



## EXHIBITIONS TEXTS

### The Presence of Absence

12 October 2024 – 2 March 2025

The exhibition is in co-operation with the Senckenberg Society for Nature Research and the Institute for Theoretical Physics at the Goethe University Frankfurt.

With works by the artists Heidi Bucher, Lawrence Malstaf, Marshmallow Laser Feast, Petra Noordkamp, Claudio Parmiggiani, Toni R. Toivonen and with exhibits from the Archaeological Park of Pompeii, the Florentine Museum and Institute of Prehistory 'Paolo Graziosi', the Natural History Museum Vienna, the LWL-Museum of Natural History in Münster, Associazione Gibellina Parco Culturale and with Prof Dr Luciano Rezzolla, Institute for Theoretical Physics at the Goethe University Frankfurt

Curated by: Prof Franziska Nori, Director Frankfurter Kunstverein  
with scientific support from Anita Lavorano and Laura Perrone

### The Presence of Absence: An introduction by Franziska Nori

Director of Frankfurter Kunstverein and curator of the exhibition

With the exhibition *The Presence of Absence*, the Frankfurter Kunstverein is continuing its collaboration with the Senckenberg Society for Nature Research for the fourth time. Following *Trees of Life* (2019), *Edmond's Prehistoric Realm* (2020) and *Bending the Curve* (2023), this exhibition emerges as a joint exploration of fundamental human questions through the lenses of art and natural science. Additionally, for this occasion, we have been able to involve the Institute for Theoretical Physics at the Goethe University Frankfurt.

Since the beginning of mankind, Homo sapiens have endeavoured to understand their relationship to the world as a structure of meanings. Where do we come from? How do we relate to the other living beings that inhabit the planet with us? How are we part of an infinite universe? Spiritual beliefs and myths, but also scientific observations and the resulting world views change over time and are an expression of how we humans interpret our relationship to the world.

We are increasingly exploring and penetrating the world. We decipher connections, we organise, quantify and name. We have created ever more complex instruments to do this. We find methods, formulate verifiable theorems and establish causalities between cause and effect. Researchers

describe the world as it is, both physically and biologically. They use science to formulate terms and concepts and constantly achieve verifiable results. They decode the world and follow methodical procedures that open up immense possibilities for action. In this way, we make the world available to us. But science does not set itself the task of asking about the meaningfulness of life.

And what does art do? Art leads everything back to us. It asks about the meaning of knowledge for us. Artists are concerned with perception, or rather, with the nature of experience itself. How we perceive, visually, linguistically and aesthetically, but also how the experience of life takes place as an existential experience of “being in the world”. And art can transform our relationship with the world through narratives, through images and sounds, through poetry, into an experience of resonance.

Both science and art have their origins in intuition, imagination and conjecture. While scientists have to create evidence, artists can proceed more freely and make associations and imagination the material of their narratives. The meaning of existence and the experience of transcendence can hardly be found in science. We humans have to find them within ourselves. And we often create symbols to do so.

*The Presence of Absence* highlights matter as a presence into which life imprints itself. Energy and life are potent yet transient. The interplay between life, energy and matter is a central theme of the exhibition.

The exhibition will spatially juxtapose exhibits that translate the abstract concept of the “presence of absence” into an expanded realm of thought from both artistic and scientific perspectives. Works by significant contemporary artists will engage in dialogue with scientific exhibits from geology and astrophysics, including casts from Pompeii, footprints of prehistoric humans from the Laetoli site in present-day Tanzania and replicas of prehistoric cave paintings.

The curatorial narrative explores the astrophysical phenomenon of black holes. Concepts of expansion, time and the infinite cosmos challenge our understanding. Simultaneously, they provoke questions about our identity and origins. Our planet hovers somewhere between the boundless and the eternal. For a fleeting moment, the window of our lives opens, revealing the unique experience of our existence through our bodies, senses and minds. Each exhibit, in its own distinct way, engages with this existential exploration of being and humanity across the dimensions of space and time.

With this exhibition, we also trace the origins of art as a fundamental human desire to express abstract ideas. Why did Homo sapiens, tens of thousands of years ago, carve animal figures and abstract geometric shapes into the walls of deep caves? Why did they create images of things that were understood by others as symbols, serving as a connection to higher, non-manifest, spiritual realms? Why did Homo sapiens, unlike other species, develop a need for transcendence?

One of the countless stories and myths that moved us is recorded by Pliny the Elder in his *Natural History*, written around 77 years AD, shortly before he met his death in the fiery ash rain of Pompeii: the myth of Butades of Sicyon, the Corinthian potter, and his daughter. The story goes like this: the young girl loved a young man who had to leave for a long journey. As the separation approached, the girl drew the outline of her lover's head against the wall where the light of the fire fell. The father, moved by her plight, filled in this shadow image with colour and made a clay imprint of the outline, which he then fired. According to Pliny's myth, art arises from the desire to capture the transient

and fleeting; to preserve it out of wistfulness and longing, absence and memory, but also out of love and through beauty. This parable is touching because it embodies such fundamental feelings.

The outline, the stone wall and the fire—doesn't this remind you of the earliest cave paintings and engravings found by palaeoanthropologists and archaeologists on every continent? Were these the origin of art at the dawn of humanity?

The oldest evidence is attributed to the Blombos Cave in South Africa, dating back 140,000 years. With the migrations of Homo sapiens, cave art spread across every continent. Despite such incredibly extended time periods, this early art exhibits similar techniques and motifs. These seem to have been passed down from group to group, from generation to generation, long before the physiological evolution of the larynx and brain suggested the emergence of language and writing.

For tens of thousands of years, humans—early artists—created images of animals, human figures and abstract signs. Did they grapple with the same questions and ideas that modern humans do?

The cave paintings of the San people in South Africa and Botswana, or those from the Magdalenian culture of the Stone Age in Europe, served as a readable visual language for early humans. They depicted the experienced environment while also representing the spiritual cosmos of these ancient people. The stone walls, where humans created their paintings, far from the outside world and deep in the darkness of the earth, were more than just canvases. They were like a skin that separated this world from the other. Negative forms and imprints of human hands have been found in caves on every continent. These suggest the magic of contact, the touch of a hand on the surface of the rock as a gateway to another world. Leaving a handprint may have been part of a sacred act of connection with an invisible beyond—a transcendental experience. It is evidence of the primordial human need and eternal quest for a deeper relationship with a reality beyond the individual.

Awe in the face of nature. The feeling that there is more than we know. The striving to understand, to perceive through both our senses and our minds the eternal structures that reveal the order of everything in this universe and ourselves as part of it.

Since the dawn of humanity, people have gazed at the night sky. "Mathematics is the language in which the book of the universe is written", said Galileo Galilei. It is a way of assigning meaning to symbols that can then be read and understood by others. Mathematics is a universal language of human thought, and mathematical rules reflect the order found in all natural processes, whether it's the Fibonacci sequence or Einstein's equations. This makes mathematics the purest form of expressing universal principles. Music follows precise mathematical structures, the growth of plants, the sequence of tides and every form of existence can be described by mathematical equations. Yet, there remains so much that humanity does not yet understand. Time and again, the power of the human mind will strive to push these boundaries.

What is the origin of all matter on earth and in the infinity of the cosmos? What effects do natural events create that reshape the earth and affect people's lives with their power? And how do people deal with the existential need to face eternity in their finiteness? What myths and images do they create in order to connect with the spiritual? Is art a way of immortalising oneself in time? The exhibition is dedicated to these questions, which have been driving the human imagination from prehistoric times to the present day. Ever since we humans have existed on earth, we have created

stories, symbols and signs to give form to our feelings, thoughts and knowledge, to leave traces in time and perhaps to connect with eternity.

We experience the miracle of reality through the senses of our body. This consists of the elements of exploding stars in space: the nitrogen in our DNA, the calcium in our bones, the iron in our blood and the carbon in our cells. In fleeting moments, we connect with eternity and give traces of existence a material form. Art is one way of doing this.

I would like to thank Claudio Parmiggiani, Indigo and Mayo Bucher, the sons of Heidi Bucher, Toni R. Toivonen, Petra Noordkamp, the artists of the Marshmallow Laser Feast collective and Lawrence Malstaf, as well as the institutional lenders, Dr Gabriel Zuchtriegel and the Archaeological Park of Pompeii, Prof Dr Fabio Martini and Dr Lapo Baglioni of the Florentine Museum and Institute of Prehistory "Paolo Graziosi", the Natural History Museum Vienna, the LWL-Museum of Natural History in Münster, Nicolò Stabile, founder of the initiative *Il Cretto è casa mia* of the survivors of the earthquake in the town of Gibellina, as well as the photographer Giuseppe Ippolito, the VR creator Alberto Stabile and the writer Giovanna Giordano. I would like to thank the Italian Consulate General for its patronage. I would especially like to thank Prof Dr Andreas Mulch, Director of the Senckenberg Research Institute and Natural History Museum Frankfurt, and Prof Dr Luciano Rezzolla from the Institute for Theoretical Physics at the Goethe University Frankfurt for a time of joint thinking and working.

Franziska Nori  
Director Frankfurter Kunstverein

## **Foreword by Prof Dr Andreas Mulch**

**Director of the Senckenberg Research Institute and Natural History Museum Frankfurt**

The world we live in is the result of billions of years of natural development. The transformation of our planet, which accompanies this evolution, can provide insights yet to be discovered into the way Earth deals with change. Science and art offer very different approaches to exploring nature. However, both come together beautifully in this exhibition, which focuses on glimpses into the absent.

If we want to understand the functional relationships between the living world, the solid Earth and the climate system, or if we aim to reconstruct how our planet has changed over millions of years, scientists must gather information that indirectly provides insight into the past. For example, they use the chemical fingerprint left by a global event in geological formations to give shape to the past, the absent, and make it tangible. The study of our planet's evolution, from the depths of time to the present, is carried out through precise, extensive and ideally innovative measurements of organisms and natural materials. These store information about a phenomenon, a development or a significant event in the living world that needs to be reconstructed. In order to delve deeply into the planet's history, scientists must overcome incredibly long timescales. We bring the past into the present; we study the traces of a development. The present, therefore, opens up the possibility of gaining insights into processes and sequences that occurred long ago and would otherwise have remained forever hidden.

To discover the absent, it is necessary to look at a question from an unusual perspective. Innovation, creativity and the courage to take unfamiliar paths are the foundations for groundbreaking scientific discoveries. But they also offer an opportunity to provide solutions to the many challenges of a rapidly changing world—solutions built on authentic knowledge. Here, science becomes part of the democratic process, which it is our collective responsibility to protect. The question of what kind of world we want to live in in the future is a societal one, and science, if we choose to frame it this way, can describe the possibilities for shaping that future and the consequences of our actions. Making the absent visible from the present in order to develop options for the well-being of both humanity and nature—that is our opportunity.

We aim, through the collaboration between the Senckenberg Research Institute and Natural History Museum Frankfurt and the Frankfurter Kunstverein, to reveal new perspectives and narratives concerning the relationship between humans and nature by combining science and art. Both partners bring their own unique expertise to this collaboration. How is the relationship between humans and nature changing against the backdrop of increasingly urgent global issues? What approaches will allow visitors to reflect on themselves without being overwhelmed by the scale and complexity of the question? For both institutions, this collaboration offers the opportunity to perceive nature and its development from different perspectives through jointly developed content. Transforming the absent into a describable reality—that is the art in science.

The collaboration between the Frankfurter Kunstverein and Senckenberg is always a great pleasure. We hope that visitors will feel and take away this enthusiasm when experiencing the exhibition.

**Prof Dr Andreas Mulch** has been a professor at the Institute of Geosciences at the Goethe University Frankfurt since 2010 and Director of the Senckenberg Research Institute and Natural History Museum Frankfurt since 2015. As a member of the Senckenberg Board of Directors, he is responsible for the research programme of the Senckenberg Society for Nature Research. The latter is one of the world's leading institutions for natural and biodiversity research, with eight institutes, three museums and around 850 employees operating globally. Andreas Mulch received his PhD from the University of Lausanne in 2004, and his work has taken him to the University of Minnesota, Stanford University and Leibniz University Hannover. His research focuses primarily on climate changes in Earth's history and the relationships between climate and biodiversity changes, as well as mountain building. Andreas Mulch is a Fellow of the Geological Society of America and has held the A. Cox Professorship at Stanford University.

## **Fulgurite from the Collection of the LWL-Museum of Natural History in Münster**

Fulgurite

Found in 1985

210 x 26 x 5 cm

On loan from the R. Riedinger Collection, LWL-Museum of Natural History, Münster

Fulgurites are figuratively referred to as fossilised lightning. They are rare phenomena in which released energy leaves a permanent form in sandy soil. Since the beginning of time, lightning has

been striking and reshaping the surface of our planet by discharging energy. This impact generates heat of over 30,000 degrees Celsius. If the impact occurs on sand, it liquefies in the immediate vicinity. Although a lightning discharge lasts less than a thousandth of a second, the temperature is so high that the sand not only melts, but practically boils. If the sand cools quickly, a fulgurite can form. It is the combination of several natural circumstances that produce such lightning tubes. They appear as glassy, tubular and hollow objects. Thanks to the loan of the LWL-Museum of Natural History in Münster from the R. Riedinger Collection, the exhibition features one of the world's largest existing specimens. It was found on the edge of an open-cast mine in 1985.

The connection between energy and matter, between trace and time, accompanies the visitor through this exhibition. Energy as an essential state variable that makes all natural processes possible in the first place; as the active force of life, which acts from atomic elementary particles to cells, for complex bodies and as the pulse of the whole cosmos. And so the exhibition *The Presence of Absence* begins symbolically with a phenomenon that is localised in geology and mineralogy. The active force of the fleeting lightning bolt leaves a trace that forms a shape. This fragile object is the materialised form of a great creative force that imprints itself into physical matter in a fraction of a second.

## Heidi Bucher

*Small Portal (Sanatorium Bellevue, Kreuzlingen)*, 1988

Gaze, Fischleim und Latex Gauze, fish glue and latex

455 x 340 cm

*Ablösen der Haut, Herrenzimmer*, 1979

Three photographs by Hans Peter Siffert

75 x 50 cm; 44,5 x 30 cm; 30 x 44,3 cm; 44,2 x 30 cm

© The Estate of Heidi Bucher

*Heidi Bucher im Libellenkostüm, Libellenlust*, 1976

Photograph by Thomas Burla

20 x 27,8 cm

© The Estate of Heidi Bucher

*Skinning of the Small Glass Portal (Sanatorium Bellevue, Kreuzlingen)*, 1988

Single-channel 16 mm film (colour)

8:57 min

Film by Michael Koechlin

Produced by German Television SWR (SWR feature *Kulturszene, Häutungen*)

© The Estate of Heidi Bucher

Courtesy The Estate of Heidi Bucher and Lehmann Maupin, New York, Seoul and London

Heidi Bucher has intensively explored the relationship between space, matter and the traces of fleeting human life that are imprinted in physical matter. She developed a unique technique and working method known as *Raumhäutung* (spatial skinning): Bucher fixed gauze, a light and grid-like semi-transparent cotton fabric to walls with fish glue, coated the fabric with liquid latex and then

pulled off the dried membranes with great physical effort. The resulting latex layer shows the relief of the room. At the same time, it also contains particles of the colours and patina that stuck to the latex when it was peeled off.

Bucher was interested in what was experienced in the spaces, what they symbolised and what power relations they produced. As an artist, she lived in a time of patriarchal structures, of the prevailing inequality of women—which was also dominant in the avant-garde art world—and which she opposed with her free artistic way of life.

As Heidi Bucher herself says in the 1988 film by Michael Koechlin, which can be seen in the exhibition, she wants to reveal what is hidden—the feelings, memories and structures inscribed in the architecture. “Rooms are shells, they are skins. Peel off one skin after the other, discard it: the repressed, the neglected, the wasted, the lost, the sunken, the flattened, the desolate, the reversed, the diluted, the forgotten, the persecuted, the wounded”, (in: *Ablösen des Kleinen Glasportals* (Sanatorium Bellevue, Kreuzlingen), 1988, 8:02 min).

Her “skinnings” are sculptures in negative forms, but they can be read as symbolic acts of liberation from an old-fashioned and patriarchal world view.

Bucher began her *Raumhäutungen* in 1973 in her studio in Zurich, a former butcher's shop with a cold store. She called this place *Borg*, from *Geborgenheit*, German for the feeling of security she felt there. She later turned her attention to her parents' house in Winterthur: in particular the *Herrenzimmer*, a room that was reserved for wealthy bourgeois landlords and their male guests in the 19th century. The work which bears the same title became one of her most famous. She then created the skins in her grandparents' ancestral home. In the years that followed, she worked in buildings steeped in history, such as the ruins of the Grande Albergo in Brissago, which served as a state internment camp during the Fascist era.

The work *Kleines Glasportal* (Sanatorium Bellevue, Kreuzlingen) is being shown at the Frankfurter Kunstverein. Heidi Bucher created it in 1988 in the Bellevue Sanatorium in Kreuzlingen on Lake Constance. Bellevue was a private psychiatric sanatorium between 1857 and 1980. The Binswanger dynasty of psychiatrists practised here for many decades. The work of Sigmund Freud and Carl Gustav Jung also took its course here.

Bucher made a mould of the entrance area of the building. How many people entered through this portal and with what fate? Historical records report that artists and scientists such as the painter Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, the actor and director Gustaf Gründgens and the cultural anthropologist Aby Warburg were also patients here. Sigmund Freud and Ludwig Binswanger carried out their first studies on hysterical patients in Bellevue. Hysteria was a condition that was once only attributed to female patients. In Bucher's art, the psychiatric institution, a place of control and psychological intervention, becomes a symbol of power structures and externally determined body politics. Bucher exposes repressed and neglected layers that go hand in hand with the suppression and regulation of body and mind, especially of women.

The latex covers the wood-panelled walls as if the artist wanted to capture an invisible essence of the life that lived there, the feelings and destinies, the words spoken and ultimately the presence of absence.

Heidi Bucher's work is a testimony to the complexity of human existence and the invisible, emotional traces that characterise our lives and our spaces. Her art invites us to look anew at the hidden and forgotten and offers a profound reflection on the visualisation of memory and emotion in space. The transformation of architecture through Bucher's *Häutungen* is a poetic process that encompasses both the material and the immaterial and creates a special kind of presence through the fragility and aesthetics of her imprints.

The artist documented each of her "skinnings" on film or in photographs. This makes her physical exertion and the intensive creative process recognisable. After the removal, Bucher wrapped her own body in the "skins", thus emphasising the intimate relationship between body, space and time. Like insects and reptiles that shed their skin again and again, what remains is an empty, hardened form of a liberated body. Bucher's works can be read as a symbolic act of self-liberation, embodying emancipation from social and cultural constraints. The knowledge of how deeply her artistic actions and methods are embedded in her own life and experiences is still moving today.

**Heidi Bucher** (b. 1926, Winterthur, CH; d. 1993, Brunnen, CH) was a prominent Swiss artist, known for her unique textile works and latex sculptures. Bucher grew up as Adelheid Hildegard Müller in Wülflingen, CH. Her connection to fashion began during an apprenticeship as a dressmaker, followed by studies at the School of Applied Arts in Zurich from 1944 to 1947, where she focused on fashion design. She later lived and worked in the USA and Canada, where she collaborated with her husband Carl Bucher and encountered feminist positions of the Neo-Avant-Garde, which influenced her later work. In 1973, Bucher returned to Switzerland, settling in Zurich, where she started working on her latex sculptures. These explore the relationship between body, space, and memory through abstracted architectural forms. Bucher spent her last years on the Canary Islands. In Europe, her work was especially celebrated posthumously in numerous exhibitions. Among her most significant solo exhibitions were those held at the Kunstmuseum Bern (CH), Red Brick Art Museum, Beijing (CN), Haus der Kunst, Munich (DE), Parasol Unit, London (GB), Swiss Institute of Contemporary Art, New York (US), Migros Museum für Gegenwartskunst, Zurich (CH), and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) (US). Bucher's works are part of major collections, including those of the Kunstmuseum Winterthur (CH), Centre Pompidou, Paris (FR), Museum of Modern Art, New York (US), Tate, London (GB), Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York (US), Kunsthaus Zürich (CH), and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (US).

### **Lawrence Malstaf**

*Shrink 01995*, 1995 – ongoing

PVC, vacuum pump, air tubes, steel pipes

260 x 320 cm

Performances every weekend with different participants

**On Saturdays:** 4 p.m. and 5 p.m.

**On Sundays:** 3:30 p.m. and 4:30 p.m.

Special date: 26 December, at 2:30, 3:30 and 4:30 p.m.

Duration 20 min



Courtesy Lawrence Malstaf / Tallieu Art Office

Lawrence Malstaf is known for his interdisciplinary artworks, which move freely between visual art, installation, dance and theatre. His work deals with the human body and its possibilities of perception and explores physical and psychological boundaries. Breath is the starting point for the staging of *Shrink 01995*, which was originally created as a six-hour performative installation. Malstaf performed it himself. He later extended the work to include visitors, who were also able to experience this intense work.

Two large, transparent foils are stretched across a framed structure. The person presses their body into the space between them. Wrapped in this skin, he or she holds two tubes. One removes air, one supplies air. One creates a vacuum between the foils so that the body floats in a compressed state, while the other allows the body to breathe. For the duration of the performance, the person inside moves slowly and changes positions, and it is they themselves who regulate the air supply. There is no danger for the participants. However, they are faced with the challenge of having to overcome their own psychological expectation that the process might be difficult and dangerous. And they need to consciously change the way they control their own physicality. Breathing must find a new rhythm.

A breath is at the beginning and end of every life. We are constantly inhaling and exhaling into the world, that is the basic way of relating to it. The breath can stagnate or flow. The interplay between breathing and mental states is known in all ancient civilisations. Pranayama originated in India as a technique of breathing exercises for meditation and controlling thoughts.

The designed arrangement of the work shuts out sight and hearing and instead intensifies the perception of touch and pressure on the entire surface of the body. The senses are directed inwards, an increased concentration on the inside of the body sets in—the beating of the heart, the rushing of blood and the rhythm of breathing. A profound experience of space and physicality, isolation and limitation, as well as peace and protection opens up. The installation reflects the adaptability of the human mind and creates an intense reflection on the duality of fragility and resilience under extreme conditions.

Malstaf is looking for an experience that throws people back to the realm of the existential. He himself has lived for years in the seclusion of Norwegian nature. Silence, vastness and the forces of nature are fundamental experiences that he considers essential for a sense of the natural.

The participants in the experience assume new poses at regular intervals. In moments of immobility, they almost look like paintings or still lifes. Depending on how you look at them, the experience may appear terrifying or peaceful. The three-dimensional state of suspension can give rise to countless associations: from *nature morte* in the sense of bodies exhibited as goods or products, to the state before birth and weightlessness in the womb. Malstaf's art is not intended to tell a story. He does not create pictorial metaphors. He creates spaces that make it possible to experience primal forces.

Over the summer, the Frankfurter Kunstverein launched an open call for people from very different areas and backgrounds to be part of Malstaf's work. The artist prepared the participants for the experience in several sessions. They experience *Shrink 01995* from a personal perspective, acting not only as observers of the artwork but also as co-creators, exploring the limits of their physical and sensory perception and bringing the artist's work to life on an intense level.

**Lawrence Malstaf** (b. 1972, Bruges, BE) lives and works between Tromsø (NO) and Oudenaarde (BE). Malstaf's art moves between visual art and theater. He is known for his sensory installations that explore space and orientation, engaging visitors as co-actors. Since graduating in industrial design from the Henry van de Velde Institute in Antwerp (BE) in 1995, he has worked both as an artist and as an innovative set designer in the international dance and theater scene. His performance *Shrink* alone has been shown over fifty times worldwide. Malstaf's works have been exhibited in significant institutions such as the Musée des Beaux-Arts, Le Havre (FR), the IOMA Art Center, Beijing (CN), the CCBB – Centro Cultural Banco do Brasil, São Paulo (BR), the Centre Pompidou, Paris (FR), the Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe, Hamburg (DE), the Trondheim Kunstmuseum (NO), Bozar, Brussels (BE), FACT, Liverpool (UK), Eyebeam Art + Technology Center, New York (US), and Z33, Hasselt (BE), as well as at numerous festivals. He has received several international awards in the fields of art and new technologies, including the Golden Nica at Ars Electronica in Linz (AT) and the Excellence Prize at the Japan Media Arts Festival in Tokyo (JP).

## Marshmallow Laser Feast

*Distortions in Spacetime*, 2018

Real-time interactive walk-in installation, multichannel audio

9 min 40 sec

Courtesy Marshmallow Laser Feast

Marshmallow Laser Feast (MLF) are a collective of artists from London who work at the intersection of science, technology and art. With their installation *Distortions in Spacetime*, they take visitors on a journey into the darker corners of the universe and on a sensory encounter with the formation of a so-called stellar black hole. The immersive, audiovisual artwork creates images that translate astrophysical research and findings into a visual allegory.

Marshmallow Laser Feast are internationally recognised for their close collaboration with scientists, resulting in artworks that expand the perception of nature through immersive technologies. In 2021, they were invited by the Frankfurter Kunstverein to participate in the exhibition *The Intelligence of Plants* with their work *Treehugger: Wawona*.

Today, astrophysics have ever better ways of allowing our gaze to penetrate into the depths of the cosmos. However, the data and researchers' mathematical calculations often remain inaccessible to laypeople. MLF use their art to attempt to translate the level of abstraction of mathematical theories into images for the general public. *Distortions in Spacetime* is dedicated to the formation of gravity, dying stars and black holes and relates these to our physical presence.

A stellar black hole is created when a huge mass of matter such as the core of a large dying star collapses. In the final moments of this collapse, matter is compressed to such an extent that its density goes to infinity. This extremely high density creates a point within the black hole at which the curvature of space-time is infinite and the laws of physics as we know them no longer apply: time stands still and gravity becomes so strong that not even light can escape its gravitational pull. The energy that forms this black hole unleashes a supernova explosion that fires the elements of

life—carbon, oxygen, silicon, sulphur, calcium and iron—into space. Cosmic explosions give rise to the very elements from which new planets, our Earth, all living beings, plants, animals and ultimately us humans have emerged.

Visitors enter into a completely mirrored cube. A frenzy of images of flowing and swirling coloured atoms and sounds unfolds around them like in a cosmic opera. The installation's technology captures people's bodies in real time and models them into galactic explosions and compressions. The outlines of people's bodies are imprinted on the particle clouds and cast the shadow of their presence into space.

What the animation *Distortions in Spacetime* can convey is a sense of wonder in the face of the bigger picture and the overarching structure of which we are a part. A sense of larger connections arises, as astronauts experience when they look at the Earth from space. They report a feeling of wholeness when they see the planet in all its beauty from afar, without political boundaries, and are captured by a deep understanding of the vulnerability of life on Earth.

Humans have always developed religious interpretations, myths and scientific theories to explain the origin of everything—including the universe itself before the Big Bang. The theoretical model of our time goes back to Einstein's theory of relativity: in the beginning there was pure energy, there was no time, no space, everything was at the same time, at one point. Until the Big Bang created everything, the universe, the fundamental forces, the stars and ultimately the Earth and mankind. How can we understand this immensity? How can we comprehend what our sensory organs are not focussed on?

Our concept of reality depends on how our body is structured in order to perceive the world. Scientific research that explores the essence of nature reveals a wide range of realities that are often beyond our perception. Art does this too, but it brings it all back to us by enquiring into the meaning of knowledge and making it relatable in images.

The essence of what makes us human lies in the depths of space-time. The artists' collective takes up the challenge of sensorially combining an examination of the nature of the universe with our own existence.

**Marshmallow Laser Feast (MLF)** is an artist collective based in London (UK) that creates immersive experiences by combining art, film, and Extended Reality, expanding human perception and exploring our connection to the natural world. MLF collaborates with interdisciplinary experts from art, programming, engineering, poetry, and chemistry to develop custom software and hardware systems. MLF has exhibited internationally at institutions such as the Barbican Centre, London (UK), ACMI, Melbourne (AU), Yamaguchi Center for Arts and Media – YCAM (JP), Phi Centre, Montreal (CA), and the Istanbul Design Biennial (TR). The collective is known for award-winning works such as *We Live in an Ocean of Air* (2018) and *In the Eyes of the Animal* (2016), with the latter receiving the Wired Audi Innovation Award for Innovation in Experience Design. *TreeHugger: Wawona* was shown at the Frankfurter Kunstverein in 2021 and won the Tribeca Storyscapes Award for Innovation in Storytelling and the Best VR Film Prize at the VR Arles Festival (FR). MLF's work has also been featured in leading publications such as The Guardian, New Scientist, Wired, The Times, and Creative Review.

## Prof Dr Luciano Rezzolla, Institute for Theoretical Physics, Goethe University Frankfurt

### Beauty and Complexity

Einstein's Field Equations of General Relativity and Schwarzschild Solution of the Black Hole, 1915  
Equation by Arnowitt, Misner and Deser

CCZ4 Equation by Alic, Bona-Casas, Bona, Palenzuela, Rezzolla

Foil print on plexiglass, each 150 x 85 cm

Courtesy Prof Dr Luciano Rezzolla, Institute for Theoretical Physics, Goethe University Frankfurt

Often in modern physics a theory swings between the presence of beauty but the absence of complexity, and the absence of beauty but the presence of complexity. This happens every time the theory goes from being formulated in its idealised form – when the mathematical beauty prevails and the complexity is hidden – to being expressed under realistic conditions as those needed for actual calculations – when then the mathematical beauty fades away to be replaced by a less beautiful complexity.

The first line on the left panel reports the Einstein equations that fully describe the theory that revolutionised our understanding of gravity. The second line shows instead the solution found by the Frankfurter Karl Schwarzschild and representing a black hole. In both cases, simple beauty hides the enormous complexity of Einstein's theory or the challenges behind the concept of a black hole.

The middle panel reports the Einstein equations when written in a form that is commonly used to represent physical laws. In this case, the four-dimensional spacetime (that is, the combination of space and time) is split into a three-dimensional space and a one-dimensional time. A transition between beauty and complexity starts to emerge.

The right panel reports the same Einstein equations written on the left when expressed in the form that is needed to solve these equations with the help of supercomputers. Written in this way, Einstein equations can be used to calculate, for instance, what happens when two neutron stars collide and produce a black hole. In this case, complexity (that nevertheless has a beauty of its own...) replaces the compact beauty of the Einstein equations.

### Seeing what cannot be seen

The Black Hole *Sagittarius A\**, 2022

Digital print on black Forex, 150 x 150 cm

© Event Horizon Telescope collaboration et al.

Courtesy Prof Dr Luciano Rezzolla, Institute for Theoretical Physics, Goethe University Frankfurt

In April 2017, scientists of the international collaboration "Event Horizon Telescope" (EHT) used eight high-frequency radio telescopes scattered around the globe to collect radio waves emitted from the very centre of our galaxy.

In April 2022, after three years of meticulous analysis of the data and on its theoretical modelling, the EHT presented to the world the image of *Sagittarius A\**, the black hole at the centre of the Milky Way, and that is presented here.

What is colloquially defined as a "photo" is in reality a map of the intensity of the radio emission averaged over time. What is peculiar about this image – that looks like a doughnut – is the approximately circular form of the bright part and the presence of a dark region of at the centre, a region that scientists call the "shadow" of the black hole.

The shadow, which is a precise prediction of Einstein's theory of General Relativity, reveals the presence of an event horizon and hence of a black hole. Mathematically, a black hole is a solution in vacuum of the Einstein equations in vacuum, that is, in the absence of any form of matter or energy. Yet, the presence of the black hole is manifested via the spacetime curvature it produces and that changes the motion of objects near it.

Because the event horizon absorbs the light produced in its vicinity, the centre of the photo is darker as it "steals" light we would otherwise receive. At the same time, near the event horizon, where temperatures are high and the emission enhanced, light can still be emitted without being absorbed by the black hole. This is the light we effectively receive and is shown in the photo.

### **Touching what cannot be touched**

Black Hole *SgrA\** as a tactile 3D model, 2024

ø 19,5 cm, height 6 cm

Produced for the exhibition *The Presence of Absence* with support from the European Research Council (ERC)

Courtesy Prof Dr Luciano Rezzolla, Institute for Theoretical Physics, Goethe University Frankfurt

The event horizon, that is, the outer surface of a black hole, cannot be seen because light cannot be emitted from this surface, where gravity is extreme.

Yet, the presence of a black hole can be deduced in terms of its "shadow", that is, the dark depression at the centre of the large image on the wall produced by the International Collaboration "Event Horizon Telescope" (EHT). The dark region reflects the absence of light near the event horizon and has allowed us to "see" a black hole at the centre of the Galaxy (*Sgr A\**) as predicted by Einstein's theory of General Relativity.

What if we cannot see? How can a black hole be "seen" by those of us whose eyes cannot receive light?

What is shown is a 3D rendering of the intensity of the radio emission from *Sgr A\** and you are welcome to explore it with your hands. In this way, you can imagine how a blind person can perceive it. The rendering also helps our minds imagine the very strong curvature of space and time that develops near a black hole and that is well reproduced by the steep walls of the print near the centre of the shadow.

### **Revealing the Presence**

Glass hologram cube of photon trajectories curved by the gravitational pull of a black hole, 2024

15 x 15 x 15 cm, Glass

Produced for the exhibition *The Presence of Absence* at Frankfurter Kunstverein with support from the European Research Council (ERC)

Courtesy Prof Dr Luciano Rezzolla, Institute for Theoretical Physics, Goethe University Frankfurt

A black hole is a solution of the Einstein equations in the absence of matter, that is, in vacuum. Its outer edge is represented by the "event horizon", a geometrical surface where gravity is so strong that nothing, not even light, can leave it. Hence, it is possible to enter the event horizon but not to leave it.

Because it cannot emit light, the event horizon of a black hole cannot be "seen", at least in terms of light rays. However, the motion in its vicinity of light rays can reveal its presence.

The block shows the trajectories of light rays, or photons as physicists also call them, as they approach or leave a rotating black hole. The complex and sometimes bizarre trajectories they follow are the result of the strongly warped spacetime. The cube helps understand that the two-dimensional image of a black hole we measure with radio telescopes and the resulting photo is really the product of the three-dimensional motion of light rays coming from all directions and being deflected by the black hole.

These trajectories provide information not only on the presence of a black hole but also on its properties, that is, the mass and spin (how rapidly it rotates). Shown on one of the sides of the cube is an almost circular shape that scientists call the "shadow" of the black hole. Measuring the size and shape of the shadow helps them reveal the presence of a black hole and understand its properties.

Texts by Prof Dr Luciano Rezzolla

## Claudio Parmiggiani

Untitled, 2024

Smoke and soot on board

4 pieces, each 115 x 205 cm

Untitled, 2024

Smoke and soot on board

6 pieces, each 200 x 150 cm

Untitled, 2024

Smoke and soot on board

40 x 40 cm

Untitled, 2024

Smoke and soot on board

40 x 40 cm

Courtesy Studio Claudio Parmiggiani

Untitled, 2023  
Smoke and soot on board  
100 x 150 cm

Untitled, 2023  
Smoke and soot on board  
100 x 150 cm

Loans: Private collection, Paris

Courtesy Tornabuoni Art

A central exhibition room is dedicated to the work of the Italian artist Claudio Parmiggiani. His soot paintings, of objects and figures that are no longer present, emphasise what is absent through contours and are pictorial metaphors of transience and the power of memory.

In the 1970s, Parmiggiani began the series *Delocazioni* (Displacements): works that explore the concept of absence and negative form through the use of fire and smoke. The artist does not paint his works. His pictures show white shadows of objects such as bottles, books, and human figures, whose outlines are created by smoke deposits in a fire chamber. The soot covers the surface of the panel. Where once there was an object, the surface remains white. Parmiggiani's unique technique is reminiscent of the photographic process of the photogram, in which objects are placed on light-sensitive paper and exposed to light so that their outlines appear as a negative print.

Claudio Parmiggiani belongs to the generation of people and artists who were born during the Second World War and who were confronted with the experiences and images of this devastating chapter in human history. When Parmiggiani was young, the house in which he grew up burned down. These personal and social traumas have undoubtedly left their mark on his soul and have perhaps been incorporated into his work as an overarching endeavour that is characterised by emergence and disappearance, creation and destruction.

Yet Parmiggiani's art is timeless. His quest revolves around the ability of art to give form to life as an experience of temporal existence—in all its beauty, horror, ephemerality and mystery. Parmiggiani is deeply rooted in the history of Western painting, whose visual languages he has mastered. For him, the essence of a picture and of painting is not to make the invisible visible (as for Paul Klee or Wassily Kandinsky, see: Massimo Recalcati, *La spiritualità nell'arte contemporanea: Claudio Parmiggiani*, 2019). His struggle revolves around the impossibility of translating the invisible into an image and thus creating an image that points beyond its visible outlines and forms.

For Parmiggiani, art becomes a form of spiritual search. The motif of the shadow plays a central role. Throughout the history of Western and Eastern art, it has served as a metaphorical image and symbol. A myth about the origin of art goes back to the idea of the shadow, which Pliny the Elder described before he died in the ash rain of Pompeii. In his *Natural History*, he describes the myth of Butades of Sicyon, a Corinthian potter and his daughter. The young girl was madly in love with a young man who was about to embark on a long and dangerous journey. In order to preserve something of him as a memento, she traced the profile of his face, which the light of the lamp cast on a wall. When her father saw this, he filled in the outline by pressing clay onto the surface, creating

a face in relief, which he then hardened in the fire. Love, loss, memory, melancholy and beauty are thus named as the origins of art.

The Frankfurter Kunstverein is celebrating the return of the artist Claudio Parmiggiani to its venue with the exhibition *The Presence of Absence*. In 1981 and 1988, Peter Weiermair, director from 1980 to 1998, dedicated two solo exhibitions to Parmiggiani. For the current show, the artist has created new, large-format works that belong to his *Delocazioni* series.

Rows of books on shelves can be seen on six monumental panels. Their titles, authors and contents remain hidden from us. Books are repositories of human knowledge. They carry people's histories and are witnesses to our culture, our imagination and our intellectual heritage. Another work consists of four panels: they depict the shadows of empty bottles. Their shapes are omitted in the layer of soot. The glass of the vessels outlines the emptiness inside as if with a line, symbolically doubling the absence. And then two human figures: they stand alone on their board. Their outlines distorted, they come from stone statues that the artist left to the fire. "Like an extinguished light that lights a soul in the dark... because statues are like souls", the artist once said in an interview with Arturo Schwarz.

The two smallest pictures in the room are dedicated to the most symbolic of things: a human skull, the epitome of the memento mori, and the cross section of a nautilus shell. Nautilidae (pearl boats) are living fossils and prehistoric creatures that inhabit the depths of the oceans and testify to the origins of life on our planet. They are traces of the past in the present. The spiral-shaped shell refers to the rules of nature, which Fibonacci tried to summarise with his mathematical sequences and which reflect the golden ratio. The proportions symbolise the perfect order of nature and are often interpreted as a reference to the divine. The shell also refers to a musical dimension. If you bring it to your ear, you can hear a rushing sound that people have always interpreted as the absent sound of the sea. We are never silent in our brains, however; we hear words and see images. The musician John Cage and the visual artist Yves Klein have devoted their work to this perception of reality.

Parmiggiani poses humanity's eternal question of what remains. Absence is like a footprint on a snow-covered path: the foot is no longer there, but the imprint shows its former presence (Massimo Recalcati, *La spiritualità nell'arte contemporanea: Claudio Parmiggiani*, 2019). The trace is something that remains, even though it threatens to dissolve. The empty silhouettes of the objects appear to Parmiggiani as portraits of absences. What are traditionally regarded as symbols of the end—soot, ash and emptiness—become metaphors for persistence in Parmiggiani's work, for the eternal presence of life in the form of memories, traces and impressions. The fire does not leave behind nothingness, but the indelible presence of the past and the openness of the future.

*"... I showed completely empty, bare rooms in which the only presence was absence, the imprint on the walls of everything that had once been there, the shadows of the things that had animated these places. For these rooms I used only dust, soot and smoke. They helped to create the atmosphere of a place abandoned by people, like after a fire, like in a destroyed city. Only the shadows of things remained, like ectoplasms of almost vanished forms, vanished like the shadows of dissolved human bodies on the walls of Hiroshima. The first displacement (Delocazione), which I made in 1970, was a place [...] where the only presence was the imprints of the things I had removed. An environment of shadows, shadows of canvases that I had removed from the walls, shadows of shadows, as if behind a veil I saw another veiled reality and behind this other veiled*



*reality yet another and other veils, and so on ad infinitum. [...] A place of absence like a place of the soul."*

From: Claudio Parmiggiani, *Stella Sangue Spirito*, 1995

**Claudio Parmiggiani** (b. 1943 in Luzzara, Italy) lives and works in Parma, IT. He is one of the central figures in post-war art in Italy and Europe. Although Parmiggiani chose an independent path within the Italian art scene and never aligned himself with a specific artistic movement, his work can be situated between Arte Povera and Conceptual Art. His works have been exhibited internationally in museums and collections. Solo exhibitions have taken place at the following institutions: Frist Museum, Nashville, TN (US), Accademia di Francia Villa Medici, Rome (IT), Palais des Beaux-Arts - BOZAR, Brussels (BE), Palazzo del Governatore, Parma (IT), Palazzo Fabroni Arti Visive Contemporanee, Pistoia (IT), Musée des Beaux-Arts de Nantes (FR), Grand Palais, Paris (FR), Galleria d'Arte Moderna di Bologna (IT), Museum of Art, Tel Aviv (IL), Musée Fabre, Montpellier (FR), and the Frankfurter Kunstverein, Frankfurt am Main (DE). Parmiggiani also participated in the Venice Biennale (IT) six times. His works are part of prominent collections, including those of the Centre Pompidou, Paris (FR), Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam (NL), Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, Havana (CU), National Gallery of Iceland, Reykjavík (IS), Mamco - Musée d'Art Moderne et Contemporain, Geneva (CH), Fondation Cartier pour l'art contemporain, Paris (FR), Francois Pinault Foundation, Venice (IT), and Museo del Novecento, Milan (IT). In his literary work, the following publications stand out: *Poesie dipinte* (1981), *Il sangue del colore* (1988), *Stella Sangue Spirito* (published in 1995, 2003, and 2007), *Incipit* (2008), *Una fede in niente ma totale* (2010), and *Lettere a Luisa* (2016).

## Cast of the Laetoli footprints from the Collection of the Natural History Museum Vienna

Cast of the Laetoli footprints

Found in 1978; location: Tanzania

PLA, 3D print with a filament based on a 3D scan

40 x 360 x 4,5 cm

Produced by the Frankfurter Kunstverein for the exhibition *The Presence of Absence: 3D scans* created by the 3D-Lab of the Natural History Museum Vienna, 3D printing by studio gilgen and manual preparation by the Senckenberg Museum of Natural History  
Courtesy Natural History Museum Vienna

3.6 million years ago, *Australopithecus afarensis*—two adults and a child—crossed the African savannah near the Olduvai Gorge in northern Tanzania. The tracks of these early human ancestors are the first imprints of individuals walking upright side by side in the infinity of prehistoric landscapes.

The ephemeral traces were preserved by a natural phenomenon. The Sadiman volcano had erupted eighteen times in quick succession. Savannah animals, including australopithecines, crossed the area on the banks of the Garusi River after the volcanic ash had cooled following an eruption. Shortly

beforehand, the landscape must have been devastated by the eruption and looked like a lunar landscape. Hot winds blew and ash veiled the sky. The passing creatures left traces in the ash, which was moistened by the sudden onset of rain. Raindrops left tiny craters in the dusty surface of the earth. The sun that followed the rain turned the ash and the traces of the creatures into hardened tuff. When the volcano erupted again immediately afterwards, the tuff was sealed like concrete and covered with a new layer of ash. As a result of these events, the traces of the creatures were fossilised and have survived to this day.

The imprints from Laetoli open a unique window into the past. They enable researchers to investigate an important chapter in human evolution. At the same time, they unlock spaces of imagination. Two parallel tracks. The large one must have been made by two adult hominins walking one behind the other. One stepped into the footprints of the other, as apes and *Homo sapiens* sometimes do. Next to their footprints are those of smaller feet. Perhaps their child, walking close to its parents. The track indicates a pause. An interruption that suggests that the child must have stopped while walking, perhaps to look back.

The footprints differ only slightly from those of people today. The balls of the feet and toes exert pressure on the ground when walking. The cast of Laetoli's footprints shown here was produced as a digital data set by the Natural History Museum Vienna for the exhibition at the Frankfurter Kunstverein. A handmade replica was produced for the exhibition by Prof Daniel Gilgen (Trier University of Applied Sciences) and Olaf Vogel (geological taxidermist at the Senckenberg Research Institute and Natural History Museum Frankfurt).

The Laetoli area is a key site in palaeoanthropology. Since the 1970s, new teams of researchers have found tens of thousands of fossilised bone remains and traces of over twenty animal species, as well as footprints of seventy individuals of human hominins in the millions of years old layers. Time has created layer upon layer of sediment and volcanic material, which in some places is more than 130 metres thick.

When a team of researchers led by Mary Leakey found bone fragments and footprints of the early human species *Australopithecus afarensis*, which includes the world-famous Lucy, it was a sensation. Palaeoanthropologists carefully uncovered the footprints several times over the decades. They documented them with increasingly sophisticated technologies, most recently with 3D laser scanners and with the help of digital forensic methods.

The first direct evidence of one of our ancestors walking upright was found. The latest investigations revealed that some of Laetoli's footprints came from another, possibly still unknown, hominin species.

We would like to thank

Dr Margit Berner (Natural History Museum Vienna)

Apl Prof Ottmar Kullmer (Senckenberg Research Institute and Natural History Museum Frankfurt)

Prof Daniel Gilgen (Trier University of Applied Sciences)

Olaf Vogel (Senckenberg Research Institute and Natural History Museum Frankfurt)

**Petra Noordkamp**

*Il Grande Cretto di Gibellina*, 2015

Film, 14 min

Courtesy Petra Noordkamp and The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation

Petra Noordkamp is an artist. She works with photography and film and explores the influence of experiences, memories, films and dreams on the perception of architecture and the urban environment.

In 2015, she was invited by the Guggenheim Museum in New York to make her film *Il Grande Cretto di Gibellina*. Noordkamp dedicated it to the landscape monument by the Italian Arte Povera artist Alberto Burri (b. 1915, Città di Castello, IT; d. 1995, Nice, FR). The construction of the *Cretto* began in 1984 and was completed in 2015. Today, the work covers an area of 90,000 square metres.

The history of the *Cretto di Gibellina* (The Crack of Gibellina) by Alberto Burri is complex. Burri began working on the idea for the work in 1979. Between 1985 and 1989, he had a 1.50 metre high layer of white cement poured over the rubble left behind by the great earthquake of 14 January 1968, which destroyed the town of Gibellina and the lives of its 5,000 inhabitants. Streets, squares, houses, shops, schools, churches, a theatre and the 14th century Chiaramonte Castle—everything collapsed, burying people and their belongings. Around a hundred people died. Everyone else lost their homes and every family had victims to mourn. A traumatising and fundamental experience of the inevitability from the power of nature. Burri's work, created eleven years after the event, preserves the ruins and covers them with a white layer of cement.

It is a place of absence, remembrance and silence. Burri's greatness lies in the fact that he felt and respected people's pain and grief. He gave it a form. Burri expressly chose white cement. For him, the colour white was a symbol of light. A light that resists the darkest experiences of destruction and death in this place. The seemingly hard material is itself vulnerable. Time makes it brittle. Caper plants take root and blast cracks in the surface, algae and moss decompose it, wind, sun and rain: all this reminds us of the human form of life, which is always vulnerable. The cement and the man-made form would disintegrate in the eternal cycle of growth and decay if the survivors of the earthquake had not dedicated themselves to the task of caring for the sculptural body of the *Cretto*. The people who founded the Associazione Gibellina Parco Culturale know how difficult it is to preserve the white of the concrete. Their care defies time and oblivion, because the *Cretto* should remain in its sublime beauty. As a symbol of an absence and at the same time as a sign of the power of beauty, this has great value to some people from Gibellina.

Burri searched for beauty. For him, it is the form that speaks to us in a strict balance of sensual and spiritual imagery. It is not the concept of beauty that conceals and glosses over the ugly, the incomprehensible, the hurt and the fragile, but rather the conviction that art absorbs them and makes them meaningful.

Petra Noordkamp spent many months in Gibellina. For her, it was an essential part of her work to experience the silence of the *Cretto*, to spend time there and to find a way, on film, to bring this place closer to people far away. She looked through historical photos and film footage that showed her the people who had survived the earthquake. She was moved by the images of times gone by and the life that is absent today. She incorporated this archive material into her film as a tribute to the friends and residents of Gibellina. For example, we see a scene featuring the father and brother

of Nicolò Stabile, now organiser of the Associazione Gibellina Parco Culturale and activist, who became a close friend.

From the sky, Burri's minimalist design looks like a white square, like a canvas that covers the entire hill, furrowed by deep fissures and cracks. These are reminiscent of the streets of the destroyed town of Gibellina. They are also evocative of the furrows caused by earthquakes. And they symbolise the cracks in the lives of the people who lost everything in Gibellina.

Petra Noordkamp deliberately chooses a point of view (alternate camera angle) at eye level. It is as if her film leads us through the paths of the *Cretto di Gibellina*. Her work evokes a sense of presence. Noordkamp gives the viewer the impression of walking through the place and feeling what may have happened there.

Petra Noordkamp invited the Dutch sound artist Nathalie Bruys to create the soundtrack for her film. She recorded ambient sounds on location—the sounds of the sheep, the wind and the birds—and integrated them as sound fragments into the final soundscape of the film.

Burri himself had stipulated that the *Cretto* should remain a place of silence. Only elements of nature should be heard—the birds, the wind and the crickets. No tourist hustle and bustle, no marketing should disturb. Moments of self-reflection. The experience of the individual as an expression of the here and now in the face of the eternity of space and time is created in this special place.

Noordkamp's entire oeuvre is influenced by Finnish architect Juhani Pallasmaa's thoughts on silence. According to the architect, the world is losing its mystery, its poetry and its sensual presence. The loss of silence and darkness symbolises man's alienation from a spiritual relationship with the world and nature.

Petra Noordkamp's film illustrates how Alberto Burri's *Cretto* stands for its own history and as a scar in time. It is a reminder of the catastrophe and at the same time shows a place of beauty in the midst of the eternal hilly landscape of the Belice Valley. Here, art has fulfilled the task of covering a wound. To protect and preserve the wounded. The presence of the absent.

**Petra Noordkamp** (b. 1967, Losser, NL) is a Dutch artist and filmmaker who lives and works in Amsterdam (NL). From 1996 to 2000, she studied photography at the Gerrit Rietveld Academy in Amsterdam (NL). In 2012, Noordkamp presented her first short film *The Mother, the Son and the Architect*, filmed in the Chiesa Madre by architect Ludovico Quaroni in Gibellina (IT), in a solo exhibition at the Foam Photography Museum in Amsterdam (NL). The film was screened at numerous international film festivals. In 2013, she was an artist-in-residence at the American Academy in Rome (IT). In 2014, she returned to Gibellina at the request of the Guggenheim Foundation, New York (US), to create the short film *Il Grande Cretto di Gibellina* about the land art piece *Cretto* by Alberto Burri. This film was shown at renowned institutions such as the Guggenheim Museum, New York (US), K21, Düsseldorf (DE), and the Centre Pompidou, Paris (FR). Her film *When You Return I'll Be Living by the Waterside* (2017) had its world premiere at the International Film Festival Rotterdam (IFFR) in 2018. In 2017, Noordkamp created the diptych installation *Fragile - Handle with Care*, commissioned by the Museo Nazionale delle Arti del XXI Secolo - MAXXI in Rome (IT). In 2020, she began the project *Better Not Move* in Tokyo (JP), which resulted in a book, a film, and several exhibitions.

## Associazione Gibellina Parco Culturale

*Il Cretto è casa mia* (The Cretto is my home), 2024 – fortlaufend ongoing

A project by **Nicolò Stabile**

34 photographs by **Giuseppe Ippolito**

Digital photography, dimensions variable

Thoughts of the survivors of 1968 Belice earthquake collected and chosen by **Giovanna Giordano**

Courtesy Giuseppe Ippolito (Photos) and Giovanna Giordano (Text)

*Il Cretto è casa mia* (The Cretto is my home) is being shown publicly for the first time at the Frankfurter Kunstverein. The photographic work was brought to life in 2024 by the tenacious determination of Nicolò Stabile, who initiated it as part of his tireless work to preserve Alberto Burri's Cretto and the history of Gibellina.

On display are portraits of people who survived the Belice earthquake, which shook and destroyed western Sicily several times in 1968. They are the last witnesses to this traumatic experience. The people affected lost relatives and their homes. The earthquake and the inaction of the authorities left them homeless and alone with the loss of their entire existence. After years in temporary barracks, Gibellina Nuova (the new Gibellina) was built 18 kilometres away. Artists and architects donated works and it became a city of a modernist utopia, which over the years was once again abandoned to decay.

In 2024, the participatory project *Il Cretto è casa mia* was created as an attempt to heal and reappropriate a place that, in its entire presence, bears witness to a deeply felt absence. More than fifty years after the earthquake, people have come together to have their portraits made, as they stand in front of the former ruins of their homes. In the 1980s, Alberto Burri's landscape artwork, the *Cretto di Gibellina*, was created on these remains as a place of silence and remembrance. The artist succeeded in transforming the pain into a form of sublime beauty through a respectful creative act. His white layers of concrete shrouded the remains, like a burial shroud, preserving them in the secrecy of their interior.

Nicolò Stabile, himself a survivor and founder of the Associazione Gibellina Parco Culturale, is the driving force behind a visionary and monumental endeavour not to abandon this place to decay, but to preserve it and mobilise collective forces to do so. For years, he has been committed to preserving the art and the memorial site. In 2024, he invited the photographer Giuseppe Ippolito to take portraits of the survivors on site. The photo campaign, conceived as an ongoing process, now comprises 60 portraits, 34 of which are printed and shown for the first time as part of the group exhibition *The Presence of Absence*. The people whose faces we see belong to the last generation to bear witness to this shattering event for Sicily and the whole of Italy.

They look at us from the photographs and do not shrink back from the violence of history, but emerge as individuals. They tell their stories to the writer Giovanna Giordano, excerpts of which can be read in the exhibition. They are proud that Alberto Burri created one of the world's most important monuments and his masterpiece from the ruins of their houses. A living place of landscape, memory and culture.

**Nicolò Stabile** (b. 1966, Gibellina, IT) worked in the 1980s alongside Ludovico Corrao (b. 1927, Alcamo, IT; d. 2011, Gibellina, IT), the former mayor of Gibellina, on the reconstruction of the city after the 1968 Belice earthquake. In the 1990s, he lived and worked in Brussels, BE, where he worked as a playwright, organiser, press spokesperson, and translator for various theaters, festivals, and artists, including Kunstenfestivaldesarts, Brussels (BE), Kaaithheater, Brussels (BE), CharleroiDances, Charleroi (BE), and Needcompany, Brussels (BE). He also worked as a producer for Thierry Salmon. In 2000, Stabile returned to Gibellina, where he led the Compagnia Caterina Sagna and realised numerous co-productions with prominent institutions such as Théâtre de la Ville, Paris (FR), Théâtre de la Bastille, Paris (FR), Festival d'Avignon (FR), and Venice Biennale (IT). From 2006 to 2010, he was responsible for public relations and the Ente Promozione Danza at Fondazione RomaEuropa, Rome (IT), as well as for the programming at Teatro Palladium, Rome (IT). Since 2010, Stabile has been dedicated to preserving and documenting the public art collection of Gibellina, particularly Alberto Burri's Cretto. In this context, he has collaborated with artists, photographers, directors, researchers, dramaturgs, archives, universities, and institutions to document the city of Gibellina and its contradictions. Collaborators include Thierry de Mey, Marzia Migliora, Petra Noordkamp, Elisa Giardina Papa, Onorato & Krebs, David Williams, Maya Bosch, Christian Lutz, Pablo Fidalgo, Alexander Rosenkranz, Istituto Svizzero, Rome (IT), Accademia Tedesca Villa Massimo, Rome (IT), Fondazione Sandretto Re Baudengo, Turin (IT), and Archivio Pietro Consagra, Gibellina (IT).

**Giuseppe Ippolito** (b. 1987, Novara, IT) is an Italian photographer specializing in portrait and reportage photography for the publishing and advertising industries. His reportage work has been published in both national and international outlets, including The Guardian, Vanity Fair, La Cucina Italiana, Business Traveller UK, The Creative Brothers, Athleta Magazine, Suq Magazine, and Trentino Magazine. Ippolito is well-known in the food and beverage industry as a photographer of celebrity chefs, and he has collaborated with La Repubblica, Panorama, Dispensa Magazine, and Fine Dining Lovers by San Pellegrino. In 2017, he received a special mention from the World Photography Organization and was shortlisted for the Food Photographer of the Year award. Recently, he expanded his work to include the creation of institutional campaigns for Regione Sicilia, SIAE (Italian Society of Authors and Publishers), and MiBAC (Ministry of Cultural Heritage and Activities). Ippolito's parents are from Gibellina.

**Giovanna Giordano** (b. 1961, Milan, IT) lives and works in Catania, IT, where she teaches philosophy at the Accademia di Belle Arti and works as a journalist and author. Giordano is known for her literary journeys from Sicily to other places beyond Italy. She studied African art history and regularly writes for publications such as La Stampa, Il Giornale di Sicilia, Il Mattino, and currently La Sicilia. She has received numerous awards, including the Premio Recalmare Sciascia for her novels, such as *Trentaseimila giorni* (1996), *Un volo magico* (1998), and *Il mistero di Lithian* (2004). In 2020, she was shortlisted for the Nobel Prize in Literature. Her work *Il profumo della libertà* (2021) was nominated for the Premio Strega in 2022.

## **We are the Cretto**

A text by Nicolò Stabile

## **What is the *Cretto*?**

The *Grande Cretto di Gibellina* by Alberto Burri is one of the largest works of art in the world and measures 270 x 310 metres. Like a shroud of white concrete, it covers the ruins of the small village that was destroyed by the earthquake on 15 January 1968. In the centre of western Sicily, in a region with a rich cultural heritage, it stands in timeless dialogue with the imposing columns of the Greek Selinunte further south and the sublime solitude of the temple of Segesta, an ancient city of the Elymians in the north.

The *Cretto* by Alberto Burri was built from the stones and things that once formed Gibellina: streets, squares, houses, stables, shops, workshops, schools, churches, an Italian-style theatre and a 14th century castle. The *Cretto* is the tomb and the lost home of a small village in the south of Italy. It reconstructs ideal, spatial and temporal paths between memory and the present, between the living and the dead.

It is a work that defies any attempt at categorisation.

## **A call to the arts**

Its history is complex. It began in 1979 and is still ongoing today. It had a *deus ex machina*: Ludovico Corrao, mayor of Gibellina from 1970 to 1994, who—like Fitzcarraldo—knew that dreams can move mountains.

We are at the end of the 1970s. For the citizens of Gibellina who survived the earthquake, the trauma continued: they had to live in temporary shelters for more than a decade—icy in winter and scorching hot in summer. New town centres were beginning to take shape according to state plans—some of them, like Gibellina Nuova, far away from the old settlements. These plans were drawn up in an office in the distant capital of Rome by a handful of urban planners who believed—as they wrote in the project report—that they could fight the mafia by building wide streets to separate the inhabitants from each other. The concerns and needs of the local communities were ignored. Furthermore, the municipalities were deprived of any decision-making power by law.

Ludovico Corrao was powerless in the face of the urban planning decisions imposed by the state. However, he was aware of the ignorance of these plans and was convinced that houses alone were not enough to restore a sense of community and solidarity. He knew that reconstruction must be given greater meaning, with beauty acting as a driving force and unifying element. That is why he brought together artists, intellectuals and cultural workers to try to make the city more beautiful.

The writer Leonardo Sciascia wrote in a speech he gave in Gibellina on 15 January 1988 to mark the twentieth anniversary of the earthquake: “The Italian state—it must be said—was neither willing nor inclined to accept a demand for reconstruction that was more than just a restoration of misery: perhaps they were actually hoping for escape, for abandonment, for the desire to start anew somewhere else; and the proof of this is that the ‘two per cent law’, the law providing for two per cent of expenditure on artistic designs for public buildings, was suspended and repealed for the reconstruction of these cities. A ban on art, a ban on beauty: it's as if they wanted everything to be uglier than before, so that people wouldn't recognise each other or their homeland. Whether intentional, an unconscious desire or simply the lack of even a vague idea among the ruling class of what beautifies and strengthens life—here in this region this has become evident on several

occasions; but in Gibellina it has found a place of resistance. [Ludovico Corrao] has shown that life is not elsewhere, but that it can also be here.”

Artists responded to Corrao's call and the new Gibellina came to life through art. At the end of the 1970s, Gibellina became a permanent laboratory of the arts, a meeting place for artists and an open-air museum.

### **A masterpiece emerges from the ruins**

Corrao even managed to persuade the artist Alberto Burri, who is considered a difficult personality, to come to Gibellina. In 1979, Burri travelled from Rome with all his prejudices about the south of Italy and its inhabitants. The new city did not inspire him, and the idea of leaving behind a piece alongside those of artists he did not appreciate did not appeal to him: “I certainly won't do anything here.” But then he visited the ruins of Gibellina, which had been destroyed by the earthquake. He must have sensed the silence, interrupted only by the cawing of crows in this hilly landscape that stretches all the way to the African Sea, and he was almost moved. The idea came to him that very evening: “I would do it like this: we compact the rubble, which is a problem for you anyway, fix it properly, and with concrete we create a huge white *cretto* (crack) so that this event will be remembered forever.”

In order to create the work, Burri dreamed of the active and energetic participation of the residents of Gibellina. It was only much later that he learnt—and it made him very sad—that many not only didn't like the *Cretto*, but perceived it as a form of violence.

### **A difficult realisation**

Corrao used countless ideas and strategies to procure funds, materials and labour. It was unthinkable to ask the state for funding. In 1985, the work began to take shape and spread out among the rubble. Burri left it to the technicians and workers to find solutions to implement his recommendations. He followed the project from afar via his friend Alberto Zanmatti, the architect on site.

On the morning of 23 May 1987, Burri saw his *Cretto* for the first and last time: he seemed disappointed and said almost nothing. He probably missed the view from above, to which he had become accustomed thanks to the model he had worked on. Despite the size, he missed the feeling of grandeur that he had imagined. The visit only lasted a few hours, just enough to take a photo of the artist's encounter with his work.

In 1989, when 70 per cent of the work had been completed, the work on the *Cretto* was stopped due to a lack of funds. Corrao managed to obtain funding from the Sicilian region by submitting the project not as a work of art but as a “city park”. But there was no time left for him to set the bureaucratic machinery in motion. After more than twenty years, the people of Gibellina no longer wanted him as mayor, and in 1994 Corrao was not re-elected. His successor managed to lose this funding on purpose, and from then on the *Cretto* was gradually abandoned.

Years passed and white turned grey. The metal beneath the surface had rusted, causing parts of the concrete to break off. There were a few small collapses, chips and cracks. Apart from a few cleanings to remove the vegetation that had begun to overgrow the work, no maintenance was carried out. Nobody came to the ruins any more. The opportunities to gather there were becoming increasingly



rare. The *Cretto* was almost forgotten. Burri didn't like to talk about it either. As he had predicted, he died in 1997 without seeing his work completed.

Then a wind farm was built on the surrounding hills, where a few years previously there had been young forests. The municipality deemed it necessary to create a car park and built it in the immediate vicinity of Alberto Burri's work using the same white concrete: from a distance, it looks like a metastasis of *Cretto's* square body. The same material was used to resurface the stretch of provincial road that runs along one side of the *Cretto*, disfiguring its shape. There was no outcry over these crude public interventions that disfigured Burri's idea. Institutional vandalism.

### The Cretto is alive

The idea of launching an appeal to save the *Cretto* came to me one summer afternoon in 2010 when I was talking to Ludovico Corrao. He was already seriously ill, but by no means resigned.

However, the fact of not seeing the *Cretto* completed made him deeply sad. The appeal was signed by around one hundred personalities from the worlds of art and culture and sent to the responsible minister and the regional council. Less than two months later, in a joint statement from the Ministry, the Secretary of State and the Regional Assessor emphasised that the appeal would not go unheeded. The Ministry provided funds from lottery proceeds for the restoration.

However, the region hesitated on the issue of completion and the assessor urged the involvement of private investors. Then, on 7 August 2011, in a fatal twist reminiscent of a Greek tragedy, Ludovico Corrao was murdered by his carer. Three days later, as we were paying our last respects to Senator Corrao on the forecourt of the Chiesa Madre of Gibellina, Assessor Sebastiano Missineo took me aside and, overcome with emotion, said that he would find the necessary funds to complete the work—he owed it to Corrao's memory. He kept his promise.

Work on the *Cretto* was completed in 2015. The new snow-white part was just as Burri had imagined it, but made the old grey part of the *Cretto* stand out even more, creating a striking contrast. What should be done to ensure its preservation for posterity? How can the old and new parts be harmonised? It was clear from the outset that maintaining this extraordinary work would require an equally extraordinary approach.

Burri would have liked the community of Gibellina to create the work themselves. After all, his work was donated to the community. Although they lost their property and their claim to it through the forced expropriation of their houses, which no longer exist, they are the moral owners and therefore guardians of the *Cretto*. It was also on this basis that, together with Corrao, it was decided that the *Cretto* should be regularly cleaned and painted with lime by the community. Lime is a simple, sanitising material that is easy to use and follows a tradition throughout the Mediterranean. This seemed to be the only way forward.

The *Cretto* must not die, but neither can it turn into a black hole of public money. Rather, it should become a common cultural asset that attracts travellers and, if well managed, brings economic benefits through targeted measures that ensure its promotion and visibility.

But the real key to securing the future of the *Cretto* lies in the relationship between the site of the ruins and the people. They initially experienced the *Cretto* as a foreign body, as an act of violence against the ruins, which in their modest physical presence nevertheless evoked a deep emotional connection. The initial rejection of this work had increased the physical distance (18 kilometres) between the new and the old Gibellina, a distance that has grown even further due to the indifference towards a half-finished work.

The need for a participatory restoration, initiated by the community, arises first of all from the need to establish a new relationship with Burri's work and with the whole site of the ruins. This need should form the basis for further planning and realisation. First and foremost, the restoration should provide an opportunity for a festive and ritualistic moment in which the population reclaims the site and the symbols associated with it. The restoration should not only be economically sustainable, but also be able to generate economic activity and thus bring direct benefits. It must also ensure that Burri's idea remains constantly visible in its original and fundamental colourfulness. For the people of Gibellina, this would be a way to break the spell of human nostalgia: the spell of a past time idealised by the tragic event of the earthquake and the events that followed, to accept the present moment and begin to invest in the future.

A restoration of all the existing works in Gibellina Nuova should also be carried out in a way that involves the numerous artists. Many have already signalled their willingness to participate.

In recent years, I have had the opportunity to share this idea with restorers, experts in materials of contemporary art, art historians, curators, artists, musicians and performers. With people who were the closest to Alberto Burri during the years in which the *Cretto* was built and who worked with him, as well as with the residents of Gibellina. And also with the decision makers at the relevant institutions, Gibellina Town Hall and the Trapani Superintendence for the Protection of Monuments. With the exception of the latter, who are still in favour of conservational restoration, everyone has welcomed the idea and its deeper meaning with enthusiasm.

Corrao's project, epitomised by Gibellina and exemplified in Burri's *Cretto*, is based on the Mediterranean idea that beauty regenerates. It is also based on the need to reactivate the fundamental myths of our civilisation by reviving them. The participatory restoration would mark the transition from utopia to the present, and the *Cretto* would ultimately become the *Gesamtkunstwerk* that Burri dreamed of.

### **The Cretto is my home**

We have asked the women and men who preserve the memory of the old Gibellina under the *Cretto* to return to the place where they were born and grew up. This is an opportunity to rediscover themselves in a ritual in which the population reclaims the place and the symbols associated with it.

Everyone bravely poses for a photo in the exact place where his/her life in Gibellina Vecchia ended and says: "This is my home."

The participatory photo project, a selection of which will be shown in the exhibition, is intended to help keep Burri's idea constantly visible in its power. Perhaps the *Cretto* will fully become the *Gesamtkunstwerk* that Burri envisioned by “activating” itself with its community.

One more small step to accompany *Il Grande Cretto* by Alberto Burri from the utopia from which it originates to our present as a marvellous reality.

## Alberto Stabile

*Gibellina Heartquake VR*, 2022–2024

Immersive virtual reality experience

26–30 min

We thank the Archivio del Centro Sviluppo Creativo “Danilo Dolci” and Rai (Radiotelevisione Italiana) for providing the archival material

Courtesy Alberto Stabile

*Gibellina Heartquake VR* was born out of a desire to tell the story of Gibellina and the Belice region, deeply affected by the 1968 earthquake. Using a VR headset, this immersive experience allows users to actively engage with key moments during and after the earthquake. The users are not mere spectators; they are invited to interact with the scenes. The virtual imagery combines computer-generated content with authentic television and radio recordings, poignantly narrating how the identity of an entire community has been shaped over generations. In the exhibition *The Presence of Absence*, *Gibellina Heartquake VR* is showcased alongside the photo project *Il Cretto è casa mia* by the Associazione Gibellina Parco Culturale and the film *Il Grande Cretto di Gibellina* by Petra Noordkamp, highlighting how memory can be kept alive through art.

The VR project was funded in 2021 by the municipality of Gibellina. Some of the town's residents and survivors can be heard in original recordings, including the activist Danilo Dolci and then mayor Ludovico Corrao. Despite the great support of the community and the donation of the final version of this virtual work to the Museum of Contemporary Art “Ludovico Corrao” in 2022, *Gibellina Heartquake VR* is being shown to the public for the first time at the Frankfurter Kunstverein.

The memory of Gibellina and its destruction by the Belice earthquake more than 55 years ago has had a lasting impact on the whole of Sicily. It must not be forgotten. *Gibellina Heartquake VR* was created to give future generations the opportunity to learn about the experience not just as a distant, historical event, but to experience it for themselves, to be touched by it—and thus to understand the wounds of the people whose lives were changed forever by the force of nature.

The first part of the VR experience shows the historical events of January 1968, beginning with TV images of Gibellina immediately after the earthquake. Users then find themselves, virtually, in an elegant living room in Rome. On television, they see original TV reports and breaking news about the earthquake. In another scene, the dramatic moments of the disaster can be experienced virtually from the perspective of Gibellina's inhabitants. The contrast between the prosperity in the capital and the poverty in Gibellina illustrates the profound inequalities between southern Italy and the rest of the country at the time. The narrative takes the users to tent cities and huts where the survivors tried to lead a normal life for years under precarious conditions. A thunderstorm rages over the

fragile huts and water seeps in. In the background, we hear historical recordings from the community radio station “Radio Libera”, in which activist Danilo Dolci publicly denounces the failure of the Italian authorities to provide decent living conditions in the emergency shelters and to rebuild the city.

The second part of the VR experience takes you into a dreamlike, surreal world. Here, the works of art and architectural landmarks of the new Gibellina stand in an empty landscape, abandoned and waiting to be discovered. Many of the buildings are unfinished. Unlike what they are in reality, this dream world stands for the utopia of a city, Gibellina Nuova (New Gibellina), which was created on the drawing board in the 1970s, 18 kilometres away from the ruins of the former city. The hope of a new beginning was to be symbolised by works of art. In addition to the famous *Cretto di Gibellina* by artist Alberto Burri, which was created on the ruins of the destroyed old Gibellina, numerous other artists from all over Italy donated works, monuments and buildings to the small town of Gibellina Nuova. But the dream remained an unfinished utopia.

*“The vision of the rebirth of the destroyed city through art and architecture is combined with my personal dream of being able to show the VR experience Gibellina Heartquake VR to the public. Both dreams share the fate of having somehow remained unfinished or been thwarted by circumstances. And both thrive on the confidence that they will be fully realised. Gibellina Heartquake VR is being presented to the public for the first time at the Frankfurter Kunstverein. It is my great wish that this project, which was created at the insistence of the residents of Gibellina, will gain new life and visibility not only in Italy but also abroad. In this way, the story of Gibellina can be made known to a wider public so that they can reflect on how to deal with wounds and loss, but also with the hope and the will to transform that dramatic events generate”.*  
Alberto Stabile

**Alberto Stabile** (b. 1994, Gibellina Nuova, IT) is a 3D artist and VR developer. His family experienced the 1968 earthquake in Gibellina and is one of the people whose fate has been shaped and changed by it to this day. Since 2018, he has been working as a 3D artist and VR developer, collaborating with architectural firms as well as international automotive companies. After years of working in 3D visualization and full CGI animation, the project *Gibellina Heartquake VR* represents a return to his roots – an attempt to revive the collective memory of his community through digital art.

## Casts of prehistoric cave engravings and high reliefs from the Collection of the Florentine Museum and Institute of Prehistory "Paolo Graziosi"

Cast from Grotta dell'Addaura (Addaura Cave on Sicily, Italy)  
70 x 100 cm

Cast from Grotta del Romito (Romito Cave in Calabria, Italy)  
150 x 100 cm

Cast from Grotte du Roc (Roc-de-Sers Cave in Charente, France)  
165 x 65 cm

Cast specially made for the exhibition *The Presence of Absence* at the Frankfurter Kunstverein; execution and manual preparation: Florentine Museum and Institute of Prehistory "Paolo Graziosi"

Courtesy Florentine Museum and Institute of Prehistory "Paolo Graziosi"

The exhibition *The Presence of Absence* presents some replicas of Palaeolithic artworks made available by the Florentine Museum and Institute of Prehistory "Paolo Graziosi". Their presence aims to create an intellectual link between Palaeolithic art, at the dawn of all aesthetics, and modern and contemporary art.

Prehistoric art, understood as visual language through pictorial representations, is a cognitive achievement of *Homo sapiens* dating back 40,000 to 45,000 years. Its existence is documented where this species, of which we are today's representatives, spread rapidly through long migrations from Africa to Europe and to the far east of Asia.

Neanderthals (*Homo neanderthalensis*) had already engraved small blocks and bones before *Homo sapiens*, using only linear signs in more or less complex graphics, but never creating recognisable figures. The use of ochre as a colouring agent and the production of simple jewellery (pendants, necklaces, etc.) show that Neanderthals had an aesthetic understanding, but never left artistic evidence in the narrower sense.

The richest and best-known repertoire of *Homo sapiens* is the European one, which is preserved in hundreds of caves and rock shelters and was produced both in the form of rock paintings (parietal art) and on transportable objects (movable art).

The hunter-gatherers of the Palaeolithic did not know writing, but used non-verbal languages instead: gestures, music and dance. Figurative forms of expression emerged at the same time as the first musical instruments (flutes made from the long hollow bones of swans and eagles), certain movements and postures (documented by fossil footprints that have survived in the damp soil of caves) and the systematic production of body and clothing jewellery as a sign of individual identity. This could also be used to mark individual deceased people in the graves.

This artistic heritage was to be understood as a communication system for passing on values and ideologies in which the community recognised itself. Early art deals with a number of central themes: the female figure, especially in her maternal ability to give life (as so-called Venus), the animal world and hunting (the most important means of acquiring food), as well as theriomorphism: human figures with masks associated with the symbolic sphere of the sacred. Handprints, freestanding vulva drawings and geometric, linear and punctual signs are also frequent depictions. Their meaning remains enigmatic. The same themes are treated in movable art on stones and bone fragments, with small statuettes, in the decoration of weapons or symbolic artefacts.

The cave is the preferred place for paintings, engravings, bas-reliefs and clay modelling, whether in living spaces or in "sanctuaries" for ceremonial and sacred purposes. The forms of expression of Palaeolithic art are diverse and various styles are already present in the first figurative manifestations of the Aurignacian, the first culture of *Homo sapiens*. A naturalism that pays attention to anatomical details, natural proportions and the movement of the motifs is accompanied by schematic, almost abstract images in which the subject always remains recognisable. In the course of time, towards the end of the Palaeolithic, geometric and linear signs gained in importance and prevailed to the detriment of naturalistic images.

Starting from the oldest artistic experiences, Homo sapiens used figurative means that we also find in classical, modern and contemporary art. One of these is anamorphosis. It consists of creating an image with certain shapes and dimensions on a wall (execution level), knowing that the viewer would perceive it slightly differently (viewing level). Anamorphosis is widespread in modern art and requires detailed planning. Another conceptual device is the synecdoche, which consists of depicting a part for something whole: for example, the vulva symbol as a motif for femininity, a horn or another anatomical detail for an animal.

In some images there are also indications of a very simple perspective. In painting and small-scale sculpture, the conceptual dissection of a theme and its recomposition show a close connection between Palaeolithic and modern and contemporary artistic thought processes. Thus, Homo sapiens from 45,000 to 40,000 years ago experienced a cognitive big bang that has been preserved and further developed over millennia up to the present day. In addition, palaeoneurological studies show that the regions of the modern human brain are similar or even identical to those of the Palaeolithic brain.

#### **“Grotta dell’Addaura” (Addaura Cave)**

The Addaura Caves consist of several smaller caves located near Palermo, Sicily. They were inhabited towards the end of the Upper Palaeolithic, around 10,000 years ago. Linear signs and figures were engraved into the walls. In one cave, researchers discovered a complex scene, presented in this exhibition through a replica.

The scene features a series of human figures engaged in different behaviours: the central group stands upright and surrounds two individuals lying on the ground. Some of the group have thick hair, while others wear masks with bird beaks; all appear to be dancing, as indicated by the positions of their legs and arms. The two lying figures, on the other hand, assume an unnatural posture, with their legs sharply bent. Their ankles are tied to their necks with what appears to be a rope, suggested by a clear, deeply incised line. The bent arms indicate that these people are attempting to hold onto the rope themselves.

Scholars generally interpret this as a depiction of an execution by strangulation, with the erect phallus of the two figures being a consequence of asphyxiation.

Other individuals, not included in this replica, are seen moving away from the group, while others seem to be joining in.

The portrayal of masked figures has led to the hypothesis that they played a shamanistic role, though more broadly they might be defined as individuals connected to magical or sacred practices. Shamanism in the Palaeolithic is a debated phenomenon, not universally accepted by all scholars.

This scene is one of the few complex depictions from the Palaeolithic, a period during which individual figures, pairs or small groups were usually preferred. The style is also distinctive: naturalistic but not true to reality, synthetic and clear in its depiction of the event.

Below the scene, a large fallow deer is shown lying with twisted legs, possibly dead. There is no obvious connection between this figure and the main scene. Additional animal figures, which are certainly unrelated to the main event, are engraved at various points along the rock wall.

This replica was provided by the Florentine Museum and Institute of Prehistory "Paolo Graziosi".

#### **"Grotte du Roc" (Roc-de-Sers Cave)**

Roc-de-Sers in Charente, in the southwest of France, is one of the most significant sites of prehistoric art: the bas-reliefs in the caves demonstrate great craftsmanship during the final phase of the Palaeolithic.

The frieze shown here—a replica—is part of the fragments discovered on rock walls between 1927 and 1951, into which animal figures were carved, both individually and in groups: horses, ibexes and, as in the case of this relief, a horse following a wild boar (though some researchers believe it to be a bison or a hybrid creature).

The frieze originates from the Solutrean cultural phase, which was widespread in Central Europe between about 17,000 and 19,000 years ago. It demonstrates highly advanced technical knowledge in stonework—not only in the production of flint tools but also in carving sculptures from rock walls using rudimentary chisels.

The frieze from Roc-de-Sers was created during the same period as the famous wall paintings of the Lascaux Cave, where painting was the preferred artistic form. At Lascaux, intricate animal figures were created using techniques still in use today, such as anamorphosis, resulting in highly effective polychromatic depictions.

The Solutrean was an era marked by artistic production of great aesthetic value, particularly due to the skilful realism and naturalism with which the volumes of bodies were painted, engraved, or, as in Roc-de-Sers, sculpted.

In the caves, artistic practice held a dual significance. In some cases, it accompanied everyday life: animal, human or abstract figures were present alongside practical activities. Other caves—and their depictions—served as "sanctuaries": spaces used for ceremonial, sacred and symbolic purposes. Roc-de-Sers is a site that documents the integration of the sacred and the profane, of daily life and a metahistorical symbolic space.

The original frieze fragments are housed in the National Archaeological Museum in Saint-Germain-en-Laye. This replica was specially created and provided for this exhibition by the Florentine Museum and Institute of Prehistory "Paolo Graziosi" in Florence.

#### **"Grotta del Romito" (Romito Cave)**

The *Grotta del Romito* (Cave of the Hermit) in Calabria, southern Italy, is one of the most significant Upper Palaeolithic sites in the Mediterranean region. Excavations there began in the 1960s under Paolo Graziosi (University of Florence). Since 2000, they have been at the centre of a research project coordinated by Fabio Martini, Director of the Florentine Museum and Institute of Prehistory "Paolo Graziosi".

Displayed here is a cast of an engraving from the Romito Cave, depicting an imposing, now extinct aurochs (*Bos primigenius*). Its profile was skilfully engraved into a large limestone block in the middle of a massive rock face in front of the cave.

The majestic figure, etched onto the rock surface, dates back approximately 14,000 to 12,000 years. It was created with a high degree of naturalism, respecting the anatomical proportions and paying attention to details (note the fur on its tail, the depiction of its gender and the mouth). The viewer instantly recognises the subject before them—motionless, frozen in a moment beyond time.

The engraving neither narrates nor describes the world, nor does it commemorate events: the motionless animal becomes a symbol. With what meaning? Prehistoric archaeology, which lacks written sources, offers no answers to such questions.

We cannot rule out the possibility that the aurochs had a totemic significance, as its features may have embodied the values of the group living there. It may not be a coincidence that some artefacts found during excavations consist of fragments of aurochs bones; horns from aurochs may have been offered as symbolic grave goods in burial rituals.

The engraving, with its deep lines, was created using a flint tool with a robust, pointed end, known as a "burin". Such tools are still used by goldsmiths and engravers today. The figure is clearly visible even from a distance: the size of the figure and its visibility have given the depiction an extremely important role.

The realistic style recalls the artistic tendencies of the time, evidence of which can be found in Central and Western Europe, particularly in France. This suggests that the artistic trends of that period were widespread across the continent, even reaching its southernmost regions. This cast was provided by the Florentine Museum and Institute of Prehistory "Paolo Graziosi".

Texts by Prof. Dr. Fabio Martini, Director of the Florentine Museum and Institute of Prehistory "Paolo Graziosi"

### **Toni R. Toivonen**

*Metascape (3), 2022*

Brass and original substance from a dead animal

32 x 38,5

Courtesy Private Collection, Finland

*Gutting a Rotten Horse Generated*

*The Most Horrific Migraine*

*With The Most Beautiful Aura*

*Upside Down Into a Landscape, 2024*

Brass and original substance from a dead animal

500 x 250 cm

Co-produced by Frankfurter Kunstverein

Courtesy Toni R. Toivonen and Galerie Forsblom

*The Rivers and Streams of a Dissolved Mind, 2024*

Brass and original substance from a dead animal

100 x 126 cm

Courtesy Toni R. Toivonen and Galerie Forsblom



*Mother, 2022*

Brass and original substance from a dead animal

300 x 200 cm

Courtesy Private Collection, Finland

*The Perfect Moment, 2022*

Brass and original substance from a dead animal

400 x 200 cm

Courtesy Nelimarkka Foundation

*Crucifixion, 2018*

Brass and original substance from a dead animal

300 x 400 cm

Courtesy Sara Hildén Art Museum

*21 Strangers (In My Head), 2024*

Brass and original substance from a dead animal

48 x 61 cm

Courtesy Toni R. Toivonen and Galerie Forsblom

*The Agony And The Ecstasy, 2024*

Brass and original substance from a dead animal

500 x 200 cm

Co-produced by Frankfurter Kunstverein

Courtesy Toni R. Toivonen and Galerie Forsblom

*Toni R. Toivonen: Miten kuolema kunnioittaa elämää? (Toni R. Toivonen: How Death Honors Life), 2023*

Film, 17 min

Directed by Meeri Koutaniemi

Season 2, Episode 5 of the TV series *Irti Kuvasta* with Meeri Koutaniemi

Produced by Gimmeyawallet Productions, Executive Producer: Elise Pietarila

Courtesy Gimmeyawallet Productions

Toni R. Toivonen is a seeker. He creates images that pose the overarching question of what life is and what remains when it fades away. He creates images that reveal the unspeakable, for which there is neither image nor word, in order to capture the moment of transition between being and non-being and to outlast transience through the sacrality of the image.

For his central motif, Toni R. Toivonen has chosen the animal, either alone or in groups. Since the origins of mankind, animals have been magically charged beings, guardians and mediators of the connection to the spiritual world. Already in prehistoric times, people painted and carved animal figures on cave walls, turning them into sacred places. The artists were shamans.

Toivonen is a painter, but he does not paint the animals. Toivonen has a deep knowledge of the history of art and painting. He has mastered the language and meanings of colour, form, material and symbolism. But after years of painting, he has abandoned the artistic gesture of depiction by

imitation. Allegory and symbols no longer meet his needs in his search for the existential. He allows reality to imprint its own image on the material.

The artist approaches the mystery of life with reverence. He creates the conditions to allow the cycle of life to take place. Everything is transformation. To see transience, not to avert one's gaze but to find comfort in the natural cycle, is the fragile level on which Toivonen moves. Melancholy and sadness, despite beauty— sacred experience.

Toni R. Toivonen seeks forms of comprehension for this fundamental human experience: transience as the most immeasurable of all absences. His works bear the imprints of the living and allow them to become objects of silent contemplation in sublime beauty. The absent forms of the departed animals are deeply inscribed in the imprint.

Toivonen lives and works far from the city, in the solitude of the Finnish forests. His artworks arise from a deep connection with animals. They are companions and beings for whom he feels respect and love. None of the animals lose their lives for art. Some of them, horses and dogs, died a natural death after spending their lives with Toivonen. Others were brought by foresters or by people whose wish it was to eternalise their animals in memory. The sacredness of the moment of transition—from life to death—is a mystery for the artist, which he endeavours to approach with his paintings.

The artist places the bodies of the dead creatures on brass surfaces. He arranges them carefully. It is the bodies that change the metal. It is the substance that surfaces, of which all living things are made. It corrodes and oxidises the metal. Like an alchemist, Toivonen has studied and tested the mutual reactions of bodies and metal. His art is created during weeks of waiting and observing, in which the cycle of nature takes its course and the cycle of becoming and fading is immortalised in the metal. What emerges are monumental images, figurative or abstract. They are signs of an incarnation, yet they visualise more than mere allusions.

The colour gold plays an essential role in Toivonen's works. From Ancient Egypt, the cults of the Incas, Byzantine mosaics and Christian painting from the Middle Ages to modern times, the beauty of gold symbolises the transcendent, the supernatural and the eternal. And so Toivonen's paintings are not created on canvases, but on golden yellow brass plates. Brass has the property of oxidising on contact with bodies; it absorbs all imprints as shapes in its surface.

Image and death and the question of transcendence have belonged together since archaic societies (see Hans Belting, *Bild-Anthropologie*, 2001). In all cultures and at all times, people have searched for forms and rituals to make it possible to experience a connection between the here and now and the hereafter of a spiritual order through images. Toivonen's works are imprints and symbolise the endurance of the ephemeral.

“You need shadows to understand the light. In a way, you have to recognise death in order to understand life”, says Toivonen.

**Toni R. Toivonen** (b. 1987, Helsinki, FI) lives and works in Hämeenkoski, Finland. He completed his Master of Fine Arts at the Academy of Fine Arts in Helsinki (FI) in 2016, following his Bachelor of Fine Arts from the Arts Academy of Turku University of Applied Sciences (FI) in 2012. Toivonen has

exhibited his work in several solo exhibitions in Finland and internationally, including in Stockholm (SE) and Vienna (AT). His works have also been featured in numerous group exhibitions, including the Ateneum Art Museum, Helsinki (FI), the Rovaniemi Art Museum, Rovaniemi (FI), and the Haus am Lützowplatz, Berlin (DE). His works are part of major public collections, such as the KIASMA Museum of Contemporary Art, Helsinki (FI), the Sara Hildén Art Museum, Tampere (FI), the Museum of Contemporary Art Kraków MOCAR, Kraków (PL), the Nelimarkka Museum, Alajärvi (FI), the Saastamoinen Foundation, Helsinki (FI), and the Wihuri Foundation, Helsinki (FI). Toivonen has received multiple awards for his art, which has been documented in the films *HEAVY* (Theo Bat Schandorff, 2018) and *Irti Kuvasta* (Meeri Koutaniemi, YLE, 2023).

## **Casts of human victims of the 79 AD volcanic eruption in Pompeii from the Collection of the Archaeological Park of Pompeii**

Adulto (Uomo) c.d. seduto (Adult man sitting), 2000

Resin

60 x 50 x 90 cm

Adulto, maschio (Adult man), 2000

Resin

140 x 80 x 35 cm

Courtesy Italian Ministry of Culture/Archeological Park of Pompeii

The Archaeological Park of Pompeii has provided two of the most touching casts of human victims of the eruption of the Vesuvius from its collection for the exhibition *The Presence of Absence*.

In 79 AD, Vesuvius erupted in the Gulf of Naples. Ash, pumice and lapilli (small lava stones) rained down on houses, people and other living creatures in the city of Pompeii for days. The earth had already trembled 17 years earlier and shaken the region, an omen of the impending catastrophe. Noble families sold their sumptuous but damaged houses to newly rich merchant families and moved away. Nobody suspected the approaching deadly danger. But the force of the volcanic eruption spared no one, neither the rich nor the slaves. The unexpected catastrophe wiped out local life with a destructive force comparable to that of the volcano eruption in Laetoli, in present-day Tanzania, 3.5 million years ago or the earthquake on Sicily in 1968. A zero hour.

What had once been a vibrant trading city of ancient Roman times froze in time. A ten-metre thick layer of ash and volcanic rock covered the city like a burial shroud. Nature reclaimed the landscape. Over time, a grey desert transformed into fertile land and pastures. People knew of the events from the letters of Pliny the Younger, an eyewitness. Yet, for over a millennium, Pompeii faded into oblivion. It was only in the 18th century, during a period of renewed archaeological interest, that Pompeii was rediscovered.

During excavations in 1863, Giuseppe Fiorelli, the head of Pompeii's city administration, discovered mysterious voids in the sediment. These voids contained human bones. The archaeologist's intuition led him to try a technique known from sculpture and metal casting. He poured liquid plaster into the underground cavities. The plaster took on the form of human bodies. Fiorelli made 100 casts of a

total of 650 hollow spaces—the traces of ancient victims of the catastrophe, whose bodies had almost completely vaporised in the heat. The forms were uncovered and can still be seen today in the collection of the Archaeological Park of Pompeii.

*“It is impossible to look upon these three deformed figures and not be inwardly moved... They have been dead for eighteen centuries, but they are human beings whom you can see in the agony of their death. This is no art, no imitation, but their bones, the remains of their flesh and their clothes mixed with plaster: it is the pain of death that has regained body and form... Until now, temples, houses and other objects have been discovered that spark the curiosity of scholars, artists and archaeologists; but now you, my Fiorelli, have discovered human suffering, and everyone who is human can feel it”.*

From: Luigi Settembrini, *Lettera ai pompeiani* (Letter to the Pompeians), 1863

*“The purpose of reconstructing this world is to extend and perhaps even relativise our own world; another world is possible—change is possible. Things have changed, sometimes radically, and they will continue to do so in the future. [...] What was and what will be is beyond anyone’s control, but the blend of remembering and forgetting with which we view our history is in our hands”.*

From: Gabriel Zuchtriegel, *Vom Zauber des Untergangs. Was Pompeji über uns erzählt* (On the Magic of Destruction: What Pompeii Tells Us About Ourselves), 2023

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