

Narrating the Living Town

The Case Study of Seminaria Sogninterra Environmental Art Biennial

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Contemporary art offers infinite possibilities to experiment with innovative ways of inclusion, to encourage intercultural dialogue, and to reinforce social cohesion by providing concrete tools and methods for the construction of common grounds among people and communities. Outside of traditional spaces of artistic production (such as museums, galleries and foundations), but within public and unconventional places, art can create new encounters and reach out to new audiences. Artists can play a real, active role in building new narratives in a town: through participatory strategies they can engage communities in active storytelling, helping them to project their own identity onto the environment.

How and why art has started a dialogue with the urban field is part of a slow historical process. Over the last few decades, contemporary art has increasingly moved out of the museum and its spatial rigidity, in order to establish a direct contact with the natural and urban environment, as well as with people and their traditions. Leaving the protected space of the

museum is indeed a challenge for the artist, who needs to face a dynamic space where landscape, architectural, human, social and sociological elements contribute to the meaning of art. It is also an act of liberation, aiming to expand the horizons of artistic research and to discover new forms of expression, new answers, and new inputs.

Seminaria Sogninterra: Empowering the Sensory Community

Seminaria Sogninterra (hereby only *Seminaria*) is a non-profit organization and a biennial of environmental art that has taken place since 2011 in Maranola, a small town in the south of Italy with a decreasing population. *Seminaria* is a community-based art project, with the declared aim to provide diverse ways to imagine the future of a place where even the present is hard to grasp. Curated by the authors of this article, *Seminaria* is a case study for those who practice art in small urban contexts and its results have been presented over the past years at La Sapienza Università di Roma, Goldsmiths University in London, Manchester Metropolitan University and the Residency Unlimited in New York.

Speaking of *Seminaria*, one cannot ignore the town in which it takes place: Maranola. It is a medieval hamlet, geographically nestled between Rome and Naples, and built on a natural belvedere overlooking the sea, between softly sloping hills full of olive groves and winding roads that climb the Aurunci mountains. The picturesque scenery surrounds a small and lively community, which is suffering from a heavy wave of depopulation. Following global trends that can be seen in the percentages of inhabitants of urban and rural areas,¹ over the past 30 years, most people have moved from the town to newly-built neighbourhoods in the surrounding hills, where anonymous but comfortable, terraced houses have been built. The approximately 1,500 people who still live in Maranola are mainly senior citizens, with some families and relatively few children. The life of the town revolves around three churches, a pharmacy, a primary school and a small grocery store; there are no theatres, no permanent cultural spaces, no concert

venues. Young people go to live and work in nearby cities and come back once a year, during summertime, along with a few tourists.

Nonetheless, the resilience of Maranola's residents is impressive: they are very active and busy in keeping their traditions alive and in organizing their own cultural and entertainment programmes. In fact, there are about a dozen local, non-profit cultural associations, self-organized according to a bottom-up model, one of which is *Seminaria*.

It is difficult to define Maranola's community, given how much it is connected to the town itself. Angelos Theocharis's definition of a 'sensory community' as a group of people who share a sensory experience, provided by a common environment, may well describe it best. Interestingly, instead of pointing at the community as a group of people held together by common stakes, beliefs and origins, as it is commonly understood, the sensory community gives credit to the place and its sensory stimuli as the main things that shape a collective identity.² This idea applies to Maranola's community, which gathers itself around the stimuli provided by the very particular architecture of the town, designed as a fortress.

When you pass through the large archway, the only entrance into the town, you have the feeling of entering a timeless and intimate dimension. First, you will meet some elderly residents sitting by the arch, enjoying the marine wind that blows through it. They will greet you, as they do everybody, almost as if they are the guardians of the town, keeping an eye on everyone who steps in and out. Once inside the fortress, you can enjoy the coolness of the narrow stone alleyways, where neither sun nor cars are allowed. You might feel overwhelmed by the tight proximity of the houses to each other and realize that there's a lack of privacy for the residents, who can see and hear everything from window to window. But you will never feel lonely in Maranola. You will be reassured by the smell of *ragù* (a red meat sauce) on Sundays or by the music of the *organetto* (the traditional instrument of the

town) drifting through some windows. You will always know what time it is by listening to the ringing of the church bells, calling people to Mass.

In spite of the fortress that encloses it, the community is open to telling stories and to listening to new ones. That is why Seminaria was founded: to provide new listeners and new storytellers.

Artists from all over Italy and abroad are called to join this dialogue with Maranola, to identify and to highlight the set of small things that make up this community, to perceive all the little marks, to collect the stories, to elaborate on them, and to return them in the form of works of art. At the core of this slow process is Seminaria Sogninterra international residency programme. Every two years, around 12 artists are invited to Maranola to develop a site-specific project according to Seminaria's guidelines. It must be a project that fits a specific place along the exhibition's predefined 1-km-long path that runs through the hamlet, the alleys, the public spaces and the private houses. Multimedia, relational and performative works, sculptures, videos and installations are Seminaria's favourite projects, especially if they incorporate local materials and elaborate local narratives.

The development of these projects takes months, until the artists return to Maranola for the production of the art works and their installation. Ten days before the opening, at the end of August, the 12 artists along with their families and a number of volunteers mixed with residents and summer tourists gather for the realization of what until then has only been imagined and collectively discussed. At this point, Maranola is busier and more crowded than ever: an explosive moment of creativity and joy. That is when the welcoming capacity of the town is put to the test and the dinner tables are always ready to be adjusted for unexpected guests.

The active participation of local inhabitants is the backbone of Seminaria: some host the artists in their own homes, others open their own, private

spaces to the visitors during the final event, young people who come back home for the summer holidays join the volunteers and help with the organization, and local artisans join the production process by sharing their own studio, tools and knowledge with the artists.

After about ten hectic days of preparation, Maranola is ready for the final event: the public opening. Three days of festival activities involve the whole town: its evocative corners, alleys, piazzas, private gardens and houses, abandoned basements and medieval towers. More than 1,500 spectators attend the event every day, doubling the population, swarming the town, which is temporarily transformed into a magical place, where art, environment, and foreign and local people bridge all gaps.

At the end of these three days, when the visitors leave, the works of art are dismantled, often destroyed, or sometimes left as permanent, small traces of what has happened. When the artists exit the archway for the last time, life in the town immediately goes back to its daily routine. Seminaria has created a wondrous, sensory encounter that contributes to the existing sense of belonging in the town and strengthens the identity of its community by building new narratives and cultural memories. The sensory community is expanded, empowered, acknowledged and sublimated.

After ten years of work and with the involvement of over 70 artists, Seminaria was heavily hit by the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020 and 2021. The lockdown became the occasion to reflect on the organization's strategies and methodologies in order to face the big changes that were happening within the whole of society as well as in Maranola's small community. It turned out that only a few elements were fundamental and unique for Seminaria's research: participation, ephemerality and addition. These were the main tools that allowed Seminaria to draw a map through which to navigate the sensory experience.

The Forms of Participation

For the first few years, Seminaria promoted interaction as the main way to draw people's attention and to actively engage them through sensory and participatory strategies. Through a seamless combination of media art, environmental art and relational art, rendered in life-sized, immersive and virtually or physically habitable installations, Seminaria's aim was to allow visitors to become inhabitants of the exhibition space and therefore to become meaningful activators of a communication process. In the urban space, it seemed necessary to break the wall of contemplation and to bridge the gaps caused by a museum's alarm system, which create a deep abyss between art and audience. So, Seminaria favoured works of art that should be experienced, that could envelop the visitors, and that would allow them to get closer and closer, letting them touch and even smell the works.

In 2011, artist Sonus Loci designed an interactive installation on the façade of a house in Maranola. Following a sound exploration of Maranola, the installation *Anelito* implemented sensory technologies that could detect the movements of the spectators in front of the house and would play recordings of the soundscape accordingly. The house felt alive, as if it was answering with its own voice to the input given by the people. *Mirror* (2016) by Alexandra Dementieva was an installation for one spectator at a time: through a complex system of a projector, cables and artificial intelligence, the viewer's image was processed by mirroring it and overlaying it with the images of people who had previously visited the installation.

Soon enough, though, the curators realized that technologically advanced, interactive research is good at developing relations between people and places, but not at bringing people in contact with one another. So, in the last few years, Seminaria's focus has moved towards a broader sense of participation, by developing projects based on an open-ended process in which people become social agents rather than just activators.



Fig. 1. Laura Cionci, *Valore Energetico*, Seminario 2016, ©seminariasogninterra.



Fig. 2. Gianni Piacentini, *Maranola Città Etica*, Seminario 2012, ©seminariasogninterra.

In this sense, *Valore Energetico* (2016) – meaning ‘energetic value’ – by Laura Cionci, has probably been Seminaria’s best project (Fig. 1). The artist went from door to door, from kitchen to kitchen, and asked for local food recipes, taking notes and pictures and inviting everybody to join a big dinner organized in the alleys, with a very long, beautifully set table, ready to accommodate everybody. The only rule: every person was supposed to bring a dish of their own to be shared with the others. The collective dinner was so successful that it was necessary to replicate it two more times, in different neighbourhoods of the hamlet, in order to involve as many residents as possible. Not only did the residents look forward to participating, but they kept on replicating the action themselves over the following years, even without the artist. *Valore Energetico* soon became a tradition. This ‘appropriation’ by the residents might be what Seminaria was looking for.

Ephemeral is Eternal

In 1926, Michel Seuphor wrote ‘L'éphémère est éternel’, a theatrical piece with a scenography by Piet Mondrian and with many connections to the visual arts. From then on, ephemerality and eternity have been explored in different ways by contemporary art. As Lucio Fontana wrote in 1946 in his *Manifiesto Blanco*:

*Art is eternal, but it cannot be immortal . . . It can live for one year or for millennia, but the moment of its material destruction will always arrive. It will remain eternal as a gesture, but it will die as matter.*³

Seminaria has made ephemerality into its focus and strength, hoping that its actions will last in the memory of the community longer than any monument would. Despite the short-lived developments over the few days of the event, Seminaria is based on a slow process, a long-term effort of building relationships and exchanges that can last for months and even years. Seminaria’s temporal dimension is measured by its ability to affect the town and its residents with just a small piece of exceptionality.

The life of Seminaria spans generations: the children that were playing around the installations in 2011 are now part of the organization. As they grew up, they became involved in the playful activities of Seminaria because of their parents and the artists, and they gradually found their place within the organization, in accordance with their age and abilities. Some of the oldest, now college students, are studying art, architecture, music or communication, and they will play an active and central role in Seminaria of 2023. For them it is a way to bring back home what they are studying abroad.

Seminaria does not only seek 'to invent possible relations to our neighbours', no matter how meaningful these can be, as Nicolas Bourriaud writes in his *Relational Aesthetics*, but also 'to bet on a happier tomorrow' and to question the present.⁴ No 'utopias of social integration' within the privileged space of art are needed, only the exploitation of the ethical-political potential of art can call the community into action for a better future.⁵

Premio Città Etica (2012) – meaning 'ethical town prize' – by Gianni Piacentini was realized in the form of a touristic sign at the entrance of the town. The artist invented this 'prize' specifically for Maranola. The sign, dated 2014, but realized and set up in 2012, played on this discrepancy to challenge the residents to be ethical in the future, and at the same time to show them the trust that they undoubtedly would deserve the award. In 2014, the town decided to keep the sign permanently and some might feel that Maranola has become a more ethical place ever since (Fig.2).

Addition

Seminaria relates to the centre of Maranola with the dynamism of a living city, not with the typical veneration of a simulacrum, of a glorious but forgotten age. Each edition of Seminaria leaves behind positive, stratigraphic units, either engraved on the walls or carved in the memory of the residents and visitors, as a sort of shared, photographic gallery. In this way, a new

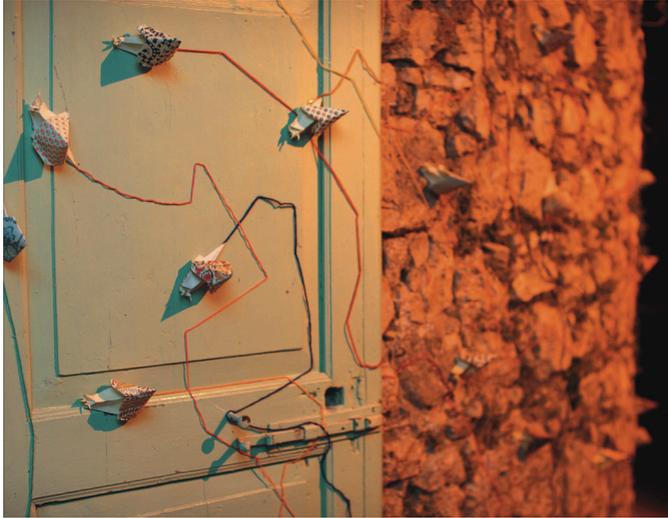


Fig. 3. Serena Piccinini, *Verso Casa*, Seminario 2011,
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Fig. 4. Stalker, *In Cerca di Rifugio*, Seminario 2016,
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collective experience is being written from year to year, strengthening the relationships between locals, artists and visitors, who are all encouraged to continue and explore the town, in order to build a new geographical and emotional map.

The narrative of the place has been growing and has enriched the commonly shared vocabulary over the years. In fact, walking with visitors during Seminaria's nights, you might hear someone say that 'this is the wall with the paper snails', citing the installation *Verso Casa* (2011) by Serena Piccinini, who covered a big, stone wall with dozens of paper snails, realized with the help of local kids (Fig. 3). You may also hear someone say: 'Come with me, behind that fence there's the ruin of a tower', or: 'This alley leads to Roberta's garden', which means that, once again, a new point of reference was added to the toponymical history of the town, citing normally inaccessible private spaces that have become part of the common and shared experience of the town. These are just a few examples of a broader process of layering, which can be understood as a logic of 'addition', meaning that new experiences are imposed on the urban landscape without affecting the foundations of medieval walls, but by relying on the realm of ephemeral and transient things.

Within this logic, Seminaria also goes beyond the public-private dichotomy, simply choosing both. Over the years, visitors have opened gates, entered kitchens, glimpsed underground cisterns and enjoyed all the kinaesthetic qualities of walking around a historical city's centre. The community watched the audience laugh and sing in the public square, whisper in private homes, lie down on lawns (Fig. 4).

This logic of addition also became very concrete when a bulky *Solido Virtuale* was added to the narrowest alley in town, as Giacomo Lion did in 2016 (Fig. 5). His massive work had to be set up and dismantled every day and every night, so that the normal life of the city could continue and a



Fig. 5. Giacomo Lion, *Solido Virtuale*, Seminaria 2016,
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Fig. 6+7. E. Gubanova and I. Govorkov, *Flood*, Seminaria 2018, ©seminariasogninterra.

small garbage truck had a chance to pass through every day at dawn. Such additions also play with the chronology and history of the village, altering the present, remembering the past, deceiving the future. In this sense the installation *Flood* (2018) by Elena Gubanova and Ivan Govorkov will be an enigma for archaeologists of the next millennium, who will find themselves wondering why there are plaques in Russian referring to the historic floods of Saint Petersburg in Maranola (Figs. 6+7).

The matching of past and future narratives that takes place in Maranola constitutes the alphabet of a new common language, through which Seminaria supports the understanding of a small but complex urban environment, proper to a living town. To consider the value of this historical site is to consider it as a whole, as a sum of different factors that the 'new' city has never achieved: a happy mix of urban density, functional variety, high social engagement, and symbolic and figurative references.

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- 1 According to UN 2018 data, the percentage of population living in rural areas in Italy has dramatically decreased over the past 50 years, and in 2050 it is expected to further augment the gap between urban and rural areas. <https://population.un.org/wup/Country-Profiles/>
- 2 Angelos Theocaris writes: '[A sensory community] is based on the common experience of the sensory environment. Along with the landmarks and soundmarks that often dominate an environment and have an essential role in navigation through space, other sensory stimuli, separately or jointly with vision and sound, are also able to acquire a symbolic dimension for certain groups of people.' See: Klaske Havik et al., *VADEMECUM: 77 Minor Terms for Writing Urban Places* (Rotterdam: nai010, 2020), 131.
- 3 Lucio Fontana, *White Manifest = Le Manifeste Blanc = Manifesto Blanco = Il Manifesto Bianco* (Buenos Aires: Color, Sonido, Movimiento, 1946).
- 4 Nicolas Bourriaud writes: 'It seems more pressing to invent possible relations to our neighbours in the present, than to bet on happier tomorrows.' See: Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* (Dijon: Les presses du reel, 2009), 45.
- 5 In her essay 'Forms of Participation in Art', Juliane Rebentisch criticizes Bourriaud's relational aesthetics by arguing that Bourriaud's practice leads to an apolitical creation of 'utopias of social integration', without actually questioning the existing community. See: Juliane Rebentisch, 'Forms of Participation in Art', *Qui Parle* 23/2 (2015), 29-54.
- 6 Ludovico Barbiano di Belgiojoso et al., *Otto Aargomenti di Architettura* (Milan: Il formichiere, 1978).