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The Language of the Land: The Memorial at Portella della Ginestra

Abstract I: Il memoriale di Portella della Ginestra ridefinisce la commemorazione pubblica unendo territorio, linguaggio, attivismo politico e memoria collettiva. Realizzato nel 1980 da Ettore de Conciliis, Rocco Falciano e Giorgio Stockel nei pressi di Piana degli Albanesi, a sud di Palermo, in Sicilia, commemora le vittime di una strage avvenuta il Primo Maggio del 1947. Il saggio ricostruisce gli eventi legati al massacro e mostra come attraverso l'arte quel territorio si sia trasformato in un luogo di memoria civica permanente, anticipando come prima opera di Land Art in Italia la moderna arte ambientale.

Abstract II: The memorial at Portella della Ginestra redefines public commemoration by uniting land, language, political activism, and collective memory. The memorial, created in 1980 by Ettore de Conciliis, Rocco Falciano, and Giorgio Stockel near Piana degli Albanesi, south of Palermo, Sicily, is a commemoration of the victims of a massacre that occurred on May Day of 1947. This essay recounts the story of the events surrounding this massacre and reveals how, through the agency of art, the land on which these events took place came to function as an ongoing site of civic remembrance, Italy's first work of Land Art, and a precursor to today's environmental art movement.

Keywords: Language, Collective Memory, Earth Art, Activism.

HUMBLE [L. humilis, low, small, slight, akin to humus, soil, earth (see HUMUS)]
1. Not proud, not self-assertive; modest.
HUMUS [L. earth, ground, soil; see HOMAGE] A brown or black substance resulting from the partial decay of plant and animal matter; the organic part of the soil.
HOMAGE [L. homo, a man; earth, ground, whence L. humus] Anything given or done to show reverence, honour or respect
(*Webster's New World* 1972: s.vv.).

The landscape and the language are the same.
And we ourselves are language and are the land
(Aiken 1961: 254).

On the stony plateau of Portella della Ginestra, language, land, and memory converge. Conceived between 1979 and 1980 by the artists and activists Ettore de Conciliis (b.1941) and

Rocco Falciano (1933-2012) in collaboration with the architect Giorgio Stockel (b.1938), the memorial to the victims of the May Day massacre of 1947 stands near Piana degli Albanesi, south of Palermo, Sicily. It is at once Italy's first work of Land Art and a radical experiment in civic remembrance: a monument without ostentation, built not of imported marble or triumphant bronze, but of the very stones that witnessed the violence it commemorates. Arranged in a low, archaic circle reminiscent of Mediterranean ritual spaces and prehistoric menhirs, these calcareous boulders serve as both sculpture and testimony, leading the visitor through the site of the massacre. They transform the landscape into a text – one inscribed not only with the names of those who died there and the dates of the massacre, but with the enduring language of resistance, one that resounds to this day as workers and their families gather on this site every 1 May to mourn their dead and continue the fight for the cause for which they died. This essay will recount how the story of those events and the land on which they occurred are transformed, through the agency of the artistic object, into a profound expression of collective memory, and how the land, in turn, will influence the role of the artist.

Visitors to the memorial are invited to read the land as an archive, to experience commemoration as pilgrimage, and to understand mourning as a form of political vigilance. As is true of much Land Art, it is in a remote area; the journey to it is akin to a pilgrimage. With no arched entranceway, no monumental marble or steel sculptures, no cross or other religious iconography, the memorial is easy to miss, as it is part of the landscape. It lies in an open field with minimal vegetation, amongst the rocks and the boulders that have always been there. In springtime, some yellow wildflowers called *ginestre* bloom on the hillside.

A small sign by the road announces that you have arrived at Portella della Ginestra. In Giacomo Leopardi's poem "La ginestra", the flower symbolises stoic courage and resilience, clinging to the arid flank of Mount Vesuvius, described as the "formidabil monte / sterminator Vesevo" ("the terrifying mountain / Vesuvius the destroyer"), where "la qual null'altro allegra arbor né fiore" ("which no other tree or flower brightens") (Leopardi 2010: 286, ll.2-4). Yet the *ginestra*, as if in commiseration with those who lost their lives at the site, emits a sweet fragrance and endures in this arid place with the tenacity of plants (and perhaps, by metaphorical extension, people) that are rooted to the land (Figure 1).

La Portella is a doorway that opens onto a long history. The site had long been a place of assembly, protest, and hope – a "portella", a mountain pass or doorway opening onto centuries of struggle for land and dignity. The stories that are told here are of enduring hardships, centuries of injustice, and tragedy, but they are not recitals of despair because, despite all that has happened here, the telling of these stories and this memorial are an assertion of resistance and resilience. Beginning in the 1890s, a May Day workers' procession and festival were held on this site – this celebration continued even during Benito Mussolini's rule, though in a clandestine manner. This is an area where social injustices have provoked many collective acts of resistance, and workers' demonstrations continue to be held to this day.

The memorial at Portella della Ginestra commemorates the events that took place at the celebration on 1 May 1947. On that morning, an estimated two thousand workers and their families from the villages of Piana degli Albanesi, San Cipirello, and San Giuseppe Jato gathered on the rocky plateau at the base of the mountain to enjoy the May Day holiday. They arrived in brightly painted carts, on donkeys, on horses, on bicycles, or on foot, carry-



Figure 1. *Memoriale di Portella della Ginestra*. Photo by Jo Anna Isaak, 2023.

ing flags, banners, and food. According to Serafino Petta, who was there that day and has kindly recounted the story to me, some people in this poverty-stricken area may have come with the hope of getting food that was traditionally shared at the festival[1]. This was an especially joyous Labour Day festival as the people were hopeful that a new social order was about to be born. The *Blocco del Popolo* (The People's Bloc) – an alliance between the Italian Communist Party (*Partito Comunista Italiano*, PCI) and the Italian Socialist Party (*Partito Socialista Italiano*, PSI) – had won a major victory in the regional election of 20 April, and hopes were high for political reforms, chief among them, the redistribution of uncultivated lands. Demands were being made for relief from the taxes Rome levied on the citizens of Sicily; some, associated with a group called EVIS, were even advocating for Sicily to secede from

[1] I interviewed Serafino Petta on 9 May 2023, in the headquarters of the CGIL in Piana degli Albanesi. He was, at that time, the last living survivor of the massacre. He passed away in 2026 at the age of 94.
Petta regularly took part in the demonstrations organised by the CGIL at the site of the massacre, giving his testimony and recalling the names of the victims.

Italy. Amid all these divided factions were the workers, hoping this was the moment when reform might be possible.

Most of those who assembled on the plain that day were from the nearby commune of Piana degli Albanesi (in Albanian *Hora e Arbëreshëvet*), the homeland of the largest and most populous colony of Arbëreshë/Albanians established in Italy in 1488, due to the Turkish conquest of the Balkans. A half-millennium later, this community remains geographically, ethnically, and culturally distinct, maintaining many elements of Albanian culture, including traditional costumes, music, folklore, Orthodox rites that the Roman Catholic Church sought to eliminate, and the Albanian language. When I asked Matteo Mandalà, a professor of Albanian literature and resident of Piana degli Albanesi, how many people in the village still spoke Arbëresh (the Albanian dialect spoken by the Arbëreshë people), he replied, "Everyone!"[2]. These fiercely independent people and the newly elected *Blocco del Popolo* posed a clear threat to the wealthy landowners and to other vested interests in the area.

On that May morning in 1947, sounds first thought to be celebratory fireworks were explosions and gunfire, and a joyous occasion became a scene of massacre. Eleven people, four of them children, were killed on site and more than forty were wounded. Many animals were also killed or wounded. Petta, who was sixteen at the time, hid behind some rocks with his father as all around them their friends and neighbours were being shot. He told me of a boy crying to his father that his horse had been shot, only to realise that his mother had also been killed.

This massacre and several successive attacks on the offices of the labour movement in the area and other murders that followed were led by Salvatore Giuliano (1922-1950) and his gang, notorious bandits who lived in the mountains and committed many crimes – robberies, kidnappings, and murders, including those of several police officers. Gangs such as these were common in western Sicily at the time. Danilo Dolci's book *The Outlaws of Partinico* (1960) is a collection of first-person accounts by gang members, many of whom were driven to join these gangs to feed their families. These men regularly engaged in robbery, extortion, and the kidnapping of wealthy people for ransom; however, firing on unarmed peasants and children, some of whom were their neighbours, was violence of another magnitude. There are many theories about who was behind Giuliano and his gang. Francesco Petrotta's book *Salvatore Giuliano, uomo d'onore: Nuove ipotesi sulla strage di Portella della Ginestra* (2018) links Giuliano directly to the Cosa Nostra, which in turn was connected to wealthy landowners and corrupt local politicians and police. Others point to influences from the government in Rome. The Italian prime minister at the time, Alcide De Gasperi, met with President Harry S. Truman in January 1947, and promised to stamp out communism in exchange for economic aid from the United States. In other accounts, including Giuliano's own account in the letters he attempted to send to Truman, he and his gang were a paramilitary group working on behalf of the anti-communist campaign the United States was promoting in Italy[3].

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[2] I met Matteo Mandalà on 10 May 2023 in Piana degli Albanesi.

[3] Imprisoned for murdering a police officer, Giuliano was freed when American forces liberated Sicily. Although the US Office of Strategic Services had maintained records on him since 1944, any direct contact remains uncertain. American journalist Michael Stern met Giuliano who asked him to carry a letter to President



Figure 2. May Day Manifestation at Portella della Ginestra, 2012[4].

These factions had shared interests, and Giuliano's actions undermining the peasants' and workers' movement directly or indirectly served their agendas. While specific accusations are controversial, there seems to be consensus that Giuliano "was being used as a vanguard in a domestic political battle with the Communists" (Cockayne 2016: 192). People from the surrounding communities gather at the site of the massacre every year on 1 May to commemorate the victims, and they continue to seek answers to questions about the events of over three-quarters of a century ago (Figure 2).

This was the tragic story with all its complications and uncertainties and political interests that the Sicilian regional government in 1979 commissioned de Conciliis and Falciano to commemorate. At this time, both artists were well-known for creating public murals that support workers' movements and the struggle for civil and human rights. In 1965, when he was in his early twenties, de Conciliis, in collaboration with Falciano, made his first mural – *Il murale della pace* (The Mural of Peace) – for the church of San Francesco in his hometown of Avellino. One side of the mural portrays people in carts, on donkeys, and on foot carrying flags, banners, farm implements, and placards for peace, forming a circle around St. Francis of Assisi. The other side depicts the ravages of war. The mural represents people of various nationalities and religions, even atheists, as well as recognisable figures such as Fidel Cas-

Truman, dated twelve days after the massacre. It included Giuliano's cartoon depicting himself severing Sicily's chain to Italy and drawing the island towards America. In *No Innocence Abroad* (1953), Stern portrays him as a handsome, engaging Robin Hood figure whose crimes resulted from police corruption.

[4] https://www.piolatorre.it/public/news/1-maggio-a-portella-della-ginestra-381/ (consulted on 09/09/2026).

tro, John Kennedy, Pier Paolo Pasolini, along with two Popes. Not surprisingly, the mural caused an uproar among religious conservatives and those on the right, but – unlike Diego Rivera's mural *Man at the Crossroads* (1933) at Rockefeller Center in New York – it survived the censorship attacks, thanks in large part to an audience granted to de Conciliis by Pope Paul VI. Now it has been put forward for UNESCO World Heritage status.

Over the next few years, de Conciliis would undertake several more murals in support of workers' movements and the struggle for equitable land distribution for farmers in other parts of Italy. In 1971, he was in Mexico City, where he studied mural painting techniques with the Mexican muralist and labour activist David Alfaro Siqueiros (1896-1974). In 1972, after his return, he worked with Falciano, Carlo Levi, and Ernesto Treccani on the mural *Occupazione delle terre e lotta per lo sviluppo* (Land Occupation and the Struggle for Development) in Fiano Romano. Falciano recalls the impetus for this mural:

> Lentamente era maturata l'idea di ricordare con un murale quelle lotte per i diritti civili e umani, collegandole al movimento locale per l'occupazione delle terre dopo la Seconda guerra mondiale, e all'azione contemporanea per lo sviluppo, la solidarietà e la pace in Italia e in altre aree del mondo (Falciano 2007: 136).

Making the memorial for those who lost their lives in the massacre at Portella della Ginestra and envisioning the appropriate form for enshrining the collective memories of a diverse community was a more complex project than commemorating a well-known individual or the labour movement in general. De Conciliis describes this process as a work of art in and of itself[5]. For a time, de Conciliis lived in a monastery in Piana degli Albanesi where he listened to those who had witnessed the event, to those living in the nearby villages, and to those working the land. In his search for how he, a relatively privileged outsider, was to give form to what their stories revealed about the intolerable conditions, flagrant injustice, and endemic violence imposed on them, he became not only an artist fashioning an individual work of art but also a conduit for the community's collective expression. His search for an adequate objective correlative for their collective memories took place over a two-year period and involved many negotiations with the people he came to know, the commune, and the Sicilian regional government.

Meanwhile, de Conciliis was becoming familiar with Land Art – also known as Earth Art or Earthworks – a movement that was expanding both the range of materials used and the possible locations of a work of art, which became inextricably connected to the natural environment. He lived for a time in New York, where he was introduced to the writings and projects of Robert Smithson (1939-1973), a pioneer of the Land Art movement. This movement was changing the American art scene, profoundly altering cultural discourse and practice. A series of exhibitions dealing explicitly with Earthworks was held at the Dwan Gallery in New York beginning in 1968, and in 1969 the exhibition *Earth Art* was held at

[5] In conversation with the author De Conciliis described this process of coming to an understanding of the wishes of the community. In many ways he thought it resembled that of his friend Carlo Levi's process of acculturation while in exile in Lucania, in southern Italy, recounted in his book *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli* (1945).

Cornell University in Ithaca. Michael Heizer (b.1944) created his monumental *Double Negative* in 1969, and Smithson completed *Spiral Jetty* the following year. Jeffrey Kastner writes that in "questioning the established notions of the artistic object" – in leaving the privileged space of the gallery and in not producing commodities – the movement was anti-authoritarian and anti-commercial, embodying "the dissonance of the contemporary age". He asserts that "the broad range of works executed in the landscape participated in a programmatic challenge to social orthodoxy through the agency of the artistic object virtually unparalleled in the twentieth century" (Kastner 1998: ix). While those aims and ambitions resonated with de Conciliis, he focused on the materials from which these works were made – earth, rocks, stones, and dirt – which, despite the movement's name, "Earthworks," were rarely considered in commentary on it. In Smithson's site and non-site pieces, rocks and soil were the art objects. In some of his works viewers are invited to look at rocks and soil placed on mirrors – that is, they look at themselves looking at rocks and soil. Walter de Maria's (1935-2013) *Earth Room* (1977) is just that – a whole room full of earth. This was perhaps the most anachronistic movement in the history of art – envisioning a way to reconnect art and nature, taking us all the way back, past the *plein air* excursions of the Impressionists, to Stonehenge. The land itself was the subject, the material, and the site. Smithson, in his writings, was radically putting forward an old way of looking at earth, art, and time:

> The strata of the Earth is a jumbled museum. Embedded in the sediment is a text that contains limits and boundaries which evade the rational order, and social structures which confine art. In order to read the rocks we must become conscious of geologic time, and of the layers of prehistoric material that is entombed in the Earth's crust (Smithson 1968: 89).

Inspired by the Land Art movement and the writings of Smithson, as well as by Francesco Rosi's 1962 film *Salvatore Giuliano* in which the scene of the massacre is filmed on the site of the massacre and the landscape becomes almost a protagonist in the film, de Conciliis decided to make the memorial on the site and out of the materials on the site. He was learning to read the language of the land, as Smithson discovered:

> Words and rocks contain a language that follows a syntax of splits and ruptures. Look at any word long enough and you will see it open up into a series of faults, into a terrain of particles each containing its own void (Smithson 1968: 87).

However, unlike the monumental interventions of American Earthworks, the Portella memorial is deliberately non-invasive. Unlike Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* and Heizer's *Double Negative,* which involved extensive manipulations of the land with heavy equipment, de Conciliis worked *with* the land as a kind of curator or interpreter, arranging the stones and boulders so they could tell the story they had witnessed. As he explained:

> Il teatro della strage ha esercitato su di me il fascino di quel luogo naturale dove ho potuto traslare il mio interesse per i paesaggi che ho dipinto tante volte. Ho cercato

> di capire la realtà ambientale nella sua dimensione arcaica, agreste, mitica, e da quel rispetto è nata la consapevolezza di intervenire tramite un'opera di arte ambientale, di Land Art, appunto. Sono quindi intervenuto utilizzando esclusivamente materiali già presenti naturalmente sul luogo, la terra e i massi erratici, cercando di imprimere in quei sassi e dare a quello spazio il senso della tragedia per ricordarla in maniera memoriale e non retorica [6].

> The site of the massacre exerted a fascination over me as a natural place where I could transpose my interest in the landscapes I have painted so many times. I sought to understand the environmental reality in its archaic, rural, and mythical dimension, and from that respect came the awareness that I should intervene through a work of environmental art – Land Art, precisely. I therefore engaged with the land using exclusively materials that were already naturally present on the site: earth and erratic boulders. I sought to imprint upon those stones, and upon that space, the meaning of the tragedy, in order to commemorate it in a commemorative rather than rhetorical manner (my translation).

To some extent, the choice of materials was also a matter of necessity. He recalls that they made the memorial "con mezzi di fortuna" ("with makeshift means") and that there was not enough water for the cement foundations[7]. They cleared the surface of the area and arranged the stones they found in the field to form a low-lying circular wall reminiscent of archaic sacred enclosures found throughout the Mediterranean.

A stone pathway leads to the circle. The pathway takes you toward a raised stone platform dedicated to Girolamo Li Causi (1896-1977). Li Causi was a Sicilian politician who led the Italian Communist Party for many years. He was also a prominent figure in the struggle for land reform and the fight against organised crime in Sicily (Figure 3).

On a large stone, the shape of which echoes that of the mountain behind it, is written the date: *1 Maggio 1947* (Figure 4).

Within the enclosure are stones placed where the men, women, children, and animals fell. Reading the "syntax of splits and ruptures" (Smithson 1968: 87) in the stone, de Conciliis, working with local stone carvers and stonemasons, allowed the shapes to emerge from their inchoate forms and, like sentient beings, express the pain of the people and the animals they represent. He became acutely conscious of the sense of the sacred in this land and he describes his realisation of recognisable forms in the rocks as a kind of intuitive shape-seeking. One stone is cleaved in half as if by some violent act; one resembles a body bent over in pain; some look as if they were heads of animals turned upward, mouths opened wide in a cry; some lie twisted on the ground, while others stand upright as if in protest (Figure 5).

One menhir-like stone is engraved with the names of the victims: Margherita Clesceri, Giorgio Cusenza, Giovanni Megna, Francesco Vicari, Vito Allotta, Serafino Lascari, Filippo

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[6] Ettore de Conciliis in conversation with Federico Sciurpa (2024: 76-77).

[7] In using large local stones, de Conciliis was unwittingly restoring the Dragon Slabs *(Çapelet e drangoit)*, the monumental group of natural rocks that had stood at the entrance of the town until they were destroyed by developers in the 1970s.



Figure 3. Platform for Girolamo Li Causi, *Memoriale di Portella della Ginestra*. Photo by Aurelio Amendola, 1999.



Figure 4. *Memoriale di Portella della Ginestra*. 2024. Photo courtesy of Alessandro di Blasi.



Figure 5. *Memoriale di Portella della Ginestra*. 2024. Photo courtesy of Alessandro di Blasi.

Di Salvo, Giuseppe Di Maggio, Castrense Intravaia, Giovanni Grifò, and Vincenza La Fata. I have visited the site on two occasions, years apart, and each time there has been a fresh wreath of laurel leaves and flowers at the base of this stone (Figure 6).

A large rock called Barbato's Stone (*Il Sasso di Barbato*) is dedicated to Nicola Barbato (Kola Birbati in Albanese; 1856-1923) who was from Piana degli Albanesi and is one of the great figures of Sicilian socialism. The forefather of the workers' movement in the late nineteenth century, Barbato was instrumental in forging the *Fasci Siciliani dei Lavoratori* (Sicilian Workers Leagues), a revolutionary peasant collective. Legend has it that he had given some of his inspirational speeches in this field, decades earlier, standing on this stone (Figure 7).

One stone recounts the story of the massacre (Figure 8):

> 1 maggio 1947. Qui celebrando la Festa del Lavoro e la vittoria del 20 aprile su uomini donne bambini di Piana S. Cipirello S. Giuseppe si abbatté il piombo della mafia e degli agrari per stroncare la lotta dei contadini contro il feudo.
>
> 1 May 1947. Here celebrating the Labour Day and the victory of 20 April, the men, women, and children of Piana degli Albanesi, San Cipirello, and San Giuseppe were broken by the lead of the mafia and the landowners to end the peasants' struggle against the fiefdom (my translation).

Another stone is engraved with a poem written in dialect by Ignazio Buttitta (1899-1997), the great Sicilian poet who was once a farmworker: "U me cori doppu tantanni è



Figure 6. Carved stone with names of victims, *Memoriale di Portella della Ginestra*. Photo by Jo Anna Isaak, 2023.



Figure 7. Il Sasso di Barbato, *Memoriale di Portella della Ginestra* (https://www.visitpiana.com/portella-della-ginestra, consulted on 09/09/2026).

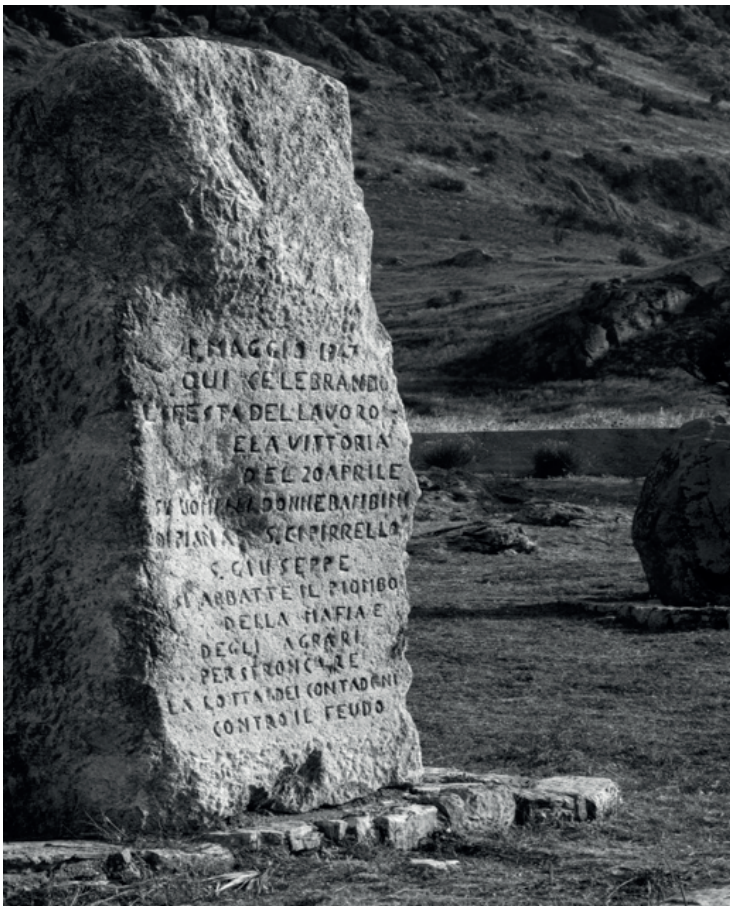


Figure 8. *1 Maggio 1947*. Photo courtesy of Alessandro di Blasi, 2024.

a Purtedda. È 'nta petri e 'nto sangu di cumpagni ammazzati" ("After so many years, my heart is at Portella. It is in the stones and in the blood of the murdered comrades"). Buttitta wrote verses in support of the workers and having once been himself a fieldworker, he understood the political importance of saving the local language. In his poem "Language and Dialect", Buttitta writes:

Un populu
diventa poviru e servu
quannu ci arrubbanu a lingua
addutata di patri:
è persu pi sempre.
(Buttitta 1970: 54).

(A people
becomes poor and servile
when their language is stolen from them
inherited from their forefathers:
it is lost forever)[8].

Creating a memorial that pays respect to the continuity of a language, of memories, of heritage, and of a sacred site is a complex project for an artist, even more so when undertaken with non-traditional materials. Witness the initial negative response to Maya Lin's *Vietnam Veterans Memorial* in Washington, DC, made of two black granite stones, which is now the most beloved and frequently visited memorial in the United States. Many may have wished that the memorial at Portella had been made of a material more precious than the stones found in the field and that it was more imposing. But the memorial does not attempt to make a grand statement, as de Conciliis says, it is "un monumentalismo senza retorica" ("a monument without rhetoric")[9]. No attempt has been made to impose an aesthetic artifice on the site. Instead, the manner in which he invited the community to engage with their land is rooted in verbal expressions and in philosophical traditions dating back to ancient Greek poet Hesiod's *Works and Days* (2008). The poem, in which the Muses take on a propitiatory role in relation to labourers and the fields, suggests that working with and caring for the land sustainably can provide insights into how to live a virtuous and just life. The

[8] Translated by Arthur V. Dieli, http://www.dieli.net/SicilyPage/Poetry/Buttitta.html (consulted on 07/09/2026).

[9] De Conciliis in conversation with the author.

idea that the land itself contains a philosophical message for those capable of reading it has been reiterated throughout the centuries by artists and writers, among them, the American nature essayist John Burroughs (1837-1921):

> The gold of nature does not look like gold at the first glance. It must be smelted and refined in the mind of the observer. And one must crush mountains of quartz and wash hills of sand to get it. To know the indications is the main matter. People who do not know the secret are eager to take a walk with the observer to find where the mine is that contains such nuggets, little knowing that his ore-bed is but a gravel-heap to them. How insignificant appear most of the facts which one sees in his walks, in the life of the birds, the flowers, the animals, or in the phases of the landscape, or the look of the sky! – insignificant until they are put through some mental or emotional process and their true value appears (Burroughs 1875: 218).

The kinship de Conciliis formed with the people of Piana degli Albanesi, San Cipirello, and San Giuseppe Jato, with writers who lived on the land and knew its language, and others living far away in both ancient and modern times is not a coincidence. He has found the gold of nature and chosen land and language for his raw materials and subject matter; and in the repeated affirmation of the organic correspondence among art, language, and land, we experience the vitality of that old tradition.

The Portella della Ginestra memorial has been the subject of numerous articles in newspapers and journals, has been anthologised in several books, and a book about it was published with photographs by Aurelio Amendola and essays by Enrico Crispolti and Marco Falciano (1999). Many photographs of the memorial are displayed in the history museum in Piana degli Albanesi. The memorial is also the subject of Carlo Laurenti's documentary film *Telling Stones* (2015). Photographs of the memorial were included in *Roma Periurbana: Risorse Agricole, Territorio, Realtà Sommerse*, a 2023 exhibition organised by a group working to support farmworkers trying to recuperate unoccupied agricultural land – in short, working for the same causes that inspired the May Day celebration in 1947[10].

Many in the community, both young and old, those on the political left and right, are currently working to maintain and preserve the memorial. On 3 May 2023, the Pier Santi Mattarella Hall of the Palazzo Reale, home of the Sicilian Regional Assembly in Palermo, was filled with people on the occasion of the conference "The Memorial of Portella Ginestra: Civic Need for a Restoration" (Mazza 2023). Plans are being made and funds are being raised for the restoration of the memorial and for the area around the site to be protected as a property of the commune. The memorial had already been included in the Register of Intangible Heritage of Sicily (REIS) of the Department of Cultural Heritage in 2010, and now, as a result of efforts spearheaded by the Comune di Piana degli Albanesi and by Selima Giorgia Giuliano,

[10] Held in the Mattatoio exhibition hall in Rome (23 March - 21 May 2023), the exhibition was organised by Matteo Amati, Carlo Cellamare, Vezio De Lucia, Cristiano Tancredi, and Alessandra Valentinelli. It is part of an ongoing project by the Cooperativa Agricola Nuova e Associazione RomAgricola to valorise farm labour and recuperate unoccupied land for agricultural use.

la soprintendente per i Beni culturali e ambientali di Palermo[11], it has been recognised as a "sito di interesse culturale" ("site of cultural interest") pursuant to the cultural heritage and landscape code. These efforts are ensuring that this memorial and the memories it embodies will endure.

De Conciliis would go on to give expression to nature in his many landscapes painted *en plein air,* in which his affinity with Claude Monet and the Impressionists is apparent. As the writer Tahar Ben Jelloun noted, "the work of Ettore de Conciliis, more than a century after Monet, celebrates nature and restores to its elements its inherent subtle and personal light" (2010: 7). However, the affinity de Conciliis has with the work of Monet goes beyond his paintings. De Conciliis credits Claude Monet as an early environmental artist for the garden and water park Monet created at Giverny[12]. And like Monet, de Conciliis would go on to create a vast nature park – *Il Parco della Pace* (The Park of Peace). In 1997 he undertook the reclamation of a large tract of land on the outskirts of Rome that had been used as a dumpsite and landfill for decades. This involved extensive land and soil remediation, clearing almost thirty acres of degraded land, bringing in tons of topsoil, planting trees and grasses, and rescuing the existing trees and vegetation. Today, this immense work of Land Art is an oasis of nature for recreation, contemplation, and meditation. The theme of peace is reiterated in a walkway of over half a mile through the area guided by large stones on which are engraved poems and words about peace and brotherhood spoken by people of all religions and from all over the world. The chorus of voices ranges from Yitzhak Rabin to Francis of Assisi, from Pope Paul VI to Pablo Neruda, from Nazim Hikmet to Nelson Mandela. As with the memorial at Portella della Ginestra, the Park of Peace brings land and language together in creative harmony, showing how heritage sites and collective memory are linked to environmental sustainability and the stewardship of the land.

The experience of creating the memorial at Portella della Ginestra, which symbolises the link between the sociopolitical issues that had absorbed de Conciliis in his earlier murals and the lyricism of nature expressed in his landscape paintings, was foundational in the realisation of "The Park of Peace". Perhaps more significantly, de Conciliis's noninvasive approach to the land at Portella della Ginestra would also be a precursor to the radical conversion that would take place amongst artists in the Earthworks movement. The early works of American Earthwork artists often used the earth as a foil or backdrop to express a formalist approach to artmaking and gave no hint of a concern for the environment. However, over time, as these artists worked with the land, they began to adopt de Conciliis's reciprocal approach to the land and come, in turn, to understand their role as "stewards of the land". Many would go on to create parks much like "The Park of Peace" from landfills or sites damaged by industry[13]. Today a radical change has taken place in the role of the artists and

[11] The superintendent for Cultural and Environmental Heritage of Palermo.

[12] Perhaps not ironically, Monet posted a sign at the entrance to the park he made at Giverny saying "My garden is my most beautiful masterpiece".

[13] One of Smithson's planned projects – to cover a small island off the coast of British Columbia, Canada, with broken glass – was stopped by a group of environmentalists. However, after this encounter Smithson had a radical conversion and began to rethink the role of the artist and his relation to the land. He began to propose

the function of the work of art as a growing number of artists are becoming environmentalists, collaborating with specialists in other fields – material scientists, botanists, farmers, industrial engineers, and community workers – to design recuperative projects for degraded environments, creating solutions that address specific environmental problems and offering prototypes that can be adapted by individuals, communities, and industry. Art's intrinsic connection to nature, so fully articulated in the memorial at Portella della Ginestra, has proven to be a key component in the evolution of contemporary art, and this connection has played, and continues to play, an important role both in the environmental reform movement and in the trajectory of some of the most progressive practices of art today.

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pragmatic ideas for making the artist an active collaborator between nature and industry and he designed large scale projects for the rehabilitation of land devastated by mining, erosion, and industrial waste. See Isaak (2017: 27-44).

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