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**Music from the Rubble: Creativity as a Tool for the  
Promotion and Enhancement of Earthquake-Hit Areas**

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**ABSTRACT**

This research work focuses on the role of creativity as a tool for the promotion and enhancement of earthquake-hit areas. An example comes from a multidisciplinary project I presented on 7<sup>th</sup> September 2021 at “Ascoli Piceno Festival” in Ascoli Piceno (Italy). A work where art, music and science come together into an unprecedented performance: a “path” through music, a sound installation that is activated by the imperceptible movements of protists, unicellular microorganisms that were found in water samples collected from the areas of Central Italy hit by the 2016 earthquake. Thanks to a microscope connected to a webcam, these microorganisms can be seen on a screen and their movements acquired by a script and turned into music in real time. By interacting with a sort of virtual keyboard, the protists’ movements generate random, ever-changing sounds. What can be observed during the performance is not only the “life” of these microorganisms but also how the interface is able to detect any change in the colour of pixels and to emit a trigger signal. The circles created by those signals move from left to right and generate a note as soon as they exceed the central threshold. These melodies blend together with the aleatoric music of a saxophone and give rise to a really unprecedented fusion of ideas and inspirations. The sounds and the colours of the installation intertwine and merge into an exciting and poetic composition. By means of a large screen, the audience can enjoy the “hidden” movements of the protists, unwitting creators of a fantastic landscape. Through this example, the paper aims to answer the following questions: what kind of aesthetic experience can be expected in a place that is commonly linked to the concepts of death and destruction? How can art and creativity improve the competitiveness of an area? Is it possible to think of a new perspective of space and to imagine different forms of relationship resulting from the earthquake experience?

**Keywords:** contemporary art, digital media, interaction, new media, earthquake-hit areas

“Music from the rubble” is the name of a cultural project whose goal is to promote and support earthquake-hit areas. This multidisciplinary work, which I presented to the public on 7<sup>th</sup> September 2021 at “Ascoli Piceno Festival” (Italy), is aimed to investigate how art and creativity can play a role in contributing to the development of an area and its community.

French mathematician Jules Henri Poincaré (1854-1912) who dealt with the theme of creativity says:

“A new result is of value, if at all, when in unifying elements long known but hitherto separate and seeming strangers one to another it suddenly introduces order where apparently disorder reigned. [...] To create consists precisely in not making useless combinations and in making those which are useful and which are only a small minority. Invention is discernment, choice [...]. Among chosen combinations the most fertile will often be those formed of elements drawn from domains which are far apart”<sup>1</sup>.

Indeed, many elements that make up this project are drawn from different worlds and domains and have been put together to create something surprisingly new. The aim is to analyse specific features relating to certain geographical areas, such as their natural and cultural heritage, and to take the necessary actions for their development.

The area investigated in this work is the Municipality of Arquata del Tronto (Ascoli Piceno), a delightful small village of 1,000 inhabitants immersed in the pristine mountains of the Sibillini National Park, Central Italy. After the seismic events that struck this area between 2016 and 2017 – with a magnitude equal or greater than 6 on the Richter scale – nothing is left standing there. Only the 13<sup>th</sup>-century castle, a fine example of local military architecture, miraculously survived the quakes.

While visiting the area in March 2020, I collected extensive documentation on the events and their aftermath. The atmosphere was sorrowful and the debris scattered across the mountain landscape was all that was left to see.

To understand how to turn a seismic epicentre into a cultural epicentre, we should ask ourselves some questions:

- What kind of aesthetic experience can we expect from a place that in the mind of most people evokes memories of death and destruction?
- How can art and creativity contribute to the improvement of the competitiveness of an area?
- Is it possible to rethink space and human relationships in the aftermath of such a horrible event and to give them a new meaning?

This study proposes to answer these questions by drawing inspiration from an impressive, unique landscape artwork created by Italian artist Alberto Burri (1915-1995) in Gibellina, Sicily. This tiny village was flattened by the violent earthquake that struck the Belice Valley on the night between 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> January 1968.

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<sup>1</sup>Poincaré J. H., *Scienza e metodo*, Torino, Einaudi, 1997, p. 12. Translated from Italian.

Rebuilt in the second half of last century, Gibellina is a young urban area and a wonderful open-air museum of art. In the 1970s, Former Mayor Ludovico Corrao (1927-2011) called on famous artists, architects and poets to take part in the material and cultural reconstruction of the new town. In the following months, many intellectuals, including Burri, answered the mayor's call. However, the Umbrian artist asked that his artwork be realized in the old town of Gibellina:

“When I went to Sicily and visited the town - said Alberto Burri - [...] I got really shocked. I was about to start crying when the idea came up: I thought, well, I feel I can do something here. Let's do like this: let's compact the rubble, which is usually a pain in the neck, and reinforce it; with the resulting concrete we'll build a huge white cretto, an everlasting memory of what occurred here”<sup>2</sup>.

The *Cretto* of Gibellina (also known as *The Great Cretto*) is a huge concrete expanse that swallowed the earthquake debris, it's a monument to life that sought to turn death into art. Begun in 1985 and completed in 2015, this landscape artwork recreates the urban fabric of the old town. An 86,000-square-meter site, a sort of huge maze with wide corridors that resemble the old streets of the town. The width of the passages varies between two and three meters and their walls are approximately 1,5-meter high. Burri clearly wanted to show the local community that the old Gibellina and its legacy had not been forgotten. It is noteworthy to point out that the earthquake rubble, the only remains of the city after the tragic event, was not disposed of; on the contrary, it contributed to the creation of a majestic artwork. It's no surprise that this artwork is mentioned in numerous books of contemporary art history.

This seems to me an ideal example of what we all need to look at when discussing the problem of how to enhance an earthquake-hit area and its development: it's not about discarding and disposing of things with the purpose to leave death behind; it's about turning matter into energy. Creativity can help achieve this goal by transforming rubble into an artwork full of life. Burri's *Great Cretto* embraces the ruins of the destroyed town and becomes a true piece of art that witnesses real life, the walks of visitors and the voices of the people who walk through it.

Following Burri's example, the first action taken was to look for whatever could be found in the area under investigation. The attention focused on the stagnant and putrid waters all around the old village. Observing this water through the microscope means to have a closer look at an apparently hidden world and to find out that there is life in there, a life full of energy that the earthquake could not stop.

These waters are home to a variety of *protists*, unicellular organisms of different shapes and sizes. The *paramecium*, for example, looks like a sucked sweet, while the *vorticella* resembles a calla flower with a long, spring-like stalk that quickly straightens and retracts. And there's the *round ciliate* that looks like a

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<sup>2</sup>[https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cretto\\_di\\_Burri#CITEREFZorzi](https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cretto_di_Burri#CITEREFZorzi) [Accessed 29 December 2021]. Translated from Italian.

toothed wheel that spins around at great speed. These organisms all live among filamentous algae like *Spirogyra*. A really surprising and fascinating landscape.

These unicellular microorganisms have been visualized on screen by connecting a microscope to a webcam. Their movements have been acquired via a script, imported into a web browser and turned into music in real time. By interacting with a virtual keyboard, the protists' movements generated random, ever-changing sounds; in this work, *protists* interacted with "Scan Sequencer Javascript"<sup>3</sup>, an experiment by Korean artist JeongHo Park<sup>4</sup>. What surprised about the performance was not only the "life" of these microorganisms but also how the interface was able to detect any change in the colour of pixels and to emit a trigger signal. The circles created by those signals moved from left to right and generated a note as soon as they exceeded the central threshold.

During the performance, these melodies were accompanied by the aleatoric music composed by Italian saxophonist Fabrizio Mandolini, giving rise to a really unprecedented fusion of ideas and inspirations. By means of a large screen, the audience could enjoy the hidden movements of the *protists*, unwitting creators of a fantastic landscape. The result is an incredible and harmonious fusion of different research studies and styles into a single structure and action. These creative processes are like a sort of continuation of the town's past and help rethink space as a thick network of ideal and abstract dialogues. As Marc Augé (2004), art has been seduced by the theme of rubble in order to reinvent the future.

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<sup>3</sup><https://experiments.withgoogle.com/scan-sequencer> [Accessed 29 December 2021].

<sup>4</sup><https://jeonghopark.de> [Accessed 29 December 2021].