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Art Review:

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Polite Society
the return of the
New York salon

Tino Sehgal
actions speak
louder than words



A CRITIC FINDS THAT ITALY'S PRECARIOUS ECONOMY IS A BOON FOR ARTIST-RUN SPACES

While Rome's MAXXI, the national museum of twenty-first-century art – which opened in 2010, four years behind schedule and \$28m over budget – faces attempts by the government to have it taken over by an appointed commissioner following difficulties meeting a 43 percent budget cut, the country is fielding questions about how to support the arts at its southernmost point, Sicily, where funding for contemporary art is extremely difficult to come by.

A local population historically noted for its resilience and adaptability is addressing the situation with great industriousness. The island's two principal cities – Palermo and Catania – fierce rivals in the fields of cooking and football, are both home to contemporary art initiatives that aim to utilise art's communicative potential to address wider social issues. To this end, Palermo's Teatro Garibaldi was reopened by occupiers as Teatro Garibaldi Aperto (the Open Garibaldi Theatre) on 13 April this year. The theatre is symbolic in that it was inaugurated by the idealistic unifier of Italy, Giuseppe Garibaldi himself, in 1872, yet has remained out of use since its closure for restoration five years ago, even though the restoration works themselves have been long since completed. Its occupation follows the occupation of Teatro Valle in Rome, ongoing since last June, and the occupation of Teatro Coppola in Catania in December, creating – along with numerous other occupied art spaces, galleries and foundations across Italy – a network for creative expression and debate. Indeed, the upside of funding cuts is that people are finding that they can run art projects without state, council and business assistance.

Among such initiatives, Catania's BOCS – Box of Contemporary Space – opened as an artist-run space by Giuseppe Lana and Claudio Cocuzza in 2008, seeks to provide an exhibition venue for young Sicilian artists, alongside a residency and exhibition programme for visiting international artists. Since then it has hosted 18 exhibitions, the most recent of which is *L'Ospite Ostile* (*The Hostile Guest*), an installation by Annamaria di Giacomo and Stefania Zocco that builds upon the artists' research into Gela, Sicily's fifth most populated city, and once a thriving area for industry, tourism and cotton farming. Gela's flagship seaside entertainment centre, La Conchiglia ('the shell' – so called for its distinctively shaped roof) has fallen into disrepair; a fitting symbol for a town where unemployment is high and where cotton cultivation – its traditional source of income – ceased around 50 years ago. Di Giacomo and Zocco paid tribute to Gela's cotton-farming past – which looks set for a revival, following trials reintroducing cotton plants to the area – by covering the floor of a large constructed wooden *agorà* (a kind of canopy or roofed piazza, under which meetings are held) left in the BOCS gallery space by a previous artist, Sebastiano Mortellaro, with wildly grown cotton that they had handpicked. Di Giacomo and Zocco covered the *agorà* in transparent plastic so as to create a barrier between the harvested cotton and those who came to view the installation from the narrow space left between the *agorà* and the industrial grey walls of the BOCS, highlighting the disjoint between Sicily's agricultural past and the present day. Mortellaro had previously left the *agorà* open (for a show entitled, simply, *Agorà*), with a video by collaborating artist Aldo Taranto, in which the short phrase "*Esiste l'anima? Nessuno può dirlo*" ("Does the soul exist? No one can say") was intermittently called out. This sentence could well be applied to the national spirit, which here in Italy is hard to locate. Post-*bunga bunga*, this country, which remains besieged by corruption and other economic problems, may well have to look to artists for solace and, along with it, an identity, due to the failure of traditional political alternatives and to the increasing politicisation of art. Increasingly those artists may be found outside museums.

