"Artistic Experimentation & Urban Change: **Luna Nera at the Mattatoio**"
Roma – 29 October to 2 November 2005

Luna Nera was invited to participate in a 4 day conference and workshop part of the project "L'età nomade" (Nomad Age) jointly organised by the Academia di Belle Arti di Roma, the artist group Com.plot S.Y.S.tem and the foundation Ocilbupetra. "L'età nomade" is an ongoing artistic research on the contemporary topic of the flux, migration and new frontiers of space and time. It is a collective reflection on themes such as site and work, the meeting point of the Other, spatial and anthropological principles and an initiative aiming at focusing interest on the contemporary panorama of research between arts and architecture.

Luna Nera took part in the conference and workshop curated by Giovanna Dalla Chiesa, art history professor of the academy and Com.plot S.Y.S.tem, an independent art group, researching on trans-disciplinary practices with a particular interest in the relation between art and architecture, and in collaboration with the Facultà di architettura Roma 3.

The conference took place in the old abattoir "Mattatoio", where the Academia di Belle Arti di Roma and the Facultà di architettura Roma 3 have partly relocated. The first two days where dedicated at the presentation of the participating art groups and architects, which gave birth to discussions and questions about practice, spatial and anthropological implications of art and architectural interventions and the formulation of collective queries. Beside offering us the chance to meet other artists and knowing of new initiatives and thus allowing each to reflect on its own practice in context with others, these also gave us the opportunity to generate new possible collaborations.

Luna Nera was invited to produce a piece of work for "L'eta nomade", in the space reserved for the exhibition of the Academia di Belle Arti di Roma (which ran to 17.11.05). We created "herd," an installation which came directly out of the experience eof dialogue during the conference and of exploring the Mattatoio and its environs.

The Mattatoio is a place which fits perfectly with Luna Nera's brief to explore sites of former significance and which are now disused or not used for their original purpose. The Mattatoio is in a state of transition: thirty ago it was important workplace which employed hundreds of people of Testaccio, and provided food for the whole city and beyond. Over time it has fallen into dereliction but not inactivity: it houses an

eclectic range of communities and facilities such as Gypsies, Kurdish refugees, horses and their keepers; a social centre, a concert hall, and most recently the traffic police, the facultà di architettura Roma 3, part of the MACRO (Roma's museum of contemporary arts), and the Academia di Belle Arti di Roma amongst its new additions. Today, Mattatoio is a huge disconnected architectural island surrounded by walls separating it from the rest of the city's social life, and it also faces an additional isolation from inside. Each community or facility using the site has isolated itself from the rest by another wall. Each is living / working blind to his/her neighbour.

Slowly the huge site is being returned to activity, though the sheer diversity of uses means that exactly how the restoration will develop is fraught with questions.

One of the workshops initiated by ComPlot SYStem asked students, researchers and artists to imagine a "meeting point" that could be established in the Mattatoio to try to bring the diverse elements together, and to bring the rest of Testaccio into the Mattatoio.
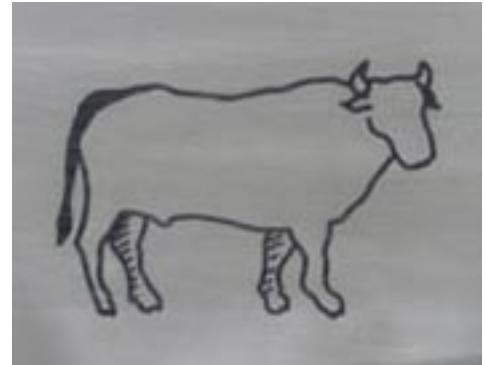
This caused us to call into question the existing models of "regeneration". This is a popular term but what does it actually mean? Does it mean simply replacing working class people with middle class people? In creating the "recently gentrified and decidedly hip Testaccio neighbourhood" [description found on the MACRO's website], what has been lost, shunted aside, destroyed? Clearly, the former use of the edifice is not recoverable, but can it in fact be regenerated into a place that does serve the locale? Or maybe in this era "local" does not mean anything, as we are in fact in a constant mode of nomadism across the city, country and continent?

Since the group's inception we have been pondering this question of the environmental and architectural heritage of localities. Luna Nera's projects address a series of issues around ideas of society, community, history, memory and public space. We asked ourselves whether, given the demands of contemporary capitalism and the pressure on urban economies, we can imagine a future Mattatoio where changing populations – including the marginal groups such as the horses, gypsies, refugees and working-class pensioners - can co-exist with major

civic institutions such as the university and contemporary art centre?

Luna Nera responded to the call to imagining as well as the theoretical debate by asking ourselves how we felt about the Mattatoio. We saw that the structure runs the risk of being –like so many others – "regenerated" to the point of institution-alisation and exclusion. Contemporary development and architecture too often focuses on containment and exclusions of groups which do not contribute to the

wealth-generating impetus of our current manifestation of capitalism. We felt that, despite this reality, the Mattatoio must somehow continue to belong to the people of Testaccio. We sought to remind people of the original use of the Mattatoio and caution against the "sanitisation" of the site.

To create "herd" we searched site for detritus of the past and found rusted metal hooks used to move carcasses. Along with other found materi-als we created a "herd" of horned beasts standing on a scarlet ground. Surrounding the herd was a transparent wall of plastic, which was also used to wrap trays

of "meat" – drawings of cows portioned into cuts of meat – much as the Mattatoio is portioned out into divided and uncommunicating areas each "wrapped" in their own concerns.

At the same time we could not avoid using the

work to explore issues of industrial food production. Recent studies show that over 70% of UK children do not understand that the meat they eat comes from an animal. The open presence of a place such as the old Mattatoio is rare in Western cities now. The wrapped drawings in "herd" insist on recalling the traditional primeval re-lationship between the food and the act of killing/sacrifice, affirming that real life does not come shrink wrapped beyond recognition but is all an integrated, com-plex, sometimes messy and unified whole.

Process was and remains a very important part of our work, and is integral to any consideration of the final production. Although "herd" came out of the dialogue taking place in the conference and workshop, we did not start working from any kind of "concept". By listening to different people's perspectives on a variety of subjects, by rooting around the site and finding diverse objects – some of which we used and some which we didn't – and by the physical labour of building, draw-

ing, arranging, recording and so on, we arrived at a state where the conceptual framework emerged as part of the final production.

This is a paradigm of how Luna Nera operates; specifically, the way the physical experience of the exploration and working process feeds the concept and how interlinked such processes are. The brain storming, conceptual development and building are inseparable parts of the creation process; the actual order in which they occur is not important.

This sort of approach can be seen as an alternative way of dealing with the space as a whole. The whole work process we are using, the loop in history, working onsite to develop different things, is actually a very organic approach towards regeneration of a specific locale. Making a series of organic public experiments in a place can form the primary step towards a regeneration of the place: acknowledging the original character, respecting the history and the contributions of those who used the place before, refusing boundaries, and using both what is left behind and what has disappeared. In this way, the working process becomes part of the historical process of the site: emotionally, rationally, spiritually, historically and geographically.

Returning to the Mattatoio, it is currently an example of how the different facets that currently rest within it form sort of stagnant pool, lacking a flow of communication between the components. The lack of movement and flow means entropy of the whole, though parts may be living.

We envision that the eventual outcome will most likely be one organisation, external or internal, taking it over in the name of "development," and alienating it from its history, both its recent history as refuge for marginalised people, and it distant history as food provider to the city.

This brings us to call for a consideration of artistic experimentation and organic development as a significant part in the process of urban change. It seems to us that any other way of approaching "regeneration," "rebuilding" or "renovation" of a site, a neighbourhood or a region usually results in either total destruction of the original or an ersatz copy of the original turning it into a "Disney" version of

itself or, if there is an attempt at "integrating" the remaining elements, these are so institutionalised that they lose any character that was worth preserving. The fact is that by creating "developed" and "hip" zones of exclusion we are creating and storing up social problems that will be very difficult to address without resorting to suspect methods. While it seems utopian to suggest that art may have the answer to these difficult social questions, we believe that by making artistic experimentation and creative dialogue between all interested parties an integral part of any urban development, we can at least make some attempt to integrate the emotional, rational, spiritual, historical and geographical perspectives to arrive at some kind of common goal and understanding.

Sandrine Albert, Julian Ronnefeldt and Gillian McIver, 2005
All translation from the Italian by Sandrine Albert.

Links

Complot SYStem http://www.complotsystem.org
MACRO http://www.macro.roma.museum/english/museum/index.html
ocilbupetra   http://www.ocilbupetra.com/
libera accademia di belle arti di Roma http://www.iaa.it

Photography

Images of the Mattatoio Gillian McIver
Installation views Julian Ronnefeldt