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Beyond the Aestheticization of Modern Ruins: The Case of Incompiuto Siciliano

Abstract

During the last 50 years, and due to the dilapidation of public funds caused by political corruption and mafia practices, a huge stock of unfinished public works has emerged in Italy. Since 2007, the group of artists Alterazioni Video have been developing the project 'Incompiuto Siciliano', through which they propose to shift the negative perspective towards these ruins by considering them as an aestheticized architectural style. This case is important because visual arts, and especially photography, have been recently accused of pursuing a mere romanticizing objective that ignores the political, economic and social contexts in which modern ruins arouse. Embedding this paper within such discussion makes possible to align Incompiuto Siciliano with literatures on contemporary archaeology that claim for the aestheticization of ruins as a first step to critically comprehend the reasons that originated them – which ultimately leads to their revalorization and eventual re-activation.

Keywords: aestheticization; modern ruins; unfinished public works; Incompiuto Siciliano; art and archaeological activism.

Introduction

Highways and railways that lead to nowhere because they were suddenly aborted; enormous dams that were never filled water; schools, hospitals or theatres without students, patients or spectators. Lack of use and inhabitation caused by incompleteness. During the last 50 years in Italy, every imaginable public infrastructure and social building have remained unfinished in a disastrous developing model that is more evident in the southern regions of the country. The Milanese group of artists Alterazioni Video (2008) have documented a total of 395 unfinished public works in Italy, from which around a third are located only in the island of Sicily. Such geographical distribution made the artists to coin the expression 'Incompiuto Siciliano' – or 'Sicilian Incompletion' in English – as a new architectural style with the potential to represent the Italian society of the last half century. Based on radical aestheticization, their intention is to “change the dark side of these structures and turn it into something nice, something that could be useful for future generations” (2012). Indeed, many academic contributions and journalistic sources have built on the idea of Incompiuto Siciliano to study the reasons that originated it, concluding that it is a product of the systematic waste of public resources caused by political corruption, mafia networks and people's indulgence (Santangelo 2009; Accattini 2011; Faris 2012; Magi 2012; Scalia 2013; Bonnett 2014; Bella 2015; Lago 2015). However, the power of Incompiuto Siciliano as it is presented by Alterazioni Video, lies in not blaming anyone in particular for such an undesirable situation. Incompiuto Siciliano is a sort of 'tabula rasa' that serves to claim for a new way of interpreting and dignifying the contemporary ruined landscape, where the use of a deliberate aestheticization conveys an implicit critical and informative purpose.

Through a simple act of renaming, Incompiuto Siciliano's objective is to simply cause a gaze turn that does not require any modification on the 'readymade' sites; it is the way

we look at them what is being modified. Suddenly, we are not facing the wasted traces of management malpractices, we are rather seeing ‘beautiful’ works of art. As theoretical references, Alterazioni Video stress Berger’s theories (1972) through which is possible to note how our perspective changes as soon as we consider to be in front of a work of art – and by extension, in front of something conceived as a ‘ruin’ (Augé 2003). Moreover, in order to fully comprehend how Alterazioni Video present *Incompiuto Siciliano*, Stead’s comparison (2003) between the different ways in which Speer and Benjamin approach to ruins turns to be very useful. On one hand, and aligned with Speer’s assumptions, unfinished public works are displayed as pleasing and monumental constructions, whose decayed state – just like classical ruins – is the product of organic transformations in time that point to eternity. On the other, following Benjamin’s vision, it is inevitable to read *Incompiuto Siciliano* without a critical sense that bring us closer to the negative ‘historical truth’ that explains its existence. As mentioned, Alterazioni Video deliberately omit this latter point and, in doing so, such lack of criticism makes the project to be – paradoxically – full of criticism. This is the reason why the artists consider their work as an example of Cramerotti’s ‘aesthetic journalism’ (2011). The aestheticized approach towards unfinished public works contributes to put the sites on the table in a creative manner, ‘informing without informing’ or even denouncing without denouncing. In this sense, art demonstrates its capacity to implicitly pose questions that should be further investigated by spectators in order to determine a complete understanding of the existing context.

After the study of Alterazioni Video’s artistic inspirations and the analysis of the art operations that derived from *Incompiuto Siciliano*, it is possible to embed this case into on-going debates of whether aestheticization is an appropriate practice that may open the possibilities for deeper investigations on modern ruins. Regarding this discussion, which is mainly taking place within contemporary archaeology, the strongest scepticism is expressed by those who indiscriminately label ruin photography as ‘ruin porn’. In this thought, aestheticized imagery is not only unable to engage with further topics, but it is indeed counter-productive due to the simplified view that it offers. Authors denouncing this issue state that, in excluding both the historic and human contexts behind ruins, aestheticization merely contributes to reinforce local stigma (e.g. Cunningham 2011; Leary 2011; Rosenberg 2011; Remenapp 2015). Without dismissing these points, the present article suggests that *Incompiuto Siciliano* is a paradigmatic case of modern ruins’ aestheticization that allows to overcome such problematics by building more constructive reflections. Hence, *Incompiuto Siciliano* is aligned with positivistic contributions that detour the alleged shortcomings of ruin imagery, claiming for aestheticization’s immediacy as a valuable source to engage with ruins (e.g. Pusca 2010; Strangleman 2013; Pétursdóttir and Olsen 2014).

Incompiuto Siciliano as a shift of aesthetic perception towards the contemporary ruined landscape

In 2004, the group of artists Alterazioni Video – which is integrated by Paololuca Barbieri Marchi, Alberto Caffarelli, Matteo Erenbourg, Andrea Masu and Giacomo Porfiri – was founded in Milan though today, they mostly operate from New York City and Berlin. Throughout their on-going career, their distinguishing mark is the use of a disconcerting irreverence that places artistic and heritage conventionalisms swallowed by popular culture. Video works are at the core of Alterazioni Video’s practices, however, Bargna suggests that, for Alterazioni Video, video art is simply a medium through which they

funnel “their poetics which looks at the artistic action immersed in the daily life, as the way to bring out the underlying political logic of the situations considered, putting them in stalemate, and turning them against themselves” (2012, 104). This assertion allows to understand the most important and largely documented project ever created by Alterazioni Video: *Incompiuto Siciliano*.

Regarding the architectural paradigm where *form follows function*, what are those unfinished public works scattering the Italian territory if they never had any function? What is a construction with the form of a stadium if it has never been used as such? These were some of the questions that Alterazioni Video posed to themselves in 2007 after witnessing hundreds of incompleteness cases (Masu 2014). Considering the complexity to architecturally signify sites that never served the function for which they were conceived (Matos 2012), Alterazioni Video’s response is both original and intricate: unfinished public works are artworks susceptible to be considered as a formal architectural style. They refer to this architectural style as ‘*Incompiuto Siciliano*’, where “the conflict between form and function is resolved. Lack of function becomes a form of art” (Alterazioni Video 2008, 193). Or in other words, if a construction with the form of a stadium was never used as a stadium, it can only be a piece of art – that interestingly, has the form of a stadium.

Through this renaming, the perspective proposed by Alterazioni Video lies in Duchamp’s readymade tradition where everything can become art, where a simple urinal is a work of art only by turning it down, labelling it as a ‘fountain’ and displaying it in a museum. Certainly, Alterazioni Video’s approach is contemplative – and ultimately rhetoric – however, unlike Duchamp, unfinished public works are not manipulated and they stay on location. In *Incompiuto Siciliano*, manipulation is exclusively addressed to our perception and it does not involve a physical transformation or transportation. This is something that Bargna (2009) brings further in coining the ‘ethnographic turn’ of contemporary art. According to this, artists, rather than producing objects to be exhibited in museums and galleries, relate their conceptual process to specific social contexts to finally focus on a work “whose objective is to comprehend and modify reality” (2009, 22). Following this, and similarly to how Duchamp’s urinal is no longer an eschatological object but a re-conceptualization of Renaissance obsession for fountains, unfinished public works no longer exemplify the harsh corrupted reality to which they belong. Instead, when interpreted through *Incompiuto Siciliano*’s filter, they are born from the creativity that “only a passionate and deep relationship with one’s own land can generate” (Alterazioni Video 2008, 193). Yet, considering how French Gothic mentally suggests ‘cathedrals’, *Incompiuto Siciliano* is a metonym that designates ‘unfinished public works’. *Incompiuto Siciliano* is then an artistic project that proposes an architectural style which conveys a shift of aesthetic perception. Therefore, its artistic component is in our gaze.

In this regard, it is not surprising that Alterazioni Video refer to John Berger’s popular book *Ways of Seeing* and Marc Augé’s *Le Temps en Ruines*¹ in order to plunge into the perceptive roots of *Incompiuto Siciliano* (Masu, 2015). For Berger, “[w]e never look at just one thing; we are always looking at the relation between things and ourselves” (1972, 9), and since he merely builds his discourse on the power of images, continues asserting that “when an image is presented as a work of art, the way people look at it is affected by

¹ This book was originally published in French in 2003 and up to the present there is not an English edition. The quotes cited in this chapter are the author’s own translation from the 2003 Spanish edition (see References).

a whole series of learnt assumptions about art” (1972, 11). Yet, when Alterazioni Video counted with the well-known Italian photographer Gabriele Basilico to document Giarre, a medium-sized Sicilian village declared as the ‘capital’ of Incompiuto Siciliano for having the highest density of unfinished public works in Italy (Figure 1; 2; 3; 4), they are intentionally opting for an aestheticized version of the sites in order to raise, in Berger’s words, assumptions such as “beauty, truth, genius, civilization, form, status, taste, etc. [that] mystify rather than clarify” (1972, 11). Indeed, Basilico’s pictures can be considered as ‘nice pictures’ since his artistic gaze implies a sort of selection in terms of chosen angle, proportion, texture or technique. Here, unfinished public works are presented as beautiful ancient sites in order to reinforce a credible status as architectural style. Monumentality, nostalgia or the passing of time are inherent romanticizing affections that arouse when these pictures are viewed.

Insert Figure 1 about here

Figure 1. Gabriele Basilico’s picture from Athletics Stadium and Polo Field in Giarre, unfinished since 1985. Source: Alterazioni Video, 2008.

Insert Figure 2 about here

Figure 2. Gabriele Basilico’s picture from Multi-functional Hall in Giarre, unfinished since 1987. Source: Alterazioni Video, 2008.

Insert Figure 3 about here

Figure 3. Gabriele Basilico’s picture from Chico Mendes Park in Giarre, unfinished since 1975. Source: Alterazioni Video, 2008.

Insert Figure 4 about here

Figure 4. Gabriele Basilico’s picture from Multi-storey Parking in Giarre, unfinished since 1987. Source: Alterazioni Video, 2008.

Hence, the mentioned aesthetic assumptions were simply absent before Alterazioni Video rendered them visible, strengthening Augé’s statement where “ruins do exist by the gaze’s effect through which we look at them” (2003, 50). This is particularly relevant because, according to interviews conducted to locals and further data collected by Alterazioni Video, people tend to erase unfinished public works from their social imaginary. As long as uncompleted structures are conceived as wasted properties that became too familiar, it seems that they do not deserve to be looked:

It’s like when you go to work every morning. Day after day you make the same route, you pass through the same places; and after some time there’s nothing special on what you see. You simply got used to that. We come from Milan and for us, all those unfinished buildings are outstanding, a fascinating view for outsiders! But locals don’t even turn their heads to

stare. It's an internalized lack of perception that leads to a sort of collective amnesia. We just want to recover those places back by proposing a new way to see them. (Masu, 2014)

Undoubtedly, *Alterazioni Video* draw their theoretical reference from Marc Augé due to the author's insistence in relating construction works – virtually unfinished – with ruins. For him, construction works “re-open the temptation of past and future. They act just like ruins” (2003, 108). But, what *perspective* towards the ruined landscape is the one that *Incompiuto Siciliano* transmit?

First, it is necessary to contextualize the notion of landscape in terms of perception because, just like ruins, “every landscape exist only through the gaze that discovers it. This entails, at least, the presence of a witness [...] There is no landscape without a gaze, without the consciousness of landscape” (Augé, 2003, 46, 85). Landscape is then a visual – and consequently, a mental construction (Schama 1995) – in which the observer is detached from it. This serves Cresswell to distinguish landscape from place: while we imagine ourselves inside a place, “[w]e do not live in landscapes – we look at them” (2004, 11). This is aligned with the traditional idea of untouched landscape, whose contemplation causes a certain peace of mind that is perfectly applicable to Romanticism paintings where classical ruins aesthetically coexist with nature. However, as Picon suggests, the irruption of contemporary ruins leads to new ‘anxious landscapes’, those in which anguish, rage or indignation emerge by revealing the ‘question of death’ (2000). Having pointed this out, it is interesting how, in *Incompiuto Siciliano*'s perception of landscape, the spectrum between tradition and modernity arouses as a space for reflection.

In Basilico's pictures, the contrasted decaying concrete stands over the flat background that forms the sky. Defined lines, balanced textures and darker shadows bring unfinished public works to a foreground that interacts with the wild vegetation that already started to take sites back. *Incompiuto Siciliano* is displayed, as in traditional landscape, like if they were ruins melting into vegetation. However, this organic manner of presenting *Incompiuto Siciliano*, contrasts with the incisive and irrational way in which it developed, showing the ‘contemporary man's conquest of the landscape’ (*Alterazioni Video*, 2008, 193). Indeed, the viewer cannot help asking: ‘How and why did this happen? Who did this?’ Once more, anguish, rage and indignation; but the power of *Incompiuto Siciliano* is that it does not answer those questions directly. Its great value is that it is merely a radical aestheticization of a disturbing, decayed and anxious landscape. *Incompiuto Siciliano*'s affection comes to tease our curiosity.

This is particularly important because a landscape is the space that one describes so others can push their imagination to create their own landscape (Augé 2003). Landscapes are then defined as “culturally produced artifacts” (Barndt 2009, 273), where culture is a synonym of communication (Harrison 2004), rendering visible what others have not seen yet. *Incompiuto Siciliano*'s framing as a landscape between tradition and modernity represents a mirror in which conservative and critical approaches to ruins are reflected. A remarkable contribution on different approaches to ruins is Stead's (2003) comparison between the classicism proposed by Albert Speer, who was Hitler's chief architect and Minister of Armaments and War Production for the Nazi regime, and the allegoric criticism expressed in Walter Benjamin's writings. According to Stead, and unlike the monuments of the ancient past, Speer diminishes the relevance of modern ruins due to their impossibility to inspire heroic messages to future generations. Moreover, modern ruins does not even fit Speer's aesthetic criteria because they have not passed any time filter. The German architect prefers to allocate his view into the beautiful effect that nature

and weather produces in his 'natural' ruins – which places these “on the scale of geological time” (Stead 2003, 54). In this sense, Speer is already envisaging a ruined state at the time of planning, hoping that in a distant future, his constructions could resemble and be admired just like Roman works. Or in other words, Speer's approach to ruins is so static that for him, even if a society fades away, its power is transmitted through eternal ruins. On the other hand, and opposed to this conservative view, Stead states that in “Benjamin's philosophy the ruin provides an emblem of allegory as a critical tool for historical materialism” (2003, 51). Stead stresses the relevance of Benjamin's thought because it allows to move from ruin as a mere 'object' to ruin as an actual 'process'. In doing so, ruins no longer use their beauty to hide their 'historical truth'. Instead, the allegory makes ruins to go *beyond* aesthetics, where, once it is detached from romantic and mythifying assumptions, ends up revealing ruins' critical existence (Stead 2003). In summary, “[w]here Benjamin sees transience and decay, Speer sees permanence and continuation” (Stead 2003, 59), and this is particularly interesting in *Incompiuto Siciliano* for representing a combination of the two approaches here expressed, for using the resources of a conservative view to silently induce to a critical thinking.

Alterazioni Video presents *Incompiuto Siciliano* as splendid decaying monuments, as the remnants of a great Antiquity empire. Here, the artistic basis lies in picturing *Incompiuto Siciliano* as spaces filled with Speer's classical aesthetics though, in its application to modern ruins, the 'classical' turns into 'critical'. It is certainly true that the focus is not put on political corruption or wasted funds, however, for a not-too-naïve viewer, there is no doubt that, *beyond* this aestheticization, a strong denounce can be interpreted. Such is the implicit criticism in *Incompiuto Siciliano*: it is a powerful art project because it deliberately makes the line between what is right and wrong to be blurred by not blaming anyone in particular. It ironically adopts a romanticizing positivistic gaze towards a situation that is undoubtedly negative. Yet, *Incompiuto Siciliano* is ultimately an example of Benjamin's allegory, where a critical reading of ruins inevitably arouses in viewers' mind. It cannot be denied that the radical depolitization of *Incompiuto Siciliano* requires a process of repolitization to be fully understood, however, it is this lack of criticism what – paradoxically – makes the project to be full of criticism.

Therefore, it is not unreasonable that Bargna (2011) presents *Alterazioni Video* as art activists or political artist, where a conscious provocation pursues to cause the spectators' critical reaction. The artists act as mediators, claiming for an active reception of their work that entails a higher degree of complexity compared to the passive sacralisation of traditional art. Then, *Incompiuto Siciliano* becomes an act of engagement with the society, a democratic inclusion in which creative irreverence is a strategy to shed light on oblivion:

Creativity and information are no longer distinct [...] therefore we must think of how to inform with a light touch, how to yield pleasure while maintaining a political grasp, how to know and to dream at one and the same time. (O'Reilly, 2009, 9)

The previous statement is part of the foreword written for Alfredo Cramerotti's book *Aesthetic Journalism: How to Inform without Informing*, the last theoretical reference in which *Alterazioni Videos* frames his artistic approach (Masu 2015). Cramerotti defines 'aesthetic journalism' as a way to tell the viewer “the harsh reality without actually informing about what went on there” (2009, 30–31). It involves the investigation of particular circumstances taking place in particular contexts, however, its modes of

representation belong to the art media and not to journalistic channels. For the author, aesthetic journalism contributes to build “(critical) knowledge with the mere use of a new aesthetic ‘regime’ [since] knowledge and aesthetics are not necessarily opposite” (2009, 22, 28) and he finally applies Umberto Eco’s notion of ‘open work’ to note the essential role of the spectator in the completion of art.

It is not hard then to perceive the similarities between aesthetic journalism and *Incompiuto Siciliano* as art project due to the common interest in creating new aesthetic perceptions to spread a critical message in an indirect way. Indeed, though *Alterazioni Video*’s contribution is as intangible as a shift of perception can be, they have attempted to communicate this through the elaboration of short-films, posters, sculptures or performances. However, before going deeper into an interpretative analysis of these, let’s take some time to explain three artistic operations throughout the history of contemporary art that inspired *Incompiuto Siciliano*.

Artistic inspirations for *Incompiuto Siciliano*

Alterazioni Video declares that there are three artistic projects from which they draw in order to develop the concept of *Incompiuto Siciliano* (Masu 2015). All these projects date from the 1970s–1990s and such timeframe, together with the fact that they focus in a reinterpretative relation with existing modern ruins rather than with the skilful production of new art pieces, allows to categorize them into the conceptual art tradition. An objective description of each of these in the first place will subsequently lead – due to their notorious resemblances – to an appropriate contextualization of *Incompiuto Siciliano*.

1. Robert Smithson – ‘Hotel Palenque, 1969-72’

In 1969, American artist Robert Smithson left New York, and after a journey of thousands of kilometres, he arrived to a remote half-finished hotel not far from the archaeological Mayan site of Palenque, located in the midst of Southern Mexico’s jungle (Wakefield 1995). Three years later, in 1972, the account of this trip resulted in a lecture given to architecture students at the University of Utah, placing Smithson’s pictures and oral communication as a form of art². His exploration of the unfinished spatiality of the hotel, with “floors that really go to nowhere and stairways that just disappear into clouds” (Smithson 1995, 120), suggests him the prison series of Piranesi. However, the most effective stylistic device that the artist uses is that of continuously comparing the hotel with Mayan temples. For him, both hotel and temples are ruins conceived with the same ‘spirit’, allowing to frame the hotel in the rhetoric of archaeological time and describing it as a ‘man-made wonder’.

Therefore, Smithson uses the archaeological environment in which the hotel is located to perceive it as a Mayan ruin – in the same way *Incompiuto Siciliano* inaugurates an architectural style in a country where the weight of architectural tradition is well-known. In both cases, the existence of solid heritage backgrounds justifies and strengthen the artists’ approaches as a radical contrast and provocation. Yet, it is not difficult to let us glimpse that *Hotel Palenque* and *Incompiuto Siciliano* share the use of irony to cause a gaze turn. Acting as a tourist that has just come back from his holidays, Smithson shows his slides through a beamer and invites the audience to repeat his experience. This

² The entire lecture is available at <http://ubu.com/film/smithson_hotel.html>

normalized transfiguration of the reality is the reason why Jaua (2008) relates Smithson's project with 'the entropic power of laughter', where humour becomes a useful tool to build an efficient discourse³. Hence, to propose that a half-finished hotel in Mexico induces the same aesthetic reactions that a Mayan ruin, or that a set of unfinished public works in Italy constitutes a new architectural style, can be interpreted as a satiric search of familiar references.

2. *Gordon Matta-Clark – 'Day's End'*

Nothing is left from *Day's End* after police closed it down in 1972 – on the day of its inauguration – and the New York City's jurisdiction demolished it two years later (Hinojosa 2007). Artist Gordon Matta-Clark had chosen an abandoned industrial building in pier 52 to develop one of his famous interventions based on material subtractions. The building, though charged with the memories of an important industrial past, was located on a declined and neglected area and it was merely used by gay men seeking for random sexual encounters (Lee 1999). During two months, Matta-Clark extracted parts of both the roof and walls, creating a series of elliptical holes that generated a dynamic game of lights reflected on the Hudson River⁴. The artist's intention was to propose a controversial dialectic between the usual grandeur assumptions applied to traditional monuments and the new alternative and individualized readings of the past contextualized in the present (Zalman 2005).

At first, *Day's End* is differentiated from *Incompiuto Siciliano* by an important detail: the fact of physically intervening on a building. While *Alterazioni Video*'s basis lies on a simple shift of perspective that does not imply to touch the ruin, Matta-Clark only proposes to shift this perspective once he has already carried out his modifications. However, there are way more aspects that connect the two projects than aspects that particularize them. Both cases consider relevant to renovate an aesthetic paradigm that allows to see ruination with another eyes. In doing so, neglected spaces are put on the table so the society can inquire uncomfortable questions about the origin and present state of the situation: "Who owned the building? What was it being used for? Was it really abandoned?" (Lee 1999, 130). On the other hand, the notion of appropriate heritage context is present once more. Zalman (2005) indicates how, not far from Matta Clark's project, one can find the Statue of Liberty representing the self-glorifying American identity. Similarly, as mentioned before, *Incompiuto Siciliano* builds bridges with a territory that is famous, for instance, for the outstanding Greek ruins in Agrigento's Valley of the Temples. Yet, by establishing a parallelism between monuments of the heritage establishment and the potential counter-meanings that modern ruins arouse, both Matta-Clark and *Alterazioni Video* come to bring the attention back to places that, until then, had remained ignored.

³ As a matter of fact, in parts of Smithson's lecture, it is possible to hear the sound of the audience's laughs.

⁴ A 23-minute film on the work's elaboration process and final result is available at http://www.ubu.com/film/gmc_daysend.html

3. Martin Kippenberger – ‘MoMAS’

There is little documentation on *MoMAS*, the conceptual artwork ‘created’ by the German artist Martin Kippenberger⁵. One of the few existing writings is Krieger’s review, which introduces the project as it follows:

The founding story of the Museum of Modern Art Syros (MoMAS) – Kippenberger’s ‘museum’ project from 1993 until 1996 – reads somewhat like a creation myth. In 1993, Kippenberger came upon an abandoned, incomplete slaughterhouse while strolling on the Greek island of Syros [...] It had no walls and consisted of little more than a floor and a roof with a few pillars to support it. Yet, standing atop a hill, the skeletal construction somehow held a stately profile. Despite its humble intended function, its triangular roof and white pillars, standing like columns, reminded Kippenberger of some 20th century Acropolis. And with its view of the Mediterranean, the site was perfect. Kippenberger thus declared the structure to be his own museum. Through a simple, *deictic act*, Kippenberger had transformed the frame of the slaughterhouse into an institutional ‘frame’. No alterations were made to it. *MoMAS* was an architectural readymade. (2011, 65, emphasis added)

Krieger continues recounting how the museum held one exhibition per year until 1996, hosting “possibly the smallest audience in the world” (2011, 65). After Kippenberger’s death in 1997, MoMAS ceased its activity and today, the structure has been finished and converted into a municipal government sewage plant (De la Barra 2006).

The similitude between Kippenberger’s project and *Incompiuto Siciliano* is simply evident. First, the assimilation of *MoMAS* as a sort of Acropolis comes to fit – once more – the monumental and classical attributes applied in the Sicilian case. But more important is what Krieger calls ‘deictic act’, in which, based on critical theory, ‘deictic’ is a “class of word whose meaning can only be fully determined by context” (Buchanan 2010, 115). Hence, to label an uncompleted slaughterhouse as a ‘museum’ or to declare an unfinished public work as part of an ‘architectural style’ automatically becomes an implicit critical gesture that is only comprehensible if we know the context in which it is pronounced. For Kippenberger, his aim was to address “the question of how the institutional frame supports and influences the value assigned to works” (Krieger 2011, 9). On the other hand, *Alterazioni Video* do not only reveal the disastrous Italian public management during the last decades, but they do it by pushing the boundaries of what deserves to be seen as beautiful and what it does not. In any case, it seems clear that after the extrapolation of MoMAS into the rhetoric of *Incompiuto Siciliano*, it is possible to read a coherent aesthetic transfiguration in the artistic perception of modern ruins.

Finally, prior to go deeper into *Alterazioni Video*’s practice, it is worth to mention how a brief selection of contemporary artists have also ‘tricked’ the way to refer to modern ruins. Camilo José Vergara’s photographic work (1999) on abandoned automobile factories in Detroit leads him to suggest that such ‘American Acropolis’ should be maintained as a museum of the tragic fate for capitalism; in Egypt, German artists Sabine Haubitz and Stefanie Zoche have documented a considerable variety of unfinished five-star hotel complexes as ‘monuments to failed investment’ (Gill 2008); and Hernández

⁵ Regarding graphic documentation, Lukas Baumewerd in conjunction with the Estate of Martin Kippenberger, edited in 1994 a catalogue with ten photographs. A preview of some of these is available at <<http://www.snoeck.de/book/162/MOMAS>>

and Zammit (2012) have presented a collection of unfinished houses in Spain as if they were on sale in a real estate catalogue. It is certainly impossible not to see the implicit – though strong – criticism behind this creative consideration of modern ruins.

Artistic operations derived from Incompiuto Siciliano

Just to reiterate, Incompiuto Siciliano is an art project that focus in shifting the perspective through which we stare at unfinished public works. As such, the project's final objective is not the production of objects, but the mentioned gaze turn in itself. However, in order to generate this new aesthetic paradigm in people's mind, Alterazioni Video opted for carrying out several artistic operations that, rather than being interpreted as an end in itself, they should be seen as a medium to originate a new *way of seeing*.

Incompiuto Siciliano's presentation card within the art world was the European Biennial of Contemporary Art *Manifesta 7*, held in 2008. Alterazioni Video exhibited, among other pieces, a sculpture and a series of collages. The sculpture (Figure 5), that remained untitled, was formed by a table made of concrete from which a real cacti emerges. It can be interpreted as a beautiful abstraction of Incompiuto Siciliano's materiality: straight lines of cement combined with the organic shapes expressed by a colonizing living plant. The collages (Figure 6) were printed on 150 x 100 cm poster-formats and their background is composed by the contracting data and layouts of unfinished buildings in Giarre. They focus the attention on specific sites through the introduction of pop elements in the foreground: vintage cars refer to Giarre's unfinished car-park; a swimmer surrounded by pictures claims for the half-finished Olympic swimming-pool, a project aborted in 1985; once more a cacti bring us to the Multi-functional Hall; and a human skeleton in prayer position personifies the death of an old people's home uncompleted since 1987.

Insert Figure 5 about here

Figure 5. Untitled sculpture. Source: Alterazioni Video, 2008

Insert Figure 6 about here

Figure 6. Series of collages. Source: Alterazioni Video, 2008

It is important to recall how Bargna (2011) notes that Alterazioni Video's art expressions might be related with how political power uses media to spread a certain message. Yet, the use of political tools conveys an artistic experience whose purpose is both critical and aestheticizing. Art performances, due to their capacity to congregate people as a parallelism with public demonstrations, come to fit the political dimension expressed here. Such was the case of the first 'polo match' played in Giarre's Athletic Stadium and Polo Field. Organized by Alterazioni Video together with the association Effetto Domino,

this form of art happening took place on 11 December 2011, resulting in a festive event that was filmed and edited as a 3-minute video by the Sicilian online newspaper CTzen⁶.

The video begins by showing the organizers characterized as polo players but, instead of riding real horses, they ride wooden hobby horses. Before initiating the game, players organized in two different teams listen to the Italian national anthem with hands on their chest. The atmosphere is charged with a ridiculous solemnity. After this, they play, they enjoy, and over all, they laugh. The result of the match is not relevant at all; the important point is how dozens of locals have come to watch this surreal performance from the stadium's seating area. Interviews are conducted with the organizers, and they assert that their intention is to raise awareness on the uncompleted location, remarking it as a potential site not only for sport facilities but for potential cultural or commercial uses. Despite the evident provocation, locals receive this action in a very positive way, which is ultimately summarized in a middle-aged man's statement: "I totally agree with this irony, whose meaning is clearly addressed to claim for hopeful expectations" (CTzen 2011).

In this performance, the stress is put on the engaging and experimental aspects of the practice, where video footage merely registers what actually happened. Contrary to this documental approach, in the last eight years, Alterazioni Video has accomplished around a dozen of fiction films. From those, the one dedicated to Incompiuto Siciliano is *Per Troppo Amore*, shot between 2010 and 2012, and which was first exhibited in November 2012 at Film Festival *Lo Schemo dell'arte*. This 22-minute piece⁷, in which Marc Augé actively collaborated, is a low-budget collage of clips that explores the aesthetic possibilities of sobriety and irony, counting with locals as amateur actors. Its psychedelic argument may well be summarized as follows: "[Augé gives voice to an] alien with the form of a dog that arrives to Giarre and gets into some of the unfinished buildings. And even if he comes from a planet that is way more developed and intelligent than ours, he is not able to comprehend anything" (Magi 2012).

Before this happens, *Per Troppo Amore* (Figure 7) introduces the Sicilian landscape by showing an aestheticized version of the dam in the town of Blufi, unfinished since 1990, to then move to Giarre's Chico Mendes uncompleted park, where a teenage girl describes to a friend of her how such location is 'very beautiful'. After the trinity formed by dog/alien/Augé visits several unfinished public works in Giarre, we hear his voiced-over thoughts calling for profound rethinking:

For years men have persevered in resuscitating ruins of the past. Tourist still come from all over the world to admire them. They travel through space to admire the work of time like in Greece, Guatemala or Cambodia; all countries where the traces of the past need to be resuscitated to believe in the future. The beauty of what should have been, the beauty of that moment in which anything could have happened. The beauty of the original gesture, of the interrupted momentum. They also describe the beauty of the landscape in which they are set. The beauty of nature and of the vegetation that almost completely covers them in some areas. (Alterazioni Video 2012)

⁶ The entire video is available at <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tYrsJ7nJE9Y>>

⁷ The trailer of *Per Troppo Amore* is available at <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HyxpoQGFYg4>>

Insert Figure 7 about here

Figure 7. Captions from *Per Troppo Amore*. Source: Alterazioni Video, 2012

Per Troppo Amore is punctuated by more extravagant scenarios and situations, bringing life to places that never counted with any life. However, it is remarkable how, despite of being a film ‘without an end’ (Alterazioni Video, n.d.), its final credits are accompanied by real press cuttings that deal with unfinished public works and *Incompiuto Siciliano* – demonstrating the public and political repercussion of Alterazioni Video’s project in local and national media. Yet, it is not unreasonable to perceive that there is space for serious criticism *beyond* *Incompiuto Siciliano*’s particular aestheticization. In addition to this, such original way of revealing by not revealing has attracted the attention of further art practitioners who, based on Alterazioni Video’s proposal, have also treated unfinished public works from an aestheticizing point of view.

Perhaps, the most notable sample is Benoit Felici’s 32-minute documentary film *Unfinished Italy*⁸. Felici travels around Sicily in order to capture the beauty of unfinished public works, the beauty “of this which could have been. Of this which is not yet there. Of this might be one day” (Felici 2011). Undoubtedly, his film is an aestheticizing exercise that includes nice portraits of the buildings, showing their complexity and monumentality. The use of traditional Sicilian music to accompany this decayed imagery gives a feeling of melancholic solitude. However, for Felici, the beauty of ruins is only an excuse to dig deeper. Through the inclusion of interviews conducted with locals, it is clear that the director’s intention is *also* to provide a critical explanation of the political reasons that originated the phenomenon. The film finally turns into a positivistic atmosphere in which it is displayed how people interact with unfinished public works on a daily basis. All of a sudden, the melancholic solitude is replaced by a human portraying of ruins.

In a similar critical use of unfinished public works’ beauty, in 2013, Italian photographer Angelo Antolino portrayed dozens of these ruins during a trip that took him to different locations along Italy. Though his images are romanticized by the fact of having mostly taken them in twilight hours, they come to express “[b]illions of euros and thousands of acres unnecessarily cementified” (Antolino 2013). Antolino’s aesthetic criticism has been even covered by the Italian edition of National Geographic, which published his pictures together with brief summaries of specific buildings’ failed stories (Gravino 2013).

In summary, works that derived from *Incompiuto Siciliano* are a demonstration of how art uses the aestheticizing aspect of ruins to build up a critical discourse which, ultimately, may contain engaging expectations. This is particularly relevant because, in the last few years, ruin imagery has been largely accused of pursuing a mere romanticizing purpose that trivializes the harsh reality behind ruin’s existence. Embedding *Incompiuto Siciliano* within this discussion serves to align Alterazioni Video’s approach with literatures claiming for ruins’ aestheticization as a first step for subsequent comprehension.

⁸ The trailer of *Unfinished Italy* is available at <<https://vimeo.com/17796072>>

Beyond the controversy in the aestheticization of modern ruins

It is not a secret that, throughout modern history, artists have been largely fascinated with ruins. Since the age of Romanticism paintings, classical ruins have been portrayed in a picturesque manner, evoking sublime aesthetic values such as “finality, beauty, majesty, glorious memory, tragedy, loss, and historical import” (Mah 2012, 7). In the early depiction of modern decay, 20th century avant-gardes also persisted in these melancholic and nostalgic feelings (Kemp 1990). Back then, the focus on ruins representation was possible due to the starting popularization of photography – an evolving relation that has considerably increased in the last decade (Pálsson 2012). Today, “the taste for urban decay seems to be global” (Gibas 2010, 156), and as a matter of fact, visual representations of modern ruins are as global as the era in which we live: photographs contain the similar architectural elements and stylistic conditions regardless the exact location where they were taken (Fein 2011). Ruins are then exhibited in countless media such as books, films, or advertisements (Garrett 2013); and yet, it is not unreasonable to state that we are in the midst of ‘an unexpected golden age for dereliction’ (Manauh 2008, 7). Moreover, due to the current easy accessibility to recording devices and the tendency to share pictures in social media, the line between professionals and amateurs has been blurred, posing ruin representation as a democratized practice (Herstad 2014). Or, in Mullin’s words, [t]oday’s ruin photography is perhaps an art of the people’ (2014, 28).

In this context, it is important to note that “ruins themselves carry a meaning that is impossible to detach from their image” (Remenapp 2015, 12), and consequently, they are still perceived as threatening spaces usually associated with destruction, uncertainty and crime (Harvey 2000; Cowie and Heathcott 2003). However, the way of portraying them maintains their picturesque attributes to the extent that such affective gaze may well eclipse the harsh reality that lies behind (Cunningham 2011). From this last thought, a series of undeniable negative assumptions arouse, however, *Incompiuto Siciliano* represents the perfect case study to overcome them, placing the aestheticization of unfinished public works as a justified excuse that – in a compatible manner – opens the possibility for deeper critical analyses.

The most recurrent way of dismissing ruin imagery is to label it as ‘ruin porn’, indicating a “one-eyed portrayal of urban decay that turns social and material misery into something seductive and aesthetically pleasing” (Pétursdóttir and Olsen 2014, 7). Here, the term ‘porn’ does not contain sexual connotations, but it is rather addressed to emphasize the both passionate and guilty desire for ruins as disposable consumption spaces (Vultee 2013; Piccini 2014). In this context, privileged ‘outsiders’ are blamed for simplifying, trivializing or even obscuring the historical conditionings that caused the ruin through its mere sensual representation (High and Lewis 2007; Leary 2011). This criticism may well be applied to *Alterazioni Video* because, after all, they are a group of artists coming from one of the richest northern parts of Italy, who deliberately reject to focus on the political origins of unfinished public works. However as mentioned before, their ‘outsider’ condition must be considered as an added value since it allowed them to see what locals had long perceived as normal – what locals did not see anymore.

Another aspect for which ‘ruin porn’ has been accused lies in its actual form of representation, usually excluding people and demonstrating a lack of engagement (Leary 2011; Shanks 2014). This critique is better understood considering that the majority of abandoned sites photographed today, correspond to places where people used to live and work such as former industrial plants or derelict residential areas (Mah 2012; Strangleman

2013). In these cases, buildings are detached from memories and “any human presence is exhibited by the trace of their past presence” (Cunningham 2011). The question whether this critique is appropriate in the case of *Incompiuto Siciliano* is very interesting because we are now dealing with spaces that were never used or inhabited. Basilico or Antolino’s pictures are then not unfair to anyone, they simply come to express the authenticity of unfinished public works: they have always been empty, therefore they are portrayed as such. And even if we opt for validating the controversy around human presence, it is worth to recall how *Alterazioni Video* has suggested the aestheticization of *Incompiuto Siciliano* without leaving people entirely aside. The artists’ commitment is reflected on the performance at the Polo Field or their film, which both counted with the participation of locals who, also in Felici’s documentary film, normalize the eventual re-use of the sites in a productive way.

Only by not wanting or not being able to comprehend *Incompiuto Siciliano*’s critical aestheticization, makes possible to raise the last negative aspect associated with ‘ruin porn’, that of considering that it contributes to create a sort of public indignation for its capacity to reinforce problems. Indeed, when disassociated from the positivistic filter that *Alterazioni Video* proposes, unfinished public works’ imagery is nothing more than the representation of political corruption and the South Italian stigma of mafia. Blackmar (2001) notes how pictures of dereliction imply ‘sadness’; Rosenberg (2011) directly blames ruin depiction of being ‘counter-productive’ for representing communities as if they were beyond help; and Ryzewsky (2014) documents the potential ‘damage’ that images do to resentful people. Remenapp goes further, invoking that artists “can create an image that is aesthetically pleasing in way that may or may not correspond to reality” (2015, 15). These accusations are certainly true but, is not this reality what *Incompiuto Siciliano* aims to change? Is not rage and disillusionment what *Alterazioni Video* faces?

These meaningful questions lead to perceive *Alterazioni Video* as art – or even archaeological – activists because *Incompiuto Siciliano* is, ultimately, a socially committed project. Such assimilation is not new in the aestheticization of modern ruins. In his study of artistic representations of contemporary abandonment in China, Chu (2012) highlights the ‘ecological consciousness’ embedded in several projects to the extent of labelling them as ‘eco-art’. For him, the value of art lies in showing a landscape that is no longer associated with negative ruins but with an awareness for ‘unity and harmony’. Moreover, in the analysis of the imaginary addressed to abandoned old ships in Bangladeshi wastelands, Crang (2010) documents how art works contributed to make visible the left-overs of global consumerism. Though acknowledging that they can only be fully interpreted after the study of the economic conditions that caused this situation, the beauty of such portrayal has the potential to be used in media campaigns, allowing to “speak to the wider agenda of the environment, global responsibility, and inequality” (Crang 2010, 1089). In the view of these examples, it is not unreasonable to consider *Incompiuto Siciliano* as a subtle paradigm of political art, whose interest, just like Pusca notes in ruin photographs, “is not so much the ‘things’ they depict, as the ‘politics’ behind them” (2014, 35). And, since “[n]ew forms of seeing create new possibilities for action” (Pusca 2010, 244), the aestheticized transfiguration of the ruined landscape in *Incompiuto Siciliano* comes to fit Martin’s vision (2014) in which ruin imagery serves as a critique to the existing contexts without renouncing to improve them.

The notion of ‘improvement’, which is undoubtedly present in the shift of perception that *Alterazioni Video* suggests, is better understood through the ‘anesthetization’ effect that Pusca (2010) notes in her contribution on industrial abandonment of Postcommunist

European countries. In this sense, aestheticization moves to anesthetization as long as images of ruins are:

opening up new ways of engaging with these spaces by tapping into their emotional and redemptive potential: their ability to provide both hope and a new sense of purpose to the communities that surround them. Decay need thus not always symbolize the death of a particular utopia but also the breeding ground of new hopes and utopias. (Pusca 2010, 240)

Yet, *Incompiuto Siciliano*'s visual impact reveals an enlargement of more productive debates and it has definitely succeeded in compelling further questions. As mentioned, its aestheticized exposure has resulted in a series of academic and journalistic contributions that investigated the phenomenon deeper, and ultimately, in architecture workshops seeking for strategies of re-valorization and eventual re-activation (*Alterazioni Video* n.d.). Yet, in Mullins' terms (2012), *Incompiuto Siciliano* is an extraordinary example of how the aestheticization of modern ruins awakens our curiosity. Therefore, far from condemning *Alterazioni Video* for its ironic and occasionally reductive manner of presenting *Incompiuto Siciliano* as something 'beautiful', we should rather be thankful because such project uses the shortcomings in aesthetics to place arts as a valid method to engage with ruins – just like Pétursdóttir and Olsen (2014) particularly address in the context of photography. With *Incompiuto Siciliano*, *Alterazioni Video* have created an architectural style as their preferred way to reflect on unfinished public works. To search for further involvement remains at our own responsibility, since:

Just because [artists] are not critical in the ways some of us might want them to be (although often times they are), it does not mean that their idea cannot be adopted for critical purposes [...] The point I want to make then, is that each subsequent generation makes its own art, or does its own critique in different ways. But that is not to say that these interventions cannot, in turn, be used in different ways later. (Strangleman 2013, 34-35)

Conclusion

This article poses *Incompiuto Siciliano* as a paradigmatic case in which the aestheticization of modern ruins, far from being simplistic, conveys a complex irony that ends up being a creative strategy to recover unfinished sites from oblivion – an on-going debate within contemporary archaeology literature. *Incompiuto Siciliano* is an artistic project that, by labelling unfinished public works as a beautiful architectural style, aims to shift our perception towards the contemporary ruined landscape. In this sense, *Alterazioni Video* draw from the fact that both 'ruin' and 'landscape' are mental constructions susceptible to be modified through the way we look at them, and even the way we refer to them (Berger 1972; Augé 2003; Schama 1995).

Alterazioni Video's references such as Smithson, Matta-Clark and Kippenberger's works help to allocate *Incompiuto Siciliano* within an artistic tradition where applying the aestheticizing attributes of classical ruination to modern dereliction turns to be an ironic strategy to establish a dialogue between Stead's vision (2003) on conservative and critical approaches to ruins. It seems that there is nothing funnier than granting the pompous qualities of old ruins to modern waste. Ultimately, this is an effective way of explaining complex places and situations that – otherwise – would be difficult to understand. Similarly, in *Alterazioni Video*'s graphic art, sculpture, performance and film, the

aestheticizing attributes encountered in unfinished public works are the breeding ground for subsequent critical and engaging implications. Yet, the mentioned artistic operations are a medium to support the proposed shift of perception which even influenced other artists' works and contributed to render the phenomenon of unfinished public works visible in further research and journalistic contributions. Aestheticization then becomes a means to a very particular end: to implicitly recount how the Italian landscape, especially in Sicily, has been dramatically shaped in the last 50 years. By rejecting a truly realistic depiction of the phenomenon and dismissing an actual informative purpose, *Incompiuto Siciliano* succeeds in its intention to seek for spectator's responses, as in Cramerotti's 'aesthetic journalism' (2009). *Incompiuto Siciliano* then expresses that beauty and criticism are not incompatible, or what is more, that the subtle critique is stronger than factual information.

Regarding the usual accusations to modern ruin's aestheticization (Cunningham 2011; Leary 2011; Rosenberg 2011; Remenapp 2015), we can certainly recognize that one of the very first thoughts that come to our mind when viewing an unfinished public work is that of indignation. These half-constructions are undoubtedly associated with wasted funds, economic benefit of a corrupted minority, Italian criminality, the systematic violation of the territory and, ultimately, the incapacity to solve these situations during the last decades. *Incompiuto Siciliano* aims to overcome these harmful feelings by replacing them for constructive fascination. It may well be argued that *Incompiuto Siciliano* essentially shows an aesthetic reality while deliberately ignoring a political side, however, it is such an original position what makes it productive – being aligned with positivistic approaches covered by contemporary archaeology (Mullins 2012, 2014; Strangleman 2013; Pétursdóttir and Olsen 2014; Piccini 2014; Pusca 2010, 2014).

Hence, we cannot say that *Alterazioni Video* did not investigate unfinished public works in depth; they simply did it in a different way, their own way. Using the tools with which they are familiar, they demonstrate that ruins' aestheticization is a first step towards re-valorization and eventual re-activation. *Incompiuto Siciliano* shows that there is space for reflection *beyond* aestheticization. It also makes evident that, when arts put the eye into 'something', this 'something' is potentially important for the rest of the society, and the way to tackle it will only depend on the actor. Yet, artistic approaches to ruins are not new and they will not cease in the future, therefore, we would do well in perceiving them as fruitful contributions.

Perhaps, this debate could be summarized by coming back once more to one of *Alterazioni Video*'s bedside books, the legendary *Ways of Seeing* written by John Berger. The very first sentence says: 'Seeing comes before words' (1972, 7). Hence, *Incompiuto Siciliano* taught us to see. Words should come after.

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