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Public Art, Collective Memory: the Contested Heritage of Arnaldo Pomodoro's Columns in Piazza Verdi

Art-Based Regeneration; Cultural Heritage; Public Space Management; Arnaldo Pomodoro, Bologna

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In 1972 the Mayor of Bologna Renato Zangheri installed three column-like sculptures in piazza Verdi, the heart of the University district and student life. In the idea of Zangheri, the columns—made by Italian sculptor Arnaldo Pomodoro and donated to the city by the artist—were a monument to the future of the world, expressed in the city by the University and its students.

Despite the harsh confrontation between the student movement and the Municipality, in particular during the 1977 clashes, the columns will soon become an affective and symbolic landmark for the student's militant population, who appropriated them in various ways. Acts of appropriation included using the columns as billboards for political pamphlets and manifestos, or staging temporary performances and installations around them. In 1977, the columns were even used as posts to build a tent to transform the square in a large campsite. The columns were colloquially referred to "totems," as a symbolic object for the Dadaist cult of the Metropolitan Indians, a counter-cultural agitation group.

During the 90s, concerns for the preservation of the artworks

forced the municipality to remove the columns from piazza Verdi—against the will of the artist—and to relocate them first at the Galleria di Arte Moderna (GAM) in 1996, and then at the Museo di Arte Moderna Bologna (MAMBO) in 2014.

Reconstructing the story of Pomodoro's "totems" allows us to tackle several issues concerning the politics of preservation, highlighting the non-linear processes of construction and removal of physical and cultural heritage, and the role of public art in place-making in urban environments, characterized by social conflicts.

Recently, in the public debate the opportunity of transferring Pomodoro's columns back to the University District has been reconsidered, removing them from the musealization of their current installation site, and bringing them back to the life of the city, together with their powerful symbolic and memory value.

However, the University District is still perceived as dangerous for the physical integrity of the artworks, because of its problematic nightlife and the proliferation of micro-criminality.

The possibility to re-locate the "totems" in the area may be facilitated by the agreement between Institutions (University, Municipality) and all the formal and informal players active in the area (i.e. the student's population, the local residents) upon an integrated plan of management and care for the artworks. The methodologies experimented in the city during the first year of the Horizon 2020 project ROCK, as well as the networks established by the University and the Municipality for the heritage-based transformation of the area, are key assets for this attempt.

At least since the "urban regeneration" of Rome promoted by Pope Sixtus V in the late 16th century, placing statues, fountains and monuments in crossroads and piazzas has been connected to the representation of local and national, religious and secular powers. Art, and its capacity to be interpreted and read as a series of signs and symbols, has been the main medium through which new urban transformations were communicated to the local population and travellers. Art was the tool through which the unity of people with their rulers was sanctioned and publicly represented. As such, public art was also the object of programmed vandalism and destruction during revolts and revolutions.

But what happens when the art to be placed in public spaces refuses to convey straightforward meanings or to employ shared symbols? And what happens if the artwork is not destroyed, but performatively appropriated by radical political groups during an urban revolt? This was the case of the Arnaldo Pomodoro's three *Columns* in Bologna. Started as the municipality's collaboration with a world-famous artist for the celebration of the city's university and its future, the columns were instead appropriated by the creative fringes of the autonomous movement of 1977 becoming universally known as *totems*. The columns became the retroactive symbol of the revolt against the established leftist city administration, but also the symbol of Bologna as a vibrant and tolerant artistic centre. The columns were then used throughout the 1980s as billboards for political posters and covered with writings and stickers, and they were finally removed by the administration to be restored and preserved in a more controlled museum environment.

Reconstructing the history of Pomodoro's columns allow us to tackle some questions on the nature of public art, cultural heritage and its relation to preservation. What happens if the intentions of the artist and the patron are swerved by the autonomous life of the artwork? Can the love for an artwork endanger its physical integrity? And also, what does it mean to restore a public artwork without restoring it to its original location, removing it from the life of the city? And finally, what could be the strategy to collective management of the artwork as a common good, to bring them back to their original location?

The life and death of a public artwork

Arnaldo Pomodoro realized his *Cilindro costruito* in 1969. The sculpture was initially meant to be installed in the Financial Plaza of the Pacific in Honolulu. The column was first noted by the Mayor of Bologna, Renato Zangheri, during the Rossini festival in Pesaro in 1971. In the same year, the municipality of Bologna

decided to buy the artwork and to exhibit it in a public art exhibition curated by Giuseppe Marchiori. Zangheri interpreted the columns as the monument to the future of the world. In Bologna the future was represented by the students of its University, known as the most ancient university of the Western world. For this reason, soon after its first public display, the Mayor asked the artist to position the artwork in Piazza Verdi, the heart of the university district. Pomodoro, who privileged the collocation of his artworks in public space, not only welcomed Zangheri's request, but he donated to the city of Bologna two more artworks: *Mole circolare* and *Colonna intera recisa*.¹

Italy had the largest communist party in the Western block. Bologna, which was governed by the Party since the end of the Second World War, was the test case for the theory of Eurocommunism, an experiment with how an actual communist political agenda could be realized in a prosperous, and advanced capitalist, middle-size European city. However, the progressive agenda of Zangheri and the local Communist Party had also its own discontents, in particular from the younger generations of workers and university students. Sylvère Lotringer has described the dissatisfaction towards the Party's future plans for a progressive, future realisation of socialism: "[f]or the first time young workers and students saw what 'Socialism' looks like: acute unemployment, living costs higher than anywhere else, and the hypocritical image of a benevolent PCI. Young emigrant workers arriving from the South soon realize that their slumlords are card-carrying members." Instead of a future socialist society, perhaps represented in Zangheri's vision by Pomodoro's columns, "[t]he youth realized that they couldn't care less about Socialism, or the future society. They wanted instant change."²

1 The general data and the cronology of Pomodoro's works were provided by Bitta Lorenzetti, from the Fondazione Arnaldo Pomodoro.

2 Sylvère Lotringer. "In the Shadow of the Red Brigades," in *Autonomia: Post-political Politics* (New York: Semiotext(e), 1980): xiv.



Fig. 1

Bologna, Piazza
Verdi, 1977.

Photo by courtesy of
Giuseppe Cannistrà.

The political contestation against the municipality of Bologna was carried on by a series of far-left groups, including several organised political formations around the area of Autonomia (in particular, Autonomia Operaia and Lotta Continua), as well as loosely-organised, spontaneist, cultural agitation groups such as the so-called Metropolitan Indians. The conflict escalated in several violent demonstrations, which culminated in March 1977 with the shooting of a militant of Lotta Continua, Francesco Lorusso. Piazza Verdi and the university district became for a few days an autonomous zone controlled by armed students and militants for several days. Only the intervention of tanks sent from the Interior minister put end of the siege of the area. Arnaldo Pomodoro's columns were placed by the municipality of Bologna in what soon literally became a war zone, which could indeed compromise the integrity of the artworks.

However, Arnaldo Pomodoro's columns were the object of other kinds of performative acts. Before and after the 1977 clashes the columns became an affective and symbolic landmark for the student's militant population, who appropriated them in various

ways which included using them as seats, billboards for political posters, stages for performances [Fig.1]. During the “international conference against repression,” that took place in September 1977, after a petition signed by intellectuals such as Jean-Paul Sartre, Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, the columns supported a large tent, transforming Piazza Verdi in a temporary campsite for militants coming from all over Europe.³

In the 1980s, Pomodoro’s columns became the retroactive symbol of the revolt of the 1970s and its collectively joyful character, as opposed to the general feeling of individualisation of the *riflusso* (the low-ebb era).⁴ In these period, the columns were still used by the local population as billboards and covered with writings. Despite the uses and mis-uses which the artworks were subject to, they were periodically cleaned and maintained, and their presence in the square was not considered problematic until 1990. During that year, concerns for the preservation of the artworks forced the municipality to remove the columns from piazza Verdi. From 1990 till 1996, the columns were stored in a warehouse, waiting for an agreement for their restoration and future relocation. Arnaldo Pomodoro, who had always embraced the collocation of its artworks in the “dangerous” environment of Piazza Verdi, saw the six years of removal of his columns from the public space as the actual “mortification” of his artworks.⁵ Eventually, in 1996 the columns were finally restored and installed in a garden in front of the Galleria di Arte Moderna (GAM) in 1996. With the relocation of the collections of the GAM from

3 See Andrea L. Hajek, “Bologna and the trauma of March 1977: the ‘intelletuali contro’ and their ‘resistance’ to the local Communist Party,” *Carte italiane* 2, no. 7 (2011).

4 The alliance between the Communist Party and Christian Democracy, followed by the cabinets led by Bettino Craxi in the 1980s produced a deep restructuring of the productive, political and cultural landscape of Italy, towards a neoliberalisation of economy, and a crisis of political representation and participation. See Paolo Virno, “Do you remember counterrevolution?”, in *Radical thought in Italy*, ed. by Paolo Virno and Michael Hardt (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), 241-260.

5 Brunella Torresin, “Ricordate i totem di Pomodoro? E’ ora che tornino a casa,” *La Repubblica* (13 September 2011).

its former peripheral position to the newly restored art citadel in the centre of the city, the columns were relocated in 2017 to their current position in the sculpture garden of the Museo di Arte Moderna Bologna (MAMBO).

The idea of moving the columns back to piazza Verdi, however, was never fully abandoned and the “totems” are often used as a polemic pretext for local controversies. Local citizens associations, intellectuals, as well as the artist himself, have more than once declared their preference to restore the columns to their original location.⁶ Instead of valorizing the symbolic strata that the columns have accumulated during an 18 year-long troubled history in a troubled location, the local administration favoured a curatorial strategy driven exclusively by the integrity of the physical aspects of the artworks. The location at the MAMBO has been considered by the municipality as “definitive.”⁷

How to do things with monuments

To fully understand the symbolic importance of the Pomodoro controversy in Bologna, it is worth exploring, on the one hand, the figure of Arnaldo Pomodoro as one of the most influential and internationally established artist of the 1960s and 1970s. On the other hand, the interpretative practices, and the use of the monuments in the performative actions of the 1970s political movement, will be analysed.

Arnaldo Pomodoro's iconic polished bronze sculptures are literally present in every major art collection in the world. Their shiny presence is seen not only in galleries but also in front of some of the most prominent palaces representing local and international institutional powers: the United Nations in New York (*Sfera con sfera*, 1991), the Palace of Youth in Moscow (*Disco*

6 Fernando Pellerano, “«Le mie colonne tornino in piazza Verdi»”, Interview to Arnaldo Pomodoro, *Corriere di Bologna* (7 May 2014).

7 Fernando Pellerano, “Bologna. «I totem di Pomodoro restano al Cavaticcio, in mezzo ai giovani»”, *Corriere di Bologna* (8 May 2014).

solare, 1983-84) the Vatican Museums (*Sfera con sfera*, 1991), the UNESCO headquarters in Paris (*La Freccia*, 1993-95) the Italian Foreign Office (*Sfera Grande*, first conceived for the Expo in Montréal in 1967), to name a few.⁸

Ironically, Pomodoro's columns were removed from Piazza Verdi in 1990, precisely when Pomodoro started to be recognized as the institutional and public sculptor *par excellence*. However, Pomodoro started gaining international visibility already since the mid-fifties as a participant of the Venice Biennale, and later, together with artists such as Lucio Fontana, as a member of the art group *Continuità*. Since 1959, he travelled to the United States and became artist-in-residence at Stamford in 1966. In 1970, he started a traveling exhibition across all the major American campuses, starting from Berkeley. When Zangheri first contacted Pomodoro, the artist was already internationally renowned. From this point of view, it is not surprising that Zangheri too wanted a Pomodoro's artwork for his city, as his sculptures were already considered in the public perception as familiar objects in the urban furniture of many Italian and international cities.

What changed the habits of public perception was instead the way in which the monument was used during the 1970s. In particular, one specific episode changed once and for all the perception of the object, producing an "incorporeal transformation" of the object perhaps more stronger than any more or less creative act of physical vandalism that was performed over the surface of the artworks.

One particular image from Giuseppe Cannistrà [Fig. 2] depicts the very moment in which this transformation occurred. A group of young militants are caught transforming one of Pomodoro's columns into a neo-pagan totem for a street performance of the so-called Metropolitan Indians, the creative fringes of the student movement. From that moment onwards, even in the

8 See Flaminio Gualdoni, *Arnaldo Pomodoro: General Catalogue of Sculptures* (Milan: Skira, 2007).



languages used in local newspapers, politicians and curators, Pomodoro's columns became universally known the Totems.⁹ Like in a dadaist artwork, Pomodoro's columns were used as an objet trouvée, ready to be attached with new meanings and uses.

What happened to Pomodoro's columns? Following the theory elaborated by John Langshaw Austin in his classic text *How to Do Things with Words* (1962), the Metropolitan Indians' provocation can be read as a "linguistic act".¹⁰ According to Austin, a linguistic act, or illocutionary act, is a statement that does not describe any thing or any situation, but allows to the speaker to perform an action. Examples of illocutionary acts are those utterances performed by a priest who celebrates a wedding, or a judge declaring a sentence. These speech act do not inform about anything, they perform actions changing the status of the newly wed couple, or on the condemned. In a similar way, the 1977 action, through an artistic and political ritual, transformed the status of the columns. But while the acts of the priest and the judge exercise sacralised powers from the above, the Metropolitan Indians performed a de-sacralisation of the institutional role of the sculptures as icons of the powers of the city and the university, giving them back to the everyday use of the city and of the student population.

The reference to linguistic theory is not far-fetched from the cultural environment in which the students of the university of Bologna were immersed at that time. In 1971, Italy's first degree in the disciplines of arts, music and entertainemnt (DAMS) was introduced at the University of Bologna. The curriculum included courses by Umberto Eco and Renato Barilli, among others. Umberto Eco in particular exercised a strong influence both inside and outside academia, providing new tools for the interpretation

9 Arnaldo Pomodoro declared that he did not like his artworks to be called totems, preferring instead the name of "columns" or "cylinders", to preserve their abstract character and leave their interpretation open.

10 John Langshaw Austin, *How to do Things With Words?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975).

Fig. 1

Performative acts on monuments: the colums become totems.

Photo by courtesy of Giuseppe Cannistrà.

of previously neglected art forms such as comics, and for the analysis of the languages of mass media. His 1965 *Opera Aperta*, translated into English in 1989, explored the character of art—in particular of modern art—of being open to various interpretations and appropriations from the beholder. Eco explored the unfinished character of art and the role of chance in the process of creation, which does not end with the exhibition of the artwork. In this way, the audience has not a merely passive role in the reception of the artwork, but it cooperates, in alliance with the author, to complete and enrich it into new and unexpected forms.¹¹

Eco expanded the concept of interpretative cooperation in his 1990 book *I limiti dell'interpretazione* (English translation *The Limits of Interpretation*, 1994). Here, Eco distinguishes a three-part interpretative scheme, composed by the intentions of the author, of the text and of the reader: *intentio auctoris*, *intentio operis* and *intentio lectoris*. Whereas the *intentio auctoris*—what the author really wanted to say—has traditionally received the attention of the critique, Eco is more interested to look for the deep motivation of the text in itself. The *intentio operis* has to be found in the text itself, and it is independent from the intention of the author. It is then possible to look for an internal textual coherence of the text, and the systems of signification which it refers to. However, according to Eco's interpretative semiotic, a text is incomplete without the intervention of a reader. The reader fills in the gaps of the text through their own signifying systems or through their own desires and drives.¹²

Seen from the point of view of the *intentio auctoris*, we can observe that Pomodoro wanted to express through his work a desire of freedom and emancipation. In his works, Pomodoro employs rigid geometric and classical forms such as spheres,

11 Umberto Eco, *The Open Work* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989).

12 Umberto Eco, *The Limits of Interpretation* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1994).

columns and cones. However, the cracks on their polished surfaces allow the proliferation of complex structures made of cryptic signs reminiscent of archaic cuneiform writing, whose meaning is lost. Similarly to the work of Lucio Fontana, whose cuts destroyed the classical unity of the canvas bringing forward new spatial possibilities in the interstices of matter, Arnaldo Pomodoro breaks with the constraints of Euclidean solids unveiling a magmatic chaos of lost signifying structures. Such a spatial syntax, with its specific *the intentio operis*, is inserted in already consolidated urban spaces. Pomodoro's works are not *site specific*—like the ones Daniel Buren who, since 1965, started elaborating his works coherently with the spaces in which they were going to be installed. On the contrary, Pomodoro's metallic structure are alien elements, with an “internal textual coherence” that progressively merge into the life of the city.

In this sense, they still work as classical monuments inserted in urban spaces. However, the abstract language in which they are composed leaves their interpretation open to various appropriations. On the one hand, the Mayor of Bologna saw them as the representation of the progressive—yet institutionalised—form of administration of the Aemilian PCI. The 1977 movement, on the one hand, ironically elevated them as fetishes into a neo-animist cult. On the other hand, they created use values for the columns, restituting them to the practical and symbolic everyday life of the student community. Preservationists and curators saw them as expensive artifacts made by a world-famous artist in need for a controlled exhibition environment, far from the dangers of an allegedly troubled urban area. For the association of the friends and family of Francesco Lorusso, who authored a petition for the relocation of the “totems” in their original location in Piazza Verdi, they represent the heyday of Bologna as an international artistic avantgarde capital—not concealing the nostalgia

permeating a certain kind of narration often practiced in Bologna.¹³ Others saw the parable of Pomodoro's columns the removal of a crucial episode in the history of the city, which changed its image and destiny forever.¹⁴

Public art, common goods

The story of Arnaldo Pomodoro's "totems" is instructive on the nature of public art and the relations it establishes with its audience in times of political turmoil. This example shows not only the gap between the intentions of author, text, and readers in their interpretation of the artwork, but also in the power relations crossing the perceptive habits of the various audiences in the city. In particular, what emerges is the gap between the political intentions in the creation of a public artwork and its reception, which appropriates the object as a *common* good for a common use. At least since Elinor Ostrom was awarded the Nobel Prize in Economics in 2009, common goods have received great interest not only in political activist circles but also in the mainstream discourses of administrators and policy makers, in particular in Spain and Italy.¹⁵ The Report of the Rodotà Commission—the first attempt to include common goods into the Italian juridical structure as a reform of the civil code—distinguishes common goods from public goods, since they can be owned not only by public bodies, but also by private individuals. They are basically composed by natural resources—such as water bodies, forests, glaciers, wildlife and other listed natural landscapes—as well as material and immaterial cultural, artistic or archaeological goods. According to the report, common goods suffer from a

13 The text of the petition can be read here [in Italian]: <http://www.radiocittadelcapo.it/wp-content/uploads/totem.doc>.

14 Piero dall'OCCA, "Quando a Piazza Verdi c'erano le colonne," *Gomorra*, 4, no. 7 (May 2004): 22-26.

15 For an overview on the institutionalisation of common goods in Italy, see Ugo Mattei, "Institutionalizing the Commons. An Italian Primer," in *Global Activism. Art and Conflict in the 21st Century*, edited by Peter Weibel (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2015), 85-100.

highly critical situation because of their scarcity, perishability, or lack of juridical protection. However, they are defined as key elements to exercise fundamental rights and to develop individual freedoms, to be kept intact for further generations.¹⁶

Despite the attempts to include a regulatory framework for common goods in the national civil law, it was through local initiatives—in particular in the city of Naples—that common goods started to be recognised, and new forms of management are currently being experimented together with citizen's association and political groups. So far, the framework of common goods has been used in Naples to prevent the local water supply agency from being privatised, and the status of common goods has been given to some self-managed experiences of social regeneration in publicly-owned buildings of the city, some of which were illegally occupied.

The municipality of Bologna too has experimented with the concept of common goods, but the idea was applied in a much smaller scale compared to Naples, mainly to give recognition (as well as small financial support) to local groups and citizen associations that were already taking care of small public spaces and green areas across the city. However, the current pilot actions that the municipality of Bologna is deploying together with the University in the university district within the Horizon 2020 project ROCK, suggest the possibility to employ the common goods framework in a more ambitious way, towards the collective and integrated management of the cultural heritage of the university area. Following the model of UNESCO's integrated management plans for the world heritage sites, Bologna is currently working towards the engagement of all the institutional, formal and informal actors of the area towards the design and the implementation of an integrated management plan of the cultural heritage

16 Stefano Rodotà et al., "Commissione Rodotà - per la modifica delle norme del codice civile in materia di beni pubblici," technical report (Rome: Ministero della giustizia, 2007).

of the university district. Perhaps this experimentation with a community-based approach to cultural heritage and its preservation could be an occasion to rethink the destiny of Pomodoro's totems. Giving them back to the city would then mean not to use them instrumentally to celebrate a supposedly glorious past, but to accept and to engage with the diversity and plurality of life forms that have animated and will hopefully continue to animate the cultural landscape of Bologna in the future.

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