

CLAUDIA LOSI

TRANSATLANTIC FLOWERBED

by Luisa Perlo

“When I first saw the courtyards of via Scarsellini, the first image that came into my mind was a large ship”, wrote Claudia Losi. Four years have passed since then, until on 27 September her ship was finally launched for Mirafiori – the *Transatlantic Flowerbed*. The movement of the earth of this “floating garden” takes the form of a flowing mantle, which will eventually be covered with grass. The green cement border rises and falls following the line of the waves, containing and surrounding its “diverse and complex” spaces, the table inlaid with leaves, the seats embedded in the earth, “like the steps to a house where you can be without having to look each other in the face”, great hemispheres into which animal and vegetable forms are carved and that bloom here and there like flowerpots. “A place to be”. There are many adjectives to define Claudia Losi’s approach, and not only to art practice. In this case, and in this moment, the adjective I prefer to use is *passionate*. But also the French word *passionant*, either in the sense the Letterists give to it, either in the sense it derives from the Late Latin *pa - ssus* (past participle of *pa - ti*), that better describes the course followed with her to reach this point. It has been a real and proper voyage against the tide, to continue with the nautical metaphor.

The commissioning of this work, like that of Stefano Arienti’s *Multiplayer*, began in the context of Urban 2’s Courtyard Project, a social project accompanying the major restoration work done on the public buildings of via Poma and via Scarsellini¹, promoted by the Forum for the local Development of Mirafiori Nord and carried out until 2006 by Avventura Urbana². The redesign of the courtyard and communal spaces according to the suggestions of the residents, as called for by the project, made this an excellent platform from which to identify a commission who would be willing to base themselves concretely on the desires of the citizens. There were two initial considerations on the feasibility of entering into this frame: on one hand, there was the intention to realize artistic projects that could complement the work of the Courtyard Project. On the other, starting from the programme’s “projective” potential, it was hoped to create a space that would be capable of involving people “later and about still later” and to alter the balance of relationships and modes of communications through the construction of cultural instruments³.

Coming inside

The housing estates of via Poma and via Scarsellini are two more or less identical low-cost housing developments, separated by a school. Each one has two series of five-storey buildings - the “oldest” being from the 1950s (the “villas”) – and one more recent series of six-storey buildings (the “blocks”), making a total of more than two hundred apartments. The two housing estates are the property of the City of Turin, while the management is entrusted to ATC (the Province of Turin Housing Agency). Enlivened by the presence of many children, the courtyards are rather large grassy areas with trees, with asphalt pathways skirting the perimeter of the houses. Until the 1960s, the apartments were allocated to families and working-aged tenants. Beginning in the 1980s, families with multiple problems were also included in the allocations. Today, the population includes both long-term residents and much more recent arrivals. However, approximately 50% of the “villa” residents have lived there for more than twenty years, which has allowed for the growth of a network of relationships, an authentic “neighbourhood”. The situation in the “blocks” is more complex. As a result of the city policy for dealing with poverty and hardship, these estates are partially inhabited by an “unstable” population who are not in fact grantees. The uncertainty stemming from the “transitory” nature of the occupancy has caused such uneasiness that many tenants have called for new rules to regulate the use of communal spaces. The recent arrival of young migrant families, however, has restored the potential for community, the beginnings of which are visible in the forms of belonging and taking care, in a place where the concept of community only existed long ago – if it ever existed at all – when these buildings sprang up for and around the nearby factory. The ATC construction work involved restoring the façades and internal stairways, along with a series of replacements (from the shutters to the bells) to reverse the advanced state of dilapidation, associated with abusive construction and vandalism. Courtyard Project’s task was to be a mediating presence to reduce the impact of these renovations, initiating a series of meetings with residents concerning both the realization of previously-determined restoration work and the participated planning of the courtyards.

Avventura Urbana’s work involved three main issues: concrete responses to practical requests, the problems of living together, and the issue of conflict. Onto these three axes, the New Patrons project then attached itself. A space of the imagination and of conflict, the courtyard is the territory where more than in any other of New Patrons’ projects, visions for the future or romanticized nostalgia for a more sheltered past are manifested and consummated between optimistic expectations and the temptation to give up. They represent concrete projects and fantasies, but also aggressive or pressing attitudes and radically divergent opinions on the use and new profile of these spaces. Listening in on certain phases of the public meetings and the “planning workshops” was essential for a title in its process of creating “separate” moments for meeting. These were held to deal with the simultaneous presence of numerous institutions in the area whose competence was not always perceived as interdependent to the residents, and also with the need to break away from the non-negotiable quality of the requests, by pointing out in more informal moments the

creative potential of many of the tenants' propositions. In via Poma, it was only necessary to reconvene the inter-generational workshop that had previously produced a well-defined series of requests (including a playing-field, to which the New Patrons had responded with Stefano Arienti's *Multiplayer* – a commission that had already been formulated). On the other hand, in the case of the courtyard at via Scarsellini, with its more acute problems of co-existence and its greater distrust of the real possibility of change, it proved more effective to initiate a series of autonomous talks. Thus a choice was made to proceed slowly, with a gradual start up period before the commission was specifically defined.

Look outside

At this point, Claudia Losi entered the scene, initiating *Guarda Fuori/Mirafuori*, a project confronting the themes of co-existence and the residents' perception of the district. Beginning without no specific objective, in a matter of a few months, Losi been a guest in about thirty apartments. "I asked them to show me what they liked most to look at from their windows and what bothered them most at that moment," she explained. Losi collected testimonies, personal histories, and stories of daily life; she photographed the tenants' "views" and transformed them into line drawings. She composed a "collective work" in a manner familiar to her, conducted usually through the art of embroidery. In the "collective embroideries", Losi metaphorically "sewed together" histories and geographies, near and far, recounting proximity and distance, and confronting the implacable otherness of peoples in conflict, too close for comfort, as in the case of *Arthur's Seat Project* (1999-2001). In this piece, she entrusted to six Serbian embroiderers from Belgrade and Mitrovitza, and six Albanian embroiderers from Tirana and Peja, in Kosovo, the completion of twelve pieces of a "puzzle" which reproduced in stylized form an extinct volcano in Edinburgh, one of her "personal geographies". Through the reconstruction of another geography (an *other* geography), she offered her "third place", a place at once imaginary and real.

For the *Etna Project* (2000-2001) the geography, this time divided into sixteen parts, was entrusted to Peruvian and Moroccan embroiderers, whom she encouraged to add photographs and designs that "best represented them". These were then reproduced on sixteen banners, "identity flags" on bits of old worn-out cloth. She had other questions for other women: "What frightens you most?" she asked the old Sardinian embroiderers in her *Places* project (2004). In via Scarsellini she collected the "personal geographies" of the residents, those that best represented their relationship – neither always nor forever, but in that precise moment – with whatever they were able to see of the neighbourhood, then physically projected them in the space at the *Affacci* event, held during a courtyard party in June 2005, enlarged onto sixty sheets hung from the apartment balconies⁴. These images, a meaningful testimony, passed from hand to hand until they reached the skilled artist from Vietri, Franco Raimondi, who painted them on ceramic tiles. These tiles were then returned to the collective in the form of "pictures at an exhibition" installed along the pathways through the *Transatlantic Flowerbed*. The method adopted by Losi in via Scarsellini is similar to the "participatory observation" of which Franco La Cecla writes in his recent pamphlet *Contro l'architettura* (Against Architecture), describing it as a method to understand "the habits, the richness of lived-in spaces, the difficulties and the merits that people encounter in their own neighborhood", writes La Cecla. "These are often things that the inhabitants of a place cannot express in words or in an interview; they are silent habits, things that 'seem normal' and even banal to them, but that seem quite special to an outsider. In this way outside observers are useful to recount to the people what they do in their everyday lives, in which they use spaces and streets, entrances and gardens. This is told so they can continue talking together and together work out guidelines by which to build new pieces of city"⁵. "Like Mr. Palomar in Italo Calvino's novel, Claudia Losi ponders gazes, places and things. 'Is it possible to see things from outside? And if it is indeed possible, whose eyes are looking?' wrote Calvino [...]. The vision that Palomar managed to see was the old depressing dullness of everyday, and only by changing his position with respect to what he saw (the outside that looks at the outside) did the world begin to change and things begin to tell their story"⁶. In the "pictures" of via Scarsellini, every image is a pretext for a story, a tool for relationships and awareness. They suggest Claudia Losi in her role as mapmaker, walker through thoughts and places. As for the ancient Greeks, this Losian cartography is a sort of glossary of the proximity, "an inexhaustible reserve of conversations, which, by connecting different places, represent an equally inexhaustible reserve of stories and itineraries"⁷.

A ship laden with....

Claudia Losi's presence⁸ helped bring to light the residents' desire for a safe place to get together, to take a break and chat while keeping an eye on their children and their group activities and games. Their shared project began with the idea to redesign an existing space to make it "livable", in this case, the large flowerbed area near the main entrance of the complex, in via Nallino, which was also visible "from outside". The "intimate attention" in the meetings with the patrons, who were mostly women of widely-varying ages, was fundamental in making it possible for residents to express their singular desires and projections, otherwise negotiable or inexpressible. Significantly, while the meetings in via Poma were nearly always held "outside", in the courtyard, the *Transatlantic Flowerbed* meetings took place "inside" – in a flat made available by ATC for the Courtyard Project activities: a place of "protected" confrontation, whose doors, however, were open to all those interested in participating.

The location chosen could be considered a "contested" area, although it had been used almost exclusively for pedestrian traffic, as evidenced by the spontaneous walkway passing through it, which served Claudia Losi as the track for the small path inside *Transatlantic Flowerbed* (this institutionalization of the residents' spontaneous practice was quite a powerful sign). In fact, in via Scarsellini, domestic space spills out beyond the apartment thresholds. Specifically, the object of the controversy was a dilapidated bench at the back of the area⁹. After much debate, it was decided to leave it (though it would be removed thereafter). It was clearly a challenge to intervene in this space, to overthrow sklerotic old habits that were not even appreciated by critics of the project or by the "Why bother?" types.

Following the public presentation of the preliminary project, aimed at gathering more opinions from residents who had not previously been involved, the central area of the new garden, destined for the seating space, was moved to the space in the middle of the two blocks of flats facing onto the area. More than the other three projects, *Transatlantic Flowerbed* provoked observations, suggestions, and controversy as it went along, which led to a series of adjustments and variations. Many questions were raised about its appropriateness, its safety aspects and future maintenance, which were carefully considered by the artist, the mediators, the social workers, the work supervisors, the ones responsible for the Courtyard Project and Urban 2, the representatives of the management agency. Last but not least were the questions regarding ownership, the title-holders, and who would be responsible for the finished work. The precondition for proceeding with the actual construction of the project was authorization from the housing estate (composed of less than 10% tenants, and the rest, of the City). But what should have been the legal status of an artwork located in a communally owned space? It was therefore necessary to define a set of rules, not least to protect the work from modifications that had not been agreed upon (also considering the possibility of later transfers of apartments). This is an asset, at once public and private, that at the very least “exceeds the question of ownership”¹⁰, fitting into a zone where the concepts of ownership, title-holders and responsibility do not always correspond to the written norms and rules. The courtyard is a *striated space*, to use the definition of Deleuze and Guattari, where processes of territorialization and of inclusion and exclusion determine the purpose and use. With forebodings of prescription, it was not surprising that some of the patrons proclaimed themselves “fighters”. “The choice to temporarily take on a fight can sometimes help to assure the future of the situation”, as Miguel Benasayag and Angélique Del Rey wrote in their *Elogio del conflitto* (In Praise of Conflict)¹¹. This is what has been done with this project, up until the last mediation during the construction phase, and concluded with the elimination of one of the tables envisaged by the original design¹².

Landfall

“That garden, chosen by some of the inhabitants, became an ‘expiatory space’”, wrote the artist. Nonetheless, it was ample enough to absorb the tensions between the expression of the desire and the difficulty of taking on its outcome as the *Transatlantic Flowerbed* finally was becoming a reality, after being an imaginary place for so long (for those who had actually imagined it and for those who wished there had been a bit less imagination). Think of *Transatlantic Flowerbed* as an island. Claudia Losi attempted to combine definitions intrinsic to the process of thought formation with real places, through *geoambulation*, and these places were often islands. Bits of land, which one can walk along or encircle with the mind, which Losi experienced and then “rewrote” in her works (in the “biological” time of embroidery). “From some of the top floors of the apartments of the block and villas, on clearer days, you can see the Alps out beyond the coloured smoke of the Fiat factory”. It is this profile, only a little softer, that Claudia Losi wanted to suggest in building the new landscape in via Scarsellini. A “moving” orography like that of *Naviganti* (2003), a portion of the Apennine Mountains that seems “cut-out” from a three-dimensional topographical map. Towards the top appears the outline of a group of whales, recalling the era when the Po Valley was covered by the sea. They look like salmons struggling against the current – rather a fitting image for these places. *Transatlantic Flowerbed* has rewritten the geography in the shape of an island – a geography of relations, both spatial and personal – without deleting it (the controversial bench that had been removed has returned like a “phantom limb”, in the form of a seat, at first far-off, and then moved closer and closer, slowly, as the projected date for “turning over” the work drew nearer). The still smooth space of the imaginary place now meets the *striated* space of “before”, a space where equal and opposing opinions clash (from demands for right of way to requests for permission). The inauguration, usually a mere formal affair, had the power of a truly symbolic act in this case: a moment of collective catharsis experienced at the “official opening” of a potential place which, regardless, will never again be what it was “before”.

Notes

1. In the framework of Urban 2 the Courtyard Project constitutes action 01 of the so-called “red axis”, relative to social integration, serving the function of social assistance to the renovation work on council housing estates, decided by the Forum for the Local Development of Mirafiori Nord.
2. a.titolo’s involvement in the courtyards began with Cecilia Guiglia and continued in collaboration with Cristina Basciano and Giovanna Demaria. Avventure Urbane (AU) is an organization established in Turin by experts from different disciplines. See M. Sclavi, *Avventure Urbane. Progettare la città con gli abitanti*, Eleuthera, Milano 2002; on AU’s methodologies (www.avventuraurbana.it).
3. This reflection emerged from Cecilia Guiglia’s analyses and following numerous encounters with her.
4. Claudia Losi’s start up was supported by Avventura Urbana as part of the cultural activities associated with the Courtyard Project. The event, which took place in June 2005 with the name of *Affacci*, conceived by the artist, Cecilia Guiglia and Giovanna Demaria, was enlivened by performances by a tight-rope walker and Fanfara Burek. This group was so popular they were invited to perform again at the opening, which was finally to be held more than three years later. The first draft of the research material was examined in February 2005 by a *focus group*, which included the social workers, a.titolo and the artist, along with sociologist Salvatore Cominu, members of Urban 2 and of the Teatro Comunità project (promoted by the Sectors Suburbs, Young and Cultural Events of the City of Turin).
5. F. La Cecla, *Against architecture*, Bollati Boringhieri, Torino 2007, pp. 81-82.
6. L. Parola, *Affacci*, project presentation, June 2005.
7. C. Jacob, *Carte greche*, in *Hic sunt leones. Geografia fantastica e viaggi straordinari*, (ed. O. Calabrese, R. Giovannoli, I. Pezzini), exhibition catalogue (Rome, Centro Palatino, 1983), Electa, Milano 1983.
8. The artist’s direct involvement followed the initial public presentation in November 2004, in which Claudia Losi illustrated her work. Along with the intervention, a small exhibition of the artist’s work was set up in the flat made available by ATC for the Courtyard Project, where educational activities for children were held as well.
9. The definitive choice of the area was preceded by further meetings held by Avventura Urbana and involving the residents of the buildings.
10. I borrowed this expression from a speech by X. Douroux, in *Questions de médiateurs, Premier Séminaire Nouveaux Commanditaires*, workshop proceedings, Chateaux de Saulon, 26-28 April 2002.

11. M. Benasayag, A. Del Rey, *Eloge du conflit*, La Découverte, Paris 2007.

12. The mediation – made necessary by the demands of a group of residents – was about the area security and was conducted by Urban 2 and Courtyard Projects with the crucial assistance of Andrea Stara, President of District 2 Santa Rita-Mirafiori Nord.

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