

# Petra Noordkamp

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**La Madre**

# The mother, the son and the architect

by Christophe Van Gerrewey



An ex is someone with whom you once had a relationship. Right now the ex is the most recent major character to enter modern life. Since the emergence (or naming) of the ex, modern humans have developed no new form of relationship that is so deep and significant. The number of exes is increasing exponentially, now that love has become relatively commonplace, accessible and repetitive. After all, having an ex or exes indicates that a love affair has ended, but also that another love affair can begin.

Yet the ex continues to haunt us. A relationship with an ex is extremely complex. In his novel *In Search of Lost Time* [À la recherche du temps perdu] Marcel Proust writes about the strange feelings and thoughts evoked by contact with an ex – even if it's merely a matter of scraps of news about a former (or deceased) loved one: "In any case, if all this was true, it's a futile verification of the life of a mistress who exists no longer, rising up from the depths and coming to the surface just when we are no longer able to make any use of it. [...] If the woman whom we see again when we are no longer in love with her, tells us everything, the fact is that she is no longer herself, that we are no longer ourselves: the person who was in love has ceased to exist. Death has also passed by here, and has made everything easy and unnecessary."

During a confrontation with an ex, Proust argues, death 'passes by', because both parties realise they are no longer the people they were. The exhibition by Petra Noordkamp is bound together by a dual contact with an ex. Firstly, Noordkamp learned that Emilio Quaroni, a young man with whom she had a relationship in the 1990s, killed his mother in 2001. Secondly, while working on her photography project *Cinecittà*, she stumbled as if by chance on an extraordinary spherical church in Gibellina in Sicily. Its architect turned out to be Ludovico Quaroni (1911–1987), the father of her ex.

Emilio will be locked away for many years yet, but nevertheless it is as if he becomes visible in Noordkamp's work, along with his late parents. As its title suggests,

Noordkamp's film *La madre, e il figlio e l'architetto* poses the question of whether contact with her ex's parents might not be the most vital way of 'touching' her former lover again. After all, it is well known that adults need to adopt a position in relation to their parents before they can enter into loving relationships. A man has to sever his intimate and fundamental bond with his mother before he can set off in search of a partner. Proust wrote about this process too. *In Search of Lost Time* [À la recherche du temps perdu] actually opens with a memory that illustrates this triangular relationship. After dinner the young narrator is sent to bed without a goodnight kiss from his mother. He waits for her anxiously, fully aware that his unwillingness to go to sleep would make his parents angry. But then he runs into them, terrifyingly, on the landing after their guests have left. Totally unexpectedly, his father is not angry and even encourages his mother to go to the boy's room for a while. "It has been a long time, too, since my father has been able to tell Mamma to 'Go with the child.' Never again will such hours be possible for me," Proust writes. "But of late I have been increasingly able to catch, if I listen attentively, the sound of the sobs which I had the strength to control in my father's presence, and which broke out only when I found myself alone with Mamma. Actually, their echo has never ceased: it is only because life is now growing increasingly quiet around me that I hear them anew, like those convent bells which are so effectively drowned during the day by the noises of the streets that one would suppose them to have stopped for ever, until they sound out again through the silent evening air."

Perhaps a man can never entirely distance himself from his mother. Is matricide, as committed by Emilio Quaroni, not the most radical consequence of this realization? It suggests that the bond between Emilio and his mother remained far too strong, ultimately becoming unbearable. Such an explanation immediately points in the direction of the father, who ought to have instructed his wife to withdraw from her son. During Noordkamp's search for Emilio, the move that



takes her to the church designed by Ludovico Quaroni – although prompted in part by chance – is as practical as it is inescapable. The multiple absence, caused by love, death, crime, madness, distance and incomprehension, that permeates all these relationships, as diverse as they are interrelated, surely could not be transformed into an experience anywhere better than in Quaroni's church in Sicily, and in the multiple reproductions of it in this exhibition of Noordkamp's work. The questions are no longer why Emilio killed his mother, why his father built this church, or how Petra Noordkamp can still be interested in him. The questions have become more general, more important, spatial and visual. Or rather: instead of answering these questions, architecture creates the framework within which they can be asked in the best possible way.

Quaroni was not simply a successful or indeed run-of-the-mill architect. In an article about his career published in *Arquitectura Viva* in 2010, Italian architect Pier Vittorio Aureli rightly described him as a tragic hero. Quaroni continually adjusted his views on architecture, precisely because Italian society, for which he worked, was also changing fast. He refused to pin himself down to a single well-defined approach, and as a result he was both influential and vulnerable. The church in Gibellina, one of Quaroni's last projects, might be seen as symbolizing that refusal and its consequences. For a start, to say that the process of creating the church did not run smoothly is an understatement. The town of Gibellina was completely destroyed by an earthquake in 1968 and rebuilt twenty kilometres away to an entirely new design. Quaroni was approached as far back as 1970 to design a new parish church. A combination of circumstances meant building work did not begin until 1985 and the first part was completed in 1989, two years after Quaroni's death. In 1994 a section of the roof collapsed and it was not until 2010 that the church was consecrated.

Its architecture is no less improbable. The church has no simple overall shape but is divided into several strict geometric forms and separate components, some of them

roofless. At its centre the church is crowned by a perfect sphere, large and closed to the public. Writing about his design in 1980, Quaroni consciously endorsed its all-embracing character: "The supernatural, symbolic perfection of the sphere represents the Universe, continuity, the Infinite, the Whole, while the square stands for human perfection and not for transcendental rationality. Although the Church is extremely small, its roundness and the bright blue of the tiles which will cover the sphere leave no doubt that this is a House of the Lord."

The way in which Noordkamp has chosen to present the church in Gibellina in images and in film illustrates the tragic nature of the building and the process of its construction. There are no people to be seen, except in photographs of the laying of the first stone. Noordkamp has turned Gibellina into a ghost town, silently and mysteriously dominated by the church's sphere, as if the building is something that happened to the town: incomprehensible, total yet at the same time everlasting. Quaroni's underworld architecture becomes the ideal decor for a shadow dance of people who will never come back. Here too death seems to keep passing by. The architecture explains nothing, but it enlarges the mystery – of the religious activities it accommodates, of the turbulent story of how it came into being, and of the town of Gibellina. And naturally, seen from Petra Noordkamp's specific viewpoint, this is also the place that Emilio once again comes to haunt, along with his parents.

In his nineteenth-century lectures on aesthetics, German philosopher Hegel called every form of architecture 'the house of the God'. Architecture always brings into being a 'temple as a fit place for concentration of spirit, and for its direction to the mind's absolute objects'. In Petra Noordkamp's project those absolute objects are demarcated without being given definitive boundaries. The past history of the artist, the past history of the architecture and of the church, of the architect, his son and his wife, are all laid on top of each other, as images that do not tell a clear story but instead make countless stories possible.

In the project *La Madre*, photographer and filmmaker Petra Noordkamp (1967) shows her most recent, not previously exhibited work. The impetus for *La Madre* was Noordkamp's short relationship in the mid-1990s with Emilio Quaroni, son of the well-known Italian architect and urban planner Ludovico Quaroni. After her contact with Emilio deteriorated, Noordkamp discovered in 2001 that Emilio had murdered his own mother in the same year. The violent story of Emilio and the matricide stayed with Noordkamp – for years she thought about doing something with it. The form of the project remained vague for a long time, until two paths unexpectedly converged. In 2009, Noordkamp visited Sicily for her photo project *Cinecittà*, and there she encountered the modernistic La Chiesa Madre. This extraordinary, white spherical church turned out to be a design by none other than Ludovico Quaroni, Emilio's father.

**Petra Noordkamp** graduated in 2000 from the Gerrit Rietveld Academie, where she majored in photography. She has exhibited at W139 in Amsterdam and De Gele Rijder in Arnhem. As well as being shown on Amsterdam billboards in 2005, her work has been published in magazines including *The Purple Journal*, *Club Donny* and *Mister Motley*. Alongside her freelance projects, Noordkamp works on commission for *Volkskrant Magazine*, *Avenue*, *Rails*, *NRC Focus* and other magazines.

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Cover image  
Film still *La madre, il figlio e l'architetto*, 2012

*Via Ludovico Quaroni (con La Chiesa Madre)*, Gibellina, 2011

Film stills *La madre, il figlio e l'architetto*, 2012

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