

“Art and Migration: Sabato Rodia’s Watts Towers in Los Angeles”
International Conference, Genova, Italy April 2-4, 2009

This report of the 2009 Watts Conference in Genova, Italy attempts to be merely descriptive and not to express a consensus of opinion on either the meaning of the Watts Towers or the overall outcome of the conference itself.

Sabato Rodia’s Watts Towers in Los Angeles, a historic meeting devoted to one of the most significant works of art and architecture of the last century, and to the Italian immigrant artist who created them, took place at the Università di Genova, Italy, from April 2-4, 2009. By all accounts the international academic conference provided participants a rare opportunity to consider the monument and its maker across a diverse spectrum of disciplinary perspectives. Artists, sociologists, architectural historians, ethnologists/folklorists, oral historians, filmmakers, scholars of literature and cinema, community activists, heritage and conservation specialists, as well as civic arts administrators came together to take historic stock of a unique artist and his highly idiosyncratic work of art. They acknowledged the artwork’s enduring mysteries (why *did* Rodia build them and what *do* they mean?), they suggested new directions for research and finally, they agreed to reassemble in Los Angeles in the Fall of 2010 to continue the fruitful exchange of ideas begun in Genova. Plans are also underway to gather some of the conference papers for publication in order to render the results of this exchange more tangible and broadly accessible.

A novel feature of this gathering was that it took place under the rubric of “Art and Migration,” adding a welcome new dimension to the Towers’ multiple meanings and discursive power. Participants considered Rodia and his Towers within the context of global migrations, contested social and urban spaces, the relations of art and economic development, the imaginaries of local, traditional, and Italian (North and South) American immigrant cultures. At the same time, careful consideration was given to Rodia’s individual artistic and architectural genius, to the theoretical and conceptual implications of this work, to its place in the history of art, and to the multiple challenges of conservation and administration that art environments such as the Towers pose.

Following introductory papers by the conference organizers, formal presentations were divided into four sections: 1) The Community of Watts and its Monument: Physical, Socio-Economic and Political Realities; 2) Art Environments, Vernacular Traditions, and their Imaginaries; 3) Italian Migrations: Literary, Artistic, and Visual Legacies; 4) Reproducing Nola. (Please see attached pdf document for detailed program.) The conference also offered opportunities for viewing several documentary films on the Watts Towers (Landler/Byer, *I Build the Tower*—simultaneously translated for the audience into Italian; Koester, 3-dimensional: *The Watts Towers*, which entailed heroic technical support from across Italy (Udine), as well as the account of the history and development of the Watts Towers Art Center by Lee Hooks, *Fertile Ground*, narrated by Congresswoman, Maxine Waters).

Because the best academic meetings foster open dialogue (which is their very *raison d'être*), our gathering was not without lively debate. (Indeed, the Watts Towers have engendered controversy from their very inception.) Speakers engaged in a sometimes pointed exchange of ideas despite limited time dedicated to discussion, question and answer. Such exchanges continued outside the conference room into hallways, onto terraces, and over meals. Given the many administrative, civic, nonprofit, arts, and conservation entities responsible for or affiliated with the Watts Towers, it is not surprising that they have alternatively collided, aligned, and/or mutually reinforced one another over the span of decades. Some of this disagreement, however, may be structurally entrenched (e.g., the City as opposed to the Committee for Simon Rodia's Towers in Watts over conservation methods and management; the City of L.A. administration as opposed to the local community of Watts on issues of economic development). Other dichotomies may have evolved synergistically (e.g., Watts Towers Community Arts Center vis-à-vis the Rodia Towers, separate yet symbiotic units). The challenge that emerged from the Genova conference, and as it might appear to third-party observers, is that of bridging divergent discourses and goals, and fostering and/or creating "common ground." The continued wellbeing of this much-loved Los Angeles structure and icon, and of the Watts community too (which has known and respected them for decades), seems to depend on it.

The most debated issues of the conference (despite, once again, the limited time devoted to debate), pertained to the first and fourth panels. Panel 1 reviewed the history of ownership, the role of various state, city, and arts agencies, and the challenges of funding conservation of the Towers. The well-known Committee for Simon Rodia's Towers in Watts (CSRTW)—the very Committee that saved the Towers from demolition in 1959 (and which this October will commemorate its 50th anniversary)—was not present to represent its current perspective on the Towers. However, the CSRTW provided conference organizers in advance with a one-page, 10 point-summary of objections to the current status and/or methods of Tower conservation, which was circulated. Given the established conference schedule, little opportunity to discuss these points presented itself. Nonetheless, conference participants expressed the desire to achieve greater clarity about these issues of concern (e.g., perhaps by receiving a studied response to the ten points from administrators and conservators, or by participating in a guided visit of the site itself). No collective plans were formulated in Genova although, informally (in conversation with City representatives), several were aired. Certainly, after reviewing the precarious situation of other art environments (e.g., in Spain), many of which have been neglected and are even currently in process of demolition, the attention the Watts Towers receive might appear fortunate by comparison. Rodia's Towers enjoy the benefit of a concerned and pro-active community, conservators, an adjacent art center, and international attention!

Another issue of great interest, but also of indirect contention, revolved around the *Italian* content of Rodia's work: e.g., the relevance of the relationship between the Towers of Rodia and the festive *Gigli* of Nola. How exactly does the work of this "independent" or "outsider" artist relate to his specific cultural heritage, immigrant experience, and worldview? Granted that Rodia displayed identifiable marks of an Italian/American folk

esthetic, artisan work traditions, motifs and themes, as well as an immigrant worldview, is the application to the Towers of a potentially “essentializing” discourse of ethnicity problematic? The fault line on this issue seemed to divide Italian or Italian American scholars of ethnology and American immigration studies from others interested in framing art and architecture within the broader context of Modernism and/or global migration studies. In light of the celebration of Rodia’s “Italianness,” the question of historic and contemporary migrations were highlighted by a poignant comparison of the U.S. and Italy: would the building of an artwork such as Rodia’s Towers, by an immigrant, be tolerated today in Italy? The implicit answer offered was: no. Neither Italy nor the U.S. are what they were in the 1950’s.

Besides enjoying a relaxed and casual meeting, participants in the Genova conference on the Watts Towers also had time to interact informally at social events: e.g., lunches in the beautiful reception room of the Facoltà di Scienze della Formazione (Dept. of Anthropology), with its terrace looking out towards the mountains, an elegant convivial portside dinner on the first night, at the restaurant “Tre Merli” (with the recurring “*pesto alla Genovese*” theme). Other activities included a guided walking tour of the city and its extraordinarily rich Turn-of-the-Century Art Nouveau architecture (known as *Stile Liberty* in Italian), concurrent exhibitions on Fabrizio De André, the noted Genovese singer-songwriter and poet (1940 - 1999) at both the Ducal Palace and the hotel lobby of the restored 17th-century Palazzo Cicala, directly across from the cathedral of San Lorenzo—which offered the ecclesiastic spectacle of a Palm Sunday celebration on its front steps on April 5. Participants were also treated to another Italian spectacle of sorts, in the form of a strike of ambulatory vendors (protesting new city ordinances), which brought the city center to a complete standstill on April 2, as participants wended their way on foot to the University for our conference opening event. Finally, all were treated to Paul Harris’ unforgettable performance of his “Alpha Rap,” a poem called “Sam’s Ark: An L.A. Landmark,” whose exclusive use of the vowel A pays tribute to the architectural outline of Rodia’s tower structures.

This conference demonstrated that Rodia and the Towers continue to inspire scholarly analysis, induce animated discussion, and foster controversy—testimony to the fact that they matter passionately to so many, representing as they do a site of extraordinary human creativity, resilience, and redemption. This, some conference participants concluded, may well be the “common ground” which gives this unique civic icon the ability to bridge the many “continental” divides determined by class, race, ethnicity, and migration status. To focus on such common ground (rather than on heightened fault lines) may be for Angelinos a welcome occasion for civic re-engagement, compassionate action, and increased interest in issues of social equity.

Building on the momentum generated by the Genova conference, initial work is already underway to create a multimedia festival and conference entitled “The Watts Towers Common Ground Initiative,” scheduled for Fall 2010. While re-affirming and re-focusing attention on the extraordinary Rodia and his Towers locally, this occasion will also address questions of art, migrations, human and community development, and endeavor to create partnerships and collaborative art, theater and music projects, across

cultural, geographic, and socio-economic borders throughout the city (contact organizer: luisadg@humnet.ucla.edu). The Towers have become a symbol of creativity under adversity and sustained resolve. They also stand as a source of identity and history to its local African American and Latino communities. How can the Towers be embraced by all Angelinos? Further, how can the many economically-depressed “Watts”-like neighborhoods on our urban landscape benefit from art and community development, especially those that have no Towers? Increased visibility for and a celebration of the Towers can only help lead us out of our current existential and societal dilemmas.

Luisa Del Giudice
Conference Co-Organizer
May 5, 2009