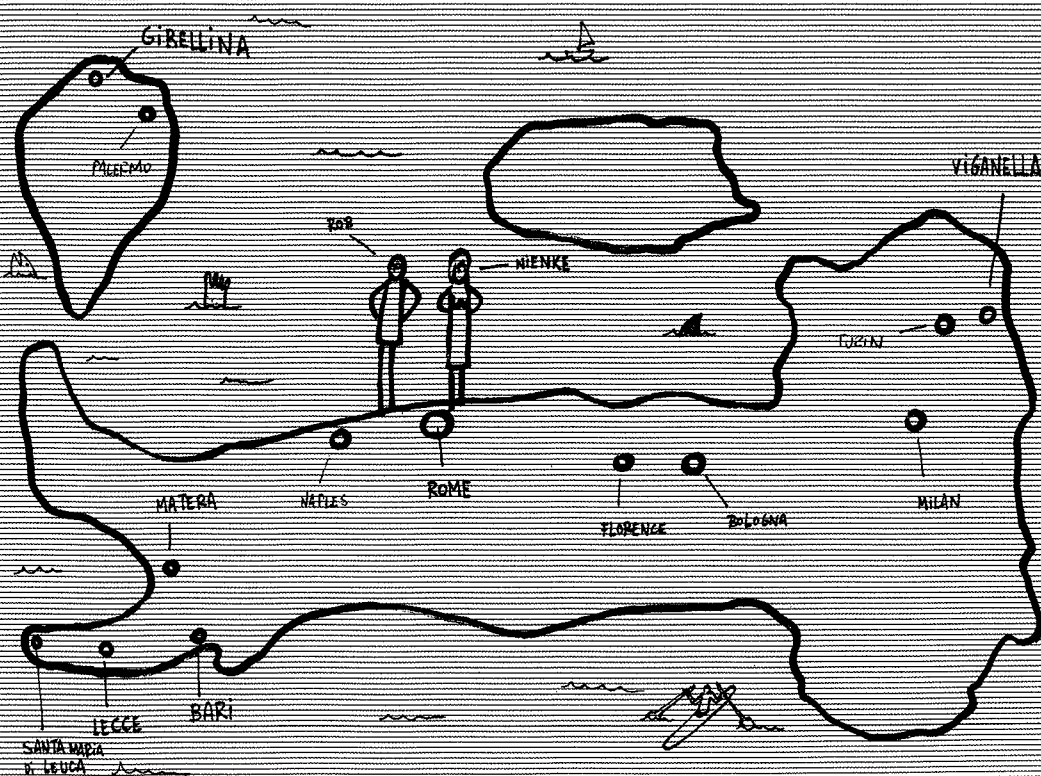


# ITALIAN CONVERSATIONS

# Art in the age of Berlusconi

Viaggio in Italia 2011

ROB AND NIENKE **FUCKIN' GOODART** MEET SOME PEOPLE OF THE ITALIAN ART SYSTEM...



drawing: Marco Raparelli

## We are against something that doesn't exist – Conversation with Giovanna Costanza Meli

*Recorded: Tuesday 19 April 2011  
outside Costanza Meli's house in  
Giacalone, overlooking Palermo*

Costanza Meli and Barbara D'Ambrosio have run progetto *Isole*, 'a laboratory of contemporary art and territorial culture of the area', since 2004. They initiate projects with local communities in Sicily. progetto *Isole* is a permanent and itinerant laboratory, among the first of the last generation to focus on the periphery rather than the centre, the region rather than the city, and the margins as an advantageous position from which to develop relations, networks, meaning. Costanza and Barbara look at contemporary art as a way to intervene in social space and base their approach on long-term commitment with a community and its territory. Any action, proposal, work always follows a phase of analysis of the territory, which they call 'listening'. When we meet Costanza is busy with the preparation of a new project in Piana degli Albanesi; Geolab.

We drive to Costanza's place, where together with Marco Di Dia she manages the cultural magazine *SuccoAcido* and the publishing house *Edizioni De Dieux*.<sup>1</sup> It's a beautiful area high up in the hills overlooking the sea and the city, but at the side of the road are enormous piles of garbage. Costanza explains how sad and embarrassed she feels about this situation. We see a meticulously dressed woman get out of her car and add a plastic bag to one of the piles. Costanza tells an anecdote; one of the piles started growing in front of some man's gate. He had it removed, but a new pile started to grow soon. Then the man installed a Maria statue on the wall next to the entrance. The problem was solved. Or relocated at least.<sup>2</sup>

*We're already talking for quite a while before we start the recorder.*

**Costanza Meli** Italy is only a small garden, a tiny province. Italy relies on self-organisation because it has no

organisations linking it to the world. Just open any English or American art-history textbook: the history of contemporary Italian art is nowhere to be found; Italian contemporary artists simply do not exist.

**Robert Hamelijncck** Well, after Arte Povera and Transavanguardia it stopped.

**CM** Exactly. This means that contemporary art in Italy, if there is nobody to make it official...

**RH** It dies.

**CM** Yes, it effectively does not exist. Well, as a matter of fact I believe contemporary art does exist, in everything we do. But I don't know the art system, I mean, who are they, this dozen people, are they the art system?

**Nienke Terpsma** Irrelevant?

**RH** Nonexistent?

**CM** Yes, I mean, in Italy people struggle against a system that doesn't exist. And this discourse involves a whole lot of rhetoric. We try to build a network, a web, but the ideal outcome would be admitting that a country with no art system also lacks a lot of other systems. Universities teach ancient stuff; courses have never been updated. They deal with the nineteenth century. Contemporary anthropology is wholly overlooked. Italy is a country where the art system isn't present yet because there is no awareness of the contemporary. I really believe the most particular situation, in Italy, is this: the fact that we, as subjects working 'underground' and following an alternative model, find ourselves dealing with ideas of participation, of resisting the system, while the system isn't there. Even if Achille Bonito Oliva said otherwise, there is no system. If you live in Switzerland or England, there is an art system – a well-organised system of power, with an art council, a host of organisations managing art on many levels – artists are organised, galleries are organised, museums have a network: there is a system and a power.

**NT** Couldn't this be a good thing? You can invent something, do things differently, to create a space outside the market. I find it interesting that we have met so many self-taught artists here, who studied something entirely different, and renew the field with cross-disciplinary input.

**CM** Yes, that is true, but it also involves a contradiction: in Italy this

system doesn't exist yet, but we all have the problem of fighting against the system. I believe it's a sort of 'war between and among the poor'. Artists are outside of the system because the latter doesn't represent them, but as a matter of fact they'd like to be within the system. They'd like to have an art system to represent them. We need to ask ourselves whether artists operating outside the system do so for political reasons, or just because there is no organised system that reaches down to the lower levels – those granting artists access to the system itself. Being outside the system is the only way to exist, we are all used to being outside the system, and there are some who struggle to get in. Of course, being outside means having more initiatives, more suppleness, more ability to create new things, to discuss with local contexts, to organise things for oneself. But this should also imply an ability to create a network between all those who are outside the system – and this is not the case: they are all individual struggles, islands. There's a small cake, and many people want a part of it. Defining yourself as an intellectual is a sort of taboo, because if you are one you are part of an elite of some kind. Actually we need intellectuals today because we are dealing with a society that's doing all it can to erase every form of thought, of intellectual work, culture, analysis and critique.

If you think of Berlusconi as a culture, a way of thinking, if you think about what he does: he imports models, makes a strange mix of Mussolini-like, fascist propaganda and the modern or contemporary system of media, an economic, perhaps American global system of propaganda. This is a dangerous connection. Italian people are not like Berlusconi. Italy is a society that is still organised like fifty years ago, although now there are less civil rights, if we consider for example the rights of the working class. Italy is Milano, Roma, Torino and similar cities with universities and museums, and regions like Tuscany, Emilia Romagna where the standard of living is good or excellent, and the distant north like Bolzano, where people speak German and live as in a different state. But Italy is also Naples, Palermo, countryside and farmers: a deep south with a terrible difference



between rich and poor people.

**NT** Yes, next to our place in Palermo there is an old guy living in one room with nothing more than a double door to the street.

### Connecting discourse to reality

**CM** Yes, but let's shift towards our main issue: cultural difference. What does the art system mean if you think of the analysis we just formulated? In that world defined by the media, why should we care about an art system? It is the same kind of propagandistic model. The real country, the real situation is different. So the work of the intellectuals I think is to reconnect the 'discourse' to the reality. In the non-profit field, curators, artists and intellectuals are used to speaking about a way of being out of the system, or against the system, and I also thought to be against something huge. But then I started to consider everything from a different point of view, looking at the reality. So I say there is no art system in Italy, and if we are against this art system, we are against something that doesn't exist. I would say it is more sincere to care about the reality

**NT** Art is a way of looking at reality, a way of dealing with reality for me.

**RH** What do you propose; how can Italy reconnect with the reality of life?

**CM** In the first place by not copying other models any longer. We have a specific model. We have a society, we have a lot of problems. There's a lot of material to work with! (laughs)

**RH** Are you against globalisation in art?

**CM** We can be against globalisation in art, but I think here this is not so present yet as in the north, or the Netherlands. We hear something connected to it every day though. It's about a global system and in this sense we are all into this one big discourse, so also here it has an influence. Still the local reality is a bit different, also concerning the commercial reality of art Italy is far from the global trade. In the space between those two, there should be the possibility to build an identity. Now it seems I make the conservative discourse about identity and nationalism, but I am not. I am not talking about 'Italian identity'.

**NT** Perhaps it's a mistake of the left

to consider this discourse about identity a right-wing topic and ignore it. People just always have a need for an identity and a community, and if you ignore it there will be a problem.

**CM** Our left party uses some slogans of Obama as an election advertisement. I'm not anti-American, but we have to choose. Do we want to collaborate on building an American way of life here, or should we build another system? You cannot speak of what you don't know, and we want to be something we are not. Italian politicians and many artists or curators know very little about Italian history and about huge unresolved issues like the building of an Italian identity between fascist and communist influences, or mafia affairs. We are still discussing about our massacres and we don't know the difference between notions like state, nation and country, yet we celebrate the 150th anniversary of Italian unification. I think we are not globalised and not conscious of our identity at the same time and these two are probably connected.

### Collective memory

**NT** Then I want to go back to the garbage. You will both laugh, but I think it is significant. Probably here outside the city there are old people who still remember the time when the garbage wasn't yet picked up, the time that all your garbage was still reusable or went back into the cycle of the farm.

**CM** I agree, there is still a memory.

**NT** And I think in traditions or knowledge that are forgotten for some reason, perhaps because another system was adopted and we forgot about some daily practices. Now I'm very aware that neo liberal ideology uses this idea of personal responsibility in a way that I don't like, for the privatisation of risks for instance, but with the garbage, we forgot about some good things. I think with the garbage we can decentralise a bit. Not with healthcare, but with the garbage yes: compost it.

**CM** Yes, you could ask the people who are interested in ancient traditions and religion, why they are not interested in these kind of memories. That is a good question. When you speak about tradition, local memory, you have to distinguish between two very different situations. The first is

our heritage: the conscious or unconscious memory of something that happened just fifty or sixty years ago. Memories about farming life or about the life after the war, memories of our parents and grandparents, connected to everyday experiences, local culture, family economy, community practices. Then there's another kind on memory, which is more official and formal. This is the collection of folkloristic traditions like religious ceremonies, popular feasts, folk songs, regional dress, each of which can be used in a commercial way. So people often know about their history through these rituals or representations, but don't remember anything about their background concerning an old but not so distant heritage of knowledge.

**NT** There is a philosopher from China who answered a question in a documentary: what do the Chinese think? Strange question, but his answer was beautiful. He said the thoughts of the Chinese are influenced by fifteen years of capitalism: that we all have to fight for the best and that if some people get rich others will automatically benefit; sixty years of communism, which takes care of some ideas of how to spread wealth; and then we have 5000 years of Confucianism, which is about each person's place in the world, in the universe. So he said there are long and short lines of imaginary ideals and traditions. And for instance, the idea of resistance wouldn't be so strong in the mind of a Chinese. It is a western concept that resistance is good and noble. Eastern people, or more specifically, Taoism, might just think it is a bit silly to go there where the resistance is high. Here in Italy I hear a lot about resistance, la Lotta.

**CM** Perhaps in China they feel part of something.

**RH** What do you mean, they feel part of something?

**CM** There is a temptation to think of something else. Resistance maybe is our existence.

**NT** Perhaps resistance allows the other party to set the topic, to decide the subject.

**RH** Perhaps progetto *Isole* is like the Taoist way? You focus on a story that is there for some hundreds of years, you initiate projects and invite people to look at some specific daily realities.<sup>3</sup>





## Museum of Migration

**CM:** Friends of Marco Di Dia and me live in Lampedusa. They are wonderful people, and I want to mention them in this context. They are fighting against a political and cultural system. They created a cultural space in Lampedusa. For them it's important, because it's the only way for them to live on this little island without stimuli from the outside. Over the years they organised events, concerts, very interesting cinema festivals. And now suddenly they are in the centre of a huge European problem.<sup>4</sup> And they feel alone, so what they do is they consider what is the real possibility for art, for culture, which is their life, their main condition. One of them is a musician, another is a poet, a writer. They consider real possibility the mechanism for change. This is one of the few situations that I know of right now, where this is happening in such direct confrontation. I am an artist, poet, musician and I have to say something about society's problems. So they are writing, singing, they are documenting the situation. One of them, two weeks ago, went to Rome, and stayed for four days at the parliament in a hunger strike. During the six days he was there he was painting, on Piazza Montecitorio. On documentation about this period, we saw that the politicians just ignored him. There was a press conference, concerts; he tried to make people aware of the problems. Now he is back on Lampedusa and he is organising an archive, a Museum of Migration. They are collecting everything they find on the beaches: clothes, papers, diaries, documents of the refugees, who died sometimes, or left things behind because they couldn't bring them with them. This way they started a museum. There are a lot of ideas around this project. Why do people feel they need a museum? To me it is a particular question. For me a museum is an existing institution, I know that. They don't have any in Lampedusa. But they need a museum to tell and to contextualise and to give meaning to the situation. So I was thinking: what is a museum actually? Why do people need it?

**NT** And do you have an answer?

**CM** I think it is a human need to give meaning.

**NT** And to have a memory perhaps. Claude Lévi-Strauss says cultures that have museums can innovate. Cultures without museums have to keep their memory alive by eternal repetition.<sup>5</sup>

**CM** Anyhow, this is the only example I know of intellectuals who live this problem, and live this huge question how to do something with their cultural knowledge, personal culture. 'What can I do?' One of our friends there said that the migrants are like brothers to him, but at the same time they are his enemies. And he feels obliged to make a discourse on this.

**NT** And a very specific example of a situation where the local and the global come really close.

**CM** An experience of existence. I could ask myself the same questions about the garbage here in Palermo, about everything, but the character of the situation is different, it seems too complex for me to act. Maybe I know too much about this society. I know the politicians who represent me in Europe. We were in school together. So I know 'Europe'. (*laughs, we all laugh*)

**NT** We heard many people here say they need to escape the local situation regularly to have a fresh view. We learned from a city planner that you need to be inside to engage, but to understand you need to zoom out to have space to look at the whole picture. Some people need to travel to do that, some can do it in their mind.

**CM** This is what I did, I travelled and studied somewhere else and I came back. Now, after six years, I am a bit tired. I am alone. We are alone.

**NT** And the artists you work with?

**CM** Artists come and go, but of course both *SuccoAcido* and *progetto Isole* are very real connections to the world, both to the reality of Sicily as to a wider art community.

1 'SuccoAcido is a nice free-magazine travelling fast and never wasted', about art, cinema, comics, music, theatre and writing. *SuccoAcido* was born as black and white free press on December 2000 in Sicily. Nineteen issues were distributed in Italy and Europe; from 2005 till now *SuccoAcido* functioned as an online magazine. However, in 2012, issue #20 will be printed on paper again and we can look forward to four printed magazines a year. *SuccoAcido* has always supported

the principle of diversity, through the publication of articles and interviews in the original language as a way to offer to any individual and any community the chance to express their ideas and to assert their own roots. (from: [www.succoacido.net](http://www.succoacido.net). See also: [www.edizioni-idedieux.com](http://www.edizioni-idedieux.com).)

2 October 15 we read in the Dutch newspaper *NRC* that the Netherlands is actually the dirtiest country in Europe. Quality of surface water and soil, and percentages of particulates in the air are among the worst in Europe; only three countries in Europe have a lower percentage of renewable non-fossil energy than the Netherlands. Intensive agriculture, transport and petrochemical industries are the biggest causes.

3 [This project focuses on] the landscape around *Piana degli Albanesi*, near Palermo. It's one of the most ancient dwellings, originated from the migration of the Albanian people in the 15th century. This place is an interesting example of 'Island within the Island', as it is often defined: a town where an ethnic minority has been able to preserve, and pass down for centuries, mostly in an oral form, its linguistic, cultural and religious heritage. This place is for contemporary art an important and fascinating 'field of investigation', in which an imaginative potential can erupt from the graftings, crossbreedings and hybridations which characterise its identity - and, more generally, that of the current 'globalised' society. (from: [www.progettoisole.org](http://www.progettoisole.org))

4 Since the early 2000s, Lampedusa is a prime transit point for immigrants from Africa, the Middle East and Asia wanting to enter Europe. In 2011 many more immigrants have come to Lampedusa during the rebellions in Tunisia and Libya. By May 2011, more than 35,000 immigrants had arrived from Tunisia and Libya. By the end of August, 48,000 had arrived. (Wikipedia)

5 'Only if the past is not collected, if the art of the museum is not secured by the museum, does it make sense - and even become a kind of moral obligation - to remain faithful to the old, to follow the traditions and resist the destructive work of time. Cultures without museums are the "cold cultures" as Lévi-Strauss defined them, and these cultures try to keep their cultural identity intact by constantly reproducing the past. They do this because they feel the threat of oblivion, of a complete loss of historical memory [...] Yet if the past is collected and preserved in museums, the replication of old styles, forms, conventions, and traditions becomes unnecessary. Even more, the repetition of the old and traditional becomes a socially forbidden, or at least unrewarding, practice.' Boris Groys, *Art Power*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 2008, p.27.





## The small Museum of Migrations in Lampedusa

by *Giovanna Costanza Meli*

This article is a collaboration with the magazine *SuccoAcido*, who will publish this article in both English and Italian.

If we consider the museum as an institution, we spontaneously relate it to concepts such as tradition, collection, scientific committee, administration, more or less codified cultural representation, more or less marked cultural policies, dialogue with its context and search for a public. If we refer to the internal debate within contemporary museums, we immediately think of integration and cultural mediation, alongside the debate concerning their public and social function and the educational departments' research. All this plays a big role in the mental image shared by art historians, anthropologists and curators researching hybridisation and crossbreeding, and what these notions could mean within the various discourses on identity, on the one hand, and self-representations of otherness on the other hand.

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But what is happening today in Lampedusa? What have this island and its population to do with cultural and scientific museological debates? Who are the main characters in this story? Who gathered this collection, and what does it include? What do these findings and traces have to tell? Which identity, which otherness? We are about to talk of memory and of its strange, unexpected connotations.

The Museum of Migrations in Lampedusa is not an institution, not a collection, not a research department focused on heritage and multiculturalism, but the population of Lampedusa: common and special people who started, from a grassroots level, the construction of a collective and individual memory, keeping clear of any conventional narrative and of dominant discursive structures.

We could shed some light on our museum's protagonists. Askavusa is a cultural association, a group of friends. Giacomo Sferlazzo is a poet, singer and artist who started gathering objects and things he found on the beach – wooden scraps from wrecked or dismantled ships – in Lampedusa, with his association. Often saving materials otherwise doomed to destruction, abandonment, scrapyards. Aska-

vusa is among the subjects who did the most, over the past few years, to help the thousands of young women, men and children who decided to embark on the desperate journey out of wars and poverty, towards Europe, Italy, Sicily, Lampedusa.

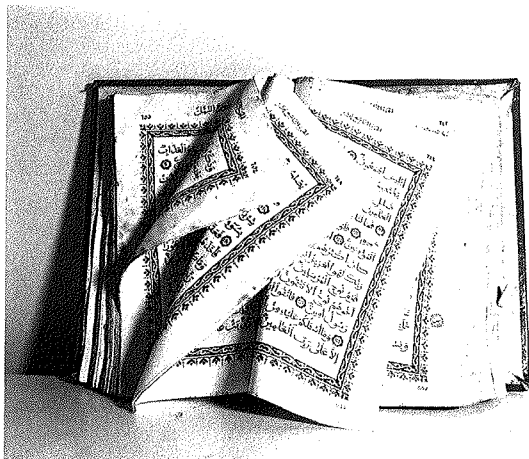
I looked at, and listened to, the protagonists of this story; I had long discussions with Giacomo Sferlazzo, to understand what reality these kids were facing, often with other volunteer or humanitarian organisations, dealing with emergencies or even with the daily arrival of migrants, who cross the Mediterranean hoping to find a new beginning in this first patch of Europe, Lampedusa.

Over my conversation with the Askavusa volunteers I discovered a whole world of solidarity and civic engagement, great humility alongside a deep awareness of one's role, of the importance of collective action and testimony. I asked Giacomo why he started hunting out and preserving those ships, Korans, Bibles, letters, travel amulets, clothes, personal belongings now representing the only trace of thousands of different people: lives which nobody knows and which the media portray as an undifferentiated mass. I discovered that the quest for memory is an individual journey, starting from oneself, one's own roots, and gradually becoming an encounter with the other.

### Giacomo Sferlazzo says:

The first time I went to the boat cemetery, I was looking – as is often the case – for something wonderful in the junkyard. I have always been extremely curious of objects, I remember my grandparents' living rooms, so many things in their cupboards – each with a story or a memory of its own: most were ugly, but still I was extremely fascinated. They had been there forever, every now and then a new one would appear, they all seemed extremely valuable to me. But as I grew up many of those objects would change places or end up in some cardboard box. I saw things materialise and vanish in those homes at an ever increasing pace, I don't know if it was my ageing which had made time and space change forever, if some magic halo around those things had gone for good, or if – as I would have later said – 'objects started being designed to become trash as soon as possible, goods to be replaced at the fastest imaginable pace'. I remember when immigration hadn't yet altered Lampedusa's face, and I would roam the island's junkyard as if on a treasure hunt, among those forms, materials





Archive of  
Migrations  
- Courtesy  
of Askavusa  
Association -  
Lampedusa  
2011

and stories all intertwined with my fantasies, eventually bringing me back to my own childhood and the quest for the invisible I never got tired of. I often found things, or just played within an abandoned car, driving it on desert trails or flying it among washing machines and brightly coloured tiles.

But when I first found, in a heap of chunks of wood, a bundle of pictures, letters and holy scriptures, I felt something I had never experienced during my trips through discarded objects. It was as if I had found something I had always been looking for, a testimony to something human that had previously been shrouded in mysteries, perhaps mystery itself. It was as if I had just taken part in the story of humanity as a whole, as if I had discovered the Egyptian pyramids, as if I had started on a path leading to a promise of light and liberation but winding through injustice and pain.



#### **Giovanna Costanza Meli:**

This is how a new approach to memory and identity has taken shape from the experiences of Giacomo Sferlazzo and Associazione Askavusa, which has been supporting him in this research, and mission, for a few years now. What immediately struck me in his project was that it was brought about by common people – not by institutions – who suddenly felt very strongly the meaning at the root of the process of musealisation itself. I wondered why a group of kids, the population of an island so often forgotten or martyred, has felt the need to make a museum out of what they found. What is this need for storytelling and witnessing, this search for an identity that can only be found through a dialogue with the memories of other populations, other people travelling and

passing through here? What can this memory – born out of the encounter between different stories and narratives – represent?

#### **This was Giacomo's answer:**

The Museum of Migrations could be a first piece to lead Lampedusa's development along a purposeful path, instead of leaving it to randomness: it could be an example to the whole world, seeing integration as an inevitable, but nonetheless rightful resource within Italy's multicultural present. In thirty years the sons, daughters, grandchildren, brothers and sisters of those we now call clandestines will be full-fledged Italian and European citizens. It is our duty to keep track of these migrations, which would otherwise be totally forgotten; it is our duty to save these ships, these Korans, these Bibles, these clothes and shoes, documents and objects the sea has brought us. They will speak – they already do – to our posterity: they will tell of these tragedies, these hopes and dreams so often drowned in the Mediterranean sea.



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