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IL POSTICIPO (THE LATE KICK-OFF): ART, RESEARCH AND URBAN REGENERATION

Abstract

This article analyses an artistic urban regeneration project, subsidised by the Italian Ministry of Culture (*Creative Living Lab Prize* 2018-2019.) The text emerged from my direct experience as an artist/researcher involved in the *Il Posticipo* project (The Late Kick-off), in the former working-class district of Ponziana (Trieste, IT). In order to understand the sense of identity, and the social fragility of the neighbourhood, we created two subprojects: a radio program hosted in the 4 different bars of the district, which was broadcasted live on local radio; a sound installation in the abandoned stadium which re-enacted the famous 1974 Trieste football derby between Ponziana and Triestina. The sound installation emanated from the idea of giving voice to a different narrative that could represent a participated memory. Through the symbolic element of football, as vehicle of social cohesion, the project involved the residents, overcoming the stereotypes implicit in urban regeneration discourse. In terms of methodology, this project opened up different lines of enquiry, including: the role of the State in urban regeneration processes and in the construction of identity in peripheral areas; the possibilities and the limits of visual arts between ephemeral and aesthetic solutions and the long-term dimensions of the project; the artistic tools used in order to overcome barriers, communicate and involve people.

Keywords

Contemporary art; public art; socially engaged art; site-specific; urban regeneration.

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1. INTRODUCTION

This text describes and analyses the artistic project *Il Posticipo* (The Late Kick-off), which was realized in the Ponziana neighbourhood (Trieste, Italy) by the artist collectives AUTOPALO and Gli Impresari, and which allows to reflect about the use of an artistic-participatory and research-based approach to work within a specific community. This project is characterized by a highly intense integration of symbolic production¹ – in terms of what makes a work, an artist, or even a genre visible and relevant, providing its sense through a system of classifications – (historical) research and social intervention through the use of media technologies, strengthened by high participatory intensities. It is this combination that also connects the project to the principles of arts-

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¹ For the definition of symbolic production: M. Sassatelli, "Symbolic Production in the Art Biennial: Making Worlds", *Theory Culture & Society*, 34, 4 (2016): 89-113.

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based research², even it is still outside the strict interpretation of arts-based research's core model.

The project was made possible by public funding, as a successful application to the *Creative Living Lab* (2018/2019) call, a Prize funded by the Italian Ministry of Cultural Heritage and Activities (MiBACT). This was the first occasion that social-artistic interventions in peripheral areas were financed (in a structured way). The requirement of the call was to realize a participatory action with the local community, in order to encourage social transformation. The artists' proposals were selected by cooperatives and local associations, engaged in projects of urban and social requalification. In the first edition, six projects, from all-over Italy, were selected and supported. The total budget for each project was € 34,000, for a period of 6 months. One of the selected projects was *Il Posticipo*, which focused on participatory research and performative interventions, using football as a medium.

In the next parts, I will first discuss the role of the concept of community in artistic practice, and its connection with football – the core of the action – as an element of sociological research. I will then detail the main components of the *Il Posticipo* action, and, finally, analyse its contributions.

2. THE SENSE OF COMMUNITY FOR VISUAL ARTS

Since the 1990s, the visual arts has achieved synergies with other disciplines such as ethnography, anthropology, cultural studies and social theory, which has generated a turning point in artistic practice – especially at a methodological level – and a re-definition of the field of action: from the studio, as in Bourdieu's definition³ of a structure of objective relations between positions in which a struggle for specific symbolic capital occurs, to the community as in Dewey's notion of organism-environment interaction as a co-designed experience⁴. Paradoxically, another consequence was the reduction of the role of the community (e.g., religious, political, geographical) in the symbolic process of visual arts. Even though such a reduction might be functional, from an exhibitionary perspective, it has caused issues from the ethical point of view. In an article from 1995, Grant Kester, one of the main critics of socially engaged art, highlighted the risk of the disconnection between the perceptions internal to the community and the view of the artist, who – on the basis of a selection process – tended to de-contextualise the meanings of the artwork, and to activate a moral pedagogy⁵.

Symbolism and representation are of course not strange to the community context. As stated by the philosopher Roberto Esposito, we can find traces of the symbolic birth of the community in Jean-Jacques Rousseau's thoughts, an early philosopher of community. In his book *Communitas*, Esposito writes that Rousseau's idea of community has a strong antinomic character: "Paradoxically, the community is made possible only by the lack of a relation among its members", which highlights the importance of repre-

² See in particular Finley's approach to arts-based research: S. Finley, "Arts-Based Research", in G. Knowles, A. Cole, eds., *Handbook of the Arts in Qualitative Research*, London: Sage, 2008, 71-81.

³ H. van Maanen, *How to Study Art Worlds. On the Societal Functioning of Aesthetic Values*, Amsterdam University Press, Amsterdam, 2009, see in particular the chapter "Pierre Bourdieu's Grand Theory of the Artistic Field", 53-81.

⁴ J. Dewey, *Art as Experience*, New York: Penguin Books, 2005.

⁵ G.H. Kester, "Aesthetic Evangelists: Conversion and Empowerment in Contemporary Community Art", *Afterimage*, 22 (1995): 5-11.

sentation. Rousseau, in fact, seeks in the community the realization of the self-sufficient man of nature, which implies that Rousseau's symbolic community is defined by its own representation⁶.

Art has a long history in representing communities, but this relationship between communities and the artist was often unbalanced. This has changed, especially since the 1990s, when a new reflection on public art was generated by artists and curators, such as Suzanne Lacy and Mary Jane Jacob, who were engaged in the production of civic discourse. Lacy, in 1995, coined the label "new genre public art" for those emerging practices⁷. Jacob gave them additional visibility through the Culture in Action art event (Chicago, 1993)⁸. This implies that we have to consider the fundamental role played by artistic practices that articulate public art, performance, social research, theatre, activism, video and sound installation. They created a mixed-media project in which the participatory role played by communities is considered crucial, and which tried to develop a methodology where the research and its representation would be balanced.

Just to name a few examples: in 2001, the artist Jeremy Deller staged a re-enactment of a 1984 miner's strike in the working-class England city of Orgreave. Through his artistic operation, Deller collected the miners' stories, analysed their points of view, and reactivated their memory by generating a stage for them, where they could perform as actors. In 2007, in New Orleans, the artist Paul Chan produced the play *Waiting for Godot* as a reflection about the damage caused by the destructive Katrina Hurricane and the lack of government intervention. After several discussions with residents and key activists, workshops and lectures given at the local university, Chan "changed" how the problem of Katrina's devastation had usually been represented. He managed to do that by generating an aesthetic representation, giving worldwide resonance of what had happened in the city. The final performance of the piece was in New Orleans, in two of the areas hardest hit by the hurricane. Through their intervention, both Deller and Chan created a participatory archive that could not be described nor analysed through a single practice or definition.

Such practices can hardly be linked to a single genre anyhow – which initially confused art critics – because the "function" of these practices is exactly to strike a balance between aesthetic value and ethical value, between a typically ethnographic field research and artistic visualization. In Italy, one of the first examples of this type of practice was *Art.2*, realized by the artist Adriana Torregrossa, within the context of an urban regeneration project in the city of Turin (1999). The aim of the project was to create a sense of sociality and belonging within the multicultural district of Porta Palazzo, marked in its physiognomy by the presence of one of the largest covered markets of Europe. By thinking about the theme of belonging and identity in a symbolic key, the artist found in the sound a metaphor of the connections between people. In the case of Porta Palazzo, the immigrant communities that suffered the greatest impact were those from North Africa, in particular Egypt and Tunisia. Since the artist was married to a Moroccan and had taught for some time in Casablanca, she began to reflect on the call of the muezzin- the person at the mosque who leads and recites the call to prayer -and the value of that gathering sound. On 17 January 1999, the loudspeakers installed

⁶ R. Esposito, *Communitas: The Origin and Destiny of Community*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010, 46.

⁷ S. Lacy, *Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art*, Bay Press: Seattle, Washington, 1995.

⁸ M.J. Jacob, M. Brenson, E.M. Olson, *Culture in Action: A Public Art Program of Sculpture Chicago*, Bay Press: Seattle, Washington, 1995.

in the square broadcasted *Aid el flour*, the prayer of reconciliation that marks the end of Ramadan. A hundred people spontaneously knelt to pray as a collective body doing a staged performance. The action caused a media hype that ended in a Catholic mass in Latin being organized, by the councillor of Italy's Northern League Mario Borghezio. Through its complex approach, *Art.2* revealed the limits of the openness of public space, giving at the same time to the Muslim community the chance to reinvent that space.

3. FOOTBALL AS A SOCIAL FACT

Since these visual arts projects seek to convey a well-defined image of the community and its meanings and messages, the artist is led to identify elements that strongly represent the community, and have strong resonance there. At this point, I want to focus on the aesthetic outcome and its underlying methodology, and focus less on the ethical perspective related to the process of delegation that takes place from the community to the artist mentioned (as developed by Bourdieu⁹). In terms of community representation and resonance, football is the element that over the years has proven to be highly significant for communities, especially in countries where it is the most popular sport. This significance resides in its political and social bonding capacity, which, of course, can be found in football with no need of artistic aestheticization. The famous Maradona's hand goal against England in the Mexico World Cup '86 is paradigmatic, when he claimed that gesture as the response of Argentina to the British intervention in the Falkland Islands.

In Italy, the sociological and cultural aspects of football were strongly aestheticized by writers such as Pierpaolo Pasolini and Luciano Bianciardi. Pasolini, in particular, used to define football as "the ultimate holy representation of our time." Beyond the Italian context and more recently, it is worth mentioning Andrei Mihail's work. In his essay *They Brought Us Together*, Mihail analysed the role of syndicate/industrial teams – football teams run and supported by factories – as the core of social activities in different areas of Bucharest¹⁰.

4. IL POSTICIPO

My experience with this project started when I was selected as an artist/researcher – as part of the art group AUTOPALO, founded in 2016, which consists of Luca Resta and myself – by the Trieste-based association Kallipolis that works with participatory projects and social inclusion. The call expected applicants to focus on the former working-class district of Ponziana that was identified as a socially fragile area, characterized by social housing and by single-family units that contributed to a general feeling of loneliness and social disconnection. These phenomena are enhanced by the population structure: Trieste was the capital of the second Italian region with the highest average age (25.7% of the population over 65). This also applied to the Trieste district Ponziana, a place where most of the people live alone in social housing flats, and are from the 51-64 age range.

⁹ P. Bourdieu, "Delegation and Political Fetishism," in *Language and Symbolic Power*, with an introduction by J.B. Thompson, translated by G. Raymond and M. Adamson, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994, 203-219.

¹⁰ A. Mihail, "They Brought Us Together", *Kajet*, 3 (2019): 68-75.

We focused our preliminary research on the history of the Amatori Ponziana football team after World War II, mainly because it represents a fascinating story, also from an artistic point of view. Moreover, it reflects what it was required by the founding agency: it represents an element from the past, known in particular by the elderly people who were part of the neighbourhood life. Here, it is important to explain that between 1947 and 1954, Trieste became part of the Free Territory of Trieste, under direct responsibility of the United Nations Security Council. It was divided into two areas: The A area (which included the city of Trieste), which was taken over by the UK and US troops, and the B area, placed under Yugoslav control. Josip Broz Tito, the president of Yugoslavia, aimed to annex the entire Free Territory, which also led to the deployment of a series of symbolic strategies. For instance, he decided to invite the small Ponziana team to play in the major Yugoslav league from 1946 to 1949. The choice was not accidental: the Yugoslav leader could not choose the well-known Triestina, that at the time was playing in the Italian A League, therefore he decided to select a small semi-professional team, that, moreover, could easily represent the socialist values of work and community.

When Tito invited the team to participate into the Yugoslav league, the club was divided into Amatori Ponziana and Ponziana Calcio, with the latter playing in the Italian third (C) division. The stadium used for the Amatori home games was in the San Saba area near the Risiera, a former rice factory that was a concentration camp during World War II. For the Amatori, playing posed moral difficulties because it looked as if they were collaborating with Tito. According to Bruno Gasperutti, one of our key informers, many of the players did not understand the actual move to the Yugoslav league, considering it instead a separate tournament and not an official competition. For others, however, the choice was not led by ideological beliefs but by economic reasons, since in Yugoslavia they were paid as professional football players.

Starting from this highly symbolic story, the research used an inductive method. Starting from the most representative element of the neighbourhood, in the years when the area located the peak of its sociability and “productivity”, and then verifying its functionality in the present. From an artist point of view, the crucial question was: how can we represent the research process, so much part of the project, in its entirety?

To start the process of getting to know the neighbourhood, we developed an itinerant radio project, called *Radio Ponziana Errante*¹¹. The radio was hosted in different neighbourhood bars – within 500 meters along the old Giorgio Ferrini stadium. It was useful in order to create a common basis for the perception of the place. We started our research in a context that was already “constructed”. In fact, in Italian literature (e.g., Stefano Benni’s novel *Bar Sport*), the bar represents one of the places where people discuss football most. That is why we thought it would be the best kind of venue to initiate a dialogue that was meant to activate memories of Amatori Ponziana. The episodes of about 40 minutes each were broadcasted on the website of the university radio Radio Ca’ Foscari of Venice (with which I have been collaborating since 2017) and on



To Radio Ponziana Errante

¹¹ <https://www.spreaker.com/show/radio-ponziana-errante>.

Radio Fragola, a local radio, established in 1984, inside the old psychiatric hospital of Franco Basaglia. In total, *Radio Ponziana Errante* produced ten episodes, from 28 February to 22 March 2019.

Figure 1 - *The episode of Radio Ponziana with Adriana Torregrossa*



The program was divided into two parts: an open mic part, in which anyone could sit down and talk with me about any topic, from sport to music, from gardening to family memories; a more structured part during which artists, scholars, musicians and politicians of the local area were hosted. Amongst the guests to be mentioned is Adriana Torregrossa¹². These meetings were starting points, to test the ‘qualities’ of the memories and the importance of Ponziana Calcio during the Yugoslav experience. We managed to do that, especially thanks to our key informer, Bruno Gasperutti, who is the historical memory of football in Trieste and a former Ponziana player from the 1960s. Gasperutti collected and saved all the material about Ponziana, before the team was disbanded. Overall, Gasperutti was the key person who introduced us to the former Ponziana players from the 1960s/70s.



To Adriana Torregrossa

Another important meeting was with a group of supporters of Triestina – the main team of Trieste that today plays in Lega Pro (third division) – who see in the Triestina-Ponziana derby of 1974 as a symbol that needed to be highlighted in terms of community and its representation. That match was a historic moment for both teams: after 47 years, they competed in the same division, Serie D (fourth division). Compared to the initial idea of retracing the actions of Amatori Ponziana and their Yugoslav adventure, this focus was much more effective, as it came out of a participatory response. It was requested to do so by the people we were meeting: our initial idea had been received and discussed, resulting in a counter-proposal that could really involve people. As a matter of fact, considering the historical period initially chosen (1946-1949), none of the people we met had either a vivid memory or any direct experience. By choosing to move towards the 1970s, we managed to get directly in touch with the elderly that lived in the neighbourhood, and represented the kind of social fragility that was described in the original project call. The research on the famous derby Triestina-Ponziana allowed us to get in contact with the former players of that match, like the captain of Ponziana, Giuliano Gerin, and the goalkeeper for Triestina, Giorgio Ianza.

The radio thus became a very efficient “ethnographic recorder”, as the participants felt like the main characters of the broadcast more than simply objects to be studied. During the month of broadcasting, the radio was rather successful. Some people would follow us from one bar to the other, some others would arrange with us a meeting on a

¹² https://www.spreaker.com/user/radiocafoscari/ponziana-ep-2_1.

specific day, and others would come up to us in the streets and start telling us their story. Initially, the depth of the topics discussed with some people made me uncomfortable: I established a true relationship with them and, outside of the artistic project, I felt personally involved when they asked me for a genuine response. This sort of emotional involvement could have been dangerous, resulting in the use of a moral pedagogy, as described by Kester, but a proper balance could be maintained.

In this process, duration – in terms of a planning with its own well-defined timing – played a double role. On the one hand, it reduced the moments of research, and on the other, it pushed people to “tell us everything immediately” because they saw, especially on the radio, the possibility of alternative and temporary narratives. Given the interest and success of the radio, we decided to involve the University of Trieste, in order to start an internship program in collaboration with the Kallipolis association. This would have allowed the project to give voice directly to the inhabitants of the neighbourhood. In theory, they would have carried on the radio together with the students. However, the idea never materialised, as the administrative procedures to start the internships were only completed when the project was almost finished, together with the budget and the overall interest from MiBACT.

After the month of the radio project, we started to analyse the symbolic structure of the Triestina-Ponziana game and all the material collected during our meetings. The place we identified for the main intervention was the old stadium named after Giorgio Ferrini, a legendary former Ponziana player. The stadium capacity was about 1,000 seats. Inaugurated in 1996, the team played there until 2014, when a financial crisis led to the disbanding of the club and its merger with another local team, Chiabola. Since then, the stadium has been abandoned. Although there have been several conversion plans, the work has yet to begin.

In order to retrace the different phases of the match, we wrote a script and we invited the most iconic Italian football radio journalist of the last 40 years, Bruno Pizzul, who played also against Ponziana when he was young. We went to Pizzul’s house and recorded the entire match, pretending it was happening in front of us. On that occasion, I was the second voice, which means that I was adding the description of the social situation in Trieste between the 1940s and the 1970s, to the commentary. As there was no video recording of the match, the script was recreated with the help of the newspaper reports of the time. Starting from a general framework, then enriched by the detailed description of the Ponziana captain Gerin, we managed to understand how the match developed and eventually reconstructed some of its game actions.

The script was not only about the game but it also included references to historical moments that had shaped Trieste as the city that we know today. One of those episodes was the story of Amatori Ponziana, its meaning and the historical match won against Hajduk Split back in 1946. After the writing part, Luca Severino, a sound engineer from Bergamo, edited the 52 minutes of radio recording, by adding back ground sounds, with voices from the terraces and sounds from the pitch, like the ball and the whistle, and the clamour of celebrations. Then we added the voice of Bruno Gasperutti, as an extra radio reporter from the field. We also collaborated with two musicians, Mattia Piani and Aleksandar Koruga, from the Conservatory Giu-



To the Il Posticipo event website

seppe Tartini (Trieste) and asked them to elaborate and mix famous sport jingles from the 70s. They did an electro piece that lasted fifteen minutes and was played during the half time. The radio report was broadcast live on Radio Fragola and made available as podcast on Radio Ca' Foscari.

After this preparatory part, we installed four large loudspeakers at the centre of the stadium. At a mere artistic level, this was the visual representation of our research as well as our site-specific work¹³. The four loudspeakers at the centre of the abandoned stadium became an active monument, created by the memories of the people who actually had taken part to the match. On a spatial level, since the access to the pitch was forbidden and the view was blocked by the stands, the loudspeakers could only be seen from a certain point and perspective. Metaphorically, it reminds us how some parts of history are not clear to anyone, but needs to be sought for.

On 25 May 2019, at 6 pm we turned on the volume. Our first spectators were local police officers, alarmed by the neighbourhood because of the sound. The sound of the commentary started to spread in the streets and throughout the buildings, so that after a couple of minutes some people became curious. They stopped, parked their scooters and cars, and came closer. Since one is not allowed to enter on the field, the sound was the only possible way to make the people approach. They first started to ask questions about what was happening. Then, they started to listen and to remember. Thanks to these memories, the area of the old abandoned stadium was suddenly crowded.

Figure 2 - *The commentary on the Triestina-Ponziiana game*



At the time, the match was crucial for the entire city. The match ended 1-0 for Ponziiana, the forward Miorandi scored at the 2nd minute of the second half, but in this kind of narrative that was 'obvious'. Nevertheless, when the goal was scored, we shot blue-white smoke bombs that rose up in the sky and spread the colours in the streets.

5. A BRIEF CONCLUSION

The approach of the *Il Posticipo* project has been developed through different forms of participatory artistic practice. The radio was the first element, and perhaps the most functional tool, to enter in contact with people in order to activate their memories and narrative. Thanks to our permanent presence, we earned the trust that allowed us to process the memories on a symbolic level, beyond the common language of the inhabitants of the neighbourhood, but still based on their own stories. The installation of the four loudspeakers in the stadium – which makes it a site-specific work – brought the attention to a place that still remains abandoned despite the promises of its rejuvenation.

Moreover, the project highlighted the difficulty of conceiving, at both theoretical and practical levels, the introduction of the artistic figure in the art-based process that is driven by social perspectives and connected to urban regeneration. As a matter of fact,

¹³ <https://autopalo.wordpress.com/2020/10/25/il-posticipo/>.

the artistic element in these projects is often intended as ephemeral and not “productive”, by linking the artistic intervention exclusively to the final act of symbolic representation. In contrast, *Il Posticipo* demonstrated that a fusion between the moment of research and the moment of its representation is possible: through the radio and through a participatory crescendo, the research was transformed into an installation. In Italy, artistic practices that are socially engaged art, in its American meaning – where the artistic intervention is an active part of the research and its social implementation – is still considered to be experimental. The mere fact that the *Il Posticipo* project was funded, shows the interest in these dynamics, even though, at a practical level, the hybrid figure of the artist as an active participant in the social processes is still difficult to frame, especially when considering his/her actual possibilities in terms of action.