

Here and Not: the Project for an Incompiuto Eden

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## HERE AND NOT: THE PROJECT FOR AN *INCOMPIUTO* EDEN

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di J. Igor Fardin

### *Abstract*

*This article proposes to read Italian Incompletion or Incompiuto (i.e. the complex spatial, political, economical and societal phenomenon that left hundreds of unfinished spaces in Italy), through the theologial categories of Kingdom and Garden as they have been elaborated by Giorgio Agamben. Through this perspective, spaces of Incompletion will emerge as fallen spaces that can be put to work within an economy of salvation that, with Eric Santner, can be defined as mana-ical. Against this background – and following Agamben’s insights into the possibility of a different figure of the Garden – the article understands the artist collective Alterazioni Video’s engagement with Incompiuto as an attempt to break with this economy through a specific Eden project, one for which Eden is here and not.*

### *Introduction*

The figure of Eden – irremediably linked to questions concerning human nature – commonly points at two different and interrelated dimensions. On the one hand it is used to signify an original past that we have lost and on the other it points at a happiness to come, achievable through a politics and a project. The Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben theorized this ambiguity as a split between the theological categories of Garden (i.e. lost original past) and Kingdom (i.e. horizon of salvation to come) in order to show how they are put to work by an economy of salvation that, through the apparatus of original sin, renders unthinkable happiness in this life by pushing the human origin in an unreachable past and salvation in an unreachable future. In this movement human nature appears as fallen, with no possibility of redemption in this life, an impossibility that is constantly put to work. In order to clarify what this means I will turn to the recent work of Eric Santner around the notion of *mana* and what he called *manatheism*, an apparatus that keeps us busy repaying an unpayable debt. It is against this apparatus, that Agamben, drawing on John Scotus Eriugena and Dante Alighieri, proposes the possibility of a different Eden, one in which the Garden and the Kingdom fall together in the here and now.

Drawing on these insights, I will read Italian Incompletion or *Incompiuto* as a spatial articulation of the economy of salvation drawn by Agamben, one in which incompleteness is put to work as a debt that can never be repaid but can be managed and exploited. Within this framework, I will then propose to understand Alterazioni Video’s engagement with *Incompiuto* as an Eden project working at freeing incompleteness from this economy, a project for which Eden is here and now. More specifically, focusing on their project for an Archaeological Park of the Sicilian Incompletion in Giarre, I will consider the possibility of an Eden that is not only here and now, but also incomplete and not-all – one that is here and not. Understanding Alterazioni Video’s project as a movement from incomplete to *Incompiuto* – one that frees spaces of incompleteness from the specter of completion without reducing their potential to a present actuality – I will read their project as a sabbatical cessation of the specific work aimed at repaying the

unpayable debt/guilt that traps spaces of incompleteness in an economy of salvation – a cessation of work that allows *Incompiuto* to emerge as an Eden in the here and not.

### *Natural Guilt and the Economy of Salvation*

The split and articulation between Kingdom, defined by Agamben as «the central paradigm of the history of humanity»<sup>1</sup>, and Garden, understood as a figure of an original condition we have lost, is at the center of the philosopher's book *The Kingdom and the Garden*. For Agamben these two categories are «so frequently and so intimately intertwined that it is likely that precisely a study of their intersections and their divergences would wind up reshaping to a significant extent the cartography of Western power»<sup>2</sup>. Agamben pays particular attention to the category of the Garden that, as early as in Ambrose, clearly appears as an allegory of human nature<sup>3</sup>. Given this specificity, Agamben doubles the dichotomy Garden/Kingdom at the center of his work with the one between fallen nature (i.e. the human condition after the fall from the Garden) and divine grace, a split that makes human nature insufficient to achieve happiness in this life.

The philosopher addresses these dichotomies in order to expose the apparatus that articulates them and to suspend it. In this case, «the most implacable of these apparatuses is certainly the doctrine of original sin»<sup>4</sup>. Agamben argues that Augustine's doctrine – postulating an original sin committed once by Adam *qua* first human and transmitted to humanity – transforms a «personal sin into a natural guilt»<sup>5</sup>. As Agamben's genealogical inquiry shows, Augustine's doctrine is at odds with a theological tradition for which Adam's sin does not corrupt human nature once and for all but is constantly repeated due to our mortal condition.

Indeed, through readings of theologians like Origen and Theodoret of Cyrus, Agamben exposes a conception of original sin that is original only in the sense that it is «as if every person were each time driven from paradise»<sup>6</sup> and «every person sins anew because of his mortal condition»<sup>7</sup>. Following Agamben's reading, it is only in Augustine and, later, Anselm, that this constantly repeated original sin is transformed into a natural guilt. In Augustine, as Agamben points out, «ecclesial reasons overlap so closely with theological ones that the latter become indistinguishable from the former»<sup>8</sup>. What is at stake is a conception of human nature that turns the human into a «living being that can corrupt his [sic.] nature, but not heal it, thus consigning himself [sic.] to a history and to an economy of salvation, in which the divine grace dispensed by the Church through its sacraments becomes essential»<sup>9</sup>. Augustine's original sin appears here as central to a paradigm articulating an original nature (Garden) that we have lost in our fallen condition with a Kingdom to come for which the divine grace dispensed by the Church becomes essential. In other words, for Agamben, starting from Augustine, the institution

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<sup>1</sup> G. Agamben, *The Kingdom and the Garden*, Seagull Books, New York-Calcutta 2020, p. 50. (*Il Regno e il Giardino*, Neri Pozza, Vicenza 2019, p. 46).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 3-4. (p. 11).

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12. (p. 17).

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16. (p. 21).

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 39. (p. 38).

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 22. (p. 25).

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23. (p. 26).

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 28. (p. 29).

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 31. (p. 32).

of the Church becomes necessary to the horizon of salvation that is the Kingdom, so much so that the latter starts to coincide with the former<sup>10</sup>. The Kingdom ceases being a rupture in history, a coming event, and becomes assimilated to the vicissitudes of the Church<sup>11</sup>. In this perspective the fulfillment proper to the Kingdom is constantly deferred<sup>12</sup>, and the Church, with its economy of salvation, becomes an end in itself. It is evident that this economy cannot actually save our fallen nature – since fulfillment is constantly deferred – but only manage it through the distribution of divine grace<sup>13</sup>. In this transformation, the possibility to maintain a relation with the original dimension of the Garden – proposed by Pelagius – is forever lost, and human nature appears «irrevocably corrupted by Adam's sin»<sup>14</sup>. This, Agamben argues, is not achieved by taking something away from human nature, but by adding something to it – grace. It is only by adding a grace that is lost due to original sin *qua* natural guilt that human nature «becomes insufficient for man [sic.]»<sup>15</sup>.

### *The works of Mana*

A similar mechanism is also at work in what Eric Santner, punning on the concept of *mana* has called «*manatheism*»<sup>16</sup>. The term *mana*, as Santner points out, was introduced to Europe by the missionary and ethnologist Robert Cordington in order to name the universal and supernatural force that he saw at work in the «malesian mind» and was then taken up, among others, by Marcel Mauss in his study of magic, and, in a critique of Mauss' work, by Claude Lévy-Strauss<sup>17</sup>. It is from this critique, in which Lévy-Strauss operates a profanation of the term *mana*<sup>18</sup>, that Santner draws his own understanding of the term. In Lévy-Strauss' reading, *mana* became a linguistic phenomenon, or as Santner puts it, the «name for a structural feature of all human languages that comes to be hypostasized, treated as a substantial reality»<sup>19</sup>. For Lévy-Strauss, there is in fact a surplus in the relation between the signifier and the signified and «in man's [sic.] effort to understand the world, he [sic.] always disposes of a surplus of signification»<sup>20</sup>. What Lévy-Strauss calls «notions of the *mana* type» serve precisely to name this «signifier-surfeit» and create unity within this non-equivalence between signifiers and signified<sup>21</sup>. In other words, as Santner observes «[n]otions like *mana* function as a kind of general

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<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 144. (p. 29).

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 146. (p. 114).

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 148. (p. 117).

<sup>13</sup> On this topic Cfr., E. Stimilli, *The Debt of the Living. Ascesis and Capitalism*, Suny Press, New York 2017. (*Il Debito del Vivente. Ascesi e Capitalismo*. Quodlibet, Macerata 2011).

<sup>14</sup> G. Agamben, *The Kingdom and the Garden*, cit., p. 50. (*Il Regno e il Giardino*, cit. p. 46).

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 125. (p. 100). Italics in original.

<sup>16</sup> E. Santner, *Untying Things Together: Philosophy, literature and a Life in theory*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 2022, p. 149. Italics in original.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 137.

<sup>18</sup> After proposing to reformulate Mauss' notion of *mana* in light of the discoveries of anthropological and linguistic research that followed the publication of his book, Lévy-Strauss writes «What would be left of the notion of *mana* after such a reformulation? It is hard to say; in any event, it would emerge *profaned*». Cfr., C. Lévy-Strauss, *Introduction to the Work of Marcel Mauss*, Routledge and Keegan Paul, London 1987, pp. 52-53. («Introduction à l'œuvre de Marcel Mauss» in *Sociologie et Anthropologie* by M. Mauss, PUF, Paris 1950, p. XLII). Italics in original.

<sup>19</sup> E. Santner, *Untying Things Together*, cit. pp. 137-138.

<sup>20</sup> C. Lévy-Strauss, *Introduction to the Work of Marcel Mauss*, cit., p. 62. («Introduction à l'œuvre de Marcel Mauss», cit. p. XLIX), Italics in original.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

equivalent for this surplus»; one that is also linked to a specific understanding of anthropogenesis in which *mana* describes what «bind[s] and relay[s]» the surplus scarcity proper to humans *qua* speaking beings<sup>22</sup>. Indeed, following Santner's reading of Levy-Strauss account of anthropogenesis, «we come into the world endowed with a distinctive sort of inadequacy, *with* something forever *withdrawn* from our comprehension yet insisting – encysting – in our lives as speaking beings»<sup>23</sup>.

In other words, in entering language *qua* symbolic system we are endowed *with* something that is *withdrawn*. For Santner, *mana* serves precisely to name and bind this surplus scarcity proper to human beings and while it allows this surplus scarcity to circulate, as a general equivalent, it also turns this surplus scarcity – this gap between signifiers and signified – into a gap to fill. It turns the human condition into an unpayable debt, the repayment of which keeps us «*mana-ically* busy»<sup>24</sup>.

We can see here the analogies between Augustine apparatus of original sin – as described by Agamben – and the *manaical* role that grace plays in turning a «personal sin into a natural guilt»<sup>25</sup>. Grace, in Agamben's critique of Augustine, names something that is added and at the same time withdrawn and that binds the created surplus scarcity to an economy of salvation in which beatitude becomes impossible in this life, much like *mana*, in Santner's reading, names what is capable of putting to work the surplus scarcity proper to the human condition in order to repay an impossible debt.

### *Eden is Here and Now*

In order to suspend this apparatus Agamben proposes a different figure of Eden and human nature – one that is not irremediably lost due to the original sin, but rather appears in the here and now. At stake is not a negation of grace in favor of human nature, but rather an attempt to suspend the mechanism that articulates grace as what binds the fallen nature of the human condition to an economy of salvation. In order to do so, Agamben draws on John Scotus Eriugena's peculiar account of creation. For the Irish theologian, Agamben argues, creation is split in two separated moments: «The body that was created in the first creation was spiritual and immortal [...]; the corruptible and mortal body was added to the first in a second creation as a consequence of sin»<sup>26</sup>. Yet, and here is a crucial point for Agamben, these two separated events are simultaneous since in Eriugena the temporal categories of before and after cannot apply to God.<sup>27</sup> This account of creation, following Agamben, short-circuits Augustine's doctrine because it entails that the consequences of sin were already present before the act as part of «a single human nature that, even in its animality, is entirely in the image of God»<sup>28</sup>. It follows that salvation and grace are not to come but are already present in the origin, and that Adam's act did not lead to natural guilt. If the consequences of sin were already present in creation, then Adam's sin did not change human nature. This allows for what Agamben defines as Eriugena's «unheard-of thesis» following which human beings «actually never dwelled in paradise»<sup>29</sup>. Following the allegorical connection between the

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<sup>22</sup> E. Santner, *Untying Things Together*, cit., p. 143.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.* Italics in original.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 155.

<sup>25</sup> G. Agamben, *The Kingdom and the Garden*, cit., p. 39. (*Il Regno e il Giardino*, cit., p. 38).

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 63. (p. 56).

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 64. (p. 57).

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 65. (p. 57).

Garden and human nature – also at work in Eriugena – Agamben observes, «this means that sin happened outside human nature, that human nature was never contaminated by it»<sup>30</sup>. Conversely «[t]here is not a sin that could corrupt human nature, because man [sic.] is always already *descendens*, in exit from it»<sup>31</sup>. In other words, the very fact that human beings are always in exit from their nature – from the Garden – also entails that the Garden *qua* «life in all its forms»<sup>32</sup> was never lost and is potential in the here and now, in our fallen world.

In this regard, Agamben's understanding of the fall, could be put in a fruitful dialogue with the work of Franz Kafka that, while absent in the *Kingdom and the Garden*, was once described by Agamben as «the greatest theologian of the twentieth century»<sup>33</sup>. In parable entitled *Das Paradies* [Paradise] Kafka writes:

Expulsion from Paradise is in its main aspect eternal: that is to say, although expulsion from Paradise is final, and life in the world unavoidable, the eternity of the process or, expressed in temporal terms, the eternal repetition of the process nevertheless makes it possible not only that we might remain in Paradise permanently, but that we may in fact be there permanently, no matter whether we know it here or not<sup>34</sup>.

In this enigmatic passage, Kafka, without conflating our world with Eden since «life in the world [is] unavoidable», suggests that Paradise is neither to come nor forever lost; quite the contrary, «we may in fact be there permanently, no matter whether we know it here or not». Kafka grounds this possibility on the peculiar temporality of the fall, one that is eternal in the sense that it is an «eternal repetition». It follows that the fall is constantly happening, constantly repeated, which, paradoxically, also makes Paradise constantly possible<sup>35</sup>. This notion of the fall, with the specific temporality it takes in Kafka's writings, I believe points at the same paradoxical dimension exposed by Agamben in his reading of Eriugena; our being always already *descendens* from Eden is actually what makes Eden potential here and now.

### *Matelda's Garden*

From the reading of Eriugena, Agamben's argument then moves to a reading of the *Canti* XVIII-XXXI of Dante's *Purgatorio* in the *Divine Comedy*, the ones concerned with Eden. At the center of Agamben's reading is the idea that Dante's Garden, with its peculiarities, is a figure of the beatitude proper to *this* life, one that is both individual *and* political. The

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<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 66. (p. 58).

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 69. (p. 60).

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 73. (p. 63).

<sup>33</sup> G. Agamben, «Angels», *Angelaki*, [Vol. 16], no. 3, (September) 2011, p. 118. («Introduzione», in *Angeli: Ebraismo Cristianesimo Islam*, edited by G. Agamben and E. Coccia, Neri Pozza, Vicenza 2009, p. 12). On the figure of Kafka within Agamben's writing Cfr., e.g. C. Salzani. «In a Messianic Gesture: Agamben's Kafka», in *Philosophy and Kafka* edited by B. Moran and C. Salzani, Lexington Books, Plymouth 2013, pp. 261-282.

<sup>34</sup> F. Kafka, «Paradise», in *Parables and Paradoxes. Bilingual Edition* edited by N. N. Glatzer, Schocken Books, New York 1976, p. 29.

<sup>35</sup> In her article «Kafka's Paradise», the American writer Yoyce Carol Oates also understands Kafka's Paradise as constantly present within our profane world, and, building a parallel between Kafka's writings and Oriental mysticism, suggests the possibility of envisioning paradise through an obliteration of the ego. See, J. C. Oates, «Kafka's Paradise», *The Hudson Review*, [Vol. 26], no. 4, (Winter) 1973, pp. 623-646.

first of the peculiarities pointed out by Agamben is that Matelda, «donna innamorata»<sup>36</sup>, inhabits Dante's Eden. It follows that the Garden, in Dante, was not left empty after the fall – it is inhabited by a woman in love. This leads Agamben to observe that the beatitude of this life is «essentially an act of love»<sup>37</sup>. While I cannot dive into Agamben's specific understanding of love here, following Bartolini's reading<sup>38</sup>, I would like to point out that this love remains open to potentialities. To love is to be an «ever open place» in which what is at stake is not the realization of a narcissistic unity that would foreclose potentialities but rather the possibility of an intimacy with a stranger that «keep[s] him strange»<sup>39</sup>. Another peculiarity of Dante's Eden remarked by Agamben is that it is immanent to our world. This is a point that Agamben stresses by comparing the «selva antica» of Eden with the frightening «selva oscura» in which the journey of Dante's *Comedy* begins. After showing the striking correspondences between the two, he notes: «It is as if Dante wants to suggest to us that the two woods are in reality one sole forest, one time as a place of bitterness and death (*tant'è amara che poco è più morte*) and another as a place of sweetness and life (*l'aura dolce; spessa e viva*)»<sup>40</sup>. This peculiarity of Dante's earthly paradise is also immediately perceivable in comparing Gustave Doré's illustrations of the first three verses of the *Divine Comedy*, with the one of the verses 22-25 of Purgatory's 28th chant.



Figure 1. Left, Gustave Doré, *Inferno c. I, vv. 1-3*, 1868, ink on paper. Source gallica.bnf.fr / BnF.  
Figure 2. Right, Gustave Doré, *Purgatorio c. XXVIII, vv. 22-24*, 1868, ink on paper. Source gallica.bnf.fr / BnF.

While depicting two distinct spaces and moments of Dante's voyage, Doré's «selva oscura» and «selva antica» could very well be in «one sole forest». Yet this forest emerges first as a place of «bitterness and death» and then as a figure of «sweetness and life», a

<sup>36</sup> Dante A., *Divina Commedia* edited by C. Ossola, Marsilio, Venezia 2021, p. 640.

<sup>37</sup> G. Agamben, *The Kingdom and the Garden*, cit., p. 84. (*Il Regno e il Giardino*, cit., p. 71).

<sup>38</sup> Bartolini P., «Love», in Murray A. and Jessica W., *The Agamben Dictionary*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh 2011, pp. 128-129.

<sup>39</sup> G. Agamben, *The Idea of Prose*, State University of New York Press, New York 1995, p. 61. (*Idea della Prosa*, Feltrinelli, Milano 1985, p. 40).

<sup>40</sup> G. Agamben, *The Kingdom and the Garden*, cit., p. 82. (*Il Regno e il Giardino*, cit., p. 69).

difference clearly perceivable in comparing Doré's dark forest with the more lighted «selva antica». Following Flavio Cuniberto, we could say that Dante's earthly paradise is «latente-immanente» [latent-immanent] to our everyday world<sup>41</sup>. In other words, Eden – as both Kingdom and Garden – is immanent to our world, it is here and now, and at the same time it is latent in it, not immediately given.

This relates to the third crucial peculiarity of Matelda's Garden pointed out by both Cuniberto and Agamben – its temporal dimension<sup>42</sup>. Dante is entering the Garden in the present and at the same time this Garden *is* the original Eden of Adam and Eve. As Agamben paradoxically puts it, Matelda's garden «is and is not the same 'ancient wood' from which the progenitors were driven out»<sup>43</sup>. This garden undeniably changed from the one of *Genesis*<sup>44</sup>, and yet the human being «who was innocent in Adam's paradise, is still happy in Matelda's garden»<sup>45</sup>; Dante's Eden points at the possibility of relating to an origin in the present.

Matelda's Garden is therefore accessible here and now; it is neither the pre-historical Garden, even though it remains in relation to an origin, nor the post-historical Kingdom, even though it is «something that is in some way now happening or to come»<sup>46</sup>. For Agamben, Dante's Earthly Paradies is a figure that makes graspable the fact that «the Garden and the Kingdom result from the split of one sole experience of the present»<sup>47</sup>; they are two polar opposites of an immanent field of tension and «in the present they can therefore be rejoined»<sup>48</sup>. This also means that the origin of human nature – the Garden – can be accessed in the present. Indeed, «Dante – who represents humanity – can enter it without any impediment»<sup>49</sup>. It follows that «human nature is not a pre-existent and imperfect reality, which must be inscribed through grace into an economy of salvation, but it is what always appears here and now in the coincidence – that is, in the falling together – of Garden and Kingdom»<sup>50</sup>.

Yet, this does not mean that Eden lies in a hedonic enjoyment of the actual, Dante's garden is not only immanent it is also latent. Agamben makes clear that «[o]nly the Kingdom gives access to the Garden» meaning that «we grasp human nature historically only through a politics»; and yet at the same time «only the Garden renders the Kingdom thinkable», meaning that a politics, «has no content other than paradise – which is to say, in Dante's words, 'the beatitude of this life'»<sup>51</sup>. I believe that an Eden project in keeping with this formulation would be one operating what Agamben has elsewhere named a «movement on the spot»<sup>52</sup>, a «messianic shift that *integrally* changes the world, leaving it,

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<sup>41</sup> F. Cuniberto, *Paesaggi del Regno*, Neri Pozza, Vicenza 2017, p. 146.

<sup>42</sup> Cfr., *Ibid.*, p. 145; G. Agamben, *The Kingdom and the Garden*, cit., p. 91. (*Il Regno e il Giardino*, cit., p. 76).

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 91. (p. 76).

<sup>44</sup> As Agamben points out, besides the fact that it is inhabited by Matelda, the Garden also has a different geographical configuration than the one of *Genesis*. Cfr., *Ibid.*, pp. 89-90. (p. 75).

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 91. (p. 76).

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 96. (p. 79).

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 152. (p. 120).

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 90. (p. 75).

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 152. (p. 120).

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>52</sup> Smith J., «I am sure that you are more pessimistic than I am...»: An interview with Giorgio Agamben», in *Rethinking Marxism*, [Vol. 2], no. 16 (April) 2004, p. 121.

at the same time, *almost intact*»<sup>53</sup>. In order to clarify what that could mean I will investigate Alterazioni Video's engagement with *Incompiuto*, but in order to do so, we first have to hone into the economy of Italian Incompletion.

### *The Economy of Incompiuto*

With the term *Incompiuto* I refer here to all those buildings scattered across Italy that never reached full completion and never fully served the original purpose for which they were thought and designed<sup>54</sup>. While the phenomenon of incompletion is not exclusive to Italy<sup>55</sup>, its importance and specificities within the Italian territory still justify the use of this Italian term<sup>56</sup>. The importance of incompletion in Italy is particularly striking when focusing on the number of public incomplete buildings – 372 in 2022, 138 of which in Sicily<sup>57</sup>. While this number has decreased steadily in the last years, it is still telling, especially considering that there is no penalization for administrations that do not transmit their information on the topic<sup>58</sup>. In what follows I will focus specifically on public incompletion – the phenomenon addressed by Alterazioni Video's project – even though *Incompiuto* is also a private phenomenon. *Incompiuto*'s peculiarities have to be linked to Italy's path to modernization in which, after the Second World War, public construction was not only necessary but also a way to stimulate the economic sector<sup>59</sup>, making possible the construction of infrastructures and buildings as ends in themselves, de-linked from uses and completion. Within this framework, excessive bureaucratization, mafia networks, political corruption, lack of rigorous planning, the necessity of creating jobs and the subsequent immediate political gains as well as, more largely, societal acceptance, all contributed to weave the web of *Incompiuto*<sup>60</sup>.

I believe that the economy of salvation traced in the previous section offers a novel perspective for reading the mechanisms at work within *Incompiuto* as well as the potential proper to Alterazioni Video's Eden project. This does not mean that the roots of *Incompiuto* could historically be traced back to Christian theology and its notion of economy of salvation or, more largely, of *oikonomia*<sup>61</sup>; rather it suggests that the notion of

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<sup>53</sup> G. Agamben, *Means without End. Notes on Politics*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis-London 2000, p. 79. (*Mezzi Senza Fine. Note sulla Politica*, Bollati Boringhieri, Torino 1996, p. 65). Italics in original.

<sup>54</sup> See, A. Giancotti, *Incompiute, o dei ruderi della contemporaneità*, Quodlibet, Macerata 2018, p. 19.

<sup>55</sup> See, P. Arboleda, «Reimagining unfinished architectures», in *Cultural Geographies*, [Vol. 26], no. 2, (April) 2019, pp. 227-244.

<sup>56</sup> On the Italian specificities of incompletion see, P. Arboleda, «Ruins of Modernity: The Critical Implications of Unfinished Public Works in Italy», in *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, [Vol. 41], no. 5 (September) 2017, p. 815.

<sup>57</sup> Ministero delle infrastrutture e dei trasporti, «Pubblicato l'elenco 2022 dell'Anagrafe delle opera pubbliche incompiute». <https://www.mit.gov.it/comunicazione/news/pubblicato-aggiornamento-2022-anagrafe-opere-pubbliche-incompiute> (accessed 28/07/2023).

<sup>58</sup> Giancotti, *Incompiute*, cit., p. 21.

<sup>59</sup> See, P. Arboleda, «Ruins of Modernity», cit., pp. 804-820.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>61</sup> Oikonomia, as Stimilli observed, names both the economy of salvation and the intra-divine economy through which God manifests itself in the Trinity. Cfr., E. Stimilli, *Debt and Guilt*, Bloomsbury Academic, London-New York 2019, p. 69. (*Debito e Colpa*, Futura, Roma 2015, p. 86).

*oikonomia*, understood as the government of humans and their environment<sup>62</sup>, could help us understand dynamics proper to contemporary capitalism<sup>63</sup>. Indeed, as Stimilli's research has shown, there is a link «between the current complex economic-institutional system and the Christian religious experience as a practice of regulatory experimentation», to the point where «[c]hristianity has been identified as the origin of *an economic mode of power*»<sup>64</sup>.

It is from this perspective – which is not a historical one – that I propose to consider the phenomenon of *Incompiuto* and its economy, as well as Alterazioni Video's project, through the lens put forward in the previous sections. What I suggest is a possible reading of *Incompiuto* as the product of an economy of salvation promising to redeem the fallen nature of Italian territories through the divine grace of public buildings dispensed by the Church *qua* public and private institutions, a process in which construction becomes an end in itself and where the Kingdom (i.e. the happiness to come promised by progress and public works) ends up coinciding with the Church (i.e. the institutions charged with dispensing the divine grace of public works). A clear example of this flattening of the Kingdom onto the Church is Giarre's incomplete polo stadium – a building of astonishing dimensions and a central element of Alterazioni Video's archeological park. Given that, as José Sorbello, then trainer of Giarre's football team, put it in Benoit Felici's movie «if you ask a Sicilian what they think polo is, the majority will say 'it's a kind of shirt'»<sup>65</sup>; it becomes evident that here completion and the happiness the stadium might bring ended up coinciding with the jobs and possible political gains that the construction site itself could offer<sup>66</sup>. Yet, paradoxically, these political gains and immediate jobs were only possible if the horizon of completion was maintained.

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<sup>62</sup> This is the meaning that the term *oikonomia* took in Agamben's study. Cfr., e. g., *The Kingdom and the Glory: For a Theological Genealogy of Economy and Government*, Stanford University Press, Stanford 2011. (*Il Regno e la Gloria: Per una genealogia teologica dell'economia e del governo*, Neri Pozza, Vicenza 2007).

<sup>63</sup> Cfr., E. Stimilli, *Debt and Guilt*, cit., pp. 89-124. (*Debito e Colpa*, cit., pp. 107-148).

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 124. (p. 147).

<sup>65</sup> B. Felici, *Unfinished Italy*, Zeligfilm, Bolzano 2011, 6:46-7:03.

<sup>66</sup> P. Arboleda, «Ruins of Modernity», cit., p. 814.



Figure 3. *Giarre's Polo Stadium*. Source Incompiuto Siciliano. Creative Commons license.

This spectral horizon also haunts the critiques rightfully addressing the systematic failures that allowed *Incompiuto* to thrive<sup>67</sup>. While important, these critiques still portray spaces of incompleteness as a «selva oscura» – as spatial marks of a fallen condition that can only be redeemed through future completion – risking to perpetuate the «mana-ical» mechanisms proper to the economy of *Incompiuto* described above. While I am in no way suggesting that buildings should not find completion if they can, I argue that the complexities of *Incompiuto* cannot be ignored. We have to seriously address the fact that at times neither demolition nor completion are viable options<sup>68</sup>, and address the specter of completion that still haunts spaces like Giarre's polo stadium, where one might question if completion is not only possible but even advisable.

### *Alterazioni Video's Eden Project*

Alterazioni Video's engagement with *Incompiuto* can be read as an Eden project precisely insofar as it works at freeing spaces like Giarre's stadium from this specter of future completion. Through workshops<sup>69</sup>, installations and movies<sup>70</sup>, a book and manifesto<sup>71</sup>, as well as the project for an Archaeological Park of *Incompiuto* in Giarre (realized in collaboration with Enrico Sgarbi and Claudia D'Aita), their work performs a movement on the spot that allows us to grasp the «selva antica» that is latent-immanent to the «selva oscura» in which we are lost. By operating a symbolic shift proposing to consider

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<sup>67</sup> Cfr., e.g., M. Torrisi and G. Schinaia, *Lavori in Corso: perché in Italia si inizia ma non si finisce mai niente*, Newton Compton, Roma 2010.

<sup>68</sup> Cfr., Giacotti, *Incompiute*, cit., p. 10.; P. Arboleda, «Ruins of Modernity», cit., p. 814.

<sup>69</sup> P. Arboleda, «Reimagining unfinished architectures», cit., pp. 227-244.

<sup>70</sup> P. Arboleda, «Beyond the Aestheticization of Modern Ruins: The Case of Incompiuto Siciliano», in *Journal of Contemporary Archaeology*, [Vol. 3], no. 1 (August) 2016, pp. 21-44.

<sup>71</sup> Alterazioni Video and Fosbury Architecture. *Incompiuto: La Nascita di uno Stile/The birth of a style*. Humboldt Books, Milano 2018.

incomplete spaces as archeological monuments<sup>72</sup>, the collective works at freeing these spaces from the economy of salvation that manages them. Alterazioni Video's provocative wager is that *Incompiuto*'s fulfillment is not linked to a completion to come; rather it is in the fulfillment of incompleteness itself, it is here and *not*. In other words, *Incompiuto*'s grace is not to come but already present in its incomplete nature. While this perspective risks falling into the apparatus of aesthetics and its mechanisms<sup>73</sup>, a risk of which Alterazioni Video is acutely aware of<sup>74</sup>, I believe, in line with Arboleda<sup>75</sup>, that its work's potential cannot be reduced to aestheticization. In order to better expose this potential, I will now focus on the project for Giarre's archeological park of *Incompiuto*.

This project started in 2007 when, in collaboration with the photographer Gabriele Basilico, Alterazioni Video realized a photographic survey of the possible monuments of incompleteness that would compose the park<sup>76</sup>. Since then, the project has been ongoing and changing in its concrete articulations. I argue that the park's project, because of its nature, is not itself incomplete and waiting for an official opening, but rather already there. As a member of Alterazioni Video put it in an interview, the park is «real because it's there»<sup>77</sup>. It is latent-immanent to our world and we can enter it here and now, thanks to the symbolic movement on the spot operated by Alterazioni Video<sup>78</sup>. It is in fact only through Alterazioni Video's movement on the spot that the «post-historical» Kingdom usually reserved to completion and the «pre-historical» Garden usually reserved to an uncontaminated nature fall together in *Incompiuto*, in the here and now. Yet, paradoxically, while *Incompiuto* is fulfilled in this movement, it is not completed and rendered whole. As the collective's member Matteo Erenbourg puts it, spaces of *Incompiuto* are «potential monuments; architectures always open to new ways of interaction»<sup>79</sup>, a point confirmed by the collective's interest in proposing ways of using *Incompiuto* without attributing a *proper* use to it<sup>80</sup>. To put it differently, Alterazioni Video's Eden project proposes the possibility of relating to – I might dare to say loving – *Incompiuto* in a way that keeps it strange, inappropriable, open to potentialities. It keeps *Incompiuto* here and *not*. What is crucial here, is not so much *Incompiuto*'s potential to be something else but rather the possibility of maintaining its potential-not-to<sup>81</sup>; its potential-not-to be a ruin, a football field or a monument.

This dimension also allows for a specific reading of the notion of archeology at work in Giarre's archeological park. While the construction of Giarre's incomplete buildings dates to the second half of the twentieth century, Alterazioni Video's project of an

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<sup>72</sup> Cfr., P. Arboleda, «The paradox of 'Incompiuto Siciliano Archaeological Park' or how to mock heritage to make heritage», in *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, [Vol. 23], no. 4 (January) 2017, pp. 299-316.

<sup>73</sup> Cfr., G. Agamben, *Creation and Anarchy: The Work of Art and the Religion of Capitalism*, Stanford University Press, Stanford 2019, pp. 1-13. (*Creazione e Anarchia. L'opera nell'età della religione capitalistica*, Neri Pozza, Vicenza 2017, pp. 7-28).

<sup>74</sup> P. Arboleda, «Beyond the Aestheticization of Modern Ruins», cit., pp. 21-44.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>76</sup> Alterazioni Video. «The Archaeological Park of the Sicilian Incompletion in Giarre», in *Abitare*, [Vol. 49], no. 486, (October) 2008, pp. 194-201.

<sup>77</sup> A. Masu quoted in P. Arboleda, «The paradox of 'Incompiuto Siciliano Archaeological Park' or how to mock heritage to make heritage», cit., p. 301.

<sup>78</sup> On the concrete effects of this shift Cfr., P. Arboleda, «A New Sensibility towards Unfinished Ruins: Affective Knowledge Translation through Experimental Video», in *Space and Culture*, [Vol. 26], no. 1, 2023, pp. 130-143.

<sup>79</sup> Interview conducted by the author in 2021 as part of an independent project titled *Dichiarazione di uno stato di fatto: Incompiuto*.

<sup>80</sup> Cfr., P. Arboleda, «Reimagining unfinished architectures», cit., pp. 227-244.

<sup>81</sup> Cfr. G. Agamben, *Creation and Anarchy*, cit., pp. 14-28. (*Creazione e Anarchia*, cit., pp. 29-52).

archeological park – one that is relation to an *arkhé*, an origin – undeniably exposes a different temporality, one that cannot be reduced to chronological time.<sup>82</sup> The archeology of *Incompiuto* does not, as Agamben puts it, «regress to a historical past, but returns to that part within the present that we are absolutely incapable of living»<sup>83</sup>. At odds with Marc Augé's understanding of the beauty of *Incompiuto* as «the beauty of a moment when everything was still possible, the beauty of the original gesture and the primary impulse that had been brusquely interrupted»<sup>84</sup>, which would still be locatable within historical time, I argue that the origin within Giarre's archeological park is precisely that inappropriable element, graspable in the present, to which we are confronted in *Incompiuto*. Once again, Alterazioni Video's Eden project confront us with the possibility of accessing an origin in the here and now, in the falling together of the Kingdom and the Garden. Furthermore, in relating with this inappropriable origin, Alterazioni Video's project proposes an Eden that cannot be flattened onto actuality. Eden is not only here and now, it is not only immanent; it is also latent and incomplete, it is also here and *not*.

Given the centrality of incompleteness within Alterazioni Video's Eden project, it is now time to focus on this dimension in order to expose its specificities and the potential it bears for thinking Eden *qua* the beatitude proper to this life in the here and not. I take my cue here from Alterazioni Video's choice of using the word *incompiuto* over *incompleto* to describe the phenomenon of Italian Incompletion. While similar, the two words differ in their relation to completeness. *Incompleto* directly presupposes a dimension of completeness to which it relates in a negative way; *Incompleto* names the loss of a spectrally present completeness<sup>85</sup>. On the contrary, *Incompiuto*, while naming something that has not been finished and is not complete, does not take on the dimension of loss that is proper to *Incompleto*<sup>86</sup>. *Incompiuto* seems freed from the specter of completion. This is not simply a question of semantics. The specter of completion related to *incompleto*, as I have shown, is precisely what turns spaces of incompleteness into a *natura lapsa* that cannot be redeemed but can be managed and put to work for political and economical interests that become ends in themselves within a capitalistic economy<sup>87</sup>. In this mechanism spaces like Giarre's stadium become marked by a debt/guilt, what in German is called *Schuld*<sup>88</sup>, that turns them into a debt that we «*mana-ically*» work at repaying even though it is impossible<sup>89</sup>. On the contrary, Giarre's project for an archeological park of *Incompiuto*, proposes the possibility of a fulfillment within incompleteness, one in which the lack of completion ceases being a debt and a guilt.

Yet, Alterazioni Video's Eden project is not a simple abolition of the potential dimension that within the economy of salvation is turned into an unpayable *Schuld*;

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<sup>82</sup> On this point Cfr., P. Arboleda, «The paradox of 'Incompiuto Siciliano Archaeological Park' or how to mock heritage to make heritage», cit., p. 303.

<sup>83</sup> G. Agamben, «What Is the Contemporary?», in *What Is an Apparatus? and Other Essays* edited by W. Hamacher, Stanford University Press, Stanford 2009, p. 51. (*Che cos'è il contemporaneo*, Nottetempo, Milano 2008, p. 22).

<sup>84</sup> M. Augé, «Incompiuto: Nostalgia or Harbinger», in *Incompiuto: La Nascita di uno Stile/The birth of a style*, edited by Alterazioni Video and Fosbury Architecture, Humboldt Books, Milano 2018, p. 29.

<sup>85</sup> Entry «incompleto», in Vocabolario Treccani, [www.treccani.it](http://www.treccani.it), viewed 09/08/2023.

<sup>86</sup> Entry «incompiuto», in Vocabolario Treccani, [www.treccani.it](http://www.treccani.it), viewed 09/08/2023.

<sup>87</sup> Cfr., E. Stimilli, *The Debt of the Living*, cit., pp. 15-48. (*Il Debito del Vivente*, cit., pp. 30-74).

<sup>88</sup> A term present for example in Walter Benjamin's reflections on capitalism and religion. Cfr., W. Benjamin, «Capitalism as Religion», in *Selected Writings Volume 1, 1913-1926*, edited by M. Bullock and M. W. Jennings, Harvard University Press, Cambridge-London 1996, pp. 288-291. («Kapitalismus als Religion», in *Walter Benjamin Gesammelte Schriften VI* edited by R. Tiedemann und H. Schweppenhäuser, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main 1985, pp. 100-103).

<sup>89</sup> E. Santner, *Untying Things Together*, cit., p. 155.

rather it points at the possibility of leaving this dimension radically open. To put it differently, Alterazioni Video's Eden project does not simply reduce *Incompiuto* to the concrete conditions of its spaces in the here and now, eliminating their potential; rather, it frees this potential from the specter of completion. The role of *Schuld* within capitalism cursorily addressed here raises historical and theoretical questions and debates that I cannot dive into within this contribution<sup>90</sup>. More modestly, I limited myself to a reading of the specific *Schuld* at work within Italian Incompletion and the way in which Alterazioni Video works at suspending it, in order to bring to the fore the specificities of their Eden project. This project, I argue, proposes to engage with *Incompiuto* as a figure of Eden *qua* beatitude proper to this life.

### *Conclusions: Eden is Here and Not*

Returning to Santner's reflections on *mana*, we can understand the break from *Schuld* operated by Alterazioni Video as what he called a «sabbatical calling» for a «cessation of work» that does not pertain to work as such – the uses and minor interventions proposed by Alterazioni Video – but rather to «the *mana*-facturing process that keeps us *mana*-ically busy working off an impossible debt, filling in a surplus scarcity that ultimately, in one historical form or other, belongs to the human condition or, in Nietzsche's terms, eternally recurs»<sup>91</sup>. In this Eden project, Garden and Kingdom fall together in the here and *not*; in a present that cannot be reduced to the actual. In this movement on the spot *Incompiuto* emerges as a figure of Eden immanent to our world and latent within it. To conclude, in pursuing Agamben's understanding of Eden as an allegorical figure of human nature, I would like to propose the possibility of considering the spaces of *Incompiuto* as allegorical figures of a human nature that while not whole and complete, is nevertheless potentially sufficient to what Agamben, after Dante, names «the beatitude of this life»<sup>92</sup>. In other words, to put it in the terms used by Kafka, these spaces are figures of the fact that we might be in heaven permanently «whether we know it here or not»<sup>93</sup>.

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<sup>90</sup> Cfr., E. Stimilli, *The Debt of the Living*, cit. (*Il debito del vivente*, cit.).

<sup>91</sup> E. Santner, *Untying Things Together*, cit., p. 155.

<sup>92</sup> G. Agamben, *The Kingdom and the Garden*, cit., p. 152. (*Il Regno e il Giardino*, cit., p. 120).

<sup>93</sup> F. Kafka, «Paradise», cit., p. 29.

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