather all this material, giving almost equal importance to both the iconographic apparatus and the documentation of texts.⁴⁸

47 Catenacci/Drovandini 2017, p. 277: “Lo scopo della manifestazione non era abbellire o decorare la città, quanto agire insieme ai suoi abitanti per avviare dei processi d’indagine ‘conoscitiva’ (di esplorazione e conoscenza dei luoghi e dei loro residenti) e ‘emancipativi’ (capaci di attivare, da questa conoscenza, delle proposte autonome di azione).” See also Gallo 2017, p. 32.

48 See Crispolti’s remarks, dated December 1974, in *Operazione Arcevia* 1979, p. 328: “Questo materiale, articolato in plastici a scala diversa, in bozzetti, studi, e materiali diversi relativi ai vari interventi, in documentazione scritta e iconografica delle diverse fasi di discussione della progettazione in tutti i suoi aspetti, sarà oggetto di un processo di informazione da attuare sia attraverso mostre itineranti in Europa (ed eventualmente anche oltre) a livello di Musei o comunque di istituzioni culturali primarie, e in una pubblicazione, un volume che

14 Ico Parisi, *Operazione Arcevia Comunità Esistenziale – Riunione della Commissione Tecnica – Como*, 19 April 1974. Clockwise from left: Pierre Restany, Ico Parisi, Mauro Di Salvo, Enrico Crispolti, Alberto Miotto. From behind, Italo Bartoletti. Pinacoteca Civica di Como, Fondo Ico Parisi, AP32C1N25 (photo Pinacoteca Civica di Como)



The commission also agreed on the production of a film documenting the operation, to be shown at art film festivals. This project directed by the gallery-owner and filmmaker Gabriella Bairo Puccetti was ultimately not realised.⁴⁹ For the publication, several formats were contemplated, including a book in Italian with a pedagogical approach, an official catalogue in three languages and a “luxury edition” including artists’ proofs and original contributions.⁵⁰

We can hardly ignore the contradiction between this carefully orchestrated media campaign, based on an aura of exclusivity that primarily addressed a public of educated individuals and collectors, and the democratic and collectivist intentions claimed by the project initiators and participants as well as their concern for communicating with the grassroots. Beyond this consistent paradox, the persistent efforts to document and communicate *Operazione Arcevia* in real time were indicative of its initiators’ desire for self-representation and their concern to keep track of the process. In this respect, Parisi’s comprehensive photographic record of the operation presents a valuable opportunity to not only see behind the scenes but also analyse the visual staging of the operation and, through it, identify the stakes or desired effects of these images.⁵¹ For Parisi, a photograph was “capable, by spontaneous and unconscious reaction, of giving rise to a series of secret counter-images.”⁵² These images and their composition indeed reveal forms of social organisation and hierarchies not always perceptible in the notes of intent for the project. This visual testimony also evidences the very reduced presence of women in this undertaking.

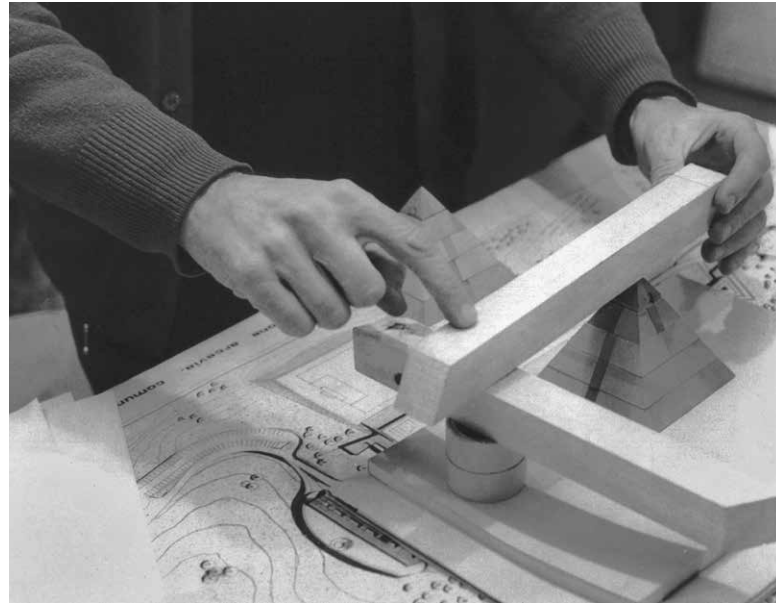
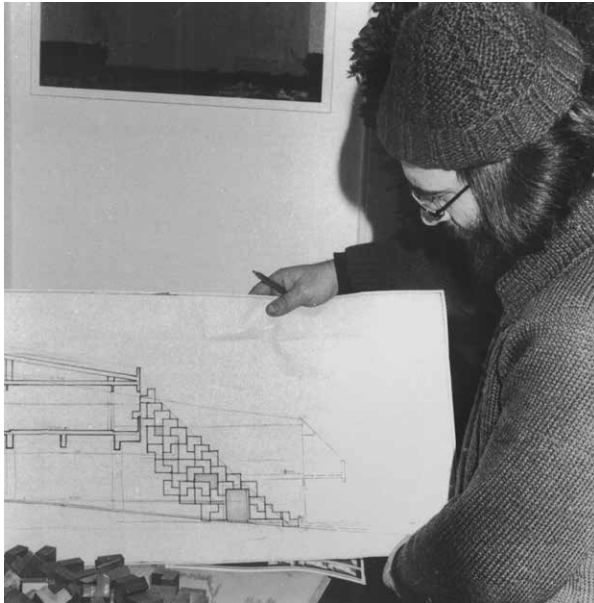
raccolga tutto questo materiale, dando rilievo quasi paritetico sia all’apparato iconografico, sia alla documentazione di testi.”

49 Bairo Puccetti founded the Motifs Art Gallery in Rapallo in the 1960s. A filmmaker, she was also president of the Centro Internazionale per il Film d’Arte e Sperimentale.

50 See the undated and untitled handwritten notes, unattributed but presumably by Restany, in ACA, Fonds Pierre Restany, PREST.XSIT31/16. The only publication resulting from the project was the catalogue of the exhibition held in 1979 at the Galleria Nazionale d’Arte Moderna in Rome, which assembled valuable documents and testimony.

51 Parisi’s photographic collection is kept in the Archivio Ico Parisi at the Pinacoteca Civica di Palazzo Volpi in Como. Parisi took all of them himself, except for those unattributed photographs in which he appears.

52 Parisi 1978, p. 100: “[una fotografia] è capace, per reazione spontanea ed inconscia, di sollecitare una serie di controimmagini segrete.”



Parisi's photographs can be divided into three main axes with a particular focus: the technical commission at work, the preparatory meetings with the artists at their homes or studios, and finally, the collegial event that brought all the collaborators together in Palazzo d'Arcevia in July 1975. The images of meetings and working sessions of the technical commission reflect the implicit pyramidal hierarchy of *Operazione Arcevia*. One in particular confirms the central role played by Bartoletti, photographed from behind as he presides over the table where the committee sits. This typical pose, reminiscent of corporate imagery, provides a visual counterpart to the internal organisation of the operation, insisting on the promoter-entrepreneur's authoritative status as "boss" (fig. 14).⁵³ Beyond his financial support that ensured the economic viability of the project, Bartoletti was actively involved in the operation and regularly interrupted the operators' fanciful drifts by reminding them that their primary task was "to objectively evaluate the different possibilities and their true usefulness, both culturally and economically."⁵⁴

Also striving to document the operation in real time, the second group of images depicts the creative process of the artist-collaborators. They are portrayed in their studios or homes, either absorbed in the study of plans, with pencil or brush in hand, or showing and discussing their progress with commission members (figs. 15–16). By focusing on the artist at work, the photographs insisted on the importance of the creative process and its dialogical, collective dimension. At the same time, it is as if Parisi had anticipated the abandonment of *Operazione Arcevia* and sought to compensate for this failure by preserving visual evidence of the attempt. This evidence would, in fact, find strategic display in later exhibitions and publications.

The third group of photographs documents the collaborators meeting in Palazzo d'Arcevia on 12 and 13 July 1975 and performing different activities. Some show the merry band exploring the village and its surroundings with evi-

15 Ico Parisi, *Operazione Arcevia Comunità Esistenziale – Incontro con Nicola Carrino*, 7 January 1976. Pinacoteca Civica di Como, Fondo Ico Parisi, AP32F292 (photo Pinacoteca Civica di Como)

16 Ico Parisi, *Operazione Arcevia Comunità Esistenziale – Incontro con Lucio Del Pezzo e Milvia Maglione – Parigi (Lucio Del Pezzo. Modello dell'intervento dell'artista presso la Comunità Esistenziale)*, 31 January 1976. Pinacoteca Civica di Como, Fondo Ico Parisi, AP32F325 (photo Pinacoteca Civica di Como)

53 Bartoletti's philanthropic action is highlighted in his biography published in 1979; see *Operazione Arcevia* 1979, pp. 16–17. There, it is stated that Italo Bartoletti & c. Costruzioni s.a.s. had collaborated with the provincial administrations of Ancona and Ravenna for the construction of roads, allowing for financing at no additional cost. The company also started operating abroad in the 1970s, particularly in Nigeria, where it set up a local branch in 1972. More politically, Bartoletti participated in a meeting about the model of the Popular Union in Chile, organised in 1972 by the working group on Latin America at the Istituto per lo Studio della Società Contemporanea founded in Rome by Lelio Basso, a socialist politician and deputy close to the minority; see Mulas 2005, p. 173.

17 Ico Parisi, *Operazione Arcevia*
Comunità Esistenziale – Ricognizione sul
territorio e riunione dei collaboratori –
Palazzo d'Arcevia, 12 July 1975. Pinacoteca
Civica di Como, Fondo Ico Parisi, AP32F119
(photo Pinacoteca Civica di Como)



dent pleasure, in a manner more akin to a bucolic stroll with friends than a field study aimed at preparing an *in situ* intervention (figs. 17–18). Besides the artistic and social challenge *Operazione Arcevia* represented for its collaborators, the project also provided an unusual sensorial and sensual experience in a natural environment that was undoubtedly perceived as exotic for many participants. The pastoral euphoria that emanates from these photos recalls other initiatives involving Restany that were developed in the Czechoslovakian countryside in the early 1970s. In particular, ephemeral events conceived by artists like Alex Mlynárčik and Jana Želibská as collective celebrations of natural and human cycles in which the local population was actively involved.⁵⁵

If Parisi saw photography as a catalyst for “secret counter-images”, as mentioned above, one such counter-image that emerges from these snapshots of artists and collaborators happily surveying the area is the absence of the local population. The photographs crudely reveal that socialisation with the locals, although central to the artists’ concerns, was still lacking. From the outset, a deep divide separated the lives and concerns of the participants in *Operazione Arcevia* from the occupants and future occupants, who remained invisible. One crucial question raised by the project was thus whether communities as distant as avant-garde artists, craftworkers and farmers could really coexist. Despite the goodwill and progressive forces of the creative community, the capacity for artisans and locals to themselves envisage the transformation of their own living and working places was hardly considered. The previous experience of Volterra ’73, which aimed for collaboration between artists and local craftworkers working with alabaster, had already shown the difficulty both professions had understanding the other due to different economic circumstances and priorities in their production process.⁵⁶

54 *Operazione Arcevia* 1979, p. 291: “Il vostro compito è quello di valutare con obiettività le varie possibilità e le loro reali utilità sia sul piano culturale sia su quello economico.”

55 Želibská set *The Betrothal of Spring* in Dolné Orešany in 1971, while *Eva’s Wedding* took place in Žilina in 1972 on Mlynárčik’s initiative. See Bátorová 2019, pp. 19–68.

56 Looking back on the Volterra experience, Crispolti observed that the question of craftsmanship was primarily an economic problem, that the difficulty laid in the lack of economic support from institutions for craftworkers who were required to modernise their work, while traditional craft production in historical centres like Volterra actually flourished thanks to tourism and the “souvenir” industry and was even exported abroad. See Avanzini 2013, vol. 2, p. 30. I would like to thank Luca Avanzini for sharing his dissertation (Avanzini 2013) and his rich interview with Crispolti, still unpublished.



Autoarchitettura on Photographic Records, Architecture and Gender Distribution

Photography for *Operazione Arcevia* was not new to Parisi, who had been integrating it into his professional and personal activities since the 1930s.⁵⁷ *Ipotesi per una casa esistenziale* and *Operazione Arcevia* differed from these projects, however, as photography became part of the working process, with Parisi retouching and altering images to incorporate visual and structural elements related to his designs. Photography was also, for *Operazione Arcevia*, a means of capturing – literally, holding captive – the environment and its constitutive elements to subject them to the projectual vision of the architect-urbanist. Such capturing resembles what Susan Sontag understood as “acquisition”.⁵⁸ By highlighting the power of the photograph over the photographed subject – whether a landscape, a built environment or a person – Sontag’s thinking has been fundamental in addressing the control exercised through the camera and the violence this control might entail.⁵⁹

The theories regarding photography as an exercise of visual capturing and appropriation cannot be adequately revisited here, however, a series of photo-

18 Ico Parisi, *Operazione Arcevia* Comunità Esistenziale – Ricognizione sul territorio e riunione dei collaboratori – Palazzo d’Arcevia, 12 July 1975. Pinacoteca Civica di Como, Fondo Ico Parisi, AP32F134 (photo Pinacoteca Civica di Como)

57 Among other photographic works, Parisi was commissioned in 1936 by *Quadrante* magazine to photograph the Casa del Fascio and, in 1937, he documented the colonial exhibition held at Villa Olmo, also in Como. See Parisi 1978, pp. 99–100.

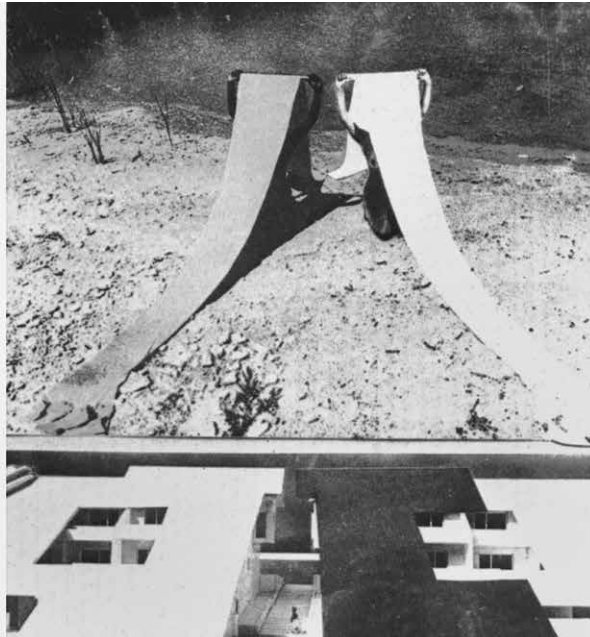
58 Sontag (1973) 2005, 120. Sontag identifies categories of acquisition in photography: “surrogate possession of a cherished person or thing” that establishes a “consumer’s relation to events”, whether truly experienced or not, and the way through which “something becomes part of a system of information.” See also Sontag (1973) 2005, p. 121.

59 Sontag (1973) 2005. On photography and modernity in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Italy and the use of photography from a social perspective, see *Stillness* 2014.



19 Ico Parisi, *Operazione Arcevia Comunità Esistenziale - Autoarchitettura (performance) - Fatima - Ritiro Laico - Palazzo d'Arcevia*, 25 July 1974. Pinacoteca Civica di Como, Fondo Ico Parisi, AP32F417 (photo Pinacoteca Civica di Como)

graphs taken by Parisi in various locations in and around Palazzo d'Arcevia on 25 July 1974 can be related to these issues, especially with respect to gender. In them, we see a young woman wearing a dress made of long strips of white cloth. As she moves around and explores the village and its surroundings, the strips rearrange in different three-dimensional configurations, like a refuge suit or a combinable architectural module. In the last photographs, the woman appears naked under a wide white strip which, by presenting a sloping plane, acts as a protective roof in the harsh sunlight (fig. 19). The performance, entitled *Autoarchitettura*, echoed Parisi's ideas on habitability already present in the multiple configurations of his *Contenitori umani*, which had explored the relationship between the human body and a modular environment. Coupled with a photographic survey of the landscape and local architectural typologies, this "environmental reading" (*lettura ambientale*) through the body of the model and her clothing units led Parisi to architectural solutions that played with inclined



20 Ico Parisi, ricerche di soluzioni architettoniche sul posto, from *Operazione Arcevia* 1979, p. 45

planes and alternated light and shadow.⁶⁰ He then reworked the photographs taken that day in Palazzo d'Arcevia to highlight the luminous contrasts and striking reliefs of the land, which he reinterpreted when integrating them into his own architectural and urban plan (figs. 20–21). From this perspective, *Autoarchitettura* was thus a preliminary anthropomorphic stage in the architect's reflection on fitting his work into the territory.

The action, whose photographic documentation was exhibited at the 1976 Venice Biennial, was described as a “transformation of dress into living space” and its performer identified as “the young Fatima.”⁶¹ While Fatima's name was mentioned in Parisi's original photographs, she remained anonymous when the images of the performance were used for communication purposes, as with the catalogue published in 1979. The obscure conditions under which the action was performed prevents ascertaining whether she was a model hired and directed by Parisi or a genuine artistic collaborator but this unique action indirectly highlights the paucity of women involved in the project. Out of thirty-three artists, only two were women: Maglione and Romanos, who both lived in France and were close to Restany's circle. Maglione was the partner of Del Pezzo, also involved in *Operazione Arcevia*. De Sanna had been invited to the commission but apparently declined, while Bairo Puccetti, whose film contributed to the documentation and communication of *Operazione Arcevia*, also gradually disappeared from the project.⁶²

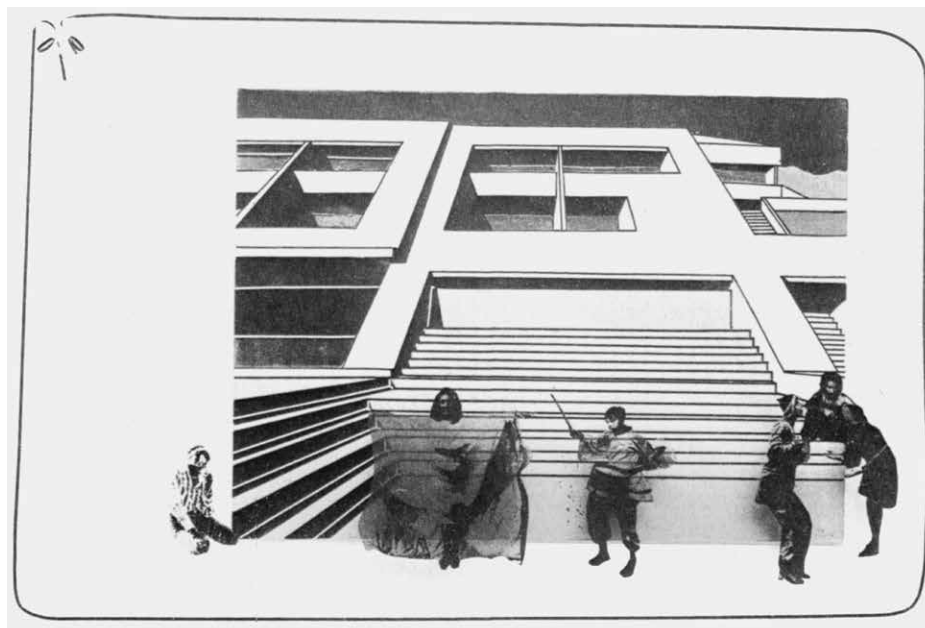
If the 600 inhabitants destined to occupy Palazzo d'Arcevia were intended to be a more equally distributed population, the creative community dedicated to the project surely seemed undisturbed by its own gender imbalance. With their focus on cooperation and their ambition to inform the grassroots of their

60 On the *Ipotesi* and *Operazione Arcevia*, Crispolti wrote: “La fotografia vi puntualizza la presenza (non più soltanto la scala) umana con un'immediatezza che, visivamente, scavalca la mediazione simbolica, dando al progetto una persuasività e presenzialità nuove.” See Crispolti 2019, p. 136.

61 Parisi (1976) 1979, p. 30: “l'azione del 25 luglio 1974 nella quale la giovane Fatima proponeva la trasformazione dell'abito in spazio abitativo (vedi documentazione fotografica).”

62 De Sanna was an art historian and critic. In 1976, early in her career, she organised the exhibition *Aptico. Il senso della scultura* at the Museo del Paesaggio di Verbania, its second Biennale di Scultura, with artists including Fabro, Staccioli, Lucio Fontana, Piero Manzoni and Hidetoshi Nagasawa.

21 Ico Parisi, *Tavola di visualizzazione*,
ca. 1976, from *Operazione Arcevia*
1979, p. 57



own possibilities for action, the socially based art projects rarely considered the structural gender inequality that still governed the sphere of artistic production. Despite their vocabulary of emancipation and critical and political references borrowed to Marxism, they overlooked the needs of women and youths, the great forgotten of the revolutionary discourses.⁶³

Individual works and collective projects parallel to *Operazione Arcevia* questioned the intertwined nature of the public and private spheres and explored new ways of creating community without reproducing patriarchal schemes. In the early 1970s, the Rivolta Femminile collective founded in Rome by Carla Accardi, Elvira Banotti and Carla Lonzi had questioned the dialectical structure of the critique formulated by orthodox Marxism. In contrast to the spheres of art and political activism, Lonzi saw hippie communities as an example of a “non-dialectical” society that opened a way out of patriarchal society, insofar as such an attitude represented “the abandonment of the culture of power-grabbing and the political models of male participation groups.”⁶⁴ The only possible action, for Lonzi, was not to fight within and through culture but, in fact, to abandon it through “deculturation” (Lonzi [1970] 1982, p. 47), an act aimed at “disproving culture” (*smentire la cultura*) as a justification of patriarchal power.

In contrast with the injunction for deculturation and the abandonment of artistic practices that surged from some militant feminism, the affirmative tone underlying the cultural action of *Operazione Arcevia* reflected the confidence of

⁶³ Artists who engaged with the issue of women’s conditions and the demands, from the 1960s onwards, for a new approach in Italian society and, also, by extension, in the arts include Bentivoglio, Carla Accardi, Nilde Carabba, Anna Maria Colucci, Nedda Guidi, Suzanne Santoro and Anne-Marie Sauzeau Boetti. The numerous collectives founded in the 1970s included Le Nemesiache in Naples, the Libreria delle Donne in Milan and the Cooperativa Beato Angelico in Rome. Recent scholarship has further investigated this issue, see Bremer 2021; Almerini 2018. For a broader view, see Iamurri 2016; Seravalli 2013; Calabrò/Grasso 2004; *Feminism* 2020. For a transnational and comparative approach to collective feminist cultural practices, see *All-Women Art Spaces* 2018.

⁶⁴ Lonzi (1970) 1982, p. 43: “proprio in questo noi riconosciamo il pregio, una disgustata fuga dal sistema patriarcale: esso rappresenta l’abbandono della cultura della presa del potere e dei modelli politici dei gruppi a partecipazione maschile.” These critiques were expressed in Lonzi’s 1970 essay *Sputiamo su Hegel* written in the collective framework of the Rivolta Femminile. See also Zapperi 2019, pp. 110–112.

its promoters in the emancipatory capacity of the project, in which culture was still considered a vehicle for social awareness and liberation. Though continually invoked as a means to transform society, the exact “culture” at play and the models it continued to perpetrate were never discussed. Chief among these models was the patriarchal structure, so highly normalised and even internalised that it had pushed some women artists and art critics to abandon activities related to the cultural sphere and invest themselves in feminist activism and consciousness-raising groups. While the very limited presence of women in *Operazione Arcevia* merely reflected the structure of the predominantly male-dominated art and political scenes nationally and internationally, these issues remained unaddressed by the participants, too busy seeking to strengthen ties with the indigenous population of Palazzo d’Arcevia.

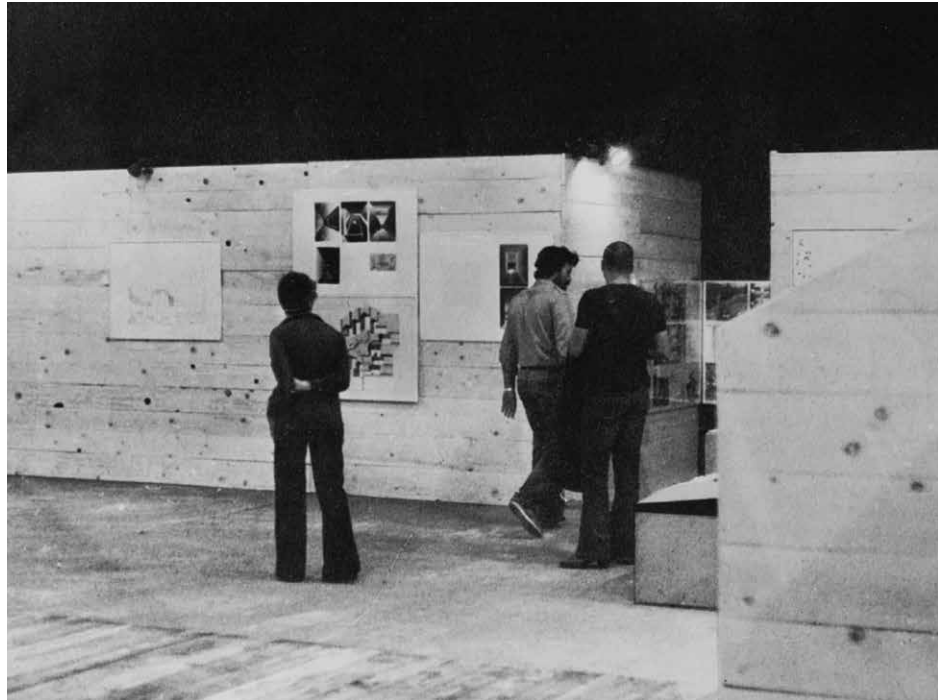
The Limits of Utopia

Unsurprisingly, the effective implementation of *Operazione Arcevia* seemed an ever more remote possibility as the encounters progressed. The project was constantly postponed and its political and social usefulness questioned. As early as 1975, Crispolti expressed skepticism about the completion of such an abstract enterprise, observing nevertheless that, “regardless of its realisation”, the project in itself and the collective work to which it had given rise already constituted a significant result, a “major cultural experience, in which one can recognise a multifaceted creative commitment of the utmost interest”.⁶⁵ The public presentation, at the 1976 Venice Biennial, of what was then referred to as a “laboratory project” (*Progetto-laboratorio*) would help confirm the primacy of its abstract dimension and its ability to transform over time.

The visitors of the Biennale discovered *Operazione Arcevia* in the Italian section, orchestrated by Crispolti and Raffaele De Grada under the title *Ambiente come sociale* (figs. 22a–22b). Responding to the general theme of the Biennale, “Ambiente”, Crispolti and De Grada understood the “ambiente come sociale”, imperfectly translatable as “environment as social”, as a new arena for collective experience and agency. Their proposal sought to “represent in an exhaustive documentary sense [...] the phenomenological framework of these projections of the cultural and especially visual operator, in the social context, through an experience that lies outside the canonical terms of art consumption: artist-aesthetic object-private art gallery or museum-user/collector”.⁶⁶ *Ambiente come sociale* was structured around five operative modes that exhibited different forms

65 Crispolti (1975) 1979, pp. 19–20: “What is real, and culturally relevant is, I believe, an experience on a hitherto unreached scale of collaboration between present-day artists (some of whom have been protagonists of the avant-garde in recent decades) and an architect who is also from the avant-garde. [...] In this sense, regardless of its realisation [...], ‘Operazione Arcevia’ as a project already represents a major cultural experience, in which one can recognise a multifaceted creative commitment of the utmost interest” (“Ciò che vi è di reale, e culturalmente di rilevante, è un’esperienza in scala finora non raggiunta, credo, di collaborazione fra artisti attuali [alcuni, protagonisti conclamati dell’arte d’avanguardia negli ultimi decenni] e un architetto progettista anch’egli d’avanguardia. [...] In questo senso già indipendentemente dalla sua realizzazione [...], l’ ‘Operazione Arcevia’ a livello progettuale rappresenta una grossa esperienza culturale, nella quale si può riconoscere un impegno creativo molteplice e del massimo interesse”).

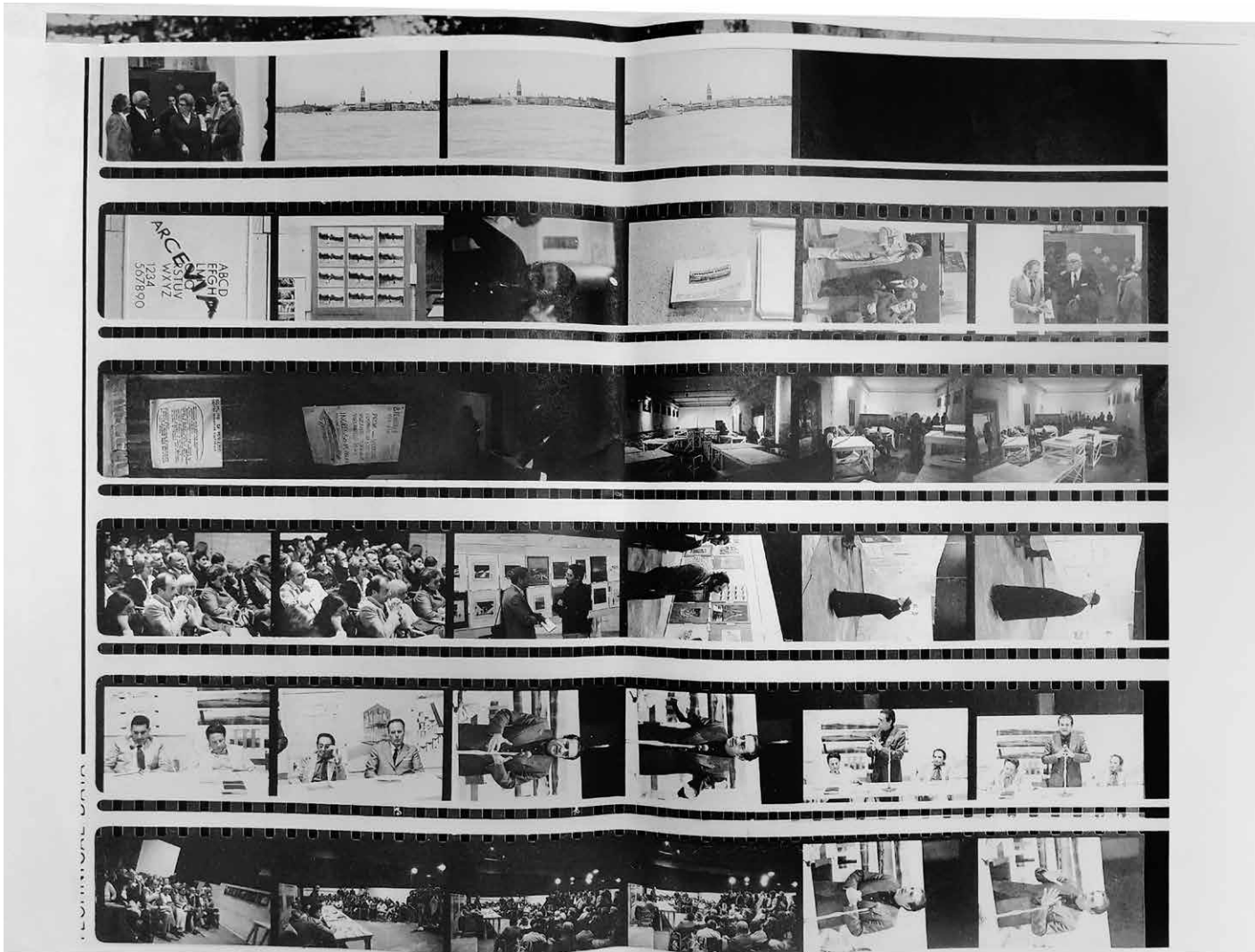
66 *Biennale di Venezia* 1976, vol. 1, p. 106: “rappresentare in senso documentario esauriente [...] il quadro fenomenologico di queste proiezioni dell’operatore culturale, e visuale in particolare, nel contesto sociale, in un’esperienza cioè al di fuori dei termini canonici del consumo dell’arte: l’artista-oggetto estetico-galleria d’arte privata o museo-fruttore/collezionista.” On *Ambiente come sociale*, see Tanga 2020; Catenacci 2015. On the Venice Biennial model in the 1970s, see Collicelli Cagol/Martini 2020.



22a, 22b Presentation of *Operazione Arcevia* in the section “Documentazione Aperta”, Venice Biennale, September 1976, from Parisi 1978, p. 211

of social participation and intervention into public space. In addition, a section titled “Documentazione aperta” offered temporary displays of a selection of ongoing experiments that changed every two weeks, among them *Operazione Arcevia*.⁶⁷

67 The other projects in “Documentazione aperta” were the experiment by the A/Social Group at the Frullone psychiatric hospital in Naples (14–25 July), the animations in primary schools by Elisa Vincitorio (28 July–8 August), the Comitato di Quartiere Garibaldi initiative for the redevelopment of the historic centre in Milan (10–19 August), Enzo Mari’s Monument to Roberto Franceschi in Milan (22–31 August), the Cracap eco-museum in Le Creusot and the work of Carlo Pomi in San Marino di Bentivoglio (both projects 15–26 September). There were also discussions of the results of the “two-percent law” (29 September–10 October) and on the detailed urban development plan for Venice (undated).



The documents and photographs exhibited in the Auditorium of the Giardini di Castello from 3 to 12 September 1976 showed, in Parisi's words, "a snapshot [*istantanea*] of the operative situation of the moment, a testimony of the proceeding and its focal points" (fig. 23).⁶⁸ This display was complemented by a public debate between Parisi, Miotto, Zevi, Crispolti and Lamberto Lambertini on 4 September 1976 (fig. 24), with Bartoletti's absence from such a prestigious event no minor matter. In fact, the terms through which *Operazione Arcevia* was evoked in Venice revealed the growing fracture between the intention of Bartoletti and others to realise the residential project and the intention of the rest of the commission to pursue artistic experimentation. The anonymous author of the statement for the Biennale, presumably Parisi, took an unabashed position: "Considering a project as a rigid contract between the sponsor, the director and the competent authorities is absurd and amoral, inflexibility crystallises errors, even validates them, and conveniently frees everyone from the duty to reflect, revise and correct."⁶⁹ By claiming creative flexibility and insisting on the tempo-

23 *Operazione Arcevia*, photographic register of the project presented at the Venice Biennale, 1976. Rome, Archivio/Biblioteca Enrico Crispolti (photo author)

68 See "Operazione Arcevia. Progetto aperto", 31 August 1976, Press Release 95/AV, Biennale di Venezia in ASAC, Fondo Arti visive, scatola 249; and Parisi (1976) 1979, p. 30: "Ogni forma di presentazione è da considerarsi come una 'istantanea' della situazione operativa del momento, una testimonianza del procedimento e della sua focalizzazione." Although Restany did not participate in the presentation, he coordinated the section devoted to *Operazione Arcevia* with Crispolti and Miotto.



24 Presentation of *Operazione Arcevia* in the section “Documentazione Aperta”, Venice Biennale, 4 September 1976, from Parisi 1978, p. 212

ral dilation of *Operazione Arcevia* even to the detriment of its actual realisation, its promoters in Venice paradoxically abandoned what justified its presence in *Ambiente come sociale* in the first place: the close relationship with its territory and the possibility of a social transformation of Palazzo d’Arcevia through material intervention. Increasingly assimilated to the delightful avant-garde experience of a group that refused all external conditioning and sought refuge in self-referential creativity, *Operazione Arcevia* came to resemble Parisi’s existential house: a hypothesis, a tautological and circular proposition, increasingly limiting the possibility of local involvement.

Conclusions

Artistic projects and initiatives from the 1970s motivated toward social transformation often remained interrupted or unfulfilled attempts. This phenomenon raises important historiographical and methodological challenges for researchers addressing their histories from the present perspective. Writing on artist collectives and groups, art historian Alessandra Pioselli has recently wondered how such projects should be assessed with regards to “their socio-political impact, the attempt to redefine the roles in the field, the legacy in the specific place of action, the complexity on the expressive and conceptual level of languages and processes”:

There is no need to highlight an autonomous expressive aesthetic value but to decipher it within the overall architecture of each action: objectives, processual, relational choices, method, means, instruments, languages. Not all the work of these groups is always so linguistically sophisticated, but it presents itself as a relevant historical phenomenon that reconfigures the aesthetic-political dimension of making. These practices escape the measure of

69 See ASAC, Fondo Arti Visive, scatola 249, in Parisi (1976) 1979, p. 28: “Considerare un progetto come un rigido contratto tra il committente, il progettista e le autorità competenti è assurdo e amorale, la inflessibilità cristallizza gli errori anzi gli convalida e libera, comodamente, tutti dal dovere di riflette [sic], rivedere, correggere.”

the permanent. They are to be framed in this situated and relational condition, qualified by the nature of contingency and contextuality.⁷⁰

Pioselli's reflexions can be extended to those artistic enterprises which, in the 1970s, found in "the social" (*il sociale*) a core element and motor of their modus operandi. Perfectly aware of the fragility of a project in which they were active for years, members of the technical commission of *Operazione Arcevia* insisted that its "heritage" consisted in the process and the contributions of the group (Parisi [1976] 1979, p. 28). The collision between this position, publicly claimed in Venice in 1976, and Bartoletti's objectives as patron aided the abandonment of the project. The gap between the idea of an existential community and the constraints of its implementation would become more pronounced and eventually irreconcilable.

The abandonment cannot be exclusively attributed to broader political and social factors in Italian history but, if we recall Enrico Crispolti's hopeful observations on the 1975 and 1976 elections cited, the field of possibilities opened up by the strengthened ties between cultural operators and municipal and regional agents did certainly close towards the end of the decade. Pressure was further increased by the fading hope of a government favourable to the interests of workers and youths, the overly conciliatory attitude of the PCI leaders towards Christian Democracy, the austerity measures from the government of Giulio Andreotti in the summer of 1976 and the resulting workers' revolts and strikes throughout the peninsula that fall. Student revolts and the hardening of a sector of the extraparliamentary left in 1977 against a background of tensions with the authorities and far-right groups all made the climate increasingly hostile to gestures of cultural cooperation. On the cultural front, the 1977 Venice Biennial, devoted to cultural dissidence in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, deepened the fracture within the Italian parliamentary left, with fierce debates about the legitimacy and aesthetic value of so-called 'dissident art.'⁷¹

Back at the Biennale in 1978 with a solo exhibition, Parisi pursued his individual research on possible utopias. His work returned him to a denser urban context, from which he observed a crisis of identity and the degraded, disharmonised character of centres, peripheries and residential areas. Here, Parisi promoted architectural and urban design not as an "existential community" but as an "achievable utopia" (*utopia realizzabile*) that would "retie the rings of the existential chain" (Parisi 1978, p. 31) and provide authentic living spaces, to free residents from physical and metaphorical packaging. Without admitting any failure of *Operazione Arcevia*, Parisi stated that the experience had taught him the difficulty aesthetic operators experience when trying to grasp the dimension of an architectural project. Far from abandoning the idea of integrated arts that had sustained *Operazione Arcevia*, the "solicitation tables" he exhibited in Venice instead continued to

70 Pioselli 2017, p. 47: "Oggi in base a cosa valutiamo le istanze dei collettivi e dei gruppi di artisti: al loro impatto sociopolitico, al tentativo di ridefinire i ruoli in campo, al lascito nel luogo specifico dell'azione, alla complessità sul piano espressivo e concettuale dei linguaggi e dei processi? Non si ravvisa la necessità di evidenziare un valore estetico espressivo autonomo ma di decifrarlo all'interno dell'architettura globale di ogni azione: obiettivi, scelte processuali, relazionali, di metodo, di mezzi, di strumenti, di linguaggi. Non tutto il lavoro di queste compagini è sempre così sofisticato dal punto di vista linguistico ma si presenta come fenomeno storico rilevante che riconfigura la dimensione estetico-politica del fare. Queste pratiche si sottraggono alla misura del permanente. Sono da inquadrare in questa condizione situata e relazionale, qualificate dalla natura della contingenza e della contestualità."

71 Crispolti was again asked to organise, together with Gabriella Moncada, the visual arts exhibition *La nuova arte sovietica. Una prospettiva non ufficiale*, continuing his exploration of artistic alternatives with a project that refused to endorse the term 'dissidence.' See Debeusscher 2019.

question the relationship between architecture, urban space and art, aiming to produce a “cultural ecology” that could constitute a linguistic base, both individual and collective, to reactivate creative capacities (Parisi 1978, p. 39).

Seen from a distance and in hindsight, *Operazione Arcevia* remains impressive for its ambition, scale and the energy and steadiness with which actors such as Italo Bartoletti, Ico Parisi, Enrico Crispolti and Pierre Restany, as well as the thirty-three artists, committed to this undertaking and defended their own views. Their total commitment, to not only the final goal but also the process that would lead to it, reflected their confidence in the possibility of transformation through art despite constraints and difficulties. The ups and downs of the project and its abandonment should not overshadow its creative effervescence and the joyful confluence of proposals and strategies for operating collectively nor inhibit possible echoes and becomings in the present.

Abbreviations

ACA

Archives de la Critique d'Art, Rennes.

ASAC

Archivio Storico delle Arti Contemporanee, Mestre/Venice.

Archival Resources

ACA, Fonds Pierre Restany, PREST. XSIT31/1.

ACA, Fonds Pierre Restany, PREST. XSIT31/2.

ACA, Fonds Pierre Restany, PREST. XSIT31/3.

ACA, Fonds Pierre Restany, PREST. XSIT31/8–10.

ACA, Fonds Pierre Restany, PREST. XSIT31/16.

ACA, Fonds Pierre Restany, PREST. XSIT31/20–21.

ACA, Fonds Pierre Restany, PREST. XSIT31/26–35.

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