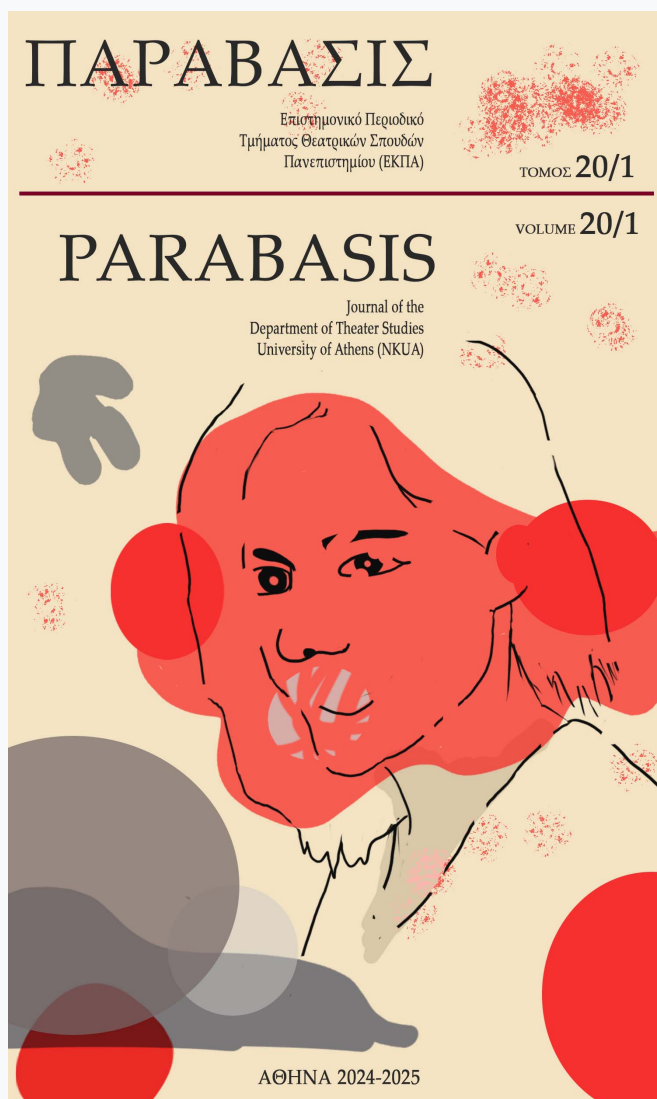


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### CONTEMPORARY MASS CHOREOGRAPHIES IN ITALY: VIRGILIO SIENI'S «AGORAS» AND «CIVIC WALKS»

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**CONTEMPORARY MASS CHOREOGRAPHIES IN ITALY:  
VIRGILIO SIENI'S «AGORAS» AND «CIVIC WALKS»****1. Introduction**

Participatory performances act as live monuments. They carry different symbolic, social, and political connotations depending on their methods, scopes and on the communities involved. They are also discursive practices on the connection between art and society that have variously been theorized as new genre public art, community-based art, socially engaged art, community dance and theatre, etc... Site-specificity, and audience engagement are shared features of these genres. Yet, processes, forms, targets, and scopes change significantly from one to the other. Even more so if we consider mass choreographies as a specific type of participatory dance, whose history traces back to the early Twenties century but whose meaning, forms and function have changed since then. In this essay, I will describe them with respect to the Italian choreographer Virgilio Sieni's work of the past twenty years. I will briefly compare his choreographic actions to other «participatory art forms», and specifically clarify their place in the Italian contemporary political and cultural scene, by referring to selected case studies. This analysis is based on first-hand research (direct participation in some actions, observant participation, archival research and interviews), conducted in the process of an historiographical reconstruction of Sieni's artistic biography,<sup>1</sup> sided by cultural studies.

**2. Mass choreographies as «figures of community»**

Participatory performances have spread in Italy before the pandemics, claiming the people's appropriation of the public space in contrast both to its expanding privatization and to the abandonment of marginal areas.

Virgilio Sieni was a leading proponent of collective urban actions since the first decade of the century both countering right-wing political discourses on citizenship in Europe and Italy and locally redefining the relation between the people and the places. In the National newspaper *Il Sole 24 Ore*, in 2015, the eminent critic Marinella Guatterini defined him as the Italian «founder» of the so-called «social dance» or «community dance» that is much in vogue now-a-days,

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<sup>1</sup> The major outcome of this research was the book I authored, *Virgilio Sieni. Archeologia di un pensiero coreografico*, Editoria e Spettacolo, Spoleto 2015. Other contributions appeared in anthologies and Italian journals: «Danza e ricerca», «Acting Archives», «Schermi», «Mantichora», «Culture Teatrali».

with as many praised fans as detractors». <sup>2</sup> However, «community dance» had a different and a more underground history in Italy at the time spreading from an extension of the educational dance in schools to intergenerational audiences and social contexts since the early 2000s. <sup>3</sup> This confusion reveals the lack of interpretative means to define fully choreographed participatory actions, which were raising an increasing attention and support from National theatres, private foundations, festivals and public administrations before the pandemics, for their capacity to aggregate hundreds of amateur performers from city to city. These works were new to the Italian scene. All at once, they gave people an opportunity to perform in major events and in iconic city sites (historical buildings, monumental squares) while enacting counter-narratives on discriminatory discourses by portraying plural figures of community. In fact, they seemed to build a sense of belonging by exposing multiplicity through the orchestrated movement of collective bodies, composed of diverse subjects in terms of gender, age and ability.

Sieni's successful choreographies indirectly benefitted from the dissemination of relational aesthetics, coincidental with the social turn of the arts. <sup>4</sup> Since the Nineties participatory projects grew in number and became the most prominent form of art in Europe. They were meant to foster community-building in the cities, and the suburbs, and fight all forms of marginalization. However, they also became a fashion and were criticized for determining a placebo effect against more structural social and economic inequalities. <sup>5</sup> The call for participation often recurred as a slogan, regardless of the agency, methods and claims of the aggregated subjects. Participation as an abstract model space of socialization consequently run the risk of producing projects speaking «for» and not «with» the people, reproducing prior colonial stances within the Western city peripheries. <sup>6</sup> Nor did physical presence and agency always go together both in overtly political and artistic aggregations. <sup>7</sup> The heterogeneity of forms and methods of participatory art growly showed the pros and cons of these formats. Mass choreographies fall into this complex scenario, which they make even more ambiguous.

Differently than most participatory projects, Sieni's choreographed actions do not take the participants process of self-determination and self-representation as a goal, and rather balance it with the autonomy of the artistic project. The

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<sup>2</sup> Marinella Guatterini, «Nell'Atlante di corpi e di gesti», *Il Sole 24 Ore*, 20 September 2015, translated by the author.

<sup>3</sup> Franca Zagatti, *Persone che danzano. Spazi, tempi, modi per una danza di comunità*, Mousiké, Bologna 2012. Rossella Mazzaglia, «Come la risacca: l'opera di Virgilio Sieni a confronto con la danza di comunità», Gerardo Guccini – Armando Petrini (eds), *Thinking the theatre – New teatrology and performance Studies*, ALMA DL, Bologna 2018, p. 315-329.

<sup>4</sup> Nicholas Bourriaud, *Esthétique relationnelle*, Les presses du réel, Dijon 1998.

<sup>5</sup> Roberto Fratini Serafide, «Liturgie dell'impazienza – Soglie dell'inazione. Le Culture della Partecipazione e la Cultura come Performance Partecipativa», *Culture Teatrali* 28 (2018), p. 227-257.

<sup>6</sup> Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*, Verso, London 2012.

<sup>7</sup> Diana Taylor, *Presente! The Politics of Presence (Dissident Acts)*, Duke University Press, Durham 2020.

choreographer designs the movements in relation to the individual bodies. Stories are embedded in the personal gestures, and ultimately may be revealed in the overall composition. Yet, they are not processed, nor voiced from the participants own perspective. On the contrary, the very private individual identities of the performers are abstracted away to model the final choral public figures. Thus, we could say that mass choreographies are collective, yet not collaborative and that they follow a clear leadership: does this actual feature make them reactionary practices?

The risk of exploitation is undeniable. In the early part of the Twentieth century, we can see it becoming a fact in the unpredictable destiny occurred to the communitarian dance model created by Rudolf von Laban: it «was developed in a context favoring the liberation of bodies but became the model for the Large Nazi demonstrations before regaining, in the anti-establishment context of performance art, a new subversive virginity».<sup>8</sup> In fact, both reactionary and liberatory figures of community disclose «the existence of something in common and the delimitations that define the respective parts and positions within it».<sup>9</sup> Even so, the figures presented by a collective body always hold a critical potential that should not be dismissed, because of a false equivalence between collectivity and collaboration, or co-creation, which is a side effect of the relational turn.

By looking at the community figures as aesthetic products, the attention is cast on the artistic object, and not on the process, which is usually crucial in community-based projects. The political meaning of the mass choreographies lays in their aesthetic configuration, rather than in their socializing power. In fact, they combine the accessible and inclusive casting, typical of community practices, with a top-down approach designed by the choreographer. The dancing masses originally come together as communities of interest,<sup>10</sup> made of people temporarily connected by the shared goal of enjoying dancing with one another, meeting other people they might not know, nor share anything with, thus stepping outside of their own individual networks. As a matter of fact, in Sieni's mass choreographies, no bottom-up process, no agency, and no overt sharing of political claims is made. And yet, people join in great numbers to find their place in these mixed communities and perform in the public space, in front of big audiences.

The figures of community are somehow structured, leaving the personal space for composition within set and strict boundaries. This means that participants collectively embody exogenously drawn figures of community, and that they are never fully aware of the final scene they ultimately co-create. The aesthetic value of these works will therefore be investigated for their political function as symbolic rituals affecting the public sphere in specific historical conjunctions, rather than for their allegedly participatory nature. We will do so by focusing, first, on *L'Art du geste dans la Méditerranée* (*The Art of gesture in the*

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<sup>8</sup> Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics. The Distribution of the Sensible* (tr. Gabriel Rockhill), Continuum, London - New York 2004, p. 18.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> For the distinction between community of interest, of location and of identity, see Caoimhe McAviney, *Performance and Community: Commentary and Case Studies*, Bloomsbury, London - New Delhi - New York - Sidney 2014.

*Mediterranean*, 2010-2013), which was a benchmark in Sieni's research for large communities and a European transnational project based on the concept of the «agora», and move on to his «civic marches» that symbolically countered the political populist discourses of the past years in Italy.

### 3. Enacting a multicultural «polis»: *Trois Agoras Marseille*

Sieni conceived the project *Art du geste dans la Méditerranée* within the Accademia sull'arte del gesto that he founded in 2007 as a nomadic school for the transmission of dance to amateur dancers of all ages and abilities. At the time, Sieni had already been one of the main choreographers in Italy for decades. He participated in the post-vanguard movements of the Eighties, cofounding the collective Parco Butterfly, after a collaboration with GroupO, led by American artist Katie Duck. Then, in 1992 he established his own company and elaborated his own style, becoming one of the most acclaimed «dance authors», as they were called at the time for their individual search based on their proper bodies and combination of techniques.<sup>11</sup> He moved from a neoclassic approach to the creation of a more grotesque dancing body in his choreographic cycles on the Greek tragedy in the Nineties and in the fairy tales towards the end of the decade.<sup>12</sup> However, with the new millennium his interest in oral history moved to the background in favor of research on human behavior and nature, inspired by the consumeristic and everyday imagery and settings.

In forty years of career, Sieni moved from a deconstruction of the codified dance techniques into a deconstruction of the very qualities of everyday movement. He continued the same line of research when he started collaborating with amateur dancers. This shift first occurred in 2005, when he choreographed *Ossò*, a site-specific choreography for himself and his eighty-year-old father, and continued after that moment in danced dialogues and in workshops, installations, and pieces with small homogeneous groups of performers, both young and elderly, before he opened his choreographic methods to mix and include greater heterogeneity and numbers. In the process, he advanced from being the director of his company into directing various cultural centers, and festivals, and the Biennale Danza in Venice in 2014. Insofar, he has been the only Italian choreographer to ever reach this position.

The Accademia sull'arte del gesto plays a relevant role in the opening of the choreographic activities to laymen, to produce aesthetic actions usually presented in public venues, and which are partly dependent on public funding and partly sustained by local productive centers. *Art du geste dans la Méditerranée* is an offspring of this major project that was made in collaboration with the «Scène Nationale» de la ville de Marseille for the celebration of Marseille Capitale de la

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<sup>11</sup> On the «danza d'autore», see Dora Levano, «Nuova danza italiana/Danza d'autore», Elena Cervellati – Elena Randi (eds), *Danza e ricerca. Laboratorio di studi, scritture, visioni* 4 (2013), p. 117-162.

<sup>12</sup> For both choreographic cycles, see Rossella Mazzaglia, *Sieni. Archeologia di un pensiero coreografico* also cf. Andrea Nanni (ed.), *Anatomia della fiaba. Virgilio Sieni tra teatro e danza*, Ubulibri, Firenze 2002.

Culture in 2013. In fact, *Art du geste dans la Méditerranée* started in Marseille at the beginning of 2010 and ended in this same city almost four years later in August 2013, when the performers who had participated in smaller units of the overall project in their hometowns in Italy and Spain conjoined in Marseille to make *Trois Agoras (Three Agoras) Marseille*.<sup>13</sup>

When casting people, the Institutions locally co-producing the performances were asked to search for the less visible minorities, as the Kurds in Marseille, as well as for the old preservers of disappearing folk cultures still living in the South of Italy. No reference was made to citizenship, instead, residency being the only prerequisite for participation in the Accademia's projects with no demarcations between regular citizens and undocumented ones. In the «coming community»<sup>14</sup> that this project was trying to build, the specificity of each enacted culture did not erect barriers: no matter their background, all people were accepted for the goal of making an open temporary alternative to exclusion-based aggregations. The debate on active citizenship was clearly the discursive setting for this cultural endeavor. As Ian Morrison argues on *Acts of commemoration*: «acts of citizenship comprise not only the establishment or challenging of rights and obligations, but also the construction, interpretation and reinterpretation of those practices and rituals that act to sustain the myths underlying particular conceptions of citizenship».<sup>15</sup> Conceiving choreography as today's rituals building a support (but also denial) of current myths provides a lens for reading the *Trois Agoras*.

In August 2013, three multi-ethnic urban pieces titled *Agora Mer*, *Agora Ciel* and *Agora Terre* composed figures of community aggregating «citizens of the world», beyond the bordering of territories and States. They were based on the embodied culture and memories of the people involved in the dances, whose movements were slowed, suspended and restored by the choreographer. The stylization of their ordinary gestures widened their semantic spectrum, affected the body habits and produced a heightened cultural awareness in the performers and in the onlookers.<sup>16</sup> During the performances, through similarity in diversity, the common timing and overlapping directions of the performers' gestures emphatically staged multiplicity. This assembly was specifically conceived as a metaphor for the Mediterranean as a multicultural site, an abstraction purposely dissolving geopolitical borders between Nations and implicitly countering the prevailing Atlantic perspective beyond the same idea of a European Union. It was also the outcome of an unusual diasporic movement symbolically countering

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<sup>13</sup> Sieni's original project included North African sites, but this idea could never materialize.

<sup>14</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *La comunità che viene*, Einaudi, Torino 1990.

<sup>15</sup> Ian Morrison, «Acts of Commemoration», Isin F. Engin – Greg M. Nielsen (eds), *Acts of Citizenship*, Zed Books, London – New York 2008, p. 289.

<sup>16</sup> Sieni's technique is not codified. It is geared towards the development of body awareness and is based on the capacity to move fluidly through different horizontal layers of the body and the space in relation to other performers, to the environment and to visual sources. As an example, see the lessons Sieni recorded during the Italian lockdown in March 2020 as *Lezione sull'arte e la natura # 2*, <https://vimeo.com/421951668>. To expand on Sieni's transmission techniques with amateur dancers, cfr. my article «La danza delle lucciole. Oralità e trasmissione nell'opera di Virgilio Sieni», *Danza e ricerca. Laboratorio di studi, scritture, visioni* 2012, p. 91-120. ISSN 2036-1599, available at <https://danzaericerca.unibo.it/article/view/2509>

international policies in the very historical moment in which walls were built or proclaimed as a solution to prevent peoples' freedom. In fact, though most European projects imply that artists travel from country to country, this is not generally the case for amateur participants of local projects. And while the artist's nomadic life can be seen in continuity with the past and, in present terms, considered a resulting effect of the neo-liberal economy allowing for the circulation of cultural products, the migration and final convergence of more than a 100 people in the *Trois Agoras Marseille* praised a cosmopolitan idea of community.

On the days of the performances, the audience could see the three *Agoras* on the trot, going independently to the performance venues, or separately on different successive nights. *Agora Mer* was performed in the Forum Hall of the Mucem (Musée des Civilisations de l'Europe et de la Méditerranée) and, like the other two parts, pieced together previous dance fragments that were abstracted from their original local settings and intertwined to include a great number of amateur performers from Italy, Angola, Cameroun, Germany, Brazil, Côte d'Ivoire, Israel and Spain (all living in Europe at the moment of the performance) in a new collective configuration: these heterogeneous bodies crossed the space, circled, advanced or stood together moving at the same rhythm as a flock. At moments, smaller groups, couples, or individuals departed to dance their original sequences, from a tarantella by a young boy to the slow construction of a precarious shelter made of chairs by an old couple who had just experienced the terrible earthquake that, in 2012, caused the temporary displacement of hundreds of families into camps in Northern Italy. These very intimate citations were textured within a continuous interdependent flow of actions, which overall conveyed an idea of an all-inclusive community growly enriched by individual and group contributions.

*Agora Ciel (Agora Sky)* was performed outdoor at the terrace of the Place D'Armes of the Mucem. Couples and trios of mothers and children danced before a magnificent scenery slowly moving in between the sky and the sea at the time of dawn.<sup>17</sup> In the background, the live music and voice of the cellist Naomi Berrilli created an all-encompassing atmosphere. *Agora Terre (Agora Land)* was located at the Conservatoire Palis Carli and was composed of three parts, happening in different rooms of the conservatoire, and requiring that the audience walk from one section to the other: *Bibliothèque Visitations, Salle Tomasi Ecoute (Hall Tomasi Listening), Salle Audoli Ceremonie du filage (Hall Audoli Ceremony of Stringing)*. This last action showed three old women from Puglia sitting on the floor amidst tomatoes, while slowly picking and threading them, one by one, as traditionally done to preserve tomatoes for the winter. Watching this obdurately living ceremony, the audience was confronted with the embodied traces of a residual rural culture that wordlessly recalled Pier Paolo Pasolini's statements on the effects of consumerism, which caused the disappearance of the Italian folk cultures with the advent of the Economic Miracle and of mass media.<sup>18</sup> As a matter of fact, when writing about this project, Sieni specifically described his work on

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<sup>17</sup> Sieni's *Madri e figli (Mothers and children)* cycles are a veiled quotation of the iconographic type represented by portraits of St. Mary and Jesus.

<sup>18</sup> Pier Paolo Pasolini, *Scritti corsari*, Garzanti, Milano 1975.

gesture as a way to exchange cultures through observation, mimesis, physical and visual correspondences.<sup>19</sup>

The same impression was given in *Bibliothèque Visitations* by an eighty-year-old Tuscan craftsman from Volterra, known in his own town as the Pupo.<sup>20</sup> As a live installation, each action was framed in squares traced on the floor and placed one behind the other along the hall of the empty L-shaped library of the conservatoire. The audience walked around and was free to pause, stand close to singular groups and actions or individually observe the whole from a corner, to grasp the human fresco these gestures created as they were repeated in loops till the end. Entering the hall, the audience first saw the Pupo. He sat in front of a table displaying small pieces of Alabaster he had previously chosen with the choreographer: rasp, chisel, bender, and a glass of wine (that is never absent in his shop).

In the previous days, while everybody else rehearsed their part to synchronize their movements, he had simply watched, having no need to practice gestures he had done during his whole life. Only his focus changed, giving a greater importance to the form than to the final craft to fit in the whole picture. Beyond him, a couple of teens executed stylized actions inspired by visual art (specifically, *Pontormo's Visitation*) with the vitality typical of their young age, while an intergenerational group of women accomplished slow movements in reciprocal touch. The craftsman's concentration also resonated with the individual action of an old boxer from Algeria who apparently trained alone, standing on a table as if in a ring. This collective dance consequently enacted plurality by embodying an inter-textual discourse based on non-hierarchical spatial parataxis and on simultaneity, altogether underscoring the resonances among performers without erasing diversity.<sup>21</sup> Cultural and biographical traces overlapped in the eyes of the audience: each body negotiated its identity in relation to others around it, or in support of its gestures as everybody moved slowly, in loops, keeping the focus on their own small ritual. At the same time, the inter-subjectivity given by the proximity between performers and audience portrayed a three-dimensional fresco of a «polis», a utopian configuration significantly titled «agora», a place in which a multitude peacefully co-habits.

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<sup>19</sup> Virgilio Sieni, *Trois Agoras Marseille. Art du geste dans la Méditerranée*, Maschietto Editore, Firenze 2013.

<sup>20</sup> His real name is Aulo Grandoli and his biography is recounted in a book by Luca Caioli, *Io, Il Pupo. Vita, opera e invettive di un alabastraio*, Distillerie Edizioni, Volterra 2015. Through the eyes and life of this old man (84 at the time the book was published), the history of Italy is told, first from the perspective of his communist family that resisted fascism and participated in the resistance, then from his own personal recounts of an everyday resilience based on his ancient craft. In this attachment to the craft as a form of resistance to the evolving times lies Sieni's interest in the artisanal gesture.

<sup>21</sup> For these same features, Sieni's choreographies can be considered as an example of post-dramatic aesthetics. See Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Il teatro postdrammatico* (tr. Sonia Antonori), Cue Press, Imola 2017.

#### 4. Counter-fictions of community: the «civic walk»

After Marseille, Sieni gradually changed the imagery related to his choreographic works from picturing agoras to civic walks. This figural shift went along a continuity in methods except for a growing involvement of the locals, not only as far as the actual participants were concerned, but also for his assistants. They were recruited among local professional dancers, teachers and community dance practitioners, whose role was precious in upholding the relationship with the performers throughout the process and after the events. Instantiating an embodied form of utopian community was still an issue, but the discourses around the organization and advertising of these projects now underscored community-building as a means towards expanded citizenship in the public space.

The cultural context and institutional acknowledgement of participatory art in Italy was also moving in this direction. For instance, in 2017 *Right to the city* was the title of the first edition of the Transnational project *Atlas of Transition–New Geographies for a Cross-Cultural Europe*,<sup>22</sup> developed under the umbrella of the European Creative Europe program with the intention to promote a better cohabitation of citizens and newcomers in the public space. The call for citizens to participate and this rhetoric, echoing the Sixties movements, contributed to reaching the people beyond the restricted field of spectatorship and audience engagement. The «right to dance» claimed by Community Dance since the Seventies was replaced with the slogan «dance for the rights» and, finally, with an openly claimed «right to the city» (the performance space being assimilated to a space of citizenship). This concept referred to an individualistic (and not nationalist) definition of citizenship based on a sense of belonging unrelated to institutionally channeled civil rights and rather connected to the participation in the social and cultural life of a community: it was around this time that the mass choreographies started spreading from city to city.

The first offspring after Marseille was the piece *Vangelo Secondo Matteo (Gospel According to Matthew)*, presented in Venice during Sieni's direction of the Dance Biennale in 2014. A majestic performance occurred during three consecutive weekends and was overall composed of twenty-seven framed actions. Every night, nine actions occurred simultaneously in the big hall of the «Teatro delle Tese», located in the Venice Arsenal. In every single frame, short group or individual actions recurred in loops, covering the overall duration of the performance. The audience was again free to walk around the frames or to simply stand and observe and could appreciate one only evening or come back, since no narration evolved through the nights. A significant change from Marseille was that, at moments, all groups stopped their autonomous dances to join in the same movement, uplifting hands, betting sticks, or applauding synchronously altogether overcoming their physical squared demarcations.

The invocation of union turned into a more explicit mass walk in 2015, in Bologna, during the piece *Cena Pasolini (Dinner Pasolini)*: more than a hundred intergenerational and mixed ability performers danced around five tables in

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<sup>22</sup> The countries involved were Italy, Albania, Belgium, Poland, France, Greece and Sweden. The PL was the ERT National Theatre from Bologna, Italy.

configurations inspired by Leonardo's *Last supper*. The audience walked, sat or stood freely along the perimeter of the hall. At first, each group was separate with only ephemeral interactions between near dancers, but in the end the performers came together in a march. At the same time, the choir, the Carpi ensemble, that had first chanted airs like the evangelic *Agnus Dei* standing still on a far side of the hall, participated in the walk singing the partisan *Bella ciao*. According to the critic Stefano Casi, this performance pictured a choral ritual, a four-dimensional fresco telling «the story of human solidarity»;<sup>23</sup> and Sieni supported this view by claiming that it was an aesthetic act reaffirming Pasolini's antagonistic view of the modern world, a critique of its cynicism, irony, brutality, conformism and hate against any form of diversity.

From *Cena Pasolini* onwards, the march became a leitmotif in Sieni's mass pieces, as in *Ballo 1265*, that was presented in Florence on 31 December 2015, in the majestic hall of Palazzo Vecchio. Here, the walk did not come at the end, as in *Cena Pasolini*, but rather gave consistency and continuity to the crowd in the very first part of the piece. Similar to rubble deposited downstream and initially motionless or curled up on crumpled blankets, at the beginning, the 150 performers looked like «waiting migrants scattered on the shores of the seas».<sup>24</sup> As rags or immanent ruins first evoking chronicles of the Mediterranean passage, they were gradually stitched together by a collective «dynamis» as they slowly rouse and marched together, supporting each other: acting against the liberal ideology of self-sufficiency, the choreography portrayed images of mutual support. In the second section of the piece, performers balanced discarded materials as if creating temporary shelters and, in the end, danced in groups mirroring each other.<sup>25</sup> In brief, they portrayed the «assembly of bodies» Judith Butler describes when speaking of vulnerability as a collective strategy.<sup>26</sup>

After *Ballo 1265*, the walk never disappeared from the mass productions, though its use varied from being a choral leitmotif to an ending common march, to becoming the main theme of what Sieni called *Cammino popolare*, which literary means civic walk. An explicit inspirational reference to conceive the civic walks was Pellizza Da Volpedo's painting *Il quarto stato* (*The fourth state*, 1901) that portrays men, women and children advancing together. The fourth state Da Volpedo depicted concerned fierce workers marching together with their children for their rights and was an explicit inspirational source for Sieni's first *Cammino Popolare* on the May Day labor holiday in Milan in 2017.<sup>27</sup> However, just like the

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<sup>23</sup> Stefano Casi, *Come si osserva un affresco (in quattro dimensioni)*, 2015 <https://casicritici.wordpress.com/2015/04/11/come-si-osserva-un-affresco-in-quattro-dimensioni/> [18/3/2020]

<sup>24</sup> Massimo Marino, «Dialoghetto di Capodanno 2016: quasi una Commedia», *Corriere di Bologna*, 1 January 2016.

<sup>25</sup> A full video of the performance is available at Virgilio Sieni, *Divina commedia. Ballo 1265* <https://www.raiplay.it/video/2017/06/Divina-Commedia-Ballo-1265-90ef57db-304c-4a15-ae20-14d20d914111.html> [2.5.2024]

<sup>26</sup> Judith Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*, President and Fellows of Harvard College, Cambridge (MA) 2015.

<sup>27</sup> Sieni's *Cammino Popolare*, in turn, became a source of inspiration for the documentary film *Hanging in the balance, Equilibrio Precario*, produced by Fondazione Feltrinelli in 2018 (the trailer

individual gestures enlivening the agora, the walk was abstracted from its source and became a motif amplifying its semantic spectrum from place to place. In presenting the people as a mass it also created a monumental epiphany in the city, which is very different than the anonymous walkscapes introduced by the surrealists and still adopted in several site-specific performances.<sup>28</sup> The collective body became an icon for the people, making a statement aiming to impact on the public sphere.

## 5. Conclusion

With the pandemics the aggregation of people became a critical issue. Eventually, even as the health crisis was over, proximity was rather identified as a partial antidote to the traumatic experience of isolation. During this time, Sieni started envisaging the «coming cities», based on the concepts of care, both relational and within the neighborhoods, through smaller ceremonies in the open air.<sup>29</sup> However, the prior community works served as the basis to mold new democratic configurations based on shared human gestures. Reconsidering the Marseille experience at a distance, both the deterritorialization from the city center and the nomadic practices showed the potential to destabilize the symbolic space and the entangled ideas of territorial identity by producing images of mutable and moving landscapes. On the contrary, local mass choreographies reached their political function because of their ceremonial nature, which required an iconic setting for them to embody a collective body in secular rituals. It showed a silent form of resistance, in years in which International widespread populism reached the point of extreme racism in Italy, with its climax when Matteo Salvini was elected as Prime Minister.<sup>30</sup> Though no direct reference was ever made to the political news in Sieni's abstract choreographies, the aesthetic beauty of the choreography was never their unique goal, nor was socialization in itself an answer, which other participatory devices would have more consistently granted. When populist political discourses were building new frontiers among those who deserved a right to live, coordinated plural performances showed alternative figures of community, based on diversity, empathy, and support. As such, they also represent historical sources and critical tools to read art in context, even when

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also pictures bits of the performance is available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=STcC198LcG4> [4.5.2024]).

<sup>28</sup> Francesco Carreri, *Walkscapes. Camminare come pratica estetica*, Einaudi, Torino 2006.

<sup>29</sup> Virgilio Sieni, «Sulla distanza. La città che viene», Gerardo Guccini – Claudio Longhi - Daniele Vianello (eds), *Creating for the Stage and Other Spaces. Questioning Practices and Theories*, AMS Acta, Bologna 2021, p. 116-117.

<sup>30</sup> Matteo Salvini was Prime Minister between June 2018 and August 2019. Both for his campaign and while governing, he used the feelings caused by the general impoverishment derived from the economic crisis for the stigmatization of migrants as common enemies. His overt racism constituted the last piece of a growing Nationalism throughout Europe culminated, in Italy, in the migrant ship blockades for which he is now prosecuted. During this time, migrants were accused of eroding the Italian identity, security and economy and became the target of reactionary political measures, he had claimed during his campaign.

aesthetic configurations prevail over social goals. They are live monuments for the future and not of the past.



## ΠΕΡΙΛΗΨΗ

### ΣΥΓΧΡΟΝΕΣ ΜΑΖΙΚΕΣ ΧΟΡΟΓΡΑΦΙΕΣ ΣΤΗΝ ΙΤΑΛΙΑ: ΟΙ «ΑΓΟΡΕΣ» ΚΑΙ ΟΙ «ΑΣΤΙΚΟΙ ΠΕΡΙΠΑΤΟΙ» ΤΟΥ SIENI

Μασσαλία 2013: περισσότεροι από εκατό ερασιτέχνες καλλιτέχνες από διάφορες περιοχές της Μεσογείου ενώνονται σε ειδικά «χορευτικά» τοπία διεκδικώντας μια πολυπολιτισμική πόλη. Λίγο αργότερα, στην Ιταλία, αρκετές πόλεις γίνονται πυρήνες μαζικών χορογραφιών απεικονίζοντας χωρικά την «αγορά» και οργανώνοντας παράλληλα, περιπάτους σε εμβληματικές ιστορικά τοποθεσίες. Ένας καλλιτέχνης που στηρίζει τις τέτοιους είδους κοσμικές τελετουργίες είναι ο Virgilio Sieni. Πρόκειται για έναν κορυφαίο Ιταλό χορογράφο που έχει εισαγάγει πολλά καινοτόμα στοιχεία στις παραστάσεις με τους ερασιτέχνες χορευτές του. Στην παρούσα μελέτη γίνεται επιλογή κάποιων καλλιτεχνικών του δημιουργιών, και βεβαίως, σύγκριση με άλλες μορφές συμμετοχικής τέχνης, όπως είναι το θέατρο. Πρόκειται να αναλυθούν οι «μορφές κοινότητας» (Rancière) και οι «συνελεύσεις σωμάτων» (Butler), διερευνώντας εις βάθος, τις μορφές πολιτισμικής ανθεκτικότητας στην ιταλική σκηνή των προπανδημικών χρόνων.



## ABSTRACT

### CONTEMPORARY MASS CHOREOGRAPHIES IN ITALY: VIRGILIO SIENI'S «AGORAS» AND «CIVIC WALKS»

Marseille 2013: more than a hundred amateur performers from different areas of the Mediterranean conjoin in site-specific dances claiming a multicultural polis. Short after in Italy, several cities become venues of mass choreographies enacting «agoras» and «civic walks» in iconic sites. The artist beyond these secular rituals is Virgilio Sieni, a leading Italian choreographer, and a model case in Italy for performances with amateur dancers. Selected case studies from his productions will be compared to other forms of participatory art such as theatre and analyzed as «community figures» (Rancière), and «assemblies of bodies» (Butler) ultimately elucidating forms of cultural resilience to the political Italian scene of the pre-pandemic years.

## Η ΣΥΓΓΡΑΦΕΑΣ

Η Rosella Mazzaglia (Ιταλία) είναι Αναπληρώτρια Καθηγήτρια στο Πανεπιστήμιο της Μπολόνια. Τα ερευνητικά της ενδιαφέροντα επικεντρώνονται κυρίως στον χορό της ιταλικής σκηνής, στον μεταμοντέρνο χορό, στις κοινοτικές και αστικές πρακτικές του θεάτρου και του χορού, στο κοινωνικό θέατρο και στη μετανάστευση. Επίσης, είναι η συγγραφέας της πρώτης βιογραφίας για τον Virgilio Sieni (*Virgilio Sieni. Archeologia di un pensiero coreografico*, 2015). Ενδεικτικά κάποιες μονογραφίες της είναι οι εξής: *Danza e Spazio. Le metamorfosi dell'esperienza artistica contemporanea* (2012), *Trisha Brown* (2010), *Judson Dance Theater. Danza e controcultura nell'America degli anni Sessanta* (2010). Τέλος, είναι η επιστημονική επιμελήτρια των βιβλίων: *Crescere nell'Assurdo. Uno sguardo dallo Stretto* (μαζί με τον Lorenzo Donati, 2018), *Trisha Brown. L'invezione dello spazio* (It/En, μαζί με την Polveroni, 2010), καθώς και του μονογραφικού τεύχους του περιοδικού *Culture Teatrali. Danza/900. Testimonianza e riflessioni intorno al processo creativo*, 2006.



## THE AUTHOR

Rosella Mazzaglia (Italy) is Associate Professor at the University of Bologna. Her research interests mainly focus on the Italian Dance Scene, Postmodern Dance, community and urban practices in theatre and dance, social theatre and migration. Among her publications, she is the author of the first biography on Virgilio Sieni (*Virgilio Sieni. Archeologia di un pensiero coreografico*, 2015). Her other volumes are *Danza e Spazio. Le metamorfosi dell'esperienza artistica contemporanea* (2012), *Trisha Brown* (2010), *Judson Dance Theater. Danza e controcultura nell'America degli anni Sessanta* (2010). She is editor of the books *Crescere nell'Assurdo. Uno sguardo dallo Stretto* (with Lorenzo Donati, 2018), *Trisha Brown. L'invezione dello spazio* (It/En, with Laura Polveroni, 2010), and of the monographic issue of the journal «*Culture Teatrali. Danza/900. Testimonianza e riflessioni intorno al processo creativo*» (2006).