ANTONELLA CAMARDA

THE DANCE OF THE ÀRGIA

Costantino Nivola, Ernesto De Martino, and the Crisis of Presence

ABSTRACT: The essay investigates Costantino Nivola's engagement with Ernesto De Martino's concept of the "crisis of presence," which informs Nivola's exploration of displacement and rootedness, reflecting his attempts to reconcile his Sardinian identity with the alienation of exile. Drawing from Sardinian folklore, especially the ritual of the Àrgia described by De Martino and Clara Gallini, Nivola channels the mythological and therapeutic dimensions of this exorcism rite into his work. De Martino's thought provides a critical foundation for understanding how Nivola reinterprets the maiden, the mother, and the widow as symbols of the feminine principle, embodying both the redemptive and destabilising forces of tradition.

KEYWORDS: Costantino Nivola; Ernesto De Martino; Clara Gallini; Rituals of the Àrgia; Modern Sculpture.

A mio padre

Ernesto De Martino's concept of the "crisis of presence" – the existential breakdown of self-awareness when cultural frameworks fail to sustain identity – underpins his studies of ritual, where symbolic acts like exorcisms or communal performances restore individuals to a stable social and ontological order. This perspective informs his analysis of tarantism, a now-vanished Southern Italian ritual in which those believed to have been bitten by a venomous spider were healed through music, dance, and religious ceremony.

In Sardinia, De Martino turned his attention to the Àrgia, a folkloric supernatural entity whose bite similarly required a ritual for the afflicted to recover. His research on this practice laid the foundation for the later work of Clara Gallini, his disciple, who expanded on his theories, interpreting the ritual as a structured drama of renewal, where the afflicted individual is healed and symbolically reintegrated into the community (1967; 1988).

The Sardinian-born artist Costantino Nivola (Orani, 1911-East Hampton, 1988) deeply engaged with Sardinian folklore and his broader cultural heritage – a connection clarified through De Martino's and Gallini's research. Yet, his artistic interpretation diverges from their reconstruction: rather than reaffirming social unity, his sculptural forms transform the Àrgia ritual into a personal meditation on exile and alienation. The fragmented, exaggerated female figures in his Àrgia series (1972-1980) evoke

displacement rather than restoration, while the smooth, hieratic *Mothers* of his late period (from the mid-Seventies on), seemingly calm and solemn, reveal a deeper ambivalence upon closer examination. If, as De Martino argues, ritual functions to reaffirm presence, then Nivola's work paradoxically highlights its failure. His representations transform the female figure from a salvific agent of exorcism into an emblem of the inescapable rupture of exile.[1]

The Malady of Uprootedness

What Simone Weil (1949, 40) calls "the malady of uprootedness" is one of the keys to understanding Nivola's work, life and predicaments. Born in a rural village of Sardinia, Nivola studied at the ISIA (Superior Institute for the Artistic Industries) in Monza and worked in Milan in the Thirties before emigrating for political reasons and relocating to New York in 1939. His experience as an exile in the U.S shaped his artistic vision, positioning him in "in an intermediate space, simultaneously inside and outside both the Italian context and the American one" (Altea 2020, 347).

Less discussed is Nivola's first "expatriation"[2] from Sardinia to mainland Italy. At that time, the socio-economic conditions on the island were profoundly different from the ones in the industrialised North. Even if Sardinian cultural elites "had Greta Garbo's picture in their wallet, bought their clothes at the *Rinascente* and talked all day about football and motorcycles" (Biasi [1935] 2010, 102), the way of living in rural villages such as Orani was substantially pre-modern.

Nivola describes the cultural shock and psychological hardships of adjusting to his new environment. He kept close company with two fellow Sardinians, Giovanni Pintori and Salvatore Fancello. Although they differed in physical features and personalities, their classmates failed to distinguish between them throughout the entire vocational course (Nivola 1980, 16-17). Identified as Sardinian, Nivola was deprived of his individuality and cast in the role of the *other*. Poverty and social marginality characterised his experience despite the progressive recognition of his talent by the Milanese avant-garde. As he recalled:

> Milan was a terrible place. Italian society is a closed one, inhuman. In all those years in Milan, from 1931 to 1939, I've never been in the house of a Milanese, and our fellows never invited us into their homes. We spent Christmas time walking in the streets because the cafés would close. We lived in

[1] I would like to thank Giuliana Altea, Pierpaolo Antonello and Carl Stein for their invaluable insights.
[2] According to Edward Said, expatriates "may share in the solitude and estrangement of exile" (2000 [1984], 181).

> houses covered in ice, without heating, and even without eating, on Christmas Eve." (Nivola 1980, 18)[3]

In the mind of the young Nivola, these kinds of situations must have strengthened his early idea that the world belonged to others than himself: "There were those in the world who had the things, in which they moved very comfortably, while for me everything was always behind a wall, always" (Nivola 1980, 13).

This view is also connected to Nivola's conflictual relationship with his mother. In *Memories of Orani*, a fictionalised account of his youth, Nivola describes the feelings of abandonment and rejection taking hold of him from the very first moments of his life, imagining an ancestral regression toward an origin marked in patriarchal terms, with an infinite distancing from the mother-matrix:

> I felt the short distance that separated me from my mother stretch and expand into infinity. I felt alone, unwanted. At that moment (and often afterwards), I wished to erase my birth and, through a process of reversal, like a film played backwards, be taken by Adriana [the midwife], unwrapped from the cloth, placed back in the sun-warmed water, reintroduced into my mother's womb, reabsorbed as semen by my father… and then by my grandfather, and so on, further and further back in time. (Nivola 1997, 12-13)

Nivola's experience – marked by two migratory movements, first from South to North, then from East to West – fits both Edward Said's concept of exile as "a discontinuous state of being" where individuals are "cut off from their roots, their land, their past," (Said 2000 [1984], 177) and De Martino's notion of the "crisis of presence" (1948), developed in relation to Southern Italy's subaltern classes. Rather than a retrospective interpretation of Nivola's subjectivity, I argue that De Martino's ideas were known to him through readings and shared connections and were consciously adopted as a framework for self-interpretation and analysis.

Motherland

In the U.S., starting in the Early Fifties, Nivola established himself as a professional artist and integrated into New York's cultural circles. He lived in Greenwich Village, owned a farmhouse in the Hamptons, and befriended artists like Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning. His successful collaborations with architects made him financially secure, allowing him to send his children to Harvard and purchase a mansion in Tuscany. To his fellow villagers in Sardinia, he embodied the American Dream. Yet, even in old

[3]Later in life, back in Milan for the opening of his first solo show in 1962, Nivola seems to find a symbolic compensation for these rejections. Describing the after-party to his wife Ruth, he writes: "…we went as a group to the trattoria Bagutta. Afterwards, to the home of an architect who lives in an elegant attic, and then to another gentleman's place, where he had risotto brought in from a restaurant…" (Nivola 1962).

age, he painfully recalled his mother's words to those impressed by his achievements: "Poor one, always living in a foreign land" (Nivola 1980, 25).

The relationship of Nivola with his homeland – *motherland* – and the way he looks and draws from its cultural heritage is thus to be understood as a means to fill an unfillable distance, to mend a torn fabric and precariously reconstruct a sense of wholeness, casting away the risk of "not being".

A recent exhibition[4] highlighted how Nivola took from Sardinian prehistoric and protohistoric civilisation not only to distil shapes, patterns and iconographies but also to elaborate a set of symbolic values to understand the world and human relationships.

Sardinian neolithic Mother Goddesses embodied a divine feminine principle connecting the individual and the earth; the Nuragic bronze statuettes of warriors, shamans and shepherds provided unparalleled examples of skill, style and expression; the megalithic structures of Nuraghes represented the very root of architecture as form, construction, shelter, and symbol.

Sardinian popular culture and folklore form the other half of Nivola's cultural reference points – more immediate and tied to his experience of subalternity. In the early decades of his career, he engaged with popular culture indirectly, reframing it within modernist aesthetics. His home in Amagansett included Sardinian artifacts such as handwoven baskets and wooden cutting boards, seamlessly integrated with modern design pieces, artworks, and vernacular American objects. He even built a small oven for baking *carasau* bread and had a young tailor from Orani, Paolo Modolo, craft him a traditional velvet suit, which he proudly wore in a widely circulated photograph.

One of the 1950 sandcast sculptures presents a colour scheme taken from Sardinian traditional festive dresses (Altea 2004, 52, Fig. 1),[5] and references to parts of it are in the monumental bas-relief created for the New Yorker Olivetti Showroom in 1953.

[4]*Sulle spalle dei giganti. La Preistoria moderna di Costantino Nivola*, curated by G. Altea, A. Camarda, A. Depalmas, L. Cheri, C. Stein, 30/11/2024-23/03/2025, Museo Civico, Cabras and Museo Nivola, Orani.

[5]It is likely, however, that the sculpture was painted sometime after its creation.

Fig. 1. C. Nivola, *Totem*, 1950.

The first overt depiction of Sardinian folklore date to 1952, when Nivola, in Sardinia for a visual reportage of *Fortune Magazine*, stayed in Nuoro at the school teacher Mariangela Maccioni (1891-1958) and her husband Raffaello Marchi (1909-1975),[6] a self-taught anthropologist, in those years the point of reference for any scholar interested in Sardinian matters (Gallini 1982, 17) and who the same year started a correspondence with De Martino (Gallini 2006).

"To make one's presence known."

At the Marchis', Nivola created *An Ancestress of Mine* (*Una mia antenata*, Fig. 2), a large metal sheet sculpture influenced by his friend Alexander Calder, thematically connected to the carnival masks of Barbagia, Sardinia's most primordial region.

[6]Nivola might have met the couple through Marianna Bussalai (1904-1947), an antifascist from his hometown and organiser with Maccioni of a resistance group during the *Ventennio*. All of them, including Nivola, were closely associated with the antifascist politician Emilio Lussu (1890-1975).

Fig. 2. C. Nivola, *Una mia antenata*, 1952.

Although rooted in his childhood memories – Orani had its own devilish carnival figure, *su Bundu* – Nivola likely revisited the masks through conversations with Marchi, who was then conducting field research on the subject. The previous year, in the Italian journal *Il Ponte* Marchi had written about the *mamuthones*, the traditional masks of the village of Mamoiada, detailing their appearance, ritual, social context, and possible historical origins. In a lengthy footnote, he noted that similar carnival masks across the region (*boes*, *boetones*, *battileddos*, *merdules*, *bumbones*) were linked to oxen and typically dressed as widows.

> All these disguised figures wear ox horns tied to their foreheads or horned masks, necklaces of cowbells, and *mastruche* ... Their appearance is anything but cheerful, also because their garments are usually mourning attire: they have donned the black costumes of their mothers or grandmothers, and thus dressed, they go about shouting, bellowing, and singing…. To describe all this, in the Sardinian dialect of Nuoro, there is the verb *si bovare*, 'to become an ox,' which originally meant all these things together: to identify with the most useful and therefore revered animal, to empathise with the beloved mother mourning the dead, and at the same time to immerse oneself in the state of euphoria and delirium that the same ox or *bumbone* would create for itself. (Marchi 1951, 1356)

These words provide a compelling lens for interpreting Nivola's uncanny sculpture. Here, Sardinian folklore becomes a vehicle for the artist to distil his anxieties about masculinity and uprootedness into a powerful aesthetic and symbolic form. The *Ancestress of Mine* – a sexually ambiguous figure with massive horns, female breasts, and oddly pointed genitalia – is both humorous and menacing, directly referencing carnival as a festival that upends social order and human presence in the world.

While the Fifties saw Nivola building a solid artistic reputation, with a flow of commissions, teaching engagements, and exhibitions, it can be argued that the theme of the crisis of presence resonated with him, becoming a recurring theme in self-representing himself and his homeland. Two quotes from coeval magazines reveal the

resurfacing of this crisis amid the broadly optimistic view of Nivola's experience. Olga Gueft observed in *Interiors* that

> The Sardinian costume, in black and white or brilliant hues, is a precise geometric human statement in the jagged landscape.Those who forsake it for nondescript modern dress fade into the background. Nivola insists they change in spirit and forfeit their assertive individuality. (1954, 96)

Dore Ashton wrote in *Craft Horizons*:

> Nivola's many projects, such as the stepped copper fountain that sings as water drops on its blades, are conceived with the idea that a man can assemble them, thereby affirming his existence. Always underlying the numerous projects in Nivola's active mind is the conviction that man has lost the "taste of things" and that he must learn again to "make his presence known in relation to life and nature". (1959, 40)

The Harvest of Sorrow

In December of 1959, Ernesto De Martino was appointed to the History of Religions post at the University of Cagliari, news unlikely to have escaped Nivola's notice. Over the previous decade, the artist had deepened his ties with Sardinian intellectual circles, and in 1958, he spent the summer in Sardinia building a tomb for his mother and brother (Fig. 3). During the same visit, he organised a participatory exhibition in Orani, decorating a church façade and creating sculptures alongside his longtime friends (Altea 2014, 232 ff).

Fig. 3. C. Bavagnoli, *Costantino Nivola poses with his mother and brother's tomb in Orani*, 1958.

More intimate and private, yet documented in staged photographs with the artist, the tomb featured bronze figurines, abstract concrete elements, and a terracotta amphora, all set atop a flowerpot planted with wheat. Nivola intended the wheat to complete its cycle annually – sprouting, ripening, and being reaped – symbolising abundance in contrast to his mother's lifelong concern over having enough grain for bread. This feature has also been linked (Camarda 2015, 324) to the *nenneri*, a local Easter tradition in which cereal seeds are grown in darkness so that their pale shoots can be displayed on church altars.

A more compelling explanation situates Nivola's choice within the context of De Martino's *Death and Ritual Mourning*, published earlier that year.

The sixth chapter – "The Harvest of Sorrow" – is devoted to the connection between the death of loved ones and the disappearance and return of cultivated plants (De Martino 1958, 228) and describes the tradition of identifying the final bundle of grain with an old person who must die to guarantee renewal and the cycle of life. De Martino writes:

> This last bundle refers to the languishing or even the extinguishing of a decrepit godly energy about to be put to death ("the old man", "the old woman", "the dead one"), or to the permanence of an inexhaustible reproductive force ("the mother"), or the epiphany of an immaculate youthful force ("the maiden"), ready to a fertile union ("the bride"). (1958, 236-237)

Nivola's use of the wheat, then, would be a homage to this tradition, but also a means – unconscious or not – to cope with his mourning and overcome the ambivalent feelings towards his mother. In April 1958, he had written:

> After all, those who truly leave their native places for good are often the ones who, even while staying there, end up seeing nothing anymore. They turn their backs on their surroundings and drift away in their imagination, carried off in a murky cloud of desires toward non-existent places. (Nivola 1958)

This sentence sounds like a posthumous answer to his mother's painful remark on his exiled condition. This is said not in an attempt to reduce Nivola's *oeuvre* to a psychological reading, but rather to acknowledge his early acquaintance with De Martino's work and the existential-ritual framework it provided. In this regard, it is worth noticing that *Death and Ritual Mourning* divides women into precise social and symbolic categories (the mother, the widow, the maiden and the bride), a partition that – as it will be discussed later – will become canonical for Nivola and the basis of his late iconographies.

Pushing forward and going back

It is unclear if Nivola and De Martino met in person. Following his participation, in 1959, in the competition for a monument to the Sassari Brigade, Nivola had intensified his relationships with Sardinia, with long sojourns in Italy and specifically on the island.

He spent the summer there in 1962, coming back to the U.S., as Saul Steinberg humorously noted, "more Sardinian than ever, and bullshitting" (Steinberg 2002 [1957], 57) and again in 1963, also for an exhibition at the Galleria Il Capitello in Cagliari.

In the meanwhile, De Martino, after publishing *Magic: a Theory from the South* (1959) and while working on *The Land of Remorse* (1961), had started focusing on the "Sardinian taranta", the Àrgia.

On December 2, 1962, De Martino organised at the University of Cagliari a conference on the rituals of the Àrgia,[7] stressing the necessity of a historical and cultural perspective in researching the matter and announcing the commencement of extensive fieldwork to gather reliable data on the rite, nearly disappeared but still preserved in the collective memory of several villages (De Martino 1963, 99).

It is not unlikely that Nivola could have been in Sardinia at the time (he opened *Divertimenti* in Milan two weeks later) and attended the conference or had friends that reported on the meeting and suggested he read *The Land of Remorse*.

The artist and the anthropologist shared significant connections within Sardinian intellectual circles beyond the already mentioned Raffaello Marchi. Both were well-acquainted with Giovanni Lilliu (1914-2012), a pivotal figure in Sardinian archaeology and in the political and cultural life of the island. Nivola likely befriended Lilliu as early as 1952, during a visit to Lilliu's most renowned discovery, the Nuragic fortress of Barumini (Altea 2022, 93). Lilliu, as Dean of the Faculty of Humanities at the University of Cagliari, was also the one who offered De Martino his teaching position, driven by a strong belief in the importance of studying popular culture and religion.

Another important figure in Nivola's network was Antonello Satta (1929-2003), an engaged intellectual who had married one of his nieces and kept him informed about the situation in Sardinia. A leftist political activist for Sardinian autonomy, Satta also carried out ethnographic research (Satta 2005 [1954]).

The idea of the Àrgia sat with Nivola for several years while his artistic vision and political convictions evolved. The transition from the Fifties to the Sixties was, in fact, a pivotal time for him as he wondered whether he could pair or even replace his successful career as an architectural sculptor with a more autonomous and gallery-focused one (Camarda 2015, 315-347).

In "an unprecedented era of growth in the display and the purchase of art," (Cras 2019, 6) Nivola witnessed many of his artist friends securing major exhibitions, showcasing their work internationally, and achieving ever-increasing sales prices, while, at the same time, the idea of the integration of art in architecture, a pillar of mid-century aesthetic, slowly became less fashionable.

[7]The event followed a major conference on religious studies, the Convegno di Studi religiosi sardi, held in Cagliari from May 24 to 26, where the need for a deeper understanding of folkloric religion had already been emphasised.

Throughout the 1950s, Nivola, though mainly focused on architectural commissions, regularly exhibited independent works in galleries and museums.[8] In 1959, he held his first exhibition in Milan at Galleria Il Milione and became convinced of the need to focus more on the artistic aspect of his work (Nivola 1959). To this end, the following year, he began working with terracotta, creating small, delicate sculptures exploring themes of beds and beaches as metaphors for the human condition. These were first presented in Milan in 1962 at the Galleria dell'Ariete in a solo show entitled *Divertimenti,* an Italian word that translates to amusements, enjoyments, but also pastimes, highlighting both Nivola's creative freedom in their creation and a somewhat dismissive attitude. He later called them "a vacation from formalism" (Nivola 1963). These expressions acted as a protective measure, encouraging viewers to perceive the works as whimsical yet less significant pieces, psychologically shielding the artist from the potential disappointment of failure.

However, terracotta works remained more of a personal endeavour, granting him respite from the constraints of public commissions rather than serving to achieve critical or commercial fame. Between 1962 and 1966, he had only three other solo exhibitions[9] (compared, for example, to the nine of his friend de Kooning).[10]

While the critical reception was generally positive, the sale prices of the terracottas,[11] ranging from one to nine hundred dollars, with an average cost of three hundred, were decidedly lower than those of major Abstract Expressionists of his generation, whose works already sold for tens of thousands of dollars. Also, his cement maquettes, which Nivola continued to sell as autonomous works, were losing value and desirability.[12] Public art remained his primary focus and main source of income, reflecting his enduring belief in art as a civic duty, though with an idealism that gradually diminished over time (Camarda 2015, 436).

[8]The last important one was *Recent Sculpture U.S.A.,* 13/05/1959-16/08/1959, the Museum of Modern Art, New York.

[9]15/01/1963-09/02/1963, Andrew Morris Gallery, New York; 05/01-30/01 1965 and 07/12/1966-07/01/1967, Byron Gallery, New York. Nivola, 15/01 - 09/02 1963, Andrew Morris Gallery, New York; Nivola, 05/01 – 30/01, 1965 and Costantino Nivola, Bronze Sculptures, 07/12 1966 – 07/01 1967, Byron Gallery, New York.

[10]https://www.dekooning.org/the-artist/exhibitions/past/one-man/1960.[last accessed 04/01/2025]

[11]As indicated in the documents of the Byron Gallery (Byron 1965A).

[12]For example, in 1960, Nivola sold five concrete panels worth $10,000. However, in 1965, for fiscal reasons, Nivola was asked to substantiate the valuation with evidence of similar sales, which he was unable to provide (Hunter 1965; Nivola 1965). That same year, Byron's appraisal of *The Mother* in the Hirshhorn collection valued the piece at $ 650 (Byron 1965B). Letter to A. Lerner, The Hirshhorn collection, 23/07/1965. Byron Gallery records, circa 1950s-1991. AAA.

Frustration with this state of affairs began to surface in his letters and interviews, often revealing bitterness towards his colleagues or a disheartened refusal to conform to the art world's rules.[13]

To counterbalance these undermining situations, Sardinia seemed to offer Nivola new opportunities. In May 1965, thanks to Marchi (1965), Nivola was commissioned to design a monument for the local poet Sebastiano Satta (1867-1914) in Nuoro, a project into which he would pour his entire self, moving away from the traditional concept of a commemorative statue to rethink the entire space as a social environment.

The Dance of the Àrgia

The inauguration took place on June 3, 1967, in the presence of Nivola, on the island to work with the weavers of Sarule on a series of carpets. Clara Gallini had just published *The Rituals of the Àrgia*, a volume that compiled all the materials from her 1962 fieldwork campaign. The book widely circulated in Italian academia and even more in Sardinia, where it was read, promoted, and debated in the intellectual and political circles in which Nivola participated.

An early, indirect testimony of the impression the book made on the artist is reflected in two posters, published by Feltrinelli Publisher in 1968, created by Nivola for Antonello Satta's political association Circolo Città-Campagna. The two posters depicted a geographical map of the island. In the first one Sardinia is overrun by military forces, while in the other by real estate speculation, with the Sardinian people constrained and threatened by the central state (Fig. 4). These images bear a striking visual resemblance to a fold-out map included in Gallini's book, which used complex sun-shaped symbols to indicate where and which rites were practised across the island. The symbols were so numerous – the research had been carried out in 212 villages – that, in the end, they obliterated the entire map, just like the overwhelming patterns in Nivola's drawings.

[13]"I've read enough not to get stuck on a formula or a signature style, which makes it very easy for the gallerist, the art critic, or the artist to be recognised as such, because I like the idea of the free artist, and I truly want them to be free… And then I've seen colleagues bored to death when they no longer knew what to do, after coming up with a little trick, like finding a wallet on the street..." He goes on with a lengthy argument on the inflated art market, the influence of critics and art historians, and related issues. (Nivola 1980, 63-64).

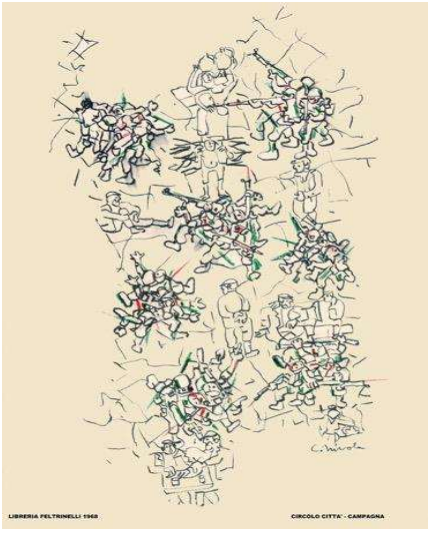

Fig. 4. C. Nivola, *Sardegna*, 1968.

More importantly, the book marked the beginning of a new creative phase, providing Nivola with the means to deal with an existential crisis stemming partly from his struggle with artistic identity and his growing marginalisation within the art world, and partly from reaching, at fifty-six, a midlife crisis. He questioned his life during a pivotal moment in history, as the '68 movement had brought women to the forefront of a revolution in sexual behaviour, society, and culture.

It is indicative that, after a period of intense activity between 1967 and 1969,[14] in the following three years he undertook only one public project: a notably uninspired concrete bas-relief for the Legislative Office Building in Albany (1972). Other proposed projects failed to gain the approval of the patrons and were never realised.[15] Additionally, he could not secure the commission for a monument to Antonio Gramsci in Ales, the philosopher's home village. During this time, he also did not hold any exhibitions.

His return to the public scene came in March 1973, when he opened a solo show at the Willard Gallery in New York, presenting a series of new terracotta pieces exploring the ritual of the Àrgia, which he had been developing since 1972 (Fig. 5).

[14]He completed Piazza Satta, a fountain for the White Plains Plaza, the *Hombre de Paz* for La Ruta de la Amistad in Mexico, works for the Charles F. Hurley Employment Security Building in Boston, the Continental Building in Philadelphia, the South Richmond High School in Staten Island, and the Janesville Gazette in Wisconsin.

[15]The 113th Precinct Station (1970), the Kips Bay Branch of the NYPL (1971), and the World Trade Center (1971) in New York.

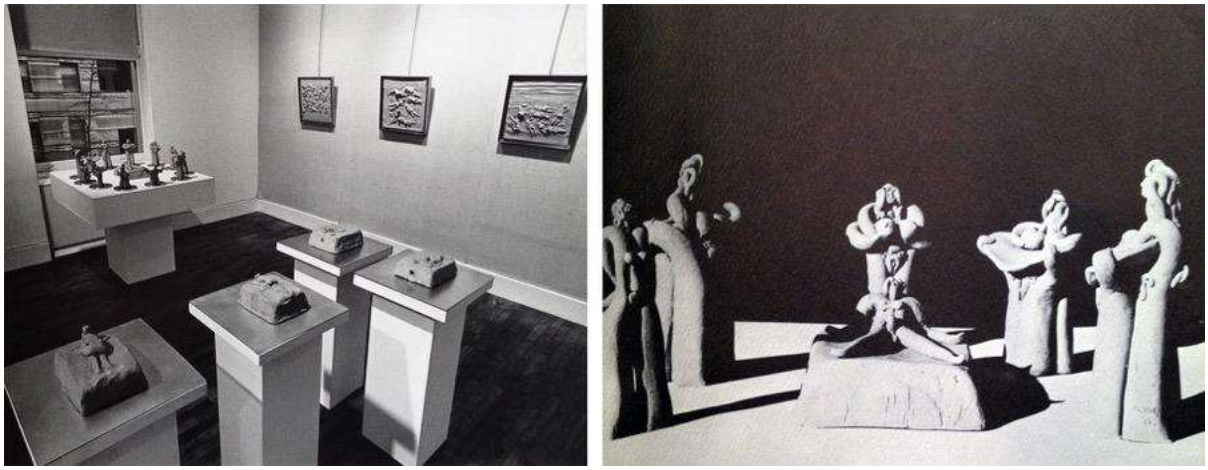

Fig. 5. C. Nivola, *Sardinian Legend (installation views at the Willard Gallery)*, 1973.

The statuettes reflected distinctive changes in Nivola's style, continuing a process towards an expressionistic and almost humorous approach. These included lean bodies crafted from coils, twisted or layered to achieve maximum expressiveness. His inspiration came from Reuben Nakian (1897-1986), an American sculptor of Armenian heritage who worked primarily in terracotta. A friend of de Kooning, Nakian received a major retrospective at MoMA in 1966,[16] just as Nivola was working on Sebastiano Satta's portraits, offering him new impetus to revive and evolve his style. Nakian's frequent engagement with classical mythology likely influenced Nivola's artistic exploration, guiding him towards a personal pantheon rooted in Sardinian folklore and centred on the Àrgia.

"Look closely at Nivola's poignant forms with their intimate celebration of love. Observe well his primordial goddesses inspired by ancient Sardinian legend," advised Dorothy Norman in the Willard exhibition booklet (1973).

The most striking element of the exhibition was a group of figures arranged as a sculptural ensemble, representing the ritual of the Àrgia. At the centre, a naked male figure lay on a bed, captured in the moment of sudden arousal. Surrounding him were twelve female characters whose demeanour was both caring and menacing. Varied in posture and form, they all displayed hypertrophic vulvas and breasts, blending allure with an element of repulsion. The coil technique gave the characters a writhing, almost worm-like appearance (Fig. 6).

[16]Nakian, 20/06/1966-05/09/1966, MoMA, New York.

Fig. 6. C. Nivola, *Dancer of the Àrgia*, 1973.

While Nivola approached the subject through the male gaze – an inescapable perspective for him – the explicitness of his depictions appears to have been influenced by contemporaneous feminist art, particularly Hannah Wilke's vaginal ceramic sculptures from the late 1960s. However, whereas artists like Wilke, Judy Chicago, and Valie Export used vaginal imagery as a radical assertion of female autonomy, Nivola's treatment remains deeply tied to male subjectivity. His exaggerated vulvas and breasts, rather than signifying a reclaiming of female identity, serve as sites of existential tension – at once symbols of desire and sources of anxiety.

At a time when feminist artists were reconfiguring the relationship between sexuality and power, Nivola's interpretation of the female body retains a more traditional ambiguity: he frames eroticism as a potential source of salvation while also reinforcing the idea of woman as an external force that acts upon the male subject. Unlike Wilke's self-portraits, where the female artist controls the representation of her image, or Chicago's feminist iconography, which directly challenges patriarchal narratives, Nivola's Àrgia figures maintain a degree of otherness. They are agents of a ritual beyond the artist's control, figures that simultaneously evoke healing and destabilisation, reintegration and exile.

Nivola provided a detailed interpretation of the ritual:

> The man stung by the poisonous insect is placed on his deathbed, surrounded by lascivious female dancers who attempt to arouse the stricken male sexually.If they succeed, it is a sign of his return to health and salvation. (Yarlow 1974)

This overtly sexual interpretation – he referred to this process as "a sexual renaissance" (Mellow 1973, 27) – enhanced in the exhibition by terracotta beds depicting couples actively engaging in sex, differed from the interpretations of De Martino and Gallini.

As De Martino already noted in *The Land of Remorse*, both the Àrgia and the Taranta were mythical, venomous animals (always a spider in the South of Italy, a spider or a

velvet ant in Sardinia) whose bite made a ritual necessary to overcome the poison. However, the effects, the rituals and the targets of the two creatures were quite different and culturally specific. At the time, De Martino's information on the Àrgia was based solely on a survey he had entrusted to his students at the University of Cagliari, so he was cautious in advancing theories. However, he observed the prevalence of male victims and confirmed that the Àrgias were always female, appearing in three distinct variants: the maiden, the bride, and the widow, each associated with different colours, music, and dances (De Martino 1961, 133-134).

In addition, De Martino believed that, in Sardinia, the bitten individual did not dance but instead lay on a bed or a carpet on the ground, surrounded by performers who danced on his behalf (De Martino 1961, 49). Gallini (1967, 113) partially confirmed this, while observing significant variations throughout Sardinia.

Nivola focused on the erotic and overtly sexual elements described by Gallini: ritual obscenities, including therapeutic gestures during the dances, such as touching the sick man's feet, lifting skirts to reveal genitalia, or exposing the breasts. According to Gallini, the goal was to make the stricken man (*argiato*) laugh, with the laughter elicited through sexual imagery symbolising a return to life (Gallini 1967, 221). Nivola, on the other hand, appeared to take the salvific power of sex very seriously. His emphasis on eroticism not only amplifies the ritual's sensual dimension but also complicates its function: rather than reaffirming social cohesion through laughter, Nivola's interpretation introduces an unresolved tension, transforming the ritual into a site of both desire and existential crisis.

De Martino (1961, 49) had written that the "critical existential meaning" linked to the differences between the Taranta and the Àrgia remained a mystery to him. Nivola, by contrast, seemed to have everything figured out. The ritual of the Àrgia made sense to him through its connection with bread, as in some versions, the *argiato* was placed in an oven or covered in sifted flour (Gallini 1967, 199). Equally illuminating to him were its links to the rites of carnival and harvest as moments of the world upside-down. As Gallini observed, this analogy suggested that the ritual of the Àrgia also encompassed elements of communal protest triggered by the critical event and subjected to the ritual control of the dance and its associated symbolism (Gallini 1967, 225).

Above all, Nivola appreciated the idea of impersonating the *argiato* because doing so would have placed him back at the centre of the community. The crisis was recognised collectively, and the community offered the means of salvation through tradition. As Gallini explained, in this kind of crisis

> the individual, having overcome the moment of solitude in the countryside, is immediately taken by the hand by the community, which removes him from his isolation and attentively follows him throughout the ritual. It makes him feel its presence while simultaneously suggesting various behaviours whose freedom of choice, as we have seen, does not extend beyond a personal variation on traditionally proposed – or imposed – patterns. (1967, 106)

Fascination and Disenchantment

A thread runs from the 1952 *Ancestress* sculpture through the 1958 tomb of his mother and brother to this series of terracottas.

In what must have been a moment of elation, Nivola felt, through the Àrgia, a connection to the pivotal episodes of his biography and the fundamental principles of his artistic practice.

This newfound connection emboldened him, shaking him from his lethargy and temporarily rescuing him from the crisis of presence.

An artist's quote from the exhibition presentation confirms that, despite a persistent sense of being out of touch with the art world, Nivola experienced a moment of self-confidence and the reassurance provided by a newfound, steadier sense of rootedness. He wrote:

> When I was growing up I naturally thought myself very sophisticated. I fantasised about going to the United States, where the streets would be shining and the high buildings made of glass, as they are now. I visualised how I no longer would be myself, short and dark-haired, but tall and blonde. I imagined myself talking to important people. Everyone would stop, turn around and point to me. But now I am bored by the largely mindless, repetitive academy that has evolved and that is unrelated to the original purposes for which the international style was born. What was at first meaningful has been allowed to degenerate into a kind of flattened Esperanto tendency to depersonalise, urbanise, mechanise, equalise – irrespective of climate, region, or cultural considerations. We are in the process of killing local richness and variety in all spheres of life, mainly so that we can display our false sophistication. An international snob came up to me one day at a café in Rome. "How is it," he asked, "that I never see you in London?" But why should he see me in London? Jet-age internationalism affects everything so that everyone is expected to be seen everywhere and to look like everyone else. Is it really more sophisticated to travel on a plane than a donkey? (Norman 1973)[17]

This idea of the necessity of a local culture did not come to Nivola with blindness to the challenges Sardinia faced in the face of modernity: environmental issues, economic crises, and more. Nivola was also acutely aware of the historical and longstanding problems of the Sardinian people: their animosity, internal conflicts, and inability to appreciate their own culture fully. These sentiments inspired his exhibition of

[17]The precariousness of this newly found assertiveness was, anyway, already clear in the eyes of Nivola's most acute critics. Gabriella Drudi (1973), in a bitter-sweet review of an exhibition of the Àrgia at the Marlborough Gallery in Rome, in March 1973, noted: "Driven by aesthetic superstition or by the terror of his own identity – a distinctly Catholic terror – Nivola sought the figures of his beloved motherland: it was an illusion. He believed he knew it when he left, and he hoped to delve into the labyrinth of ancient magic now that he had idealised it from a safe distance. But the truth was something else. Once the automatic process is set in motion, the colourless ego of a domesticated consciousness comes alive with unthought-of ferment, with wonder, with laughter. With his terracottas, Nivola was simply searching for himself, for existence. What else is art?"

watercolour drawings, *Disenchanted Sardinia*, which opened in Nuoro in 1973,[18] as well as his recurring reference throughout the 1970s to Sardinia as a place of delights and horrors (Nivola, 1975, 32-37). Nevertheless, thoughts of and longing for Sardinia grew ever stronger as old age approached, as did his fascination with the Àrgia. The identification between Nivola and the *argiato* is evident in the new decoration of his solarium, created in the late 1970s. In the spot where he would lie naked to sunbathe, he drew the dancers of the Àrgia, reconstructing the 1973 composition as a tableaux vivant and having the dancers endlessly perform the ritual of "sexual renaissance" for him. Sketched in the same quick and expressive style as the terracottas, the female figures, brought to human scale, appeared even more *unheimlich*, with eyeless faces, disarticulated limbs, and surrealist *vaginae dentatae* (Fig. 7).

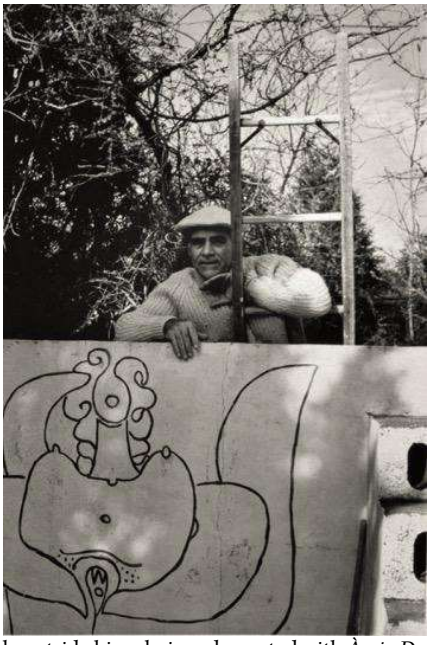

Fig. 7 C. Nivola outside his solarium decorated with *Àrgia Dancers*, late 70s.

The 1970s were a complex period for Nivola, with phases of depression and illness alternated with bursts of hectic activity and an existential unease that manifested in frenetic sexual activity. While teaching at various American Universities he explored his sexuality, reinterpreting his relationships through a mythical lens.

[18] *La Sardegna disincantata di Costantino Nivola*, 31/03/1973-13/04-1973, Galleria d'arte '31, Nuoro. "I would like to believe that the only reasons for the disillusionment I felt during a recent visit to Sardinia are due to age, to more frequent visits, and to my particular predisposition to melancholy during the winter months; and that my inability to share with other Sardinians the enthusiasm for concrete, asphalt, chainsaws and axes, dynamite, chimneys, and children dressed as Mickey Mouse who cannot speak Sardinian is somehow normal. These things are the pride of mayors, municipal and regional administrations because they are considered manifestations of progress. To me, all this seems distressing and apocalyptic. In this state of mind, I created these watercolour drawings attempting to express, in a sardonically affectionate way, my personal reactions to the new face of Sardinia today" (Nivola 1973).

Starting in 1973, Nivola began writing poetry, likely another sign of the influence of Gallini's book, which included numerous *muttetti*, traditional poems used in the exorcism. He often incorporated his verses into his works, inscribing them into fresh clay or using them as captions. Many of his compositions were erotic in tone ("I'd like to model you early in the morning with a pinch of clay and a bead of dew")[19], referencing his relationships with students of him or young women drawn to his work.[20] As public commissions became increasingly scarce, terracotta remained a vital medium for expressing his emotional life.

In 1979, he collaborated with Luigi Nioi, a master potter from Assemini, to a new series of terracottas representing the ritual of the Àrgia. The dancers transformed into vessels, elegant vases that also evoked Mediterranean amphoras, or performed around the sick man on large graffito plates enriched with verses in the Sardinian language. For the first time, the actual insect was depicted, as a humanised, comic-like velvet ant, further expanding the visual narrative of the ritual (Fig. 8).

Fig. 8 C. Nivola and L. Nioi, *Su ballu de sas viduas de Mamojada (The dance of the widows of Mamoiada)*, 1980.

The Maiden, the Mother and the Widow

At the same time, since the mid-1970s, Nivola had contemplated creating new monumental figures, intended as pure art, autonomous from architecture. Some of these works translated the abstract geometric language of his earlier concrete pieces into stone, while others adopted more sensual and streamlined forms, focusing on the female figure. Drawing on the idea of the three mythical Àrgias (the maiden, the mother, and the

[19]Cfr. *Works for Private Places*. Exhibition leaflet. Jaffe-Friede Gallery Hopkins Center, Dartmouth College, Hanover, New Hampshire, 20/10/1978-03/12/1978.

[20]Nivola's poetic works, some of which remain unpublished, are still awaiting comprehensive study.

widow) as incarnations of the feminine principle, he distilled hieratic figures in marble and bronze from the grotesque and humorous coil figurines and graffito drawings (Fig. 9).

Fig. 9. C. Nivola, *Dancers*, 1980.

These new forms reconnected with the pre-Nuragic cultures of Sardinia, creating a cultural continuum spanning prehistoric Sardinia, folkloric tradition and his contemporary vision. The iconography of the dancer gradually evolved into abstract idols, retaining the sexual and emotional ambivalence of their earlier models (Fig.10).

Fig. 10 C. Nivola, *Untitled*, 1985 ca., marble.

Far from being merely a tangential connection or an engaging read, De Martino's and Gallini's thought and research provided Nivola with a conceptual framework for interpreting his homeland's culture. Their work situated his experience of displacement within a horizon of meaning, enabling him to reconstruct a sense of wholeness – even if precarious – by translating these experiences into art.

At the core of this engagement, Sardinia, the woman, and the Àrgia emerged as three interconnected symbolic and universal entities, simultaneously endangering his existence and offering him salvation. Nivola's work explored the dual nature of myth and ritual: both a soothing force meant to reaffirm identity and a site of rupture where meaning dissolves. While Gallini and De Martino interpreted ritual as a means of

reintegration into the social fabric, Nivola reconfigured it into an intimate meditation on exile and estrangement.

This reading challenges the assumption that Nivola's return to Sardinian themes was merely an act of nostalgia. Instead, his engagement with the Àrgia and the broader female archetypes can be seen as an exploration of the limits of ritual efficacy: can mythology still function as a stabilising agent when the artist himself remains outside the cultural structure it was meant to sustain? The female figure – whether as the Àrgia, the mother, the widow, or the maiden – becomes central to this inquiry, embodying both the salvific potential of ritual and its inherent fragility.

The tension between ritual as reintegration (Gallini, De Martino) and ritual as fragmentation (Nivola's interpretation) runs throughout his entire body of work. By transforming traditional Sardinian imagery into a modernist, deeply personal vocabulary, Nivola reclaims the feminine and its rituals not as a resolution but as an ongoing, unresolved question that continues to resonate in his art.

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