

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.